

“Polis is This: The Persistence of Place” A Review Essay¹

Henry Ferrini’s film on the life of Charles Olson, great Gloucester poet and the originator of projective verse, has finally been released after more than a dozen years as a work in progress. It could have been entitled “Polis is eyes.” For this is the opening line, both of Letter 6 of the *MAXIMUS POEMS* [hereafter, abbreviated “*MP*”] and of the movie, which begins with a voice-over asking “What do you see..?” This is a promising opening, for one of the keys to understanding the intersect of poet and place is perception – its modalities in words and action, its nature and implications. The opening words, however, quickly move from a local to cosmic perspective (“as far as space...”). This shift from the concrete to the abstract begins to indicate what becomes a problem with the entire documentary -- its failure to realize the “particularity” of place in terms of essential details that were earmarks of Olson’s projective verse and vision.

It is especially ironic that so much of the movie’s imagery (perception?) has the quality of tourist videocams – images of gulls and fishing boats that seem more like those of the outsider looking on rather than those of the citizen invested in his community (polis?). This perception of the Gloucester landscape is utterly foreign to Olson, who views Gloucester as a working, not a tourist landscape. Thus, by the time we hear Olson say, at the end, “Where we are is a particularity we’d better use...the truth is what we do with it,” the words don’t ring nearly as true as they should, for the preceding words and images do not take us to this point with sufficient matter, focus and momentum. One is reminded of the titles of two books relevant to the movie’s theme: “No Sense of Place” and “No Place of Grace.” And “Persistence of...”? By the film’s end, we have learned that there was little or no “persistence of”, either for Olson or Gloucester.

Let it be said at the outset that Ferrini was engaged in a heroic undertaking – to capture the meaning of the life of a poet larger than life whose history and legacy were complex. We should all be thankful for the persistence, bootstrapping and personal sacrifice that served to bring the first film on Olson to completion after many years of effort. In terms of fundraising, Ferrini received little help from the local chapter of the Charles Olson Society and Gloucester others. Outside support was spasmodic and often insufficient. Nevertheless, we cannot fail to plumb the reasons for disappointment with the final product. Olson appreciated a plumb bob...to read sand in the bottom of a lead, and be precise about what sort of bottom your vessel’s over.”² The nexus of poet and place that Olson, “this man of my own place”, represents is far too important not to get it right.³

One approach to evaluation of a work of art is to examine it in light of the goals and perspectives of its creators. A prospectus for the documentary stated:

¹ By Peter Bearse, Ph.D., Member of the Board of the Charles Olson Society, Gloucester, MA. Comments welcomed via peterj@politicalcommunity.us or 603-244-1041.

² *MP*, “Letter 5,” Butterick edition, p.27.

³ Gloucester is the author’s hometown. He served on the City Council, elected at-large, and ran for Mayor three times. Olson influenced his sense of art, place and politics.

- “*Polis Is This* is a 60 minute film on the life of a poet in the town he made mythic.(which) explores this **dynamic** between poet and place...”
- “As poet and **historian**, Olson synthesized not only what happened but more significantly what might happen. He combined the particulars of history and archeology with the **universality** of poetry...*Polis Is This* time travels through the history of **mankind**...”
- “*Polis Is This* is an act of **historical** investigation...”

Another perspective to inform a review is that of context, to recognize that the work in question usually does not stand alone; it is part of a producer’s corpus of creative work. Indeed; Ferrini has done two prior documentary films on American writers in relation to the places important to them – one, *Poem in Action*, on another fine Gloucester poet, his uncle Vincent Ferrini; another, on Jack Kerouac, in *Lowell Blues*. Both are very good documentary films. In this reviewer’s opinion, both do a better job than *Polis is This* in making the join between poets and places. But the subjects were simpler. And so, let us proceed to review *Polis is This* in the spirit of constructive criticism. It should be regarded as the first rendering of a continuing work-in-progress by Ferrini and/or others.⁴

The immediately problematic terms in the Ferrini prospectus been highlighted above in bold – “dynamic,” “historian,” “universality” and “mankind.” The most difficult of these to understand and to document is the first, the “dynamic between poet and place,” so let us table it for awhile. The remaining three suggest that the filmmaker may have started with some degree of misunderstanding of his subject.

Olson was not a historian. He delved into history selectively, to find both historical and pre-historical [indeed, geological] factors that supported his selection of Gloucester as both a unique historical community and geophysical location. His fond memories of “summers” may have led him to Gloucester, but he was not one to rest on roseate romantic remembrances, “any old romantic thing...other than...that which you can do!”⁵ He was a very un-romantic post-modern poet. He realized that human behavior had ancient roots and, in many ways that resonate with Blake, a source of important insights and guides to human behavior. Mythology was as real to him as reason. See his “Causal Mythology.”

Pretense to “universality” and references to “mankind” were foreign to a poet whose (arguably) greatest prose essay was entitled “The Human Universe.” He traced the pretense to Plato and ascribed to it a bad influence on Western Civilization. The concept of “mankind” was foreign to one to whom the human universe is unremittingly variegated, one who described himself as “contained within my own skin” like others, each a unique individual.

⁴ A fundraiser was held at the Kismet Wharf, Rocky Neck, Gloucester, on August 25, 2007 to begin to raise money to enable Ferrini to adapt the film for TV [PBS]. This may provide an opportunity for further improvements in the work to be made.

⁵ *MP*, “I, Maximus of Gloucester, to You,” in Butterick’s edition, p.8.

Now, to the dynamic. The film documentary has not been able to capture this most complex among categories. How this could have been accomplished, this reviewer does not know, but it would have helped if Ferrini had paid more attention to an aspect of the poet's personal history that is quite central to Olson's life project – the poet as a political being. Ferrini alludes to this; first, in his prospectus, stating that “Olson charged himself with restoring America as “city on a hill” . . . , and second, in the movie, recognizing Olson's recollection of the concept's origin with Massachusetts Bay Colony Governor Winthrop. It has inspired American political leaders ever since.

Yet, even though the prospectus cited “governmental posts in FDR's administration” as part of the poet's “Background”, the documentary fails to document perhaps the most important early passage of the poet's life – from those years during World War II when Olson served in a fairly high position in the Roosevelt Administration to the immediate postwar period when he emerged as a poet. We are shown a still photo of Olson looking like a suit in Washington, “sitting in D.C.,” nothing more. Lacking more background for Olson's political orientation, much of the dynamic is lost. That which is shown – e.g., readings from Olson's “Scream” to the editor of the Gloucester Daily Times while a wrecking ball destroys a historical structure – seems somewhat disconnected and disembodied. We get no sense of how Gloucester “politics works” as a key to the place as polis -- how, ultimately, it fell far short of the Olsonian dream.

After all, much of the dynamic is political in nature [given an expansive rather than narrow construction of “political,” as in “polis”]. In many of the *MAXIMUS POEMS*, we see passages that are undeniably political, explicitly or implicitly. There is a tension between the ideal (“city on a hill”) and the real (politics and people of Gloucester). This tension is unresolved to the end of Olson's life, except perhaps through disillusion and denial. At the end, we hear Olson say, via Boer's voice: “I don't have any roots in that city!” (Gloucester). The dynamic tension, and the political lessons one can draw from *MP*, are given short shift omission of even short segments of poems that would document it, such as the following:

- ◆ “Let those who use words cheap, let them not talk of what is good for the city . . . and that word meant to mean not a single thing the least more than what it does mean . . .”
- ◆ “So can know polis, not as localism, not as musick . . .”(or “perjorocracy”).
- ◆ “Not the many but the few who care . . .”
- ◆ “The new way does promote cleverness; the main chance is its law . . .”
- ◆ “You see, I can't get away from the old measure of care . . .”
- ◆ “Let them not make you as the nation is . . .”

- ◆ “There are only eyes in all heads, to be looked out of...”
- ◆ “...if they dare afford to take the risk...”

Thus, the film as a documentary of the political orientation of the poet is weak overall and misleading in part. The weakness of its political tea becomes apparent near the end of the documentary, when an Olson scholar known to be an expert on the political aspects of Olson’s poetry and career, Craig Stormont, is brought on to bear witness to a generality, that Olson’s legacy pertains to “change” (will and ability to). No “particularity” here. What is misleading is the implication that the film’s limited treatment of the political aspect of Olson seems to convey -- that the poet’s “greatest generation” politics are indistinguishable from the latter day, new-age liberalism of the film’s producers and commentators. What political implications may be drawn from Olson’s poetry to help us address what he called “the necessity of now” is very much open to debate.⁶

Theoretically, there is also a dynamic inherent in contradiction, but the film fails to confront some important features that are paradoxical if not outright contradictory. One is “ownership; another, “back,” as in reverse or looking to the past. Consider ownership. On the one hand, Olson lauds ownership as represented by Portugese vessel owners, who are but “extensions of their diesels.” The documentary overlooks this aspect while focusing on other, negative constructions of ownership; e.g., “the musickracket of ownership” in Song 3. A contradiction not confronted cannot be resolved.

As for “back,” there is the tension between “back is not better” (illustrated by the nice vignette of Olson’s car, unable to move in reverse) and “back, back” in terms of Olson’s methodology, ever seeking deep historical roots. But no attempt is made to bridge the multi-millennial gap between “ice age” and “shopping mall.” There may be some partial or seeming resolution, however, in the observation that people’s obliviousness to history “perpetuates continued consumption.”

More of the dynamic between poet and place is lost because the movie offers too many segments that are indeed “disembodied and disconnected.” There is a distinct lack of continuity to build a “sense of place” and the meanings, especially dynamic aspects, of that place as perceived by the poet and projected via his words-in-action or actionable words. The movie suffers from inadequate resolution of the basic questions faced by any artist or producer: questions of selection, emphasis and organization. Some scenes strike one as either quite anomalous or unrelated to the film’s other parts. The viewer too often finds oneself asking ‘why this segment’ or scratching one’s head wondering ‘what is this scene doing here.’? Why, for instance, include the scene featuring Pete Seeger and Woody Guthrie? How does the scene featuring “Betty”, revealing something of Olson’s sexuality, fit in a movie that pays so little attention to the poet’s personal life? What’s the point of including bad art in the form of Ed Sanders’ singing “Okeonos”? (&c). The disparate, spasmodic nature of such inclusions undercuts the supposedly “holistic” or

⁶ A limited attempt to address this issue was made by the author in the context of Gloucester’s “now” circa 1995. It was published by the *Gloucester Daily Times* in two parts [Sept.25th and 26th] under a headline assigned by the paper’s then editor, “Politics and City Elections,” Part I and Part II, respectively.

integrative nature of the poet's own mind-set, methodology and writing, so nicely highlighted in the segment on Black Mountain. Per "emphasis," however, treatment of the latter is overly long even while other educational aspects of Olson's career are ignored; e.g., his stint at Harvard, where his interactions with Harry Levin were quite revealing.

The pointer provided to viewers at the outset, to the Greek city-state as a model of "polis," is more pregnant with meaning than the film's interlocutor or producer seem to realize. For the Greek vision is basically tragic, having nothing whatsoever to do with the more or less emotive or transcendent images or ideas that crop up here and there in the film. Peter Anastas remarks sadly on how Gloucester changed (irreversibly?) for the worse, from being an "unspoiled" community [as perceived at first by Olson, or is Olson's perceived perception colored by Peter's own childhood memory and/or by the poet's memory of childhood summers in Gloucester?]. Whatever, however, the film has a tragic quality as it moves, spasmodically, to document the tension between the ideal, "city on a hill" and the evolving reality of Gloucester. The politics of the real Gloucester polis has little in common with that of the city-on-a-hill or the Athenian agora. The poet's projection of his vision is bound to be disappointed. He is bound to deny his roots at the end. His vision of community was never understood as a source of change; so it was often subverted and effectively denied.

The latter, tragic outcome arises almost inexorably because of a deep-rooted paradox in Olson's work -- if only the film had been designed to show this! On the one hand, he observes a working landscape and honors "those who have polis in their eye." On the other, his is a distinctly elitist view, as in "It is not the many but the few who care." Curiously, but in a way that sometimes detracts from the producer's ability to honor his own goals, the film is also (and, in this reviewer's view, unnecessarily) elitist to the extent that it over-relies upon poets, intellectuals and arcane referents. Olson was definitely a part of this hyper-intellectual community of souls who, like any such community, communicate with each other in language that is largely foreign to the apocryphal "man in the street" -- as one could readily tell if the scenes involving the Gloucester working men and women were juxtaposed with those featuring poets and intellectuals. The failure to bridge this gap is an aspect of tragedy in Olson's otherwise rich, creative and influential life. It is also a failing of the documentary, in its ability to connect poet and place. For the most important "particularity" of a place as a "polis" is not its geography or scenic beauty but its people and whether they, indeed, "have the polis in their eye."

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