

Curriculum for the Conning of the New Polis (Olson Now!)

The work of poetry

a poetry of *essential use*

is to know how, to con—*scholarship* [school business], whether a whale ship is your Harvard and your Yale, or, you are unlucky, and Harvard or Yale is your Harvard and Yale. Knowledge is important only for its consequences.

Black Mountain was founded at the last possible moment when self-reliant farming could be a model discipline (1933), an image of a way of life: the honing of the mind and the care of the kine, as a complete package. By 1945, even the sentimentality was dead, though it was revived by the Whole Earth Catalog movement in 1960s. The fishing village, and its discipline, as an image of a possible life, did last long after Olson took up the theme.

(o Po-ets, you

should getta

job

It's hard to imagine Jonathan Williams milking the cows at Black Mountain, if that was the proposition, but we are talking vocational education here. The Curriculum for the Study of the Soul appeared in the context of people preparing to become college professors. In either case it was preparation for lives of alternative simplicity. Black Mountain was founded on the precybernetic, educational principles of John Dewey, and although Olson rarely mentioned Dewey, he was a Deweyite and transactionalist in his bones

Poetry was captured as a discipline of being in Olson's historical narrative by Pindar (see "Letter 23"), and it embodied eternal states of mind ("gods," Pound called them). And this classical generalization took possession, beyond all of the people who entered into and out of these eternal states, of history for twenty-five centuries. The philosophic arguments were quite beside the point. People had these experiences of eternity, to their detriment as viable Earthly creatures. When the church died out in the nineteenth century, the arts were repurposed, as we would now say, as the zone of being. The resurgent Protestantism of the 1970s was a commercial version of modernist aesthetics.

In face of the actual state of Earth in the twentieth century, these eternal states of mind can only be understood as psychotic. We live in a world in which all of the leaders of the overwhelming empire, including the leaders of the official opposition party, have lost contact with reality. And a large percentage of the people who should be screaming their

heads off with alternative arts and alternative plans will look at my use of “reality” in the previous sentence and get so anxious they will pee in their pants.

You look out your window: *that is reality*. Reality is not what you read about in the *NY Times*; it is the queasy feeling you get just *after* you read it. We can be clear enough about these matters without having a three-day conference and publishing a tome of proceedings. Reality is easy. What to *do* is another matter.

To con

To know, know how, design, make (OE *cunnan*, from *gno-*, the root also of *cunning*, notice, recognize, noble, diagnosis, narrate)—all of this being in itself, or leading to, act.

What are the protocols of the new, secular dispensation.

Olson found in Melville the end of that dispensation of self-responsibility and authoritarianism. It was a regime of contradictions, the inevitable condition of finitude (without final knowledge or access to deities). The old order negotiated the relation between the individual and authority, which resolved in tension, tension as value, not the orgasm but just before. Western civilization was a seminal retention cult. The tension was delicious but sooner or later, they’d destroy the world: anywhere is everywhere, black is white, the World Wars and so forth. S

“What’s on the other side of despair?” *Now*.

There is no easy way out of this mess. *Moby Dick* has already won (Jack Clarke). The Earth does not have the resources to feed, clothe, house, provide health care for, and educate its present population, so they can live with the dignity of autonomous creatures. This is not extrapolation. We are in total crisis. In this century, it will not be possible for *anyone* to ignore the fact.

Stafford Beer (“World in Torment,” 1992):

“I estimate that more human beings are enduring agony today than ever before; the number could be greater than the sum of sufferers throughout history. I speak of starvation and epidemic; war and terrorism; deprivation, exploitation, and physical torture. I repeat the word agony; I am not talking about 'hard times'.

“Second on my list is the collapse of the civilization we have known in our lifetime. We are looking at the rubble that remains of two competing empires. Soviet communism has accepted its own demise; Western capitalism has not accepted it yet. But I am not making a forecast. I am examining the facts that are under our noses.

“Out of 'political correctness', no one talks about the exploitation of either nature or indigenous peoples any more. They talk instead about 'sustainable development' - but there is no such thing. Not only can development not be sustained; even the existing

fabric cannot be sustained any longer. These two spectacular transitions, of human agony and societal collapse, are connected - not only at the phenomenal level, but in their etiology. It is not credible that most people prefer to live under these twin conditions. It follows that we are governed by an oligarchy - by the few; it is an oligarchy of power, greed, and terror. In the most extraordinary way, we are blind to this. To take the major example: none of the phenomena I have mentioned would be observed in their current and virulent form if there were no powerful modern armaments.”

I do not know if the 40,000 capitalist elect are preparing space ships for their escape. They are surely not as stupid as they appear and have their brightest and best in underground research centers in Nevada, making plans for a planetary exodus.

Somehow they have neutralized our numbers. The assaults on the attentions have been coming in ever greater and more efficient waves for sixty years or more. Olson went back to the grandparents—to the Titans—and their struggle; our war is to liberate ourselves against the Olympians and their generalized order. We have to deal, not with the contradiction of self-responsibility and authority, but the contradiction of communalism and anarchism. The old contradiction resolved in tension as a value; its limit was violence. The contradiction of communalism and anarchism resolves in every increasing complexity as value; the limit is indecision.

Let’s suppose someone would say to the Poetry Project, okay, Construct an Earth of value. We will bankroll you.

We are not much beyond where Olson left things. The second-order cybernetics group at the University of Illinois, which was addressing the construction of an Earth of value from a different perspective, published *Cybernetics of Cybernetics*, edited by Heinz von Foerster, and disappeared shortly thereafter. We can learn much from Stafford Beer’s work in Allende’s Chile.

<http://www.staffordbeer.com/papers/Fanfare%20for%20Effective%20Freedom.pdf>

The artists, who have fully taken up the challenge, are Arakawa and Madelaine Gins.

<http://www.reversibledestiny.org/>

I like Pierre Joris’ suggestion that Olson curriculum needs to be redone, but what are the terms now? What directly are the terms of the New Kind of Nation?

What are the *topoi* now? What are the texts that contribute to directly to the making of an essential verse now?