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Draft of paper presented 2/24/2022 on The Charles Olson Society, Panel 1 – “Charles Olson and the Secular Divine” at The Louisville Conference on Literature and Culture Since 1900, University of Louisville

Joanne Kyger and “the Kook Strain” in Olson: A Reading

“Kyger Kyger, Burning Bright, In the Forests of the Night’. . . Blake sure knew, and so does Joanne Elizabeth Kyger—once and for all.”

- Robert Creeley, Introduction to Joanne Kyger reading in Buffalo, April 2, 1982¹

“What is problematic for Bob I think is including his Olson in such drek (his word), when he has been at pains for some time to “edit out” the kook strain and make Charles available to all”

- Jack Clarke to Tom Clark, 28 June 1991²

“De Quincey placed hands over his ears in ‘horror’. When Lamb had finished, he assumed a ‘sarcastic smile’ and told his guest that had he known they were going to talk ‘in this strain’ they should have said grace before we began our conversation.”

- Frances Wilson³

“The influence of Olson’s Buffalo—and finally it must be seen, I think, in those collective terms rather than singularly—is not easy to measure, precisely because of the resistance to the literary that is central to its thought of itself [...] to shake off the stupor of the literary and realize poetry’s possible vocation.”

- Michael Boughn⁴

“you had in fact written new rules for a new ANCIENT RITE!”

- Charles Olson to Joanne Kyger, Sept 27th 1968⁵

My original abstract called for more ambitious an agenda than I’ll achieve in the span of one panel session. In place of covering multiple poets and digging too deep into Olson overall, I’ll be looking at Joanne Kyger as one vital continuing conduit of what Joshua Hoeynck’s call for

¹ *There You Are*, 104

² originally posted February 21, 2016 “in Documents”. <https://wayback.archive-it.org/12142/20201105010759/https://www.dispatchespoetrywars.com/documents/john-clarke-to-tom-clark-28-june-1991/> accessed 2/14/2022

³ *A Guilty Thing: A Life of Thomas de Quincey*, 126

⁴ “Olson’s Buffalo”, 18. https://www.academia.edu/23131481/Olsons_Buffalo accessed 2/14/2022

⁵ *There You Are*, 50

papers identifies in Olson's poetics as "what poet Jack Clarke once called 'the kook strain,' a line of thinking that grew increasingly esoteric, mystical, and gnostic."

The roots of whatever might be considered "the kook strain" in Olson undoubtedly arise from out his last year teaching in Buffalo (1964-65), or rather the lingering after effects as it were of his presence there. As seen in the epigraph above, Clarke employs the term in a 1991 letter to Olson biographer the poet Tom Clark identifying an undesirable quasi-mystic sense to Olson's legacy held by Olson's longtime friend, as well as of Tom Clark's, the poet Robert Creeley, by then himself a chaired professor in Poetics at Buffalo. "Drek" [sic] in fact is Creeley's word for what Clarke goes on to claim the poet saw as "religious contexting": "what I think 'spooked' Bob (his word) is this what he regards as religious contexting of Olson." (1991 Letter to Clark)

Exactly what Creeley was reacting against was in no doubt to some degree the then decades old ongoing project, *A Curriculum of the Soul*, overseen by Clarke and Albert Glover. Composed of twenty-eight individual fascicles each written by a different poet over several decades, the full *Curriculum* was finally published as a whole in a private limited edition in 2010, followed by a trade edition in 2016 (Spuyten Duyvil). The full realization of the project is without doubt a major representative byproduct of "the kook strain" delivered direct from Olson.

The beginnings of *A Curriculum of the Soul* came from out Clarke's earliest exposure to Olson's teaching in Buffalo, when at Glover's urging as chair of the dept, the newly hired Clarke sat in on Olson's Fall 1964-Spring 1965 classes. Having just written his dissertation deeply immersed in the visionary poetics of William Blake, Clarke's imagination was intensely sparked by the

breadth of Olson's elemental engagement with myth and poetry (a demonstrative practice of mythopoesis in the flesh) as based in the lived experience of one's reading and writing. Olson's teaching was far more concerned with demonstrating a manner of existing than any of the other more conventional modes of learning. This emphasis spilled over outside of the classroom.

Olson originally approached Clarke at a party in Buffalo, warmly engaging him in a chat remarking how he "dug [his] pants."⁶ And as Glover remarks on Olson's teaching: "I do believe he set out quite deliberately to take away some habits we might have adopted from our education [...] 'information' was the least of it."⁷ Olson sought a mode of immediacy in terms of being in his teaching that relied more on intuitive connections made in-the-moment over studious preparation and rehearsal of facts.

Clarke took extensive notes of the classes, the first set of which is entitled "The 28 phases of Charles Olson", notably mirroring the number of *Curriculum* fascicles. This may or may not be relevant to the significance of Clarke's use of the number 28, but Blake was born on the 28th of November and the Blake family operated a hosiery business and lived at no.28 from 1752-1812, Blake's older brother James taking over the business and residence after their father's passing, while Blake moved just down the street. Coincidentally, *Ideology and Utopia in the Poetry of William Blake* (1998) also happens to be no.28 in the Cambridge Studies in Romanticism Series. In addition, the Wikipedia entry for the number 28 notes that when at 45° the sun rotates every 28 days; the Gregorian calendar follows a general 28 year cycle; there is a 28 year solar cycle

⁶ John Clarke to Tom Clark, October 23, 1986. "John Clarke to Tom Clark — Correspondence 1985-1986, with an introduction by Michael Boughn", 9. <https://wayback.archive-it.org/12142/20201105003836/https://www.dispatchespoetrywars.com/documents/john-clarke-to-tom-clark-correspondence-1985-1986-with-an-introduction-by-michael-boughn/> accessed 2/14/2022

⁷ "THE 28 PHASES OF CHARLES OLSON" AND "THE ARCHEOLOGY OF MORNING: CAUSAL AND APPLIED—" (1965) *Paideuma: Modern and Contemporary Poetry and Poetics*, 2016, Vol. 43 (2016), 51

within the Jewish tradition; and “deriving from the 29.46 year period of Saturn's revolution around the Sun, the 28-year cycle as well as its subdivisions by 14 and 7 are supposed in Astrology to mark significant turning points or sections in the course of a person’s development in life” while also pointing out the importance of the number 28 for certain Sufi sects utilizing a 28-beat metric pattern.⁸ At any rate, when Olson abruptly left Buffalo in 1965 (his wife Bettie having died in a tragic car accident in the Spring of ’64) he scrawled out for Clarke, who took over teaching Olson’s class, a sprawling “plan” composed of “223 names, subjects, ideas, topics, strewn across the page at all angles”⁹ from which Clarke drew the 28 ‘topics’ covered by the fascicles.

In his Introduction to Clarke’s notes, Benjamin Friedlander describes the argument in Clarke’s Blake dissertation for “practice as a mode of intellection, not simply a means of creating what the intellect explains.”¹⁰ Clarke recognizes that for Blake “nothing could enter his visionary crucible. . .without undergoing complete and continual metamorphosis.”¹¹ This interaction between textual and visceral worlds conveyed through a singular perspective was what Clarke found himself witnessing firsthand in Olson’s teaching. And one that Clarke would himself pursue in decades to come. In a review of Clarke’s later collection of lectures, *From Feathers to Iron*, poet Gerrit Lansing mentions hearing Clarke’s work referred to as “a Blakeification of Olson”.¹²

⁸ [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/28_\(number\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/28_(number)) accessed 2/14/2022.

⁹ Joanne Kyger, “The Community of The Curriculum of the Soul.” <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet-books/2012/08/the-community-of-the-curriculum-of-the-soul> accessed 2/14/2022

¹⁰ Ibid, 58

¹¹ Ibid, 54

¹² *A February Sheaf*, Pressed Wafer Press, Boston, 2003. 108

In Clarke's lecture notes Olson declares, "the poet must have a cosmology"¹³ going on to insist "The universe is your collaborator [...] You start with the active growth process going on in the cosmos. Cosmology is a cooperative act."¹⁴ It is a dual engagement between the poet and the entirety of the ongoing processes at work in the vastness of known existence, as Olson continues to explicate: "When you discover your 'proper subject' you'll get production, because it (creation) is going on, and you can share in it, if you don't disturb to discover."¹⁵ Extrapolating upon what he means by "don't disturb to discover", Olson emphasizes that although the grasping of the discovered content is active in the immediate moment there is nonetheless extensive work that must be done (for Olson reading lists were always of utmost importance): "You get the most by doing the least at invasion point, but you never get to the context, the invasion point, unless you do your homework, unless you prepare yourself, that is, unless you have acquired yourself—the phenomenology of perception."¹⁶ Importantly "you must not impose your subjectivity on the cosmos to get a subject."¹⁷ Or alternately as I recall somewhere a line of poet Clark Coolidge's going, "A universe is not of use."¹⁸ Olson argues against any predetermination of value prior to discovery in the committed act, which is the writing of the poem.

Olson also urges his Buffalo students to "be a shaman" emphasizing there is "no static cosmology" but rather an evolving exchange of energy resulting from the individual's interaction with what is outside of themselves, the very locale in which they find themselves working:

¹³ *Ibid.*, [114]

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, [115]

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, [116]

¹⁸ *Melencolia*. The Figures, 1987.

“process in place—the place & the practice”.¹⁹ What the poet writes is the documentation of ongoing development “you become what you behold” upon the page.²⁰ All that feeds into the poem is specific to what’s at hand “there is no such thing as general knowledge”.²¹ The poet must seek “to incarnate and to do this you must discover your ‘leading propensity’ you own unique stamp or type as a person” which requires “the acquisition of what you have got where you are” that is, the surroundings in which you write.²² But beware that you mustn’t be too eager, pushing too hard for results. Olson reminds: “as Blake puts it, ‘attempting to become more than man we become less.’”²³ That is to say, tread lightly know and stay within your own limits (“Limits are what any of us are inside of”- Olson) and breathe easy.

Whether or not consciously mirroring Clarke’s expression for Creeley’s distaste, Friedlander notably finds Olson “kooky in his erudition”.²⁴ It should be no surprise that understanding *A Curriculum* as representing an immersive engagement with Olson’s mythopoetic teaching helps to flesh out “the kook strain” of Olson’s poetics as identified by Clarke and so disturbing to Creeley. In particular, it seems for Creeley that there was something off-putting about having his old friend’s words associated with any sense of such a religiously tainted thing as “soul”. Creeley himself, along with poet Ed Dorn, had refused the opportunity to contribute a fascicle to *A Curriculum*. They did not wish to have their work put to use under the guiding control of a figure who they saw aligned with quasi-spiritual/religious/mythic intent (namely, Clarke, who assigned *Curriculum* topics to contributors and thus presumably tainted them with “Blakeification”).

¹⁹ "THE 28 PHASES...", [119]

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid., [124]

²² Ibid., [127]

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid., 53

There was a sense of, as Tom Clark once referred to it, a “Buffalo mafia” afoot at times with Clarke as the presiding Don.²⁵

The fact that Joanne Kyger contributed *Phenomenological* (published 1989, written 1984) to *A Curriculum* shows she shared no such qualms. From her longtime home in the small coastal town Bolinas just north of San Francisco, Kyger became one extension of Olson’s Buffalo. She taught Olson regularly in poetics classes locally at New College of California as well as in Colorado at Naropa. Her writing embraces what might be seen as “religious contexting” in its easy relation to elements of Buddhism and other Eastern spiritual traditions, along with Native American ceremonial rites and beliefs in relation to Place. In addition, much of her work is clearly sympathetic to ideas Olson expresses in Clarke’s notes.

Kyger’s fascicle topic is directly alluded to in Olson’s remark: “you never get to the context, the invasion point, unless you do your homework, unless you prepare yourself, that is, unless you have acquired yourself—the phenomenology of perception.”²⁶ Composed of daily travel and dream notes made during Kyger’s 1985 trip to the Yucatan Peninsula, her contribution to *A Curriculum* unfolds, as so much of her writing does, as a kind of life-practicum of principles laid out in Olson’s teaching. While writing *Phenomenological* Kyger had Olson in mind, near the beginning she mentions (re-)reading his *Mayan Letters* and he seems a few pages later directly addressed mid-entry:

We find
our own little niche of sand
and coral amid the masses of snorklers

²⁵ Joe Safdie, personal communication, Feb 1 2022.

²⁶ "THE 28 PHASES...", [115]

on this tiny famous reef.

Tour boats from
Cancun empty and load up Americans for a stop
I see an avenue of 30 swimmers go by...

Charles! Use some
imagination...
Well it's hard to have imagination
when you're getting so many
first impressions

Our Lampara de Mesa
Lampshade is a conch shell

The island is littered
with caracol shell, must be
no protection for them

Little streets of toy town Isla
sand and brick
teeny boutiques, & homes with T.V.
sets and hammocks

Super torta from happy
young lady in lime green hole
in the wall.

We sit in two chairs on the empty
roof top and view the moon and town
all so close together

Very few cars on Isla Mujeres, mostly
motor bikes and bicycles.

In a recent critical survey of Kyger's work, Timothy Gray offers observations demonstrating the weaving confluence of various influences upon her work, citing Olson and referencing the lowkey vibe her writing conveys:

the poet notices that she has traveled far enough off the beaten path to breathe easy: "If you make it this far you are fairly out of danger/ because now you are on foot/ on dirt roads, edged with sunlight/ and small birds. When the wind/ comes up you inhale it whole/ and slowly distribute it/ calm the torrent of breathing" (About Now 563). For Kyger, the confluence in this passage is subtle but revelatory, since the poetic breath unit

of Olson's "Projective Verse," the meditative breathing exercise of the practicing Buddhist, and the refreshing wind that whips in from the ocean, are all of one piece. The balance of inhalation and exhalation, depicted evenly in three-beat lines, suggests an easy, stress-free continuum, rather than an epic call to action. "Ideas are a dime a dozen," Kyger told an interviewer in 1983. "I don't want that. I want to see how you live in your environment or in your compassion for place" (Thorpe 99). Total immersion is key to what Kyger once termed "the broad/ sweeping/ form of being there" (About Now 211), a state of wellness that doesn't rely on the self so much as it relies on natural phenomena surrounding the self (which subsequently dissolves in those surroundings).²⁷

Note the mellow balance and emphasis placed upon locality Gray identifies. The idea of "total immersion" mirroring Olson's "the acquisition of what you have got where you are".

Casting about for ways to open skeptical secular readers like Creeley to the idea of "soul" and what purpose a "curriculum" of it might serve, poet scholar and Clarke's literary executor, Michael Boughn describes how "Soul is an experience, then, an event, a *being here*."²⁸ That is, an emphasis upon the everyday tactile mundaneness of the term as expression of what it is to be alive in the circumstance of living. One's focus upon the term need have nothing so much other worldly about it. Scarcely looking further than to some of the titles of Kyger's many books we can feel how much such focus resonates with her own writing: *Places to Go, Trip Out and Fall Back, Up My Coast, Going On, Just Space, Again, As Ever, About Now*. For Kyger, it's more than enough to just be where you are at. Write from there. Hear the poem coming to you.

Buddhism plays a central role for Kyger yet it is ever playful, literally. She recounts a dream of her friend poet and Zen Abbot Philip Whalen:

"in his hands
a long wooden string of Buddhist Rosary beads, which he keeps
moving. I ask him which mantra he is doing - but he tells me

²⁷ "Take It Easier": Joanne Kyger in Bolinas. *Journal of Beat Studies*, 2020, v.8, 11-12

²⁸ What is soul and why might it need a curriculum? -- Charles Olson's "Curriculum of the Soul", 3.
https://www.academia.edu/23968506/What_is_soul_and_why_might_it_need_a_curriculum_Charles_Olsons_Curriculum_of_the_Soul accessed 2/14/2022

in Zen, you don't have to bother with any of that.
You can just *play* with the beads.”²⁹

Her Buddhist practice, like her writing practice remains grounded within informalities of the everyday.

While Clarke’s notes on Olson’s teaching in Buffalo may have a “kooky” quality for Friendlander, British-Guyanese poet Fred D’aguilar recognizes “[Olson] realised that there was a heavily formal procedure involved in bucking tradition.”³⁰ As Olson himself stresses, there is necessary “homework” that must be accomplished. By no means did he allow for complacency or an attitude of anything goes. Similarly, Kyger operated in the New College Poetics class I had the pleasure to attend with an ever generous yet firm grip. She brooked nothing half-assed from her students. The expectation was that you came attentive and remained so throughout the three hours each week. Not simply attentive to her, but to each other as well as yourself and your own writing, the world(s) through which you were moving. As Kyger describes her practice: “The shape of the day, the words of the moment, what's happening around me in the world of exterior and interior spaces—these are my writing concerns.”³¹

Particularly striking was how much effort she would put into coaching students when reading out loud. Every week we read not just our own work to each other but also, round-robin style, extensive passages from the assigned reading. Kyger frequently stopping us mid-reading, advising on volume, pace, inflection, and passion—show some interest! Always pointing out that

²⁹ “Philip Whalen’s Hat” *Just Space: poems, 1979-1989* (Santa Rosa: Black Sparrow Press, 1991)

³⁰ *Poetry London* 100 Autumn 2021, 54

³¹ Artist Statement, Dec. 2005. Foundation for Contemporary Arts.

<https://www.foundationforcontemporaryarts.org/recipient/joanne-kyger/> accessed 2/22/2022

how the work is presented upon the page indicates in a specific manner how to approach oral presentation. Heavy emphasis was drawn upon reliance upon “breath” and the possibility of the page carrying over to the reader clear indications of how the poet intends the lines be sounded out. She opened the Poetics class I took with a heady exegetical, quite personal interrogation of Olson’s “Projective Verse” essay. Olson’s text had long served as central tenet for her writing practice, as she acknowledges:

In San Francisco in 1957 when I was first "coming of age" in poetry, Joe Dunn gave me a copy of *Poetry New York* #3, which contained Charles Olson's "Projective Verse." I had questions then about how to structure my words on the page. From then on, "Projective Verse" became my constant meditative text. I found comfort in the dense muscular conversational rhetoric and became aware that it was possible to chart the actual breathing of a human voice on the page.³²

Over forty years later, Olson remained ever relevant. The weekly class sessions I attended, twenty years ago now, will always remain lasting primary example of practical everyday poetics, executed with tutorial finesse.

CODA:

In a footnote Gray mentions: “Kyger was notable in the New American Poetry movement for refusing self-promotion, Michael Davidson asserts (xiii).” She also didn’t care to witness her poet-friends take to grandstanding and would humorously let them know it with self-deprecating charm.

³² “The Community of The Curriculum of the Soul.” <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet-books/2012/08/the-community-of-the-curriculum-of-the-soul> accessed 2/14/2022

Question to Anne Waldman after being interviewed by Bill Berkson at The New College like they were at Club 21 sitting at a ringside table on November 19, 1999

“Do you think they should show on public tv a camera shot of the inside of a Panda bear’s vagina getting artificial insemination at an army base in Texas?”

Kathleen Fraser e-mails Anne the next day to find out if Joanne Kyger is ‘ok’.

- Joanne Kyger *Again: poems 1989-2000*, pg. 163 (La Alameda Press, 2001)

The Berkson-Waldman public interview *was* a strange occasion. To my mind less ringside at Club 21 as Kyger puts it and more weekday morning tv talk show. There was even a houseplant of some sort placed on or near the small table with waters that was between their two chairs. As the poets had known each other for some three decades by then, at periods living in the same poetry communities, whether in NYC or Bolinas, the event had been relatively exciting for me as a second-year graduate student in Poetics at New College. Yet it fairly sputtered out into dull boredom. Kyger’s rather cryptic question, hollered out from the relative darkness somewhere to the side and back of the rather packed gym-stadium-like rows of seating provided by far the liveliest moment. As I recall, she was even asked to repeat the question by the quizzical pair on stage. In any event neither poet offered much in the way of a response.

While Kyger’s query did indeed come out sounding like a bit of bag lady’s sort of heckle, especially given the rather absurd stoic formality of the event, is it really so crazy-sounding as to merit Fraser’s wondrous query, “if Joanne Kyger is ‘ok?’” Is it not a fair question whether the artificial insemination of a panda bear’s vagina should be broadcast over publica television? A procedure clearly done against the animal’s will and while the creature was held captive, on an “army base in Texas” no less! And, what’s more, she was addressing fellow poets whose friendship she was as much a part of as either of them over the decades. Yet Fraser could only

hear Kyger as though a stranger would. As if some kook had wandered in from off Valencia street.

And this was behavior Kyger was known for. A jokey no bullshit stance. Another anecdote: Kyger at a local Bolinas reading hosted by Bill Berkson expressing her frustration at the poems being read by getting up and flicking the light switch on the wall on and off until Berkson pushed her out the door. Too Kooky? Who cares.

Kyger was utterly clear about where she was coming from:

“The whole occupation of poet, if it does not exist as an entity in the current society, is one that has to do with a spiritual, cultural practice of words, and can’t be ‘bought.’”

[...]

“This is a record of entering into history, and however one writes, one *is* writing one’s history.”

(*There You Are*, Waldman, “Questions” 127).

*

“Company that’s what/ it’s all about entwined / in the same air and walking/ in the same sun’s dawn” (About Now 495)

*

“this existence thing” (About Now 626)
