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“MY SON IS A MAGYAR”: IDEAS OF FIRSTNESS AND ORIGIN IN CHARLES OLSON’S POEMS

Charles Olson’s “On first Looking out through Juan de la Cosa’s Eyes” is a poem that deals with several large themes: doing, knowing, and staying in process. Through the figure of Juan de la Cosa, cartographer and early explorer of the West Indies, captain of the *Niña* in 1493 and Columbus’ “Chief Chart Maker,” the author problematizes the nature of perception and in particular seeing, as well as the possibility of firstness and origin.

This is how the poem begins:

Behaim—and nothing
insula Azores to
Cipangu (Candyn
somewhere also there were spices

and yes, in the Atlantic,
one floating island: de
Sant

brand
an

l
St Malo, however.
Or Biscay. Or Bristol.
Fishermen, had,
for how long,
talked:

Heavy sea,
snow, hail. At 8
AM a tide rip. Sounded.
Had 20 fath. decreased from that to
15, 10. Wore ship.

(They knew
Cap Raz

(As men, my town, my two towns
talk, talked of Gades, talk
of Cash's

drew, on a table, in spelt,
with a finger, in beer, a
portulans

But before La Cosa, nobody
could have
a mappemunde

The poem is from the first book of *Maximus*, written in early May 1953 at Black Mountain College. We have, among the concrete details of the various instances registered in the poem, the abundance of fish (cod), the sounding of St. George's Bank for fish, Columbus' insistence on the pear shape of the earth (that of a woman, with nipples), the stormy ocean, the worms literally eating up the ship, ships and fishermen going down the Atlantic, and finally the Gloucester ceremony of July or August when they remember, by throwing flowers into the outgoing tide, those fishermen lost at sea. George Butterick's *Guide to The Maximus Poems* is helpful, as ever, in identifying the facts here: la Cosa's *mappemunde*, map of the world, the first to include the New World; seaports from which Breton, Basque, English fishermen sailed to North America in the 15th and 16th centuries; Nathaniel Bowditch's journal; the promontory of Cap Raz in southeastern Newfoundland as referred to in Hakluyt's map of 1587; the abstraction involved in mapmaking concretized here in the form of the *portulans* or *periplus*, as well as spelt; the Phoenician Herakles as prototype of Odysseus; Newfoundland as the Land of the Cod-Fish.

1. Knowing

Knowing is at least threefold here, happening equally by measure, by myth, and by word. In each case knowing is rooted in act and experience—that “doing” which Olson considered a primary form of living. “You see,” he wrote to Vincent Ferrini, “I take it there are only two forms of mind about how it is human beings live on earth. They either do, or they build nine chains to the moon” (*Maximus to Gloucester* 16). In other poems this doing will reappear as the “onslaught” (“The chain of memory is resurrection ...”) that narrows the “distances” (“The Distances”), while also accounting for “the brilliance of the going on” (“An Ode on Nativity”).

Knowing by measure. This is the form of knowledge rooted in act and experience and offered by the explorers and navigators that Olson so particularly evokes in the Juan de la Cosa poem. Deeply interested in all kinds of beginnings, he cites various sailors traversing oceans: in addition to la Cosa, we have the 4th century, B. C., Greek explorer Pytheas, the Portuguese Cortereal brothers, Giovanni Verrazano, John Cabot, Christopher Columbus, John Lloyd, and all the fishermen. Indeed, for Olson fishermen were the true explorers of the Atlantic coast, having been there centuries before the explorers sent by European courts. The Breton fishermen sailing from St. Malo, the Basque fishermen departing from Biscay, the English fishermen sent by Bristol merchants, and all the others heading towards such well-known fisheries as Sable Island, Cash’s Ledge, or George’s are different in one very significant sense from the explorers on royal missions: they were after the fish and not power, after the fisheries and not the land. They did not set sail in order to colonize new continents and exploit new lands for profit, and their earning was commensurate with their fishing enterprise.

Olson’s interest in beginnings is matched only by his interest in narratives of beginnings. This “double vision” projecting a “‘return’ to nature, the origin, and the thing,” on the one hand, and “a departure in and for a new *discourse about* nature, origin, and thing” [*italics in the original*], on the other, is, Philip Kuberski claims, a persistent quality in American thought, ranging from the Puritans through Emerson and Whitman to Pound and Olson (175). Thus, the poem mentions several written documents in which travelers narrated their adventures: the

journal of Nathaniel Bowditch, the globe of Behaim, the *mappemunde* of Juan de la Cosa, the map of Richard Hakluyt, Hieronymus Verrazano, Maggiolo; the letters and diaries of Columbus; as well as the spelt onto which fishermen drew their maps while drinking in the taverns. What is common in these records is their primary interest in the sea as opposed to land: their mission was to traverse the seas and give true record of how they did it. Their vision was directed toward the oceans, of which they were part. So Olson's insistence on this kind of seeing, knowing by measure, and the textualization of experience onto journals, maps, portulans, etc., might be read as one version of what Tadeusz Sławek describes as "Phoenician eye-view" (taking its cue from a two-line poem in *Maximus*, where Olson assigns this capacity to Gloucester painter Fitz Hugh Lane): seeing (vs. recognizing), belonging, while looking with passion, to the world seen. "The Phoenician eye," Sławek explains, "looks at the world and SEES it (for the first time) rather than merely recognizes it (works along a pattern of reconstructive activity which only re-collects things somehow well known even before the act of looking)" (72). "It is a most awkward eye whose power is almost surreal: it looks outside and maps the world [...] even before the very thought of the world being settled and explored occurs" (73). This view is not limited by the land, not even by the bottom of the ocean, for that is unfathomable. What we have here, then, is an early conceptualization of the abyss, or endlessness, for which Olson coined the word "landlessness" in his journals. Landlessness here refers to that condition of the sailor where no land is seen on the horizon and no bottom can be fathomed below. It suggests not only a longing to go to sea and encounter such conditions, but also a kind of limitlessness of form and idea concomitant to sea voyages. This is, in Sławek's words, the "unfathomable bottom towards which the thought must reach only to discover its always progressing erosion and collapse" (25).

Knowing by myth. Mythic narratives of Hercules and Odysseus offer early models of navigation. Odysseus, instructed by Calypso to keep the Big Dipper on his left hand, represents as legitimate and useful a source of knowledge as experience informing maps and portulans. In fact, the best maps and records seem to contain mythic details too. Martin Behaim's Nuremberg globe, for instance, was showing various legendary islands, such as St. Brendan's. St. Brendan

the Navigator identified various monsters and mermaids on what he called Judas-land, probably around the British Isles. Accounts, John Lloyd's among them, of the legendary island of Brasylle off the coast of Ireland were common in the 15th and 16th centuries. The popular ballad of the *Titanic* Olson refers to—"Ladies & / to the bottom of the, / husbands, & wives"—seems also to belong to mythic knowing.

Knowing by word. Attention to words is a legitimate source of knowledge not only for poets, but for sailors and fishermen too. For example, one of the first names given to the American Atlantic coast was the Basque word for cod, *bacalhaos*; *Tierra de bacalaos*, the land of codfish, was the Spanish term for Newfoundland used on early maps (such as Verrazano's); *Norte*, in Mexican Spanish, has the particular meaning of strong north wind; "Pytheus' sludge" refers to that mixture of sea, land, and air surrounding the British Isles, described by Pytheas, which cannot be crossed by sailors. Even misspellings are helpful: although the term *Terra nova sive Limo Lue* means, in the orthography of the times, "Newfoundland or the Land of Cod-fish," it seems derivable from Latin *limus*, mud, as well, which, given the mud banks around the area, is also an apt expression. Similar to this replacement of "Mud Bank" for "Cod-Fish" in *Limo Lue* is the substitution of the name *Bertomez* for *Bretones*: Olson is ready with the conclusion that the Atlantic coast was visited by some Spanish or Portugese explorer of that name, as opposed to what mappemundes indicate: that sailors from Brittany regularly reached its shores.

2. Origin **and** process; direct experience **and** experience narrated

The poem makes a complex claim about origins, problematizing instances of firstness by asserting and questioning its possibility within one gesture. In this sense it seems to fit into that "project of American poetry" which Joseph Riddel describes as "a myth of origins that puts the myth of origins in question" (358).

When firstness is a possibility. Olson is known for his scholarly interest in cultural morphology, which might help explain the origins of certain cultures within certain spaces. Hence his familiarity with the work of Leo Frobenius and Carl Sauer, who taught him that "only certain places had been conducive to the beginnings of culture" and

that certain coincidences of place, environment, and man were necessary for a culture to begin (see George Hutchinson 83ff). This means that in cultural morphology he might have found reassurance to the possibility of firstness and origin.

In this poem his interest in beginnings figures in the insistence on *seeing* vs. *recognizing*, on one time events vs. repetitive events. Indeed, Olson registers what la Cosa sees and not what he might recognize from existing narratives (of scenes of which he had not been part). Since he did not know he landed in the “New World,” he did not recognize a cultural concept, but saw waters of cod and lands surrounded by deep mud banks to be sounded. Using his own eyes only (and not the abstraction of aerial maps), he remained part of the picture, whose primary function was to capture the viewer in a new circumstance. This implies that he still saw the scene, to apply a current New Americanist distinction, not as “other” but simply in terms of “difference,” granting an identity of its own to the land and the people. While “otherness” is part of an imperial monologue, “difference,” Myra Jehlen points out, is part of a two-sided exchange: it “denies the centrality of any point of view and the all-encompassingness of any horizon” and is thus “the anticolonial response to the imperial history of otherness” (42–43).

In addition, la Cosa drew his map, the first one to show the “New World,” based on his own tactile experience (when he felt his way, as if with his fingers). These two firsts involved here refer to experience and text, both valorized for their particularity and contingency, their being unlike anything else preceding it. Properly understood, all experience is a first if it is lived in its contingency and relieved of having to fit into pre-existing patterns of abstraction, generalization, comparison, or metaphorization. What with hindsight we know as a first was only a once event at the time it happened. Epiphany comes about from the recognition of particularity and singularity, where the imprint of precedence does not determine the “meaning” of the event, where experience remains act without claims on knowledge. In other words, Olson tries the impossible: he allows la Cosa to see what one does not know. To present what is in front of the senses, but in such a way that what he knows should not interfere with what he sees. Olson tries to get out of the trap posed by cultural and social paradigms by picking a scene where somebody sees things for the first time, sees

them as they are, and not as elements of some cultural and historical knowledge.

When firstness is folded in process and endlessness, direct experience is collapsed into narrative and cultural paradigm: no originary event at the unfathomable bottom of process, no originary experience at the unfathomable bottom of discourse. La Cosa's landing cannot be considered as an absolute first: the explorers were ahead of the colonizers; the Portugese were ahead of Cabot; the fishermen were ahead of the colonizers; Odysseus was ahead of the fishermen; Hercules was ahead of Odysseus; Pytheas was ahead of St. Brendan (even in seeing mermaids, monsters, and other creatures). In each case, the firstness of the encounter is both asserted and repeatedly withdrawn by references of the previous firsts. A scene of origin as presence or preexistent referent being no longer possible, each "discovery" is preceded by earlier discoveries. Aware of the fact that the desire of returning to origins was itself informed by myth, Olson does not wish to restore some original condition in history; instead, he seems fascinated by simply imagining—as a mental exercise—such situations that are ripped of conceptualization, rationalization, or abstraction. The Juan de la Cosa poem is, more than anything else, a rehearsal of perceiving supposedly first events with a "Phoenician eye": as once contingencies that are still parts of processes. What is claimed to be more important than firstness and originality, then, is process and staying in process. For it is through process that the energy of particularity and contingency can be retained. This whole line of discoveries, explorations, fishing, and navigation is offering interconnected instances of knowing, doing, seeing—always as if for the first time. Olson ties into these narratives without making metaphors or symbols out of them; rather, he stays in process by continuing the stories, but without trying to open up metaphysical depth beneath. This is a contiguous relationship, where the poet is in line with la Cosa, Columbus, Bowditch, Hakluyt, or Homer. This is a feedback situation, an act of passing on and responding to, without loss of energy, the concrete narratives. The voyagers—from the 15th and 19th century alike—the fish, the worms are all real, not metaphorical, they do not refer to something beyond themselves, but are simply the objects that demanded the poem—just

like, in Ralph Maud's superb reading of "The Kingfishers," "the birds demanded the poem" (27).

Olson's alternative to America's beginning, then, is not another definitive "discovery" preceding the supposedly "original" act, but a whole series of discoveries whose existence simply suspends the very idea of origin. As such, it rehearses some new knowledge about origin being not only an empty concept, but one that is repeatedly being emptied out. Since every "discovery" was preceded by previous discoveries, origin is always already preceded by another origin: history is a Moebius strip, an empty structure always returning onto itself. "A man within himself upon an empty ground," as he says in the poem with this title ("The Moebius Strip").

Not only does Olson fold origin into process, but also collapses direct experience into the narrative and cultural paradigm of this experience. Indeed, as much as he valorizes direct experience, he recognizes, in each instance, the textual nature of this experience. His heroes are necessarily those who have been recorded in history: mapmakers, chart makers, and authors of journals and letters. Even the fishermen, who preceded the colonizers, have left *portulans* and *periploi* behind, and are remembered in rituals and city records. Ultimately all forms of knowing—by measure, myth, and word—are semiotic and/or textual. In addition, the poem gains its interest from the tension between a context-based reading and its decontextualized focus on the particularities of la Cosa's perceptions. We who live four centuries after la Cosa do know the cultural significance of his landing: his seeing the shore for the first time is not innocent because neither la Cosa, nor Olson, looks with the eyes only, but through cultural concepts that are just being constructed. La Cosa's eyes are, so to speak, making their cultural objects right on the spot. In portraying the experiencing of experience, neither the captain nor the poet can avoid using language and cognitive constructs that were evolving as la Cosa arrived on this scene of a supposedly first encounter.

3. Apocatastasis as process and textuality.

Olson's fascination with the possibility or impossibility of restoring some original condition figures in another poem too, one that has

particular relevance for Hungarian readers: “The chain of memory is resurrection.” It is here that he celebrates *apocatastasis* not as a return to origins but as process and textuality, the interconnectedness of textuality, or the processional textuality of memory and imagination. This is “the chain of memory” that leads him back to his supposedly Hungarian background.

All that has been
suddenly is: time

is the face
of recognition, Rhoda Straw; or my son
is a Magyar. The luminousness
of my daughter
to her mother
by a stream:

apocatastasis

how it occurs, that in this instant I seek to speak
as though the species were a weed-seed a grass a
barley corn
in the cup of my palm. And I was trying
to hear what it said, I was putting my heart down
to catch the pain

Resurrection

is. It is the avowal. It is the admission. The
renewal
is the restoration: the man in the dark with the
animal
fat lamp
is my father. Or my grandfather. [...]

The poem attempts to tie into the process of remembering, to recreate the momentum of the soul’s “onslaught,” the human capacity for *apocatastasis*, the soul’s attack against time and death. This staying in process is achieved by accepting the “landlessness” in life, the abyss created by endless generations, and makes for an emotional tension (“putting my heart down / to catch the pain”) not easy to solve. Since *the* originary condition is impossible to reach, *an* originary condition can be approached by staying in process: in this case remembering and imagining. It seems that the poet’s Hungarian roots, imagined or otherwise, are also part of this *apocatastasis*. Even though Olson could not even have known that in Hungarian the words

onslaught [támadás] and *resurrection* [feltámadás] have the same root, what he suggests is no less than the overcoming of death via staying in process. “The renewal / is the restoration.”

What exactly are these Hungarian roots? In a letter to Robert Creeley dated May 27, 1950 he refers to the family name of his grandmother, Lybeck (Lübeck), as being Hungarian (*Correspondence* 1: 51). This supposedly exotic identification appears also in the Berkeley reading: “That’s because I am a Hungarian” (*Muthologos* 1: 131). On the same page with this reference in volume one of the *Olson-Creeley Correspondence* he cites the Hungarian mathematician Farkas Bolyai and his famous metaphor of the violet-like coincidence of new thoughts:

It is here again c. 1825 Bolyai Farkas, to Bolyai Janos:
“Son, when men are needed they spring up, on all
sides, like violets, come the season.” (51)

The original quote reads: “many things have an epoch, in which they are found at the same time in several places, just as the violets appear on every side in spring” (see the notes to *Olson-Creeley Correspondence* 1:164). He refers to this remark in other poems as well, among them “The Story of an Olson, and Bad Thing” and “Apollonius of Tyana.”

John Smith is another “Hungarian connection,” and Olson was aware of this (see his essay “Captain John Smith”). John Smith had been in the service of the Hungarian Zsigmond [Sigismund] Báthori (1572–1613), prince of Transylvania, and fought the Turks in the tragic battle of Mezőkeresztes in 1596, where he nearly died. Captured, he escaped—with the help of the Turkish princess, Charatza Tragabigzanda—from Constantinople in 1603, went on to Russia and returned to England in 1604. Here he joined the group of English colonists setting sail in December 1606, to arrive first at Chesapeake Bay (April 1607) and then to what was to become Jamestown Colony, May 14. The journals of John Smith give ample description of both his adventures in Transylvania and of the young Byzantine princess, Charatza Tragabigzanda, Smith’s benefactor for whom he named Cape Ann. This Tragabigzanda then appears in Olson as the “Turkish

princess,” who gave her name to a pageant in which young Charles was to participate in Gloucester (“Maximus to Gloucester, Letter 11”).

For Olson Captain John Smith meant several things: a traveler, mapmaker and journalist (journal-writer), he created modern versions of the *periplus* or *portulans* by valorizing the particular and showing scrupulous attention to detail; he was a man of action, who acted upon his attention, curiosity, and passion. What seems significant for Olson is that John Smith was a figure of cultural dislocation, in possession of the advantage, or capacity, of changing perspectives and thereby convey history as an instance of wonder, while also producing wonder. Olson took his “Hungarian roots” as emblematic of this dislocation and paradigm change, as well as some condition preceding logocentrism and the written word. As Robert Creeley notes in his preface to the Hungarian edition of Olson’s poems:

[...] it is the implicit echoes of “Hungarian” itself, as a language and movement of people, which must have pleased him. It reaches beyond the enclosure of the Indo-European to a world one has only as words spoken, which last would have been his delight. (13)

4. István Budai Parmenius’ account.

If, following the lead of these “implicit echoes” of Hungarianness, Olson had dug a little further into the writings of European explorers, he might have found another person of this same period of Transatlantic Renaissance, one more Hungarian capable of cultural dislocation: István Budai Parmenius, or Stephanus Budaeus. Born in Buda in the second part of the 16th century, Parmenius was a student in various cities in Europe, Heidelberg mostly, but traveling as far as Elizabethan England. In Oxford he studied in Christ Church College, and was the roommate and friend of Richard Hakluyt. Through Hakluyt he met Humphrey Gilbert, who was just getting ready to make his second voyage to North America. Parmenius wrote a poem of praise, in Latin, to Gilbert, which was published in 1582. Gilbert then took the Hungarian poet along for his third voyage starting in 1583, in order to secure a poet to chronicle their adventures. The expedition contained four ships, out of which three landed, 50 days later, in Newfoundland’s Saint John’s Harbor. Parmenius sent a long letter back home from here, with one of the ships, describing to his

friend Hakluyt the land they had reached. As the two ships turned south, they got into a storm and were shipwrecked in August 1583, with Parmenius among those lost to the sea. Only one of the four ships, that of Captain Edward Hayes, returned home to England.

In his letter written on Newfoundland, Parmenius first describes Penguin Islands, where they saw no penguins and did not land. Then he goes on to writing about the sick on the ship, then about Newfoundland itself. He frankly admits being unable to discuss local customs, since he has only seen the wilderness. He is especially amazed at the abundance of fish, all sorts. Trees are so many that it is just about impossible to move around or see anything. Vegetation is exuberant, he says; there are all sorts of corn, rye, nuts, and berries (blackberries and strawberries), all tasteful and enjoyable. He has not met any local inhabitants, neither can he imagine what varieties of metal the mountains may hide. He notes the extremities of weather: in August it is so hot that the sun scorches their scraps of fish, but snow and ice are still common in May, he hears. The air is always clear above the ground, but always foggy above the sea. Parmenius closes his letter with another paragraph on the wonderful fishing opportunities along the 40 mile Bank where the bottom of the sea can be still sounded.

Now I ought to tell you about the customs, territories and inhabitants: and yet what am I to say, my dear Hakluyt, when I see nothing but desolation? There are inexhaustible supplies of fish, so that those who travel here do good business. Scarcely has the hook touched the bottom before it is loaded with some magnificent catch. The whole terrain is hilly and forested: the trees are for the most part pine. Some of these are growing old and others are just coming to maturity, but the majority have fallen with age, thus obstructing a good view of the land and the passage of travelers, so that no advance can be made anywhere. (Quinn 171)

The primary significance of Stephen Parmenius' letter of 1583 lies in its existence: it is the first document written by a Hungarian from and about America. Otherwise it seems to represent all those forms—widely prevalent in the 15th–17th centuries—of knowing and doing from which Olson distances himself, his fishermen, and explorers. First, Parmenius looks in order to recognize. For example, he approaches the Penguin Island with the expectation of seeing penguins

there, which preconception prevents him from learning anything about the island: "It is an Ilande which your men call Penguin, because of the multitude of birdes of the same name. Yet wee neither sawe any birdes, nor drewe neere to the lande" (Quinn 174). Second, he watches the scene from a safe distance and does not allow himself to be part of it. For example, he does not land on Penguin Island and does not wish to venture into the woods (the "wildenesse"), and thereby does not meet the inhabitants of the land. "Whether there bee any people in this Countrey I not know, neither have I seene any to witnesse it" (175). Third, he sees in terms of general categories, not concrete details. When describing the flora and fauna of Newfoundland, he merely speaks about fish, trees, pines, and berries, but without going into specifics. Fourth, he perceives with an eye for use and profit, hoping the land "may easelie bee framed for the use of man" and "mettals lye under the hilles" (175). Finally, he recognizes that their journey must be "profitable to the intentions" of the Patron (176), and rejoices over how the "Admirall tooke possession of the Countrey, for himselfe and the kingdome of England: having made and published certain Lawes, concerning religion, and obedience to the Queene of England" (175). He sees himself as the advance guard of colonization and exploitation.

5. Olson/la Cosa vs. Parmenius

Read next to Stephen Parmenius' letter, the features of Charles Olson's "On first Looking out through Juan de la Cosa's Eyes" I discussed earlier seem all the more prevalent. Parmenius writes out of the colonizer's perspective, with a sense of European centrality; representing the financial and political interests behind the explorations; as such he writes conquest literature. What he sees is constantly fitted into the paradigms of what he knows; his seeing takes place in general categories rather than concrete details. At the same time he withdraws himself from the scene, making an "other" of the object of his vision.

Olson's *la Cosa* is an explorer trying to know by measure, myth, and word. He tries to see without recognizing, to understand scenes that might not fit his cultural paradigms. When Olson "first" looks out through Juan de la Cosa's eyes, he sees a whole series, a whole process, of first and once events—or more properly, their records—

and is thereby claiming and at the same time suspending the very idea of firstness and originality. Finally, looking at a scene of which he too is part, he captures “difference”: his discovery is geared at his own self (in a new environment) as much as the “New World” itself.

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