Charles Boer on Charles Olson


In the early sixties, when Olson was teaching his now legendary poetry courses at Buffalo, Charles Boer was one of his most ardent student disciples. Later, when Mr Boer became a member of the English department at the University of Connecticut, he frequently invited Olson, who had returned to his native Gloucester, down for a visit, but ‘it was like inviting the Pope. I never really expected [him] to come’ (p. 11). In September 1969, however, Olson not only came; like the Man Who Came To Dinner, he stayed for more than three months, first at Boer’s house (until the latter nearly broke down from the strain of hosting his Gargantuan guest) and then at a nearby hotel. For a time, he taught at the university, where he typically enchanted a select group of students and alienated most of his colleagues. But in December Olson contracted a fatal cancer of the liver, and he died in January of 1970.

*Charles Olson in Connecticut* is Mr Boer’s intimate record (written in the second person as a tribute to Charles) of these last months. Although he frequently refers to Olson’s past and provides vivid anecdotes about the poet’s youth in Gloucester or his later misadventures in the Washington bureaucracy of the forties, he modestly disavows any intention of writing a ‘definitive biography’. His is a highly personal portrait and, as such, one’s response to it is naturally coloured by one’s own view of Olson. For Mr Boer himself never questions Olson’s status as Great Poet; both literally (he measured six feet eight inches and weighed 255 pounds) and figuratively a ‘Gulliver in Lilliput’ (p. 124). Thus, although the memoir makes no bones about Olson’s megalomania and egocentricity, his erratic behaviour, his rudeness and crudeness, Mr Boer implies that such faults are to be viewed as the charming eccentricities of a genius. Poets, it seems, are exempt from the laws that govern the lives of ordinary people.

The reader who shares this view of artists in general, and Olson in particular, will undoubtedly find this memoir witty and warm, humane and touching. But if one
happens, as I do, to take a less positive view of Olson's achievement, one finds oneself all too frequently exasperated by Olson's behaviour as well as by Charles Boer's tolerance of it.

For one thing, nothing in this book convinces us that Charles Olson (especially in his final phase) had a great mind. He may have had much random knowledge of Anatolian artefacts and Mayan hieroglyphs, but it is not clear to what use he actually put these materials. As a philosopher, he was given to pseudo-profundities: myth, for example, was to be divided into 'three proper areas: initiatic cosmos, the world of nature, and the celestial world' (p. 27). Of Whitehead, his favourite philosopher, he could write: 'The spiritual is all in Whitehead's simplest of all statements: Measurement is most possible throughout the system. That is what I mean. That is what I feel all inside. That is what I love' (p. 107). And although he dismissed most of his fellow poets as ignorant bores, towards the end, he himself was writing poems like the following:

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\begin{align*}
&\text{the Blow is Creation} \\
&\text{and the Twist the Nasturtium} \\
&\text{is any one of Ourselves} \\
&\text{And the place of it all?} \\
&\text{Mother Earth Alone}
\end{align*}
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I prefer an earlier America. I didn't know that I wd... (p. 70)

This is not exactly Making it New.

But what about Olson's fabled powers as a conversationalist? 'There was no sane man', Mr Boer reports, 'who could match Olson as a talker. Your conversation was overwhelming':

It would be a two-way exchange, fast and easy, for the first few hours. Then, as my energy started to droop, you would actually pick up the pace, getting more and more intense as you saw me flagging. After several hours of listening to you talk in an increasingly booming voice about everything from poetry to cigars, I was exhausted. . . . Sometimes you would talk for nine or ten hours straight. At first it was marvelous. I felt privileged to have the Olson genius all to myself at my table. But as the hours went on, and the days too, I couldn't keep it up. (p. 33)

The author consistently takes this apologetic line. When a week's supply of dirty dishes had piled up in the sink, he 'formally' asked Olson's 'permission' to wash up, making sure he played Stravinsky and Dylan records the Great Man would enjoy so that he would not be bored while his host worked. When the phone rang for 'Cholly', Olson would hang up on the caller. When friends came to visit, Olson told them, 'Boer's busy and won't be able to see you for a few weeks' (p. 34). At a dinner party given by Charles Brover, another former Buffalo student now teaching at Connecticut, Olson excitedly slammed down his fist on the glass-top coffee table, smashing it to bits. What was his reaction to this accident? 'You quickly said you were sorry, offered to pay for it, then went right on talking' (p. 42). On the way home, 'you kept grumbling . . . about Brover's politics' and criticizing his guests. 'At the same time, though, Brover told me that you called him afterward, to thank him for the dinner, and also to tell him, "There's just the three of us, Brover, just the three of us: you, me, and John Wieners"' (p. 44).

Delightfully eccentric? Or callous and hypocritical? When William Moynihan, the chairman of the English department, arranged, against all odds, to get Olson a teaching appointment in the middle of the term, the poet remained unimpressed, implying that such favours were, after all, no more than he deserved. On his first day of class, arriving with his wicker baskets filled with Keebler cookies and books stuffed with toilet-paper book markers, he greeted his audience 'with a long blast
of the foulest language [he] could muster', hoping to scare away the more timid students, especially the women. 'This', Mr Boer fondly recalls, 'was a tactic you had used effectively at Buffalo' (p. 53).

I find nothing endearing or charming about this anecdote. Even more irritating is the account of Charles Boer's near breakdown as a result of Olson's endless talk-and-drink marathons, and the impossibility of convincing Olson to move out. 'I told you', Mr Boer recalls, 'that if you didn't go, I was going to go. You said that was fine, that I should go' (p. 74). Later, when Olson finally moved to the Altaveigh Hotel, Mr Boer continued to play the role of adoring slave. One evening, ill with a high fever, he actually tried to cancel a dinner engagement with Olson. In a fury, the poet summoned him to the hotel. Sweating and shivering, Mr Boer arrived at the appointed hour.

One can argue, of course, that as an aspiring poet, Boer could put up with a great deal of bullying from his mentor in return for the privilege of daily contact with genius. Certainly he gained as much as he lost from the intense relationship. But what about Olson's attitude towards ordinary people? Mr Boer suggests that working people, waitresses, janitors, shoemakers, adored Olson and catered to his every whim. Yet he could be brutal. One anecdote should suffice. When admitted to the hospital, Olson had to share a room with a bourgeois type who was suffering from an inflamed testicle. This man, whose family generally sat in silence by the bedside, was overwhelmed by the 'boisterous giant' in the neighbouring bed, not to mention his boisterous visitors, and complained to the nurses that his room-mate was crazy. Incensed, Olson told him one night: "Listen, McCormack, if you don't shut up and stop telling the nurse that I'm crazy, I'm going to get up out of this bed and come over there and squeeze you know what!" (pp. 115-16). After a few such threats, McCormack became so terrified that 'he started screaming for help and they had to take him out and give him another room'. Olson and Boer were jubilant: 'You finally had a room to yourself' (p. 116).

I suppose that Olson's admirers will regard this as an exemplary tale, illustrating the triumph of artistic genius over Babbitry. And his genius, Mr Boer believes, was never more in evidence than during the gruelling ride to New York Hospital where the dying poet spent his last painful days. En route, Olson recited the 'Poor naked wretches' speech from Lear. Mr Boer comments: 'I could only marvel, Charles, at the greatness of your heart that you should come up with that speech from that play on this coldest of winter days in an ambulance now drifting into the gloom of New York where you must certainly have realized your life would soon end' (pp. 140-41).

Great poet or great poseur? Whatever we make of it, there is no doubt that Olson himself was convinced of his greatness. When Mr Boer, who was covering his classes, asked him what the topic of discussion should be, Olson replied, "Tell them about me... Tell them who I am" (p. 117). When asked what kind of funeral ceremony he wanted, he said, "Just have all my friends stand around and talk about me" (p. 149). And even his carcinoma of the liver could be assimilated into the Great Olson Myth: "I'm Prometheus", he announced one day, "because Prometheus got it in the liver!" (p. 145).

Mr Boer's record of what Olson said and did is consistently lively and compelling; he is particularly good at defining the tensions and contradictions in Olson's amazing personality. But ultimately he loves the great Charles too much to be able to evaluate his accomplishment or to place it in a larger context. A later generation, however, will judge it, and I think the verdict will be less than happy. One would think that the Pound case had taught us, once and for all, that the Nietzschean view of the Poet as Superman, above and beyond all law, is a very dangerous one. Bullying nurses and fellow-patients who happen to be ordinary
middle-class citizens is, to my mind, neither brave nor endearing; it is merely offensive. Again, I find Olson's disparagement of the Academy and his contempt for his colleagues irritating because it is precisely the Academy that launched his career in the first place, and it has continued to be the Academy (whether Black Mountain, Buffalo, or Berkeley) that has credited him with the title of 'Major Poet'.

*Charles Olson in Connecticut* reminds us what a good thing it is that in our society poets and philosophers do *not* become kings. Having spent so much time imaginatively dwelling in the world of the Second Millenium B.C., Olson seemed finally to have forgotten what a *civilization* is.  

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