

A Witness Walking to these Shores: Embodied Memory and the Dispersed Spatiality of Networked Presence

Michael Joyce

*Michael Joyce is Professor Emeritus of English and Media Studies at Vassar College (USA). His 15 books and seminal digital works—most recently the poems *Light in its Common Place* (2020), the novel *Remedia: A Picaresque* (2018), and the Kindle e-book *The World Beyond* (2021)—span a career as novelist, poet, critic, theorist, digital literature pioneer, and multimedia artist. In the early 1990s *The New York Times* called his digital novel *afternoon*, a story ‘the granddaddy of hypertext fictions’. In 2020 it was the focus of an international online thirtieth-year festschrift hosted by the Electronic Literature Lab at Washington State University Vancouver (USA) <<https://dlc-wsu.org/afternoon-with-afternoon/event.html>> as part of the Electronic Literature Organization virtual annual conference.*

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A witness walking to these shores in our time would not spy a single war-worn and sea-tossed Ithacan sailor returning to his homeland but rather thousands of woeful, current-day avatars of Odysseus, refugees who in the words of Homer find themselves ‘τῆλε φίλων καὶ πατρίδος αἴης’, ‘far from friends and home’.

The linkage of space, politics, and the humanities in the theme of this conference is something more than a matter of mere historical timeliness—and certainly not opportunism—but instead an expression of the deepest roots shared by Greek and American notions of language, literature, history, philosophy, and the arts, that for better or worse we have come to call by the increasingly awkward term ‘the humanities’.

‘The humanities’ has become an awkward term not only because of a broadening definition of human beings’ reciprocal relationship with both the animal world and the inorganic quantum universe, but also on account of the convergence of techné and epistēmē in the networked world, factors that increasingly challenge the centrality of the human. But our humanity is also challenged on its face as the internal politics of nation upon nation across the globe turn misanthropic and the immigrant experience of an increasingly

exiled global population of refugees becomes brutalized, hopeless, and dehumanized. We are all of us ‘estranged from that which is most familiar’, as the twentieth-century American poet Charles Olson frequently paraphrased and evoked Heraclitus.

If we gathered here have been both careful and caring during these days, perhaps we can leave here having renewed our familiarity in the root sense of not just our shared humanity but also what we mean by both politics and space. I hope by these remarks to make some suggestions toward that renewal.

‘Politics’, of course, is a fine and ancient Greek word, at first meaning the affairs of the city, the polis, but where the meaning of polis in time came to be understood not just as the concentrated and fortified high place—the citadel—but the surround which the city state encompassed and whose extent the polis gave a view to. ‘Polis is eyes’, Olson—himself a one-time politician—declared in his four-volume epic *The Maximus Poems*, whose prototypic hero is modeled upon not Odysseus but the second-century Greek rhetorician and philosopher, Maximus of Tyre (MI 26).¹

1 Charles Olson, *The Maximus Poems* (University of California Press 1992).

By 'Polis is eyes' Olson meant a quality of attention—a caring attention to the what, the whom, and the when of the world—possessed by those women and men who had eyes to see their relation to both others and otherness. For Olson politics was a poetics, what he called 'the attention, and the care' with which 'each of us/chooses our own/ kin and/ concentration.' He attributed this quality of attention not just to poets—but perhaps unsurprisingly to a Greek audience—to fishermen, those whose eyes we might say could discern the kinship between the ship of the returning hero on the horizon and a raft teeming with Eritrean refugees nearing Kos.

Olson made consideration of the polis the center of the *Maximus* poems. Writing about his coastal Massachusetts Ur-city of Gloucester, he proclaims, 'As the people of the earth are now, Gloucester / is heterogeneous, and so can know polis / not a localism'. He expanded this nascent and prophetic global consciousness in four lines that enjamb poetics and politics and for me evoke Melville's floating global village, the Pequod, populated by what Melville termed Isolatoes, 'federated along one keel'. Olson writes: 'Polis now / is a few, is a coherence not even yet new (the island of this city / is a mainland now of who? who can say who are /citizens?' (M II 10).

In her influential untitled essay about prosody and politics in *Nillings*, the Canadian poet Lisa Robertson notes that a 'prosodic thinking of politics will carry Hannah Arendt's statement concerning the polis into the domestic sphere also' pointing to how 'In *The Human Condition*, Arendt, following Aristotle, argues that polis is the exchange of speech, and arises anywhere and each time this free exchange takes place.'²

What elements, and more importantly what actions, form the keel of coherence for humanity let alone the humanities—and even whether any such coherence is possible—increasingly comes into question as space, time, and our own embodied selves seem unsettled. Ours is a world in which the mobile phone makes every person global and nomadic, locations unfixed, their sole abode in the body constantly in dispersal. The ocular polis, the world in which we can see that our actions have consequence and coherence, is displaced by mere lulling recurrence. 'I saw it somewhere', becomes the warrant of the global citizen inhabiting the dispersal (not the disappearance) of place. A human's passing presence is recorded in shot after shot upon cellphone cameras whose images are either left unconsidered in the phone's own archive or dispatched to the cloud in lieu of remembering, or, as with Snapchat, disappear in hours. Suspended in Foucault's 'place without place' like the wayward hero or the refugee, unable to choose either kin or concentration, we experience our lives as a bracketed present. We lose the embodied memory of proprioceptive presence whose gravity grounds our humanity in space, and instead are thrown into the Melvillean horizon of punctuated time. It is by lingering along this horizon that the humanities can recover, not its centrality but its own inner weightiness, among a world of things.

By punctuated time I mean to summon both Bergson's sense of la durée and Deleuze's notion of the cinematic 'affection-image' where the subject 'experiences itself from the inside', however, endowing both with a new liminality of the sort that, in *The Coming Community*, Giorgio Agamben identifies as inherently political.³ For Agamben

'the outside is not another space that resides beyond a determinate space, but rather, it is the passage, the exteriority that gives access [to] the experience of the limit itself, the experience of being-within an outside.'⁴ It is this experience that makes us always already refugees.

Writing of Melville, Olson begins his poetic and prophetic study *Call Me Ishmael* by locating the American experience in such a continual and liminal exteriority: 'I take SPACE to be the central fact to man born in America, from Folsom cave to now. I spell it large because it comes large here. Large, and without mercy.'

Arguably the limitless and merciless space of the networked world is a distinctly American creation, part of what the British theorists Richard Barbrook and Andy Cameron dubbed 'the Californian Ideology'.⁵ It seems clear that against the seamless fabric of instantaneity and ubiquity of digitized life, what the humanities can provide is the snag, the run, the flaw that calls attention and marks resistance, that which gives the space its space and gives the moment back to itself. In such a world as Charles Olson insisted 'there are no hierarchies, no infinite, no such many as mass, there are only / eyes in all heads, / to be looked out of' (M II 29).

After serving the Roosevelt administration during World War II, Olson faced the decision of whether to pursue a life as a poet or accept the offer of the Postmastership of the United States, a strong temptation for the son of an ordinary mailman. Rather than choose poetry over politics, he chose to explicitly construe poetry as politics, speaking of 'making a Republic/in gloom on Watchhouse Point' in Gloucester where he lived, considering his work in terms of 'an actual earth of value'. In *The Maximus Poems* Olson proposed a political poetics in opposition to what he termed 'Pejorocracy'—that is, rule by the worst—propagated by the falsifying language of the nascent postwar media culture. His figure for the rise of this commodified media culture was what, punning on both Muzak and muse, he called 'mu-sick'. In the half-century since Olson first wrote of mu-sick, we have come to inhabit an age of pervasive background entertainments whose ubiquitous taming and containing functions don't just take the place of religion as the opiate of the people but in America distracts populations of opioid users. Mu-sick has evolved into military-infotainment, recently reaching its perigee in the alt-right authoritarian regime of a reality television figure. Its controlling force is a constant spew of low noise and punctuated flarings meant to keep the populace in a constant present and to suppress memory.

Politics, like poetics, is an embodied memory art. The Korean novelist Yi Mun-yol's celebrated historical novel *The Poet* begins almost offhandedly, 'Perhaps we ought to begin this investigation into the deviations of his life by evoking the problem of memory.' Yi's novel is intimately concerned with the relation between authorship and the familial, cultural, and political memory of a poet whose family had fallen into disgrace during the uprisings of the late Joseon period in Korea. Yi's narrator says his main concern was 'to gain a sense of the consciousness of the age, which undergoes various transformations to give rise to [the poet protagonist's] poems.'

In considering space, politics, and the humanities through these reflections, I proceed from a belief that poetry (which here stands as surrogate for the humanities) is, as Yi writes, 'the product of

² Lisa Robertson, *Nillings* (Bookthug 2012) 74.

³ See Henri Bergson, *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness* (first published 1913; FL Pogson tr, Dover Publications 2001); Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1 The Movement Image* (Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam tr, University of Minnesota Press 1986).

⁴ Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community* (Michael Hardt tr, University of Minnesota Press 1993).

⁵ Richard Barbrook and Andy Cameron, 'The Californian Ideology' (1995) 1(3) Mute <<http://www.metamute.org/editorial/articles/californian-ideology>>.

consciousness [and] so the pursuit of a poet may turn out in the end to be the pursuit of consciousness.' More, I mean to suggest that even the most troublesome elements of contemporary digital technologies offer ways forward toward a humanities capable of provoking consciousness and embodying memory. Under provocation conscious memory becomes viral—infecting, inhabiting, and mimicking media culture, spoofing the forms of what Olson called mu-sick even as it overcomes and supplants them. It enables global communities assailed by change to track and take charge of the transformations, which they not only undergo, but in some fundamental sense co-author in an age of auto-amnesia.

By auto-amnesia I mean to mark the wholesale way in which the world (or at least the networked part of it) has in recent decades precipitously and almost unthinkingly offloaded human memory into digital forms. The giving over of embodied memory to machine memory has taken place in a profoundly political—if unacknowledged and even invisible—incremental succession of seemingly passive actions, resulting in a surrender of our record of seeing for oneself, which is how Charles Olson translates Herodotus's use of the Greek verb *historein*, the root of history. While notions of the politics of memory have wide currency among social scientists as the subject of active studies, the political values of memory itself are challenged by auto-amnesia. Almost unknowingly we have submitted communal consciousness to a radical transformation of what it means to remember as well as the means by which we do so. In offering a witnessing political poetics a newly configured humanities can help us recover an awareness of not just what we have given over but the moment of our doing so.

Olson stands as a fervent prophet of embodied memory through proprioception, which he defines as 'the data of depth sensibility/the "body" of us as object which spontaneously or of its own order produces experience of, "depth".' Both conservative calls for a return to a lost golden age and the Californian Ideology's radical summoning of new ages each share a depthless world view flattened by the temporality of auto-amnesia and the dispersed spatiality of networked presence. Against such flattened presence and abstracted power Olson set actual (in both senses of the word as 'act' and 'reality') embodied politics. Writing from the aforementioned and fortuitously named Watchhouse Point in Gloucester, Olson's charge to the citizen of the polis is

an actual earth of value to
construct one, from rhythm to
image, and image is knowing

To such knowing Olson summons Confucius' dictum that 'nothing is possible without doing it', insisting upon the immediacy of presence:

It is where the test lies, malgre
all the thought and all the pell-mell of
proposing it. Or thinking it out or living it
ahead of time. (M 3 90)

Knowing through actual doing is something like what the Franco-American political and media theorists Don Foresta and Edwige Armand, borrowing freely from Bergson, theorize in their paradoxical notion of *le souvenir oublié*, the forgotten memory. There 'our intelligence cannot give form to any part of the real while, in grappling with the brutality of reality, the body shows forth what it has seen-through.'⁶ Through the forgotten memory the polis, the

world as experienced, is re-placed by proprioceptive presence, the world as returned to us.

In Walter Benjamin's famous meditation upon Paul Klee's painting *Angelus Novus*, Benjamin, too, sees a flattened world. The Angel of History's face is 'turned towards the past' and where 'we see the appearance of a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe, which unceasingly piles rubble on top of rubble and hurls it before his feet.' The angel would like 'to piece together what has been smashed' but a wind from paradise keeps him moving.⁷ Finding ourselves in the face of such a whirlwind we might long for the time-reversal mirror of quantum physicists that, rather than allowing us to piece together the ruins of memory, would instead return us to the forgotten memory of the intact and inhabited moment before auto-amnesia, helping us recover and reify our motivations in our present actions.

We live in a time of compounded, prefixed posts, from the post-post-modern to what one might call the post-post-lapsarian, where the Fall of Man gives way to the rise of the post-human in the present era. The accompanying fall of what once constituted the humanities has quite literally become afterthought. It is perhaps not too facile a pun to speak of our age as a verbal-visual mash-up of after-word and after-world: the afterwor(l)d.

David Ciccoricco writes about how immersive media 'tests our ability to "encode" it in working memory—that is, to actually remember what we have managed to see.'⁸ Ciccoricco uses the phrase 'what we manage to see' in a practical way to describe the mental task of someone reading a rapidly changing screen. The afterwor(l)d invites a deeper poetic and philosophical consideration of what we manage to see, not so much looking past as—through a feat of time-reversal—looking prior to the reality of what only seems to appear in recurrent flashes upon a screen. To manage to see we must act, doing so by instinct when the intellect cannot fathom what is before us, and so undertake the witness of embodied memory in a world of things.

A contemporary version of Plato's allegory of the cave might illustrate our alienation from the witness of memory. In recent years passers-by walking through any large urban US shopping mall during the holidays might have spied a choreographic pantomime framed in the windows of computer shops. In this midwinter's dream lithe young figures, product demonstrators wearing virtual reality headsets, moved through an unseen gameworld, a version of which was projected on overhead monitors. What passers-by viewed upon these monitors was not what one might call by way of oxymoron the actual experience of the virtual world, but rather its effect upon the young product evangelists as it unfolded before their eyes as they stumbled along invisible paths flowing through their VR headsets. Lost in the gameworld neither could these mimers view their witnesses, nor know their number, nor in any way imagine the paths their witnesses wander.

To the witness the movements of the enchanted mimes seemed as supple as Tai Chi sequences, although what actual or virtual events or matters might have snagged or enfolded them remained unseen. We would like to think such pedestrian witnessing is of a different order than the profundity of silent reading of a poem or novel. Yet traditional forms hold no franchise upon registering our memories of passing through—or, for that matter, passing from—a world of things; nor do they hold sole franchise in registering the things or beings that pass away from

⁶ Don Foresta and Edwige Armand, 'Le saut intuitif' (unpublished paper, 2016).

⁷ Walter Benjamin, 'On the Concept of History' (1940) <<https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/benjamin/1940/history.htm>>.

⁸ David Ciccoricco, *Refiguring minds in narrative media* (University of Nebraska Press 2015).

and among us. It would be presumptuous—and disserve what we want to secure of, and for, a fluid humanities—to reserve memory to precincts that circumscribe such virtual, enraptured, spaces. Neither do the humanities, as traditionally configured, provide us with a privileged perspective upon the similarly enraptured evangelists in an online forum, nor upon rabid partisans populating a nationalist rally or a subreddit, nor upon pseudonymous citizens avidly retweeting the inculcated scripts of vagrant memes and post-truth narratives. What comes and goes through these fora is as ephemeral as a walk in the mall and as unknown as ‘seems’ are to Hamlet.

If we consider auto-amnesia as a form of voluntary cultural dementia, it may be said to evoke the condition of those of us—young or old—living in a world that insists upon constantly recurrent presence but where witness seems unregistered as it passes the threshold into cloud memory. Once again it would be the worst kind of cultural arrogance, gross sentimentality, and self-indulgent nostalgia to imagine that the humanities alone—and especially literature or public life as priorly constituted—bear witness to the details of life lost.

Deleuze, in speaking of Foucault’s disguised memoir in the form of a meditation upon Raymond Roussel, *Death and the Labyrinth*, writes of experience in terms of its ‘doubling of an emergence, the phrase of the outside’. Like Foresta and Armand after him, Deleuze locates this phrase of the outside as body knowledge: ‘(the “snag” [I’ accroc]) and the twisting and doubling from one to the other [which] is no longer the accident of the tissue but the new rule on the basis of which the external tissue is twisted, invaginated and doubled.’⁹ The snag of the outside in the form of what the feminist philosopher and quantum physicist Karen Barad describes as ‘entanglements in the lively dance of mattering’, are what a newly considered humanities can offer as witness.¹⁰ Poetics and politics can conspire to entangle the seamless fabric of instantaneity and ubiquity of digitized life that takes place not before our eyes but in a space of remove, disappearing before it can be registered.

At the beginning of this essay, I spoke of the shared roots of Greek and American notions of the humanities, but now as I near the end I must confess that Charles Olson in his poem ‘Maximus to Gloucester, Letter 27 [withheld]’, offers what may at first seem a parochial and direct disavowal of that affinity. Yet I would suggest that Olson means to claim a truer affinity between Greek and American thought than dualistic metaphysical mind-body distinctions allow, and surely more than the xenophobic rantings of the orange-haired cyclops recently installed in Washington might suggest. Instead, Olson situates the roots of Greek and American affinity in a shared sense of both space and embodied knowledge alike, one in which—from Herodotean *historein* to Heraclitian *πάντα ῥεῖ*—everything flows. ‘No Greek’, Olson writes,

will be able
to discriminate my body.
An American
is a complex of occasions,
themselves a geometry
of spatial nature.
I have this sense,
that I am one
with my skin (M III 185)

⁹ Gilles Deleuze, *Foucault* (Seán Hand tr, University of Minnesota Press 1988).

¹⁰ Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway* (Duke University Press 2007).

For Olson, already ‘persuaded that at this [mid]point of the 20th century it might be possible for man to cease to be estranged, as Heraclitus said he was in 500 B.C., from that with which he is most familiar’, the content of a world of things and others, including everything from animals to stones to the constructs of quantum physics was ‘the reality in whose face anyone of us has to take a stance ... which yields the possibility of acts which are allowably historic.’

To manage to see we must act, doing so by instinct when the intellect cannot fathom what is before us. We must want to see. This is a sort of wanting that, of course, begs the double meanings of the word ‘want’ in English as both ‘desire’ and ‘lack’. It is a wanting whose fulfilment requires an instinctive act in Foresta and Armand’s Bergsonian sense, one that embodies an active recollection of forgotten memories that the intellect, having no form for, forgets. Witness, the act of embodied seeing, is essential to the survival of humanities, which in poetics and politics alike provide primary arts of seeing through in a globally networked world. For if the humanities are to avoid slipping into irrelevancy in the face of the immediacy of social media, virtual presence, and other participatory and performative technologies, they must act as a shadow to lost memory, snagging our attention in the way that instinctual memory twists and doubles experience. That is, a refigured humanities will not only have to lead us to what we remember, but—in the face of an increasingly pervasive auto-amnesia—help us recover an awareness that we do and must remember in order to be fully alive.

This will involve, and involve us in, what Karen Barad calls the way ‘the world theorizes as well as experiments with itself.’¹¹ To be fully alive we must stray from the path, set off in ships or rubber rafts. ‘I fear chiefly lest my expression may not be extra-vagant enough’, Thoreau wrote, ‘may not wander far enough beyond the narrow limits of my daily experience, so as to be adequate to the truth of which I have been convinced.’ Outside these limits—in Karen Barad’s punning formulation—mattering is what all of creation does. ‘Figuring, reconfiguring’ she writes, ‘life, whether organic or inorganic, animate or inanimate, is not an unfolding algorithm. Electrons, molecules, brittlestars, jellyfish, coral reefs, dogs, rocks, icebergs, plants, asteroids, snowflakes, and bees stray from all calculable paths, making leaps here and there, or rather, making here and there from leaps.’¹²

An embodied witnessing will involve us in active transmission in which the Shannon information model is supplanted by a hydraulic, multichanneled material presence of the sort that Alphonso Lingis summons in his insistence that ‘to live is to echo the vibrancy of things.’ In ‘The Murmur of the World’ he describes a world—our actual world—in which ‘if the reception of a determinate signal is the segregation of a sonorous field into figure and background drone, the emission of a determinate signal forms the hum of the field.’¹³

This is the prospect from, and to which, we must summon a humanities whose own long history endows it with the courage, grace, and humility to give witness to its kinship with media of presence and the ways in which the continuity of each are intertwined. In English, the phrases ‘bear witness’ and ‘give witness’ are often used interchangeably but where they differ, not just in the verbs but in their implied arenas, is critical. What we bear upon us we often do not, or cannot, give. It weighs us down, marks us,

¹¹ *ibid.*

¹² *ibid.*

¹³ Alphonso Lingis, *The Community of Those Who Have Nothing in Common* (Indiana University Press 1994).

and is most often kept to ourselves. And even when we do shift our burdens of witness toward others it is often to oppress or mark or contain them. Giving witness lightens us of such confining burdens and extends a light to the others to whom we give it upon whatever shores they come to us.

Further reading

- 'Auto-amnesia haze' (YouTube, 2016) <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2b28JbKD7ME>>.
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