

A Novice in Sais

“Olson had to have two steaks or three when he ate and when others had a hit of acid he had to have three or four.” This is a remembered and here paraphrased sentence from some in-class conversation of Jack Clarke’s.

Other snippets that linger:

- ☛ Onetto's Restaurant [My once pal Tony baloney washed dishes and bussed for Louie Onetto long before I even knew about *The Maximus Poems*. See Creeley’s poem “The Tiger” Onetto’s was at the corner of Main and Bailey].
- ☛ Rocky Neck [Clarke had rented a place in Rocky Neck (across the harbor from Gloucester) when he was on sabbatical: see Clarke’s *Gloucester Translations* (Clarke related the image of Our Lady of Good Voyage on the cover was no the exact one he wished.)].
- ☛ Olson tried to save a 17th century house in Gloucester.
- ☛ Dogtown is the interior of Cape Ann.
- ☛ “Remember the 1960s?” said Jack Clarke as he quickly flicked the classroom lights on and off to strobe effect.

Uncanny, that as a Millard-Fillmore College (University at Buffalo) Night School student, still working day-shift in the silk-screen decorating department of Buffalo China, 75 Hayes Street, Buffalo, New York that I was summoned by poetry. FYI Buffalo China: It was and is a china factory, the plates on which sit your free range chicken eggs and veggie sausages, wheat toast. Sitting in a classroom in Annex-B, Annex-B being the Mt. Helicon of that once upon a time Al Cook UB English Department of Leslie Fiedler, John Barth, Gregory Corso. I was dumb as a Chemical Engineer. Berkeley East dreams. It was the Spring semester of 1974, meaning it was January 1974 in Buffalo, New York. It would remain winter for the next 8 months.

In the student union some fundamentalist guy in a gray suit, white shirt with bland tie, was handing out little bibles bound in a sort of grass green vinyl. About the size of a pack of Larks, they could pop into your top pocket with some comfort. They were tossed all over the place, in the toilets, on the steps of Norton Union, in the parking lots along Bailey Avenue. What glorious days back then when God was inconsequential and ROTC was banned from campus. Oh Sigh.

The first encounter ☛ Sitting in a classroom in Annex-B and Professor Clarke walked in. His coat, I think, was sort of like a three-quarter length coat maybe with a bit of fur or a furry collar and corduroy. It was brownish brown. He wore glasses. Brown hair. As far as I recall he didn’t bring anything with him. Somebody had left one of the snot green bibles on a desk near the front of the class or maybe it was on a desk in front of mine. I mean no one touched it. So Clarke, moving towards the front of the classroom, he to

face west and we to face east, he turns back towards me, like he didn't turn his neck but his entire half of his body from his shoulders and over his glasses looking at me he asked, gesturing to the bible. "Yours?"

I said, "no."

Amused, he smirked.

Our book list:

Archeologist of Morning by Charles Olson

A Day Book by Robert Creeley

By The Sound by Ed Dorn (Harvey Brown, Clarke's friend, with long blond hair would periodically show up to class. Harvey Brown of Frontier Press was the publisher of *By The Sound*. He tucked his flowing and long blonde hair behind his ear. I seem to recall some conversation about Olson and mushrooms.)

Robert Duncan's *Bending the Bow*

A Poet in the World by Denise Levertov

And *The New American Poetry* and maybe *The Poetics of the New American Poetry*. Maybe one of them and maybe both maybe it really was *The Poetics of the New American Poetry*. Maybe *The New American Poetry* was absent. Remember? We never had particularly a reading assignment as in classroom assigned readings that you, as student, were supposed to read and then show up and spew this and that poetic. The books were in your hands to read and to explore. They were offerings urging exploration into the uncharted realm of the poem. You could enter the realm or not. This day, the same question is put to you. ?...Well? Or is it: *Dancing and Spilling Oil With the Stars?*

The course was titled: Modern Poetry.

Once Clarke walked in and sat at the front table and looked at the class (Oh nice night school students fresh from offices and factories and driving truck.). He asked what we wanted to do because he said, "Well, we are going to be faced by this often."

The project was not a pointed scholarly training directed at scoring a job in a college. Modern Poetry was a way to act, think and be. It was a way to be a poet. Something less or not much discussed these days of conferences and essays and elegancies and gushings from the font of self interest.

In class, someone asked Jack Clarke what he thought about Rod McKuen [*Listen to the Warm*]. And Clarke said something like, "...in some gardens there are beautiful tulips."

In my copy of *The Poetics of the New American Poetry*, I have numbers next to:

- 1) "Walt Whitman to Ralph Waldo Emerson" by Whitman
- 2) "From The *Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry*" by Ernest Fenollosa
- 3) "A Statement for Poetry" by Louis Zukofsky
- 4) The four essays in the Pound section
- 5) All the essays in the William Carlos Williams section
- 6) "Projective Verse"

My notes across the pages of "Projective Verse" are:

Pound, Williams, busted it up

Composition by field

Words have the energizing people

Stay with it

Keep it happening

When it stops it dies

Ear

Breath

Line

Spontaneous

Rythum

Line unit of phrasing

The Field

!!Type Writer!!

Objectivism

Listening

Hurrah!

I remember we had an assignment! Robert Creeley had just returned to Buffalo and to U of B. We were supposed to go to the poetry reading and the conversation in class had to do with getting ready to go to the reading. Clarke said something like, "You should prepare yourself. You have to get ready." The ready was the individual's choice but it had to be made with an intention. Might be a beer, might be a reefer, might be one's Zen or just being in the poetry, reading the book.... Having some broccoli. To have an open clarity was the task of a person attending the/a reading. "It" was to get the self ready – not like the color of your shirt but a state of mind to be ready to be in the poetry. There was a lot of talk about "it" in the classroom.

I think one reason poetry readings have become so boring these days is that no one gets ready. It has become like having to go to church because you are being told to go or to go out as some obligation. No GO! It ain't "it."

In Norton Union cafeteria literally hundreds of people filed in. Clarke had told us that Creeley always pushed his hair aside and messed with it at readings and it would fall into his eyes so that was why he wore a wool cap, a sort of striped wool cap. Some part of it was blue. Creeley read from *A Day Book*. It was the first poetry reading I attended.

Do you think that if
you once do what you want
to do you will want not to do it.

One day Clarke walked in and said he was going to hear Diane Wakoski read. He told us where the poetry reading was (at that time Rosary Hill College). We were welcome to go to the reading if we wished and he left. I went. Wakoski read poems about how short and ugly she was. I didn't think she was so short or ugly.

Jack Clarke read to us. I remember him walking in with a bottle of Red Barrel beer and reading Olson's *O'Ryan* with cadences the likes of which I had never imagined. And I was smitten. I asked Professor Clarke where he got his Red Barrel. I went to a deli on Bailey Avenue and bought a six pack of Red Barrel. I was poet.

I got out my *Archeologist of Morning* and while my mother was ironing I read her *O'Ryan*. As I was re-reading the work the other night, I read aloud:

Underneath all them poems
it's night
you got a hard on
and it's

to be made.

I thought, Jesus Christ, did I really read this to my mother? It's no wonder she considered me nuts. Oh Christ! I wonder was it the angel, muse or duende, or some other perversity that compelled me, inspired me to do that. Jesus! I should have kept the little green bible.

Our final examination was to read aloud in class. I remember reading a long "Howl" like poem called "Call Me Michigan" and short poems about swans who were lesbians. Some of my night school peers brought in candles and we sat in the flickering candlelight of our Annex B classroom and read our bad poems to each other. George Datterwich brought in plastic bags full of dough to massage during poems. George read his poems too. We had prepared ourselves for "it" by sitting in a bar on the corner of Amherst and Main Street. I can't remember the name... something East or something West. I did a great deal of preparation back then. "It" was great.

The class seems to have been, upon retrospect, an artful improvisation. The proposal was that modern poetry was a community and the classroom was a place of that action. I learned how to become a good citizen of the realm of modern poetry.

In my notes someplace I have written: the novices of Sais. A snippet that lingers in my mind is Clarke talking about Sais in Egypt and how the priests had a certain form of a knowledge that was passed along as a type of apostolic succession. *The Novices of Sais* by Novalis, translated from the German by Ralph Manheim and with a preface by Stephen Spender. The book was published in 1949 and it was probably about 1974 that I wrote the title in my notebook and it was another twenty years before I got to the library, Lockwood library, to actually check it out. It is a beautifully mystical book and it holds two works. The first is titled "Novice" and the second titled "Nature." Don't wait twenty years.

Sais was the Jack Clarke classroom. With a lot of doors opening endlessly. "It" was a Gnostic information, a poetic intelligence and understanding, which was other than purely rational or traditional or practical. It was a place of imaginative knowledge, a way of being, a place of poetry, of poetic knowing, like Buffalo.

John Clarke's papers are held at The Poetry Collection of the University at Buffalo.

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