

Language and the Renewal
of Society in Walt Whitman,
Laura (Riding) Jackson, and
Charles Olson

Modern and Contemporary Poetry and Poetics

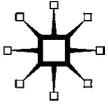
Modern and Contemporary Poetry and Poetics promotes and pursues topics in the burgeoning field of twentieth- and twenty-first-century poetics. Critical and scholarly work on poetry and poetics of interest to the series includes social location in its relationships to subjectivity, to the construction of authorship, to oeuvres, and to careers; poetic reception and dissemination (groups, movements, formations, institutions); the intersection of poetry and theory; questions about language, poetic authority, and the goals of writing; claims in poetics, impacts of social life, and the dynamics of the poetic career as these are staged and debated by poets and inside poems. Topics that are bibliographic, pedagogic, that concern the social field of poetry, and reflect on the history of poetry studies are valued as well. This series focuses both on individual poets and texts and on larger movements, poetic institutions, and questions about poetic authority, social identifications, and aesthetics.

Language and the Renewal
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Charles Olson

The American Cratylus

Carla Billitteri

palgrave
macmillan



LANGUAGE AND THE RENEWAL OF SOCIETY IN WALT WHITMAN, LAURA (RIDING) JACKSON,
AND CHARLES OLSON
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Softcover reprint of the hardcover 1st edition 2009 978-0-230-60836-8

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First published in 2009 by
PALGRAVE MACMILLAN®
in the United States—a division of St. Martin's Press LLC,
175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010.

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registered in England, company number 785998, of Houndmills,
Basingstoke, Hampshire RG21 6XS.

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ISBN 978-1-349-37524-0 ISBN 978-0-230-62040-7 (eBook)

DOI 10.1057/9780230620407

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Billitteri, Carla.

Language and the renewal of society in Walt Whitman, Laura
(Riding) Jackson, and Charles Olson : the American cratylus / by Carla
Billitteri.

p. cm.—(Modern and contemporary poetry and poetics)
Includes bibliographical references.

1. American poetry—History and criticism.
2. Poetry—Social aspects—United States. 3. Sociolinguistics—
United States. 4. Poetics. 5. Whitman, Walt, 1819-1892—Criticism
and interpretation. 6. Jackson, Laura (Riding), 1901-1991—Criticism
and interpretation. 7. Olson, Charles, 1910-1970—Criticism and
interpretation. I. Title.

PS310.S7B55 2009

811.009'3552—dc22

2008036705

A catalogue record of the book is available from the British Library.

Design by Newgen Imaging Systems (P) Ltd., Chennai, India.

First edition: April 2009

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

For Robert Creeley, *in memoriam*

There are words voluptuous
as the flesh
in its moisture,
its warmth.

Tangible, they tell
the reassurances,
the comforts,
of being human.

Not to speak them
makes abstract
all desire
and its death at last.

Robert Creeley, "Love"

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Series Editor's Foreword

In this original, elegant, synoptic study of Whitman, Olson, and (Riding) Jackson, Carla Billitteri has made a critical debut of high importance. This is a work on the dream of a “Cratylic” language—a language joining the exact nature of words with things to broker a transformation of human community. The Cratylic position illuminated by Billitteri allows her to explore linguistic priorities, theories of representation, a sense of political opposition, and the hope for social renewal. Making dazzling use of Plato’s *Cratylus*, Billitteri simultaneously analyzes the specific projects, failures, conflicting arguments, and perspectives of three disparate poets while opening a discussion of the social and ethical goals of American poetry.

RACHEL BLAU DUPLESSIS,
Professor of English, Temple University;
Author of *Blue Studios: Poetry and Its Cultural Work* (2006)
and *Genders, Races, and Religious Cultures
in Modern American Poetry,
1908–1934* (2001)

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Preface

This book takes up the seemingly ineradicable desire for a perfect language of words univocal in meaning, known in Western thought as Cratylishm, and its impact on the projects of three of the most intellectually ambitious of American poets, Walt Whitman, Laura (Riding) Jackson,¹ and Charles Olson. I say “ineradicable” because this desire persists in the face of unanswerable critiques (of which Plato’s *Cratylus* dialogue is only the first) and in the face of extensive empirical evidence that language is *imperfect* and *polyvocal* in meaning. All three of the poets I discuss were aware of those critiques, and of the empirical evidence amassed against their dream of a perfect language, but clung to Cratylishm nonetheless for its utopian potential. That potential is the key element in what I call the American Cratylus, a desire for a perfect society achieved through the perfection of language.

Chapter 1, “The True Forms of Things: Cratylishm and American Poetry,” provides an introduction to the topic. There I discuss what Cratylishm is, and entails: the belief in the possibility of the imminence of meaning in language. I also discuss the link between “linguisticity” (Michael P. Kramer’s term for self-consciousness about language) and visionary politics in American poetry after Emerson, establishing a context for the more particular link between Cratylishm and society’s renewal in Whitman, (Riding) Jackson, and Olson. To clarify the difference between Cratylishm and other, similar forms of linguisticity, I distinguish Cratylishm’s *perfect* language from the *universal* language of C. K. Ogden’s BASIC English and Cratylishm’s *utopian* perfection from the *nostalgic* perfection of Adamic language. The rest of this first chapter offers a detailed reading of Plato’s dialogue, identifying the various positions on language it permits. These different positions are not simply antagonistic stances, as one might expect, but points on a continuum allowing the perfect and the actual to coexist in meaningful relation. As my subsequent chapters will show, the coexistence of these discrepant positions can also be found in the works of individual poets.

Chapter 2, “Substantial Words: Walt Whitman and the Power of Names,” situates Whitman’s language studies in relation to American interest in language from Webster to Emerson, then takes up the discontinuity between Emerson and Whitman, a difference that highlights the latter’s Cratylic interest in a language of names. The chapter concludes with a look at Whitman’s struggle to theorize and make compelling his name-language as an instrument of democracy. The language studies and visionary politics I examine in this chapter are well documented, and Whitman’s quasi-mystical belief in the capacity of language to sustain both human presence and the substance of the natural world is part of his enduring appeal, but building on existing scholarship my own account shows just how well this overall project conforms to the Cratylic model. For Whitman, words should be so exact in meaning that they take on the exact function of nature, to support the growth and prosperity of a people. As he puts it in a posthumously published prose note, “From each word, as from a womb, spring babes that shall grow to giants and beget superber breeds upon the earth” (figure 1).

The political call of Whitman’s “substantial words” is answered and developed in new ways by (Riding) Jackson and Olson, but with distinctly different emphases. (Riding) Jackson takes on the call for exact meaning, imagining a society that realizes its potential through perfect communication; Olson takes on the call for substantiated meaning, imagining a society where individual experience is not obliterated in abstraction.

Chapter 3, “The Linguistic Ultimate: Laura (Riding) Jackson and the Language of Truth,” sets forth (Riding) Jackson’s mature language theory—as a Cratylicism brought into conformity with Spinoza’s rationalism—as the solution to an impasse in her earlier work’s view of poetry as both a rectification of ordinary language and a mediate stage in the unveiling of truth. Her famous renunciation of poetry was a direct consequence of her growing belief that ordinary language, properly understood and used, requires no rectification, but is itself the language of truth. This belief, given powerful expression in *The Telling*, is first glimpsed in *The World and Ourselves*, published the same year as *Collected Poems*, but only emerges fully in the posthumously published *Rational Meaning*, the culminating text of (Riding) Jackson’s lifelong polemic against the misuse of words. My chapter provides an overview of (Riding) Jackson’s career, then examines the emergence of her Cratylicism and the concomitant transformation of her social vision. Looking backward and forward from this crucial vantage point, I reappraise her project as a poet before concluding with a detailed reading of *Rational Meaning*.

Chapter 4, “A State Destroys a Noun: Charles Olson and Objectism,” locates Olson’s social imagination in his critique of Greek *logos* as articulated by Plato and in his upholding of what “Projective Verse” terms “objectism,”

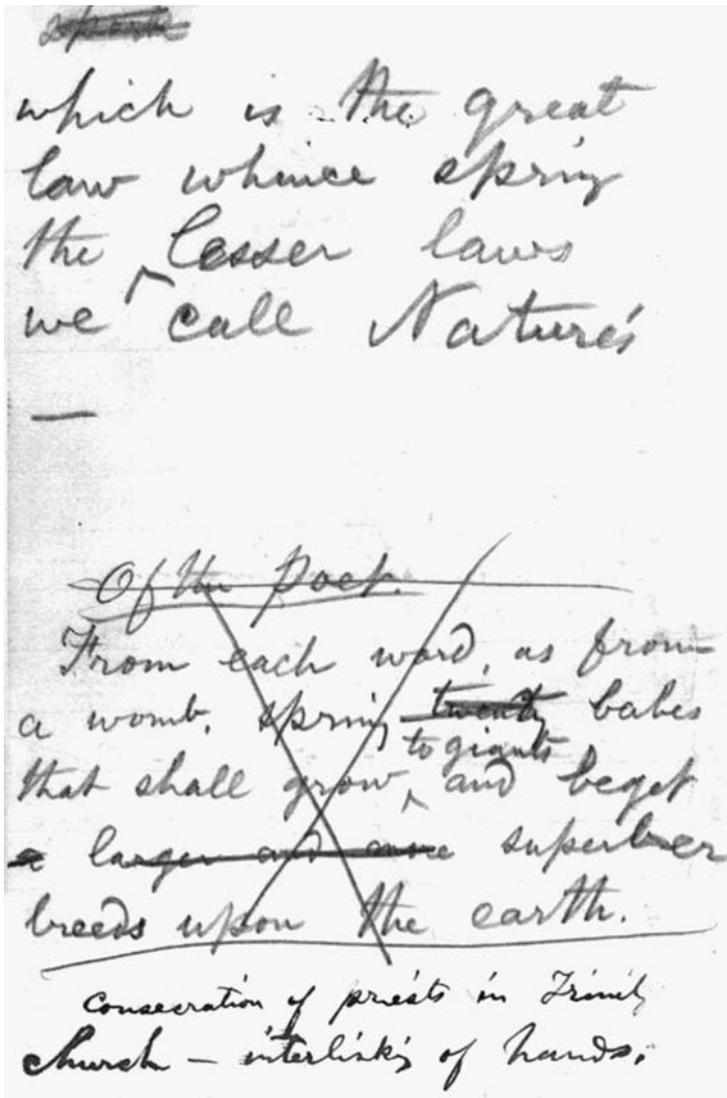


Figure 1 Page from one of Whitman's notebooks in the collection of the Library of Congress (LC #86); for a transcription of the text see NUPM 1:125, based on an alternative manuscript now lost.

an insistence on the concreteness of language and experience. Olson's Cratylism took shape and developed as a solution to the problem of abstraction in linguistic usage, and my chapter looks at several manifestations of that solution, beginning with the emphasis on speech in "Projective Verse"

and continuing through the stone-carved language of the Maya and word-writing of “Logography.” The historical Cratylus in Plato’s dialogue believed in the fixity of meaning in a natural language and yet held to the Heraclitean view of nature as ever in flux, a paradoxical combination of beliefs that Olson too attempts to link by joining the fixity of glyph-writing with the kinetic power of speech. My chapter concludes by looking at Olson’s adoption of the Whitmanian word *kosmos* to indicate the scope of what a Cratyllic renewal of society makes available.

My Coda briefly examines the traces of an American Cratylus in the work of the Language poets, focusing on three writers who in their very different ways theorize an exact correlation of language and reality. With Robert Grenier, Whitman’s “substantial words” are reimagined as a language whose performance as handwriting attempts to “participate in the invention of nature” (“Realizing Things”). With Bruce Andrews, the utopian poetics of Language writing depends, despite the repudiation of any belief in words as natural phenomena embodying their meanings, on a kind of neo-Cratylism that treats language as a whole as the very stuff of reality. With Lyn Hejinian, instead, description (i.e., mimesis) is reconceived as a metonymy that “conserves perception of the world of objects, conserves their quiddity, their particular precisions” (*Language of Inquiry* 151).

* * *

The research and writing of this book go back several years. Drawing on my earliest training in language, literature, and philosophy at the University of Catania, the present text first took shape as a dissertation at the State University of New York at Buffalo, reaching its final form only after substantial rethinking and revision at the University of Maine. I am happy, then, to finally have this opportunity to thank numerous friends, teachers, and colleagues on both sides of the Atlantic for their essential advice, insights, and assistance. In some cases, I am acknowledging debts that go back twenty years.

My first acknowledgments must go to Charles Bernstein and Robert Creeley. This book would not have progressed beyond its first incomplete notes without Charles Bernstein’s faith in my project, and I am deeply grateful for his encouragement throughout the subsequent years. The substantial rethinking necessary to the completion of this project was greatly influenced by my friendship and conversation with Robert Creeley, with whom I had the pleasure to teach two graduate seminars in Maine (on Charles Olson and William Carlos Williams); I dedicate this book to his memory. It was Creeley who made me realize the full import, for poets and readers alike, of that certain stubborn love for words that goes beyond mere use.

To my teachers across time I offer my humble gratitude. In Catania, Gaetano Compagnino, Maria Vittoria D'Amico, and Nino Recupero first showed me the beauty and reward of rigorous scholarship. In Buffalo, Joseph Conte, Rodolphe Gasché, Jill Robbins, and Henry Sussman had a most profound impact on my intellectual life with the example of their dynamic scholarship and powerfully discriminating intelligence. I am also grateful to my colleagues in the English Department of the University of Maine for providing a supporting and collegial environment. In particular, I want to thank Tony Brinkley, Jeff Evans, Burton Hatlen, Naomi Jacobs, Margo Lukens, and Deborah Rogers for reading early portions of this book and providing useful suggestions. Special thanks to Naomi Jacobs for granting release time at a crucial juncture.

The writing of this book has been blessed with the unique generosity of many outstanding colleagues across the country who read the manuscript in its semi-complete state during the summer of 2007: Don Byrd, Michael Davidson, Rachel Blau DuPlessis, Craig Dworkin, Stephen Fredman, Robert Grenier, Lyn Hejinian, and Barrett Watten. I have greatly benefited from their sensitive and generous responses, precise criticism, and vigorous encouragement. I owe a special debt of gratitude to Rachel Blau DuPlessis, whose acumen and enthusiasm helped me get this book off my desk and into the world. At Palgrave Macmillan, my editor, Julia Cohen, has been a most reliable and understanding point of reference.

Grateful acknowledgments to Penelope Creeley for permission to quote Robert Creeley's poem "Love," and to Leslie Scalapino and Robert Grenier for permission to reproduce four pages from *What I Believe Transpiration/Transpiring Minnesota*. My thanks are also due to the Archives and Special Collections at the Thomas J. Dodd Research Center, University of Connecticut Libraries, and in particular Melissa Watterworth, Curator of Library, Natural History and Rare Book Collection, for assistance with archival materials from the Charles Olson Papers. Works by Charles Olson are copyright © The Estate of Charles Olson and © The University of Connecticut Library. Michael Basinski of the Poetry/Rare Books Collection of the University Libraries at SUNY-Buffalo has been very helpful for many years in providing essential materials for this and other projects. I am also grateful to Bonnie B. Coles, senior research examiner at the Library of Congress, Washington, DC. A warm thank you to Sirje Curtis, Mel Johnson, and Barbara Jones at the Fogler Library of the University of Maine: their assiduous labor in locating important texts has been crucial to my research. Thanks also to the impeccable Fogler Library staff for help with the many practicalities of researching: Peter Altman, Sharon Behrends, Diana Green, Peter Lawrence, Jerry Lundt, Jeff Roggenbuck, and Ken Tudor. Special thanks to my student research assistant, Laura Latinski, and to the administrative assistants of the English Department at the University of Maine, Hansie Grignon, Stella Santerre, and Diana Weddell.

Over the years I have enjoyed and learned from my conversations about poetry, language, and politics with Robert Bertholf, Tina Darragh, Kevin Davies, Judith Fetterley, Alan Gilbert, Ernesto Grossman, Carla Harryman, Rosemary Hennessy, Mazie Hough, Karen Mac Cormack, Joy Leighton, Kathleen March, Amy Nestor, Tina Passman, and Dunstan Ward. Friends and family members have kept me afloat and nourished me with their affection: Aria Amirbahman, Stefani Bardin, Armando Billitteri, Laura Billitteri, Pina Torrisi Billitteri, Richard Brucher, Patricia Burns, Daniela Callari, Penelope Creeley, Laura Cowan, Farahad Dastoor, Liz DePoy, Carmelo Ferlito, Bobbie Garber, Henry Friedlander, Stephen Gilson, Alex and Julie Grab, Jean MacRae, Salvina and Giovanni Orecchio, and Anna-Maria Pitrone. I must acknowledge here in particular my debts to Eugene Garber, who first invited me to the United States and has been a mentor ever since. Salvo Marano, my classmate and accomplice in Catania, now an esteemed colleague, has been a source of intellectual delight for more than twenty years. Giovanni Miraglia and Tino Cutugno, beloved friends, shared their passion for poetry and philosophy when I was still a teenager; our conversations continue to this day.

I have been especially fortunate in the past fifteen years to be able to share my ideas with Benjamin Friedlander, whose fiery intellectual companionship and spectacular editorial intelligence have made this writing, even when most maddening and strenuous, a labor of pleasure. My last and lasting thanks are for him: without his help, unwavering good sense, practical assistance, and sustaining gift of love this book would not have been completed.

Abbreviations

See “Works Cited” for full bibliographic information on the individual titles.

Walt Whitman

- DBN *Daybooks and Notebooks*. 3 vols.
- LG *Leaves of Grass. Comprehensive Reader's Edition*. The text and pagination match the Norton Critical Edition prepared by the same editors, Harold W. Blodgett and Sculley Bradley, but not the revised Norton prepared by Michael Moon.
- LGVar. *Leaves of Grass: A Textual Variorum of the Printed Poems*. 3 vols.
- NUPM *Notebooks and Unpublished Prose Manuscripts*. 6 vols.
- NYD *New York Dissected: A Sheaf of Recently Discovered Newspaper Articles by the Author of Leaves of Grass*.
- PW *Prose Works 1892*. 2 vols.
- WWWC *With Walt Whitman in Camden*. 9 vols.

Laura (Riding) Jackson

- A *Anarchism Is Not Enough*.
- Biol “Riding, Laura.” *Twentieth Century Authors: A Biographical Dictionary of Modern Literature* (1942).
- Bio2 “Jackson, Laura (Riding).” *Twentieth Century Authors, First Supplement: A Biographical Dictionary of Modern Literature* (1955).
- Conv “Laura (Riding) Jackson in Conversation with Elizabeth Friedmann.”
- Epil *Epilogue: A Critical Summary*. 3 vols.
- FA *First Awakenings: The Early Poems of Laura Riding*.
- FPPL *The Failure of Poetry, The Promise of Language*.

FUL	<i>Four Unposted Letters to Catherine.</i>
Is There	“Is There a World for Literature?—Is There Literature for a World?”
LRJR	<i>The Laura (Riding) Jackson Reader.</i>
PLR	<i>The Poems of Laura Riding.</i>
PJW	<i>Poems: A Joking Word.</i>
RM	<i>Rational Meaning: A New Foundation for the Definition of Words and Supplementary Essays.</i>
SMP	<i>A Survey of Modernist Poetry.</i>
T	<i>The Telling.</i>
Taken	<i>It Has Taken Long—: From the Writings of Laura (Riding) Jackson.</i>
UMW	<i>Under the Mind’s Watch: Concerning Issues of Language, Literature, Life of Contemporary Bearing.</i>
WO	<i>The World and Ourselves.</i>

Charles Olson

ALMG	“The Art of the Language of Mayan Glyphs.”
DU	“Definitions by Undoing.”
COCC	Charles Olson and Cid Corman. <i>Complete Correspondence, 1950–1964</i> . 2 vols.
CORC	Charles Olson and Robert Creeley. <i>The Complete Correspondence</i> . 10 vols.
CP	<i>Collected Poems.</i>
CPr	<i>Collected Prose.</i>
Max	<i>The Maximus Poems.</i>
Muth	<i>Muthologos. The Collected Lectures and Interviews</i> . 2 vols.
OJ	<i>Olson: The Journal of the Charles Olson Archives</i> . 10 vols.
Storrs	Unpublished texts (cited by title, or first line where appropriate) from the Charles Olson Papers, Archives and Special Collections at the Thomas J. Dodd Research Center, University of Connecticut Libraries. Each document is listed under its own title in the bibliography.
SL	<i>Selected Letters.</i>
SV	<i>The Special View of History.</i>