

**Two more thoughts about deixis**  
by RACHEL BLAU DUPLESSIS

Sometime between 1957 and 1959, Charles Olson sent Robert Creeley a tiny poem, elaborately entitled “One Word as the Complete Poem” (Collected Poems, excluding Maximus 660). A one-word poem is always an intentional challenge to the norms of poems in general, since to call a word equal to a poem invests a good deal in that word, and manifests an elaborate resistance to the many, many words of many other poems. In Olson’s case—that would mean to his own poems, too. That one word, the one single word that comprises the whole poem is “dictic” (Collected Poems 425). The poem says: pointing, the pointing function, and illustrates itself simply by indicating itself as word. It is thus an indexical poem.

The OED (under deictic) defines this word as “directly pointing out, demonstrative.” Making this word the whole thing—the whole idea, the whole poem—is shocking and amusing. It implies that a complete poem, by extension a necessary poem, and even a suggestive poetics can be found in this one minimalist summation. The contrast between the six word title (with four capitals) and the lower case one-word poem is also very pleasant, not to say gleeful in the editorial presentation. The minimal thereby becomes challengingly maximal. Titling this word as Olson does suggests that pointing to pointing is fully adequate statement, a claim interesting enough to ponder as the content and message of a “complete” poem. By a glissade, the poem also presents the idea that a complete poem—any complete poem—is an extension or elaboration of the deictic function. (This poem may have served as one of Olson’s homages to Pound, a politically damaged and rejected figure, but a poetic inspiration.) Such a singular work points into its own pointedness. Its very limits offer it up as a mantra or epigram that claims the poetic functions are forms of knowledge. Poetic method, through selection and indication (plus combination), offers a knowledge as pertinent as argument or logic. Indeed, we thereby return to the origins of the word deictic—as a form of immediate

argument in contrast to the more sophisticated “elenctic.” Beyond this (this “poem,” this “one word”) you need nothing, it seems to say.

Beyond what? Deixis comes (into Greek) from the Indo-European root “deik-” to show and pronounce solemnly. To teach. To make a sign or mark. To betoken, to say, tell or proclaim—and the word digit, the indicator, finger (or toe). From the Latin version of this root, “dict,” there is not only dicere (to say, tell), but words like interdict, dictate, contradict, edict, predict, addict, verdict. And veridical. Expressing the truth. All the functions of poetry (except to please) are contained here, in the etymological aura of the word.

Deixis in linguistics is a particular category of words: the shifters, precisely those that change in reference given the position in time and space of the speaker. They are words that can only be fully understood as particular statement about particular contexts; they point into this situation, Now. When we say “we” what we is meant? What is this today and that tomorrow? What is that when here is this? Where is there? When is recently? Deictic words acknowledge that my here is not your here; my tomorrow is not your tomorrow. They demand situated knowledge and contextual readings. They acknowledge differences between and among people, situations, temporalities, places. The words take on specified meaning spoken from and to a located situation. Deictic terms can only be understood by social understandings, by understanding intimate, particularized, historical and local sites.

This is very striking to me. Why can the term deictic mean both the shifter and the pointer? Why can it be both situational and static, contextual and absolute? It must be—because only then will the full sociality of the deictic be acknowledged. Without the strange doubleness of deixis, one is left with an inadequate theory of language. Pointing needs to be accompanied by a sense of sociality, of the transaction, while speaking and understanding require abilities to decode and appreciate contexts.

Saying “just point” or “lo” underplays the way language represents. The differences in fanciness between the uncommon word “veridical” and the plain-spoken words “truth telling” indicate what I mean. Which is everything-- about the social discourses of language, about tone, status, usage, choices, dictions, syntax, address, position of audience, all learned and changing social conventions about address. Everything about language’s flexibility and its transactional functions seems ignored in the claim made for poetry in the whole poem: “deictic,” if this means simply to point, to show. There is perhaps a utopian message of immediate apprehension, epiphanic imprinting, a flash transferred via that pointing, but this is a utopia without sociality. The Poundean claim: I will point to what I see, and you will be treated to an immediate insight without passing via the turgid impediment of what Pound scoffed at as abstract thought. Pound’s much-touted rejection of abstraction allowed a system-building move without the problematic of system-building; it also helps the purveyor deny he is building any system whatsoever. The Poundean claim is followed by the less pleasant Poundean paradox: Pound thought that in that flash of insight, you would be treated to the truth, that is, to Pound’s immediate insight, the only true immediate insight. The test of the deictic for Pound was that you were to see what he saw. If you saw anything else, you didn’t get it. Is this problematic imprint of an overtly unmediated, but covertly controlled worldview the only plausible reading of the deictic pointing? It is not clear that Olson mean only a “Poundean” meaning, but such a meaning is necessarily evoked, in part by what we know of Maximus, a work that certainly plays with and into Poundean modes of instant apprehension, even if Olson’s poem does not completely buy into an aesthetic ethos like that of the Cantos: “simply show” (and the truth will appear).

This desire for the flash is also expressed by Walter Benjamin. “Method of this project: literary montage. I needn’t say anything. Merely show. I shall purloin no valuables, appropriate no ingenious formulations. But the rags, the refuse— these I will not inventory but allow, in the only way possible, to come into their own: by making use of them.” (The Arcades Project 460). To collect and set

forth, Benjamin claimed, would allow a myriad of flashes to be generated over the whole texture of the collaged project. With cinematic imagination, Benjamin proposed a montage of images offering instantaneous meaning (458), but he also modified this desire for instant epiphany by a focus on the syntax between: “intervals of reflection” or “distances lying between.” (456). (Of course, it is hard to extrapolate a finished argument given the intense, spotty, anti-positivist mode of presentation that Benjamin uses.)

This famous passage, one which I continue to find infinitely suggestive, insists on the creation of structure by interactive space between the images (very much the theory of poetic seriality, as in Oppen.) The key word is interactive, and this undercarriage of the other meaning of the deictic is everywhere in evidence in this passage, apparently rejected, but palpable in image and rhetoric. Benjamin rejects the malign academic method of stealing and appropriating the points of others—collecting and restating already existent theories and interpretive explanations. He refuses this option, and with it, a whole social apparatus of indebtedness and quarrels, positions, debates, sources and camps, institutional practices from the university or journalism. He says that what he wants to present is (metaphorically) the socially despised debris, the cast-off stuff, the detritus. Of this material a new analytic constellation will form. This last is the “Poundean” or “intuitive-flash” place, and the field poetics of pieces of juxtaposed plethora touching each other. But it is supported and surrounded by many acknowledgements of the sociality of knowledge. Thus this famous passage in Benjamin brings in, covertly what it rejects overtly. By invoking interactional or transactional meanings resting on the social only to reject them, by isolating the pointing function of the deictic, nonetheless Benjamin embraces the social in claiming to find the debris and refuse of greatest value.

Contextually, in the unrolling serial sequence of Benjamin’s juxtapositions, this famous passage about the deictic showing forth comes next to a rejection of the base-superstructure relation of economy to culture. So all of his formal

ideas here are involved with a desire to show how details are saturated in larger schemes (but never into totalities or grand history).

And Benjamin proposed, as well, another important, saturated flash: of the dialectical image (this in a series of passages from 464-475 in The Arcades Project). This is a way beyond the simple showing or shining forth, because, while the dialectical image emerges in a flash (473) it consists of a "constellation saturated with tensions." It is a mode of thinking within the material and historical when normal thinking is blocked; in a flash a "dialectical image appears" at the point of maximal opposites. This "dialectical image" is a form of poetic knowledge, because it is deictic in the full sense; it is a showing forth that is also transactional.

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This note was written after I wrote "Draft 33: Deixis," an essay in verse dated 1997-98, and containing a whole meditation on deixis as a mechanism. The poem appears in Drafts 1-38: Toll (Wesleyan University Press, 2001). The two references here:

Olson, Charles. The Collected Poems of Charles Olson, Excluding the Maximus poems. Edited by George F. Butterick. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997.

Benjamin, Walter. The Arcades Project, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999.