

arrive on wave

Gil Ott

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edited by Trace Peterson, Gregory Laynor, and Eli Goldblatt

reviewed by Chris McCreary

I'm not sure when I first became aware of Gil Ott as either a poet or publisher, but I know that by the early or mid-1990s, as I was trying to patch together a personal grid of the contemporary poets whose work I found most striking, I kept coming across his work in local bookstores, and by the time I met him a few years later, I fully understood his reputation as one of the most crucial people to bring together the Philly poetry community. When Ott passed away in 2004, we lost a fierce champion that can never be replaced.

I thought I'd done a reasonably good job of collecting his work over the last 20 or so years, but the publication of *arrive on wave*, Ott's collected poems, has most certainly proven me wrong. In addition to including the titles most readily available during his lifetime, co-editors Trace Peterson, Gregory Laynor, and Eli Goldblatt have brought together Ott's work from sources such as magazine supplements and leaflets as well as previously unpublished poems. (If I have a quibble with this book, it's a relatively minor one: an index of poem titles would've been handy to have with a book this sprawling, especially since the table of contents does not include the titles of individual poems. What an embarrassment of riches this tome must be, though, for me to ask for additional guidance through its 300+ pages!)

arrive on wave leads off with *Light Series*, a batch of self-published poems from 1978. In this and Ott's other earlier work, a kinship with Robert Creeley's terse, tightly wound lines is readily apparent:

an air
specific

to refine love's riddle
that this
all happens

in fear
find the thickest
progress.

By the time he wrote the run of books that includes *Public Domain* (1989), *The Whole Note* (1997), and *Traffic* (2001), Ott had not so much found his voice as discovered a way to torque it further, switching between prose and poetry while modulating diction along the way, something Peterson refers to as the “intentionally disrupted, disarrayed quality” of Ott’s work. As Ott writes in *Public Domain*’s “Introductory,” “The true site of all language is in the pairing, writer to reader, speaker to listener. The poem is public event, host to a multitude of private entries, a defined anarchy.” However, rather than setting up his work to aggressively confront the reader as in some avant-garde traditions, he invites the reader to stand alongside him and sing:

I am calling forth a poem.
I am calling forth a poem.

Come help me sing the song.
Come be with me the poem.

The Whole Note remains the work that I return to most often, always finding new paths through it. Reading his body of work as a whole now, I am struck by how often the narrative voice is literally on the move, often across city streets, but in this collection that means exploring where land and water meet. Indeed, the book begins, “Our sea, to rough trade cautiously approached. Pea green and troughing, sounds like poetry.” By turns essayistic and lyric, *The Whole Note*’s syntax suggests the narrator’s halting walk as he leaps from abstracted thought to keen and specific observation, seeking always to “scrape up art from surfaces unbidden.” “Weed be beautiful,” Ott writes as he sends his “(p)oem to another auditor: prayer, chant, lecture lovingly assembled.”

Ott struggled with kidney disease throughout much of his adult life, and as his friend Goldblatt puts it in his introduction, “Gil lived in that hurt body and danced damn well inside it.” While Ott would likely chide me for reading his work at all autobiographically, I can’t help doing so as *The Whole Note* comes to a close, and I can’t help being moved each time I return to this passage, either:

Prone to the observance, a formal end only, blurred with or without
morphine decides to live. I have made a mistake, a meandering

stasis, down a notch and starting over. Someone else's surgery pulled a knot out, left a hand handled roughly

bumped and thrown what dirt brackets. Possessed of this violence, a plea remains. Fed on seed here, a small black bird

far and still admissible. I will build a body of utterance, that fooled me. The odor will stay, and I

will walk away.

The work that follows in *arrive on wave* is more stylistically varied. I'm not sure to what extent Ott bothered with distinctions between poetry and prose, but if some of the pieces in here read as fiction, they're akin to the work of Beckett, Borges, or Kafka, often relying on an unsettled and unsettling first-person narrative voice. Other work, such as the piece "Heaven," push at the boundaries of clear utterance.

The author's note to this piece describes it as being a monologue that is "a composite of several shelter residents who I have known over the years," and with its stuttered lines often suggesting phonetically written dialogue, "Heaven" is best savored when read aloud:

t'endure
common inhumanity and neglect
t tier n tier yr

step measuring light a gain
strew holiness strain
sa frosted window
less aperture

'sall around us, the light, ever
she finds everly
dust magnified t'hit n ent her
up here eh among d
d zzi glorious err t terror

atop a tower

Between Goldblatt's Foreword, Peterson's editorial introduction, and Chax Press publisher Charles Alexander's Afterword, new readers will find plenty of useful context for Ott's work, and longtime fans will likely gain some insight into the poet, publisher, activist, husband, father, and friend whose writing was rarely revealing of personal details. (Should you seek to gain further insights into Ott's life and work, I'd suggest *the form of our uncertainty: a tribute to Gil Ott*. Edited by Kristen Gallagher, this 2001 publication by Chax Press and handwritten press contains an extraordinary range of responses to his life and work.)

What would Ott have thought of this age of building of our individual brands as poets? His magazine *Paper Air* brought together the likes of Nathaniel Tarn and Leslie Scalapino, Cid Corman and Jackson Mac Low, and while he and his work certainly brushed up against Language poetry and numerous other movements or factions, he never fully threw in his lot with any one of them. (If he had, I wonder, would he already be regularly anthologized, his work more widely taught in college classrooms?) When Ott was in the process of generously publishing a book of poems by Jenn McCreary and myself, he suggested a few editorial changes, all of which I immediately agreed to. "That's the problem with your generation, brought up working in the service industry," he said. "You're trained to say 'yes' to everything. But what do you *really* think?" I learned a great deal from this man who never hesitated to speak his mind, and if you never had a chance to meet this tough, loving, and exceedingly talented individual or his work, well, now is the time, and *arrive on wave* is the book.

Chris McCreary's most recent book is [*neüro / mäntic*] (Furniture Press 2014). A high school English teacher, he lives in Philadelphia with the poet Jenn McCreary and their brood.