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► **To cite this version:**

Vincent Dussol. Versions of the Earth. "Poetry and Politics", Jul 2006, STIRLING, United Kingdom.  
hal-04522176

**HAL Id: hal-04522176**

**<https://hal.science/hal-04522176>**

Submitted on 10 Apr 2024

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## VERSIONS OF THE EARTH

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### **The Minimal**

I study the lives on a leaf: the little  
Sleepers, numb nudgers in cold dimensions,  
Beetles in caves, newts, stone-deaf fishes,  
Lice tethered to long limp subterranean weeds,  
Squirmers in bogs,  
And bacterial creepers  
Wriggling through wounds  
Like elvers in ponds,

**Theodore Roethke**

Eleni Sikelianos's 190-odd-page *The California Poem* (2004) purports to be the poem of a community. One could alternatively call it a community-poem in that it tries to bring together more than previous American long poems had done. By "more" I mean facets/ agents of reality/ nature that had heretofore never made it into a poem: most remarkably, infinitesimally small particles, living or inert. The significance of those infinitesimally small/ tiny elements is called to the reader's attention and mirrored or echoed by the extensive presence of paronomastic pairs on the surface of the text. The inclusion in the text, hence the designation of possible points of slippage between words should be read as a reminder of the power of the infinitely small in the shaping of the larger picture. In environmentally conscious times, it is to be heard as a plea for the earth, largely reminiscent of a great ancestor: Lucretius.

Sikelianos's poetics goes hand in hand with a profound distrust of establishment politics: her beliefs lie in language and its ability to give or restore a voice to mute or silenced members of the earth's community. May her stand not be self-defeating in its too widely open form?

If you type in "Sikelianos" and start a web-search, the first name that comes up is likely to be the one of Angelos Sikelianos, a Greek poet and playwright who died in 1951. Eleni Sikelianos, an American poet, is his great-grand-daughter. Is her Greek ancestry where her taste for the epic comes from? She is the author of *The California Poem*, a 190- odd-page work which came out in 2004 and is the main focus of this paper. Much in the poem is related to nature and the text ends on the word "Earth." The poem has quite a few candid statements in it indicating that this is the work of a Progressive wishing to take a stand for the Earth. What her politics is, is what I set out to determine.

The post-Cold War period has seen politics develop in two main directions. One has been towards the larger scale: nation-states have consented to lose some decision-power to supranational organizations, hoping that future returns will amply compensate for the loss. The other has seen a return to the local and the particular with claims often rooted in ethnicity and territory. *The California Poem* is a faithful record of this evolution: "*In my topophilic state/ I am receiving & transmitting/ international influence now* (66)." The "topophilic state" may be a disposition even a condition in the speaker or an inclination to the emotional investment of place in her native state: whichever it is, this comes jointly with an opening to what lies outside national boundaries.

The poem actually stretches to the extreme the polarity of the small and the large. It has seemed interesting to compare it on this point with a distant predecessor, Lucretius's *De Rerum Natura*, one of antiquity's major poems on nature and the one that first made invisible particles a subject for poetry.

Both *The California Poem* and Lucretius's are long poems. In antiquity, this meant an epic and the function of the epic was to record and preserve a civilization's "traditions, its identity, and consequently its political coherence and stability. [...] Poetry was essentially encyclopaedic, archival, conservative (Di Piero, 1993, 564)." Forms would therefore be fixed. By contrast, it seems an accurate judgment to assert that "the lack of restrictive generic conventions is crucial to the identity of the long poem [in the Western literature of the past hundred years] (Keller, 534)" and *The California Poem*'s 'open' form matches the criterion. Has embracing the 'open' form indicated a progressive-minded author? Things are not that clear-cut: Ezra Pound could be called a misguided Progressive. Difference in form between *De Rerum Natura* and *The California Poem*, however, should not obscure essential similarities. For both poems aim to instruct on the subject of nature: the contemporary poem, at least implicitly, is true to the epic tradition of didacticism, if only through all the demands it makes on readers in terms of documentation on nature, with special attention dedicated to the infinitely small.

Also, Sikelianos follows in Lucretius's footsteps in that hers is an epic foregrounding nature with no identifiable hero. "[P]oem in which the planet takes over] (190)" writes Sikelianos in one of her endnote-poems. While presenting politics as a specifically human pursuit, Lucretius decentred man in nature: his epic about the origins of everything takes man away from center-stage. In a dialogue on work process, Sikelianos explained in turn that she was having trouble coming to terms with the absence of a hero in her epic approach, adding: "I am trying to add the vestigial tailbone of one now." The autobiographical thread running through the poem makes Sikelianos's universe more human than Lucretius's and marks a retreat from his radically materialistic tenets.

The inscription opening Sikelianos's poem reads: "For all the echinoderms and dinoflagellates (3)." Both nouns refer to marine *phyla*: *Phylum* is a taxon used by biologists for the classification of life. [The scientific terminology is used in the author's endnotes to *The California Poem*]. Interestingly, *phylum* comes from the Greek *phylai*, the clan-based voting groups in Greek city-states. To revert to the inscription, "echinoderms" include starfish and sea-urchins. I have personal experience of dinoflagellates.

In the dog-days with the wind blowing from the north-west, the salt ponds of Languedoc will turn pink red. A strong stench then rises. Fish dies. Not until the wind shifts to south

quarters will the process be stopped with sea-water coming in to replenish the ponds. “Red tides”, as biologists call them, are caused by the reproduction in huge numbers of coastal marine species of dinoflagellates, unicellular organisms – protozoans – belonging to the kingdom of protists. Keeping in mind the etymology of “phylum”, the inscription of the poem to “all the dinoflagellates” may appear as an extension to the tiniest forms of life of the current political consciousness of diversity. “When an ecosystem is fully functioning, all the members are present at the assembly (Snyder, 1990, 12).” All the up-to-now unheard of teeming life-forms she makes room for in her poem may be seen as an updated definition of the wretched of the earth or of the “masses” that “at the checkout line huddle (116).”

*The California Poem* clearly purports to be exploratory and break new ground: “Tell, what lurks at the boundaries (7)”; “Now: to let go what we knew [...] / to find a world, a word / we didn’t know (9).” Microscopic life-forms are given unprecedented exposition by Sikelianos: apart from dinoflagellates, the reader is told about “micro monsters caught / in writhing waves (183); notice is made of “each tiny eye / of the cell / where the cytochrome [a protein] / drinks language (39).” The end-product of the process inside of “the belly of the lily (122)” is described as “mini\_ / scule orangestation twisted into a tree (122).” The reader also encounters “radiolarians (179)” [= unicellular planktonic marine organisms], “chemosynthesized bacteria (179)”, “eukaryotes (45)”, “amphipods (79)” [= small crustaceans] “every gray whale is gorging on (79)”, “the folding membranes / of organelles (90)” [a specialized part of the cell], “cilia (160) [the motile or sensory projections of some cells], “spirochetes (160)” [an order of bacteria]. The focus on what the human eye cannot see or can barely see is not confined to living organisms: attention is paid to “bright spores of daylight (119).” The speaker invites one to “[f]ollow the foot- / prints inside the nerve cell: they lead to [...] [a] tiny patch of memory (55).” A simile to convey what memory mechanisms involve evokes “microfine powders (23).” Anthracite is said to display “minute radiating eruditions (90).” The breaking of a wave is related to its “particles (180)”, dream to a “dust of light (13).” In a revised version of the Ecclesiastes’ “ashes to ashes and dust to dust”, the creation of the human body comes down to the condensation of “clouds of dust, dust-devils (159).”

Such fastidious coverage of small beings and things suggests that the utmost attention is being paid to all, ensuring adequate representation. Gary Snyder quotes approvingly the doubts of a fellow poet – maybe Allen Ginsberg – who, on gazing at a breathtaking expanse of mountains, once exclaimed: “You mean there is a senator for all this?” All the exotic-sounding terms scattered throughout *The California Poem* make a catalogue – an epic feature often retained

by the long poem – and are like taking census of newcomers by a well-disposed government, prior to taking the sensible action the situation requires.

In *De Rerum Natura*, Lucretius turns to the infinitely small to liberate humanity from all fears brought on by religious faith, which he equates with superstition. One of the tasks of politics was always to decide [on] what authority it is legitimate to obey and enforce. Lucretius strives to establish that, contrary to popular belief, no authority or intention is at work in nature. “What is needed is the rational study of nature (VI, p.178).” He therefore vigorously debunks established renderings of it, such as prosopopeia: “There is a fixed location where soul and mind can grow/ There can be no reason whatever for asserting/ They could hold their own outside any animal body,/ In the crumbling soil or in the fire of the sun,/ In water, or in the highest ethereal region (V, p.141).” That location, Lucretius insists, is “within the human container (V, p.141).” Given the place of the soul in western religion up to the present day, it is worth recalling how its mystical version comes undone in the hands of Democritus’s follower.

He accounts for the mysterious workings of the soul by hypothesizing the power of the infinitely small: “[S]o this anonymous force, made of tiny particles,/ Hides itself; it is indeed the soul of the soul/ And dominates the whole through which it is infused (III, p.183).” It is because of their excessively small size and of their limited number that the elements of the soul seem to work mysteriously: “[T]he elements of the soul are very much smaller/ Than those of which our bodies are made up;/ Moreover they are less numerous, and disseminated/ Throughout the limbs: the most you can say is this:/ The distance between the elements of the soul/ Is as great as the smallest object of which the impact/ Can put our sensibility in motion (III, p.85-86).” Lucretius’s tracking down of the ultimate indivisible particle is an attempt to shrink metaphysics – and its power to abuse human beings – to its degree zero.

Very little is known about Lucretius’s biography. One can, however, safely assume that he was not on the side of the powers that be. He had no fear of the consequences of his disturbing statements: “But I have the support of my passion for reputation,/ I can even claim a certain addiction for poetry/ And – what does not always go with it – some mental energy./ Thus equipped, I am not afraid of unpromising country (I, p.39).” Thus poetry was, by his own admission, instrumental in convincing him that embracing Democritus’s subversive atomism was tenable. The text of the poem enables one to intuit how this was so.

A number of explanatory similes used by Lucretius in expounding his “whole account [...] of the nature of nature (I, p.39)” are about the boundless generative power of letters and sounds. And, says the Latin poet, there is no reason why it should be otherwise with the indivisible particles of matter. “For the particles are the same in sky, sea, rivers,/ Earth, sun, all

crops, all trees, all living things,/ But in different patterns and moving in different ways./ It is not so different as you might think with verses,/ For so many letters are common to so many words,/ Yet the words and verses differ from one another/ And that is true of meaning as well as sound./ And this is only a change in the order of elements;/ The variations for particles are more numerous/ And so make all the variations of nature (I, p.36).” What metaphysics could such a mind not undo, or deconstruct, should we say? What is worth remembering for our purpose is that it was the mechanics of language and poetry that introduced Lucretius to his physics of nature and sowed potential seeds of subversion in the ground of civic stability, running counter to the function epic poems had been expected to perform.

It is no accident that the word “creation” should be used indifferently to refer to the making of a work of art and to the coming of the world into existence. To Canguilhem, a contemporary epistemologist, the notions entertained by human beings about the origins of the world will directly transfer to their assessment of what poetry can or cannot achieve. In Lucretius’s case, the sequential order may have been reversed. Democritus’s lexicon has made it possible to establish with some certainty that in his case, it was the kinesis of writing certain letters that led him to his conclusions on the structure of matter.

In what order did influences work for Sikelianos in *The California Poem*? Was it awareness of the power of the tiny variation on the page that impacted and increased her sensitivity to the significance of smaller species and processes? Or did the ecological consciousness come first? As with ecosystems, it may be a case of interdependency of two types of attention.

Paronomastic pairs constantly come up in the poem, bearing out Lucretius’s observations on the effectiveness of language at generating meaning from minor substitutions. Thus and to confine ourselves to the most significant examples: “world” and “word (9 & 38-39),” “matter” and master (48), “early” and “earthly (82),” “books” and “brooks (104),” “fame” and “flame (112),” “eagles” and “angles (135),” “singing” and “stinging (136),” “holes” and “haloes (7),” “pursue” and “peruse (187),” “annals” and “Annelids (177),” “otters” and “offers (29);” “hinder” and “Pindar (32),” “radial” and “radical (133),” [“the human race/” said to have “toiled”, and to be “tailed/ by the tiny bones” of negative feelings (20), “sandflies” and “sandfleas (49),” “purr” and “poor (53),” “clock” and “cluck (42),” “black” and “back (35),” “mutt” and “mottled (52),” “signees” and “signets(98),” “split-tree” and “spit-tree (98).] “At Union Station, everybody’s got a lump/ or (...) a limp (22).” More pairs include “soiled” and “spoiled” written as one word with “p” between square brackets, “shy”, “sly” and “fly (120)”, and maybe most interestingly in the connections the slippage establishes “anther”, “anthem”, “atom (161).”

A dream reported by Sikelianos's speaker would seem to confirm that her regard for the tiny owes as much to the experience of the page as to the experience of the page's referent: "I dreamed/ that dust mote was the first word ever I wrote/ when I first wrote it would be something/ to be floating in beams of light, very/ tiny, nightly,/ lightly (130)". Elsewhere, an off-voice in the poem comments on "*the mystery of generative forces here on Earth* (38)" and language is one of them: "Begin with a homophone, move/ through numbers, animals & rocks participated/ in the inventions of language/ (from the snapping of twigs/ we learned k's and t's) (38)." And, to drive the point home, this exclamatory statement: "All praise to the letter 'dust' (159)."

It does not take more than micro-units of language to alter power structures in the heavens:

RISE UP, ————— phonemes  
 cum genomes, let  
 language disintegrate, tiny  
 technology in the compost heap  
 [...] Canis Major-bright my words [...] [...]  
 [...] slip  
 new gods  
  
 into the sky  
 (139)

In that the local is always small compared to the national and *a fortiori* the international or the global, it does not seem unreasonable to assume that in highlighting the role of the small, Sikelianos is taking a stand for commitment at the local level, advocating micro-politics in the making versus existing macro-politics.

Small size and large size interrelate within the wide spectrum of nature in *The California Poem* and *De Rerum Natura* alike. The ability to shift scales (Snyder, 1990, 14) is as much a part of the requirements that, following Lucretius, the epic poet must fulfil in the rendering of the whole as of those of the politician in today's multilayered world.

In the Latin poem, the story of the grand ordering of the world includes political development but no clear homology is predicated between the former and the latter. The first human beings had a crude approach to the subject: "[t]hey had no notion at all of the common good,/ Understanding nothing of custom or of law [...] The only idea they had was: Each man for himself (V, p.162)." As sophistication increased, the rule of law gradually came into existence: "Then some men had the idea of setting up magistracies/ And establishing codes so that people could live by law (V, p.167)." Since no relationship is hinted at between nature and politics, the conclusion must be that Lucretius held the opinion that politics is the preserve of human beings. In retrospect, one might see there foreshadowings of the views of 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup>-century constructivist rationalists like Hobbes or Rousseau who theorized that political constructions could only be artefacts.

Dividing lines between human things and nature are not drawn so sharply in *The California Poem* which reads a plea for complexity and non-separation. Time now to return to the other half of the poem's inscription, which was "for all the echinoderms."

The second phylum honoured at the threshold of the poem includes starfish and sea-urchins and their contribution to the aesthetics and politics of *The California Poem* is explicated in Sikelianos's endnotes. They stand for a wish to outgrow Manichean visions of life: "An *asteroidean* (starfish) begins as a bilateral entity, but does not stay obsessed with mirrors, mirror stages, self-reflection, binary modes (190)." Sikelianos laments "California's polarization (105)." That is why the phylum of echinoderms, which "is based on a plan of five (191)" interests Sikelianos so much. She reminds us in the acknowledgments section that the world has five Kingdoms: "Animalia, Protoctista, Plantae, Fungi, and Monera (2)." Aristotle, the author of a treatise on politics and who famously declared Man a "*zoon politikon*," is also brought into the picture in a line about sea-urchins, among other things because "Aristotle's lantern (142)" refers to the five united jaws and accessory ossicles of some of those sea-urchins. "Starfish [...]" it is stated elsewhere, "make [...] radial symmetry/ radical syllabi; the Asterozoa might teach us/ autonomous habits (133)." Five becomes nine as the prologue opens: "Let me tell you of my cat-o-nines cosmovision." The cat-o-nine tails was a whip used on board ships for chastisement of unruly sailors. During WW2, a US Navy Flying Squadron operating in the Pacific war zone, baptized itself the Cat-o-Nines. Sikelianos's "cat-o-nines cosmovision" can therefore be heard as a threat, especially since it follows an epigraph in which a fifteenth-century Spanish writer – in fact the very one who coined the toponym "California" – describes the inhabitants of California as Amazon-like black women able to cause "so much injury (5)." It is hoped that the nine-tailed cosmovision too may imperil the order of things.

Sikelianos's politics become more explicit as she voices her concerns about larger 'space-units', from California out to the planet and the planets.

She makes herself the spokeswoman of the environmentally-minded and publicises the risks faced by the Earth. Unlike Whitman who could find "occasion to/ sing war & perfect soldiers," she has to deal with "the war that wages over the/ face of the Earth (43)." "[S]hall we put/ nuclear waste into unlined pits, (76)" she asks? From the vantage point of a plane, she identifies the blurring of natural phenomena, remarking: "I know, I know, it's night/ not-night/ It's the rolling earth/ with its ass on fire (173)." The jeopardizing of the earth matters for it is but the start of more damage to come: "The planet/ representing planets will crackle/ and spit (187)."



A “timetable” ranging from 12,500 years ago to the present (80-81) and an “*Endangered, Threatened, & Extinct Interlude + Outdoor Hazards* (165-168)” read as “a funeral litany for variety (anonymous online review).” Showing her credentials as a Progressive, the author chooses for the main landmarks of her chronology events related to the life and death of native languages, others affecting ethnic minorities – especially Indian tribes that lived on the territory of present-day California – or more generally events reflecting non-mainstream views on California, from the perspective of its prehistory, its discovery and its environmental history.

The speaker of *The California Poem* visibly places no trust in politicians. She portrays a representative of the species with “vice/ like an oil swimming/ at the surface of his body (60).” Sikelianos registers that political ideals have gone awry and wishes “(t)o stand apart from institutions/ distorted utopias here on Earth (159).”

She equally fights back history, speaking about “a collision/ between history my enemy/ and the self (164)” and admits it is beyond her to “catalogue/ all the false histories/ that wobbled through (94).” History has led to the present predicament, proving a self-defeated enterprise. Nature is presented as a possible way of fixing the holes in a master narrative that promoted ignorance in pursuit of its own purposes:

All of human history  
is lying in the grass, in  
nature, there is nothing,  
we can do to escape it

so just relax, Sybarite, (Symbiont),  
and let this melt  
from my hand to yours  
like tar seepages on the beach  
used to caulk gaps in the knowing  
(60)

“Symbiont”, a Linux-based (i.e. user-friendly non-Microsoft) computer networking solution, is shown as integral to the audience interested in change. We shall return to the subject of computers.

If what, in *The California Poem* is referred to as “the human hurricane (127)” i.e. “the human” is so hard to pin down, it is because it is contested ground between various forces among which history seems the most negative:

—Wait, what is  
“the human”? : the will, & “I have a hand”  
[...]

fate, false history, I cannot  
make this list because  
another it  
is “at it with a vengeance, and what [this]

it is is Nature”  
(128)

Unlike Lucretius’s ordering of the world, Sikelianos’s politics and poetics visibly draw from nature. She recalls approvingly one “Blake/ [who] stuck his finger into the bloody deer and all you ghosts who could give a fuck/ about aesthetics, that strictly human endeavour (148).” “Who/”, she asks “is of more use on the face of the earth, Eleni/ or opossums? (58)” The answer lies in the very asking. Different ecosystems are baptized “communities:” “*Biotic Community: Rocky Shore* (27);” “*Biotic Community: Riparian Woodland* (64);” “*Biotic Community: Freshwater Marsh* (104).” Sikelianos’s offers for an example a version of nature cleansed of overbearing human presence. Human community is shown as non-existent. Models for its building lie in smaller or larger orders of life and the universe. “What do I have in common with my fellow humans? (160)”, she asks. Observing that “(humans) fall apart”, she quotes her addressee’s reply, also a question: “Are you speaking of molecules/ or community interactions? (160)” The assumption behind the question suggesting that the former – “molecules” – could be equated with the latter – “community interactions” is validated by what follows, confirming that lessons for the organization of society are to be drawn from the infinitely small and the infinitely large, and nature at large both sentient and inanimate:

My less fragile

body, little planet, had an answer, had  
a question and response; an orbit offering an image  
of all our circling grandstand  
[...]  
in the united states of all this place, every  
amalgamated rock and singing string & dirt, our sexual  
flowering earth, vectee crowded  
with vectors. What  
have you made  
flower?

anther  
anthem  
atom

Little planet, crystal ball  
tells the tale of a many-layered dustcake  
(161)

Information technology – here present via dustcakes, i.e. microchips – has a place in the version of the *polis* to be wished for: “as animal organs are orphaned/ [they are] replaced/ by my motherboard lattices in the new/ articulation of civic space”, states Sikelianos in a former passage.

Political poets of the past century have given different versions of the earth. In 1934 in his long poem “On a Raised Beach” written in Shetland, Scottish poet Hugh Mac Diarmid

placed stones and geology above everything else. To this man who was about to join the Communist Party of Scotland, the mineral world encapsulated the lesson that men should learn from the earth. That lesson was about the value of solitude, the ability to stand alone and to sever oneself from the entanglements of humanity so as to clarify purpose. In his poem, stones are made by MacDiarmid to stand for steadfastness, exemplary “single inspiration, foundations, firm and invariable;/ (...) [an] immense exercise of will,/ Inconceivable discipline, courage, and endurance,/ Self-purification and anti-humanity,/ Be[ing] ourselves without interruption,/ Adamantine and inexorable.” Such notions as “anti-humanity” may seem surprising given the political leanings of the author of “On a Raised Beach” at the time. But criticism in it of “all that fears to grow roots into the common earth (38)” suggests that it is a wider and deeper commonality of experience that the poem’s speaker is reaching for. “What happens to us/ Is irrelevant to the world’s geology”, stated MacDiarmid, “But what happens to the world’s geology/ is not irrelevant to us./ We must reconcile ourselves to the stones,/ Not the stones to us (44).” One of the semantic fields of the poem is transformation of living matter into stone: “lithogenesis”, “carpolite fruit”, “eburnation”, “Truth is not crushed;/ It crushes, gorgonises all else into itself.” MacDiarmid acknowledged the “discovery/ Of the dual nature of lichens, the partnership,/ Symbiosis, of a particular fungus and particular alga (50)” but would retain the lesson taught by the bare stones which “bring me straight back to reality./ I grasp one of them and I have in my grip/ The beginning and the end of the world,/ My own self, and as before I never saw/ The empty hand of my brother man (50).”

Strongly geological versions of the earth – from Robinson Jeffers to poets from the Marxist Left as MacDiarmid was in 1934 or Progressives like the early Gary Snyder – in *Riprap* (1958) – have tended to be austere quests, baring processes informed by a puritanical vision. Geology and astronomy have provided a number of contemporary poets – especially progressive ones – with substitutes for the underworld and heaven. Hailing a liberator, Neruda exclaimed: “your impenetrable rectitude/ issues from our hard geology (119).” But the exuberant Chilean poet’s approach was in fact a more inclusive one: “farther down, in the gold of geology,/ like a sword enveloped in meteors,/ I plunged my turbulent and tender hand/ into the genital matrix of the earth (30).” Contact with the earth was eroticised but penetration was so deep that it reached the heavens. His lush vision of the earth imbued his Communist politics, causing him to celebrate an anti-puritan, even sensuous integrated whole.

Integrating man again into the universe was a notion Charles Olson (1910-1970) developed as he came into close contact with descendants of the Maya in Yucatan. From his stay with them in the early nineteen fifties, he evolved the notion of “human universe”, making of the body –

like Neruda before him and Sikelianos now – the privileged channel of rediscovery of a meaningful universe: “[D]iscourse”, he wrote, needs now to be returned to the only two universes which count, the two phenomenal ones, the two a man has need to bear on because they bear so on him: that of himself, as organism, and that of his environment, the earth and planets (Olson 1997, 157).” Olson traces contemporary Mayans’ ability to wear their bodies – the “human house” – in a gentler way than Americans, back to a “concept at work which kept attention so poised that (1) men were able to stay so interested in the expression and gesture of all creatures, including at least three planets in addition to the human face, eyes and hands, that they invented a system of written record, now called hieroglyphs (...) [of which] the signs (...) retain the power of the objects of which they are the images (159).” Loathing what he named the pejorocracy of post-WW2 America’s consumer society which turned human beings into shadows of citizens, Olson yearned for self-reliant figures, servants of the community of heroic stature, of the kind he had encountered in prominent fishermen from the past of his hometown Gloucester, Massachusetts.

Olson brought together concerns about the *polis*, the city, faith in the connective powers of the body with a rather inclusive vision of nature, of the earth and of a human universe, without, however, infiltrating the inanimate world with intentions.

*The California Poem* marks a regression to an animistic way of thinking the earth: “for EARTH is an intelligence (92).” Compare this with Lucretius speaking about the indivisible particles: “No trace there of an intelligent mind;/ They did not work out what they were going to do (I, p.41).”

The body is *The California Poem*’s speaker’s privileged way of experiencing at-oneness with the earth. Repeatedly, the speaker finds a shortcut to a solution through immediate contact with the earth via any one of its kingdoms. In response to threats on the planet, she proposes to “lie down in the quiet waters and fold myself// into the cunning jewel box of the Agate Chama [ a Californian rock oyster] (...)/and bury/ my arms/& legs in the earth at this/ juncture (188).” “I’m worried for the cyberphyla, she explains elsewhere,. . . / which is why I/ kneel among the lesser deuterostomes/ licking an *Anthopleura elegantissima* & all/ the radiate animals (169).” The connection becomes explicitly erotic as, she says, I “lay my head among/ foredune & dune scrub & dune swale (...)/ fore-/ play in bushes/ amidst ancient assemblages of organisms, give head to/ armoured stink bugs, decapods & pinnipeds (169).” More erotic interchange shows “Me, making out with some hooped mammals up north (pronghorn antelope), kissing/ a long-tailed weasel (96).” All extremities and orifices are susceptible to be used for the same purpose, for better or for worse: “But let E. kiss with the rabbit the dew-struck grass/ in the morning, sun-/ light slapping her face (91).” “[Y]et try licking an

anemone/ and it will sting (175).” Or, “Down from the cliff, I stick/ my fingers/ into sea anemones with a finger that if/ left too long will turn/ to bone (29-30).” “[W]rap my tongue around the slug (120)” is yet another strategy. The slug comes as an echo of the fact that for Sikelianos, the puritan hard geological version of the Earth has become obsolete for Progressives and lost its appeal. She describes the scattered clouds she sees through the window of a plane as “a soft geology” and “Lakes/ gather themselves/ up to form/ nervous revolutions/ revolutionary/ lakes fold up (172).” In a dream, she will see “any/ soft-bodied animal that oozes at the edges/ of symmetry [as] anything delicious, wearable, -/ lovely (109).”

One might call it Sikelianos’s the copulative approach to the greater community. It is a way of bypassing and overtaking existing channels of political life. The body affords the opportunity to relate at all scales, from the microscopic to the macroscopic.

To a certain extent, *The California Poem* marks a regression to an animistic way of thinking the earth: “for EARTH is an intelligence (92).” Compare this with Lucretius speaking about the indivisible particles: “No trace there of an intelligent mind;/ They did not work out what they were going to do (I, p.41).” The poem’s speaker’s friends warn her: “you can’t say ‘Music/ comes from God,’ that’s just silly my friends were/ trying to explain me in the situation in the/ future if it were to speak/ it would speak of you (138).”

For Eleni Sikelianos, like Language poets before her, has made the front of language her battlefield. She entertains the hope “to create/ the worlds/ by naming (39).” For “language/ is a shape/ the planet takes (190).” She extirpated herself from an alienated language: “what I velcroed myself out of:/ a spinning rip through lawless language (94)”. “Writer”, she exclaims, “make us a sea we can believe in” instead of “mythologizing the landscape beyond recognition (95).” She resents her language being “rippled word/ by word by human/ crowding (171).” She now finds her bearings “up from the Narrating Bay/[where] reservations lie dusty and secretive in the muddy recesses of the map (148).” Her task is to “tell the history of each & every piece (152)”, no doubt to further the advancement of micropolitics. She is in search of a new paradoxical language: “Invent a language, ‘the tongue/ of the mirror,’ into which/ anything, everything can be/ perfectly translated, but in which/ nothing can be said (153).” Is this why she included several reproductions of gestures of the alphabet for the deaf-and-dumb in the poem?

Concern for the literal may thus be what stops Sikelianos from straying into woolly mysticism and ensure that her version of the Earth remain usable and useful, swerving, swirling, truly Lucretius-like:

And you, self-magnifying sons & daughters of Earth-  
quake

the rolling genius of that laughing language  
able to shake

boulders and dirt  
Swirl, swirl  
(158).

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