Leave the Roots On: Charles Olson’s Theory of Language

by

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Abstract

Charles Olson opened his 1950 manifesto, “Projective Verse,” by rhetorically questioning the relevance of poetry in postwar America. If verse is “to go ahead” and “to be of *essential* use” it must “catch up,” he states. What verse was expected to catch up *with* is not specified, but Olson’s pronouncement suggests that, like Pound, he was sensitive to poetry’s diminished position in the cultural mainstream. But Olson was more optimistic about the future of poetry than his predecessor. In his study of the etymon, he discovered that language can and does evolve in response to changes in values and perspectives. Writing in the postwar period, Olson’s “roots theory” of language was an attempt to uncover ancient, oral, and “pre-rational” models of discourse that could be used to reshape consciousness.

Keywords: American poetics; Postmodernism

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List of Acronyms

COEP	Olson, Charles. *Charles Olson & Ezra Pound: An Encounter at St. Elizabeths.* Ed. Catherine Seelye. Grossman Publishers, 1975.
CP	Olson, Charles. *Collected Poems.* University of California Press, 1997
DBU	Olson, Charles. "Definitions by Undoings". *boundary 2*, Autumn 1973 – Winter 1974.
HU	Olson, Charles. *Human Universe and Other Essays.* Grove Press, 1967.
ML	Olson, Charles. *Muthologos*. Talonbooks, 2010.
PVII	Olson, Charles. *The Principle of Measure in Composition by Field: Projective Verse II.* Chax Press, 2010.
SL	Olson, Charles. *Selected Letters.* University of California Press, 2001.
SW	Olson, Charles. *Selected Writings.* New Directions, 1967.
TCP	Olson, Charles. *The Collected Poems of Charles Olson.* University of California Press, 1997.
TMP	Olson, Charles. *The Maximus Poems.* University of California Press, 1983.
SVH	Olson, Charles. *The Special View of History.* Oyez, 1970.

Introduction

If verse is to continue to be of “essential use,” Charles Olson declares in his 1950 manifesto “Projective Verse,” a new poetics grounded in “the possibilities of the breath” must be adopted in place of the traditional modes of composition (SW 15). “Projective Verse” sets out a rigorous rubric that starts with the breath and leads to a new “stance toward reality.” In addition to this revolution in poetics, Olson’s essay contained several original insights that would develop into a more robust theory of language. Olson’s “roots theory” of poetics would be exemplified by his poetry and elucidated by his prose, lectures, and letters.

For Olson, projective verse — which includes epic and dramatic forms, but excludes the lyric — begins with the breath and the voice. As a poet attuned to, and eager to exploit, the rhetorical pressures of the spoken word, Olson’s poetics are unambiguously grounded in the oral/aural dimensions of speech. That said, some commentators have argued that Olson’s experiments with the spatial, visual aspects of the poem on the page contradict his emphasis on speech and listening. This reading, as I will argue in chapter 1, is the result of a misunderstanding of the function of the poem in its written form. Speech is “the ‘solid’ of verse, the secret of a poem’s energy,” and it is the sound of its syllables, words, and lines that gives the projective poem its vitality (SW 20). Grounding poetic language in the oral rather than the visual was also a necessary step in Olson’s mission to develop a new mode of discourse — one that favoured the expression of one’s immediate experience.

Olson’s writing on language elicits important questions about the function of poetry and of human communication in general. “Art does not seek to describe but enact,” Olson writes in his essay “Human Universe.” Poetry, then, is not a static artifact: it is the active transference of “energy” between poet and audience — a *kinetic* force (to use Olson’s phrase) that inspires others to act. Poetry also serves a rhetorical and pedagogical function; certain forms of verse are more suited to this than others. In “Projective Verse” Olson brazenly challenges the rhythmic and syntactical conventions of “closed” verse forms and offers a new rubric for poets working in the “open” or “projective” form — one that “registers the field of reality in its rhythmic abstractions, thereby accounting for how reality’s influences on the poet mediate the line a poem

forms from beginning to end" (Hoeynck 165). While working in an open form is a requirement of the projective poet, Olson refrains from making similar decrees about the poem's content. (This would contradict his high regard for poetic freedom.) "There is no content to which a poem is alien," Olson writes. "None. Can that be heard?" (PVII 20).

Olson's theory of language builds on the work of American modernists such as Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams. Like Pound, Olson is interested in the careful use of language. In his poetic practice, he traces the history of language through an analysis of the etymon, which reinforces his roots theory of poetics — a theory supported by several early twentieth century philosophers and linguists such as Ernest Fenollosa, Alfred North Whitehead, Ernst Cassirer, and Benjamin Lee Whorf. These thinkers share with Olson an understanding of the world as an active, continuous process of becoming. In the projective poem, the immediate experiences of nature are captured with language that is concrete and particular. Generalizations, taxonomies, abstractions, and even metaphors are exiled. In his later essays, Olson proposes that the poetic revolution begins with the adoption of a new syntactical structure — a move that "directly challenges the socially sanctioned patterns of thought and expression and symbolically challenges the conventions of social order" (Von Hallberg 71).

My thesis begins with an analysis of the structure and arguments of "Projective Verse," as well as a survey of the critical commentaries Olson's polarizing essay provoked. In chapter two, I will introduce the genesis of Olson's roots theory of poetics and explore how he applies this theory to his poetic practice. While much of Olson's poetics are grounded in the modernist tradition, his offering of a new "stance towards reality" directs us to the postmodern era by drawing the openness of the poem into the body of the poet.

Chapter 1: Projective Verse

Charles Olson opens his poetic manifesto “Projective Verse” with the following proclamation:

> Verse now, 1950, if it is to go ahead, if it is to be of essential use, must, I take it, catch up and put into itself certain laws and possibilities of the breath, of the breathing of the man who writes as well as of his listenings. (SW 15)

By calling attention to the status of verse in this post-war moment, it is clear that the revolution this literary manifesto hopes to incite will extend beyond poetics. It is, for Olson and his generation of poets, an ethical concern. Olson’s career as a writer was preceded by several years of working for various political organizations. After leaving Harvard to complete his book on Melville, he moved to New York and took a job as publicity director for the American Civil Liberties Union. He went on to serve as the Chief of the Foreign Language Information Services of the Common Council for American Unity and, while in Washington, as the Foreign Nationalities Director of the Democratic National Committee. A New Deal supporter, Olson’s commitment to American politics began to wane following Roosevelt’s death in 1945. When Truman assumed office, Olson abandoned his political career and turned his attention to writing.

In 1946, Olson reconnected with an old acquaintance — Jewish-Italian painter Corrado Cagli. During the war, Cagli had fled Italy to escape prosecution under Mussolini’s regime. Finding asylum in America, he enlisted in the U.S. Army and was assigned to the unit that liberated Buchenwald, a Nazi concentration camp in Central Germany. Cagli returned to America with a collection of drawings depicting what he had witnessed at the camp. Olson wrote his poem “La Préface” in response to Cagli’s drawings; the piece appeared in a brochure for the artist’s exhibitions in Chicago and New York. Written from the perspective of a camp prisoner, the opening lines of Olson’s poem attempt to give voice to a Holocaust survivor:

> “I will die about April 1st …” going off
> “I weigh, I think, 80lbs …” scratch
> “My name is NO RACE” address
> Buchenwald new Altamira cave
> With a nail they drew the object of the hunt. (SW 160)

In the late 1940s, as the world began to comprehend the full extent of the Holocaust, Olson was convinced that there must be something fundamentally corrupt at the core of Western culture. “Man came here by an intolerable way,” he stated in an essay written for Jean Riboud, a member of the French Resistance and former captive at Buchenwald:

> When man is reduced to so much fat for soap, superphosphate for soil, fillings and shoes for sale, he has, to begin again, one answer, one point of resistance only to such fragmentation, one organized ground, a ground he comes to by a way the precise contrary of the cross, of spirit in the old sense, in old mouths. It is his own physiology he is forced to arrive at. And the way — the way of the beast, of man and the Beast. (SW 13)

Many of the poems and essays written during this time concern themes of cultural reform and the role of poetry in effecting social change. Building upon his democratic ideals, Olson’s goal of establishing a “New Humanism” would require a reshaping of consciousness, one that recognized the dignity and fragility of all human life. The rise of mechanization brought about by World War II had revealed the vulnerability of the human organism. “In this intricate structure are we based, now more certainly than ever,” Olson concluded, “for its power is bone muscle nerve blood brain … a man, its fragile mortal force its old eternity, resistance” (SW 14). In 1950, Olson would bring the power of the human body into focus in his essay “Projective Verse” as he advocated for a physiologically grounded poetics of the breath.

While Olson and Cagli were collaborating in Washington, Ezra Pound was being held nearby in the maximum-security ward of St. Elizabeths Hospital. Commenting on Pound’s incarceration in “This is Yeats Speaking,” Olson advised the poets of his generation to “hold the mirror up to authority” (COEP 30):

> It was Pound’s error to think, because he was capable to examine with courage and criticize eloquently the world we have inherited … Pound thought this power, necessary to us men who had to make the language new, also gave him the sight to know the cure. (COEP 28)

Pound’s “cure” included both linguistic and economic reforms; it also prescribed a program of eugenics, as his letters to American politicians and broadcasts on Rome Radio’s American Hour would attest. Between 1946 and 1948, Olson visited Pound regularly at St. Elizabeths. Given his progressive social views and his friendship with

Cagli, it is surprising that Olson sought to establish a relationship with Pound; yet, like many poets of his generation, Olson felt that there was still much to be learned from the "master" about his craft. Olson held firm that Pound's artistic genius should be judged separately from his fascist and anti-Semitic opinions. He was not alone in this. As Christopher Beach explains, poets with radically different political dispositions were often attracted to Pound, and "it seemed to matter less to these poets what Pound's politics actually were than that his work addressed political issues at all" (Beach 26). What Pound offered these young poets was a modern and unorthodox method of composition, one that took into account the "structural, etymological, and sonic properties of language, as well as the implicit social and political structures language contains" (Beach 23). Olson's use of economic language and concrete imagery in his poetry, as well as his liberal incorporation of historical source texts, were drawn directly from Pound's example.

In the pages of the journals he kept to document his visits, Olson articulated what he observed were Pound's most damning flaws — his elitism, his republicanism, and his unwillingness to acknowledge the dignity and autonomy of all human life. Frustrated by Pound's prejudicial comments, Olson concluded that, given "the only life he has lived is, in fact, the literary," Pound was out of touch with the real world (COEP 97). His inability to make meaningful social connections with people outside of his literary circle led Pound to instigate a "revolt against the cult of the common man" and an "alliance with the cult of the elite" (COEP 20). Under fascism, Pound believed his reputation as a public intellectual would guarantee a position of influence in Europe — something he was never able to achieve in America. To move society forward, Pound looked to what he imagined to be more culturally refined eras such as the Italian Renaissance and ancient Greece. As Hugh Kenner observes, Pound believed that to return society to its previous state was "a simple matter of reactivating knowledge. And this was implicit in his guiding myth of Odysseus, whose journey through unknown dangers is directed toward his former home. Mussolini seemed to be helping to rebuild Ithaca" (377). In his writing, Pound uses examples from the past two millennia to develop his critique of contemporary Western culture. While Olson adopts much of Pound's approach, his scope is temporally broader. To find models that will shape the world's future, he searches beyond the written history of Western culture to uncover our shared primordial past.

As Beach argues, for Olson, Pound's sense of history was too narrow and conveniently subjective in its application. "Olson felt Pound and other modernist writers had used 'history' for their own ends: to build a case for the relative inferiority of the present state of civilization, an inferiority that could be rectified only by the establishment of standards of 'culture' based on elitist models gleaned from the past" (Beach 93). For Olson, "history is what one does, rather than what one learns, or is determined by" (Ross 213). This emphasis on history as action (or process) sets Olson apart from other modernists and is central to his definition of 'postmodernism.' After the war, poets like Olson came to realize that a critique of culture was insufficient: to reform culture, one needed to act. Writing in his journal on January 24, 1946, Olson laments Pound's myopic nostalgia for a non-existent past:

> Though it must be said for Pound that his sense is not social, but societal, more John Adams, and the Adams' family sense. What's shallow about it is the deadness of it, the 18th century *lag* in it, the moan for the lost republican purity, the wish to return America to its condition of a small nation of farmers and city-state patricians, all Boston brahmin, and Philadelphia brick. (COEP 53)

Two weeks later, Olson cut off contact with Pound. "There is a haste in Pound," Olson wrote in his essay "GrandPa Goodbye," "but it does not seem to be rushing to any future or away from any past. It is mere impatience" (COEP 97). Olson could not reconcile Pound's yearning for a "lost republican purity" with his own commitment to democratic ideals and belief in the power of social activism. While he acknowledged his debt to Pound's poetics in "Projective Verse," Olson's postmodern poetics would introduce an "epistemological reorientation" that was fundamentally incompatible with Pound's politics (Beach 29). His "new stance toward reality" was an indication of more than just an esoteric sense of language as energy; it demonstrated Olson's engagement with an active, living ecology — what Hoeynck identifies as Olson's "ecocentric poetics of events" (156). If language is used with care, it can produce an *empathetic* connection between poet and listener. As these connections are multiplied through a network of conscious agents — what Olson referred to as the *kinetic* element of projective verse — the collective can begin to transform the larger culture. With this approach "language reveals as an action within nature," Altieri notes, "not an attack on it" (628). Through its role in action, language exerts rhetorical pressure on the world as a natural force. Following the war, Olson felt that there was a stagnation in thought and language that needed to be pushed through. His solution was a new "projectivist" poetics that would

call for a radical reformation of language, one that would lead to a broad reshaping of consciousness.

How poetry might be used to shape the future was a concern for Olson's circle of avant-garde poets; his essay adopted and synthesized many of their ideas. The original draft of "Projective Verse" was circulated as a pamphlet before it was published in its final form in *Poetry New York* magazine. Although the magazine's readership was small, it allowed Olson to reach a core audience of poets working in an "open" mode. A decade after its initial publication, "Projective Verse" was re-published in Donald Allen's 1960 anthology, *The New American Poetry: 1945–1960*. In his introduction to the volume, Allen notes that Olson's essay introduces what has since become "the dominant new double concept: 'composition by field' and the poet's 'stance toward reality'" (xiv). In his biography of Olson, Tom Clark notes the impact this second publication had on the poet's status amongst the avant-garde:

> Ironically, in the years 1960 to 1962, during which Olson's material fortunes descended to their lowest point, his work received its first widescale national exposure, bringing him, if not financial security, a growing recognition as poetic revolutionary and leader of an emerging underground movement in writing — and in the process starting a literary civil war of sorts. (287)

Olson's "literary civil war" was characterized by an emphasis on a verse form rooted in the breath, freed from conventional applications of rhythm, meter, and rhyme. Poets already working in the open mode embraced Olson's new "projective" poetics; William Carlos Williams became one of Olson's most influential advocates. "Williams greeted the essay's appearance with enthusiasm, seeing it as a forceful declaration of something very like his own poetic principles," Lake explains, "and he helped champion both the essay and its author" (594). The essay made such an impression on Williams that he chose to include it in his 1951 *Autobiography* — allegedly without Olson's knowledge or permission (ML 148). Robert Creeley quotes Williams in his introduction to Olson's *Selected Writings*:

> When Williams first read 'Projective Verse,' his response was immediate: 'I share your excitement, it is as if the whole area lifted. It's the sort of thing we are after and must have… Everything in it leans on action, on the verb: one thing leads to another which is thereby activated'. (SW 6)

Williams recognized that, if action was the key to Olson's projectivist poetics, it was necessary for the verb to take on a more central role. To achieve this transformation, the rules of syntax would need, as Olson suggests, to be "kicked around anew" (SW 21).

Even with the support of prominent poets such as Williams, Olson's sudden fame made him a target for poets and critics who distrusted his approach, particularly those allied with the Formalist movement. As a defender of Olson's project, Clark characterizes the ensuing conflict as "not so much a considered aesthetic or intellectual judgment as the defensive campaign of a threatened orthodoxy against an iconoclastic cultural assault far broader in implication than mere tactical poetics" (287). For example, the anti-lyrical sentiments of Olson's 1950 essay compelled poet Paul Lake to come to the defense of the lyrical form forty years later. In his essay, "The Verse That Print Bred," Lake argues that Olson made a fundamental mistake when he declared closed verse to be indicative of the kind of poetry that emerged as a result of the printing press. Instead, Lake claims, projective verse "represents the final step away from the aural space of preliterate societies to the visual space of literate, industrial man." More ominously, this new form provides "the next logical step in the abolition of poetry's communal origins," due in part to its emphasis on the way poetry appears on the typewritten page (Lake 597). While "Projective Verse" draws attention to the advantages of the typewriter, Lake's conclusions are misguided. As I will argue over the course of this paper, Olson's poetics is grounded in the aural/oral. The page is a temporary vessel for poetic transmission; projective verse is firmly rooted in the breath, voice, and ear.

While more sympathetic to Olson's project, Brendan Gilliott admits that Olson's prose writing is often inconsistent and ambiguous. Any attempt "to construe Olson as a systematic thinker, one whose ideas finally cohere or 'make sense' as a totality," Gilliott warns, "is an essentially fruitless endeavour" (11). For Ralph Maud, "Projective Verse" was "a great act of liberation for all poets who were ready for it, mainly because it was vague enough to be useful" (60). In "Charles Olson and the 'Inferior Predecessors'" Marjorie Perloff accuses Olson of repurposing the ideas of modernists like Pound and Williams as well as contemporary poets like Robert Creeley whose letters to Olson helped to shape the latter's poetics. For Perloff, Olson's essay should be regarded as nothing more than a "scissors-and-paste job, a clever but confused collage made up of bits and pieces of Pound, Fenollosa, Gaudier-Brzeska, Williams, and Creeley" (295-96). Perloff's reading of "Projective Verse" fixates on the reverberations of the author's

modernist predecessors as her analysis links many of the essay's passages to previously published texts. She concludes that the arguments of "Projective Verse" are unoriginal, derivative, and — due mostly to their popularity amongst the younger generation — a threat to the future of poetry. The avant-garde poets most closely associated with Olson's project, she argues, "are now in the peculiar position of being adored by an active band of disciples and enthusiasts, while the more traditional band of academic critics prefer to ignore the very existence of these Wild Men" (Perloff 286).

In her critique, Perloff attempts to isolate "the sources of Olson's aesthetic" as though the poet was actively trying to deceive his readership. Olson had always been open about his influences, though his relationship to Pound was particularly complex. In a 1963 CBC interview with poet Phyllis Webb, Olson was asked about his literary influences. Williams, he stated, "did remarkable things for me on his own with no traffic or even friendship between us" (ML 467). When considering Pound's influence, however, Olson was less forthcoming. "I would say for sure that Pound is perhaps an influence," he admits, but qualifies his statement by elaborating on Pound's role:

> I, in dream, have been instructed by a man, of dream, named Ezra Pound, exactly how to write my verse, and that is not influence. That is something much more mysterious and vital and crucial, and I believe that any one of us would have to not only listen to that instruction but in that instruction we are being told exactly what to do. Pound in a dream, in fact, is my influence, and anything that I now am or do is following those instructions. (ML 467)

Olson's response reveals a complex mix of feelings for his predecessor. This "man of dream" has provided Olson with instructions more "vital and crucial" than mere influence. By casting Pound as a dream-figure Olson imagines he can continue employ Pound's methodology without having to reconcile his methods with the reality of Pound's repugnant politics. In his farewell essay to Pound, Olson concludes that "Pound's verbal brilliance, delightful as it is, leaves the roots dry" (COEP 99).

Olson's careful study of Pound's techniques of textual collage and typographic experimentation is exemplified in the following lines from "The Kingfishers," which uses passages of text extracted from William Prescott's *History of the Conquest of Mexico*:

> "of green feathers feet, beaks and eyes
> of gold

> "animals likewise,
> resembling snails
>
> "a large wheel, gold,
> with figures of unknown four-foots,
> and worked with tufts of leaves, weight
> 3800 ounces
>
> "last, two birds, of thread and featherwork, the quills
> gold, the feet
> gold, the two birds perched on two reeds
> gold, the reeds arising from two embroidered mounds,
> one yellow, the other
> white. (SW 169)

Olson's poem builds on Pound's earlier experimentations with the printed page, guiding both its visual and aural reception. In *Charles Olson and American Modernism*, Mark Byers observes that the "'hard and clean' sounds of the new poetry are the same sculptural, haptic, austere forms Pound had called for in 'A Retrospect' (1918). The aural inheritance of Pound appears to be carried over when 'Projective Verse' picks up these themes in 1950" (145). Olson's attack on the closed form — what he refers to as the "'old' base of the non-projective" (SW 16) — is also central to Pound's project. Olson refers to the "revolution of the ear" which began in 1910 with "the trochee's heave" (SW 15); in Canto LXXI, Pound declares: "To break the pentameter, that was the first heave." As Perloff correctly observes, Olson's poetry "could not have been written without the Pound model" (297). However, while Perloff's analysis convincingly traces many of Olson's insights back to their original sources, she does not attempt to provide a rationale for the essay's reception and the impact it had on the generation of young poets that followed. Olson's poetics were certainly influenced by Pound, Williams, and Creeley, and he frequently acknowledges his indebtedness to them in "Projective Verse". But his essay also demonstrates a talent for synthesizing a wide range of source materials into a form that resonates with his readership. His emphasis on the physiological aspects of a poetic composition rooted in breath, extends well beyond that of his predecessors. As Von Hallberg explains, Olson's manifesto

> begins with the distinction between the projective and the nonprojective — between friends and foes — Pound and Williams on one side and, all too predictably, Milton and Wordsworth on the other. He was deliberately constructing a bridge to span the more than forty years since Pound and Williams began their careers, to extend a line of continuity from Pound and

> Williams to the younger poets beginning their work in the late forties and early fifties — a task that now looks complete. (46-47)

Von Hallberg's metaphor of the bridge is apt: Olson's *ars poetica* carries forward the work of his modernist predecessors to a new generation of postwar poets. In his study of the Black Mountain poets, Edward Foster applauds Olson's erudition, describing him as a "prodigious autodidact" who "recognized the virtue of grounding his speculations in arguments that had already been accepted by scholars and critics" (33). Responding to Perloff's critique, Foster explains:

> Perloff was right in one sense: Olson was speaking in the essay as a derivative poet and thinker. But his statement contained major shifts in emphasis from the poetics of his immediate predecessors, such as Pound. Olson scrapped the modernist desire to salvage the Western cultural tradition and erected in its place a vision of poetry unaligned to any cultural or political expediency. (51)

Unlike his modernist predecessors, Olson's vision expanded beyond the boundaries of Western culture. His project was not one of restoration, but of discovery.

Defining the projective

In an early draft of his essay, Olson provides an example of what he means by the term "projective." The opening scene of Eisenstein's film *Ivan the Terrible* features a sober invocation delivered in an unaccented monotone. Olson's draft refers to this scene as a potential model for the projective poet. "Why the tag 'projective'?" Olson writes, "'Aural' won't do, for any verse worth the name is aural" (Charles Olson Research Collection, University of Connecticut Library at Storrs, Box 34, 1). For Olson, projective verse denotes a style of poetry characterized by an unimpeded momentum: it "leans on action" as Williams observed, and is continuously pressing forward. To achieve this effect, the poet must adopt a new approach — what Olson dubs "COMPOSITION by field" (SW 16). In the act of composing a poem, the poet's consciousness is projected outwards onto a field of objects in the world. Composition by field registers "the metrical flexibility demanded by a model of relationality that is retroactive rather than unilateral, in which relations are as important as the materials they relate and determine" (Brown 69). In contrast, the *non*-projective poet turns inwards, fixating on the products of the mind. This method of composition results in an inferior verse — one Olson associates with

poets like T.S. Eliot. From Olson's perspective, Eliot's poetics are rooted in "the mind alone":

> it is because Eliot has stayed there where the ear and the mind are, has only gone from his fine ear outward rather than, as I say a projective poet will, down through the workings of his own throat to that place where the breath comes from, where breath has its beginnings, where drama has to come from, where, the coincidence is, all act springs. (SW 26)

In the act of composing projective verse, it is not enough to engage the ear and the mind — the entire body must be engaged. Olson sensed Eliot's poetry was weakened by the mediation of his rational mind; it lacked the physical immediacy, the elements of "bone muscle nerve blood brain" that gave projective verse its power (SW 14).

In March of 1966, a film crew visited Olson's home in Gloucester, Massachusetts to gather footage for a segment on Olson that would appear on the series *USA: Poetry* later that year. Director Richard Moore followed Olson on a tour of the town that served as the central location for his multi-volume opus, *The Maximus Poems*. In an interview, Moore asks Olson to talk about the importance of the breath in his poetry. Moore's question led the poet to reflect on the origins of the projective:

> "Projection" is where you permit your feeling to flow and go out through the subject matter… It has to do with the search to undo the inherited reason in art that we have had for so long and is based upon a false, a poor discourse and a poor aesthetic. (ML 214)

The projective poet must feel their way through the material without interference from the rational mind — that "poor discourse" he will come to associate with the *logos*. With projective verse, Olson aims to dismantle "the conventions which logic has forced on syntax" and see "how far a new poet can stretch the very conventions on which communication by language rests" (SW 21). By breaking the constraints of conventional syntax, Olson attempts to introduce a new form of language which will, in turn, reshape the nature of thought itself.

Olson's rhetoric

"Projective Verse," written and revised over several iterations, is the product of a dialogue between Olson and his circle of avant-garde poets. The audience for his essay is an extension of that circle. As Vanderborg observes, Olson's rhetorical style gives the

impression of “a special contract between author and reader” (375). The author often addresses his readers with a tone of familiarity, as “brothers,” “workers,” and “citizens.” As Olson explained in his interview for *USA: Poetry*, he envisioned “Projective Verse” as an *ars poetica*, a technical manual for poets working in this new mode of field composition (ML 214). In his role as Rector of Black Mountain College, he brought his method to a small group of likeminded artists, intellectuals, and activists. Despite its size and remote location, Olson believed this isolated *polis* in the mountains of North Carolina could exert a significant influence on American culture. Seen within this larger context, “Projective Verse” is as much a pedagogical tool as it is a manifesto: Olson’s aim is not merely to persuade but to *instruct*. As Foster observes, Olson writes with “the voice of an individual lecturing his readers the way a professor lectures a seminar” (75). The essay’s structure resembles that of a lesson plan: “I want to do two things,” Olson explains in the essay’s opening section,

> first, try to show what projective or OPEN verse is, what it involves, in its act of composition, how, in distinction from the non-projective, it is accomplished; and II, suggest a few ideas about what stance toward reality brings such verse into being, what that stance does, both to the poet and to his reader. (SW 15)

The sections that follow are, for the most part, faithful to Olson’s plan. In section one, he explains that he will show what projective verse is by introducing a three-part formula. These maxims — what Olson refers to as “simplicities” — will provide the core methods by which a poet can begin working in the projective mode:

> First, some simplicities that a man learns, if he works in OPEN, or what can also be called COMPOSITION BY FIELD, as opposed to inherited line, stanza, over-all form, what is the “old” base of the non-projective. (SW 16)

The first maxim positions the poet with respect to the poem. It describes a dynamic relationship that occurs between poet, reader, and the interdependent world of objects and experiences that will provide material for the poem. “COMPOSITION BY FIELD” sets the foundation for a poetic practice that begins with adopting a new “stance toward reality” (SW 15). The technique of field composition, combined with this new orientation towards the world, is the foundation of Olson’s postmodern poetics.

The second maxim proposes a law that both guides and constrains the poet practicing in the projective mode. “FORM IS NEVER MORE THAN AN EXTENSION OF

CONTENT," Olson declares, citing his literary correspondent, Robert Creeley, as the originator of the edict (SW 16). The subordination of a poem's form to its content reinforces Olson's rejection of the "inherited line" and "all-over form" which characterize closed verse. As Bond observes, it is understandable that "many fine poets have lost faith in formal writing in part because, according to their own process, formalism represented some patriarchy that was there to test them" (169). Formal literary devices like rhythm, meter, or rhyme were originally developed before the advent of writing to aid in memorization; these techniques helped poets recall and recite long passages. As Olson explains,

> For the ear, which once had the burden of memory to quicken it (rime & regular cadence were its aids and have merely lived on in print after the oral necessities were ended) can now again, that the poet has his means, be the threshold of projective verse. (SW 23-24)

For Olson and his circle, set line lengths, rhyming schemes, and the metrical foot are seen as remnants of a tradition that imposed these constraints out of necessity. The inherited form results in an inferior "closed" verse by impeding the natural rhythms and cadence of the breath. "I take it that PROJECTIVE VERSE teaches," he explains, "is, this lesson, that that verse will only do in which a poet manages to register both the acquisitions of his ear *and* the pressures of his breath" (SW 17). For Olson, the role of the breath "has not been sufficiently observed or practiced" due to the "smothering of the power of the line by too set a concept of foot" (SW 17). In projective verse, the length of the line is constrained only by the length and pattern of the poet's breath. In practice, this shift to a focus on the breath provides an accessible alternative to conventional rhythmic forms. But, as Von Hallberg suggests, Olson's emphasis on the breath was also tied to his ethical concerns:

> World War II was thought to have been one of the most disruptive events in human history; the spectacle of genocide made it appear that human life, especially biologically, is worth very little. Olson's argument for a poetry paced by the breathing of the poet was intended to counter that spectacle. (179)

In his essay "Human Universe," Olson christens this ethical stance the "New Humanism" — a way to "stay in the human universe, and not be led to partition reality at any point, in any way" (SW 56). Von Hallberg summarizes the poet's utopic vision of "a human universe in which man exists feelingly in the same space and time with the objects of his

perception" (90). In Olson's universe, all objects — including the poet and reader — are equal participants within the field of nature. Breath returns the poet to a state that is neutral, proportionate, and unmediated:

> For Olson, breath is an essence — both culturally and philosophically unproblematic — insinuated into a theory of writing as 'natural' to carry enormous positive presuppositions. (McCaffery 46)

Breath links the living organism with the broader world; the act of breathing brings elements of the world inside the body of the breather. Breath is, therefore, both inner *and* outer. Speaking is a physiological act that connects the breather with other individuals. The speaker's breath triggers sound waves which make their way to the ear of the listener, thus entering their body. When used in the production of verse, it facilitates what Olson envisions as a "kinetic" transference of energy from speaker to listener, or from poet to audience. For Olson, breath is "the beginning and the end": it is where the poet's body most immediately engages with the world (SW 24). As Bond argues, Olson's claims for the breath "suggest that he wishes to invoke a phenomenon of relative immediacy and primacy, much like the body itself, or, better yet, the dynamic process wherein the body and spirit comingle and surge" (163). For McCaffery, Olson's essay "evokes the syllable as a sovereign spontaneity aligned to the categories of breath, voice, and listening — so as to register an unmediated presence" (47). The force of the syllable in projective poetics is always dependent on a living, breathing body. Returning poetry to its source in the body reinforces both the power and vulnerability of the human organism — a vital perspective for poets living in the shadow of the second world war. As Ross explains, it is "this body, in a Projectivist poetics, that is seen as the reliable producer of breath, and also a new democratic medium for grounding the poetic afflatus in the organ of the lungs" (139-40).

To achieve his mission of developing a "New Humanism," it was necessary for Olson to put his theory into practice. His privileging of breath and voice (as opposed to the written text) is evident in the rhetorical style of "Projective Verse". His explorations of the use of the breath, syllable, and line move at the speed of thought, leaping laterally from topic to topic. Verbal idiosyncrasies like "Okay" and "So" are preserved; unfinished thoughts are punctuated by a trailing ellipsis. The effect is that of an extemporaneous speech. This style of writing may be the source of Perloff's frustration — Olson's prose is deliberately vernacular, and his arguments are unsystematic. However, despite its non-

linear structure, a careful reading of Olson's essay reveals core themes of birth, death, and renewal that contribute to a sense of unity. This theme is so central to Olson's focus that it is taken up in both "Projective Verse" and poems such as "The Kingfishers," which was composed while Olson was developing the initial drafts of his essay. In this poem, Olson describes the kingfishers' nests as being built from "rejectamenta" — scraps of fish bones "thrown up in pellets by the birds":

> And, as they are fed and grow, this
> nest of excrement and decayed fish becomes
> a dripping, fetid mass (SW 168)

The image of "excrement and decayed fish" is in tension with the more common pastoral image of the nest as a site for nurture — in "The Kingfishers," birth and morbidity share common quarters. Similarly, in "Projective Verse," new life emerges symbolically from the death of what is no longer of use. In his essay, Olson begins by introducing a metaphorical "flock" of linguistic conventions that are to be hunted down:

> For there is a whole flock of rhetorical devices which have now to be brought under a new bead, now that we sight with the line. Simile is only one bird who comes down, too easily. (SW 19-20)

Both simile and description are examples of the kind of prey that the projective poet must pay close attention to. "The descriptive functions generally have to be watched, every second, in projective verse," Olson explains, "because of their easiness, and thus their drain on the energy which composition by field allows into a poem" (SW 20). Syntax and grammar are the next targets caught in the hunter's scope:

> Which brings us up, immediately, bang, against tenses, in fact against syntax, in fact against grammar generally, that is, as we have inherited it. Do not tenses, must they not also be kicked around anew, in order that time, that other governing absolute, may be kept, as must the space-tensions of a poem, immediate, contemporary to the acting-on-you of the poem? (SW 21)

Once these unnecessary constrains have been brought down, there is an opportunity for growth and renewal. "It is my impression that all parts of speech suddenly, in composition by field, are fresh for both sound and percussive use," Olson observes. These new poetic elements, grounded in the breath, will "spring up like unknown, unnamed vegetables in the patch, when you work it, come spring" (SW 21). As Beach notes, "Olson's vegetable metaphor for poetic language points toward his belief in an

organic relationship between language and nature, one that allows for linguistic structures not dependent on 'historical' measures of writing" (109) The cyclical birth-from-death motif is also evident in Olson's poem "La Torre":

> The end of something has a satisfaction.
> When the structures go, light
> comes through
>
> To begin again. Lightning
> is an axe, transfer
> of force subject to object is
> order: destroy!
>
> To destroy
> is to start again … (TCP 189)

Writing in the shadow of the second world war, Olson felt it was time to "begin again." As Olson and his generation were well aware, a general apathy regarding the rise of authoritarian ideologies had led to unspeakable acts of cruelty in the previous decades. Drawing on his experience in politics, Olson recognized that the way a society uses language influences the way it acts; to avoid repeating the errors of the past, language had to change. Tearing down the old structures inherent in the language of poetry would become the focus of "Projective Verse," and Olson believed this would have a direct impact on the broader culture. Additionally, he was sensitive to poetry's diminished status in a postwar world. If poetry was to remain relevant, his generation of poets would need to adopt a radical new approach to language. He begins this process by dismantling the poem's underlying structure so that its individual components can be examined, re-evaluated, and revitalized.

Syllable, line, and score

"Let's start from the smallest particle of all, the syllable," Olson suggests. "It is the king and pin of versification, what rules and holds together the lines, the larger forms, of a poem" (SW 17). For Olson, the syllable is the root of speech, and it is spoken language that will provide the foundation for a new mode of thought. To engage with the syllable is to "step back here to this place of the elements and minims of language, is to engage speech where it is least careless — and least logical" (SW 18). The syllable provides the foundation for a new, anti-rational form of discourse. In his *ABC of Reading*, Pound similarly emphasizes the role of the syllable:

> In making a line of verse (and thence building the lines into passages) you have certain primal elements:
> That is to say, you have the various ‘articulate sounds’ of the language, of its alphabet, that is, and the various groups of letters in syllables.
>
> These syllables have differing weights and durations that seem naturally imposed on them by the other syllable groups around them:
>
> A. original weights and durations
>
> B. weights and durations that seem naturally imposed on them by the other syllable groups around them.
>
> Those are the medium wherewith the poet cuts his design in TIME. (198-99)

Like Pound, Olson recognizes that the “weights and durations” of syllables depend upon their relationship to other sounds — what he describes in “Projective Verse” as “the figures of, the dance” (SW 18). Syllables operate as “particles of sound” that allow words to “juxtapose in beauty” (SW 17). Beauty is achieved when the poet’s ear is led by the sound of the syllable:

> It would do no harm, as an act of correction to both prose and verse as now written, if both rime and meter, and in the quantity of words, both sense and sound, were less in the forefront of the mind than the syllable, if the syllable, that fine creature, were more allowed to lead the harmony on. (SW 18)

For Olson, paying closer attention to sound than semantics “appeals directly to a phenomenological ideal of disclosing a more authentic subjectivity through the ‘process’ of nature” (Ross xvii). Byers connects Olson’s interest in the sound of the syllable with the idea of an “impersonalized sound,” a concept introduced by avant-garde poets and composers. Impersonalized sound attempts to

> recover sound *an sich*, without the interference of either the lyric or the artisanal subject. In this effort, poets and composers similarly emphasized attention to the smallest sound units, rejected habituated sound combinations, posited sounds as discrete objects in space, and devised new kinds of visual notation. (Byers 140)

To initiate a reshaping of consciousness, projectivist poetics calls for a shift in perspective from the isolated subject-ego to a more objective view of the subject and object in the larger field of force.

From beneath the syllables, those “figures” of the dance, comes the line, what Olson refers to as a “threshing floor” — i.e., the place where syllables make their

movements heard (SW 19). Here, Olson uses the metaphor of the dance to illustrate the kinetic relationship between syllable and line. This metaphor can be found in an early, unpublished draft that Olson titled “Mouths Biting Empty Air”. In the unnumbered pages of this 1946 manuscript Olson describes the emergence of the syllable as both dynamic and physical, like the kinetic activity of atoms:

> From the root out the syllables comes, the figures of the dance. The intricacy lies in the three extending phases from the body as begun (considered stopped and static), to the arms, limbs, leaves, or fingers, and their gestures, out into that third state, movement, where the dance is, and the life proper, where they strike against and pile up one upon the other, or go and stay apart, or fuse and cease to be themselves, any and all the conditions atoms and breath can create by act and multiplication. (Charles Olson Research Collection, University of Connecticut Library at Storrs, Box 32, Folder 1630)

Several selections from this draft would be included in “Projective Verse.” What this draft shows is that, as early as 1946, Olson was already developing his roots theory of language and beginning to explore the relationship between syllable and line in terms of bodies in movement. For Olson, “English verse is made not of feet and metre but of line and syllable; and lines and syllables emerge from the circuitry of the human body” (Gilliott 3).

If the juxtaposition of syllables brings beauty to a poem, the line carries that beauty through time and space. But, if the conventional models of meter and stanza are to be rejected, by what mechanism should a poem’s lineation be governed? As Richard Taylor explains, for the avant-garde poet, “it was not so much a question of what one saw on the page as what one heard in the inner ear” (144). Unlike the earlier generation of modernist poets who disrupted rhythmic regularity visually through unconventional line lengths, the next generation of poets “subverted both line-length and syntactical unit, giving precedence to the recurrence of rhythmic-set which could only be registered aurally” (148). For Olson, it was the “LAW OF THE LINE” — the sound of the breath and speech patterns of the poet, with their individual rhythms and lengths — that, if obeyed, would preserve the “space-tensions” of a poem (SW 21). This new law rejects the “conventions which logic has forced on syntax” and the “too set feet of the old line”. For Olson “the line will run as long as the breath of the poet can sustain it, in a manner somewhat analogous to the phrasing of a song” (Gilliott 3). To centre the line in the

breath of the individual gives the poet ultimate control over its form and frees one from the constraints of previously established forms.

While the projective poem begins with the individual, its effect is communal and participatory. The poem is not a static artifact but rather a vehicle for transferring what the poet has registered from “the HEAD, by way of the EAR, to the SYLLABLE” to “the HEART, by way of the BREATH, to the LINE” (SW 19). It is a force in motion, moving swiftly towards its destination: the ear of the listener. For the transference of energy to pass from the poet’s breath to the audience’s ear, the projective poet must pay close attention to the poem’s auditory qualities. When composing a poem, Pound instructs the poet to “LISTEN to the sound that it makes” (*ABC of Reading* 201). As Olson notes, many poets who followed Pound and Williams were already practicing a form of projective verse where “not the eye but the ear was to be its measure” (SW 23). His emphasis on listening with the ear (as opposed to reading with the eye) reinforces the idea that the projective poem is, at its core, an *aural* phenomenon. He calls for a return to “the ear, the ear which has collected, which has listened, the ear, which is so close to the mind that it is the mind’s, that it has the mind’s speed” (SW 18). Given his emphasis on the aural dimensions of the poem, Olson’s prodigious endorsement of the typewriter in “Projective Verse” may seem incongruous:

> The irony is, from the machine has come one gain not yet sufficiently observed or used, but which leads directly on toward projective verse and its consequences. It is the advantage of the typewriter that, due to its rigidity and its space precisions, it can, for the poet, indicate exactly the breath, the pauses, the suspensions even of syllables, the juxtapositions even of parts of phrases, which he intends. (SW 22)

Some readers have argued that Olson’s focus on the “advantage of the typewriter” contradicts his earlier criticism of “closed” verse forms. This is understandable given his declaration that what “we have suffered from, is manuscript, press, the removal of verse from its producer and its reproducer” (SW 22). Gilliott acknowledges this discrepancy and concludes that Olson is simply “ambivalent about print, casting it as an outdated vehicle belonging to the ‘closed verse’ [he] looked to replace, while simultaneously and paradoxically idealising the typed-and-printed page as the only medium that can fix and communicate the supposed *im*mediacy of the poet’s breath” (6). Brown reconciles this conflict by identifying a “simultaneous complicity of orality and graphism” in Olson’s poetics (75). Byers questions whether “Projective Verse” argues “exclusively for a

speech-based prosody" or suggests instead "a plastic use of page surface, irrespective of oral restraints" (86), while Lake interprets Olson's statements on the advantages of the typewriter as merely an extension of his attack on the lyrical form:

> Because poems in metrical rhymed stanzas look closed on the page, Olson suggests we dispense with the last vestiges of lyric poetry's musical heritage — meter, rhyme, stanza — and instead score poems on the two-dimensional plane of a sheet of paper by means of a typewriter's mechanical spacing. (596)

Olson's anti-lyrical statements in "Projective Verse" have led some commentators to conclude that his poetics are also anti-musical. Bond finds irony in the fact that the "lyric, in its original connotation, [embodied] a primacy very close to that of a projective poem which, like a song, takes the breath as its basic unit and so asserts an immediate physical presence, a sense of language as not just semiotic, but also corporeal, both inside and outside the play of signs" (160). With its emphasis on breathing and the voice, projective verse appears to share many characteristics with song, yet Olson is clear in his determination to rid poetry of that "interference of the individual as ego" which the lyrical form engenders. Bond argues that, counter to Olson's claims, music has traditionally served as a "vehicle to break down the ego," particularly in its communal, ritualistic applications — an opportunity that Olson appears to have ignored (168). But should Olson's dismissal of the lyrical verse form equate to a rejection of musicality? Olson's complaint against lyricism is its tendency to exhibit "a hesitant, self-conscious compositional method incapable of authenticity" (Bond 158) rendered with the "too set foot" of conventional meter. His emphasis on the value of the spoken, performative aspects of poetry is a critique of "that verse which print bred," not a rejection of the musical potential of verse. In their critique of Olson, Bond and Lake display too narrow an understanding of musicality. While at Black Mountain College, Olson was exposed to radical new approaches to musical composition; like Olson, these composers were pushing the formal boundaries of their discipline. Olson's poetics, though often discordant, shouldn't be labelled as anti-musical. As Von Hallberg suggests, such discord "makes struggle possible, and struggle is motivated by the hope for a better future. Discordant verse promises something new and different, which must establish itself against the old" (174). Olson believed poetic language could serve as a catalyst for changing the nature of consciousness. Verse that is dissonant, discordant, or otherwise challenging to the ear isn't necessarily *un*musical. To appreciate it one must adopt a new

way of listening. For the postmodern poet, cultivating an ear that is open to a diversity of sounds and rhythms allows one to break the habits of lazy, conventional thinking. Olson felt the "openness" of open verse — even when it was perceived to be discordant — provided an antidote to the conformist attitudes that permitted anti-humanistic ideologies to flourish in the early 20th century. With the typewriter, he had access to an instrument that could more accurately render these new, unconventional, and often dissonant sound formations on the page.

For Olson, the advantage of the typewriter is that it allows the poet to instruct the reader how "silently or otherwise, to voice his work" (SW 22). The range of typographical marks it produces allows the poet to note pauses, emphases, and line endings more precisely than a hand-written text. As Olson observes, with the invention of the typewriter, "the poet has the stave and the bar a musician has had" (SW 22). The apparent inconsistencies identified by Gilliott and Lake can be further resolved by recognizing that the typewritten page is a *function* of poetry — like a score is for a piece of music — not a finished artifact. Using the idea of the typewritten poem as a musical score helps to illustrate Olson's concept of a poem's "kinetic":

> A poem is energy transferred from where the poet got it (he will have some several causations), by way of the poem itself to, all the way over to, the reader. Okay. Then the poem itself must, at all points, be a high-energy construct and, at all points, an energy discharge. So: how is the poet to accomplish same energy, how is he, what is the process by which a poet gets in, at all points energy at least the equivalent of the energy which propelled him in the first place… (SW 16)

For the poem's energy to be fully transmitted, it must retain its potency when transferred to the page. A score encodes the composer's intentions ("energy transferred from where the poet got it") and transmits those intentions ("by way of the poem itself") to the musician ("all the way over to, the reader"). The musician decodes the score to determine how a piece of music is meant to be performed. In this way, the score conveys a heightened level of meaning. Through notation, the composer can communicate the intended intonation, emphasis, and pacing. Few musicians would read a piece of musical notation and conclude that it is equivalent to its performance. In both music and projective poetry, what is printed on the page is merely a means to an end. The text instructs; what matters is what is produced by the performer (or reader) when

those instructions are decoded. As Gilliott notes, for Olson, the poem's final location is not the typewritten page but the breath of the reader:

> To return to the question of breath-poetics' embodiment: where in fact is the projective text written? What is its 'place', its material substrate? If it is indeed the case that Olson envisaged a notational system which would enable the reader to 'voice his work' exactly as the poet would like, then while the text is the poem's medium, its mode of transmission, the reader her or himself becomes the substrate into which the inscription occurs — it is not the poet's breath which is inscribed but that of the reader. (10)

In "Projective Verse," Olson declares that "speech is the 'solid' of verse," that the utterance of verse is "the secret of a poem's energy" (SW 20). Whether the poem is spoken aloud or inscribed on the page for future elocution, what Olson is most interested in is the *performative* action of the poem, its sound when spoken "silently or otherwise," which is key to its success in transferring its energy from poet to reader. The medium in which it exists at any given moment is fleeting; once the energy has been transferred, its work is complete. The task of the reader is to take up those energies and apply them to their own works of art. For Olson, this is the mechanism through which poetry can mobilize a reshaping of human consciousness.

Shaping the energies

Olson's three-fold rubric for projective verse can be summarized as the process by which the "law of the line" — that is, the poem's form — shapes the "energy" (kinetic) of its content. In constructing a line of verse, Olson commands, "ONE PERCEPTION MUST IMMEDIATELY AND DIRECTLY LEAD TO A FURTHER PERCEPTION" (SW 17). These perceptions "must be handled as a series of objects in field in such a way that a series of tensions (which they also are) are made to *hold*, and to hold exactly inside the content and the context of the poem which has forced itself, through the poet and them, into being" (SW 20). The effect of this is one of forward momentum: the field exerts pressure on the poet as the poet works on the poem; the poem is then returned to the field of objects, and the cycle begins again. For this effect to succeed, it must continue its advance unimpeded by rationalization. Olson illustrates this methodology in his own work. In an interview with the BBC, he gave a reading of one of his early poems, "The K," and commented on its form:

> Shallows and miseries shadows from the cross,
> ecco men and dull copernican sun.
> Our attention is simpler
> The salts and minerals of the earth return
> The night has a love for throwing its shadows around a man
> a bridge, a horse, the gun, a grave. (SW 159)

"This poem has to my mind no shape," Olson explained. "It just happens to have lines that hang together like wash on the line should. But I don't think it has a shape, like laundry doesn't have a shape; but you have to put it on… It's a poem, well, which is based on uninterrupted statements" (ML 290). In Olson's poem, the perception of "shallows and miseries" is directly followed by "shadows from the cross." This symbolically charged vignette is juxtaposed with the "salts and minerals of the earth". The passage ends with a succession of isolated nouns that, like the cross, have the effect of throwing "shadows around a man." The line is a taut thread that holds these disparate images together like laundry hanging on a line. In projective verse, the line must not interfere with the transmission of these perceptions — its role is to carry the motion forward. There is no opportunity for reflection, generalization, or even predication. If projective poetry moves at the speed of thought, syntactical rules will only impede its momentum. The projective poet must "keep moving, keep in, speed, the nerves, their speed, the perceptions." The "whole business" of projective verse is to "keep it moving as fast as you can, citizen" (SW 17).

Olson's paratactic style, which he employs in both his poetry and prose, contributes to what Byers describes as a sense of "friction and compelling fragmentariness" (28). In *The Postmodern Turn*, Ihab Hassan identifies parataxis and fragmentation as characteristics of postmodern art. The postmodern artist embraces "the openness of brokenness, unjustified margins," preferring "paratactic over hypotactic forms, metonymy over metaphor, schizophrenia over paranoia" (Hassan 168). But Von Hallberg warns that this fragmentary style and use of unconventional syntax poses a risk to Olson's project. The average reader must work "harder than he is accustomed to work … to make sense of a string of words that on first reading may sound like gibberish" (70). Olson's experiments with visual fragmentation are meant to keep the eye moving forward; however, this technique may have the opposite effect if the reader must labour to reconstruct meaning from disorder. In "The Songs of Maximus," Olson uses unclosed parentheses to represent the fragmentary nature of thought:

colored pictures
of all things to eat: dirty
postcards

        And words, words, words
all over everything
                No eyes or ears left
to do their own doings (all

invaded, appropriated, outraged, all senses

including the mind, that worker on what is
                                And that other sense
made to give even the most wretched, or any of us, wretched,
that consolation (greased
                    lulled
even the street-cars

song (SW 230)

Olson's unconventional syntax is displayed in lines like "the mind, that worker on what is" and "made to give even the most wretched, or any of us, wretched." Bond recognizes that Olson's focus is "on keeping pace with consciousness and thus moving ever toward the next needful thing," but questions whether this attention to the unimpeded flow is "truly enough to sustain a poem without some principle of selection to spare the reader various genuine and spontaneous banalities" (168) Olson's rejection of conventional syntax presents new possibilities for meaning, but its success depends on the willingness of the reader to put in the necessary effort. Olson believes this is well worth the risk. "When the syntactical connections fail to give us an adequate sense of what is being expressed," Altieri observes, "we are forced to try to recreate the dramatic exchange of energies driving the speech" (629). This activity transforms the reader from a passive recipient of the poem's substance to an active participant in the reception and (re)construction of its meaning.

Poetry as a field of action

Paul Valéry describes a poem as "a kind of machine for producing the poetic state by means of words" (231). For both Valéry and Olson, the poem is not a static entity, but rather a force acting on and through the poet and reader. In the practice of field composition, poet and reader are connected like wires in a circuit. In his introduction to "Projective Verse," Williams noted that an "advance of estimable proportions is made

by looking at the poem as a field rather than an assembly of more or less ankylosed lines" (*Autobiography* 333). It is no surprise that Williams found Olson's concept compelling — he had previously proposed the idea of a poem as a field. In a speech delivered at the University of Washington in 1948, Williams spoke of "the poem as a field of action" (*Lofty Dogmas*, 167). But Olson's concept of action differs from Williams': it is "primitive," "libidinally assertive," and identified with political action (Byers 60). The field in which this action occurs is a field of energy. When a poet is working in the mode of field composition, the poem "must, at all points, be a high energy-construct and, at all points, an energy-discharge" (SW 16). The function of this discharge is communicative. As Maud explains, Olson's "energy-discharge" is

> a communication from poet to reader, a communication by means of language that has received heightened energy of expression from the particular nature of the several subjects the poem has been asked to carry and that has the strength to deposit that energy with like intent with the reader. (44)

Maintaining the flow of energy from poet to poem to reader takes vigilance; any laziness on the part of the poet can break the momentum and render the process inert. "*Any* slackness takes off attention," Olson insists, "that crucial thing, from the job in hand, from the *push* of the line under hand at the moment, under the reader's eye, in his moment" (SW 20).

To maintain the "*push* of the line," the poet must consider the relationship between each element of the poem: "the syllable, the line, as well as the image, the sound, the sense." Olson discovered a foundation for his poetic model in the work of philosopher Ernest Fenollosa. Olson first encountered Fenollosa's essay, "The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry," in the summer of 1945 (Clark 103). The essay — co-edited by Pound and included in his book *Instigations* — would have a significant impact on Olson's theory of language. In "Projective Verse," Olson calls attention to Fenollosa's analysis of the Chinese ideograph as representing the "passage of force from subject to object… the VERB, between two nouns" (SW 21). Like Olson, Fenollosa argued that communication is a "*transference of power*" (47) and that pictographic forms of writing, like the Chinese ideograph, are better suited to communicate meaning poetically. For Fenollosa, the ideograph is a concrete medium. It aims to represent the experience of nature immediately and, therefore, withstands abstraction. "Chinese notation is something much more than arbitrary symbols,"

Fenollosa explains. “It is based upon a vivid shorthand picture of the operations of nature” (45). Conversely, alphabetic writing is composed of arbitrary symbols detached from nature. Alphabetic writing systems are inferior as they tend to capture experiences in abstract rather than concrete terms. As Dowthwaite argues, “an apparent overreliance on abstraction in alphabetic writing has led to a loss of concrete imagery, which [Fenollosa] — like Pound — believes to be the meaningful unit of poetry” (78). With projective verse, Olson attempts to recreate in English what Fenollosa thought to be the exclusive domain of the ideograph.

In his essay, Fenollosa focuses on an example of a simple sentence form — “farmer pound(s) rice” — to illustrate how the Chinese character represents what he envisions as the “temporal order in causation” (47). As Fenollosa explains, this simple phrase “consists of three necessary words: the first denoting the agent or subject from which the act starts [farmer], the second embodying the very stroke of act [pound], the third pointing to the object, the receiver of the impact [rice]” (48). Fenollosa argues that this subject-verb-object relationship corresponds to a “universal form of action in nature.” It demonstrates how nature is not composed of *things* but of *actions*. “‘Farmer’ and ‘rice’ are mere hard terms which define the extremes of the pounding. But in themselves, apart from this sentence-function, they are naturally verbs” (Fenollosa 52). As Dowthwaite observes, Fenollosa’s model

> corresponds to the transference of energy in nature, the natural order of temporal succession, by reflecting what he takes to be the universal sentence structure of agent-verb-object. The theory that intransitive verbs are primary proposes that verbs denote states rather than actions, whereas his understanding of the primacy of transitive verbs argues that all human thought begins with action in the world. (78)

Fenollosa’s example helps to illuminate what Olson means by field composition. The “transference of energy” between poet and reader is achieved via the poem. Following Fenollosa’s model, the poet takes on the role of the agent. The reader is the object — the recipient of the energy — and the poem is the action that transfers that energy. If the poem follows the laws of projective verse, the result is a successful transference of energy from poet to reader. Through field composition, the reader is linked to the poet through the action of the poem. As Valéry describes, “the sound, like the figure of your little phrase, returns in me and is repeated in me, as if it delighted in me… Here we are on the very edge of our poetic state” (218). By situating the verb at the centre of

language, Fenollosa disrupts the noun's hegemony — a perspective Olson adopts in his view of language (and objects) as action, energy, and process.

Secrets objects share

"The real is only things," Olson told an audience of poets gathered at the Vancouver Poetry Conference in 1963. "No, I mean, literally it only means it, and that's all it is. Otherwise, you're going to poeticize, tragedize, do a hell of a lot of '-izing' to what really has a greater impact." (ML 71). Field composition requires the poet to engage with the world of objects in a new way. The poet's job is to render the object's *haecceity* — that is, how the object appears in nature — rather than how it is represented in the mind. The objects of a poem are not abstract, mimetic representations of their corporeal counterparts — they are participants in a dynamic network of relationships between other objects, including the poet. "At root (or stump) what *is*," Olson contends, "is no longer THINGS but what happens BETWEEN things, these are the terms of the reality contemporary to us — and the terms of what we are" (HU 123). With his new "stance toward reality" Olson's aim is "to give agency to objects, objects which guide and obscure the human as much as the human overwrites or encompasses them" (Gilliott 11). But this capacity to give agency to objects is not easily attained. The challenge for humans and other self-conscious organisms is that "we are ourselves both the instrument of discovery and the instrument of definition" (SW 53). The problem of subjectivity wasn't exclusive to poets writing after the war; it was an issue for many modernists, Pound included. As Ross explains, "modernism saw subjectivity, as a 'problem' which could be solved by reforming language itself, just as thinkers had sought to eliminate the subjectivist bias of a post-Kantian philosophical point of view" (xv). Building on the work of his modernist predecessors, Olson proposed a new category of being to address the subject-object problem:

> Objectism is the getting rid of the lyrical interference of the individual as ego, of the "subject" and his soul, that peculiar presumption by which western man has interposed himself between what he is as a creature of nature (with certain instructions to carry out) and those other creations of nature which we may, with no derogation, call objects. For a man is himself an object, whatever he may take to be his advantages, the more likely to recognize himself as such the greater the advantages, particularly at that moment that he achieves an humilitas sufficient to make him of use. (SW 24-25)

Olson's 'Objectism' provides an alternative to 'Objectivism,' a movement initiated in 1931 by *Poetry* magazine editor Louis Zukofsky and poet George Oppen (Brown 80). The Objectivist poets had been hindered by what Olson characterized as a "necessary quarrel" with poets operating in a mode of lyrical subjectivism. "It is now too late to be bothered with [subjectivism]," Olson concludes. "It has excellently done itself to death, even though we are all caught in its dying" (SW 24). Adopting the 'Objectist' perspective is a key component in Olson's new "stance toward reality." The subjectivist poet projects their subjectivity onto the objects of the poem, imposing a hierarchical order on experience (Von Hallberg 46). The subjectivist distorts the natural order of reality through their imposition of the subject-ego:

> The ego, in Olson's terms, is its obstacle. In contrast to the naked poem, the artifice of what Olson calls 'closed verse,' with its typically revisionary compositional demands, suggests for many an artifice of self, one that cannot keep pace with the great phenomenological river that is the fullness of consciousness and its imaginations. (Bond 157)

Olson proposes a way out of this conflict by eliminating the hierarchy altogether. The poet is not an autonomous subject detached from the external world of objects, but is, rather, an object situated in and operating on the same level as the objects of the poem: "man is himself an object" (SW 24). As Bond argues, by adopting this 'Objectist' perspective, the poet comes to recognize that "the subject-as-object is not the possession of the ego. What this suggests is that 'self' in some of Olson's taxonomy is a larger phenomenon than the ego that is its representative" (160).

By measuring oneself against the larger world of objects, the poet is ontologically subsumed by that world. A more thorough understanding of the relationship between objects in the world allows the projective poet to infuse the poem with vitality and tap into the "secrets objects share" (SW 25):

> every element in the open poem… must be taken up as participants in the kinetic of the poem just as solidly as we are accustomed to take what we call the objects of reality; and that these elements are seen as creating the tensions of a poem just as totally as do those other objects create what we know as the world (SW 20).

The projective poem, emptied of the subjective ego, creates its own world by making use of the same kinetic processes found in the world outside the poem. McCaffery describes this process as "the preservation of the energies of immediate experience … which

establishes the poem as an object among objects — heterogeneous but unified" (52). Altieri suggests that Olson's flattening of the subject-object hierarchy is a property of all postmodern poetry:

> Dating perhaps to Roethke's "The loneliest thing I know/is my own mind at play," postmodern poets have been seeking to uncover the ways man and nature are unified, so that value can be seen as the result of immanent processes in which man is as much object as he is agent of creativity (608).

This monistic perception of the unity of nature and humanity is a key component of Olson's mission to reshape consciousness. In "Projective Verse," Olson establishes a vision of the poet as both agent and object, operating on the same level as the other objects in the world, including the poem-as-object:

> It comes to this: the use of a man, by himself and thus by others, lies in how he conceives his relation to nature, that force to which he owes his somewhat small existence. If he sprawl, he shall find little to sing but himself, and shall sing, nature has such paradoxical ways, by way of artificial forms outside himself. (SW 25)

While Pound and Fenollosa influenced Olson's early poetics, shortly after the publication of "Projective Verse" Olson would encounter a thinker who would shape his view of the universe — the English mathematician-turned-philosopher, Alfred North Whitehead. Olson acquired a copy of Whitehead's opus, *Process and Reality,* in 1955. He revisited Whitehead's text multiple times, applying its philosophical ideas to his poetry and prose. *Process and Reality* became "one of the most heavily annotated volumes in [Olson's] library, and his markings show that he continued to read around in it during the late fifties and sixties" (Von Hallberg 83). In his interview for *USA: Poetry* he referred to Whitehead as the "great master and the companion of my poems" (ML 216). Ironically, during his time at Harvard, Olson had the opportunity to meet Whitehead, but the philosopher did not make a notable impression on the young doctoral student. It would be several decades before Whitehead would become a central figure for Olson.

Whitehead's writing inspired Olson to reconsider some of the philosophical convictions he had inherited from Pound. In his study of *Process and Reality*, Olson came to realize that "the Poundian removal of the subject from poetic practice leaves out the vibrant experience of reality's diverse occasions" (Hoeynck 154). Whitehead provided a way to recover that vitality without resorting to an entirely subjectivist mode. Most importantly, his philosophy overturned the epistemological tradition by making

space for the feelings, intuitions, and memories of the subject. “Whitehead’s rereading — a corrective, in Olson’s mind — of three centuries of philosophy in Descartes, Locke, Hume, Kant and, by implication, Hegel, had been necessary to prepare for the three stages of feeling in process” (Blaser 209-10). Whitehead’s emphasis on process, flow, and feeling would be particularly attractive to poets seeking a metaphysical foundation for their practice. As Whitehead observes, the “creative process is rhythmic: it swings from the publicity of many things to the individual privacy; and it swings back from the private individual to the publicity of the objectified individual” (*Process and Reality* 229).

In *Process and Reality*, Whitehead grapples with the views of several of his predecessors, concluding that, while each has made significant contributions to the field of metaphysics, their views are flawed in one way or another. Arguing against the positions of both idealists and materialists, he affirms that it is the *event* that is primary (as opposed to mind or substance). Echoing Heraclitus, Whitehead’s view of reality is one of becoming (process) rather than being (statis). As Von Hallberg observes, Olson “believed — and found confirmation of this belief in Heraclitus and Whitehead — that reality is an unceasing process which undermines all static achievements. Hence, all preconceived forms, in fact all closure, is unfaithful to reality” (72). In *The Concept of Nature* Whitehead states that “the immediate fact for awareness is the whole occurrence of nature … There is no holding nature still and looking at it” (10). Objects are characterized by their various attributes — i.e., the specific colours, textures, and sounds that we draw out of the available sensory data. However, Whitehead cautions, it is important to recognize that the object “cannot really be separated from its field” as it is “nothing else than the systematically adjusted set of modifications of the field” (121). For Whitehead, reality is a continuum of interconnected relationships between overlapping events — what he refers to in *Process and Reality* as “prehensions.” The object’s field includes the entirety of that object’s relationships. As Von Hallberg explains

> Each actual entity is, in Whitehead’s system, a process, first a process of becoming itself and then of becoming every other actual entity. According to his interpretation of the theory of relativity, no two actual entities are unrelated; each actual entity ‘feels’ every other actual entity. His term for this ‘feeling’ is ‘prehension’. (86)

If we accept Whitehead’s view that every entity in the universe is linked through this process of becoming, “the subject-object problem of classical philosophy is considered to be resolved” (Altieri 623). Olson’s concept of ‘Objectism’ as introduced in “Projective

Verse" is also vindicated. For poets and artists in general, this has a profound ontological significance — it allows for the unification of the artist with the work of art:

> The artist need no longer be conceived as creative mind outside of what he makes; the art object literally becomes a place (or in Whitehead's terms an 'event') where artist and world meet and where the old aesthetics of the harmony and unity of the art work can now be related to the artist's existential relation with and literally *in* his work. (Altieri 626)

In January of 1958, Olson wrote to *New American Poetry* editor Donald Allen to inform him that his latest essay, "The Principle of Measure in Composition by Field: Projective Verse II" was nearing completion. Allen had planned to publish this follow-up to "Projective Verse" in an upcoming issue of *Evergreen Review* (Hoeynck 12). A few months later, Olson confessed to Allen that the essay wouldn't be ready for publication. In his letter, he expressed concern that the essay would be seen as too derivative of Whitehead's philosophy. The project was eventually shelved. In 2010, a century after Olson's birth, *Projective Verse II* appeared in print for the first time. Olson begins the essay by invoking Whitehead; as Hoeynck points out, the opening line borrows directly from *Process and Reality*: "The poem's job is to be able to attend, and to get attention to, the variety of order in creation" (PVII 15). Themes of order and attention are carried throughout the work:

> A poem is a 'line' between any two points in creation (the poem's beginning, and its end). In its passage it includes — in the meaning here it passes through — the material of itself. Such a material is the 'field,' and in verse has the function of an integral which shall be called 'impetus' (PVII 16).

In his essay, Olson synthesizes his original concept of field composition and the "law of the line" with Whitehead's concept of the "impetus" — a means of measuring a field that doesn't rely on two-dimensional distance markers. Following Whitehead, Olson uses his essay to propose a new "principle of measure" in poetry to replace those traditional forms of poetic measure which are no longer of use. His notes reveal what this new principle might entail:

> There is a spatial element in any smallest part of a word as well as a temporal element: you measure its 'time' (as accent/pitch/speed in relationship — or 'rest') but it matters how you cut, even cut the syllable, you have the particle of it as such, as particle, measurable quantum. They 'weigh' in time (duration); they also occupy (occur) as any thing they are felt, as they are heard (PVII 31).

For Olson, words occupy both space and time. How the word or syllable is “cut” contributes to the poem’s overall measure, that is, how it is heard (and felt) by the listener. “When Olson read Whitehead, his attention was captured by the description of actual entities, or actual occasions — Whitehead’s terms for the *res vera*, the smallest units of being — as reliably determinate” (Von Hallberg 86). In “Projective Verse,” Olson identifies these smallest units of being in “the elements and minims of language” (SW 18). According to Von Hallberg’s reading, these atomic units of language possess the most stable truth value. In his poetic practice, Olson engages with language in its root form, at the meeting place of sound and sense: the *etymon*.

Chapter 2: Leave the Roots On

In 1950, Charles Olson wrote and circulated a short poem outlining his “roots theory” of poetics. William Carlos Williams forwarded his copy of Olson’s poem to the editor of a small literary magazine. “These Days” appeared in an issue of *Imagi* later that year:

> whatever you have to say, leave
> the roots on, let them
> dangle
>
> And the dirt
>
> Just to make clear
> where they come from (CP 106)

Olson’s poem would serve as a personal credo. His roots theory contributed another principle to his evolving poetics: the ability for a poem to transfer its energy from poet to reader depends on both the sound and meaning of the words it contains. Understanding both the contemporary definitions and etymology of those words would be key to the poem’s “kinetics.” Olson’s poem revealed his burgeoning interest in the etymon — the morphological root of a word. In “Projective Verse,” he explores the relationship between common English words and their etymological origin in ancient languages:

> ‘Is’ comes from the Aryan root, *as*, to breathe. The English ‘not’ equals the Sanscrit *na*, which may come from the root *na*, to be lost, to perish. ‘Be’ is from *bhu*, to grow. (SW 18)

For Olson “the history of words is one of the most telling and accurate histories of civilization” (Von Hallberg 74). With his exploration of the etymological roots of language, Olson strove to access the experiences, attitudes, and beliefs of the original language users; in his poetic practice, these roots are exposed to reveal the origins of a given word.

In 1959, British poet Elaine Feinstein wrote to Olson requesting clarification on some of the concepts introduced in “Projective Verse.” In his reply to Feinstein, Olson addresses what he identifies as the “source” question, that is, how an individual comes to learn a particular language as well as how that language has developed over time — what he refers to as the “double line of chromosomic giving” (SW 27). His explanation

begins with an emphasis on the importance of speech patterns and rhythm in language development:

> I couldn't stress enough on this speech rhythm question the pay-off in *traction* that a non-literate, non-commercial and non-historical constant daily experience of tracking *any* word, practically, one finds oneself using, back along its line of force to Anglo-Saxon, Latin, Greek, and out of Sanskrit, or now, if someone wld do it, some "dictionary" of roots which wld include Hittite at least. (SW 27)

In addition to this proposed dictionary of roots, Olson describes the poetic advantages of the practice of etymological analysis. By reaching into the past, the poet has an opportunity to *restore* language to an earlier and, presumably, unadulterated state. "I am talking from a new 'double axis'," Olson explains, "the replacement of the Classical-representational by the primitive-abstract … One means it now as 'primary,' as how one finds anything, pick it up as one does new — fresh/first" (SW 28). To return language to this "primary" state requires more robust tools for etymological research, something Olson felt was lacking in his current toolset. In a letter to poet Larry Eigner, he wrote that "what's most needed right now is an *Indo-European* Dictionary — *roots*, so one can feel that far back along the line of the word to its first users — what they meant, in *inventing* it" (SL 237).

When a poet attends to the historical development of a word, not only are they able to access its multiple meanings, they can also bring new vitality to a stale or static term. In a 1963 lecture at the Vancouver Poetry Conference, Olson explained to an incredulous Allen Ginsberg that the "event of language" could be discovered by a study of its etymological roots:

> I mean, either we're men of language in the real sense that language is the life that we're producing — and, by god, to my mind, the event of language — I would say the thing that we're after is etymons, all over the place … Etymon. The right word. The root. The word in its rightness of its root. (ML 48)

Olson's championing of the poetic advantages of the etymon is echoed in Fenollosa's essay on the Chinese character. "The chief work of literary men in dealing with language, and of poets especially," Fenollosa explains, "lies in feeling back along the ancient lines of advance" (54). Olson's directive to "leave / the roots on" is an invitation

to “feel” our way back through the history of language and to uncover elements of a past embedded (and often hidden) within ordinary speech.

“I hunt among stones”

> Despite the discrepancy (an ocean   courage   age)
> this is also true: if I have any taste
> it is only because I have interested myself
> in what was slain in the sun
>
>   I pose you your question:
>
> shall you uncover honey / where maggots are?
>
>   I hunt among stones (SW 173)

In “Projective Verse,” Olson invites his readers to discover ways to “engage speech where it is least careless — and least logical” (SW 18). He opens his essay “Human Universe” with the claim that the mode of rational discourse (*logos*) commonly practiced by ancient Greek philosophers has led to a habit of thinking that favours categorization, generalization, and abstraction:

> We have lived long in a generalizing time, at least since 450 B.C. And it has had its effects on the best of men, on the best of things. Logos, or discourse, for example, has, in that time, so worked its abstractions into our concept and use of language that language’s other function, speech, seems so in need of restoration that several of us go back to hieroglyphs or to ideograms to right the balance. (SW 53-54)

In an effort to restore language to its primal form, Olson spent several months digging through ruins in Mexico’s Yucatán peninsula, studying the ancient glyphs inscribed on the stones he found. On March 20, 1951, he wrote to Robert Creeley about his discoveries:

> Christ, these hieroglyphs. Here is the most abstract and formal deal of all the things this people dealt out — and yet, to my taste, it is precisely as intimate as verse is. Is, in fact, verse. Is their verse. And comes into existence, obeys the same laws that, the coming into existence, the persisting of verse, does. (SW 94)

Olson’s archaeological investigations provided substantial material for his second manifesto, “Human Universe.” The hieroglyphs cut into stone had retained for Olson “the

power of the objects of which they are the images" (SW 58). Like Fenollosa's Chinese ideogram, Olson believed he had found a new potential for verse in these ancient inscriptions. Chiseled into stone, the hieroglyph communicates its message using a concrete, visual, and non-discursive medium. As Byers observes, "the Mayan glyph is formally uncertain, demanding reading rather than decryption" (111-12). For Olson, the glyph also exhibited a core principle of projective verse — that form is never more than an extension of content:

> a Sumer poem or Maya glyph is more pertinent to our purposes than anything else, because each of these people & their workers had forms which unfolded directly from content (sd content itself a disposition toward reality which understood man as only force in field of force containing multiple other expressions. (SW 113)

The Mayan glyphs displayed a proportionality — a "distribution of weight" — which seemed exceptionally "distributed & accurate" to Olson (SW 111). Human features were presented alongside non-human images; both representations were rendered in equal proportion. In a letter to Creeley, Olson catalogued the types of inscriptions he observed on the stones he had unearthed:

sun
     moon
            venus
                     other constellations & zodiac

snakes
        ticks
             vultures

jaguar
        owl
             frog

feathers
          peyote
                  water-lily

…

& above all
human eyes
              hands
                    limbs (SW 111-12)

In *Mayan Letters*, Olson tells Creeley about his admiration for this ancient form of inscription where non-human objects are placed in proper proportion to the human subject. Nothing is either exaggerated or diminished for the purpose of elevating humanity's status. The glyphs capture the immediate experience of nature without resorting to metaphor, abstraction, or comparison. Contemplating the lessons gained by his study of the Mayan hieroglyph, Olson wrote:

> All that comparison ever does is set up a series of *reference* points: to compare is to take one thing and try to understand it by marking its similarities to or differences from another thing. Right here is the trouble, that each thing is not so much like or different from another thing (these likenesses and differences are apparent) but that such an analysis only accomplishes a *description*, does not come to grips with what really matters: that a thing, any thing, impinges on us by a more important fact, its self-existence, without reference to any other thing, in short, the very character of it which calls our attention to it, which wants us to know more about it, its particularity. (SW 56)

Olson's observations regarding the "particularity" of the entities inscribed on these stones reflects his concern with preserving the dignity of all living entities. When we interact with nature's objects, he explains, what we encounter is "not the thing's 'class,' any hierarchy, of quality or quantity, but the thing itself, and its relevance to ourselves who are the experiences of it" (SW 56). Olson believed he found an accurate registration of the "thing itself" in these ancient hieroglyphs. He wasn't alone in his interest: to members of his generation, the pictograph was

> the lingua franca of the burgeoning critique of scientific reason, calling into question the linguistic abstractions through whose medium the physical world is rationalized, administered, and materially exploited. The glyph offered an alternatively sensuous practice of inscription, far removed from the arbitrary signs of phonetic alphabets and the dense accumulations of grammatical and syntactic convention. (Byers 94)

For Olson, the hieroglyph is better suited to represent "the thing itself" (and its relationship to the individual experiencing it) than other forms of written communication, particularly those based on alphabetic scripts. In "Human Universe," he argues that the concrete details of the hieroglyphs produced by the ancient Maya "disclose a placement of themselves toward nature of enormous contradiction to ourselves" (63). When Fenollosa analysed the structure of Chinese ideographs in "The Chinese Character as a Medium for Poetry," he concluded that logographic writing systems were the ideal conduit for poetic expression. Like poetry, glyphs and ideograms are dense, economic,

and concrete; and, because they appear to encode the objects of nature in visual form, their evolution can be examined by deconstructing those forms. Through his analysis of the Chinese character, Fenollosa believed to have discovered the process by which simple nouns and verbs had combined over time to represent more abstract concepts. In the character for "East," for instance, he saw the character for the sun "entangled in the branches of a tree" (60). Unlike these iconic characters, he felt that there was "nothing in a phonetic word to exhibit the stages of its embryonic growth. It does not bear its metaphor on its face" (Fenollosa 55). Olson intuited a similar potential in the hieroglyphic ciphers left behind by the ancient Mayans, and his reading of Fenollosa provided him with a framework for studying the glyph. Olson's primary innovation, however, was to apply Fenollosa's methodology to *spoken* language. Olson departed from Fenollosa in his belief that the evolution of the English language *could* be revealed through a study of its etymology, and that the English etymon was as viable a medium for poetry as the Chinese character.

Olson's interest in the roots of language was accompanied by his curiosity about the history of the human species. "I go back as far as I can — and the fortunate thing is, due to archeology and other recent disciplines, one can go back to the history of the species to get another gauge on the individual man" (DBU 8). In considering his desire to define a new "Human Universe" grounded in *humilitas*, Olson's appreciation of the sense of proportion exhibited by the Mayan glyph can be seen as both an aesthetic and an ethical judgment. Advances in knowledge brought about by the Enlightenment, the rise of rational scientism, and a naive faith in the value of progress have led to a distorted view of nature and humanity's position within it. To address this dilemma, Olson believed that the "headlong Promethean work of modernity, of progress and improvement, ought now to be 'reversed', and a sense of humility established where once reigned the 'glory' of man" (Byers 41). Olson's aim is to undo the damage that began with "the 5th Century in logic" and has carried through the "history of man since the 17th century in physics" (SVH 41). Viewing nature as an instrument for promoting human progress has brought with it serious social and ecological consequences. Olson's "reversal" is a new mode of consciousness that sets us in appropriate proportion to nature — a "stance toward reality" he believed to be a quality held by our primordial ancestors. His roots theory of language is an attempt to access that world and reaffirm its values in the present moment.

A care for language

Olson's belief that language had the power to shape culture was shared by many modernist writers. As Von Hallberg observes, both Pound and Olson "pick up accrued senses of words as clues to a more accurate perception of reality, a reality that inheres in the language almost magically" (77). For Pound, a written language based on arbitrary alphabetic signs is less suited to rendering the swiftness and vitality of thought. He believed the Chinese ideogram to be a superior medium for poetry as it "does not try to be the picture of a sound, or to be a written sign recalling a sound, but it is still the picture of a thing in a given position or relation, or of a combination of things" (*ABC of Reading* 21). While the English language may be less capable of producing the kind of poetry Pound envisioned, he recognized that an English word still "comes up with roots." The poet must, therefore, pay close attention to its many connotations. As Pound argues,

> the good writer chooses his words for their 'meaning', but that meaning is not a set, cut-off thing like the move of knight or pawn on a chess-board. It comes up with roots, with associations, with how and where the word is familiarly used, or where it has been used brilliantly or memorably. (*ABC of Reading* 36)

"Language is the main means of human communication," Pound explains. "If an animal's nervous system does not transmit sensations and stimuli, the animal atrophies. If a nation's literature declines, the nation atrophies and decays" (*ABC of Reading* 32). From Pound's perspective, American culture was in a state of decay due, in part, to its careless use of language. This situation could only be remedied by a purification of its cultural products. In the process of returning literature to its prelapsarian state, Pound expected to restore the writer to a position of power and influence: "[a] nation which neglects the perceptions of its artists declines. After a while it ceases to act, and merely survives" (*ABC of Reading* 82). As Victor P.H. Li observes in "Philology and Power: Ezra Pound and the Regulation of Language," for modernist poets like Pound, "philology, especially in the form of etymology, becomes a kind of hermeneutics of restoration, an interpretive act that recovers the original meanings of words corrupted by social misuse or historical neglect" (192). Dowthwaite shares Li's perspective on Pound's motivations, adding that for Pound "language is a symptom of a usurious culture. Words are used to mislead people, and in a language like English which has many abstract categories, such disingenuous argument is more readily possible than in a language near-solely

comprised of concrete detail" (121). As Pound opined, "[a] people that grows accustomed to sloppy writing is a people in process of losing grip on its empire and on itself" (*ABC of Reading* 34). While Olson shared Pound's passion for careful writing, his political motivations differed from his predecessor's. Olson showed little interest in restoring his nation's "grip on empire." Such an attitude had become particularly distasteful in the years following the second world war. By the time he began writing *Projective Verse II*, Olson had completely rejected Pound's project and aligned himself instead with Whitehead's "democratic ecology" (Hoeynck 156).

In contrast to Pound's grandiose imperialism, Olson's interest in ancient languages and cultures signals what Gilliott characterizes as a "radical retreat from western modernity" (12). Through his poetry and prose, Olson "tried to create a communal text that redefined its own borders to incorporate marginal voices and narratives, an alternative to the repressive public policies he described during the Second World War and its aftermath" (Vanderborg 363-64). However, although their political motivations were at odds, Olson's theory of language is unquestionably influenced by Pound. In his study of the relationship between Pound's philological inquiries and his political objectives, Li confirms that "Pound's valorization of Chinese as an iconic language reveals a desire for direct access to a permanent reality unburdened by the conventions, conflicts and changes of social discourse" (Li 190). Like Pound, Olson sought to unburden language of the distortions imposed by syntactical conventions and to return it to the vital, immediate experience of nature. In his essay "Date Line," Pound writes:

> As language becomes the most powerful instrument of perfidy, so language alone can riddle and cut through the meshes. Used to conceal meaning, used to blur meaning, to produce the complete and utter inferno of the past century… against which, SOLELY a care for language, for accurate registration by language avails. (*Literary Essays of Ezra Pound* 77)

Olson shares Pound's dedication to a "care for language." Several poems written in the early 1950s grappled with what Olson saw as the misuse of language in print advertising, billboard slogans, and radio jingles. "All things are made bitter, words even / are made to taste like paper" Olson writes in his poem "In Cold Hell, In Thicket" (SW 182). "The Songs of Maximus" summons a similar grievance:

colored pictures
of all things to eat: dirty
postcards
And words, words, words
all over everything (SW 230)

In “I, Maximus of Gloucester, to You,” the poet asks, “o my people, where shall you find it, how, where, where shall you listen / when all becomes billboards, when, all, even silence, is spray-gunned?” (TMP 6). Troubled by the “mu-sick, mu-sick, mu-sick,” of the mindless slogans infecting the ears of his fellow citizens, Maximus cries out in dramatic verse:

o kill kill kill kill kill
those
who advertise you
out) (TMP 8)

A witness to rapid economic growth in postwar America, Olson was wary of the impact these changes would have on the nation’s culture. His three-volume opus, *The Maximus Poems,* attempts to engage with this issue by providing an alternative to the expansionist’s agenda. Situated in the idyllic town of Gloucester, Massachusetts — an isolated island-like community historically protected from the damaging effects of capital and modernization — Olson’s narrator, Maximus, must contend with the rising commercial pressures that are reshaping postwar America. Encroaching billboards, misleading newspaper advertisements, and ebullient radio jingles are, for Olson, symptoms of a culture in decline.

Root city

Olson’s roots theory of language is not only a philosophical perspective — it has a pragmatic value when applied to poetic practice. Olson demonstrates his use of a word in the “rightness of its root” in the poem “Letter 3,” from the first volume of *The Maximus Poems*:

Tansy buttons, tansy
for my city
Tansy for their noses

Tansy for them,
tansy for Gloucester to take the smell

> of all owners,
> the smell
>
> Tansy
> for all of us (SW 225)

In "Letter 3," Olson, in the guise of his alter-ego, Maximus, recalls a childhood memory of playing in fields of yellow flowers on the shore of Gloucester's Cressy Beach: "Tansy from Cressy's / I rolled in as a boy" (SW 225). Olson's repetition of the word "tansy" (which appears in the poem ten times), as well as his coupling of "tansy city" with "root city," invites investigation into the function of this word within the poem. Recalling Olson's directive in "Projective Verse," that for the projective poet, it is "a matter, finally, of OBJECTS, what they are, what they are inside a poem, how they got there" (SW 20), Olson leaves the roots of this word exposed, to "make clear / where [it] came from."

Native to Europe, tansy is classified as an invasive species in North America. In a note to his editor, Olson related some facts about the flower's arrival in New England:

> Tansy was brought on the bottom of bags in cargoes to Stage Head originally out of Dorchester's entry (at the mouth of the Wey) persons directly probably responsible William Derby and Thomas Purchase (though London ships also here at or at same time as transfer. It is strong (like goldenrod) and smells almost offensive with a pineapple odor. (Butterick, *Guide to the Maximus Poems* 22)

This bitter, offensive-smelling flower, whose seeds were stuck to "the bottom of bags" carried by the English is, like most of Gloucester's inhabitants, a foreign transplant. Its history in the region has ties to the colonization of America in the seventeenth century. Additionally, its botanical Latin name, *tanacetum*, translates to "immortality" (*athanatos* — "not death"). Olson's "tansy city" is also his "root city" — although he was raised in nearby Worcester, he spent summers in Gloucester as a child and, in his later years, would make the town his permanent home:

> o tansy city, root city
> let them not make you
> as the nation is (SW 227)

Olson's Maximus envisions his "tansy city" as immortal, untouched by time. The flower's etymological root foregrounds the poem's central theme: the previously untouchable Gloucester is now threatened by American progress. A scenic, seaside resort town, Gloucester became a desirable location for real estate investors after the war. Those

who were looking to purchase land in the area would use the local media to persuade long-time residents to sell or convince renters to move out. Concerned about the impact of their rhetorical tactics, Olson used his poetry to make an appeal to his people in "Letter 3." When words are used "cheaply" in the local press, the people of Gloucester are similarly devalued:

> Let those who use words cheap, who use us cheap
> take themselves out of the way
> Let them not talk of what is good for the city (SW 225)

But Olson wasn't above using the local media to his own advantage — he understood the power of the printed word. In 1965, he submitted a letter to the editor of the *Gloucester Daily Times* expressing his outrage towards a local developer who had torn down a nineteenth century home to build a YMCA. The letter reads like a continuation of his earlier poem:

> oh city of mediocrity and cheap ambition destroying
> its own shoulders its own back greedy present persons
> stood upon, stop this renewing without reviewing (SL 342-43)

"Letter 3" demonstrates Olson's use of the etymon to add depth to a poem's meaning. The reader is given a clear understanding of the word's root, where it came from — in this case, a memory of an experience from the poet's childhood — and how it relates to the larger theme of *The Maximus Poems*. Through an examination of its etymology, "tansy" carries us through its own history, from ancient Greece to America (by way of England) and back to Olson's present moment in Gloucester, Massachusetts.

Olson uses Gloucester to "see history as the presence of the past" and to "look for concrete instances of that presence" (Altieri 631). In *The Maximus Poems,* Olson's narrator presents an eye-witness account of Gloucester's history that focuses on the people who have put down roots there: "polis is / eyes" he writes in "Letter 6". As Pattison points out, Olson's method is that of *'istorin*: of finding out for oneself:

> He sought to revive older meanings of words whose roots and accompanying historical contexts could assert his cosmology, his most heavily-cited example being the recovery of history through its Herodotean root of the verb 'istorin. In this verbal act, rather than hypostatized noun, the writer wished to re-signify history as 'story' in order to recover the legitimacy of personal witness and evidence, to equalize knowledge with the processive act and experience of 'finding out for oneself'. (54)

In *The Maximus Poems,* Gloucester's history is elevated to the level of mythology. Myth, history, and language commingle in a space that expands from the root out. Regrettably, in the decade that lapsed between the publication of *The Maximus Poems* and his letter to the *Gloucester Daily Times*, Olson's "root city" had apparently degraded into a mere "city of mediocrity".

The roots of meaning

In his essay "The Gate and The Center," Olson calls for a return to the "living oral law" that, he believes, can still be traced through modern, mid-century American speech. From Olson's perspective, Fenollosa's contribution to poetics and the philosophy of language "reasserted these resistant primes in our speech, put us back to the origins of their force not as history but as living oral law to be discovered in speech as directly as it is in our mouths":

> Take language (& start with Fenollosa): did anyone tell you — same anyones are so stuck with variants — that all Indo-European language (ours) appears to stem from the very same ground on which the original agglutinative language was invented, Sumeria? and that our language can be seen to hold in itself now as many of those earliest elements as it does Sanskrit roots? that though some peoples stuck to the signs while others took off with the sounds, both the phonetic and ideographic is still present and available for use as impetus and explosion in our alphabetic speech? (HU 18)

It is interesting to note that, in this passage, Olson appears to be working on the assumption that ancient Sumerian arose from an earlier, proto-Sumerian language that shared many characteristics with the family Indo-European languages. This theory was popular in Olson's day but has since been debunked[1]. Nevertheless, Olson believes that modern European languages exhibit their history in both their sounds and signs, despite the potential disadvantage of "alphabetic speech." An examination of these linguistic roots connects the language user to their ancient forebearers. As Altieri explains, while modernist poets relied on historical allusions to evoke images of the past, postmodernists sought to "recapture the original prehensive graspings of the world by focusing on etymology" (630). Aliteri's use of Whitehead's term "prehensive graspings" is

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[1] See Rubio Gonzalo's "On the Alleged 'Pre-Sumerian Substratum'" in *Journal of Cuneiform Studies,* 1999, Vol.51 (1), p.1-16

fitting. In his book *Symbolism: Its Meaning and Effect*, Whitehead argued that the present meaning of a word is directly linked to, and charged by, its usage in the past:

> A word has a symbolic association with its own history, its other meanings, and with its general status in current literature. Thus a word gathers emotional signification from its emotional history in the past; and this is transferred symbolically to its meaning in present use. (84)

In the late 1920s, Alfred North Whitehead was delivering a series of lectures at Harvard University. These lectures would eventually be published in book form as *Process and Reality*. During this same period, German philosopher Ernst Cassirer was working on his three-volume study of language, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*. While Cassirer's Neo-Kantian perspective is considered incompatible with Whitehead's metaphysics — as Whitehead claimed, his philosophy is the *inversion* of Kant's philosophy — the two philosophers were united in their conception of reality as process. Both saw the objects (or events) of the world as emerging out of a Heraclitan flux. Cassirer and Whitehead's perspectives on the nature of reality algin with Fenollosa's assertion that the relations between things "are more real and more important than the things which they relate" (Fenollosa 54). Cassirer's emphasis on the role of action (verb) over static being (noun) echoes Fenollosa's observations about the Chinese language:

> It is particularly in the verb that the finest particularizations and shadings of the I-feeling are expressed, since the objective apprehension of an event is most characteristically permeated with the subjective apprehension of doing in the verb and since in this sense verbs, as the Chinese grammarians put it, are truly 'living words' in difference to nouns, which are 'dead words'. (*Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* 202)

Cassirer argues that humans developed several symbolic systems (language, science, religion, mythology) in order to make sense of an otherwise chaotic stream of sensory data. While these symbolic systems are required to understand and communicate about the world, they often obscure what they seek to reveal: "For all mental processes fail to grasp reality itself, and in order to represent it, to hold it all, they are driven to the use of symbols. But all symbolism harbors the curse of mediacy" (Cassirer, *Language and Mythology* 7). As a symbolic system, language mediates raw experience. As words become more generalized, the original experiences they were meant to capture become distorted. Olson's emphasis on the need for poetic language to capture the immediacy of experience was inspired by this theory of language. For Olson, the poet's role is to uncover the raw, unmediated experience encoded in our symbolic language system. He

believed this could be accomplished through an examination of word roots. Like Olson, Cassirer understood how the etymon could reveal the original source of meaning:

> human language has from the first been subject to change and decay. Hence we cannot content ourselves with its present state. We must trace our terms back to their origins if we are to detect the bond uniting them with their objects. From derivative words we must go back to primary words; we must discover the etymon, the true and original form, of every term. (Cassirer, *Essay on Man* 113)

Like Fenollosa, Cassirer believed that the earliest forms of languages reflected a way of thinking that was both mythical and poetic. "Mankind could not begin with abstract thought or with a rational language," he explains. "It had to pass through the era of the symbolic language of myth and poetry. The first nations did not think in concepts but in poetic images; they spoke in fables and wrote in hieroglyphs. The poet and the maker of myth seem, indeed, to live in the same world" (Cassirer, *Essay on Man* 153). For Cassirer, examples such as the Homeric epic and the Egyptian hieroglyph are representative of this pre-rational system of symbolic expression. The differences between species, families, and genera may be "fundamental and ineffaceable" but the "primitive mind" of the mythmaker ignores these classifications (*Essay on Man* 81). By contrast, the modern, analytic mind has, as Olson will also come to argue, reduced language's mythic and poetic potential. The development of a discourse based on taxonomy and abstraction has distanced us from the immediacy of experience and allowed us to objectify other living beings. Recalling Olson's concern with the egocentric lyrical form, this form of discourse is equally subjective in that it allows one to apply the category of "other" and justify inhumane actions through rational argument. To return to the mythopoetic, we must adopt a more authentic, *eco*centric mode of discourse.

For Fenollosa, the key to returning to a more immediate form of expression lies in recognizing that nature is a continuous activity. Fenollosa argues if "one action in nature promotes another," it is logical to conclude that "the agent and the object are secretly verbs" (58). The objects of nature are not static nouns but rather "cross-sections cut through actions" by the perceiving mind (Fenollosa 46). We use language to pin down the events of nature; how the boundaries of these objects are demarcated is often a matter of human convenience. Linguist Benjamin Lee Whorf makes a similar claim:

> We dissect nature along lines laid down by our native languages. The categories and types that we isolate from the world of phenomena we do

> not find there because they stare every observer in the face; on the contrary, the world is presented in a kaleidoscopic flux of impressions which has to be organized by our minds — and this means the linguistic systems in our minds. We cut nature up, organize it into concepts, and ascribe significances as we do, largely because we are parties to an agreement to organize it in this way — an agreement that holds throughout our speech community and is codified in the patterns of our language. (272)

Olson was certainly familiar with Whorf's contributions to linguistic theory. In his bibliography for *Mayan Letters*, he references Whorf's "four papers on Maya, among his many on other languages, and on language itself" (SW 126-27). In both Fenollosa and Whorf, Olson found a theory of language that would align with Whitehead's metaphysics and contribute to further defining what he set out to accomplish in "Projective Verse" — a "new stance towards the reality of a poem itself" (SW 24).

The theories of language developed in the early 20th century by philosophers like Cassirer, Fenollosa, and Whorf lead us to a controversial conclusion: if the first language users shaped their world through the language they created, those original choices must play some role in shaping the way *we* experience the world today. The values and biases of our ancient ancestors have left traces in our language which we rarely perceive. This view has important implications for modern poetics. A poet who is attuned to the immediate and continuous flow of experience can use language to create new "cross-sections," dissecting the world based on new values. As Altieri observes:

> language is not only a process of discovering the world but also enables us to recognize man's place within it. The poet is not an independent self-conscious creator but an actor who becomes conscious of his situation and of the energies he shares with the world in the process of defining it… (629)

For critics like Bond, however, adopting the view that language determines our worldview can be problematic:

> The gospel of seeing the limits of our language as the limits of our world has led to the error that all we know of the world comes to us via semiotic play. Given interpretive play, both endemic and cultivated within language, such a gospel, once inflected by a faith in the infinite nature (as opposed to possibility) of that play, leads to the untenable position of radical relativism. (173-74)

To what extent might Olson have subscribed to the view that language influences, shapes, or even determines the way we come to understand the world? While he does not explicitly align himself with the linguistic determinists, one thing is clear: Olson firmly

believed that language shapes consciousness. His search for the roots of language was an attempt to unveil the earliest examples of this process. In his poetic practice, he strove to *re*-shape consciousness through the language of poetry.

“Prosody is a dictum”

“A poem is ‘heard’ before it is written, and until it ends,” Olson asserts in his follow-up to “Projective Verse,” “[s]o its prosody is a dictum” (PVII 17). The auditory characteristics of verse when spoken aloud — its intonations, rhythms, accents, and tone — are qualities belonging to the voice of the speaker. These prosodic qualities can be difficult to capture in written form. When such cues are absent from the written text, elements of the poet’s original intention are also lost; preserving this prosody requires a more complex notational system than our basic alphabet can provide. Olson’s discussion of the notational potential of the typewriter in “Projective Verse,” as well as his emphasis on the importance of the breath and the ear, confirms his phonocentric bias. But projective verse is not a product of the breath and ear alone. In a letter to Williams, Olson suggests that an attention to “the advantage of quantity” (the length of time it takes a poet to pronounce a particular syllable, word, or line) puts poetry where it belongs — “right back in the mouth”:

> And all that glot of consonants, and what moo those vowels do accomplish, the sweet things. Its dentals, labials, thoraces, or whatever those linguistic bastards call all those parts of speech, one might call them, just to cross em up: hard palette, soft palate, whatever!
>
> And gets that biz of how we do, despite common pronunciations … how we do differ, in getting the words out of our mouths. How great: that we do. There’s, the play I count on. (SL 229)

For Olson, this sense of “quantity” originates in the complex physiological components that work together in the human body to form audible speech. As each speaker is a unique physical being, “quantity” gives the poet the freedom of individual expression. For the projective poet, this mode of composition involves the entire body. The body produces sound in the form of language, which allows the poet to extend beyond the body’s limits:

> Sound is a dimension [man] has extended. Language is one of his proudest acts. And when a poet rests in these as they are in himself (in his physiology, if you like, but the life in him, for all that) then he, if he chooses

> to speak from these roots, works in that area where nature has given him size, projective size. (SW 25)

In 1960, Olson produced a short piece entitled "HAVING SAID TO ED DORN THAT THE WORD AS THING DOES SORT ITSELF":

> that is, what basket does one carry it in, if it isn't by ear
>
> P.S. I'd still think 'the page' is scoring-paper, that how the words lie can register *quantity* … and thereby achieve whatever 'form'
>
> That we don't know nothing (because *logos* still drags its ass all over everything, & still 2500 years old, the fucking shit!)
>
> & have it all to find out? (in the fact that reality does dissolve into,) *vibrations*? (Charles Olson Research Collection, University of Connecticut Library at Storrs, Box 22, Folder 1012)

For Olson, spoken verse is a pattern of sound vibrations, gathered and sorted by the listener in a metaphorical "basket" — the ear. When a poem is transferred to the page, those sound vibrations must be captured accurately. In addition to the role of the ear, Olson's note to Dorn reveals his concern with the role of *logos* in contemporary discourse — what he alluded to as the flawed "discourse system" in a lecture at Goddard College. The impact this form of discourse had on human consciousness was a central concern. Throughout his prose writing, Olson uses the term *logos* (i.e., rational discourse) in contrast with *muthos*, an ancient Greek word meaning "to recite by mouth." *Muthos* is etymologically related to the English word "myth" and is used to refer to stories passed down through an oral tradition. As Von Hallberg explains, Olson "prefers muthos to the more usual transliteration *mythos*, meaning word or story, because the former suggests a connection with the Old English *muth*, meaning simply mouth" (58). When Plato banished the poets from his ideal state in *The Republic*, it was those epic and dramatic forms of poetry that were the targets of his contempt — i.e., poetic forms primarily delivered via speech. In Book X of Plato's *Republic*, Socrates criticizes Homer for his corrupting influence:

> Speaking in confidence, for I should not like to have my words repeated to the tragedians and the rest of the imitative tribe — but I do not mind saying to you, that all poetical imitations are ruinous to the understanding of the hearers, and that the knowledge of their true nature is the only antidote to them … Homer, which even now makes the words falter on my lips, for he is the great captain and teacher of the whole of that charming tragic

> company; but a man is not to be reverenced more than truth, and therefore I will speak out. (Plato, *The Republic* 310)

To Socrates, epic poetry is an inferior art form as it must rely on the use of *mimesis*, the imitation of nature. *Mimesis* results in a distorted and misleading representation of the world. The philosopher, by contrast, uses *logos* to understand and articulate the true nature of the world, one which is structured by logic and accessible to human reason. In a perfect state, rational discourse would supplant the myths, oral histories, and dramatic retellings that had dominated Greek culture.

For Olson, the arguments against poetry put forward in *The Republic* signalled a major shift in Western thought and culture. In “Human Universe,” he suggests that the shift from oral- to text-based discourse introduced new ways of thinking that altered the way we perceive the world:

> We stay unaware how two means of discourse the Greeks appear to have invented hugely intermit our participation in our experience, and so prevent discovery. They are what followed from Socrates’ readiness to generalize, his willingness (from his own bias) to make a ‘universe’ out of discourse instead of letting it rest in its most serviceable place … With Aristotle, the two great means appear: logic and classification. And it is they that have so fastened themselves on habits of thought that action is interfered with, absolutely interfered with, I should say. (SW 54-55)

Olson rejects Plato’s argument against the poets by asserting that the oral poetic form is *not* an inferior, mimetic representation of nature — it is a direct and unreflective expression of human experience. The strength of oral verse lies in its immediacy. Speech grounded in *muthos* is the “act of the instant” whereas *logos* is a “thought about the instant” (SW 54). *Logos* produces a pattern of speaking and thinking characterized by rational self-reflection and therefore tends towards generalization or abstraction. Cassirer similarly notes that the rational mind — that “distinctive *organ* at the disposal of philosophy” — is incapable of “penetrating the mediating sphere of mere signifying” (*Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* 49). He concludes that the kind of rational discourse valued by philosophers prevents them from entering the “paradise of pure immediacy” (49). In his study of Mayan hieroglyphs, Olson saw a potential for a new kind of verse inspired by ancient glyphs inscribed on stone. In “Projective Verse,” he sought to engage speech where it is “least logical” (SW 18). Over a decade after his trip to the Yucatán, and the publication of his *ars poetica*, his intuitions about writing and its impact on language would be confirmed by British classicist, Eric Havelock.

A Homeric state of mind

In 1964 Olson published a review of Havelock's latest book, *Preface to Plato,* in the *Niagara Frontier Review*. Olson praised the text, claiming it to be "the only work in criticism which is still relevant at all to the developments in thought and poetry over the past 150 years" (*Niagara Frontier Review* 40). In a lecture delivered at Beloit College four years later, Olson described Havelock's book as "the first attempt, the first time anybody has taken Plato's *Republic* and examined that question of the poets' rejection, the rejection of poets by Plato from society" (ML 253-254). Olson's invective against the kind of logical discourse popularized by Plato, Socrates, and Aristotle, was most clearly articulated in "Human Universe." There, Olson argues that "harmony of the universe, and I include man, is not logical, or better, is post-logical, as is the order of any created thing" (SW 55). For Olson, the introduction of logic, classification, and generalization in our language led to its decline. Like many poets of his generation, he "sought to root his writing not in modern rationality but in an ancient topos. In this Olson was unusual only in that he wanted to put the clock back so far: to pre-Classical Greece, the time before Socrates and the Platonic Ideal" (Gilliott 11). In *Preface to Plato,* Havelock traces the genealogy of *logos* from its rise in 5th century Greece back along its roots in early alphabetic writing systems. For a postmodern poet like Olson, this served as a kind of revelation — i.e., that logic was not the foundation upon which the universe was structured. If *logos* was contingent, it seemed possible that language, culture, and consciousness could now enter a "post-logical" stage.

In his book, Havelock equates Plato's attack on poets in *The Republic* with an attack on Greek oral culture. He argues that the introduction of writing, particularly in its pedagogical application, caused a shift in consciousness that shaped Western culture. According to Havelock, the preliterate Greeks possessed what he characterized as a "poetic" or "Homeric" state of mind, as evidenced by their epic and dramatic poetry:

> there was a state of mind which we shall conveniently label the 'poetic' or 'Homeric' or 'oral' state of mind, which constituted the chief obstacle to scientific rationalism, to the use of analysis, to the classification of experience, to its rearrangement in sequence of cause and effect. (47)

In the decades leading up to the establishment of Plato's academy, a new mode of discourse based on analytic reasoning was taking hold in ancient Greece. With Havelock, Olson found a convincing account of the kind of cultural decline he had

similarly attributed to the post-Socratics. Havelock's arguments also resonated with Olson's reading of Whitehead's objection to the bifurcation of nature which, the poet believed, began with Plato's introduction of the theory of Forms. The development of a discourse based on classification, hierarchy, taxonomy, and logic was "as loose and inaccurate a system as the body and soul had been, divided from each other and rattling, sticks in a stiff box" (SW 48). For Havelock, preliterate Greek culture was dominated by the epic and dramatic forms. In epic verse "the thing-happening predominates over the idea" and "the concrete symbol over the abstract concept" (Havelock 294). The characteristics of epic verse were a result of the limitations of human memory. The need to memorize large passages of verse produced a poetic form that was naturally rhythmic, patterned, fluid, and economic. According to Havelock, these techniques allowed Greek culture to thrive:

> It was the popular mastery of the shaped word, enforced by the needs of cultural memory, which brought the Greeks to a mastery of other kinds of rhythm also. Their supposed disadvantage in the competition for culture, namely their non-literacy, was in fact their prime advantage. (Havelock 128)

In reading Havelock, Olson was delighted to find that the grammatical structure of Greek epic verse was similar to the style he had been employing in his own poetry. In his review of *Preface*, Olson highlights Havelock's discovery that the epic poets had been working with "a wholly different syntax," one in which "the words and actions reported are set down side by side in the order of their occurrence in nature, instead of by an order of discourse, or 'grammar' as we have called it, the prior an actual resting on vulgar experience and event" (*Niagara Frontier Review* 41). Like Olson's verse, the grammar of the Greek epic was primarily paratactical.

According to Havelock, in an oral culture, learning was an activity — one learned by doing. "What you 'did' were the thousand acts and thoughts, battles, speeches, journeys, lives, and deaths that you were reciting in rhythmic verse, or hearing, or repeating" (Havelock 159). As a listener, you carried the poet's verse with you. You re-enacted it silently in your mind, memorized it, and repeated it aloud. Through recitation, the rhythm of the poetry was repeated in the rhythms of your own speech. The act of re-enacting blurred the division between subject (the poet or listener) and object (the poem). From Havelock's perspective, underlying Plato's argument against the poets is a concern for how the members of his *polis* should be educated. In a culture which relies

on the spoken word for its delivery of historical and ethical teachings, "any poetised statement must be designed and recited in such a way as to make it a kind of drama within the soul both of the reciter and hence also of the audience" (Havelock 45). The learning process in preliterate Greece was characterized by a "continual act of memorisation, repetition and recall" (Havelock 157). According to Havelock, "this way of reliving experience in memory instead of analysing and understanding it" was, for Plato, "the enemy" (45). To ensure the citizens of Plato's ideal state would be educated using only those tools sanctioned by philosophers, the poets had to be banished; their methods for transmitting cultural knowledge were seen as a threat to the pedagogical ambitions of the philosopher set.

With the shift towards a text-based system of education, the need to re-enact cultural lessons was diminished. "There is only one thing you can do about kinetic, reenact it" Olson explains. "Art does not seek to describe but enact" (SW 61). The type of artistic and educational praxis that Olson first championed in "Projective Verse" was seemingly incompatible with the mode of discourse imposed by the "literate bookish culture" of Plato's Athens (Havelock 41). In his reading of Havelock, Olson saw an opportunity to reverse the course of history and return poetry to its original place: in the body and breath of the poet, and the ear of the listener.

Muthopoetics

Olson opens the final piece in his collection of lectures, *The Special View of History,* with the following confession:

> I have the difficulty — which must reflect what kind of writer I am — that words are pictures to me … What I am about to say will seem, I'm sure, frightfully abstract if you don't see that I am making pictures — that I am what I am interested in: a mythologist. (57)

He goes on to explain that by "mythologist" he means someone who "enlarges" the experiences shared by a community using "the language of the unconscious." The mythologist "celebrates what men have selected from what their ancestors did which seemed to them useful" (SVH 57). Olson points to "the moment the mythological was displaced by the rational (date, sometime around 440 B.C. Socrates)" as a turning point in the development of language and thought in the West (SVH 31). Havelock observes

that, for Plato, “the content of poetry is *mythos* as opposed to dialectical *logos*” (236). By exiling *mythos* from the dominant modes of discourse, Western culture has been left with

> a language which insists on emptying events and actions of their immediacy, in order to break them up and rearrange them in categories, thus imposing the rule of principle in place of happy intuition, and in general arresting the quick play of instinctive reaction, and substituting reasoned analysis in its place as the basic mode of living. (Havelock 282-83)

The syntactical structure of this new form of discourse is poorly suited to capturing the immediacy of events or the “quick play of instinctive reaction” — what Whitehead and Olson would define as the true experience of reality as a continuum. With the introduction of logical discourse, *parataxis*, the grammatical mode best suited to memorized speech was replaced by *hypotaxis*, a syntax that allowed for more complex linguistic structures. Picking up on Havelock’s theories concerning the impact of literacy on “oral primary” cultures, Walter J. Ong argues that without a writing system “breaking up thought — that is, analysis — is a high-risk procedure” (39). Writing provides a mechanism for capturing fragments of thought and setting them aside for future review, a process Ong refers to as “backlooping”:

> The mind concentrates its own energies on moving ahead because what it backloops into lies quiescent outside itself, always available piecemeal on the inscribed page. In oral discourse, the situation is different. There is nothing to backloop into outside the mind, for the oral utterance has vanished as soon as it is uttered. (39)

Olson’s privileging of the oral over the written — *muthos* as opposed to *logos* — is directly related to his idea of a poem’s “kinetics.” When he states that “ONE PERCEPTION MUST IMMEDIATELY AND DIRECTLY LEAD TO A FURTHER PERCEPTION,” he is providing an antidote to the effects of “backlooping” as introduced by the invention of writing. The propulsive and transitory qualities of spoken language are echoed in Valéry’s essay on poetry and abstraction:

> I speak to you and if you have understood my words, those very words are abolished… In other words, in the practical or abstract uses of language the form — that is, the physical, the evident — and the very act of speech are not retained. The form does not survive the comprehension; it dissolves into clarity; it has acted; it has performed its duty; it has caused understanding; it has lived. (219)

The life of speech is temporary; it “dissolves into clarity” when it is understood by the listener. There is no opportunity to revise or retract once a speech has been uttered. For

Ong and Olson, the introduction of writing altered our way of thinking. Our immediate, concrete experiences were able to be combined with other temporally distant phenomena to produce general concepts, abstractions, and taxonomies. Writing also changed the way we view language itself. “Writing makes ‘words’ appear similar to things,” Ong explains, “because we think of words as the visible marks signaling words to decoders: we can see and touch such inscribed ‘words’ in texts and books. Written words are residue. Oral tradition has no such residue or deposit” (11).

Ong expresses some uncertainty in his assessment of the impact of writing on culture. “Writing introduces division and alienation,” he admits, but it also leads to “a higher unity” amongst geographically distanced members of a language community (Ong 175). Olson is less ambiguous about the impact of *logos* on consciousness. In a 1968 interview with the BBC, he spoke reverently of a time “before the development of these unhappy grammatical constructions which made possible logic and classification and the whole taxonomy of Aristotle” (ML 297). But, despite his critical stance on the current state of language, Olson is optimistic about the future of writing. He observes that those grammatical constructions that have dominated writing are “slowly coming to pieces.” This dismantling of a syntax based on logic will allow poetry to “get back to ground and then start again” (ML 297). What form will this new, post-rational literature take? In “Projective Verse,” Olson points to examples such as Euripides’ *The Trojan Women*, the Homeric epics, and Japanese Noh drama as potential templates:

> Such works, I should argue — and I use them simply because their equivalents are yet to be done — could not issue from men who conceived verse without the full relevance of human voice, without reference to where lines come from, in the individual who writes. (SW 25)

Although their contemporary equivalents have not yet been produced, Olson asserts that, like these ancient forms that arose within an oral tradition, projective verse must be composed with the poet’s body, breath, and voice. The resulting form will be epic in both size and material:

> if projective verse is practiced long enough, is driven ahead hard enough along the course I think it dictates, verse again can carry much larger material than it has carried in our language since the Elizabethans. (SW 26)

To produce a postmodern epic like *The Maximus Poems*, a writer must avoid falling into habits of thought based on conventional syntax — those "unhappy" effects introduced by the reflective ego. "For the habits of thought are the habits of action," Olson explains, "and here, too, particularism has to be fought for, anew" (SW 54). By returning to these ancient forms, Olson will "try to make English start to behave like a condition before man had a definite article, knew how to generalize" (ML 311). In "Letter 23" he documents the history of the bifurcation of *muthos* and *logos*:

> *mythologos* has lost such ground since Pindar
>
> The odish man sd: "Poesy
> steals away men's judgment
> by her *muthoi*" (taking this crack
> at Homer's sweet-versing)
>
> "and a blind heart
> is most men's portions." Plato
>
> allowed this divisive
> thought to stand, agreeing
>
> that *muthos*
> is false. *Logos*
> isn't — was facts. (TMP 104)

When Olson first developed his concept of projective verse, he envisioned a poetics rooted in the breath and capable of transferring the energy of a poem from poet to listener. With the epic, he discovered a poetic form whose contents were "projective" in size (*mythos*) and "projected" by the poet through speech (*muthos*). To return verse to its origins in *mythos/muthos*, the projective poet strips away the residue of accumulated meanings to select the word in the "rightness of its root" (ML 48).

Conclusion

Sd he:
to dream takes no effort
to think is easy
to act is more difficult
but for a man to act after he has taken thought, this!
is the most difficult thing of all (SW 175)

The first aim of the projective poet is to accurately convey the immediacy of human experience. As Olson first illustrated in "Projective Verse," the poem is a transference of energy that motivates the recipient of that energy to take action. To achieve this, the poet must be attentive to language, selecting each word with an awareness of both its current use and its etymology. As language communities grow and vocabularies expand, words extend to encompass meanings well beyond their original usage. Rather than inventing a new word, an existing word is re-purposed; over time the original meaning of that word becomes obscured. In *Preface to Plato*, Havelock describes how "a vocabulary of the semi-abstract grows out of epic concreteness, not by substituting new words for old, but by altering the syntax in which the old words are found … In this way all abstractions advanced by exploiting the resources of metaphor" (298). Fenollosa concludes that the "whole delicate substance of speech is built upon substrata of metaphor. Abstract terms, pressed by etymology, reveal their ancient roots still embedded in direct action" (54). In a lecture delivered at Goddard College, Olson described the advantages of a new kind of language unburdened by metaphorical baggage:

> I'm suggesting that just such a thing as metaphor has broken down and to some extent we're involved in succeeding in picking up things which will not then behave as metaphors again, but which will put us in touch with what metaphor didn't put us in touch with and never would, because metaphor is caught in a discourse system. (ML 27)

Here, Olson is suggesting that the "substrata of metaphor," which has served as the foundation for communication, is beginning to shift. By digging under the layers of metaphor to expose the roots of language, the poet has the advantage of "picking up" words "as one does new — fresh/first" (SW 28).

Through his study of the etymon, Olson attempts to return the language of poetry to what he believed to be its original state — i.e., prior to the introduction of analytical reasoning, categorization, generalization, and metaphor. For Olson, this state is a more natural one: "The harmony of the universe, and I include man, is not logical, or better, is post-logical, as is the order of any created thing" (SW 55). His poetics, grounded in the breath and the body, favour the oral over the written form. In a letter to Ed Dorn, Olson articulates his *muthocentric* poetics:

> the poem should be lost in the language
> lost in the language / the
> tongue in the mouth, it belongs — there
>
> (Charles Olson Research Collection, University of Connecticut Library at Storrs, Box 17, Folder 215)

In "Human Universe," Olson argued that "we are ourselves both the instrument of discovery and the instrument of definition … if we are to see some of the laws afresh, it is necessary to examine, first, the present condition of the language — and I mean language exactly in its double sense of discrimination (logos) and of shout (tongue)" (SW 53). To return the language of poetry to its physiological root — "the tongue in the mouth" — is to return to the pre-rational (and therefore mythic) mode. Or, as Blaser observes, it may be more accurate to characterize Olson's approach as *post*-rational:

> Olson is a careful and poised modern mind but with this interest in the archaic he follows through on an intuition that has colored the arts of our century. The archaic may be understood as a pre-rational language of being in love with the earth and the heavens, but in its telling in the twentieth century, it is also post-rational. (220)

For Olson, to survive in a post-rational world requires one to accept uncertainty as the norm. Keats referred to this capacity as "Negative Capability" — an idea which Olson used (in conjunction with Heisenberg's uncertainty principle) as a foundation for his personal philosophy (Brown 78). In *The Special View of History,* Olson wrote that to "stay in the condition of things" is to stay "in mysteries, uncertainties, doubts … not to slip into error of trying to fix things by an irritable reaching after fact and reason" (42). Reaching after fact, Olson explains,

> is the experimental method and reaching after reason is logic. And I need not, I should imagine, emphasize that, in these two methodologies, you will recognize the whole previous history of Western man from the 5th Century

> in logic and the whole history of man since the 17th century in physics. (SVH 41)

When Keats defined negative capability he was, for Olson, "talking of the subject, the poet, made object — 'servant' of the poem, made negatively, by obverse, capable" (PVII 36). The new "stance towards reality" first introduced in "Projective Verse" aligns with this Keatsian understanding of the poet as an object among objects, a "re-setting [of] man in his field" (27). To be negatively capable is to be open to uncertainty, to be satisfied with incomplete knowledge, and to live in appropriate proportion to nature. In Olson's universe, indeterminacy rules the cosmos, "Heraclitus is restored," and the "Socratic error" that dominated Western thought for centuries comes to an end (PVII 21).

The atrocities of World War II urged Olson and his generation of poets to imagine new ways of thinking, speaking, and being. Modes of discourse that favoured rationalization, generalization, and abstraction had led to the development of anti-humanist ideologies. Von Hallberg observes that, for Olson, "World War II showed that the certainties of faith, the conviction of one ideology or another, have led [us] astray … Only a restrained examination of what is actually before our eyes will suffice now, after the horrors of global conflict" (185). In the late 1940s and early 1950s, Olson's response to those horrors came in the form of poems like "La Préface" — a poem that captured the "zero hour of the postwar world" standing at the "threshold of a new artistic movement" (Byers 34). "Put war away with time," Olson commands, and "come into space":

> Draw it thus: (   ) 1910 (
> It is not obscure. We are the new born, and there are no flowers.
> Document means there are no flowers
>   and no parenthesis. (SW 160)

Reflecting on what he calls the "summons of Olson's legacy," Bond argues that our need for "negative capability" in a postwar, postmodern world is a reaction to the pressures of pluralism. "It requires a good deal more negative capability to live in a world, and likewise understand it, where there are degrees of truth-value, where the real is a pressure that exerts itself in partial eclipse or partial distortion" (Bond 174). For Olson, a new "stance towards reality" is required to successfully navigate a pluralistic universe characterized by diversity and driven by change. Olson's writing foregrounds his desire to both understand and instruct his *polis* on how to cope with this uncertainty, regardless

of whether the broader public was ready to adopt these methods. “Olson was after the depth of the world to which, as I have said, we all respond, though the modern public culture refuses to think of it” (Blaser 220).

Hassan describes the indeterminacy that pervades postmodern culture as a phenomenon that encompasses “all manner of ambiguities, ruptures, and displacements affecting knowledge and society” (168). Perhaps Olson is correct in his conviction that only the negatively capable can thrive in an indeterminate world. For Altieri, the promise of postmodern poetry lies in its ability to evoke a new “mode of consciousness,” one that “seems necessary now to the survival of the planet” (636). Olson expressed a similar perspective when he wrote “there is nothing which belongs merely to the privacy of one individual’s feeling. All origination is private. But what has been thus originated publicly pervades the world” (PVII 21). Olson described Williams’ choice to include the text of “Projective Verse” within his *Autobiography* as “one of those utterly beautiful examples of ‘turning together’” (ML 305). By “turning together,” he may have been thinking of the Latin root of the word “verse” — *vertere*, to turn — originally referring to the turning of a plow in a field when it reaches the field’s edge. “Conversation,” he explained, “really means ‘to turn, in turn with each other’” (ML 305). In considering the goals of Olson and his contemporaries, Altieri admits that these poets “do reach depths of experience they share with others,” but what this leaves us with is often little more than “a pathetic band of the saved — a band united by perspectives it can find no way of mediating into the cultural mainstream and without a coherent public philosophy to combat the mainstream” (636).

Olson opened “Projective Verse” by rhetorically questioning the relevance of poetry in postwar America. If verse is “to go ahead” and “to be of *essential* use” it must “catch up” (SW 15). What verse was expected to catch up *with* is not specified, but Olson’s pronouncement suggests that, like Pound, he was sensitive to poetry’s diminished position in the cultural mainstream. But Olson was more optimistic about the future of poetry than his predecessor. In his study of the etymon, he discovered that language can and does evolve in response to changes in values and perspectives. As an art form rooted in the concrete and immediate experiences shared by human beings, perhaps postmodern poetry is uniquely suited to thrive in a post-rational world.

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