CHARLES OLSON AND THE (POST)MODERN Episteme

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Charles Olson and the (Post)Modern *Episteme*

by

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Abstract

This thesis argues that Charles Olson's place within the American poetic tradition is more than simply being either an imitator of a certain type of modernity or a catalyst for a radical postmodernity. Olson's designation as a postmodern figure must therefore be seen in a new and different way than has been established thus far in Olson criticism. I will argue that Charles Olson's oeuvre is best understood through a reevaluation of his position as a nexus between the modern and postmodern periods. Instead of seeing the modern as a separate totality from the postmodern, this thesis will investigate the division of these two entities in terms of Michel Foucault's conception of the *episteme*. Here the boundaries between the underlying sets of rules that govern the discourse of the modern *episteme* and the postmodern *episteme* become less a solid foundation for placing Olson neatly within the American literary tradition than the polemical separation that these terms actually imply. In pursuing this course of inquiry, I intend to establish a greater realization of the dynamic nature of postmodern American avant-garde poetry through Charles Olson's critique of modern discourse.

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Chapter 1

1.1 Charles Olson: From Bureaucrat to Poet

The first realization that one comes to when confronted by Charles Olson's poetry and prose is the diversity of his interests, stemming from an almost limitless source of literary, philosophical, historical, and pedagogical knowledge. Similarly, Olson's biographical history is as diverse as the knowledge he pursued during his poetic career. After dropping out of his PhD program in American Studies at Harvard, Olson had a brief career in the political administration of Roosevelt's Washington, where he was the Assistant Chief of the Foreign Language Section in the Office of War Information. However, Olson resigned from this position in protest over the then director's policies. After his career as a Washington bureaucrat, Olson became the first American poet to embrace the term "postmodern" (Butterick "Postmodern" 4-6), and became rector of the experimental Black Mountain College (1951-6), professor at both the University of Connecticut and the State University of New York (SUNY) at Buffalo, and participated in Timothy Leary's LSD experiments between December of 1960 to February of 1961 (*Muthologos 1*: 20). Olson was born in Worcester, Massachusetts, in 1910, to an Irish-American mother and a Swedish-American father, and perhaps because of his background felt marginalised from the Puritan aristocracy that dominated mainstream Massachusetts literary and social life. A radicalism would eventually manifest itself in Olson's poetry and prose as a response to established tradition in society, poetry, and thought. Olson would

be the first American poet to accept and use the term "postmodern" (Allen and Friedlander 10), and his call to others to write "projective verse" embraced what Allen and Butterick have called the "idiosyntactic" flexibility that enabled postmodern American poetry to oppose the "centrist values" of "unity," "significance," and "linearity" that characterised the formalism of the poetics of the New Criticism (Allen and Butterick 10; Hoover xxvi-xxvii). Olson was educated at Wesleyan, Yale, and Harvard, which he left after completing his course work towards a PhD in American Studies, without having submitted a thesis. He died on January 10, 1970 in New York Hospital after a brief battle with liver cancer. He was immediately recognised by *The New York Times* as a major American postwar poet (Christensen 21). His library from his house in Gloucester, Massachusetts, was purchased by the University of Connecticut and is now the Charles Olson Archive of the University of Connecticut Library System in Storrs, Connecticut.

Olson's early academic interests centred on Herman Melville and *Moby Dick*; the title of his Master's thesis was "The Growth of Herman Melville, Prose Writer and Poetic Thinker." During his PhD program at Harvard, Olson decided not to submit his dissertation although it became the basis for his first major publication, *Call Me Ishmael*, subsequently published in 1947. In 1949, Olson received a Guggenheim Fellowship for his work on Melville and published a collection of poetry, entitled *Y & X*. This publication led to an invitation to join the avant-garde Black Mountain College as theatre program director in 1949. Olson would eventually become the College Rector from 1951-1956, and it is through his stint at Black Mountain that he came to be a major influence upon a

whole generation of American avant-garde writers. The year following *Y & X*, Olson published "Projective Verse," which "called everything to order" (Duncan 515) for what would become known as American postmodern poetry. This work focussed the raw energies of the new avant-garde poetry around "the line of Pound and Williams" (Allen and Butterick 10) instead of Eliot and Auden. From 1950 until his death in 1970, Olson wrote an interesting series of polemical essays and participated in numerous interviews, the most notable of which are collected in *Human Universe*, *Muthologos,* and *The Special View of History*. In addition to these essays and interviews, there are also over a hundred shorter poems in *The Collected Poems of Charles Olson: Excluding the Maximus Poems*, and one major long poem in the tradition of Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* and Ezra Pound's *Cantos*, consisting of over six hundred pages. This major work, known as *The Maximus Poems* or more commonly, *Maximus*, contains seven separate books of poems, published while Olson was alive (*Maximus I, II, III*) and posthumously (*Maximus IV, V, VI, and Maximus Vol. 3*).

A characteristic of Olson's writing, whether prose or poetry, is his technique of imparting as much of his vast and eclectic knowledge into his work as possible. However, much of what he includes is referred to in a passing and often esoteric manner, as if he assumed the reader would be acquainted with his many diverse areas of knowledge. Although allusion is a common modernist poetic practice, one can find fault in Olson's tendency to complicate his argument. However, one must realize that much of this difficulty arises from his idiosyncratic tendency to quote directly from his personal

conversations, and from his insertion of remote factual data on various and very specific areas of history, grammar, philosophy, and science into his poetry and prose. Moreover, Olson rarely documents his sources, and when he does they are not always entirely accurate. Thanks primarily to the dedicated work of the late George F. Butterick, and to a lesser extent Donald Allen,[1] it is now possible to trace a vast amount of Olson's sources. Regardless of his deliberate avoidance of documenting, one can view Olson as an American writer who rejected elements of Western – particularly American – civilization that he felt were innately wrong, but his relationship to the American tradition is much more complicated than this, lying at the heart of his position in the epistemic break between the modern and the postmodern.

1.2 Charles Olson and the (Post)Modern *Episteme*

Charles Olson stands at an interesting point in American literary history, beginning his public career in 1950, with the publication of "Projective Verse," and thereafter becoming the first significant figure of American postmodern poetry. However, Olson's designation as a postmodern figure must be seen in a new and different way than has been established thus far in Olson criticism. Often, when critics discuss Olson's postmodernist tendencies they do so by positing the idea that the modern period, generally acknowledged

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[1]See George F. Butterick's *A Guide to the Maximus Poems of Charles Olson* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), and also the notes to *Collected Prose: Charles Olson*, ed. Donald Allen and Benjamin Friedlander (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

as falling between 1890-1945, and the postmodern period, 1945 to the present, are two distinct and separate spatio-temporal spheres of knowledge (Butterick, "Postmodern" 4). These studies posit the notion that the two time frames are more like two monoliths that have little connection to one another except that one, the modern, gave rise to and necessitated the birth of the other, the postmodern. It is as if all the components that created the modern period stopped at the moment the postmodern period replaced it. However, divisions in aesthetic approaches to literature, philosophy, and culture in general are often more arbitrary in nature than the distinction between the terms "modern" and "postmodern" represent. In this view of criticism Olson has been seen as either an anti-modernist, a figure who ushered in the death of the modern tradition, as in Paul Bove's Heideggerean treatment of Olson in *Destructive Poetics: Heidegger and Modern American Poetry* (1980), or, conversely, Olson has been described as an inferior imitator of major modernist figures, such as Pound and Williams, as in Marjorie Perloff's "Charles Olson and the Inferior Predecessors: 'Projective Verse' Revisited," and, most infamously, James Dickey's section on Olson in *Babel to Byzantium: Poets & Poetry Now (1979)*. Unfortunately, Olson is often presented as either a radical American poet and thinker or as an insignificant imitator. I argue in this thesis that Charles Olson's place within the American poetic tradition is more precarious than simply being either an imitator of a certain type of modernity or a catalyst for a radical postmodernity. In pursuing this course of inquiry, I intend to establish a greater realization of the dynamic nature of postmodern American avant-garde poetry, with Olson as an example. The figure of Charles Olson and

his position within the American poetic tradition become more visibly problematic than has previously been acknowledged in studies of American postmodern poetry generally, and in the criticism that deals with Charles Olson particularly.

Charles Olson's problematical position within American literary history is best understood through a reevaluation of Olson's position as nexus between the modern and the postmodern periods. Instead of seeing the modern as a separate totality from the postmodern, we should understand the division of these two entities in terms of Michel Foucault's conception of the *episteme*. Here, the boundaries between the underlying set of rules that govern the discourse of the modern *episteme* and the postmodern *episteme* become less a solid foundation or "given" for placing Olson neatly within the American literary tradition than the polemical separation that these terms actually imply.

In *The Order of Things* (1970) and *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1972), Foucault questions the foundations of our Western conception of knowledge. In order to analyse our epistemological tradition, Foucault directs his attention to how the discourse that contributed to certain modes of thought became accepted as "true," such as Platonic conceptions of epistemology, and then was unquestioningly disseminated as such. Foucault criticizes how, for example, an ancient Greek philosopher like Plato became the dominant figure in the philosophical tradition as opposed to the more marginalised figures of Heraclitus or even Parmenides. Foucault questions how and why certain figures became accepted and others did not. For him, the matter requires an investigation of the history surrounding the discursive structures of our knowledge. In *The Archaeology of*

Knowledge Foucault describes the knowledge tradition we have come to blindly accept as the

> history of those shady philosophies that haunt literature, art, the sciences, law, ethics and even man's daily life; the history of those age-old themes that are never crystalized in a rigorous and individual system, but which have formed the spontaneous philosophy of those who did not philosophize . . . .The analysis of opinions rather than of knowledge, of errors rather than of truth, of types of mentality rather than forms of thought
>
> (Foucault 136-7).

Foucault's "archeological method" of inquiry seeks to expose the "shady philosophies" that "haunt" the history of knowledge; Olson's own investigations into areas such as Hopi language, Mayan hieroglyphs, Whitehead, non-Euclidean geometry, and pre-Socratic philosophy, seem to mirror Foucault's archaeological method, particularly in his desire to uncover thought structures and cultures that have been covered over by the dominance of western culture and Greek philosophy.

Just as Foucault was searching for alternate methods to accepted structures of knowledge, so was Olson. In his essay entitled "The Poet as Archaeologist: Archeologist of Morning," Matthew Corrigan describes Olson's archaeological method as a search for "origins of life and language" that existed before "*Logos* got hold of the mind and twisted it out of the context of the body . . .; a state where language and event are coincident . . .; where speech (syntax) names things, gives way to the actual knots and hesitancies of experience . . ."(273). Corrigan is describing Olson's investigation of what Foucault would see as events in the history of knowledge that came to form part of a period's *episteme*. An *episteme*, in Foucault's use of the term, becomes the "epistemological field"

governing the "sets of discursive structures as a whole within which a culture thinks" in a given period (Foucault, *The Order of Things* xxiii; Mills 56; Sheridan 209).

The notion of *episteme* was not foreign to Olson. In fact, in his "Review of Eric A. Havelock's *Preface to Plato,*" Olson describes the advance of post-Socratic philosophy as being "false" and "invented" (*Collected Prose* 355-58). More important to Olson is Plato's objection to the poetry of Homer and Hesiod, which was intentionally done "in order [to] better himself [and to] support his own invention of another *episteme*, of his belief in a dialectic of Socrates' order . . ."(355). The term *episteme* is Greek for "understanding," "knowledge," "science" (456). In the editor's notes to *Collected Prose: Charles Olson* (1997), Donald Allen and Benjamin Friedlander trace Olson's view of the term to a recorded interview from 1963 entitled "Under the Mushroom," which was subsequently collected in *Muthologos I*, a collection of interviews and essays published in 1978 (456). Here Olson discusses the word *episteme* and how it came to be epistemology or "[h]ow do you know. Or the belief that we – that there is knowing. And it was invented by a man named Plato. *Episteme* is his invention and it's one of the most dangerous things in the world – is the idea that there is such a thing as knowledge" (*Muthologos* 1: 29). Olson and Foucault both question the givenness of the term *episteme*, but Foucault accepts the term as an arbitrary designation of the thought structures – and the discourse that created these thought structures – that contributed to a certain period of knowledge, which we now designate as "Classical," "Renaissance," "Modern," and even "Postmodern."

A main point that Foucault insists upon in his archaeological investigation of knowledge is that when one discursive formation [such as the modern *episteme*] gives way to another [such as the postmodern] completely new objects, concepts, and theoretical choices do not necessarily appear. To the contrary "a number of elements remain unchanged" and become part of the new discursive formations that characterize the *episteme* (Sheridan 109). When one *episteme* gives way to another the latter is not necessarily a completely "new" entity. However, what does occur in the transition from one *episteme* to another is known as an epistemic break or rupture. And it is in this light that we should consider Charles Olson's "postmodern advance" (Butterick, "Postmodern" 4). When Olson's most famous essay "Projective Verse" was published in 1950 the modern *episteme* did not simply evaporate without a trace. Elements of the modern were carried over into Olson's poetics, but in such a way that his reformulation of these concepts became uniquely postmodern.

Much of Foucault's concept of the epistemic break can be traced back to his philosophy teachers, Gaston Bachelard and Georges Canguilheim. Bachelard's study in the history of science led him to the idea that epistemological breaks, or epistemic breaks in Foucault's synthesis of Bachelard's thought, do not just simply mark the rejection of past thought structures, but also preserve these structures through their reformulation into a new and broader context. More precisely, the discursive structures of the previous *episteme* are "replaced by generalizations that reject them as unconditionally correct but preserve them as correct under certain restricted conditions" (Gutting 20). There are

similarities to Pound and Williams in Charles Olson's poetics; these notions of modernity (which will be dealt with in greater detail later in this chapter) are what can be seen as being "preserved under restricted conditions" in Olson's poetry (Gutting 20). Olson does not, however, accept all of Pound's notions of the poetic, nor does he accept all of Williams', but similarities do exist. Olson is not simply walking in the footsteps of Pound and Williams. Olson is not entirely derivative of his influences, as Perloff and Dickey would lead us to believe, but he was *influenced* by them. To say that Olson was entirely derivative would be like saying that the postmodern is entirely derivative of the modern.

In his *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1984), a seminal investigation of the concepts that define postmodernism, Jean-Francois Lyotard describes the postmodern in duplicitous terms. The postmodern writer, he says, does not create a work governed by the principle that preestablished rules exist (Lyotard 81). Rather, familiar categories of the modern or the known are thrown out in favour of new rules and categories, and these new "'rules'" determine the work's postmodern nature. In other words, "the artist and the writer, then, are working without rules in order to formulate the rules . . ." (Lyotard 81). Lyotard does not see postmodernism as the "end" of modernism, but as the birth or "nascent state" of what is truly modern (79). Postmodern poetry is more than the continuation of modern poetry: postmodern poetry is characterized by a "new formal and syntactic flexibility" that signifies a new attitude toward self, mind, nature, society, and the "inherited assumptions" of modernity (Allen and Butterick 12). One can see T. S. Eliot's use of Tradition, as an acceptance of the necessity for the

givenness of tradition in the construction of poetry. Eliot does not see the possibility of an individual identity or even meaning without Tradition. In his famous 1919 essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent," Eliot even goes so far as to say that one can be imprisoned by the lack of tradition, and so one must therefore acquire it by working diligently toward incorporating it within one's work (Fredman 10). Clearly, Eliot does not easily fit into the Lyotardian definition of postmodern as inventing new rules that do not necessarily agree or cohere with the modern tradition (Lyotard 80). Abandoning the modernist notion that accepts certain elements of tradition, such as the New Critics who followed in Eliot's path, the postmodern prefers "formal freedom or openness as opposed to academic, formalistic, strictly rhymed and metered verse" (Allen and Butterick 9). Olson prefers these postmodern notions of poetry to Eliot's "scholastic mind" (Olson, *Selected Writings* 26). However, Olson unabashedly favours the work of Pound and Williams, two decidedly modernist poets, in the same essay that he disparages Eliot and the New Critics (15). In comparison with Eliot, Olson appears to be postmodern, but does his alignment with Pound and Williams contradict his position as a postmodern writer who formulates new rules of writing?

It would be useful at this point in the discussion to look at Olson's role in the epistemic break that occurred in American poetry after World War Two. In her book *Discourse* (1997), Sara Mills correctly recognizes that in Foucault's conception of discursive structures there are periodic and chaotically random "discontinuous developments" within the discursive structure of the *episteme* (Mills 58). However, when

she goes on to describe the "discontinuity of discourse" that occurs at the moment(s) of the epistemic break (there is often more than one single event that signals the end of one *episteme* and the beginning of another) she oversimplifies the dynamism that Foucault's conception contains. When Mills says that "in fact intellectual history should be seen as simply a series of lurches from one system of classification and representation to another" (59) she is blindly accepting an overtly simplistic notion of the *episteme* as a neat monolithic entity that seamlessly morphs into the next. The discursive evolutions that characterize an epistemic break are non-linear, and are therefore more like the violent smashing of atoms that randomly combine continuities from the old and the new. This concept may be better viewed through the works of contemporaries of Foucault, particularly Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari.

In their work *What is Philosophy?* (1994) Deleuze and Guattari describe the concept of a thing or "monument" becoming other while remaining the same due to its constant future-oriented nature (164, 175-7). This paradoxical concept is explained through the example of Herman Melville's novel *Moby Dick*, where Ahab, in his obsessive quest to destroy the white whale, actually becomes more and more like the whale itself, until he is eventually destroyed by his own obsession to possess or become, from a Deleuzean standpoint, the white whale. In Ahab's orientation toward the future destruction of Moby Dick he is "becoming-whale" but he still maintains his own "Ahab-ness" during the pursuit that concludes with his ultimate demise. In philosophical terms this example of becoming other while remaining the same is similar to Bachelard's and

Canguilheim's epistemological break within the history of the development of knowledge, where the break in a particular method of inquiry signalled a "new" thought-structure that synthesized features of the previous method, as well as completely new ones, into a coherent, "new" form: thus becoming other while remaining the same. Therefore, in terms of the delimitation between the modern and postmodern, the modern *episteme* became the postmodern *episteme* while retaining similarities that belong to both. What matters is not that modern concepts exist in the postmodern, but *how* they are used by postmodernity. In the next section I consider how Olson synthesized these notions of the modern and the postmodern to develop postmodern, projective verse.

It is, ultimately, not fair to Olson's project to represent him simply as a derivation of another poet or group of poets that preceded him. This kind of naive criticism only sees temporality and ideas in a linear fashion. The breath and scope of Olson's work is too vast and diverse to treat him so simplistically. The complexity of his work and his position in the transition from the modern to the postmodern is also too complicated to discuss Olson as belonging to one side of history or another. Olson is not either a holdover from the modern period (like Robert Lowell, for example) or a postmodernist. He is, however, postmodern in that Lyotardian sense: Olson signifies the beginning of a modernism that is not dependent upon previous movements as modern writers and poets like Eliot were. However, Olson's postmodernism, like the *episteme* it partakes in, is complicated and even at times paradoxical. Olson's postmodernism is not principally governed by preestablished rules but is instead a search for new rules of poetry and thought. This search can be

clearly seen in his poetry and prose, particularly in its appearance and content. In order to grasp the significance of Charles Olson in relation to the American literary tradition one must begin with an analysis of how he arrived at his poetics. This process necessarily includes the poets and thinkers who influenced Olson's own thought, as well as the criticism that has critiqued the nature of these influences on his work.

1.3 Olson and American Literature

Despite what one critic has referred to as Olson's poetry being similar to "Whitmanesque prose," there has been very little written on Olson's poetic connections to Walt Whitman (Corrigan 275). In terms of their shared sense of the spoken or oral orientation of their work, open form poetic style, and the ambiguous presence of their poetic personae (Whitman's cosmic "I" and Olson's Maximus) Whitman and Olson can be said to share many poetic techniques. However, there is simply not enough space in this thesis to argue their poetic congruency effectively, especially considering their experiments with the American long poem. Interestingly, there have been several studies on Olson's affinity with predominantly prose oriented writers from the nineteenth century, such as Stephen Fredman's Thoreauvian analysis of Olson in *The Grounding of American Poetry: Charles Olson and the Emersonian Tradition* (1993) and Edward Halsey Foster's *Understanding Black Mountain Poets* (1995), which also casts Olson and his contemporaries, Robert Creeley and Robert Duncan, in an Emersonian-transcendentalist light.

Although the influence of Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman on later American writers cannot be understated, the most important nineteenth century influence in American literature on Olson's aesthetic was Herman Melville and his *Moby Dick*. As mentioned, Olson wrote his Master's thesis on Melville, and his first major work, *Call Me Ishmael* (1947), was based on his unsubmitted Doctoral thesis. Not much noteworthy work has been done on the earliest of Olson's works. However, the main thrust of Paul Christensen's *Charles Olson: Call Him Ishmael* (1979) is aimed at reading Olson's later essays and poetry through the conceptions of space that Olson posits in *Call Me Ishmael*. Olson begins *Call Me Ishmael* with the declaration that he "take[s] SPACE to be the central fact to man born in America, from Folsom cave to now. I spell it large because it comes large here. Large, and without mercy" (*Collected Prose* 17). Indeed, Olson feels that "it is geography . . . . [t]hat made the first American story . . ."(17). Christensen conducts a very thorough investigation on the importance of *Moby Dick*'s influence on Olson's thought, particularly Olson's conception of space, and the significance Melville's novel holds for the concepts he was later to develop in essays such as "Projective Verse," and more obviously in the collection *Human Universe* (1967). However, the study focuses too much on aligning Olson's concept of space, particularly the ideas of the way westward expansion formulated a certain American conception of the spatio-temporal realm and man's relationship to it, to the formal appearance of Olson's projective poetry. For example, Christensen discusses the positioning of Olson's verse in terms of a tension of movement along vertical and horizontal axes. Of the movement he says "[l]ike a

staircase, these strophes move simultaneously down and across the page as the thought tends toward deeper introspection in an effort to resolve the conflict within the thought" (Christensen, notes between 112-3).

This is an interesting approach to Olson's prosodic positioning. However, it is highly doubtful that Olson formulated his poetics this way, especially not in "an effort to resolve the conflict" of his thought. Olson created his poetry according to "composition by field" which attempted to preserve the unresolved tension of open form poetry. In "Projective Verse," Olson says "[t]he objects which occur at every given moment of composition [of the poem] . . . [must be] made to *hold*, and to hold exactly inside the content and the context of the poem . . ." (*Selected Writings* 30). Furthermore, for Olson and other postmodern poets, particularly his fellow Black Mountain poet and friend Robert Creeley, the form that the content of the poem takes is not as important as the content itself. To resolve the "tension" of the content of the poem, as Christensen implies, would result in a "closing" of Olson's poetic aim, and this is too similar to the formalist poetry under review by the New Critics. Unfortunately, this is an error that Christensen himself cannot avoid making. Olson never intentionally "closes" or resolves the content of his poetry in the manner of New Critical formalism as simplistically as Christensen depicts. Olson's poetry is much more self-consciously hermeneneutical than that.

The historical time period in which Olson was writing puts him in a transitional state between two eras – he is not entirely modern or completely postmodern in his poetic orientation. Moreover, the concept or notion of an American tradition is itself open to

critique. In the way that Olson is both postmodern and, in certain ways, modern, his rebellion against tradition is a common feature of a strong anti-traditionalism present in the foundations of the American tradition. For example, in *The Grounding of American Poetry*, Fredman asserts that this anti-traditionalism is built into the fabric of the American idea itself. America embodies a "spirit of anti-traditionalism" because it generally distrusts "tradition" and "authority," partly because of its strong belief in the values of "freedom and independence" (8). This ideological standpoint results in the sacrifice of the "supportive function that foundational myths supply" (8). As a result, American poets often face the need to create their own idiosyncratic foundation from which to speak.

The question of groundlessness has always been a part of the American literary tradition. After the Revolutionary War, America, and in turn American literature, renounced their ties to Europe. Furthermore, American literature has always been visibly different in its orientation from its European counterparts, particularly since the nineteenth century. This can easily be seen by comparing a poem from Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* to a poem by his historical contemporary Robert Browning. The need for American writers to cultivate their own ground, particularly since the nineteenth century, and continuing in an even more radical fashion to the present, is a symptom of the "postmodern condition" that Lyotard describes as "working without rules in order to formulate the rules" (81). The preference for formal freedom and the desire to be free from a constraining tradition is a strong part of the American identity.

In *A Quick Graph* (1970), Robert Creeley, Olson's closest intellectual supporter

and partner in the postmodern projective verse project, describes the groundlessness that American poets must face in order to create their art. American poets "perhaps more than any group of people upon the earth at this moment, have had to imagine and thereby to *make* that reality which they are then given to live in. It is as though they had to *realize* the world anew" (65). Creeley's view is actually a major theme of the American tradition itself. Indeed, each successive generation of American poets has always sought to see the world in a new light. Creeley's desire to "*realize* the world anew" has ingrained itself as the "central preoccupation of American poetry" (Fredman 3). Fredman uses the figures of William Carlos Williams and T. S. Eliot to illustrate the complexity that surrounds the issue of American poets' acceptance or denial of tradition. Because of the dual nature of American tradition, it is as common to accept a formulation of the tradition as it is to deny that one exists. William Carlos Williams's conception of the tradition and Eliot's conception of the tradition are both "revisionary" in their approach (Fredman 17). However, Williams' revision consists of an emphasis on the personal rewriting of the tradition based on the idea of Emersonian self-reliance whereas Eliot finds the groundlessness of American tradition imprisoning, and so advocates acquiring the ground of tradition through diligent synthesis of other traditions.

As with Eliot's presentation of tradition in "Tradition and the Individual Talent," William Carlos Williams in his *In the American Grain* defends the individual construction of a poetic ground or foundation. However, Williams is not interested in previously established notions of anything: "No opinion can be trusted; even facts may be nothing but

a printer's error . . . . If we cannot make a man live again when he is gone, it is boorish to imprison him dead within some narrow definition . . . . It's lies, such history, and dangerous. Just there may lie our hope for the future, beneath that stone of predjudice" (*In the American Grain* 190). Just because a writer or idea once existed before this does not mean that each successive generation of writers should ignore the past. Rather, like Eliot, the writer or idea exists, in Williams' conception, as a building block or inspiration for a new writer's formulation of his or her own ground. Williams saw much of himself in the way Poe attempted to "clear the *GROUND*" of American tradition from literary colonialism (*In The American Grain* 216). For both Williams and Eliot, the past exists in order to be used or ignored, but not to be imitated; literary history, even American literary history, is not there as a repository of ideological stagnancy.

This notion that Williams expounds in *In The American Grain* is what Philip Kuberski refers to as a "recurrent pattern in American culture"; it is a pattern that attempts to find "authenticity" and "establish a new discourse as an old one" by confirming that change is "a return to the oldest truths" (175). Kuberski sees American literature as containing both a "radically 'wild'" and "mythic" "double vision" that inscribes each successive generation of American writers (175). Kuberski's conception of the American literary tradition explains why a writer such as Charles Olson can be seen as being simultaneously a radical wild "other" within a new movement in American poetry and "deeply traditional" in his "classic American revolt against the formalist poetry of the New Critical poets who created a style that concentrated on the seventeenth-century aspects of

Eliot's and Pound's poetry . . ." (Kuberski 178). Although Kuberski recognises the doubleness that is essential to the ideology of the American grounding of tradition, he does not actually retain this doubleness in his depiction of Olson's poetics. He too falls victim to the "derivative" school of Olson critics, with statements like this: "like Pound's, Olson's poetics are conservative documents" (186). Kuberski's error lies in his misconception of the "conservative" character of Olson's poetics. Olson is not "conservative" in the way that Eliot is in regard to tradition, where "conservativism" is seen as a dissatisfaction with (post)modernity's "radical rejection of the authority of tradition" (Fredman 19). Olson's poetry and prose may inscribe itself in a "field of old texts" but only in the same manner that "an archaeologist might open up a site" (Riddel 179). Olson's purpose in using Pound and Williams as foundations for his own poetic ground is not in order to "sanctify old texts or uncover their origin" like New Critical poets, but rather to "decipher the crux that led to their writing" (Riddel 184). We can see that by continuing with the metaphor of archaeology, and relating it to the "archaeological" method of Michel Foucault, Olson is investigating how and in what form modern discursive structures can take part in the emergence, insertion, and functioning of his own poetics within the American tradition. Olson's use of, and similarity to, his modern predecessors shows how he used a method more akin to the "archaeology" of Foucault than to imitation. Olson's dynamic synthesis of the American tradition of anti-traditionalism places him on a shifting and fluctuating ground. He is at once part of the Williams strain of the tradition and a part from it. Just as the American tradition seems to

be rooted in a notion of always becoming "new," so must Olson become "new." To what extent does Olson differ from the modernists in order to achieve his "new" formulation of American poetry?

When the New Critics advocated the authenticity of adhering to a tradition they essentially accepted a conservative approach to the classical tradition. Although Ezra Pound's poems often take the appearance of an "avant-garde" or "non-traditional" form, as in *The Cantos*, they still rely heavily on what Charles Doria refers to as two "ordinary classical forms," the "encyclopedia" and the "lyric" (Doria 134). Doria goes on to say that Olson's use of the classical tradition was the "opposite" of Pound's because Olson was much more willing to "challenge," "discredit," and "remove" it as "an institutional roadblock" (134-35). Doria is likely right in this assertion. For example, a common theme of Olson's poetry is his violent criticism of Socratic epistemological discourse: "the Greeks appear to have invented [a discourse] that has hugely intermit[ted] our participation in our own experience, and so prevent[s] discovery" (*Selected Writings* 54). Olson is also highly critical of what most would view as traditional notions of poetical composition, such as rhyme scheme and metre: "[i]t would do no harm, as an act of contention 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 . . ." (*Selected Writings* 18). For Doria, Olson's reliance upon Pound as a poetical influence was mostly in providing an example for his own positioning within American literature. Robert Duncan, the third most influential Black Mountain poet along with Olson and Creeley, would agree

with this statement, "Toward the end Charles saw where [the postmodern poetic movement] was, but *initially* he wanted to be like Ezra Pound, a mover; and he was a mover, of course . . . . projective verse really called us" (Duncan 517, italics added). Although it is now "commonplace" for literary historians to see Olson as part of the Pound-Williams line, due, no doubt, in part to Olson's own admonition of them in his poetry and prose (*Selected Writings* 15 and *Collected Poems* 172), Olson had suspicions about the "advance in discourse which Pound and Williams . . . led the rest of us on to" (*Human Universe* 63). It is these suspicions that led Olson to acquire his own poetic identity through projective verse.

Arguably the most important thing Olson took from Ezra Pound was not directly from Pound's own poetics but from the poetics of Ernest Fenellosa's *The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry*, which Pound edited. It is from Pound's version of Fenellosa that Olson arrived at an important notion of his projective verse: the kinetics or energy of verse. In Fenellosa's work, Olson read concepts of the latent force behind words. Statements such as "one action in nature promotes another; thus the agent and the object are secretly verbs"; "[t]he transferrence of force from agent to object . . . occupy time. Therefore, a reproduction of them in imagination requires the same temporal order"; and most importantly, "[t]he sentence form was forced upon primitive men by nature itself . . . .[a]ll truth has to be expressed in sentences because all truth is the transference of power. The type of sentence in nature is a flash of lightning" (Fenellosa 29, 7, 12). The presence of Fenellosa rather than Pound is more blatantly manifested in Olson's most

famous piece, "Projective Verse": "the *kinetics* of the thing. A poem is energy transferred from where the poet got it . . . . the poem itself must, at all points, be an energy-discharge . . . . yet an energy which is peculiar to verse alone" (*Selected Writings* 16). In his "La Torre," Olson's verse is clearly rooted in Fenollosa:

> To begin again. Lightning
> is an axe, transfer
> of force subject to object is
> order: destroy!
>
> To destroy
> is to start again, is a factor of
> sun, fire is
> When the sun is out, dowsed
>
> (*Collected Poems* 189)

This is obviously quite different in appearance and tone from one of Pound's more "avant-garde" passages from the *Cantos*. For example "Canto 95":

> Benton: when there was plenty of metal
> Van Buren already desmearing Talleyrand
> J.A. "the whole people (devaluation)."
> . . . .
> Leukos Leukothoe
> White foam, a sea-gull
>
> (Pound, *Cantos* 644)

Although the appearance of Pound's poem is more "postmodern" than other poems in the New Critical inventory, it does not contain the revolutionary avant-garde message that Olson's "La Torre" does. "La Torre" is an overt call to remove the "institutional roadblock" that the classical tradition became for poets like Eliot and Pound (Doria 135). Olson is violently asserting the destruction of a teleological grounding for his poetics. The

tower of tradition must be broken so that new poetic formulations can arise. Olson is advocating the destruction of preestablished rules so that he can establish new rules for creating poetry. He is clearing the ground of an American literary tradition for himself in a way that cannot be dismissed as derivative of Pound.

Although, understandably, much has been written about the affinities between Pound and Olson, it is helpful to consider how Olson's synthesis of Fenellosa actually moved him away from being what some have termed derivative of Pound. There are also obvious links between Olson and Williams, but much of this can be related to their shared approach to the American literary Tradition. Perhaps the most obvious presence of Williams in Olson's poetics is Olson's internalization of Williams' dictum "no ideas but in things" (*Paterson* 6). Olson's formulation of this concept can be seen in his attack upon Eliot. Olson criticized Eliot's reliance upon over-intellectualization of images and concepts within his poetry, but Olson's poetry can also be accused of possessing this trait. In light of Harold Bloom's *Anxiety of Influence* (1973), it can be said that Olson's anxiety over the enormous influence of Eliot upon modern literature forced Olson to divorce himself from Eliot in order to establish his originality within American (post)modern literature. At this point in the discussion it would be useful to compare excerpts from Eliot's *The Wasteland* to Olson's "Kingfishers" in order to see their similarities:

> What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow
> Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man,
> You cannot say or guess, for you know only
> A heap of broken images, where the sun beats,
> And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief,

And the dry stone no sound of water.
. . . . . .
I will show you fear in a handful of dust.
Frisch weht der Wind
Der Heimat zu
Mein Irisch Kind,
Wo weilest du?
"You gave me hyacinths first a year ago;
"They called me the hyacinth girl."
. . . . . .
Looking into the heart of light, the silence.
Oed' und leer das Meer.

(Eliot, *The Wasteland and other Writings* 39)

Eliot juxtaposes images without any apparent logical continuity between the poem's dense imagery and disjointed content, whether expressed in familiar or unfamiliar language. Olson also relies upon these disassociative techniques in "The Kingfishers," but he is more conscious in his refusal to adhere to the left-hand margin as a foundation in the positioning of his verse:

I thought of the E on the stone, and of what Mao said
la lumiere"
but the kingfisher
de l'aurore"
but the kingfisher flew west
est devant nous!
he got the color of his breast
from the heat of the setting sun!
. . . . . .
But not these things were the factors. Not the birds.
The legends are
legends. Dead, hung up indoors, the kingfisher
will not indicate a favoring wind,
or avert the thunderbolt.
. . . . . .
Mao concluded:

nous devons
nous lever
et agir!
(Olson, *Collected Poems* 87)

Although at a glance Olson's poetry does not seem so strikingly different from Eliot's poetry, it should be realized that Olson was reacting to his anxiety over Eliot's enormous influence on modern literature. Indeed, Olson would view Eliot's poetry as too divorced from its own images. For Olson, Eliot's problem is that his poetry is too rooted in the ego-centric conception of mind to be projective: "Eliot is not projective. . . . it could be argued that it is because Eliot has stayed inside the non-projective that he fails . . ." (*Selected Writings* 26). Olson intentionally contests Eliot in order to render him less intimidating, and, as a result, Olson commits what Bloom calls an act of misprision, a misreading of past poets that results in the young or "new" poet's non-derivative voice (*Anxiety* 30). Although more akin to Pound than Eliot, Olson also derides Pound for his ego-centred poetry: "Ez's epic solves problems by his ego . . ." (*Selected Writings* 5) and "so much of Ez is, the 19th century [ego] stance" (83). However, in his critique of New Critical poetry Olson often avoids direct attacks upon Pound in favour of Eliot, and Olson's aversion to Eliot often becomes a theme for his poetry as well as his prose. Moreover, Olson's disagreement with Eliot and his favouring of Pound and Williams is actually more a difference of degree than of kind. In "ABCs" Olson states the position of the projectivist, contrasting it with what he sees as Eliot's overt scholasticism:

Words, form

but the extension of
content

Style, est verbum

The word
is image, and the reverend reverse is
Eliot

(*Collected Poems* 172)

Much of Olson's criticism of Eliot stems from what Olson would see as Eliot's conservative synthesis of the American tradition. In "La Preface" Olson sees the dead figures of tradition that always stand in the way of creating the new. The dead poets cannot be relied upon for the creation of a new verse. Much like Emerson's "imitation is suicide," Olson feels that it is unwise to imitate "dead" poets. In "La Preface" Olson phrases this notion as "the dead bury the dead, / and it is not very interesting" (*Collected Poems* 47). Ultimately, the postmodern is "born not of the buried" poets; even the "unburied dead," such as those of the Eliot line, must be rebelled against (47). Olson arrived at this stance early in his poetic career. In addition to his attack on Eliot in 1950's "Projective Verse," at the height of Eliot's fame in 1953, Olson declared him and other poets like him "a dead end in the development of modern literature" (Faas, *Towards a New American Poetics* 40).

1.4 Whitehead, Objectivism, and Olson's Reevaluation of the Subject-Object Dichotomy

Besides his obvious rebellion against the New Critics, a move by which many

postmodern poets can be characterized,[2] one of Charles Olson's definitive breaks with his modernist influences centres on his conception of the ego-position and its presence within the poem. In a letter written to Robert Creeley on March 8, 1951, while Olson was studying Mayan hieroglyphs in Lerma, Mexico, he discusses his struggle to find a unifying principle for the poetic epistemology he was developing as a "stance toward reality" (*Selected Writings* 15). This would act as a natural philosophical extension of the postmodern projective poetic style he first discussed in "Projective Verse." For Olson this "stance" or philosophical position would centre on his reformulation of the concepts surrounding the age-old division between what constituted a subject and an object. One of Olson's main problems with other modern American poetry was its acceptance of a dominance of subject over object. Often this would present itself as the presence of the poet's own ego or subjectivity within the poem. Olson refers to this type of subjectivity as the presence of an "ego-position" (*Selected Writings* 24, 83). In his letter to Creeley, Olson writes "I am trying to see how to throw the materials I am interested in so that they take, with all impact of a correct methodology AND WITH THE ALTERNATIVE TO THE EGO-POSITION" (*Selected Writings* 83). Olson sees a potential model for this in Williams' *Paterson*: "Bill HAS an emotional system which is capable of extensions & comprehensions the ego-system (the Old Deal, Ez as Cento Man, here dates) is not" (83).

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[2]Other postmodern poets, for example, who also rebelled against the New Critics are Robert Creeley, Robert Duncan, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Philip Whelan, Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, Gary Snyder, and Michael McClure. For an interesting collection of these and other American postmodern poets see Donald Allen and George F. Butterick's *The Postmoderns: The New American Poetry Revisited* (New York: Grove Press Inc., 1982).

However, Williams' limitation of the subject within the poem breaks down over what Olson refers to as his "methodology" which "contributes nothing, in fact delays, deters, and hampers, by not having busted through the very problem . . ." (83). Olson sees Williams' failure as due in part to his reliance upon a poetic movement known as objectivism.

Much of what is known as objectivism in American poetic circles is traceable through either "affinity" or "influence" to the British philosopher Alfred North Whitehead (von Hallberg, "Olson, Whitehead, and the Objectivists" 86). Louis Zukofsky is perhaps the best known of the objectivist poets, whose main unifying concept was based upon his definition of objectivism in the April 1931 edition of *Poetry* magazine. Here Zukofsky described the objectivist position as "objective" and "contextual" because it was based on "self-contained" notions of the object that were not oriented subjectively in their nature (56). In Whitehead's *Process and Reality* there is an emphasis on the equality of the subject and object, which, because of his notion of process, entails that each entity in existence is always in the process of constructing itself as well as simultaneously constructing every other entity. For Whitehead, the traditional division between subject and object is removed, and consequently the subject loses the importance it had in the Classical and Renaissance *episteme*. Whitehead's philosophy emphasizes the process or activity of each entity, which in nature contains no subject-object division. His philosophy is one that avoids distinguishing man as the most important entity, and so is anti-anthrocentric. Whitehead, von Hallberg says, "does all he can to avoid hard and fast

distinctions between man and other entities" (103). This is in order to preserve the equality of the object and the subject.

It is clear that Olson was perhaps more familiar with Whitehead's conception of objectivism than most poets of his time. Indeed, in 1956 while rector of Black Mountain College, Olson gave a series of lectures on Whitehead that eventually became collected as *The Special View of History* in 1970. Furthermore, Robert Duncan, in an interview that forms part of the introduction of *The Special View of History* fondly recalls how Olson came to give a lecture on Whitehead to the San Francisco Poetry Center in 1957:

> In 1957, the Poetry Center raked up about $200 for Charles to come to San Francisco. We had a group of about twenty people and he gave five lectures. Charles was presenting Whitehead's *Process and Reality* . . . . So in the later part of 1956 and 1957, just the period he's also involved in closing out the [Black Mountain] school, he was occupied with *Process and Reality*. After all, it is projective verse, it enlarges the idea of field. . . .
>
> (*The Special View of History* 10-11)

From Olson's copy of Whitehead's *Process and Reality*, held in the Olson Library at the University of Connecticut, Robert von Hallberg has been able to deduce that Olson was reading and writing his own marginalia in the margins, periodically but faithfully from 1955 well into the 1960's (86). Furthermore, Olson was also familiar with Whitehead's less daunting text *Adventures of Ideas* from at least 1955, but probably in actuality even earlier than this (86). When Olson writes that his new version of objectivism is based upon "getting rid of the lyrical interference of the individual as ego, of the 'subject' and his soul," and that following this "man is himself an object, whatever he may take to be his

advantages" it is easy to see the presence of Whitehead (*Selected Writings* 24). However, Olson refrains from truly accepting the equality of the subject-object dynamic even though he also calls for a "humilitas" that would assert an equality between the two (25). Olson even goes so far as to use Whitehead's conception of the object as the basis for his own new humanism (93). As with the examples of how Olson incorporated American literary tradition to create his own poetic space he also uses Whitehead in a similar fashion. Although in his essay "Projective Verse" and continuing through the trajectory of his career, from "Human Universe" to *The Special View of History*, and even the *Muthologos* collection, Olson was arguing for an epistemological shift in the poetic conception of the subject-object division, he still retained an anthrocentrism that Whitehead denied. Olson's epic *Maximus* is also peculiar in this instance because it can be read as an extension of his own persona, which if he had truly gotten rid of the "ego-position" as he had claimed in "Projective Verse," the presence of the *Maximus* persona would not be so pervasive. Robert Creeley sums up the inherent contradiction in Olson's conception of the subject-object division by saying that "*objectivity* is, in intention, the prime aspect of a method [objectism] which plans to deal with the 'things around' as characters in themselves . . . . As such, this wish intends as complete a break *as possible* with the *subjective*" (Creeley, *A Quick Graph* 18, italics added). Clearly, the intentions of Olson's objectism "belie [the] result" (Creeley 18). Although Olson turned to Whitehead as a basis for the development of his new postmodern ground for American poetry, it was ultimately his relationship with Robert Creeley that allowed Olson to break with his modern influences.

1.5 Charles Olson and Robert Creeley: Institutionalizing the Anti-Institutional

Charles Olson and Robert Creeley's literary relationship began in 1950 when Creeley, a recent Harvard dropout, rejected Olson's poems from inclusion in his newly created *Lillitz Review* because Olson's poems seemed to lack a conviction in their language. Immediately following this first interaction a flourishing correspondence ensued. It is from this correspondence that Creeley's *Gold Diggers*, a collection of short stories, and the first section of the *For Love* poems, as well as Olson's "Projective Verse" and "Human Universe" were formulated. The Creeley-Olson correspondence has been collected and edited in nine volumes by George F. Butterick, and this collection only contains the first two years of their exchange. The bond that Olson and Creeley formed in these years allowed for what would become a major part of the American postmodern literary field. In the early fifties there was no audience for their work, and they had essentially to invent themselves simultaneously with the audience that would receive their work. This relationship can be seen in terms of Bourdieu's literary field and Foucault's archaeological analysis, particularly in how Olson and Creeley formed a new discourse of the postmodern through intervention into the avant-garde literary field.

In his *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field* (1996), Bourdieu sees the cultural field as divided into "large-scale" and "restricted" production; the former corresponds to the market of the trade-press publishers, while the latter is more akin to the avant-garde, where economic factors are not as important as the critical

acceptance of one's group, movement, or peers (142-44). The restricted field of production often leads to "anti-institutional institutions" (Bourdieu 258). Charles Olson and Robert Creeley invented and advocated their conception of postmodern poetics – projectivism – through restricted areas of production, such as the small leftist magazines *Origin*, edited by Cid Corman but heavily influenced by Olson and Creeley, and *Black Mountain Review*, which Creeley edited after his *Lillitz Review* folded. These initially small magazines became an essential part of the institution of the postmodern American avant-garde. For example, the last edition of *Black Mountain Review* collected the first generation of "Beat" writers like Kerouac and Ginsberg along with members of the Black Mountain movement, like Duncan and Olson. The "large-scale" literary production side of the literary field acted as an authority of delimitation for Olson and Creeley: the conservative press focussed on poets of the New Critical school, and did not actively publish avant-garde writers. The avant-garde, which Olson and Creeley were a part of because of their shared anti-formalist attitude, had to create the space, or in Foucault's terms, the "surface of emergence," for their own brand of poetry (Sheridan 97).

The division in the literary field can be seen in the publication of two separate anthologies of new American poetry in the 1960's. In 1962, Donald Hall and Robert Pack edited a publication of "new" poetry entitled, *New Poets of England and America*. Hall and Pack's compilation is centred on the formalism of the New Criticism. For example, William Carlos Williams is excluded from the anthology while Yeats is included, and there is an obvious emphasis on common New Critical elements of poetic construction like

"rationalism," "elitism," "learnedness," and the "historical" (Hoover xxviii). The Hall/Pack anthology is formed out of its basis in the "large-scale" cultural field of production. It is conservative in its orientation due in part because of its position in the cultural field and because of its intended audience. *New Poets of England and America* is not indicative of the emergence of the postmodern *episteme* that had begun with the publication of Olson's "Projective Verse". Donald Allen's *The New American Poetry*, published two years before is the opposite: Allen's anthology favours the "irrational," the "contemporary," and the "spontaneity" of the postmodern American voice (Hoover xxviii). It also, coincidentally includes both poems and prose from Olson, who is also the postmodern poet who begins the collection. *The New American Poetry* collects the avant-garde poets that have until that time been subjected to a restricted cultural field of production, and in a sense, institutionalizes the anti-institutional. The seeds for the institutionalization of the anti-institutional postmodern avant-garde, however, began with the Olson-Creeley correspondence.

The relationship between Olson and Creeley initiated their becoming the "front-guard" of the postmodern American poetry movement. In order to understand how they invented their own surface from which to emerge it is necessary to understand their conception of doubleness. In her book *Career Moves: Olson, Creeley, Zukofsky, Berrigan, and the American Avant-Garde* (2000), Libbie Rifkin provides an illuminating commentary on the evolution of the Olson-Creeley aesthetic. Shortly into their correspondence Olson and Creeley became conscious of the necessary ontological

ramifications of their collaboration: they began to see themselves as a "single human figure" that was comprised of equally important "complimentary halves" (Rifkin 44). The ultimate goal of this "figure" was to disrupt or "decentre" previous notions of the "ego position," while creating a surface for their emergence into an avant-garde literary field which did not then exist (Riddel 162-3). Olson would comment on the dynamic of this single entity as being based on his "root principle" that "the PERSON accomplishes the SINGLE by way of the FACT that experience is always DOUBLE" (Butterick, *Guide to the Maximus Poems* xxxiii). Olson's view of his "root principle" is reminiscent of Whitehead's reformulation of the whole-part relationship in philosophy which becomes, in Whitehead, the notion of process whereby the single (part), is always simultaneously involved in the construction of every other entity (whole). To develop a "single human figure" out of "two complimentary halves" is the reification of Olson's concept of process that he took from Whitehead. Indeed, Olson dedicated his *Maximus* poems to Robert Creeley, "the Figure of Outward," with the phrase "All my life I've heard / one makes many" (*The Maximus Poems*, dedication page). Commenting on their collaborative process in 1969, Olson writes "otherwise / why *was* the pt. then to . . . write to Creeley / daily? To make that whole thing / double" (Butterick *Guide to the Maximus Poems* 3). That is, in other words, to create a larger space for emergence into the literary field through collaboration, which in Bourdieu's terminology would be the only mode of production available to the restricted production that necessarily characterizes the nature of the avant-garde's commodification: acceptance by one's peers. But what was the main

factor in how the Olson-Creeley collaborative process became a model for the institutionalization of the postmodern avant-garde?

The main event that institutionalized Olson and Creeley was the publication of Olson's "Projective Verse," which is actually an unwieldy and often disjointed amalgamation of modern, soon to become, postmodern, poetical theories. Shortly before the publication of the essay, Creeley wrote to Olson complaining of the rejection his story "The Unsuccessful Husband" was receiving from publishers at the *Kenyon Review* (Rifkin 49; Butterick *Complete Correspondence* 1:79-81). Probably from the pain of rejection, Creeley launches into an attack on the notions of subjectivity that reigned in the publishing business. He offers his notion of the "Single Intelligence," an entity that necessarily benefits from being free from the demands of the commodification of mind that occurs when involved in the "large-scale" production methods of trade-press publishing. Instead of having his intelligence commodified by his story's publication in the *Kenyon Review*, Creeley comforts himself with the avant-garde creation of his own essence, and the "restricted" acceptance of his creation by Olson. "Breaking down the supposition/ that prose & poetry: depend on perhaps counter/ at least 'different' kinds of attitude and intelligence" than large scale production of the literary field would accommodate because of its emphasis on New Critical conceptions of traditional formalism, Creeley offers instead the antithetical, avant-garde view that it would be better to realize that "form is never more than an *extension* of content" (Butterick, *Complete Correspondence* 1: 78-9). Olson would write back to Creeley, excited about this phrase, reprinting it twice in his letter

alone, and would insert it as the second principle of "Projective Verse," where it becomes the "reason why a projective poem can come into being" (*Selected Writings* 16). "Projective Verse" would achieve a "totemic" status by the "vigorous circulation of its precepts" between Olson and Creeley and their "accumulating company of peers" that were unified through small, avant-garde magazines like *Origin* (Rifkin 51). The correspondence between Olson and Creeley led to "Projective Verse" becoming a postmodern standard of American literary history. It is through their conception of the literary collaboration that they were able to overcome their delimitation by the trade-press publishing market.

1.6 Olson and Black Mountain College

Although some critics see Olson as merely a continuation of Pound, like Dickey and Perloff, the influence of Pound and even Williams was not as important to Olson's postmodern poetics as were his collaborative efforts with Creeley. However, Olson did not meet Creeley in person until he became rector of the avant-garde Black Mountain College and invited Creeley to join the faculty as lecturer in 1954 (Rifkin 45). Black Mountain College was another factor in Olson's ascendency in becoming the first recognizable American postmodern poet (Butterick, "Postmodern" 4). In many ways the formation of the experimental college mirrors Olson's postmodern push. Black Mountain College was founded in 1933 by John Andrew Rice, who was fired from his position as professor of classics at Rollins College for his avant-garde theories of education, which

were not shared by the Rollins College president (*Muthologos 2*: 57). Black Mountain College was formed from buildings that were initially owned by a religious organization in Black Mountain, North Carolina, and the college quickly became an experiment in freedom from the bureaucratic policies that characterized mainstream universities. After the publication of "Projective Verse," Olson came to the attention of the literary world, and this newfound fame coupled with his relationship with Edward Dahlberg, who was rector of Black Mountain at the time that "Projective Verse" was published, and a mentor to Olson while he wrote *Call Me Ishmael,* resulted in Olson's invitation to become the college's next – and last – rector. When Olson became rector in 1951, he essentially acted as liaison to the world outside of the college (Foster 2). Although Olson led faculty discussions on curriculum and administration, his power, due to the egalitarian nature of the college, was no greater than any other faculty member: "Rector was the title that John Rice demanded that the place have for its *apparent* president" (*Muthologos 2*: 58, 63; Foster 2). Black Mountain had long had a concentration in liberal arts. Painting, dancing, music, and literature had all been emphasized at one point or another depending on who was rector at the time. When Olson became rector the curriculum became even more focussed on the liberal arts, with an obvious emphasis on poetry and literature.

Olson knew that the novelty of Black Mountain was in putting the liberal arts at the centre of its curriculum, and Black Mountain was able to attract a distinguished faculty. Notable avant-garde faculty members that attended the College included John Cage, Franz Kline, Stefan Wolpe, Jackson Pollack, Merce Cunningham, Robert Creeley, and Robert

Duncan. Olson ultimately saw Black Mountain as an experiment in living together. He described this idea to a BBC audience:

> What really has made it valuable today is that she was not only the first breakthrough in curriculum since the middle ages, but she was in some strange way right-up-to-date the only, only, communal invention that has substituted for the damn Western conception of society. [3]

Interestingly, Olson's personality was so dominant that during his rectorship Black Mountain College became identified as an extension of his personality and ideas (Foster 7). According to Martin Duberman, author of *Black Mountain: An Exploration in Community* (1973), the seminal text on the college, when Olson became rector there was

> much more emphasis on the literary than the visual arts, and an even more disheveled physical plant; a place distinctive, in other words, not in endowment, numbers, comfort or public acclaim, but in quality of experience, a frontier society, sometimes raucous and raw, isolated and self-conscious, bold in its refusal to assume any reality it hadn't tested – and therefore bold in inventing forms, both in life style and art, to contain the experiential facts that supplanted tradition's agreed-upon definitions.
>
> (Duberman 336-7)

In other words, when Olson became rector of Black Mountain College, it became an extension of his collaboration with Creeley. It became a bigger stage or audience for the acceptance and dissemination of his postmodern poetics, projective verse, and the philosophy that necessarily followed from it, objectism. Black Mountain College became

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[3]Charles Olson, quoted in Robert von Hallberg's *Charles Olson: The Scholar's Art* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978), 16-17. This is taken from a transcript of a BBC broadcast on Black Mountain College, narrated by Alasdair Clayre.

the final stage in the institutionalization of the avant-garde aims of Olson's poetic career.

The unique place that Charles Olson occupies in American literature is due certainly to his position as the first postmodern (Butterick "Postmodern" 4). Olson himself embraced the term, even referring to himself and other like minded poets as "[those] of us that want to take on the post-modern" (*Human Universe* 112). However, it must be noted that Olson cannot be merely reduced to being a postmodern poet because to do this is to ignore his modern influences, and essentially results in the same kind of "either" "or" criticism that has far too long dominated Olson scholarship. When Dickey and Perloff maintain that Olson is a minor derivation of Pound and Williams they are neglecting Olson's postmodern formulation and application of Pound and Williams' poetics into his own poetry. Similarly, one cannot simply see Olson in a postmodern light because his spatio-temporal positioning in literary history is at the cusp of the epistemic break between the modern and the postmodern. As such, Olson should be viewed as simultaneously being a part of both the modern and the postmodern in the way that he carried over elements of the modern into his projective poetics, but it must be remembered that his reformulation of these concepts became uniquely postmodern. Olson's healthy disrespect of tradition and reliance upon it, his orientation in the avant-garde, and his collaboration with Creeley, resulted in a literary figure who cannot be so easily labelled.

In understanding the significance of Charles Olson's poetics it is necessary to view his poetry and prose as two separate halves of a whole entity, in much the same way that his collaboration with Creeley has been presented above. Often Olson's prose, with its

erratic and idiosyncratic use of grammatical rules, seems more projective than his poetry. Indeed, many of the notions he posits in his essays "Projective Verse" and "Human Universe" are not as clearly presented in his poetry. Often the criticisms Olson offers against the discursive tradition of poetry and even philosophy are presented in a "half-baked" manner; he assumes the reader's familiarity with his ideas and so eschews the necessary argumentative rigour his sweeping and overly generalized accusations of western culture and thought need. This is a common criticism of Olson.[4]

The next chapter in this thesis attempts to provide the details to Olson's argument against the foundations of the modern *episteme*. In order to arrive at this point one must begin to understand the "stance toward reality" that Olson proposes in "Projective Verse" and elaborates in "Human Universe" (*Selected Writings* 15). Olson's poetry will be seen as an elaboration upon notions presented in his prose. This thesis is an attempt to provide a clear understanding of Olson's major critique of modern discourse. The next chapter presents a detailed analysis of Olson's argument as presented primarily in "Projective Verse," *Human Universe*, and *The Special View of History* in order to provide his argument with the analytical background it has been accused of lacking. The extent of Olson's critique will then be seen more clearly.

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[4] For example, see James Dickey's section on Olson in his *Babel to Byzantium: Poets and Poetry Now*, Marjorie Perloff's "Charles Olson and the 'Inferior Predecessors': 'Projective Verse' Revisited," and Robert von Hallberg's *Charles Olson: The Scholar's Art*.

Chapter 2

2.1 Introduction

Although it appears Olson followed random poetic forms that resisted any structure, Charles Altieri's assumption that Olson's poetry adheres to a "poetic logic" that is quite different from poetry based upon the "discursive logic" of "rational thought" seems more likely (Altieri 174). Due to this "poetic logic," Olson's poetry and prose critique the logic of the sentence as a complete thought and the notion of a unified, autotelic text. Charles Olson's poetry, like other postmodern poetry, includes such things as "dream data," "messages," "chance occurrences," "misspellings," "frustrations," "vulgarity," "allusions," "philosophical waxings," and "aesthetic gossip" which act as digressions that attempt to free the poem from "anticipated patterns," such as iambic pentameter (Butterick, "Postmodern" 20, 22; Golding 77). Interestingly, Olson's projective poetry does not always strictly follow the prosodic idealism he posits in his prose. In order to grasp the significance of Olson's work, however, it is best to see his poetry and prose as two halves of a whole project. Indeed, Olson's prose is filled with idiosyncratic grammatical constructions that only make sense if one considers his notion of projectivism as advanced in his essay "Projective Verse." The appearance of Olson's open form poetry, with its emphasis on the syllable and erratic line breaks, only makes sense when understood through the notions he offers in his prose. In order to become familiar with Olson's poetic theories and how they become implemented in his prosody, one must begin

with an analysis of his most famous prose piece "Projective Verse."

"Projective Verse" is, in many instances, an idealistic approach to postmodern poetry. Olson's prosodic theories are based on notions of the poem as energy-construct, and the syllable as the ultimate measure of rhythm. "Projective Verse" is primarily a critique of the logical assertion that the sentence, and by extension, the poetic line, should express a complete thought. Olson's critique of the sentence rests primarily on his conception of syntax, which abandons the rigor of grammatical logic, emphasizing instead what New Critics would see as the "unpoetic" language of the natural speech act (Kellogg 64). Olson's poetry is an attempt to represent the rhythms of speech, which are more dynamic than the rhythms of traditional, iambic based poetry. Olson's poetry and prose have also been seen as a "critique" and "disruption" of "Western metaphysics" (Kellogg 64; Riddel 171). Although Olson does explicitly critique Western metaphysics in "Human Universe," the essay is problematic in its overt generalization and simplistic treatment of the philosophy of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. Olson's critique of post-Socratic philosophy will be dealt with in more detail in the next chapter of this thesis, but it is enough for now to concentrate more on notions that pertain specifically to prosody and Olson's essay "Projective Verse."

Olson is no different from other postmodernists in his refusal of preconceived forms. The poetic logic of Olson's prosody is more akin to Heraclitus' universe of flux than it is to Plato's static and unchanging world of forms (Kellogg 76). Olson's argument with preconceived forms is grounded in his denial of the syntax of logical discourse.

Further, the meaning of Olson's poetry depends upon his idea that form is only an extension of content (Olson, *Selected Writings* 16), which is more or less the idea that the "unified multiplicity" of forces within the poem are more important than the poem's references to "interpretive systems" that exist outside of it (Altieri 177, 185). In "Poetry and Truth," Olson describes his theory of composition-by-field through images of strain, tension, and contortion that represent the discontinuity of his poetry and, as a direct result, what he sees as the fallacy of the sentence as a complete thought (Butterick, "Postmodern" 17; Riddel 171). The unique syntax of Olson's poetry and prose cannot be fairly understood through conceptions of logically based grammar and traditional rhyme and poetic meter. Olson's syntax must be understood though his unique concept of lineation, which depends upon the syllable as the measure of his verse.

This chapter is an attempt to provide a general overview of common characteristics of Olson's projective verse. Although the best study of Olson's poetics is arguably Alan Golding's "Charles Olson's Metrical Thicket: Toward a Theory of Free-Verse Prosody," I disagree with Golding's assumption that each poem is so individual that Olson's poetry cannot be seen to cohere around common prosodic devices. In order to unify certain aspects of Olson's prosodic structure it is necessary to concentrate primarily on his shorter poetry. Although *The Maximus Poems* are considered Olson's *magnum opus*, it is such a huge collection, characterized by what one critic calls the impediment of its "large architecture," that it is not fair to Olson's conception of the long poem to deal with these poems in isolation (Kellogg 63). Furthermore, there is not sufficient space in this thesis to

provide an adequate understanding of the massive collection. There is, however, a large body of work written on *The Maximus Poems*, such as Christensen's *Charles Olson: Call Him Ishmael*, Robert von Hallberg's *Charles Olson: The Scholar's Art*, L. S. Dembo's "Olson's *Maximus* and the Way to Knowledge," Don Byrd's "The Possibility of Measure in Olson's *Maximus,"* and Sherman Paul's *Olson's Push: Origin, Black Mountain, and Recent American Poetry*. In order to demonstrate that Olson's prosody coheres around certain unified principles, this chapter deals specifically with lesser known poems in the canon of Olson's shorter poetry.

2.2 Projective Verse

In 1950, at the age of forty, Charles Olson's first major statement of his views on poetry and the philosophical elements that ground this "new" poetics was published in October in *Poetry New York*. He called this essay "Projective Verse." This piece combines much of his vast knowledge into a uniquely poetical-philosophical position and is arguably Olson's most widely known and academically accepted text. "Projective Verse" is his most anthologized work, now an integral part of the postmodern American literary canon, appearing in Donald Allen and George F. Butterick's influential collection *The Postmoderns: The New American Poetry*, Allen and Warren Tallman's *The Poetics of the New American Poetry*, and Paul Hoover's *Postmodern American Poetry: A Norton Anthology*. The nine-page essay is demarcated into two major sections. The first details a new technical approach to modern prosody and the last attempts to explain this new

poetics through a unique philosophical ground based on "composition by field":

> The objects which occur at every given moment of composition (of recognition, we can call it) are, can be, must be treated exactly as they do occur therein and not by any ideas or preconceptions from outside the poem, 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.
>
> (Olson *Selected Writings* 20)

Olson's notion of field composition characterizes the unique relationship between the construction of projective poetry and the philosophical position (objectism) that occurs from and gives semantic form to projective verse. Creating poetry based upon Olson's polemical conception of a "field" of tensions interacting with one another within the content and form of the poem, as well as the creative faculties of the poet himself, has been said to resemble the non-Euclidean conception of an energy field (Christensen 57). Olson saw the individual artist as a field of perception, constantly mediating intrusions from the phenomena of the larger world outside of the individual mind. Within Olson's view of a person's relationship with reality it was impossible for any one part of the larger phenomenal field to be understood or experienced as clearly and authentically as the individual field or mind.

Olson's argument here raises the classic question concerning the nature of subjectivity and objectivity, albeit redressed in the specialized language of postmodern scientific theories about geometric space, mathematics, and physics. The problem Olson is confronted with is whether we can only truly trust our own subjective state of mind, and if

this is the case, as it is for Olson, how do we account for our massive and daily interaction with the larger world? How do we process our experiences with it? Olson sees his methodology of "Projective Verse" as a necessary act that the artist, particularly the poet, must adhere to in order for the emphasis on formulaic constructions of poetry, such as metered and rhymed poetry, to be weakened. Olson believed that the discrepancies he found between subject and object could be overcome through coherence around a common principle. The logical choice for a common principle became his own principle of prosody: projective verse. However, his poetic and philosophical theories are based upon various notions taken from several disciplines of modern scholarship: from literature, history, and philosophy, to music, the visual arts, and science.

Although Olson had familiarized himself with the philosophical theories governing the new rules of non-Euclidean geometry while studying under Hans Rademacher during his tenure at Black Mountain College, he characteristically took only what he felt was necessary to his own scholarship (Christensen 57). Olson's own reformulation of non-Euclidean mathematical concepts resulted in his subsequent oversimplification of the complex and often rigid philosophical investigation that grounds mathematical inquiry. The result is that Olson's views about and usage of non-Euclidean geometric theories of space are highly questionable from the serious scholar's viewpoint. But Olson's appropriation of scientific fact, however inaccurate, is quite interesting in terms of how he fashioned his own conception of (post)modern American verse. The most immediate and clear example of Olson's use of non-Euclidean theories of spatiality is seen in how he

anarchically places stanzas and poetic clusters all over the page. Olson no longer sees space as two-dimensional like it is in Cartesian and Euclidean geometry. Rather, like the non-Euclidean geometers, he is attempting a three-dimensional framework for his poetic reformulation of space. This is most obvious in the typography of Olson's poems: the left hand margin is no longer a rigid imaginary line against which to base the positioning of his poetry. In the 1954 poem "Love" one can see Olson's attempt to incorporate space into the presentation and meaning of his poem, as well as a rare use of enclosed parentheses, which he often avoids, usually favoring instead the open ended parenthesis:

. . . . . .
There is no intelligence
the equal of
the situation

There are only

Two ways:
Create the situation
(And this love)
Or avoid it.
This also can be
Love.

(*Collected Poems* 300)

In "The Motion" Olson places the priority of prosodic spacing on an equal level of importance as the words themselves. This technique is so pervasive that the reader is forced to recognize the significant role that space plays in Olson's projective poetry:

the motion
not verbal
the newt
less active

than I: the fire pink
not me
(the words
not me

not my nature
I . . .

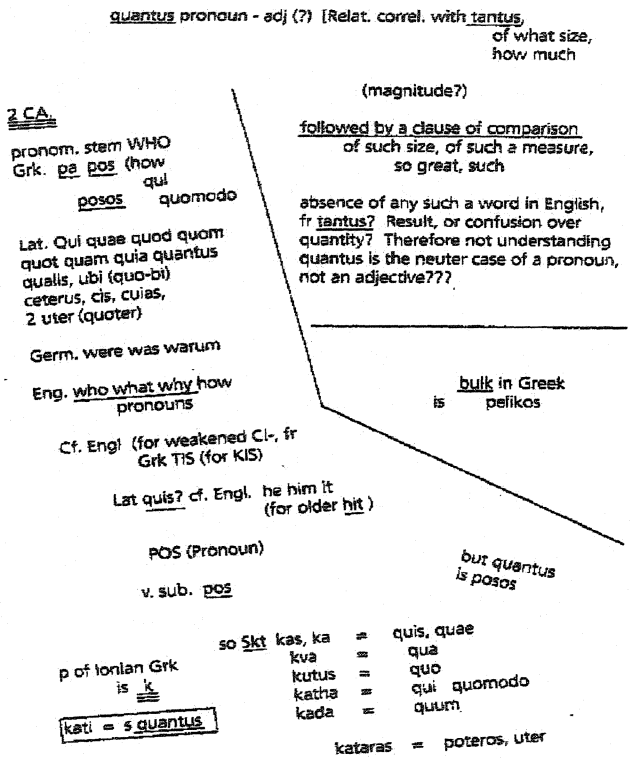
(*Collected Poems* 300)

Olson's poetry is often formed around a unique conception of prosodic spatial orientation. However, much like the lack of rigor Olson often exemplifies in his appropriation of other's ideas (like his reformulation of non-Euclidean geometry), he does not strictly adhere to his own unconventional notions of spacing prosody. In fact, his poems can also appear quite conventional in their positional conformity toward the left-hand margin. For example, in "The Thing was Moving," a poem Olson sent to Robert Creeley in May, 1952, there is a strict formal adherence to the left-hand margin, but Olson's grammar (or lack thereof) within the stanzas is still unconventional:

> It's so beautiful, life, goddamn death
> that we have to die, only the mind knows what lies next the heart or a five-petaled flower
> restores the fringed gentians I used to so love
> I'd lie amongst them in the meadow near the house
> which was later covered by a dump to make an athletic field
> and the brook was gone to which we tried to speed our sleds
> from the hill the house stood on and which the dump
> was meant to join, the loss punctuated by the shooting . . .
>
> (*Collected Poems* 263)

It appears as though the poem was never properly edited for grammatical mistakes, but this is also part of Olson's attempt to break free from the grip that "rules" have had upon modern American poetry. Much the same can be said of Olson's prose, which becomes

more projective as his career evolves. Indeed Olson's *Proprioception* (1962) and *The Vinland Map Review* (1965) appear more like rough journal entries than essays, and because of their chaotic typography they appear to be formulations of Olson's projective theories of verse applied to prose:



(*Collected Prose* 192)

Olson's study of non-Euclidean geometry led him to the conclusion that the totality of our experience, both the subjective inner world of the individual mind and the objective and less personalized field of the phenomenal world outside of ourselves, could be understood through his unifying principle of objectism that allowed, in his opinion, these

two seemingly distinct realms of experience to cohere. In Olson's mind, his reformulation of non-Euclidean geometry shared a similar intellectual theme to one he claimed to have first noticed in his own readings of Melville: the desire to move away from what he saw as the limitations of previously established thought-structures.

Non-Euclidean geometry, Melville, and the analytical philosopher Alfred North Whitehead were all assimilated into Olson's own work with little reliance upon any logical formulation of his own argument. Instead of philosophical rigor and objectiveness, Olson offered random assertions based upon his very personal and passionate understanding of concepts he felt were important catalysts in overcoming the "old system" of thought that dominated ideas about poetry, philosophy, and history. Olson's anti-logical fastening of disparate areas of thought became the basis for his philosophy of experience that he felt necessarily followed from projective poetry. Altieri refers to this anti-logic as "poetic logic," which was consequently not dependent upon meaning, or the "discursive logic of rational thought" (174). The argument Olson proposed was that in order to write projectively one must think projectively as well. Olson named this philosophical stance "objectism," but this philosophy is not completely objective.

In formulating this phenomenological stance Olson also borrowed from the British analytical philosopher, Alfred North Whitehead, the notions that subject and object are equal and matter is more dynamic than Aristotle's matter as substance (von Hallberg, "Olson, Whitehead, and the Objectivists" 90, 93). These notions became Olson's own philosophical basis for what he felt was happening within a poem. Olson's hypothesis,

however, lacked the rigid analytic form of Whitehead's, and therefore was more in the tradition of an existentialist, or the phenomenology of Heidegger, than an analytical philosopher. Indeed, Olson misconstrued Whitehead's theory of objectification as abstraction and formulated an anthrocentric concept of an alternative humanism from Whitehead, even though Whitehead himself did not see humanity as a more important entity than any other in his philosophy (Whitehead, *Process and Reality* 140; Olson, *Selected Writings* 103; von Hallberg, "Olson, Whitehead, and the Objectivists" 103). Olson's philosophical posturing relied more on personal feeling than on analytical logic and, therefore, is better situated within the tradition of Rousseau and Emerson, not that of Aristotle or Kant.

2.3 A Discontinuous Multiplicity

Although upon first glance Olson's poetry may appear to be randomly created, there is a definite structural formula and philosophy to the new form of poetry he and other projective poets such as Robert Duncan and Robert Creeley were positing in post-war America, and this "structure" will become more apparent as we move through major collections of his poetry and prose: *The Collected Poems of Charles Olson: Excluding the Maximus Poems* (1987), *Human Universe* (1967), *Muthologos* (1979), and *The Special View of History* (1970). At this point it is important to understand the meaning behind Olson's ideas of open versification because his poems are quite different from other strains of American poetry. Olson's projective verse can be characterized by his idiosyncratic

usage of grammatical rules governing punctuation such as the comma, and his insistence on a unique physical appearance for the poems themselves, with line breaks occurring at unexpected points and stanzas that often defy the left-hand margin of the page. As such, Olson's poetry is difficult for the uninitiated to understand. It is even hard to read the poems properly without an in-depth look at the principles guiding his distinctive verse, but one must realize that Olson does not adhere to his own theories as strictly as one might suppose.

Much of Olson's prosody hinges upon his acceptance of Fenellosa's notion of the sentence as a transference of power, and his subsequent criticism of the sentence as a grammatical construction that forms a complete thought. Riddel refers to Olson's disruption of the traditional sentence as "discontinuous play of forces" because "nothing returns to a subject" in his poetry (171). It is not that the content does not return to its subject, as Riddel suggests, but rather that Olson is trying to remove the conception of the subject within his poetry so that there is only a multiplicity of objects interacting with one another. One can see Olson's attempt at removing the dominance of the subject in "From the Inca," a two-line poem from 1952: "The mighty man and the mother-egg / leg over leg over leg" (*Collected Poems* 275). But Riddel is correct in suggesting that Olson's poetry is more oriented around "chance" and "accident" than it is around the subject, as Olson himself phrases this as "the chance success of a play of creative accidents" in *The Special View of History* (Riddel 179; Olson 49). The extent to which Olson is successful in eliminating the predominance of the subject, however, is debatable; he has been accused of

being as much of an idealist in his language and poetics as Plato was in his philosophy (Kellogg 75).

The first and most significant explication of his poetic project is defined by the four principles described in his 1950 essay "Projective Verse." The first principle concerns the kinetics of the poem, where the concept of the poem becomes an energy-construct: "a poem is energy transferred from where the poet got it," because Olson feels that "the poem itself must, at all points, be a high energy-construct and, at all points, an energy discharge" (*Selected Writings* 16). This results in what Butterick has called an "intensified syntax" which is brought about by Olson's "systemic disordering" of the poetic line ("Postmodern" 5). The most immediate example of this can be seen in the rapid-fire, stream-of-consciousness-styled semantics of Olson's poetry as it appears on the page of the text itself:

> Direction—a directed magnitude—is
> resurrection
>
> All that has been
>
> suddenly is: time
> is the face
> of recognition, Rhoda Straw; or my son
>
> is a Magyar . . .

("A Newly Discovered 'Homeric' Hymn," *Collected Poems* 66-7).

The word 'is' appears four times in the above cluster, adding to the urgency of the poem through the "syntactic strain" of its repetition, which forces the reader to enter Olson's idiosyncratic "world of language" (Butterick, "Postmodern" 18). Furthermore, the reformulation or inversion of the noun 'direction' to the adjective 'directed,' in "Direction—a directed magnitude..."; revolves around the root word or verb 'direct.' Words are repeated and roots of words are altered with different suffixes and prefixes, confirming that Olson is more concerned with the etymology of language than with conveying a dramatic image (Altieri 183). For example, in the opening stanza of the poem "In Cold Hell, In Thicket," written in 1950, there is a heavy repetition of the word how:

> In cold hell, in thicket, *how*
> abstract (as high mind, as not lust, as love is) *how*
> strong (as strut or wing, as polytope, as things are
> constellated) *how* strung, *how* cold
> can a man stay (can men) confronted
> thus?
>
> (*Collected Poems* 155, italics added for emphasis)

There is also an almost obsessive insertion of the comma into the lines of poetry, a jarring use of bracketed thought clusters ("as strut or wing, as polytope, as things are / constellated"), as well as unconventional breaks in the length of Olson's line, with "can a man stay (can men) confronted / thus?" Olson characteristically breaks the poetic line prematurely in order to "decenter" the narrative line (Riddel 180). In order to best understand the connotations of Riddel's interpretation of Olson's projective project it is helpful to interpret Riddel's notion of decentering in terms of Bakhtin's centrifugal (disunifying/decentering) and centripetal (unifying/centering) forces in *The Dialogic*

Imagination. Although Bakhtin was primarily concerned with the novel, Olson's poetic line can be seen as a centrifugal force that decenters the homogenizing centripetal forces of the narrative line. Furthermore, Olson's poetry is not dominated by one voice or subject; it is more of a multiplicity of centrifugal objects. For example, in the poem "Friday, Good Friday . . .", the presence of several different voices competing in conversation acts as a centrifugal force, decentering the centripetal, unifying voice of the poet:

> . . .Well, some years ago, one Good Friday,
> we were all down to the gas station, sitting around chewing the fat,
> when Walter says, "What about a little game, boys." Sez the others,
> "Why, Walter! Don't you know? This is Good Friday!"
> And Walter, who always sort of drawled after he grew up, answers,
> "Whhhat's goooood abooooout it? Allll Iiii can
> sssay isss, Iiiiii hoooope it'll be Goooooood
> for meeeee!"
>
> (*Collected Poems* 145)

Projective poetry is therefore a poetic reformulation of Bakhtin's disunifying notion of heteroglossia. This is what Riddel is trying to say when he refers to the "decentering" element of Olson's line.

According to Olson's projectivist stance, repetitions, comma splices, and parentheses allow the poem to retain the "energy" or immediacy of the thoughts as they appeared in Olson's mind to the moment when the reader reactivates this kinetic phenomenon:

> 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. . . . Then

> the poem itself must, at all points, be a high energy-construct and, at all points, an energy discharge . . . . [A]n energy which is peculiar to verse alone and which will be . . . different from the energy which the reader. . .will take away.
> (*Selected Writings* 16)

According to this statement, for Olson there is no depreciation or distance between the projective poem as the medium for the reader's internalization of the projective poem's message and the reader's experience of the projective poem as such. Olson allows for differences in the experience between a projective poet as creator and the reader of this poem as receiver, but for him there must never be a weakening of the poem's energy from the moment of creation to the instant of reception, and this is an important element of Olson's projectivism. This means that the speed and immediacy of Olson's thoughts as rapidly spinning out of logically based order are to be instantaneously realized as a kinetically charged experience. The reader should see the speed and immediacy of Olson's verse from inspiration to completion because the poem's urgency is manifested on the page itself with his odd usage of the comma, parentheses, abrupt line breaks, and irregular positioning of stanzas. Olson's projective verse shows that the struggle to create the poem is still alive, imprinted upon the page.

The visual retention of the creative struggle involved in composing poetry characterized by the apparently "rough" or unfinished appearance of Olson's verse is important to Olson's poetics because it shows a less ego-driven presence within the poem; it is also a physical representation of Olson's composition-by-field philosophy. Indeed, during a lecture he gave at Black Mountain College in 1956, Olson described the poem as a struggle between variance, dissension, contention and dissonance (Charters 88). Even in

one of Olson's earliest attempts at projective verse, "La Preface," one can see images of "strain" and "contortion" that characterize his notion of field composition (Butterick, "Postmodern" 20).

> Birth in the house is the One of Sticks, cunnus in the crotch.
> 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.
> (*Collected Poems* 47)

There are overt sexual images, parentheses, both closed and open, with nothing written inside them, the date of Olson's birth (1910), and an apocalyptic commentary on what his generation has been born into ("We are the new born, and there are no flowers"). "La Preface" retains a sense of Olson's creative struggle in constructing the poem, and the poem is, therefore, disunified and "unfinished" in its typography.

2.4 Typography

The visual appearance of Charles Olson's poetry has obviously become a major factor in appreciating his verse. In the essay "Olson's Metrical Thicket: Toward a Theory of Free Verse Prosody," Alan Golding states that "typography becomes a major clue to rhythmic structure" (66). Golding bases his theory of Olson's free verse prosody on the rhythm and intonation breaks that create Olson's line. Because of Olson's reliance upon the syllable instead of the narrative line, Golding correctly sees the syllable as the only "objectively measureable entity" in Olson's verse (66). Because Olson adheres to the

rhythms of speech, in order to analyze the nature of Olson's line, poetic rhythm is best measured by the beats of the syllable.

Using Olson's poem "In Cold Hell, in Thicket" as an example, Golding defines the "appositional rhythm" of Olson's poem as an "intensification of stress" that is brought into coherence by the juxtaposition of "sharp line-breaks," "polysyllables," "a predominance of monosyllables," and by the regular occurrence of "caesura," and "enjambment" (68-9,72-3). Like other critics of Olson's prosody, such as Ralph Maud's *What Does Not Change: The Significance of Charles Olson's "The Kingfishers"* (1998), and to a lesser extent Robert von Hallberg's *Charles Olson: The Scholar's Art* (1978), Golding relies heavily upon the poems "In Cold Hell, In Thicket" and "The Kingfishers" to explain his theory of Olson's prosody. The reason for their reliance upon these poems is that they are some of the most obvious examples of Olson's projective verse, and so have become part of the Olson canon. However, much of what Golding says about Olson's prosody can be applied to his other lesser known poems, albeit in a slightly different context. The 1951 poem, "Abstract #1, Yucatan," also displays abrupt line-breaks, a predominant use of monosyllables, and caesurae which occur more often towards the end of his poetic line rather than its traditional appearance in the middle of the line. The pause, or caesura, is often indicated by Olson's forced insertion of the comma, which would often be seen as a comma splice by grammarians. The poem is included in its entirety here so that Olson's prosodic structure will appear appropriately in context.

> the fish is speech, or see
> what, cut

in stone, starts, for

when the sea breaks, watch
watch: it is the tongue, and

he who introduces the words (the
interlocutor) the
beginner of the word, he

you will find, he
has scales, he
gives off motion as

in the sun the wind the light, a fish
moves

(*Collected Poems* 203)

In the second stanza there is a repetition of "watch" but this repetition is interrupted by the break in the line. In the next two stanzas there is the repetition of "he," which creates syntactical accumulation, or in Butterick's words "syntactical strain" ("Postmodern" 18). However, the dominant technique in this poem, as with most others by Olson, is the jarring use of the comma as caesurae. All these devices create a sense of tension or "struggle" within the poem, and Olson uses them intentionally to add intensity and speed to the poem through an abandonment of grammatically correct syntax.

Although there are few consistent structures to base a theory of Olson's prosody upon, mainly because postmodern poetry does not particularly adhere to preconceived forms, Olson's use of the comma as caesurae and his etymological emphasis on syntactical significance demonstrate his projective verse, and as Creeley suggests, emphasize the prosody of poetry and not its interpretation (Butterick, "Postmodern" 21; Creeley, *A*

Quick Graph 163). Similarly, in *Proprioception*, Olson describes his approach to writing as "[w]ord writing. Instead of 'idea-writing' (ideogram etc.). That would seem to be it" (3). Indeed, Pound's idea that "[p]rosody is the articulation of the total sound of the poem" can also be said to be shared by Olson (Creeley, *A Quick Graph* 163). Olson is more concerned with the overall sound of his poetry than he is with its meaning, and this further explains Riddel's assertion that Olson's poetry rarely returns to its subject because there is no need to return to the subject if the poetry is oriented toward sound and not meaning (Riddel 171, 175). It is, however, difficult to discuss Olson without recourse to the poetic symbol as subject.

The difference between a New Critical poet who emphasizes the poetic symbol as subject, what Olson calls symbology, and a poet emphasizing projectivism, is similar to those who "make use of traditional forms" for "discipline or solution," and those who, as Olson does, go "by ear" (Creeley, *A Quick Graph* 163). The difference between a New Critical poet and a projective poet like Olson is also the difference between poetry that seeks only to describe where Olson wishes to enact (Gray 281). This working "by ear," in Creeley's words, or by speech rhythms in Olson's words, contributes to Olson's unique typography or prosody. Therefore, in comparison with other pre-modern and modern poetry that is dominated by symbology, Olson's poetry will seem not to make "sense" from this stance.

The disparity between Olson's unique typography and that of a more traditional prosodic structure where rhyme and meter predominate can be more clearly seen if we

look at the opening verse of a George Herbert poem from 1633 – a poem which, from Olson's projectivist stance, exemplifies a much less immediate transference of energy:[5]

> The merry world did on a day
> With his train-bands and mates agree
> To meet together where I lay,
> And all in sport to jeer at me.
>
> ("The Quip," *George Herbert: The Complete English Poems* 102).

"The Quip," in visual form (the familiar quatrain), pre-modern diction ("The merry world did on a day"), traditionally established rhyme-scheme (abab), and the rhythm of iambic pentameter, creates, from Olson's view, more distance between the poet, the poem, and the modern reader of this poetry than projective verse. Simply put, for Olson the more "closed" a poem is to a projective stance the less kinetic it is. Olson's first principle of "Projective Verse," that "the poem itself must, at all points, be a high energy-construct and, at all points, an energy discharge," is intended to keep the poem more active and activating for the reader (*Selected Writings* 16). Therefore, this principle is in direct opposition to a deadening or dulling of language that occurs in poetry constructed from adhering to prescribed forms (such as iambic pentameter and rhyming couplets), established in most cases by a poetic formula that predates the twentieth century: "form

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[5]But it is interesting to note that Herbert's "Easter Wings"(1633), among other selections from *The Temple*, may be seen as quite "projective" for the seventeenth-century. Of particular note for the "projective" poet is how in "Easter Wings" the stanzas appear visually as "wings," or concrete poetry. However, not all poems from this collection are what Olson would refer to as projective, and even "Easter Wings" is not entirely projective in the contemporary sense because of its inherited (*apriori*) rhyme scheme.

got set by Sappho & Homer," Olson says, "and [form] hasn't changed much since" (*Selected Writings* 28).

Olson's idea for kinetic poetry depends upon the poet's openness to the energy forces of perception and language that are around him. The result, according to Olson's intellectual counterpart Robert Creeley, is that the poem is "some *thing*, a structure possessed of its own organization in turn derived from the circumstances of its making" (Creeley, *A Quick Graph* 186). Writing *projective*-ly then is a direct progression of perception, resulting in the knowledge that echoes the words of Edward Sapir, a linguist Olson quotes extensively in *Proprioception*: "style is not an absolute, a something that is to be imposed on the language from Greek or Latin models, but merely the language itself, running in its natural grooves" (Sapir, *Language* 242).

2.5 A Geneaology of Influence

The notion of the poem as an "energy-construct" was not entirely of Olson's own origination. In *The Poetry of Charles Olson: A Primer* (1982), Thomas F. Merrill documents that the idea came to Olson from his reading of Fenollosa, particularly Fenellosa's concept of the "sentence as a 'transferrence of power' applied to verse"; and from Ezra Pound, who, along with Williams years earlier, had developed the notion of the poem as a kinetic entity (49). Indeed, William Carlos Williams' essay "The Poem as a Field of Action," published in 1948, demanded a new view of poetry that is reminiscent of Olson's dabbling in non-Euclidean geometry and Einsteinian theories of relativity.

According to Williams, "[t]he one thing that the poet has not wanted to change. . . is structure" (283) and an attack on structure "must be concentrated on the *rigidity of the poetic foot*" (289). Therefore, he proposed: "sweeping changes from top to bottom of the poetic structure . . . . I say we are *through* with iambic pentameter. . . through with the measured quatrain, the staid concatenations of sounds in the usual stanza, the sonnet. . . . [b]ecause [the sonnet] is a form which does not admit of the slightest structural change in its composition"(281, 291). In "Projective Verse" Olson mirrors Williams' position when he says "[i]t would do no harm . . . if both rime and meter . . . sense and sound were less in the forefront of the mind than the syllable"; and, if this were to occur, the projective poet would be speaking language that is "least careless," but also "least logical," or anti-logical in Riddel's view (Olson, *Selected Writings* 18; Riddel 163).

In his seminal essay, Williams also demands a new observation of speech as it presently exists in order to "discover" or bring about the changes in poetic structure necessary to reinvigorate poetic language particularly, and language in general (290). In an analogy referring to "*dead* classics" that "we have *never heard* as living speech," Williams asserts that likewise "[n]o one has or can *hear* them as they were written any more than we can *hear* Greek today (290). Olson expresses a similar notion of language in "La Preface" where the dead are in the way (The dead in via / in vita nuova / in the way), obstructing the creation of new forms of thought in space and poetry (Olson, *Collected Poems* 46-7; Kellogg 69). A similar theme can be found in "As the Dead Prey Upon Us," but here the dead are as much a part of the living as they are of death:

> As the dead prey upon us,
> they are the dead in ourselves,
> awake, my sleeping ones, I cry out to you,
> disentangle the nets of being! . . .
>
> (*Collected Poems* 388)

Olson also declares his similarity with Williams in his essay "Human Universe" where he says that speech is in "need of restoration" (*Selected Writings* 54). In "Human Universe" Olson is attempting to reverse the influence that the "*dead* classics" (Williams 290) have had upon our conception of the speech act. The obvious affinities between Olson's ideas in "Projective Verse," which appears only two years after Williams' "The Poem as a Field of Action,"and his essay "Human Universe," published three years after Williams' essay and Olson's poetry, are quite startling. Both demand a new poetics that reflects the modern condition more so than traditional forms and the then status quo of New Critical poetics. Both also see this new poetic direction as being grounded within the way language is presently heard and used. This is why Olson and Williams attacked antiquated notions of poetic measurements, like the conception of the poetic foot, that contribute to the idea that the poem's content should be dominated by its form.

The separation between Olson and Creeley's thought here also seems to be not easily demarcated. Many of the ideas found in "Projective Verse" also appear in *Charles Olson and Robert Creeley: The Complete Correspondence* (1980), often predating the publication of "Projective Verse," albeit not in a fully synthesized manner. However, it is enough to note here that much of what becomes "Projective Verse" is an aggregate of (post)modern American poetic theories, such as those of Pound and Williams, the latter

whom later "borrowed" much of Olson's seminal essay in his own *Autobiography* (1951)[6], and others with whom he corresponded, such as Creeley, Edward Dahlberg, and Ezra Pound.

A coherency behind "Projective Verse" can be seen in Olson's explicit desire for a new, modern poetics, quite obviously against the inherited *a priori* traditions of New Critical poetry – what Olson termed the "NON-Projective"-- or "closed verse" (*Selected Writings* 15). To further clarify the distinction between projective verse and closed verse, Olson offers the second axiom of his poetics: "FORM IS NEVER MORE THAN AN EXTENSION OF CONTENT" (*Selected Writings* 16). The phrasing of this second doctrine is officially attributed to Robert Creeley.[7] This statement is the most famous phrase in "Projective Verse," an "overstated" and metaphysically oriented romantic conception that is offered as Olson's refutation of New Critical formalism (Kuberski 181). This notion depends greatly upon the next proposition in the essay "ONE PERCEPTION MUST IMMEDIATELY AND DIRECTLY LEAD TO A FURTHER PERCEPTION" (*Selected Writings* 17). The result, according to Altieri, is that the form of Olson's poetry is dependent upon the action of events, not discourse (176). Subsuming the importance of form under content is Olson's attempt to reverse the idea that form comes before ideas, which, consequently, stems directly from the Greek conception of the sentence as a

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[6]Williams included "Projective Verse" in the introduction to his autobiography without any mention of, or permission from, Charles Olson.

[7]"(Or so it phrased by one, R. Creeley, and it makes perfect sense to me. . .)" in *Selected Writings* 16.

"completed thought" (*Human Universe* 95). Furthermore, Creeley's claim epistemologically implies that the object of the poem is more complete than what is usually thought (von Hallberg 114). Poetic content exists as its own form. This form is present in the content of the poem even before a poet imposes his own formal conceptions upon it. The process of extending content into form is the task that the projective poet must pursue. Translating form into content is the activity as discovery, according to Creeley.

In a 1978 interview with William Spanos, Creeley offers the best description of content becoming form. Here he likens the process to emptying a glass of water on the floor: ". . . take a glass of water and just dump it on the floor. The fact of water – the content inherently of water – discovers a form – a form specific to its "nature," to put it loosely – on the surface it meets. No idea of water will change that situation . . ." (Spanos, "Talking" 22). Similarly, in the posthumously released *Muthologos* (1978), Olson says "[y]ou enter the subject matter, and *that* projection is where you permit your feeling to flow and go out through the subject matter" (*Muthologos* 1: 184). The key idea to glean from this second precept is that content acts as the nucleus for the formal appearance and sound of the poem. This then supposedly results in a simultaneity of form and content at the moment(s) of creation and reception. However, if form precedes content, and therefore dictates content, then the type of poetic experience for both poet and reader is less immediate, less free, and less natural than its projective counterpart. This idea, perhaps communicated more precisely in Olson's correspondences with Robert Creeley, is that "[t]he 'formal' has killed what the head: might get into: in that it has put

menial/ enclosed/ work: what it sd have been determining, ONLY as an extension of its center: in any given work. Which is to say: as now, in many, the insistence on an attention (FIRST) to possible castings for a content" (*Olson-Creeley Correspondence*, 1:63). Both Creeley and Olson are opposed to any formal control of the poem because in their view it gives rise to a static work, whereas a free-flowing, keen attentiveness to acting as an ego-less, non-controlling agency manifests itself as an open, projective work. Although the concept is hard to accept as a poetic principle because of its almost naive idealism, it is best to understand it as a rejection of New Critical formalism.

The third principle of "Projective Verse" derives directly from Olson's redefinition of the relationship of content and form which defines the *"process"* of the poem as a progression that moves rapidly between a multiplicity of perceptions. Olson phrases it as: "ONE PERCEPTION MUST MOVE IMMEDIATELY AND DIRECTLY LEAD TO A FURTHER PERCEPTION" (*Selected Writings* 17). This statement, along with his emphasis on the poem as kinetic entity, explains Olson's "high tolerance for disorder" in his poetry (Butterick, "Postmodern" 22). The interrelationship of these two poetic ideals becomes apparent when Olson says "keep moving, keep in, speed, the nerves, their speed, their perceptions, theirs, the acts, the split second acts, the whole business, keep it moving as fast as you can citizen . . . always, always, one perception must must must MOVE, INSTANTER, ON ANOTHER!" (*Selected Writings* 17). He gives Edward Dahlberg,[8]

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[8]Edward Dahlberg has authored *Bottom Dogs*, *Those Who Perish*, *The Flea of Sodom*, as well as other works. Most interesting to Olson scholars, however, is his influence on Olson's own *Call Me Ishmael* (1947) – a book on Herman Melville and *Moby Dick*.

mentor, author, and rector of Black Mountain College before Olson took over as rector from 1951-6, credit for this idea: "I think it can be boiled down into one statement (first pounded into my head by Edward Dahlberg) . . ."(*Selected Writings* 17).

Olson acknowledges Dahlberg as the source for this dogma and John Cech suggests that Dahlberg is responsible for the initial phrasing *and* poetic practice that became perfected by Olson in "Projective Verse." In his book *Charles Olson and Edward Dahlberg: A Portrait of a Friendship* (1982), Cech says "Dahlberg had been instrumental in helping Olson to define the process by which the projective poet should work" (111). Indeed, during the winter of 1945, in a unpublished manuscript, Olson declares his insistence on the racing immediacy of perceptual progression: "Leap ahead and try the ambitions. Go to the extreme of your imagination and go on from there: fail large, never succeed small. Again ED [Dahlberg] makes sense: one intuition must only lead to another farther place"(qtd. in Cech, 88-9; from an unpublished manuscript note in Olson Archive at the University of Connecticut). This gives Olson's poems a "dizzying quality" (Christensen 72) that move through a helter-skelter montage of rapidly juxtaposed images. This "process" gives Olson's poems their speed, their cascading abstractions, their force, and their unhindered intellectual toponymy; but this principle is yet another idealism that finds its way into Olson's postmodern poetry (Kuberski 181) .

2.6 Reading the Poem "Projectively"

Now if we return to "A Newly Discovered 'Homeric' Hymn"we can see all the

principles of "Projective Verse" in operation:

> Direction—a directed magnitude—is
> resurrection
>
> All that has been
>
> suddenly is: time
>
> is the face
>
> of recognition, Rhoda Straw; or my son
>
> is a Magyar. The luminousness
>
> of my daughter
>
> to her mother
>
> by a stream:
>
> apocatastasis . . .

(*Selected Poems* 66-7)

The progression of perception in Olson's poems can be seen in the way the syllables of each phrase are juxtaposed with one another. Olson relies upon the syllable as the rhythmic measure of his poetry because it allows the poems to be more dynamic than if they were written according to the rhythm of the metrical foot. Olson's emphasis on the syllable is also an attempt to base the rhythm of his poetry upon the natural rhythms of breath and speech (Riddel 180). Altieri correctly sees Olson's argument for breath as a part of the "rhythmic measure" of his poetry as a "questionable" attempt to replace New Critical or formalist conceptions of poetic rhythm (178). As such, it is best to see Olson's breath argument as an idealistic extension of his notion of the syllable as guiding rhythmic

measure for the poem. Furthermore, a syllable can be seen in terms of basic rhythmic patterns – "be" and "being" for example, have one and two syllables, or beats, respectively. With the syllable acting as guiding agent in the poem's rhythm we no longer need any knowledge of metrical feet and rhythmic variation inherited from Greek, Latin, and European models. The projective poet can now create lines that break in accordance with the rhythm of respiration and the natural rhythms inherent in the words themselves.

In the first phrase of "A Newly Discovered 'Homeric' Hymn" the word "Direction" has three beats or syllables, and it is separated by a dash, which acts like a rest in musical notation, "[f]or the fist time the poet has the stave and bar a musician has had" (*Selected Writings* 22); this is then followed by the seven beats of "a directed magnitude,"which is again followed by a dash or rest, with the line finally ending with "is," which contains one beat. Thus, there is an initial build up of pace, moving from three beats to seven. The section's contrapuntality occurs, however, when "is" the single-beat word, is left dangling at the end of the line, slowing the pace of the poem's progression, creating a dizzying movement in the first line. However, the pause also acts as a kind of "half-rest," to borrow another term from music, before beginning the next line with "resurrection." It is also a further example of what Riddel describes as Olson's "decentering of the poetic line," and it is brought about by Olson's emphasis on poetic logic rather than discursive logic (Riddel 180; Altieri 174).

The word "resurrection" contains four syllables or beats, and it is the only word that comprises the second line of the excerpt. It also acts as a kind of temporary time-

signature for the next rhythmic cluster of four beats that can be seen and heard in "All that has been /"and "suddenly is." The stability of the line's rhythm is slightly jarred with the interjection of "is" at the end of the fourth line. This allows the reader to take the poem's cue that the word following "is" must be read and understood at a slower, pause-for-thought pace, and this important word is, ultimately, "time."

All that has been

suddenly is: time

is the face

of recognition, Rhoda Straw; or my son . . .

(*Collected Poems* 66-67)

"Time" is "All that has been" and both "Time" and "All that has been" are "the face/of recognition, Rhoda Straw; or my son . . .," due to the repetition of "is." This excerpt of "A Newly Discovered 'Homeric' Hymn" shows the kinetics of the poem as an energy construct containing various spiraling rhythms which depend upon Olson's compounding a multiplicity of images and perceptions within short abruptive lines. The visual appearance of the poem and its grammatical, as well as rhythmic, structure are characteristic of Olson's non-linear syntax.

"Projective Verse" is arguably the most important essay ever written by Charles Olson. However, George F. Butterick believes that Olson's essay "Human Universe" is the most important work in Olson's canon. In that essay Olson articulates his criticism of logical discourse that is only implicitly stated in "Projective Verse." Indeed, Olson himself

saw "Human Universe" as the central foundation for his ideas on poetry, philosophy, language, and culture. He called the essay the "base," "body," and "substance" of his "faith" (Olson, *Letters for Origin* 69). As such, "Human Universe" provides the necessary detail for Olson's unique syntactical experiments in poetry and prose. However, "Projective Verse" is still the most effective description of what Olson means by postmodern prosody. It is within this piece that he clearly demarcates the differences between a projectivism that is "projectile, percussive, and prospective" and a closed verse which is none of these things (*Selected Writings* 15). Like "Human Universe," "Projective Verse," is also a necessary template with which to understand his poetry and prose. Olson's projectivism is by no means limited to his poetry, and even in the visual representation of the 1950 essay, with its shorthand and characteristically atypical breaks and bracketing, we can see that it too is projective. It should be noted that Olson's writing – whether poetry or prose – is always following the syntactical rules first set out in "Projective Verse" to some extent. It can also be said that Olson becomes more projective as he develops; this can be seen in the progression of his writing from 1950's "Projective Verse" through to *Proprioception* and *The Maximus Poems*.

In the second section of "Projective Verse," and continuing into "Letter to Elaine Feinstein," which has subsequently become attached to the end of Projective Verse in the influential collections *The Selected Writings of Charles Olson* (1966) and *Collected Prose: Charles Olson* (1997), Olson begins to develop the "why" behind his projective project. Here Olson criticizes the Hellenistic tradition and its dissemination of *logos* as "word as

thought" for the first time (21). It is a philosophical position that attempts to explain his projective project in poetry and prose, and it continues more explicitly in later works like *Human Universe* (1967), *The Special View of History* (1970), and *Muthologos* (1979). The anti-Hellenistic stance that Olson adopts in these polemical writings becomes a recurring theme in his thoughts on poetry, philosophy, history, and pedagogy. It is also an extraordinarily similar position to Martin Heidegger's in his later writings, particularly those concerned with the nature of language, and this explains why there have been many Heideggerean readings of Olson's poetry and prose.[9] The most notable of these studies are Paul Bove's *Destructive Poetics: Heidegger and Modern American Poetry* (1980), William Spanos' "Charles Olson and Negative Capability: A Phenomenological Interpretation" (1980), and most recently, Judith Halden-Sullivan's *The Topology of Being: The Poetics of Charles Olson* (1991). However, it must be said that Olson's argument is often marred by a serious lack of critical detail that must necessarily accompany any serious criticism of post-Socratic Greek philosophy. This is perhaps another reason why critics have turned to Heidegger in Olson studies.

However, regardless of Olson's lack of analytical rigor in his criticism of Greek philosophy, it can be posited that much of Olson's work marks a definitive break with neo-

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[9]It should be noted that Martin Heidegger's philosophy, like Olson's poetics, represents a definitive break with the logocentric discourse of philosophy as we commonly understand it. Heidegger's writings cannot properly be assimilated into the canon of the discipline because they rebel against it. Where there is rigidly logical philosophical investigations there is the "anti-logic" of Heidegger's "mysticism." Here, I am arguing that Heidegger, unlike Spinoza et al, is a very *projective* philosopher.

classical and pre-modern conceptions of poetry. Olson's poetry, prose, and interviews often critique the poetic *a priori*, and Western culture as obsolete thought-structures. Interestingly, however, much of Olson's argument hinges upon his translation of the Greek concept *logos*, particularly the consequences it holds for the way we understand and use language. The next chapter attempts to provide the details that Olson often avoids in his critique of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. This necessarily includes a discussion of Olson's unique notion of discourse, how it depends upon a reevaluation of *logos*, and how this is perhaps the main unifying philosophical idea in Olson's work.

Chapter 3

3.1 Introduction

Within a year of the publication of "Projective Verse," in February 1951, Charles Olson moved from Washington D.C., to Lerma, Mexico, for six months, partly to recover from the death of his mother (Christensen 18). Here Olson began an intensive correspondence with both Cid Corman, editor of *Origin* magazine, one of the first dedicated to the avant-garde poetry movement associated with Black Mountain College, and continued his correspondence with Robert Creeley.[10] It is from these letters that several significant literary projects, particularly the essay "Human Universe" and *Mayan Letters* (1953), were first conceived.[11]

"Projective Verse" is where the process by which Olson struggles to free his own mind from Western philosophy takes shape as a new view of the world, but it is in the essay "Human Universe" that this view becomes more apparent. As such, these two works should be viewed as two parts of a greater movement that is more than just a poetical or a philosophical statement: it is a reevaluation of the very foundations of our

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[10]See the photographs between pages 112 and 113 in Paul Christensen's *Charles Olson: Call Him Ishmael* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1979). Here, Christensen acknowledges that "Cid Corman was the backbone of the Black Mountain movement in the early years with his magazine *Origin*, which helped launch Olson and the figures of his circle."

[11]*Mayan Letters*, consists of Olson's letters to Robert Creeley while Creeley was living in Mallorca, and Olson in Lerma. It was originally published by Divers Press (Mallorca, 1953).

place in existence.

Beginning with "Projective Verse" and "Human Universe," and continuing through his later poetry and prose, Olson is characteristically struggling to come to terms with his role within a postmodern, dialectical shift that intentionally moves away from the foundations of Western thought. The problem, for Olson, is that Western metaphysics caused a disproportionate emphasis upon the discriminating and logical side of language as opposed to the more chaotic and natural side, more akin to the "rules" of live speech (*Selected Writings* 54). Olson's position against Western metaphysics hinges upon his assertion that the dissemination of post-Socratic philosophy ushered in the milieu of literacy and with it the idea of a logically structured language system.[12]

In the closing pages of "Projective Verse" it is obvious that Olson is against the standard rules of syntax and grammar he feels we have inherited from Greek and Latin models: "the conventions which logic has forced on syntax," he says, "must be broken open" (*Selected Writings* 21). In "Human Universe," Olson is attempting to explain in more detail the significance of his projective project and why it is necessary for him to break with the Greek metaphysical tradition. As a poet interested in positing a new formulation of poetic language, Olson realizes that his critique of the Western metaphysical tradition must begin with the re-examination of discourse founded on

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[12]See the last part of Plato's *Phaedrus* in *The Collected Dialogues of Plato: Including the Letters*, ed., Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961), 475-525, for a discussion about the epistemic break that occurred when written language displaced the spoken.

humanist ideals.

Interestingly, twelve years after "Human Universe" was written Olson recognized through his reading of Eric Havelock's *Preface to Plato* (1963) much of his argument against Greek metaphysics actually focused on what Havelock explained as "the Separation of the Knower from the Known" (Olson, *Collected Prose* 355-9; Havelock 198). This concept is how Havelock refers to the revolutionary change that occurred with the appearance of Socrates toward the end of the fifth century B.C. This phenomenon was the "counterpart of the rejection of oral culture" (Havelock 233), and it was, in Olson's view, the start of the separation between the human universe and the discursive universe.

Much like Olson, Martin Heidegger also investigated the nature of the Greek metaphysical tradition in his later writings, particularly in *An Introduction to Metaphysics* (1959). There are affinities between Olson and Heidegger's critique of Greek metaphysics, and this accounts for several Heideggerean studies on Olson, such as William Spanos' "Charles Olson and Negative Capability: A Phenomenological Interpretation" (1980), Paul Bove's *Destructive Poetics: Heidegger and Modern American Poetry* (1980), and Judith Halden-Sullivan's *The Topology of Being: The Poetics of Charles Olson* (1991).

Olson's argument against Western metaphysics is present in both his poetry and prose. Although excerpts from *The Maximus Poems* are used occasionally to show that Olson's poetry and prose are extensions of the same project, this chapter is not an attempt to deal in detail with the massive structure of Olson's long poem. Rather, it is an

investigation of Olson's critique of the Western metaphysical tradition, beginning with "Human Universe" as the focal point of his critique. The discussion then provides an analysis of the connection between Olson and Heidegger's projects. The chapter concludes with a reading of "La Torre," one of Olson's first poems to critique the Western tradition.

3.2 Socrates, or "Old Stink Sock"

In Olson's view, Socratic philosophy was the beginning of a deliberate invention of a false *episteme* that became characterized by its "belief in a dialectic of Socrates' order," and a new sense of metaphor which became fully manifested in Aristotle as "a part or parcel of the Plato-Socrates generalization system, species genus and analogy, similarity and contiguousness, including – let it be emphasized – the periodic sentence" (*Collected Prose* 355). In "Human Universe" Olson insists that around 450 B.C. a general preoccupation with generalization, logic, classification, and idealism all begin to dominate Greek language and thought (54-5). This discursive bias toward *logos*, which Olson had previously defined as "word as thought" in "Projective Verse" (*Selected Writings* 21), corrupted our concept and use of language as a speech act (*Selected Writings* 54-5).

In Olson's thought *logos* is interchangeable with the term discourse, and it is diametrically opposed to the notion of speech as act. Olson's conception of discourse is quite different from other modern notions of discourse, such as those of Bakhtin in *The Dialogic Imagination*, and Foucault in *The Order of Things* and *The Archaeology of*

Knowledge, where the term "discourse" often refers to the speech act. With Olson, discourse is not seen as being heavily dominated by the speech-force element of language. Rather, discourse is seen as inordinately formed by logic and structure. The result of post-Socratic metaphysical discourse is an unnatural and arbitrarily man-made discursive bias that reveals that "language's other function, speech, seems so in need of restoration" (*Selected Writings* 54).

In a 1956 seminar at Black Mountain College Olson specifically describes the moment when Socratic philosophy replaced the human universe (which becomes the mythological in his later work) with the rational:

> But you will see what happened the moment the mythological [human universe] was displaced by the rational (date, sometime around 440 B.C. Socrates) but datable back from that date to some point inside and after Heraclitus . . . because the will and culture was always ready to put out the light (any one of us has the danger to sleep), if you do what the rational does – to seek one explanation – or to put it more evenly, undo the paradox (the rational mind hates the familiar, and has to make it ordinary by explaining it, in order not to experience it), you can easily see why the West has been halved [into subject and object and the human and discursive universes], and each of the persons in it for nigh unto two and a half millennia.
>
> (*The Special View of History* 31)

In the seminar, which subsequently became part of *The Special View of History* (1970), Olson described the epistemic rupture that occurred when Socrates began questioning knowledge systems and systems of experience that had previously existed. The development of Socratic dialectic and its eventual widespread dissemination, in Olson's mind, severed humanity from what it had originally known, and in its place a totally new

system of thought arose, one that was based on an otherworldly and intangible idealism.

In going back through the history of Western metaphysics, Olson offers 450 B.C., roughly the year Socrates began teaching his dialectical philosophy, as the moment when *logos*, or "word as thought"(*Selected Writings* 21), took hold of the Western mind, forever changing the nature of epistemological enquiry. Prior to this time, Greek thought, particularly in the area of philosophy, was more concerned with investigating phenomena as such because a systematic study of the phenomenal world had yet to be developed. The rigid system of logical deduction, dialectic, and idealism that began to manifest itself more prominently with the appearance of Socrates was not as prevalent in the less systematic thinkers of pre-Socratic Greece. However, in the progression of pre-Socratic thought from Anaximander (ca. 610-ca. 546 B.C.) to Heraclitus (fl. 500 B.C.) and Parmenides (fl. ca. 485 B.C.?), Greek philosophy moves from a general enquiry into the infinite, or indefinite, fundamental principle of the world (Anaximander's *apeiron*), toward a distinction between knowledge and belief, and being and nothingness (Parmenides' investigation of the one and the many, knowledge and justice).

Interestingly, Olson sees pre-Socratic Greek philosophy as belonging to a time that was the opposite of Socrates' generalizing discourse. With the appearance of Socrates there also came a loss of an original wholeness when language was tied to its referents (Kuberski 179). However, it must be said that Olson's critique of Western metaphysics is not a new approach within American literature; according to Kuberski, there is a recurrent pattern in American literature to try and establish new discourses as a return to original

truths (175). Olson's attempt to establish his "human" universe as an older one with links to older truths that existed before Socrates is also what Riddel has referred as "going back to come forward" (162). This concept of "going back to come forward" explains why Olson uses Heraclitus, a philosopher who emphasized the notion of flux, as opposed to Socrates, whose philosophy emphasized stasis. Olson returns to Heraclitus because he is an important figure in opposing Socratic philosophy. It is Heraclitus who helps Olson formulate the notion of estrangement that he believes results from the post-Socratic division of the human and discursive universes (*The Special View of History* 15; *The Maximus Poems* 52).

For Charles Olson, a modern thinker fascinated by what he saw as an innate fallacy within the Greek philosophical tradition, the movement from pre-Socratic philosophical investigation to Socratic dialectic is analogous to a movement of thought conceived through "language as the act of the instant" to thought conceived through "language as the act of thought about the instant" (*Human Universe* 4). Before Socrates, we had no need for the mediation of logical reasoning to render this experience in language. After Socrates, however, logic and reason dominate language and thought, and poetry and speech become less kinetic and less projective. Hence, in Olson's view, our original, pre-Socratic understanding of poetry and speech becomes estranged from us by the logocentric bias of post-Socratic thought.

Indeed, Olson thought that 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" (*Human Universe* 4), led directly to *logos* and reason becoming final philosophy, or, in Kantian terms an end-in-itself. *Logos* and reason should have remained on equal terms with poetry and speech; they should have remained as a means to an end, instead of being elevated to an arbitrarily important level ("the Greeks went on to declare all speculation as disclosed in a 'UNIVERSE of discourse'") (4). From Olson's theory it follows that if one aspect of the language dichotomy becomes drastically privileged over another, one part of the dichotomy will, in a sense, atrophy:

> 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 . . . . It is not sufficiently observed that logos, and the reason necessary to it, are only a stage which a man must master and not what they are taken to be, final discipline. Beyond them is direct perception and the contraries which dispose of argument. 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. (*Selected Writings* 54-5).

Olson's human universe, which is really a Romantic state of unmediated experience through direct sensory perception, poetry, and speech, became illegitimized as an important part of discovering and understanding. As a result, thought and action are so interfered with that Olson's concept of the post-logical harmony of the universe cannot be experienced.

For Olson, the direct problems that result from post-Socratic epistemology are that man has settled for too little knowledge, and, as a result, definition follows discovery too quickly (*Human Universe* 3). Indeed, although it is impossible to avoid being subjective on any level, Olson felt definition had become as dominant a part of discovery as sensation

(3). In other words, we have become both "the instrument of discovery and the instrument of definition" (3). By becoming the instrument of discovery *and* definition we continue to perpetuate humanistic modes of thinking and structures of language (grammar, syntax, rhyme scheme, etc.). Therefore, Olson must examine language in its "present condition" as the vehicle of this discourse that allows one aspect of language (*logos*) to dominate the other (speech) (3). It follows that if a balance can be achieved whereby the nonrational, projective, "shout"of language can be restored to an equal position with logos, then maybe the metaphysical sins of Western humanism can be first exposed and eliminated. For Olson restoring the spoken half of the language dichotomy necessarily involves a critique of Western metaphysics and this characterizes him as a postmodernist (Kellogg 63; Butterick, "Postmodern" 7).

3.3 Plato the "Honey-Head"

In "Human Universe" Olson also attacks Plato for his "world of Ideas, of forms as extricable from content" because they are as dangerous to the human universe as Aristotle's logic and classification (*Human Universe* 5). Platonic idealism, with its emphasis on the superiority of reason over imagination, and the dependence of the phenomenal world on a world of forms is nothing less than what Olson wanted to eradicate in "Projective Verse" and "Human Universe." More specifically, Olson's critique centers on Plato's idealistic philosophy that distinguishes between two worlds of existence: the temporal and immediate reality of the physical world; and the eternal and perfect world

of forms. For Plato, knowledge and experience of this world are inevitably transitory because we are mired in the trap of our fluctuating passions and appetites. All things within the realm of the physical world, therefore, are merely lesser representations of their perfect and otherwordly form. Knowledge and experience of the world of forms, however, is completely the opposite: it is eternal and it is the highest truth. More importantly for Olson, however, is avoiding what Plato's idealism ultimately causes: an overemphasis of form over content, which plays a major role in separating the human universe from the universe of discourse. Plato's idealistic metaphysics is yet another example for Charles Olson of how the "whole Greek system" has carved up and divided the human universe (5).

In Olson's view, the very presence of a world of forms relegates the status of our physical existence in this world to an inferior position. Olson felt that we did not need Plato's notion of form because "built in is the connection, in each of us, to Cosmos, and if one taps, via psyche, plus a 'true' adherence of Muse ["the Muse ('world"], one does reveal 'Form'"(*Human Universe* 97). Concepts of form do not come from the heavens, but rather from the inspiration of the individual mind. Furthermore, Olson also explicitly blames Plato for the transformation of *logos* as speech act to logic and reason (*ratio*). In a lecture from 1968 Olson says "I want you all to realize that the word *logos*, or logical has been ruined without your knowing it in your experience . . . ."; *logos* was originally part of the larger concept of *muthologos* that included both *muthos* or mouth, and *logos* (*Muthologos 2*: 37-8). Olson states this more clearly in "Letter 23" of his *Maximus*

sequence:

. . . Plato

allowed this divisive

thought to stand, agreeing

that *muthos*

is false. *Logos*

isn't – was facts . . . .

(*The Maximus Poems* 100)

Perhaps Olson's aversion to Plato came from his immersion in Melville, who saw Plato as a "honey-head. . . treacherous to all ants," or would-be-idealists (*Human Universe* 5). Plato, Olson said during a 1968 interview with Alisdair Clayre, which was subsequently broadcast on the BBC in the summer of 1969,[13] was "frightened of the arts sharing the center of the curriculum with philosophy and mathematics and sculpture and dance. He's scared of the dogmatism and the absolutism of art."[14] In another interview that touches upon Plato's philosophy Olson says ". . . in *The Republic* in general but I think in the tenth book in particular – Plato drives the poets out, including Homer and

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[13]See Charles Olson, *Muthologos: The Collected Lectures and Interviews, Volume II*, Edited by George F. Butterick (Bolinas: Four Seasons Foundation, 1979), 80.

[14]Charles Olson, quoted in Robert von Hallberg's *Charles Olson: The Scholar's Art* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978), 17.

Hesiod, from the education and the preparation of people for society and civilization" (*Muthologos 2*: 80). Similarly, in the sixth book of the *Republic* Plato (through the voice of Socrates), uses the metaphor of a line to explain his theories of knowledge, form, education, and the state. The line itself symbolizes a vertical movement upwards from the lowest form of perception (imagination) to the highest form (true knowledge or understanding), and represents the division between sensate perception and the knowledge of things through reason. By placing imagination at the bottom of his line and reason at the top, Plato clearly separates the creative arts and poetry, perhaps his most often used example of the irrational, from philosophy and logic: ". . . the poetic man also uses names and phrases to color each of the arts. He himself doesn't understand; but he imitates in such a way as to seem . . ." he says, because "[t]he maker of the phantom [the poet], the imitator, we say, understands nothing of what *is* but rather of what looks like it *is*. Isn't that so?" (Allan Bloom 283-4). As translated, Plato's view states that sensation, perception, imagination, and poetry are inferior modes of experience and it is only through reason and logic that true knowledge can be obtained. Consequently, poetry and the creative arts are removed from any prominent position within the *Republic* because they would undermine the importance of reason and logic.

Understandably, Olson's poetic has been seen as being both a struggle against the "Western tradition"and a critique of Platonic metaphysics partly because Olson attempts to reverse the idealism represented in Plato's line and cave analogies (Butterick, "Postmodern" 7; Kellogg 63; Doria 138). Much like Shelley's argument in "Defence of

Poetry," Olson reverses the position of Plato's line by emphasizing the importance of poetry and imagination over reason and logic because Olson believes this reversal will achieve a balance between *logos* and speech, restoring us to our once familiar human universe. One can see Olson's transposition of Platonic idealism when he describes a similar situation to Plato's cave analogy in his 1964 poem, "The Lamp," except that here the images being projected are those on a cinema screen. The cave dwellers are now movie goers locked in the darkness of their imagination, watching images move on the screen, creating their own notions of form from their own content. For Olson, this "darkness" is a completely natural and beneficial state of perception. Indeed, in direct opposition to Plato, Olson thinks it is possible for the subject to "know" the image without knowledge of Platonic forms because one's own individual perception constructs form. Olson's reliance on "poetic logic" as opposed to the discursive logic of Plato's rational thought is an attack on what Olson sees as Plato's false assumption that "teleology of form [is] progressive," because for Olson it is only content that is dynamic and progressive (Altieri 174; Olson, *Special View of History* 48).

> You can hurry the pictures toward you but
> there is that point that the whole thing itself
> may be a passage, and that your own ability
> may be a factor in time, in fact that
> only if there is a coincidence of yourself
> & the [human] universe is there then in fact
> an event. Otherwise – and surely here the cinema
> is large – the auditorium can be showing
> all the time. But the question is
> how you yourself are doing, if you in fact
> are equal, in the sense that as a *like power*

> you also are there when the lights
> go on. This wld [sic] seem to be a
> matter of creation, not simply
> the obvious matter, creation
> itself . . .
>
> ("The Lamp,"*Collected Poems* 614)

In Plato's philosophy, knowledge of an image in fact represents false knowledge or imagination. For Plato the highest mode of knowledge is not imagination or opinion but understanding or intellection. From Olson's projective stance, however, the opposite is true: reason must first be mastered in order to understand imagination (*Human Universe* 4). Continuing Shelley's argument that began with the "Defence of Poetry," Olson sees reason, logic and classification as only the most rudimentary stage in understanding experience, because for him real knowledge is post-logical (*Human Universe* 5; Shelley 503).

Perhaps the main unifying idea in the progression of Olson's prose is his insistence that the appearance of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle beginning around 450 B.C. began a tyranny of linguistic laws that made *logos* a language unto its own, fostering the discursive methods of logical formulation and classification through a disproportionate emphasis upon *logos* in conceptions of language and poetry (Christensen 51). However, Olson's argument against Plato's "world of Ideas" with its "forms as extricable from content" has also been seen as "strangely Platonic" and therefore guilty of idealism (Olson, *Selected Writings* 55; Kuberski 181). Olson's critique of Plato in "Human Universe" is an extension of his argument against formalism in "Projective Verse," where he states that "FORM IS NEVER MORE THAN AN EXPRESSION OF CONTENT" (*Selected*

Writings 17). In "Projective Verse" Olson does not critique the source of his argument against formalism, but in "Human Universe" he traces it back to Plato's world of forms. Olson's reversal of Plato's conception of form is not a way out of idealism, but rather a substitution of Plato's idealism for his own: the idea that an original language existed which was then lost or corrupted by the domination of *logos* is a common Romantic conception of the loss of an "original wholeness" (Kuberski 179).

In the second part of "Human Universe" Olson's idealism continues when he offers an idyllic account of his experience with the descendants of the Maya in Mexico as a "civilization anterior" (Creeley, *A Quick Graph* 159) to Ancient Greece. Olson saw the Maya as the perfect embodiment of a culture that retained the balance between speech act as the "act of the instant" and logical discourse as the "act of thought about the instant" in their hieroglyphic language (*Selected Writings* 54). Olson was obviously impressed with the way the Mayans invented a language that retained "the power over objects of which they are images," their domestication of maize ("one of the world's wonders") and the way they carried their bodies. Olson makes huge generalizing assumptions about the Maya in order to provide himself with an "alternative to a generalising humanism" that he saw in Greek metaphysics (Creeley, *A Quick Graph* 159). Indeed, Olson typically abandons logical facts and argumentative analysis when it suits his own needs. Although Olson offers an alternative to formalism and idealism in his critique of Plato, Olson can be fairly criticized for overt generalizations and naive assumptions that undermine his project.

Although some Heideggerean Olson scholars such as Bove in *Destructive Poetics:*

History and Interpretation in Heidegger and Modern Poetry and Spanos in "Charles Olson and Negative Capability: A Phenomenologocal Interpretation" have insisted that Olson's project is concerned with the "destruction of the Western [metaphysical] tradition" (Spanos 75), it is better to see Olson's project as an attempt to break with the tradition of Western metaphysics than it is an attempt to destroy it because Olson himself occasionally falls victim to the Platonic idealism that he wishes to eradicate and cannot be seen, therefore, as offering a destruction of or solution to Plato's idealist philosophy.

3.4 Aristotle, or "Hairystottle"

For Olson, Aristotle's influence as a philosopher has only further added to the marginalization of poetry and speech as reliable forms for understanding perception and experience in Western thought. Even in a later work, Olson mockingly refers to the philosopher as "Hairystottle," humorously undercutting Aristotle's prominent position in Western history (*The Special View of History* 40). Indeed, in a simplistic way, the progression of Western thought can be seen as merely adding to the habits of logic and classification generated by Aristotle in such works as the *Organon*[15], where he was the first to develop a form of logical argumentation based upon the syllogism.[16] This kind of

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[15]*Organon* is the collective name for the body of Aristotle's work that deals specifically with logic and thought as the instruments of knowledge. The *Organon* comprises *The Categories*, *The Prior and Posterior Analytics*, *The Topics*, and *On Interpretation*.

[16]The most famous syllogism is based upon the facts that (a) all people are mortal and (b) Socrates is a person, therefore: (c) Socrates is mortal.

reasoning is based upon comparison, which along with symbology, Olson blames for hiding and rendering the active (kinetic) intellectual states of metaphor and performance unusable (*Human Universe* 6). Olson denies the importance of description, comparison, and symbology as literary motifs because they ultimately deny, in his view of Whitehead's nature as process, the continual process of reality.

Olson specifically criticizes Aristotle for providing the "two great means" of logic and classification that "have so fastened themselves on habits of thought" that they prevent thought as the act of the instant (*Human Universe* 5). Aristotle's thought emphasized logical inference and classification, a distinction between form and matter, as well as four kinds of causes: material, efficient, formal, and final. Aristotle contributed much to the dominance of the syntactical sentence within the logically structured rule system of language. For Olson, however:

> There are no hierarchies, no infinite, no such many as mass, there are only
> eyes in all heads,
> to be looked out of
>
> (*The Maximus Poems* 29)

Furthermore, any thing at any given time can only be understood through its self-existence because only something that exists through itself can become meaningful (*Muthologos 1*: 129). Therefore, analogy, comparison, and symbology necessarily fail as literary techniques and techniques of discovery because they deny the very fact of a thing's self-existence by attempting to understand it through something else.

> 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 . . . . but that such an analysis [comparison and classification] only accomplishes a description, does not come to terms 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 . . . . This is what we are confronted by, not the thing's 'class,' any hierarchy, of quality or quantity, but the thing itself, and its relevance to ourselves who are the experience of it . . .
>
> (*Human Universe* 6)

In Olson's view, the monocultural dominant of the Platonic-Aristotelian tradition has prevented humans from directly experiencing and engaging the world. We must restore speech to its rightful place within the language dichotomy if we are to begin to undo the effect Hellenistic logocentrism has had on our perception and language. Indeed, for Olson's projective philosophy (objectism), description, and definition are not valid because they ultimately neglect the self-existence of the thing in question In other words, because of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, Olson feels "we do not find ways to hew to experience as it is, in our definition and expression of it," or "find ways to stay in the human universe, and not be led to partition reality at any point, in any way" (*Human Universe* 5). Indeed, we have allowed comparison, description, and classification to dominate our perception through their influence on Western thought, but for Olson it is also a

> . . .question of re-establishing a concept of knowledge as culture rather than what's wrong with the schools, I mean that already anyone who wants to begin to get straight has to, to start, a straight man has to un-educate himself first, in order to begin to pick up, to take up, you get back, in order to get on.
>
> (*Human Universe* 17)

Ultimately, analytical categories like description, comparison, and simile filter and distort

sensory experience, rendering them incapable of grasping the process and self-formation of the things in question.

Perhaps the most obvious example of logic and classification that Olson repeatedly returned to was Aristotle's influence on grammar, and particularly how this grammar affects poetry. The very notion of having a logically structured language system that emphasizes the form of how we say something over what we are saying indicates, from a projective stance, that imposing grammatical form upon the content of our ideas directly contributes to a loss of energy. Grammatical structures directly result in language that is "the act of thought about the instant" (*Selected Writings* 54), and as such they slow down the initial kinetic inspiration that often characterizes Olson's language.

An example of Olson's rebellion against Aristotelian grammatical form can be seen in his refusal to adhere to the dominance that syntax exerts in logically structured language. The sentence is commonly understood to be formed by both noun and predicate and it must express a complete thought. For Olson, however, the sentence is "a transfer of force, from object to object by verb" so that the "very act of the sentence is the dynamic which matters" (*The Special View of History* 45). Aristotelian hierarchy and classification divided reality into subject and object and substance and quality which from Olson's projective view, prevents the expression of our immediate actions (Whitehead 68; von Hallberg, "Olson, Whitehead, and the Objectivists" 93). Therefore, Olson concludes that in order to bring about the dynamic of Fenellosa's concept of the sentence as an energy transfer "one has to go back to the original noun-verb terms [the pre-Aristotelian notion

of noun and verb where the verb is more active and less cognitive]" (*The Special View of History* 45). This is why Olson offered a projective verse to counteract the division of subject and predicate, and substance and quality, that he found in non-projective syntax.

As he did in his critique of Plato, Olson based much of his argument against Aristotle on the Romantic idea of a golden era that existed before Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, an era that was characterized by a discourse that was "oral," "whole," and eventually "lost" (Kuberski 187). This is yet another example of Olson's idealistic critique of Greek philosophy. Some years after writing his critique of Western metaphysics in "Human Universe," however, Olson became further convinced from reading Eric Havelock's *Preface to Plato* (1963) that after the advent of Socrates and Plato, particularly with Aristotelian notions of grammar, Greek language became more structured around nouns and verbs of cognition as opposed to verbs of action (Olson, *Collected Prose* 355-8; Havelock 197-201).

Indeed, in "The Kingfishers" Olson plays with the reader's expectations of what poetic language is "supposed" to do. Olson relies heavily on digressions, allusions to other languages, and the dislocation of word order, all of which undermine the norms of syntactical rules (Butterick, "Postmodern" 19-21).

> What does not change / is the will to change
>
> He woke, fully clothed, in his bed. He
> remembered only one thing, the birds, how
> when he came in, he had gone around the rooms
> and got them back in their cage, the green one first,
> she with the bad leg, and then the blue,

the one they had hoped was male
. . . . . .
I thought of the E on the stone, and of what Mao said
la lumiere"
but the kingfisher
de l'aurore"
but the kingfisher flew west
est devant nous!
. . . . . .
I am no Greek, hath not th'advantage
And of course, no Roman:
he can take no risk that matters,
the risk of beauty least of all
. . . . . .
It is only because I have interested myself
in what was slain in the sun . . . .

(*Collected Poems* 86-7, 92-3).

Immediately in "The Kingfishers" we are aware of Olson's position that language must be freed from syntax, and there is a certain irony in the way Olson plays with our expectations of syntactical principles. The message of the poem is also an important example of what Creeley has referred to as the clearest indication of Olson's "need to break with the too simple westernisms of a 'greek culture'" (Creeley, *A Quick Graph* 159) that is now dead: "I pose you your question: / shall you uncover honey / where maggots are? / I hunt among stones" (Olson, *Collected Poems* 93). The ideas expressed in the last section of "The Kingfishers" mirror Olson's 1963 comments on Havelock's *Preface to Plato*: "[t]here is a discourse. There is a grammar. There is a sentence you do have. It happens also to be a motive of things that you are not" (*Collected Prose* 358). There is nothing for Olson to discover in post-Socratic Greek philosophy anymore ("shall you uncover honey / where maggots are?), and so Olson searches in cultures that he believes

are the antecedent of Greek culture, like the Mayans and Sumerians, for his answers ("I hunt among stones").

Although Olson can be blamed for being an idealist when he says things like "the literal is an invention of language and . . . . Truth lies solely in what you do with it. And that means *you*" (*Causal Mythology* 36), he does, however, place the blame of idealism's presence in our language and thought squarely upon Socrates, Plato and Aristotle. "[T]ruth is only a true thought," he says, "[b]y which statement I believe I also make evident why truth is not what [it was when it] unfortunately got stuck . . . in our craws since Socrates, Plato, and the one, of all, Hairystottle. It ain't at all absolute. It is fortunately dynamic . . ." (*The Special View of History* 40). So it is that Olson's poetry and prose leave meanings open to interpretation while compounding the kinetics of the ideas expressed in the language with ellipses, commas, and a heavy use of prepositions: it is part of his argument against post-Socratic metaphysics. What follows is that since the projective world is not a logically structured entity, and therefore not analogous to syntactical order, a poetry that reflects a kinetic fluctuating world must also be post-logical and continually in process.

3.5 The (In)Significance of *Logos*: Olson and Heidegger

As mentioned, Olson's argument against the Greek devaluation of the irrational and subsequent cultivation of reason and logic shares similarities with the philosophy of Martin Heidegger as part of the "expression of the universal postmodern quest for an

alternative decentered modality of knowledge to the privileged logocentric "humanistic" orientation of the Western tradition" (Spanos 39-40). Like Olson's objectism and projective verse, Heidegger's phenomemology is a philosophy that seeks to "reinstate the primacy of the organism in the act of perceiving"(Christensen 45). Both Olson and Heidegger see that achieving a return to direct perception requires a reevaluation of post-Socratic epistemology, which is preventing immediate perception by enclosing "language within an absolute uniform system" (Spanos 41).

Both Heidegger and Olson see inherent problems in Greek philosophy, and both see these problems as impinging on our ideas of thought generally, and language particularly. Olson's poetry is rooted in the idea that the poem is constructed from objects taken as they are found in nature and then captured by the poet's adherence to an ego-less language. Heidegger would agree with this dictum because he thinks that we impose our own constructions upon language far more than is necessary, and this is reminiscent of Olson's refusal to allow form to dictate content, which was discussed in more detail in Chapters One and Two (see also Spanos 43). In "Projective Verse," Olson described his philosophy of objectism as "the getting rid of the lyrical interference of the individual as ego" because the individual is merely an object among other objects of nature; there is no special hierarchy needed for the concept of the individual (*Selected Writings* 24). Heidegger also relates this idea to his concept of language in works like *The Way to Language* (1971).

Just as Olson's poetry and his "Projective Verse," *Human Universe*, and *The*

Special View of History critique the poetic *a priori* and Greek abstract philosophy, Heidegger's *Poetry, Language, and Thought* (1971), *The Way to Language* (1971), and *An Introduction to Metaphysics* (1959) critique the foundations of humanism and the philosophy of language. Showing Olson's affinity with aspects of Martin Heidegger's philosophy only demonstrates the broad range and perceptive scope of Olson's projective project, and this is undoubtedly why there have been numerous Heideggerean studies on Olson. The most notable work in this area of Olson scholarship has been William Spanos' "Charles Olson and Negative Capability: A Phenomenological Interpretation," Paul Bove's *Destructive Poetics: Heidegger and Modern American Poetry*, and, most recently, Judith Halden Sullivan's *The Topology of Being: The Poetics of Charles Olson*.

Both Spanos' "Charles Olson and Negative Capability: A Phenomenological Interpretation" and Bove's *Destructive Poetics: Heidegger and Modern American Poetry* attempt to portray Olson as willingly partaking in the "destruction of the Western tradition" and have subsequently been referred to as being "destructive" critics (Halden-Sullivan 28). However, Olson can not be regarded as a wholly "destructive" critic of the Western tradition because he too often lapses into Platonic language and idealistic solutions to Platonic philosophy. It is therefore more effective to see Olson as a figure who actually breaks with the Western tradition, although his vigorous language in his various critiques of post-Socratic philosophy indicates he himself would probably prefer to be classified as a "destructive" figure. However, one cannot naively accept Olson's own word because of the complications inherent in his own argument.

Although both Spanos and Bove's work on Olson shares a similar orientation in their analysis, Bove can be faulted for being too rash and overzealous in his argument as Halden-Sullivan correctly suggests (95-7). Bove's motives seem to be more in tune with deifying Olson as a rebellious figure who was only interested in destroying an intellectual tradition, rather than portraying Olson as someone who attempted to right the wrongs of the tradition (Bove 271).

Although Spanos is more thorough and true to both Olson and Heidegger than Bove, he has been falsely criticized for not relying upon Heidegger's notion of "Being" in *Being and Time* (Halden-Sullivan 95). However, if Spanos were to have relied as heavily upon Heidegger's mystical and often unsubstantiated notions of "Being," as Halden-Sullivan does, then his work would also succumb to an over-usage of Heideggerean terminology that jarringly interrupts Halden-Sullivan's prose. Indeed, Halden-Sullivan's non-critical approach to Heidegger's language and philosophy results in obscuring the later Heidegger's connection to Olson: her argument too often offers only mysteries and uncertainties where there should be clarity and focus (see Halden-Sullivan's analysis of Heidegger's "world" the "Open" and "*Aletheia*," 92-129). Furthermore, Halden-Sullivan should have realized that one cannot read the early Heidegger's *Being and Time* as an extended preface to his later work on language and poetry because Heidegger's later work is often an intentional movement away from *Being and Time*. Regardless of their critical approach, however, Spanos and Sullivan (the best work on the Olson-Heidegger affinity) agree on a similar focal point for their criticism: the dissemination of the Greek concept of

logos and the consequences it holds for the way we understand and use language.

In his book *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, Heidegger writes, "let us . . . attempt to regain the unimpaired strength of language and words; for words and language are not wrappings in which things are packed for the commerce of those who write and speak. It is in words and language that things first come into being and are" (13). Heidegger, like Olson, thinks that language is supposed to be more than a medium for communication or rhetoric; both want to make it clear that this is not what is happening in our Western application of language. Just as Olson sees a shift in thought occurring with the appearance of Socrates, so too does Heidegger. Heidegger makes a distinction between the early Greek, pre-Socratic's use of language, which had more immediacy between the speaker, the spoken, and the action; and our language, which has lost this sense of immediacy and become more passive and distant from the speaker (*Introduction to Metaphysics* 13-14). For Olson and Heidegger, the early Greek's language was simply more effective in conveying the existential immediacy of lived experience. Whereas it is impossible for modern language to communicate this immediacy because of its inherent logocentric bias and reliance upon previously established hierarchical structures of symbology, grammar, poetry, and thought (Olson *Selected Writings* 53-6; Heidegger *Introduction to Metaphysics* 13).

Olson and Heidegger see the problem as coming directly from our Western metaphysical tradition. Both Olson and Heidegger are trying to make the point that language is less a solid foundation for logical communication and metaphysics than it is a

mystery; language is less a user-friendly, logically structured meaning system than it is an entity unto itself. For instance, language, particularly poetic language, is often wrought with logical inconsistencies, and it is a projective open verse that best embodies this other realm of language: "poetry as being written today, especially by or in our language, yields a future that is unknown, is so different from assumptions that poetry has had, in our language . . ." (*Poetry and Truth* 12). Indeed, the arbitrary foundations of language are unsolid, in flux, and more chaotic than we often realize because ". . . we are moving within language, which means moving on shifting ground" (Heidegger, *What is Called Thinking*? 43).

Olson is also trying to mark where, when, and why language is not as projective as he thinks it is supposed to be. Olson blames the beginning of Socratic thought as the foundation behind a language built on *logos*, and then tries to turn two thousand years of Western culture on its head by criticizing elements of Greek metaphysics that we now take for granted as our own. But what exactly is the distinction between the pre-Socratic use of language and that of the post-Socratic in Olson's or even Heidegger's thought?

The defining point in this distinction rests upon notions that developed around the Greek term *logos*. Both Olson and Heidegger prefer a Heraclitean world of flux to Socratic idealism and stasis, which helps their attempt to establish the difference between pre-Socratic and post-Socratic *logos*. When Heidegger says that there is another part of language then just *logos* he is trying to show, as Olson did in "Human Universe," that there is something other to language than reason and order (*Introduction to Metaphysics*

123-7). Language, by its very nature, is not entirely logocentric; language is also "overpowering and uncanny," and "uncontrollable and wholly other"; language is dark and mysterious and always just barely out of *logos*' complete control (Bruns, *Heidegger* 120). Language then is not just logos but is also *physis*, an ancient Greek term for the mysterious and unknown. Heidegger's notion of *physis* is like Olson's projective speech act and it is integral to his conception of language that has been lost since post-Socratic Greece. Both Olson and Heidegger are trying to make the modern thinker aware of this forgotten aspect of language. It may help here to think of philosophical (metaphysical) discourse as the height of a closed (non-projective) language governed by *logos*, and poetry as *physis*, or language that is open to human experience; *physis* exposes language to "the uncanny, estranging it from" the "comfortable fixities" of Greek philosophy (Bruns, *Heidegger* 118).

With this Heideggerean background, Olson's view that Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle forced language to become *logos* so they could overpower the strange waywardness of poetry and speech acquires more philosophical detail than he offers in his critique. It is logic and reason that constrained poetry's imaginative or illogical nature. But Olson's postmodern poetry remains beyond the complete domination of reason and logic -- and therefore of logocentrism -- because it naturally withdraws from this sort of analysis. Poetry is somehow other to language as *logos* because poetry is *physis*, and this is particularly evident in Olson's projective poetry. Simply put, poetry, and I would argue particularly a projective, postmodern poetry, shows that language is not just *logos* and

therefore cannot be wholly reducible to it. However, the paradox is that just as there could not be projective verse without first having a non-projective verse to rebel against, language as *logos* could not exist if there were not first language as *physis*, which was then "tamed" and constrained into a sensical formula for communication by the post-Socratic notion of *logos*.

Both Charles Olson and Martin Heidegger also argue that there are fewer divisions in reality than Greek epistemology has led us to believe. By constraining language with rigid grammatical rules, Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle constructed an impossible obstacle to understanding the nature of language as something more than just *logos* or rational communication (*ratio*). In his poetry, prose, and conversations, Olson is advocating a conscious refusal of Greek metaphysical discourse that forsakes "the fullness of experience for the sake of logical tidiness" in favor of a "universe of experience" that adheres to the flow of events through projective verse (Olson *Selected Writings* 54-5; Merrill 38).

Olson's projective stance toward reality also encompasses a unique notion of illiteracy in its denial of Hellenism. Just as Olson separated the discursive universe from the human universe, and the projective poem from the non-projective, he transposed our notions of literacy and illiteracy: to be literate is to be too well-versed and therefore dependent on Hellenism, and to be illiterate is to be projective and free from post-Socratic metaphysics.

In a 1959 letter to Elaine Feinstein, Olson divulges the "non-literary sense" of his projectivism as an example of "the value of the vernacular over grammar," or the

colloquial speech act over *logos* (*Selected Writings* 27). Indeed, his refusal to allow form to dominate content is "non-literary" because it is based on the natural advantages of speech rhythms (27). It is because of his emphasis on "illiteracy" and his distrust of a Greek culture that spawned Western civilization that Olson turns to cultures he perceives as anterior to our own. However, Olson does not see these cultures as uncivilized in the savage, barbarous context that the Ancient Greeks did. Rather, he sees vibrancy and freedom in the "grammars" of North American Indians, like the Hopi of the Southwestern United States, and the Yani of Northern California, because they provide him with the inspiration to embrace language systems and cultures that do not have the same metaphysical foundations or syntactical "hangups" as Western civilization (*Selected Writings* 28). Olson's investigations into non-Western culture demonstrated to him that language based on Greek philosophy and grammatical systems slows and impedes language as speech.

In an interview collected in *Muthologos*, Olson admits that, in his mind, it is "better to be, really, illiterate" because it is only possible for the illiterate to truly hear the projective speech act, and without this kind of attention to language, poetry and thought will remain closed (1:54). Reorienting the mind to a projective stance involves new ways of paying attention to language and not paying attention to the pre-established forms that language arrives in. Therefore, a literacy that depends upon Greek metaphysics for its structures of meaning impedes the more natural, free-flowing "illiteracy" of projectivism. To reorient oneself to projectivism necessitates a reorientation of one's own understanding

of perception, which includes the act of hearing:

> . . . it's very crucial today . . . to be sure that you stay illiterate simply because literacy is wholly dangerous, so dangerous that I'm involved, every time I read poetry, in the fact that I'm reading to people who are literate – and they are *not* hearing. They may be listening with all their minds, but they don't hear.
>
> (*Muthologos 1*:54)

The people who are listening to and yet not hearing Olson remain in the non-projective discursive universe because they are too literate in the same way that T.S. Eliot is too "scholastic" in "Projective Verse":

> Eliot is not projective. . . his root is the mind alone, and a scholastic mind at that. . . in his listening he has stayed there where the ear and 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 . . . .
>
> (*Selected Writings* 26)

Similarly, Martin Heidegger refers to the difference between people who merely listen, those who are "present yet absent," and those who can truly hear (*Introduction to Metaphysics* 130). It is only the poets and thinkers who have questioned Greek metaphysics that are able to hear the essence of language. The essence of language shows itself as our speech and it is projective:

> Those who are more daring by a breath dare the venture with language. They are the sayers who more sayingly say. For this one breath which they are more daring is not just a saying of any sort; rather, this one breath is another breath a saying other than the rest of human saying.
>
> (Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought* 140)

The audience that Olson is addressing in *Muthologos* has not questioned the foundations of literacy enough to hear what Olson is saying. They are the ones who are

"present yet absent" because they are physically present at the lecture but they are deaf to the ideas inherent in projective verse. In *The Way to Language*, Heidegger makes a distinction between speaking and saying that illuminates Olson's point. Here, he says that speaking is merely the creation of sounds whereas saying is something quite different: "One can speak, speak endlessly, and it may all say nothing. As opposed to that, one can be silent, not speak at all, and in not speaking say a great deal" (408). All that idle "talk" ever does is foster an illusion of false understanding by obscuring or holding back critical inquiry (Steiner 95). In a similar way, both Heidegger and Olson think Greek philosophy has given us a false sense of understanding the world and ourselves while simultaneously obscuring its own fallacies. Olson wants to shed light on this overlooked discrepancy in his poetry and prose because being literate implies being literate of the Greek tradition that has covered over its mistakes, particularly the dominance of *logos* over speech.

In *Muthologos* (1978), Olson explains how intent he is on disrupting the literacy of Hellenism. Unfortunately, not everyone is ready for this conceptual adjustment, but they must be shocked into it:

> . . . recently I read at Brandeis and I got so damn offended I backed up against the wall and said, "You people are so literate I don't want to read to you any more," and stopped. And the moment I said it of course the shock was so great that I could read from that point on as long as I chose. Everybody needs to be bumped like mad on this point.
>
> (*Muthologos 1*:54)

What Olson is saying to his audience, however, is "a saying other than the rest of human saying" (Heidegger *Poetry, Language, Thought* 140) because the saying questions the

"whole shaky edifice"(Christensen 25) of the Greek tradition. The significance of what Olson is saying becomes clearer when we see the connotations that speaking has for Heidegger. "Speaking" in the Heideggerean sense is equivalent to Olson's "shout" in "Projective Verse." The sense of saying in both Olson ("shout") and Heidegger is the same as the German "*sagan*," which means "to point out, to show, to let something appear, to let it be seen or heard" (*The Way to Language* 409). In his poetry, prose, and interviews Olson is trying to point the way to projectivism while directing us away from what he sees as the fallacies of post-Socratic notions of poetry and philosophy.

3.6 "La Torre": The "Tower" of Greek Metaphysics

"La Torre" is one of the first poetic examples of Charles Olson's critique of the Western tradition, and it took seven years and numerous revisions from the time the poem was first drafted in 1946 to the time it was published in 1953 for Olson to be satisfied with it (Foster 44). It is also a poem that is often overlooked in Olson studies, with many scholars choosing to rely most heavily upon "The Kingfishers" as the definitive poem in the Olson oeuvre. This is perhaps because "The Kingfishers" was the one of the first Olson poems to be accepted into the canon of American literature as an important piece of twentieth-century American postmodernism, along with his 1950 essay "Projective Verse." However, I believe it is the poem "La Torre" that comes the closest to representing clearly a major aspect of Olson's thought, and perhaps the only potentially unifying notion in all of his disparate ideas – the false appropriation of post-Socratic discourse by Western

philosophy, language, and culture. What proceeds from here is a reading of "La Torre" that is based upon William Spanos' assertion that the tower depicted in the poem "represents the Western epistemological tradition" (Spanos 76). However, I have emphasized the tower as a metaphor for the Western metaphysical tradition where Spanos suggests the more limited term epistemology, because the term metaphysics includes epistemology as well as ontology and cosmology.

As this chapter has established, there is an insistent proposition in Olson's work, not only in his poems and his essays, but also in his lectures, conversations, letters, and notes, that we are at the end of a great historical milieu, one that has been characterized by our inheritance, and reliance upon the Greek philosophical tradition. This tradition is the foundation for our entire Western humanist tradition, as well: from ideas of poetical form, to grammatical rules and rules of syntax, extending even to the basis of scientific thought. Greek philosophy, specifically the discourse of this philosophy, has continually prevented humanity from directly experiencing the world. In Olson's view, we have allowed the discourse of Greek metaphysics, which includes logical formulation and classification, as well as symbology, dualism, and idealism, to form a Hellenistic prison around us.

For Olson the discursive methods of Greek philosophy are the most rudimentary means of arranging and sorting experience (*Selected Writings* 54-55). In order to realize this we must first break the dominance Greek metaphysics holds over our tradition of knowledge; that is, we must tear down, brick by brick, the tower of Greek metaphysics we

find ourselves mired in.

> The tower is broken, the house
> where the head was used to lift,
> where awe was . . .
>
> ("La Torre," *Collected Poems*, 189)

Olson opens "La Torre" with the speaker witnessing the breach in a tower ("The tower is broken"). It is a venerable tower, much respected for its links to our intellectual antiquity ("where awe was"), but it is crumbling. And with this disintegration there comes fear and exultation. It is a scene that shows a tower being struck and set aflame by lightning. However, this tower is, ultimately, the tower of Greek metaphysical philosophy, keeper of the "Athenian Three" (*Collected Prose* 358). The image of this tower becomes a metaphor for the boundaries of the human mind, a mind that has locked itself away from directly experiencing the world around it. It is Aristotelian grammar and syntax. It is the tower of the rational mind; Plato's line analogy as medieval spire; a place where our reliance on reason has given us a false sense of our superiority over other objects. But the tower is rotting ("It is broken!"), and so too is the thinking that helped construct it. Olson discussed his desire to marginalize (decenter) Western metaphysics in a 1968 interview:

> In other words . . . it was in the development of the Greek language after Homer and Hesiod – in, for example, the invention of the definite article – that generalization occurred for the first time in the world. And that such things then that Plato and Aristotle invented, or that conversation by Socrates made possible – and I mean conversation in that bad sense . . . at the same early stage as Greek in the hands of Homer and Hesiod was, before the development of these unhappy grammatical constructions which made possible logic and classification and the whole taxonomy of Aristotle which has had to be destroyed and is being destroyed, is slowly coming to pieces as is the present civilization, so that we can get back to

ground and then start again.

(*Muthologos 2*: 86)

For Olson, the crumbling tower represents the division, caused by Greek philosophy, between the human universe and the universe of discourse. The discursive universe, as we have discussed earlier in this chapter, is based upon the dominance of a logically ordered "word as thought" language system. There is no room for the projective speech act here; the tower has been constructed to keep it outside, to keep it from asserting its own dominance. In Olson's thought the "human universe" is post-logical, as are the rest of the objects in the phenomenal field (*Selected Writings* 55). The Western tradition forced notions of Aristotelian logic and hierarchical classification upon the human universe, turning what was human into what is now discursive (*Human Universe* 4). The tower is also the tower of *logos*, and *logos* has become a language unto its own. This "tower" has estranged us from the familiarity of ourselves. It is the place of Socratic dialectic, Platonic idealism, and Aristotle's logic and classification. It is the tower Olson feels we must abandon if we are to reenter the human universe; and the projective minded are waiting on the beach watching the tower implode, listening to the sweet sound and smell of destruction:

(It is broken!
And the sounds
are sweet, the air
acrid, in the night fear
is fragrant . . .

(*Collected Poems* 189)

Here, as in all of Olson's poems, there is a struggle or refusal to adhere to logically governed syntactical rules. In the excerpt above, Olson uses parenthesis to set the second cluster slightly apart from the rest of the poem. This is not an unusual occurrence in a poem by Charles Olson, and the significance in allowing the parenthesis to remain open is that it exemplifies, in verse, Olson's desire to allow the poem to resist completeness, to remain in a Heraclitean state of flux in order to physically represent his need to abolish the fixed syntactic connections of Aristotelian grammar.

It is ultimately satisfactory for Olson to see the end of post-Socratic metaphysics, because "When the structures go, / light / comes through" (*Collected Poems* 189). With the shackles of Greek philosophy erroding, we are better able to see other areas that have been estranged from us in their proper context. Greek epistemology has also prevented us from acknowledging that we are always simultaneously both subject and object (*The Special View of History* 32). There are fewer divisions in the human universe than the discursive, and this is why Olson wants to "establish the double axe or axis as sign" (33): he wants to abolish the old static, Platonic notion of one, best demonstrated by Plato's unchanging, static, ego-self, by destroying it with a projective sign that is both subject and object. Again, the presence of Fenellosa's *The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry* (1936) can be felt here. In order for a transfer of force to occur between subject and object in a sentence the separation between subject and object, caused by Aristotle's division of substance and quality, must be overcome:

> To begin again. Lightning
> is an axe, transfer
> of force subject to object is
> order: destroy! . . .
>
> (*Collected Poems* 189)

But "To destroy / is to start again" even by "dowsing" the sun out as symbol of Apollo, god of centripetal order, and Plato's highest state of reason, in favor of the disordered chaos of Heraclitus' ever-changing first principle of fire. Olson wants to extinguish this heliotrope of Greek philosophy as surely as he wants to destroy the tower, for they are really one and the same. Much like a modern day Copernicus, Olson wants to reorder our knowledge in the service of his human universe, where a new humanism will return to us what we have long lamented, our estrangement from that with which we were most familiar (*The Special View of History* 15; *The Maximus Poems* 52)

> To destroy
> is to start again, is a factor of
> sun, fire is
> when the sun is out, dowsed
>
> (To cause the jaws to grind
> before the nostrils flare
> To let breath in
>
> Stand clear! Here
> it comes down and with it the heart has
> what was, what was
> we do lament . . .
>
> (*Collected Poems* 189)

In "La Torre," Olson seems to be endorsing William Carlos Williams' belief in the

creative necessity of destruction (Paul 9). Indeed, the theme of destruction as the "beginning of new action and new power" is present throughout the poem (To destroy / is to start again) (Foster 44). With the destruction of the Greek metaphysical tower, humanity becomes free from divisions of all kinds and is able to reorient itself in a new stance toward reality, one that will undoubtedly be projective, because:

> Where there are no walls
> there are no laws, forms, sounds, odors
> to grab hold of
>
> Let the tower fall!
> Where space is born
> man has a beach to ground on . . .
>
> (*Collected Poems* 190)

With the destruction of the tower, we are finally free from the looming presence of *a priori* models of thinking and writing; there is now nothing to subsume content over form, or prevent us from engaging the phenomenal world. We are once again returned to the pre-Socratic state, but this time Olson is offering projective verse and objectism to prevent the domination of *logos*. Projective verse and objectism will be the "stone" and "new tufa" that build the new tower of humanism.

> It will take new stone, new tufa, to finish off this rising tower.
>
> (*Collected Poems* 190)

"La Torre," is an extension in verse of Olson's prose ideas expressed in "Human Universe," *The Special View of History*, and *Muthologos*; and, as such demonstrates that

his desire for the outcome of his critique of Greek metaphysics was not utter chaos, but a new and redeemed humanity (*The Special View of History* 11; *Muthologos 2*: 86).

The epistemological posture Olson elaborates on in the essay "Human Universe" provides the outline for much of his thought on an alternative to Greek metaphysics. Although Olson is perhaps most famous for his 1950 essay "Projective Verse," the issues that he addresses in this seminal essay were to crop up again and again in his poetry and prose. Indeed, the majority of Olson's work between his most productive literary period, from 1950 with the publication of "Projective Verse" to his death in 1970, can be seen as an attempt to answer two major questions: the problems of modern language and poetry and the search for a viable alternative to the Western tradition of Greek metaphysics.

Olson's attack on the Western tradition centers on what he sees as the errors of Greek metaphysical inquiry that began with the appearance of Socrates around 450 B.C. In Olson's mind, Socrates, with his dialectical reasoning and willingness to generalize, was the first to remove the emphasis on human speech in language. Socrates favored *logos*, reason, and logic over the spoken, irrational and post-logical, and his ideas were further disseminated by Plato and Aristotle. Plato's idealism and Aristotle's hierarchical system of logic and classification further contributed to humanity's separation from Olson's concept of the original human universe. "Projective Verse" only deals implicitly with the poetic implications of post-Socratic metaphysics. However, it is in *Human Universe*, *The Special View of History*, various interviews collected in *Muthologos*, and elsewhere in his notes that Olson specifically addresses the philosophical problems inherent in the Greek

epistemological tradition. Here Olson specifically attacks the philosophy, grammar, syntactical structure, and world view of post-Socratic philosophy. Ultimately, it is his critique of Greek metaphysics that is perhaps the main unifying notion of Olson's project.

Conclusion

Charles Olson has been read equally as the last of the modern American poets in the imagist line of Pound and Williams and as the first of the postmodern poets. He is criticized and applauded by critics for his loose appropriation of grammatical rules, his ideas about poetry and America, his lack of documentation, and his refusal to wholeheartedly accept the assumptions of modernity. Olson is essentially a paradoxical figure who cannot be easily categorized. His wealth of prose material deals with such diverse topics as Greek philosophy, Whitehead, modern poetics, history, grammar, Melville, and D.H. Lawrence among other things. However, Olson is known primarily as a poet and has published a wealth of poetry in collections such as *The Maximus Poems*, as well as numerous shorter poems that have appeared in various collections including *Selected Writings*, *Archaeologist of Morning*, and *Collected Poems*. Elements of Olson's poetics can be found in the works of many postmodern American poets, perhaps due to the canonical acceptance of "Projective Verse" by American postmodernism. Indeed, Olson's "Projective Verse" is commonly anthologized in collections of postmodern American poetry and its relevance can still be seen in more recent work by American poets like Michael McClure.

McClure's 1997 collection *Rain Mirror* is explicitly referred to as projective verse. Discussing the creative process of the collection in the preface to *Rain Mirror*, McClure says "I'm astonished at the vigor of projective verse which brought forth energy at the

time of the writing" (viii). McClure relied upon Olson's formulation of the poem as energy-construct and kinetic entity in writing *Rain Mirror*, but the content and meaning of McClure's poem also take on a visual style that is reminiscent of Olson's own typography. Whitehead and Heraclitus, central figures in Olson's prose and poetry, appear in the collection, but it is McClure's use of caesurae and random capitalization of key words and ideas that create a typography that is Olsonian:

GOING
the way of all flesh,
CAUGHT IN THE ROAR OF THE PLANES
PASSING OVER
while the bronze bell rings
in the wind
It's all the same:
"*Agathon kai kakon tauton,*"
writes dark Herakleitos.
"We think in generalities but we live
in detail," replies Whitehead.
Ten trillion facets swirl and collide
bound up by senses
INTO
THE
TASTE
of one grain of black-purple rice . . .

(*Rain Mirror* 72)

Because of its elusive nature, the study of postmodern poetry is uneasily identified and defined. There is no general consensus on the evaluation of its effects. For example, the diverse range of differences in poets such as Olson, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Jack Kerouac, Philip Whalen, Denise Levertov, John Ashberry, Gary Snyder, Michael McClure and Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones) makes it difficult to neatly define postmodern poetry. Olson's

projective verse could be very valuable as a model or touchstone for understanding the many diverse elements often present in postmodern American poetry. It would be very difficult, indeed, to read or even understand the radical abandonment of prescribed form that characterizes postmodern American poetry without having sufficient knowledge of Olson's poetics and the events in literary history that led to projective verse. Olson is a seminal figure in American poetry but he is often overlooked as a serious figure because of the initial critical bias toward him as a poet who was merely derivative of Pound and Williams. This critical bias unfairly relegated Olson to the status of a minor figure in American postwar poetry.

To be sure, Olson requires a considerable amount of dedication, knowledge, and familiarity for the significance of his work to be appreciated. His thoughts on poetry, language, philosophy, and history share similarities with the phenomenology of Heidegger, long before these ideas were generally accepted and studied as part of mainstream North American critical theory. Olson has also been useful as a figure in recent feminist theory approaches to conceptions of the body in feminist poetry. In her analysis of Daphne Marlatt's revision of Olson's projective verse, Sabrina Reed acknowledges that Marlatt challenges her allegiance to Olson's poetics in acquiring her feminist version of Olson's theories of the body and its relation to poetry. The body, in Olson's poetry, represents "freedom" from "societal and poetic norms" (Reed 137). Olson's body is obviously a male body and so his conception of the body must be revised if it is to be applied to a feminist discourse on poetry.

It is also interesting to note that Olson's poetics can be appropriated by and understood through diverse areas of poststructuralist theory. Olson's ideas about discourse and power certainly require a greater analysis than has been given in this thesis. Obvious studies of Olson's discursive theories would involve Foucault, Barthes (particularly his ideas about mythology), and Bakhtin (if the differences between Bakhtin's orientation toward the novel could be reconciled with Olson's poetic oeuvre). Although there has been some work accomplished in the area of the Olson-Heidegger affinity, a definitive study has not yet been done. There is also a significant amount of unpublished work contained in the Olson Archive at the University of Connecticut in Storrs. For example, before his death in 1970 Olson had written but not finalized versions of "Projective Verse II" and had reformulated ideas that he began in "Human Universe." Unfortunately, since the death of George F. Butterick, the publication of previously unpublished Olson material has slowed significantly.

Charles Olson was the first postwar American poet to embrace the designation of postmodern, although his relationship to the concepts that generally typify postmodernism is problematic. Olson is postmodern in a Lyotardian sense as he signifies the beginning of a true modernism that is not dependent upon previous assumptions of modernity. In this way, he is a substantial figure in postmodern American poetry as demonstrated by the wealth of knowledge contained in his large body of work. In any study of postmodernism in American poetry, Olson should be seen as a figure who typifies the paradoxical notions that postmodernism implies. Olson's poetry and prose challenge the boundaries of

modernity while simultaneously subverting many of the assumptions that are, far too often, taken for granted as given in poetry, language, and even philosophy. The diverse range of topics contained in his poetry and prose requires a much deeper evaluation of his work. There is still much work to be done in the area of Olson studies.

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