

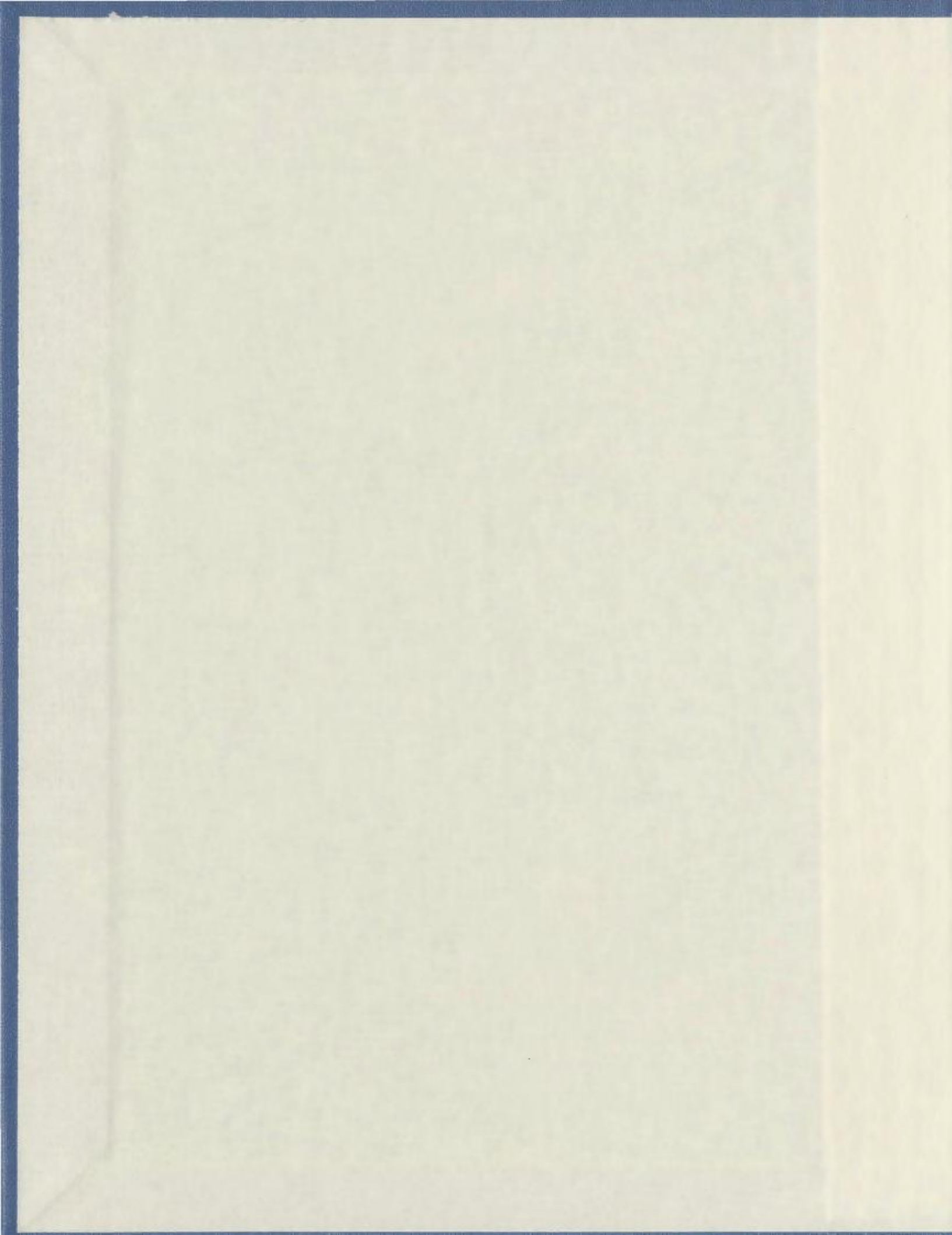
**"I AM NOT MY PARTS. I AM ONE SYSTEM:"
CHARLES OLSON'S MEMETIC METHODOLOGY**

CENTRE FOR NEWFOUNDLAND STUDIES

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**"I AM NOT MY PARTS. I AM ONE SYSTEM:"
CHARLES OLSON'S MEMETIC METHODOLOGY**

by

Derrick Jason Stone

**A thesis submitted to the
School of Graduate Studies
in partial fulfilment of the
requirements for the degree of
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Abbreviations

- AP* Olson, Charles. *Additional Prose: A Bibliography on America, Proprioception & Other Notes & Essays*. Ed. George F. Butterick. Bolinas, California: Four Seasons Foundation, 1974.
- DDI* Dennett, Daniel C. *Darwin's Dangerous Idea*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995.
- DLB* Christensen, Paul. "Charles Olson." *The Beats: Literary Bohemians in Postwar America*. Ed. Ann Charters. *Dictionary of Literary Biography* Vol. 16, Pt. 2 M-Z. Detroit: Brucoli Clark Books, 1983. 427-433.
- HU* Olson, Charles. *Human Universe and Other Essays*. Ed. Donald Allen. New York: Grove Press, 1967.
- MSC* Heylighen, Francis. "Memetic Selection Criteria." Accessed online 10 May 1997. <http://pespmc1.vub.ac.be/MEMSELC.html>
- SA* Von Hallberg, Robert. *Charles Olson: The Scholar's Art*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard UP, 1978.
- SG* Dawkins, Richard. *The Selfish Gene*. New ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989.
- SVH* Olson, Charles. *The Special View of History*. Ed Ann Charters. Berkeley: Oyez, 1970.
- SW* Olson, Charles. *Selected Writings*. Ed. Robert Creeley. New York: New Directions Press, 1966.

CHAPTER ONE:

INTRODUCTION: Charles Olson's Lament

Our attention is simpler

The salts and minerals of the earth return

The night has a love for throwing its shadows around a man
a bridge, a horse, the gun, a grave.

--- "The K"

Charles Olson, the American poet, understood imperatives: a man must "seek to master it all, all... a man is the sum of it all, by whatever method he chooses, but with that as absolute end, or he is not worth our time" (*Muth* 1 111). The moral implications of this statement are large and, for Olson, include philosophical and literary systems. For Olson, Modernism was only technical innovation; morally, it was a failure: the "sum of it all" is only a reflection of cultural norms and as such does little to redress human concerns. Olson makes his case against Modernism, specifically Eliot and Pound, in "Projective Verse":

if I think that the Cantos make more "dramatic" sense than do the plays of Mr. Eliot, it is not because I think they have solved the problem but because the methodology of them points a way by which, one day, the problem of larger content and of larger forms may be solved. Eliot is, in fact, a proof of a present danger, of "too easy" a going on the practice of verse as it has been, rather than as it must be, practiced. (*SW* 26)

For Olson, 'mastery' is synonymous with solving the "problem of larger content and of larger forms." Because Pound and Eliot's Modernism is unable to solve these problems, its "absolute end" can only be a cultural reflection not, as Olson requires, cultural criticism and the postulation of an alternative cultural existence. Thus, Modernism cannot be said to be mastery. In response to Modernism's failure Olson states, in a letter to Frances Boldereff: "[t]he truth is, and what is not seen except by the very best, the very few, is, that what a man has to do today is to devise some other method to accomplish coverage of the whole field of knowledge" (quoted in Maud 5).

Modernism fails and it is imperative that an "other method" be found; for Olson, that other method, as will be shown in this thesis, is memetics. Olson continues the letter; man can "smell, by way of a sentence, say, the totality of a man's work" (Maud 5). From a linguistic, sentential or archaeological fragment a man can know the totality of that object's meaning. Likewise, the essence of an ideology can be found contained within fragments. But the knowledge contained in these fragments is elusive:

The trouble has been, that a man stays so astonished he can triumph over his own incoherence, he settles for that, crows over it, and goes at a day again happy he at least makes a little sense. Or if he says anything to another, he thinks it is enough -- the struggle does involve such labor and some terror -- to wrap it in a little mystery: ah, the way is hard but this is what you find if you go it. (*SW* 53)

Olson's statement was certainly not egoless. As Ralph Maud notes in the most recent Olson

biography, Charles Olson's *Reading: a biography*: "when Olson rested in his reading, at Berkeley in 1965 he said, 'I really have no more than to feed on myself' (*Muthologos 1*, 66), and we felt we were in the presence of the man, for our time, almost complete in knowledge" (Maud 3). Olson believed that there was no single source from which he could derive his cultural critique; he had only himself and his knowledge. Olson had no other recourse but to devise a poetic technique that would recapitulate the totality of that critique.

Olson, like the Modernists before him, created poems using fragments from non-Western cultures, including the ancient Egyptians, the pre-Sophist, the Mayans and the Sumerians. But while Pound and Eliot used fragments from non-Western cultures, Olson would state that these poets used them as justification for the Western Tradition. Olson's use of diverse and even contradictory fragments is an attempt to oppose Modernism's pattern of homogeneity.

For Olson, Pound and Eliot were unable to be critical of Western culture because they were unable to reach beyond the system that I am calling Platonic Rationalism for a more "original" dynamic. Olson takes discrete cultural fragments, from non-Western cultures, engenders them in a poem and hopes that they will become the inaugural means for the creation of an alternative to Platonic Rationalism. This poetic methodology has great affinities to twentieth-century neo-Darwinism, specifically memetics.

One of the great leaps forward in human understanding occurred in 1859 with the publication of Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of the Species*. The beauty of Darwin's theory is that, as Richard Dawkins writes, it "shows us a way in which simplicity could change into

complexity, how unordered atoms could group themselves into ever more complex patterns until they ended up manufacturing people" (SG 12). This "way" is, of course, evolution and evolution through the reproduction of replicating entities. Because of the openness in the definition of "evolution," it is a useful term to describe non-organic cultural change. According to Dawkins there are discrete units of cultural transmission, units analogous to the gene: he calls these units "memes" and postulates that memes can be thought of as that cultural analogue. Dawkins says that

[e]xamples of memes are tunes, ideas, catch-phrases, clothes fashions, ways of making pots or of building arches. Just as genes propagate themselves in the gene pool by leaping from body to body via sperm or eggs, so memes propagate themselves in the meme pool by leaping from brain to brain via a process which... can be called imitation. (SG 192)

Following Dawkins, Daniel C. Dennett takes these ideas to their logical conclusion when he says, in *Darwin's Dangerous Idea*, that "like life itself, and every other wonderful thing, culture must have a Darwinian origin" (341). Thus memes, for Dennett, are the entities through which cultures transmit themselves. The evolution of a culture is seen as a reflection of the survival of individual memes. As Douglas R. Hofstadter notes: "Memes, like genes, are susceptible to variation or distortion—the analogue of mutation. Various mutations of a meme will have to compete with one another, as well as with other memes, for attention" (18).

In my thesis I argue that Olson uses memes to postulate a cultural praxis in which there is no one way, no one tradition, no one culture but many. The conclusions I draw about

Olson's writings are very much sympathetic with most critical understandings, but the mechanism whereby these conclusions are reached (memetics) is unique.

Charles Olson writes a very fragmented poetry, which while not in itself original, has a focus which is unique. Unlike most Modernists, Olson seeks to replace Platonic Rationalism with a "new humanism" derived from various non-Western sources. He uses the methodology of memetics, with his "mastery" of Western, and non-Western Culture, to create highly original poetry. The poems, Olson hopes, will survive in the public sphere long enough so that their memetic force will overturn the cultural norms of post-War America and create a new "humanism".

Memetics provides the groundwork for a new critical approach (but demonstrates all the problems inherent in any structuralist approach) and has yet to be applied, on any large scale, to literature. The reader of Olson's poems, through an understanding of his memetic methodology, comes to a fuller and deeper understanding of the structural principles of his poetry, the principles that govern the construction of his cultural criticism and, consequently, the appreciation of his work is enhanced.

CHAPTER TWO: A Virus Among Us.

“Ladies & Gentlemen,
he lost his pearl,
he lost the Indies
to a worm.”

--- “On first Looking out through Juan de la Cosa’s Eyes”

Charles Olson's antipathy towards Socrates, Plato and Aristotle is well known and well documented. In "The Gate and the Center" Olson calls Socrates, the leader of this triad, "Old Stink Sock" and accredits his philosophy with the most deleterious of effects: "his methodology still the RULE: 'I'll stick my logic up, and classify, boy, classify you right out of existence'" (*HU* 17). Olson blames Socrates for his "readiness to generalize, his willingness... to make a 'universe' out of discourse instead of letting it rest in its most serviceable place" (*SW* 54). Olson felt that rather than letting discourse and language express reality, Greek philosophy had broken the bond between sign and referent, thereby allowing it to create "purely hypothetical conditions" (Christensen, *Ishmael* 7). In "A Bibliography on the State of Knowledge for Charles Doria" Olson summarizes his concern to restore language and discourse to their proper functions: "Words then are naming and logography is writing as though each word is physical and that objects are originally motivating. This is the doctrine of the earth" (*AP* 51). With discourse and language having been dislocated from their original

functions, knowledge becomes subservient: “What I am kicking around is this notion: that KNOWLEDGE either goes for the CENTER or it's inevitably a State Where -- which American and Western education generally is, has been, since its beginning. (I am flatly taking Socrates as the progenitor...)” (*HU* 17). Next, he blames Aristotle for bringing logic and classification to intellectual prominence: “With Aristotle, the two great means appear: logic and classification. And it is they that have so fastened themselves on habits of thought that action is interfered with, absolutely interfered with, I should say” (*HU* 4). Logic and classification operate in such a manner as to limit “our participation in our experience, and so prevent discovery” (*SW* 54). Discovery is one of the actions which define, for Olson, the event of being human. Finally, he blames Plato for emphasizing the preeminence of the Ideal over the Real, thus further preventing knowledge and discovery: “Plato may be a honey-head... but he is precisely that -- treacherous to all ants, and where, increasingly, my contemporaries die, or drown the best of themselves” (*HU* 5).

These three pillars of Western thought are held accountable for helping to create a debilitating system of thought that replaced man's original condition with a philosophical system that sought to “CONFUSE confuse CONFOUND” (*HU* 17). I am calling the totality of their thoughts and philosophies “Platonic Rationalism.” Platonic Rationalism has, for Olson, sublimated expressions of humanity under abstraction, thus diverting human beings from their original condition, a condition in which the “most human is not man-the-maker but man-the-talker, who participates in a communal system that exists prior to the individual” (*SA*

34)¹.

In contrast to the sublimation necessitated by Platonic Rationalism, Don Byrd writes that Olson's work is "characterized not by beginnings, middles, ends but by intensity of engagement which informs even the most fragmentary records. It is a test of the proposition, 'that which exists through itself is what is called meaning'" (8). Anything which diverts man from the direct and immediate experience of things and of nature is necessarily another step removed from meaning and reality. Olson states that the blame for the elevation of abstraction rests not solely with the Greeks; we are as culpable, for we let their ideas and philosophies keep us out of the "human universe":

It is not the Greeks I blame. What it comes to is ourselves, that we do not find ways to hew to experience as it is, in our definition and expression of it, in other words, find ways to stay in the human universe, and not be led to partition reality at any point, in any way. For this is just what we do do, this is the real issue of what has been, and the process, as it now asserts itself, can be exposed. It is the function, *comparison*, or, its much bigger name, *symbolology*. (SW 56)

For Olson, comparison demands that a relationship of similarity and difference between things be enunciated in order to classify objects appropriately, to confer upon them a quality or a quantity. The effect of this quantification and qualification is that Platonic Rationalism denies

¹ For a full discussion see SA 34-40 and Bollobás 27-35.

the self-existence of the thing itself (whether that be a rock, a tree or even a human being) and especially its "particularity" (*SW* 56). To lose the thing's particularity and to use comparison as a basis for knowledge has altered man's "original condition" from "unselectedness" to generalization and universalism.

The cumulative effect of the disassociative philosophy of Platonic Rationalism was seen and felt directly by Olson: World War II. It was the horrendous atrocities of the war, and the prison camps of Buchenwald, which awakened Olson to the realities and the inherent dangers of this philosophical system:

Man came here by an intolerable way. When man is reduced to so much fat for soap, superphosphate for soil, fillings and shoes for sale, he has, to begin again, one point of resistance only to such fragmentation, one organized ground, a ground he comes to by a way the precise contrary of the cross, of spirit in the old sense, in old mouths. (*SW* 13)

The way, "Der Weg" (*SW* 53) as Olson calls it, is the direct result of Platonic Rationalism and its reverence for idealisms:

Idealisms of any sort, like logic and like classification, intervene at just the moment they become more than the means they are, are allowed to become ways as end instead of ways to end, END, which is never more than this instant, than you on this instant, than you, figuring it out, and acting, so. If there is any absolute, it is never more than this one, you, this instant, in action. (*HU* 5)

Because idealisms distract man from being contained in the immediate moment they force man to see others as commodity rather than as the co-existing objects they really are. Because of the invasion of Rationalism, Olson thinks that the Platonic “world of Ideas, of forms as extricable from content, is as much and as dangerous an issue as are logic and classification, and they need to be seen as such if we are to get on to some alternative to the whole Greek system” (*SW* 55).

Rather than remaining complacent in a world marked by reverence for classification and the possibilities that that entails, Olson sought a return to the original condition of man, a return to "direct perception" and what he calls man's original "dynamic" (*SW* 59). Olson's poetic project is to show the errors of and to replace Platonic Rationalism with an alternative that allows man to confront "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" (*SW* 56). In order to illustrate this original dynamic Olson sought out what he called the "systemic particulars" (*SW* 59) of non-Western cultures and goes back beyond Greco-Roman history to begin with cultures at the end of deglaciation. This alternative, for Olson, was found embodied in many non-Western cultures. The ancient Sumerians, Mayans, and Cambodians are just some of the cultures who, Olson believed, experienced things and nature directly.

In his recovery of the ancient past he advances Sumer as the center, "the culture hearth where the city was coherence (polis), nourishing and advancing all people" (Paul 57). As he relates in "The Gate and the Center;"

from 3378 BC (date man's 1st city, name and face of creator also known) in

unbroken series first at Uruk, then from the seaport Lagash out into colonies in the Indus Valley and, circa 2500, the Nile, until date 1200 BC or thereabouts, civilization had ONE CENTER, Sumer, in all directions, that this one people held such exact and superior force that all peoples around them were sustained by it, nourished, increased, advanced, that a city was a coherence which for the first time since the ice, gave man the chance to join knowledge to culture and, with this weapon, shape dignities of economics and value sufficient to make daily life itself a dignity and a sufficiency. (*HU* 19)

What happened to the Sumerian cosmology was that around 500-450 BC the ideologies espoused by Aristotle, Plato and Socrates predominated with dangerous consequences. In "The Human Universe" he writes "We have lived long in a generalizing time, at least since 450 BC And it has had its effects on the best of men, on the best of things" (*SW* 53-4). The effect of this change is the estrangement of man from his original condition: "It is this which Heraclitus meant when he laid down the law which was vitiated by Socrates and only restored by Rimbaud: that man is estranged from that which he is most familiar" (*SVH* 28). For Olson to begin again is to replace the Western Tradition with a reconciliation of man with "that which he is most familiar," man. The reconciliation entails a return to man's original dynamics and original relationships to language, nature and objects. While the results of the Second World War stimulated Olson's desires for a change they also inspired a cyclical view of history in which he believes that

we have come to the end of a great historical cycle whose monocultural

dominant has been the Platonic-Aristotelian tradition. This Western humanistic tradition, and more specifically its discourse, the prison of Hellenism, has kept man away from direct experience, preventing his engagement with the world.
(Bollobás 37)

Speaking directly on his cyclical view of history, Olson in a very early poem, "The K," writes

We have come full circle....

Full circle: an end to romans, hippocrats and christians. (*SW* 159)

Now, at the end of man's domination by Platonic Rationalism, a time when we have come "full circle," there is an inherent possibility of recapturing that original dynamic and starting fresh. In order to facilitate this return Olson seeks a "New Humanism," founded in cultural alterity and discordance, that places man in his proper and original relation to everything else.

In the early 1950's Olson thought he had found an example of a modern people living close to that "original condition." He writes, in a letter to Robert Creeley soon to be re-written as part of "Human Universe," that the Mayan people of Campeche possess this original dynamic:

(it is so very beautiful, how animal the eyes are, when the flesh is not worn so close it chokes, how human and individuated the look comes out: jeeesus, when you are rocked, by the roads, against any of them -- kids, women, men, -- it's so very gentle, so granted, the feel, of touch -- none of that pull, away, which, in the States caused me, for so many years, the deepest sort of questions about my own structure (*SW* 93).

Obviously, for Olson, Platonic Rationalism has estranged him from his own body, and the Mayans give him an idea of what it means to be in one's "original condition." Descriptions of the Mayans, coupled with heterogeneous fragments from a variety of non-Western cultures demonstrate that Olson is searching for alternate cultures and cultural experiences that recapitulate that sense of ease of living within oneself and of the original dynamic. But not all of these fragments are derived from living cultures, some come from dead or dormant cultures.

The ancient Egyptian hieroglyph system and the Gnostic Gospels are examples of "dead" schemes which lay dormant for millennia in hidden or untranslatable texts, waiting to re-activate themselves by infecting modern archaeologists. Some obsolete memes never become entirely dormant, such as Phlogiston theory, which simply mutated from a "belief" into a "quaint historical footnote." (Grant 1)

Olson's work contains many such dormant schemes and through the process of reading, they become re-activated, they become alive again, but now in the mind of the poem's reader. In this way the reader becomes a new host for that meme and a medium through which that meme will continue to be transmitted.

When waging a war against an ideology, there are only so many things one can do: yell and scream, visibly work at changing it, or try and replace it through covert means. It is my belief that Olson tries to start a covert cultural virus in his attempt at overthrowing Platonic Rationalism. In order to make this argument Olson's poetry has to be seen in the

context of memes and memetics. In order to talk about the relationship between memes, meme viruses, and Olson's poetry I have to begin with culture and cultural evolution and to show that cultures are susceptible to viruses.

When asked what it is that separates humans from all other species, most people will probably respond with "culture":

Human societies are qualitatively different from societies of animals because of the ability of the human being to create (not just use) language. Language serves two functions: communication between individuals and modelling of reality. These two functions are, on the level of social integration, analogous to those of the nervous system on the level of integration of cells into a multicellular organism. The body of a society is the bodies of all people plus the things made by them, its "physiology" is the culture of society. (Joclyn 1)

The biologist Juan D. Delius writes that what distinguishes human culture is not its complexity; rather, he sees "culture" as a description for "the ensemble of traditional behaviours that is characteristic of a population. Traditional behaviours are those that individuals take over from others through some form of social learning" (76).

Culture is essentially a series of behaviours and beliefs, and, as such, the complexity of actions and ideas transmitted from one generation to another makes human culture remarkable and distinct. Humans possess a range of vastly complex beliefs and customs that are passed from one generation to another through entirely non-genetic means. Perhaps even more important is that these traditional cultural behaviours (wearing a certain dress, speaking

a language, particular beliefs, customs, fashions, etc.) are constantly changing and adapting. The philosopher Daniel C. Dennett states that one cannot deny that cultures evolve and consequently cultural change can be described by appeal to Darwinian principles of variation and selection (*DDI* 345). Richard Dawkins writes

is there anything that must be true of all life, wherever it is found, and whatever the basis of its chemistry?... Obviously I do not know but, if I had to bet, I would put all my money on one fundamental principle. This is the law that all life evolves by the differential survival of replicating entities. (*SG* 191)

Because the history of the idea of, say, egalitarianism or of Catholicism, is the history of that idea as it has passed from one generation to another, from one culture or area, one person or state to another, it appears to be a model of replication. As Dawkins points out: “If a scientist hears, or reads about, a good idea, he passes it on to his colleagues and students. He mentions it in his articles and lectures. If the idea catches on, it can be said to propagate itself, spreading from brain to brain” (*SG* 192). These bits of non-genetic information, that comprise the totality of culture, these ideas and cultural behaviours, were first called memes in 1976 by Richard Dawkins in his controversial book *The Selfish Gene*. Examples of memes would be architectural designs, slogans, spoked wheels on carts, clothing fashions, and a host of others. Memes do not exist outside a vehicle in which they are carried -- for example the meme *Theme From Rocky* as it is stuck in my mind is carried in the vehicle of my brain, as are the totality of ideas and thoughts that I carry around. Memes are transmitted from one meme

vehicle, in this example the movie *Rocky*, to another meme vehicle, the record which I hear on the radio, to yet another meme vehicle, my brain, and finally, as I walk down the University hallway humming it, to the brain of a colleague, who swears at me a few hours later: "I can't get that damn song out of my head." As Francis Heylighen notes

Since the individual who transmitted the meme will continue to carry it, the transmission can be interpreted as a replication: a copy of the meme is made in the cognitive system of another individual, making him or her into a carrier of the meme. This process of self replication, leading to spreading over a growing group of individuals, defines the meme as a replicator. (Memetics 1)

And what memes replicate is cultural information, transmitting it from one meme vehicle to another. Obviously, this transmission is not always perfect². In fact, it would be highly unlikely if there wasn't at least a degree of discrepancy between the transmitted and received information. Memes, therefore, are the replicators of cultures, they are the ideas and behaviours that are passed on (by non-genetic means), and are those things which, when combined, define a particular culture. The totality of memes that a culture of memes believes is called a meme-complex. According to memeticists a meme complex is a "set of mutually-assisting memes which have co-evolved a symbiotic relationship. Religious and political dogmas, social movements, artistic styles, traditions and customs, chain letters, paradigms, languages, etc. are meme-complexes" (Grant 3). Essentially a meme-complex is a cultural

² *The Selfish Gene* 196

belief system and Platonic Rationalism is an example of a very large and effective meme-complex. In "Maximus, to Gloucester, Sunday, July 19" Olson writes that the scraps of civilization from which he creates his meme-complex, is the refuse dump of history:

it is more true a scabious

field than it is a pretty

meadow (*SW* 276)

Because, as we have seen, belief systems change and the carriers of beliefs (memes) evolve and change themselves, it is possible to manipulate social and political events by manipulating the existing meme-complex. Elan Moritz writes that "one inescapable realization is that it is entirely possible that many political, economic, and social events can be understood and possibly controlled by an understanding of the process of spread and replication of cultural entities" (2). If culture then is a series of ideas and behaviours that are contained within replicating objects (memes), then culture necessarily is a system that has the *potential* to undergo cultural evolution.

Simply because memes replicate does not qualify them for the status of an evolutionary system: there is another consideration which helps to describe evolutionary systems. In order for genetic and memetic evolution to occur there must be a system that responds to genetic or memetic changes over time. That system can be described by appeal to the cybernetic system known as feedback. Basically, a feedback system is one in which there are both inputs and outputs. The inputs are the environment's report back to the system on the fitness of that change, while the outputs are the system's adaptive changes to the

environment. As Norbert Wiener writes in *Cybernetics*: “when we desire a motion to follow a given pattern the difference between this pattern and the actually performed motion is used as a new input to cause the part regulated to move in such a way as to bring its motion closer to that given by the pattern“ (6-7).

In other words, any adaptive actions will return input to the system, which will respond appropriately. The response will either be a change further in a particular direction or a change back toward the previous state. When an idea (either genetic or memetic) is introduced into its environment, it will be in the form of an output; if that output is accepted, then the system will respond by facilitating the replication of that idea. If, however, that output is detrimental for that environment, or is non-adaptive to that environment, then it will tend to be eliminated. If any output leads to weaker fitness of the vehicle in which it is contained, then obviously the vehicle will not replicate. Auto-toxicity (self-extinction) and exo-toxicity (other-extinction) are inevitably bad examples of genetic or memetic ideas; either they kill off their own hosts or they kill off others, many of whom have the potential for the containment and further replication of that meme.

In other words, culture is contained in objects (memes) which imperfectly replicate and are controlled by a feedback system. Because cultures evolve and change through the differential survival of these memes it is possible, by manipulating these memes, to alter the society. Olson, in order to alter the already existing cultural system, must then use memes and memetics to instill a trait that will replicate itself and facilitate a change in that system. For Olson, who seeks a total repudiation of the existing culture, nothing less than a cultural virus

will do.

Obviously, memes which complement the existing ideosphere (or belief-space) will be more easily accepted for they already have a degree of memetic fitness (survivability) simply by being a co-meme for those other memes that are already part of the existing ideosphere. Behaviour patterns which are incompatible with, or directly contradict the already established cultural matrix, will tend not to be assimilated into the existing environment. Daniel C. Dennett points out that “minds are in limited supply, and each mind has a limited capacity for memes, and hence there is a considerable competition among memes for entry into as many minds as possible. This competition is the major selective force in the infosphere” (*DDI* 349).

The memes which find a hold in a mind do so at the expense of other memes. The memes which tend to survive the longest are the memes which "make their own replication more likely by disabling or pre-empting the environmental forces that would tend to extinguish them" (*DDI* 349). The meme for rationalism survives because it is a self-reinforcing meme: part of its definition includes the meme that denies the validity of intuition, impulse and non-rational inference.

Problematically for Olson, the existing ideosphere is one defined by its relationship to rationalism – problematically, because Olson felt that intuition, contradiction, and occult arts were all valid aspects of human existence, and ways to come to a fuller understanding of humanity. In a 1956 lecture at Black Mountain College, Olson spoke of the necessity for contradiction and discord:

I mean, discords. The discordant. The want of agreement. The want of concord or harmony. Variance, dissension, contention, dissonance. Contest. The *agon* as well as the *pathos* and the *epiphany*. (The name of the actor in Greek tragedy was *agonistes*, contester.) The shift from sorrow to joy. (Charters 88)

Obviously, the meme for discordance will find it very difficult to enter into the ideosphere of Rationalism despite Olson's claims for its authenticity: "unselectedness is man's original condition (such is more accurate a word than that lovely riding thing, chaos, which sounds like what it is, the most huge generalization of all" (*SW* 59). Authenticity and fact are impotent enemies to a system that does not even recognize them.

In order to create a cultural virus then the memes used must appear to be ones that are "easily assimilated into the cognitive system" (*MSC* 1). One of the implications of this condition is that memes should not be overly complex, and should not directly contradict the rules and laws of the existing meme-complex (ideosphere). Further, any memes which lead to behaviours that are either auto- or exo-toxic, will tend to be eradicated from the population. If the meme is trying to create an output that is inconsistent with genetically determined instincts or behaviours, then that meme will not be incorporated.

New ideas, therefore, tend, as Liane Gabora notes, historically, to be "variations of old ones; they result from tweaking or blending existing ideas" (Variation 1). This is not to say that radical ideas do not occasionally spring up (Platonic Rationalism serves adequately as an example) and become adopted, but that they do not regularly unless they appear to

contribute to the fitness of the collective: "Memes that increase the fitness of the group or social system formed by their carriers are more likely to get more carriers, because successful groups expand or are imitated" (*MSC 2*).

It is not only the memes which aid the host that get replicated; sometimes pernicious memes will become "successful" and spread rapidly, despite their obviously low fitness levels. Memes such as "smoking," while pernicious, and deadly to the host, are very difficult to eradicate (*DDI 363*). These pernicious memes can be considered viral memes.

Memetics, at this point, become most relevant to Olson's poetry. Olson seeks to write poetry using memes which are viral: the memes he uses are meant to help return man to his "original condition" (*SW 59*) but because Olson believes that his project is generally beneficial for humankind, his memetic project must be deemed not viral but antibiotic. In "Human Universe" Olson writes that

There must be a means of expression for this, a way which is not divisive as all the tag ends and upendings of the Greek way are. There must be a way which bears *in* instead of away, which meets head on what goes on each split second, a way which does not -- in order to define -- prevent, deter, distract, and so cease the act of, discovering. (*SW 56*)

One would think that any system which would "prevent, deter, distract" the host from confronting "what goes on each split second" would necessarily lessen its environmental fitness. Like the meme for smoking, there is something self-reinforcing about Rationalism that makes it flourish. Obviously, meme-complexes such as the Sumerian Cosmology can be, and

were, invaded by pernicious memes, such as Rationalism. The effect of this cultural invasion is that these new memes, and meme-complexes, will effectively enter the existing meme-complex and alter it totally. These pernicious memes are considered to be meme viruses.

Disease organisms, such as viruses, must transmit themselves from one host to another without being detected in order to replicate. Detection of a virus will lead to an immediate immune system response and the eradication of that virus. In "Virus of the Mind" Richard Dawkins writes about computer viruses, but the analogy can easily be drawn to most other viruses:

A virus that is too virulent will be rapidly detected and scotched. A virus that instantly and catastrophically sabotages every computer in which it finds itself will not find itself in many computers. It may have a most amusing effect on one computer -- erase an entire doctoral thesis or something equally side-splitting -- but it won't spread as an epidemic. (15)

Olson's poetry is designed to behave very much like a cultural virus; it seeks to enter into the existing cultural matrix (Platonic Rationalism) and destroy that which is causing its illness, to find "an alternative to the whole Greek system" (*HU*, 55).

It turns out that viruses are fairly simple things: viruses are simply entities which enter into systems and alters those systems' outputs. Regardless of whether that system is organic (i.e. human), or just seemingly so (i.e., society and culture), or even mechanical (i.e. computers) any thing which can be considered a system is, by definition, susceptible to some form of virus. In terms of computers, viruses are merely "pieces of code that graft themselves

into existing, legitimate programs and subvert the normal actions of these programs“ (Dawkins, "Virus" 14). A genetic virus will do exactly the same thing, only, instead of programs, they will graft themselves into DNA. A cultural virus, therefore, would be simply a meme or a meme-complex that replicates itself at the expense of the host culture. Olson enters the cultural matrix with his virus: his poems. As Paul Christensen writes “Olson saw the poem as a social force, a way of arousing a torpid populace to seek their own freedom -- by its thrilling display of the reaches of consciousness in just those moments of intense awareness” (*Ishmael* 88). Because poems are social forces -- they can effect the population and the present meme-complex. And by infecting the present meme-complex Olson can reinstate the "human universe."

Essentially, a memetic infection is the "successful encoding of a meme in the memory of a living being" (Grant 2). There are two aspects to memetic infections: a memetic infection can be either active or inactive. The infection is inactive if the infected host does not feel the need to replicate the meme and thereby infect other people. In contrast to this is an active infection, where the infected host will feel inclined or driven to infect others with the meme or meme-complex that he holds. An example of an infected host who is driven to infect others would be the religious fanatic and evangelist. This person is infected with the meme "Go And Save Others And You Will Be Saved." The infected person will then go and try to infect others with this very same meme -- thus perpetuating that meme ad infinitum, or ad nauseam. The memeticist Glenn Grant states that "a host can even be unconsciously infected, and even transmit a meme without conscious awareness of the fact. Many societal norms are

transmitted this way" (2).

It is essential for an effective meme infection to be active, to make the hosts continually want to transmit, and work toward transmitting those infectious memes to other people. The claim can be made that Olson's memetic infection is active -- it makes the hosts continually replicate the memes with which they are infected. Indeed, this thesis is an example of the infectiousness of Olson and Olson's memes, as are the hundreds of articles, theses, dissertations and books written about him and his poetry.

There is another case to be made here: because an active infection makes the host want to infect others, there is a sense in which Olson's poetry makes the reader transmit those memes. Olson accomplishes this by having a poetic theory that is substantially unique; rather than writing poems that tell the reader what their meanings are explicitly, Olson's poems require the reader to participate in making the meaning of the poem. The poem is not just a confusing mass out of which the reader tries to elaborate an idea -- rather the poem is filled with didactic statements of fact. Once these didactic elements, these "facts," are accepted, then the poem relinquishes its meaning. Because the reader has had to accept Olson's "facts" as true, even for just a short while, those facts (memes) have been activated and transmitted into another person's brain where, Olson hopes, they will, as facts tend to do, be passed on to yet another person.

For Olson the poem is an active social force, because the poem transmits the energy of the objects used, as Robert von Hallberg writes: "Much of [Olson's] hope for the beneficial effects of poetry stems from an ultimately participatory poetic: the end of poetry is the

transmission of energy. A poem is not a "reflection upon" but an "engagement with": it invites not observation but response in kind" (SA 31).

Olson's intention is to force the reader of his poems into his "hermetic circle of understanding" (SA 32) by demanding that the reader participate in making the meaning of the poem. And this is where Olson's poetry can be seen as devious: the poem only relinquishes its meaning when the reader accepts as "true" the facts that Olson uses in his poems. Olson accomplishes this, to a great extent, by being a very didactic poet. As Olson says "The poet is the only pedagogue left, to be trusted" (HU 19). Olson's notion of the poet as teacher "one who conveys information" is not a new idea; Pound, Olson's most important predecessor, felt the same way. What makes Olson distinct from Pound is "his willingness to make -- actually his frequent insistence on making -- his point directly and explicitly, only too often at the expense of flat and uninteresting language" (SA 60). Von Hallberg's condemnation of some of Olson's poems as being linguistically "uninteresting" is not an appropriate criticism. Olson defines himself and his poetry against a tradition which could be labelled "lyricism" or "the-private-soul-at-any-public-wall" school of verse. Don Byrd writes that

Olson denies the fundamental western premise that art and life are *qualitatively* distinct. He does not imagine the poet as an artisan as Pound and Williams do, but as a biological machine, the product of which is distinguished from "nonpoetic" utterances by the accuracy of its measurement and, therefore, its intensity. (*Maximus* 16)

Because of the repudiation of the applicability of artistic qualities an Olson poem is not

measured by values such as good or bad, or whether his language is "flat and uninteresting," but only to the extent to which it represents the real. Merrill makes the following point:

From the point of view of one who considers the poet a "maker" or craftsman of "discrete" poems that thereupon become available for analysis, interpretation, and criticism, projective verse will inevitably seem perverse, for it rejects the overt manipulation of reality that such words as "craft" and "Art" imply. Fealty to the real is the overriding criterion. (54)

Since the poet is a maker and a shaper of social means Olson's poems are valued only by the amount of action they stimulate. If an Olson poem is successful it creates an action in the reader. But

action results in, and usually from, conviction and certainty; it eliminates indefiniteness and vagueness by delimiting possibilities... Action is the consequence for Olson of knowledge: he who acts knows something with certainty. And in order to know anything one must remain open to the objective world. (SA 94)

The reader's sense of certainty and conviction, his or her belief in Olson and his poems arises out of Olson's belief in and use of facts and documents. For Olson, documents are a means whereby a person can access the real. Because he believes in the "transcendent" qualities of documents they are what he fills his poems with, and with what he sees knowledge to rest in.

In "A Bibliography for Ed Dorn" he writes

PRIMARY DOCUMENTS. And to hook on here is a lifetime of assiduity.

Best thing to do is *to dig one thing or place or man* until you yourself know more abt that than is possible to any other man. It doesn't matter whether it's Barbed Wire or Pemmican or Paterson or Iowa. But exhaust it. Saturate it. Beat it.

And then U KNOW everything else very fast: one saturation job (it might take 14 years). And then you're in, forever. (AP 11)

It is not the mere reliance upon facts that Olson assumes; rather he believes that facts necessitate action: "the collection of facts in an Olson poem 'add up' not to belief but to action" (Byrd, *Maximus* 20). Olson states that

Man is forever estranged to the degree that his stance toward reality disengages him from the familiar. And it has been the immense task of the last century and a half to get man back to what he knows. I repeat that phrase: *to what he knows*. For it turns out to coincide exactly with that other phrase: *to what he does*. What you do is precisely defined by what you know. (SVH 29)

What you do is defined by what you know, but what you know, Olson insists, is based upon how you find facts in this world. Olson re-defines a person's role in the world: Olson insists upon engagement, upon being a historian. To this end Olson reiterates "history" as 'istorin ("finding out for oneself") and advances Herodotus, as the exemplary historian, who sought out evidence rather than relying upon hearsay. As Olson says in "Letter 23" of *The Maximus Poems*

muthologos has lost such ground since Pindar

... Plato
 allowed this divisive
 thought to stand, agreeing
 that *muthos*
 is false. Logos
 isn't -- was facts. Thus
 Thucydides

I would be an historian as Herodotus was, looking
 for oneself for the evidence of
 what is said.... (*Maximus I* 100-101)

Because a poem "is energy transferred from where the poet got it... all the way over to, the reader" (*SW* 16) it contains a certain inherent philosophy, inherent in the objects used, and, therefore, one must be careful about what one accepts as true:

This is not easy to state, I guess. BUT OF EXTREME IMPORTANCE. For I come on, here, what seems to me the real, live clue to the results of what I keep gabbing about, *another* humanism. For it is so much a matter of resistance -- like I tried to say, about, *leaving* the difficulties, not removing them, by *buying* the improvements so readily available at the corner. You buy something all right, but what gets forgotten is, that you sell, in that moment of buying -- you sell a whole disposition of self which very soon plunders you just when you are not looking. (*SW* 93)

Rather than simply accepting those things that are touted to be "improvements" Olson insists that people see what is being sold with those "improvements." Despite the ease with which we are swayed by memes and the ideas they hold, Olson suggests that we have the ability to resist. Olson's words recall Dawkins's comments about being able to defy the selfish replicators of culture: "We have the power to defy the selfish genes of our birth and, if necessary, the selfish memes of our indoctrination... we have the power to turn against our creators. We, alone on earth, can rebel against the tyranny of the selfish replicators" (*SG* 215).

Obviously by reading and writing on Olson I am engaged in the transmission of his memes. I have transmitted Olson's memes to at least a few people -- my friends, my fellow students, my wife -- all have been introduced to Olson and his memes: even those who read this thesis and have never heard of Olson will be introduced to Olson and his meme-complex.

CHAPTER THREE: Objectism as Memetics

... Image

can be exact to fact, or

how is this art twin to what is,

what was,

what goes on?

— “Knowing All Ways, Including the Transposition of Continents”

"What do we do with a poem like this: Charles Olson's 'La Préface'?" my 3rd year English teacher, Dr. Miriam Nichols, asked as she displayed the poem on the overhead ten minutes before our class ended. She read the poem aloud and turned to see twenty silent students. She was waiting for a reaction; she stood waiting for a long time. I re-read the poem, silently. Then re-read the opening:

The dead in via

in vita nuova

in the way (*SW* 160)

As an undergraduate trained on a steady regimen of New Criticism, I was hard pressed to say anything interesting about the poem, couldn't even decide if it was a poem. I turned to my friend Jeff and said, "Who are the dead?" He shook his head: "Dunno."

I had no Latin, so "via" was a train. I had not read Dante, so "vita nuova" made no

sense. But I understood that the dead, whoever they were, were in the way. Jeff and I talked some more: "I think that the "dead" are in the way, but what does that mean? what way? what does "vita nuova" mean?" "Dunno." The next lines were:

You shall lament who know they are as tender as the horse is.

You, do not you speak who know not. (*SW* 160)

"Jeff, who is the 'you' that will lament? Does he mean me? How can he? I don't know that they are 'as tender as the horse is.' Don't even know who 'they' are. Do you think he is talking about the dead, again?" "Dunno." "Predictable, Jeff." "I'm not going to speak, because Olson tells me not to: I 'know not'." And I agreed, I also knew not. I looked at Dr. Nichols and smiled slightly. It would have been easy, then, to agree with Thom Gunn who wrote, in *New Books in Review*, in 1961, on a fairly straightforward poem, "The Lordly and Isolate Satyrs" that

the habit of scholarly detail inherited from Pound clutters the imagination, and the habit of recklessness in the imagination (inherited maybe from Rimbaud) cancels out any possible consistency or relevance... the poem consists merely of a gigantic list of associations accumulated at whim. (595)

The poem felt like so much detail thrown at me, without any sense of coherence. How did all the parts fit? My sense of dismay and confusion would have made it even more difficult to understand Robert Creeley's early judgement, written eight years before Gunn's: "The value of any [Olson] poem is not at all the fact of any technique, however much it is necessary to be master of just such things. For the reader, beyond the way a poem is written or made, is

the ultimate impact of its *meaning*, what it either can or does mean -- to us" (352).

Dr. Nichols looked at the class: "Well, can anybody understand anything?" She was very good; she knew we couldn't understand the material and didn't patronize us: "Difficult" was all that she said as we left the classroom. I scanned the next few lines:

Draw it thus: () 1910 (

It is not obscure. We are the new born, and there are no flowers.

Document means there are no flowers

and no parenthesis. (*SW* 160)

Despite what Olson says, to a person trained as I was, it was "obscure": what was so important about 1910? Who are the "we"? Is it Olson and myself? If so, then why are we "new born"? Why are there no flowers, and why does "document" necessitate the end of flowers? By the end of the poem I was certain that if this was a poem, I had no idea what it was about. Robert von Hallberg made my confusion understandable when he wrote, in "Olson, Whitehead, and the Objectivists," that Olson makes "every reader accept the role of interpreter right from the beginning. The reader must grasp the thematic sense of the first line.... But the poem's diction and syntax make the reader realize that he does not know nearly enough" (24).

Not having any idea how to "grasp the thematic sense of the first line" I went to the library and grabbed a book on Olson, Enikő Bollobás' *Charles Olson*, to see if I could make some sense of the poem, and maybe of Olson, before the next class. Bollobás writes that "La Préface" "is a complex poem, responding to World War II as the event expressing the final

collapse of our civilization" (71), that Olson "makes the statement that new life can be built on this dead civilization of power and ego" (71). Indeed the poem is complex, but how does the poem come to mean? The following lines *seem* to be indicating Bollobás' conclusions:

"I will die about April 1st ..." going off

"I weigh, I think, 80 lbs ..." scratch

"My name is NO RACE" address

Buchenwald new Altamira cave

With a nail they drew the object of the hunt. (*SW* 160)

But the lines do not neatly answer the question of how a new life can be built on the death of Western civilization. Indeed while Buchenwald is an atrocity, how does its relation to Altamira become an alternate to "power and ego?" Bollobás couldn't answer that question directly because the answer is not derived directly from the poem but from both Olson's poetry and his theoretical writings. In an early essay, "The Resistance," Olson states explicitly his antipathy to the Western Tradition, what he calls "Der Weg":

Man came here by an intolerable way. When man is reduced to so much fat for soap, superphosphate for soil, fillings and shoes for sale, he has, to begin, one answer, one point of resistance only to such fragmentation, one organized ground, a ground he comes to by a way the precise contrary of the cross, of spirit in the old sense, in old mouths. (*SW* 13)

From this quotation, combined with several others, including the "Buchenwald" excerpt from "La Préface," Bollobás' conclusions are understandable. But, I thought, the poem itself ought

to give us the same answers.

So, I turned to Robert von Hallberg's *Charles Olson: The Scholar's Art* to see if he could help. Von Hallberg writes that "La Préface" demonstrates how "history... has left poets only bare bones" (7), that Olson "will have nothing to do with history" (8), and that "the new history will issue partly from antihistorical traditions, from the suppressed and occult arts... 1910, the year both Olson and Cagli were born, marks a new, postpastoral epoch of documentation" (8)"

I was intrigued by the pluralistic meaning of "history" especially the "antihistorical traditions," but, even equipped with this, still could not conclude how or what the poem meant. As von Hallberg notes, the poem does not insist: it "demonstrates." Interspersed between von Hallberg's comments were extracts from the poem -- but the extracts didn't seem to fit as neatly as I was trained to expect. When von Hallberg wrote "History... has left poets only bare bones" he uses the following as illustration:

The dead in via

in vita nuova

in the way (*SW* 160)

The excerpt, it seems, simply states that the dead block the way -- not that history has left only bones for the poet. When von Hallberg wrote that Olson "will have nothing to do with history" he quotes this:

Put war away with time, come into space.

It was May, precise date, 1940. I had air my lungs could breathe.

He talked, via stones a stick sea rock a hand of earth.

It is now, precise, repeat. I talk of Bigman's organs

he, look, the lines! are polytopes.

And among the DPs -- deathhead

at the apex

of the pyramid (*SW* 160)

Even with von Hallberg's gloss the poem remains obscure and still as difficult. Is space an alternative to history as chronology? And if so what does this mean? Despite my obvious lack of knowledge with matters relating to Olson's poems, I understood that von Hallberg was right, of course, for he had read Olson, all of Olson, and therefore his approach to the poem is an enlightened one -- the information necessary for understanding the poem comes from bits and pieces: Olson's prose, his other poems, his letters, etc., none of which is accessible to a preliminary, or even subsequent, readings.

At the next meeting of our class Dr. Nichols read through the poem, gave annotations, glosses, references, explications, contexts and definitions. Combined, this gave me an insight into the poem. That was all -- *insight*. As Creeley stated, "the ultimate impact of [the poem's] *meaning*, what it either can or does mean" (352) is mine. The meaning was mine if I could find it. The problem was that I couldn't find any.

To a person with only a traditional education in poetry, Olson's poems remain obscure, difficult, and seemingly impenetrable. Therefore, to read an Olson poem a reader must start with a different set of presuppositions based not in the New Critical ideology of

poetic unity, but rather in a set of presuppositions drawn from Olson's own writings. As is evident from Bollobás and von Hallberg's own work, Olson's work gathers meaning by accretion.

While Robert von Hallberg begins to address the notion of Olson's fragmentary poetics, his focus is elsewhere: "Moreover," von Hallberg writes, "Olson could claim as gain the result that the individual elements of the passage... are perceived more distinctly" (*SA* 70). Likewise, Paul Christensen, in *Charles Olson: Call Him Ishmael*, makes the following point about his methodology: Olson

wants to perceive the unity of experience by means other than abstraction and logical deduction. His alternative is an elaborate form of induction, in which each step of the inductive process moves against a dense thicket of that moment's feeling and thought. The intellect's powers of discernment are here humbled before the sheer disarray of the body's whole knowledge of things. Perceptions emerge from the reluctant intellect as they are wrested from the disorder that overwhelms it. (8-9)

What neither von Hallberg nor Christensen explores is the nature of this emerging perceptiveness. It is my contention that memetics describes the means whereby meaning emerges from the disorder of the poetry. Because Olson is trying to infect Western culture with a memetic infection (as was illustrated in Chapter one) his best recourse is to the use of memes.

Primarily memes are culture bearers; they are the entities through which culture

transmits itself. And while Olson never states explicitly that he believes that objects contain cultural information, he often points out sources which discuss the transmission of culture through a plurality of means (Byrd, *Maximus* 88). Tellingly, in a letter to Frances Boldereff, Olson says that man can "smell, by way of a sentence, say, the totality of a man's work" (qtd in Maud 5). From this quotation it is readily seen how Olson believed that a man's work could be, not summarized, but extrapolated from a single sentence. From a linguistic, sentential, or archaeological fragment a man can know the totality of that object's meaning. Likewise, the essence of an ideology can be found contained within fragments. Memes are, as Daniel Dennett puts it, "identifiable cultural units" (*DDI* 344) and embody an cultural context and a cultural systems. Therefore, memes, as culture bearers, necessarily reproduce the culture from which they were taken. A song, a tool, an archaeological fragment will reveal, as anthropologists and archaeologists have shown, a huge amount of cultural information.

Based on this understanding of how cultural information is contained within objects, Olson creates a poetic methodology which he calls "objectism." In the following pages I am going to show how memes are a better description for what Olson calls an object and how the poem "La Préface" demonstrates the relationship between objectism and memetics.

The poem, "La Préface," was written in 1946, four years before Olson's most important theoretical works: "Projective Verse" (1950) and "Human Universe" (1951). Because of the poem's chronological position it provides an appropriate place to begin looking for a means of getting into Olson's poetry. Unlike the usual preface, "written last of all and placed up front as a gesture of authorial command," Olson's does "claim a

summarizing function, a power of abstracted systematic statement" which, contrary to Norris, *does not* deny "the very process and activity of thought involved in the writing" (Norris xiii). For Olson had already developed, *in situ*, the embryonic structure of his poetics -- and was now exploring its possibilities.

Perhaps the most important lines in "La Préface," and maybe in all of Olson's poetry, occur midway through the third stanza: "He talked, via stones a stick sea rock a hand of earth./ It is now, precise, repeat." In this brief passage Olson is referring to a significant meeting he had with the Italian artist Corrado Cagli. Tom Clark writes

After meeting through mutual friends in Gloucester, Olson and the wiry, intense emigre passed a warm May afternoon together sitting in the thick outfield grass of the baseball diamond at Cressy's beach, exchanging ideas and philosophies as best they could -- with Cagli "speaking" "via stones a stick sea rock a hand of earth." Soon, by such imperfect but inventive means, the artist had introduced Olson to a new world of arcane knowledge, taking in a "fourth-dimensional" artistic geometry as well as the mysteries of the ancient Italian tarot deck. (64)

Even more important than the recollection of this meeting is the sense that Olson is going to attempt to repeat that "imperfect but innovative means" of communicating: "It is now, precise, repeat." Olson's understanding that an alternate communication "via" objects is possible may have begun at this point for his poems really demonstrate his wholehearted commitment to this ideology.

Cagli, in their initial meeting, gave Olson a rudimentary lesson in alternative communication and now, in "La Préface," Olson attempts to communicate with his readers in like manner. Rather than using random objects, or only the objects at hand, Olson is going to range across history and culture to find those objects which best replicate an aspect of the idea or principle around which he writes. In this way Olson begins to initiate his cultural infection by discovering and using culture-bearing memes. Four years after writing "La Préface," in his "Projective Verse" essay, Olson's position has solidified; he writes:

(We now enter, actually, the large area of the whole poem, into the FIELD, if you like, where all the syllables and all the lines must be managed in their relations to each other.) It is a matter, finally, of OBJECTS, what they are, what they are inside a poem, how they got there, and, once there, how they are to be used... these elements are to be seen as creating the tensions of a poem just as totally as do those other objects create what we know as the world. (*SW* 20)

Olson calls this position "objectism," a derivation from Ezra Pound's "objectivism." While there is a debate about how different the two terms are, for my purposes I will agree with Christopher Beach who writes that, unlike Olson's Objectism, "Pound's Objectivism never reached the point at which the poet was in a 'natural' relation to his experience of an Object. Olson coined the term *Objectism* to "refer to 'a more valid formulation' of Objectivism suggested by his reading of Alfred North Whitehead" (75).

Objectism, for Olson, is a privileging of objects:" Objectism is the getting rid of the

lyrical interference of the individual as ego, of the "subject" and his soul... For a man is himself an object" (*SW* 24). Because man is an object among objects he is ruled by those same laws that govern objects in the universe. In terms of a person as an object Olson states in "In Cold Hell, In Thicket,"

Who am I but by a fix, and another,

a particle, and the congery of particles carefully picked

one by another,

as in this thicket, each

smallest branch, fern, root

-- roots lie, on the surface, as nerves are laid open --

must now (the bitterness of the taste of her) be

isolated, observed, picked over, measured, raised

as though a word, an accuracy were a pincher! (*SW* 184)

In this passage Olson insists that man is a "congery of particles," that man is, as nature made him, an object. But that object is not a static and self-contained thing. Because man is an object, a congery of particles, that object can be seen in relation to the concept of a meme; memeticist Liane Gabora writes that "memes often appear to be stored in a distributed, network-like fashion, connected through webs of association... there is not necessarily a definitive rationale for saying where one stops and another begins, in semantic space let alone physical space" ("Day" no page).

Olson's object and Gabora's meme are strikingly similar. And when a person comes to the understanding that he or she is an object, with a plurality of connections to the rest of the universe, that will necessitate a radical change in a personal philosophy. Rather than relying upon outdated and irrelevant modes of personal philosophy and of poetic creation, "objectism" demands humility. The traditional means of poetic creation require a philosophy of isolation and irrelevance:

By setting himself above the natural scheme of things and giving himself metaphysical attributes, he will perforce fall back upon his ego and subjectivity and picture the world as nothing but a reflection of his subjective self. The artistic forms he creates will bear the signs of his artificial relation to reality.

They will be artificial and estranged from his true identity. (Gefin 91)

Obviously "objectism" is not merely a literary ideology: it is, for Olson a way of life, a "stance toward reality" (*SW* 15), and a way of being in the world. It encompasses an outright rejection of the "Egotistical Sublime," and a denial of the subject-object dichotomy which has so problematized Western thought since at least Descartes (Merrill 51). The entire philosophy of "objectism," when applied to matters beyond literature, becomes a useful tool for guiding human existence. When "objectism" is employed as "the artist's act in the larger field of objects, [it] leads to dimensions larger than the man" (*SW* 25). In "The Mayan Letters" Olson expands upon this idea:

man as object in field of force declaring self as force because is force in exactly such relation & can accomplish expression of self as force by conjecture, &

displacement in a context best, now, seen as space more than a time such: which I take it, is precise contrary to, what we have has, as "humanism," with, man, out of all proportion of, relations, thus, so mis-centred, becomes, dependent on, only, a whole series of "human" references which, so made, make only anthropomorphism, and thus, make a mush of, any reality, conspicuously, his own, not to speak of, how all other forces (ticks, water-lilies, or snails) become only descriptive objects. (*SW* 112)

For Olson "object" does not mean just solid three dimensional substances. Robert von Hallberg makes this point: "What is usually termed an event, such as the setting of Boston, is not different in kind, for either Whitehead or Olson, from what is usually spoken of as an "object." ... [Olson's] imagination is captured not so much by objects in space as by events in time" ("Object" 96). Thus, when Olson uses fragments to create a poem he uses fragments that come laden with an entire cultural context. These cultural contexts are, perhaps, a better definition of what Olson means by an object.

To return to "La Préface," the reader must look to see which objects combine to make the poem: but the reader is immediately overwhelmed. In "La Préface" many things appear as potentially objects: Buchenwald; the action of giving birth; Odysseus' ship; Osiris; the One of Sticks; etc.. Could all these be considered objects? Olson, aware of the potentiality for confusion, directly limits what should be considered objects: "stones a stick sea rock a hand of earth." By doing this Olson has indicated what objects are to be looked for. It is a fact that in every Olson poem each line should be considered to be of equal importance in terms of

creating the poem's meaning. So, why do I isolate this line and say it is the most important line in Olson's poem? I draw this conclusion because in a poem so overly concerned with talking, communicating and discovering an alternative to "Der Weg," any line that hints at (or in this poem, makes explicit reference to) the possibility of going beyond the system of language and discourse must be given more emphasis than others.

The "stones" which Olson refers to are both the stones that comprise the cave at Altamira and the foundation stones of the buildings at Buchenwald. The stick is the "One of Sticks," or Ace of Wands, an arcana card from the Italian Tarot deck. The sea rock tropes out as the "new Osiris, Odysseus ship." The "hand of earth" is literally the hand of a "Babe" born from the ground.

But merely seeing the poem as a series of objects does not indicate the poem's full meaning. Meaning, in an Olson poem, is found not inhering *in* the objects, but in the relationship between objects. In "The Escaped Cock," an essay on D.H. Lawrence, Olson writes "At root (or stump) what *is*, is no longer THINGS but what happens BETWEEN things, these are the terms of the reality contemporary to us -- and the terms of what we are" (*HU* 123). Thus it is the relationship between objects, the "terms of reality," that creates the meaning.

How the objects are therefore positioned in the poem, in relation to all the other objects used, will determine the meaning. In other words, Olson writes a poem by selecting a series of objects which, when placed together, combine to elucidate or express Olson's poetic idea.

"La Préface" is the perfect poem to begin with for Olson directly indicates the four objects that are being used to create the poem's meaning. By giving the reader such a clue, Olson allows for the meaning of the poem to be far more easily accessed. By way of clarifying this point Olson writes in "Projective Verse" that

Every element in an open poem (the syllable, the line, as well as the image, the sound, the sense) must be taken up as participants in the kinetics of the poem just as solidly as we are accustomed to take what we call objects of reality; and that these elements are to be seen as creating the tensions of the poem just as totally as do those other objects create what we know as the world. (*SW* 17)

Olson takes simple objects and places them together to create a complex object (the poem), and in order to understand what that complex object is (the meaning) the reader must view the poem's constituent objects and then see the relation necessitated by those objects. Because Olson believes that objects in a poem contain energy, a poem cannot be static but the re-creation of an energy state. Liane Gabora, writes that information is

related to the number of differences required to specify the state of a system... states have not only a structure of differing relations between them, but also a combinatorial structure -- each state can itself be an information space, so that complex information can be built up from simple information. ("Day" no page)

The more complex the state the more information is necessary to re-create that energy state. Olson's poem as an energy state and information space is built up from simple objects which

recreate a more simple information. What Gabora calls a meme, Olson calls an object, for both memes and objects represent the "information lodged in the collective memory of a given cultural ensemble" (Delius 92). Because objects are energy states, the ideas that they combine to express can only be expressed through parataxis:

parataxis is active, attempting to bring the poem to an immediate coherence by developing concrete associations on multiple planes. In other words, when the abstract noun, which gathers the multiple facts of experience into a static concept, is repluralized by conjecture and explored through anecdotes, a new sense of order arises. (Byrd, *Maximus* 45)

In other words, the meaning of the poem is created by the paratactic placement of objects (memes) each with its own specific trajectories and meanings ("cultural ensemble"). The combination of all these objects' trajectories, and memetic information, gives the poem its meaning. Don Byrd states in, "The Possibility of Measure," that

Olson speaks of the dynamics of content, which coincide with the implicit dynamics of the heuristic quality of prosody, as the *vector* force of image (*HU*, 97). The image is not a mere static weight but a center of vitally directed energy. The poem is a product of vector forces being brought into phase with one another. (48)

Byrd is close; it is the meaning of the poem, not the image which is the centre of that "directed energy," of those vector forces. Liane Gabora, writing on the use of memes, writes what could be a paraphrase from Olson: "One could argue that recreation is the re-creation

of information patterns in different domains from the ones in which they were originally encountered" ("Day" no page). Olson's understanding of these vector forces, or trajectories, arises out of modern physics:

In a discrete universe the norm for evaluating experience is inert matter. Things are regarded as constant and autonomous, sufficiently so that they are perceived as "substance" that possesses classifiable "qualities." In a continuous universe, however, time, as a fourth dimension, forces us to perceive things no longer as inert "substances," but as "events" -- "All things flow." (Merrill 58)

And because of this, the arrangement of objects in "La Préface" necessitates that the reader begins to perceive things not as utterly discrete, but both discrete and continuous. In "Equal, That Is, to the Real Itself" Olson writes that

It took thirty-one years (Melville's age when he wrote *Moby-Dick*) for the German mathematician Riemann to define the real as men since have exploited it: he distinguished two kinds of manifold, the discrete (which would be the old system, and it includes discourse, language as it had been since Socrates) and, what he took to be more true, the continuous. (HU 117)

For Olson the understanding of the continuous nature of all objects comes from his reading of physicists and geometers such as Coxeter, Riemann, Bolyai and others. But, Olson's understanding of how a "complex object" works comes from Ernest Fenollosa's "The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry." Fenollosa's conception of the complex Chinese

character helps determine Olson use and placement of objects. Fenollosa believes that a static object, the "true noun," does not exist in nature:

Things are only the terminal points, or rather the meeting points of actions, cross-sections cut through actions, snap-shots. Neither can a pure verb, an abstract motion, be possible in nature. The eye sees noun and verb as one: things in motion, motion in things, and so the Chinese conception tends to represent them. (364)

Because all we see are "things in motion, motion in things," there is no such thing as a "noun," as a static object. Therefore the poet, following this conception of object as a basis for composition, must learn to harness the energies of all the objects in such a way as to create a larger structure of meaning.

This larger structure of meaning cannot be accomplished through traditional means of metaphor and comparison. If all objects are "meeting points of actions" then metaphor is a falsity – metaphor requires the concrete apperception of objects as individual entities. Olson understood this problem when he wrote in "Human Universe" that

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... such an analysis only accomplishes a description, does not come to grips with what really matters: that a thing, any thing, impinges on us by a more important fact, its self-existence, without reference to any other thing.... That 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.

(*HU* 5-6)

Fenollosa's conception of objects as "in motion" obviously arises out of modern physics, but he sees in Chinese characters an application of this. Fenollosa states that because of the object's thingness, the compound Chinese character is very much non-Hegelian: "two things added together do not produce a third thing but suggest some fundamental relation between them:" the character for sun behind the character representing the bursting forth of plants represents "spring;" the sun sign in the branches of a tree sign represents "east;" the sign for "rice-field" combined with the sign for "struggle" represents male, etc. (365). Meaning, and language, is founded not on metaphor but parataxis.

Fenollosa sees this "suggestive" nature of the Chinese characters as being the closest and most accurate relationship of language to nature: "In nature there is *no* completeness... the truth is that acts are successive, even continuous; one causes or passes into another.... All processes in nature are inter-related" (365) and Chinese characters, which represent action and process, do not contain the energy but demonstrate it. In relation to Olson's poetry Robert von Hallberg's comments become pertinent to repeat: as von Hallberg notes, Olson's poems do not insist: they "demonstrate." As the Chinese characters are the suggestive result of parataxis so is the meaning of Olson's poems. Since Olson's poems are the combination of objects suggesting "some fundamental relation between them" they, like Chinese characters, do not contain but also "enact" that action.

What constitutes a poem, such as "La Préface," is a series of objects; but what constitutes the play of these objects is the language used to write down the objects. And the language used is determined by the poet's reaching to "that place where breath comes from, where breath has its beginnings... where, the coincidence is, all act springs" (*SW* 28). Olson learns from Fenollosa that to breathe means to act, and to act means to stand forth, and to stand forth means to grow. Therefore, breathing "is the self-act by which we take from the world and give ourselves being" (Paul 40).

Olson's fundamental axiom is that "Art does not seek to describe but to enact." "Enact" is the method "the artist can use to deal with the live things in the universe, to reenact its process in linguistic form" (Gefin 88). A projective poem, such as "La Préface" will, as Ekbert Faas so aptly puts it, "mirror in print the 'presentational immediacy' which is the poem's essence. In this way the reader... will relive the process of creation and share the dance of cosmic forces that has found a voice in the poet's words and rhythms" (qtd in Bollobás 20). Obviously, then, the objects used in the construction of a poem cannot be indiscriminately chosen – even if it may seem so to critics like Thom Gunn. Rather, the objects must reenact the energy of the idea or principle around which the poem takes shape, and the poem can only accurately reenact this energy when the poet is aware of his relationship to nature:

if he stays inside himself, if he is contained within his nature as he is participant in the larger force, he will be able to listen, and his hearing through himself will give him secrets objects share. And by an inverse law his shapes will make their own way. It is in this sense that the projective act, which is the artist's act

in the larger field of objects, leads to dimensions larger than the man. For a man's problem, the moment he takes speech up in all its fullness, is to give his work his seriousness, a seriousness sufficient to cause the thing he makes to try to take its place alongside the things of nature. (*SW* 25)

By understanding that he is an object among objects the poet can perceive the real. By paying attention to the vector forces of those objects, the poet can write the real.

At this point memes become a crucial tool for understanding Olson's objects. When a reader understands that Olson's term "object," is better described by "meme," then the reader is equipped to begin to understand his poems. A meme is literally an entity which contains an idea, a trait, a philosophy or a cultural behaviour. So when I claim that Olson's objects are memes I am saying that the objects he uses are in fact cultural entities. But how does one distinguish an object from a cultural object? Fortunately for the reader, in "La Préface," Olson indicates what those will be. The objects that Olson uses are not physical entities but larger cultural artifacts – mythologies, alternate forms of knowing, the rejection of linear history, and the potential for the regeneration of mankind. These are the objects that Olson uses and the reader must adjust his understanding of "object" to include the concept of meme in order for the poem to make sense. "La Préface," then, as Olson indicates, is composed of four memes: Buchenwald and the Altamira cave, the Ace of Wands, Odysseus' ship, and a hand of earth.

The first object that Olson indicates is "stones." Indeed, they are specifically the stones of Altamira and Buchenwald. A memetic reading tells us that this meme, "stones," this

cultural bearer, recapitulates Buchenwald as the terminal point in human culture and necessitates a new start, a new "Altamira." The meme of Buchenwald contains, for Olson, the reduction of European culture to rubble, inhumanity and degradation, while the meme of Altamira contains all the energy and cultural impetus of that point in human history when man first started living in civilizations. Olson combines these two memes into a complex meme. The complex meme is, as Tom Clark writes, "the birth-ground of a new archaic, a 'new Altamira cave' whose walls were windows open on a future of indeterminate possibility" (Clark 113). More specifically the complex meme Olson re-enacts two things: first the meme requires humanity to completely reject the cultural system that is contained in the Buchenwald meme, and to reacquaint themselves with a time in history where myth and art combined to foster the development of human culture.

The second meme "stick," or the Ace of Wands, comes from the Tarot deck. The picture on the Ace of Wands is of sticks with flowers growing from the ends of them; an image of flowering and a new beginning. The meme of the Ace of Wands recapitulates the energy and philosophy that is carried within the Tarot as a form of knowing. While the stick card represents the start of a new enterprise, it recapitulates the revision of human regeneration through non-rational means. Not surprisingly, the suit of Wands represents one of the four elements (fire suit) and as such represents process and energy, themes intimately connected to Olson's poetics. Olson once plotted "not merely poems but a full-scale book on the occult mythic framework of the tarot (to include in its embracing scheme 'major arcana-gods, minor arcana-demiurges, arcana-man')" (Clark 114).

The meme of a new start, a new Altamira, arising out of the rubble of Europe, combined with the arcane possibilities of the Tarot meme (as well as other occult systems) means that a "new start" can or must be found through alternate means of knowledge and learning. What ends up being rejected is Platonic Rationalism, and in its place is an arcane and archaic form of knowing which, for Olson, better enacts man's original condition. As he says in "Human Universe" man's original condition is "unselectedness," and any system that forces selection (whether through comparison, rationalism, etc.) necessarily is incompatible with man.

The sea rock, like the stone meme, is a compound meme; this meme is composed of both Odysseus's ship and the Egyptian god Osiris. Odysseus's ship, as a rock, a foundational movement, is actually a meme for Odysseus, and the reader, to return home -- to their "root place." The cultural possibilities of Odysseus are varied and many, but when this meme is combined with the previous two, whose memetic energies stimulate a sense of returning home and to beginnings, it becomes readily evident that its energy comes from the energy of returning home, of reacquainting the self with the "root place." Altamira is the meme for the root place, and now Olson gives us the meme for returning to that root place: Odysseus.

But the third meme is a complex one; there is the additional sea component to this meme. The Egyptian god Osiris, who had his body torn apart and scattered into the sea, becomes the "sea" of the "sea rock." Osiris, after being dismembered, was then reassembled from the pieces and became the god of the underworld; the god who leads people to the next world, the after-world. In returning home, in returning to the root place, our Altamira,

humanity will unleash itself from the way that brought them to Buchenwald. The means for doing this (the reassemblage of humanity from bits and pieces) is through alternate, non-Western forms of knowledge. Combined into one object, into one meme, Odysseus' ship and Osiris re-present root acts; centres of Western mythology. As Enikő Bollobás writes "Olson considered mythology as a "hard science" (*Muth I:46*) that granted him "the activeness, the possible activeness and personalness of experiencing. especially experiencing the earth as familiar (*Muth I:70*)" (131).

All three of these memes (stone, stick and sea rock) and their "proper confusions," their cultural energies, gather around the final meme, "a hand of earth," to give the poem its ultimate meaning. The meme "a hand of earth" is literally the hand of a "Howling Babe" borne from out of the earth. The earth that the hand arises from is the "birth-ground" of the new Altamira. By utilizing the babe from William Blake's "The Mental Traveller," a babe who instigates a new cyclical epoch of human history, Olson asserts that he will have nothing to do with linearity and the irredeemable inhumanity of history. As Tom Clark writes "Olson invited his fellow survivors to 'put war away with time, come into space,' and emphasized his defiance of the temporal by echoing William Blake's 'The Mental Traveller,' transporting Blake's howling, time-entangled babe into a timeless present" (113). The "Babe" is also literally Olson and Cagli. Olson believed that he and Cagli were "born not of the unburied dead," and that they take their life and their issue from their direct relationship with the earth, with nature, and with the past. Because only Olson and Cagli have demonstrated their abilities to utilize the knowledge gained from being in a direct relationship with nature, they are the

only ones that they know of who are in positions to guide humanity back to its "root." Olson does not mean that only he and Cagli are able; but that it takes someone like them, with their concerns and knowledge, to become the person to help humanity to return to its original dynamic. Olson says that he and Cagli are the "radical, the root" who "put [their] hands to these dead". The dead being the dead "in via." By removing the dead (and all that that entails -- a replacement of Platonic Rationalism) Olson and Cagli have fostered a new way, a "vita nuova." Olson and Cagli as the "Howling Babe[s]" are the combined persons of objects -- they have amalgamated the terminal point of Western culture and occult possibility, and have become figures leading to a new future and, simultaneously, a return to man's "root place." The "Howling Babe" at the end of the poem is also a precursor of Olson's Maximus -- a figure who leads the residents of Gloucester toward a new future.

A traditional reading of "La Préface," such as that done by Enikó Bollobás, states that the poem is about how Olson and Cagli "choose to begin again" (71). Sherman Paul, using a similar methodology, writes that the poem "tells us that [Olson's] work originates in the moral collapse of western civilization" and that Olson has become a "counteragent in combat with [history]" (8). But what these reading miss, and all non-memetic readings miss, is that the poem really places Olson and Cagli at the center of the poem, as images and figures of possibility, that it places communication by alternate means as the charge for humans in the twentieth century. The poem also signals the direction by which Olson will continue to write his poems: according to occult means and alternate non-rational means of communication, to use these techniques and forms of knowledge as valid means of recovering the "root place."

Olson in a letter to Cid Corman writes what could be a memetic reading of "La Préface:"

But let's go back to root: to *methodos*, and look!

with a way,

with a via, with a path (weg, that which died, and does

not die, which it is any man's job -- and the moreso now, when the old

way is dead, long live the methodology in other words, the science of

the path -- what could be more exactly what we are involved in -- it is

not the path, but it is the way the path is discovered! (qtd in Paul 70)

Indeed, the poem is about the methodology of looking, of discovering a way to return to the "root."

Given this memetic reading, "La Préface" becomes a true preface, an indicator of the soon to be discoverable, a preface to a style of writing, a cultural infection, a means of communication as well as a body of work. While Olson's "objectism" begins to describe the means of understanding the poetry, even early poems such as "La Préface," an evaluation of the poetry by appeal to memetics helps to further illustrate a means whereby the poem means.

CHAPTER FOUR: The Hunt

I alone

live in the sun.

How to outrage

Creation.

— "The Will To"

In looking at Charles Olson's poem, "The Kingfishers," the reader cannot ignore the varied and contradictory reactions the poem has received from both scholars and critics. With the publication of *In Cold Hell, In Thicket* in 1953, in which "The Kingfishers" was a focal point, the poem has suffered a very mixed reception: while Robert Creeley says "The Kingfishers" is an example of how "Mr. Olson's work represents a sole and major content in contemporary American poetry" (350), Louis Dudek says that Olson "seems never to have known other poetry than the imagined clatter of prehistoric voodoo or the excited natural jumpiness of his own mind" (35) and that "The Kingfishers" is mere discontinuity and "a jerky and very characteristic Olsonic static" (36). For "The Kingfishers," then, this duality of reviews has been the poem's nemesis for the past fifty years. Either the poem has been praised as being "the most modern of American poems, the most energetically influential text in the last thirty-five years" (Davenport 250) or it has been ignored. As Marjorie Perloff notes, Olson is a "peculiar anomaly" appearing as a focus in some post-modern journals, while at the

same time he remains wholly unnoticed in others (251).

Louis Dudek, in one of the original hostile reviews of "The Kingfishers," notes that while he does not particularly like Olson's poetry he must concede Olson's poetic achievements: "Olson is one of the most energetic, and verbally gifted, of the new voices in poetry. He is working at the center of our poetics... to find the syntax, punctuation, break-up of lines which will somehow catch the breath and halt of actual speech" (36-7). In an anonymous review, entitled "The Hazards of Modern Poetry," written in *The Times Literary Supplement* in 1961, the author openly addresses the problem of trying to read and understand the poems:

supposing one has found out how to read these poems, are they worth reading? After the perhaps negative tone of the foregoing remarks, the reply 'yes' may come as a surprise. The outraged critics who think that a pot of words, many of them dirty, has been flung in the face of the public may come to seem as shortsighted.... There is a good deal of trash in this volume... there are also some fine poems, and many others which are at least considerable.

(484)

The reviewer has understood a considerable part of Olson -- that one must relearn how to read poetry when confronted with a poem such as "The Kingfishers." Given the critics' confessed inability to read an Olson poem, it is inevitable that there be a range of opinion as to the meaning of any poem: Maxine Combs in "Charles Olson's 'The Kingfishers': A Consideration of Meaning and Method" sees the poem as an assault on T.S. Eliot and the

Christianity he espouses:

Olson, in "The Kingfishers" is launching, I believe, an all-out attack on Eliot; ostensibly addressing himself to the problem of a shifting political reality (the dichotomy between East and West) he uses the political situation as an example of the inadequacy of Christianity. Christianity for Olson is a barrier which prevents (rather than affords) adequate understanding of experience.

(68)

Thomas F. Merrill takes issue with Combs' thesis: "this argument begins to cohere only if passages quoted directly from Plutarch are attributed instead to Eliot and if Olson's widely expressed cultural opinions are totally ignored" (65). Without a doubt the poem does not easily surrender its meaning as Burton Hatlen, in "Kinesis and Meaning," demonstrates: "the curious reader can consult at least eight interpretations of the poem" and Hatlen, unsatisfied with their interpretations, takes issue with them: "the critics who have written about 'The Kingfishers' disagree radically not only in the way they read many individual passages but also in their interpretations of the poem as a whole" (546). Sherman Paul, in an interview in the *North Dakota Quarterly*, states that the critics "all misread the poem. And that's because they all bring to it reading habits which no longer apply" (Lewis 60).

In terms of a general theme, there appears to be something of a consensus: Carol Kyle in "The Mesoamerican Cultural Past and Charles Olson's 'The Kingfishers,'" published in *Alcheringa/ Ethnopoetics One*, sums up the general critical consensus quite nicely when she says that Olson is writing a poem which is a search, and a postulation, for cultural

regeneration: "the poet has found a new world to create. It may well look like the decayed ruins of an old world but as Olson has explained earlier, that is how new worlds begin" (76). But Michael McClure writes against critical extrapolation: he sees the poem, quite correctly, as an object itself:

So. It is there. The poem stands in itself. Sherman Paul's gloss of the poem tells us much of what it means but I am more impressed with the poem than with what it means. I am more impressed with an ocelot when it is in front of me than with the history of an ocelot. The ocelot means itself, and it means, to me, the perceptions that it creates in me. (64)

McClure is right; the poem is an object itself, as Olson constantly tells the reader, but McClure does not tell the reader *how* the poem, as an object, comes to mean. It is my contention that by appealing to memetics the reader can better understand the meaning of "The Kingfishers" and all of Olson's writings.

As was shown in the application of memes to "La Préface" Olson is instructing his readers that communication through objects is a more dynamic and natural means of communicating. And it was shown that a better way of understanding what Olson means by "object" is by appeal to memes and memetics. "The Kingfishers" is a poem that furthers Olson's use of cultural objects (memes); in the poem he uses these cultural fragments to create what memeticists call a meme-complex. A meme-complex is basically a system of belief that coheres around a foundational idea or principle.

In order to apply a memetic reading to "The Kingfishers," the reader must examine

the poem and decipher the constituent memes that Olson uses. Once these memes have been located, the reader must start analyzing the relationships that the paratactic association of those memes necessitates. Generally, memes are regarded as constituent objects: "Not the 'simple ideas' of Locke or Hume . . . but the sort of complex ideas that form themselves into *distinct memorable units*" (DDI 344). And as "distinct memorable units" Dawkins points out that there is no practical "lower level" which can be considered a meme (SG 89). Based on this condition one might be tempted to conclude that almost any cultural idea that replicates itself can be considered a meme. But of primary importance in the designation of "meme" is that the candidate meme must exist as an identifiable cultural unit. A meme may be an entity that contains a complete cultural trait, behaviour, etc., but what constitutes a cultural unit? How can one decide what limits (upper and lower) should be upheld; or are these questions unanswerable?

The problem in "The Kingfishers," and with any attempt at doing a memetic reading, is to discover and differentiate between the possible cultural units (memes) that are present in the poem. This is undoubtedly the most difficult part of applying memetic theory to literature: determining what constitutes a meme. Richard Dawkins asks that very same question, and has no answer:

So far I have talked of memes as though it was obvious what a single unit-meme consisted of. But of course it is far from obvious. I have said a tune is one meme, but what about a symphony: how many memes is that? Is each movement one meme, each recognizable phrase of melody, each bar, each

chord, or what? (SG 195)

While most memeticists talk about the "principled lower limits" of the length of what may be considered a meme, few talk about the principled upper length of the meme. Certainly then, there appears to be a problem. But I think that the problem, when applied to poetry, can be made manageable. Dawkins writes that the application of the term "meme" might be solved by appeal to a critical norm, or consensus:

An 'idea-meme' might be defined as an entity that is capable of being transmitted from one brain to another. The meme of Darwin's theory is therefore that essential basis of the idea which is held in common by all brains that understand the theory. The *differences* in the ways that people represent the theory are then, by definition, not part of that meme. If Darwin's theory can be subdivided into components, such that some people believe component A but not component B, while others believe B but not A, then A and B should be regarded as separate memes. If almost everybody who believes in A also believes in B— if the memes are closely 'linked' to use the genetic term— then it is convenient to lump them together as one meme. (SG 196)

In this way, one has only to look at the critical reception of the text in order to see what is the consensus. If all the critics agree that a part of a poem merits being singled out as an object on its own then that deserves the appellation "meme." If the critics find no value or cultural import in some other part of that same poem, then it is not a meme. Because of this, as Glenn Grant writes, "an idea or information pattern is not a meme until it causes someone to

replicate it, to repeat it to someone else" (3). If the critics, then, do not replicate some parts of a poem, then those parts are not memes. Personally, I do not like this possibility; it requires a status quo mentality and a deferring of all critical judgements to others and so I am not going to pursue this method in this thesis. Rather I am going to look at the poem and see if it gives an indication as to what a reader can regard as memes. In "La Préface," Olson tells the reader exactly which things are to be considered as objects, but in "The Kingfishers" he is not so explicit. Seemingly, I am forced to use the critics' work as a foundation. But in a work where there is no critical reception the memetic reader is on his/her own with regards to finding out what memes are being used. For the purposes of this thesis I would like to assume this critical position -- as if no other commentary has been written on the poem -- and begin to look for memes on my own, but I am going to defer to other critics and will be using their texts to support my conclusions.

The methodology that I am choosing is fairly simple: I start by considering the poem to be just one meme. If the poem is obviously subdivided, then I consider each of the subdivisions to be other memes. If there is some form of radical differentiation in each of those subdivisions then I consider each subdivision a meme, and so on. Because there is no principled lower limit on what may be a meme it is possible that the reader ends up with an enormous number of memes. But it seems that in order to make a coherent poem, or anything coherent, the artist must not use too many parts. The simple reasoning behind this is that a number with seven digits (or a poem with seven objects) is easier to remember (or to make understandable) than a number with nine digits (or a poem with an equal number of objects).

So for a memetic author, it would be advantageous to be conscientious about the number of memes used to make an argument or a poem. (This position must certainly be considered contentious – and I am not certain that I truly believe it, but I have an intuition that inevitably even hard-core postmodern disparate random entities cohere) A further reason for caution is that because memes are competitive (they compete for human brain space) what determines the success of any particular meme is its reception, its memorability, and its capability for being retained and replicated. And an author using memetics would not want to create too much competition for any of his memes. Despite these considerations I am going to let the poem's physical and linguistic structure determine what shall be called a meme.

The memes that Olson uses are inactive or "dormant memes" that come from a plurality of cultural matrices: Heraclitus, Prescott, Encyclopedia Britannica, Plutarch, Cambodia, the Mayans and many others. By situating all of these cultural actions within a contemporary poem Olson may be seen as attempting to re-activate those cultural matrices -- or aspects of the cultural matrix for which the fragment represents. Because memes are ideas in competition they can be re-activated by resituating them or re-calling them to the reader's minds. Richard Dawkins writes that "the human brain, and the body it controls, cannot do more than one or a few things at once. If a meme is to dominate the attention of a human brain, it must do so at the expense of 'rival' memes" (SG 197). And because meme-complexes survive by eliminating all possible 'rivals' Olson must use memes in his poems that are 'rivals' to the cultural tradition he seeks to dislodge. While Olson never knew of memes or memetics, his conception of ideas parallels a memetic methodology. Olson states "any image around

which any people concentrate and commit themselves is a useable one just because it is theirs... truth is never more than its own action" (*SW* 153). The "image" around which man positions himself, is an image which recapitulates a cultural order or normative relationship. Memeticists tell us to view these images as cultural transmitters, as memes; for these "images" are identifiable cultural units which replicate and transmit their particular cultural information. Olson does centre himself around a cultural order but that order is best described as a meme-complex. Because Olson's meme-complex is so varied in its sources the poem, as an illustration of that meme-complex, may seem to be a little confused. In an entry on Olson in *American Writers: A Collection of Literary Biographies*, Maxine Olian Apse writes that the lines of "The Kingfishers" are chaotic, that there is no real order to them: "these lines are not like T.S. Eliot's "heap of broken images" but are, rather, a tumult of unspecified references and disparate quotations. They represent change as chaos in a flood of thoughts about primitive impulses of men throughout history" (560).

But, memetics states that a reader can view the poem as actually a conscious construction of heterogeneous fragments (or memes), and that there is no chaos but a meme-complex composed out of a series of culture-bearers. Because the memetic poem actually coheres around an idea or principle, the reader must come to see that "the poem... is a single ideogram, its components working in synergy" (Davenport 252). Or, the poem is a meme-complex with all its component memes "working in synergy" to create the poem's meaning. Synergy is the perfect word to describe the action of a memetic poem: because memes recapitulate a cultural order and, as Olson tells us, they contain all the energy of the cultural

matrix from which they were drawn, "synergy" which means a combined action or event, describes perfectly the paratactic relationship of energetic memes. Paul Christensen writes that "The Kingfishers" "moves with cinematic abruptness from one facet of thought to another, building up, as it proceeds, a complex mosaic of ideas that ultimately declare the poet's changing cultural orientation" (*DLB* 430).

Indeed, Olson's poem is a complex mosaic composed of a series of cultural ideas. But those ideas, which extend into pre-history, cohere to demonstrate how Olson's sense of cultural heritage has changed to contrast the Western Humanist Tradition, "Der Weg": "he declares at the end of his poem that he has ceased to be a westerner of the Greco-Roman tradition but has instead identified his roots in the ancient civilizations of the Americas, particularly the Mayan" (Christensen, *DLB* 430). Olson seeks to reanimate the kind of relation of man and nature that was extant in the past. As he writes in "The Gate and the Centre:"

until date 1200 BC or thereabouts, civilization had ONE CENTRE, Sumer, in all directions, that this one people held such exact and superior force that all peoples around them were sustained by it, nourished, increased, advanced, that a city was a coherence which, for the first time since the ice, gave man the chance to join knowledge to culture and, with this weapon, shape dignities of economics and value sufficient to make daily life itself a dignity and a sufficiency. (*HU* 19)

"The Kingfishers," then, is Olson's attempt at reconstructing, through a memetic means, a meme-complex which will re-animate a more human sense of wholeness. He seeks to do this

by reactivating the inactive memes of the past. By combining very commonsensical readings of the memes it will be shown that memetics can fully explicate the meme-complex known as "The Kingfishers," and give a reading of the poem which is both sympathetic to Olson's own writings but also a reading which, once illustrated, seems abundantly clear.

Because the poem is broken into three discrete sections, with the first section being broken into four subsections, I am going to give equal memetic weight to each of the three sections. Because the first section is broken into four subsections I am going to start with the first subsection and view that as the first possible meme. When the reader approaches the poem what is first noticed is the distinctiveness of the opening line: "What does not change/ is the will to change." Immediately following this line there is an obvious change in tone and subject – because of the distinction between the first line and the rest of the first section, the first line will be considered the first meme. The first line of "The Kingfishers" is a pseudo-Heraclitean fragment that states that in our constantly changing world the only constant is change. Because memes re-enact the energy of the cultural matrix from which they were extracted, the cultural matrix (meme-complex) that produces this kind of axiom is re-energized in this line. Because, according to Olson, the western world is guided by "the whole Greek system" (*SW* 55) the opening fragment of this poem, which is trying to overthrow western dominance, must re-capitulate an alternate way of being. The cultural system of this opening line

might be seen as a recommended position in the face of universal flux, a position that is comfortable with mystery, content in process and devoid of

"irritable reaching after fact and reason." It is a position in which the will is obedient to the larger force of process, neither assertive nor egocentric, and yet one that "achieves" because it taps the energy of the "actionable." (Merrill 71)

Because this meme takes its place at the head of the poem, the reader must conclude that the rest of the poem takes its cue from this preliminary fragment: it is the preface to the poem, the meme which guides the reading practice and, therefore, the understanding of the poem. Guy Davenport writes on the thematic sense of this line: "Against this continuous line of natural onwardness the rise and fall of human empires are swift and of indifferent interest to the living universe" (254). Indeed, Olson's first meme recapitulates a cultural system where man is in a more direct relationship to nature than at present. As Olson states, change is a condition of man: "unselectedness is man's original condition (such is more accurate a word than that lovely riding thing chaos, which sounds like what it is...)" (*HU* 9). But the opening line also recounts the energy of a philosophical system that can account for civilizations rising and falling, it also "advises that the cultural consequences are in man's control: he can choose to assert or obey, disperse or cohere, impose or achieve" (Merrill 71).

All of the following memes, then, must accrue meaning through their proximal and paratactic relationship with this meme. As the reader works past this first line, the entire first section of the poem elaborates upon a single theme and thus becomes the poem's second meme. I am calling the rest of section one the second meme because of the narratorial consistency of this section: the party, Fernand's passionate commentary, and the obvious

emphasis upon one topic. The narratorial comments surround a party wherein an enigmatic figure, Fernand, introduces the subject of kingfishers.

The narrator remembers how Fernand, while at the party and drunk, reminisces about the value and the historical precedent of using kingfisher feathers in trade. But, as Fernand comments, for some unknown reason they have ceased being used as a medium of exchange: "the kingfishers' feathers were wealth why/ did the export stop?" (*SW* 167). Fernand, in these comments, "tells the despair he feels at loss of tradition. This is genuine, and it is moving" (Paul 14). Indeed Fernand's emotions are real; they tell of a similar emotion in Olson and his sense of unease that Fernand would be the person to raise these issues: "That is should have/ been he who said, "The Kingfishers!/ who cares/ for their feathers/ now?" (*SW* 167). Sherman Paul writes that Olson is more than uneasy with Fernand: "Olson opposes all that Fernand represents" (13), but Thomas Merrill writes that "although [Fernand] is profoundly disturbed by the eroded value of kingfisher feathers, it is not clear whether his concern is aesthetic, economic, or even pedantic" (Merrill 72). What is ignored in these protracted discussions of the symbolic value of the figure of Fernand is the explicit concern expressed for a loss of, not Sherman Paul's "tradition," but the changed relationship between man and kingfisher: "who cares/ for their feathers/ now?"; "the kingfishers' feathers were wealth why/ did the export stop?" and "The pool is slime." Memetically, the kingfisher feathers re-present a cultural system whereby feathers are a medium of commodity, not a commodity themselves, a state where natural objects are actually part of the cultural system and the "human universe."

Memes from the 'meme pool' can combine together to create larger complex memes

that become, ostensibly, new memes, new ideas which can be expressed in various ways. In other words, new ideas can be built from the joining of two memes and the first section of "The Kingfishers" creates an entirely new idea. Given the nature of the first meme ("What does not change/ is the will to change"), Fernand's comments must be considered as example of a pattern of change. But the grief that Fernand and Olson feel at the loss of this natural relationship suggest that the loss is not just a product of the inevitable change, but a product of "a greater crime" (*SW* 60), the crime of malicious and wilful destruction of alterity and "unselectedness" (*SW* 59). As Thomas Merrill so correctly writes "we sense the genuineness of [Fernand's] concern, we feel the depth of his disillusionment with the present, and we grasp the urgency of his appeal" (72). Indeed, Merrill is correct; we empathize with Fernand and Olson because the memes re-create the cultural matrix of a more human way of existence, and the reader is immersed in that system and when Fernand tells the reader that no one cares -- the reader necessarily feels the loss directly.

The combination of the first and second meme present the reader with the energy of two philosophical systems (one in which change is a cultural constant, and the second in which nature is valued) combined into one system -- a system Olson calls the "human universe." By re-enacting those cultural systems Olson seeks to re-invigorate them in the reader's minds. Thus the first two memes combine to energize the reader into entering into an alternate cultural system, where the reader's relationship to nature is direct and authentic.

To this point in the poem there are only two memes present and working; the meme of change and the meme of the disappearance of the kingfisher's feathers, and the poem now

makes a clear demarcation into a second section. This second section is composed of one meme, but that meme is comprised of these four constituent memes: the "E on the stone," Mao's speech, the description of the kingfisher, and the "cup-shaped structure." This attribution is done because there are clearly four different themes interweaving throughout this section where they combine together to make one complex meme. Combined, these four objects created the most complex object in the poem, aside from the poem itself.

Perhaps the most paradoxical and disputatious meme in the poem is the stone with the E carved into it: "I thought of the E on the stone and of what Mao said." When first reading the poem most readers confront this line and say "I don't know what this means." The reader is unable to discover the meaning of the E because they do not know which stone is being discussed but also that its meaning has been lost not only to us, but also to later antiquity. As Guy Davenport writes "it is abundantly clear that the meaning of the E had been lost by Plutarch's time" (253). While Davenport's gloss helps it is unnecessary: the reader has but to be self-aware. When the reader says "I do not know what this means," he or she is paradoxically stating the content of that meme. Because there is no way of knowing what the E meant -- we are necessarily faced with a meme that represents lost knowledge: "to think of the "E cut so rudely on the oldest stone" is to contemplate a sign of central importance in a world we have lost the meaning of wholly. It is as eloquently mute as the prehistoric cave paintings in which Olson found so deep a meaning" (Davenport 254). In this way Olson has begun the second section (his third meme) with what may be termed an inactive, or dormant meme. Glenn Grant writes that a dormant meme is a meme

currently without a human host. The ancient Egyptian hieroglyph system and the Gnostic Gospels are examples of "dead" schemes which lay dormant for millennia in hidden or untranslatable texts, waiting to re-activate themselves by infecting modern archaeologists. Some obsolete memes never become entirely dormant, such as Phlogiston theory, which simply mutated from a "belief" into a "quaint historical footnote." (1)

Simply by using this meme, Olson may be hoping that it may re-activate other inactive memes from the meme pool of its cultural matrix. By re-animating this meme, Olson hopes to make that cultural matrix, once again, part of the everyday human experience. In the third subsection of the poem, Olson tells us directly that he does not know the meaning of the E, but that he understands that it belonged to a cultural matrix distinctly foreign to his: "But the E/ cut so rudely on that oldest stone/ sounded otherwise,/ was differently heard/ as, in other time, were treasures used." For Olson, that stone, that example of lost knowledge, was once used and respected as a "treasure."

The reader immediately notices that the second section is marked by the immediate paratactic positioning of Mao with the E of the stone. Olson states that he thought of the stone and at the same time he thought of Mao's speech: "I thought of the E on the stone, and of what Mao said." While, it is important to isolate these memes, in order to examine them closely – Olson indicates that they are intimately connected. Olson starts to quote from Mao's speech but his poem, his thought pattern is immediately interrupted by "but the kingfisher." Obviously these three memes (the E, the speech of Mao, and the kingfisher) are intimately

connected – they cannot be spoken of without reference to each other. The practical aspect of memetics appears here: it can isolate and illustrate the energies of the constituent parts and then illustrate how those constituent parts form one object, one meme.

Mao and Mao's speech, excerpted from Mao's 1948 Report to his Party, are written into the poem as it was reported to Olson: "la lumiere/de l'aurore/ est devant nous!... nous devons/ nous lever/ et agir!" (*SW* 168). As Robert von Hallberg notes, Olson may have felt that Mao's cultural revolution may be a good model for his American cultural revolution (*SA* 17). But given a memetic reading, the meme of Mao's words in conjunction with the first meme of the poem, demand that the words of Mao are "the chief embodiment of the will to change... as an exemplar of activism, of the desire for change itself, never mind change from what to what. Change itself is the goal" (*SA* 18-19). When the meme of Mao's words are combined with the meme of "lost knowledge" of the stone, the reader may feel that, perhaps, Olson is stating that the words of Mao (but not the figure of Mao) may represent those words that were lost to antiquity. In this way, Mao's words embody and re-enact the energy of that stone, of that E carved into the stone.

Still, the meme is not completed. The E on the stone, combined with the words of Mao, are linked with one of the many legends surrounding the kingfisher: "the kingfisher flew west... he got the color of his breast/ from the heat of the setting sun!" (*SW* 168). What follows immediately is a documentary description of the kingfisher, drawn from the Encyclopedia Britannica:

The features are, the feebleness of the feet (syndactylism of the 3rd & 4th

digit)

the bill, serrated, sometimes a pronounced beak, the wings
 where the colour is, short and round, the tail
 inconspicuous. (*SW* 168)

By contrasting the documentary nature of description with legends Olson is asserting that legends which surround the kingfishers are merely fictitious, merely legends, and that document is more telling -- it is fact. Thomas F. Merrill writes that "from the point of view of "discourse," legends are simply that -- legends: quaint, amusing, but pragmatically useless fictions" (75).

In "A Bibliography for Ed Dom" Olson writes that a person must use documents in order to access the real:

PRIMARY DOCUMENTS. And to hook on here is a lifetime of assiduity.
 Best thing to do is *to dig one thing or place or man* until you yourself know more abt that than is possible to any other man. It doesn't matter whether it's Barbed Wire or Pemmican or Paterson or Iowa. But exhaust it. Saturate it. Beat it.

And then U KNOW everything else very fast: one saturation job (it might take 14 years). And then you're in, forever. (*AP* 11)

By using documents, one can have first hand information about a subject and one can then KNOW that subject. The contrast between the fictiveness of legends and the accuracy of documents, when combined with the E on the stone re-iterates the memeticist's suggestion

that knowledge can be reanimated, that it need not be lost in legend or antiquity. While the knowledge of change is constant, certain details of the natural world can be known and transmitted to others, through document. Mao's speech, for Olson, is document; it documents change and the possibility for change for humanity.

The complex meme of the second section is developed further by reference to the "cup-shaped / structure" of the kingfisher's nest. The birth and regeneration of kingfishers from out of a "dripping, fetid mass" indicates that out of the decayed Western Tradition there is the possibility that cultural systems (such as the knowledge held by Mao, by the E on the stone, and of change) can re-arise or be re-animated. The re-activation of dormant memes from out of the inactive meme pool allow for the potentialities of human existence and wholeness:

On these rejectamenta

(as they accumulate they form a cup-shaped

structure) the young are born.

And, as they are fed and grow, this

nest of excrement and decayed fish becomes

a dripping, fetid mass. (*SW* 168)

Olson feels that *Der Weg* is a decaying system: Logos and generalization have all but killed man's relationship to nature and being. So, by reanimating these dead memes, by re-vitalizing a dormant cultural system, Olson seeks to revitalize man's relationship to nature, to the earth, and to him or herself. But Olson knows that any large scale cultural upheaval must be very

difficult: large memetic systems have self-reinforcing capabilities; they support their own systems by the conjunctive animation of other ancillary but complementary memes. Memetic systems such as Christianity, Platonic Rationalism, Capitalism, Communism, etc., create large self-reinforcing systems that do not allow for the possibility of other memes evolving. As Richard Dawkins writes

Selection favours memes that exploit their cultural environment to their advantage. This cultural environment consists of other memes which are also being selected. The meme pool therefore comes to have the attributes of an evolutionary stable set, which new memes find it hard to invade. (*SG* 199)

The nest that becomes a fetid mass, the culture which becomes a decayed and ruined system, is the nest, or culture, from which the possibility of a "human universe" is extracted.

The second section of the poem ends with a return to Mao's Party speech: "Mao concluded: nous devons/ nous lever/ et agir!" (*SW* 168). The cultural revolution that Mao was instigating required an entire country's acting in concert for its success. Merrill writes that "whatever the cause, the cultural 'pejorocracy' of the West is diagnosed as "a pool of slime" and a "dripping fetid mass." A prescription is called for and, for the moment, Mao is permitted to supply it" (76).

Because the poem is a complex meme, it does not resolve itself until the end of the poem. And only then, with all of the memetic energies of all of the memes gathered together can a reader really begin to suggest a possible meaning. But this third object, the most complex object of the poem, can be described: Enikó Bollobás writes that

we witness the evocation of "the E on the stone," fragments from Mao Tse-tung's speech given to the Chinese Communist party, quotations from the Encyclopedia Britannica's entry on the kingfisher, and Olson's own mental runs on the features and nesting practices of the kingfisher. He contemplates the bird's natural history and the lessons it offers concerning human history and the fate of civilizations. Concepts like polis and community, constancy and change, east and west, scientific precision and mythical legends, the building of civilizations as layers of history – they all interact on the page and within the mind of the reader, and bring into motion a whole field of thought clusters.

(78)

A memetic reading gets beyond Bollobás' reading, and speaks more directly: out of the fetid mass of the Western tradition (the kingfisher's nest), a new humanism arises (la lumiere), which is defined by its relationship to facts and documents (the legends are legends) as a basis for knowledge. This new humanism must engage man (nous devons/ nous lever/ et agir!) and nature as it did in the past (the E on the stone) thereby allowing man a more original relationship to nature and self. Olson creates a very complex meme, utilizing four very different memes, from four very different cultural expressions: the E on the stone, from the ancient world, Mao and his Chinese revolution, as well as the legends and the facts of the kingfisher.

The third section of the poem becomes the fourth meme (another complex meme), and is created out of the cultural matrix surrounding the events of the conquering of Mexico, the

societal forces that brought man to the state of being a conqueror, and a warning that we can, when we let our "attention" drop, easily slip into that mode ourselves. For Olson, the Mayans were the living exemplars of a culture living in a whole and original relationship to nature and the conquering of Mexico, a direct result of Platonic rationalism -- the meme-complex of Platonic Rationalism has as a co-meme the need to destroy alterity -- is unforgivable: "And all is now war/ where so lately there was peace,/ and the sweet brotherhood, the use/ of tilled fields." The memes of the Mayans (the cultural ideas, and artifacts) must be destroyed and quantified by those infected with the memes of Platonic Rationalism but as Robert von Hallberg notes "nothing could be more pointless than a prayer-wheel's weight in gold, but this is the measure our culture yields" (*SA* 21). Indeed, a cultural equivalency is not possible in a system where any artifact, such as the stone with the E carved into it, was "differently heard" (*SW* 169). While not resigning himself to this fact, Olson acquiesces to this as a fact of history. But other facts of impinge upon this meme.

What begins this section is an ethical exhortation: "When the attentions change/ the jungle / leaps in." For Olson the word "attention" sums up his concept of a vital stance toward reality. In "The Gate and The Center" Olson speaks of the difficulties in the effort to "remain civilized" (*HU* 23) of staying at "attention": Olson reads the myth of Gilgamesh, and the God's creation of Enkidu who was sent to keep Gilgamesh civilized as an example for us:

As I read it, it is an incredibly accurate myth of what happens to the best of men when they lose touch with the primordial & phallic energies & methodologies which, said this predecessor people of ours, make it possible

for man, that participant thing, to take up, straight, nature's live nature's force.

(HU 23)

Obviously, this is a condemnation of Platonic Rationalism, that it has caused man to lose touch with his original energies, and the result is the willful destruction of the Mayans. The allusion to the "other conqueror" who "so resembles ourselves" is Olson's warning that a slackening of attention, whether that be cultural or individual, invites the inevitable erosion of a cultural matrix, a personal isolation, exploitation and death. Coupled with this warning is the repeated reference to the stone with the E cut into it. The effect of this repetition brings the reader back to that point of re-enacting the complex meme from part two. Just as the stone has suffered a radical shift in cultural meaning and value the treasures of the Mayans have as well. Where once these objects were no more no less than part of a cultural system they have been altered to a base commodity. The meme of this third section is basically an admonition for the maintenance of attention, of keeping aware of our civilization, coupled with a catalogue of examples of what happens when that civilization gets indifferent to the world.

The fourth section contains what I am going to call an "extended meme." Like the section before, which focussed around one meme and gave a multitude of examples, this section creates a meme focussed around the object of "feedback." As was illustrated in chapter one, feedback is essential for any genetic or memetic system, in fact, is essential for any evolutionary system. Olson writes "the feed-back is/ the law." As Guy Davenport writes

This is called in the language of cybernetics (which took it from the language

of machines) *feedback*, the advantages of learning from experience and of having developed reflexes. Olson learned this word from... Norbert Wiener's *Cybernetics*. "Feedback," Wiener says... "is a method of controlling a system by reinserting into it the results of its past performance" (61). (256)

Olson gives several Heraclitean fragments surrounding this meme as exemplars of change and feedback: "Not one death but many;" "into the same river no man steps twice;" "When fire dies air dies;" "No one remains, nor is, one;" and "to be in different states without a change/ is not a possibility." Obviously, the feedback system, in cultural life, is essential for understanding the nature of change and for learning how change can be both positive or negative. Feedback gives a message to the participants in that system:

... And what is the message? The message is

a discrete or continuous sequence of measurable

events distributed in time

is the birth of air, is

the birth of water, is

a state between

the origin and

the end, between

birth and the beginning of

another fetid nest

is change, presents

no more than itself. (*SW* 171)

The feedback system gives the participant the apparatus to "take pleasure now/ in what we did not take pleasure before.. [to] love/ contrary objects... [to] use/ other words, feel other passions" (*SW* 170). Olson is stating that we must be aware of the nature of feedback, that it is an essential ingredient in human and natural life and that feedback, either positive, negative, or otherwise is essential for understanding the dynamics of the system we exist within. But we can be too officious with regard to the system of feedback: "the too strong grasping of it... loses it/ this very thing you are" (*SW* 171). In a universe defined by change, "where one moment's description of a thing is nullified by the new constellation of the next moment" (Merrill 80), feedback is, indeed, an appropriate definition of a human being

At this point in the poem Olson begins his second full section of the poem wherein his sixth meme is focussed around the "factual details of Mayan burial and baptism ceremonies" (Merrill 80) coupled with the recommendation to adopt Mao's direction, emphasizing the acts of looking and hearing. Running through the previous five memes has been the recurring emphasis on death, and in this meme the actual Mayan burial ceremony is being re-presented: "And she sprinkled water on the head of the child, crying/ "Cioa-coatl! Cioa-coatl!"/ with her face to the west" (*SW* 171). Despite Olson's adoration of the Mayan there is a sense of the imminence of decay and corruption: "Where the bones are found, in each personal heap/ with what each enjoyed, there is always/ the Mongolian louse" (*SW* 171). Even in death, the bones

of the buried dead, and the valuables they have buried with them (cultural markers) are not safe from profanation and spoilage. Immediately following this Olson re-writes Mao's words in English: "The light is in the east. Yes. we must rise, act" (*SW* 172). Harkening back to the meme of the second section, Olson re-energizes the meme of the possibility of a new humanism, the light. From Mao's speech comes the command to "act" and part of that is, for Olson, the necessities of both looking and hearing. The act of looking is contentious, is not merely to look with admiration, but to look critically; to look directly into the face of the Platonic system, if one can bear to look long enough, and to look with "candor," the viewer will notice "the dryness of the place" and how the system has necessitated "the long absence of an adequate race" (*SW* 172). The act of hearing is to hear history, to hear "where the dry blood talks/ where the old appetite walks" (*SW* 172). Olson has created a very contentious meme; he juxtaposes the burial and the imminent desecration of all dead with the exhortation to act, and by acting to see the inadequacy of the present system "what breeds where dirtiness is law" (*SW* 173), and to hear the echoes of the "old blood" in the "flesh." The meme then becomes a meme of critical awareness -- of seeing what is actually going on, what happens when even the dead are not sacred, when the only thing sacred is conquest. As Thomas Merrill writes

Despite the "apparent darkness" that Olson sees shrouding modern Western civilization, the "whiteness/ which covers all," if we take the trouble to "look," there is eventually to be discovered a "light" and a "flower." The "apparent darkness" refers... to the darkening effects of "discourse" upon the West.

Underneath this apparent dark whiteness is to be found salvageable value -- that of an alternative culture to the Greek. (81)

Olson closes this section, not with answers or conclusions but with questions addressed to those who have the "candor" to look directly at the system they are part of: "what breeds where dirtiness is law/ what crawls/ below" (*SW* 173).

Olson finishes his poem with a seventh meme in his third full section. This is the shortest full section of the three (four unrhymed quatrains and three single line stanzas) yet, develops the meme to its fullest point, and gives a focus for the entire meme-complex called "The Kingfishers."

The meme for this section develops itself, and builds its energies, around the final line of the poem: "I hunt among stones." Beginning with the fact of his cultural dislocation: "I am no Greek," Olson admits that his kin are those who have a relationship with nature that is an alternative to the Greek way: including, especially, the Mayan. By quoting Rimbaud, Olson identifies his own philosophical stance as being linked to phenomenology, "la terre et les pierres." The most fruitful discussion of this meme has been written by Olson himself, in *The Special View of History*:

It is this which Heraclitus meant when he laid down the law which was vitiated by Socrates and only restored by Rimbaud: that man is estranged from that which he is most familiar... Man is forever estranged to the degree that his stance toward reality disengages from the familiar. And it has been the immense task of the last century and a half to get man back to what he knows.

(SVH 29)

It is this stance toward reality which the last meme directs the reader to: "I hunt among stones" (SW 173). Olson's search through the stones of history is a means of looking among the inactive cultural memes of civilization for those which more accurately reflect human needs and desires, that genuinely reproduce an original stance toward reality. Fundamentally Olson's stance is, as a poet, a medium through which the energies of objects flows, to be placed onto the page for the reader's participation with. As Don Byrd states

Olson intends to establish a situation for the poet in which it is possible to engage speech *before* it has been formed to taste or even to thought. Speech must become a living thing, an instance of living rather than a reflection on, or a description of, life.... Olson proposes a language in which the use of words and what one has to say are aspects of a single engagement. Until speech is again returned to the condition of act, language will continue, as it has for the past three millennia, to separate men from the space in which they have their proper being and to replace the dependable actuality with a transcendence which, though perfect, can be drawn into intercourse with men and women only through destructive acts of Ahabian will. (24-5)

Thus the final meme of "The Kingfishers" attempts, by reproducing a kind of committed freedom, to create a meme of individual exploration, of the individual becoming an 'istorin.

Combining all seven memes into one large meme-complex gives a thoroughly comprehensible meaning and is as follows: Our universe is defined by a simple axiom of

change, and inevitably becomes a decayed "dripping, fetid mass" out of which inevitably arises a new generation. There is an inevitable system, the feedback system, to which we, as humans, can appeal to in order to evaluate our cultural and individual actions; one needs only to pay attention to the results of each and every action: calculate the gains and losses. Action, and attention to its results, tells the person whether their actions are true to the human condition or not. By acting, by listening and hearing, the participant can, if not must, recognize the inherent value in those alternate cultural systems. Olson asserts that he will have little or nothing to do with the Western system, as it stands, and that he will search among those things of the earth that he has a physical taste for. In his search he will traverse history and cultural boundaries, will confront death and change, and will find his cultural kin among the stones and among the dead, for Olson admits that he is interested in "what was slain in the sun" (*SW* 173). As he states in the "Mayan Letters" "the substances of history now useful lie outside, under, right here, anywhere but in the direct continuum of society as we have had it" (*SW* 84). In other words, one must go outside the quantification and qualification of Platonic Rationalism to find the substances of the past that are useful.

Coming to an understanding of the meaning of "the Kingfishers" is made more possible through the application of memetics. But this is a problematic position, for Olson resisted all "irritable reaching after fact and reason" and sought to write with "language as the act of the instant" (*SW* 54). Any approach that values the "meaning" over the "process" of the poem seems to contradict Olson's very essence. On the other hand, to become aware of *how* Olson creates his poems is extremely valuable. As Olson states in a lecture first given at Black

Mountain, a statement that certainly applies to "The Kingfishers," "one does what one knows before one knows what one does" (Charters 86). Memetics, and its search for meaning, emphasizes the process of creation of the poem, to discover that which "one does." And as Olson stated in a letter to Cid Corman: "if you don't know Kingfishers, You don't have a starter" (*LO* 63). And memetics gives us that "starter."

CHAPTER FIVE:

Conclusion: You Sing, You.

In the land of plenty, have
nothing to do with it
take the way of
the lowest.

--- "Song 3"

Charles Olson is arguably one of the most complex and far ranging poets of the twentieth century, and especially during the period following World War II. Because of Olson's intellect and vast reading (he frequently professed that he "read to write") his poetry is often very difficult to follow, and for neophyte readers extremely difficult. The difficulty arises not because of vagueness or because of ambiguousness -- Olson was neither vague nor ambiguous -- but because his poems and prose writings are clearly saturated with what seems to many an overload of information. The plurality of references and obscure cultural fragments are difficult enough on their own, but when combined into one poem they require the reader to undertake a great intellectual effort in order to come to a rudimentary level of understanding. This requirement has turned off more than one critic, and at least as many readers. Despite the difficulty, many critics and readers have found great reward and more

than adequate compensation for the effort.

From the beginning of his writing career Olson was a target of ridicule. His philosophic, scientific, and aesthetic positions were seen as outlandish and irrelevant to mainstream American writing. The most common charge levelled against him (by Marjorie Perloff, for example) stated that he was merely a confused derivation of Pound, Williams and a hodgepodge of other (seemingly more impressive) writers. In the twenty seven years since his death this charge has been found wanting. Based on the number of critical articles, studies, books and doctoral dissertations on Olson it appears that Olson has found a niche and an area of critical study that would not have been granted to a writer who was merely derivative.

It may be difficult to accept Olson as a great poet when his poetic ideals were imperfection, incoherence, incompleteness, process without end, and disordered vitality. Because Olson wrote against (what many consider to be) the standard of art his poems seem at times to be too obscure and written in absurdly non-poetic language. But the very fact that he wrote against these arbitrary standards reveals a discerning intellect and a desire to confront and replace the linearity and structure of Logos. Amongst the charges levelled against him was that of a saboteur of the certainty that thrived in his era. No longer would the philosophy and techniques of New Criticism have such a treacherous foothold on the literary landscape. But more than literary criticism, Olson's work reached beyond to the basic fabric of human existence, to the basic structure of life itself. The degradation of humanity through consumerism and commercial expansion found a very hostile witness in Olson. In contrast to his vision of man as a wild and passionate creature, Olson found that commercialism lured

man into "a false Eden of systems and institutions and who barter the realms of nature and his own primordial humanity for a few material possessions" (Christensen, *Ishmael* 212). As Olson argued throughout his writings, Polis is eyes. And by this he meant that caring and attention were the best, if not only, means for human regeneration and for the repossession of place.

Olson's poems and prose writings were always engaged in direct moral action: seeking to repossess man of his original dynamic the poems become instruments of a higher cause. As primarily didactic efforts, the poems rarely had time for literary concerns. But "literacy" was not important to Olson; he could never be content to create poems, he wanted more. And Olson approaches this task as Shelley's "unacknowledged legislator of the world." But as Ekbert Faas notes "in our world of specialized knowledge any such polyhistoric attempt is, of course, bound to fail in a strictly scholarly sense" (39). And it is little wonder that, as Olson scholar Dr. Alan Golding wrote to me, some consider Olson to be the most important yet most invisible poet of the twentieth century.

The difficulty in this thesis was in discovering how memes and Olson's poetry fit. I felt an intuitive connection between the two but could not articulate it precisely. This difficulty was overcome when I realized that the philosophy behind the poems that Olson wrote bore a striking similarity to the philosophy of memetic viruses. With this insight, Olson's "objectism" was more easily seen as another description for memetics. Armed with these two insights memetics became an appropriate means for better understanding Olson's poetry.

So what comes next? Does the memetic methodology have a great future in literary

studies? I think, honestly, no. It is probably a very localized and particular kind of discourse suitable to few poets, but, when suitable, very revealing. In regard to Olson's poetry, it may be that memes and memetics can be seen as an opportunity to expand the critical tools necessary for understanding how Olson's poetry comes to mean.

Memes have not had an tremendous impact on society; although the meme "meme" does appear to be surviving there is little likelihood of it taking over the intellectual landscape. Perhaps that says something about the landscape -- that the meme complex of Rationalism is stretched too far, too tight to allow alterity. If memetics can be seen as a valid explanation of cultural change, writing can be looked at as a memetic system. If writing is a memetic system one can view literary history as the history of a war between ideas. And this possibility leads to greater topics of discussion.

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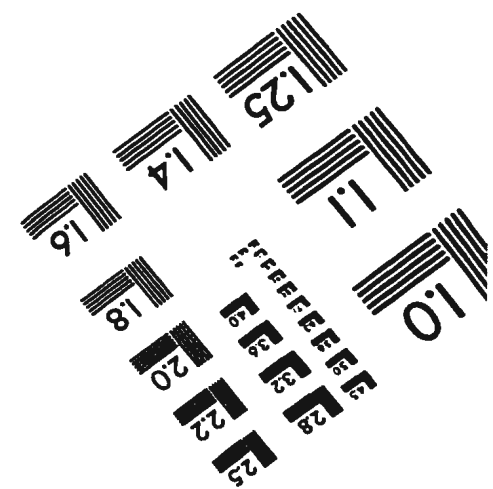
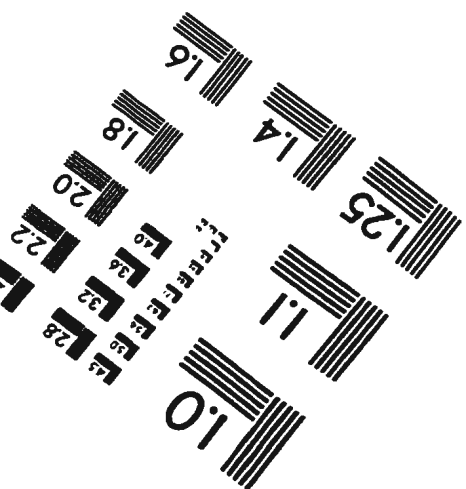
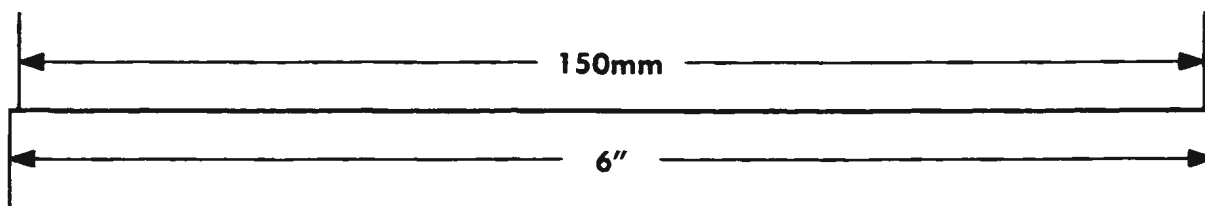
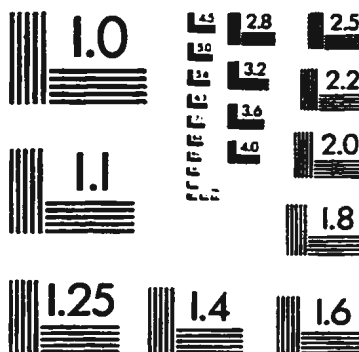
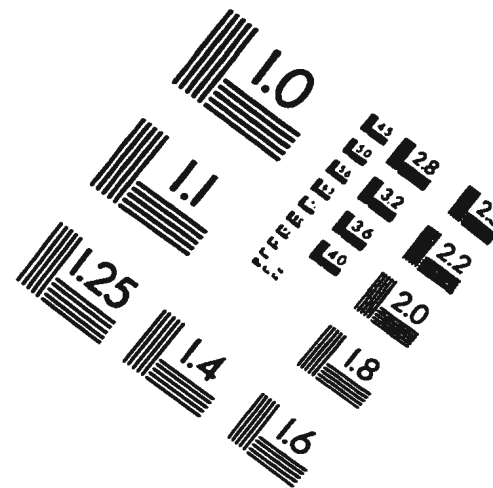
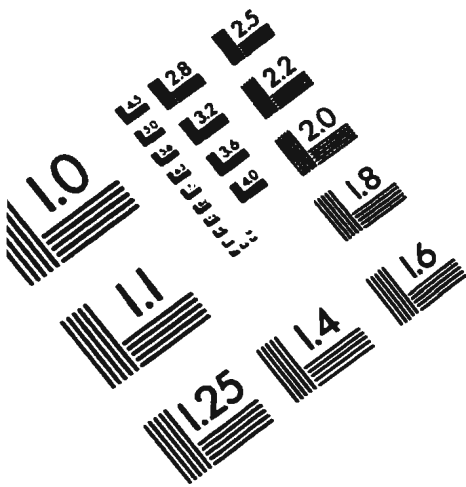
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