

"(boundary
Disappear."
Olson



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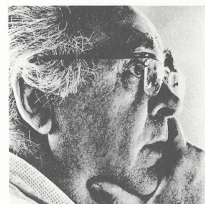
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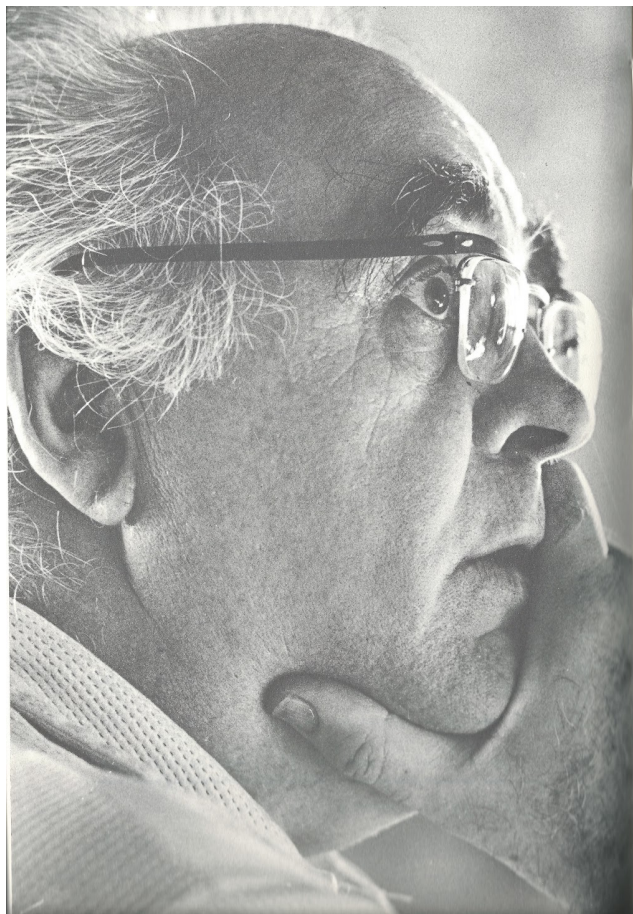
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Preface

*"Limits
are what any of us
are inside of"*

None of the essays collected here were actually commissioned. All were in process anyway and I happened upon them — so the collection, for better or worse, reflects Olson's status three years after his death, but more significantly, thirteen years after the fact of the Donald Allen anthology, that famous collection which ranked Olson number one influence, consciously or unconsciously, on the new American poetry.

Put another way Olson now seems out of the hands of the avant and into the hands of the middle guard (complete with barbed footnotes); one positive of which is the absence of that awful atavism which tainted the first (the avant) writing on him. One can't stanch historical process and these essays reflect the change Olson's reputation has now undergone — from his teaching at Buffalo, ten years ago, through his lectures at Vancouver, Berkeley, Beloit, Storrs (most of the essays are by students or friends of his during this period); a change, without which, no proper or fair assessment is possible.

The new wave of Olson enthusiasts, for the most part, are serious academics. Rather they are academics and they are serious — and though we think negative thoughts immediately we should think of the sense in which a wave of similar enthusiasts made Melville, the *Metaphysicals*, Vivaldi, available to a generation. They bring many of the old tools and strategies to bear on the man and his work — releasing a good deal if they also, as a whole, sadden a bit that in dealing with someone so new they couldn't adjust the old methodology a bit to handle that newness. That is, and remains, my own reservation with the collection, though it does, historically, mark a turning point, and that has made it worth doing.

Olson grows quite dull when dealt with in dissertational terms (whether under old or new critical auspices). He craves, more than any contemporary, a new critical methodology; one that is descriptive rather than analytical, phenomenological in inspiration and form — especially since his own work moves to offset so much of the casuistry of our times. The best and sharpest responses to Olson lie ahead of us: will take their very methodology as well as their subject from his work; rather, from the effects of that work upon the next generation's student, who, even now, is sharpening his descriptive shears.

And yet, the issue is more complicated, because, in a sense Olson encouraged erudite response to the text. Encouraged it in the same way his archenemy Joyce did. You can't stir up learning (from scratch) and not be the brunt of learning's joke, somewhere, somehow. Olson, to those closest to him, the poets of his generation and just after, was clearly a Socratic figure. They worshipped, feared, disavowed his presence. One can almost feel the release in their work now that he's dead — release and something else as well, some slight loss of center. For a decade at least, his last, he kept everyone on his toes who came in contact with him.

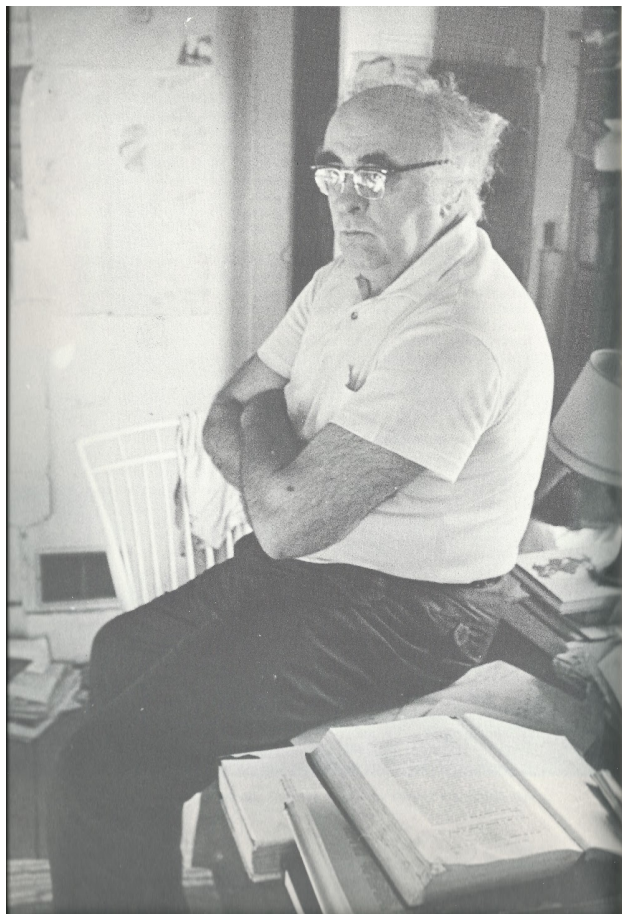
This collection, if it does nothing else, releases Olson from a certain clannish context that really (history will probably observe) didn't understand him and did little to help him — though it provided the cover he needed to develop as widely as he did. This, of course, is brazen and snobbish. Olson, the most difficult of recent poets (the most "turgid" to use his own word) was surrounded with even greater turgidity, with the ambience (or is *aura* the word) of a social and cultural movement that was an aspect of the larger, political "movement" of the times, though it subjected itself to little of the rigorosity of that larger event, and not at all to outsiders of any sort. We think more sternly of such futures now, are more sober about their enclosures. Certain aspects of the late fifties, early sixties, disgorge taste. Yet Olson, a part of that, those times, that future, *that America*, stands. His work stands and it is untainted with the artificial enthusiasm, the artificial (because contrived to handle the present only) humanism of the times. If you look at that whole scene obliquely what strikes you is the degree to which Olson, and perhaps Olson alone, stands above it, though at the time he gave the appearance only of leading it onward, of providing it with intellectual credentials.

The great poets who will learn from Olson, who will take his lesson (as amanuensis) and let it aid themselves, are not his immediate disciples. No law says they have to be; indeed, the law pretty much says a great literary figure stands alone, overshadows his contemporaries. They are yet to come; may now be among us. One would hardly expect from them a critical or even a creative piece on Olson, at this time. Undoubtedly, at the moment, they condemn Olson, whereas ourselves, ten years after the fact of seriously encountering his work, are just beginning to understand, to write up that understanding. This is how history, as it

deals with literary event, works — miserably, haphazardly. Yet with a determinism that signifies, after the fact, it may have had slight sense of what it was about.

A word, also, on Olson's uniqueness: on the way, the difficult way he strikes a contemporary's ear. Seeing is always the last act to take cognizance of itself. We are slowest in the eye, perhaps because we are fastest there. Slowest to tolerate change, to experience its full, wide effects. Almost, we have to undergo a process of memorization before we learn to love, to use, what we see. In the process we are usually confused. It is the eye leads man to strike out in non-understanding; that pre-judges (prejudice). Olson comes to our age a total anomaly. He strikes its eyes, so much of him does, as such. In his scope (the kinds of writing he gives us, all of one cloth: no difference felt between the letters, essays, poems, tracts, bibliographies) but chiefly in his language, the seemingly awkward, rambling sense of language that is his, the shape itself of irritation, of dragging prongs along the skin to make us feel more the bite of language. Language functioning as function once again. There is so much there that is different a first, facile prejudice is simply to strike out, to defend ourselves and what we've shored inside against him (ours is very much an age of shoring, consolidation). Thus the lengthy diatribe of the tribe (the Establishment) against Olson, the fact no major publisher in America owns one large parcel of him, though he is probably the most important influence in literature since Pound. That last remark, by the way, isn't saying much. While it is true literature is fairly healthy and prolific in America today, it is also true it has never so clearly lacked masters, direction, a sense of itself beyond its own thing and moment. Olson is the most articulate force literature has had in recent years (its most ardent and best theorizer); that he has drawn that theory like a net around our culture (our language), pretty much assures his importance in the future. The sudden welter of activity on and about him (the first ten years' concentration of which this issue compiles), the precise underground it springs from, indicates the almost desperate need we have to know beyond ourselves and the pressures (the acquiescences) of the times.

M.C.



Materials for a Nexus

Matthew Corrigan

1

Two cultures are loose in America today. Both have their audiences, their dictators, their false prophets, their media and publishing outlets. New York publishing tries to ride the best of both worlds, though its allegiances lie solidly in one direction, towards solid print (the presses are set up that way). You can see, though, at what point they think to step in: when the fourth or fifth small press publication of an important author gets picked up by them — *vide* Duncan, Grossinger, Tate. Olson, too, were he now alive and entering his middle stage, though we suspect he would refuse such corporate access to his work on principle. They are afraid, some of them are afraid, they might miss something, might miss out on a genuine new discourse; so they set up branch offices on the West Coast, send bright young editors there, take chances they've never taken before, though of course, lacking the taste and intelligence they've lacked before, the result is disheartening, the maze of enthusiasms disheartening, the *plethora*: the way America leaps on any band-wagon, sex or something really fine like Women's Lib, and batters the organ to death, smears it with deodorants and prophylactics.

In both cultures some things are more central than others. Some experiences, intuitions, more central than others. Olson, for want of a better home, seems central to the second. Not only in his notion that something new and vital is being formed out of the detritus of the present (to say nothing of the past), some new "total, social future." But even leaving that generalization aside to which too many are heir who haven't earned it, he belongs to the front ranks of this second culture. His discourse and all that implies places, situates, him there. What do we entail by discourse? — a word he himself strove to resurrect, giving its original meaning of "running from," of one thing building freely and strongly from another, the arms of a tree, say, or an embrace: languages, purposeful and fluid. Languages do change but an age is the last to see that fact. Recognition comes even slower. It is, as you might expect, a normal, even a natural, recalcitrance. Consider for instance that little exists in nature that can be viewed in process of growth or change except the seasons — and even there we think only of four possibilities; have names only for that many, or maybe (if you include Indian summer) a fifth. Seeing is slow. Has to be. Man's vision (almost) is deliberately retarded so he can't actually *see* anything grow on earth except in artificially controlled situations. Little, except under the microscope, and that's another world (like the world of the mind), he can actually see grow or infoliate before his very eyes. Animals, children, fog, clouds, glaciers, the fastest growing plant, all grow at a rate that is invisible to the human eye. It's as though man's presence has shied the whole of nature into concealing herself.

Language is little different. The changes we tend to notice are the obnoxious ones; the breakdowns, the *craze* marks, the things an Anthony Burgess argues against in *The New York Times* in his best *London Times* fashion, which is to say in another discourse. But losses of fluidity, impairments, shortcuts, *caesurae* of all kinds, are only indices to something larger struggling to be born. There can be eloquence in anything man decides should be done properly. There are disintegrations, iconoclasm, plain grates, whose own ear is burdened out of accepted speech, whose ennui rides that burden, so it does destroy what we take to be accepted speech (the norm and fancy thereof). But those surely are the writers an age works upon rather than through, if we can make that distinction. They are writers who are imposed upon, whose work is a reaction against; a stress or breaking point reached, given in to. An anxiety or *angst* in the truest sense. There are others though who don't feel destroyed by present awareness, who can ride it in some way, whose common language (the language they have inherited and the tradition in which that language inheres) works as a tool to explore that awareness. They are the writers who carry us from one age to another. Or, since this "us" is misleading, who provide the incoming generation its best rendered image of its own possibilities. In fact it is the serious young who understand Olson, who

have discovered him on their own, who find in his intensesness and spontaneity a challenge to their own fragmentation; for Olson has given that fragmentation an order, a meaningful pneumatic sphere, a *discourse*. For some of them (to hear them talk) it is as though he has carved out of air a new language of experience, a way of listening to the noise that isn't itself noise; a genuine inquisitiveness and response. That much of Olson's poetry is difficult, impossible, hardly matters. There is enough there that is not opaque to understanding, that *excites*. And it stretches over beautifully into the other works: the letters (a form which many of the poems, the whole *Maximus* sequence, takes), the pamphlets aimed at injustices, deficiencies of contemporary vision and learning, the Mayan enterprises (where he found a buried culture that seemed to correspond to his wildest imaginings), the essays and reviews, perhaps the richest of all outside two dozen incredibly forceful and seminal poems, where he lets loose some of his sheerest poetry, drives it towards the reader, the way he could physically shake a man (all 6'9" of him), wanting the old ideas, the encumbrances to fall loose.

2.

It would be foolish and even dangerous to pretend that Olson is easy. I suspect there will be a wave of books that pretend that he is or at least refuse to come to terms with what is the greater challenge: his difficulty, his opaqueness; and all it entails. There is so much there each of us can find his world; each locate entrances that get us at least towards a feeling of meaningful center. The danger, already, with Olson scholarship, though it is remarkably advanced given so short a time, is that it digs in too soon, demarking territories, too soon; excluding live matter. Several Olsons could devolve: mythologist, anthropologist, cosmologist, archaist, socialist, formalist, lyricist. The range, when you spread his books before you, is staggering; no other writer I know of in the present period could touch that range, the solidness of it; his command of so many features of the present occasion, so many genuine interests, all of which merge with the poetry, merge as one with it, without gaps, after-tastes, voluble poetics that force an organicism where it doesn't obviously obtain.

What that difficulty entails is another thing. Part of it lies beyond him, beyond his self-control. Lies with the lethargy of an age that consistently mocked his effort and gave him less of a chance than he (anyone) deserved. The energy that has been spent by poets like James Dickey, Robert Bly, Michael Benedick, to extirpate his influence, is staggering and sad. It is as though their own work, its cool clouded sanity, its denatured anguish, could exist only in a world that excluded on principle his. It is as though we do have something to lose (their conservatism seems to prove); that we could, by taking chances, push the present further than the lethargized niche it's found for itself, somnolent

between states of modernism, between *passions*, into something truly active and energizing, held in the reins by a genuine new language and discourse. Theirs is a gesture towards self-preservation a later age will render the obsolescence it deserves.

After a while Olson didn't care; in a sense he catered to his detractors, whom, though, he outmatched intellectually. Catered to them through an increasing unwillingness to clarify, to let fall the rash and beautiful stab at poetry felt at some center (some Enyalion center) only he had gotten to; leaving the most sympathetic of us shaking our heads, knowing what he means, what the response means, but not really feeling it because of course we have not worked our way to that centerfold ourselves, have not earned its vision, do not simply know the language or relevance that were as hand and glove to himself.

But the obscurity, more interestingly, entails something positive. It entails the range of his attempts to disrupt and organize perception. What he thought to do he may have concluded possible in none of the standard ways. Finally he didn't want to be a visionary of anything ordinary; he didn't want to be a poet of the new who turned language out in the meter and sense of a common newfangled parlance (minus the punctuation, merely). He didn't want (I'm not putting it very well) language just to sound and look different. Genuinely he wanted it to fall apart at the seams, to justify itself in and for itself, before daring to give it a new order, before letting it run to some other easy order or discourse, no better finally than the old. Olson didn't want, in other words, to write his own death warrant into his work, as Joyce had done in *Finnegans Wake*, germinating the very protoplasm of linguistic analysis that was eventually to engulf that book and all such like it. Olson wanted not to fall into the ruts that any new shattering of vision (Blake's, say) finds for itself. He fought himself accordingly; fought the easy clarities in himself he fought in others. Favored contraries, contradictions. Told himself: it mattered. Mattered to resist in this way. In life and language. These urgencies.

So that what should be deduced I think (one proposition at least) is that this striving against himself and against easy orderings of matter and soul produces some really new entities or it produces nothing at all, obscurities. To rattle or hanker a man who took such chances because half or more failed to materialize (in the truest sense) would be to follow his detractors into thinking all such effort an arbitrary and dangerous threat to the present. What comes through the worst obscurities always is this intense questioning (not questioning, which is properly of another disposition from his own); his inquisitiveness to take hold of something as it maybe was or maybe can be. That it strives to do so in an equally open form, a form entirely without presuppositions (or rather a mind entirely without formal presuppositions, since the former doesn't exist until it gets discovered), gives him at least the chance at newer, wider structures. It is a principle after all he learned from science: that the best discoveries seldom

come as mathematical logicalities drawn from preceding whole mathematical schemata, but from the *problems* that existing science can't cope with. From questions raised not answers already come to terms with, already finished.

Translated into terms of modern art: the realization that to break an old weary form you must reach in your seeing of it a total surcease or exhaustion. Then to come alive in the exhausted state. To stare, then, at the canvas and blank wall of the mind and say: but I still must paint (as I still must live, experience). Nothing, no amount of excess, can stop that, as no plethora can stop us wanting to see beyond itself into something really new or fresh should it enter the horizon of possibilities. Then, slowly, to repair the damage, to work to repair it. Olson very much is born of a concentration of stresses in the present age; yet his eyes are strong. His perception never leaves off trying to aggravate the new: to let it invent itself where it will and help it where it will not, where it gets stuck. Most of us get stuck rearranging the old.

With Olson, in conversation, you sometimes had the feeling he was pumping life — pumping it for enthusiasms, the way he pumped for information about your field, no matter what that field was, geology or cosmic physics. (The way, also, he pumped you for idiom.) He had this incredible way of conveying energy in public. Leaving him, sometimes, you had the feeling that if it wasn't for pure, inquisitive genius like Olson's the world would fall into some kind of desuetude — that, even, we'd transcend backwards. So much of his energy was spent showing the wrong moves made by history; made by men, in political and other pressured situations, unthinking acts of every unthinking kind. He had a beautiful sense of order, even clarity (in a strange obscure way; though he was, most of the time, the most obscure of men in his private language, moving great distances ahead and around you in conversation). Always he was *after* something. Encountering him you became aware of the mystery of your own being and that of the universe in a new way. Half hour and your head rang with questions. In one of his notebooks Wittgenstein remarks of the modern period that it suffers a "loss of problems" (of the truly problematical); that man is incapable of being rubbed the wrong way by ontological experience, rubbed into questioning himself, his condition, language; dying (to extend the trope further than he takes it) in an acquisitive rather than inquisitive state. Olson seems to move in mass and spirit against this tendency of *Problemlust*. He could pick runes from everyone's conversation and piece them together into some useful whole. The result some true specie of dialogue, some true experience.

3.

There is something about Olson's work it is important to get straight that has to do with his development as an intellectual. In a sense,

as soon as you say that, emphasizing the intellectual in the man, joining the allocation with poet or maker (*Maximus*), you've said it. He was an intellectual, turned, become, poet. A poet of the intellect whose effort, in his own words, moved toward a curriculum of the soul — with poetry, of course, its mean vehicle.

Most poets today make a knowable sacrifice in their work. Their poetry lies on one side of the line, their intellectual pursuits (their teaching) on the other. Literary parlance is rife with such distinction. Obviously, therefore, it exists. Few manage to incorporate the one into the other: since it tends to be the belief that the subject of poetry (*experience* or some other bolt of ordinary looking cloth) differs from the subject of one's critical pursuits. Not, strangely enough, from the subject of one's reading, which act of attention characterizes much of contemporary poetry: the poet in apt response to . . . text, painting, item of news, whatever.

Olson's early poetry tends to be relatively simple. People even thought he'd become a successful poet. His first efforts confused, at least, editors of *Atlantic* and *Harpers* into thinking so. Thereafter, until the end of his life, his work appears in more and more obscure places. Intellectual places — where there is little discussion of poetry as anything other than truth. Olson becomes a teacher, though not in any formal sense, a true intellectual driven to find the scratchings on things, true beginnings, so far as such is ever possible to us. His papers at University of Connecticut are littered with clippings from *Scientific American*, his library with books not of literature but *real* discovery, as he would say.

What happens somewhere along the line of his growth is that his exact inquiry into the technology of the soul (*tekhne* meaning art; before it became technology, artifice) becomes the poem. The poem, as it later and always was for him, becomes the configuration of its moment of creation; poetry the configuration of his own inquiring self. Technically, even, it becomes so, not only aesthetically, as for example, it tends to become for Stevens, whose know-how seems primarily a species of aesthetics. If there is such a thing as a degree zero stance (or posture) for a poet; if, for example, we think of Pound's basic stance (in the *Cantos*) as one of reviewing history: commenting on that history, singling out its jewels of perfection and transgression, its meannesses, exultations, its artfully wrought, polemicizing against much of what he finds; if, for another example, we think of Roethke experiencing a second-intensity nature, a nature of the mind, a left-over from an exuberant youth of humus and glassy green growth, exploring that nature of the mind at his desk, *its forms of growth and decay*, intensifying and going beyond any common and garden nature we know; we can, analogically, depict Olson's stance as one of inquiry into and beyond the material (usually set down in glyphs or myths of some kind, thus coded) that engages him. The matter

of creation and continuation. Engages the mind — rather than the senses (to employ that useless but necessary distinction).

Olson is one of few poets of recent times (Pound is another, finally) who incorporates his intellectual pursuit (seen as one *intellecto*, one driving grace or stance) into the very act of making (I think that's the word) poetry. Incorporate *is* the word because it implies an act that is brought about in time; something acquired. Olson, often used to say he *learned* how to write; even, on occasion, that someone (Dahlberg) taught him. What he seems to have learned (which must have been for him the greatest of freedoms) was the essentialness of poetry to the graceful art of inquiry. The oneness of the two seemingly disparate acts Plato so rudely set against one another — and the most disturbing of historical facts to Olson.

Olson's work takes on the shape of inquiry, most of it aimed at beginnings, *telos*. The urge to uproot America as it got set down and around Gloucester was the same as drove him to the Mayan and something fresher than the mind presently knew life to contain; was the same as drove him to Sumer, Crete, Herodotos, archaeologies of every kind. Now what is peculiar about root people is that they are interested in two things: beginning forms, or more accurately, possibilities of form. (They rank possibility, negative capability, above accomplishment, content.) Secondly, the easy declivities that have spoiled these possibilities; pathways taken that have become, thereafter, overrun, ecologically or otherwise ruined. (The interest, of course, being in clarifying these, clarifying mistakes.) Nietzsche fits into the history of philosophy not at all because of his irritability on just such an issue.

Olson's work, gathered together, letters, essays, poems so called, pamphlets on the soul and senses, is of one intentional structure and act. No difference occurs to the reader as he steps from one to the other of these works. No differences of *milieu*. No deficiencies. One tissue, act, mind. In that, really, he is unlike anyone I know in the late modern period. In that (I think it is safe to call it an achievement), won against any kind of popular self-image, won against an age's schizophrenia, against a demon success, he stands out as one of the great free beings of all time. Free as Blake was, say; or, as Hawthorne, was not.

4.

Olson is things. An interest in things, seen.

Conrad remarked his purpose was to make the reader see. Olson, more the poet (the celebrant) than story-maker, dwells more in the act of seeing. Relations interest him. Especially fine are the dumb brute acts man executes like a dance in the pursuit of his work (his life). His poetry depicts a mythology of fishing as that industry spread itself along the Eastern seaboard, 1623 to the present. He ferrets out the staggering acts

(ships snapped like matchsticks over Atlantic shoals), the likes of which you'd have to go to a distinctively Greek climate to duplicate. Acts where man excels his own possibilities; where he becomes what the heart is capable of.

Olson's purpose, geologically, is to bring the mind back into line with the eye. To retrace the precision so the mind, if it is working properly, is working *with* the eye. In "Letter 5," to a local poet starting a magazine, he condemns the use of a title like "4 Winds" — the imprecision of it, the impossibility. Olson's eye fed his world. He built a noetic around the visible event. I recall, once, in his 53rd year, in the hills east of Buffalo, he stopped to notice a fat spring robin hop across the ground. Our attention seemed to make the bird self-conscious (its look gave indication of this), but its little dry dance was perfect. Olson had remarked on this phenomenon 15 years before in his KingFisher poem, and elsewhere (birds always intrigued him, he learned from them). His comment, simply, "Rhythm. It's rise and fall there!" We had not been talking about rhythm at the time (or so I thought); what he noticed he noticed as though for the first time, not as teacher recollecting something in tranquility for the benefit of pupil. I have been watching birds ever since, and it seems to me that wherever he stopped to look *at*, in nature, he found his subject, and the subject was adequate; that the visible justice he does things, rebukes slovenly awareness. Shows up our slowness to respond to the particular (or quality) of things.

Olson adhered to Merleau-Ponty's idea of the eye as key to understanding (vision connected via the conduits of perception to Vision); perception as the model by which we live, think, philosophize, though we can easily forget this, and obviously can abstract ourselves great distances from the reality it entails. Those distances, in language, philosophy, the cold universe of discourse, disturbed him, and he fought in his own instance to bring them back in line with the body.

Olson's sense of what poetry does and how it works on the being of man was, if not gained, reinforced by his work with Mayan hieroglyphs. It is appropriate to put on the cover of *Archaeologist of Morning* a reproduction of a Lingsberg Rune. Many of Olson's poems are fragments as this stone is a fragment — impenetrable to anything but the eye (Olson would crucify me on that *anything*). Few of his larger patterns are clear at first reading, though always a line or two stands out as entrance to the darker labyrinth of the poem. Doubtless, much of his own work stood in this relationship to himself; was a thing half realized, a *massa confusa* with a few guidelines for the mind to connect with another time. His craft may have taken its chief sense of itself from the archaeological: rootings and scrapings. Reading Olson can deteriorate into cryptology (the game of). Sometimes the effort is worth it, sometimes not. The incredible thing, though, is the way he causes you to make sense of it; the way he stretches

imagination, expands language, to encompass it; by which time (and effort) he has you in his world. Sense of gravity is no longer quite your own.

A poem for Olson is the configuration (the "glyph") of its instant of creation. We are meant to feel a difference between such spontaneity and poetry that is after the fact, recollected in whatever secondary state of mind or imagination. His poems open in the middle of a thought (as some of Shakespeare's plays) and end, usually, in the middle of another. What lies between is a universe of energy, impatient of expansion and release. Sometimes the scene is clear: we picture Olson at his workbench, New England stretched at his feet. We are given the book he is reading (sometimes the line his mind catches hold of which gets the poem going). We are given the weather. These are the materials, the geography of the poem. But the flow of the thing, the life, is of mind over matter. The result a mass of cerebral energy about to discharge in all directions.

We learn to look for the poem not so much in the individual items as in the arrangement of the whole; the force and ease of the overall cadence as it leads thought back and forth, between head and heart, as the sea does somehow . . . leaving us the majestic, enaweing presence in which to fall back on ourselves, finally unchanged. The sea, perhaps, is the issue and mood of the poems. The sea that one minute involves us in its sheer bulk (its dashing), then diverts us to the land, or some paper cone of a sail, or ribbon of smoke, or fin. It is background, always, to the items that striate and subvert it; as the solid of Olson's poems acts as background to the items (events, sightings) placed against it. The result is new to seeing even more than to any aural sense. *Polis* as eyes.

5.

It's the quotidian, the minutiae, that has been deftly surgeoned from poetry. The idea of life rather than the life of it, is what gets left. Olson brings back into poetry something of what's been missing these centuries. Nothing is too low, no idea, observation, thought, to be considered, to be drawn into the poem as though it were subject itself of the poem. John Donne shows something of this refusal to exclude the average flea from the works of creation. And why not? What bastard classical law ever described life at its fullest (which must be one kind of art) any better than to acknowledge the workings of mind and body as it comes upon and tries to set down the thing called poem.

Many of Olson's poems are explorations in form: syllable and image as discovery. The sense Olson has of the sheet of paper as palimpsest and the typewriter as lacking in half its characters works with his sense of "field" to create formal obscurities. In a sense, though, there is no such thing as a formal obscurity, as far as Olson is concerned. Every scratching on the cave wall lays claim to his being he cannot disavow. The lack is felt

to be in ourselves, as readers. The mystery is that we dismiss much of Olson's poetry as impossible of elucidation only to discover it has declared itself upon us regardless. Such is his power of mind. It makes something beyond itself possible.

His distinctions are of the order of casual, original speech. He does not impress us with his words. He teaches us a kind of humility because of the loudness of our expectations, of our paltry questioning, which follows upon his originalness like any dry convulsion of language or time. Thus his effort against

they
who can teach nothing of vice
or of a death without regrets, nothing
of a life so lived

[AM, 41]

Scratchings almost.

There is, for the finest ear of its generation, a speech that rests between the vernacular and what makes it into formal print. It is a speech that seldom gets uttered except in the privacy of mind, and seldom gets beaten into a great literature, though great literature usually gives witness to its highest possibilities (*vide* Shakespeare). It's a speech that leaves its schooling behind, though it may become, on its own terms, erudite as all hell, as Olson's does. Whitman entails such a speech, Olson as well. Their exuberance differs but their intimacy does not; an intimacy that bows down, that milks conversation for all it's worth. Both use language to separate realities as they did to separate their friends from the mass of those lacking in interest or inclination.

A language in any age has two things to worry about (and by language I mean the language a poet has to worry about and work with): *sound* and *originality*. It has to sound right to its own age, not be archaic or stilted in any way; be part of that age's sense of itself (to which any animal is entitled). It must never be self-conscious of performance. The poet feels this pressure to make his words conform to some ideal of speech. Wordsworth and Coleridge's discourse, on their walks through the Lake District, concluded as much. Pound and Eliot's, a hundred years later, the same. *The poet must employ a vital speech*. The implication is that a dead language existed for these men. Wordsworth and Coleridge could point to the Neo-Classicalists. Pound and Eliot to the Victorians. Olson, in his urge to liberate a vital speech over a dead literature, points to Eliot, Inc.

Also, a language must be original. Original in the sense that it must find something new with its newfangled sharpness. To say a language worries about sound is a negative characteristic. To have it worry about originality more positive. That a new form replaces an old and does so

according to some principle or law that incorporates the old, or more specifically incorporates the present's attitude toward the old, is cliché. That new form discovers a meaningful era is not so evident or certain. It can and often does. Usually what history unfolds is newness for newness' sake; that dry ritual that aggravates cause and effect and calls it process. Or worse, *organic*. Seldom does newness come with its own teeth and something large enough to bite into — thus some new understanding. There are examples of dead movements in art, language and literature that lead the life of the dead. And of course they've had followers. Every movement has followers. The principle's at work there too. But movements that convey us somewhere, these are less frequent, and one has to honor them where they occur, and irritate them where they might again. With Olson the leap of syllables into trots and sheer runs is language in action. Nothing hinders it. Blood, heartpump, diaphragm, breath, tongue, admit its presence into the world. Language as forerunner of consciousness. A moment when everything holds as possibility, which moment of course has passed forever, never existed *per se*, outside the attempt to reassert its originalness, an idea we know to change as the notion of the organic changes from age to age.

Olson's discussion of *breath* has confused the issue and critics, who always rush in to excuse (and misunderstand) the issue confuse it further. As a maxim it cannot be taken literally (except after considerable effort). When Olson talks of *projective verse*, *kinetics*, *energy discharge*, *the law of the line*, *one perception leading immediately and directly to another*, all of which he aligns with the act of breathing, breathing properly, he means to rescue the individual from history. On a complicated level he is talking about how a man realizes his body, a culture its human universe. On a linear, syntactic level he means the way you let speech stutter out, find its own emphases outside the one implied (applied) by the traditional sentence. He means *stop, listen, syntactically, to where you're going; let words, queried by emotion, insinuate meaning, back track when they can, wield commas where they must* (true accent marks of written speech our age has forgotten), *so each thrust gets felt, in the flesh*. In between the cosmic and syntactic meanings, of course, lies a world of other meanings, uses. Breath becomes the image of the body in action: the rhythm each man must come to terms with; that brings him alive into the world, that runs out on him at the finish. *Breath*. It seems a simple enough image for a man who discovered the world through his body and his body through the world.

On a language level, the one that interests us as poets and critics, he is talking about the life of speech — poetic, forceful speech, as opposed to the stereotype variety. He is arguing a break in all traditional (thus *unfelt*) reliance on form: form as predisposition or expectation of what the sentence should sound like. The denominator, of course, is speech, since speech is carried on the breath, on breathing itself. It was an irony to

Olson (as to Coleridge) that ordinary speech should harbor what the written tends to overlook. We do not listen enough to ourselves. Ordinary language does not approximate poetry; Olson will share none of *that* nonsense. It must be listened to, though, learned from, before the task of poetry can begin. What this means in practical terms, terms of the poetic line, is that you never utter a word, or connect a thought, an image, unless it is absolutely felt in that order. To find the natural, unprejudiced order, of course, is the secret (as finding the right subject is another secret), difficult especially in an age where we all hear so badly.

Olson feels his way through language. He refuses, ever, to be caught midsentence in another man's discourse — the rest of whose thought one way or another has been prefigured. Thus his continual wrestling with syntax, wrestling to bring it down and not be downed by it — closed in the noose of punctuation. Thus, his often upturned, *upturning* syntax, shaking the utterance so the particles or whatever else has been taken for granted, fall loose. Thus his continual "of-ness": prepositions hit and left without objects to show us what a terrible death the object brings the preposition — itself the intentional structure (the meaning) of the observation.

And why shouldn't language be reshuffled? — when the lie of language (as of politics) gets so out of hand you can't say what you mean, it has already been said for you, obituarized. It is that question the average, paralyzed poets who condemn Olson refuse to allow. They refuse not to write their father's poetry, updated of course, snared with newness, Detroit's definition of newness, which is always and merely curvilinear.

6.

There is a sense, and we tend to forget it, in which every literary genius outreaches his contemporaries in what he expects of language — the language of his age. A sense in which he deliberately puts that language to the test. Think of the obscurities of Shakespeare in the *problem* and later plays. Think of Blake, Goethe, Rilke, Pound. Think of Eliot, the most sober when it comes to experimentation. His essays on English vs American English (couched in a beneficent optimism) indicate the fear he felt he might have chosen the more recalcitrant of the two possibilities (the two futures). He could admit to great swatches of his own work he didn't understand — what, or how, he was being driven to say something; and now, with the publication of the original manuscript, it would appear that much of *The Wasteland* was "automatic writing," written in a sanatorium in Switzerland when Eliot was in a state of nervous breakdown. Genius puts language on trial or is buried by it. That language changes as radically as it does from age to age testifies to the possibility that one or two individuals help effect the transformation. It's never, of course, their own doing. Languages move only when they want to move;

always they move because of disenchantment and fatigue. We live at a particularly ripe moment to see how this works. Language in America has changed drastically the past ten years. It has worked like a kind of feeler through the various new sensibilities (extreme sensibilities) from far Left to Woman's Lib. It has demarked issues, territories; and now that we are back in a consolidatory state, and have to take inventory of what has been gained, we look to language itself as having clouded our efforts: having swept us along. In a similar way, German intellectuals could look back on the thirties and point to the deterioration of language as an accomplice in the larger breakdown of law and order. In an age of excess (whether in feeling or ideology) language automatically seeks an opposite profile. So much of what happened in the sixties worked through language; the structures of events registered themselves in the language, bequeathed to the young as energy possibilities, real or inflated, as raw material for immediate discourse. Language turned essentially to a code or semiology: which could be transacted right in front of the enemy (using his words though never his structures) without his being parley to it. Language turned true political arcanum.

Listening to the Berkeley tapes (1965) one has a sense of how this worked for Olson. The image of his running for office (the highest office in the land, he muses), which he picks up as he steps to the podium, is a telling one. Olson moved poetry and language against the *status quo* with voluble energy. But even in terms of his followers (the poets among them) the lectures set him apart: he lectures *them*, each and every one, on some specific issue, which, if you listen to what he's saying, carefully sets himself apart. Olson's language, as those lectures have captured for all time, allows few outsiders. It is esoteric, didactic, ego-centric, though in a way that is more acceptable than the egotism of his peers. It is a language that clearly excludes. It moves to encompass another presence but only if certain issues are pushed to the verge. Olson condemns mediocrity and his weapon is speech: free speech that moves to dislodge acquiescences of all sorts; speech that moves like an arrow of established sensibility against a maze of clichés — minds that *haven't* made up their minds. It was the degree to which language could contain us in our mediocrity, slovenliness of decision, awareness, whatever, that Olson struck out against. The testaments of students dribbled out in sundry small magazines testify to the degree he put an individual on the spot: got him to declare, justify himself. If he could not (and the accusation is that the age, America, has not) he was sent to do his homework, via the bibliographies on America, cullicula for the soul, etc.

With Olson there is this problem with language: his trying to upset accepted literary speech (the urge behind all literary movements that have resulted in a new literature); his trying to irritate a more authentic speech (to borrow Heidegger's term) out of something that has gone dead. But there is another problem or another part of the problem which has not

to do with Olson's revolutionary instincts, but with the state of language itself. In order for a Shakespeare, Wordsworth, Pound, Olson, to shake up an old discourse something has to be particularly wrong, or at least at its wit's end, with that discourse. And the degree to which discourse has fallen into disuse is the degree to which the revolutionary's push works. Olson's point is that we have, as a civilization, fallen pretty far; have, even, been spurred on by the very releases, so called releases, we thought to free us from ourselves. All our efforts in the post-modern period (which is distinctively Olson's period), seem doomed by this law (we might call it Olson's law): that the more poignantly we see our dilemma, whether it be merely of dehumanization or more insidiously, hyper-humanization, the more the system works to ease our seeing into acquiescence. The system of our quotidian lives, government, etc. — systems of language of all kinds. It is simply not true this dilemma is perennially history's dilemma. True, the structure seems the same. Wordsworth's howling at pollution is not another species of awareness from our own. Yet it is not our own because we know more than Wordsworth knows. We lack his innocence to render the possibility of that suffering human and even poetic. We are infinitely more jaded — and what that means is that feeling has gone dead. Olson is somewhat unique (or lets just say different) because the age of which he writes and moves against is unique (let's call it different). We are extensions upon our pasts but technology (that ominous word Olson and McLuhan, when they clashed at Buffalo (1964) on every issue under the sun, could merge toward one center of panic over) has rendered, mutated, that extension so it has to be dealt with as a new thing (as opposed to what the past always tended to call its immediate future — "newfangled").

We live, according to Olson, in an age where the disease has stabilized itself in language. It is ironic that science produces exactly the metaphors we need to describe the problem: in biology, the notion that an organ is never healthy in any naive sense but merely balanced in its ills: it is the triggering that counts, about which we know very little. In physics, the notion you can't really take certain measurements because the category of measurement (the tools, formulae, whatever) imposes a pattern of distortion. Language is diseased and has mutated the body to disguise the disease. Measure the disease and you contaminate the result. *Something is out of control*, seems to be the particular message. The thing (the *musick*) carries on by itself. It seems to have a life, a noetic of its own, and it is only in a separate, unused part of our brain we know it does not.

We are caught, so to speak, in a surplus of knowledge. Knowing as much as we do complicates rather than increases our power over the problem. The more deeply we delve the less capable we are of simple, effective action (to say nothing of equivalent speech). The mystery, of course, is the expectation that it should be otherwise. And here is the peculiar aspect of our dilemma: that we have come to believe our

metaphors and thus are hamstrung by them. Have come necessarily to believe them because of the ethic of progress — the myth of our age.

The issue of dishonesty looms large with Olson. In a sense what he is saying about language is that it leans on a backward, false, secondary structure of behavior: that because language has departed from true speech and hearing (become media-ized) it has become a debased currency — no longer standing for anything and certainly no longer a part of ourselves. Thus language continually *lies* to us. Madison Avenue has only to tap a capability already inherent in language to reap its success. Thus the great political lying of our age: how it makes mockery of common speech. The dilemma is this, that we pretend, still, an ethos, an honesty, which no longer holds, which the system itself (the way it works; its false honesties and tediousness), if measured against, would fail miserably. We get snared in the sheer workings (the machinery of government, law, whatever) and nothing is wrought or learned as a result.

The problem in America is that systems go haywire (the languages they create and that recreate them in turn): we no longer control but are controlled by them. When something goes wrong we try to bring it out into the open: we scatter it across the *networks* (that beautiful, telling word); we put in on public trial. In America it has always been easier to conduct a public witchhunt than look within: easier to continue the lie than examine why the lie has come about. *America has never understood the unconscious*; its own unconscious. It operates as a civilization as though all action (morality) is a surface, conscious thing. Its literature is marred with this superficiality: it has always looked without for what essentially lies within.

7.

We have said that Olson is language. In his very nature he is against the cheapening of livelihoods (of commodities), and the tools thereof. Language is the most essential to him of such tools. Life depends upon it. (And he's not talking about the life of the mind.) Action finds complement in it. There's no need, ever, to mention art. On the surface Olson writes a kind of early American: the English practiced in the colonies by the exiles of Stuart England: an English, we hasten to add, already felt as less strict than its employment in and around the royal courts. Often, it is the case, the best language gets written by exiles. One thinks of Dante, Joyce, Conrad, Pound. There has seldom been so rich a language, if we can speak of language on its own, as England's under Elizabeth. The secret, it strikes me, of Elizabethan English (and by this I mean to conjure up Shakespeare, Webster, Donne) is its freedom from grammatical restriction, a freedom we can know only secondhand, though if we listen to either of the great sub-languages in America today, Negro and Middle Hippy (not early or current phase), we can sense what such

freedom entails. It entails an absolutely uncut piece of cloth. No guidelines outside of impulse and rhythm (design). No ideas before the fact: that is, no grammar operating in a vacuum. Grammar, for Shakespeare, was something he studied in another language (Latin). In the best sense it remained foreign to his manner of speaking. Words don't move along a track of conceptualization except at considerable loss. They roll, as it were, with the punches. Language never very far removed from the act that enacts it. One, or almost one, with it. The act gives sense to the words where the words flag, words enliven action where action flags. Not, let me add, what happens on either side of this phenomenon, as it transpires in Shakespeare: where the game of words gets carried away with itself. It is significant that Elizabethan English (the best of it) is surrounded on either side by impossible embellishment, embellishment of such an order that the terms used to describe it (euphuism, mannerism, baroque), are still the very measurements of ornamentation.

The embellishment that surrounds the moment of precision that permits a Shakespeare or Webster (for they stand as most central to this language experience, its most agile indwellers) is but the diseased extremity of their precision. Embellishment, after all, is nothing but leisure self-inhaled; an exercise of freedom, though an aberrant one, which a normal age thinks excessive. Thus the archival business with Melville and Shakespeare (on Olson's part) starts to make sense. Olson argues that Melville got his second breath from reading Shakespeare; and indeed there is a kind of exhalation in Melville's prose after his Shakespeare experience. To find syntax like Olson's one has to go back to Melville, as before him to the American post-Elizabethans. Take, for instance, this very self-conscious piece of syntax:

In the south of Europe, nigh a once frescoed capital, now with dank mould cankering its bloom, central in a plain, stands what, at distance, seems the black mossed stump of some immeasurable pine, fallen, in forgotten days, with Anak and the Titan.

[Melville, "The Bell-Tower"]

Compare with Olson:

The movement is, generally as, as weather comes from the west.

[AM, 42]

We are let out
sightless, and thus miss
what we are given, what woman
is, what your two sons

looking out of a picture at me,
sitting on some small hillside —
[AM, 205]

and those lovers
of the difficult, the hours
of the golden day welcomed her, clad her, were
as though they had made her, were wild
to bring this new thing born
of the ring of the sea pink
& naked, this girl, brought her
to the face of the gods, violets
in her hair

[AM, 80]

The riddle is (beside femininity, that is)
that of which beauty is only the most interesting expression, why
we persist, why we remain, even in the face of, curious,
even before the example of

[AM, 23]

Very simply, what such stoppage, redirection, second breath does is knead language into some kind of original softness or malleability. It's an attempt to restore to the printed word the quality (the hesitancy) of speech which it has lost and which has always been the measure of a language thinking on its feet. It exaggerates, to be sure. But all change begins with exaggeration. That's one definition of idealism.

Shakespeare wasn't writing for the printed page, at least initially. There are places, in the successful Shakespeare, where he does seem to be doing this; where he packs his speeches so densely it seems he is writing *poems* rather thanactable speeches (metaphysical poems at that). Every freshman is taught the difference between the written and spoken word. Thus a sentence like the above of Melville could be corrected to read:

In the center of a plain somewhere in the south of Europe there stands what appears to be from a distance an ancient fallen pine. [Commas optional after (be,) and (distance,)]

A clean, smooth shaft, which looks better in print. The eye reads it more quickly and can get on to the next (it turns out) paragraph more quickly. A self-consciously hesitant style like the one Melville employs is difficult to skim. It requires work. As proof check how many times you had to read the sentence before it made sense. Once you learn the technique, however, the original is more satisfying. It has more bite, more spontaneity. *More*

Melville. We feel the reins Melville has his piece in tow with (as Olson might say). An actor can make something of it. There's room for his shaping hand, for voice; whereas, with the stream-lined version, he can do little. And here is the secret precisely. For it is the eye that dictates the form our sentences come in after a while; as it is the eye that Madison Avenue works around and *with* when it wants to sell something. Now it makes sense that for a writer to succeed in his true self he has to fight the easy inclinations of the age's eye to pattern his experience. To the degree that he fights it he is, of course, eccentric — meaning *not of the center*.

What happens with print is that a certain kind of mesmerization takes place on the printed page. We are allowed to drift sleepily into the smooth flow of the novel or whatever. If we are an average reader we pick up about 75% of what is being given us. For a novel, first time through, this is sufficient. If the style is simple we pick up 95%. I wouldn't be surprised if the success of the English novel resulted from just this capacity to mesmerize for long stretches before open fires on cold Essex evenings. What results (to jump ahead) is that certain patterns take over the prose. Expectations get set up in whole generations (*genealogies*) of readers. Language loses its immediacy, its revelatory edge, in favor of other qualities. Other more somnambulant qualities, such as sentimentality, which could be described as language softened at the center. The long (and ever lingering) form the novel finds for itself in this period (chapter, book, volume) is a duplication of what happens within the individual sentence. And is this not the age of the semicolon, that subtle little admission that things can't be said simply; or at all? Of the age, only a few exceptions to the rule exist, Laurence Sterne being one. It is significant the criticism he received because he refused to attenuate his epiphanies into carefully sustained 30-page chapters.

The difference we are talking about is that between *a*) a prepared speech, read to us, and calculated to have us hover in half-sleep throughout; and *b*) the impassioned orator who keeps us on the edge of our seats with his performance. In *a*) we notice that we are falling asleep and resent the fact we can't absorb every word. In *b*) we never notice we hear every word. We are swept along in the act. Language is doing its job, as it should, effortlessly. Olson would have the poem run a course of *b*), finding itself freshly for poet and reader alike, even to the hesitations of speech, the changes of mind mid-sentence, flashes which shoot the eye from page to landscape, to history and back. *Of course the result is difficult for the reader*. He's never read anything like it. He's thought this way all his life, but been taught to read and write otherwise. Schönberg, before he could make you hear his music had to make you unlearn Beethoven. Not forget, but unlearn, a difference.

Analogy can, I think, be drawn with music and the visual arts. For some reason, though, it has been more difficult for the writer to break the mould of sentence (book) than the musician or artist. *Ulysses* tries and

does so against the most prolonged prose mesmerization of all time, *A la recherche du temps perdu*. Since then, except for a few isolated examples, the novel has fallen back into its mould, and the sentence into its. Only the poets have continued the fight against this calcification. Olson culminates the tradition that tries hardest to do this: Whitman, Pound, Williams. Significantly, they are all Americans. We would agree with Eliot (who felt this problem very deeply) that the freedom American English achieves in this regard is the same the vernacular won against the Latin of the late Middle Ages; or, to bring the analogy closer to home, that Elizabethan English won over the Latin grammar school. We could, for want of a better label, add this freedom to the list of protests, and call it the protestantization of language. Olson, like an angry Luther, stands for such protestation, against an old discourse of learning and proper speech.

8.

Olson's *Werke*, in overall appearance, is parochial, rooted to street names, neighbors, views from specific windows (his), history (his-story, as he breaks it); but, then, that is how we live. The life of the body is that way, and of the mind, if we see it properly. America began that way, is also Olson's contention; and hasn't really furthered itself, though it now thinks megalopolis. Olson forces the present to a standstill (*a Stillstand*): extracting from it its original contours, as they press upward through the rubble we disfigure them with, that is our lives. "Memory is the history of time," he says. How lucky for us that civilizations build one atop another, that decay settles *that* issue for us. Imagine, if instead of decomposing, we composed. Civilizations would not only disappear but also their remnants. Dust would lack the inhibition of the past, its germinal possibilities removed like water from primordial wood. There would be no past to irritate present awareness. Fortunately, dust *is* the history of memory. Memory the history of that dust.

Olson refuses the easy future we have prepared for ourselves. Of course the effect is to make us see how little we have transcended; as, also, how much we have transgressed in the effort, the past. Is it possible, finally? Whitehead speaks of each moment as containing the universe. That past (and the pathetic little convolutions of it that are history) is what we hold, now, this instant, to be the case.

And the foundation of reverence is this perception, that the present holds within itself the complete sum of existence, backwards and forwards, that whole amplitude of time, which is eternity.

[Whitehead, *The Aims of Education* (1929)]

Such reverence is what Olson is all about. Lévi-Strauss says we can never *know* the Greek mind; Olson that we have it *here* (hand pressed to breast) always. All ways. The moment can lend itself to any switch of contours we like. Its fulness, plenum, is that. Why deny this to put his poems down as not understandable? They are; in the original, long forgotten sense, understandable. Their genus all we can understand. Easier knowledges, transferences thereof, are the real lie. They delude in that they simplify. Like stealing books they give the illusion content goes along with act—content, as we are, to possess the appearance of truth. Possession is 9/10's the concept of learning as we pass around that cheap currency today. The 1/10 is the difficult part to chew and has all the nutrients. The nutrients the Pure Food and Drug Administration allow removed to make the product clean smelling, clean looking. An eye-ful of transparency.

But to return to this center of the work: for the work stands or doesn't on this precisely. What does Olson think he is doing with the lists he finds in foxed editions at the Essex Institute, Salem? Lists that give priorities, specific names, spellings, little else, and which he offers as part of his story of place.

The Account Book of B Ellery

vessels
goods
voyages
persons
salaries
conveyances

[M-IV, 34]

A poem? Surely not, let's leave that label aside altogether. A part of (something) larger? Yes, a part, or rather a part *of*, a piece of connective tissue, the right skin flap of an interstice. How else do we come to piece things together in the head. As usual, if we look, he tells us what he wants, even as he does it.

you drew the space in
reticule

now spread the iron net,
Enyalion

[M-IV, 184]

I dare say if we had only this list of one B Ellery and nothing else we could construct a milieu; we could make something of it. And something having been made (a treatise), there would be another upon that, additions to the list in the nature of volumes. The facts would suffice. We'd develop (evolve) investigative skills accordingly. From a skull and tibia in a Tanganyika gorge we have pieced together the earliest hominid "culture," 1.75 million years ago.

Olson works in one large image; one wide stream of image, Okeanos. On the cover of *Maximus* (Goliard edition) is a mock-up of "the Earth (and Ocean) before Earth started to come apart at the seams, some 125 million years awhile back." Olson liked such mock-ups. The original cover of *Maximus* bore the design of a fillet of rusted tin found on the floor of a bar in Arizona. Such is form on its way to becoming true form. The glint of things between motions. The form of energy in process. Which is all we are, after all, and all the earth: a moment within the larger explosion. One universe, among many.

America, in its rude beginning, its crude lists, did not see itself. We never see ourselves at the moment of our becoming. How can we, the event is so overpowering, so inclusive? What we see is the struggle, which is not seeing but feeling, an involvement, a way of life to be lived. Later, thought clears. Later still, image appears. Literature stakes its life on such belated, second comings. That is why there is no end to literature, only beginnings, fresh as any common season. Picasso's African masks inherit a world the original do not, regardless of the technical remnants. It becomes our Africa. The division separating the *Fall* is clear. Innocence and experience delineated. The ab-original enriched as a result. Is it not that division exactly we crave to place in past events? Do we not grope for this aspect, this eternal past? Conquering moral essence as we think to conquer its way of seeing. The whole action and thrust of the mind is meant to fondle and reshape (what, elsewhere, the phenomenologists thought to call the intention of every act of mind; thought's equivalent to energy flow, which we yet know nothing of, though everywhere is found its scintillant effect). This, too, is why Olson is a gathering of *of's*; the very link-word of his poetry, the prehensile that language no more than event can avoid. Nothing is without its *of*. Its *being part of* something else. Everything on its way to becoming part of. Act and thought of.

In that constant reshaping (which is the mind in the act of itself) we always stop some place, when the nodules are eased out, the instant the idea of form strikes us. This is the moment Olson is after. When form quivering to a globule declares itself. Of course he misses half the time,

how could he otherwise. Thought itself misses at least by that much. But to live in such anticipation (as he seems to have done) is to experience a freedom few of us, I think, find in traditional forms. Is to have left behind a body of work notable in its freedom, difficult to lay hold of in its dynamism. As rewarding, finally, as any experience cut for the first time. And as rare.

9.

What Olson does for American poetry is no easier to describe than what he does *in* his poems. His following is growing rapidly and includes the most astute among the young, a sign. They, in fact, are better equipped to read him than their teachers, who are still vulcanized in a way of thinking Olson used his life as a tool to dislodge. What Olson gives poetry now is a new example, and in that a challenge to a kind of freedom poets have talked about since Mallarmé, but drawn to small conclusion. Pound doesn't do so but lingers (or so it seems to us now) midway, in his own future of formal possibilities. Eliot doesn't pursue form beyond the echoic, which is to say he mines the past (like an etymologist) for his best musical effects. Roethke touches some pure well-spring of syntax but the music he unloads keeps him lashed to the mast, deters him in the conch of the mind, marvellous as that place is within his world.

Olson is atonal in the best modern sense that he is open to new auditory arrangements. Only on the surface, though, is his iconoclasm an ear thing. True, he makes us follow his own breathing, dropping us off at desolate points in the periodic sentence to discover we are lost, lost because of our (its) expectations; making us question that gaseous universe of discourse we took to be a live verse.

But his probing goes deeper than that. To question language, as he well knew, is to question the way of existence that has settled into that language. The shape of Olson (the *intentio* that drives his forms) is an arching over, an attempt to see over the hill, to find as he dreamed in the Yucatan, the sign (the shape) of some completely other thing. To get back through language "to those passages of man that archaeologists do not get to." His poetry, in the largest sense, assumes the interrogative mode, and in this joins with the great essays in *Human Universe*, the concerted breathy attempts of a man without a metaphysik to irritate one out of an everyday sort of being. Add to this *being in action in the world*, and you have a fair sense of what he's about.

10.

America is currently on fire with minor poetry. There have never been so many solitary lyrical cries. Olson's voice is one of pure dissent amid this luscious cacophony. His voice stands out as a constant scrutiny

of all easy effort and success. He is telling us in the happy climax of our art that our way of life and the language that supports it may be dead; or, if not dead, then dishonest, removed from an original condition of life. History teaches us the need for such antiphonies; as it teaches that the men who sing them be abused by those who feel threatened by continuance (to say nothing of convergence). To his credit, there was no continuum Olson felt threatened by. He loved life, man, human possibility. And he never lost interest in the new. Stasis, and the ignorance of will engendering it, was really all he despised.

Knowing Olson one realized he took from no one, he was his own source of energy, that he seems like someone else only at the soft edges where he stops to befriend someone or turns to a place vehemently, or an idea. Olson is, to W. C. Williams, on the issue of things ("no truth but in things"), as Husserl is to Kant on the issue of phenomena, and our perception thereof. One man breaks ground, the other plants, thrives off of. One thinks up something, the other makes use of. Williams' idea is carried on the crest of an age, and boredom with the old methods of seeing is its gradual device. The idea is as much unfelt reaction as it is dictum for living, thus negatively capable. Williams was tired, simply, of Eliot's dissemination of events, in which the real thing (and Williams' timing is so profitable we all know what he means by the *real thing*, and don't cant him on a point of definition) is lost sight of, in an ambience of half seasons, semipiternal times between times, still points of moving time. Nothing is so beautiful as the sheer parataxis of event, of seeing, handled in everyday language, which we presume parallels as effortlessly as possible the phenomenological scan of the eye over matter. Or so Williams has only to tell us (to re-tell us).

The difference between seeings, of course, has been allowed for in language all along. Such is the beauty of language to indicate sharp- or slovenli-ness of all kinds. Olson was delighted later in life to discover that the philologists had names for what he had been describing all along: *parataxis* and *hypotaxis*. According to one school of classical thought, Homer's syntax is one of simple naming: A + B + C (*para*, along; *taxis*, connect). Events run one into another. Names carry with them their simple epithets. The eye collects. Metaphysics gives way to the physical links the eye knows all about but which the mind can elaborate *ad nauseam*. Later, towards 500 B.C., the mind seems to get hold of itself as a thing, actual gives way to logical field, and a universe of discourse replaces to some extent the one of materials and weights. Language, too, convolutes, to accommodate the subtle but decisive shift. "A" is linked to "B," with the possibility of a "C" to extenuate circumstance. Thus A + B — C + D — F. Thus hypotaxis (beneath/connect). The conditional, along with qualifiers (and categories) of all kinds move into the way of the simple sentence. Western philosophy, as we know it, gets born in distinctions made possible by words.

It is not, of course, that Olson would emulate Homer. Homer may not be cresset but crepuscule of something else, something that never got illuminated properly. Already the formulaic has a pretty tight hold on his syntax, though it is intricately part of it, musically a part. We might say that every language, even the best sample as is had of it, is inclined toward imprecision. It's hard work keeping a language in shape. Everywhere there is temptation to slacken. Everywhere patterns, ruts, to slacken into. We might hear the formulaic in Homer as such a temptation. A temptation (let's give the poet the benefit of the doubt) he puts to subtle use, as we can often our largest weakness. It stands (the formulaic), nevertheless, as a degeneration, no matter how honed and musical the effect.

11.

A great deal is written, in our own time, on how poetry lies ahead of the novel, more experimental, more open to experience, example. Little is said about why this is so. Reading Olson one has a sense of the why. The novelist, by nature, is a narrative seer. He is telling, at best, the story of his age; at worst, one story within that age, which aspires to universality with it. Thus, the justice of the contemporary novelist's prosaic *Weltanschauung*. His given, in large measure, is the age, though of course he can use his imaginative faculty to advance where reason can't or doesn't by inclination take him. He is, in a sense, limited to certain materials, which are the lives about him, actually, or as they become enlarged in his imagination. He is not creating the unconscious of his race so much as recreating it, as the most imaginative novelists of our time have understood it. A writer like Joyce was in, I think, on the death of narrative, as we are not, and cannot be. The idea of such death, at least, was fresh to him, and a challenge (it *had* possibilities); whereas to us, as writers or critics, even that is passed. The reason, simply, is that Joyce came on the heels of a great narrative art, the greatest century of it we've had. By disposition a satirist, he could muster all his energies to topple what reared and teased him; and what he, in turn, contemned.

The poet, it seems to me, has a more natural right and thus, because of the talents refined around that right, more direct access to the truly uncreated part of ourselves. If there is any truth at all in the Pound-Lewis dictum that the artist is the antennae of the race it makes most sense here (though one thinks also of the so-called philosopher-seers, the Nietzsche's and Kierkegaard's for instance, who would have to be given a place in any such generalization).

A mythographer, like Olson, who is distanced by a good measure from the sources of his inspiration, e.g., the England created on this side of the Atlantic, 1600; but also, a period of rebeginning in Greece, 750 B.C. Whose chief chronicles, in other words, have to do with beginnings (archaeo-logies); momentous occasions man was alert to and chronicled to

some extent. The *ur-* of the thing rather than the impossible *res itself*. Which means two things get distinguished: the death of (the old order, etc.) and the burgeoning. By nature, such an attitude depicts a passion for structures. Olson is a more true to form archaeologist than we realize. To have his talent on the contemporary scene, another such moment if we are to take our apocalyptic writers seriously, is to have something genuine to work with. That he delivers to the present his experiences of the past allows a perspective on ourselves that might, could we work to synthesize it, inspire us. Granted his researches are personal. Subject to the same slights of error as Pound's when he thought to rehabilitate specific, ideal pasts. There is always a measure of pathos in an otherwise great man advancing upon a world that's past. And this because what he identifies with in that past is the minority view. It has to be. He is not after the majority opinion of what was happening then any more than he is within his own age. Your average Greek scholar is after the most general (the largest slices of) that past. He'll settle for huge lumps of time, decades even. He'll take anything that moves and leaves a numinous trail. A mind like Olson's is interested only in a moment. A moment, we should understand, that never existed for any living thing in that age. That he has an obsession with such moments should not aggravate the possibility of our seeing through them to some larger issue of moving time.

We are talking, thus, not of happenings but of presences. Some of Olson's New England poems give us a sense of presence no amount of reading formal history can do. And I don't mean in the same way Shakespeare's histories give us Tudor history. Shakespeare wasn't an historian (he was interested in character and human complex); Olson is. There are few poets who are. His individuality as one and as a mythographer must be seized or we can't see Olson for what he is. And it is (he tells us) the particular disease of our age that we can't keep ahead of the pattern. That we can't, in the short or long run of it, *see*.

12.

Excess, of course, is a relative term, but it strikes me that Olson avoids the usual kinds of excess that even a poet like Pound (to say nothing of Eliot) succumbs to. What excess does, either of a metaphoric or sentimental kind, is root a work in its own times forever. Only a vagary of history or taste will up-sweep that sensibility or one like it again. Already, Eliot feels terribly aged, his language heavy and lugubrious. Even a good deal of Pound suddenly strikes the eye as *art nouveau*, coy and precious; a reaction to something there is no longer a need to react to, often a little obtuse sounding. Olson manages the kind of stark beauty he above all respects: beauty of relationship and form. He is seldom giving us content in any traditional sense. If we take phenomenology and existentialism to

be the chief philosophic occupations of the modern period, an easy distinction is to see existentialism as content and phenomenology as quest for form: what we know of ourselves and how we do so. Pound and Eliot, as they recede from us, take on the sense of content (the heavy sense of it) that may temporarily cloud their greatness. There is much dogma in both to object to and I dare say the age upon us will do just that. A poet like Stevens will fare better because it is less easy to say what he means. What he stands for, finally, is an evasive quality of beauty's search: an almost deliberate attempt to remove matter (even some species of feeling) from the poem. Pound at his worst is even unwilling to remove his bigotry. The point I am trying to draw attention to is Olson's struggle to purify his way of seeing (an act we have seen that overlaps a similar concern with language itself); both are effected by a return to basics. Particularly, basic relationships. It is significant that Olson belittled metaphor. Metaphor, in life, no less than in language, was death to life, in that it evoked *category* — the mechanical in mind and speech. What he opposed it with was *image*. The thing graphed rather than the thing arranged to suit the mind at work upon the thing.

What Olson means by this terse opposition (image as against metaphor) is that language must be sighted first in order to work effectively as speech. Metaphor tends to be a later re-construction. Something is *like* something else only in retrospect or in the legal chambers of the mind. For the eye nothing is *like* anything else in creation except morphologically. Forms shadow other forms. They never become them, except insensitively. That the mind of children can't work outside metaphor is less to bespeak natural process than to underline the laziness of equivalence. Olson was adamant about this (adamant as the mineral). It is interesting that Blake and Pound, to cite two others, thought there was something finer than metaphor and thought to employ it whenever they could. Their own poetry, much of it at least, and Olson's too, lapses into what is nothing but obvious metaphor. Often, though, it manages an effect that is as they propose: something finer than mere annealment for the sake of sortment and collation (which was Aristotle's whole sense of metaphor, *category*).

Essentially, the difference is this. Metaphor draws one thing into the other, blurs two to make one. Thus all that talk by the New Critics about metaphor's fusion of two separables into a third, new . . . Etc. The finer way is not to cloud distinguishables but to let both hover in such a way that the relation, not the union, says what you want. Clarities, not obscurities. Pound's famous haiku

The apparition of these faces in the crowd; [semicolon]
Petals on a wet, black bough.

tries to argue such a relationship. And does. One negative placed over another and the two held up to allow more light. What you see is not a new thing but myriad things. Skeletal structures show through. You can trace the original form or you can enjoy the overlap. Relationship, rather than fusion, a large difference. Thus all those isolated prepositions in Olson ("The Ring Of"), the general run on connectives.

Pure image-tracing is more subtle still and at his best Olson is employing this in his poetry. It's a way of experience that has to be understood in the overall way of his life and work. To name, to follow the natural line of, to be in rhythmic tune with, is what counts. Thus, in speaking of Maximus, and presumably of himself, he can offer us a description of the indescribable that is of another order altogether than metaphor allows. He can remark, with the clarity of a gull's eye:

I have had to learn the simplest things
last. Which made for difficulties.
Even at sea I was slow, to get the hand out, or to cross
a wet deck.

The sea was not, finally, my trade.
But even my trade, at it, I stood estranged
from that which was most familiar. Was delayed,
and not content with the man's argument
that such postponement
is now the nature of
obedience,

that we are all late
in a slow time,
that we grow up many
And the single
is not easily
known

It could be, though the sharpness (the *achiote*)
I note in others,
makes more sense
than my own distances. The agilities

they show daily
who do the world's
businesses
And who do nature's
as I have no sense
I have done either

[M, 52]

Observe the purity of line in this, syllabic purity. It's all naming. Everything is said in terms of the ordinary geometry of the eye. Distance, measurement and weight. That we are all *late*, in a *slow* time; that we grow up *many*; the *single* is not easily known. . . . That the *sharpness* in others makes more sense than his own *distances*. *Agilities* . . . He's done what he says the eye that's alert to experience can do. Mind hasn't yet touched these lines. A child could think them, they are so simple (not simpleminded). Against metaphor, then, one brings the canon of the eye. The explosiveness of it. The (as he puts it) image.

It's as though he's saying (on the issue of metaphor) that that trope is an excuse for the real act of perception. That it develops out of the duress of life and speech (as all those other bad things have developed out of exigency, loosing us from the real world as man once felt that world, in the eye, on the balls of the feet). That it does what technology has done, to take the foot out of the brake. Or, to strike an analogy closer to the work: does what sonar does for fishing, diminishes the eye, kills the noetic of the deep, turning the eye to a green screen and synthetic aureolas of light. If you look experience in the eye, i.e., physically rather than psychologically (it's the *logos* that's wrong with all such words), you can probably describe it on its own terms of mass, weight, volume. Much of experience can be described physically, or at least the practice of describing it that way where it is found in the raw sharpens our vision so that it finds a way of seeing even what doesn't seem to lend itself to seeing.

the sharpness
I note in others,
makes more sense
than my own distances.

says it. Says something physical lesser poets would think to say otherwise.

Righting the Balance: Olson's *The Distances*

Robert J. Bertholf

In *The Distances*, Olson claims there has been a breakage or a blockage in our culture, a fracture between thought and action. Mending the distance between figure and meaning is the poet's project here, as it had been the project of Pound, Williams and Hart Crane before him. The problem is clear:

We have lived long in a generalizing time, at least since 450 B.C. And it has had its effects on the best of men, on the best of things. Logos, or discourse, for example, has, in that time, so worked its abstractions into our concept and use of language that language's other function, speech, seems so in need of restoration that several of us got back to hieroglyphs or to ideograms to right the balance. (The distinction here is between language as act of the instant and language as the act of thought about the instant.)

[HU, 3-4]

In the Hours of Initiation of Apollonius of Tyana, about whom Olson composed a short dramatic piece, the eighteenth arcanum is the stage of The Twilight:

Ninth hour of Apollonius: "*Nothing is finished here.*"
The Initiate now extends his perceptions beyond our solar system, "beyond the Zodiac"; he is in sight of the Infinite; he touches the limits of the intelligible world; the divine light commences to show itself, an object of new terror and danger.⁷

With the completion of the Twelfth Hour, the initiate is said to have achieved nirvana.⁸

It is the possibility of such a spiritual initiation which is the focus of "The Moon is the Number 18." Therefore, a progress is effected within the verses; the tower is ascended, and heaven is approached, the instinctual dogs recede, and the flame becomes more prominent. The crab also, night, is now within.

The tower is the projection of man's upward yearning spirit on the necessary creation of a dwelling place; "there/is all substance, all creature." Self-consciousness and watching, the cat; steady movement, the crab; and triumph, the sound of the cold blue dogs which are diverted and fed by the red droplets, and which howl towards the moon and towards the red tower, as if in prayers of fellowship with man, offering those inside only sound. This is "all there is against the dirty moon, against/number, image, sortilege"; it is what preserves the soul of man from the worship of the order of number, or of the "grinning god," or what keeps him from becoming hopelessly lost in a concern for material progress and events.

NOTES

1. S.R. Kaplan, *Tarot Cards for Fun and Fortune Telling* (New York, 1970), p. 50.
2. Papus, *The Tarot of the Bohemians* (Hollywood, 1971), pp. 174-6; Mouni Sadhu, *The Tarot* (Hollywood, 1970), pp. 408-409.
3. When the poem appeared in *Origin* 1 (Spring 1951), p. 52, it was accompanied by a woodcut of this card.
4. Papus, *op. cit.*
5. Mouni Sadhu, *op. cit.*
6. Jean Danielou, S.J., *The Bible and the Liturgy* (Notre Dame, 1964), p. 65; the citation is from Pseudo-Barnabas (IX., 6-8).
7. Papus, *op. cit.*, p. 270.
8. *Ibid.*

The Poet as Archaeologist

(*Archaeologist of Morning*)

Matthew Corrigan

The poet as archaeologist: *arche*, beginnings.

One recalls that Husserl, when he "discovered" phenomenology, and was looking for a name for his method (which moved back through the experience of phenomena to basic, infra-psychological structures of perception and judgment), wanted to call it an *archaeology*. The name, however, was pre-empted by the narrowing science of that name. Olson, as Maximus, as original maker, seeks another archaeology: origins of life and language, a concise paratactic sense of event before *Logos* got hold of the mind and twisted it out of the context of body (and its run on existence); a state where language and event are coincident (at least energetically so); where speech (syntax) names things, gives way to the actual knots and hesitations of experience, rather than losing itself in its own welter of delight and effect (*Weltanschauung*).

Olson is certainly the most unique voice in contemporary American poetry. No other poet requires such an effort — equivalent to learning a new language, or rather adjusting the sense we have of the old one, so that we hear the precision of his, and experience a world through it. There are Olson poems I doubt anyone will ever understand, except in their general aspect. Others are line and sunlight clear. The best of them

His shifts are subtle though major. It is as though in his hands the American language is once again in touch with its roots, still bears a relationship to doing (*praxis*). He is not quite archaic though he is full of archaisms. His syntax is too alive (in verb and preposition) to be archaic. His focus stops in the noticing of something where you least expect it, and the sudden concentration that is felt brings about a rearrangement of all that has gone before.

That love at least must live
is lie we practice to protect
What we inherit, breath;
unwilling to admit
the large wrongs bring
love also down to
death

Why should love live
when all that should enforce it fails
this side of meaning tearing off
what love alone is key to, form
that feature nature wore
before man turned her, woman, whore;
when matter stood so many objects clear
not use . . .

Olson finds poetry where it has not existed before. Maximus-like, he makes his world out of bits and pieces: issues, moods, incidents. The result in terms of an individual poem is a palimpsest of considerable age and distortion. To view the collected poems as this volume forces us to do, stretched out horizontally at our feet, is to get a confused sense of subject. There are poems that weave classical images through contemporary instances; that create Piero di Cosimo effects, luxurious yet deft. Poems that burst upon the tide of an established myth and seem to vivify it, as the beautiful ode to Aphrodite, "The Ring Off." Poems written in the heat of Olson's dig among the Maya, unfolding theories of body (and eye), against his enmity for modern civilization, and its usury of spirit. Poems that try to place everything in a happy parataxis of Sumerian drift, that root out beginnings to beginnings, pre-logic, pre-Socratic, pre-liminary. Broadside directed to the *Gloucester Daily Times* against the dismantling of old houses to make way for the plastic and the new. Poems on what

The best poems are delicate conjectures of the self caught in the thicket of its own awarenesses. A woman's personal swagger gives way to the dance that is feminine among things and movement; and the whole entitled "For Sappho, Back."

As blood is, as flesh can be
is she, self-housed, and moving
moving in impeccability to be
clear, clear! to be
as, what is rhythm but
her limpidity?

Rhythm, tide, is the search; as beauty is the glimmer; as energy the form it all takes; as the line its verse, its "dry dance." Olson has a Whiteheadian sweep to his imagination that connects one shimmer of brightness with the first spark, the first spring, "the shoot, the thrust of what you are." Process is all, is the message (the reality) of many of these poems. His ability to link one detail with another is startling and often gives the feeling your eye has erred until then.

Olson defines a poem in one of his letters as "a conjecture about an experience we are, for what reason, seized by – BUT I MEAN SEIZED" (*LO*, 121). The best of these poems depict such vivid seizure. The lyrical burst that comes to a head from a gathering of eye and feeling-energy, so that what erupts is as pure a shout as that of any common and garden Sappho before the beautiful. Take such a burst, that comes at the end of the Sappho poem, and watch how it *builds on itself out of itself*, breath upon breath, to the final "I" of "this!" Then, releases itself, by the reverse process.

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is awkward variation

this! this
is what gives beauty to her eye, inhabitation
to her tender-taken bones, is what illumines
all her skin with satin glow
when love blows over, turning
as the leaf turns in the wind
and, with that shock of recognition, shows
its other side, the joy, the sort of terror of

a dancer going off

[AM, 79]

Description that is pure description, verbless items caught in the kinesis of eye and mind (eye before it gets to mind); vision before it gets to Vision. Here, in microcosm, is the Olson sense of how eye attunes to process, to dance, woman, nature, in order to thrive in the event. The circling motion that revs through so much of Olson's syntax (the sense of closing in) is often the subject of the poem. In this sense many of the poems are replicas of their occasions, little intervening between moment and poem, the two growing as coral grows one with its environment.

What is surprising to observe now that we have the collected poems before us (collected from all those small pamphlets and pockets of distribution they found for themselves over a lifetime) is the emphasis on Christian themes. We might say the Christian act: Christ's coming, lesson, trial, aftermath. The Christian state of being, in other words, as history delivers it again each generation, for Jew or Mohammedan or Taoist (anyone) to behold. The early poems harp on the idea of love, the death of it usually, the pity of that death. One early poem inhabits (I think that's the word) the mind of Him, and is entitled "In the Hills South of Capernaum, Port." The moment seized, the delivery of a sermon on the commandments, is again a slur on all easy effort and success.

The old commandments hold,
I would intensify them:

And does.

As usual, it is the elements are drawn upon to complete the picture of the self.

The sun rises. And on the just and the unjust
the rain comes down.
The idea is to be perfect.

[AM, 6]

Olson's Savior, like his Apollonius of Tyana, and his Maximus of Tyre, raises the commandment of life to the level of proper fulfillment, a positive allegiance to self and body, never to dearth and negativity.

The light of the body is the eye, let it be clear.

[AM, 6]

Many of the poems twist faith and charity through assumed historical text or context and the lesson is as much of mind (and the beautiful) as it is of spirit.

A Nativity ode (Olson was born and died a Capricorn), a blend of natural reminiscence, a boy and his parents, and the image of a fire the boy saw, Olson himself when he was seven, a lumber yard on fire, "and the death of horses I saw burning, / fallen through the floors / into the buried Blackstone River the city / had hidden under itself, / had grown over . . ." The poem mixes generations, his own, his grandparents', his daughter's, whose second birth (as his own) he presently contemplates. What is it keeps man going, that allows him not to die at the sights he sees? The poem ends with this interrogation and the answer it presumes (birth) allows the poet to ease back to daily existence:

is there any birth
any other splendor than
the brilliance of the going on, the loneliness
whence all our cries arise?

[AM, 84]

Olson's dictum is that language, as tool, can be used to move things, to transfer energy. Depending on how the light strikes, it can also appear as a weapon. Lines drawn out horizontally like lances touching sun to pure source. Everything can be a measure of some finer sense — no less language, the first hurl man made to get his self into action, later to become a grievous world unto itself, a universe of discourse. None of this happens, of course. Language doesn't become weapon, or tool, even for Olson, unless you take polemics such as his defense of Pound or his attack on the Melville Society, as language tempered to steel thrust. It is a question of intentionality, the subtle pointing of self which means everything for a poet like Olson. It depends on how you conceive of language, how it comes out. If you let it ride you it will; if you let it fall into the ruts of the mind it will, facile Kantian that it is. But if you catch it in the rein lightly you can control it. You can let it race or meander on its own yet keep it generally within the rein of feeling. The measure of the full self lets itself out to merge with the measure of the reeling world (the verb), and both ride effortlessly, as though free of gravity.

is awkward variation
 this! this
 is what gives beauty to her eye, inhabitation
 to her tender-taken bones, is what illumines
 all her skin with satin glow
 when love blows over, turning
 as the leaf turns in the wind
 and, with that shock of recognition, shows
 its other side, the joy, the sort of terror of

a dancer going off

[AM, 79]

Description that is pure description, verbless items caught in the kinesis of eye and mind (eye before it gets to mind); vision before it gets to Vision. Here, in microcosm, is the Olson sense of how eye attunes to process, to dance, woman, nature, in order to thrive in the event. The circling motion that revs through so much of Olson's syntax (the sense of closing in) is often the subject of the poem. In this sense many of the poems are replicas of their occasions, little intervening between moment and poem, the two growing as coral grows one with its environment.

What is surprising to observe now that we have the collected poems before us (collected from all those small pamphlets and pockets of distribution they found for themselves over a lifetime) is the emphasis on Christian themes. We might say the Christian act: Christ's coming, lesson, trial, aftermath. The Christian state of being, in other words, as history delivers it again each generation, for Jew or Mohammedan or Taoist (anyone) to behold. The early poems harp on the idea of love, the death of it usually, the pity of that death. One early poem inhabits (I think that's the word) the mind of Him, and is entitled "In the Hills South of Capernaum, Port." The moment seized, the delivery of a sermon on the commandments, is again a slur on all easy effort and success.

The old commandments hold,
 I would intensify them:

And does.

As usual, it is the elements are drawn upon to complete the picture of the self.

The sun rises. And on the just and the unjust
 the rain comes down.
 The idea is to be perfect.

[AM, 6]

Olson's Savior, like his Apollonius of Tyana, and his Maximus of Tyre, raises the commandment of life to the level of proper fulfillment, a positive allegiance to self and body, never to death and negativity.

The light of the body is the eye, let it be clear.

[AM, 6]

Many of the poems twist faith and charity through assumed historical text or context and the lesson is as much of mind (and the beautiful) as it is of spirit.

A Nativity ode (Olson was born and died a Capricorn), a blend of natural reminiscence, a boy and his parents, and the image of a fire the boy saw, Olson himself when he was seven, a lumber yard on fire, "and the death of horses I saw burning, / fallen through the floors / into the buried Blackstone River the city / had hidden under itself, / had grown over . . ." The poem mixes generations, his own, his grandparents', his daughter's, whose second birth (as his own) he presently contemplates. What is it keeps man going, that allows him not to die at the sights he sees? The poem ends with this interrogation and the answer it presumes (birth) allows the poet to ease back to daily existence:

is there any birth
 any other splendor than
 the brilliance of the going on, the loneliness
 whence all our cries arise?

[AM, 84]

Olson's dictum is that language, as tool, can be used to move things, to transfer energy. Depending on how the light strikes, it can also appear as a weapon. Lines drawn out horizontally like lances touching sun to pure source. Everything can be a measure of some finer sense — no less language, the first hurl man made to get his self into action, later to become a grievous world unto itself, a universe of discourse. None of this happens, of course. Language doesn't become weapon, or tool, even for Olson, unless you take polemics such as his defense of Pound or his attack on the Melville Society, as language tempered to steel thrust. It is a question of intentionality, the subtle pointing of self which means everything for a poet like Olson. It depends on how you conceive of language, how it comes out. If you let it ride you it will; if you let it fall into the ruts of the mind it will, facile Kantian that it is. But if you catch it in the rein lightly you can control it. You can let it race or meander on its own yet keep it generally within the rein of feeling. The measure of the full self lets itself out to merge with the measure of the reeling world (the verb), and both ride effortlessly, as though free of gravity.

The point should be that the poet's intention can reach after more than meaning (where discussions of intentionality break down and critics posit just "fallacies"). Intention can be — *is*, for the phenomenologist — structure of mind: the direction of mind over matter. It is the curve the mind takes regardless, bound as it is by the energy of other curves, beyond itself, of space and time. This is why Olson wages the word freedom; this is what he means by it. Freedom from the mind existing before or after the fact of language: a dissociation of more than sensibility. Unity of self with language (with speech), a recognition of the forces that undulate both, a reconciliation of those forces in the actual play of syllables across the blank page. A challenging, if impossible, ideal.

Few poets have raised the moment of the poem to the level of subject as Olson has, a move which the best of contemporary poetry seems to have picked up to one degree or another. Certainly, he is the most articulate theorist of the move toward "composition by field": the poem as configuration (as "glyph") of its instant of creation. That, together with his work in getting language back on its feet, make him the most interesting figure in recent American poetry. Though he may not be its most lucid practitioner there is this peculiar beauty to his work which balances the strength of his cerebral reach with the grace of his imagination to convey a genuine dance. When the lesson of his person has faded, this no doubt will suffice.

Olson's *Maximus* and the Way to Knowledge

L. S. Dembo

The true interest of Olson's *Maximus Poems*, Robert Creeley has asserted, lies not in its social criticism but in its "particularizing vocabulary," "which forces thought to specific terms — much against a progress of easy, generalized understanding."¹ Such a vocabulary has behind it a special dynamic way of perceiving things: "as one sees a thing he may then deal with it or be dealt with by it, in the manner to which he is a party." True knowledge is "an active form of relation to term, with the corollary that *all* exists in such relation, itself natural to the conditions." Its opposite is the passive knowledge attained by generalization and analysis, the heritage of Socrates.

What Creeley describes as a characteristic of the *Maximus Poems* is also one of its main themes: active knowledge, with its particularizing language, is an ideal to be achieved. It is precisely Olson's social criticism that throws it into relief. It stands against the exploitive knowledge and "musicracket" that marks the fallen world of "pejorocracy;" and its achievement, involving as it does one's total character, is arduous. For Olson, the truly ethical life, in general, means active relation with nature