The N. York Times Book Review

Language as a tool to move things

Archaeologist of Morning

By Charles Olson.
Unpaged. London: Cape Goliard Press.
In association with Grossman Publishers. $12.95.

By MATTHEW CORRIGAN

It is good to have the collected Charles Olson in hand. Cape Goliard of London, publishers of the most magnificent books of poetry in English today, have given us in "Archaeologist of Morning" all the poems Olson published in his lifetime, apart from the "Maximus" sequence. The earliest of the poems (1946) are culled from established magazines like Harper's and Atlantic, the later ones from subterranean publications such as Matter and Magazine of Further Studies. Undoubtedly many poems exist in manuscript that have yet to appear, so this collection is incomplete against the larger effort of his lifetime; nonetheless, we are grateful for it. It is a beautiful and impressive tribute to Olson, a year or so after his death at 59.

Olson is unique, and probably the most difficult of recent American poets. No other poet requires such an effort, equivalent to learning a new language, or rather to adjusting the sense we have of the old one, so that we hear the precision of his, and learn to 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 hover between formal clarity and the larger obscurity of the man's mind, a mind so rich that hosts of poets not of his school have paid him the tribute of a Socrates.

His shifts are subtle though major. It is as though in his hands the American language is once again in touch with its roots. He is not quite archaic though he is full of archaisms. His syntax is too alive 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.

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 . . .

To view the collected poems as this volume forces us to do 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 Of." Poems written in the heat of Olson's dig among the Maya, unfolding his 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-liminary. Broadsides directed to The Gloucester Times against the dismantling of old houses to make way for the plastic and the new. Poems on what America was, meant, like his "West" series.

Olson on the subject of America (in the glory of its possibilities) is beautiful. Confronting America, as it radiates out of Gloucester and environs, his poetry often breaks step into a kind of Whitmanesque prose, a paradox of immense bulk and grace that fits the subject exactly. The tempo is right, the sense of space. The arrogance and the humility.

The New York Times Book Review

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 is 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 of many of his investigations. His ability to link one detail with another is startling and often gives the feeling your eye has erred until then.

Olson's dictum is that language, as a tool, can be used to move things, to transfer energy. Depending on how the light strikes, it can also appear as a weapon. Language doesn't become a weapon, or a tool, even for (Continued on Page 25)

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. 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 out of gravity.

Olson is the most articulate theorist of the move toward "composition by field": the idea that the poem becomes the configuration ("the glyph") of its own instant of creation. That, together with his work in getting language back on its feet, make him one of the most interesting figures 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. ■

Matthew Corrigan is a member of the English Department of the State University of New York at Binghamton.