

Unpublished article on Olson and Whitehead, 2004.

R. Bruce Elder

Olson and Whitehead on Energy's Form

About his method of 'Composition by Field,' Olson proposed this as the first 'simplicity':

. . . the *kinetics* of the thing. A poem is energy transferred from where the poet got it (he will have some several causations), by way of the poem itself to, all the way over to, the reader. Okay. Then the poem itself must, at all points, be a high energy-construct and, at all points, an energy-discharge. So: how is the poet to accomplish same energy, how is he, what is the process by which a poet gets in, at all points energy at least the equivalent of the energy which propelled him in the first place, yet an energy which is peculiar to verse alone and which will be, obviously, also different from the energy which the reader, because he is a third term, will take away?

This is the problem which any poet who departs from closed form is specially confronted by.

A poem should have the force of a verb and the reader should be "the receiver of the impact." A poem that remains open to the "some several forces" and that will follow whatever "track . . . the poem under hand declares" must be disjunctive. Instead of looking for patterns of symmetry, readers of Projective verse should open themselves to the poem's transitive energy, to how one moment leads, or leaps, to another. Olson's stress on transferring energy to the reader suggests that his ideal for a poem is that it be able to communicate without loss of speech-force.

These ideas, the basis of his poetics, Olson developed under the influence of Alfred North Whitehead. Olson advocated that poets not think in terms of time or rhyme or symmetry or form, but in terms of the complete "Field." Olson's idea of the "Field" is similar to Whitehead's conception of the electrodynamic field. Further, Olson's poetics echoed Whitehead's notion that reality is made up not of discrete and unchanging entities but of processes, through which individual entities come into being and pass away.

Whitehead's influence on Olson was direct—in March 1966, Olson described Whitehead to a National Educational Television crew as "my great master and the companion of my poem." George Butterick notes that *Process and Reality* is among the most heavily annotated books in Olson's library. Whitehead's metaphysical theory (and it was Whitehead's metaphysics that most influenced Olson) developed from his early work in the logic of relations, and explicates the relatedness of each existent to all others. Olson's notion of the "field" provides the means by which he, as a poetic theorist, works out an aesthetic organicism akin to Whitehead's organicist metaphysics. Like Whitehead, too, Olson argued that poems share in reality's principal attribute, which is innovative becoming. Olson expressed his belief in the dynamic character of both the poem and reality in many ways: sometimes with the slogan "What does not change / is the will to change" and at others, and more tellingly, with the assertion that "If there is any absolute, it is never more than this one, you, this instant, in action."

His most famous statement of his idea of process and its relation to the notion of the

Field, appears in "Projective Verse."

Now . . . the *process* of the thing, how the principle can be made so to shape the energies that the form is accomplished. And I think it can be boiled down to one statement (first pounded into my head by Edward Dahlberg): ONE PERCEPTION MUST IMMEDIATELY AND DIRECTLY LEAD TO A FURTHER PERCEPTION. It means exactly what it says, is a matter of, at *all* points (even, I should say, of our management of daily reality as of the daily work) get on with it, keep moving, keep in, speed, the nerves, their speed, the perceptions, theirs, the acts, the split second acts, the whole business, keep it moving as fast as you can, citizen. And if you also set up as a poet, USE USE USE the process at all points, in any given poem always, always one perception must must must MOVE, INSTANTER, ON ANOTHER!

For Olson a poem displays the activity by which thought develops, streams and courses. It is not—it must not be—retrospective. It must not be, for example, emotion recollected in tranquillity. The poem must have the power to reveal that the poet has the strength to live through the discovery of truth. Olson recognized that the discovery of truth is a disclosure in immediate experience which relies on one's being open to process. A poet must be ready to get on with it, prepared to move in whatever direction the next recognition carries her. Further, a poet must not impose categories on experience to tidy it up; she must follow nature rather than dictating to it. Thus, Olson's poems involve continuous change, fragments, discontinuities, and abrupt shifts in direction and tone.

Olson's notion of poetic form evolving in the process of the poem's composition resembles Pound's idea of the *periplum*, the "image of successive discoveries breaking upon the consciousness of the voyager." Both Olson's idea of open form and Pound's of the *periplum* entail using the sequence of words and images in a poem to suggest the movement of the mind. What distinguishes Pound's ideas of the *periplum* from Olson's ideas about form-in-evolution is that Olson insists that language is a form of action that externalizes the psyche. The new poetic language will not present pictures, Olson suggested, nor will it evoke the idea of objects by speaking their names. Rather, words in this new language will resemble the gesture of the action painter, for it will serve to exteriorize the artist's psychic state. Uttering a word—giving it breath-life—is a gesture (a pneumatic gesture, in fact) that creates a resonance in the open reader's body/consciousness, a response commensurate with the gesture itself. Thus, the words of this new language will impart to the reader energy that will induce corporeally energy flows in the reader that have similar dynamic and functional properties in his/her mental universe as the energy that initially motivated the poet's writing had in the poet's mental universe. The poet opens herself to as many influences as possible—to as many forces active in the circumambient field from within which he or she makes the composition. What distinguishes the poet from other humans is a more developed sensitivity that allows the poet to be aware of elements in the circumambient field that other people overlook. The poet opens herself to the effects of forces and energies that others diminish or, even, deny outright. The energy the poet takes in she then projects back into reality, in the form of a poem whose energy can affect the reader energetically.

Though Olson's idea of open form resembles Pound's idea of the *periplum*, it has even closer similarities with Whitehead's conception of causation. According to Whitehead's theory of causation, entities do not harbour causal powers and are not really causal agents; rather an

actual entity emerges through prehending and interrelating antecedent and environing occasions. Olson's stress on the poem as a field of energies rather than as a perfectly composed object mirrors Whitehead's efforts at replacing the common conception of reality—as made up of inert, simply located objects—with a conception of reality as active, as consisting of nothing else than the processes through which actual occasions emerge and then dissolve. Even Olson's extreme individualism, his insistence on the uniqueness of each individual, reflects Whitehead's ideas that integration of actual occasions is located within a specific perspective and that each actual occasion integrates what it prehends in a way that is specific to itself and that depends largely on its specific perspective.

Furthermore, Olson's belief that a poem completes a circuit of energy that began with the environing field affecting the poet and finishes with the poet reprojecting that energy back into the field resembles Whitehead's conception of experience as an expression of the relatedness of an experiencing consciousness to whatever that consciousness experiences. Cartesian metaphysics had left consciousness as a sort of homunculus, peering out the windows of the senses and observing the world around it (and sometimes turning the gaze to the glassy sensory medium that transmitted the impression of the world). Whitehead objected, proposing, against that common philosophic conception of consciousness, the idea that perception is self-reflexive for it arises within, and belongs to, the system of nature. Our experiencing, then, is really a process through which nature experiences itself. And what nature knows in the act of knowing is the whole of nature viewed from one of its perspectives. Thus, according to Whitehead the experiential structure of cognition is continuous with the processive structure of reality.

Similarly, Olson maintained that the dynamic structures of creativity are continuous with the energetic structures of reality. And, just as Whitehead proposed that knowledge is possible because the process of cognition participates in the fundamental dynamics of reality, Olson argued that non-egoic creativity is corporal (that is, natural) because such creativity participates in reality's energetics. Furthermore, just as Whitehead's epistemology rests on a biological (that is, non-mentalistic) understanding of perception, Olson's poetics rests on a biological conception of "representation becoming projection." Further still, just as Whitehead's epistemology depicts the perceiver as a natural organism that is an organic part of a world and responds to its flux, Olson's poetics depicts the poet as a biological organism that is an integral part of nature (not above it) and responds to its dynamics and its energy.

Like others of his generation, Olson developed a poetics that valorized what Keats had called "negative capability." Keats had asked whether any philosopher ever frames her system without ignoring objections that she cannot answer, or ignoring features of reality that cannot be reconciled to the system. In asking the question, he was pointing out human's liking for intellectual systems and their aversion to contradiction. A key ability of the poet, Keats argued, is negative capability, by which he meant the capacity to endure contradiction and the doubts that contradictions raise. Exponents of Open Form poetry evinced a similar loathing of exclusion and a similar belief that the strong poet is one who can endure multiplicity, contradiction, and doubt; and they often invoked Keats' name when they expounded their beliefs. If reality is an infinite dynamic process, then a poet who opens himself or herself to as much reality as possible must accept that the senses will present reality as contingent, inconsistent, changing and uninterpretable. Most humans systematize their perceptions, and in doing so, they eliminate doubt, inconsistency and incomprehensibility. The strong poet, on the other hand, accepts contradiction and the ambiguities of reality. The method of composition by the open field requires the capacity to live with indeterminacy and contradiction, since indeterminacy and

contradiction are inevitable features of any method for grasping anything more than a small part of reality.

Nor did the Open Form poets care to create smooth transitions from one element to another. To create such transitions is to forge artificial links where none really exists, and so to be untruthful to reality. Each new element in a paratactical series is a vividly independent moment, different from all others and possessed of a vital energy all its own. Robert Duncan shared Charles Olson's interest in paratactical constructions. In his preface to *Bending the Bow*, he wrote

. . . the phrase within its line, the adjoining pulse in silence, the new phrase—each part is a thing in itself; the junctures not binding but freeing the elements of configuration so that they participate in more than one figure. . . [The poet] strives not for a disintegration of syntax but for a complication within syntax, overlapping structures, so that words are freed, having bounds out of bound.

A poem that incorporates a paratactical series is constantly changing, and each change instils new life and fresh energy into the poem. The appearance of each successive element in the series enacts a sudden turning of feeling and thought; it can be a rapid reversal of opinion, an instantaneous formation of an association, or an unexpected leap of comparison. Thus, the series of juxtapositions externalizes the poet's thought processes.

Open Form poets propose that we concentrate on the moment of experience, on what *this* very instant of experience reveals. Complete openness to everything that belongs to every moment of experience can reveal much more about reality than any overarching system can. The Projective Poet's ideal, accordingly, was complete responsiveness to the entire content of each moment—a responsiveness that allows him or her to go wherever it seems to be leading. They strove to experience life with what Olson characterized as “point by point vividness.”

Olson's ideas on poetic form stressed as well the importance of personal rhythm. The true end of poetry is to create an object that contains verbal energies projected from the self's dynamics and that relays that personal dynamic to anyone who reads it. Pound still maintained the Romantic belief that moments of ecstasy can transport us out of ourselves and enable us to experience something impersonal; he continued to believe that transcendence of the self was the state that great poetry strives for, because it is the state that great spirits seek. Olson maintained no such belief. Rather, he thought that to make a poem is to create an external equivalent of the feeling self—that is, to compose a field of energy equivalent to the energies that course through the poet's body and constitute her feeling. Olson's constant effort was to get as many as possible of the vagaries of the conscious processes of a highly individuated consciousness into the finished poem. To achieve that, the poet must open himself or herself to vicissitudes of the compositional process.

A poem exposes the movement of thought, and what makes such a poem an important poem is the magnitude of its field, the number and complexity of the elements (perceptions) it holds in a tension. Ideogrammic form permits such a display, for it allows the many elements cast up by movement of thought to be held together in a field of tensions. As Allen Ginsberg put it, it allows the poem to be the “exfoliation, on the page organically, showing the shape of the thought.”

Olson intended the term “projective verse” to indicate his belief in the possibility of creating verse that consists of sounds projected from the body. “Speech force” means “projective” or “projectile,” Olson suggested. Or, rather, by the term “projective verse” Olson

intended verse that propels outward the energy that caused the poem to be written in the first place, relaying it to the reader. It must not have escaped him that “projective” also means “propelling forward,” for projective verse form evolves from the force that propels the poet forward through the composition. Every word that a poet writes down exerts a push. This push—this force—is what the poet must attend to while writing, not what he or she wanted to say. A poet should write a poem by sensing the dynamics of the poem she is creating, by opening herself to the anti-inertial push of the movement of all the syllables and all the lines so far put down and to the interrelations amongst these forces (that is, to the entire field of the poem), and by going wherever the forces generated by those interrelations lead.

A trouble Olson found with writing is that it tends to assume linear form. A poet when writing a poem is not subjected to a simple succession of singular, isolated impulses; he or she is influenced, moment by moment, by the total environing occasion, which includes the entire circumambient universe. Olson’s ideas on this matter, too, resemble Whitehead’s. From his first philosophical work, *Treatise on Universal Algebra* (1898), Whitehead argued that most existents have complex relations with other entities. Much of the trouble with science, he insisted, is the result of its trying to model the relation between material objects and space as a two-termed relation, rather than as the polyadic relation it actually is. Later, in the period in which he produced *Process and Reality*, Whitehead argued that each actual occasion relates, either positively or negatively, to the entire antecedent universe. Exfoliating the complex structure of relations that existents possess, showing that ultimately everything relates to everything else, was the fundamental point of Whitehead’s theory of prehension. Every actual entity takes account of, or prehends, every prior antecedent occasion, either positively or negatively. If it prehends the other occasion positively, the emergent actual occasion incorporates the prehended occasion into its complex nature, harmonizing characteristics of the prehended occasion with other characteristics of the emerging entity. If, however, the emergent occasion prehends an existing actual occasion negatively, the negatively prehended object does not become a part of the emergent occasion. The solidity of the universe requires that negative prehensions influence the emergent entity; that is, it requires that the elimination of negatively prehended occasions play a role in constituting the nexus that is the emergent actual occasion. Thus, the emergent actual entity reflects the entire universe from its own perspective, for every antecedent occasion is either incorporated in or expelled from its coming-to-be.

Olson wanted to capture speech that moved with the speed of synaptical triggering. He strove, too, to fashion in the poem a field that could hold together a lifetime of experience—in Olson’s case, his poetry ‘com-prehends’ experiences that range from his youthful activities he engaged in while living in a tenement in Worcester to fantasies of the present moment in Gloucester. Such a poem can be thought of as conjecture, since it takes its form from what is thrown up from the synapses—or from what is “thrown together,” that is, what is pitched into the force field of the poetic work. Such poems will incorporate paratactical constructions that suggest the shifts of thinking that leave ideas uncompleted. In his letter to Elaine Feinstein he wrote

The basic idea anyway for me is that one, that form is never any more than an extension of content—a non-literary sense, certainly. I believe in Truth! (Wahrheit) My sense is that beauty (Schönheit) better stay in the thing itself: das Ding—Ja!—macht ring (the attack, I suppose, on the “completed thought,” or the Idea, yes? Thus the syntax question: what is the sentence?)

Along with these ideas came the idea that traditional poetic forms, closed forms, broke the relation that art has with life—or, more exactly, with the life-force. The closed form poem is limited in scope because it is selective, and it imposes meaning on experience. Life, on the other hand, is unselective: it presents everything that comes along in an indiscriminating flow. In life nothing exists as a completed entity and nothing is isolated, nothing set apart for special attention. Moreover, events in life do not bring their interpretation with them: they just are, and we make of them what we can. If we cannot discern their significance, then so much the worse for significance.

Exponents of Open Form poetics often rejected the idea that each composition should be a separate object, complete in itself. Instead, they strived to bring the poem into the organic flow and pulse of life. Instead of the perfect poem, they proposed to create compositions that are best regarded as fragments of an ongoing composition, a serial poem that will take years to produce. Olson's *Maximus Poems* and Robert Duncan's *Passages* were just that—on-going, open form, evolving, never-ending works.

Olson's emphasis on language as action led him to reject the idea that poetic language is representational and, consequently, to repudiate the Romantic emphasis on the image in poetry. His letter to Elaine Feinstein also stated: "Which gets me to yr 1st question— 'the use of the Image.' 'the Image' . . . Image, therefore, is vector." Or it could be, but mostly isn't. For, Olson alleged, the image, because it is representational, is a dead-spot. It lacks the energy; for, if it had energy, the energy would be present in the poem and the verbal image would not be a mere representation but something dynamic—something that conveyed the energy that it possesses in and through itself and that gives that thing its form. Because it lacks energy, an image does not cause anything to happen. The Projective Poet, therefore, will reject the image.

Yet, Olson does not reject realism holus-bolus. However, the version of realism he expounded is different from that which forms the basis of the classic realist text. His brand of realism aims at creating a work that is "equal to the real itself"—and that push justifies his claim that his art has the status of documentary.

The passage I quoted from immediately above raises another important issue in Olson's poetics. It concerns the distinction between meaning as action generated by the material of language and meaning as description—that is, between perlocutionary effect and denotation. Olson repeatedly instructed anyone who cared to listen that meaning is a self-actualizing power. In the famous lecture he delivered to the Berkeley Poetry Conference on July 20, 1963, Olson stated, at the outset, that "*that which exists through itself is what is called meaning.*" What does he mean by this? A clue to answering this question appears in his essay, "Human Universe," in the rejection of what he calls "description."

. . . we do not find ways to hew to experience as it is, in our definition and expression of it, in other words, find ways to stay in the human universe, and not be led to partition reality at any point, in any way. . . . It is the function, *comparison*, or, its bigger name, *symbolology*. These are the false faces, too much seen, which hide and keep from use the active intellectual states, metaphor and performance, [sic] All that comparison ever does is to set up a series of *reference* points: to compare is to take one thing and try to understand it by marking its similarities to or differences from another thing. Right here is the trouble, that each thing is not so much like or different from another thing (these likenesses and differences are apparent) but that such an analysis only accomplishes a *description*, does not come to grips with what really matters: that a thing, any

thing, impinges on us by a more important fact, its self-existence, without reference to any other thing, in short, the very character of it which calls our attention to it, which wants us to know more about it, its particularity.

William Carlos Williams had contended that metaphor has harmful effects on cognition because it results in comparing one thing to be like another. Olson reiterated this claim. "To exist in and through itself," is partly to have a self-contained existence, to exist as a concrete particular. What has meaning (that is, what exists in and through itself), in Olson's view, is the concrete particular. Olson must have recognized that a being that exists through itself, a being that has self-actualizing power, conforms to the classical conception of divinity. By likening the concrete particular to the classical divine, he suggests that the concrete particular has supreme value. Thus, Olson expounds a version of the American doctrine of particularism.

Stephen Fredman devotes much attention to Olson's idea that meaning is that which exists through itself; by following up on work George Butterick had done, Fredman shows that this famous claim regarding meaning developed from Olson's reading of a Daoist text, *The Secret of the Golden Flower*. In that work, Lu Tzu is quoted as saying, "That which exists in and through itself is called Meaning. Meaning has neither name nor force. It is the one essence, the one primordial spirit." Olson interpreted this as Whitehead might have, to mean that each existent comes into existence within an all-encompassing field by reducing its unique potential (which depends on its relations to previously and contemporaneously existing entities) to a determinate actuality. Each existent is unique, irreplaceable, and incommensurate with any other concrete particular, since it can be referred only to the relational field itself—which Olson, in this context, calls Meaning. Fredman quotes Olson's text, "Experience and Measurement:" "everything does issue from the Black Chrysanthemum [the *Dao*, as Fredman shows] & therefore nothing is anything but itself." Relating this to Olson's ideas about "the third of the civilized pleasures . . . 'Perspective'—which," like the *Dao* or the field of relations, "is everywhere and every thing"—we note that Olson's cosmological beliefs imply that every coming-to-be emerges within a field of relations and is nothing but a collocation of those relations; therefore nothing is anything but itself, since no other being can possess the same perspectival conditions or, consequently, the identical set of relations. A demand arises from this: in order to know an object in its uniqueness, we must not compare it with any other, but must penetrate it deeply enough to appreciate its uniqueness.

Bringing the lesson home to the individual knower, Olson puts the idea (somewhat opaquely): ". . . we like everything else are only anything because everything is itself only. . . we . . . become ourselves itself as all is anyway, direct from the Black Gold Flower." In the end, Olson takes this to imply that each particular becomes meaningful through an act of self-creation; thus, despite its provenance in a relational theory of existence, Olson goes on (though with dubious consistency) to develop this relational theory of existence into nothing less than a full-fledged particularism that is a celebration of beings (including human beings') creative self-making.

The idea of the identity of mind and syllable (energy) so fundamental to Olson's prosody and poetics also has its root in Whitehead's philosophy of process. So, too, does his belief that there is an essential continuity between the throbbing energy of the physical world, characterized by the continual generation of novelty, and the stream of experience which, likewise, is in continual flux and, when not under the stultifying regulation of a static, life-denying logic, is charged with tension and conflict. Awareness of this continuity of body/self and world comes by

. . . getting rid of the lyrical interference of the individual as ego, of the “subject” and his soul, that peculiar presumption by which western man has interposed himself between what he is as a creature of nature (with certain instructions to carry out) and those other creations of nature which we may, with no derogation, call objects. For a man is himself an object . . .

Whitehead attempted to avoid the “bifurcation of Nature” that had plagued Western philosophy by basing his metaphysical theory on concepts of physical reality, rather than psychological processes, and by describing physical nature as characterized by the precursors and prototypes of feeling. Olson adopted a similar strategy: as the passage quoted immediately above shows, Olson put consciousness back into nature and also depicted nature as throbs of energy that resemble feelings—consciousness was naturalized while nature itself became a form of feeling. Olson shares with Whitehead the idea that experience is of the world and in the world—that neither can we achieve a panoramic view of experience nor can we transcend the world in experience. Thus, in *A Special View of History*, Olson describes his project as “re-setting man in his field” and claims that in doing so he is “doing no more than giving him back his ‘time.’”

Olson also embraced a variant of Whitehead’s philosophy of organicism as an alternative to the traditional, deleterious metaphysic based on the reification of logical categories.

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

Or, according to an even more Whiteheadian formulation,

. . . For this metaphor of the senses—of the literal speed of light by which a man absorbs, instant on instant, all that phenomenon presents to him—is a fair image as well, my experience tells me, of the ways of his inner energy, of the ways of those other things which are usually, for some reason, separated from the external pick-ups—his dreams, for example, his thoughts (to speak as the predecessors spoke), his desires, sins, hopes, fears, faiths, loves. I am not able to satisfy myself that these so-called inner things are so separable from the objects, persons, events which are the content of them . . .

While the premodern paradigm conceived of the order of nature as evidence of God’s beneficence and of the objects of nature as His creations, the modern paradigm represents the objects of nature as ungrounded—as the products of natural processes for which no higher explanation can be given (and, indeed, as the result of a cluster of statistical probabilities). One result of this change was just what we have seen in Olson’s writings: a turn towards subjectivity and the idea that the good life is life lived at its fullest intensity (a conception of life not conducive to those goods the philosophers of the Classical era deemed properly human, *viz.*, the goods of contemplation and “inactivity”). But humans long for contact with something

beyond themselves; consequently, sheer intensity can never fully satisfy the spirit. So we seek another response, one that answers to that inadequacy. That response is the very one that Olson expressed in the passages immediately above: to strive to make contact with a world that enfolds us. The philosophies of Alfred North Whitehead, and his predecessor Henri Bergson, show how this can be done without abandoning the conviction that reality is merely flux (and so, one might be tempted to conclude, is not truly substantial). That way involves emphasizing the bodily experience: the body's experience of time as pulsation puts us in touch with the dynamics (Olson uses the term "kinetics") of reality.

Given his desire to make contact with "the thing itself," it is hardly surprising that there is a phenomenological thrust to Olson's enterprise. We see this in Olson's effort to reduce time to living present. His poetics propose an ecstatic temporality, in which the past is present as a spacious legacy and which, being totalized at every new moment of presence, provides a place for consciousness to dwell. More generally, a similar aspiration fuelled Olson's archaeological interests as motivates the phenomenologist's researches: the desire to get back "*zu den Sachen selbst*" (to things themselves) by stripping away the accretions of history and convention. Doing so, Olson maintained, enables one to reach the primordial conditions that produce the artefact of experience we now live within. Olson longed to recover an authentic, individual and primordial consciousness. He was chary of notions received on hearsay evidence, and proposed to ideas that had come from rigorous personal examination of the evidence (which, as Olson's poetry shows, necessary involves a component of rigorous self-examination.).

Olson frequently celebrated Herodotus as the historian who demanded that historical evidence be validated by personal encounter. About Herodotus, Olson wrote, "*istorin* in him appears to mean 'finding out for oneself,' instead of depending on hearsay. The word had already been used by philosophers. 'But while they were looking for truth, Herodotus is looking for the evidence.'" "History," in Olson's system, comes to mean the knowledge that one acquires by adopting a special stance toward reality, one that sets one against the dominant philosophical tradition, since it commits one to the effort to apprehend reality directly, without the mediation of the general categories through which discursive thinking operates. While philosophers were looking for truth in language's airy abstractions, "Herodotus," Olson pointed out, was "looking for the evidence."

Further, like the phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Olson recognized that consciousness has a chiasmatic structure. Since the birth of the human sciences, man has been both ". . . the instrument of discovery and the instrument of definition," he states. Humans are both subject and object within the human universe. Indeed Olson, like Merleau-Ponty and, for that matter, like Whitehead, claimed that the terms "subject" and "object" reflect no real distinction within the human realm, for in the human realm the perceiving subject is "now inside, and now down under his own eye as microscopic or probe."

Consequently, Olson averred that language and experience have intimate relations with our bodies:

. . . breath is man's special qualification as animal. Sound is a dimension he has extended. Language is one of his proudest acts. And when a poet rests in these as they are in himself (in his physiology, if you like, but the life in him, for all that) then he, if he chooses to speak from these roots, works in that area where nature has given him size, projective size.

Olson even went so far as to relate breath, and in particular its projective thrust, to the phallus.

. . . if you hide, or otherwise duck THE ORAL as profoundly phallic—if you try to ignore the pile of bones . . . you leave out the true animal bearing of the species and in the end . . . you pay for it by sex, and sex alone, becoming the only ORAL, and thus, the very inversion of the whole PHALLIC base—you get the present ultimate DELIQUENCE (example, Hitler, who, was a copralagnist [sic]).

Olson sought in studies of pre-Socratic and pre-Columbian cultures a new and vital language that would be “language as the act of the instant . . . [as distinguished from] language as the act of thought about the instant”—indeed his interest in the power of the spoken word derived partly from what he discovered through these studies. Alfred North Whitehead had recognized the conceptual violence perpetrated by the distinction our language draws between subject and predicate and by the categorization that language imposes on experience through segregating its basic terms into nouns and verbs. This violence results from language’s prescribing a morphology of experience that is out of true with the real, since it is based on the assumption that the world can be pictured as arrangements of substances and qualities.

The result always does violence to that immediate experience which we express in our actions, our hopes, our sympathies, our purposes, and which we enjoy in spite of our lack of phrases for its verbal analysis. We find ourselves in a buzzing world, amid a democracy of fellow creatures; whereas orthodox philosophy can only introduce to solitary substances, each enjoying an illusory experience.

Olson undoubtedly was familiar with Whitehead’s critique of language, and he drew the obvious conclusion: if we could align language with the processes of nature, so that language did not impose its own order—one that derives strictly from its own morphology—on experience, then we could say what we experience and mean what we say. But that would require having a new linguistic order replace the mimetic mode of our present language, which is based on faulty abstractions from the object world. The words of this new language would be actions—speech acts—and speech then would be, before all else, kinetic. Then language would be action and speech acts would be equal to the real, because they would possess energy equivalent to that of the real.

Olson found in the Pre-Socratics a model for a non-mimetic discourse that avoids the discontinuities between the subject and the objective order embedded in the languages we now use. More exactly, he found it in the discussion of the Pre-Socrates that the Canadian philosopher and literary theorist, Eric Havelock, presented in his great work, *Preface to Plato*. In a review of that book Olson extolled pre-Socratic syntax as an antidote to the present order of language; more specifically, he celebrated the sentence structure of pre-Socratic Greek writers for avoiding the periodic sentence and its debilitating effects. Olson contended that the poetry of Homer and Hesiod offered

. . . a wholly different syntax, to which Notopoulos (1949) has applied the word *parataxis* in which the words and actions reported are set down side by side in the order of their occurrence in nature, instead of by an order of discourse, or ‘grammar’ as we have called it, the prior an actual resting on vulgar experience and event. . .

He maintained, too, that Pre-Socratic writing was grounded in a different mode of temporal experience than that which we know.

. . . There is no while back at the farm sequence possible. The epic action is a stream and you are not free play around jump as though you was [*sic*] on the bank or the other [*sic*] or in the water -- at your choice or privilege or pleasure, that you either is or you isn't, definitely . . .

These two passages, taken together, state some basic reasons that so many twentieth century artists have shown interest in paratactical form—feelings of transit, turbulence and stir shaped Charles Olson's mature poetry as they did the work of so many other poets and painters.

Furthermore, Olson's interests in a language whose attributes corresponded to the dynamics of experience and in his concern with the flux of time led him to conceive of a manner of speaking and writing that would engender a totally synchronous attention to the whole experienced event and thereby eliminate all temporal contradictions in an uninterrupted, complete presence.

Olson turned to sites other than Pre-Socratic Greece to garner additional ideas about the new linguistic order he envisaged. His efforts to replace "the Classic-representational by the primitive-abstract" (as he, following Worringer, characterized it) led him to study the alternative that Yan-Hopi language provided. To work out his ideas about the character of that alternative, he drew on the work of Edward Sapir and his student Benjamin Whorf—linguists who had described how language shapes experience and shown that different languages present differently structured worlds. His study of the Hopi language convinced him that it would be possible to reorganize tenses, to "drive all nouns, the abstract most of all, back to process—to act" and so to revitalize the kinetics of a language based in the body's dynamics. He thought of a poem as a sort of biography and he wrote as though he wished he could dispatch his body into his writing. Olson agreed with Whorf that the Hopi language does less violence to the actual structure of space-time than our own language, which segments and classifies reality into one temporal and three spatial dimensions. The Hopi language favours nouns-in-action and avoided sorting words into the distinct categories of nouns and verbs. Olson offered this metaphrasis of Hopi in *Maximus*.

"And past-I-go
Gloucester-insides
being Fosterwise of
Charley-once-boy
insides"

Further, Olson searched the Yucatan for Mayan inscriptions that provide testimony of a natural, even Adamic language—he sought, that is, a pictorial language with a salutary relation to the real. Olson believed the Mayans had a truer relation with the real than we do. Olson wrote ". . . these people [the Mayans and the Sumers] & their workers had forms which unfolded directly from content (sd content itself a disposition toward reality which understood man as only force in field of force containing multiple other expressions." Olson believed, then, that humans have become "estranged from that with which [they are] most familiar" and he held out the possibility for a more beneficent language that would have the effect of returning humans to a more

genuine and more authentic epistemological space.

Olson's strived to develop a method that would allow him to compose with the materials of reality. He understood that to achieve that goal, he would have to fashion linguistic forms that relay fields of energy by inducing corresponding organizations of energies in those who open themselves to those compositions. If he could accomplish that, he understood, he would create works that possess the actual structure and character of the real. These aspirations draw on Emerson's ideas about natural language. Like Emerson and the Puritan reformists with whom Emerson shared so much, Olson proselytized for a new, redemptive language that would rescue Americans from the inherited sin of Western European culture. In a letter to an editor of an academic journal, protesting (what seems to have been) an egregiously silly, overly academic article on William Carlos Williams, Olson exposed how the author uses words slyly, to derogate, ". . . the whole American push to find out an alternative discourse to the inherited one, to the one implicit in the language from Chaucer to Browning, to try, by some other means than 'pattern' and the 'rational'; to cause discourse to cover—as it only ever best can—the real." Consequently, Olson proposed to renew language, to imbue it with the authenticity of American being and thereby to crack it out of its European mould, in which it had gone stale.

Olson's investigation of hieroglyphic writing was a propaedeutic exercise that would lay the groundwork for reconstructing language whose energy was equivalent to that of the real. He asserted that gyphs on Mayan stellae were signs "so clearly and densely chosen that, cut in stone, they retain the power of the objects of which they are the images." Because they have the power (energy) of the objects of which they are the images, they are poems in miniature. The comment reflects Olson's need to find ". . . a way which bears *in* instead of away, which meets head on what goes on each split second, a way which does not—in order to define—prevent, deter, distract, and so cease the act of, [*sic*] discovering." Direct contact with concrete particular was the goal. European languages, since Plato, have traded in abstractions: Western thinking has accorded special importance to the relation it believed exists between the universal and the particular, and, in doing so, it has diminished the importance of the concrete particular in itself. After learning a European language, people begin to think in abstractions—to think *in* words and *about* words. After acquiring language, people begin to think in descriptions, Olson maintained. When one thinks in abstractions—that is, in words—one directs one's mental energies towards apprehending the similarities and differences between the object one currently observes (that is, a word) and other objects one has experienced (that is, other words.) Against this, Olson adopted Williams' proposal, that in the new, poetic language there should be "no ideas but in things" (which Olson renders "not in ideas but in things.")

Olson's proposal for an Emersonian "natural language" turns on the contrast between presentation and representation. Whitehead's philosophy gave Olson the idea (or confirmed his idea) that reality is not made up fixed forms (that is, objects); he concurred with Whitehead's idea that reality is a field of dynamic energy. So, colour is not a property that inheres in an object—colour is rather the product of quanta (particles of energy) that excite our nervous system as they impact upon it. We can find words (which themselves are bundles of energy) that, arranged appropriately, when they are sounded, stimulate the nervous system of those who attend to them in the same way that the poet's responded to his or her environing field—in our example, to the colour that first excited the poet. Olson was never precise enough, when laying out his ideas on these matters, to analyse how an arrangement of words might have such an effect, or to describe how we might go about finding the words that will have this effect: what he does offer amounts to no more than a set of metaphors for the process. Perhaps the most interesting of those metaphors is the modern (post-Lobatschewsky, post-Cayley and post-Klein)

understanding of congruence. Earlier centuries understood congruence under the form of spatial intuition; but, following these thinkers' lead, Olson suggested that a more recent (that is, truer) topological conception does not consider congruence as the coincidence of static forms in Euclidean/Cartesian space. Rather, as "it developed in his [Melville's] century, congruence, which had been the measure of the space a solid fills in two of its positions, became a point-by-point mapping power of such flexibility that anything which stays the same, no matter where it goes and into whatever varying conditions (it can suffer deformation), it can be followed, and, if it is art, led, including, what is so important to prose, such physical quantities as velocity, force, and field strength." The mathematical metaphor that Olson used here, of a point-to-point mapping, relies on the idea of a function, a rule for mathematical procedure that correlates each element in the domain of the function with a different element in its range: given two sets of elements that can be correlated with one another by a function that meets these conditions, then any set drawn from the range of the function is said to form an image of the set drawn from its domain. Olson uses this mathematical metaphor to suggest that the force that each corpuscle of energy in the poet's field possesses (each "actual entity" in the poet's enviroing field) has a corresponding force in the poem itself; and though there may be some distortion, some expansion or contraction of the force's energies, the relations among various forces that make up the event that registers in the poem are preserved by the forces inherent in the poem. The poem itself maps (point-to-point) the energy of the field that activated the poet, and the energy in the reader who opens herself to the poem maps (point-to-point) the energy of the field of the poem itself. Hence, the poem does not represent the energies that inspired it, but actually *presents* them.

Olson rejects mimeticism—he proclaims that he wants to re-enact reality, not reproduce it. Since a poem (as a conformal mapping of the energy of the original) contains energies similar to those of the event, and since reality is nothing but a field of energy, a poem can, and should be, "equal . . . to the real itself." Therefore, each quantum of energy in the circumstance that prompted the writer to write the poem has a corresponding quantum of energy in the poet's responsive body (though, of course, the quantum might differ in magnitude) and the relations between the quanta in the poem resemble the relations between quanta in the original. Furthermore, each quantum of energy in the poet's responsive body is propelled outward as a quantum of energy in the poem he or she creates in such a way as to preserve homologically the nexus of the relations amongst quanta of energy in the poet's body. Each quantum of energy in the precipitating event has a corresponding quantum of energy in the projective poem that results—and, if the reader be responsive, each quantum of energy in the poem will activate a corresponding quantum of energy in the reader's body.

Olson's metaphysics of energy served another purpose—it grounded his claim that the actual relation between a subject and the world is much different than what European metaphysics took it to be. European metaphysics traditionally depicted the subject as a kind of "outside spectator," above the world and looking in on it; in truth, Olson maintained, the spectator is immersed in the world of flux.

Nothing was now inert fact, all things were there for feeling, to promote it, and be felt; and man, in the midst of it, knowing well how he was folded in, as well as how suddenly and strikingly he could extend himself, spring or, without even moving, go, to far, the farthest—he was suddenly possessed or repossessed [*sic*] of a character of being, a thing among things, which I shall call his physicality. It made a re-entry of or to the universe. Reality was without

interruption, and we are still in the business of finding out how all action, and thought, have to be refounded.

Olson contrasted forms that depend on the mind alone with forms that arise from that place where the ear and the mind are at one—from the “place where breath comes from,” the source of energy that connects mind and body and world. In doing this, he corporealized the conceptions of rhythm, breath, dynamism—dimensions of art that traditional metaphysics portrayed as spiritual.

To get rid of subjective effects is to give experience, and so form, over to the body. Corporal experience is radically different from subjective experience, inasmuch as the mind strives to control experience, while the body gives itself over to being controlled (or massaged) by a stream of energy/experience. Hence, to experience bodily is to experience immediately, directly, naturally, to open oneself to the energy of event-objects. To speak bodily is to invest every word with force, to compose using words with power. The body speech force imparts a blow to the letter of the word and empowers the otherwise inert terms of language; the dynamic force of the enunciating body tears words away from abstractions and converts them into actual energies. Olson’s term for the force of the enunciating body was “resistance,” a term he chose because what “resistance” refers to is a life-force mobilized against death, but also against the categorical, detached thinking that dominates Western cultures: “In this intricate structure [our body] are we based, now more certainly than ever (besieged, overthrown), for its power is bone muscle nerve blood brain [space in original] a man, its fragile mortal force its old eternity, resistance.”

Olson connected these ideas about speech to the social purpose of poetry in an essay he titled “The Resistance.” Olson framed “The Resistance” following the revelation of the horrors that had transpired at Auschwitz and Hiroshima. Olson believed these terrible events had drastically reduced human existence; resistance, he proclaimed, is the urge to struggle against these life-denying forces. To have the strength to stand against history’s monumental force, a person must stand on solid ground. But that same process that led to Auschwitz and Hiroshima had shattered all certainties and demolished the groundwork of existing values. The only way one could tolerably inhabit the present is to find a ground in the human body. In a time that has reduced humans to fat for soap and to superphosphates for fertilizing soil, “[i]t is his own physiology he is forced to arrive at.”

The basis of resistance, then, is the physical body. In connecting with the physical body, we focus ourselves in the present moment. We contract attention to a foreshortened span. We abolish layer upon layer of false self-images and dispel the deceits bred by living out the social roles we are assigned. Finally, after disabusing ourselves of all false self-images, we reach bedrock, in the body itself, firmly situated in a particular setting and aware, in its fibres, of its connection with that setting. When one situates him or herself in the resistance, one’s stance takes on moral force, for the body gives one a solid foundation on which to confront the world. Its vitality aims itself against death—or, rather, death and abstraction.

Resistance means living inside one’s own fleshy casing, graciously living within one’s own limits rather than sprawling over the whole face of the world, for, by living within one’s own flesh, one taps into what one has in common with others, and so attunes oneself with others. Discussing the Yucutan Maya, Olson comments on the sort of being that emerges through living graciously within one’s own flesh. They do, Olson stated,

. . .one thing no modern knows the secret of . . .: they wear their flesh with

that difference which the understanding that it is common leads to. When [riding in one of those wondrous Mexican buses] I am rocked by the roads against any of them—kids, women, men—their flesh is the most gentle, is granted, touch is in no sense anything but the natural law of flesh, there is none of that pull-away which, in the States, causes a man for all the years of his life the deepest sort of questioning of the rights of himself to the wild reachings of his organism. The admission these people give me and one another is direct, and the individual who peers out from that flesh is precisely himself, is a curious wandering animal like me—it is so very beautiful how animal human eyes are when the flesh is not worn so close it chokes, how human and individuated the look comes out of a human eye when the house of it is not exaggerated.

We affirm the force of resistance, or we fall victim to civilization's fraud.

It is his body that is his answer, his body intact and fought for, the absolute of his organism in its simplest terms, this structure evolved by nature, repeated in each act of birth, the animal man; the house he is, this house that moves, breathes, acts, this house where his life is, where he dwells against the enemy, against the beast.

Or the fraud. . . .

The body is what makes it possible for “man [to be] that participant thing, [and] to take up, straight, nature's, [*sic*] live nature's force.” Olson extended this notion of having a corporeal relation with nature to the sexual energies, saying that we know nature most immediately through nature's sexual powers. Of the Mayans, he speculated, “. . . [M]y assumption is that they took the phallus—& sex—as simply man's most immediate way of knowing nature's powers—and the handiest image of that power.” The implication of this is that language becomes revived when it comes into proximity to phallic (and, I think, more generally sexual) powers. While Olson believed that the body provides, in the lungs, the physical machinery of poetic inspiration and poetic aspiration; at the same time, he argued that orality is profoundly phallic.

Olson maintained the body mobilizes unity and power against the divisive and inert categorizations of subjectivity; thus, it provides the grounds for a natural and therefore authentic language. Olson felt strongly enough about the body's redemptive potentials that he proposed two writing projects (which he never undertook): the one, a book on the body that would serve as a prolegomenon to the second, “fables of organs.” The former was to be “[a] record in the perfectest language I can manage of the HEART, LIVER, BRAIN, KIDNEY, the organs, to body them forth, to give a full sense of the instrument of the organism, approached on the simplest of premises.”

Like D. H. Lawrence and Ezra Pound, Olson advocated the use of paratactical forms of constructions that present each object or moment in experience in its full particularized intensity. He outlined the experiential basis of this advocacy.

. . . analysis only accomplishes a *description*, does not come to grips with what really matters: that a thing, any thing, impinges on us by a more important fact, its self-existence, without reference to any other thing, in short, the very character of it which calls our attention to it, which wants us to know more about it, its particularity. This is what we are confronted by, not the thing's “class,” any

hierarchy, of quality or quantity, but the thing itself, and its *relevance* to ourselves who are the experience of it (whatever it may mean to someone else, or whatever other relations it may have).

Like Lawrence again, Olson praised such paratactical forms for their capacity to convey corporal energy. The basis for Lawrence's idea of an open form of poetry, of a poetry of the immediate present, the essence of which (to repeat the point) would lie in "the sheer appreciation of the instant moment, life surging itself into utterance at its very well-head" conformed remarkably well to Whitehead's view of reality. Olson's ideas on open form have important similarities to Lawrence's beliefs on poetics. Both Olson and Lawrence conceived of reality in a manner similar to the way Whitehead pictured it, as a process, and both strove to create a poetic form which (to repeat Lawrence's assertion) could convey a sense of "the rapid, momentaneous association of things which meet and pass on the forever incalculable journey of creation: everything left in its own rapid, fluid relationship with the rest of things." Olson even went a ways towards accepting Lawrence's prescription that, to overcome the Faustian need to control nature, one must become one with it by acknowledging those "primordial & phallic energies & methodologies which . . . make it possible for man, that participant thing, to take up, straight, nature's, live nature's force." Further, Olson underwrote, too, Whitehead's idea that the shape of any living thing is fluid, changing, and to a degree indefinite, and that, when it becomes definite and completely formed, it loses its actuality and becomes only the potential for influencing subsequent concrete actualities. This belief led him to a Lawrentian idea of open form, a form that is actual as long as it is in evolution.

Olson also had a predilection for forms that allow instantaneous shifts in tone, syntax, diction, metre, and rhythm. Hence, the length of successive lines in Olson's poems often varies widely. Following Lawrence's dictum that a free verse is the "direct utterance of the instant whole man," Olson found a physiological justification for where he put line breaks. The division of a poem into lines should follow the poet's breathing, Olson counselled. Line breaks occur where the voice pauses for breath: the line "comes (I swear it) from the breath, from the breathing of the man who writes, at the moment that he writes," Olson proclaimed.

Olson strove to develop forms that allow the transitory conditions of the poet's physiology to decide the rhythm of the poem. If a poet is in touch with his physiology, he or she feels rhythm and "Whoever has rhythm has the universe," Olson declared. Centredness in one's physiology, one's *being*, is a key feature of the poet's make-up.

. . . the use of a man, by himself and thus by others, lies in how he conceives his relation to nature, that force to which he owes his somewhat small existence. If he sprawl, he shall find little to sing but himself, and shall sing, nature has such paradoxical ways, by way of an artificial forms outside himself. But if he stays inside himself, if he is contained within his nature as he is participant in the larger force, he will be able to listen, and his hearing through himself will give him secrets objects share.

Olson's idea of *tropos*, which he describes as a tropistic drive, that is, as an impulse that is our response to the influx of cosmic energies, also reflects the idea that human beings are participants in nature's life-force. Olson maintained that, in obeying one's own urges, one complies with cosmic desire. The very possibility of human action depends on the world's eliciting the desire for action in the individual; so, Olson claimed that "the actionable is larger

than the individual.” The cosmos, working through the body, impresses on the individual the intention to act.

Life surging through the body registers the whole of reality. In the true poem, reality expresses its relevance to us through the poem’s capacity to elicit and modulate the coursing and flowing of corporal energy. Contrary to the Romantics and the Symbolists, who conceived of the image as a transcendent ideal, Olson (as we have noted) considered the image to be a vector, that is, as directed energy—and energy the poem can only re-enact, but cannot describe precisely. For, he points out, description attempts a false separation between the image, the instrument of the description, and the object of the description. The result of this false separation is that description, in the end, leaves out the object’s dynamics:

. . . Here again, as throughout experience, the law remains, form is not isolated from content. The error of all other metaphysic is descriptive, is the profound error that Heisenberg had the intelligence to admit in his principle that a thing can be measured in its mass only by arbitrarily assuming a stopping of its motion, or in its motion only by neglecting, for the moment of the measuring, its mass. And either way, you are failing to get what you are after—so far as a human being goes, his life. There is only one thing you can do about kinetic, re-enact it. Which is why the man said, he who possesses rhythm possesses the universe. And why art is the only twin life has—its only valid metaphysic. Art does not seek to describe but to enact. And if man is once more to possess intent in his life, and to take up the responsibility implicit in his life, he has to comprehend his own process as intact, from outside, by way of his skin, in, and by his own powers of conversion, out again.

The ideas that the image is a vector, that human beings live in a field of energies, and that rhythm is primary are all poetic notions that Olson would have been familiar with from Ezra Pound’s writings, and especially from the poetics Pound expounded during his Vorticist years. From the proposition that artists live in a field of energies to which they must open themselves, and the conviction that true poetry must have deep roots in a sense of place and must be brought out of artists by their responsiveness to the place where they live, Olson drew the conclusion that space is the distinctive feature of American culture: “I take SPACE to be the central fact to man born in America, from Folsom cave to now,” Olson declares at the beginning of *Call me Ishmael*. “I spell it large because it comes large here. Large, and without mercy.” He means when he says “space,” space as opposed to time: if you live in time, then you know in every moment of your existence that the past conditions and limits your present experience, while if you live in space, however, every point is a point you can move from, to begin anew. Olson praised Pound’s *Cantos* for treating time and history as space and for the way he leaps from one point in that space to another.

Olson perspicaciously connected his ideas on the role that space played in shaping American culture to his understanding of Americans’ beliefs about technology and the illusions they harbour about its liberatory potential:

. . . Americans still fancy themselves such democrats. But their triumphs are of the machine. It is the only master of space the average person ever knows, oxwheel to piston, muscle to jet. It gives trajectory.

To Melville it was not the will to be free but the will to overwhelm nature that lies at the bottom of us as individuals and a people. Ahab is no democrat.

Moby-Dick, antagonist, is only king of natural force, resource. Olson believed that wilfulness, which he saw as the downfall of contemporary humankind, was a consequence of our failing to recognize the essential continuity between the dynamic of the world and that of the inner realm of experience. As a result, we conceive of nature as bifurcated.

Olson argued, too, that humans often overvalue human action, and that when human action is good, it is

. . . the equal of all intake plus all transposing. It deserves this word, that it is the equal of its cause only when it proceeds unbroken from the threshold of a man through him and back out again, without loss of quality, to the external world from which it came . . . In other words, the proposition here is that man at his peril breaks the full circuit of object, image, action at any point. The meeting edge of man and the world is also his cutting edge. If man is active, it is exactly here where experience comes in that it is delivered back, and if he stays fresh at the coming in he will be fresh at his going out. If he does not, all that he does inside his house is stale, more and more stale as he is less and less acute at the door. . . Man does influence external reality, . . . If man chooses to treat external reality any differently than as part of his own process, in other words as anything other than relevant to his own inner life, then he will . . . use it otherwise. He will use it just exactly as he has used it now for too long, for arbitrary and willful purposes which, in their effects, not only change the face of nature but actually arrest and divert her force until man turns it even against herself, he is so powerful, this little thing.

Here Olson suggests the imperative of our recognizing that we belong to the field, that we are not above the world, but a part of the world, that our flesh is one with the flesh of world—the skin only the region of contact between the fused bodies. So in Olson’s poetics, as in Robert Duncan’s, care for the body is important. A poet must be able to sense her process from within, intact within the body, and then, through powers of concentration, project it out again. In a passage quoted above, Olson argued for the need for care of the body, the skin, and the senses and for the poet to open the skin (the senses) to the world in order to refresh and revivify the contents held within the skin. Olson stressed the fact that skin, the surface of the human body, maintains the relation between self and world.

Olson goes on to articulate an apparent paradox that is germane to any artist whose work rests on the premise that changes in our bodily state are the source of our knowledge of reality. The paradox arises from the relation between two methods for incorporating analogues of reality’s flux and change in a work of art, and more specifically, from the relation between two non-narrative means of “narrating.” Underlying the paradox is the principle that a work of art must re-enact the energy that drives reality’s flux. The narrator may have two sorts of relation to that “outer energy” and these two relations seem to lead to different narrative methods. One method is

. . . what I call DOCUMENT simply to emphasize that the events alone do the work, that the narrator stays OUT, functions as pressure not as interpreting person, illuminates not by argument or “creativity” but by master of force . . . the art, to make his meanings clear by how he juxtaposes, correlates, and causes to interact whatever events and persons he chooses to set in motion. In other words his ego or person is NOT of the story whatsoever. He is, if he makes it, light from

outside, the thing itself doing the casting of what shadows;

The other method seemingly relies on just the opposite—on the total subjectivity of the narrator.

. . . the exact opposite, the NARRATOR IN, the total IN to the above total OUT, . . . the narrator taking on himself the job of making clear by way of his own person that life *is* preoccupation with itself, . . . so powerful inside the story that he makes the story swing on him, his eye the eye of nature INSIDE (as is the same eye, outside) a light-maker.

Olson escaped the modern understanding of nature and so, like Whitehead, he could grasp the reconcilability—indeed the essential identity—of these two methods. In truth, both drive toward the same end, of letting reality speak for itself, “. . . so to re-enact experience that a story has what an object or person has: energy and instant. . . . And the writer, though he is the control (or art is nothing) is, still, no more than—but just as much as—another “thing,” and as such, is in, inside or out.”

Olson’s ideas about facts, and about document, are more complex than we have yet allowed. Olson believed that by getting to know the facts, we break through the ego, that unbounded subjectivity that sprawls across the world and hampers us from seeing things as they are. Breaking through the ego establishes parity between the self and that objective world which the lyrical ego, in the absence of such of a relation to the world, derogates. Olson stressed the dual roles of getting to know the facts in his famous open letter to Ed Dorn titled “A Bibliography on America for Ed Dorn.” Olson’s letter argued for engagement with the facts—that is, for engagement with *primary* documents and facts.

PRIMARY DOCUMENTS. And to hook on here is a lifetime of assiduity. Best thing to do is *to dig one thing or place or man* until you yourself know more abt that than is possible to any other man. It doesn’t matter whether it’s Barbed Wire or Pemmican or Paterson or Iowa. But *exhaust* it. Saturate it. Beat it. / And then U KNOW everything else very fast: one saturation job (it might take 14 years.) And you’re in, forever.”

This, of course, is similar to the advice that Northrop Frye gave to students: choose one and live inside it, learn its ins and outs. This, Frye asserted, is the ideal education (and, he reports, it was the way he learned, by occupying William Blake’s capacious mental universe, the extent of which gave his mind space to develop and to sprawl).

A complexity of Olson’s thought that can easily escape notice becomes conspicuous when one considers the relationship between these two methods of narration—or, for that matter, when one considers Olson’s thoughts on the more general matter of the relation between artistic control and chance. At the very basis of Olson’s poetics is the claim that the new poetry must be *open*—and by this he meant that the form of the poem must derive from—must never be anything more than the expression of—its content. He believed, in the end, that a poem is made up of the energy transactions occurring in the vicinity of the poet at the time of composition (some of them released in the very act of composition)—it is this processes/energies that give a poem its shape.

The poet must be attentive to the act of composition and must respond to feelings that arise from the act of composition as though to an act of nature. To this end, Olson advocated

that poets employ a compositional method that resembled the creative methods practised by his contemporary, Jackson Pollock—who, too, believed that painting was an activity that involved entering into and being controlled by the energies of a natural process.

In *Science and the Modern World*, Whitehead summarized how the picture of reality he draws there differs from that of seventeenth century science (which he believed had its conceptual foundations in materialist philosophy and which, in its turn, founded modernity). Against seventeenth-century science's conception of an empty event (i.e., an event in empty space, devoid of electrons, protons, or any other form of electric charge) as a habitat of energy, Whitehead argued "that there is no individual discrimination of an individual bit of energy, either as statically located, or as element in the stream. There is simply a quantitative determination of activity, without individualisation of the activity itself." According to Olson, setting aside "the lyrical ego" and entering into a stream of energy, allowing oneself to become "the qualitative determination of activity, without individualisation of the activity," is what makes possible the triumph of creativity.

Whitehead went on to show how an organicist philosophy construes events in occupied space (i.e., space containing electrons, protons, or any other form of electrical charge).

When we look into the function of the electric charge, we note that its rôle is to mark the origination of a pattern which is transmitted through space and time. It is the key of some particular pattern. For example, the field of force in any event is to be construed by attention to the adventures of electrons and protons, and so also are the streams and distributions of energy. Further, the electric waves find their origin in the vibratory adventures of these charges. [This was a point Bergson also made.] Thus the transmitted pattern is to be conceived as the flux of aspects throughout space and time derived from the life history of the atomic charges.

Similarly, Olson argued that since the words that make up a poem are affected by the field in which they originated, they transmit pattern through space and time; accordingly, we should construe projected/projectile words as embodying the adventures of charges that form of a stream of energy and a poem as registering how the flux of aspects of a field of energies is registered by another field of energy, in this case a sentient energy field.

Olson's propositions about creative method and the relation between the creator subject and nature implies that the creative process endows its product, the work of art, with the status of a natural object; this led Olson to the view that, "the thing [the artist] makes [tries to] take its place alongside the things of nature." The conclusion that artworks aspire to the same status as natural objects figures among Olson's motivations for making the comment that the elements that enter a poem must be taken up ". . . as participants in the kinetic of the poem just as solidly as we are accustomed to take what we call the objects of reality." "Projective Verse" offered a method for overcoming the classical realist effort to reflect or reproduce reality as it is: rather than being a derivative of the real, the poem will be equal to the real itself. It will have the "actual character and structure of the real itself," by which Olson meant that it will have the fluxing, changing, relational, experiential character Whitehead had described. His concerns with the object-like nature of the elements that enter a poem and of the poem itself, with the ability of a poet to overcome the ego, that hideous construct which humans have interposed between themselves and nature, and with getting in touch with "real objects" (that is with temporary patterns of relation between fields of energy, on the model of Whitehead's actual objects) are

undoubtedly among the motivations for Olson to choose “objectism” as the name for his poetic theory. Because it possesses the energy that, finally, is the reality of an object, a poem is an object, just as much as a foot that kicks is and just as the objects it kicks are.

The term “objectism” also reflected Olson’s belief that a human being is an object among other objects. Further, it served to declare both Olson’s affinity with and—what is far more important—his reaction against “objectivism” (the poetic movement of which Pound was an early proponent); Olson interpreted the term “objectivism” as suggesting there exists a dichotomy between objective and subjective dimensions of existence and as advocating for a detached and contemplative consciousness (as against a participatory and highly charged consciousness). At the same time, the modernist idea of the objecthood of a work of art, which the term also invokes, was part of the polemic waged against mimeticism. Olson declared

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

The objects which occur at every given moment of composition (of recognition, we can call it) are, can be, must be treated exactly as they do occur therein and not by any ideas or preconceptions from outside the poem, must be handled as a series of objects in field in such a way that a series of tensions (which they also are) are made to *hold*, and to hold exactly inside the content and the context of the poem which has forced itself, through the poet and them, into being.

Nor are the objects to be brought into a uniform accord.

. . . yet each of these elements of a poem can be allowed to have the play of their separate energies and can be allowed, once the poem is well composed, to keep, as those other objects do, their proper confusions.

and

(wow, that you capitalize it makes *sense*: it is *all* we had (post-circum *The Two Noble Kinsmen*), as we had a sterile grammar (an insufficient “sentence”) we had analogy only: images, no matter how learned or how simple: even Burns say, allowing etc and including Frost! Comparison. Thus representation was never off the dead-spot of description. Nothing was *happening* as of the poem itself—ding and zing or something. It was referential to reality. And that a p. poor crawling actuarial “real”—good enough to keep banks and insurance companies, plus mediocre governments etc. But now Poetry’s *Truth* like my friends from the American Underground cry and spit in the face of “Time.”

Though he was committed to the modernist belief in the objecthood of a work, Olson was no orthodox modernist. What distinguishes his poetics from much of modernist art theory was his idea of “open form,” an idea which acts as a dialectical dual of the modernist belief that the work of art has an autotelic character. This openness is the formal analogue, and perhaps a consequence, of the type of experience Olson wants poetry to bring about. That type of

experience is perhaps best termed “ecstatic,” for it involves “standing outside” oneself, of being lifted up, out of the quotidian ways of experiencing, and coming to the realization that “. . . the projective act . . . leads to dimensions larger than man,” and that the Projective Poet, in going down into the workings of breath will enter into that place from which “all acts springs.” Or, we could say, it leads not out of “man” but to the authentic, completed man.

Olson, and, more generally, poets in the Emersonian tradition, celebrated ecstatic experience because its effect is to extend experience beyond the comfortable half-truths of conventional knowledge and to put in touch in the actual reality of one’s situation. The American poet, after all, lacks a tradition which might validate his or her achievements. Lacking such a tradition, the poet seeks to ground him or herself in the immediate reality of the present situation. Olson reiterated Heraclitus’ statement that “Man is estranged from that with which he is most familiar,” and he searched for poetic means to overcome this estrangement. Awareness of body’s energy, Olson declared, is the only basis of knowledge, the only ground for metaphysical thinking and the essential foundation for “the only valid metaphysic.” Earlier, we glossed Olson’s endorsement of the Pythagorean claim that “he who possesses rhythm possesses the universe,” and for Olson, rhythm is “a pumping of the real” as breath is evidence of our oneness with the rhythms of things. By turning ourselves over to the rhythms of reality, that is, by learning to feel them in our bodies, we become participants in the real, rather than masters set above it.

Olson’s attention to bodily knowledge likely followed from, and certainly was involved in, his interest in dance. He was a professionally trained dancer and among the first to recognize (around 1951) Merce Cunningham’s greatness. He performed with Cunningham in one of the first happenings, a dance/performance inspired partly by Olson’s research into “primitive” cultures. The performance dealt with a fictive tribe of the Upper Nile that Olson called the Gumnoi or NAKEDS, and their rituals he characterized as having “taken up direct from energy... [from] daemorial nature in anything, including ourselves . . .” Among the features of Cunningham’s dance that impressed Olson was its non-representational nature: Cunningham’s dance was aimed not at describing events but at re-enacting the energies that drive an event.

Dance was Olson’s favourite projective form. Olson set out his ideas on the central importance of dance for the contemporary writer in a series of letters written to the Indian dancer Nataraj Vashi (that are collected in “Syllabary for a Dancer.”) The text is a “paragone” tract, and dance is declared to be the “ottima arte.” Comparing the writer and the dancer, Olson asserted that the writer

has been forced, today, to re-make his attention to the kinetics of words, to syllables as the eyes and fingers of his medium, to the nouns & verbs in the torso and limbs, to the connections in the ankles and the wrists of speech and to his total use in any given go as more than the sum of any of those parts, or of their relevances to each other, as a dance which has achieved its implicit form is more than the body and its movements, is, actually, the thing we used to call the beauty of it.

Olson took sufficient interest in dance that he felt justified in referring to dance as the base of his discipline. Dance’s syllabary is the source of all others, he proclaimed. His respect for dance suggests the importance he accorded to recognizing the kinetic as vital—as conveying life. What is more, he appreciated dance because it returns us to our bodies, for in dance, “we use ourselves.” Dance brings the whole of the intelligence—body, mind and soul—into participation in the present, as action painting and jazz improvisation do.

Olson was unquestionably a seminal figure in the movement of American art that began at mid-century and that endeavoured to ground artistic truth in the body—and in particular the body as experienced from within (the body as revealed through proprioception), the body that links us to the rest of reality. Not only did he accord the body a central role in his poetic theory, he suggested that our culture had devalued the body, at a horrifying cost. That devaluation of the body had gone so far that a reaction was bound to develop—one that accorded the body pride of place. In a passage part from which I quoted earlier, Olson declared

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

It is his body that is his answer, his body intact and fought for, the absolute of his organism in its simplest terms, this structure evolved by nature, repeated in each act of birth, the animal man; the house he is, this house that moves, breathes, acts, this house where his life is, where he dwells against the enemy, against the beast.

Or the fraud. This organism now our citadel never was cathedral, draughty tenement of soul, was what it is: ground; stone, wall, cannon, tower. In this intricate structure are we based, now more certainly than ever (besieged, overthrown), for its power is bone muscle nerve blood brain a man, its fragile mortal force its old eternity, resistance.

Olson's interest in non-Western cultures—the aboriginal peoples of the Americas, the Sumerians, Hittites, and the Egyptians—and in that fountainhead of Western culture, the pre-Socratic Greeks, reflected his belief that, with the bombing of Hiroshima, Western culture came to end. Ours is a “post historical age,” he said; the apocalyptic event that ended the war with Japan broke our continuity with the past. We must begin again, amidst the ruins. We must go back, beyond history, to a “primitive” state of mind, and rebuild a bodily, and hence timeless, immediate, and mythical relation with the world. Olson valued the body so highly, probably, because his sense of embodiment was so strong that he believed it could found the new, redemptive, relation that we, moderns, must build with nature if we are ever to escape the crushing wilfulness of technology. His sense of nature's energy was similar to Lawrence's, and so like Lawrence, he strove to reawaken a sense of the power in nature. The body is the source of our sense of energy's force, Olson proclaimed. The body teaches us that human being is no more than one amongst many forms of life in nature and that we, humans, have no special status in nature.

As a poet, Olson was intensely opposed to the idea that there is a single, static tradition, passed down by the official culture and institutions of learning. He insisted on taking a personal look at “the facts of the matter,” of doing away, as much as possible, with historical influences on the sensibility and understanding, on ridding oneself of inherited perceptions and inherited figures of thought. Tradition figures in Olson's writings as a logomachy that denigrates individual perceptions. Unlike Tate, Eliot, Brooks, Yeats or Pound who attempted to establish an alternative tradition to that of the modern (based in the Church, the Hermetic tradition or Fascism), Olson refused to seek a replacement for the discredited, still-decaying civilization of

modernity. Rather than striving to create a new tradition (which would surely soon become, itself, fixed and static), Olson sought an epistemology, a metaphysics and a society that would accept a more radical sense of history and that would recognize change and novelty as the only real constants, that would allow one to see for oneself, that would be more vital, more generative than that of the accepted social canons.

Olson's antagonism to stasis accounts for his vilification of logic which, he claimed, prohibits change and growth. Too, logic eliminates the contraries which are usually present in experience. At the base of Olson's antagonism to logic is his recognition that our hypervaluation of logical form depends on a view of nature as bifurcated—a view that denigrates the outer world as a realm of process, change, instability, chaos and valorizes the inner world as a realm of stasis and stability, the order of which (at least according to the New Critics) is the source of value. Olson was utterly opposed to that New Critical proclivity towards celebrating the mind's capacity to impose an order on the poem whose coherence and stability transcends the chaos of everyday reality.

In place of "the old discourse" which trades in the tyranny of abstractions, Olson proposed "a new discourse" which would be permeable to the fugitive interactions of real, concrete things. Olson associated "the old discourse" with Europe; "the new discourse" he associated with America. American poets should listen to the speech of their streets, rather than read European writings. Olson was convinced that America had the responsibility to renew language by reformulating it to accord with claims Emerson had made for natural language.

Olson's efforts at reconstructing language resembled not just Emerson's proposals concerning natural (Adamic) language—they displayed, too, that same reformist zeal that entered American life through the Puritans. As I remarked above, Olson himself described his efforts as a part of

. . . the American push to find out an alternative discourse to the inherited one, to the one implicit in the language from Chaucer to Browning, to try, by some other means than "pattern" and the "rational," to cause discourse to cover—as it only ever best can—the real.

Olson believed that America, by cutting free from domination by a historical tradition, pitched people back on themselves. Americans must speak of "ONE'S SELF AND ONE'S RELATIONS," Olson stated, because "We Americans have nothing but our personal details." Like most American Romantics from Emerson to the present, Olson celebrated the primacy of the individual experiences of the completed person. And he sought a poetic line that would externalize the pulse of an actual person's thinking. Olson told his friend and fellow poet Cid Corman, "The revolution that I am responsible for is this one, of the identity of a person and his expression." Olson argued consistently for replacing the conventional sociolect with a personal idiolect: "there is point now to speak of a syntax which is, ultimately, dependent upon the authority of a completed man, might I say, in this sense, that the syntax is of the man's own making, not something accepted as a canon of the language in its history and the society."

Olson believed completed humans will possess linguistic and imaginative powers beyond those inherited from the social order of communication and, what is more telling, that only discourse that is so thoroughly idiosyncratic as to be idiolexical can reveal those powers. To fall into speaking the conventional language of one's society is to lose one's being in inauthenticity; consequently, making oneself complete and authentic means formulating a discourse that, at every point in its creation, bucks all convention. The authentic discourse of a

completed person, instead of following conventions, is shaped, at every turn, by an individualized and localized imaginative act. Poet Cid Corman commented on the force of such speech, using the example of Olson's language to typify it: "Olson's language is thrown back at him as if it were impossible. But the meaning is in the motion of it. And what is impossible is to read him consecutively and fail to grasp, or be grasped by, what he is driving at. For the 'end' arrives at every moment and is 'co-substantive.'"

Corman spoke for an action poetry whose founding ideas resemble the ideas that ground action painting. The aesthetics of dynamism that underlies action poetry echoes Whitehead's notions on presentational immediacy. Whitehead believed that perception in the mode of presentational immediacy is more primitive than our ordinary mode of experience, which he calls symbolic reference. Symbolic reference is a mixed mode of perception that combines the two pure modes, causal efficacy and presentational immediacy. Whitehead's analysis of perception in the mode of causal efficacy showed it to be a crude form of perception, for it involves the inheritance of feeling from past data. Perception in the mode of causal efficacy has no need of consciousness or life and it pervades any actual entity. Perception in the mode of presentational immediacy is more complex, for it does demand consciousness. It is the perceptive mode ". . . in which there is clear, distinct consciousness of the 'extensive' relations of the world. . . . In this 'mode' the contemporary world [the world existing in the instant] is consciously prehended as a continuum of extensive relations." Causal efficacy transmits to the present the inheritance from the past; these data are massive in emotional power, but vague and inarticulate. Presentational immediacy, on the other hand, transmits data that are sharp and precise. Too, the data that presentational immediacy transmits have spatial location—they resemble the *sensa* that ground the empirical and analytic philosophers' analysis of experience (that is, an immediate and almost uninterpreted sensation such as "green there.") And, unlike the data that causal efficacy transmits, the data of presentational immediacy are self-contained temporally and unconnected with any inheritance.

In a way, the two pure modes of perception amount to a functional separation of the two forms of location, temporal and spatial. As I pointed out above, Whitehead maintained that causal efficacy, by transmitting data from the past, enables an actual entity to form temporal relations. Presentational immediacy, by transmitting data from the world contemporaneous with the instant of prehension (that is, the world constituted by actual entities that have no causal connection to the prehending entities), enables an actual entity to have extensive relations, but lacks any power of continuity. However, to conceive of perception in the mode of presentational immediacy only in this way would be simplistic, for there is interaction between these two functionally distinct modes of perception in 'symbolic reference' (our ordinary mode of experiencing). Because perception in the mode of causal efficacy occurs in the first phase of concrescence, it presents only ill-defined *sensa*. Perception in the mode of presentational immediacy, because it occurs in later phases of concrescence, seizes upon these vague emotional feelings and transmutes them into well-defined qualities that are then projected onto the region of experience contemporaneous with the percipient occasion. Thus, the functional differentiation of these two modes of perception allows them to complement one another in symbolic reference. Olson proposed teasing out what causal efficacy and presentational immediacy each contributes to symbolic reference and recognizing each as a unique and value mode of experience.

These ideas, though perhaps a bit abstract, really are close to ideas that Olson advanced, and their influence on Olson's manner of formulating his ideas was direct. Whitehead argued that contemporaneous actual entities do notprehend one another; any entity contributes

to the general process of becoming, but it does not affect other contemporaneous occasions.

Olson must have found Whitehead's principle of universal relativity (that is, the principle that every item in an actual entity's universe affects its concrescence—or, to state the principle otherwise, it belongs to the nature of any 'being' that it is a potential for future 'becoming') extremely attractive, for it has the strength to explain the relation of every element to every other in the Open Form creative process. But it had an even more definite influence; to understand this influence, we must ask Whitehead's philosophy the important question, "If contemporaneous actual entities cannot prehend one another, then how can an actual entity prehend a contemporaneous actual entity in the mode of presentational immediacy?" Whitehead's answer was that it cannot. When, for example, people are conscious of some entity located in contemporary space, they do not really perceive the nexûs of contemporaneous actual entities—in fact, they do not even derive their sensations from contemporaneous events. Rather they derive them from antecedent states of their own bodies (and indirectly from the world, as it affects their bodies) and then project those sensations into contemporary space. Whitehead maintained that the serial nature of perception explains how a perception can be sustained. Whitehead's idea that perception involves a changing subject knowing a changing object through its body is another notion Olson took up. Further, the idea that organisms take energy in through the body and project it out into the environment influenced Olson's fundamental ideas concerning Projective Poetry.

The desire to create works that exist wholly in the present, that import no influence from the past, was part of what drove the action poets (i.e., the poets associated with the aesthetics of abstract expression) to use "spontaneous, irregular, guerrilla forms." The action poets aspired to create works that belong entirely to the present in order to recreate the pure perceptual mode that Whitehead refers to as presentational immediacy; that is, they strove to create poetry that was as much of the nature of process as reality is, to "get on with it" by getting with it, whatever it was that it was going. Yet at the same time, they wanted to reawaken the primitiveness of perception in the mode of causal efficacy. This accounts for their being chary of hypotaxis, of sentence forms involving relative clauses (consider the contrast between Olson's poetry and Swinburne's), and of extended qualifiers; sentences that do not employ those constructions can better convey the flux of reality and the sense that change comes as so many discrete impulses, Olson believed. The action poets wanted to create a totally synchronic experience, in which anticipation and recollection play no part.

Olson maintained that "the structures of the real are flexible, quanta do dissolve into vibrations, all does flow"—and to this he adds a qualification that reconciled change with permanence much in the manner of Whitehead—"and yet is there, to be made permanent, if the means are equal." Earlier in the same essay (in a passage which was quoted in part above) Olson had characterized the achievement of the nineteenth century:

. . . An idea shook loose, and energy and motion became as important a structure of things as that they are plural, and, by matter, mass. It was even shown that in the infinitely small the older concepts of space ceased to be valid at all. Quantity—the measurable and numerable—was suddenly as shafted in, as it was also, to any thing, as it had been obvious, the striking character of the external world, that all things do extend out. [cf. Whitehead's critique of 16th Century science that rendered nature as characterless atoms in motion.] Nothing was now inert fact, all things were there for feeling [a term that here has Whiteheadian overtones], to promote it, and be felt; and man, in the midst of it

[just where Whitehead placed him], knowing well how he was folded in, as well as how suddenly and strikingly he could extend himself, spring or, without even moving, go, to far, the farthest—he was suddenly possessed or repossessed [sic] of a character of being, a thing among things, which I shall call his physicality. It made a re-entry of or to the universe. Reality was without interruption, and we are still in the business of finding out how all action, and thought, have to be refounded.

But, Olson opined, the course of change which, when considered from a sufficiently synoptic vantage point becomes history, never progresses linearly, as the Semitic traditions suggest, nor cyclically, as the ancient Greeks, among others, believed. Its outcome is not foreclosed. Olson's notion of history resembles Whitehead's analysis of concrescence, for Olson claimed that all history is co-present, yet history as a whole must be kept going moment to moment. He insisted, further, that the only agency through which history can go on being regenerated is the agency of "actual willful men." The lack of tradition and the demand that the individual regenerate history ensures that American history will be anything but progressive, smooth and continuous. Olson realized this; indeed, he celebrated it: "when traditions go, the DISCONTINUOUS becomes the greener place." Hence Olson's poetry employs collage, fragments, and discontinuity. He favoured: compositional forms that use juxtaposition, correlation and interaction; sentence fragments; rhetorical repetition that has the effect of isolating, through stress, the repeated element; extreme variation in line length; percussive rhythm with frequent caesurae; multiple digressions and interpolations before the sentence's period (if it comes); and an almost constant rhetorical emphasis that, at times, makes almost every phrase seem an ejaculation. There is a passage early in *Maximus Poems*:

the underpart is, though stemmed, uncertain
is, as sex is, as moneys are, fact!
facts, to be dealt with, as the sea is, the demand
that they be played by, that they only can be, that they/ must
be played by, said he, coldly, the
ear!

Look at how Olson breaks apart the movement from "the underpart is" to its resolution, "fact!" In this description, Olson introduces, first, the qualifier, "though stemmed," then amplifies it with "uncertain," then picks up the line from which he had digressed, qualifies its subject by putting down "is," then presents, initially, one comparison, "as sex is," then a different one—"as moneys are"—and then finally comes to the sentence's period, "fact." He even marks "fact" with an exclamation point, to isolate it and to stress its importance; the line break after "fact" further emphasizes its separateness. The use of rhetorical ejaculation to isolate a term continues in the next line, which opens with an isolating repetition of "facts." Olson then glosses "facts" with another isolated phrase, "to be dealt with." Then the momentum of introduced comparisons takes over from the previous line. What seems most simply there, "to be dealt with," in Gloucester is the sea, and so the comparison is "as the sea is." Too, the comparison echoes "as sex is" and so (considering that the poet is male) suggests that the sea is feminine. So Olson leaves the next fragment, "the demand," hanging. As the composition hints at the pumping rhythms of sex, we realize at that point, if not before, that the staccato phrases convey the energy of sexual activities; that explains the lexicon, "underpart," "stemmed," and "moneys." He

follows this with a statement of the demand, then two reformulations of it. Next, we have what seems to be an interruption, the words “said he,” a statement that Olson immediately qualifies by a quasi-independent adverb, whose isolation he emphasizes by setting it off by commas. The line ends with a definite article, separated from the adjoining noun by a line break, lest the line conform too strictly to the pattern of a statement attribution breaking into a statement. The line break also sets off the incongruous, completely isolated noun, “ear!” The general aural texture formed by the mixture of dental and explosive consonants, the high frequency of caesurae, and the rhetorical exclamations (“facts!” and “ear!”) produce a general impression of urgency and energy associated with its sexual theme.

Olson believed that the intense experience of the vivified body responding to the open field had restorative and reparative potential. By coming to see and hear for oneself, with one’s own eyes and ears, one could escape from Heidegger’s “they,” from the crowd which substitutes a generalized inauthenticity for the individual percipient and whose collectivity constitutes what Olson calls peyorocracy. Thus, in Song I of “The Songs of Maximus,” he writes

 colored pictures
of all things to eat: dirty
postcards
 And words, words, words
all over everything
 No eyes or ears left
to do their own doings (all

invaded, appropriated, outraged, all senses

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

song

Olson suggests here that inert words conceal reality; that is, he claimed that if the power of the word to uncover being goes unsensed and unrealized, beings are obscured. Consequently, language conveys only a generalized, abstracted, and overly schematized image of the world. Peyorocracy is the social order that develops when humans come to deal with the word rather than the world. Olson even attacks picture-making at the beginning of the poem, probably because he believed that pictures (images) describe or represent reality rather than passing on its energies (and so are an inert form of representation). The only hope Olson offers for a way out of peyorocracy is for us to get in touch with our doings. Language as discourse (for the ear) and as image (for the eye) has depleted our immediate, sensuous perception of objects. The eye sees images that are social and linguistic models. Thus, language impedes the body’s natural tendency to produce a form of vision that is uniquely proper to that particular body. In the time of peyorocracy, a deliberate and even violently forcible banishing of intruder language is necessary to carry out a phenomenological reduction. Only in this way can we get, as Husserl’s

maxim has it, “*zu den Sachen selbst*,” (“to the thing itself”) or as Olson’s American contemporary, the poet William Carlos Williams has it, to the state in which there are “no ideas but in things.” The similarity between Williams’ and Husserl’s slogans should say something about the currency of that conviction in the redemptive power that results from transcending “the verbal icon” to attain the thing itself.

According to Olson, then, tradition has interfered with the normal functioning of the human organism by interposing a screen between the body and the world. The circuit of the external world/body/senses/imagination/projection-into-the world essential to creativity has been broken, for language (in the form of both discourse and structured imagery) has intervened and obscured the world. Language has disrupted the body’s sensitive reaction to the throbbing energy of reality and has reduced the intensity of sensation. It has weakened the intention to act which is the motor-force of imagination. Art made from mimetic or descriptive language does not “get what you are after—so far as a human being goes,” *viz.*, life. A poetry of immediacy, that tries to capture experience while it is still alive and hot at least stands some chance to avoid the inauthenticity of language as discourse and picture.

Olson did have doubts about how a poet (who is, after all, like all modern human beings, implicated in pejerocracy) could escape from its deleterious effects—doubts he related in “Song 2” of “The Songs of Maximus.” However, he harboured a faith that it is possible. His principal tactic for reconnecting with the energy and emotional value of experience was to begin by focusing attention on what was closest to him—himself, his home, his locale, his family. Attention to the particulars that compose any situation can provide artists with the energies and the means—even with the words and images, if they are conceived as vehicles of particular energies—to keep moving from one encounter to another, from one percept to the next, from one instant to the next.

This morning of the small snow
I count the blessings, the leak in the faucet
which makes of the sink time, the drop
of the water on water as sweet
as the Seth Thomas
in the old kitchen
my father stood in his drawers to wind (always
he forgot the 30th day, as I don’t want to remember
the rent

Here self and other, the internal and external worlds, are so close to one another that energy flows easily from one to the other. Thus Olson’s work often employs forms that bring their readers/viewers through many layers of the familiar and ordinary until they come to see the commonplace as energized with some force or as possessing some allure that previously escaped their notice. In conversation with Robert Duncan (at a public lecture/discussion at Berkeley in 1965), Olson was absolutely insistent on the importance of one’s own locale, one’s place, one’s body.

And I don’t believe there is a single person in this room that doesn’t have the opportunity—the absolute place and thing that’s theirs. I mean places and things that are theirs. . . . I don’t believe that everyone of us isn’t absolutely *specific*. And *has* his specificity The *reductive* is what I’m proposing. I don’t

think you can get your recognitions by going out. I think they come from within.

R. Bruce Elder,
Graduate Program in Communication and Culture,
Ryerson University,
Toronto, Canada.