

## PROJECTIVE VERSE

Projective verse refers to poetry written in the second half of the 20th century by a group of early **postmodern** American writers, the **Black Mountain poets** primarily, emphasizing field composition, spontaneity, energy, process, and **open form**. The name is taken from **Charles Olson's** essay by the same title, published in 1950 in *Poetry New York*, one of the most studied and debated poetic manifestos of the century, often taken as the possible starting point of American postmodernism. Although Olson was the drafter of the main tenets of projectivism as well as its chief practitioner, other poets such as **Robert Creeley**, **Robert Duncan**, **Denise Levertov**, and **Ed Dorn** have also applied these ideas without necessarily calling their poetry projective.

"Projective Verse" is Olson's first and major *ars poetica*, a statement and credo of poetic technique and philosophy. The technical issues discussed involve various "dogmas" relating to projective or open verse and composition by field. These dogmas refer to poem as energy, form as the extension of content, the process of composition, as well as the material and linguistic elements of the open poem dependent on and expressive of breath and speech. The projectivist stance implies that the poem does not strive to be confession or self-expression, but is a form of address and communication. The philosophical issues relate to the "stance towards reality" that projective writing involves. Concepts like objectism, obedience, attention, humilitas, and participation are expounded in this projectivist position.

In composition by field the poem retains the energy with which it responds to whatever it was that called forth poem. As Olson formulates his first principle, "a poem is energy transferred from where the poet got it (he will have some several causations), by way of the poem itself to, all

the way over to, the reader. ... Then the poem itself must, at all points, be a high energy-construct and, at all points, an energy discharge" (*Selected Writings* 16). The energy that the poem starts out with gains momentum from the fact that the poem has its origin in actual experience; this experience is projected onto the page and thereby communicated to the reader by as little intellectual reordering as possible. It is the energy of experience that is being transferred in such a way that it should not get lost, that the "going out" (writing) be the direct continuation or extension of the "coming in" (experiencing and perceiving) . "This means very literally," Creeley explains in his Introduction to Olson's *Selected Writings*, "that a poem is some *thing*, a structure possessed of its own organization in turn derived from the circumstances of its making" (7). The projective stress on the poem as energy-construct within the field of composition bears resemblance with certain ideas of **William Carlos Williams**, who in his 1948 essay "The Poem as a Field of Action" speaks of the poem as a category of activity and as a possibility for discoveries made by listening to the language.

Olson gives credit to Creeley for the phrasing the second so-called dogma, "form is never more than an extension of content." By questioning the distinction between form and content, not only does projectivism reject the imposition of form by the poet upon poetic material, but also deflates traditional Western dichotomies accounting for separations. The self, whether the poet's or otherwise, is reintroduced into the world, but stripped of the impulse for mastery. In the poet's case, this impulse take the form of an egotistic imposition of form, where verse forms existing prior to or separately from the poem are used. Countering this position, the projectivist poet will reject the form/content separation and the prior existence of form; instead, particular feeling will take shape in each poem as form extending content. As Olson puts it, "You enter the subject matter, and *that* projection is where you permit your feeling to flow and go out through the subject matter" (*Muthologos* I, 184). The task of the poet is not to impose, but to extend: to

realize content into form by giving up controlling agency. Attention and humility guarantee this holding back of the ego, and help form obey its inner laws. In Denise Levertov's phrasing of the Olson-Creeley dogma, "Form is never more than a revelation of content" (*Poet in the World* 13).

In the third dogma Olson stresses process and speed:

ONE PERCEPTION MUST IMMEDIATELY AND DIRECTLY LEAD TO A  
FURTHER PERCEPTION. ... get on with it, keep moving, keep in, speed ... keep  
it moving as fast as you can, citizen. ... always one perception must must must  
MOVE, INSTANTER, ON ANOTHER! (*Selected Writings* 16-17)

According to this principle of poetic process that Olson took from Edward Dahlberg, the direct and immediate projection of sense perceptions shall guarantee a dynamic and open, or "willess," poetry, abounding in kinetic energies. Projectivist writing is often most recognizable for the dizzying speed, the racing-propelling modality gained from keeping to this discipline of progression. As the poet enters composition by field, he participates fully in the natural processes, and—instead of halting them, if only for the moment of a static **image** —, he tries to keep pace with these processes. When the poet sits down to write, it is still open what direction the poem might take. In writing the poem, the poet acts not as a creator but as a master of ceremonies rather, and will allow the poem to take the direction it demands.

The fourth dogma concerns breath as speech force becoming measure in projective writing. Poetry in this conception is not only a verbal but also a physiological act, fusing mental and natural, biological and physical values. The physicality of writing is emphasized by relating the syllable and the line with ear and mind, breath and body. Breath is the physical vehicle of

projectivism, directly transporting what the poet perceives during the act of composition. The typewriter will help project experience cadenced by breath onto the page; so breath becomes a factor in creativity here. In the essay Olson refers to the Romantic notion of inspiration: "western wynd," this archetype of creative spirit, brings breath into the making of the poem. But for Olson breath no longer serves as a metaphor for the spiritual, it becomes instead the extension of the bodily into the spiritual. The bodily and the spiritual are aspects of one and the same process, the body being part of the soul, and vice versa. "I think," he said in this vein, "our body is our soul. And if you don't have your body as a factor of creation, you don't have a soul" (*Muthologos* II, 170).

Projectivism, as the second part of the "Projective Verse" essay indicates, involves a "stance toward reality outside the poem": the artist is placed in the "dimensions larger than the man" (*Selected Writing* 25). Objectism is the term Olson uses for the relation of man to experience commensurate with the projectivist stance: "*Objectism* is the getting rid of the lyrical interference of the individual as ego [...] For a man is himself an object, whatever he may take to be his advantages, the more likely to recognize himself as such the greater his advantages, particularly at the moment that he achieves an humilitas sufficient to make him of use (*Selected Writings* 24-25). It is the use of man Olson is interested in: in man as object capable of participating with humilitas in nature. The use of man is determined by participation as opposed to imposition and mastery, whether over language, experience, or nature. Olson here takes an explicit stand against **T. S. Eliot**, whom he calls a "nonprojective" poet: "his root is the mind alone" (*Selected Writings* 26). Unlike Eliot, the projective poet does not allow the separation of self and world, physical and spiritual. He will go "down through the workings of his own throat to that place where breath comes from, where breath has its beginnings, where drama has to come from, where, the coincidence is, all act springs" (*Selected Writings* 26). The poetry written from

this stance will be characterized by a mode of relatedness defined by obedience and humility, the transcendence of subjectivity, as well as attention and perception.

The projective poem will have a particular look on the page that evokes especially the later *Cantos* of **Ezra Pound**: its lines are usually scattered, broken, and indented, faithfully projecting and transcribing the poet's consciousness. Creeley describes this adherence of the projective poem to mental energies in a letter dated July 1950: "This would seem to me to be a principal advantage of Pro Verse, OPEN FIELD, that: the *objects* which occur, at the moment of recognition (you had composition—how abt that/ same damn thing), can because of, THE SPEECH, BACK IN (the energy), be treated exactly as they do occur (in their effects, that is, on us, daily, can keep their confusions (*Complete Correspondence* 2, 60). The operations involved here are not ordering, systematization, classification, or categorization, but listening, obeying, responsiveness, and in general an attention to one's consciousness. The poet tries to remain in a state of intellectual transparency in order to be able to transcribe (by projecting onto the page) all that surfaces in his/her consciousness at the time of writing.

Olson's "The Kingfishers" is a typical projective poem. In fact, the essay might be considered to explain what was practiced in the poem written a year earlier. The poem is projective in the sense that it was provoked by a particular experience, has a racing-propelling movement deriving from the poet's insistence on the transference of energy, and takes the reader into the process of his thinking. Its look on the page also conforms to projectivist principles: full sentences and end-stopped lines are avoided, while the indented and broken lines draw attention to forms of consciousness.

In projective verse it is not knowledge but experience and perception that are communicated. The projectivist stance refuses the compulsion of having to know and understand, and opts, instead, for being comfortable in not knowing. This acceptance of disorder and undecidability is related to Keats's Negative Capability—that "condition of things" which Olson defines by three words: "mystery confusion doubt" (*Collected Prose* 120) —as well as that "high tolerance of disorder" which Olson was confirmed to have when participating in the Thematic Apperception Test conducted by psychologist Henry A. Murray. What projective verse is supposed to project onto the page is not simply the poet's consciousness, but its contents prior to cognition, so to say. The poem should be the projection of the process that is the alternative to logocentrism, and should express experience without the mediation of already existing categories of thinking. Olson's poem "On first Looking out through Juan de la Cosa's Eyes" is a case in point: when describing what the new land must have looked like to Captain de la Cosa—who did not know he landed in the "New World"—, it reaches back to a moment when familiar cultural concepts and paradigms were not yet in place. Olson registers la Cosa's perception without post-dating it, so to say: without employing later categories of cognition. By trying to discover what one does not know, Olson refutes the claim that perception is cognition-dependent. He manages to get out of the trap posed by cultural and social paradigms by picking a scene where somebody perceives something without the interference of later cultural meanings.

**Further Reading. *Selected Primary Sources:*** *Selected Writings of Charles Olson*, ed. Robert Creeley (New York: New Directions, 1966); ---, *Muthologos: The Collected Lectures & Interviews*, ed. George F. Butterick (Bollinas: Four Seasons Foundation, vol. 1, 1978; vol. 2, 1979); --- and Robert Creeley, *The Complete Correspondence*, ed. George F. Butterick, vol. 2 (Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow P, 1980); ---, *Collected Prose*, ed. Donald Allen and Benjamin Friedlander (Berkeley: U of California P, 1997); Levertov, Denise, "Some Notes on Organic

Form" (*The Poet in the World* [New York: New Directions, 1973], 7-13. ***Selected Secondary***

***Sources:*** Butterick, George F., "Charles Olson and the Postmodern Advance" (*Iowa Review* 2.4 [1980], 4-27); Maud, Ralph, *What Does Not Change: The Significance of Charles Olson's "The Kingfishers"* (Cranbury, NJ: Associated U Presses, 1998).

Enikő Bollobás

Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest, Hungary