

Charles Olson

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Biography

The son of a Swedish letter-carrier and a Catholic Irish-American mother, Charles Olson was born on 27 December 1910 in Worcester, Massachusetts. He grew up in Gloucester, received his degrees in English from Wesleyan University (1932, 1933), took courses at Yale when on an Olin fellowship, and worked as an instructor at Clark University. He was a doctoral candidate in American Studies at Harvard University (1936-39), but left without submitting a dissertation. He received a Guggenheim fellowship for studying Melville (1939), which later resulted in his first book.

Olson chose a public career for the next five years: he became publicity director for the American Civil Liberties Union (1941); worked for the Office of War Information (1942-44) and the Foreign Nationalities Division of the Democratic Party (1944-45). However, he soon became disappointed in politics, and gave up his public career. The final break came with Roosevelt's death: that same afternoon he started to write his Melville book, *Call Me Ishmael* (1947).

He visited Ezra Pound at St. Elizabeth's Hospital in Washington (1946-48), defended Pound against charges of treason in the voice of Yeats ('This Is Yeats Speaking'), and covered the trial for *Twice-A-Year*. 'Olson saved my life,' Pound acknowledged later.

During a brief period of lecturing at various universities (1947-51), he established his intellectual ties with the writer Edward Dahlberg, the anthropologist Carl Sauer, the poets Robert Duncan and Robert Creeley, and the artist Corrado Cagli. He received a Guggenheim fellowship for a study of the interrelation of racial groups ('Red, White and Black'). Olson first visited Black Mountain College in 1948, returning for occasional lectures in the following years. Thirsty for things happening to him 'directly', Olson travelled to Mexico in December 1950 to study Maya civilization.

From Lerma he returned straight to Black Mountain College in 1951, where he remained as rector until its closing in 1956. After that he settled down in Gloucester with his second wife, the actress and pianist Betty Kaiser. His first selection of poems (*The Distances*) came out in the same year as the first book of his major long poem, *Maximus Poems* (1960). He read at the Vancouver Poetry Conference in 1963, and held another teaching job at the State University of New York at Buffalo for two years, but this was terminated by the death of his wife in a car accident in 1964. Afterwards he resided in Gloucester. 1965 saw the publication of his most influential essays collected as *Human Universe*; his *Selected Writings* came out the following year, edited by Robert Creeley. Olson died of cancer in 1970, at the age of 59.

Critical Essay

Olson was a charismatic figure, towering over a whole generation of poets and artists. A mountain of a man, he had extraordinary physical dimensions: he was over 6'8" tall, with a proportionately large spirit and personality. He was a compulsive consumer of food and thought, a big talker of interminable conversations, and an obsessive reader, holding all information in his computer-like memory.

Referring to his complex teachings on literature, dance, philosophy, mathematics, archeology and history that went on at Black Mountain College between 1951 and 1956, Olson claimed to be a 'Professor of Posture'. Black Mountain was an experimental educational workshop, an American *Bauhaus*, that was the source of much of the contemporary avantgarde in the fields of the visual arts, of poetry, music, dance, education, politics and life-style. During its 23 years of existence between 1933 and 1956, it was an inspiration and a refuge for various innovative radicals (John Rice, Josef Albers, Anni Albers, John Cage, David Tudor, Merce Cunningham, Franz Kline, Willem de Kooning, Buckminster Fuller, Robert Rauschenberg, Robert Duncan, Robert Creeley, Paul Goodman, Cid Corman, Ed Dorn, Michael Rumaker, LeRoi Jones, Joel Oppenheimer, John Wieners, Jonathan Williams, and Fielding Dawson).

The college was built on some basic principles such as openness, personal freedom, an experimental and workshop spirit, self-sufficiency and equality, common responsibility, democracy, poverty, participation, free exchange of ideas, fellowship and community. The 'Black Mountain spirit', the common aesthetics that was the bond among members of the community, was, at least in its poetic version, embodied and formulated by Olson himself, who had the spiritual capacity for such a synthesis.

His most influential and anthologized writings are the seminal essays written during his Black Mountain period, 'Projective Verse' and 'Human Universe'. (Page numbers shall refer to these two essays as published in *Selected Writings of Charles Olson*, ed. Robert Creeley.)

'Projective Verse', his 'kick-off piece', was published in 1950 in *Poetry New York*. It was Olson's first major *ars poetica*, a statement and credo of poetic technique and philosophy, one of the most debated and studied poetic manifestos of the century.

The first part, in the form of poetic 'dogmas', touches upon technical issues related to the mechanism of writing: the kinetics of composition, form as the

extension of content, the principle of poetic process, poetry as a physiological act relying upon breath. Olson insists that the poem is a transfer of energy, and as such has a kinetic nature:

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.

(16)

In other words, the 'going out' (writing) is the direct continuation or extension of the 'coming in' (perception). Projectivism opposes 'old controlling humanism', and proposes instead an extension and realization of content into form by limiting the controlling agency, 'the ego-position', of the poet as much as possible. Attention and humility guarantee this holding back of the ego, and help form obey its inner laws. The principle of progression has become one of the most determining principles of his poetry: the progression from one assertion directly to the next. It is a key concept that has generated the most conspicuous qualities of Olson's verse: its speed, racing thoughts, momentum and unlimited intellectual courage. Olson deals with breath as the physical vehicle of projectivism, directly transporting all that is 'in form of the senses' during the act of composition.

The second part of the essay touches upon philosophical questions relating to the 'stance towards reality' that projectivism involves. A whole field of concepts like objectism, obedience, attention, *humilitas* and participation make out the Olsonian 'posture'.

Objectism is the getting rid of the lyrical interference of the individual as ego, of the 'subject' of 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, whatever he may take to be his advantages, particularly at the moment that he achieves an *humilitas* sufficient to make him of use.

(24-25)

Objectism is the acceptance and acknowledgement of man's humble place in the universe; it implies awareness, a care for details, attention and humility towards the larger forces of nature of which man is participant.

Coupled with this humility of objectism, attention becomes the faculty of true spirituality, and also the indication of a person's being at home in the world. The use of man that Olson is interested in is 'man as object', man capable of participating in nature with *humilitas*. Obedience serves as the notion for this relatedness with the world; humility as the transcendence of subjectivity; participation as the dissolving of boundaries between the subjective and the objective.

The lay-out of Olson's poems, with lines scattered over the pages, broken and indented, is the outward mark of the projectivist stance. Projections and transcripts of the workings of his mind, the poems follow in a visually perceivable way the mental turmoil of the writer in the moment of composition. The most important creative faculties are not ordering, rethinking, systematization and classification, but listening, obeying, responsiveness, remaining in a state of intellectual transparency in order to be able to transcribe (by projecting onto the page) all that surfaces to the consciousness of the poet at the time of writing.

'Human Universe' was written during Olson's stay in Yucatán in 1951. In this essay he explains how humanism enclosed all speculation into a 'universe of discourse': that is, generalization, logic, classification and idealism, all preventing knowledge and discovery through direct perception and participation. Analogical categories like description, comparison and simile are, Olson insists, secondary notions, incapable of grasping the processes and self-formation of the thing in question; instead, they filter and distort experience. Olson suggests an 'alternative to the whole Greek system', 'a way which does not – in order to define – prevent, deter, distract and so cease the act of, discovering'. (56)

In search for non-anthropocentric philosophies 'alternative to the ego-position', Olson claimed to have found in Mexico all the primeval values that Western humanism has lost. Through the spiritual condition of attention and perception ('sharp sure hunger of the senses'), the descendants of Maya civilization found ways to fight inertia, the lack of individual energy and passivity: they found the way for man that helped 'repossess him of his dynamic'. (59) Attention does not only create a spiritual state, then, but becomes the primary agent of creativity too: art being the only 'twin of life', only art can create or recreate (give/feed back) nature's forces without loss of energy.

Olson's philosophic stance grew out of his studious readings from Eastern religions and philosophies to modern linguistic anthropology, nuclear

science, and mathematics. In thinkers like Alfred North Whitehead, Heisenberg, Schrödinger, Benjamin Lee Whorf and János Bolyai he found models for an alternative to the ego-position, for non-humanistic thinking, where order is not imposed but allowed to emerge. Immanence is a key concept, presuming an innate harmony between nature and mind. Instead of the mastering gesture or the controlling reflex, the immanent imperative is to penetrate, to enter, to submerge into the condition of things. The Romantic emphasis on sacramental experience and authentic presence is reinforced here by the American imperative of reverence for the simple, the familiar and the trivial, born out of an intense moment of restored harmony with the world.

Other essays deal with similar philosophic and literary issues. 'The Gate and the Center' and 'The Escaped Cock: A Note on Lawrence and the Real', for example, unfold Olson's ideas on energy and the rhythm of civilizations, together with the counteracting forces of coherence and dispersion. 'Equal, That Is, To the Real Itself' depicts the world in its sensuous reality, while his Black Mountain lectures collected as 'The Special View of History' revolve around his notion of space and history. The special 'reading list' compiled for his students under the title 'A Bibliography on America for Ed Dorn' pins down his intellectual allegiances, while in 'Causal Mythology' Olson articulates the spiritual and mystical ramifications of his position. 'Proprioception' explains the physicality of the self, a topic also dealt with in the Beloit lectures collected by George F. Butterick as *Poetry and Truth* (1971).

Short poems

In the poems collected in his first book, *Y & X* (1948), Olson had not yet found his own distinctive voice, although pieces such as 'The K', 'La Préface' and 'The Moebius Strip' reveal the possibility of his becoming a major poet. But the second collection of poems published while at Black Mountain, *In Cold Hell, In Thicket* (1953), leaves no doubt about his power and originality as a poet. The order of the poems is arranged with precision and care, the format is consciously attended to as the three sections express the inner struggles of a poetic initiation as well as clarify the poet's allegiances and intellectual debt to the living and the dead. The major poems of the volume are: 'The Kingfishers', 'The Praises', 'In Cold Hell, In Thicket', 'La Torre' and 'Ode on Nativity'.

A characteristic quality of these poems is their seeming fragmentariness. The complete sentence is conspicuously missing, together with other standards

of finality and completeness: 'we have to kick sentences in the face', he wrote to Vincent Ferrini. He will spell words in idiosyncratic ways, form unusual abbreviations, use foreign words in an English context and exploit puns, thus to bring out the solidity, 'taste' and tactile quality of words. All these provide various means for Olson to lift the barrier of rationality in discourse, so that the poet be permitted to enter the inner circles of language. Insisting on precision and explicitness, he takes language seriously, and manages to be precise in a distinctive way: he does not simply use the 'exact word', but presents the intellectual process of his finding it. His poetry will thus be full of rephrasings, hesitations, and other instances of preciousness, as if he was constantly adjusting and fastidiously refining his choice of words. The language process that we witness in his poems grows out of this reaching down into his soul for *claritas*, while explicitly propagating linguistic hygiene:

Avert, avert, avoid
pollution, to be clean
in a dirty time

('The Praises')

The Distances (1960) collects 21 individual poems of which only half are new: with the new arrangement, however, Olson creates a new unity, a new organism, as the poems are allowed to interact. This body of poems expresses Olson's 'stay against confusion', articulating his distances and isolation from the world, as well as connections between self and experience. The powerful elegies prove that coming to terms with the dead remains a chief concern in this book too ('As the Dead Prey Upon Us', 'Moonset, Gloucester, December 1, 1957, 1:58 A.M.'). Gloucester seems to take over, foreshadowing later preoccupations ('The Librarian'). Dream visions induce a sense of distances ('The Lordly and Isolate Satyrs', 'The Librarian'). One of the most discussed Olson poems, 'Variations Done for Gerald Van De Wiele', states an elemental relationship to nature, with visions of coincidence and singleness versus multiplicity.

Archeologist of Morning (1970) was posthumously published, but contains only those poems that Olson authorized for publication during his lifetime. It is a volume of 250 pages, containing most of the published poems apart from the *Maximus* poems. This collection is again an organic body of writings, with interacting poems discussing his 'methodology for living'. The

overlapping themes touch the true appraisal of the world in its process and 'flow of creation', and the 'catching' of messages from nature and history, from mythology, archeology, philosophy, linguistics and other forms of human knowledge.

The non-*Maximus* poems have now been published by George F. Butterick; *The Collected Poems of Charles Olson* (1987) was American Book Award Winner in 1988.

The Maximus Poems

Olson's monumental masterpiece, *Maximus*, came out in three volumes: *Maximus Poems* (1960), *Maximus Poems IV, V, VI* (1968), and *The Maximus Poems: Volume Three* (1975); the complete version, edited by George F. Butterick, was published in 1983. A modern epic, a long poem written in the tradition of Whitman, Pound, Hart Crane, Williams and Zukofsky, *Maximus* is the story of man's displacement and of his distancing himself from 'that which is most familiar'. It is also the poetic version of the Ishmaelian 'will to cohere', attempting to restore the world to its wholeness and completeness, to show 'an actual earth of value' (*Beloit Lectures*).

The first triad has a unified, finished, polished look. The locale here is Gloucester and Cape Ann, the first American polis, whose communal and personal histories are capable of evoking man's lost sensual relationship to the world. Olson is careful about historical facts and details as well as details of the texture and condition of life as an event.

Apposition is a typical language catalyst for Olson, holding several elements alongside one another. It is as if he deposits successive layers of thought in building a poem. Speech-like repetitions are used for emphasis and clarity; parentheses and quotation marks – single as well as double – cut off appositioned and inserted texts. Olson's fragmented, discontinuous style resists completeness; by unlinking syntactic – as well as cognitive – patterns and connections, the poet voices his ethical imperative in a mercantile society.

"In the midst of plenty, walk
as close to
bare
In the face of sweetness,
piss
In the time of goodness,
go side, go
smashing, beat them, go as
near as you can

tear

In the land of plenty, have
nothing to do with it
take the way of
the lowest,
including
your legs, go
contrary, go

sing

('Songs of Maximus', Song 3)

The scope of the second volume expands historically and spatially to mythological and psychological spheres, to prehistory and to the human mind. The text has a notebook appearance, is difficult, with unorganized perceptions appearing in a crude, rough form. Recording cosmic and inward explorations, the poems become documentary field notes creating a projectivist poetic field. The act of thinking is projected and graphed in its free movement, generating the quickness of language so characteristic of Olson. Speech drives the writing on, constantly evading the completing closure and initiating new beginnings.

The posthumous third volume is a long, undivided sequence, a spontaneous weaving of ideas, motifs and moods. *The Maximus Poems* is Olson's major achievement, his grand attempt at synthesis. By decoding the archeological 'glyphs' of the past, he reveals comprehensiveness in a fragmented, postmodern text.

Olson's poetic achievement culminated, it seems, in the elaboration of a poetic language fitted to hold a universe without restrictions. He created a language that provided the space for the whole, yet at the same time charged with presence, with words acting as vectors of the kinetics of the page. The turmoil on the page corresponds exactly to the order inside the poet's consciousness, creating a space that allowed the continuously generated relations to emerge both as linguistic and intellectual tensions.

Arguably the most complex and far-ranging American poet of the past fifty years, Olson presented a radical system of thought unmatched by contemporaries and descendants; his was a radicalism dictated by a passion for imaginative and intellectual alternatives. Olson came up with a coherent network of poetics and philosophy: with his ideas on humility and ecology,

Christian orthodoxy, the native roots of American culture, his rejection of the 'humanism' and 'ego-position' of Western civilization, he is a precursor of the break-up of the monolithic Anglo-American sensibility into a diversity based on tolerance towards all forms of 'otherness'.

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