

“an actual earth of value to / construct one”

1)

Going through a box of papers recently, I found a tabloid-sized page, yellowed and with thumb-tack holes, from *Vortex* (April 14, 1970), an underground newspaper published in Lawrence, Kansas. It was Olson’s obituary, written by Max Douglas:

From whence the Berkeley reading, then
Drives it HOME—
(I cld leave off asking yr fucking indulgence—
“Words are value, instruction, action. And they’ve
got to become political action. They’ve got to become social action.
The radicalism lies from ours words, alone.” Dig.
“poetics IS politics”,
otherwise it’s (all
of it), like
they say, more of the same.

Olson’s work is about the making and *use* of information—the difference that makes a difference, in Gregory Bateson’s words. With *The Maximus Poems*, any citizen became a radical function of his or her own poetics. It did not mean that poets were going to set themselves up to Gloucesterize every place from Austin to Zanevilles. The difference that makes a difference is not prescribed. “Projective Verse” does not tell anyone how to write poetry. *Our words alone*.

Olson’s writings on poetics are consistently on a single theme, how is it possible to keep the circuit of matter, energy, and information—the person and the environment as they co-construct one another—open? How is this oscillating thing, the rhythm of the living creature, at once energy *and* information—this difference that makes a difference—not to lose itself to mere consciousness, metaphysics, and the grammar of representation? There is a quality in words as physical—Olson found it in the late plays of Shakespeare and in *Moby Dick*—that, as soon as you hear it, really hear, gives a measure of what words might be. Olson spoke of this quality in terms of *innocence*, of taking the words up innocently, so they are not references, not already ravaged by consciousness or grammar or logic or mimesis or style or meaning, so meaning and form are not prior to them, but their consequence, as a result of what happens to them in their environment. It is clearer perhaps in a fishing town. The words, the work, the knowledge of fishing, and the catch *do* belong to the same circuit. And the reason for this is not to escape the constraints of form in order to free the body or release the emotions or to encounter some unspeakable other, but it is precisely in order *to make form* as large as it can be for the person and not to presume the false size that is involved in all forms of representationalism, including the representation of language itself, or grammar itself, or logic itself.

Grandfather Poetry has wondered what happened to the poets who took up the burden of this innocence—the poets who published in *Io*, *Caterpillar*, *Truck*, *Tansy*, *Credences*, *Wch Way*, *Vort*, *O.ars*, *Broadway Boogie Woogie*, *Coyote's Journal*, *Notus*, *Sarcophagus*, and other magazines of the 1970s and 80s. It was an active scene. What happened? It is not a matter of personal innocence, but the discipline of being innocent before language. It is hard to think that you are not your words; they are your consequence; they are the outside coming in, like fish. It's hard.

Max Douglas died of an overdose shortly after he wrote Olson's obituary for *Vortex*. Ken Irby wrote a magnificent elegy, *To Max Douglas* (1974). In a preface to which, Ed Dorn wrote: "Max Douglas, child of the crossing. From the Missouri bank, but imbued with a Kansas tendency to flow out over the western swells, a grand inclined table.... Max was quite saturn, full of the sensation of his own brilliance. In his short life he was able to modify Olson's procedures to fit his own situation." And it is such appropriations and modifications that remain the undone business of poetry.

I think John Clarke was right to say the crunch came in 1973 (the magazines went on another decade). We entered the "Act Aeon," as he entitled the second poem in *The End of this Side*.

Since 1973, Stag Nation, trying to get further
finding a new measure at each point in
the terrestrial scale precluded in heaven....

We saw Artemis, the goddess of reflected light and carnivorous hunters, naked. It was an insight into the nature of distinction—the difference that is the same, uninformative—object-subject, reflect light, as phony as the movies, and we were making serious headway on the problem of an earthly measure—a difference that made a difference.

Olson, Duncan, Dorn, Jackson Pollock, Cy Twombly, Sun Ra, Cecil Taylor, Ornette Coleman, Donald Judd, Richard Serra, Robert Smithson and a few others signaled clearly the end of this side. What was on the other side of despair? What was "a new measure at each point in the terrestrial scale?" It required a constant discipline and a knowledge base that would never settle down and leave you be. It needed a community, a polis.

The war makers and finks of the bosses—Olson calls them—got scared. Something that was not more of the same was happening. Somehow they closed things done. Nixon not only stole the post office, as Ed Dorn said, he also somehow stole time. As Stag Nation, we have been pursued by our own dogs to the end of the peopled Earth, dogged by Indo-European Grammar, Christianity and its opposite (often embodied in it), the European ghost dance, and Empire. Clarke, further:

All reduced to a drop of meaning
protected from premature fellowship

almost exclusively by jazz playing
at the end of the twentieth century
refusing neo-capitalisms coagulation
in doubt of the coming of the Paraclete
in the twenty-first immunizing the mass
from mental disease of aesthetic materialism
keeping everyone in chasms of despair of
ever having their Whitman shirt parted,
for when language fails cultural entropy
falls back into its Paleolithic gradient of
evolution where again only Dogs who will
collaborate with the system can survive.

What happened? There was a conservative turn at all levels of sophistication. The red necks got redder, the hard hats got harder, the cops and war makers got meaner, the tweedy academics got tweedier, and the protestant fundamentalists, having nothing more literal than literal, became psychotic.

The place of attention itself has been long under attack. In the first letter to Gloucester, Maximus exhorts his fellow citizens:

o kill kill kill kill kill
those
who advertise you
out).

It may seem a bohemian and excessive rant. But he takes up the theme in the first “Song” of Maximus: “And words, words, words / all over everything / No eyes or ear left / to do their own doings (all / invaded, appropriated, outraged, all senses / including the mind, that work on what is....” It was an absolute assault on precisely the source of action at the bottom of the throat. *We knew this!* Marshall McLuhan (1951): “Ours is the first age in which many thousands of the best-trained individual minds have made it a full-time business to get inside the collective public mind. To get inside in order to manipulate, exploit, control is the object now.... To keep everybody in the helpless state engendered by prolonged mental rutting is the effect of many ads and much entertainment alike.” And by 1973, or before, also, *actively*, government.

The poets and the researchers fell back to defensive positions that conceded verse of essential use. They gave up on words (logography) and syllables (projective verse)—the writing that arose from rhythm and marked difference that made a difference—and started to write sentences again. It was safe and social. You couldn’t go wrong. The philosophers, just as they had fought their way down to words and the darkness behind words, let themselves get befuddled again, as they had been befuddled for twenty-five centuries, by the conundrum of the sentence and its representation of itself in the place of the world. They retreated to a defense of literacy, which was already, Olson and McLuhan both knew, a lost cause. They infused the dead form of the sentence, its

grammar, and grammatical philosophy with creative and theoretical juices of a sluggish and unwholesome order—the disease of aesthetic materialism, Clarke called it. HIV is only the most extreme form of the viral attack upon the immune system.

Grammar was back in control, in place of rhythm; it was better than the secret police. It was possible to deconstruct, decenter, foreground, alienate, even terrorize writing. Many kinds of eccentricity were possible, but the house of grammar was ones prison, and the meaning of ones life was its walls. One was not “Astride / the Cabot / fault, / one leg upon the Ocean one leg / upon the Westward drifting continent, / to build out of sound the wall / of a city....” A poetry that sought “out the preconditions of a liberated language within the existing social fact” was safer, already possessed of a grammar and a world, but it was lacking in interest. “Language,” “society”— these are deific terms of late modernist, secular theology. The revolution, having failed to take down the state, devoted itself to playing dirty tricks on Mrs. Roebaum, the grammar teacher.

Olson in “Human Universe”: “What makes most acts—of living and writing—unsatisfactory, is that the person and/or the writing satisfy themselves that they can only make a form (what they say or do, or a story, a poem, whatever) by selecting from the full content some face of it, or plane, some part..... It comes our a demonstration, a separating out, an act of classification, and so, a stopping, and all that I know is it is not there, it has turned false. For any of us, at any instant, are juxtaposed to any experience, even an overwhelmingly single one, on several more planes than the arbitrary and discursive which we inherit can declare.”

The sentence and its discourses (“runnings about”) are planar. Words and syllables for Olson are molecular or cellular, events on non-Euclidean surfaces, which have the advantage precisely that one can decide for oneself how close or distant things are from other things. These are monstrous forms. Olson himself was a monster (“Peloria”), and his ways are monstrous. The new forms were without preconditions. They too were monsters, non-genetic; they were realizations of their consequences.

I sometimes find myself thinking the silly thought that Eisenhower was the last President, because he could still *warn* about the Military-Industrial complex. The War Makers had made so much money from a half-century of hot and cold war that they owned everything. Kennedy bought in totally or was killed by them (or both, reality itself, in the last stages of literacy, having become smudged and indeterminate). By 1973, the world was given totally to world destruction and the dogs who would collaborate. The paradox that Christianity had at its center came to term: the history of the absolute coincidence of heavenly light and earthly matter finally cancelled itself out, and we have been in metaphysical free-fall. Perhaps no generation since Plato has witnessed such total destruction. I have thought we were hitting bottom before, and we still have a ways to go, but we begin now to be able to recover Olson’s clarities.

2)

When Olson turned down offers of Postmaster General and Assistant Secretary of the Treasury in the Truman administration (1945), he had established a career in Democratic Party politics that many would have envied. He was thirty-five years old. Had he stayed the course, he would have been, likely, a significant player in the Kennedy administration. But Olson knew that politics and the nation state had died with World War II. The Truman administration was its rot. He was sick of the cynicism and rank greed and the mean-spirited, little hacks, carving up the spoils of the commonwealth, even before the dead Roosevelt was decently cold. He set out, he said, to make a verse of “essential use.” *Verse of essential use*. Who would have thought it? Nothing was sillier or more useless than verse. It was a private, even shameful device—a kind of sex toy for the emotions. How could such a frail-and-mincing-biscuit-and-sherry sort a thing be of essential use to a guy who had been a kick-ass organizer of the ethnic vote for the DNC and could have been a player in the consolidation of the United States as the New Empire?

“Verse now, 1950, if it is to go ahead, if it is to be of *essential use*, must, I take it, catch up and put into itself certain laws and possibilities of the breath, of the breathing of the man who writes as well as of his listenings” (Olson’s emphasis). And further: “a projective poet will [go], down through the workings of his own throat to that place where breath comes from, where breath has its beginning, where drama has to come from, where, the coincidence is, all act springs.” If action—making cities, war, or poems—is to find a terrestrial measure, it must come from not breath, but from where breath has its beginnings. It is always possible to make poems, they are such silly things—often not as interesting as fancy tatting or jigsaw art, but to make poetry, two things are necessary: you must be in possession of the well-spring of action, that coincident place of knowing and oxygen processing, and you must know—this seems hard—*everything*. Olson: “There is no truth at all, of course, in the modern velleity... that you can’t know everything. It is literally true that you *have* to know everything. And for the simplest reason: that you do by being alive.”

A projectivist poem is an algorithm for the recovering a particular state of the system.

3)

As a power politician, educational administrator, and poet trained in the classical mode, Olson was uniquely positioned to see the end of literacy at the last moment it was possible to use literary devices to make the transition to another kind of nation. The pessimistic view is that we missed the chance. Let’s say not.

Olson had the literacy skills to see first that the whole of history from Hesiod (at least) to 1910 (“the revolution of the ear”) had to be bracketed and set aside for *grammatical* reasons. It was the epoch of literacy and the mystery of the Word,

impossibly figured in the flesh. Sentences and bodies never mixed, and they still don't. They belong to different orders of time. As soon as *distinction*, the basis of the sentence, comes into control, in place of rhythm (to flow), expression is dead, and the universe is caught only in mirrors—language, consciousness, the Cartesian TV.

The fragment of Heraclitus that Olson frequently quoted, “We are estranged from that which is most familiar,” is true precisely because it already belongs to the self-estranging grammar. It is true because the sentence itself—the form of the logical proposition itself—makes the subject the controlling thing, controlling even time, and sets the object at an earthly dead-end. This was Olson's persistent and never entirely resolved problem: “We have lived long in a generalizing time, at least since 450 B.C. And it has had its effects on the best of men, on the best of things. Logos, or discourse, for example, in that time, so worked its abstractions into our concept and use of language that language's other function, speech, seems so in need of restoration that several of us go back to hieroglyphs or to ideograms to right the balance. (The distinction here is between language as the act of the instant and language as the act of thought about the instant.)” (1950) And shortly before his death (from *Olson in Mansfield*):

If you condition yourself to approach the mythology / poetry in words
& letters
& alphabets
& the material
on which they are inscribed

like you would a tree
or a rock
or a god

then you will have directed yrself toward the future.

It is precisely the imposition of propositional form on the act of knowing (and the knowing of act) that first required metaphysics, and then required aesthetic materialism as a necessary corrective (for those who give up on metaphysics but not the structure of the sentence), so both the art and the criticism of the last half of the twentieth century in their official forms were twice removed from the any place whence action could be initiated. Olson was a radical empiricist and a radical pragmatist. Words, letters, alphabets, materials, tress, rocks, and gods are potentials (gods are pure, otherwise unidentified potentials) or entropic cells that refer not to their origins but exclusively to their consequences.

Olson's grammar is logographic: “Word writing. Instead of ‘idea-writing....’” And recursive (in the middle voice), not based upon subject-object distinction (See “Grammar—a ‘book’”); it has to do with the cells and pulses of language.

How Olson went through Whitehead's Platonism and extricated himself and his language from the bullshit of western philosophy—and in some sense, *had* to go through

Platonism, because it was (and, in the academy, still is) our despair, to get to the other side.... Olson makes no claim on us:

Feminine
Writing so that all the world
is redeemed, and history
and all that politics,
the "State" and Subjection
are for once, done away with,
as the reason
of writing.

Robert Duncan noted that, when he visited Olson in the hospital not long before he died, he was interested in the fact that liver cancer is a disease that afflicts mostly women, and he spoke of his cancer of the live-HER.

Or he makes no claim on us in any way, at any rate, that we ourselves are not fully responsible for again and beyond. The advertisers and dogs of wars came at us in waves, and keep coming. It is now clear, as it was not in 1973, that the immune system of Earth itself has turned against itself. The biosphere is in deep trouble. The American town is finished. Even those who live in Gloucester do not live in Gloucester. I do not live in Bill Kennedy's Albany, even though I live a couple of blocks from Bill's Albany house (the house where Legs Diamond was shot). To be as big as Maximus sought to be we may now have to be entire communities. We have used up history as we have used up the air and the oil.

4)

Olson's critics (including the author of *Charles Olson's Maximus*) have been often mistaken not so much in their details as in their attempts to assimilate Olson's work to a generalized modernism or even romanticism. Olson's work, like Jackson Pollock's, was strange when it appeared, and it is still strange and still largely unaccounted for. In the "Epilogue" to *Charles Olson's Maximus*, I wrote: [Olson's] work is addressed to the central cultural and intellectual problem of the past century. What does one *do* with the massive accumulation of information when the structure that seemed the source of its ultimate meaning and use suddenly collapses? It is an all or nothing situation: the system depends upon its absolute coherence." So far, so good. I went on to say, however: "In his radical vision Olson undertakes to demonstrate how fact relates immediately to fact and how factual complexes related immediately to life, without resort to abstract form." This, of course, is bullshit.

Olson himself was not free of Pound's and Williams' badmouthing of abstraction. "Go in fear of abstraction" and "No ideas but in things" hover about, particularly in the early essays. And, although I knew Olson took what he wanted and only what he wanted from whatever he read, I made the mistake, endemic in criticism, of reading more the poet's most lavishly acknowledged philosophic source in place of the work in question.

Olson himself was sometimes suckered by his enthusiasms: "...Whitehead, who cleared out the gunk / by getting the universe in (as against man alone....)" This note relates, however, specifically to an advance on Descartes. My *Maximus* was more Whiteheadian and, thus, more Platonistic, more cosmological, and more coherent than Olson's; its narrative was more novelistic. It was too tame. About 1970, Richard Grossinger published an essay, which I am not now able to put my hands on, in which he argued that Olson was properly a science fiction writer, and that popular science fiction failed for the lack of what could be learned from Olson's essays on poetics. It seems to me now perhaps the best critical insight we have had. The way beyond Olson would be a William Gibson writing projective verse.

The form that is so abstract that it belongs properly to mathematics and logic, poetry and painting, government and self, *and everything else* was the central cultural mystery for twenty-five centuries. Abstraction was that impossible thing that finally made contradictory things, such as subject and object, word and flesh, one—the grand generalization. Between 1930 and 1970, the period of Olson's adulthood, abstract form was understood and became available for ordinary use. At the time, no one could know what was going on in the larger sense. Cybernetics, information theory, projective verse, and free jazz were names of this new thing from this or that organized perspective. There is still no theory or paradigm in the larger sense, and it appears there will never be. It was not a move from one paradigm to another, but from a time when knowledge was organized in a generalized paradigm to a time when it is not. In order for knowledge to get really sharp, the forms had to be particular. The one-sized universe that fits all would not work. The MFA programs devoted themselves to inessential verse, mistaking the particularity of form for the particularity of image (Silliman's school of quietude) or the particularity of grammar or "ink" (aesthetic materialism, or as grammar and matter are inherently and equally general, perhaps aesthetic nihilism would be a more descriptive term).

There are forms within forms that, so long as they are isolated from one another, may or may not behave according to the same formal rules. Formal rules may change from place to place. Some forms are tightly organized like a machine, some loosely like a community. A machine-like form and a community-like form may interact to create another kind of form. Whatever works as a form—anything there is an internal rule for—counts as a form. There are formal habits, perhaps even formal addictions, that may appear to be prior to content, but form itself has no authority. We are not compelled by forms; we *use* them. They are there for our use as our natural resources once were. The constraints are physical. I cannot sit and stand at the same time for physical, not for logical, reasons. One might create a form that would include the difference between sitting and standing as a formal element in such a way the restraint might extend throughout the local system. When there are no physical restraints, the only reasons for following the rule of non-contradiction are practical.

Jean Piaget's remarkable little book, *Structuralism*, published in 1968, was too late. The poststructuralist "event" had taken up academic "history" and recreated a relatively secure "philosopher's garden." When Derrida spoke of structure, he was

speaking of a certain kind of illusion, language as it might appear in the mind of god or in the golden fields of metaphysics. He designated the event of its disappearance as an 'event' because it was nothing more than the disappearance of an illusion. God did not abscond; the illusion of god could not be sustained. The thing that 'disappeared' did not exist. It was a subtle kind of event. Derrida imagined, however, that the structure—the logic of distinction, the sentence, the logic of the mark (grammatology) remained, like a dirigible suddenly cut loose from the rope that anchored it to the Earth—a metaphor that Henry James uses in his distinction between the novel and the romance, and indeed the whole space of poststructuralism is precisely the romance of the philosopher's garden (the aesthetic materialism of the nineteenth century reappeared, with profound force, about 1973).

Piaget noted, "When a property is arrived at by abstraction in the ordinary sense of the word, 'drawn out' from things which have the property, it does, of course, tell us something about these things, but the more general the property, the thinner and less useful it usually is. Now the group concept or property is obtained, not by this sort of abstraction, but by a mode of thought characteristic of modern mathematics and logic—'reflective abstraction'—which does not derive properties from things but from our ways of *acting on things*, the operations we perform on them; perhaps, rather, from the various fundamental ways of *coordinating* such acts or operations—'uniting,' 'ordering,' 'placing in one-one correspondence,' and so on."

All of this, which was almost entirely missed after 1973, is implicit in the dictum, "Form is never more than an extension of content," as it is in Ornette Coleman's harmolodics: "When you put your sound or idea into an arena mixed with other things—if what you are saying has a valid place—it's going to find its position in that total thing, and it's going to make that thing much better. You don't have to worry about being a number one, number two, or number three. Numbers don't have anything to do with placement. Numbers only have something to do with repetition." Measure is not counting. The forms that participates in the thingness of things and their interactions are measured by extension, duration, phrasing, for both the poet and the saxophone player.

Classical forms were objects of meditation that could only be known by meditation. They were representations, disciplines of consciousness. They were symmetrical, reversible. They could be negated, but the picture remained the same, like photographic negatives. Aesthetic materialism was aesthetic idealism was aesthetic materialism ("Numbers only have something to do with repetition," sentences counting out the place like the twelve bars of a blues tune). Projective forms and harmolodic forms are mechanisms of participation in physicality itself. A form is what can be made a form, that thing denoted by what you know; a thing that belongs not to the privacy of the soul but that is already abroad as an earthly potential.

Olson knew that "The difficulty of discovery...is, that definition is as much a part of the act as is sensation itself, in this sense, that life *is* preoccupation with itself, that conjecture about it is as much of it as its coming at us, its going on. In other words, we are ourselves both the instrument of discovery and the instrument of definition." Or "one

loves only form, / and form only comes / into existence when / the thing is born / born of yourself / born of hay and cotton struts...’ Born of yourself, yet born of things “you carry in, my bird.” The inside of the information circuit is the outside. This paradox and the incoherence of the consequent un-universe were the costs of ridding Earth of metaphysics and its life-denying smell.

There seem to be three possibilities: one can (1) give in to the chaos; (2) make arbitrary forms; or (3) make forms with the value of increasing the possibility of making more forms the next time. The first is the way of the indifferent consumer-producer (anything in; solid waste, including text, out); the second is the way of repetition obsession (Zukofsky’s “A”); the third is the way of any successfully evolving creature or community. Of course, this third way is multiply and wildly abstract, with recursive process piled upon recursive process.

I should have written in my “Epilogue”: Olson undertakes to demonstrate how forms on Earth relate immediately to adjacent forms and how formal complexes relate immediately to life, without resort to *generalized* form. And I should have glossed “immediately” with this brief passage from “Bibliography on America for Ed Dorn”: “how-how-how, & / what happens takes a / certain amount of time / to happen, a measurable / quantum, say, $1/10^{\text{th}}$ of / a second. So past, present, / and future are c. $1/10^{\text{th}}$ of a second,” the interval in which it is possible to differentiate two signals, and, thus, a past and a future. It is neither metaphysical immediacy, nor the grammatical immediacy of the object present to the subject, but the interval in which history, as finding out for oneself—past, present, and future—has a place to be. History and its potential as action belong solely to this interval where rhythm begins.

When asked what he taught at Black Mountain, Olson would sometimes say, “Posture.” He taught—as a technique of poetry—how to stand, with poise, on an incoherent site, without controlling theme, image, or device of any kind; in fact how to stand in any $1/10^{\text{th}}$ of a second that was already past, present, future, and wherever you are. If you sink down into it, it is just white noise. You have to be on the ball. Everything is there, as potential.

Olson saw globalism coming and got out of government work just in time, hid from his hounds at Black Mountain and 28 Fort Square, to make a mappemunde—globalism, but not the *generality* of the global (what we got)—*a mappemunde so abstract that it did not belong to the system of the universe*. This was new. *Tomorrow is the Question! The Shape of Jazz to Come, Change of the Century* (Ornette Coleman’s 1959 albums).

Maximus: “I am making a mappemunde. It is to include my being. / It is called here, at this point and point of time / Peloria.” Butterick glosses “Peloria” with a passage from Jane Ellen Harrison’s *Themis*: “Thunder and lightning, wind and rain, storm and tempest might fitly be classes as as *peloria*, portents.... The word *peloria* covers, I think, both Earth-powers and sky-powers, both Giants and Titans....” Monstrous, that is, non-genetic. Harrison goes on to say that Peloria also means “monster,” as portents must.

Melville gets the two meanings together in a brief sentence: “Such a portentous and mysterious monster roused all my curiosity.” But you can’t satisfy that curiosity by making poems; you have to go down with the Pequod, and by 1973, the ship of the American State had been struck. It’s been more than thirty years sinking, and Queequeg’s coffin still has not bobbed up from the spume. It may be *now*, Olson’s coffin, inscribed with the *Maximus*.

Maximus and *Free Jazz* do not obey the cosmological imperative that prevailed from Pythagoras to Alfred North Whitehead: there can be no entity so abstract that it escapes the system of the universe, and the corollary, all is repetition and representation. Olson’s mappemunde is the sum of its local and specific potentialities (“a new measure at each point in the terrestrial scale”) is such an abstraction; it exceeds the universe. Universes appear with every first distinction and as readily disappear, popping like bubbles in a puddle.

If you go to Dogtown, you will find Hell’s Mouth where Gravelly Hill runs out *only* if, in that moment, you are able to construct an adjacent map that includes *your* being; only if

...one suddenly is walking

in Tartarian-Erojan, Geaan-Ouranian

time and life love space

time & exact

analogy time & intellect time & mind time & time

spirit

the initiation

of another kind of nation. [Thus, 1969]

Tartarian-Erojan, Geaan-Ouranian time is not the time of primal chaos, but just after it—that first moment of creative selection, which is called in evolutionary biology “pre-adaptation,” when the creature selects, say, for the components of an eye without knowledge of sight or for the components of a wing without knowledge of flight. We do not have a scientific explanation of these creative progresses. The proposition is that the intelligent designers are the organisms themselves.

The organic complexities arise from sources that are neither themselves complex nor predictable in their outcome: breath, not yet rhythm, but the medium of rhythm, from whence comes image, knowing, and the construct or goal (see “ABCs (2)” and “Added to / making a Republic”). Already, physically, time is implicated in proportion (analogy), perception or choice (intellect), and thoughtful processing (mind), and still referential to itself—time proportioned, selected, and processed without being partitioned. Thus, spirit appears in time and space as fully physical, as information, as entropy, as breath, to

initiate a nation without metaphysics, not by reduction to matter and energy but by the realization of knowing itself as a constituent of physical Earth. *This was new.*

5)

It did seem, in 1969, even with the ugliness of Viet Nam, the evil of Nixon, and the shames of domestic racism and poverty as daily sources of gloom, that a new nation was being initiated. There were civic dissolution and much noise, but the trajectory was creative. I was wrong in *Charles Olson Maximus*, however: there was not a new democracy; the nation is still to be initiated.

Maximus makes little progress. He is insistent on this point. The Dogtown poems, for example, are visionary moments, in a village of cellar holes, and the texts are algorithms for recovering the fleeting state of the system to which they belonged. They are fragile. The mapping does not hold past the time of its mapping and its use. It all easily becomes merely literary; even the most cautious becomes a poetic day tripper and tour guide. One does not get over two millennia of self-estrangement in a year or a century. Olson did not advance very far, because it takes a community, a few to share, and after he left Black Mountain, the community was often thin. Many of the poems of the third volume of *Maximus* are poems of intense loneliness: “Bottled up for days, mostly / in a great sweat of being, seeking / to bind in speed—petere—desire, / to construct knowing back to image...” (III, 126); “after the snow not a jot of food left / in this silly benighted house all night long sleep / all day, when activity, & food, And persons] / 5:30 AM hungry for everything” (III, 206).

There is much more to say. A couple of quick hits to end with:

War

It was, above all, disgust with Truman’s use of the A bomb that got Olson out of government.

On the order of 200 million people were killed in the twentieth century directly as a result of war, ethnic cleansing, and the immediate intent of governmental policy. The history that was institutionalized by Christianity realized its form. History was ended by total war, which was the only resolution of the dialectic dissonance.

These were wars of the mind—intellectual wars. People were killed most specifically not to control territory and to expand the empire. It was pure killing—killing as the ritual of individualism and authoritarianism.

Olson’s interest in Mao in “The Kingfishers” and *The Mayan Letters* (this, of course, the time of the revolution and shortly thereafter) was ideological only in that communalism—whatever you want to call it, communism, collectivism—was the alternative to the exhausted Mediterranean-Atlantic form that sank, in Olson’s view, with the Pequod: “The Pacific is the end of the UNKNOWN which Homer’s and Dante’s

Ulysses opened men's eyes to. END of individual responsible only to himself. Ahab is full stop.”

The Christian order arose from the negotiation of authority and self-responsibility. The conflict was resolved by tension as a value. Its failure was war. The new order, if Earthly life forms make it across the dangerous, present threshold, arises in the negotiation of communalism and anarchism. The conflict is resolved by complexity as a value. Its failure is mere consumption, arbitrary form, and the failure of chaos to produce complexity. (The chaos of life and the chaos of death are distinguished only by their rhythms.)

Olson's address to this transition—perhaps the best we have—is not good enough. Obviously. The wars continue. The conflict of culture is a deeper and sunnier reason for killing than ideology.

Technique

We consume information resources as we consume everything else. We are voracious. Our numbers are staggering. There must be a rule: *In a system of evolving complexity the materials of history are not adequate to construct the always more complex, recursive forms of the future.* The construct demands ever more and new material.

The first research into cultural anthropology (Frazer, Harrison, Frobenius, et. al.) was used up by the modernist generation, and given something of a new life by Jung and archetypalism. Jung opened another reservoir of imagery with his research in alchemy and the traditional sciences. This material has been commercialized by New Agers and mostly turned into theme parks. It is hard to clear the mythological material from its millennia of association with oppression. The Christian, Jewish, and Islamic neo-Platonic traditions and their syncretic mystery cults are freighted with the generality of successive empires.

One can say that The Curriculum for the Study of Soul, which arose from an Olson lecture at Buffalo in 1965, was intended to open new topoi to mine for materials for the increasingly complex Olsonian construct. Olson was explicit about this: “My dear Jack, Fortunately, as usual, I am not free, but I did want to offer you my impression that the unusual, and only maybe Jung's grabbing of Alchemy a comparable opportunity, is Pleistocene” (*Pleistocene Man*).

A research team and researchers with the keen nose for hot material are necessary, but the narrative of the future cannot be constructed by recombining the cellular units of the past. This requires pure creativity and a sense of humor. Without a joke this is all too fucking grim.

Counting Beyond Three

Let me try to say what Olson did. The Pythagoreans said that three was the first real number, because it had a beginning, an end, and middle. The triune form was the limit of the classical tradition: the subject, object, and the medium (the holy spirit, language, whatever); the three-in-one forms of Platonic cosmology, the Stoic interpretation of logic, Augustinian theology, Hegelian-Marxian dialectic, Peircean semiotics, and even early cybernetics. The same shuffle is figured forth only somewhat more obscurely in the triadic tension of the Freudian family and even in the multiplicities in current vitalist and biopolitical philosophies of language, which, though they subvert their own settlement into unity, circle the absence of the unity as the geese in the myth circled the sunken Atlantis. The history of classical thought was pervaded with these dimensionless, triune structures—a rigorous first and second, with a third or medium through which the second returned to the first. Philosophy knew one, two, and many. Olson is sometimes trinitarian: topos / typos / tropos, in “Letter to Elaine Feinstein,” for example. Three is the universal cookie cutter, the minimal unit of distinction and event. Thus, we mirror the earth, but do not inform it; thus, we are forever the victim. Humanism, even at its proudest (man is the measure of all things, etc.), was the cult of the victims, a trope without a place on earth. But Olson received instructions in a dream from Pound on how to construct an Earth of value: and this formula is the interior structure of Olson’s work:

of rhythm is image
of image is knowing
and of knowing there is
a construct.

Rhythm is one; image is two; knowing is three, which is the limit of *inessential* verse—theory and verse that instantiates theory. Classically the construct was a return to the one: of knowing there is a rhythm, of rhythm there is a blueprint, of a blueprint there is a building (or a poem, a person, or whatever desperate concrete thing). Olson gets to four, a construction of construction—not the product of evolution but the producer of evolution. There may be a five: of rhythm is of image / of image is knowing / and of knowing there is / a construct / *from which there is emergence*. And nothing less will address the bleakness of our possibilities.

Let’s face it: all of the leads one finds in history lead to—sooner, rather than later—disaster. Nothing in the human past gives a sign that we can manage the complexity that our survival to this point (2005) has required. I try to find leads in the late pieces, like “The Animate versus the Mechanical, and Thought” and its addendum (February and April, 1969), but the turn back to Corbin will not do. The man gave us an essential verse, increased our possible size by a quarter, and taught us that there is a measure that is not repetition. Not bad for a poet whose career was cut off after twenty years, but we have much work to do.