CHARLES OLSON AND THE "INFERIOR PREDECESSORS": "PROJECTIVE VERSE" REVISITED

BY MARJORIE G. PERLOFF

In 1950, when William Carlos Williams first read Charles Olson's essay "Projective Verse," he wrote enthusiastically to Robert Creeley: "I share your excitement, it is as if the whole area lifted. It's the sort of thing we are after and must have. . . . Everything leans on action, on the verb: one thing leads to another which is thereby activated." Williams' praise was not mere gesture: he included the bulk of "Projective Verse" in his Autobiography (1951), prefacing Olson's essay with the following remark: "An advance of estimable proportion is made by looking at the poem as a field rather than an assembly of more or less ankylosed lines." 2

Today, some twenty years after its original publication and Williams' warm endorsement, "Projective Verse" seems to be safely enshrined as a cornerstone of avant-garde poetics, perhaps the key theoretical statement in defense of the "new poetry." Olson himself suggested in the essay that he was laying the groundwork for a "new poetics" and "new concepts from which some sort of drama, say, or of epic, perhaps, may emerge." 3 It did not take long for the gospel to spread. In the pages of Origin, Contact, and Black Mountain Review, highly regarded younger poets like Robert Creeley and Edward Dorn consistently

3 "Projective Verse" first appeared in Poetry New York in 1950. Widely reprinted, it is best read in Charles Olson, Human Universe and Other Essays, ed. Donald Allen (New York: Grove Press, 1967), pp. 51-52. This collection contains Olson's other important critical essays, including the "Letter to Elaine Feinstein," written as a postscript to "Projective Verse." The quotation referred to in this note is found on p. 51, but since the essay is readily available elsewhere and I quote it at such length, I give no further page references in the balance of this paper.

Marjorie G. Perloff

285
cited and paraphrased the “new poetics.” In “A Note on Poetry” (1953), for example, Creeley declared that Olson’s “notion of the poem as a field at once clears us from the usual sense of progression, i.e., that we have a line, building forward perhaps to ‘climax,’ and then relaxing to an ‘end.’”⁴ In the Preface to his popular anthology, The New American Poetry (1960)—an anthology which includes a generous sampling of both the poetry and the poetics of the Black Mountain school—Donald M. Allen suggested that Olson’s essay introduced “the dominant new double concept: ‘composition by field’ and the poet’s ‘stance toward reality.’”⁵ “Projective Verse,” said Donald Davie in his important study of Ezra Pound (1964), “is the most ambitious and intelligent attempt by a poet of today to take his bearings and plot his future course by his sense of what Pound’s achievement amounts to—Pound’s and also Williams.”⁶ Recently Chad Walsh has referred to Olson as “the author of the most influential statement on ‘the new poetry,’”⁷ and Ann Charters, who edited Olson’s The Special View of History, refers to the “distinctly original views” expounded in “Projective Verse.”⁸

But is Olson’s poetic theory in fact “distinctly original”? Has his concept of Projective Verse really laid the groundwork for a poetry based on a “new double concept: ‘composition by field’ and the poet’s ‘stance toward reality’”? Or did Williams possibly champion Olson’s manifesto because it so neatly echoed his own theory of poetry? These are questions which we must attempt to answer because Olson—and indeed all the Black Mountain poets—are now in the peculiar position of being adored by an active band of disciples and enthusiasts, while the more traditional academic critics prefer to ignore the very existence of these Wild Men.⁹ We need, then, to reconsider, as objectively as possible, the

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nature of the argument presented in “Projective Verse,” the sources of Olson’s aesthetic, and the extent to which Olson’s own poetry meets the requirements laid down in his manifesto.

Olson’s essay begins with this diagram:

\[
\text{projectile} \quad \text{percussive} \quad \text{prospective} \\
\text{vs.} \\
\text{The NON-Projective}
\]

To Creeley, this terminology and mode of presentation was enormously exciting, a way of breaking out of the “closed system,” of “poems patterned upon exterior and traditionally accepted models.” ¹⁰ In his later years, Olson liked to claim that he adapted the term projective verse from H. M. S. Coxeter’s Projective Geometry,¹¹ but in fact Olson had to go no further than his own backyard to find this vocabulary: it occurs in Pound’s Antheil and the Treatise on Harmony.¹² In this essay, Pound praises the composer-theorist Antheil for his understanding that “music exists in time-space; and is therefore very different from any kind of plastic art which exists all at once” (p. 41). The rhythm unit is viewed by Antheil as a “mechanism,” a “construction in time-space” with “quasi-sculptural solidity” (p. 49). The “monolinear,” “lateral,” and “horizontal” action of such “musical mechanisms” is, in Pound’s words, “like a projectile carrying a wire and cutting, defining the three dimensions of space” (pp. 49-50). Antheil himself praises Debussy for his “new propulsion of time-spaces” and defines great composers as those who “create a new locomotion for their musicality” (p. 59). The projective element in music—its locomotive quality—is defined as the fourth dimension.

The notion of the poem as projectile, a mechanism or force projected through time-space, is thus not as revolutionary as Olson’s admirers have professed it to be. The synonymic use of “projectile” and “percussive,” for that matter, makes little sense until one has read Pound’s Antheil, in which he devotes a whole

¹⁰ “Introduction,” Selected Writings of Charles Olson, p. 6.

Marjorie G. Perloff
section to the role of percussion in the “time-spacing” created by “musical mechanisms” (pp. 28-29). Again, when in the parenthetical remarks that follow his initial diagram, Olson claims Keats as a forerunner of projective verse, one of the first poets to understand that the “closed verse” of Milton and Wordsworth is nothing but the “Egotistical Sublime,” he is, of course, simply paraphrasing Pound, who insisted on this distinction as early as 1914, castigating the “bombast” of the “donkey-eared” Milton and the “slobber” and “drivelling imbecility” of “dippy William,” while praising Keats for understanding that poetry is “an art of verbal music” that “need not be the packmule of philosophy.”

So much for preliminaries. In the first two pages of his essay, Olson defines “OPEN verse” and discusses “COMPOSITION BY FIELD” under three headings: its “kinetics,” its “principle,” and its “process.” Olson’s method in this, the most important part of the essay, is best understood by comparing his own statements to their probable sources. Note that although, in the citations that follow, Olson singles out Robert Creeley and Edward Dahlberg as the fellow writers who most influenced his theory, the text of “Projective Verse” itself suggests that their concepts as well as Olson’s were in turn derived from the critical writings of Pound and Williams.

OLSON

“Verse now, 1950, if it is to go ahead . . . 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.”

SOURCE

“Pound’s line in his Cantos is something like what we shall achieve. Something which when later (perhaps) packed and realized in living, breathing stuff will . . . be the thing.”

—Williams, Letter to Kay Boyle (1932), Selected Letters, p. 135.


14 The following abbreviations are used in the citations that follow, after the first longer reference:

“First some simplicities that a man learns, if he works in OPEN, or what can also be called COMPOSITION BY FIELD, as opposed to inherited line, stanza, over-all form, what is the ‘old’ base of the non-projective.”

“(1) the kinetics of the thing. A poem is energy transferred from where the poet got it . . . 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.”

“(2) is the principle, the law which presides conspicuously over such composition, and, when obeyed, is the reason why a projective poem can come into being. It is this: FORM IS NEVER MORE THAN AN EXTENSION OF CONTENT. (Or so it got phrased by one, R. Creeley, and it makes absolute sense to me, with this possible corollary, that right form, in any given poem, is the only and exclusively possible extension of content under hand.)”

“I’m going to say one thing to you—for a week! . . . It concerns the poem as a field of action. . . . I propose sweeping changes from top to bottom of the poetic structure. . . . I say we are through with the iambic pentameter as presently conceived . . . through with the measured quatrain, the staid concatenations of sounds in the usual stanza, the sonnet.”

—Williams, “The Poem as a Field of Action” (1948), Selected Essays, pp. 280-81.

“I defined the vortex as the point of maximum energy. . . .”

—Pound, GB, p. 92.

“(1916), p. 81.

“The image is not an idea. It is a radiant node or cluster; it is what I can, and must perforce call a VORTEX, from which, and into which, ideas are constantly rushing.”

—Pound, GB, p. 92.

“The ‘new form’ . . . is not a mimicry of external life. It is energy cut into stone. . . .”

—Pound, GB, p. 110.

“Style is the absolute subjugation of the details of a given work to the dominant will; to the central urge, or impulse. . . .”

—Pound, GB, p. 78.

“Prose may carry a load of ill-defined matter like a ship. But poetry is the machine which drives it, pruned to a perfect economy. . . . In a poem this movement is distinguished in each case by the character of the speech from which it arises.

“Therefore, each speech having its own character, the poetry it engenders will be peculiar to that
OLSON

“Now (3) 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. . . . get on with it, keep moving, keep in, speed. . . . USE USE USE the process at all points, in any given poem always, always one perception must must must MOVE, INSTANTER, ON ANOTHER!”

SOURCE

“At this point we must make a clean cut between two kinds of ‘ideas.’ Ideas which exist and/or are discussed in a species of vacuum, which are as it were toys of the intellect, and ideas which are intended to ‘go into action’. . . .”

—Pound, Guide to Kulchur (1938), p. 34.

“The ideogrammic method consists of presenting one facet and then another until at some point one gets off the dead and desensitized surface of the reader’s mind, onto a part that will register.”

—Pound, Kulchur, p. 51.

“The first essential is the narrative movement, forward, not blocking the road as Chapman does. Everything that stops the reader must go, be cut out. And then everything that holds the mind, long after the reading . . . must be clamped back on the moving prose. It is enough to break six men’s backs. . . .”


Having thus defined projective verse or “COMPOSITION BY FIELD,” Olson concludes, “So there we are, fast, there’s the dogma. And its excuse, its usableness, in practice. Which gets us, it ought to get us, inside the machinery, now, 1950, of how projective verse is made.” But the “dogma” is, as we have seen, hardly news: Olson’s “now, 1950” doctrine is an amalgam of theoretical statements made by Pound and Williams from 1914 on. Such indebtedness is not, in itself, a fault; William himself, after all, derived many of his critical concepts from Pound and

Charles Olson and the “Inferior Predecessors”
then adapted them to his own purposes. The difference is that Olson consistently insinuates, as he does in the paragraph cited above, that his theory of poetry is revolutionary. Yet his main deviation from the Pound-Williams aesthetic is that he muddles their concepts.

Take, for example, the tripartite division into the kinetics, the principle, and the process of projective verse. The division sounds impressive but what is its real point? If poetry is a "high energy-construct" (Rule 1), clearly its form will be determined by the content or energy to be conveyed from poet to reader (Rule 2). Why the first is kinetics and the second principle is never made clear. The third division—the "process of the thing"—seems to be no more than a corollary of (1), for if the poem is an "energy-discharge," it follows that one perception must immediately and directly lead to a further one (Rule 3). This is kinetics all over again. Or process if you want to call it that. Olson's three-step definition is, in short, merely pretentious, a device used to convince the reader that the argument in question is proceeding logically or that, at the very least, it is highly complex.

In the next section of his essay, Olson turns to a consideration of prosody. Again we may compare his statements to their probable sources.

OLSON

"Let's start from the smallest particle of all, the syllable. It is the king and pin of versification, what rules and holds together the lines, and larger forms, of a poem."

SOURCE

"In making a line of verse (and thence building the lines into passages) you have certain primal elements:

"That is to say, you have the various 'articulate sounds' of the language, of its alphabet, that is, and the various groups of letters in syllables... Those are the medium wherewith the poet cuts his design in TIME."


"With cummings [E. E. Cummings] every syllable has a conscience and a specific impact. . . ."

“But the syllable is only the first child of the incest of verse. The other child is the LINE. And together, these two, the syllable and the line, they make a poem. . . . And the line comes (I swear it) from the breath, from the breathing of the man who writes, at the moment that he writes. . . . contemporary workers go lazy RIGHT HERE WHERE THE LINE IS BORN.”

Here Olson is again following Pound and Williams in his insistence that the basic unit of prosody can no longer be considered the foot, that, as Pound said in Canto LXXXI, “To break the pentameter, that was the first heave.” In the “new poetry,” the basic unit becomes the line or breath group of artfully arranged syllables. Olson’s emphasis on the centrality of syllable and line thus has ample precedent. But his conclusion is his own:

Let me put it baldly. The two halves are:
the HEAD, by way of the EAR, to the SYLLABLE
the HEART, by way of the BREATH, to the LINE. . . .

This formulation, like the distinction between kinetics, principle, and process discussed above, has more manner than matter. Since a syllable is by definition, according to the latest Random House Dictionary, “a segment of speech typically produced with a single pulse of air pressure from the lungs,” it can just as easily be associated with the BREATH as with the EAR, with the HEART as with the HEAD. The formula could, in other words,
be reversed, and in any case it hardly seems to matter which of
the two—syllable or line—is HEAD or HEART.

In the final section of Part I, Olson considers the relationship
of objects to one another in the new “field” of the poem and
evaluates the role of the typewriter in projective verse. Again the
tone of oracular pronouncement is deceptive.

**OLSON**

“The objects which occur at
every given moment of composi-
tion . . . 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 a
field in such a way that a series
of tensions . . . 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.”

**SOURCE**

“When a man makes a poem,
makes it, mind you, he takes
words as he finds them interre-
lated about him and composes
them—without distortion which
would mar their exact signifi-
cances—into an intense expression
of his perceptions and ardors that
they may constitute a revelation
in the speech that he uses. It
isn’t what he says that counts as
a work of art, it’s what he makes,
with such intensity of perception
that it lives with an intrinsic
movement of its own to verify its
authenticity.”

—Williams, “Introduction to
*The Wedge*” (1944), SE,
p. 257.

In comparing the next two parallel passages, one should note
that, despite Olson’s claim that “from the machine has come a
gain not yet sufficiently observed or used,” typographical experi-
ments existed long before the Projective Verse movement got
under way:

**OLSON**

“It is the advantage of the
 typewriter that, due to its rigid-
ity and its space precisions, it can,
for a poet, indicate exactly the
breath, the pauses, the suspen-
sions even of syllables, the juxta-
positions even of parts of phrases,
which he intends. For the first
time the poet has the stave and
the bar a musician had. For the
first time he can, without the
convention of rime and meter, re-

**SOURCE**

“All typographical disposition,
placing of words on the page, is
intended to facilitate the reader’s
intonation, whether he be read-
ing silently to self or aloud to
friends. Given time and tech-
nique I might even put down the
musical notation of passages of
‘breaks into song.’”

—Pound, Letter to Hubert
Creekmore (1939), SLP, p.
322.

*Marjorie G. Perloff* 293

156
cord the listening he has done to his own speech and by that one act indicate how he would want any reader, silently or otherwise, to voice his work.”

In Part II of “Projective Verse,” Olson turns from technical problems to the larger question of the “new stance towards the reality of a poem itself” that characterizes projective verse. And here he declares his independence, parting company with his Masters:

Pound and Williams were variously involved in a movement which got called “objectivism.” But that word was then used in some sort of necessary quarrel, I take it, with “subjectivism.” It is now too late to be bothered with the latter. . . . What seems to me a more valid formulation for present use is “objectism,” a word to be taken to stand for the kind of relation of man to experience which a poet might state as the necessity of a line or a work to be as wood is, to be as clean as wood is as it issues from the hand of nature. . . . Objectism is the 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 . . . and those other creatures of nature which we may, with no derogation, call objects. For man is himself an object. . . .

The necessity of “getting rid of the lyrical interference of the individual as ego” and of avoiding the traditional mimetic role of poetry is one of Olson’s obsessive themes. In “On Poets and Poetry” (1953), for example, he defines the image “as a ‘thing,’ never so far as we know, such a non-animal as symbol,”15 and in the “Letter to Elaine Feinstein” (1959), which serves as a postscript to “Projective Verse,” he declares that in the past few centuries, “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.”16

If this allegedly new concept of the image as thing, as object relating not to any external reality but only to other objects within the field of the poem, has a familiar ring, it is because Olson’s “objectism” is merely Pound’s “objectivism” in not very new dress. In his famous “Retrospect” of 1913, Pound wrote, “I believe that the proper and perfect symbol is the natural object, that if a man use ‘symbols’ he must so use them

15 Human Universe, p. 65.
16 Human Universe, p. 96.
that their symbolic function does not obtrude; so that a sense, and the poetic quality of the passage, is not lost to those who do not understand the symbol as such, to whom, for instance, a hawk is a hawk.” 17 Again, in the essay on “Vorticism” (1914), reprinted in Gaudier-Brzeska, Pound insisted that “Imagisme is not symbolism. The symbolists dealt in ‘association,’ that is, in a sort of allusion, almost of allegory. They degraded the symbol to the status of a word. They made it a form of metonomy” (GB, p. 84). The function of poetry is not mimesis: “The organization of forms is a much more energetic and creative action than the copying or imitating of light on a haystack” (GB, p. 92).

By the time that he translated Fenollosa’s The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry in 1919, Pound had made “objectivism”—or “objectism” as Olson irrelevantly calls it—a positive doctrine. Poetry is viewed as a purely presentational art. In the normal English sentence, “The subject is that about which I am going to talk; the predicate is that which I am going to say about it.” Chinese, according to Fenollosa, avoids such “pure subjectivity” by insisting on the transitive verb: “The true formula for thought is: The cherry tree is all that it does. Its correlated verbs compose it.” Indeed, “the moment we use the copula, the moment we express subjective inclusions, poetry evaporates. The more concretely and vividly we express the interactions of things, the better the poetry.” 18

Thus although Olson uses the analogy of “clean wood” rather than of granite or marble—Pound’s favorite building materials—to define poetry, the doctrine is really the same. Williams summed it up in his famous phrase, “No ideas but in things,” and in his assertion that “the coining of similes is a pastime of a very low order. . . . Much more keen is that power which discovers in things those inimitable particles of dissimilarity to all other things which are the peculiar perfections of the thing in question.” 19

“Projective Verse,” one concludes, is hardly the breakthrough in literary theory it is reputed to be. It is essentially a scissors-and-paste job, a clever but confused collage made up of bits and pieces of Pound, Fenollosa, Gaudier-Brzeska, Williams, and

17 Pound, Literary Essays, p. 9.
19 “Prologue to Kora in Hell” (1920), SE, p. 16.

Marjorie G. Perloff 295
Creeley. One could argue, of course, that Olson repeatedly acknowledges his debt to "the work of Pound & Williams," and that he admittedly uses their poetics as a springboard from which to chart the directions the "new poetry" should take. But this is not quite what happens. We have already seen that Olson claims his "objectism" to be a "more valid formulation for present use" than the "objectivism" of his Masters. In the years following the publication of "Projective Verse"—years in which Olson began to publish his own poetry—he became increasingly testy about his relationship to Pound and Williams. Having schooled himself in their critical vocabulary, he now had to prove, both to himself and to others, that he was his own man.

The first inkling of Olson's resentment about his discipleship comes in the *Mayan Letters* written from the Yucatan to Robert Creeley in 1951. Pound is now accused of driving through "all time material . . . by the beak of his ego," and hence unable to invent "an emotional system which is capable of extensions and comprehensions." Williams, on the other hand, does have such a system, but in "making his substance historical of one city (the Joyce deal), Bill completely licks himself, lets time roll him under as Ez does not and thus, so far as what is the more important, methodology, contributes nothing . . ." (pp. 27-28). "Each of the above jobs," Olson concludes, "are HALVES," waiting to be completed by a poet who can combine the two in a fully achieved whole, a poet who is obviously Olson himself! Both Pound and Williams, moreover, are accused of not knowing how to use history:

. . . another reason why i don't think Ez's toucan works after 1917 is, that, after that date, the materials of history which he has found useful are not at all of use (nor are Bill's despite the more apparent homogeneity: date 1917, not only did Yurrup (West, Cento, Renaissance) go, but such blueberry America as Bill presents (Jersey dump-smoke covering same) also WENT (that is, Bill, with all respect, don't know fr nothing abt what a city is) . . . (p. 30)

This sweeping dismissal of the subject matter of *Paterson* and the *Cantos* is all the odder when one considers that the style of

20 According to the chronology found at the back of *Archeologist of Morning*, Olson’s collected shorter poems (New York: Cape Goliard Press, 1970), Olson published his first poem in 1946 and had published only twelve or thirteen poems altogether before the publication of "Projective Verse" in 1950.
the above passage is straight Pound: the lower case “i,” the familiar references to “Ez” and “Bill,” the word “toucan” purposely assigned a meaning no dictionary provides, the shorthand expression (“date 1917”), the parenthetical interjection (“nor are Bill’s . . .”), the phonetic spelling of Europe (“Yurrup”) and phonetic abbreviations (“fr nothing abt”), the offhand references to places and eras (“West, Cento, Renaissance”), the folksy humor (“blueberry America”), the newsreel style (“Jersey dumpsmoke covering same”), the cute use of slang (“Bill . . . don’t know”). *Mayan Letters*, like “Projective Verse,” with its typographical spacings, its juxtapositions of lowercase letters, capitals, and italics, its abbreviations and phonetic spellings, and its peculiar blend of slang and elevated diction, could not have been written without the Pound model.

Perhaps because he was himself aware of this indebtedness, Olson became overtly hostile when someone else recognized it. On November 23, 1953 he wrote a letter to his friend Cid Corman, the editor of *Origin*, raging at the latter’s suggestion that his *Maximus Poems* contained passages similar to but not as well written as comparable passages in *Paterson* and the *Cantos*:

... you impose on me a hierarchical system which is only yr own, is no part of my life or work. In fact, I read exactly the passage you put between the Pat quotes & the Cant as distinct from either. And that makes me feel very damn good, thank you.

But i don’t feel good abt you. For you don’t, obviously, see that. You see something else—a necessity to say something abt a disappointment of yr own in it. Which, of course, is, flatly, yr own behindhandness—that Pound & Williams are yr measure of music, not the moving music of other men.22

Olson refuses to be involved in “value comparisons.” “Christ,” he exclaims angrily, “to say i leave the music in the things! You, who have seen that it was published! And now, by god, you use the very virtu of the practice to mouth WCW and Eppie at me, as, superior. Fuck em, even if they are. It’s none of our bizness” (p. 130).

But what hurts Olson even more than Corman’s comparisons, is that in the most recent issue of *Origin*, his own poem “The Morning News” was put last whereas a Williams poem headed the issue: “Morning news . . . patently . . . belongs no where but

first . . . the reason why it was where it is, now you say it, that
you honestly,—finally—do feel that older names must be some-
how, better music” (p. 130). Corman is told to “Come out
among men, where they are—and not, for christ sake . . . where
Mr. Williams sez they are most alive, when they are dead!” And
after a series of nasty expletives, Olson concludes, “I know
what’s missing in the music. But it’s olson which ain’t there,
not Williams or Pound. And you shld know that’s who is
missing. Not these two inferior predecessors . . .” (pp. 131-32).

Olson’s quarrel with his “inferior predecessors” was not con-
finned to letters. In the early fifties, while at St. Elizabeth’s, Pound
was translating the Odes of Confucius, attempting to capture the
archaic quality of Confucius’ Chinese by rendering the Odes in a
somewhat archaic English and making use of fixed stanza forms,
regular meter, and rhyme. Olson, who was a frequent visitor to
St. Elizabeth’s in these years, decided that the Inventor of the
Cantos, the one-time High Priest of Open Verse, had finally and
irrevocably sold out. The poem “I, Mencius, Pupil of the Master
. . .,” first published in Black Mountain Review in 1954, presents
in the thinly veiled form of Mencius’ attack on Confucius, Olson’s
public repudiation of Pound’s newest poetry:

the dross of verse. Rhyme!
when iron (steel)
has expelled Confucius
from China. Pittsburgh!
beware: the Master
bewrays his vertu.
To clank like you do
he brings coolie verse
to teach you equity,
who layed down such rails! 23

Pound, Olson suggests, has bastardized Confucian wisdom by
presenting it in a mechanical kind of “coolie verse” replete with
rhyme (“the dross of verse”), a form appropriate not for ancient
China but for that most mechanized of modern American cities,
the steel capital Pittsburgh. In the second verse paragraph, the
poet suggests that the Master has lost his touch: he no longer
knows “a whorehouse / from a palace”; his version of Confucius

61-63. The poem is reprinted in Archaeologist of Morning, in which the pages are
unnumbered.
is the fake *chinoiserie* of Whistler: "willow" and "peach blossom" for "the old ladies." "Let decoration thrive," says the poet sarcastically, for "he / who taught us all / that no line must sleep, / that as the line goes so goes / the Nation!" is now pandering to the Poetic Establishment:

that the great 'ear
can no longer 'hear! . . .
the Distributor
who couldn't go beyond wood,
apparently,
has gone out of business. . . . (p. 62)

The rest of the poem asserts, rather flatly and didactically, that although Pound has nothing further to teach younger poets, there are enough others, including the speaker, who can carry on the "trade":

we are the process
and our feet

We do not march

We still look
And see
what we see

We do not see
ballads

other than our own.

Evidently, Olson's aim here is to use the typographical spacing and verse technique of the *Cantos* to criticize Pound's unfortunate return to the "closed verse" of traditional poets. But despite its parody rhymes ("bewrays his vertu. / To clank like you do"), its recurrent metal images, or its witty allusions to Whistler, Whitman, and Solomon Levi, "I, Mencius" is no more than a superficially clever poem. For one thing, Olson's own Rule #3—"ONE PERCEPTION MUST IMMEDIATELY AND DIRECTLY LEAD TO A FURTHER PERCEPTION"—is not observed in this poem, which basically restates the same theme over and over again. The following lines, for example, with their reference to the Pound-Fenollosa treatment of the image:

that what the eye sees,
that in the East the sun untangles itself
from among branches,
should be made to sound as though there were still roads
on which men hustled
to get to paradise . . .

make the same point as does the Whistler passage earlier in the
poem. This is not exactly a case of “get on with it, keep moving.”

Again, despite Olson’s repeated insistence that “contemporary
workers go lazy RIGHT HERE WHERE THE LINE IS
BORN,” his own prosody is not in any way remarkable. In the
passage cited above, for example, it is not clear that the line
always ends “where its breathing, shall come to, termination.”
Suppose we transpose it as follows:

that what the eye
sees
that in the East
the sun untangles itself
from among branches should be made
to sound
as though there were still roads
on which men hustled
to get
to
paradise. . . .

Olson insists that “only he, the man who writes, can declare, at
every moment, the line its metric and its ending,” but in that
case, “only he, the man who writes” can know why the line
ends when it does. I doubt very much that Olson’s readers would
know the difference if they found my transposition rather than
the original on the printed page. One finds, in other words, no
sense of inevitability in Olson’s verse line, no principle which may
be said to govern the way syllables must be combined to constit-
ute lines. The poet simply breaks off where he happens to break
off.

By 1960 or so, the bitterness and defensiveness betrayed in the
letter to Cid Corman had more or less disappeared. For one thing,
with the publication of The Distances, his collected shorter poems,
Olson now had an established reputation of his own. Indeed,
during the sixties, Olson became such an oracle, even if to a
relatively small coterie, that he could and did say almost anything
—banal, confusing, contradictory, meaningless—and get away
with it. Here are some samples:

Charles Olson and the “Inferior Predecessors”
The radical of action lies in finding out how organized things are
genuine, are initial.24

... like, the meter is sort of gone and come and down in front of
ourselves, and how do you therefore have meter? Well, I think it’s
simple measure, and I think it is what I’m unfortunately, probably—
sort of engaged to do.25

of rhythm is image
of image is knowing
of knowing there is
a construct.26

And other such pseudo-profundities. Shortly before his death in
1970, Olson gave Gerard Malanga of the Paris Review permission
to interview him—if we can call the set of questions and non-
answers that resulted an interview. By this time Olson had
become an elaborate myth, “The Man Who,” in the words of a
Wallace Stevens title, literally “Took The Place Of A Mountain,”
Black Mountain incarnate, a man who no longer needed to blast
Pound and Williams in self-defense but could remain blissfully
above it all in his own Emperor’s-New-Clothes-World. Asked by
Malanga whether his poems resembled the Cantos, Olson replied,
“My interest is not in cantos. It’s in another condition of song,
which is connected to mode and has therefore to do with absolute
actuality. It’s so completely temporal.”27 Which means just
about anything you want it to.

This is not the place to launch into an examination of Olson’s
poetry, as distinct from his poetics, but since he claims not to be
interested in “cantos” but in “mode,” “actuality,” and the
“completely temporal,” we might conclude by looking at a late
Olson poem so as to see to what extent Olson has managed to
MAKE IT NEW.

My text is, appropriately I think, a late Olson poem entitled
“from The Song of Ullikummi,” which bears the subtitle:
“(translated from Hurrian and Hittite and read at Spoleto 1965
to honor the presence of Mr. Ezra Pound).”28 At this festive
occasion, one gathers, Olson finally wanted to make peace with his
“inferior predecessor.” Like his first Master, he would base his

25 Poetry and Truth, pp. 63-64.
26 Poetry and Truth, p. 64.
28 Archeologist of Morning, third-to-the-last poem. Also reprinted in Causal
Mythology, pp. 33-35.
poem on an ancient myth, only he would go one step further than Pound by choosing an obscure Hurrian myth, wholly beyond Pound’s own scholarly range.  

"From The Song of Ullikummi" is based on Hans Güterbock’s 1951 translation of the incomplete epic, which is in turn based on the following myth. The god Kumarbis has dethroned his father Anus but is in turn threatened by Anus’s second son, the storm god. Kumarbis sends his messenger, Imbaluris, to the Sea to seek her advice. She summons Kumarbis to her house and feasts him. As a result of her advice, Kumarbis leaves his native Urkis and goes to a place where he meets a huge rock. He has intercourse with this rock and bears a son called Ullikummis, who grows into a gigantic pillar of diorite. He rises from the sea like a tower until his height is 9,000 leagues and his girth the same. To the consternation of the gods, he reaches up to heaven. A conflict between Ullikummis and the storm-god now ensues.

Olson’s poem is based on the first twenty-two lines of the first tablet. The Güterbock text prints the Hittite transcription of the Hurrian myth on the left side of the page and the English translation on the right:

**TRANSCRIPTION**

dapiy (as siunas addan) Kumar-bin ishamihhi
Kumarbis-za hattatar istanzani piran haskizzi
nu idalun siwattan huwappan sallanuskizzi
nu (-za) St.G.-ni menahhanda idalawatar sanhiskizzi
nu St. G.-ni tarpanallin sallanuskizzi
Kumarbis-za istanzani piran hattar daskizzi
nat kunnan man iskariskizzi
man-za Kumarbis hattatar istanzani piran das

**TRANSLATION**

Of Kumarbi, father of all the gods, I shall sing.
Kumarbi wisdom unto his mind takes, and a bad ‘day’ as evil (being) he raises.
And against the Storm-God evil he plans, and against the Storm-God a rebel he raises.
Kumarbi wisdom unto his mind (takes), and like a bead he sticks it on. When Kumarbi wisdom unto his mind had taken,

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302 Charles Olson and the "Inferior Predecessors"

165
from (his) chair he promptly rose. Into (his) hand a staff he took, upon his feet as shoes the swift winds he put. And from (his) town Urkis he set out, and to ikunta luli he came. And ( . . . . . ) in ikunta luli a great rock lies. Her length is three leagues but her width is (one league) and a half league. What below she has upon this ( . . . . . ) his mind sprang forward, and with the rock he slept, and into her his manhood (flowed). And five times he took her, (and again) ten times he took her. In his version, Olson omits the statement of epic theme, the reference to the conflict between Kumarbis and the storm god, and the description of the journey. His subject, rather, is the act of intercourse itself, yet, although his poem deals only with this one event, it is more than twice as long as the relevant portion of the original narrative. It begins as follows:

fucked the Mountain
fucked her but good his mind
sprang forward
and with the rock he slept
and into her let his manhood
go five times he let it go
ten times he let it go
in ikunta luli she is three
dalugasti long
she is one and a half
palhasti wide. What below she has
up on this his mind sprang upon.

These lines are somewhat reminiscent of Pound: the retelling of ancient myth in contemporary idiom, the casual free verse, the juxtaposition of foreign text with its English equivalent. Yet the differences outweigh these superficial similarities. Whereas Pound usually juxtaposes different myths, playing off one against another
to create a new image, Olson harps with tiresome monotony on the same theme:

the fucking
of the Mountain
fucked the mountain went right through it and came out
the other side.

And, although he often copies the Güterbock translation verbatim, as in “and to ikunta luli / he came” or “What below she has,” in the few cases where he does make changes in the parent text, it is in order to turn a neutral narrative statement into a cute sexual reference. Thus the lines “Kumarbis-za istanzani piran hattatar (daskizzi), / nat kunnan man iskariskizzi,” which Güterbock translates as “Kumarbi wisdom unto his mind (takes), / and like a bead he sticks it on,” become in Olson’s version:

Kumarbis-za istanzani piran hattatar
daskizzi
sticks wisdom
unto his mind like his cock
into her
iskariskizzi

This is evidently meant to be terribly witty, but note that the wit, which does not rise above the most banal locker-room joke, is fraudulent in that Olson depends upon our not being able to read the Hittite so that we will be tickled by the idea of a man sticking his cock into somebody’s “iskariskizzi.” Once we have the original text before us, however, and know that “iskariskizzi” is a third-person present-tense verb meaning “puts on,” the joke wears pretty thin.

The whole poem is, in fact, a tiresome adolescent hoax; Olson himself admits that it “fell dead” when he read it at the Spoleto festival.32 His main device is to copy a line of Güterbock’s translation and then to give its Hittite equivalent, as in the following examples:

and in ikunta luli a great rock
lies
sallis perunas

or

he slept
with the rock kattan sesta

32 See Causal Mythology, p. 18.
The novelty of these linguistic juxtapositions rapidly wears off once we know what the Hittite means. If a poem is meant to be, in Olson's words, "a high energy-construct" or "energy-discharge," it is difficult to justify the essential repetitiveness of "from The Song of Ullikummi." Nor does the "FORM" of this particular poem seem to be "AN EXTENSION OF CONTENT," for as we can see by looking at the parent text, the same content can be and is presented in very different form. One would be grateful if, in keeping with the doctrine of "Projective Verse," the "PERCEPTION" of the opening line—"fucked the Mountain"—ever led to a "FURTHER PERCEPTION," but Olson seems to find the notion of a god fucking a rock so titillating, so enchanting, that he can think of nothing else, and the poem ends as it began:

And five times he took her
nanzankan 5-anki das
and again ten times he took her
namma man zankan 10-anki das

Arunas
the Sea.

One can object at this point that it is unfair to judge Olson by this relatively unimportant poem, that the *Maximus Poems*, say, or "The Kingfishers" would give us a different image of the poet. No doubt there is some truth in such an objection—Olson did write better poems than "Ullikummi"—but we must take the poem seriously because Olson himself took it very seriously indeed. Although the reading at Spoleto fell on the deaf ears of Ezra Pound, Olson gave "Ullikummi" a central place in subsequent readings at Vancouver and Berkeley. In the lecture entitled *Causal Mythology*, delivered at Berkeley in July 1965, Olson discusses the background myth of "The Song of Ullikummi," that "marvelous Hesiodic poem," at some length and announces that the theme of his own version is "the nature of the assault upon the rock that fathers and mothers us all," a formulation that strikes one as oddly pretentious, for the poem has nothing to say about "the nature of the assault upon the rock," nor does it help us to see ourselves as heirs to Kumarbis and his mountainous bride.

"Ullikummi," in fact, simply manifests in particularly blatant

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*Marjorie G. Perloff* 305

168
form Olson’s central imaginative failure. Pound and Williams, one should recall, talked of prosody only after long and arduous experiments with different verse forms, line units, and syllable combinations; theirs was what Eliot liked to call “workshop criticism.” Olson, on the other hand, began by announcing that the syllable and the line were the “HEAD” and the “HEART” of the new prosody and hoped that no one would notice that, in his own poetry, he let the lines fall where they may. Again, whereas Pound’s and Williams’ objectivist theories were the natural outgrowth of their experiments with imagery, Olson simply announced that the “objects in field” that compose a poem must refer to nothing outside themselves, only to discover that in his own poetry, references to external reality became increasingly obtrusive.

But of course by the time he wrote poems like “Ullikummi,” it no longer mattered. Olson was, after all, the Guru Extraordinary, “living,” as Chad Walsh puts it in his introduction to the Beloit Lectures, Poetry and Truth (1968), “in the world of complex simultaneity with its own and different rules of logic.” Walsh admits that most of Olson’s statements made absolutely no sense to him, but concludes with some self-deprecation that this could not have been Olson’s fault: it was just that “his center of gravity seemed not to be in this globe but a new and greater planet waiting for creation.”

Perhaps. . . . Fortunately others have not been quite so credulous. After Olson read “Ullikummi” at Berkeley, an unidentified person in the audience asked, “Why do you go to another culture to get your myth?” (p. 35). Olson, always a bit uncomfortable when asked such a direct question, gave a reply that is, I think, a paradigm of the confusion, inconsistency, and pretentiousness that characterize the aesthetic of the “Father of Projective Verse”:

Well, you knock me out if you say that. I just thought I bridged the cultures. (he laughs.) I don’t believe in cultures myself. I think that’s a lot of hung up stuff like organized anything. I believe there is simply ourselves, and where we are has a particularity which we’d better use because that’s about all we got. Otherwise we’re running around looking for somebody else’s stuff. (pp. 35-36)

Olson himself never stopped running.

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Poetry and Truth, pp. 6-7.