

Bard

Bard College
Bard Digital Commons

Senior Projects Spring 2013

Bard Undergraduate Senior Projects

2013

Force of Gesture

Amy Jane Pedulla
Bard College

Recommended Citation

Pedulla, Amy Jane, "Force of Gesture" (2013). *Senior Projects Spring 2013*. Paper 57.
http://digitalcommons.bard.edu/senproj_s2013/57

This Access restricted to On-Campus only is brought to you for free and open access by the Bard Undergraduate Senior Projects at Bard Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Senior Projects Spring 2013 by an authorized administrator of Bard Digital Commons. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@bard.edu.

Bard

Force of Gesture

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Languages and Literature
of Bard College

by

Amy Pedulla

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

May 2013

Acknowledgements

To Mom, Dad, Lauren, and all Pedullas: for your continued support and love throughout this project.

To Jaime Bayard, a dear friend.

To Michael Ives and Ann Lauterbach for your passionate criticism and genuine encouragement to pursue this research.

To Ammiel Alcalay for giving me *A Little History*.

To Wyatt Mason for an unrelenting attention to the improvement of my writing over the past few years, for forcing me to say what needs to be said within the right margins, and for teaching me to read in new ways.

And to Cole Heinowitz, a passionate advisor and inspiring woman: Thank you for making me write this.

Contents

Preface (1
<i>Meaning in Movement</i>	9
Olson	31
Gesture	64
Presence	90
<i>Remarks</i>	109

Preface (

I know very little about the language I use.

I have always been inspired by the possibilities of performance.

I read a poem by the San Franciscan poet Jack Spicer; my response after reading it was to make a performance out of and inspired by his language.

It was a happening, a strange engagement with body, word, and movement. What happened? A change of tense is needed: Two performers quote Cocteau behind a glass window in the center of a science building while another recites a verse from Spicer's poem. Someone rides by on a bicycle while several dancers waltz up the stairs. They are intercepted by a cascade of red balloons. The entire sequence unfolds in silence, until the ensemble performs a complicated symbolic dance, sings a prayer inside an inflated pool, rushes to catch a Ford Escalade that speeds off into the distance, abandoning the audience seated in the grass. The building is a vacuum shot through with white light.

What happened unfolded as a sequence of events in front of the bystanders. The poem became a silent movie reel enacted in real time, in real space.

I don't know why reading did not suffice, why I decided to enact, so to speak, the words themselves.

Since the event, I have realized that I know less about my interests than ever before.

What I do know is that I have wanted to write about both of these things, about the cohesion between word and action, between language and performance, ever since I realized that I could not ignore their relationship to one another. I had questions after the event: what were the limits of language and the possibilities that can open up in live performance? What was lost in the live performance that remained anchored to the original text?

Regardless of whether or not there are definitive answers to these questions, I obviously have another that must be asked now:

It is simply this: What is the relationship between language and action?

I ask this question now with the same vigor I had a year ago when I made the performance. It's clear that the task ahead of me is not to respond in performance, but in words. To get things straight. Or to complicate them more.

What I write in the following pages began by asking this question in the dark. I zealously pursued the relationship between these two forms, looked the entries "language" and "performance" up in the OED, discovered that their point of cohesion was in fact the word: "action".

Spicer cannot be found in the pages to come. Rather, I sift through the words of his predecessor, the mammoth of a man, the mail carrier from Gloucester, Massachusetts who seems to be asking similar questions. But the one I ask asking is my own and it hasn't been answered by any means.

Because it's still bugging me.

This Gloucester poet is enormous in size. His body is unwieldy, giant.

I first came across his poetry a few years ago. I was perplexed, irritated by its complex allusiveness. I quickly became discouraged by my inability to read it very closely. My attention was short-lived. Though my immediate aversion to his work evaporated once I saw his body on camera, witnessed the way it moved, understood the way his breath activated the words of the poems, imbued them not with the meaning I could not decipher on my own but with such a FORCE, an energy that was completely palpable. I had apparently missed something the first time I struggled to read Maximus's letters to Gloucester. His mannerisms and precise attention

to cadence, breath, and intonation completely altered the way I understood his approach to poetry. I was anything but discouraged after seeing him on screen: I was only inspired to read the work again, to make sense of this dramatic shift in my interest once I had seen a physical enactment of the language. A cold first reading yielded very little insight, watching him generated an unprecedented degree of interest.

There's a particular moment I wish to describe here for the sake of getting across the essential fact of his physical presence. He is reading "Letter 27[withheld]". There is a lull of silence in the first few seconds of the shot, he is sitting at a table calmly without speaking. The next second he looks up with a slight smile and speaks the first line to the person sitting at the other end of the table, out of my view. He speaks and I hear stone, the low grumble of sediment utters the first few words in one breath. On the next beat he immediately reaches his left arm off to one side on the words "the land falling off to the left". Suddenly he flings the same arm forward towards the person he is speaking to, talks of playing baseball in the summer "until no flies could be seen", points inward to his head with his index finger, then points back outwards to locate the presence of some other object. He speaks: "until we came home". In the next few words, he takes a breath after "women", elevates his head, fills the internals with air, inflates the body with potential energy, and releases all the breath on the single word "bust"; he is precise with the consonant on the end: says it sharp, then cuts he breath off. There is a lull. Then the energy pathways changes, it builds. He pushes away the air to his left with his whole arm, and then again to the right, designating place the "city" and the "sea" with his upper body. The land, his physical core, the geography of place is within him, in his presence. Suddenly the cadence of the words change, he lifts his eyebrows, pulls his whole hand through his open mouth on the word "teeth". He presses through the "sh" on "she" and "sure"; I mistake the sound to

be the word “shore”, but I am happy with my error: I suddenly see the ocean view he breathes into my vision. In the next few lines he emphasizes in the same pointed mudra the word “this”. He juts his right arm out towards another object that I cannot see. “This” is something I cannot perceive, I can only understand the force of his arm, a slingshot he releases with the point of his finger. The intonation of his voice changes. On “the precessions of me” his wrist and hand make a rapid circle in the air. With “From all that I no longer am both hands rest on his chest, his eyebrows arc up, he seems to convey some acceptance of truth. For a moment he rests his hand atop the crown of his head and utters: “the slow westward motion”. His voice is careful over the next line: “an American is a complex of occasions, themselves a geometry”. He shakes his head back and forth quickly, as if to say that this idea is as unbelievable as it is incontestable. In the next moment: “I am one with my skin”. With this he rolls his shoulders back, sending a rush over the external plane of the body. The slight movement mimics the subtle oscillation of a fish in water. “Plus this, plus this” are stated in rhythm, he prepares to take another breath. His arms reach up above his head, his hands rest on the sides of his face, energy builds until he barks the words “I compel”. At this point, both arms push outwards, the rocks in his voice rattle. “To yield”: his voice is so low at this point he nears a low rumble, his hands are clenched in fists. “Polis is this”: he swings his arms around his body, his head hung low by his chest, the last word I hear is that same one from before: “this”.

I wonder what “this” means.

The body is the basis of Olson’s poetry. His gestures unleash the force behind the words.

A gesture made of the body, though, is not the same as a gesture made in language. The latter is the basis of my endeavor to follow. My interest in Olson’s language is based in a fascination with how he moves; how he theorizes the connection between body and word. Had I

not had such a hopeless experience upon my first reading of The Maximus Poems and had I not later watched him read the work, I would have had no basis for my inquiry to follow. The force behind my own writing here is my pursuit of the link between language and action. I write this essay as changed reader: once critical, inert, and unenthusiastic, I've come to read Olson in a completely new way. I wasn't paying attention to the things that were there, in the poem, moving. "This" is something that requires a second glance. It is there to be noticed.

SOCRATES: Wisdom (*phronesis*). Wisdom is the understanding of motion (*phoras noesis*) and flow. Or might it be interpreted as taking delight in motion (*phoras onesis*) (411e). [...] Knowledge (*episteme*) indicates that a worthwhile soul follows (*hepetai*) the movement of things, neither falling behind nor running on ahead (412a).

--Plato, *Cratylus*

These details show how the cries of the passions contributed to the development of the operations of the mind by naturally originating the language of action, a language which in its early stages, conforming to the level of this couple's limited intelligence, consisted of mere contortions and agitated bodily movements (115).

-- Etienne Bonnot de Condillac, "Essay On the Origin of Human Knowledge"
(1746)

Pantomime without discourse will leave you nearly tranquil; discourse without gestures will wring tears from you. The passions have their gestures, but they also have their accents, which thrill us, these tones of voice that cannot fail to be heard, penetrate to the very depths of the heart, carrying there the emotions they wring from us, forcing us in spite of ourselves to feel what we hear. We conclude that while visible signs can render a more exact imitation, sounds more effectively arouse interest (9).

--Jean Jacques Rousseau, "On the Origin of Language" (1781)

Words and deeds are quite indifferent modes of the divine energy. Words are also actions, and actions are a kind of words.

-Ralph Waldo Emerson "The Poet" (1841-1843)

The limits of my language mean the limits of my world.

--Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Logico-Tractatus Philosophicus* (5.6) (1921)

This ‘may there be’ lets be the relation of word and thing, what and how it really *is*. Without a word no thing is (152).

-- Martin Heidegger, *On the Way to Language* (1959)

The most real, the truth, the beauty of the poem is a configuration, but also a happening in language, that leads back or on towards the beauty of the universe itself. I am but part of the whole of what I am, and wherever I seek to understand I fail what I know (3-4).

--Robert Duncan, “Towards an Open Universe” (1950)

When Platonic *mimesis* is applied to describe the poet’s act of creation, we are confronted with the question: What is the material which he creates? What is the actual content of an *epos*, or of a poem? (Havelock 165).

--Eric Havelock, “Preface to Plato” (1963)

For me, back of the idea of organic form is the concept that there is a form in all things (and in our experience), which the poet can discover and reveal.

--Denise Levertov, “Some Notes on Organic Form”
(September 1965)

for
forwarding

—Charles Olson
The Maximus Poems, I.2, 6

Meaning in Movement

The idea of action necessitates an understanding of tense and time. Action has to do with the relationship between a current situation, a sudden change, and the environment that is a result of that change. Ralph Waldo Emerson writes about the relationship between words and actions in his essay “The Poet”. The poet must bring the things of Nature into being by saying, by pointing to, and naming each of them. The task of the poet is naming, and by doing so, the poet makes language. This crucial position, this responsibility to bring into being those objects, things, that the poet experiences in the world is a complicated process: one that involves the poet’s presence, perception, thought, and choice. “But the poet names the thing because he sees it, or comes one step nearer to it than any other” (Emerson 227). The poet names the thing as he alone sees it; he puts the thing into language based on his perception alone.

Words are what the poet must use to bring the thing into the domain of language. Words are actions, and actions are kinds of words, writes Emerson. Things are the objects in the world that are later named. The poet that names things puts the world into the field of language. The poet imbues language with a kind of power that makes words do things, “gives them power which makes their old use forgotten” (Emerson 226). The task of the poet does not merely bring

things into being by naming them. The poet must activate words and make use of them in alternative ways. The poet “puts eyes, and a tongue, into every dumb and inanimate object” (Emerson 226). Here Emerson’s account of the poet deviates slightly. The poet, it seems, makes the thing, the object he sees, act like a body.

The process of naming is not solely Emerson’s concern. In fact this conversation about words, things, and the role that action plays in that tripartite relationship is one that precedes Emerson. The process of naming, of bringing things into being through the medium of language, is essential to an understanding of how perception functions and what the responsibility of the poet as a name-maker is when he must put into words the things that he sees.

The *Cratylus* dialogue bears mentioning. Plato presents two perspectives of how this process functions: on the one hand, Socrates and Hermogenes argue about the correctness of names. Hermogenes adopts a theory that basically asserts that names are used by convention as determined by the community in which that name is used. Opposed to Hermogenes is Cratylus who asserts a very different kind of theory of naming which is steeped in a rationale that assumes that names naturally name things, regardless of the convention of a given society or community. Convention has nothing to do with this; things have their natural names. A tree is called a tree in its *being* a tree. Obviously, the two perspectives are entirely oppositional. On the one hand, Hermogenes exposes the arbitrariness of names; on the other, Cratylus suggests that things have their proper names because nature commanded them to be so.

A closer look at the conversation reveals a great deal about how language works, and how this triangular relationship between the three concepts introduced function in a larger sense. Socrates eventually discounts both of these kinds of approaches. Despite his use of etymological investigation, Socrates does not see the truth in the name once a word is genealogically traced

backwards to its origin because it does not assess the essence of the thing itself. He argues that even though an excavation of a name down to its bare bones is possible, the bones themselves do not address the thing in its entirety. The “bones” do not bring us to the things they were meant to represent.

Socrates asks: “So whatever each person says is the name of something, for him, that is its name?” (Plato, *Cratylus* 385d) The question seems to point to the immense possibilities of the process of naming. The discussion continues:

HERMOGENES: Yes, Socrates, for I can’t conceive of any other way in which names could be correct. I call a thing by the name I give it; you call it by the different name you give it. In the same way, I see that different communities have different names for the same things—Greeks differing from other Greeks, and Greeks from foreigners.

SOCRATES: Let’s see, Hermogenes, whether the same also seems to you to hold of the things that are. Is the being or essence of each of them something private for each person, as Protagoras tells us? He says that man is ‘the measure of all things,’ and that things are to me as they appear to me, and are you as they appear to you. Do you agree or do you believe that things have some fixed being or essence of their own? (385e-386)

The measuring of names by their “correctness” seems related to the idea that the name must near the essence of the thing itself. If anyone can name any thing, then these names would inevitably vary in their correctness perhaps. Though each thing appears to each perceiver as it does to them alone.

The dialogue shifts once Socrates introduces the idea of speech, again applying the idea of “correctness” to the act itself: “Tell me this. Is there something you call speaking the truth and something you call speaking the false?” (*Cratylus* 385b2) He then develops the point that saying names is a part of speech, and therefore using names is a “kind of action” (*Cratylus* 387c6). The work of the so-called “rule setter” (389a) is that of making names. A name, according to Socrates, is “a sort of tool” (388a) to be used. At this point, Cratylus’ argument is introduced to

explain that the act of naming is a natural process. If names are tools, they have particular functions. “A name is a tool for giving instruction, that is to say, for dividing being” (388b) says Socrates. The name-maker, then, cannot merely rely on convention, Socrates counters, because the name must distinguish between things, between things in their essence. Only the person who looks to the natural name of each thing will be able to make the name, to put the thing’s form into language” (390e). Here Socrates agrees with Hermogenes’ opponent: “Cratylus is right in saying that things have natural names, and that not everyone is a craftsman of names, but only someone who looks to the natural name of each thing and is able to put its form into letters and syllables” (390e). Cratylus does not believe in the making of names through some arbitrary system. He believes that names naturally belong to the things they are describing. In this way, if one refers to something that is not its natural name, Cratylus believes this act to be false. Using a name that is not the natural name of the thing itself would be to refer to it *incorrectly*. Socrates’ method of determining corrections is one that relies on the etymology of words. Later, though, Socrates mentions the things that the “speech-makers” named were in fact in motion: “Perhaps you didn’t notice that they are given on the assumption that the things they name are moving, flowing, and coming into being” (411c). Naming, it seems, is not only a process by which some thing is given a name, a tool that describes its being, but that the things themselves are given a name *because* they are moving. A few lines later Socrates parses the etymology of the word Wisdom, which is revealed to be the understanding of motion and flow. A few lines later: “‘Knowledge’ (*episteme*) indicates that a worthwhile soul follows (*hepetai*) the movement of things, neither falling behind nor running on ahead” (412a). An understanding of motion or “flow”, perhaps the recognition of one thing in relation to another, is part of the “speech-maker’s” task. Knowledge is he who follows the motion of all things presumably in the present

moment, neither behind nor ahead of himself in the present moment. The human that names things, that puts action into language, has to see the world in a perpetual state of motion. At this point, Socrates terminates his exploration of Cratylus' argument. He believes that now, names are so adorned, so removed from the things that they actually describe, that no one can understand what the word itself means, what the things actually are (418d).

Cratylus and Socrates discuss this alternative perspective, that things are called by their natural names. Socrates and Cratylus disagree on the position of the namer and his knowledge of things. Socrates asks Cratylus whether the giver of the first names knew the things he named. Cratylus answers yes. Socrates counters, and asks the question of whom the name-giver learned those things from. The names had not been given before the name-giver gave the names to the things themselves. If the things did not have names, how did the name-givers discover them? How did the name-givers have knowledge of these things? Cratylus argues that a "more than human power" gave the first names to things, so they are "necessarily correct" (438c). This already puts into question the knowledge of the name-maker. So too, it exposes a problem in Cratylus' argument. Socrates argues: "How to learn and make discoveries about the things that are is probably too large a topic for you and me. But we should be content to have agreed that it is far better to investigate them and learn about them through themselves than to do so through their names" (439b). To see things in motion is to come to know them, to know things only in their names is to only investigate them partially. The question of what is a name is precarious. It cannot be arbitrary nor is it naturally and divinely given. The only thing that is made clear by the end of the argument is Socrates assertion that knowledge is indeed recognition of things in motion, and that the process of naming is situated within this process. The process of naming is a process of coming to know things: "Then it can't even be known by anyone. For at the very

instant the knower-to-be approaches, what he is approaching is becoming a different thing, of a different character, so that he can't yet come to know whether what sort of thing it is or what it is like—surely, no kind of knowledge is knowledge if what isn't in any way" (440a). The instant is a new idea that must be introduced in this strange flux of word, thing, and action. The moment the knower-to-be approaches a thing, he is competing with another reaction, for the thing he looks at is already changing. No name can possibly attest to the namer's knowledge of the thing. This calls to mind the question of what naming does. Is a name a reliable tool in any sense? Is naming a claim to false knowledge? So too, where does knowledge find itself if everything is changing, if its is always passing on? "On this account, no one could know anything and nothing could be known either" (440b). The status of knowledge rests, perhaps, on the recognition that things are in motion, and to know them is to recognize their flux. What is the position of the man who does not know? "But surely no one with any understanding will commit himself or the cultivation of his soul to names, or trust them and their givers to the point of firmly stating that he knows something—condemning both himself and the things that are to be totally unsound like leaky sinks—or believe that things are exactly like people with runny noses, or that all things are afflicted with colds and drip over everything. It's certainly possible that things are that way, Cratylus, but it is also possible that they are not" (440c-d). So, one can only investigate things and not accept everything about them easily. After having an experience with things, then, says Socrates, one may share that experience. Experience is not the word that Socrates uses, but it in fact encapsulates this relationship between the knower-to-be and the things they wish to know.

Aside from this notion of the knowledge of things and the experience of them as separate from the process of naming itself, the interlocutors discuss the function of gesture. Socrates

postulates that if people didn't have tongues or voices, they would need to use their body to communicate ideas effectively:

SOCRATES: [...] Answer me this: If we hadn't a voice or a tongue, and wanted to express things to one another, wouldn't we try to make signs by moving our hands, head, and rest of our body, just as dumb people do at present? [...] So, if we wanted to express something light in weight or above us, I think we'd raise our hand towards the sky in imitation of the very nature of the thing. And if we wanted to express something heavy or below us, we'd move our hand toward the earth. And if we wanted to express a horse (or any other animal) galloping, you know that we'd make our bodies and our gestures as much as like theirs as possible (422e).

The question exposes the fact that were it not for the voice or the ability to speak, the rest of the body would be the only means of communication. The speech-maker brings things into language: a name gives something solidity in syllables. And yet, these names are false. They are only *approximations* of the things themselves. To know the things is to experience them. The using and making of names does not, in fact, grant the knower-to-be, the speech and rule-maker, any knowledge at all. How can knowledge be attained then? How can the name-tool be used differently? If there were no words, there were gestures.

Socrates, by the end of the dialogue, seems to combine aspects of both linguistic arguments. He argues against Hermogenes, for he explains that some aspect of "the natural" must be incorporated into his theory of naming. Arbitrary naming on the basis of geographical location as dictated by the social sphere in which those people use that word is not merely enough. Though as we have seen, Socrates disagrees with a purely naturalistic approach to naming, for he believes that there is no name that could possibly encapsulate the thing it represents, and in this way some degree of convention is needed.

How the name-maker does in fact come to name things cannot be done based on some rule of convention or the laws of nature alone. Etymologies hollow out the things to their bones, and leave only bones, only pieces of the things that once were. Arbitrary names only assess

things to a very small population of people; they do not seek to present things in their entirety. Both interlocutors are proven wrong by Socrates on the basis that the path to knowledge is one that requires an awareness of motion. The human body is healthy, its immunity goes down, it catches a cold. It is in flux and a name cannot merely encapsulate it. So too are things in motion, they change, move, act. There is something in gesture that gets the name-maker closer to the things that he tries to name, closer to the *motion* of the thing itself. The name will more closely represent the thing that it needs to if the name addresses the thing in its motion.

It is clear that naming is a kind of action and that a gesture of the body is a movement. What is this relationship between language and the body, between a name and the thing it represents? Of course Plato does not arrive at an answer in this dialogue, and the question still remains. How gesture could come to bear on language, though, is a larger idea and it involves a discussion of the origin of language itself. The making of words and the necessity of language as an extension of man and the limits of his body, is precisely the problem that is dealt with in 18th century language discourse.

Etienne Bonnot de Condillac and John Jacques Rousseau theorize the origins of language and the position of the poet. Their ideas about language were preceded by a lineage thinkers that sought to define perception: how humans observe the world and how thoughts were produced. The development of the idea of “the language of action” is the basis of Condillac’s argument. The movements of the body through the use of gesture are for Condillac the origin of all verbal communication. This very idea separated Condillac from the Cartesian apparatus, exemplified by Descartes and Locke alike, who considered the mind to be an entity unto its own as separate from all sense impressions. Condillac’s argument in *On the Origin of Human Knowledge* births the idea of a language that derives its meaning from bodies acting in a social space. At the

beginning, Condillac argues, the passions were inextricably linked to the body. The language of action is understood to be the mode of communication through the use of the body. Through gestures, the body is able to communicate effectively *without* speech. The body transmits information and communicates through physical movements. Though Condillac's development continues to describe the development of a communication of another kind: one that incorporated the use of signs: "Nevertheless, when they had acquired the habit of connecting some ideas to arbitrary signs, the natural cries served as a model for them to make a new language. They articulated new sounds, and by repeating them many times to the accompaniment of gesture that indicated the objects to which they wished to draw attention, they became accustomed to giving names to things" (Condillac 116). Thus the early language of action gave way to a kind of hybrid communication: where both gesture and sound were needed in the process of naming. There was a moment, though, when "speech succeeded the language of action" (Condillac 119). This transformation was a displacement: speech "preserved the character of its predecessor" (Condillac 120). With the absence of forceful, violent movements of the body, the voice therefore had to perform the same degree of aggression: "the voice was raised and lowered by strongly marked individuals" (Condillac 120). The language of action shifted then, into a language that depended increasingly on the articulation of speech. Therefore the language of action, as Condillac describes it, was one that depended on three things: the word, the body and its gesture, and finally, the culture in which the language existed in, its the social sphere.

Condillac expands on the idea of sound in the chapter devoted to words. For one, he sees the language of action as encompassing the following arts, all of which he views as interrelated and dependent upon each other: "I could not allow any interruption of what I wished to say about the art of gestures, dance, prosody, declamation, music, poetry: all these are too closely

interrelated as a whole and to the language of action which is their underlying principle” (Condillac 156).

Jean Jacques Rousseau’s development of language in *On the Origin of Language* serves as a supplement to Condillac’s argument that the language of action is the “seed of the languages and of all the arts” (Condillac 194). Rousseau’s argument begins with the idea of speech and communication. Speech for Rousseau “distinguishes man among the animals” (Rousseau 5) and language “distinguishes nations from each other” (Rousseau 5). The essay begins with the phenomenon of the desire to communicate: “Generally, the means by which we can act on the senses of others are restricted to two: that is, movement and voice” (Rousseau 6). This fusion of movement, speech, and the presence of a social sphere (in this case the need to communicate with another person necessitates the presence of a culture) is akin to Condillac’s language of action. Rousseau says that the language of gesture is more direct, depends less on convention, and is more effective: “For more things affect our eyes than our ears” (Rousseau 6). Rousseau makes the case that communication that appeals to the eye is more effective. Speech that incorporates the image is the most effective means of communication. Sound is considered the most powerful when it can produce the same effect of color, thus appealing once again to the eye. Though, Rousseau’s argument changes when he speaks of the passions. His emphasis on sound is important, and furthers Condillac’s idea of the language of action. The “tones of voice” that Rousseau describes relocates speech in the language of action; the sound of speech brings the auditor closer to the “depths of the heart”. Condillac and Rousseau here differ in their assessment of what is heard as opposed to what is seen. Sound for Rousseau arouses interest, forces the auditor to feel, to undergo an internal emotional experience. Visible signs communicate in a more direct way, though speech is characterized by its degree of persuasion,

its ability to manipulate and activate the emotions. Rousseau concludes: “This leads me to think that if the only needs we ever experienced were physical, we should most likely never have been able to speak; we would fully express our meanings by the language of gesture alone” (Rousseau 9). Rousseau pinpoints the necessity of gesture in the communication of basic human needs. Anything beyond that which could be signified by the body, is therefore not-necessary. Speech comes into being once a need for something outside of what can be expressed by the body is a possibility. Rousseau develops the idea of “unnecessary” speech: “It seems then that need dictated the first gestures, while the passions stimulated the first words” (Rousseau 11). The “depths of the heart”, the passions, are the basis for speech. The language that speech generates is “vital and figurative” and furthermore it is “not at all due to people’s first needs” (Rousseau 11).

The language of action that is defined in Condillac’s argument and explored to some extent by Rousseau is one comprised of three essential facets: word (logos), body, and culture. How this kind of communication operates is unknown. Rousseau hypothesizes the various characteristics of this kind of system:

This language would have many symptoms for expressing the same thing according to various relationships. It would have few adverbs and abstract names for expressing these same relationships. It would have many argumentatives, diminutives, composite words, expletive particles to indicate the cadence of sentences and fullness of phrases. It would have many irregularities and anomalies (Rousseau 15).

A language that contained “few adverbs” would not approximate or describe the object it seeks to represent, but rather, would present it as it is. A language in this case would act, would “persuade without convincing, and would represent without reasoning” (Rousseau 15).

Under the possibility of “the language of action” a few terms must be clarified. The question *what is a word?* and *what is a verb?* must be asked, for both of these structural

components of the language must be understood in relation to each other, to the extent that we may come to understand how language performs, how it acts. We learn from Plato's dialogue that wisdom is the understanding of motion and flow. If this be the case, naming requires a precise attention to kinesis.

American Transcendentalism focuses on the interrelation between language and individual experience in the world. Emerson's essay "The Poet" is primarily concerned with words, actions and the position of the poet as a name-maker. The idea of coming to know things by experiencing them, by refusing to accept things as they are, but rather, to acknowledge them in perpetual motion, out of reach, is the position that the knower-to-be must take, says Socrates. Emerson's argument in "The Poet" attunes the conversation so that more emphasis is put on behalf of the poet, the name-maker as such, so that *despite* the precarious nature of the process of naming, it must be undertaken. Plato's dialogue exposes the idea that this name-maker is one who must perceive something and "put its form into letters and syllables". So, the name-maker is a craftsmen of sound; he must sonically embody the thing. Emerson says much the same in his essay: "The men of more delicate ear write down these cadences more faithfully, and these transcripts, though imperfect, become the songs of nations. For nature is as truly beautiful as it is good, or as it is reasonable, and must as much appear, as it must be done, or be known" (Emerson 220). The task of naming is not merely a solidification of thing in sound, but a striving towards knowledge. This is Plato's idea. Emerson says that nature offers the observer everything as a "picture-language" (Emerson 222). The poet observes the world and must articulate it in verbs and nouns. The notion that the name-maker "embodies" things is extended further by Emerson by way of his metaphor: "The poet, by an ulterior intellectual perception, gives them a power which makes their old use forgotten, and puts eyes, and a tongue, into every dumb and

inanimate object" (Emerson 226). The poet literally imbues things, objects, with life. With a "body" so to speak. The "body" in which these things exist is in language. Like Plato, Emerson claims that the poet "sees the flowing or metamorphosis" (Emerson 226), sees things in flux and transition. Emerson situates himself at the very end of the dialogue and acknowledges the two perspectives that surface: "By virtue of this science the poet is the Namer, or Language-maker, naming things sometimes after their appearance, sometimes after their essence, and giving to every one its own name and not another's [...]" Emerson aligns himself with Socrates and states that the poet, in choosing to name any particular thing, comes a step closer to knowing it.

Emerson's stance that the poet literally imbues objects with life by naming them, by using words to denote things, is problematic. Emerson believes, along with many Romantic writers, that the meaning of the object is created by the beholder. The name-maker assigns meaning to the objects in the world. Creation of meaning allows for a period of thoughtful recollection about the meaning of the object. The instant the name is chosen, the poet digresses into the thought about its very meaning. This complicates Emerson's belief that words are actions and actions are a kind of words. If words themselves are actions, they behold meaning in themselves! Things in the universe are there and if we consider Socrates' etymology, wisdom is the recognition of things in flow: their meaning lies in their being there. No poet or name-maker can imbue them with any more body than they already have. This is a difficult stance to take, and the language debate continues despite this inherent problem with how meaning is determined.

It is difficult to reconcile this notion that the poet gives a name to a thing, gives one name and not another, and in so doing, comes to understand the thing itself. But what of this flow of objects? Things and words are understood with respect to one another, but what of actions? If the very basis of naming, at least as far as Plato and Emerson are concerned is this comprehension of

flow and movement, if Emerson himself calls language “fossil poetry” (Emerson 227), what has happened to the movement of things? Has their formalization in the word deadened them? If things in the world are in motion, how can they be mobile in a frozen language?

Speech comes to bear on how language acts. Saussure explores the ideas of speech and language in *Course in General Linguistics*. To begin, he deliberately opposes the two: “Whereas speech is heterogeneous, language, as defined, is homogeneous. It is a system of signs in which the only essential thing is the union of meanings and sound-images, and in which both parts of the sign are psychological” (Saussure 961). Later, “language is concrete” (Saussure 961). Saussure introduces this idea of the linguistic sign, which is composed of the sign and the signified. In this view, the word itself is the sign of that which it signifies. The union of the meaning and the sound-image constitutes the word. There is an inherent problem here with Saussure’s categorization because it assumes a complete one-to-one correspondence between the thing and the word itself. Already this is put into question by Plato in the *Cratylus* when Socrates states that “It’s certainly possible that things are that way, Cratylus, but it is also possible that they are not” (440c-d). There is a problem with words. If the word cannot account for the thing as “sound-image” what does it represent? Perhaps the problem is that language is representational, and to get away from this relationship between thing, and that which represents it, the word itself has to do more than *merely* signify.

Heidegger’s *On the Way to Language* explores much the same discourse as Plato, the 18th century Romantics, and Emerson. Heidegger’s articulation of the relationship between word and thing is as follows: “From now on may the word be: the beginning of the thing. This ‘may there be’ lets the relation of word and thing, what and how it really *is*. Without a word no thing is” (Heidegger 152). Things do not exist, do not come into being, without the word. The philosopher

quotes a line from the poem “Words” by Stephan George: “Where word breaks off no thing may be” (Heidegger 152). Where the word is lacking, a thing does not exist. Although Heidegger appears relevant in this case to the discussion of words, things, and actions, there is a problem with this statement. Things do exist in the world, they do constitute reality, regardless of the words that are used to signify them.

Wittgenstein explores the relationship between thing and word, and the phenomenon of naming in *Philosophical Investigations*. Early in the argument he makes the distinction between the word and the meaning of the word: “You say: the point isn’t the word, but it’s meaning, and you thing of the meaning as a thing of the same kind as the word, though also different from the word. Here the word, there the meaning. The money, and the cow that you can buy with it” (Wittgenstein 49e). There is a disjunction between the word as a symbol and the word as something that conveys meaning. This problem with language has to do with what Wittgenstein sees as a failure to “command a clear view of the use of our words” (Wittgenstein 49e). Language must do work, independent of its ability to embody things. Rather, language serves its communicative purpose. Often it is vastly imprecise and does not function in the way that it needs to. These confusions in meaning are what Wittgenstein preoccupies himself with, and he makes it his business to locate those moments when language is “idle, not when it is doing work” (Wittgenstein 51e). What is the work of language? Perhaps here Wittgenstein critiques the apparatus that Saussure has set up. The word, if it is to command a clearer view, must do more than signify.

J.L. Austin’s focus in his essay “Performative Utterances” is the idea that names do not always refer to existing objects. His idea of “performatives” explores the notion that words are used to do things, to do work. The “work” of language is undertaken by Austin and requires

some close consideration. Granted, Austin's exploration does not merely confine itself to the performance of the single word, but rather, he explores the performativity of various cases of "utterances". He is concerned with sentences. Condillac's original use of the term "the language of action" comes to mind here, though what Austin is trying to establish is a language that acts. He opposes the assumption that philosophers make about the word "action", that being that it merely means a physical movement. Action for Austin is something wholly different with regards to the sentence and how it is transmitted from speaker to receiver. The so-called "performative utterance" is a particular statement that causes an action to subsequently occur. For instance, by saying "I do" in a marriage pact, the subsequent action is one in which the following is executed: two people are wed. So too, the promise functions in a similar way. When saying "I promise" the act of promising is occurring. To say "he promised" for instance does not achieve this effect; it is based in the past and does not cause an action to happen at present. Beyond the pronouncement of these utterances, Austin explains that the clarity and effectivity of these utterances are subject to a variety of compounding variables. For example, "the tone of voice, cadence, gesture—and above all we can rely upon the nature of the circumstances, the context in which the utterance is issued" (Austin 1437). Later, Austin's argument concludes with his distinction between utterance and statement. He assesses the utterance on the basis of *the force* of its delivery beyond what the utterance means: "What we need beside the old doctrine about meanings is a new doctrine about all the possible forces of utterances, towards the discovery of which our proposed list of explicit performative verbs would be a very great help" (Austin 1442). The force of the utterance, the energy behind it, is the question he leaves open-ended. Nonetheless, this sense that words themselves contain energy and that they exert force is a new idea that opposes many of the

thinkers thus far. The meaning of words for Austin is in their autonomous ability to channel energy, *to make meaning through their own actions.*

The relationship between words, things, and actions is one that has yet to be resolved. This relationship for many theorists of language focuses on the position of the name-maker, the poet, the knower-to-be. Things are the objects in the world that are experienced and remain in flux. The knower-to-be experiences these things, and must name them. The process of naming is complicated; a criterion the poet can rely on has not been found. Names are on the one hand arbitrary, on the other naturally given. They are the sound-images that give things being and if they do not exist, there are no things. The role of the poet and the responsibility of naming is put into question when the idea of correctness is attributed to the name itself. Emerson says that the poet brings form into being through sound, the making of syllables. The idea of communication and language as a social phenomenon cannot be forgotten. Austin and Wittgenstein in their own right have explored the effectivity of language and how it is that communication is inhibited by the language we used in conversation. Compounding factors like intonation, circumstance, and *force* of delivery matter in the saying of sentences as they effect the reception of words themselves. What Austin explains that the other theorists don't, however, is this idea that language can itself perform an act and this act is done with force. Emerson believes that meaning is assigned by the poet. He does not believe that words convey meaning in themselves. Instead, the name-maker derives meaning, constructs it, and embodies it in the word. The language does not exert a force on its own.

Representation brings language out of itself, and exposes the division between the sign and the signified. Is there a kind of "language of action" that appeals *both* to the eye and the ear?

A kind of action not only on the level of the utterance, but on the level of the word? What kind of action is required to make things and words move? What kind of force is necessary?

Emerson's affirmation that meaning is assigned by the individual is an idea that American poet Robert Duncan¹ dogmatically opposes in the 1960s. Duncan describes imagination very differently from Emerson, for instance. In his essay "Towards an Open Universe" he states: "The imagination of the cosmos is as immediate to me as the imagination of my household or my self, for I have taken my being in what I know of the sun and of the magnitude of the cosmos, as I have taken my being in what I know of domestic things" (Duncan 1). Duncan aligns himself with the cosmos, with the universe. He fashions the poet, for example, within the universe in which he lives. In this way, the poet cannot make things move with his imagination, rescuing them from the fossilization that Emerson is worried about. Instead, the individual that observes the world is faced with another challenge: he cannot make meaning, but instead must discover it in the world as it is. Duncan explains the challenge with writing poetry: it is an act of trying to align the poem with the happenings of the universe: "The most real, the truth, the beauty of the poem is a configuration, but also a happening in language, that leads back or on towards the beauty of the universe itself. I am but part of the whole of what I am, and wherever I seek to understand I fail what I know" (Duncan 3-4). In simple terms, Duncan means to say that the meaning of the universe is already determined, it is already fixed. No poet or name-maker can *create* meaning, in fact he can only come to understand the meaning that already *exists*, in the objects themselves. The poem, as such, is the location where the poet tries to create a happening in language, just as it forcibly appears. Duncan wants the things in the

¹ Though Duncan and Denise Levertov have been influenced by Olson and extend his theories in their own work much later, I mention them here "before" Olson, to be considered relevant thinkers to the lineage that has dealt with the relationship between word, thing, and action.

poem to act on their own, just as they do in life. Words do not signify anything other than what they *are doing* (emphasis on the present progressive) in the poem itself. The words carry no sentimental meaning, no ideological content that the poet may wish to “imbue” them with. Instead the words act themselves in their own universe: on the page.

Duncan’s idea that words themselves are actions that operate just the way things in the universe operate is compelling and helpful with regard to the relationship between word, thing, and action. The poet, then, must navigate between the world of the universe and the world of the page on which he writes. Although, the fact that the poet himself cannot make meaning seems problematic. How can the poet evade responsibility for the creation of meaning in the writing of poetry at all?

Eric Havelock’s *Preface to Plato*² combines these ideas of language, naming, the poet, and meaning. Havelock articulates the basic ideas of Plato’s philosophy with regards to preserved communication through action. Duncan suggests that the poet cannot create meaning through language. Havelock’s study of Plato’s work reveals a counter to Duncan’s views, and he makes his point with reference to action: “When Platonic *mimesis* is applied to describe the poet’s act of creation, we are confronted with the question: What is the material which he creates? What is the actual content of an *epos*, or of a poem?” (Havelock 165). The poet uses language, but also creates meaning. Later Havelock writes of the Homeric apparatus of the oral storyteller that conveys language through the body: “The content of the *epos* should therefore

² Olson writes a summarization of Havelock’s points in his essay “Review of Eric A. Havelock’s *Preface to Plato*”: “(1) that [the poetry of Homer and Hesiod was based on] a wholly different syntax, to which Notopoulos (1949) has applied the word *parataxis* in which the words and actions reported are set down side by side in the order of their occurrence in nature, instead of by an order of discourse, or ‘grammar’, as we have called it, the prior an actual resting on vulgar experience and event” (356).

itself consist preferably of a whole series of doings [...] You can be stimulated by words to identify yourself with what ‘they’ say only when ‘they’ express emotions and passions in active situations” (Havelock 167). So, the content, the meaning, of the poem is contained within a series of happenings and actions. Force, impact, and meaning are perhaps located within the action of the body. A provocative idea. One that challenges the basis of written language. Indeed, Havelock writes: “Action presupposes the presence of an actor or agent. The preserved *epos* can therefore deal only with people, not with impersonal phenomena” (Havelock 167). If meaning is conveyed through action, how can the poet do so in language alone? And what kind of meaning is to be conveyed if it must “deal only with people?”

The preservation of *epos* has to do with recording, with putting the things of the world into words. Thus knowledge is preserved. However, once this occurs words solidify, they freeze. Havelock writes about the translation of actual event into language: “First of all, the data or the items without exception have to be stated as events in time [...] Second they are remembered and frozen into the record as separate disjunct episodes each complete and satisfying in itself [...] Action succeeds action in a kind of endless chain [...] Thirdly, these independent items are so worded as to retain a high content of visual suggestion; they are brought alive as persons or as personified things acting out vividly before the mind’s eye” (Havelock 180).

How is it that language is “so worded” so that the knowledge it is preserving is “brought alive” or put into action? It is clear that tense and time are at play with the formation of language. If words and actions are related, as Emerson says, how is it that knowledge is preserved but not deadened? Wisdom is the understanding of motion and flow: how does that sensibility to kinetic activity allow the poet to write in such a way so that events in time are recorded but not frozen?

Duncan says the poem is its own world. The motion of the universe and the motion of the poem operate similarly: both are comprised of things, and these things act, move, and speak.

At the end of “The Poet” Emerson searches “in vain for the poet whom I describe. We do not, with sufficient plainness, or sufficient profoundness, address ourselves to life, nor dare we chaunt our own times and social circumstance” (Emerson 235). Emerson is looking for the poet that would appear in the American tapestry a generation later. *Gignomena*, or a knowledge of happenings, are experienced in many units (*polla*) rather than being understood in a system of cause and effect says Havelock. If knowledge can itself be understood as a series of experiences, perhaps language can as well be understood in terms of a motion of progression. And what is the force of this progression? The poet who would make words move, who would create meaning within motion, who would address himself to life and to language with considerable force is Charles Olson.

you can't use words as ideas any more than they can
be strung as sounds. They are meanings only and actions of
their own sort

-- Charles Olson
Collected Prose, 202

I. Olson

Olson spent his summers as a child on the seaport town of Gloucester, Massachusetts.

From 1950 through the late 1960s he composed *The Maximus Poems*, a five-volume collection that focuses on American history in its broadest sense, while it localizes the entirety of the poem in the city of Gloucester. The first generation modernist American poets, Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams, were of great influence to Olson. *Maximus* in some ways resembles Pound's *Cantos*. To develop an understanding of Olson's poetry and poetics it is important to mention that he is coming out of the legacy of these modernists. So too, Whitman, Thoreau, and the American pragmatists embodied the historical and conceptual framework which Olson was a descendent of, and these predecessors inevitably shape a great deal of what Olson eventually comes to say about poetry. Olson himself is more often regarded for his writing of poetic manifestoes (Hallberg 2) rather than his poems, although there is a risk in oversimplifying Olson's work by merely regarding the poetry and the poetics as two separate genres.

Action is at the very center of both Olson's poetics and his poetry. The tripartite relationship between word, thing, and action is a focal point of Olson's work. For Olson, action is a concept that can be understood on the level of the word, through the movement of the body, and finally, with regards to the continuous changing of any culture and society. To approach the

idea of action in Olson is to first understand where he is coming from in American literary history, and to realize where he is going. The action is one that incorporates body at its core, and it is a body that operates in space, in time, and in history. The action that appears in Olson's work is that of the gesture. His attention to the movement of the body and interest in new methods of communication makes Olson a relevant poet and theorist to consider in light of any discussion worth having over language and the challenge with meaning making in words.

The critic that wishes to say something about Olson's poetry is presented with an enormous challenge. Olson's emphatic poetic manifestoes (namely "Projective Verse") are read in classrooms and sited in discussions pertaining to American poetry after 1950 more often than the poetry itself is read at all. His predecessors, most notably the canonical T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and William Carlos Williams are so often sited in discussions of post-war contemporary American poetics, whereas Olson himself is often left to the wayside. There is a criticism of Olson's work that is common: the notion that his poetics are too monumental, that they demand a view of poetry so great, that his poems cannot feasibly support the complexity of his ideas. The critic and reader of Olson may find difficulty in saying something about the work, for his ruminations, explanations, letters to friends, editors, students, and fellow poets that reveal an enormous breadth of reading, knowledge, and insight into how poetry should be read and composed, what the poet should do, and what verse can be, is difficult to ignore when faced with the challenge to say something about the experience of reading Olson.

Though Olson's essays and poetry should be read in tandem with one another: poetics as a form of poetry and the poetry as a continuation of the poetics. No essay should be read *onto* any one particular poem, and no unit of *The Maximus Poems* can be traced back to any one dictum of his essays. Rather, it is important to keep in mind that poetry is defined in terms of

process for Olson. The poet William Carlos Williams writes in Book I of *Paterson*: “no ideas but in things” a maxim that Olson recycles. So too the critic of Olson must apply this very idea to the process of reading his work so that precise attention is paid to what is *there* in the poems themselves. The scholar George Butterick provides a useful tool in his *A Guide to the Maximus Poems* for any reader that wishes to chart a path through the entire collection. Above all else precision of attention is the only thing the reader can go on.

Olson is concerned with history: one that is distinctly American. Olson is writing in the wake of World War II. Postwar America explores “the active” and Olson is clearly working with this idea as well. Olson’s influences go farther back in the American grain, though. 19th century Pragmatism, pioneered by William James and James Dewey, for instance, introduced the idea that knowledge is attained through the doing of things. There is cohesion between theory and practice. James’ thoughts here link the knower with the doer. In this case the individual is called to act, must perform some doing, in sum, must live up to what is expected of him in the vast scheme of existence. Consider James’ idea of action in “The Sentiment of Rationality”:

The monstrously lopsided equation of the universe and its *knower*, which we postulate as the idea of cognition, is perfectly paralleled by the no less lopsided equation of the universe and the *doer*. We demand it in character for which our emotions and active propensities shall be a match. Small as we are, minute as is the point by which the cosmos impinges upon each one of us, each one desires to feel that his reaction at that point is congruous with the demands of the vast whole—that he balances the later, so to speak, and is able to do what it expects of him (James 17,18).

What is essential here is James’ insistence on the link between the doer and the knower: the acquisition of knowledge is attained by acting, by assuming some kind of responsibility and fulfilling that duty.

John Dewey connects an individual’s action with the notion of experience. What is experience? Dewey explores this in his writings in *Experience and Nature*: “We begin by noting

that ‘experience’ is what James called a ‘double barreled word’. Like its congeners, life and history, it includes *what men do and suffer, what they strive for[...]* It is ‘double-barrelled’ in that it recognizes in its primary integrity no division between act and material, subject and object, but contains them both in an unanalyzed totality” (Dewey 8). Experience is composed of both “thing” and “thought” in which both are recognized in unity. What men strive for, as Dewey says, which can be referred to as their experience may be also thought of as striving towards the unity of thought and thing. Though to have an experience, action must inevitably occur.

Olson’s essay “Projective Verse”, which first appeared in 1950 in the magazine *Poetry New York* (Tytell vii), is perhaps the best place to begin in the pursuit of coming to understand this idea of action as it relates to language and the act of writing. The essay serves as a kind of preface to the rest of his ideas and as a response to the work of Pound and Williams before him. The essay outlines how poetry should be composed on the page. It begins:

(projectile	(percussive	(prospective
-------------	-------------	--------------

(PV 15).

Notice the unbound parenthetical. Immediately we understand that the word is not confined: it is left open to breathe, so to speak, to move outward. The first of the three: projectile. The word meaning the sending of an object into space with some degree of force. At the very beginning of the essay it is understood that motion is operating in language, that things are being sent, via kinesis, outwards. The next word: percussive. Sound is the next word we see. It is as if the object that came before this one, that has been projected into the air and finally: lands! And we hear it. Motion and then the sound of its impact. The third word: prospective. Time is the third concept unleashed. The temporality is one that is in the future, one that is about to happen, will come

eventually. Have we heard the object fall yet? Or are we waiting for it to hit the ground? Has it even been launched into the air? This early succession of words, unhinged by the parenthetical, sets up the essay to follow: it presents three concepts that will eventually come to bear on Olson's idea of action later in the essay and in the poems. Movement by force, sound of impact, and the possibility of action are linked together.

The beginning of the essay sets up a dichotomy for the purposes of defining what "projective verse" is in Olson's terms. "Closed verse" or the "non-projective" Olson says, despite the efforts of Pound and Williams, is a form of poetic composition that has existed in American and English poetry up until now. Verse must be salvaged: the only way to do so, to bring it back to life, so to speak, is to incorporate the breath into the work. "I want to do two things: first, try to show what projective of OPEN verse is, what it involves, in its act of composition, how, in distinction from the non-projective, it is accomplished; and II, suggest a few ideas about what stance toward reality brings such verse into being, what the stance does, both to the poet and to his reader" (Olson 15). Not only does Olson wish to distinguish the projective from the non-projective, but he wishes also to affirm that the idea of the projective is not only a form of composition, but that it is an outlook, a mantra so to speak, for how to engage with the world. At the very beginning of the essay, we learn that Olson is not only attempting to prescribe a remedy for the rigidity and density of closed form, but to so too suggest a new way to live and engage in the world.

The "closed verse" that Olson is opposing is one that is fixed in form. Olson credits Pound and Williams for instigating the transition in American poetry towards a more open form at the beginning of the essay. For example, Olson's idea that the poem on the page was a world unto itself is an idea he reformulates after Williams before him. In *Spring and All* Williams

writes: “poetry: new form dealt with as a reality in itself” (67). Before him, Pound published a collection of essays in 1934 entitled *Make it New*, based on the slogan he coined during the modernism period. It would serve as a central imperative to his writing and as a fixed challenge for future American poetic movements. Olson uptakes Pound’s challenge with the ideas he presents in “Projective Verse”. Olson demands an attention to the present moment and calls for a new configuration of language on the page that would explode the rigidity of verse prior to 1950 and offer up new possibilities for meaning making. To begin with, Olson states at the end of the essay that T.S. Eliot is not projective. Consider the format of the poem “Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” first published in 1915:

*S' io credessi che mia risposta fosse
A persona che mai tornasse al mondo,
Questa fiamma staria senza più scosse.
Ma perciocchè giammai di questo fondo
Non tornò vivo alcum, s' i' odo il vero,
Sensa tema d' infamia ti rispondo.*

Let us go then, you and I,
When the evening is spread out against the sky
Like a patient etherized upon a table;
Let us go, through certain half-deserted streets,
The muttering retreats
Of restless nights in one-night cheap hotels
And sawdust restaurants with oyster-shells:
Streets that follow like a tedious argument
Of insidious intent
To lead you to an overwhelming question . . .

Oh, do not ask, “What is it?”
Let us go and make our visit.

In the room the women come and go
Talking of Michelangelo.

The yellow fog that rubs its back upon the window panes,
The yellow smoke that rubs its muzzle on the window panes,
Licked its tongue into the corners of the evening,
Lingered upon the pools that stand in drains,

[130]

(*Poetry: A Magazine of Verse*)

Olson writes that Eliot's lines are "dramatic", but that he fails as a dramatist. What is drama? Etymologically *drama* comes from the Greek term *dran*, which means "to do". Eliot's verse does not achieve the dramatic effect Olson is looking for: the language does not act. Moreover, Eliot's closed verse cannot achieve the same impact that a so-called projective verse can because he remains, in principle, within the mind and not the body. Thus, Olson opens with his first demand: that the breath and the totality of the body be incorporated back into the process of poetic composition. Pound and Williams get closer to what Olson demands of the poet at the start of 1950. Compare *The Pisan Cantos* with *Paterson*:

CANTO XC

*Animus humanus amor non est,
sed ab ipso amor procedit; et
ideo seipso non diligit, sed amore
qui seipso procedit.*

5 **F**ROM the colour the nature
 & by the nature the sign!"
Beatic spirits welding together
 as in one ash-tree in Ygdrasil.
Baucis, Philemon.
Castalia is the name of that fountain in the hill's fold,
 the sea below,
 narrow beach.
Templum aedificans, not yet marble,
 "Amphion!"
10 And from the San Ku 

孤

to the room in Poitiers where one can stand
 casting no shadow,
15 That is Sagetrieb,
 that is tradition.
Builders had kept the proportion,
 did Jacques de Molay
 know these porportions?
20 and was Erigena ours?
 Moon's barge over milk-blue water
Kuthera δεινά
Kuthera sempiterna
 Ubi amor, ibi oculus.
25 Vae qui cogitatis inutile.
 quam in nobis similitudine divinae
 reperetur imago.
"Mother Earth in thy lap"
 said Randolph
30 ήγάπησεν πολύ
liberavit masnatos.

The theme
is as it may prove: asleep, unrecognized—
all of a piece, alone
in a wind that does not move the others—
in that way: a way to spend
a Sunday afternoon while the green bush shakes.

. . . a mass of detail
to interrelate on a new ground, difficultly;
an assonance, a homologue
 triple piled
pulling the disparate together to clarify
and compress

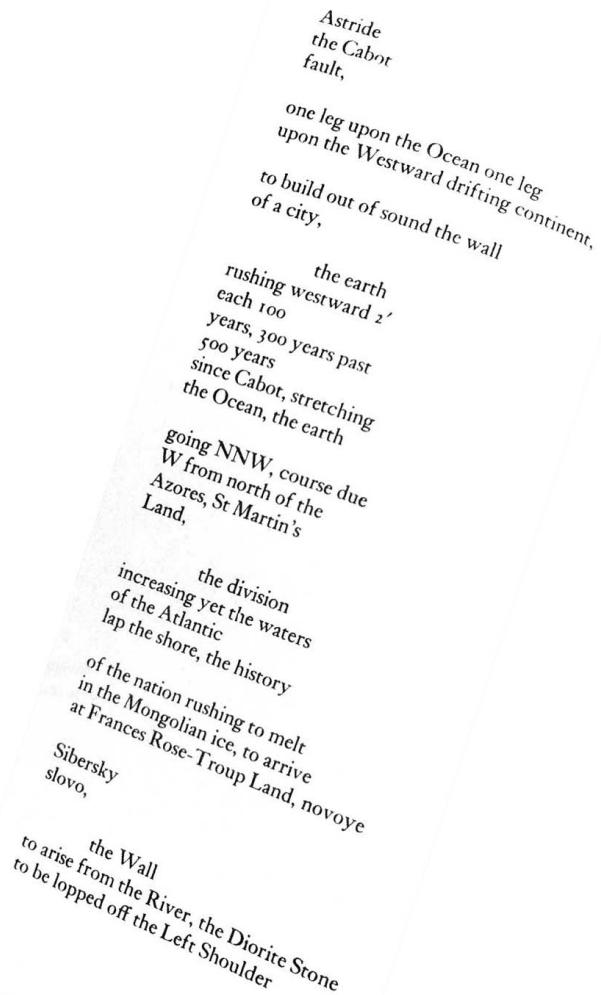
the river, curling, full—as a bush shakes
and a white crane will fly
and settle later! White, in
the shallows among the blue-flowered
pickerel-weed, in summer, summer! if it should
ever come, in the shallow water!

On the embankment a short,
compact cone (juniper)
that trembles frantically
in the indifferent gale: male—stands
rooted there .

The thought returns: Why have I not
but for imagined beauty where there is none
or none available, long since
put myself deliberately in the way of death?

Stale as a whale's breath: breath!
Breath!

As with Eliot, the poems are formally confined to the left side margin of the page. Olson's verse experiments with structure explicitly. Consider these two forms in contrast to a stanza of "Steven's Song", which can be found in Volume III of *The Maximus Poems* for instance:



(MP, III.37,404)

The stanzas are pulled towards the southeast. The left margin of the page is no longer a constraint. Olson was interested in the potential of language once the breath was incorporated

into the composition of poetry. There are three qualities that Olson provides that distinguish the projective from the non-projective: “(1) the *kinetics* of the thing. A poem is energy transferred form 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” (Olson 16). The idea of the projected object is recycled here. The poem itself is some kind of interstitial region between where the poet got the energy, to the poet, all the way to the reader. The poem is a record of this passage of energy. Projective verse, as measured by its kinetics, reveals this relationship between reader, poet, and energy source. “FIELD COMPOSITION” as Olson terms it, allows the poet to situate himself within this energy circuit, he is aware “instant-by-instant” of the forces operating between poet and energy source, between poet and poem, and between reader and poem.

The second facet of this new kind of outlook 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” (*PV* 16). The poet Robert Creeley is to credit for this idea. Creeley means to emphasize here that the way something is said, declares what is being said. The form dictates the what that is being communicated. For the purposes of this idea of the projective, Olson means to say that the form, the open-verse composition, dictates what is being said in is openness, it so too allows for this stance towards reality to be realized within the functioning of the verse as such. The third piece of this argument that Olson provides is the following:

Now (3) the *process* of the thing, how the principle can be made to shape the energies that the form is accomplished. And I think it can be boiled down to one statement (first pounded into my head by Edward Dahlberg): ONE PERCEPTION MUST IMMEDIATELY AND DIRECTLY LEAD TO A FURTHER PERCEPTION. It means exactly what it says, is a matter of, at *all* points (even, I should say, of our management of daily reality as of the daily work) get on with it, keep moving, keep in, speed, the nerves, their speed, the perceptions, theirs, the acts, the split second acts, the whole business, keep it moving as fast as you can,

citizen. And if you also set up as poet, USE, USE, USE the process at all points, in any given poem always, always one perception must must must MOVE, INSTANTER, ON ANOTHER! (PV 17)

It is easy to see in Olson's explanation in the essay that he favors movement: the excessive use of comma splices between each new thought moves the sentence forward, until the moment when the text is in bold, and there is a moment where both the writer and reader can take a breath, release energy, and move on to the next idea. The essay itself in form assumes the kind of generative movement that he wishes the poems to uphold. The idea of process is difficult to understand simply. What must be understood here though is the idea that one perception must immediately and directly lead to a further perception. The process of perception is one that operates in such a way that perceptions lead from one into the next: so much so that the process or succession of perceptions is the focus, and not the individual perceptions themselves. MOTION here occurs when perception is seen as a process between things and not particular, distinct moments of experience. The task of the poet, then, is to put this process TO USE! The idea being: to make one perception move on another, in verse, in open form, in language.

Olson considers the composition of the poem to be process-based. In terms of *The Maximus Poems*, each poem is not its own distinct unit. Rather, they are structurally connected to one another, so that seen in their entirety they stitch together a whole. Rosemarie Waldrop makes the connection in her "Charles Olson: Process and Relationship" that *The Maximus Poems* is the knotting together of a net. This is somewhat problematic, for it supposes that the final result is a single product: a physical object. For Olson poetry writing is process writing. Olson studied the work of the English philosopher Alfred North Whitehead, specifically his book *Process and Reality*. In it, Whitehead outlines a complicated view of reality, the cosmos, and physical reality. Whitehead himself opposes the views of perception that are outlined by such thinkers like

Descartes and Locke: instead, he posits a view of reality that challenges the Cartesian idea of substance, which suggests that minds and bodies exist to stand in need of nothing beyond themselves. Whitehead challenges this idea of “furniture” as Olson and others have described it and instead posits that the world is ever-changing and expanding, it is not frozen but in constant motion, in a perpetual state of becoming. Olson’s idea of the projective connects to this very premise. As Shahar Bram writes in *Charles Olson and Alfred North Whitehead*: “Olson perceives the space of the poem as living and breathing. He develops a poetics of events and process whereby the long poem is viewed as a continuously expanding poetic universe, enabling a poetics of multiplicity within unity” (Bram 25). The relationship between body and language is another aspect of Olson’s poetics that will eventually connect to this notion of action. But this immediate point must be made clear: the poem, like the universe, is expanding. Each poetic “unit”, each letter, each piece of text in the poem constitutes the whole, and that whole is continuing to expand. As such, Olson’s “work” is one in the process of occurring. *Maximus* is a work that continues to grow, open up, extend outwards. Whitehead writes in *Science and the Modern World*:

Thus nature is a structure of evolving processes. The reality is the process. It is nonsense to ask if the color red is real. The color red is ingredient in the process of realization. The realities of nature are theprehensions in nature, that is to say, the events in nature (429).

This is one of those moment’s in Whitehead’s rhetoric that seem to appear like a flash of light in the midst of seemingly impenetrable theory, at least for a reader who has not encountered him before. But this idea seems so relevant and applicable to Olson and his sense of how perception functions. The world is an ever expanding idea, the reality of it’s existence is a process. It is “nonsense” to ask if the color red is “real” because the color red, as Whitehead says, is the process of realizing that it is so. The event, the happening upon the color red is what Whitehead

is focused on, and it is this very idea that Olson emphasizes in *The Maximums Poems*. Consider part of “Letter 9”:

I, dazzled

as one is, until one discovers
 there is no other issue than
 the moment of
 the pleasure of
 this plum,
 these things
 which don’t carry their end any further than
 their reality in
 themselves

(*MP*, I.42, 46)

There is no other issue than the moment of. The moment of what? Of some action that will happen, that will be a source of pleasure. The moment of “this plum” is to say that the plum is moving, the same way that the recognition of the color red is the process by which the viewer comes to understand the color red. These “things”: be it color, as denoted by the word “red”, the moment of the thing, the fruit, the name it bears, they only call attention to the reality in themselves. They don’t carry their end any further than the fact that they exist. The “realness” of the pleasure of eating a plum is not a question that should be asked. There is no other issue than the moment, the instant.

The physical comes to bear on the composition of lines in a poem. Olson begins this explanation of the atomics of language with the syllable: “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, the larger forms, of a poem” (*PV* 17). At the basis of the line is this small structural unit, this small piece of language material that holds the line together. This emphasis on the syllable is later revealed to be inextricably tied to the senses, to the body: “I say the syllable, kind, and that it is spontaneous, this way: the ear, the ear which has collected, which has listened, the ear, which is

so close to the mind that it is the mind's, that it has the mind's speed..." (*PV* 18). In *The Maximus Poems* the same is stated: "said he, coldly, the/ ear!" (*MP*, I.2, 6). The ear as part of the sensorial machinery listens and understands, like the mind. Later: "it is from the union of the mind and the ear that the syllable is born" (*PV* 17). The mind and the ear birth this small structural unit of language. The BODY necessitates an engagement with language, even on this atomic level.

The syllable is a structural component, though. It builds to form lines, and lines later form poems. The line, Olson states, does not come out of the EAR, but the BREATH: the lungs: "The line comes (I swear it) from the breath, from the breathing of the man who writes, and thus is, it is here that, the daily work, the WORK, gets in [...]" (*PV* 19). Here we understand Olson's process of writing literally as *living*; writing is evidence of the fact that the poet is breathing and working (the man who writes, and thus "is"). The ear first brings the syllable into being, and then the breath formulates the line. The body and its senses necessarily determine how the language is composed. Olson formulates a blueprint for this kind of translation:

the HEAD, by way of the EAR, to the SYLLABLE
 the HEART, by way of the BREATH, to the LINE (*PV* 19).

The direction of this translation from body to language is outward, and that direction is one that must be understood beyond Creeley, for example whom Olson dedicates his *Maximus* to: "for ROBERT CREELEY—the Figure of Outward" (*MP*).

The direction outward, the movement of the line as an extension of the breath, this relationship between text and body, is the focus here. Though, the line is comprised of a variety of things, words, objects, and these internal components are part of this action that is done outward. Similes, Olson says, slow the line down. By comparison and by likening things to other things, the line does not hold a sense of immediacy, and does not possess the same force. They

“drain on the energy which composition by field allows” (*PV* 20). The field is a new idea: “(We now enter, actually, the large area of the whole poem, into the FIELD, if you like, where the syllables and all the lines must be managed in their relations to each other.) It is a matter finally of OBJECTS, what they are, what they are inside a poem, how they got there, and once there, how they are to be used” (*PV* 20). The FIELD: the vast expanse of space on which the poem operates contains within it objects, and objects that must be used. The simile, for example, does not allow this process to occur, because the object does not act, instead it is likened to another thing that performs an entirely different operation. Through comparison, the two function in relation to each other and they lose their force. This idea of objects in the poem that are put to use is the key to understanding Olson’s sense that the poem must operate the way reality does: “(the syllable, the line, as well as the image, the sound, the sense) must be taken up as participants in the kinetic of the poem just as solidly as we are accustomed to take what we call the objects of reality; and that these elements are to be seen as creating the tensions of a poem just as totally as do those other objects create what we know as the world” (*PV* 20). The poem itself would, if it uses objects in such a kinetic way, create tensions and structures of meaning the same way that objects in the world illustrate what we know to be our reality.

The key to understanding the poem that contains real things is the idea of speech: “Because breath allows *all* the speech-force of language back in [...] everything in it [the poem] can now be treated as solids, objects, things; [...] yet each of these elements of a poem can be allowed, once the poem is well composed, to keep, as those other objects do, their proper confusions” (*PV* 21). Each object operates in its own way, in its own space; it has its own confusions. Everything in the poem can be treated as “solid” as real. Speech gives language force, and because of this, the objects within the poem are charged, they contain matter, they are

“solid” in the vague sense that they can be moved, recognized as whole, they have substance: they are not ideas. They are tangible things. The way that these things move, the way that they operate within both the line and the larger whole involves grammar. Looking to Olson’s work in the poems a bit later, it will be understood that his use of grammar and syntax is so precise so as to allow these solids to operate, to move, in a very specific way.

Olson sites Ernest Fenollosa at this point in the essay. Fenollosa’s essay “The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry” deals with language as an action precisely. The first claim that must be understood is that of succession: “Perhaps we do not always sufficiently consider that thought is successive, not through some accident or weakness of our subjective operations but because the operations of nature are successive. The transferences of force from agent to object, which constitute natural phenomena, occupy time” (Fenollosa 14). Thought is (perhaps) successive, because things that happen in nature occur consecutively, in time. Consider Fenellosa’s mention of the function of gesture aside the presence of an image: “If we all knew *what division* of this mental horse-picture each of these signs stood for, we could communicate continuous thought to one another as easily by drawing them as by speaking words. We habitually employ the visible language of gesture in much this same manner” (Fenollosa 15). “The visual language of gesture” communicates something, stands in place of something, “continuously”, without the aid of verbal language. The ideogram, like the gesture, communicates meaning. However, the meaning, according to Fenollosa, is one that is distinctly verbal. The image stands in place of the action: “It is not so well known, perhaps, that the great number of these ideographic roots carry in them a *verbal idea of action*. It might be thought that a picture is naturally the picture of a *thing*, and therefore the root ideas of Chinese are what grammar calls nouns” (Fenollosa 16). Here Fenollosa introduces the connection between

language and action. The picture represents the thing, or in the grammatical sphere: the noun. So, the image represents the things, or nouns, doing actions in order, in succession.

Fenollosa pauses for a moment to describe the noun, the small familiar thing in the world: “A true noun, an isolated thing, does not exist in nature. Things are only terminal points, or rather the meeting points, of actions, cross-sections cut through actions, snap-shots” (Fenollosa 17). What happens *between* things is the idea. So, in grammatical terms, the verb would fit in between these two nodes: “Neither can a pure verb, an abstract motion, be possible in nature. The eye sees noun and verb as one: things in motion, motion in things” (Fenollosa 17). In Letter 9 Maximus writes: “the flowering plum/out the front door window/sends whiteness/inside my house” (*MP*, I.41,45). The kinetic effect that the plum has is the plum’s significance. The meaning of the object is in this case the plum’s very presence.

Fenollosa expresses the idea of the sentence in two specific ways: “[T]heir [grammarians] definitions fall into two types: one, that a sentence expresses a ‘complete thought’; the other, that in it we bring about a union of subject and predicate” (Fenollosa 17). Fenollosa opposes the presence of both of these functions in nature. In the former, the one that calls to mind the expression of a complete thought, Fenollosa makes clear that “no full sentence really completes a thought[...] The truth is that acts are successive, even continuous; one causes or passes into another” (Fenollosa 17). In the second model, he unites the subject and predicate: “[T]he sentence according to this definition is not an attribute of nature but an accident of man as a conversational animal” (Fenollosa 18). Man as a conversational animal, as the agent that through speaking, transmits energy, is at the center of this discussion. The sentence operates in the following way:

term from which	transference of force	term to which
--------------------------------	--------------------------------------	------------------------------

(Fenollosa 18)

The sentence proceeds in succession from the “term from which” to the “term to which”. The between, the “transference of force” is the action that is done from one thing to another. The operation is simplified: “agent act object” (Fenollosa 19). This particular formulation “brings language close to *things*, and in its strong reliance upon verbs it erects all speech into a kind of dramatic poetry” (Fenollosa 19). So language apparently needs to be oriented towards things, the familiar, the objects in the world so that it may perform action. Olson writes: “But there is a loss in Crane of what Fenollosa is so right about, in syntax, the sentence as first act of nature, as lightening, as passage of force from subject to object, quick, in this case, from Hart to me, in every case, from me to you, the VERB, between two nouns” (*PV* 21). The VERB between two nouns acts like the passage of energy between two distinct things.

The second half of Olson’s essay has to do with his idea that the projective involves not only a very particular attention to how things are operating in the poem, but so too how they function in reality. This task is one that involves the poet himself remaining *physically present* in the world and through precise attention, devotes himself to the appraisal and notice of things: “But breath is man’s special qualification as animal. Sound is a dimension he has extended. Language is one of his proudest acts. And when a poet rests in these they are in himself (in his physiology, if you like, but life in him, for all that) then he, if he chooses to speak from these roots, works in the area where nature has given him size, projective size” (*PV* 26). From breath, to sound, to language, man has executed a kind of act. There is a sense here in these lines that the

idea of presence is essential to the act of writing. In order to write, man's body must be present, he relies on his senses, he breathes, and then he creates language. The act of writing poetry is the process by which the poet navigates from perception to written word. Olson concludes the essay: “[...]a projective poet will, down through the workings of his own throat to that place where the breath comes from, where breath has its beginnings, where drama has to come from, where, the coincidence is, all act springs” (*PV* 26). The projective poet enacts language, BECAUSE the poet has a body. All act springs from within the body, from its source, outwards.

This idea that language is an *extension* of the body is hard to imagine, at least as far as Olson's process is concerned. How is it that Olson's body, his physical matter, comes to bear on the poem itself? By what sequence of events does the poet's body get itself into the poem? If the poem is itself a process, and not a product, how can we come to understand the process by which the energy of the body infiltrates the word?

This idea that the body is the essential underpinning of language of Olson's poetics is expanded upon in the essay “Proprioception”. Olson here makes his argument on the basis of the actual physiology of the body, its physical matter. He begins with a definition:

Physiology:

the surface (senses- the ‘skin’: of ‘Human Universe’)
 the body itself- proper
 —one’s own ‘corpus’: PROPRIOCEPTION
 TION the cavity of the body, in which
 the organs are slung: the viscera, or interceptive,
 the old ‘psychology’ of feeling,
 the heart; of desire, the liver, of sympathy,
 the ‘bowels’; of courage—kidney etc—
 gall[...] (*P*, 182).

The cavity of the body contains the organs, the internal parts. This is where the feeling dwells: in the physiology of the tissues, the ligaments, and the skin. Later we get “PROPRIOCEPTION: the

data of depth sensibility/ the ‘body’/ of us as object which spontaneously/ or of its own order produces experiences/ of ‘depth’ Viz/ SENSIBILITY WITHIN THE ORGANISM/BY THE MOVEMENT OF ITS OWN TISSUES” (Olson 182). The movement of the body through the extension of its tissues reveals, the sensibility of that body. Olson has only described the sense of the body moving, perhaps as a reflection of the internal workings of the body.

‘ACTION’—OR, AGAIN, ‘MOVEMENT’

This ‘demonstration’ then leads to the same third, or corpus, thing or ‘place.’
the

proprious-ception
‘one’s own’-ception

the ‘body’ itself as, by movement of its own tissues, giving the data of, depth (P, 183).

The body collects information and “gives data”. The moving body allows an individual to form “one’s own ception”. The active body is one that has undergone experience. The individual body is distinct, it records and perceives experience entirely differently than any other body would.

Later he reveals that the soul is a physical part of the body:

The soul is then equally physical. Is the self. Is such, ‘corpus’. Or—to levy [...] surface (senses) projection cavity (organs—here read ‘archetypes’) unconscious the body itself—consciousness: implicit accuracy, from its own energy as a state of implicit motion (P, 184).

Consciousness is the body acting in a state of implicit motion. William James’s essay “The Sentiment of Rationality” is relevant to Olson’s attention to the physical body and its connection to the accumulation of experience over time. James argues that in order to know things, the body must do something, must act in such a way so as to have an experience, and that experience is

unique to that particular body. The notion that the body must act then becomes a kind of duty, it is assumed and it is necessary in order to come to know things. Olson's phrase "energy as a state of implicit/motion" seems to describe a similar system, where the individual acts without question, performs a duty, assumes responsibility. Olson introduces the concept of '*istorin*' in *A Special View of History*³, a term he gets from his reading of Herodotus. It means "finding out for oneself". The attention Olson places on the individual is central to an understanding of what he is attempting to do within poetry. The individual body that interacts with space and the objects within it undergoes an experience. Olson's American outlook for poetry has to do precisely with his insistence on space. In *Call Me Ishmael*, an analysis of Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*, Olson introduces this very premise: "I take SPACE to be the central fact to man born in America, from Folsom cave to now. I spell it large because it comes large here. Large, and without mercy. It is geography at bottom, a hell of wide land from the beginning. That made the first American story (Parkman's): exploration" (17). The body is the instrument for experiencing the world; the American body explores SPACE, boundless space. Picture the geographic plane: two oceans bracket the terrain that dwells within them. The unexamined terrain is confined within the closed parenthesis:

ocean (land) ocean

) **SPACE** (⁴

³Olson delivered these series of lectures at Black Mountain College, (where Olson met Creeley, Duncan, and many other artists that were teaching there at the time such as choreographer Merce Cunningham, whose classes and lectures Olson attended regularly, John Cage, Buckminster Fuller, and a slew of other American avant-garde thinkers and writers. Olson's influence can be seen in the work of poets such as John Wieners, Jonathan Williams, Ed Dorn, Joel Oppenheimer, Michael Rumaker, and many others who were students at the college during the 1950s. Olson first taught in 1948 and then resumed his position in 1951 until 1956.

⁴ This is how I see the parenthesis working with regards to SPACE and the American at least. The symbols are actually FORCED outwards when the poet wills himself onto the expanse of the page, thus confronting the space that is closed, until it is attended to with precision and force.

American exploration explodes the confines of the closed parenthesis. The acting body forces these limits outward. Olson uses the open-ended parenthesis in *The Maximus Poems* repeatedly to further his projective outlook and to perhaps signify this force outwards onto the page, like the American who wills himself onto the geography in order to pursue his experience.

The body that interacts with SPACE, with a plane of any kind, is dependent upon its own energy source. What must be noted before any further consideration of Olson's theory is the fact that the work of the postwar American painters, Olson's contemporaries, is emblematic of an essential concept: the gesture. Carter Ratcliff's *The Fate of A Gesture* and Harold Rosenberg's essay "The American Action Painters" surmise that action painting was a process-based phenomenon and one that involved the active body of the artist. Rosenberg writes: "At a certain moment the canvas began to appear to one American painter after another as an arena in which to act—rather than as a space in which to reproduce, redesign, analyze or 'express' an object, actual or imagined. What was to go on the canvas was not a picture but an event" (2). The plane of the canvas in some ways resembles Olson's "field" on the page. The vast expanse of space allows for infinite possibilities for action to occur. Ratcliff's argument centers around the action painters, namely Pollock, and considers the development of his aesthetic: "The artist's postures signal no falsity; though he's not painting, he is not acting. He is behaving and appears to be at one with his behavior, like someone running not for form but to get somewhere quickly" (Ratcliff 8). This idea that the painter "behaves", needs to get somewhere quickly, is akin to Olson's own regard of writing as "process" or as "work". The scale of Pollock's paintings is made possible through his use of the gesture; the marks made on the canvas cohere with the body that performed the action: "Even a small poured painting is ungraspably large in scale; and even the largest has a human scale, because it is a residue of the artist's gestures" (Ratcliff 70). Drip

lines on the canvas convey much more than visual complexity and depth on the plane. They materialize the internal energy pathways of the body. They bear the evidence of the mobile body that produced them. Robert Duncan seems to allude to the gesture, with regards to language, when he describes Olson's work in "Towards an Open Universe": "the totality of the body is involved in the act of the poem, so that the organization of words, an invisible body, bears the imprint of the physical man" (Duncan 11). Ratcliff argues that the total spatial magnitude, the infinity that the canvases convey, locate the same boundlessness in the body: "the infinite were bodily and the body were infinite" (Ratcliff 70). Through Pollock's use of gesture, the energy of the body is literally projected onto the canvas: the product depicts a space that is interminable, and by virtue of the fact that the body was implied in its creation, the dimensions of the corporeal are thrust open onto the plane. The result is the documentation of the event: the interaction between human body and space.

Thus the gesture can be understood to be an American action: Olson's insistence on the individual's pursuit of SPACE is akin to the painter's confrontation of the space of the canvas. The gestures that the artist, the poet, the American left behind are the markings of a human being confronting the physical openness, potentiality, and possibility that space allows for. Space was Pollock's concern as well. "Pollock 'left us at the point where we must become preoccupied with and even dazzled by the space and objects of our everyday life, either our bodies, clothes, rooms, or if need be, the vastness of Forty-second Street' (Ratcliff 175). Pollock's work returns the attention to the "everyday", to the familiar objects in the world. This idea of the familiar was not wholly Pollock's. "The argument had precedents. 'Art should not be different from life but an act within life,' John Cage had declared at Black Mountain College" (Ratcliff 175).

The individual is forced to act within space, to redirect his attention to the familiar. In a section entitled “Objects” in the *Special View* lecture, Olson weaves his ideas of history and the body together. These two concepts are tied together on the very basis that “There is no limit to what you can know. Or there is only in the sense that you don’t find out or you don’t seek to know” (*SVH* 29). The challenge is to realize that this acquisition has to do with acting, with doing, with seeking out the rest of what you don’t already know. History comes to play here:

I see history as the one way to restore the familiar to us—to stop treating us cheap. Man is forever estranged to the degree that his stance toward reality disengages him from the familiar. And it has been the immense task of the last century and a half to get man back to what he knows. I repeat that phrase: *to what he knows*. For it turns out to coincide exactly to that other phrase: *to what he does*. What you do is precisely defined by what you know (*SVH* 29).

To get man back to what he knows he must act. The “familiar” returns man to the things that are in his life everyday: the objects of reality that constitute that reality. “Which is the first way to define the objective; that it is anything OUTSIDE of any one of us. This is knowable. Most of us stop at the fact that it is experientable” (*SVH* 30). What lies outside the body must be experienced; the objective is that which the body must come into contact with something. Beyond this point, beyond the very basis that it *can* be experienced, is the sense that it is knowable, and that by experiencing it, we come to know it. Knowledge can then be used, and in the case of Olson—it is put to use in poetry.

“Human Universe” directs attention to the *internal* body, not merely the objects around it: “In other words, we are ourselves both the instrument of discovery and the instrument of definition” (*HU* 53). Through the body, the individual in space is able to endure experience and gain knowledge. “Human Universe”, more than any of Olson’s other poetic ruminations thus far, collapses his idea of the body and language together the most successfully.

The body is the crux of inquiry for obtaining knowledge: it is the instrument that allows the individual to experience the world. Olson argues that the body itself must be *measured*, investigated, confronted. The body and language are intertwined: “Which is of course, why language is a prime of the matter and why, if we are to see some of the laws afresh, it is necessary to examine, first, the present condition of the language—and I mean language exactly in its double sense of discrimination (logos) and of shout (tongue)” (*HU* 53). The present condition of language for Olson is this: logos and tongue. This later bit, the “tongue” is what Olson sees as that part of language that has been ignored, pulled to the wayside. The synecdoche of the tongue for the idea of speech is powerful, for it exposes a desire to reunite speech with language.

If the totality of the body is involved in the act of the poem, the poem itself bears an imprint of the body that produced it. The measure of man is this constant oscillation between consonance and dissonance, as Duncan says, a being in or out of tune with the poem and with the body. There is a musicality that must be balanced, between word and body, and this is what Olson is trying to articulate with his syllogism in the essay. The HEAD, by way of the EAR, gets itself into the SYLLABLE. The HEART by way of the BREATH gets to the LINE. There is a cyclical passage of energy from inside to outside: the head and heart are internal, the ear and the breath are external. Finally, the output is within the poem itself: it bears imprint of *both* the internal and external parts of the body.

At this point Olson’s argument about action in language is made the most clear: his demand for language to re-subsume the body takes him to his next concern: how action can be brought back into language. What has been “lost” in the medium is the focus of the essay, and the body on all fronts serves as the ultimate antidote to the crisis of language as Olson sees it. A

return to what man knows, in this case the very vessel in which he must dwell, the flesh, allows for greater understanding of his life. Later he writes: “In fact, by the very law of definition and discovery, who can extricate language from action?” (Olson 54). The point Olson is trying to make is important: the fact that the world is a landscape *to be discovered*, and as such, *to be defined*, calls for a kind of action on behalf of the one that wishes to know. And the action must occur in the present: “If there is any absolute, it is never more than this one, you, this instant, in action” (HU 55).

Olson sets up this idea of action as a postulate for the rest of the argument. Above all else, this sense that the body must act, may always undergo the possibility of action “ought to get us on” (HU 55). It is what makes most acts “of living and of writing—unsatisfactory” (HU 55). Action remains at the center of daily life and of writing. If these acts are not done, though, if they are not undertaken, if they are not completed, what is the risk? Duncan’s suggestion that the relationship between man and poetry is the fundamental liminality between being-in-tune or being-out-of –tune is part of this demand to act. Olson’s need to “get us on” has to do with action in life, not only in poetry. To be “out-of-tune” as Duncan suggests, is perhaps understood with regards to Olson’s sense that if action does not occur, energy is used to its disadvantage.

Olson wishes to return to things—to the familiar objects in the world. The use of comparison the simile gets the poet farther away from things as they actually are. To extrapolate and describe a thing is to only give the object partial attention. Olson writes:

All that comparison ever does is set up a series of *reference* points: to compare is to take one thing and try to understand it by marking its similarities to or differences from another thing [...] such analysis only accomplishes a *description*, does not come to grips with what really matters: that a thing, any thing, impinges on us by a more important fact, its self-existence, without reference to any other thing, in short, the very character of it which calls our attention to it, which wants us to know more about it, its particularity[...]the thing

itself, and its *relevance* to ourselves who are the experience of it (whatever it may mean to someone else, or whatever other relations it may have) (*HU*, 56).

In the poem “Letter 27 [withheld]” Olson writes: “An American/ is a complex of occasions” (*MP*, II.15,185). The essential fact that the American is concerned with space is related to this idea that we are the “experience of the thing itself”. The individual pays attention to the things within the space that are near, familiar.

This preoccupation with the body and action explains Olson’s affinity to Fenollosa and his notes on the Chinese ideogram. The exactitude of these images allowed them to capture the essence of the things they were meant to represent. The movement, the kinetics of the things that men gave attention to, were solidified within the stone. The process of transcription apparently operated as follows: man notices motion, a body moving, it gestures. The written equivalent of that which man sees is chosen so as to capture the thing *as it is, as it moves*. Olson, like Fenollosa, is interested in the image because it more impactfully demonstrates the relationship between that person that performed the gesture and the one that witnessed the gesture.) The image was the closest approximation to the interaction between the conscious body and that which it saw. The visuality of the image more effectively and rapidly communicated meaning in its pictorial soundness.

Though sight is only part of the sensorial apparatus. Olson extends the idea of perception to include the entirety of the body. The process by which the body undergoes experience, takes in information via the skin, for instance, has to do with Olson’s eventual premise that action must occur in language. He begins with the flesh:

There is only one thing you can do about kinetic, reenact it. Which is why the man said, he who possess rhythm possesses the universe. And why art is the only twin life has—its only value metaphysic. Art does not seek to describe but to enact. And if man is once more to possess intent in his life, to take up the responsibility implicit in his life, he has to comprehend his own process as intact,

from outside, by way of his skin, in, and by his own powers of conversion, out again. For there is this other part of the motion which we call life to be examined anew, that thing we overlove, man's action, that tremendous discharge of force which we overlove when we love it for its own sake but which (when it is good) is the equal of all intake plus all transposing (*HU*, 62-62).

Olson nears a more sound articulation of what the *responsibility* of a person is: how action of the body has to do with some understanding of the human's place in the world. Olson states that Art does not seek to approximate, describe, nature, but to enact it. For the body in space, man comes to comprehend his own physiology: he understands that he is separate from the environment in which he lives, that is, his skin separates him from the exterior world. To possess meaning in life, to take up this "responsibility", he must understand his life as entirely whole. This wholeness is preserved through the process by which man takes in the experience around him and must, "by his own powers of conversion" understand his life as entirely whole. The motion of the body involves a dual process: a taking in, and a release outwards. (Much like breathing, which is the catalyst for all projective endeavors.) The "wholeness" of the body is constituted by this reciprocity, this equilibrium of man's inward and external dimensions. Olson's insistence on the "active" is the basis of man's responsibility. Though there is a moment in the essay where Olson suggests that this responsibility is also the site of man's fall: "In other words, the proposition here is that man at his peril breaks the full circuit of object, image, action at any point. The meeting edge of man and the world is also his cutting edge" (*HU* 62). There is serious risk, incredible pressure put on the individual to act, and if he does not, the equilibrium of the internal and external does not remain intact. If man does not act, he does not accrue his experiences inward, and thus he cannot guarantee his own output. Olson's various ideas about the body and experience pool together at this moment in the essay. He states that if man does not treat all external reality as entirely relevant to his own inner life, he will use his energy

otherwise, in some other way. Olson is clear that man does influence external reality; he is part of that reality. If man chooses to use his energy, his internal source of power, in some other way, he will do so arbitrarily. This will cause him to affect nature in a negative way. He will use himself “if he choose, to his disuse” (*HU* 62). Olson’s precautionary tone is one that cannot be ignored because he acknowledges the principle relationship between the two siblings: art and life, and the risk implied when man *does not act*.

It is clear that Olson insists on the active in man. To remain inert, to not fully engage with external reality, with the objects that constitute that reality, to fail to use the body: these are the causes of an inactive stance towards reality. It is an insufficient way of living. Action is the only way that energy may be used.

The idea of the active, willful subject within space is the basis of *A Special View of History*. In “History, A Definition” Olson starts to blend some of the ideas from the other essays in this lecture: “(Only thus, by the way, can one say mortal—not as a ‘lifetime’, not as flesh going toward death and resurrection but as *history*: that you live. An active. The dynamic is, not the energy exploded, wasted, used, whatever is done with it. But that it is there, to be used” (*SVH*, 17). History is the fact that the human is living. Olson insists that history is *not* the account of the energy that what was “exploded, wasted, used”, all of which have occurred in the past, but that it is a confrontation with energy that “can be used”. At the end of this section on history Olson states: “A function is how a thing acts. There is a natural proper or characteristic action of anything. That is its function. As of a human life I say it is its history. It is the how. There can be no other” (*SVH*, 18).

The “how” of action has yet to be defined, it is perhaps in Olson’s poetry that this *way* of acting may reveal itself. Olson repeatedly insists on a call to action in these essays. From that

position, where man accepts responsibility and so chooses to *act on it*: his stance towards reality is revealed.

We learn from Olson that there are always two given stances that man may take at any time. The question “What did happen?” (*SVH*, 20) is something man asks himself and thus there are two alternatives: “make it up, or try to find out, both are necessary. We inherit an either-or, from the split of science and fiction” (*SVH*, 20). This complicates Olson’s original idea of history. Olson means to say that history is another kind of story. It is not only what is happening now, the function of a human life, but what happened *ago*, even if it occurred just seconds before the present moment. So, there are two stances that Olson posits. The first is to make it up, the second, to find out.

In order to know what happened man must tell the story. Story is *logos*: it is both word and mouth. Though this later part, this idea that story was also orally told, makes story also Muthos (*SVH*, 20). “What it all comes to is this, that to those who listened to the Stories a Muthos was a Logos, and a Logos was a Muthos. They were two names for the same thing” (*SVH*, 20). So, history is both fact and fiction, or man decides if it is either of the two. What Olson emphasizes is an idea he inherits from a book by Herodotus. Olson paraphrases: “‘*istorin* in him appears to mean ‘finding out for oneself,’ instead of depending on hearsay. The word had already been used by the philosophers. ‘But while they were looking for truth, Herodotus is looking for the evidence’” (*SVH*, 20). A bit of elaboration is needed here to understand Olson’s line of thought. The stance man takes is the decision: to find out what happened, or to make up what happened. Olson regards Herodotus as both a mythologist and a poet, he practiced “muthologos” or “the practice of life as story” (*SVH* 20).

What kind of truth is being suggested by the pursuit of the story alongside the idea of history as something that actually happened? And how, through poetry, does Olson achieve this? Again, the how has yet to be done: the possibility of action, of finding out for oneself is clear, but the execution of that desire has not been described. On the week of March 27th, 1968 Olson gave a series of lectures at Beloit College collectively entitled: “Poetry and Truth”. On Wednesday, March 27th, Olson elaborated on this idea of action and on this idea coined by Herodotus: the ‘*istorin*’ that apparently each individual must endure:

In other words, if you stop to think of yourself as an impediment of creation, I mean you...I think you follow me, that the unknown is rather your self's insides. And I suddenly was talking to these two men on the basis of the fact that that's exactly the whole meaning: that we become sure in the dark, that we move wherever we wish in the six directions with *that* light[...]I mean, literally, that to *light that dark* is to have come to whatever it is I think any of us seeks” (*SVH* 44).

What is the demand that Olson is putting on the poet? In a letter to Cid Corman, the editor of a magazine called *Origin* in Boston, Massachusetts, Olson writes:

that THE DEMAND
ON YOU, CID CORMAN, is, to accomplish each issue—to see it, always,
clearly, exhaustively, as—A

FIELD OF FORCE

that is, that, as agent of this collective (which ORIGIN is going to be) the question is larger than, yr taste, alone: it is the same sort of confrontation as—in any given poem—a man faces: how much energy he has got in, to make the thing stand on its own feet as, a force, in, the fields of force which surround everyone of us, of which we, too, are forces: to stand FORTH (Olson 50).⁵

Everything that man has at his disposal is used to make the poem stand on its feet, to make it live. So too, though, Olson calls for a kind of presence on behalf of *people*. To fine-tune their attention to such a precise degree that life itself is only a process of coming to know, and never

⁵ *Letters for Origin*

knowing. Olson is calling for a kind of gesture in art, in politics, and in life that has considerable repercussions. If these demands are not met, energy is wasted. If energy is wasted, if it is not harnessed in some way, if this tipping scale as Duncan shows us, is completely out of tune, man does not live up to his potential. Man does not live in his present if he uses energy to his disuse. To live in the present, to live in *what is happening*, is to engage with life through precise attention alone.

Olson's essays are the essential underpinnings of his poetry; they provide useful information that may aid the apprehensive reader. It would be a mistake to say that gesture was only Olson's doing. The gesture bears the evidence of an American concern for space and the need to encounter it. Gesture is the action Olson performs and this action is done in language. In the essay "The Present is Prologue" Olson reveals his own active position, his own responsibility to poetry: "[...] I find it awkward to call myself a poet or a writer. If there are no walls there are no names. This is the morning, after the dispersion, and the work of morning is methodology: how to use oneself, and on what. That is my profession. I am an archeologist of morning" (206-207). As an evidence seeker he acts in the midst of the dark, turning towards the day.

Movement (

In theory, Olson suggests that the body is inextricable from the process of writing. This is his most basic idea, but it is one that the reader may not understand with regards to the poetry itself.

Is Olson suggesting a sort of improvisation within writing?

Olson insists on an acute degree of attention on behalf of his reader, a kind of unrelenting pursuit of the present moment, of the objects in the poem and the way they move in relation to one another. Such is the arduous task that the reader must endure, for he cannot look outside of what is already inside the poem itself. Is this also true of the poet, who must pay attention to the demands of the energy of his body. It is at this same moment that the poem is created.

There is clearly a difference between what the body can do, and what words are capable of. Both act, yes, but in different ways. And perhaps this is a matter of the degree of force each of them exerts. The body exerts a force through presence, movement. Olson wants language to do the same thing, to demand attention the same way the body does, the way things do.

Words then are naming and logography is writing as though each word is physical and that objects are originally motivating. This is the doctrine of the earth.

--Charles Olson

from

“The Advantage of Literacy Is That Words Can Be on the Page: A Bibliography on the State of Knowledge for Charles Doria”

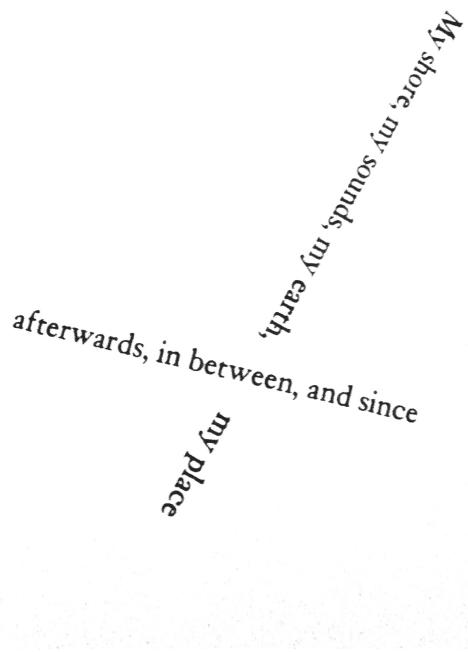
II. Gesture

The Maximus Poems are a dense collection; the reader unfamiliar with Olson's work may find them so formally experimental and densely allusive that it becomes hard to concentrate and attend to what is happening in the language. The series of poems constitute a world within themselves. Olson explores the scope of American history through the eyes of one Maximus of Tyre within the mythic city of Gloucester, Massachusetts. With a painstaking attention to the specificity of his place, Olson provides details of the particular houses on each street, makes maps with words of the geography of the space, and catalogues the names of the early settlers on the shore. Coupled with this attention to what he sees in Gloucester, Olson mines what he reads.⁶ His own experience and the particular details of his life also find their way into the poems: from his relationship to the poet Vincent Ferrini, to early memories of his childhood (that time before he knew the meaning of the word "tansy"), to the leaky sink in his house. He places the fishermen at work in their boats off-shore, takes issue with the habits of newsprint and advertising, details the vegetation life of the sea town, looks closely at rocks: reads the rocks.

The lone reader must confront the space of the poem the way the body interacts with the space of the world: attention to details, objects, and movement are necessary. The ideas set into motion in "Projective Verse" all call for a change in how verse is written. The poetics that Olson

⁶ Alfred North Whitehead and Herman Melville's conceptualizations of space and reality appear repeatedly for instance.

suggests is one that puts language into action. This is achieved through the special relationship between body and language, between the poet and the syllables and lines that eventually give shape to the form of the poem. It is important to remember, too, that the poem as Olson saw it was “a high energy construct”, the medium through which energy is transferred. The focus of this chapter is not merely to apply Olson’s poetics to his poetry. An awareness of his insistence on the body, language, the “active”, and this evolving term “gesture” is necessary in order to study Olson’s words, syntax, grammar. While journeying through the entirety of *Maximus* it becomes clear that Olson is experimenting with the ideas in “Projective Verse” to extreme degrees, so as to challenge the idea of poetry as process, and with it, the form of composition on a blank page. By the time he reaches “Cole’s Island” in Volume III, there are stanzas that stand alone on a single page: lines intersect each other to create a visual image of two phrases that appear to be occurring simultaneously:



(MP, III. 110, 438)

Visually the stanza stands out next to the earlier poems that are formally experimental in their own right, but they span the page in various horizontal configurations. Here Olson presents two phrases that collide: the first: “afterwards, in between, and since” the second: “My shore, my sounds, my earth, my place”. It appears that the word “between” has cut off “my place” from the first part of the sentence.

The Maximus Poems are divided into three volumes and composed of five parts. Formally the poems are “postmodern” in their scope. Not merely a historical term used to distinguish the art after World War II, the idea conceptualizes a new kind of energy in American culture. The “postmodern” is a word that is often used to describe Olson’s project in particular. In a letter to Robert Creeley in 1951, Olson describes what this means, and simultaneously castes the whole category aside:

my assumption is any POST-MODERN is born
with the ancient confidence that, he does belong.

So, there is nothing to be found. There is only (as
Shoenberg had it, his Harmony) search) tho, I should wish to
kill that word, too—there is only examination (Alcalay 67)

The postmodern, despite whether Olson considers it a useful idea or not, necessitates the human being in the universe, its presence. This sense of belonging is applicable to Duncan’s ideas in “Towards an Open Universe”. Meaning, according to Duncan, is already within what exists. This includes the human, as part of the world it lives in. There is “nothing to be found” because it is already there. The objective of the postmodern is examination, attention, and exploration, of *what is*. The task is to do something with what is already there: to act among and towards objects that are present. The body must act in response to what is already in front of it, what constitutes its reality. This is Olson’s project specifically: it is the seeking out of knowledge and the transmission of it.

Olson's "Projective Verse" essay is itself a manifesto of this kind of perspective. The critic and scholar George Butterick for instance takes up Olson's postmodern sensibility and describes it in relation to what Olson says about the difference between "the act of the instant" rather than the "thought about the instant" as he discusses in "Human Universe". What this kind of action looks like in language itself, in Olson's poetry, is complex: "In an effort to break free, post-modern poetry requires almost a total and systematic disordering or disorientation—not so much of the senses, as Rimbaud proposed—but of syntax, at the same time accompanied by a demand for a re-orientation to a new, a 'human universe' (Butterick 5).⁷ The post-modern in this case involves the acute attention on behalf of the reader. As Olson and Duncan suggest, the poem itself tries to put objects in relation to one another the way things in the universe do. Therefore, if attention to things in the world is what Olson wants for the individual, an attention to things happening in language is also what he demands on behalf of his reader.

This demand for attention on behalf of the reader and poet alike is related to Olson's use of the term '*istorin*'. This mantra of discovery puts the poet, the human, back into the framework of the universe, rather than being estranged from it (Butterick 7). This sense that more is required on behalf of the reader is such is absolutely true; he must pay attention to things in the poems, look closely at the solids in the poem, the things that are set into motion. The reader acts on a '*istorin*' throughout *Maximus* and makes it his business to unearth what's there.

The position of the poet, however, has to do with gesture, this aforementioned term that has yet to solidify conceptually. In a letter to Cid Corman on May 8, 1951 Olson writes:

That is (written) dance as it is definitely the *graphic of drama* (mime, as only the broader aspect of

⁷ Charles Olson and the Postmodern Advance

gesture &, motion
 (voice (verse) as working against, & out
 of, such, under motion---- dance as
 motion *around* language
 (*Origin* 53).

What becomes immediately clear here is Olson's concern for the image, for the visual aspect of dance aside and the visible quality of writing. Black text taking up space on the page in this case. "Written dance" in this case is a language that moves, it is a visible imprint of the movement it came from. Mime, gesture, and motion are all terms that apply to performance, to the body moving in space. Olson here applies them to *language*. So too, verse is equated with the voice, speech. Speech works *against* and out of motion. Dance does not do this. Dance is the motion *around* language. Language comes *from within* motion, it is later the *outward* gesture made in graphic form. How these theories come to bear on the poetry themselves is difficult to determine. However great the task is of paying attention to what happens in the poems themselves, it is the only way to know what is going on, what is happening in language.

Both the gesture and the postmodern are applicable to Olson. Derek Bailey's book *Improvisation: It's Nature and Practice in Music* makes reference to Pollock's process in conjunction with the work of prominent jazz improvisers. American composer Earle Brown says to Bailey in an interview:

I had also come up as a jazz musician—and also the influence of Alexander Calder and Jackson Pollock's paintings...Jackson was sort of a wild guy and he was a very brilliant man and felt this kind of intensity in his own spontaneity and it occurred to me that Jackson was almost performing his paintings—and so all of these things came together in 1951 and '52 for me [...] (Bailey 62).

The idea of improvisation in the musical and visual art contexts as it relates to the body could perhaps be applied, explored in some sense, in Olson's writing of *The Maximus Poems* in some way. The "gesture" in Pollock's work, the gestures in improvised jazz composition, operate in

their own ways. In order to explore the kind of gestural imprint that appears in Olson's work, though, a more complex conceptualization of the movement of the body needs to be explored. What is the difference between the force of gesture as opposed to the force of language? This is where Olson fits in the language discourse discussed earlier through the work of J.L. Austin. What kind of force does the language transmit? Is it a kind of force that derives its electricity from the body?

Poet and scholar Ammiel Alcalay offers a reassuring message in his book *A Little History*: "It is helpful to read *The Maximus Poems*" in light of the fact that work worth doing always entails risk" (Alcalay 105). As the reader in this case, it will require a kind of attention to the realities and the movements of the poems themselves.

The epigraph to the poet Robert Creeley are the first words we see in the collection: "for Robert Creeley—the figure of outward" (*MP*, 4). Below it are the words "All my life I've heard/ one makes many" (*MP*,4). The short epithet "Figure of Outward" was apparently something Olson got from a dream he had at Black Mountain (Butterick 3). Olson's notes on the dream from May 1969 explain that this turn of phrase meant a kind of return to the world, he writes "way out way out *there*:" (Butterick 3). Creeley apparently had rejected Olson's poems for publication in a magazine in New Hampshire. Creeley wrote to Vincent Ferinni, a mutual friend of the two, and said that "Olson was looking around for a language, and the result is a loss of force" (Butterick 3). The story behind the epithet suggests a kind of defensiveness on behalf of Olson. *The Maximus Poems* begin with this address, a reference to the disagreement between the two friends. Olson recycles the term, and whether we know the context of the anecdote or not, we understand that "The Figure of Outward" has to do with shape and movement: the form of the thing coming into being. The epigraph reveals a new idea: "All my life I've heard/ one makes

many" (*MP*). It calls to mind the relationship between the singular and the collective. Olson's "Human Universe" comes to mind here, for he means to suggest that the singular is part of the collective, the collective is comprised of individuals. In some notes on the poems he calls this premise: "the dominating paradox on which *Max* complete out to stand" (Butterick 5). This sense of the one in the many, the many as a group of individuals, the sense that the poems do intend to search for a kind of language imbued with force, with a direction towards life, towards things, outwards, is the underlying principle that Olson is trying to achieve with his projective outlook.

The first poem is called "*I, Maximus of Gloucester, to You*". From the title it is clear that the poem is some kind of first person address from Maximus to an unnamed recipient "You". He addresses the whole of Gloucester: its geography, history, people, rocks. In 1961 Olson writes that he used *Maximus* as the vehicular momentum to get the poem going to test this idea that the single human being is powerful: "*the advantage of the single human figure*" (Butterick 8). The single human figure addresses himself to the whole, turns himself towards the world in which he lives. And the poem begins:

Off-shore, by islands hidden by the blood
 Jewels & miracles, I, Maximus
 a metal hot from boiling water, tell you
 what is a lance, who obeys the figures of
 the present dance

(*MP*, I. I, 5)

Maximus: a metal. Maximus: the person who addresses himself to the place in which he stands. The metal that has come "from" some aquatic origin. "I, Maximus/ a metal": the metal denotes the body, the individual, the "single human figure". The metal inside Maximus is not of the mind, it is of the body: Maximus himself *is* the metal. In the essay "Place; & Names" Olson writes: "the crucialness being that these places or names/ be as parts of the body, common & capable/ therefore of having cells which can decant/ total experience" (*Collected Writings* 200).

Place is important to the body, to the individual. “Islands hidden by the blood” signifies the relationship between place and geography, as they exist within the body itself. Later “who obeys the figures of/the present dance”. He is insisting on the present moment, a movement that is already happening. The present dance is what the poem comes out of. The figures of the present dance are not only bodies moving, dancing, but language, verse bearing the imprint of the body that it came out of. In the next stanza the movement that Olson is trying to get onto picks up momentum:

1

the thing you're after
may lie around the bend
of the nest (second, time slain, the bird! the bird!

And there! (strong) thrust, the mast! flight
of the bird
o kylix, o
Antony of Padua
sweep low, o bless
the roofs, the old ones, the gentle steep ones
on whose ridge-poles the gulls sit, from which they depart,

And the flake-racks
of my city!

(MP, I.I,5)

Whatever is being sought after “may lie around the bend”. This suggests that movement is continuous, the person looking is moving towards something, but it is just shy of their line of sight. As a reader of the poem a series of questions arise with each line: “the thing you’re after” (*after what?*), may lie around the bend (*the bend of where?*). The third line is dictated completely by the motion that is happening around it, time quickens, and suddenly an object comes into view: a bird. Considerable force is felt, the parenthetical makes this known: “And there! (strong)”. As soon as the mast of a ship appears, it is likened to the flight of the bird. There is a

noticeable change in the cadence of the following stanza. The almost elegiac address of the bird, the repetition of the “o” as it’s own word and as the sounds imbedded within “Antony” and “low” stitch together an altogether different rhythm than the preceding lines. The movement of the next two lines is dictated by the comma splices, there is a lurching towards something. Finally the “flake-racks” which are “of my city!”. There is an attention here not only to movement but to distinct objects: the mast of the boat, the birds, the roofs of each house on which the birds sit, then take flight, the force of the flight is akin to the force of the mast of the boat, the boat is as significant as the gull, the flake-racks. “What you’re after” is everything that constitutes the reality “of my city”. The next stanza considers matter, objects again:

2

love is form, and cannot be without
important substance (the weight
say, 58 carats each one of us, perforce
our goldsmith’s scale

feather to feather added
(and what is mineral, what
is curling hair, the string
you carry in your nervous beak, these

make bulk, these, in the end, are
the sum

(o my lady of good voyage
in whose arm, whose left arm rests
no boy but a carefully carved wood, a painted face, a schooner!
a delicate mast, as bow-spirit for

forwarding

(MP, I.2, 6)

The lines introduce the idea of love as that which contains matter, physical material. “Important substance” is the body: “the weight/ say, 58 carats each one of us, perforce/” allots a specific,

“important”, numerical value to the presence of each one of the figures that are present on the field. The next stanza is an off-shoot of the first; Olson begins to compile various important substances, adding them up, tallying them into the field that is growing. Each thing, each material, “makes bulk”. The poet begins to fill in the field, constituting it with real matter, real things that accumulate to form “the sum”. The “you” is part of this equation: “the string/you carry in your nervous beak”. The “you” could be a bird. The “you” could be anything in this amalgamation of material, this reverence for anything with “important substance”, with a presence of any kind. This attention to detail is once again interrupted by the incoming presence of a ship. The physical description of the boat’s “important substance” is then filtered into the words “for/forwarding”. Here the stanza ends, the boat continues forward, regarded for both its physical importance and it’s pulling of the field “forward”.

It is clear that the language is enacting movement on the page: the possibility of something out of sight beyond the bend pulls the stanza forward quickly, reorients the reader in another place. The bird flies away to some unknown location; the reader is affected by the force of the take-off, the direction of flight. At the end of the stanza, the progressive verb pulls the poem forward.

Perhaps to understand where the action of the body comes to bear on the poetry is to understand Olson’s sense of grammar, how he reconfigures the structural components of his verse so as to access a wholly different energy, one that originates in the body. Michael Boughn assesses Olson’s sense of the “literary” in 1963, when Olson arrived in Buffalo for a teaching position:

The literary, then, as an institution, as institutionalized practices. Crucial to Olson’s sense of a move beyond or around the literary is his notion that it’s possible to reconnect with or recover energies that pre-exist their historical institutionalization into a specific, fixed grammar of social practices. And even

more importantly, that to do that, to push one's self toward that connection, is to disrupt or alter that grammar, a profoundly political act (Alcalay 142).

The action that Olson is himself undertaking is not solely physical. In order to enact some kind of action in the present moment, there is a serious consideration not only of what is apparent in the now, but what was. Olson's action, gesture, in the present is made with a regard for the past, with a sense that in order to move forward, a reconnection with energy of what came before is necessary. Condillac and Rousseau are concerned with a kind of originary language that was necessitated by the gesture, by the body that could communicate needs through the body alone. Olson is himself searching for a way to communicate through a return to origin, and perhaps that origin is itself within the gesture. To "push oneself toward that connection," to uptake the '*istorin*, to find out for oneself, is to act on this dualism: to look back to the past in order to then move forward. To move forward is so too a disruption of the past: a political gesture.

The gesture that Olson makes in his poetry and in his stance, in his life, is one that is necessitated by the body, and it is one that bears considerable social and political consequences. So too the action of the gesture bears a kind of force in a variety of ways: on the level of grammar, through the movement of the body, and finally through political means. Poet and Olson scholar André Spears writes:

As an 'archeologist of morning,' Olson is positioned to bring to his poetry the globalism and 'post-modernism' of a Pleistocene perspective on history, from which he looks as far back as the discovery of fire an the invention of language to relocate humanity in the present (Alcalay 101).

As one in search of the facts, of the things that exist, are present, Olson takes it upon himself to look back, to look explicitly at *what already happened..* As he writes in the first letter to Gloucester: "facts, to be dealt with, as the sea is, the demand" (MP: I.2, 6)

The origin of things is what Olson looks at. In the fourth part of Maximus' address to Gloucester gesture operates in a few ways:

4

one loves only form,
and form only comes
into existence when
the thing is born

born of yourself, born
of hay and cotton struts,
of street-pickings, wharves, weeds
you carry in, my bird

of a bone of a fish
of a straw, or will
of a color, of a bell
of yourself, torn

(MP: I.3, 7)

Spatially the stanzas increasingly move to the right, away from the original. They appear as quickly as separate instances in time, one after the next. The word “of”, however, links the three pieces together. Despite the “forwarding” of the language to the East, the language continually references what came before. It begins: “one loves only form”: this is contingent on the subsequent lines: “form comes/into existence when/ the thing is born”. No form exists when there is no thing.

The next stanza expands on the presence of the thing, which, if we recycle Heidegger’s idea: the thing is *where* the word is. The notion of place, the “where” of something, is where the action is happening. Olson repetitively uses the word in the third part of the letter: “when even you”; “when, on the hill, over the water”; “where she who used to sing”; “when the water glowed” (I.4). These lines come before this 4th section that is devoted to the idea of form and origin. Heidegger’s idea: “No thing is where the word is lacking” is operating here. Maximus continues in 4: “born of yourself, born/ of hay and cotton struts”. The poem sets up an

increasingly complex level of origin here: born of oneself, born of “hay” and “cotton struts,/ of street-pickings, wharves, weeds/ you carry in, my bird”. The final stanza makes use of the word to intensify the relationship of origin further: each “of” contains another “of”: “of a bone of a fish”: the preposition brings the form close to the internal. That same body of the fish has an origin: “of a straw, or will”. The line “of a straw, or will” is hard to decipher, though read inflow with the next line, we get another reading: “of a straw, or will/of a color, of a bell/ of yourself, torn”. The function of the preposition here sets up a complicated succession that performs the relationship of form and content: “of a bell of yourself”; “or will of a color” are all approximations of the form of the “thing”, which, inevitably at the end is “torn”. Olson makes use of the word, the preposition, as a means of describing the relationship between thing and that which it signifies. Though the word “of” joins things, here the poem amalgamates the relationship of form and thing until finally it is revealed to be “torn”.

The preposition allows for the gesture to be performed in this distinct moment. The grammar in this case simulates the approximation of something, the desire to get to the root of the origin of things, the need to communicate the very bare bones of the thing. In this case the thing is comprised of many layers and shells of other things. In order to love form, one has to love the thing that is born, and that is itself comprised of many things. In order to revere the thing, the action of going back, of trying to understand what came before it, must be done. However, what Olson is simultaneously able to do by returning to the past, is the paradoxical *forwarding* that is happening in the motion of the language itself, on the field of the page, as it moves from left to right with each stanza. The boat is moving forward just as the preposition is incessantly pulling the reader’s attention back to something that existed before. This dualism between what came before and what must occur now creates tension. The FORCE that the reader

experiences is this overwhelming sense that in order to move forward, one must also look back. The poetics of action is dictated by the force of gesture: this intense codependence between the past and present, between the body then, and the body now, between what already happened, and what will happen.

The sixth part of the letter is the culmination of the building of all elements of the field thus far: the bird, the mast, the sense of hearing, and the sum of all “important material”. The word “in” is used with particular force:

in! in! the bow-sprit, bird, the beak
 in, the bend is, in, goes in, the form
 that which you make, what holds, which is
 the law of object, strut after strut, what you are, what you must be, what
 the force can throw up, can, right now and hereinafter erect,
 the mast, the mast, the tender
 mast!

(MP, I.4,8)

The use of the preposition as exclamatory statements at the beginning of the stanza immediately imbues the word with force, and it is obvious that the word is acting, though it is difficult to determine how. At the beginning of the phrase the word is repeated twice: “in! in!”, two successive actions that pull, staccato, the language somewhere. There is an obvious contrast between the quick beat of “in! in!” and the lull, the gradual “forwarding” that Olson begins with. The preposition tells us that the direction is changing, but “where” this pathway is going is still uncertain. The next line echoes the words in 4: “in, the bend is, in, goes in, the form”. It is difficult to splice the phrases, the commas here perform the act of “bending”: at every comma the line curves towards the idea of the preposition: in. This phenomenon is repeated throughout the rest of the stanza. The command “in！”, though it was imbued with considerable force at the beginning of the stanza, is fully realized as an action through Olson’s use of the comma in these

lines. Again, the question of “where” the language is moving is uncertain, but through the process of reading the lines, and noticing the persistence of the comma, it is made consistently clear that the direction means nothing more than what it is: “in”. Its meaning is its direction. The line performs the preposition’s action. There’s a final turn in the last few lines: “the force can throw up, can, right now and hereinafter erect”. “Hereinafter” means in this case “beginning now” Notice the same “in” between the brackets “here” and after”. So, the word now has its place between the other two. The lines bend in towards some unknown destination. Through the process of reading the reader pursues the direction of the line, understand the action of “in” as one that is continually curving towards some location, until finally, the same “force” that was felt in the two exclamations at the beginning then funnels the lines into the phrase “hereinafter erect”. At this point the word “in” is not used again. It resides between “here and “after”. The force now has taken control of “the mast, the mast, the tender/mast!”. At the end of his letter Maximus concludes:

The nest, I say, to you, I Maximus, say
under the hand, as I see it, over the waters
from this place where I am, where I hear
can still hear

from where I carry you a feather
as though, sharp, I picked up,
in the afternoon delivered you
a jewel,
it flashing more than a wing,
than any old romantic thing,
than memory, than place,
than anything other than that which you carry

than that which is,
call it a nest, around the head of, call it
the next second

than that which you
can do!

(MP, I. 4, 8)

The end of the letter makes reference to the very beginning of the address. Maximus names himself as separate from the “you” again: “I say, to you, I Maximus, say”. The relationship between I and You relies on the letter. Later in the fourth part of “Letter 5” the same preoccupation with naming reappears: “(I am not named Maximus/ for no cause” (I. 20). An attention to naming, to pointing something out, ends the second letter: “than that which is,/ call it a nest, around the head of, call it/ the next second/ than that which you/ can do!”. “That which is” must be named, “called” something, and noticed. In “Tyrian Businesses” this process is reinvoked: “There may be no more names than there are objects/ There can be no more verbs than there are actions” (I. 36). The job is stated in “Letter 7”: “(As hands are put to the eyes’ commands” (I. 32). Eyes that notice, hands that point to things. A gesture of the body is done. To see and then to point is the responsibility. Indeed there are no more names than there are objects that already exist; there are no more verbs than there are actions.

The project of naming things, of recognizing objects and assigning them meaning, is related to the function of nouns. Nouns call attention to themselves in the poetry. Fenollosa will be helpful in this case: “A true noun, an isolated thing, does not exist in nature. Things are only terminal points, or rather the meeting points, of actions, cross-sections cut through actions, snapshots” (Fenollosa 17).

“Tansy” in the O.E.D. is defined as the following: “1. An erect herbaceous plant, *Tanacetum vulgare*, N.O. Compositæ, tribe *Corymbiferæ*, growing about two feet high, with deeply cut and divided leaves, and terminal corymbs of yellow rayless button-like flowers; all parts of the plant have a strong aromatic scent and bitter taste” (O.E.D. Online). Olson describes the herb to Donald Allen on July 22, 1963: “It doesn’t grow anymore at the same place but that is due to more efficient mowers, and the desire (like blacktop) to have anything smooth and of one

sort or character. We therefore celebrate TANSY MORE THAN BEFORE" (Butterick 23). Olson's manipulates the word in "Letter 3", and a closer consideration of it will yield a greater understanding of how the word acts within the poem. The letter begins:

Tansy buttons, tansy
for my city
Tansy for their noses

Tansy for them,
tansy for Gloucester to take the smell
of all owners,
the smell

Tansy
for all of us

(*MP*, I. 9,13)

The word functions as scent in the first part of the poem. It bears considerable weight. The smell is "for" another thing: "tansy/for my city"; "Tansy for their noses"; "Tansy for them,/ tansy for Gloucester to take the smell/ of all owners,/ the smell". The scent is what is important here, and this quality is then distributed. The next stanza expands on the previous one, it is set in on the page slightly to the right of the first three stanzas. Here the concept of the word opens up:

Let those who use words cheap, who use us cheap
take themselves out of the way
Let them not talk of what is good for the city

(*MP*, I. 9,13)

The exploitation of the word is here equated with the manipulation of bodies, the "us" of the city. A sense of moral responsibility is being formulated, and this outlook is based solely on the way in which language is used in the city; the way words are used. The final stanza on the page uses the word again:

Tansy from Cressy's
I rolled in as a boy
and didn't know it was
tansy

(*MP*, I.9, 13)

Tansy from Cressy's. The flower is given a distinct origin; Cressy's is a beach located on Freshwater Cove in Gloucester (Butterick 23). The word "tansy" encapsulates Maximus' particular experience with it as a child. Later: "runs with summer with/ tansy" and "o tansy city, root city/ let them not make you/ as the nation is" and then finally: "Root person in root place, hear one tansy-covered boy tell you/ what any knowing man of your city might; a letter carrier, say," (I.11,12,13). How is it the noun is functioning in these lines? Yes, tansy is denoting a particular herb, of a particular origin, and so too, it is describing the boy's experience with the object before knowing what it's proper name was. This idea of the noun operating between things comes across in the poetry. In the last case, for instance. The tansy-covered boy communicates the same way that a letter carrier does: he passes information between two people. This idea of the noun as "between" is later performed by the succession of hyphenated words in the subsequent lines: "the condition of the under-water, the cut-water of anyone, including those/who take on themselves/ to give you advice," (I. 12). The entire letter concludes with a familiar relationship:

Isolated person in Gloucester, Massachusetts, I, Maximus, address you
 Islands
 Of men and girls

(MP, I.12,16)

The herb apparently grows on a particular beach in this city. Though by the end of the poem, it is understood that the presence of tansy is so too indicative of experience, communication between people, the whole passage of time "in this rare place" (I.11). The word is complicated: "only a man or a girl who hear a word/ and that word meant not a single thing the least more than/ what it does mean" (I. 11). What does the word tansy mean, though? It is not as Olson says "strong (like goldenrod) and smells almost offensive with a pineapple odor" (Butterick 22). The word

opens up the relationship between “I” and “you” once again. The individual sees the flower in its uniqueness, like the isolated person.

“The Songs of Maximus” depart from the original structure of the poems. No longer does Olson use the format of the address or the letter. The last lines of “Song 3” have a striking cadence, and the body is implicated here in a few ways:

“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
(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

(MP, I.14, 18)

The first line references a sixteenth century English lyric from *Gammer Gurton's Needle* (by a man named John Sill) which begins with the first few lines: “Back and side go bare, go bare, / both foot and hand go cold...” (Butterick 28). Olson here specifies what the command “go” means: to walk. The lines build in energy, in impact, until the final one: “(as near as you can”. The reader may ask: *can what?* The next line: tear. The following lines recycle the original ones: the poem almost begins again, a reprise of the original verse, but it has been modified: “In the

land of plenty, have nothing to do with it” it begins. Olson shifts the attention to geography: the land. In the land of plenty, in the midst of things: “take the way of/ the lowest, including/ your legs, go contrary, go/ sing”. The last few lines are not “torn”, disrupted by some other external force. Here the poet offers some other kind of remedy for living in the midst of much: to walk, to sing.

Olson and his father before him were letter carriers in Gloucester. In *The Post Office*, Olson writes about his father’s walking route:

For years my father had the route he wanted [...] Just to cross the bridge a winter morning and a winter afternoon, or to be a part of the boating around it in the summer and the fall, gave his work day a freedom he could never have known in any other route in the city. The whole route has this quality (Olson 38).

There is a wonderful connection here between Olson’s description of the carrier on foot and what Henry David Thoreau’s says in the essay “Walking”: “When I go out of the house for a walk, uncertain as yet whither I will bend my steps, and submit myself to my instinct to decide for me” (Thoreau 254). Olson, in line with Thoreau, is positing a kind of action in the simplicity of the movement of the body, and the movement of the body in the present moment of things: “in the midst of plenty”. Thoreau says towards the end of the essay: “Above all, we cannot afford not to live in the present” (Thoreau 254). In Volume II of *Maximus* there is a distinct moment where the mail carrier traces his steps on the way to the person he will deliver the mail to:

up the steps, along the porch
turning the corner
if the L,

to go in the door
and face the ladies
sitting in the comfortable

chairs,
and greet Simp
with the morning's mail

(*MP*, II.96, 266)

The present tense pulls the reader's attention towards what is happening and hones in on the interaction between the mail carrier and "Simp", who will receive a letter from him. So too, all of the commands in "Song 3" are in the present tense: go, walk, sing. The demand that Olson has on the individual is to "walk" so to speak, to act in the present moment: to engage in the now. This is central to this idea of the pragmatic quest for knowledge in experience: a gnosis through movement. "Song 6" is short:

you sing, you
who also
wants
(*MP*, I. 16, 20)

Through the doing of some action, desire is directed at the end of that completed task. To walk, to sing, to move: these are all actions that function on the basis of some inner corporeal drive to complete that task, to learn from it.

This knowledge is acquired through the body, and it is a process that Olson uses to critique the Cartesian apparatus that Locke and Hume argue for. In "Letter 5" Maximus addresses Ferrini:

The mind, Ferrini,
is as much of a labor
as to lift an arm
flawlessly

Or to read sand in the butter on the end of a lead,
and be precise about what sort of bottom your vessel's over

(*MP*, I.23, 27)

To lift an arm flawlessly suggests that there is risk in the performance of that action. It requires precision: like knowing the specific body of water the boat is floating on. Attention in the particularity requires thought yes, and precision of action: acute attention to movement, gaining knowledge through *doing*.

“Letter 6” picks up on this central notion that attention is necessary for Olson, and it is essential in a *political* sense. Guy Davenport writes in his essay “Olson” that the poet focuses his energy on precision and noticing: “Knowledge to Olson was a compassionate acquisition, an act of faith and sympathy. He meant primarily that knowledge is the harvest of attention, and he fumed in great rages that the hucksters prey on our attention like a plague of tricks” (Davenport 82). At the beginning of the letter there are two short lines:

polis is
eyes
(MP, I. 28, 32)

The social arena is constituted by people; people who see. But it is more than this: it is the fact that they can choose to see, and they can also fail to do so. Later on in the letter:

Eyes
& polis,
fishermen,
& poets
or in every human head I've known is
busy
both:
the attention, and
the care
however much each of us
chooses our own
kin and
concentration
(MP, I. 28, 32)

Gloucester is composed of people, and they are able to see. But Maximus wants a kind of attention beyond what is seen: he wants an attention that is concentrated and one that cares. This

is the choice that Maximus offers up, the one he demands people make, because “so few/ have the polis/ in their eye” (*MP*, I. 28, 32). This sense that attention is necessary, that it needs to be undertaken with serious precision is undercut by the final few lines in the poem: “There are no hierarchies, no infinite, no such many as mass, there are only/ eyes in all heads/ to be looked out of” (*MP*, I. 29, 33). On the one hand Maximus suggests that the kind of stamina it requires to engage with the world through the body is just as demanding as it is to engage with it through thought. So too, though, Maximus posits that it is not a complicated task, despite its necessity. If polis is eyes, Maximus demands that people simply use them, and use them with polis in *mind*.

Olson’s gesture is not one that can merely be understood with regards to physical movement only; this idea that gesture is connected to his identification as a postmodern poet is not only an aesthetic quality that can be found in the minute uses of his grammar, or through the way he manipulates prepositions like “of” and “as. Olson’s gesture is not only one that merely occurs in language. It is a way of living, a behavior, a *choice*, really that he asks people to make. To pay attention to place and all that constitutes it.

“Letter 9” seems to encapsulate a sense of *how* it is that these people of a nation, as people of a polis, of a particular place, must follow suit with some sense of direction. Towards the end of the letter Maximus likens “self-acts” to that of the plums he mentions in an earlier poem: “that those self-acts which have no end no more than their own/ are more as plums are/ than they are as Alfreds/ who so advance/ men’s affairs” (*MP*, I. 44, 48). In this sense Maximus equates human action, “self-acts”, to the objects in the world that are continually in the process of becoming. In this sense, action occurs in the progressive tense, not the present: to arrive at the present moment is a progressive seeking. The letter ends: “I measure my song,/ measure the sources of my song,/ measure me, measure my forces” (*MP*, I. 44, 44). Earlier in the songs the

small line is introduced: “you sing, you/ who also/ wants”. Action bears with it the desire to pursue it. Like the “of” that expanded the origin of “form”, the word “measure” here expands the confines of the song, the “self-act”: one measures his song, but in order to do so, one measures the origins of that song. The source is found internally, the force is found within the body that carries a history of experience with it in the present. The end of “Letter 9” weaves together many of Olson’s ideas thus far. Olson is concerned with action, yes, and the action is done by the body. The body itself is able to gesture, is able to move, with both a regard for what came before it, in order to initiate the “forwarding” in the present moment, the “next second”, whatever is “around the bend”. Action occurs with the simultaneous operation of both the past coming to bear on the present, and the present as an ever shifting, developing idea. The present is in the process of arriving. If this be so, then any measure of oneself is continually changing, as it should, for the present continues to present itself as the past fuels one’s actions forward. In the midst of this, in the process of becoming, Olson suggests that attention be paid to everything and anything, because everything is already there: “There may be no more names than there are objects/ There can be no more verbs than there are actions/ It is still/morning” (MP, I. 36, 40). The demand for action is directed towards things, towards objects is what each person must feel within the machine of their body. It is this machine that allows a person to do something and by doing so, engages with the world, with the things that the eyes see. “It is still morning” because action is still occurring, space is opening up. The demand is on the reader to look while the poet points.

Movement (

Gestures are carried out through the body. They are physical acts. Mudras. Like the ideogram: they signify some idea with such force, with such immediate impact. Information is more quickly understood by the eye than the ear, says Rousseau. And yet, sound is more arousing.

If Olson's task is a self-proclaimed archeological one, how does he deal with language? And if the body is central to this engagement, how does the language both gesture: convey information the way an image can, and simultaneously: both arouse interest and preserve fact?

And what of force? How does the reader come to understand the gesture if the body is not present, but removed? What kind of record does the gesture makes if, in a physical sense, it vanishes after it has been performed?

What is the force of gesture in language and how does it record, preserve, while at the same time, put into motion the events of the past, present, and future?

Since Condillac refers in the Essay to ‘the force alone of the connexion’ to define the relation between a presence and an absence, a perception and all its others; since he refers to beginning with attention and imagination, in what sense must we understand the word force? To what sense must we extend it? Reserve it? And if, the organizing thesis of this discourse, language is primordially metaphorical; if the primitive is figured, where is force found?

-Jacques Derrida, *The Archeology of the Frivolous*, 77

But the concepts compressed in the title *The Mind is a Muscle* itself open a more complex two-way street in the relationship between doing and thinking. Mind-as-muscle signifies a conflation of action and consciousness, readable as gesture.

--Catherine Wood, *Yvonne Rainer: The Mind is a Muscle*, 36

“A Later Note on Letter #15”

In English the poetics became muebles—furniture—
thereafter (after 1630)

& Descartes was the value

until Whitehead, who cleared out the gunk
by getting the universe in (as against man alone

& that concept of history (not Herodotus’s.
which was a verb, to find out for yourself:
‘istorin, which makes any one’s acts a finding out for him or her
self, in other words restores the traum: that we act somewhere

at least by seizure, that the objective (example Thucidides, or
the latest finest tape-recorder, or any form of record on the spot

—live television or what—is a lie

as against what we know went on, the dream: the dream being
self-action with Whitehead’s important corollary: that no event

is not penetrated, in intersection or collision with, an eternal
event

The poetics of such a situation
are yet to be found out

--*The Maximus Poems*, II. 79, 249

III. Presence

Olson proclaims himself to be an archeologist. What is the archeologist's task? To uncover fact, to know *what happened*. In sum, to act on his '*istorin*'. At the end of "Letter 9" Maximus writes: "measure my forces". This act involves an awareness, a keen attention on what came before *oneself*, before the song of oneself. What is the source of this force? Derrida asks the question in *The Archeology of the Frivolous* as a response to Condillac's *On the Origin of Human Knowledge*. It is precisely this question, this issue of force, where it is *found*, how it is measured, what impact it has, that challenges this notion that a gesture is done in Olson's language. What kind of impact does a physical gesture have that the written word does not?

Olson's interest in the ideogram is relevant to this question. Towards the end of 1950 he traveled to the Yucatan peninsula. While in Mexico, he wrote a series of letters to Robert Creeley chronicling his studies of the Mayan hieroglyphs. Olson, like Ezra Pound, studied the Chinese ideogram. Both poets asserted that the visual character (a pictorial language) stands closer to the phenomena of nature rather than the way Western languages tend to describe things through reason and representation. Moreover Western languages tends to function in such a way so that consciousness is equated with logic. A markedly different kind of perception is translated with

the image. Olson's studies of the Mayan hieroglyphs are an extension of his interests in the ideogram and Pound's musings. He writes to Creeley on March 20, 1950:

Because there was a concept at work, not surely 'sacred,' just a disposition to keep the attention poised in such a way that there was a time to (1) be interested in expression in gesture of all creatures including at least three large planets enough to create a system of record which we now call hieroglyphs [...] Here is the most abstract and formal deal of all the things this people dealt out—and yet, to my taste, it is precisely as intimate as verse is (*Mayan Letters*, 93-94).

The process by which gesture solidifies into sign, as motion is translated into a legible picture, is how Olson wishes verse to function. This attention to a particular culture's means of communication parallels Olson's idea about poetry as "work" or as process. The method of interaction between people, that of recording movement in stone, can be translated to the word making process of poetry. Additionally, Olson's scrupulous study of the hieroglyphs mirror his demand on the reader, like the citizen, to pay attention to things. He writes in "Human Universe": "It was better to be a bird, as these Maya seem to have been, they kept moving their heads so nervously to stay alive, to keep alerted to what they were surrounded by, to watch it even for the sake they took it to be or that larger bird they had to be in awe of[...] (HU 64). At the end of a later note to Creeley on March 15th Olson includes a short poem. It reads:

The fish is speech. Or see
what, cut
in stone
starts. For

when the sea breaks, watch
watch, it is the
tongue, and

he who introduces the words (the
interlocutor), the
beginner of the word, he

you will find, he
has scales, he

gives off motion as

in the sun the wind the light, the fish
moves

(*Mayan Letters*, 101)

The first sentence: “The fish is speech”. The statement implies the equation between the fish swimming and the words that come from an attention to that movement. What is striking in the next few lines is the idea that once a perception is put into stone, it is not frozen there, but rather, it instigates something: “cut/in stone/ starts”. Starts what? The next stanza reaffirms the previous one on a much larger scale. He looks at the ocean: “when the sea breaks, watch/watch”. The repetition the words at the line break caution a reader that may have “missed” the crest of the wave come crashing down. The meaning is found in the motion of the action: when the sea breaks, it is the tongue. Speech comes into being when attention is paid to the motion of things that can be missed by a lazy eye. “He who introduces the words” is later revealed to be a constituent in the motion of the fish and the wave. The poet is not inert: “you will find, he/ has scales, he/ gives off motion as”. Olson emphasizes the sense that any perceiver has an external skin that allows him to experience the objects and material around him at any point. Conversely, he not only notices motion but he “gives off motion” as “in the sun the wind the light , the fish/ moves”. Olson jots down the three elements in order without commas (sun, wind, light) to get the pictures across just as quickly as they would when seeing them as one complete image in nature. The perceiver is in motion just as the phenomena he watches is also moving. Action is probably better understood at this point in Olson’s poetics to be *an interaction* between the body and the things outside of it: both of which are in motion. In language, the task is to recapture the events and movements that have happened in such a way so that in language, that same dynamism between the word-maker and the perceived objects remains the same.

Michel Foucault describes the task of the archeologist in *The Archeology of Knowledge*. Foucault opposes the apparatus of the history of ideas with that of archeology. The first distinction that he makes is the fact that archeology is not an interpretive discipline: “it does not seek another, better-hidden discourse. It refuses to be ‘allegorical’” (Foucault 139). The meaning of things and ideas is revealed in their being there, rather than what they stand for. Archeology in this regard seeks to understand things in their *presence* rather than their symbolic or metaphorical significance. Presence is an important concept that archeology depends upon. It can be understood similarly with reference to the way Olson describes simile and comparison: description does not get the poet closer to things; it abstracts him from them. The things in the poem are present. Olson hopes the reader will look closely at them. “Letter 11” requires this kind of attention to the particulars of place:

The rock reads

the rock I know by my belly and torn nails, the letters on it
 big enough I sat in triumph arriving,
 by a head start,
 run up the face, grab the stone emboss
 anchor rope
 carved from it) get onto
 the bronze plaque:

(MP, I. 48, 52)

Metaphor, simile, and comparison pull words away from that which they represent. Archeology seeks to understand things as they are: it does not describe them. The second point that Foucault makes is the idea that archeology strives to “define discourses in their specificity; to show in what way the set of rules that they are put into operation is reducible to any other; to follow them the whole length of their exterior ridges, in order to underline them the better” (Foucault 139). Archeology seeks to define ideas in their specificity, not in their relation to other ideas, which is

what history seeks to do by tracing the “continuous, insensible transition that relates discourses” (Foucault 139). The archeological approach to things has to do with underlining them in their uniqueness.

Such is the task for Olson in his poetry. In *A Special View of History* Olson describes this very phenomenon of successive events and the idea of human action in history. In the section entitled “THE FACTORS”, Olson develops the ideas of human action, human motion, and the passage of time with regards to John Keats’s idea of Negative Capability and Heraclitus’ idea of flux and the human:

THAT ALL THINGS ARE IN MOTION INCLUDES the human: the familiar turns out to be simply that, there is a natural, proper and characteristic action of man—

PROCESS: ‘any phenomenon which shows a continuous change in Time’

MAN IS A CONTINUOUS CHANGE IN TIME (*SVH* 33).

All things are in motion: this includes the human body. Man is a continuous change in time. As he evolves he acts: “To act or not to act: can you drive the familiar situation of being a human any further?” (*SVH* 33).

The idea that “all things are in motion” (including the human) and the fact that the single man *acts* (this is evidence of his humanness) seem to be at odds with the fact that Olson places considerable attention on the individual and not the collective. If all things are in motion, and this includes all humans, why does Olson single out the individual? Thus far in this exploration of Olson’s work there has been no mention of the relationship between two bodies that act in space: it appears that Olson is only writing about the individual. Is this the case? Is the task of the archeologist merely to look at individual things: be they one human, one tansy flower, one city (Gloucester), one Maximus? Is Olson’s project really to follow things in motion in their singularity? Consider the letter at the beginning of *The Maximus Poems*:

I, Maximus of Gloucester, to You (MP, I.1, 5)

The method of communication is the address: the I addresses the You. Though distinct, they are connected. The single man addresses himself to the city. The epigraph to the note to Creeley just before the first letter reads: “All my life I’ve heard/one makes many” (*MP*, 4). The archeological approach Olson embarks on throughout the collection is not merely focused on the individual alone. The individual body that acts is essential, and Olson pays attention to this, but with an attention to the individual comes the inevitable connection to the “You”. The letter is the connection between them: it establishes the singularity of both parties, yet joins them through the address.

Olson’s archeological approach seeks to realize things and persons alike in motion, but does not seek to evaluate their meaning metaphorically. A fisherman working on a boat near the shore of Gloucester bears his significance in himself, in his work, in his own USE. *The Maximus Poems* is not one long poem: it is a collection of many, all of which constitute the whole. Olson’s sense that the poem is a process of unfolding makes this idea of the collective and the individual much easier to comprehend. The individual units constitute a whole, but the whole is forever expanding, and so are the parts. Foucault writes: “Archeology is much more willing than the history of ideas to speak of discontinuities, ruptures, gaps, entirely new forms of positivity, and of sudden redistributions” (Foucault 169). Olson does not seek to engender a poem that seeks to place person-to-person and thing-to-thing in direct relation to each other. Rather, his focus is on what occurs between them: the gaps between them that illustrate their continual movement.

It is an arduous task: to try to “measure” the force of Olson’s language, to attempt in some way to undertake this archeological approach to what has ostensibly been left behind: the gesture has left an imprint, and it can be read. This idea is complicated and cannot be answered

with regards to poetry alone. Perhaps understanding the operation of the gesture of the body before applying it to that of language will illustrate this idea. A comprehension of the impact, the kinetic *affect* of the gesture, is perhaps best understood in light of the field of choreography. Olson writes in the essay “A Syllabary for A Dancer” the essential fact that dance teaches people to use themselves. He writes: “[...]man is a thing which thinks and dances. I should imagine the meaning is, a thing which simultaneously thinks and dances” (*Maps* 9). Olson himself was a frequent attendee of Merce Cunningham’s lectures and class sessions at Black Mountain College. Reference to dance is made often in his poetry and prose.⁸ The separation of the mind and the body is challenged by dance. The body moves, it is conscious, it is thinking.

Yvonne Rainer and Simone Forti were two female American choreographers in the late 1950s through the 1970s that theorized the interactions between language, body, gesture, and breath. Their work in performance may compliment Olson’s project as an archeologist.

Simone Forti’s text *Handbook in Motion* is an account of her early choreographic efforts in the 1960s. Forti, among other postmodern American choreographers, was interested in gestural movement, movement of the everyday: movement as a *fact* of the body as opposed to movement that could be measured for stylistic elaborateness. Early in the book she provides a definition of what she calls “kinesthetic awareness”: “The kinesthetic sense has to do with sensing movement in your own body, sensing your body’s changing dynamic configurations. But

⁸ His play *The Firey Hunt* was composed as a text score for two male dancers to play the roles of Ahab and Ishmael within a loose framework of the Melvillian tale. Olson experimented with stage directions that instruct the performers to dance and make gestures with their body that are dictated by the language he uses in the verse. Olson also wrote a short piece called *Appolonius of Tyana: A Dance, with Some Words, for Two Actors*. In it he explores the relationship between dancing and concentration: “As Tyana speaks the introduction most slowly and most clearly, it should be as though the words came out of the mouth of the forward figure, the dancer—whose lips do not move, or his features, at first, they are held, and it is like a soliloquy in the cinema, with the face steady and the words coming from the sound track, like thoughts alongside the concentration” (Olson 133).

it's more than that. I can remember waking from dreams and still having a sense of the dream landscape not only in my memory but in my limbs as well" (Forti 31). Forti seems to suggest here that memory is in fact recorded within the body. The body is itself a capsule of events: a plane on which events are recorded. The present body is a vessel of the past: half full. So too, the present body engages with what is happening, what it is capable of in the moment: it is half empty and may be filled. Kinesthetic awareness is not a "measurement" of movement, but an access to it. A bringing forth of something from within. Olson's idea of proprioception is relevant: the internal energy is revealed through the external gesture. Forti writes:

I wasn't doing this in a studied way, it was simply a mechanism of intelligence that I found existing in my body. I sensed that I had hit on an organic set of links between mind, balance, and gesture, and it seemed that here was the basis for a natural language. Sometimes, having achieved a state of balance, I would lift my eyes up and to the right as if saying hello. The sudden asymmetry would take me by surprise and the resultant internal careening of my center seemed to radiate into an outburst of a kind of song whose melody was made of movement. And I would find myself weaving movement melodies charged with stories the body holds (Forti 131).

Intelligence exists within the body and needs to be tapped into. Proprioception is this very idea of the realization that the body does, in its viscera, carry the weight of what came before. To quote his essay, Olson writes: "PROPRIOCEPTION: the data of depth sensibility/ the 'body'/ of us as object which spontaneously/ or of its own order produces experiences/ of 'depth' Viz/ SENSIBILITY WITHIN THE ORGANISM/BY THE MOVEMENT OF ITS OWN TISSUES" (Olson 182). Forti is clear: it was an intelligence that she found already existing within her body. And she *found* it, it was *present*. It already existed, and therefore through a kind of "archeological" sensibility, or as she calls it a "kinesthetic awareness", Forti locates the very "forces of her song". The songs were "charged", they were imbued with force from the from

language that the body itself already accumulated, encoded in the viscera. Like Olson, Forti finds that the breath is central to any kind of transmission of energy, be it physical or linguistic:

I started working on an action in which, as I exhale, I give in to centripetal force. And as I inhale, well, I don't know what it is, maybe my center rises, but suddenly I'm much more under the sway of centrifugal force. And I loop in and out of the circle on my way round and round (Forti 136).

The breath itself is the energy source behind the *force* that the body is able to access. In movement, Forti suggests that as she exhales, as she breathes outwards, she relinquishes control to a strength that circulates the motion of the body to a center point. Conversely, when she inhales, this central node rises, and her body is controlled by a force that *resists* a center. The respirating corpus navigates between these two forces.

This center, this core, is difficult to locate and comprehend. Forti's thoughts in movement are helpful with regards to understanding Olson's relationship between the body and language, however. Forti postulates that body itself contains a linguistic component that is released in movement, so that the physical operation of the body seems to follow a kind of narrative logic, a spatial unfolding of expressible events. What Forti alludes to is this sense that a combination of the mind, a balance of the center, and the performance of a gesture themselves constitute a kind of "natural language". This second property: the balance of the center, seems to require a kind of awareness on the part of the mover to recognize that critical moment when the body is "off-kilter", between the centrifugal and centripetal ends. It requires a kind of awareness of the body *in between* these two nodes.

In April of 1968, Yvonne Rainer, a young contemporary of Forti's, presented her evening length piece *The Mind is a Muscle* at the Anderson Theater in New York City (Wood 36). The performers did use stylized movement. As Rainer mentions in her artist statement in the evening's program: "[...] it is also true that I love the body—its actual weight, mass, and

unenhanced physicality. It is my overall concern to reveal people as they are engaged in various kinds of activities—alone, with each other, with objects—and to weight the quality of the human body toward that of objects and away from the super-stylization of the dancer” (Rainer, circa 1968, from *Tulane Drama Review*). Rainer’s apparent objective was to experiment with seven dancers. Each body, each physical mass, were revealed in relation to one another, through a study of the gestural and everyday movement of the body. The everyday in Rainer’s dance complements Olson’s attention to the *familiar* in poetry.

Catherine Wood’s analysis of Rainer’s work provides helpful material when thinking about Rainer’s objective towards making images that relied on this kind of “unadorned” movement. Wood writes: “But the concepts compressed in the title *The Mind is a Muscle* itself open a more complex two-way street in the relationship between doing and thinking. Mind-as-muscle signifies a conflation of action and consciousness, readable as gesture” (Wood 36). It is difficult not to invoke Olson with regards to Rainer’s work in dance. A conflation between action (movement of the body) and consciousness (perhaps the recognition of a ‘center’ by Forti), makes the gesture readable. Wood continues: “If the mind is a muscle, consciousness cannot be known unto itself, but can only be demonstrated and shared via gesture” (Wood 65). What is central to this use of gesture is the fact that it signifies the consciousness of the performer. Through a demonstration of gesture, the one that performs the action comes to know consciousness. This suggests that in performing the gesture, the dancer then undergoes some kind process of realization. Wood writes of Rainer: “Her pragmatist stance led to an aesthetic of radical laconicism that bypassed the fundamental question of bodily ‘authenticity’, and instead formulated new ways of behaving or performing herself” (Wood 36). Here the performer, through movement, comes to know consciousness through movement and is able to explore a

variety of behaviors, ways of engaging, and means of communicating. Through the gesture, the mind-as-muscle pays attention through physical action: it arrives at consciousness through the process of movement.

Rainer was herself a poet. In the conclusion to her memoir, *Feelings Are Facts*, she writes the following with regards to language and movement:

I don't know what this relation/opposition between words and body means or portends. As I returned to dance in the 1990s I stopped writing poetry. And now again movement language is superseding verbal language. I tell myself 'Don't worry. The mind works in mysterious ways, even stranger than the body.' The body declines, the mind continues to extrude language. I look forward to the perambulations of both—mind and body—in the next decade. It follows, then, that this epilogue can be read as another prologue (Rainer 466).

This notion that “epilogue” may be read as another “prologue” is so reminiscent of Olson’s ideas in *A Special View of History*. Her fascination with these two properties, mind and body, has to do with a kind of cyclical temporality. The intersections (and differences) between these two domains are both the beginning and the end: the future is the necessary tension, repulsion, and attraction of both. This relationship between body and words is one that will last. For Rainer this relationship is ongoing, continual, both in the past and the immanent future. Olson’s job in the “morning” acts on the potentiality of language within “the next second” (*MP*, I.4,8) of time. The conscious body acting on the instant makes the past become present: the prologue and the epilogue collapse into the present moment. The poem “The Song and Dance of” begins: “In the present go/ nor right nor left;”/ nor stay” (*MP*, I. 54, 58).

Olson’s challenge for instantaneous action is alas in language. Consider the short section in Olson’s “Tyrian Businesses”, in which he poses this very task: “how to dance/sitting down” (*MP*, I.35, 39). This is precisely the link between Rainer and Olson: how to deal with the relationship between word and body. Rainer is able to communicate through gesture a kind of

language, and so too, how Olson is able to *make language move*, make words move, so that they themselves gesture, act, and communicate.

Olson's notion that the poem is composed on the "field" is influenced by Einstein's theory of relativity. Shahar Bram writes in *Charles Olson and Alfred North Whitehead: An Essay on Poetry*: "The field, as defined by Ferris, is the 'domain or environment in which the real or potential action of a force can be described mathematically at each point in space'; 'force' is the agency responsible for change in a system" (Bram 20). The field is the plain on which action *can occur* at any moment, force is the source responsible for the change.

In the context of dance, force comes from the body: the energy pathways of the internal, the oscillation between the centripetal and centrifugal nodes forces the body to follow the circular pathways, according to Forti. In language, though, how do these notions of "field" and "force" apply? For Olson, says Bram: "When the definition of field is 'transposed' to the realm of poetry, we have a domain or environment where we can describe the actual or potential activity of a force for any point in space, when force, as 'the agency responsible for a change in a system' is, in this case, language in all its aspects" (Bram 22). Force in this sense comes from the language, which is imbued with energy from the body. This attitude is what Olson argues for in "A Later Note on Letter #15". Olson, like Whitehead, is challenging the theory of reality as proposed by Descartes. A "poetics of furniture" is what Olson rejects: instead he promotes the notion that the field is expanding and the words themselves are the force that enhances this expansion. Whitehead and "gets the universe" into the poem. Thus, the poem, like the universe, is ever expanding, shifting, changing.

Forti uses the phrase "natural language" to describe the cohesion between body, gesture, and thought. Her emphasis on the organic has to do primarily with the connection between

language and the body. A natural language would merely rely on the movement of the body to communicate, to tell a story. The social aspect is clearly of importance to Olson and the nature of speech must be looked into aside the gesture. Speech is the force behind Olson's language. The breath is what Olson says gets all the energy back into the poem in the essay "Projective Verse". Speech advances the field forwards just as much as the body does. Olson pairs the tongue with *logos*.

Heinrich Von Kleist's essay called "On The Gradual Construction of Thoughts During Speech" focuses on the relationship between thinking and conversation. He explains the difficulty in formulating thoughts when sitting alone, while not speaking. Kleist observes that when he begins speaking with his sister, his thoughts immediately become clear to him: "I discover facts which whole hours of brooding, perhaps, would not have revealed [...] I only have to begin boldly and the mind, obliged to find an end for this beginning, transforms my confused concept as I speak into thoughts that are perfectly clear, so that, to my surprise, the end of the sentence coincides with the desired knowledge" (Kleist 42). The social dynamic between speaker and listener instigates the process by which the speaker clarifies himself. Speech does not inhibit thought, it draws it out: "The chains of ideas and of their designations proceed together at the same speed, and the mental documents for the one and for the other agree. Then speech is not an impediment, a sort of brake on the wheel of intellect, but like a second wheel running parallel with it on the same axle" (Kleist 44). Speech runs alongside the successive chain of ideas of the mind. Speech and thought operate on the same continuum: both wheels turn at the same time. If the thought is completed before the utterance of the thought, the mind relaxes when the statement is made. What Kleist is arguing for is the excitement of the individual's mind when thought

occurs through the act of speaking, not before or after it. If the thought is completed before speech, the mind relaxes.

The relationship between speaker and listener is important. Olson begins *Maximus* with a letter. In doing this, Maximus addresses not one place but all the people that compose it: he addresses the polis populated by all the beings within it. The force behind the language is not only the energy of the body, but this essential relationship between the one person as part of a larger whole.

Denise Levertov's "Notes on Organic Form" sites Olson's "Projective Verse" essay. She explores the "natural" development of language in poetry as it relates to experience, the body, and action. Organic form suggests that there is a form in all things, including experience, which the poet must discover and reveal. Olson's influence is clear. Levertov explores the idea of putting into language the experience the poet has in the world: this requires action, movement, and then subsequent speech after the experience has happened: "How does one go about such a poetry? I think it's like this: first there must be an experience, a sequence of constellation of perceptions of sufficient interest, felt by the poet intensely enough to demand of him their equivalence in words: he is brought to speech" (Levertov 8). The poet is brought to speech after he has acted, after he has experienced the world. He is brought to speech because he is compelled by what has already happened to him.

The initial question needs to be asked again: what is the source of Olson's gesture in language? The poet "brought to speech" as Levertov writes, has undergone experience and is forced to put that experience into language. Perhaps understanding the sources of Olson's gesture involves a better understanding of Olson's views of what the poet should put into writing. John Tytell writes in the Forward to *Letters for Origin*: "And the best subject for poetry, Olson

advises Corman, who is trying to write his own poems, is not what you think is proper but always the self, the autobiographical perspective” (Glover xi). Individual experience in the world is the prerequisite for Olson’s writing. But this insistence on the individual is not without a consideration of the collective. To repeat the opening epigraph to *The Maximus Poems* once again: “All my life I’ve heard/ one makes many” (*MP*). The individual is implied to be part of a larger sum. Therefore an individual action, in art or in life, affects the space exists in.

Olson argues that human beings are a result of a series of events in a particular space. In the poem “Maximus to Gloucester, Letter 27 [Withheld]” Olson writes: “An American/ is a complex of occasions,/ themselves a geometry/ of spatial nature” (*MP*, II.15,185). Olson means to suggest here that the living body is a result of successive events in history. Olson takes this idea again from Whitehead. The sense that the body is a complex of occasions suggests that the body is continually changing like space itself.

How does the poet arrive at what he does say? What is the source of the force that is carried out in speech? “Letter 11” reads:

That a man’s life
(his, anyway)
is what there is
that tradition is

at least is where I find it,
how I got to
what I say

(*MP*, I.48, 52)

Robert Creeley writes in “Charles Olson: Y & X” the following: “For Olson the line becomes a way to a movement beyond the single impact of the words which go to make it up, and brings to their logic a force of its own” (152). The words within the line constitute the line that moves beyond the impact of those words themselves. Consider the first line followed by the second

“That a man’s life” and then “(his, anyway)”. Emphasis is on the pronoun. He locates not the many, but “his”, meaning the distinct life that any one person has. What constitutes a life? Read without the parenthetical: “That a man’s life [...] is what there is/ that tradition is”. A life is what there is, what exists. The last three lines: “at least is where I find it, how I got to/what I say”. Tradition is where man finds what already exists, and once found, through the process of (“how I got to”) what that individual may arrive at what he can say about “his” life.

Creeley writes in a later essay on Olson: “*The Maximus Poems* are, or seem first to me, the modulation of man’s attentions, by which I mean the whole wonder of perception. They are truth because their form is the issue of what is out there, and what part of it can come into man’s own body [...] The local is not a place but a place in a given man—what part of it he has compelled or else brought by love to give witness to in his own mind” (Creeley 157). Man’s life is what there is, the what and whom that are around him. *The Maximus Poems* are not only about attention to things in motion, but they are an account of this one poet’s necessity to say: to put into words the motion that has already been perceived. “To make that present, and actual for other men, is not an embarrassment, but love (Creeley 158). The force for Olson is not merely found in his body, his proprioception, but from a need to make present something that has happened, the actual events of human life, in language. This is the basis of his archeological approach.

Olson’s poetics of action is essentially an “interaction” between perceiver and object. This can be understood as the process by which the knower-to-be notices the things within the space around the body. Consider the poem “*Maximus to Gloucester, Letter 27 [withheld]*”:

An American
is a complex of occasions,

themselves a geometry
of spatial nature.

I have this sense,
with my skin

Plus this-plus this:

that forever the geography
which leans in
on me I compell
backwards I compell Gloucester
to yield, to
change

Polis

is this

(*MP*, II.15.185)

The first line echoes the line from *A Special View of History*: “MAN IS A CONTINUOUS CHANGE IN TIME” (20). Olson insists on the position of the American within space; on that space the citizen engages in moments of interaction. So too the space itself acts upon the American: the geography leans in. The American “compels backwards” onto the place where he exists. Interaction not only involves the force of the individual on place, and vice versa, but with the idea that once interaction occurs, change has occurred. The measure of change is Polis. “This” is the interaction between person and place, between person and objects. The opening line of “The Kingfishers” is relevant: “What does not change/ is the will to change” (Olson 167).

The American that compels backwards onto Gloucester, onto the place he dwells in, wills himself to do so.

The gesture in Olson's work is made with considerable force, and this force is continually forward moving as the events in a life are continually happening. Poetry is a process. Wisdom is recognition of movement : its work is "get things on". Charles Olson's gesture is the work he has done in poetry. Language is *for forwarding*. The poet brought to speech in the present puts the events of his past into the present. The archeologist of morning unearths both what has happened and remains aware of what is present. In poetry these events are put into the words of the morrow. The poet seizes the opportunity to put into language the world coming into being. "It is still morning", Olson writes, because the poem, like the world, is continuously expanding. The poem "The Telesphere" appears towards the end of Volume III of *Maximus*:

an actual earth of value to
construct one, from rhythm to
image, and image is knowing, and
knowing, Confucius says, brings one
to the goal: nothing is possible without
doing it. It is where the test lies, malgré
all the thought and all the pell-mell of
proposing it. Or thinking it out or living it
ahead of time.

Reading about my world,

March 6th, 1968

(MP, III.190, 584)

The poet acts on the instant, that pursues all possibility through action, nears knowledge. “The Earth, then, is conceivably a knowable, a seizable, a single, and *your* thing, and yours as a single thing and person yourself” (*Casual Mythology* 118). The reader, the poet, the painter or dancer, American citizen, the single human body engage with the world and come a step closer to knowing it. The possibility for action is always present. It is still morning. We learn this from *Maximus*:

It is undone business
I speak of, this morning,
with the sea
stretching out
from my feet

(*MP*, I. 53, 57)

Remarks

The force behind the endeavor to re-read Olson's work was the desire to reconcile two of my interests: performance and poetry, with one another. The performance that I made a year ago was the first time that I realized that these two interests of mine could be interlaced in a critically engaging way. I didn't know that my desire to pursue both of these in writing would lead me back to the very poet I had originally kept at bay for a lack of understanding, for my inability to say anything substantial about the work at all. Making a performance after reading Spicer made immediate sense to me. The link between these two forms is the idea action, a powerful notion I had not understood fully with regards to Olson. There was a lot I needed to reexamine. I had overlooked the field.

The first time I read Olson's poetry I had no idea how to navigate my way through it. I couldn't hold onto anything in the language that made me stick with it long enough to get something from it. I read "Projective Verse", I understood it on a fundamental level, I could sense that Olson's objectives were vast and that they needed to be met, NOW, in the present moment (that present being 1950 and all subsequent years ahead.) I couldn't yet say that I was a reader that understood Olson's ideas, his aims for poetry, his verse.

Something changed for me though. I was less doubtful once I watched the footage. Readers of Olson absolutely need to familiarize themselves with the full scope of what he means by physicality, the active, the kinetic. I could not yet explain why Olson made sense to me after watching him read “Letter 27” but I knew that I had been missing some crucial part of him: this being his body, its movement, his distinct sensibility, cadence of breath. I was delighted to find that the letter was marked as “[Withheld]”. It was the piece of evidence I had missed the first time around that would fill in the gap for me as a reader.

Olson’s presence as far as influence is concerned is important to mention. Poets like Diane Di Prima, Anne Waldman, Denise Levertov, Edward Dorn, Robert Duncan, Jack Spicer, Barbara Guest, Susan Howe, Joanne Kyger, to name only a few, have in their own distinct ways formulated their approach to poetry with Olson in mind. Waldman sites the Berkeley Poetry Conference of 1965 as her “confirmation of a life in poetry” and mentions the moment in the lecture when he says, “I’m in the presence of an event” (Alcalay 163). Poetry becomes an investigative process by which the poet-perceiver, looking out of his eyes, learns through watching, by noticing the immediate movement of the now. The open field continually expands as each new event, “the next second”, come into being. The Maximus Poems stretch outwards to limits that Olson wished could extend infinitely. Man sees motion and tries to name it. The world of the poem grows. The challenge for the poet is that he must simultaneously tell what already happened and devote attention to what will happen moments later. The past, therefore, exerts its force onto the present moment. It forces the field to extend outward to enormous proportions. Olson says history is the function of a human life. The past is inherently present in the living, breathing, and present body. The past can be examined because the body is here, and the body has collected its fair share of experiences through the skin.

“I am in the presence of an event.”

The gesture revealed itself to me when I did return to Olson’s work. The repetition of the preposition “of” at the end of so many of the lines in Maximus force the reader to ask “of what?” The preposition points to nothing more than the space that lies beyond it. The line acts like a mannerism, like Olson’s finger that points to some distant location in the film clip when he utters the phrase “polis is this”. The viewer, like the reader, follows the force of the poet’s gesture. He indicates, names, points to something: some thing, any one thing, in space. The gesture in Olson’s poetry forces the reader to confront the same space that the poet has, to step onto topographical expanse of the page, and to notice an instantaneous unfolding of language.

Ann Lauterbach writes in her poem “Gesture and Flight”:

A gesture, a glance
So the thing stood for its instance

Folded tidily under the lamplight
With the logic of fact.

(from *Clamor*, 50)

The gesture remains an essential fact of the human body that performed it. The gesture is made with considerable force in the instant it is performed. “So the thing stood its instance” reminds me of that idea Olson mentions when he writes to Cid Corman: “to make the thing stand on its own feet as, a force, in, the fields of force which surround everyone of us, of which we, too, are forces: to stand FORTH” (Olson 20).

How to make meaning with motion is the task of the poet. The Chinese ideogram and the Mayan hieroglyphs capture the things in the world as they move and as they are noticed by the

perceiver. Olson wants language to function similarly: to get words closer to the things they point to: to make words act like the things do.

The body is the means by which our experience in the world can be measured. To “measure the sources of my song” is to look into the body: to archeologically pursue the space of that internal space: to find place within the internal viscera of a physical presence.

Rainer’s Trio A is perhaps the most famous piece of The Mind is a Muscle work. In it she performs a solo: the choreography unfolds as one continuous motion. Rainer does not look at the camera or pause at any moment during the entirety of the piece. The prologue of movement becomes epilogue: one movement of the body continues into the next, the force of the preceding body configuration pull Rainer into the subsequent ones. There is a sense that Rainer continues to retrace circular pathways with her body. Past becomes present as she navigates the space with each new instant of movement.

“Any form of record on the spot” is the idea, I think, that breath allows language to capture what is happening as it is happening. On the spot: at that moment on the canvas, the field of the page.

The task of the poet is to enact language: to make it move. In order to do so, the poet must see himself within the continual expansion of space. The poet as an object among objects. I’ll end here with some lines from the Tao Te Ching. I return again to the very premise that naming matters. This very epilogue, I am pleased to find, can be found in my prologue:

The unnamable is the eternally real.
Naming is the origin
of all particular things.

--Lao Tzu

Bibliography

- Alcalay, Ammiel. *A Little History*. New York City: UpSet Press, 2013. Print.
- Allen, Donald M., and Warren Tallman, eds. *The Poetics of The New American Poetry*. New York: Grove Press Inc., 1973. Print.
- Austin, J.L. "Performative Utterances." *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. Ed. Vincent B. Leitch. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2001. N. pag. Print.
- Bakhtin, M.M. *The Dialogic Imagination*. Trans. and ed. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981. Print.
- Blaser, Robin. *The Fire: Collected Essays of Robin Blaser*. Ed. Miriam Nichols. Berkeley: U of California, 2006. Print.
- Bourriaud, Nicolas. *Relational Aesthetics*. N.p.: Les presses du réel, 2002. Print.
- Bram, Shahar. *Charles Olson and Alfred North Whitehead*. Trans. Batya Stein. Lewisberg: Bucknell University, 2004. Print.
- Brecht, Bertolt. *Brecht on Theater: The Development of an Aesthetic*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1957. Print.
- Butterick, Charles F. *A Guide to the Maximus Poems of Charles Olson*. Berkeley: U of California, 1978. Print.
- Butterick, George F. "Charles Olson and the Postmodern Advance." *The Iowa Review* 11.4 (1980): n. pag. *JSTOR*. Web. 29 Apr. 2013.
- Chomsky, Noam. *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax*. Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1965. Print.
- Condillac, Etienne Bonnot De. *Essay on The Origin of Human Knowledge*. Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2001. Print.

- "Cratylus." *Plato: Complete Works*. Ed. John M. Cooper and D.S. Hutchinson. Cambridge/Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997. N. pag. Rpt. in *Plato: Complete Works*. N.p.: n.p., n.d. N. pag. Print.
- Creeley, Robert. *A Quick Graph: Collected Notes and Essays*. San Francisco: Four Seasons Foundation, 1970. Print.
- Davenport, Guy. *The Geography of the Imagination*. N.p.: David R. Godine, 1997. Print.
- Derrida, Jaques. *The Archeology of the Frivolous*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1973. Print.
- Dewey, John. *Experience and Nature*. Chicago: Open Court, 1926. Print.
- Di Prima, Diane. "'Old Father, Old Artificer': Charles Olson Memorial Lecture." *Lost and Found: CUNY Poetics Document Initiative* 3rd ser. (2012): n. pag. Print.
- Dorn, Ed. *Ed Dorn Live*. Ed. Joseph Richey. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 2007. Print.
- Dorn, Edward. "Charles Olson Memorial Lectures." *Lost and Found: CUNY Poetics Document Initiative* 3rd ser. (2012): n. pag. Print.
- Ducrot, Oswald, and Tzvetan Todorov. *Encyclopedic Dictionary of the Sciences of Language*. Trans. Catherine Porter. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1972. Print.
- Duncan, Robert. *A Selected Prose*. New York City: New Directions, 1944. Print.
- Eliot, T.S. "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock." *Poetry Magazine* (1915): 130. *Poetry Foundation*. Web. 29 Apr. 2013.
<<http://etryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/browse/6/3#/20570428>>.
- Emerson, Ralph Waldo. *Essays: First and Second Series*. N.p.: Paperback Classics, 1983. Print.
- Foucault, Michel. *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. Trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith. New York: Pantheon Books, 1972. Print.

- Havelock, Eric A. *Preface to Plato*. Cambridge: Harvard University, 1963. Print.
- Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*. Trans. Joan Stambaugh. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1953. Print.
- . *On the Way to Language*. Trans. Peter D. Hertz. New York, London, San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers, 1959. Print.
- . *Poetry, Language, Thought*. Trans. Albert Hofstadter. New York: Perennial Classics, 1971. Print.
- Jakobson, Roman. "'Linguistics and Poetics', 'Two Aspects of Language and Two Types of Aphasic Disturbances', 'The Metaphoric and Metonymic Poles .'" *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. Ed. Vincent B. Leitch. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2001. 1254-65. Print.
- James, William. *Essays in Pragmatism*. New York City: Hafner, 1948. Print.
- . *Writings: 1902-1910*. N.p.: Library of America, 1987. Print.
- Kenneally, Christine. *The First Word: The Search for the Origins of Language*. New York City: Viking, 2007. Print.
- Kleist, Heinrich. "On The Gradual Construction of Thoughts During Speech." Trans. Michael Hamburger. 1951. *German Life and Letters*. N.p.: n.p., n.d. 42-46. Print.
- Lauterbach, Ann. *The Night Sky*. New York City: Viking, 2005. Print.
- Levertov, Denise. "Some Notes on Organic Form." *The Poet in the World*. New York City: New Directions, n.d. 7-13. Print.
- Locke, John. *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. Comp. Alexander Campbell Fraser. New York: Dover Publications Inc., 1959. Print.
- Lowe, Victor. *Understanding Whitehead*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Paperbacks, 1966. Print.

- Maud, Ralph. *Charles Olson's Reading: A Biography*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois, 1996. Print.
- Morgan, Kate Tarlow. *Circles and Boundaries*. New York: Factory School, 2011. Print.
- Olson, Charles. *Additional Prose*. Ed. George F. Butterick. Bolinas: Four Seasons Foundation, 1974. Print.
- . *Archeologist of Morning*. London: Cape Goliard, 1970. Print.
- . *Collected Prose*. Ed. Donald Allen and Benjamin Friedlander. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997. Print.
- . *Letters for Origin (1950-1956)*. Ed. Albert Glover. New York: Paragon House, 1969. Print.
- . *The Maximus Poems*. Berkely: University of California Press, 1960. Print.
- . *Muthologos*. Ed. Ralph Maud. Vancouver: Talonbooks, 2010. Print.
- . *Poetry and Truth: The Beloit Lectures and Poems*. Ed. George F. Butterick. Berkeley: Book People, 1971. Print.
- . *Selected Writings*. New York: New Directions, 1966. Print.
- . *The Special View of History*. Ed. Ann Charters. Berkeley: Oyez, 1970. Print.
- Pound, Ezra. *The Cantos*. New York City: New Directions, 1934. Print.
- Rainer, Yvonne. *Feelings are Facts: A Life*. Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2006. Print.
- . *The Mind is a Muscle*. YouTube. Dance Film Archives, n.d. Web. 29 Apr. 2013.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aggv4jybdaY>. part 1 ; choreographed 1966 and performed August 14, 1978
- Ratcliff, Carter. *The Fate of a Gesture: Jackson Pollock and Postwar American Art*. Boulder: Westview, 1996. Print.
- Rosenberg, Harold. "The American Action Painters." *Art News* 51.8 (1952): 1-8. Print.

- Rousseau, Jean-Jacques, and Johann Gottfried Herder. *On The Origin of Language*. Trans. John H. Moran and Alexander Gode. Chicago: University of Chicago, 1966. Print.
- Sapir, Edward. *Language: An Introduction to the Study of Speech*. London: Granada, 1970. Print.
- Saussure, Ferdinand De. "Course in General Linguistics." *Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. Ed. Vincent B. Leitch. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2001. 970-77. Print.
- Shelburne, Donald. *A Key to Whitehead's Process and Reality*. New York City: Macmillan, 1966. Print.
- Silliman, Ron. *The New Sentence*. New York: Roof Books, 1977. Print.
- Thoreau, Henry David. *Collected Essays and Poems*. New York City: Library of America, 2001. Print.
- Tooke, John Horne. *Epea pteroenta or The Diversions of Purley*. London: William Nichols, 1860. Print.
- Tzu, Lao. *Tao Te Ching: An Illustrated Journey*. Trans. Steven Mitchell. N.p.: Francis Lincoln, 2009. Print.
- Volosinov, V.N. *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*. Cambridge: Harvard, 1973. Print.
- Waldrop, Rosmarie. "Charles Olson: Process and Relationship." *Twentieth Century Literature* 23.4 (1977): 467-86. JSTOR. Web. 29 Apr. 2013.
- Whitehead, Alfred North. *Adventures of Ideas*. New York City: Macmillan, 1937. Print.
- Williams, William Carlos. *Selected Poems*. New York City: New Directions, 1917. Print.
- . *Spring and All*. New York City: New Directions, 1923. Print.
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *The Blue and Brown Books: Preliminary Studies for the "Philosophical Investigations."* New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1958. Print.

- - -. *Philosophical Investigations*. Trans. G.E.M. Anscombe. New York: Macmillan, 1958. Print.
- - -. *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. N.p.: Createspace Independent, 2013. Print.
- Wood, Catherine. *Yvonne Rainer The Mind is a Muscle*. N.p.: Afterall Books, 2007. Print.
- Zurbrugg, Nicholas, ed. *Art, Performance, Media: 31 Interviews*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota, 2004. Print.

