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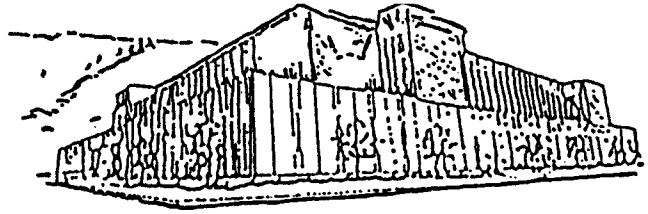
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TO LIBERATE THE PARTICULAR:
POLITICS AND POETICS in CHARLES OLSON'S THE MAXIMUS POEMS

by

Kurt Andrew Slauson

B.A. University of Oregon, 1992

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Master of Arts

The University of Montana

1995

Approved by:

Clintel Beal
Chairperson

R. C. Murray
Dean, Graduate School

May 17, 1995
Date

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To Liberate the Particular: Politics and Poetics in Charles Olson's The Maximus PoemsDirector: Christopher Beach ^{CB}

Charles Olson's diverse oeuvre, consisting of essays, letters, journals, lectures, and poems, contain a sustained critique of what he termed "The Western Box." While numerous critics discuss the stylistic and theoretical implications of Olson's attempts to construct a poetic idiom that challenges and transforms traditional Western literature, little work has been done to explore the political dimension of his writing in any depth. Throughout his "epic" work The Maximus Poems, Olson launches an attack on capitalist economy in both its historical and contemporary manifestations. In the first chapter I discuss the "content" of this critique through writings that developed out of the Frankfurt School, principally the work of Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, and Walter Benjamin. I make the case that the politics of Olson's poetry extends beyond mere literary practice, and works for a radically alterior disposition toward social behavior. Whereas the dominant poetry of his time, that of the New Criticism, centered on transcending social and political contexts, Olson emphasizes these strata of historical material continually.

I go on in the second chapter to explore the content of Olson's social critique in its methodological deployment, emphasizing Olson's insistence on the political dimensions of any literary practice. In spite of the difficulty of Olson's poetry, the "unreadability" in Olson's poetry, as a politics of poetic form, is not beyond critique, not a silencing agent, nor does it strive for a universality which would relieve the poetry of its relation to historical contexts. Rather, The Maximus Poems are themselves a cultural studies arena in miniature. Where traditional poetic practice seeks to seal off the poetry from its social contexts, thereby reifying itself through the very gesture of claiming transcendence, Olson's engagement of a polyphony of cultural texts *opens* the space, and is itself a model, for cultural critique.

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A Note on the Text

Charles Olson was extremely exacting with the final published versions of his poems, particularly his specific use of the line break. In order to preserve the integrity of Olson's lines, I use a smaller type when quoting his poetry. This small type is harder to read, and I apologize for any inconvenience this may cause.

Also, for the convenience of the reader, I use the following abbreviations for the Olson texts that I quote throughout. All of these texts are fully cited on the final "Works Cited" page:

COEP Charles Olson & Ezra Pound: An Encounter at St.

Elizabeth's

HU "Human Universe" in Selected Writings of Charles Olson

MP The Maximus Poems

PV "Projective Verse" in Selected Writings

SVH The Special View of History

Preface

This thesis represents a learning experience, and as such it is less a completed work in itself than an end of a beginning, an orientation toward future work. My first experience of Charles Olson was in high school, when I held Maximus IV, V, VI in total bewilderment. I had never seen a poetry that on the surface looked so bizarre, nor had I ever read anything so utterly difficult. This astonishment continues to this day, even though I did not begin reading Olson until early last year. In the interim, most of my readings in contemporary poetry have been peppered with references to his work, with many writers claiming him as their predecessor, mentor, and inspiration. My curiosity as to why Olson is hailed as a central figure for postmodern poetry and poetics inspires this work throughout. In the process of "using" Olson as a ground for understanding postmodern experimental poetry, I also developed a profound love for the poetry itself. I continue to find Olson a foundational artist and theoretician, and my understanding of his work opens many insights into the experimental poetry that follows him.

The theoretical discourses that I work into this thesis derive from the same spirit of discovery and experimentation. My first chapter discusses "politics" in Olson's poetry, and toward this end, I make a connection

between Olson and the Marxist-based philosophers of the Frankfurt School. A great deal has been written about the Frankfurt writers since their major works were published in the forties, fifties, and sixties. For my own research, I felt it imperative to explore the primary works as closely as possible before delving prematurely into recent secondary studies. Furthermore, I find the Frankfurt School's analyses of "the culture industry" to be prophetic and hauntingly contemporary, leaving me to feel no urgency over getting to the most recent studies. I do not involve myself with trying to prove whether or not Olson was a Marxist, for he was consistently opposed to "isms" of any sort. Rather, I emphasize a connection between Olson and the Frankfurt School's critique of American political economy as it is reflected in aesthetic production. Furthermore, I approach the Frankfurt writers just as I do Olson, finding their works at the center, in terms of methodology, of most recent cultural criticism. Like the work of Olson, their writings represent important groundwork.

My second chapter reads Olson's "politics" in its formal and stylistic manifestations, and for this study I deploy the work of Jacques Derrida. As with Olson and the Frankfurt writers, I am fully aware of the hoards of secondary work surrounding this compelling writer, but again I have made a concentrated effort to get as deeply into the primary works as possible, rather than relying on secondary.

The choice of Derridean texts continues my effort throughout this thesis to lay a foundation for future work, as I find that nearly all of the important discussions of postmodern poetry and poetics intersect on some level with Derrida's ground-breaking work.

Finally, Charles Olson, Theodor Adorno, and Jacques Derrida are, hands down, the most difficult writers I have ever read. The difficulty of their works alone makes them compelling and attractive sources for me. I am certain, however, that these writers are not deliberately obfuscating, in the sense of playing games for the sake of games. At heart I see in their work a tremendously sincere commitment to improving the political, cultural, and economic well-being of individuals and social groups at large.

In closing, I should add that this is not really a study of The Maximus Poems, but rather a glimpse into a few of them. The bulk of Olson's writings is astounding. Olson's Maximus sequence is 630 pages of very complex work, and at least half of his of complete opus is outstanding in other forms. Therefore, I try to emphasize that my focus is fairly specific. Given the vastness of his writings, ample evidence for readings counter to my own can easily be produced. I do my own share of criticizing the critics, but nearly all of the texts I researched were helpful and useful in some way. I regard all studies that celebrate

experimental literature to be somewhat daring, and in light of the difficulties I myself experienced in reading Olson, I am grateful for the excellent work, though scarce, that is currently available to the public.

Olson began his major work in the 1950's, a period of conservatism both in American politics and in literary practice. Reactionaries are returning to the American cultural scene with tremendous zeal. This thesis both celebrates Olson's radical poetic achievement and defends that radicalism against an increasingly conservative cultural milieu.

I. The Resistance

The shackling of man's thoughts and actions by the forms of extremely developed industrialism, the decline of the idea of the individual under the impact of the all-embracing machinery of mass culture, create the prerequisites of the emancipation of reason. At all times, the good has shown the traces of the oppression in which it originated. Thus the idea of the dignity of man is born from the experience of barbarian forms of domination.

--Max Horkheimer, Eclipse of Reason

Over the course of my research on Charles Olson, I developed a suspicion that something is missing in the current accounts of his poetry. Throughout The Maximus Poems, and particularly in the first volume, I find a spirit of venomous anger in the poetry, a rather fierce and specific attack on capitalism as it functions both historically and in contemporary society. Olson's focus on the function of capitalism in American culture is not solely an economic analysis; he explores in numerous ways how capitalism impoverishes social behavior and individual well-being. While it goes without saying that I have not been able to read everything ever written about Charles Olson, I have made my way through the major studies in addition to numerous articles, and still I find no thorough account of Olson's politics. This gap in the criticism puzzles me, for the dominant impression I take from The Maximus Poems is that of a poet almost entirely concerned with a kind of

archaeological unearthing of hidden strata, such that an historical record can be retrieved that emphasizes a dreadful history of capital in the West. Furthermore, the intense hostility that emerges in Olson's treatment of American political economy ("the shore the City/ are now/ shitty, as the Nation/ is - the World") is to me one of the most salient features of the poetry (MP 179). A partial explanation for the reticence surrounding Olson's politics might lie in the history of the criticism itself; for, as near as I can tell, the emergence of post-structuralist criticism coincides with the pioneering studies of the Pound tradition in American poetry. The early champions of this experimental tradition in poetry, from James E. Breslin, Charles Altieri, and Marjorie Perloff forward, focus primarily on stylistic features endemic to this tradition. In good post-structuralist fashion, their readings of "content," are, for the most part, secondary. The most recent move away from these more purely stylistic analyses appears in Christopher Beach's The ABC of Influence: Ezra Pound and the Remaking of American Poetic Tradition. This study restores an historical context to the Pound tradition that goes beyond the mere dissemination of literary features in poetic practice.

Beach explains Olson's postmodernity primarily through the poet's rewriting of Pound's injunction that the poem include history. He makes the case that Olson's deployment

of historical material in the poetry derives from Pound, thus keeping a sense of "tradition" alive, while radically transforming that use of extrapoetic material:

Unlike Pound, Olson is no longer interested in "dominating" a chaos but rather in exploring in painstaking detail the world around him. His metaphor is technological rather than personal and heroic; it suggests a "postmodern" process of fragmentation and reintegration rather than a Modernist ethos of masculine virility and physical force. Olson's conception is less concerned with control and order than with discovery. (Beach 89)

The fact that Olson is not concerned, as was Pound, with "yanking and hauling" the chaos around him "into some sort of order (or beauty)," suggests a radical new disposition toward reality that counters the Modernist stance of subject-against-the-world (Beach 89). Beach argues that Pound's method of including extrapoetic material is

fundamentally that of the nineteenth-century cultural archaeologist: he studies the cultural archive for comparisons with, and supplements to, an unfavorable present. Olson's method, exemplified by his work on Mayan remains in the Yucatán, is in a more rigorous sense that of the on-site archaeological researcher. (Beach 87)

I agree with Beach that Pound posits an essentially linear

conception of history, and that his deployment of that material is often both a nostalgic retreat to past forms of "beauty" as he saw them, and a device by which to lambaste what he found to be a culture utterly devoid of any meaningful forms of expression. Olson's use of extrapoetic material, without question, avoids the elegiac/nostalgic turn of Pound and Eliot.¹ While Olson's focus on historical material differs from Pound's, this does not by any means preclude him from the sense of, as Beach politely puts it, "an unfavorable present." Indeed, Olson frequently turns to historical material so as to expose the details of meaning systems that have led to crises in American culture; crises that, in my opinion, he finds utterly horrifying. It should be noted furthermore that Olson deploys more than historical material in the poems. Olson draws on mythology, anthropology, philosophy, psychology, ethno-botany, and physics, all with considerable relish.² It is my wish, therefore, to leave off explicating Olson's extrapoetic material, so as to explore his sense of "an unfavorable present" through an understanding of his characterization of contemporary society. That is, I want to understand Olson's postmodernity not only through reading his methodological innovations, but foremost through understanding his situation as a poet in the context of post-war American society.

Yet my focus on Olson's rage at the machine is not by

any stretch a totalizing reading of the poet and his work; it covers only a part of Olson's enterprise, but one which intrigues me for two reasons. First, I find myself identifying with what I see as his real anger at the machinations of American culture, and second, I am disturbed by the lack of conviction in the criticism toward Olson's vehement critique of that culture. From his lectures, interviews, and public readings, we get the sense that Olson was an extremely considerate, generous, energetic, and convivial person. Poet Joel Oppenheimer, one of Olson's students at Black Mountain College, warns against "this strange story circulating that Charles was this monster who demanded that everybody write like him" (Beach, "Interview," 89). Indeed, a tyrannical didacticism was for Olson one of the most disturbing aspects of his mentor, Pound. In Charles Olson & Ezra Pound: An Encounter at St. Elizabeth's, Olson expresses his contempt for Pound's overwhelming arrogance:

But [Pound was] wrong with a stink of death on all to do with politics and society. Here a fascist as evil as all of them. The confusion of the people with decadence. So that they become his and Pegler's mob--to fear, and thus to hate. The filth of them both, the bastards, and Pound the worst, for the brain and the ear and the flesh to know better. Cut off, he is, cut off from life.

That a poet should choose hate! (COEP 44)

Clearly Olson's anger shows through here ("the bastards"), but is obviously distinguished from Pound's. Furthermore, my emphasis on the criticizing dimension of Olson's poetry, and the language of rage through which it often emerges, fully recognizes the fact that this is only a part of his work, but one, however, that I cannot ignore. Olson's reverence toward his mentors, his peers, and his students, must not be forgotten, and informs his poetry as deeply as does his contempt for society at large. Thus, I argue that Olson *does* foreground a sense of "an unfavorable present," but not in the limited way that Pound does. Olson also posits, as Beach argues, "an entirely new epistemology" (89).³ Unlike Pound, Olson does not make contemporary society his whipping post. Rather, he explores history with anger, with distrust, and with despair, while simultaneously generating a more healthy, creative arena for human community and communication. My reading of the aggravated language by which Olson criticizes contemporary society displaces the immense, celebrating spirit in which he labored--a spirit which delivered up a poetic gift that is still felt with tremendous gratitude by writers living and working today, myself included. I shall move to this "creating" Olson in the next chapter, but it seems crucial to first get an understanding of the social context that, with powerful conviction, daring, and compassion, Olson

worked against throughout his career. As we shall see, the critical reluctance to discuss the scope of Olson's critique of American society pervades many crucial studies of his poetry. Thus, I make a "trial separation" theoretically, in order to privilege content, in this chapter, over form. For Olson, form and content are always generating a dynamic relationship, and he constantly foregrounds the "politics" of writing, both in terms of what is said and how it is said; that is, he considers form and content inseparable. Yet since the dominant critical disposition toward Olson's poetry regards form only, his "politics" generally gets ignored. Olson's politics is not just a "literary" practice, but generates a thoroughgoing sociocultural critique.

Robert von Hallberg's critical biography, Charles Olson: The Scholar's Art, published in 1978, devotes one chapter to the historical context of Olson's writing. While von Hallberg's text marks the most sustained effort to present Olson's politics, he focuses primarily on Olson's poetics and concerns himself "only secondarily with individual poems" (von Hallberg 1). A great deal of Olson criticism follows these tracks: whole articles treat Olson's poetry with scant readings of the poems themselves.⁴ The paucity of close readings of Olson's poems is problematic insofar as it negligently separates theory and practice. The most common "separation" that the criticism has

perpetuated is the divestment of Olson's poetry from a notion of politics. Robert von Hallberg argues that "a case can be made that a study of his poetics should logically precede an examination of his poetry," while I contend that an examination of his politics, as it is coterminous with poetic practice itself, can mark a significant point of departure (von Hallberg 1).

The piece that I will work from to explore this silencing of Olson's politics appears in M. L. Rosenthal and Sally M. Gall's The Modern Poetic Sequence: The Genius of Modern Poetry. Their chapter on Olson links his work to Hart Crane's "neo-regionalism and epic memory," and makes important connections between these poets' notions of the politics of location.⁵ Not only is this text an important study, charting modern experimental poetry in its historical and international contexts, but also the illuminating section on Olson was very helpful in my early research into his poetry. While I have great admiration for Gall and Rosenthal's work, a number of assumptions they make in their Olson chapter are problematic, and their essay exemplifies the circumlocution of Olson's politics that characterizes much of Olson criticism.

Gall and Rosenthal's study of Olson has a dual purpose, providing both a "reading" of Olson's poetry in the context of the modernist use of "place," and a general introduction to the world of Charles Olson.⁶ What surprises me about

their chapter, serving as it does to give a general sense of Olson's poetry, is the amount of attention they *do* devote to the angry strain in Olson's poetry. The authors speak to an incensed tone in Olson's poetry that was required in order to shock a complacent American bourgeois. They write that

the only way to make a fresh start and get out from under the whole betrayal of hard-earned self-regard and deep-rooted local ways is to repudiate all facile affirmation within the present system of things. And that must be done with determined nastiness, an offensive "grossing-out."

(Rosenthal, Gall 338)

I completely agree with their statement here, and find it rather daring in light of the fact that part of the purpose of the piece is to introduce newcomers to Charles Olson's milieu. It does not seem too far-fetched to imagine that such a reading of Olson would scare readers away rather than draw them into his work. It seems the authors also realized the risk that they were taking, for they wind up watering-down Olson at the same time as they foreground the angered, political dimension of his work. When the authors speak of Olson's "political, social, and moral argument," they simultaneously withdraw their commitment to exploring the language through which these "arguments" are conducted:

Nevertheless, Olson (fortunately) never succeeded in sloughing off the work's dependence on

emotional and subjective intensities for its major effects poetically, despite the presence of many passages like the one closing "Letter 23," and despite his ambition--proclaimed in the same poem--to be a special kind of poetic historian.

(Rosenthal, Gall 340)

I have no problem with poetry of emotional and subjective intensity, and Olson does have some poems of this ilk. Yet these authors should know that for the most part, Olson is the last place one should look for the Romantic confessional lyric; a poetic mode that had a huge revival in Olson's day, and which, in spite of his love for Shakespeare, Rimbaud, and Melville, he clearly disliked in its contemporary revivals.⁷ In fact, the passage they refer to in "Letter 23" is a prime example of Olson's non-lyric, "prosaic" passages. It reads as follows:

What we have in this field in these scraps among these fishermen,
and the Plymouth men, is more than the fight of one colony with
another, it is the whole engagement against (1) mercantilism
(cf. the Westcountry men and Sir Edward Coke against the Crown,
in Commons, these same years--against Gorges); and (2) against
nascent capitalism except as it stays the individual adventurer
and the worker on share--against all sliding statism, ownership,
getting in to, the community as, Chambers of Commerce, or theocracy;
or City Manager (MF 105)

and thus the poem ends. Without going into detail on what,

specifically, the passage says--it's critique of capitalism, for example--the authors insist that the poem "is conceived as poetry despite its anti-poetic bearing" (Rosenthal, Gall 340). Furthermore, they charge Olson with "a Poundian tendency to harangue and, at worst, a deadly didacticism in which even the melody of passionate intellectual interest is lacking" (Rosenthal, Gall 333). These passages that insist on the "fortunate" uses of "emotional and subjective intensities for his major effects," function precisely to deny Olson one of his major strengths--his politics--in the very same moment that they foreground his "determined nastiness." Right down to their use of musical metaphor (which implies that good poetry have "melody"), the authors maintain that the value of Olson's poetry, when he is at his best, is that which keeps alive the lyric mode of utterance, the Shakespearean or Keatsian beautiful phrase. God forbid Olson do anything "unpoetic," and when he does, it must be "conceived as poetry despite its anti-poetic bearing" (Rosenthal, Gall 340). In his most central prose text, "Projective Verse," written in 1950 before the Maximus work had really gotten off the ground, Olson objects to the standards by which poetry is traditionally written and valued; standards that Rosenthal and Gall, for all their desire to celebrate Olson's severe modes of critique, continue to uphold. Olson "harangues" this poetry of "emotional and subjective intensities," to use Rosenthal and

Gall's terms, as the poetry of "the Egotistical Sublime"; and it persists, at this latter day, as what you might call the private-soul-at-any-public-wall" (PV 15). Rosenthal and Gall's denial, or evasion, of Olson's powerful cultural and political critique is symptomatic of Olson studies in the main. That the poet deploys passages of "anti-poetic bearing," and that he "harangues" with a "deadly didacticism," are issues *central* to Olson's poetry, and should not be seen as fringe elements that, "fortunately," do not mar the poet's lyric mastery.

Olson's politics, as it inheres in poetic practice, can be seen in his poem "Letter 5," written in 1953 and included in the first volume of The Maximus Poems. The interest of this poem lies in the fact that with this text, Olson's conceptions of history, locality, politics, and literary production all intertwine. The poem centers on Olson's objection to a Gloucester literary magazine entitled The Four Winds, edited by Vincent Ferrini and first published in 1952.

Olson begins this poem with characteristic "unpoetic bearing," opening his text with the ambiguous, parenthetical phrase "(as, in summer, a newspaper, now, in spring, a magazine)" (MP 21). He then goes on to ask "though how Gloucester will know what damage...only Brown's window...This quarterly/ will not be read," thereby keying his readers to the central focus of the poem. The "damage"

in Gloucester, and by association, the American "polis" everywhere, bears the stamp of its relation to contemporary media--Ferrini's quarterly, and "Brown's window" in which it was displayed, "will not be read," its objectifying look at the people of a small fishing community, "are the limits/ of literacy." How will Gloucester "know what damage" motivates its existence? Certainly not through "the habit of newsprint/ (plus possibly the National Geographic)," for Olson argues that Ferrini's quaint, commodification of New England life runs counter to what the working people of that community know:

(tho that the many want any more than, who died
 what scrod brought the Boston market,
 what movies, Gorin's scales, the queer doings
 Rockport--or Squib's coynesses
 about the Antigonish man was pulled out, 3 AM,
 from under Chilson's Wharf, mumbling

I am not at all aware
 that anything more than that
 is called for. Limits
 are what any of us
 are inside of (MP 21)

What Olson has in mind when he writes that "Limits/ are what any of us/ are inside of" is the specificity and complexity of individual beings. Olson argues that poetry requires

distinct, historical data--"the Boston market," "what movies," "Squib's coynesses," and "Chilsom's Wharf." With intimate Gloucester detail such as this, Olson charges that "I am not at all aware/ that anything more than that/ is called for." As George Butterick points out, Ferrini also published a book entitled The Infinite People, whose theme of the "common man" came at the expense of understanding the historical depth and complexity of individual persons and community relations.⁸ This task of dissolving difference among persons, an essential cornerstone of any transcendental idealism, as I see it, has been taken over by the culture industry.

In "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception," Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno write that "the necessity inherent in the system" of the culture industry is to never "leave the customer alone, not for a moment to allow him any suspicion that resistance is possible" (Horkheimer, Adorno 141). Thus, Olson's attack on Ferrini's publication is by no means an innocent affair, for the journal encourages a complacency that stifles individual action:

And there is nothing less applicable
 than the complaints of the culture mongers
 about what the people don't know but oh!
 how beautiful they are, how infinite!
 And think how it will be when:

(Saint Santa

Claus! how they need
 is the latest for oh!
 how they bleed, the poor
 children (MP 22)

The satiric tone dominating this passage drives Olson's objection to the superior attitude of "the culture mongers" toward "what the people don't know." This attitude produces the objectification of blue collar Gloucester: "how beautiful they are, how infinite!" Furthermore, the promise of happiness, delivered up by the culture industry, ("And think how it will be when") is a broken promise, the work of "(Saint Santa/ Claus!" All that comes from a publication such as The Four Winds is the reduction of complex histories into consumable products. In jarred syntax, Olson characterizes the culture industry's implicit functioning in Ferrini's magazine as, "how they need/ is the latest." This passage attacks the culture industry's power to come up with "the latest" products, which, under the banner of giving the people what they want ("how they need"), only produces endless rubbish.

Olson labored, in terms of literary production, under the hegemony of the New Criticism. The poem for New Criticism, as Eagleton writes, is "a delicate equipoise of contending attitudes, a disinterested reconciliation of opposing impulses" (Eagleton 50). While the New Criticism

seeks to sublimate poetry and remove it from historical realities, their view of the poem is intensely ideological. The emphasis in New Critical poetry on structure and technique (irony and ambivalence being the keywords) is decidedly imbued with a "politics":

Reading poetry in the New Critical way meant committing yourself to nothing: all that poetry taught you was "disinterestedness," a serene, speculative, impeccably even-handed rejection of anything in particular. It drove you less to oppose McCarthyism or further civil rights than to experience such pressures as merely partial, no doubt harmoniously balanced somewhere else in the world by the complementary opposites. It was, in other words, a recipe for political inertia, and thus for submission to the political status quo. (Eagleton 50)

Ferrini's journal is symptomatic of the New Critical aesthetic. The banishment of history from poetry turns it into a fetishized object, and poetry's claims to universality erase the memory of conflict and suffering that make up a city like Gloucester. As Olson argues, Ferrini's journal purports to be a Gloucester publication, but is utterly without "one small Gloucester thing" (MP 240). Against the essentially utopian, democratic ideal of New Critical aesthetics, where all the parts ultimately submit

to and service the whole, Olson posits discrete, specific historical discovery. Against this pacifist model of poetry (poem-as-world-reconciler), Olson takes an activist stance toward the brutal hardships felt by a community whose primary industry, fishing, has exploited them for years. Ferrini's journal, in typical New Critical fashion, longs to evade politics in writing, yet Olson delivers up a barrage of evidence to the contrary:

I do not know that Four Winds has a place
 or I a sight in it
 in a city where highliners breed,
 if it is not as good as fish is

as knowing as a halibut knows its grounds (as Olsen knows
 those grounds)

its stories
 as good as any of us are
 stories (as even Squibs knows
 what men have done in dories)

as women have had it, raising kids
 in such an unsteady economy (MF 23)

Ferrini's Gloucester has no "place" in it, the city he constructs lacks specificity--it can be anywhere. Turned against this generalizing aesthetic, Olson requires

historical evidence for any poetic treatment of location. For Olson, writing is completely immersed in the details of its environment, and must be "as knowing as a halibut knows its grounds." Olson's attention to detail produces a more rigorous engagement with the political realities of Gloucester, and retrieves the "stories" that constitute the living histories of actual persons. Gloucester is not Ferrini's quaint fishing town, but a culturally depressed community--one that, for example, keeps women confined to motherhood, forcing them to raise their "kids in such an unsteady economy." By emphasizing the suffering of Gloucester's female population in this case, Olson steers away from universalizing human endeavors. Rather, he stresses an historical record of a town, burdened by "an unsteady economy," whose people have been denied their fundamental human rights. Olson writes that Gloucester is "its stories," its history, and that its individuals are historical beings as well: "as good as any of us are/ stories." By focusing on the historicity of both Gloucester and its people, Olson politicizes the function of poetic writing. Ferrini's version of the world has not "a place/ or I a sight in it." To counter Ferrini's de-historicized poetic, Olson provides not only places, but events:

That day was a sign, Ferrini.

The C & R Construction Company

had hired us Gloucester help

because the contract read "local"

and fired us, after 12 hours,
 had tricked the city's lawyers,
 had covered, by one day's cash,
 the letter of the law

The new way does promote
 cleverness, the main chance is
 its law

And you who come after,
 who've not known the ones
 had to crawl up out of Brace's Cove
 (even in red jacks)

will not so easily know
 the grey-eyed one it does take
 to make a man's chest shine

and he shake off the salt,
 the muck of the in-shore sea, the sludge
 of all shallows (MP 25)

From these passages we clearly see Olson's sense of a committed literature. The dignity of Gloucester's citizens derives not from some universal essence, but from the particular suffering they endure, such that a "man's chest"

can "shine" only by shaking off the "muck" and "sludge" of polluted waters. Taken metaphorically, Maximus/Gloucester shakes off the cultural system that generates "pollution," both literally and figuratively. The function of poetry for Olson, if it to have any social significance at all, is in part to teach people about the cruelty of an economic system that "hired us" and then "fired us, after 12 hours."

Yet, Olson's commitment to inform those "who come after" him about the history of betrayal experienced in Gloucester runs deeper than the ballot box. Olson's exposure of Gloucester's exploitive economy and history challenges the whole system of cultural production:

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 (MF 27)

The role of the poet is not to uphold the eternal verities, but to speak as a ship's captain might, "and be precise about what sort of bottom your vessel's over."

The essential fact to be gleaned from Olson's insistence on historical accuracy in poetry, and the need for poetry to involve itself in the politics of location, is that writing must reveal something about present social

relations. Olson admits that he does "hark back to an older polis," but this is neither nostalgia nor a means of criticizing current society, as he warns, "Nor assuage yrself I use the local as a stick to beat you" (MP 24). Olson's concern for the presence of history in contemporary life, apart from nostalgia, is thoroughly revealed in section five:

I'd not urge anyone back. Back is no value as better. That sentimentality
 has no place, least of all Gloucester,
 where polis
 still thrives

Back is only for those who do not move (as future is,
 you in particular need to be warned
 any of you who have the habit of
 "the people" - as though there were anything / the equal of / the context of / now!

I'll put care where you are, on those streets I know as well as (or better: (MP 26)

It is Ferrini's "Das Volk" caricature of Gloucester that Olson despises, and he suggests that the heroism of its people is revealed primarily through their specific triumphs in the face of a failing economic system. As Walter Benjamin writes in "The Author as Producer," the writer's "mission is not to report but to struggle; not to play the spectator but to intervene actively" (Benjamin 223). Olson insists that his poetry, and poetry at large, return to

"those streets I know," such that his relation to culture is that of a producer, and not a spectator/consumer. History is conceived as an ongoing process, and is practiced actively in order for it to have substantial political force; history must speak to "the context of/ now!" Olson writes that "Back is only for those who do not move (as future is." The fact that the future is written into/as the present tense--"future is"--suggests a radical disposition toward social life: the past and the future can only have personal significance when they are conceived of as informing a dynamic, living present--one that empowers individual "stories."

The passages I have noted thus far should reveal what Rosenthal and Gall negatively describe as Olson's "Poundian tendency to harangue." Olson charges readers of The Four Winds, and Ferrini in particular, to "look straight down into yr pages, into the pages of this sheet you've had the nerve...to put upon the public street" (MP 22). This tone of hostility, so overlooked in Olson criticism, pervades "Letter 5," and is an essential component of Olson's sense of politics. The fact that Olson foregrounds the grim underbelly of American political economy, and the exploitation the American people have suffered at the hands of greedy industrialism, is a possible cause of the critical silence concerning his political commitment: whatever bad conscience Americans might harbor is implicated in the

poetry. Olson writes through a voice of resistance, and if it must bark in order to get the point across, so be it. Yet to "harangue" alone is not enough, and therefore, in order to get a more developed sense of Olson's politics, we must turn to what Rosenthal and Gall describe as Olson's "deadly didacticism." The didactic function in art is of crucial importance to Olson, and cannot be construed as some marginal feature of poetic arrogance.⁹

I have been charting Olson's politics in terms of what is actually said, politically, in the poetry. It seems clear in "Letter 5" that Olson recognizes the "politics" in Ferrini's journal, and that any text has an inevitable relation to social codes of meaning--and thus, to political ideology. In Robert von Hallberg's study, an attempt is made to pin down Olson's "politics" insofar as it reflects partisan behavior. Von Hallberg calls Olson a "New Dealer," and suggests that Olson believed "that meaningful political change can come from legislation," and that, for Olson, "more important than legislation is executive leadership" (von Hallberg 12). While these assertions are interesting and complex, I am less interested in Olson's politics as it reflects, say, how he voted, than I am interested in a broader concept of politics: a politics of poetic form, a politics that is rooted in aesthetics foremost.

Concerning the didactic function in art, Walter Benjamin writes that:

An author who teaches writers nothing, teaches no one. What matters, therefore, is the exemplary character of production, which is able first to induce other producers to produce, and second to put an improved apparatus at their disposal. And this apparatus is better the more consumers it is able to turn into producers--that is, readers or spectators into collaborators. (Benjamin 233)

Olson takes up this same challenge of producing producers, by steering readers away from spectatorship toward a more rigorous, active involvement with the poetic process itself. In The Special View of History, Olson writes "History is story. It means nothing else as a noun. Herodotus was the first to use the word (sign of the 5th Century change) and he used it as a verb: to find out for yourself" (SVH 26). Christopher Beach describes this active stance toward history as contrary to Pound, Eliot, and Yeats, whose High Modernism can be seen "as a fundamentally reactionary mode in which history is viewed either as a factual source of 'authority' or as part of a resurrected wealth of past knowledge needing only to be reclassified and reordered within the bounds of literary writing" (Beach 88). As we have seen in "Letter 5," Olson speaks to Gloucester and "its stories/ as good as any of us are/ stories," thus bearing out the notion of "history as a verb," a living source of self-knowledge, rather than an authoritative

archive of proofs (MP 23).

Yet in spite of this open stance toward history, Olson is also a teacher, a torch-bearer for lost histories. In "Letter 5" he writes that "it is not the many but the few who care/ who keep alive what you set out to do:/ to offer Gloucester poems and stories" (MP 22). Benjamin writes that "the bourgeois apparatus of production and publication can assimilate astonishing quantities of revolutionary themes, indeed, can propagate them without calling its own existence, and the existence of the class that owns it, seriously into question" (Benjamin 229). Turned against this ability of the culture industry to appropriate forms of resistance, Olson speaks of "the few who care," and most importantly, asks that they "keep alive" the stories through continuous critical reflection. This concern for history "as discourse," as continuous dialogue and debate, is fundamentally political, and marks Olson's resistance to the tempo of commercial society. Adorno writes that "everything has to run incessantly, to keep moving. For only the universal triumph of the rhythm of mechanical production and reproduction promises that nothing changes, and nothing unsuitable will appear" (Horkheimer, Adorno 134). The culture industry, and its dependence on forgetting the past in order to sell its never-ending arsenal of "new" products, is undermined by Olson's insistence on renewing history in everyday life. His concern for "you who come after,/ who've

not known the ones/ had to crawl out of Brace's Cove" is simultaneously a critique of the invasion of capital into every area of social life, particularly its erasure of historical memory.

In my discussion of Olson's "politics" I have deliberately delayed discussing the one section of "Letter 5" that could usurp my entire argument, but I have attempted to save the most crucial section for last. In section eight, Olson continues his assault on Ferrini's magazine and all those that resemble it:

your magazine might excuse itself
 if it walked on those legs all live things walk on,
 their own

that is, it might,
 if you knew that a literary magazine is not,
 for example,
 politics

(even a man's own personal politics--
 what sticks out in this issue is verse
 from at least four other editors
 of literary magazines

do you think such scratch-me-back
 gets by our eyes, the few of us there are

who read? (MP 28)

The good-ol'-boy, "scratch-me-back" politics of publishing "at least four other editors/ of literary magazines" is straightforward enough--a strange kind of nepotism that excludes, in Olson's opinion, works produced at the margin. Yet this notion that "a literary magazine is not,/ for example,/ politics" seems to be a problematic assertion in a poem that is, as I find it, intensely and deliberately political. Bruce Andrews' essay, "Poetry as Explanation, Poetry as Praxis," helps interrogate this notion that literary production is "not,/ for example,/ politics." Andrews' involvement with the Language poets, a "school" directly descending from Charles Olson. gives his aesthetic as crucial resonance with Olson:

A desire for a social, political dimension in writing...has meant, in recent years with this work, a conception of writing *as* politics, not a writing *about* politics. Asking: what is the *politics* inside the work, inside *its* work? Instead of instrumentalized or instrumentalizing, this is a poetic writing more actively *explanatory*. One that explores the *possibilities* of meaning, of "seeing through": works that foreground the process by which language "works," implicating the history & context that are needed to allow the writing to be more comprehensively

understood. (Andrews 24)¹⁰

It is this notion of politics, of writing-as-politics, writing/politics, as politics in and of writing, that Olson anticipates in his poetry. Unlike the topical politics, for example, of the 1930's socialist poetry, or the 1960's protest poetry, Olson's politics inheres in the form of the poetry itself.¹¹ As I have argued, Olson speaks in a voice of protest, of contempt and anger. Since the "complaints of the culture mongers/ about what the people don't know" is the dominant (and dominating) politics of American cultural production, the work of art must liberate the political margin, the regions where capital has not penetrated.

Poetry must speak to what the people *do* know:

the shocking play you publish
 with God as the Master of
 a Ship' In Gloucester-town
 you publish it, where men
 have cause to know where god is
 when wooden ships or steel ships,
 with sail or power,
 are out on men's business

on waters which are tides, Ferrini,
 are not gods

on waves (and waves

are not the same as deep water)

and themselves, and their vessel,

in the hands of winds: winds, Ferrini,

which are never 4, which have their grave dangers (as writing does)

just because weather

is very precise to

the quarter it comes from (as good writing is,

if it is as good as (MP 29)

The deeper scope of Olson's resistance to the culture industry of American society is borne out by a form of writing that possesses "grave dangers." Olson's politics does not "transcend" actual events in the world, for his repeated reference to the historical archive of Gloucester is directed precisely against such reification. Olson demands that any substantial writing "is very precise to/ the quarter it comes from," and thus he critiques Ferrini at the most basic level: "on waters which are tides, Ferrini,/ are not gods."

Olson's insistence on "political" writing, specifically by liberating marginalized histories, is never doctrinaire, but emphasizes personal discovery. Olson challenges single party loyalty, and thus no fundamental metaphysic or unified ideology can be elicited from the poetry. Olson's challenge to the whole capitalist system of literary production is not "useful" in the sense of creating a coherent, applicable

platform from which to voice dissent. Olson resists "activism," as Horkheimer describes it, as a form of propaganda:

Is activism, then, especially political activism, the sole means of fulfillment, as just defined? I hesitate to say so. This age needs no stimulus to action. Philosophy must not be turned into propaganda, even for the best possible purpose. The world has more than enough propaganda...Some readers of this book may think that it represents propaganda against propaganda...If philosophy is to be put to work, its first task should be to correct this situation. The concentrated energies necessary for reflection must not be prematurely drained into the channels of activistic or non-activistic programs. (Horkheimer 184)

Thus, what Rosenthal and Gall term Olson's "deadly didacticism" is in fact the very mode by which he evades propagandizing, or generating a purely use-value theory of literary production. Olson does argue that poetry must be "of essential use," but his notion of the poet-as-teacher is always centered in a process of continual self-discovery (PV 15). This pedagogy of process marks a substantial resistance to what Horkheimer describes as the "overwhelming machinery of social power" and its oppression of "the automatized masses" (Horkheimer 186). To achieve this

resistance, his tone often verges on hostility. Yet in "Letter 5" he does try to "meet" Ferrini, and the aesthetics/politics that he represents, throughout the poem. By the end, however, Olson cannot surrender in the name of diplomacy, and will not compromise his conviction that Ferrini's mode of literary production is utterly limited:

It's no use.
 There is no place we can meet.
 You have left Gloucester.
 You are not there, you are anywhere
 where there are little magazines
 will publish you (MP 29)

The all-pervasive commodification of cultural productions has as much hold on Ferrini's work as it does on society at large: "you are anywhere." Resistance to the culture industry, however, cannot concern itself solely with "protest," with Olson's angered voice of dissent. As Bruce Andrews writes:

I GET IMPATIENT
 Conventionally, radical dissent & "politics" in writing would be measured in terms of communication & concrete effects on an audience. Which means either a direct effort at empowering or mobilizing -- aimed at existing identities -- or at the representation of outside conditions, usually in an issue-oriented way. (Andrews 23)

Olson also gets impatient, and his poetry casts a political critique of events as such, often in direct, enraged, transparent language. Yet turned toward the limits of progressive, "activist" writing, Olson also foregrounds a self-interrogation of the very means for critique. Thus, the methodological deployment of Olson's politics will be the topic of the next chapter. There I will explore how this angry, political voice, which often seems to want to bash the system from some "outside" position, actually generates its most radical "politics" through its internal machinery. The "grave dangers" that interrogate culture also question the very medium through which interrogation is conducted: language.

Notes

1. For a brief, extremely biased, though perceptive account of Eliot's (and by association Pound's) orthodoxy, see chapter one (specifically pages 39-40) of Terry Eagleton's Literary Theory: An Introduction. He reads Eliot's tradition-defining texts as "an arbitrary construct" that is, however, "paradoxically imbued with the force of absolute authority." The essential point is that Eliot's and (to an extent) Pound's tradition is narrowly conceived and exclusive--a men's club--whereas Olson's work, in both theory and practice, is inclusive. Eagleton argues that "the governing principle" of Eliot's tradition "seems to be not so much which works of the past are eternally valuable, as which will help T.S. Eliot write his own poetry." Olson's method, on the contrary, makes the use of extrapoetic material available to anyone, *as praxis*: no ideology of greatness, beauty, or genius, is demanded of his sources. Olson is concerned with teaching through his poetry, and thus specific kinds of sources, especially marginal histories, are of great importance to his work. Yet what emerges from the poetry, particularly for poets who followed his lead, is a more open, "anything goes" approach toward including extrapoetic material.
2. Numerous articles treat specific texts of the "library" within Olson's poetry. The most comprehensive study is

George F. Butterick's A Guide to *The Maximus Poems* of Charles Olson, which provides non-interpretive exegesis only. Studies of Olson's intertexts generally concern his more "literary" references, while Olson's interest in science, for example, is still new and unexplored territory. For a quality discussion of Olson's poetics as it relates to physics, see Steven Carter's "Fields of Spacetime and the 'I' in Charles Olson's The Maximus Poems."

3. I should qualify here what is meant by "new epistemology." Beach does not suggest, nor do I wish to, that Olson's epistemology is "new" insofar as he dreamed it up out of nowhere. Olson's vast and diverse library included the work of phenomenologists Martin Heidegger and M. Merleau-Ponty, as well as texts by Carl Jung, Alfred North Whitehead, and Leo Frobenius, all of which inform his "new" epistemology. Though "new epistemologies" belong as much to the era as to Olson, his "version" is nonetheless idiosyncratic and unique--only not in the sense of a spontaneously generated theory. For Olson's "complete" library, see Olson: The Journal of the Charles Olson Archives.

4. For example, Philip Kuberski's otherwise compelling article, "Charles Olson and the American Thing: The Ideology of Literary Revolution," is marred, in my opinion, by the fact that not one line of poetry is cited in his discussion.

5. In section four, chapter twelve, part two (IV.xii.ii,

331-49)

6. What I mean by "place" in modern long poems, for example, refers to Williams' Paterson, Crane's The Bridge, and Bunting's Briggflatts, to name a few. This extended "archaeological" concentration on a specific locality in intimate detail arguably belongs as well to Whitman's focus on Manhattan. The distinguishing feature is methodology: that is, specific detail certainly inheres in innumerable novels and poems, but the method of archaeology, in the more Nietzschean/Foucaultian sense of the term, as uncovering stratified discourses, and marginal ones in particular, represents a specific stance toward writing that is common and unique to these writers.

7. I am speaking here of the early poets of the New Criticism, the Fugitives, including Robert Penn Warren, John Crowe Ransom, Randall Jarrell, and Allen Tate, among others, as well as the loosely defined "confessional" poets: Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, Theodore Roethke, Robert Lowell, John Berryman, and Delmore Schwartz. Olson wrote Creeley about a psychological study of poets he had been asked to join, concluding that "the whole study is bound to be cockeyed: what can Eberhart, Lowell, Wilbur (o yes Cummings sd no thanks), Bishop, MMoore, for that matter, Aiken & such shits tell?)), " in Charles Olson & Robert Creeley: The Complete Correspondence, vol. 3, p.60. Although Olson speaks at great length about the poets he admired--Duncan, Creeley,

Levertov, Dorn, and Ginsberg, among others--it appears he did not have time for poets he disliked, and outright attacks, though intense, are relatively infrequent.

8. The mention of Ferrini's book The Infinite People is drawn from Butterick's Guide, p.32.

9. The word "arrogance" had special interest for Olson, and he uses it in the poem "Maximus, to himself," MP p.56. In The Special View of History, Olson writes "the word [humilitas] is an old Indo-European root meaning arrogance, actually (from rogo, to ask a question to or of something, to make a demand which has to be answered. And because the demand is made of yourself (that with which you are most familiar) it turned over, and became that horror and practice of western man, humility." Rosenthal and Gall deem Olson's powerful tone arrogant, yet the word really means "to find out for yourself." Thus, given Olson's focus on history as self-discovery, the negative valence of "arrogance" exposes the Christian moral system wherein weakness is a virtue, and arrogance, self-discovery, is wicked. Olson's objection to this system is carried right down to the smallest root particles of language. Quoted from Butterick's Guide, p.83.

10. For a full account of the connection between the Language Poets and Olson's work (and others in the Pound tradition) see Beach's conclusion to ABC, "Reappropriation and Resistance: Charles Bernstein, Language Poetry, and

Poetic Tradition," pp.237-251.

11. Let's take, for example, the early political poetry of Kenneth Patchen in Before the Brave (1936), and possibly Allen Ginsberg's late-sixties/early-seventies poetry. By "topical" politics in these poetries I mean to suggest a transparency in the language, such that the "protest" occurs in a more available, populist language that really doesn't survive much beyond the context in which it is written. This form of political poetry, as poetry speaking to specific events, generates a different sort of "resistance," and one that is, for the most part, ephemeral. Shelley's "The Mask of Anarchy" is a classic 19th-century example of "protest" poetry--it is simple-minded and doomed, while his more complex poems survive as more radical modes of "politics" in poetic writing.

II. To Liberate the Particular

Indeed the long poem is virtually doomed to failure by its own ground rules. Any extended work needs a strong form to guide both the poet in creating it and the reader in understanding it. By rejecting the traditional epic structures of narrative (as in Virgil) and didactic exposition (as in Lucretius), the modern author has been thrown almost entirely on his own resources... Given that the structure of the modern epic has become an elaborate nonce form, it is not surprising that one finds no incontestable masterpieces among the major long poems of this century but only a group of more or less interesting failures, none widely read in its entirety by the literary public, though all jealously guarded by some particular faction (with no group quite so rabidly partisan as those professors who have staked their academic careers on researching and explicating a particular poem): William's Paterson, Jones' Anathema, Olson's Maximus Poems, Zukofsky's A, Berryman's Dream Songs, Dorn's Gunslinger, and so forth.

--Dana Gioia, "The Dilemma of the Long Poem"

The "politics" of Gioia's aesthetic above can be seen as representative of the New critical context that Olson challenges, and yet, Gioia is still working and gaining prominence today, most notably among the Neo-Formalists. Since the New Critical aesthetic still maintains cultural centrality, it can be argued that the long poem in the Pound tradition of American poetry continues to suffer from marginalization--both in and out of the academy. Whether in the case of Pound's Cantos, Williams' Paterson, Zukofsky's A, Crane's The Bridge or Robert Duncan's book-length poems,

the critical reception of these works has been outrightly hostile or indifferent, and recuperation of these poems has rested primarily with an insular community of omniphiles and "specialists."¹ Gioia rightly claims that the modern long poets reject traditional forms, and by this he means The Tradition of epic poetry--Homer, Virgil, Dante, Milton. For Gioia, the thought of challenging and displacing the traditional, patriarchal canon, is cause for despair. Charles Olson's The Maximus Poems is no less irksome to the traditionalists of the canon. While vital critical works on the Pound tradition continue to be published, the dominant aesthetic and pedagogical priorities of American academia persist in devaluing the poetry of the Pound tradition in general, and the long poems of that tradition in particular. Eagleton locates the conditions for this peculiar "marginalization" of the long poem within the history of pedagogy itself. He argues that the short, New Critical lyric "provided a convenient method of coping with a growing student population. Distributing a brief poem for students to be perceptive about was less cumbersome than launching a Great Novels of the World course" (Eagleton 50). A Great Long Poems of the World course poses similar problems, and I am not suggesting that academics should turn full-circle and begin reading only the most laborious poetry. Nor is it a "fault" in teachers to steer away from works of near overwhelming length and complexity. Rather, the constraints

of limited classroom time, and possibly what is yet a lack of effective critical methodologies for long poetries, makes works like The Maximus Poems virtually impossible to get through. To a great extent, the higher educational system has the exclusion of a work like The Maximus Poems built right into its structure. Whatever gets into the classroom, to varying degrees depending on the level of the course, must be made into a consumable product. Obviously, exceptions to this rule abound, and yet, it seems Olson's "politics" is to a great extent reflected by using the long, serial poem for his crucial work. What example, does one do with a "poem," such as The Maximus Poems, that is 630 pages long, with one page, handwritten in a spiral, that is, quite literally, illegible?²

The American long poem has generally had one foot in the work of Walt Whitman, whose "Song of Myself" provided grounds for a "tradition" that positioned itself precariously within questions of private and public expression. Whitman continuously transgresses, fuses and confuses the lines between private and public behavior: the private becomes public, and the public is private. This stance of the "American" poet is central to the long poem. The poet is created as the healer, the visionary bard intimately linked to a developing culture. Pound took up this challenge to be the voice of America as early as 1911, when in "Recondillas, Or Something Of That Sort," a

deliberate imitation of Whitman, he flippantly inverts his master:

I would sing the American people,
 God send them some civilization;
 I would sing of the Nations of Europe,
 God grant them some method of cleansing
 The fetid extent of their evils. (Pound 216)

Similarly in Paterson, William Carlos Williams laments an "incomunicado" that dominates his citizens, and longs to recover a language that will bridge the divorces between human beings:

The language is missing them
 they die also
 incomunicado.

The language, the language
 fails them
 They do not know the words
 or have not

the courage to use them (Williams 11)

Williams' claim that "the language/ fails them" points to the dissolution of communities and the alienation experienced by individuals as a result of multi-national capitalism. As we have seen, by the time Olson began composing The Maximus Poems, this need to reform culture had an immediacy that goes beyond Pound's crankiness and

Williams' lamentations. The sure grounds for the availability of a "civilization" to "grant them," or a "language" to break the silence and alienation, is in question from the first Maximus poem forward:

But that which matters, that which insists, that which will last,
 that 'o my people, where shall you find it, how where, where shall you listen
 when all is become billboards, when, all, even silence, is spray-gunned?

when even our bird, my roofs,
 cannot be heard

when even you, when sound itself is neoned in? (MP 6)

This passages recalls the Whitmanic apostrophe, "o my people" (this time, however, in lower case), and the question of cultural heritage, of "that which will last." And yet the distinction between the universal and the particular collapses, "sound itself is neoned in." The Modernist capacity to create a subject in opposition to objectification is utterly threatened by the time Olson writes. As I have argued, a critique of a "culture industry" with an inexhaustible capacity to appropriate "artistic" expressions into commodity forms pervades Olson's Maximus sequence. When Olson asks "where shall you listen...when, all, even silence, is spray-gunned?" he also asks if art has become the commercial and the commercial an art form. Jameson links this notion directly to new

modes of production:

What has happened is that aesthetic production today has become integrated into commodity production generally: the frantic economic urgency of producing fresh waves of ever-more novel-seeming goods (from clothing to airplanes), at ever greater rates of turnover, now assigns an increasingly essential structural function and position to aesthetic innovation and experimentation. Such economic necessities then find recognition in the institutional support of all kinds available for the new art, from foundations and grants to museums and other forms of patronage. (Jameson 56)

Olson detests the commodification of aesthetic production with considerable vehemence, and yet, in his own life, Olson saw little of the "patronage" of which Jameson speaks. Now, however, Charles Olson is in the driver's seat of the brand new Norton Anthology of Postmodern Poetry. It stands to reason that the "institutional support" for "aesthetic innovation and experimentation" has got some degree of a hold on The Maximus Poems as well. The extent to which certain new anthologists hail Charles Olson as the godfather of postmodern poetry might throw some doubt on the vitality and contemporaneity of his resistance to that very institution; an institution which now takes him, however

incompletely, to be their founding father. What forms of resistance to the culture industry are possible, when resistance itself is recuperated by the system? As we shall see, it is not only the content of Olson's critique of the culture industry that resists commodification, but the poetic deployment of that critique--its shape, its forms--that makes for radical new grounds for the role of poetry in American culture.

What, first of all, is meant by the "long poem"? As Joseph Conte writes in Unending Design: The Forms of Postmodern Poetry, "the 'long poem' has been the measure and the lifework of many significant modernist and postmodernist poets," and yet the field of the long poem is extremely diverse (Conte 26). Some critics contend that a poem of one hundred lines is a long poem, while Olson's tome clearly represents a project of considerably broader scope. Conte, in his typology of postmodern poetic forms, is very careful to "respect the formal integrity of the poem rather than to bolster some ambitious schema of my own, one of the risks in working out any sort of typology" (Conte 1). And yet Conte confines his assessment of Olson's poetics to the manifesto "Projective Verse," with considerable good faith that this theoretical tract has a direct correspondence to Olson's practice. Thus, he situates Olson's formal work between the two "laws" announced in "Projective Verse."

The first of these laws, called "the principle," is

Olson's injunction that "FORM IS NEVER MORE THAN AN EXTENSION OF CONTENT" (PY 16). Conte finds this notion to be a Coleridgean, organicist model of form, likening it to the way "the outer wall of an amoeba is an extension of its cytoplasm" (Conte 30). The second law that Conte cites is "the process," which for Olson is that "ONE PERCEPTION MUST IMMEDIATELY AND DIRECTLY LEAD TO A FURTHER PERCEPTION" (PY 17). Conte finds that the "principle" is "limited to the organic mode," while the "process" "actually encompasses the greater number of formal types" (Conte 30). To confine Olson's poetics between these two poles of principle (as organicist) and process (as open to numerous formal types) is, as Conte is no doubt aware, somewhat reductive. First of all, to call the "principle" an organicist model is somewhat misleading. If "form is never more than extension of content," what exactly is meant by "extension"? What does this "extension" actually look like, what is its shape, how can it be read? The extension of content as form should not imply a harmonious weave, as the "organic" model implies, where what is said and how it is said constitute a perfect, thematic unity. Conte points out that "the ideal union of form and content" was the aesthetic that "the New Critics were equally prepared to claim as the pursuit of any able poet" (Conte 30). Therefore, to describe Olson's method as organicist oversimplifies the relation of form and content that is implicated in the device of "extension."

Perhaps it goes without saying that within the totality of The Maximus Poems, there are numerous exceptions to Conte's polarizing of "principle" and "process."

As he is concerned with making a typology, these distinctions serve as handy signposts, from which he generates an astonishingly thorough account of diverse postmodern poetic forms. The exceptions to the rule, do, however, concern me, such that I cannot fully trust that Olson's manifesto "Projective Verse" is reflected more or less exactly in the poetry. The Maximus Poems contain a whole universe of play with structure, and Olson, rather than holding himself to his "laws," uses them as a springboard for wildly diverse experiments with forms. Yet Olson's Maximus sequence, to an extent, does follow Whitman's conception of Leaves of Grass as the sum total of a life: the oft-quoted "who holds this book holds a man." Considered in this way, The Maximus Poems reject the digestible, internally coherent, fetishized, New Critical lyric mode. Taken as a "whole," the long, serial mode carries out Olson's resistance to capitalist production as much as anything. Any single poem within Maximus, by virtue of the variety of extrapoetic material included, has a nearly infinite "dialogue" with other poems in the volume, and with the world of letters outside the poetry. This chapter focuses on Olson's politics in its technical manifestations, and I examine one poem as representative of

an anti-establishment, de-authoritarian poetic methodology. While I focus specifically on one poem, it should be remembered that this poem occurs in the context of the long series, or epic, a form whose totality also marks a resistance to capitalist production and consumption.

In a rather sour analysis of American film in "The Culture Industry," Adorno speaks to what Benjamin describes as the means by which "the bourgeois apparatus of production...can assimilate astonishing quantities of revolutionary themes" (Benjamin 229). Adorno suggests that

Whenever Orson Welles offends the tricks of the trade, he is forgiven because his departures from the norm are regarded as calculated mutations which serve all the more strongly to confirm the validity of the system. (Horkheimer, Adorno 129)

Ignoring the specific filmic history Adorno discusses, we that this passage raises the problem of a dominant cultural system, whose power to reify and commodify cultural expressions attempting to transform that system, makes resistance seeminlg futile. I find a similar formulation in Jacques Derrida's essay "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences." This latter essay will serve my analysis more fully, for though it has remarkable resonance with Adorno, it deals with structuralism and stylistics rather than with film. But the issue in Adorno is to locate aesthetic properties in works of art whose

challenges to the dominant system of cultural production resist appropriation by the system. I find a corollary argument in Derrida:

The function of this center was not only to orient, balance, and organize the structure--one cannot in fact conceive of an unorganized structure--but above all to make sure that the organizing principle of the structure would limit what we might call the *play* of the structure. By orienting and organizing the coherence of the system, the center of a structure permits the play of its elements inside the total form...the concept of a centered structure is in fact the concept of a play based on a fundamental ground, a play constituted on the basis of a fundamental immobility and a reassuring certitude, which itself is beyond the reach of play. (Derrida, Writing 278-279)

Derrida's notion that the "center of a structure permits the play of its elements inside the total form," in stylistic terms, mirrors Adorno's political formulation that Welles' "departures from the norm"--that is, from the structure--"serve all the more strongly to confirm the validity of the system." Thus the "play" of Welles' "mutations" is only "permitted" within the presumed totality of the system. Neither Adorno nor Derrida suggest that some position

"outside" systems or structures, whether literary, linguistic, or political, is possible. Indeed, both writers insist on the inter-relatedness of these cultural systems. But in Derrida, as in Adorno, the possibility of a totalizing system must be undermined. For Adorno, the meta-system is the culture industry, while for Derrida, the meta-system is structuralism. In both cases, a critique is generated that challenges the hegemony of these systems; and both writers suggest a certain "going beyond" the structurality of structure, a radical alterity, a play of structure that resists being consumed by the structure. Olson's poetry generates a sense of this play, which in stylistic terms "plays without security," and which, in political terms, resists reification and commodification (Derrida, Writing 292).

A lesser known poem loosely titled "at the boundary of the mighty world" or "Now Called Gravel Hill" provides numerous examples of Olson's radical politics of form. The uncapitalized title, "at the boundary of the mighty world," is a quote from Hesiod, and throughout the poem Olson explores different forms of boundaries. The first "stanza" reads as follows:

Gravelly Hill was 'the source and end (or boundary)' of
 D'town on the way that leads from the town to Smallmans
 now Dwelling house, the Lower
 Road gravelly, how the hill was, not the modern useableness

of any thing but leaving it as an adverb as though the Earth herself
 was active, she had her own characteristics (MP 330)

As the secondary title suggests, the fact that the hill is now called "Gravel Hill" is a source of considerable disturbance for Olson. This Gloucester landmark was once called "Gravelly Hill," in the adverbial form, and what Olson finds in this shift to the nominal is the intervention of an exploitive industry, changing a gravelly hill into "the modern useableness/ of any thing." Olson sees this hill "as the source and end" of Gloucester, and finds it imbued with mythic significance. Without giving any sign of a change in his discourse, Olson moves immediately from a contemporary vision of the hill, now called "Gravel Hill," and slides into myth. The Earth

could

stick her head up out of the earth at a spot

and say, to Athena I'm stuck here, all I can show

is my head but please, do something about

this person I am putting up out of the ground into your hands (MP 330)

Here the entire Gaia myth is rendered in a few lines, but without knowing the myth, one can clearly make the connection to what Olson sees as a "spirituality" to the land which the "modern useableness" vilifies continually. The story drawn from here is Gaia at the birth of Erichthonios, as she delivers him up to Athena's hands, and thus, Gravelly Hill is connected with Erichthonios, an

Athenian hero.³ Because of the mythic significance of Gloucester's Gravelly Hill, Olson writes that this is a "reason" to

leave things alone.

As it is there isn't a single thing isn't an opportunity
for some 'alert' person, including practically everybody
by the 'greed', that, they are 'alive', therefore Etc.
That, in fact, there are 'conditions'. Gravelly Hill
or any sort of situation for improvement (MP 330)

The sense of there being a need for "improvement" of the land, and that any "'alert' person" might capitalize on the land through the "'greed'" that "they are 'alive'," all represent the anthropocentric view of man toward nature that destroys nature, turns nature into a noun, gravel, a thing. These "conditions," Olson goes on to explain, are the conditions, essentially, of industry, imposed on the land by a human "greed" which fails to respect the inherent story (myth) that the land embodies:

It is not bad

to be pissed off

where there is any

condition imposed, by whomever, no matter how close

any

quid pro quo

get out. Gravelly Hill says
 leave me be, I am contingent, the end of the world
 is the borders
 of my being (MP 330-331)

Olson's radical play with form can be seen here as a rejection of the traditional syntagmatic order of the sentence. The coherence and fluidity of "the line," the cornerstone of lyric poetry, is subverted. The phrase that ends "no matter how close" is left unclosed, a gap ensues, signified spatially on the page, and a new fragment enjoins, "any/ quid pro quo/ get out." Thus, while Olson is "ranting" at the evils of industrial exploitation, he does so by decentering the authority of his own voice: the commanding tone carries a self-interrogation, and the jagged syntax makes "typical" protest considerably more complex.

What this poet is "pissed off" about is that Gravelly Hill is now

darkness,
 in a cleft in the earth
 made of a perfect pavement
 Dogtown Square
 of rocks alone March, the holy month
 (the holy month,
 LXIII
 of nothing but black granite turned
 every piece,

downward,
 to darkness,
 to chill
 and darkness. (MP 331-332)

This "holy month" is the month and year (1963) in which the poem was written, thus suggesting Olson's attempt to restore to Gloucester's consciousness the inherent spirit of a landmark worthy of reverence. What has happened, however, is that Gravel Hill has become a "paved hole in the earth;" the gravel has been turned into the raw materials for blacktop, and Gloucester, metaphorically speaking, has become a parking lot. Furthermore, the slippage of perspective in this passage, from pavement, to the ambiguous, unclosed parenthetical "holy month," back to the pavement, is a form of poetic writing that provides "protest" without falling prey to the tyrannical, monoglossic "voice" that it challenges. Rather, voices and perspectives shift and slide, the egocentric position of author is abandoned.

Olson's mandate that form extend content is at work in this passage, for the "black granite turned/ every piece,/ downward,/ to darkness,/ to chill/ and darkness," itself, as text, falls "downward" on the page. Conte's argument on Olson's organicism ("form is never more than an extension of content") is fairly limited in this case. The "organic" model, where form and content generate a one-to-one

correspondence, traditionally aspires to harmony and unity, such that a poem, by itself, represents a coherent, understandable totality. Furthermore, this unified relation of form and content ultimately supports a cultish view of the author. The author of the organically coherent poem is the lyric master, the inspired mind, whose ability to make form and content into a perfect unity is, traditionally, the "genius." Yet Olson's "downward" projection of a text that speaks of "depth" does engage something of an organic aesthetic. In Olson, however, the author is no longer the master ego behind the words, carefully ordering them into coherent wholes. Rather, content is privileged over form, insofar as language, whatever it might be, dictates the graphic course of any given utterance at any given moment in the poem. The author, therefore, no longer "controls" language, but follows words wherever they might lead. This decentered author is not so much a thing done, or created, by the poet. Rather, it suggests a non-egocentric perspective toward language that the poet inhabits, an immersion in language for itself. This method of decentering, as Bruce Andrews suggests, resides "*inside* the writing," and generates deconstruction by resisting a control-oriented aesthetic (Andrews 24).

Yet, given the fairly powerful voice of anger we have seen in the first chapter, it seems problematic to assert that Olson is willing to completely relinquish authorial

control. Does Olson simply try to reverse the situation of capitalist exploitation, and does such a reversal become, as Derrida writes, "dogmatic and, like all reversals, a captive of that metaphysical edifice which it professes to overthrow" (Derrida, Reader 35)? The risk of Olson's "politics" is the question of whether or not it becomes as "metaphysical" as the oppressive system it seeks to undermine:

all these destructive discourses and all their analogues are trapped in a kind of circle. This circle is unique. It describes the form of the relation between the history of metaphysics and the destruction of the history of metaphysics. There is no sense in doing without the concepts of metaphysics in order to shake metaphysics. We have had no language...which has not had to slip into the form, the logic, and the implicit postulations of precisely what it seeks to contest. (Derrida, Writing 280-281)

For Derrida, the question of generating a truly radical, transformative critique, hinges on a mode of language use that does not fall into the trap of "destruction." That is, a writing which tries to posit itself *outside* of writing, as a place from which to bash the system, to some extent imitates the very methods it seeks to undermine. Olson's methodology, as it reflects a "politics" that goes beyond

"destruction," can perhaps best be seen through his method of "allusion."

Christopher Beach's chapter on the poetry of Ed Dorn in The ABC of Influence develops an understanding of poly-voicedness as a form of radical textuality. He reads Dorn's poetry as being composed out of "migrating voices" that, unlike Olson and Pound, have "no single origin" and "belong to or in no particular place" (Beach 236). This method of poetically including de-author(iz)ed text, especially, in Dorn's case, radio fragments, does represent a departure from Olson's mode of citing extrapoetic material. And yet, Beach sees a greater similarity between Olson and Pound's method of "allusion" than between Olson and Dorn. As I will argue, the terms by which Beach reads Dorn's poetry can be applied to Olson equally well. Beach is concerned primarily with discussing the difference between Dorn and Olson, and the differences are significant. At the same time, however, Olson also has a method of generating "migrating voices" quite like Dorn's method, and thus it is their similarity that I wish to explore.⁴

The godfather of allusion, Ezra Pound, mentor to both Olson and Dorn, had considerable influence of these poets' use of extrapoetic material. Yet when Ezra Pound quotes from the Latin, I often get the sense that one had damn well better know Latin or else not read his poetry at all. The scholarly demands Pound places on the reader are somewhat

aristocratic and exclusive, but they are importantly conducted in protest of the newly developing technologies of mass production that surrounded him. While Pound's impassioned effort to restore integrity to poetic writing seems to inscribe a fairly limited audience, he does refuse, as Beach argues, to see tradition as an authoritative source, thus making his poetry attractive to successive generations of poets:

It was Pound's more idiosyncratic, iconoclastic, and interactive sense of a tradition, rather than Eliot's notion of a tradition as orthodoxy, that appealed to postwar American poets such as Charles Olson and Robert Duncan. They and other poets of the 1950s and 1960s saw in Pound's poetry and concerns an alternative model of literary Modernism to what they considered the more rigid and hierarchical set of values and expectations represented by Eliot and the New Criticism.

(Beach 18)

Olson's method of "allusion" is arguably less pretentious or elitist than Pound's, and yet, a major point of contention over Olson's poetry is the very abundance and obscurity of his references. As I suggested earlier, Pound's desire to make order out of chaos can suggest a mystified, cultish, heroic, genius-oriented notion of the poet. Yet Pound's diverse source material also suggests that the poet does not

compose, but is composed of, multiple texts and cultural perspectives. In both Pound and Olson, therefore, a fairly old-world, monoglossic voice of resistance is cast in a poetic mode which de-authorizes that very egocentrism. The often contemptuous voice of critique in Pound and Olson is deployed poetically in a manner more fundamentally egalitarian, polyvalent, and open.

Beach's description of a "migration" of voices suggests a means by which to undermine the "authority" of any text drawn into the poetry, such that "the voice or point of view migrates from one place, one site in the linguistic code, to another. It has no distinct place of residence, no 'home' to return to, no identifiable origin of authorship: the point of view changes spaces like a migrating subject" (Beach 225). This conception of a "migrating subject" is extremely useful in understanding the heteroglossic "character" of Maximus. Furthermore, passages in "Now Called Gravel Hill," do achieve this same sense of "migration" that we find in Dorn. In the passage that follows, the "authority" of sources Olson draws on is entirely problematized:

Gravelly Hill

or any sort of situation for improvement, when
 the Earth was properly regarded as a 'garden
 tenement message orchard and if this is nostalgia
 let you take a breath of April showers

let's us reason how is the dampness in your
 nasal passage - but I have had lunch
 in this 'pasture' (B. Ellery to

George Birdler Smith

'gentleman'

1799, for

£ 150) (MP 330)

Three different texts, or voices, are all elided in this passage, with little or no indication of where one text stops and another begins. Olson, or Maximus, "speaks" the beginning lines, where "the Earth was properly regarded as," and then a shift occurs into 17th-century legalese, "a 'garden/ tenement messuage orchard." As Butterick's Guide points out, the letter that Olson migrates into is from John Winthrop, penned in 1630. Olson not only refuses to provide any documentation or context for the Winthrop letter, he also selects only certain phrases that interest him. If allusion traditionally reinforces the "greatness" of canonical texts, Olson's complete rewriting of this source subverts conventional practice. Not only is the letter an utterly non-aesthetic source, the importance of it is left unsaid; that is, he leaves the contextual "meaning" of the letter for the reader to reconstruct.

Furthermore, the letter from Winthrop, while beginning with a quotation mark to signify its "beginning" ("a 'garden"), is not closed with the "proper" punctuation.

Rather, Olson shifts into another letter, this time penned by Benjamin Ellery (1744-1825) with absolutely no indication of the shift. From the Guide we might infer that Ellery's letter begins with "and if this is nostalgia," for the only words that Olson draws from Winthrop's letter are "`garden/tenement messuage orchard." Yet what these elided texts make abundantly clear is that referencing them in the Guide tells us little about what they mean, nor how these texts are rendered formally in their new context.

Beach writes of "the line breaks, parentheses, or semantic spacing used by Olson" to signify changes in extrapoetic discourses that are drawn into the poetry, all of which contribute to a style definitely "Olsonesque" (Beach 229). This "style" has arguably become reified, and has turned into a "school," a "tradition" that limits the radicalism of the poetry. And yet, as we can see in "Now Called Gravel Hill," these graphic symbols which ordinarily signify changing voices are, for the most part, abandoned: no real indication is given as to where or when Olson's voice becomes Winthrop's letter becoming Ellery's letter. About all we can glean from "translating" Olson's letters is that he is questioning an older perspective toward Gloucester's land (that it once was "properly regarded as a `garden"), and that he is possibly disturbed by what amounted to the parcelling and selling of that land (for "£ 150").

Beach describes Dorn's use of deliberately non-poetic materials, such as pop-culture soundbites and "radioese," as a means of challenging traditional modes of poetic utterance and allusion (Beach 232). There is nothing particularly pleasing aesthetically about this pair of old letters that Olson incorporates. While he does provide the "source" for the letter of "B. Ellery," to track the letter to its "origin" only yields innumerable possible thematic meanings for the poem. Like Dorn's method of blurring the distinctions between different discourses, I find this passage suggestive of the kind of relinquishing of authorial control that Beach describes as "migrating voices." While Olson's sources may be more superficially Poundian, insofar as they are drawn from an historical archive, the deployment of those materials ultimately produces no "unified voice of stylistic continuity" (Beach 232). In spite of the potential for there being a reified "Olson style," as I see this passage, no unified persona can ultimately be posited behind these letters. They are drawn into the text with virtually no ground from which we might know what they mean and why they are there, and they are dropped just as quickly, as the poet "migrates" outward through the rest of the poem.

This decentering of authorial authority does carry a politically charged relation to poetic writing. In relation to the political dimension of Dorn's poetry, Beach suggests

that

Dorn places greater emphasis than had his predecessor on humans as a destructive agent in nature, not simply participants in the natural "forces" constituting Olson's vision. Whereas Olson's poetry includes a generalized attempt to criticize the "pejorocracy" of contemporary culture, Dorn's poem has a more directly ecological and political agenda. (Beach 226)

While I can't at all disagree with Beach's assessment of Dorn's politics, it seems that a poem such as "Now Called Gravel Hill," with its attack on the "modern usability/ of any thing," also carries a serious "ecological and political agenda." While Olson does "mythologize his subject," through the myth of Gaia, it seems he is simultaneously concerned with presenting the contemporary exploitation of natural habitats in sociocultural terms. Thus, Beach's descriptions of Dorn's poetry are extremely useful tools in exploring Olson. The thematic of the "migrating voices" allows for a methodology that is decisively political without being tyrannical or authoritarian.

Olson's disgust with the exploitive industries in American history ("It is not bad/ to be pissed off") is always conducted through a polyphony of voices and texts. In a discussion of T.S. Eliot, Terry Eagleton argues that "his scandalous avant-garde techniques were deployed for the

most arriè-re-garde ends: they wrenched apart routine consciousness so as to revive in the reader a sense of common identity in the blood and guts" (Eagleton 41). While Eagleton's emphasis on Eliot's "blood and guts" politics (as a form of conservative southern agrarianism) is a bit hyperbolic, nevertheless, his insight on Eliot's subtext of authoritarian tradition is crucial. For Eliot, the individual is fragmented by poetic writing only so as to become assembled anew, according to the strictures of what "the tradition" offers. In Olson, and to an extent in Pound, the exact inverse situation is at play. That is, the singular, didactic, commanding, resisting "voice" of protest is delivered through a poetic medium of openness and liberation. Eliot's fragmented voice generates a unified, authoritarian tradition, while the often singular voice of Olson generates an open, fragmented tradition. One of those voices, as we have seen, is definitely that of the poet: the voice of anger and rage, defiantly challenging hypocritical politicians, bleeding-heart poets, and squeamish, liberal academics. And yet as the passage I have discussed above illustrates, Olson also absents himself from the text, such that, like Pound, the "author" is not finally constructed as a fundamental, egocentric locus of meaning. Instead, a play of texts and voices determines the shape and course of any given poetic utterance. This poly-voicedness is a deliberate challenge to a dominating, logocentric stance

toward reality that Olson sees as the central agent in impoverishing human lives.

As a politics of poetic form, what Olson's poly-voicedness accomplishes is the liberation of the particular. In his discussion of dialectics in Minima Moralia, Adorno argues that in Hegel

with serene indifference he opts once again for liquidation of the particular. Nowhere in his work is the primacy of the whole doubted...he perceives, with classical economics, that the totality produces and reproduces itself precisely from the interconnection of the antagonistic interests of its members. (Adorno 17)

Olson challenges "the primacy of the whole," a tendency in thought which, for poetics, informs the dominant aesthetic of the New Criticism. Olson actively retrieves the specific particulars of people and places: "particularism has to be fought for, anew" (HU 54). This notion of "the particular" represents the detail that eludes the structure, the "play" of particulars that fail to ultimately "add up" to some totalizing, systematic paradigm. In spite of Olson's complex political and poetic agendas, his stylistic openness requires that writing reflect process, such that each person may make his or her "own special selection from the phenomenal field" (HU 61). What we find from this aesthetic that "art does not seek to define but to enact," is,

finally, a virtually infinite series of voices and texts, no single one of which organizes or controls a coherent, formal structure (HU 61). This play, this liberation of the particular, creates a poetic idiom of radical multi-perspectivity, which by deconstructing what Derrida calls the "reassuring certitude" of a centered structure, restores to reading and writing a truly active, interpretive poetic medium that prevents any final, resolvable readability (Derrida, Writing 279). The "marginality" of the long poem in the Pound tradition in both academia and American literary culture at large is due in part to this radical illegibility and infinite seriality generated by a poly-voiced text such as The Maximus Poems.⁵ If the failure to locate a master concept in The Maximus Poems produces anxiety, a goal quite obviously frustrating to most current modes of criticism, then the poems are a profound "success," and generate a lasting, vital critique of the traditional thinkability of poetic writing. The structuralist thematic of locating a centered structure, where form and content reflect continuity and harmony, is as undermined by The Maximus Poems as is the political economy which can reify and commodify aesthetic productions. Neither Adorno, Derrida, or Olson present forms of writing that abandon structure, but all argue defiantly against the purely enlightenment humanist, essentialist ideology of "harmony." Structure is not abandoned, but the "center" is transformed

so as to resist the dominant cultural system rather than affirm that system.

As I have argued, Olson's radically indeterminate poly-voicedness reflects a "political" disposition that resists the objectifying domination of multi-conglomerate capital. Turned toward the domination of capitalist production, Olson strives for a poetic idiom that generates active interpretation. Adorno discusses the endless output of commodity forms, which, under the guise of forms of entertainment, dissolve the politically committed possibilities of aesthetic works. "Amusement under late capitalism," he writes, "is the prolongation of work. It is sought after as an escape from the mechanized work process, and to recruit strength in order to be able to cope with it again" (Horkheimer, Adorno 137). The carefully constructed New Critical lyric, with its emphasis on formal unity, poetically and aesthetically represents the commodity form as well, a non-reflexive, unmediated communication. This aesthetic of the "the whole" simultaneously inscribes an inadequacy of human potential. The submission of the particular to the whole represents a "flight; not, as is asserted, flight from a wretched reality, but from the last remaining thought of resistance" (Horkheimer, Adorno 145). This notion is echoed almost exactly in Olson's essay "Human Universe," where he argues that

the notion of fun comes to displace work as what

we are here for. Spectatorism crowds out participation as the condition of culture. And bonuses and prizes are the rewards of a labor contrived by the monopolies of business and government to protect themselves from the advancement in position of able men or that old assertion of an inventive man, his own shop. All individual energy is bought off--at a suggestion box or the cinema. Passivity conquers all. (HU 58)

To argue that the lyric consciousness universally inscribes the poet as an ontological totality, and that poem creates an unmediated communication that affirms the human subject, is of course, a problematic assertion. And yet there is a distinct sense in which the affirmation offered by the essentially lyric, New Critical aesthetic, as the resolve of particulars into a unified whole, inscribes a nihilistic helplessness toward a dysfunctional political system. Affirmation, in the New Critical aesthetic, is facile and ultimately cynical. The "pleasure" that is divined from writing points directly to one's domination by the cultural monolith. Olson's poetry resists this situation at every turn: the angered poetic I emphasize is one that refuses to accept the world as it is. The "utopia" of the New Critical aesthetic, in Olson, is left unsaid. Rather, the creative and imaginative potential of the reader is called upon to

divine the potential for "utopia" out of the ruin toward which Olson directs our attention.⁶ One is constantly asked to make sweeping associational leaps, discovering social meanings in a poetic idiom that empowers the intellect and imagination through the struggles, trials, and discrepancies that the poetry delineates. This affirmation, the foregrounding of an active interpretation, generates a true poetry of struggle, of resistance, and of liberation. It is Olson's respectful, compassionate intelligence, with its refusal to accept the tyranny of dominant ideology, that has made him such an influence for subsequent writers. "If there is any absolute," he writes, "it is never more than this one, you, this instant, in action" (HU 55).

Notes

1. This point, however, seems purely academic, insofar as *poets* have drawn from traditions of experimental poetry for generations. The very presence of "tradition" in experimental poetry suggests that, no matter what politics have gone on in academia, the writers themselves have kept up with their work. Academia cannot be construed as the primary agency for the rightful dissemination of literary practices.

2. see The Maximus Poems: Volume Three, p. 479 [III.104] Butterick's title is "Migration in fact..." or "The Rose of the World."

3. see Butterick's Guide, p.453.

4. I want to be careful with the implications of this reading. For one, Beach's argument is solid, and the differences he highlights between Olson and Dorn are astutely rendered. In discussing Dorn, however, I find that he links Olson more closely to Pound, as representing an older, more Modernist use of extrapoetic material, whereas I find Olson as radical as they come. By no means do I wish to suggest, however, that Olson somehow is the "better" poet for having beaten Dorn to the chase. One of the functions of Beach's book is to put an end to Harold Bloom's agonistic, Oedipal model of literary influence. My concern, therefore, in using the terms by which Beach differentiates

the poets to locate similarities, is not to ascribe a value to either similarity or difference. Dorn is no copycat. Yet while their materials may be different, their practice is, in my opinion, quite similar. Thus, it is merely the terms Beach uses, and not the poetic proofs of their difference, that I find effective in discussing their resemblance theoretically.

5. The term "infinite serial" is given specific treatment in Joseph Conte's Unending Design. I use it here to designate a more general "illegibility" in Olson's textuality.

6. While I describe this "aesthetic of the whole," which as Adorno writes, "liquidates the particular," as essential to New Criticism, this aesthetic does not belong to New Criticism as the "source" for this ideology--rather New Criticism is a symptom of a larger western metaphysics, essentially Hegelian, of "the whole." I stick to New Criticism in the case because it is the dominant poetics both in Olson's time and arguably today.

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