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Black Mountain and
Projective Verse

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Background

If anyone deserves particular praise for reviving and extending modernist aesthetics in mid-century America, then that person is the poet Charles Olson. Born in Worcester, Massachusetts, in 1910, Olson studied at Wesleyan, Yale and Harvard universities, becoming an acknowledged expert in the work of the nineteenth-century novelist and poet Herman Melville. Abandoning a promising academic career for politics, he held a variety of posts in the third and fourth administrations of President Franklin D. Roosevelt. After the latter's death in 1945, increasingly disenchanted with the USA of Truman and McCarthy, of Cold War paranoia and rampant commodification, Olson reverted to his literary interests with the pent-up energy of a late starter. Erudite, alienated and experimental, his writings were decisively pedagogical, the express intention being to provide a blueprint for an alternative culture. Modernism offered stylistic prototypes for this endeavour, together with the ideology of the avant-garde.

Olson was well equipped to preside over a recrudescence of the movement. As a graduate student he once danced for Diaghilev's Ballet Russe (by then under the direction of Léonide Massine). Through his friend and mentor Edward Dahlberg, he met the photographer Alfred Stieglitz and the painter Marsden Hartley, two great survivors from the first generation of American modernists. In 1946 he was the first person to visit the disgraced Ezra Pound, who had been brought back to the United States to stand trial for treason, and who was to spend twelve years incarcerated in St Elizabeth's lunatic asylum ('Olson saved my life', said Pound). His first book, *Call Me Ishmael* (1947), a critical study of *Moby-Dick*, unveiled the nascent modernism lurking beneath the Romantic surface of Melville's epic novel. A year later he wrote a dance drama for Martha Graham's experimental dance company. His first volume of poems, *Y & X* (1949), was published by the celebrated Black Sun Press, which had specialized since the 1920s in the publication of figures like Proust, Joyce, Pound,

Hart Crane, Lawrence, Hemingway and Faulkner. At a time when *Paterson* was being dismissed in the *Hudson Review* as 'non-sequential babble', Olson was corresponding with and learning from William Carlos Williams. In 1950, when the Objectivists were utterly neglected, Olson was quarrelling with Zukofsky's achievement, praising that of Reznikoff, and commenting generally on the implications of Objectivism for younger practitioners. Hugh MacDiarmid's *In Memoriam James Joyce*, perhaps his most modernist work (though by no means his best), was received with a deafening silence: Olson, however, was drawing his students' attention to it shortly after its publication in 1955. Over and over again, one finds Olson excavating the buried monuments of modernism, and this at a time when many younger Anglo-American poets were reverting to the routine use of regular metres.

The next stage in Olson's project came in 1951, when he joined the faculty of the small liberal arts college of Black Mountain, North Carolina, at which he had been a visiting speaker since 1948 and of which he became the last rector. Until its closure in October 1956, Black Mountain College provided Olson with a suitably isolated site within which to refashion the modernist concept of the avant-garde community. As rector he gathered about him a teaching staff which consisted almost entirely of practising artists. They presented the students, who rarely numbered more than a hundred and at one point less than ten, not with information with which to pass exams, but with the example of what it meant to be seriously engaged in creative activity. At various times the staff included the painters Josef Albers, Franz Kline and Willem de Kooning; the sculptor Richard Lippold; the dancer Merce Cunningham; the composers John Cage and Stefan Wolpe; the architect Buckminster Fuller; and the poets Robert Creeley, Robert Duncan and Olson himself. Students who later became famous include the prose writers Fielding Dawson and Michael Rumaker; the sculptor John Chamberlain; the painters Kenneth Noland and Robert Rauschenberg; the film-maker Stan Vanderbeek; and the poets Ed Dorn, Joel Oppenheimer, John Wieners and Jonathan Williams.

The seven poets named above as having been present at the college would later become known as the 'Black Mountain School'. The designation is misleading, however, for these poets were part of a wider flowering of early 1950s American verse which also involved Denise Levertov, Paul Blackburn, Cid Corman, LeRoi Jones (later known as Amiri Baraka), Larry Eigner and Gilbert Sorrentino (now more famous as a novelist), none of whom set foot on the eponymous mount. This wider grouping had in common: publication in such small magazines as Robert Creeley's *Black Mountain Review* and Cid Corman's *Origin*; book publication through Robert Creeley's Divers Press and Jonathan Williams's Jargin Books; a view of twentieth-century poetics which gave central importance to Pound, Williams, Lawrence, H. D., Cummings, Moore and the Objectivists; and, most especially, an approach to prosody that found its clearest theoretical expression in Olson's celebrated 'Projective Verse' essay. Not all of these poets were directly indebted to Olson: Denise Levertov worked out many of the shared ideals for herself; as did Gary Snyder, a younger poet whose work has some affinities with this group. Yet Olson's role as catalyst in this extraordinary

florescence is confirmed in the testimonials of the poets themselves. One thinks of Ed Dorn's *What I See In The Maximus Poems*, Duncan's 'Notes on Poetics Regarding Olson's *Maximus*', and the reviews and articles gathered in Robert Creeley's *A Quick Graph*. As Gilbert Sorrentino put it, 'Olson is our Ezra Pound'.

Theory

Written in 1950, 'Projective Verse' was a theoretical launching-pad from which Olson hoped to propel himself and others into poetic creativity. Herbert Read once said that 'a tradition in art is not a body of beliefs: it is a knowledge of techniques'. Bearing his dictum in mind, we might see the essay as an attempt to identify a prosodic tradition which the author's own verse will later be seen to have forwarded. Even the name 'Projective' may partly have been chosen in order to signify the extending or projecting forward of an existing continuity. Thus, Pound is named seven times, Eliot six, Williams and Hart Crane four times, Cummings twice, and the Objectivists once.

The aim of 'Projective Verse' is to advance 'projective or OPEN verse' as an alternative to 'closed verse'. On one level this is but the familiar, not to say wearisome, opposition between regular and free verse resurrected under new banners. What is unique is Olson's sense that free verse must be thoroughly energized if it is to retain its virtue:

From the moment (the poet) ventures into FIELD COMPOSITION – puts himself in the open – he can go by no track other than the one the poem underhand declares for itself. . . .

And I think it can be boiled down to one statement (first pounded into my head by Edward Dahlberg): ONE PERCEPTION MUST IMMEDIATELY AND DIRECTLY LEAD TO A FURTHER PERCEPTION. It means exactly what it says, is a matter of, at *all* points . . . get on with it, keep it moving.

There is in this account a great sense of the intensity of the creative process, the poet urgently tracking the poem in its vertiginous procession down the page, seeking to render the successive spurts, lunges and digressions of its fleet unfolding. In keeping with modernist aesthetics, the poem is credited with an autonomous existence, the function of the poet being to facilitate its emergence. This is done by meeting its requirements as, moment by moment, they make themselves known. Poets are obstetricians, presiding over the birth of a living organism; the worst thing they can do is obstruct the process by setting up demands of their own, seeking to guide the poem to a form that has been predetermined. As Olson says, 'the objects which occur at every given moment of composition . . . must be treated exactly as they do occur therein and not by any ideas or preconceptions from outside the poem'.

Having thus indicated the peculiarly energized version of free verse he is dubbing 'projective', Olson enumerates various techniques by means of which to implement

it. Of these, by far the most important is the use of the terminal juncture. Quite simply, Olson is proposing that every line should end with a pause; or, to put it the other way round, whenever the poet feels the need for a fresh intake of breath, he or she should signal this fact to the reader by a line-break. Lineation thus becomes a function of respiration: 'the line comes (I swear it) from the breath, from the breathing of the man who writes'. This proposal is easily mistaken for platitude. From the translated psalms of the King James version of the Bible through to the work of the Imagists, free verse had substituted a lineation based on melic cadences for that based on regular syllable counts. What Olson noticed is that in the bulk of this work the lines form complete syntactical units as well as musical phrases, with the result that the terminal pauses are predictable and the transitions from line to line only a little less stately than in regular verse. Olson's injunction that the line should be structured as a breath unit *regardless of whether it also forms a syntactical unit* should be judged against this background. It is true, as he freely acknowledges, that e. e. cummings and William Carlos Williams had already begun to explore this possibility. Yet recorded readings show neither poet to have been diligent in his observation of the terminal juncture, and neither so much as mentions it in his critical and theoretical writings. Olson's greatest coup in 'Projective Verse' is to have brought this matter, towards which the practice of his immediate predecessors had led, into the centre of the debate.

In the manifesto, the structuring of lines by breath patterns is intimately connected with a second contention, which is that contemporary prose and verse would both be improved 'if the syllable, that fine creature, were more allowed to lead the harmony on'. For Olson, breath determines lineation, but the syllable determines the prosody: 'it is the king and pin of versification'.

A third aspect of technique to receive attention is typography. Thanks to the typewriter, the poet now has an equivalent to the stave and bar of the musician. 'It is time we picked the fruit of the experiments of cummings, Pound, Williams, each of whom has, after his way, already used the machine as a scoring to his composing, as a script to its vocalization.' Of these fruits, four are specified: the equating of units of space, whether between lines or between words within a line, with units of silence in the oral delivery of the poem; the use of the oblique, or solidus, when the poet 'wishes a pause so light it hardly separates the words, yet does not want a comma – which is an interruption of the meaning rather than the sounding of the line'; the varying of the left-hand margin, whether on a stanzaic or a line-by-line basis, so as to register minute changes of pace in thought and vocal delivery, progressively greater indentings informing the reader that a more rapid movement from unit to unit is required than in those poems where a single left-hand margin is observed; and, lastly, the opening and then not closing of a parenthesis in those cases, so common in speech and thought but so frequently suppressed in written English, where what began as a temporary digression ends by usurping, rather than returning to, the original subject.

Considered individually, the typographical devices enumerated by Olson may seem trivial, even gimmicky; some were certainly soon abandoned. Considered in combi-

nation, however, they are expressive of an extraordinary concern for the scoring of the poem. It is worth remembering that in 1965 Olson withdrew the second volume of *The Maximus Poems* from the Jargon/Corinth press, publishers of the first volume, when they failed to duplicate in print the typographical oddities of his manuscript. Similarly, in 1970 Robert Duncan decided to henceforth publish his own typescript versions of his verse after the New Directions and Black Sparrow presses had muddled his scrupulous notations.

Finally, it might be remarked that although 'Projective Verse' addresses itself to matters of technique rather than of content, the urgent propulsive motion of the sort of verse Olson desiderates peculiarly fits it for dealing with essential ontological processes. Even the agitated compulsive prose in which the manifesto is written is a sign that deep down Olson was searching for a poetics of the emancipation of the self. Whether or not he achieved anything so grandiose, it is certainly the case that in poem after poem the Black Mountaineers use their obsession with the process by which the work unravels as a formal enactment of the self's unfolding. To this extent, they may be said to share a subject as well as a style.

Practice

As Olson first formulated parts of 'Projective Verse' in an exchange of letters with the young Robert Creeley, it is fitting that we begin our textual analysis with one of the latter's poems. These are interior monologues, the *mental* address of a man to a woman. The peculiar intensity of Creeley's work derives precisely from the consequent lack of public address. One approaches the poem with care, for fear of violating a mind in action:

SOMETHING

I approach with such
a careful tremor, always
I feel the finally foolish

question of how it is,
then, supposed to be felt,
and by whom. I remember

once in a rented room on
27th street, the woman I loved
then, literally, after we

had made love on the large
bed sitting across from
a basin with two faucets, she

had to pee but was nervous,
embarrassed I suppose I
would watch her who had but

a moment ago been completely
open to me, naked, on
the same bed. Squatting, her

head reflected in the mirror,
the hair dark there, the
full of her face, the shoulders,

sat spread-legged, turned on
one faucet and shyly pissed. What
love might learn from such a sight.

This poem fulfils many of the injunctions of the 'Projective Verse' essay. In particular, it confirms Olson's thesis that the structuring of lines as breath units would lead to an increase in pace and dynamicism. The fact that every break is already pointed for the listening ear by a terminal juncture allows Creeley to avoid end-stopping eighteen of the twenty-four lines of the poem. Lacking terminal punctuation, most of the lines end in an unwritten question:

I remember (*remember what?*)

once in a rented room on (*on what?*)
27th street, the woman I loved (*did what?*)
then, literally, after we (*we what?*)

had made love on the large (*the large what?*)
bed sitting across from (*from what?*)
a basin with two faucets, she (*she what?*)
had to pee . . .

The stranglehold of syntax on lineation is broken, the reader being propelled from line to line by the need to conclude the sentence. The precipitous forward propulsion, momentarily checked by successive terminal pauses, leads to an increase of stress on the first syllable of sequent lines: 'the woman I loved (pause) *then*, literally, after we (pause) *had* made love on the large (pause) *bed* . . .'. With line lengths varying between five and ten syllables, the pumping of these added stresses falls into no predictable periodicity. The result is a kind of syncopation, the inherent rhythm of the phrasing being counterpointed by the intrusive stops and starts arising from the breath patterns. In Creeley's case, this is used to register the nervous garrulity of a timorous narrator forced by the pressure of emotion into reluctant utterance. In the example before us, the stuttering hesitations of the poem's progress down the page culminate in an apparently confident assertion which, on second thoughts, can only lead to the further question: *what* might love learn from such a sight?

In places, the syncopating of the rhythm is enhanced by inversions, excessive use of the comma, and by the dislocations of syntax consequent upon the depending of innumerable qualifiers from each principal clause. Even written out as prose, a

sentence such as the following has an extraordinarily fitful and impulsive movement: 'I remember once in a rented room on 27th street, the woman I loved, then, literally after we had made love on the large bed, sitting across from a basin with two faucets, she had to pee but was nervous, embarrassed I suppose I would watch her, who had but a moment ago been completely open to me, naked, on the same bed'. The tortuous structure bespeaks its author's struggle to bring sensitive matters to exact definition, such awkwardnesses as arise being earnest of the narrator's sincerity. Olson's use of the words 'projectile', 'percussive' and 'prospective' to augment our understanding of the term suggests that it was this propulsive, staccato quality which most prompted the choice of the designation 'projective' for the verse which he had fathered. Certainly, the agitated and compulsive rhythms that result from pausing for breath at the end of every line regardless of punctuation or sense characterize Black Mountain writing as a whole.

This same poem will serve to elucidate the second characteristic of projectivism, the diminishing of the tyranny of the *ictus* by basing the poem's prosody on quantitative or, in this instance, syllabic intensities. Syllabic prosody measures only the number of syllables per line, stress or accent being applied as a device of embellishment and not a criterion of the basic metrical structure. As the syllabic pattern only emerges in integers larger than the individual line, the verse paragraph or stanza tends to be the primary structural unit. Most pertinent of all, it is a convention in syllabic verse to pause at the end of every line in order to point the numerical patterning for the listening ear.

There is no question of Creeley slotting his lines into preconceived grids in the manner preferred by Marianne Moore: his poems are played by ear, not plotted on a graph. Nevertheless, in the poem before us the recurrence of the three-line stanza, the roughly approximate line-lengths, and the predominance of monosyllables (90 of the poem's 125 words), all tempt the attentive ear into trying to descry a syllabic plan. Nor is this a futile activity, for the poem perpetually hovers over, without quite settling into, a fixed permutation based on the seven-syllable line. The seven-syllable line is the most common. The seven-syllable line is the average. Every stanza bar one contains a seven-syllable line. The only stanza which does not contain a seven-syllable line approximates to doing so by being constituted of lines of six and eight syllables. There is no five-, nine- or ten-syllable line which is not adjacent to one of seven syllables. And the last line of the poem is one of seven syllables. Configurations of this kind may be arbitrary, the inevitable consequence of juggling with a few fixed quantities. Nonetheless, what we have here is a syllabic piping which stems from number as surely as does the more calculated carolling of Marianne Moore. As Cid Corman said, 'it is not a matter of counting syllables, but of making syllables count'.

That Creeley's syllables do count is easily demonstrated. Consider, for example, the terrific spinal column of internal rhymes that, vertebra by vertebra, provides the poem with its hidden backbone: stanza one, approach-such; stanzas two and three, whom-room; stanzas three and four, love-love[d]; stanzas four, five and six,

she-pee-bee[n]-completely-me; stanza seven, hair-there; stanza eight, turn[ed]-learn, might-sight. To those attuned to its subtle orchestration, such mastery is a source of exquisite pleasure.

Of the comments on typography in 'Projective Verse', the one which had most influence concerned the use of textual spacings to notate silences in oral performance. In the hands of an Olson or a Paul Blackburn this could lead to poems that zigged, not to say zagged, dynamically across the page. For purposes of illustration, however, one might consider a less frenetic work such as 'The Hermit Cackleberry Brown, On Human Vanity' by Jonathan Williams:

caint call your name
but your face is easy

come sit

now some folks figure theyre
bettern
cowflop they
aint

not a bit

just good to hold the world together
like hooved up ground

that's what

This poem has the aforementioned characteristics of projectivism. There is the same use of the terminal juncture to dislocate syntax in a manner that propels the reader from line to line in the attempt to conclude the sentence:

now some folks figure theyre (*theyre what?*)
bettern (*bettern what?*)
cowflop they (*they what?*)
aint

And there is the same relaxing of accentual patterning by laying down a gritty succession of monosyllables (31 of the 36 words in the poem). But what concerns us here is the function of the spacings. Knowing the poet's love of hitchhiking through the American South, we may take it on trust that the text is a direct transcript of the speech of the hermit named in the title: the poem is an *objet trouvé*. Granted that transcripts of conversation are usually regarded as prose, Williams has cunningly deployed his spacings so as to reveal within the text that more highly patterned utterance we call verse. The poem consists of three main stanzas; each of these stanzas is followed by a typographical space; and after traversing each of these ruptures the reader comes across a terse afterthought to the preceding statements. The sense that the recurrent model of stanza-pause-afterthought constitutes a kind of poetic structuring is added

to by the fact that the three terse appendages are near-rhymes: come sit; not a bit; that's what.

At the same time, these spacings neatly augment the poem's scrupulous attention to the speaker's pungent colloquialisms. Consider the first four lines. The opening *distich* records Cackleberry's salutation to our narrator:

caint call your name
but your face is easy

Having greeted his visitor, the speaker pauses long enough to decide whether or not to invite him to stay and, having made his decision, offers him a chair:

caint call your name
but your face is easy

come sit

Having offered him a seat, Cackleberry pauses again to allow his guest time to get settled, only then launching into his main subject:

caint call your name
but your face is easy

come sit

now some folks figure . . .

Each of these typographical rifts is a meaningful hiatus into which we read certain undescribed physical or mental operations; we decipher the spaces as well as the print. And what we glean from the spaces hardens our conviction that this is not a fictive text, but is an authentic rendering of an actual exchange between real people. The erasures in it help lend the text its whiff of authenticity. Jonathan Williams may be a miniaturist, but in a poem such as this he displays a tact and exactitude not always found in the work of those who employ a larger canvas.

The Maximus Poems

With poems as technically adroit as this, Olson, Creeley, Williams and Levertov resuscitated the experimental lyric earlier perfected by the likes of William Carlos Williams. However, the ways in which the shared techniques led on to a shared concern with individuation, the spasmodic process by which we achieve some sort of selfhood, is best explored in relation to Olson's magnum opus. For as early as 1950 he was devoting most of his energies to *The Maximus Poems*, a second-generation modernist long poem after the manner of *The Cantos*, *Paterson* and *Four Quartets*. When he

died of cancer in 1970, the work consisted of between three and four hundred passages in verse, prose and assorted amalgams of the two. Set in the small fishing city of Gloucester, Massachusetts, where Olson's parents had holidayed and in which he was eventually to settle, *The Maximus Poems* is one of the most thematically unified and coherent of modernist epics. Despite its surface appearance of bewildering diversity, the work is entirely constructed from the fragments of innumerable tales of coming into being, of beginnings, of origination. The poem is a compilation creation myth, and nothing is included that does not contribute to its account of universal beginnings.

The autobiographical content of the poem provides a clear example of this, for the account of Olson's life in Gloucester dwells almost exclusively on his earliest memories of the city, with remarkably little being said about the Gloucester of the 1950s and 1960s in which the work was largely composed. So marked is the preference for the poet's earliest impressions that the word 'first' runs like a refrain through the many passages of recollection:

It rained
the day we arrived . . .
the first time I saw
the sea
(Vol. I)

I was so young my first memory
is of a tent . . .
(Vol. II)

the bed broke down under
my mother and father the first night we came to Gloucester
(Vol. II)

where the Parsons
had their first wharf . . .
And where I first went out,
in a dory . . .
and later, moored my own first skiff
(Vol. III)

It is symptomatic of this bias toward beginnings that Olson's parents are a recurrent subject of discussion, while his own wives and children are hardly mentioned.

The same tendencies are evident in the poem's treatment of Gloucester history. The burden of attention is placed on three origin stories: the city's first founding in 1623; its rebirth in 1642; and the founding of its satellite community, Dogtown, in the early eighteenth century. Around these three principal creation stories a group of subsidiary 'firsts' is arranged: the arrival of Gloucester's first shipwright; the building of Gloucester's first schooner; the establishment of the city's first salt-works, and so on. The historical matter is not fixed and dogmatic, for as each of the three volumes of

The Maximus Poems appeared over a twenty-year period, Olson was to be found pushing each moment of creation back in time as if to enhance its originatory credentials. Thus, the birth of the second Gloucester is dated 1642 in the first volume; early in volume two, after intensive historical research, Olson adjusts the date to 1635; a few pages later this becomes 1632; and in volume three it is pushed back to the late 1620s, thereby linking it, in almost unbroken sequence, to the first Gloucester of 1623. Similarly, the birth of the satellite community of Dogtown is laboriously traced back, over several hundred pages of intermittent documentation and speculation, from 1717 to 1707.

The historian James B. Connolly has said, 'As American history goes, Gloucester in Massachusetts is an ancient port. Of the permanent English settlements here only Jamestown and Plymouth precede it'. Olson is able to trace in fascinating detail how and why a community is born and made to cohere because cities in the United States, unlike those in Europe, were all founded recently enough for a wealth of contemporary evidence to survive. At the same time, by choosing one of the very first English settlements on the North American continent, our poet is able to examine in microcosm the process by which the nation itself came into being. The two creation stories are intimately connected.

This identifying of the founding of Gloucester with the founding of the United States brings us to another constituent of Olson's compilation creation myth – the various waves of exploration, migration and settlement that led to the discovery of the New World. In the first volume the heroes are the expected ones: Columbus, Juan de la Cosa (who made the first map to include the New World), Captain John Smith and Champlain. These figures continue to be celebrated in the subsequent volumes, but it is noticeable that volume two hazards that the Vikings discovered America as early as the tenth century. Volume three, whilst reporting the latest archeological proof that the Vikings had indeed been present in Newfoundland *circa* AD 1006, opens up vastly earlier possibilities by mention of Professor Cyrus Gordon's theory of cultural traffic between ancient Crete and contemporary South American civilization. Once again we find the poet, ever convinced that the key to an event lies in the nature of its genesis, adjusting the date of discovery backwards, as though pushing against the confining walls of known history.

Undergirding all the origin stories so far mentioned are a series of reworkings of those ancient myths, called cosmogonies, that sought to explain how the world was created. In typical modernist style, Olson scavenged the whole of human culture for material, his myth sources including Old Norse, Greek legends, ancient Egyptian religions, the Hindu *Vedas*, and the Hurrian-Hittite civilization of the Mesopotamian Valley. However, his interest in these deposits was extremely selective, the intention being to celebrate the Earth gods of prehistory at the expense of the better-known Sky gods (like the Greek Zeus and the Judaeo-Christian Yahweh, or Jehovah) who later replaced them. Olson is trying to salvage, not the Earth deities as such, but the sacramental view of this planet that has given us life. It is a major purport of *The Maximus Poems* that the cosmic process is natural rather than supernatural, physical

rather than abstract, terrestrial rather than sidereal. For Olson, whatever spirit there is informs a body; whatever infinite there is informs the finite; whatever intangibles there are inform the actual; whatever ideal there is informs the real. His continual restitution of archaic Earth gods who have been wrongfully displaced by more abstract Sky gods is therefore an attempt to assert that the human sense perceptions are revelatory, and their revelation is the world:

nakedness
is what one means

that all start up
to the eye and soul
as though it had never
happened before
(Vol. I)

The spiritual trajectory of *The Maximus Poems* is thus identical with that plotted by Eliot in the closing lines of *Four Quartets*:

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.

By exploring a vast collection of origin stories, Olson is seeking to return the reader to an original experience of now and here and this. He does not ask us to look at a different world, but to look at this same world differently. Even his account of the discovery of the Americas may be interpreted metaphorically as an expression of this desire to experience freshly, as a New World, our battered and abused planet. To achieve this state of innocence after experience is to acquire psychic wholeness; or, to use the term Olson filched from the psychologist Jung, it is to become 'homo Maximus'.

After presiding over the closure and sale of Black Mountain College in 1957, Olson settled in Gloucester. He may have been hoping, by this removal, to break the cultural elitism of the *avant-garde* community, rooting his modernist epic in the lived reality of a working city. It is certainly the case that *The Maximus Poems* honours those citizens whose practice of their trade promotes the general health of Gloucester:

The brilliant Portuguese owners,
they do. They pour the money back
into their engines, into their ships,
whole families do, put it back
in. They are but extensions of their own careers
as mastheadsmen.
(Vol. I)

Olson especially cherished the fishermen, whose dangerous calling obliged them to develop a physical and mental alertness conspicuously absent from the wielders of public power:

A fisherman is not a successful man
he is not a famous man he is not a man
of power, these are the damned by God
(Vol. I)

It is also true that Olson became a local celebrity, campaigning in the *Gloucester Times* against the destruction of historic buildings and on occasion being asked by the townsfolk to represent them in their battles with the city council.

Yet it is difficult to credit that the citizenry of Gloucester joyously whiled away winter evenings reading *The Maximus Poems*. That work is *about* them, but it is not *for* them. This is not just because it incorporates so much scholarly material; but also because large parts of it are written in a crabbed and cryptic fashion. It would seem that Olson wished to enact his theme of origination by leaving exposed the means by which his own poetry originates in prose notes. The imperfections that in the earlier modernists were unwilling, are in Olson's case the willed product of a desire to encompass both the flower of art and the compost from which it arises. At times this highly literate poet appears to be returning to a preliterate condition, as though he were trying to complement his vision of a new world with the hieroglyphics of a new speech. Some parts of *The Maximus Poems* have the battered, fragmentary, runic character of the earliest examples of writing. It is the simultaneous coming into being to World and Word that we are offered.

Unfortunately, the fact that Olson had a rationale for incoherence cannot excuse writing like this:

Cyprus
the strangled
Aphrodite – Rhodes

Crete
– the Mother Goddess
fr Anatolia
Phrygian Attis

Malta: Fat Lady

Spain
(Vol. II)

This 'poem' (it is quoted entire) can be made sense of: each of the islands named – Cyprus, Crete, Rhodes, Malta – represents a stepping stone in the westward progression of humankind from the Near East through the Mediterranean to Spain, last stop before the Atlantic voyage to the New World. The references

to Aphrodite, the Mother Goddess and the Fat Lady, attest that along this route specific matriarchal myths were disseminated. We might even interpret the typography of the poem as a visual equivalent, a verbal map of the itinerary described, each stanza being an island of words in the sea of the page's white. Yet the fact that the piece can be decoded and discovered to belong in the corner of the jigsaw devoted to migration diminishes not one jot the vexation of the reader. Resembling nothing so much as the marginalia the poet habitually scrawled in his favourite source books, this is the recipe for a poem, a preliminary list of ingredients, rather than the finished article; in place of the expected meal, the famished reader is invited to dine on the menu.

Reading *The Maximus Poems* is as exhilarating as riding on a roller-coaster, the work alternately plunging into incoherence and abruptly ascending to the giddiest heights. However, its ragged texturing and formidable range of reference severely limit its appeal. Olson's influence upon other poets has been immense, but his standing with critics is insecure and his readership tiny. (The 1953 Jargon Press edition of *The Maximus Poems*, 1–10 had a print-run of 350 copies but was still available in some bookshops at the original price in 1975.) As for his place in literary history, Olson was one of the first to consistently use the term 'Postmodernism' and the whole projectivist tendency represents both a second-generation modernism and a step towards the subsequent aesthetic. In retrospect, the Black Mountain poem that most decisively bespeaks Postmodernity is Ed Dorn's mock epic *Gunslinger*, with its affectionate Pop Art-style guying of the icons of commercial culture (especially Western and Sci-Fi movies). However, this very willingness to incorporate the ad-mass ideology and rampant commodification that Olson deplored may well mean that *Gunslinger* marks not so much the fulfilment of the Black Mountain project as its demise.

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14

The Beats

John Osborne

The Beats: A Problematic Canon

Writers commonly dislike group labels, feeling that their works are being cruelly amputated – an arm off here, a leg there ('the work bleeds', D. H. Lawrence protested) – to fit a communal box. Yet, as David Lodge has pointed out, no text can generate meaning in a vacuum. The meaning of a book is in large part a product of its differences from and similarities to other books. If, say, a novel did not bear some resemblance to other novels, we should not know how to read it, and if it was not different from all other novels we should not want to read it. Any adequate reading of a text, therefore, involves identifying and classifying it in relation to other texts, according to content, genre, mode, period, language, nationality, and so on. Granted the comparative imprecision of literary categories, there is a special onus upon any critic using a group designation to limit the capacity for slither by lending that term a utile definition (through one that must always be held under potential cancellation). And, certainly, of all such terms bandied about in recent decades, the Beat label is one of the oftenest used but least defined.

The source of most of the confusion bedevilling discussion of the Beats is a critical obsession with their lifestyle rather than their literary aesthetic. Emerging in the culturally repressive America of the Cold War era, the Beats sought to counteract a philistine and inhibitive society by exploring the most extreme, potentially ecstatic areas of the self. Characteristic preoccupations of those engaged in this quest were art (Abstract Expressionist painting was especially admired); jazz in its 'Bebop' and 'Cool' phases; drugs (from alcohol to heroin); sex (in Ginsberg's words, with 'whomever come who may'); communal living; frenetic travel; anarchistic drop-out politics; religious experimentation (with various forms of Buddhism, for example); the espousal of an anti-materialist ascetic lifestyle; an infatuation, sometimes consummated, with criminality (archetypal Beat heroes include the murderer Lucien Carr, William Burroughs who 'accidentally' killed his wife, the thief and heroin addict Herbert Huncke, and