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PROJECTIVE VERSE AND PEDAGOGY

Michael Kindellan

PREAMBLE

Charles Olson was a “poet-pedagogue”.¹ Throughout most of his writing life, these vocations were radically compatible, the practices of one bearing intrinsically upon the principles of the other. It could be important to note that Olson began this dual existence only after he had properly and permanently stopped being a teacher and a scholar active in ways compatible with mainstream institutions of higher learning, the basic outline of which is as follows. In 1932, Olson received a Bachelor of Arts from Wesleyan University, wherefrom here also received a Masters in 1933. He continued his research there that fall after his teacher, Wilbert Snow, arranged an Olin Fellowship allowing Olson to pursue further his highly original work on Melville’s library. From there he went on to teach English at Clark University, 1934-1936.² That autumn, Olson entered Harvard University as a graduate student on Frederick Merk’s nascent “American Civilization” program and began working as a teaching assistant in English and American Literature. In 1937, with Edward Dahlberg’s encouragement, he turned a paper written for a class offered by F. O. Matthiessen into “Lear and Moby-Dick”, his first published research article.³ By 1939, Olson had completed the coursework for a PhD, but found himself temperamentally unsuited to “the exacerbating circumstances of academia”,⁴ a misfit that would stay unreconciled for the rest of his working life. In 1940, he received a Guggenheim grant in support of his Melville research, an award that led, albeit circuitously, to the “poetic historiography” that is *Call Me Ishmael*.⁵

¹ Robert von Hallberg, *Charles Olson: The Scholar’s Art* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978), 22.

² As a former girlfriend of Olson’s remarked: “Realizing he couldn’t really live well off doing research, he did come to Worcester [...] I don’t think he was very happy about it [...] But it was a job, and he ate regularly, which is something he liked to do”. Edmund A. Schofield, “Transcript of a Tape-recorded Interview with Barbara D. Milliken about Her Friendship with the Poet Charles Olson”, in “Charles Olson at 100”, ed. Stuart Peterfreund, special issue, *The Worcester Review* 31, nos. 1 & 2 (2010): 42.

³ Charles Olson, “Lear and Moby-Dick”, *Twice-a-Year* 1 (Fall-Winter 1938), 165–89.

⁴ Tom Clark, *Charles Olson: The Allegory of a Poet’s Life* (1991, Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2000), 50.

⁵ Charles Olson, *Call Me Ishmael* (New York: Reynall and Hitchcock, 1947).

From this point onwards, Olson’s “career” in academia, at least in any normative sense of that word, effectively ends; simultaneously, his equally atypical “career” as a writer begins; Olson wrote his first poems that same year.⁶ One of the earliest, “Purgatory Blind”, as its title suggests, describes a state of emotional and intellectual liminality. It begins:

Between the river and the sea,
Annisquam and Atlantic
Boundaries,
The moors of doubt and self-mistrust maintaining
A perilous structure of land against the flood.⁷

Following a series of political appointments—Publicity Director for the American Civil Liberties Union and Chief of Foreign Language Information Services at the Common Council for American Unity in 1941; Associate Chief of Foreign Languages Division at the Office of War Information in 1942; Director of Foreign Nationalities Division at the Democratic National Committee in 1944—he left politics, turning down an offer in 1945 to become Assistant Secretary of the Treasury.⁸ Significant of such refusals, he wrote “The K” early that year. Its initial line tenders Olson’s poetic resignation: “Take, then, my answer”, while its second verse paragraph preemptively rebukes anyone who might think a move from politics to poetry effected some kind of retreat from social care: “The affairs of men remain a chief concern”.⁹ Charles Stein’s widely-shared take goes like this: “Olson does not withdraw from politics; his understanding of what constitutes political action

⁶ Libbie Rifkin has argued that, despite Olson’s anti-establishment posture, there is something about the schedules of exclusive and coterie positionings that structure his authority as both poet and teacher in ways rather more familiar than they might at first appear. See particularly chapters one and two of her book *Career Moves: Olson, Creeley, Zukofsky, Berrigan and the American Avant-Garde* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2000), 13–71.

⁷ Charles Olson, “Purgatory Blind”, *The Collected Poems of Charles Olson*, ed. George F. Butterick (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 3. Though Maximus was but a twinkle in Olson’s eye at this point, the “moors” he refers to are better known locally as “Dogtown”.

⁸ For a pretty scathing critique of Olson’s brief political life (and much else besides), see Heriberto Yépez, *The Empire of Neomemory*, trans. Jen Hofer, Christian Nagler and Brian Whitener (2007, Oakland: Chain Links, 2013), 36–7.

⁹ Olson, “The K”, *Collected Poems*, 14. Olson finished *Call Me Ishmael* in the summer of 1945.

deepens and expands”.¹⁰ Apropos of this, in 1946, Olson started visiting Ezra Pound at St. Elizabeths, long before it was fashionable to do so. In 1948, convinced of the legitimate cultural, political and social relevance of poets in general, but absolutely fed up with the snarling intolerance of one in particular, Olson quit Pound as well.¹¹

BLACK MOUNTAIN COLLEGE

That autumn, Olson received and accepted an invitation from Josef Albers to teach at Black Mountain College. It is important to note that a few poems in Harper’s, Harper’s Bizarre and Atlantic Monthly aside, Olson remained an unknown, novice poet (though dated 1948, his first collection, a modest 5 poems with illustrations by Corrado Cagli, entitled Y & X, was not published until early 1949).¹² Olson initially refused Albers on account of its being too-substantial a commitment. Olson regretted his decision deeply, knowing “how very much the most attractive place Black Mountain is for a writer to teach”.¹³ Undeterred, Albers proposed a less onerous engagement, asking Olson to come for “a week or more, giving some lectures, or if you prefer, some seminars”, a schedule that would continue on a monthly basis from October through to the summer of 1949. Olson subsequently came to refer to this arrangement as a “Chinese” model of pedagogical commitment. As he explained to W. H. Ferry, in ancient China:

¹⁰ Quoted in Ammiel Alcalay, *A Little History*, ed. Fred Dewey (Los Angeles: re: public / UpSet Press, 2013), 124. The same could be said of his understanding of education.

¹¹ Catherine Seelye reads Olson’s break with Pound as expressive in-part of a determination to rid himself of feelings of inadequacy in relation to greater men. Introduction to *Charles Olson and Ezra Pound: An Encounter at St. Elizabeths*, ed. Catherine Seelye (New York: Paragon House, 1991), xxiv. She is right. There seems a strong connection between Olson’s “resistance at any longer being a son” to Pound and the enthusiastic opposition in the “Projective Verse” essay to “inherited line, stanza, over-all form”, where the key word here is inherited. In this same essay, Olson counts Pound as amongst the progenitors of “composition by field”. Charles Olson, “Projective Verse”, *Collected Prose*, ed. Donald Allen and Benjamin Friedlander (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 239. For further discussions of homosocialities crucial to the formation and perpetuation of postwar American poetics, see Michael Davidson, *Guys Like Us: Citing Masculinity in Cold War Poetics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004); Andrew Mossin, *Male Subjectivity and Poetic Form in “New American” Poetry* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2010); and Rachel Blau DuPlessis, *Purple Passages: Pound, Eliot, Zukofsky, Olson, Creeley and the Ends of Patriarchal Poetry* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2012).

¹² Charles Olson and Corrado Cagli, *Y & X* (Paris: Black Sun, 1948).

¹³ Charles Olson, 30 September 1948 Letter to Josef Albers, “Olson, Charles: Fall Visiting 1948-1949”, Series III, Box 5, BMC Records, Western Regional Archives, State Archives of North Carolina.

a so-called creative man stays at his own last in a capital city, doing his work, where men ought to do their work, in the midst of an active society, but once a month, or whatever, they come to such a retired place as a college is [...] and give out with, what they have been doing in their own trade, so that other men and women who have been working at their own lasts can hear them, can exchange businesses, and what students there are who are interested, can find out whatever the men and women have to say, whatever they have to show.¹⁴

Such a model restores to education “what it so very much needs—the active professional man, in the arts and in the fields of knowledge, who is not an historian (as, basically, all ‘professors’ are) but is himself actively a maker of ‘history’”. Olson felt Black Mountain College was a “special sort of thing, and was worth more to me than any other educational situation I knew”.¹⁵

It is no coincidence that Olson’s poetical avant-gardism took shape in the highly experimental pedagogic setting of Black Mountain College. My argument is that Olson’s pedagogy—his theory and practice of teaching—is more than merely related to his poetics—his theory and practice of writing verses. Each bears intrinsically upon, and mutually constitutes, the other. Poetics and pedagogy in Olson’s work are not, in other words, meaningfully distinct. Indeed, the opening sections of *The Maximus Poems*—conceived of and begun while teaching at Black Mountain College—might be understood as an realization of the “Chinese” teaching method. The creature Maximus simply turns up and does his thing:

..... tell you? ha! who
can tell another how
to manage the swimming?

¹⁴ Charles Olson to W. H. Ferry, 7 August 1951, in *Olson: Journal of the Charles Olson Archives* 2 (Fall 1974), 9. Olson says he learned of the Chinese angle through his friend, the author and editor Robert Payne. Charles Olson and Robert Creeley, *The Complete Correspondence*, ed George F. Butterick, vol. 1 (Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow, 1980), 27–8.

¹⁵ Olson to Ferry, *Olson* 2, 8; 9.

he was right: people

don't change. They only stand more

revealed. I,

likewise¹⁶

In this passage, the speaker openly scoffs at explicit instruction (tell you? ha!), urging concerted self-revelation instead (the “I”, isolated at the limit of the line). There is a suggestion here, too, of a principle essential to Olson’s pedagogical poetics, namely that writing consists in an ever more ardent disclosure of one’s own peculiar circumstance.

In this way, “istorin”, or “finding out for oneself”, that central tenet of Herodotean historiography so central to Olson’s autodidactic self-reliance, is as much a poetic as an epistemology. One of its clearest articulations can be found in “A Bibliography on America for Ed Dorn”: “dig one thing or place or man until you your self know more abt that than is possible to any other man [...] exhaust it. Saturate it. Beat it. And then U KNOW everything else very fast”.¹⁷ Having said that, it is perhaps important to note that in “Projective Verse” Olson does not actually issue any instructions, at least not specifically. Therein, he attempts instead to outline a set of intellectual, emotional and epistemological attitudes oriented towards skeptical inquisitiveness.¹⁸ In doing so, as Miriam Nichols put it, Olson assumes a rather traditional place in a fairly well-

¹⁶ Charles Olson, *The Maximus Poems*, ed. George F. Butterick (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 9.

¹⁷ Olson, “A Bibliography on America for Ed Dorn”, *Collected Prose*, 306–7. Although not published until 1964, the “Bibliography” was originally composed during Olson’s time as a teacher (and Dorn’s time as a student) at Black Mountain College in 1955.

¹⁸ What I have here called “attitudes” Olson might refer to as “stance”, an idea in 1953 he traced back to the composition of *Call Me Ishmael* some ten years previous. Charles Olson, “The Chiasma, or Lectures in the New Sciences of Man”, *Olson 10* (Fall 1978): 96. Olson devoted an entire section of *The Special View of History* to this concept. Charles Olson, *The Special View of History*, ed. Ann Charters (Berkeley: Oyez, 1970), 19–24. It finds its most prominent articulation in “Projective Verse”, where Olson says a “new stance towards reality” will “lead to new poetics and to new concepts”. *Collected Prose*, 239. As Ann Charters recounts, “when asked by a lady visitor to Black Mountain College what he taught there, Olson replied: ‘You might say that I teach posture’”. *Olson/Melville: A Study in Affinity* (Berkeley: Oyez, 1968), 84.

established quarrel between poets and philosophers, between knowing how and knowing that,¹⁹ between being practically situated in perceptual experience and being theoretically removed therefrom in order to achieve a more critical and thus more truthful perspective. Naive as Olson's recommendation that poets stay radically situated in and attuned to their own proprioceptions will seem to most theorists (for whom our reality is shaped by forces largely imperceptible to the senses), there exists a pedagogical dimension to this as well. Olson was no staunch disciple of John Dewey's educational progressivism, but like Dewey, he saw an "organic connection between education and personal experience".²⁰ Olson's "Bibliography", one of the most explicitly pedagogical of his published texts, assumes "politics & economics (that is, agriculture, fisheries, capital and labor) are like love (can only be individual experience)". Olson contrasts the amatory, experiential learning activities he recommends with "sociology": "a lot of shit—produced by people who are the most dead of all".²¹ Olson hated statistics.

Indeed, the distinction Olson draws here is one that maps fairly well onto another that Dewey makes between traditional and progressive schools in that late summative text, *Experience and Education*. For Dewey, "traditional" schooling sought to transmit knowledge from teacher to learner without due respect for the varied backgrounds, interests and experiences of the pupils concerned.²² It fixed "the aims and methods of instruction and discipline" and prepared the young for future success by handing down information and standards of proper conduct gleaned from the past by teachers who at once communicated knowledge and skills as well as enforced rules of conduct.²³ Progressive education, by contrast, should base its method and curricula on the curiosities and initiatives of the students as individuals; and teachers should avoid fostering docility, receptivity, and obedience in them. A principle difficulty for teachers lay in striking a balance between, on the one hand, the obvious, necessary and in some sense natural authority of

¹⁹ Miriam Nichols, *Radical Affections: Essays on the Poetics of the Outside* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2010), 6. See also, for example, Gilbert Ryle, "Knowing How and Knowing That", *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 46 (1945-1946): 1–16.

²⁰ John Dewey, "Experience and Education", *The Later Works of John Dewey, 1925-1953*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston, vol. 13 (1938, Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2008): 11.

²¹ Olson, "A Bibliography on America for Ed Dorn", *Collected Prose*, 297 (original emphasis).

²² I have borrowed this succinct run-down from Ansgar Allen and Roy Goddard, *Education and Philosophy: An Introduction* (London: Sage, 2017), 177.

²³ Dewey, "Experience and Education", 5.

the teaching tasked with the education of immature members of society, and with providing each student both sufficient and correct kinds of freedom to best facilitate their intellectual, moral and emotional growth.²⁴ In some respects, Olson's authoritarian classroom demeanor,²⁵ coupled with his frequent demand that students, like poets, put themselves in the open and go by no other track than their own, seems to suggest that Olson preferred full-blown contradictions between freedom and restraint to more balanced resolutions. Such, perhaps, is the "double position"²⁶ of this poet-pedagogue: at once entirely concerned with his own authority and devoted to the separate but (perhaps not quite) equal agencies of his students.

Having said that, Olson's engagement with Dewey's pedagogical theories was, so far as I have been able to discern, fairly limited, and at best second-hand. His exposure thereto was largely a residual effect of his membership of the Black Mountain College community. Its founder, John Andrew Rice, admired Dewey's work and considered himself a friend. As Annette Jael Lehmann reminds us, quoting Dewey, Black Mountain's founders wanted to "restore continuity between the refined and intensified forms of experience that are works of art and the everyday events, doings and sufferings that are universally recognized to constitute experience".²⁷ Lehmann summarizes: the "synergistic continuum of art and everyday experience" was "the focus of their educational efforts" at Black Mountain.²⁸ Beyond this broad set of shared principles, it could be that Rice, not Dewey, offered Olson a more immediate if not also more attractive pedagogical legacy. Olson's introductory statement for Black Mountain College bulletin published in the spring of 1952

²⁴ "When education is based upon experience and educative experience is seen to be a social process, the situation changes radically. The teacher loses the position of external boss or dictator but takes on that of leader of group activities". Dewey, "Education and Experience", 37.

²⁵ Former Black Mountain College student Fielding Dawson called Olson "the bluff deepfeeling yet often cruel, rule-making overbearing Poet-Scholar and amusing man". "The Pork Chop Incident", *Chicago Review* 30, no. 3 (Winter 1979): 106. See also Francine du Plessix Gray's account in "Black Mountain: The Making (Breaking) of a Writer", *Black Mountain College: Sprouted Seeds*, ed. Mervin Lane (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1990), 300–10. And for a brief run-down of other recollections, see Clark, *Allegory of a Poet's Life*, 109–10 and Martin Duberman, *Black Mountain College: An Exploration in Community* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1972), 390–1.

²⁶ Rifkin, *Career Moves*, 61.

²⁷ John Dewey, "Art as Experience", *Later Works of John Dewey*, 10: 9.

²⁸ Annette Jael Lehmann, "Pedagogical Practices and Models of Creativity at Black Mountain College", *Black Mountain: An Interdisciplinary Experiment*, ed. Eugen Blume, et alia (Berlin: Staatliche Museen zu Berlin / Spector Books, 2015), 99.

begins by outlining “two of the simplest & oldest principles on which higher learning [...] has rested: 1, that the student, rather than the curriculum, is the proper center of a general education”, and second, “that a faculty [...] be measured by what they do with what they know”.²⁹ Olson then proceeds to quote from an early statement written by Rice some twenty years before. That statement begins: “Our central and consistent effort is to teach method, not content; to emphasize process, to invite the student to the realization that the way of handling facts and himself amid the facts is more important than the facts themselves”.³⁰ The statement, as quoted by Olson, concludes: “Teachers in a place like this, where education is taken seriously, should always bear in mind that they are the central problem; that we would provide the students with a liberal education if we merely gave them the privilege of looking on while we educated ourselves”.³¹

Both Rice and Olson espoused a student-centric pedagogy, but this concern for and with students was not unconditional. To install in them the right kind of productive indiscipline, the teacher himself needed to be severe. Rice: “In the center of his being a teacher should be calm, quiet, tough”;³² Olson: “the poet is the only pedagogue left, to be trusted. And I mean the tough ones, only the very best, not the bulk of them and the other educators”.³³ By all accounts Rice and Olson were similar kinds of teachers: they could be charismatic or patronizing, inspirational or offensive, kind or temperamental.³⁴ In this sense, the educational theories they developed might not be so straightforwardly democratic or progressive as they seem. Just so. Olson’s “A Draft of a Plan for the College”, written in September 1956, makes this point exactly. “Progressive education”, he wrote, “has now become modish everywhere”; “each student is now handled as though he or she were necessarily valuable, and the result is that each is, when educated, essentially friable”. There exists here a palpable demand for excellence. Olson continues: “the will

²⁹ Charles Olson, [Untitled Statement], *Black Mountain College Bulletin* 9, no. 4 (Spring 1952): n.p. (Olson’s emphasis).

³⁰ *Ibid.* This sounds, some grammatical conventionality aside, a lot like something Olson himself could have written. There is, to my mind, a direct connection between such an assertion and what Rifkin calls, in relation to his Mayan experience, Olson’s tendency to turn linguistic and cultural ignorance into aesthetic strength. Rifkin, *Career Moves*, 61.

³¹ Olson, [Untitled Statement], n. p. (Olson’s emphasis).

³² Olson quoting Rice, *ibid.* (Olson’s emphasis).

³³ Olson, “The Gate and Center”, *Collected Prose*, 170.

³⁴ For more on Rice, see Duberman, *Black Mountain*, 3–4; 141–2.

to know (what general education panders to) and the will to be free (what progressive education sought to pump-prime) are nothing unless the will to use any talent for the first-rate alone is invoked".³⁵ This emphasis on use echoes Alfred North Whitehead's claim in *The Aims of Education* that "the importance of knowledge lies in its use",³⁶ a copy of which Olson acquired after 1952. Given his enthusiasm for Alfred North Whitehead's most influential work, *Process and Reality*, Olson must have been emboldened by Whitehead's emphasis on the importance of use for both knowledge and learning.³⁷ As Whitehead wrote elsewhere in the former: "the secret of success is pace, and the secret of pace is concentration. But, in respect to precise knowledge, the watchword is pace, pace, pace. Get your knowledge quickly, and then use it".³⁸ It is a passage that resonates with one of Olson's: "USE USE USE the process at all points, in any given poem always, always one perception must must must MOVE, INSTANTER, ON ANOTHER".³⁹

POETICS AND / AS PEDAGOGY

The extent to which the theories underlying "Projective Verse" (the basic contours of which I assume a reader of this book knows already, maybe even ad nauseam) double as pedagogical principles is evident when compared to Olson's express views on best teaching practices. The minutes of a November 1951 Black Mountain College Faculty meeting are revealing in this regard. Therein, we find record of a discussion between Olson, the theoretical mathematician Max Dehn and the anthropologist John Adams. Here, the three discuss what Dehn called the "structure of knowledge" in higher education, in particular the ideal curriculum for a liberal arts college such as Black Mountain. I would like to quote in some detail from this exchange:

³⁵ Charles Olson, "A Draft of Plan for the College", *Olson 2* (Fall 1974): 50.

³⁶ Alfred North Whitehead, *The Aims of Education and Other Essays* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1942), 49.

³⁷ For discussions of Olson's reading and interpretation of Whitehead see Robin Blaser, "The Violets: Charles Olson and Alfred North Whitehead", *The Fire: Collected Essays of Robin Blaser*, ed. Miriam Nichols (1983, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 196–228; Shahrar Bram, *Charles Olson and Alfred North Whitehead: An Essay on Poetry* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 2004); and Joshua Hoeynck, "Poetic Cosmologies: Black Mountain Poetry and Process Philosophy" (PhD dissertation: Washington University, 2008).

³⁸ Whitehead, *The Aims of Education*, 57.

³⁹ Olson, "Projective Verse", 240.

Mr. Adams said there's been suffering from myopia as to what a liberal arts education consists of; that he thinks offering a broad education at the beginning is not good; that students need first to think for themselves, to read and write i.e. the basis [sic] disciplines and he wonders if we wouldn't stress that students for the first year or two should take subjects stressing general disciplines; that as Dr Dehn had pointed out, some subjects lend themselves more readily to basic disciplines; maybe the first thing should be something we have to talk about together, then an art and then come back to general knowledge [.]

Mr Dehn said that he though[t] not only of math but of foreign languages, especially ancient lang where the structure is very strict, as a subject out of which knowledge of structure should come, then to go on to broaden knowledge; perhaps very strict work in music would do; perhaps biology since it is so broad and rich is not right for beginners but maybe for the second year; history is still more difficult and requires a very disciplined mind; then crowning all to grasp all together philosophy [...]

Mr Olson said that what makes the strata of the usual Amer[ican] education is not admitting that the individual is more complex than any curriculum [... and] that he objected to a theory of chronological order of studies; he differs from Dr Dehn in his use of structural and assumes there is more than structural, against structural he would oppose the assumptions that (1) man is different from what we thought and (2) the principle on which education has been based has to be changed; that everything is based on things and knowledge is of no use in itself but only in use and the principle of his course is a bold attempt [at] education on an intensive occasion of basic disciplines; he said he grants there is a point at which learning structural subjects is essential, not at the start [...]⁴⁰

Mr Adams said that he and Mr Dehn we're talking about what education ought to be and that Mr Olson was talking about what education is, the idea of Nietzsche to have education grow out

⁴⁰ We might note here, in regards to these comments by Olson specifically, some familiar poetic influences. In the phrase "that everything is based on things and "knowledge is of no use in itself but only in use" I think I detect here William Carlos Williams's "no ideas but in things" and Ezra Pound's espousal of "ideas going into action". See book I of Paterson, ed. Christopher MacGowan (1946, New York: New Directions, 1995), 9; and Ezra Pound, *Guide to Kulchur* (1938, New York: New Directions, 1970), 44. Both Williams and Pound were of course deeply curious about the pedagogical implications of radical poetics.

of and be involved with vital life experiences; that the final and best synthesis would be when both come together, the above and the abstracting and generalizing; that he doubts if anybody here knows what Mr Olson is talking about[.]

Mr Olson said that he was educated in a university and the fact that he writes has nothing to do with his theory of education; that he would not base teaching on a course in literature; that he assumes he was retarded, it was late when he could read abstractions;⁴¹ that these students must be bright.

Mr Adams said that Mr Olson was objecting not to Mr Dehn's method but to method[.]

Mr Olson said that we gain by the fact that we do not make plans for a curriculum.⁴²

Some weeks earlier, Olson said that one of his own pedagogical principles was that "you don't make a priori definitions of what you intend to accomplish".⁴³ The simple but quite radical suggestion, that curricula be removed from teaching practice, shows the extent to which Olson was more than willing to forego what we now call learning outcomes or learning objectives. Not that a disregard for the integrity of different academic disciplines and the avoidance of planned sequences of instruction imply one another necessarily, but together they do point to a fairly wholesale rethinking of institutional teaching as such. By analogy, Olson's lionizations of "openness" and his unequivocal oppositions to "inherited line, stanza, over-all form" in "Projective Verse" construe external, historically-imposed formal obligations as varieties of poetic curricula. Further, his recommendation that student-readers (whom he refers to as "boys" in the essay: "go by it, boys")⁴⁴ write in ways responsive to and therefore expressive of their own internal physiological and intellectual pressures, rather than in ways obedient to closed forms, attests to his belief in the absolute complexity of any individual.

⁴¹ Cf. Olson's claim in *The Maximus Poems* that "I have had to learn the simplest things / last. Which made for difficulties [...] But even my trade, at it, I stood estranged / from that which was most familiar. Was delayed / and not content with the man's argument / that such postponement / is now the nature of / obedience, / that we are all late / in a slow time, / that we grow up many / And the single / is not easily / known". *The Maximus Poems*, 56.

⁴² "Minutes, Rough Drafts of Board of Fellows, Faculty Meetings, September 1951-November 1952", Series I, Box 9, BMC Records, Western Regional Archives, State Archives of North Carolina. Cf.: "Goals and interests are a major source of bias in any form of enquiry: knowing what one wants to find in advance tends to shape what one searches for and what one overlooks". Ophelia Benson and Jeremy Stangroom, *Why Truth Matters* (London: Continuum, 2006), 135.

⁴³ Olson, quoted in Duberman, *Black Mountain*, 359.

⁴⁴ Olson, "Projective Verse", 240.

The following spring, Olson offered a course at Black Mountain called “Projective Verse”. That fact alone underlines the pedagogical credentials of Olson’s poetic ideas. A description thereof appeared in the spring 1952 Black Mountain College Bulletin (and is it probably the “course” Olson refers to in his exchange with Dehn and Adams):

The course focuses on problems of projection as the voice and speech are parts of the projective art, and on the usages of the poet historically and again now as the root of drama. The emphasis or the metaphysic at all points is decisive: that form is never more than an extension of content, and that content, whatever, is under hand. So, the combination in the discipline is (1) the value of form, and (2) the discovery of methodologies, both in the knowledge of content (basically, research and knowledge, how, to concentrate and so to come to know materials) and in the act of expression, going, in the direction of, form, in any given case.⁴⁵

I would be surprised if any prospective student could rightly anticipate what exactly Olson’s course was going to be about. And that is precisely the point. Moreover, the course proposes to teach projective verse as both a subject to be examined—“the course focuses on problems of projection”, etc—and as a discipline or method to be followed.

In the “Projective Verse” essay proper, published the year before, Olson exclaims further slogans, such as “form is never more than an extension of content”, and “one perception must immediately and directly lead to a further perception”. These tenets will be deadly familiar to Olson’s readers. I recount them here not to further discuss or explain them, but to suggest they, too, be regarded as pedagogical statements. The first extols a decidedly organicist mode of thinking ranged against arbitrary regulation, while the second supposes energy and enthusiasm more valuable than logic or expertise. Both slogans are attributed to other writers, the first to Robert Creeley, the second to Edward Dahlberg, implicitly recognizing an educational dimension to Olson’s most formative homosocial relationships. The language used to describe these innovations shows their wider application: Olson at one point calls them “dogma”; he says that “Projective

⁴⁵ “Course: Projective Verse”, Black Mountain College Bulletin 9, no. 4 (1952): n.p, Series II, Box 27, BMC Records, Western Regional Archives, State Archives of North Carolina.

verse teaches” a poet “to register both the acquisitions of his ear and the pressures of his breath”; and he writes that other aspects of his methodology comprise a “lesson” for his readers.⁴⁶ Simply put, pedagogical designs exist throughout. Moreover, it could be useful to realize that although “Projective Verse” remains largely a document calling for certain changes in the way verse is conceived and written, Olson himself considered it “critique”, a genre that has a more obvious relation to teaching and education than does, say, *ars poetica*:

base texts:

	odyssey	berard
	moby-dick	
	herodotus	
pausanias	ovid (heriodes as well as m’s)	
euripides	<u>critique</u> :	
	fenollosa	
	dante’s d[e] v[olgari] e[loquentia]	
	pv [projective verse] ⁴⁷	

A reciprocity between poetry and education was certainly at the forefront of Olson’s thinking during his time at Black Mountain. He was interested, as he put it in the 1951 essay “The Gate and the Center”, in “re-establishing a concept of knowledge as culture”.⁴⁸ This could be achieved, “turkey-crazy” as it sounds (Olson’s phrase), through a process of “uneducation”, by which Olson probably had in mind a reversal of the basic action revealed by the etymology of the word “educate”, namely “to lead out”. Uneducation in this sense counteracts disciplined learning, whose tendency to separate knowledge informs the organization of western higher education and

⁴⁶ Olson, “Projective Verse”, 240; 241.

⁴⁷ Charles Olson, “Notes on Language”, Box 37, Charles Olson Research Collection, Archives & Special Collections at the Thomas J. Dodd Research Center, University of Connecticut Libraries, hereinafter CORC. I am grateful to the Estate of Charles Olson and to the University of Connecticut Libraries for permission to reproduce archival material.

⁴⁸ Olson, “The Gate and the Center”, *Collected Essays*, 168.

research institutions (science over here, humanities over there).⁴⁹ Olson, like many of his colleagues, rejected what he calls “arbitrary divisions of learning which are calculated, are purposefully brought into being [...] to confuse and confound”.⁵⁰ Instead of centrifugal divisions of knowledge into discrete categories, Olson proposes a centripetal movement, a pulling inward, predicated on the poet’s innate “WILL TO COHERE”. Poetics, in this formulation, offers “an IMAGE of possibilities implicit in the energy, given the METHODOLOGY of its use”.⁵¹ In short, Olson believed that it was a poet’s special dispensation to engage in a sort of master discipline able to comprehend all others. In today’s lingo, Olson’s poetics at this time approaches transdisciplinarity. A case in point: Olson typed a carbon supplement to the 1954 Black Mountain College Bulletin advertising a course entitled “History and / or Culture”:

A course by Mr. Olson into the reasons, causes, and consequences of the present. The attempt of the course is to cut through and across any of the known previous disciplines for measuring event. That is, the premise is that history as such, politics, government, sociology, psychology, anthropology, archaeology, culture morphology, mythology, and philosophy, as well as the exact sciences, are not any longer sufficient when applied (or learned), in separation from each other.⁵²

Since at least 1951-1952, Olson had been scheming ways to replace normal term-time curriculum with a program of “institutes” modeled on the college’s summer sessions. The animating

⁴⁹ For a recent history of organizing systems, intellectual specialization and disciplinary identity, see Chad Wellmon, *Organizing Enlightenment: Information Overload and the Invention of the Modern Research University* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015). For a history of literature as a discipline, the standard authoritative account remains Gerald Graff, *Professing Literature: An Institutional History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

⁵⁰ Olson, “The Gate and the Center”, 168.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 173.

⁵² Charles Olson, “Black Mountain College Courses of Instruction”, *Olson 2* (Fall 1974): 42. Olson’s copy of Alfred North Whitehead’s *The Aims of Education and Other Essays* contains a preface by Felix Frankfurter in which he (Frankfurter) describes Whitehead’s similar promotion of “interdependence among the various disciplines”, his advocacy of “the need for breaking down sterilizing departmentalization” and his mistrust of “closed systems because they imprison creative possibilities of insight and experience”. In *The Aims of Education and Other Essays* (New York: Mentor, 1949), n. p.

pedagogical and epistemological idea here being that “the real existence of knowledge lies between things & is not confined to labeled areas”.⁵³ Even the term “projective”, usually associated with Olson’s most famous statement on poetics, applies simultaneously to geometry, psychology and cinema.⁵⁴ The range of his concern expresses a certain chutzpah: on the one hand, an intellectual daring and curiosity, and on the other “a gigantic need to be an ‘authority’ on everything, even that which he knew little about”.⁵⁵

“POEMS & LEARNING”

As Alan Golding has observed, through tone, diction and forms of rhetorical address, a number of Olson’s poems written in the late 1940s and the early 1950s foreground “teacher-student relations”; Olson frequently opened his language to academic tropes, thereby explicitly making “pedagogy a constitutive feature of its poetics”.⁵⁶ One of Olson’s most explicit pedagogical poems

⁵³ Olson to Marguerite Wildenhain, undated [1952], quoted in Duberman, *Black Mountain*, 360. Olson eventually settled on what he called “the 4 disciplines of the present: they are the geo-, bio-, archeo-, and mytho-”. Olson, “A Draft of Plan for the College”, 53. The last of these disciplines is the demesne of the poet, and of the highest order, a fact implicitly attested to by the graphic layout of his widely reproduced 1954 diagram for the proposed reorganization of Black Mountain College. See *Leap Before You Look: Black Mountain College, 1933-1957*, ed. Helen Molesworth (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), 50.

⁵⁴ Clark, *Allegory of a Poet’s Life*, 161. That said, I am of the opinion that in the 1950s Olson conceived of “projective” as having an original and not a derivative meaning. As Fielding Dawson recalled, “one day Charley was standing there with a book in his hand. As I passed him, he yelled to me: ‘THOSE SONS OF BITCHES—THEY STOLE MY WORD!’ Projection. Boy, that turned me around”. *The Black Mountain Book* (New York: Croton Press, 1970), 82.

⁵⁵ Michael Rumaker, *Black Mountain Days* (New York City: Spuyten Duyvil, 2012), 144. On this latter point, Michael Rumaker goes on, many pages later: “Charles was, first and foremost, The Patriarch, Black Mountain his patriarchy with all the attendant, tacit and implied, hierarchical orderings and groupings, starting uppermost with the imperative categories of artistic and visionary endeavor, followed by crafts work, then the sciences, with particularly biology, chemistry, and physics taking a back seat according to how they were taught and by whom”. Rumaker, *Black Mountain Days*, 242.

⁵⁶ Alan Golding, “From Pound to Olson: The Experimental Poet as Pedagogue”, *Ezra Pound and Education*, ed. Steven G. Yao and Michael Coyle (Orono, ME: National Poetry Foundation, 2012), 198–9. Golding really leads the way when it comes to questions of poetics and pedagogy in postwar American verse. See, for example: “Isn’t the Avant Garde Always Pedagogical?: Experimental Poetics and / as Pedagogy”, *The Iowa Review* 32, no. 1 (Spring 2002): 64–70; “American Poet-Teachers and the Academy”, *A Concise Companion to Twentieth-Century American Poetry*, ed. Stephen Fredman (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005), 55–74; “The wedge of the WHOLE FRONT’: Document, Pedagogy and Postmodernity in Charles Olson’s Cultural Poetics”, *Exorcizing Modernism*, ed. Mikołaj Wiśniewski (Warsaw: SWPS, 2014), 38–50; and “The Black Mountain School”; *The Cambridge Companion to American Poets*, ed. Mark Richardson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 340-354. See also Jim Cocola, “Olson as Educator”, *The Worcester Review* 31, nos. 1 & 2 (2010): 58–69.

is “The Praises”, composed in the latter half of 1949. Robert von Hallberg reads it as part of Olson’s burgeoning attempt to “centralize cultural expression from an institutionally peripheral position”,⁵⁷ and in this sense Olson’s “push”, as Sherman Paul once called it, seems to continue, albeit on his own terms, an undertaking established in and for American letters by Ezra Pound.⁵⁸ And as Golding goes on to point out, the poem comes across as an exposition in “coterie knowledge”, that is, knowledge and explanation tailored to an audience of specialized readers. Further, it makes a central character of the “master”-teacher Pythagoras, and presents Pythagorean ideas using language verging on the essayistic, complete with footnote-like asides claiming scholarly-credibility. Summarizing transitions—such as “so we have it”—overt connectives—such as “We now turn to Ammonius”—and explicit admonitions to an imagined audience—“Here we must stop And ponder”—all contribute to an overwhelming sense of lecture-in-progress, a discursive rather than lyric argument unfolding before us. The content, too, of which the poem’s form can, in Olson’s view, never be more than an extension of, is unmistakably academic in its inclusion of geometrical, historical and philosophical material. This brief passage, for instance, is lifted quite literally from Matila Ghyka’s *The Geometry of Art and Life* (1946):

its capital role in the distribution of
leaves seeds branches on a stem (ex.,
the ripe sun-flower)

the ratios 5/8, 8/13

in the seed-cones of fir-trees

the ratio 21/34

⁵⁷ Hallberg, *Scholar’s Art*, 15.

⁵⁸ Cf. J. H. Prynne’s rather critical letter to Ed Dorn: “[T]he commitment to opposition finally makes sense at such a level only with the gloss relating to power. Of course in the Jeffersonian ideal the informed and cultivated individual, well read in history and with an active mind, claimed influence and the influence was to be allowed a due power: to sway the consideration of thoughtful men. But because Whitman and then even more Pound made such a deep misapplication of this idea the whole U.S. aftermath has taken a parody version in lieu”. Quoted in Edward Dorn, *Charles Olson Memorial Lectures: Edward Dorn*, ed. Lindsay M. Freer (New York: Lost and Found, CUNY Poetics Document Initiative, 2012), 28.

in normal daisies

Pendactylism is general in the animal kingdom.

But crystals...⁵⁹

Though Ghyka's book is, it must be said, an attempt at popular science, and thus represents a cross-over genre, at stake here is rather more an attempt to instruct than to delight. This poem—by no means unique amongst Olson's verse during the late 1940s and 1950s—takes the nature, acquisition and dissemination knowledge as its larger subject. Combined with the fact that "The Praises" is essentially expository (that is, in a rhetorical mode designed to explain, inform or describe), we have here a text openly committed to education in style and substance.

But it is not at this point a particularly nuanced pedagogy, I hasten to add. Often its lessons are delivered in the form of simple imperatives, and in large part "education" is rather narrowly conceived as the transfer of knowledge and demonstrative of a zeal for answers and / or explanation, as opposed to a more capacious sense of cultivating the understanding or fostering emotional and intellectual growth. More or less towards the middle of the poem, what Olson tellingly calls "the present inquiry", readers are urged to "avert, avert, avoid / pollution" and then a few lines later, we are told the "discloser" "will answer" "if you will look, look!".⁶⁰ Throughout, Olson offers diagnoses of cultural loss and clues⁶¹ as to its restitution (a stance absolutely familiar to anyone who has read through the opening letters of *The Maximus Poems*):

What has been lost
is the secret of secrecy, is
the value, viz., that the work get done, and quickly,
without the loss of due and profound respect for

⁵⁹ Charles Olson, "The Praises", *The Collected Poems of Charles Olson*, ed. George F. Butterick (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 97.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 100.

⁶¹ Cf. the lines towards the end of the poem: "Which is about what we had to say, / the clues, anyhow // What belongs to art and to reason is / the knowledge of / consequences". *Ibid.*, 101.

the materials

which is not so easy as it sounds, nor
can it permit the dispersion which follows from
too many having too little
knowledge⁶²

This passage reads exactly like any number of letters Olson wrote to people he considered informal “students”, such as Cid Corman, in which the poet often actively explained his ideas about poetry/knowledge. Indeed, towards the end of the poem’s opening section, Olson offers an account of educative poiesis (spoken as though ventriloquizing a master):

Sd he:

to dream takes no effort
to think is easy
to act is more difficult
but for a man to act after he has taken thought, this!
is the most difficult thing of all.⁶³

Not insignificantly, Olson also quotes these lines in “Projective Verse”, in that context as being exemplary of one of his essay’s most famous claims, that readers should “observe him”, i.e., the poet, “when he takes advantage of the machine’s multiple margins [...] Each of these lines is a progressing of both the meaning and the breathing forward”. Olson writes:

⁶² Ibid., 100.

⁶³ Ibid., 98. Note that Olson is allowing his own authority as poet to mingle with that of the ostensible speaker, the teacher Pythagoras.

The irony is, from the machine has come one gain not yet sufficiently observed or used, but which leads directly on toward projective verse and its consequences.⁶⁴

It is the advantage of the typewriter that, due to its rigidity and its space precisions, it can, for a poet, indicate exactly the breath, the pauses, the suspensions even of syllables, the juxtapositions even of parts of phrases, which he intends. For the first time the poet has the stave and the bar a musician has had. For the first time he can, without the convention of rime and meter, record the listening he has done to his own speech and by that one act indicate how he would want any reader, silently or otherwise, to voice his work.⁶⁵

Beyond the rather self-explanatory claim that the visual layout of the words on the page functions as a score for oral performance,⁶⁶ there are some hitherto unnoticed pedagogical dimensions to this well-known passage. First, and most generally, to act projectively, outside or beyond the conventions of rime and meter, is really to act against abstract imposition of any historical precedent or custom. Olson opposed forms of active particularity to more inertial kinds of thinking. The latter is manifest, for him, most acutely through Socrates' "readiness to generalize" via what Olson calls "the universe of discourse". It was, in sum, moving swiftly along, Aristotle's "two great means", namely "logic" and "classification" that "fastened themselves onto habits of thought" and "absolutely interfered" with man's capacity to actively perceive his organism and his environment. Such interferences, Olson contends in "Human Universe", "hugely intermit our participation in our experience, and so prevent discovery".⁶⁷ Elsewhere Olson asserts:

⁶⁴ The term "consequences" has a special meaning for Olson, one he associates explicitly with learning. In an unpublished 1952 prose piece called "Propositions", he makes a "base distinction between knowledge & learning (learning is consequence)". "Propositions", Box 37, CORC.

⁶⁵ Olson, "Projective Verse", 245 (my emphasis).

⁶⁶ Eleanor Berry has cogently argued that a poem composed in the projective mode is itself as much a "visual performance" as a guide to an oral one. See "The Emergence of Olson's Prosody of the Page Space", *Journal of English Linguistics* 30, no. 1 (March 2002): 51–72.

⁶⁷ Olson, "Human Universe", *Collected Prose*, 156.

KNOWLEDGE either goes for the CENTER or it's inevitably a State Whore—which American and Western education generally is, has been, since its beginning. (I am flatly taking Socrates as the progenitor, his methodology still the RULE: “I’ll stick my logic up, and classify, boy, classify you right out of existence”).⁶⁸

Second, Olson is saying—a point most commentators citing this passage latch on to—that the mechanical precisions of the typewriter allow contemporary poets to have unprecedented, because newly exact, control over the spacing of the words on the page. The typewriter’s capacity to be a “personal and instantaneous recorder of the poet’s work”⁶⁹ certainly is amongst its virtues (a fact to him “ironic” because counterintuitive to the embodied and therefore non-mechanical verse he otherwise recommends).⁷⁰ But its real effect is the direction of a reader’s physical and intellectual activities. Poetically and pedagogically, Olson was keen to extend an invitation to individual discovery, even to insist upon it. But at the same time, in the classroom as in the poem, there was little question as where the authority was really to be found, which in itself embodies a pedagogical impulse seemingly at odds with the purported openness of the theory and practice of “projective” verse. Part of that apparent contradiction can be resolved by thinking about for whom that openness was prescribed: writers, not readers. With that in mind, we should be clear that Olson’s notion of “projective” verse, which, in that essay, he also calls “open” verse, is not at all open in the sense that, say, someone like Lyn Hejinian described in *The Language of Inquiry*. For Hejinian, a “closed” text is one wherein “all the elements of the work are directed towards a single reading of it”, whereas “the ‘open text’, by definition, is open to the world and particularly the reader. It invites participation, rejects authority of the writer over the reader and thus, by analogy,

⁶⁸ Olson, “The Gate and the Center”, *Collected Prose*, 168.

⁶⁹ Olson, “Projective Verse”, 246.

⁷⁰ The archival records show that Olson generally wrote his poetry first in longhand, then transposed it onto typescripts. He was exacting and very precious about such presentations. That said, some of his more “graphic” work, for example the Maximus poem “I have been an ability—a machine”, with the “phallic” concretion towards the end, is a post-facto, and indeed posthumous editorial construction that I find, personally, to be a rather implausible extrapolation from the extant manuscript. For further discussion of this, see George F. Butterick, *Editing The Maximus Poems* (Storrs: University of Connecticut Library, 1983) and my “Poetic Instruction”, *Contemporary Olson*, ed. David Herd (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015), 89–102.

the authority implicit in other (social, economic, cultural) hierarchies”.⁷¹ To Olson’s way of thinking, on the contrary, “no poet wants any hearer to write a poem”.⁷² That is to say, no poet wants any reader to actively participate in the construction or determination of meanings (of their own). Whilst teaching *The Maximus Poems*, Robert Duncan discovered something similar: Duncan understood this work to be “the gospel of Charles Olson” and “a recipe that has to be followed”: “I got this gospel and my spirit could be a child in Gloucester”.⁷³

TEACHING WRITING

To put Olson’s disinclination into a specifically pedagogical setting, we might return briefly to Dewey’s *Experience and Education*. In this text, Dewey notes that “it is possible of course to abuse the office [of teacher, or, in Olson’s case, of poet-teacher] and to force the activity of the young into channels which express the teacher’s purpose rather than that of the pupils”.⁷⁴ Clearly this is an abuse neither Dewey nor Olson advocated. But whereas Dewey imagined the democratic “purpose” of education as “cooperative enterprise, not a dictation”,⁷⁵ Olson sought to cultivate something more akin to dictatorial anarchy. As per the first term of this phrase, Olson recognized the fact: “I was too much mouth”,⁷⁶ as per the second: “there’s three Black Mountains: the Rice Black Mountain, the Albers Black Mountain, and then this ragged-arse place that I and others were a part of”.⁷⁷ At Black Mountain (and after), Olson was not primarily interested in fostering community or even democracy, but, of course, polis. As a kind of pre-eminent anti-administrator, Olson was attracted to Black Mountain College because it had “no accreditation, no board of trustees, no endowments, no ranks”.⁷⁸ Likewise, in Olson’s polis:

⁷¹ Lyn Hejinian, *The Language of Inquiry* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 43.

⁷² Olson, *Letters for Origin, 1950-1956*, ed. Albert Glover (London: Cape Goliard, 1970), 103.

⁷³ Robert Duncan to Charles Olson, 15 March 1961, in *An Open Map: The Correspondence of Robert Duncan and Charles Olson*, ed. Robert J. Bertholf and Dale M. Smith (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2017), 172 (my emphasis).

⁷⁴ Dewey, *Experience and Education*, 13: 46.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 72.

⁷⁶ Charles Olson, “On Black Mountain (I)”, *Muthologos*, ed. Ralph Maud (Vancouver: Talon Books, 2010), 281.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 271.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 273.

There are no hierarchies, no infinite, no such many as mass, there are only
eyes in all heads
to be looked out of⁷⁹

Having said that, for Dewey, pedagogically speaking, “the teacher’s suggestion is not a mold for a cast iron result but is a starting point to be developed into a plan though contributions from all engaged in the learning process”.⁸⁰ For Olson, prosodically speaking, a mold—albeit of an entirely new and idiosyncratic kind—is exactly what a poet’s “suggestion” aims to achieve. The poem should be, in Olson’s mind, the poet’s record of listening to his own speech and a score equally valid for and indiscriminately applicable to “any reader”. A poem should, by virtue of its being, indicate breath, pause, suspension of syllables and juxtaposition of phrases. All this is fairly well-established territory. The point I want to emphasize here is that a poem, like a score, tacitly directs a reader’s performance (whereby “performance” I think I mean both interpretation and act of self-representation, whether silent or spoken).

The term that Olson would have used is not performance but reenactment. The poet enacts his work; and the reader follows suit. In “Projective Verse”, Olson speaks of “kinetics”: “a poem is energy transferred from where the poet got it (he will have several such causations), by way of the poem itself to, all the way over to, the reader”.⁸¹ A year after, in “Human Universe”, Olson continued: “there is only thing you can do about kinetic, re-enact it. Which is why the man said, he who possesses rhythm possesses the universe. And why art is the only twin life has—its only valid metaphysic. Art does not seek to describe but to enact”.⁸² Olson prefaced a reading at Goddard College in 1962 by remarking: “that’s that problem with reading, it gets to be kind of a bore, because it’s become a performing art, and you feel as though you have an audience and you’re supposed to do a concert or something. And, uh, I don’t think I believe in verse in this respect at all. In fact, I know I don’t”.⁸³ One performs a poem, say, for the audience’s appreciation; one enacts

⁷⁹ Olson, *The Maximus Poems*, 33.

⁸⁰ Dewey, *Experience and Education*, 13: 47.

⁸¹ Olson, “Projective Verse”, 240.

⁸² Olson, “Human Universe”, 162.

⁸³ Charles Olson, “Charles Olson at Goddard College”, 12 April 1962, mp3 file, 1:08, Slought Foundation, https://slought.org/resources/charles_olson_at_goddard_college.

a poem for their edification. And, invariably, Olson did not perform (in either sense). Talks planned as lectures evolved into poetry readings, while, conversely, events scheduled as poetry readings became lectures (of sorts). Olson's two on-stage appearances at the 1965 Berkley Poetry Conference exemplify both cases. His 20 July lecture, "Causal Mythology", included substantial material from *The Maximus Poems*, often re-read for clarity. Conversely, his four-hour reading on 23 July, though it does contain poems, is substantially a prose monologue (although similarly instructional rather than delightful in intent—even if accounts of the evening differ).⁸⁴ This is not to say that Olson was making a category error between these two modes of delivery, but rather refusing to acknowledge a difference as such:

No, I wanna talk. I mean, you want to listen to a poet? You know, a poet, when he's alive, whether he talks or reads you his poems is the same thing. Dig that!

[APPLAUSE] And when he is made of three parts—his life, his mouth and his poem, then, by God, the earth belongs to us! And what I think has happened is that that's—wow, gee, one doesn't like to claim things.⁸⁵

Filmmaker Robin Eichele, who was in attendance at Olson's 23 July Berkeley reading, described it as "Olson, in public, putting his edge to the world and heaving, cutting deep and wide at the dictate of his concerns".⁸⁶ Olson's "lectures" were, in many respect, purposeful travesties of academic display. Far from coherent ceremonies offering the latest, logically presented stage of a larger idea

⁸⁴ Robert Creeley called it a "sad evening" for "those of us who stayed" and "felt a lot of bleak dismay. It was NOT a pleasure". "Letter to the Editor", *Minutes of the Charles Olson Society* 4 (March 1994): 2. Tom Clark called it a "drunken performance" that offended "older friends" (Robert Duncan walked out in protest). *Allegory of a Poet's Life*, 324. Paul Breslin called the event a "non-reading". "Black Mountain: A Critique of the Curriculum", *Poetry* 136, no. 4 (July 1980): 226–7. Ralph Maud offers a rather different, entirely more upbeat account in his corrective biography, *Charles Olson at the Harbor* (Vancouver: Talon Books, 2008).

⁸⁵ Olson, "Reading at Berkeley", *Muthologos*, 150. Olson, of course, does claim things, lots of things, about his verse and in ways that have had serious and important impacts upon its critical reception. More about which promptly.

⁸⁶ Quoted in Alcalay, *A Little History*, 139 (my emphasis). Cf. Olson's remarks in *The Principle of Measure in Composition by Field: Projective Verse II*, ed. Joshua Hoeyneck (Tucson, AZ: Chax Press, 2010), 17: "A poem is 'heard' before it is written, and until it ends. So its prosody is a dictum: there is no form until the poem creates its own" (my emphasis).

or argument, his teaching style was by all accounts closer to effusive monological outpouring. Reports of Olson holding all-night seminars at Black Mountain are not exaggerated. Francine du Plessix Gray recalled “his classes averaged four hours but could last six or eight, and sitting through them was like seeing an archaeologist throw a tantrum in a richly endowed museum”.⁸⁷ Despite the “redneck Yahoo posturing in this Harvard-educated scholar”, Olson’s marathon workshops were genuine attempts to make education both “iconoclastic and antilinear”.⁸⁸ Learning, for Olson, was less a progressive undertaking (in the literal sense, involving incremental development) than a spatial one, instantaneous and expansive. Hence Olson’s aversion to traditional curricula characterized by sequential development.

As a consequence, neither Olson’s poems nor his lectures have anything like beginnings, middles and ends. What Alcalay calls “Olson’s refusal to read his poems properly”⁸⁹—“CREELEY: Charles, read the poetry; OLSON: Huh?; CREELEY: Read a poem; OLSON: What d’you say?”⁹⁰— collapses the established boundaries between biographical self and poetic act, or between the poem and the social, political and intellectual contexts in which it was enacted. This itself reprises the central tenet of “Projective Verse”, namely that a poem’s form results from a particular “psychological and physical reality of the moment”.⁹¹ Or, as Dale M. Smith put it in his introduction to Robert Duncan’s lectures on Olson, Olson wanted to push “poetry beyond the domain of literature [and to] confront a larger cultural and historical frame of action”.⁹² A 1956 prose piece entitled “As aimed as his poem is” takes this claim further. There, Olson intimates that projective poetics, as he understands it, implicates more than aesthetics:

take it that a poem is more than just what he makes, is knowledge because language is, the only means men have to know [...] A poem is the total bearing of a man now because it issues from his mouth, coming all the way from the sacral to said mouth,

⁸⁷ Gray, “The Breaking (Making) of a Writer”, 303.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Alcalay, *A Little History*, 140.

⁹⁰ Olson, “Reading at Berkeley”, 156.

⁹¹ Clark, *Allegory of a Poet’s Life*, 183.

⁹² Dale M. Smith, introduction to *Imagining Persons: Robert Duncan’s Lectures on Charles Olson*, ed. Robert J. Bertholf and Dale M. Smith (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2017), 2.

and, therefore, is a hell of a lot more—and takes a lot more—than mere mastery of self-expression, a traffic not in knowledge but in the avoidance of same.⁹³

As Robert von Hallberg pointed out some years ago, Olson’s “expository poems” resist close reading and critical examination for the relatively simple reason that he rarely goes in for irony or imagery or anything else “modern critics have argued is essentially poetic”.⁹⁴ Put otherwise, “judged by conventional standards”, as Don Byrd contends, Olson does not have a good ear”.⁹⁵ Olson himself conceived of his work not only as “post-modern”, but as also “post-literary”: “Your purpose in writing”, Charles Boer summarizes, addressing Olson in the second person, “was not the making of ‘literature’. From the vantage point of the post-literary, the rules and directions of anything ‘literary’ were obsolete. Such a position is beyond conventional criticism, which of course remains ‘literary’ [...] You saw poetry, the primary mode of expression in all pre-literary societies, as your own best post-literary means of knowing and articulating order”.⁹⁶

There are separate but related consequences of this, for both poetry and pedagogy. Poetically, emphasizing a new base in personal physiology implicitly refuses all connection to an historically determined status quo, the “practice of verse as it has been”;⁹⁷ this is the revolutionary intent of Olson’s literary work. But in refusing all existing tastes, beliefs and critical assumptions, Olson supplants what might be ours, whether a common curriculum or a shared heritage, with what is more singularly his own, as proprietor of absolute idiosyncrasy. This is transparently an attack on literary reception as such. As Olson put it in a bad-tempered note to Cid Corman:

⁹³ Charles Olson, “As Aimed As His Poem Is”, Folder 1492, Box 29, CORC. The Charles Olson Research Centre lists this document as “prose”, which it is. But the generic subcategory into which it falls is probably best described as “lecture notes”.

⁹⁴ Hallberg, *The Scholar’s Art*, 2.

⁹⁵ Don Byrd, ‘The Possibility of Measure in Maximus’, *boundary 2* 2, no. 1/2 (Autumn 1973-Winter 1974): 40.

⁹⁶ Charles Boer, *Charles Olson in Connecticut* (Chicago: Swallow Press, 1975), 63–4. Boer’s book is largely a biographical and critical reflection on Olson’s last and briefest teaching post, as visiting professor at the University of Connecticut in 1968.

⁹⁷ Olson, “Projective Verse”, 248.

Forget criticism. It's a phoney [...] Good god, merely read what's sd. And don't so fucking much worry abt what you are going to say abt what you have read. it ain't written to be criticized. It is written to be read, that's all. (Doesn't that occur to you? [...] writing critiques, for "Poetry"! Shit. Just shit.⁹⁸

A writer so ill-disposed to even the slightest consideration of readers will invariably come up with forms that persistently and often infuriatingly defy their expectations even, as suggested above, the resultant prosody imposes new forms of control over them. But such defiances, like the formal innovations that encode them, are in fact secondary, collateral effects. The pedagogical dimension, not the literary, is primary. In an 1952 document simply entitled "Propositions", Olson describes "how the attention is disposed... what stance you manage in your dealings with... your reality. For surely there is no other but your own."⁹⁹ Olson goes on to explain that, for him, a poem must be "like principles of learning now — of projective learning". His aim, in proposing such a category, is to "clear learning of history & of education". "Knowledge", in this scheme of things, is inert, while "learning", as a non-finite verb, is both continuous and non-teleological. This "New Learning" is fundamentally a "methodology", a term Olson favored in the 1950s and used interchangeably with, and often instead of, "poetics". As Olson wrote to Corman around the time:

Methodology keeps forcing itself into my mouth as the word to cover the necessities that the execution of form involves. And I shall again, right now, see what light I can throw on it, etymologically:

Take it flatly:

The science of method or arrangement; hence:

⁹⁸ Olson to Cid Corman, 23 November 1953, Letters for Origin, 130–1. Cf. Olson's statement in "The Present Is Prologue": "The instant, therefore. Is its own interpretation, as a dream is, and any action—a poem, for example. Down with causation". Olson, *Collected Prose*, 205.

⁹⁹ Olson, "Propositions", n. p. (original ellipses). Olson composed "Propositions" while on leave from Black Mountain College having received a Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research grant to study Mayan glyphs.

- (a) A branch of logic dealing with principles of procedure
- (b) Educ. The science which describes and evaluates
arrangements of materials of instruction.¹⁰⁰

As early as an unpublished 1949 prose fragment called 'Credo', Olson outlines 'THE VIA', that is to say, the methodology of his burgeoning poetics: "to get it all down as it is, with avoidance of (avert avert) all interpretation, explanation, evaluation".¹⁰¹ Such energetic immediacy attempts to move from the part to the whole, with utmost speed. Apropos of this, he began his 1956 lecture series, *The Special View of History*: "the idea is in the shortest compass, to get down a schema to cover everything, as it presents itself inside and out at this juncture of man and the world".¹⁰² The point being that knowledge and its use are functions of "get[ting] it all down as it is", and that learning is a projective, not a receptive act.¹⁰³ When Olson taught "literature", he was not training readers. This much is clear. But neither was Olson very interested in teaching people how to write (for, again, "no poet wants any hearer to write a poem"). His writing classes were not "creative" in the sense that we might now understand that epithet. Instead, Olson understood writing pedagogically, a means through which to teach people how to learn. The description of his course "Prose and Verse at Black Mountain" included in the Tentative Program for 1949-1950 makes this intention clear: "The end is not to produce writers but men and women of some clarity and beauty (which is force). It is not impossible that a writer will also be produced".¹⁰⁴

¹⁰⁰ Olson to Cid Corman, 14 June 1952, *Letters for Origin*, 105.

¹⁰¹ Charles Olson, "Credo", Folder 1519, Box 29, CORC. Such acts led to moral and intellectual estrangements that Olson sought to identify and even resolve: "Man is not ideal, and life is not an isolation, and the falsest estrangement of all, which set in with logic and classification in the 5th century B.C., is contemplation". Olson, *The Special View of History*, 25.

¹⁰² Olson, *The Special View of History*, 15. Cf. Guy Davenport's gloss of a note Duberman made from the intellectual diary of Mark Hedden, written while attending Olson's class: "Olson wanted his students to achieve vertically the entire horizon of human knowledge". *Geography of the Imagination* (San Francisco, CA: North Point Press, 1981), 82.

¹⁰³ The fact accounts for two countervailing tendencies in Olson's work: on the one hand, a compulsion to establish plans, outlines and arguments; and on the other, a penchant for deranging systems. In both poems and lectures, Olson incessantly sets up categories, sections, facets of argument and hierarchies of value only to then proceed, in a favorite term of his, "willy-nilly".

¹⁰⁴ Charles Olson, "Prose and Verse at Black Mountain", Tentative Program for 1949-1950, Black Mountain College Records, Western Regional Archive, State Archives of North Carolina.