

Article

Charles Olson's 'Projective Verse' and the Inscription of the Breath

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Abstract: Charles Olson's hugely influential essay-manifesto 'Projective Verse' is usually understood as proposing a close - and a necessary—link between poetry and body. Some account of Olson's as a 'poetics of embodiment' or a 'breath-poetics' is almost ubiquitous in the extant criticism, yet what this might actually mean or imply for poetry and poetry-reading remains unclear. 'Projective Verse' is deeply ambivalent about print, seeing in it the 'closed verse' Olson looked to replace, while simultaneously idealising the typed-and-printed page as the only medium for the supposed immediacy of the poet's breath. This essay contends that Olson's lionisation of the typewriter is accompanied by a suppressed inscriptional register—a concern with carving and engraving—and asks what the substrate hosting this inscription might be. The aims of the piece are twofold: to demonstrate that 'Projective Verse' contains a logic of inscription which has gone severely underappreciated; and to argue that this logic runs up against the much better-documented logic of poetic embodiment via the breath in such a way as to deeply trouble criticism's rather murky understanding of what that latter logic implies, both in Olson's specific case and for poetry more generally.

Keywords: Charles Olson; breath; projective; poetics; inscription; ideogram; anti-art

1. Introduction

Since its publication in the third number of *Poetry New York* in 1950, Charles Olson's essay-manifesto 'Projective Verse' has been central to the critical interpretation and poetic speculation built up around his work. It has received many reprintings: the first, partial reprint in 1951's *The Autobiography of William Carlos Williams*; then as a stand-alone pamphlet from Totem Press in 1959; in Donald Allen's influential 1960 anthology *The New American Poetry 1945–1960* (Allen 1960), which volume it bookends along with Olson's poem 'The Kingfishers'; in the first collection of Olson's prose, *Human Universe and Other Essays*, from 1965; in 1966's *Selected Writings*, edited by Robert Creeley; and in a wide variety of editions which emerged after the poet's death in early 1970. This profusion, and the enthusiasm with which it was first met, have ensured that 'Projective Verse' is usually seen as a defining—often in fact *the* defining—artefact of Olson's career. Indeed it seems likely that, for many poetry-readers, it is the only piece by Olson with which any sustained contact has been made. The essay is frequently cited as one of the most influential statements of poetics of the mid-to-late twentieth century, and it has certainly gained significant currency, both in the English-speaking world and beyond. Yet exactly why 'Projective Verse' has cast and continues to cast such a long shadow over the poetry of the last decades is less easy to say. It is a curiously ambivalent, evasive, and contradictory text, moving by turns through extremes of rhetorical flourish and obscure, even tentative, analytical and referential prevarication. While every reader seems to gather some sense of what 'Projective Verse' is 'about,' spelling out that sense in more coherent prose than Olson's own has proven challenging.

In and of itself the significance of 'Projective Verse' has never been in doubt: it represented 'the first positive restatement of modernist poetics since Zukofsky's Objectivist proclamation' (Géfin 1982, p. 86) and for all the charges lodged against its vagueness and unoriginality in certain respects (notably in Perloff 1973)—charges admitted to by Olson himself, in the text itself—it has continued to hold attractions for successive generations of readers and poets, since Olson's critique of "'closed" verse' or the 'verse which print bred' provided a number of precedents for later material and spatial practices in poetry [. . .] offering a flexible, plastic measure of page space [. . .] drawn upon directly by later poets, such as Susan Howe, while anticipating the development of visual poetry in the 1950s' (Byers 2018, p. 66).

This is not to say that the essay has met with either total comprehension or exhaustive assent. Elaine Feinstein, the poet and correspondent of Olson's (his 'Letter to Elaine Feinstein' is seen as one of his key theoretical statements, and as a sequel to 'Projective Verse'), writes that '[i]n my own poems, it's easier to make out what Olson liberated me from than exactly what I learned from him' (Feinstein 2015, p. 127). There remains significant uncertainty as to the exact nature of what Olson is proposing in 'Projective Verse' even among those who, like Feinstein, were closest to the scene of its production and whose own work was most intimately shaped by its influence.

Most readings of 'Projective Verse' share certain common features and concerns. These primarily coalesce around two allied issues: the openness of the 'field' in Olson's conception of writing, instantiated in the free use of the page, and the accelerated breakdown of received poetic form he prescribes; and the corporeality of the future verse Olson imagines will populate that 'field.' This is as close as it comes to a consensus view on 'Projective Verse,' a representative example of which can be found in Kaplan Harris' survey-essay on 'Black Mountain Poetry': '[Olson's] major accomplishment was to define verse according to the body rather than traditional poetic form' (Harris 2015, p. 159). Questions of majority aside, this is an essentially accurate assessment of Olson's general intent in 'Projective Verse,' one to which few readers will be likely to object. Nevertheless, it is unclear what this might mean or indicate in practice. It risks, for example, setting up an unsustainable gulf between received and 'bodily' poetic form of a type which seems untrue to the history of writing and theorising across a huge range of forms and genres. What type of poetry has *not* defined itself in some accordance to bodily capacities? What type of versification has *not* been underwritten with some corporeal claim or another?

While it may be said, then, that the broad *themes* of 'Projective Verse' are a matter of general concurrence, the significance and ramifications of those themes for Olson himself and for later poetries are significantly more controverted. In part this controversy can be understood as a product of the extremely broad, and consequently extremely complex and overlapping, issues the essay speaks to and the changes it looks to effect withal. If we are to agree with Daniel Katz that '[a]t stake [in 'Projective Verse'] is the place of the body and its relation to language, as well as the latter's negotiation of the page, and intersubjective space' (Katz 2015), then we can hardly expect bite-size answers to such sweeping and foundational questions. In this essay I propose a reading of 'Projective Verse,' which attempts to clarify some of these underlying questions. What I want to argue is that the first two issues Katz outlines—the relation of the body to language and the relation of language to the page—are interrelated in Olson's account via a suppressed logic of inscription, one which both gives detail to the materiality of Olson's conception—its embodiment—and yet disguises the substrate of this inscriptive process, leaving the exact object into which the inscribing may happen unclear. In the process I will consider how this aspect of Olson's poetics is traceable, to a currently underappreciated degree, back to aspects of English Romanticism. Katz's third issue, the calibration of 'intersubjective space,' will also be touched on by way of conclusion.

2. Laws and Possibilities

I begin on familiar territory, with Olson's mapping of poetic functions onto human corporeal being—his much-remarked 'poetics of embodiment'—the most famous articulation of which runs as so:

the HEAD, by way of the EAR, to the SYLLABLE
the HEART, by way of the BREATH, to the LINE (Olson 1997, p. 242)

It is the latter of these prescriptions, linking the breath to the line, which has gained the most attention in the general reception of Olson's work, and it is to this that I will pay the majority of my attention here, without thereby implying that Olson's discussion of the syllable is unrelated or incidental. Both the head-syllable and heart-line strictures function as circumnavigations of older conceptual frames for thinking about versification, primarily theories of verse which ground themselves in metrical feet and take these to be the actual building blocks of poetry in the English tradition rather than merely regulative ideals or descriptive tags.¹ Olson makes it clear that he has no time for this kind of thinking; for him, English verse is made not of feet and metre but of line and syllable; and lines and syllables emerge from the circuitry of the human body. It is breath which Olson most tightly identifies with this paradigm, and 'Projective Verse' is primarily concerned to return (American?) English versification to this root—despite frequently being read as proposing a new methodology, Olson's conception is fundamentally one of a return to an older and truer appraisal ('I return you now to London, to beginnings' (p. 245)). There have of course been a large number of historical models for versification which link verse-production to breath in some manner—rhetorics of 'inspiration' figure prominently here—but Olson aims to integrate these ancient articulations into a postmodern synthesis:

Verse now, 1950, if it is to go ahead, if it is to be of *essential* use, must, I take it, catch up and put into itself certain laws and possibilities of the breath, of the breathing of the man who writes as well as of his listenings.² (p. 239)

The exact nature of these 'laws and possibilities' has been the subject of much speculation and debate. Uncertainties proliferate along several axes: in what way does the moment of Olson's writing necessitate this intervention? how does breathing relate to listening? by what method is the breath 'put into' verse? what are breath's limitations? what is meant by '*essential* use'?

The most common reading of Olson's breath-poetics takes it as a straightforward prescription (or more properly de-prescription) regarding line-length: the line will run as long as the breath of the poet can sustain it, in a manner somewhat analogous to the phrasing of a song. This reading finds some corroboration in the immediacy and instantaneity which Olson repeatedly insists on throughout the essay: 'the line comes (I swear it) from the breath, from the breathing of the man who writes, at the moment he writes, and thus is, it is here that, the daily work, the WORK, gets in' (p. 242). The scene of writing is directly implicated in the production of poetry, 'at the moment'. This seems to open up the possibility of varieties of line-length dependent on the varieties of breathing—relaxed, ragged, meditative and so on. Paradoxically the 'law' of the breath seems to be variable and highly situational.

It is difficult, however, fully to square this interpretation of 'Projective Verse' with the poetry Olson went on to produce, and even with those poems written around the time of the essay's composition. As Michael Davidson has demonstrated, the strict equation of breath length to line length does not stand up to scrutiny when recordings of Olson reading his work are taken into account

¹ i.e., theories of verse that take 'iambic pentameter', for example, to be a real, constituent part of a given poem rather than merely one way (among other possibilities) of describing or analysing that poem.

² It should be noted at the outset that Olson exclusively formulates the personages of 'Projective Verse' as *he, him, man, men, boys* etc. The gendering of 'Projective Verse' has been discussed in a critical light by Rifkin (2000, pp. 21–26), and DuPlessis (2015).

(Davidson 1981). It is not of course reasonable to expect that Olson would have set his method in amber after writing one highly speculative essay—in the two decades of writing which followed the publication of ‘Projective Verse’, Olson’s poetics developed significantly. Yet, I maintain here that there are lines of continuity between this early piece and the later work as exemplified in *The Maximus Poems*, the ‘some sort [. . .] of epic’ which ‘Projective Verse’ imagines (Olson 1997, p. 239). If it is the case that ‘Projective Verse’ foreshadows and continues to inform Olson’s writing into the 1960s, then it follows that the ‘breath-poetics’, as one of its major components, must be taken to indicate a less literal programme than is contained in the equation of breath capacity with line length. This programme is also potentially a broader one, marking an attitude not only to a specific formal feature (the poetic line), but to poetic form as such. If the injunction on the breath cannot be read as a simple ‘tip’ or ‘instruction’ for poets, then its significance can only be uncovered via a proper appreciation of the breath’s actual locus. Throughout ‘Projective Verse’ Olson describes the making of poetry as a *labour*, a matter of ‘use’ and of ‘work’, and the breath is central to this: ‘it is here’, he writes, ‘that, the daily work, the WORK, gets in’ (p. 242). The essay does not unambiguously specify what the material substrate of the ‘work’ is, or what Olson is pointing to with his ‘here’; if it is not simply the work of transposing the breath into the line, then how are we to understand the embodiment of Olson’s poetics? What is this work done *in* or *on*? The most common reading of ‘Projective Verse’ tends to equivocate on this point, locating the line *both* in the body of the poet (her or his lung capacity and so on) *and* on the page, as text produced. This doubled materiality poses its own problems—if line length is governed by the particular physiology of the poet, then might a reader with different physical dimensions—a different lung capacity, say—be unable to read the resulting poem ‘correctly’?

3. By Ear, He Sd?

Though well known for his expansive use of the space of the poetic page and interest in the possibilities of typographical technologies, a practice underwritten by the presumed ‘openness of the field’ as outlined in ‘Projective Verse’ and the consequent license to overturn the gridlike quality of the page in traditional verse-forms, Olson’s attitude to print as expressed in the essay is in fact highly ambivalent. In championing an ‘open’ poetics, Olson opposes this to “‘closed” verse’, which he defines as ‘that verse which print bred’ (p. 239). Indeed, Olson suggests that it is the technology of writing as a whole which has damaged poetry: ‘What we have suffered from is manuscript, press, the removal of verse from its producer and its reproducer, the voice, a removal by one, by two removes from its place of origin *and* its destination’ (p. 245). Again the future is to be found *in nuce* in the ancient, here in fact the *prehistoric*, in that time before written records. In this passage Olson’s poetics seems definitively to award primacy to the voice, which is positioned as authentic and *immediate*, that is, untraded by the mediation of text. The voice is kinetic, active, remembering the boisterous energetics of earlier modernisms (as I shall go on to discuss). Text alienates poets from their productions in this understanding; the voice is both ‘producer’ and ‘reproducer’, and text can only ever be its sorry middle-man or holding-pen. This would seem to be strong evidence for reading Olson’s poetics as ‘embodied’ *precisely in the human body*, ideally separated from type and page altogether. Yet this only puts further pressure on the question of how the projective poem relates to *readers*, who do not possess the same embodiment the poet does. The first section of *The Maximus Poems*, entitled ‘I, Maximus of Gloucester, to You’, contains a much quoted line which has lent much credence to this view, even as the lines after it suggest exactly the problems I have argued such a position entails:

By ear, he sd.

But that which matters, that which insists, that which will last,

that! o my people, where shall you find it, how, where, where shall you listen

when all is become billboards, when, all, even silence, is spray-gunned? (Olson 1984, p. 6)³

'By ear' suggests the primacy of the spoken word, the 'live' performance, and the reactivity or 'making do,' which actual conversation consists in (as in 'to play it by ear', to act without certainty and/or predetermination). This sense is compounded by the conversational frame 'he sd'; the contraction here, somewhat ironically prefiguring contemporary text-speak, might be read as indicating exactly the hybrid instantaneity text-speak performs, where correct morphemic form is subordinated to communicative efficiency. The source of the idiom 'to play by ear' is a musical one—to perform a composition without sheet music. In this line text itself is infiltrated by the slippages and short-cuts which spoken language achieves, and which print can only attempt to *capture*, with all the languishment that word implies. Yet in the subsequent lines the immediacy of this conception is troubled by its accompanying and corollary impermanence: 'that which will last' has been lost in the welter of advertising and noise which Olson decried in the Gloucester of the mid-century. The problem of text is here a dual one, as the lack of writing intimated in the first line consigns speech to oblivion whilst the text that *is* produced is of an entirely trivial and trivialising kind, the mere ephemera of capitalism. The force of Olson's complaint here is that there remains no method for recording what 'matters' or 'insists', the true and significant life of the community. Text as it exists, entrained to the activities of commerce, is both anti-social and superficial ('spray-gunned' onto walls or signage) with no meaningful rootedness or permanence. The spoken word is a poor tool for righting this wrong—it is always in danger of being drowned out in an environment for which even silence is an opportunity to sell something. The waxing of the line lengths after 'By ear, he sd' emphasise the cacophony which confronts the voice—and seem *breathless* rather than natural, or conversational, or controlled, not the communication of the voice but its defacement.

This conflicted relation to print is played out in Olson's comment on the utility of the typewriter, which constitutes one of the best-known passages of 'Projective Verse.' Strikingly, Olson employs exactly the musical analogue he disparages in the 'By ear, he sd' gesture, arguing that the typewriter provides poetry with the precision and uniformity of classical notation:

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 juxtaposition even of parts of phrases, which he intends. For the first time the poet has the stave and 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. (Olson 1997, p. 245)

The question of how the reader is to read projective poems is here seemingly answered: they are to read it as the poet would, physiological capacities notwithstanding.⁴ The genius of the typewriter in this context is found in how it enables the poet to mark with exactitude how his or her ideal reading

³ The first draft of 'I, Maximus of Gloucester, to You' was significantly different from the version familiar to readers of Maximus today. A particularly significant variation concerns these quoted lines: in the final version they appear in part '3' of 'I, Maximus of Gloucester, to You', whereas in the original draft they began that poem, and The Maximus Poems as a whole. Had it remained at the inception of the book, the 'By ear, he sd' line might have held an even more totemic and authoritative position than it now does. Olson began the composition of 'I, Maximus of Gloucester, to You' in 1950, as 'Projective Verse' was about to be published, and it seems likely that the conflicted thinking evidenced in the essay had some influence on Olson's changing of the poem in the years leading up to its first publication in 1953. For a full account of the complex compositional history of this poem, see (Maud 2008, pp. 138–46).

⁴ Without wishing to be flippant, it seems to me relevant to the current discussion that Olson himself was a giant. There are many accounts of his great size—especially his height, standing at some six feet and eight-or-nine inches—and his enormous appetite. It is not unlikely that such a person would possess unusual aerobic characteristics. As further complication: Olson was an extremely heavy smoker, a point remarked on in Shaw (2018, p. 123) and Davidson (2008, pp. 119–20), who both discuss how Olson's emphysema nuances our sense of his poetics as in some way embodied and performance-oriented. Davidson particularly points out that understanding Olson's lungs as *disabled* reveals how the 'embodiment' many critics have ascribed to his poetics presumes a hypothetically *perfected* body in which that embodying occurs. Traditional interpretations of an Olsonian 'poetics of embodiment' have in this sense operated not as materialisms but rather as covert idealisms.

sounds via a precise mapping of how it *looks*. Formality is lodged not in ‘poetic form’ as traditionally understood but rather in the notation of that form. To put this another way: in traditional or ‘closed’ verse, form and notation are either identical or configured in such a way that notation completely determines form—a form is primarily a shape on a page, a visual function which the word ‘form’ itself privileges. For a projective poetics, conversely, the shape on the page is completely determined by the ‘openness’ of the voice, of the breath. ‘Form’ in the sense of a poem’s oral/aural manifestation completely determines notation. In its role as ‘stave and bar’, notation is highly formalised so as to act as the perfect communicatory medium between poet’s voice and reader. Olson’s innovation of typographic markers for certain voice effects—most famously the ‘/’ as ‘a pause so light it hardly separates the words, yet does not want a comma’ (p. 245)—marks both a newly rigorised attitude to notation and a newly flexible account of the poem’s formality. In this vision, poetry in-and-of itself is less subject to the predeterminations of ‘form’ in the traditional sense.

The purpose of this deformat stance, in Olson’s account, is to aid communication, not only of sonic but also of energetic states. Text is to function in a manner analogous to the tape recorder—a much newer technology than the typewriter, the history and traditional function of which is in many ways effaced here even as it is lionised. The tape-recorder plays a significant role in contemporary reception of Olson via the many extant recordings of his readings and lectures, providing thereby useful measures of how Olson conceived of his own performance-poetics and how this changed (carrying ‘the poem itself to, all the way over to, the [hearer]’, to amend a line from ‘Projective Verse’ (p. 240)); even where these recordings are of dubious quality, they register the instructive and indeed *constitutive* failures that a poetry which dreams of being unmediated must suffer, in effect turning a jumble of bloopers and offcuts into a valuable catalogue and demonstration of an aesthetic.⁵ It is this permanence, the capacity to form an *archive*, which differentiates tape recordings from radio broadcasts and marks them as especially symptomatic for Olsonian poetics. Radio-broadcasts, while seemingly more dynamic, are also more fleeting, recapitulating the problem of talk’s erasure Olson wrangles with in ‘I, Maximus of Gloucester, To You’. Olson retains writing itself as a vestigial technology, useful only due to its capacity for permanence, and then barely, on sufferance. The written word itself is to have a minimal expressive function. Readers may still reasonably ask how exactly this rigorised formalisation of poetic notation differs from ‘that verse which print bred.’ The state of perfect, non-entropic communication Olson looks to instantiate in ‘Projective Verse’ has in its imagined permanence and incorruptibility much that could be seen as continuous with the ‘closed’ verse which preceded it. The simple fact is that Olson’s uncertainty about print is, like much to be found in ‘Projective Verse’ and in his work as a whole, a tension never to be fully resolved. There are certain incoherencies in Olson’s thinking which have to be accepted as *incoherencies* if their highly productive character is to be properly appreciated.⁶ ‘Projective Verse’ is deeply ambivalent about print, casting it as an outdated vehicle belonging to the ‘closed verse’ Olson looked to replace, while simultaneously and paradoxically idealising the typed-and-printed page as the only medium that can fix and communicate the supposed *immediacy* of the poet’s breath. Even after the strictly voice-oriented programme of

⁵ Lytle Shaw provides an extensive account of the triumphs and tribulations of Olson’s adventures with the tape recorder in his book *Narrowcast* (Shaw 2018), noting that most recordings of his work ‘produce an auditory event that fails to perform many of the most basic functions associated with recorded poetry’ (p. 124). However, he also argues that ‘if consciously 1960s poets tended to use tape merely as a voice registration machine, the very imperfection of this machine might be understood now, paradoxically, to aid their larger projects of situating subjectivity or human agency within a larger field—be that a field of energy or media or simply social relations’ (p. 151); i.e., that ‘tape exists [. . .] as a fictive “objectivity” that Olson must contest’ (p. 150). It is this *must* which is significant in the current context: it is not the case that Olson’s poetics is idealised in or idealises the tape-recorder, but rather that it is in a necessarily and constitutively *agonistic* relationship with the technology. Like the typewriter, the tape recorder is another potential inscriptional medium which ‘Projective Verse’ renders indeterminate.

⁶ This quality of incoherence can in fact be understood as ‘in line’ with the promotion of sound over semantic ‘sense’ which ‘Projective Verse’ urges, an aspect of the essay which has been historically underappreciated; by extension it can be seen at the root of the demotion of sense-making within Olson’s poetics as a whole.

'Projective Verse' has faded into the background of Olson's own writing, this broader ambivalence about the status and use of text itself remains active and informative.

4. As Shaped As Wood Can Be

It is at this point that I want to consider the question of inscription more directly. The confusion which much existing criticism has evinced in response to 'Projective Verse' has as one of its major components a dilemma inbetween text and voice—between one interpretation of the essay as proposing a primarily aural/oral poetics framed as a return to the springs of the poetic tradition, and another proposing a new attitude to the space and order of the page mediated by modern technologies (the typewriter and, implicitly, the tape-recorder). If the medium in which a projective poetics is to operate is up for question—is it to be text-based, or voice-based, or a mixture of the two?—then some light may be cast by a consideration of the materials mentioned in 'Projective Verse' and how they are figured. Take, for example, this central passage:

If I hammer, if I recall in, and keep calling in, the breath, the breathing as distinguished from the hearing, it is for cause, it is to insist upon a part that breath plays in verse which has not (due, I think, to the smothering of the power of the line by too set a concept of the foot) has not been sufficiently observed or practiced, but which has to be if verse is to advance to its proper force and place in the day, now, and ahead. I take it that PROJECTIVE VERSE teaches, is, this lesson, that that verse will only do in which a poet manages to register both the acquisitions of his ear *and* the pressures of his breath. (p. 241)

The first thing to note in this passage is the initial verb: what is it that Olson is hammering here? This could be read as simply an idiom for insistence, a contraction of 'to hammer one's point home,' or something equivalent. Alternatively, recalling the typewriter which Olson praises in the essay, and on which he presumably composed the piece, one could conjure a picaresque image of the poet's creative fury in a racket of high-speed typing: the force of the fingers punching the keys, the force of the typebars striking the page. The inscription thus evoked is of a very different character from the superficial 'spray-gunned' kind Olson reacts against in 'I, Maximus of Gloucester, to You'; here it is highly energetic, marking the textual substrate by force as much as by ink—to hammer is to deform, to indent, to drive in. On closer inspection this passage, and the essay as a whole, are amply supplied with language which suggests actions of forcing, pushing, beating and carving. This can be seen in the 'pressures' of the breath, its 'calling in' to some unspecified material.

The claim I want to advance here is: that this concern with different kinds or modes of inscription is an important if somewhat submerged dynamic in 'Projective Verse'; that it has effects which ripple through Olson's later work; and that this inscriptional register can be understood as part of a tradition of inscriptional thinking which is evident in the works of earlier modernist writers, and aspects of which can be traced back to Romanticism.⁷ This tradition has at its root a concern with engraving and with the epitaph, a concern which harmonises to a remarkable degree with some of Olson's own preoccupations: permanence versus immediacy, the personal and/or the universal, the relationship of art to nature/reality.

Here it is worth briefly recalling the actions and tools which the inscriptional process of engraving or carving usually involves. Though there are numerous methods for inscribing wood, metal, stone and the like, the most common is the use of some version of a hammer and chisel—the process thus requires both a forceful striking action and a consequent digging, chipping or displacing action which leaves the material underhand marked in two ways—shaped by indenting and deformed by localised

⁷ For an account of inscriptive poetics which similarly traces the links between Romantic and late-modernist inscriptions (in this case finding these in Cy Twombly, Iain Hamilton Finlay and Christian Bök), see (Riley 2017). Riley argues that this history is necessarily somewhat vague: 'When we get to an end of seeking the nature of the lapidary style, a large blur is what we shall find' (p. 19).

separation or destruction. In this context Olson's '[i]f I hammer' takes on a more realised material charge—hammering into matter and chiselling *out* pieces of that matter.⁸ Olson's celebrated conception of the line itself potentially falls into this inscriptional orbit—where in one part of the essay the line is inscribed in the air which fills the poet's lungs, in the following it seems much more like the groove chiselled out under the hand of the master engraver: '*Any slackness takes off attention, that crucial thing, from the job in hand, from the push of the line under hand at the moment, under the reader's eye, in his moment*' (Olson 1997, p. 243). Here again the making of poems is figured as labour, 'the job in hand'—and not, notably, the job in the lung. This image of the poet as a carver or engraver is made even more explicit towards the end of the essay, as Olson asserts 'the necessity of a line or a work to be as wood is, to be as clean as wood is as it issues from the hand of nature, to be as shaped as wood can be when man has had his hand to it' (p. 247). The analogy here is rather more obvious, but is also more complicated in that poetry is described as ideally constituted both by artful crafting and unmarred nature—the simultaneous result of human effort and of sheer providence. What Olson proposes is in effect a synthesis of art and nature in which the matter of the poem is perfected. For now, at least, this more utopian ambition can be set aside; but it is worth noting here that the status of the poem as component *either of art or nature* is thrown into doubt. More generally the settled idea of the artistic act as 'creative' is also troubled, as the chiselling, carving gestures of engraving involve just as much destruction as they do creation: to make such an inscription it is necessary to shatter and scar the object inscribed. Though the inscriptional gesture liberates the line from the two-dimensionality of traditional verse forms, then, it does not do so with quite the virtuosic, sculptural aspirations found in Olson's predecessor Pound, preferring the dissipative and entropic blow to that of the skilled craftsman. Mark Byers has suggested that Olson's 'as clean as wood' is a direct reference and response to Pound's comment on the sculpture of Gaudier-Brzeska: 'hard and clean' (Byers 2018, p. 146). This is instructive in that Olson's plastic art is 'clean' of the gaudiness of traditional forms, 'clean' in its directness, but it is not 'hard.' Rather, it admits of, and in fact is constituted on, an indeterminacy of form which leaves it in a state of constant damage and defacement. Whether readers decide that the ideal substrate for Olson's inscription is the voice or the page—and the question remains, at a certain necessary level, undecidable—there can be little doubt that what Olson proposes in 'Projective Verse' implies a fragmenting effect in both, the reduction of each to a state of some incoherence.

This strange simultaneity of destruction and creation is exemplified in the following passage, in which Olson addresses the relationship between his new conception of the poetic line and those of traditional or ancient models:

I would argue here, too, the LAW OF THE LINE, which projective verse creates, must be hewn to, obeyed, and that the conventions which logic has forced on syntax must be broken open as quietly as must the too set feet of the old line. (p. 244)

To 'obey' the 'LAW OF THE LINE' is not simply to replace the methods of previously existing poetics, their versification and their syntactical structures alike; it is to leave them 'broken open' like a prison door.⁹ That this must be done 'quietly' only adds to the general sense of a necessary if furtive escape. Olson recommends the dissolution of what is calcified, 'set', in traditional verse; old forms becoming fragmentary or liquid (or gaseous?) on contact with the projective. This dissolutive aspect of projective poetics can be seen in its full quandary in the phrase 'must be hewn to'. At first glance this looks like a simple misprision of the Americanism 'hewed to', meaning to cohere or concur with. Errors and typos

⁸ Here there are resonances with Olson's brief 1952 essay on Cy Twombly, in which the poet finds in the painter an indication that 'two dimensions as surface for plastic attack is once more prime' (Olson 1997, p. 175). One thing reading Olson's as an *inscriptional* poetics allows us to see is that within it the line is no longer conceived as a vector on a plane, but rather as a three dimensional construct with depth and volume, that is to say, with a longform orientation: 'How make that plane, the two dimensions, be all—from a point to any dimension?' (p. 176).

⁹ Notice how the attack on traditional form is entrained to an attack on traditional syntactic modes of sense-making, with the assumption that to replace one is to necessitate replacing the other.

of this sort are very common in Olson's writing, seeming to owe at least some of that ubiquity to the lionisation of the typewriter and its immediacy which the poet provides in the present essay. But in this case it seems unlikely that 'hewn' for 'hewed' is a simple oversight, and it may in fact be the case that Olson caught the error in editing the manuscript of 'Projective Verse' but subsequently decided to keep it for its felicity, as he has been recorded doing in several other parts of his writing.¹⁰ 'Hewn to' is interesting for my purposes in this piece because it signifies destruction (as in the hewing—chopping down—of a tree) and purposive craft or formation (to hew a path, for example); when its close American cousin 'hewed to' is considered along with it, as this passage encourages us to do, we can see a model for the complexities of the inscriptive poetic which 'Projective Verse' subtly proposes, one which positions inscription as both destructive of nature and 'hewing to' it, which sees it as an act requiring destruction and one calling forth creation, damaging its host material even as it attempts to fully actualise and even idealise it. At this submerged, almost unconscious level, 'Projective Verse' details a conception of poetic writing as a complex and borderline incoherent act of inscription within and across several competing substrates, and it is here that the essay's confusions are at their most extreme but also, potentially, their most enlightening.

The recurrence of so traditional a poetic trope as inscription in a pioneering theoretical work of the mid-twentieth century *avant-garde* might seem surprising; a mode which constituted 'such a normal, accepted, even archaic feature of the *eighteenth-century* literary scene' (Hartman 1987, p. 32; my emphasis) does not immediately recommend itself to a role at the leading edge of a writing culture separated by two centuries and an ocean. Yet in a certain sense it can hardly be thought surprising that inscription returns or remains, given the basic simplicity of its formal characteristics, the relatively low bar a text needs to surmount in order to count—or be counted—as an 'inscription'. In that eighteenth-century European context:

The inscription was any verse conscious of the place on which it was written, and this could be tree, rock, statue, gravestone, sand, window, album, sundial, dog's collar, back of fan, back of painting. (Hartman 1987, p. 32)

Olson is frequently thought of as a poet of 'place', specifically concerned with the fishing port of Gloucester, Massachusetts, where he lived in his later years. Certainly locodescription is a very important mode in Olson's writing, and in this his work shares much with the inscriptive poetics of the Romantic elegiac and epitaphic traditions. Similarly, Olson's poetry is much concerned with the passing of time and the ruinations of history, a subject with clear epitaphic and elegiac resonance. Nonetheless the basic component of the definition above is awareness of the place of the *inscription itself*, not the place which *surrounds* that inscription, and, as has been demonstrated, the material into which projective poetics is to be inscribed is somewhat obscured in Olson's account. If his is an inscriptive poetics, it must be understood as one in which the fundamentals are rendered indeterminate, in which the inscriptive act is always the subject of doubt and indecision.

For Olson, the usefulness of typos in this context is twofold: they register the energies of the moment, the immediate blow of the typewriter, thereby preserving the scene of writing precisely in the inscriptive act; equally they instantiate the breaking gesture which I have argued is central to 'Projective Verse', delegitimising the idea of poetic production as concerned with textual perfection, mastery or virtuosity, with that conception of art as superlative craftsmanship. To 'hew to' the poetic act is also to 'hew' it, to inscribe with a force so indeterminate that its result escapes the writer's control. It is worth pointing out here that part of what is unusual about Olson's work considered through this inscriptive lens is its skewed relation to both lyric and epic modes. Whilst this is most

¹⁰ For example: in his review of Eric A. Havelock's Preface to Plato published in the Niagara Falls Review, Olson misspells 'Marx' as 'Mrak' (Olson 1997, p. 358). In a letter of 18 January 1964 to Charles Boer, who alongside Harvey Brown and Olson himself was an editor of the Review, Olson is, in the face of copy-editing, adamant that 'Mrak' must stay: 'no damn it the error is valuable' (quoted in Olson 1974, p. 95).

obvious in *The Maximus Poems*, which moves asymptotically between fragmented epic and metastasised lyric-sequence, the blurring of modal and generic lines is in fact as evident in Olson's shorter (and so symptomatically more lyric-proximate) poems. The inscription has historically been understood as appendage to the lyric form, a close cousin of the epitaph and the elegy, but Olson's own poetic writing is in no sense clearly 'lyric', even in its shorter instantiations, and one of the tasks 'Projective Verse' most successfully accomplishes is the breakdown of any reliable epic/lyric distinction based on received Classical or Renaissance models, or indeed on cruder long-versus-short categorisations.¹¹

The inscription in its eighteenth- and nineteenth-century manifestations often has a fragmentary character of its own, presenting only a part or a relic with the hope of thereby inducing the reader to the labour of reconstruction, as John MacKay has argued:

the inscription presents itself as a fragment in order to *request*, tacitly, a community of interest, centred on the palpable traces that make up the place. The fragmentary quality of the inscription implies, that is, some additional apparatus of attention and transmission. (By analogy, readers would become [. . .] an extension of the *stone* on which, classically, the original is inscribed—though much less malleable and more predictable, to be sure). (MacKay 2006, pp. 18–19)

In 'Projective Verse' the fragmentary character of the inscription is radicalised by the fragmentation not of the inscribed text but rather of the material from which the inscription is hewn. To return to the question of breath-poetics' embodiment: where in fact is a projective text written? What is its 'place', its material substrate? If it is indeed the case that Olson envisaged a notational system which would enable the reader to 'voice his work' exactly as the poet would like, then while the text is the poem's medium, its mode of transmission, *the reader her or himself becomes the substrate* into which the inscription occurs—it is not the poet's breath which is inscribed but that of the reader. By the same token, the breath of the reader loses its specificity, its belonging *with* readers, its quality *of* them. Breath itself becomes an object oddly separable from any given breather, transferrable and *impersonal* (and as suggested, the 'embodiment' at issue is thereby a counterintuitively idealised and abstract one). If the inscription of the breath tempts us to imagine a move towards the line as *signature*, the particular physiological mark of the author, it can only be so as a signature which paradoxically erases personality in those who receive it while abstracting the signature's author 'into' them (this remembers what Heriberto Yépez has termed the '*Frankenstein or spiritual cyborg*' aspect of Olson's poetics, contained particularly in the parahuman figure of Maximus (Yépez 2007, p. 15)). What 'Projective Verse' terms 'objectism'—as a development out of and beyond Objectivism—already implies this inhuman, or at least non-anthropocentric, aspect of the resulting poetics, since everything, even the human, becomes an object within this model:

breath allows *all* the speech-force of language back in (speech is the "solid" of verse, is the secret of a poem's energy), because, now, a poem has, by speech, solidity, everything in it can now be treated as solids, objects, things; and though insisting upon the absolute difference of the reality of verse from that other dispersed and distributed thing, yet each of these elements of a poem can be allowed to have the play of their separate energies and can be allowed once the poem is well composed, to keep, as those other objects do, their proper confusions. (Olson 1997, p. 244)

The claim to breath's solidity Olson makes here is difficult to credit. If read as a general statement as to the *materiality* of a breath-based poetics, one imbued with the 'solidity' of embodiment, it might make some sense were it not for the real ambiguity as to *whose body the poem is inscribed in*. The actual process of inscription into the 'solids, objects, things' evinced here is, I have argued, as much a

¹¹ In fact a crucial aspect of Olson's poetics resides in its troubling this quantity/quality distinction as it relates to such formal categorisations.

process of dissolution as it is of assertion or composition. This is reinforced by Olson's description of the 'well-composed' poem as one which allows for retention of objective 'proper confusions'; in that model of poetic achievement proposed by the New Critics—the dominant critical paradigm in the US at the time of 'Projective Verse's composition—confusion is considered the archetypal opposition to the 'well-composed' or 'well-formed'. The validation of confusion which 'Projective Verse' both proclaims and enacts proposes not just a confutation of Brooksonian 'Well-Wrought Urn' aesthetic hierarchies (Brooks 1970) but also, and more significantly, a decentering of the author in the process of poetic production, such that the materials of the poem can produce their own effects. Olson declares this straightforwardly at the outset of the essay: 'the moment he ventures into FIELD COMPOSITION—puts himself in the open—he can go by no track other than the one the poem under hand declares, for itself' (Olson 1997, p. 240). The solidity of the authorial grasp is compromised by the solidity of the poem's objects or the poem-as-object; but equally, the material which houses the inscription (its object in the most basic sense) is inscribed only by a trespass on its integrity. This is, to say the least, a tangled situation. As I have argued, attempting to construe Olson as a systematic thinker, one whose ideas finally cohere or 'make sense' as a totality, is an essentially fruitless endeavour. One thing I think readers can see here is that this incoherence at the level of theory is not to be understood as an outright failure but rather a necessary result of a poetics which looks to give agency to objects, objects which guide and obscure the human as much as the human overwrites or encompasses them. This aspect of the 'projective', which is to say the self-generating of what is 'proper' to the 'object' of the poem, has not been generally appreciated, but is a crucial part of what Olson is proposing in the essay and accounts, at least in part, for some of its more obvious contradictions.

The ultimate result of all this is that 'Projective Verse's inscriptive poetics present a double erasure: of the particular human voice by a reified, universalised 'breath' which migrates more-or-less indiscriminately between text and bodies without being finally located in or coherent with either; and of poetic materials destroyed by the high-energy inscriptive gesture. What MacKay describes as 'the terrifying (or liberating) possibility of a total retraction of any "pointing power" [in poetic inscription], of the inscriptive surface as malleable, even unto blankness' (MacKay 2006, p. 13) is here taken to an extreme, as both person and material are rendered truly indeterminate, at once overrun by reality in its guise as 'that other dispersed and distributed thing', and yet stubbornly held apart from it, unable simply to integrate into thing-ness or settled materiality.

5. Go Back To Hieroglyphs

The enthusiasm for confusion Olson demonstrates in 'Projective Verse' is part of a broader phenomenon evident both in his own writing and in literary modernism as a whole. In reaction against what he understood to be modernity's excessive fervour for rationalism and classification, Olson, along with many of his contemporaries and recent ancestors, sought to root his writing not in modern rationality but in an ancient topos. In this Olson was unusual only in that he wanted to put the clock back so far: to pre-Classical Greece, the time before Socrates and the Platonic Ideal. In his essay 'Human Universe', published in the winter 1951 edition of *Origin*, Olson directly rejects the whole direction of post-Socratic thought under the sign of *logos*, arguing that

Logos, or discourse, for example, in that time, so worked its abstractions into our concept and use of language that language's other function, speech, seems so in need of restoration that several of us go back to hieroglyphs or to ideograms to right the balance. (The distinction here is between language as the act of the instant and language as the act of thought about the instant). (Olson 1997, pp. 155–56)

In place of the blanched, anaemic language Olson believed modern America to have gifted him, he here proposes a return to speech, imaginatively opposing the 'abstractions' of 'discourse' (cognate, it seems, with 'that verse which print bred') with the 'solidity' of the voice. Here then the 'solidity' in speech inheres not in literal embodiment so much as in speech's opposition to text, which latter is

for Olson inherently linked to a presumed abstracting character in western thought and in scientific rationality particularly (see Byers 2018, pp. 92–95). Speech represents language used in the heat of the moment, ‘a high energy discharge’ which makes claims neither to correctness nor coherence (here the otherwise counterintuitive identification of the typo with speech can be observed); text, on the other hand, indicates a process of reflection and revision which, Olson implies, bleeds language of its native force and efficacy. Olson connects this desire for instantaneity and spontaneity to the interest in ancient pictographic writing systems much in evidence amongst late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century writers. Indeed, one can see in aspects of ‘Projective Verse’s more practical recommendations the glimmering of an inscriptive poetics based on a totally foreign notational system. But Olson himself does not ‘go back to hieroglyphs or to ideograms’, however much innovation there may be in his approach to poetic notation and *mis-en-page*; his poetics is a step through and beyond such gestures.

Here as elsewhere in Olson’s theoretical writing there is much which is owed to his modernist forbears. Most obviously, the reference to ‘hieroglyphs or [. . .] ideograms’ points readers to Ezra Pound’s interest in Classical Chinese culture and calligraphy, evidenced in his pedagogical prose, his translations and in sections of the *Cantos*. Pound’s particular interest in the Chinese ideogram was famously ignited by contact with Ernest Fenollosa’s *The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry*, which Pound published in 1919. Though the quality of its linguistics is debateable (notoriously, Fenollosa claims that in Chinese the characters have no phonic value, which is simply untrue), *The Chinese Written Character* was an extremely influential work for Anglophone poetics on both sides of the Atlantic; Olson himself makes two explicit references to it in ‘Projective Verse’ (Olson 1997, pp. 244, 242), to say nothing of the strong formative impact that can be felt in almost all aspects of the essay. At the heart of Fenollosa’s argument is the (admittedly questionable) belief that Chinese ideograms constitute a system of reading and writing which is lively and flexible because it lacks the rigidities of English syntax; the whole of Chinese poetry is paratactic, ‘as plastic as thought itself’ (Fenollosa 2008, p. 44). The ideogram, for Fenollosa, does not so much *signify* as *body forth* the phenomena of the world, without all the abstractions and interruptions and muddlings English language (and, consequently, English thought patterns) require. In Chinese poetry ‘[t]he type of a sentence in nature is a flash of lightening. It passes between two terms, a cloud and the earth’ (p. 47). It is easy enough to see why a poet tired of ‘abstractions’ and ‘discourse’ would find this highly appealing, and why it would seem to chime with a desire for a radical retreat from western modernity.¹² As Laszlo Géfin has demonstrated, within the various strands of modernist poetics the ideogram was almost always associated with the ‘primitive’, with what came before the generalising and classifying tendencies of modernity as enumerated in ‘Human Universe’; on the contrary the ‘ideogrammic’ poets operated as ‘*mystics of the particular*’, concerned with specificities of place, item and artefact (Géfin 1982, pp. 75, 82). For these poets, as MacKay has it, ‘the modern *is* the antique’ (MacKay 2006, p. 132). Pre-historic operations point the way to the future.

‘Projective Verse’ has as its most obvious literary forbears the variety of modernist manifestos which emerged in the 1910s and 1920s, from *Blast!* and the “*Objectivists*” *Anthology* through to Pound’s *Imagiste* writings and the statements of the Futurists. It is these latter to which Olson’s piece bears the strongest resemblance, not only stylistically, in its hyperactive bombast and hyperbolic praise of speed and energy, but more profoundly in its desire to dissolve the existing conditions of the poetic arts altogether. A good inscriptive example of such a Futurist programme is to be found in Velimir Khlebnikov’s ‘To the Artists of the World’, published in 1915, in which the Russian poet proposes the development of an ‘alphabet of concepts’—‘*A Written Language for Planet Earth: /A Common System of Hieroglyphs/for the People of our Planet*’ (Khlebnikov 1985, p. 146). This was to be a system of markings which would be universally comprehensible (as Pound claimed the Chinese ideogram

¹² Olson provides a derisive etymology for ‘discourse’ in the fragment ‘Footnote to HU [Human Universe] (lost in the shuffle)’: ‘TO RUN TO AND FRO!’ (Olson 1997, p. 167).

was, to the capable eye), doing away with the diffusion of human languages which had sewn division and 'become differentiated auditory instruments for the exchange of rational wares'. 'Languages have betrayed their glorious beginnings', Khlebnikov complained; it would be better to do away with them altogether and synthesise a new, universal and ideogrammic system:

Let us hope one single language may henceforth accompany the long-term destinies of mankind and prove to be the new vortex that unites us, the new integration of the human race. Mute graphic marks will reconcile the cacophony of languages. (p. 147)

On the face of it Khlebnikov's programme seems antithetical to that readers have usually found in 'Projective Verse'; but whilst these hieroglyphs are highly abstract, and are specifically designed to limit or even 'mute' the voice, the breath, entirely, they share with Olson a concern to turn poetry back towards 'the world' and away from 'discourse'; that is, to stop *talking about* the world and instead *be an active part of it*. Poetry was not to be a commentary on the world but an actor within it, inscribing reality into itself and itself into reality.¹³

Olson's own engagement with hieroglyphs was brief but instructive in this sense. In his 'Mayan Letters', sent to Robert Creeley from Campeche, Mexico in 1951, Olson identifies Mayan glyphs with 'verse' as such, with 'rock as vessel' preserving and purifying this uncommunicative language (Olson 1997, pp. 94, 113). It seems that Olson found value precisely in the fact these texts were untranslated; with no conceptual programme to impute or surround them, they rest in a sort of simple, absolute haecceity. The Mayan glyph, Olson's version of the ideogram, is then notably inert, in some ways *blank*, imagined as maximally resistant to mediation. It embodies not a human voice but the 'voice' of the stone itself. It is the epitaph of a language lost entirely, a culture which remains only in its stone appendages. The speed and energy of the ideogram is reinterpreted as both instantaneity and neutrality, a dynamism of indifference. This in turn remembers the futurist preference for the brute and boisterous over the finely-produced or tasteful, an attitude that could tip over into categorical denigration of art itself, as famously exemplified by F.T. Marinetti's rapturous assertion, in his Futurist manifesto of 1909, that 'a roaring car that seems to ride on grapeshot is more beautiful than the *Victory of Samothrace*' (Marinetti 2003, p. 147). I shall now briefly consider how this anti-art sentiment forms a crucial link between Olson's own poetics and their inscriptive forbears.

6. Cut So Rudely

Olson is not usually associated with English Romanticism; indeed, he is often thought of as a bloody-mindedly *American* author, one somewhat dismissive of everything British after Shakespeare. He has often seemed a poet more concerned to understand and to shape his own national literary patrimony than to connect with its prehistory in that of another country's. This argument has been put across most fully by Stephen Fredman (1993), whose study *The Grounding of American Poetry: Charles Olson and the Emersonian Tradition* has as its premise that U.S.-American poetry characteristically has no 'ground', no inherited tradition, and that much in modern American poetry can resultantly be understood as a search for some form of legitimating history. In Fredman's account, Olson found his ground in Emerson and the American Transcendentalists, often considered (with some justice) to be the United States' answer to the European Romantics. Fredman diagnoses in this 'Emersonian tradition' a fundamentally un-traditional character, one which both worries *about* and worries *at* the lack of a legitimating literary history for a specifically *American* language, responding to this groundlessness both with anxiety and excitement: 'modernity's antitraditional attitude informs the work of modern poets everywhere' (Fredman 1993, p. 8), but particularly so in the United States. In this view it is the established English (and to some degree British) literary tradition from which 'groundless' poets like

¹³ For a discussion of Khlebnikov's resistance to discursive poetics, see 'Khlebnikov's Soundscapes: Letter, Number, and the Poetics of *Zaum*' in (Perloff 2002, pp. 121–53).

Olson are alienated, cut loose from its sure moorings even as they continue to navigate in its language. Whilst I think there is a lot of truth in this account, it underestimates the degree to which, in the words of Julie Carr and Jeffrey C. Robinson, 'Romanticism [was] antifoundational' from its beginning (Carr and Robinson 2015, p. 12), and how, as a result, one can 'see modern and contemporary innovations not as a break with a retrograde nineteenth-century past but as a development from experimental Romantic poetry and poetics' (p. 3). They claim that Romanticism 'has never come to an end but has continually reemerged over the past two centuries' in response to periods of political and poetic crisis, especially in times, like those Fredman outlines, in which the grounds for either seem to have fallen away. Olson, similarly, can be seen as one of these lost children of Romanticism, pulled into its orbit by their alienation from it.

More pragmatically, we know that Olson read English Romantic texts in school and at university, and demonstrated some conversance with them even as he was outspoken in his preference for other authors (primarily Melville).¹⁴ Beyond this point he seems not to have engaged much with that tradition. To this there one notable exception, John Keats, whose 'Negative Capability' became something of a watchword for Olson in the '50s, and reference to which is prominent as a structuring concept for Olson's highly unconventional philosophical study *The Special View Of History* (Olson 1970) (which began life as the last set of lectures given at Black Mountain College in 1956), and at the beginning of the 1958 essay 'Equal, That Is, to the Real Itself', in which Keats' 'Negative Capability' is set against Coleridge's 'irritable reaching after fact and reason' (Olson 1997, p. 120).¹⁵ Olson seems to have conceived of English Romanticism as divided against itself, between Coleridge's geriatric pedantry and nicety, and Keats' more dynamic, even iconoclastic desire 'to stay in the condition of things', which Olson opposes to 'the old system [. . .] discourse, language as it has been since Socrates' (p. 120). In other words, Olson found in Keats a forerunner of projective poetics and a champion of literary indeterminacy and antiformalism.

As we shall see, this derogation of the traditional, the received and the abstract in artistic life was more common among the Romantics—even Wordsworth and Coleridge—than Olson allows for or perhaps was aware of; but in taking the side he did Olson committed himself, however unwittingly, to something like a Romantic position on the ends of art. In this he was no doubt encouraged by similar positions taken by his modernist predecessors. The claim here, then, is not that Olson was a keen scholar of English Romanticism, or even that his understanding of that tradition was anything other than unsophisticated; rather, it is that via a mixture of half-remembered youthful reading, idiosyncratic and selective interpretation, and the influence of his modernist forbears, elements of Romanticism's inscriptive thinking inveigled their way into Olson's own poetics and set down deep roots which, though not immediately or superficially apparent, fundamentally orient Olson's profoundest poetic and philosophical aspirations.

Inscription is recognised as a particularly prevalent feature of English Romantic poetry, one encouraged by a renewed interest in classical culture and the continuing popularity of epitaphic writing. As Geoffrey Hartman writes, such poems often functioned as 'liberated epigrams', written in relatively informal and unclosed blank verse, and concerned themselves overwhelmingly with natural environments unsubjected to 'obtrusive personification' or even to personage at all; more often than not the only human presence in such a poem is an unnamed traveller or passer-by who merely book-ends

¹⁴ Establishing just what Olson was and was not familiar with in English Romanticism is not of course a straightforward task, though Ralph Maud's catalogue and commentary on the poet's personal library as it existed at the time of his death holds some clues. Olson read Coleridge and Wordsworth at Wesleyan College and compared them unfavourably to Melville in his M.A. thesis (Maud 1999, p. 27). He seems to have preferred Keats and Shelley to Wordsworth and Coleridge as a student (p. 228) and his enthusiasm for Keats' idea of 'Negative Capability' is voluminosely evidenced, though quite how familiar he was with Keats' oeuvre beyond this gnomic statement must perforce be a matter of guesswork. None of these poets are present in Olson's personal collection by 1970.

¹⁵ Olson's reference in both texts is to Keats' letter to his brothers George and Tom, of December 1817 (Keats 2008, pp. 369–70). Maud notes that Olson spoke at great length on Wordsworth's *Prelude* at the Vancouver Poetry Festival in July–August 1963 (Maud 1999, p. 165; Olson 2010, p. 71) though again no copy of the poem was found amongst Olson's possessions.

or tees-up the poem itself, which primarily addresses the depopulated landscape the inscription is set in (Hartman 1987, p. 38). These inscriptive poems took on an increasingly meditative cast, and in many ways the Romantic inscription can be read as a key instance of the ‘philosophic Song’ Wordsworth dreamt of (Wordsworth 2000, p. 380). Of particular relevance to my argument here is the degree to which these inscriptions contain the spoliation of poetry/art itself as one of their central operations, as in this epitaphic sonnet:

I met a traveller from an antique land
 Who said—‘Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
 Stand in the desert. Near them, on the sand,
 Half sunk, a shattered visage lies, whose frown,
 And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,
 Tell its sculptor well those passions read
 Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,
 The hand that mocked them and the heart that fed;
 And on the pedestal these words appear:
 “My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings:
 Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair!”
 Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
 Of that colossal Wreck, boundless and bare
 the lone and level sands stretch far away.’ (Shelley 2003, p. 198)

The standard reading of this most famous of Romantic poems casts it as a warning against hubris, the arrogance of those who would claim immortality through their monumental endeavours. This is certainly a fair interpretation. But at another level, the very familiarity of this text poses problems for readers, because it obscures the degree to which ‘Ozymandias’ is precisely concerned with misprision and with the loss of even the *tools* for its proper construal. Not only is the brag of ‘Ozymandias’ rendered otiose by the collapse of his works (whatever they may be), but the contemporary reader is unable to assess its initial justice, because the works are almost gone, and those which ‘yet survive’ give little indication of their previous function or value. This is an inscription with no surround, no environment remaining. The craft of the sculptor is similarly traduced: just as the artist may have ‘well those passions read/which yet survive’, he may not—there is no way to tell. Because the work itself has been destroyed the meaning has been lost; the work of poesis has been rendered a jumble of ‘lifeless things’. But the world itself, ‘the lone and level sands’, persist indifferently, uninterrogated in its ‘antique’ being. The inscription survives only in a debased situation, unavailable even for a truly ironic reading. ‘Ozymandias’ not only depicts but instantiates a failure of the artistic object as a site of interpretation.

The point here is that the inscription, precisely because it is meant to register or sign a survival of memory or presence beyond the living memory or presence of the inscriber, is always at least proximate to a fail-state, to the undoing of its conditions for meaning anything at all. In this it is a curiously self-defeating poetic gesture, one which will always summon the thought of poetry’s dissolution even as it attempts to shore up its integrity and survivability. It is perhaps indicative of Romanticism’s own peculiar hubris that the poets of the 1790s and early 1800s were so keen to evoke this state of poetic dissolution, to highlight the limitations of writing.¹⁶ In fact almost every Romantic inscription poem contains some sense of loss, miscommunication or failure, and a central reason for this was that authors like Coleridge, Wordsworth and Shelley believed, under the more or less explicit influence of German

¹⁶ A particularly famous and formative example of this can be found in the first two poems of Wordsworth and Coleridge’s *Lyrical Ballads* of 1800 and 1805, ‘Expostulation and Reply’ and ‘The Tables Turned’ (the 1798 edition was differently ordered, beginning instead with Coleridge’s ‘Rime of the Ancient Mariner’). Both poems, which are in dialogue, feature the lyric voice exhorting itself—and by implication readers—to ‘quit your books!’ or equivalent, for fear of missing out on the wonders of nature through an overzealous application of literacy (Wordsworth 2000, pp. 129–31).

and:

When the attentions change/the jungle
leaps in
 even the stones are split
 they rive

Or,
enter
that other conqueror we more naturally recognize
he so resembles ourselves

But the E
cut so rudely in that oldest stone
sounded otherwise,
was differently heard (Olson 1987, pp. 87, 88)¹⁷

The 'E' Olson refers to is that supposedly located at the Delphi oracle, probably carved into the wall of the temple of Phoebus Apollo. Though there is little doubt that the inscription existed—it was a much celebrated feature of the temple amongst worshippers, and appeared on images of the building on coinage—almost nothing is known about it, and the inscription itself has not survived. Furthermore, the mystery of the 'E' is not a new one; the letter's meaning had already been lost by the time of Plutarch, who is our only literary source for the inscription, and who speculates on several possible interpretations himself (Davenport 1974, pp. 252–54). Alternately, it may never have had a meaning at all, as some archaeologists have argued, or it may have been the last, damaged remnant of a larger and more determinately meaningful inscription (for an overview, see Hodge 1981). What is significant for my purposes here is that the Ozymandian 'E' is an instance of inscriptive language which does not communicate in the standard sense but does cause things to *happen*—for example, a large quantity of archaeological, historical, mythological and poetic speculation, or the establishment of a religious mystery-cult. The failure of the inscription's semantic function coincides with the loss of Wordsworth's capital-P 'Poetry', with the capacity of that exalted, pseudo-religious account of poetic production to make its transcendent claims. In its place there arise two things: firstly, an intermingling or infusion with the revolutionary statements of Mao Zedong, who Olson was enthused about at the time (but reference to whom should probably be cautiously read as only a token for future-oriented, countercultural energies rather than as a specific endorsement of Mao or of Chinese communism); secondly, and more importantly, the lost meaning of the E is associated with the return of nature, on the one hand, 'riving' the stones and monuments left by humans, and with the return of the ego on the other, the conqueror 'who so resembles ourselves'.¹⁸ It is the E itself which mediate between these poles, figuring an irreducible difference from our current modes of expression, and a path towards a new language for the future—'the light of the dawn is before us', as Olson asserts via Mao via French. The lost meaning of the inscription at Delphi, this silent mark, is for Olson a guide, an emblem that will break the distinction between discourse and object: an inscription with no meaning which is the only thing to survive of a destroyed or lost stone. Neither the stone (item of craft) nor the meaning (item of discourse) remain, but the multiply-embodied inscription itself has outlasted both.

¹⁷ The phrase 'cut so rudely' resembles The Waste Land's 'so rudely forced' (Eliot 2002, p. 41) and 'So rudely forc'd' (p. 44), which in turn refer to the Philomela myth of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and to the lost Sophoclean play *Tereus*. This half-remembered Classical tale is also connected to Eliot's epigraph (p. 38), quoting the *Satyricon*, in which Trimalchio regales Agamemnon with a tale of having visited the ancient and decrepit Sybil at Cumae. Phoebus Apollo cursed the Cumaean Sybil to aging since he could not convince her to give up her virginity, essentially inverting the myth of Philomela. This almost Vorticist nexus of reference finds Olson at his most Poundian.

¹⁸ Mark Byers argues that the turn to ideograms in American art of the mid-century occurred precisely because their indecipherability seemed to confute a programmatic Marxist politics (Byers 2018, p. 98).

Olson was remarked upon, amongst his friends, for his low opinion of ‘beauty’; Charles Boer notes that the poet hardly ever used the word, and then only condescendingly or dismissively (Boer 1975, pp. 56–57). What I have shown is that this attitude can be seen as congruent, and to some degree even continuous, with a long history of art-skeptic or even overtly anti-art sentiment in Anglo-American literary and artistic culture, a history George J. Leonard has masterfully documented as stretching back to the work of Sir Joshua Reynolds and Thomas Carlyle, through the poets of high Romanticism and into the conceptual-art era with Olson’s Black Mountain College colleague, collaborator and sometime rival John Cage (see Leonard 1994). What this scepticism about the very institutions of Art and Poetry can tell us about Olson’s own poetics, in ‘Projective Verse’ and elsewhere, is that they are fundamentally geared towards artistic dissolution—the unlearning of technique and tradition and their associated values—and not nearly so concerned to provide new technical or evaluative principles. When, in the final line of ‘The Kingfishers’, Olson declares that ‘I hunt among stones’ (Olson 1987, p. 93), it is of course a rebuke to *The Waste Land*, a restitution of the ‘stony rubbish’ Eliot decries in that poem (Eliot 2002, p. 38); if western culture has been reduced to ruins, *à la* Eliot, then for Olson these ruins might at least be made useful. But it is the *hunt*, the process, searching rather than finding, which is finally most significant; to ‘hunt among stones’ is to navigate among different mediums for inscription, different substrates for writing. Ultimately it is to refuse the overdetermination either of body or page, breath or typewriter; to work towards a poetry ‘Equal, That Is, to the Real Itself’ (Olson 1997, p. 120).

7. Two Conclusions

To conclude: two major consequences emerge from the preceding interpretation of Olson’s poetics, its inscriptive qualities and the context of these.

Firstly:—‘Projective Verse’s coupling of the poetic line to the breath is not to be read as a literal or prescriptive instruction for poets; still less is it to be understood as a normative description of Olson’s own writing. The breath-line diode is best thought of not as a technical recommendation but rather as an attempt to reconfigure the traditional distinction between ‘form’ and ‘content’ by making the former a consequence of the latter.¹⁹ It is a central but underappreciated aspect of what Olson is saying about the line in ‘Projective Verse’ that *in his conception the line is not in fact so clearly a ‘formal’ feature at all*, at least in the delimiting, conventional sense of the word ‘formal’. It certainly resists ‘formality’, privileging instead the spontaneous and the flexible, qualities Olson writes in praise of elsewhere in the essay. One of the perverse consequences of Olson’s tying of the line to the breath in ‘Projective Verse’ is that by naturalising rather than formalising the line (however dubious this naturalisation appears on closer inspection), Olson makes the line no longer a usable unit of formal measurement; the line becomes less distinctively a ‘formal feature’ of the poetry. This in turn has profound consequences for poetic form as a whole, since, in traditional poetic formalisms, this relation has always been more explicitly structured: long poems are made of (enumerated) books, cantos, and so on; poetry can be conceived as made of stanzas or lines; all of these are to some degree known quantities. From the outset this is not the case with Olson, not because he never wrote a decasyllable or a stanza of ballad metre, but because for him *such forms of measurement are simply incidental to the production of poetry, not determinative of it*; the severe mereological and formal-generic indeterminacies everywhere evident in *The Maximus Poems* flow directly from this innovation.

For the second consequence I return to Elaine Feinstein, who made out what Olson liberated her from but not exactly what she learned from him: given the huge influence ‘Projective Verse’ had on younger poets on both sides of the Atlantic, and considering the fact that almost everyone agrees on some version of the ‘breath-poetics’ reading of the essay—that is, interprets the piece as one fundamentally concerned with the embodiment of poetry in some more-or-less material and affective

¹⁹ Axiomatically: ‘FORM IS NEVER MORE THAN AN EXTENSION OF CONTENT’ (Olson 1997, p. 240).

way—it seems likely that the proliferation in recent years of varieties of poetry and poetics precisely concerned with the material and affective nature of embodiment is not an unrelated phenomenon. In its (indubitably extremely variegated) desire to write—to inscribe—the body, much late-modernist and post-modernist work even into the present day can be seen as sharing in the characteristically Romantic, art-sceptic DNA that Olson reveals in his own poetic investigations. Feinstein’s uncertainty can be read as a confirmation of this: for all that inscribing the body might seem to release one from the straightjacket of tradition and formality, freeing the poet to put her or his signature indelibly into the work, that signature is inherently a paradox, a mark made only to denote an absence, that which has been removed, deleted or lost. Olson’s projective poetics might then seem to lack positive instructive value because its gesture is all liberatory rather than determinative, its recommendations all open rather than technical; ultimately the inscription it really wants to embody is that which would liberate poetry from the status of a mere ‘art’.

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