

# *Actual Willful Man: Olson in His Own Words*

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It readily becomes apparent in trying to come to a formulation of Charles Olson which is both full and general that merely descriptive discourse is not sufficient for the job. Because he is a large man, in several senses, it's important to characterize him in a large way. The connection between his poetry and poetics and the immense range of thought on myth, culture, science and individual truth is fundamental and, honestly, indissoluble. The brilliance of Olson is beyond his statements alone; the way of looking is also crucial. So I have to want to put it his way, as much as "explanation" will allow, to map it. "The subject, then, is actual willful man" (who is Charles Olson).

DICTA

Organizing by sections is a lie insofar as it does not take into account the overlapping and interpenetration of the categories. If we were where we seek to be, "actual willful man" would be redundant, a verbosity. By "actual" Olson means "the true word for what has been called totality"<sup>1</sup> but also implies as a condition of its literal being, "to act" or "action."<sup>2</sup> To anticipate myself, it is both all there is (the field) and its ongoing context, or process. "Will" he defines as "the infinitive of being,"<sup>3</sup> or the process, yet classes it as a "quality." And, again in his own scheme, he locates "man" in the Processes, though without denying him personal singularity. See The Special View of History, p. 46, for his qualification of categories, and please allow me a similar awareness of inaccuracy in the organization of the Dicta which follow.

I Say --

1) Stance: is Man. He has identity, which is derived from the proprioceptive impulse, "that life is preoccupation with itself".<sup>4</sup> By "Identity, therefore (the universe is one) is supplied; and the abstract-primitive character of the will (asserted) is 'placed'..."<sup>5</sup> "In other words, we are ourselves both the instrument of discovery and

the instrument of definition."<sup>6</sup>

But not Ego, as in the case of Pound; because of his "beaked Ego," "he does not seem to have inhabited his own experience."<sup>7</sup> Preconceived notions, fixed (and therefore external) ideas or values prevent self-awareness; this constitutes a denial of "the intimate connection between person-as-continuation-of-millenia-by-acts-of-imagination-arising-directly-from-fierce-penetration-of-all-past-persons, places, things and actions-as-data (objects)...."<sup>8</sup> Hence Olson's rejection of tradition for its own sake, which is usually accompanied by longing for the past and lamentations of the present state of "culture" (as with Pound and Eliot). Man removes himself from his potential for actuality, his will is subordinated to the past, to that which he has not made.

Olson follows Keats's distinction between the Man of Achievement, who is active in the world, involved with doing, and the Man of Power, who holds to that "irritable reaching after fact and reason."<sup>9</sup> Both men thus distinguish the quality of a man's attention, one of quite a few watchwords in the Olson argot. The emphasis on "Negative Capability," the suspension of fixed Character so as to enter the functioning processes of life, erasing subject-

object duality, is central to Olson's Special View of History (for which it provides one of two epigrams).

Stance is etymologically akin to stand; it is willingness not to fix position but to presence in one's experience, in the moment. In his stance, man is unmediated; he stands in "the skin itself, the meeting edge of man and external reality...where all that matters does happen," for "man and external reality are so involved with one another that, for man's purposes, they had better be taken as one."<sup>10</sup> Olson insists on the physical aspect of being:

It is his body that is his answer, his body intact and fought for, the absolute of his organism in its simplest terms, this structure evolved by nature, repeated in each act of birth, the animal man; the house he is, this house that moves, breathes, acts, this house where his life is....<sup>11</sup>

Man is wide-open; he is new, constantly renewing himself; he is naked. In his 25th Maximus letter, Olson powerfully states this condition in an often-quoted passage:

nakedness  
is what one means  
that all start up  
to the eye and soul  
as though it had never  
happened before...<sup>12</sup>

Man's stance is always in the world; he is, as

Olson was, as Maximus is, a public figure. Personality, the self in action, is purposeful; didacticism is no vice in a context this malleable. Rather it is the expression of man's energetic insistence, of "man as object in field of force declaring self as force because is force in exactly such relation & can accomplish expression of self as force by conjecture, & displacement in a context best, now, seen as space more than a time such.." <sup>13</sup>

The public quality of actual willful man is demonstrated, as in the passage above, in Olson's use of letters. In "Mayan Letters," in Origin magazine, in Maximus itself, he stresses the possibilities for communication by the letter form. It becomes active art by this use, not as a gloss for other writing. A primary reason Olson was able to employ the letter so profitably lies in his belief that truth (which is actuality) and experience of discovery which poetry articulates. "One wants phenomenology in place, in order that event may rearise. There are only two facts about mythology which count: that they are made up of tales and personages, in place. Words then are naming and logography is writing as though each word is physical and that objects are originally motivating. This is the doctrine of the earth." <sup>17</sup>

"It comes to this: the use of a man, by himself and thus by others, lies in how he conceives his relation to nature, that force to which he owes his somewhat small existence."<sup>18</sup> All the issues, the relations that concern Olson are stated early (1950) in "Projective Verse," a great document of thought on life as well as poetry. One of the two largest things it does (followed up, too, most directly in The Special View<sup>19</sup>) -- I'll get to the other in #3 -- is place man, give him his world and his possibility made necessary. "And it involves a whole series of new recognitions. From the moment (a poet) ventures into FIELD COMPOSITION -- put himself in the open -- he can go by no track other than the one the poem under hand declares, for itself. Thus he has to behave, and be, instant by instant, aware of some several forces just now beginning to be examined."<sup>20</sup>

For now only man's activity, its very movement, creates limits. And poetry itself is the Field, where possibility exists in multiplicity, "the large area of the whole poem...where all the syllables and all the lines must be managed in their relations to each other."<sup>21</sup> Multiplicity may be the single word that separates the Twentieth Century from the past, whether as

problem or as opportunity. It opens up the universe, allows man unbounded range, makes denial miserable and useless. "It is a matter, finally, of OBJECTS, what they are, what they are inside a poem, how they got there, and, once there, how they are to be used."<sup>22</sup>

Oh, objects again. That same word that man has been using since before Descartes to keep the world at a distance. No. The field contains objects, certainly; a new recognition of that (which neither destroys identity, nor reduces to a mishmash of "oneness") is "objectism." "Objectism is the getting rid of the lyrical interference of the individual as ego, of the 'subject' and his soul, that peculiar presumption by which western man has interposed himself between what he is as a creature of nature (with certain instructions to carry out) and those other creations of nature which we may, with no derogation, call objects. For a man himself is an object, whatever he may take to be his advantages, particularly at that moment that he achieves an humilitas sufficient to make him of use."<sup>23</sup> So Olson extends the principle of "objectivism" initiated by Williams and Zukofsky in the early 1930s.

The field contains objects, including man.

He still picks and chooses, but as things occur in his acts of digging. Stance as what to do with the multiples in the field; a consciousness of place.

"The advantage is to 'place' the thing, instead of wallowing around sort of outside, in the universe ...."<sup>24</sup> To ask, "Can you dig it?" in an Olsonian sense is a mighty serious question.

Place is Where You Are. It is both noun and verb. (So is Man -- Olson's friend Fuller.) "The meeting edge of man and the world is also his cutting edge. If man is active, it is exactly here where experience comes in that it is delivered back, and if he stays fresh at the coming in he will be fresh at his going out."<sup>25</sup> Place is space; man uses it, exists in it (in time, yes, but isn't so tyrannized). Respect for it is vital -- any place; with that, harmony of a sort is possible. There is focus, an occasion for activity. Man can inhabit his own experience because he doesn't abstract himself from it (an arrogance). There is ground to his being. Earth is to Place as Body is to Man. Olson says of the Mayans,

I'd guess that this people had a very ancient way of not improving on nature, that is that it is not a question of either intelligence or spirituality, but another thing, something Americans have a hard time getting their

minds around, a form or bias of attention which does not include improvements....<sup>26</sup>

Identity is freed in the field: Olson can be both critic of culture (damning when he must) and seer of alternatives. Without the paralyzing obstruction of Ego. So he can say seriously, believably, "I equally wish, I equally feel, hopefully, that you may trust me enough to believe that I also have the authority to discuss any piece of your own past as well as my own...One must ask that any act of yours or my life or anyone else's, be not actually that life but its act or production."<sup>27</sup> This, I think, is what Lévi-Strauss means when he says, "There is no single 'true' version of which all the others are but copies or distortions. Every version belongs to the myth."<sup>28</sup>

Remember multiplicity: place is field mediated by man as part of it. Place, then, can be anywhere; the field is everywhere, in time as well as space. All is present. Place is local, and cosmic. It finds origins, is its own beginning. The act of discovery characterizes itself, becomes a meaningful object (as evidenced in Olson's interest in the Mayan hieroglyph, and his use of direct transposition into his poetry). "I

drag it back: Place (*topos*), plus one's own bent plus what one can know, makes it possible to name."<sup>29</sup>

This is PLACE. Also topos, the place recognized, and entered into, by naming. In the end it is polis, the community of persons that Olson sought. The ideal place, of renewal and unity: "Polis is eyes."<sup>30</sup>

(3) Process: is Will. "'Will is the infinitive of being.' An infinitive is a form of verbal noun..."<sup>31</sup> As in Fenollosa -- the ideo-graphic Chinese character carries a verbal idea of action: "In reading Chinese we do not seem to be juggling mental counters, but to be watching things work out their own fate."<sup>32</sup> For this marvelous little book, a direct antecedent of "Projective Verse," thank Pound, whose prime value for Olson lies in his method.

Process is the means, the working of the universe, the act of creation. How Stance and Field are united. "The logic of juxtaposition" employed by Olson, by Cid Corman in Origin, the initial Olson showcase.

Process is motion, continuum, flow. "A poem is energy transferred from where the poet got it (he will have some several causations), by way of

the poem itself, all the way over to, the reader, Okay. Then the poem itself must, at all points, be a high energy-construct and, at all points, an energy-discharge." "FORM IS NEVER MORE THAN AN EXTENSION OF CONTENT." "ONE PERCEPTION MUST IMMEDIATELY AND DIRECTLY LEAD TO A FURTHER PERCEPTION."<sup>33</sup> This is how verse, and all activity, is projective. There are no compartments; association is instant and intrinsic, a quality of being. Likewise, the world, which is the poet's material; any experience, from any facet of life (any "discipline") can be involved, and approached from any other. There are connections, perceivable to the mind at play ("...is not that that shows whether a mind is there at all?"<sup>34</sup>). "In fact, by the very law of the identity of definition and discovery, who can extricate language from action?"<sup>35</sup>

Language is an action of man, the literal writing down of perception provides a bridge between him and the myriad universe; it is the closest thing we have to Process. Arrangement on the page is crucial because it records motion, the mind's equivalent of the universe, made tangible. It corrects the visual emphasis of previous poetry, returns to the most basic fact of

human life, the breath. "If a contemporary poet leaves a space as long as the phrase before it, he means that space to be held, by the breath, an equal length of time. If he suspends a word or syllable at the end of a line...he means that time to pass that it takes the eye -- that hair of time suspended -- to pick up the next line."<sup>36</sup> The impetus for this, again, is Williams, also the "objectivist" side of Pound.

Olson's sense of process, again, gives him his method: the breath, the active mind-body, joins, on the one hand, direct, didactic statement and, on the other, unexplained transposition. The result is poetry, what Lawrence called "poetry of the present."<sup>37</sup> When Olson asserts, "The question is two things, the attention itself, what it is on.. and how it is on, the degree of intensity mounted, that it be the equal of the occasion."<sup>38</sup>, there is implied the process that gets it done, makes it manifest. In his poetry, as in this statement, the method of composition holds everything together, silently. Of course, he speaks often of this elsewhere, but the point is that this is how it works. "For the truth is, that the management of external nature so that none of its virtue is lost, in vegetables or in art, is as much a delicate

juggling of her content as is the same juggling by any one of us of our own."<sup>39</sup>

The great value of this way of doing (and, as such, of being) is that it creates meaning, and which is not external to it: "that which exists through itself is what is called meaning."<sup>40</sup>

"We are in the presence of the only truth which the real can have, its own undisclosed because not apparent character. Get that out with no exterior means or materials, no mechanics except those hidden in the thing itself, and we are in the hands of the mystery."<sup>41</sup> The process universe, in which everything exists as present in the mind of man, is a positive condition. Olson, among others, has given the Twentieth Century itself.

Process does not destroy time, but it does shoot it out of the saddle. It no longer need be seen as dooming man's action to transience and futility; rather its sequentiality participates in the movement toward form, as Fenollosa gleefully notes.<sup>42</sup> But linearity, as controlling force, the single-minded, obstinate progression, is dead. (Olson prefers the Oriental sense of six directions -- "front, back, left, right, up and down...the vectors on which you actually are experiencing things."<sup>43</sup>) This may be the most difficult point

at which to enter Olson, and much of post-Einsteinian thought. The challenge, which is damned hard to actualize in the day-to-day America, is "to believe that things, and present ones, are the absolute conditions; but that they are so because the structures of the real are flexible, quanta do dissolve into vibrations, all does flow, and yet is there, to be made permanent, if the means are equal."<sup>44</sup>

This is why synthesis is necessary. Life is open-ended, as man must be made to be. Maximus, considered thusly, is a poem that never ends. There is always more to include, as more strikes man's sentience. That possible permanence, even in mortality: only death stopped Olson.

This is METHOD. Also topos, "the riddler of the lot."<sup>45</sup> Because it is the seeking part, experience itself, the factual how.

You see by now the partial spuriousness of such arrangement. As it is a self-conscious model, however, it should do. I arrange it like this, to be read vertically as well as horizontally:

Field	Process	Stance
PLACE	METHOD	MAN
topos	topos	typos
Actual	Willful	Man

This is a tool, to be used in going further.  
We could add:

4) Task: is POETRY. Olson's use of his own theories is varied; in some cases, as in incorporation of sources into the poems ("logic of juxtaposition"), it is fundamental and pervasive. In others, as the insistence on breath as line determinant, only occasionally noticeable. Obviously, my intention has been to try to characterize Olson as a thoughtful man, prior to or more-or-less outside of the actual verse. This would be an impossible omission had I wished to give a picture of the total experience and effect of Olson on me, on any reader. I take seriously his feeling that "the poet is the only pedagogue left, to be trusted."<sup>46</sup> The deepest value of what he is after can only be gleaned from the poetry. Because the poetry is what happens. It leaves the categories where they belong, outside the gate, far from the center. Just as Williams felt, "A new world is only a new mind ", so it's true that a new poem (all of it new) is that new mind. And that poetry is what we are seeking, a human universe.

Notes

- 1 Charles Olson, The Special View of History (Berkeley: Oyez, 1970), p. 36.
- 2 Ibid., p. 33.
- 3 Ibid., p. 44.
- 4 "Human Universe," Selected Writings (New York: New Directions, 1966), p. 53.
- 5 "Proprioception," Additional Prose (Bolinias, California: Four Seasons Foundation, 1974), p. 19.
- 6 "Human Universe," p. 53.
- 7 Charles Olson and Ezra Pound (New York: Grossman 1975), p. 99.
- 8 "A Bibliography on America for Ed Dorn," Additional Prose, p. 7.
- 9 Keats is quoted in The Special View of History, p. 14.
- 10 "Human Universe," p. 60.
- 11 "The Resistance," Selected Writings, p. 13.
- 12 The Maximus Poems, I-III (New York: Jargon/Corinth, 1960), p. 107.
- 13 "Mayan Letters," Selected Writings, p. 112.
- 14 Poetry and Truth: The Beloit Lectures and Poems (San Francisco: Four Seasons Foundation, 1971), p. 11.
- 15 "'The Present is Prologue,'" Additional Prose,

- 16 "A Bibliography on America for Ed Dorn," p. 11
- 17 "The Advantage Of Literacy Is That Words Can Be  
On The Page," Additional Prose, p. 51.
- 18 "Projective Verse," Selected Writings, p. 25.
- 19 The Special View of History, p. 13.
- 20 "Projective Verse," p. 16.
- 21 Ibid., p. 20.
- 22 Ibid.,
- 23 Ibid., pp. 24-25.
- 24 "Proprioception," p. 17.
- 25 "Human Universe," p. 62.
- 26 "Mayan Letters," p. 92.
- 27 Poetry and Truth, p. 45.
- 28 Claude Lévi-Strauss, Structural Anthropology  
(New York: Basic Books, 1963), p. 218.
- 29 "Letter to Elaine Feinstein," Selected Writings,  
p. 30.
- 30 The Maximus Poems, I-III, p. 26.
- 31 The Special View of History, p. 44.
- 32 Ernest Fenollosa, The Chinese Written Character  
as a Medium for Poetry (San Francisco: City  
Lights, 1936), p. 9.
- 33 "Projective Verse," pp. 16-17.
- 34 Ibid., p. 19.
- 35 "Human Universe," p. 54.
- 36 "Projective Verse," pp. 22-23.

- 37 D.H. Lawrence, "Introduction to New Poems,"  
Selected Literary Criticism (New York: Viking  
Press, 1966), p. 85.
- 38 "Quantity in Verse," Selected Writings, p. 44.
- 39 "Human Universe," p. 58.
- 40 Causal Mythology (San Francisco: Four Seasons  
Foundation, 1969), p. 2.
- 41 "Quantity in Verse," p. 45.
- 42 Fenollosa, p. 9.
- 43 Poetry and Truth, p. 51.
- 44 "Equal, That Is, To The Real Itself," Selected  
Writings, p. 52.
- 45 Poetry and Truth, p. 43.
- 46 "The Gate and the Center," Human Universe and  
Other Essays (New York: Grove Press, 1967), p.  
19.