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# After the New Failure of Nerve:
# Charles Olson and American Modernism
# 1946 - 1951

Submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, Trinity Term 2014

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One medium has dominated accounts of American art in the years following the Second World War. The period witnessed, in the words of one critic, a 'Triumph of American Painting', with advances in the easel picture far surpassing those in other media. Whilst more recent accounts have nuanced this view, drawing attention to developments in music and sculpture, literary contributions to the new American modernism have gone almost without assessment. Were there advances in literature comparable to those of Mark Rothko and Barnett Newman, David Smith and John Cage?

Drawing extensively on his unpublished writings, *After the New Failure of Nerve* reveals the poet Charles Olson to have been the keenest literary advocate of the new American avant-garde and one of the most astute observers of its conditions and possibilities. Paying special attention to unpublished notes, lectures, and correspondence, the thesis utilises Olson's early writings in order to examine the momentum given early postwar modernism by a potent contemporary reaction against abstract rationality, a reaction identified at the time as a 'New Failure of Nerve'.

Born of recent disillusionment with 'scientific' Marxism and New Deal progressivism, the thesis demonstrates the several ways in which this 'New Failure of Nerve' fuelled vanguard American art from the middle of the Second World War to the end of the decade. It argues that the new critique of abstract rationality—which was also reflected in the contemporary American work of the Frankfurt School—defined the way American artists understood the function of postwar modernism, the posture of the postwar modernist artist, and the status of the postwar modernist artwork. This pivotal moment in the history of modernism was shaped, I contend, by a philosophical critique explored most ambitiously by an American poet.

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**Contents**

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

He muses less about glory than he dreams of fraternity. He does not invent his manner against tradition, but for want of one, and in certain ways his most extreme audacities are *naïvetés*. The world is new in his eyes, everything is yet to be said.

—Jean-Paul Sartre (1948)

# Introduction

## Beginning Again

> Whatever the outcome of the war will be, the arts will have to contribute to the rebuilding of men or else their function will degrade to an ornament in a degrading society.
>
> Alfred Neumeyer, 'The Arts and Social Reconstruction' (1944).[1]

> We have come together as American modern artists because we feel the need to present to the public a body of art that will adequately reflect the new America that is taking shape today and the kind of America that will, it is hoped, become the cultural center of the world.
>
> Barnett Newman, 'American Modern Artists' (1943).[2]

In June 1944, days after the Normandy landings, the American *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* turned its attention to an imminent problem: 'Art in a Post War World'.[3] Gathering thirteen essays on painting, poetry, film, dance, theatre, music, architecture, and civic planning, the journal welcomed 'disagreement with many of the ideas expressed' in its double-number, debate and provocation being crucial, the editor declared, to that 'self consciousness' which alone guarantees the 'unbroken advance toward the better in human living'.[4] Contributors to the journal may have been self-conscious about their task, writing of a postwar art which did not yet exist, their tone edging between the prophetic and the hortatory. But, as a rule, they were less self-aware about the telling presumption of the special issue itself. For here was the future of Western art debated in an American journal,

[1] Alfred Neumeyer, 'The Arts and Social Reconstruction', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 3:9/10 (1944), p. 79.
[2] Barnett Newman, 'American Modern Artists', *Selected Writings and Interviews*. Ed. John P. O'Neill (Berkeley, 1992), p. 29.
[3] *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 3:9/10 (1944).
[4] H. G. S., 'Editorial', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 3:9/10 (1944), p. 3.

two months before the liberation of Paris and a full year before the end of hostilities in Europe.

In this respect, however, the journal was following a precedent set by the 'American Modern Artists' exhibition held in New York in 1943, a show which had seen the painter Barnett Newman look forward to a homegrown art which would 'adequately reflect the new America that is taking shape today'. And it was not only American artists and critics who felt the transatlantic shift. In 1944, for instance, Theodor W. Adorno imagined the reconstruction of German drama along American lines—for him ignobly demotic: 'A glance at the literary output of those émigrés who, by discipline and a sharp separation of spheres of influence, performed the feat of representing the German mind, shows what is to be expected of a happy reconstruction: the introduction of Broadway methods on the Kurfürstendamm'.[5] 'Happy reconstruction': against the photograph of Lucio Fontana amongst the ruins of his Milan studio in 1947, or Richard Strauss's dirge for a devastated Hamburg in *Metamorphosen* (1945), one can set Newman, announcing a new American art that reflects the 'kind of America that will, it is hoped, become the cultural center of the world'.[6]

Both at the time and in critical retrospect, classic expression of this new internationalist confidence has been identified with New York School painting—the loose ensemble of New York-based artists, including Newman, Willem de Kooning, Mark Rothko, Jackson Pollock, Franz Kline, Clyfford Still, Adolph Gottlieb, and Robert Motherwell, whose mature work began to be realized three or four years after the end of the war.[7] These artists owed two major debts: first to the Federal Art Project (1935-43) of

[5] Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*. Trans. E. F. N. Jephcott (London, 2005), pp. 57-58.
[6] See Sharon Hecker, '"Servant of Two Masters": Lucio Fontana's Sculptures in Milan's Cinema Arlecchino (1948)', *Oxford Art Journal* 35:3 (2012), p. 342.
[7] The terms 'New York School' and 'abstract expressionism' will be used interchangeably in what follows. 'New York School' was a term first applied by Motherwell in his essay of that name in 1950. 'Abstract

the Works Progress Administration, which maintained most of them during the Depression; and second to the arrival of European artists in New York during the war. Though the tidiness of this narrative has sometimes been challenged, the New York School is conventionally seen rising from the Regionalist and Social Realist aesthetics of the Depression, turning the lessons of *émigrés* such as Hans Hoffmann and Arshile Gorky into two abstract styles: gesturalism (Pollock, de Kooning, Kline) and the colour field (Newman, Rothko, Gottlieb, Motherwell, Still).[8]



expressionism' was first used four years earlier by Robert Coates, art critic for *The New Yorker*. Coates, 'The Art Galleries: Abroad and at Home', *The New Yorker* 12:7 (1946), p. 83. In early work on the New York School by American critics, this 'confidence' was celebrated triumphally. See especially Irving Sandler, *The Triumph of American Painting: A History of Abstract Expressionism* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970).

[8] For instance, Erika Lee Doss emphasized continuities between Pollock's major work and that of his apprenticeship under the Regionalist Thomas Hart Benton. Doss, *Benton, Pollock, and the Politics of Modernism: From Regionalism to Abstract Expressionism* (Chicago, 1991). The early work of the abstract expressionists would also be much indebted to the exiled New York surrealists, whose work was reproduced and discussed in such journals as *View* (1940-47) and *VVV* (1942-44). For more on these see Stamatina Dimakopoulou, 'Europe in America: Remapping Broken Cultural Lines: *View* (1940-7) and *VVV* (1942-4)', *The Oxford Critical and Cultural History of Modernist Magazines: Volume II, North America 1894-1960*. Ed. Peter Brooker and Andrew Thacker (Oxford, 2012), pp. 737-758.

But Newman's new American art was not exhausted by painting. Along with parallel advances in sculpture and photography—especially by David Smith and Aaron Siskind—there was a strong renaissance of experimental American music. Those associated with the New York School of composers—John Cage, Morton Feldman, Earle Brown, and Christian Wolff—were personally acquainted with the painters, and the groups met at the same Greenwich Village bars, especially the Cedar Tavern. Like the painters, the composers owed debts to European artists newly immigrated to America, forging late modernist legerdemains informed by the European avant-garde.[9] Whether or not they did 'adequately reflect the new America', these movements undoubtedly constituted the new American art Newman had been hoping for in 1943. As Serge Guilbaut puts it, New York had stolen the idea of modern art, and just at the moment when, in the words of G. John Ikenberry, the United States 'emerged as the world's most powerful state'.[10]

But if the imminence of late modernist American painting and music seemed secure by the end of the decade, that of late modernist American literature did not. Indeed, pathologizing the contemporary 'State of American Writing' was a period pastime, both in the United States and across the Atlantic.[11] There was little sense, as there was in other media, that a new round of modernist innovation was on the horizon, that new American writers would establish styles as unforeseen and unfamiliar as the postwar world itself. In a 1948 symposium in the *Partisan Review*, the art critic Clement Greenberg identified the

[9] Cage had studied with Arnold Schoenberg in Los Angeles, Feldman with the German composer Stefan Wolpe in New York. Edgard Varèse, who had been in the United States since 1915, was another key European precursor. See Brigid Maureen Cohen, *Stefan Wolpe and the Avant-Garde Diaspora* (Cambridge, 2012), p. 246. See also Olivia Mattis, 'The Physical and the Abstract: Varèse and the New York School', *The New York Schools of Music and the Visual Arts*. Ed. Steven Johnson (Cambridge, 2002), pp. 57-74.
[10] Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom, and the Cold War.* Trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago, 1985). G. John Ikenberry, *Liberal Leviathan: The Origins, Crisis, and Transformation of the American World Order* (Princeton, 2011), p. 159.
[11] The title of the *Partisan Review*'s symposium in 1948. *Partisan Review* 15:8 (1948), 'The State of American Writing, 1948', pp. 855-894.

problem as one of 'stabilization'.[12] Unlike painting, American writing had become professional and (for Greenberg the one implies the other) pedestrian:

> It seems to me that the most pervasive event in American letters over the last ten years is the stabilization of the avant-garde, accompanied by its growing acceptance by official and commercial culture. It has modified that culture to a limited extent and has in return been granted a recognition and place that do not dissatisfy it. The avant-garde has been professionalized, so to speak, organized into a field for careers; it is no longer the adventure beyond ratified norms, the refusal in the name of truth and excellence to abide by the categories of worldly success and failure. The avant-garde writer *gets ahead* now.[13]

In a word, American modernist writing was 'academic', frozen into a 'standardized repertory of attitudes'.[14] And the conviction that American literature, more than painting or music, was particularly vulnerable to the diktats of 'middlebrow culture', to accommodation and 'getting ahead', was widespread. Writing in *Horizon* the previous year, *Partisan Review* editor William Phillips made a similar point:

> It is almost impossible for a writer to starve here, since easy money is perpetually dangled before anyone with any talent. And all one has to do is to make the proper adjustment, which may be conscious or unconscious, or it may take the form of a permanent conflict resulting from an uneasy compromise. What we can say, however […] is that in the sense that it is difficult to starve, it is difficult to be the kind of writer who might starve. For the impulse to be seriously creative has been mostly channelized into more traditional and acceptable forms. However disturbing it may be to face the facts, it must be said that very few

[12] Clement Greenberg, *The Collected Essays and Criticism Volume 2: Arrogant Purpose, 1945-1949*. Ed. John O'Brian (Chicago, 1988), p. 254.
[13] Greenberg (1988), p. 254. It is worth noting that early postwar writers in Europe were less alarmed by the prospect of literary professionalization. In *What Is Literature* (1947), published in French the same year, Jean-Paul Sartre regarded this less an issue of compromise than of creative responsibility: 'When the whole of Europe is preoccupied before everything else with reconstruction, when nations deprive themselves of necessities in order to export, literature […] reveals its other face. Writing is not living. Neither is it running away from life in order to contemplate Platonic essences and the archetype of beauty in a world at rest. Nor is it letting oneself be slashed, as by swords, by words which, unfamiliar and not understood, come up to us from behind. It is the practising of a profession, a profession which requires an apprenticeship, sustained work, professional consciousness, and the sense of responsibility'. Sartre, *What is Literature?*. Trans. Bernard Frechtman (London, 2010), p. 179.
[14] Greenberg (1988), p. 255.

> contemporary writers have been wholly untouched by the influence of the middlebrow.[15]

Perhaps this was not entirely justified. In the same issue of *Horizon* in which Phillips lamented the absence of 'the kind of writer who might starve', the young poet Philip Lamantia published a 'Letter from San Francisco' announcing the existence of just such authors in California, a whole new 'generation' of West Coast poets 'alive to new orientations—new methods of expression, new moral and intellectual concerns'.[16] Moreover, though in a less experimental mode, new American poets were beginning to publish collections whose voices vied with those of their recent modernist forebears: Elizabeth Bishop's *North & South* (1946), Robert Lowell's *Lord Weary's Castle* (1946), and John Berryman's *The Dispossessed* (1948), amongst others.[17]

Nevertheless, the San Francisco Renaissance, like the New York School of poetry, the Beat movement, and the Confessionals, would not come to maturity until the end of the following decade.[18] And there would be no real resurgence in experimental American poetry until that time, with poets ten to twenty years younger than the painters: Robert Duncan (1919), Barbara Guest (1920), James Schuyler (1923), Denise Levertov (1923), Frank O'Hara (1926), Allen Ginsberg (1926), Robert Creeley (1926), John Ashbery (1927), Ed Dorn (1929), and so on. In other words, there was no literary counterpart to the

[15] William Phillips, 'Portrait of the Artist as an American', *Horizon* 93/94 (October 1947), pp. 12-13.
[16] Philip Lamantia, 'Letter from San Francisco', *Horizon* 93/94 (October 1947), p. 118.
[17] Modernist poets of the previous generation also published major mature work at the close of the war. Pound's *The Pisan Cantos* (1948), which Charles Olson read before publication, would cause controversy when it earned Pound the Library of Congress's Bollingen Prize. The first volume of William Carlos Williams's *Paterson* appeared in 1946 and would prove crucial to Olson's later conception of the *Maximus Poems*. What is crucial however, and what the essays in *Partisan Review* and *Horizon* make clear, is that there was a need for a radically new postwar literary art that was not being satisfied.
[18] Michael Davidson, in his study of the San Francisco Renaissance, focuses on the years '1955 to 1965', beginning with the infamous Six Gallery reading in October 1955 by Allen Ginsberg, Michael McClure, Gary Snyder, Philip Whalen, and Philip Lamantia. Davidson, *The San Francisco Renaissance: Poetics and Community at Mid-century* (Cambridge, 1989), pp. xiii, 3.

radical innovations in painting and music which were beginning to become apparent in New York from around 1943.[19]

But one poet would later become acutely conscious of belonging to the same generation as Pollock and de Kooning, even if his residence in Washington, D.C. meant that he did not recognize this at the time.[20] Sequestered from the art scene in New York, his work to the end of the decade ran parallel to theirs, both in its insistence on new aesthetic advances and in its struggle with the conditions which made this necessary. For Jean-Paul Sartre, writing in 1948, the American writer 'muses less about glory than he dreams of fraternity', and this was certainly true of Charles Olson, whose genuine contemporaries worked in studios four hours away, and whose literary life in Washington was ultimately that of the Pequod, 'Isolato'.[21]

*

What would it mean then to reread the early postwar avant-garde through the contemporary writings, much of them unpublished, of a contemporary American poet? To begin with, Olson would not long remain as islanded as Melville's whale ships, 'separately sailing the sea' (though all the more 'sociable' for that).[22] From 1948 he began to teach at Black Mountain College, several miles from Asheville, North Carolina.[23] There, over the next eight years, he encountered several artists of his own generation: Kline, Cage,

[19] Following Donald Allen's classic anthology, *The New American Poetry 1945-1960*, some studies elide the late forties into the more radical fifties. A recent example of this would be Alan Filreis, *Counter-revolution of the Word: The Conservative Attack on Modern Poetry 1945-1960* (Chapel Hill, 2008). The first section of Filreis's book is entitled 'The Fifties' Thirties', and the first five years of his period are lost in that decade. Filreis's 'archival methodology' ('what is literally past Z') is such that Olson is given short shrift in this study, p. xiii.

[20] 'I believe that the American painters,' Olson would say, 'namely Mr Pollock and Mr Kline, in 1948, and I'm of their time, solved the problem of how to live'. Olson, *Muthologos: Lectures and Interviews*. 2nd ed. Ed. Ralph Maud (Vancouver, 2010), p. 224.

[21] Charles Olson, *The Maximus Poems*. Ed. George F. Butterick (Berkeley, 1983), p. 16. The noun, which Melville used of the crew of the Pequod, is used by Olson to describe both Gloucester's fishermen and Maximus himself. Subsequent references to the Maximus poems will be given as MPo.

[22] Herman Melville, *Moby Dick*. Ed. Tony Tanner (Oxford, 2008), p. 215.

[23] For the most comprehensive account of Black Mountain College in the period see Mary Emma Harris, *The Arts at Black Mountain College* (Cambridge, Mass., 2002).

24

Motherwell, and Siskind (though not de Kooning, who finished *Asheville* (1948) at Black Mountain just weeks before he arrived for the first time in October 1948).[25] He would also meet second generation New York School artists such as Cy Twombly (whom he greatly admired) and Robert Rauschenberg (whom he did not), and form lasting friendships with the composer Stefan Wolpe (Morton Feldman's former tutor) and his wife the poet Hilda Morley, both of whom had been key members of the abstract expressionist Eighth Street Club in New York.[26]

[24] A further incidental connection exists between Olson and this painting. It was acquired in 1953 by the Phillips Collection in Washington, one of whose curators, John Gernand, had been the inspiration for Olson's lisping Fernand in 'The Kingfishers' (1949). Ralph Maud, *What Does Not Change: The Significance of Charles Olson's "The Kingfishers"* (Madison, 1998), p. 25.

[25] Annalyn Swan and Mark Stevens, *De Kooning: An American Master* (New York, 2004), pp. 252-258.

[26] For more on Morley and the abstract expressionists see Mark Byers, 'Hilda Morley and the Painters', *Contemporary Women's Writing* 8.3 (November 2014), pp. 262-280. For Morley's recollections of the Eighth Street Club see Morley Wolpe, 'The Eighth Street Club, From *A Thousand Birds: An Autobiographical Memoir*', *On the Music of Stefan Wolpe: Essays and Recollections*. Ed. Austin Clarkson (Hillsdale, 2003). Incidentally, evidence that Olson knew something of Feldman's music comes from his report to Robert Creeley of Rauschenberg's near-drowning in Black Mountain's lake in 1952. According to Olson, Rauschenberg had been 'blown out by the pressure of Morton Feldman's stuff' before 'going out of the door of the dining hall' and swimming out into the lake. Charles Olson and Robert Creeley, *The Complete Correspondence: Volume 9*. Ed. Richard Blevins (Santa Rosa, 1990), p. 64.

Even in the absence of such personal contact however, there might still be reason to regard the oeuvre of a poet as potentially revealing of cognate developments in other media, especially when the sense of an 'unconscious community', a shared *Weltanschauung,* was strong.[27] This is particularly true of the early years of the American avant-garde, when (as Olson's early work proves beyond doubt) the idea of a 'we', a potential plurality of late modernist artists across the arts, was pervasive: 'We are off on another path' Olson claimed in a note of 1948, taking as self-evident the existence of peers he had yet to meet.[28]

But accounting for this first-personal plural is more difficult, and Olson's assertion that he was of the same 'time' as Pollock and Kline does not get us very far. In December 1964, however, Newman made a more searching attempt in a television interview with Frank O'Hara. Broadcast as part of the Channel 13 series 'Art: New York' the interview saw O'Hara reveal his impressive understanding of Newman's work whilst gently ribbing their maker, visibly discomfited by the idea of turning his paintings over to the insufficient world of words.[29] Asked about *Pagan Void* (1946), whose marine palette and gestatory figures suggest nothing so much as the world under microscope, Newman gave an account of the pressures under which this painting had been created. In doing so, he gave a thumbnail sketch of the conditions out of which Olson's 'generation' had emerged:

> I was preoccupied with the void in the sense that I disliked the void and I must say that all these things took place […] after having gone through the terrible war and earlier Depression. I think our generation, and certainly I…

[27] T. S. Eliot, 'The Function of Criticism' (1923), *Selected Essays* (London, 1951), p. 24. As Eliot put it: 'Between the true artists of any time there is, I believe, an unconscious community', p. 24.
[28] Charles Olson, 'Creatively we are neolithic', I Box 29:1518, Prose No. 204, Charles Olson Research Collection. Archives and Special Collections at the Thomas J. Dodd Research Center, University of Connecticut Libraries.
[29] The New York School's resistance to language is discussed at length in Chapter Four. Though Newman himself never ceased inventing literary titles for his work, Rothko, Still, and Pollock turned decisively to purely descriptive names, often including numbers or letters.

> we were hopeful. And so I was involved with a sense of the void out of which life could begin.[30]

The same year, in the first draft of 'La Torre' (1946), Olson expressed the same hope and need to 'begin again', the sense that 'our generation' had been gifted an historical opening, an opportunity to renew not only modernist art but also modernity itself, 'modern man' in particular.[31] And 'La Préface', also of 1946, echoed Newman in expressing this starting-over in metaphors of birth and regeneration: 'We are the new born', 'vita nuova', 'We are born not of the buried but these unburied dead', 'The Babe / the Howling Babe'.[32]

Even non-American artists recognized the imminence of a 'vita nuova' led by the United States. In 1943 Salvador Dalí had produced *Geopoliticus Child Watching the Birth of the New Man* (1943) in New York. Here, as Newman and Olson would figure three years later, new life irrupted from the North American continent itself. And like Olson and Newman, Dalí stressed the 'dire woe' from which this 'Howling Babe' was emerging, a streak of blood seeping from the broken shell of the war-torn globe.[33] Such birth throes had been experienced throughout the world during the global Depression and the Second World War. But as Newman emphasized, the American experience had been one of special uncertainty and transformation, a period C. Vann Woodward has described as 'unique in American history for its complexities of change and violence of contrasts':

> People who lived through the years of the Great Depression, the New Deal, and the Second World War—only half the years normally assigned to one generation—experienced more bewildering changes than had several generations of their predecessors. These changes included a transition from economic and social paralysis to unprecedented outbursts of national energy,

[30] Barnett Newman and Frank O'Hara, 'The Continuity of Vision' (8 December 1964), http://www.frankohara. org/media/video.html. Accessed 30 October 2012.
[31] Charles Olson, 'La Torre', I Box 18:717. Charles Olson Research Collection, Archives and Special Collections at the Thomas J. Dodd Research Center, University of Connecticut Libraries. Barnett Newman, 'The New Sense of Fate', *Selected Writings and Interviews*. Ed. John P. O'Neill (Berkeley, 1992), p. 169.
[32] Charles Olson, *The Collected Poems of Charles Olson Excluding the Maximus poems*. Ed. George F. Butterick (Berkeley, 1987), pp. 46-47. Subsequent references will be given as CPo.
[33] William Blake, *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*. Ed. David V. Erdman (Berkeley, 2008), p. 483.

> the emergence from wretched years of poverty to unparalleled levels of prosperity, and the repudiation of a century-and-a-half of isolation as America entered World War II.[34]

The New York School generation had been young adults at the time of the Wall Street Crash in October 1929. Olson was eighteen, a sophomore at Wesleyan University, Newman a student at the Art Students League in New York. Rothko, twenty-seven, was teaching at the Brooklyn Jewish Center. Each would be caught in the turbid political



waters of the following decade, Olson aligning himself with the 'bold, persistent experimentation' of the New Deal, the painters taking advantage of the Federal Art Project of the Works Progress Administration.[35] Common cause against fascism (encapsulated in the Popular Front policy of the Comintern) meant that, in these years, little distinguished a

[34] C. Vann Woodward, 'Editor's Introduction', *Freedom from Fear: The American People in Depression and War, 1929-1945* (New York, 2001), p. xiii.
[35] President Roosevelt's promise during the presidential campaign of 1932. Quoted in David M. Kennedy, *Freedom from Fear: The American People in Depression and War, 1929-1945* (New York, 2001), p. 218. Barnett Newman was one of the few artists associated with the New York School not to receive funds through the Federal Art Project, preferring to maintain his independence from the government and supporting himself by teaching. Ann Temkin, 'Barnett Newman on Exhibition', *Barnett Newman*. Ed. Ann Temkin (Philadelphia, 2002), p. 24.

Rooseveltian liberal like Olson from any other advocates of social reform; Marxist, labourist or otherwise.[36]

This crisis consensus did not last long however. With the coming of war in Europe the American left fragmented and de-radicalized. On the one hand, and most obviously, the Moscow Trials (1936-38) and the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact (1939) brought about a crisis of coherence within the revolutionary movement. This was mirrored in journals such as *Partisan Review*, which divorced from the Communist Party in 1937 in order to establish an 'unequivocally independent' forum for radical ideas and cultural criticism.[37] Despite major strike action into the middle of the following decade, there was growing scepticism about Old Left strategy and the revolutionary efficacy of the American (and world) working class. For many on the formerly radical left, Communism was now a failing god.[38]

At the same time, the reformist fervour of the New Deal quietly subsided. As David M. Kennedy notes, 'Roosevelt's annual message to Congress in January 1939 was his first in which he did not propose new social and economic programs'.[39] And even if he had, they would have been unnecessary, since 'recovery awaited not the release of more New Deal energies but the unleashing of the dogs of war' two years later.[40] Thus, as Richard H. Pells observes, the era of reformist experiment which had seen liberals and Communists near-allies was over. At the start of the war, American intellectuals and artists were no longer energised by social change:

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[36] As Daniel Aaron put it: 'You could be for every kind of social reform, for the Soviet Union, for the Communist Party, for proletarian literature—for everything and anything that was at one time radical, rebellious, subversive, revolutionary, and downright quixotic—and in doing so you were on the side of all the political angels of the day; you were on the side of the Roosevelt administration, on the side of Labor, the Negroes, the middle classes; on the side of Hitler's victims, on the side of all the oppressed colonial peoples in the world'. Quoted in Guilbaut (1985), pp. 18-19.
[37] Anonymous, 'Editorial Statement', *Partisan Review* 4:1 (December 1937), p. 3.
[38] See the collection of essays under that name. R. H. S. Crossman (ed), *The God that Failed: Six Studies in Communism* (London, 1950).
[39] Kennedy (2001), p. 363.
[40] Kennedy (2001), p. 363.

> By 1939, the issues of the Depression were already giving way to the anticipation of combat. The complicated problems of unemployment and economic collapse, the experimental impulse of the New Deal, the radical ideas and programs that captivated the imagination of many intellectuals in the 1930s, had all faded at the end of the decade.[41]

The 'generation' of Olson and Newman had long inhabited the radical political imaginary of the thirties, only to witness its decline as mature adults. For the painters, this was reflected both institutionally and stylistically. Though the Federal Art Project had tolerated abstraction, most of those associated with the New York School had worked in representative modes, their work keyed to the quotidia of American life, and occasionally slipping—as in the case of David Smith's *Medals for Dishonor* (1937-40)—towards the propagandistic.[42] But during the war, as the left buckled and retreated, the insufficiency of the 'subject' began to be felt keenly. This was treated directly by Newman in his essay 'The Problem of Subject Matter' (1944-45) which hailed the postimpressionists for making possible the 'emancipation of the artist from nature'.[43] Parallel with the move from subject to abstraction, American painters also disengaged from institutional associations with social aesthetics. In 1940, for instance, Rothko and Gottlieb abandoned the Popular Front American Artists' Congress for Meyer Schapiro's new Federation of Modern Painters and Sculptors. Though prompted by the Soviet invasion of Finland (which the AAC failed to condemn), this was an opportunity to withdraw from the social aesthetic of the Popular Front and imagine a 'free progressive art' which was essentially apolitical.[44] Tentatively

[41] Richard H. Pells, *The Liberal Mind in a Conservative Age: American Intellectuals in the 1940s and 1950s* (New York, 1985), p. 8.
[42] Jeremy Lewison (ed.), *David Smith: Medals for Dishonor, 1937-1940* (Leeds, 1991).
[43] Barnett Newman, 'The Problem of Subject Matter', *Selected Writing and Interviews*. Ed. John P. O'Neill (Berkeley, 1992), p. 83.
[44] As Serge Guilbaut notes: 'Even though many of the artists belonging to the Schapiro group were affiliated with the Trotskyists, the emphasis was on the apolitical nature of the group, whose purpose was said to be to defend the interests of artists and the "democratic way of life"'. Guilbaut (1985), p. 41.

but determinedly, progressive American artists were developing abstract styles from positions socially and politically aloof.

Newman's recollection in 1964 was therefore far from unwarranted. At the close of the war, the idea of a 'hopeful' new beginning was pervasive, predicated on a forgetting of the aesthetic and political imperatives of the previous decade, and a conviction that a sea-change was imminent in American art as much as it was in world affairs. The 'generation' which Newman and Olson spoke of as unique and coherent, subject to the same narrative of political hope and slow disillusionment, looked hopefully to a new era which they conceived of as a *tabula rasa*, clear of the internecine controversies and political fervours of the previous years. It was the nature of this 'vita nuova' that would be at stake in the new American modernism, an advance squared against novel social conditions: the de-radicalisation of the left, an economy thriving on private consumption, the spectre of totalitarianism, the *Pax Americana*.

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From Randolph Place Northeast, a forty minute walk to Capitol Hill and the Library of Congress, Olson had established by the close of the war a political career at both the Office of War Information (1942-44) and the Democratic National Committee (1944).[45] His commitment to Roosevelt had brought him some prominence within the Democratic Party machine, especially in the run up to the 1944 Presidential Election.[46] But with his poem 'Telegram' (1945), which he later renamed 'The K', Olson had begun to make his exit from party political engagement, claiming creative autonomy just as the painters had in New York a few years earlier. Withdrawing from political life, Olson would catch a 'tide' with which he hoped to 'run again and swell / to be tumescent I' (CPo 14). Relying on the

[45] He would also work briefly for the Congress of Industrial Organizations in 1946.
[46] Olson was entrusted with the task of winning the votes of first and second-generation Americans on the East Coast as Director of the Foreign Nationalities Division of the DNC. Tom Clark, *Charles Olson: The Allegory of a Poet's Life* (New York, 1991), pp. 85-89.

income of his wife Constance, and the collections of the Library of Congress, he completed his Herman Melville study *Call Me Ishmael* by the end of 1945.

But it was only the following year, 1946, that Olson came to understand the timeliness of his commitment to writing and the pressing need for a new postwar aesthetic. In other words, it was only in 1946, the year of Newman's series of gestatory works (*Pagan Void, Genesis-The Break, The Beginning*), that Olson identified the need for an art which would take the measure of the newborn postwar world. The language with which he imagined this reflected closely that of the painters, as we will see. But it was also encouraged by confidantes closer to home. In November 1945 he had been assigned *Twice a Year* reporter for the trial of Ezra Pound, recently arraigned on nineteen counts of treason.[47] In January 1946, with the encouragement of the publisher James Laughlin, he visited Pound at St. Elizabeth's Hospital in Washington, where the poet had been transferred after entering an insanity plea at the District Court.[48] Olson would write a partial defence of Pound for the *Partisan Review* the same year, 'This Is Yeats Speaking' (1946), and, as his notebooks attest, he read or reread Pound's prose in preparation for his visits.[49] The meetings continued until February 1948 when, after Pound's sneers about the parentage of William Carlos Williams, Olson ended his uneasy discipleship.[50] From Pound Olson derived a prose and verse style characterized by parataxis, an insistence on the

[47] Humphrey Carpenter, *A Serious Character: The Life of Ezra Pound* (London, 1988), pp. 706-708.
[48] For a full account of the meetings see Charles Olson, *Charles Olson and Ezra Pound: An Encounter at St. Elizabeth's*. Ed. Catherine Seelye (New York, 1975).
[49] Charles Olson, 'Washington, Spring 1945' (Notebook #12). I Box 64, Charles Olson Research Collection, Archives and Special Collections at the Thomas J. Dodd Research Center, University of Connecticut Libraries.
[50] *Twice a Year* had published Olson's first essay in 1938. Olson, '*Lear* and *Moby-Dick*', *Twice a Year* I (Fall-Winter 1938), pp. 165-189.

*Figure 1.4*. Charles Olson and Corrado Cagli in Washington, D.C. (c. 1946). Charles Olson Research Collection.

presentness of the past, and recourse to a model of the poet as unacknowledged legislator. Pound's example, especially in the *Cantos*, would remain Olson's touchstone, even when his own disjunctive epic, *The Maximus Poems* (1950-70), swung closer to the work of Williams in *Paterson* (1946-58).[51]

Just as significant as his appointments with Pound, however, was Olson's 1946 reunion with Corrado Cagli, an Italian painter of the *Scuola Romana* whom Olson had first met before the war.[52] With the assistance of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, Cagli had arrived in the United States in 1940. He later enlisted in the US Army, serving in Europe and witnessing the liberation of the Buchenwald concentration camp. Cagli's influence—especially his Buchenwald drawings and his interest in multidimensional

[51] Many readers would convict Olson of over-indebtedness, including Frank O'Hara, who recommended Olson to Jasper Johns with caveats: 'I don't know if you like Charles Olson but I always find him interesting if sometimes rather cold and echoey of Ezra Pound, but I like the Maximus poems and IN COLD HELL IN THICKET very much'. Quoted in Marjorie Perloff, *Frank O'Hara: Poet among Painters* (Chicago, 1998), p. 15. Accounting for Olson's debts, whether sympathetically or critically, has usually meant ignoring the historical milieu of his writing. For instance Don Byrd claims that 'in the fragmentary and incoherent record left by the modernist masters, Olson found a useful practice which restores us to ourselves', a claim which (leaving aside its cultish overtones) follows the formalist critics of abstract expressionism in regarding Olson as the acme of a hermetic modernist tradition rather than an artist speaking out of immediate conditions. Byrd, *Charles Olson's Maximus* (Urbana, 1980), p. 8.

[52] Clark (1991), p. 64.

space—would be decisive for Olson in the next few years.[53] He stood behind Olson's first major poem, 'La Préface', and the two collaborated on Olson's first chapbook, *y & x* (1948), published in Washington by the Black Sun Press. Cagli remained a correspondent until 1958.[54]

Even in Washington then, Olson was not quite an 'Isolato'. And two further figures offered stimulus through correspondence. The first, Frances Boldereff, was a typographic designer, independent scholar, Russophile and (at least according to her neighbours in rural Pennsylvania) Soviet secret agent.[55] Boldereff wrote to Olson for the first time in November 1947 after finding *Call Me Ishmael* on the shelves of Pennsylvania State College library.[56] By September 1950, less than a year after the start of an affair, their correspondence ran to 328 items. Boldereff provided Olson, as Sharon Thesen puts it, with a creative 'compass', offering not only encouragement but also problems and ideas which would find their way into his early writings.[57] The same was true of the second correspondent, Robert Creeley, whom Williams introduced to Olson in a letter of 20 April 1950. When Olson's correspondence with this twenty-four year old writer was published four decades later ('He's got some ideas and wants to USE them,' Williams had confided) it filled ten volumes up to 1952.[58]

Along with his increasing contact with Black Mountain College, these were the parameters of Olson's creative life. And the urgency with which, between them, he began

[53] The wartime drawings are collected in Corrado Cagli, *Disegni di guerra* (Milan, 1971).
[54] Cagli's final letter from Rome records a fascinating moment in postwar literary history. Having spent 'two days reading and translating' 'In Cold Hell, In Thicket' (1950) for the Italian poet Emilio Villa, the latter is said to have announced that he and Olson must be 'twins'. Cagli to Charles Olson (15 April 1958). II Box 135, Charles Olson Research Collection, Archives and Special Collections at the Thomas J. Dodd Research Center, University of Connecticut Libraries.
[55] Sharon Thesen, 'Introduction', *Charles Olson and Frances Boldereff: A Modern Correspondence*. Ed. Ralph Maud and Sharon Thesen (Hanover, 1999), p. x.
[56] Thesen (1999), p. x.
[57] Thesen (1999), p. ix.
[58] William Carlos Williams to Charles Olson (20 April 1950). II Box 222, Charles Olson Research Collection, Archives and Special Collections at the Thomas J. Dodd Research Center, University of Connecticut Libraries.

to ‘begin again’ is evidenced in the poems, lectures, notes and drafts written between 1946 and the end of the decade.[59] These writings reveal Olson to be, along with Newman, Cage and Greenberg, one of the major advocates of the new avant-garde, wrestling with the problems, imperatives, and opportunities which awaited American artists now that the United States had become, in Newman’s words, ‘the cultural center of the world’.

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But what was the nature of the ‘vita nuova’? What kind of era did the new modernists hope to articulate, or usher themselves through the doors of American history? This was a question traditionally ignored by the painters’ early formalist critics, who found in the new avant-garde only the apogee of modernist pictorial tradition, a realisation of the autonomous easel picture that was also, by necessity, its self-annihilation.[60] Later ‘revisionist’ critiques gave a more lateral perspective, emphasizing the ideological stakes involved in the making of a new avant-garde at the turn of the ‘American Century’, especially as this seemed to involve the painters in reneging on their earlier political postures.[61] But as ‘The K’ revealed in the terms of Marcus Brutus, the turn from outright social advocacy to creative autonomy was a conflicted and reluctant one. Abandoning positions adjacent to progressive social movements might not mean deserting social need altogether:

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[59] There is a tradition of focussing attention on these pivotal years in art history. Serge Guilbaut focussed on the period between roughly 1943 and 1950 in *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art* (1985). Nancy Jachec justifies a slightly narrower time frame: ‘1945 marks both the end of World War II and the beginning of a stylistic change in the work of each of the Abstract Expressionists, as they moved from a Surrealist-influenced style to what can be considered their mature styles. 1950 is more of a temporary terminus, roughly marking the point at which the journey from socialism to American-style democracy is completed […] These five years also encapsulate both the visual and theoretical development pf the artists we customarily recognise as the Abstract Expressionists’. Jachec, ‘“The Space between Art and Political Action”: Abstract Expressionism and Ethical Choice in Postwar America 1945-1950’, *Oxford Art Journal* 14:2 (1991), p. 18.

[60] Clement Greenberg, ‘The Crisis of the Easel Picture’, *The Collected Essays and Criticism Volume 2: Arrogant Purpose, 1945-1949.* Ed. John O’Brian (Chicago, 1988), pp. 221-225.

[61] Henry Luce, ‘The American Century’, *Life* 17 February (1941), pp. 61-65. Luce announced to his American readers that: ‘it now becomes our time to be the powerhouse from which the ideals [of justice, truth, and charity] spread throughout the world and do their mysterious work of lifting the life of mankind from the level of the beasts to what the Psalmist called a little lower than the angels’, p. 65.

Take, then, my answer:
there is a tide in a man
moves him to his moon and,
though it drop him back
he works through ebb to mount
the run again and swell
to be tumescent I

The affairs of men remain a chief concern (CPo 14)

Perhaps the final line protests too much. 'But the affairs of men remain a chief concern', or even 'Nevertheless, the affairs of men remain a chief concern', are the grammatical concessions Olson does not bring himself to make. Anxious not to appear to have forsaken social commitment for literary bohemianism, for *l'art pour l'art*, 'The K' falls for *non sequitur*. The distance between 'tumescent I' and the 'affairs of men'—drawn out further by enjambment—is never really closed by the stately iambic.[62]

But that the new American modernism might incorporate, in some transfigured form, the aspirations of prewar politics was not the ambition of Olson alone. Indeed, despite the 'nightmarish' Cecil Beaton photographs of 1951, the new avant-garde did not simply accommodate itself to the fierce new postwar liberalism, an outlook efficiently subsidized by a federal government keen to promote homeownership and private consumption (Levittown, that archetype of postwar suburbia, was constructed between 1947 and 1951).[63] And though it may sometimes have led to absurdity—Newman would claim that if only people understood his pictures 'it would mean the end of all state capitalism and

[62] Olson's readers have often underestimated this change of tack. For instance, Robert von Hallberg identified a trajectory of emulation, whereby Olson's literary work became as socially 'ambitious' as the New Deal politics he had left behind: 'Olson began his literary career in reaction against political events immediately following World War II. He designed a poetic theory as ambitious in its way as the political administration from which he resigned'. von Hallberg, *Charles Olson: The Scholar's Art* (Cambridge, Mass., 1978), p. 3. And Lisa Siraganian has recently asked 'how a poet heading toward an administrative political career at the end of World War II, a poet dedicated to advancing progressivism within the structures of government, transforms these institutional convictions into a poetics'. Siraganian, *Modernism's Other Work: The Art Object's Political Life* (Oxford, 2012), p. 145.

[63] *Vogue* published several Beaton photographs of evening-gowned models before Pollock's paintings in March 1951. For T. J. Clark: 'The photographs are nightmarish. They speak to the hold of capitalist culture: that is, to the ease with which it can outflank work done against the figurative, and make it part of a new order of pleasures', *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism* (New Haven, 1999), p. 365.

totalitarianism'—the sense that the 'affairs of men' remained at issue in the new work was strong, even when the avant-garde echoed American political language by shifting its focus from Depression and wartime collectives, 'men', towards the liberal postwar monad: 'tumescent I'.[64]

Indeed, not for the first time in modern literary and art history, the semblance of radical change, of the new modernism's commitment to cultural betterment, was maintained by a substitution of literal social revolution by philosophical upheaval.[65] Disappointed by the prospects of collective political change, American artists now sought metaphysical or phenomenological revolution instead, imagining changes in the modern habitus which did not depend upon revolutionising American *politeia.* It is this inflection point which *After the New Failure of Nerve: Charles Olson and American Modernism 1946-1951* takes as its subject of inquiry, the moment when interventions over class and economy were translated into vigorous searches, in Olson's own words, for a new 'stance toward reality'.[66]

[64] As Nancy Jachec argues, and as this thesis will suggest, the new avant-garde was invested in a broader movement on the American left to discover new kinds of radical agency in the individual, now that the world working class had proved politically inefficacious. Nancy Jachec, *The Philosophy and Politics of Abstract Expressionism, 1940-1960* (Cambridge, 2000), pp. 8, 22. Barnett Newman, '"Frontiers of Space": Interview with Dorothy Gees Seckler', *Selected Writings and Interviews*. Ed. John P. O'Neill (Berkeley, 1992), p. 251.
[65] Following Jachec, it does not seem enough to claim, like Stephen Polcari, that the abstract expressionists were simply 'not interested in ideological politics' and that instead they 'drew from the psychological experience of their time'. Almost all the painters (and Olson) had prewar and wartime commitments to left, communist, or liberal programmes or groups. A major part of their 'psychological experience of their time' was the abandonment of these positions. It was not that they were 'not interested' in ideology then, but that they were in search of some kind of compensation for political disillusionment, turning to revolutions of sensibility rather than collective social upheaval. Polcari, *Abstract Expressionism and the Modern Experience* (Cambridge, 1991), p. xxii. For the same reasons, neither is it true, as Guilbaut avers, that artists 'deserted politics altogether' by turning the 'sole focus of interest' to the individual. Guilbaut (1985), p. 142.
[66] Indeed, although it is true that, in Michael Davidson's words, Olson 'had no use for the generalized cultural despair of a Joyce or an Eliot', he certainty shared high modernism's redemptive fervour. Davidson, 'Archeologist of Morning: Charles Olson, Edward Dorn, and Historical Method', *ELH* 47:1 (1980), p. 177. Charles Olson, *Collected Prose*. Ed Donald Allen and Benjamin Friedlander (Berkeley, 1997), p. 247. Subsequent references to this collection will be given in the text as CPr.

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But the nature of the philosophical changes now imagined were nevertheless shaped and defined by the political experiences of the previous fifteen years. In 1943 the *Partisan Review* hosted a series of articles under the title 'The New Failure of Nerve', a controversy exactly contemporary with—and in many ways revealing of—the kind of 'beginning again' now imagined by American artists. In the first of these essays, the Pragmatist and socialist Sidney Hook diagnosed a new loss of faith in scientific method, an 'intellectual panic' which was beginning to segue into philosophical obscurantism.[67] For Hook, this loss of nerve was the fallout of recent failures on the American and international left. It was caused, he said, by the 'inability of those liberal, labor, and socialist movements which have prided themselves on being scientific and which have lost one social campaign after another, to supply a positive philosophy, that would weld emotion and scientific intelligence, as a new rallying ground'.[68]

This diagnosis, of a loss of faith in scientific method, and even of a tendency to impute to such method the logic of totalitarianism, was more perspicuous than even Hook himself imagined. Max Horkheimer followed the debate closely whilst revising Adorno's chapter on the culture industry in *Dialektik der Aufklärung* (1944), which appeared the following year.[69] Moreover, the 'beginning again' of the new avant-garde incorporated the revolt against instrumental reason into the most basic textures of its work, both discursively (in the writings of Olson, Newman, and Cage particularly) and in the form of renewed interest in the primitive, irrationality, spontaneity, uncertainty, indeterminacy, and the

[67] Sidney Hook, 'The New Failure of Nerve', *Partisan Review* 10:1 (1943), p. 2.
[68] Hook, 'The New Failure of Nerve' (1943), p. 8. The amplification of political disappointment into critique of modern rationality was inevitable if, as Zygmunt Bauman has said, 'Communism was modernity in its most determined mood and most decisive posture; modernity streamlined, purified of the last shred of the chaotic, the irrational, the spontaneous, the unpredictable', *Intimations of Postmodernity* (New York, 1992), p. 167.
[69] James Schmidt, '"The New Failure of Nerve", the *Eclipse of Reason*, and the Critique of Enlightenment in New York and Los Angeles, 1940-1947', http://people.bu.edu/jschmidt/James_Schmidt/Welcome_files/Schmidt CASMunich.pdf. Accessed 26 October 2012.

unconscious.[70] The general spirit of their critique can be gleaned from typewritten notes composed by Olson in April 1947:

> The upper hand on matter makes engineers of all of us, technocrats, hippocrats, democrats. Bah. We don't know from nothin'. I am no Luddite, nor do I play romantic to the past, but I should very much demand we look around us and consider what the engineers have done to human life. What improvement have they made in the personal and the private sense of experience?[71]

That rational and instrumental dominion over 'matter' does not necessarily improve the 'personal and the private sense of experience'—that it might actually diminish the depth and range of human experience—was the theme Olson shared with many of his contemporaries; Adorno and Horkheimer, but also the painters and composers who would all seek, in their various ways, to circumscribe the reach of reason in their work.[72] And although critiques of this sort had shadowed 'scientific method' from its earliest beginnings, the 'New Failure of Nerve' was, as Hook argued, spurred and shaped by recent political disappointment.[73] The new American modernism weighed against modern

[70] Nancy Jachec observes that the painters had already incorporated 'a form of commentary on technocracy and instrumental reason while still in their Surrealist phase'. Jachec (2000), p. 89. More broadly, Jachec reads the new American 'Counter-Enlightenment' in the light of the influence of French existentialism. Jachec (2000), pp. 105-156. Michael Leja, on the other hand, situates the nascent critique of abstract reason in a contemporary 'Modern Man' discourse. But this literature, as Leja himself notes, has its roots in the early twentieth-century, and can only provide a very nebulous intellectual context. Leja, *Reframing Abstract Expressionism: Subjectivity and Painting in the 1940s* (New Haven, 1993). Paul Christensen is typical of Olson's readers when he notes the poet's critique of 'Western thinking' without providing intellectual context. Christensen, *Charles Olson, call him Ishmael* (Austin, 1979), p.7.

[71] Charles Olson, 'De Priapo or, Notes for an Historian of a Suppressed Religion', I Box 30:1531, Prose No. 204, Charles Olson Research Collection, Archives and Special Collections at the Thomas J. Dodd Research Center, University of Connecticut Libraries.

[72] It was also shared by George Orwell. In *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) scientific reason is used only for the purposes of social control: 'In Newspeak there is no word for 'Science'. The empirical method of thought, on which all the scientific achievements of the past were founded, is opposed to the most fundamental principles of Ingsoc. And even technological progress only happens when its products can in some way be used for the diminution of human liberty'. Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (London, 2000), p. 201.

[73] The term 'Counter-Enlightenment', although used by Nietzsche in 1877 (*Gegenaufklärung*), was first used in English by William Barrett in his *Partisan Review* essay 'Art, Aristocracy, and Reason' (1949). It seems likely that scholarship on the tradition of counter-Enlightenment thought was itself stimulated by the 'New Failure of Nerve'. See James Schmidt, who argues that the idea of counter-Enlightenment was invented at this moment in order to 'fortify liberalism in the face of the threat posed by totalitarianism'. Schmidt, 'Inventing a Counter-Enlightenment: Liberalism, Nihilism, and Totalitarianism', http://people.bu.edu/jschmidt/James_Schmidt/. Accessed 28 April 2014. Another contemporary, Isaiah Berlin (b. 1909), would

instrumental reason (the 'upper hand on matter') because of its ubiquity in the language of modern progressive politics, the radical projects and programs which had already fallen apart by the time of Pearl Harbour and the American entry into the Second World War. New American artists could therefore imagine their turn to the 'personal and the private sense of experience' not as a quietist retreat from collective struggle but as a preparing of the ground for more thoroughgoing kinds of philosophical, phenomenological or cognitive change.[74]

If the 'affairs of men' were still to be at issue in the new American art then, and if it could still claim to be in some sense revolutionary, this was because the movement regarded itself as contesting what Newman would call (also in 1947) the 'domination of science over the mind of modern man'.[75] 'To begin again' was to break free from an 'outmoded politics', but it was also to begin again intellectually.[76] The 'vita nuova' was imagined as a fresh start because it was also—to adapt a phrase of Olson's—an 'archaeology of morning', an attempt to recuperate regions of thought supposedly obscured by the 'domination' of modern scientific rationality, 'logic', 'classification', 'discourse', and other structures of modern intellectual life.[77] Even where major rifts appeared within the early postwar avant-garde—such, as we will see, over the 'lyrical interference of the individual as ego' (CPr 247)—it remained coherent in its hostility to scientism and the subordination of the 'personal and private sense of experience' to abstract reason.

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popularise the term in the coming decades. See especially Berlin, *Three Critics of the Enlightenment: Vico, Hamann, Herder* (London, 2000).

[74] The general sense that the violence of the Second World War had precipitated a *moral* shift is well attested by American writers in Europe. During the Blitz H.D. would write that: 'in the rain of incendiary, / other values were revealed to us'. H. D., *Trilogy* (Cheadle, 1973), p. 19.

[75] Barnett Newman, 'The First Man Was an Artist', *Selected Writings and Interviews*. Ed. John P. O'Neill (Berkeley, 1992), p. 157.

[76] Newman, 'American Modern Artists', (1992), p. 29.

[77] 'Logic' and 'discourse' would be anathematized in Olson's essay of 1951, 'Human Universe' (CPr 156).

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How this essentially theoretical turn, an ironic disavowal of 'all the vestigia of Western civilization we have inherited', formed the basis of a new art, is a question this thesis approaches from the especially revealing vantage of a poet's poetry and prose.[78] Olson's early work is seen here not as that strange meeting of iconoclasm and derivativeness it is sometimes taken to be, but as an archive uncommonly reflective of a 'genetic moment' in postwar American art, one of the most indicative 'voltometers and steam-gauges' of the time.[79]

The first chapter uncovers this generative moment in the substitution of conventional progressive political agencies for another kind of revolutionary momentum: the supposed authenticity, groundedness, and vitality of 'first' or primitive man. Reading Olson's poems from 1946, as well as unpublished prose notes, the chapter situates these texts amidst contemporary works and writings by Newman, Rothko, and Gottlieb, whilst drawing out the implications of the 'New Failure of Nerve' controversy of 1943. If participants in that debate feared that disillusionment on the left was leading to new kinds of obscurantism—the making-metaphysical of unquestionably social problems—the primitive 'radicalism' of the new avant-garde revealed how much this might also contribute to the imagining of a postwar aesthetic.

Taking up the arguments of the first chapter, the second rereads what was seen at the time as a 'he-man cult' within the new modernism.[80] Drawing attention to figures in the contemporary left intelligentsia such as Dwight Macdonald and Paul Goodman, as well as

[78] Charles Olson, 'Ideas for Series of Lectures at Richman's Institute of Contemporary Art', I Box 31:1593, Charles Olson Research Collection, Archives and Special Collections at the Thomas J. Dodd Research Center, University of Connecticut Libraries.
[79] Ezra Pound, 'The Teacher's Mission', *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*. Ed. T. S. Eliot (London, 1954), p. 58. Olson himself recognized the derivative in his early work, and excused himself for it in notes towards his abandoned long poem 'West': 'Let yourself be derivative for a bit. This is a good and natural act. Write as the father to be the father'. Olson, 'From Notebook "Key West II"', *OLSON* 5 (Spring 1976), p. 11.
[80] The phrase was Hubert Crehan's in a critical review of Newman's show in April 1959. Quoted in Newman (1992), p. 215.

to the painters and their critics, this chapter contends that male virility was central to the search for new forms of radical agency that did not depend upon the mobilisation of labour. Olson's concern with what he called 'tumescent I' was, this chapter finds, exemplary of a much broader trend towards a 'gonad theory of revolution' which would later become important to the New Left through works such as Herbert Marcuse's *Eros and Civilization* (1955).[81]

A third chapter leaves questions of political agency behind momentarily for a closer look at questions of early postwar form. Taking its lead from Greenberg's 'The Crisis of the Easel Picture' (1948), the chapter contends that new concerns about a formal impasse in modernist art were not confined to painting, and that the very belatedness of the new American modernism encouraged it to scrutinise new possibilities of aesthetic space. Drawing attention to Olson's unpublished lectures on Cagli in 1948 and 1949, this chapter reveals how spatial attempts to exceed the limits of the medium (the poem and the easel picture) were co-involved with the new critique of scientific reason, positing relationships between subject and environment which were not mediated by regimes of instrumental control.

The fourth chapter takes a new look at a strategy which Olson shared strongly with the New York School of painting. Non-phonetic writing systems (glyphs, ideographs, and pictograms) became pervasive in the avant-garde between 1943 and 1951. Instead of reading this as a simple remainder from earlier modernisms (Surrealist automatism or the Sinology of Pound) this chapter suggests that such signs ciphered a very contemporary crisis of political semiosis. They signified, that is, a new lack of confidence in the capacity of sign systems to properly account for historical contingency, indexing instead the

[81] C. Wright Mills and Patricia J. Salter, 'The Barricade and the Bedroom', *politics* (October 1945), p. 314.

political and philosophical 'uncertainty' which Olson himself recognized as an historical 'principle' in drafts of 1949.[82]

The penultimate chapter looks more closely at the idea of uncertainty raised by the glyph. Reading Olson's work against the writings of one of the New York School's key precursors, the Austrian-Mexican painter Wolfgang Paalen, this chapter reveals how uncertainty in quantum physics was drawn upon to imagine the new posture of postwar modernism, its 'stance toward reality' and its approach to history. For Paalen and Olson, the Copenhagen interpretation of quantum physics called for a rejection of historical determinism and the hubris of abstract reason for a new art of possibility or Negative Capability.

But the revolt against abstract reason is seen—in the final chapter—to have come to its purest and most definitive form in the early work of the New York School of music. This chapter therefore explores a major conjunction between literary and music aesthetics in the period, one which reveals again the primacy of the New Failure of Nerve to early postwar American modernism. In 1950 Olson and the New York School of music began to address what Olson called the 'egocentric predicament'; the singularity of the creating artist and his unwanted presence in the work of art.[83] These anxieties about the interfering 'ego' are traced back to the new critiques of rational control and the sovereignty of what Adorno and Horkheimer would call the 'rule of computation and utility'.[84] In their attempts to overcome the egocentric predicament, Olson and the New York School of music are seen to have imagined, in the same year, strikingly similar aural worlds.

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[82] Charles Olson, 'The Kingfishers', I Box 16: 564, Charles Olson Research Collection, Archives and Special Collections at the Thomas J. Dodd Research Center, University of Connecticut Libraries. A facsimile of the typescript is reproduced in Maud (1998), p. 134.
[83] Charles Olson, 'Me-mo to Stefan & John', *OLSON* 8 (Fall 1977), p. 41.
[84] Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Trans. John Cumming (London, 1997), p. 6.

Together these chapters make a claim for coherence, for unities of perspective which united the early postwar avant-garde despite local differences of style and approach. Olson himself is seen, despite his relative isolation in Washington, as fully participant in a contemporary movement, a poet whose work attests—perhaps more than any other contemporary writer—to the incentives driving a new, vernacular American modernism.[85] 'To begin again' was a common project defined by a dual need: to escape the radical social imaginaries of the prewar world whilst continuing to offer some kind of struggle against—or mourning over—things as they stand; a struggle that would pertain after 1945 to sensibility rather than social structure.[86] Whether or not it was the 'last gasp' of a negative or critical modernism, as T. J. Clark considers, the new avant-garde remained adversarial even as it appeared to abandon the 'affairs of men', surpassing its modernist, Depression, and wartime precedents with a boldly reconstructive vision of the postwar world.[87]

[85] Imagining an early postwar avant-garde that coheres—one in which a writer's prose and poetry speak to and about the contemporary work of painters, sculptors, photographers, and composers—involves some risk. If it does not elide the distinctive idiom of each medium, it risks flattening the expressivities of the period. Unlike, for instance, Daniel Belgrad's *The Culture of Spontaneity: Improvisation and the Arts in Postwar America* (1998), the present study does not suppose that a single theme, praxis, or formal device could adequately account for the work of the period. On the other hand, and unlike Robert Genter's *Late Modernism: Art, Culture, and Politics in Cold War America* (2010), it does suppose that only with a very narrow temporal focus is it possible to draw plausible correspondences between the formal and thematic imaginaries of different forms of expression. By focussing on the years 1946 to 1951, *After the New Failure of Nerve* imagines an avant-garde that was both centripetal and centrifugal, coalescing briefly around certain ideas or formal motifs, before pulling violently apart over others.

[86] T. J. Clark suggests that abstract expression provides the 'ridiculous moment of coalescence, or of mourning, or of history [which] we still want from painting'. Clark (1999), p. 401. Of course the idea of beginning again, and of escaping European provenances, has been an American narrative and imperative since the Pilgrims. In the same year Olson wrote his poem, for instance, William Carlos Williams began his epic *Paterson* with the same trope ('To make a start, / out of particulars / and make them general, rolling / up the sum'). But the 'beginning again' attended to in this thesis was of a particular historical moment and took on a quite distinctive philosophical identity. Williams, *Paterson* (New York, 1963), p. 3.

[87] 'Sometimes,' Clark writes, 'it falls to a class to offer or suffer the absurdities of individualism in pure form – unbreathably pure, almost, a last gasp of oxygen as the plane goes down. That was the case, I think, with American painting after 1945'. Clark (1999), p. 403. In Clark's reading, deeply ambivalent though it is, abstract expression is the last modernist movement to have stood obliquely to modernity, the triumph of which in coming decades was so complete as to leave little room for negation. The world-historical importance of the period covered in this thesis has recently been asserted in a special number of *Critical Inquiry* entitled 'Around 1948'. In their introduction, Leela Gandhi and Deborah L. Nelson note that: 'In a relatively short span of time, from 1947 to 1949, a wide array of nation-states and other institutions would assume new forms, most immediately in the aftermath of the Second World War but also in relation to the unfinished business of the decades that preceded it'. In the present study, it is the collision of that 'unfinished business' with a sense of 'beginning again' that is shown to have provided the conditions for a new American art. Gandhi and Nelson, ''Editor's Introduction', *Critical Inquiry* 40:4 (2014), p. 286.

## Chapter One

## The New Failure of Nerve

> The artist today is striving for a closer approach to the truth concerning original man than can be claimed by the palaeontologist, for it is the poet and the artist who are concerned with the function of original man and who are trying to arrive at his creative state.
>
> Barnett Newman, 'The First Man Was an Artist' (1947).[1]

> Any time you show me another poem another door is opened and it looks the way it should look: as the initial point, the beginning, the primordial way of thinking and feeling…
>
> Corrado Cagli to Charles Olson, 9 December 1946.[2]

In 1939 Alfred H. Barr, first director of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, sponsored the emigration of a young Jewish Italian artist to the United States.[3] The *Dichiarazzione sulla Razza* of October 1938, and the catalogue of racial laws following it, had convinced Corrado Cagli of the need to leave Europe. In May 1940, several months after his arrival, Cagli met Charles Olson in Gloucester, Massachusetts.[4] They would meet again in New York early in 1946 after Cagli's return from service in Europe with the US Army. Their reunion in New York coincided with *From Cherbourg to Leipzig: Documents and Memories,* a solo exhibition of Cagli's drawings held at the Hugo Gallery on East 55th

[1] Barnett Newman, 'The First Man Was an Artist', *Selected Writings and Interviews*. Ed. John P. O'Neill (Berkeley, 1992), pp. 159-160. First published in *The Tiger's Eye* 1 (October 1947).
[2] Corrado Cagli to Charles Olson (9 December 1946), II Box 135, Charles Olson Research Collection, Archives and Special Collections at the Thomas J. Dodd Research Center, University of Connecticut Libraries.
[3] Raffaele Bedarida, 'Operation Renaissance: Italian Art at MoMA, 1940-1949', *Oxford Art Journal* 35:2 (2012), p. 157.
[4] Tom Clark, *Charles Olson: The Allegory of a Poet's Life* (New York, 1991), p. 64.

Street and Madison Avenue.[5] In stark, uncompromising clarity Cagli's work depicted a barbarised mainland Europe, including the scene at Buchenwald when the artist reached Ettersberg with American forces in April 1945.[6] Olson responded immediately. 'No graphic art,' Tom Clark records, 'had previously moved him with the force of these harrowing images, signifying in their tortured figurations the destruction not merely of civilization but […] of the entire humanistic proposition underlying it'.[7] In the following weeks Olson attempted to measure the trauma Cagli had recorded; its meaning for modernity and for modern art.

News of the camps and early survivor testimony provided immediate contexts for the interpretation of the Buchenwald drawings.[8] But in responding to Cagli's wartime art Olson also entered the mainstream of a burgeoning 'New Failure of Nerve'; a swelling revolt against modern instrumental rationality and the unbridled optimism of uninterrupted scientific and technological progress. Early symptoms of this insurgency had been apparent, as James Schmidt notes, at the 'Conference on Science, Philosophy and Religion in their Relation to the Democratic Way of Life' in New York in September 1940, a conference convened, as Van Wyck Brooks put it, as an 'effort to face the crisis in our culture by an experiment in corporate thinking'.[9] Here, despite the urgency of a common cause against fascism, prominent American public intellectuals had been drawn into a fierce debate over the commensurability of abstract, scientific reason with modern liberal democracy.

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[5] Ralph Maud, *Charles Olson at the Harbor* (Vancouver, 2008), p. 92.
[6] Corrado Cagli, *From Cherbourg to Leipzig: Documents and Memories* (New York, 1946).
[7] Clark (1991), p. 113.
[8] By 1946 the figures Cagli sketched had fully entered the public imagination. Alfred Kazin would recall seeing such them in a newsreel theatre in London: 'On the screen, sticks in black-and-white prison garb leaned on a wire, staring dreamily at the camera'. Quoted in Richard H. Pells, *The Liberal Mind in a Conservative Age: American Intellectuals in the 1940s and 1950s* (New York, 1985), p. 47.
[9] James Schmidt, '"The New Failure of Nerve", the *Eclipse of Reason*, and the Critique of Enlightenment in New York and Los Angeles, 1940-1947', http://people.bu.edu/jschmidt/James_Schmidt/Welcome_files/Schmidt CASMunich.pdf. Accessed 26 October 2012. Van Wyck Brooks, 'Conference on Science, Philosophy and Religion in Their Relation to the Democratic Way of Life', *Science, Philosophy, and Religion: A Symposium* (New York, 1941), p. 1.

Indeed, hopes of cooperation had been compromised at the outset by the philosopher Mortimer Adler, whose address to the delegates provocatively claimed that the 'most serious threat to Democracy' was not the 'nihilism of Hitler' (as most supposed) but the 'positivism of the professors'.[10] Upsetting the consoling wartime narrative which pitted democratic 'civilization' against fascist 'barbarism', Adler floated the idea that (far from the child of Romantic unreason) National Socialism was itself 'the bitter fruit of "Enlightenment rationalism"'.[11] Adler's lecture became the touchstone for a series of statements in *Partisan Review* in 1943 under the general title 'The New Failure of Nerve'; a series which, in the very vigour with which it attacked 'philosophical, religious, and political forms of mystical or anti-scientific thought', underlined the growing threat to secular rationality by a new and pervasive distrust of its supposed narrowness, totalitarianism, and nihilism.[12]

The 'New Failure of Nerve' essays—by Sidney Hook, Ernest Nagel, and John Dewey amongst others—came at exactly the moment when, in Michael Leja's words, 'reference to the primitive and the archaic became a conspicuous feature of some controversial modernist painting in New York'.[13] In his own discussion of the controversy, Leja somewhat underplayed this conjunction, placing the 'New Failure of Nerve' within a much longer and broader debate over 'modern man' which emerged 'in the years during and immediately after World War I'.[14] But the simultaneous appearance of the 'New Failure of Nerve' and a new avant-garde archaism is more than a minor coincidence, something which becomes especially clear if the political stakes of the 'intellectual panic'

[10] Quoted in Schmidt (2012), p. 2.
[11] Quoted in Schmidt (2012), p. 5.
[12] Terry A. Cooney, *The Rise of the New York Intellectuals:* Partisan Review *and Its Circle* (Madison, 1986), p. 192.
[13] Michael Leja, *Reframing Abstract Expressionism: Subjectivity and Painting in the 1940s* (New Haven, 1993), p. 51.
[14] Leja (1993), pp. 7, 15. Leja (1993), pp. 240-243.

are brought into sharper focus.[15] Apart from the obvious causes ('Economic crises, world war, a bad peace, tragically inept statesmanship, the tidal waves of totalitarianism…'), there was another reason for this 'fusion of super-agony and superstition'.[16] Indeed, Sidney Hook was unequivocal in laying blame at the door of the American left, its imaginative entropy and slow disillusionment. War and economic crisis may have contributed to the panic, but the real cause lay elsewhere.

> This is the inability of those liberal, labor, and socialist movements which have prided themselves on being scientific and which have lost one social campaign after another, to supply a positive philosophy, that would weld emotion and scientific intelligence, as a new rallying ground. Wilsonian idealism is dead although some do not know it, syndicalism is a fascist changeling, and orthodox Marxism is bankrupt. The grand visions of the socialist prophets have given way to petty political horse-trading and fixations on the good will of bourgeois statesmen. The left lives from day to day in a world going from worse to worse.[17]

The loss of confidence in scientific positivism and instrumental reason was, for Hook, cognate with a political disorientation sweeping the American left. The 'intellectual panic' conflated political disappointment with a revolt against the philosophical languages and *condicio sine qua non* that had driven progressive, modernising, bourgeois democratic politics since the French Revolution. Disaffected liberals and socialists did not simply turn their backs on the political aspirations of the previous fifteen years, they actively questioned the philosophical premises upon which those imaginaries of change had thrived.

Those whom Robert M. Coates would call 'abstract expressionists' in 1946 were not immune from the 'New Failure of Nerve', and neither was Olson.[18] Indeed, insofar as it represented a turn from political commitment that was also a critique of abstract reason and

[15] Sidney Hook, 'The New Failure of Nerve', *Partisan Review* 10:1 (1943), p. 2.
[16] Hook, 'The New Failure of Nerve' (1943), p. 8.
[17] Hook, 'The New Failure of Nerve' (1943), pp. 8-9.
[18] Robert M. Coates, 'The Art Galleries: Abroad and at Home', *The New Yorker* 12:7 (1946), p. 83. Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom, and the Cold War*. Trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago, 1985), pp. 69-70.

what Olson scornfully called 'improvement'—its hubris, its lack of self-reflexivity, and its obliviousness to unquantifiable aspects of experience—the new avant-garde represented the foremost expression of the 'intellectual panic' diagnosed by the *Partisan Review* in 1943.[19] For Olson, as for the painters, incremental political retreat was covered by a prolonged critique of the 'domination of science over the mind of modern man'. And in its earliest stages this was given special impetus by the fetishisation of (as Corrado Cagli put it) the 'initial point, the beginning, the primordial way of thinking and feeling'.[20] In other words, if Olson was an 'archeologist of morning' (CPr 207), he shared his profession with most members of the new avant-garde, with artists who were beginning to find in primitive expression a counter-rational eloquence. The new modernism had to 'get back, in order to get on' (CPr 168).[21]

Of course aesthetic and philosophical recourse to the primitive, especially as a means of insurgency against what Max Weber influentially called the 'disenchantment of the world', was hardly new in 1943.[22] As Frances S. Connolly suggests, primitivism has

[19] Though she does not treat the 'New Failure of Nerve' controversy, Nancy Jachec stresses how far contemporary critiques of instrumental reason (especially by Adorno and Horkheimer in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*) were consistent with the search for new forms of individual political agency and perhaps influential for New York artists. Nancy Jachec, *The Philosophy and Politics of Abstract Expressionism, 1940-1960* (Cambridge, 2000), pp. 44-47.

[20] For the painters this was especially pronounced in the years 1943 to 1948, just before the 'classic' gesturalist and colour field styles emerged at the end of the decade.

[21] Olson's credo would find a receptive audience amongst his later readers. In 'Die a Millionaire', collected in *Kitchen Poems* (1968), J. H. Prynne is at his most Olsonian:

> The first essential is to take knowledge
> back to the springs, because despite
> everything and especially the recent
> events carried under that flag, there is
> specific power in the *idea* of it.

J. H. Prynne, *Poems.* 2nd ed (Tarset, 2005), p. 13.

[22] Max Weber's well-known phrase (reused by Adorno and Horkheimer) appears in his lecture 'Science and Vocation' (1917): 'The growing process of intellectualization and rationalization does *not* imply a growing understanding of the conditions under which we live. It means something quite different. It is the knowledge or the conviction that if *only we wished* to understand them we *could* do so at any time. It means that in principle, then, we are not ruled by mysterious, unpredictable forces, but that, on the contrary, we can in principle c*ontrol everything by means of calculation*. That in turn means the disenchantment of the world. Unlike the savage for whom such forces existed, we need no longer have recourse to magic in order to

accompanied the march of philosophical modernity from its earliest origins, providing visions of the deepest past the better to imagine the distant future.[23] But be this as it may, the work of early postwar American primitivism was unique—and uniquely combative. For not only was the new archaism an expression of ironic contempt for the philosophical foundations of modern progressive politics, it was also (and perhaps slightly contradictorily) the declaration of a 'new life' and a new American art complementary to the new primacy of American diplomatic power. In other words, there was a strong sense in which the 'vita nuova' or 'new man' was American, and that the 'examined and vigorous attack on all the vestigia of Western civilization we have inherited' (as Olson put it) was an assault against specifically European intellectual traditions.[24] Approached through the early oeuvre of Olson, the multiple work of early postwar primitivism can be brought into clearer focus, restored to its place between the diminishing imagination of the American left and the arrival of a distinctive postwar purview.

*

Sidney Hook followed his lead article on the 'New Failure of Nerve' with an essay entitled 'The Failure of the Left' (1943), published in the following issue of *Partisan Review* though originally intended as a section of the first article.[25] Early in the essay Hook identified the kind of 'left' he was talking about, and—thinking of the critics and writers Lewis Mumford, Waldo Frank, and Archibald MacLeish—the fate which had befallen it:

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control the spirits or pray to them. Instead, technology and calculation achieve our ends', *The Vocation Lectures*. Ed. David Owen and Tracy B. Strong. Trans. Rodney Livingstone (Indianapolis, 2004), pp. 12-13.

[23] As Connelly notes: 'The efforts to reconstruct the origins of culture began in earnest during the Enlightenment era, the earliest such enterprise being Giambattista Vico's landmark treatise of 1725, *La scienza nuova* […] In fact, the notion of 'primitivity' as an infant state of development through which all cultures passed was an invention of Enlightenment universalism'. Frances S. Connelly, *The Sleep of Reason: Primitivism in Modern European Art and Aesthetics 1725-1907* (University Park, PA, 1999), p. 5.

[24] Charles Olson, 'Ideas for Series of Lectures at Richman's Institute of Contemporary Art', I Box 31:1593, Charles Olson Research Collection, Archives and Special Collections at the Thomas J. Dodd Research Center, University of Connecticut Libraries.

[25] Sidney Hook, 'The Failure of the Left', *Partisan Review* 10:2 (1943), p. 165.

> By the "left" we mean those political groups who either avow themselves openly revolutionary or who, professing allegiance to democratic collectivism, are hide, hair and tail-feathers in Roosevelt's political camp. In different ways all of these groups, proud of their pretensions to scientific politics, have succumbed to a metaphysical approach to politics. They can offer nothing except desperate hope to those who wish to think in a world in which they must also act.[26]

'For a man to act after he has taken thought, this!', Olson agreed in 1949, 'is the most difficult thing of all' (CPo 98). In fact, Olson knew each of Hook's targets personally: Mumford had read *Call Me Ishmael* for Harcourt Brace and reviewed it (negatively) for the *New York Times*; Frank had been a friend and correspondent since 1936; and MacLeish was still, in early 1943, Olson's superior at the Office of War Information. For Hook such figures were exemplary culprits, guilty more than most of those new 'metaphysical' strategies ('Platonist', 'Romantic', and 'Bohemian') which were daring to imagine social change without socialist orthodoxy. Turned ineffectual angels, they had mostly given up on 'the theory that politics is an expression of the struggle between class interests'.[27]

That 'metaphysical' strategies for change were emerging by 1943—strategies which often included critique of the 'scientific' basis of earlier radical doctrine—is revealing of the turn which American artists were now making from their earlier left commitments towards more arcane forms of personal or public revolution. And that this turn might follow, almost logically, into new kinds of aesthetic primitivism is suggested by the 'metaphysical' strategy of another of Hook's targets, Dwight Macdonald, who would resign from the editorial board of *Partisan Review* later in 1943 and establish his new post-Marxist journal *politics*.

In 'The Root Is Man' (1946), an essay published in *politics* a few years later, Macdonald made a paradigmatic distinction between left 'Progressives' and left 'Radicals',

[26] Hook, 'The Failure of the Left' (1943), pp. 166-167.
[27] Hook, 'The Failure of the Left' (1943), p. 173.

between the 'scientific' revolutionism of social analysis and historical law and a new radicalism which would begin at the beginning, with the emancipation of private human experience.[28] By Progressives, Macdonald suggests: 'would be understood those who see the Present as an episode on the road to a better Future; those who think more in terms of historical process than of moral values; those who believe that the main trouble with the world is partly lack of scientific knowledge and partly the failure to apply to human affairs such knowledge as we do have; those who, above all, regard the increase of man's mastery over nature as good in itself'.[29] The Radical, on the other hand, has substituted confidence in historical and technological progress for attention to human experience as it stands now; for a eudaemonist politics with 'man' at both its centre and circumference:

> "Radical" would apply to the as yet few individuals—mostly anarchists, conscientious objectors, and renegade Marxists like myself—who reject the concept of Progress, who judge things by their present meaning and effect, who think the ability of science to guide us in human affairs has been overrated […] They, or rather we, think it is an open question whether the increase of man's mastery over nature is good or bad in its actual affects on human life to date, and favor adjusting technology to man, even if it means—as may be the case—a technological regression, rather than adjusting man to technology […] The Progressive makes History the center of his ideology. The Radical puts Man there.[30]

Within months of this, Olson would call for a 'reverse of a renaissance' and 'demand [that] we look around us and consider what the engineers have done to human life. What improvement have they made in the personal and the private sense of experience?'[31] And though Macdonald was only aware of a 'few individuals—mostly anarchists, conscientious objectors, and renegade Marxists', the rejection of progressivism and technological

[28] Jachec notes that the essay 'sent shock waves throughout the independent leftist community'. Jachec (2000), p. 55.
[29] Dwight Macdonald, 'The Root Is Man', *politics* (April 1946), p. 100. Paul Buhle sees *politics* as 'the definitive intellectual link between the Old Left of 1930s-40s and the New Left of the 1950s-60s'. Buhle, *Marxism in the United States: Remapping the History of the American Left*. 3rd ed. (London, 2013), p. 211.
[30] Macdonald, 'The Root Is Man' (1946), p. 100.
[31] Charles Olson, 'De Priapo or, Notes for an Historian of a Suppressed Religion', I Box 30:1531, Prose No. 204, Charles Olson Research Collection, Archives and Special Collections at the Thomas J. Dodd Research Center, University of Connecticut Libraries.

'mastery over nature', and the simultaneous return from deterministic history to the 'personal and private sense of experience', was a powerful contemporary paradigm. If, on the one hand, this provided an historic precedent for the radicalism of the New Left fifteen years later, it also provided structure and motivic force for the artists of the new avant-garde, all of whom were seeking routes out of the orthodox left, critiquing the 'scientific' mind and returning to the basic experiences of 'man' alone as they did so.[32] Indeed, the new avant-garde's turn to primitivism, 'the primordial way of thinking and feeling', constituted a direct and potent expression of the new experiential 'Radicalism' Macdonald had only tentatively described.

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In handwritten 'Notes for a Lecture on Cagli and the 4th Dimension' (1949), Olson would describe Cagli's arrival at Buchenwald in April 1945 as an 'ultimate experience', an event at the furthest limits of comprehension.[33] The phrase may have recalled the words of Hannah Arendt writing in *Partisan Review* a year earlier. Reviewing David Rousset's Buchenwald novel *Les Jours de notre mort* (1947), which Olson had read soon after

[32] Gregory D. Sumner is also right to judge that: 'The critique of technology, bureaucracy, and Old Left collectivism offered in "The Root Is Man," along with its emphasis on the moral responsibilities of the individual, anticipated in many ways the humanist radicalism of the student New Left of the early 1960s'. *Dwight Macdonald and the* politics *Circle* (Ithaca, 1996), p. 151. Kevin Mattson makes a similar point of *politics* as a whole: 'In its pages, *politics* showed that radicalism could ground political action on a new basis, emphasizing decentralized communities, humanitarian and libertarian socialism, individual conscience, and personal free will. Macdonald saw how pacifism and nonviolent direct action could serve as important political alternatives. He believed that the concept of mass culture was deeply political, not simply cultural, and that mass politics was increasingly corrupt and superficial. He also left behind a critical tension between a gloomy depiction of a social reality that closed out alternatives—"bureaucratic collectivism," as he often called it, or what others labeled a conformist "mass society"—and hope for political change. All of these themes and their inherent tensions played themselves out in the later thinking of New Left intellectuals', *Intellectuals in Action: The Origins of the New Left and Radical Liberalism, 1945-1970* (University Park, PA, 2002), p. 41. These readings of Macdonald and *politics* are consistent with that of Jachec, who reads Macdonald as representative of the reforming American left. Jachec (2000), pp. 54-55.

[33] Charles Olson, 'Notes for a Lecture on Cagli and the 4th Dimension', I Box 33:1660, Prose No. 31, Charles Olson Research Collection, Archives and Special Collections at the Thomas J. Dodd Research Center, University of Connecticut Libraries.

publication in French,[34] and Eugen Kogon's *Der SS-Staat* (1946), Arendt gave the following warning:

> Both books are indispensable for an understanding not only of the concentration camps, but of the totalitarian regime as a whole. They become useless and even dangerous as soon as they attempt a positive interpretation—Kogon because he cites apparent historical precedents and believes that the camps can be understood psychologically, Rousset because he seeks the consolation of an "extreme experience" in a kind of suffering which, strictly speaking, no longer permits of experience, and thus arrives at a meaningless affirmation of life that is extremely dangerous because it romanticizes and transfigures what must never under any circumstances be repeated on this earth.[35]

'Extreme experience,' Arendt clarifies in her footnotes, was the phrase used by Georges Bataille in his review of Rousset's novel in the Parisian periodical *Critique* (October 1947), and subsequently translated in the first number of the New York surrealist journal *Instead* (1948). Arendt feared that the 'positive interpretation' of Rousset, Kogon, and particularly Bataille—who celebrated the 'virile' senselessness of events as narrated by Rousset—might normalize, even 'romanticize', the singular extremity of the camps.[36] Arendt was warning against any interpretation which found in the 'ultimate' or 'extreme' experience anything consolatory or creative: a glib 'affirmation of life' or juvenescence in extremity.

In October 1949, after reading his poems of 1946, Edward Dahlberg gave a similar warning to Olson: 'You will find,' he said, 'no healing seaweed or salts in a Buchenwald'.[37] In 'La Torre' and 'La Préface' Olson confirmed Arendt's observation that the camps might be held up as a watershed, a pivot between the past and some radically unfamiliar future. But unlike Bataille Olson did not find in the illogic of the camps a grotesque sublime. Instead, the 'positive interpretation' was taken from the advent of a

[34] Ralph Maud, *Charles Olson's Reading: A Biography* (Carbondale, 1996), p. 265.
[35] Hannah Arendt, 'The Concentration Camps', *The New Partisan Reader 1945-1953*. Ed. William Phillips and Philip Rahv (New York, 1953), pp. 230-231.
[36] Arendt (1953), p. 248.
[37] Charles Olson and Edward Dahlberg, *In Love, in Sorrow: The Complete Correspondence of Charles Olson and Edward Dahlberg*. Ed. Paul Christensen (New York, 1990), p. 76.

cultural terminus: the camps promised 'the end of something', bringing to previously unimaginable conclusion the era whose methods had apparently produced them. The eclipse of this epoch would mean a beginning again, an opportunity to rebuild from the barest materials of human life itself. In his first draft of 'La Torre', composed in response to Cagli's drawings in autumn 1946, Olson found an appropriate metaphor and an appropriate prior text.

> tower
> The ~~TOWER~~ is broken, the house of God!
> Man's reach ~~!~~ struck down!
> (~~t~~The sound is sweet
> acrid in the night
> fear fragrant)
> The end of something has a satisfaction.
> When the structures go the light comes through.
> We are but poor and naked wretches.[38]

Lear calls across the heath to the 'poor and naked wretches' of 1945. These are the wretches of Cagli's Buchenwald drawings—*Ragazzo nel lager* (1945) for instance—representing humanity 'unaccommodated', reduced by the 'concentrationary universe' to barest life.[39] But they are also 'we'; bare forked animals in the ruins of modernity.[40] 'Is

[38] Charles Olson, 'La Torre', I Box 18:717, Charles Olson Research Collection, Archives and Special Collections at the Thomas J. Dodd Research Center, University of Connecticut Libraries.
[39] Four years earlier, the figure had appeared in one of the most well-known Second World War poems, F. T. Prince's 'Soldiers Bathing' (1942): '"Poor bare forked animal," / Conscious of his desires and needs and flesh that rise and fall, / Stands in the soft air, tasting after toil / The sweetness of his nakedness'. F. T. Prince, *Collected Poems 1935-1992* (Manchester, 2012), p. 55.
[40] Along with Adorno, Olson was amongst the first to read the death camps as a product of modernity rather than a sudden and unaccountable deviation from it. As Zygmunt Bauman has said, this has become one of the most troubling facts of its remembrance: 'The unspoken terror permeating our collective memory of the Holocaust […] is the gnawing suspicion that the Holocaust could be more than an aberration, more than a deviation from an otherwise straight path of progress, more than a cancerous growth on the otherwise healthy body of civilized society; that, in short, the Holocaust was not an antithesis of modern civilization and everything (or so we like to think) it stands for'. Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Cambridge, 1989), p. 7.

man no more than this?' Lear asks of Edgar, 'Consider him well'.[41] The same year, 1946, Primo Levi rephrased the question after Auschwitz: '*Considerate se questo é un uomo'*.[42] Like Levi, Olson turned to the heath scene in 1946 in order to write the camps; he would see man as no more than a 'bare, forked integer' again in notes of 1948.[43] But in 'La Torre', as in *King Lear*, this is also a moment of anagnorisis, a turn from futile imaginative futurities (the tower) to simple human experience—experience which, it is implied, the prewar world had taken too little care of. Despite Arendt and her fears of romanticization, unaccomodated man presages here a return to authentic selfhood ('We are but…').

[41] William Shakespeare, *King Lear* (3.4.101) Ed. R. A. Foakes (London, 2005), p. 278. Olson had quoted from the scene a year earlier in *Call Me Ishmael*. The tower itself appeared in Part Four: 'Whether it is the appropriation of space involved or the implied defiance of time or the enceladic assault on the heavens, MASONRY is especially associated with MYTH in man. The tale of the Great Tower is as ultimate a legend as the Flood, Eden, Adam' (CPr 85).
[42] Primo Levi, *Se questo é un uomo* (Turin, 2006), [unpaginated].
[43] Charles Olson, 'The Search in Art, or Notes on the New Dimension', I Box 35:08. Prose No. 27, Charles Olson Research Collection, Archives and Special Collections at the Thomas J. Dodd Research Center, University of Connecticut Libraries.

Apart from the Major Arcarnum of the Tarot, which Cagli had been teaching him, Olson's 'tower' is the 'structure' of modernity itself; a symbol of progress or 'man's reach'.[44] And Olson was not, in fact, the only one to take the stricken tower as a symbol of modernity's apparent undoing during the war. In January 1944, for instance, Peter Vardo used the same metaphor in a collage for *Fortune* magazine. Here, in an image discussed by Michael Leja, Vardo combined Bruegel's *Tower of Babel* (1563) and *Triumph of Death* (1562) with Albrecht Dürer's *Maryrdom of the Ten Thousand Christians* (1508) and *Apocalypse with Pictures* (1498).[45] A physiological diagram set in the right of the collage, taken from Andreas Vesalius's *De humani corporis fabrica* (1543), identified the apocalypse as self-designed: scientific modernity is seen reaching the end of its Faustian pact.[46] Even more pertinently, Mortimer Adler had ended his own denunciation of positivism at the 'Conference on Science, Philosophy, and Religion' in a stream of Old Testament imagery which fell finally upon the image of Babel: 'Until the professors and their culture are liquidated,' Adler declared, 'the resolution of modern problems—a resolution which history demands shall be made—will not even begin. The tower of Babel we are building invites another flood'.[47] 'La Torre' developed a contemporary iconography

[44] A common reading of 'La Torre' finds the reconstruction simply poetic. For instance, Robert von Hallberg suggests that the tower ciphers Symbolism, and that its fall presages a 'spatial' poetic. von Hallberg, *Charles Olson: The Scholar's Art* (Cambridge, Mass., 1978), p. 46. Likewise, Andrea Scott claims that in 'La Torre' Olson 'figured the cultural crisis mid-century [sic] as a chance for his generation to reinvent modern poetry'. Scott, *Lyric Diplomacy: Cold War Poetics in the United States and West Germany, 1945-1955* (PhD thesis, University of Chicago, 2008), p. 253. However, as I suggest below, it is only in the draft of 1950 that Olson definitively turns the poem into a literary manifesto, inserting an allusion to Pound and Fenollosa's 'The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry'.

[45] Leja (1993), p. 73.

[46] But Olson's apocalypticism was far from unusual in 1945 and 1946. Peter Vardo's collage in *Fortune* did not have an 'axe' of lightning but it did have the star-shower from Dürer's *Apocalypse*. A few months after Olson finished the second draft of 'La Torre', the *New York Times* reviewed a new abridgement of Arnold Toynbee's *A Study of History* (1940) under the title 'Is Our Civilization Doomed?' Cultural apocalypticism was beginning to suit a pervasive sense of endings. Albert Guerard, 'Is Our Civilization Doomed? Explaining the Death of Other Cultures, Mr. Toynbee Holds Out Hope for Our Own', *New York Times* (13 April 1947), p. 203.

then, and the architectural metaphor, colluding with the allusion to Edgar, was taken further in a second draft:

> To begin again.
> Lightning is an axe to make things new
> a way of sun where sun is out.
> To ease the jaws which grind
> before the nostrils flare,
> to let the air, the air, the needed air in.[48]

'*L'air est déjà fétide*,' Olson had read in Rousset's *L'univers concentrationnaire* (1946) the same year, '*seules deux ampoules rouges dans l'obscurité'*.[49] The stagnant air and bare red lights of Buchenwald are taken here for an intellectual tradition (claustrophobic 'structures') at its most oppressive. Only a catastrophic 'axe' of lightning, as represented in the Tower card of the Tarot, can make 'a way of sun where sun is out' and 'let the air, the air, the needed air in'. Olson's apocalyptic metaphor seems to provide the pretext for a socially responsible avant-gardism; 'to begin again' and 'make things new' will presumably (given the allusion to Pound) be the responsibility of a modernist vanguard.[50] And in this respect, as we will see, Olson was close to the truth. But the urgency of 'La Torre' is also indicative of the shift from, in Macdonald's terms, Progressivism to Radicalism. The poem figures a rejection of abstract aspiration—the dubious benefits of

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[47] Mortimer J. Adler, 'God and the Professors', *Science, Philosophy, and Religion: A Symposium* (New York, 1941), p. 127.
[48] Charles Olson, 'La Torre', I Box 18:719, Charles Olson Research Collection, Archives and Special Collections at the Thomas J. Dodd Research Center, University of Connecticut Libraries.
[49] David Rousset, *L'univers concentrationnaire* (Paris, 1946), p. 155.
[50] When Olson rewrites the poem in 1950 the 'lightning' shifts from that of the Tarot and the 'oak-cleaving thunderbolts' (3.2.5) of *King Lear* to the lightning strike of Ernest Fenollosa; the new lines 'Lightning / is an axe, transfer of force / subject to object' deriving from a passage in 'The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry' which Olson had copied into a notebook in 1945:

> The sentence form was forced upon primitive men by nature itself…a reflection of the temporal order in causation. All truth has to be expressed in sentences because all truth is the transference of power. The type of sentence in nature is a flash of lightning.

The combination of lightning and primitive man, already present in the first drafts of the poem, made the reference back to Fenollosa inevitable. Olson, 'Washington, Spring 1945', I Box 64, Charles Olson Research Collection, Archives and Special Collections at the Thomas J. Dodd Research Center, University of Connecticut Libraries.

'man's reach'—for man himself. And in this sense the poem figures not only the New Failure of Nerve but also the growing conviction that, in Macdonald's terms, 'History' and 'Progress' ought now to be replaced by 'man' alone.[51]

If this is the case then 'La Torre' does not respond simply to news of the camps. And, indeed, at other times Olson attributed the imminent sea change in modern experience to quite different causes. In unpublished notes of 1948, it is the atomic bombing of Japan which makes a return to Edgar, 'to unaccommodated' man, imperative:

> I take this displacement of man and such other obvious objects as Cezanne's houses, trees, napkins, or Van Gogh's, as a most healthy return to man, if man of another order. If man in the perspective of earth is no longer interesting to us, is exhausted, if done today ineveitably [sic] sentimental, it is because the disposition of man in nature has quite literally been blasted. He is not centre stage, nor you, nor I.[52]

A less hubristic vision of the modern subject (no longer at the 'centre stage' of nature) seems to be demanded by the 'noiseless flash' over Hiroshima.[53] But as Hook and Macdonald both recognized, growing distrust of abstract intellectual projects, and a consequent return to the bare facts of human life, had less tangible causes than the *universe concentrationaire* or the Enola Gay. Olson's poem betrays a disillusionment with abstract reason and historic progress which, however much inflamed by the events of 1945, had already been noted by worried observers in 1943. Distrust of abstract social ambitions, felt keenly by disappointed liberals as well as 'renegade Marxists', was returning from

[51] It is worth noting here that the work of the French existentialists (especially Sartre and Albert Camus) was being introduced to American audiences at precisely this moment, especially in journals such as *Partisan Review* and *politics*. However, the shift from grand narrative to 'man' alone was not the dependent on French influence. For more on existentialism in the United State in this period see Ann Fulton, *Apostles of Sartre: Existentialism in America, 1945-1963* (Evanston, Ill, 1999).
[52] 'The Search in Art', Charles Olson Research Collection.
[53] John Hersey, *Hiroshima* (London, 2001), p. 3.

obscurity the root figure of unaccomodated man, that 'pure natural existence' which, as Adorno and Horkheimer observed, had always been for civilization 'the absolute danger'.[54]

*

That Peter Vardo's collage also carried Palaeolithic hunting scenes, Matisse-like figures above the naked Christian martyrs of Dürer's Mount Ararat, suggests how far primitivism was the natural language of this shift. And, in fact, Olson's 'unaccommodated man' had been rediscovered in American painting three years earlier, at exactly the moment when the 'New Failure of Nerve' was being debated in *Partisan Review*. Like Olson, these artists seized upon spare, natural, primitive man in order to launch their own 'beginning again', one that combined an innovative thematic (archaic subjects now replacing subways and railroads) with the recuperation of supposedly fundamental experiences and sensibilities.

Dismissive comments by Edward Alden Jewell, the *New York Times* art critic, about Rothko's *The Syrian Bull* (1943) and Gottlieb's *The Rape of Persephone* (1943), had incited the two painters (aided by Newman) to make a verbal defence of the new American painting, a rationale published in the *New York Times* eleven days later.[55] For the painters this was, as Serge Guilbaut puts it, 'a unique opportunity to declare their independence': 'In a polemical style quite in keeping with avant-garde tradition they made a series of points that clearly spelled out the ideology of the nascent avant-garde'.[56] As Bonnie Clearwater has shown, the draft and final versions of this defence 'differ considerably'.[57] But what was consistent throughout was an affirmation of the renewed relevance of archaic experience, what Cagli would soon call the 'primordial way of thinking and feeling'. Such

[54] Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment.* Trans. John Cumming (London, 1997), p. 31.
[55] Edward Alden Jewell, 'Modern Painters Open Show Today', *New York Times* (2 June 1943), p. 28.
[56] Guilbaut (1985), pp. 74-75.
[57] Bonnie Clearwater, 'Shared Myths: Reconsideration of Rothko's and Gottlieb's Letter to *The New York Times*', *Archives of American Art Journal* 24:1 (1984), p. 23.

sensibility was not wholly lost, the painters claimed, merely obscured by modern patterns of thought, feeling, and apprehension. And it would be the task of the artist, yet again, to



clear away such epiphenomena for firmer ground. As Rothko put it in an early draft: 'the modern artist has a spiritual kinship with the emotions which […] archaic forms imprison and the myths which they represent'.[58] The final letter would affirm similarly: 'We assert that […] only that subject-matter is valid which is tragic and timeless. That is why we profess spiritual kinship with primitive and archaic art'.[59] In both versions of their statement, Rothko and Gottlieb stress that 'archaic' experience is in fact permanent, and that the moment is opportune for its rediscovery: 'The significant rendition of a symbol, no

[58] Quoted in Clearwater (1984), p. 24.
[59] Quoted in Clearwater (1984), p. 23. It is worth pointing out that this emphasis on the eternally 'tragic' nature of human experience was something the painters shared strongly with Macdonald in his own turn from History to Man—he would see the Radical as cognisant of 'the tragic element in man's fate not only today but in any conceivable kind of society'. Macdonald, 'The Root Is Man' (1946), p. 100.

matter how archaic, has a full validity today as the archaic symbol had then', or, in Rothko's draft: 'My own art is simply a new aspect of the eternally archaic myth, and I am neither the first nor will be the last compelled to evolve these chimeras of our time'.[60]

The epistolary riposte to Jewell by Rothko, Gottlieb and Newman was only the most conspicuous index of a contemporary turn to primitivism in New York painting at the mid war moment. Counting Pollock among its numbers, the work of the 'Myth Makers' (as Rothko called them) was replete with allusion to primitive ritual and myth, archaic symbols and inscrutable glyphs.[61] As commentators have often noted, the Myth Makers were heavily indebted to Native American art and, in the case of Rothko, the influence of Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy* (1871).[62] Yet the contemporaneity of the New Failure of Nerve controversy in *Partisan Review* provides clearer parameters for its interpretation, since the turn to archaic experience was in full accord with a much broader move from collective and institutional commitment towards the 'private sense of experience', and, crucially, from a model of man as master of his environment to the model of a man no longer 'centre stage' of the natural world (like Olson, the painters would think of early man in terms of his natural 'awe').[63] Gottlieb, Newman, Rothko and Pollock shared with Olson a conviction that 'unaccomodated' man was newly pertinent not only because of the intensity of his mental life but also because his stance towards the world was antitypical of modernity's 'engineer'.

If Cagli recognized the same 'kinship' between archaic and postwar experience in Olson's work ('the initial point, the beginning, the primordial way of thinking and

[60] Quoted in Clearwater (1984), pp. 23-24.
[61] In 1946 Rothko mentioned the 'small band of Myth Makers who emerged here during the war'. Quoted in Anna C. Chave, *Mark Rothko: Subjects in Abstraction* (New Haven, 1989), p. 91.
[62] W. Jackson Rushing, 'The Impact of Nietzsche and Northwest Coast Indian Art on Barnett Newman's Idea of Redemption in the Abstract Sublime', *Art Journal* 47:3 (1988), p. 187.
[63] Compare, for instance, Newman's comments in 'The First Man Was an Artist', discussed below: 'Man's first expression, like his first dream, was an aesthetic one. Speech was a poetic outcry rather than a demand for communication. Original man, shouting his consonants, did so in yells of awe and anger at his tragic state.' Newman (1992), p. 158. The same year Olson would call for a 'rebirth of awe' before nature. 'De Priapo or, Notes for an Historian of a Suppressed Religion', Charles Olson Research Collection.

feeling'), it is because he had read 'La Préface'. Whilst 'La Torre' heralded the return of 'unaccomodated' man, 'La Préface' followed Rothko and Gottlieb in seeing this bareness as specifically archaic (although all the more modern for that). Written immediately after Olson met Cagli again in early 1946, and at about the same time as Macdonald's 'The Root Is Man', 'La Préface' marks the beginning of a project which, like that of Rothko and Gottlieb, affirmed the relevance of primordial 'thinking and feeling' to a world newly apprised of its progressivist hubris, a world with its 'schemes of human greatness thoroughly discredited'.[64] But, again, this poem needs to be read against the drawings of Cagli. On 12 May he wrote to Olson about the fate of a Chicago exhibition where 'La Préface' was to be set against his Buchenwald work. The plan had been foiled:

> The ladies of the Chicago Arts Club have had their own thriumph [sic] – alias: "all the important people came to the tea party on the opening day" – good for them – But they have failed to [print?] "la préface" and to hang my "spleen" and "Opening" I rather overlooked the last omission than the first one but they didn't give me any satisfactory answer. Of course they tried to use the alibi that your "préface" was mailed to [sic] late – But, when I have mentioned the fact that both "preface" and plate were sent to Chicago in the same shipment and yet the plate had been used, they came out with some different reasons – the truth is that the ladies couldn't take the full mesure [sic] of your expression[65]

Though the 'ladies of the Chicago Arts Club' did not see it, 'La Préface' was in direct conversation with the drawings sent to Chicago by Cagli. Nevertheless, they can be forgiven for noticing stylistic disjunctions between drawings and poem, for whilst Olson's poem rendered his materials resistant, Cagli's draughtsmanship was noticed for its artlessness of execution. In a *New Yorker* review of 9 February, when Cagli's exhibition was at the Hugo Gallery in Manhattan, Robert M. Coates lauded the drawings for their 'slight' simplicity:

[64] T. S. Eliot, *Collected Poems 1909-1962* (London, 2002), p. 161.
[65] Corrado Cagli to Charles Olson (12 May 1946), II Box 135, Charles Olson Research Collection, Archives and Special Collections at the Thomas J. Dodd Research Center, University of Connecticut Libraries.

> There are no pictures of actual fighting; instead, he shows the stillness after the fighting, and the hunger and death and desolation that are then made evident, in the ruined towns and cities, and the prison camps of Buchenwald and elsewhere. Superficially, the drawings seem slight and the treatment very unmelodramatic, but he brings to them a sensitivity and a maturity of feeling which make them by far the most moving that have yet come out of the war.[66]

Cagli, Coates argued, was more successful than those contemporary American surrealists and abstractionists who 'must many times have asked themselves how the devil they could keep within the framework of their art and still register an opinion on such matters as Fascism, militarism, and the war'.[67] In other words, it was Cagli's representationalism, his slight but figural 'sensitivity', which granted his work the 'maturity' and measuredness of its response to Buchenwald and the 'ruined towns and cities' of Europe. Though Coates (who coined the phrase 'abstract expressionism' in the *New Yorker* the same year) overemphasized the representational literalness of Cagli's images, they were (as the 'ladies' of Chicago recognized) in distinct contrast to the elliptical 'La Préface'.

> The dead in via
> in vita nuova
> in the way
> You shall lament who know they are as tender as the horse is.
> You, do not you speak who know not.
>
> "I will die about April 1st . . ." going off
> "I weigh, I think, 80 lbs . . ." scratch
> "My name is NO RACE" address
> Buchenwald new Altamira cave
> With a nail they drew the object of the hunt.[68]

A few months before Olson wrote these lines, Dorothy Norman's *Twice a Year,* in which Olson had published his first essay in 1938, published the 'Text of the Official Report of

[66] Robert M. Coates, 'The Art Galleries: Abstraction, Surrealism, and the War', *The New Yorker* (2 February 1946), p. 65.
[67] Coates (1946), p. 70.
[68] Charles Olson and Corrado Cagli, *y & x* (Washington D.C., 1950), p. 2.

Buckenwald [sic] Atrocities April, 1945'. Forwarded from the Supreme Headquarters of the Allied Expeditionary Forces, the report included the note that 'American surgeons stated that the adult corpses weighed only 60 to 80 pounds, having in practically all cases lost 50 per cent to 60 per cent of their normal weight, and also having shrunken in height'.[69] Olson imagines this victim ('80lb' 'I think') weeks before the liberation of Buchenwald in April.

As with 'La Torre' however, and despite the warnings of Arendt, the Buchenwald figure is made over into metaphor. In the former poem the 'poor naked wretches' of Cagli's drawings had become the 'unaccommodated' Edgar. Here they become the unaccommodated men of the Upper Palaeolithic and Buchenwald itself a 'new Altamira cave'. Though the Chicago Arts Club may not have been able to 'take the measure' of such figures, they were far from unique. And it was not only the 'Myth Makers' who would have recognized Olson's manoeuvre. In an editorial for the *Saturday Review of Books* on 18 August 1945, later published in book form as *Modern Man Is Obsolete* (1945), Norman Cousins looked to the same primitive figure in one of the most stirring expressions of the contemporary Failure of Nerve. There were two ways, Cousins argued, that 'man' could cope with the catastrophic success of rational modernity, recently witnessed in Hiroshima. The first would be to establish world government. The second, which was suggested 'in all seriousness', was 'fairly simple':

> It requires that man eliminate the source of the trouble. Let him dissociate himself, carefully and completely, from civilization and all its works. Let him systematically abolish science and the tools of science. Let him destroy all machines and the knowledge which can build or operate those machines. Let him raze his cities, smash his laboratories, dismantle his factories, tear down his universities and schools, burn his libraries, rip apart his art. Let him murder his scientists, his lawmakers, his statesmen, his doctors, his teachers, his mechanics, his merchants, and anyone who

[69] Eric F. Wood and Charles H. Ott, 'Text of Official Report of Buckenwald Atrocities April, 1945', *Twice-A-Year* XII-XIII (1945), p. 25.

> has anything to do with the machinery of knowledge or progress. Let him punish literacy by death. Let him eradicate nations and set up the tribe as sovereign. Let him, in short, revert to his condition in society in 10,000 B.C.[70]

'A hair-raising yet calmly reasoned editorial,' wrote the *New York Times* art editor the following week, 'submits only one alternative to world control […] and that is the deliberate return to cave-man status'.[71] Cousins was writing less than two weeks after Hiroshima, but his conviction that man of '10,000 BC' was a relevant model for postwar man was shared not only by Olson writing of Buchenwald but also by those artists who had begun, after 1943, to express the New Failure of Nerve in archaic configurations.

As Rothko and Gottlieb's letter to the *New York Times* of 1943 would seem to prove, it was not news about 'that which happened', nor news from Hiroshima and Nagasaki, which initiated this new disenchantment with the 'machinery of knowledge or progress'.[72] Rather, the conviction that 'civilization' itself was 'the source of the problem' had its roots, as Hook and Macdonald both saw, in growing scepticism on the American left about the cultural primacy of abstract reason and scientific progress. If it is true, as Paul Buhle has said, that new left 'secession movements' were now emerging, prompted by the realization that 'the founding program of the forefathers, even severely adapted, no longer served', then the new primitivism of the avant-garde should be counted amongst these.[73] It was with the politically disoriented that the 'return to cave-man status' would be taken most literally, above all by American artists. 'We have come,' Olson declared in 'The K', 'full circle' (CPo 14).

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[70] Norman Cousins, *Modern Man Is Obsolete* (London, 1946), p. 54. Michael Leja regards Cousins's essay as representative of a new belief in the 'continuity of the primitive and the modern'. Leja (1993), p. 60.
[71] Edward Alden Jewell, 'Art in the World of Tomorrow', *New York Times* (26 August 1945), p. X2.
[72] Paul Celan, *Selected Poems and Prose*. Trans. John Felstiner (New York, 2001), p. 395.
[73] Buhle (2013), p. 191.

*

'Cave-man status' would be one way of returning 'full circle' in 1945. But 'La Préface' imagined another kind of 'radicalism' which Olson shared strongly with Newman and Rothko: genetic and impregnatory beginnings which iconically announced the nascence of a new American modernism. The reversion to bare, unaccomodated man might figure a new unease with 'civilization and all its works', and it might be used to imagine 'man of another order'; less Promethean, with more 'humilitas', as Olson would put it in 1950 (CPr 247). But, at the same time, it could also declare the arrival of new aesthetic life:

> Birth in the house is the One of Sticks, cunnus in the crotch.
> Draw it thus: (  ) 1910 (
> It is not obscure. We are the new born, and there are no flowers.
> Document means there are no flowers
> and no parenthesis.
>
> It is the radical, the root, he and I, two bodies
> We put our hands to these dead.
>
> The closed parenthesis reads: the dead bury the dead,
> and it is not very interesting.
>
> Open, the figure stands at the door, horror his
> and gone, possessed, o new Osiris, Odysseus ship.
> He put the body there as well as they did whom he killed.
>
> Mark that arm. It is no longer gun.
> We are born not of the buried but these unburied dead
> crossed stick, wire-led, Blake Underground
>
> The Babe
> the Howling Babe (CPo 47)

'Not absolutely clear @ <u>all</u> pts,' somebody (perhaps Robert Creeley) admitted in their annotations to Olson's typescript.[74] What is clear, however, is that 'he and I' (Olson and Cagli, both born in '1910'), by 'putting our hands to these dead', have conceived the

[74] Charles Olson, 'La Préface', I Box 17:649, Charles Olson Research Collection, Archives and Special Collections at the Thomas J. Dodd Research Center, University of Connecticut Libraries.

'Howling Babe' of 'The Mental Traveller', 'begotten in dire woe'.[75] This 'vita nuova' is the life of a 'we' which encompasses the entire postwar epoch; a 'man of another order', a new life conceived from—and conditioned by the fact of—'these unburied dead'. That this new era would have to be, in Macdonald's terms, 'radical', recuperating the most fundamental orders of experience, is stressed by Olson in the central lines of the poem ('It is the radical, the root, he and I…'). And the lines from the young Marx with which Macdonald prefaced his own distinction between Progressivism and Radicalism provide an apt gloss on Olson's poem: 'To be radical is to grasp the matter by its root. Now the root for mankind is man himself'.[76]

'La Préface' stood as the first poem of Olson and Cagli's collaborative *y & x*, and its metaphors of birth and reproduction identify the title of that chapbook as much with chromosomes as with the co-ordinates of two-dimensional space. Indeed, given that Olson and Cagli referred to one another in their correspondence as y (Olson) and x (Cagli), the idea that 'he and I, two bodies' have conceived 'The Babe / the Howling Babe' points to an almost mitotic creative relationship.[77] There is little distance here between the birth of a new era and that of an aesthetic which might articulate it. 'La 'Préface' speaks at the zero hour of the postwar world but also at the threshold of an imagined creative advance.

It is in this sense that Olson's 'La Préface' should be read against several other examples of the birth-from-trauma motif and the cell biology metaphor which appeared in the same year. With *Pagan Void*, as we have already seen, Barnett Newman came to terms with contemporary history as fertile absence ('the void out of which life could begin').[78]

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[75] William Blake, *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake.* Ed. David V. Erdman (Berkeley, 2008), p. 483.
[76] Macdonald, 'The Root is Man' (1946), p. 97. The words would also be echoed in Erich Fromm, *Man for Himself*.
[77] Corrado Cagli to Charles Olson (8 December 1949), II Box 135, Charles Olson Research Collection, Archives and Special Collections at the Thomas J. Dodd Research Center, University of Connecticut Libraries.
[78] Barnett Newman and Frank O'Hara, 'The Continuity of Vision' (8 December 1964). www.frankohara.org. Accessed 30 October 2012.

His ‘pagan’ void evoked the moral abyss of the war but also, with its piercing blue projections, the fertilization of an ovum. Newman was using the same mitosis metaphor as

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79

*y & x*, finding in the void of recent events the ‘Howling Babe’ of a new postwar order.[80] His other *vite nuove—The Beginning* (1946), *Genesis—The Break* (1946), and *Genetic Moment* (1947)—rearticulated this vision, and Rothko would use the same metaphor in *Genetic Instant* (1946) the same year.[81] The parturitive icon was, like the tower, of clear contemporary currency.

‘In all seriousness’ then, as for Cousins, Macdonald, Newman, and Rothko, Olson turned to ‘the radical, the root’ not only to express a new dissatisfaction with the

[79] The circular form appears in two further drawings of the same year, though here without the biological, gestatory overtones. Barnett Newman, *The Complete Drawings, 1944-1969*. Ed. Brenda Richardson (Baltimore, 1979), pp. 112-115.
[80] Though this was not quite the beginning because, as Jeremy Strick has noted, ‘elements of the painting were rehearsed in Newman’s 1945 brush-and-ink drawing, *Untitled*’. The ‘circular seed shape’ had also appeared for the first time in drawings of 1944. See Newman, ‘Enacting Origins’, *The Sublime is Now: The Early Work of Barnett Newman: Paintings and Drawings 1944-1949* (New York, 1994), p. 20.
[81] Robert Genter, *Late Modernism: Art, Culture, and Politics in Cold War America* (Philadelphia, 2010), p. 166.

'machinery' of political and scientific progress but also to shift investment in collective political aspirations towards plain experience. In this, Olson's work was consonant with the political moment as well as with the early work of the abstract expressionists. But it was Cagli who provided him with an initial impetus. In a sense, their collaborative work itself constituted the new life Olson was beginning to see rising from the 'new Altamira cave'. In their 'unmelodramatic' rendering, Cagli's Buchenwald drawings witnessed that restitution of unaccomodated life which had already become the reflex of an emerging avant-garde.

*

With 'La Torre' and 'La Préface' Olson had begun to measure the new pertinence of 'pure natural existence', the bare life Adorno and Horkheimer recognized in 1944 as the suppressed and dangerous other of modernity. This radicalism declared what it would mean to make a true *volte face*, a turn from ambitious political and scientific progressivism to less 'accommodated' modes of living and creating; a turn which was also the substitution of the 'personal and the private sense of experience' for collective social projects. Turning bare life to aesthetic account would soon become Olson's primary concern, as a brief note written in 1947 makes clear. In these lines Olson argued that postwar primitivism ('it is not primitiveism,' he insists) is a considered response to recent moral history. His words recall those of Newman, Rothko, and Gottlieb in 1943:

> Creatively we are neolithic. The interest in the rudest form is the most significant sign of work today. It is not primitiveism. It only appears so to those who think civilization can be measured. Or that the Renaissance is the measure of civilization. Despite the fact that the mathematization of man precedes [sic] directly from the Renaissance.
>
> We are off on another path, a path which we follow by way of the pieces of cloth of ourself. Ariadne's thread is our own. For it is the primordial

> demands to find a base for life, for a humanism which will stand up against modern primitivism, that drives us to the neolithic forms.[82]

The creatively 'neolithic' (which is 'not primitiveism') will 'stand up against' another kind of archaism: 'modern primitivism', or, the moral barbarism of Buchenwald, Hiroshima, Dresden. The 'rudest form' provides an exit from modern barbarism and a labyrinthine 'path' to a 'humanism' which is more humane. The contention that the 'mathematization of man', deriving 'directly from the Renaissance', was at least partly responsible for modern moral 'primitivism', was a contemporary credo. In 1944 Adorno and Horkheimer had pointed out that, 'for the Enlightenment, whatever does not conform to the rule of computation and utility is suspect'.[83] And they identified Olson's 'mathematization' as a form of enlightenment self-defence: 'In the anticipatory identification of the wholly conceived and mathematized world with truth, enlightenment intends to secure itself against the return of the mythic'.[84] It is a 'return of the mythic', of the incalculable and the unquantifiable, which Olson sees in the 'neolithic forms' standing up against the 'modern primitivism' of war. Outside the rational, the archaic becomes a point of resistance against the 'mathematization of man' recently diagnosed by Adorno and Horkheimer in the tradition of György Lukács and Marx.

But the key metaphor in Olson's brief note is the private labyrinth, the 'Ariadne's thread' of the solitary individual. Like Macdonald and the painters—not to mention Erich Fromm, whose *Man for Himself* (1947) was published the same year—the real boon of a turn from abstract reason is the recovery of the unaffiliated self: 'We are off on another path, a path which we follow by way of the pieces of cloth of ourself. Ariadne's thread is our own'. In other words, a 'base for life'—more stable than a 'Progressivist' tradition

[82] Charles Olson, 'Creatively we are neolithic', I Box 29:1518, Prose No. 204, Charles Olson Research Collection, Archives and Special Collections at the Thomas J. Dodd Research Center, University of Connecticut Libraries.
[83] Adorno and Horkheimer (1997), p. 6.
[84] Adorno and Horkheimer (1997), p. 25.

proven so disappointing—can be found only in bare subjecthood. Olson's 'neolithic' creativity rides upon a language of return—from the abstract plans of 'civilization' to plain human experience itself—which was already pervasive in the literature of the splintering American left.

Olson is emphatic in these lines that his answer to the 'mathematization of man' is shared by a broader cultural vanguard. 'The interest in the rudest form,' he argues, 'is the most significant sign of work today'. A *Life* article on 'South Seas Art' in 1946 had argued much the same ('Now African Negro sculpture, prehistoric European cave paintings and the Mayan and Aztec designs of Central America are profoundly influencing modern art', it noted).[85] Greenberg would do so in *Partisan Review* the following year: 'As our painting and sculpture abandon naturalism they find more and more stimulating precedents outside the historical and social orbit of Western culture'.[86] The 'we' Olson identifies, a group following 'Ariadne's thread' into the personal primordial labyrinth, is not further defined. But it seems likely that Olson was thinking of Cagli. Indeed, unpublished correspondence suggests that Olson and Cagli were working out the pertinence of the new 'radicalism' together; a project they both saw as extending the work of modernism after 1945.

In a letter of 8 December 1949, Cagli explained the 'link' between himself and Olson in these terms.[87] His 'conclusion' was that they shared a kind of 'Poesia orfica' (Orphic Poetry) which relied on their recovery of the primordial.[88] But 'let me try to be clear' Cagli added, and at the foot of the page he drew an annotated diagram (see Figure 2.4).[89] Cagli represents three levels here: first the '*subconscio atavico*', the 'seed to be digged out from x 00000 years ago to come to *coscienza primordiale*'; second the

[85] Anonymous, 'South Seas Art', *Life* (4 November 1946), p. 77.
[86] Clement Greenberg, *The Collected Essays and Criticism Volume 2: Arrogant Purpose 1945-1949*. Ed. John O'Brian (Chicago, 1988), p. 291.
[87] Cagli to Olson (8 December 1949). Charles Olson Research Collection.
[88] Cagli to Olson (8 December 1949). Charles Olson Research Collection.
[89] Cagli to Olson (8 December 1949). Charles Olson Research Collection.

'*subconscio individuale*'.[90] Together these layers represent the '*AULA della memoria secondo Sant Agostino and Yung*' ('The chamber of memory according to Saint Augustine

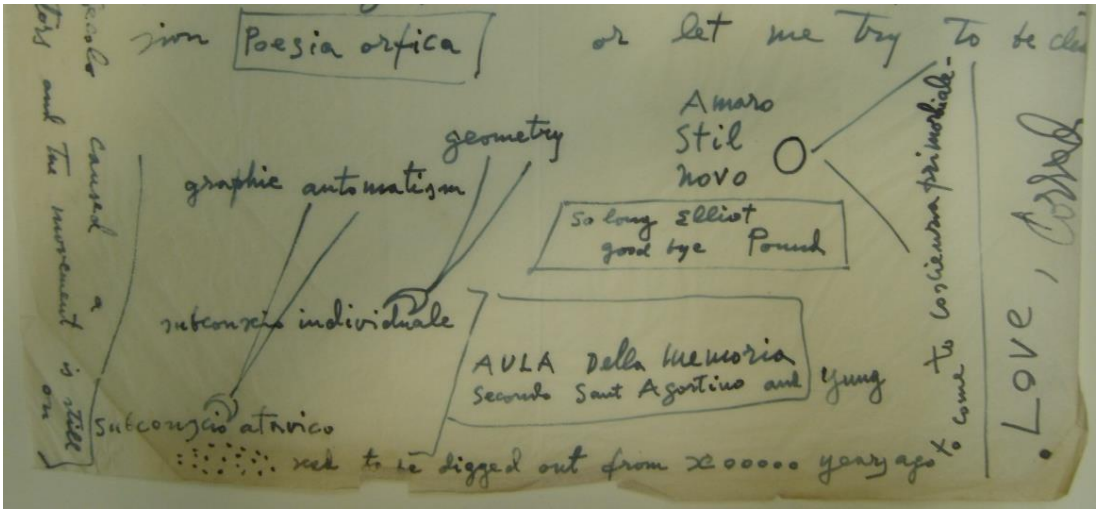


*Figure 2.4.* Corrado Cagli, 'Poesia orfica', 8 December 1949. Charles Olson Research Collection.

and Jung'). The final level, 'graphic automatism', is an aesthetic practice deriving from the subconscious. And 'Geometry' derives from the second level alone. To draw from the individual and collective unconscious, Cagli suggests, would be to create a '*stil nuovo'* which will finally allow postwar artists to exorcise the stubborn ghosts of high modernism: 'so long Elliot [sic] good bye Pound'.[91]

There is reason to think that Olson would have been sceptical of Cagli's Jungian take on the '*atavico*', at least in 1949. In July the following year he told Frances Boldereff that he had recently endured his '1st reading of Jung' with *Psychology and Religion* (1946). 'Mr Jung is, as I always hunched,' Olson commented, 'a lazy fraud'.[92] He would change his mind, but not until 1952. In fact, Cagli's diagram would have been better appreciated in 1949 by those primitivists amongst the avant-garde who—unlike Newman or Olson—saw the Ariadne's thread leading directly to the subconscious (Pollock and Gottlieb

[90] Cagli to Olson (8 December 1949). Charles Olson Research Collection.
[91] Cagli to Olson (8 December 1949). Charles Olson Research Collection.
[92] Charles Olson and Frances Boldereff, *A Modern Correspondence*. Ed. Ralph Maud and Sharon Thesen (Hanover, 1999), p. 396.

particularly). Nevertheless, Cagli's 'Poesia orfica' diagram did represent their shared understanding of a path leading directly from rational abstraction to some form of personal primordiality. A late modernist '*stil nuovo*', following a thread back to primitive beginnings, would recuperate that 'pure natural existence' banished to the margins of a 'mathematizing' modern order.

*

Whether Olson and Cagli were aware that a '*stil nuovo*' along these lines was already active in New York in 1949 is not entirely clear. In an interview conducted in 1965, Cagli noted that '*non ho avuto il tempo di seguire quel che stave succedendo in quegli anni a* New York' ('I didn't have time to follow what was going on in those years in New York').[93] Olson, likewise, would not discuss abstract expressionism until 1958 when he mentioned Pollock and Kline in 'Equal, That Is, to the Real Itself' (1958). In 1966 he would credit the same painters, rather hyperbolically, with having 'solved the problem of how to live'. Nevertheless, Olson's imagined community of primitivists in 1948 ('the rudest form is the most significant sign of work today') could have included the painters of New York, whose work had been seeking the 'rudest form' since 1943.

As an alternative to the mathematized man of modernity, however, Olson's radical subject held greatest affinity with the 'Original Man' of Newman. There is no evidence that Olson came across Newman's essay on this theme, 'The First Man Was an Artist' (1947). But Newman shared with Olson (and for that matter Adorno and Horkheimer) a resistance to scientific naturalism (an 'attempt to dominate all realms of thought'), a conviction that 'scientific method' had become a 'new theology', and a total affirmation of 'the root, the radical'.[94] And both called, in 1946 and 1947, for a 'neolithic' art which would encapsulate

[93] Corrado Cagli, *I percorsi del Mito: Opere 1929–1976*. Ed. Sergio Troisi (Milan, 1999), p. 46.
[94] Newman, 'The First Man Was an Artist' (1992), p. 157.

the new revolt against both abstract reason and the political projects which relied upon its power. The artist as 'original man', who refuses to see the world as a 'gigantic analytic judgement',[95] becomes in Newman's essay the first model of the postwar artist:

> The artist today is striving for a closer approach to the truth concerning original man than can be claimed by the palaeontologist, for it is the poet and the artist who are concerned with the function of original man and who are trying to arrive at his creative state. What is the *raison d'etre,* what is the explanation of the seemingly insane drive of man to be painter and poet if it is not an act of defiance against man's fall and an assertion that he return to the Adam of the Garden of Eden? For the artists are the first men.[96]

'Creatively,' as Olson put it the same year, 'we are neolithic'. Original man—who can be recouped by the artist rather than the 'palaeontologist'—offers a 'creative state' befitting the peculiar imperatives that, 'today', find the artist in a race back to beginnings. But for Newman, as for Olson, primitivism is much more than a merely aesthetic procedure. In 1943 he had spoken of the need to surpass an 'outmoded politics', and this was only the most immediate and obvious expression of that 'examined and vigorous attack' which the new avant-garde now hoped to direct against 'all the vestigia of Western civilization we have inherited'.[97] The retreat to 'First Man' was therefore an ideological as much as a philosophical manoeuvre. Returning to some supposedly permanent centre of subjectivity—shared as much by the Palaeolithic cave painter as the abstract expressionist—was one way of retreating from the more concerted, collective political projects which Olson and his contemporaries had supported before the close of the war.

In notes written the same year, now included with 'De Priapo or, Notes for an Historian of a Suppressed Religion' (1947), Olson identified an unexpected component of this 'vigorous attack' on Western civilization; a component he shared strongly—as we will see later—with at least two composers in the New York avant-garde. It was in these notes

[95] Adorno and Horkheimer (1997), p. 27.
[96] Newman, 'The First Man Was an Artist' (1992), pp. 159-160.
[97] 'Ideas for Series of Lectures', Charles Olson Research Collection.

that Olson lamented the tendency of instrumental reason to value abstract improvement over the 'private sense of experience'. Like Dwight Macdonald the year before, Olson wonders here whether the 'increase of man's mastery over nature is good or bad in its actual affects on human life'.[98] And it is for this reason that he calls for a new philosophical posture which, leaving the 'engineers' and their hubris behind, attacks 'Western civilization' through pure *humility*.

> What is needed is a reverse of a renaissance, exactly the opposite of what is asked for by the great brains. A modicum of modesty would go a long way with these men and women. If they had a rebirth of awe they'd be much better than a renaissance of man's glory. A little nature would go a long way. As would its consequent, a sense of worship.[99]

'A modicum of modesty'. In 'Projective Verse' this would become 'humilitas' (CPr 247). The headlong, Promethean work of modernity, of progress and 'improvement', ought now to be 'reversed', and a sense of humility established where once reigned a vision of 'man's glory'.

A 'rebirth of awe' did in fact emerge in these years, as the atomic bombing of Japan initiated a belated rediscovery of the sublime.[100] The 'nuclear sublime', as Robert Genter notes, 'provoked the drives for shelter and self-preservation that Burke associated with the sublime experience', impressing on Americans the 'feeling of insignificance in the face of

[98] Macdonald, 'The Root Is Man' (1946), p. 100.
[99] 'De Priapo or, Notes for an Historian of a Suppressed Religion', Charles Olson Research Collection.
[100] See, for instance, Newman's 'The Sublime Is Now' (1948). Characteristically, Newman sees American art recuperating a sense of the sublime through its recovery of man himself, free from the 'abstract', Europe's 'obsolete props' and antiquated legend': 'I believe that here in America, some of us, free from the weight of European culture, are finding the answer, by completely denying that art has any concern with the problem of beauty and where to find it. The question that now arises is how, if we are living in a time without a legend or mythos that can be called sublime, if we refuse to admit any exaltation in pure relations, if we refuse to live in the abstract, how can we be creating a sublime art? We are reasserting man's natural desire for the exalted, for a concern with our relationship to the absolute emotions. We do not need the obsolete props of an outmoded and antiquated legend'. Barnett Newman, 'The Sublime Is Now', *Selected Writings and Interviews*. Ed. John P. O'Neill (Berkeley, 1992), p. 173. The essay was one of a series on the sublime published in *The Tiger's Eye* in 1948.

such destruction'.[101] Olson himself was explicit about this in 'The Gate and the Center' (1950): 'We have been shocked at what we did not know nature's energies capable of' (CPr 172). But the new 'awe' and 'modesty' before nature was not simply a response to the bomb. As 'De Priapo' revealed, such humility had been born of a much broader revolt against the hegemony of abstract reason, a revolt with its origins before August 1945, and one only intensified by the spectacle of mushroom clouds over Japan and the remote north Pacific. As the readers of *Partisan Review* or *politics* would have been well aware, critiques of instrumental rationality and unreflexive scientism were now a major feature of the disorderly retreat from 'outmoded' left politics. And as Olson showed in 'Projective Verse', it was the task of new American avant-garde not only to escape these lapsed enthusiasms but also, and more importantly, to find a 'stance toward reality' (CPr 247) which compensated for them.

*

The earliest material which 'Projective Verse' drew upon—notes entitled 'Mouths Biting Empty Air', dated 27 October 1946—affirmed the new primitive 'radicalism' in literary form: 'the work must be as hard and clean,' Olson suggests here, 'as the rocks and water where men first uttered themselves'.[102] And this necessarily entailed that process of forgetting which Newman and Olson had both called for in their essays of 1947 to 1950—'man has to uneducate himself first' (CPr 168), or, 'freeing ourselves of the impediments of memory'.[103] To be forgotten are, Olson says: 'inherited line, stanza, over-all form, what is the "old" base of the non-projective' (CPr 239). 'Inherited' recalls the new American art

[101] Genter (2010), p. 164.
[102] Charles Olson, 'Mouths Biting Empty Air', I Box 32:1630, Prose No. 15, Charles Olson Research Collection, Archives and Special Collections at the Thomas J. Dodd Research Center, University of Connecticut Libraries. The title is taken from Ezra Pound's *Mauberley* (1920). And the terminology is, of course, very much indebted to Pound. In 'The Hard and Soft in French Poetry' (1918) Pound notes the provenance of hardness in Théophile Gautier's *Emaux et Camées* (1852): 'He exhorts us to cut in hard substance, the shell and the Parian'. Pound, *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*. Ed. T. S. Eliot (London, 1954), p. 285.
[103] Newman, 'The Sublime Is Now' (1992), p. 173.

Olson called for in 1948, with its 'examined and vigorous attack on all the vestigia of Western civilization we have inherited'. And like Newman, who lamented the stranglehold of 'Renaissance notions of beauty' over painting, Olson sees those forms to be forgotten as Renaissance in origin: 'verse here and in England lost it [the 'syllable'] from the late Elizabethans to Pound, lost it, in the sweetness of meter and rime' (CPr 241).[104] Since, as he said in 1947, the 'mathematization of man' also 'precedes [sic] directly from the Renaissance', Olson evidently associated these 'inherited' forms with a larger conceptual project which he—like Adorno and Horkheimer in the first pages of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*—dated to the early seventeenth-century and characterized as the increased mastery of human mind over 'content' or nature.[105]

To overcome this immodesty 'Projective Verse' calls for the postwar poet to return to 'the root, the radical' and take up (as he said in 1947) the 'path which we follow by way of the pieces of cloth of ourself'. Specifically, this will take the form of the 'breathing of the man who writes' (CPr 242), a manoeuvre which turns out to be more ontological than prosodic.

> 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. If he sprawl, he shall find little to sing but himself, and shall sing, nature has such paradoxical ways, by way of artificial forms outside himself. But if he stays inside himself, if he is contained within his nature as he is participant in the larger force, he will be able to listen, and his hearing through himself will give him secrets objects share. And by an inverse law his shapes will make their own way. It is in this sense that the projective act, which is the artist's act in the larger field of objects, leads to dimensions larger than the man. (CPr 247)

'Artificial forms outside himself' will fall to something more basic ('from the root out, from all over the place, the syllable comes', CPr 242). Returning to the body, the

[104] Newman, 'The Sublime Is Now' (1992), p. 172.
[105] Adorno and Horkheimer regard Francis Bacon's 'In Praise of Human Knowledge' as pivotal, with its evocation of a human mind which is to 'hold sway over a disenchanted nature'. Adorno and Horkheimer (1997), p. 4.

unaccommodated oral poet is much the same as the 'first man' Newman called for three years earlier. He does not attempt to arrange the world according to his own arbitrary and 'artificial' forms (as would, presumably, the 'engineer') but 'stays inside himself', finding his own place in the 'larger force' by witnessing to his own 'small existence'. Though ostensibly concerned with oral prosody, the passage is deeply resonant not only of Olson's earlier more metaphysical notes (the 'Ariadne's path' to the self) but also of the broader contemporary shift towards a person-centred politics, towards 'man himself'. Like new revolutionary theories on the disaffected American left, 'Projective Verse' turns from 'artificial forms' outside the individual to the most basic, stable, and unchangeable grounds of human subjecthood.

For all that it owed technically to Pound and Williams then, 'Projective Verse' is in the same vein as Newman, Rothko, Gottlieb, and other New York artists who were also returning attention to man 'inside himself', his 'first' sensibility and most primitive experience. And part of this involved, as 'Projective Verse' demonstrates, a critique of abstract reason which was potent expression of the New Failure of Nerve. Olson may have understood, as Robert von Hallberg has said, 'that poetic theories rest on epistemological and metaphysical assumptions'.[106] But in 'Projective Verse' these assumptions are seen in the act of resettling, with the new philosophical imaginary of the 'vita nuova' assuming priority. 'Projective Verse' speaks of the need, expressed by the New York School of painting as much as the renegade American left, to retreat to the more dependable stuff of human experience.

*

This retreat represented a 'genetic moment' for the new American modernism. From 1943 it had become clear to many that political disappointment across the American left had

[106] von Hallberg (1978), p. 83.

been amplified into far-reaching philosophical critique. Those who identified this New Failure of Nerve were concerned principally with strategy, since the new distrust of abstract reason and scientific method threatened to undermine the Old Left's claims to 'scientific' validity and jeopardise the possibility of postwar gains through the traditional mobilisation of labour. But what may have been more significant was that amongst those afflicted by the failure of nerve were those who had begun to imagine a new aesthetic expression for the postwar world. Macdonald may have thought of 'Radicalism' as a vanguard limited to the contributors to *politics*. But Olson and his contemporaries shared its strategies in several important respects. In its early commitment to the 'primordial way of thinking and feeling' the new American modernism defined itself as a project which abandoned scientific rationality, progressivism, and collective political programmes for the root experience of the private subject. Emboldened by political disappointments, it articulated a radicalism which went much further than *politics* in its search for what Olson called a 'base for life'. If this search affiliated Olson with his peers, it also gave impetus to early postwar American modernism as a whole. And, as we will see in the following chapter, in one special incarnation it also promised the artists an aesthetic mechanism for imagined social change.

## Chapter Two

## From the Barricade to the Bedroom

> What has happened to the social vitality of the world working class? Why do the masses all over the globe no longer seem capable of initiating anything new aimed at their own self-liberation?
>
> A Reader, 'Decadence of the World Workingclass' (1945).[1]

> You are very much all right if you are orgastically potent. Your desires are good; your acts, beneficent; and your life is in tune with the great, cosmic, vital force that is the natural law of the universe. The sad thing is the rest of the world.
>
> Mildred Brady, 'The New Cult of Sex and Anarchy' (1947).[2]

In 1960 Jasper Johns presented *Painting with Two Balls* (1960) at a solo exhibition in New York.[3] This parodic anatomy, comprising three painted panels separated by two painted balls, established an ironic literalization of New York School masculinity, the cult of virility which had been central to the rhetorical construction of the new avant-garde. *Painting with Two Balls* was responding to figures, Pollock and Newman prominent among them, for whom painting 'with two balls' had been a measure of artistic seriousness and painting itself a function of masculinity.[4] With one satiric gesture, he deprived the New York School of its moody swagger, its retrogressive elision of creative genius and masculine prowess.

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[1] Anonymous, 'Decadence of the World Workingclass', *politics* (November 1945), p. 349.
[2] Mildred Edie Brady, 'The New Cult of Sex and Anarchy', *Harper's Magazine* 194:1163 (April 1947), p. 315.
[3] Robert Genter, *Late Modernism: Art, Culture, and Politics in Cold War America* (Philadelphia, 2010), p. 197.
[4] Quoted in Genter (2010), p. 197.

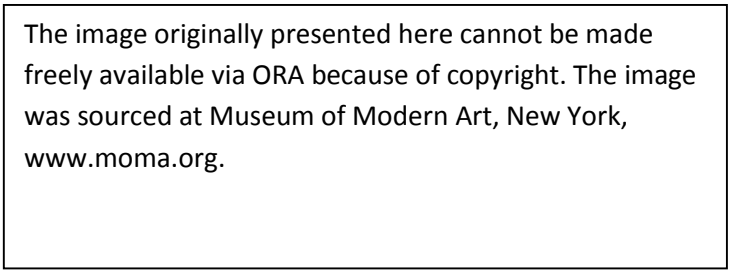
Yet Johns was hardly alone in dismantling the alliance between male virility and American avant-gardism at the turn of the decade. In April 1959, for instance, Newman had been attacked in *ARTnews* for turning up to his New York exhibition dressed like a 'Madison Avenue Nimrod' and presenting works which were the 'apogee' of a 'he-man cult'.[5] The critic, Hubert Crehan, found indubitable evidence for this in *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* (1950-51), which, he noted, might be translated 'Heroic Man Erect'.[6] For a new generation of painters and critics, the strident masculinity of New York School painting was now to be abandoned, condemned to painterly oblivion along with all the posturing Nina Leen had captured in her well-known photograph of the painters in 1951.[7]

But by 1960 it was already difficult for critics such as Crehan and Johns to place this 'he-man cult' in necessary perspective, to appreciate the kind of function it may have had in the early years of the new American modernism. As Michael Leja argues, painterly expressions of male virility were partly a way for the avant-garde to assert its aesthetic priority over Europe, now 'portrayed as weakened and effeminate'; a way of declaring the sovereign vitality of the new modernism of New York City.[8] And, as Marcia Brennan has said, such 'notions of masculine vitality, freedom, and authenticity […] held a particular relevance for a contemporary bourgeois audience'; they resonated, in other words, with wider cultural concerns about the postwar American male.[9]

But interpreting American late modernist masculinity as a way of staking a claim to the modernist inheritance, or of claiming a receptive contemporary audience, goes only

[5] Quoted in Barnett Newman, *Selected Writings and Interviews*. Ed. John P. O'Neill (Berkeley, 1992), p. 215.
[6] Newman (1992), p. 215. A more conventional translation would be 'Man, Heroic and Sublime'.
[7] Anonymous, 'Irascible Group of Advanced Artists Led Fight Against Show', *Life* (15 January 1951), p. 34.
[8] Michael Leja, *Reframing Abstract Expressionism: Subjectivity and Painting in the 1940s* (New Haven, 1993), p. 256.
[9] Marcia Brennan, *Modernism's Masculine Subjects: Matisse, the New York School, and Post-Painterly Abstraction* (Cambridge, MA, 2004), p. 10.

some way to revealing its period purpose, for the idiom of the early postwar 'he-man cult' was not native to the painters alone. Indeed, the avant-garde's language of male virility

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overlapped with its appearance in the theory of the splintering American left, especially amongst those searching for alternatives to liberal reform or orthodox Marxism. The shift to 'man himself' was articulated, more often than not, in the same masculine and libidinal terms, with male virility becoming a crucial resource in the reversion from collective political efforts to more private loci of social change. Revolution in the contemporary habitus could be achieved, so the argument went, if basic sexual imperatives were recuperated along with those other human experiences supposedly obscured by the

[10] This is a later lithograph based on the original of 1960.

intellectual habits of modernity. The 'he-man cult' was part, in other words, of that major critique of abstract reason now asserting itself as an alternative instrument—post-Marxist and post-New Deal—for radical change.[11]

The avant-garde 'cult' of virility was thus part of a broader reflex of the early postwar American left. At a moment when socialists questioned the 'social vitality of the world workingclass' and liberals lamented the collapse of the New Deal's social radicalism, and at a moment when the rational life was being called into question by the New Failure of Nerve, a new agent for personal and social change was discovered in the deeply irrational potential of human (specifically male) sexuality.[12] Crehan's 'he-man cult' was, in fact, a revolutionary fad; a broad yet spontaneous attempt to imagine political upheaval along erotic lines.[13]

Indeed, so much was this so that in 1945, and again in 1947, several American critics openly attacked what they called the new 'gonad theory of revolution' or the 'new cult of sex and anarchy'; theories of radical political change predicated on the liberation of

[11] In his own discussion of 'Late Modernism and the Gonad Theory of Revolution', Robert Genter somewhat underplays the extent to which this drive to libidinal revolution was consistent with the search for new kinds of individual political agency across the disappointed American left. As we will see in this chapter, the new sexual politics were also a function of the New Failure of Nerve and its critique of abstract reason. Genter (2010), pp. 206-211.

[12] Was this perception accurate? At the very moment 'tumescent I' was first hailed as an alternative to organized labour (1945-46) an 'explosion of strikes' hit the United States. As Leo Panitch and Sam Gindin note: 'At General Motors 225,000 walked off the job; 175,000 electrical workers and 800,000 steel workers soon did the same; and these actions were followed by national strikes in railroads and mining', *The Making of Global Capitalism: The Political Economy of American Empire* (London, 2012), pp. 82-83. But this was in many ways a paroxysmal affair because, as Gindin, Panitch and David Harvey have all emphasized, raising wages, low interest rates and federal incentives were creating a boom of mortgage-financed home-owning and consumption which significantly lessened the appetite for radical political change. As Harvey puts it: 'What better way to kill two birds with one stone: revive the economy through massive housing and suburbanization and co-opt the better-paid workers into conservative politics by debt-encumbered homeownership!', *Rebel Cities: From the Right to the City to the Urban Revolution* (London, 2012), p. 50.

[13] Though as I point out in the conclusion to this chapter, the effort to place sexuality at the centre of radical strategy provided a precedent for the New Left. Indeed, it is even possible that this early postwar he-man cult provided the impetus for the later marriage of socialism and sex in the 1960s, since Herbert Marcuse's deeply influential *Eros and Civilization* (1955) was itself indebted to the debates of the late 1940s which I discuss here. It should go without saying that the weakness of the gonad revolutionism of 1945 to 1950 was that it focussed entirely on the emancipation of male sexuality, barely even considering the social, sexual, economic, and political disenfranchisement of the era's women (many of whom had been forced to give up their wartime occupations to returning men at the close of the war).

repressed instinctual behaviour.[14] These critics were not social conservatives affrighted by the latest incarnation of avant-garde excess, however. Nor were their critiques concerned with popular morality or a perceived threat to the social *status quo*. Early postwar critiques of the 'cult of sex and anarchy' were instead issuing from the political left, and their primary concern was one of strategy. For C. Wright Mills and Patricia J. Salter, writing in *politics* in October 1945, the problem with the 'gonad theory of revolution' was that, *qua* revolution, it was hopeless. By dedicating itself to the emancipation of repressed individual virility, they argued, the gonad theory lost sight of the 'ensemble of social relations'; the 'institutional structures' whose revolutionization was the *sine qua non* of real political change.[15]

When Mildred Edie Brady attacked the 'cult of sex and anarchy' two years later, it was along similar lines. A staff writer at the *New Republic* under the editorship of Henry Wallace, Brady attacked the new gonad theory of revolution as a left liberal who distrusted not only its anarchic individualism but also its irrational 'sentimental mysticism'.[16] Though Mills, Salter, and Brady were responding to the particular influence of the Austrian former-Marxist psychoanalyst Wilhelm Reich, their critiques revealed a much broader strategic trend. As the era of the New Deal and Popular Front came to an end, a large section of the left were reneging on socialist orthodoxy and seeking a new kind of political agency which did not depend upon labour and class struggle. What they were looking for was a political agent which could effect social change without political organization, transforming everyday life without transforming 'institutional structures' first. And, as Mills, Salter, and Brady noted with combined derision and concern, this new political agent was being found in male instinctualism. For painters, poets, and art critics

[14] C. Wright Mills and Patricia J. Salter, 'The Barricade and the Bedroom', *politics* (October 1945), p. 314. Brady (1947), p. 312.
[15] Karl Marx, 'On Feuerbach', *Early Political Writings*. Ed. Joseph O'Malley with Richard A. Davis (Cambridge, 1994), p. 117.
[16] Brady (1947), p. 314.

alike, the virile male monad, what Olson called in 1945 'tumescent I' (CPo 14), appeared to be leading the defeated political left out of its impasse, remaking society by emancipating his own vital solitary self.

The avant-garde 'he-man' cult that was apt to look so ridiculous to Jasper Johns by the end of the fifties was thus something more than performance and posturing. And if the early career of Charles Olson makes this especially clear, it is because his work is unusually expressive of the kind of demands which were making the 'gonad theory of revolution' so attractive. For Olson, male virility was expressly the language of the new American modernism, so much so that recent critics have challenged its gender exclusivity.[17] But in this respect his career from 'The K' (1945) to the first Maximus poem (1950) is paradigmatic. First imagined weeks before Mills and Salter wrote their essay for *politics* in 1945, the 'tumescent I' of 'The K' is exemplary of the radical masculine agency imagined by the new modernism. As disillusionment with organized politics segued into commitment to simple, private experience, the virile male was called on to lead the retreat. Not only a cipher of the emerging American modernist artist, 'tumescent I' was also a gonad revolutionary.

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Four months before V-E Day, and three months before the death of Roosevelt, 'The K' heralded a distinctive feature of the nascent avant-garde: the meeting of male virility, modernist aesthetics, and the pastness of New Deal and Popular Front politics. The poem was contemporary with a letter to the anthropologist Ruth Benedict (a former colleague at

[17] Rachel Blau DuPlessis, 'Manifests', *Diacritics* 26:3/4 (1996), p. 44. And Rachel Blau DuPlessis, *Blue Studios: Poetry and Its Cultural Work* (Tuscaloosa, 2006), p. 84. Andrew Mossin's discussion of 'Olson and the Crisis of Cold War Masculinity' is biographically astute but historically injudicious. Though Mossin focuses on an 'early period' in Olson's career, roughly 1947 to 1952, much of the intellectual context he provides is weighted towards the middle to late 1950s. Mossin, *Male Subjectivity and Poetic Form in "New American" Poetry* (New York, 2010), pp. 28, 25-64. Other recent discussions of Olson and gender have been even less sensitive to the historical moment. See, for instance, Donald Wellman, 'Olson and Subjectivity: "Projective Verse" and the Uncertainties of Sex', *Olson's Prose*. Ed. Gary Grieve-Carlson (Newcastle, 2007), pp. 47-61.

the Office of War Information) in which Olson announced that he had 'left both politics and government again and gone back to writing'.[18] 'I have a feeling you will know what I mean,' he wrote, 'when I regret that we are not city states here in this wide land. Differentiation, yes. But also the chance for a person like yourself or myself to be central to social action at the same time and because of one's own creative work. I envy Yeats his Ireland'.[19] The poem Olson wrote soon after this posed an alternative to 'social action' which anticipated not only his own future work but also that of his contemporaries. Written in February, 'The K' represented an envoi to 'politics' which was also the discovery of a new agent for change:

> Take, then, my answer:
> there is a tide in a man
> moves him to his moon and,
> though it drop him back
> he works through ebb to mount
> the run again and swell
> to be tumescent I
>
> The affairs of men remain a chief concern (CPo 14)

In early 1945 the withdrawal from collective politics to autonomous selfhood was becoming, as we have already seen, politically paradigmatic. Before the end of the year, Will Herberg would write in *politics* that the choice was now between totalitarianism and 'personalism', with the latter affirming the 'primacy of the person both existentially and morally'.[20] A year later Dwight Macdonald put it somewhat similarly: 'The first step towards a new concept of political action (and political morality) is for each person to decide what he thinks is right, what satisfies *him*, what *he* wants'.[21] And the same

[18] Quoted in Tom Clark, *Charles Olson: The Allegory of a Poet's Life* (New York, 1991), p. 94.
[19] Clark (1991), p. 94.
[20] Will Herberg, 'Personalism against Totalitarianism', *politics* (December 1945), p. 372.
[21] Dwight Macdonald, 'The Root is Man (II)', *politics* (July 1946), p. 214.

emphasis on autonomous 'personalism' was given by Erich Fromm in *Man for Himself*, also in preparation in 1945.[22]

What made the new personalist credo distinctive, however, was that in establishing 'a new concept of political action', it expressly identified the new politics with the free expression of instinctual masculinity. Olson was particularly overt in this respect, of course, his tidal withdrawal from the political scene allowing him to 'run again and swell / to be tumescent I'. But Macdonald also believed political personalism would involve a recuperation of individual potency, his personalist anarchism requiring the 'removal of all social bars' to the 'complete and immediate satisfaction of [man's] sex life and all other aspects of his nature'.[23] And even Fromm imagined man-for-himself in far from gender-neutral terms. Not only was this figure potent ('potency and impotence refer to all powers characteristic of man'), but he was also a 'courageous' antitype to the 'passive' authoritarian personality, the man in flight from freedom.[24]

'Tumescent I' was therefore a peculiarly apt metaphor. Not only did it accurately record the turn from collective politics to 'personalism', but it also suggested a new tendency on the American liberal and radical left to imagine such personalism in terms of masculine vigour. And in this respect, as we will see, Olson, the abstract expressionists, and the theorists of the fragmenting American left were entering upon the same territory, imagining a 'new concept of political action' in which male instinctualism usurped the revolutionary role of organized labour whilst consolidating the new critique of instrumental reason and the political programmes which had thrived upon its Promethean ambitions.

Returning from Key West in April 1945, where 'The K' had been written a few weeks earlier, Olson stopped in Virginia at the country estate of the exiled Polish aristocrat

[22] Lawrence J. Friedman, *The Lives of Erich Fromm: Love's Prophet* (New York, 2013), p. 136.
[23] Macdonald, 'The Root Is Man (II)' (1946), p. 208.
[24] Erich Fromm, *Man for Himself: An inquiry into the psychology of ethics* (London, 2003), p. 187.

Adam Kulikowski.[25] As several lyric poems of the time confirm, this was a moment when 'tumescent I' was beginning to be exercised, when the recuperation of male subjectivity found an unexpectedly pastoral foothold. Indeed, the Kulikowski estate became the subject of several finger-exercises in Schillerian sentimentality, lyrics which spoke of the growing tendency to position male sexuality at the centre of both a new art and a new radical politics. 'Said Adam' (1945), for instance, found male virility to have been lost within the 'enigma' of civilizational self-regard:

> All else moves easily
> bee and flaming bird
> tree, light and whipping song.
> We lumber
> make enigma
> lack what we want
> locked in what we have. (CPo 26)

What distinguishes this from a later alienation plaint, 'I stood estranged / from that which was most familiar', is its open lament for Adamic sexuality (MPo 56). The previous section reads: 'Cortex and spine, / bulls we are / caught in habit / prevented by a fence / from our desire' (CPo 26).[26] In 1948 Alfred Kinsey would reveal in *Sexual Behaviour in the Human Male* (1948) that this was not strictly true. But 'Said Adam' was heralding a new discourse in which the recovery of male sexuality was not only a personal but also a political imperative. Indeed, within months of this a debate about the radical political value of 'our desire' would cause substantial disagreement in the ranks of the deradicalizing left, forcing its participants to consider more soberly than before the uncertain future of progressive American politics.

[25] Clark (1991), p. 99.
[26] Perhaps Olson had in mind Rimbaud's similar sentiments in 'Les anciens animaux saillissaient': 'But the sterile hour has struck; the horse / And the ox have reined in their passions; no one / Will dare run a flag up his genital pole'. Arthur Rimbaud, *Collected Poems*. Trans. Martin Sorrell (Oxford, 2009), p. 161.

Three months after Olson's stay with Kulikowski, *politics* published a controversial article on Wilhelm Reich by Paul Goodman, whom Olson would meet at Black Mountain College in 1950.[27] Critiqued in George Orwell's 'Politics and the English Language' (1946) the following year, Goodman's essay attempted to establish the political potential of liberating man from the 'enigma', as Olson had put it, of sexual restraints, habits, and mores.[28] Arguing that conventional psychotherapy was inuring the masses to 'non-revolutionary social adjustment', and that the 'goal' of recent psychotherapy was simply 'the smooth running of the social machine *as it exists*', Goodman called for a revolutionary psychology oriented by the work of Reich. By cracking the 'enigma' of instinctual repression, Goodman claimed, Reich was fomenting an 'orgastic' revolution:

> The core of neurosis is in the deprivation of instinctual satisfaction, and the aim of therapy is to give instinctual satisfaction. Orgastically potent people will not tolerate authority or present-day industrial forms, but will instinctually create new forms. The role of the judging and deciding Ego is left largely out of account, and the instincts are considered correspondingly simple and compatible. At present, such a theory is acceptable in every *positive* detail (though not always in what it denies); it has enormous revolutionary dynamism. It is the psychology of the revolution.[29]

Reich, who had emigrated to the United States from Austria in 1939, was quickly gaining new American adherents in 1945. His major work, *The Function of the Orgasm* (1942), had been published in New York by the Orgone Institute Press three years earlier. And at about the time Olson composed 'Said Adam' his earlier work *Die Sexualität im Kulturkampf* (1936) had been issued as *The Sexual Revolution* (1945). As Goodman's

[27] Clark (1991), p. 224.
[28] George Orwell, 'Politics and the English Language', *Horizon* 13:76 (April 1946), p. 254. Orwell included a passage from Goodman's essay alongside several others. As he put it: 'Apart from avoidable ugliness, two qualities are common to all of them. The first is staleness of imagery: the other is lack of precision. The writer either has a meaning and cannot express it, or he inadvertently says something else, or he is almost indifferent as to whether his words mean anything or not. This mixture of vagueness and sheer incompetence is the most marked characteristic of modern English prose'. Orwell (1946), pp. 254-255.
[29] Paul Goodman, 'The Political Meaning of Some Recent Revisions of Freud', *politics* (July 1945), p. 202.

article made clear, the growing interest in Reich owed to the fact that his work appeared to offer a psychotherapeutic alternative to conventional (Marxian) radicalism. As Goodman saw it, Reichian psychotherapy promised spontaneous upheaval, bypassing the laborious Old Left imperatives of organization and theory: 'Orgastically potent people will not tolerate authority or present-day industrial forms, but will instinctually create new forms'. For writers and artists disenchanted with the Old Left this was an appealing idea, and, as Christopher Turner notes, Goodman's article found a 'deeply receptive audience' in the New York avant-garde.[30]

Not everybody was convinced, however, that radical politics could be established on so simple a principle as 'instinctual satisfaction'. In the following issue of *politics*, Mills and Salter launched their swingeing critique of Goodman's 'gonad theory of revolution', insisting that rational and collective action could not be dismissed so easily: 'The psychological problem of a socialist movement is not how to release the "orgastic potencies" of men but how to make men rationally and critically aware of where their interests lie and how they may realize them collectively'.[31] For Mills and Salter,

> The dynamics of revolution go on within institutional structures. The motives of individual men engaging in movements for or against the status quo must be understood in terms of the different positions they occupy within these structures, and in terms of the biographies they seek to live out within and beyond the circles of their society. The locus of freedom, and of the historical dynamic, is not the gonads but the political and economic order.[32]

Goodman replied that Mills and Salter exhibited a 'curious misconception' about his position.[33] 'We are not asserting that the liberation of instinct will of itself produce a "heaven on earth"', he clarified, 'but we assert that the repression of instinct makes good

[30] Christopher Turner, *Adventures in the Orgasmatron: Wilhelm Reich and the Invention of Sex* (London, 2011), p. 245.
[31] Mills and Salter (1945), pp. 314-315. For another account of the debate see Genter (2010), p. 210.
[32] Mills and Salter (1945), p. 314.
[33] Paul Goodman, 'Reply', *politics* (October 1945), p. 315.

institutions unattainable'.[34] 'Since the instincts are elaborately organized,' he claimed, 'the repression of some will entail the repression or violent reaction of others'.[35] Despite Goodman's attempt to settle the misunderstanding, the controversy exposed a new and deepening rift within the American left. On the one hand, Mills and Salter insisted upon that orthodox theory which found an imperturbable 'historical dynamic' expressed in the development of social relations. Goodman, on the other hand, represented a new trend in radical thought which found that, whilst the 'dynamics of revolution' may well be articulated in 'institutional structures', they arise at first instance in the individual. The Mills-Salter and Goodman debate was a bellwether for later disputes between the Old and New Left.

But pivoting as it did on a distinction between the 'rational' and the 'instinctual', the controversy also reflected the New Failure of Nerve debate which had dominated the pages of the *Partisan Review* less than two years previously. The turn to 'tumescent I' was, from the point of view of the orthodox left, an obvious failure of nerve, part of the larger retreat from rational collective effort to private, and perhaps metaphysical, experience.[36] And this would soon become pronounced in the work of Olson and his contemporaries, as their 'first man' primitivism and forthright antirationalism was swiftly elided with the supposedly revolutionary boons of masculine tumescence. For Olson and the painters of New York a masculinized primitivism now offered the direct route to a new political aesthetic.

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[34] Goodman (October 1945), p. 315.
[35] Goodman (October 1945), p. 315.
[36] The fact that Olson does not seem to have read Reich until 1969 ('how more *valuable* every day the life of Wilhelm Reich strikes one', he would say) confirms that the turn to instinctual male subjectivity by disillusioned left liberals and radicals was not caused simply by the Austrian psychoanalyst. Quoted in Ralph Maud, *Charles Olson's Reading: A Biography* (Carbondale, 1996), p. 331. With or without Reichian theory, potent masculinity was now holding out the possibility of social change from within the instinctual self. Beginning in spring 1945 with 'The K' and the pastoral lyrics of Virginia, this would continue to be the case for Olson. 'Tumescent I' as an emancipated or emancipatory subject would reappear up to the writing of the first 'Maximus' poems in 1950.

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If ‘Said Adam’ contributed to the growth of ‘tumescent I’ as a new subject of radical political thought, it also echoed two works which had recently come to the forefront of debates about the new American painting, one of which shared its ‘bull’ metaphor of male potency. The recent exhibition of Rothko’s *The Syrian Bull* (1943) and Gottlieb’s *The Rape of Persephone* (1943) at the Wildenstein Galleries in New York has often been identified as a threshold; a moment when, as we saw earlier, New York School painting emerged from émigré Surrealism to establish its own claim to critical attention. Responding to Jewell’s brusque dismissal in the *New York Times* (‘You will have to make of Marcus Rothko’s ‘The Syrian Bull’ what you can; nor is this department prepared to shed the slightest enlightenment when it comes to Adolph Gottlieb’s ‘Rape of Persephone’), Rothko,

Gottlieb and Newman made their infamously primitivist defence of contemporary American painting.

What is seldom noted about this critical moment in the early history of the New York School however is that 'tumescent I' was at stake in both the subject of the paintings and in their written defence. Whilst Gottlieb took the Persephone myth as his subject, Rothko took the Assyrian winged bull, with both drawing upon a mythography of male desire, potency, and sexual possession.[37] And this was pointedly reflected in their design. David Anfam notes that the 'phallic shaft at the second left of *The Syrian Bull* appears to equate aggression and masculinity', and this is even truer of the testicular shoulders and phallic neck of the figure in *The Rape of Persephone*.[38] This aggressive masculine figuration was clearer still in the defence written by Rothko, Gottlieb, and Newman for the *New York Times*, especially in their comments on Gottlieb's picture: 'It is an easy matter to explain to the befuddled that "The Rape of Persephone" is a poetic expression of the essence of the myth; the presentation of the concept of seed and its earth with all its brutal implications: the impact of elemental truth'.[39] 'Would you have us present this abstract concept,' they asked, 'with all its complicated feelings, by means of a boy and a girl lightly tripping?'[40] Perhaps the hard 'impact' and 'brutality' of Gottlieb's rendering owed something to D. H. Lawrence, whose treatment of the myth appeared in *Last Poems* (1933) ten years earlier:

> down the way Persephone goes, just now, in first-frosted September
> to the sightless realm where darkness is married to dark
> and Persephone herself is but a voice, as a bride
> a gloom invisible enfolded in the deeper dark
> of the arms of Pluto as he ravishes her once again

[37] Not the tauroctony of Roman Mithraic reliefs as claimed by James E. B. Breslin, *Mark Rothko: A Biography* (Chicago, 1993), p. 188. David Anfam, 'A Note on Rothko's "The Syrian Bull"', *The Burlington Magazine* 139:1134 (1997), pp. 629-31.
[38] David Anfam, *Mark Rothko: The Works on Canvas: Catalogue Raisonné* (New Haven, 1998), p. 65.
[39] Quoted in Edward Alden Jewell, '"Globalism" Pops Into View', *New York Times* (13 June 1943), p. X9.
[40] Quoted in Jewell (1943), p. X9.

and pierces her once more with his passion of the utter dark
among the splendour of black-blue torches, shedding fathomless
darkness on the nuptials.[41]

For Gottlieb and Rothko, as for Lawrence, the 'elemental truth' of the Persephone myth resides in its very brutality, something minimalized in such recent treatments of the subject as Thomas Hart Benton's *Persephone* (1938-39), which Gottlieb may have seen in *Life* magazine in 1939.[42] Whilst Benton domesticized the myth, reducing it to the dimensions of



[41] D. H. Lawrence, *The Poems: Volume I*. Ed. Christopher Pollnitz (Cambridge, 2013), p. 611. This is the second version of 'Bavarian Gentians', published in an appendix to *Last Poems*.
[42] Anonymous, 'Benton's Nudes People the Ozarks', *Life* (20 February 1939), p. 39. The painting appears in a photograph of Benton at work with his model and in the form of a clay preparatory sculpture. It hung for a time in the Diamond Horseshoe cabaret in Manhattan and later inspired an American ad campaign for Roberto Rossellini's *The Miracle* (1950). Tino Balio, *The Foreign Film Renaissance on American Screens, 1946-1973* (Madison, 2010), p. 54.

small-town scandal, Rothko and Gottlieb are concerned with its violent universality. 'Truth' concerns 'the concept of seed and its earth' and is expressible only in the 'brutal' terms of unrestrained male power and sexuality. Against 'a boy and a girl lightly tripping', academic or kitsch, they propose an abstract 'poetic expression' replete with 'brutal implications'.[43]

If this was a revolt against academicism however, it also had another function, one which allied Rothko and Gottlieb with those who were beginning to find in 'tumescent I' a new radical political subject. As Goodman would soon argue, the libidinal self could be a site of transformation; a foundation for new kinds of private and social life. Breaking down the 'elaborate organisation' of desires promised immediate change, unpredictable perhaps, but certainly less cumbersome than the mobilisation of an entire social class. In the same way, by leaving behind the aesthetics of the Popular Front, Gottlieb and Rothko turned to the more essential 'truth' of the 'seed and its earth', the return of which promised fundamental transformations of experience without the need for a revolution of social relations. Indeed, the recovery of instinctual sexuality provided more than a new iconography. An instrument in the broader effort to slip the net of abstract reason and rational progressive politics, it allowed the painters to propose experiential revolution in lieu of more orthodox imaginaries of change.

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'Elemental truth' had been repossessed, so Gottlieb and Rothko claimed, by an avant-garde experience fixed upon the 'seed and its earth'. If the 'brutal' truth of male sexuality provided foundations for a particular kind of 'poetic' painterly praxis—one distinguished

[43] Moreover, the reception of such virile expression by the viewer does not stop at the ocular, but constitutes instead something akin to hermeneutic congress: 'No possible set of notes can explain our paintings. Their explanation must come out of a consummated experience between picture and onlooker' (quoted in Jewell (1943), p. X9). Rothko and Gottlieb were establishing male sexuality, 'the concept of seed and its earth', as equally the subject, the style, and the reception of the new American painting.

from the effeminate ('lightly tripping') artifice of the academy—it also provided a new force for experiential change, one which would not rely upon the messy and unpredictable business of organized politics. Olson's 'Said Adam' made a similar manoeuvre, finding in pastoral potency the basis of a 'tumescent I' who turned from direct participation in the 'affairs of men' to the rather less onerous emancipation of personal virility. In his notes entitled 'De Priapo or, Notes for an Historian of a Suppressed Religion' (1947), which we came across in the previous chapter, Olson took this much further. Following not only 'Said Adam', but also Macdonald and Goodman, 'De Priapo' (whose title may have derived from Hans Herter's Latin study of the cult of Priapus) opened with the claim that instinctual potency had been lost, that 'tumescent I' had been 'denatured'.[44]

> Poor Nature. She gets so little credit for anything these days. Everything is either personalized or sociolized [sic], - or simonized. It's either the parents or childhood, or it's society that is the cause and source and explanation of everything. It's such a greedy business. All the sense of the source as nature, and the mystery which attends it, is sacrificed to this stupid human mass which arrogates to itself all things in this cheap grab. There's still more mystery in the……of the kidneys, to take nature's lowest seat, expurgation, than in all this psychological, sociological hogwash. And the end of it all is a weary race, so full of itself it has no life left, no nature in it. Denatured.[45]

'Psychological, sociological hogwash' rephrases questions about the human in terms of social life or psychological history. For Olson this is simply to escape the ontological crux; the *whatness* of the human as he pertains to an immediate 'source' in nature. Like Rothko and Gottlieb, and under the sign of Priapus, such quiddity is seen here as essentially masculine and archaic, the subject of a 'suppressed religion' of the phallus. Once the 'hogwash' is abandoned, man is found to be just a 'part of nature', neither 'monster nor beauty'.

[44] Hans Herter, *De Priapo* (Giessen, 1932).
[45] Charles Olson, 'De Priapo or, Notes for an Historian of a Suppressed Religion', I Box 30:1531, Prose No. 204, Charles Olson Research Collection, Archives and Special Collections at the Thomas J. Dodd Research Center, University of Connecticut Libraries.

That Olson turns to early Greek religion at this juncture probably owes to his recent introduction to the work of Jane Ellen Harrison. Reading in her *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion* (1903) that with the arrival of the Olympian gods the early Greek had 'explained and mysticized away all the primitive realities of his own beloved religion', Olson commented in the margin: 'As here now, in this new decadent time, the contemporaneous'.[46] And the same vocabulary appears in 'De Priapo' with a somewhat *ad hominem* swipe against existentialism, newly imported from Paris by journals such as *politics* and *Partisan Review*: 'The last decadence is the existential. These pathetic sons of man make of themselces [sic] nature's mirror, and see her monstrous. The monster is man, not in his essence but in his modern act'.[47] The Greeks had been 'denatured' when they turned from fertility ritual to anthropomorphized deities, and a 'decadent' modernity was doing much the same by turning from 'nature' either to the new gods of the human sciences or to the grim refuge of existential autonomy. Though he did not share their psychotherapeutic solution, Olson echoed Goodman, the Reichians, and the painters in supposing instead that real succour for present ills could only be found in the recovery of more basic orders of experience, by beginning again with due attention to those primal imperatives occluded by the modern. And given the currency of such convictions, it is not surprising that in the same month Olson wrote of Priapus another contemporary commentator voiced concerns about a 'modern version of ancient fertility cults' which was quickly spreading amongst new avant-garde artists.[48]

Dated to April 1947, 'De Priapo' was written in the same month Brady published her essay 'The New Cult of Sex and Anarchy' (1947) in *Harper's*, which had published one of

[46] Jane Ellen Harrison, *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion* (Cambridge, 1903), p. 7. Charles Olson Research Collection, Archives and Special Collections at the Thomas J. Dodd Research Center, University of Connecticut Libraries.
[47] 'De Priapo', Charles Olson Research Collection.
[48] Brady (1947), p. 314.

Olson's poems about the Kulikowski estate only a year earlier.[49] Brady noted here the alarming rise of a group of writers and artists who identified 'sex as the source of individual salvation in a collective world that's going to hell'.[50] Prime instigator of this was Wilhelm Reich, whose *Function of the Orgasm*, Brady noted, 'is probably the most widely read and frequently quoted contemporary writing in this group'.[51] Though Brady could have been discussing avant-garde circles in New York, she was actually referring to a group of young writers who had 'set up typewriters' twenty miles from Carmel, California, the same group Philip Lamantia would introduce to the readers of *Horizon* in October that year.[52] Indeed, Brady was providing an important early history of the San Francisco Renaissance, one of whose members, Robert Duncan, Olson would meet in California only three months later.[53]

What made Brady's piece especially perspicuous was its recognition that sex had been adopted as a means to 'individual salvation' only because the more conventional instruments of social change had withered away: the San Francisco writers were offering 'individual salvation in a collective world that's going to hell'. Though the 'cult of sex and anarchy' was drawing upon a strong Californian anarchist tradition then, it was also responding to the collapse of those radical unities which had defined the prewar period. Like Olson, the abstract expressionists, and commentators such as Macdonald, Lamantia and his colleagues had turned to the revolutionist 'Priapo' now that organised and collective agitation for change had faded. And it was this turn which concerned Brady the most. One phrase in her essay, 'gonadal revolution', was taken directly from the article on Goodman and Reich by Mills and Salter.[54] And in some ways 'The New Cult of Sex and

[49] Charles Olson, 'Lower Field—Enniscorthy', *Harper's Magazine* 192:1151 (April 1946), p. 332.
[50] Brady (1947), pp. 313-314.
[51] Brady (1947), p. 314.
[52] Brady (1947), p. 312.
[53] Lisa Jarnot, *Robert Duncan: The Ambassador from Venus: A Biography* (Berkeley, 2012), p. 108.
[54] Brady (1947), p. 315.

Anarchy' simply restated their position. Brady's concern was not with radicalism *per se* but with the theoretical lacuna which sundered private sexual emancipation from collective social change. To be of 'Priapo' was, as Brady realised, to have claimed not only a new mode of modernist expression but also a new kind of radical strategy, one entirely unforeseen by earlier progressive and revolutionary traditions.

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Nowhere was this transition more definitively expressed than in *y & x*, published within months of Olson's final break with party politics after the Democratic Party convention in July the following year.[55] The book had been in the offing since September 1946, when Cagli wrote to Olson from New York that their editor, Caresse Crosby, was enthusiastic about the project: 'Caresse and I got together today, finally, and the Caresse reaction to our book was wonderful: she liked your poems very much, she loved the title, approved my choice of drawings'.[56] The title that Crosby 'loved' was something of a private joke. In a letter of December 1949 Cagli referred to himself as 'x' and Olson as 'y', appellations they had presumably been using since 1946.[57] Given their mutual concern with geometry and space it might be supposed that Olson, with his exceptional height, was being ciphered as the 'y' axis of a graph, and Cagli, with his comparative flatness, an 'x' axis. These two figures, y and x, were represented by Cagli in a letter of 8 August 1946. In this way, *y & x* graphed

[55] As Tom Clark records, Olson was closely involved in the failed bid by supporters of the left-liberal Senator Claude Pepper to 'ditch' President Truman from the Democratic ticket: 'Olson pitched in on a thirty-six hour impromptu "campaign" organized from Pepper's hotel suite. But the desperate effort to rally delegate votes fell short. On the hot, humid nominating night of July 15, Pepper withdrew his name from the running even before the roll of the states was called. Drenched in sweat and noise amid the throng of Truman celebrants on the floor, a disappointed Olson bade his final farewell to politics'. Clark (1991), p. 138.
[56] Corrado Cagli to Charles Olson (21 September 1946), II Box 135, Charles Olson Research Collection, Archives and Special Collections at the Thomas J. Dodd Research Center, University of Connecticut Libraries.
[57] Corrado Cagli to Charles Olson (3 December 1949), II Box 135, Charles Olson Research Collection, Archives and Special Collections at the Thomas J. Dodd Research Center, University of Connecticut Libraries.

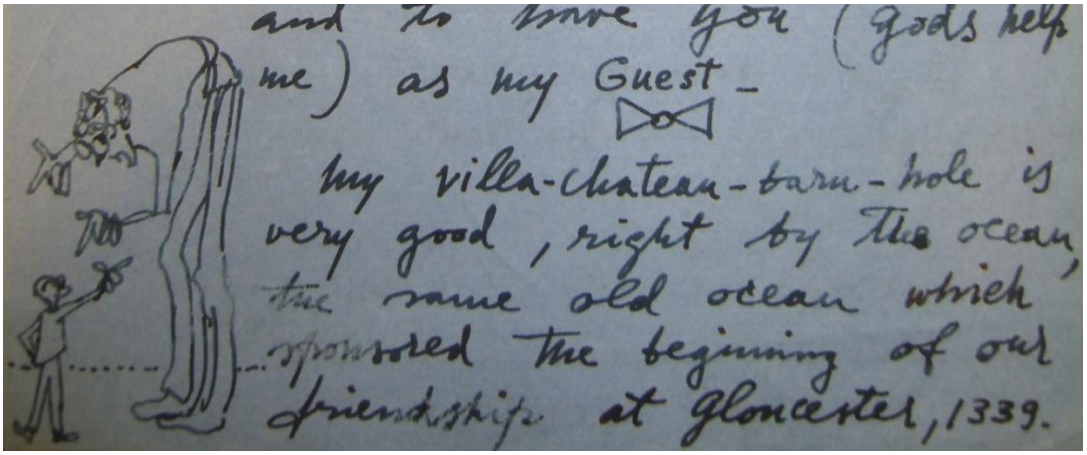


*Figure 3.4.* Corrado Cagli to Charles Olson (21 December 1946). Charles Olson Research Collection.

an intimate collaboration between the two men and between poetry and visual art. But, as we saw in the first chapter, the title also hinted elsewhere. The collaborators are axes but they are also male sex chromosomes, y and x (or XY). Their collaboration is not only productive, but reproductive, a meeting in meiotic terms. Olson would return to the 'organic or genetic matter of matter' in 1965, concluding (as he had in 'De Priapo') that 'man has lost the secret of connection to creation'.[58] But *y & x* already posited the 'matter of matter' in the most elemental cellular form: this first book alludes to its own, and Olson's, reproductive vitality.

If Olson and Cagli were thinking of cell biology, they were drawing on a key concern of the middle to late years of the decade. During Olson's stay at Enniscorthy in spring 1945, the first electron micrograph of a cell had appeared in *The Journal of Experimental Medicine*.[59] New imaging techniques, particularly electron microscopy, were beginning to transform the life sciences, and significant public interest was growing around the new developments. In March 1947 for instance, six months after Crosby first accepted *y & x*, *Life* magazine ran an article on the 'young science' of genetics, illustrated with microscopic

[58] Charles Olson, 'Notes from reading Frobenius and Fox', I Box 33:1663, Prose No. 309, Charles Olson Research Collection, Archives and Special Collections at the Thomas J. Dodd Research Center, University of Connecticut Libraries.
[59] Barry R. Masters, 'History of the Electron Microscope in Cell Biology', *Encyclopedia of Life Sciences*, http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/9780470015902.a0021539/full. Accessed 18 December 2012.

images of body and sex cells and diagrams of meiotic and mitotic cell division.[60] The rising public profile of genetics in particular, accelerated by the Genetics Controversy in the Soviet Union, played directly into the discursive formation of virility as a subject of the new American avant-garde.[61] Indeed, as *y & x* gestated between 1946 and 1948, genetic topoi entered the visual language of New York School painting. Rothko—who had discussed 'Art as a Natural Biological Function' in his posthumously published *The Artist's Reality: Philosophies of Art* (c. 1940-1941)—had begun to make this move with *Slow Swirl at the Edge of the Sea* (1944), a work which, in the words of Robert Genter, 'mixed the evolutionary and the spermatozoal' in imagining the 'generation of life from a



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[60] Anonymous, 'Genetics: Young Science Studies Continuity of Life', *Life* (17 March 1947), pp. 83-84.
[61] Loren R. Graham, *Science in Russia and the Soviet Union: A Short History (*Cambridge, 1993), pp. 131-133.

primeval couple'.[62] Similarly cellular and genetic motifs appeared in subsequent works by Rothko over the following two years, including *Untitled* (1945) and *Genetic Instant* (1946).

But it was Newman in *Pagan Void* (see above) who presented the definitive cellular evocation of the new avant-garde virility. In his interview with Frank O'Hara in 1964, as we have seen, Newman placed this study of biological conception in period context. His 'void' evoked the moral abyss of the war and the 'void' of Genesis, but also, with its piercing blue projections, the fertilization of an ovum. The discourse of masculine potency, to which Newman had already contributed with the *New York Times* controversy, was appropriated here to signify the complex political etymology of the new avant-garde. On the one hand, and like Dalí's *Geopoliticus*, the biological metaphor identified a new world order emerging from the void of the last. But it also figured the new avant-garde itself, emerging from the Depression and the New Deal, from commitment to what Olson soon called 'labor and the social struggle', and from social realism.[63] Fertility, the meiosis of *y* and *x*, the potent expression of 'tumescent I', were here speaking of the new 'life' of an art which had escaped the priorities of an earlier era and established the potent male as the subject of new creative and political interest. Continuing the work of *The Syrian Bull*, *The Rape of Persephone*, and 'The K', Newman and Olson were playing variations on the 'elemental truth' of male potency, a truth which had become central both to the aesthetic avant-garde and to the new 'fertility cult' of a renegade American left.

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By 1948 then, and despite warnings from the Old Left, the new American avant-garde had begun to adopt the potent male figure as a substitute for more conventional instruments of

[62] Mark Rothko, *The Artist's Reality: Philosophies of Art*. Ed. Christopher Rothko (New Haven, 2004), p. 18. Genter (2010), p. 166.
[63] Charles Olson, 'Notes for a Response to "A Letter from Italy"', I Box 33:1661, Prose No. 203, Charles Olson Research Collection, Archives and Special Collections at the Thomas J. Dodd Research Center, University of Connecticut Libraries.

social change. 'Priapo' had become a figure from whom new futurities could be expected now that the collective projects of the New Deal era had ended. Olson was aware that this had important repercussions for both the subject and the style of the new modernism, particularly in painting. Indeed, it was at this time that he noted his thoughts on the 'historical approach' of New Deal-Popular Front aesthetics, the 'painters of labor and the social struggle'. On a single piece of blue paper included with his 'Notes for a Response to "A Letter from Italy"' (1948) he defined the relationship between New Deal social realism and regionalism—an 'historical approach to politics and ethics'—and the 'form' of less representative (modernist) modes of aesthetic expression:

> The historical approach to politics and ethics has been reflected in aesthetics, peculairly [sic], it would seem to me, in America, where the painters of labor and the social struggle, from the Mexicans to Shahn, have flown their material like a flag in the face of form, alert enough, though they have been to take lessons from the abstract painters of Europe. The least interesting part of this development [sic]. The painters of the mere local and national[64]

By 'historical approach to politics and ethics' Olson may mean something like the 'socializing' he had identified in 'De Priapo' the previous year; any extraneous narrative imposed on the fluid and uncertain experience of lived history. He may have been claiming, in other words, the 'poverty of historicism' as Karl Popper had done five years earlier.[65] But be that as it may, Mexican muralists like Diego Rivera and José Clemente Orozco, or his OWI colleague Ben Shahn, had been committed to the 'historical approach' to the extent that they had 'flown their material like a flag in the face of form'—their fidelity to social struggle had blinkered them to the (in Olson's view) autonomous demands of design. The implication of this, of course, was that if 'painters of the mere local and national' were to turn away from 'labor and the social struggle' then 'form' itself would

[64] 'Notes for a Response to "A Letter from Italy"', Charles Olson Research Collection.
[65] Karl Popper, *The Poverty of Historicism* (London, 1957). And Karl Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (London, 1945).

return to the forefront of aesthetic practice.[66] Was Olson aware that this had already happened in American painting? Whether he was aware or not, this brief note reveals the extent to which a retreat from the 'historical approach' to the independence of 'form' was imminent in American art.

But the turn from 'labor and the social struggle' to pure 'form' was not, Olson contended, a turn from the 'affairs of men' completely. If the work was of 'Priapo', if it recovered the elemental and libidinal grounds of the (male) human subject, it still promised a revolution in everyday life. This was a conviction he had shared with his contemporaries since 1945 and one he explored again in a poem contemporary with the note on social realism. The second draft of 'Conquerer' (1948), written in January, probably draws upon a pedestrian commute from Randolph Place to the Library of Congress.

> Gulls on the grass and the odor of live worms and worms dead on the walk
> Nature deranged mine as well feeding irregularly
>
> It is easy to put the alternative. We know where the grass is. But der Weg—
> tough as we are a path is not stirbt easy to get the foot on Mister gull.
>
> We know the stupid ones are dead, they cover the smell of the rain,
> which is a way of saying, a knowledge of the most elementary things
>
> A man, a revolution proceeds out of a man, the root curiosity, the process
> question, and the end
> a method. His motion will be less clear, at least double in direction, himself
> ahead and
> backward as he goes. He starts where the path died. (CPo 73)

The phrase *der Weg stirbt* was found in Leo Frobenius's *Paideuma* (1928), an account of which Olson had seen in Douglas Fox's essay 'Frobenius' Paideuma as a Philosophy of

[66] It is of course interesting that Olson should disparage the 'mere local' only two years before beginning work on *The Maximus Poems*. But perhaps Eliot solves the seeming paradox when, in his lecture 'American Literature and Language' (1953), he finds in the national author a 'strong local flavour combined with unconscious universality'. This would seem to describe *The Maximus Poems* and *Paterson* as much as *Huckleberry Finn*, *La Divina Commedia*, *Don Quixote* or *Faust.* T. S. Eliot, *To Criticize the Critic, and Other Writings* (London, 1965), p. 54.

Culture' (1936).[67] But the path he picks up here is not necessarily the one Frobenius had found. The conviction that nature is 'deranged', and the mention of the 'stupid ones', calls up 'De Priapo' again: 'All the sense of the source as nature, and the mystery which attends it, is sacrificed to this stupid human mass'. To 'start where the path died' is to start with 'knowledge of the most elementary things'. This is not, however, a Cartesian process, however much the 'method' might give us grounds to think so. Indeed, far from doubt-free, the 'elemental things' Olson has in mind here are the 'source as nature' with all the 'mystery that attends it'. In 'De Priapo' this mysterious source was an obviously virile force, an *élan vital* belonging to the autonomous, procreative male. And 'Conquerer' finds much the same: 'A man, a revolution proceeds out of a man, the root curiosity'.

The revolutionary potential of the lone, creative and proliferative male was, as we have seen, an idea which had been sweeping the disillusioned and 'renegade' left for three years. Indeed, 'Conquerer' closely echoes Macdonald's Marxian epigraph to his expressly post-Marxist essay 'The Root Is Man' two years earlier: 'To be radical is to grasp the matter by the root. Now the root for mankind is man himself'.[68] That quote from the early Marx (to which Fromm's *Man for Himself* also alluded in 1947) had been held by Macdonald to justify his retreat from orthodox Marxism, his turn from revolutionary labour to the emancipation of 'man himself'. In the light of his contemporary comments on 'the painters of labor and the social struggle' it is clear that Olson was making a similar manoeuvre, asserting his confidence that in turning away from social subjects the American artist was not necessarily reneging on his political responsibilities.

And in this Olson could also call on the authority of Emersonian self-reliance, for the assertion in 'Conqueror' that man is ultimately 'a method', making his world through acts

[67] Maud (1996), p. 260.
[68] Dwight Macdonald, 'The Root Is Man', *politics* (April 1946), p. 97. Karl Marx, 'A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right: Introduction', *Early Political Writings.* Ed. Joseph O'Malley with Richard A. Davis (Cambridge, 1994), p. 64.

of selective 'curiosity', is that of Emerson in 'Spiritual Laws' (1841): 'A man is a method, a progressive arrangement; a selecting principle, gathering his like to him, wherever he goes'.[69] To remake the world in one's own privacy was a 'method' instantly attractive to Olson and his contemporaries, especially if this involved recovery of 'elemental' aspects of human nature. Unestranged from his 'root' principles, the new subject of American art and left politics, 'tumescent I', was both centre and circumference of a revolution in sensibility.

It was only with 'Projective Verse', however, that 'tumescent I' assumed its preeminent position in Olson's political aesthetic. As its commentators have never failed to point out, 'Projective Verse' is overloaded with phallic and ejaculatory metaphors, seemingly gratuitous reproductions of the male physiology. Rachel Blau DuPlessis is exemplary when she notes that the title of the essay 'offers a representation of an inseminating event' and that, ultimately, the essay 'rides on an energetic subtext filled with conventional gender ideas'.[70] It was exactly these ideas, as we have seen, that led Jasper Johns to create *Painting with Two Balls* ten years later, and familial resemblances between Olson's essay and the 'he-man cult' of the painters are strong. Indeed, if 'Projective Verse' installs at its centre the gonad revolutionary of the renegade American left, it also adopts a lexicon of manly assertiveness which would soon dominate critical discussion of abstract expressionism. 'Insemination' in 'Projective Verse' is usually allied with one word:

> The act of the poem. (CPr 243)
>
> The sentence as first act of nature (CPr 244)
>
> It is in this sense that the projective act, which is the artist's act in the larger field of objects, leads to dimensions larger than man (CPr 247)
>
> Language is one of his proudest acts (CPr 248).

[69] Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Essays and Lectures*. Ed. Joel Porte (New York, 1983), p. 311.
[70] DuPlessis (1996), p. 44.

> Where breath has its beginnings, where drama has to come from, where, the coincidence is, all act springs (CPr 249)

Action, which Olson identifies throughout the essay with dramatic action, is the very nature of the 'projective' poem. Action is primitive or original (the sentence as a 'first act of nature', one that 'springs' from natural 'breath') and phallically, libidinally assertive: it is a 'projective act' and language itself is one of man's 'proudest acts'.

'Action' had only recently entered Olson's critical vocabulary, perhaps entering through William Carlos Williams's 'The Poem as a Field of Action' (1948), a lecture which had imagined 'sweeping changes from top to bottom of the poetic structure' through the enactment of 'purposive action'.[71] But Olson's action is different. It is, on the one hand, phenomenological: the 'action' of the person disposed within a 'larger field of objects'. It had been used this way in notes of the previous year: 'We are fixed in space, but if time is imagined as cpable [sic] of all use at any given moment, then we can, and this is the advantage, comprhend [sic] in one action all that is inside and outside an object'.[72] But Olson also identified 'action' with political action. In 1948 he lauded several contemporary Italian painters in this way: 'They balance on the same pin-point as life: they have discovered that in action and in art the measure is the same, a scrupulous man'.[73] The word then became pivotal in the political sense in 'The Kingfishers': 'Mao concluded: / nous devons / nous lever / et agir!'. *We must stand up and act!*[74] It then passed through 'The Praises' (1949) in lines quoted in 'Projective Verse' itself: 'to think is easy / to act is more difficult / but for a man to act after he has taken thought, this! / is the most difficult thing of all' (CPr 246).

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[71] William Carlos Williams, *Selected Essays of William Carlos Williams* (New York, 1954), p. 281.
[72] Charles Olson, '4th Dimension', I Box 16:564, Charles Olson Research Collection, Archives and Special Collections at the Thomas J. Dodd Research Center, University of Connecticut Libraries.
[73] 'Notes for a Response to "A Letter from Italy"', Charles Olson Research Collection.
[74] Perry Anderson, *The Origins of Postmodernity* (London, 2002), p. 10.

Written the following year, 'Projective Verse' combined the two kinds of action as Olson had perceived them in the previous eighteen months. 'Action' is a private phenomenological stance within a 'larger field of objects', but taking up this stance is politically reverberative because, for Olson, as we have seen, 'a revolution proceeds out of a man'. The political 'action' of 'The Kingfishers' is found here in a poetry of priapic 'action' which, by overturning habituated 'stance[s] toward reality', revolutionizes everyday life.

Insofar as it stressed the revolutionary potential of private adjustments of phenomenological 'stance', and insofar as this involved special attention to a latent sexual assertiveness, the strategy of 'Projective Verse' was not far removed from that of Goodman and the Reichians. But the specific form of phenomeno-political 'action' which Olson outlines here was perhaps closest to that of an art critic. Two years later Harold Rosenberg published 'The American Action Painters' (1952) in *ARTnews*, an essay which profoundly influenced the way abstract expressionism would be understood in the following decades. Like Olson, Rosenberg conceived of 'action' as dramatic: 'What gives the canvas its meaning is not psychological data but *rôle*, the way the artist organizes his emotional and intellectual energy as if he were in a living situation'.[75] That 'living situation' might recall Olson's 'larger field of objects'—both poet and critic imagine the artist acting within the physical, extensive world. But what really draws 'Projective Verse' and 'The American Action Painters' into critical conversation is the masculine language within which this 'action' is couched. As Gavin Butt has noted, Rosenbergian action was later rendered in terms far from gender neutral.[76] But these were already implicit in the

[75] Harold Rosenberg, *The Tradition of the New* (Freeport NY, 1971), p. 29.
[76] 'Evaluations of the action painter's gesture were often coded,' Butt puts it, 'with stultifyingly conventional gender meanings'. Gavin Butt, '"America" and its Discontents: Art and Politics 1945-1960', *A Companion to Contemporary Art since 1945*. Ed. Amelia Jones (Malden, MA, 2006), p. 23.

original essay, as Rosenberg elided 'action' with the wilful self-searching of the frontiersman:

> With the American, heir of the pioneer and the immigrant, the foundering of Art and Society was not experienced as a loss. On the contrary, the end of Art marked the beginning of an optimism regarding himself as an artist.
>
> The American vanguard painter took to the white expanse of the canvas as Melville's Ishmael took to the sea.
>
> On the one hand, a desperate recognition of moral and intellectual exhaustion; on the other, the exhilaration of an adventure over depths in which he might find reflected the true image of his identity.[77]

Restlessly, the American action painter takes to the canvas to escape the 'damp, drizzly November in [his] soul', his 'moral and intellectual exhaustion'.[78] The flight to the canvas is the conventionalised desire to 'light out for the Territory' which, whilst thoroughly and self-consciously in the American grain, is also a specifically masculine enterprise.[79]

Rosenberg goes on to claim that action painting does not bear the traces of its own political or ideological prehistory: 'if the war and the decline of radicalism in America had anything to do with this sudden impatience, there is no evidence of it'.[80] Yet his recent commentators have stressed how far the theory of action painting *itself* wears the features of a response to the 'decline of radicalism in America', and it is here that 'The American Action Painters' can be brought into contact with that broader trend towards radical 'gonadic' individualism which this chapter has traced from its roots in 1945.

As Christa Noel Robbins has recently noted, Rosenberg's earlier Marxist essays—especially 'The Pathos of the Proletariat' (1949), in which Rosenberg attempted to establish the 'special kind of collective person' that was the revolutionary agent—had a

[77] Rosenberg (1971), p. 31.
[78] Herman Melville, *Moby Dick.* Ed. Tony Tanner (Oxford, 2008), p. 1.
[79] Mark Twain, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Ed. Emory Elliott (Oxford, 2008), p. 262.
[80] Rosenberg (1971), p. 30.

direct influence on the way he thought of painterly action.[81] And as Rosenberg himself later admitted, such essays 'were philosophically related to the idea of action which I applied to action painting'.[82] 'The notion in Marxism that the proletariat discovers itself through action', Rosenberg explained, 'comes into the idea of action painting, as far as the individual is concerned'.[83] In other words, the 'action' of the Marxian proletariat, a process of liberating self-becoming, was simply handed over to the artist once the revolutionary proletariat lost its momentum. Masculine, assertive, and exploratory, 'action' had now become the responsibility of poets and painters rather than the masses.

The time to '*nous lever* / *et agir*' in the conventional Marxian sense was, at least in the United States, over. Implicit to the new American avant-garde and its contemporary theorisation was the idea that a new impetus for change might be found in the active, hypermasculine artist. As Olson put it in notes written in 1948: 'It is upon the artist that the moral responsibility of the people falls. It is why he leads when he leads'.[84] With no political agency equal to that of revolutionary China or the prewar United States, 'action' would have to take place at one remove from politics—aesthetically. And in 'Projective Verse' Olson made clear, as Rosenberg would two years later, that such unconventional agitation for change could only be performed by an art which was, from the start, of 'Priapo'.

*

'The hero of Marx's drama of history is,' as Rosenberg noted in 1949, 'the proletariat'.[85] That he would soon allow the action painter to usurp this role exemplified how immediate was the need to define a new kind of 'heroism' now that the proletariat had faded as a

[81] Harold Rosenberg, 'The Pathos of the Proletariat', *The Kenyon Review* 11:4 (1949), p. 595.
[82] Quoted in Christa Noel Robbins, 'Harold Rosenberg on the Character of Action', *Oxford Art Journal* 35:2 (2012), p. 202.
[83] Quoted in Robbins (2012), p. 202.
[84] 'Notes for a Response to "A Letter from Italy"', Charles Olson Research Collection.
[85] Rosenberg (1949), p. 595.

political force. In his essay 'The Gate and the Center' (1950), written a few months later, Olson made a similar move, finding in the Priapic 'hero' another version of the revolutionary 'tumescent I' of 'The K'. Composed on 27 July 1950, 'The Gate and the Center' was unequivocal about its purpose: 'What I am trying to crack down is, heroism' (CPr 170). And eventually Olson has a definition: 'Quickly, therefore, the EXCEPTIONAL man, the "hero," loses his description as "genius" […] and becomes, instead, IMAGE of possibilities implicit in […] energy' (CPr 172-173). There is no evidence that Olson had yet read Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949), published a year earlier. But his definition of heroic 'energy' closely recalls Campbell's description of the heroic adventure: the 'unlocking and release again of the flow of life into the body of the world', a release and recirculation often seen 'dynamically as a streaming of energy'.[86] For Olson, this energy is of a very particular kind—it is, he avers, 'primordial & phallic' (CPr 173).

But the hero is not heroic by virtue of his phallic energy alone. He also performs the political function which 'tumescent I' had maintained since 1945, turning his own 'force' to the work of social change. As Campbell had noted, the idea that a hero must periodically recuperate 'energy' for the community, releasing a 'flow of life into the body of the world', is a 'monomyth' common to many human cultures. In 'The Gate and the Center' Olson reproduces the myth himself by way of the Sumerologist L. A. Waddell, imagining the ancient hero as a redeemer of depleted social energies. In the earliest cities of Mesopotamia, Olson claims, phallic energy was first manifested as a 'will to cohere' (CPr 170). But this endogenous force had been vulnerable to dissipation, entropy, a 'falling off':

[86] Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (London, 1993), p. 40.

> Suddenly, by such a smallness of time, seen as back there 3378 to 2500 BC, the nature of life then is made available, seems suddenly not at all history, seems what it was, men falling off the original impetus but still close enough to the climax of a will to cohere to know what CENTER was, and, through going down hill, still keeping the FORCE, even though the SHAPE was starting even then to lose its sharpness. (CPr 170)

That a civilization, like its citizens, might reach an energy 'climax', 'fall off the original impetus', and finally 'lose its sharpness', was an idea shared by all those who had recently become enamoured of Oswald Spengler, whose *The Decline of the West* (1926-28) Olson had read in 1940.[87] Spengler's trajectory of rise and fall, energy and diminution, was particularly attractive to those who had begun to read a new radical politics into masculine potency. In *The Naked and the Dead* (1948), for instance, the Reichian Norman Mailer had an American commander in the Pacific identify the Reichian orgasm with Spenglerian history, drawing in his notebook the same trajectory of 'climax' and 'falling off' which characterised both the 'asymmetrical parabola' of his artillery ('the phallus shell that rides through a shining vagina of steel, soars through the sky…') and the parabola of 'Spengler's plant form for all cultures (youth, growth, maturity, old age, or bud, bloom,

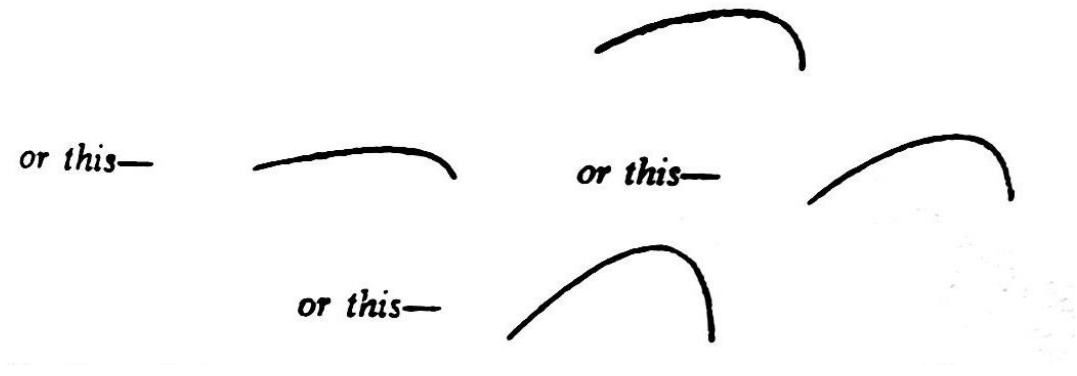


*Figure 3.6*. Norman Mailer, *The Naked and the Dead* (1948), p. 569.

[87] Maud (1996), p. 292.

wilt, decay').[88] The role of the hero, as both Olson and Campbell argue, is either to arrest this catastrophe, or to recuperate the community after it has fallen into entropic decay. In Olson's terms, it is the artist hero who keeps the 'phallic energies' at a permanent climax, the peak of the parabola.

Though 'The Gate and the Center' relies on rather dubious ancient history then, its speculations are symptomatic of the way Olson and his contemporaries imagined the social function of the 'tumescent' artist. Far from turning his back on the community by refusing to represent 'labor and the social struggle', the heroic artist had become a gonadal hero, remaking the social world by reuniting the community with its original nature. Without Sumer, and without its historic obscurantism, this was the same narrative traced by anarchists like Goodman, renegade Marxists like Macdonald, and the wider American avant-garde. Mailer's later admission that he had turned from reading *Das Kapital* to *The Function of the Orgasm* was, in this respect, exemplary.[89] If only people were repossessed of their virile life, perhaps they could 'spontaneously' create a more humane society?

Four days after sending the second draft of 'The Gate and the Center' to Robert Creeley on 4 August 1950, Olson sent a poem, 'Bigmans II', to Frances Boldereff.[90] This was the second in a series of poems prompted by his reading of Sumerian poetry in the translations of Samuel Noah Kramer.[91] It was also another attempt to imagine those 'primordial & phallic energies' lying beyond what Mildred Edie Brady had called, mocking the priapic primitivism of the Californian Reichians, the 'elaborate dog-in-the-manger device' that was modern civilization.[92] Olson was undoubtedly less confident than people like Goodman that the liberation of 'phallic energies' was a serious and pragmatic

[88] Norman Mailer, *The Naked and the Dead (*New York, 1948), p. 569.
[89] Norman Mailer, *Conversations with Norman* Mailer. Ed. J. Michael Lennon (Jackson, 1988), p. 191.
[90] Charles Olson and Frances Boldereff, *A Modern Correspondence.* Ed. Ralph Maud and Sharon Thesen (Hanover, 1999), p. 475.
[91] Clark (1991), p. 148.
[92] Brady (1947), p. 315.

political strategy. But the Sumerian poems he discovered through Kramer gave at least literary historical support to the dream of social regeneration through orgastic force. Indeed, in the first Bigmans poem, Olson turned a Sumerian religious invocation to immediate cultural needs, calling on his own Gilgamesh figure, Bigmans, to 'arouse yrself' on behalf of an entropic social body:

> Bigmans, yr place
> is out, out from inside, you've slept
> enough the self, got fat
> b'exceptionality, your own
> and generally. Let go, hulk, pull out
> from her house, dispose
> your strength where others are, where they lie
> as things do, as cities, waiting
> to be waked (CPo 148)

Rousing himself from sleep, primordial Bigmans rouses his community, 'cities, waiting / to be waked'. His 'place' is 'out / from inside' in the sense that, as Olson had put it in 1948, 'a revolution proceeds out of a man', his 'knowledge of the most elementary things'.

Although the revolutionary rousing the social body from slumber is a common metaphor in the Western political imagination, Olson may be thinking again of the Chinese Revolution. His friend Robert Payne, who had met Mao Zedong in Yenan in 1946, had recently published *China Awake* (1947), a diary of his time in in the country between 1944 and 1946. In his introduction, Payne revealed the source of his title: 'I had once thought of calling this book *Hope out of Asia*, till one evening in Kunming a Chinese pored over the manuscripts and said: "You must call it *China Awake*"'.[93] 'Here,' Payne added, 'is the rough sketch of a landscape written while China was in anarchy, but never—in spite of so much oppression and hunger—had she been more awake'.[94] Whether or not Olson was thinking of revolutionary China in the Bigmans poems, the shared metaphor of

[93] Robert Payne, *China Awake* (London, 1947), p. ix.
[94] Payne (1947), p. ix.

revolutionary arousal reveals how far his use of Sumerian poetry buried a contemporary political imperative. It may be true that, as John R. Maier has said, 'it is difficult to say how much personal and political causes help sustain the ancient' in these poems.[95] But set amidst a broader avant-garde moment, one indivisible from new heresies on the splintering American left, the Bigmans poems reveal more clearly their period purpose. Embodying 'primordial & phallic energies', the Sumerian hero is 'tumescent I', the figurehead of a new 'gonad revolutionism' in radical American theory. Soon after, the 'cities' to be 'waked' would be reduced to one, Gloucester, and the gonad revolutionary Bigmans would find a conclusive incarnation in Maximus.

*

Near the end of *Themis* (1912) Jane Ellen Harrison made a somewhat peremptory remark about the etymology of the English noun 'giant'. This excited Olson. In the left margin of his copy he scribbled in pencil: '<u>giant</u> means only gia-born; Earth-born! (Maximus/Bigmans etc!)'.[96] It is not certain when this note was made, though other pencil annotations in the book are dated by Olson himself to 1958 and 1959 (annotations in blue biro are dated 1962, 1965, 1968, and 1969). Whatever the date, Olson was looking back on his work of 1950, revealing how far Bigmans and Maximus shared a common source in 'the most elementary things'. Olson sent the first Maximus poem, 'I, Maximus of Gloucester, to You' (1950) to Frances Boldereff on 17 May ('darling: my mind is aswarm'), a day before he sent the Bigmans poem.[97] This was a new beginning, initiating a project which would occupy him for twenty years. But it was a beginning, a 'forwarding',

[95] John R. Maier, 'Charles Olson and the Uses of Mesopotamian Scholarship', *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 103:1 (1983), p. 233.
[96] Jane Ellen Harrison, *Themis: A Study of the Social Origins of Greek Religion*. 2nd ed. (Cambridge, 1927), p. 452. Charles Olson Research Collection, Archives and Special Collections at the Thomas J. Dodd Research Center, University of Connecticut Libraries.
[97] Olson and Boldereff (1999), pp. 335-338.

articulated in the terms of the previous five years; of 'tumescent I' and the gonad revolutionism of the early postwar avant-garde.

Off-shore, by islands hidden in the blood
jewels & miracles, I, Maximus
a metal hot from boiling water, tell you
what is a lance, who obeys the figures of
the present dance

1

the thing you're after
may lie around the bend
of the nest (second, time slain, the bird! the bird!

And there! (strong) thrust, the mast! flight
(of the bird
o kylix, o
Antony of Padua
sweep low, o bless

the roofs, the old ones, the gentle steep ones
on whose ridge-poles the gulls sit, from which they depart,

And the flake-racks
of my city! (MPo 5)

Maximus looks out across Gloucester, across the roofs, the ridge-poles, the gulls in flight; Anthony of Padua is invoked as the patron saint of the American-Portuguese fishing fleet.[98] It is the 'kylix' or drinking-bowl, however, which reveals more of their speaker.

Olson had signed off his letter to Boldereff in characteristically cryptic terms: 'And I, as hard-boiled instrument, as metal hot from boiling water, tell you, he recognizes what is lance, obeys the dance / mio chorego / eros, eros eros! / a kylix'.[99] On the one hand, he was identifying his own poem as a 'kylix' because, just as the decoration on the *tondo* of a kylix appears only gradually as the wine is drunk, so the import of Olson's new epic poem

[98] George Butterick, *A Guide to the Maximus Poems of Charles Olson* (Berkeley, 1978), p. 11.
[99] Olson and Boldereff (1999), p. 338.

will only appear slowly in the long writing and hermeneutic process to come. On the other hand, however, the drinking-bowl reveals something of the nature of Gloucester itself. The kylix was a permanent fixture in symposia, and 'eros' was the subject of Plato's *Symposium*. The latter also included a 'dance'; the rowdy *komos* of Alcibiades, a 'large drunken party' often depicted on kylixes and also related to the 'choregos' (chorus-leader) of the Dionysia.[100] The 'present dance' referred to at the opening of the poem is thus something like a *komos*, and this explains the phalloi: 'what is a lance', '(strong) thrust, the mast!'.[101]

Why Dionysus and 'eros' should be such central motifs in a poem about 'my city' is clear only in the context of the 'tumescent' route out of the organized American left at the end of the war. It is only through unrepressed eros, Olson insists, that the ideal community can be imagined, a conviction shared by many of those who had now given up on the progressive or revolutionary potential of organized labour. It is as a coherent community, a *polis*, that Gloucester bears the 'phallic energies' Olson saw in his Sumerian poems a few weeks earlier, something represented in the 'masts' of the schooners and the 'lance' and '(strong) thrust' of the swordfish strikers. If this needed more confirmation, Olson gave it in the sixth part of the poem, his most breathless, Dionysiac, evocation of 'tumescent I'.

> in! in! the bow-sprit, bird, the beak
> in, the bend is, in, goes in, the form
> that which you make, what holds, which is
> the law of object, strut after strut, what you are, what you must be, what
> the force can throw up, can, right now hereinafter erect,
> the mast, the mast, the tender
> mast! (MPo 8)

[100] Plato, 'Symposium', Trans. Alexander Nehamas and Paul Woodruff, *Complete Works*. Ed. John M. Cooper (Indianapolis, 1997), p. 494.
[101] There may also be a buried allusion to the Dionysiac *φαλλοί* of Pound's 'Coitus': 'The gilded phaloi of the crocuses / are thrusting at the spring air', *Personæ: Collected Shorter Poems* (London, 2001), p. 113.

Bow-sprit and mast, polis and 'forwarding' poem, combine. As an incarnation of Gloucester itself, Maximus is a bearer of 'force'; the heroic Bigmans as guarantor of community cohesion and potency. 'Eros' becomes the *modus operandi* of the poem as well as the 'polis' (MPo 26) it represents, an economy of sexual energy which gives both the 'will to cohere' of early Sumer. In turning to Gloucester, Olson was making the step which Goodman, Macdonald, Reich, and the California avant-garde had envisaged but not yet taken: imagining a community which really did 'obey the figures' of a dance of erotic force. For all that the first Maximus poem was a 'forwarding' then, it was a poem produced from the political conditions of the previous five years. The bearer of 'phallic energy', Maximus is a later incarnation of that figure who had been directing the left out of labour radicalism towards a new kind of politics, one which began at the very beginning—'eros eros eros'.

Five years after Olson completed this poem in Washington, Herbert Marcuse published *Eros and Civilization* (1955). Required reading for the New Left of the following decade, Marcuse's text was nevertheless firmly rooted in the crisis of left politics after 1945. Though Marcuse distanced himself from the 'revisionary' Freudianism of Reich, he too saw in the unleashing of libido a revolutionary function, an answer to the 'intensified unfreedom' of industrial civilization which was also, *ipso facto*, an admission that the revolutionary proletariat had failed its historic task.[102] This chapter has suggested that the attempt to imagine an alternatively erotic radical agency after 1945 was made as much by the new avant-garde as by political theorists. Poets and painters who had once been closely associated with the Popular Front or the New Deal turned definitively away from 'labor & the social struggle' between 1943 and 1945. They turned towards virility, phallicism, and potency not simply because American masculinity was under threat during

[102] Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud* (London, 1956), p. 4.

the war, and not simply to assert aesthetic priority over a weakened European modernism, but because these forces seemed to offer a political agency which could substitute for revolutionary labour. If this was obvious in the case of the followers of Reich, it was equally true for those, such as Olson and the abstract expressionists, who had not read the Austrian psychoanalyst. Despite warnings from the Old Left, these artists imagined a new politics of individual and libidinal emancipation, a recovery of 'tumescent I' which, it was hoped, would provide alternative foundations for thoroughgoing social change. From 'The K' in 1945 to 'I, Maximus of Gloucester, to You' in 1950, Olson constructed a poetic praxis with 'tumescent I' at its centre, a figure whose root 'radicalism', his intimacy with fundamental human forces, allowed him to make good on the new conviction that 'revolution proceeds out of a man'. As an aesthetic rationale, a way of justifying creative expression, this may have looked absurd by the end of the 1950s. Jasper Johns certainly thought it did. But 'tumescent I' had a critical transitional function. Leading American artists away from the political aesthetics of the New Deal, this gonad revolutionary prepared the ground for a new American modernism.

## Chapter Three

## Uninhabited Kingdoms, New Worlds of Space

> Taking possession of space is the first gesture of living things, of men and of animals, of plants and of clouds, a fundamental manifestation of equilibrium and of duration. The occupation of space is the first proof of existence.
>
> Le Corbusier, *New World of Space* (1948).[1]

> Is not space the uninhabited kingdom we are returning to?
>
> Charles Olson, 'The Drawings of Cagli' (1948).[2]

Cagli had offered Olson, through his pen and ink drawings of Buchenwald, a vision of 'pure natural existence', man as *tabula rasa*, in his barest original state.[3] 'Unaccommodated' man ciphered not only the perceived disintegration of enlightenment tradition, but also the 'radical' postwar culture that would replace it: vital and authentic, unencumbered by convention, close to the wellsprings of original life. Olson's radicalism, like that of Newman, Gottlieb and Rothko, turned a masculinised image of human origins to the work of cultural renewal, compensating for the abandoned progressive imaginaries of the previous decade.

But Cagli also offered a second conceptual impetus, one which Olson shared again with his contemporaries in other media, and one which—whilst strengthening the new avant-garde's critique of instrumental reason—also responded to a perceived impasse in

[1] Le Corbusier, *New World of Space* (New York, 1948), p. 7.
[2] Charles Olson, 'The Drawings of Cagli', I Box 30:1539, Prose No. 21, Charles Olson Research Collection, Archives and Special Collections at the Thomas J. Dodd Research Center, University of Connecticut Libraries.
[3] Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Trans. John Cumming (London, 1997), p. 31.

modernist aesthetics. This concerned multidimensional or environmental space; ways of seeing anew the position of both the human subject and the artwork in the extensive world.[4] That Olson was scrutinising these issues between 1946 and 1950 is potentially revealing, since contemporary painting and sculpture evidenced a very similar spatial temperament.[5] In fact, the present chapter contends that through the work of Olson we might begin to see why a new spatial prerogative emerged across American art in the first years after the Second World War, why three-dimensionalizing the discrete high modernist artwork, dissolving the threshold between aesthetic object and ambient world, became such an incentive for the new avant-garde.[6]

The move to make worldly the art artefact combined, as we will see, two distinct agendas; one formal, concerned with the art object and its future; and one broadly philosophical, concerned with what Olson called a 'stance toward reality' (CPr 239). The first of these reflected a new struggle against modernism's apparent demise; an eclipse heralded in the middle 1940s by literary and art critics alike. As regards modernist poetry, it was Randall Jarrell who made the case most forcibly. In his early essay 'The End of the

[4] The reading of Jackson Pollock's work of 1947-50 in particular has been crucial to historical debates about the dimensionality of American art in this period. This chapter takes its lead from that tradition (exemplified by Harold Rosenberg and later Allan Kaprow) which sees in the work of the period a movement towards the environmentalisation of the art object, its introduction into three-dimensional space. But it should be noted here that this tradition competed with another line of thought (exemplified by Greenberg, Michael Fried, and others) which insists that the new spatiality was merely optical and that, as Hal Foster puts it, 'the imaginative projection of the embodied viewer into pictorial space, offered by painting since the Renaissance, was both canceled and preserved—in effect sublated'. Foster, *Prosthetic Gods* (Cambridge, Mass., 2004), p. 288.

[5] The bequest of abstract expressionism in this sense has been suggested by Rosalind E. Krauss in discussing Jackson Pollock: 'The afterlife of the drip pictures continued to be conducted within this sublimatory, formal plane of the vertical. To that we have the testimony of the procession of artists who claimed themselves as Pollock's heirs: Helen Frankenthaler, Morris Louis, Kenneth Noland, Jules Olitski, Larry Poons […] The drive of sublimation moves the paintings steadily away from the material, the tactile, the objective'. Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious* (Cambridge, Mass., 1993), p. 247.

[6] Michael Fried's seminal essay 'Art and Objecthood' (1967) was, in this sense, belated. In critiquing minimalist 'literalism'—the making three-dimensional, theatrical, and worldly of the art object, or rendering indistinct the experience of art and the experience of everyday life—Fried did not note that the roots of this project were to be found already in the high period of abstract expressionism. As we will see, subsequent commentary has revealed the extent to which this is the case, and Olson's theoretical essays on poetry, painting, and space give further credence to the idea that it was between roughly 1948 and 1950 that 'literalism' emerged in force. Fried, 'Art and Objecthood', *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago, 1998), p. 148.

Line' (1942) Jarrell became one of the first in a long line of commentators to declare the end of modernism. 'Modernism As We Knew It,' he said quite unequivocally, 'is dead':

> Modernism is a limit which it is impossible to exceed. How can poems be written that are more violent, more disorganized, more obscure, more - supply your own adjective - than those that have already been written?[7]

Six years later Greenberg made an equivalent case in his essay 'The Crisis of the Easel Picture' (1948). Here he claimed that the 'evolution of modern painting from Manet on has subjected the traditional cabinet picture to an uninterrupted process of attrition'.[8] Calling ever more attention to depthless surfaces, Greenberg argued, modernist painting had brought the traditional easel picture to a dead-end, a final flatness, something evidenced in the recent work of new American painters such as Pollock.

These essays reveal the major anxiety of late or postwar modernism: its belatedness, the sense that high modernism offered precedents impossible to surpass. But Greenberg's attention to pictorial flatness—and both critics' attention to modernism's formal aloofness—also implied a late modernist solution: the making-worldly of the hermetic high modernist art object; the elision of its theoretical boundaries and its projection off the planar page, score, or canvas into three-dimensional space. This strategy, annexing the work with the world, was one the early postwar avant-garde began to pursue in earnest after 1946, providing antetypes for, amongst other movements, the performance art of the following decades.

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[7] Randall Jarrell, 'The End of the Line', *Kipling, Auden & Co.: Essays and Reviews 1935-64* (Manchester, 1981), p. 81. The same question was asked the same year by Edmund Wilson in *Axel's Castle*: 'What then is to be the future of this literature? Will the poets become more and more esoteric as the world becomes more and more difficult for them, diverging further and further from the methods and the language of popular literature […]?'. Ultimately, Wilson was less pessimistic than Jarrell, disagreeing with Paul Valéry's prophecy that literature would soon be as 'obsolete and as far removed from life and practice as geomancy', and suggesting instead that the Symbolist mode in literature was not a general trend but a quite specific and confined response to historical and philosophical circumstances. Whether Valéry or Wilson has been proved correct is one of the more interesting and pressing questions in contemporary poetry. Wilson, *Axel's Castle: A Study in the Imaginative Literature of 1870-1930* (New York, 1942), pp. 283-284.

[8] Clement Greenberg, *The Collected Essays and Criticism Volume 2: Arrogant Purpose, 1945-1949*. Ed. John O'Brian (Chicago, 1988), p. 224.

This genealogy has been noted before. Indeed, that Pollock and Cage provided 'conditions for the emergence' of multidimensional art in the 1950s was something recognized by practitioners of performance art themselves, especially Allan Kaprow.[9] What is missing, however, is an account of the contemporary philosophical work of the project, the way the making worldly of the work of art involved a critique of the art object which was consistent with, and mobilised by, those broader critiques of abstract and instrumental reason which had emerged during the war. It is in Olson's early prose that this connection becomes most apparent, and these lectures and notes gloss revealingly the contemporary spaces imagined by Pollock, Newman, Cage, and David Smith, amongst others.[10]

The spatial vogue of the last years of the decade was not simply the product of a formal impasse then. Instead it was encouraged by a new desire, borne of the general temper of the New Failure of Nerve, to disestablish the abstract and instrumental nexus prevailing between self and world. As Olson put it in 1950: 'it behooves man now not to separate himself too jauntily from any of nature's creatures' (CPr 161). A formal move from the hermetic art object to extensive space would provide momentum for this ambitious philosophical project, imagining a less appropriative, less instrumental, and less hubristic stance toward nonhuman reality.[11] There was a powerful confluence, in other words, between a sense of formal exhaustion and a prevailing mood of philosophical scepticism, with the equable annexation of space, the extinction of fixed boundaries

[9] See especially Allan Kaprow, 'The Legacy of Jackson Pollock', *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*. Ed. Jeff Kelley Exp. Ed. (Berkeley, 2003).
[10] Judith F. Rodenbeck, *Radical Prototypes: Allan Kaprow and the Invention of Happenings* (Cambridge, Mass., 2011), p. 4. Rodenbeck describes the move into multidimensionality as an 'extension of the performative aspects of painting and musical practice: the move from the easel to the painted arena or from the score/performance dyad to chance and indeterminate composition (a model of discrete notation, performance, and reception), followed by the move from these to the interactive environment of installation or aleatory performance', p. 133.
[11] Another way of putting this, of course, is that it represented a new *romantic* critique of rationalism. If, as Charles Taylor puts it, 'the tensions between them [rationalism and romanticism] is one of the dominant features of modern culture', then this tension is all the more acute in periods of uncertainty such as that which followed the Second World War. Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* (Cambridge, Mass., 1990), p. 319.

between self and world, and between work and world, offering a solution to both problems at once. And though at least one other contemporary artist noticed this deepening trend—Newman would comment in 1949 that 'there is so much talk about space that one might think it is the subject matter of art'—it was Olson who considered most fully its dual purpose. Involving a 'jointure of the moral to the aesthetic', the discovery of space after 1946 would further the modernist tradition whilst sustaining a much broader contemporary critique of the enlightenment inheritance.[12]

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As a contributor to the Milanese periodical *Quadrante* from 1933 to 1936, a journal which sought, in the words of David Rifkind, to square architectural rationalism with the 'goals and values of the fascist regime', Corrado Cagli had long been aware of the pertinence of geometrical space to modernist aesthetics.[13] But by April 1946, when he met Olson again in New York, his interest had turned definitively to non-Euclidean geometry and the spatial fourth dimension. Onboard a flight to New York on 12 May, he wrote to Olson that: 'while in Urbana I've had the chance of meeting some mathematicians and have advanced another inch in the fourthdimensional [sic] field'.[14] A November 1946 notebook entitled 'Verse & Geometry' suggests that Olson began reading in the area himself in the following months.

[12] Barnett Newman, 'Ohio, 1949', *Selected Writings and Interviews*. Ed. John P. O'Neill (Berkeley, 1992), p. 175. It is worth nothing that, only a year earlier, Joseph Frank had published his seminal essay 'Spatial Form in Modern Literature', one of the key early studies of the modernist novel. For Frank, modern literature, exemplified by the work of Eliot, Pound, Joyce, Proust, and Djuna Barnes, was 'moving in the direction of spatial form'. 'This means', Frank suggested, 'that the reader is intended to apprehend their work spatially, in a moment of time, rather than as a sequence'. In a sense, this was to understand modern literature as aspiring to the condition of painting. In this chapter, however, I suggest that only after 1946 was there a concerted and substantive effort to breach the limits of the modernist medium. Frank, 'Spatial Form in Modern Literature: An Essay in Two Parts', *The Sewanee Review* 53:2 (1945), p. 225. Charles Olson, 'Notes for a Response to "A Letter from Italy"', I Box 33:1661, Prose No. 203, Charles Olson Research Collection, Archives and Special Collections at the Thomas J. Dodd Research Center, University of Connecticut Libraries.

[13] David Rifkind, '*Quadrante* and the Politicization of Architectural Discourse in Fascist Italy', http://davidrifkind.org/fiu/quadrante_files/dissertation%20introduction.pdfp. Accessed 27 December 2012.

[14] Corrado Cagli to Charles Olson (12 May 1946), II Box 135, Charles Olson Research Collection, Archives and Special Collections at the Thomas J. Dodd Research Center, University of Connecticut Libraries.

One page carried reading notes in pencil on the two non-Euclidean geometries arising from the violation of Euclid's parallel postulate:

> Euclidean – parabolic
> hyperbolic - Bolyai-Lobatschewsky
> spherical
> elliptic - Riemann – Cayley
> finite but unbounded O[15]

Deriving from H. S. M. Coxeter's *Non-Euclidean Geometry* (1942), which he was probably reading in the Library of Congress, these notes show that Olson was beginning to understand spherical geometries (hyperbolic and elliptic) as a serious challenge to everyday spatiality. Was not three-dimensional space, the milieu of ordinary life, also paradoxically and counter-intuitively 'finite but unbounded'? Coxeter had put this simply on the page Olson quotes from: 'If a line and a plane can each be finite and yet unbounded [like a circle, an 'O'], why not also an *n*-dimensional manifold, and in particular the three-dimensional space of the real world?'.[16] Olson was probably not following Coxeter's mathematical logic very closely here—'I should like immediately to disburden myself of any idea on your part that I have any adequate knowledge of mathematics & geometry', he would tell an audience in 1949—but reading these pages of Coxeter in November 1946, he was beginning to draw upon the intimation that inherited or everyday conceptions of space were at best partial, vulnerable to revisions which could exercise the literary as much as the mathematical imagination.[17]

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[15] Charles Olson, 'Verse & Geometry plus E. P.', I Box 49:37, Charles Olson Research Collection, Archives and Special Collections at the Thomas J. Dodd Research Center, University of Connecticut Libraries.
[16] H. S. M. Coxeter, *Non-Euclidean Geometry* (Toronto, 1942), p. 11. The phrase had been used by William Empson in 'Dissatisfaction with Metaphysics' (1928): 'New safe straight lines are finite though unbounded, / Old epicycles numberless in vain.' *The Complete Poems*. Ed. John Haffenden (London, 2001), p. 17. The phrase is taken from Albert Einstein's lecture 'Geometry and Experience' (1921), *Sidelights on Relativity*. Trans. G. B. Jeffery and W. Perrett (London, 1922), p. 45.
[17] Charles Olson, 'Notes for a Lecture on Corrado Cagli and the 4th Dimension', I Box 33: 1660, Prose No. 31, Charles Olson Research Collection, Archives and Special Collections at the Thomas J. Dodd Research Center, University of Connecticut Libraries.

Six months earlier ‘La Torre’ and ‘La Préface’ had already begun to identify space as a means of renovating postwar culture. ‘Let the tower fall. Where space is born / man has a beach to ground on’, he wrote in the second draft of ‘La Torre’, declaring the collapse of modern civilization and the recovered spatial ‘ground’ of a postwar avant-garde.[18] ‘La Préface’ would likewise plead: ‘Put war away with time, come into space’ (CPo 14). But it was only with several lectures on Cagli given in Washington over the next three years that Olson would elaborate on what it might mean to ‘come into space’ as a moral, ontological, and aesthetic manoeuvre; one that could give new impetus to modernism after the Second World War whilst weighing new philosophical stances towards the physical world.

Presented at the American University Art Center, Washington D.C., on 29 July 1948, ‘The Search in Art, or Notes on the New Dimension’ (1948) represented Olson’s first steps in this project, his first effort to establish the ‘new dimension’ of non-Euclidean space as the basis for a postwar culture freed from the ‘verbalisms’ of ‘spirit’, ‘destiny’, and ‘time’.[19] The lecture began with a ‘1st premise’: ‘that man is prospective’, beyond and other than himself. There were ‘two ways’ that proved ‘man’ to be such. The first was as an ‘animal organism’ whose ‘original lifespan’ (according to the Soviet physiologist Oleksandr Bogomoletz) was ‘125 years’.[20] The second reason—marginally less

[18] Charles Olson, ‘La Torre’, I Box 18:719, Charles Olson Research Collection, Archives and Special Collections at the Thomas J. Dodd Research Center, University of Connecticut Libraries.
[19] Charles Olson, ‘The Search in Art, or Notes on the New Dimension’, I Box 35:08, Prose No. 27, Charles Olson Research Collection, Archives and Special Collections at the Thomas J. Dodd Research Center, University of Connecticut Libraries. ‘Verbalism’ may have arrived via Pound’s essay ‘French Poets’ (1918): ‘Bad verbalism is rhetoric, or the use of cliché unconsciously, or a mere plating with phrases’. For Pound there is also a ‘good verbalism’, which he later termed *logopoeia*, of which Jules Laforgue is ‘master’. Pound, *Make It New* (London, 1934), p. 172.
[20] ‘The Search in Art’, Charles Olson Research Collection. The American press seems first to have noticed Bogomoletz in 1944. In that year it was reported that he had devised a serum to forestall the effects of old age. The same year it was reported that the serum could also be used to treat war wounds and that Bogomoletz had offered it to his British and American allies. In 1946, the year he died, (aged 65), Bogomoletz gave his first major interview with the foreign press, in which he stated that: ‘Normally a man should live to the age of 150 years […] That is, if he starts to use my serum’. Quoted in Drew Middleton, ‘Soviet Biologist Sees 150-Year Life If His New Serum Is Used Properly’, *New York Times* (7 June 1946), p.1.

outlandish—had to do with the place of 'man' in the 'miraculous universe' built upon non-Euclidean space.

> The other sign of prospective man is more familiar knowledge but only so superficially, especially in the arts, that we have no more begun to count the gains than we have the advantage of 125 years of life. I refer to the miraculous universe Ernst Mach, Willem de Sitter and Albert Einstein have raised up as our inheritance on the foundations of the non-Euclidean geometries of Lubachevsky, Bolyai, Riemann and others.[21]

That 'miraculous universe' had been known to the poet since October 1931, when he heard Willem de Sitter discuss 'The Size of the Universe' at Wesleyan University. On the flyleaf of William Foster's *Argumentation and Debating* (1917), which he brought with him to the lecture, Olson had made a number of notes (mostly algebra) regarding de Sitter's principal claim: that cosmological redshift proved spiral nebulae were diverging; that, in short, the whole universe was expanding.[22] In the 'Verse and Geometry' notebook of 1946 Olson made reading notes from de Sitter's *Kosmos* (1932) on the same topic: 'It is this degradation of the light, technically known as the red-shift of the spectral lines, by which we become aware of the [receding?] velocities of the extra-galactic nebulae'.[23] And on the following page: 'the whole system of galactic systems is expanding'.[24]

In his lecture Olson brought these new models of space together, his recent reading of Coxeter clarifying the mathematical basis of the 'miraculous universe' revealed to him seventeen years earlier by de Sitter's discussion of redshift. And in this he was finding the work of a new postwar aesthetic: 'in the arts, we have no more begun to count the gains [of space] than we have the advantage of 125 years of life'. The work of modernism was not

[21] 'The Search in Art', Charles Olson Research Collection.
[22] William Foster, *Argumentation and Debating* (New York, 1917). Charles Olson Research Collection, Archives and Special Collections at the Thomas J. Dodd Research Center, University of Connecticut Libraries.
[23] 'Verse and Geometry', Charles Olson Research Collection.
[24] 'Verse and Geometry', Charles Olson Research Collection.

yet complete then. Contemporary artists were faced with the responsibility of imagining not only the new spaces of recent physics but also the human place within them:

> I want only now to impress upon you that these two concepts alone, Bogomolets, Einstein, are enough to displace prfoundly [sic] the total base of human life as we have known it, are already doing just that, and to the degree that we master these changes do we discover the direction of art and life ahead.[25]

The moment and location of these words added something to their significance. Three months earlier Greenberg had announced in *Partisan Review* that American art had surpassed the French.[26] And the Arts Center at American University had itself been established only two years earlier, at just the moment when American art was beginning to establish a serious challenge to European cultural hegemony. Moreover, Olson's talk was delivered only two weeks after he dropped out of party politics at the Democratic National Convention in Philadelphia, having joined the doomed rebel bid to 'dump Truman'.[27] The 'search in art' he discussed at American University was therefore both a personal retreat from public politics and an advanced cultural project consistent with that new American leadership identified by contemporary critics and patrons of American art.

But what was the basis of the 'direction of life and art ahead', and how would this differ from that bequeathed by Europe? 'The upshot of all these changes,' Olson argued, 'is an approach to man as OBJECT, both as unit and in the mass, stripped down from all those attributes and ends he gave himself as subject both of his destiny and his own creations. Man as object, which means man in space'.[28] The lofty 'spirit' and 'destiny' of modern progressivism (including political progressivism of all stripes: man 'in the mass') would be replaced with something much humbler, and the perfectible, boundless subject of

[25] 'The Search in Art', Charles Olson Research Collection.
[26] Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom, and the Cold War*. Trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago, 1985), p. 169.
[27] Tom Clark, *Charles Olson: The Allegory of a Poet's Life* (New York, 1991), p. 138.
[28] 'The Search in Art', Charles Olson Research Collection.

enlightenment tradition would be 'stripped down' to the mere 'forked animal'. If this was encouraged by recent advances in physics, it was also a response to those recent 'ends' which—for Olson, as for Adorno—had travestied the project of abstract reason:

> I take it we do see a human life different from our fathers, are forced to. Against the use of human beings for soap, what do you oppose? What weight can you give him which has value in it, value, rather than money for his teeth, his fat, the nitrogen of his bones?[29]

New 'directions' for art could be found, Olson claims, if artists aligned themselves with a paradigm shift made imperative by such experience; a move 'from human life as a time-bound experience to human life as a space-located thing', from the Promethean, developmental subject of modernity—prone to misuse his power—to the humble subject of an age profoundly sceptical of untempered ambitions.[30] By the end of his first lecture of 1948 then, Olson had claimed new conceptions of space as the 'base' for both 'art and life ahead'; a way of building a new purview and a new means of expression now that the death camps had revealed the lurking inhumanity of instrumental reason ('human beings for soap').

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In 'Notes for a Response to "A Letter from Italy"' (1948), written later that year, Olson took things a little further, considering how 'objectivism'—man as a 'space-located thing'—would provide 'direction' for a new American modernism whilst imagining a 'human life different from our fathers'. It is not clear who the sender of this letter was, but, whoever its author, the letter drew Olson's project involuntarily into early Cold War politics, since the 'Letter from Italy' was almost certainly a riposte to the 'Letters to Italy' campaign earlier in 1948, a propaganda operation in which Italian-Americans had been

[29] 'The Search in Art', Charles Olson Research Collection.
[30] 'The Search in Art', Charles Olson Research Collection.

encouraged to persuade family members back home not to vote for the Italian Communist Party in the 18 April elections.[31] With this electoral interference as backdrop, Olson used his 'notes' to measure the potential counterinfluence of contemporary Italian painting on postwar American modernism. His lecture considered the work of Cagli and his friends Carlo Levi, Mirko Baseldella, Afro Baseldella, and Renato Guttuso, several of whom (including Cagli) would appear in the MoMA exhibition 'Twentieth-Century Italian Art' the following year.[32]

In these notes Olson is divided in his allegiances. Whilst he affirms the merits of the Italian painters, he does so largely to provide a vision of the new American modernism, regarding the achievements of Cagli and his colleagues as potential catalysts for American innovation. And space is central to this vision. Taking up the theme of his lecture at American University, Olson emphasizes the extent to which the 'secrets of space' provide grounds for philosophical renewal at the same time as providing scope for aesthetic invention. After opening with reference to contemporary Italian fresco, he approaches a primary 'question':

> Question: how much has this to do with the interest the best of these men show in the secrets of space, both as space informs objects and as it contains, in antithesis to time, secrets of a humanitas eased out of contemporary narrows?[33]

The term 'humanitas' had appeared briefly in the lecture at American University earlier in the year: 'We come up, in an attempt to offset Buchenwald, with the form "humanitas"'.[34] Olson was probably not aware of the prevalence of this noun in ancient theories of empire:

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[31] C. Edda Martinez and Edward A. Suchman, 'Letters from America and the 1948 Elections in Italy', *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 14:1 (1950), pp. 111-125. The operation was a success, Alcide De Gasperi's Christian Democrats winning enough seats to form a centrist government without the PCI.
[32] James Thrall Soby and Alfred H. Barr Jr, *Twentieth-Century Italian Art* (New York, 1949). Cagli was represented by *Tragic Theatre* (1946), a study for *Spies at the Stake* (1947), and *Buchenwald* (1945).
[33] 'Notes for a Response', Charles Olson Research Collection.
[34] 'The Search in Art', Charles Olson Research Collection.

Pliny the Elder on Rome's responsibility to 'give mankind civilization (*humanitas*)'; Tacitus on Britons under the same cultural imperium: 'The simple natives gave the name of 'culture' (*humanitas*) to this factor of their slavery'.[35] Instead, his 'humanitas' probably derives from the recently-published *Pisan Cantos* (1948), which he had read in manuscript in 1946:

> and for all that old Ford's conversation was better,
> consisting in *res* non *verba*
> despite Williams's anecdotes, in that Fordie
> never dented an idea for a phrase's sake
> and had more humanitas  jen[36]

As A. David Moody notes, 'jen' might be glossed: 'Man in touch with both heaven and earth'.[37] But Olson uses 'humanitas' somewhat differently. 'Eased out of contemporary narrows', 'humanitas' represents a new postwar purview, one encompassing a new *humaneness* deriving from the 'secrets of space'. By grounding the subject in his physical environment, Olson supposes that postwar art can respond to an 'intense experience of modern shame and disaster' attributable to abstract narratives; stories about the future dependent upon the developmental subject and community ('spirit', 'destiny', progress).[38] To be located in space rather than time is, for Olson, to be chastened and humbled.

These reflections owed much to their origins in the revolt against abstract reason which had now become such a distinctive feature of the American intellectual left. Indeed, Olson judged in a contemporary note that defining a 'body of doctrine from which a new humanitas can be born' would constitute 'an examined and vigorous attack on all the

[35] Quoted in Robin Osborne, 'Cultures of Empire: Greece and Rome', *New Left Review* 77 (2012), pp. 105, 107.
[36] Ezra Pound, *The Cantos of Ezra Pound* (New York, 1996), p. 545.
[37] A. David Moody, *Ezra Pound: Poet: A Portrait of the Man and his Work. 1, The Young Genius, 1885-1920* (Oxford, 2007), p. 115.
[38] 'Notes for a Response', Charles Olson Research Collection.

vestigia of Western civilization we have inherited'.[39] His spatial 'attack' was therefore both contemporary and consistent with the features of the New Failure of Nerve. However, such an assault could not simply be appended to the modernist aesthetic as it had survived the Second World War. In fact, it would have to be launched on the back of a very *new* modernism, because: 'our masters are actually the end products of the old and not the beginnings: Joyce, Pound, Gide, Eliot, Massine, ~~Chaplin~~'.[40] For Olson, in other words, modernism had always been too old to begin with, too beholden to the traditions it made new. The 'attack on all the vestigia of Western civilization' which he envisioned—one prompted by a new and far-reaching cultural and political scepticism—demanded that modernist art reinvent itself, running against the grain of 'Western civilization' by returning 'man' to his original home in space.

*

Early in his 1948 lecture Olson referred to the 'analysis of space' represented by Cagli's painting of an 'egg', and this canvas might give us some idea about what he had in mind when he thought of a new spatial modernism, including his own 'projective' prosody.[41] The painting is probably *La Nascita* (1947), which had been reproduced in *Harper's Bazaar* earlier in 1948.[42] Cagli's subject echoes the 'genetic moments' of Newman and Rothko the previous year, whilst strongly recalling the *Scuola Metafisica* and Giorgio de Chirico.[43] And Olson was right to identify the 'analysis of space' as its principal concern. This 'birth' turns Cubist perspectives and drawn de Chirico shadows to the extension of counterintuitive spaces, the inner surface of the hatching egg escaping its own structural

[39] Charles Olson, 'Ideas for Series of Lectures at Richman's Institute of Contemporary Art', I Box 31:1593, Charles Olson Research Collection, Archives and Special Collections at the Thomas J. Dodd Research Center, University of Connecticut Libraries.
[40] 'Ideas for Series of Lectures', Charles Olson Research Collection.
[41] 'Notes for a Response', Charles Olson Research Collection.
[42] *Harper's Bazaar* 82:1 (1948), p. 234.
[43] In their catalogue to the Italian art exhibition of 1949, Soby and Barr noted that Cagli's recent abstract works were indebted to de Chirico: '[Cagli] has since become an abstract artist, utilizing perspective elements from de Chirico's "metaphysical period". Soby and Barr (1949), p. 127.

logic and heading off into the corner of the canvas. It represents, in other words, the 'prospective' subject Olson imagined in his lecture at American University earlier in the

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*Figure 4.2*. L'Obelisco Art Gallery, *Cagli* (1948).

year; a subject which, projecting beyond itself into exterior space, provides the basis for 'Projective Verse' in 1950. These projections also appeared on the cover of a programme for Cagli's exhibition at the L'Obelisco Art Gallery in Rome the same year, a programme which also included a study for *La Nascita* and, significantly, Olson's poem 'To Corrado Cagli' (1947), later renamed 'The Moebius Strip'.[44] The projective geometric forms of both the painting and the exhibition programme loosely resemble diagrams in Coxeter's *Non-Euclidean Geometry*, such as his construction for the theorem '*Any two ultra-parallel lines have a common perpendicular*'.[45] All of these forms presented, to Olson's mind, imaginative forays into unfamiliar dimensions. Their very strangeness suggested a sense of

[44] L'Obelisco Art Gallery, *Cagli* (Rome, 1948).
[45] Coxeter (1942), p. 191.

standing *in situ*, anticipating the 'humanitas' which would only come with seeing human life as 'prospective' or 'projective', just one object amongst many in the dense and varied fabric of inhabited space.

*

With his lectures and notes of 1948 Olson had given his sense of the role of space in the making of postwar American modernism and, through this, a postwar 'humanitas' that could 'offset Buchenwald'.[46] A loose sheet amongst the 'Notes for a Response to "A Letter from Italy"' shows him clarifying these ideas further, but it also shows him, for the first time, putting space to the work of poetry itself. On one side of the sheet Olson wrote out an 'axiom' by hand in blue pen. Reducing to essentials the theme of the lectures, it gave a clear rationale for rejecting 'time-bound experience' for man as a 'space-located thing':

> The axiom is:
>
> > in space a human being is first of all an object and to be measured in terms of weight, gravity, attraction, generally
> >
> > in space a human being is first of all an object and is to be measured by physical laws
> >
> > in time he is an animal possessed of the notion he is on the way to being an angel and thus creates measurements which have no natural counterparts [47]

Aside from clarifying some of the propositions in the lectures, this 'axiom' was significant for what followed at the foot of the page; a typewritten upside-down 'LANSC'.[48] The axiom, it becomes clear, had been written at the foot of the first draft of 'Landscape without Color' (1948), the first two stanzas of which are typewritten on the opposite side of the page. The material origin of this poem suggests the textual environment from which

[46] 'The Search in Art', Charles Olson Research Collection.
[47] 'Notes for a Response', Charles Olson Research Collection.
[48] 'Notes for a Response', Charles Olson Research Collection.

it emerged and to which it can be returned; 'Landscape without Color' gives verse expression to the declarative sentences of the axiom on the other side of the page. From the outset, this poem unsettles the 'landscape' genre it nominally represents, rehabilitating the conventions of the genre to those new worlds of space at the centre of the 1948 lectures. A third and final draft opens:

> The train carries me swiftly by, yet
> I stay
> The train carried me swiftly away, yet
> I stay
> And the crane stands as he stood
>
> The water up to that intolerable claw of his raised leg
> the crane stands as he stood
>
> The long-necked geese fly down the slough, competent, organized
> still new
> the speed of their most irritating flight still doubled by the rushing train
>
> The undirected, unstill gulls blast the marsh in memory as in fact
> Unlocated, wild, there and not there, watching, intact
> not relative
> as geese and crane
> to train and time[49]

Of the suite of metaphors routinely called on to illustrate the theory of relativity, the railway carriage is by far the most prominent. Indeed, the train had been the favoured subject of Einstein's *Gedankenexperimente* throughout *Relativity: The Special and the General Theory* (1916). But in Olson's poem the train metaphor of relativity theory is called on to disrupt the traditional relations governing the landscape genre in painting and poetry. The static observer of that genre is substituted here with an indeterminately mobile one ('the train carries me swiftly by, yet / I stay') whose spatial coordinate is mapped against an immobile 'crane' and the 'irritating flight' of 'long-necked geese' ('doubled by

[49] Charles Olson, 'Landscape, Without Colour', I Box 16: 569, Charles Olson Research Collection, Archives and Special Collections at the Thomas J. Dodd Research Center, University of Connecticut Libraries.

the rushing train'). He becomes the 'space-located thing' Olson had seen as the new model of postwar subjectivity in 'The Search in Art' and in the axiom: an object with no ontological privilege, merely a reference-body relative to other objects 'measured by physical laws'. The poem enacts what had been argued throughout the lectures of 1948; that the postwar generation must have 'quieter notions' or an 'original modesty' about human life; that it must see itself barely, without the 'destiny' and 'spirit' which had

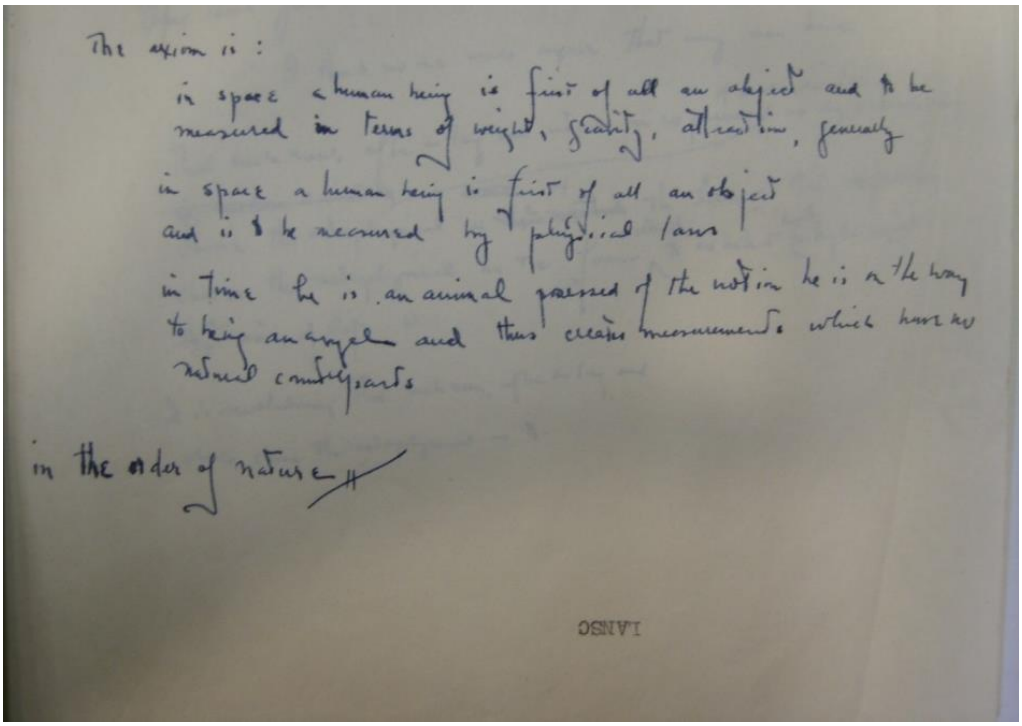


*Figure 4.3*. Charles Olson, 'The axiom is..', 'Notes for a Response to "A Letter from Italy"' (1948). Charles Olson Research Collection.

justified so much of the 'modern shame and disaster' of the first half of the twentieth-century.[50] The postwar subject is conceived here as 'first of all an object', free of 'syrup and nonsense'. For the first time in his poetry, the 'analysis of space' Olson saw in the

[50] 'The Search in Art', Charles Olson Research Collection. That Olson's early poems evidence a desire to 'reestablish man's ties with nature though a return to the senses, to the body, to the elementary constituents of nature' may be true. But, as this poem demonstrates, it is the abstract continuum of shared space which provides the basis for such reconstructed unity. Enikő Bollobás, *Charles Olson* (New York, 1992), p. 66. 'Notes for a Response', Charles Olson Research Collection.

work of Cagli comes to the fore as critique and as a vision of renewal, of a 'stance toward reality' befitting a new scepticism towards modernity in its more Faustian modes.

*

In his last lectures on geometry, delivered in Washington in 1949, Olson compared this 'projective' stance to the 'analogical extension of space' implicit to hyperspace, or space in four dimensions. This was to enter more arcane territory, but, like his earlier lectures, these addresses provided a workbench for Olson's developing ideas, occasions on which he could test the merits and plausibility of a later modernist spatial aesthetic which married formal innovation with philosophical critique. He opened his lecture '4th Dimension' (1949)—now included with an early draft of 'The Kingfishers' (1949) at the Charles Olson Research Collection—by defining hyperspace in a way that would prepare his audience for 'Upon a Moebius Strip', his own 'four-dimensional' poem:

> ~~We better, right at the start, set this question of the 4th dimension right. Geometrically (and that is where Cagli and Donchian are based) it is not difficult.~~ You are all ready to recognize a point as zero dimension, a line as 1 dimension, a plane as 2, and a cube as 3 dimensional. Now 2 points bound a line, 4 lines bound a square, 6 squares a cube, and 8 cubes a hyper-cube. In other words, hyper-space is an analogical extension of space as it is familiar to us.[51]

Unfamiliar to everyday experience, hyperspace is nonetheless quite reasonable, simply an 'analogical extension' of quotidian dimensions. Olson goes on to note that only 'one or two people' have 'attained the ability to visualize solids in the 4$^{th}$ dimensions (hypersolids) as simply as we three dimesnional [sic] mortals visualize three dimensional solids'.[52] One of the two people was Alice Boole Stott, a colleague of Coxeter and the originator of the term polytope. But Olson wanted to discuss Corrado Cagli's friend Paul Donchian, whom

[51] Charles Olson, 'The Kingfishers', I Box 16: 564, Charles Olson Research Collection, Archives and Special Collections at the Thomas J. Dodd Research Center, University of Connecticut Libraries.
[52] 'The Kingfishers', Charles Olson Research Collection.

Coxeter had profiled in *Regular Polytopes*.[53] When Olson mentions the 'ability to visualize solids in the 4th dimensions (hypersolids)', he was probably thinking of Plate VI in that volume, which represented Donchian's 'Projections of the Simpler Hyper-Solids'. Here Coxeter describes how Donchian was attempting in these assemblages to project the almost unvisualizable: 'Donchian did not attempt to indicate the faces, because any kind of substantial faces would hide other parts (so that the model could only be apprehended by a four-dimensional being). The cells appear as "skeletons", usually somewhat flattened by foreshortening but still recognizable'.[54] Whilst Coxeter noted the



'psychological value' of the models—since they offered at least a metaphorical visualization of the fourth dimension—Olson thought much more of them. 'What is involved here,' he suggests, 'is something which both science and art have long been

[53] H. S. M. Coxeter, *Regular Polytopes* (London, 1948), p. 260.
[54] Coxeter (1948), p. 242.

capable of, the act of taking a point of vantage from which reality can be freshly seen'.[55] Their intimation of further dimensions, beyond those of everyday life, returned the world as suddenly less knowable and therefore as substantially less manipulable, a realm in which man could regain his 'original modesty'.[56]

This prospect of a whole new world of space—and a whole new human posture towards that world—was then given a literary analogy: 'What resolves it is, the point of vantage gained, a point, like that of Troilus, in Chaucer's poem, who when he is at the seventh sphere, looks back on the earth, and on that whole ball where his troubles have been'.[57] Troilus could look back on earth with a new perspective, finding equanimity despite Criseyde's betrayal. The postwar world can look on the earth from the fourth dimension, finding in this perspective the possibility of a new 'humanitas'. Perhaps more clearly than anywhere else, Olson confirms here that a new approach to space would enable a new and humble postwar ethic. In 'Troilus' (1948), published a year earlier, he had had Troilus announce this from the postwar *selva oscura*: 'The path, love is the path. / And in the forest calls, calls!' (CPo 77).

In its very unfamiliarity, the 'vantage from which reality can be freshly seen' appeared, in Olson's view, to disallow the confident hold which technoscientific culture laid upon the three-dimensional world. Opening his second lecture of 1949, 'A Lecture on Corrado Cagli and the 4th Dimension' (1949), Olson stated again his position thus far: 'What I want to do tonight, to justify my appearing before you, is to illuminate in what way a new conception of space (which is, I think, what Cagli & I keep working towards) leads toward a new art & thus toward a redefinition of man, and accomplishes, in the moral sense, a new humanitas'.[58] Donchian's models were examples of the way art could achieve

[55] 'The Kingfishers', Charles Olson Research Collection.
[56] 'Notes for a Response', Charles Olson Research Collection.
[57] 'The Kingfishers', Charles Olson Research Collection.
[58] 'Notes for a Lecture', Charles Olson Research Collection.

this, but Olson had his own example in 'Upon a Moebius Strip', the poem included in the catalogue for Cagli's exhibition at the L'Obelisco Gallery in Rome the year before. The poem attempted to realise 'a new conception of space' within its own formal textures, and for this reason Olson felt the need to 'aid' his audience 'a little', constructing a Moebius strip himself at the lectern.

> I can make you a Moebus [sic]
> (Make Strip)
> It is a 3d object which, because it can, if painted properly, reveal its own life in the interior dimension, create the allusion [sic] of the 4th dimension. I have not yet seen such a painting but it was my imagining of such a painting that led to the writing of the poem Upon a Moebus Strip [sic] which was 1st published here in Washington by Mrs [Caresse] Crosby, in PORTFOLIO. I shall read it to you, & aid you a little, by merely reminding you that the distortions & movements are intended to force language to do a like job in its dimensions as painter would operating on a strip.[59]

'I know of one Greek labyrinth which is but one straight line,' Jorge Luis Borges had the detective Lönnrot say in 'Death and the Compass' (1942) a few years earlier, 'so many philosophers have been lost upon that line that a mere detective might be pardoned if he became lost as well'.[60] Olson valued the band for the same reason he valued Donchian's models; it defamiliarizes spatial assumptions, producing another 'vantage from which reality can be freshly seen'. 'Upon a Moebius Strip' attempted to catch its paradoxical properties, imagining a painting turning slowly through the band:

> Upon a Moebius strip
> materials and the weights of pain
> their harmony
>
> A man within himself upon an empty ground.
> His head lay heavy on a huge right hand
> itself a leopard on
> his left and angled shoulder.
> His back a stave, his side a whole into the bosom of a sphere (CPo 54-55)

[59] 'Notes for a Lecture', Charles Olson Research Collection.
[60] Jorge Luis Borges, *Fictions.* Trans. Andrew Hurley (London, 2000), p. 123.

Olson had 'not yet seen such a painting'. But Cagli would have told him about *Untitled* (1947) which featured a Möebius band prominently.[61] The first stanzas of the poem also appear to be ekphrastic, perhaps drawing on Cagli's neoclassical male nudes of the middle 1930s. The solitary man 'within himself upon an empty ground' was Olson's subject throughout the 1948 lectures on space and in 'Landscape without Color'. This is the subject whose sense of self could be transformed by an awareness of his disposition within a 'miraculous universe' as paradoxical as the Möebius band itself. And the final line of the second stanza, 'His back a stave, his side a whole into the bosom of a sphere', suggests not only the 'prospective' subject Olson discussed at American University a year earlier, but also the projective vectors of Cagli's *La Nascita* and the non-Euclidean spherical geometries noted in the 'Verse and Geometry' notebook written in Washington in November 1946.[62]

If Olson 'intended to force language to do a like job' as a painter on a Möebius band, this was, in a sense, to revalidate modernist parataxis under the aegis of four-dimensionality. But it was also to move, as Olson put it, 'toward a redefinition of man'. New experiments in literary spatiality would work not only to further the modernist tradition but also to imagine a new kind of postwar subjectivity, one with 'modesty' and 'humanitas' at the fore. That Olson was not alone in this respect would have been evident from contemporary reportage. In spring the following year, for instance, the *New York Times* would publish an article entitled 'A Stress on Space: Growing Tendency Noted in American Art'.[63] But other events in the New York artworld in these years suggest that

[61] Michele Emmer, 'Visual Art and Mathematics: The Moebius Band', *Leonardo* 13:2 (1980), pp. 109-110.
[62] And 'spherical feats of rare efficiency' (to adopt Marianne Moore's words of 1951) were prominent elsewhere too. In 1948 and 1949, for instance, R. Buckminster Fuller had erected his first non-Euclidean geodesic domes at Black Mountain College. Moore, *The Complete Poems of Marianne Moore* (London, 1968), p. 143. For more on Olson and Fuller see Mark Byers, 'Environmental Pedagogues: Charles Olson and R. Buckminster Fuller', *English* 62:238 (2013): 248-268.
[63] Howard Devree, 'A Stress on Space: Growing Tendency Noted in American Art', *New York Times* (6 March 1949), p. X9. 'Notes for a Lecture', Charles Olson Research Collection.

space had indeed become a critical issue for the nascent avant-garde. Olson's concern with 'prospective' subjects and 'projective' art, their 'jointure of the moral to the aesthetic', was far from eccentric.

*

In 'The Crisis of the Easel Picture' Greenberg had seen modernist painting driving itself into oblivion by drawing ever more attention to surface design. He identified Pollock as one of the new painters working unavoidable violence upon traditional easel painting: 'using the easel picture as they do—and cannot help doing—these artists are destroying it'.[64] Yet within a few years another critic would come to very much the opposite conclusion about the dimensional significance of Pollock's work in the final years of the decade. As we saw earlier, Rosenberg's 'The American Action Painters' cast the new American painter as hypermasculine actor, embodying the dramatic dynamism that Rosenberg had once seen collectively in the Marxian proletariat. 'What gives the canvas its meaning,' Rosenberg declared, 'is not psychological data but *rôle*, the way the artist organizes his emotional and intellectual energy as if he were in a living situation'.[65] The 'action' painting—no longer aloof and autonomous—could be seen as the epiphenomena of a 'living situation', the gestural evidence and trace of acts performed beyond the canvas.

> At a certain moment the canvas began to appear to one American painter after another as an arena in which to act—rather than as a space in which to reproduce, re-design, analyse or "express" an object, actual or imagined. What was to go on the canvas was not a picture but an event.[66]

'The act-painting,' Rosenberg concluded, 'is of the same metaphysical substance as the artist's existence. The new painting has broken down every distinction between art and

[64] Greenberg (1988), p. 225.
[65] Harold Rosenberg, *The Tradition of the New* (Freeport, NY, 1971), p. 29.
[66] Rosenberg (1971), p. 25.

life'.[67] Of course this meant that the new 'picture', no longer confined to the canvas, took place in a 'four-sided arena', in the multidimensional realm where the artist acted according to his dramatic rôle.[68] Like Olson, Rosenberg was imagining an artwork which trespassed its own putative boundaries, exceeding its own perimeter to enter (as 'Projective Verse' put it), 'the larger field of objects', 'dimensions larger than the man' (CPr 247).

The homology goes further, however, for both Olson and Rosenberg conceived of these new spaces as areas which would afford some kind of political or ethical change now that more conventional means had failed. For Rosenberg and Olson, if not for the increasingly conservative Greenberg, the onus now was on destroying the modernist art object in such a way that the new modernism would provide fresh aesthetic possibilities whilst at the same time—and here was their leap of faith—providing some kind of substitute for an evaporated political optimism. Thus their strategies of substitution: for Rosenberg the destruction of the art object created a space for artistic 'action' which replaced the action of the proletariat; for Olson the destruction of the art object created a space within which the artist could transform everyday life, revolutionizing not the state but his own ethic and his stance toward the world.

Rosenberg's essay drew out the three-dimensional implications of Pollock's recent canvases much more forcefully than anybody else, but he was not the only contemporary to interpret Pollock's works after 1947 three-dimensionally. Two further readings demonstrate just how pervasive was the desire to challenge the modern theoretical boundaries which had long resigned the work of art to splendid isolation. On the one hand, Rosenberg was himself probably indebted to the still photographs and documentary film, *Jackson Pollock* (1950), by Hans Namuth, who captured the artist at work on Long Island in 1950. Caroline A. Jones ventures that Rosenberg 'must have been thinking of Namuth's

[67] Rosenberg (1971), p. 28.
[68] Rosenberg (1971), p. 29.

film' when he describes the 'arena in which to act', and notes that 'Namuth's film and photographs were the first images to make this spatial identification viscerally clear'.[69] In Namuth's images the canvas stretched across the foreground is frequently out of focus, the real subject of the photograph being Pollock himself and the environment in which he moves.

But the 'four-sided arena' of Pollock's work had emerged in another collaborative project even before Namuth visited Long Island, this time with the architect Peter Blake. Pollock had asked Blake to design his exhibit at the Betty Parsons Gallery in the autumn of 1949.[70] Instead, the architect imagined an exhibition space near Pollock's home on Long Island: 'an exhibit of translucency, paintings hanging suspended in the magnificent expanse of the landscape out here, the landscape penetrating them'.[71] He went on to construct 'a model of a flat-roofed, glazed pavilion in the manner of Mies van der Rohe' with an 'interior divided by colored reproductions of Pollock's paintings'.[72] The project never came to fruition, but a scale model of the space was included in the show at the Betty Parsons Gallery.

Blake's 'translucent' pavilion exaggerated the sense, shared by Rosenberg and Namuth, that in his work in the final years of the decade, Pollock had diminished the isolation suffered by the modern artwork. For Blake, the canvases could easily be brought into formal dialogue with the world. His Miesian glass design, extinguishing boundaries between inside and outside, would liberate Pollock's works *into* the natural world, saving them from that strange aloofness which attended the picture in drawing-room or gallery. And Blake seems to have thought of this project along Olson's lines; of a spatial aesthetic

[69] Caroline A. Jones, *Machine in the Studio: Constructing the Postwar American Artist* (Chicago, 1996), pp. 72-73.
[70] Elizabeth L. Langhorne, 'Pollock's dream of a Biocentric art: The challenge of his and Peter Blake's Ideal Museum', *Biocentrism and Modernism*. Ed. Oliver A. I. Botar and Isabel Wünsche (Farnham, 2011), p. 228.
[71] Quoted in Langhorne (2011), p. 228.
[72] Langhorne (2011), p. 228.

where the loss of strict formal isolation reflected an analogous push against the immodest primacy afforded the human subject by modern philosophy. Indeed, his reference to Mies van der Rohe confirms that he had taken inspiration from the Farnsworth House (1946-51), a weekend house in Illinois which Mies himself had justified in similarly humble terms:

> Nature should also live its own life, we should not destroy it with colors of houses and interiors. But we should try to bring nature, houses, and human beings together in a higher unity. When you see nature through the glass walls of the Farnsworth House, it gets a deeper meaning than outside. More is asked from nature, because it becomes a part of a larger whole.[73]

Like the Ideal Museum which it inspired, the Farnsworth House stated in plastic, structural form the conviction that, in Olson's words, 'it behooves man now not to separate himself too jauntily from any of nature's creatures' (CPr 161). For Mies, as for Peter Blake, 'unity' could be achieved between the life of man and nature through an act of aesthetic fiat.

Rosenberg's theatrical reading of Pollock was only one then amongst a small constellation of responses which blurred the boundaries of artwork and extensive world. In the contemporary work of Blake and Namuth, and even of Mies van der Rohe, Olson's project to break the *objet d'art* of high modernism and discover a new 'humilitas' on the way found unexpected analogues. 'Projecting' out of the sealed domain of the self-sufficient artwork had become a powerful contemporary imperative, and one adjacent to a new brand of antianthropocentric speculation. In his own isolation in Washington, the poet was providing a critical language for projects appearing across the American avant-garde.

[73] Quoted in Jean-Louis Cohen, *Mies van der Rohe*. Trans. Maggie Rosengarten (London, 1996), p. 93. According to Farnsworth's memoir, Mies had told her early in the project: 'Here where everything is beautiful, and privacy is no issue, it would be a pity to erect an opaque wall between the outside and the inside. So I think we should build the house of steel and glass; in that way we'll let the outside in'. Quoted in Franz Schulze and Edward Windhorst, *Mies van der Rohe: A Critical Biography*. Rev. ed (Chicago, 2012), p. 249.

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Yet Blake and Pollock's Ideal Museum of 1948 found its closest cognate not with Mies's house in Illinois but in upstate New York. In 1940 David Smith had moved to Bolton Landing in the Adirondack Mountains, occupying a large farm house not far from the shores of Lake George. Spending one week a month in Manhattan, where he remained in close contact with the abstract expressionists, Smith completed his mature work in rural isolation.[74] Nor was this simply a snub to the New York artworld. From 1945 the environment around Smith's home assumed a prominent role in his work, as he began to take photographs which counterpointed sculpture and landscape, drawing the lines of his steel works into reciprocal relation with the contours of the surrounding hills and treelines. As Michael Brenson has said:

> As a rule, he photographed individual sculptures from below, looking up, so that their verticality is seen against the horizon, holding its own against an expanse of sky. Often, Smith emphasized the different tiers within his sculptures by photographing them against different levels of the landscape—for example, the lake or the curve of hills below, more curves a bit above that, then perhaps those of treetops, and finally, at the top of the photograph, the sky.[75]

That Smith would use these photographs in catalogues for exhibitions in New York is revealing; they represent a pastoral challenge to the rarefied art circles of Manhattan, proof that the 'ideal' environment for the postwar artwork is not the gallery but the open space of hill and field. In other words, Smith's open museum antedated Blake's very similar project for Pollock's work in Long Island, only doing away entirely with the need for the steel and glass of Mies van der Rohe. The principle, however, is the same: Smith's works are handed out to the environment to be fulfilled by the lines and forms of the natural world. Though

[74] Michael Brenson, 'The Fields', *David Smith: A Centennial*. Ed. Carmen Giménez (New York, 2006), p. 41.
[75] Brenson (2006), p. 42.

the artist has a part in establishing the terms of the dialogue, it is the conversation between work and world which becomes the focus of aesthetic experience.

*Australia* (1951), now collected at the Museum of Modern Art, is one of the most striking instances of this. Whilst its softly curving lines quote from the repertoire of Surrealist biomorphism, this sculpture stands in especially close structural correspondence with the landscape around Bolton Landing. In the photographs which Smith himself took

of the sculpture in 1951 this became especially clear. The gently bowed horizontal bars and the ovoid form at head of the sculpture immediately echo the soft curves of the hills on the skyline. At the same time, the spindly vertical projections flanking the sculpture on both sides gesture towards the vertical elements of the landscape: the trees leading up to the hill and, in the immediate foreground, the grasses of the field itself. The leaflike segments, in the central ovoid form as well as in the pouch on the right, find living cognates in the trees and fields on all sides. Nor are these relations as fixed as such a description might imply, because the photographs taken in 1951 demonstrate that these systems of relations alter dramatically depending on the angle from which the sculpture is viewed. Unlike Stevens's jar, Smith's sculpture does not take 'dominion' of the landscape but engages in a ceaseless search for reciprocities, for counterpoints and correspondences; for, in Mies's words, 'unity'.[76]

From 1952, as his works grew bigger, Smith began to place his sculpture further around Bolton Landing; in the fields, on the terrace, and in the driveway.[77] And after 1958, when he hired an assistant, they began to occupy these spaces more permanently, in long rows lining the hillsides. By the time of his death in May 1965, Bolton Landing had become not simply an outdoor museum but a total work of art. As Patricia Johnson recalled: 'It was like the whole fields of David Smith was [sic] the work of art. It wasn't one sculpture. It was that work in relation to the landscape that was so powerful'.[78] 'Discontent with galleries and museums' was certainly one reason why Smith felt the need to install his sculpture outdoors.[79] But the project was consonant with a growing effort to imagine a new space for postwar art, one which did not annex to itself a place apart, but moved out into the extensive world, diminishing distinctions between made and natural

[76] Wallace Stevens, *Collected Poetry and Prose*. Ed. Frank Kermode and Joan Richardson (New York, 1997), p. 61.
[77] Brenson (2006), p. 43.
[78] Quoted in Brenson (2006), p. 39.
[79] Brenson (2006), p. 61.

space, and between art and life. In Olson's work of these years, as much as the work of his contemporaries, this was increasingly seen as both an aesthetic and a 'moral' advance, a way of superseding modernist precedent whilst exploring new postures, more 'modest' perhaps, between self and world.

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Early in 1950 Olson added somewhat more depth to his spatial ideas about the 'direction of art and life ahead'. Enclosed in a letter to Frances Boldereff on 21 March, his essay 'About Space' (1950) announced a paradigm shift in physical understanding which, according to the poet, had yet to reveal itself in the arts: a 'dying of the hold of the time-concept on western man' and the birth of a 'new man' in a 'new history'.[80] Indeed, for Olson, 'space is the mark of new history, and the measure of creative work now afoot is the depth of the perception of space, both as space informs objects and as it contains, in antithesis to time, secrets of a humanitas eased out of contemporary narrows'.[81] Those words—culled from 'Notes for a Response to a "Letter from Italy"'—lead the poet to reemphasize how the aesthetic opportunities afforded by space will be (and must be) accompanied by a new ethic:

> A treatise on dimensions, springing out of non-Euclidean geometry, would be as contributory to art now as Piero della Francesca's treatise on perspective was in the 15th century, out of Euclid. For art, thought and action now stem from the same questions Einstein has. What is missing is form, form, the law of object, of a leaf, what only the artist can give […] Without form, the comprehension of it, researches and formulations, there is no moral purpose to the design.[82]

The questions of Piero della Francesca (deriving from Euclidean geometry) and those of Einstein (deriving from non-Euclidean geometry) illustrate a profound shift in the human

[80] Charles Olson and Frances Boldereff, *A Modern Correspondence.* Ed. Ralph Maud and Sharon Thesen (Hanover, 1999), pp. 254-255
[81] Olson and Boldereff (1999), p. 254.
[82] Olson and Boldereff (1999), p. 255.

understanding of space. An aesthetic treatise on spacetime, Olson suggests, would contribute to modern art as much as Piero's *De Prospectiva Pingendi* did to the early Renaissance. And yet this contribution would be less technical than ethical. 'Researches and formulations' into the space and forms of non-Euclidean geometry and Einsteinian physics would provide art with a new 'moral purpose', the foundations of which are described by Olson in what follows: 'The gains of space', he says, 'can be put in an old triad: man, and nature society god'.[83] The moral gains of Einsteinian spacetime for the first of this triad Olson goes on to describe:

> Man as object is equatable to all other nature, is neutron, is thus no more than a tree or pitchblende but is, therefore, returned to his abiding place where he always is whatever his notions, the primordial, where he can rest again as he did once with less knowledge to confirm his humilitas.
>
> It is as force that the eye of nature sees man. Seen so, the animal and the bones of him do not disturb the remainder of organic and inorganic creation. As force man has his place, and wonder. He is participant. It is enough, more than he knows. Instead of his own alone he is in touch with all life, and image and fable come back.[84]

The 'knowledge' of recent physics is enough to confirm a 'humilitas' (man as 'equatable to all other nature') which previous cultures 'with less knowledge' accepted intuitively; an ethics in line with the understanding of humankind as 'participant' only.

Several months earlier 'Projective Verse' had claimed similarly that 'man is himself an object' and that his 'advantages' would be 'greater' as soon as he achieved a 'humilitas sufficient to make him of use' (CPr 247). And, indeed, 'About Space' might be regarded as that essay's companion piece, for together they provide Olson's culminating account of the spatial ideas he had begun to refine from 1947. In a way comparable to the Ideal Museum of Blake, Mies's Farnsworth House, or the fields of David Smith, projective verse is a

[83] Olson and Boldereff (1999), p. 255.
[84] Olson and Boldereff (1999), p. 255.

medium which has slipped its putative boundaries (print, the page) in order to enter a much more encompassing milieu. Its attempt to overcome '"closed verse"' (CPr 239) is exemplary of the contemporary move to expand the parameters of the recursive high modernist art object and attenuate—if not entirely collapse—the distinction between world and medium.

*

But by the time that essay was published, the spatial movement Olson had been imagining for two years was already coming to fruition. The impasse Greenberg had identified in modern painting seemed to have been overcome by the 'four-sided arena' of expressionist gesturalism, and the work of Smith, Blake and others added depth to a movement which saw in three dimensions the next frontier of modernist art. The initiative to break down the recursive high modernist art object, opening it out to the real world, was stark in these cases; the poem, the building, the action painting, and the sculpture entered their new worlds of space quite literally, surrendering formal autonomy and seeking correspondence with the objective, ambient world. But even in the contemporary work of Newman, where the flattening of the picture plane was apparently obvious, a similar logic was at work, something which becomes much clearer in the light of his contemporary writings.

On 29 January 1948—a few months before the appearance of 'The Crisis of the Easel Picture' and Olson's first lectures on space and Cagli—Newman completed *Onement I* (1948), a small picture (twenty-seven and a quarter by sixteen and a quarter inches) representing a long uneven band dividing vertically a field of Indian red. Newman was at first uncertain what this picture *meant.* As he later revealed to the British art critic David Sylvester: 'I'd done this painting and stopped in order to find out what I had done, and I

actually lived with that painting for almost a year trying to understand it'.[85] What Newman had done, he eventually realised, was something like a Pentateuchal world making: 'The streak was always going through an atmosphere; I was trying to create a world *around* it'.[86] In other words, Newman thought, the vertical line did not divide pictorial space, but—

[85] Barnett Newman, 'Interview with David Sylvester', *Selected Writings and Interviews*. Ed. John P. O'Neill (Berkeley, 1992), p. 255.

[86] Quoted in Arthur C. Danto, 'Barnett Newman and the Heroic Sublime', *Unnatural Wonders: Essays from the Gap Between Art and Life* (New York, 2007), p. 191. Yve-Alain Bois rightly notes that in its world-making moment, *Onement I* continues the 'thematics of the Origin' which appeared in works of 1946 such as *Genetic Moment* (see Chapter One). But Bois also seeks to establish what was new about this work: '*Onement I* is concerned with the myth of origin, but for the first time this myth is told in the present tense. And this present tense is not that of the historical narrative, but an attempt to address the spectator directly'. Bois, *Painting as Model* (Cambridge, Mass., 1993), p. 193. In a later essay, Bois emphasizes that this address situates the spectator spatially: 'Newman always said that what he wanted most to achieve was to give the beholder a sense of place. In bilateral symmetry, which relates so directly to our body structure and to the way we, as humans, organize our perception of the world, he had found a perfect mode of address'. Bois, 'Newman's Laterality', *Reconsidering Barnett Newman*. Ed. Melissa Ho (Philadelphia, 2005), p. 33.

unwarrantably—brought the picture itself into the world inhabited by the viewer: 'For the first time with this painting the painting itself had a life of its own'.[87] And the title of the painting, as Arthur C. Danto has suggested, testifies to this illusion, signifying the strange visual fiat by which the central line establishes a dimensional world: 'It is on the surface and on the same space as we are. Painting and viewer coexist in the same reality'.[88]

A painting which tautologically surpasses its own objecthood, entering whichever space it finds itself, is projective. It is also involved in relinquishing the autonomy that would hold it aloof from its viewers. Like Olson or Blake, Newman desacralizes the artwork even at the moment it assumes a 'life of its own'. Why he thought this especially significant in 1948, and how it reflects the work of his contemporaries in the same years, can be gathered from his contemporary writings and *obiter dicta*. On the one hand, echoing Greenberg, Newman was conscious of, and anxious about, a modernist *ne plus ultra,* an end of the line, formally speaking. 'Painting is finished,' he had told Gottlieb some time the previous decade, 'we should give up'.[89] But a picture which created a continuity with the world had some claim to overcoming this impasse, for in entering extensive space it escaped the closed teleological system which made the idea of a formal impasse plausible.

On the other hand, Newman shared Olson's conviction that any late modernist aesthetic would need to accompany a new metaphysic or 'stance toward reality'. And he was convinced, like Olson, that new conceptions of space were pertinent to this reevaluation. As Michael Auping has said: 'He felt that if abstraction as it developed at the beginning of the century was to engage the changing metaphysics of his own time, it would need to take a bolder step […] Newman was seeking what he called "a sense of place" [and he] understood that to engage such an epic topic required that painting develop a new

[87] Newman, 'Interview with David Sylvester' (1992), p. 256.
[88] Danto (2007), p. 191.
[89] Michael Auping, 'Four Horizons', *Declaring Space: Mark Rothko, Barnett Newman, Lucio Fontana, Yves Klein* (Munich, 2007), p. 144.

approach to space'.[90] This new approach was what Newman found fulfilled in *Onement I*, which placed 'the viewer in a new relationship to painting itself', turning the art object towards the extensive world in much the way that Olson demanded in his lectures of 1948 and 1949 and in 'Projective Verse'. It was also at issue in his essay 'Ohio, 1949' (1949), which recorded his impressions of the Native American mounds near Akron. For Newman, these structures, landscape art ahead of their time, established a deeply unfamiliar relationship between themselves and their viewers, creating a space in which both structure and spectator are interior. Looking out to the horizon from this vantage feels like 'looking out as if inside a picture':

> Here is the self-evident nature of the artistic act, its utter simplicity. There are no subjects—nothing that can be shown in a museum or even photographed; a work of art that cannot even be seen, so it is something that must be experienced there on the spot: The feeling that here is the space; that these simple low mud walls make the space; that the space outside, the dramatic landscape looking out over a bridge one hundred feet high, the falling land, the chasms, the rivers, the farmlands and far-off hills are just picture postcards, and somehow one is looking out as if inside a picture rather than outside contemplating any specific nature.[91]

Written whilst he was still coming to terms with *Onement I*, this passage is revealing of the way Newman would come to see that picture. What has been effected by the single vertical band, which he would later call a 'zip', was an inclusive space shared by picture and viewer. Like the mounds and walls of Akron, *Onement I* draws viewer and painting into spatial unity, an interiority, giving a sense not only of the situatedness of the viewer but also of the openness of the painting itself, its loss of boundaries. The art object of Greenbergian art history, with its internal laws and exhaustible possibilities, has

[90] Auping (2007), p. 144.
[91] Newman, 'Ohio, 1949' (1992), pp. 174-175.

disappeared. In its place stands something closer to experience, one of 'utter simplicity'; of standing here, *in medias res*.[92]

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Dissolving the aloof, self-reflexive art object was a project closely tied to the new critiques of abstract and instrumental reason; those patterns of thought which placed the human at one remove from an available, manipulable reality. An art simply open to its surroundings, partaking of them, pointed the way to a more 'modest' approach to matter and 'quieter notions' about the human subject. The 'projective' was thus not merely, or not only, a kind of formal ekstasis, but involved a critical intervention into contemporary debates about the 'totalitarianism', in Adorno and Horkheimer's view, of objective rationality.

But if the tendency of the American art object to lose its borders after 1946 was due to a very contemporary climate of critical opinion, if it was the direct product of the New Failure of Nerve, it also laid the foundation for a long future aesthetic tradition. A turning point in this respect came in 1952, with two works by John Cage that would quickly enter the folk memory of the American avant-garde. With these works we might conclude the present chapter, for they demonstrate how naturally the spatial ideas of the late 1940s segued into the performance movements of the following decade and beyond.

The first was performed in the dining room of Black Mountain College, and the earliest account of what happened was recorded by a student, Francine du Plessix Gray, who made a note of it in her journal:

> At eight-thirty tonight John Cage mounted a step-ladder and until 10:30 he talked about the relation of music to Zen Buddhism while a movie

[92] As Paul Crowther has argued, Newman's 'zip and field' relation is a 'matrix of specific visual possibilities of reciprocity', and the 'figure and ground relation is closely tied to optical illusions of presence and absence'. I would follow Auping in suggesting that one of these 'visual possibilities' is the illusion of three-dimensionality, of the zip entering the environment of the viewer and thus gatekeeping between the ambient environment and the colour field. Crowther, *The Language of Twentieth-Century Art: A Conceptual History* (New Haven, 1997), p. 163.

> was shown, dogs ran across the stage barking, 12 persons danced without any previous rehearsal, a prepared piano was played, whistles blew, babies screamed. Edith Piaf records were played double-speed on a turn-of-the-century machine...[93]

In 1965 Cage ventured a slightly different version of events in an interview with Michael Kirby and Richard Schechner. If du Plessix Gray evoked the chaos of the performance, Cage emphasised a latent structure behind his disorderly assembly of mixed media:

> At one end of a rectangular hall, the long end, was a movie and at the other end were slides. I was up on a ladder delivering a lecture which included silences and there was another ladder which M. C. Richards and Charles Olson went up at different times. During periods that I called time brackets, the performers were free within limitations—I think you would call them compartments—compartments they didn't have to fill, like a green light in traffic. Until this compartment began, they were not free to act, but once it had begun they could act as long as they wanted to during it. Robert Rauschenberg was playing an old-fashioned phonograph that had a horn and a dog on the side listening, and David Tudor was playing a piano, and Merce Cunningham and other dancers were moving through the audience and around the audience. Rauschenberg's pictures were suspended about the audience—[94]

'In later years,' as Leta E. Miller notes, '*Black Mountain Piece* [or *Theatre Piece No. 1*] would assume epic proportions, touted as the first of many mixed-media, multi-disciplinary, anti-establishment "happenings"'.[95] But as well as read forward into the performance art of the following decades, this 'neutral bracket for varied and unpredictable experiences' should also be read back into American work of the previous few years; into the task of 'finding a place' in multiple dimensions which had occupied not only Olson but

[93] Francine du Plessix Gray, 'Black Mountain: The Breaking (Making) of a Writer', *Adam & Eve and the City: Selected Nonfiction* (New York, 1987), p. 323.
[94] Quoted in Richard Kostelanetz, *Conversing with Cage*. 2nd ed. (New York, 2003), p. 110.
[95] Leta E. Miller, 'Cage's collaborations', *The Cambridge Companion to John Cage* Ed. David Nicholls (Cambridge, 2002), p. 151.

also Newman, Blake, Rosenberg, Pollock, Smith, and other contemporaries in the New York artworld from 1946.[96]

This is especially so because in Cage's writings of these years one finds a moral rationale for the new spatial aesthetic which often echoes Olson's unpublished contemporary lectures. Indeed, Cage's determination to abandon the kind of formal 'control' he learned (or failed to learn) at the feet of Arnold Schoenberg between 1934 and 1938 was encouraged by a similar kind of 'modesty' to that which Olson had asked for in his lectures of 1948 and 1949.[97] If Cage wanted sounds to 'be themselves'—as he put it in 1957—'rather than vehicles for man-made theories or expressions of human sentiments', this was because he shared the poet's fight against creative—and by extension philosophical—hubris.[98] He shared, that is, the new scepticism of instrumental reason which lay at the heart of Olson's early writings and which had begun to define the early postwar American imaginary.[99]

In *Black Mountain Piece* this sceptical humility was given expression in semi-aleatory form, with the performers (including Olson himself) seizing some autonomy from the controlling imagination of the artist. Dissolving any clear boundaries between the media at his disposal, Cage here turned the *Gesamtkunstwerk* into a space of uncertainty, beyond the reach of what Olson called the 'lyrical interference of the individual as ego'

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[96] Caroline A. Jones, 'Finishing School: John Cage and the Abstract Expressionist Ego', *Critical Inquiry* 19:4 (1993), p. 650. Michael Szalay's contention that aesthetic interactivity and performativity at this moment (especially that of Olson) is indebted to the 'fantasy market' of New Deal modernism, the 'interactive community in which all can imagine themselves at work', does not seem to me convincing. Szalay, *New Deal Modernism: American Literature and the Invention of the Welfare State* (Durham, 2000), p. 269.

[97] John Cage, *Silence: Lectures and Writings* (Middletown, 1973), p. 124. Cage later recalled his struggle with harmony: 'Several times I tried to explain to Schoenberg that I had no feeling for harmony. He told me without a feeling for harmony I would always encounter an obstacle, a wall through which I wouldn't be able to pass. My reply was that in that case I would devote my life to beating my head against that wall'. Quoted in David W. Bernstein, 'John Cage, Arnold Schoenberg, and the Musical Idea', *John Cage: Music, Philosophy, and Intention, 1933-1950*. Ed. David W. Patterson (New York, 2002), p. 23.

[98] Cage (1973), p. 10.

[99] Cage would be significantly influenced by Ananda Coomaraswamy's *The Transformation of Nature in Art* (1934), which he read around 1946. David W. Patterson, 'Cage and Asia: history and sources', *The Cambridge Companion to John Cage*. Ed. David Nicholls (Cambridge, 2002), pp. 41-59.

(CPr 247). But if it suggested how useful was the aleatory in seeking 'humility', *Theatre Piece No. 1* also proved how necessary were three dimensions, for in order to expunge the tyranny of authorial control and lyric self-expression, the closed and recursive domain of the self-sufficient artwork had to be opened to happenstance, to the contingency and unpredictability of worldly event. As Olson had suggested since 1948, only by turning into real extensive space could postwar art reflect those 'quieter notions' necessary to the 'vita nuova'.

Cage took these 'quieter notions' to elegant extremity only a few months later with *4'33"* (1952), a work which claimed direct inspiration from Robert Rauschenberg's *White Paintings* (1951), completed at Black Mountain the previous summer.[100] Crucially, the religious overtones attributed to the paintings by Rauschenberg were not given any credence by Cage, who stressed instead their humble openness to the environment.[101] As Kyle Gann puts it: 'For Cage, the whiteness wasn't a divine presence but an absence that refused to dominate the viewer, in a way analogous to the "silent piece" he'd been contemplating. The lack of focus turned the White Paintings into objects not separated from their environment (as art is) but contiguous with it'.[102] In his later essay 'On Robert Rauschenberg, Artist, and His Work' (1961), Cage would stress this seamless contiguity again in describing the *White Paintings* as 'airports for the lights, shadows, and particles', neutral and receptive arenas for events within the extensive world.[103] He was reading the

[100] Though, as David Nicholls puts it, *4'33"* had a 'surprisingly long gestation'. Indeed, Cage seems to have had the idea as far back as 1948 when he gave his lecture 'A Composers Confessions' (1948) at Vassar College. He was also moved by his experience inside an anechoic chamber at Harvard University earlier in 1952, at which point he still 'honestly and naively thought that some actual silence existed' (quoted in Nicholls). David Nicholls, *John Cage* (Urbana, 2007), pp. 58-59.
[101] Rauschenberg described the paintings to Betty Parsons on 18 October 1951: 'They are large white (1 white as 1 GOD) canvases organized and selected with the experience of time and presented with the innocence of a virgin'. Quoted in Kyle Gann, *No Such Thing as Silence: John Cage's 4'33"* (New Haven, 2010), p. 157.
[102] Gann (2010), p. 158.
[103] Quoted in Gann (2010), p. 158.

*White Paintings*, in other words, in a way that had been anticipated a few years earlier by Blake, Mies, Smith, and Olson.

But *4'33"* took the humble, open, spatiality of these artists to an extreme. By 'composing' a work without notes, Cage allowed his allotted time bracket to become sensitized to the indefinite aural world. The very absence of authorial intervention—other than in the imposition of a temporal frame—meant that the performance space itself (rather than the artist) became the author of the audience's aural experience. Unlike the putatively impersonal art object of high modernism, the appearance of authorlessness in *4'33"* was achieved not by formal mastery but by (almost) total uncontrol; the extinction of aesthetic objecthood into inhabited space itself.[104] Following Newman, Smith, Blake, Rosenberg, and other contemporaries—but with much more of the ethical thrust of Olson—Cage situated the postwar subject and artwork within a continuous ambient environment; a space amenable, as the poet had put it, to 'quieter notions' about the postwar subject and artist.

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Five years after *Black Mountain Piece* and *4'33"*—and at about the time the college shut its doors for the last time—Allan Kaprow, George Brecht, and Robert Watts composed a brief proposal for what has since been described as an 'experimental laboratory, organized along scientific and industrial lines, for producing art'.[105] Entitled 'Project in Multiple Dimensions' (1957), the proposal called for an advanced art in multidimensions and in multimedia, and for the advanced artist to 'conceive of the individual as part of an infinite

[104] George J. Leonard's contention that works such as *4'33"* evidence a Wordsworthian heritage, a commitment to the 'simple produce of the common day', is compelling. However, this aesthetic inheritance needs to be brought into contact with the imperatives of the immediate postwar world, the 'New Failure of Nerve', and the apparent need for a humbler, less instrumental stance toward the physical world. George J. Leonard, *Into the Light of Things: The Art of the Commonplace from Wordsworth to John Cage* (Chicago, 1994), p. 169.
[105] Benjamin H. D. Buchloh and Judith F. Rodenbeck, 'Introduction', *Experiments in the Everyday: Allan Kaprow and Robert Watts - Events, Objects, Documents.* Ed. Benjamin H. D. Buchloh and Judith F. Rodenbeck (New York, 1999), p. 3.

space and time'.[106] The following year Kaprow published his major early essay 'The Legacy of Jackson Pollock' (1958), and found in the late painter's oeuvre the first opening into such a worldly realm:

> The space of these creations is not clearly palpable as such. We can become entangled in the web to some extent and by moving in and out of the skein of lines and splashings can experience a kind of spatial extension. But even so, this space is an allusion [sic] far more vague than even the few inches of space-reading a Cubist work affords […] What I believe is clearly discernible is that the entire painting comes out at us (we are participants rather than observers), right into the room.[107]

The Pollock canvas 'tends to lose itself out of bounds, tends to fill our world with itself', and as such had broken 'fairly sharply with the traditions of painters back to at least the Greeks'.[108] Like Greenberg, Kaprow accepted that Pollock had 'destroyed painting'.[109] But he followed Rosenberg in believing that Pollock had also pioneered a way beyond the impasse he had created: 'Pollock, as I see him, left us at the point where we must become preoccupied with and even dazzled by the space and objects of our everyday life'.[110] To this end, Kaprow looked forward to the 'alchemies of the 1960s', to an art encompassing 'all of life'.[111]

Like Jasper Johns rereading the 'he-man cult' of abstract expressionism in 1960, however, Kaprow could not entirely appreciate the circumstances in which this division between art and life had been collapsed. For as this chapter has sought to demonstrate, as well as overcoming formal problems, the desacralization of the art object after 1946 was informed by a much broader early postwar debate about the nexus between 'man' and

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[106] George Brecht [Allan Kaprow, and Robert Watts], 'Project in Multiple Dimensions (1957-58)', *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art: A Sourcebook of Artist's Writings*. Ed. Kristine Stiles and Peter Selz 2nd ed. (Berkeley, 2012), p. 384.
[107] Kaprow (2003), p. 6.
[108] Kaprow (2003), p. 6.
[109] Kaprow (2003), p. 2.
[110] Kaprow (2003), p. 7.
[111] Kaprow (2003), p. 9.

world. Olson's early unpublished lectures, leading up to 'Projective Verse' in 1950, reveal these ampler contexts clearly, demonstrating how far the discovery of space occasioned a 'jointure of the moral to the aesthetic' in which an advanced art held to an ethical imperative.

New experiences of space pointed in the 'direction of life and art ahead' because they promised to expand the possibilities of modernist aesthetics whilst reimagining the human stance toward the physical world. If the former was made necessary by a new sense of belatedness, of modernist art reaching an internally logical terminus, the latter was occasioned by a revolt against rational hubris, and a new search for 'humilitas', which had deep roots in the New Failure of Nerve. Dissolving the boundaries of the high modernist art object, and erasing the hierarchized difference between designed and ambient space, meant outdoing the modernist inheritance whilst adjusting the postwar sensibility to a new state of 'modesty', a state which carried with it an implicit critique of scientific objectivity and the 'irrational rationality' of a method 'incapable of determining the ultimate aims of life'.[112] For Olson, as for many of his contemporaries, to enter the 'New Dimension' was to be 'eased out of contemporary narrows' far more restrictive than those of the merely aesthetic.

[112] Max Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason* (London, 2004), pp. 61, 63. First published in 1947.

## Chapter Four

## Thrown Down Glyphs

Today when our aspirations have been reduced to a desperate attempt to escape from evil, and times are out of joint, our obsessive, subterranean and pictographic images are the expression of the neurosis which is our reality.

Adolph Gottlieb, [Untitled], (1947).[1]

We must realize that a sentence is not the only packmule for an idea. It is on the realm of the pictorial where language can find new expressions of reality.

Anonymous, 'Language is a primary abstraction', (1948).[2]

'Now, if i am crazy with discoveries i want to shoot to you,' Olson warned Creeley in October 1951, 'you must excuse me'.[3] He had just been reading *Compton's Pictured Encyclopedia and Fact-Index* (1950) and had found, under the entry for 'alphabet', a definitive answer to the question he had been 'kicking around' for some time: 'ANY TRACEABLE GRAPHIC or GLYPHIC PAST IN PHONETIC ALPHABET AMERICAN WORDS MADE UP OF?'.[4] Compton's had answered unequivocally. 'And here it is for YOU, RC, the STORY, lad, the STORY! and it WOWS ME, to realize that, behind our',

A, is a BULL
B, is a HOUSE
C, is a T-SQUARE

D, is a DOOR
E, is A MAN WHO REJOITHETH, who YELLS—aiyii! eeeeeee!

[1] Adolph Gottlieb, [Untitled], *The Tiger's Eye* 2 (December 1947), p. 43.
[2] Anonymous, 'Language is a primary abstraction', *The Tiger's Eye* 5 (October 1948), p. 73.
[3] Charles Olson and Robert Creeley, *The Complete Correspondence: Volume 8*. Ed. George F. Butterick (Santa Rosa, 1987), p. 32.
[4] Olson and Creeley (1987), p. 32.

F, is PEG, H
is a twisted rope for a WRAPPING

I, is a HAND ("I am": YOD ALEPH MEM: HAND BULLHEAD
WATER!!!—christ!! how abt that for,
pig latin, or hog American!
K, is a leaf of a PALM
L, is a LOOP of a string, and N
is simply a SNAKE.[5]

Olson enclosed a hand-drawn chart which, cribbed from Compton's and dedicated to Creeley's five-year old son, displayed the development of the alphabet from 'hieroglyph' to 'Seirite' to 'Semitic' to 'Greek'. With this chart even 'AMERICAN WORDS' revealed their roots in the pictography of Pharaonic Egypt, an etymology which linked their symbols to the final world of things—houses, hands, doors, pegs and palms.

The letter followed a period of intense investment in the 'GRAPHIC or GLYPHIC PAST' at Black Mountain College earlier in the year. Within hours of his return from Mexico in July Olson had delivered an early version of 'Human Universe' (1951) before his students and faculty, an essay which suggested that 'discourse' had 'so worked its abstractions into our concept and use of language that […] several of us go back to hieroglyphs or to ideograms to right the balance' (CPr 155-156). An ideogrammic call-and-response arose soon after when his poem 'Glyph' (1951) was answered by Ben Shahn's drawing 'A Glyph for Charles' (1951) and Lou Harrison's piano piece 'A Glyph for Katy Litz' (1951) was answered by Litz's dance 'The Glyph' (1951).[6] Franz Kline was also on campus at work on his calligraphic black and white paintings and Cy Twombly was producing paintings which responded, in Richard Leeman's words, to the 'primitive ability of signs to exert power in different civilizations—Chinese, Indian or Egyptian'.[7] In

[5] Olson and Creeley (1987), p. 34.
[6] For an account of the glyph exchange see Mary Emma Harris, *The Arts at Black Mountain College* (Cambridge, Mass, 2002), p. 210.
[7] Richard Leeman, *Cy Twombly: A Monograph.* Trans. Mary Whittall (London, 2005), p. 16. Kline himself objected to the description. He told Katharine Kuh: 'Calligraphy is writing, and I'm not writing. People

1951 Olson was far from the only artist at Black Mountain to be 'crazy with discoveries' about graphic signs.

But the 'GRAPHIC OR GLYPHIC PAST' had already been a feature of the broader American avant-garde for some time. For Olson it can be traced to spring 1945, when he first read Pound and Ernest Fenollosa's 'The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry'. In New York visual art it was seen as early as 1941, reaching its peak a few years later in the work of Gottlieb, Pollock, Kline, Lee Krasner, Theodoros Stamos, David Smith, and Aaron Siskind, amongst others. Discussion of the topic was focussed in a New York magazine, *Iconograph* (1946-47), and had been further highlighted by an exhibition at the Betty Parsons Gallery curated by Newman, 'The Ideographic Picture' (1947).

Why had graphic writing systems entered the imagination of the avant-garde so strongly and pervasively? And what was at stake for the new American modernism in a graphic language poised on the threshold of comprehensibility? 'As a means of communication rooted in sensory experience and materiality,' Daniel Belgrad has argued, 'ideograms were thought to structure experience differently than the abstractions of modern language. Through them, the avant-garde hoped to challenge the hegemony of abstract reasoning in American culture'.[8] The ideogram or pictograph was, in other words, the *lingua franca* of the New Failure of Nerve, critiquing those linguistic abstractions through whose medium the world is rationalized, administered, and materially exploited.[9]

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sometimes think I take a white canvas and paint a black sign on it, but this is not true. I paint the white as well as the black, and the white is just as important'. Kline and Kuh, 'Franz Kline', *Franz Kline 1910-1962* (Milan, 2004), p. 124.

[8] Belgrad (1998), p. 78. For Belgrad's reading of Olson and the glyph see Belgrad (1998), pp. 83-94.

[9] We could point out, in addition to this, that there was already a clear precedent for the use of graphic writing systems as a critique of abstract rationality in the work of the exiled European Surrealists, whose work had been introduced to American artists through the New York journals *VVV* (1942-44) and *View* (1940-47). Gottlieb, for instance, saw a direct connection between the psychic automatism of the Surrealists and his own pictographs. Another periodical of interest here is *Dyn* (1942-44) edited by the Austrian painter Wolfgang Paalen from Mexico City. *Dyn* anticipated Olson's interest in both Mayan culture and writing and quantum physics. There is no evidence that he ever saw the journal but it was available in New York City through the Gotham Book Mart and Wittenborn & Co. Books on the Fine Arts. Rebecca Zamora,

By the very fact of their putative 'rootedness', the glyph or ideogram defied the abstract and instrumental hold with which other sign systems laid claim to the world.

This account is consistent with the writings and *obiter dicta* of the artists themselves, including those of Olson. But the critique of abstract reasoning which was embedded in the glyph reflected, as we have seen throughout this thesis, an evolving process of political deradicalisation. Could it be then, that the glyph reflected something of this political process? In this view, the American avant-garde's non-alphabetic sign would be a function of the New Failure of Nerve but also the language of a new political imaginary, one that reflected the scepticism and disillusionment sweeping the American left. What was it about the glyph or ideogram which would have appeared equal to this kind of signification?

The glyph sought to represent, this chapter will suggest, a political temperament unprecedented in its resignation to, and even pleasure in, uncertainty. That is, the recondite sign managed to express a new and profound disbelief in linguistic exegesis, a dismissal of the idea that any language (political, ethical, or scientific) could account for the world and its happenstance. The very obscurity of the graphic sign, polysemous to the point of meaninglessness, foregrounded the defeat of language as it approached the world, embodying a semiotic scepticism which had arisen directly from the New Failure of Nerve and its revolt against the standard left progressive narratives of the prewar era.

Thus Adorno spoke for many at this moment in claiming that 'explanations of the world as all or nothing are mythologies'.[10] The glyph was the cipher of this view, embodying a retreat from supposedly infallible doctrine to the unforeseeable and

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'Disseminating *Dyn*', *Farewell to Surrealism: The Dyn Circle in Mexico*. Ed. Annette Leddy and Donna Conwell (London, 2012), [unpaginated].

[10] Harold Rosenberg is a case in point. In 'Breton-A Dialogue', published in *View* in May 1942, he has Hem (a 'left-wing intellectual') declare: 'Action is always absolute; while all explanations, whether formed in the laboratory or by the camp-fire, are merely symbols that lose their meaning when life turns elsewhere'. Rosenberg, 'Breton-A Dialogue', *View* 2:2 (1942), [unpaginated].

haphazard, a kind of poststructuralism before its time. Glyphs, ideograms and pictographs (which were never carefully distinguished in this period) did not constitute a 'natural' or nominative language fixed to the real world (the Fenollosan reading Olson would increasingly depart from). Nor were they the correlates of mental states or unbidden images from the collective unconscious (a reading the painters themselves were wont to profess). Instead, inscrutable writing systems foregrounded the idea of a semiotic shortfall, a sense—occasioned by recent political disappointment—that no explanatory language could do justice to history's anarchy. For the disillusioned American left, the march of events was now *de facto* inscrutable, weïrdly contingent, and no exegetical language could possibly presume to account for it.

As we will see in the following chapter, there was a strong sense at the time that this semiotic failure was attributable to the fact that no language or theory could place itself at one remove from that which it described, that critical discourses were always compromised by their interiority.[11] But, be this as it may, the avant-garde's 'glyphomania' was pure referential scepticism, implicitly critiquing those political languages which had aspired to historical certainty.[12] If, as Olson put it in a draft of 'The Kingfishers', 'uncertainty is the principle', it was glyphs which best expressed the new consensus.[13] At a

[11] If Olson was concerned with the immanent, 'rootedness in the present moment', this was not (as Stephen Fredman avers) because immanence 'compensate[s] for the lack of [an American] tradition'. Olson's immanence derives specifically from this disillusioned wartime and early postwar conviction that the immanent is all we have, that an 'objective' view of history is impossible and that all attempts at 'total' exegesis are mere mythologizing. This is very clear in Olson's allusion to the Uncertainty Principle in *Call Me Ishmael* (see Chapter Six) and it would become crucial to the significance of the glyph. Stephen Fredman, *The Grounding of American Poetry: Charles Olson and the Emersonian Tradition* (Cambridge, 1993), p. 26.

[12] Leeman (2005), p. 16. Here my emphasis differs from that of Jonathan Harris, who suggests that the feeling that 'adequate referential communication' was now 'jeopardized' was the result of the threat of 'world-wide nuclear annihilation' and the 'gathering momentum of anti-subversive hysteria in America'. Though not incompatible with this reading, my claim is that this referential scepticism was produced not by the nuclear ineffable or the repression of subversive articulacy as much as by the loss of confidence in radical political discourse. Harris, 'Mark Rothko and the Development of American Modernism 1938-1948', *Oxford Art Journal* 11:1 (1988), p. 44.

[13] Charles Olson, 'The Kingfishers', I Box 16: 564, Charles Olson Research Collection, Archives and Special Collections at the Thomas J. Dodd Research Center, University of Connecticut Libraries. A facsimile

moment of disillusionment, when a 'mythological' enlightenment and its political imagination were called into question, the most truthful languages had become the most obscure.

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On 23 September 1946, nine months after his first visit to St. Elizabeth's, Olson received a letter from Dorothy Pound. 'It occurs to me,' she wrote, 'that you should procure a copy of Ezra-Fenollosa's "Chinese Written Character"'.[14] 'You would like it,' she added, 'as you seemed to catch on to the [thing?] yesterday!'.[15] But Olson had already read it. Indeed, in a small spiral-bound notebook, entitled 'Washington, Spring 1945', he had copied out much of the essay verbatim, including the transliterated examples 'sun rises east' and 'man sees horse'.[16] The essay would provide a number of leads for Olson over the next five or six years, particularly for 'Projective Verse'. The phrase 'all truth is <u>the transference of power</u>', copied and underlined in the notebook, would appear in 'Projective Verse' in a description of the sentence as the 'first act of nature, as lightning, as passage of force from subject to object' (CPr 244). And Fenollosa's claim that '<u>a true noun, an isolated thing, does not exist in nature</u>'—again copied and underlined in the notebook—was responsible for Olson's strange critique of Hart Crane, his 'isolated push' towards 'the nominative' (CPr 244).[17] In fact, the notebook reveals Olson to have been almost wholly won over by the essay. The few occasions when he remained unconvinced—moments recorded in the notebook with a vertical line and a question mark—would be accepted with time.[18]

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of the typescript is reproduced in Ralph Maud, *What Does Not Change: The Significance of Charles Olson's "The Kingfishers"* (Madison, 1998), p. 134.

[14] Dorothy Pound to Charles Olson (23 September 1946), II Box 206, Charles Olson Research Collection, Archives and Special Collections at the Thomas J. Dodd Research Center, University of Connecticut Libraries.

[15] Dorothy Pound to Olson (23 September 1946), Charles Olson Research Collection.

[16] Charles Olson, 'Washington, Spring 1945' (Notebook #12), I Box 64, Charles Olson Research Collection, Archives and Special Collections at the Thomas J. Dodd Research Center, University of Connecticut Libraries.

[17] 'Washington, Spring 1945', Charles Olson Research Collection.

[18] 'Washington, Spring 1945', Charles Olson Research Collection.

Fenollosa's claim that a 'true noun' does not exist in nature, for instance, was initially queried, as was the associated idea that 'relations are more real and more important than

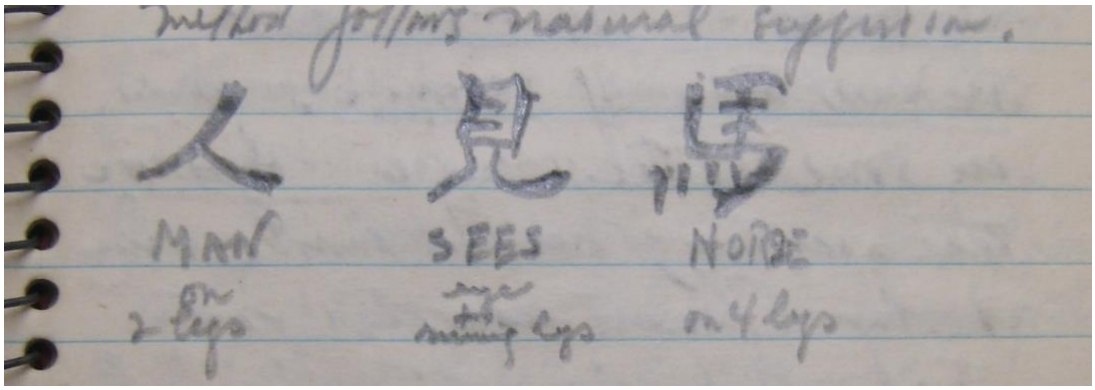


*Figure 5.1*. Charles Olson, 'Washington, Spring 1945'. Charles Olson Research Collection.

the things which they relate'.[19] But these claims had been entirely accepted by 1951 when, in his essay 'The Escaped Cock: Notes on Lawrence & the Real', Olson would argue along similar lines that it is 'no longer THINGS but what happens BETWEEN things' which represents 'the terms of reality contemporary to us' (CPr 138).

Reading 'The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry' then, Olson was accepting the idea that ideograms ('the picture of a thing; of a thing in a given position or relation; or of a combination of things') held a more immediate relation with the world than alphabetic systems.[20] Chinese characters, Fenollosa insists, imitate the 'operations of nature', that 'transference of force' which is the *modus operandi* of organic economies.[21] But whilst Pound was enthused by *hanzi* characters because they improved on the 'anemia of modern speech', Olson was attracted to the ideogram and pictogram for quite different reasons.[22] The principle of pictogrammic accuracy was attractive in 1946 because it could contend with new anxieties which were not purely literary or linguistic.[23] This had already

[19] 'Washington, Spring 1945', Charles Olson Research Collection.
[20] Ezra Pound, *A B C of Reading* (London, 1951), p. 21.
[21] 'Washington, Spring 1945', Charles Olson Research Collection.
[22] 'Washington, Spring 1945', Charles Olson Research Collection.
[23] Marjorie Perloff, 'Charles Olson and the "Inferior Predecessors": "Projective Verse" Revisited', *ELH* 40:2 (1973). Perloff sees Fenollosa in this 'clever but confused collage', pp. 295-296.

become clear in ‘La Préface’, written a few weeks before Dorothy Pound sent her missive in September. If this poem was Olson’s central statement on the moral, political, and epistemic rupture within which the new avant-garde would imagine an American modernism, it also offered an oblique commentary on the kind of writing appropriate to the postwar condition:

> The dead in via
> in vita nuova
> in the way
> You shall lament who know they are as tender as the horse is.
> You, do not you speak who know not.
>
> “I will die about April 1st . . .” going off
> “I weigh, I think, 80 lbs . . .” scratch
> “My name is NO RACE” address
> Buchenwald new Altamira cave
> With a nail they drew the object of the hunt. (CPo 46)

‘You, do not you speak who know not’. If that injunction is broken for prayer, ‘The dead in via / in vita nuova’, the significance of written language for those who did ‘know’—the significance of recording and self-preserving with permanent written marks—is also recognized as paramount: ‘“I will…“I weigh…“My name’. In positing the imperativeness and impossibility of communication in the camps Olson may be indebted again to Rousset’s *L’univers concentrationaire,* which he mentions to Creeley in January 1950.[24] In Rousset’s words, the victims of the concentrationary universe were ‘set apart from the rest of the world by an experience impossible to communicate’.[25] In ‘La Préface’ that apartness leads not to communication silence but to the most primitive of inscriptions. This is less the writing of manuscript or print than it is the pictography of Magdalenian rock painting—a ‘new Altamira cave’. Camp graffiti returns poetry to Palaeolithic impasto: ‘With a nail they drew the object of the hunt’.

[24] Charles Olson and Robert Creeley, *The Complete Correspondence: Volume 1*. Ed. George F. Butterick (Santa Rosa, 1980), p. 60.
[25] David Rousset, *The Other Kingdom*. Trans. Ramon Guthrie (New York, 1947), pp. 168-169.

What this says about written tradition—and Olson is recalling the tradition which does not 'superannuate either Shakespeare, or Homer, or the rock drawing of the Magdalenian draughtsmen'—concerns the capacity of 'literary' modes of written expression to record truly the new barbarism.[26] Indeed, Olson's poem calls into question the moral viability of conventional literary writing in a way which Adorno, writing a year later, would make unequivocal: '*nach Auschwitz ein Gedicht zu schreiben, ist barbarisch*'.[27] Here, however, the barbarism of writing after Auschwitz is not moral but philological; in the 'new Altamira cave' the most faithful mode of communication—Rousset had used the exactingly literal verb '*transmettre*'—is also the most primitive.[28]

And Olson was not alone in seeing this. In spring 1945 Cagli had turned to the sparest ink drawings in order to record a newly liberated Buchenwald, his 'primitive' inscriptions abandoning rhetorical ingenuity for blunt witnessing. Having read 'The Chinese Written Character', Olson makes a similar manoeuvre, lauding the earthy authenticity of pictographic writing as appropriate for a postwar world which must 'begin again' from barest essentials. In 1946 then the glyph was valued for its stability; the pictograph here is a cultural last resort, the foundation on which a 'vita nuova' might be established. Yet within a few years this would change. If the 'object of the hunt' was pictographically exact, later glyphs would become uncertainly recursive, their indecipherability itself expressive of new attitudes to—especially political—semiosis.

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As a preface not only to the 'vita nuova' of the postwar period but also to a poetic career, 'La Préface' declared its difference from the writing Olson had produced for the Office of

[26] T. S. Eliot, *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism* (London, 1997), pp. 42-43.
[27] Theodor W. Adorno, *Prismen: Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft* (Munich, 1963), p. 26.
[28] David Rousset, *L'univers concentrationnaire* (Paris, 1946), p. 182. And 'silence is impossible' according to Maurice Blanchot: 'Not to write—what a long way there is to go before arriving at that point, and it is never sure; it is never either a recompense or a punishment. One must just write, in uncertainty and in necessity'. *The Writing of the Disaster*. Trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln, 1995), p. 11.

War Information and the Democratic National Committee; essays such as 'Spanish Speaking Americans in the War' (1943) and 'People v. the Fascist, U.S. (1944)' (1944). Pictographic and ideographic writing systems may have appealed for their supposed exactness, but this was partly because they offered an alternative to the leading, overabundant languages of the previous decade: wartime propaganda on the one hand, fraught dialogues amongst a fragmenting American left on the other.

With pictographic exactitude one might escape the loaded infelicities of such charged political rhetorics, but there was another way. For the painters (and soon for Olson) glyphic forms attracted not for their exactitude but for their indecipherability, their imperviousness to closure. American artists were turning to glyphic forms divorced from political 'commitment' to the extent that they hardly signified at all.[29] That graphic writing systems allowed American artists this freedom could be shown through a figure such as Gottlieb, who pioneered the pictograph in 1941 not long after breaking with the American Artists' Congress after it refused to condemn the Soviet invasion of Finland. Indeed, the emergence of the inscrutable glyph is central to the narrative which reads the decline of the Popular Front, the withering of American Trotskyism, and the arrival of an ostensibly apolitical avant-garde, one which substituted personal and metaphysical upheaval for revolutionary social change.

But perhaps the most revealing example of this paradigm is that of a photographer, Aaron Siskind, who was close to Newman, Rothko, and Franz Kline and briefly a faculty member at Black Mountain College, where he may have met Olson in the summer of 1951. After taking up photography in 1930, Siskind had joined the New York Film and Photo League, a group committed to social reform through documentary photography. Unhappy

[29] See R. H. S. Crossman (ed.), *The God That Failed: Six Studies in Communism* (New York, 1950).

with its Communist Party dogmatism, he left the League in 1935, only to return in 1936.[30] At this time he became a member of the League's 'Feature Group', a coterie committed to documenting the effects of the Depression on the urban poor. As Carl Chiarenza notes: 'the Feature Group had no funding; and, as was true of the League in general, its members were motivated by the appalling effects of the Depression on the lower strata of society in the major urban center of the world, New York City. Their work circulated largely through newspapers, magazines, and exhibition spaces underwritten by the Communist Party, labor unions and other liberal or radical groups friendly to the cause of reform'.[31] Despite his reservations, Siskind's work participated fully in a documentary aesthetic with social justice as its objective. His work for the *Harlem Document* project (1932-40) attests to a 'genuine interest in pictorial propaganda for social reform'.[32]

Compositions like 'Peace Pies' (c. 1937-40) should therefore be read against later works such as 'Chicago' (1949). Not, however, in order to make too simple a distinction between the two images: the first an example of documentary realism, allowing for social depth but not formal complexity, the second a pure abstraction, deferring meaning indefinitely. Because if, as Joseph Entin argues, the Harlem project represented a 'modernist documentary', one in which the 'desire for transparent social referentiality' is balanced unstably with 'modernism's tendency to treat photography as a mode of symbolic and abstract expression', then in the Harlem portrait it is clearly written language (the vendor's sign) which achieves this precarious equilibrium.[33] Whilst the sign establishes a social metier, it also breaks down the documentary paradigm by opening the possibility of a figurative, symbolic, modernist reading. The juxtaposition of 'PEACE' and '10 & 15 c',

[30] Ronald J. Hill, 'Aaron Siskind: Ideas in Photography', *Record of the Art Museum, Princeton University* 39:1/2 (1980), p. 4.
[31] Carl Chiarenza, 'Form and Content in the Early Work of Aaron Siskind', *The Massachusetts Review* 19:4 (1978), p. 818.
[32] Chiarenza (1978), p. 823.
[33] Joseph Entin, 'Modernist Documentary: Aaron Siskind's *Harlem Document*', *Yale Journal of Criticism* 12:2 (1999), p. 359.

for instance, might prompt us to compare peace and the money-form as weightless abstractions. And, raising his hand beneath a striped awning, does the vendor not recall (satirise?) a routine electoral theatre? Documentary realism is, in other words, balanced



against the interpretability of modernist abstraction. But the modernist multivalence of the portrait is still 'committed'. If it teeters on the brink of metaphor it does so in order to raise questions (and possibly demands) about society, economy, political representation, social justice, and so on. Even if the portrait is a modernist one (achieved through the instability of its writing) it is consistent with the Photo League's commitment to social reform.

With 'Chicago' this is no longer the case. Writing, of a kind, remains. But semantic inexhaustibility now becomes an end rather than a means. If the portrait used unstable

writing in order to establish what Georg Lukács called at this time the 'dialectical unity of appearance and essence'—the surface street-life of Harlem but also the deep structure of its social and economic organisation—'Chicago' turns instead to writing as a semantic



centrifuge.[34] Apart from the city of its title, 'Chicago' has slipped loose of any social milieu. Foregrounded now is the very uncertainty of written forms, their proliferation of sense and meaning. Siskind would later think of this break with documentary realism in a paradigmatic way. In the terms of Olson's 'The K', concern with the 'affairs of men' had given ground—around 1942 to 1945—to 'tumescent I':

> We were all reacting very violently to what, during the thirties, was a very strong and dominating slogan: that art was a weapon of the working class—that it was something to use…a political arm…We were all

[34] Georg Lukács, 'Realism in the Balance', Trans. Rodney Livingstone, *Aesthetics and Politics*. Translation editor Ronald Taylor (London, 1977), p. 33. Lukács himself did not think photography capable of this, of course.

> disillusioned with that because we found that the very substance of art was corrupted by that attitude. So there was a withdrawal into the personal and a re-examination of the person in relation to the world.[35]

In his disenchanted 'withdrawal' from public to private, from social change to a 're-examination of the person in relation to the world', Siskind was representative of his era, of the 'beginning again' which made work for Olson as much as it did his contemporaries in other media. But a 'withdrawal into the personal' does not quite explain compositions such as 'Chicago'. Graphic writing systems were not expressive of private states of mind—they were not Rorschach tests. Instead they increasingly embodied the semantic uncertainty which came with a new scepticism ('we were all disillusioned') that any political discourse, any 'dominating slogan', could properly account for historical reality.[36] The uncertain glyph embodied a new political consciousness; a scepticism of any claim to make true account of history, present or future. Siskind's 'ideogram'—void of all meaning apart from the possibility and proliferation of meaning—is expressive of this new state of affairs, exposing the difference between the 'committed' uncertainty of the Harlem work (where ambiguity tells more) and the undecidedness of the glyph (where meaning remains provisional). Olson, first enamoured of the 'exact' glyph, would soon turn to the glyph as uncertain deferral, as a rejection of 'mythological' semiosis. Interpreted as a renewed acceptance of fallibility after the confidence of prewar socialism, the glyph had become, as Plutarch said of the 'E' at Delphi, 'a reminder to mortal man of his own nature and of his weakness'.[37]

[35] Quoted in Chiarenza (1978), p. 828.
[36] If abstract expressionism would soon prove amenable to a missionary postwar American liberalism—both exported around the world with the help of the State Department and the CIA—this was partly for reasons contained in the glyph. Eviscerated of social content and semantic commitment, the uncertain glyph is at once vulnerable to ideological exploitation and itself semantically mimetic of laissez-faire.
[37] Plutarch, *Moralia: Volume V*. Trans. Frank Cole Babbitt (Cambridge, Mass, 1989), p. 248.

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Those, the final words of 'On the E at Delphi', stand behind 'The Kingfishers', written between April and August 1949. There is no skeleton-key to this poem. But if the 'E on the stone', introduced in the second movement, is considered alongside Siskind's *Chicago* of the same year, or Lee Krasner's *Composition* (1949) of the same year, its ambiences become more distinct. What can be said with initial certainty is that the 'E', alphabetic or not, has surrendered its Fenollosan exactitude:

> I thought of the E on the stone, and of what Mao said
> la lumiere"
> but the kingfisher
> de l'aurore"
> but the kingfisher flew west
> est devant nous!
> he got the color of his breast
> from the heat of the setting sun! (CPo 87)

To think of the 'E on the stone' is, as Plutarch demonstrated, to be seized by uncertainty, lost in a search for a signified. If 'E' is εἰ then it might mean 'if', used in petitions to Apollo: '*If* they shall conquer; *If* they shall marry; *If* it is advisable to sail; *If* to farm; *If* to travel'.[38] But it might just as well represent a mathematical symbol, a part of speech, or an oblique address to God. As we will see in the next chapter, drafts of the poem show that Olson originally intended to figure such uncertainty with an extended conceit from quantum mechanics. The revolutionary 'lumiere' of Mao Zedong was to be associated with wave-particle duality and the Uncertainty Principle of Werner Heisenberg. For Olson, the E ciphers uncertainty itself, no more and no less; a semiotic counterpart to the deep epistemological uncertainties revealed by quantum mechanics. For all that Olson still held partly to Fenollosa then (and 'Projective Verse' would soon redeploy central tropes from his essay), the inscrutable stone has come to resemble something like Siskind's glyph in

[38] Plutarch (1989), p. 248.

*Chicago*, or Krasner's grid of inscrutable signs. Indeed, Anne Wagner's description of a similar Krasner canvas of 1949 could be a rumination on the Delphic E; Krasner's



'tantalizing suggestions of writing' are, Wagner says, 'refused, deflected into signs left just at the edge of resolution. Meaning remains at the level of a resemblance approached, and then skirted once and for all'.[39]

[39] Anne Middleton Wagner, *Three Artists (Three Women): Modernism and the Art of Hesse, Krasner, and O'Keeffe* (Berkeley, 1998), p. 144. Wagner contrasts Krasner's signs with the contemporary 'pictographs' of Adolph Gottlieb. Unlike Gottlieb, Wagner suggests, Krasner's signs 'hold out no hopes of posing as a mythic new language'. A more immediate source, as Wagner also notes, is the Hebrew Krasner learned in childhood and subsequently—in her own words—'lost track' of. Wagner (1998), p. 146.

Thus Thomas F. Merrill is surely correct to note of the fourth section of 'The Kingfishers' that 'the moral seems to be that such mysteries as [kingfisher] feathers and Es are impervious to a discursive, analytical stance'.[40] But this is not because 'their real significance is rooted in a primordial matrix'.[41] And it is certainly not the case that the problem can be understood from within 'the Olson posture' alone.[42] As Siskind's passage from *Harlem Document* to *Chicago* made clear, Olson was hardly the only contemporary artist to evince a new concern with the instability of semiotic systems, a concern closely related to what Siskind identified as a profound 'disillusionment' with political discourse. If, as Dwight Macdonald put it in 1946, 'the rock of Historical Process on which Marx built his house has turned out to be sand', then all totalizing analytics—marshalling the complex and evitable into the simple and inevitable—now looked insecure.[43] The uncertainty of 'The Kingfishers' is not simply the expression of a 'primordial matrix', nor the dividend of a style derived from Pound (as Guy Davenport's important early reading has it) but the evocation of a new disenchantment with political semiosis which had come to possess the emerging avant-garde almost in its entirety, from Olson, to Siskind, to Lee Krasner.[44]

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As a figure of semiotic uncertainty, the glyph had taken firm hold of the New York avant-garde two years earlier in 'The Ideographic Picture', an exhibition organized by Newman at the Betty Parsons Gallery in January and February 1947. Including works by Rothko, Stamos, and Still, amongst others, the exhibition was accompanied by a revealing

[40] Thomas F. Merrill, '"The Kingfishers": Charles Olson's "Marvellous Maneuver"', *Contemporary Literature* 17:4 (1976), p. 516.
[41] Merrill (1976), p. 516.
[42] Merrill (1976), p. 506.
[43] Dwight Macdonald, 'The Root Is Man', *politics* (April 1946), p. 106.
[44] Davenport argues that, 'like Pound's ideogrammatic forms […] its seeming inarticulateness is not a failure to articulate, but a declining to articulate images and events which can be left in free collision'. Guy Davenport, 'Scholia and Conjectures for Olson's "The Kingfishers"', *boundary 2* 2:1/2 (1973-74), p. 262.

catalogue essay by Newman himself. Here, in the very first paragraph, Newman regards the 'ideograph' as beyond the paraphraseable and (what seems closely connected) above the political:

> The Kwakiutl artist painting on a hide did not concern himself with the inconsequentials that made up the opulent rivalries of the Northwest Coast Indian scene […] The abstract shape he used, his entire plastic language, was directed by a ritualistic will toward metaphysical understanding. The everyday realities he left to the toymakers.[45]

With their own ideographs, the New York avant-garde has (like 'the Kwakiutl artist') left behind the 'inconsequentials' of social life ('everyday realities') and internecine politics ('opulent rivalries') for a more exalted 'metaphysical understanding'. Newman is clear that the new ideograph is not a simply 'visual fact' but an 'abstract thought-complex'.[46] Yet the nature of this 'metaphysical understanding' remains obscure. Indeed, for Newman it is actually the 'terror of the unknowable'.[47] Like the Delphic 'E', Siskind's glyphs, or Krasner's inscrutable signs, Newman's ideograph is expressive insofar as it is inexpressive, embodying the uncertainty involved in a flight from the 'inconsequentials' of social life and the political narratives which once gave them meaning. Newman may have been dignifying the ideograph as an 'abstract thought complex' but, in these terms, it is rather an occult device, transporting the viewer beyond a hapless political reality into the uncertain ineffable.

Newman was at pains to prove that, despite their resistance to paraphrase, these inexpressive signs were not simply decorative. The glyphs of the abstract expressionists, like those of the Kwakiutl, are not 'the pleasant play of nonobjective pattern', decorative

[45] Barnett Newman, 'The Ideographic Picture', *Selected Writings and Interviews*. Ed. John P. O'Neill (Berkeley, 1992), pp. 107-108.
[46] Newman, 'The Ideographic Picture' (1992), p. 108.
[47] Newman, 'The Ideographic Picture' (1992), p. 108.

schemes which were the domain (Newman explains) of 'women basket weavers'.[48] That Newman felt the need to pre-empt such critiques is revealing. He evidently intuited that semiotic uncertainty could be a market virtue as well as a stance against discursive finality: unlike figural painting or portraiture, abstract patterns recede into the background, claiming only cursory inspection from passers-by. And in this Newman was, of course, correct. In March 1951 *Vogue* would publish four pages of evening-gowned models posed before Pollock's early 'drip' paintings. Taken by Cecil Beaton, the shoot took place at the Betty Parsons Gallery, in the very same space as the 'The Ideographic Picture'.

'The *Vogue* photos raise the question', T. J. Clark has said, 'of what possible uses Pollock's work could anticipate, what viewers and readers it expected, what spaces it was meant to inhabit; and, above all, the question of how such a structure of expectation can be

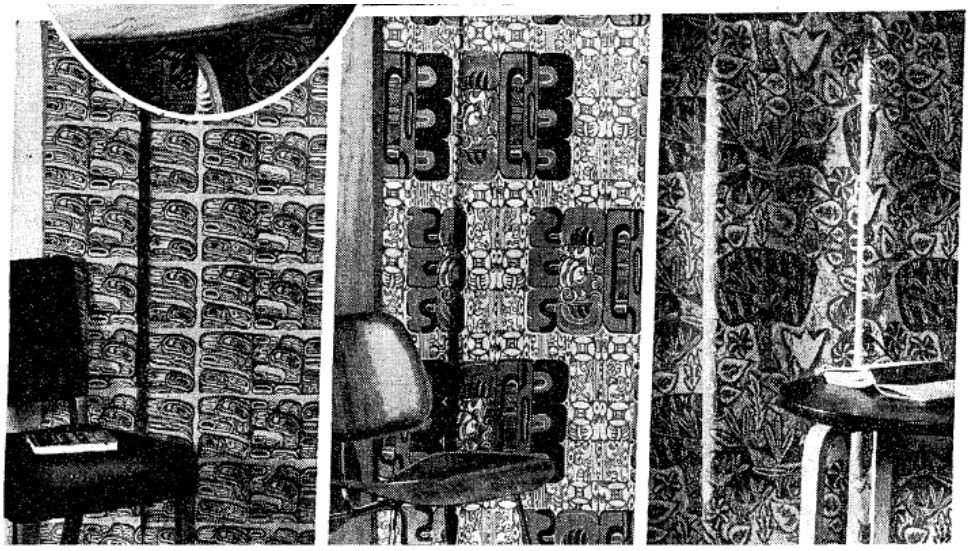

*Figure 5.5*. 'For the Home: New Fabrics Show Ancient Motifs'. Mayan glyphs left. *New York Times* (27 December 1950).

seen, by us in retrospect, to enter and inform the work itself, determining its idiom'.[49] Returning to Newman, we can say that 'pleasant' decoration was part of the 'structure of

[48] Newman, 'The Ideographic Picture' (1992), p. 108.
[49] T. J. Clark, *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism* (New Haven, 1999), p. 305.

expectation' behind 'The Ideographic Picture'. Is it possible that the paintings were propounded as 'abstract thought-complexes' and sold as fancy home furnishing? Certainly the glyph was in decorative use in New York in the same years. Only a few weeks before Olson left for Mexico in January 1951, an illustrated full-page article appeared in the *New York Times* entitled 'For the Home: New Fabrics Show Ancient Motifs'. A monochrome image showed the writing Olson would soon be studying in Yucatan as upmarket wall-fabric. According to the article, this particular example: 'is derived from a glyph or stone carving found in the Mayan ruins. It is named after a town, Chichenitsa […] There are several color combinations, one being brown, tan, and old gold on a burnt orange background. This may be ordered in Macy's hand-print section and is $5.49 a yard'.[50] Olson would be in 'Chichenitsa' a few weeks later.[51] Now this is not to claim, as Clark puts it, '"guilt by vague association"'.[52] But it is to say something about the political stakes involved in what Ad Reinhardt—who was also included in the 'The Ideographic Picture'—rightly called the 'sign which refuses to signify'.[53] Obviously, Olson's work was not vulnerable to appropriation of the kind revealed in *Vogue*. But in ciphering a dissatisfaction with languages which aspired to definiteness, 'unsignifying signs' did risk losing 'the affairs of men' (Olson after Brutus) for a vague 'understanding' (Newman) which merely disguised political defeatism. In other words, if 'uncertainty is the principle', as Olson put in 'The Kingfishers', the glyph may only signify a paralysed passivity; 'we were all disillusioned', as Siskind admitted.

But be that as it may, it is certainly not the case that signs were deployed at this moment for purely formal reasons, as 'a way of getting free of systems of representation

[50] Anonymous, 'For the Home: New Fabrics Show Ancient Motifs', *New York Times* (27 December 1950), p. 27.
[51] Tom Clark, *Charles Olson: The Allegory of a Poet's Life* (New York, 1991), p. 191.
[52] Clark (1999), p. 304.
[53] Ad Reinhardt, *Art-As-Art: The Selected Writings of Ad Reinhardt*. Ed. Barbara Rose (Berkeley, 1991), p. 111.

that destroyed the picture plane, but without adopting non-figurative art'.[54] The internal logic of avant-garde painting (even if there is such a thing) does not explain why the ideograph was so expressly connected with a departure from 'everyday realities' and the 'opulent rivalries' of human politics. As Newman's essay for 'The Ideographic Picture' made clear, unmeaning signs expressed a decisive shift from the social and (what may be the same thing) from any language which claimed a privileged exegetic relation to history. Historical inevitability having foundered, these dark symbols signified a new perplexity.

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Yet there was one figure who attempted to reconcile social commitment with uncertain mark-making. In his essay 'The Language is Image' (1951), drafted on 20 October 1951, David Smith expressed his conviction that the 'word world (Joyce etc. excepted) […] has become the tool of pragmatists'.[55] In other words, instrumental rationality had corrupted language itself.[56] Like Olson in 'Human Universe' the same year, Smith diagnosed the fallen 'word world' in contradistinction to the uncorrupted expression of 'ancient texts':

> Judging from cuneiform, Chinese and other ancient texts, the object symbols formed identities upon which letters and words were later developed. Their business and exploitation use has become dominant over their poetic-communicative use, which explains one facet of their inadequateness.[57]

Like Pound, Smith suggests that an originally poetic and pictographic writing system ('object symbols') was soon corrupted by the utilitarian 'exploitation' of 'letters and words'. And like Olson a few years earlier in 'La Préface', Smith thinks of original man as

[54] Lawrence Alloway, *Imagining the Present: Context, content, and the role of the critic*. Ed. Richard Kalina (Abingdon, 2006), p. 97.
[55] David Smith, 'The Language Is Image', *David Smith: Works, Writings, Interviews*. Ed. Sarah Hamill (Barcelona, 2011), p. 133.
[56] There was something of this in early Frankfurt School critique too. But whilst Smith saw the 'eidetic image' as redeeming language from use function, Adorno thought this was the role of music: 'Music is called upon to do nothing less than retract the historical tendency of language, which is based on signification, and to substitute expressiveness for it'. *In Search of Wagner*. Trans. Rodney Livingstone (London, 2009), p. 88.
[57] Smith (2011), p. 133.

the bearer of this lost language: 'The cave man from Altamira to Rhodesia had produced true reality by the eidetic image. This image even today defies word explanation as does any art, since it is simply to be received by a totally different physical sense'.[58] Defiance of 'word explanation' thus becomes the aim of any art which does not wish to be exploited by the merely pragmatic; 'uncertainty' becomes a defence against 'exploitation use'.[59]

Although Smith attributes his horror of the modern 'word world' to its pragmatism, 'word explanation' and 'pragmatic' use had been expected of American artists during and before the war. Smith himself had benefitted from the Public Works of Art Project and had made use of his skills during the war as an armour-plate welder in Brooklyn. A little later he had volunteered to design a series of bronze medallions to be awarded, as he put it, 'for extremely meritorious war service in industry'.[60] Returning to the 'eidetic image' may have been to defy 'exploitation use' generally then but, for Smith as much as Siskind, it was also to break specifically with public service and outright political commitment.

What is singular about Smith, however, is that he makes a case for the progressiveness of the same uncertain images which would replace the more obviously committed languages of the previous two decades:

> In perceiving, all men are potentially equal. The mind records everything the senses experience. No man has senses anything another has not, or lacks the components and power to assemble. The word version of art represents both censoring and prejudice. Yet it is the version educational institutions advocate and is the general public's basic response. Yet, perception open to any man, ignores the language barrier.[61]

Difficult texts ('the word version of art') are elitist. But 'eidetic images' are egalitarian because, expecting no prior knowledge, their opacities are opaque to all. There is a democracy of perplexity, in other words, rather than a clerisy of understanding. Smith

[58] Smith (2011), p. 133.
[59] Presumably Smith had seen neither the March edition of *Vogue* nor his 'ancient languages' in Macy's.
[60] Quoted in Karen Wilkin, 'Two Into Three Dimensions', *The Hudson Review* 51:1 (1998), p. 190.
[61] Smith (2011), p. 133.

rejects conventional writing both because it is ‘pragmatic’ and because it is socially exclusive, because it is reduced to use-values that are accessible only to the few.

But *The Letter* (1950), which Smith completed only a few months before ‘The Language is Image’, tells a slightly different story. This steel sculpture invokes the most familiar of writing experiences, the personal missive, only to frustrate its expression. In this

way, it might serve to place a question mark against what Ann Gibson has called abstract expressionism's 'evasion of language'.[62] True as it is that Smith—like his friends amongst the abstract expressionists—evaded 'word explanation', it is not the case that he evaded the linguistic as such.[63] Like the work of Gottlieb, Pollock or Siskind, Smith summons the possibility of verbal meaning only then to dismiss and 'evade' it. It is not that language is being 'avoided' but that it is being invoked in order to be cut down.[64] As Rosalind E. Krauss says of *The Letter*: 'The imagery inside the frame remains depicted and furtive. It is not made legible within the context of the sculpture but reads like a set of secret glyphs for which the viewer has no key'.[65] By providing the conventional parameters of written discourse (lines, margins, and apparently a signature) Smith shows that the new American modernism was not concerned with the strangeness of exotic writing systems as much as the strangeness of semiosis as such, its distance from lived life.[66] Invoking the communicative power of writing only to call it into question, *The Letter* alludes to a new doubt that any symbolic order can truly represent personal and social history—a scepticism which, like the 'New Failure of Nerve' in its entirety, emerged with the breakup of the wartime American left.

If the 'affairs of men' could not be wholly explained or anticipated by the political languages of the previous two decades, perhaps no metanarrative, apart from 'uncertainty', could really account for the welter of historical happenstance, history 'unfolding pell-mell',

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[62] Ann Gibson, 'Abstract Expressionism's Evasion of Language', *Art Journal* 47: 3 (1988). 'It may be maintained,' Gibson concludes, 'that the avoidance of language is at least part of what enabled them to produce the dense multivalence of their work', p. 212.
[63] Smith's own comments underline the contemporary anathema of paraphrase. He would say of his work circa 1952-59: 'There were no words in my mind during its creation and I'm certain words are not needed in its seeing'. *David Smith by David Smith: Sculpture and Writings*. Ed. Cleve Gray (London, 1988), p. 164.
[64] Gibson (1988), p. 212.
[65] Rosalind E. Krauss, *Terminal Iron Works: The Sculpture of David Smith* (Cambridge, Mass., 1971), p. 84.
[66] David Anfam likens *The Letter* to the visual languages found in memory treatises such as Johann Horst Romberch's *Congestorium Artificiose Memorie* (1533). Anfam, 'Vision and Reach: The World Is Not Enough', *David Smith: A Centennial* (New York, 2006), p. 28.

to use T. J. Clark's phrase.[67] And, to this extent, abstract expressionist glyphs voiced a growing consensus that 'explanations of the world as all or nothing are mythologies'; that discursive structures cannot hope to contain the world in themselves (at least without Procrustean violence), that semiosis will always be defeated by the density and contingency of what it hopes to account for. In *The Letter* what is the case is the case outside language; these steel signs are only negative images or shadows of what cannot be ciphered by the mark.

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'It's hieroglyphs, which are the real pay-off, the inside stuff, for me'.[68] So Olson declared on 15 March 1951, several weeks into his stay in Campeche, Mexico. 'Inside stuff' and 'pay-off', a vocabulary of corruption or espionage, reflected Olson's position in Mexico apropos mainstream Mayan scholarship ('the Peabody-Carnegie gang', in particular).[69] In his letters to Creeley, Olson characterised his time in Campeche as a battle against the vested interests of American and Mexican academia, particularly their reluctance to share scholarly knowledge with outsiders. Indeed, Olson was ambitious to save Mayan writing from its experts, a project which reflected what remained of his Fenollosan approach to 'graphic' writing systems. Mayan glyphs could be saved from the specialists because, like Chinese ideograms (supposedly), they spoke a language anybody could understand. In the same letter of 15 March Olson writes of a potential publishing venture in a way which makes this clear: 'it cld be a live graphic job, to present these glyphs, without comment, in such a way that their clarities & the width of their comment on human face & gesture, all animal and abstract nature, should sock any reader'.[70] By virtue of their innate 'clarities',

[67] T. J. Clark, 'For a Left with No Future', *New Left Review* 74 (2012), p. 61.
[68] Charles Olson and Robert Creeley, *The Complete Correspondence: Volume 5.* Ed. George F. Butterick (Santa Barbara, 1983), p. 73.
[69] Olson and Creeley (1983), p. 25.
[70] Olson and Creeley (1983), pp. 73-74.

Mayan glyphs would not only be comprehensible to 'any [American] reader', but would actually 'sock' him with the force of a revelation. In suggesting that the reader will grasp Mayan glyphs intuitively, without any recourse to notes or glosses, Olson recalls a crucial footnote in Pound's text of Fenollosa's essay. Commenting on a passage in which Fenollosa claims (mistakenly) that the 'phonetic theory' of Chinese ideograms is 'unsound', Pound comments:

> Professor Fenollosa is borne out by chance evidence. Gaudier-Brzeska sat in my room before he went off to the war. He was able to read the Chinese radicals and many compound signs almost at pleasure. […] He was amazed at the stupidity of lexicographers who could not, for all their learning, discern the pictorial values which were to him perfectly obvious and apparent.[71]

In Olson's letter, Gaudier-Brzeska becomes 'any reader' and Mayan glyphs become 'perfectly obvious and apparent' as long as they are not waylaid by editorial 'comment' in English. As Olson put it a week later: 'in themselves as *images*, they tell, tell, tell!'.[72] Mayan glyphs could be read, that is, as Fenollosan pictographs; their strong 'pictorial values' make for immediate legibility ('almost at pleasure').

But this Fenollosan hermeneutic was held with another simultaneously, and it is here that Olson's writings on Mayan glyphs become—revealingly—inconsistent. In his 'Letter of Petition to the Viking Fund' (1951), written a few months later in June 1951, Olson explains that Mayan writing is, in fact, neither wholly pictographic nor wholly phonetic, that it occupies an uncertain position between the two. Because of this, Olson claims, Mayan glyphs cannot be treated simply as codes to be deciphered. Instead, they require the imaginative interpretation of the artist, someone sensitive to gradations of meaning at the

[71] Ernest Fenollosa and Ezra Pound, *The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry: A Critical Edition*. Ed. Haun Saussy, Jonathan Stalling, and Lucas Klein (New York, 2008), p. 59.
[72] Olson and Creeley (1983), p. 91. The sense that such signs might communicate before being understood was also suggested by another aficionado of the glyph, Hart Crane, in his two-line poem 'Hieroglyphic': 'Did one look at what one saw / Or did one see what one looked at?'. *Complete Poems of Hart Crane*. Ed. Marc Simon (New York, 2001), p. 189.

uncertain boundary between pictograph and phoneme. In this reading, the glyph is not linked concretely to any signified and 'can rightly be comprehended only, in its full purport, as a plastic art'.[73]

> With these things in mind I have called the study, and the book I plan to be sum of the work here, "The Art of the Language of Mayan Glyphs." The "art" is a matter of the fact that a glyph is a design or composition which stands in its own space and exists-whether out in stone or written by brush- both by the act of the plastic imagination which led to its invention in the first place and by the act of its presentation in any given case since. Both involved-I shall try to show—a graphic discipline of the highest order.[74]

This 'plastic imagination' is some distance from the pictorial realism of Fenollosa. Fidelity to a natural referent has become less important than '"art"': internal relations within a 'design or composition' and an 'act of presentation', or the positioning of the glyph within a larger system of signs. What is being valued, in fact, is a 'graphic discipline'

*Figure 5.7*. Hipolito Sanchez (?). [Untitled] (c. 1951).
Pencil drawing. Approx. 15 x 10 cm. Charles Olson Research Collection.

[73] Charles Olson, 'A Letter of petition to the Viking Fund', I Box 32: 1610, Prose No. 38, Charles Olson Research Collection, Archives and Special Collections at the Thomas J. Dodd Research Center, University of Connecticut Libraries.
[74] 'A Letter of petition to the Viking Fund', Charles Olson Research Collection.

fundamentally resistant to the work of 'decipherers'.[75] Indeed, far from maintaining a direct and decipherable relation to the physical or social world (which a mere expert could identify), the Mayan glyph is here formally uncertain, demanding *reading* rather than decipherment. Indeed, Olson declares that he is interested in the literarily 'live stone' rather than that cold '"lexicon" of glyphs' already provided by the 'decipherers'.[76]

What Olson had in mind can perhaps be seen in a drawing inserted in his copy of J. Eric Thompson's *Maya Hieroglyphic Writing* (1950)—which, according to a pencil note on the flyleaf, 'Olson ordered Lerma June bought BMC July 51'.[77] The author of this drawing is almost certainly Hipolito Sanchez, assistant at the Campeche Archaeological Museum, whose drawings Olson intended to publish in Cid Corman's *Origin* magazine and exhibit in the United States (preferably at the Boston Institute of Contemporary Art).[78] Though these grand designs did not come off, Sanchez's drawing does demonstrate the 'graphic discipline' Olson had found in Mayan glyphs themselves; their function not simply as meaning-bearers but as unbounded signifiers; as signs *literary* in their resistance to simple decipherment. As Olson put it to Creeley: 'Here is the most abstract and formal deal of all the things this people dealt out—and yet, to my taste, it is precisely as intimate as verse is. Is, in fact, verse'.[79]

Between pictographic exactness and literary interpretability lies a substantial hermeneutic gap, one which Olson does not manage to bridge. The problem is neatly encapsulated in a phrase used near the end of his petition to the Viking Fund. Mayan hieroglyphic writing, Olson avers, is to be appreciated for its 'exactness and subtlety'.[80]

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[75] 'A Letter of petition to the Viking Fund', Charles Olson Research Collection.
[76] 'A Letter of petition to the Viking Fund', Charles Olson Research Collection.
[77] J. Eric Thompson, *Maya Hieroglyphic Writing* (Washington, 1950). Charles Olson Research Collection, Archives and Special Collections at the Thomas J. Dodd Research Center, University of Connecticut Libraries.
[78] Clark (1991), pp. 195-196.
[79] Olson and Creeley (1983), p. 85.
[80] 'A Letter of petition to the Viking Fund', Charles Olson Research Collection.

This ‘exactness’ is clear and obviously Poundian. Indeed, Olson claims that Mayan ‘exactness about all the solid things which nature offered them’ is now being reproduced by the ‘contemporary American poet, due to the work of his immediate and distinguished predecessors’.[81] But exactness and ‘subtlety’? By subtlety Olson ostensibly means ‘fineness’ or ‘delicacy’ in execution. But there is also a strong sense—given that Mayan is a ‘hieroglyphic system in between the pictographic and the abstract (neither was it any longer merely representational nor had it yet become phonetic)’—that subtlety may also mean exactly the opposite: ‘abstruseness of language’, or ‘thinness of consistency; tenuity’.[82] Exact and clear, Mayan is also abstruse and tenuous; it is a lexicon and an art, it is certain and it is uncertain. Olson accepted these contradictions as live and irresolvable.[83] The poet who had established ‘uncertainty’ as a ‘principle’ only a year earlier, and who would soon reprise Negative Capability via quantum physics, was interested in Mayan glyphs not because they were exact, but because this exactness was tinged with undecidedness. Like Siskind, Krasner, or Smith, Olson introduces a supposedly faithful graphic language only in order to expose the ‘subtlety’ of all semiosis: its ‘artful’ estrangement from the world it represents, the fine line between the simple letter and the inscrutable E.

A decade letter J. H. Prynne would confirm to Olson that ‘Chinese is not as exclusively visual an idiom as one might have assumed from THE CHARACTER’, that

[81] ‘A Letter of petition to the Viking Fund’, Charles Olson Research Collection.
[82] ‘A Letter of petition to the Viking Fund’, Charles Olson Research Collection. Oxford English Dictionary Online. http://ezproxy.ouls.ox.ac.uk:2277/view/Entry/193191?redirectedFrom=subtlety#eid. Accessed 7 August 2013.
[83] In her discussion of Olson and Mayan glyphs, Carla Billitteri is keen to claim Olson as a Platonic ‘Cratylist’ (that is, a poet expressing his ‘desire for a perfect language of words univocal in meaning’), whilst accepting that he has his ‘Hermogenist’ moments. But the very fact of the inconsistency seems to suggest that, like his peers, Olson saw significant contemporary appeal in the semiotically unstable, polyvocal, and uncertain. Billitteri, *Language and the Renewal of Society in Walt Whitman, Laura (Riding) Jackson, and Charles Olson: The American Cratylus* (New York, 2009), pp. xiii, 140.

'phonetic compounds appear very early, and are very extensive'.[84] But even with his work on Mayan writing in 1951, Olson was no longer following Fenollosa exclusively. Like Gottlieb and Siskind, Krasner and Smith, Olson introduced a strong element of uncertainty into his semiosis. As the 'E on the stone' of 'The Kingfishers' had revealed, this was not simply to protect postwar art from the heresy of paraphrase or the purposefulness of prewar realism. Instead, it was because uncertainty was 'the principle' of the new era.[85] Indeed, whilst Olson was attracted to the idea of visual definiteness (which also allowed him to save face as an amateur enthusiast), there was a strong sense in which this ideal was inappropriate to postwar conditions. Like the abstract expressionists, Olson brought to the glyph a sensibility informed by political disappointment and epistemic uncertainty. The Delphic E could figure that state, and so too could Mayan writing as long as Fenollosa was compounded with 'graphic' indecipherability. With uncertainty 'the principle', Mayan was again a living language.

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Within hours of his return from Mexico in July, Olson delivered an early version of 'Human Universe' before the students and faculty of Black Mountain College, asserting that 'discourse' had 'so worked its abstractions into our concept and use of language that […] several of us go back to hieroglyphs or to ideograms to right the balance' (CPr 155-156).[86] It was in the light of this lecture that the 'glyph exchange' of the summer session took place, an exchange which brought together Olson, Ben Shahn, Lou Harrison, and Katherine Litz; poetry, drawing, music, and dance. But another artist, recently arrived from the Art Students League in New York, may have heard 'Human Universe' too.

[84] J.H. Prynne to Charles Olson (26 November 1961), p. 2. II Box 206, Charles Olson Research Collection, Archives and Special Collections at the Thomas J. Dodd Research Center, University of Connecticut Libraries.
[85] 'A Letter of petition to the Viking Fund', Charles Olson Research Collection.
[86] Clark (1991), p. 203.

Cy Twombly had made the trip to North Carolina on the advice of Robert Rauschenberg. According to Richard Leeman, however, Twombly 'claims not to have attended' Olson's lectures on pictographic writing.[87] In an interview of 2007 Twombly also noted that, whilst 'everything revolved around Olson' at Black Mountain, he 'was always doing [his] own thing'.[88] Yet by the time of his second visit to Black Mountain later in the year, Twombly and Olson had discussed their work at some length. On 29 November Olson told Creeley how much of a 'pleasure' it was 'talking to a boy as open & sure as this Twombly, abt *line*, just the goddamned wonderful pleasure of *form*'.[89] This 'pleasure' found expression in his essay 'Cy Twombly' (1952), conceived as the prospectus for an exhibition at Washington and Lee University. As his comment to Creeley would suggest, Twombly is viewed in these pages from a distinctly Mayan vantage; the 'graphic discipline' Olson had recently discovered in Yucatan glyphs was now identified in contemporary American painting.

This was not unwarranted, since Twombly's work of 1951 and 1952 invested heavily in those glyphic forms which had their origins in the years preceding Newman's 'The Ideographic Picture' in 1947. Twombly may also have seen 'New Paintings by Adolph Gottlieb' (January 1952) at the Kootz Gallery in New York a few months earlier; an exhibition which would have included Gottlieb's glyphic *Pictographs* (1941-1953). He would also probably have known wartime semiotic works by Pollock such as *Guardians of the Secret* (1943), which had been reproduced in the fourth issue of *Iconograph*. The Twombly paintings Olson saw at Black Mountain would have been from the following group: *Landscape* (1951), *Zyig* (1951), *Myo* (1951), *Didim* (1951), *Min-Oe* (1951), *Zyxig* (1951), *Ancient Glyph* (1951), *Solon I* (1952), *Solon II* (1952), and *Untitled (Cyclops I)*

[87] Leeman (2005), p. 16.
[88] Cy Twombly and Nicholas Serota, 'History behind the thought', http://www.cytwombly.info/twombly_writings5.htm. Accessed 7 August 2013.
[89] Olson and Creeley (1987), p. 199.

(1952); all of which reprised the glyphic forms of Twombly's elders in the New York School. With one of these works in mind, Olson sought the ground-note of his recent painting:

> What I like about Twombly is this sense one gets that his apprehension—his *tien* 天 is buried to the hips, to the neck, if you like the dug up stone figures, the thrown down glyphs, the old sorells in sheep dirt in caves, the flaking iron—these are his *paintings*. (CPr 177)

This dung and dirt reading of Twombly is evocative of the earthy palettes Olson saw in 1951. But it also reflects the 'graphic discipline' which had come to characterise the postwar glyph. Twombly's 'thrown down glyphs' are authentic, but not because they are exact. 'Buried to the hips', Olson claims, they do not correspond to objects or concepts but the immanent 'going live present' (CPr 207) itself. That is, they 'apprehend' the *res* or 天—the cosmos—in its totality, rather than any specific (verbal) distinction within it.[90] In this way, Twombly's work reprises the 'plastic imagination' of the Maya rather than any Fenollosan pictorial fidelity; the indefiniteness of his forms leads to immersive 'apprehension' rather than specific referentiality. Perhaps this reading says more about Olson than it does about Twombly. Indeed, it articulates exactly the kind of experience Olson had seen in Plutarch's E in 1949, an immersion in uncertain semantic possibility ('buried to the hips'), an experience he would often refer to as Negative Capability in his later writings.

Nevertheless, in the case of *Myo* this indefinitely 'apprehensive' reading would have been supported by the title itself. The Japanese noun *myō*, first character in the Japanese rendering of the Lotus Sutra (*myōhō-renge-kyō*), is translated by Jacqueline I. Stone as

[90] Olson had typed the first three letters of 'perception' before deleting and substituting 'apprehension'. The revision deemphasizes the phenomenal for the immanent uncertain. 'Cy Twombly', I Box 29:1525, Prose No. 51, Charles Olson Research Collection, Archives and Special Collections at the Thomas J. Dodd Research Center, University of Connecticut Libraries.

91

'wondrous' or 'subtle'.[92] The Zen populariser D. T. Suzuki emphasized its sheer indefiniteness: '*Myō* or *myōyū* is a Japanese word signifying "something defying the challenge of man's thinking powers"'.[93] *Myō* is not effable then, and this is what Twombly means by *Myo*, whose facture does not bear any resemblance to the Japanese character. Olson's indefinite reading of these 'thrown down glyphs' is, in these terms, wholly accurate. Indeed, by invoking *myō*, inexplicable even in Japanese, Twombly is taking a stance on what, by 1951, had been a long-standing approach to the glyph in New York. With the faintest edge of irony, he reveals the glyph in its opacity. Impervious to thought for Suzuki, for Twombly *myō* is uncertain.

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[91] According to a Sotheby's auction catalogue 'Myo' was completed in Lexington, Virginia in 1951 and given to Tom Wilbur, a cadet at the Virginia Military Institute. It is therefore unlikely that Olson saw this particular work at Black Mountain. Sotheby's, 'Contemporary Art Evening Sale: 12 May 2009'. www.sothebys.com /cn/auctions/ecatalogue/lot.pdf.../N08550-13.pdf. Accessed 16 August 2013.

[92] Jacqueline I. Stone, *Original Enlightenment and the Transformation of Medieval Japanese Buddhism* (Honolulu, 2003), p. 169.

[93] Daisetz T. Suzuki, *Zen and Japanese Culture* (London, 1959), p. 140. It is possible that Twombly had come across the earliest version of this book, *Zen Buddhism and Its Influence on Japanese Culture* (Kyoto, 1938).

With Twombly, Olson's work on the glyph finally made contact with a New York art scene which, for the last seven years, had shadowed his concern with the 'graphic imagination'. And with his essay, Olson not only provided one of the earliest appraisals of the painter, but also reflected on his own work since the spring of 1945. The presence and the possibility ('buried to the hips'), the semiotic provisionality, which Twombly demonstrated in these early canvases, revealed to Olson how far he had come himself since reading 'The Chinese Written Character'. Twombly's work confirmed that the most speaking signs of the 'vita nuova' were not the most exact but, as Olson himself realized, the most indefinite.

*

In 1958 Olson would write of John Keats, 'walking home from the mummer's play Christmas 1817': 'He'd had to listen to Coleridge again [sic], thought to himself all that irritable reaching after fact and reason, it won't do. I don't believe in it. I do better to stay in the condition of things' (CPr 120). The 'condition of things' should remind us of Olson's Twombly, 'buried to the hips'. And Negative Capability, 'when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason', will serve to define Olson's later approach to the glyph, which he shared with his contemporaries in New York.[94] For though Olson had begun in spring 1945 as a late disciple of Fenollosa, his understanding of non-phonetic writing systems had altered by 1951. The new approach was that of the 'ideographic picture' imagined by contemporary painters, photographers, and sculptors, a language which drew attention to its own incommunicativeness. Glyphs were pertinent because, as commentators and artists alike noted, confidence in the discursive structures which had sustained the American left in the previous decade had now failed. It was not that unspeaking glyphs beat a retreat from

[94] John Keats, *Selected Letters*. Ed. Jon Mee (Oxford, 2002), pp. 41-42.

history, but that they voiced a new failure of nerve with regard to political semiosis, the capacity of signs to properly reckon with historical experience. In other words, political disillusionment had here spilled over into discursive crisis. Olson's migration from the accurate 'Chinese Written Character' to the inscrutable 'E on the stone' was exemplary of this shift: the most telling sign was now the most uncertain. Yet, as we will see in the following chapter, it wasn't only unsignifying semiosis that ciphered the new social and political purview. Physics, and specifically quantum physics, had much to say about the new experience of uncertainty too.

## Chapter Five

## Difficulties of Discovery

> In such an era of frustration and collapse, when so many connections have broken down, and not only under aerial bombardment, there is no hope in trying to have an art that is rational and based on solid facts. Solid facts are a luxury that even natural science cannot afford any longer.
>
> Ernst Kaiser, 'The Development from Surrealism' (1946).[1]

> Uncertainty is the principle.
>
> Charles Olson, draft towards 'The Kingfishers' (1949).[2]

In October 1931 the Dutch physicist Willem de Sitter delivered a lecture at Wesleyan University entitled 'The Size of the Universe'. Amongst his audience was the twenty year old Olson, who quickly filled the inside cover and flyleaf of William Foster's *Argumentation and Debating* (1917) with careful notes.[3] He would later tell a class at SUNY Buffalo that he felt himself 'comprehending immediately, to his own amazement, all that de Sitter had to say'; a not unreasonable claim given that de Sitter himself described the lecture as 'popular'.[4] What Olson understood was that, with the identification of redshift, and the discovery that distant objects were moving away from the earth with a velocity proportional to their distance, the static model of the universe could no longer hold. As de Sitter put it: 'the whole system is expanding'.[5]

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[1] Ernst Kaiser, 'The Development from Surrealism', *Circle* 9 (Berkeley, 1946), p. 75.
[2] Quoted in Ralph Maud, *What Does Not Change: The Significance of Charles Olson's "The Kingfishers"* (Madison, 1998), p. 28.
[3] George Butterick, *A Guide to the Maximus Poems of Charles Olson* (Berkeley, 1978), p. 421.
[4] Butterick (1978), p. 421. The lecture was published the following year. Willem de Sitter, 'The Size of the Universe', *Publications of the Astronomical Society of the Pacific* 44: 258 (1932).
[5] de Sitter (1932), pp. 99-100.

De Sitter's lecture on the expanding universe impressed Olson. He would copy passages from de Sitter's *Kosmos* (1932) into his 'Verse & Geometry' (1946) notebook fifteen years later.[6] But what was ultimately more significant for Olson and his contemporaries was a revolution in physical theory to which de Sitter alluded only tangentially. This came when the physicist, explaining how relativity theory might account for the expanding universe, was forced to make an historical distinction:

> The term "to explain" has considerably changed its meaning in the last quarter of a century. Thirty years ago we thought we could explain everything, and make a nice mechanical model of the universe. Nowadays we are not so sanguine; we have realised that the mechanical model, even if it were possible to make one to represent our modern physical theories, would not really mean anything beyond a slight help to our imagination, and would not contribute anything essential to our understanding of nature. Thus we are content when we succeed in representing the observed facts by a set of mathematical formulae, which express the fundamental laws of nature, and the relation between different observed facts.[7]

De Sitter's periodising ('last quarter of a century', 'thirty years ago') gestured obliquely towards the emergence of quantum mechanics. Paul Dirac had published his seminal study *The Principles of Quantum Mechanics* (1930) only a year earlier. Three years before that the fifth Solvay Conference, 'Electrons et photons' (1927), had convened figures including Dirac, Einstein, Niels Bohr, Erwin Schrödinger, Max Planck and Werner Heisenberg for a quantum conference which would become renowned in the physics community. Quantum mechanics offered a probabilistic theory which seriously challenged the 'mechanical model' of Newtonian physics. Wave-particle duality, superposition, complementarity, the uncertainty principle, and other quantum theories revealed a universe in which subatomic energy and matter behaved in ways wholly unfamiliar to the everyday world. At stake were classical assumptions about causation, as well as the knowability, unitarity, and

[6] Ralph Maud, *Charles Olson's Reading: A Biography* (Carbondale, 1996), p. 269.
[7] de Sitter (1932), p. 100.

predictability of physical phenomena. Quantum theory presented a world where electrons could be waves and particles at once, where probabilities actualised upon measurement, and where observers determined results merely by their presence. Its metaphysical implications troubled even its own early pioneers. Einstein would oppose it throughout his life, famously telling his friend Max Born that God 'does not play dice'.[8] Bohr would remark that 'anyone who is not shocked by quantum theory has not understood it'.[9]

In de Sitter's lecture Olson was exposed for the first time to the epistemological and metaphysical challenges posed by the new physics. Yet his notes inside *Argumentation and Debating* are just the first evidence of his continued engagement with quantum mechanics. This was something he shared with at least one major figure in the new modernism, Wolfgang Paalen, an Austrian-Mexican painter whose interest in quantum theory began in 1939 and continued into his journal *Dyn* (1942-44), widely read by the emerging abstract expressionists in New York. Paalen's peripheral position to the New York artworld (he lived in San Angel, Mexico City) aligns him with Olson as much as his call for a new avant-garde informed by quantum theory.[10] Both artists looked forward to a new modernism which, both formally and philosophically, took its lead from post-Einsteinian physics, especially Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle.

As we have seen, uncertainty was foregrounded by the New York School semiotically, through indecipherable glyphs and runes; the 'sign which refuses to signify',

[8] Quoted in Dirk Vanderbeke, 'Physics', *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Science*. Ed. Bruce Clark with Manuela Rossini (London, 2011), p. 194.
[9] Quoted in Vanderbeke (2011), p. 194. Though compare Richard Feynman in November 1964: 'I think I can safely say that nobody understands quantum mechanics'. Feynman, *The Character of Physical Law* (London, 1965), p. 129.
[10] Paalen has been described as 'one of the most underrated [artists] in the modern period'. The assumption of this chapter is that, as far as his reception of quantum mechanics goes, the artist closest to Paalen in the 1940s was Olson. Robert Linsley, 'Between Art and Science', *Oxford Art Journal* 29:1 (2006), p. 54. It is also worth stressing that, although Paalen was isolated from the New York world physically, his journal *Dyn* was written for a New York audience, especially the exiled Surrealists. The younger generation of American artists also had access to Paalen's writings through the journal. Jackson Pollock, for instance, owned all five numbers. Martica Sawin, *Surrealism in Exile and the Beginning of the New York School* (Cambridge, Mass., 1997), p. 267.

as Ad Reinhardt put it. But in the work of Olson and Paalen it was also treated theoretically, in work which alluded directly to post-classical physical theory. But like Gottlieb or Siskind, the uncertainty imagined by Olson and Paalen was prompted by the particular pressures of the postwar moment; the need to express the New Failure of Nerve as both a loss of faith in political analysis, prophecy, and progress, and a loss of confidence in abstract, instrumental reason. It was not simply then that post-Einsteinian physics provided metaphors for formal experimentation.[11] On the one hand, the idea of quantum indeterminacy was drawn upon to throw historical determinism into doubt (and in this Olson and Paalen anticipated Karl Popper). On the other hand, quantum indeterminacy was also used to undermine confidence in the objective and administrating relation between human reason and the physical world.[12] Quantum physics proved a useful ally, in other words, as the avant-garde retreated from its political commitment and contributed to the contemporary critique of instrumental reason.

Olson and Paalen's reading of quantum mechanics (specifically the observer effect in the Copenhagen interpretation of wave-function collapse) would eventually make for a philosophy of the 'going live present' (CPr 207), a passive immersion in happenstance and

[11] Several commentators have claimed that Olson's exposure to post-classical physics proved decisive as he forged a late modernist aesthetic, providing models or metaphors for the making of a new modernist prosody. Burt Kimmelman posits a relation, for instance, between Creeley's dictum 'FORM IS NEVER MORE THAN AN EXTENSION OF CONTENT' (quoted by Olson in 'Projective Verse') and the problem of visualizability in quantum theory. Kimmelman, '"Equal That Is, to the Real Itself": The New Physics, Charles Olson, and Avant-Garde Poetics', *Restoring the Mystery of the Rainbow: Literature's Refraction of Science*. v. ii. Ed. Valeria Tinkler-Villani and C. C. Barfoot (Amsterdam, 2011), pp. 641-667. Douglas Duhaime argues, on the other hand, that Olson's poetry displays the formal condition of Bohr's quantum complementarity. Duhaime, 'Charles Olson and the Quest for a Quantum Poetics', *Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities* 3:1 (2011), p. 129. Steven Carter suggests similarly that Olson's Maximus Poems represent an attempt to 'devise a quantum of action in language'. Carter, 'Fields of Spacetime and the "I" in Charles Olson's The Maximus Poems', *American Literature and Science*. Ed. Robert J. Scholnick (Lexington, 1992), p. 199. And Alan J. Friedman and Carol C. Donley suggest further that in Einstein's general theory of relativity Olson found 'a congenial metaphysics for innovations in poetic form'. Friedman and Donley, *Einstein as Myth and Muse* (Cambridge, 1985), p. 78.

[12] Karl Popper, *The Poverty of Historicism* (London, 1976).

(as Paalen would have it) 'possibility'.[13] Post-Einsteinian physics allowed for a sidestepping of history into the indivisibly immanent; a physical world where the human intelligence could no longer claim objective authority, where he or she would have no choice but to assume, in Olson's terms, a new 'modesty'.[14] This need for a new 'humilitas' significantly influenced the way early postwar modernists thought about their formal innovations; it had encouraged them, as we saw in our discussion of space, to introduce the self-reflexive modernist artwork into the ambient world. And for Olson and Paalen, as we will see, quantum mechanics pointed towards similar formal strategies. For both the poet and the painter, adapting modernist aesthetics to the new condition of quantum uncertainty was exactly what distinguished their work from that of their high modernist predecessors.[15] Though he would excise this line from 'The Kingfishers' then, Olson's conviction that 'uncertainty is the principle' was a keystone. Quantum indeterminacy offered not only new paradigms for the postwar world but also an identity for the new modernism that would give them expression.

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In November 1946 Olson entered passages from H.S.M. Coxeter's *Non-Euclidean Geometry* (1942) and Roberto Bonola's *Geometria non-Euclidea* (1906) into his 'Verse & Geometry' notebook.[16] These works elucidated the elliptic and hyperbolic geometries which, in challenging Euclid's parallel postulate, provided the 'curved' alternative to

[13] Carter Stone and Wolfgang Paalen, 'During the Eclipse', *Dyn* 6 (1944), p. 20. Reprinted in *Wolfgang Paalen's DYN: The Complete Reprint*. Ed. Christian Kloyber (Vienna, 2000). This interview is the work of Paalen alone.
[14] As Ann Charters says of Olson's insistence on immanence: 'the implication is that the unexamined life is the only one worth living'. Charters, *Olson/Melville: A Study in Affinity* (Berkeley, 1968), p. 19.
[15] It is no coincidence that Paalen turned to quantum physics at almost exactly the moment he turned from Surrealism. According to Gustav Regler's brief biographical study of the painter (in which Paalen himself had a hand), Paalen had been concerned with the 'philosophical implications of post-Einsteinian physics' since 1939. The following year he made his break with Surrealism: 'In the spring of 1940 Paalen exhibited in the Julien Levy gallery in New York. It was his last surrealist manifestation. For even though he did not at that time foresee the rapid decline of surrealism, he was convinced, after his stay in New York, that surrealism had lost its revolutionary impetus'. Regler, *Wolfgang Paalen* (New York, 1946), pp. 42, 40.
[16] Maud (1996), p. 71.

Euclidean 'flat' space essential to the theory of General Relativity. By this time *Call Me Ishmael* had been accepted by the New York publishers Reynal & Hitchcock. But the manuscript in their hands already evidenced Olson's reading in physics, particularly quantum mechanics. Indeed, Olson's use of mathematics and quantum physics in *Call Me Ishmael* would have contributed significantly to contemporary perceptions of the work as, in the words of Lewis Mumford, 'something of an anomaly'.[17]

Even if it was an unorthodox *bricolage* of bibliographical, literary, historical, and sociological scholarship however, *Call Me Ishmael* was articulate of the contemporary political imagination, not least in the way it deployed quantum theory to raise doubts about the plausibility of accurate social knowledge.[18] Unearthing Melville's debts to *King Lear* in the second part of his book, for instance, Olson tries to account for the way an American writer might approach his or her nation, and he does so in such a way that, for the first time in his oeuvre, the subatomic world comes into contact with the realm of history and political theory. On the one hand, Olson says, one could 'approach BIG America and spread yourself like a pancake, sing her stretch as Whitman did' (CPr 63). In other words, the American writer could fall back on what one reader has called Whitman's 'ecstatic geography', hymning the blank interminable spaces across the American hinterland.[19] But on the other hand, Olson says, one could take Melville's approach:

> You can take an attitude, the creative vantage. See her [America] as OBJECT in MOTION, something to be shaped, for use. It involves a

[17] Lewis Mumford, 'Baptized in the Name of the Devil', *New York Times* (6 April 1947), p. 4.
[18] It is in this way that David Herd's discussion of *Call Me Ishmael* might be tempered. That Olson is 'after data' and that, for Olson, Melville is 'exemplary' of the way the 'poet gets hold of his or her world', is potentially misleading. For Olson, as we see when Heisenberg is introduced, Melville is exemplary exactly because he *renounced* the possibility of assuming such a 'hold'. Indeed, sacrificing 'exact knowledge' for 'usable' indeterminacies is precisely the 'creative vantage' of the American writer. Herd, '"From Him Only Will the Old State-Secret Come": What Charles Olson Imagined', *English* 59:227 (2010), p. 380.
[19] John F. Roche, 'Democratic Space: The Ecstatic Geography of Walt Whitman and Frank Lloyd Wright', *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 6:1 (1998), pp. 16-32. Although Whitman himself was prone to epistemological doubt of the kind that Olson is concerned with here. Indeed, he would write in 1867 'Of the terrible doubt of appearances, / of the uncertainty after all, that we may be deluded'. Whitman, *The Complete Poems*. Ed. Francis Murphy (London, 2004), p. 153.

> first act of physics. You can observe POTENTIAL and VELOCITY separately, have to, to measure THE THING. You get approximate results. They are usable enough if you include the Uncertainty Principle, Heisenberg's law that you learn the speed at the cost of exact knowledge of the energy and the energy at the loss of exact knowledge of the speed. (CPr 63-64)

Melville's 'creative vantage' on the United States, according to Olson, anticipated the epistemology of the Copenhagen interpretation of quantum mechanics. He calls particular attention to the Uncertainty Principle of Heisenberg, a thought-experiment which provided, in the words of Dirac, 'a plain illustration of how observations in quantum mechanics may be incompatible'; of how, as John Polkinghorne puts it, 'observables come in pairs that epistemologically exclude each other' at subatomic scale.[20] The more exactly one knows the position of an electron, the less exactly one knows its momentum (and vice versa), and for Olson Melville understood the political properties of the United States in the same uncertain terms. In *Moby-Dick* one finds that American 'potential' and 'velocity' are not measurable with simultaneous accuracy; that in calling attention to one aspect of American democracy one loses sight of another; that, ultimately, the nature and future of the United States must remain beyond definitive observation, epistemologically uncertain (within a degree of probability) and historically inscrutable.[21]

This is Olson the literary historian discussing Melville's America in 1851, his prophetic undecidedness and equivocation, his understanding that there is, after all, no ideal position from which American history can be observed with distinctness and clarity. Melville's 'sheer apprehension of the world', as Lawrence put it, was tinged in Olson's

[20] Paul Dirac, *The Principles of Quantum Mechanics*. 4th ed (Oxford, 1958), p. 98. John Polkinghorne, *Quantum Theory: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford, 2002), p. 33.
[21] This passage is also Olson at his most Pragmatist. For the Pragmatists truth represents the 'most expedient form of error' (to adopt Hans Vaihinger's phrase). For Olson, likewise, the point of the 'creative vantage' is to attain results which are 'usable enough' though only 'approximate'. Quoted in Walter Kaufmann, *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist.* 4th ed (Princeton, 1974), p. 88.

eyes with the very uncertainty of its immediacy.[22] But Olson's socializing of the Uncertainty Principle in 1945 also bears the imprimatur of his own political doubt. Indeed, the epistemological uncertainty he finds in Heisenberg and extends to the social contours of the United States might be read in the light of contemporary debates about the rational basis of social progress. Two years earlier, as we have seen, Sidney Hook attributed this loss of confidence to the failure of the American left; the 'inability of those liberal, labor, and socialist movements which have prided themselves on being scientific and which have lost one social campaign after another, to supply a positive philosophy'.[23] Hook and his colleagues sought to turn the tide against growing discontent with 'scientific' political programs and with scientific rationality itself; scepticisms which *Call Me Ishmael* evidences as it picks up quantum probability to account for the indefiniteness of social observation and the unpredictability of social life. Heisenbergian uncertainty seems to justify, in other words, a rejection of any social analysis which claims a privileged exegetic relation to reality or (what amounts to the same thing) any social analysis which banishes the random and the unpredictable. It should come as no surprise then that, in a poem written the following year, Olson was drawn to quote A.E.'s comment to Joyce in 1910: 'have you enough chaos, man, to make a world?' (CPo 56).

As a sociology of the United States, *Call Me Ishmael* betrays the New Failure of Nerve's scepticism to an unparalleled extent, turning physical theory in the direction of history and society, denying the availability of any objective lookout from which the course of American society might be observed, predicted, and manipulated. But the problem of quantum observation also intimated the possibility of a new aesthetic, a 'creative vantage' for which Olson finds a precedent in Melville. Though he would only give this full treatment much later, in his essay 'Equal, That Is, to the Real Itself' (1958),

[22] D. H. Lawrence, *Studies in Classic American Literature*. Ed. Ezra Greenspan, Lindeth Vasey, and John Worthen (Cambridge, 2003), p. 134.
[23] Sidney Hook, 'The New Failure of Nerve', *Partisan Review* 10:1 (1943), p. 8.

Olson already implies here that the artist's responsibility after quantum mechanics is to a kind of presentation which flaunts its own provisionality. With quantum uncertainty undermining the pragmatic fiction of commanding objectivity, the author must find subject matter in the very gulf between mind and world, the point at which representation falls short of definiteness. This might echo the decisive contemporary shift against representationalism in New York painting; the feeling, as Rothko put it, that 'the figure could not serve'.[24] But that physical uncertainty finds expression in history—and that the new modernism should make of this indeterminacy an aesthetic—were ideas Wolfgang Paalen had been advocating in *Dyn* since 1942.

*

Paalen had arrived in Mexico in September 1939 from Paris, where he had been closely associated with the Surrealists. Across the Atlantic, as Gavin Parkinson puts it, Paalen 'cut his ties with Surrealism and immersed himself in the philosophy that was issuing from modern physics'.[25] *Dyn*—written almost single-handedly by Paalen under a variety of pseudonyms—took the philosophical cruces of quantum physics as *points d'appui* for a new vanguard aesthetic, one which would depart from Surrealism and establish itself at the leading edge of modernist innovation. For Paalen, quantum complementarity and wave-particle duality were especially important in this respect, since they revealed a physical world far removed from that understood by earlier generations of artists. According to these theories, as Paalen read in Louis de Broglie's *Matière et lumière* (1937), matter must be regarded as simultaneously particle-like and wave-like, possessed of paradoxically

[24] Quoted in Jonathan Harris, 'Mark Rothko and the Development of American Modernism 1938-1948', *Oxford Art Journal* 11:1 (1988), p. 40.
[25] Gavin Parkinson, *Surrealism, Art and Modern Science: Relativity, Quantum Mechanics, Epistemology* (New Haven, 2008), p. 157. Parkinson's is the best account of Paalen's engagement with quantum physics. Other treatments, such as that of Amy Winter, are vague at best ('Paalen's ideas on space-time related to theories of post-Einsteinian physics…'). Winter, *Wolfgang Paalen: Artist and Theorist of the Avant-Garde* (Westport, Conn., 2003), p. 134.

complementary states which can only be measured independently.[26] In the sixth number of *Dyn*, Paalen advocated a new aesthetic and a new 'concept of reality' adjusted to the indeterminacy this implied.

> It seems to me that we have to reach a *potential* concept of reality, based as much on the new directives of physics as on those of art, a concept that I call *dynatic* (from the Greek word *tó dynaton*: the possible). A Philosophy of the Possible which would understand art as a rhythmic equation of the world, indispensable complement of the logical equation that science makes. For only the cooperation of the two will be able to create a new ethic capable of finishing with metaphysical and religious obscurantism. It means *dissociating once and for all imagination and metaphysics*; to understand that imagination creates reality as much as it is created by reality, that the images of art are neither vain reflections, nor blueprints for tools, but blueprints for man himself.[27]

For Paalen, as for Olson, physical indeterminacy could not be left in the hands of physicists alone. 'Metaphysical and religious obscurantism' could be swept away once and for all if only philosophers and artists took heed of the '*potential* concept of reality' revealed by post-Einsteinian physics.

Yet Paalen's advocacy for such an indefinite, flexible view of reality must also be read in the light of his dispute with the Marxism of the Surrealists, now exiled in New York City with the emerging abstract expressionists. In the second number of *Dyn*, published in July 1942, Paalen had published what he called an 'Inquiry on Dialectic Materialism', comprised entirely of results from a questionnaire the magazine had sent out to writers, artists, critics, and philosophers including Sidney Hook, Dwight Macdonald, Clement Greenberg, Harold Rosenberg, Robert Motherwell, and André Breton. To the question 'Is Dialectical Materialism the science of a verifiable "dialectic" process?' almost

[26] As De Broglie said of advances in physics in the second decade of the century: 'In the theory of Matter, as in the theory of radiation, it was essential to consider corpuscles and waves simultaneously if it were desired to reach a single theory, permitting of the *simultaneous* interpretation of the properties of Light and of those of Matter'. De Broglie, *Matter and Light: The New Physics*. Trans. W. H. Johnston (London, 1939), p. 46.
[27] Stone and Paalen (1944), p. 20.

all the respondents answered, predictably, 'no'.[28] Paalen followed up the inquiry with an essay entitled 'The Dialectical Gospel' (1942), in which he claimed not to be attacking Marxism as much as saving it from itself, at least in its late, 'fossilised' form.[29]

Only in the following issue of *Dyn* did it become obvious that Paalen's 'potential concept of reality', drawn from quantum uncertainty, was closely involved in his critique of Marxist historical determinism. His essay 'Art and Science' (1942) opened with a discussion of Goethe's 'quarrel' with Newtonian optics in *Zur Farbenlehre* (*Theory of Colours*, 1810).[30] And from this controversy Paalen developed a simple binary between science and art; between the 'scientific credo' which admits 'practically nothing but the quantitative interpretation of reality', and an art which has 'always been pre-eminently concerned with quality'.[31] Paalen established this binary, however, only to stress its recent dissolution. The 'philosophic implications of the latest discoveries in physics', especially of quantum indeterminacy and the observer effect, threaten to break the 'quantitative' interpretation of reality entirely, collapsing the historical distinction between art and science.[32] It is here that the ramifications of physics for determinist accounts of history become obvious:

> The new Quantum Physics is compelled to abandon the rigorous determinism that until now was held to be the very foundation of physics; compelled also to realize that it is impossible to know exactly and simultaneously position and velocity; to admit that in microphysics one "can no longer make a clear distinction between the phenomenon that one observes or measures and the method of observation and measurement". If, in other words, in the highest possible precision of observation the perfect distinction between instrument and matter of experience becomes uncertain, are we not permitted to conclude that physics is on the point of

[28] Wolfgang Paalen, 'Inquiry on Dialectic Materialism', *Dyn* 2 (July-August 1942), p. 50. Reprinted in *Wolfgang Paalen's DYN: The Complete Reprint*. Ed. Christian Kloyber (Vienna, 2000).
[29] Wolfgang Paalen, 'The Dialectical Gospel', *Dyn* 2 (July-August 1942), p. 54. Reprinted in *Wolfgang Paalen's DYN: The Complete Reprint*. Ed. Christian Kloyber (Vienna, 2000).
[30] Wolfgang Paalen, 'Art and Science', *Dyn* 3 (1942), p. 4. Reprinted in *Wolfgang Paalen's DYN: The Complete Reprint*. Ed. Christian Kloyber (Vienna, 2000).
[31] Paalen, 'Art and Science', pp. 4, 7.
[32] Paalen, 'Art and Science', p. 8.

> abandoning its pretension of offering us a purely quantitative and yet satisfying interpretation?[33]

It is hard not to see Paalen's essay on the collapse of physical 'determinism'—published only a few months after his critique of a 'fossilised' Marxism in the summer of 1942—as justifying his earlier assault on the 'gospel' of historical determinism.[34] In other words, Paalen's vision of pure potentiality, of *tó dynaton*, applied as much to politics as it did to art and 'reality'; he appeals to physics to corroborate a political hunch. And in this way the passage above closely anticipates Olson's discussion of Melville three years later, for the physical impossibility of knowing 'exactly and simultaneously [the] position and velocity' of an electron, the impossibility of assuming an authoritative, objective stance to reality, is also seen in Paalen to bear upon social as much as physical observation. In *Dyn,* the 'rigorous determinism' of Newtonian mechanics collapses along with that of political modernism, especially in the extreme form of historical materialism.

Importantly, and this will be true for Olson as much as Paalen, the new history arising from this uncertainty is one of immanence, of standing *in medias res*. And it is here that the historical anti-determinism of Paalen can be seen seguing into an aesthetic programme:

> Reality is one and indivisible. The word loses all meaning if it does not designate both being and becoming. Only by making use of empty abstraction such as "the absolute", or "nothingness" does this reality cease to be *ours*. Our human aspirations are valid as such, and do not need the justification of an extrahuman, cosmic finality, for the very reason that we are always and everywhere *within* reality and not *face to face* with it.[35]

[33] Paalen, 'Art and Science', p. 8.
[34] Parkinson does not stress this sufficiently in his discussion of Paalen and quantum mechanics. In *Dyn* physical indeterminacy is used, so to speak, as a stick to beat dialectical materialism, just as it would in the work of Karl Popper some years later. Parkinson (2008), pp. 149-168.
[35] Paalen, 'Art and Science', p. 8.

'Empty abstractions'—and Paalen is thinking of historical materialism—assume that humans can stand 'face to face' with reality, observing its laws objectively. The Copenhagen interpretation of quantum physics proves this to be impossible. In fact, post-classical physics suggests that 'reality is one and indivisible' and that humans are 'always and everywhere *within'* it.[36] This 'indivisible' reality bears comparison with Olson's holograph note from around 1951: 'To partition reality is to lose it'.[37] Or, in a negative rendition, 'X to the Nth' (1946): 'Mixed, fixed / here in the middle place / choked / locked in event' (CPo 56), which adapts the first lines of *Inferno* ('*Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita…*') to suggest the potential claustrophobia of such a continuous universe.[38] Indeed, Paalen's indivisible world, rid of 'empty abstractions', is a close forerunner of what Olson would call the 'Human Universe' several years later, in an essay which followed quickly from the same note.[39]

In *Call Me Ishmael* Olson had linked this quantum view of reality directly to a 'creative vantage', a provisional regime of representation he saw in the prose of Melville. Making the same link between historical and formal uncertainty was Paalen's challenge between 1940 and 1944: how could one represent *tó dynaton* pictorially? For Gavin Parkinson, Paalen did not go much beyond 'clumsy literalism' in this respect, his canvases only crudely mimetic of their quantum subjects.[40] And although Annette Leddy has stressed how far his work of the period combines quantum physics with pre-Columbian

[36] The phrase 'one and indivisible' has more political than ontological overtones. The French Republic was declared 'One and Indivisible' on 25 September 1792 and this became the first principle of the French Constitution of 1793.
[37] Charles Olson, 'To partition reality is to lose it', I Box 36. Prose No. 228, Charles Olson Research Collection, Archives and Special Collections at the Thomas J. Dodd Research Center, University of Connecticut Libraries.
[38] Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy I: Inferno*. Trans. Robin Kirkpatrick (London, 2006), p. 2.
[39] For Olson, of course, the critique of abstraction was at least partly inherited from Pound. Explaining the significance of Fenollosa in his *A B C of Reading* (1934), Pound commented: 'In Europe, of you ask a man to define anything, his definition always moves away from simple things that he knows perfectly well, it recedes into an unknown region, that is a region of remoter and progressively remoter abstraction'. For Pound, ideogrammic pictures offered a substantive, thingish alternative. Pound, *A B C of Reading* (London, 1951), p. 19.
[40] Parkinson (2008), p. 168.

motifs, it is hard to disagree with this judgment.[41] Yet perhaps this is part of the point. Indeed, in pictures such as *Figure pandynamique* (1940)—which faces page one in the first number of *Dyn*—Paalen deliberately draws attention to the problem of pictorial literalism for his aesthetic of pure 'possibility'. Here vortexes, waves, and funnelled swirls intimate the electron as wave, whilst eyeball-like globules depict the electron as particle. *Figure pandynamique* seems to be intervening in the debate between Heisenberg, Schrödinger, and Bohr over the 'visualizability' of quantum phenomena, setting two contradictory states in



[41] Annette Leddy, 'The Painting Aesthetic of *Dyn*', *Farewell to Surrealism: The Dyn Circle in Mexico*. Ed. Annette Leddy and Donna Conwell (London, 2012), pp. 13-14

visual juxtaposition.[42] Clearly, for Paalen, painting *can* visualize complementary states such as wave-like-ness and particle-like-ness, even if these properties are never simultaneously available to the physicist. Post-Surrealism, in Paalen's view, works in exactly this state of paradoxical 'possibility'.

But Paalen does come up against a problem, and one that Olson would soon encounter in writing 'The Kingfishers'. For the literal representation of uncertainty must, in a sense, diminish its indeterminacy. In other words, Paalen's art of pure possibility was unable to risk a definitive pictorial statement, for to do so would have been to 'petrify' its state of possibility. What was really needed was not a representational evocation of post-classical physics, but an art which evinced 'possibility' through its own formal regimen.

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Physical uncertainty was for Paalen, as for Olson, doubly usable. Calling into question the legitimacy of historical determinism and the immodest, objective stance of the social engineer, it also offered the basis for a new 'creative vantage', one which followed (near paradoxically) from its own provisionality. Olson first aired these ideas in the second part of *Call Me Ishmael*, but in drafts towards 'The Kingfishers' in 1949 they came to prominence again. Indeed, though Olson was not aware of *Dyn*, these drafts deployed quantum physics in a way Paalen would have found familiar. What is more, they involved him in the same quandary: how does one represent indeterminacy without emptying it of happenstance? How does one affirm a 'principle' of uncertainty without immobilizing it as dogma?

The early genesis of 'The Kingfishers', as both George Butterick and Ralph Maud have noted, is bound with a contemporary note in prose; four paragraphs in which Olson

[42] For a good summary see Arthur I. Miller, 'Imagery and Representation in Twentieth-Century Physics', *The Cambridge History of Science: Volume 5, The Modern Physical and Mathematical Sciences*. Ed. Mary Jo Nye (Cambridge, 2003), pp. 203-205.

considers the inscription Pausanias discovered at the temple of Apollo at Delphi, γνῶθι σεαυτόν ('know thyself').[43] After considering that the only way to 'go to the heart of your time' is to do just this, Olson considers the danger of confusing self-knowledge with 'truth', which he goes on to define in different terms. It is here that his later discussion of quantum uncertainty has its source:

> What is the truth? It is nothing but the permanence of human effort shifting as it does its direction. Why it shifts is not so easy to say. Is it for as elementary and animal a reason as the simplest need of the nerves—for change? I should imagine this is a more accurate way to put it than we generally do when we talk of goals. They change. What does not change is the will to change[44]

There is 'no period', as Maud notes, and on the other side of the page Olson composes the first line of his poem: 'What does not change / is the will to change' (CPo 86). At the earliest stage in the genesis of 'The Kingfishers' then, Olson's concern is with social knowledge or the episteme. Self-knowledge may 'go to the heart of your time', but how does one account for the indirection of collective knowledge, the way a period's corpus of concept and conviction changes into something other than itself over time? Olson identifies uncertainty within the 'permanence of human effort shifting as it does its direction'. In other words, the real problem is not finding 'the heart of your time', or even 'knowing oneself', but accounting for the apparently happenstance 'change' by which one *Weltanschauung* disappears into another.[45] This is the uncertainty of social time, and the reason why social prophecy is destined to failure.

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[43] Maud (1998), p. 36. George F. Butterick, 'Charles Olson's "The Kingfishers" and the Poetics of Change', *American Poetry* 6 (Winter 1989), p. 55.

[44] Quoted in Maud (1998), p. 36. At about this time, in 'An Ordinary Evening in New Haven' (1949), Wallace Stevens made a strikingly similar observation. Our 'spirit', Stevens declares, 'resides / In a permanence composed of impermanence'. Nevertheless, he still longs for 'the eye made clear of uncertainty, with the sight / Of simple seeing'—exactly that which quantum physics had called into question. Stevens, *Collected Poetry and Prose*. Ed. Frank Kermode and Joan Richardson (New York, 1997), p. 403.

[45] Writing a little less than ten years later, Jacques Maritain would identify the 'intuition' of such change as vital to 'great' philosophy: 'This basic intuition has been described as the intuition of the mobility and disquiet which are essential to life, and especially to the being of man, who is never what he is and is always

If Paalen sought corroboration for this in physical uncertainty, so too does Olson. The fifth part of 'The Kingfishers' was originally conceived as a paratactic reflection on wave function collapse, the discontinuous change in the quantum state of a particle at the moment of its measurement. Here Olson finds a metaphor for that uncertainty which pertains on the plane of 'expression', the indeterminacy with which an individual and his milieu give themselves voice and definition over time:

> What you are / all is
>
> a certain quantum, arrived at by accumulation,
> which quantum, by that accumulation, becomes
> what all is, what you are, that which may
> change
>
> ~~change,~~ which better be understood to be
> energy
> given off
> ~~light~~ [light], which ~~better be understood~~ [is now proved] to be
> both particle and wave
>
> what you are, what all is
> uncertain~~ty~~…. yet, uncertain
> only in respect to when,
> in what direction, where
> you shall express yourself, burst
>
> la lumiere,
> la lumiere et la matiere
> is one
> [~~light and matter is~~] [l'aurore]
> is energy in,
> and out, is
> constant, ~~if discontinuous~~
> ~~change,~~ is [inconstant]
> ~~indeterminate only~~ in respect [?] to
> choice, ~~to the moment of~~
> ~~change, to the giving off of~~
> ~~light~~
>
> It is necessary now to put it ~~another~~ [this] way:
> the discontinuous is

what he is not. In other words, we might say that it is the intuition of *reality as history*, that is, as mobility, as motion, as change, perpetual change'. Maritain, *On the Philosophy of History*. Ed. Joseph W. Evans (London, 1959), p. 16.

the law, uncertainty is
the principle, nature
makes nothing but
jumps[46]

De Broglie's *Matière et lumière*, which so influenced Paalen, may have been amongst Olson's reading at this time.[47] As we have seen, in that book de Broglie explained the central quantum mechanical principle that Olson outlines here: that all matter must be thought of as simultaneously both particle and wave, and that this superposition is resolved only uncertainly by wave function collapse (or quantum 'jumps', as Olson puts it). Thus, in this passage, physical indeterminacy—an abrupt entelechy from potential to actuality—is extended beyond the subatomic realm into the textures of private and public experience ('what you are / all is…').

Yet Olson follows his prose note in claiming that the prime uncertainty here is the 'direction' of 'expression'. Whilst the note found indeterminacy in 'human effort shifting as it does its direction', the draft poem finds indeterminacy 'in respect to when / in what direction, where / you shall express yourself'. In other words, Olson finds historical indeterminacy to reside in the haphazard of human meaning-making; the unpredictable ways in which knowledge is deepened and expression broadens the parameters of understanding. The episteme, as well as the expressive intent of the individual, can be characterised paradoxically as both 'constant' and 'discontinuous'; subject to changes which are, like the results of wave-function collapse, unforeseeable ('nothing but jumps').

This section was excised entirely from 'The Kingfishers'. But it might still be useful to ask what it would have meant *in situ*, amidst the sections Olson did preserve in his final version. What would it have meant, that is, for a poem partly inspired by the Chinese

[46] Facsimile reproduced in Maud (1998), p. 134.
[47] Indeed, this seems the likeliest candidate for the 'specific source' Maud could not identify. Maud (1998), p. 84. This can only be speculative, however, since the copy Olson would have read in the Library of Congress is unannotated. Paalen adopted its title for a painting. Leddy (2012), p. 11.

Revolution of the same year, and one which, at its outset, seems to provide something like a revolutionary clarion call ('what does not change / is the will to change')? To put it slightly differently, what kind of revolutionary discourse could survive the discovery that public experience is 'nothing but jumps', or the assertion that social vision is limited by its own partiality?

For Paalen, of course, quantum indeterminacy instantly undermined determinism at historical scale. Subatomic uncertainty was, in this view, fatal to the idea that history and society followed discoverable laws. And if the 'The Kingfishers' does ride upon a 'visionary confidence', as Perry Anderson claims, this confidence is clearly not attributable to the historical logic of any revolutionary programme.[48] Indeed, an apparent affirmation of revolutionary upheaval—compounded by a quote from Mao Zedong later in the poem—is compromised by gestures towards uncertainty, contingency, and discontinuity at the subatomic scale. Change is inevitable in 'The Kingfishers' but it is also happenstance, inexorable but directionless. More importantly, the political 'change' it appears to welcome does not follow towards any particular end (liberty, egality, fraternity, and so on) because the only 'law' that can be trusted to is lawless 'uncertainty' itself, a principle rendering one result as likely as any other. Olson is providing a philosophy of history which, like that of Paalen, turns quantum uncertainty against crude revolutionary determinism.

Had Olson retained this section, 'The Kingfishers' would have remained in ambivalent territory, somewhere between revolutionary praxis ('Lever et agir!', CPo 87) and theoretic doubt ('discontinuity is the law / uncertainty is the principle').[49] But even after removing his section on quantum mechanics, such uncertainty remained formally,

[48] Perry Anderson, *The Origins of Postmodernity* (London, 1998), p. 75.

[49] And, in fact, Olson made an adage of this Hamletian position only a few weeks later in 'The Praises' (1949): 'to think is easy / to act is more difficult / but for a man to act after he has taken thought, this! / is the most difficult thing of all' (CPo 98).

and it is here that Olson proved more successful than Paalen. The indeterminacy apparent in the drafts as content, pedagogically, remains in the poem stylistically, in the gnomic textures of its verbal surface, its parataxis and indirection. True, this did not take it very far from the collagist precedent of its antetypes *The Waste Land* and the *Cantos*, but high modernist parataxis was peculiarly suited to a physics of 'nothing but / jumps'. The very weight of critical commentary and exegesis on Olson's poem testifies to the fact that, unlike pictures such as *Figure pandynamique*, Olson achieved that state of unresolved 'possibility' which Paalen had been calling for throughout *Dyn.* This section was probably excised because it made too plain, too hortatory, an uncertainty already legible in the unforeseeablity of its disjunctive style.

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Composed at the other end of the decade, 'The Kingfishers' imagined a conjunction between physics and society which, like that of Paalen, stressed the uncertain 'possibility' of historical experience and the hubris of that objective instrumental 'stance toward reality' which was now under such heavy fire from those of Failed Nerve. For Paalen, indeterminacy followed from the embeddedness of the subject in the extended world, the reciprocal relation between observer and observed. And Olson had gestured towards this too: in his discussions of quantum measurement, in poems such as 'X to the Nth' ('here in the middle place […] locked in event'), and in his prose note 'To partition reality is to lose it'. In 'Human Universe', which took its lead from the latter, this idea was taken much further, and it is worth reading Olson's use of quantum mechanics here in the light of Paalen. At the start of the essay, after a brief discursus on the need for a new philosophical path or 'Weg' (CPr 155), the problem of quantum observation again becomes paramount:

> The difficulty of discovery (in the close world which the human is because it is ourselves and nothing outside us, like the other) is, that

> definition is as much a part of the act as is sensation itself, in this sense, that life *is* preoccupation with itself, that conjecture about it is as much of it as its coming at us, its going on. In other words, we are ourselves both the instrument of discovery and the instrument of definition. (CPr 155)

There is only ipseity, in other words, 'nothing outside us'. This 'close world' is exactly that of Paalen ('we are always and everywhere *within* reality and not face to face with it'). It is, moreover, precisely the problem of the observer effect in the Copenhagen interpretation of wave function collapse. The observer must be both the 'instrument of discovery and the instrument of definition' if, as this interpretation posits, the superposed values of a wave-function (Ψ) actualise upon human measurement.[50] Fifteen years earlier, Schrödinger had encapsulated this problem with an infamous thought-experiment:

> A cat is penned up in a steel chamber, along with the following diabolical device (which must be secured against direct interference by the cat): in a Geiger counter there is a tiny bit of radioactive substance, so small, that perhaps in the course of one hour one of the atoms decays, but also, with equal probability, perhaps none; if it happens, the counter tube discharges and through a relay releases a hammer which shatters a small flask of hydrocyanic acid. If one has left this entire system to itself for one hour, one would say that the cat still lives if meanwhile no atom has decayed. The first atomic decay would have poisoned it. The Ψ-function of the entire system would express this by having in it the living and the dead cat (pardon the expression) mixed or smeared out in equal parts.[51]

This 'indeterminacy', Schrödinger concludes, can only be 'resolved by direct observation', at which point the 'mixed' dead-living cat actualizes into either a dead or a living cat.[52] For Schrödinger, this exemplifies the problem of applying superposition to objects at everyday scale. But for Olson the key point is rather that, if humans are both the 'instrument of

[50] This is not, of course, the only interpretation of wave-function collapse. Five years after the publication of 'Human Universe', Hugh Everett submitted as a PhD thesis an early version of the many-worlds interpretation of quantum mechanics. This posited that, instead of a 'collapse' of potential values into just one, *every* possible value actualizes in its own universe. In this theory, as Simon Saunders puts it, 'this universe is one of *countlessly many others, constantly branching in time, all of which are real*'. Simon Saunders, 'Many Worlds? An Introduction', *Many Worlds? Everett, Quantum Theory and Reality*. Ed. Simon Saunders, Jonathan Barrett, Adrian Kent, and David Wallace (Oxford, 2010), p. 2.
[51] Quoted in John Gribbin, *Erwin Schrödinger and the Quantum Revolution* (London, 2012), p. 181.
[52] Gribbin (2012), p. 182.

discovery and the instrument of definition', observer and actualizer, then no just division can be made between human and nonhuman worlds.[53] Indeed, he makes this point clear by introducing the claim he had jotted down in his note 'To partition reality is to lose it':

> We do not find ways to hew to experience as it is, in our definition and expression of it, in other words, find ways to stay in the human universe, and not be led to partition reality at any point, in any way. (CPr 157)[54]

Rather than applying quantum physics simply for the elaboration of a new holism however, Olson turns to the 'one and indivisible reality' of quantum theory specifically to contest 'discourse' (CPr 155), and this should be seen as a manoeuvre equivalent to that of Paalen, who also claimed that 'empty abstraction' had falsely divided the continuous world revealed by post-Einsteinian physics. Ostensibly, Olson blames such partitioning on Athenian philosophy: Socrates with his 'readiness to generalize' (CPr 156), Aristotle with his 'logic and classification' (CPr 156), and Plato's 'world of Ideas' (CPr 156) constructed a universe of 'discourse' at one remove from reality, an artificial realm in which most of us (save the Maya) have languished ever since.[55]

But what is important about Olson's claim is not its reading of ancient philosophy. Indeed, we might say that this critique of Greek thought is a kind of *Verschiebung*. What was really at issue was the danger, newly identified in the middle of the decade, of constructing exegetical worlds outside the world in which we live. Like Paalen, who was also following the Copenhagen interpretation, Olson emphasises that there is only a 'close world', that no discursive system ('logic and classification', a 'world of Ideas', Marxism)

[53] In his study *Philosophic Foundations of Quantum Mechanics* (1944), Hans Reichenbach noted that 'philosophical mysticism' had attended the reception of Heisenberg, providing a warning for the likes of Olson, Paalen, and Popper: 'Quantum mechanics should not be misused for attempts to revive philosophical speculations which are not on a level with the clarity and precision of the language of physics'. Reichenbach, *Philosophic Foundations of Quantum Mechanics* (Berkeley, 1944), p. 15.
[54] Compare 'To partition reality is to lose it', Charles Olson Research Collection.
[55] This critique may have been indebted to Pound who derided the 'logic-chopping' school of criticism. Pound, 'Date Line', *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*. Ed. T. S. Eliot (London, 1954), p. 74.

can step outside reality in order to 'define' it. The indivisible world of quantum observation shows that there is no *locus amoenus*, hermeneutically speaking, from which life can be viewed with objectivity and authority.

If 'Human Universe' bears comparison with Paalen's writings on quantum mechanics then, it also stands consistent with *Call Me Ishmael*. Melville's 'creative vantage' anticipated the Uncertainty Principle in the sense that it accepted the provisionality of its presentation and the reciprocity between object and observer. In other words, it was the polar opposite of that 'discourse' which Olson finds, rightly or wrongly, in post-Socratic philosophy. This 'creative vantage' was also politically inflected. Anathematizing 'discourse', Olson follows Paalen in contesting any kind of language which would claim an authoritative relation to the social or physical world, a stance implicit to the New Failure of Nerve and its disillusioned turn from the liberal, labour and socialist narratives of the prewar era. As it had been in *Dyn,* the problem of quantum observation is called upon here to imagine a 'stance toward reality' which, renouncing exegetical hubris, claims contentment with continuity and uncertainty. For Olson as for Paalen, quantum physics implies a world of the sufficient and apolitical now, ontologically indivisible, preoccupied 'by itself'.

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Seven years after 'Human Universe', in 'Equal, That Is, to the Real Itself' (1958), Olson brought his engagement with quantum mechanics full circle, returning to Melville and the 'creative vantage' of *Moby-Dick.* Railing against a recent scholar for describing Melville's aesthetic as 'naturalist', Olson impugns to literary naturalism a proprietorial 'appetite of matter', an instrumentalism of the kind predominant since 'Newton's Scholium' (CPr 121). Melville's approach, on the other hand, anticipated post-classical physics insofar as it

refused such certain and instrumental knowledge for the contradictions of the world as it appears to an *involved* observer.

> It is rather quantum physics than relativity which will supply a proper evidence here, as against naturalism, of what Melville was grabbing on to when he declared it was *visible* truth he was after. For example, that light is not only a wave but a corpuscle. Or that the electron is not only a corpuscle but a wave. Melville couldn't abuse object as symbol does by depreciating it in favor of subject. Or let image lose its relational force by transferring its occurrence as allegory does. (CPr 124)

What Melville knew as '*visible* truth' is the yield of more than empiricism. Olson regards it as the result of immanence or embeddedness, an alternative to the objectivity of literary naturalism and scientific empiricism. And he likens this quantum condition, the uncertainty of being *in medias res*, to Negative Capability. Indeed, the problem of quantum observation corroborates Keats's intention to refrain from 'irritable reaching after fact & reason', his commitment to 'stay in the condition of things' (CPr 120).[56] In this essay then, Olson repeats his claim in *Call Me Ishmael* that the modern artist must not seek a false position of objective scrutiny but attend instead to the uncertainties deriving from his embeddedness in a contingent physical and social world. Yeats's condition under more martial circumstances is here rendered universal: 'We are closed in, and the key is turned / On our uncertainty'.[57]

But by 1958 the moment that had produced Olson's dictum, 'uncertainty is the principle', had passed. With the New Failure of Nerve and the nascence of a new American modernism in the middle of the previous decade, quantum indeterminacy had proven immediately usable. On the one hand it spoke of recent political experience: the

[56] Standing 'in the condition of things', unable to gain a sure intellectual grasp of nature, was an idea Olson would have come across in Emerson, especially in 'Experience' (1844). For Emerson, however, the problem of uncertain observation is distressing: 'I take this evanescence and lubricity of all objects, which lets them slip through our fingers then when we clutch hardest, to be the most unhandsome part of our condition. Nature does not like to be observed, and likes that we should be her fools and playmates', *Essays and Lectures*. Ed. Joel Porte (New York, 1983), p. 473.
[57] W. B. Yeats, *The Major Works.* Ed. Edward Larrissy (Oxford, 2001), p. 105.

feeling that there was no longer room for certainty in politics; the suspicion that, being ourselves inside history, it might not be possible to observe its movement with anything like accuracy. In this way, physical indeterminacy conveniently justified a retreat from overt political engagement towards immanent aesthetic experience, calling into question that objective and instrumental stance toward reality which was now being questioned across the disenchanted postwar left, from Adorno to Macdonald to Newman. On the other hand, the principle of uncertainty was also drawn upon to imagine (if not entirely achieve) a new modernist idiom, a 'creative vantage' founded upon provisionality itself. Olson and Paalen may have been the only artists to imagine this in specifically quantum mechanical terms. But the themes it involved them with—distrust of language and 'discourse', the immanent or the happenstance, critiques of instrumental reason—were a pervasive concern of emerging American artists. Indeed, as we will see in the next and final chapter, their immanent, happenstance, and *modest* aesthetic found a striking cognate in the New York School of music.

## Chapter Six

## Egocentric Predicaments

We feel, in seeing a noble building, which rhymes well, as we do in hearing a perfect song, that it is spiritually organic; that is, had a necessity, in Nature, for being; was one of the possible forms in the Divine mind; and is now only discovered and executed by the artist, not arbitrarily composed by him.

Emerson quoted in Charles Olson, 'Literary Criticism in Emerson' (1932).[1]

One may give up the desire to control sound, clear his mind of music, and set about discovering means to let sounds be themselves rather than vehicles for man-made theories or expressions of human sentiments.

John Cage, 'Experimental Music' (1957).[2]

In the summer of 1951 Olson heard David Tudor perform Pierre Boulez's notoriously difficult *Second Piano Sonata* (1947-48) at Black Mountain College. Boulez, Olson quickly declared, was 'the first composer since Bach'.[3] He wrote excitedly to Creeley about the *enfant terrible* of French music: 'For god's sake, go get him, when you are in Paris—he is 25, and I shall try to find out his address for you—Christ, does he come

[1] Charles Olson, 'Literary Criticism in Emerson (Term Paper, June 1932)', I Box 32:1612, Prose No. 169, Charles Olson Research Collection, Archives and Special Collections at the Thomas J. Dodd Research Center, University of Connecticut Libraries.
[2] John Cage, *Silence: Lectures and Writings* (Middletown, 1973), p. 10.
[3] Tom Clark, *Charles Olson: The Allegory of a Poet's Life* (New York, 1991), p. 209. Olson would give an account of the recital to Alasdair Clayre for the BBC Third Programme in July 1968: 'I'd never heard of David Tudor, but suddenly there was a concert by a pianist named David Tudor on a Sunday afternoon. We all played ball, we wouldn't give that up, and I can remember we came in and we were so embarrassed because we were full of sweat. So we sort of went out and sneaked onto the porch to lie down and listen to this man. And that's when I first heard Boulez's *Second Sonata*, all covered with dust from playing first base, and full of sweat. I thought I'd flip'. Charles Olson, *Muthologos: Lectures and Interviews* 2nd ed. Ed. Ralph Maud (Vancouver, 2010), pp. 292-293.

*straight* from himself, compose as a man, with none of the shit of "music," or experiment'.[4] The performance had been arranged by Tudor's friend Cage, whom Olson would invite to Black Mountain the following year. But Olson—who narrowly missed the premiere of Cage's *Sonatas and Interludes* (1946-48) at Black Mountain in 1948—did not receive Cage's music as warmly. Indeed, he scoffed at Cage's 'library for our ears' (a 'Biblioteque' of exotic sounds) and admonished Cage for his use of aleatory composition. His contemporary squib 'A Toss, for John Cage' (1952) was uncompromising:

> Take it another way, take water
> (or be classical—fire, air, earth, too) ask him
> about vessel, ask this old dog to ask his 64 numbers,
> the 16 trigrams, a question, have him throw his 3 pennies
> (the old Three, dat old number) to find you out in what way his 20 Minutes
> despite all the new wine therein (I'll believe his discoveries)
> is not a bottle, is
> so blown, doth
> intervene, hath
> beginning. And ends
> like an hexameter.[5] (CPo 272)

Despite his 'discoveries', Cage was putting 'new wine' in old bottles, ending up with the musical equivalent of the Greek hexameter. Presumably, Cage had fallen for the 'shit' of 'experiment' in a way that Boulez had not, though what Olson thought the difference was will take some unpacking. In fact, Cage had only begun using aleatory methods ('64 numbers', '16 trigrams', '3 pennies') the year before, leading to his first fully indeterminate work, the *Music of Changes* (1951). And Olson's mention of 'magnetic tape' later in the poem suggests that Cage had used his time at Black Mountain to discuss his first efforts with this medium too: the *Williams Mix* (1951-1953) and *Imaginary Landscape No. 5* (1952), the latter scored for a combination of 'any 42 phonograph

[4] Charles Olson and Robert Creeley, *The Complete Correspondence: Volume 7*. Ed. George F. Butterick (Santa Rosa, 1987), p. 111.
[5] The 'library' apparently derives from Cage himself. In 1958 he would mention the 'library of recorded sounds' used for the *Williams Mix* (1951-53). Cage (1973), p. 26.

records'.[6] It was 'tricks' such as these, as Olson called them, that led the poet to wonder just how 'serious' Cage really was, whether he was coming '*straight* from himself' like Boulez, or whether his work was simply ludic, with sounds as playful 'shadows / on the wall' (CPo 271)—an image combining the technical feigning of puppetry with the impoverished reality of the Platonic cave.

That Boulez and Cage elicited such strong responses from Olson perhaps suggests that, for the poet at least, what was at stake in their work was in some way at stake for the early postwar avant-garde in its entirety. And, as we will see, there is evidence from the following year that Olson believed this was the case. This necessarily complicates our understanding of early postwar modernism, however, since literary and music aesthetics are usually not considered to have been very much in conversation in the early postwar years. Indeed, whilst recent commentary has emphasized the personal and even formal relationships between the New York Schools of music (Cage, Morton Feldman, Earle Brown, Christian Wolff) and painting, very little attention has been paid to relations between early postwar avant-garde music and late modernist literary aesthetics. This chapter suggests that, as the poet seems to have recognized himself, there was a significant expanse of shared ground between the new modernist aesthetic imagined in 'Projective Verse' and that imagined by the New York School of music, whose members were beginning to assemble in the early months of 1950, just as Olson was finishing his essay.

If there were shared convictions and strategies this was because Olson and the composers could claim an early postwar provenance alike configured by the New Failure of Nerve and the consequent cultural imperative to 'begin again'. As Paul Griffiths has said of postwar music: 'there is no period in musical history when, so much as between 1945 and 1960, the attention of so many composers was focused so vigorously on basic

[6] John Cage, *Imaginary Landscape no. 5: for any 42 phonograph records* (New York, 1961).

matters of compositional technique. It is as if the Second World War had brought about a large-scale failure of musical nerve'.[7] 'Basic matters' were also, as we have seen, at the forefront of Olson's imagination from 1946; he shared with the composers a conviction that both aesthetic and cultural narratives would have to be thought out anew. But Griffiths's wording is particularly fortuitous because, as we have seen throughout this thesis, there was also much more than a merely musical 'failure of nerve' in the wartime United States. What Olson and the New York School of music shared was a reaction against abstract reason and instrumental administration which was also a marked feature of abstract expressionism, the splintering American left, and émigré critics such as Adorno and Horkheimer.

But, in negotiating this reaction, Olson and the composers shared a strategy which set them at some distance from the New York School of painting. Indeed, Olson shared with Cage and Feldman a resistance to lyric subjectivity which was strongly antithetical to the egoistic, almost confessional, rhetoric which attached to abstract expressionism by the end of the decade. As Caroline A. Jones has said, this resistance was very much a conscious one for Cage: 'in his early compositions—verbal and musical—Cage engaged, among other things, the problematic of the abstract expressionist ego'.[8] Cage's 'Lecture on Nothing' (1949), delivered to the painters at the Eighth Street Club in early 1950, was perhaps his most provocative challenge in this respect. Here he launched, to the embarrassment of several observers, an ill-concealed critique of the 'overwrought emotionalism' and 'heroic existentialist narcissism' of the painters, a performance intended to provoke much more than amuse.[9]

[7] Paul Griffiths, *Modern Music and After: Directions since 1945* (Oxford, 2002), p. 51.
[8] Caroline A. Jones, 'Finishing School: John Cage and the Abstract Expressionist Ego', *Critical Inquiry* 19:4 (1993), p. 630.
[9] David W. Bernstein, 'John Cage and the "Aesthetic of Indifference"', *The New York Schools of Music and Visual Arts*. Ed. Steven Johnson (New York, 2002), p. 121.

Though Olson was not as close to the New York art world, he was equally concerned to eliminate the kind of heroic egocentrism which was becoming the dominant logic of New York painting. Indeed, through Olson's work we can begin to see that resistance to the abstract expressionist ego was less a personal foible of Cage's than a parallel paradigm in early postwar American art. In other words, the putative impersonality of Olson and the New York School of music reveals egolessness to have been a critical function of the new avant-garde, a way of overcoming not only the lyric, 'emotional' subject but also the administering, rational subject, the intellect which remakes the world according to its own unquestioned laws. In this way, the drive against the 'interference of the individual as ego' (CPr 247) revealed itself as a major articulation of that broader contemporary retreat from the abstract intelligence and the cognate search for 'modesty', 'humilitas', and 'quieter notions'.

But this impersonal offensive against what Olson called the 'egocentric predicament' did not stop at critique.[10] Indeed, the egoless ideal encouraged the development of new formal strategies, ways of eliding egocentric interference at the very moment the work of art came into being. The present chapter aligns Olson and the New York composers by suggesting that, at the very same moment, both attempted to actively institute egolessness (an important paradox, as we will see) by constructing new theories of impersonalised sound. Their strategies were ostensibly alike: to recuperate sound *an sich*, without the interference of either the lyric or the artisanal subject. And, in this effort, Olson and the composers developed accounts of sound which were remarkably similar; emphasizing attention to the smallest sound units, rejecting habituated sound combinations, positing sounds as discrete objects in space, and devising new kinds of aural notation. As we will see, these strategies had earlier modernist precedents in music composition and poetic

[10] Charles Olson, 'Me-mo to Stefan & John', *OLSON: The Journal of the Charles Olson Archives* 8 (Fall 1977), p. 41.

theory, and they also echoed other developments in postwar composition, particularly the emergence of electroacoustic music. But what makes the strategies of Olson and the New York composers distinctive is that they were imagined as solutions to, in Olson's words, the 'predicament' of the subject, his or her stubborn intrusion on the world. In seeking auditory answers to this problem, Olson and the New York School of music were pursuing a late modernist project quite unlike that of the New York painters or any other formation of early postwar modernism. Whilst music may have been 'mysterious' to Olson then (as another composer friend of his put it), his attempt to imagine a new modernist aurality without the 'interference of the individual as ego' reveals an important conjunction between the aesthetics of music and poetry in the early postwar moment.[11]

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What Olson did not mention in his poem 'A Toss, for John Cage' is that he had been complicit in the composer's 'trickery' himself the same year in *Theatre Piece No. 1.* What he intoned from his ladder in this performance is not recorded, but the audience—scarcely distinguished from the performers themselves—seems to have been either nonplussed or maddened. In the latter group was the German *émigré* composer Stefan Wolpe, former teacher of both Morton Feldman and David Tudor, who was 'observed to get very upset by the whole thing and leave in protest'.[12] It may have been Wolpe's hasty exit which led Olson to write, in the same weeks, a 'Me-mo to Stefan & John' (1952). This brief note was an attempt to conciliate the two composers, and it provides crucial evidence for the way Olson was thinking about the shared task of the early postwar avant-garde. Endeavouring to find common ground between Cage and Wolpe, Olson admits that though poets 'shld be

[11] Clark (1991), p. 134.
[12] Andrew Kohn, 'Black Mountain College as Context for the Writings of Wolpe 1952-1956', *On the Music of Stefan Wolpe: Essays and Recollections*. Ed. Austin Clarkson (Hillsdale, NY, 2003), p. 115.

putting the words in your mouths', they have yet to fully articulate the problem facing postwar artists. But, he says, it can be 'got down something like this':

> the doublet that any of us is, that is, that we are from the skin in and the skin out, is unit [sic] because any of us is single, that dull physiological fact that we are not Siamese, that we are differentiated, so separated (if only so), in other words, how they had it, the egocentric predicament (which, notice is simultaneously the referrent of Stefan's cry that a determinism by the self is required, in other words that the answer to the predicament is out from it by using it, and of John's uncry that below is the way out (tao), that the continuity of all life saps the single self from beneath itself.[13]

The 'doublet' of the artist is the *principium individuationis*, the indubitable fact of the 'differentiation' and 'separation' of the monadic 'unit'. Wolpe, Cage, and himself, Olson argues, are deeply concerned with this 'dull physiological fact' and are trying to surpass it. However, Wolpe and Cage disagree with regard to the means by which this 'egocentric predicament' can be overcome. For Wolpe, a 'determinism by the self is required'; in other words, self must surpass self in near-Nietzschean fashion. In aesthetic terms, this implies that only rational craftsmanship will be sufficient for the artist to overcome his isolation and achieve universality or social relevance. For Cage, on the other hand, the 'egocentric predicament' is to be overcome by immanently realising 'the continuity of all life'; an epiphany of which 'saps the single self from beneath itself'. In aesthetic terms, this will mean abandoning formal control and merely *facilitating* the holding forth of 'all life'.

There was certainly a suppressed political logic to this dispute. The former Marxist Wolpe—who had recently set to music *Excerpts from Dr Einstein's Address about Peace in the Atomic Era* (1950)—may have found in Cage's ludic performance a quietist retreat into the immediate. But as a flight from egoism it was more than this. And it was also more than a private project. Olson's 'egocentric predicament' takes for granted that the ego must

[13] Olson (1977), p. 41.

be overcome by the artist, that art cannot be content with the mere vocalisation of the subject's solitude. The fact that Olson felt this way (and 'Projective Verse' had treated it at length) should serve to nuance those accounts of Cage's early career which find sources for his antiexpressivism in the aesthetics of Ananda K. Coomaraswamy or the teachings of D. T. Suzuki. For if, as Alastair Williams argues, these figures allowed Cage to abandon 'values of originality and self-expression' implicit to post-Romantic western art, this is because there was already a standing need for such ideas in the United States.[14] In other words, the move against egocentric 'self-expression' needs to be understood within a broader antiexpressive milieu which includes those figures (such as Olson) who did not share the same intellectual provenance. In fact, in seeking to remove the 'interference of the individual as ego', Cage and Olson were both responding to the new and pervasive distrust of abstract reason, something which had already become obvious in their writings. Cage's solution to the 'egocentric predicament', like Olson's, would be driven by the need to remove that rational temperament whose 'rule of computation and utility' was beginning to look ever more inhumane.[15]

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Albeit obtuse, the 'me-mo' was perspicuous. Written only weeks before the premiere of Cage's 'silent piece' *4'33"* on 29 August, it accurately identified the egoless course Cage's music was now taking. But it also confirmed how far Olson saw the work of the postwar avant-garde as being in common, since the 'egocentric predicament' had been prominent in his own *ars poetica* 'Projective Verse' eighteen months earlier. Indeed, in that essay Olson had similarly called for the elimination of the 'interference of the individual as ego' and bemoaned what Keats had called the 'Egotistical Sublime', 'the private-soul-at-any-public-

[14] Alastair Williams, 'Cage and postmodernism', *The Cambridge Companion to John Cage*. Ed. David Nicholls (Cambridge, 2002), p. 234.
[15] Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Trans. John Cumming (London, 1997), p. 6.

wall' (CPr 239). The first draft of Olson's essay was written two weeks after the New York School began to assemble in January 1950. Its discussion of the 'interference of the individual as ego' is exactly contemporary with similar discussions amongst the composers. In an essay of 1957 Cage summarised the position of himself and Feldman apropos the same interfering subject: it is possible, Cage affirmed, for the composer to 'give up the desire to control sound, clear his mind of music, and set about discovering means to let sounds be themselves rather than vehicles for man-made theories or expressions of human sentiments'.[16] In a memoir written several years later Feldman characterized his own works of 1950 and 1951 as similarly selfless organizations of sound:

> *Projection II* for flute, trumpet, violin and cello — one of the first graph pieces — was my first experience with this new thought. My desire here was not to "compose," but to project sounds into time, free from a compositional rhetoric that had no place here. In order not to involve the performer (i.e. myself) in memory (relationships), and because sounds no longer had an inherent symbolic shape, I allowed for indeterminacies in regard to pitch.[17]

The interfering ego which had been excised seems—for Olson, Cage, and Feldman—to have been conceived as a twofold entity. On the one hand, the ego was, as Olson put it, 'lyric'; it was possessed of feeling and emotion and prone to introducing these into its compositions. Thus Olson dismisses any poetry which works as a repository of subjective feelings, the 'private-soul-at-any-public-wall', and Cage sought sounds without 'human sentiments' attached to them. That Feldman shared this distaste for aural feeling can be gleaned from his later comments on a Carnegie Hall performance of Olivier Messiaen's *Oiseaux exotiques* (1955-56), in which he sneered at a 'sustained piano chord in unbelievably bad taste' which had 'raised the audience to a state of exultation'.[18] This

[16] Cage (1973), p. 10.
[17] Morton Feldman, *Give My Regards to Eighth Street: Collected Writings of Morton Feldman*. Ed. B. H. Friedman (Cambridge, MA, 2000), pp. 5-6.
[18] Feldman (2000), p. 10.

resistance to (trite) feeling was an obviously high modernist inheritance. Whilst Olson's attack on lyric sloppiness was inherited from the early Pound ('emotional slither'), Cage and Feldman's resistance was strengthened by their dedication to the equally austere Anton Webern, a performance of whose *Symphony* (1928) had led to their first meeting in the lobby of Carnegie Hall in January 1950.[19]

But the second side of the excised 'ego' was of deeper concern. In his essay of 1957 Cage used a word which had recently become pervasive in the new critiques of abstract reason. The composer, Cage says, must 'give up the desire to control sound'. A few years earlier, Adorno and Horkheimer had claimed that 'the control of internal and external nature has been made the absolute purpose of life'.[20] And whilst Cage diagnoses a 'desire to control' in the modern Western artist, Adorno and Horkheimer find an 'inescapable compulsion' to control at the very heart of the modern project.[21] The second side of the interfering aesthetic ego thus represented that privative and hubristic instrumentality which was now beginning to be associated with the 'totalitarian' side of modern and modernist rationality.[22] To remove the 'interference of the individual as ego' became not only to elide 'lyric' feelings but to excise the organizing intellect.[23] Thus 'compositional rhetoric' (Feldman), 'man-made theories' (Cage) and 'artificial forms' (Olson, CPr 247) are to be superseded by more 'open' or, as Feldman put it, 'de-controlled' ensembles.[24] The other

[19] Ezra Pound, 'A Retrospect', *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*. Ed. T. S. Eliot (London, 1954), p. 12.
[20] Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*. Ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr. Trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford, 2002), p. 24.
[21] Adorno and Horkheimer (2002), p. 27.
[22] Adorno and Horkheimer (1997), p. 6.
[23] Removing the 'interference of the individual as ego' had always been a modernist fantasy. Besides from Pound's personae, Eliot's impersonalism, and the personality of Joyce's author (which 'refines itself out of existence'), one could also set, more appropriately here, Proust's pianist: 'So with a great musician […] his playing has become so transparent, so imbued with what he is interpreting, that one no longer sees the performer himself—he is simply a window opening upon a great work of art'. However, high modernist impersonalism was a literary device, a stylistic sleight of hand. And, in any case, his or her residue was always present in the device itself. For Olson and Cage, on the other hand, the removal of the interfering subject is quite literal, and includes the paradoxical removal of the creative artist by further creative cunning. Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (London, 1963), p. 219. Proust, *In Search of Lost Time* (v. ii) Trans. C. K. Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin. Revised by D. J. Enright (London, 2001), p. 337.
[24] Feldman (2000), p. 35.

way of seeing this was that, by removing the organizing intelligence, the work was to become immanent, 'part of the res itself', to use Wallace Stevens's phrase of the same year.[25] Thus 'Projective Verse' makes a physiological interpretation of the Emersonian poetic Olson discussed in a term paper in 1932, stressing the roots of the poem in the 'necessity' (Emerson) of the 'breathing of the man who writes' (CPr 239) rather than the 'arbitrary composition' (Emerson) of 'closed verse'.[26] In a very similar manner, Cage would insist that, with the excision of the rational ego through the use of chance composition, the work had now been drawn into 'accord with nature in her manner of operation'.[27]

The attempt to remove the ego as controlling craftsman led to a contemporary schism between the New York School and Boulez, whose commitment to the *artisanat furieux* made him, Feldman admitted, 'everything I don't want art to be'.[28] But the strategy was consistent with those American and *émigré* critiques of instrumental reason which had been on the intellectual horizon for at least six years. The 'failure of nerve' was now being reflected in an avant-garde aesthetic which sought to suspend not only 'lyric' expression (rife in abstract expressionism) but also aesthetic mastery. The question that remained was how to achieve this formally, because, insofar as strategies to achieve egolessness compromised it by their own ingenuity, it seemed to leave the artist in a Tantalean position. Olson was aware by 1951 that Cage had opted for chance procedures in order to overcome this difficulty. And, in 'A Toss, for John Cage', he revealed his contempt for this technique. But he did share the conviction that ensembles of sound could be freed from

[25] Wallace Stevens, *Collected Poetry and Prose.* Ed. Frank Kermode and Joan Richardson (New York, 1997), p. 404.
[26] The same passage from 'Thoughts on Art' (1841) would appear in F. O. Matthiessen's *American Renaissance* (1941), in which Olson was thanked by his former Harvard tutor for 'painstaking research' on Melville's personal library. Matthiessen, *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman* (London, 1941), pp. 135, 413.
[27] Cage (1973), p. 155.
[28] Pierre Boulez, *Le marteau sans maître: pour voix d'alto et 6 instruments* (Vienna, 1957). Feldman (2000), p. 33.

rational control; that sound-as-sound promised an art fastened to natural imperatives, unguided by arbitrary rules of the intellect.

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This meant negotiating with high modernist sound regimes. Not least because figures such as Pound, Webern, and Edgard Varèse had themselves initiated the first part of the project by abandoning 'emotional slither'. Indeed, what Olson and the composers can be seen doing is taking these earlier modernist accounts of sound further, maintaining the silence of the lyrical ego whilst also pushing into uncharted territories of 'decontrolled' arationality. For Olson, the start of this process can be dated to 27 October 1946, when he wrote his brief note 'Mouths Biting Empty Air'. Not only did this provide several lines for 'Projective Verse' but it also established much of its auditory logic. Calling for a new poetic regime acutely sensitive to textures of sound, the note imagined a new *ursprache*: 'The work must be as hard and clean as the rocks and water where men first uttered themselves, and the exaction complete, the assurance of the ear purchased at the highest price'.[29] As we might expect, these words bear the imprimatur of Pound (and through him, T. E. Hulme). Bidding farewell to the poet in his essay 'GrandPa, Goodbye' (1948) two years later, Olson would identify Pound as the 'extraordinary ear of an era' (CPr 146). By insisting upon the 'assurance of the ear' in 'Mouths Biting Empty Air', he was thus declaring his allegiance to the Poundian precedent. Indeed, the 'hard and clean' sounds of the new poetry are the same sculptural, haptic, 'austere' forms Pound had called for in 'A Retrospect' (1918). The aural inheritance of Pound appears to be carried over when 'Projective Verse' picks up these themes in 1950:

[29] Charles Olson, 'Mouths Biting Empty Air', I Box 32:1630, Prose No. 15, Charles Olson Research Collection, Archives and Special Collections at the Thomas J. Dodd Research Center, University of Connecticut Libraries.

> Let's start from the smallest particle of all, the syllable. It is the king and pin of versification, what rules and holds together the lines, the larger forms, of a poem […] It is by their syllables that words juxtapose in beauty, by these particles of sound as clearly as by the sense of the words which they compose. In any given instance, because there is a choice of words, the choice, if a man is in there, will be, spontaneously, the obedience of his ear to the syllables. (CPr 241)

Again, the insistence on 'particles of sound' follows Pound's fine aural detail, what Andrew Crozier has called his 'mastery of the syllable'.[30] But *pace* Marjorie Perloff, these Poundian devices are now engaged in a distinctly new kind of cultural work.[31] Olson is drawing attention back to 'particles of sound' here in order to suspend a certain kind of aesthetic control. Sounds, for Olson, must be recovered as they emerge 'where breath comes from', 'down the workings of his [the poet's] own throat' (CPr 249). In other words, physiologically produced sounds are being favoured over sound combinations rationally 'mastered' by the organizing intelligence of the artist. If Pound wanted sounds as 'hard and clean' as a Gaudier-Brzeska sculpture, Olson wants them 'hard and clean' as the stuff and matter of the natural world ('rocks and water'). High modernist *technê* is being replaced by formal orders incipient within the natural world, the human body, 'the breathing of the man who writes'.

That the human body might provide a route out of the instrumental intellect was a conviction Olson had long held. In notes for *Call Me Ishmael*, written in 1939 or 1940, he put it this way: 'Melville knew what western man, so body-bound, insatiate to be erect, skyscrape [sic] of power, has forgot and only now, in terror of ashes, begins to remember. In the secret house of him he felt a backward which made an Ilium of the First Past'.[32] 'Body-bound' anticipates the 'me-mo' to Cage and Wolpe (the 'dull physiological fact').

[30] Andrew Crozier, 'The Young Pound', *PN Review* 5:2 (January-March 1979), p. 29.
[31] Marjorie Perloff, 'Charles Olson and the "Inferior Predecessors": "Projective Verse" Revisited', *ELH* 40:2 (1973), pp. 295-296.
[32] Charles Olson, 'Melville book manuscript', I Box 32:1622, Prose No. 179, Charles Olson Research Collection, Archives and Special Collections at the Thomas J. Dodd Research Center, University of Connecticut Libraries. The entire page is crossed out in pencil.

But a means to overcome this ambitious 'western man' (whose 'skyscraper' also anticipates 'La Torre') is held already within the human body, the 'secret house' which holds still a vestige of the 'First Past'. In the 'terror of ashes' of a new world war, the overreaching modern subject finds in his own physiology the passage to an earlier and less destructive habitus. This is the point from which 'Projective Verse' begins in 1950, with Olson identifying bodily rather than rationally organized sound as key to reprising an earlier human purview. A poetry keyed to human respiration will bypass the Faustian intellect and re-establish a natural prerogative.

This found an echo in Cage's reading of Coomaraswamy; his attempt to 'transform our contemporary awareness of nature's manner of operation into art'.[33] But, more particularly, the 'smallest particles' of sound on which Olson would build his arational aural regimes were something he shared strongly with the New York composers. This was not a coincidence, because it was by turning attention to individual sounds (rather than organized ensembles of sound) that Olson and the composers hoped to replace 'compositional rhetoric' with the natural medium itself. Only by attending to sounds individually, in other words, could sounds be freed from rational control and be reprised of their natural haecceity. As Olson put it: 'The objects which occur at every given moment of composition (of recognition, we can call it) are, can be, must be treated exactly as they do occur therein and not by any ideas or preconceptions from outside the poem' (CPr 243). Returning to the smallest elements of inherited aural structures was taken as the most efficacious way of recovering sounds *an sich*. And it is significant that Olson and the composers came to think of these individual elements in a similar way: as aural 'objects'. This is made clear early in 'Projective Verse':

[33] Cage (1973), p. 9. Cage found the phrase in Coomaraswamy's *The Transformation of Nature in Art* (Cambridge, Mass, 1934).

> It comes to this, this whole aspect of the newer problems. (We now enter, actually, the large area of the whole poem, into the FIELD, if you like, where all the syllables and all the lines must be managed in their relations to each other.) 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 […] Every element in an open poem (the syllable, the line, as well as the image, the sound, the sense) must be taken up as participants in the kinetic of poem just as solidly as we are accustomed to take what we call the objects of reality. (CPr 243)

Sounds (as much as 'images' or semantic 'sense') are 'solid' objects, *things* placed in spatial and tensional relationships. This idea seems to have emerged from Olson's writings on 'space' and 'objects' in 1948 and 1949: 'The Search in Art, or Notes on the New Dimension' (1948), 'Notes for a Response to "A Letter from Italy"' (1948), 'The Drawings of Cagli' (1948), and 'Notes for a Lecture on Corrado Cagli and the 4th Dimension' (1949). But sounds as particulate 'objects' in space were, in 1950, becoming just as central to the acoustic imagination of New York music. As Gascia Ouzounian observes, the 'Western musical avant-garde […] developed a new vocabulary of space in relation to musical forms and processes during the post-war period'.[34] In particular, it began to think of 'sound-objects within three-dimensional space'.[35]

This was particularly true of Feldman. According to Alex Ross, Varèse had taught Feldman to 'think of music as an arrangement of objects in space', something which led him to work with close attention to both aural particles and the silence that envelops them.[36] As Ross puts it: 'Feldman was patient. He let each chord say what it had to say. He breathed. Then he moved on to the next. The textures are daringly sparse. One page of *Extensions 3* [1952] has a mere fifty-seven notes in forty bars. In confining himself to so

[34] Gascia Ouzounian, 'Sound installation art: from spatial poetics to politics, aesthetics to ethics', *Music, Sound and Space: Transformations of Public and Private Experience*. Ed. Georgina Born (Cambridge, 2013), p. 76.
[35] Ouzounian (2013), p. 76.
[36] Alex Ross, *The Rest is Noise: Listening to the Twentieth Century* (London, 2012), p. 528.

little material, Feldman releases the expressive power of the space around the notes'.[37] The sound object also appeared in the writings of Earle Brown, who would explain to Boulez: 'Each "sound object" or element of the material [is] very different from the others in rather sonically "objective" ways…highly defined trajectories, rhythmic densities, intensities, and instrumentation'.[38] The sound particles of Olson and the composers are, of course, distinct. Whilst the 'object' for Olson is the syllable, the 'minim of language', the objects of the composers are singular events with manifold qualities of pitch, frequency, timbre, and so on. But in each case these particles are valued because, object-like and spatially disposed, they are articulate of their quiddity alone, free from any logic or meaning imposed from without (they are 'sonically "objective"', in Brown's phrase). The 'egocentric predicament' is being solved here by exposing the materiality of the aural medium itself.

But this solution also relied on the kind of space in which these sonic 'objects' were disposed. And, in this way, Olson's stress on the open aural 'FIELD' (CPr 239) is revealing, because the same word had already become crucial to what Ouzounian identifies as the 'new vocabulary of space' in New York music. The concept was one Cage relied on particularly heavily, as in his early essay 'The Future of Music: Credo' (1937):

> THE PRESENT METHODS OF WRITING MUSIC, PRINCIPALLY THOSE WHICH EMPLOY HARMONY AND ITS REFERENCE TO PARTICULAR STEPS IN THE FIELD OF SOUND, WILL BE INADEQUTE FOR THE COMPOSER, WHO WILL BE FACED WITH THE ENTIRE FIELD OF SOUND.[39]

If here the 'field' was of the entire aural world, Cage also thought of his own aleatory compositions as reprising this field synecdochically:

> The reason I am presently working
> with imperfections in paper is this:

[37] Ross (2012), p. 529.
[38] Quoted in Elena Dubinets, 'Between Mobility and Stability: Earle Brown's Compositional Process', *Contemporary Music Review* 26:3-4 (2007), p. 425.
[39] Cage (1973), p. 4.

I am thus able to
designate
certain aspects of sound
as though they were in a field,
which
of course
they are.[40]

The open 'field of sound' was attractive to Cage because it eliminated the idea of sound 'steps'—in other words, intervals, series, major-minor scales, and so on. Cage's 'field' probably owes to his regard for Feldman's teacher Varèse. As he put it in 'A History of Experimental Music in America' (1959): 'While others were still discriminating between 'musical' tones and noises, Varèse moved into the field of sound itself, not splitting it in two by introducing into the perception of it a mental prejudice'.[41] For Feldman too the open aural field proved a useful way of imagining an epistemic break with the 'steps' and 'series' of 'controlled' composition. In an introduction to his later work *Patterns in a Chromatic Field* (1981) he identified this as a lesson from New York School painting: 'What I picked up from painting is what every art student knows. And it's called the picture plane. I'm trying to balance, a kind of coexistence between the chromatic field and those notes selected from the chromatic field that are not in the chromatic series. And I'm involved like a painter, involved with gradations within the chromatic world'.[42] This refusal of series, scales, steps, or any kind of 'splitting in two' recalls Olson's brief holograph note of 1951: 'To partition reality is to lose it'.[43] The idea of 'COMPOSITION BY FIELD' (CPr 239) for Olson, as for Cage and Feldman, was to undo the work of creative partition—the introduction of form into the void by man-made divisions and

[40] Cage (1973), p. 157.
[41] Cage (1973), p. 84.
[42] Morton Feldman, *Patterns in a chromatic field: for violoncello and piano* (Vienna, 1981).
[43] Charles Olson, 'To partition reality is to lose it', I Box 36, Prose No. 228, Charles Olson Research Collection, Archives and Special Collections at the Thomas J. Dodd Research Center, University of Connecticut Libraries.

distinctions. What they imagined instead were continuous structures, free spaces where sounds represented nothing but themselves.

There was, as Ouzounian carefully notes, a 'conjunction' between such spatial forms and 'new sound spatialization technologies'.[44] And there is some justification for seeking technological sources for these ideas. Olson's French contemporary Pierre Schaeffer, for instance, had been using similar terms—the 'sonorous object' and 'acousmatic field'—to describe *musique concrète*.[45] But the fact that Olson echoed this vocabulary without being aware of such advances suggests that technological innovation was not the first cause of the new aurality.[46] Rather, spatial structures were being employed in order to imagine forms which could respond to a new distrust of rational organization. Objects and fields were conceived as routes towards an art which escaped the claims of human expressivity and the conventions of the organizing imagination.

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That Feldman thought of chromatic fields in terms of the (abstract expressionist) picture plane suggests that the sounds of the new American modernism were felt to be consistent with the visual experience of its painting. To what extent then did Olson and the composers share their concerns with 'open' forms and medium materiality (sound as a thing-itself) with the painters and their critics? Or (a more manageable question) what did the composers (and later Olson) find in abstract expressionism which was of pertinence to their own auditory experiments? In fact, both Olson and Feldman seem to have read abstract expressionism in ways which called to their own concerns, leading to formalist accounts of

[44] Ouzounian (2013), p. 76.
[45] Pierre Schaeffer, 'Acousmatics', *Audio Culture: Readings in Modern Music*. Ed. Christoph Cox and Daniel Warner (New York, 2004), pp. 78-79.
[46] In a letter to W. H. Ferry from Black Mountain he mentions that Cage and Varèse are interested in the 'effect of electronics on music now', *Selected Letters*. Ed. Ralph Maud (Berkeley, 2000), p. 144. The following year Otto Luening and Vladimir Ussachevsky gave the first performance of electronic music in the United States at the Museum of Modern Art. Luening's piece was entitled *Fantasy in Space* (1952).

New York painting which were not always consistent with the more lyric pronouncements of the painters themselves. Feldman, for instance, recorded the following thoughts on *Attar* (1953) by his friend Philip Guston:

> As I write, *Attar* is hanging on the other side of my room. I have the feeling that if I moved it to another wall, it would be an entirely different painting. It seems to be reflecting rather than ordinating phenomena. As the tones vibrate, they recede beneath the pigment and return, but with another bowing. In music we would say the sound was sourceless due to the minimum of attack. This explains the painting's complete absence of weight. But the sensation of what you see *not coming from what is seen* is characteristic of all Guston's work.[47]

Feldman reads the picture as a thing *of* the world. Rather than an 'ordinating' analytic, remaking or reflecting, it is a manifestation of the world itself, adjusting to its conditions ('I have the feeling that if I moved it to another wall, it would be an entirely different painting'). The 'tones' of *Attar* escape their origins on the canvas (and certainly their origins with the author) and enter the spatial world like sounds from a bowed instrument ('As the tones vibrate, they recede beneath the pigment and return, but with another bowing'). What Feldman reads in *Attar* is a work which has eluded the conditions of its making and the binds of expressivity to the extent that its formal gestures assume independence as worldly events. *Attar* becomes, like Feldman's own 'projected' pieces, a 'sourceless' sensational experience.

Feldman found in Guston a reflection of his own aesthetic imperatives: his desire 'not to "compose"' but to 'project' material media beyond their human sources. This was a way of removing the interfering artist, of employing painterly praxis as a temporary means of achieving objective sourcelessness. When Olson came to read abstract expressionism in 1958 he was equally tempted to read the paintings as attempts to present visual materials as themselves, free from the organizing and metaphorical intelligence of the artist. Reviewing

[47] Feldman (2000), p. 39.

Milton R. Stern's *The Fine Hammered Steel of Herman Melville* (1957), he redeployed the vocabulary of 'Projective Verse' in positioning New York School painting at the end of a Melvillean tradition of antisymbolism:

> Melville couldn't abuse object as symbol does by depreciating it in favor of subject. Or let image lose its relational force by transferring its occurrence as allegory does. He was already aware of the complementarity of each of two pairs of how we know and present the real—image & object, and action & subject—both of which have paid off so decisively since. At this end I am thinking of such recent American painting as Pollock's, and Kline's. (CPr 124)

Alluding obliquely to the Copenhagen interpretation of quantum mechanics, Olson suggests that the painters represent an American tradition which has always recognized the 'complementarity' of 'image & object' and 'action & subject'—a tradition, in other words, which has held fast to the noumenal ('the real') and refused to introduce mediating strategies ('symbol', 'allegory') between *das Ding* and the expression of it.[48] What Olson is suggesting—with two words used prominently in 'Projective Verse' ('object' and 'action')—is that painters such as Pollock and Kline have drawn attention to the very thingishness of their formal materials, shifting focus from maker or metaphor to the medium. If this draws directly on the account of 'objects' in 'Projective Verse', it also echoes Cage's central statement on egoless organization, his desire to 'let sounds be themselves'.

Feldman and Olson were alike then in reading New York painting as consistent with their own concerns, particularly their overcoming of intrusive subjectivity and their emphasis on the natural facticity of their media. But this was a very partial reading of abstract expressionism, and one which Cage (for instance) was reluctant to follow. Indeed,

[48] Olson had used the Kantian term five years earlier in his notes 'Language & Mythology' (1953): 'to [use?] a Germanism has never left my mind since I acquired it: das Ding an Sich – the thing in itself'. I Box 33: 1605, Prose No. 261, Charles Olson Research Collection, Archives and Special Collections at the Thomas J. Dodd Research Center, University of Connecticut Libraries.

it is difficult to reconcile Feldman and Olson's egoless reading of New York painting with the lyric rhetoric of the painters themselves, their emphasis on expression and 'feeling':

> We are freeing ourselves of the impediments of memory, association, nostalgia, legend, myth, or what have you, that have been the devices of Western European painting. Instead of making *cathedrals* out of Christ, man, or "life", we are making [them] out of ourselves, out of our own feelings.[49]
>
> (Newman, 1948)
>
> The modern artist is working with space and time, and expressing his feelings rather than illustrating.[50]
>
> (Pollock, 1950)

As his 'Lecture on Nothing' showed in 1949, Cage was aware that between the painters and himself (and soon Feldman, Christian Wolff, and Earle Brown) there was a major disparity of strategy and sensibility. New York painting *might* be interpreted in the manner of Olson and Feldman, but Cage was concerned that it still relied on that 'lyrical interference of the individual as ego' which he, as much as Olson, was concerned to expunge. In other words, if New York School painting shared the same attention to medium-materiality, antisymbolism, and expansive 'all-over' forms, it was not always clear that this was for the same egoless ends.[51] Nevertheless, composing sounds as independent objects disposed within open 'fields' encouraged thinking in visual, even painterly, terms. And, in 1950, Olson and Feldman would both turn to visual and spatial representations in order to transcribe the structureless sound they now envisaged.

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[49] Barnett Newman, 'The Sublime Is Now', *Selected Writings and Interviews*. Ed. John P. O'Neill (Berkeley, 1992), p. 173.
[50] Jackson Pollock, *Interviews, Articles, and Reviews*. Ed. Pepe Karmel (New York, 1999), p. 21.
[51] Clement Greenberg, *The Collected Essays and Criticism Volume 3: Affirmations and Refusals 1950-1956.* Ed. John O'Brian (Chicago, 1995), p. 105.

*

Christian Wolff once revealed the synaesthetic nature of Feldman's auditory imagination, how far his sound objects were conceived visually: 'he used to work by putting his manuscripts on the wall so that he could step back and look at them the way an artist looks at a picture'.[52] 'I'm not sure about this', he added, 'but I have a feeling sometimes he might have thought of something to do "down here," and then go back "up here"'.[53] The spatial nature of the new sound, its fields and objects, seemed to demand a more visual grammar, and it is for this reason that both Feldman and Olson could claim parallels between their own media and that of the New York painters. But visuality became particularly important for Olson and the composers when they tried to represent these sounds in notational form; a process which risked returning the new aurality to conventional modes of composition and performance. In 1950 Feldman and Olson independently imagined new kinds of visual-spatial notation which could hold true to the egoless and arational aurality they now demanded.

In December Feldman showed Cage a new composition which, to Cage's surprise, was not notated on staff paper but on graph paper.[54] Entitled *Projection 1* (1950) for solo cello, it was the first of five 'projections' Feldman composed with 'graphic notation' the following year. The 'projections' of Olson and Feldman—'Projective Verse' had appeared in *Poetry (New York)* only two months earlier—are coincidental. In fact, Feldman is likely to have received the idea of 'projection' from Varèse, who had described his chamber work *Intégrales* (1924-25) as 'conceived for a spatial projection' in 1939.[55] But the

[52] Christian Wolff and David Patterson, 'Cage and Beyond: An Annotated Interview with Christian Wolff', *Perspectives of New Music* 32:2 (1994), p. 72.
[53] Wolff (1994), p. 72.
[54] David Nicholls, 'Getting Rid of the Glue: The Music of the New York School', *The New York Schools of Music and Visual Arts*. Ed. Steven Johnson (New York, 2002), p. 26.
[55] Quoted in John Strawn, 'The *Intégrales* of Edgard Varèse: Space, Mass, Element, and Form', *Perspectives of New Music* 17:1 (1978), p. 139. See also Brett Boutwell, 'Morton Feldman's Graphic Notation: *Projections* and Trajectories', *Journal of the Society of American Music* 6:4 (2012). Boutwell is sceptical that Feldman shared the egoless non-intentionality of Cage (however much Cage insisted he did). But it is still

coincidence does say something about the character of the new avant-garde's theory of sound, since 'projection' emphasises the outward, extra-subjective nature of the work whilst also intimating its troubled relation with the written page. In order to overcome this problem in *Projection 1*, Feldman invented a 'graphic' score comprised of boxes and cells. The performer reads from left to right across the three rows: the top row (◊) indicating harmonics, the middle row (P) pizzicati, and the bottom row (A) arco. Small boxes (icti) represent notes in high (top of the box), middle (middle of the box), or low (bottom of the box) relative registers. Duration is represented by the elongation of the icti into rectangles. Thus *Projection 1* begins: 3 silent icti; 1 ictus middle register pizzicato; 3 silent icti; 1 ictus low register pizzicato; 1 ictus high register pizzicato; 1 silent ictus; 2 icti high register arco; 1 silent ictus; 1 ictus middle register harmonic, and so on. The effect of this notational form is to foreground what Olson had called, a few months earlier, 'the smallest particle';



difficult to see how Feldman could have treated 'sound-*qua*-sound' (p. 470) without sharing Cage's antisubjectivism to a significant degree.

sound objects in expansive space. Indeed, according to the analysis of John P. Welsh, not only is silence 'present far more than sound' in this piece, but the 'density of events' also diminishes as its six sections unfold; ever more attention focussed on individual sonic objects until, eventually, they disappear altogether.[56] By removing the staff and incorporating indeterminacies of pitch, Feldman was drawing attention to the very quiddity of sounds themselves, sounds no longer subsumed by a larger 'compositional rhetoric'.

David Nicholls notes that, 'both visually and aurally', this is 'suggestive' of the contemporary work of Newman and Rothko.[57] But the clearest analogy is with the recently published 'Projective Verse', in which Olson also tried to set 'minims' of sound with a new spatial notation. Indeed, Olson looked to musical notation itself as his model, seeing in the typewriter the possibility of utilizing page space for a precision notation equivalent to that of musicians:

> The irony is, from the machine has come one gain not yet sufficiently observed or used, but which leads directly on toward projective verse and its consequences. It is the advantage of the typewriter that, due to its rigidity and its space precisions, it can, for a poet, indicate exactly the breath, the pauses, the suspensions even of syllables, the juxtapositions even of parts of phrases, which he intends. For the first time the poet has the stave and the bar a musician has had. For the first time he can, without the convention of rime and meter, record the listening he has done to his own speech and by that one act indicate how he would want any reader, silently or otherwise, to voice his work. (CPr 245)

What Olson says next about silence could be an explication of Feldman's graphic notation: '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' (CPr 245). This is to compose poetry, Olson says, 'as though not the eye but the ear was to be its measurer' (CPr 246). But the further 'irony' is that, at the very moment Olson was moving towards musical notation, the

[56] John P. Welsh, 'Projection 1 (1950)', *The Music of Morton Feldman*. Ed. Thomas DeLio (Westport, 1996), pp. 23-25.
[57] Nicholls (2002), p. 28.

composers were moving away from the staff towards something like abstract visual art (and painters like Pollock, we might add, were moving from easel painting to something like mural).[58] This may be read—following Greenberg's 'The Crisis of the Easel Picture'—as symptomatic of a late modernist crisis of formal medium, a sense that conventional media had already been pushed as far as they could go. But, be that as it may, for Feldman and Olson the point of the new spatial notations was to capture those sound values which might release the work from the organizing intelligence of its author. For instance, spatial notation was particularly amenable to inscribing silence, something which 'print' (CPr 239) verse and staff notation could not foreground in the same way. It also directed an intense degree of attention on the single sound, emphasizing the very singularity of that sonic event (or non-event) as an object for itself, not as filler in structures of 'meter and rime' or as a feature in any larger compositional language. This was 'projective' not only because it imagined the three-dimensionalization of a planar score, but also because it rendered sounds (like Guston's colour tones) as events of the world, making their producer less an organizing artisan than a collaborator in the construction of the aural environment.

Feldman was not alone amongst the New York School in turning towards spatial and visual inscriptions. Two years later Earle Brown composed *December 1952*, a score consisting of a sheet of card inscribed with thirty rectangles of different dimensions. The score can be read standing on any of its four sides, but otherwise nothing (instrumentation, pitch, tempo, and so on) is further specified. In effect, the performer or performers are here

[58] See Pollock's application for a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1947: 'I believe the easel picture to be a dying form, and the tendency of modern feeling is towards the wall picture or mural'. Pollock (1999), p. 17.

asked to 'play' a piece of geometric abstraction. Works like this raised a problem with the new notation which Feldman only belatedly realized. As he later put it:

> After several years of writing graph music I began to discover its most important flaw. I was not only allowing the sounds to be free — I was also liberating the performer. I had never thought of the graph as an act of improvisation, but more as a totally abstract sonic adventure.[59]

Spatial notation was intended to recover sounds themselves, aside from any interference by the author or by compositional convention. The problem was that by introducing indeterminacy (by not specifying pitch, for instance) Feldman had simply replaced the 'interference' of the artist with the interference of the performer.

[59] Feldman (2000), p. 6.

Olson seems to have understood this problem from the beginning. His spatial approximation of the 'stave and bar' was explicitly meant to rule out interference on the part of the reader: 'For the first time he [the poet] 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' (CPr 245). The relationship between the artist and the performer was, for both Olson and Feldman, of particular concern. But Olson recognised that to recover sounds themselves—after all the 'listening he has done to his own speech'—the poet must prevent the reader from improvising. As Feldman later realized, the 'interference of the individual as ego' had to be removed twice: from the artist and from the performer herself.

But there was a paradox (or at least another 'irony') here, for in order to pay closest attention to sounds themselves, removing the interference of the lyric and artisanal subjects, it had become necessary to severely regulate the production of sound and silence. Thus Olson invents new punctuation for keener control of duration—the [/] representing 'a pause so light it hardly separates the words' (CPr 245)—and Feldman produces 'graph' compositions so sparse that scrutiny attends every aural event. Though the new notations of Olson and Feldman seemed to offer a means of letting 'sounds be themselves' then, free from extraneous prejudices, it had become apparent that these 'open' works had to be more controlled than their 'closed' predecessors (CPr 241). Ushering the egocentric artisan out of the front door, he had returned through the rear. Perhaps this is why Olson and Feldman turned away from their graphic innovations of 1950 within three years; Feldman returning to the stave and Olson never programmatically applying the innovations of 'Projective Verse'. But their notations did respond to what had appeared an urgent problem. Within months of one another they abandoned conventional kinds of inscription in order to realize

what Feldman called a 'sound world more direct, more immediate, more physical'; a world in which lyric expression and organizing rhetorics gave way to sound itself.

*

A few months after the New York School came together in early 1950, Olson completed his first 'Maximus' poem in Washington. Written only a few weeks after 'Projective Verse', it provided an oblique rationale for the attention to sound Olson had given in that essay:

> 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?
>
> when even our bird, my roofs,
> cannot be heard
>
> when even you, when sound itself is neoned in? (MPo 6)

That listening had atrophied, and that sound ('even silence') had been corrupted by mass culture ('mu-sick, mu-sick, mu-sick' in the Gloucester streetcars), was a conviction Olson shared with many of his contemporaries, most notably Adorno.[60] This is of concern, Olson contends, because listening is the first sense; the sense which offers most direct access to the world beyond the isolated subject: 'that which matters', he insists, can only be had 'by ear'. If this was contrary to modern philosophical visuocentrism, it was consistent with 'Projective Verse' and consistent with the claims made for 'sounds themselves' by the New York composers. Over the previous two years, Olson and the New York School of music had been alike in finding in sound an unmediated recourse to the real, to 'that which matters'.

[60] See, for instance, 'On the Fetish Character of Music and the Regression of Listening' (1938), *Essays on Music.* Ed. Richard Leppert. Trans. Susan H. Gillespie (Berkeley, 2002).

But it was not to counter the influence of 'billboards' that this project was undertaken. What Olson and the composers held in common was a conviction that, for too long, the work of art had been subject to the wilful egoism of its maker, whether as lyric subject or as rational artisan. The first, it was felt, had already been somewhat muted by high modernism, at least in the work of predecessors such as Pound, Webern, and Varèse. But the latter was still a serious concern: Pound might be thought of as bringing the *Cantos* together through the 'beak of his ego', for instance, the dodecaphonists as relying still on arbitrary 'musical habits'.[61] Earlier modernists may have removed 'emotional slither' then, but their works still represented the world of arbitrary aesthetic convention and rational control. On the one hand, excising this rationalizing ego for the unmastered immanent, the world itself, provided an answer to an impasse in postwar modernist aesthetics. Greenberg's essay 'The Crisis of the Easel Picture' did not speak only for painting when it identified a new anxiety about taking modernism further, and abandoning formal control altogether was certainly one way to exceed a standing modernist tradition. But there was another and more substantial reason why Olson and the New York composers may have wanted to suppress the organizing artisan, one which spoke clearly of the American avant-garde's early intellectual provenance.

When Cage insisted in 1949 that 'any composing strategy which is wholly "rational" is irrational in the extreme' he was echoing contemporary critiques—of which *Dialectic of Enlightenment* was only one—which found instrumental reason transformed into its own uncritical myth.[62] Instrumental rationality, the enlightenment tradition itself, had to be called into question once more, if only to save itself from its own lack of reflexivity. In seeking to excise the rational ego from their work, Olson and the New York composers were contributing to the same reaction, contesting a modern tradition which seemed to

[61] Charles Olson, *Mayan Letters*. Ed. Robert Creeley (London, 1968), p. 27.
[62] Cage (1973), p. 62.

have broken down irrevocably. With faith in the 'interfering' rational ego at a low, these artists looked towards aesthetic forms which relied on the world itself and not its idea, seeking the kind of 'modesty' which Olson placed at the centre of his project in contemporary notes and lectures.

Though Olson would dismiss Cage's 'biblioteque' of noises and chance operations, he shared with the New York School of music a conviction that allowing sounds to 'be themselves' was one way of achieving this goal. His prosody revealed an auditory imagination similar to theirs, one which stressed the singleness of sounds, their object-like qualities, and their place within larger aural continua. This may not have solved the 'egocentric predicament' as Olson and Cage saw it (their ingenious solutions to interfering rationality could only have led to paradox), but it did respond to present needs. Against the lyricism of New York painting, another front of the avant-garde was devising means to remove the maker from his materials. What they offered were 'sonic adventures'; 'projections' beyond the subject into 'dimensions larger than the man' (CPr 247).

## Coda

## Pagan Void

And you, my semblables, know that this time
Is not an early time that has grown late.

Wallace Stevens, 'Dutch Graves in Bucks County' (1947).[1]

In the speculative notes which occasioned the first line of 'The Kingfishers', Olson pondered over the difficulty of accounting for 'human effort shifting as it does its direction'; an enterprise at once headlong and diversionary, prone to unpredictable branchings and abrupt reorientations. These shifts—of attention, application, and understanding—would not come to theoretical prominence until more than a decade later, and then only in France.[2] But that the *coupure* should preoccupy an American poet in 1949 is telling, for the period itself does not constitute just another moment in any *longue durée* so much as an interstice, a 'genetic moment' or fertile 'void' encompassing both the political and aesthetic spheres; a moment of decreation and recreation in which the impetus to 'begin again' was strongest in America.

Newman's pictures of 1946 were especially evocative of this. His *Genesis–The Break* took its lead from the *Shevirat ha-Kelim* of the Kabbalah, the 'Breaking of the Vessels'; an interregnal moment between the dissolution of the cosmos and its recreation in the image of God.[3] This symbol, echoed in *Genetic Moment* and *Pagan Void* the same

[1] Wallace Stevens, *Collected Poetry and Prose*. Ed. Frank Kermode and Joan Richardson (New York, 1997), p. 260.
[2] That is, in the '*coupure épistémologique*', a term first used by Gaston Bachelard and subsequently invoked by Louis Althusser (1963) and Michel Foucault (1969). The idea emerged contemporaneously with Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962) and its now-proverbial 'paradigm shift'.
[3] Newman's use of Kabbalistic literature has caused some controversy. In 1995 his widow Annalee Newman protested vigorously against the claim—made by Thomas Hess and repeated by Matthew Baigell—that

year, was uncommonly descriptive of the early postwar moment; an ellipsis between old orders and new, a beginning again which occupied American avant-garde artists as much as it did the architects of the United Nations (1945) and the Bretton Woods system (1945). This was not an 'early time that has grown late' but a pivotal moment in the truest sense, ending one epoch and turning into a new.

Early critics of the New York School of painting were wont to read this turn triumphally. Already in 1946 Greenberg claimed that American art had surpassed the French. And formalist critics writing in Greenberg's wake—William Rubin and Michael Fried among others—elaborated upon that trajectory which saw abstract expressionism surpass the tradition bequeathed to them by European modernism. Claims that the initiative of modern art (along with those of industry and diplomacy) had shifted to the United States were also expressed institutionally, especially in the 'New American Painting' exhibition of 1959.[4]

Though later 'revisionist' criticism challenged the autonomous formal logic implied by Greenbergian formalism, returning abstract expressionist works to the 'material and ideological conditions in which, and out of which, they were made and received', there has remained some reluctance to position the New York School of painting adjacent to other arts and artists, especially writers.[5] And perhaps this is for good reason, because after around 1947 abstract expressionism emerged as defiantly *unliterary*, casting off the figurative visual language of Surrealism (captured in early metaphorical titles by Pollock,

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Newman's stripe paintings are based on teachings from the Kabbalah. Nevertheless, it seems unlikely that, as Annalee suggested, Newman chose Kabbalistic titles purely for their 'poetic and fanciful' language. In the case of *Genesis—The Break*, for instance, the Kabbalistic symbol asks to be read as contemporary commentary. Annalee Newman, 'Barnett Newman and the Kabbalah', *American Art* 9:1 (1995), pp. 117-118.

[4] It is worth comparing this 1959 show with Donald Allen's anthology *The New American Poetry, 1945-1960* (1960), which had a similarly dramatic influence on (especially English) audiences across the Atlantic. Art historians have been much more inclined than literary historians to read such avant-garde internationalism as complicit in what Olson himself called the 'Americanization of the world' after the Second World War (CPr 66).

[5] Francis Frascina, 'Introduction (1985)', *Pollock and After: The Critical Debate*. Ed. Francis Frascina. 2nd ed. (London, 2000), p. 117.

Rothko and others) for an abstract and unsignifying aloofness (Clyfford Still had a particular genius for the evasive title).[6] Critical to the break with subject and figure, in other words, was a break with language and metaphor.[7]



But if Newman, Pollock, Rothko and others were not simply drawing modernist painting to some internally predestined fruition, surely they shared their 'conditions' with others, and with writers? And in this case might not the avant-garde be viewed as a whole

[6] Barnett Newman was perhaps the most literary of the group and remained so. One of the reasons, perhaps, that his and Olson's writings of the period sometimes sound so eerily similar.
[7] Though, as we saw in Chapter Four, this was a break which first exposed the unfaithfulness of signification, its failure to account for reality truly.

through other, exemplary oeuvres, especially those acutely conscious of the aesthetic and historical demands of the moment?

This thesis has suggested that the early work of Charles Olson, including his unpublished lectures and notes, his draft essays and poems, speak revealingly not only of his own career and its origins but of the wider avant-garde in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War. Along with Newman, Cage and Greenberg, Olson is one of the indispensable voices of this moment, one that 'bears true witness' to the pressures and imperatives experienced by experimental artists as the United States emerged from war.[8] One of its strongest advocates, Olson spoke more clearly than most of the shape and responsibilities of a new American modernism.

And for Olson the postwar era was indeed *new*. True, earlier modernists had felt much the same of their own period. Like many, for instance, Lawrence believed that the First World War had 'smashed the growing tip of European civilization', leaving it morally adrift, 'directionless'.[9] And Virginia Woolf identified the very month Olson was born ('on or about December 1910') as the moment when, rather unaccountably, 'human character changed'.[10] Modernist art has always presumed or anticipated major shifts in sensibility to justify its formal innovations. But that the end of the Second World War, from an American perspective, heralded a 'vita nuova' was almost taken for granted; it was part of the common consensus as well as an issue over which policymakers, artists, critics, and historians could compete for the last word. What exactly the new world would look like was, inevitably, fiercely contested.

And what the new world looked like for American writers and artists depended, as it did for everybody else, on their experiences before and during the war, especially their

[8] Ezra Pound, 'The Serious Artist', *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*. Ed. T. S. Eliot (London, 1954), p. 45.
[9] D. H. Lawrence, *Movements in European History*. Ed. Philip Crumpton (Cambridge, 2002), pp. 255, 257.
[10] Virginia Woolf, 'Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown', *Selected Essays*. Ed. David Bradshaw (Oxford, 2008), p. 36.

political allegiances and the strength with which they had held to the radical political ambitions of the prewar left. Indeed, the new American modernism took its character from the manner in which American artists born around 1910 broke with the liberal and labour movements of the previous decade, radical groupings which had been—from New Dealers to liberal antifascists to card-carrying Communists—allied as never before.

As the new avant-garde broke with these political affiliations, and with the imaginary of imminent social change, it carried with it a much broader critique of the philosophical foundations upon which modern progressive politics were founded. This is not to say that Olson or Pollock or Cage were especially incisive philosophers or intellectual historians. But it is to suggest that the disappearance of the prospect of immediate and substantive social change led many American artists to question the terms over which that change is usually negotiated: reason, rationality, progress, science; the entire lexicon of political modernity and its march towards an obscure, hypothetical future. As Sidney Hook realised, the 'Failure of the Left' was intimately tied with an intellectual 'Failure of Nerve'.

This critique, which found extensive, exemplary, and effusive expression in the early work of Olson, was not confined to politically disillusioned artists. On the one hand, it aligned the new modernists with other renegade Marxists and New Dealers such as Dwight Macdonald and the writers constellated around his journal *politics*. On the other hand, it was echoed in the work of émigré intellectuals in the New School for Social Research. Indeed, the contemporary work of Adorno, Horkheimer, and Fromm, though stricken with a more visceral fear of fascism than would be possible in the work of an American, was deeply resonant of the same critique of scientific reason, the same conviction that the mastery of nature had been bought at too high a price: the impoverishment of human experience itself.

For Olson, as for the New York Schools of painting and music, this rupture, which was at once philosophical and political, occasioned a shift of social, aesthetic, and philosophical focus; 'a withdrawal into the personal,' as Aaron Siskind put it, 'and a re-examination of the person in relation to the world'.[11] Retreating from collective politics and its abstract intellectual apparatus, the new modernists were drawn instead to reimagine what Olson called the 'stance toward reality', the private nexus between self and world. This had all the appearance of the classic reactionary gesture, the immemorial withdrawal from disappointing public projects into the solace of a private metaphysic (one thinks of S. T. Coleridge). It also had all the appearance of the classic modernist gesture, offering change, renewal, or redemption not through social action but through revolutions in sensibility.[12]

But the avant-garde's turn to 'tumescent I' was only the most uncompromising expression of a sea change in American political life and language, a shift which swept across the political spectrum as America demobilized and a foundering American left sought new sources of social renewal not *en masse* but *in persona*. On the one hand, the avant-garde's 'tumescent I' emerged at just the moment federal incentives were producing a boom in homeownership and private consumption, fuelling economic growth and reducing labour militancy. And, to an extent, the new avant-garde reflected this aggressive new postwar liberalism. But more immediate to American artists was the fact that the splintering left began to look for new sources of revolutionary upheaval in the individual, having largely given up faith in the revolutionary masses. The new left subject was 'tumescent I', 'man himself', or 'man for himself', he was also 'First Man' or *vir heroicus sublimis*, and his politics were that of 'personism'. The avant-garde more clearly reflected

[11] Quoted in Carl Chiarenza, 'Form and Content in the Early Work of Aaron Siskind', *The Massachusetts Review* 19:4 (1978), p. 828.
[12] In other words, it was a classic avant-garde in Peter Bürger's sense, a movement which intended to 'do away with art as a sphere that is separate from the praxis of life'. Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*. Trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis, 2009), p. 53.

a turn to private radical agency, a turn which did not represent left defeatism so much as it did a way of imagining post-labour revolutionism, one that, in hindsight, sets the tone for New Left politics fifteen years later.

Of course there was no consensus amongst vanguard American artists about how 'man himself' was to be constituted. Almost all, from Olson to Newman to Cage, began with a vision of primitive experience; an experience irrational, fearful and authentic, sometimes masculine and phallic, but above all unencumbered by logic, science, and rationality. High modernist primitivism, the idiom from *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* (1907) onwards, was resurrected to meet the needs of a very new historical moment. But whilst this quickly segued into lyric expressionism for many of the painters, it took a quite different course elsewhere. Indeed, for Olson and the New York School of music, the new sensibility was almost diametrically opposed to the lyric speaker of abstract expressionism; it had a new 'modesty' and 'humilitas', it refused to reduce the world to its own laws, logic, and intellectual habits. 'Tumescent I' might be at the centre of the new avant-garde project for them too, but rather because of its humbleness than its dominance (a paradox that persists in the work of Cage as much as Olson).[13] This had obvious repercussions for questions of form: how might a work evacuate the moment of its making, escaping the conscious design of its author? Between the expressionism of the painters and the almost dialectical impersonalism of Olson and the composers there remained an insuperable rift.

But such differences should not obscure the deeper continuities. The sense that a 'beginning again' was in order, and that a new American art would have to be in some sense *ethical*—imagining a new 'stance toward reality' which was based on neither the instrumental stance of scientific rationality nor the political subjectivities of Newman's 'outmoded politics'—was pervasive and unquestioned. Olson's early work is invaluable to

[13] Indeed, Louis Zukofsky could have been speaking of Cage when he noted, in 1950: 'To excel in humility / Is not to be humble'. Louis Zukofsky, "*A"* (New York, 2011), p. 138.

the extent that it reveals this process in its unfolding; the culturally broadbased but intellectually tentative search for philosophical and aesthetic postures more fitting the chastened and sceptical purview of the early postwar American left.

A purely, or even predominantly, formal historical approach to early postwar modernism—its debts to Pound and Williams, Picasso and Mondrian, Schoenberg and Webern—cannot do justice to the specificity and contemporaneity of this cultural work. Neither Olson nor the New York Schools underestimated the presence of the modernist past in their theory and practice; they were fully self-conscious of their status as epigones. But the social, historical, and philosophical rupture they identified in the early postwar moment reduced the melancholia that might otherwise have attached to their belatedness.[14] American late modernism was not the decadent, entropic dissolution of classic or high modernism but a new project with strong new imperatives.

Indeed so clean was the historical rupture in the eyes of American artists that Olson was inclined to nominate the new era 'post-modern' (CPr 207). This term should be treated with some caution however. The fact that Olson used the same adjective does not mean that he was thinking of the same postmodernity as its later theorists. Certainly, some aspects of the work and philosophical posture of the American avant-garde look forward to postmodernism in art and theory (scepticism about the grand narrative, dissolution of the hermetic art object, critique of enlightenment rationality, semiotic instability, and so on). But then they also look back to earlier thinkers, artists, and modernist movements, including Nietzsche and Dada.

More interesting than this dubious long view is the fact that the early postwar moment constitutes a break that is also a period in its own right, a 'pagan void' of special

[14] Fredric Jameson notes that the 'melancholy of Epigonentum' is observable as early as Cassiodorus, for the first time distinguishing *modernus* from *antiquas*. Jameson, *A Singular Modernity: Essay on the Ontology of the Present* (London, 2002), pp. 17-18.

creative and intellectual intensity.[15] American aesthetic responses in the years covered by this thesis were incentivised by a very particular concatenation of political and philosophical doubts. Whilst the 'Failure of Nerve' has always been modernity's internal countermovement—from romanticism to modernism to postmodernism—the 'New Failure of Nerve' in the United States after 1943 was occasioned by quite specific and local conditions, above all the collapse of confidence in progressive politics and the philosophical assumptions underpinning it. The new avant-garde was the overt expression of the latest antimodern moment, the latest urge to begin again.

That this coincided with the end of the most costly war in human history made the postwar moment peculiarly pregnant. There was an urgent need, as Newman saw it, to inseminate the postwar 'void' with new ideas: new conceptions of the human, new stances toward reality, new routes towards private and public betterment. And who would be responsible for this revolutionary conception if not an American avant-garde moved by the new political, economic, and cultural predominance of the United States itself?

The early oeuvre of Olson is the most potent literary expression of this generative moment, its ambition—at once thrilling, expansive, and excessive—most revealing of the depth and urgency of the need to start over. For Olson and his peers the work of the new American art was as clear as it was momentous: a new postwar modernism would be forged amidst the making of a postwar world.

[15] In the same essay Jameson notes that 'enforced attention to a break gradually turns the latter into a period in its own right', something borne out by the present thesis. Jameson (2002), p. 24.

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