

## CHAPTER 2

### Projectivism and Other Black Mountain Theories

The theoretical and critical writings of Charles Olson have been collected in one volume by Donald Allen titled *Human Universe and Other Essays*. Most of Olson's essays appear like distinct unique pieces and the author never clarifies the relationships between the varied ideas that they contain. According to Duncan, "the projections in 'Projective Verse' are not even meant to hang together" (Davey, *Theory* 61). Things won't "hang together" in reality for Olson and they "hang together" only in the "artificialities of men's talk about reality" (Davey, *Theory* 61). His essays possess a spontaneous natural order and the readers are supposed to piece their ideas together, similar to that of a scientist who is forced to coordinate ideas about the universe. His essays often appear to be prophetic in tone, but he himself does not consider them as his genuine efforts to convert or communicate some noble ideas. During one of his poetry readings at Berkeley, he declared the essays in *Proprioception* as "in congestible". He adds that they are not readable and if the readers happen to find them interesting they can be dug up as signs. He conceives them as signs of man and that of the universe.

Recently, there is a new wave of Olson enthusiasts and they mostly

comprise of serious academics, similar to the one that made Melville, the Metaphysical etc. available to the reading public. For instance, Donald Allen, in his *Anthology of the New American Poetry*, ranked Olson as the number one influence among the contemporary writers. "... Olson now seems out of the hands of the avant and into the hands of the middle guard (complete with barbed footnotes); one positive of which is the absence of that awful atavism which tainted the first (the avant) writing on him" (Corrigan xi). The second issue of *Boundary*, Fall 73/ Winter 74 reflects the change Olson's reputation has undergone from the time he started teaching at Buffalo through his lecture at Vancouver, Berkeley, and finally at Storrs. Olson grows quite dull when discussed with dissertational terms or through some critical approaches.

Olson's works could offset much of the casuistry of the present age. He is one of the most difficult poets of the mid-twentieth century and "was surrounded with even greater turgidity, with the ambience (or is *aura* the word) of a social cultural movement that was an aspect of the larger, political 'movement' of the times, though it subjected itself to little of the rigorousness of that larger event, and not at all to outsiders of any sort" (Corrigan xii). His works remain untainted without the interference of any type of artificial enthusiasm. He was the prominent of all Black Mountain groups of poets. To the poets of his generation and immediately after him, he was a figure like Socrates. They worshipped, feared and, at the same

time, disavowed his presence. When looked at the whole scene obliquely, he stands above everything, though his intention was to lead it onwards, providing with desired intellectual credentials. His critical theories are valid manifestos of mid-twentieth century struggle to redeem American poetry from the clutches of the traditional works which were highly appreciated in the academic circles. Many of his contemporaries could agree with most of his poetic practices in general, and they believed at least among themselves that their views of poetry and poetics were of course superior to what the academy was promoting.

Both poets and academics have varied opinions on Charles Olson – some consider him as a “complex irrational bore;” for many others, he is someone like a “guru”, “the one thinker capable of suggesting poetic and philosophical strategies for breaking beyond modernism to a post-modern vision of reality and a redeemed human consciousness sustained by that reality” and his poetic theories try to recast the “Romantic organicist models” (Altieri 173) in contemporary terms. He starts from the very same point where William Wordsworth began, “seeking to uncover the Dogmatic Nature of Experience” by “arguing a world which has value” and by “linking the creative imagination with direct perception” (Altieri. 183). Olson feels that in order to restate man with his dynamics, the poetic imagination has to be brought into acts which can be perceived directly. This must live on the cutting edge where the energies of man and world are

interchanging eternally. His mission is to complete the attempts of the Romantics to identify the secular values in the interchange between mind and nature. He turns to science for organicist ideas and tries to explain the creative mind that separates it from the poet's lyrical ego. That is "he places the cutting edge between mind and world under a philosophical microscope" (Altieri 174).

Olson develops the idea of Coleridge that "there is a unique poetic logic distinct from the discursive logic of rational thought" (Altieri 174). He is much concerned with the poetic logic and his ideal was that poetry carried a religious burden due to its capacity to keep alive several levels of experience. It was the only means by which men could remain aware of the mystery of being alive. Most of our cultural forms depend on discursive logical models and Olson brings forth its limitations and the potential threats. The poet has to discover what lies on the other side of the 'despair' to uncover the sources of such despair (*Human Universe* 114).

Hanging over into the present from the old cosmology are three drags, each of them the offsets of the principal desire of man for Kosmos during the two millennia and a half preceding us. And the three hang about people's necks like dead birds. They are Void, Chaos, and the trope Man. Or to put them down in the order of their occurrence, Chaos, Man, Void;... (*Special View* 47-8)

Chaos already existed when Kosmos set form. Man was its “later child”. ‘Void’ is left behind at the time “Kosmos” breaks down as the “interesting evidence of order”. As the purpose falls, man also falls and the “only assumption” left behind is “Void”. Kosmos concludes “Chaos” as its precedent and “Man as succeeding”. When it emerges as a controller, Void becomes premise of measure and man will be filling an empty space, which “turns quickly by collapse into man is kin and flesh surrounding a void as well. Void in, void out. It is the counsel of despair” (*Special View* 48).

If a cosmology looks at only a specific part of it as its measure, it is certain that the ultimate purpose must continually fight off despair since there will arise contradictions between assortment of the whole and the limits of the measuring agent. Wordsworth and Coleridge were aware of this fact, but could not escape from projecting onto that emptiness either subjective or rationalist fictions. More than a hundred years later, Olson presents a cosmology where multiplicity provides for its own measure, and meanings and values are considered as functions of events, not as any fictitious constructs which eventually turn into mere invented stories. “Meaning,” according to Olson is “that which exists thru itself” and that emerges as “active presence or defines energy in an event” (*Call Me* 2). To understand a present reality, we must refer to a system of causes and relations. The referential theory of meaning demands a distinction between

an event “there”, and an interesting mind “here”, otherwise, “stimulus or matter” over there and response and secondary qualities here. “It necessitates, in addition, a gap between temporal flux and the permanent and hence limited and inadequate interpretive structures in the mind” (*Human Universe* 97).

Anyone can find fault with referential theories of truth, but it is not easy to provide alternative models. Here, the poet has some advantages over the philosopher since he works in a tradition which is hardly dedicated to the predominance of reference. Poetic theory is based on the ideal that meaning is “not discursive but a condition of being, not completely mental but linked with some form of bodily response” (Altieri 176). Olson believes that poetic theory has not completed its task because it is yet to build the bridge between all aesthetic events and the ordinary experiences. The real Romantic dream was to construct that bridge and to identify ways in which one could recognize in the common world, the fullness, the significance, the identity, and the coordination of both mental and physical energies that prevail in art. The Romantics could not continue with their mission because they were looking for Platonic or incarnational models in order to justify the transfer of harmony of mind and the world, experienced in art.

William McPherson is of the view that: “Olson’s poetic occupies the liminal place between aesthetic and ontological experience” (196). Many

critics adopt his concepts to conventional Romantic or New Critical ideas. If someone just halts at these parallels, it will be an act of overlooking at the genuine radicalism in Olson's endeavor. Olson's principle is to rely on naturalistic definitions to extend terms which are limited to aesthetic vocabulary in general. Whenever Olson discusses form, he usually begins with 'poetic truism', even though he continuously seeks natural, scientific and mythological analogues to minimize the gap between aesthetic and existential values.

Olson's essay entitled "Projective Verse" first appeared in *Poetry: New York* in 1950. It was a "theoretical launching pad from which Olson hoped to propel himself and others into poetic activity," says John Osborne (168). Sherman Paul considered it as a "harbinger of post-modernism," (Paul, *Olson's Push* 46) an essay comparable in importance to Pound's early essays and notes on poetry. Olson's notion was that poetic theories are based on epistemological and metaphysical assumptions. Before a person makes some suggestions on how to communicate, he should be aware of "not only what is to be communicated, but also how one knows what is to be communicated" (Corrigan xiii). So at the beginning of the "Projective Verse" essay, in addition to discussing the techniques of Projective Verse, he is suggesting a few ideas about "what stance toward reality brings such verse into being, what that stance does, both to the poet and to his reader" (Olson, *Collected Prose* 237).

The essay begins with an open tussle. The readers feel that some war is going on between projective and non-projective; otherwise open verse and closed verse. Olson declares war on the traditionalists who still go on with the “closed verse”. It is something like the “private-soul in any public wall”. He suggests that if the present verse forms go ahead, then they should be in tune with the “breathing of the man who writes as well as of his listening” (*Selected Writings* 15). Olson explains what a poem is in this context and how it is different from non-projective. He also suggests a few ideas about what attitude towards reality will bring such a poem to originate. He says that this attitude involves some change, that is more technical, and it may lead to the emerging of some drama or some epic. He calls the Open form as “composition by field” and the Closed form as “inherited stanza”. A man can learn some “simplicities” if he works in the open (*Selected Writings* 16).

Initially, Olson talks about “the kinetics” of the thing. He explains what a poem is: “an energy transferred from where the poet got it (he will have some several causations), by way of the poem itself to, all the way over to, the reader” (*Selected Writings* 16). It is both an “energy construct and energy discharge” (*Selected Writings* 16). The very idea of the poem being an “energy construct” has been discussed by his predecessors Pound and Williams much and Olson adds some sort of philosophical depth to this concept. Now the question is how a poet can transfer the very same energy



he possessed at the time of composition all the way over to the reader. This problem is faced by all the poets who deviate from closed form. When a poet enters into *field composition* he cannot take any track other than the poem he is preoccupied with directs him. Every instant, he must be aware of “several forces” that contribute to the composition of the poem. When a poet obeys such rules, the final result is the projective poem. Olson says “form is never more than an extension of content” (*Selected Writings* 16) and this is the principle behind such composition. He presents the process of the thing in one statement: “One perception must immediately and directly lead to a further perception” (*Selected Writings* 17). This statement is a passing reference to the leading aspect of his practice as a poet and majority of his shorter poems progress from “one clarifying assertion to the next” (Christensen 71).

Breath plays a dominant role in the composition of a poetic work and its role is not being properly utilized or practiced. It functions as the vehicle of projectivism and is capable of transporting the poet’s perception during the course of his composition. It should be given adequate attention if the verse has to move to its “proper force and place” during the current period. Syllable is “the king and pin of versification, what rules and holds together the lines, the larger forms, of a poem” (*Selected Writings* 17). The poets belonging to the late Elizabethan period to Ezra Pound dropped this secret from their versification because they were carried away by the

charm of meter and rhyme. Olson says that words “juxtapose” in beauty through the arrangement of syllables. He gives an example:

O western wynd, when wilt thou blow  
 And the small rain down shall rain  
 O Christ that my love were in my arms  
 And I in my bed again      (*Selected Writings* 18)

He asks the present day poets to bring syllable to the forefront, ahead of rhyme and meter. If one can “purchase the assurance of the ear” and listen to the syllable constantly and scrupulously, the syllable will come out as if it were in some dance. Olson was a talented dancer and he might be incorporating his knowledge of dance with his poetic theories in this context.

The emerging of syllable is spontaneous and it is born from “the union of mind and ear”. Syllable is the first child of this ‘incest’ and second child is *line*. The syllable and line, when put together, make a poem. The poem thus becomes the product of the unifying act of mind and body accomplished through the ingenious collaboration of ear and breath during the course of their merging syllable into line. The line directly comes from the breathing of the man who writes and he alone can state when the poem comes to termination (*Selected Writings* 19). Olson finds fault with the contemporary writers as they go lazy at the point “where line is born”. There is no union between ‘the Head and the Heart’.

the HEAD, by way of the EAR, to the SYLLABLE

the HEART, by way of the BREATH, to the LINE

The shaping of the poem occurs in the line. Since “the Head” makes its presence felt in the syllable, “the dance of the intellect” is there. The “threshing floor” of this dance is the line. In this assimilation, we are bored by the small things like “similes”, “adjectives” etc. The descriptive functions easily appear in projective verse and they need to be observed quite closely because they let drain on energy in composition by field. Any type of observation should be “previous to the act of the poem” and if it is not permitted, it does not “sap the going energy of the content toward its form” (*Selected Writings* 20). A lot of new problems arise at this instance. It is a problem with objects, “what they are, what they are inside a poem, how they got there, and, once there, how they are to be used” (*Selected Writings* 20). Olson indicates that every element in an open poem including “the syllable, the line, the image, the sound and the sense” must be considered as “participants in the kinetic of the poem” and these objects should be considered as something that creates “tensions of a poem” in the very same way as other objects create tension in the world.

Different objects occur at different stages of the composition of a poem and they must be considered exactly as what they are and not by any “ideas or pre-conceptions” outside the poem. They ought to be handled as a series of objects in a field and they must be made to hold sequences of

tensions inside the “content and context” of the poem. The solid form of verse is speech and it is the secret of a poem’s energy. A poem comprises of speech and thus everything contained in it can be considered as “solids, objects and things”. These elements of speech clash against tenses, syntax and grammar in general. Olson argues that the “Law of Line” created by projective verse must be obeyed and all the poetic convention must be broken open.

The limitations of composing in projective verse were many; they had problems with manuscript and press. The poems lost their beauty because of the editing imposed on them before publication. Latin alone retains the “double meaning” that breath has possessed. The contribution of the machine called the typewriter at the time of poetic composition is invaluable and this benefit is yet to be properly observed or used. The advantages are that, because of the typewriter’s “rigidity and 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” (*Selected Writings* 22). It is something like acquiring “the stave and the bar” that had been once possessed by the musicians. The poet could get rid of the convention of rhyme and meter for the first time, and he could “record the listening he has done to his own speech” (*Selected Writings* 22). Poets like E. E. Cummings, Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams have employed this technique and it is high time

for the present generation writer, “to pick the fruits of the experiment” (*Selected Writings* 22). These poets could conceive the scope of the machine for their compositions and it is only a matter of identifying their conventions and to bring them as open verse with all its advantages.

Olson defines how an open poem appears to be. If a poet leaves a space in his poem, he means, that space is to be occupied by the breath of the poet. Similarly, if he suspends a word or syllable at the end of a line, it is the time for the eye to go to the next line. The typewriter can produce pauses, shorter than a pause that a comma can produce, for it possess certain symbols and they are readily available. “What does not change / is the will to change”. The machine can also produce multiple margins and the poet can exploit it to the maximum.

“sd he:

to dream takes no effort

to think is easy

to act is more difficult

but for a man to act after he has taken thought, this!

is the most difficult thing of all” (*Selected Writings* 23)

There is a progressing of meaning here, denoted by the forward breathing, and then a withdrawal without any kind of external influence. The typewriter is the “authentic, personal and instantaneous” recorder of the

poet's work. Williams and Pound have already utilized these possibilities. What is important is the reading and its 'measurer' is the ear, not the eye. That is, the ear is the threshold of projective verse.

Projective is concerned with the reality of both the poem as itself and what lies outside it. It denotes a matter of content followed by people like Homer, Euripides and Seami, and it is different from the content of the present day literary masters. The content of verse will change by the time the projective purpose of it is identified. Sometimes a poem will begin with the breathing of the composer and also ends with his breathing. Olson also discusses the term "objectism": it is a word that represents how a man is related to experience and it is mandatory for a line to the poet. It is like "wood" which is very clean by the time it is issued from nature, and it is shaped as man puts his hand on it. Olson defines objectism as "the getting rid of the lyrical interference of the individual as ego" (*Selected Writings* 24). He says that man himself is an object irrespective of his advantages.

"The use of a man" is determined by the question, how he conceives his relation to nature? If he "sprawls", he shall hardly find anything to sing, but if he remains within himself, he can listen to himself and this enables him to visualize the secrets that objects share. In the same manner, artists act in the field of objects, and they reach at 'dimensions' much broader than what ordinary people can comprehend. The problem with man is that he tries to render his seriousness to work of art so that it can carry a

position along with other objects of nature which is of course complex. Even in the act of destructions, nature works with reverence. The privilege of man is 'breath', his extended dimension is 'sound' and one of his proudest acts is 'language'. Olson states: "...when a poet rests in these as they are in himself, then he, if he chooses to speak from these roots, works in that area where nature has given him size, projective size" (*Selected Writings* 25).

Olson establishes that projective technique has been successfully put to work in ancient dramas. The "projective size" of Euripides' play *The Trojan Women* enables it to stand beside the Aegean. In the same way, for Olson, in *Hagoromo*, the Fisherman and the Angel stand clear. These works were issued from men who conceived verse, bearing in mind the relevance of human voice without any reference to the person who writes or the place where the lines come from. At this point, Olson emphasizes how projective verse is going to be of great use for the contemporary writer. If it is driven ahead "along the course it dictates", verse can carry much larger material than language has done since the Elizabethan age. Olson is of the view that *Cantos* make more "dramatic sense" than the plays of Eliot; the methodology employed in *Cantos* proves the problem of larger contents, and that of Eliot's is an example of the "present day danger" for his verse goes easy rather than what it ought to be. Olson points out certain merits of Eliot; still the problem is that he is not projective. Eliot preferred to stay

inside ‘the non-projective’ and thus he failed as a dramatist. He has his roots only in his scholastic mind and stayed at the place where the ear and the mind had been. From the ear, he had only outward mobility, whereas a projective poet will go downwards through his writings to the exact place – the throat where the breath comes from; where “breath has its beginnings, where drama has to come from, where, the coincidence is, all act springs” (*Selected Writings* 26).

Olson, in his letter to Elaine Feinstein repeats this notion: “form is never anymore than an extension of content.” He believes in truth and wants beauty to remain with the thing itself. He does not find anything noteworthy with speech rhythm and its advantage is “illiteracy”. He says: “... speech as a communicator is prior to the individual and is picked up as soon as and with ma’s milk” (*Selected Writings* 27). Speech will rhyme if only someone possesses it. In “Equal, That is, To the Real Itself” Olson says how John Keats came to that “irritable reason after fact and reason” (*Selected Writings* 46) which is otherwise called “Negative Capability”. He contradicts Keats and his idea of Negative Capability that is a “writer’s ability to accept uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason” (*Merriam Webster’s* 802). Keats says that an author who possesses negative capability will be objective and he will not be guided by any kind of intellectual or philosophical didacticism. Olson explains this concept in a different manner: “No matter what it amounts to,



mystery confusion doubt, it has a power, it is what I mean by Negative Capability” (*Selected Writings* 46).

The Nineteenth Century brought significant changes in creative writing, but this got wasted in the Twentieth Century due to “ignorance and abuse of its truth”. Melville was part of this change and while at the workshop of *Moby Dick*, he wrote to Hawthorne: “By visible truth we mean the apprehension of the absolute condition of present things” (*Selected Writings* 47). The former age owed a very positive environment and Olson says: “An idea shook loose, and energy and motion became as important a structure of things as that they are plural, and, by matter, mass” (*Selected Writings* 47). The importance of space got deteriorated and quantity became the *leit motif* of the outside world. Nothing was inert and all things were to be perceived; at this context, man, all of a sudden possessed and repossessed a character which Olson terms as “physicality”. Reality reentered the scene and the human beings were in pursuit of inquiring how every action and thought are to be re-established. It had its impacts on writing: “discrete” was no longer the “base for discourse”; classification was considered as mere “taxonomy”; and logic, a loose and inaccurate system like the body and the soul (*Selected Writings* 48).

Melville incorporates the possibilities of “congruence” in his prose. It was a “spatial intuition” to Kant and Olson says Melville possessed its powers by the time when he was born. Melville’s prose is distinct in such a

way that sometimes its rhetoric appears to contradict even with it. He is interested in endowing more general space than many other writers.

Melville's novel *Moby Dick* is noted for his use of "enormous" space. This very space that the novel is made of has the properties of "projective space". Melville makes things that are transparent and homogenous to stand out due to his use of "elliptical and hyperbolic spaces" (*Selected Writings* 48).

Olson alleges that a great deal of "academicism" has been wasted through studies on Melville by people like Stern. They usually focus on the use of allegory and symbols in Melville and his contemporaries. "As the Master said to me in the dream," says Olson, "of rhythm is image / of image is knowing / of knowing there is / a construct" (*Selected Writings* 50) and he declares that it is quantum physics that can give much evidence in this context. He was highly influenced by 'quantum physics', the branch of physics that uses quantum theory to describe and predict the properties of a physical system. Quantum theory says that radiant energy is transmitted in the form of discrete units. Thus, Olson believes that nothing could substitute objects and it was an abuse on the part of a writer to make symbol represent objects. For example, light is not merely a wave, but also a corpuscle. "Image loses its relational force by transferring its occurrence as allegory does" (*Selected Writings* 52). American painters like Pollock and Kline adhere to Olson's theories. Melville realized this secret one

hundred years ago and his “whale” is the best example. Melville was never tempted like Whitman, Emerson and Thoreau, and it was not his mission to “inflate the physical”. Olson finds Melville as a typical model since he never “take the model for the house, the house for the model, death is the open road, the soul or body is a boat, etc” (*Selected Writings* 51). Unlike Hawthorne, he did not make any attempt to render some spiritual outlook to them. Melville found himself incapable of using symbols and images due to “congruent” reasons.

Olson relates “the actual character and structure of the real” to a state of inertia. He says “I pick up on calm or passivity” (*Selected Writings* 51). A harpoon can be thrown accurately from a mild repose. He could focus on varied aspects of Melville’s thoughts because he relates the “feelings or necessity” of the inert to a “passivity”, a position of the rest through instant and very powerful actions. Only from a calmness of mind can Melville invent the swiftness of the whale, the inordinate will of Ahab, the harpooner’s skill to kill. “The inertial structure of the world is a real thing which not only exerts effects upon matter but in turn suffers such effects” (*Selected Writings* 52). Through his reading of *Moby Dick*, Olson comes to conclusion that the “metrical structure of the world” is directly linked to the “inertial structure”. He says that the famous scientist Albert Einstein also established the same concept through his “phenomena of gravitation” and the relation of the “field of inertia” on matter. For Olson,

things are absolute conditions and they remain so because the real structures are supple.

Like Williams' and Donald Davie's writings, Olson's "Projective Verse" also influenced many writers. Williams found it as an extension of his idea of variable foot by announcing that an "advance of estimable proportions is made by looking at the poem as a field rather than an assembly of more or less ankylosed lines" (Rosenthal 254). He linked the essay's importance to the fact that the chief commitment of the intelligence of contemporary time was the restructuring of a poem in a very innovative manner.

Williams experienced some sort of fatherly pride in Olson's greatness. Most of the poets associated with Olson possess close resemblance to Williams on the whole than Pound. Davie, in his essay "Ezra Pound: Poet as Sculptor" finds "Projective Verse" as an aid to understand the precise characteristic of Pound's experimentation with the structure of the rhythm. He believed that Pound, along with the poets he has influenced, worked for poetry of "presentative simultaneity" (Rosenthal 254) and not for energy and time sequence, and thus, he finds Olson's ideas quite supporting. But what Davie overlooked while talking about Pound and Olson is "the relation between Pound's conception of *periplum* – defined by Hugh Kenner as 'the image of successive discoveries breaking upon the unconsciousness of the voyager' – and

Olson's conception of the poetic process" (qtd. in Rosenthal 255) which is "one perception must immediately and directly lead to a further perception" (*Collected Prose* 240). Olson speaks like someone who is at work, not exactly like a theoretician or a scholar. He discusses about "poetic action" and his voice is more similar to that of a captain of some sports event. Olson's poetics resembles Dylan Thomas' description of poetry as "a moving column of words and from his image of blaspheming down the stations of the breath" (Rosenthal 255). For Olson, the process is "composition by field"; such a composition of poem will be a "high energy-construct, at all points, an energy discharge" (*Collected Prose* 240). At this point Olson proves that "form is never more than an extension of content" (*Collected Prose* 240).

Olson's "projective verse" is set far apart from Pound's idea of *periplum* and Eliot's "objective correlative". The attention here is not to any sequence of images or any deliberate efforts to the "externalization of speaking psyche" through the medium of language. Olson is talking of a poet who works by 'ear' rather than 'what the eye suggests' in relation to the spacing of movement and of silences, and sweeps and pauses and he seems to have surprised Davie when he says that British poetry in general is self-conscious about the attitudes and tones of sensibility but not about the use of language or rhythm. His theory creates some sort of confusion between spatial arrangement of the words and lines of the poem on one

side and the movement of the poem on the other. “The avowed intention ‘to get on with it, keep moving’ is blocked by a certain narcissism of form, the poet’s over-absorption in his own voice not as the embodying element of the curve of the poem but as a reflection of his own self-awareness”(Rosenthal 256). Olson’s “Projective Verse” is more vulnerable to the criticism of itself being anti-aesthetic. Traditional conceptualization of aesthetics is at stakes within the contours of Olson’s definition of a radically open and free aesthetics.

Olson’s style is different from the dead decorum of what we normally think of as beautiful style. His thoughts are often sophisticated. He is aware of his poetic history and could write poetic theories and complicated poems by some criteria that carry elegance and power. He is a “solid theorist and practitioner in what by this time can well be called the tradition of the experimental” (Rosenthal 272). He tried to elaborate his personal visions. In “Call Me Ishmael”, he wrote: “I am willing to ride Melville’s image of man, whale and ocean to find in him prophecies, lessons he himself would not have spelled out” (13). Such personal liberty that he enjoyed provided him the base to formulate his own poetic theories. His vision focused on the concept that the way to the universal was through something very particular. This is how he sees it: “the intimate and the concrete of the present ... enabled [Melville] ... to loose [sic.] himself into space and time and, in their dimensions, to fell and comprehend such an

object as the Pyramids, to create, in like dimensions, an Ahab and a White Whale” (*Call Me* 101).

Olson says that like anything else, one can explore deep and find new things from Human Universe. It can also be defined with the available terms. The major difficulty in discovering it is that, this is within us and nothing outside the closed world. “We are ourselves both the instrument of discovery and the instrument of definition” (*Human Universe* 53).

Language is the prime of the matter and first the condition of it must be examined thoroughly – language “in its double sense of discrimination (logos) and of shout (tongue)” (*Human Universe* 53).

Since we do live in a generalizing time, it has its own impacts on the best – especially of men and things. ‘Logos’ or ‘disclosure’ imposed its ‘abstractions’ in the mind of the people, and thus the other function of language seems to be restored. Several people turn back to the hieroglyphs or ideograms to maintain the right balance. Olson says: “The distinction here is between language as the act of the instant and language as the act of thought about the instant” (*Selected Writings* 54). A man will act according to his thought and it is not easy to release language from action. It was the Greeks who went on to declare every speculation as confined in the universe of discourse. They considered language as an absolute, not as an instrument, and it was impossible to extend it, whatever the urge had been. Man and language are in the hands of power and beauty, and they do not

need any exaggeration of words. Presently, Olson says that there are universes; one is man himself as an organism and the other one is his environment – the earth and the planets.

Olson finds fault with the Greeks saying that their invention of two means of discourse is a hindrance to man's participation in his own experience, and thus, is a barrier to discovery. He points out: "They [Greeks] are what followed from Socrates' readiness to generalize, his willingness (from his own bias) to make a 'universe' out of discourse instead of letting it rest in its most serviceable place" (*Selected Writings* 54). "Logos" is to be mastered by man and it is not the ultimate discipline. One should go beyond this to experience the direct perception and the contradictory elements that "dispose of argument". The harmony of the universe lies in the specific order of all created things. The two great means – logic and classification – are very much visible in Aristotle and they are intertwined on habits of thought that they interfere with action.

Olson's "Projective Theory" says that form is an extension of content. What makes everything "unsatisfactory" is the belief of certain people that they can create a form like story, poem or whatever it is by selecting from the full content or from some part. Plato possessed a sort of "latitude and style" that was a source of inspiration for poets belonging to Olson's generation. Olson could not agree with Plato's 'world of ideas' and he says that this concept is also dangerous like Aristotle's:



Idealism of any sort, like logic and like classification, intervene at just the moment they become more than the means they are, are allowed to become ways as end instead of ways to end, *end*, which is more than this instant, than you on this instant, than you, figuring it out, and acting, so.

*(Selected Writings 55)*

The contemporary writers also struggle to shape experience with the available definitions and expressions so that they could stay comfortably in the human universe. Olson thinks that this is the original issue to be exposed and it is a matter of comparison otherwise termed as “symbology”. The false faces like “metaphors and performance” hide the “active intellectual states” from use; “All that comparison ever does is to set up a series of *reference* points: to compare is to take one thing and try to understand it by marking its similarities to or differences from another thing” (*Selected Writings 56*). Every object is unique in itself and a mere comparison or description doesn’t clearly specify what it really is. A thing comes to our mind with its self existence and not with its reference to something else, and we are interested in its own ‘particularity’. This is a major problem that we confront – the thing as it is and how far is it relevant to human beings. Olson is quite confident in finding a solution to this conflict. He explains why “Maya” still retains its significance. There was a time when man could enjoy the expression and gestures of all living things.

They invented a written record called “hieroglyphs” which itself was “verse”, and the signs that were inscribed on stones retained the power of objects and Olson calls them as images.

Olson enquires whether it is possible to repossess man with his dynamic that he previously owned. The inherited formulations like “man as the center of phenomenon” or “God at the center with man as God’s reflection” has suppressed nature as a mere “third party” resulting in the evading of nature forever. Science also has “upset all balance and blown value, man’s peculiar responsibility, to the winds” (*Selected Writings* 59). Instead of chaos, he uses “unselected ness” to represent man’s original condition. “Selectiveness” is the impulse by which man proceeds to do something about the “unselected ness”. He says that “skin” is the “meeting edge” of man and external reality, and everything happens here. Since man and external reality are very much involved with one another, they would be considered as one. Olson suggests a way to restore man’s lost relevance. Due to man’s inner energy, certain things are separated from “external pick ups” like his “dreams, thoughts, desires, sins, hopes, fears, faiths and loves” (*Selected Writings* 59). These inner things are inseparable from the objects, persons or events which are the content of them and man either represents or re-enacts them without the assistance of any symbol. Man makes “his own special selection” from the phenomenal field and thus we speak of personality. What happens at skin is different from what is within.

“The process of image” cannot be identified separately from “the stuff” it works on. That is form is an extension of content. Werner Karl Heisenberg, the celebrated German physicist and one of the founders of quantum mechanics, in his principle, admitted that a “thing can be measured in its mass only by arbitrarily assuming a stopping of its motion or in its motion only by neglecting, for the moment of the measuring, its mass” (*Selected Writings* 61). The result of this observation is that one will fail to get the desired result. The purpose of art is not to describe, but “to enact”.

Whatever flows from a man should reach the outer world, whether it is in the shape of a single human being, or a group which we call “society”, in an unbroken manner without any loss of quality. Olson says: “Man at his peril breaks the full circuit of object, image, action at any point. The meeting edge of man and the world is also his cutting edge” (*Selected Writings* 62). The experiences that come in here for an active man, and if he is fresh in his coming in, it will be the same for his going out. Man influences external reality and he should treat it as part of his own process. If he thinks in the opposite way, he will have a tendency to use it for “arbitrary and willful purposes” that will eventually give way to a change in the face of nature and to “arrest and divert” its forces. Man has the power to turn everything against nature and often the modern man fails to understand the fact that what he turns against nature can even turn against him. Man has a tendency to “depart from nature” and thus to “depart from

his own chance” and intends to do what nature “disallows”, resulting in the loss of energy. Olson is of the view that man “destroy destroy destroy energy everyday” (*Selected Writings* 63) and he vehemently expresses his disagreement:

It is too much. It is too much to waste time on, this idiot who spills his fluids like some truculent and fingerless chamaco hereabouts who wastes water at the pump when birds are dying all over the country in this hottest of the months and women come in droves in the morning begging for even a tasa of the precious stuff to be poured in the amphoras they wing on their hips as they swing their babies. Man has made himself an ugliness and a bore. (*Selected Writings* 63-4)

1930s was noted for its shift in interest from political verse, and Olson should have made his own imprints as a traditional poet, if he had chosen that way. His earlier poems hardly give any clue about what was to come later and they were usually published in *Harper's Bazaar*, which was odd in a retrospective way due to his reputation as an experimental poet later. Like Melville, Olson also intended to discover ways to release himself in space and time which was totally free from corrupt politics and conventional academics. Such a search leads him to *The Maximus Poems* that opens in Gloucester in Massachusetts where he spent his childhood days,

and also, a later stage of his life. The poem then leads to the self revelation of ‘Maximus’ the speaker and his concept of ‘polis’. This poem is discussed in detail in the next chapter.

Olson’s earlier poems, especially those written before 1945, adhere too much to such convention. His “White Horse” (1940) is “a formalist exercise in rhymed quatrains” (Foster 29). It was not at all unusual or disturbing like most of his poems. The poem revolves around the theme of desire – white horse being the symbol of masculine desire and the black one, the feminine.

He grew more human,  
less woman she,  
image approached  
animality. (*Collected Poems* 6)

The poem is a fine example of Olson’s metrical skill. The ideas are presented directly and the readers are aware of the technical restraints during the course of the poem. It is noted for its grace and mellifluous, but at the same time, highly formal verse.

Olson’s poetic and epistemological principles were actually a revision of the Objectivist position of the 1930s:

It is no accident that Pound and Williams both were involved variously in a movement which got called ‘objectivism’. . . . .  
What seems to me a more valid formulation for present use is

‘objectism’, a word to be taken to stand for the kind of relation of man to experience which a poet might state as the necessity of a line or a work to be as wood is, to be as clean as wood is as it issues from the hand of nature, to be as shaped as wood can be when a man has his hand to it.

Objectism is the getting rid of the lyrical interference of the individual as ego, of the ‘subject’ and his soul, that peculiar presumption by which western man has interposed himself between what he is as a creature of nature (with certain instructions to carry out) and those other creations of nature which we may, with no derogation, call objects. (*Human Universe* 59-60)

Olson’s proximity to the objectivists is quite clear when he says that “it is now too late to be bothered with subjectivism” and when he defines objectism as “getting rid of the lyrical interference of the individual as ego”. Louis Zukofsky, in 1931 stated that “Objectification” has to do with “self contained” interpretations and thus objective (contextual) not “subjective” in nature. Zukofsky’s statement resembles Olson’s description of a line or a verse as wood when he defines “Objectification” as “the appearance of the art form as an object”. As a corollary to objectification, Zukofsky says: “Sincerity is the care for detail. Before the legs of the table are made, you can see a nice top of a nice grain in the wood, its potential,

anyway, to be the complete table” (Dembo and Pondrom 34). Olson looks similar to Zukofsky’s idea of sincerity due to his claim that it is mandatory for man to achieve “humilitas”. As poets, Olson and Zukofsky differ vastly in their temperaments, but it is their programmes that adhere to overlap more than their poetry.

Olson viewed “objectism” in a historical context that included “the exploration of outer space and the penetration of particulate matter” (Von Hallberg, “Olson, Whitehead,” 87). He explained such “historical context” through the medium of science and technology and it was thrived by capitalism. The question that remained was whether poetry could discover value in such a world and time.

I would argue that times of physical expansion (I do not say terrestrial, because ours is already both beyond the earth and below the particle of sand) provoke man’s sensuality, stir up what the spirit has caused to sleep or be blunted, and the result is a double thing, a huge sweeping sickness of materialism (due to man as brute) and the other expression of it, objectism, a sharp sure hunger of the senses that, if they pierce deep enough, if they ride this joy in the mortal particulars, they will find a dimension, a ‘spiritual dimension’ if you like, to satisfy the soul. (Olson, “The Mystery”)

In the early 1950s, Olson was arguing for an epistemological shift towards objectism. A great deal of Olson's discussion of his "stance toward reality" was "polemical, not precise". "Form is never more than an extension of content" was actually Creeley's notion and this principle involved something more than poetics. "The basic idea anyway form is that one, that form is never more than an extension of content – a non literary sense, certainly. I believe in Truth!" (*Human Universe* 95). The implied meaning of Creeley's statement is that "the object – that which a poem is 'about' its content – is more complete than is usually thought: the content has its own form; it has no need of a poet who can impose form on it" (Von Hallberg, "Olson, Whitehead," 102). While treated in a polemical context, Creeley's formulation means that the content is quite complete, and it is itself formal, and that its form is manifested. But, for Olson, the poet's task was to extend content into form, the type of form suitable to the particular context. Olson continued to redefine the relation between form and content. Initially, he was interested in the epistemological issues, but later he moved towards metaphysical issues and he found nature lacking in proper order. In "The Special View of History", he says: It is the principle of randomness seen in its essential application, not in any serial order imposed at random on either chance or accident (the new tautologies of the old Chaos) but in the factual observation of how creation does occur: by the success of its own accident" (48). He contradicted this very same idea in 1952. In



“Human Universe”, he said, “Nothing is accident, and man, no less than nature, does nothing without plan or the discipline to make plan fact” (*Human Universe* 7). He finds the creation of order, very strictly a human function here. Again, in “The Special View of History” Olson declares:

If order is not the world – and the world hasn’t been the most interesting image of order since 1904, when Einstein showed the beauty of the Kosmos and one then does pass on, looking for more – then order is man. And one can define the present (it does need to be noticed that the present is post the Modern) as the search for order as man himself is the image if same. (47)

Alfred Whitehead had a different kind of approach to this humanistic concept of order. “It is the mark of a high-grade organism to eliminate, by negative apprehension, the irrelevant accidents in its environment, and to elicit massive attention to every variety of systematic order...” (250). Olson could not agree with him and wrote in the margin, “The egotism of creation” (Von Hallberg, “Olson, Whitehead,” 103). The problem was that Olson failed to understand Whitehead completely. When Whitehead mentioned “high grade organism” he did not mean man alone. His definition of order is process, and the process exactly begins in the atom and not with the man. His system worked under the principle that the

order attained by each atom differs from the order of man's experience only quantitatively. In "The Special View of History", Olson takes a reciprocal view when he distinguishes man from the rest of the world:

The actual, turns out to be the determinative [factor] which isolates a human being from any other creature or thing in creation, as decisively as the fact that man is the distinguishing one in differentiating human experience from any other – a stone, or a garbage pail, not to speak of flowers or apes or the Abominable Snowman. Man is, He acts. (34)

The Objectivists are antithetical to the concept that order has its origin in man. They argue for a poetics that is opposite to Olson's ambitions. The Objectivists believed that they were developing Poundian principles and derived energy from Pound's poetry. But the truth was that their role model was not the "Pound of the Cantos", but "Pound the critic" and "Pound the imagist".

Another prominent member among the Black Mountain group of poets is Robert Creeley and he is more committed to poetry than criticism or literary theory. He has never attempted any serious defenses of his poetic theory and practice, and has never tried to charm others to his way of writing. His explanations appeared rather as prefaces or notes to his various publications. But this does not mean that Creeley's writings lack any wide vision of life. His "picture of the universe and his way of writing are as

inextricably bound together as are those of any of the Black Mountain Poets” (Davey, *Theory* 115). His limited critical utterances introduce him as a hesitant and apprehensive man, unclear about the structure of reality encircling him. What he can say about the world is extremely limited. He learned the principle of how inseparable is form from content from Valerie, and from Williams and learned the concept of language as the collective work of the whole human spirit. Louis Zukofsky was an important source to him, and from him, he comprehended the notion that poet must not show himself in the poem. But Olson was his major source of inspiration. William Carlos Williams is noted for his use of “end-stopped” lines and his poem “The Lily” is a fine example.

The branching head of  
 tiger -lilies through the window  
 in the air - (*Collected Earlier Poems* 344).

The words, “of”, “window” and “air” are end-stopped and they receive special emphasis, much greater than in conventional speech. Ekbert Faas says that break like the one between the first and second lines are intended to speed up the poem and by “reading this way made visible . . . the strangeness of the struggle to articulate the fact of the sentence” (151).

Robert Creeley started writing poems as an undergraduate at Harvard and his style was somewhat like that of Williams.

The advantage of end-stopping was that, it rendered adequate attention to the grammatical items like prepositions, conjunctions and articles – words that might have slipped attention while the ear listens to them for meaning. Juan Amador Bedford in his study of Williams' influence on Creeley says, "thingness underline [their] integrity . . . and loads them with that energy that makes them reach forward toward the next line, thus stressing their importance and singularity" (220-21). This technique has its own limitations. It suggests the arbitrary nature of syntax, broken in the middle and the phrases lose their impression of certainty which was usually provided by the conventional grammatical structures and speech rhythms. "Language reveals its artificial nature, and the artificiality of the way in which we make sense of the world is exposed" (Foster, *Understanding* 82). Creeley's poem "Words" gives a different meaning if it is read as a 'statement'. It is possible that the reader may think it as a line from some popular literature.

You are always  
with me,  
there is never  
a separate

place. (*The Collected Poems* 320)

The poem achieves the specific meaning only if it is presented in Creeley's

way as above. It obtains the rhythmic tensions due to the hesitations and syncopations prompted by the powerful breaks at the ends of the lines. A serious reader can feel the leading motive of the poet being lost through the overuse of sentiments. This poem reminds us of Creeley's ideal that the words as well as the speaker determine the border of what can be said. Charles Bernstein says: "Writing becomes not the wish to express a self egocentrically but rather to hear – attend – the order of syllables in the world and in so sounding find who 'I' as a 'self' am" (294).

The most admired poet during Creeley's time was Robert Frost. His poetics provided an 'instructive contrast' to Creeley. Frost's poems were noted for the sounds which carried sense and he depended on the spoken language tones and cadences that appeared to be meaningful. The poems achieved their beauty not because of the actual words but due to their music. Frost's prosody is an example of the poetic taste that existed during the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century. The period admired conventional poetic techniques. Creeley's writings challenged this tradition by projecting the technicalities of the poem as the dominant objective. He confronted his reader "not with the sound of sense but with syncopated rhythms that drew attention to the materiality of words – and the materiality of sense" (Foster, *Understanding* 85). William Carlos Williams, the major figure who inspired the Black Mountain Poets, defined a poem as a "small (or large) machine made of words" (*Selected Essays* 256).

Though Creeley and Frost belonged to New England, they were New Englanders with some differences between each other. Frost was more affiliated to the Concord Transcendentalists and he very much resembled Emerson. He is an epitome of what Olson condemned “wisdom as such”. Creeley’s affinity is to Thoreau. His insistence on clarity and particular is visible in the works of Emily Dickinson. She found rhythm as a means to emphasize the process in which syntax allows meaning. Often, she broke her lines with dashes to hinder the free flow of cadences.

Similar to Emily Dickinson’s writings, Creeley’s poems must also be considered as enactments, not imitations of ideal form. Creeley finds Dickinson’s worldliness as a quality that makes him closer to her. He agreed with Emerson’s view that “how poetry takes place was crucial to American writers” (Packard 166). Duncan points out that Emerson’s attention, curiosity and respect were important for Creeley. He says: “at first we think to find [Creeley] self-expressive, but this is not the case. He is concerned ultimately with his medium and the world, not his private affairs” (*Fictive Certainties* 228).

Creeley began his literary career as a short story writer and thus he studied the capacities of the language to express exact psychological states. He talks about reality in “Notes for a New Prose” published in *Origin* in 1951. His belief was that reality was something just to be believed. Poets were aware of this fact and Creeley wanted to introduce the same concept

in fiction. “There is nothing more real, in essence, about a possible prose than there is about any possible poetry” (Foster, *Understanding* 93). A good writer can present a “conjectured situation” in an actual manner. In “A Note on the Objective” also, Creeley says that the poets usually want to be “free of imprecise feeling making as complete a break as possible with the subjective, things have to come in before they go out” (Foster, *Understanding* 94).

Creeley is solely concerned with his use of language in his works. Language to him, in a sense, is a political act and he feels that the greatest responsibility of the poet is the integrity of the language. “The single most concern of Creeley, the writer,” asserts Arthur L. Ford “has been this obsession with getting the word precisely right, in terms of the demands of language and in terms of his own insistences” (23). In an interview, Creeley told Michael Andre: “I feel writing primarily the experience of language, and diversity of contexts, and diversity of changes and significations. I’m frankly and selfishly interested in words” (194). His poems are assemblages of obscure but precise ideas and they are not mere perfectly constructed machines. Gustaf Sobin identifies Creeley’s poems with a waterfall – “the lines themselves like so many ledges and the poem, the thrust of the poem, like a waterfall, falling down over those ledges, splashing, plummeting as it does” (Foster, “An Interview” 31). It is not easy to separate form and psychology from Creeley’s poetry and prose and

the movement of words is in high demand in his poetry. Creeley once said, “I think somehow poetry includes certainly the attitudes and feelings one has, but they are not the particular point” (Sheppard 56). What matters more in a poem is the skillful amalgamation of rhythm and syntax.

Most of Creeley’s predecessors like Kenneth Fearing, Kenneth Patchen, Muriel Rukeyser and Kenneth Rexroth were interested in poetry as a means of communication, as a vehicle for politics, metaphysical speculation and spiritual matters, whereas Creeley’s works concentrated on formal matters. Much of his poetry is filled with conventional structuring devices and techniques. Creeley adopted Olson’s Projective Poetics in the 1960s and 1970s. His other poetry is traditionally shaped, at times in the form of couplets or quatrains and occasionally rhymed, even though it has unusual line breaks. It is orderly and often deals with conventional themes. His essays, reviews and interviews are published, respectively, under the titles *A Quick Graph* (1970), *A Sense of Measure* (1973) and *Contexts of Poetry: Interviews* (1961-1971). These books consist of Creeley’s consistent statement on thoughts and other’s poetics since 1940.

Creeley got acquainted with Williams, Pound and Olson mostly through correspondence. Throughout his letters, he insisted on his belief that:

The ‘point’ of a poem is not what it suggests beyond itself  
but rather what it is, and the form (both in its visual



arrangement and – more importantly – in its arrangement of sounds) is given to it by its own necessities, that is, by what the poet feels and thinks is needed to present the poem. (Ford 24)

For him, a poem is not merely an ego, or an image, but has a lot more to do than what a metaphor does. He is primarily concerned with what a poem itself is rather than what it has to convey beyond itself. He is interested both in the visual arrangement of a poem and the arrangement of sounds. A poem attains its form based on its necessities, that is, what the poet perceives and imagines ought to be the prerequisite of the poem. The form of the poem attains its shape during the process of its composition, it is not something preplanned. But he never insists that a poem must adhere to some sense of measure. He wanted the poem to be devoid of all pre-conceived rhythmic structures or anything of such kind. In one of his correspondences, Creeley wrote to Olson; “Form is never more than an extension of content” and during an interview with Linda Wagner, he said, “I would now almost amend the statement to say, ‘Form is what happens’ ” (“A Colloquy” 82). But the view of Creeley in the early 1960s, as evident from “The New World”, was much more different when he said: “The poem is not a signboard, pointing to content ultimately to be regarded; but is, on the contrary, a form inhibited by intelligence and feeling. It is the way a poem speaks, not the matter, that proves its effects ...” (*Quick*

*Graph* 207).

Creeley believed that he belonged to a “definable tradition” (Ford 25) of twentieth century American Poetry, provided “tradition” is strictly taken in a general sense, and it accepts the distinctions among the members of its group. The most prominent tradition, visible at that time was largely supported by the New Critics. Creeley belonged to a parallel tradition – the Black Mountain tradition, comprising of Pound, Olson, Zukofsky etc. which was called by M.L. Rosenthal as “The Projectivist Movement” (151-57).

Most of Creeley’s articles, published in 1965, presented the poetic situation that prevailed during the 1940s. In “A Note on Ezra Pound” Creeley talks about the role models who influenced the young Creeley during that time: Auden, whose “socially based use of irony became the uselessly exact vigor of repetitive verse patterns” and Stevens, whose “mind one respected, in the questions it realized, but again whose poetry had fallen to the questionable fact of device” (*Quick Graph* 95). Creeley was highly influenced by the impact of Olson’s “Projective Verse” when it was published in 1950. In “A Note on Ezra Pound”, he said,

It was an excitement many of us shared, because what confronted us in 1950 was a closed system indeed, poems patterned upon exterior and traditionally accepted models. The new Criticism of that period was dominant and would

not admit the possibility of verse considered as an ‘open field’. (*Quick Graph* 188)

Admiring Olson, he wrote in the review of Olson’s *Y & X*: “Any movement poetry can now make beyond the achievement of Pound, Williams, et al, must make use of the act of their work, and, further, of what each has stressed as the main work now to be done” (*Quick Graph* 151).

Creeley is of the view that Ezra Pound by his own example and teaching developed new arenas for American poetics in the twentieth century. Pound explored the various possibilities of poetry and thus could secure a certain level of technical excellence that was capable of introducing a poetic standard for the forthcoming years. Creeley learned from Pound that a poet should look and listen closely because the clarity of perception and the mobility of the line were quite crucial during the process of composition. In the essay, “Introduction to Charles Olson II”, he writes:

It was impossible to avoid the insistence he put on precisely how the line goes, how the word is, in its context, what has been done, in the practice of verse – and what now seems possible to do. It was, then, a measure he taught – and a measure in just that sense William Carlos Williams insisted upon. (*Quick Graph* 96)

Dr. Williams of Rutherford, a general practitioner and poet, was adored by

many poets of Creeley's time. He was a compassionate man that he extended moral support to unknown poets by encouraging them. Creeley recognized certain impulses of his own in this person, which were yet to take 'form'. He quoted Dr. Williams profusely with due respect and reverence.

William Carlos Williams urged for authenticity of utterance based on the authenticity of experience that was possessed by the early settlers and explorers of America, which, somehow, had been lost on the long run. "Columbus, Bradford and Boone experienced directly the virgin continent and captured that immediacy; whereas others only wrote about it, removed from the experience" (Ford 27). Williams possessed this category of authenticity; he was interested in the original documents of America's past and not in the diluted history versions. This concept of Williams led Creeley to look for poetry that was made of words which were "concrete, specific and real". Creeley's favourite dictum was what Williams often said in *Paterson*: "No ideas but in things."

Robert Duncan can be considered as the leading theoretician of the Black Mountain group since he tried to explain the grounds of the group's poetry. Olson's chief accusation against Duncan was that he was pursuing "wisdom as such", and Duncan's answer was that it was "pretentious fiction" (Foster, *Understanding* 122). Duncan was under the impression that Olson was "so keen upon the *virtu* of reality that he rejects my

‘wisdom’ not as it might seem at first glance because ‘wisdom’ is vice; but because my wisdom is not real wisdom” (*Fictive Certainties* 65). Olson himself adored wisdom and Duncan felt that Olson’s protagonist Maximus is a “sage and teacher” involved with both political economical affairs – a kind of “market place wisdom”. Olson involved the wise intellects like philosophers, scholars and prophets in his works until they fulfilled his social vision. Duncan did not have any personal interests; he included those who were striking in his poems irrespective of being practical or true to some cause. Thought was melody to him.

Duncan, in his issue of *Audit* (1967), responded to certain questions that Olson had raised. He disagreed with Robin Blaser on his translation of Gerard de Nerval’s *Chimeras*, and it was an opportunity for him to express his views on poetics. His ideal was that a poem has a larger social obligation; it should carry forward the reality of man’s experience in terms of language and literature. He also wrote,

I work in meanings which I receive or find in research. I am not, as I have perhaps tediously reiterated, ‘my own poet’, but like Nerval, I seek to find my Self in the terms of a confluence of traditions that my faith follows toward the real in the commune of man’s numbers, images and names.

(“Returning to” 48-9)

In this respect, wisdom was a property like “numbers, images and names”

and thus it was a property of the poem, and this notion was its significance to a poet.

Emerson wanted the poet to write his poem “resigning himself to the divine aura which breathes through forms, and accompanying that” (Foster, *Understanding* 124) and Duncan was deeply influenced by this concept. His Emerson was the “Gnostic fatalist”, who submits to “whatever happens in the course of writing as revelation - not from an unconscious, but from a spiritual world” (*Fictive Certainties* 227). Duncan identified the spiritual world as a world of poetry. He found the sources of poetry in the “works of the marvelous,” a point where the writings of one poet merge or rhyme with the works of others. Duncan called himself as a “derivative poet” and he wanted everyone to “recognize correspondences or rimes between one’s own voice and the voice of other poets,” so that, they become “a source of ecstasy” (Foster, *Understanding* 125). The Theosophists were under the impression that the universe existed due to its immense network of correspondences and to Duncan all arts, including poetry got involved in a single unique system.

Gnosticism teaches the doctrine of Salvation and knowledge. Gnostics were people with secret knowledge (Gnosis) and their knowledge at once constituted them a superior class of beings, whose present and future status was essentially different from that of those who, for whatever reason, did not know. They taught that the ultimate end of all human beings

is to overcome the grossness of matter and to return to the Parent-Spirit, and such return will be facilitated by the appearance of some God-sent Saviour. (Arendzen, *Catholic Encyclopedia*). Theosophy propagates the principle of “Gnostic Poetics”, a Neo platonian stance that proposes a steady ideal universe. Even though the real things such as the body decay, the unrealities, the fantasies and the ideas will remain eternally. Duncan agrees with Pound, when he says, “All ages are contemporaneous for they were all spun out of the same grand system of fantasies” (*The H.D. Book, Part I, Chap. 3*” 80). The purpose of Duncan, the poet, was to manifest these ideas.

Duncan’s foster parents were associated with the local “Hermetic Brotherhood” and this prompted his life long fascination with the occult Hermeticism, Gnosticism, neo-Platonism and Christian religion. These types of interests fused with others in psychiatry, field psychology and modern art during his post-1938 period of travel between the East and West coasts of America: first in close proximity with Anais Nin and her New York circle and then as a major figure that led to the San Francisco Renaissance of the 1950s. After his meeting with Olson in 1947, he became a prominent member of the movement associated with Black Mountain College. His critical prose, published in avant-garde journals and booklets, represents a unique achievement, both for its theoretical originality and erudite comprehensiveness.

Duncan often emphasized his dissimilarity with Olson by stating that poetry was a revelation of language, not of personality. In 1969, during an interview with George Bowering, he stated that what he had made of as “composition by field” was different from Olson’s practice, and he did not want any dichotomy of “closed versus open”. Instead, Duncan made poems which were open, but which also contained closed elements. He emphasized such view during one of his interviews with Ekbert Faas:

If we have a field, how can we throw out closed forms? They are only forms within a field. In the early *Passages* there is a proposition that the universe has only the boundaries we imagine. Every step in science is the imagination of a new boundary and every boundary gives us a new figure of the universe. (61)

Duncan had often stated that the language of poetry should be an echo of the greater language in which the universe is written. He was of the view that in human language, we turn the sounds of our mouths into a language of things in order to imitate the way we experience. He says: “I think there is a primal intuition in our expression: The mountain speaks to me. So we try to speak back. What Piaget says makes sense to me. We speak back to something that speaks to us” (Faas 81). While on conversation, there is a co-operation going on between the world and person. If only we find the universe, our engagement in language is active. Many of the modern poets



had practical difficulty with language because they are no longer interested in knowing the universe in the right spirit. Language, for Duncan, is an engagement to find the universe. “Seeing” is very closely related to language or we imitate “seeing” in language. Reading precedes language. He quotes an example during his interview with Faas: “... we can read the tracks of the dinosaurs and we can understand them” (81). In the same way, as long as we are interested in universe, we read it.

In “Nel Mezzo Del Cammin Di Nostra Vita”, Duncan says that he could not separate Simon Rodilla, the creator of the three Watts towers from his works, “a trinity upbraided by himself” (*Roots and Branches* 22). The title of the poem is the opening line of Dante’s *Divine Comedy* and it rhymes Rodilla’s achievement with Dante’s. Here, he makes a reference to Olson’s warning in “Against Wisdom as Such” and asks not to separate wisdom from experience. Wisdom, once being distracted, may lead to theology and thus to religion. Dante’s theology is his experience and not the books and Rodilla’s towers stand far above the church. The towers and the *Divine Comedy* have outsoared their creators. In Duncan’s view, they attain perfection by “the scales of the marvelous”.

We can compare Duncan’s poetry to an astrologer’s celestial map, the “Zodiac, in which stars separated by vast distances seem linked in a visual and metaphysical order: certain stars form the shape of Sagittarius, the archer, while others form Capricorn – configurations that are believed

to be intimately related to one's fate" (Foster, *Understanding* 126). The universe is logically connected, but ways are not easy to comprehend. Duncan had deep faith in such beliefs and his fate as a child depended on it. People had varied opinions on the concept of Zodiac – the rationalists discarded it as mere absurdity, but for some it was as sure as the arrival seasons. For the latter, it was a means of universal harmony and comradeship.

The strength of Zodiac was its words, its "fictive power". Whether it is true is a matter of controversy, but its believers experienced its magnificent power of universal harmony. Even though astrology, Hermeticism, Gnosticism and such similar beliefs do not have a firm base in this material world, many could experience their effects, "transcendence and transfiguration were as actual as sunlight" (Foster, *Understanding* 127). To a great extent, Duncan's poems are indebted to such mysterious beliefs. His friend, Jess Collins, successfully made use of this belief in his collage, and Kenneth Anger, in films. Blavatsky and Crowley are dismissed by many as pretenders, but their ideas are directly linked to antiquity and were capable of strengthening and transforming art. "Theosophy was a relay through which a complex of feelings and beliefs reached the present" (Foster, *Understanding* 127). Duncan's poetry is a sequel to "the tradition of Gnostic revelation, Neo-Platonism, and *trobar clus* – the tradition of Dante, Pico della Mirandola, Marsilio Ficino, Shakespeare's *Tempest*,

orphism, Mallarme, symbolism, Rilke, Yeats, and much more” (Foster, *Understanding* 127).

Duncan was a prominent figure in the “Bay Area Community Poetry”, in the mid-twentieth century and he was at ease on his relation with the “Hermetic Brotherhood”, though it was not so for Olson. He made use of his theosophical background as a means to get beyond the limitations of rationalist thought and common sense. Olson was more interested in the theory of “Quantum Physics” and Duncan’s “wisdom” was of no use to him. But both shared the concept that the poem should avoid “the lyrical interference of the poem as ego”. From a different perspective, Duncan also reached the same point where Olson and Creeley had been, that is the belief that a poem was much more than that of a lyrical expression.

Duncan was overtly influenced by Emerson and his theory of fatalism. Emerson believed in a universe that was a single coherent unit and individuals were absolutely devoid of any control over it. In “Fate”, he wrote: “Let us build altars to the Beautiful Necessity which secures that all is made of one piece” (51). What attracted Duncan to Emerson was his willingness to yield and to be guided by some mystic power: “For Emerson, that power is the Over soul. For Duncan, it is tradition” (Foster, *Understanding* 130). Duncan’s earlier works adhere to this notion. He once commented these works as “forms embodying or expressing the content of

an inner psychological drama” (*Fictive Certainties* 30). He was more concerned with tradition and not the chance of using a poem as personal statement. He was much aware of the power of language when he wrote, “As I write, the writing talks to me” (*Fictive Certainties* 125).

Robert Browning’s ‘dramatic monologue’ was also of equal interest to Duncan. He used this as a tool to manipulate language as a voice, not of his own. Duncan explains: “Browning had practiced a kind of spiritualist’s art; he was a medium through whom a range of characters spoke, and yet the poems all had his own characteristic diction and cadences” (“Warp and Woof” 9). Duncan goes beyond in “Steins Limitations”, where he pushes Browning’s poetics “until the poet’s voice was virtually obscured in the voice of the person speaking through him” (Foster, *Understanding* 130). Duncan was attracted towards Browning due to his interest in “poetics of dictation” – the kind of poetics that let the poet to yield to voices that surpassed his will or intention. He paid due attention to “automatic writing”, a style followed by poets like W.B. Yeats and Rainer Maria Rilke.

Duncan was considered an “anarchist” in the Emerson-Thoreau tradition because of his unwillingness to condemn homosexuals as outcasts of society. Duncan himself was accused of being a homosexual, but at Berkely, he had a group of friends who could accept him irrespective of his personal life. Duncan found most people intolerable, other than his “libertarian and anarchist” friends. The homosexual communities failed to

provide an alternative, for Duncan felt that they were factions who claimed a superior awareness or sensibility. His essay “The Homosexual in Society” was an attack against the people who turned their sexual nature into “marketable oddities and sentimentalities”. He urged for a social situation where everyone could live with dignity with his or her own personal identity. He urged people to discard all special groups like nations, religions, sexes, races etc. and to look forward to freedom and tolerance in general. Many found Duncan’s essay quite radical at that time.

John Crowe Ransom dismissed Duncan’s poem “An African Elegy” written for the *Kenyan Review* after he had read Duncan’s essay “The Homosexual in Society”. Duncan somehow could not convince his arguments to Ransom and thus this poem never appeared in Ransom’s magazine. The poem is not a “homosexual advertisement” in any means. Duncan’s Africa is a metaphor for deep emotional conflict, “... the work is exceedingly private and inner, less concerned with homosexual desire than a desire for self-annihilation” (Foster, *Understanding* 133). The poem pays attention to language rather than ego.

Duncan was exploring the ways of getting out of the stigma inflicted upon him because of his lyrical work discussed above in the 1940s and 1950s. In this venture, he made use of “the formalist techniques and imitations of Stein”, “the poetry of dictation” etc. and eventually in Olson’s “Projective Verse”, he found one who could “open up everything I am”

(Duncan and Ginsberg 133). In *Origin*, he came across Levertov's "The Shifting" and Creeley's *The Gold Diggers* and they proved to be a "new artistic movement" in which he can also be a part. By the mid 1950s, he shifted the earlier directions of his poetry and in 1955, started to work for *Letters* and *The Opening of the Field*. In Donald Allan's anthology, *The New American Poetry*, he found a place among the San Francisco Poets, but his interest was to be identified as one among the Black Mountain Poets.

H.D.'s (Hilda Doolittle) poetics was closely associated with "Christian analogies" and "H.D.", Duncan said, "returned to the concept of the Christos as the incarnation of Helios, most real or only real in His Manhood" (*The H.D. Book*, Part II, Chap. 5" 83). For both the poets, "poetry as incarnation" was important, which was in contrast to the contemporary era. The political climate was quite unfavorable – Europe has just survived two great wars and people were under the impression that spiritual power could manifest in individuals. But the concept of "an individual invested with spiritual authority" was rejected as "a source for political authority". H.D.'s influence on Duncan's professional growth was noteworthy. "Basic to H.D.'s poetics was her Platonic, Gnostic view that the poet could be invested with the divine, the cosmic imperative of form" (Foster, *Understanding* 138).

We can see some other analogies from Christian theology in

Duncan's works. Duncan finds the roles of the poet and the priest almost similar. For example, there is no need for a priest to get deep into the meanings of the sacraments that he performs, and in the same way, the poet does not have to know what a poem that he has written means. The poet Jack Spicer who was often identified with "San Francisco Renaissance" was the one closely associated with Duncan when he developed "the poet as priest" concept. Duncan's interest in Spicer got deteriorated when he gradually moved towards Olson. Still, when Spicer published his *After Lorca* (1957), Duncan wrote that "Spicer had taken his place again among my primaries". He wrote a sequence of poems *Medieval Scenes* when he was with the poets like Spicer and Blaser. This collection of poems was "an event in language". In Duncan's words, "the divinity that had made it possible, was not a personal genius, but the genius of the language" (Foster, *Understanding* 140).

Duncan's essay "The Truth and Life of Myth" can be compared to Olson's "Human Universe". Both essays are important in "social and political" terms. Duncan declares Cassirer and Freud as well as the "mythopoeic weavings" of Pound's *Cantos* as sources for his work. Duncan named Jane Harrison's definition of the dithyramb – the "song that makes Zeus leap or beget" (*Fictive Certainties* 6) – as his fourth source that was really important to him. Duncan identifies three forces that "move to incarnate themselves" in the poem – "the words, the life experience and

imagination of the poet and the actual body of the poet” (*Fictive Certainties* 18). In the beginning, Stein’s imitations made Duncan to keep the poet away from the work of art, while later, his works insist on the presence of the writer in the words. “This is not to say that the poem fulfills a personal need or that it is an expression of ego; it is rather that the language achieves its force by drawing on the poet’s sensibility, emotion, imagination, and experience” (Foster, *Understanding* 150).

Duncan can be compared to Olson in many aspects. In “Projective Verse”, Olson argued that the poet’s rhythms are inseparable from his or her breath and emotional and sexual being. The purpose of the poet is not to represent the external world as such, but to speak “within the self”. Olson concluded that “the poet who remained within the self would be able to listen, and his hearing through himself will give him secrets objects share” (*Collected Prose* 60). Duncan was greatly influenced by Olson’s essay and thus he wrote a loosely structured free verse, the lines shaped to amplify the content of each poem. He frequently used “irregular metrics and frequent enjambment” resulting in an “asymmetrical rhythm and dissonant quality” to the poems that evoked the sense of surprise and humor. In *Themis: A Study of the Social Origins of Greek Religion*, Harrison identifies myth as “the arrangement of incidents – not the incidents themselves but their pattern, which is abstract and felt rather than concrete and nameable” (158). For Duncan, myth represents some story



that cannot be told. In order to create a poem, the “writer had to be an adept, participating in its dithyrambic dance” or rather a “myth-teller”, reciting not a “story of what he thinks or wishes life to be” but the “story that comes to him and forces his telling” (*Fictive Certainties* 1).

Edward Dorn worked closely with Olson as a student at Black Mountain College. Olson’s influence stimulated his interest in place and geography as themes and in non-western settings as alternative and authentic modes of living. His voice was heard in the 1960s and much of that was of “a self-exile standing skeptically outside mainstream culture, intensely distrustful of wealth and authority and its abuses and acutely aware of their effects on national and personal life” (Barker 132). Mostly, he wrote about the commercialism of American culture, government’s exploitation of other cultures, the marginalized class and the environment. Regarding Dorn’s poetry, Donald Wesling comments: “When the possibility of taking a new look at American realities seems removed by his country’s entrepreneurial systems, he [Dorn] invents a language of the moral imagination that is capable of blowing such entrapment to rags” (218). He also presented touching observant poems on personal and family relationships in a career that saw plenty of poems, fiction, essays, translations etc. His “poems of place” are considered as unique “apprehensions variously geological, geographical, cultural, social, historical, continuously interlaced of locales in Idaho, England, the

American Southwest and other places” (Clark, *Edward Dorn* 46). Wesling writes: “If English and American writers are to recover the means of facing the urgent public concerns of the era without giving up the rectitude of a personal witness (or elegance of style), Dorn’s achievement will need to be known” (219). In his preface to *The Collected Poems, 1956-1974*, Dorn declared that for him, “the work is ratiocinative, not bardic: From near the beginning I have known my work to be theoretical in nature and poetic by virtue of its inherent tone” (viii). Due to this vision, Dorn is more affiliated to poets like Wallace Stevens and with his Black Mountain College mentor Charles Olson and his “open field theory” that is represented by the sequence of syllables and the perceptions of the act of the mind. Dorn resembles the declarative qualities of William Wordsworth both in theory and in tone, especially in the managing of transitions. Most of Dorn’s writings are theoretical in nature, and he is interested in “responding to cogency, precision of detail and political credibility” of his native America. Dorn’s poetic theory includes an elaborate account of human history:

... from the early hunter gatherers to the present ‘North Atlantic Turbine’ of commodity production, international trade, and warfare between conscienceless collectives called nation states: an account which is fully historical, but also, In Black Mountain Language, *areal* – locating in place as well as place-in-time certain types of material and intellectual

production.(qtd. in Wesling, 219)

His theoretical concerns are political and economical. Olson says, “politics & economics ... are like love (can only be individual experience) ... I don’t myself know how you master them except by practicing them ... Economics as politics as money is a gone bird. It’s much more now power as state as fission” (*A Bibliography* 16). His insinuations are not always dogmatic in tone. During 1972, when he was writing *Gunslinger*, in an interview with Albert Barry, he said that his early 60’s “responsibility to say how you feel” has totally gone and he was interested in the aesthetic textures of American English (69).

Denise Levertov is considered as a member of the Black Mountain School of poets, though she never attended there. Her works were influenced by Charles Olson, Robert Creeley and Robert Duncan, though she followed William Carlos Williams formally. Besides being a poet, essayist and editor, she was a translator of French and Spanish literature and was also active in political protest. Her poetry is a combination of private and public experiences. Her major themes are love, solitude, divorce, marriage, motherhood along with the major events of her times like the Vietnam and the Gulf War, nuclear proliferation, environmental degradation, and even, AIDS. She was a master of free verse and her essays like “Some Notes on Organic Form” is now considered as the classics of contemporary poetic theory. Here she states that every poet is brought to

speech by an innate experience which brings forth the diction of a poem as perceptions. She uses simple poetic voice and mostly relies on images and clear language to highlight everyday experiences.

Levertov defines poetry as a revelation of the meanings or patterns of experience: “As the poet contemplates or ‘muses’ in the temple of life, meaning is revealed to her: to contemplate comes from ‘*templum*, a temple, a space for observation, marked out by augur’. It means, not simply to observe, to regard, but to do these things in the presence of god” (Beck 270). To meditate is to keep the mind in “a state of contemplation”. To the attentive poet, the organic form of existential experience is revealed as poetry. Levertov comments:

So, as the poet stands open-mouthed in the temple of life, contemplating his experience, there come to him the first words of the poem, if there is to be a poem. The pressure of the demand and the meditation on its elements culminate in a moment of vision, of crystallization, in which some inkling of the correspondence between those elements occurs as words. (*The Poet* 8)

Her poetics combines “musing or meditation”, similar to what Emerson in “Poetry” calls “the intellect being where and what it sees” with articulation to “sharing the path or circuit of things through forms and so making them translucent to others” (*The Poet* 50).

Prof. Albert Gelpi, one of the eminent Levertov critics, is of the opinion that “Levertov deliberately maintains the tension of the meeting of mind and nature”. He says, “... hers is a sacramental notion of life; experience is a communion with objects which are in themselves signs of their own secret mystery” (1034). In “Some Notes on Organic Form”, Levertov says that “organic poetry is based on an intuition of an order, a form beyond forms in which forms partake, and of which man’s creative works are analogies, resemblances, natural allegories” (*The Poet* 7). She acknowledges two “muses” or “source of poetic truth” in her prose writings. First one is “rational discrimination” that is the Apollonian guide who directs her in “deliberate imaginative creation,” and the second is “meditation”, the Beatific “breath” or Spirit through which “the invisible substances of organic forms are revealed to her” (Beck 271). In “A Sense of Pilgrimage”, she reflects on both these symbols, drawing their associations.

In an interview with Gary Pacernick, Levertov admitted that she has never found anything hard about poetry. Her poetic talents were inborn and she has received a lot of positive response. Throughout her life, she has done what was ‘natural’ for her to do. When asked whether we were at the end of the long journey of poetry and what could a late twentieth-century poet hope to accomplish through his writings, she responded:

We may, if we continue destroying our environment, be at the

end of our journey as a species! – but as long as the human species exists so will poetry, I believe, because it is a human characteristic. I don't have an answer to the second question; or perhaps I do: poems can serve to remind people of many things they don't notice, and to reveal the extraordinary within the ordinary, and to stimulate imagination and intuitive knowledge, and by being beautiful, moving, powerful – just as poems have always done. (qtd. in Little and Paul 85)

She believes that a poet needs to develop craft and also perceive and recognize the craft elements of other poet's work, though it is not necessary to adopt them. Like any other technical devices, the function of rhyme and meter can be learned and they are not to be taught at school. Reading must be rendered adequate attention.

As a young poet, Levertov was influenced by William Carlos Williams, and it greatly supported her to free diction and rhythm from received habits. Olson's "Projective Verse" carries a different meaning to her. During her interview with Gary Pacernick, she says:

No, I don't believe in the "breath unit". To me, 'projective verse' meant the possibility of a much more inclusive kind of poem ("composition by field") than the discrete focus of a more "bijou-like" poem prevalent in the 50s; and also the

necessity for a good poem to follow its trajectory without stopping to “load the rifts with ore” (as Keats has said) because it would have no rifts. This may well not have been exactly what Olson meant. In any case, it was good advice as I understand it - though not particularly original. (qtd. in Little and Paul 86-7)

Levertov’s “Statement on Poetics” in the anthology, *The New American Poetry* (1960) begins like this: “I believe poets are instruments on which the power of poetry plays” (Allen 411). A poet is someone like a prophet or seer blessed with the gift of poetry through magic, divine inspiration etc. for her and in some way or other he resorts to the uncontrollable or unpredictable supreme force. Levertov is close to the romantic definition of the poet here. She finds the poet as the “receiver of poetic power,” but “they [poets] are also makers, craftsmen. It is to the seer to see, but it is then his responsibility to communicate what he sees” (Allen 412).

Because of her allegiance to the Black Mountain Poets, Levertov advocates an organic, open approach to form. But her attitude is different from the “traditional Black Mountain Poets” for her belief is that “neither the poet nor the poet’s reader is bound by a definition” (qtd. in Little and Paul 94). Levertov’s gift is her poems and it is up to the readers to decide whether to receive this gift or not. She was a prolific writer and her talents lie in her short lyrical poems where she visualizes the indefinable and the

mystical in day to day affairs.