

PAUL NELSON/The Sound of the Field

the HEAD, by way of the EAR, to the SYLLABLE
the HEART, by way of the BREATH, to the LINE
- Charles Olson

Charles Olson's seminal essay Projective Verse is written in two parts. First he discusses the process and then the "stance toward reality (which) brings such verse into being" (Olson 239). That process being about spontaneity, the stance being sourced in the organismic cosmology of Whitehead. Yet one can see two distinct aspects about the process Olson enunciated better than anyone of his time and perhaps since regarding the basics of an open form process. Of those two aspects in the compositional process, the first he says he got from Edward Dahlberg, who Olson replaced at Black Mountain College in 1948, two years before the publication of Projective Verse. That nugget was "ONE PERCEPTION MUST IMMEDIATELY AND DIRECTLY LEAD TO A FURTHER PERCEPTION" (Olson 240). The second part is regarding the layout of an Open Form poem. He suggests the typewriter can indicate exactly the breath and pauses the poet intends to be used when reading the work. (Imagine what he would think of the personal computer, given his penchant for unusual typography.) In Robert Duncan's words, line breaks are better described as notation, a notion I first got from George Bowering whose Vancouver Tish Group was much inspired by Olson and Duncan and other connected with what some call Projectivism.

Olson said: "What we have suffered from, is manuscript, press, the removal of verse from its producer, the voice, a removal by one, by two removes from its place of origin *and* it's destination (Olson 245). So here we again get Olson the radical, interested in getting to the root of the situation, the source.

The importance of the ear is not lost on Sam Hamill, who begins his remarkable book of essays “The Poet’s Work” with a preface that begins: “Language-and thus knowledge-begins with listening. In the Sumerian myth of Inanna, goddess of heaven, daughter of the moon and the morning star, we find the word for ‘ear’ being the word for “wisdom” and the word for ‘mind.’ ...Inanna *set* her ear; the goddess of heaven listened to the world below. In retelling the tale of Inanna-literally telling the tale to audiences-she listened to her own telling, and, consequently, revised, that is, perceived freshly – her own telling. By listening attentively to the telling, the teller clarifies the vision. To listen is to know...The Chinese/Japanese goddess of mercy and bodhisattva, Kuan Shih Yin (Kannon in Japanese) is named ‘She-who-perceives-the-world’s-cries,’ her vision bound up in her capacity to listen. In her purest incarnation, she rejects *all* outward expressions of devotion so that she may be worshipped only by extending to others the compassion one finds in her; in order to extend the compassion one finds in Kuan Yin, one must learn to listen as Kuan Yin listens; in order to listen as she does, the listener must *become the act of listening completely*. (Emphasis mine.) To listen is to see.” (Hamill xiii and xiv).

As we get back to one of the lesser investigated notions of what Olson called Composition by Field, the *energetic field* emitted by the work, one can see Hamill engaging tremendous fields by evoking Kuan Yin and the attribute of compassion. Notice also the key lines: “By listening attentively to the telling, the teller clarifies the vision” and “her vision bound up in her capacity to listen.” It is this kind of consciousness that is evoked in the best acts of composing protectively. Few have the kind of power that Kuan Yin has, but this is the kind of neighborhood you want to be in if you’ve had your share of extra suffering. Yet the listening, and the documentation (notation) of sounds the best poets can hear in their own mind’s ear, is the act, which practiced, that is at the heart of the power of an Open Form such as Projective Verse.

William Carlos Williams knew the act of writing for him was his way of thinking. Hamill shows how in more ancient civilizations the notion of listening was equated with wisdom. From the ancient Tibetan Bön Tradition, Master Physician Christopher Hansard suggests his tradition teaches that “all sound is sacred. It depends on how you recognize it and then what you do with it. So therefore, how you apply that sound or understand what is within that sound you then begin to use, because sound is the body of light. Sound is actually a vibration of light. As your physical body is an expression of the energy generated by your brain, so is sound an expression of light... The brain itself is full of light, according to the Bön Tradition and impulses of energy that rush through your body, and it is from your brain that you get great energy that generates life force. There are many Bön methods of actually training the brain to generate a higher resonance, a higher frequency, a bigger field of energy... You can actually get your brain to store more light and as you store more light you store more sound” Question: “Is there a tool by which you can measure levels of consciousness? Christopher: “Yes, it’s called your heart.”¹”

The act of composing Projective Verse may be a crude form of this method. The first thought/best thought ethos of this process is similar to Free Association, opening up the realms of the unconscious to the poet. Again, on a scale of consciousness, we are going much deeper than the levels of behavior, thoughts and emotions to levels I have described earlier as *Personal Mythology* and *Archetypal* levels. Dream imagery may be at the archetypal level and the Surrealists were noted for their mining of this for their art. Indeed, Automatic Writing is similar to Projective Verse, though Olson makes no reference to it in the essay.

I’m suggesting the tracking of these sounds in one’s head (tracking the light in them), the scrupulous effort of listening to the point of actually becoming the act of listening as in the way

¹ Hansard, Christopher, from an interview recorded by the author and published September 15, 2004.

of Kuan Yin as Hamill pointed out, is a critical skill necessary to harness the power of this method. The line breaks then in fact ARE notation. They are a sound map, or score, of the moment by moment revelation of the content in the act of projective verse composition.

Olson suggested that the typewriter could notate, accurately, stops for breath, pauses, etc. In this method, the field not only refers to those fields of energy one is accessing through this method, but the page as field. Olson, in the poem:

Maximus, to Gloucester

Letter 2

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

he was right: people

don't change. They only stand more
revealed, I,
likewise

The line breaks here facilitate the music, emphasizing the musical nature of *who* and *how*. If you hear the fourth line, it sounds at first like he is making a statement, but after a short pause, denoted by the new stanza beginning with line five, the payoff comes. This is a bit of what Allen Ginsberg called “Surprise Mind,” and then a bit of humility from Maximus as he suggests he is not above the average person, but no different. I have seen no more impressive use of this technique than Michael McClure’s work, especially in “Dolphin Skull.”

The registration of how the sounds come in one’s mind then is critical to get these quirks just as they come. The listening must be scrupulous, or one misses the humor and *quiddity* of the moment, as Allen Ginsberg told me: “First Thought, Best Thought... meaning that the first raw

flash on your mind that's usually visual, before you mediate it and edit it and editorialize on it and generalize on it or make it ok for other people to look at it or censor it or filter it, before you filter it, it usually comes in tact as a kind of raw, emotionally interesting gleam. Usually visual. So Kerouac has the idea in his instructions for writing: 'Don't think of words when you stop, but to see picture better.'...Because what people tend to do is to be a little ashamed of their raw thoughts...Say I'm having a dream in which I'm sleeping with my Mother! No, I don't want to write about THAT! So, I think I'll say I had a dream in which I did something bad. Or I had a dream in which I outraged society...so finally you lose the humor, contradictoriness, and quiddity and humanity of the first glimpse that goes back to Oedipus, that goes back to Freud, or goes back before the BIBLE! and you lose the detail, and you lose the believability and instead you get some generalization or abstraction. One very interesting thing that William Blake says is: 'Generalization and abstraction are the plea of the hypocrite, knave and scoundrel.'²'"

Homeostasis

The energy of these fields are quite powerful. If Whitehead's theories are correct, that the world is not made up of matter, but of events that are they are conditioned in part by past events and effect future events, and if there is merit in Rupert Sheldrake's notion of morphogenetic fields, and how the morphic resonance in them works, then there is power to be had if one can overcome the timidity of revealing deeply personal thoughts and the dominant culture antithetical to authenticity. The process of writing projectively, may be a process of homeostasis. American physiologist Walter Cannon coined this term in 1932 and it is: "one of the most remarkable and most typical properties of highly complex open systems. A homeostatic system (an industrial firm, a large organization, a cell) is an open system that maintains its structure and

² Allen Ginsberg from June 1994 interview conducted by the author

functions by means of a multiplicity of dynamic equilibriums rigorously controlled by interdependent regulation mechanisms. Such a system reacts to every change in the environment, or to every random disturbance, through a series of modifications of equal size and opposite direction to those that created the disturbance. The goal of these modifications is to maintain the internal balances. Ecological, biological, and social systems are homeostatic...Complex systems must have homeostasis to maintain stability and to survive. At the same time it bestows on the systems very special properties. Homeostatic systems are ultrastable...Their behavior is unpredictable; "counterintuitive" ... or contravariant: when one expects a determined reaction as the result of a precise action, a completely unexpected and often contrary action occurs instead...For a complex system, to endure is not enough; it must adapt itself to modifications of the environment and it must evolve."

Free Association certainly would bring up disturbances, or what Jung called elements of "shadow." The ego acts in opposition to the homeostatic process out of self-preservation. It assumes the behaviors that were necessary at age three to survive will always be necessary, but after ten or twenty years said behaviors can be destructive. Therefore, Olson's notion of how humility plays a role in this process can not be underestimated. (Of course the fields of consciousness enacted by acts of humility are more powerful.) The courage strengthened by a projective verse discipline, and the sacred listening skill developed by years of use and re-enacted for the eye through careful notation, are the homeostatic tools of the projective process, aiding that quest for evolution. It is why the strength of the best work created this way, Whitman's "Song of Myself," Williams "Asphodel, That Greeny Flower," Olson's "Maximus to Gloucester, Letter 27 [withheld], Michael McClure's "Dolphin Skull," Diane di Prima's first poem in "Loba," Anne Waldman's "Fast Speaking Woman," George Bowering's "Kerrisdale

Elegies,” Robin Blaser’s “Image –Nation 1 (the fold” and “Image-Nation 3 (the substance,”) are among those powerful projective acts that demonstrate the courage, rigor, myriad-mindedness, and depth of consciousness available to the poet willing to train their beings to honor the sounds unique to, and recognized only by, their own skillful heart-minds. The sound of the field.

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