

Paul Nelson/Dualism and Olson's Antidote

In this essay I seek to examine the development of a mechanistic world view, as seen through American politics and culture and how the philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead, specifically as seen through the Whitehead-inspired poetics of Charles Olson is a model which transcends such dualism and is a viable model for writers wishing to facilitate such transcendence in their own lives.

The dualism of our age may be unprecedented, at least as far as the United States is concerned. Anyone familiar with the now legendary Red State vs. Blue State maps, the first of which appeared in USA Today, can see how the American political division is eerily similar to the dividing line between the Union and the Confederacy. In his study of the 2000 election, Steven Hill shows these divisions are based on race. He says “the racially conservative white vote and the multiracial burgeoning of our population are on a collision course (Hill 20). And those who *are* voting are a minority as Hill also points out that the turnout in the world's lone remaining superpower in 2000 sunk to 138th in the world, falling between Botswana and Chad (Hill viii).

Yet American politics are also bogged down by the form of campaign financing, corporate involvement in elections and policy, broadcast commercials and special interest groups, the likes of which are uncommon in any other country, making the political view of the cultural landscape problematic. A much more usable view of the contemporary divisions in the United States was developed by Paul Ray and Sherry Anderson in their book “The Cultural Creatives”. In it they suggest that the stances toward reality that underlie our politics can be boiled down to three main subcultures: The Traditionals, The Moderns and The Cultural Creatives. Briefly

stated, the divisions are the *Traditionals*, who have a life stance of *leaning backward*. They are in reaction against the Modern, secular world view. The second subculture they call *Moderns*, the mainstream of which Ray and Anderson suggest has been in existence for five hundred years, is based on a life stance of *standing pat* and doing the best they can with the modern world view. *The Cultural Creatives* are referred to as the *planet's new counterculture*, with a life stance of *leaning forward* and a practice of *inwardly* departing from the materialist worldview (Ray and Anderson 82).

What I am suggesting here is that this third subculture, though likely unaware of the philosophy of organism, is in sync with the world view proposed by Alfred North Whitehead. According to Whitehead's philosophy: "The fundamental elements of the universe are occasions of experience. According to this notion, what people commonly think of as concrete objects are actually successions of occasions of experience... Whitehead's occasions of experience are interrelated with every other occasion of experience that precedes it in time. Inherent to Whitehead's conception is the notion of time; all experiences are influenced by prior experiences, and will influence all future experiences. This process of influencing is never deterministic; an occasion of experience consists of a process of prehending other experiences, and then a reaction to it. This is the process in process philosophy."¹ In other words, for Whitehead, the universe is incomplete, in process and past events have an effect on present ones.

In literature Charles Olson has been the pioneer out on the fringe of culture, in fact, investigating outside of what he called "The Western Box" through studies of indigenous Mayan and other ways of knowing. In his essay; "The Violets: A Cosmological Reading of a Cosmology", Robin Blaser quotes George Butterick as suggesting that Olson said Whitehead's

¹ Wikipedia.org

“philosophy of process underlies the Maximus Poems” and that Whitehead is “my great master and the companion of my poems.” (Blaser 11)

The cultural split which Ray and Anderson see as being at least five hundred years old, Olson suggests goes back a thousand years further, as Shahar Bram points out:

“The split between myth and logos, then represents for Olson the chain of splits that began to characterize the Greek worldview in a process whose beginning was marked by the pre-Socratic philosophers. As soon as the Greek worldview began to grant autonomy to thought (to the intellect) and to draw away from the concrete and experience in favor of abstraction and consistency...as soon as the concept of “subject” and “object” separated from each other; as soon as the religious character lost its holiness to secular representations – as soon as these processes became dominant, the multiplicity within unity broke down into homogeneity as unity, or homogeneity as split (Bram 106,7).

Olson’s Rx for this split has many facets, but the most important was the process of writing and how a focus on process, rather than product, was the key to opening up new realms for the poet. It was best articulated in *Projective Verse*, his seminal 1950 essay. In it, he explains what Projective Verse is, poetry composed spontaneously with the form being dictated by the moment, the process. Olson suggests that the poem is a high-energy construct and that this spontaneous (open) process, as opposed to inherited line, stanza and overall form, or closed verse. Projective verse uses the ear as measurer, and the structure of the poem is based on the syllable and the breath line. It is the use of speech where it is “least careless and least logical”. (Non-linear.) (Olson CP 239, 241, 247). Olson also knew that the heart was a critical component in

the process of composing poetry. He believed the heart was activated by way of the breath, through the compositional focus on the line. In this may be the strength of Olson's argument. In 1963 researchers at Syracuse University "reported the first measurements of the magnetic field of the human heart, just a millionth the strength of the earth's magnetic field, yet highly coherent and *measurable* throughout the body and beyond. Then in 1971, the SQUID, a highly sensitive superconducting magnetometer, was developed which was used to measure the magnetic field of the brain, 100 times weaker than that of the heart (Lee 12, emphasis mine). As one begins to inhabit those fields of higher energy, fields at those levels become accessible. In Whitehead's language, those events now begin to influence events vibrating at a similar frequency. We're in the right energetic neighborhood and the content DOES change, as the impulses and energies become more refined. Is this a matter of entrainment? Perhaps.

There is a great deal more about the process of composition Olson laid out and he takes a firm stance, no doubt inspired by the didactic writing style of Ezra Pound's prose. But his understanding of Whitehead, his recognition of the critical nature of process, and his *experience* which validated the notion of how content changes as you delve into the projective act, are all aspects of Olson's poetics. This open stance toward poem-making, sourced – in part – in Whitehead's cosmology of process and interconnectedness, may not have been articulated more keenly in the 56 years since the publication of *Projective Verse*.

Field Theory

How does the content change when writing this way? My guess, based on ten years of study of this essay and the practice of writing spontaneously, without major revision, but more of a fine-tuning as Gary Snyder has called it, suggests that as you open up and become capable of

having the courage to trust instinct, and process, you begin to attract deeper fields. I refer again to the best map we have, albeit imperfect, of consciousness at all its levels. That is the one created by David Hawkins in “Power Vs. Force”. What he calls the level of *integrity* is recognized by the attribute of Courage and below that level are Pride, Anger, Desire, Fear, Grief, Apathy, Guilt and lastly Shame. Going up from the line of integrity Hawkins suggest the attributes are Neutrality, Willingness, Acceptance, Reason, Love, Joy, Peace and finally Enlightenment, where he would put the historical Buddha, or Christ (Hawkins 52). (I am skeptical regarding the placement of Reason, but language can be an inexact method of communication.) Can Hawkins’ map be validated scientifically? He suggests so, through kinesiology, but skeptics – even in the post-Newtonian scientific realm – abound. Yet validation comes through the experience of individuals, if not through the ways of double-blind placebo studies and other methodologies leftover from Newtonian science, as is the case with consciousness, where everyone’s process, and experience differs. Yet modern physics does have terms such as *entrainment* and *resonance* which may apply here.

It is the projective act, which may be used as one tool to allow us to begin to understand (and more importantly *document*) life as a process, which Olson argues is the *motive of reality* (Olson SV 49). It is the journey, not the destination. And yet while Olson had an inkling that the notion of Field Theory had a role in this, he was still suggesting that life was “the chance success of a play of creative accidents” (Olson SV 48) when in fact it is attractor fields that are in play. “When the student is ready the teacher will appear” goes the saying and as one goes up a level on that map of consciousness, one sees the things to avoid, or develops in Whitehead’s terms *negative prehension*. If prehension is an event, or act of awareness based on experience, then negative prehension is intelligence, or a conscious choice to NOT engage with something in

one's environment. As one goes up the consciousness ladder, the choices of what to avoid become obvious, but is this not wisdom? The mark of a wise person is to foresee consequences before they arise and experience is certainly the best teacher of this. Of course knowledge may be seen in this model as *brain-centered* while wisdom can be seen as heart-centered, so the heart comes in again. Modern science is just at the beginning of understanding the heart as an intelligence center, a 2nd brain, if you will, and this only validates Olson's Open poetics.

So the practice of writing spontaneously, learning to trust the non-linear nature of this process poetics, developing that courage, (in William Carlos Williams terms – “peculiar to that speech also in its own intrinsic form” (Williams 4)) willingness and acceptance, leads us to deeper and deeper states of consciousness and the attractor fields bring in material and experiences which resonate on those levels. Of course the average poetry workshop, or academic setting, is motivated by other concerns than getting the impulse cleanly, whatever the product of the process, often making them an impediment to the larger process of individuation. It is also interesting that the content of a lot of political poetry, and poetry in general, stands against oppression, competition, domination and other symptoms of the modernist (mechanistic, Newtonian/Cartesian) paradigm, yet in process continues to be product-oriented, reinforcing the attractor fields (and their by-products) it claims to oppose.

Whitehead and Maximus

Shahar Bram begins his insightful essay on Olson and Whitehead with Olson's poem:

A Later Note on Letter #15

In English the poetics became meubles – furniture –

Thereafter (after 1630

& Descartes was the value

until Whitehead, who cleared out the gunk
by getting the universe in (as against man alone

& that concept of history (not Herodotus's,
which was a verb, to find out for yourself:
'istorin, which makes any ones acts a finding out for him or her
self, in other words restores the traum: that we act somewhere

at least by seizure, that the objective (example Thucydides, or
the latest finest tape-recorder, or any form of record on the spot

- live television or what – is a lie

as against what we know went on, the dream: the dream being
self-action with Whitehead's important corollary: that no event

is not penetrated, in intersection or collision with, an eternal
event

The poetics if such a situation
are yet to be found out

January 15, 1962

The most important aspect of this poetics is not the product, not the outcome of a process, but the heroic act itself of the creativity of a human being in the world. Since Olson's time on the planet, which ended in 1970, the pressures that preclude such acts have only gotten more intense and no letup seems near. Yet as Bram points out in his epilogue, an actual entity never dies, but becomes a real potentiality. In the case of Charles Olson the rich field that he swirled out is attracting an expanding polis of citizens who recognize that all events are connected, that art does not seek to describe, but enact, and that each of us must comprehend our own process as intact.

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