The Move Toward Reality: A Study of the Poetry and Poetic Philosophies of Charles Olson and Walt Whitman

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Introduction

One hundred years after Walt Whitman's first publication of Leaves of Grass, the late Charles Olson was writing his "Maximus" poetry. The Maximus Poems are an extended sequence dealing with American culture in the small New England town of Gloucester, Massachusetts. Olson was also formulating his new poetic theory--"Projective Verse"--which helped to begin a large scale poetic movement at Black Mountain College in North Carolina and which has since influenced a large group of prominent American poets, including Robert Creeley, Denise Levertov, Robert Duncan, Paul Blackburn, and others. Both Whitman and Olson questioned the nature of the poetry that existed in their centuries, and both disliked what they saw and consequently became determined to redefine the concept of poetry.

The poetry of both men can be most effectively studied by considering their attitudes toward four aspects of existence: the self, reality, society, and the universe. An analysis of the similarities and differences between their approach to each of these categories reveals that there has been a significant change in the focus and character of American poetry since the nineteenth century. It becomes evident that the poetry of this century--epitomized by Olson and his poetic philosophies--often attempts to deal more directly with physical reality as well as with the physical and imaginative processes of artistic creation.

An intrinsic part of the poetics of Whitman and Olson is their concept of the self. Both men chose to present their poetry through the perceptions of a persona--Whitman's "Walt Whitman, a Kosmos,"[1] and Olson's "Maximus of Gloucester."[2] Although both writer's technique of using an ego-persona is similar, the two individual personas are

radically different.

Whitman's persona attempts the colossal task of encompassing everything around it. Whitman interweaves the urban and the rural, the living and the dead into a relationship with his self:

> The city sleeps and the country sleeps,
> The living sleep for their time, the dead sleep for their time,
> The old husband sleeps by his wife and the young husband sleeps by his wife:
> And these tend inward to me, and I tend outward to them,
> And such as it is to be of these more or less I am,
> And of these one and all I weave the song of myself.[3]

Later in Leaves of Grass, Whitman displays the expansiveness of his ego by absorbing all of America:

> I match my spirit against yours you orbs, growths, mountains, brutes,
> Copious as you are I absorb you all in myself, and become the master myself,
> America isolated yet embodying all, what is it finally except myself?
> These States, what are they except myself?[4]

At times, Whitman's self-oriented conception of all things is not unlike the naively possessive child who discovers and celebrates the world only in terms of 'me' and 'mine.'

Whitman also sets forth personal, deeply felt subjective perceptions throughout his writing. Due to the frequent confessional nature of his poetry, Whitman at times becomes a voluntary sacrificial victim whose own flesh and blood are pouring out through his writing:

> Candid from me falling, drip, bleeding drops,
> From wounds made to free you whence you were prison'd,
> From my face, from my forehead and lips,
> From my breast, from within where I was conceal'd press forth red drops, confession drops,
> Stain every page, stain every song I sing, every word I say, bloody drops.[5]

Related to this feeling is the comradeship, concern and even intimacy which Whitman feels with his readers. In "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," for example, he feels this kinship with his future readers:

I am with you, men and women of a generation, or ever so many generations hence,
Just as you feel when you look on the river and sky, so I felt,
Just as any of you is one of a living crowd, I was one of a crowd,
. . . Closer yet I approach you
. . . I consider'd long and seriously of you before you were born.[6]

Whitman also has a desire to intellectually stimulate his readers, and at times the poet-reader relationship becomes almost physical:

Camerado, this is no book,
Who touches this touches a man,
(Is it night? are we here together alone?)
It is I you hold and who holds you,
I spring from the pages into your arms . . .[7]

Whitman's persona is also a perceptive individual who constantly looks through the objective reality of things to apprehend their spiritual significance:

Facts, religions, improvement, politics, trades, are as real as before
But the soul is also real, it too is positive and direct.[8]

Thus, Whitman accepts nothing at face value, but has an ultimate faith in the spirituality of all things.

Throughout Leaves of Grass, "Walt Whitman, A Kosmos" becomes a well-defined personality. Because of Whitman's openness and honesty, one becomes well aware of the many facets of this man, including such things as his sexual drives, his distrust of the intellectual and his faith in experience, his egotism as well as humility, his patriotism, and his deeply personal love for the working class and common man.

Olson's Maximus is also a complex character, although less defined than Whitman's "I."

The most noticeable technique in Maximus' communicating is his fragmentary conversational style. This style seems to suggest that Maximus is sensitive to the complex chaos of life, and he reflects this in his statements. It also suggests that he is impulsive, and perhaps unable to con-

centrate his attention on any one thing for any length of time. But the style also imbues the poetry with a sense of breathless excitement and urgency.

Maximus at times instructs the reader about his philosophies concerning his poetic theory and his concept of 'things.' In the first poem of The Maximus Poems, he says:

one loves only form,
and form only comes
into existence when
the thing is born.[9]

But most often, Maximus is concerned with the local events and histories of Gloucester, Massachusetts. He often relates detailed descriptions of the local residents, such as in "John Burke," or in this passage from "Letter 6":

Burke was raising his family
in a shack out over the marsh;
and Olsen, they now tell me,
is carting sish, for Gorton-Pew,
the lowest job, Gloucester,
the job we all started with

young Douglas, who never went to sea,
he's different, is in the front office
at Gorton-Pew, was so good a ball player
he got moved up, and fast.[10]

And again in "April Today Main Street," he shows a gossip-like interest in small-town occurrences:

. . . talked to the cop
at the head of Duncan, discovered that Joe,

the barber, had inherited the Fredericksons'
shop, that it was Mrs. Galler, not the Weiners

"winers" the cigar woman and the greeting card
clerk in Sterling pronounced it

as I said her husband
they said he died
in front of her here
in the store.[11]

Maximus is also much aware of Gloucester's historical past, and he often utilizes historical chronicles which deal with the first settlements and early life in the area. "The Record" and "14 Men Stage Head Winter 1624/5" are two poems composed almost entirely of historical data, and in "Some Good News," Maximus/ Olson tells of the actual settlement of Gloucester:

> a permanent change had come
> by 14 men setting down
> on Cape Ann, on the westerly side
> of the harbor.[12]
>
> . . .Smith
> changed everything: He pointed
> out Cape Ann.
>
> named her
> so it's stuck . . .[13]

But Maximus is not always so objective in presenting Gloucester's past and present. At times he relates intimate personal details about his own life:

> This morning of the small snow
> I count the blessings, the leak in the faucet
> which makes of the sink time, the drop
> of the water on water as sweet
> as the Seth Thomas
> in the old kitchen
> my father stood in his drawers to wind (always
> he forgot the 30th day, as I don't want to remember
> the rent . . .
> ...Or the plumbing,
> that it doesn't work, this I like have even used paper
> clips
> as well as string to hold the ball up and flush it
> with my hand . . .
> . . . Holes
> in my shoes, that's all right, my fly
> gaping, me out
> at the elbows . . .[14]

And sometimes Maximus becomes almost bitter in his observations:

> Men are so sure they know very many things,
> they don't even know night and day are one.[15]

Maximus also relates what he feels to be a basic paradox in his intellectual existence. He realizes that although he is a complex and educated individual ("I have made dialogues,/have discussed ancient texts"[16]), nevertheless he has found that simplicity is the primary concern of his life. He contemplates this in "Maximus, to Himself":

> I have had to learn the simplest things
> last. Which made for difficulties.
> Even at sea I was slow, to get the hand out, or to
> cross
> A wet deck.
> The sea was not, finally, my trade.
> But even my trade, at it, I stood estranged
> from that which was most familiar.
> . . . that we are all late
> in a slow time,
> that we grow up many
> and the single
> is not easily
> known.[17]

Unlike Whitman, Olson's relationship with his readers might be described as informative and slightly withdrawn rather than intimate. Much of the poetry seems aimed directly at the reader; for example, the first poem of The Maximus Poems is entitled "I, Maximus of Gloucester, to You." Many poems attempt to convince the reader to adopt a new, non-materialistic simplicity in life, yet the observations are often objective, and hence the poems become less a personal comment from poet to reader than they do an exemplification of a way of seeing.

As a result of their respective philosophies concerning the persona-self, Whitman and Olson do not trust in the same things. Whitman believes that the individual self is most important:

> I hear and behold God in every object, yet understand
> God not in the least,
> Nor do I understand who there can be more wonderful
> than myself.
> . . .And nothing, not God, is greater to one than one's
> self is . . .[18]

But Olson relies little on the self, and instead trusts in things outside the self, as he states in his essay, "Equal That Is, to the Real Itself": "I take care to be inclusive,

to enforce the point made at the start, that matter offers perils wider than man if he doesn't do what still today seems the hardest thing for him to do . . . to believe that things, and present ones, are the absolute conditions."[19]

Thus, it is evident that there exist some basic distinctions between Whitman and Olson's conceptions of the persona-self. Whitman envisions the self as the nucleus of the universe; all things are subject to the self, and they minister to it. Olson's self is not center of the universe, but instead it exists with the objective reality of the things and objects which surround it. Maximus does not possess an all-encompassing and possessive ego as Whitman's "I" does, but he instead accepts his place and defines himself as one fragment of the immense collage of things known as the universe. Whitman's ego also recognizes this fragmentation of the universe, but it aggressively attempts to draw all the parts of the universe together into a new and orderly "Kosmos."

The next logical step outward from the poetic ego is into the world of reality. An analysis of each poet's conception of reality cannot, of course, be precise unless a definition of reality is given. For the purposes of this discussion, reality can be defined as the material things to which the poet reacts, in other words, the raw material of poetry, the worldly things which serve as a basis upon which the two men build their poetry.

In both theory and practice, each poet recognizes the extreme importance of "things" in their poetry. Whitman described the place of things in his scheme of the imagination in his essay, "A Backward Glance O'er Travel'd Roads," stating that "the true use for the imaginative faculty of modern times is to give ultimate vivification to facts, to science, and to common lives, endowing them with the glows and glories and final illustriousness which belong to every real thing, and to real things only."[20]

Whitman's poetry displays two basic techniques of perceiving things in the world. First, he most often employs long observations and catalogs which often follow a general organic development. These catalogs might be thought of as linear, that is, moving in one plane of development in a step-by-step progression, as in "Song of Myself," when he talks of

> The latest dates, discoveries, inventions, societies,
> authors old and new,

> My dinner, dress, associates, looks, compliments,
> dues . . . [21]

Whitman's catalogs often convey the motion, rhythms, and sensory excitement which he experienced in his rapidly growing and many-faceted nineteenth-century America.

Certain other poems show a different perception, "A Paumanok Picture" for example, in that they deal directly with a kind of objective still-life:

> Two boats with nets lying off the sea-bench, quite
> still,
> Ten fishermen waiting--they discover a thick school
> of mossbonkers--they drop the join'd seine--ends
> in the water,
> The boats separate and row off, each on its rounding
> course to the beach, enclosing the mossbonkers,
> The net is drawn in by a windlass by those who stop
> ashore,
> Some of the fishermen lounge in their boats, others
> stand ankle-deep in the water, pois'd on strong
> legs,
> The boats partly drawn up, the water slapping against
> them,
> Strew'd on the sand in heaps and windrows, well out
> from the water, the green-back's spotted moss-
> bonkers.[22]

In this unique photographic perception, Whitman creates not a linear catalog or list which develops an idea, but instead he suggests an entire scene through a series of objective pictures.

In Olson's philosophy, the importance of things is equally evident, and he states in his essay "Equal, That Is, to the Real Itself," that "'things' are what writers get inside their work, or the work, poem or story, perishes. Things are the way the force is exchanged. On things communication rests."[23]

Olson, like Whitman, utilizes catalogs of objective detail in his poems. Most often, Olson employs historical descriptions and chronicles which become catalogs of early colonial activities; such as this section from "Maximus, to Gloucester, Letter II":

"The quarter Maisters", he declares,
"hath charge of the hold
for stowage,
rummaging, and trimming
the ship;
and of their squadrons
for the Watch. A sayne,
a Fisgigg, a Harping Iron,
Fish-Hookes for Pogos,
Bonatos or Dorados Etc
And tayling lines
for Mackerell."[24]

Some of Olson's poems are comprised of an objective recording of a simple experience. One such poem is from Book V of Maximus Poems, IV, V, VI, and it concerns Olson's experience as a mail carrier:

up the steps, along the porch
turning the corner
of the L,

to go in the door
and face the ladies
sitting comfortable
in the

chairs,
and greet Simp
with the morning's mail.[25]

But more often, Olson uses a collage of complex ideas and images in his poetry, and he often skips from concept to concept with a kind of syntactical gymnastics, such as in this segment from "Tyrian Business":

A hollow muscular organ, which, by contracting
vigorously, keeps up the
(to have the heart
(a whorl of green bracts at the
base
(ling,
she is known as
Weather
comes generally
under the
metaphrast.
(When M is above G, all's
well. When below, there's

upset. When M and G are
coincident, it is not
very interesting).[26]

The complexity of Olson's fragmented style is often compounded by the poem's physical arrangement on the page, as in the "1st Letter on Georges":

Tow you out by
10 lb Island, &
you'd sail out
the harbor from
there

So we went out, and were gone a
week when the wind shifts SE, and
with it snow. We laid out and
hauled back, and we threw the lead
over, and found we were in 6
fathom of water. So we took the
mainsail in, and put her under rid-
ing sail, foresail and outer jib.[27]

Olson's tendency toward kaleidoscopic simultaneity seems to be a result of his experience with the chaotic and distractive reality existing around him. It might also be attributed in part to his projectivist philosophy that "ONE PERCEPTION MUST IMMEDIATELY AND DIRECTLY LEAD TO A FURTHER PERCEPTION . . . USE USE USE the process at all points, in any given poems always, always one perception must must must MOVE, INSTANTER, ON ANOTHER!"[28] The urgency of Olson's statement suggest that there exists a complex world which almost demands to be discovered; the poet must utilize all his powers of perception and observation in order to absorb all that he possibly can.

Although Whitman and Olson have basic similarities regarding the importance of the use of things in the poem, the two poets are far from being alike in their beliefs about the writing process and its relationship to reality. Whitman, for example, believes that the process of description through the image has dynamic and creative properties. In "Democratic Vistas," he states "This is . . . the image-making faculty, coping with material creation, and rivaling, almost triumphing over it. This alone, when all the other parts of a specimen of literature or art are ready and waiting, can breathe into the breath of life, and endow it with identity."[29] In Whitman's concept, the imaginative faculty of the poet grapples with reality and eventually, through the poetic images, gives it a lifelike quality.

Olson, on the other hand, does not see the image-making faculty as an active enhancer of reality. From Olson's point of view, "All that comparison ever does is 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 . . . such an analysis only accomplishes a description, does not come to grips with what really matters: that a thing, any thing, impinges on us by a more important fact, its self-existence, without reference to other things."[30] Thus, Olson sees the reality imposing its existence upon the poet, rather than vice-versa. This sense that reality possesses a self-assertive existence is demonstrated in "Letter 9" of The Maximus Poems:

> I, dazzled
> as one is, until one discovers
> there is no other issue than
> the moment of
> the pleasure of
> this plum,
> these things
> which don't carry their end any further than
> their reality in
> themselves.[31]

Olson's concept of reality is not unlike the Zen Buddhist philosophies, which state that "reality itself has no meaning since it is not a sign, pointing to something beyond itself. To arrive at reality . . . is the very life of the universe, which is complete at every moment and does not need to justify itself by aiming at something beyond."[32] Thus, for Olson, the use of reality and things in poetry is not a means to an end. Instead, he sees the poet as an object existing within the realm of "things," and hence, ideally, reality becomes an objective condition.

Whitman's reality is usually an intensely personal and subjective thing; it is experienced in terms of the self, as stated in "Song of Myself":

> I have instant conductors all over me whether I pass or stop,
> They seize every object and lead it harmlessly through me.[33]

And this process of perception and absorption is twofold; Whitman sees an inherent duality in the reality which surrounds him, and he uses things both as an end in themselves, and as a passageway to gain spiritual knowledge about them.

Whitman and Olson's concept of America is another integral part of their poetry which might be analyzed.

Throughout Leaves of Grass, Whitman concerned himself with both the whole of America as well as many of its individual facets. He regarded it as a huge, potentially great country, and it was his desire to consolidate and unify it into a national identity. In his preface to the 1872 edition, he said that "Leaves of Grass, already published, is , in its intentions, the song of a great composite Democratic Individual, male or female . . . I suppose I have in my mind to run through the chants of the Volume . . . the thread-voice, more or less audible, of an aggregated, inseparable, unprecedented, vast, composite, electric Democratic nationality."[34] Because of this attitude Whitman also looked ahead to the future, and hoped that the country would grow into this "great composite" that he had envisioned. He states in "Democratic Vistas" that while "Assuming Democracy to be at present in its embryo condition, and that the only large and satisfactory justification of it resides in the future . . . I must do the best I can, leaving it to those who come after me to do much better."[35] This idealism developed in Whitman to the extent that he felt little reason for criticisms of the country, and many reasons for being arrogant. For example, in "Starting from Paumanok," he proclaimed America to be:

> Expanding and swift, henceforth
> Elements, breeds,adjustments, turbulent, quick and audacious,
> A world primal again, vistas of glory incessant and branching,
> A new race dominating previous ones and grander far, with new contests,
> New politics, new literatures and religions, new inventions and arts.[36]

While Whitman looks to the future with unending optimism, Olson often looks with disillusionment at the development of twentieth century-America and the egotism of his fellow countrymen. He sees man as a gluttonous creature who hoards and misuses his natural resources:

> follow us who
>
> from the hustings ("trash"),
> industrial fish
> are called which Gloucester
> now catches

. . . anything
nature puts in the sea
comes up
. . . from a ship's hold

to the truck
which takes it to the De-Hy
to be turned into catfood
and fertilizer.[37]

In another poem, Olson states that some New England fishermen want "to start to make any ocean / a Yankee lake."[38] Olson is also disgusted at man's pollution of natural resources:

Part of the Flower of Gloucester

from the sunsets
to the rubbish on the Harbor bottom
fermenting so bubbles
of the gas formed from the putrefaction
keep coming up and you watch them break
on the surface and imagine the odor
which is true
at low-tide that you can't stand the smell
if you live with Harbor Cove or the Inner
Harbor to your side.[39]

Another major problem in twentieth-century America as Olson sees it is the large scale control and outside ownership of industry. In "Letter 3," he declares:

Let those who use words cheap, who use us cheap
take themselves out of the way
Let them not talk of what is good for the city

Let them free the way for me, for the men of the fort
who are not hired, who buy the white houses

Let them cease putting out words in the public print
so that any of us have to leave, so that my
Portugese leave,
leave the Lady they gave us, sell their schooners
with the greyhounds aft, the long Diesels
they put their money in, leave Gloucester
in the present shame of,
the wondership stolen by,
ownership.[40]

As a result of this loss of economic control for the individuals of Gloucester, Olson recognizes that the concept of a democracy is no longer fair. The common man is even alienated from the country's actions of war and destruction by the cheap and deceptive words of manipulation:

we do it all
by quantity and
machine.

. . . they put Smith down
as, and hire a Standish
to do corporative
murder: keep things clean,
by campaigns

drop bombs. One cries Mongols
instead.[41]

Thus, Olson sees Whitman's dream of a free and ideal democracy as having expanded out of control and become a materialistic monster which turns its back on the individual man in America. Commercialism and large industry are destroying the livelihood of the Gloucester fishermen, and in the opening poem of The Maximus Poems, Olson attempts to mobilize these local people:

(O Gloucester-man,
weave
your birds and fingers
new, your roof-tops,
clean shit upon racks
sunned on
American

braid
with others like you, such
extricable surface
as faun and oral . . .
o kill kill kill kill kill
those
who advertise you
out).[42]

When his poetry is viewed from a broad perspective, it appears that Olson is unwilling or perhaps unable to cope with the enormous complexities of twentieth-century American society. His poetry celebrates not a composite society, but instead, with some echoes of W. C. William's Paterson, he concentrates upon the local life in one small town.

Whereas Whitman celebrates the prospects of a coming democracy, Olson laments the loss of true democracy in a country where too few men greedily hoard the wealth and where too few individuals have control over their own destinies. Whitman dealt with the broad expansive whole of America; but for Olson, the city of Gloucester is enough. Gloucester becomes the symbol of a community which manages to retain its local identity in spite of the constant threat from the surrounding manipulation and materialism of America.

In "Letter3," Olson portrays Gloucester as a last island of hope:

> The word does intimidate. The pay-check does.
> But to use either, as cheap men
>
> o tansy city, root city
> let them not make you
> as the nation is
>
> I speak to any of you . . .[43]

It seems that Olson's conception of America is unquestionably more realistic than was Whitman's. Olson recognizes that waste, destruction, and greed accompany or follow much of the progress in this country, and Whitman only idealized about the progress and development in a blindly optimistic manner.

A final area of comparison between the two poets concerns their strivings to comprehend the universe--that is, the order of all things--through their poetics.

Basic to the poetic of Whitman is the assumption that each physical thing has its spiritual counterpart. He recognizes a spirituality in man's body:

> I have said that the soul is not more than the body
> And I have said that the body is no more than the soul.[44]

Furthermore, there exists a spirituality within all things in the universe. To find this is Whitman's goal as an artist; he says that the "culmination and fruit of literary artistic expression, and its final fields of pleasure . . . are in metaphysics, including the mysteries of the spiritual world, the soul itself."[45] This philosophy is exemplified in "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry":

> Thrive, cities--bring your freight, bring your shows,
> ample and sufficient rivers,
> Expand, being than which none else is perhaps more spiritual,
> . . . You furnish your parts toward eternity,
> Great or small, you furnish your parts toward the soul.[46]

Because he perceives a dualism of reality, Whitman often strives through his poetry to span from the physical realms of things to the spiritual realms of oneness in the universe.

Olson's view of the universe, on the other hand, is an extremely concrete one; he does not look beyond things for any spiritual significance. He seems to espouse W. C. Williams' philosophy that "for the poet there are no ideas but in things."[47] Olson sees that a meaning is inherent in things, as he states "that which exists through itself is meaning."[48] In his poetry, Olson often sets forth this doctrine by emphasizing concrete reality:

> the body
> does bring us
> down
> The images
> have to be
> contradicted
> The metamorphoses
> are to be
> undone
>
> The stick,
> and the ear
> are to be no more than
> they are.[49]

In other words, there is to be no Whitmanesque movement from reality to spirituality in Olson's poems. For things simply <u>are</u>, and that is enough; the universe is a precise thing:

> all motion
> is a crab.[50]

The concepts of sound and line length are also an integral part of Olson's oneness with the universe. He states that "PROJECTIVE VERSE teaches . . . this lesson, that that verse will only do in which a poet manages to

register both the acquisitions of his ear and the pressures of his breath."[51] He then proceeds to define these two elements and to formulate a conclusion about them:

> I say the syllable, king, and that it is spontaneous, this way: the ear, the ear which has collected, which has listened . . .
>
> . . . And the line comes . . . from the breathing of the man who writes, at the moment that he writes . . .
>
> . . . And together, these two, the syllable and the line, they make a poem, they make that thing, the--what shall we call it, the Boss of it all, the Single Intelligence.[52]

Thus, the significance of this theory is Olson's attempt to equate the act of writing with man's own physiological condition. Whitman's intimate confessionalism was an attempt to achieve this also, but at the same time, his poetry went far beyond his self. He desired a unity of literature with the masses of American people so that they would realize their spiritual and national potential. Olson defines a literature which recognizes only the individual poet and his physical idiosyncrasies as a human being.

It seems that, for Olson, the ideal condition for the poet would be a state of pre-language and pre-consciousness, for then, and only then was man a unified creature. Stanley Burnshaw analyzed this pre-conscious condition of man in his book The Seamless Web. Burnshaw tells of the birth of the ego, stating that "At a certain time . . . ancestral man entered his own head. All that our kind has become goes back to this crucial moment . . ."[53] Later in the book, Burnshaw, using a quote from Trigant Burrow's Preconscious Foundations of Human Experience, explains what happened after this crucial development in man's head:

> As a result of its ever-increasing emphasis and dependence on word-sign-symbol, human behavior began to lose contact with the medium of actuality, "the good earth." In this physiological transition from action to symbols of action, says Burrow, "the human species, unaware of what was happening, gradually lost touch with the organic source of its own behavior . . . our feeling-medium of contact with the environment and with one another was

> transferred to a segment of the organism--the symbolic segment, or forebrain . . .What had been the organism's whole feeling was transformed into the symbol of feeling."[54]

In this pre-ego period, there was no alienation of art from life and there was no need for myth, for reality was reality without intellectual interference. Myth apparently evolved as a result of man's consciousness of the self and hence his desire to explain himself and things in relation to him. Thus, Olson's poetry is, in a sense, an attempt to destroy all myth and all that interferes with reality. Its ultimate goal is to make man's consciousness at one with his universe again. Whitman, on the other hand, was attempting to fabricate new myths about the individual and America in order that they be united into a physical and spiritual union.

Whitman and Olson also differed concerning their concept of the function of poetry.

Whitman has often been characterized as a dual personality, as in Literary History of the United States, where it is said that "In his vatic moods Walt clearly regarded himself as two persons, one of them under the influence of inspiration."[55] This seems to be related to the fact that throughout Leaves of Grass, Whitman utilizes poetry as a unifying medium to bring about both a personal unity with his spiritual essence, and his country's spiritual and physical unity. The nineteenth-century conception of a basic duality in the universe is placed in a broader perspective by J. Hillis Miller in his introduction to Poets of Reality when he says "Much romantic literature presupposes a double bifurcation. Existence is divided into two realms, heaven and earth, supernatural and natural, the 'real' world and the derived world. It is also divided into subjective and objective realms. Man as subjective ego opposes himself to everything else."[56] And Miller goes on to say that the "dialectic of movement through stages to attain a goal"[57] is also a nineteenth-century romantic characteristic. Whitman clearly felt this romantic desire to span distances and attain goals, as shown in such poems as "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" and "Passage to India," as well as in one early notebook jotting, where he wrote "When I walked at night by the sea shore and looked up at the countless stars, I asked of my soul whether it would be filled and satisfied when it should become god enfolding all these, and open to the life and delight and knowledge of everything in them or of them; and the answer was plain to me as the breaking water on the sands at my feet; and the answer was,

No, when I reach there, I shall want to go further still."[58] In The Solitary Singer, G. W. Allen recognizes Whitman's feelings and states that Whitman had a "longing for identity, this insatiable desire for even more larger existence."[59] And, In American Renaissance, Whitman's desire for 'becoming' is exemplified as F. O. Mattiessen relates that Whitman read a line of John Sterling's, and "Whitman added this gloss to it: 'The word is become flesh.'"[60]

In one of his essays, Olson indicates that he sees a change from the romantic dual vision of the universe in nineteenth-century writings. He states that "man, in the midst of it, knowing well how he was folded in, as well as how suddenly and strikingly he could extend himself, spring or, without even moving, go, too far, the farthest-- he was suddenly possessed or repossessed of a character of being, a thing among things, which I shall call his physicality."[61] Thus, according to Olson, the modern poet should no longer allow himself to grope for things beyond his physical self. In one of his lectures, Olson says "let's knock that subjective thing out, too, right now--that that is all that is, the language that you have by having been alive. And I mean literally your own self, I don't mean some division of individuality, or even identifying or identity."[62] Such beliefs lead Olson to exclaim in his poetry:

> I have this sense,
> that I am one
> with my skin.[63]

Olson's poetry is an attempt to condense all the realms of time, place, reality and the personality into one singular plane of existence which can be explored and mapped. And the attitude of objectivity is important, as Olson explains in his essay, "Projective Verse":

> subjectivism . . . has excellently done itself to death . . . What seems to me a more valid formulation for present use is "objectivism." . . . Objectivism 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 . . . and those other creations of nature which we may, with no derogation, call objects.[64]

Thus, poetry should no longer be dominated by the personality as interpreter, but instead it should attempt a pure description of things without subjective interference.

In Poets of Reality, Miller defends Olson's type of "new poetry"[65] claiming that it achieves a unity of all things as opposed to the dualistic poetry of romanticism:

> The effacement of the ego before reality means abandoning the will to power over things. This is the most difficult of acts for a modern man to perform. It goes counter to all the penchants of our culture. To abandon its project of dominion the will must will not to will. Only through an abnegation of the will can objects begin to manifest themselves as they are, in the integrity of their presence. When man is willing to let things be then they appear in a space which is no longer that of an objective world opposed to the mind. In this new space the mind is dispersed everywhere in things and forms one with them.[66]

This theory poses several problems. First, the act of 'willing not to will' is illogical; it is an impossible concept which can only be accomplished by using the will. Furthermore, for all poets, poetic material must be willed into a poem, or there would be no creation.

And this same discrepancy exists at the basis of Olson's theories. Olson states that "'things' are what writers get inside their work, or their work, poem or story, perishes. Things are the way force is exchanged. On things communication rests. And the writer, though he is the control (or art is nothing), is, still, no more than--but just as much as--another 'thing'". . .[67] Thus, the artist is just another 'thing' within the poem, yet paradoxically, he must also be the controller of the poem. It is evident that Olson cannot be a complete equal to things in a poem; instead, a part of his existence must dominate by observing and ordering the reality or there would be no artistic creation. This duality is expressed by Olson in one of his poems:

> The landscape (the landscape!) again: Gloucester,
> the shore one of me is (duplicates), and from which
> (from offshore, I, Maximus) am removed, observe.[68]

And Olson as an artist-controller appears repeatedly throughout The Maximus Poems in the form of a subjective commentator:

I measure my song,
measure the sources of my song,
measure me, measure
my forces

(And I buzz,
as the bee does,
who's missed
the plum tree,
and gone and got himself caught
in my window.[69]

This morning of the small snow
I count the blessings, the leak in the faucet
which makes of the sink time, the drop
of the water on water as sweet
as the Seth Thomas
in the old kitchen
my father stood in his drawers to wind (always
he forgot the 30th day, as I don't want to remember
the rent
a house these days
so much somebody else's . . .[70]

These passages portray an emotional self-analysis and self-pity, and they undoubtedly have their basis in the inherent subjectivity or interposing ego of the poet. In a discussion of this last passage and others, M. L. Rosenthal has noted that "Olson's way of letting go, tuning in on himself without inhibition, serves to give a special kind of subjective body to his work."[71]

So it is evident that there does exist a basic duality in Olson's poetry, and though it is not a romantic Whitmanesque duality of spiritual becoming, it is nevertheless a separation of the inevitably subjective controlling artist and the world of things that surround him.

Though there are discrepancies that exist between his theory and his practice, it is still evident that Olson's theories have displayed a radically different attitude toward poetics and art. This attitude indicates a change in the nature of American poetry since Whitman's time, because now poetry is less concerned with spiritual things and is more concerned with moving toward a unity with objective reality.

Whitman had begun his struggle by casting off the fetters of the conventional verse of his time, a verse which described life and emotion through a veil of literary prettiness. He was able to achieve a new direction by producing an emotionally honest poetry which used the things of objective reality to express his inner reality. His writing was an attempt to bring poetry closer to the subjective emotional reality of living, to make it an utterance of the whole spiritual being and thus to unify the poet's emotions with his act of expression.

But Charles Olson's theory moved poetics several dynamic steps further. He attempted to gain an even closer unity of poetry with man by making poetry an integral part of man's physiological self. Olson's goal was not an emotional outpouring, but instead an identification of poetry with the physical realities of life and perception. The acts of living--breathing, hearing, and so on--as well as the physical processes of perception play a central role in the expression of a physiologically honest poetry which was akin to the essence of the poet's physical life. The describer himself becomes another 'thing' within the process of the poem; thus, in a sense, the poem approaches a oneness with physical reality.

Although Olson's goal of poetry's oneness with the physical may be an impossible one to achieve, it is nevertheless an admirable attempt, and it has definitely become a twentieth-century trend in American poetry which moves toward the unity of the poet with the poem, and ultimately, a fusion of art with life itself.

Footnotes

[1]Walt Whitman, Complete Poetry and Selected Prose, ed. James E. Miller, Jr. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1959), p. 41.

[2]Charles Olson, The Maximus Poems (New York: Jargon/Cornith Books, 1960), p. 1.

[3]Whitman, Complete Poetry, p. 36.

[4]Ibid., p. 251.

[5]Ibid., p. 92.

[6]Ibid., pp. 116 &119.

[7] Ibid., p. 349.

[8] Ibid., p. 164.

[9] Olson, The Maximus Poems, p. 3.

[10] Ibid., p. 27.

[11] Ibid., p. 155.

[12] Ibid., p. 120.

[13] Ibid., p. 124.

[14] Ibid., p. 14.

[15] Ibid., p. 154.

[16] Ibid., p. 52.

[17] Ibid., p. 52.

[18] Whitman, Complete Poetry, p. 66.

[19] Charles Olson, Human Universe, ed. Donald Allen (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1967), p. 122.

[20] Whitman, Complete Poetry, p. 445.

[21] Ibid., p. 27.

[22] Ibid., p. 321.

[23] Olson, Human Universe, p. 128.

[24] Olson, The Maximus Poems, p. 51.

[25] Charles Olson, Maximus Poems Iv, V, VI (London: Cape Goliard Press, 1968), n. pag.

[26] Olson, The Maximus Poems, p. 36.

[27] Ibid., p. 139.

[28] Olson, Human Universe, pp. 52& 53.

[29] Whitman, Complete Poetry, p. 497.

[30] Olson, Human Universe, pp. 5 & 6.

[31] Olson, The Maximus Poems, p. 42.

[32] Alan W. Watts, The Way of Zen (New York: Pantheon Books, Inc., 1957), p. 144.

[33] Whitman, Complete Poetry, p. 45.

[34] Ibid., p. 432.

[35] Ibid., p. 477.

[36] Ibid., p. 23.

[37] Olson, The Maximus Poems, p. 127.

[38] Ibid., p. 15.

[39] Olson, Maximus Poems IV, V, VI, n. pag.

[40] Olson, The Maximus Poems, p. 9.

[41] Ibid., p. 125.

[42] Ibid., pp. 3 & 4.

[43] Ibid., p. 11.

[44] Whitman, Complete Poetry, p. 66.

[45] Ibid., p. 495.

[46] Ibid., p. 120.

[47] William Carlos Williams, The Autobiography of William Carlos Williams (New York: Random House, 1951), p. 390.

[48] Charles Olson, Causal Mythology (San Francisco: Four Seasons Foundation, 1969), p. 2.

[49] Charles Olson, The Distances (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1960), p. 69.

[50] Ibid., p. 33.

[51] Olson, Human Universe, p. 53.

[52] Ibid., p. 54.

[53]Stanley Burnshaw, The Seamless Web (New York: George Braziller, Inc., 1970), p. 165.

[54]Ibid., p. 168.

[55]Robert E. Spiller, Willard Thorp, Thomas H. Johnson, Henry Seidel Canby, eds., Literary History of the United States (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1948), Vol. I, p. 482.

[56]J. Hillis Miller, Poets of Reality (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1965), p. 1.

[57]Ibid., p. 9.

[58]Walt Whitman, Uncollected Poetry and Prose of Walt Whitman (New York: 1932), p. 66.

[59]G. W. Allen, The Solitary Singer (New York: New York University Press, 1967).

[60]F. O. Mattiessen, American Renaissance (New York: Oxford University Press, 1941), p. 524.

[61]Olson, Human Universe, p. 118.

[62]Charles Olson, Poetry and Truth, ed. George F. Butterick (San Francisco: Four Seasons Foundation, 1971), p. 46.

[63]Olson, Maximus Poems IV, V, VI, n. pag.

[64]Olson, Human Universe, pp. 59-60.

[65]Miller, Poets of Reality, p. 9.

[66]Ibid., p. 8.

[67]Olson, Human Universe, p. 128.

[68]Olson, The Distances, p. 90.

[69]Olson, The Maximus Poems, p. 44.

[70]Ibid., p. 14.

[71]M. L. Rosenthal, "Olson / His Poetry," Massachusetts Review. Vol. XII, No. 1, p. 54.

Small Philosophies: A Short Story

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Colors Coffen stepped along the road at a pace that his ancient, bluetick, Cletus, was hard put to keep up with, except love of his master and the rhythmic harmonica strains set the timing. Why even a dog should find Colors necessary is difficult to say. The facts of his shabby gray work outfit and his battered fedora proppped on a bony frame that jutted through at the elbows of his shirt would lead one to believe that it wasn't a full belly or comfort which made him trudge ever after this worn man. Perhaps constant affection over the years and knowing he got exactly half of whatever the old man called his own made Cletus faithful to the wanderer.

How I had, on this low, hanging day in fall, happened to stand on the top of a knoll, Winchester rifle clapped to my side, and discovered them on the road must have been coincidence and more. Six of us had started out that misty morning, partners until our paths diverged in the search for game. As has happened with a man reaching his prime, the woods, the particular odor of things and the feel of the gun's weight and smooth wood on my arm below my rolled-up shirtsleeve brought me gently back into my adolescence, unaware as the sensory experiences gave way to hallucinations of the past. Thus, the sight of Colors Coffen and the dog, Cletus, seemed more than coincidence. It was like a vision my reason struggled with to decide them flesh and blood of ghosts or another dead memory.

I hadn't seen him for years, living as he did, in the woods and removed from the rest of a society he despised. Still, I could not forget the many hours I spent with Colors, learning and listening on walks through these same woods. We spied on everything nature worked to conceal and took what supplies skill and fate would give us: rabbits, fox, otter, squirrel, deer and goose. During the sun-honeyed summers and the crackly snowshoe winters I gave him all my child's questions as he became the father of my thoughts. One day between summer and the onslaught of fall, I asked why the sky's colors changed and he replied, with twinkling eyes, that God was a temperamental artist changing the