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Charles Olson and Frank O'Hara:
The Poetics of Action

A study of the development of the American arts during the last three or so decades demonstrates that the current drive toward performance, or theatricalization, has been inseparable from what Susan Sontag, in her essay Against Interpretation, calls the "flight from interpretation," that is, content-oriented, mimetic art.¹ It should seem only logical, then, that a literature which addresses itself to the current aesthetic issues shall also orient itself toward performance and, eventually, approach the condition of an anti-mimetic art. Interestingly, the tradition of such a literature is primarily a poetic, as opposed to novelistic, tradition, which may be a mere historical coincidence, though given the exigencies of anti-mimetic art it seems quite natural that poems — because they are less dependent for their impact on logical discourse and because they are shorter than novels and do not rely exclusively, as most novels do, on language's semantic dimension but make use of its visual and aural aspects as well — are more immediately recognizable as autonomous aesthetic facts and not as pictures or imitations of other objects.

In the first half of the 20th century, the anti-mimetic, or anti-Symbolist, mode in poetry, first introduced, as Marjorie Perloff claims in her The Poetics of Indeterminacy, by Rimbaud, was represented in America by such poets as Gertrude Stein, Ezra Pound, and William Carlos Williams. They were all profoundly influenced by con-

temporary avant-garde visual artists, who, M. Perloff observes,

From the early days of Cubism in 1910 through Vorticism and Futurism, Dada and Surrealism, down to the Abstract Expressionism of the fifties, and the Conceptual Art, Super-Realism, assemblages, and the performance art of the present... have consistently resisted the Symbolist model in favor of the creation of a world in which forms can exist "littérale-ment et dans tous les sens," an oscillation between representational reference and compositional game.²

The eventual drifting of anti-Symbolist poetry toward performance could already be seen as an inevitable development in the works of Gertrude Stein, of whose *Accents in Alsace*, for example, M. Perloff observes that it is a text "that allows for free play, constructing a way of happening rather than a description of how things look" /p. 85/, and of Ezra Pound, who, Perloff notes, admired Rimbaud for his "directness of presentation" /p. 158-9/ and advocated a new non-mimetic art which he called "Vorticist," defining the "VORTEX" as "the point of maximum energy" /p. 161/. The merger of the anti-Symbolist and the performative modes became a fact with the American poets associated with the artistic avant-garde gathered around Black Mountain College and New York's Action Painters, which, significantly, fathered several first-rate poets while no novelist of similar stature emerged in those circles. Two of those poets, Charles Olson and Frank O'Hara, have played an absolutely fundamental role in establishing the performative as the dominant mode of postmodern American poetry.

Charles Olson, the more theoretically-minded of the two poets, is the author of several important essays, two of which will be discussed here at some length. One is *Human Universe*, which expounds Olson's view of man and the world, the other is *Projective Verse*, where he puts forward his notion of the poem as a force field.³ *Human Universe* is a fierce indictment of the way modern man approaches reality and situates himself in relation to nature. As a writer, Olson is primarily concerned with this relationship as it is reflected in modern man's habits of thought and his use of language. His mind, the poet observes, operates on principles of logic and classification, the Greeks' legacy. Therefore, he approaches nature by partitioning it into units to be compared and symbolized by means

of language, his fundamental instrument in discovering the meaning of phenomena. The result of the stress on comparison, or symbolism, is that, instead of constituting a link between man and world, language, "by selecting from the full content some face of it, or plane, some part" /p. 55/, falsifies the human experience of reality and thus separates him from it - "It comes out a demonstration, a separating out, an act of classification, and so, a stopping, and all that I know is, it is not there, it has turned false" /p. 55/. This is so because, Olson points out, "All that comparison ever does is set up a series of reference points: to compare is to take one thing and to try to understand it by marking its similarities to or differences from another thing" /p. 56/. The poet explains: "Right here is the trouble, that each thing is not so much like or different from another thing /these likenesses and differences are apparent/ but that 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 any other thing" /p. 56/. In other words, analytical language fails because it aims to explain what is self-referential in terms of something else, to find referential meaning in what has no other meaning than its own existence. For Olson, life is inherently autotelic, because, by its very nature, it "is preoccupation with itself" /p. 53/. By modern standards this implies lack of any meaning at all, for by those standards meaning is necessarily referential, but Olson's is an entirely different, postmodern, conception of meaning. In his introduction to *Selected Writings*, Robert Creeley records Olson as saying at the Berkeley Poetry Conference in 1965 that "that which exists through itself is what is called the meaning" /p. 9/.

The way Olson sees it, the problem is, then, to find a way to convey in language the fact that "we are confronted by, not the thing's 'class,' any hierarchy, of quality and quantity, but the thing itself" /p. 56/. He is convinced that "there must be a means of expression for this, a way which is not divisive as all tag ends and upendings of the Greek way are" /p. 56/. Characteristically, like many other postmodern thinkers and artists, he sees a possible solution to the modern dilemma in the premodern world view. Having lived in Mexico for some months, Olson has come to appreciate the culture of the ancient Mayas, whose civilization "was a contrary of that which we have known and of which we are the natural children"

/p. 56/. Olson is particularly fascinated with their language, whose written form, hieroglyphs, is an example of a system of signs which "retain the power of the objects of which they are the images" /p. 58/. One way to achieve the same in our language, Olson suggests, is to restore to language both its phonetic and visual dimensions, that is, to restore the immediacy of the relationship between language and experience. The poet says: "Logos, or discourse, for example, has ... so worked its abstractions into our concept and use of language that language's other functions, speech, seems so in need of restoration that several of us go back to hieroglyphs or to ideograms to right the balance" /p. 54/.

But this is not enough, Olson insists, "one can't any longer, stop here, if one ever could" /p. 54/. We need today, he claims, an entirely new conception of language, one which recognizes that "the habits of thought are the habits of action" /p. 54/, that is, one that recognizes that language itself is action. For Olson, this fact is obvious, for "by the very law of the identity of definition and discovery,⁴ who can extricate language from action?" /p. 54/. Such a conception of language is naturally utterly different from the modern one, and "the distinction here is between language as the act of the instant and language as the act of thought about the instant" /p. 54/. The two are not only different but, in fact, contradictory and, therefore, irreconcilable. Modern man's habits of thought and use of language, based on the principles of logic and analysis, or classification, "the two great means" of discourse, hinder direct perception and articulation of "the harmony of the universe," which, as the postmodern mind recognizes, "is not logical, or better, is post-logical, as is the order of any created thing" /p. 55/. It is the persistence of the former that is responsible for the growing alienation of man, for his exclusion from active participation in the processes of the world. Olson puts it this way: "It is that they Logic and classification⁷ have fastened themselves on habits of thought that action is interfered with, absolutely interfered with, I should say" /p. 55/.

Modern man's misuse and degradation of language is indeed at the same time the cause and the effect of the general character of his relationship with the world. In this relationship, man regards himself as "the center of phenomenon by fiat" - or, if he admits that God is the center, he sees himself as "god's chief reflection" - while nature is set aside as "an unadmitted or suppressed thirdpar-

ty" /p. 59/. This separation of man from nature follows from man's conviction that inner and outer belong to two entirely different realms and that if not mastered by him nature will destroy him - "It has long been the soul which has softly stood as a word to cover man as a selecting internal reality posed dangerously in the midst of those externals which the word chaos covers like Williams' paint" /p. 60/. But such an egotistic view of the world, Olson observes, is as destructive of nature as it is of man himself:

If man chooses to treat external reality any differently than as part of his own process, in other words as anything other than relevant to his own inner life, then he will /being such a froward thing, and bound to use his energy willily-nilly, nature is so subtle/ use it otherwise. He will use it just exactly as he has used it now for too long, for arbitrary and willful purposes which, in their effects, not only change the face of nature but actually arrest and divert her force until man turns it even against herself, he is so powerful, this little thing. But what little willful modern man will not recognize is, that when he turns it against her he turns it against himself, held in the hand of nature as man forever is, to his use of himself if he choose, to his disuse, as he has. /p. 62/

By destroying nature man destroys himself, for "man and external reality are so involved with one another that, for man's purposes, they had better be taken as one" /p. 60/.

Olson argues that the inseparability of man and nature can be demonstrated to have a very concrete character. Namely, the skin, a natural physical threshold between inner and outer, does not separate man from the external world but, on the contrary, the poet claims, enables man to experience it immediately: "And it has gone so far, that is, science has, as to wonder if the fingertips, are not very knowing knots in their own rights, little brains /little photo-electric cells, I think they now call the skin/ which, immediately, in responding to external stimuli, make decisions! It is a remarkable and usable idea. For it is man's first cause to wonder how rapid he is in his taking in of what he does experience" /p. 60/. The usability of this idea is in that "this metaphor of the senses - of the literal speed of light by which man absorbs, instant on in-

start, all that phenomenon presents to him - is a fair image as well, my experience tells me, of the ways of his inner energy, of the ways of those other things which are usually, for some reason, separated from the external pick-ups - his dreams, for example, his thoughts /to speak as the predecessors spoke/, his desires, sins, hopes, fears, faiths, loves" /p. 60/.

As is already implied in the passage just quoted, there is, however, an even more fundamental premise of Olson's organicism, or holistic, vision of man and world. It is that both human existence and the existence of physical reality are aspects of something greater which provides for the basic unity of all phenomena. Mind and matter, he states, are but instant manifestations of the different forms that "the motion we call life" /p. 61/ takes. With life conceived of in terms of eternal motion, or energy flow,⁵ the position of man is no longer that of a master of the world but, rather, that of an element in "the full circuit of objects, image, action" /p. 62/. The goal of his being in the world, then, should be active participation in the processes of life, for "if man is active, it is exactly here where experience comes in that it is delivered back, and if he stays fresh at the coming in he will be fresh at his going out" /p. 62/. "Active" here means that man is not a neutral and static element. On the contrary, Olson stresses, "Man does influence external reality, and it can be stated without recourse to the sturdities of mysticism" /p. 62/. This is because he does not merely participate in the transmission of energy as passive conduit but contributes to the world by giving this energy forms uniquely human - "Man's action, that tremendous discharge of force which we over-love when we love it for its own sake but which /when it is good/ is the equal of all intake plus all transposing" /p. 62/.

The kind of transposition that Olson has in mind is of course artistic action. His conception of art naturally reflects his conception of life, for, he says, "art is the only twin life has - its only valid metaphysic" /p. 61/. Art, like life, consists in action and, like life, it is inherently autotelic and autonomous - "Art does not seek to describe but to enact" /p. 61/. In fact, art cannot be otherwise since "There is only one thing you can do about kinetic, reenact it" /p. 61/.

Olson's own poetic of action is expounded in Projective Verse, which discusses the nature of poetry conceived of in terms of energy transference. First of all, since projective verse, also called open

verse or composition by field /field composition/, is an art of the instant, "the kinetics of the thing" /p. 16/ is the crucial aspect of it. Olson puts it this way: "A poem is energy transferred from where the poet got it /he will have some several causes/ by way of the poem itself to, all the way over to, the reader. Okay. Then the poem itself must, at all points, be a high-energy construct and, at all points, an energy-discharge" /p. 16/. From this characteristic follow the next two: a poem like that is not a representation of anything outside itself - it is only about energy transference - and it does not tolerate pre-meditation on the part of the poet. It necessarily has an unpremeditated and autonomous character, for the poet "can go by no track other than the one the poem under hand declares for itself" /p. 16/. At the same time, however, to accomplish the desired /open/ form, the poet must observe certain principles. The most important of them follows directly from the dynamic nature of projective verse - it is "the process of the thing" /p. 16/. Olson's high-energy prose conveys the idea best:

ONE PERCEPTION MUST IMMEDIATELY AND DIRECTLY LEAD TO A FURTHER PERCEPTION. It means exactly what it says, is a matter of, at all points /even, I should say, of our management of daily reality as of the daily work/ get on with it, keep moving, keep in, speed, the nerves, their speed, the perceptions, theirs, the acts, the split second acts, the whole business, keep it moving as fast as you can, citizen. And if you also set up as a poet, USE USE USE the process at all points, in any given poem always, always one perception must must MOVE, INSTANTLY, ON ANOTHER!

/p. 17/

This is the famous "Olson's push," an approach to life and poetry which is based on the conviction that man fulfills himself only in action. Action, Olson believes, unites physiology and thought, abolishes the inner fragmentation of man and his alienation from the world, breaks down the barrier between art and life. Projective verse teaches how poetry can do this. Starting with the smallest particle of poetry, the syllable, Olson states that "it is from the union of the mind and the ear that the syllable is born" /p. 18/. The next, larger particle is the line, which "comes /I swear it/ from the breath, from the preathing of the man who writes it, at the

moment he writes" /p. 19/. As a verbal structure, a projective poem is constantly in motion keeping track of its own composition, thus becoming a record of its own occurrence. In fact, one should rather say that it is the record and not a record, for, admitting that "FORM IS NEVER MORE THAN AN EXTENSION OF CONTENT" /p. 16/, Olson adds a corollary to it: "... right form, in any given poem, is the only and exclusively possible extension of content under hand" /p. 16/. Making form and content inseparable, Olson rejects the possibility that the same content can be expressed in many different forms, an idea based on the assumption that a poem carries a recognizable meaning which refers to something outside the poem, a meaning that is interpretable and which resides in the poem's content and so is independent of its form. If a poem has no referential meaning, if it stands only for itself, then its form and content are indistinguishable. They form a continuous whole in which dynamic interactions of the poem's elements occur at "each moment of the going" /p. 19/. Olson says:

... every element in an open poem /the syllable, the line, as well as the image, the sound, the sense/ must be taken up as participants in the kinetic of the poem just as solidly as we are accustomed to take what we call the objects of reality; and ... these elements are to be seen as creating the tensions of a poem just as totally as do those other objects create what we know as the world.

/p. 20/

In other words, a projective poem requires a status equal to that of other objects existing outside it. At the same time, it frees itself from "the lyrical interference of the individual as ego, of the 'subject' and his soul" /p. 24/. Olson calls this "objectivism," not "objectivism," for "objectivism" inevitably brings to mind "subjectivism," and, as the poet asserts, "It is now too late to be bothered with the latter. It has excellently done itself to death, even though we are all caught in its dying" /p. 24/. Objectivism is a view which is a reaction against "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. For a man himself is an object, whatever he may take to be his advantages ..." /p. 24/. Man's place in the world is defined in terms

of "how he conceives his relation to nature, that force to which he owes his somewhat small existence" /p. 25/. And the right relation is, of course, participation through action, for only "if he is contained within his nature as he is participant in the larger force, he will be able to listen, and his hearing through himself will give him secrets objects share" /p. 25/. Here the poet has a special role to play - if he listens to and participates in the process of nature, nature will share its secrets with him, and both will profit. By giving his work "a seriousness sufficient to cause the thing he makes to try to take its place alongside the things of nature" /p. 25/, he partakes of the ultimate act of communion of man and world, art and life: he makes his performance as a poet continuous with his presence in the world.

Olson's projective verse displays other features of postmodern performance besides its dynamic holism as well. The seriousness he has in mind does not preclude playfulness, which is so characteristic of contemporary performance-oriented art. Replacing the modern "I think, therefore I am" with "I play, therefore I am," Olson asks: "... is it not the PLAY of a mind we are after, is it not that that shows whether a mind is there at all?" /p. 19/. His projective verse also emphasizes the process of composition including the mechanics of it, here meaning the mechanics of type-writing. "It is the advantage of the type-writer that, due to its rigidity and its space precisions, it can, for a poet, indicate exactly the breath, the pauses, the suspensions even of syllables, the juxtapositions even of parts of phrases, which he intends" /p. 22/.

"Playing the type-writer" was an important aspect of Frank O'Hara's "conversational life." He considered Olson's views on poetry with some skepticism, finding the leader of the Black Mountain school too theoretical and self-consciously programmatic, but many postulates of "projectivism" found their way into O'Hara's "personalist" poetry. Less concerned with literary theory, O'Hara took inspiration from his friendship with many New York Action Painters and his work as assistant curator at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. His ideas concerning poetry were in fact often contained in his art criticism and paralleled the ideas of Abstract Expressionists so closely that, as Fred Moramarco suggests, it is enough to change the words "canvases," "painter," and "picture" in a description of an Action Painting to get a statement on an O'Hara poem. O'Hara himself often used the Action Painters' vocabulary when

talking about his own poems. In a letter to his frequent collaborator in poem-painting, Larry Rivers, he wrote:

How please tell me if you think these poems are filled with disgusting self-pity, if there are "holes" in them, if the surface isn't kept "up," if there are recognizable images, if they show nostalgia for the avant-garde, or if they don't have "push" and "pull," and I'll keep working on them until each is a foot-high.⁸

Like Action Painters, O'Hara emphasized the autonomous nature of his poems, not as representations of reality but as integral objects existing in reality. As Jerome Klinkowitz observes, "In O'Hara's hands the poem is not a report of experience, nor is it a distillation of experience. The poem is more experience."⁹ Since it does not follow experience in time, is not created "after the fact" but is this experience, this fact, an O'Hara poem exists as a presence. As such, it is a chronicle of its own composition, its sole subject matter. The poet said: "I hope the poem to be the subject, not just about it."¹⁰ Paraphrasing his statement on the art of Jackson Pollock, one may say of O'Hara's own poetry that "it is the physical reality of the poet and his activity of expressing it, united with the spiritual reality of the poet in a oneness which has no need for the mediation of metaphor or symbol. It is Action Poetry."¹¹

Poetry which stresses vitality, action and motion has an unpremeditated and playful character. O'Hara's collaborators, L. Rivers and Norman Blum, have compared their work with the poet to a happening, stressing the importance of the event more than the final product. O'Hara's playfulness, as has already been mentioned, often manifested itself on the level of the mechanics of writing. Like for Olson, the type-writer was for him the essential instrument in conveying the speed and spontaneity of the verse act. As M. Perloff observes about O'Hara's poetry, "Playing the type-writer" rather than writing in longhand inevitably leads the poet to emphasize visual prosody,¹² which in turn calls attention to the material of poetry as printed text - letters and words filling the white spaces of the page. Typing a poem, the poet creates visual patterns that later request physical involvement from the reader, who not only reads the words but actually scans the surface of the page the way the viewer of a painting does. As J. Klinkowitz points out,

The chief components of Frank O'Hara's poetry are the author and the reader - all of his techniques lead to this conclusion. It was the dual principle he admired most in Abstract Expressionist painting, that a good work of art "engages the viewer in its meaning rather than declaring it." Equal parts of perception and participation were the sum of Frank O'Hara's poetry.¹³

A further analogy between Abstract Expressionism and O'Hara's poetry concerns its superficial character. Both Action Painters and O'Hara are artists of the surface, regarded as a field upon which the artist discharges his physical and spiritual energy. This quality is powerfully conveyed in those of O'Hara's poems in which the poet is physically present, walking as he talks. These poems are casual sidewalk conversations, skimming the surface of life in a big city. There is however a depth to such superficiality, for, as A. Libby observes, "As Pollock flattened the field of his paintings on-ly to discover the depth in their surfaces, O'Hara's flat recording of mundane existence only reveals the depths of his perceptions."¹⁴

Notes

- 1 Against Interpretation, Dell, New York, 1969. In this essay, S. Sontag exposes the dubiousness of the theory which assumes that a work of art is composed of "items of content" and states that "a great deal of today's art may be understood as motivated by a flight from interpretation" /p. 2/.
- 2 The Poetics of Indeterminacy: Rimbaud to Cage, Princeton Univ. Press, Princeton, 1981, pp. 33-4. References follow in the text.
- 3 Selected Writings, ed., with an introduction, by Robert Creeley, New Directions, New York, 1966. References follow in the text.
- 4 "The difficulty of discovery ... is, that definition is as much a part of the act as is sensation itself" /p. 53/.
- 5 In Equal, That Is, to the Real Itself, Olson observes: "... the structures of the real are flexible, quanta do dissolve into vibrations, all does flow" /p. 52/.
- 6 Cf., Personism: A Manifesto, /in/ The Selected Poems of Frank O'Hara, ed. Donald Allen, Vintage Books, New York, 1974.

- 7 John Ashbery and Frank O'Hara /in/ "Journal of Modern Literature," 1976, no. 3, p. 438.
- 8 Quoted by M. Perloff in Frank O'Hara: Poet Among Painters, Univ. of Texas Press, Austin, 1979, p. 22.
- 9 The American 1960s. Imaginative Acts in a Decade of Change, Iowa State Univ. Press, Ames, 1980, p. 35.
- 10 Quoted by M. Perloff in Frank O'Hara, p. 22.
- 11 Cf., M. Perloff, Frank O'Hara, p. 23.
- 12 Frank O'Hara, p. 116.
- 13 Op. cit., p. 41.
- 14 O'Hara on the Silver Range, /in/ "Contemporary Literature," 1976, no. 2, p. 257.

Małgorzata Matecka

Wincenty Wieriesajew w krytyce rosyjskiej i radzieckiej. Stan i perspektywy badań.

Wincenty Wieriesajew /1867-1945/, pisarz rosyjski polskiego pochodzenia, był jednym z ciekawszych przedstawicieli nurtu realistycznego w literaturze rosyjskiej końca XIX i początku XX wieku.

Trwająca ponad pięćdziesiąt lat twórczość literacka Wieriesajewa przypadła na okres burzliwych przemian społecznych w Rosji, zapoczątkowanych powstaniem pierwszych organizacji marksistowskich, a zakończonych zwycięstwem Rewolucji Październikowej. Były to jednocześnie lata żmudnych poszukiwań i głępkich przewarstwowań rosyjskiej myśli ideowo-estetycznej i społeczno-politycznej. Twórczość Wieriesajewa wpisana w warunki nurtu rosyjskiego życia polityczno-kulturalnego owej epoki, wnosi wiele istotnych elementów uzupełniających do późniejszego i głębszego zrozumienia niektórych zjawisk historycznoliterackich Rosji przełomu XIX i XX wieku.

Spuścizna pisarza, zgodnie z opinią krytyki rosyjskiej, stanowiła swobodną kronikę życia umysłowego w Rosji na przełomie dwóch wieków. Najbardziej znane jego utwory: Na bezdrożu, Na wojnie, Zwierzenia lekarza, Żywe życie - waleśnie odzwierciedlają społeczne i ideowe poszukiwania inteligencji rosyjskiej w poszczególne okresy rozwoju ruchu proletariackiego w Rosji.

Złożona, pełna poszukiwań była droga twórcza Wieriesajewa. Konty-