

HONEY FROM MAGGOTS: AURA, SACRIFICE, AND THE HUMAN UNIVERSE  
IN CHARLES OLSON'S "THE KINGFISHERS"

by

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## THESIS ABSTRACT

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Title: Honey from Maggots: Aura, Sacrifice, and the Human Universe in Charles Olson's "The Kingfishers"

In this thesis, I contend that some form of aura can be recovered from the ravages of technological reproduction described in Walter Benjamin's "The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility (Third Version)." Recovering this aura, however, may require adopting an aesthetic of immediacy through destruction and even wanton disposability (what Georges Bataille in his general economic theory calls "nonproductive expenditure") to ensure that, though routinely diluted and discarded, the split-second authenticity of a work remains, its radical ephemerality and formal irreproducibility opposing the enslaving, commodifying powers of the copy. The poetry and poetic theory of American poet Charles Olson, especially in his long poem "The Kingfishers" and his essays "Projective Verse" and "Human Universe," serves as an example of how an author might inscribe auratic energy along nonproductive, general economic lines.

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## CHAPTER I

### HONEY FROM MAGGOTS: AURA, SACRIFICE, AND THE HUMAN UNIVERSE

#### IN CHARLES OLSON'S "THE KINGFISHERS"

In "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility (Third Version)," Walter Benjamin describes the "aura" characteristic of one's relationship to traditional painting and sculpture. This aura, he claims, bases itself on the authenticity of a work as the singular focus of cult-like worship, now threatened by modern technologies of mass reproduction such as the typewriter, printing press, and camera. Despite dramatically and democratically increasing access to art, these technologies, in Benjamin's view, simultaneously dilute a work's aura, compromising its authenticity by fracturing that singular nature and allowing viewers to approach, in debased copy form, what once drew strength from separateness. The traditional work of art suffers in proportion to the degree that "*replicating the work many times over, [ . . . ] substitutes a mass existence for a unique existence*" (Benjamin, "Work" 254). Yet Benjamin complicates this argument later in praising film's ability to "further [ . . . ] insights into the necessities governing our lives by its use of close-ups, by its accentuation of hidden details in familiar objects, and by its exploration of commonplace milieu through the ingenious guidance of the camera" ("Work" 265). On the surface, this praise would seem to gloss over mass reproduction's potential to damage the very immediacy that a focus on the "hidden details in familiar objects" might encourage. As such, Benjamin leaves open the question of whether such an aura can (or should) be recovered from the diffusing power of the machine.

In this thesis, I contend that some form of aura can be recovered from the ravages of technological reproduction—but that, since one cannot put the mass reproductive genie back in its bottle, one must look toward mass technological reproduction and the willing dissipation of cult aura as a necessary part of such recovery. In many cases, this means adopting an aesthetic of immediacy through destruction and even wanton disposability (what Georges Bataille in his general economic theory calls “nonproductive expenditure”) to ensure that, though routinely diluted and discarded, the split-second authenticity of a work remains, its radical ephemerality and formal irreproducibility opposing the enslaving, commodifying powers of the copy. The poetry and poetic theory of American poet Charles Olson serves as one example of how an author might reinscribe auratic energy along nonproductive, general economic lines. Olson’s landmark poem “The Kingfishers” (1950), and the major essays “Projective Verse” (1950) and “Human Universe” (1951) which followed it, demonstrate how often Olson’s poetic practice turns on instances where realistic (i.e. factual, discursive) details and the split-second energy of poetic composition are registered only to be discarded again. At stake, for Olson, is the birth of a new (or, alternately, the rebirth of a very old) form of humanism capable of seeing past the destruction of set poetic forms and our traditional, auratic relationship with them to the true individuality and commonality of human beings. Olson’s aim, surprisingly similar to Bataille’s in his examination of Aztec sacrifice in *The Accursed Share*, is to delineate one path by which a person’s innate sovereignty might be returned to him or her, arresting a process of human commodification that Olson notes at least as early as Heraclitus but which has accelerated in the twentieth century. Viewing these things alongside Benjamin’s notion of auratic degradation underscores the way that

earlier commentary on traditional art echoes the dilution of the willful human beings consuming it. Few critics have leveraged either Benjamin or Bataille to explain the interleaving of Olson's poetic practice and his aims in practicing that way. This thesis demonstrates the applicability of both writers to the conversation surrounding Olson's praxis and illustrates how Benjamin's account of the increasing dilution of traditional auratic energy may in fact help renew it, if only within the context of the change which Olson felt governed all things.

It is useful, by way of a beginning, to note some of the many similarities between Benjamin's "The Work of Art" and Olson's "Projective Verse," the latter of which may be considered Olson's take on the dissatisfaction with techniques of traditional poetry held by many poets of his generation. Olson's essay, first published in 1950, the same year in which he published "The Kingfishers,"<sup>1</sup> posits "composition by field," a speech-based prosodic system employing the entire page in placing text, as a remedy for the lifelessness of traditional verse ("Projective" 614)<sup>2</sup>. For Olson, such lifelessness was, in part, the result of metrical poets failing to recognize the kinetic nature of their work: the status of the poem as "energy transferred from where the poet got it [. . .], by way of the poem itself to, all the way over to, the reader" ("Projective" 614). Traditional forms, even the descriptive function in poetry, he felt, sap this energy by forcing the dynamic flow of perception-in-composition into what we might think of as concrete irrigation channels. While those pathways may convey sound and sense efficiently from point A to point B, they do so without reference to the shifting natural processes that spawned this energy and without attention to the problems that generalizing forms can cause, thus neutering their true source of power and authenticity in the open field (Olson,

“Projective” 614-616). Temporal and spatial authenticity are also at issue in Benjamin’s “Work of Art,” where one of his primary claims is that, while mass reproduction “may leave the artwork’s other properties untouched, [it] certainly devalue[s] the here and now of the artwork,” and this devaluation damages the “sensitive core of its authenticity” (254). As noted, Benjamin terms this irreplaceable here-and-now quality “aura” and claims that aura withers to the extent that mechanical reproduction “*substitutes a mass existence for a unique existence*” (“Work” 254). While Benjamin does not necessarily view mass existence as a negative, he seems to feel that the erosion of this older, cultural system still demands recognition (256). For many, the mass existence brought into being by technological reproduction might seem quite separate from the bugbear of traditional poetic form deplored by Olson. Yet we need only turn to Ezra Pound’s lines from *Hugh Selwyn Mauberly* comparing rhyme to alabaster sculpture to see the congruence (Pound 1299). Both Benjamin and Olson were responding to the ways in which their “age demanded an image / Of its accelerated grimace” rather than such traditional sculpting (Pound 1299). Both deal with duplicates—Pound’s “mold[s] in plaster, / Made with no loss of time”—and with “kinema,” or movement, of different sorts (Pound 1299). The difference is simply that Olson, concerned with the reproduction of form as well as material substance<sup>3</sup>, already views the traditional work of art in his field as a debased copy and welcomes the kinema with less reservation<sup>4</sup>. If then, “to an ever-increasing degree, the work reproduced becomes the reproduction of a work designed for reproducibility,” this is simply, for Olson, a new spin on an old problem (Benjamin, “Work” 256). After all, the sonnet form so loathed by William Carlos

Williams<sup>5</sup> had been an aid to what he felt was the debasing reproduction of certain sorts of lyric thought for years.

However, Olson is also concerned with the effects of material reproduction that explicitly concerned Benjamin, as shown by his claim in “Projective Verse” that “What we have suffered from, is manuscript, press, the removal of verse from its producer and its reproducer, the voice, a removal by one, by two removes from its place of origin *and* its destination” (618). Though Olson never labels what we have suffered the loss of ‘aura’ as such, preferring words like ‘energy,’ his belief that page and press sever poetry from the voice of the poet amounts to a similar condition. The poet, by virtue of being there-and-then in the moment of speaking or composing, assumes all the auratic qualities Benjamin assigns to physically present stage actors (“Work” 259-260). Hence, the mediation of writing (the first remove) represents, for Olson, one layer of detachment from the here-and-nowness of the work. Constraining the poem to fixed forms like the sonnet instead of honoring it for what it was in the instant of its creation (the second remove) only makes things worse.

Given this mutual investment in aura, it is not surprising to find Olson and Benjamin jointly interested in other concepts related to spatial or temporal distance. Take for example their notions of the split-second and the open field. In Olson, it is the split-second, not the relatively artificial “trochee’s heave,” that serves as the focal point and basic unit of perception for a poet in the act of composition (“Projective” 613). Taking a page from his friend and predecessor at Black Mountain College, the author Edward Dahlberg, Olson stresses in vehement capital letters that “ONE PERCEPTION MUST IMMEDIATELY AND DIRECTLY LEAD TO A FURTHER PERCEPTION” (614).

These split-second attentions are to be funneled into individual syllables and words, measured by a combination of the poet's ear and the pressures of his or her breath, and arranged in the "open field" (i.e. with recourse to the entire page) in a way representative of those attentions as they originally existed (Olson, "Projective" 615-617). If successful, the result is a kind of graphing out of the poet's mental and auditory unconscious—an opening up of content, of the type of experience allowed in a poem, that in turn sanctions a new use of poetic space. Olson credits fellow poet Robert Creeley for the injunction that "FORM IS NEVER MORE THAN AN EXTENSION OF CONTENT," though with "this possible corollary, that right form, in any given poem, is the only and exclusively possible extension of content under hand" because it was the natural form of the poem at the moment of its birth (Olson, "Projective" 614). This notion of organic form and moment-to-moment change in context resonates powerfully with Benjamin's thinking about film, "where the way each single image is understood appears prescribed by the sequence of all the preceding images" (258). One may view each line of projective poetry as prescribed by the same sort of moment-to-moment sequencing in all the preceding lines. Once one moment is registered, the work discards it to a certain degree, moving on to the next moment or perception and its attendant forms.

Consider Benjamin's discussion of the possibilities of film in "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility," which incorporates notions of freedom and confinement found also in Olson:

On the one hand, film furthers insight into the necessities governing our lives by its use of close-ups, by its accentuation of hidden details in familiar objects, and by its exploration of commonplace milieu through

the ingenious guidance of the camera; on the other hand, it manages to assure us of a vast and unsuspected field of action [*Spielraum*]. Our bars and city streets, our offices and furnished rooms, our railroad stations and our factories seemed to close relentlessly around us. Then came film and exploded this prison-world with the dynamite of the split second, so that now we can set off calmly on journeys of adventure among its far-flung debris. (Benjamin, "Work" 265)

This could easily be a description of projective verse. Benjamin's "insight into the necessities governing our lives" finds its parallel in Olson's comment that the need for one perception to lead immediately and directly to another "is a matter [. . .] at *all* points [. . .] of our management of daily reality" (Olson, "Projective" 614). Benjamin's close-ups might as well be Olson's minute, moment-to-moment emphasis on the ear and the play of syllables. The closing in around us of city streets, offices, *already* furnished rooms, railroad stations, and factories in Benjamin becomes the smothering force of meter, rhyme, and fixed form in Olson. Just as the camera's split-second "resources for swooping and rising, disrupting and isolating, stretching or compressing a sequence, enlarging or reducing an object" allow for "journeys of adventure among its far-flung debris," projective verse's ability to cut around the page in response to dynamic change releases us to adventures among far-flung lines not frustrated by classical form (Benjamin, "Work" 265). Both essays speak of this process in terms of "fields of action," connoting, at once, a greater access to space (in film or on the page) and possibilities for split-second play stemming from the unconscious. That speed and that range exist to

bring us closer to the work, understood by both Benjamin and Olson as an event unthinkable were the distances of traditional aura still in place.

There are additional similarities. Benjamin quotes Gestalt psychologist and film critic Rudolf Arnheim on the “curious gliding, floating character” of filmed movements, a description which resonates strongly with the way words and lines in projective verse often seem to drift across their page (qtd. in Benjamin, “Work” 266). Follow Arnheim to his notion that actors and props are often interchangeable in film, and Benjamin connects us, in some ways, with Olson’s discussion of Objectism as well (Eiland and Jennings 227). Objectism is Olson’s sense that everything in a projective poem “must be handled as a series of objects in field in such a way that a series of tensions (which they also are) are made to *hold*, and to hold exactly inside the content and context of the poem” (“Projective” 617). Later he calls Objectism “the kind of relation of man to experience which a poet might state as the necessity of a line or a work to be as wood [. . .] For man is himself an object, whatever he may take to be his advantages, particularly at the moment he achieves an humilitas sufficient to make him of use” (Olson, “Projective” 619-20). This humilitas echoes that of Benjamin’s film actor, who must also “operate with his whole living person,” just as the projective poet does, and whose performance Benjamin sees as a collage of tensions between non-chronologically filmed shots made to hold inside the content and context of the film (“Work” 260-61). As Benjamin writes:

The recording apparatus that brings the film actor’s performance to the public need not respect the performance as an integral whole. Guided by the cameraman, the camera continually changes its position with respect to the performance. The sequence of positional views which the editor



composes from the material supplied him constitutes the completed film. It comprises a certain number of movements, of various kinds and duration, which must be apprehended as such through the camera, not to mention special camera angles, close-ups and so on. Hence, the performance of the actor is subjected to a series of optical tests. (259)

One might equate this notion of optical tests with the way Olson asks us to “Observe him [the projective poet] as he takes advantage of the machine’s [*sic.*] multiple margins to juxtapose” several lines excerpted from his poem “The Praises”:

Sd he:

to dream takes no effort

to think is easy

to act is more difficult

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

is the most difficult thing of all (qtd. in “Projective” 618-19)

Olson describes these lines as “a progressing of both the meaning and the breathing forward, and then a backing up, without a progress or any kind of movement outside the unit of time local to the idea,” which could also describe the process of splicing a film scene together (619). The split-second optical unconscious uncovered by the camera and pieced together by a film editor that Benjamin describes seems analogous to the split second auditory unconscious that the projective poet pays heed to “at every given

moment of composition” (Olson 617). Change in the split-second is such a powerful and native thing for the poet composing that Olson even calls it “recognition,” as in ‘recognition of a sound, an idea, or an impulse as it flits by the conscious mind,’ much the way an object or shot might flash across a movie screen (617). Olson’s description of this instantaneous recognition from hearing even parallels Benjamin’s statements about the instantaneous recognitions of the eye. For Olson, “the ear [. . .] is so close to the mind that it is the mind’s, that it has the mind’s speed” (615). For Benjamin, “a cinematographer shooting a scene in the studio captures the images at the speed of the actor’s speech,” which is in turn the speed of the actor’s mind (253). In both cases, this continual registering depends on an equally instantaneous, though less acknowledged, willingness to discard the former camera angle or whorl of sound and sense for the next, and the next, and the next.

“Projective Verse,” then, reads much like a reflection on Benjamin, even if it seems unlikely that Olson could have encountered “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility” before its first English translation in 1968. When Olson laments the lack of emphasis on breath as a prime element in the composition of verse, we might say that he is as good as lamenting, in Benjamin’s terms, the way mass production and mass-reproduced poetic forms curtail the “breathing in” of here-and-nowness that is the poem’s aura (Benjamin 255). This curtailing causes problems for the poet because it allows the expectation of auratically denuded form to influence the way the poem is shaped, and for the reader because he or she is then that much further from what Olson takes to be the true source of the poem’s energy. One of the virtues of projective verse is that it forces us to ask whether traditional form is itself an energy-

sapping, authenticity-degrading machine. If we accept these affinities between Benjamin and Olson, we may claim that the underlying project of projective verse is an attempt to restore the authenticity or aura of that verse (its essential breath or energy) from a position within the machine of mass reproductive technology and mass-reproduced traditional forms<sup>6</sup>.

We cannot, however, run far with such a claim before we are compelled to ask whether one can ever truly reclaim the degraded aura, energy, immediacy, or authenticity of a work from within the very thing causing that degradation. If the base of poetry truly changes, the way Olson believes it must when “the projective purpose of the act of verse is recognized,” will it produce a superstructure never before seen or, as sometimes seems to be the case with projective verse, produce a superstructure that only points back at the old auratic economy (“Projective” 619)? It is at this point that we must attend to several important differences between Olson and Benjamin. For example, the two thinkers operate on very different definitions of transmissibility and its relation to authenticity. Olson, for his part, affirms that there *is* a way for the energy of the poem—for its aura—to be “transferred from where the poet got it [. . .] by way of the poem itself to, all the way over to, the reader” (“Projective” 614). The way to accomplish this involves adhering to certain procedural recommendations in “Projective Verse.” In addition to maintaining split-second fidelity to “the HEAD, by way of the EAR, to the SYLLABLE” and “the HEART, by way of the BREATH, to the LINE,” one must police whatever might distract a poet “from the *push* of the line under hand at the moment, under the reader’s eye, in his moment” (Olson, “Projective” 616). Olson maintains that “Observation of any kind is, like argument in prose, properly previous to the act of the

poem, and, if allowed in, must be so juxtaposed, apposed, set in, that it does not, for an instant, sap the going energy of the content toward its form” (Olson, “Projective” 616). In a passage inspired by nineteenth-century orientalist Ernest Fenollosa regarding grammar’s ability to promote this sort of authenticity-through-transmissibility Olson writes that projective verse honors “the sentence as first act of nature, as lightning, as passage of force from subject to object, quick, in this case, from [the poet] to me, in every case, from me to you, the VERB, between two nouns” (“Projective” 617-618). Even though the poet’s ability to detect and accurately inscribe such auratic, grammatical lightning has suffered from the press, Olson also believes that “from the machine has come one gain not yet sufficiently observed or used[.] [ . . . ] It is the advantage of the typewriter 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” (“Projective” 618).

Benjamin would disagree and claim that “*The whole sphere of authenticity eludes the technological—and, of course, not only technological—reproducibility,*” making Olson’s claim regarding the typewriter seem untenable (253, emphasis original). Though Benjamin agrees that “[t]he authenticity of a thing is the quintessence of all that is transmissible in it from its origin on,” he quickly clarifies that this transmissibility has to do with the art object’s physical duration and historical testimony (254). From Benjamin’s perspective, the aura in Olson’s “The Kingfishers” degrades every time a copy of the poem shoots out of a printing press or appears online, regardless of how scrupulously Olson used the typewriter to figure the energy attending that poem’s birth or the duration of its pauses. This is because, ultimately, the reader is not here-and-now

with Olson, with Olson's voice, or with the original written artifact. He or she is in the presence of a mass-reproduced copy. According to Benjamin, "*It might be stated as a general formula that the technology of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the sphere of tradition. By replicating the work many times over, it substitutes a mass existence for a unique existence*" (254, emphasis original). The use of one mass reproductive technology (the typewriter), for the purposes of even greater mass production (via the printing press), only gestures at a uniqueness lost in attaining mass existence. Similarly, Benjamin would doubtless maintain that one cannot regain an aura related to tradition and the historical identity of a *physical* art object by discarding a different kind of tradition (the textual, literary tradition of rhymed and metered verse, fixed forms, etc.) and claiming Objectism for every element in a mass-reproduced poem. The duration of a line uttered live on a stage is, to his view, not the same as the graphical equivalent of that duration as reproduced on a sheet of archival quality paper. It can only ever be an approximation existing outside of time with respect to the original. As Benjamin notes, "Uniqueness and permanence are closely entwined" in the auratic art object, and the ceaselessly reprinted projective poem offers only uniqueness with transitoriness (255). The projective poem, for Benjamin, would be simply another example of that which "by means of reproduction, [. . .] extracts sameness even from what is unique" (256). The "profusion, the Mass—heterogeneous—ill-assorted—quite breathless [. . .] conglomerate" of new writing called for by W.C. Williams in "The Poem as a Field of Action" (284-285), picked up by Olson in his call for projective verse as a process of "daily work," appears particularly damning in this light (614). For Benjamin, the heterogeneous will always fall prey to the mass. Consequently, Olson's promise "to

get us, inside the machinery, now, 1950, of how projective verse is made” might appear as little more than a rationale for failure (“Projective” 614).

The exciting truth about Olson, however, is that he agrees with Benjamin on the close intertwining of uniqueness and permanence. He simply believes that the relationship runs counter to the direction Benjamin believes it takes. Rather than seeing the increasing disposability of mass reproduced art as something which “extracts sameness even from what is unique,” there is evidence that Olson saw certain forms of mass existence as capable of extracting uniqueness even from that which is the same (Benjamin, “Work” 256). Such a position would be essential if, as argued, Olson believed that Benjamin’s sphere of tradition was already producing authenticity-eroding copies and wanted a detaching to take place. Understanding how Olson viewed all of this, however, requires a shift in our understanding of the poetic economy within which projective verse operates: a shift from what we might call an economics of cult-auratic accumulation and distancing to an economics of deliberate, distance-reducing cult-auratic loss.

In “The Notion of Expenditure,” George Bataille writes concerning “The Insufficiency of the Principle of Classical Utility” underlying our now-familiar bourgeoisie economic system. He claims that, “on the whole, any general judgment of social activity [from the perspective of this system wrongly] implies the principle that all individual effort, in order to be valid, must be reducible to the fundamental necessities of production and conservation” (117). The wasteful, purposeless parts of our personal experience, Bataille says, tend to undermine the validity of this general judgment. Yet most wasteful individuals still choose to view their wastefulness as an aberration or

sickness relative to the way they should be living (Bataille, "Notion" 117). "Humanity," he concludes, recognizes the right to acquire, to conserve, and to consume rationally, but it excludes in principle *nonproductive expenditure*" (Bataille, "Notion" 117). This section of Bataille's essay reads as an explanation of the economics underlying both Olson and Benjamin's obsession with the conservation of aura, the energy of authenticity. The general belief is that poems participate in the production of meaning in an economy that assumes the possibility of auratic or communicative exchange between author and reader. If such transmissibility is impossible in the age of technological reproducibility, this economy at very least assumes the value of conserving cult-aura and mourns its loss. But what if, as Bataille suggests, this economic (or in our case literary) "exchange might have as its origin not the need to acquire that it has today, but the contrary need, the need to destroy and to lose?" ("Notion" 121). What if projective verse fails to recover aura only in the sense Benjamin means when he writes about physical duration and certain types of historical testimony? What if projective verse is truly separate from the "'old' [i.e. acquisitive] base of the non-projective" (Olson, "Projective" 614)? If it takes its cues for prosodic superstructure more from Bataille's discussions of human sacrifice and or *potlatch* ("the opposite of a principle of conservation [. . .] as it existed within the totemic economy, where possession was hereditary") than from bartering, then projective verse may lose a degree of one sort of aura only to regain it by other means ("Notion" 121).

If we apply Bataille in this way to projective verse, certain of his other statements in "The Notion of Expenditure" become provocative as descriptions of what the projective poet is and how his or her poetry operates. Bataille's claim that the

nonproductive expenditure's "accent is placed on a *loss* that must be as great as possible in order for that activity to take on its true meaning" resonates with projective verse's imperative to show the most immediate and emotionally expensive workings of the writer's mind (Bataille, "Notion" 118). This in turn synchronizes with Bataille's comment that poetry is "synonymous with expenditure; [for] it in fact signifies, in the most precise way, creation by means of loss" ("Notion" 120). Poetry is "precise" in the case of projective verse because it goes to such great and repeated lengths to figure, via the typewriter, the original energy of the poem in the here-and-now of composition. Even if these attempts are in some respects just as abstract and inaccurate as iambic pentameter, they at least have the distinction of being more personal than institutional in their expenditure. Bataille links such expenditure with sacrifice and his view therefore helps turn the act of writing or reading projective verse into a kind of secular religion—the best we have now that god is dead ("Notion" 120). The projective poet throws his or her poem on the fire of cult-auratic degradation in the manner of a sacrificial bull, never expecting his or her prayers will be answered, his or her meanings comprehended by god (or in this case the reader). Yet the projective poet does this and the reader submits to it because, "for the rare human beings who have this element at their disposal, poetic expenditure ceases to be symbolic in its consequences; thus, to a certain extent, the function of representation engages with the life of the one who assumes it" (Bataille, "Notion" 120). With such engagement, and in its new quasi-religious capacity, the projective poem apprehends a kind of here-and-nowness despite its inevitable sacrifice to the unredeemability of meaning.



This “positive property of loss” increases the nobility and honor of projective verse among prosodic forms in the same way it increases honor in *potlatch*: by deemphasizing what one gains despite the rigged game of language and emphasizing what one gains precisely because the game is rigged (Bataille 122). The power of the projective poet, because of the doomed, mass-produced way he gains it, is a “power to lose” that ennobles him or her in the process (122). If this is true, the projective does not recover Benjaminian aura so much as participate in the formation of a new, provisional, process- and instance-based aura of loss produced by continually moving forward through form after form, poem after projective poem. Thus, projective verse does not succeed auratically despite its failures, the way a classical work of art might. It succeeds because of them.

Unfortunately, if we ask why it should matter that projective verse gather aura through destruction instead of simply destroying it, the answer is somewhat lacking in “Projective Verse” itself. We might get the sense that the point has to do with “the degree to which the projective involves a stance towards the reality outside a poem as well as a new stance toward the reality of a poem itself” or with Olson’s theory of Objectism. Yet, much of the context still seems missing. There is indeed a wider context, one relevant to the reasons Olson would want to prey upon inaccessible distances of traditional aura, but to get a sense of it, one must turn to Olson’s equally important, though less familiar, essay “Human Universe.” Published in 1951, a year after the publication of both “The Kingfishers” and “Projective Verse,” Olson’s “Human Universe” is essential to understanding those other works. If “The Kingfishers” is what

Olson wrote, and “Projective Verse” is mostly about how he wrote it, “Human Universe” is about why he bothered in the first place.

“Human Universe” begins by restating the familiar argument that man cannot truly communicate anything (be it energy, meaning, or aura) with fidelity. Olson vehemently disagrees with this as a given, instead calling for a greater recognition of the thing he feels is actually causing that lack of fidelity: the alienating influence of generalization, of ancient Greek *logos*, and the ‘universe of discourse’ Socrates claimed for it, which has negatively influenced Western language since 450 B.C. (“Human” 162-163). This generalizing impulse, initiated in part by Aristotle’s emphasis on classification, has resulted in our loss of the fundamental distinction “between language as the act of the instant and language as the act of thought about the instant”<sup>7</sup> (“Human” 162). All of this leads Olson on the quest for a particularism in art that would prop up the two universes that really matter to humans: the universe of man, himself, as an organism and the universe of his physical environment. Generalization in discourse, in comparison, in baser forms of description, or as symbol, he writes, only inhibits our participation in our own experiences, limiting what we might discover therein (“Human” 163-164).

Olson singles out Plato for special comment along these lines. “His world of Ideas, of forms as extricable from content, is as much and as dangerous an issue as are logic and classification,” Olson writes, “and they need to be seen as such if we are to get on to some alternative to the whole Greek system” (“Human” 163). The emphasis on “forms as extricable from content” should put us immediately in mind of Olson’s Creeley-cribbed statement in “Projective Verse” that form is never more than an

extension of content, and it explains, to a degree, Olson's stridence on that point. He shouts at us, resorting to the blunt ammunition of capital lettering, because he is fighting against a way of thinking and writing so entrenched in Western languages that we now take it as the way language *is* rather than as one stance toward the reality encoded in language. The stance toward reality bound up in Western language since the Greeks is one of the first things Olson mentions in "Projective Verse," though with less explanation. It is so vital that it appears also at the beginning of "Human Universe" in a formulation cribbed this time from Pound (who was himself borrowing from Frobenius): "Der Weg stirbt [The Way dies], sd one. And was right, was he not? Then the question is: was ist der Weg?" ("Human" 162). The way that must die, here, is the traditional poet's generalizing stance toward reality and the traditional aura that results.

This matters because classical forms of any sort are forms of abstracting discourse. They select a single, and in some cases predetermined, formal plane relevant to the work and separate it from the herd as much as Aristotle ever does with classification. This process has the unfortunate effect of denying the inherent multi-facetedness of the reality that Olson says both he and the traditional formal poet want to understand and revel in. The idea that separating a thing stops its motion is a criticism Olson would likely hurl at Benjamin's traditional, cult-based aura and that system's desire to classify the work as singular ("Human" 164). To give a more concrete example, the actual *Mona Lisa*, in its role as a particular painting, might seem to be exactly what Olson is after in his quest for particularism in the universe of one's environment. Yet classifying the original "Mona Lisa" as the only valid form of the painting and labeling its aura the one true aura (a pure state damaged by aura-diluting copies) stops the

progress of the work as a multi-dimensional, multi-media entity as it passes through our experience. In other words, cult worship of the sort that produces a traditional auratic here-and-now makes the *Mona Lisa* a Platonic ideal form that, as such, abstracts and limits the experience we could be having and learning from. The one *Mona Lisa* is therefore, despite its originality, as false as any copy. “For any of us at any instant,” Olson writes, “are juxtaposed to any experience, even an overwhelming single one, on several more planes than the arbitrary and discursive [forms] which we inhabit can declare” (Olson, “Human” 164). For a here-and-now aura to exist in a way that does anything but sap the energy or power of the object, that object must be rendered as a function of the human organism experiencing and defining reality as part of its immediate environment, then acting on that input. This action is just as easy to accomplish with a copy as with an original, provided the copy is part of one’s immediate environment and therefore available to experience and self-discovery.

We cannot, Olson continues, “partition reality at any point, in any way” but must instead “find ways to stay in the human universe of our experience” (“Human” 164). These notions explain, in greater detail, Olson’s insistence in “Projective Verse” that a poet must stay within him or herself to attain projective size, and that in so doing, he or she will never run out of things to write about. This is not, as it might seem, an exhortation to write only about one’s literal or metaphorical innards in a process of navel-gazing so intense that it never stops but, rather, an exhortation to avoid becoming expansive in the sense of the generalization or “exaggeration of words, especially that spreading one, ‘universe<sup>8</sup>’” (Olson, “Human” 163). Olson’s injunction against the partitioning of language is also useful to our understanding of Benjamin’s “Work of Art,”

since it encourages us to see the shift from traditional aura to technologically denuded, mass-produced aura as less about technology ruining aura than mass reproduction and its attendant destructions exposing cult-auratic forms for the partitions they have always been. “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility” might then be viewed as an earlier example of *Der Weg* dying out in favor of the multi-faceted, in-the-moment shifts and turns of film montage that both Benjamin and Olson valued<sup>9</sup>.

This aversion to partitioning explains how, in “Human Universe,” Olson can write what seems to be a defense of cult aura that is, in reality, no defense of that form of energy use at all. To hear Olson tell it:

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, in short, the very character of it which calls our attention to it, which wants us to know more about it, its particularity. This is what we are confronted by, not the thing’s “class,” any hierarchy, of quality or quantity, but the thing itself, and its *relevance* to ourselves who are the experience of it (whatever it may mean to someone else, or whatever other relations it may have). (“Human” 164)

On the surface, this sounds like cult aura. “Self-existence, without reference to any other thing, [. . .] its particularity” is, after all, the bulk of the traditional artwork’s claim to superiority and authenticity compared to its copies. Particularity, or uniqueness, would

seem to stand in perfect contrast to the mass existence that, for Benjamin, debases it. Olson qualifies that traditional cult-artistic Way, however, by insisting that comparisons, including the comparison of a supposedly authentic traditional work to its mechanical reproductions, winds up as little more than a description of two facets of the reality in a multifaceted work rather than an engagement with them. As we know from “Projective Verse,” Olson was extremely wary of the “descriptive functions of verse,” believing they sapped the energy of the poem (616). “Human Universe” makes it clearer why he worries over this. The partitioning of reality into hierarchies of class, quantity, and quality takes us away from “the thing itself, and its *relevance* to ourselves who are the experience of it” (164). Heaping praise and acceptance on the original work alone is to select only one facet of a work’s more complex, multi-valenced existence and deny the immediate relevance of the copy in the play of energies one embodies while experiencing that work.

This is virtually what Benjamin writes of in “The Work of Art” when defining traditional aura “with reference to an aura of natural objects” (255):

We define the aura of the latter as the unique apparition of a distance, however near it may be. [. . .] [and] In light of this description, we can readily grasp the social basis of the aura’s present decay. It rests on two circumstances, both linked to the increasing significance of the masses in contemporary life. Namely: *the desire of the present-day masses to ‘get closer’ to things spatially and humanly, and their equally passionate concern for overcoming each thing’s uniqueness by assimilating it as a reproduction.* (“Work” 255-256, emphasis original)

These “two circumstances” describe Olson well. The Olson of *The Maximus Poems* obsesses over getting closer to things spatially in his ceaseless delving of Gloucester, Massachusetts. The Olson of “Projective Verse” does the same in his notion of the way one must attain proper projective size by avoiding linguistic, geographic, and symbolic sprawl (Olson, “Projective” 620). The Olson we see in “Projective Verse,” “Human Universe,” and related essays such as “Proprioception” is clearly trying to get closer to things humanly and then stay inside the human so as not to void the momentary energies he wishes to transmit. Thus, Olson does indeed have a “*passionate concern for overcoming each thing’s uniqueness*” (Benjamin, “Work” 255, emphasis original). Thanks to “Human Universe,” however, we know that Olson’s “stripping [. . .] the veil from the object, [causing] the destruction of the aura” is more than just “the signature of a perception whose ‘sense for sameness in the world’ has so increased that, by means of reproduction, it extracts sameness even from what is unique” (Benjamin, “Work” 256). It is also a way to strike back against a form of abstracting and partitioning reality that devalues humanity by insisting upon a distance (or traditional aura) that only takes us away from ourselves. Olson does not want to abolish the authentic here-and-now of a work of art that is its aura. He wants to do away with the distance of traditional aura, which blunts the potential for personal relevance, and replace it with something more disposable but also more democratic.

Olson is very much after what Benjamin terms “the alignment of reality with the masses and of the masses with reality” because he views the mass and the heterogeneous not as violations of reality but as the real (“Work” 256). Even the homogenized copy or near-copy has its place in this framework as the relevant, reader-facing portion of a

multifaceted art object. Olson puts a positive spin on such an alignment, but for Benjamin in “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility,” this hopefulness is suspect, inflected by his experience with the rise of fascism in Europe before and during WWII. Following his initial definitions of aura and his lines about the way mass reproduction makes sameness from what is unique, Benjamin ventures that such realignment “is a process of immeasurable importance for both thinking and perception” (“Work” 256). He expands on why in his Epilogue:

The increasing proletarianization of modern man and the increasing formation of masses are two sides of the same process. Fascism attempts to organize the newly proletarianized masses while leaving intact the property relations which they strive to abolish. It sees its salvation in granting expression to the masses—but on no account granting them rights. The masses have a right to changed property relations; fascism seeks to give them *expression* in keeping these relations unchanged. [. . .] The violation of the masses, whom fascism, with its *Führer* cult, forces to their knees, has its counterpart in the violation of an apparatus which is pressed into serving the production of ritual values. (“Work” 269)

Olson would likely see the “apparatus which is pressed into serving the production of ritual values” as the apparatus of form in traditional rhymed and metered poetry. Projective verse is an attempt to escape this abstracting, ritualizing system. Yet Benjamin’s potential criticism cuts deeper. It is not just that the old rituals were bad; the new technologies of mass reproduction, such as the typewriter Olson champions so forcefully in “Projective Verse,” have a similar potential for misuse if they, too, serve the



production of ritual values. Certainly, many things in “Projective Verse” are ritualistic. Every time Olson shouts at his readers, urging them to manage their daily reality as they would their daily work, there is ritual. Every time he tells poets to “get on with it [and] keep it moving as fast as you can, citizen,” he encourages us to put the performance of the daily reality prior to the act of thinking about it, potentially covering any abuse the performance enacts. Is the use of “citizen,” here, an attempt to organize the proletariat in a manner not so different from a speech by the *Führer*? Possibly. Over all, there exists an uncomfortable sense in “Projective Verse” that someone might manipulate the poetic process Olson outlines to accomplish whatever form or objective he or she wishes, ethics be damned. Olson, certainly, manipulated the here-and-now of his poetry every time he sat down to edit, something we know he did frequently<sup>10</sup>. What prevents the machinery of mass production or the aesthetic of disposability from taking on fascist tones?

“Human Universe” provides a vivid answer. Understanding it is easier, however, if we remember much of “Human Universe” stems from correspondence with Robert Creeley while Olson was on an extended research trip to Lerma in the Yucatan peninsula, studying the remains of Mayan glyphs<sup>11</sup>. The glyphs were important to Olson for many reasons. Partly his interest had to do with his reaction to the Chinese ideograms popularized by Ernest Fenollosa’s “The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry,” which posited an especially close relationship between that form of writing and the entity being written about. This swerve toward the concrete appealed to Olson, who was already looking for historical alternatives to the abstracting tendencies of Western language since the Greeks. His interest in the glyphs had also to do with Olson’s related, non-abstractionist approach to “history” as *istorin*, Heroditus’s original form of the word,

which meant going to the place and experiencing it yourself (*Special View* 20). Olson obliged. His reward for that effort of direct experience was a discovery of importance to both “Human Universe” and to the notion that projective verse is not just another new, supposedly revolutionary technology allowing one expression without substantially changing the exploitative property relations of the past. He discovered the bodies of the Lerman people and the ways in which they reacted to one another’s physical presence.

Olson writes both compellingly and disturbingly about the Lermeros, claiming “that it is only love and flesh which seems to carry any sign of their [people’s] antecedence, that all the rest which was once a greatness different from our own has gone down before the poundings of our way” (“Human” 165). Yet even that much, he claims, is enough to challenge *Der Weg* of Western abstraction. He continues:

They have [sadly] lost the capacity of their predecessors to do anything in common. But they do one thing no modern knows the secret of, however he is still by nature possessed of it: they wear their flesh with that difference which the understanding that it is common leads to. When I am rocked by the roads against any of the—kids, women, men—their flesh is most gentle, is granted, touch is in no sense anything but the natural law of flesh, there is none of that pull-away which, in the States, causes a man for all the years of his life the deepest sort of questioning of the rights of himself to the wild reachings of his own organism. The admission these people give me and one another is direct, and the individual who peers out from that flesh is precisely himself, is a curious wandering animal like me—it is so very beautiful how animal human eyes are when the flesh is

not worn so close it chokes, how human and individuated the look comes out of a human eye when the house is not exaggerated. (Olson, "Human" 165)

There are a number of striking things about this passage. First and foremost is Olson's emphasis on the commonality of flesh in these "contemporary Maya" ("Human" 166). The Lerman commonality is an affirming one and has the strange effect of producing more individuation rather than less in the midst of that direct admission of one body into the next. Mass existence is not what drains the auratic energy and individuality of the object, here. Rather it is the distance Western man maintains with respect to those around him that bleeds away both energy and individuality. This distance is eerily similar to the distance a traditional work of art maintains from its viewers, and to some degree, both forms of distance work in the same manner. Both insist on their bubble of space, no matter how close one approaches, and when that bubble is pierced by another object that looks more or less like it (i.e. by a copy), both question their right to a view of themselves as inviolably authentic. Yet, to Olson's view, the pull-back of modern Western man, the shrinking away from the mass, is a denial of the "wild reachings of his own organism," which in discarding the isolations and partitions of traditional aura achieves individuality anyway. This is consonant with Olson's emphasis on the particular in the sense that the value of the particular human individual shines through to a greater extent when the false, abstracting aura of the traditional art object isn't so strenuously insisted upon. "Value is perishing from the earth because no one cares to fight down to it beneath the glowing surfaces so attractive to all," Olson writes ("Human" 67). In Benjamin, the glowing surface would have been the mass reproduced object with

the valuable original underneath, but here that sterile, supermarket sameness comes in large part from the habits of the traditional-aura-maintaining American and his or her consumer culture, founded on the maintaining of physical and linguistic distances.

The passage above is also notable for the way it treats the distinction between the human and the animal. “It is so very beautiful,” Olson says, “how animal human eyes are when the flesh is not worn so close it chokes, how human and individuated the look comes out of a human eye when the house is not exaggerated” (“Human” 165). The animal features here are not as distressing to a focus on humanism as they might first appear. Discarding the generalizing Western distinctions caught up in pairings such as me/you or me/them levels the human playing field to the point that all exist in a state of animal equality, from which point real differences, rather than the imagined, hierarchical ones, may be perceived alongside a reaffirmed sense of individual human value. Though it may seem counterintuitive that such a radical leveling could produce a greater sense of human individuality, this process is readily apparent in life. All it takes is for one to look up from his or her business in a crowded supermarket and realize that reality is not *me* in the midst *them* but, rather, *all of us together*, united by the commonality of our flesh and our membership in the brother and sisterhood of humankind. If the common flesh then has blue eyes or green eyes, is young or old, or makes a different choice about whether or not to wear a hat, these concrete particulars remain based in an essential appreciation for the closeness of the bond we share with that person, however different he or she may seem. For Olson, this is far preferable to an appreciation of difference proceeding from the other direction: the direction of insisted-upon-distance and traditional aura, which would make the blue-eyed old man without enough money for a warm hat a function of

his classification, his partitioning, even his enslavement to his generalized status as a Poor Person. Olson's struggle is always to destroy enough of the distance of traditional aura, through the process of projective verse or by allowing himself to be crammed into a bus with dozens of Lermeros, to change the property relations that need changing, thereby avoiding fascism in Benjamin's definition. "Projective Verse" certainly contains characteristics that one might label productive of Benjamin's "ritual values" ("Work" 269). Yet Olson's project is the incessant, ritualized destruction of just those ritual values and linguistic generalizations ripest for abuse. It is much harder, after all, to convince oneself to value ethnic cleansing if one is denied access to us/them rhetoric and must instead recognize John, an individual man who is nonetheless essentially the same as me and who also happens to be Jewish. The distancing generalizations of form and content in traditional poetry, however, do just the opposite, according to Olson. They make exploitable things out of what were once individual human beings.

Olson's aura-destroying typewriter, then, is very much the authenticity-dismantling machine Benjamin would claim it to be. For Olson, though, it dismantles only a certain type of authenticity—the traditional kind based on unshakable, monolithic distances between the viewer and what he or she views. Such distance has the ill effect of classing the "authentic" work in a way that partitions it from the other versions of itself, denying both the fuller, more complex nature of the work of art in the age of its technological reproducibility and the range of potentially relevant auratic experiences available to viewer. It is better, from Olson's point of view, to get rid of this sort of aura with whatever is at hand. This is especially true when doing so also allows him to experiment with the use of space in the open field, destroying the rote abstractions of

traditional aura in both the material object and its literary form. The result is an Objectism that joins us instead of setting us apart.

As critic Ralph Maud writes in *What Does Not Change*, his book on the significance of Olson's "The Kingfishers," Olson makes a mistake in his invocation of the typewriter, but it is only the mistake of oversimplification. "Weak-brained critics," Maud writes, "when all else in Olson was beyond them, were pleased to have this to ridicule [. . .], but I'm sure Olson was not proposing to bring constraint to open verse. What he wanted to emphasize [. . .] was its potential use as 'the personal and instantaneous recorder of the poet's work'" (*What Does Not* 59). The emphasis Maud points to aligns with the production of a new form of authenticity not based on distance but on extreme nearness and identification between the author or the reader and the work at each moment. As Maud also writes, "Olson was thinking about how best to take a snapshot of birds on the wing" (*What Does Not* 59). Maud goes on to quote a letter from Olson to Frances Boldereff dated January 16<sup>th</sup>, 1950, in which Olson writes that "The problem of a poem (that which explains the coming into existence of form) is, that it stay within itself. Not spill out, and, likewise, that it contain all that it has to contain. This is the struggle. And it is permanently difficult, is new each time, and defies any law other than the new one each new one creates" (qtd. in Maud, *What Does Not* 59-60). This notion of form as a particular, local extension of content rather than an adherence to abstractions of form so much like the abstractions of Western language brings us back to the kind of discarding and destroying of energy, effort, and formal currency we expect from Bataille's general economic theories and his concept of nonproductive expenditure. It does so because this aspect of projective verse is not particularly efficient. In the letter

to Boldereff, Olson highlights the difficulty of always having to reinvent the formal wheel. In a subsequent letter dated June 26<sup>th</sup>, 1950, he even claims that “The Kingfishers” is like history—his own—and that the method of its particular composition was not “viable” for anything but the exact sorts of things covered by “The Kingfishers” (qtd. in Maud, *What Does Not* 60). As Maud puts it, “‘The Kingfishers’ was projective, but only in its own way” (*What Does Not* 60). Projective verse, therefore, does not lead to the accumulation of forms in poetry. Instead, it advances Bataille’s positive property of loss. This quality is extremely evident in the content of “The Kingfishers,” and so, by Olson’s logic, we should not be surprised to find it governing the form of the piece as well.

The focus on nonproductive expenditures begins very early in “The Kingfishers.” Olson’s famous first line, “What does not change / is the will to change,” puts us immediately into the realm of a projective verse that changes its approach to formal expression with each new burst of experience (“Kingfishers” I.1.1). The “will” to change gets the focus here rather than the more standard formulation, which would list change itself as the only constant, because Olson is after self-affirmation through personal, human agency—the enacted will to change of the unenslaved, willful man—rather than the purely random changes we might call chaos. After all, the property of loss in Bataille is not positive simply because loss occurs. It is positive because it is voluntary on the part of the one who loses. Ideally, the sacrifice owes nothing to base economic imperatives, not even those pertaining to physical survival. Neither is the loss compelled by a set of property relations that force the one who loses to expend his or her energy on behalf of another who can demand that expenditure from him. Rather, one sacrifices

freely and wastefully as proof that he or she is still fundamentally at his or her own disposal. To make the world's one constant anything other than the will to such perpetual self-disposal through change would be to take away this agency and enslave us to the abstractions of static, Platonic forms.

This preoccupation with wasteful expenditure extends also to the substantial portion of section two of the poem describing the qualities of the real-life kingfisher and its nest. The nest, Olson clarifies, is not the sum of the abstracting legends told about it over the years, which have stolen from us our ability to experience the real object fully. In the manner of traditionally auratic art objects, these legends take on an essential distance due to their unreality. Perceiving this, Olson proceeds, as he often does, by tearing that form of aura away and letting us approach the particular, many-faceted thing that shares our world. This allows us, finally, to react to the genuine article as well as its stories. After describing the feet, bill, wings, and tail of the kingfisher, he writes:

The legends are  
legends. Dead, hung up indoors, the kingfisher  
will not indicate a favoring wind,  
or avert the thunderbolt. Nor, by its nesting,  
still the waters, with the new year, for seven days.  
It is true, it does nest with the opening year, but not on the waters.  
It nests at the end of a tunnel bored by itself in the bank. There,  
six or eight white and translucent eggs are laid, on fishbones  
not on bare clay, on bones thrown up in pellets by the birds.  
("Kingfishers" I.2.14-22)



This vomiting forth of fishbone pellets is an admission of the kingfisher's inability to use the bones of its prey in the service of its own growth, that constant accumulation of size and power which would be possible in a perfectly lossless biological economy. This wastefulness is not a given; we know that other animals, such as the cookie-cutter shark, are perfectly capable of consuming even rows of their own shed teeth to gain back the vitamins and minerals spent in growing them (Compagno, Dando, and Fowler 127-128). Thus, the kingfisher's disgorging of the materials exists as a kind of wastefulness on the part of nature. The obvious objection, that the bird disgorges the pellets only to use them in constructing its nest, and that the bird therefore uses the waste constructively after all, is valid in the sense that nests make life more comfortable for itself, a condition which might lead to the more successful rearing of its young. Yet comfort, as it would be in the case of a comfortable human home, is in many ways still wasteful because it exists beyond the survival and growth of the parent bird.

In the first volume of *The Accursed Share*, which focuses on the economic implications of excess energy and the need for its responsible destruction, Bataille singles out sexual reproduction as one of the most wasteful, nonproductive uses of energy imaginable. This is so much the case with sexual reproduction that Bataille includes it along with eating and death as one of the "Three Luxuries of Nature" (*Accursed* 33). "If, with regard to the species, sexuality appears as a growth," Bataille writes, "in principle it is nevertheless the luxury of individuals. This characteristic is more accentuated in sexual reproduction, where the individuals engendered are clearly separate from those that engender them and *give* them life as *one gives* to others" (35). This makes the kingfisher an energy destroyer several times over. It destroys energy wastefully in order

to produce eggs that it must then waste bones constructing a nest for, all so that it may shelter young that do not increase the parent in any way. The bird must expend further energy hunting for the hatchlings and feeding them, not itself. Olson is careful to give this wasteful element of feeding, another of Bataille's luxuries, particular focus in the following stanza, which itself expends what some might consider a needless amount of energy in breaking away from the left margin:

On these rejectamenta

(as they accumulate they form a cup-shaped structure) the young are born.

And, as they are fed and grow, this nest of excrement and decayed fish becomes

a dripping, fetid mass (I.2.23-68)

The excrement that helps nothing grow and the fish bits that go to waste as they decay, uneaten, are additional destructions of energy. Even the type of food, fish as opposed to some more energy-efficient water plant, contributes to the waste. The kingfisher's choice of a diet that centers on complex creatures is therefore twice as destructive as the eating habits of a fish that continually eats algae (Bataille, *Accursed* 33-34). It would also be remiss not to mention the eventual death of the kingfisher parent as a wasteful act in a world that already includes certain types of functionally deathless microorganisms. Though we do not see the kingfisher that lays these eggs die, we need only look a few lines back up the page to witness one strung up lifeless, leaving the room necessary for whatever young it may have had to fish plentifully and later die themselves. As is the case in much of Olson's poetry and theory, the focus on these realistic, even encyclopedic details aims to bring us closer to the kingfisher rather than establishing any kind of

mythical, cult-auratic distance between it and us. In witnessing both the bird's squalor and Olson's similarly wasteful projective treatment of it, we may be tempted to experience the kingfisher more fully as a real creature, connecting it with the similar processes of eating, procreating, and dying that constitute the most essential nonproductive expenditures in our lives. Avoiding abstractions and the raising of partitions between birds and human beings in nature encourages a kinship with these other living creatures similar to the unselected human kinship Olson discovered amongst the Lermeros.

This focus on inefficient, even nonproductive expenditure in a poem's content and prosody is just one part of what we must consider a suite of field-based compositional strategies with the shared goal of demolishing cult-auratic distance. For example, calling Olson's description of the kingfisher and its nest "encyclopedic" is literally true. In his book on "The Kingfishers," Maud presents several passages from the *Encyclopedia Britannica* entry on the kingfisher that Olson quotes nearly word for word. Maud compares, for example, lines I.2.14-18 of the poem, the passage beginning with the strung up kingfisher and ending with its living brethren's calming of the waves, with the following from page 808 in Olson's copy of the *Britannica*:

The kingfisher was supposed to possess many virtues. Its dried body would avert thunderbolts . . . or hung by a thread to the ceiling of a chamber would point with its bill to the quarter whence the wind blew . . . All readers of Ovid (Metam. Bk. Xi.) know how . . . all gales were hushed and the sea calmed so that their floating nest might ride uninjured over the waves during the seven proverbial "Halcyon days." (qtd. in Maud 47).

The passages in this section of the poem dealing with the feebleness of the bird's feet and the particular construction of its real-life nest are taken in similar fashion from the same source (Maud, *What Does Not* 46-47). According to Maud, this "illustrates one of Olson's basic modes of form, the inclusion of primary documents" (Maud, *What Does Not* 49). This is a destruction of cult-auratic distance in the sense of avoiding as much secondary interference as possible. To this view, the only thing better than quoting from the scrupulously non-subjective *Britannica* would have been to go and dig the "dripping, fetid mass" of a kingfisher nest out of its bankside hole—an action so disgusting that we can hardly fault Olson for not rolling up his sleeves ("Kingfishers" I.2.26). This sort of literal digging was, in any event, something he ended up doing soon enough with Mayan glyphs during his trip to Lerma. The Creeley-edited *Mayan Letters* bursts with examples of Olson and his wife riding the bus for hours just to root around in breezeless, sunbaked pits for the remains of Mayan writing (Olson, *Mayan* 90). The practice resonates with Olson's definition of Objectism as "getting rid of the lyrical interference of the individual as ego, of the 'subject' and his soul, that particular 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" ("Projective" 620). This desire to dismantle the false "presumption" of space between man as an approachable creature with his own nesting instructions and the traditionally unapproachable auratic soul therefore exists at all levels for Olson, including the mid-ground of his research and quotation habits.

Returning to the poem, we note that Olson's relentless shifting of focus has many of the same effects as his emphasis on waste in the content and prosody of "The

Kingfishers.” Olson touches on what we might learn about kingfishers from Ovid’s legend-perpetuating direction, then discards legend in favor of the *Britannica*, which he discards to switch back to Mao, quoted here in a French translation which temporarily discards even English as a given. Any reliance on left-justification in one spot Olson discards in a heartbeat for more mobile, projective lines in another. The multifacetedness of reality blooms as a result of this constant switching, and readers benefit from an increased sense, perhaps, of the way everything is connected to everything else in a brotherhood of objects. Olson even collapses the partitions of chronological time by jumping between the modern-day Fernand episode, kingfisher feathers as a trade commodity in ancient Ankor Vat, historical accounts of the kingfisher, the real-life habits of that species, and the Aztecs before and after Cortez. This palimpsest vision of history was one Olson discussed via letter with Creeley during the Lerma stay that produced “Human Universe.” In a notable passage discussing the merits and demerits of Pound and Williams in *The Cantos* and *Patterson* respectively, Olson writes about his view of Pound as the yin to Williams’s epic, historical yang. Pound’s epic is “beautiful,” he claims, “because it destroys historical time, and [. . .] thus creates [. . .] a space-field where, by inversion, though the material is all time material, he has driven through it so sharply by the beak of his ego, that, he has turned time into what we must now have, space & its live air” (Olson, *Mayan* 81-82). Unfortunately for *The Cantos*, the beak of Pound’s ego cut quite poorly in other ways, and Olson criticizes Pound for having an emotional system that tended to raise additional generalizing partitions even as it compressed all of human history into a workable field. People in *The Cantos*, Olson says, are sorted into two groups: those who are Pound’s equals and those who are his

inferiors. The former group was very small, consisting, Olson believed, of just Confucius and Dante (*Mayan* 82). Williams, by contrast, “HAS an emotional system which is capable of extensions and comprehensions [that] the ego-system [of Pound is not] [. . .]. Yet [. . .] by making his substance historical of one city [. . .], Bill completely licks himself, lets time roll him under as Ez does not” (Olson, *Mayan* 82-83). Olson preferred projective verse, which he felt provided all the temporal distance-collapsing power “of a correct methodology,” i.e. Pound’s method<sup>12</sup>, while retaining an “ALTERNATIVE TO THE EGO-POSITION,” i.e. Williams’s resistance to Pound’s way of sorting of people into automatic categories. This should further our sense that the new form of epic Olson promises in “Projective Verse” is a destructive one.

The danger with collapsing all of time into one field and manipulating everything in it as one would manipulate objects is, of course, that such a methodology reduces man to a homogenized, machined product without prompting the necessary recognition of commonality. When the aura or authenticity of a unique work dissipates, how is the base thing it becomes to find its way back? What precedent exists to suggest that the pervasive destruction of one sort of uniqueness may coexist with, and even prompt, the valuing of another sort—and a humanist uniqueness at that? The third section of “The Kingfishers” provides a potential answer by introducing us to the Aztecs, yet another facet of history made to share room in the radically leveled space-time of the poem.

The Aztecs, clearly, are not the Mayans Olson ended up studying in Lerma and whose descendants instructed him regarding the commonality of flesh in “Human Universe.” Yet the Aztec economy, built on the extreme destructions of war, slavery, and human sacrifice, was remarkably similar where it matters to an account of what removes

classical auratic distance so that an aura of authenticity-through-immediacy and wasteful expenditure may flourish. In a letter to Creeley dated February 24<sup>th</sup>, 1951, reprinted in *Mayan Letters*, Olson writes about the fundamental importance of “VIOLENCE [to the Mayans]—*killing, the heart, out, etc.*,” and he rails against “*those sons of bitches, those ‘scholars’—how they’ve cut that story out, to make the Mayan palatable to their fucking selves, foundations, & tourists!*” (Olson, *Mayan* 79-80). This is Olson’s dislike of presenting one plane of a more complex truth again, but it is also just the sort of violence he had written about a year or two earlier in “The Kingfishers” to conclude the third section of the poem:

In this instance, the priests  
(in dark cotton robes, and dirty,  
their dishevelled hair matted with blood, and flowing wildly  
over their shoulders)  
rush in among the people, calling on them  
to protect their gods

And all now is war  
where so lately there was peace,  
and the sweet brotherhood, the use  
of tilled fields. (“Kingfishers” I.3.31-40)

It is tempting, from our contemporary, Western point of view, to read these stanzas as a rejection of the brotherhood of humanity Olson proposes in “Human Universe.” We want to frown at the immorality of human sacrifice, signs of which mark Olson’s Aztec

priests as unpalatably as the dripping, fetid mess of rotting fish and excrement marks the real-life kingfisher nest. We want to shake our heads at the shame of “war / where so lately there was peace” (“Kingfishers” 8I.3.37-38). We might even point to Benjamin’s intense skepticism of Marinetti’s manifesto for the colonial war in Ethiopia, quoted at the end of “The Work of Art,” and claim that the vision of Aztec society Olson shows us is just another example of “war [which] makes it possible to mobilize all of today’s technological resources while maintaining property relations” (269). If there is war where there was once peace and the use of tilled fields, how can there be brotherhood?

Bataille lends us the necessary perspective. In his discussion of the Aztecs in *The Accursed Share: Volume I*, he leans on Bernardino de Sahagún’s mid-Sixteenth Century account of Aztec sacrifice to show how such actions could, even in the most horrifying circumstances, still foster the commonality Olson requires. Bataille begins by retelling the story Sahagún heard from certain older Aztecs about the birth of the sun—which is for Bataille the ultimate source of all earth’s energy and his chief model of purely wasteful expenditure. In Sahagún’s account, the sun was originally a lesser god named Nanauatzin who agreed, along with another god named Tecuciztecatl, to sacrifice himself to bring light to the world. Tecuciztecatl’s offerings leading up to the immolation were very expensive (gold for items that need only have been grass, etc.), yet when it came time to throw himself on the fire, his courage failed so many times that the rules of the sacrifice disqualified him from trying any further. Nanuatzin, on the other hand, made offerings that were less expensive but, at the same time, far more costly. Where Tecuciztecatl had substituted red coral for bloody spines, Nanuatzin dipped the traditional spines in his own lifeblood. Nanuatzin also sacrificed the scabs off his unsightly buboes,



another example of this more personally wasteful form of sacrifice. When it came time to throw himself on the fire, Nanuatzin did not hesitate—a remarkable action considering that the other gods bullied him into the sacrifice to begin with. Nanuatzin’s flesh burned horribly, but he ascended into the heavens as the sun, flaring so brightly that he temporarily blinded the other gods. Tecuciztecatl, meanwhile, shamed by his inability to act, leapt onto the fire as well, ascending as the less intensely bright moon due to the poorer quality of his sacrifice (Bataille, *Accursed* 46-49). Thus, Bataille writes, both wars and men existed “so that there would be people whose hearts and blood could be taken so that the sun might eat,” consuming, in a symbolic fashion, as he had been consumed (*Accursed* 49). In this way, the Aztecs were about conspicuous consumption, not conquest (Bataille, *Accursed* 49).

This is an important distinction for Bataille because conquest would have been an accumulation of wealth and land with the implication that the victor could hold onto it, that holding it meant something, or that the victor’s strength was somehow different than the strength of those he had conquered. Bataille’s theory of general economy rejects this possibility as forcefully as Olson rejects formal verse. In any event, accumulation was never an option for the Aztecs since “the Mexicans thought that if they ceased the sun would cease to give light” (Bataille, *Accursed* 49). This allows us to return to what may initially have been distasteful in Olson’s description of the Aztec priests in “The Kingfishers” and perceive another sense in his words—a sense that runs alongside the dripping horror, inflecting it into its real-life shape. “All now is war / where so lately there was peace” because war and the sacrificing that resulted from it were some of the primary ways in which the Aztecs affirmed personal agency, therefore their authenticity

as human beings, and pursued an important form of cosmological peace-making. In this view, “the sweet brotherhood” becomes less necessarily linked to the absence of war, and may even come about because of it. The “use of tilled fields” becomes not the mark of a peaceful brotherhood now dashed to pieces but a representation of the accumulated wealth that wars and sacrifices aimed at squandering to the Aztecs’ collective spiritual benefit. In other words, we may read this passage as we read the one where the legends of the kingfisher’s legendary qualities mix with its actual qualities as objects in the field of the poem. Olson protects the Aztecs from the abstracting distance that both the legend of their brutality and the more sanitized, scholarly account of them as astronomers and maize cultivators would enact.

The Aztec need to endlessly repeat their sacrificing places them in a situation similar to that of aura in the traditional work of art at the start of the Twentieth Century. Slavery, in reducing people to things, reduces their uniqueness. Such reduction, carried out on a massively repeatable scale, reduces the uniqueness even further<sup>13</sup>. Yet the Aztecs still found great power and authenticity in the repeated diminishing and discarding of human life. How did they manage to preserve and transmit such energy hundreds of years before sculpture, painting, and print poetry faced similar, if less deadly, hurdles and failed to surmount them? How do we account for Benjamin’s well-warranted distrust of Marinetti’s Futurist view of war, which the Aztec way of life seems to corroborate? Bataille admits that the sort of butchery that results in an estimated twenty-thousand casualties a year is morally indefensible, even if it worked as a continuing source of spiritual energy (*Accursed* 51). Yet he offers Sahagún’s tale and other examples of ritual sacrifice because the indefensible is still explicable in general economic terms. We may

disagree absolutely with the methodology employed, finding it as disgusting as the fetid waste of a kingfisher nest, yet the Aztecs, like the Mayans, had their reasons for such continual destruction, and Olson's multifaceted view demands that we not ignore the empathy they also exhibited toward their victims. Such empathy may seem like a contradiction, but forcing these things to occupy the same space is not unusual for "The Kingfishers." Holding up the rejectamenta of the kingfisher nest helps us see the six or eight delicate, translucent eggs and the new life that comes from them with greater clarity. Similarly, holding human sacrifice up to the light can bring us, as it brought the Aztecs, to a better appreciation of the human connection that gave their incessant discarding of life its meaning. According to Bataille, the Aztecs were extremely worried about the way slavery wore away at human authenticity and self-possession for both slave and slave owner. Because of this, they took steps, however imperfect, to guard that essential conception of shared humanity through a dramatic redistribution of property and property relations that, much like the eventual sacrifice, was eminently wasteful. This makes sense to Bataille's general economic view since nonproductive expenditure is one of the surest ways to demonstrate that we are at our own disposal, even if in this case the unfortunate fact of slavery surrounds that freedom.

It also helps us understand the lavishness of the annual sacrifice that Bataille describes of "a young man of irreproachable beauty [. . .] chosen from among the captives the previous year, and [who] from that moment [. . .] lived like a great lord" (*Accursed* 49). The comparison to a lord is no exaggeration, as the Aztecs considered their intended victim to be the great god Tezcatlipoca and gave him rights and privileges in tremendous excess of what slaves usually receive from their captors. These extended

to things as wastefully trivial as the ability to play the flute atop the temple pyramid at any hour of the day or night. The gentle wastefulness of this act would later find its nonproductive match in the moments prior to his sacrifice, when he would break one previously played flute per step on his way up toward the sacrificial altar (Bataille, *Accursed* 49-51). If flutes, open worship of this slave in the streets, and the women given to him for his pleasure in the days before his death do nothing to take away his ultimate status as a slave, they nonetheless put him as much at his own disposal as he could be as a captive in the Aztec system. They restore the maximum amount of humanity possible, as earnestly as possible, under circumstances the Aztecs did not feel they could change. The hope was that this degree of self-possession would culminate in the young man bravely and willingly mounting the stairs without more prompting than press of the crowd, his guards, and his status as a slave already imposed. The hope was that he would accept his sacrifice as the sun did, expending the costliest thing in the universe (his life) in the most nonproductive, and therefore agency-affirming, gesture of all, to continue bringing light and the wasteful superabundance of solar energy into the world. The cynicism we rightly feel toward the way a slave loses choice in the act by virtue of his or her enslavement is not necessarily a critique of the underlying principles so much as a critique of the methodology the Aztecs adopted in its pursuit. The answer is a new methodology, rooted in the truths Aztec sacrifice turned upon, but gentler on the human beings involved. This is what Olson proposes to us, albeit in very different, poetic circumstances, in both “Projective Verse” and “Human Universe.” We discard moment after moment, impulse after transcribed impulse, formal strategy after formal strategy in the manner of broken

flutes and cast-off bodies, and the result is a greater surge of authenticity and community from the foregrounding of the transitory reality of life.

Still, Olson's claim that we should treat people, things, and ourselves like wood is understandably disquieting when we encounter it in "Projective Verse." It would seem a short path from this view of human beings as things to the gas chambers of Nazi Germany. It is, however, difficult to make this charge of nascent fascism stick to Olson. So much in his biography points away from such a view that it suggests he is trying to do something different with his destructions. For all that the fascistically-inclined Pound was one of Olson's luminaries, Olson broke off a two-year personal acquaintance with the aging poet, then confined to St. Elizabeth's hospital, after a diatribe in which he slurred William Carlos Williams's mixed racial heritage, an act that Olson would not stand for<sup>14</sup>. Even in "This is Yeats Speaking," Olson's complex defense of Pound, the explanation he gives for Pound's fascistic deification of order still makes it clear that he feels Pound is wrong. "What have you to help you hold in a single thought reality and justice?" Olson has Yeats ask readers in the final sentence of the essay, daring them to say how they would have done any better in Pound's time and place, with the demerits of the authoritarian point of view less clear than they would be in the aftermath of World War II ("This is Yeats" 144). Fascism is clearly not the yoking of reality and justice that Olson wants—a view he held in 1946, well prior to "The Kingfishers," a poem in which we must view Olson as both utilizing what he'd learned from Pound regarding the palimpsest of history and attempting to distance himself from Pound as well. "GrandPa, GoodBye," the essay which explains Olson's eventual falling out with Pound, is dated 1948, the year Olson began working on "The Kingfishers," so it is reasonable to infer that

the problems he had with Pound were on his mind and influenced the type of anti-distance, anti-order, anti-cult-aura methodology which would become “Projective Verse” in 1950.

Further proof that Olson rejected fascism despite his call to treat people as objects appears in his poem “La Préface,” written approximately May of 1946 to help introduce an exhibition of drawings by Olson’s early friend and influence Corrado Cagli, who helped open Buchenwald with Allied forces at the end of WWII (Maud, *What Does Not* 79-80). According to Maud, concern with the physical plight of concentration camp victims in “La Préface” meshes with Olson’s later essay “The Resistance” (1953), dedicated to another of Olson’s close friends, Jean Riboud, who survived internment at Buchenwald in 1943 for participating in the French resistance (Maud, *What Does Not* 40). In both poem and essay, survival is positioned as an act of bodily resistance—the most basic resistance possible—and what remains when all other possibilities for resistance have been taken away. “Man came here by an intolerable way,” Olson writes in “The Resistance,” for:

When man is reduced to so much fat for soap, superphosphate for soil, fillings and shoes for sale, he has, to begin again, one answer, one point of resistance only to such fragmentation, one organized ground, a ground he comes to by a way the precise contrary of [such abstractions as] the cross, of spirit in the old sense, in old mouths. It is his own physiology he is forced to arrive at. And the way—the way of the beast, of man and the Beast.

It is his body that is his answer, his body intact and fought for, the absolute of his organism in its simplest terms, this structure evolved by nature, repeated in each act of birth, the animal man; the house he is, this house that moves, breathes, acts, this house where his life is, where he dwells against the enemy, against the beast. (Olson, "Resistance" 174-175)

Maud writes that, in these words, "Olson is establishing a basically humanist moral structure from the power of unaccommodated man" (*What Does Not* 80). This moral structure allows us to turn back to the concept of human sacrifice in Mayan culture and to the gore-soaked Aztec priests in "The Kingfishers" and see Olson's concern for the sacrificial victims. The radical leveling and objectification of people, in the content of the piece or in the form of a projective poem, is in fact Olson's attempt to reach the most basic common denominator of human value: the connection of one's own messy unselectedness to that of everyone else. Life, Bataille reminds us, is a terribly inefficient form for the expression of solar energy. We squander it in squalor, as with the kingfisher's nest, and we squander it in beauty, as with the eggs the kingfisher lays on its bed of rejectamenta. We squander it in the unnecessarily complex workings of our biological bodies and in the three key processes of eating, procreating, and death. Yet, in the end, so long as we live, we control that squandering to some degree. Our choice to destroy energy through such behavior is a positive, willful human choice. Making it both affirms our essential uniqueness and provides a better option for energy use than letting it bleed off less useful ways: escaping, say, into the void of space or predetermined sonnet form, unused forever, or worse, as the catastrophic destructions of a war where that bleeding is more bodily and more violent on virtually every front.

We must remember that the Aztecs and the Nazis are not equivalent in their barbarism. Despite the horrifying body count on both sides, their approaches to the thinging of the human animal are in some ways very different. As Bataille points out, the Aztecs respected body of the beautiful young slave with the flutes, carrying his body gently down to the temple courtyard even when it was the usual practice to dump the body down the stairs. Even the slaves they would discard in this fashion received decent treatment during their captivity. “The Aztecs,” he writes, “observed a singular conduct with those who were about to die. They treated their prisoners humanely, giving them the food and drink they asked for. Concerning a warrior who brought back a captive, then offered him in sacrifice, it was said that he had ‘considered his captive as his own flesh and blood, calling him son, while the latter called him father’”<sup>15</sup> (*Accursed* 51). Bataille also notes that the victorious warrior had rights to a bowl of the sacrificial victim’s blood in proportion to that which belonged to the priests doing the sacrificing. He tells how the warrior who had given up the productive potential of his slave to such sacrifice would wet his lips with the warm blood, and take the body home and serve it, unspiced, at a banquet where he himself would not partake, since he “regarded his victim as a son, as a second self” (Bataille, *Accursed* 53-54).

Olson mentions such cannibalism in section II of “The Kingfishers,” describing it as “the old appetite” before going on to quote Marco Polo in Italian salvaged from a footnote in his 1931 Modern Library edition of Prescott’s *History of the Conquest of Mexico and History of the Conquest of Peru*. The footnote, interestingly, attaches to a paragraph discussing the “argument in favor of some primitive communication with the great brotherhood of nations on the old continent, among whom similar ideas [including



human sacrifice and cannibalism] have been so widely diffused” (Prescott 698). It claims that “Marco Polo notices a civilized people in South-eastern China, and another in Japan, who drank the blood and ate the flesh of their captives; esteeming it the most savory food in the world,—‘la piú saporita et migliore, che si possa truovar al mondo’” (Prescott 698). While it is difficult to avoid feeling queasy in the face of both this and the footnote’s subsequent assertion that “The Mongols [. . .] regarded the ears ‘sowced in vynegre,’ as a particular dainty,” Bataille’s reading of Aztec sacrifice allows for an alternate understanding that trends toward tenderness. Beneath the horror, at least for the Aztecs, was a sense in which the slave and the slave owner did not consider themselves separate from each other. Even in the battles that resulted in the capturing of slaves, Bataille writes, “the Mexicans shed blood only provided that they risked dying” (*Accursed* 52). Bataille returns once more to Sahagún, quoting him to the effect that those who died, who indeed *hoped* to die, gloriously in battle were equally regarded as sacrifices to the earth and sun, intended for this purpose since birth (qtd. in Bataille, *Accursed* 53). Beyond the moment of sacrifice or death in battle, having fed the sun in one way or the next, this same sun celebrated the souls of both sorts of victims equally in his palace, something we cannot imagine an earnest believer in Jewish pogroms ever agreeing to (Bataille, *Accursed* 54).

I would argue that this acknowledgment of shared humanity, of shared duty to each other and to the perpetuation of life (albeit through sacrifice aimed at the sun’s continued health), is an important part of what draws Olson’s attention in the Aztec portions of the “Kingfishers.” The difference between the Aztec version of human expenditure and the version at Buchenwald, where the wasteful destruction of life had no

humanizing function, only the purpose of reinforcing an inviolable distance, is unexpectedly stark. Olson prefers the form of sacrifice, of energy destruction or leveling, that draws people closer and then improves on that model of nonproductive expenditure by foregrounding a notion of biological resistance to oppression that allows us to keep expending throughout the inefficient mess of our lives. Along these lines, we might even think of Olson's sudden change of career (from up-and-coming civil servant of the late F.D.R. period to that of a poet) and his choice of poetry as the medium for his nonproductive expenditure as improvements on the Aztec system and a response to Benjamin's concern with Marinetti. For Bataille, war is the catastrophic result of a buildup of energy within a system (*Accursed* 23-24). It is the same for Benjamin, who at the end of "The Work of Art" states that "if the natural use [or expenditure] of productive forces is impeded by the property system, then the increase in technological means, in speed, in sources of energy will press toward an unnatural use" and that "[t]his is found in war" (270). Poetry is a supremely effective way to destroy energy peacefully since it is both more time and energy consuming to produce than prose and because, according to thinkers such as Emmanuel Levinas, it is not actually capable of doing anything<sup>16</sup>. So much the better if throwing it all away in this fashion has the unexpected side effect of forcing us to take a long, hard look at the ties that bind us.

The continuing need to (1) destroy excess energy/wealth and (2) close what Olson would see as the harmful, abstracting distance of traditional aura, thus affirming our shared humanity is a large part of what drives the remainder of "The Kingfishers." I would argue, for example, that this is why, just prior to the appearance of the Aztec priests, Olson stresses that in former days knowing oneself was analogous to the use,

rather than the accumulation, of treasures<sup>17</sup> (Olson, “Kingfishers” I.3.9-13). The truth, Olson writes at the beginning of section four, is that reality consists of “Not one death but many, / not accumulation but change” (“Kingfishers” I.4.1-2). This, too, represents a bettering of the Aztec system of humanizing through copious waste, for it becomes clear that Olson’s engine for nonproductive expenditure is change, and not necessarily change through the purifying fire of war that Marinetti wanted. As Olson puts it:

Into the same river no man steps twice

When fire dies air dies

No one remains, nor is, one

Around an appearance, one common model, we grow up  
many. Else how is it,  
if we remain the same,  
we take pleasure now  
in what we did not take pleasure before? love  
contrary objects? Admire and / or find fault? use  
other words, feel other passions, have  
nor figure, appearance, disposition, tissue  
the same?

To be in different states without a change

is not a possibility (Olson, “Kingfishers” I.4.4-17)

Olson’s giving away of the self does not need to end immediately in the ultimate wasteful gesture of war and death. Great amounts of perishing are involved even in the relatively

peaceful, life-affirming process of change we experience along the way to that inevitability. To that extent, the expenditure-focused metaphysical model Olson outlines in “The Kingfishers” shares much with Alfred North Whitehead’s theory of Organism (part of what is now more generally called Process Theory)<sup>18</sup>. The “appearance” or “one common model” that we grow up around, which seems to be our inviolable, cult-auratic core, is really just one eventuation in the unending process of who we were *then* perishing in order to become who we are *now*. Hence, Heraclitus’s quote, repeated by Olson in “The Kingfishers,” that no man steps into the same river twice, for both he and the river will have changed in the intervening time. Hence also Olson’s paraphrase of Plutarch regarding the one common model. Plutarch writes that “the ‘yesterday’ has died into the ‘today,’ and the ‘today’ is dying into the ‘tomorrow,’ and no one remains, nor is *one*, but we grow up many around one appearance and common model, whilst matter revolves around us and slips away” (qtd. in Maud, *What Does Not* 130). Neither Heraclitus, nor Plutarch, nor Whitehead view the forward movement of time, or of history, as a strict accumulation of wealth in terms of days. Like Olson, they view what we gain in life as a function of what we have lost. If there is accumulation and growth, here, it is an accumulation only in the sense of the many little deaths or energy expenditures that we call change and growth only in the sense of alteration.

For Whitehead, this process of loss is as positive and as important as it is for Bataille in *The Accursed Share* and for Olson throughout his poetry and theory. In an essay titled “Process and Reality,” published as a part of his 1948 collection of writings, *Essays in Science and Philosophy*, Whitehead explains Organism (and his most complex book, *Process and Reality*, where he systematically outlines the concept) in blunt terms.

“Aristotle has some very relevant suggestions on the analysis of becoming and process,”  
Whitehead claims, and yet:

there is a gap in his thought, that just as much as becoming wants  
analysing so does perishing. Philosophers have taken too easily the notion  
of perishing. There is a trinity of three notions: being, becoming, and  
perishing. [. . .] Now that notion of perishing is covered up as a sort of  
scandal. [. . .] Almost all of *Process and Reality* can be read as an attempt  
to analyse perishing on the same level as Aristotle’s analysis of becoming.  
The notion of the prehension of the past means that the past is an element  
which perishes and thereby remains an element in the state beyond, and  
thus is objectified. That is the whole notion. If you get a general notion of  
what is meant by perishing, you will have accomplished an apprehension  
of what you mean by memory and causality, what you mean when you  
feel that what are is of infinite importance, because as we perish we are  
immortal. (89)

One interpretation of Benjamin’s discussion of traditional aura in “The Work of Art in  
the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility” is, of course, to say that the immortal  
unique can only exist by imposing distance between itself and the rest of the world, by  
avoiding any form of change or of perishing into supposedly lesser copies of itself.  
Accepting this view without qualification, however, is to ignore the powerful and equally  
valid sort of immortality conveyed precisely because something does perish into the past,  
at which point it becomes an unchangeable, if subjectively interpreted, datum in the  
ongoing process of a person or a poem becoming whatever it will be next. For

Whitehead as well as for Olson, both the permanent and the transient are necessary, mutually reinforcing concepts. As such, Olson (and we ourselves) do not have to abandon traditional aura completely, even if the main goal of something like projective verse is to strip it away. “I think the universe has a side which is mental and permanent,” Whitehead claims in the same essay:

On the other hand, this permanent actuality passes into and is immanent in the transient side. [. . .] Enlarge your view of the final fact which is permanent amid change. In its essence, realization is limitation, exclusion. But this ultimate fact includes in all its appetitive vision all possibilities of order, possibilities at once incompatible and unlimited with a fecundity beyond imagination. Finite transience stages this welter of incompatibles in their ordered relevance to the flux of epochs. Thus the process of finite history is essential for the ordering of the basic, vision, otherwise mere confusion. The key to metaphysics is this doctrine of mutual immanence, each side lending to the other a factor necessary for its reality. The notion of the one perfection of order, which is (I believe) Plato’s doctrine, must go the way of the one possible geometry. The universe is more various, more Hegelian. (Whitehead, “Process” 90)

This, Olson would probably claim, is just as true in the case of art and its authenticity. The distance of the traditionally auratic object is not a first principle subsequently destroyed by copies. Rather, the distance of the traditionally auratic object is created as the result of an eventuation—an act of becoming—which is, by Whitehead’s definition, a process of limiting the final product, of discarding every other conceivable potentiality

for its form. Much like Bataille's Aztec sacrifice, the squandering of this infinite potential is an act of stepping toward something amid the "welter of mutual incompatibles" and "fecundity beyond imagination," not an act of setting the work or oneself apart. If the traditional work of art that sometimes results gains permanence from the definitiveness of this destruction, that permanence is, intrinsically, no more important than any other fixed datum available in the ongoing processes of eventuation.

When we "enlarge [our] view of the final fact which is permanent amid change" in this way, we may perceive the "mutual immanence" of both the original and its copy ("Process" 89-90). We recognize the insistence on cult aura as a separate thing as one more example of the limiting of reality Olson stands against in "The Kingfishers," "Projective Verse," and "Human Universe." Benjamin seems to recognize some aspect of this, blunting the sharpness of the partition in his very positive discussion of cult-aura-destroying film technology. He weakens the partition further by reaching for the same sort of historical diversity Olson employs and by structuring his essay in montage-like bursts similar to Olson's technique in "The Kingfishers"<sup>19</sup>. Yet "The Work of Art" still largely represents the perishing of traditional aura and the degradation of auratic art objects as a one-directional (i.e. historically accumulative) fall from grace rather than a cyclical process that might better figure aura's full nature. As a result, Benjamin falls into the same trap that Olson feels snared Williams in *Patterson*, and "The Work of Art" lacks a degree of clarity regarding this mutual immanence that we often interpret as ambivalence toward technological reproduction.

In the final lines of Part I of “The Kingfishers,” Olson emphasizes the reciprocal aspect of art and reality, nearness and distance, permanence and ephemerality. “We can be precise” about perishing, Olson writes, because:

The message is  
a discrete and continuous sequence of measurable events distributed in  
time  
[ . . . ]  
a state between  
the origin and  
the end, between  
birth and the beginning of  
another fetid nest  
[ . . . ]  
and the too strong grasping of it,  
when it is pressed together and condensed,  
loses it

This very thing you are (Kingfishers I.4.18-35)

One is, in other words, not an accumulation of discrete, continuous moments so much as a process of those moments perishing one into the next, yielding a state that is never origin and never the end. Olson would claim that this is as true of works of art as it is of people, counter to Benjamin’s insistence on the importance of accumulated history to the cult auratic object.



As for the unapproachable distance of the cult auratic work, Whitehead's primary biographer, Victor Lowe, describes the general philosophic theory underlying Organism as that of a "*connected* pluralistic universe [. . .] [which] denies that ultimately only one individual (God, or the Absolute) exists" unmoved by the rest of creation (*Understanding* 35). To this view, "[i]ndependent existence is a myth, whether you ascribe it to God or to a particle of matter in Newtonian physics, to persons, to nations, to things, or to meanings" (Lowe 36). Everything links to and is more or less implicit in the continuing evolution of everything else—a notion that in both its sense of radically leveled interconnectedness and its avoidance of Platonic forms as first principles matches "Human Universe" almost perfectly. This is not to say that the uniqueness does not exist. Indeed, the process analytical view of life is, for Whitehead, fundamentally concerned with the production of novel beings and structures from commonly held materials, concerns we have seen Olson fret over in both "Human Universe" and "Projective Verse." This is only to say that these concepts function as parts of Whiteheadian "actual entities," the most essential, indivisible, and particular parts of the process (or processes) that constitute reality. As Whitehead writes in *Process and Reality*, "'Creativity' is the principle of *novelty*. An actual occasion is a novel entity diverse from any entity in the 'many' which it unifies. Thus 'creativity' introduces novelty into the content of the many, which are the universe disjunctively. The 'creative advance' is the application of this ultimate principle of creativity to each novel situation which it originates" (588). These novel situations are the "discrete and continuous sequence[s] of measurable events distributed in time" that Olson writes of in "The Kingfishers" as births and deaths, beginnings and endings in an eternal process of nest formation that cannot separate itself

from distance-annihilating wastefulness. This, Olson implies, is reality. We cannot get the eggs without the bone vomit. We cannot get the dazzling structural blue of the kingfisher's feathers, so valuable in China that they made Angkor Vat a fortune, without feeding the kingfisher its wastefully inefficient diet. Trying to hold on to any one part of that equation too tightly, thinking of that slice of life as a monolithic form or first principle, causes us to miss the point. Like Western Language or the cult-aura of traditional works of art, it fails to foreground the reality of a selectedness (or individuality) that can only grow from the radically leveled garbage heap of cast-off potentialities, of not-so-special flesh. "The Kingfishers" starts with Fernand wondering why the trade in kingfisher feathers, which were wealth, ever ceased. Olson's answer is that the trade in feathers perished because perishing and change are as fundamental to the reality of Angkor Vat as the isolated facts of the feathers or the stones they bought. Too tightly grasping an idealized, accumulative economic vision of these things, like the lingering of traditional poetics over its favorite forms, only results in our losing sight of "This very thing you are," A.K.A. the authentic form of that person or thing, which cannot wholly base itself on the perception of an abstracting distance.

"The Kingfishers" has a few final things to suggest to us about the importance of expenditure and the distances of traditional aura. In the final section of the poem, for example, Olson writes that:

I am no Greek, hath not th'advantage.

And of course, no Roman:

he can take no risk that matters,

the risk of beauty least of all. ("Kingfishers" III.1-4)

This negated Greekness might, in one respect, be read as Olson's by now recognizable objection to the abstracting powers of Western language, which in the act of generalizing or categorizing imposes cult-auratic distance between the real thing and the word that gestures to its ideal form. The negated Romanness is less familiar. Yet, I would argue that Olson's criticism of this generalized historical figure is simply another affirmation of the nonproductive, transitory expenditure of energy in life and poetry. For much of its history, Rome was an empire, a grand exercise in the belief that one might accumulate land, money, and servitude—along with other forms of energy and wealth—and keep these things forever. Like the Platonic ideal forms of Western language, the form of a sonnet, or the form of traditional art in general, empire invites no change that is not its own growth. We see the growth of the Benjamin's traditional work in its gradually deepening history of ownership, which he says results in a growth of the work's meaningfulness ("Work" 254). Yet what grows forever? For Bataille, nothing accomplishes this. Some form of expenditure or destruction of energy in the system becomes inevitable, progressing from small examples of personal and bureaucratic wastefulness toward the extreme expenditure of war. The history of Rome features many examples of lavish expenditures, but in the end even these were not sufficient to offset the sort of careful acquisitiveness Olson gestures to in "The Kingfishers." Rome gathered energy more quickly than it could discharge the same (either in growth or nonproductive expenditure) until war and the fall of its empire became the catastrophic consequences of that overabundance.

This Marinetti-like cleansing is not the only paradigm available for such expenditure, however, and given the chaos that the fall of the Roman empire brought

Europe, it is difficult to advocate for it when any other option is possible. Olson helps us by extending the need for an increased, Bataille-esque energy discharge into the realm of art and beauty, which may allow us, again, to speak of the destruction of classical forms and classical aura without necessarily having to consider the destructions of war a given. Destroying the former would potentially help protect against the latter, provide of course that the discharge is great enough, and especially when that discharge came prepackaged with an ethical system that steered its wasteful use of the machine further away from Marinetti even as it employed machines and mass production techniques Marinetti might have approved. We see further evidence of this ethical destructiveness in Olson's rejection of the Greeks in the above passage if we peel back Olson's cryptic allusiveness enough. In *What Does Not Change*, for example, Maud elaborates Olson's conception of Greekness by making a connection to Werner Jaeger's *Paideia: The Ideals of Greek Culture*, from which Olson read at least the first chapter, "Nobility and Areté" (*Change* 104). Maud writes that:

Jaeger defines the word "areté" as 'proud and courtly morality with warlike valour . . . the quintessence of early Greek aristocratic education' (p. 5); to which he adds Aristotle's notion that "the highest areté" is 'to take possession of the beautiful' (p. 12). The latter phrase, says Jaeger, is "so entirely Greek that it is hard to translate"; it is not aesthetic or spiritual but "moral heroism": "to abandon possessions and honours in order to 'take possession of the beautiful.'" (Maud, *Change* 104)

If Maud is right in claiming that Jaeger's work helped shape Olson's conception of Greekness, this is another example of Olson's emphasis on the destruction of a variety of

types of accumulated wealth, with the gathering in of an ephemeral, authentic quality as the result. Yet, for Olson if not the Greeks, this destruction stops quite clearly short of war, as Maud argues in quoting from an unpublished Olson poem “Ilias,” now in the archive at UC Storrs, which characterizes the Trojan war as a conflict between a whore and a cuckold where “fools fight fools for each other’s trash” (qtd in Maud, *Change* 104). For Maud, Olson is “not taken in by Aristotle’s propaganda. The heroes of the *Iliad* take possession of trash not the beautiful” (*Change* 104). Even as this attitude repudiates the extreme expenditures of war, it does much to reinforce the trashy, all-too-common, even brutal side of reality that we have been tracking elsewhere in “The Kingfishers.” The Greeks’ mistake is not the attempt to take action to grasp authentic beauty through a form of sacrifice but rather the attempt to hold on too tightly to something (Helen, a Platonic ideal notion of beauty) that was not actually pure and had in any case already fled the system. Like any superabundance of energy, Helen needed to remain outside of Greece, lost to it, lest the attempt to retain what had once been acquired lead to a more terrifying evacuation of that energy in the form of war. Thus, the toxic attempt to acquire what does not exist is just as doomed as the Roman attempt to stave off loss by not risking the expenditure for the unreality of beauty at all.

Olson is useful to us because he charts a middle ground between these perceived defects of the Greek and Roman worldviews. “The Kingfishers,” “Projective Verse,” and “Human Universe” are Olson’s argument that we do not have to choose between an uncompromised, expenditure-laden striving for a distant Helen and the crass accumulations of the Romans, produced and reproduced until the system ruptures. As these works show, Olson would rather have us expend ourselves in the action of

voluntarily committing ourselves, fully and even unwisely, to repetitive loss through repetitive production such that we might regain a sense of the beauty in our common flesh and fallible characters. While doing all that, he would also have us strengthen the humanistic bond he felt would result from a view of individuality that stemmed from mutual unselectedness. As he writes in the stanzas following his comments on the Greeks and Romans (quoting variously from Pound's *Guide to Kulchur* and from Rimbaud, another of his poetic idols):

I have my kin, if for no other reason than  
(as he said, next of kin) I commit myself, and,  
Given my freedom, I'd be a cad  
If I didn't.<sup>20</sup> Which is most true.

It works out this way, despite the disadvantage.

I offer in explanation, a quote:

si j'ai du goût, ce n'est guères  
que pour la terre et les pierres.<sup>21</sup>

Despite the discrepancy (an ocean courage age)

this is also true: if I have any taste

it is only because I have interested myself

in what was slain in the sun ("Kingfishers" III.5-16)

If this invocation of Pound in the first of these stanzas seems out of place given the anti-fascist sentiment both Maud and this paper have insisted upon in Olson, we must see it as

Olson using the same sort of double vision on himself that he used previously on the kingfisher nest and the Aztec practice of human sacrifice. The ugliness is coextensive with the beauty in both of those situations, and so it is here. Nothing precludes Olson from being both, in 1948, one who had resolved never to visit the aging, racist Pound ever again and one who could, in a letter to Dorothy Pound dated 24 February 1949, worry quite earnestly about Pound's health and write of him as a literary next of kin (Maud, *What Does Not* 101, 167). Like the episode with the nest, this should only succeed in bringing us closer to a real appreciation for our subject before Olson moves on to the next thing. The next thing, in this case, is a quote in French in the succeeding stanza, by Rimbaud, who Olson revered for his ability to fully discard one version of himself and commit fully to the next. Rimbaud gave it all away once for beauty in poetry, and then gave away the beauty and poetry for a life as an African trader. The poet's life served Olson as a particular example of how to garner a certain authenticity of being by giving oneself away as fully, as quickly, and in some senses as inefficiently as possible: values we certainly see in the methodology of "Projective Verse." The second to last line of "The Kingfishers" sums this up by asking if either Olson, or by extension any of his readers, "shall [. . .] uncover honey / where maggots are" (III.18). The answer that Olson suggests variously in the "The Kingfishers," "Projective Verse," and "Human Universe" is yes, but only if we acknowledge the importance of the maggots, of perishing, and of change in producing the full honey-like aura of authenticity.

Those maggots, indicators of discard, crawl in spirit over the last line of the piece, which features Olson hunting through the stones of particularized reality for a way to regain the full use of himself in the face of all that would abstract, classify, or distance

him. The poem ends with the hunt ongoing, and in the sense that searching through concrete reality for the forms of one's experience is the poet's daily work, it never ended for Olson. His death left the epic stone hunt of *The Maximus Poems* unfinished, for example, because the projective process of human affirmation through authenticity-granting expenditure works in such a way that only the ultimate expenditure of death could stop it. The rest of Olson's life could only be spent in the act of harnessing a process of ceaseless mass production and reproduction in the service of an aura that closed the distance between people and things rather than increasing them. Despite the lack of any earlier finishing line, however, Olson's sort of searching is far from bleak. He walks out of "The Kingfishers" and into his future in possession of methodology that acknowledges the unique concrescence of energies authentically present in each moment of a poem's composition that, in discarding the moment and its forms to allow the next, destroy that energy before it becomes an accumulative problem. The moment that has perished remains to some degree immortal, just as Benjamin says it does when he discusses the traditional work of art. But just as important is that the moment and its aura move past that immortal instant, which is by no means untouchable, toward a more honest view of the way reality works. This is what Benjamin notes, in his way, when he discusses film form. Olson's projective verse highlights the totality of the process more clearly, however, and is therefore a more honest vision of how here-and-now authenticity intersects with the eternal object. In theorizing the process that degrades the auratic object as part of aura creation, Olson wipes away the anxiety over certain forms of technological reproduction and allows us to enjoy both the original and the original we



call copy as both potentially relevant in our continuing formation as willful human beings.

## Notes

1. For a brief publication history of “The Kingfishers,” see Maud, *What Does Not Change*, pp. 125-127. Though published in 1950, Olson was working on “The Kingfishers” actively in early 1949 and, with some likelihood, attended the party that provided the material for the opening section with “Fernand” and the birds even earlier, in October of 1948 (Maud 24-27).
2. In a talk titled “The Poem as a Field of Action,” given at the University of Washington in 1948, one of Olson’s poetic heroes, William Carlos Williams, put this increasingly common dissatisfaction with the techniques of traditional verse succinctly. “I propose,” he said, “sweeping changes from top to bottom of the poetic structure. [. . .] I say we are *through* with the iambic pentameter as presently conceived, at least for dramatic verse; through with the measured quatrain, the staid concatenations of sound in the usual stanza, the sonnet” (Williams 281). To fill the formal vacuum resulting from this dismissal, Williams called for “a new measure or a new way of measuring that will be commensurate with the social, economic world in which we are living as contrasted with the past” (283). Olson’s “composition by field” in “Projective Verse” is a clear answer to both the general call to arms and the more specific terminology put forward in Williams’s talk.
3. For Olson in “Projective Verse,” the distinction between form and substance is often less of a barrier than one might expect. “Speech,” he says, “is the ‘solid’ of verse,” (“Projective” 617) and those solids, in the form of syllables, are shaped in the line at “each moment of the going” (“Projective” 616). This is enough like the manipulation of traditional sculpture to sustain the comparison of poetic form to plastic art, even if Olson’s aim is to let the traditional elements of this shaping (i.e. tens, syntax) “be kicked around” and “broken open” to keep “the space-time tensions of a poem, immediate, contemporary to the acting-on-you of the poem” (“Projective” 617).
4. *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*, 5<sup>th</sup> edition, glosses “kinema” as “Motion (Greek); and an early spelling of *cinema* (motion pictures)” (Ferguson, Salter, and Stallworthy 1299). Since Benjamin practically overflows with love of the cinema in “The Work of Art,” his appreciation for the concept is less only in relation to Olson’s more enthusiastic dismantling of the traditional work of art, which he has less use for than Benjamin, who appreciated the aura of tradition due to his enthusiasm as a collector.
5. See W.C. Williams 1948 speech “The Poem as a Field of Action,” note two above.

6. Though the ‘necessity’ of this position may seem dubious when Benjamin writes in such positive terms about the lost cult aura of traditional art or when Olson writes about the poem as breath or as speech force, both authors insist upon it. Benjamin does so in the title of his essay, offering readers “The Work of Art *in* the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility” (emphasis mine) as opposed to a reality where that Age was not already upon us. Though Benjamin appreciates cult-auratic authenticity—and though there are, even today, many works that retain this classical here-and-nowness for lack of having been copied—it is clear from this and other of Benjamin’s writings that the world where cult aura existed was either already dead or dying. This point of view is on display at the end of Benjamin’s essay “Unpacking My Library” when he writes that his passion for the authenticity of rare books is “behind the times” and that “time is running out for the type [of collection and, we might add, aura] that I am discussing here” (66-67). At the end of the essay, Benjamin envisions a house made of books and lets the collector, the consumer of purer, more exclusive forms of traditional cult arua, “disappear inside, as is only fitting” in the world Olson would inherit, where anything could be technologically reproduced, even if not everything was.

The sale of the only extant copy of the Wu-Tang Clan’s 2015 album *Once Upon a Time in Shaolin* to former pharmaceutical executive Martin Shkreli is a contemporary example. The Wu-Tang Clan printed only one physical album and scrupulously avoided any release of the music digitally so that it would be one of a kind, retaining what Benjamin would have seen as the greatest degree of its traditional, cult-auratic authenticity. In crasser, more market-based terms, this feature of extreme rarity (read: low supply) increased market demand for the album to the point that it reportedly sold for two-million dollars. Yet even this was not enough to protect the work’s traditional aura. Shkreli released parts of the album on *YouTube* in celebration of Donald Trump’s victory in the 2016 U.S. Presidential election, instantly evacuating its Benjaminian aura. Since we cannot reverse the evacuation of *Once Upon a Time in Shaolin*’s aura, we must move forward, finding some way to value the ephemerality of Shkreli’s *YouTube* copies alongside the original.

7. Ideas that recall the extreme emphasis placed on energy and language in the moment of composition in “Projective Verse.”

8. Olson uses the term, but he does not have to like it. He notes that “universe” is “their word [Greek philosophers], and the refuge of all metaphysicians since” (“Human” 162). While frequent use of the word might seem like an instance of Olson failing his own call for a greater discrimination, calling “universe” a sham word and then using it repeatedly tends to reinforce Olson’s point. It aggressively foregrounds the sham and illustrates how dangerously rigged against us language has become. If not even the word’s opponents can fully avoid using it, or words like it, we must be extra vigilant regarding its abuse.

9. Olson lists filmmaker and film theorist Sergei Eisenstein as one of the must-read authors in his “Bibliography on America for Ed Dorn” (1955). In this work, Eisenstein surpasses Picasso, Proust, and Joyce, and “all the ‘creative’ men who have gone along side of” Jung except Charlie Chaplin (Olson, “Bibliography” 301). Maud notes that “Besides the films, Olson would have known Sergei Eisenstein’s books: *The Film Sense*

(New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1942) and *Film Form* (New York: Harcourt, Brace 1949), because they were edited by Olson's friend Jay Leyda; he did not own them" (Maud, *Charles Olson's Reading* 290). Benjamin, for his part, quotes or mentions several film theorists in "The Work of Art," including Abel Gance, Severin-Mars, Alexandre Arnoux, and the previously mentioned Rudolf Arnheim ("Work" 258-259).

10. Much of this evidence survives in the Charles Olson archive at the University of Connecticut Storrs, compiled there by Olson's most influential editor and archivist, George Butterick. See also Butterick's "Charles Olson's 'The Kingfishers' and the Poetics of Change," which provides reproductions of several draft versions of the "Proteus," the poem that eventually became Olson's "The Kingfishers" and "The Praises" respectively. Olson quotes directly from "The Praises," in the course of "Projective Verse."

11. Robert Creeley published Olson's half of this correspondence under the title *Mayan Letters*. It also exists as one part of the enormous ten-volume collection of the letters between Olson and Creeley edited by George Butterick.

12. In *What Does Not Change*, Maud views much of the form of "The Kingfishers" as a response to the view of history exemplified in Hart Crane's poetry, especially in *The Bridge*. Though he cannot establish causality along these lines, he still maintains that Olson would have understood Crane's distaste for the notion of "history as primer" (Crane qtd. in Maud, *What Does Not* 54). "'What I am after,' [Crane] wrote in a letter 'is an assimilation of this experience, a more organic panorama, showing the continuous and living evidence of the past in the inmost vital substance of the present'" (qtd. in Maud, *What Does Not* 54). Maud's note for this (Chapter 3: Modes of Form, n. 7) specifies the source as "Letter to Otto Kahn of 12 September 1927 in *The Letters of Hart Crane 1916-1932* edited by Brom Weber (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1965), p. 305." This living evidence is what Olson sees in Lerma when its people, who otherwise want nothing more than to be Western, treat their bodies in a way that stems from their past even if they don't know that this is what is happening. It is also what Olson sees in Pound's palimpsest-like approach to history in *The Cantos* and will emulate in poems like "The Kingfishers" and, to an even greater degree, in *The Maximus Poems*.

13. In the case of the Three-Fifths Compromise in the Pre-bellum American South, this lack of authenticity vs. the original, undegraded free voter was assigned a specific fractional value. The Aztecs were not so mathematically precise, but the diminutions of slavery are still there and work in much the same way as the authenticity-killing diminutions Benjamin ascribes to copies.

14. Olson gives the context and content of this racist harangue in his essay "GrandPa, GoodBye." Upon hearing that Williams had recently been hospitalized and that he had returned a letter to a hopeful young poet in which he largely said he had no fresh wisdom to give the younger man, Pound replied: "Bill has always been confused. He's one of the reasons I make so much of race. It's hard enough for a man to get things clear when he's of one race, but to be Bill!—french, spanish, anglo, some jew from Saragossa. . . ." (qtd.

in Olson, "GrandPa" 148). Immediately after this, Olson declares that he left Pound that day with no intention to ever see him again.

15. The indirect quotation here is once again Bernardino de Sahagún, from *Historia general de las cosas de Nueva España*, Mexico City: Porrúa, 1956. Book II, Ch. 21.

16. Levinas would likely find projective verse to be toxically preoccupied with finding reality in an image fundamentally disconnected from that reality. In "Reality and Its Shadow," Levinas writes, "The consciousness of the representation lies in knowing that the object is not there. The perceived elements are not the object but are like its 'old garments,' spots of colour, chunks of marble or bronze. These elements do not serve as symbols, and in the absence of the object they do not force its presence, but by their presence, insist on its absence" (136). In short, Olson's energy does not transfer from agent, to act, to object, allowing the reader, in Coleridge's phrase from a notebook draft of an essay on punctuation, to "regulate his *breath* foresightedly, & inclusively in his Tones [. . .] [and] place himself in the state of the writer or original Speaker" (422, 424). Levinas is even more damning to Olson's Objectism and Coleridge's punctuation when he writes that:

The whole of our world [. . .] can become an image. That is why classical art which is attached to objects – all those paintings, all those statues representing *something*, all those poems which recognize syntax and punctuation – conforms no less to the true essence of art than the modern works which claim to be pure music, pure painting, pure poetry, because they drive objects out of the world of sounds, colours and words into which those works introduce us – because they break up representation. A represented object, by the simple fact of becoming an image, is converted into a non-object[.] [. . .] The disincarnation of reality by an image is not equivalent to a simple diminution in degree. It belongs to an ontological dimension that does not extend between us and a reality to be captured. (134)

For Levinas, neither the traditional poetics Olson and Williams loath nor the poetics of the open field they propose in the place of the classical system can recover the aura Benjamin speaks of as lost. This is because the issue is not one of some former authenticity dropping away by degrees in the age of technological reproducibility. According to Levinas, art has never connected with reality, making it impossible for projective verse to walk things back to a previous auratic state because that state never existed, not even for the works to which Benjamin would have attributed aura. For Levinas, the "qualities, colour, form, and position" of the thing depicted "remain as it were behind its being [. . .] like a 'still life'" (135). In effect, a "still life," whether painted or rendered as poetry, is always "life, stilled." This applies as much to Olson's open field as it does the field through which Anna Christina Olson (no relation) crawls in Andrew Wyeth's magical realist painting *Christina's World* (1948). Neither Olson will ever claw his or her way to the house on the horizon because the image:

is an idol [. . .] in the last analysis [. . .] a statue – a stoppage of time, or rather its delay behind itself. [. . .] A statue realizes the paradox of an instant that endures without a future. Its duration is not really an instant. It does not give itself out here as an infinitesimal element of duration, the instant of a flash; it has in its own way a quasi-eternal duration. [. . .] An eternally suspended future floats around the congealed position of a stature like a future forever to come. The imminence of the future lasts before an instant stripped of the essential characteristic of the present, its evanescence. It will never have completed its task as a present, as though reality withdrew from its own reality and left it powerless. In this situation the present can assume nothing, can take on nothing, and thus is an impersonal and anonymous instant. (Levinas 137-38)

For Levinas, there is no split-second change to pay heed to, either in film or in projective poetry. There is no “sentence as the first act of nature, as lightning, as passage of force from subject to object” because there is no duration of the instant—only the limbo of a quasi-eternal duration that does not operate in the same way (Olson 617-618). If the present can assume nothing and take on nothing, if it is impersonal and anonymous, there can be no here-and-now of aura, and any cult-inspired worship of authenticity based on this value amounts to false idolatry. “To put it in theological terms,” Levinas concludes, “art does not belong to the order of revelation. Nor does it belong to that of creation, which moves in just the opposite direction” (132). Thus, Levinas’s damns both the terminology Benjamin uses to describe the ritual nature of the authentically auratic and the emphasis on the process of creation in projective verse.

17. Maud (*What Does Not* 61-64, 66) clarifies that Olson is quoting more or less directly from his sources again, this time from a footnoted list of treasures Montezuma gave Cortez, which he found in his Modern Library copy of William Prescott’s *History of the Conquest of Mexico*. The effect of referring to the most factual, scholarly record available in this instance and of sidestepping the energy-leeching abstractions of heroism and villainy William Carlos Williams allowed himself regarding Cortez and Montezuma in *In the American Grain* is the same as it is for the kingfisher and its nest earlier. It reduces the distance between us and the aura of those legends through the beautiful particularity of a mundane list. The emphasis is also on the giving of that treasure, not Cortez’s accumulation of it, an idea that might almost have been stolen from Bataille.

18. Though Olson would not actually read Whitehead’s *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology* until the spring of 1955, “The Kingfishers,” “Projective Verse,” and “Human Universe” may be read as anticipations of the influence that work would have on his thinking. In *Charles Olson’s Reading: A Biography*, Maud claims that “The importance of this work for Olson could not be overexaggerated,” and he notes that Olson read the book not only in the spring of 1955 but again in the spring of 1956 and the spring of 1957, at which point he bought a copy of his own (290). Olson would at least have known of Whitehead at the time he wrote “The Kingfishers,” however. According to Ann Charters in *Olson/Melville*, Olson claimed in a 1956 lecture that: “I am the more persuaded of the importance and use of Whitehead’s thought that I did not know his

work—except in snatches and by rumor, including the disappointment of a dinner and evening with him when I was 25 and he was, what, 75!—until last year. So it comes out like those violets of Bolyai Senior on all sides when men are needed, that we possess a body of thinking of the order of Whitehead’s to catch us up” (84). Olson was on an intellectual trajectory that would eventually match orbits with Whitehead, and it is in this spirit that I read some of the terms and ideas from *Process and Reality* back into this earlier period of Olson’s life as a poet.

19. Benjamin’s *Arcades Project*, with its tight geographical focus, its palimpsest-like viewing of diverse historical substrata as elements in a single cultural and physical field, and its obsessive quotation ends feels, in some ways, like a Modernist forerunner to Olson’s *Maximus Poems*. The affinities between these two authors extends far beyond a mutual investment in film editing and the concept of the split second.

20. See Maud, *What Does Not Change* page 101, also n.10 for this chapter on page 167.

21. See Maud, *What Does Not Change* pages 96-99, also n.3 on page 166 for relevant discussion and citations.

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