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Slips of the Mouth: The Paratactic Voice of Charles Olson’s *Maximus Poems*

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Charles Olson’s *Maximus Poems* are typically read as part of the American ‘long poem’ tradition, following on from William Carlos Williams’ *Paterson* and Ezra Pound’s *Cantos*, the latter forming the primary poietical model on which Olson based his own long work. What is called the ‘long poem’ grew to prominence as a modernist response to epic, and is often characterised as explicitly fusing lyric and epic ‘voices,’ combining epic mythopoiesis with lyric intensity, “a breadth of subject and discursive scope [developed to] insure poetry’s social relevance” (Keller 534). This fusion brings with it anxieties concerning the work’s coherence, as the long poem is characteristically an uneasy synthesis between a variety of anterior forms, combining both public and personal utterance. The poet must thus find a method which holds these otherwise uncomfortable bedfellows in some functional union. *The Cantos’* influential solution to this difficulty is found in what Pound termed the “vortex,” a “radiant node or cluster” (*Gaudier-Brzeska* 92), which pulls otherwise unconnected voices and ideas together; at its root the vortex is a structural form of parataxis, which places rather than subordinates phrases and images. There can be little doubt that Olson’s poetry had its genesis in Pound’s paratactical tendency, but it is also indispensable, in reading Olson, to recognise the younger poet’s deployment of parataxis as not only moving on from but explicitly opposing itself to Pound’s. In thinking through Pound’s parataxis, Olson came to conceptualise and practice poetic speech in a way which differed markedly from ‘the Master’s’ own.

Writing to Robert Creeley in 1951, Olson was coming to the view that Pound’s voice in *The Cantos* is, though compelling, in an important sense suboptimal; Olson suggested that *The Cantos’* success is funded by its poet’s “EGO POSITION,” an overbearing and authoritarian personalization of history which ultimately means that Pound and his associates “never speak … basically, for anyone but themselves” (“Mayan Letters” 93). In making this judgement, Olson aligns ‘Ez’s epic’ with Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, which, in his foundational essay “Projective Verse,” he dams as an example of
Keats’s ‘Egotistical Sublime,’ or, in his own terms, “the non-Projective” (39). The epic, for Olson, is made fatally dysfunctional in and for modernity by the ‘egoism’ of its great practitioners. (Wordsworth and William Carlos Williams are made to share the blame here.) The project of the newly-begun *Maximus*, then, is in part one of redeeming epic through a smashing of the poetic ego, and a return to a pre-modern, Homeric model of epic speech and experience. Olson’s prime tool in this task is a fragmenting parataxis, one distinctively allied to the bodily operation of speech.

Early Olson criticism, whilst more than cognizant of the symptomatically fragmentary and paratactic nature of the writing, tended to emphasize its attempted coherence. Thomas Merrill, in 1982, wrote that what he called Olson’s “grammar of illiteracy,” his tactical derangement of syntax, “is really the grammar of life—life in all its ongoing continuity and unremitting process” (62). In another influential study, of 1978, Robert von Hallberg read Olson as essentially a didactic poet, leading to the conclusion that Olson’s best work was done in the first volume of *Maximus*, and that the more mythological, allusive, and heuristic-hermetic work of the second and third installations was therefore a falling off and an aberration from his vital poetic (3; 41). In both of these views Olson’s primary genius is essentially a continuous one, and his paratactical poetic is read as only “apparent disorder” (von Hallberg 62) working in service of an overarching or prospective logicality. More recent criticism has, if anything, exacerbated this tendency. Carla Billitteri’s 2009 study *Language and the Renewal of Society in Walt Whitman, Laura (Riding) Jackson, and Charles Olson* argues that Olson’s opposition to logos as syntax forms part of a broader American search for a Cratylic poetic utterance which makes language natural and ideal (118-19). Olson’s failure to achieve such a language does not stop Billitteri from adjudging his poetry as fundamentally geared toward coherence, however. Similarly, Heriberto Yépez’s 2013 *The Empire of Neomemory* characterizes Olson’s making of the “text into a living body that breathes” as tantamount to creating “a Frankenstein or spiritual cyborg” (15), one imagined as a perfectly functioning machine which never breaks down. The thread which unites these positions is that they take Olson’s work too much as theory rather than as praxis, and imagine that a ‘grammar of life,’ a ‘Cratylic language,’ will effect an uninterrupted, didactic synthesis between poem and world. This piece will argue, on the contrary, that Olson’s parataxis is one based in physical, spoken performance rather than written discourse or an elevated epic ‘voice’ of ‘high style’ and elaborate formulaic figure; if it is a machine, then it is a machine whose articulations are composed in no small part of noise, whose ‘coherence’ is paradoxically instantiated in entropic leakage.

Olson’s ‘noisiness’ is already present in the complexity of the voice masquerading as ‘Maximus’ in the early poems, some interference pattern of poet and/or teacher, and of
its audience, neither Homer’s massed polis nor Milton’s “fit audience … though few” (391), which is, perhaps, also Pound’s. Speaking in 1962, Olson outlined what function he understood ‘Maximus’ to have in his work:

The general proposition is … this creature, Maximus, addresses himself to a city, which in the instance is Gloucester, which then in turn happensto be in Massachusetts. I’m not at all impressed that there’s necessarily any more Gloucester, Massachusetts in any meaningful sense than the creature is either me or whom he originally was intended as, which was Maximus of Tyre, a second-century dialectician. At least on the record what he wrote was *dialethi*, which we have I guess in the word ‘dialectic,’ meaning intellectual essays, or essays on intellectual subjects. And he mostly wandered around the Mediterranean world, from the center, the old capital of Tyre, talking about one thing—Homer’s *Odyssey*. I don’t have much more impression of him than that. I’ve tried to read his *Dialethi* and found them not as interesting as I expected. But he represents to me some sort of figure that centers much more than the second century A.D.—in fact, as far as I feel it, like, he’s the navel of the world. (Butterick 6-7)

Both the city which the poems address and the persona which addresses it are not ‘impressed’ into the work in Olson’s mind in that they are not stable poles of communication: ‘Gloucester’ is no more literally or only the city than ‘Maximus’ is literally or only a characterisation of a second-century philosopher. Rather, Olson cryptically states that he understands Maximus as “the navel of the world” (Butterick 7). Here, Maximus is associated with another object of Olson’s enthusiasm, demonstrated in his famous early poem “The Kingfishers”: the *omphalos* or navel, which sits at the gnomic centre of that work.

Laid in Delphi, the *omphalos* stone is held in myth to be the centre or ‘navel’ of the world. In “Kingfishers” Olson associates it with the revolutionary potential of Mao, and is particularly interested in the untranslatable sigil carved on its side:

> But the E
> cut so rudely on that oldest stone
> sounded otherwise,
> was differently heard.
> *Collected Poems* 88

The *omphalos* is emblematic of the beginning, and of the centre or root of cosmogenesis; but it also bears on it the mark of how that beginning and centre have been lost. The now meaningless sigil (it looks like, but probably is not, an *epsilon*) must, Olson reasons, have been of great power and deep significance once. Maximus of Tyre, as a scholar of Homer, has some connection to this lost world through the *Odyssey*, and so has access to the rule of poetry Olson believed, via the classicist Eric Havelock’s account in his *Preface to Plato*, to have preceded the disastrous intervention of
Plato, with his logic of subordinated experience, cause-and-effect, and the written word. In his 1963 study Eric Havelock wrote that “just as poetry itself [for Plato], as long as it reigned supreme, constituted the chief obstacle to the achievement of effective prose, so there was a state of mind which we shall conveniently label the ‘poetic’ or ‘Homerian’ or ‘oral’ state of mind, which constituted the chief obstacle to scientific rationalism, to the use of analysis, to the classification of experience, to its rearrangement in sequence of cause and effect” (46-47). If Plato represents the rule of logical and syntactical abstraction in the shape of the written word, then Homer represents, and legislated for, a prior, alogical and essentially paratactic oral-poetical regime which Olson understood to have enshrined a more direct, even proprioceptive, relationship to phenomenological objects—and to the world itself. Maximus of Tyre is imagined as a final outrider of this consciousness. The ‘Maximus’ of the poems, then, is not a ‘persona’ or a ‘character’ so much as he is a vortex in the Poundian sense: a gathering of luminous connections and details from across time and culture. Indeed, more so than this, he is an omphalos in his own right, an anchoring point and beginning that is nonetheless inscrutable and of uncertain genesis. From here we can begin to understand the unstable form of address Olson creates through ‘Maximus,’ already a point of contestation at the beginning of the poem, and becoming increasingly complex and even compromised as the sequence progresses.

At the beginning of *Maximus*, then, ‘Maximus’ can be understood as a type of paratactic construct, one whose inner dynamics are suggested rather than demonstrated. He is also the nexus of a range of referents—to the Classics, to epic, to Olson’s own great height, and so on. In first entering the poem he pulls these references together. Speaking to Gloucester, he speaks from the east, the sea, and Tyre. This oceanic character is reinforced through invoking a whaling “lance,” described as “metal hot from boiling water” (5); here Olson returns to older hunting grounds, reflecting his period as a Melville scholar, by evoking the pivotal moment in which Ahab “baptises” his harpoon in blood (Melville 435). Olson, perhaps wary of unhappy precedent, reverts this chrism to water, but it is telling that compacted references to two long works which the poet deeply admired (both *The Odyssey* and *Moby Dick* could be described, in different senses, as ‘epic’) begin *Maximus*’ enormous undertaking. At this stage of the work Olson’s handling of parataxis for the purposes of pulling together disparate material owes an obvious debt to Pound. However, the development of Olson’s poetics soon took his understanding of parataxis in a markedly different direction, a direction indicated in the very earliest sections of Olson’s great work.

The clue is already there in “I, Maximus of Gloucester, to You,” on the second page of *Maximus*: “By ear, he sd” (6). Plato socially and imaginatively ostracised the poet when he ushered in writing and logic,
pushing the rhapsode to redundancy. Similarly, the oral aspect of the Chinese ideogram had been conveniently ignored by sinologist Ernest Fenollosa, who privileged its supposed immediacy as a pictorial sign; Pound (broadly) followed him. Olson was going to put the spoken word and aural reception back at the forefront of long form poetics. Maximus is conceived of not as written but as said. It will be composed with attention to the sound it makes — in fact, “be played by, said he, coldly, the / ear!” (6). To ‘play by ear’ suggests a more reactive and spontaneous approach to composition than can be found in the Cantos; a mode of composition happy to backtrack, concede and correct error, and contradict itself. Scholarship has thought of this as primarily a processual dynamism and has associated it with the sonic and the oral. Such will become the major trajectory of Olson’s handling of ‘voice’ as The Maximus Poems progresses. This reaches a pitch in the third volume (published posthumously, in 1975), but the seeds are present in the early 1950s as volume one (published 1960) was in production. So, for example, in “The Songs of Maximus,” which constitutes the fourth ‘letter’ of the sequence:

SONG 5

I have seen faces of want, and have not wanted the FAO: Appleseed ‘s gone back to what any of us New England. (20)

This is the whole song, the second shortest of six brief songs which compose this section. Again here, a series of historical, mythological, and personal references are juxtaposed: Jonny Appleseed (a fellow Massachusite) and the Food and Agriculture Organization (a suppressed reference to its one-time founder FDR, Olson’s political hero and one-time boss). Olson/Maximus is the omphalos or centre cohering these otherwise disparate parts, and might seem to fall here exactly into the trap he saw Pound caught in: the omphalos as ‘EGO-POSITION.’ What is significant for our argument is that the song is short; in fact, it is cut off. “Appleseed / ‘s gone back to / what any of us / New England” (20) is obviously not a speech including logical sense; in fact, it sounds like a speaker ‘winging it,’ or ‘mouthing off,’ and then running out of ideas or inspiration into the fourth line. Thus “what any of us” (20) is a vague push toward a conclusive or universal point which cannot find the link to where it is going (New England), and is more a case of playing for time than it is of artful and suggestive paratactic construction. The voice is, then, explicitly constructed as a voice here, a speaker who can say the wrong or the stupid thing, or go out of his zone of competence. The umms and aahs of a person speaking naturally, rather than as a ‘public speaker,’ are reinserted into the voice in Olson’s poetic; this spontaneity makes his poetry a parataxis of sonic event as much as it is a site of a more Poundian vortex-parataxis.
The poetic ego is weakened because it knows itself to be part of a compromised world of happenstance.

Olson develops this self-cancelling gesture as an antidote to the Poundian ego. Combined with his habit of revising earlier stages of *The Maximus Poems* in later passages, as direct and explicit corrections or as additions, the tendency of the voice to speak over, confute, or interrupt itself at a local level demonstrates an increasingly idiosyncratic style orientated towards process and the kinetic rather than the completed, hypotactic, or monumental. This is in part a product of Olson’s thinking the poem as necessarily corporeal, as comparable to activities such as walking or dancing. Such activities are always a series of trade-offs between intention, artistry, physical capacity, and chance encounter. So, in ‘*Letter #41 [broken off]*’, which begins the second volume of *The Maximus Poems*:

> With a leap (she said it was an arabesque I made, off the porch, the night of the St Valentine Day’s storm, into the snow. Nor did she fail of course to make the point what a sight I was the size I am all over the storm trying to be graceful Or was it? She hadn’t seen me in 19 years (*Maximus* 171)

This is not parataxis in the manner used by Pound. There is a great deal more ‘personal mythology’ in Olson by this point than is ever immediate in Pound; though ‘*Letter 41*’ goes on to make the ‘leap’ between this evening of Olson’s youth and the movements and settlements of migrating populations (“The Jews / are unique because they settled astride / the East African rift” [171]), and further back into deep geological time and the breaking (‘leaping’?) apart of the continents, it is the poet’s body, flailing or felicitous, which is the sight-out-of-proportion sitting at the centre and made ridiculous. The relationships between clauses are pointedly indistinct. The key blur enabled here is between two possible states of the body in flight—leap and arabesque. The latter is decorative or poised; the former suggests some degree of desperation. The unclosed bracket between what Olson-as/ or-Maximus calls the leap and what ‘she’ calls arabesque is a characteristic Olson gesture. Here, it is particularly instructive because it decouples the statement from the competence of the speaker (the ‘EGO-POSITION’), and at the very beginning of the letter—the whole page of text shimmers under the sign of this uncertainty. That the action under discussion, which is itself the lynch or *omphalos* of the poem, is so fuzzily delineated suggests precisely the great break Olson makes with Pound. It is not so much a matter of self-knowledge as of self-doubt: “what a sight I was the size I am all over the storm / trying to be graceful Or was it?" (171) The mutual unknowing of 19 years is nowhere near as radical, here, as the self-ignorance which cuts in with “Or was it?” (171), an ejaculation with which the
poet-mouth destabilises itself and frustrates its own associations. The body is not just in movement—it is in movement against itself, taking two contradictory poses simultaneously: leap and arabesque, memory and oblivion, elocution and interruption. Olson’s kinetics is one shaped by entropy; it is unlike the “radiant node” (Gaudier-Brzeska 92) characteristic of Pound.

The crucial difference is that Olson’s verse is radically unclosed, explicitly orientated towards its own process (it is not distinct in being processual as such, but in the degree to which it embraces the processual). Its parataxis points not only to polysemic or undetermined relations but also toward the way in which the paratactic structures of Maximus itself are compromising and deranging to the writing, highlighting irregularities and lacunae. In this context, Theodor Adorno’s writings on Friedrich Hölderlin’s parataxis are illuminating:

The paratactical revolt against synthesis attains its limit in the synthetic function of language as such. What is envisioned is a synthesis of a different kind, language’s self-reflection, while language retains synthesis. To destroy the unity of language would constitute an act of violence equivalent to the one the unity perpetuates: but Hölderlin so transmutes the form of unity that not only is multiplicity reflected in it—that is possible within traditional synthetic language as well—but in addition the unity indicates that it knows itself to be inconclusive. (136)

There are some clear distinctions between the characteristics Adorno finds in Hölderlin and those of the poetry Olson was writing as Adorno produced in his essay. Primarily, English is usually considered an analytic language, and has a small number of synthetic components relative to Hölderlin’s German. This relatively analytic nature of English was a central cause of Ernest Fenollosa’s view, formative for Olson, that the language avoids the more abstracting tendencies of most European languages, and so has a better chance of recovering the immediacy of the ideogram (15). Adorno is more sanguine: synthetic features of language are inevitable and constitute the ‘limit’ to the possibilities inherent in parataxis. Olson’s work is as subject to this limit as anyone’s. The innovation, which Adorno also sees in Hölderlin, is in the infusion of ‘unity’ with the ‘inconclusive,’ and vice versa. This is crucial, because Olson’s project aims both to break up the monolithic and abstract ‘ego’ he finds in the Miltonic epic and its fractious American-long-poem progeny (Pound, Williams etc.), and to pull together experience and language in such a fashion that it overcomes the alienating effect of abstracting and hypotactic thought. This latter, well-documented aspiration is exemplified in what Olson calls ‘the will to cohere,’ to overcome the divide between body and mind, human and environment, form and content, subject
and object which he feels is our major dele-
terious inheritance from Plato. This might be
understood as a desire to have the world as
a realm or site of being rather than of mere
contemplation, where the active stance im-
plied by ‘being’ presages the role of the
‘inconclusive’ in ‘unity.’ Adorno suggests that
these two seemingly contradictory sub-pro-
jects are achievable through parataxis. The
question of how Olson achieves this, how the
pairing of the inconclusive with coherence
becomes manifest in his work—especially
considering the stark differences between
Hölderlin as a lyric poet and Olson’s more
extended scope—can be answered in consid-
ering one of Olson’s latest and most accom-
plished poems, “Golden Venetian Light From
/ Back of Agamenticus Height Falling / Like
Zeus’ Dust All Over the River & marsh as /
Night Falling Saturday June 28th 1969 on //
Gloucester / Ripping Red River.”

“Golden Venetian Light …” is not
alone amongst Olson’s later work in possess-
ing a long and involved title (the section fol-
lowing is called “Short Possible Poem To Fol-
low / Long Excessive ‘Venetian Job’ Written
Earlier / At Toward Sunset on Squam River
Tonight Also”), but it does furnish a number of
useful details for understanding what the pages
that follow are trying to achieve. The mythic
references reinforce the epic tropes already at
play in Maximus. “Zeus’ Dust” is the shower
of golden particles as which the god appeared
to Danâe and conceived the hero Perseus. In
contrast, the referent of “Agamenticus
Height” is closer to home, although more ob-
scure: Mount Agamenticus in southern Maine.
The mountain is not excessively large but can
be easily seen from Cape Ann, and commands
famously impressive views itself; it might
be read as Gloucester’s answer to Milton’s
“AonianMount,” Helicon, the home of the muses
(Milton 59). “Golden Venetian Light” is about
four-and-a-half pages long, not an “Excessive”
length by the standards of an Olson poem (if
we include the non-Maximus work, it is proba-
ably about average), but it has a sort of exuber-
ance and plenitude which could usefully mar-
ry “Excessive” to Adorno’s ‘inconclusive’ as a
description of the section’s progress. It begins:

I believe in what the Arabs by
muezzin — that at least once a day
(& for me it almost has to be sunset to face
the sun directly
as often as it is out & let its rays or what
ever
(the fact of its existence, & that without it
self as the hydrogen furnace
there’d be no us on earth.
(Maximus 613)

Here the paratactic gestures, though more
frequent, are essentially recognisable to the
reader of “Letter #41”: unclosed brackets, the
juxtaposition of ‘&’ clauses, a lack of subordi-
nating or causative structures, and the way in
which the voice seems to interrupt itself either
by speaking over itself (the long dash that both
ties and separates the “muezzin” and “that at
least” [613] suggests a type of agglutination which is stickier, messier and more confused than the linguistic sense of the word often implies—a gumming together of two distinct instances of speech) or by confuting/dismissing what it says (“its rays or whatever” [613]). These techniques are more widespread in Olson’s later work but retain an essential similarity with the writing of the first two volumes. They are primarily located in writing which is ‘about’ thought in the form of memory or study, therein demonstrating their genesis in autodidactic Poundian poetics.

The majority of the first page of “Golden Venetian Light” is in this vein. The poem is nominally split into two sections, this first page and a second section marked ‘II,’ which runs down two thirds of the next page. However, the full force of Adorno’s ‘inconclusive’; and its relevance, can be felt in the way that the poem refuses to finish at the point that it ostensibly ‘finishes.’ The section marked ‘II’ begins with Olson reporting his view of some birds on the marsh; he is then distracted by the houses behind them, which remind him of the model village given to him by his Aunt Vandla (a recurring memory in The Maximus Poems), which in turn brings up the “model toy steam shovel” (614) Olson bought his son for his birthday. Olson finishes on an angry denunciation of ‘models’ in general, a point which is in itself a significant gesture in his poetics. The most remarkable thing about ‘II,’ however, is that it is fractured by an asterisk, which interrupts the flow of the verse paragraph, and continues the poem after this invective as if in the manner of an explanatory footnote. The shift of attention from the birds to the houses is the point of this break; Olson continues underneath as if in a footnote, ostensibly discussing the architecture of the houses but continues to struggle to finish. Repeated attempts to cut the text off as if it were a letter (“Love // O” [615] and “Signed off / & going home. Me” [616]) are to no avail. The poem’s attention is systematically redirected by its author’s surroundings (“No wow the gulls // are suddenly back & // chomping” [Maximum 615]). Consequently, the environment becomes the active process in the poem, driving the poet to observation; it is not the literary convention of the letter but the natural event of nightfall which ultimately brings the poem to its close. Rather than merely reflective, the poem becomes reactive, interacting with the world which surrounds it.

As has been suggested above, the asterisk poses a problem for the reader: where does it come in the poem? What order is the material supposed to be put into? “Golden Venetian Light” has at least two endings, with several other candidates not quite making it. This can be read as of a piece with a paratactical poetics dedicated to breaking down subordinating logical structures, but it still entertains a series of problems around performance and so (for Olson) around corporeality. The crux of this difficulty can be found on the fourth page of the poem, as Olson again tries and fails to end:

Word of Mouth
Trout in them–no pickerel–no what, herring
in those
waters

today. signed off
& going home. Me.

Love life until it is
your own. Missive, & PS
like also for
Jack & Mary’s
lifetime.

(Maximus 616)

The “PS” (616) here is not, really, a postscript, because such a thing implies a controlled addition to a controlled end, where in fact the poem goes on for another page under the aegis of the column of text which sits mockingly next to Olson’s claim to have “signed off” (616). The writing here poses questions about chronology and simultaneity, as even ‘before’ the ‘postscript’ new and distinct lines appear in parallel, though exactly what ‘before’ means here is hard to judge. Like much of the poem the lines on the right seem to be a response to some immediate happening, in this instance the hanging of some laundry. The pages under discussion are primarily driven by this notational-observational style, which begins by situating itself and allowing things to go ahead round. The result is that only a limited degree of guidance is given to it by its writer (whose activity is primarily one
of noticing, and giving notice), and there is relatively little in the way of a logic or argument. The poetic voice does not so much speak over itself as allow itself to be repeatedly occupied by its landscape; the voice conceived of as declamatory and authoritative has no choice but to stumble here. A text which becomes so alogical that it breaks down all possibility of a ‘complete’ or ‘final’ performance by the poet might seem to be too much the fulfilment of Olson’s campaign against the poetical ego. The poem cannot even speak for itself. It might, however, be more true to Maximus to read it as a total derangement of the written text, which builds a series of undecidable decisions into any reading. Two texts sit juxtaposed as if a great ‘&’ sat between them, neither able to finally subordinate the other. The frustration of the reading voice is thus its triumph in that it places emphasis on the kinetic and entropic character of the mouth’s action rather than the nominally stable and monumental character of the written word posed as a stylised ‘voice.’ The text lets the world in in all its superfluity and simultaneity, which of necessity it can neither contain nor fully comprehend.

The effect of this can be usefully compared with Adorno’s comment on the relationship between ‘form’ and ‘content’ in Hölderlin: “His poetry expresses, better than any maxims could and to an extent that Hegel would not have approved, that life is not an idea, that the quintessence of existing entities is not essence” (123). There is no ‘form’ that can radically control reality; nor is reality amenable to containment in a ‘form.’ Any poetical encounter with reality, any coherence between verse and world, is going to be a process of deforming speech in which what are labelled ‘form’ and ‘content’ engage in a mutual creative destruction. This is of course true of all poetries; what is notable about Olson’s is that it explicitly demonstrates it. This goes some way to explaining Olson’s distaste for models, which pretend to contain a likeness of a thing in a changed form. For the poet who wrote that “FORM IS NEVER MORE THAN AN EXTENSION OF CONTENT” (“Projective Verse” 40), such an effort is ludicrous since all things have a proper, and more to the point, a necessary form.

For Olson, the necessary form of human experience is the body. This is the insight at the centre of “Projective Verse,” where the ‘stance toward reality’ is understood as shaped by the physicality of the stander (47). By extension, the stander’s physicality is shaped by his or her environment; as in “Golden Venetian Light,” all experience is in some degree compelled by landscape. Much of the ‘noise’ or ‘interference’ in Olson’s later poetry can be understood as the landscape’s phatic utterance, expressing its presence in and through and to the speaker.

Here, then, is the answer to the problem of the long poem’s (in)coherence which Olson formulates: to use ‘place,’ the city, not just as *topos* but as a condition of possibility, to allow it to speak in and through and over
the poem through a physiognomy that is like a knot, held in place by the way it pulls against itself. If it is to be in a place it must perforce be in a body, and embodiment makes ego impossible because the body is a complex process rather than a given value or meaning lifted from history as stable; it is already unstable, needs no further destabilising. Olson takes modernist parataxis well beyond traditional ‘subjective’ or even ‘speaker’-centric models of poetic ‘voice,’ finding coherence not in these theoretical-rhetorical models but in physicality. The instability of paratactic structures is not only an analogue of this fact but provides a platform which is naturally bodily and oral-aural. In attempting to re-embody the long poem Olson’s parataxis of voice finds paradoxical coherence in the incoherent, entropic body itself rather than in some present or prospective discourse; language’s frustrated synthesis manifests itself as a huge and ‘excessive’ release of energy which forms Maximus’ impetus. Two decades after “Projective Verse,” Olson’s poetry could perhaps be better described as ‘fissive verse,’ fragmenting, fractious, and of enormously energetic mouthings.
Works Cited


Word of Mouth