

The Poetics of Presence

The poet Charles Olson and the philosopher Jacques Derrida are both provocative thinkers, notorious for the difficulty of their styles. Each can also lay claim to significant legacies: Olson's work continues to exert influence as a predecessor to language poetry and, though Derrida's ideas received a cool reception from analytic philosophers, his critical practice (deconstruction) has been generative in other areas, especially literary theory and postcolonial studies.

Despite also sharing the label "postmodern," Olson and Derrida have very different ideas about the nature of being and its relationship to speech and writing. Olson insists that everything in the world possesses its own, self-sustaining existence outside of any relation to other things. Derrida, by contrast, considers being and meaning to be the result of relations between differing elements in a system, each element containing within it traces of the others. Olson privileges speech as closer to being than writing, and he inveighs against a "print-bred" poetry that threatens to exile the poet from speech's life-giving energy. Derrida rejects this view, arguing that Western thought has long placed writing in a subordinate position in order to secure for speech the illusion of a fullness which it does not and can never possess.

I could say that I set out to write an essay about "Projective Verse" that would put Olson's ideas in conversation with those of Derrida, but that would be a lie. The kind of conversation I have in mind here is less that of an even-handed comparison of positions, and more like one of Plato's dialogues. In the dialogues, the character of Socrates encounters a fellow Athenian citizen and engages him in a conversation about some philosophical concept – about Virtue, or Justice, or Piety. At the beginning, Socrates's interlocutor holds what he believes to be sensible and coherent convictions. Through a series of questions and answers, however, Socrates leads his partner to question these commonly held positions and to recognize that the concept in question is more complex and contradictory than it first appeared.

"Projective Verse" is full of confident declarations about the nature of being and its relationship to speech and the voice. Drawing on Derrida's account of the role of speech in Western metaphysics, I aim to undertake a critical reading of "Projective Verse" that undermines Olson's certainties and re-opens a set of questions about the relation of being to presence and speech to text that the essay appears to regard as settled forever.

I.

The central claim of "Projective Verse" is that a new and truly modern poetry must transcend the ordinary functioning of language. The poem should not be a fossilized representation of thought, but "an energy discharge," one that transmits the poet's vital essence directly: "A poem is energy transferred from where the poet got it ... to the reader."¹ For Olson, the shimmering of the poet's being at the moment of composition is embodied and expressed by means of his voice and breath. Only that verse which faithfully transcribes the poet's living voice and delivers it intact to the reader can truly be called "projective." Olson contrasts this kind of poem with the non-projective, "that verse which is print bred and which is pretty much what we have had, and have still got ..."² Olson presents projective composition (or "composition by field") as a break from what has gone before, a liberation of poetry's energy from both the constraints of logical argument and the petrifying effect exercised by writing on authentic human speech.

In earlier essays, Olson laments the persistence of prejudices first articulated in classical philosophy – "the whole Greek system" from "Old Stink Sock [Socrates] on down" – in favor of discourse and logic over what he terms "live speech."³ Despite his stated hostility to classical metaphysics, the statements Olson makes in "Projective Verse" about the unbreakable bonds between being, breath, and speech – and which form the basis for his prescriptions for poetic composition – correspond exactly to a set of ideas about speech and writing that have

characterized Western thought since the Platonic Socrates.

In his discussion of "thingness" in "Human Universe," Olson asserts: "A thing, any thing, impinges on us by a more important fact, its self-existence, without reference to any other thing ..."⁴ Key to Olson's metaphysics is the notion that a thing must exist by itself, without referring to any other thing. A thing that depends for its existence on some additional, exterior thing is not unified, not truly and at all times itself; part of it is always elsewhere. A dependent thing is a divided thing, part of it occupying one place and time and another part occupying the place and time of the other thing on which it depends. According to this way of thinking about being, something that doesn't exist entirely on its own doesn't really exist at all – or, at best, has a diminished or degraded share of being in comparison to those things thought to exist independently.

The historical development of Western thought and language has been dominated by just this conception of being as equivalent to presence. Our traditional formulations of being as "self-existence," "the now," "Truth," and "consciousness" all refer to the idea of something unified, undifferentiated, constant, proximate, and present.

Each of these terms seeks to designate something that is really *here now*, without any difference from itself in nature, any distance from itself in space, or any deferment of its presence in time.

Of course, this conception of the nature of being (Olson's "thingness") has implications for how we understand the status of concepts and language. Let's assume for a moment that the function of language is to represent things in reality, and that those things have the kind of inherent self-existence that Olson attributes to them. We end up in that case with a hierarchy of being, with "things" placed at the top. Below things we have concepts, which depend for their existence on their reference to actual things. On the next rung down we have spoken words which, according to this model, represent (and thus owe their existence to) concepts. Finally, at the very bottom, we have written words which are, supposedly, imperfect representations of speech.

Olson clearly regards textual representations as inferior substitutes for spoken words, stating:

What we have suffered from, is manuscript, press, the removal of verse from its producer and reproducer, the voice, a removal by one, by two removes from its place of origin and its destination.⁵

In the great chain of being, the printed text finds itself at the furthest remove from the poet's being. To begin composition from textual forms rather than with attention to one's own breath and voice is, for Olson, to give the poem over at the start to suffocation and death.

Olson's commitment to the classical conception of the relation between being and speech is clear in his discussion of the syllable. The spoken syllable, what he calls "the minimum

and source of speech," is the basic formal element of projective verse.⁶ He instructs the projective poet to regard the syllable as well as "every [other] element in an open poem" as "objects," possessing as much inherent existence "as we are accustomed to take what we call the objects of reality."⁷ The projective poet listens so intently to the voice and the breath and transcribes these so precisely that the ordinary distance between spoken words, concepts, and things collapses. Syllables cease to function as parts of a system of representation and, instead, announce their own intrinsic existence to the listener. It is "speech," Olson tells us, "the 'solid' of verse" that authorizes the poet to regard "everything in...[the poem] as solids, objects, things."⁸ As we have seen, in Olson's system "things" are always constituted as singular and primordial presences.

By means of the "living voice," Olson seeks to provide language with a shortcut to the reader, to spare it the tedious detour through references to things outside of itself. Language in a projective poem is no longer a means of representation, but a transparent medium for the communication of being. Despite the tone of Olson's rhetoric, this does not constitute a rejection of the traditional metaphysical conception of representational language. It is, instead, an attempt to realize that metaphysics' ideal of total transparency.

Olson's claim that "living speech" must finally be liberated from its subordinate position seems to me to profoundly misread the history of Western thought – to get things exactly backwards. The valorization of speech as the herald of

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being, and the denigration of writing as its exterior and imperfect supplement is nothing new. It is, to borrow Olson's phrase, "pretty much what we have had" since Plato.

But simply exposing Olson's explicit rejection of classical metaphysics as either confused or disingenuous doesn't get us very far. In order to truly re-read "Projective Verse," we have to challenge its claims for the self-sufficiency of being and the primacy of the voice. We must discover the traces of difference and dependence in categories that it regards as whole and complete in themselves. We must pursue meanings that, though they are unauthorized and disowned, continue to spill out from the aperture of Olson's text.

II.

There are, of course, other ways to think about language and its relation to being and presence. The structural linguistics of Ferdinand de Saussure provides a useful starting point. De Saussure rejected the notion that language is simply a system for naming things in the world. He famously described meaningful signs not in terms of their reference to things, but instead according to their structure.

A sign, de Saussure argued, does not consist of "a thing and a name,"

but rather of "a concept and a sound pattern."⁹ De Saussure called the concept "a signified" and the sound pattern "a signifier." In examining the English word "pear," de Saussure would likely make the following points. First, the sound [ˈper] has no identity outside of a particular system of differences (the English language) in which it is distinguished from other meaningful sounds such as [ˈder] and [ˈber]. He would also observe that the same is true of concepts, which don't derive their meaning from things in reality or from timeless ideals, but from relations with one another. The concept of "a sweet and juicy greenish fruit" relies for its meaning on a whole set of other concepts related to the classification of plants, colors, and taste sensations. These concepts do not arise spontaneously from a physical pear or from some set of universal ideas about colors or tastes held by everyone at all times – we know very well that different cultures have different systems for classifying such things.

These two elements, signifiers (sound patterns) and signifieds (concepts), occupy separate, but parallel places in an overall structure; they are two faces of a single coin. The relationship between a given signified and its signifier is arbitrary. The signified "pear" is linked to the signifier [ˈper] in English and to the signifier [ˈpwar] in French. So long as it

is used consistently within a particular system (English or French), one sound will serve just as well as the other to indicate the concept. Thus, structural linguistics dispenses with the notion that spoken words and concepts derive their significance through reference to independently existing things.

Poststructuralists like Jacques Derrida argue that this approach does not go far enough. Derrida's work offers a trenchant critique of the traditional Western conception of being and voice, what he refers to as "the metaphysics of presence." Derrida observes that the desire for the ideal of an independent and inherent self-existence has been so powerful and pervasive in Western thought that any term associated with it tends to be elevated to the status of an original and transcendent value. Such an ideal must be protected from anything that might show that it is not, in fact, whole and complete in itself.

This sleight of hand is accomplished by pairing the privileged term with a forsaken one, a scapegoat. The scapegoat term is said to contain within itself everything that pure presence must (in order to maintain its integrity) exclude, namely: lack, difference, dispersion, deferment, absence, and death. He sees this prejudice at work even in the structuralist approach to language.

In *Of Grammatology*, Derrida argues that de Saussure ultimately fails to leave classical metaphysics behind. By partitioning the sign into parallel parts, structuralism privileges the signified in favor of the signifier, the pure idea over its expression in a sound pattern. This division reflects a desire for "a signified

able to 'take place' in its intelligibility, before its 'fall,' before any expulsion into the exteriority of the sensible here below."¹⁰

In structuralism, Derrida argues, signifieds still retain their special place. By placing a structural barrier between them, signifieds are walled off from the promiscuous play of signifiers, the tendency of words to get mixed up in metaphors, to swap positions, to take time unfolding their meaning, to run ahead and then circle back, to never arrive at their destination at all. One might say that the classical ideal of the intelligible is that it be allowed to sport with the sensible, yet never find itself sullied by the encounter. In this relationship, the signifier is clearly the scapegoat term.

The signifier is imagined to be an exterior (and ultimately unnecessary) supplement to a conceptual meaning that comes before it. All of the undesirable characteristics of language – impermanence, difference, materiality, and misunderstanding – can be handed off onto the signifier to bear alone. This allows the signified to be constituted as pure meaning, a self-sustaining presence that does not rely for its existence on anything so coarse as a spoken word or a graphic mark. Don't we refer to just this privileged relationship of concepts to spoken words when we suggest that some words that we have uttered were "not what we meant to say"?

In place of such a rehashing of the metaphysics of presence, Derrida proposes a true departure: the logic of the trace. He denies that there is any such thing as a "transcendental

signified," any concept that can exist independent of its expression in language.¹¹ Essentially, all elements in a signifying system – concepts, spoken words, graphic marks, gestures, objects – function as signifiers. They all produce meaning in relation to one another, never through a reference to some element higher up on a chain of meaning and being. Meaning is a product of the constant shifting, or "play," of these elements in a signifying system:

the play of differences ... forbid at any moment, or in any sense, that a simple element be present in and of itself, referring only to itself ... no element can function as a sign without reference to another element which itself is not simply present. Each "element" ... is constituted on the basis of the trace within it of the other elements of the chain or system.¹²

In Derrida's system, there is no place set aside for pure meaning or self-sufficient being; there is only the trace.

Returning to Olson's notion of the syllable, we can see how far we've come from classical metaphysics. Olson seeks to treat the syllable as a substantial minimal unit of projective composition, an undifferentiated and independent "thing." A syllable however, is nothing other than an element in a signifying system.

To take up our earlier example, the syllable ['per] has no inherent significance; it's meaning is an index of its relative difference from other syllables in the English language. A syllable is always different from itself, constituted as it is by the traces of other syllables,

none of which are "every simply absent or present."¹³ Contrary to Olson's claims and the principles of classical metaphysics, there are never any pure presences or absences within signifying chains, but rather "only, everywhere, differences and traces of traces."¹⁴

III.

The principal scene in Olson's essay, the one that serves as the foundation for all of his prescriptions, is that of the poet listening to his own voice. The projective poet is one who records "the acquisitions of his ears and the pressures of his breath," one who provides a faithful account of "the listening he has done to his own speech."¹⁵ Because it is the organ that registers the poet's speech, the ear is granted a special proximity to his conscious being; it is "so close to the mind that it is the mind's."¹⁶ Olson also praises the breath, "voice in its largest sense," because it "allows all the speech-force of language back in" to the work.¹⁷

This scene – of the solitary individual listening to his own speech and gaining thereby a direct and unmediated access to the fullness his own conscious existence – is not original to Olson. It has, in fact, been the chief way in which the notion of being as self-presence has been staged since at least the seventeenth century. In the act of vocalizing her own speech, the speaker experiences the illusion of a self-sufficient existence. Derrida describes the structure of this experience of self-presence:

From this point of view, the voice is consciousness itself. When I speak, not only am I conscious of being present for what I think, but I am conscious

also of keeping as close as possible to my thought, or the “concept,” a signifier that does not fall into the world, a signifier that I hear as soon as I emit it, that seems to depend upon my pure and free spontaneity, requiring the use of no instrument, no accessory ... Not only do the signifier [the spoken word] and the signified [the concept] seem to unite, but also, in this confusion, the signifier seems to erase itself or to become transparent, in order to allow the concept to present itself as what it is, referring to nothing other than its presence.¹⁸

Listening to our own spoken (or mental) discourse, we can easily deceive ourselves into believing that our consciousness is a self-existing entity. It is certainly tempting to imagine, as René Descartes did, that by virtue of thinking – and at the same time being aware of my thinking – I have proof of my independent present existence.

Derrida argues, however, that this experience is a ruse. The entire phenomenon of auto-affection is founded on language, a signifying system which operates according to the logic of the trace – a logic in which elements don’t exist independently but only by their relation to one another, a logic in which there is never simply full presence or complete absence.

In auto-affection, however, the apparent unity of the signified, the signifier, and the voice (what Olson calls “living speech”) presents itself as self-presence. To maintain this illusion of completeness, any trace of distance, difference, or absence must be made exterior, shunted off onto a scapegoat

term. “Writing” has long been the name given in Western metaphysics to that which lies outside the boundary of this Edenic plenitude.

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In the opening line of Olson’s manifesto, the projective and the non-projective are separated by the confrontational “vs.,” marking from the start their absolute difference. As the antithesis of a projective verse united with being and the voice, the non-projective takes as its origin that which should be secondary and supplemental to living speech, namely writing. The non-projective poem is “print-bred,” the product of a compositional process grounded in “closed” literary forms. A poet who takes “inherited line, stanza, [and] over-all form” is starting at the end of the chain of being rather than its origin.¹⁹ His is an artificial, fallen language, cut off from the experience of the voice as the poet’s self-present existence.

The projective poet, we are told, “stays inside himself,” while the non-projective poet is guided by “artificial forms outside himself.”²⁰ The crime of the non-projective poet is that he places writing in the position of origin reserved for the voice. Writing for Olson is an exterior and dangerous addition to living speech; it is threatening because

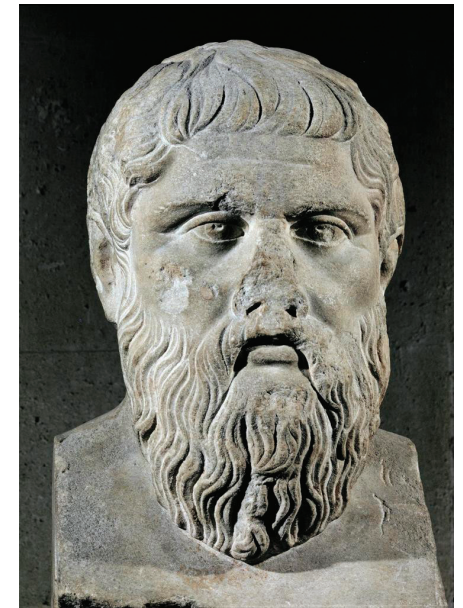
it reveals that living speech does, in fact, require a supplement, that the voice was never whole and complete in itself. Further, writing is treacherous because it seeks not just to supplement speech but to substitute itself as the origin for poetic composition.

Western metaphysics has long sought to neutralize the subversive power of writing, its potential to overthrow the myth of living speech. As Derrida argues, it has done so by ascribing to writing a purely “secondary and instrumental function: translator of a full speech that was fully present.”²¹ Writing has been figured as phonetic transcription, a method for transparently representing a speech to which it is nonetheless exterior and on which it depends.

Graphic writing, however, has always marked its difference from speech, if only “by reason of the necessary spacing of signs, punctuation, intervals, the differences indispensable for the functioning of graphemes [e.g., written characters], etc.”²² It is precisely these visible differences that Olson seeks to erase by his introduction of the typewriter as a kind of magical speech-transcription machine. Olson suggests:

It is the advantage of the typewriter that, due to its rigidity and its space positions, it can, for a poet, indicate exactly the breath, the pauses, the suspensions even of syllables, the juxtaposition even of parts of phrases, which he intends.²³

The poet can use the typewriter “as a scoring to his composition ... [and] a transcript to its vocalization.”²⁴ As a tool of projective practice, the



Portrait of Plato. Second Century BCE.

typewriter serves to efface the presence of non-phonetic elements (such as spacing) and bind them to the sole task of transcribing speech.

In this way, the typewriter is presented as a technological totem, capable of containing the danger writing poses to living speech. This humble machine is introduced as a kind of rhetorical *deus ex machina* that will finally guarantee the text’s unfailing services as a mere scribe to speech. This device alone is to stand between the poet’s being and a fallen writing representing the threat of absence, suffocation, and death. Perhaps it is not unfair to such an argument, such a ribbon-thin barrier, to warn that some specters are not so easily gotten rid of.

In the concluding section of Plato’s *Phaedrus*, Socrates discusses rhetoric

and writing with the young aristocratic friend for whom this late dialogue is named. Plato's protagonist describes writing as an orphan child, forced to go about in the world without the protection of its father. Unlike the living speaker who brought it into being, a written text cannot respond to critiques leveled against it:

It continues to signify just the very same thing forever ... and when it is faulted and attacked unfairly, it always needs its father's support; alone, it can neither defend itself nor come to its own support.²⁵

For Olson, the non-projective poem is just such an orphan, cut off from the voice and breath of the poet-father.

Were it not for the threat it represented to the father and his rightful heir, living speech, this illegitimate and abandoned offspring would be merely an object of pity. But the threat of writing for Olson, as for Plato, is that it seeks to usurp the place reserved for speech in Western metaphysics. As Derrida argues in his critique of the *Phaedrus*, "from the position of the holder of the scepter [the father], the desire for writing is indicated, designated and denounced as a desire for orphanhood and patricidal subversion."²⁶

From the perspective of those who consider Charles Olson to be the natural origin of his thought and speech, deconstructing his text is equivalent to denying his paternity. It is to give him over to patricide and theft, to the crime of writing. Yet what is it that makes a father in the first place, if not a kinship system? The term "father" only has meaning in relation to the traces of simultaneously present and absent elements ("son," "maternal uncle," etc.) within a structure of kinship.

In a supplementary note to "Human Universe," Olson remarks that "the etymology of 'discourse' has its surprises. It means, TO RUN TO AND FRO."²⁷ By re-reading "Projective Verse" in this way, I have not sought to deny Olson a place in his own text. Rather, I've tried to re-open that text to just some of this "to" and "fro," to the playful tension between presence and absence, speech and writing.

NOTES

1. Charles Olson, "Projective Verse," in *A Charles Olson Reader*, ed. Ralph Maud (Manchester: Carcanet, 2005), 40.
2. *Ibid.*, 39.
3. Charles Olson, "Human Universe," in *A Charles Olson Reader*, 114; Charles Olson, "The Gate & the Center," in *A Charles Olson Reader*, 80.
4. Charles Olson, "Human Universe," in *A Charles Olson Reader*, 114.
5. Charles Olson, "Projective Verse," in *A Charles Olson Reader*, 45.
6. *Ibid.*, 42.
7. *Ibid.*, 44.
8. *Ibid.*, 44.
9. Saussure, Ferdinand de, *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. Charles Bally (Chicago: Open Court, 2007), 66.
10. Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Corrected Edition (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 13.
11. *Ibid.*, 20.
12. Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1981), 26.
13. *Ibid.*, 26.
14. *Ibid.*, 26.
15. Charles Olson, "Projective Verse," in *A Charles Olson Reader*, 41.
16. *Ibid.*, 42.
17. *Ibid.*, 47.
18. Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, 22.
19. Charles Olson, "Projective Verse," in *A Charles Olson Reader*, 39, 40.
20. *Ibid.*, 48.
21. Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 8.
22. Jacques Derrida, *Positions*. Alan Bass (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1981), 26.
23. Charles Olson, "Projective Verse," in *A Charles Olson Reader*, 46.
24. *Ibid.*, 46.
25. Plato, *Phaedrus*, trans. Alexander Nehamas and Paul Woodruff (Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1995), 81 (275E).
26. Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Jones (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 77.
27. Charles Olson. "Footnote to HU (lost in the shuffle)," in *Collected Prose*, ed. Donald Allen and Benjamin Friedlander (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 167.