Foreword

The briefest survey will reveal that until now Charles Olson has not been given the serious critical attention his poetry and poetics demand. Many of the earlier critics, too close in time, were unable to clearly distinguish his contributions to American writing. Most reviewers compared Olson to Ezra Pound only to dismiss him as a Poundian imitator or disciple. James Dickey, for instance, rejected the poems in both *The Distances* and *The Maximus Poems* as "predictable Pound-cum-William-Carlos-Williams constructions." Karl Shapiro wrote haughtily, "Charles Olsen [*sic*] is a disciple of Pound and I like him for that. Pound in the long run is the best modern master, if one needs masters." And Robert Lowell remarked in an interview published in 1971, "Olson's *Maximus* is *Paterson* and the *Cantos*, though woodier," whatever that means. Even George Oppen, ordinarily given to fine discriminations, wrote that "to encounter Olson's work, in spite of the currency of the phrase, is simply not an encounter with a new poetry," because of the "audible presence of Pound" in the verse (this may have been one of the reasons Olson chides Oppen in *The Maximus Poems*). Only Charles Boer's extended memoir gave us the man in all his original dynamic genius and extravagance, his uniqueness, his variability. It was hoped the publication of *Charles Olson & Ezra Pound*, so ably edited by Catherine Seelye, as one of the earliest posthumous volumes, would cause the entire issue to be raised and thoroughly faced, and to some extent that has begun to happen.

Paul Christensen does not face this issue at the greatest possible length or, thank goodness, exhaust himself upon it but saves his strength (real strength) for the larger issue: how does a poet propose to transform the world (if it needs transforming; celebrate it, if that is what is called for)? He discusses Olson in terms of a new awareness, an altered consciousness that Olson's own writings propose and—almost by the straining of syntax alone—require. The title, of course, echoes that of Olson's study of Melville and America, but it also presents the poet himself as Ishmael, Melville's Ishmael, a sole survivor. Survivor of what, it might be asked—the West? modernism? perhaps America itself? Certainly a survivor of the old dispensation or disposition of mind. Olson

is both as archaic as Pleistocene man and, as Christensen writes, a "first Westerner of the new consciousness."

This book is not just a mechanical reading through the poems—even with wit and common sense—or the imposition of some ideological or systemic grid on the work to see what it will yield. It is rich in the author's own ideas, with a sense of literary and intellectual history, original scholarship (he has done at least one thing I could not do—identify the old German x-ray technician whose story is alluded to in "The Distances"), and a critical intelligence that is at once sympathetic and usefully precise. All this is present in a style most pleasant and effortless. It is a brisk, sure prose—but not all charm, or charm alone. There is method, orderliness in his approach. He gives us the man, the essential biographical details, then proceeds with the earliest writings, discussing them against the intellectual background of the time, and from there advances to separate "subject categories," a long comprehensive stretch on *The Maximus Poems*, and concludes by placing Olson once more in history, among his contemporaries. He reasons, he weighs, he wrestles. He applauds the risks Olson took. He grapples with them both above and below the surface. He remains self-possessed in the face of undisguised eccentricities.

The writing, then, is characterized by a general orderliness of mind, without the relegating of live ideas to labeled cages and other substitutes for thought. Christensen's judgments are his own, not begged or borrowed. He does not bluff the difficulties. He covers the ground, from the most immediate and obvious—Olson's relationship with his predecessors Eliot, Pound, and Williams, the tradition of the long poem—but also back to Hegel and the Romantics. He is not overly dependent on but faithful to the texts. He uses them in such a way that we are stirred to go back to them in their entirety, back to them as to a favorite hope or home.

Christensen's book is a series of natural balances between proof and faith. And behind all the words is the deeply rooted conviction that Olson's work, wide and sprawling though it may be, originates in a coherent, clear center of concern. Christensen shows us the ways in which Olson's poetry can be judged on its own terms, by its own techniques, as well as according to more commonly traditional ones. The techniques in the verse as practiced by Olson include processual (in Whiteheadian terms), "openness," discovery rather than recovery of form, reward by image, syncopation, incremental associations, paratactic forwarding. It is not unusual to observe that the experimental mode has conventions of its own, that the avant-garde becomes a tradition like any other, a "tra-

dition of the new." Consequently, it is possible to judge a bad "projective" poem from a good one without blindly dismissing all such poetry as antipoetic. Within the new consciousness, within the new conventions, as within the limits of the old, only the most energetic, the subtlest, the largest-hearted survive. It is no different than for the writer of the sonnet or the sestina. At its worst, what in 1950 Olson called "open" poetry leads to vapid looseness, sleepy rambles, pedantic tangle, solipsism, exclusiveness, and other forms of selfishness and decadence. There might even be, in an author's sudden terror of blank openness, a forced apocalypticism. At its best, however, a wholly new and dominant tradition emerges, although one already begun by Whitman, vers libre, and imagism. Its characteristics are triumph, ecstasy, heart change, renewed mind, recovered purpose, keenness of sensation, sensual awakening, and comprehension—not the least bit different from the "old" verse of Arnold or Tennyson. What is different, perhaps, are the risks it takes, the pitching of success or failure on the moment and against the limits of language, the total organicism.

The reoriented consciousness is not hot-eyed mysticism. It is not to lead to automatic writing or astral projection or other attempts at sustained ecstasy. Olson was not so inexperienced. The new consciousness is a polis of the self. It is "a coherence which, for the first time since the ice [always that scope in Olson], gave man the chance to join knowledge to culture and, with this weapon, shape dignities of economics and value sufficient to make daily life itself a dignity and a sufficiency." This is what Olson sought for the poem, to "make daily life itself a dignity and a sufficiency."

Christensen is willing to judge Olson's poems on their own merits rather than solely against the terms of formalist verse. Otherwise, how can he discuss the change of consciousness the writing proposes, how can he dare? He begins to build the principles for understanding and judging this new poetry that has emerged since the Second World War, this postmodernism. He contributes directly to what he calls a "new grammar" for such poetry. And within the new tradition, thanks to his work, it will be seen there are gradations and discriminations enough for any dedicated reader, or seeds enough for the *next* poetic advance.

Olson's is not comfortable poetry, and when it moves it sunders. With its freely wielded lines and disarming syntax, it does violence to complacency and orthodoxy. It dislocates readers either too inexperienced or too set in their ways or, it would be hoped, relocates such readers. A new, positive earth of value is felt under the feet. It is a poetry of belief, a poetics of optimism. Olson begins his "Human Universe" essay, his

most accomplished piece of theoretical prose, with the statement, "There are laws." That piece, like the "Projective Verse" essay before it, embodies the very argument it seeks to make. It is equal to its argument, not about it; its form is, indeed, nothing less than the extension of its content. It opens with a denunciation of reason as the major determinant of life, arguing the invention of logic and classification by the Greeks is that which divides us from nature and from ourselves and which has estranged us from all that ought to be most familiar. And, rather than argue it out thoroughly, syllogistically, logically, Olson substitutes the very alternative he has proposed, concluding with a myth itself, the Mayan story of the Sun and the Moon—which wins the day and the case.

Similarly, the "Projective Verse" essay embodies the very principles it propounds, the total energy. It is itself an "energy-discharge"—so that literalists need not turn blue in the face, as X. J. Kennedy once claimed he did, seeking to put Olson's principle of "breath" into practice. Another poet wondered helplessly if a person in an iron lung could ever write "projective verse"!

Many of the early reviews were mocking, rhetorical, in the way some reviewers can get, but also vituperative and almost inexplicably hostile from today's perspective. Louis Simpson, winner of the Pulitzer Prize for poetry and professor for years, rejected Olson as a dull poet of "small feeling." (Paul Christensen knows otherwise.) Simpson writes of the poems in *The Distances*—a volume which includes "As The Dead Prey Upon Us" and "The Lordly and Isolate Satyrs"—that "if Pound did not exist, neither would these poems." Robert Bly, who may have softened his views somewhat in more recent years, declares in a survey of poetry published in 1960 that "the worst book of the year was probably Charles Olson's *Maximus Poems*. This is Babbitt in verse, and it is painful to see intelligent men defend it." (The only more bitter attacks to date have come from Martin Seymour-Smith, Robert Creeley's old English friend from Mallorca days, a character in *The Island* and author of a *Bluffer's Guide to Literature*, who has entries for Olson in two separate books purported to be reference works and guides. His remarks include such amazing statements as "Olson, who was in many ways a good and generous man, had an excellent education . . . which he partially misused" and "[Olson's] influence cannot be stated to have been bad, but it was not good"—though it must be said his odd views in the volumes are by no means limited to Olson.)

It is of course more convenient for some minds to respond that way; it assures their independence and conserves energy for the business of their own creation. And it might be said that the lines of both poets,

Simpson and Bly, opened up in the course of the 1960s, became "Americanized"—as did James Dickey's and Adrienne Rich's—as the cultural wind shifted. Mostly it was "Projective Verse" that gave the trouble. But, then, it should be recalled that, at the very time that essay was being written out in letters to Creeley, a reviewer in *Poetry*—once the bellwether of American poetry—was dismissing William Carlos Williams, that most American of poets, as a "very minor poet"!

Perhaps now that the earth has creaked a little more on its axis—new nations have emerged, old colonial attitudes have been thrown off—Olson can be approached more directly. New assessments can be made, younger readers guided both to an understanding of his accomplishments and to what he hoped to accomplish but fell short of achieving. Paul Christensen has been alert enough to arrive early, and his book is a welcome relief. He has been able to construct a remarkably comprehensive study. His book is a patient, generous, long-sighted introduction to one of our most challenging poets, one who in many ways represents the recent giantism of America more than any of its other poets. It is not only timely but, by its care and passionate intelligence in this boom year (there are at least two other fine books on Olson appearing from the nation's university presses, as well as a scholarly guide to his major poem), it becomes already, automatically, a standard volume in the approach to Olson (and modern poetics at large, for that matter). Standard, then, in both senses: a flutter at the head of the advance, and also a dependable, substantial reference work—a fixed value—to be regularly and widely used.

University of Connecticut
April 1978

George F. Butterick

THIS PAGE INTENTIONALLY LEFT BLANK