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Charles Olson's Poetical Economy

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The phrase "poetical economy" in the title above intends to bring the contexts of political economy and the process of poetic production together, and this article aims at explicating the interaction between these two fields in Charles Olson's work, particularly in *The Maximus Poems.* Within this framework, Olson's work is not just a case in point which we can replace with any other poet's work; but for Olson, as I attempt to show, principles that govern poetic activity and economic life are closely interrelated.

Olson never wrote on economics in a fashion that directly falls within the scope of the discipline proper. His writings are, however, immensely involved in a project concerning the individual and the community; and economics, in this context, is the subsistence activity of the organism, or of the community. In this respect, Olson's reading of economic activity is "political," not only because Olson holds a certain stance as to the issues of production and distribution, but also because the authentic meaning of "political" is hidden in polis (city, community) which is Olson's main point of reference especially in *The Maximus Poems.*

Olson deals with economics on two planes. On the first plane are his opinions directly relating to the economic activity and reality of his subject, that is, of Gloucester of *The Maximus Poems.* The second level is, however, a little more complicated, and reference to economy takes a metaphorical turn. This is the level where Olson's principles or ideals about the organization of material reality can be translated into tenets underlying his poetics.

It is apt to begin with Olson's notion of economy, which he clarifies in "A Bibliography on America for Ed Dorn" as follows:

> politics & economics (that is, agriculture, fisheries, capital and labor) are like love (can only be individual experience) and therefore, as they have been presented (again, like love) are not much use ... (*Additional Prose* 3)

Olson regards economy as the function of a living organism; therefore, whatever relates to that function necessarily involves the physical presence of the organism.

This physical presence is the presence of a form; that is of the body. As love can emanate only from a particular body, self-subsistence activity of the organism is meaningful only with an awareness of the body which economic activity is, after all, meant to serve. Tying love, body, and subsistence activity together, Olson's is a highly eroticized understanding of economy. In *The Special View of History*, he points to the relationship between "Eros," and "Economos," which, along with "Ethos," make up "the inclusive factors in the single life" (55). Olson's emphasis on the origin of the word "economy" is meant to unfold the long-lost authentic meaning of economic activity. As he states, "Economos" is the art of one's controlling and managing one's "own house" (55). The primary question that should be addressed, according to Olson, is "ekos: how is the 'house'?" (*Notes for a University* 65). In a pleasant but not surprising way, "ekos" resonates in "ecology" which relates to the earth as the house on a larger scale. Furthermore, "Ekos" is also man's body, as he explains in "The Resistance":

> 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, the house that moves, breathes, acts, this house where his life is, where he dwells against the enemy, against the beast. (*Selected Writings* 13)

In Olson's project, economic activity revolves around three concerns. The first one is the physical reality of the organism, the body of the human subject and its "physiology," and the resulting "SENSIBILITY WITHIN THE ORGANISM BY MOVEMENT OF ITS OWN TISSUES," an awareness which he calls "proprioception" (*Additional Prose* 17). This is the internal economy of the body. Secondly, there is human activity to keep the house functioning. Such activity involves using the body in interaction with nature and with other members of the community. Thirdly, these two activities are possible only with care about the well-being of our environment.

The Maximus Poems relate the destruction brought by a course which has disturbed the coherence among these three components. To put Olson's project into context, I want to make use of an item coming from the frozen food section of a supermarket: a pack of fish sticks processed by Gorton's, the largest fishing related industry in Gloucester. This plastic bag with the product it contains represents everything that Olson stood against. As a part of material reality, this product relates to Gloucester, to fishing, and to economy, all of which Olson was concerned with, not only as the source of his poetry, but also as the facts of his life. On the other hand, the way Gorton's language presents the product is an excellent example of the mode of representation that Olson tried to abolish with his poetic practice (see Figure 1). Interestingly, the picture Gorton's uses is a reproduction of the sculpture which Olson writes about in "Maximus, to Gloucester, Sunday, July 19." Olson was accurate in his recognition of the underlying idea in the false representation of the

fisherman. The poem opens with the line “and they stopped before that bad sculpture of a fisherman,” and the poet warns us against being deceived by that false image:

> Let them be told who stopped first
> by a bronze idol
> A fisherman is not a successful man
> he is not a famous man he is not a man
> of power, these are the damned by God.
> (*The Maximus* 158/Max. I. 153)

Gorton’s logo produces an image which justifies the anxiety Olson expresses here. As the eye moves between the words and the figure, the fisherman at the wheel is visually subdued by the letters underneath, suggesting a semiotic reconstruction of the material reality. The possessive case “Gorton’s” almost unconsciously refers to the nature of the bond between the company and the fisherman “since 1849.” From another perspective, we can also say that with his clean-shaven face and in a rather formal looking suit, the one steering is the chief executive, or, in Olson’s words, “a successful man,” “a famous man,” “a man of power,” but not the fisherman who is already outside of the picture. Under the logo is a summary of Gloucester’s geographical features and of Gorton’s sense of duty. Pseudo-poetic language solicits the consumer’s appreciation concerning not only the product but also Gorton’s mission. After this appeal to the consumer’s intellectual and aesthetic faculties, the second paragraph addresses the consumer’s reason. Although the transition between the two paragraphs is rather abrupt, the consumer of the frozen food has time for only this much of history and poetry. Perfect taste comes through a perfect knowledge of the object of taste, and Gorton’s, as the mediator between the experts of such knowledge and the consumer, also grants us that knowledge at no extra cost. “Every crunchy, golden bite,” is an absorption of that wisdom. Even the nature of the activity of fishing, therefore of the product, is under control: Gorton’s makes chance obsolete and assures that not one package among the thousands can escape that touch of uniformity.

Starting from this reading of Gorton’s “text” and placing its inferences next to those of Olson, we arrive at two opposing paradigms. On Olson’s side there are fish, body/individual, danger, chance, and story, whereas on Gorton’s side are fish stick, machinery/corporate, security, control, and history in the fashion of fish stick advertisement. From this point on, I would like to bring these terms first into a discussion of Olson’s idea of economy then into his poetics.

The name Gorton’s, or, as it was formerly called, Gorton & Pew, appears in *The Maximus Poems* several times. Olson himself worked for the company when he

was a young boy (Butterick 46). He attributes, however, no particular significance to the agency of the company in Gloucester's story. A particular instance, where Gorton's is mentioned, is relevant. In "for Robt Duncan, who understands what's going on-written because of him," Gorton's is presented in its paradoxical role:

> the decline of fishes, such a decline Bayliss, my son calls her his first teacher, suggested to her husband Gorton's have an aquarium to show what fish look like - or it was already said it won't be long, with fish sticks, pictures will be necessary on the covers of the TV dinners to let children know that mackerel is a different looking thing than herrings. (*The Maximus* 208/Max. II. 38)

Gorton's by itself is not the only responsible agency; it is part of an economic system which is based upon the principle of a constant transformation and processing of nature's forms. The existence of the system, as well as of Gorton's, depends on the condition that as many fish as possible should be transformed into fish sticks. This enormous task requires the replacement of the body and individual labor by machinery. As more fish take the form of fish sticks, the more fishermen or fishermen-to-be become a part of that machinery, being "processed" into factory workers, as in the case of the heroic fisherman Carl Olsen in "Letter 6" (*The Maximus* 30/Max. I. 27). Destruction of "ekos" is accompanied by the fisherman's becoming, as Olson would say, quoting Herodotus, "estranged from that with which he is most familiar" (*The Special View of History* 25). Against such transformation, Olson always emphasizes his interest in the natural and undistorted forms as they exist in "ekos":

> I think stone, for example, and wood, and clay are more interesting, again than brick, or steel, or glass, or iron, or copper, or plastics—that these givens (rather than transformations of men) are solid to habituate ourselves with more fruitful, in their issue, than (as above, airplanes, any motors, than buildings, than mountains or their urban equivalents like such building as Manhattan's—than those hysterias: elevators, say—than "china"—than the "fine" things. ("The Cave" 25-26)

The difference between the natural and refined forms Olson mentions is the same as the difference between fish and fish stick. Each natural object has its individuating particulars, whereas its processed forms become uniform, as "mackerel" and "herring" do in the plastic bag.

There are other ways of making use of nature. Here I want to digress briefly by quoting Ivan Illich who, in his *Shadow Work*, compares a "subsistence-oriented way of life" with a primarily exchange- and consumption-oriented economy. Illich presents the characteristics of the former as follows:

> There, the guitar is valued over the record, the library over the schoolroom, the backyard garden over the supermarket selection. There, the personal control of each worker over his means of production determines the small horizon of each enterprise, a horizon which is a necessary condition for special production and the unfolding of each worker's individuality ... This mode of production can be maintained only within the limits that nature dictates to both production and society. (14-15)

Olson's preference for the natural over the manufactured forms come out of his desire for a social and economic order as described above. The ideal economy Olson has in mind is strictly "subsistence-oriented." The activity of fishing perfectly fits in the context of an economy as such, because fishing, by its nature, is not a mode of production but of harvesting what "ekos" yields. In an interview with Herbert Kenny, Olson rejects the notion that fishing is a form of business and warns against the deceptive form it has taken ("I know Men for Whom Everything Matters" 24-25). With the transformation that it goes through, fishing loses its characteristics which define and distinguish the activity from others. Among these characteristics, danger and chance factors are the most definitive ones, become almost extinct with machinery taking over the human factor. In the same interview with Kenny, Olson defines the loss as follows:

> Well, one big thing, Herb-sure, which has gone out of human life-which is nature, right? I mean, it's like as though you no longer had to hunt for your food. I mean, they were still fishermen as hunters of food because of the condition of the vessel. It was like--jeez, it was like Indians and White men as hunters, right? And when suddenly that thing got protected, then, in a sense, in a funny way—and in fact it's now developing, as you know-in fact today's great mother ships, the Mayakovsky class Soviet draggers and all that stuff, are factories, they are called factory ships. Essentially, there isn't any danger in fishing any more. (29)

The element of danger is a primary principle of life. Every moment of man's life is a struggle against an unpredictable death. This incertitude stimulates the organism and keeps it alive. If danger is eliminated by the agency of an alien factor and not by the organism's own devices, then the organism atrophies and gradually loses its powers. When Kenny asks Olson if "we need that element of danger for our best character," Olson's reply is:

> Well, I wouldn't say it's the nature of danger but it is the nature of perception, of attention, yes. Which is a spiritual condition. You could put it, intensity. I mean, the amount of slackness today, the laziness, the slackness, the limpness, is all in the fact that you don't need attention any more, you don't need your perceptions any more. It's all taken care of for you by the environment of your automobile, your house, of the economy, of the money system. In fact there isn't any money, there is credit. In fact, it's worse. I mean this is a crazy sort of a post-nature, post-natural thing that the species has gotten into. (30-31)

The situation Olson describes is the draining of human proprioceptive power by a non-organic and alien (and alienating) mechanism which AP-propriates what originally belongs to human beings who thus bleed to death. Olson's fascination with the Mayan culture and the Mayan people is due to their mode of relating to "ekos," which reflects in the frame of the Mayan descendants, as Olson reveals in "Human Universe":

> they still carry their bodies with some of the savor and the flavor that the bodies of the Americans are as missing in as in their irrigated lettuce and their green-picked refrigerator-ripened fruit. For the truth is,

> that the management of external nature so that none of its virtue is lost, in vegetables or in art, is as much a delicate juggling of her content as is the same juggling by any of us of our own. And when men are not such jugglers, are not able to manage a means of expression the equal of their own or nature's intricacy, the flesh does choke. (*Selected Writings* 58)

What Olson points out here is the interdependence between two senses of "ekos": environment and man's physical frame. As products of an undue and corrupting interference in the natural course, "irrigated lettuce" and "green-picked ... fruit" harm both sides of the scale.

These issues and connections are brought into the same context by Olson within a single poem, entitled "Maximus, to Gloucester, from Dogtown, after the flood" which was written during *Maximus Poems* IV, V, VI but was not included in that volume by the poet. The poem opens with Maximus addressing mankind in a prophetic manner, almost like Noah, as "the flood" implies a punishment for humankind. Yet, due to human destruction of "ekos," even the flood is devoid of its constitutive element, that is, of water, and can only be a "reverse deluge" and a "flood of dryness" (9). Man's and woman's reproductive powers, as well as their faculties of reason and emotion, have their share in this dryness (9). All three senses of "ekos"—environment, human physical form and power, and humanity's ability to manage its own house—decline in an interrelated manner. Maximus's first aim is to revive the productive powers of mother nature. Then comes an awareness of "polis," which would enable human beings to regard themselves as part of a larger organic structure. Once humanity starts paying attention to the particulars of its own environment, or "ekos," life itself becomes "the business" that should be taken care of. Maximus wants people to make their "houses" an extension of the "polis," and build them in a fashion as nature dictates them, "as though it were planting" (8). In order to achieve this, people should first unplug themselves from that system, "a government or a banker's loan," which works against the well-being of "ekos," drives "Sicilianos" and "Portuguese" out, and replaces fish with "slabs of frozen fish" only to process them into fish sticks.

Once Olson's notion of ideal economy is located in the context of his project concerning Gloucester, some aspects of his ideal can be traced into his poetics, not as the subject matter of his poetry but as a sensibility defining the way in which the poet relates to his material.

Fishing as an activity does not only comply with the principles of an "ekos"-oriented economic activity but also serves as an apt metaphor for Olson's understanding of poetry, particularly as presented in "Projective Verse." As Olson suggests, the idea of "projective" has ramifications reaching far beyond poetry; it involves a new "stance towards reality" (15). Being in the Open is equal to being in touch with "ekos." The human being/poet has to face and cope with the unpredictable nature of the Open and depend exclusively upon proprioceptive powers in this constant challenge. As in the words of a fisherman of Gloucester,

who has “been out in a dory a lot alone,” once you are in the Open “you gotta watch it yourself. That’s survival for yourself” (*When Gloucester Was Gloucester* 32). The Open is the fishing grounds for the poet who can reap only what nature yields to him. In this nature-based economy, the poet does not try to impose patterns or manipulate the activity. As Olson states in “Projective Verse,” “from the moment he ventures into FIELD COMPOSITION—put himself in the open—he can go by no track other than the one the poem under hand declares for itself” (16). Yet, nature does not yield itself without resistance, or, in other words, without co-operation on humanity’s part. In this respect, the fisherman and the poet share the same responsibilities towards their activities. Sherman Paul aptly illustrates this fact in the context of “Letter 6”:

> Both fishermen and poet are active men of skill (“hands”), of attention and care (“eyes”), and Maximus assimilates them to each other throughout the poems, explicitly in “Letter 6.” Their stance is exemplary: they have the readiness, the responsiveness to the field, the quick attentiveness to change, to the moment, the possibility that summons one and defines “that which you can do!” (122)

The eye, which is the primary tool in the fisherman’s activity, is replaced with the ear in the poet’s case. This physical quality pertaining to writing in the Open has another dimension. Components of a poem, or elements in the Field, have their physical quality and autonomy. And Olson, who is interested in the undistorted states of nature’s forms, is determined to protect the “ekos” of the poem, when he says, “the objects which occur at every given moment of composition (of recognition, we can call it) are, can be, must be treated exactly as they do occur therein and not by any ideas or preconceptions from outside the poem ...” (*Selected Writings* 20). Olson wants to prevent fish from becoming fish sticks.

Another important aspect in Olson’s poetical economy is the nature of the relationship between the Open, language, and the poet. Olson places the poet’s relation to his language in the same context as one’s managing one’s own house. In her journal kept during the Summer of ‘63 conference, Daphne Marlatt jots down Olson’s remarks as follows:

> economicos——use of words: “testing any word you use”
> Olson: each word must be taken/claimed as
>
> its own
> your own. (80)

The language of a poem written in the Open comes into being in the immediate context of the poet’s existence in “ekos.” Language belongs to the poet’s “house,” house being the natural and social environment. This is the origin of language, as in Illich’s description of the relationship between language and society in “subsistence-oriented” traditional cultures:

> These cultures that lived mostly on the sun subsisted basically on vernacular values. In such societies, tools were essentially the prolongation of arms, fingers, and legs. There was no need for the production of power in centralized plants and its distant distribution to clients. Equally, in these essentially sun-powered cultures, there was no need for language production. Language was drawn by each one from the cultural environment, learned from the encounter with people whom the learner could smell and touch, love or hate. (66)

Olson is aware of this connection between material life and language. In his "Letter to Elaine Feinstein," and along the same line as Illich, he insists upon the power of language as it is closer to its source. What sounds like a deficiency of non-standard language to the "refined ear" is actually what makes it stronger:

> The only advantage of speech rhythms (to take your 2nd question 1st) is illiteracy: the non-literary, exactly in Dante's sense of the value of the vernacular over grammar-that speech as a communicator is prior to the individual and is picked up as soon as and with ma's milk. (*Selected Writings* 27)

As language moves away from its roots and is processed by forces which do not belong in the same field of existence, it becomes a deception. Language should be "proprius," that is, "one's own." As in the case of Gorton's language, however, it is AP-propriated. It is the language of the corporate body and machinery, instead of that of the individual or organic activity; yet it pretends to be speaking the same language as that of fish and fishermen. The purpose of Gorton's language is not to communicate but to render communication a formality of successful marketing techniques. If we reverse Illich's words in Gorton's case, Gorton's language neither touches, nor loves or hates. It does not discriminate; it says the same things to thousands. Language becomes the primary obstacle to its own purpose; it speaks but does not communicate. The poet, whose relation to language is a matter of love, is furious about the corruption and pollution which turn to language after having finished their job on "ekos." Olson's anger in the following lines is directed at Gorton's kind of language which pervades "all over," leaving no breathing space for man:

> And words, words, words
> all over everything
> No eyes or ears left
> to do their own doings (all
> invaded, appropriated, outraged all
> senses. (*The Maximus* 17/Max. I. 13)

We should remember that "eyes" and "ears" are what make fishermen and poets. Destruction of "ekos" brings about the decay of "eros," "economos," and "ethos" as well as the withering of our senses. To withstand destruction and keep the fisherman and the poet in each of us alive, we should hear Olson's grievance.

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