

AFTER MODERNISM: CHARLES OLSON, ECOLOGICAL THOUGHT AND A POSTWAR
AVANT-GARDE

By

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Abstract

At the end of World War II, American avant-garde culture underwent a significant transformation best qualified as an intellectual as well as social detachment from its original political contexts. Between the wars, in the US, most avant-garde art and writing derived their respective mandates from Leftist politics and a Marxist critique of industrial capitalism. For many intellectuals, however, the Hitler-Stalin pact of 1939 effectively terminated any association of radical aesthetics with the Soviet system and orthodox Marxism. Couple this ideological catastrophe with the anti-Communist cultural policing of the McCarthy era, and the aesthetic and social appeal of a politicised art practice seemed increasingly unworkable as the first half of the 20th century drew to a close.

The failure of ideology-based revisionary thought and writing signified the need for new intellectual roles in society, as much as it suggested the political inability of extreme Left or Right wing positions to achieve their utopian ends.

For many postwar avant-garde writers, the shift away from ideology led to a more psychologically integrated vision of human activity as a setting of constant, natural self-transformation.

Various ways of qualifying this development can be outlined with respect to the emergence of specific "ecological" approaches to the arts and social sciences. Ecological studies repudiated all forms of determinism in reasoning and emphasised instead a complex series of attitudes and informal speculations, non-specific to any distinct ideology or political apparatus. A small sampling of such work would include the theory of Gregory Bateson, Murray Bookchin and Karl Polanyi.

As an exemplary postwar avant-garde writer, Charles Olson demonstrates an active use of ecological thinking in his own poetics and prose work. Influenced by revisionary Leftism while at the same time highly critical of the political conservatism of writers like Pound and Eliot, Olson found it increasingly necessary to locate his oppositional poetics in a less overtly politicised discourse.

This dissertation focuses on Olson's work done while he was rector of Black Mountain College (1950-1957). Among avant-garde writers and artists working in the 1950s, the College was a well-known site for progressive learning, intellectual freedom and innovative art practices. There Olson learned and further developed an extremely integrated, holistic approach to his art

and theory. Rather than the intellect alone, Black Mountain sought to shape what it considered to be the entire person. The College encouraged a communal form of lifestyle, where cultural responsibilities could be explored alongside academic ones without overt references to political positions or religious faiths. In this framework, the key to re-capturing a stronger, more vital cultural practise depended upon an immanent sense of identity rather than an ideological one.

Drawing upon the ideological criticism of Antonio Gramsci, Pierre Bourdieu and Luc Ferry, my dissertation investigates the discourse of ecology as an important response to the radical socialisms of the Right and the Left that developed during the interwar period. Discouraged by the lack of ideological alternatives to what they perceived to be the status quo, many intellectuals after 1945 increasingly substituted political beliefs with notions of "immediacy," "process," "randomness" and other typical ecological values.

This shift in counter-cultural poetics has been severely under-emphasised in most studies of this period; yet, an ecological view of culture and writing continued to inspire much of Olson's work as well as that of his contemporaries – most notably, Robert Duncan – throughout the 1950s. In these writers' works, a unique fascination with epistemological relativism and a highly holistic view of the relationship between language and place appear as primary, if not defining, aesthetic themes. Ecological theory provides the most important context for the development of these ideas and the new directions in aesthetics they subsequently inspired for an entire generation of writers.

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Chapter One

Charles Olson, Ecology and the Postmodern Vision

It was as if he [Olson] had left politics
and Pound and headed towards himself in
history and art and Black Mountain.

(Fielding Dawson)

In an important essay published in 1973, Charles Altieri saw the cultural shift from the modern to the postmodern as rooted in a phenomenology which specifically rejected symbolism for what he called "immanence." Postmodern poets, he argued, see "the immediacy of the poem as event, as itself the issue of an authentic being, or more properly 'doing,' in the world... Poetry is the emergence of place into the energy of language."¹

Altieri's adoption, and indeed adaptation, of several recurrent terms in the shift to the postmodern in the years 1945-1970 deserve close attention because they point to some of the complexities of that "immanence": immediacy; event; authentic; being; and (perhaps above all) place. In Altieri's essay, as in the poetics he sought to define, such terms serve emphatically to distinguish the "new" American poetry from its contemporaries and antecedents.

¹ Charles Altieri, "From Symbolist Thought to Immanence: The Ground of Post-modern American Poetics," *Boundary 2* (1973): 605.

As we shall see, the principal distinction Altieri seeks to draw rests on his notion that phenomenology —with its rejection of both metaphysical transcendence and scientific empiricism — directed the development of postmodern thought in general and of such poetry in particular. Immanence, the notion that the task of the poem is to convey an immediate —i.e., unmediated sense or apprehension of things (what William Carlos Williams had earlier called "the thing itself") —demands a radical reconsideration of notions of form, which can no longer be seen or thought of as an abstraction independent of the actual context of its immediate appearance.

There is much ambiguity surrounding Altieri's understanding of postmodernism. How exactly phenomenology, for example, directs or guides the development of postmodern thought requires some elaboration. Nevertheless, such key terms as "authenticity," "being," and "place" contribute strongly to the concept of "immanence" Altieri has located at the centre of this aesthetics. Evoking "immanence," as Altieri contends, the postmodern poem ostensibly re-imagines its entire relationship to language as a mode of interpretation. In other words, what might be called the formal aspects of language, i.e., those pertaining to its structure as a medium are, in a certain sense, being called into question by this category of immanence. To profess or convey an immanent sense of things is to move beyond

form with its connotations of the abstract into the realm of the intrinsic. This is, perhaps, what Altieri means when he credits postmodern poetry with "the emergence of place" into language.

In the postmodern poem, expression seeks to expunge, both technically and theoretically, all barriers between the "Real" and its representation. Contrasting this aesthetic with earlier "symbolist thought," Altieri describes a mode of expression that, theoretically at least, is able to foreground a basis of meaning in its own context rather than represent it via some separate symbol or ideal image. The veil of language alluded to by poets as diverse as Eliot and Williams, usually in reference to the difficulty of capturing the object or situation in words (for example Prufrock's lament that "it is impossible to say just what I mean"), has less bearing on postmodern verse.

Altieri runs some risk in his essay of over-generalising what is, in fact, a varied and complex poetics. After all, different postmodern writers would likely have their own concept of immanence, especially with respect to aesthetics. Altieri is useful, however, in outlining a distinct "postmodern" relationship to language, one that appears to emphasise the intrinsic generation of meaning over its representation. The distinction here originates in the process of signification. A postmodern sense of language tends to subordinate its function as a medium of representation to a more direct role in the

actual construction of meaning. To evoke the postmodern is to authenticate an entire reality in itself, not merely reproduce some separate image of an object or structure. In his essay, "What I see in the Maximus Poems," Ed Dorn distinguishes a poetics of "enactment" from one of description, citing Olson's epic work as a prime example of the former (298). According to Dorn, Olson's active use of language imbued his poetry with a sense of "place." He writes,

It isn't that Olson doesn't manifest the same recognizable properties that mark writing. It is that the terms are not extractable from the whole art: there are no terms, but there is the term of the form. It isn't just a piece of logic to say that for the total art of Place to exist there has to be this coherent form, the range of implication isn't even calculable. (297)

It may at first seem contradictory to point out that in Olson's work "there are no terms, but there is the term of the form," yet Dorn is, in fact, highlighting the ostensible novelty of Olson's entire concept of structure. Olson does follow a distinct methodology in his poetry. The *Maximus Poems* together constitute a highly rigorous writing project. But their structure, argues Dorn, cannot be defined according to any pre-set principles, of writing or otherwise. What terms or properties are exhibited in Olson's poetics remain confined to (i.e., "are not extractable from") the individual poems in which they are generated. For this reason, Olson's readers shouldn't

expect the poetry to provide tips on how to write, so much as specific insights into the very activity of perception.

Dorn's commentary on what he sees in Olson as a perception-oriented, active aesthetics further clarifies Altieri's own notion of immanence, especially with respect to postmodern poetry. An important characteristic of both Dorn's and Altieri's concept of the "New American" poem centres upon the relation of aesthetic form to the communication of meaning. As Dorn shows, Olson's active sense of language evokes a close interdependence between form and meaning, so much so that neither element can be separated from the other. In this sense, Olson's poetics of "enactment" conveys "immanent" meaning. His poetry rarely contained any presuppositions about formal technique—a quality that makes it difficult to discuss his individual works purely in terms of their structure. Conventional terminologies of form begin to break down within the text of the poem.

In "The Kingfishers," for example, Olson opens the poem with what appears to be a single prose narrative.

He woke, fully clothed, in his bed. He
remembered only one thing, the birds, how
when he came in, he had gone around the rooms
and got them back in their cage, the green one first,
she with the bad leg, and then the blue,
the one they had hoped was a male (SP 5)

The ambiguity of the narrative, with neither the protagonist nor the events surrounding "him" being explicitly identified, is not

resolved through any particular symbolism. The fact that one of the birds appears to be green and the other blue signifies little beyond what is being communicated in the scene itself. As readers, we learn only that two birds have been re-caged, both of them presumably female, by a single man with a penchant for sleeping in his clothes. Even the form of the text, that of a third person, realist narrative, does not help us much since it changes with each subsequent section.

In this manner, Olson's poems appear to generate their own respective structures and nuances in relation to the different contexts giving rise to them. Such works convey neither a set of structural principles nor some archetypal identity beyond the poem itself. What formal qualities or techniques that appear within Olson's works remain, instead, highly symbiotic with each poem's respective themes and movements. It is poetry capable, in Olson's mind, of generating its own activity. It does not summarise or describe inspiration; it neither generalises nor symbolises specific points, but literally "enacts" its own concepts, brings them into being. In short, the postmodern poet can be said to participate in the conception of a reality as much as in an aesthetics — in fact, it is the very creation of a reality that constitutes this aesthetics.

The poet who best exemplifies Altieri's reading of the postmodern, in some ways establishing its very terms, is indeed

Charles Olson. As one of the first writers to describe his poetics explicitly as "post-modern,"² Olson provides an important departure point in American letters from what has been traditionally identified within the postwar academy as "high modernism." In the early postwar period, specifically between the years 1948 and 1956, Olson was rector of Black Mountain College. There, as we shall see, Olson worked diligently on a new poetics and pedagogy, often in direct response to the cultural criticism developing throughout mainstream universities. As Gerald Graff's recent history of the American post-secondary institute, *Professing Literature*, points out, the aesthetics of high modernism dominated the academy soon after the New Criticism established its hegemony in the 1950s (145ff). Graff emphasises the fact that the "the New Critics were originally neither aesthetes nor pure explicators, but culture critics with a considerable 'axe to grind' against the technocratic tendencies of modern mass civilization" (149). The subsequent pedagogy of writers like Allen Tate, John Crowe Ransom and Robert Lowell carried a distinct social and moral agenda, one that operated within the internal structure of the literary works themselves. It is a formalism or idealisation of

² Charles Olson, "The Material And Weights of Herman Melville," *Collected Prose*, ed. Donald Allen and Benjamin Friedlander (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997) 116. This was Olson's first published reference to "postmodernism," a term that had circulated in correspondence with Robert Creeley since 1950.

form that, as we shall see in Chapter Two, was already implicit in much of T.S. Eliot's work. Such a moral sense of internal structure produced a corresponding cultural orthodoxy, and this is precisely the element of high modernism that Olson most directly attacks.

The primary failing of New Criticism, for Olson, lay in its abstract emphasis upon form or "technique." Seeking to provide a stable cultural discourse of value for presumably all of western society, New Criticism organised a set of prominent literary paradigms from within the academy. Cleanth Brooks's *The Well Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry* (1939),³ as is well known, provided an entire generation of new writers with general strategies of literary interpretation, complete with a reformed canon of exemplary texts to help illustrate them. This is not the place to summarise New Criticism's entire pedagogy, save to re-emphasise that much of the inspiration behind it derives from T.S. Eliot's critical vision. Eliot's essay, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," constitutes perhaps the single most influential mandate for 20th century mainstream literary criticism. For New Critics, this essay provided an important basis for understanding the very development of

³ One year earlier, Brooks also co-edited with Robert Penn Warren the New Criticism text book for teaching poetry at a post-secondary level: *Understanding Poetry: An Anthology for College Students* (New York: Henry Holt, 1938).

western culture itself. Of particular interest was the following famous statement:

The existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work of art among them. The existing order is complete before the new work arrives; for order to persist after the supervention of novelty, the whole existing order must be, if ever so lightly, altered; and so the relations, proportions, volumes of each work of art toward the whole are readjusted; and this is conformity between the old and the new. (*Sacred Wood* 64)

Expressed here, in Eliot's conception of an "ideal order," is a strategic respect by practising poets for some greater historical continuum. The conception of an ideal literary order implies that, regardless of theme or talent, the new poet cannot help but threaten disarrangement; each emerging writer must present him or herself with a demeanour of conformity if there is to be any chance of altering existing historical forms, that is, of joining the company of canonical writers. Eliot's call later on in the essay for the poets' "continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality" urges the need for humility before larger, more established cultural movements and visions (*Sacred Wood* 64). This is not to say that Eliot advocated a type of blind, impetuous assent to the past. Indeed, he was quite critical of much of what was deemed canonical during his own emergence into the world of letters. Eliot's

particular dissatisfaction with the work of John Dryden, for example, firmly countered that poet's privileged position in most British university curricula on 18th century poetry. The past, in Eliot's view, was not identical to history. History implied critical thinking; in other words, it demanded selection, change and informed choice, and that was precisely how tradition was built. The concept of a literary tradition implied, for Eliot, an active intellectual engagement with culture, not its obsolescence.

The pedagogy of New Criticism followed closely Eliot's respect for tradition and historical techniques, properly defining formal principles of composition based upon a specific image of the order of literature itself. In some ways, the New Critics made Eliot out to be more of a traditionalist than he actually was, for Eliot's was a highly qualified traditionalism, including certain "minor" writers from the past (like Jules Laforgue), while abandoning such canonical entries as Hugo, Tennyson and Swinburne. For the New Critics, evidence of cultural universalism in the poem as a distinct historical work implied the absence of all personality of the poet. The logic of New Criticism was empiricist, emphasising technique and form as opposed to either personal expression or the poet's immediate sense of his or her context. All literary value or meaning in a poem derived exclusively from its place within a particular

historical and cultural order. Without some form of reference to this order, both contemporary talent and any continuity in tradition appeared threatened with extinction.

Olson's poetics, by contrast, invoked a less formal vision of history and cultural development. His writing deferred to no previous canon or model, offering instead an open approach to composition or what he called a "stance to reality [that] involves...a change beyond, and larger than, the technical" ("Projective Verse," SW 24). While Olson's repudiation of historical authority does not automatically imply a corresponding interest in personal expression, his work does, in fact, constitute a very different sense of history and the evolution of culture. Certainly Eliot's conception of an ideal order within culture to which younger poets must inevitably conform has little parallel in Olson's vision. His ambivalence towards the "technical" in writing strongly opposes any sense of permanent or fixed rationale behind the evolution of western culture through history. Where Eliot and his "New Critical" interpreters saw a transcendental order to the practice and development of all art, Olson theorised a more fluctuating, ongoing interdependence between form and content. This consistent antagonism to any sort of transcendental unity in aesthetics is laid out in some detail in his first major essay on poetics, "Projective Verse" (1950).

As a theory of writing, "Projective Verse" operates on methods quite different from various earlier modernist strategies for poetry. Such critical writings echoed Eliot's concerns for an ideal order both within the poem and with respect to the poem's placement inside a larger cultural tradition. The poet who best represented this view and, as such, constituted the most significant early influence on the development of Olson's own unique position was Ezra Pound. As we will see, the forced re-patriation of Pound in 1945 from the ruins of fascist Italy, followed by his lengthy incarceration within the hospital, St. Elizabeths for the Criminally Insane, gave Olson an important first-hand glimpse at some of the more extreme political components informing revisionary modernism, especially as practised by Pound and Eliot. One of the primary theoretical concerns behind "Projective Verse" originated in direct response to the formally ordered views of culture found in the works of these earlier modernists. This is not to suggest that Olson regarded the two poets as in any way equivalent. In fact, Eliot hardly inspired Olson to the extent or degree that Pound did. Olson attributed to both writers, however, a similar necessity to outline a historically sanctioned cultural paradigm to which contemporary writing should conform. The failure of this methodology, Olson believed, was rampant in T.S. Eliot's work. Accordingly, Olson ends "Projective Verse" with the

following comments on the original, "non-projective" modernism of the recent past:

Eliot is, in fact, a proof of a present danger of 'too easy' a going on the practice of verse as it has been, rather than as it must be, practiced. There is no question, for example, that Eliot's line, from "Prufrock" on down, has speech-force, is "dramatic," is, in fact, one of the most notable lines since Dryden. I suppose it stemmed immediately to him from Browning as did so many of Pound's early things...but it could be argued that it is because Eliot has stayed inside the non-projective that he fails as a dramatist...his root is the mind alone, and scholastic mind at that...and that, in his listenings he has stayed there where the ear and the mind are, has only gone from his fine ear outward rather than, as I say a projective poet will, down through the workings of his own throat to that place where breath comes from, where breath has its beginnings, where drama has to come from, where, the coincidence is, all act springs. (SW 26)

Like Pound, Eliot depends upon a poetics of appropriation in which different historical texts and text fragments are formally re-contextualised to produce a more legitimate, revised "cultural" discourse of value. As a result, the various fragments tend to support, despite their discontinuous format, an explicit hierarchy of account, a structural ranking designed to legislate an entirely new civic language. In *The Waste Land*, for example, Eliot juxtaposes the harsh cockney of a London barmaid with Shakespearean quotation, in effect, recognising the contemporary relevance of demotic speech while at the same time

asserting his own loyalty to older, suppressed classicisms. The barmaid is meant to provide drama in the poem, to assert her own distinct claim of identity within some wider sea of disparate cultural movements and voices. To assume an easy transition from one language to the next, however, is to misread Eliot's own relationship to such discourses —a, by no means, arbitrary or especially tolerant cultural vision. In a similar manner, Olson, too, works from a wide variety of discursive sources, many of them deriving from histories much older and more exotic than Eliot himself ever encountered. "The Kingfishers" features text fragments from personal anecdotes, Maoist political doctrine, Mayan legends, and western philosophy among others. However, where in Eliot's poetics, such fragments are stoically and rigorously assimilated into a more completely unified framework of cultural reference, in Olson's work no such vision exists to help guide each separate discourse. Behind the respective textual collages that form *The Waste Land* and "The Kingfishers," consequently, there lie two very different conceptions of cultural history, with Eliot by far emphasising the more openly ideological sense of writing as a formal or distinct system of knowledge.

The "principle" behind "projective" verse, "the reason," in Olson's words, "why a projective poem can come into being" owes very little to historical structure. Projective techniques

depend almost exclusively upon the context in which they are written. Olson introduces this point with the following pronouncement: "FORM IS NEVER MORE THAN AN EXTENSION OF CONTENT" (SW 16). This declaration, emblazoned in caps within the first paragraphs of his essay quickly emerges as one of the most succinct, yet provocative summaries of Olson's poetics. Olson actually attributes the statement to his friend and fellow poet, Robert Creeley, with whom he was in constant correspondence in the early 1950s. At the time, Creeley was living and working in the Canary Islands, attempting to formulate, like Olson, a new, revised writing practice in response to the earlier modernisms of Pound, Williams and, due to his influence in the academy, Eliot. By the mid-1950s, Creeley would be back in the US, working even more closely with Olson at Black Mountain College. Even at this early date, however, Olson recognised in Creeley's work a similarly equivocal regard for traditional forms in poetics. Both poets were highly suspicious of the authority of history as a dominant influence on contemporary writing practices. Yet much high modernist work, especially the long, epic visions contained in Eliot's and Pound's respective oeuvres, continuously alluded to an ideal cultural order able to guide all western art.

In "Projective Verse," Olson clearly seeks an alternate concept of aesthetic form. Creeley's aphoristic statement on the

interrelationship between form and content seems a step in the right direction. By tying form directly to the "process" of writing, Olson hopes to free contemporary writing from all configurations of historical confinement. History here, as understood by Olson, implied the hierarchical subordination of active thinking to social and cultural precepts. "Now...the process of the thing," he writes, "...how the principle can be made so to shape the energies that the form is accomplished...can be boiled down to one statement (first pounded into my head by Edward Dahlberg): ONE PERCEPTION MUST IMMEDIATELY AND DIRECTLY LEAD TO A FURTHER PERCEPTION" (SW 16-7). Again Olson capitalises his most significant conclusions. The act of perception as a physical, substantial process plays an important role in his poetics. Exactly what he means by perceiving, as such, is never actually defined (he alludes briefly to "our management of daily reality"), yet almost every point in his essay seems consistent in its criticism of permanent, immovable poetic principles. The emphasis in "Projective Verse" is primarily upon movement: "Get on with it, keep moving, keep in, speed, the nerves, their speed, the perceptions, theirs, the acts, the split second acts, the whole business, keep it moving as fast as you can citizen" (SW 17). No specific line in any one poem can be said to capture or somehow image enduring, larger truths. If there is a particular message being conveyed throughout his early poetry,

it is the assertion, after Heraclitus, that only the essential impermanence of reality is permanent - or, as he opens "The Kingfishers," "Nothing changes / but the will to change."

Some equivalent terms to "Projective Verse" include "composition by field," "open verse," "the kinetics of the thing," and "objectism." As distinct as these notions may first appear, what they do have in common is a specific criticism of the more fixed cultural positions Olson sees in "closed verse...the inherited line, stanza, over-all form" (SW 16). Wary of all abstract truths, Olson neither possesses nor can even claim access to a hypothetical stance of evaluation. There is nothing "inherited," he claims, in the structure of his writing. This may seem paradoxical since "Projective Verse" does, on one level, attempt to outline a new "form" of poetry, complete with an alternate set of poetic "values." What the essay does not provide is any concept of an autonomous cultural tradition. Instead, Olson attempts to shift the ground of cultural "value" from a transcendental realm to a local, in some cases, physiological one. Personally inspired by what might be called the "informing spirit" behind these earlier "modernisms," yet consistent with his scepticism of absolute truths, Olson promises no revised cultural order in his poetics. His criticism and theory does not derive from any alternate canon or concept of fixed formal principles. When he marks "the process of the

thing" as a new "stance to reality," he is not abandoning all pretence to structure. Rather the immanent aspects of this methodology imply more a reconsideration of actual origins of structure. Here, too, Dorn's reading of Olson emphasising, as it does, a strongly active sense of form, far removed "from the effete and at the same time the aesthetic...the zeal for material effect," seems highly relevant (297). "Images suffer," Dorn continues, when "[t]echné is brought in" as a cardinal virtue in itself. The notion of immanence implies a much less abstract conception of language, one that uniquely associates the structure of any poem with the very context of its construction. There is a logic to Olson's poems, as various contemporaries like Dorn and Creeley point out, yet it is a logic that is in constant motion. "I believe in Truth! (Wahrheit)," declares Olson in a separate letter written to Elaine Feinstein almost a decade after "Projective Verse," "[m]y sense is that beauty (Schönheit) better stay in the thing itself..." (SW 27). The stance to reality to which Olson refers in the opening paragraphs of "Projective Verse," might be further described as an entirely new objectivity, one strongly rooted in the poet's individual sense of perception. Again, Olson is not implying here a revised subjectivism where writers and readers alike are encouraged to express their own interpretation of things. Personal vision is vital in his poetics, yet his subsequent

emphasis upon movement and flux prevents the abstraction of any individual perception into an "over-all form."

This is, perhaps, why Olson continues to stress the object in both his poetry and criticism. A writing conceived in itself as a "stance to reality" cannot be confused with personal expression. He writes:

It is a matter, finally of OBJECTS, what they are inside a poem, how they got there, and once there, how they are to be used. This is something I want to get to in another way in Part II, but, for the moment, let me indicate this, that every element in an open poem (the syllable, the line, as well as the image, the sound, the sense) must be taken up as participants in the kinetic of the poem just as solidly as we are accustomed to take what we call the objects of reality; and that these elements are to be seen as creating the tensions of a poem just as totally as do those other objects create what we know as the world.
(SW 20)

"Part II," as Olson promises, elaborates further on the formulation of his poetics as a bona fide objectivity. Here additional characteristics of his poetics emerge under the rubric, "objectism" (SW 24). The term, itself, derives from the earlier poetic movement "objectivism" associated with the writings of Louis Zukofsky, George Oppen, Charles Reznikoff and Carl Rakosi.⁴

⁴ Louis Zukofsky, "An Objective," *Poetry Magazine* (1931): 13.

Before exploring in detail this allusion, it is perhaps necessary to establish what exactly constituted the later poet's reading of it. It is generally accepted⁵ that Olson had studied, at the time of his brief dismissal of the movement, very little of its actual poetry. Likely his knowledge of objectivist writing depended almost exclusively upon Zukofsky's short summary of his aesthetics for *Poetry* magazine in 1931. In February of that year, at the instigation of Pound, Harriet Monroe formally contracted Zukofsky to edit a special issue devoted to the work of such new writers as Oppen, Reznikoff, Rakosi, and Zukofsky himself. The resulting text, as Rakosi recently complained, greatly simplified and abbreviated what was in practice a widely variable and individualistic poetics. Rakosi contends,

No, Zukofsky was not speaking for the rest of us. The introductions were strictly his show. He did not ask us what we thought a definition should be. For one thing, he didn't think it important enough to go to all that work of arriving at a consensus...All he was doing was cooking up a concoction for Harriet Monroe, which he hated doing because he hated categorizing. He was too intelligent for that.⁶

Given this wariness of categories, epistemological or otherwise, much of the theoretical basis behind Olson's specific

⁵ Ralph Maud's exhaustive bibliography of Olson's library, *Charles Olson's Reading: A Biography* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois Press, 1996) lists several of Zukofsky's books, though none published in the 1950s.

⁶ Carl Rakosi, "A Word about the Objectivists," *TO* 2.3-4 (Spring 1994): 63.

critique of objectivism seems contestable. Rakosi's later discussion of the movement suggests that Olson's limited view of objectivism derives more from Zukofsky's quick summary of it in 1931 than any actual knowledge of the poetry. In fact, Rakosi advises all new readers of objectivism to ignore most of Zukofsky's preliminary "introductions." Rakosi, of course, is hardly an "objective" witness of the movement, being so closely involved its development; yet he is right to discriminate between objectivist poetry and the criticism surrounding it. "If you want to know what Zukofsky's ideas were about poetry when he was still an Objectivist," Rakosi contends, "you have to go to *A Test of Poetry*. There he showed his extraordinary talent for making fine distinctions in critical judgement and met the most difficult challenges head-on with flying colors."⁷ The Objectivist Press published *A Test of Poetry* in 1948, only a year before Olson first outlined his projectivist method. Consistent with Rakosi's own repudiation of objectivist categories, Zukofsky's anthology offers very little theoretical commentary on the work being featured. If there is a specific rationale or cultural vision informing the poet's choice of verse, it inspires no grand manifesto. Instead, Zukofsky summarises his efforts at this point in his career as merely an attempt "to suggest standards" (*A Test of Poetry* 12). The formal

⁷ Rakosi, "A Word about the Objectivists" 64.

evaluations he makes in this collection consequently depend less upon some fixed aesthetic schema than on various subtle, structural distinctions between the various works. A comparison of Thomas Hobbes's translation of *The Odyssey* to a later attempt by William Morris, for example, is outlined with a single "note" on musicality: "the music of verse carries an emotional quality; when the music slackens, emotion dissipates, and the poetry is poor" (*A Test of Poetry* 67). In Zukofsky's view, objectivism could never properly be called an "ism." Even a brief glimpse at Zukofsky's own criticism at this time presents a much more complex notion of objectivism than what Olson understood as the abstract binary counterpart to an even more obsolete subjectivism.

However limited Olson's exposure to the full development of these writers' ideas may have been, this lack of certainty does not change the fact that in 1949 he felt it necessary to respond to a very particular set of aesthetic issues — themes and ideas generalised here under the heading of "objectivism"; and this response, in itself, still establishes a useful dialogue between his methodological interests and certain earlier revisionary movements.

Olson does not specifically mention Zukofsky in his essay, yet he does associate the movement with a distinct mandate that can be discerned in the writings of Pound and Williams. Olson's

references to objectivism appear as part of a general effort to distance his poetics from the work of Pound and Williams. That said, if there were any poets to whom Olson appears indebted for his own poetics, they are Pound, Williams and D.H. Lawrence. His relationship to Pound may have been fraught with much political tension. But both Pound's and Williams's respective interests in the "real," their privileging, in other words, of a distinct material world of objects, critically inspired Olson's own methodology. As Olson notes, "the projective involves a stance toward reality outside a poem as well as a new stance towards the reality of a poem itself" ("Projective Verse," SW 24). This mandate strongly corresponds to what Olson sees as a similar reference to the real in the "objectivism" of Pound and Williams. Such "renderings" were important to Olson in that they constituted an essential aim of poetry in general. Inspired by Williams's use of form to summon an instantaneous relationship between the writer and his/her context, Olson affirms his own interest as a poet in the "thing itself." In his words:

...the use of a man, by himself and thus by others, lies in how he conceives his relation to nature, that force to which he owes his somewhat small existence. If he sprawl, he shall find little to sing but himself, and shall sing, nature has such paradoxical ways, by way of artificial forms outside himself. But if he stays inside himself, if he is contained within his

nature as he is participant in the larger force, he will be able to listen, and his hearing through himself will give him secrets objects share. ("Projective Verse," SW 25)

Seeking to extend poetic inspiration beyond the confines of the personal, Olson emphasises the importance of nature as a larger, more meaningful context in which the process of writing may develop. The fact that the poet conceives this context as the ultimate source of all "existence" endows it with an especial authority over every creative act, including poetry. Without some reference to nature, that is, to the object itself, no art can be considered "full" or "serious." The previous objectivism of Pound and Williams was, therefore, valuable in that it recognised the limits of personal expression. Again, their primary deficiency lay in their inability to move beyond this critique of what he calls "subjectivism" towards a fuller apprehension of the actual world. Subsequently, the logic behind objectivism remained too dependent upon an abstract notion of structure.

Zukofsky, himself, in his 1931 essay, substantiates this quality when he describes his methodology as a new formal system of organising human knowledge. The capabilities of the Objectivist poem were such that they could provide what he called a "rested totality" within one's interpretative framework. Zukofsky writes in his essay "Poetry" (1946),

The need for standards in poetry is no less than in science...Good verse is determined by the poet's susceptibilities involving a precise awareness of differences, forms and possibilities if existence - words with their own attractions included. The poet, no less than the scientist, works on the assumption that inert and live things and relations hold enough interest to keep him alive as part of nature. (*Prepositions* 6)

While Olson would have endorsed Zukofsky's emphasis of different forms and structures in his work, few of objectivism's premises seemed to him to be particularly "natural." Particularly disturbing to Olson, in fact, would have been the debt that Zukofsky's aesthetics claimed to owe to the empiricism of conventional science. By Zukofsky's own admission within the 1931 text, little difference existed between Objectivism's fidelity to poetic "objectivity" and the technical notion of "objective" as defined by the science of optics: "A lens bringing the rays from an object to a focus" (*Prepositions* 12). For Zukofsky, the structures of verse operated in an analogous manner. Thus, one year earlier in "A"-6:

My one voice. My other: is

An objective - rays of the object brought to a focus,
An objective - nature as creator - desire
for what is objectively perfect... (24)

Zukofsky's language tended to emphasise quite explicitly the importance of technical form above all other components in the

generation of knowledge. In his work, the visible is directly reduced to the very conditions of visibility.

More than just metaphors, Zukofsky's linguistic devices collectively constituted an important set of instruments through which writing, itself, was demythologised, i.e., purified as a medium of the "Real." As Peter Cole writes, "the language of the objectivist poem aims to recreate in us the sensation of the poet's eye, ear, and mind moving along the contours of what is being sensed or thought. Literally the kinesthesia of this brought into the language."⁸ Cole correctly emphasises the sensuality inherent in objectivism as both a theory of poetry and a "way" of seeing. This sensuality corresponds to Olson's own interpretation of language as a potential medium of disenchantment, a new eye as lens, so to speak.

As an inspiration behind projective verse, objectivism was clearly useful. That these "objectivisms" continued to critique representational forms of writing as overly anthropomorphic further testified, for Olson, to the earlier movement's past cultural validity. Although inherently too formal in its basic approaches, Objectivism, nevertheless, continued to draw the reader's attention to many more serious misappropriations of the Real in a wide variety of other cultural discourses. For both Olson and Zukofsky, the "realness" of a poem's object or focus

remained a function of disenchantment, not the work's ability to reference some form of universal. The aesthetic principle operating here, in other words, is not a type of mimesis; rather, Objectivist writing attempts to convey a more immanent notion of the Real. Poetry thus conceived does not record reality so much as it attempts to re-enact it as an integral, innately "present" process. The distinction between these two aesthetic procedures derives once again from divergent notions of abstract form and its relation to the material real.

Consistent with the general philosophical objectives of immanent idealism, cultural modernism continues to refute all conceptions of a "final cause." What principles of function may be in operation here remain strongly dependent upon ideas of motion and variation: In the modernisms of Pound, Zukofsky, and especially Olson, the primary purpose of formal theorems is to express the diversity of the content to which they refer. The relationship, in other words, between abstract forms and various concrete elements of the particular real in modernist thought remains at times hard to distinguish. This is abundantly clear in the aesthetics of Objectivism, where such principles continue to be explicitly outlined in the poems themselves. The formal structure of Zukofsky's early contributions to "A," for example, derives simultaneously from the specific words and typographic

⁸ Peter Cole, "The Object and Its Edge: Rothko, Oppen, Zukofsky, and Newman,"

symbols used in the poem and a more abstract sense of how these symbols might eventually be ordered. "To find a thing," Zukofsky states in "A"-6, with respect to his poetic aim, "all things" (27). Language, if it is to be meaningful, must offer the concrete essence of objects; it must translate both sum and substance of the particular, while ordering it in a way that is interpretable to all minds.

On that morning when
everything
 will be clear,
Greeting myself, despite glasses,
The world's earth a rose,
 rose every particle
The palm open,
 earth's lily,
One will see
 gravel in gravel (27)

As Michael Heller explains, "Words are real, in the Objectivist formulation, because they instate an existence beyond the words" (4).

Consistent with this logic, Zukofsky considered his poems to be nothing less than natural structures, "keeping time with existence" – a perspective that evokes as distinctive a paradigm of nature as it does a theory of writing. Zukofsky's sense of the Real stressed its precise organisation as a coherent framework or pattern. Reality, itself, in other words, remained commensurate with a discourse of value. Hence, the structural

aspects of an Objectivist poem actually helped constitute the work's identity as a natural construction. As a poetics of disenchantment, Zukofsky's writing literally encouraged objects to become objects; reality defined itself as reality. It is this characteristic "coherence" or structural integrity of Objectivism that Peter Quartermain further qualifies as a unique resolution of aesthetics with social activism where "the demand for the poem to be political is a formal demand" (11). To separate the two propositions, as Quartermain suggests, is to ignore one of Objectivism's most salient features. Once again, Blaser's "fundamental struggle for the nature of the real" appears to have inspired, first and foremost, a radically new theory of language composition, a revision of the symbolic. Properly read, each line, perhaps even each individual word in a Zukofsky poem inherently evokes wider moral themes. Hence, when Zukofsky himself describes aesthetic methods, it is usually with reference to notions of "sincerity" and linguistic "integrity." As Heller notes, Zukofsky's structural vision "has about it a moral burden: the Objectivist poet, meaning to inform, to convey or translate to the reader the existence which he knows through the media of objectification and sincerity, must resist not only the aleatory, freewheeling associativeness of words but also the usual decorative conceit of the symbol or image" (28). It was to

this need for a more specific formulation of a truly object-oriented poetics to which "objectism" now turned its attention.

As with Olson's refusal to reference an ideal cultural order, Williams also repudiated any type of symbolism in which images and poetic techniques would properly evoke some authoritative tradition of western art and philosophy.

"Doctrinaire formula-worship - that is our real enemy," he writes, in "A Novelette," attacking what he calls the "idea-vendors" for their tendency "to transmit abstract ideas" (*Imaginations* 279). By contrast, Williams's poetry would simply contain "no symbolism, no evocation of an image" (*Imaginations* 299).

The "symbol," then, and what it signifies in Olson's thought, clearly owes much to Williams's earlier criticism, a connection indirectly affirmed in much of his prose - for example, his 1954 defence of Williams's poetics written to the editor of *New Mexico Quarterly*. In this letter, Olson discounts critics like Grover Smith for their unquestioned adherence to general aesthetic formulae, noting that the value in Williams's work derives precisely from its lack of preconceived patterns. "It doesn't take much thought over Bill's proposition - 'not in ideas but in things'," Olson writes, conveniently misquoting Williams, "to be sure that any of us intend an image as a

'thing,' never, so far as we know, such a non-animal as symbol."⁹

In Olson's view, Williams evoked through his images an entirely new sense of beauty, one distinct in its independence of all previous platitudes or accepted ideas of the subject. Further, Olson continuously applauded Williams for his vigilance against the "symbolic" abstraction of such images into new platitudes. Against the symbol, Olson also urged a more detailed focus on the moment itself. Williams exemplified this type of focus in his capacity to evoke the experience of beauty rather than some fixed definition of it. Again, the chief merit of Williams's work, for Olson, derived from its unique sense of movement, a dynamism conveyed through its attention to performance and human action; Williams, he noted in a book review contemporary with "Projective Verse," remained distinguishable as "a man who registers the going-ons (sic) of all the human beings he lives among" ("The Materials and Weights of Herman Melville," CP 115).¹⁰

In his own thinking, therefore, Olson relied strongly upon the poetics and criticism of Williams and, as we'll see, Pound. Other writers he sometimes included in addition to this pairing were Hart Crane, e.e. cummings and D.H. Lawrence (*A Bibliography*

⁹ Charles Olson, letter to the editor, *New Mexico Quarterly* 24.1, (Spring 1954); reprinted in *Human Universe and Other Essays*, 1965.

¹⁰ Olson reviewed the 1952 edition of *Moby Dick*, edited by Luther S. Mansfield and Howard P. Vincent (New York: Hendricks House) for the magazine *New Republic*.

on America for Ed Dorn 8). Each of these writers, he felt, had contributed perceptive insights about the very nature of human thought. What intrigued Olson most about them, however, was how each poet successfully avoided the influence of previous cultural discourses and traditions on their own respective work and thought — an odd view of Crane, perhaps, given his immersion in Elizabethan rhetoric. In Olson's view, Change was not only embraced by these poets, it constituted the core rationale of their entire vision.

Such an attitude of anti-absolutism translated for many of Olson's contemporaries, including Duncan, Creeley, Dorn, and Oppenheimer, into an especial agenda of political and/or cultural progressiveness. In fact, given its value of natural objects and authentic contexts, projective verse well parallels several concurrent developments within American postwar culture, notably the emergence of a new left intelligentsia and a revised liberal arts discourse within the academy. After World War II, a less doctrinal leftism, compared to the Marxisms of the 1920s and 1930s, permeated most intellectual scenes across the US. One clear correspondence between the open, performance-oriented character of projective verse and these newer intellectual movements appears in the various ecological paradigms of social development on the rise during this period. In the ecological vision, important homologies quickly emerge between the

particularity of Olson's "composition by field" and America's postwar management of both its natural and intellectual resources.

As we've seen, a projective stance towards phenomena extols not only a more relevant social agency, but also a naturally authentic human voice. Here, in Olson's view, the objectivity at which Williams aimed in his poetry is effectively realised in a manner that he, himself, could only imagine. Hence, what he saw in Williams as a highly conceptual struggle for the object itself becomes in his own hands an open engagement where concept is replaced by action, aesthetics with reality. In Olson's vision there is, above all,

not one death but many,
not accumulation but change, the feed-back proves,
the feed-back is
the law ("The Kingfishers," SP 8)

Once again, repudiating any notion of fixed cultural vision, the complex terminology of projective verse emphasises an aesthetics of constant movement – a logic of flux in which perception after perception is successfully gathered together to form a new, unique poetic structure. In this way, the structure of Olson's narrative fragments continues to emphasise a series of voices rather than a single, dominant vision. Once drawn into these narratives, the reader's focus remains centred upon the quick, near-meteoric movement of individual phrases and sentence

fragments. If there is any particular meaning to be accessed in this work, it continues to depend upon the ability of the reader to navigate a wider variety of different issues and themes, not the author's ability to reproduce a specific reading or summary of different events. Such a method, for Olson, addressed, even if it did not fully prevent, the controlling influence a particular narrative form might conventionally hold over its content. Throughout "The Kingfishers," Olson continually changes his technique and style. "Each of these lines," Olson writes, "is a progressing of both the meaning, and the breathing forward, and then a backing up, without a progress or any kind of movement outside the unit of time local to the idea" ("Projective Verse," SW 23). The actual form of "The Kingfishers," in other words, ceases to function here as a permanent category of knowledge able to regulate, as formal principles purport to do, the actual process of reading. Instead the poet envisioned a much more amorphous type of framework for his verse. As one critic notes, such a stylistics conforms well to Olson's critique of "closed" writing as a function of institutional structures of literacy such as the academy and the media.¹¹

The resulting phenomenology is Hegelian in the sense that it does envision an ideal condition or state of possibility

¹¹ Burton Hatlen, "In That Sea We Breathe the Open Miracle," *Sagetrieb* 3.1,

dialectically ordering individual perspectives and events as particular moments of a larger historical idea. Consistent with his interest in John Wiener's cybernetics, the dialectic, for Olson, was achieved through the notion of feedback. The prominence of feedback mechanisms in his poetry helped ensure a constant dialogue between disparate discourses. As a result, no perspective ever holds in a static, hence, unnecessarily didactic manner. Fixed positions or statements such as those represented by Eliot's work would only collapse of themselves, argued Olson, given their lack of dramatic engagement. Within a truly advanced "system" of writing, there simply would be no general conclusions, no symbolic references. Instead, writers would engage in a dialectical struggle of constant translation, an ongoing process of encoding and re-encoding. What specific objects might appear in such works fade in and out, change their shape from line to line, secure in the knowledge that, since they cannot be permanently located, their integrity can never be challenged.

As I've suggested, the philosophical sources of Olson's poetics derive partially from Hegelian phenomenology, with its notions of the dialectic and feedback mechanisms. Hegel's thought on history and historical process compares with Olson's in its critique of all transcendental logic or teleology.

History, according to Hegel, did evoke a particular will or logic known as "Reason." Reason manifested itself in history, however, not as a pre-established ideal or absolute aim, but rather through individual, local engagements, the so-called "by-products" of a larger, invisible structure. One might even argue that a basic strategy in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* is to undermine past absolute idealisms by revealing their hidden inconsistencies — usually by referencing the subjective components evident in each one. Olson did read Hegel,¹² yet the specific philosopher he followed most closely was Alfred North Whitehead.¹³ In Whitehead, as I will show, Olson discovered an important precursor to the type of cultural vision and epistemology he sought in his own work. The specific text he focused on most was *Process and Reality* (1929), a work that Duncan also credited with containing many core ideas behind projective verse. In fact, *Process and Reality*, according to Duncan, "permeates projective verse, it enlarges the idea of field... When Charles talked in SF, it was the Whitehead view of history as past and future, and the fact that we're at the point of genesis and that the end of this is back of us" ("As an

¹² In *The Special View of History* (1970) Olson specifically applied Hegel's philosophy of the dialectic. The text he used was *The Logic of Hegel*, trans. William Wallace (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1892; 1950). See also Ralph Maud, *Charles Olson's Reading: A Biography* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois Press, 1996) 105.

¹³ Olson used Whitehead's metaphysics extensively in his lectures at Black Mountain, culminating in 1956 in the series entitled *The Special View of*

Introduction: Charles Olson's *Additional Prose*," SP 150). Such a comment highlights the homologous attitude towards history informing both Olson's thought and Whitehead's philosophy. In particular, his summary of Whitehead's view of history "as past and future" describes well several of Olson's own critical preoccupations with time and non-linear modes of thought.

Clearly, the intellectual "tone" of Olson's aesthetics shares with Whitehead (and with phenomenology in general) a similar philosophical aim in its effort to overcome its own formalism through an emphasis on movement. Olson's poetics derives strongly from his critical interest in defining a wider rationalism out of different dialectical responses. Such logic, however, was hardly limited to Black Mountain pedagogy. Ecological theory also makes use of synthesis. In fact, Hegel's definition of the subject in *Phenomenology of the Spirit* as "nature sick unto death" acquires new relevance in ecological thought, given the discipline's emphasis throughout the postwar era on environmental crisis. Comparable to Hegelian phenomenology, the concept of ecology demonstrates an overarching interest in combining different pieces of information into a larger, natural – yet, most importantly, unseen – totality. Its vision emphasises a fluid and perennially shifting set of ideas and practices that, as with Olson's

History and, in the following year, a series of talks for the Poetry Centre

poetics, displays specific postmodern propensities. Rejecting traditional Enlightenment belief in universal social progress, ecological theory categorically opposes all notions of hierarchy and fixed systems in thought. Its focus remains on the particular components being organised within these systems and the complex manner in which they interact. The discourse's consistently arbitrary sense of traditional Enlightenment disciplines, whether they be national, historical or even cultural, furthermore, allows it to adapt to a diverse set of activities ranging from agricultural production to political theory. As we will see, much leftist politics adopted the postwar mandate of the "ecosystem" in order to transgress traditional Marxist doctrines based on class and ideological hegemony. These more schematic utopian movements, ecological theorists argued, placed too much emphasis on economic modes of conduct in their social theory. The resulting vision was deterministic at best with a dangerous political pre-disposition towards tyranny in the case of Stalinist Russia.

The conventional Marxist response to ecological critique in turn pointed out the later movement's deficient analysis of ideology and its subsequent failure to mobilise the working classes. The ecological vision, with its preference for integration over conflict, holism over partisanship, many

Marxists believed, risked suppressing even the most basic interests in social change.

Ecological thinking remained, throughout the postwar period, highly mistrustful of any calls for open revolution, especially one originating in the industrialised labour classes. However, despite the traditional Marxist charge that ecological theorists had, in fact, betrayed labour movements by abandoning their critical interest in class structure, an examination of American leftism in the first half of the 20th century reveals little impetus to form anything resembling a revolutionary labour political party. Conceptions of the political role of the proletariat certainly differed between America and Europe long before Russia's own labour revolutions: contrary to Europe's historically entrenched, rigid class structure, the ideology of American liberalism had always emphasised a more fluid vision of constant class mobility. The common New York image of labour, for example, was premised not on social revolution, but on a simpler narrative of individual achievement – one in which the poor, oppressed dishwasher worked towards the position of waiter followed by "maitre de," before eventually gaining ownership of his own restaurant.

Ecological theory proposed a co-dependent model of interaction between organisms, rather than a theory of constant individual gain. Yet its emphasis upon movement often suggests

strong roots in some of the more fundamental premises of American liberal thinking. Disenchanted with the promises of conventional Marxist and socialist politics, ecological thinkers responded with a series of new precepts and theoretical emphases, one of which had long been a component of American culture: the possibility of movement and the will to change.

As the ecologist Karl Kroeber writes, "an ecosystem is a constantly self-transforming continuity. No ecosystem exists outside of time or is adequately representable as anything other than an encompassing ongoing process made up of diversely intersecting subordinate temporal processes."¹⁴ Such an emphasis in criticism upon this new sense of immanent social holism was also prominent throughout the postwar era, with Olson representing one of its earliest impressions. The ecosystem by definition remains adaptable to most social contexts. Dismissing all diacritical narratives of political identity, such as the earlier leftist conception of the working class as a source of social agency, these discourses consider no single position or specific activity to represent universal logic. In fact, consistent with its phenomenological origins, the structure of the ecosystem functions primarily as a type of formal hybrid. Its systematic character allows for little permanent distinction to operate between individual cultural forms and their content.

As will be shown, a wide array of positions in an even larger matrix of divergent social fields have at some point engaged with the concerns of this discourse.

To associate the critical imperatives of ecological theory with a distinct epistemology – i.e., a theory of knowledge or how we think – is to recognise in them the imposition of a discursive form or cultural discourse of value. Providing a strong framework of conceptual unity for a variety of different texts and investigations, the ecological discourse formatted, like no other previous cultural logic, a homologous set of attitudes and strategies for describing individual organisms and their interactions. More than a specific sociological discipline, in other words, ecology constituted for both intellectuals and consumers of popular culture an entire belief system.

Olson's aesthetics, as we've seen, drew much of its inspiration from the poet's critical attitude towards all fixed cultural beliefs, especially those exemplified by Eliot. Within ecological theory, too, a strong antipathy towards rigid, didactic categories of knowledge can be discerned. Although such antipathy can be considered characteristic of postmodernist thought in general (and, as suggested, the ideology of American liberalism), ecological theory reveals important conceptual

¹⁴ Karl Kroeber, *Ecological Literary Criticism, Romantic Imagining and the*

groundwork in this position decades prior to the intellectual adoption of the term. Ideas and theories, considered ecologically, rarely produce permanent concepts or systems of thought. Rather the ecological viewpoint tends to look at how different ideas interact regardless of their origin or subject matter. In this manner, once again, ecological concepts seem to be in continuous flux, as no relationship between objects or pattern in ideas can be reduced to a fixed theoretical premise. If there is a larger, natural order to processes and forms, it cannot be abstracted beyond the processes themselves.

For Kroeber and other ecology-informed cultural theorists, this correlation between process and order precisely constitutes the literary or cultural discourse in which their criticism is based. As a framework, it may be difficult to define permanently, but it does outline distinct sets of relations within most any individual discipline or study. Politically, it has offered leftists and socialist-minded thinkers of the postwar period new perspectives on society and social change without resorting to universal theories or linear notions of progress. Where traditional leftist ideologies promoted the rational development of society through centralised government and the equal distribution of wealth, ecological-politics tends to favour a more relativistic, de-centralised approach to power

and social change. No single group or class, it maintains, can function as the sole agent of social change. In fact, the entire concept of universal transformation in politics is suspect. Shifting in focus from ideology to the "environment," much postwar social critique waived issues of class for crises of place, for example: street violence, air pollution and urban poverty. In short, ecological theory appears to have left its mark on almost every discipline within the fields of sociology and the human sciences. Moreover, as we will see in the art associated with Black Mountain, especially when Olson worked there, aesthetic theory was far from immune from this influence.

The ecological quality of Olson's work at Black Mountain is evident in both his poetics and many of the intellectual sources he drew upon while teaching there. While Whitehead's phenomenology constitutes an important philosophical foundation to Olson's work, perhaps the most explicitly ecological writer connected with Black Mountain was editor and poet, Richard Grossinger. Grossinger was too young to have ever visited the college (he was only 12 when it shut its doors), yet both Olson and Duncan became familiar with his work in the 1960s.¹⁵ Likewise, Grossinger was heavily influenced by Olson's poetry, publishing what he called his own "proprioceptive study of the

¹⁵ Both Olson and Duncan contributed articles for Grossinger's journal, *Io*, published in the 1960s. It should be noted, however, that, according to Ralph Maud, nothing of Richard Grossinger's, except for a few issues of this

natural world" in 1970, *Solar Journal: Oecological Sections*. In Grossinger's ecological readings of the postwar landscape a very strong correlation between natural process and social structure stands revealed. This is especially clear in Grossinger's etymological presentation of the very word ecology. Recalling the word's common linguistic root in the Greek term *oikumene* meaning "law of the house," Grossinger spells ecology with a capital "O." For Grossinger, the more integrated and ordered a social system is, the more it reflects larger, natural coherences. The symbolic framework he believes best exemplifies such coherences is that of the household or home, universalised here as a sort of primal space of human dwelling. Within the house, all events, all processes are interpreted collectively to represent this larger totality. For Grossinger, the system as home displays a transcendental logic, displacing all previous discourses of value, including both ideology and economy. Grossinger comments, "the house has been built, and we've been living in it all these many years, and we're long past the time of deciding whether it's beautiful or functional. We've got to begin living in it."¹⁶

Similar to Olson, Grossinger offers his readers a new epistemology or paradigm of object relations. In his vision of

journal, was ever found in Olson's library.

¹⁶ Richard Grossinger, *Solar Journal; Oecological Sections* (Los Angeles: Black Sparrow Press, 1970) 8.

nature as home, a distinct sensibility or language of spirit appears, providing its subjects with both a way of seeing and the social grounding to support it. Unlike Olson, Grossinger has little trouble qualifying this language as universal, a point frequently emphasised throughout his work *Solar Journal* (especially in the Oecological Sections), in which Egyptian hieroglyphs are able to interact with both astrological zodiacs and urban traffic lights with very little loss in translation. "Every motion," writes Grossinger, "wind through trees, blue warpaint on the forehead, taste of pig flesh is as real, is universal" (31). Such is the cosmology described by Grossinger, and implicit in some of the more extreme expressions of social ecology. Absorbing all conflict between universal and particular wills, Grossinger's poetics reflects, at a basic level, a very holistic cultural logic. He uses many of the same terms Altieri associates exclusively with postmodern aesthetics, including immanence and being, while, like Olson, placing enormous value on concepts of "place." Grossinger's flirtation with linguistic consciousness might be situated, thus, within the larger political and moral idealism evident in postwar American thought and writing.

Yet, as with Olson's search for real "Kingfishers," it is useless to seek in Grossinger's oecological journal a single symbolic key or legend that might formally reveal the inherent

connection between "the taste of pig flesh" and "wind through trees." To do so would only re-emphasise certain categorical differences between the two phenomena, while obscuring the deeper, more important coherences that bind the oecological community. A more relevant knowledge of the world compared to that offered within mainstream culture must emphasise the larger patterns connecting all phenomena.

God is food, is pig, is thought of warfare,
is toss of spear, blue separate from red, is
red, is cold and moist, is petrol, is the
storm petrel, is a great petroleum drill on
the plains of Oz is cold and moist, is
sulphuric acid, is the urine of the horse,
is motion sizzling one step ahead of the
cognitive ether, twined in every snap of the
bow, is a face behind a dream, is generative
grammar, the yeast rising in the ovens, is
seen from a body of frayed whipped skin
because that priest is at a slant to the
earth and can feel its invisible rays. (16)

For Grossinger, "God" or the universal will exists purely in process, regardless of the various forms this will may take. Individual identities and structures in Grossinger's thought become subordinate to a larger harmony or holism. Importantly, this sense of harmony cannot be categorised in itself. Yet it is more than the sum of its parts. Structures and various paradigms (for example, food, petroleum and urine) may exemplify the universal will for a particular moment in time and space, but they cannot permanently capture it. In contrast to traditional epistemologies of the West, Grossinger's discourse describes a

very different set of guidelines for determining cultural coherence between phenomena. Questions of fixed epistemological definition seem considerably difficult to pinpoint, for within the philosophy of social ecology, discursive boundaries and limits have become largely extraneous. Any debate over which areas of this particular cultural "house" are more relevant than others tends to overlook this feature of a wider, "informing spirit" supporting the various texts and identities. At best such critiques can only appear inauthentic and insincere. Gaps in knowledge are far less threatening to the overall order of the cultural continuum in which they appear, as what remains questionable or ambiguous in one narrative may appear more meaningful in relation to some other text. No paradigm is permanent. New rooms are continuously being added or moved within the house. "What does not change / is the will to change."

Grossinger's particular ecological theory conforms well to the ideas and practises of "deep ecology." The deep ecology movement began in the 1960s, distinguishing itself from other ecological theories through its high reverence for nature and natural laws. It is not enough to have environmental concerns, most deep ecologists argue; a truly effective ecological theory

must acknowledge society's actual "one-ness" with nature.¹⁷ Like Grossinger, for deep ecologists, the search for cultural value begins with asserting the naturalness of humans living in harmony with the environment. The first step towards this harmony, according to Grossinger, is in admitting the power which natural laws have over all cultural and social affairs and to try to accommodate them rather than work against them. Nature is seen here as an overall benevolent force, a nurturing framework as opposed to the more traditional western view of it as a type of chaotic space or unstructured environment needing control. Grossinger writes,

Here is where the universe eluded Newton, where he cast out his more obsessive and discontinuous thoughts, which burned in a physical experiment, sparks crackling, the snake spitting light between the spheres, a faint glow filling gap. And the dance of the benzenes is also back and forth, switching between double and single bonds, the house held up in the interim just as the body is during the oscillation of thought, for there is only an interim. In the gap we live. (16)

Accepting our place within nature to be in the interim, that is, in the gap between shifting forces and events, is tantamount to discovering our true role as humans. Ironically, it is Newton and western science (despite its emphasis on linear thinking) that Grossinger characterises as discontinuous, not the

¹⁷ See for example, the work of Steven Vogel, William McKibben, in particular, *The Death of Nature*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990) and John Lovelock, *The Ages of Gaia: A Biography of our Living Earth* (Oxford: Oxford University

discourse of "oecology." Though Grossinger may shift from topic to topic throughout his writing, his faith in natural principles informing his thought provides an overarching, conceptual coherence to his work. Fragmentation in process, he notes, signals larger unities. Epistemologies that attempt to control nature through fixed definitions and identities encourage little more than the human subject's alienation from actual truths or meanings within the universe.

Knowledge of nature and society, according to Grossinger, can still be recorded and communicated even if it doesn't provide fixed definitions. In other words, it is still possible to write about the world while taking into consideration its tendency towards change and discontinuity. One example of a type of writing or aesthetics capable of capturing natural truths or meanings, he notes, is Michel Foucault's concept of "signatures, ...diagnostic occurrences in the Fabric of the World."¹⁸ The signature, he notes, expertly locates any object within a wider tableau of variable meanings and identities. The mere act of an insect landing on a sick man, for example, becomes suddenly "readable" when situated as a signature within the context of an ecosystem. Comparable to Olson's compositional field or projective poetics, Foucault's ecological signatures provide a particularly inclusive paradigm of meaning able to subordinate

even the most radical shifts in identity to a larger "field" of interrelated ideas and concepts. As we've seen in "The Kingfishers," the short fragment detailing the actions of "He" — an unnamed protagonist — appears at first meaningless as an isolated narrative:

He had left the party without a word. How he got up,
/got into his coat,
I do not know. When I saw him, he was at the door, but
/it did not matter,
He was already sliding along the wall of the night,
/losing himself
in some crack of the ruins. (SP 5)

Like this figure, the reader, too, seems perpetually on the verge of becoming lost between the ruins or fragmented remnants of some previously complete narrative. Each subsequent discursive interruption further disorients the reader's perspective. At one point, searching diligently for some small coherence, the reader might be inspired to consider the possible "symbolism" of his leaving the party with respect to the "kingfishers'" own mysterious absence throughout the rest of the poem. No explicit clue emerges, however, to verify this association. Projective verse refuses to make symbolic references. Past details of other characters and narratives disappear as quickly as they first surfaced. A perpetual amnesia or lack of fixed context continues to plague the reader through the entire piece as positions and perspectives constantly shift

¹⁸ Grossinger, "Signatures in the World," *Io* (1966): 35.

and evolve from section to section. Yet while few distinct identities within this structure remain constant or stable, when considered as signatures within an ecosystem, such references nevertheless form specific patterns and congruencies. Comparable to an ecological sensitivity, the reader's ongoing awareness of some possible larger meaning prevents the poem from sinking completely into an ambiguous mess of contradictions.

After Fernand's lisping narrative of "Albers and Angkor Vat," an even more obscure reference is made to the attrition of kingfishers as a source of exchange value. The unnamed protagonist exclaims in the monologue:

...That it should have been he who said, "The Kingfishers!
Who cares
for their feathers
now?"

..."the kingfishers' feathers were wealth why
did the export stop?" (SP 5)

As a "signature" of obsolete exchange value, i.e., some long lost political economy, "The Kingfishers" continue to indicate primarily discursive interruption and discontinuity. Once a stable medium of exchange, perhaps the economic foundation of an entire ruling stratum, kingfisher feathers appear more significant now in their virtual absence from all cultural narratives. In "Section 2," their lack of "symbolic" grandeur is emphasised further. What mythological import these birds may have once possessed seems to have vanished long ago. The

kingfisher, Olson notes, will no longer "indicate / a favouring wind, / or aver the thunderbolt. Nor, by its resting, / still the waters, with the new year, for seven days" (SP 6). If the birds invoke any significance at present it is that of refuse or discarded debris, in short, a type of "waste land." The lives of young kingfishers, he informs us (quoting from the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*), are associated exclusively with "rejectamenta" - the stuff of death and transience. Olson is liberal with his details.

And, as they are fed and grow, this nest of excrement
/and decayed fish becomes
a dripping, foetid mass. (SP 6)

Such imagery, however, does not invite a nostalgic mourning for their lost associations with economic value and political power. Far from constituting a sense of loss and failure, these more recent allusions together evoke a new source of development and regeneration. Within the natural or ecological environment of these birds, excrement signifies not waste but nourishment. Subsequently, in the life cycle of a kingfisher, Olson locates one of his most important concepts of knowledge in general. Due to its instinctive tendency to re-use or recycle objects of decay in its everyday activity, the kingfisher's very existence automatically aligns itself with the natural process of the feedback mechanism. The cyclic nature of this process

subsequently imputes an especial holism to the kingfishers' life and, by extension, the poem itself.

Interpreted in this manner, the strange proclivity of the kingfisher for nesting on decayed fish parts becomes nothing less than a new model of objectivity, effectively replacing what Zukofsky laboriously sought to attribute to the more formal "optical objective," and Pound to the ideogram. In Olson's ecological reading of the Real, no such pretence to formal structure is needed. The various elements of "rejectamenta," the fish bones, the bare clay, the excrement, constitute in themselves fundamental stages of a potentially greater, more complete knowledge of what these kingfishers actually are. It is this principle of continuous construction and evolution that further informs the poem's entire architecture, generating its aesthetic form. The text may be fragmented with many leaps of thought, but whenever it turns to new materials, it does so with an intensity of vision and specificity that only adds to the poem's overall structural harmony. There are no actual waste products in Olson's landscape, for no object or image is without value when considered within the larger cycle of natural change, of growth and decline. In fact, each image appears to fulfil itself by not fulfilling itself, thereby constituting the grounds for future regeneration. In "The Kingfishers," the very process of construction remains inextricably linked to that of

destruction or decay. Every loss is recompensed, in advance, by its dialectical relationship to birth or renewal. Paradoxically, then, it is precisely those images most evocative of notions of waste and excrement that tend to provide the poem with its primary sources of conceptual vitality and value. Only where objects are in the process of natural decomposition can a more dynamic process of rejuvenation apparently be outlined. In order to uncover "honey," Olson concludes the work, one must be prepared to encounter "maggots" (SP 12).

Read in tandem with Grossinger's concept of the Oecological signature, each disjunctive turning in the poem references a larger, often hidden, fabric of identities. Just as Grossinger in his "Oecological Journals" is able to configure a possible hybrid meaning out of "shaman ritual" and "rock and roll," a new alphabet out of an "atmospheric frontal system" and "the paying of electric bills," Olson, too, finds much that is "readable" in what, in his own terms, appears as a new sense of perpetual transition,

...a state between
the origin and
the end, between
birth and the beginning of
another foetid nest (SP 9)

These are the particulars of Olson's revisionary poetics. So inclusive is his sensibility, so extensive, that nothing, no identity, is able to escape or even function outside its logic.

Olson's poetics of process, as we've seen, contrasts sharply with both Pound's and Eliot's earlier emphases on form and technique. With respect to the ecological concerns that emerge from this contrast, it seems further possible to situate Olson's work within a distinct homology of postwar texts and narratives. The defining characteristics of this homology recall Altieri's description of postmodern poetry, namely: epistemological relativism, immanence, authenticity, place and, of course, the ever-present emphasis on process. Other postwar art works and practices besides poetry exhibited similar qualities such as the American painting movements of automatism and abstract expression, eurythmic dance, gestalt therapy and bebop jazz styles in music. Much of the art at Black Mountain was engaged with one or more of these movements, as might be noted in the choreography of Merce Cunningham and the visual art of Franz Kline and Robert Rauschenberg, to name a few. In a lecture given shortly after Olson's death in 1970, Robert Duncan specifically links Proprioception to gestalt theory and action painting.

He had the term "field composition" which I'd seen before and thought about in relation to painting. The gestalt had advanced the "field composition" of painting [so] that intention does not move pointedly around a painting; the eye actually rediscovers the painting with different paths. You look at painting somehow in its entirety. Then the great question came up

with the gestalt: don't we read the same way? Scan the entire area we're reading and then read into it so that we're already in an advanced state of recognition without much time passing at all. ("Projective Project: Charles Olson," SP 29-30)

Focusing on Olson's anti-formalism, Duncan uses gestalt theory to address the epistemological claims he sees in projective verse. Such references are consistent with Olson's own view of his work as an actual "stance to reality." Within these "field compositions," Duncan suggests, a unique interdependence between form and content provides the reader with the necessary perspective to interpret the work before actually reading it. In other words, each field composition evokes simultaneously a mode of communication as well as an individual message. One does not interpret an Olson poem so much as one "scans" it, participates in its overall vision. It is a communicative process, moreover, that Olson further qualified as the "advantage of speech rhythms," i.e., a sense of language that was "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" ("Letter to Elaine Feinstein" SW 27).

The strong visual emphasis in Duncan's reading of Olson may derive chiefly from Duncan's own retrospective glance at the action paintings of his companion, Jess, who likely first

introduced Duncan to gestalt therapy. Jess had been using the techniques of "field composition" in his paintings since the early 1950s. In fact, for most writers and artists who, like Jess and Duncan, had worked at Black Mountain, the aesthetic possibilities of gestalt were hardly new in 1972. After the arrival of Paul Goodman, co-author of *Gestalt Therapy* (1946),¹⁹ at Black Mountain in 1950, many students and teachers alike became well versed in his psychology of spontaneous awareness in a cognitive field or *gestalt*. Joel Oppenheimer credited Goodman's class with opening for him entire new modes of awareness.²⁰ Robert Motherwell, who taught painting at Black Mountain that same year, also used field theory in his classes on the visual arts and had suggested as early as 1946 that gestalt psychology might provide the basis for a new theory for the social role of art, one that in turn would help distinguish the new American painting from earlier European modernisms such as surrealism. He wrote,

For the goal which lies beyond the strictly aesthetic, the French artists say the "unknown" or the "new," after Baudelaire and Rimbaud..."Structure" or "gestalt" may be more accurate: reality has no degrees nor is there a "super" one (surréalisme)...Structures are found in the interaction of the body-mind and the

¹⁹ Paul Goodman, Frederick S. Perls and Ralph F. Hefferline, *Gestalt Therapy: Excitement and Growth in the Human Personality* (New York: Julian Press, 1951).

²⁰ Martin Duberman, *Black Mountain: An Exploration in Community* (New York: Dutton, 1972) 377.

external world, and the body-mind is active and aggressive in finding them.²¹

In re-asserting the link between avant-garde art and gestalt psychology, therefore, Duncan recalls a central component in the intellectual context surrounding Olson's early writing.

This is not to suggest that Olson's poetry, or Black Mountain aesthetics in general, derive from a single set of related texts. If the inspiration for the college's foundation could be linked to any one philosophy or school of thought, the Deweyian pragmatism that founder Jim Rice followed would certainly be the most logical choice. Yet, here, too, the multiple interests and developments that would characterise Black Mountain's pedagogical maturation problematise even this relationship. I would rather suggest that common discursive threads within postwar American counterculture find their most capable definition in the discourse of ecology also emerging after 1945. If one follows Altieri's association of the postmodern with phenomenology, the influence of Hegelian philosophy on postwar American thought is also evident. In fact, given its emphasis upon epistemological relativism and anti-deterministic thinking, postmodernist theory in general offered a profound reconsideration of Hegelian phenomenology within a variety of different philosophies and discourses, including

²¹ Robert Motherwell, "Beyond the Aesthetic" (April 1946); reprinted in *The Collected Writings of Robert Motherwell*, ed. Stephanie Terenzio (New York:

existentialism and anarcho-syndicalism. As Marxist criticism fell in influence, so, too, did its often misunderstood repudiation of Hegel. Dialectical reasoning, with its stress on process and constant thesis-antithesis engagement, presented postwar intellectuals with an effective counter-argument against development-based theories of society, like modernism and social Darwinism. Contemporary re-readings of gestalt psychology through Hegelian philosophy further suggest the common intellectual "heritage" of much American intellectual activity in general here.²² Echoing Hegel's notion of universal development through dialectical sublation, any meaning or truth value that emerges in Olson's early poems does so through its own negation. That is to say, consciousness maintains itself by way of negative self-relating, subordinating its particular will to some conception of a larger pattern or structure. According to Hegel in *Phenomenology*,

In the world of culture (*Bildung*) itself, it [self-consciousness] does not get as far as to behold its negation or alienation in this form of pure abstraction; on the contrary, its negation is filled with a content, either honour or wealth, which it gains in place of the self that it has alienated from itself; or the language of Spirit and insight which the disrupted consciousness acquires; or it is the heaven of faith, or

Oxford University Press, 1992) 36

²² see for example, Eugene Graziano, *Language-operational-gestalt awareness: a radically empirical and pragmatic phenomenology of the processes and systems of library experience* (Tempe, AZ: Association for Library Automation Research Communications, 1975)

the Utility of the Enlightenment. All these determinations have vanished in the loss suffered by the self in absolute freedom; its negation is the death that is without meaning, the sheer terror of the negative that contains nothing positive, nothing that fills it with a content. At the same time, however, this negation in its real existence is not something alien; it is neither the universal inaccessible necessity in which the ethical world perishes, nor the particular accident of private possession, nor the whim of the owner on which the disrupted consciousness sees itself dependent; on the contrary, it is the universal will which in this its ultimate abstraction has nothing positive and therefore can give nothing in return for the sacrifice. But for that very reason it is because it is the pure negative; and the meaningless death, the unfilled negativity of the self, changes round in its inner Notion into absolute positivity. (362)

In Hegel, western self-consciousness, derived as it is from the epistemological split between subject and object, can achieve knowledge of itself only through negation, since any positive determination of something depends ultimately upon abstraction. Failure to note this tendency towards the abstract in epistemology results in false consciousness, that is, a subjectivity bound, however loosely, in some pre-determined cultural discourse, such as, say, utilitarianism, a religious faith, or merely a love of wealth. In this way, Hegel's critique of abstraction parallels much of the postwar counterculture's specific epistemological imperatives, especially with respect to their mistrust of ideological polemics and economic determinism.

Both positions proceeded to investigate a more open, boundless conception of knowledge and its actual principles. In Hegelian thought, however, the dialectical progress of history and civic society embodied a universal, determinate idea of "Spirit" that acted from within and outside individual historical circumstances. Few postwar countercultural movements offered this type of philosophical or aesthetic grounding, relying more on the repudiation of all determinations, whether material or metaphysical in origin.

Olson's important dismissal of subjectivism follows a Hegelian logic. In "Human Universe" (1951), Olson labels Platonic idealism with its penchant for universal forms "as dangerous an issue as is logic and classification" (CP 157). Abstraction "in definition and expression," he notes, must be exposed as having little or no truth value: "these are the false faces, too much seen, which hide and keep from use the active intellectual states, metaphor and performance" ("Human Universe," SW 157).

Olson rarely referred to Hegel in his work. The most direct application of Hegelian philosophy appears in "The Special View History," where he quotes extensively from *The Logic of Hegel*, translated by William Wallace. As much as Hegel's dialectical sense of history generally complemented Olson's own work, enough contrasts between the two perspectives rendered them ultimately

incompatible. In Ralph Maud's view, "in the end, [Olson] has to abandon Hegel, who is interested in result rather than staying in the condition of things" (105). Nevertheless, several distinct conjunctive themes appear in both Hegel's and Olson's thoughts, leading one to speculate about the central significance of Hegelian logic in postwar countercultural thinking in general.

Comparisons of postwar counter-cultural initiatives to Hegelian phenomenology inevitably emphasise the especial holism through sublation common in each set of discourses. Rather than dispute evidence of this holism, it seems more critically accurate to associate postwar American counterculture with a specific set of epistemological imperatives at this time. Many Black Mountain poets, Olson included, explicitly envisioned their work as part of a larger cultural "spirit" or discourse of value. The revisionary aspects of Olson's work at the college have parallels in a variety of other media and cultural movements, ranging from New Left socialism and improvisational jazz to abstract expressionism. Understood together, these movements evoke a type of collective statement against conventional notions of cultural orthodoxy – whether they are based in ideology or some metaphysical vision of moral standards. Emphasising the aesthetic basis of all social formations made it possible for many postwar writers and artists

to argue for a complete rejection of explicit social doctrine in their work. Since it was through artistic production that a culture developed, it might be possible, many intellectuals believed, to precipitate a change in the social structure through a change in epistemology, arrived at through experimental art. The artist, Wolfgang Paalen, writing in the avant-garde magazine *Dyn*, considered all socially inspired art to be dictated by conservative ideologies: "The true value of the artistic image does not depend upon its capacity to represent, but upon its capacity to prefigure, i.e., upon its capacity to express potentially a new order of things...Everything that opens the way for new possibilities of experience is revolutionary — without the need of superimposed finalities."²³ Paalen demonstrates in this passage a fairly Romanticist vision of the social role of artists, echoing, in some ways, Shelley's concept of the poet as unacknowledged legislator. Such allusions to Romanticism again confirm the anti-modernist quality in much postwar thought. What should be stressed, therefore, is the immanent, anti-doctrinal quality of this formation, and its direct intellectual attachment to the ecological thought developing through and around it.

The primary point of reference regarding Olson's aesthetics remains in this context, not Hegel, but the immanent critique

²³ Wolfgang Paalen, "The New Image," trans. Robert Motherwell, *Dyn* 1 (Spring

found in much postwar western counterculture of the more formal, ideology-based revisionary modernisms of Pound, Zukofsky and, to an extent, Williams. As I've suggested, the shift in "optics," in the poetic eye, implied by Olson's critique of earlier modernisms is emblematic of a much larger transformation of America's counterculture in general. Various ways of qualifying this development can be outlined with respect to the emergence of specific disciplines within the discourse of social ecology. The most evident difference in America between these newer ecological movements and previous countercultural writings lies in each generation's respective relationship to ideology and the politics of cultural expression. Both Grossinger and Olson present their work not so much as a new set of cultural forms as an alternate stance towards all form in general. Again, compatible with most tenets of social ecology, the aesthetics of projectivism demonstrate a conscious rejection of ends, affirming instead a "negative will" placed in the service of self-overcoming. Movement becomes here the primary objective, not just a secondary means to an eventual finish or climax. Olson's perspective depends rather strongly on a resolute confrontation with constant process as an authentic experience of freedom. This notion may, in fact, correspond closely to Hegel's concept of "absolute" freedom through self-negation;

more significantly, Olson's poetics provides an important counter-argument to the aesthetic formalisms of writers like Pound and Eliot, writers for whom culture continued to describe distinct moral imperatives. Their more categorical (and, in Pound's case, ideologically explicit) view of culture encouraged a more class-conscious sense of objectivity as an economic construct — hence, Pound's proclivity to consider his poetics a medium of exchange comparable in function to any other currency or form of capital. As we will see, in Pound, a new poetics had much to contribute to both the political and economic reform of the modern state.

No such penchant for political doctrine operated in the ecological discourse of the postwar period. Any attempt to reconstruct a fixed paradigm of objectivity, as one might introduce a new currency or means of financial exchange, violated, according to the "eco-sensibility," a much deeper code of natural process. The possibility of even defining one's subjectivity or consciousness as a fixed or formal perspective seemed almost fanciful in its anthropomorphic conceits.

Grossinger writes,

We are things across night and across day.
We are dreamers, dreamed; we feel our
bodies, feel like holdfasts; it won't hold.
We are loose; we won't hold...we are the
lights we imagine we see, the saucers,
neutrinos, comets, fields of Egypt...We are

drunk. We have worms. We are a thousand
people wanting to speak, and now are. (30-1)

In Grossinger's vision, the poles of subject and object have more or less merged, producing an ever-shifting sensorium. Personal and, hence, poetic objectivity in this framework is not so much in question, as it is completely questionable, since, the true limits of epistemology can never be fully determined. Given the phenomenologically inebriated state of the modern sensorium, any notion of objectivity evokes little beyond fragmented, half-formed perceptions and momentary flashes of intuition. If a position of subjectivity begins to emerge here, it does so on the very edge of its own dissolution, radically sacrificing its particular will for a higher, yet unseen, natural law. The result of this sacrifice is a subject that remains permanently split according to a variety of disparate, internal impulses and desires. For Pound, such a view of culture only added to the confused state of contemporary Euro-American epistemology. Yet within the context of an eco-system, the possibility of an active, progressive intellectual stance depended upon constant process and a respect for difference above all else. Meaningful patterns and relationships between objects could never be forced, but, instead, coaxed to emerge gradually and of themselves out of the surrounding environment.

The web of contacts envisioned by Grossinger would not fail to reveal itself, given the right stance or orientation.

Ecological studies, informed as they were by a complex plurality of interrelated narratives, repudiated all ideology-based doctrines or systems. So its emergence as a discourse marks a significant development in America's political economy as it developed after World War II. Characterisations of this discourse²⁴ have tended to emphasise a complex series of attitudes and informal beliefs non-specific to any explicit ideology or political apparatus. As we've seen with ecologists like Kroeber, the very concept of an ecosystem opposes all traditional notions of schema, political or otherwise. The specific details of an ecosystem, Kroeber notes, are always more important than their formal organisation as a totality. Still more significant, he adds, is the overall energy flow through the various sections of ecosystems. As an epistemology, ecology provided a radically new paradigm of knowledge itself, challenging traditionally empiricist grounds of cognition and identity. In theory, the structure and function of the ecosystem could be explained best in terms of energy transformations. Kroeber follows this logic in his work when he characterises the ecosystem as a "self-transforming continuity."

²⁴ See for example John Porritt and Dennis Winter, *The Coming of the Greens* (London: Fontana, 1984) and E.F., *Good Work* (London: Abacus, 1973) who emphasise as a point of principle that ecological writers are neither left

The person primarily responsible for this emphasis on energy in the study of ecosystems was Howard Odum. Odum, as David Pepper points out, was unique among ecosystem ecologists in that he reduced all ecological parameters, bio-mass, diversity, essential chemical elements, feedback mechanisms, etc. into energy (68). Although his major work, *Environment, Power and Society* (1963) had little impact on the intellectual climate of the postwar period, his energy-based approach to ecosystems influenced a large number of disciplines in both the human sciences and the arts. Energy, as we've seen with respect to the arts at Black Mountain, continued to be a particularly vital trope within the counter-cultural art movements of the early postwar period. At the same time, within postwar aesthetics both economic and political references in the arts become increasingly veiled, if not completely hidden. Despite his ongoing commitment to social change in American society, Olson along with most Black Mountain artists consciously avoided all direct mention of ideology.

An important distinction to make here is that Olson's lack of interest in ideology and economic theory does not automatically imply a corresponding disregard for social issues. Olson, as befitting his background in politics and civil service, continued to evoke strong social concerns in his

nor right, but "forward" or "above the old politics" (Schumacher, 1973 35).

writing. His teaching at Black Mountain went beyond conventional pedagogy, propounding at times a complete amendment of art and general humanities programmes at the post-secondary level. Such theories, however, though social in quality, were rarely advanced as a set of explicit visions or ideals. Part of the revisionary nature of Olson's writing lay in its complex approach to philosophical or theoretical enquiry in general. Before social structure could be altered, Olson argued, an entirely different mode of perception would need to be engaged - one that repudiated abstract principles at every level of thought.

That a new cultural discourse of value is in operation informing these disparate narratives continues to be evident in their respective tones and themes. Grossinger's inebriated sensorium, swimming in a vast sea of constantly mobile phenomena, for example, parallels well many other revisionary sociological and anthropological studies published at mid-century. A small sampling of such work would include the scholarship of Gregory Bateson, Murray Bookchin and Karl Polanyi. Focusing primarily on pre-industrial social structures, such as kinship groups, and nomadic camps, these studies also tended to conceive social relations as fluid, ongoing processes. Like Grossinger, they emphasised their own growing scepticism within their respective fields of study about discovering

objective epistemological standards. Together these discourses reveal an important postwar response within the human sciences to the perceived failures of logical empiricism, on the one hand, and all ideology-based epistemologies, on the other.

Given its prevalence among postwar intellectuals, the ecological response to ideology and traditional science clearly reveals a new social formation or cultural sensibility emerging within the US at this time. For the purpose of this dissertation, this discourse further supplies the most perceptible intellectual context behind the development of Black Mountain aesthetics, especially during Olson's rectorship. Most of the writers, artists and critics working at Black Mountain at mid-century were highly conscious of participating in some larger, collectively organised break with the political and cultural prerogatives of the recent past. Yet it was primarily ecological theorists who categorically defined this break in the form of a new academic discipline. As an institutional discourse, complete with its own formal methodology and objectives, ecological theory acquired an especial cultural legitimacy, while similar directions in art and literature remained relatively obscure.

The inherent plurality of different narratives and approaches in the field ensured its wide influence within the academy. Writers as diverse as sociologists, Howard Odum, Karl

Polanyi and the anthropologist Gregory Bateson, all identified ecological theory as the most progressive and innovative theory of society since Marxism. Once again, emphasising process over product, objectivity over definition, the concept of the "ecosystem" respected few discipline boundaries and instead offered theorists a radically new perception of knowledge itself. Unlike earlier Marxist critiques, therefore, ecological theory did not envision some final re-structuring of society; nor did it identify possible sources of this type of change - such as the re-distribution of economic and political power to the working classes. Although economic modes of production constituted important determinants of class structure, for ecological theorists, they no longer evoked the sole basis of social relations. In general, ecological sociology produced few social maxims. Definitions of social unity depended upon more than just a shared economic base; they expressed a complex system of widely varied relations and influences, including the epistemological, the spiritual and even chance inspirations. Few ecological theories prioritised a single source of social influence, and, subsequently, no two studies or even disciplines offer the exact same framework of state relations. References to ecological concepts appear throughout the postwar human sciences and arts, including anthropology, political theory and many forms of philosophy. Yet such pluralism in theory hardly

affected the cultural legitimacy of the discourse as a whole. In fact, what continues to hold ecological thought together in all of its disparate studies and disciplines is precisely this repudiation of social determinism in any form.

True to its agenda, ecological theory functions here in my dissertation, not as a single sociology, but rather as a network of related studies on human society and culture. Its value to my own investigation of Olson and Black Mountain aesthetics lies exactly in its indeterminism; for such a sensibility defines best not just the work, but the motivation and epistemology behind it.

Before continuing our analysis of Olson, Black Mountain aesthetics and their respective relationships, we need to investigate more closely specific ecological studies, especially those published concurrently with Olson's work at the college. The particular epistemological imperatives common to these writings seem most thoroughly analysed in the theory of Karl Polanyi, Gregory Bateson and Murray Bookchin among others. The following chapter will study further several exemplary texts produced at roughly the same time in which Olson and other Black Mountain writers were engaged in their own experiments in poetics and theory.

The analytical aims of this dissertation are twofold. An historical topography of the immediate political context behind

ecological theory and aesthetics seems necessary to explain more fully both the ideological choices these writers and artists made and the resulting new disciplines. As we've seen, ecocentrism emphasised a holistic sense of culture as an intrinsically integrated system of shared beliefs and practices. Historically and politically this cultural paradigm has several important sources. Perhaps the primary political context of ecological writing and theory lies in the emergence in the postwar west of an aggressive, information-based economy, polarised by two violent ideologically opposed military movements.

By no means is it possible to demonstrate within a single study every intricate thematic and lexical connection informing the core intellectual mood after 1945. Yet a more inclusive cultural analysis of postwar revisionary art and writing demands an investigation of not just the dominant sensibility of this period, but the political contexts in which it flourished. Chapter Three will outline in detail some of the massive cultural changes endemic to this particular political economy and the responses intellectuals made to them. In particular this chapter will isolate the overt political objectives of American conservatism after 1945, with an especial focus on the cultural influences of the cold war and the use of psychological coercion in government. Threatened by ideologically subversive elements

both within and outside the US, the American government affected an even stronger, more profound psychopathology of the everyday, outlining precise roles and services for its intellectuals, writers and artists.

Chapter Four will explore in more detail exactly what these roles were, situating the New Criticism and other mainstream cultural movements of the mid-century within the larger, Gramscian paradigm of "public intellectual labour." This paradigm will then be analysed as one of the major political and cultural developments (alongside the rise of totalitarianism in Europe) that inspired writers and artists in the US to consider alternative, less partisan approaches to their work.

Chapter Five will look specifically at the role of Pound as a threat to postwar American culture and, therefore, an object of state discipline. Captured in Italy after the fall of the fascist state, Pound was later flown to Washington D.C. to stand trial for his somewhat vituperative radio broadcasts against American involvement in World War II. What the Pound problem further emphasised for intellectuals both on the Left and in the Centre was the critical need for a philosophy that successfully transcended the political limitations of conventional ideologies.

Chapter Six explores further Olson's personal repudiation of Pound's poetics and his subsequent embrace of the Black

Mountain environment. Black Mountain itself will be described as an especial social formation with strong philosophical roots in the corresponding field of ecological anthropology. The chapter will then analyse these roots, paying close attention to the specific philosophical sources Olson himself used. In general I hope that by resituating the revisionary modernism of Olson and Black Mountain College with respect to the political and cultural contexts in which this aesthetics evolved, some of its particular qualities as a discourse of value will become clearer. Faced with the rapid erosion of all ideological opposition to hegemony and the harsh cultural policing of the cold war state, intellectuals at mid-century become increasingly sceptical of their capacity to provide ideological or direct political change in American society. Black Mountain College, though highly radical in objectives and mandate, was no exception to this tendency. Its somewhat aloof disdain for academic professionalism on the one hand and political polemics on the other derived in part from a collective anxiety over the mixture of politics and cultural production in the postwar era. However, the poetics subsequently engendered there reflects ultimately the high, newly developed "ecocentric" optimism that a more balanced ideological and epistemological integration could evolve either within or in spite of the new cultural markets.

Chapter Two

Ideology and its Discontents: the New Social Ecology

One better-known writer who exemplifies ecological thinking is Gregory Bateson. Bateson began publishing in 1942 when he collaborated with his first wife, anthropologist Margaret Mead, on a study of Balinese culture entitled, *Balinese Character: A Photographic Analysis*. What followed were several other collaborations crossing between the disciplinary fields of psychiatry and anthropology. His most widely read effort to date remains the collection of essays that resulted from these collaborations: an assortment of influential cross-disciplinary works culled from over twenty years of research. Part cultural theory, part psychology with a strong attachment to genuine field research, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (1971) devised a completely new series of conceptual connections and patterns across many disparate areas of study. Bateson qualified these patterns as a distinctly "aesthetic" ordering of information, preferring analogies of poetry, art and rhetoric rather than traditional empiricist assumptions about knowledge. The object of an ecology, writes Bateson, is not so much a fixed framework of knowledge, as a less formal sense of general relevance "shared by all mind or minds, whether ours or those of redwood

forests and sea anemones" (*Mind and Nature* 13). Redwood forests, in other words, can display the attributes of intelligence (like communication) as much as human societies can; for in each interlocking aggregate of organisms messages can be exchanged. Mind, Bateson theorises, is immanent, i.e., a part of all natural systems, human or otherwise.

Outlining highly fluid, indefinite concepts of both perception and information, Bateson relates a framework of knowledge comparable to Grossinger's own complex sense of discursive connections. His understanding of epistemology disputes any sense of fixed cardinal difference between phenomena, while rejecting all abstract categories of knowledge as falsely reified concepts. When he worked with Mead in Bali, he depended exclusively upon photography in an effort to preserve the integrity of his data as an ongoing process. Mere diagrams or drawings betrayed too much subjectivity and authorial input, he believed, to capture the actual intricacies of the place and phenomena being observed. Photographs, by contrast, were "noisy," i.e., filled with descriptive detail and particularity, evoking a more complete presentation of context to study and discover. Similarly, Bateson's later investigations into psychiatry and the mental-health field evoked much revulsion on his part against the deliberate manipulation of patients and their environments by supposedly qualified

therapists. In what might be called a lifelong preoccupation, Bateson worked consistently to protect the autonomy of nature from all forms of abstraction in thought and reason. Whether they originated in empiricism or ideology, fixed epistemological principles did little but promote unilateral power relations within a state or society. By contrast, an "ecology of mind" pursued the more significant "discovery that man is only a part of larger [social and ecological] systems" over which there could and should be little control (*Steps to an Ecology of Mind* 434). Positions of observation and supposition, in Bateson's work, subsequently tend to blur into one another. Perception, he reasoned, derived not from the individual organism but the "larger system" informing all mental processes. Hence, no single position or perceptual stance could be determined exclusive of the larger meta-pattern of identities constantly surrounding it. Similar to Grossinger, Bateson offers a cosmology that recognises few natural epistemic limits. The boundaries of where one object's identity ends and another's begins become almost impossible to delimit, as all individual ties or definitions are effectively subsumed within the overarching dynamic of nature itself. Knowledge, in Bateson's "whole systems" approach to the science of mind, signifies homology above all else, since the entire system can never be defined or even seen from any one particular position. To organise one's observations from a fixed

perspective is tantamount to imposing a complete moral agenda on processes and events that may have originated far beyond the confines of the observer's social order. However, insights into these alternate systems of thought and behaviour are not automatic, since the observer can never completely escape the biases of his or her original position. Different parts or ideas within a system can but echo other parts without ever revealing the system itself. Referencing the newest medium in his day, Bateson compared consciousness to the television set - able to display only one channel or one part of the whole broadcast system at a time. "Such a report...of the total process would require extra circuitry. But to report on the events in this extra circuitry would require a still further addition of more circuitry, and so on. Each additional step toward increased consciousness will take the system farther from total consciousness" (*Steps to an Ecology of Mind* 438).

Bateson criticises traditional epistemological frameworks that fail to consider this larger web of congruencies as being overly anthropomorphic, even oppressive of the natural patterns informing all existence. In a later study, published in 1968, he points to the interplay of religion and biology in most Western conceptions of mind and nature. Such pathologies, he notes, only confirm the fallacious assumption within the West that it is possible to control nature, given the right tools. No doubt

Bateson's views, especially in the 1950s, appeared radical to conventional schools of anthropology and sociology. Yet Bateson was far from being alone in these opinions. Karl Polanyi, a Montreal-based economist and anthropologist working in the early postwar period, offered a similarly holistic approach to anthropology. In fact, many of Bateson's most innovative epistemological suppositions might be drawn from Polanyi's research. Unlike Bateson, however, Polanyi emphasises strong economic components in his work. He realises the vital importance of market exchange in defining social values within a particular community. Market systems for Polanyi can operate within a society alongside other non-economic social formations without necessarily controlling them. In fact they were quite vital within pre-capitalist societies; they were simply not as predominant. Prior to capitalism, or what we can refer to as a market-based society, economic activities were a subordinate part of the general process of social reproduction. Although there existed various economic mechanisms such as trade, money, markets, prices, and so on, these were highly regulated and circumscribed by political authority and social tradition. Pre-capitalist states were essentially political societies in which there was no separate and autonomous economic sphere. Even with respect to mercantilism, which relied increasingly on markets to meet human needs, Polanyi notes that "the economic system was

merely an accessory feature of an institutional setting controlled and regulated more than ever by social authority" *The Great Transformation* 67) A proper critique of capitalism begins, not with a sweeping rejection of all market exchange, but rather with a more careful consideration of society's domination by such activity. Capitalism, Polanyi declares, produced the world's first "disembedded economies." What distinguishes market-driven from all previous societies is the emergence of a separate and autonomous economic sphere in which the economic motives of fear of hunger and desire for wealth became the primary forces of the system. Within such a society, all members, whether business owners or property-less workers, have little choice but to conform to the forces and conditions of supply and demand. In Polanyi's words, "self-regulation implies that all production is for sale on the market and that all incomes derive from such sales" (*The Great Transformation* 69). All needs depend exclusively on the process of exchange, as each person's fate and fortune become more entwined within the dictates of the market.

Bateson, too, critiqued the subordination within any state of different social contexts to a single set of motives or systematic drives; yet, he did not specifically associate such dispositions with capitalist markets. Bateson argued more generally that any paradigm of human interaction, once it makes

normative claims to the correctness of its objectives or motives, has moral implications. "Just as in logic a proposition can never determine the metaproposition," writes Bateson, "so also in matters of control the smaller context can never determine the larger" (*Steps to an Ecology of Mind* 76). If individuals were composed, as Bateson thought they were, of their relations with others, then they possessed only a limited command over any whole system in which they participate.

Polanyi argues a similar thesis, designating industrial capitalism as a type of isolated system or "disembodied economy" that enforced its normative claims on all forms of social interaction within the West. In general, Polanyi's discussion of economy and social relations can be said to derive from two sources: Marxism and anthropology. The two disciplines, for Polanyi, were never completely unrelated. In Marx, rather than in Darwin, Polanyi discovered the first completely secular, scientific framework of an investigation of human nature. In 1938, Polanyi notes,

The starting point for Marx is anthropology in its fullest sense, i.e., a science of the nature of man. This science is the basis of Marx's method. It deals not with man as an individual, but with mankind, the genus man. Man's nature is the result of the history of human society. Since history is the progressive realization of freedom, it should be added that it is man as a number

of the community, not man as an individual,
who becomes free.¹

Despite Marx's own adherence to conventional Western concepts of progress and materialism, Polanyi considered Marxist critique to offer an important sociological model, one that correctly emphasised the profound communal forces of production informing individual relations. In his view, previous readings of Marx within the West failed to recognise the full cultural import of his work because they tended to restrict their concept of exchange value solely to commodity markets. By contrast, Polanyi's use of Marx parallels Bateson's sociological theory, in that Polanyi discusses a much wider sense of social conformism than that produced by capitalism. According to both Polanyi and Bateson, materialism in a society derives from the systematic abstraction of any one set of contingencies over all other possible positions and perspectives, not just a particular class's economic oppression of the masses. Capitalism, Polanyi argues, is one example, albeit an important one, of the larger social problem of epistemological abstraction. Hence to amend economic injustice within the West, one needed to begin by reforming the organisation of knowledge itself. Similarly, when Bateson critiques materialism in Western culture, he is referring not only to the distribution of wealth, but any

¹ Karl Polanyi, "The Essence of Fascism," *The Life and Work of Karl Polanyi: a*

exchange of information or knowledge that attempted to transcend the "material" contexts in which it originated and present itself as a universal truth or principle.

Polanyi's critique, like Bateson's sociology, clearly reflected an interest in education and research over ideological concerns. Influenced by the widespread effort among ecological theorists to free economic theory from an ideology-based doctrine, Polanyi, too, developed a much more holistic, less formulaic theory of social relations, one in which patterns of social formation extend far beyond the movements of goods and resources. In this intellectual shift away from ideological critique, Polanyi exemplifies a common movement among Western sociologists who began at mid-century to search for alternate, non-economically determined theories of society.

Polanyi thus examined the capitalist economy in a non-revolutionary manner compared to the more radical leftism associated with orthodox Marxism and the Communist Party. For example, Polanyi did not reject the entire institution of wage labour, but he did repudiate its many concrete deficiencies, such as: unequal income, insecurity of income, unemployment, etc. A socially responsible society, he felt, would take care of these actual problems. In his first major study, *The Great*

Transformation (1944), Polanyi further qualifies the type of economy needed to remedy the current conditions of capital as "generic," that is, one that remains "embedded" within the surrounding society (*The Great Transformation* 34). Generic economies operate according to principles of social equilibrium as opposed to profit and gain. Again, like Bateson, Polanyi firmly argues against any theory of society, whether based in ideology or religious faith, transcending the context in which it originated. A more accurate sociology, he notes, organises itself in terms of an expanding, discontinuous hierarchy of contexts. In fact, sociology, properly practised, contains no general principles at all, but rather centres upon the exchange of messages between subjects in a plurality of contexts (*The Great Transformation* 36).

Beginning with *The Great Transformation* (1944) and continuing with his co-edited *Trade and Market in the Early Empires* (1957), Polanyi investigates multiple forms of economic integration as they correspond to different social structures. Where orthodox Marxism went on to develop ideas to be used exclusively in a critique of capitalism, in particular the concepts of "alienation" and "surplus value," Polanyi's work seeks to describe a wider range of possible cultural experiences. Orthodox Marxism's focus on capitalism's relations of production represented, for Polanyi, only one level of a

larger set of interacting factors and influences. Such relations, Polanyi categorises as "appropriational movements," i.e., systems of exchange that are specifically sequestered by the ruling strata of a particular culture for the purpose of regulating that culture's wealth. Given the overall social significance of these systems, Polanyi values Marx for his theoretical insights. Nevertheless, in Polanyi's economic models, appropriational movements comprise only half the story, that is, one half of a binary social hierarchy.

The other half derives from "locational" movements, processes that operate outside all institutional frameworks. In a capitalist society, locational movements remained far less socially influential than appropriational or institutional ones. Yet to ignore such relations altogether as, Polanyi charges, orthodox Marxists do, is to privilege a single ideology over all other social observations, in effect, reducing Marx's original critique of class relations to a mere epiphenomenon of the economic base. Marx's critique, Polanyi argues, firmly distinguished economic structures in a society from all cultural ones. Hence, Polanyi credits Marx with providing an important precedence in sociology for separating locational movements from appropriational ones. By including the locational in his sociological studies, Polanyi argues, therefore, for a return to basic Marxist strategies and a shift away from orthodox or

Communist doctrine. Such a change in positioning would help counter ideological biases in sociological theory and, in turn, supply a more accurate assessment of both the capitalist state and other pre-capitalist social orderings. Sociology, for Polanyi, needed be flexible enough to offer insights into all forms of social integration and not just those based on market exchange.

Subsequently, Polanyi theorises several larger categories of social intercourse that include market activities without being completely dependent upon them. His categories are reciprocity, redistribution, market exchange, and householding, once again illustrating that the movements informing a society's development derive from a whole range of processes and activities that make up the provision of a material-means, from production to consumption (*Trade and Market* 250). Even in capitalist societies, Polanyi argues, social exchange consists of more than the distribution of commodities. A complex variety of cultural and cross-cultural changes mark the evolution of a single political economy. Activities of reciprocation, redistribution as well as market exchange continuously circumscribe different networks of social interaction. Sociology's aims, according to Polanyi, are to establish a rational model of these networks inclusive enough to adapt to all cultural movements in a variety of contexts.

Although capitalism's "disembedded" markets promoted class oppression and exploitation of the masses, the construction of a centralised economy under the direction of the labouring classes did not guarantee, as orthodox Marxists argued, a healthier, more harmonious framework of human interaction. Even partial assimilation of the markets by the state, an important component in Keynesian models of economics, Polanyi notes, risked political suppression of personal choice and activity. Polanyi argues instead that a democratic socialist economy can retain separate spheres of economy and state as a means of preserving one's individual freedom from the overbearing influence of market exchange. A truly radical reform of capitalism, in Polanyi's view, would originate outside the market and begin by subordinating the drive for profits to broader social needs.

The resulting structure or "generic economy," as Polanyi calls it, combined anthropological frameworks with economic ones to produce a wide topography of human society. In *The Great Transformation*, Polanyi contends that a properly organised society could both combat the destructive, dehumanising forces of industrialisation and capitalise on the social benefits derived from such processes. Where orthodox Marxism linked the growth of human alienation to specific economic factors of social interaction, i.e., to the unequal accumulation of surplus value, Polanyi insists that these components are only one source

of civil development among many. The flow of goods, Polanyi reasons, holds considerably less influence than most Marxists believe over power relations. This is not to suggest that Polanyi ignores economic factors in his sociology. In Polanyi's view, the growth of commodity markets remains an important component in the ongoing evolution of any culture; yet Polanyi could not accept orthodox Marxism's claim that market exchange actually controlled that evolution. Such fixed doctrinal theories, he believed, amounted to little more than a form of economic determinism.

Any study of social relations that confined itself to a pre-set, fixed framework of evaluation, Polanyi maintained, tended to reflect little beyond the expectations and subjective interests informing that framework.

At the same time, Polanyi considered the structural rigour of conventional liberal economics to be equally confining, calling it a failed "interpolation of social and historical facts" (*The Great Transformation* 74). Polanyi furthermore agreed with Bateson's final labelling of such studies as distressingly anthropomorphic. In *The Great Transformation*, he condemns anti-Marxist, pro-capitalist work in this area for its "methodological individualism." Rejecting what he called the "economistic fallacy" for a larger, more inclusive discourse encompassing politics, law, religion, kinship, ethics, etc.,

Polanyi invokes in his book "an entirely new framework of human experience" (*The Great Transformation* 13).

As I've argued, Polanyi's view of culture can be compared to Bateson's (and, for that matter, Grossinger's) in that all three theorists sought to define a new epistemology that emphasised relations between contexts rather any one methodology or philosophical mandate. Each writer believed social relations to be naturally complex and therefore impossible to delineate according to fixed principles of cause and effect. Anchored to a concept of innate development, Polanyi's theory, as did Bateson's and Grossinger's, emphasised epistemological relativism over any notion of permanent positioning.

Polanyi also clarified his theory with reference to the term "ecology," often substituting it for the concept of economy in an effort to distinguish further between locational movements ("changes of place") and appropriational movements ("changes of hands"). Ecology, in Polanyi's view, described exactly how modern institutional arrangements combine with various spatial relationships to bring forth cultural changes within a society. Polanyi did not deny that the relationship between spatial and institutional structures, between ecological and economic paradigms, was rife with struggle, but the two types of movements were not completely antithetical. Within Polanyi's ecological theory of society a new sense of culture emerges, in

which social development derives from a broader interactive weaving of material and ideal motivation. As one critic notes, "it was above all the link that Polanyi forged between the historical role of states in economic development and his conception of human freedom that distinguished his work so fundamentally from prevailing trends of thought... Polanyi saw that the emancipatory potential of the market was fully realisable only in tandem with the power and regulation of the state. In such a way, the bonds of human community – the freedom of the soul on which he based his philosophy – could be preserved only through the linkage of power and individual rights."²

As an ecological theorist, Polanyi anticipates many of Bateson's ideas, further demonstrating a larger shift in sociological theory. Both writers emphasise a holistic view of an individual's social behaviour, forgoing the more conventional Marxist sociological focus on labour issues, resource management and forms of capital. Compared to Bateson, Polanyi makes more use of economic theory, however, since his basic thesis holds that individuals need to maximise, regardless of their place in society, various gains while minimising risks or losses. Importantly, though, he treats these patterns not as

² Margaret R. Somers, "Karl Polanyi's Intellectual Legacy," *The Life and Work of Karl Polanyi: a Celebration*, ed. Kari Polanyi-Levitt (Montréal; New York: Black Rose Books, 1990) 155-56.

institutional structures, but rather as natural tendencies endemic to all organisms. Where conventional economists, including orthodox Marxists, analysed processes of production, distribution and consumption, Polanyi discussed what he calls intrinsic organisational principles, or social relations that are a part of human nature rather than some historically distinct product of industrialisation.

Polanyi's efforts to re-embed the institutional components of society within locational processes further expounded a concept of place, i.e., a social context operating outside all economic or market systems. In this manner, Polanyi's ecological view of culture bears some resemblance to Olson's own poetics of place. As with Olson, Polanyi's precepts remain anchored in a new understanding of culture as a social process that functioned quite independently to both politics and market economies. In Polanyi's work, production processes appear no longer dependent upon the more exploitive dictates of capitalist industry, but rather as basic acts of nature. In this way, Polanyi's sense of culture emphasised primarily its status as a process rather than a product. Social relations operated, for Polanyi, as one of two types of movements: "locational, i.e., those associated with everyday life and "appropriational," those associated with social institutions — such as the market or government. According to Polanyi, locational movements depend entirely upon

their social context, in other words, the spatial and historical particulars of their respective structures. Here again, the need to differentiate locational acts from institutional ones seems pivotal. As locational movements, all acts of production and consumption, whether they pertain to art, engineering or even agriculture, emerge free of previous ideological taint. To view any form of cultural product purely in terms of its institutional affiliations revealed economic determinism. Polanyi and the ecological anthropologists who followed his thinking³ theorised specific cultural networks of exchange socially exempt from the usual dictates of surplus profit. A framework of culture as something other than economic superstructure stood revealed in these studies, refuting the traditional Marxist focus on class conflict. For Polanyi and these other anthropologists, many activities still operated outside the institutions of capital. At least two mutually dependent processes of exchange were discernible to the ecological theorist when studying socio-cultural relations, and only one operated according to the concerns and principles of the market. As Rhoda Halperin notes, "[t]he separation of locational and appropriational movements and their respective association with production and distribution processes became the template for divorcing ecological from economic

³ See for example, Geertz (1963), Steward and Harris (1968) among others.

anthropology. Without anthropologists realizing it, locational and appropriational movements became solidified as two poles of an underlying dichotomy" (63).

Later Marxist sociologists like Pierre Bourdieu and John Clammer, as we will see, were apprehensive of such a strict separation of spatial elements from institutional ones in ecological theory, though they, too, recognised the importance of both frameworks in the evolution of social relations. Before looking at their responses more closely, it seems historically necessary to investigate the important parallels between these ecological theories of culture and those offered by Olson and the aesthetics of Black Mountain College. As we saw in the last chapter, Olson's poetics shares with ecological theory a strong anti-institutional sense of culture that emphasises process over product. In Olson's theory of projective verse, an important set of equivalencies emerges between processes of production and those of natural creation. In his essay, "Human Universe" (1951), he explains, "[I]f man is once more to possess intent in his life, and to take up the responsibility implicit in his life, he has to comprehend his own process as intact, from outside, by way of his skin, in, and by his own powers of conversion, out again" (SP 61). As we've seen, this particular view of cultural activity expresses itself both in Olson and in ecological theory as a focus on place.

For Polanyi, "place" signifies the immediate context of any act of creation or production outside most institutional frameworks. Cultural activity, he argues, invests a place with meaning, enabling the subject to "locate" him or herself within society. Such "locational movements" conveyed thus a strong moral purpose, according to which one's social role as well as value was defined. Polanyi further qualified this mode of social identity as "the authentic," and contrasted it with institutional forms — such as the market system — which objectified and alienated its subjects. The often violent class politics of the twentieth century, he believed, were wrought in the tension between the authentic (moral/locational) self and the divergent forms of institutional structures. These two different embodiments of the individual, Polanyi believed, one genuine and one artificial, were locked in a great struggle.

In Olson's poetics, a similar struggle can be glimpsed between processes of natural, authentic creation and fixed institutional forms. As he suggests in "Human Universe," the creative act originates in the skin itself, as opposed to some fixed cultural mandate. Implied in both Polanyi's ecological theory and Olson's aesthetics is a cultural discourse of value based exclusively in an immanent sense of meaning, originating out of the creative act, as opposed to an institutional framework. In ecology, this discourse of value focuses upon

movements of production and consumption as natural transfers of energy from one location to another. In Olson's projective poetics, a similar movement occurs. The "projective" poet remains firmly connected to the process of creation, participating within, rather than abstracting from his or her surrounding environment. Here cultural structures highlight the moral individual's inner freedom to create as opposed to higher principles of order. Knowledge of place signifies for Olson a special probing of all limits and boundaries, both epistemological and natural. The fact that these boundaries are ever-shifting affirms not the impossibility of knowledge, but its dynamism. Freed from the abstractions of cultural institutions, the projective poet is able to participate fully within the complex environment of everyday life.

Postwar ecological theory, as we've seen in the work of Bateson, Polanyi and Grossinger, raises strong objections to all forms of cultural orthodoxy, regardless of whether they originate in leftist suspicions or right-wing celebrations of the market. For both Bateson and Polanyi, any orthodoxy in thinking provoked complex moral challenges to the individual to preserve an ethical society, one in which each private citizen needed to define his or her social role independent of institutional doctrines. Without this separation of "locational" and "appropriational" movements, social relations would lose all

authenticity. Ecological frameworks provided Polanyi with both an epistemology and a cultural theory that resisted easy institutional appropriation – especially by ideologues of either the Right or Left, and his resistance to doctrine is especially characteristic of the works of Bateson and Grossinger. Their respective writing projects in combination with their opposition to abstract epistemologies also stress the inherent difficulty of eluding institutional biases in thought. In *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, Bateson himself notes, epistemological

premises work only up to a certain limit, and, at some stage or under certain circumstances, if you are carrying serious epistemological errors, you will find that they do not work any more. At this point you discover to your horror that it is exceedingly difficult to get rid of error, that it's sticky. It is as if you had touched honey. As with honey, the falsification gets around; and each thing you try to wipe it off on gets sticky, and your hand still remains sticky. (*Steps to an Ecology of Mind* 487).

In his critique of epistemological abstraction, Olson used the same metaphor, calling Plato, as the source of misplaced universalism in Western thinking, a "honey head." The metaphor works well in literature; for Matthew Arnold charged artists and writers with the responsibility of establishing permanent aesthetic standards without any appeal to social context, describing such work as the epitome of "sweetness and light." In Olson's view, this view of literature was not only meaninglessly

abstract, but also politically and culturally coercive. Likewise, epistemological error and political intimidation within traditional Western thinking had convinced ecological theorists like Bateson and Polanyi that the key to political reform originated not in power relations, but in the nature of knowing itself. Without a change, as Bateson put it, in "epistemological habit," there could be no corresponding transformation of social relations.

Subsequently, theorists like Bateson and Polanyi formed an important basis in the mid-century for an alternate discourse of socio-political critique, inspiring many other writers in a variety of different disciplines to look beyond conventional notions of ideology and logic in their studies. A typical example of this type of activism appears in Christopher Stone's paper to protect parkland trees from being destroyed by corporate development. Stone, a professor of law at the University of California, argued that permanent safety for the trees could be gained by granting them a form of legal standing, which should befit all natural objects. *Should Trees have Standing? Toward Legal Rights for Natural Objects*, published in 1974, challenged not so much American ideology, as conventional knowledge of trees as actual objects. In the interest of providing a new complex of hotels, restaurants and play areas for potential tourists in the Sierra Nevada, Walt Disney Inc.

planned to clear-cut and redevelop vast expanses of scrub forest. Left alone, the natural landscape, Disney argued, provided few incentives for the "serious" traveller. These plans alarmed many environmentalists and nature societies, such as the Sierra Club, but their efforts to protect the parkland failed, for no actual injury to any single specific interest could be demonstrated (4). In searching for a new strategy to block Disney's intentions, Stone reasoned that the most logical way to preserve the original environment would be to demonstrate or to represent the exact interests of the trees and wildlife themselves, as threatened by Disney's development. "Perhaps," Stone explains,

the injury to the Sierra Club was tenuous, but the injury to Mineral King — the Park itself — wasn't. If I could get the courts thinking about the park itself as a jural "person" — the way corporations are persons — the notion of nature having rights would here make a significant operational difference.... (4)

In Stone's view, therefore, a more politically responsible, environmentally sensitive social order must necessarily re-think its very concept, not just of trees, but of nature in general. Before any litigation against Disney could be pursued, it was imperative to change the concept of nature, a transformation that could only be effected by shifts in epistemology. If trees were to be granted the same legal footing as any human agent, a

new epistemological equivalence between the two was necessary. In Stone's view, such a re-configuration of nature would constitute the primary victory in the case against Disney.

In this application of ecological theory Stone called into question a basic tenet of Enlightenment epistemology. Stone's case for trees required a rejection of empiricism, with its emphasis upon abstract principles drawn from material observations. A more empathetic awareness of nature, noted Stone, denied its study as a set of mutually autonomous objects and processes. Nature functioned instead, he believed, as a complex interweaving of processes and energies, none of which could be explained outside the context in which they originated. Bestowing rights upon trees would be a primal step towards a society built upon the dictates of co-operation for a communal good rather than according to discourses of utility and exploitation.

Stone's move to prevent further depletion of US wilderness displays on one level a strong ethical concern for the environment. On another level, his critique of epistemology delivers a profound anti-humanist message, prompting opposing views from philosophers and writers who in the 1990s continue to support Enlightenment culture. French philosopher and social critic, Luc Ferry, for example, is hesitant to dismiss many of the foundations of modern, secular society and criticises Stone

for unwittingly advocating a type of social regression in his theory. Ferry, in fact, compares Stone's call for nature's rights to legislation practices existing in pre-Revolutionary France. Up until the eighteenth century in France, he notes, it was not uncommon to legislate against various "natural" trespasses and intrusions animals might make within a given community. Thus in 1587:

The inhabitants of the village of Saint-Julienne took legal action against a colony of weevils. These "creepers" having invaded the vineyards, where they caused considerable damage, the peasants called on their municipal magistrates to compose a petition in their name addressed to the Reverend Lord Vicar-General and official of the diocese of Maurienne, whom they entreated to prescribe the appropriate measures to appease the divine anger and to undertake, "by means of excommunication or any other appropriate censor," the lawful and definitive expulsion of the tiny beasts.
(ix)

For Ferry such litigation exemplifies a particularly "pre-modern" approach to social rule. To accord both civil rights and legal representation to the animal kingdom is indicative of what he calls a "pre-humanistic" relationship to nature in general (xvii). In contrast to the "modern," post-Enlightenment subjection of the natural world to human will, civil law before the eighteenth century evoked a comparatively equal relationship between humanity and its surrounding environment. At that time, writes Ferry, it was customary to "give legal rights to forests,

oceans, rivers and other so-called natural objects in the environment as a whole" (xvii).

Drawing an analogy between legal reform, ideology and epistemology, Ferry agrees with Stone that such a significant change in civil litigation necessarily corresponds to a fundamental transition in subjectivity. When one ascribes legal representation to the non-human, natural world, several profound epistemological contentions automatically follow, including, of course, the essential equivalence between human and non-human consciousness. Such contentions do not necessarily grant plants and animals attributes of free-will and agency; but instead question the common acceptance of these qualities as determinants of reason. A similar paradigm of integration between natural and political structures appears in Bateson, Polanyi and, of course Grossinger. But Ferry, unlike these American critics, does not consider this cultural logic to be necessarily progressive. Given their disillusion with the modern world, he sees such ecological thinking as conservative, resurrecting currents of mediaeval thought, rather than any utopian visions of the future.

Exchanging a humanistic vision of law for one more inclusive of the natural world, ecological theory, as exemplified by Stone, puts forth a biological egalitarianism that challenges human centred-ness in economics as well as

social development. For Stone, a less anthropocentric vision of nature was morally and politically superior to those positions founded upon Western empiricism. Stone's anti-humanism matches Polanyi's revisionary anthropology, which also criticised those socio-political theories based exclusively upon the production and distribution of capital as oppressively narrow and confining. Their eco-centric position views human-kind as part of the global eco-system and subject to the laws of nature rather than to those of different human societies. Hence, the evaluation of social behaviour – whether it be industrial, intellectual, or political in origin – required a much more inclusive consideration of the natural environment as opposed to mere human need. Without these limits, the interests of nature would continue to suffer, with little hope for social justice. The demands of an ecologically based morality constrained human action, particularly by imposing limits to economic and population growth; for the anthropomorphic view of nature had already caused much irreparable damage, not only in the widespread destruction of wilderness, but in the increased alienation felt between individuals as well. It is here that Ferry is in essential agreement:

In the zoophile spirit that impregnates our democratic culture, the ideas that a distinction between human kind and animal-kind may possess ethical significance seems intolerant, an indication of a spirit of

segregation, of exclusion even, at a time when the right-to-be-different ideology reigns almost exclusively. Indeed, doesn't science teach us that a secret continuity exists between living creatures? In the name of science, then, it is proper to grant equal respect to all manifestations of life in the universe. (3)

Ferry realises that the ethos of such a position, of this pluralist, "right-to-be-different ideology" is usually self-evident to most progressive liberals. Indeed, they ask, how can one argue effectively against such values as tolerance, environmental protection and a respect for all democratic movements? In contrast to these beliefs, the anthropomorphism that has characterised Western thought of the last two centuries appears increasingly barbaric. The Enlightenment's domination of the natural world in the name of resources evokes a history steeped in ecological crisis. Western utilitarianism has facilitated, ecological theorists argue, economic, social and political relationships based on hierarchy, authority and control.⁴ Ecocentrics lack faith in modern large-scale technology and the technical and bureaucratic elites in charge of it. They advocate instead the construction of decentralised, democratic, small-scale communities that are sensitive to the needs of the environment: "act locally and think globally" is their most popular mandate.

⁴ See, for example, Albury and Schwartz 1982.

At the risk of sounding unintentionally reactionary to ecocentric positions, Ferry cautions his readers to rethink some of the more problematic political and cultural implications of their critique of the Enlightenment. Certainly the tendency within Enlightenment thought over the last three centuries, to reduce the natural world, to economic resources has raised important questions concerning the long-term effect of industrial growth on the environment and the threat of permanent damage to the natural world. Ecocentrism purports to make social justice part of a wider justice required for all life forms, not just of human society. To accomplish this objective, ecocentrics maintain, the very principles behind the modern, industrial state must be abandoned. Industrialism, they argue, was a mistake; it carries an enormous social price in the loss of essential human values and constant environmental degradation. Yet can an unquestioned abandonment of Enlightenment thought as advocated by ecocentrics fully repair these apparent deficiencies in what they call the "industrial way of life?"

Ferry is sceptical, pointing out that what first appears as a rational enlightened critique of ideological coercion possesses, upon closer examination, several politically questionable attributes as well. In repudiating the Enlightenment view of society and culture as a field of human activity incommensurable with the natural world, important principles of social and

political emancipation are also placed at risk. Here, Ferry worries that, taken to an extreme level, ecocentrism leads primarily to an anti-technological, anti-industrial romantic anarchism. If the Cartesian "mind" which once distinguished the human from the animal, Ferry argues, loses all credibility, so too does reasoned reflection, to be replaced with notions of instinctual behaviour and natural essentialisms. Western principles of freedom depend, in other words, on a strict separation of human existence from the natural world. Ferry points out,

If we did not have the ability to detach ourselves from the traditional culture that is imposed upon us like a second nature, we would continue, like all animals, to be governed by natural codes. If we could not put this culture in perspective and adopt a critical viewpoint, which alone allows us to change it and inscribe it in history, our culture of origin would be akin to animal habits, and human societies would be as devoid of history as those of ants or termites. (11)

For Ferry, government by natural roles constitutes a form of cultural coercion even more totalising than that attributed by ecocentrism to industrialisation: ecocentrism, seeking emancipation from the actual origins of emancipation, (i.e., Enlightenment thought), has not discovered a new philosophy of freedom so much as an alternate determinism or second nature. Natural determinism, says Ferry, cannot offer Western thought

any valid precepts for human freedom. To argue against Enlightenment reason is to rescind that tradition's unique claims for political and intellectual autonomy for all subjects. The philosophical aims of ecocentrism, in his view, envision an entirely different relationship between the human subject and the natural environment — one that prioritises non-human nature or at least places it on par with humanity (Eckersley 17). Here there is no desire to separate human consciousness from the forces of nature. Rather the ecocentric orientation is towards a wider sense of behaviour and activity encompassing both human and natural will. In this manner, ecocentrism distinguishes itself from the anthropocentrism of previous political ideologies, such as socialism and capitalism.

Ferry's Enlightenment-based critique of the ecocentric position, a movement he calls the new "naturalism," does not reject all ecology movements and certainly not environmentalism per se. If environmentalism is about ideologies and practices that flow from a concern for the environment, it is no exaggeration to say that most politically aware people in the West have become to an extent environmentalists. Ferry does not dismiss the many legitimate concerns environmentalists have about industrial society and its tendency towards unrestricted commercial growth at the risk of serious environmental damage. However, he does note the wide range of ecological movements,

and many of the more extreme ecocentric positions seek to establish more than just restrictions on industrial and technological development, they envisage a radical alteration of all Western political and epistemological structures. The movements that best reflect Ferry's concerns for the intellectual autonomy of the Western subject are "Gaianism" and deep ecology.

Gaianism derives from J. Lovelock's work, *The Ages of Gaia: a Biography of our Living Earth* (1989). It combines the old Greek concept of an earth goddess with Lovelock's view of the earth as a complex "homeostatic" system, one, in other words, that is resilient enough to destroy any humans who threaten it. Lovelock's hypothesis does not attribute intelligence to Gaia. But many Gaianists do: particularly "deep ecologists" and those who follow New Age philosophies. Gaianism lends itself to the type of ecocentric ethic of which Ferry is most critical – that which calls for respect and reverence for nature's intrinsic rights and worth, regardless of human needs or wants. Such a logic threatens the principles of human emancipation Ferry considers vital to the Enlightenment tradition. Without a sense of human need, Ferry cautions, irrational mysticisms and superstition will replace the Western concept of individual will and freedom. This is why Ferry further compares Christopher Stone's promotion of tree's rights with a mediaeval view of the

world. Before the Enlightenment, humanity held nature to be a mysterious, possibly threatening source of power over human destiny. Pre-Enlightenment culture viewed nature as a force continuous with the divine mystery, participating in the system of retributive justice anchored in God's will. The threat from nature was part of a cosmic moral economy the key to which lay in scripture. Nature and human fate for pre-Enlightenment thought were bound in a single moral and spiritual order. Hence, Ferry summarises, the mediaeval world invoked a view of human subjectivity perpetually enslaved to cosmological forces (14). Rights for trees, he consequently argues, can only be acquired with the simultaneous loss of rights for humans.

In Ferry's view, the ethical vision of ecological theory invites, at least partially, a reactionary response to the Enlightenment tradition of human emancipation. Ferry is particularly adept at isolating some of the more critical arguments behind ecocentrism, specifically with respect to its opposition to Western rationalism. Many ecocentric thinkers, especially Gaianists and deep ecologists, would likely agree with Ferry's assessment, pointing out that the "Enlightenment," conceived here as a series of social, political and intellectual movements based upon the primacy of human reason, lies in ruins. Environmental destruction, socio-political oppression and the banality of mass culture have led ecocentric writers like Stone

and Lovelock to conclude that, politically, intellectually and ethically, Western rationalism must be rejected. While providing many advances in technology and technical knowledge, Enlightenment principles of reason carried too high an environmental price to be allowed to continue – even if reformed. Ecocentrism, by contrast, advocated only those technologies it considered environmentally benign. That is, those that could be owned, maintained and used by individuals and groups with little interest in power or profit and a strong awareness of nature's vital concerns.

Neither Polanyi, Bateson, nor even Grossinger completely conform to Ferry's critical assessment of ecocentrism. Ferry is correct to point to elements of mysticism and anti-Enlightenment irrationalism informing much Deep Ecology/Gaianist theory, yet neither Polanyi nor Bateson emphasised in their respective work a reverence for nature so profound that it completely negated principles of Enlightenment reason. Grossinger's writing, on the other hand, attributes an intelligence to nature equal to that traditionally confined only to humanity. Accordingly, much of his work lends itself to mysticism and spiritual beliefs.

There is very little mysticism in Polanyi's and Bateson's thought however; nor is Olson's poetry, as we will see, anti-Enlightenment. While each of these writers was critical of many properties of Enlightenment reason, their respective ecological

arguments did not abandon entirely traditional humanism and the many developments in Western technology it inspired. Both Polanyi and Bateson recognised the environmental problems incurred through rampant industrialism and profit-motivated corporate capitalism. They criticised the anthropomorphism of conventional Enlightenment thought. Yet, these writers also held that with careful economic and environmental management and a revisionary approach to humanist principles, society would only improve. Such radical solutions as the bestowing of rights upon trees and other objects of nature do not appear anywhere in the writings of Bateson or Polanyi. As Polanyi insisted, the capitalist economy was responsible for massive social inequality; yet the elimination of this economic schema did not automatically mean the subsequent exclusion of market systems in general. The social exchange of goods and services was basic to all human communities. Hence nature still functioned in Polanyi's thought, as it did in Bateson's, as a resource necessary for social and cultural growth – an idea highly abhorred by deep ecologists.

How does nature appear in Olson's work? Olson, too, in his poetry professed an interest in natural processes and a corresponding apprehension of socio-economic determinism. Yet Olson also rejected the romanticist penchant for nostalgic primitivism, since it contradicted his vision of the poet as a

force for social change. Poetic inspiration, in Olson's view, was not solely the product of some mysterious natural energy; rather it derived from a more conscious human engagement with these forces. The romanticist, in Olson's view, minimised human agency in the creative act, attributing imagination to larger, cosmological sources. Olson's poetics envisioned, by contrast, a more conscious, wilful interaction between social forms and natural processes. This type of exchange appears as a central idea in the poem, "The Story of an Olson, and Bad Thing," written in 1952 at Black Mountain. In this poem, Olson cast his writing career in terms of a vision-quest or walkabout. After an arduous journey, the poet-protagonist re-emerges from the wilderness:

When he came out...he carefully took the
things he had made) despite Bad Thing, and
his botherings) and instead of disposing of
them in so many ways that would occur to
you, he merely set them out there where the
rest of the causes of confusion are. (CP 49)

The poem's protagonist did not enter into direct combat with "the causes of confusion," but simply "set out" "the things he had made," making them available as an alternative or counterforce. This is not a mystical vision, but rather an intensely democratic one, in which the observer's reverence for place allows him to engage with it directly, and not be subordinated by it.

As a poet, Olson sought neither to control nature (as much Enlightenment-based humanism did), nor place himself completely in its service. He described his relationship to his surroundings to be synergetic, with the poem acting out or reproducing an exchange of energy between the poet and his or her context. "Composition by field" or "projective verse" meant that the poet was to treat each "utterance," each observation, as an event in a field of force of which the poet was the centre. Such exchanges, he argued, effectively combated the dangerous instrumental sway of corporate capitalism and of abstract reason, in general.

Ferry's critique of ecocentrism does partly apply to Bateson, Polanyi, Grossinger, and, indeed, Olson, in that each writer's respective works also evoke an important departure from Enlightenment principles. Ferry's intellectual background derives from Marxist political theory. Hence all ecocentric developments in Western thinking, regardless of how extreme they may appear; represent for him the potentially risky loss among the Left of an ideology-based criticism of capitalist economics. Ferry values Marxist theory, in this way, for its ability to separate such progressive Enlightenment principles as universal human rights from their ideological impoverishment within the corporate capitalist state. For example, it is not coincidental that in capitalist societies "freedom" of the individual usually

translates into the freedom to own land and other resources, to go into business with minimal planning and taxation restrictions from the state, to compete and to buy and sell what one likes if one can afford it. But it does not include freedom from material want or from unemployment, even though such ideas were common to Enlightenment thought. Marxist political theory, for Ferry, successfully addresses the many corruptions of Enlightenment reason by capitalist ideology, criticising its assumptions as evidence of the subordination of human suffrage to class interest. To turn one's back on Marxist-socialist principles is to confuse the errors of capitalism, therefore, with the objectives and ideas of Enlightenment reason in general.

While the ecological theory of both Polanyi and Bateson carried little of the neo-mystical rejection of Enlightenment thought found in the deep ecology movement, it did seek to loosen the critical hold Marxism conventionally had on the disciplines of sociology, anthropology, as well as much political theory. This revisionary approach to Marxist thought has already been discussed with reference to Polanyi. In his view, Marx's investigation of Western political economies told only half the story, reductively elevating the relations of production to a metaphysical level as the source of all social meaning. Bateson offered a similar critique of Marxism.

What ecocentrism doubted most of all, as one critic notes, was the "Promethean quality of early Marxism" (Redclift 48). No longer under the illusion that resources, especially in the West, were inexhaustible commodities, the truly, politically conscious critic would hardly be concerned with how best to redistribute abundance. Rather, human survival itself now constituted sociology's primary topic, an insight that must have appeared increasingly prescient, given the recurring crisis of African famine in the postwar period and the ongoing threat of nuclear war.

The critique of Marx from an ecocentric perspective is epistemological in the sense that it interprets Marxism more as a theory of knowledge, than of production and class structure. The Marxist worldview, for Polanyi and Bateson, evoked an entire definition of reality based solely upon the processes of industrial production. When a particular economy, they argued, becomes the premise behind all cultural relations and knowledge, one is left with a narrow theory of social development. Yet this is precisely how ecologists tended to view Marxist thought. Polanyi and Bateson respected Marxism's critical insights into the capitalist ideology — Polanyi even credited Marx with the invention of anthropology, calling the 19th century writer the first scientist of the human condition. But, while Marx may have initiated this form of study, his focus on the relations of

production, Polanyi argued, functioned better as political doctrine than a theory of society – industrialised or not. With respect to epistemology, Marxism yielded the same fundamental errors compared to all previous scientisms in its emphasis upon material production and unlimited social and technological development. Paralleling the dominant values and morals behind the industrial state, Marxism offered little respite, according to ecocentrism, from the competitive hierarchies and social struggles usually associated with the Western state. In the Marxist worldview, the myth of Prometheus drew honour, while Western progress depended solely upon material advancement. Neither Marx nor later Marxists considered, other ecological thinkers argued (Deleage 1989), how an economy like capitalism, working with exhaustible resources, might eventually use up the means of production. There can be no Marxist school of ecology, John Deleage writes, because Marx's view of history envisaged unlimited development of productive forces under socialism.⁵

Early ecological writers, for this reason, firmly situated themselves in opposition to Marxist values, rejecting what they saw as an economic, materialist focus in favour of a more ecocentric perspective based on co-operation, subjectivity, spirituality and the emotions. An important trope in this new

⁵ John Deleage, "Eco-Marxist Critique of Political Ecology," *Capitalism, Nature, Socialism*, 3 (1989): 19.

discourse was the concept of "wilderness," a position on nature that sought to address the conventional Western sense of this space as material resources. This trope is dominant in the work of Grossinger, while also appearing in studies by Bateson and Polanyi. Etymologically the word derived from the Anglo-Saxon "wild déor," connoting the primeval forest, i.e., a space which is untamed and uncontrolled. Enlightenment reason, ecological theory argued, traditionally viewed such an environment or space as a hostile area suitable to only one activity: development. If an antithesis to the values of the West and modern civilisation could be found, then it lay in the idea of the wilderness. Roderick Nash's study of this important symbolic structure well outlines its especial prominence in Western thought. As a concept, wilderness

was instinctively understood as something alien to man - an insecure and uncomfortable environment against which civilization had waged an unceasing struggle. The Europeans knew the uninhabited forest as an important part of their folklore and mythology. Its dark, mysterious qualities made it a setting in which the prescientific imagination could place a swarm of demons and spirits. In addition, wilderness as fact and symbol permeated the Judeo-Christian tradition. Anyone with a Bible had available an extended lesson in the meaning of wild land. Subsequent Christian history added new dimensions. As a result, the first immigrants approached North America with a cluster of preconceived ideas about wilderness. (Wilderness and the American Mind 8)

As an antipode to all things civilised, wilderness illustrates well the West's traditional relationship to any unsettled landscape. Nature as wilderness was not to be celebrated, but feared. Associated with the monstrous, with chaos and a complete lack of control, the primeval forest functioned primarily to justify any and all myths of progress. From the early Renaissance period in Europe to the settlement of the New World, the idea of the wilderness continued to presuppose humanity's need to control its surrounding environment. In wilderness, Western culture continued to glimpse a most enduring antithesis. Its very existence, Nash notes, provided a strong rationale for civilisation itself.

Nash's survey of the wilderness trope in American culture offers an impressive catalogue of its consistent influence. From the moment the first European settlers set foot in North America, the especial wildness of the landscape seems to have dominated popular conceptions of this new world. "Anticipations of a second Eden," Nash notes, "quickly shattered against the reality of North America...Previous hopes intensified the disappointment. At Jamestown the colonists abandoned the search for gold and turned, shocked, to the necessity of survival in a hostile environment" (*Wilderness and the American Mind* 44). Moving into the eventual settlement of the new states, Nash

finds that the hostility the pioneers felt towards their landscape remained a constant feature of the American experience. If one image captures this relationship, it is that of "mortal combat." What the Americans couldn't conquer might at least be held at bay. The very idea of social order seemed to stop at the edge of every settlement.

Although dominant well into the 20th century, such militaristic antagonism to nature continued to inspire a strong counter-argument, and Nash makes it a central part of his project to document the rise and evolution of the ecocentric view of wilderness. The "modern" concept of nature as something other than a threat to civilisation appears earliest in Kant's work on the sublime. For Nash, Kant's theory of natural sublimity can be further situated within an even larger tradition of "eco-romanticism" beginning among specific intellectual circles in Europe as early as the 16th century. The "flowering" of this movement would not take place until the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, when, Nash reminds us, "wild country lost much of its repulsiveness." Nash explains,

It was not that wilderness was any less solitary, mysterious, and chaotic, but rather in the new intellectual context these qualities were coveted. European romantics responded to the New World wilderness and gradually a few Americans, in urban situations and with literary interests,

began to adopt favorable attitudes. To be sure, indifference and hostility toward wilderness remained generally dominant. Even the enthusiasts of the wild found it difficult to discount the pioneer point of view completely. Yet by mid-nineteenth century a few Americans had vigorously stated the case of appreciation. (*Wilderness and the American Mind* 44)

Examples of this change in attitude are plentiful. The romantic celebration of nature could be found in the works of William Gilpin, Rousseau, Chateaubriand and de Tocqueville, among others. Connecting all of them is the notion that God or a metaphysical sense of a "Creator," a "First Cause," might actually be associated with wild nature. Far from the traditional sense of Eden or Paradise as an ordered, perfectly cultivated garden of beauty, sublimity ushered in a respectful appreciation of nature's roughness as a new sign of God's power and majesty.

This spiritualised conception of wilderness, this chaotic God, further constitutes an important precedent for later ecological theories. Divested of most fear of chaos or wild nature as an abject horror, these early Romantic Primitivists, as Nash calls them, were among the first intellectuals to attempt a more harmonious co-existence with the wilderness beyond society. Here, he notes, an important counter-argument to the Western emphasis upon social progress begins to formulate itself. The Enlightenment's Promethean regard for development

converts to the acceptance of nature as a power in its own right. Primitivism appears, in this manner, as a progressive re-visioning of the natural world rather than the fearful and irrational hatred of civilisation the movement sometimes evokes. In fact, as Nash points out, Primitivists believed that human happiness and well being actually decreased in proportion to civility. If any aspect of human existence was barbaric it was the ongoing interest within the West in destroying the original purity and natural abundance of the wilderness environment.

François-René de Chateaubriand, an early enthusiast of Romantic Primitivism, described his first exposure to the wilderness of northern New York in 1792 as "a sort of delirium." He wrote: "in vain does the imagination try to roam at large midst [Europe's] cultivated plains...but in this deserted region the soul delights to bury and lose itself amidst boundless forests...to mix and confound...with the wild sublimities of Nature."⁶ For Chateaubriand, power was not the exclusive property of human invention; and neither was delight.

In cataloguing this change in Western attitudes towards wilderness, Nash establishes a fairly continuous counter-tradition to Western rationalism. Most importantly, he does this from within the Enlightenment itself, historicising the Romantic

⁶ Quoted in Durand Echeverria, *Mirage in the West: A History of the French Image of American Society to 1815* (New Jersey: Princeton Press, 1957) 32-33.

sensibility as an integral component of reasoned reflection and not as some reactionary movement to the problems of progress. As Nash demonstrates, consistent within the Romantic vision and its later ecological incarnations is the critical contention that rationalism had failed in its mandate to provide a healthy, meaningful social order. In shunning nature in all its wild splendour, human development had denied itself a truly progressive cultural framework. Ecological theory saw itself, accordingly, as restoring the West to the promise of Reason, not severing it. Wherever the Promethean attitude re-surfaced in Western thinking, the Romantic sensibility usefully counteracted its more destructive tendencies. In shunning nature, Western rationalisation had produced powerful economic systems, driven, regardless of ideological orientation, by the development of a state's natural resources. The association of wilderness with nature rather than human development aided ecocentrism in its attempt to define a non-economic mode of social relations. Here was a notion of nature that bore no economic value, and hence operated beyond the concerns of any ideology. To consider nature as wilderness presupposed a social order based upon more than just industrial growth and resource development. Emphasising co-operation rather than expansion, mutual collaboration rather than growth, the Romantic roots of ecocentrism carried a strong anti-economic bias in almost every core idea.

This is why, Nash contends, most forms of Marxism had little intellectual purchase in America. Marxist theories of economic development, which were alleged to have proposed cast-iron historical laws of historical progress, primarily provoked scepticism among American intellectuals. This uncertainty regarding Marxist principles, as we've seen, strongly inspired both Bateson and Polanyi to define new approaches to the field of sociology and anthropology. Many more extreme ecocentric writers, especially those interested in deep ecology, were more explicit in their criticisms, viewing Marxism as an indefensible exploitation of natural resources. Even Polanyi's use of Marx in his writing inspired criticism from other ecological theorists as well as conservative, anti-Communist ideologues, especially in the US. As Halperin notes, Polanyi purposefully downplayed his economic references in his writing because of his untimely interest in Marxism: "His critique of capitalism and his attempts to develop a generic set of concepts for understanding economic processes were muddled by a combination of McCarthyism and a brand of development economics that was interested in transforming economies in precisely the ways most abhorrent to Polanyi" (44). The role of Marxism, therefore, in American political and social theory lost considerable purchase after World War II, while ecocentrism became increasingly respectable on a variety of levels. If Marxism was going to survive as a

discourse, writers like Polanyi and Bateson realised, it needed to address and reform its own epistemological faults and political failures.

That Marxism continued, throughout the postwar period, to view history as a progression (through socialism to communism) cannot be denied. However, many Marxist thinkers, like Ferry, in turn, refute such criticisms as reductive, confused conflations of one particularly orthodox strain of Marxist thought. Distinctions are necessary, they argue, between Orthodox Marxist theory and its later, more advanced Westernised variations.⁷ Ferry's position conforms to later Western Marxisms, de-emphasising, as it does, the movement's more economically and historically deterministic components. The critical theory of the Frankfurt School, as well as Gramsci's philosophy of Praxis, refused all notions of history as simply the progress of ideas. Social theory, in these cases, contrary to what many ecological thinkers charged, did not imply the economic or historical march towards some ideal social vision. Rather, Western Marxism attempted to re-assess Marx's material determinism by focusing on his earlier original works, i.e., his *Theses on Feurbach* and *Grundrisse*. Critical Theory, in some ways, can even be compared

⁷ See, for example, Deleage (1989), Martinez-Allier (1990) and O'Connor (1991).

to ecology due to its similar apprehensions about the domination and exploitation of nature through culture.

Pierre Bourdieu exemplifies well this type of response to ecocentrism, criticising it for reducing the many variations of Marxist thought to its historical materialist concerns. Bourdieu's sociology introduces many of Ferry's concerns about the lack of ideological references in much ecocentrism. In fact, for Bourdieu, the tendency within ecocentrism to dismiss enlightenment principles of reason is indicative of a strong political unconsciousness among many postwar intellectuals within the West. Read through Bourdieu, the search by ecocentric writers for a non-economic basis for society — far from placing it beyond the influence of ideology — exemplifies an even stronger interdependence between cultural and political structures. Bourdieu formally delineates this relationship as "symbolic power," an apparatus of ideology that distributes its influence through consensus rather than direct political force. Such structures may effect a more rationalised and sublimated institution of coercion, but a certain political hierarchy remains consistent.

In Bourdieu's view, the proper study of class interests and modern relations of power must necessarily begin, not with relations of production, but with cultural discourse as an important political apparatus in its own right. Otherwise, he

notes, cultural interaction between individuals becomes falsely separated from economic structures despite the strong evidence of power relations influencing and directing both types of activity. In ignoring the economic and political components of culture as delineated in later Marxisms, ecological criticism tends to set up a false dichotomy between industrial processes and everyday life. An organised cultural market operates much like any other industry, outlining, as he puts it, a formal "set of dispositions" which incline agents to act and react in certain ways" (12). While such structures may not appear to be market-based, they do play an important role in the management of consumer relations. Identifying the actual social component of a cultural market as a "linguistic habitus," Bourdieu writes:

Every speech act and, more generally, every action, is a conjuncture, an encounter between independent casual series. On the one hand, there are socially constructed dispositions of the linguistic habitus, which imply a certain propensity to speak and to say determinant things (the expressive interest) and a certain capacity to speak which involves both the linguistic capacity to generate an infinite number of grammatically correct discourses, and the social capacity to use this competence adequately in a determinate situation. On the other hand, there are the structures of the linguistic market, which impose themselves as a system of specific sanctions and censorships. (37)

When Bourdieu investigates the evolution of culture within the modern era, it is with particular attention to the profound

effect that the "linguistic markets" tend to have on the linguistic habitus as social relations become increasingly institutionalised. Accordingly, Bourdieu makes little distinction between Polanyi's locational and appropriational movements in his subsequent analysis of modern political economies. The symbolic nature of power, especially within the postwar state, ensures that institutions remain key points of focus, even where state or economic legislation seems completely absent. Rather than dismiss institutional arrangements in his work, as Polanyi does, Bourdieu enlarges them to encompass entire social formations, paradigms of value and interaction he calls "social totalities." Within a particular social totality, different disciplines such as literature and anthropology may have very little actual institutional affiliation with each other, and yet still convey a strong cultural homology. The fact that disparate fields of production and analysis can appear profoundly linked through (in Polanyi's case) collective interaction or (as with Grossinger) a metaphysical wholeness demands, for Bourdieu, an entire new conception of the relationship between culture and ideology.

The construction of a "social totality," Bourdieu writes, occurs through a linguistic field, that is, through linguistic relations of power as opposed to either material forces of coercion or capitalist exchange value. Once a distinct

linguistic authority is able to assert its dominance over the social order, patterns of cultural assimilation quickly become codified and then officially disseminated among the polity. An authorised "linguistic market" can potentially influence all forms of public expression, including educational frameworks, mass media and the arts. The complex, symbolic nature of such authority, Bourdieu continues, effectively conceals what factors of control and political force may, in fact, be functioning. Instead power is exercised in a more sublimated manner through the conservation and control of legitimate fields of cultural production. A subject's "indoctrination" within these fields similarly requires little actual duress; "[s]ince mastery of the legitimate language may be acquired through familiarization, that is, by more or less prolonged exposure to the legitimate language, or through the deliberate inculcation of explicit rules..." (61). Subsequently, locational movements, as distinguished by Polanyi from all institutional frameworks, re-emerge in Bourdieu's work as potent modes of acquisition. Bourdieu writes,

In this sense, like the sociology of culture, the sociology of language is logically inseparable from a sociology of education. As a linguistic market strictly subject to the verdicts of the guardians of legitimate culture, the educational market is strictly dominated by the linguistic products of the dominant class, and tends to sanction the pre-existing differences in

capital. The combined effect of low cultural capital and the associated low propensity to increase it through educational investment condemns the least favoured classes to the negative sanctions of the scholastic market, i.e., exclusion or early self-exclusion induced by lack of success. The initial disparities, therefore, tend to be reproduced since the length of the inculcation tends to vary with its efficiency: those least inclined and least able to accept and adopt the language of the school are also those exposed for the shortest time to this language and to educational monitoring, correction and sanction. (62)

For Bourdieu, therefore, both family and educational frameworks hardly exemplify the autonomy from the state apparatus that Polanyi granted them. Rather, within these specific social spheres, political influence can be rendered quite efficiently. To study critically the sources of class structure requires a close examination of how culture itself is used as a form of capital, to study, in other words, the symbolic transposition of power into discursive hegemonies.

Not surprisingly, Bourdieu takes as his focus in this project the main qualities of culture considered by ecological thinkers to lie beyond the constraints of market pricing mechanisms, namely: concepts of morality, ethics and authenticity. Symbolic power, at least initially, would rarely express itself in conventional terms of capital. Here, value remains subject to the thematic and lexical terms of censorship

specific to each individual field or discipline. The exact measurement of such qualities as ecological theory maintains, is difficult to ascertain. Yet, for Bourdieu, it is precisely the ambiguous, fluctuating nature of these positions that needs to be analysed. To comprehend the political influence of modern cultural markets requires an awareness of the intuitive, even spiritual sense of holism permeating various studies and works, keeping them intact as both a methodology and an epistemology.

While, for Bourdieu, this holism certainly has an ideological function in society, he is careful not to reduce it to mere class interest. The political potency of symbolic forms of power derives from their own highly idealised nature, a sense of value that literally transcends all elements of class identification. When Bourdieu defines what he calls "cultural capital," he is not only describing a new source of power relations, but a significant transformation in the very concept of coercion itself. "[I]t is perhaps useful," Bourdieu notes, "to remember that without turning power into a circle whose centre is everywhere and nowhere, which could be to dissolve it in yet another way, we have to be able to discover it in places where it is least visible, where it is most completely misrecognized – and thus, in fact, recognized. For symbolic power is that invisible power which can be exercised only with the complicity of those who do not want to know that they are

subject to it or even that they themselves exercise it" (163-4). Such are the terms of this particular form of power, the sublimated quality of which conceals not only its effects, but its political objectives as well.

In Bourdieu's revised critique of capital, therefore, relations of power do not necessarily have to function as movements of political and economic domination to constitute an apparatus of coercion. In his brand of Marxism, ideas of commodity fetishism extend conceptually to include all areas of linguistics and education, as opposed to just those objects mass produced within industry. The institutional nature of language meant, for Bourdieu, that class rule did not necessarily end at the factory gate; to think otherwise risked more political unconsciousness which, in turn, perpetuated class oppression.

With respect to Ferry's criticism of ecology, evidence of this political unconsciousness occurs in those strands of ecological thought that mistakenly attribute environmental damage to "automation," leaving other less manufacturing-based industries free of criticism. In Stone's ecological defence of the rights of trees, no charge of political injustice was ever actually levied at the Disney Corporation probably because the entertainment giant's role in environmental damage is not as clear that of a chemical industry. Disney, by virtue of the same rights and needs or representation accorded to the parkland

itself, is also allowed its particular concerns and political objectives. Ideological struggle is reduced in this scenario to mere conflict of interest. All that Stone asks of the corporation's particular agenda is distance and a greater tolerance for smaller, less powerful cultural movements.

Marxism, for theorists like Bourdieu and Ferry, was highly useful in the discipline of sociology since it provided important knowledge of processes in history. Contrary to the views of orthodox Marxism, the point of this knowledge was not to produce an objective scheme of history's unfolding, but to be critical about the form of society emerging and to act on it to facilitate the construction of more democratic, socially responsible state. An expanded, more complex view of class interest appears also in Gramsci's theory of modern hegemony and what he calls the "economic corporate phase" of state power. For Gramsci, class interests within the industrialised state operate as a "rationality" for that class's intellectuals, influencing their actual consciousnesses. Revolutionary struggle, he argued, depended upon the active creative role of human intellect, not just labour conditions or supposedly objective laws of history and economic determinism. Like Bourdieu, thus, the type of power that most interests Gramsci in his critique of ideology operates on a cultural or superstructural level. Gramsci writes, since:

...the impetus of progress is not tightly linked to a vast local economic development which is artificially limited and repressed but is instead the reflection, but is instead the reflection of international developments which transmit their ideological currents to the periphery - currents born on the basis of the productive development of the more advanced countries - then the group which is the bearer of the new ideas is not the economic group but the intellectual stratum, and the conception of the state advocated by them changes aspect; it is conceived of as something in itself, as a rational absolute. The problem can be formulated as follows: since the state is the concrete form of a productive world and since the intellectuals are the social element from which the governing personnel is drawn, the intellectual who is not firmly anchored to a strong economic group will tend to present the state as an absolute; in this way, the function of the intellectuals is itself conceived of as absolute and pre-eminent and their historical existence and dignity are abstractly rationalised. (116-7)

Class interests, according to Gramsci, desire not just control of the means of production, but control of the ideological superstructure - for hegemony over mass consciousness. Such influence, he writes, is a decisive factor in the domination of society, for it means control over how society sees itself - the conventional wisdom or sensibility, the system of myths, images and sense of morality that people identify with publicly and privately. More important than the relations of production, the ruling class of the 20th century "owned" the general ethos of the

national community that provides the churches, schools and the family, as well as the mass media.

Gramsci's exemplary figure of this brand of intellectual influence is the Italian philosopher and historian Benedetto Croce. For Gramsci, the definitive aspect of Croce's socio-historical writings on Italy is their consistent failure to address explicit occurrences of political violence, i.e., those moments in a nation's social development "in which the conflicting forces are formed, are assembled and take up their positions..." (163).

This "passive" quality of his work, Gramsci reasons, derives from the philosopher's particular ideological aim to preserve hegemony as it pertained to his own class interests.

Croce began his work within a period of massive political reform not unlike that which occurred in France in 1831 and 1848 — the years of Jacobinism. The reactionary forces during Croce's time, however, were not movements of moderate and conservative liberalism, but of fascism. Still Gramsci maintains that the ideological prerogatives exhibited by intellectual progressives during both periods were basically similar. Revolution was to be avoided at all costs and reform initiated through a process of gradual legislative intervention of the state as opposed to the populist agendas of fringe groups. Only under the direction of the traditional ruling classes, in competition with other more

advanced foreign industrial monopolies, could the productive forces of Italian industry be developed.

While such a stance may on one level seem primarily academic in its repudiation of extreme political action, Gramsci effectively re-situates Croce's work as an important ideological apparatus in a "war of position." Positioning, Gramsci theorises, describes a distinct political process within the evolution of the modern state, usually following the more extrinsic social violence of actual revolution or what he terms a "war of movement." The war of position Croce represents evolved directly from Italy's own revolutionary movement, designated by Gramsci as falling between March 1917 and March 1921. The political outcome, of course, was fascism a positioning far more extreme than that encountered by either French intellectuals in 1848 or, for that matter, American ecologists in the early postwar period. Nevertheless, following Gramsci's theory of hegemony, maintains, all three of these subsequent cultural struggles seem comparable.

Gramsci's division of the revolutionary process into an active and passive phase, that is, a war of movement and position, highlights the critical need to analyse power as a symbolic as well as an ideological apparatus in the modern state. Both Bourdieu and Gramsci continue to emphasise, in this way, the more symbolic or cultural elements of industrialised

political economies, revealing them to be powerful sources of ideological influence, despite there being little evidence of explicit social violence. For Gramsci the symbolic phases of state transformation tend to be expressed as self-contained rationalities which are then re-negotiated by the state according to pre-established cultural values and the terms of censorship germane to available communication frameworks. In his study of Croce, Gramsci defines an intellectual hegemony based specifically in Croce's philosophical concept of "absolute spirit."⁸ Where Croce sought to distinguish levels of social engagement as deriving from a type of transcendent level of human awareness he called the "spirit," Gramsci saw only ideological superstructures. It is not Gramsci's intention to re-introduce the orthodox Marxist sense of "superstructure" as mere appearance or phenomena, yet, at the same time, Croce's metaphysical sense of the different relations of "class," "work" and "technique" within society must somehow reflect class interests. Polemically speaking, notes Gramsci, Croce represents such structures as belying a "hidden god," a "noumenon" in contrast to the appearances of the superstructure (128). Defining his work as a philosophy of praxis, however, it is here that Gramsci reflects upon the more symbolic, "pre-rationalised"

⁸ See for example Benedetto Croce, *Philosophy of Giambattista Vico* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1913); and *Logic as the Science of the Pure Concept* (London, Macmillan and co., 1917), both texts that Gramsci worked from in his

forms of political activity. For Gramsci, Croce's work well represents the transformation of ideology into abstract cultural value that succeeds the immediate impulse to political action. In the symbolic war of position, what might begin as historical movements to consolidate economic assets quickly acquire transcendental qualities and, before long, begin to involve a wide play for emotional and psychological influence.

Within the context of Italian fascism after 1921 – that is, the symbolic implementation of fascist reform – it is sufficiently dramatic to witness the gradual failure of a once Leftist thinker like Croce even to address, much less confront, the political conditions developing around him. Croce did not play a direct or active part in fascist cultural policy, withdrawing from public life in 1926. But he did support the regime at the outset, and the increasingly abstract character of his later studies continued to inspire a conformist and depoliticised intellectual response to the social crises of this period. It is this latter tendency in Croce's work that Gramsci attacks most emphatically in order to show how the political potency of hegemony lay less in explicit doctrines than in the sublimated repression of all opposition. In fact, Croce's specific brand of idealism represented for Gramsci one of the most significant cultural barriers to establishing a permanent

own analyses.

social-democratic alternative to the forces of the Right. Crocean idealism efficiently neutralised all revolutionary vision regardless of what class in which it might originate. It dissuaded both the working and bourgeois strata of Italian society from seeking social emancipation more successfully in some ways than Roman Catholicism could claim to have done. In this point Gramsci appears to vilify the Crocean intellectual even more than the fascist ideology itself: "fascism has given back to the bourgeoisie a class consciousness and class organisation," he writes in 1925, a view prompted by the fascist intensification of its own dictatorial agenda and powers. By contrast, the idealist's avoidance of class conflict signals a more serious erasure of consciousness by burying the very will towards emancipation beneath a larger, more abstract rationale of metaphysical holism. "This is why," Gramsci notes, "the mode of being of the new intellectual can no longer consist in eloquence which is an exterior and documentary mover of feelings and passions, but in active participation in, practical life as constructor, organiser, 'permanent persuader' and not just a simple orator (but superior at the same time to the abstract mathematical spirit); from technique-as-work one proceeds to technique-as-science and to the humanistic conception of history, without which one remains 'specialised' and does not become 'directive' (specialised and political)" (10). By the

somewhat elliptical "directive," Gramsci hopes to emphasise more than the strong moral imperatives informing much "specialised" intellectual work. Modern intellectual discourse, far from offering any element of critical distance from any ideological framework, maintains close theoretical relationships with what political agendas might currently be in operation. An especial awareness of these relationships was absolutely vital, Gramsci maintained, in order for any subsequent critique to develop some form of political objectivity. Only when consciously detached from the influence of ruling class institutions (including all private markets), could an intellectual discourse become directive, i.e., counter-hegemonic.

Gramsci's work is useful for my purpose in that it critically isolates Crocean idealism as a form of hegemonic power in the West. Although the philosopher was ultimately interested in the social and political problems of economic displacement within the modern state, his brand of Marxism was sophisticated enough to consider cultural forms of coercion as well as issues of class and the unequal distribution of wealth. Similar to ecological critiques of Marxist doctrine, Gramsci also realised that the social problems created by capitalist industry were caused not only by the physical ramifications of manufacturing and over-development on the environment, but also by the very logic of these processes. For Gramsci, the

industrialised political economy exercised its power almost entirely in the form of what he called "hegemonic culture," an apparatus of coercion based upon the subject's wilful submission to a higher communal "good." Gramsci's theory of hegemony explicitly identifies the attendant cultural prerogatives driving the 20th century capitalism. Material development, whether in the form of factory expansion or a war of movement, could accomplish only so much; the essential positivist vision or belief system informing such movements provided the continuity and order within society long after any physical effects were forgotten. What Gramsci's philosophy of praxis shares with ecology, therefore, is the firm conviction that capitalism is *inherently* environmentally unfriendly, although how much this shows at a given time will fluctuate: profitable operations can afford greater environmental consciousness than can unprofitable ones. Contrary to various ecological critiques of Marxist theory, both movements reveal a similar intellectual disenfranchisement from many of the original doctrines of Marx. It is to this particular division among American writers and critics in the postwar period that we now turn.

Chapter Three

The Un-American Typewriter: Hegemony and The New Left

Ecological thinking is symptomatic of the alienation from conventional socialist theory shared by many postwar intellectuals. Evidence within orthodox Marxist thought of both an economic and technological determinism became increasingly apparent to the American Left, especially after World War II and the emergence of the Soviet Union as a nuclear superpower. Hence, not only did ecological critics declare Marx's view of social history as overly deterministic, but as we will see, many revisionary socialists did as well. The economic "production and reproduction of real life," as Engels put it, may be an important determinant of history, but it was not the only one. Other forces or energies, many postwar leftists believed, also affected social structure, not all of them deriving from class alienation. A more inclusive study of social disenfranchisement, much of the postwar American Left believed, should consider the potent effects of spiritual or emotional dissatisfaction as well as economic despair.

Theories of ideology and cultural hegemony, such as those offered by neo-Marxists like Gramsci and Bourdieu, stressed the symbolically sophisticated, highly psychologised nature of state

power within the 20th century. Seeking to avoid the tendency in orthodox Marxism to reduce complex cultural networks of varying determinations to economy, later leftists like Dwight Macdonald, Philip Rahv, Murray Bookchin and Herbert Marcuse constructed a more differentiated model of social formation, composed of many competing modes of production rather than one dominant level. Earlier orthodox analyses, which stressed a more elementary struggle between the working and ruling classes, gave over to views that no longer saw the proletariat as the sole agent of liberation. Herbert Marcuse, for example, identified sources of social change in a plethora of groups and political strata, including the "unemployed, unemployable, poor and victims of discrimination." Political struggle, he argued, occurred on a variety of social and cultural levels, deriving from "various kinds of communes for production and distribution, residential communes, clubs, study circles, work groups, information centres, journals, health centres, legal aid centres, free alternative schools and 'universities' [etc., and it]...has its own alternative norms which anticipate those of the socialist society" (43).

What this advanced Marxism conveys is the important role cultural narratives and other "symbolic" activities continue to play in the formation of power relations within capitalism. The "New Left" approach to political theory, as demonstrated in the

thought of Macdonald, Marcuse and Bookchin, among others, refuted materialist or economic determinist models of society. Marcuse argued that consciousness could transcend the material social conditions which alienated, to liberate itself (45). For this advance to happen, a conscious engagement with culture was necessary. The problem, for the New Left, with Marx's emphasis on class-consciousness was that it did not admit the possibility that each individual also possessed potential for radical dissent. Likewise, for Gramsci, the politics of cultural production was central to any investigation into ideology and state power. Ideological control in the 20th century, he argued, meant more than mere military coercion. It meant control over how society sees itself – the conventional wisdom, the system of myths, images and morality that people identify with publicly and privately (453). Like Gramsci, the New Left had obviously learned how difficult it was to shake this form of "total" control or "hegemony" within the existing relations of production.

Certainly this shift in neo-Marxist criticism seems partially attributable to the growth of European totalitarianism during and after World War II – specifically, the rise of Stalinism and the Nazi-Soviet pact of 1939. As the political relationship between the US and the Soviet Union deteriorated during the 1950s, Marxist criticism came under increasing

American government scrutiny. The political and cultural policing implemented through McCarthyism had a strong disciplinary effect on American intellectuals inside and outside the academic institutions. As Richard Ohmann writes of his own academic experiences at this time,

We could freely teach and do research within reasonably broad limits, but activism was risky, and membership in at least one political organization - perhaps, then, others - was suicidal. By extension, to be a professional was to be non-partisan, to abstain from historical agency. Practitioners of literary studies, like those in all fields, should stay within their own areas of expertise. (83)

Evidence of the often harsh, regulatory influence of American cold war politics on culture also appears in both the "high" and popular art of the time. The general impression of crisis and social instability permeating much early postwar American thinking can be seen in Republican anti-Communist propaganda as well as in the grassroots movements of "folk" and "country" then taking root in rural areas. Perhaps no cultural work manages to convey the psychological climate of the time as well as Thomas Pynchon's enigmatic novel *V.* (1961). Highly evocative of the more paranoid and fearful qualities of American mainstream culture at this time, *V.* emphasises this culture's particularly volatile, highly unsteady sense of itself. Even the mysterious title character is distinct in her capacity to dominate the

story from its beginning without ever actually materialising within it. Pynchon emphasises the allusive, symbolic nature of this figure early in the tale:

As spread thighs are to the libertine,
flights of migratory birds to the
ornithologist, the working part of his tool
bit to the production machinist, so was the
letter V to young Stencil. He would dream
perhaps once a week that it had all been a
dream, and that now he'd awakened to
discover the pursuit of V. was merely a
scholarly quest after all, an adventure of
the mind, in the tradition of *The Golden
Bough* or *The White Goddess*. (50)

Much more than the identity of a single woman, the letter "V" in Pynchon's hands seems to evoke an entire cultural order. Given such symbolic potency, it is not surprising that Stencil, the agent of this epic search, becomes frequently sceptical that any one object might eventually be rescued from within this complex mythological matrix. In the symbolic landscape of Pynchon's text, even the most literal of material quests threatens to dissipate into wider typologies at any given moment.

Bereft of any actual objects Pynchon's novel presents, accordingly, an effervescent image of the American postwar state. Although symbolically integrated, its culture encourages a corresponding subjectivity that is completely transient at best, unable to offer any definitive interpretation of its surroundings. As Stencil himself admits, in Pynchon's modernity, there is neither a proper nor a false way to read "V." More than

a single figure, "V." hosts a wide variety of equally arbitrary disguises, including Victory in Europe, the mythological land of "Vheissu" and even Queen Victoria.

As an initial symbol of the postwar era, "V." reigns supreme. Yet, even her ubiquitous presence at this time does not fully account for the intensely political nature of her role in the 1949 espionage trial of Alger Hiss. This time, "V" appears in one of her more culturally authoritarian disguises: the little steel "V" in mechanical typewriters that guides individual letters to the ribbon before making an imprint. In certain models, there was an unfortunate tendency for this "V" to bend under repeated use, thereby causing it to mis-channel and disfigure the approaching letters. In the case of Alger Hiss, it was exactly this type of flawed mechanism which misaligned the capital letters of his wife's old Woodstock, thus incriminating the machine as the one typewriter that copied sensitive government letters for Soviet agents during the Second World War.

Given this evidence, between twenty-five and thirty FBI agents diligently combed Washington, D.C. for the un-American typewriter. As with Stencil's search in Pynchon's narrative, however, this manifestation, too, of the enigmatic "V." was to remain elusive — though not before causing much public anxiety. For a moment, a disfigured symbol revealed itself from inside

the wider spectacle. A gap appeared within the cultural order, one serious enough to require the corrective energies of the government. As newspaper accounts of the trial emphasised, even though the typewriter was never found, the disruptive and sporadic manner in which Hiss's capital letters escaped the lines of type contributed more publicly to his image as traitor than any actual material evidence. Hiss's typographic offences, in other words, conveyed symbolically what his prosecutors had long suspected: that in the new postwar culture produced by the bi-polar politics of the cold war, any typewriter could be mistaken for an enemy agent.

The symbolic threat which Hiss's supposed activities in espionage invoked reflects well upon the important role information networks increasingly played in American politics, as well as the intimate and inclusive nature of the mechanics of power these networks implied. The primary reason behind the attack hinged upon Hiss's important position as an actual government employee. Even though the US was not officially at war with the Soviet Union, the instability of their relationship at this time inspired within each superpower less tolerance for any ideological opposition inside its own borders. To maintain the enhanced form of cultural control and influence that Gramsci attributed to ruling classes in the 20th century, sometimes an

explicit ideological censure of its discursive structures was necessary.

The American government's censure of Alger Hiss's typescript showed intellectuals how quickly culture can be politicised, given the right ideological conditions. Artists and writers, especially those working from a position outside mainstream culture, could not help but ascertain the potential ideological components of their work. Olson, as we've seen, never doubted the important social role the artist or writer played in society. Not surprisingly, almost contemporary with the Hiss case, the typewriter re-emerges in Olson's hands as an important source of linguistic experimentation. The especial potential of this machine to generate modern cultural dissent derives, for the poet, from its unique ability to provide a more direct connection between the individual and his/her community. "It is the advantage of the typewriter," Olson declares in "Projective Verse," "that due, to its rigidity and its space precisions, it can, for a poet, indicate exactly the breath, the pauses, the suspensions even of syllables, the juxtapositions even of parts of phrases, which he intends" (SW 22). It would appear, thus, in Olson's work that through the typewriter, the writer gains an unprecedented degree of access to his/her entire culture. At the touch of a single finger, profound symbolic exchanges are almost instantly put into circulation. Exactly

"how far," Olson admits in this essay, "a new poet can stretch the very conventions on which communication by language rests, is too big for these notes...;" nevertheless, the means for wide-scale social revision never seemed quite so apparent.

As the Hiss trial demonstrated, given its ability to reproduce sensitive government documents for quick and easy anonymous distribution, the typewriter wielded profound political and social influence. Similarly, convinced of its inherent authority, Olson attributes to this tool a much more active role in the construction of a cultural discourse than was previously accorded most devices of reproduction. In the Hiss case, as in Olson's poetics, the typewriter continues to constitute a rather complex symbolic paradigm in itself. One mere glance at Hiss's offending typescript and an individual series of spatial moments, as particular and definitive as those defining Maximus's Gloucester, appears before one's very eyes: Hiss standing over his wife, dictating the federal document as she diligently types to the rhythm of his speech. For the purposes of Hiss's federal prosecutors, and, in fact, consistent with all evidence in any criminal trial, "form" here really did need to derive directly from content.

A very similar sense of form as evidence appears in Olson's prose when he attributes much of the peculiar stylistics of "Projective Verse" to the machine on which it was produced. It

is Olson's intention, thus, to re-conceptualise the typewriter as an important, if not primary component in the actual process of production. Enframing his purposefully nebulous thesis or law of lawlessness within an equally fluent typography, Olson challenges his readers with a methodology that erases as well as repudiates traditional prose forms. Suddenly typewritten script in general becomes evocative of an entirely new aesthetics. Where Olson's prose leaves off, a variety of other typographies might faithfully continue with little loss in theoretical content, encouraging the poet to view his writing as a part of larger, more "essential" cultural development. "Projective Verse" advertises its many technical innovations, thus, in a very explicit manner. The poet, for example, habitually leaves most parenthetical phrases only half-bracketed, suggesting the perpetual openness of the idea(s). In fact, Olson's sentences in general seem to resist coming to any type of close; much of his phrasing is packed with modifiers and descriptive clauses, effecting a type of verbal stutter. Ideas appear to bombard the reader from all directions in quick succession.

Olson's poetics exemplifies how cold war politics and its subsequent influence on culture encouraged writers, activists and artists alike to discover alternate political agendas as well as new forms of cultural theory and criticism. As Gregory D. Sumner notes in his history of the intellectual milieu

associated with Dwight Macdonald and his journal *Politics*, the experience of World War II and the ensuing friction between the US and USSR had an almost paralysing effect on leftist thought in America. For Macdonald, especially, the technological efficiency with which the modern West was able, both during and after the war, to eradicate whole populations and centuries old cultural monuments completely re-framed the writer's understanding of the industrialised state. The Nazi genocide of the Jews, Hiroshima, the bombing of Dresden and the later stockpiling of nuclear weapons convinced Macdonald of the need not merely to improve political diplomacy between countries, but to alter the West's entire way of thinking. World War II, Sumner writes, and in particular the Nazi holocaust was "something new" for writers like Macdonald, "a signal of nothing less than the bankruptcy of the western faith in the inevitability of progress. The dead end of the Enlightenment project of freedom through mastery, Hitler's network of death factories was a stunning triumph of rationalized technique dedicated to irrational and barbarous ends" (50). A profound cynicism regarding the essential structure and function of ideology began to spread throughout many intellectual spheres. Disenfranchised from the allied rhetoric that had spurred the West on to immoral atomic horrors, Macdonald came to the conclusion that in the present era, "It is not the lawbreaker we must fear...so much as

he who obeys the law."¹ Robert Duncan evokes similar sentiments appear over a decade later in his essay "Ideas of the Meaning of Form" (1961): "As long as the battle is for real, where so much depends upon control of self or of environment, there is pathos and even terror in the reasonable man, for there is so much in man's nature and experiences that would never be within his authority" (SP 27).

Through the development of this more sceptical intellectual position, Macdonald and his group remained heavily influenced by such German ex-patriate writers as Hannah Arendt and certain members of the Frankfurt School of Social Research, particularly Eric Fromm and Leo Löwenthal, who settled in the United States after the war.² For members of Macdonald's group, Arendt represented a perceptive, yet balanced intellectual response to the ideological and cultural tragedy that had befallen her country. Her sense of the German political shift towards totalitarianism in the 1930s and the 1940s continuously emphasised its larger, western contexts, drawing important parallels between Nazi atrocities and the erosion of individual conscience that seemed general to all western societies. Macdonald couldn't have agreed more with these parallels. In the

¹ Dwight Macdonald, "Notes on the Psychology of Killing," *Politics* 1 (September 1944): 239.

² Arendt, Fromm and Löwenthal left Germany in 1940 along with various other members of the Frankfurt School of Social Research, including Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno. Horkheimer and Adorno returned to Germany in the 1950s,

August 1945 issue of *Politics* he spared all subtlety in his response to the atomic annihilation of the Japanese cities Hiroshima and Nagasaki, labelling it the "final blow" to his wavering Marxist faith. Within the post-Hiroshima age, he declared the very "CONCEPTS 'WAR' AND 'PROGRESS' ARE NOW OBSOLETE...WE MUST 'GET' THE MODERN NATIONAL STATE BEFORE IT 'GETS' US" (the upper case is his) (*Memoirs of a Revolutionist* 169).

Betrayed by the ideological utopianism of the extreme Left, and horrified by the totalitarian excesses of the Right, Macdonald and his circle adopted an increasingly non-ideology-based, less orthodox approach to politics. His journal *Politics* explicitly conceived itself to be answering a need for a fresh approach to radical activism. Yet, this intellectual interest in political pluralism did not imply a corresponding repudiation of all political action. While the New Left of *Politics* argued for a less "doctrinal" mode of activism, neither Macdonald nor his fellow editors considered themselves to have forsaken their original causes. The need for organised resistance to the destructive dominant forces responsible for both the recent war and the atom bomb remained just as potent as ever. Importantly, though, the individual and political strategies behind such causes had changed. The true political enemy, these writers now

while Arendt, Fromm, Marcuse and Löwenthal stayed in America.

began to feel, was not a specific counter-ideology to the socialist principles they themselves advocated, but the more general leviathan they called "statism." Here, government bureaucracy in general, along with the ever-looming spectre of national chauvinism, constituted the new intellectual targets of critique for the American Left. Gone from their political vocabularies were most visions of deliberate ideological resistance. Instead Macdonald and his circle located their struggle in larger cultural issues - for example, those based upon ideas of human emancipation and the liberty of the individual.

Although the writers at *Politics* refrained from defining their political objectives any more specifically than a type of moral pursuit of humanist values (i.e., human dignity, social tolerance and emancipation), they exemplify the profound scepticism the New Left had in general regarding most forms of bureaucratic organisation and ideological beliefs. A progressive and enlightened movement of emancipation, they believed, operated much more openly, that is without any ideological prejudices. In contrast to pre-war Marxist inspired social resistances and political activism, the new antithesis to all apparatuses of authority offered few specific political solutions to the problems, but rather a commitment to communal values and general social welfare. While such vague gestures

towards notions of social harmony may not have valorised class struggle within the capitalist state, they seemed to provide the only starting point for discussions of how to extricate western culture from the "blind alley" it had somehow reached by the 1940s. Macdonald wrote as early as 1939,

"There are no more general ideas" — what better describes the intellectual atmosphere today? Most political thinking has abandoned not only the old optimism of progress. But also the very notion of any consistent attempt to direct the evolution of society in a desirable direction. Submission to brute force of events, choice between evils rather than between positive programs, a scepticism about basic values and ultimate ends, a refusal to look too far ahead — this is the mood.³

Comparable in many ways to Olson and other disillusioned writers at Black Mountain as well as the new ecocentric sociologists working in the academy, Macdonald exemplified a strongly inward-looking gaze. Reflection and not attack was his mode of critique. A more culturally informed activism, Macdonald believed, sought not the doctrinal elitism of past decades, but a new relationship between the individual and society that went beyond class and economic structures. Macdonald qualified this relationship in a manner that recalls Olson's own description of the poet's ideal connection to his social context, i.e., as a

³ Macdonald, "War and the Intellectuals, Act Two," *Partisan Review* 6 (Spring 1939) 8.

more emotionally, culturally dynamic exchange between the individual and his or her environment.

Given this new emphasis on culture, it is hardly surprising that much of the Left within the US at this time initiated less formal ideological opposition to the political mainstream than orthodox Marxists had done only a decade earlier. This de-radicalisation of the New York group should also be viewed in relation to the American government's ongoing suspicion and condemnation of oppositional ideologies within the US. Yet, as I've suggested at the beginning of the chapter, what might have begun as strict ideological censure of communist or anti-capitalist doctrine quickly evolved into a much more general pursuit of cultural conformity. Not satisfied with the banning of individual membership within the Communist Party of America, various school and ladies' committees also prohibited works like John Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath* for being too critical of American society during the Depression (Goldman 122). In a similar move, "textbook boards," as Eric Goldman points out, "setting out to protect the schools from communism shielded the young from any praise of minimum wage laws along the way" (122). Goldman writes,

The heart of the emotional drive behind this whole conspiracy theory lay precisely in the fact that it was a theory of conspiracy. The hated developments could all have been prevented; they were all the work of a few

wicked men, operating behind a cloak of hypocrisy. The American who was so annoyed at the fact that a Negro sat down beside him in a bus rarely saw that the social upsurge in the United States as an ineluctable part of the democratic process. The Negro was there because New Dealers had plotted to put him there. The rise of Communism around the world did not result from long-running historical forces; the Red advances came from the Alger Hisses, who had contrived to bring them about.... The danger had been and was within the United States, not from the outer world. (123)

To sustain what, following Goldman's descriptions, seems to be the paranoiac repudiation of all explicit social commentary requires more than just political propaganda, it demands intense psychological and emotional control. The cultural objectives of much of the postwar American government tend to reveal, thus, a highly xenophobic sense of social and moral vision. Its positions remained reactionary in many of its policies, effecting a radically paranoiac, defensive orientation towards its entire polity. Policing strategies, along with most corresponding discourses of punishment, became increasingly severe. Potent political and personal threats, it seemed, lurked within every corner and crevice of the postwar state. To support American social policies at this time required an especial awareness bordering on suspicion of much cultural activity in general. As Ohmann notes,

By the 1950s, too, secrecy seemed an inevitable condition of world politics, of

"intelligence," of special knowledges in science and beyond. Others were in charge of those matters; we lacked not only their expertise but also the right to know how they were deploying it and the right to voice encouragement or criticism, except for an occasional scandal such as the U-2 incident that lifted the veil of secrecy. Real history was someone else's business. Literary studies went along on history's margin, with little cold war money and excluded from policy circles. (76)

Fear of a new ideological menace to the American "way of life" clearly inspired, despite the US's relative prosperity and social stability, much political hostility and reactionary doctrine. As the political suspicion between the Soviet Union and the US intensified after 1945, strategies of social as well as psychological repression became readily rationalised as measures necessary to ensure moral order.

In his analysis of the early years of the cold war, Guy Oakes also emphasises the especial prominence of an overwhelming fear and dread throughout American culture, linking it to several specific military and political developments of that time. The policy of deterrence, he argues, required a public willingness to act coherently and with conformity should the unthinkable - i.e., a communist invasion or nuclear attack - actually occur. Thus, although an essential feature of the modern political economy in general, the ideological drive within American conservatism for increased socio-cultural

conformism significantly increased as the cold war evolved. Effective social stability, in the opinion of both the Federal Administration and the National Security Council, now had to counter the continuous threat of complete annihilation, and for this to be possible, the natural propensity to be in terror of atomic warfare had to be somehow neutralised.

What Oakes's revisionist study of this period shows is the strong moral imperatives inspired by America's sense of its own ideological vulnerability. Once again, Gramsci's analysis of 20th century ruling structures with their more inclusive, culturally focused vision of power seems highly relevant. As Gramsci originally noted during his own imprisonment by the fascists in the 1920s, a critical understanding of cultural production necessarily grasped its political function in organising consensus within the bourgeois state. Within modern industrialised (or what he called the "post-Fordist") state, preserving order shifts as a civic responsibility from the military to institutions of culture, such as the media. Consequently, even temporary gaps in hegemonic influence, such as those induced by subaltern cultural practises, possessed the potential to dislocate social morality. Here, the dominant media and public intellectual networks of the 20th century appear as important "gatekeepers" for hegemonic culture. Marking out and defending the limits of acceptable political conflicts, these

networks developed their own strategies of exposing, condemning, or excluding from the public agenda, those elements which violated or challenged the political consensus.

For planners of national security at mid-century, such as John Foster Dulles (perhaps one of the most authoritative voices on foreign policy in the Republican Party), the question as to whether the United States could win or even survive the next world war depended not upon their country's military readiness, but rather upon the moral resources of the American people. During the 1948 presidential campaign, Dulles was New York Governor Thomas E. Dewey's principal foreign policy advisor. Dulles's views first gained notoriety in 1946 in a two-part *Life* magazine article in which he castigated American culture for being morally bankrupt, irreligious and, worst of all, completely materialistic. He elaborated further on these criticisms four years later in a long essay published in book form called *War or Peace* (1950). The essay ostensibly outlined how the US at mid-century might still avoid conflict with Soviet Communism if it were prepared to undertake serious cultural renewal. For the first time in its history, Dulles wrote, the US was being surpassed in all areas of social and cultural development. The primary reason for this crisis lay in the gradual erosion within the country of its moral and spiritual foundations. An unhealthy and runaway dependence upon material

goods had led to a more or less complete corrosion of the very basis for American individualism and its ethic of self-control. Contemporary Americans, he maintained, had lost the virtues that made America great: the "commitment to hard work, [as both a] duty [and] a source of self-satisfaction and inner discipline" (5).

Dulles wasn't alone in his opinion on the moral decline of American society. George F. Kennan, a prominent State Department foreign policy strategist, held a similarly pessimistic view of American will, although based on a different premise. Rather than attribute the current weakness of American character to a loss of theological grounding, Kennan expressed a nostalgic lament for an obsolete class of pre-industrial producers, including independent family farmers, merchants, and craftspeople. Kennan was convinced of the superior virtues of this class and their importance in maintaining the characteristic traditions and institutions of American life. In his book, *Sketches from a Life* (1989), a collection of diary excerpts written over the course of his professional life, the following personal reflection dated 26 August 1956 summarises his views:

I am living in the world my father despaired of, and rightly so. Why should I take it too seriously, hurry and worry and bustle around in it. It is, after all, later afternoon; the main happenings of the day are over; not

much more is going to happen today. In this way I may acquire something of that same peace that [my father's grave has] recognizing, too, without complaint, that my day is past, that I am as much of an anachronism as the house, that I, too, have been passed by and do not really mind too much — because the present is too uninteresting. We of the past have a secret; and we need never worry about its being betrayed — for no one now is curious about it. No one would understand it even if he tried. (*Sketches from a Life* 172-3)

In many ways, both Dulles's and Kennan's cultural positioning can be compared to a fairly traditional Republican stance on the modern state and its complex relationship to industrial progress. Dulles's lament for the loss of spiritual grounding within postwar America derives ideologically from the conservative mistrust of rampant, hasty trends in modernisation. The spiritual and moral qualities of Dulles's viewpoint might also be traced to the strong religious foundation of the American right. It is worth recalling here that Gramsci also analysed American ideology with reference to the Protestant, puritan roots of capital development in general. In his study of Fordism, Gramsci emphasises what he calls the "puritanical initiative of American industrialists like Ford" where an idealist concept of work and physical efficiency seems evident above all. Despite the mechanised and de-humanised quality of Fordist labour, Gramsci notes, a strong moral fervour tends to

dominate its development (at least in theory) as a paradigm of successful social management.

Hence Dulles's retreat to spiritual perspectives retraces a conventional line of thought within the political and theoretical parameters of conservative thinking. Like Ford, Dulles was obviously not against technological progress; yet he believed in retaining strong social limits on its directions and rate of growth. At its simplest level, Dulles's critique expresses a fearful nostalgia for a purer, less differentiated economy, one in which relations of power were more explicitly visible and therefore directly enforceable. As well, Kennan's pessimism can be interpreted as a lament for a more stable discourse of industrial and social development. In both perspectives, the key to a revitalised American order lay in past moral disciplines.

These strategists' consistent veneration of an older, "golden" era of American culture not only corroborates Gramsci's linking of bourgeois and Protestant ethics, but his observations of conservative reactions to political and economic instability as well. As Gramsci notes, the moral imperatives initiated within Protestantism always precipitated serious social and political crises. When consensus seems to be in danger of rupturing due to either domestic or foreign threats, formal apparatuses of coercion and persuasion frequently become

necessary to repair stability. Under republican Puritanism, the American government hoped to re-introduce its polity to a renewed paradigm of virtue and moralism, establishing, in turn, a re-vitalised contract of state liability.

The unique political crisis in the US - USSR cold war, with its attendant spectre of nuclear destruction, elicited from ideologues like Dulles and Kennan a new call for moral policing. Without an inclusive re-imagining of strong, ethical principles in the American everyday, the entire country, they imagined, was ripe for invasion. Kennan's description of postwar urban America emphasised primarily the corrupted and degraded character of his milieu. Heeding his warnings, the State and Defence Departments sent Kennan on a journey by train from Washington to Mexico in order to configure a more exact vision of the American cultural ethos. Kennan was not optimistic in his portraits. St. Louis, for example, appears to Kennan as a series of dilapidated storefronts, sooty old buildings and "grotesque decay surrounded by lots strewn with indecent skeletons of blight, debris and befoulment."⁴ In contrast to the original rural and townscape of emotional strength and communal responsibility, the current ethos inspired little beyond despair and depression.

Kennan published his melancholy views of American morality in a series of political articles and memoranda beginning almost

immediately after the war. Importantly, each critique was framed not only in contrast to an idealised historic fantasy of Republican virtue, but as a military and political failure to meet the growing Soviet threat. In a famous "Long Telegram" from Moscow dated February 1946, Kennan explicitly connected his concerns about the moral resilience of postwar America with a larger fear regarding the growth in Soviet armaments and military capability. Kennan wasted little time and words in noting that a successful response to the Soviet danger depended directly upon "the health and vigor" of America itself. Every effort to build the "self-confidence, discipline, moral and community spirit of our own people," Kennan argued, "is a diplomatic victory over Moscow worth a thousand diplomatic notes and joint communiqués" (*Memoirs, 1925-1950* 559).

Kennan exemplifies in his criticism the new Puritanism that began to permeate much of American culture. His appeal to tradition in the face of what he saw as a profound crisis in American virtue reflected the sensibility of the New England pilgrim more than that of the postwar American. Anxious to preserve American postwar hegemony, Kennan reformulated a set of explicit moral imperatives for both the country's domestic policies and domestic movements in culture. As one historian notes, anti-Communist hysteria "drew on a wide range of

⁴George Kennan, *Sketches from a Life* 131-2.

traditions [including] hatred of the 'eastern establishment' that dominated the state department, and congressional concern at presidential activism...distaste for European entanglements, and the Chinese intervention in Korea" (Dunbabin 41). Henry Nash Smith's *Virgin Land* (1950) re-introduced past mythologies of the "West" as frontier and a site of American ingenuity, beginning an academic "backlash" to Leftist histories that had in the 1920s and 1930s critiqued such thought as a "rationalisation" and, hence, oppressive. Smith's book won a quick academic following and was praised for its scholarship. It was labelled "a major achievement in both history and criticism" in the *New York Herald Tribune Book Reviews*.⁵ A.B. Guthrie of the *New York Times* qualified Smith's work as "a study that is sure to stand as a lasting contribution to the field opened familiarly by Frederick Jackson Turner and his 'The Significance of the Frontier in American History'."⁶ Fearful that it could not rehabilitate its citizens when they happened to succumb to foreign ideological "infections," the American State apparatus now turned its energies to harsher punishments and policing methods.

In describing the political and military aims of the US during the cold war era, Christopher Simpson emphasises the

⁵ Bernard DeVoto, rev. of *Virgin Land* by Henry Nash Smith, *New York Herald Tribune Book Reviews* 9 (April 1950): 4.

totalising vision the state initiated when defending itself against Soviet ideology. Simpson defines American domestic policies in the cold war era as "psychological warfare," noting how postwar America deployed a new paradigm of national defence based upon practices of domestic control and civic organisation.

The clearest indication of this new military thinking and sense of warfare lies, Simpson comments, in the profound interest the state showed in contemporary communication research and theories of social management. "Government psychological warfare programs," he writes, "helped shaped mass communication research into a distinct scholarly field, strongly influencing the choice of leaders and determining which of the country's scientific paradigms of communication would be funded, elaborated, and encouraged to prosper. The state usually did not directly determine what scientists could or could not say, but it did significantly influence the selection of who would do the 'authoritative' talking in the field" (13). The new prominence of communication theory in political military development corresponded, in essence, to the moral imperatives apparent in the thinking of strategists like Dulles and Kennan. In these parallel concerns, a similar focus on the individual American psyche and state of mind seems to dominate all preparations for

⁶ A.B. Guthrie, rev. of *Virgin Land* by Henry Nash Smith *New York Times* 2 April 1950: 7.

military conflict. A secure state in the postwar era derived as much from proper management of its human resources as it did any traditional refortification of its external borders and physical defences. Dangers to the state, these conservatives argued, lay in any possible breakdown in its postwar network of resources and consumption. Threats to conventional values and cultural visions, whether they derived from foreign military sources or domestic economic decline, demanded a particularly organised response centred upon its internal components and social infrastructure. Once again, practices and agendas of rehabilitation took precedent over those of military violence and political attack. The preservation of consensus against all modern threats demanded, in other words, an inward-looking, self-reflexive positioning of defence. The key to survival was in re-generating both liability and self-dedication on the part of every citizen.

Most defence advisors in the US at this time considered the newer political emphases upon persuasion and propaganda as a relatively rational, more humane alternative to the extraordinary brutality and expense of conventional war. Furthermore, persuasive mass communication not only lessened military casualties, it encouraged domestic conformity and solidified political will in general. The primary goal of the

cold war remained ideological containment both within and exterior to US boundaries.

As a figure of cultural transgression Alger Hiss is valuable for making explicit the underlying political – not to mention penal – components informing much of the official rhetoric of moral persuasion and cultural responsibility. As I've suggested, the threat Hiss posed was primarily symbolic, undercutting the cultural fabric of the American everyday through his unlawful use of technology (the typewriter) and appropriation of political information. Although research in the KGB archives has ultimately shown that Hiss was an actual Soviet mole, this fact detracts little from the type of investigation pursued against him in the early postwar period. More than the mere threat of exposing important military secrets to the enemy, Hiss signified to the government the significant potential for sabotage newly manifest in the most banal contexts of the everyday. One did not need to be an ex-patriot poet utilising foreign texts and publishing facilities to spread anti-American sentiment. In the postwar world of bi-polar political super-apparatuses, the ideological demarcation between friend and foe was no longer dependent upon national boundaries. Cultural transgression could be occurring in the homes next door to yours with American-made typewriters, utilising American information networks. US propaganda films such as made in the early 1950s

continued to stress the practically limitless number of sources within the country from which anti-American activity could conceivably originate. Journalists, writes Goldman, "caught the national mood" in its fuller nuances:

Cold fear is gripping people hereabouts...It's not fear of Communism in this country. Few think there are enough Commies here to put it over. It's not fear of the atom bomb. For most think we still possess a monopoly. But it does seem to be a reluctant conviction that these three relentless forces are prowling the earth and that somehow They are bound to mean trouble for us.
(78-9)

The ambiguity of the threat in tandem with its remove from conventional politics or military targets only seemed to increase its potency. Even its broad categorisation as "anti-American," as opposed to communist or fascist, reveals how individual ideological threats had evolved by this time into wider decisions about lifestyle and cultural beliefs. The Soviet ideology was not interpreted here as a rival labour or class structure, so much as a blatant and purposeful attempt to destroy the "American" way of life. The preservation of hegemony in the 1950s meant for the conservatives psychological rehabilitation and an intensified control of the media and cultural production. The cold war would be fought on two fronts: militarily, it would depend upon nuclear intimidation while

domestic stability would derive from one's command of information.

When the US began to re-develop its ruling structures in preparation for a more totalising psychological mode of warfare, it realised the importance of general communications and cultural research in pursuit of its military aims. Federal agencies such as the Department of Defence, the US information agency and the CIA provided the substantial majority of funds for many large-scale communication research projects by US scholars between 1945 and 1960 (Simpson 9). According to one source, the federal government in the 1950s spent as much as \$1 billion annually on such activities.⁷ In addition, certain major foundations such as the Carnegie Corporation and Ford usually operated in close co-ordination with government propaganda and intelligence programmes in the allocation of money for mass communication studies. Nelson Rockefeller, in his capacity as both a major source of cultural patronage and president between 1946 and 1962 of New York's Museum of Modern Art (MOMA), remained an important advisor in American foreign policy. Few Secretaries of State after 1945 were not in some way influenced or at least engaged with the various foundations and agencies directly controlled by the Rockefellers. Very little of this

⁷ Steven Chaffee and John Hochheimer, "The Beginnings of Political Communications Research in the United States: Origins of the 'Limited Effects' Model," Michael Gurevitch and Mark Levy eds., *Mass Communications*

relationship was ever purposely kept from the public. In June 1941, a Central Wire story described the MOMA as "the latest and strangest recruit in Uncle Sam's defence line-up." The story quotes the Chairman of the museum's board of trustees, John Hay Whitney, on how the museum could serve as a weapon for national defence to "educate, inspire, and strengthen the hearts and wills of free men in defence of their own freedom." Whitney himself spent the war years working for the Office of Strategic Services (OSS - the predecessor of the CIA; in 1967, his charity Trust was exposed as a CIA conduit).⁸ Throughout the early 1940s, MOMA engaged in a number of war-related programmes, operating as a minor war contractor for propaganda and information services. Such policies established a clear precedent for the important political role museums and cultural institutions would play in the postwar era and contributed, in general, to the ethos of fear and mistrust that subsequently involved.

The general importance of communication and "cultural" research in US campaigns of psychological warfare invokes a side of government not usually analysed in conventional political critiques or histories: namely, the government's role in determining what it considers to be legitimate or illegitimate forms of culture. Such duties during the cold war involved more

Yearbook, Vol. 5 (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1985) 77.

⁸ "Whitney admits CIA Connection," *New York Times*, 25 February 1967.

than mere censorship; government agencies such as the OSS and, during the war, the Office of War Information (OWI) worked to propagate its own information networks. In its role as "educator," the postwar government sought to repair all potential fissures in the dominant culture before serious social disorder sets in. Threatened politically and militarily by the rapidly industrialising USSR during the 1950s, the United States saw an increasing need to re-assess its own structures of discipline and symbolic coercion, its own "intelligence." It may seem odd to historians now that the US intelligence services at the beginning of the Cold War could not assess at that time how limited Soviet industrialisation in fact was. Immediately after World War II, the USSR suffered from major structural weakness. When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, huge swatches of former Soviet territory were revealed to be undeveloped and more or less at third world levels. While it may seem implausible that the CIA knew little of this during the years they were building up the Soviets as a threat, few studies have gone so far as to accuse them of having deliberately misled Americans about the possible Soviet menace. To speculate on the very possibility of such a cover-up invites theories of conspiracy. Hence, it seems more historically accurate to suggest a genuine confusion among American Intelligence regarding the USSR's exact military intentions.

Following World War I, the US government had little to fear from foreign influences and so shut down its propaganda and espionage agencies within months after signing the Treaty of Versailles. After World War II, by contrast, the Truman and Eisenhower administrations institutionalised these agencies and encouraged them to acquire sweeping powers (Simpson 31). In a sense, as far as subsequent administrations were concerned, the allied victories in central Europe and the Pacific did not signify an actual end of war. The postwar West acquired instead an altogether new sensibility concerning its political relations and the development of foreign policy in the years to come. American society would remain, even after 1945 clearly on the defensive, though no specific battle had been or would be declared. No functioning field of activity or disciplinary structure would, if at all possible, escape continuous reassessment, and when necessary, complete reconstruction. In this manner, a strong revision of America's social semiology was undertaken almost immediately after the war's end. Given the military's aim of cultural rehabilitation throughout the modern social body, it is not too surprising how the official rhetoric of the time resorted most often to metaphors of illness and viral infection when expressing immediate political goals. Comparing Marxism to a serious "confusion of mind," the chief of intelligence of the US Army Ground Forces asked, "Where is the

mental penicillin that can be applied to our loose thinking to ensure the wholesome thought that is so urgently needed in our country today....Our troubles of the day — labor, demobilization, the discontented soldier — these are the sores on which the vultures of communism will feed and fatten."⁹ American authorities had declared a virtual state of emergency, which in turn paved the way for an increase in the degree of state manipulation needed to re-stabilise hegemony. Consistent with their Republican roots, such attempts to immunise the viruses of sabotage expressed themselves politically as either populist celebrations of the rural and suburban landscapes or moral-based laments for the loss of the Puritan work ethic. Both positions readily supplied important source material for the production and distribution of right-wing propaganda and where necessary the cultural screen behind which more pernicious acts of subterfuge, such as black-listing, attacks on unions, etc., continued. What such activity shows, aside from some insights into the nature and structure of political coercion in the 20th century, is that in an age of supposedly self-regulating cultural markets, extreme measures of state manipulation were far from obsolete in the US at mid-century.

⁹ Maj. Gen. W.G. Wyman, letter to Asst. Chief of Staff G-2, War Department General Staff, quoted in Simpson 35.

Given the often strict measures the state used to maintain ideological conformity, it is, perhaps, not surprising to witness the abandonment by intellectuals of past oppositional ideologies. In fact, as we will see in the next chapter, many academics were even open to participation in certain propaganda and counter-information services. Some intellectual journals like *Encounter* (1953-90) were specifically CIA supported. The strongest network of collaboration likely centred on the journal, *Public Opinion Quarterly*, a periodical, begun at Princeton in 1937, ostensibly centred on US foreign policy. As Simpson points out, much of the editorial board at *POQ* was explicitly connected to or had worked for the US government's psychological warfare effort whether through the Department of State, the CIA, or even the Armed Forces (Simpson 44). Here sociologists, anthropologists, and other such researchers analysed diligently how the socio-psychological and behavioural characteristics of a given population could be used within a political framework. Much research, for example, was done with polling results in an attempt to determine what a polity's specific ideological orientation might be in different areas of the world (especially within the "new" West) circa 1945-1950. Despite the clear political biases of this work, such studies operated, for the most part, under the pretence of scientific neutrality or objectivity and relatively few protests over the

nature of the work ever materialised (Simpson 48). In general, the military value of this research dramatically increased the overall socio-cultural status of the social sciences within the academy, encouraging intellectuals from a variety of disciplines to adopt the supposedly ideologically neutral stance of scientific objectivity.

Even poets and artists, such as Charles Olson and Archibald MacLeish, among others, found service for their government in the guise of "strategists" for the Office of War Information. The Office of War Information (OWI) replaced the Office of Facts and Figures (OFF) in 1942, by executive order, once America formally entered the war. At the OFF, MacLeish and his staff had worked to supply Americans with information about the developing war. Insisting that "a full knowledge of what we are fighting for" was the best way to ensure "national unity," they emphasised the ideals of increased democracy and social equality at home and abroad (Winkler 8). When the OFF changed hands and became the OWI, MacLeish became assistant director in charge of the Policy Development branch, thinking that he would continue to shape OWI output according to his own vision. However his idealism soon ran afoul of administrators with a different, more propagandistic vision of the OWI's function.¹⁰ The government,

¹⁰ Sydney Weinberg, "What to Tell America: The Writers' Quarrel in the Office of War Information," *Journal of American History* 55 (1968): 75.

both MacLeish and Olson realised, was looking for a specific type of intellectual who would help establish and maintain fixed American values, while censoring any information or culture that did not meet them. Not surprisingly, Olson, MacLeish and many other like-minded staff writers found the entire office to be completely antithetical to their own aesthetic sensibilities and political beliefs.

For many social scientists, the new political threats and military challenges of the postwar era encouraged the reactionary vision of Social Darwinism with its distinct survivalist orientation. Social Darwinism, as with "development theories" in general, tended to equate social advancement simply with modernisation — a perspective shared by the American military. Modernisation theory holds that the more structurally specialised and differentiated a society is, the more modern it is. Modernisation involves technological sophistication, urbanisation, the spread of markets, social and economic mobility and the weakening of traditional elites, collectives and kinships. Individualism and self-advancement attitudes prevail, guiding a wider notion of overall social progress. In response to both these Darwinists and the rise of Stalinist orthodoxy throughout the international communist movement, much progressive intellectual work, especially in the field of sociology, became less interested in ideology. Leftist writers

felt they could no longer offer a critique of civil norms in the context of their bourgeois deformation. As exemplified among the editors and writers of such New Left mid-century journals as *Politics* and *Partisan Review*, alternate, less partisan oppositional strategies emerged that were interested not so much in ideological critique as in locating a position that transcended all ideology.

Such extreme scepticism came to define and inform the more progressive liberalisms of this era, as can be seen in Macdonald's writings as well as in those of many of his colleagues. Disenfranchised with the continued Soviet distortion of communist principles while simultaneously threatened by the narrow-minded provincialism of the reactionary Right, the postwar intelligentsia retreated increasingly inward towards a position of supposed neutrality and political autonomy, a position, so to speak, of non-positioning.

The most concrete practise or project to emerge from these writers was likely the formation of "Europe-America Groups" in the late 1940s. Attempting to organise and, hence, expand many of the ongoing dialogues between European and American writers at this time, Macdonald and his colleagues set up a formal network of critical exchange. The impetus behind such efforts seemed to follow a more or less universalist approach to cultural politics, expressing itself as a distinct

cosmopolitanism or international pluralism. With its commitment to relative solutions and provisional, consensus-based truths, what remains emphasised above all in this movement is the repudiation of the very concept of ideology. True progressivism, these writers maintained, sought larger principles of integration. If a lasting basis for human relationships were to be found, then it would be "outside" politics, drawn from some imagined sphere of innate justice and value.

In comparing these later, de-radicalised visions of reform with some of the more reactionary, paranoid agendas of the moral Right, important contrasts quickly emerge. Both viewpoints remained highly suspicious of overt government interference in day-to-day social interactions. Conservative positions, however, offered strict moral alternatives to excessive government, while the more progressive stances advocated an open tolerance for multiple perspectives and movements. No one ideology or vision, the New Left reasoned, should be allowed dominance if the democratic social order were to be truly reformed. Each side of the ideological spectrum, accordingly, claimed access to a vision beyond the structures of politics; the primary difference between the two, it appears, was more a question of how severe the actual threat to American civil society might be perceived, how strongly, in other words, did moral measures need to be enforced.

Progressive, neo-Marxist reformisms rarely offered explicit ideological critique; yet they also refused to indulge in the moral platitudes and populist slogans their conservative counterparts stressed. Instead, a comparatively subtle will to communicate, to cohere, informed their public vision, producing phrases and catchwords of a much more psychological nature. The political message of reform now focused on the sanctity of the individual and its ability to transcend ideological coercion. Unlike the Old Left, which had based its critique on the design of an alternate political economy, postwar progressive thought harboured few pretensions that it could ever supply the final prescription for a social utopia. At most, such intellectuals merely required a more or less neutral space of activity and reflection in which a healthier, artistic and more individually expressive cultural order might grow. As Max Eastman writes in *Reflections on the Failure of Socialism* (1955):

...I don't see how there can be an answer, to their assertion that mankind is confronted with a choice between two and only two business systems -- a choice which involves the fate of democratic civilization. We can choose a system in which the amount and kind of goods produced is determined by the *impersonal* mechanism of the market, issuing its decrees in the form of fluctuating prices. Or we can choose a system in which this is determined by commands issuing from a *personal* authority backed by armed force. You cannot dodge this issue by talking about a "mixed economy." The economy is inevitably mixed; nobody in his right mind proposes a

total abandonment of government enterprise.... That is the difference between collectivism and the market economy. That is the alternative with which mankind is confronted. You can not dodge it, or pray it away, or hide it from yourself with smokescreens of ideas. It is a fact, not an idea. We have to choose. And the choice is between freedom and tyranny. (31)

At a fundamental level, therefore, both the conservative and more progressive positions within American intelligence appear remarkably similar in their relation to ideology. No longer aligned politically against the promises and structures of consumer capitalism, the New Left focused instead on a rejuvenated appeal for what they felt to be the ideologically free values of liberty and political equality. Reluctant to define any political alternative to the self-regulating markets of the liberal state, this new generation of intellectuals fell back increasingly to a more traditional sense of democratic idealism based upon concepts of cultural holism, civic liability, personal expression and other similar values.

That such values continued to constitute the core precepts of mainstream aesthetic disciplines and culture industries is not surprising; yet by the end of World War II, many marginal, less hegemonic movements had begun to embrace them as well. Writers and critics of all ideological persuasions found themselves amidst a new cultural rationale, according to which most elements of socio-political struggle and conflict could be

effectively sublimated. While one must be wary of reducing to a single mode of thought or ideology what was in reality a wide variety of disparate cultural movements and political positions, it is important to emphasise the ultimate lack of ideological ends newly evident in almost all areas of postwar literary production. In contrast to the intellectual opposition of the early interwar period, ideological positioning, both during the war and immediately afterwards, remains much less galvanised in both its work and immediate objectives.

Most histories of American intellectual activity and art in this period solely connect this shift in ideological positioning to the rise of Stalinism and the totalitarian state in Europe.¹¹ As influential as these ideological developments in the Eastern Bloc were, they do not completely explain the psychological and cultural re-evaluation of America's political economy evident in many of the more progressive reformisms of this period. To consider more fully the complex moral and epistemological choices the New Left began to make, it is necessary to analyse the more symbolic forms of power then confronting it. Threatened by ideologically subversive elements both within and outside the US, the American State apparatus affected an even stronger, more profound psychopathology of the everyday. The role of the Left

¹¹ See for example, Serge Guilbaut's *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art* (1983).

in these cultural economies varied widely, of course, in degree of consensus as well as in each movement's respective political consciousness of its own ideological practices. The constant search for funding prompted many academics and social scientists to accept US government projects in the 1950s. As Simpson recounts, a full half-dozen of the most important centres of US communication research depended for their survival on funding from a handful of national security agencies. Their reliance on psychological warfare money was so extensive as to suggest that the crystallisation of mass communication studies into a distinct scholarly field might not have come about during the 1950s without substantial military, CIA and USIA intervention (Simpson 53). Even the New School of Social Research, though once the seat of Marxist critical theory, found it necessary to work with such US propaganda devices as the *Voice of America*. Ex-Frankfurt theorist Leo Lowenthal wrote for both *Public Opinion Quarterly* and *Voice of America* and, accordingly, had his own role in the 1950s propaganda campaign in the West to discredit and undermine Stalinist contingents everywhere. On one level, Lowenthal's work signifies the often contradictory pressures felt by intellectuals and scientists during the early cold war years. Lowenthal supposedly never recanted his Marxist perspectives for the State Department. Yet, as well, both Lowenthal's and Marcuse's brand of Marxism highlights the

theoretical necessity these intellectuals felt to re-examine their own ideological positionings. In a later interview, Lowenthal reframes his past in the following manner.

I'm not interested in posing as an ardent critic of American foreign policy. I looked at it from the vantage point of my specific function; after all, I was only the director of a certain department with the American propaganda apparatus that didn't make political decisions itself. I'm emphasizing this only in order to make clear that what I'm about to say is merely an aphoristic marginal note, not a conclusive assertion. The governmental activity didn't compromise either Marcuse or me. For practical reasons I was forced to find suitable employment. As you know, the Institute's funds had become diminished, and already beforehand I had actively tried to find an acceptable academic position, an endeavor in which I finally succeeded after this "detour" in government. (Jay 93-4).

As exemplified here, a more problematic impression of active political opposition informed most intellectual work at this time. The discourse of critique and experiment that evolved instead were much more optimistic, even idealistic concerning matters of cultural production and social interaction. Increasingly aware of the intensified psychic links between cultural activity and the state apparatus, much intellectual work began to organise itself with reference to a specific cultural discourse of value, exchanging strategies of political opposition for a new study of civic liability and social organisation. All symbolisms and narratives, all forms of social

reproduction, however obscure, are to be considered in some way vitally relevant to cultural growth as it was imagined at this time. To engage in critique involves primarily the repudiation of the very structure of ideology as an inherent despotism. Advocated instead is a strongly universalist appeal for tolerance at all cost or what writers like Eastman qualify as a basic "contentment" that "things are going well."

As both postwar neo-Marxism and ecocentrism in general demonstrate, the general dilution of political interests in art (specifically poetry) and criticism in the postwar US remained extremely well rationalised within each relevant discipline, so much so that, in many cases, no significant alteration in theoretical and aesthetic principles is evident. Within the editorial circle of *Politics*, for example, the obvious critical withdrawal by these writers into an imagined sphere of autonomous value was considered completely consistent with earlier strategies of organised social resistance. Such a radical "rejection" of the very structure of ideology, Macdonald noted at the war's end, "is the first condition for the human spirit's survival in the face of the increasingly tighter organization of state power everywhere."¹² Clearly Macdonald's unflinching dedication to moral ideals represents, in this case, a source of intellectual optimism and informed critique rather

than intellectual failure. The very fact that Macdonald could celebrate the awarding of the Bollingen prize to Pound in 1948 as a progressive and socially redeeming act suggests that, far from sinking into psychological nihilism, this generation of intellectuals considered themselves thoroughly committed to notions of resistance. Macdonald viewed the prize not only as a practical aid to Pound's legal dilemma, but as a moral victory for the writing community at large.

This strong concern for community and moral idealism evoked by Macdonald and the New Left paralleled many trends in ecological thinking. While ecological theory, on one level, saw itself in opposition to Marxism, a large number of similarities are observable between their respective critical interests and objectives. Primarily, the need among the postwar intelligentsia to move beyond economic theory to include epistemology, cultural relations and the environment as topics of study seems equally evident in both the neo-Marxism of the New Left and all ecological thinking. In this context, both movements in criticism appear to be not so much in opposition as highly affiliated discourses with common political origins and social directions. Ecological paradigms in both the sciences and arts provided intellectuals with a new series of critical objectives, while ensuring a continued commitment to progressive left-

¹² Dwight Macdonald, Editorial, *Politics* 2 (March 1945): 16.

oriented cultural ideals. Sumner's own history of *Politics* and its immediate context describes the newer, moral quality of postwar intellectual positions as an enabling departure from "the shallow and confusing collective categories of 'Left' and Right' [for] a more revealing inquiry into the nature of individual responses to totalitarianism."¹³ Social change could still be expected, in fact, actively sought in these responses, but in the form of moral refinement as opposed to political change. Rehabilitation, not revolution was to be the new methodology; toleration, it was hoped, would beget more toleration. Deriving his formulations from a primarily innate vision of human virtue, Macdonald remained predisposed to a more immanent style of criticism, one that abandoned most socio-political contexts for a specific discipline-oriented approach. Certainly, Macdonald felt, writers and artists had much to contribute to political struggle; their first duty, however, was to resist collaboration and this implied that there was to be no direct involvement with the forces of control. The need for social change, such intellectuals reasoned, had never been greater. Yet, the source of this change transcended the political arena, requiring not transgression, but co-operation, not the erasure of disciplines, but rather their combination

¹³ Sumner 38.

into a more consensual, less institutional or abstract set of structures.

Chapter Four

Intellectual Conservatism and the New Modernisms

While the New Left and other revisionary writers and artists became increasingly sceptical about their social relevance in the postwar period, many intellectuals found significant professional roles within the public sphere at this time. In *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation* (1993), John Guillory discusses the emergence of the New Critical canon at mid-century, aligning its strong cultural influence within the corresponding rise of a distinct social formation. He writes, "[t]he substantial area of agreement between the judgements of Leavis and the New Critics points to a deeper level of social determination underlying these judgements, a set of common social conditions. Viewed from this level, the two movements could be seen to provide different solutions to the same social or cultural problems" (135). Guillory's critique thus recalls the Gramscian concept of hegemony as an ideological apparatus based upon one particular class's domination of its surrounding culture. For Guillory, Gramsci's analysis of "passive" intellectual idealism sustains an enabling critique of postwar consumer culture precisely because it outlines how power constitutes itself through

symbolic positions of cultural influence. It is worth recalling here Gramsci's important distinction between ideology as a product of intellectual labour and its use to generate class warfare or revolution. According to Gramsci, intellectuals pursue ideological objectives in a very different manner compared to military or police forces.

In his or her "capacity [as] an organiser of society," Gramsci said, the public intellectual provides an important source of pedagogical and moral stability in times of social unrest and economic transition. Clearly when these ruptures are especially severe, as in the era of Italian modernisation under fascism, the privileged position accorded this type of labour can be absolutely vital to maintaining a ruling class's social influence. The political role of Crocean idealism, in this context, has been significant in the bid for consensus after the fascist march of 1922.

Mid-century conservatism in the US did not invoke the extremism of fascism, yet, as Guillory notes, the "specialised" intellectual work of the New Critics constitutes a cognate attempt to re-organise and protect "cultural values" from political threat. Similar to Gramsci's depiction of Croce as an intellectual who helped promote cultural orthodoxy within the fascist Italian state, Guillory's analysis of New Criticism emphasises its specific role in American arts as "cultural

capital" — in his words, "the vector of ideological notions which do not necessarily inhere in the works themselves" (29). The professional nature of this canon, in tandem with its institutional affiliation with American academia, indicates the movement's ideological alignment. Yet, as Guillory notes, one should also consider the "symbolic" quality of this relationship, i.e., its lack of explicit ideological statement, when analysing the movement's development, especially after 1945. New Criticism interests Guillory precisely because it exemplifies a "sublimated" form of political censorship, and it is this quality of conformism that he subsequently addresses.

For Guillory, the New Critics' "ideology cannot simply be read off from the canon itself, and...a positive or negative valuation of a work does not necessarily imply a corresponding affirmation or rejection of the 'ideology' expressed in the work" (136). Explicit instances of this ambiguity in the politics of the New Critics are readily available, beginning, as we shall see, with their own insistence in the 1940s of separating Ezra Pound's support of Italian fascism from the "aesthetic" value of his poetry. This intensely ambivalent relationship to ideology, Guillory further notes, derives directly within literary criticism from the influence of Arnoldian theory.

On the whole, the Arnoldian position informs most professional, i.e., academic, literary disciplines in America as well as Britain, and has since Arnold's own lifetime over a century ago. Frances Mulhern and Chris Baldick argue this point in their respective analyses of the influence of Arnoldian theory on British literary criticism via the work of F.R. Leavis and *Scrutiny*.¹ "The general project of Arnold and his followers," Mulhern writes, "can be described as an attempt to replace the current dogmatic and explicit forms of ideological expression with the implicit and intuitive properties of literary sensibility" (35ff). Mulhern specifically compares Arnold's promotion of a "literary sensibility" to the passive idealism Gramsci associates with Croce's work and other "specialised" intellectuals. While the Arnoldian rejection "of ideological expression" in art might at first seem progressive, even liberating, the literary sensibility that followed installed an equally rigorous framework of criticism and cultural exclusion. For Gramsci, such intellectual passivity falsely emphasised the supposed "autonomy" of cultural formations, and eluded the complex relations that have always existed between "civil society" and government.

¹ See for example Francis Mulhern, "Marxism in Literary Criticism," *New Left Review*, 108 (March - April 1978) and *The Moment of Scrutiny* (London: New Left Books, 1979).

Guillory's analysis also distinguishes an important complicity between the "complex of notions informing a literary sensibility" and ideological frameworks. The idea of a literary sensibility, for Guillory, cannot be separated from a particular ideology. Sensibilities merely indicate a more psychologised or sublimated form of political influence over a social order. In his view, the distinctly Arnoldian practice of re-evaluating "vernacular works in English as the equivalent of the Greek and Roman classics provided the emergent bourgeoisie with a means of emulating the cultural capital of the aristocratic and clerical states" (136). Here the ideological component of Arnold's "literary sensibility" seems abundantly clear. Guillory is careful, however, not to reduce Arnold's use of classicism to pure ideological opportunism. Arnold's especial literary sensibility, Guillory notes, also illustrates the important role culture itself played in settling the various tensions and instabilities associated with the British bourgeois classes in the late 19th century. The substitution of political dogma with a more intuitive, implicit "sensibility," as both Guillory and Gramsci recognise, is indicative of profound changes in the very use of ideology by intellectuals. No mere "economism," Gramsci reminds us, can subsequently summarise the multiple and often contradictory forces at work in any given cultural situation (207).

After Sketching Arnold's efforts to build an "implicit" cultural canon, Guillory turns to the dominant influence of the New Critics on literary standards in America at mid-century. As with Arnold, the New Critics' use of academic and publishing institutions to fulfil a specific cultural mandate calls to mind the more symbolic struggles for position both Gramsci and Bourdieu associate with power relations in the 20th century. In an effort to establish themselves permanently within mainstream culture, the New Critics attempted not just to organise, but to construct distinct standards of civil society; for this reason, they offer a rare glimpse of the more symbolic workings of ideology.

The figure culturally dominant in this scenario is, of course, T.S. Eliot, who after 1930 worked diligently to define "a literature that should be unconsciously rather than deliberately and defiantly Christian" (*Idea of a Christian Society*, 1940 26). As Guillory comments, "[s]uch a statement coyly presupposes a society in which Christianity is so pervasive and dominant a belief system as to require no explicit advocacy on the part of the authors" (136). Like Arnold's aestheticism, Eliot's view of Christianity repudiated all explicit dogmatic statements, though the poet remained consistently critical of the Arnoldian penchant for prioritising aesthetic concerns over religion. What should be emphasised,

however, is how, for Eliot, Christianity as a moral system operated more as a sensibility than as an explicit platform of set principles. Both Eliot and Arnold responded to a similar call within the state to safeguard, if not actually produce, new standards of civil behaviour. In each case, an innate cultural discourse of value stands revealed, one in which an intuitive sense of orthodoxy (whether it derives from an aesthetic or religious framework) effectively inspires a new social formation.

Here again, the literary canon of postwar America, informed to a large extent by the poetics and criticism of T.S. Eliot, recalls Gramsci's description of specialised intellectual roles within the modern state. Eliot exemplifies the type of public intellectual who works from a position of privilege within his society, identifying and assessing cultural standards. He never doubted his role of educator within society. Given its fragmented, politically unstable condition, the West, Eliot believed, needed a poetry capable of renewing all cultural value.

In this way, Eliot's teachings conform to Gramsci's concept of a war of position or "passive" revolution in which an official intelligentsia helps society organise specific cultural codes of behaviour and meaning. Only in an age, said Eliot in "Religion and Literature" (1932), where "there is common

agreement on ethical and theological matters...can literary criticism be substantive" (SP 97). Not surprisingly, following his 1927 baptism into the Anglican church, Eliot turned to Christian theology as the one source of cultural grounding strong enough to stem the pernicious influence of "liberal" decadence:

I have suggested that the liberal attitude towards literature will not work. Even if the writers who make their attempt to impose their "view of life" upon us were really distinct individuals, even if we as readers were distinct individuals, what would be the result? It would be, surely, that each reader would be impressed, in his reading, merely by what he was previously prepared to be impressed by; he would follow the "line of least resistance," and there would be no assurance that he would be made a better man...It is not enough to understand what we are, unless we know what we are; and we do not understand what we are, unless we know what we ought to be...What I believe to be incumbent upon all Christians is the duty of maintaining consciously certain standards and criteria of criticism over and above those applied by the rest of the world; and that by these criteria and standards everything that we read must be tested. ("Religion and Literature," SP 105).

Eliot's critical interests in maintaining cultural standards strongly appealed to the New Critics, as did his Christian beliefs. As Golding notes, the formative years of New Criticism centred upon establishing specific guidelines to qualify literary evaluation "as a professional activity," distinct from historical scholarship (72). A "mutual

antagonism," Golding continues, between historians and critics challenged the latter to differentiate their practice as a specialised discourse. To produce this discourse, the New Critics needed specific evaluative criteria, i.e., a distinct set of standards able to guide their efforts. Hence such influential New Criticism texts as *Understanding Poetry: An Anthology for College Students* (1938), co-edited by Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren; Brooks's own *The Well-Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry* (1939) and *Modern Poetry and the Tradition* (1939); and Wimsatt and Beardsley's *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry* (1954), all worked to establish a modern canon of distinguished texts as well as the New Critics' personal qualifications to interpret and judge them. Eliot further inspired their efforts through his own work as a poet. Being poets themselves (each writer had published, Golding reminds us, at least one book of poetry before any works of criticism), the New Critics had much to gain professionally from distinguishing studies of modern literature from the discipline of history. It was Eliot, however, who best exemplified how poetry intrinsically provided cultural value.

To analyse more fully the development of American intellectual "hegemony" at mid-century, therefore, the work of T.S. Eliot seems especially relevant. More than any other writer, Eliot, throughout the 1930s and well into the postwar

era supported both Leavis's popular movement in England and the New Criticism in the United States. Drawing heavily, for example, upon Eliot's highly intuitive approach to social morality, the New Critics habitually pursued what Guillory calls a "covert orthodoxy of aesthetic form" (149). As much as they sought distinct literary standards for their disciplines, they remained apprehensive of any actual doctrines. "The problem for the New Criticism," explains Guillory, "was how to express the orthodoxy of literature without representing the university as an institution too like the church, within which literature would express its orthodoxy directly as doctrine (Christianity, agrarianism, etc.)" (140). Inspired by Eliot's poetics of implicit value, the New Critical canon emphasised a highly flexible set of evaluative criteria based upon an intuitive sense of cultural standards rather than fixed literary qualities. Guidelines were still necessary to produce valuable works; yet, properly used, these standards were meant to harness inspiration, not confine it. The task of the first generation of New Critics, including Cleanth Brooks, René Wellek and I.A. Richards was to make available specific reading strategies, complete with a set of illustrative works that demonstrated just how to separate the wheat from the chaff. The general role of literary criticism within modern education was to be far from formulaic. As James Conant (one of the most influential American

educators of the twentieth century and, like Eliot, a graduate of Harvard) reasoned, the study of literature can have no quantitative value; rather, it

is a means by which a man may live a rich life; it may so "accumulate years to him as though he had lived even from the beginning of time." Surely it is easy to convince anyone of the wisdom that comes from a long life lived with understanding. Good literature can compensate to some degree for the limits which time and space put on each individual's knowledge of human nature. In order to achieve his or her place in the sort of society here envisaged, each adult should be as free from frustration as possible. We can hope to neutralize the emotional strains of a mechanized civilization by cultivating enduring satisfactions. And for many men and women continued acquaintance with literature and the fine arts provides just such satisfactions. (84)

Conant, like many educators in the rapidly industrialising Northeast of the US, were not opposed to processes of modernisation; yet, they argued, rapid advances in technology did not automatically guarantee a corresponding social enlightenment. In fact, publishing his book at the beginning of World War II, Conant saw only division between wisdom and technology. Thus Conant rationalised his professional role in society. The value of literature, in this context, derived precisely from those aspects considered to be the least measurable. In fact, given the "emotional strains of a mechanized civilization," it was art's innate duty to counter

the coldly deterministic components of modernity. Not only was a new discipline of literature able to offer the heights of cultural enlightenment possible, it was completely necessary. The march of industrial progress and technological rationality seemed inevitable to writers like Conant at mid-century; yet they remained confident that they could somehow temper it, if not control it outright. Technology brought many material and quantitative results - it raised living standards, improved personal comfort and built new communication networks. Such social amenities, however, were far from satisfactory in the eyes of the New Critics. Certain values and qualities of life, they decided, were simply beyond the scope of these structures. For a truly complete life, i.e., one that did not sacrifice the beauty and profundity of good art for social efficiency, society needed professional critics. The goals and values of these critics may not be strictly measurable, yet without their influence, society would decline into an emotionless, cold wasteland.

This vision constituted the primary lesson the New Critics drew from Eliot. Eliot's poetry and criticism outlined the specific quality endemic to intellectual work within the industrialised West. Where, for Eliot, this quality expressed itself through a marginal Christian culture, in the New Criticism, the intellectual sphere of the academy constituted

the best space of refuge where individual art works might be properly adjudicated. Central to either position, whether it be rooted in religion or academia, however, was the clear allusion to distinct cultural standards able to influence and guide a society. Importantly, neither Eliot nor the New Critics desired a violent revolution. Eliot's Christianity dictated a gradual approach to social change and the New Critics had left all interest in political protest with their Agrarian days. As a discipline, the New Criticism certainly envisioned a distinct social role for itself, yet what is unique about their moral imperatives is that they did not derive from dogmatic principles or make use of explicit censoring agents. As Guillory points out, one of the most significant qualities of Eliot's revised "mandarin" canon of aesthetic masterworks is its sublimated nature. Eliot's particular evaluative tropes remain oriented along a horizontal axis of merit and merit potential, emphasising variety, inclusiveness and breadth of scope as opposed to explicit and unchanging principles of value. In his influential "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1919), Eliot had written how, rather than conforming to a separate agenda of cultural and political doctrine, "[t]he existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work of art among them. The existing order is complete before the new work arrives; for

order to persist after the supervention of novelty, the whole existing order must be, if ever so lightly, altered; and so the relations, proportions, values of each work of art toward the whole are readjusted; and this is conformity between the old and the new" (*Sacred Wood* 50). The "conformity" or aesthetic order described by Eliot appears highly dynamic and adaptive. Its intrinsic logic repudiates all efforts to fix it (one might almost add "in a formulated phrase"), not because it contradicts standards, but because it forms them in itself.

Conventional critiques² of Eliot and the despotic influence he may at times seem to have had over postwar literary study often fail to discuss the sophisticated forms his methods of evaluation actually invoked. Eliot did exercise considerable authority over Anglo-American verse, especially after 1930 when he became poetry editor at Faber and Faber. However, in no single prose work did the poet outline anything resembling an explicit agenda for cultural renewal. No Poundian "How to Read" was ever forthcoming. Subsequently, Eliot's unique appeal to aesthetic standards may at first seem difficult to analyse with respect to its ideological and political orientation. "Tradition and the Individual Talent," advocating, as it does, a return to past moral and cultural sensibilities, is essentially

² See for example, M. C. Bradbrook, *T.S. Eliot: The Making of 'The Waste Land'* (Harlow, Essex: Longman Group, 1972) and Fred D. Crawford, *Mixing*

conservative. Eliot's later influence over modern English and American poetics successfully established a powerful cultural hegemony that helped to define an entire programme of writing on both sides of the Atlantic. Nevertheless, outside Eliot's Anglicanism, few permanent ideological doctrines identify themselves in the interest of political struggle.

Eliot's position as a modern public intellectual exemplifies Gramsci's analysis of the cultural critic as an important negotiator between the polity and the industrialised state. A professionally employed banker and a prominent editor in modern publishing, Eliot closely resembles Gramsci's specialist as "practical constructor, organiser" and "permanent persuader." In practice, Eliot, himself, hastily refuted any such identity with modern professionalism, subordinating what bourgeois attributes he may have unconsciously acquired to his own ideal image of the intellectual as mandarin or scholarly cleric. With respect to such cultural identities, Gramsci distinctly targeted intellectuals like Eliot as little more than cultural specialists who promoted institutional orthodoxy and social conformism indirectly through their own professional affiliations. Gramsci writes:

If not all entrepreneurs, at least an *élite*
amongst them must have the capacity to be an

organiser of society in general, including all its complex organism of services, right up to the state organism, because of the need to create conditions most favourable to the expansion of their own class; or at least they must possess the capacity to choose the deputies (specialised employees) to whom to entrust this activity of organising the general system of relationships external to the business itself. It can be observed that the "organic" intellectuals which every new class creates alongside itself and elaborates in the course of its development, are for the most part "specialisations" of partial aspects of the primitive activity of the new social type which the new class has brought into prominence. (5-6)

Eliot certainly had the capacity to be an "organiser of society." His position as poetry editor at Faber and Faber allowed him to develop one of the first modernist literary "orders" within the expanding middle-class markets of the early twentieth century. W.H. Auden, who first encountered the poetry and criticism of Eliot in the early 1920s while still a student at Oxford, managed by 1930 to become his first "protégé." Under the tutelage and publishing savvy of the older poet, Auden's debut with Faber became the first book of original modernist poetry to sell over 1000 copies in the U.K., and require a second edition.³ Other supporters would quickly follow. Leavis's later promotion of Eliot's aesthetics in England alongside New Criticism's expansion in the US contributed to the emergence of Faber and Faber as an important node on the Eliot network.

Although Eliot's ultimate objective of establishing a renewed Christian "sensibility" within Western society did not develop to his satisfaction, a distinct social formation began to emerge. The New Criticism exemplifies a specific institutional orthodoxy that did evolve within academic and publishing networks of the mid-twentieth century. As a literary organiser in priest's clothing, Eliot presents for analysis one of the more important "new social types" that Gramsci associates with the emergence of modern class struggle. A specialised "orator" for the high bourgeoisie, Eliot maintained a vigilant, censoring eye against the many cultural challenges popularly associated with the newer markets of the interwar period. Here, as Gramsci informs us, lie potent discursive "symbols," weapons in a war of position expressly formulated as a search for innate cultural value or rationality.

Although the poet rarely invoked political doctrine in his prose, his especial brand of cultural conservatism nevertheless functioned as an invaluable source of moral authority. Thanks to New Criticism, Eliot's aesthetics became well known both within and outside the US academy. His dominant status within the canon of British modernism derives specifically from the criticism of the Leavisites in the UK. Hence it is not surprising that

³ Edmund Wilson, Norman Foerster, John Crowe Ransom and W.H. Auden, *The Intent of the Critic*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1941) 23.

Charles Olson uses Eliot as an exemplary figure when arguing against moral imperatives in art. Postwar counter-cultural movements in poetry inevitably targeted Eliot as an exemplary figure when critiquing mainstream literary movements. Both William Carlos Williams and Louis Zukofsky demonised Eliot when elaborating their own poetics.

Olson's criticism, as we saw in Chapter One, is clear in its view of Eliot as an example of flawed cultural orthodoxy. So too, Eliot represented in Williams's mind a socially restrictive vision of art – especially with reference to Eliot's position on cultural tradition and history. Williams qualified Eliot's view of history as typically "aristocratic," in that his sense of the past emphasised a transcendental order able to guide and inform the present.⁴ Such a position, for Williams, effectively subordinated the present to historicity, prohibiting a freer, less historically determined development of contemporary art. It was not that Williams rejected all influences of the past on the present. Rather Williams believed that writing could both animate the modern and preserve the historical:

Our age isolated will fall apart from sheer
surrounding emptiness. To live, our poetry
must send roots into the past. To live
freely it – as we – must live free of time
it must live for all time, past and future.
It must have the common interlocking quality

⁴ William Carlos Williams, "America, Whitman and the Art of Poetry" (1917), *The William Carlos Williams Review* 13:1 (Spring 1987): 2.

that establishes it in its environment. It must live or be capable of living from the beginning to the end.⁵

Williams's sense of the relationship between tradition and the present is clearly much more dynamic and interdependent than Eliot's. In *Modernist Poetics of History*, James Longenbach borrows Frederic Jameson's term, "existential historicism" to describe the historical perspectives of such thinkers as Wilhelm Dilthey, Croce, Gadamer and, Longenbach adds, Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot (4). The existential historian, as identified by Jameson, in turn, parallels Gramsci's reading of Croce as a "passive idealist," who rationalises all social or political crises in his culture according to some larger metaphysical order or purpose. As Jameson explains, "existential historicism"

does not involve the construction of this or that linear or evolutionary or genetic history but rather designates something like a trans-historical event: the experience, rather, by which historicity as such is manifested by means of the contact between the historian's mind in the present and a given synchronic cultural complex from the past.⁶

Longenbach explains how both Pound and Eliot derived much of their thought from the ideas of Dilthey and Croce. All four believed in the individual's ability to transcend his own historical context and environment with the help of larger past

⁵ Williams, 1917 4.

narratives. Only the test of history, Eliot believed, could bestow meaning and value on the uncertainty of one's present.

Williams's literary concerns were quite different. Strongly aware throughout the interwar period of the need to define a distinctly "American" literature, Williams criticised both Pound and Eliot for working within a pre-established literary tradition thousands of years old and neglecting the need for "new canons." Their work remained rooted in "the aristocratic forms of past civilizations," and in Williams opinion, they were among those who "have clearly taken up old forms and as cleverly refurbished them."⁷

Considering Eliot's status in 20th-century literary studies, the success of his cultural "refurbishing" might now seem a foregone conclusion. Few can contest the fact that he did establish a prominent cultural discourse of value within 20th-century literature. A distinct literary sensibility certainly emerges out of Eliot's teachings and criticism, one that continues to inspire some of the most culturally successful poets and writers of the late 1990s (for example, Ted Hughes and A.R. Ammons). It can be argued that Eliot's influence on contemporary poetry stems primarily from his canonical authority within the academy. Outside English departments, Eliot may not

⁶ Frederic Jameson, "Marxism and Historicism," *New Literary History* 11 (1979) 50-51.

appear to be much of a live force in current poetics, but as long as the development poetry as a genre of writing remains anchored in academic research, Eliot's work will have a strong audience.

The relative success of his positioning, however, does not alter the historical fact that no hegemony emerges without some form of political struggle and the context in which Eliot's poetics finally emerged dominant is no exception. Williams's and Olson's respective critiques of Eliot illustrate some of the more effective challenges to the cultural dominance of New Criticism; Williams's label of Eliot as "aristocratic" in fact constitutes a highly class-conscious response to Eliot's mandarin theory of the poet. In his 1951 *Autobiography*, Williams attacks *The Waste Land* because "it returned poetry to the classroom."⁸ In other words, a war of position *did* ensue in the interwar period and just after World War II, much as Gramsci describes it, in which different class contingents from both sides of the ideological spectrum were forced to respond symbolically to abrupt changes in bourgeois culture and politics. In Eliot's case, industrial progress signalled not only higher living standards, but also the economic emergence of new under-classes — such as the petty bourgeoisie and labour —

⁷ Williams, 1917 1-2.

⁸ Williams, *Autobiography* (New York: Random House, 1951) 43.

who presented threats to older, more traditional ruling orders. These new classes appeared to benefit most from industrial advancement, as they constituted the workers and technicians managing and operating the technologies informing the economy. Together, the petty bourgeoisie and the labouring classes in Britain and America constituted a new stage in capitalism, one which was rapidly redrawing the terms of social hegemony within the industrialised West. His roots in an older ruling class, Eliot felt some form of cultural retort to this phase of active social change was necessary.

It is useful, for this reason, to consider Eliot's writings of the interwar period (especially that work which was written in the 1920s) in light of a wider modernist project of literary re-definition. Politically, Eliot's primary consideration centred upon somehow preserving his own class, the high bourgeoisie, and its interests during this time of unprecedented cultural crisis. Class-based readings of both "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" and *The Waste Land* inevitably yield a strong under-current of fear for the poet's own social rank in the themes and text of each work: "I have heard the eternal footman snicker / and in short I have been afraid." Yet, an extended examination of his cultural criticism also suggests a distinct tolerance for social change in general and a desire to adapt to new conditions. In contrast to Pound, the emerging cultural

markets of the petty bourgeoisie did not inspire in Eliot a reactionary extremism; instead, Eliot was much more compromising in his criticism. David Chinitz's essay on the poet's seemingly inconsistent reverence for popular jazz, melodrama and music hall theatre outlines the unique role the lower classes played within Eliot's grander cultural schemas. Far from being demonised as one more sign of the decline of Western civilisation, working-class culture held for Eliot a profound social significance of its own. Chinitz qualifies this interest as, in fact, "a lifelong attraction to various forms of 'lowbrow' culture: comic strips ('Krazy Kat, 'Mutt & Jeff'), boxing, street slang, melodrama, vaudeville, sensational news stories (especially about murders), the music of Broadway and Tin Pan Alley, the bawdy comedy of Ernie Cotiga."⁹

Eliot was never vague about his appreciation of such work: lowbrow culture constituted a unique and vital component of the modern sensibility. In other words, the culture of mass consumption was not inherently opposed to the aesthetics of higher tastes. As Eliot saw it, the cultural objectives of both strata were strongly unified. In a 1927 essay in support of melodrama, Eliot dismissed the very idea of "popular culture" as

⁹ David Chinitz, "T.S. Eliot and the Cultural Divide," *PMLA* 110:2 (March 1995): 237.

separate from higher forms as "unnatural [and a] pretence of concealment." Eliot writes,

In the golden age of melodramatic fiction, there was no such distinction. The best novels were thrilling; the distinction of genre between such-and-such, a profound "psychological" novel of today and such-and-such a masterly "detective" novel of today is greater than the distinction of genre between *Wuthering Heights* or even *The Mill on the Floss*, and *East Lynne*. (SE 409-10)

Eliot's analysis of the history of genre, as Chinitz notes, is ostensibly accurate, and has been corroborated in other studies, for example, Lawrence Levine's *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (1988). For Levine, stricter hierarchical divisions between cultural categories remain directly attributable to the growth of the middle class beginning in the late nineteenth century. This would have been readily apparent to Eliot, as he became increasingly involved in the new publishing markets of the interwar period. For the poet, it was not so much the proliferation of low-brow markets that had contributed to the devaluation of the West, but the constant threat of their complete isolation from higher levels of cultural production. Where once an aesthetic continuity flowed from serious writers and theorists to all strata of society — or so Eliot maintained — there now appeared an increasingly reified network of semi-autonomous art industries. A cultural wedge created by the petty bourgeois, it seemed, had effectively

severed what consensus might previously have operated between the ruling and working classes. Lost was all sense of cultural unity needed to integrate the disparate segments of Western society, leaving only vague traces of spiritual confusion.

Although there is hardly what might be called a clear political agenda behind Eliot's criticism, many of his revisionary aims seem oriented around replenishing or somehow healing the many cultural fissures increasingly visible in the West after World War I. As Chinitz notes, "the arts of the lower class are an ally in Eliot's war against this stultifying misappropriation [i.e., the isolation of cultural markets], and at the end of [his essay on melodrama], Eliot finds relief from both English and American poetry in the music hall."¹⁰ More than even the respected traditions and ecumenical pretensions of high Anglicanism, it is vaudeville and musical comedy that provides the poet with a momentary space of refuge from the variety of social ills and psychological tensions he associated with the modern state.

Chinitz's interpretation of Eliot's somewhat eccentric fascination with working class culture tends to defy, on many levels, most conventional readings of the poet's aesthetics as those of an unswerving conservative, ever-critical of all mass movements in cultural production. Yet, paralleling Gramsci's

analysis of the public intellectual, it is precisely Eliot's purpose to neutralise symbolic tensions between the different classes that constitutes his political role within social hegemony. No ruling discourse can hope to maintain its pretensions to cultural dominance without preserving some gesture of solidarity toward other more subaltern positions. Further, Gramsci theorises, the general intellectual objective in these instances remains closely bound to the pedagogical and manufacturing goals of the professional classes. Consent of the masses to the "general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group" is a basic requirement in all modern political structures, extending far beyond the aims and capabilities of economic and/or military coercion. The contemporary strategies of cultural influence, Gramsci notes, depend exclusively upon "the prestige (and consequent confidence) which the dominant group enjoys because of its position and function in the world of production" (12).

Unlike Pound, Eliot did not position himself in strict opposition to mainstream culture. Not one to consider himself marginal to hegemony, Eliot sought more to preserve his social status rather than establish it anew. His work was conservation, not revolution. To work within a social formation, as Eliot did, was to employ the indirect, implicit political control Gramsci

¹⁰ Chinitz 239.

and Bourdieu both attribute to public intellectuals. Eliot, like the New Critics in the US, nurtured a close relationship with the ruling classes within his society; and Eliot's respect for collaboration constitutes one of the most important differences between his aesthetics and those of Pound or Olson. In contrast to Eliot's social vision, both Pound and Olson, each in their own respective ways, held a more confrontational approach to cultural change. For Olson especially, modernism signified a restrictive, highly deterministic view of social progress and history in general. Both Eliot's mandarin concept of social status and the aesthetics that went with it, Olson argued, were indefensible.

When Eliot laments the decay of the traditional "music hall" in a 1927 essay on jazz,¹¹ it is more the unique structure and social role of such an institution as opposed to any actual programmes that the poet finds meaningful. The inherent integrity of music-hall theatre, he believed, stemmed largely from its formal use of audience participation and large-scale choral arrangements. Together these components signified an especially vital, organic community interacting with each other at a level of almost implicit understanding. The communal relations of the working class in this context translated for

¹¹ T.S. Eliot, "Charleston, Hey! Hey!" *Nation and Atheneum* 29 (Jan. 1927): 595.

Eliot into a complete model of cultural harmony, something he found dangerously absent in his present day.

This idealisation of working class culture is evident, of course, in most of his longer poetry pieces, including *The Waste Land* (1922). A distinct cultural link between the language and dialogues of the lowbrow and various mythical unities is a prominent feature of this poem. This is especially evident in the many references to ritual that appear in the work; in ritual behaviour Eliot likely located one of the most fundamental historical forms of cultural consensus, a public equilibrium, in other words, which functioned more or less unconsciously. Accordingly, those moments in *The Waste Land* when Eliot's awareness of aesthetic form seems most explicit usually describe some type of ritual, ancient or otherwise.

The aesthetics of the chorus in music hall theatre functioned similarly. The chorus line evoked a particular form of consensus – a social order that was almost mechanical in its union, enacting principles of performance under which the many became one. Its general structure was self-renewing, internally coherent, and even womb-like in its promise of communion and security. For Eliot, only religion could ultimately provide the cultural integrity suggested in these other aesthetic forms. Religion was the foundational source of all ritual, and what structures of unity Eliot associated with low-brow culture

remained essentially theological in origin. The fact that most practitioners and followers of such cultural forms remained unaware of any sacramental components only testified further to their growing isolation from their own social roots. It was thus the duty of the equally threatened élite classes to amend this lost harmony and re-establish their integration with the larger public sphere. The aesthetics of "wastelandism" were, like the particular class position they derived from, primarily absorptive, working diligently to assimilate the more degenerate elements of the decaying West into a higher spiritual discourse.

This is, with reference to Gramsci's analysis of the modern intelligentsia and their relation to cultural hegemony, one manner in which Eliot's anti-romantic classicism can be interpreted as a specific ideological position. Eliot's self-proclaimed mission to facilitate cultural integration between the classes invokes a much wider political agenda, according to which certain fractional and potentially agitated elements of society can be better assimilated into a dominant order.

In his study of Eliot and ideology, Kenneth Asher further links the poet's political position with a distinct brand of conservatism endemic to the modern period. "At the end of the nineteenth century," he argues, "...the conservative position is made up of a loosely related series of fears: of the revolutionary spirit, liberalism, progress, democracy, Rousseau,

capitalism, the Enlightenment, foreigners in general, and Jews in particular" (21). Once again, it is important to contextualise these fears specifically with reference to the neo-révolutionary zeal of post-World War I society and the changes in industrial economies brought on by consumer capitalism. As a conservative member of the high bourgeoisie, Eliot is well placed within the many contingents of anti-liberalism that began to emerge on both sides of the Atlantic at this time. Asher, in particular, outlines a consistent genealogy of right-wing anxiety within the West over the growth of the petit bourgeoisie within the modern period. Beginning with the clerical-aristocratic critique of revolutionary republicanism in the 18th and 19th centuries, Asher provides a rich history right up to Eliot's modern concerns about threats from the lower classes to his own social position.

One important early influence on Eliot's brand of conservatism, Asher notes, is the thought of T.E. Hulme. A strong and overt anti-bourgeois stance persists throughout Hulme's writings, and, like Eliot, Hulme, too, feared for the moral health of England's labour community, given the state of modern culture. For Hulme, the ability of any political organism to provide proper intellectual and cultural guidance derived from its religious and aristocratic foundation. To be a classicist, therefore, implied a strong respect for theological

principles, of which the most basic remained the concept of original sin. "In contrast to the Romantic system of ideas you find in Sorel," writes Hulme in an early essay, "...springs...the conviction that man is by nature bad or limited, and can consequently only accomplish anything of value by discipline, ethical, heroic, or political. In other words, it believes in original sin" (187).

Asher thinks it most likely that Eliot was introduced to the thought of Hulme through Pound while in London. In 1916, Eliot developed a short lecture series in Yorkshire or what he called an "extension course" strongly influenced by Hulme's writings. Hulme's anti-romantic repudiation of all revolutionary and bourgeois movements is quite evident in the syllabus, especially in the first two lectures. Pitting notions of "aristocracy" and religious authority against what he labelled as the "excess of romanticism," Eliot outlined a six-week exploration of modern French thought in its political as well as cultural forms. Eliot saw these two components of society as being inextricably linked. Culture, as would be maintained in the ritualistic references of *The Waste Land*, carried inherent social import: "a classicist in art and literature," he writes in the preface to the course, "will therefore be likely to adhere to a monarchical form of government and to the Catholic

church."¹² In constructing this course, Eliot reveals the deepening influence of French conservative thought, as disseminated through the intellectual Right of London (and, of course, France itself) in the early twentieth century. Further, it emphasises the anxiety Eliot himself continued to feel over the possibility of increased cultural fragmentation, leading perhaps to revolutionary violence within the industrialised West at this time. Under the tutelage of Hulme and Pound, Eliot was able to assemble his own civic doctrine of restraint, political reserve and self-discipline. Faced with the new postwar world and its continuous slide into cultural barbarism and political chaos, the poet remained committed to reintegrating Britain's labour communities with the upper classes. Cultural reform, he reasoned, required more than just enthusiasms of the status quo; a more complete consensus, i.e., a common respect for tradition and moral obedience, was necessary within the lower classes as well.

This eclectic hybridism between high and low culture invoked in Eliot's writing remains one of the more significant symptoms of his class's confrontation with the emerging petty bourgeois and labourers in the 20th century. The interwar years especially saw enormous changes in the political economy of the

¹² T.S. Eliot in his preface to his course, quoted from Ronald Schuchard, "Eliot as an Extension Lecturer," *Review of English Studies*, 25 (1974): 165-

West, precipitating profound ideological struggles to preserve or re-position one's class identity. In Eliot's mind, his effort to re-think cultural value actively counteracted the instability of the interwar state. In this objective, Eliot was hardly alone. The New Critics in the US and the Leavisites in Britain responded similarly when challenged to find a professional position within their respective societies at mid-century.

Aside from their own professional ambitions, the New Critics also drew inspiration in their writing from the increasing cultural instability they associated with the cold war, especially after the Korean War (1950-53). Such ideological conflict, they reasoned, ran the risk of further marginalising the art of poetry as well as its criticism; hence it was necessary to sever poetry from historical process and distinguish it from other practical uses of language. Only properly trained literary critics had the skills and position to perform such manoeuvres, since they, not ideologues, understood the experience of good writing as a particularly intransitive state of consciousness. Good poems, wrote Brooks, manage a "unification of attitudes into a hierarchy subordinated to a total and governing attitude. In a unified poem, the poet has 'come to terms' with his experience" (*The Well Wrought Urn* 35). In other words, we can "come to terms" with dissonance in social

life by "containing it," by striking balanced attitudes, as a successful poet does. Through this set of ideas, New Criticism made its own contribution to the popular "end of ideology" theory much noted in the postwar period, and to the eclipse of history and politics.

The cultural struggle and threat of "wastelandism" inspiring these writers in both their profession and social role was not imaginary. As Walter Kalaidjian notes in his book, *American Culture Between the Wars* (1992), "the American tradition of critique between the wars nurtured a revolutionary textual praxis. This new cultural force aspired to the avant-garde transformation of everyday life in its internationalist scope; its diversity of gender, racial, and class perspectives; its contentious mix of Greenwich Village bohémianism and Washington Square socialism, and its blend of high and populist styles" (9). What Kalaidjian calls a "revolutionary textual praxis" parallels Gramsci's concept of symbolic or passive ideological struggle. Sensing a need for vast changes in society, various key radical art/intellectual movements, such as anarcho-syndicalism, constructivism and surrealism, began to experiment in methodology and in medium. Like Eliot and the New Critics, these other revisionary writers and artists also used culture to vie for position and influence within the state.

The emergence between the wars of a new contingent of radical, left wing commentary would only increase Eliot's anxiety over what he saw as the diminishing purity of the working class. Yet as Kalaidjian observes, revisionary contingents of ideological as well as cultural opposition continued to expand throughout the interwar period. Far from fulfilling Eliot's call for a metaphysical, aestheticised critique of bourgeois values, journals like *New Masses*, founded in 1926 in New York, *Partisan Review* (originally) in 1927 and *Politics* (1940), presented, instead, a much more labour-oriented programme of cultural reform.

During its formative years, *New Masses* sought and solicited a mostly pro-Soviet, i.e., "revolutionary" approach to journalism, printing material that was otherwise too politically controversial to place in other mainstream journals. It would hardly be between these pages, thus, that Eliot's neo-spiritual alignment of working class culture with a more traditional, clerical class of intellectuals would develop. Instead, the contributors and readers of the *New Masses* were more likely to find their inspiration in the avant-gardisms of the new Soviet state. For the journal's editors, Joseph Freeman and Mike Gold, the revolutionary aesthetics of Russian constructivism offered far more cultural relevance to the American worker of the 1920s than anything John Donne or Anglican politics in general might

have accomplished centuries ago. The formal innovations evident in the art of Vladimir Tatlin, for example, as well as in the political poetry of Mayakovsky expressed as no previous idealism had before a genuine public demand for widespread social regeneration.

Freeman had become acquainted with Soviet revolutionary art and writing as early as in 1917 when, at Columbia University, he met and befriended many leftist intellectuals like Randolph Bourne, Richard McKeon and Matthew Josephson (32). Gold would be influenced by the art of revolutionaries like Tatlin and Mayokovsky during his own summer visits to the nascent Soviet Union, beginning in 1925. In this manner, as Kalaidjian remarks, the avant-garde aesthetics of 1920s Europe continued to presage the many disruptive shifts in American lifestyle, customs, and general cultural logic brought on by the new industrial modernisms of the post-World War I West (32). Judy Kutulas, in her history of the American Left between the wars, further qualifies these shifts with reference to "a new wave of optimism... It was strangely reassuring to know that capitalism failed people in the end, that business got its comeuppance, and that adversity united Americans... Liberals and radicals alike recognised that change was likely. With business repudiated by the Crash, new forces would be called upon to shape American

society" (32). Recalling his own experiences, Granville Hicks confirms Kutulas's reading of the period:

We — I mean vaguely the intellectuals — had for the most part been opposed all through the twenties to the status quo, to what we thought of as a business civilisation, but in the period, business had been so strong that our criticism seemed futile. We were somewhere on the sidelines, snickering at this and thumbing our noses at that while the men of power paid no attention. Now, however, for the first time we felt that we could and must take responsibility. (*Part of the Truth* 92-3)

Hick's sudden political awareness well exemplifies what Kutulas sees as a widening gap in the class structure of interwar

America. Intellectual histories of this period generally emphasise its radical instability, with respect to both the economy and American culture. As Chintz's political critique of Eliot comments, high as much as popular forms of art underwent significant transformation.¹³ New forms of media (for example, the radio and motion pictures) combined with the rapid emergence of highly diversified, more specialised audiences and markets virtually guaranteed a volatile cultural order. In Eliot's vision, as we've seen, interwar culture appeared increasingly fragmented and morally ambivalent. What social and historical foundations had once served to guide and inspire artistic production had apparently vanished. Other popular studies of the

¹³ Chinitz 239.

period, contemporary with Eliot, shared his unease. Writers like F. Lewis Allen labelled his society as changeable and uprooted, incapable of moral assessment. His account, *Only Yesterday: an Informal History of the 1920s* (1931), openly categorised the first interwar decade as "a time of revolution...[when] everything seemed meaningless and unimportant" (17). Coping with the social, political and cultural ramifications of the first world war, the American people, Lewis continued, were left "restless," "discontented," "disillusioned" and "spiritually tired." Despite the confusion and spiritual fatigue the interwar period seemed to generate, Allen did not follow Eliot's call for a more functional intellectual elite, but instead looked forward to a more politicised questioning of past, moribund, cultural traditions. Intellectual disillusionment, Allen argued, can often inspire revolt and innovation. Accordingly, where Eliot saw cheap consumerism and superficial mass culture, Allen envisioned a "breathless excitement at smashing taboos" (46). To Allen, even the most clichéd images of interwar culture, namely, the flapper, the bootlegger, flasks of contraband whiskey, etc. together symbolised a radical disregard for authority.

Another popularisation of the interwar period, appearing roughly the same time as Allen's work, was Mark Sullivan's six volume, *Our Times: the United States, 1900-1925*. The fifth of these volumes attempted to dissect the intellectual and

political temperament of the times, offering a similar assessment to Allen's. He paints the years following the "Great War" as a time marked by a disillusionment and cynicism that would, in turn, "continue to affect the whole national spirit."¹⁴ In Sullivan's view, the first half of the 1920s appeared as one giant experiment in decadence with a flapper (complete with "stubby feet, incredibly long and brittle legs, a brief and scant skirt, two accurate circles of rouge just below the cheekbone, and a tight little felt hat like an inverted tumbler") on every street corner.

Certainly such popular histories have dominated, if not wholly constructed, the contemporary image of the early interwar period. These histories provide a consistent popular picture of the times and, in doing so, present an important symptomatic component of the cultural milieu itself. Allen and Sullivan confirm Eliot's particularly bitter sense of interwar culture. Their respective portrayals of this period tend to emphasise the postwar collapse of an especial American classicism and social vision to be replaced by cynicism, triviality, consumerism and uncontrolled hedonism.

In a later history of intellectual behaviour in the early interwar period, *The Nervous Generation: American Thought 1917-*

¹⁴ Mark Sullivan, *Our Times: the United States, 1900-1925*, 5 (New York: Scribner, 1926-35) 186.

1930 (1970), Roderick Nash summarised the popular view of these years as an essentially trivial one. If Allen's and Sullivan's assessments appear dominant, he argues, it is because there are still so few unchallenged official accounts drawn from the popular media of the period. Nash wrote,

A handful of intellectuals, writing largely about each other, have created the impression that every thinking American in the early twenties either sought exile in Paris or wished he could. Some like Matthew Josephson in *Life among the Surrealists* (1962) first protest the lost generation appellation but then proceed to document what they disclaim. Sexuality of diverse varieties, alcoholism, and wild parties, after all, make for a more interesting book than a description of trying to write stories and poems in cheap cold water flats. And so the myth survives. (*The Nervous Generation* 17)

It is not Nash's intention to dispel the myth, since as he himself contends, there is basis in every exaggeration. The early interwar period did produce the curious cultural by-products of the flapper, gangsters, booze-runs and, of course, jazz. Yet, far from being ubiquitous across America at this time, such movements or scenes remained confined to a particular demographics and class. Despite the media prominence of this new stratum of careless and beautiful people, other histories of the period, like Braeman's, Bremner's and Brody's (1965), show that most Americans "were serious hard-working people who did their best to earn a living, bring up their children, live decently by

the best light they had, and lay away a few dollars for their old age."¹⁵ Nash argues similarly that the relative superficiality of some of the interwar's best-known symbols did not lessen or contradict their potency. While the flapper may have, in fact, been a fairly localised urban phenomenon, she did signify a much more rampant trend of innovation, moral questioning and alienation from tradition. The early interwar period, Nash declares, produced a "nervous generation," i.e., a disenfranchised intelligentsia, detached from conventions, yet equally unsure of what cultural direction, if any, to pursue.

Nash writes:

Even while disappointed with their country, the attitude of American intellectuals was one of relief that the weaknesses of the old order were finally exposed. Now, perhaps, reconstruction of a better America could begin. The war had been a needed catharsis.
(43)

Much of this enthusiasm for change, as journals like *New Masses* show, looked readily towards the Russian revolution of 1917 for inspiration. In Europe, especially in the new Soviet Union, the public anticipation of and subsequent demand for cultural experimentation fostered a strongly prominent vanguard. However, not every left-wing intellectual in the United States condoned Soviet methodology. Max Eastman, for example, was convinced

¹⁵ John Braeman, Robert H Bremner and David Brody, *Change and Continuity in Twentieth Century America: The 1920s* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press,

throughout the interwar years that the post-revolutionary culture of the USSR was little more than agitprop.¹⁶ In fact, as is evident in most histories of the American sub-altern of this time, the Russian avant-gardisms and the utopian politics they represented never completely took hold in American writings and art production at any single moment during this period. From the Moscow trials of 1936-38 (in which some of the Soviet Union's most prominent intellectuals were attacked) to the Hitler-Stalin pact of 1939, virtually every public act performed by the communists in the late 1930s ensured that party's mediocre status within sub-altern as well as mainstream American politics. Faced with the violent fratricidal politics of the Stalinist regime, relatively few of the radical Left's social policies constituted a workable alternative to bourgeois liberalism. As Serge Guilbaut summarises in his history of mid-century cultural politics in America:

For many intellectuals, the fall of 1939, which saw the partition of Poland and the entry of France and England into the war, was a dramatic period, a period of reconsideration and re-evaluation of all that the intellectual Left had believed in for so long and, some said, so naively and superficially. Although many still saw the Russian-German alliance as unnatural and nothing more than a bit of real politick, the Soviet Union lost the advantage it had

1968) 12.

¹⁶ See, for example, early essays he wrote for *The Masses* and *Voices of October*, criticising the propaganda devices the USSR used in conjunction with its intellectuals.

when it was seen as the leader of the opposition to Fascism. In the eyes of surprised liberals, the crisis that the Nazi-Soviet pact represented for the American writers was spiritual, intellectual, and moral. (*How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art* 39)

For Guilbaut, such events constitute what he calls the "de-radicalisation" of intellectuals, when they began to reject in increasing numbers Soviet ideology. On the eve of World War II, even the editorial staff of *New Masses* had to concede that their moment of popular approval and widespread cultural appeal had likely passed years ago. At the time of the Moscow trials in 1936, various Trotskyites in Canada began to wager openly on which editor, either Freeman or Gold, would be the first to break with the CPUSA (107). In 1938, Freeman, himself, offered his own requiem for the utopian cause of American communism with his novel, *An American Testament*. In his preface, Freeman explains,

The American generation of which I am a member had neither the catastrophe of capitalist economy in this country, nor the rise of fascism in Western Europe, nor the astounding successes of the Soviet Union to guide its choices. Its development was consequently confused and painful. What is obvious today was obscure yesterday; what thousands of young Americans now take for granted, and champion with joyous vigour, we had to examine, question, test, relying here upon logic, there upon emotion, and again upon accidental, dimly understood experience. (10)

As Freeman admits, many aspects of his original support for the communist ideology had, by this time, altered significantly. Emerging in Freeman's own work was a scepticism that, according to Kutulas, had always been dormant in his ideological position. "Probably no party intellectual consistently grappled with the notion of a divided self," she writes, "more than Joseph Freeman. Freeman wanted to be truthful as a writer; yet he also strove to be a good party member. Writing truthfully, though, always seemed to violate the party truth" (53-4). Such ambivalence becomes especially clear in *An American Testament* when he describes how various "political figures" and projects "have lost the glamour, which dazzled [him] in former years" (12). Not surprisingly, most party functionaries found subversive ideas throughout the novel — and several members asked him directly to stop the book's circulation (54). Freeman thus offers a superb model of orthodox leftism's decline during the interwar years, illustrating the gradual rejection by these intellectuals of official Comintern policy.

Of course, Freeman was far from ready in 1945 to embrace the type of intellectual solution that writers like Eliot continued to advocate. Freeman became increasingly sceptical of the extreme ideological orthodoxy evident in the totalitarian states of Europe. Yet, his interest in a culturally broad, less politically extreme basis of social change did not inspire in

him any special allegiance to an intellectual élite or "mandarin" class. What must be emphasised, rather, is the tendency within both the Right and Left to prescribe social change through cultural means, as opposed to ideology.

A similar emphasis on culture, as both Guilbaut and Kutulas note, can be observed in the *Partisan Review*. As with Freeman's own writing, after the Moscow trials of 1936, a new political scepticism effectively dominated this journal's editorial board. An increased autonomy from official Communist policy had actually been sought by the *Partisan Review* as early as 1934 when the party, in keeping with its new Popular Front strategy, decided to close down its John Reed Clubs, thus depriving the periodical of its main source of revenue. The magazine was able to survive on its own primarily due to money raised at various dances. Kutulas summarises:

The party could do nothing to stop [William] Philips and [Philip] Rahv from publishing, so had to fight them with words. Advised by attorneys that any suit to reclaim the *Partisan* might result in unwanted questions about other CP activities.... Party intellectuals decided to let them "keep the magazine they had literally stolen from our group and our movement." Thereafter, the publicity assault against them began. Michael Gold denounced Rahv as "a literary snake," "a sneak," and an "opportunist." Both the *New Masses* and *The Daily Worker* linked the not-yet-published magazine with "Leon Trotsky, the POUM, and the Trotsky Defence Committee." Some progressives also

picked up the cry. The campaign was ugly, mean-spirited, and deceptive. (126)

Its days as a proletcult forum effectively over, a new *Partisan Review* under the helm of Philips and Rahv surfaced almost three years later in December 1937. True to earlier rumours, the revised magazine did, in fact, adopt an openly supportive position towards the exiled Leon Trotsky. "*Partisan Review*," declared its editors, in an early editorial, "aspires to represent a new and dissident generation...it will not be dislodged from its independent position by any political campaign against it." Distancing itself from all party polemics, the journal's original proletarian focus evolved to emphasise instead the artist or intellectual as the more genuine revolutionary subject.

Despite their various differences and disagreements in editorial policies, what the appearance of magazines like *Partisan Review* and *New Masses* within American culture represents is a rare moment in US intellectual history when a more left-oriented branch of the media began to capture sizeable conventional readerships. Their appeal, in accordance with their editorial policies, lay in the substitution of aesthetic theory and cultural criticism for ideological content

To use Gramsci's terminology, the increasing animosity, especially after 1936, between the American Communist Party and

the new editors of the *Partisan Review* illustrates well a war of position. Disillusioned with the totalitarian regimes erupting across Europe, most American intellectuals witnessed first hand what an unquestioning faith in ideology could produce. To organise one's entire social and cultural order according to the dictates of a single political economy produced at best a cliché-ridden "Kitsch" aesthetics and at worst a state tyranny of unprecedented severity. In the new *Partisan Review*, as Guilbaut suggests, a very different relationship between intellectuals and socio-political structures begins to define itself. This does not mean that *Partisan Review* had completely rejected the tenets of Marxism upon which the journal had been formed. On the contrary, the *Partisan Review* considered itself to constitute the one proper Marxist orientation left in the West. The new journal now avoided all reference to the Communist political agenda as well as any common display of reactionary patriotism. Yet, at no time did it ever consider itself anti-labour or even anti-Marxist. Social change and greater political equity were still primary components of its mandate. The manner in which these objectives were to be fulfilled, however, had altered considerably. No longer solely directed by an ideological agenda, the editors of *Partisan Review* began to look increasingly toward "culture" and "art" as the only true fields of human activity capable of sustaining and nurturing thinking.

An active avant-gardism, the New left maintained, procured a form of social rebellion independent of all ideological programmes. No single political movement or organisation, it was maintained, should be supported if an art practice was to be truly radical. The *Partisan Review* published its clearest, most direct statement on this issue in the autumn of 1938: a manifesto written by Diego Rivera and André Breton in collaboration with Trotsky himself entitled, "Towards a Free Revolutionary Art." By this time, along with Rivera and Breton, Trotsky's name carried much cultural weight, for other anxious artists and writers now as firmly disenfranchised from the communist Left as they were from the American mainstream.

It is important, for this reason, to isolate the *Partisan Review* as one of the more representative intellectual responses to the political crisis of the Left in the 1930s. Their positioning seemed equally inspired by the emerging orthodoxy of the New Criticism and that witnessed in the Soviet trials of the late 1930s. Unable to accept the renewed sense of nationalism or Americanism that attracted many other previous supporters of Soviet Russia and the Communist International, those cultural modernists associated with the *Partisan Review* became increasingly wary of all ideological categories. In "Towards a Free Revolutionary Art," Breton and Rivera called for a "true art," one, in other words, that derived its social and political

relevancy from its complete repudiation of any particular position or agenda. In Breton's and Rivera's respective views, an improved objectivity required a certain amount of political ambivalence. To pursue a rigorous scepticism was to defend unequivocally a purer freedom of thought. Both Breton and Rivera remained adamant in the late 1930s in their defence of ideological indifference as a socially responsible aesthetics. Furthermore, each artist's respective association with the Soviet exile, Trotsky, helped convince the American Left that their aesthetic theory was a viable political solution to the current cultural crisis. As Guilbaut notes, "[t]he solution proposed by the manifesto was the organisation of a third force based on Trotskyism: a Trotskyism for the artist, an alliance of an unspecified nature between a political avant-garde and an artistic avant-garde" (33).

This aesthetic "Leftism" fostered a new paradigm of cultural vanguardism. No longer dependent upon a specific ideological programme for social renewal, a more isolated, less politically polemic avant-garde movement spread throughout American cosmopolitan centres. Due to its inherent social and ideological detachment, a comprehensive description of this movement is consequently difficult to present. It is important, nevertheless, to recall that political ambiguity functioned in itself as an important strategy for the Left at this time. To

speak of cultural positions and beliefs as the interwar period drew to a close was to evoke immanent values and common sense rather than specific political doctrines.

In this editorial shift, the *Partisan Review* echoes some of the ideological developments found between the pages of *New Masses*. Despite political disagreements between the editors of the two magazines, *New Masses* and *Partisan Review* shared a distinct critical interest in separating art from all ideological agendas. The first two issues of *New Masses* ranged in content from the feminist poetry of Babette Deutsch to the prose of William Carlos Williams and D.H. Lawrence. Although not any of these writers, especially Lawrence, ever seriously committed themselves to an overtly Marxist political position, any hint of social controversy in their respective works signalled to *New Masses* a potential ally in the formation of a new intellectual network. As Kalaidjian remarks,

New Masses offered a populist forum for showcasing unknown talent and otherwise marginalized feminist, minority, and proletarian constituencies. *New Masses* actively solicited its readership's input on format, aesthetic styles, social content, and political perspectives. (46)

New Masses signalled no explicit revolutionary call to arms between its pages. It did not demand, as would a more revolutionary intelligentsia, the complete, irreversible overthrow of the bourgeois state. Its particular appeal lay in

the sheer number and variety of writers and artists who quickly responded to its eclectic format. The mere fact that the journal was open to a more pluralistic cultural positioning constituted its core radicality. In its formative period, the *New Masses'* list of contributing editors contained many notables of the New York intellectual scene, including Sherwood Anderson, Van Wyck Brooks, Max Eastman, Waldo Frank, Lewis Mumford, Eugene O'Neill, and Lola Ridge, among others. The diverse readership of the periodical allowed pieces by Leon Trotsky to circulate relatively easily alongside works by Carl Sandburg.¹⁷ Common to this specific network of intellectuals was a political as well as cultural need for a more sophisticated strategy of social opposition. As Cary Nelson argues in his history of the period, *Repression and Recovery* (1989), American attitudes toward culture "were transformed for significant numbers of people – as political poetry became increasingly visible in the 1920s and exploded in a profusion of new journals in the 1930s. In the process not only poetry, but also those cultural domains either traditionally or newly defined in relation to poetry found their 'essential' nature changed as well" (130). The journals of this period remain an important marker of widespread cultural re-orientation: Nelson continues,

¹⁷ See the first issue of *New Masses* (March 1926) as an example of this type of diversity in editorial practice.

If we read widely in the journals of the period, some of the competing and reinforcing styles of the time, invisible in the collected works of individual poets or the canon - reinforcing anthologies and literary histories, become apparent. To return to the little magazines of 1914-1930 is to feel the established grouping and hierarchies of modern poetry disappear. Imagism, political poetry, linguistic fragmentation, and other tendencies are continually reshuffled and counterpointed. The major names in the current canon are set beside poets we have since marginalized or forgotten. The modernism of the little magazines is undecided, unfixed, still exploring its potential and its possible alliances. (230)

Nelson's project, similar to Kalaidjian's, constitutes a specific programme of recovery. Attentive to the influence and control that conventional academic and New Criticism commentary still have over the interpretation of cultural modernism, writers like Nelson purposefully focus on the early interwar period as an important moment of social and historical ambiguity. Extreme political anxiety and general social unrest on both sides of the political spectrum instigated what Kalaidjian calls a specific genre of linguistic interpretation. These historical avant-gardes, because they developed out of similar social positions of displacement, can be further described with reference to a common cultural stance. When *New Masses* momentarily loosened its pro-Soviet orientation to include in its June 1928 issue a piece by Ezra Pound entitled

"The Damn Fool Bureaucrats," a strong commitment to anti-liberalism seemed to override all other political interests. To be sure, the editors printed Pound's invective against Stalinism alongside a prominent disclaimer; yet, though the magazine "disagreed violently with [Pound's] statement," its intrinsic anti-liberalism inspired wider, less specifically partisan concerns.

In light of the complex political antagonisms circulating throughout the US in 1920s and 30s, it is possible to situate Eliot's own conservatism within the general intellectual mood. These new leftisms remained firmly opposed to the clerical, mandarin leadership Eliot hoped would emerge somewhere from the margins of mainstream society – somewhere, that is, outside the waste land that appeared to be growing throughout the West. The New Left might have agreed in principle with Eliot's and the New Critics' collective condemnation of ideological extremism, as well as with their general sense of widespread cultural decline, yet critics like Rahv and Phillips and, later, Dwight Macdonald (editor of *Politics*), had little use for the critical vision that these more conservative writers had developed.

Most of the modernist writers constituting the New Critical canon failed to inspire any of the New Left. Conversely, the New Critics rejected most of the poetics and art discourses featured between the pages of *New Masses*, *Politics* or *Partisan Review*.

Golding discusses probably the most prominent example of disagreement in literary inclination, namely the influence of Whitman on "progressive" poetry. As he notes, the New Critics considered Whitman an exemplary figure of romantic parochialism and hence completely artless. Any suspicion of a Whitmanesque slant in poetry generally occasioned strong reproach from critics like Tate, Ransom and Brooks. Golding suggests several reasons for Whitman's disfavour among the New Critics:

"Whitman's nationalism, which they saw as parochialism, ran counter to the particular history of English poetry that they wanted to construct; it bolstered their new definition of English studies and their efforts to institutionalise their own brand of criticism to reject a poet who was warmly embraced by other competing schools." The other "schools" include specifically the New Left who "discussed and invoked [Whitman] throughout the thirties..." (93).

Many leftists openly celebrated Whitman as a bona fide socialist, interpreting his particular view of democracy as an exemplary vision of universal suffrage and progressive thinking. Golding provides a succinct summary of Whitman's adoption by the Left, a view not confined to the interwar period:

The Left's embrace of Whitman...had begun early in the century. In 1901 the editorial announcing the first issue of *Comrade* (an "*Illustrated Socialist Monthly*") begins with the first two stanzas of "For you, O

Democracy" to represent the journal's aims...Whitman was the subject of a short but sympathetic 1909 essay in *Socialist Woman*. Among leading socialists of the time, Floyd Dell could begin in a 1915 essay with the assumption that "Walt Whitman seems to have been accepted by socialists as peculiarly their poet." (94)

As Golding notes, Whitman's own ambiguous politics, as well as his relationship to capitalism and trade unions, seem not to have affected his romance with the Left. In general, the Left interpreted Whitman poetically, that is, according to his aesthetic sensibility, as opposed to his ideological orientation — or lack thereof. It did not matter by the close of the interwar period, especially as the totalitarianism of Europe began their preparations for the next world war, that Whitman did not offer a partisan message to leftist intellectuals. Quite the contrary, the poet's lack of ideological statement only improved his standing. Symbolically, Whitman signified to these writers the lost cultural vision of democratic America. His rhetoric and poetic imagery invoked a highly dynamic, eclectic voice. Experiencing the sheer brazen energy of Whitman's writing suggested an agency that essentially resisted all doctrine. Whitman's voice floated strongly above all social structure, whether its nature was moral, political or even historical. No tradition defined Whitman. Where the New Critics situated their

writing in a transcendental order of classical forms, Whitman evoked a transcendental self breaking through such structures.

Another important figure in the aesthetics of the New Left was Clement Greenberg. Because of his later cultural capital and corresponding influence over postwar art-history approaches, Greenberg stands out as practically a complete school of criticism in himself. The most important piece of Greenbergian theory appeared in 1939 in the autumn issue of *Partisan Review* bearing the title, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch." For Greenberg, what culturally valuable components might be found in the genuine vanguardisms of the late 1930s could be generally characterised as anti-kitsch. An effective ideological scepticism implied a strongly heroic, ever-vigilant stance against the cultural abyss of mass-produced industrial commodities. Exclusively associated with a "debased and academicized simulacra of genuine culture," Kitsch, in Greenberg's programme, appears distinctly

...mechanical and operates by formulas. Kitsch is vicarious experience and faked sensations. Kitsch changes according to style but remains, always the same. Kitsch is the epitome of all that is spurious in the life of our times. Kitsch pretends to demand nothing of its customers except their money -- not even their time.¹⁸

What Trotsky earlier had qualified as a politics of lost patronage and intellectual alienation reappears in Greenberg's

work as an aesthetic crisis. By channelling the growing political disenfranchisement being felt by these intellectuals into a more thematically condensed directive against the mass cultural product, Greenberg was able to re-organise the avant-garde around a new series of revisionist goals. Under Greenberg's tutelage, capitalist social structure could once again be criticised, this time through the analysis of culture without the attempt to build a new political and economic system. No longer confined by conventional critiques of capitalism as a form of class suppression, the Greenbergian vanguard could focus instead upon cultural relations under capital as an aesthetic, i.e., symbolic problem.

The Kitsch object, for Greenberg, contained no real materiality. Consequently, to criticise it did not necessarily require an in-depth analysis of class structure and the accumulation of material wealth within the modern state. Rather, by reconsidering social relations under consumer capitalism as a "symbolic" structure, Greenberg was able to preserve an intellectual position of integrity while simultaneously avoiding the ideological problems of Soviet and/or official communist party doctrine. Much of this intellectual shift from class opposition, Guilbaut informs us, again has its origins in

¹⁸ Clement Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," *Partisan Review* 6.5 (Fall 1939): 48.

contemporary events: "with the threat of a second world war, Greenberg felt that it was impossible to attempt action in both the political and cultural spheres at the same time. The house might be in danger, but by fighting to protect Western culture, at least the furniture might be saved" (36). Faced with the strong probability of violent world conflict and the expansion of political totalitarianism, Greenberg, like many other intellectuals at this time, deliberately sought a much tamer, less revolutionary agenda than their counterparts in the 1920s for the domestic crises of 1930s American capitalism. Accordingly, though the cultural politics of the *Partisan Review* and its writers consistently condemned many of the new streams of patriotism developing as the decade drew to a close, inherent in the critique of Kitsch was a strong nationalism of its own. As Guilbaut notes, a central element in what he calls "the demarxization of the American intelligentsia" remains the corresponding tendency among these writers to re-consider their relationship to mainstream culture and, hence, to the ruling classes directly producing it. Greenberg's intellectual attempt to purge American art production and writing of Kitsch symbolism parallels, thus, the wider tendency at this time among intellectuals to repudiate ideology for what George L.K. Morris called "an authentic and appropriate cultural expression."¹⁹ The

¹⁹ George L.K. Morris, "American Artists' Congress and American Abstract

vision of art production offered by these critics remained restorative as opposed to transgressive. In "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," Greenberg refers specifically to the degenerative aspects of contemporary American culture and the subsequent need to preserve what values and virtues might still exist. In working within such strongly defined cultural categories as kitsch and the more valuable, "living" artwork of genuine artists, Greenberg effectively provided a new, formalist agenda for the American intelligentsia. As Guilbaut comments, this essay successfully rationalised "an intellectual position that had been adopted in a confused way by many painters. Although extremely pessimistic from the standpoint of anyone who was looking for a revolutionary solution to the crisis, the article restored hope to these artists" 37). Where before a common sense of political and economic disenfranchisement served to unite these artists as a collective front of social critique, Greenberg's prose offered a more inclusive vision of moral cohesion.

Against the background of the Russo-German pact of non-aggression and the Soviet invasion of Finland in 1941, Greenberg's call for a new cultural orientation found a willing audience amidst the growing political cynicism permeating the American Left. More than mere political identity and class

equality, Greenberg's argument alluded to a level of social renewal of almost cosmological proportions. As mentioned above, the renaissance of art production outlined by these writers carried strong moral overtones, with its mandatory reference to notions of artistic freedom and human dignity. Founder of the new League for Cultural Freedom and Socialism, and avid supporter of *Partisan Review*, Sidney Hook updated the traditional leftist critique of right wing-class oppression with universal condemnation of all "totalitarianism" regardless of ideological orientation or political schema: "The present time in America is a time of political revaluation. Never before in recent American history have political labels meant so little - Republican, Democrat, Socialist, Communist."²⁰ No longer uncertain of their social stance, such intellectuals were able to adopt a surprisingly well-defined platform of ideals in a fairly short period of time.

In this manner, Greenberg's symbolic isolation of Kitsch as his culture's most pressing intellectual target parallels well the increasingly autonomous vision of American culture evident in much late 1930s writing in general. When Williams qualifies the value of his aesthetics as an expression of transcendent and universal concern, he evokes a symbolic paradigm not unlike

²⁰ Sidney Hook, "The Anatomy of the Popular Front" *Partisan Review* 6.3 (Spring, 1939): 29.

Greenberg's outline of cultural authenticity. Acting as a "representative" American writer in a questionnaire published in the *Partisan Review* in 1939, Williams imputes "the political tendency of American Writing as a whole since 1930...[to the] discovery of the terms of a discussion and declaration in the only world it can know, that under its nose."²¹ In response to the same question, Gertrude Stein was even more blunt: "Writers only think they are interested in politics, they are not really, it gives them a chance to talk and writers like to talk but really no real writer is really interested in politics."²² For both Greenberg and Williams, though not necessarily Stein, an immanent sense of culture inspired an entirely new theoretical position from which mainstream art movements could be critiqued. Convinced of the intrinsic or universal significance of their aesthetics, much of the artistic vanguard, working at the end of the decade, affected a progressively tolerant attitude towards cultural production in general. The ethics of authenticity practised by writers like Greenberg inherently implied an even more basic acceptance of a functioning symbolic legitimacy, a willingness to subordinate one's individual social and political interests to some wider sense of cultural validity. Abandoning

²¹ William Carlos Williams, "Seven Questions," *Partisan Review* 6.4 (Summer, 1939): 43-4.

²² Gertrude Stein, "Seven Questions," *Partisan Review* 6.4 (Summer, 1939): 44.

all pretence to Gramsci's war of position, such writers and critics evolved professionally within a variety of specialist fields from a cultural stance of critical attack to one that was primarily defensive in nature.

In Guilbaut's history, this cultural development of profound social withdrawal and intellectual scepticism is situated explicitly within the context of the emerging symbolisms of both the Second World War and the cold war that immediately followed. Confronted with the progressive reduction of all ideological alternatives to bourgeois capitalism to propagandistic, autocratic systems of mass domination, American intellectuals fell into a pattern of widescale retreat.

Periodicals like *Partisan Review* and their respective editorial boards sought more and more theoretical/social distance from the political vanguardism of their own past as well as the various ideological fronts still operating on the eve of World War II. After the Russian invasion of Finland in 1940, many *Partisan Review* writers and editors voted unanimously to resign their membership within the Communist-sponsored American Artists' Congress. Meyer Shapiro, cultural critic and long time writer for the *Partisan Review*, co-wrote and published the following critique and declaration of resignation in the *New York Times* on 17 April that year:

The American Artists' Congress which was founded to oppose war and fascism and to advance the professional interests of artists, at its last membership meeting on April 4, endorsed the Russian invasion of Finland and implicitly defended Hitler's position by assigning the responsibility for the war to England and France. The congress has also revised its policy of boycotting fascist and Nazi exhibitions (e.g. Venice and Berlin 1936). It has failed to react to the Moscow meeting of Soviet and Nazi art officials and official artists, which inaugurated the new esthetic policy of cementing totalitarian relations through exchange exhibitions.

Moreover, congress officials have informed members that participation in a projected fascist show at Venice is a matter of individual taste. The congress no longer deserves the support of free artists.²³

Among the signers were Lewis Mumford, Mark Rothko, Dorothy Eisner, Milton Avery, Peggy Bacon, and many others. Common to each artist and critic was a central intellectual interest in preserving some notion of cultural "freedom," and hence, defending the artist's moral right to his/her own individual aesthetic vision.

While the difficulties of the Nazi-Soviet pact certainly contributed to the de-politicisation of the Left, an equally significant new intellectual pre-occupation with aesthetic formalism and artistic techniques also contributed to these developments. As Greenberg most explicitly exemplifies, this rapid evolution of a bona fide new cultural ethos in addition to

widespread ideological disillusionment confined any period of serious aesthetic reflection and criticality to a bare minimum. In the last months before America's formal entry into the Second World War, writers such as Sidney Hook and Meyer Shapiro had become convinced of the importance of aesthetics over ideology; cultural objectives, they reasoned, could be just as inspiring and important as their previous call to political reform had been.

In Dwight Macdonald's view, the need to address oppositional politics symbolically reflected the general need for leftist intellectuals to conceptualise a new social vision. We "have no vocabulary with which to ask for the things which are today really in the interests of the oppressed – and which will not be granted from above," Macdonald asserted.²⁴ The original ideological terms of "Left" and "Right," he argued, were no longer relevant to current organisations of power within the West. Faced with the erosion of actual class struggle, intellectuals found it increasingly difficult to "classify" their political objectives according to economic need and the re-distribution of wealth. Certainly, the old Right still defended social privilege, and the idea that a smoothly functioning society mattered more than the personal development

²³ "17 Members Bolt Artists' Congress," *New York Times*, 17 April 1940: 24.

²⁴ Dwight Macdonald, "The Root is Man," *Politics* 3 (April 1946): 112.

of individuals. Yet, as we've seen, writers like Eliot and the New Critics, those Macdonald had labelled as "new conservatives" expressed their position in terms of cultural ideals and moral superiority, rather than state politics. Macdonald therefore suggested a new political distinction: that of "radical" versus "progressive." For Macdonald, the progressive orientation, which included the old left as much as old Right, was ideologically aligned with bureaucratic collectivism. Its distinguishing feature was its emphasis on technological progress and materialism. "Marxism is the most profound expression of what has been the dominant theme in Western culture since the 18th century," he wrote: "The belief that the advance of science, with the resulting increase of man's mastery over nature, is the climax of a historical pattern of progress. Before we can find any new roads...a break with a whole cultural tradition is involved."²⁵

Despite their lack of economic reference, the new conservatism betrayed a flawed social positioning, Macdonald asserted, which subordinated basic human interests to elitist standards. The aesthetics of Eliot and the New Critics, as writers for *Partisan Review* and *Politics*, as well as poets like Williams and Olson showed, firmly fit this paradigm. Like Macdonald, Olson expressed the need for personal and cultural

²⁵ Macdonald, 1946 113.

modes of resistance. When he left Democratic politics in 1944, he too was frustrated by the links between popular culture and the political hegemony of large corporations. His acquaintance with the mechanisms of political decision-making had left him discouraged about the possibility of meaningful change through political channels. Anticipating Macdonald's own focus on the "human," he wrote in 1945 of his decision to search for other avenues of influence. In a letter to anthropologist Ruth Benedict, he indicated that he was leaving politics and turning to literature: "I have left politics and govt. again and gone back to writing. I have a feeling you will know what I mean when I regret we are no city states here in this wide land. Differentiation, yes. But also the chance for a person like yourself or myself to be central to social action at the same time and because of one's own creative work."²⁶

Olson's shift in intellectual objectives understood in tandem with the wider revisionary work of the New Left reveal an important "collective" struggle for position within Western culture. The sources of this shift were both cultural, as can be seen in the institutionalisation of the New Criticism, and political, as demonstrated in the Soviet Union's fall from grace throughout the West. While intellectuals endeavoured to secure

²⁶ Charles Olson, "Letter to Ruth Benedict," (Jan. 1945) in Maud, *Charles Olson's Reading: A Biography* (Chicago: Southern Illinois University Press,

new social formations, political relations between the Right and the Left gradually evolved to accommodate the postwar markets and the growth of a Soviet-American dominated ideological spectrum. Macdonald's "radical" positioning correctly interpreted the new conservatisms as a cultural movement as well as an ideological one — recognising the Right's moral import in postwar society to be as equally significant as its political influence. Contemporary conservatives, Macdonald argued, had constructed a much more intrinsic mode of social influence compared to previous Right-wing contingents. Focusing on conservatism as a form of cultural orientation, the New Left could still critique Right-wing politics, despite the supposed concern that writers like Eliot and the New Critics professed to have for different marginal communities and the underclass. Where Eliot saw the need to educate the masses, intellectuals like Macdonald and Greenberg saw only cultural élitism and a distinctly oppressive social agenda.

The struggle for position within Western culture at mid-century highlighted a distinct social revolution for the New Left, while making them conscious of new forms of political coercion and violence. A quick glimpse at Europe at this time revealed fresh evidence of an active war where political doctrines had been and were being used to persecute artists and

writers all along. Examples of violence in culture could be found not just in Germany and in the Soviet Union, but in America, too, as in the case of Ezra Pound — to which we now turn.

Fuelled by Federal spending on armaments, American industry staged a strong recovery from the recession of the 1930s. Between 1947 and 1960 the gross national product more than doubled.²⁷ Significant to fields of research and criticism, this growth in GNP was based primarily in new, light, high-technology and service industries. Inevitably the shift towards what Daniel Bell called the "Post-industrial" economy would affect the economic situation of the intelligentsia. As the number and importance of semi-and unskilled blue-collar jobs declined, demand for a trained literate and technically proficient work force increased. Consequently American higher education underwent a massive expansion from 1.5 million enrolled students in 1940 to 3.6 by 1960.²⁸ Employment opportunities for intellectuals increased comparatively. In 1940, there were approximately 150 000 faculty members in American universities; by 1960 that figure had also doubled to 380 000.²⁹ Macdonald 's

²⁷ Hugh Brogan, *Longman History of the United States* (New York: Longman, 1985) 607.

²⁸ US Bureau of Census, *Statistical History of the US from Colonial Times to the Present* (New York: Basic Books, 1976) 383.

²⁹ US Bureau of Census, *Statistical History of the US from Colonial Times to the Present* (New York: Basic Books, 1976) 390.

own middle-class upbringing likely welcomed the new opportunities for the new class Bell defined as the "the Knowledge Worker" (37). What sympathies he may once have had for class struggle had all but dissipated by 1945. No writer for *Politics* supported any type of political revolution whatsoever, preferring to preserve social unity, rather than interrupt it. Subsequently, with so little class conflict, all but the most extreme political and economic objectives of the 1950s American military-industrial complex could proceed unhindered. At no other time since the revolution, it might even be argued, did both sides of the ideological spectrum seem as unified in political vision.

Consistent within American postwar culture at this time, therefore, was not only a strong ethos of anxiety and dread, but a corresponding emphasis upon facilitating inside its movements and organisations an improved structural coherence or identity. Impatient to confront all practices and positions that might constitute even a basic threat to cultural interaction, technical prescriptions continued to flow from both the dominant and sub-altern sites of legitimation.

Chapter Five**Disciplining Pound: Symbolic Power and the New Left**

I want quiet. If this is a hospital, you
have got to cure me
...whatever the hell is the matter with me -
- you must decide whether I am to be cured
or punished.
(Ezra Pound, St. Elizabeths Hospital)

For the Americans, the terms of surrender were clear as early as August 1943. They were to be unconditional, with little room for negotiation and none for uncertainty. The end of the Italian Fascist state would be complete, unambiguous and permanent. On 8 September, faced with the northern advance of the allied 5th and 8th armies, Marshal Badoglio formally broadcast over Rome radio details of the Italian capitulation to the American forces. With most remnants of the Italian Axis armies retreating quickly northwards, leaving only small pockets of German resistance, the American advance into the country could be accomplished efficiently and with minimal defence. By spring of 1944, the city of Rome would be filled with American forces, signalling the relatively early arrival of the postwar cultural order in Italy. In the last days of summer 1943, Mussolini's short-lived totalitarian state structure promptly gave way to the new US occupation movement.

If the American occupation of Italy appeared to signal a new cultural order, it is because such transitions, though political and economic at their base, are socially inclusive enough to be identified as complete cultural revolutions. The decisions of state made by Mussolini's Fascist government, which extended far into the private sphere of everyday Italian life, had produced cultural changes that went beyond any mere military and economic structuring. Upon removing Fascist influence in most areas of the country, the Americans subsequently gained control of a huge cultural as well as political network. To eliminate fascist influences within the Italian state, the Americans would therefore need to re-educate most citizens at a deeply personal, psychological level.

When the communist partisans of the North became increasingly active in the wake of Fascist retreat, American forces acted accordingly to retain their new influence and power. The clandestine use by the American O.S.S. of such extremist organisations as ex-Blackshirt police groups, the Masonic Order of Malta, and even the Mafia, ensured that Italy would never lose completely its right-wing contingent.¹ These connections in many ways duplicated Mussolini's original network of political support, albeit much more secretly. The leftist

¹ Arthur E. Rowse, "Fladio: The Secret U.S. War to Subvert Italian Democracy," *Covert Action Quarterly* 49 (Summer 1994): 22.

threat proved, in general, to be a great unifying force among past enemies. Aware of the strength of the partisan movement in the north of Italy, the Americans worked to ensure that any future Italian society developed in close co-operation with the ideologies of the occupying forces. Immediately after World War I and before Mussolini's march on Rome, the Italian Socialist Party had boasted over 1.2 million members as well as the support in principle of millions of others. Given the near economic collapse of Italy after its costly defeat in 1943, in tandem with the growing power of the trade unions and other left-wing interest groups, the possibility of the next Italian state being Communist seemed anything but remote. The American-led reconstruction of Italian society needed to be more than political; it required an intense cultural and even psychological re-orientation.

His own cultural context and the communities he had known for over two decades shrinking with the territory of the Fascist republic, Ezra Pound offers, at this time, a similar image of cautionary retreat, abandoning Rome for a northward trek with the defeated Italian armies. Pound had been indicted for treason less than two months earlier on 26 July 1943, the day after the king of Italy, following the lead of the Fascist Grand Council, removed Mussolini as head of the Italian government. In response, the German army swiftly swept down on the capital and

central Italy in an attempt to recapture the defeated Republic. Surrounded by the chaos of these terrifying new military actions, Pound had little choice but to return north, first to the Tyrol where his daughter lived, and then finally back to Rapallo. Although little of the immediate future seemed certain, Pound's first steps back marked the beginning of a much larger and ongoing period of withdrawal that would culminate in his return to the US. By the Spring of 1944, the Allies had reached far into northern Tuscany. Italy was effectively in American hands and Pound found himself under military arrest. From 24 May 1945 until November of that year, Pound remained a military prisoner at the American Army Disciplinary Training Centre in a wire and concrete cage, the area of which measured only six feet by six and a half. As one of the original American expatriate modernists remarking on the passing of an era, Pound seems justified in describing the end of his European tenure as, contrary to T.S. Eliot's prediction, "a bang, not a whimper" (canto LXXIV).

Pound could hardly have interpreted his last months in Europe otherwise. From America's entry into the war to his capture, Pound's sense of his own cultural marginality had only intensified, prompting him to reflect bitterly on "The enormous tragedy of the dream in the peasant's bent / shoulders:"

Manes! Manes was tanned and stuffed,

city awaited him, one that hardly recalled an epic hero's victorious return. There is an Odyssean parallel for this journey; yet it lay not in the final sections of Homer's historic poem, but rather in the earlier, less climactic encounter between Odysseus and the primitive Cyclops Polyphemus.

The name by which Pound identifies his epic protagonist in canto LXXIV is that Odysseus gave when challenged by his enemy Polyphemus: "*OY TIS, OY TIS*" (canto LXXIV). "Ou tis"- the Greek words for "no man" - is the name Pound now feels is appropriate for the narrator of this canto as well: "I am no man, my name is no man" (canto LXXIV). In the Homeric poem, Odysseus deceives the Cyclops, eater of men, to avoid being consumed. In Washington D.C., in 1945, facing a federal charge of treason, Pound likely feared for his life, and so was inspired to attempt a similar deception. In order to avoid prosecution (and a possible death sentence), he chose a plea of insanity, denying his own subjectivity among his colleagues, readers (eaters?) and judges. As Hugh Kenner describes his situation in *The Pound Era*, "He was in a tent in the medical section of the compound, regaining his wits, wits as always shaped by myth: a man of no fortune and with a name to come, Odysseus in the Cyclops' den" (474). Considering the seriousness of the charges against Pound, any terms of survival, even those implying the public loss of his identity would have seemed reasonable. As well, the general

hostility surrounding the poet may have indeed prompted a rather diminished sense of self-worth. In this first "Pisan Canto," Pound also alludes to the Australian aboriginal legend of Wanjina, invoking "Ouan Jin / or the man with an education / and whose mouth was removed by his father / because he made too many things." (canto LXXIV). Imprisoned and censored by his country, Pound likely felt more than a passing kinship with this son of a god who lost his mouth because he had "created the world by speaking the names of objects" (Cookson 73).

Pound's allusion to the Cyclops myth, while illustrating the pragmatic acceptance of his situation, also emphasises the elements of parody he likely recognised in his return to America. Clearly, the postwar nostos or homeland eventually prepared for the poet little resembled the enlightened temple of refuge he often sought in his writing. If Pound's revisionary poetics can be said to derive at least partly from his own ongoing sense of cultural crisis in the West, then the postwar legal controversies over his work likely only confirmed for him the extent to which civilisation had already decayed. The tone of *The Pisan Cantos* is apocalyptic. They are, in a sense, Pound's "final" Testament, presenting a detailed overview of his friends and his life's concerns, a mapping of one man's intellectual journey from tribulation to tribulation. For the first time in his career, what were for Pound primarily

aesthetic and academic debates now constituted a life-threatening situation. LXXIV continues after the Cyclops episode with references to Villon's *Epitaph* (which was written under similarly harsh circumstances): "Absdouldre, que tous nos vueil absoudre," and the crucifixion, "lay there Barabbas and the two thieves lay beside him" (441). Thus Pound invokes the personae of those already condemned. His cultural testimonies had apparently transgressed more political boundaries than he himself had intended. At no time during the composition of either *The Cantos* or his radio speeches did Pound ever consider his ideas "anti-American," viewing them, on the whole, to be consistent with the very precepts behind the American Revolution. Cantos XXXI and XXXII had already qualified his epic as a distinctly American work, composed, as they were, chiefly from the letters of Thomas Jefferson and John Adams. The ten cantos that immediately preceded the work he did in Italy (LXII-LXXI), in fact, serve largely as a homage to Adams. Pound considered these two men, especially Adams, to have demonstrated an intelligence and energy during their respective presidencies unparalleled in any European state. As Pound wrote elsewhere, "[f]rom 1760 to 1826 two civilised men lived and to a considerable extent reigned in America. They did not feel themselves isolated phenomena" ("The Adams-Jefferson Letters," SP 117).

It is hardly surprising, then, that much of the language of LXXIV, the first "post-capture" canto is parodic. The words being "broadcast" at this time are consistent with the poet's overwhelming awareness of losing all pretence to an audience; they are the words of nobody, of a subject who has lost his "homeland." Pound had consistently sought in his work to provoke wide-scale economic and political reform, especially in the US; yet, to be apprehended as an actual threat to the social order had so far eluded his sensibility. Biographical and historical commentaries on this period, in fact, suggest that, up to the moment of his incarceration, Pound was convinced that his return to the States involved some mysterious diplomatic task the government was preparing for him (Stock 526). The political reality, of course, revealed a very different agenda. Pound's cultural responsibilities in the postwar era would be dramatically less than even his most pessimistic imaginings likely considered. The element of parody in these cantos can be interpreted, thus, as an important defence mechanism, a device conducive to one's survival in a hostile environment. And even here, as canto LXXIV has specifically shown, such an attitude seems consistent with Odysseus's own actions as an epic hero.

The more pragmatic components of the Homeric narrative have been illustrated elsewhere. In *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944), Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno offer a reading of

Odysseus's journey past the Sirens in which the epic hero's successful navigation of the once fatal lure becomes a parable of rational principles, a mythical tribute to the entrepreneurial spirit. Qualifying the Odyssean attribute of "cunning" as "defiance in a rational form," the authors write:

Odysseus does not try to take another route that would enable him to escape sailing past the Sirens...He keeps to the contract of his thralldom and struggles in his bonds at the mast, trying to cast himself into the destroyer's arms. But he has found an escape clause in the contract, which enables him to fulfil it while eluding it. ... The bound listener wants to hear the Sirens as any other man would, but he has hit upon the arrangement by which he as subject need not be subjected to them. (59)

What was previously a clear moment of mythic sacrifice stands suddenly revealed as a complex manipulation of available resources and labour. The survival of one peril after another inaugurates a newer, more "cost effective" exchange system in Odysseus's culture. There lies in each victory, therefore, the image of a less metaphysical moment, for in sacrificing sacrifice itself, the mythic act of atonement gives over to the more sensible one of negotiation. By saving himself, Odysseus has established the rational principle of compromise, becoming, in a sense, the West's first enlightened subject. Implied already in the protagonist's epic travels is the dynamic of the tourist vacation. The protean narrator of Western culture turned

travel agent offers an open invitation to explore the same islands and seas to countless other potential Odysseuses, this time supported by the even subtler promise of a return ticket, and the possibility of repeat visits.

The personal qualities most specific to Odysseus's character in this interpretation remain not heroic strength or some unique wisdom, but the ability to adapt to surroundings, to forgo conflict for consensus. It is this attribute of cunning, the belief that all is negotiable, that dominates Odysseus's character from the very beginning of the Trojan war and the resulting epic poem. Unmoved by the usual rhetoric of nationalism and historical glory, Odysseus originally feigned mental illness to avoid military duty. It was not heroism that placed Odysseus at the centre of a major war, but rather his failure to escape the authorities that had started it. Far from establishing a well-formed identity based upon incontestable social principles, the epic protagonist signifies a form of psychological relativism, an individualism that considers autonomy to be its essential objective.

Aware of the Homeric precedent of this situation, Pound may have viewed his postwar diagnosis of insanity and subsequent incarceration as, in some ways, a practical solution to the problem of survival in a hostile social environment. Although Pound, at first, needed to be persuaded to cop a plea of

insanity (for he still had enormous faith in his cause), he eventually accepted the possibility that his health, both mental and physical, needed to be re-built (Stock 543). As a space of both political and physical shelter, St. Elizabeths hospital was remarkably efficient, providing Pound with the bare resources he needed to continue working. As Noel Stock observes, he even "eventually established there a 'Pound Centre' with world-wide ramifications. There was plenty to keep his mind over his work and his legal position, and the publication during 1946 and 1947 of some of the *Pisan Cantos*..." (543). In general, his continued isolation from the outside world only confirmed his belief that an intense socio-cultural crisis still plagued both America and the West. Whether genuine or not, Pound being declared insane remained, in some ways, consistent with past responses to his eccentric life and career, and the official responsible for diagnosing his condition found it frequently necessary to remind federal prosecutors of how unpredictable and confusing his thought tended to be. As late as 1951, for example, Dr. Overholser would argue to the state that Pound's continued poetic output in the institution could in no way be considered culturally valuable:

I must say that Mr. Pound's mental condition has shown no substantial change, except perhaps for the worse... He suffers from numerous paranoid delusions... We have no evidence that he has done any productive

literary work during his stay in the hospital. (Stock 547)

Similar to Odysseus at the beginning of the Trojan war, Pound appeared increasingly to conform to the image of madness, sowing salt instead of the expected fertile seeds of literary genius. The price for survival in both cases was a fairly complete separation from the "warrior's" respective social realities, a cultural surrender of all identity. In 1947, the charge of his estate was legally removed from him and given to his wife Dorothy. For a writer who, throughout his career, staunchly defended the public nature of his social role as a poet, this loss of autonomy remains both an ironic and politically worrisome form of retirement.

Likely the supporters who based their cause directly upon principles of aesthetic detachment missed the ideological implications of Pound's incarceration. For writers like Robert Frost, Allen Tate and T.S. Eliot, Pound's physical survival and well-being constituted, according to their own accounts, the most important objectives in the case at hand. As Frost summarised: "None of us can bear the disgrace of our letting Ezra Pound come to his end where he is. It would leave too woeful a story in American literature."² The principles to which Frost appeals derive from a space he has called "American

literature," an important source of humanitarian ethics. Pound's past political engagements and racist views hardly compared, for these writers, to the cultural travesty of so severely censoring a talented writer.

Behind the appeals for cultural justice and literary honour lay a much more pragmatic fear for the needless destruction of an intellectual far removed from the spheres of politics. While this sense of collegiality may have enabled writers like Frost, Auden, and Eliot to depoliticise Pound's position, the reality of the situation, i.e., Pound's possible execution, suggested a very different dynamic between the American state and culture at the beginning of the postwar era. It was a relationship that, given his interest in economics and political history, Pound himself knew well; most of Pound's academic supporters, though, found it difficult to accept that Pound's poetry or any verse, for that matter, if it was aesthetically valuable could be considered politically suspect. For the New Critics, represented by periodicals like *Kenyon Review*, *Quarterly Review of Literature* and *Sewanee Review* among others, an organic sense of culture, free from any political and economic agendas, remained an important condition for authentic cultural meaning and growth. Such writers considered aesthetic issues to be ideally

² Robert Frost, "Court Statement," *A Casebook on Ezra Pound: Pro and Con Selections*, ed. William Van O'Connor and Edward Stone (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1957) 135.

context-free, operating at a level somewhat removed from the political landscape in which they originated.

This is not to suggest that Pound's colleagues, especially those emerging from the poorer, less industrialised southern states, had always held, in their work, an unquestioning stance of devout national support. During much of the 1920s and early 1930s, Allen Tate supported a politicised mistrust of American modernisation as a distinctly northern phenomena, the benefits of which had yet to be seen in areas of the South; such contempt, furthermore, was rarely hidden in his work with the "Fugitives." As the interwar era drew to a close, however, the social dislocation felt by Tate and other southern writers increasingly prompted a strong isolationism. For these writers, culture, properly conceived, provided an independent, enlightened space of refuge from the baser demands of politics. Pound's ill-conceived attempts to transgress the boundaries of American culture, thus, signified more than just profound naiveté, they violated important aesthetic principles as well. The sirens of fascism had loosened the bonds, in Pound's case, designed specifically to protect the bourgeois artist from abandoning the tasks of culture for the errors of politics.

As we've seen in the writings of Eliot and the New Critics, the official institutions of postwar American culture, i.e., the network of museums, universities, writing societies, etc.,

supported the Arnoldian use of art for the moral and psychological reform of society. This vision of aesthetic purity dominated the poetry and criticism of Tate, Ransom and Cleanth Brooks among others. Within the discourse of high modernism, consequently, the social role of the author completes its shift from cultural renegade to professional aesthete, a movement that wholly excluded Pound's political and economic concerns. In this respect, Pound's extreme republicanism and interest in international diplomacy appear all the more radical. That Pound was not executed effectively denied the poet, as one writer astutely realised, "an aura of martyrdom" while simultaneously re-affirming the progressive tolerant attitude the American state officially cultivated towards its artists.³ It is for this reason that the New Critics readily accepted the judgement of Pound as an eccentric, misguided poet in need of therapy as opposed to punishment. The successful awarding of the Bollingen Prize to Pound in 1949 only confirmed the cultural sensibility informing much of the New Criticism in general.⁴ The fact that an "objective," unobstructed aesthetics could survive even the

³ Nathaniel Wehl, "The Strange Case of Ezra Pound," *A Casebook on Ezra Pound: Pro and Con Selections*, ed. William Van O'Connor and Edward Stone (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1957) 17.

⁴ The Bollingen Prize of one thousand dollars named the best book of American verse for the year, chosen by the Fellows in American Letters of the Library of Congress, at the time consisting of Conrad Aiken, W.H. Auden, Louise Bogan, Katherine Garrison Chapin, T.S. Eliot, Paul Green, Robert Lowell, Katherine Anne Porter, Karl Shapiro, Allen Tate, Willard Thorp, Robert Penn Warren and Leonie Adams.

waywardness of one of its most important progenitors testified to the State's overall rationality. As well, the choice by these writers of a possible political reactionary like Pound to receive the award exemplified a unique moral agenda, a framework of evaluation guided by universal values rather than political ones. Like many intellectuals at the beginning of the Cold War, Allen Tate would later demonstrate his renewed allegiance to conservative principles by taking part in the McCarthy trials in the service of the House of Un-American Activities. In this manner, the postwar intellectual community slowly fortified itself as an integrated network of shared concerns and interests. Writing for the *Partisan Review's* 1948 symposium on "The State of American Writing," Clement Greenberg noted somewhat cynically:

It seems to me that the most pervasive event in American letters over the last ten years is the stabilisation of the avant-garde, accompanied by its growing acceptance by official and commercial culture. It has in return been granted a recognition and place that do not dissatisfy it. The avant-garde has been professionalised, so to speak, organised into a field for careers; it is no longer the adventure beyond ratified norms, the refusal in the name of the truth and excellence to abide by the categories of worldly success and failure. The avant-garde writer gets ahead now, and inside established channels: he obtains university or publishing or magazine jobs, finds it relatively easy to be published himself, is asked to lecture, participate in round tables, etc., writes introductions to the

classics, and can even win the status of a public figure.⁵

Although the New Criticism generally supported Pound's work, it is, nevertheless, unlikely that Pound himself completely accepted the New Critics' aesthetics. As Noel Stock observes,

Generally he regarded Tate as a man who was on the right side but not active enough in the pursuit of Poundian goals. Certainly there is evidence that during this period Pound could turn quite suddenly, even against good friends, when they seemed to be getting too much of the limelight or were slow in falling in behind him in his fight to reform the universities and the monetary system. (551)

For the New Critics, what Pound might have considered a temporary capture, amounted to nothing less than total surrender. Here the social role of the American poet as political "nobody" confirmed many of the New Criticism's primary aesthetic principles. The New Critics did not simply disassociate formal elements in poetry from all content. Given their sense of transcendental meaning in art, principles of form actually helped constitute a poem's content, and, hence, served as a device of unity, not polarisation. Form implied discipline, which in turn meant that Pound was curable, despite his mistaken political beliefs. One had to respect in his work, especially

⁵ Clement Greenberg, "The State of American Writing, 1948: A Symposium," *Partisan Review* 15 (1948): 876.

The Cantos, the poet's impressive attempts to secure a more unified, singularly consistent vision of history. After all, the New Critics themselves sought a similar totality in their own aesthetics. Furthermore, this logic, far from implying the critical prioritisation of aesthetic schemas over the actual material experience of writing or reading, attempted to erase any such distinction. According to writers like Tate and Ransom, the experience of writing was a discipline, that is, a very active form of social engagement in itself. This idea of culture also derived from T.S. Eliot's concept of tradition, especially with respect to his theory of the tradition. The canon, the New Critics maintained, represented a universal vision of order or consciousness, revealed to a specific élite. Good poetry, as a part of this canon, reached inherently beyond its immediate context. The poet ideally was "no man," i.e., not reducible to any agenda exterior to the business of writing poetry, be it based on gender, ideology, race, etc. The sensibility of American high modernism created, in this way, an entire set of cultural norms grounded in a frankly isolationist, trans-historical sense of social position.

Thus, confronted with Pound's sprawling and rather formless epic, Allen Tate was not being merely irreverent when he claimed that *The Cantos* were "not about anything"; he was making an

aesthetic judgement.⁶ For Tate, the creative brilliance of *The Cantos* derived ostensibly from the complex and mysterious method in which they constructed their own rationality. Labelling them a type of ongoing "conversation," Tate considered their oblique formlessness as an essential type of structure in itself. To interpret various sections of the poem or poem collection as fascist propaganda or racist slander was to invoke an alien, and, hence, irrelevant, set of standards. Pound's primary offence, according to the New Critics, lay entirely in the act of forsaking the poetic for the political. Once Pound began to work as an international diplomat and political journalist, as well as a poet, all themes and issues considered merely provocative in his verse suddenly became punishable, anti-American threats. It was this transformation from poet to politician that these other modernists found most threatening. The official diagnosis of paranoia and general mental unbalance provided a reasonable solution, yet it did not completely excuse Pound's reactionary politics. Pound's cultural survival, therefore, depended almost exclusively upon his role as a poet, his role as "no man." The apparent retrieval of this figure (or non-figure) in Pound's *Pisan Cantos*, coupled with the psychiatric dismissal of the poet's more political persona was,

⁶ Allen Tate, et al., "The Question of the Pound Award," *A Casebook on Ezra Pound: Pro and Con Selections*, ed. William Van O'Connor and Edward Stone (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1957) 80.

not surprisingly, interpreted as a much-needed social endorsement of the cultural project of American modernism. In this manner, much of the contradiction between modernism's more radical political views and its literary sensibility could be avoided.

The New Left also supported the Bollingen Award to Pound, but for different reasons. Unlike the New Critics, Macdonald and other *Politics* editors considered the prize to be highly political – a quality that only added to its value. Describing the award as a "demonstration" against "Soviet totalitarianism in the name of freedom," Dwight Macdonald commented in 1949, "Such imperfect democracy as we of the West still possess depends on our continuing ability to make the kind of discrimination the Bollingen committee made, to evaluate each sphere of human activity separate from the rest instead of enslaving them all to one great reductive tyrant, whether it be The Church, The Proletariat, People's Democracy, The Master Race or American Patriotism."⁷

Considering the fact that Pound himself described *The Cantos* as a "political weapon," he would have likely supported Macdonald's interpretation – while including American liberal capitalism in his critique. Odysseus denied his identity in

⁷ Dwight Macdonald, "Homage to Twelve Judges," *A Casebook on Ezra Pound: Pro and Con Selections*, ed. William Van O'Connor and Edward Stone (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1957) 48.

order to re-affirm it at a later date. In Pound's case, however, his survival seems to have implied a much more permanent impotence. Contrary to the New Criticism's interpretation of the legal verdict, Pound realised that, in fact, he had been judged as a poet. Subsequently Pound realised that, though his poetry might win awards, his politics and economic theories would have little or no place in any postwar modernisms. If the New Criticism exemplified Pound's primary future audience then all political anxiety in *The Cantos* would continue to be neutralised, transforming Pound's cultural "bang" back into the whimper he feared it might be.

As the New Critics realised, incarcerating Pound would disqualify all political interpretations of the poet as a foreign enemy of the state. In fact, Pound's more or less benign punishment did much to dispel even the remote possibility that a "serious" writer or artist, in general, could ever operate as a political agent. In "healing" Pound, the state in its medical and therapeutic capacity was not only publicly re-appropriating the poet's work but, in some ways, formally declaring its own need of treatment and rehabilitation. Once in St. Elizabeths, Pound effectively re-emerged as an "American" problem, an adjustment that promptly re-directed any sympathy that might once have flowed to his cause (and, therefore, against the state) back towards the new postwar order itself. Pound still

exemplified a particularly valuable cultural and intellectual asset. Hence, if he were to be considered anywhere naturally foreign, the new jurisdiction maintained, it was within the context of European fascism, not American capitalism. The question for the state and, by extension, its public intelligentsia was mainly how could one of its key writers make such an obvious political error. In other words, where had it failed in maintaining its intellectual allegiance? With therapy, the poet's integration into his proper social milieu, it was hoped, could still be accomplished. From within the context of his hospital room, what once may have signified an actual ideological or political act of transgression quickly took on the characteristics of a more general sickness, a temporary malfunction of the true political body. Psychologically as well as politically, this important "medical" event further serves to remind one of the modern state's essential symbolic or cultural components. With respect to the US's emergence as one of two world powers, this new inclusiveness defined itself further according to the post-1945 geo-ideological division of the East and West. Given the eroded national boundaries of the cold war, Pound had not only not acted against his country, he had, in some ways, never even left its perimeters.

More than an act of individual policing, Pound's incarceration signifies a much wider discourse of general social

admonition. As an important cultural figure, Pound supplied the postwar state, as did Hiss, with an early case-study to help define the moral role within society of aesthetic forms. If Pound's ideological infractions could be re-interpreted as aesthetic or technical flaws an enduring truce between his cultural objectives and those of America's new public intellectuals might subsequently develop. In addition, the important role of the critic in negotiating this truce would also help position the New Critics as essential professionals in the postwar West.

Testing their moral imperatives, the New Critics confirmed their usefulness in preserving a more stable, integrated political order. Here the New Critics introduced themselves within the same social context as that of Pound's doctors: the therapeutic, sometimes penal assessment of public work and community outreach. Their task, considered collectively, centred upon their individual abilities to authenticate the work and interactions of the country's writers, artists and intellectuals. In legitimating specific cultural works and actions, the New Critics sought to confirm, if not preserve, their society's symbolic coherence while illustrating their own concerns about a community's successful development. For this reason, the primary quality they demanded from each work or project was public liability: the capacity to exemplify social

relations, the capacity to reform. In attempting to cure rather than punish Pound, the American State was in effect offering the poet the opportunity to renew both his professional and personal ties to his culture. The objective here was to re-claim Pound as an American poet and re-interpret his lived experiences as specific American concerns. The symbolic gap he opened in the discourse of liberal capitalism needed to be healed and re-closed.

The *Pisan Cantos* and the work he subsequently completed in Washington, D.C. functioned well to this purpose, in many ways re-establishing the poet's liability to the postwar state. Pound's specific intentions in these works are open to interpretation; yet, for most critics responding to cantos LXXIV to LXXXIV as they were published in 1948 these pieces signified primarily an unambiguous quest for redemption. More than any other aspect of the *Pisan Cantos*, it is likely their context of arrest and detention that evokes this theme. In Noel Stock's opinion,

Out of a life of bright achievement and miserable failure he rescued the rare pieces and the broken columns, transforming them as with the pale light of a late afternoon in autumn. The *Pisan Cantos* are a man of sixty remembering, against a background of life in the Disciplining Training Centre at Pisa, with a charitable Negro prisoner ("doan you tell no one I made you that table") taking his place alongside a memory of Cunningham Graham riding in the Row in 1914.... Dreaming

of his celestial city, "now in the mind indestructible," he mentioned monetary reform and justice and voiced his hatred — though with less rancour now and in a more mellow tone — of usury and usurers. (531-2)

This sense of the *Pisan Cantos* appears in Forrest Read's review of them in 1957, almost ten years after their appearance, when he interprets them as nothing less than the poet's "creation of a new self out of materials of the past and present, out of achieved harmony with the process, and out of union with the rhythms of the process."⁸ Through these poems, Read continues,

Pound develops a full sense of responsibility for himself and for Western civilization from which he had previously isolated himself so vituperatively. His self-examination becomes through its sincerity the self-examination of us; its intensity fuses himself, Western culture, Confucius and the process of nature into a significant unity.⁹

Emphasising their personal tone and epic-journey motif, Read uses these pieces to signal the poet's final return to his preferred homeland. Once "isolated," and lost in cultural bewilderment, here, the poet as Odysseus has at last ended his journey, "fus[ing] himself" with "Western culture" and all values such symbolisms supposedly represent. Throughout his

⁸ Forrest Read, "The Patterns of the *Pisan Cantos*," *Critics of Ezra Pound*, ed. E. San Juan jr. (Miami: University of Miami Press, 1972) 51.

⁹ Read, "The Patterns of the *Pisan Cantos*," *Critics of Ezra Pound*, ed. E. San Juan jr. (Miami: University of Miami Press, 1972) 51.

review of the *Pisan Cantos*, Read continues to evoke both structural and thematic examples of balance, harmony and profound holism, generically situating the poet's voice into a wider cultural identity, a representative social body of which he is an important member.

Needless to say, Read is quite prepared in his review of Pound to forgive the poet his past indiscretions, a position that, consistent with its reformist objectives, implies a certain amount of empathy with the transgressor's acts. In a later critical work on *The Cantos*, Read elaborates how Pound's work advocates not revolution per se, but rather a "theory of history as revolution resulting in just government and viable order."¹⁰ The value of *The Cantos*, according to Read, is precisely in its "internal consistency, coherence and proportion. He writes,

One may read *The Cantos* in any way one wishes. But a classic reading must be rooted in the ground of the poem — the whole poem — and built upon its foundations. As Pound tried to make history speak for itself, so the serious reader or critic must, as a first step, try to make *The Cantos* speak for itself...One reads for oneself. But one can also read in the way Pound wrote, as a catechumen for posterity. When the thing itself has been grasped felicities can be appreciated intelligently and the reaches of pleasure and judgement may begin.¹¹

¹⁰ Forrest Read, *'76 One World and the Cantos of Ezra Pound* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1981) xi.

¹¹ Read, 1981 xii.

Pound may have been radical in his economic and political beliefs, yet rather than danger he represented, for Read, a passionate, "classical" desire for cultural unity. Read saw a universal ethic in *The Cantos*, the failure of which should elicit loss and tragedy rather than anger and fear. Seeking to transcend the historical context of Pound's work, critics like Read sought to elevate his political invectives to universal concerns, generating a sense of collective guilt rather than accusation.

Here, the relationship of public intellectuals to one branded criminal among them remains highly "empathetic," inviting compassion rather than punishment. Hence, when Read invokes Pound's supposed repentance within the *Pisan Cantos*, he is also, in many ways, commemorating the poet's own social return as orchestrated through the re-construction of a particular literary discourse. With Pound's return, a renewed sense of cultural "responsibility" effectively revitalised the specific writing communities and literary networks that had felt only loss and confusion in the 1930s when the poet originally declared his support for Mussolini. Once fragmented and alienated by Pound's political choices, these communities experienced a restored cultural continuity thanks to the poet's apparent re-patriotisation. This larger theme of an extended

literary or aesthetic renewal is quite evident in Read's review, associating, as he does, Pound's personal reflections and re-evaluations with those of "Western civilisation" in general.

When the poems won the first annual award of the Bollingen Prize for poetry in 1949, their cultural appropriation as a mode of public restitution seemed fairly secure — this, despite the controversy the award generated among the popular presses and various politically outraged intellectuals. Karl Shapiro, for example, writing for the *Partisan Review* that year voted against Pound in the ballot "in the belief that the poet's political and moral philosophy ultimately vitiates his poetry and lowers its standards as literary work."¹² Shapiro further explained some months later that, being Jewish, he could never honour an anti-Semite no matter what he might write. For the most part, however, the *Pisan Cantos* and Pound's continued efforts in prose and translation (*Guide to Kulchur*, 1938; *The Women of Trachis*, first published in 1952), did much to re-establish for him a prominent position in postwar American letters. As Noel Stock observes, "Despite the shadow cast over his career a few years by his wartime propaganda, he was probably more widely appreciated by the mid-1950s than at any time. Newspapers and magazines in England, the United States, Italy, Spain, Portugal,

¹² Karl Shapiro "The Bollingen Prize," *Partisan Review* 16.3 (Spring, 1949): 46.

Germany, Mexico, Brazil and many other parts of the world carried reviews and articles" (Stock 563). Pound became a highly respected literary leader during the 1950s, participating, along with Hemingway, Joyce, Wallace Stevens, Marianne Moore and Eliot, in a distinct canon of modernism. Not only was Pound able to reform his American identity, becoming newly liable to the Western state, he remained instrumental in the development of its postwar literary disciplines. The reformist and penitent theme emphasised by Pound's New Criticism readers informed his rehabilitation.

A closer look at the severe nature of Pound's transgressions makes explicit the more juridical, even punitive, aspects of this reading of him. Comparable to Forrest Read's emphasis on the personal tone and self-examination in his reading of the *Pisan Cantos*, postwar analyses of Pound rarely avoided some reference to themes of discipline and subjugation in both his life and work. Critiques like Clark Emery's 1958 book, *Ideas into Action: A Study of Pound's Cantos*, stressed the extreme rigour of Pound's poetic sensibility. If anything, in these texts, Pound might be accused of merely being over-zealous in his sense of social responsibilities as both a poet and a teacher. Evoking the poet as a model of religious health, Emery writes, "Pound has tried to awaken his readers to the living religion which underlies the dead cerebralization of

contemporary 'Christianity' by compelling their attention toward those epochs when, in the Mediterranean basin, it was alive and toward the conditions under which such life is possible" (16-7). Likewise, George P. Elliott remarks in an article published in 1961 that the true value of Pound's work remained in the well ordered, "musical" sense of language the poet in his best pieces was able to convey – a quality that emphasised each poem's formal vision of balance and structure.¹³ This musical aspect of Pound's poetics was linked, even earlier, by David W. Evans to the poet's experience of prison, when he aligned the *Pisan Cantos* with works originating specifically within the context of confinement and/or juridical oppression. The prison site, for Evans, operated as a unique space of personal development – perhaps, even metamorphosis – inspiring Pound to produce "a very moving reflection of one aspect of the contemporary human condition."¹⁴ In short, Evans suggests that not only was Pound able to offer a strong, idealistic aesthetic vision for these new times, his prison experience made it appear all the more disciplined and morally valuable. The rigorous cultural idealism in Pound's poetics literally conveyed, for such critics, a distinct political commitment to notions of personal and social development. Rather than comment, though, on what might be

¹³ George P. Elliot, "Poet of Many Voices," *Carleton Miscellany* 2 (Summer, 1961): 11.

perceived as ideological similarities between fascist dictatorships and liberal capitalism – as Pound himself did in his book, *Jefferson and/or Mussolini* (1935)– those writers who did not censure Pound directly tended to avoid altogether the larger political implications of this brand of "Americanism." Instead, in its final analysis, the postwar Pound evoked an unquestionably revitalised view of US culture, one in which civil relations seemed propelled by an altogether new logic of development. The ideological imperatives in Pound's work could be considered not so much false as merely misdirected. No doubt, Pound's indiscretions needed to be corrected, but, rather than punish the poet with permanent social isolation or even death, it seemed more socially progressive to reconcile his wayward energies and desires with a healthier discourse of value.

What must be stressed in re-evaluating the cultural significance of Pound's incarceration at mid-century is the manner in which both his sentence and the work it subsequently inspired quickly facilitated an especial literary paradigm: that of the reformed ideologue. Within this interpretation of Pound, several theoretical parallels can be glimpsed between the disciplinary strategies of New Criticism and those of postwar American political administrations. In both structures, there

¹⁴ David W. Evans, "Ezra Pound as Prison Poet," *University of Kansas Review* 5.23 (1957): 86.

appears a similar political interest in administering a much more emotionally and psychologically integrated socio-cultural body. As I suggested in Chapter Three, from World War II onward, American corporate structures and military intelligence began to assume greater influence in government activities. Responding to the ideological menace of fascist and soviet totalitarianism, the US military/industrial centres instituted tighter bureaucratic control over government policies and the American polity. Departments like the Office of War Information (OWI) emerged in 1942 to develop advertising campaigns in the service of the war effort and conservative moralism. The director of the "Domestic Branch" was Gardiner Cowles Jr., a republican from the Midwest who owned a group of newspapers, *Look* magazine and a radio station. Not surprisingly his ideological orientation favoured corporate business and the mass media.

Charles Olson worked for the OWI as did many other writers and artists, including the painter Ben Shahn, poet and playwright Archibald Macleish, and Arthur Schlesinger Jr., all of whom wanted to fight fascist propaganda and help disseminate important information to the American people. However, Cowles's corporate agenda inevitably disappointed these intellectuals, and it was not long before a cultural split emerged between them and the researchers and media/advertising executives for whom they worked. Macleish lasted until the end of 1942, when he

tendered his resignation, citing "policy differences." Much later he reflected bitterly: "I hated information work...I suppose in times of peace, so-called, you could probably devote yourself to information, trying to help a self-governing people to govern themselves by seeing that they got the information they had to have. But in war you were always on the verge of propaganda and...I just detested it" (155). Olson, too, quickly left this department, as did Shahn, both shifting their energies to Nelson Rockefeller's office of Inter-American Affairs in 1943. Even there, though, Olson could not justify the type of propaganda he ended up producing. His years at OWI only confirmed for him that the democratic possibilities of the New Deal had come to a close and a corporate advertising oligarchy was in power. Olson's thoughts appear in the poem, "The Songs of Maximus" (1951)

colored pictures
of all things to eat: dirty
postcards
And words, words, words
all over everything
No eyes or ears left
To do their own doings (all
Invaded, appropriated, outraged, all senses
Including the mind, that worker on what is...
(greased
lulled... (SW 230)

The OWI exemplified for Olson and other leftist writers the blatant sacrifice of democratic principles for corporate industrial interests. Macdonald decried what he called the "fraudulent character of World War II" asserting that a

fundamental similarity defined the social structures and cultural goals of all major antagonists. He also identified the increasingly psychologised nature of state authority in which the governing élite guaranteed higher living standards to the polity in exchange for their social docility.

In the view of OWI, however, the promotion of capitalism and industrial progress constituted exactly the type of intellectual labour needed at this time. Corporate interests, Cowles believed, formed a healthy, if not the only, alternative to European totalitarianism, whether soviet- or fascist-influenced. Conservative writers like the New Critics may have been similarly apprehensive of such unquestioned faith in industrial progress; yet, as I discussed in the last chapter, they agreed at an ideological level with the need to manage social relations from a cultural and psychological position to guard against the threat of political extremes. They accepted, accordingly, the terms of intellectual labour as conceived by the departments like OWI. The key to preserving their autonomy as writers lay in managing the project of criticism themselves, in effect, shifting the site of critique from government departments to academic ones. The function of literary disciplines, as a symbolic apparatus of social reform, they believed, was simply too important to leave to government agents: a fact demonstrated by the treatment of Pound's

rehabilitation in the 1950s. Literary disciplines, the New Critics contended, helped establish standards and habits within the practice of writing and the necessary apparatuses to survey and assess them. Moral principles and a certain sense of social liability worked hand in hand within larger literary fields, promising renewed cultural coherence. Without help from professional critics, the government would never be able to assess the cultural value of the *Pisan Cantos* – or any poetry, for that matter. Hence, it was up to criticism as a professional field to discern the poem's essential coherence, i.e., those aspects or components in them that emphasised formal discipline and perhaps even redemption. To be able to function within the modern economy demanded, the New Critics granted, an especial docility among the masses. Without cultural unity there could be no subsequent political integration and the symbolic disciplining of Pound at mid-century demonstrated how important aesthetics were in such matters.

Hence, the politics of Pound evoked very different responses from some of the more experimental writers working at mid-century. As we'll see in the poetics of Charles Olson and Robert Duncan, the avant-garde communities of the postwar period retained a much more politicised interpretation of Pound's writing, viewing it as an ideological catastrophe. Pound's reputation as an important modernist poet was secure, they

believed, but his political experiences could not be negated. If the New Deal signified to the Left a rare democratic idealism in government, where a respect for both social equality and innovative thinking flourished, World War II and the administrative changes it brought announced a more oppressive politics based on surveillance, intimidation and mass control.

As Macdonald points out in his criticism in *Politics*, the Left quickly realised their own disenfranchisement. In ecological theory, many leftists found a new paradigm of critique and activism to counter corporate thinking, not only in US politics, but in all mainstream culture. Macdonald, of course, was far from alone in his desire to find a new political vocabulary, and the discourse that most clearly expressed these concerns was that of ecocentrism. Most importantly, ecological thinking applied itself to a myriad of cultural spheres, not just those of the Left or avant-garde writing.

As noted in Chapter Three, an ecological sense of culture consistently informed the pages of *Politics* prompting new strategies of critique and analysis. No longer motivated strictly by ideology, Macdonald's programme sustained an ongoing effort to define a fresh approach to radical activism. Among its first postwar series was the year-long "New Roads in Politics" instalments introduced by Macdonald at the end of 1945 as a forum to "criticize the dominant ideology on the Left today -

which is roughly Marxian — in the light of recent experience."¹⁵ When pressed to define a better, more enlightened view of society, Macdonald remained committed to the concerns predominant among his intellectual milieu and emphasised the need for a "humanly satisfying" social order above all other qualities.¹⁶ For Macdonald, working closely with the thought of Nicola Chiaromonte and Hannah Arendt, human values needed to be considered "outside" not only political structures, but also the entire logic of Western rationality. Both Macdonald and Chiaromonte argued for "immanent" standards of justice, though in Macdonald's case the true origins of these standards remained highly ambiguous, perhaps even mystical in their "transcendent" relationship to the social real. Only a politically autonomous, moral framework of value, these writers maintained, could restore the principles of civil society and individual conscience that seemed to have disappeared these past few decades. By the late 1940s, Chiaromonte feared, Tocqueville's premonition of an unfettered Leviathan ruling over atomised masses appeared close to reality. In the absence of a revolutionary "class" or mass "constituency," some other

¹⁵ Dwight Macdonald, "New Roads in Politics," editorial, *Politics* 2 (December 1945): 369. Other participants in this series included Will Herberg ("Personalism against Totalitarianism," *Politics* 2 (December 1945), Helene Constan ("A Critique of Marxian Ideology," *Politics* 3 (January 1946) and Paul Goodman ("Revolution, Sociolatry and War," *Politics* 2 (December 1945).

¹⁶ See for example his early editorials in *Politics* 1 and 2.

principle of positive development needed to be explored and encouraged to germinate in the present social era.

Sumner has noted the failure of the Left hardly encouraged Macdonald, Chiaromonte, or even Arendt to become "rigorous social philosophers";¹⁷ hence their subsequent search for a definitive politics remained in one sense unfocused and abstract. In tandem with their declining sense of ideological purpose these writers continuously refrained from invoking economic and political theories. Yet they also realised how aesthetics and cultural theory could be used to promote political ends without directly referencing ideology. Their notion of culture, accordingly, as a sphere of activity took on an increasingly amorphous, fluid shape, evolving towards some as yet vague, undefined concept of human virtue or civility. To consider a superior format or paradigm of social development demanded private wilful agency above all else. As Macdonald articulated in the October 1946 issue: "all I can suggest is that we get down to something small enough to handle, real enough in terms of what we ourselves as individuals think and feel in order for us to be able to know whether it is serving our purposes or not."¹⁸ The search for a non-conformist alternative to ideological critique inspired these writers to

¹⁷ Gregory D. Sumner, *Dwight Macdonald and the Politics Circle: The Challenge of Cosmopolitan Democracy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996) 97.

seek out new cultural values and qualities in their work and thought. Among the most common in Macdonald's writing were spontaneity, pluralism, authenticity, tolerance and openness.

These values were close to those informing ecological thinking. In its objectives and inspirations, as we saw in Chapter One, ecological theory responded to several of the same limitations associated with mainstream sociology and political theory. In tandem with the New Left, ecological theory struggled against corporate industrialism's growing social influence as well as the ruins of ideology. Its opponents rejected altogether the traditional politics of Left and Right, which they considered had aggravated a crisis in independent thinking in almost every area of culture. Indications of this emergency were especially prevalent within the academy, where ecological theory was becoming increasingly attractive to sociologists and political activists eager to adopt a more radical position of critique. Evidence of partisanship and intellectual censorship could be seen in almost every academic discipline, especially history, sociology and psychology. As Peter Novick notes, even some of the most eminent American historians were prepared to sacrifice independent scholarship for docility:

It was the community of diplomatic historians who contributed most wholeheartedly and directly to the support

¹⁸ Dwight Macdonald, "Reply," *Politics* 3 (October 1946): 334-5.

and defence of the American cause in the cold war. These scholars' principal contribution was providing a version of recent history which would justify current policy, link America's struggles with the Axis and with the Soviet Union as successive stages in one continuous and unavoidable struggle against expansionist totalitarians.
(73)

As the postwar period began, there was virtually no organised activity by any intellectuals in the academy, and very few individual protests against the military actions of the United States. Foreign military presence, such as American interventions in the third world, was always rationalised as part of struggle against communism. The US intervention in Korea had cost over a million Korean lives. In 1953, the same year the Korean war ended, the US government organised the overthrow of the nationalist leader Mossadegh in Iran. The French were trying to re-conquer their old colony in Indochina, and the United States was supplying most of the military supplies for that war. In 1958, President Eisenhower sent 14000 marines into Lebanon to protect Western colonists there against a possible rebellion.

The silence of the academy in regard to cold war foreign policy in the 1950s paralleled its passive acceptance of the Cold War's domestic affairs: the firings, the black-listings, the attacks on unions, the FBI harassments were all justified as part of the fight against communism. As Ellen Schrecker

concludes, after her careful study of McCarthyism in the universities:

Professors and administrators overrode the civil liberties of their colleagues and employees in the service of such supposedly higher values as institutional loyalty and national security.... The extraordinary facility with which the academic establishment accommodated itself to the demands of the state may well be the most significant aspect of the academy's response to McCarthyism. (35)

Working within this repressive atmosphere, scholars and intellectuals of opposing views found few venues or frameworks to help organise alternate narratives. Ecological theory, much like the work of the New Left, responded to this lack. Comparable to Macdonald's desire for a new vocabulary or critique, ecocentrism sought to establish an effective, politically sensitive counter argument to the anti-Communist corporate fervour that had taken over the academy. A primary motivating concern, as we discussed in Chapter One, uniting ecological interests with those of the New Left was the need to move beyond ideology-based positions. Both groups, I argue, embraced a new cultural politics that encompassed bold experiments in democracy, community and co-operation. Given their openness to innovative ways of thinking and tolerance for disparate perspectives, many ecologically inclined thinkers

enjoyed the broadminded approach to criticism journals like *Politics* offered.

With its new, more subjective emphasis upon social development as process, rather than any fixed framework, Macdonald's journal could accommodate a highly pluralist critical agenda. Perhaps the best known example of this brand of progressive thinking is the bold publication in 1944 of Robert Duncan's essay, "The Homosexual in Society." Issues of sexuality were perfectly suited for the editorial policies of a magazine like *Politics* as sexual activity in general delineated important areas of non-revolutionary change and personal growth. Sexuality was in the process of becoming the one cultural category where the personal and political seemed perfectly intertwined. The very style of the essay, being confessional, seemed to support this contention. As well, Duncan's argument, while it strongly condemned mainstream culture's persecution of those deemed sexually "deviant," polemicised in general against the exclusive and formal organisation of a "cult of homosexuality." In short, Duncan's position argued for tolerance and integration over all other considerations, this on the part of both the oppressed and the oppressors. Sexuality operated for Duncan (as it did for Macdonald) as a prime model of cultural universality (after all, all people, regardless of class, race or religion were sexual beings); and therefore it could be used as an ideal source of

natural development. Duncan subsequently argued for both homosexuals and the homophobic to transcend their parochial walls to join with Blacks, Jews and other sub-altern groups in a shared struggle for permanent emancipation. "Only one devotion can be held by a human being a creative life and expression," Duncan wrote in the original version of the essay, "and that is a devotion to human freedom, toward the liberation of human love, human conflict, human aspirations. To do this one must disown all the special groups (national, religious, sexes, races) that would claim allegiance" ("The Homosexual in Society," SP 41).

In Duncan's use of sexuality as a category of social reform, *Politics* found exactly the type of ecological vision of social reform it required. The primary object of Duncan's critique was not so much political change as a type of psychological re-orientation in one's lifestyle. In other words, Duncan shared with Macdonald an interest in making culture more sociable as opposed to socialist. In an expanded version of the essay published some forty years later, Duncan himself remarked of his potential audience how he came to believe "there was an entity in the imagination of 'mankind,' and that there was a community of thoughtful men and women conceived with the good of that totality to whom I was responsible. The magazine *Politics* represented for me during the Second World War an arena where

intellectuals of that community were concerned, and I care to question myself in the light of the good they served" ("The Homosexual in Society," SP 38). Once again, for Duncan, the sphere of sexuality and sexual behaviour functioned as nothing less than a universal category of human experience. In his expanded reflections he describes sex as a "natural factor in a biological economy larger and deeper than...human will" ("The Homosexual in Society" SP 38). Rather than constitute an agenda for political change, homosexuality, in its role as an essential part of this larger "biological economy," becomes here a means of integration. In sexuality, Duncan continued to locate a potent cultural dynamism, a site of unlimited development and social growth.

Such beliefs were not confined to theory, for Duncan led an active sex life, especially throughout the late 1940s. In Miami, Florida, still recently separated from his wife, the poet experimented with a wide variety of contacts and intimacies, including a brief stint as a hotel gigolo. What these practises seem to suggest is not only the poet's open-mindedness, but the lack of separation between his writing and his lifestyle. Drawing from many past cultural traditions, including the 19th century decadent movement and even classical Greece, Duncan envisioned lovemaking as nothing less than a component of his aesthetic practise, a poetics of sex with the human body as the

medium. A description in a letter of his experiences makes explicit this parallel.

...excitement begins for me when she becomes a mechanism - once I begin to handle the woman - losing sight of her character...once I begin to handle the body - in a way I never can with a man - I can concentrate upon the sensual experience - playing with the body as one might sit down to play over the keys of a piano - and then release a hot streak - a well-tuned stroke of her cunt...a sudden wildness allowed and then muted - holding an allegro back for a long andante - hot and repressed.¹⁹

Sex supplied the poet not only with a source of artistic identity, a framework of equivalencies rooted deep in nature, but an entire paradigm of social relations as well. Again, he notes in his essay on homosexuality,

My own conviction is that no public issue is more pressing than the one that would make a man guilty and endanger his livelihood for the open knowledge of his sexual nature; for the good of humanity lies in a common quest through shared experience toward the possibility of sexual love. Where we attend as best we can the volitions and fulfilments of the beloved in sexual acts we depend upon all those who in arts have portrayed openly nature of love; and as we return ourselves through our writing to that commune of spirit we come close to the sharing in desire that underlies the dream of universal brotherhood.

("The Homosexual in Society," SP 42-3)

¹⁹ Robert Duncan, "To Pauline Kael," 22 March 1944, in Ekbert Faas, *Young Robert Duncan: Portrait of the Poet as Homosexual in Society* (Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow, 1983) 143.

Duncan's dynamic use of sexual engagement in his cultural position evokes a deep psychosocial sense of communal attachment. In other words, Duncan advocates more than just political or ideological change — he seeks a more complete transformation of lifestyle and cultural attitude in his essay. A tolerant society is one that accepts not just homosexuals, but champions openness as a virtue in itself. Rather than initiate a new social category for the homosexual as citizen, Duncan would prefer to abandon all classifications in society in general.

Like Macdonald's revised leftism, Duncan's approach to cultural reform remains intuitive rather than schematic. Few of his actions seemed to have been planned according to specific political objectives. His sense of community derived, not from any specific social system, so much as from an innate moral idealism whence all motivation for change and growth evolved. Here again, Macdonald's pluralist vision continued to appeal to a growing international contingent of disenfranchised intellectuals, fed up with party agendas and schematic thinking. Duncan's earliest work fits in well with revisionary modernism as associated with Williams and Olson. Duncan himself would eventually meet the Black Mountain community in the mid-1950s. Yet even in the late 1940s he found a strong audience for his work. With an eye on the emerging literary disciplines of the postwar academy, these more radical circles of American poetry

continued to question the relationship between aesthetics and politics. Duncan's relationship with the New Criticism, comparable to that Olson's and Williams's, was one of mutual suspicion and disrespect. In a later essay published in 1961, Duncan himself theorises a strict separation between poetic structures and what he calls those of social habit or convention. Associating the latter with the oppressive dictates of political doctrine, Duncan remarks,

the reality of the world and one's habits must be constricted to a realm – a court or a salon or a rationale – excluding what ever is feared. It is a magic that survives in Christian science and the New Criticism, a magic that removes the reasoning thing from its swarming background of unreason – unmentionable areas where all the facts that reason cannot regulate are excluded and appear as error, savage tribes, superstitions, and anarchical mobs, passions, madnesses, enthusiasms, and bad manners' ("Ideas of the Meaning of Form," SP 24-5).

Where the New Critics envisioned standards transcendent of their material origins, Duncan saw only a metaphysics of opposition. Duncan's poetics, by contrast, pursued a much less organised or even defined cultural agenda. His work courted a purposeful autonomy from all social institutions, whether they originated in mainstream or subaltern fields of activity. Again, comparable to Macdonald's own vision, Duncan's repudiation of institutional politics derived as much from the failure of the American Left

to construct a basis of ideological resistance as from his own essentialised, "biological" sense of cultural production.

The sexual "economy" that Duncan had experienced first-hand during the mid-1940s continued to operate as the primary paradigm of all human interactions. What notion of ideology he held onto remained confined to the immediate context of World War II, where, as far as he could see, a corporate agenda run by power-seeking individuals helped establish systems of coercion to further their own will. Duncan's dynamic vision of both labour and social activity as a natural extension of the sexual impulse inspired a keen critique of these types of relations, and the subsequent cultural repression they inspired. Duncan did not have to travel too far to the ruins of postwar Europe to experience political intolerance. Cultural oppression pursued Duncan at home, as is evident in his relationship to the editors of the *Kenyon Review*, an important vehicle for New Criticism. Shortly after Duncan's article appeared in *Politics*, the poet received an indictment from John Crowe Ransom concerning not only the essay but also a poem he had submitted earlier for publication in Ransom's *Review*. The poem, *An African Elegy*, had been accepted and even typeset for this journal by Ransom himself who found it "very brilliant" at the time. Duncan's use of Africa, Ransom originally commented, offered a "fine symbol of whatever was dark in the mind," which the poet had explored

well.²⁰ After reading Duncan's essay, however, Ransom panicked over the prospects of having an "obvious homosexual advertisement" in the *Review* (Faas 83). The editor wrote to Duncan for some explanation and, possibly, a form of semiotic loophole by which the piece might be redeemed.

But please tell me what you think. Is it not possible that you have made the sexual inferences inescapable and the poem unavailable? Or do I misread the poem? Or misunderstand the situation as an editor should see it?²¹

No justification was forthcoming and as a result the piece was not printed, firmly severing any possibility for Duncan to enter the then quickly growing canon of New Critical poetics. Yet Duncan's refusal to placate Ransom's homophobia did not derive from any corresponding interest in defending a specific politics of gay sexuality. As the offending article emphasised, Duncan considered the practice of homosexuality a completely natural form of interaction originating far beyond the particular concerns of society. To politicise it as such was to reduce it instrumentally to just one more tool of influence and coercion in a social order already saturated with such symbols. In fact, Ransom's own homophobic rejection of Duncan's poem typified for

²⁰ John Crowe Ransome, "to Robert Duncan," 26 Oct. 1944, in Ekbert Faas, *Young Robert Duncan: Portrait of the Poet as Homosexual in Society* (Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow Press, 1983) 151.

²¹ John Crowe Ransome, "to Robert Duncan," 26 Oct. 1944, in Ekbert Faas, *Young Robert Duncan: Portrait of the Poet as Homosexual in Society* (Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow Press, 1983) 151-52.

the poet the exact misuse of culture for political purposes he so deplored. Ransom could not submit, however, and Duncan had little choice but to accept the fact that he and the *Kenyon Review* would have nothing to do with each other at this point in his career.

Faced with this type of oppression, Duncan retreated both personally and professionally from all sense of a public discourse. As he himself noted in 1967, (Faas 86) his rejection from the *Kenyon Review* quickly expanded into a full frontal assault from various other respected periodicals such as *Hudson Review*, *Southern Review* and *Sewanee Review*. Except for a few poems printed in *View* and *Poetry*, Duncan had not yet appeared in many literary journals, and, much to his fear, circumstances seemed intent on ensuring a more permanent anonymity. Over the year immediately following the *Politics* scandal Duncan wrote almost no poetry (Faas 179). Instead, rejected by most academic and literary circles, Duncan became less settled in his professional contacts and circles, beginning with his abandonment of Florida for New England. Despite a less than stable lifestyle, however, the poet was never at a loss for cultural pursuits able to stimulate, if not fully satisfy, his intellectual needs. His work with *Politics* and the Macdonald circle continued to develop, though an increased hostility to the latter's view of popular culture prevented his formal entry

into the group. Macdonald's original support of Duncan's critical writing constituted for some time the only professional outlet for his work, inspiring the poet to consider socio-political writing as a possible career. His reading interests switched from modernist poetry to contemporary political theory. Throughout the summer of 1944 he became increasingly drawn to the work of the Russian anarchist Kropotkin and the psychology of Eric Fromm. In Duncan's own words, "Kropotkin expressed basic principles of human behaviour, ethical and social understanding" rarely found elsewhere, including in verse.²² Other works that aroused his enthusiasm included Fromm's *Escape from Freedom* and Ciliga's *The Russian Enigma*.

As Macdonald had always made clear in his appreciation of Duncan's prose, *Politics* would continue to provide the poet with a ready medium to disseminate his work; yet the two writers' disparate views on contemporary culture eventually terminated this relationship as well. *Politics* printed only one more article by Duncan entitled, aptly enough, *The Politics of the Unrejected* in January 1945, before the poet uprooted again and moved to New York. The cultural progressivism of *Politics* as a new leftism, though marginal and undefined at this point, was far from singular, and, as will be shown, various other networks of revisionary modernism were able to aid Duncan's intellectual

²² Robert Duncan, "Letter to Pauline Kael," 19 Oct. 1944, in Faas 158.

development, especially between 1946 and 1956. Duncan's theoretical commitment to locating a more inclusive, ideologically transcendent basis for social relations was shared at this time by a number of small aesthetic and critical networks. Ekbert Faas emphasises the many friends and intellectual circles in which Duncan was able to move regardless of where he lived. Duncan admits as much himself in a letter from this period where he describes his obsessions with "such second-hand literati, that is daughters of, wives of, friends of friends of etc. Et moi? a friend of a friend of etc."²³

Far from the image of the secluded poet who requires isolation in order to function, Duncan seemed to draw his inspiration and energy almost entirely from the many contacts and relationships continuously surrounding him. For this reason, Duncan remains an exemplary, perhaps even ideal figure, of this more progressive side of cultural modernism developing throughout the US at this time. To follow Duncan in the late 1940s as he made his way from city to city, from cultural scene to cultural scene is to witness, once again, the overwhelming restlessness that characterised America's intellectuals in the early postwar period. Motivated more by a perpetual dissatisfaction with his immediate milieu than by a specific artistic and/or critical itinerary, Duncan could assimilate into

²³ Robert Duncan, "Letter to Pauline Kael," 4 Oct. 1945 in Faas 174.

almost any environment. All he seemed to ask of his inspiration was that it be new and relatively unstructured. Inevitably any optimism that he had at last a permanent environment in which to work would be shattered by either some unforgivable revelation concerning the work and beliefs of his new found colleagues or merely his own boredom with their particular habits and conventions. A quick glance at many of the burgeoning, late 1940s vanguards on both coasts confirms Duncan's likely interest in their development. For the most part they were rigorously non-partisan, pluralistic in their beliefs, and, thus, receptive to almost any new idea or participant. Taking advantage, as many other writers, labourers, and artists would of the newly completed interstate highway system,²⁴ Duncan can be considered more nomadic than even the Beat poets who by the mid-1950s seemed fairly settled in the San Francisco Bay Area.

Over the Fall of 1945, Duncan packed his few belongings in New York and hitchhiked to California where, after a quick stopover in Sacramento and a more extended stay at a suburban farm "collective," he eventually landed in Berkeley. Once in the Bay Area it took Duncan little time to find his own niche in what would later be known as the "San Francisco Renaissance." Here, Duncan almost immediately established a new source of

²⁴ The first layer of the American National System of Interstate and Defence Highways was completed in 1948, providing a 42,500 mile system of highways connecting both coasts.

personal and professional contacts. His previous experience of the New York New Left continued to inspire him to meet and work with those in some way committed to social critique and political activism. Some years earlier, Duncan had been in correspondence with poet and anarchist Kenneth Rexroth; now living in the same city, the younger poet earnestly re-sought this connection. An enthusiastic letter detailing his early meetings with Rexroth appears at the end of 1945 addressed to his friend Pauline Kael in New York. "We have here," Duncan writes, "become rabid Rexroth devotees - for the man himself, I mean. He has a truly amazing quantity of knowledge. We learned only last week that he reads the Encyclopaedia Britannica from cover to cover yearly. Only something like that would make credible the fund of knowledge he has on almost every subject. And that is coupled with a high style in the Johnsonian tradition, a never ceasing ability to delight and astonish gift for burlesque, a caustic and an affectionate wit. He is, finally so much the devotee of his own devotees."²⁵ Through Rexroth, Duncan soon found himself within the centre of an exciting, new intellectual milieu composed of such writers as William Everson, Philip Lamantia, Richard Moore, Sanders Russell and Jack Spicer. Formally the group baptised themselves "The Libertarian Circle." They first met at Rexroth's home, but soon required a larger

²⁵ Robert Duncan, "Letter to Pauline Kael," 19 Feb. 1946 in Faas 191.

venue, and so procured a dance hall located just off Mission Street in the city proper. Rexroth, typical of the New Left, was neither in favour of party discipline nor averse to attracting people by means that downplayed the political component of the meetings. As a result, as he himself recalls, they

had by far the largest meetings of any radical or pseudo-radical group in San Francisco. The place was always crowded and when the topic for the evening was "Sex and Anarchy" you couldn't get in the doors. People were standing on one another's shoulders, and we had to have two meetings, one upstairs, the overflow in the downstairs meeting hall. (58)

As important as it was to Duncan's development as a writer, it is not possible here to elaborate fully on the complex evolution of the San Francisco postwar vanguard. What can be emphasised at this point, though, is the eclecticism in viewpoints and cultural objectives that continuously permeated this network of intellectuals. As with *Politics* and Macdonald's New York circle, few writers and artists in San Francisco possessed or were informed by specific political aims. Rather, as Rexroth noted, "[o]ur objective was...to re-found the radical movement after its destruction by the Bolsheviks and to re-think all the basic principles, i.e., in other words to subject to searching criticism all the ideologists from Marx to Malatesta". (Faas 192). Although Rexroth refrained from all allusions to such vague humanist values as "liberty" or "peace," an attempt

similar to Macdonald's to locate his theoretical interests beyond all notions of ideology remains evident.

If specific references to a cultural discourse of liberal values were not immediately forthcoming in the early days of the San Francisco Renaissance, an extended history of the period would quickly lead into the Bay Area's prominent counterculture of the 1960s. By that time, many of the more ambiguous references to human virtue and organic vision that surfaced within early postwar leftist thought had found their most explicit expression yet in theories of communal living, free speech, the Peace Movement, sexual liberation and what we've defined as ecocentrism. In the late 1940s, however, such thinking remained much more ambiguous and unfocused. Once in San Francisco, Duncan discovered a strong cultural environment well suited to his own aesthetic interests. His poetry developed rapidly, culminating in one of his most accomplished pieces of that time, *The Venice Poem* (1948).

More than a lyric work, *The Venice Poem* conveys a well-developed formulation on poetic structure. For the first time in his career Duncan felt it necessary to elaborate a precise statement on poetry as an aesthetic medium. Subsequently he was more prone to revision in completing this work than he had previously been in his writing. In fact, several prose pieces composed contemporaneously with the poem feature a similar

interest in formal construction. In "Notes on the Psychology of Art" (1948), he remarks how art "is governed not by the impulse to self-expression but by dogma"; when creating art, "one must seek law and selection and deny limitless possibility."²⁶ Such new formal concerns stand in marked contrast to the poet's earlier, more intuitive perspectives. By the late 1940s a much better defined intellectual programme became generally apparent within Duncan's thinking. Where before Duncan's highly eroticised sense of aesthetics tended to override most structural concerns, his newer contacts and relationships with writers like Spicer, Blaser, and Everson seems to have inspired an altogether different aesthetic vision. Quite soon after Duncan's arrival in the Bay Area, the poetic and political discussions to evolve out of his new friendships almost immediately included a wider variety of intellectual contacts, ranging from poets such as Charles Olson and Ezra Pound to various political radicals and experimental artists like Wallace Berman and Jess. Compared to his previous association with Macdonald and the *Politics* circle, Duncan appears here to be acquiring a more mature, more fully developed intellectual position regarding both his own work and that of his colleagues. A specific discourse began to take shape in Duncan's poetry,

²⁶ Robert Duncan, "Notes on the Psychology of Art," *Occident* (Spring, 1948): 27.

providing him with his first methodology beyond the random exchanges of ideas he had previously experienced with other writers, artists and lovers.

Accordingly, Duncan's aesthetics seem well placed in the early San Francisco Renaissance, though, as I have already suggested, the art of Black Mountain College and the New York vanguard of the 1950s constitute, with hindsight, his most significant set of influences. The San Francisco scene would continue to develop during this period under the more or less undisputed influence of the North Beach, Beat writers. While Duncan lived in San Francisco there was much interaction among his colleagues and the Beats, hence, it is difficult to isolate completely who associated with whom. At best, two distinct SF scenes might be delineated with respect to Spicer's workshops and Ferlinghetti's City Lights bookstore. Above all what must be emphasised here is how Duncan, along with Spicer and Blaser, might at first have been loosely involved with the Beats and their particular counter-cultural vision; yet, in time, Duncan's group would come to signify a very different aesthetic sensibility.

As can be seen as early as 1948 in Duncan's own structural concerns, this difference centres, for the most part, on the relationship between language and mimesis. Without a doubt, *The Venice Poem*, with its neo-classical references to Renaissance

culture, seems anathema to the free-flowing linguistic spontaneity evoked in Beat writing. In this piece, the poet presents a richly discursive portrait of the Adriatic city, filled with literary and historical references. When Duncan comments in his review of Stravinsky's prose work, *Poetics of Music* (1948), that "[t]he more art is controlled, limited worked over, the more it is free," his poetics seems more comparable to the writings of Pound, Zukofsky and Eliot than to what would later be called the San Francisco "Beat" scene. Duncan had been in correspondence with Pound since 1946, and while involved in the Spicer - Rexroth "community" co-wrote and sent to the poet a special poem entitled *Canto for Ezra Pound*. Like Olson, though the two poets were hardly aware of each other, Duncan followed the trial and resulting incarceration of Pound with a disciple's zeal. When Dorothy Pound responded to *The Canto* at the end of 1946 with warm appreciation, Duncan decided to visit the older poet as soon as winter had passed. Consequently, in the summer of 1947, Duncan found himself once again on the east coast after yet another hitchhike across the continent.

As we will see with Olson's more extended meetings with Pound, both his and Duncan's respective visits to the notorious iconoclast are equally significant for delineating as many cultural differences between the two generations as they did similarities. In the case of Olson, Pound's bizarre predicament

represented one of the most important learning experiences of the younger poet's career, revealing to him many significant, if not disturbing, correspondences between ideology and aesthetics. Face to face with Pound's incarceration for treason, Olson would find it necessary to consider carefully his own political responsibilities as a writer. Just as the devastating politics of Soviet-Nazi pact, Auschwitz and Hiroshima inspired the New Left to rethink their relationship to ideology, so, too, did the neo-fascist, anti-Semitic thought of Pound cause Olson to reconsider the connections between politics and poetry.

But for Duncan, meeting Pound in August 1947, the political antagonism between the two writers seemed less severe than Olson's dramatic encounters. "My appreciation of Pound," he wrote to Louis Zukofsky,

Has never been a political expediency. I am concerned with the whole picture of what the man has to say not whether he has to say what I have to say. Once I grant an ear, the authenticity of the voice, then it is to hear not to agree or disagree.... Over the years my interest in Pound and what I have learned in that interest have deepened into that love which a young writer has for those admired precursors who have, in a sense, conquered his language. (Faas 239)

Nevertheless, major aesthetic differences eventually emerged within the two poets' correspondence. Pound readily admitted that he was far more interested in Duncan's prose and ideas than in his poetry. He had little enthusiasm, it seemed, for *Heavenly*

City Earthly City, and *Medieval Scenes* was dismissed with the patronising comment that Pound himself "had already cleared that ground in earlier years" (Faas 240).

The most significant aesthetic disagreement, however, would occur a full year later with *The Venice Poem*. In its use of history and Mediterranean imagery, *The Venice Poem* seemed to draw much of its influence and style from Pound's work; yet the older poet was dissatisfied with its final form. This disfavour is worth investigating, since many of the lines do seem at least partially inspired by Pound's verse, especially in their imagery and tone of utterance. Reminiscent of *The Cantos*, Duncan's portrait of Venice frames the city in epic grandeur, evoking a cultural history rich in symbolism and aesthetic value. At the beginning of the poem:

The lions of Venice crouch
suppliant to the
ringing in the air.
The bell tower of San Marco
shakes the gold of
sound upon
The slumbering city.... (*First Decade* 81)

Duncan seems to be aiming for a totality of vision comparable to that found in Pound's verses. Further on he quotes Pound's famous postcard, sent to dozens of American poets; "we must understand what is happening..." Maintaining a firm focus upon Western European tradition, Duncan's presentation of San Marco's

"onion-shaped copper-domes" builds carefully out of a larger, historical narrative where they were known as the

...pride of 14th century
Venetian pomp, erected to cover
the actual archaic domes built in the image of
Byzantium's perisht five domed
Church of the Apostles.
(*First Decade* 84)

Despite Duncan's interest in Pound's own aesthetic maxims, *The Venice Poem* develops in other sections various alternate strategies; and this is likely the cause of Pound's consternation over the work. Faas suggests in his account of their correspondence that, while Pound approved of Duncan's obvious interest in linguistic structure and literary history, he may have been less certain about the more intuitive, "Dionysiac" influences evident in later sections. In the "coda" of the poem, Duncan develops a profoundly non-Poundian, improvisational approach to language. Where the older modernist effected (especially throughout *The Cantos*) an ongoing search for the ideal culture, the "City of Dioce," Duncan evokes a more fluid dynamism, a tableau where "forms, / painted as they are, / lift into music."

Here the "artist"
searches out the deepest roots.
He is violent. He is animal.
Driven by the language itself
alive with such forces,
he violates, desire to move
the deepest sound. (*First Decade* 102)

Pound would likely consider it an aesthetic error to be "driven by language," as such a proposition implies the poet's subordination to the medium. In Pound's view, poetics, properly investigated, required an especial drive for control and mastery above all else, a quality that was reflected in Pound's more deliberately instrumental use of the medium. This formal imperative emphasised, in Pound's words, the "knowledge of technique; of technique of surface and technique of content;" ("A Retrospect," LE 10) yet such a premise was not completely accepted by Duncan, who often used language more expressively and personally. Both poets understood the importance of formal principles in all aesthetic construction. Where Pound and Duncan appeared to disagree most was over the issue of whether any structural framework could ever be ideally established and hence constitute the permanent aim of all art. In Pound's work, the possibility of formalising an enduring paradigm of aesthetic equivalencies remained one of the highest objectives in any art practise. Furthermore, this penchant for structural rigour paralleled specific political concerns for radical socio-economic reform. Pound, it can be argued, even during his early years of incarceration, emphasised how his work in poetics could somehow provide the basis for an entirely new cultural order. Ideologically, however, Duncan shared with Olson revulsion for Pound's explicit political aims with regard to his poetry. What

seemed at an ideological level an unquestioned support of fascist totalitarianism translated for these later writers into an overly deterministic, almost propagandistic theory of poetry.

By contrast, Duncan's vision of cultural development repudiated most notions of fixed reform, maintaining much distance between his own cultural politics and most conventional economic concerns. This ambivalence towards ideology could already be seen in his essay on the practice of homosexuality and what he considered to be its fatal tendency to entrench itself in organised, insular networks of reactionary thinking. For culture to remain vibrant and socially relevant, the artist must stress a constant process of learning, unhindered by particular material goals. This more fluid, less instrumental approach to poetry translated, thus, into a purposefully non-committal politics. In *The Venice Poem*, Duncan celebrates more the open potential of cultural development, based, as it were, not in any one ideological agenda, but some larger, socially transcendent set of coherences. The position of the poet, accordingly, could not help but remain in constant flux, moved by these wider forces from which he could no more escape than conquer. Towards the end of the poem, Duncan observes,

Knowledge does not survive;
accuracy does not survive;
but the devotion survives,
bearing many wounds
no wisdom would bear. (*First Decade* 106)

Though highly motivated by Pound's work and the dramatic political situation facing him, both Duncan and Olson owe their evolution as writers to their repudiation of the older poet's aesthetics as much as their acceptance of them. The subsequent movement in art confirmed by these two poets represents less a completely new cultural development than an important response to a prior modernism. As I've suggested, Pound's work in poetics continued to develop as a literary discipline well into the postwar era. Yet, similar to the significant changes the New Left underwent while attempting to revitalise its voice in American politics, the revisionary aesthetic formalisms of this later period sought an increased distance from past ideological concerns. Rejecting Pound's past political imperatives as egotistical indulgences in extreme thinking, Duncan, Olson and many other writers redefined progressive art production in terms of its ability to reach outside politics for a more tolerant, less schematic pluralism.

Pound's rehabilitation, in this way, seems culturally extendable to include, not just the new academic modernisms of the New Critics, but important shifts in radical revisionary modernisms as well. If the inception of these other modernisms can be attributed to any one literary event, then it would

appear to be Olson's and Duncan's simultaneous critique of the older poet's more doctrinal approach to poetics.

Although Duncan would compose *The Venice Poem* in the Bay Area thousands of kilometres away from Pound, the most concentrated locus of this new modernism would remain on the East Coast, emerging earliest at Black Mountain College in North Carolina. Like Duncan and Olson, most of the poets and writing students who worked at Black Mountain derived their aesthetics from the more radical formalisms of writers like Pound, Zukofsky, Williams — as opposed to the canon represented by the New Critics. Yet while one might distinguish a particular set of formal imperatives in this genealogy, the Black Mountain movement also represents several core differences.

In Pound's work, Olson would continue to explore a variety of structural innovations and other, more experimental qualities of writing. Not the least of these qualities was Pound's penchant for wide-scale cultural revisionism. Throughout his career, Olson remained strongly interested in various issues of social reform; yet these political concerns were rarely allowed to eclipse, as he charged they did in Pound's work, any aesthetic aims. To establish a culturally relevant poetry involved, for Olson, a diverse and complex set of principles extending far beyond most conventional literary disciplines. Commonly, Olson himself characterised such qualities as

epistemological; i.e., with reference to the social status of a text as knowledge. At a basic level, then, writing exemplified for Olson acts of human communication or what Olson referred to as "illiteracy," i.e., the "non-literary" aspects of writing: "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" ("Projective Verse," SW 27). Emphasised in much of Olson's early prose is a sense of language as an inherently social activity, a form, in other words, of human interaction. When Olson criticises other writing methods and texts for failing to evoke a dynamic public response, it is usually due to their inability to communicate a social message in a public medium. Literary disciplines with their verbal tools of analysis necessarily subordinated all concerns of expression and speech to those of linguistic structure. By contrast, a truly socially relevant art, in Olson's view, "could not issue from men who conceived verse without the full relevance of human voice, without reference to where lines come from, in the individual who writes" ("Projective Verse," SW 25).

For this reason, Pound's incarceration implied for Olson much political significance even after his trial for treason was indefinitely postponed. The central influence of Pound on Olson's career has been well-documented in literary criticism

for over three decades.²⁷ Consequently, it is difficult to overestimate the historical significance of Olson's early visits to Pound during the first two years of his imprisonment. Few other events in Olson's lifetime would prove to be as singularly powerful in helping him define his professional objectives as a writer. The simple fact that Pound was being held against his will prompted Olson to re-think not only Pound's social role but also that of the postwar American poet. The sheer force of Pound's personality within their first meeting convinced Olson that many of the political ramifications of Pound's work and position were not being dealt with adequately. At a significant level, Pound was still communicating a very specific "social message" and treating his poetry separate from his political choices could not challenge this.

The complexity of the two poets' relationship is plainly evident in Catherine Seelye's record of their encounter, *Charles Olson and Ezra Pound: An Encounter at St. Elizabeths*. The chronicle itself is culled from a massive and eclectic collection of files, filled with correspondence, poetry, conversation snippets and newspaper clippings of the period. The result is a fairly intimate, semi-biographical document of Olson's visits to Pound in the late 1940s. Even at the beginning

²⁷ See for example, the criticism of Paul Christensen, George F. Butterick, as well as Robert Creeley's introduction to *Selected Poetry of Charles Olson* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

of the affair, Seelye notes, Olson's interest in Pound was never casual, witness his public defence of the poet, "This is Yeats Speaking," written in 1945, some months before their first meeting (*An Encounter* xiv). The fact that, like Duncan, Olson himself was then struggling with his own aspirations to become a poet explains some of his fascination with Pound. Olson's increased attraction to Pound after his 1945 trial, however, seems very much a direct result of the older poet's controversial political adventure and its rather serious legal consequences.

Olson began visiting Pound almost immediately after his confinement to St. Elizabeths in January 1946. Olson was only 35 at the time and far from comfortable in the world of American letters. For the first months, his visits were, indeed, weekly, only tapering in frequency after other, better known poets began to compete for the poet's attention and scheduled visiting hours. Although Olson later described his early visits as a more or less humanitarian gesture of good will from one poet to another, a strong and ongoing interest in Pound's reactionary politics continuously infiltrated each meeting. Having only recently withdrawn from a career in national politics and much active support for the Democratic Party, Olson continued to envision a professional route strongly connected to social development and community politics. The fact that such

objectives could not be entirely satisfied through government work only convinced him further that genuine social reform originated at some distance from party politics. Few social institutions, whether they organised education, economies, or cultural work, seemed to provide Olson with the professional and intellectual network he obviously sought. At the time of Pound's trial, thus, Olson appeared overly conscious of being a "failure in [his] work and life." For this reason, aspects of Pound's growing isolation from his contemporaries in both Europe and America easily reminded the younger writer of his own relation to post-war literary communities. Olson's notebook of 1947 mentions a strong sense of what he termed to be "Pound's struggle to keep his head above things, against the others, Eliot, Joyce, Lewis, Yeats, even" (*An Encounter* xvii). As well, Pound's hostile relationship with federal authorities was a firm reminder, for Olson, of poetry's potential social potency. Less explicable, and, hence, more intriguing to the younger poet was the exact inspiration for these ideas and the reason for their durable hold on an intelligent and talented poet. Unlike many other older writers and friends of Pound who tended to dismiss the latter's political pretensions as naive at best, Olson remained, throughout their meetings, invariably captivated by his often bizarre verbal tirades and tireless rages. Seduced easily by his personal charm and gracious manner, Olson found

himself time after time especially vulnerable to Pound's shocking, if erratic, displays of racial hatred and unprovoked slander. He describes one meeting in the following manner,

He comes forward with a movement peculiar to himself both like a loaded gun and with the sort of blind swing of a battering ram. It is all upper body, a sense of chest and head. Part of it's restlessness to get going, which accounts for a motion to the right and ahead, as though to hurry past one. (*An Encounter* 42)

Olson's notes on these first meetings are filled with intensely personal and detailed descriptions of Pound, indicating the extent of his fascination with this imprisoned writer. Adding to Olson's puzzlement was the fact that so few others, whether they be legislators, psychiatrists or fellow poets, seemed to share his concern. In Olson's opinion, the inability of the American state to properly legislate Pound's actions implied not only a complete misinterpretation of the poet's career, but a failure to respond to the wider intellectual challenges to post-war liberalism that Pound's affairs clearly insinuated. Hence, in one of his notebooks: "[i]t is not as a traitor to the U.S., but as a fascist he should be judged. It is not his radio broadcasts, but the whole body of his work that should be the testimony" (*An Encounter* 16). Implicit in Olson's judgement of Pound was the recognition that, in his work, the older poet demonstrated more than just a well developed aesthetic

sensibility; he represented or tried to represent an extremely complex intellectual position, one that covered a wide range of different social and economic issues. The fact that few of these other concerns were sufficiently explored by Pound's audiences prevented Olson from agreeing completely with either his detractors or his supporters.

The entire trial, Olson concluded, was "a consequence - a game - a sort of infantile climax-anti-climax, to be in American history - unsophisticated - the Pound trial, like the trial of Goring and Streicher is already emptied of meaning...the only premise by which any of them could be brought to proper justice is lacking. It was lacking in the war just fought" (*An Encounter* 21). Just what this "premise" actually was, Olson never explicitly states. From his commentary on the trial and its outcome, however, it is evident that Olson was consistently disappointed at the lack of references to the fascist ideology in all public commentary about either the trial per se or the war in general. When Olson characterised World War II as part of a longer "international civil war" rather than some isolated historical showdown between good and evil, he attempted to define his own society's history as a more continuous political process, and not a finished state of ideal government. The tremendous lack of informed political debate surrounding these issues only confirmed for Olson that his country's conflict with

opposing ideological extremisms was far from over. "What constitutes 'our' side is not easy to see or state: to go no further than the term 'democracy,' left or center, it is too lazy, too dead of the past to include the gains of the present and advances to come. But the enemy, because he attacks, stands clear. A 'Fascist' is still a definition" (*An Encounter* 23-4).

In many ways, Olson had to concede, the fascist "criticism" of Western liberalism had performed its task exceedingly well, establishing an alternative political consciousness to the bourgeois framework that had dominated Euro-America for two centuries. Despite its destructive extremism, fascism offered a surprisingly complete and explicit language around which notions of social change could be developed and disseminated without ambiguity. As a writer increasingly aware of the many obscurities plaguing the terms and ideas of modern democracy, Olson could not easily overlook the power of such a language to attract those intellectuals committed to more than just artistic forms. In Pound, Olson likely recognised not only a common interest in general social re-construction, but a shared sense of how little the rhetoric of mainstream liberalism seemed to contribute to this interest. He writes: "Our own case remains unexamined. How then shall we try men who have examined us more than we have ourselves? They know what they fight against. We do not yet know that we fight for" (*An Encounter* 24).

As a cultural event, Pound's intellectual drift from American liberalism to Italian fascism would continue to fascinate Olson. In Pound's retreat into the eccentric economic theories of "social credit," Olson recognised a profound need to come to terms with some of the extreme ideological choices that had evolved in the West over the past two decades. Unlike Pound, however, Olson could never completely abandon the basic precepts of the liberal ideology as he understood them. The many cultural problems associated by Olson with the American cold war remained formulated as important questions in his work, but little did they inspire the reactionary quality of Pound's rhetoric. Instead, the inability of his own culture to produce a stable political ontology only served to sanction, in Olson's opinion, new individual efforts to re-envision a more socially relevant aesthetics. At this level Pound's critique of the American political order actually aided Olson's attempts to re-configure his own social role as a poet. But the emphasis here would remain on the poetry. Far from intellectually dismissing Pound's economic theories and political concerns, Olson willingly allocated them a central role in his private assessment of the older poet's career — to the detriment, however, of his poetics. Confronted face to face with a writer who had provoked a harsh, political reaction from within his society, Olson could not help but wonder about the effect that this crisis would have on

Pound's aesthetic sensibility. Pound may have accepted a responsibility open to all politically aware citizens of a democratic state, yet to a large extent, he had overstepped this responsibility, exchanging the mantle of concerned artist for righteous governor. In Olson's view, Pound should have heeded Yeats's advice not to be "elected to the Senate of your country." This was not an urging to remain politically mute. Indeed, Olson's conception of a socially vibrant culture necessarily included, if not depended upon, the right to address seriously the very society in which it functioned. To confuse that right with the actual task of governing, however, amounted to nothing less than a complete misuse of aesthetics. Where Olson saw aesthetic form, Pound apparently envisioned an entire state structure. For this particular visitor, such confusion remained the most significant error of the incarcerated poet's career and, accordingly, the real violation to be analysed and judged. The fact that so few writers and artists appeared willing to confront these challenges, in Olson's opinion, only further demonstrated the widespread failure within American aesthetics to define, let alone enact what a poet's actual social role was. In Pound's career, Olson paradoxically recognised both an admirable, if unique exploration, of a poet's social responsibilities followed by their almost complete betrayal of these interests.

Exemplifying a profound, if ideologically conservative politics, Pound continued to provoke during Olson's visits a veritable whirlwind of conflicting emotions. Pound was not the professional academic subordinating vital poetic innovation to its disciplinary categories. His rationalist desire, however, for the perfect, aesthetically pure state continued to prompt the most harmful of intellectual abstractions. The older poet's inevitable retreat, during these meetings, into the language of fascism and racism hardly failed to surprise Olson, no matter how frequent such episodes were.

It amazed both of us. Here we were listening not only to a fascist, but the ENEMY! The resistance [Pound referred to in his 'war stories'] was patently the German-Italian gun, behind allied lines. Pound was talking like no American but an out and out enemy.
(*An Encounter* 69-70)

To reconcile Pound's violently anti-democratic perspective with some other political agenda proved increasingly futile for Olson, compelling the younger poet to regard his mentor in an almost schizophrenic manner. Olson actually summarised his portrait of this eccentric cultural icon as "the tragic double of our day."

Noise! that Confucius himself
should try to alter it, he
who taught us all
that no line must sleep,
that as the line goes so goes
the Nation! That the master
should now be embraced by the demon

he drove off (*Distances* 62)

Thus in "I Mencius, Pupil of the Master..." Olson chastises his former mentor for his seemingly hypocritical failure to adhere to his own poetic principles. In Pound, Olson had originally recognised a powerful aesthetic dynamism. His form remained inspiring precisely because of its theoretical embrace of innovation and its own transformative potential. "No line must sleep," reiterates Olson in this conflicted homage to his mentor; yet, as the pupil had come to realise, both Pound's politics and his later poems seemed to move quickly away from such aims. Hardly new and reformist, the political fascism and anti-Semitism advertised throughout Pound's work exemplified more a form of intellectual retreat than bold exploration. Just as disturbing to Olson was Pound's more recent poetry, such as his translation of the *Odes of Confucius* – serving here in the context of "I Mencius..." as the primary source of the younger poet's ire. In Olson's view, the very fact that Pound had translated the *Odes of Confucius* in regular meter, complete with rhyming, fixed stanzas constituted the strongest evidence yet of his intellectual stagnation. If Olson was unsure of whether Pound had completely abandoned his earlier aesthetic precepts, he was fairly certain now. The "Odes" revealed a worryingly moribund poetics.

the dross of verse. Rhyme!

when iron (steel)
has expelled Confucius
from China. Pittsburgh!
beware: the Master
betrays his vertu. (*Distances* 61)

Pound's vision is so depleted that he seems no longer able to differentiate "a whorehouse / from a palace.../ that the great 'ear / can no longer 'hear!" (61-2). Olson's disappointment in Pound quickly extended, thus, to include his aesthetic sensibility as well as his political one. Undoubtedly, the older poet required serious rehabilitation of some sort; the question, however, whether a mental hospital such as St. Elizabeths could provide the actual attention he needed was not so easily answered. Neither the official legal verdict of mental unbalance nor Pound's subsequent incarceration in a sanatorium effectively addressed Olson's growing discomfort with his mentor's work. Neither the academy nor the judiciary system, Olson contended, provided many insights into Pound's poetics, and by failing to deal explicitly with either the political or the aesthetic failures in his work, the American social order only invited more numerous future challenges to its cultural order. Presently, Pound's transgressions, it appeared, led solely to a perpetual stand-off between those seeking careful avoidance of all relevant issues and those who could only answer Pound with an equally dogmatic, hence, irrelevant American nationalism. As a result, Olson concluded, one is left without either a

legislative or intellectual presence in the case, only a "lame and pitiful" silence with "no justice with sanctions strong and deep enough to contain the crime" (*An Encounter* 22)

As Olson's meetings with Pound continued on into the late 1940s, no final solution to the political dilemma he represented to Olson ever revealed itself. The complex, almost paradoxical image of Pound that had formed in Olson's mind only increased in its intensity. Olson remained convinced, for example, that Pound's placement in custody should continue regardless of the fact that no suitable method of incarceration seemed forthcoming. With equal vehemence, however, Olson argued at this time for the preservation of Pound's work as well as the conditions that would enable the poet to produce new writings. Ideally, Olson noted,

This could be done within a framework of the federal prison system, if it were recognised that the rehabilitation of such a prisoner as Pound includes allowing him to work at his "trade." There is no need in this case to teach him basket weaving, machine tooling, or carpentry. His craft is there, and society can still use his gift for language if it wants too...otherwise he is all waste.

(*An Encounter* 48)

Despite Olson's projections, such a scenario, he realised, was unlikely to develop, underlining still further the many irreconcilable aspects of Pound's post-war existence with mainstream society. Other contemporary writers rarely shared

Olson's strong belief in the social relevance of Pound's poetry. Both Pound's intellectual progressiveness and his reactionary conservatism remained openly demonised as examples of bizarre, anti-cultural activities. Consequently, any possibility of the poet undergoing a more complete socio-political form of rehabilitation seemed continuously remote, perhaps even fantastic. Rejecting this tendency to simply dismiss all of Pound's interests that did not directly pertain to either aesthetics or the notion of culture as an autonomous social sphere, Olson, it appeared, would need an entirely new rhetorical strategy to comprehend the older poet's complex aesthetics. Olson writes,

It is this contradiction which keeps me from turning my back on him. I imagine that is why when suddenly he throws his bowels in my face I am forever surprised and react too late for anger and disgust to strike back. I am carried on by the gravity and intensity of the man now as ever examining, examining, as puzzled as ever to the questions, as naïve as your skin and mine to a new rain, an open man, the poet who does not hide his pain, joy, doubt, pride, or hate.

(*An Encounter* 46-7)

Confronted with a series of cultural paradoxes, the solutions to which seemed perpetually elusive, Olson could do little but learn the value of his questions. Further, as his later writings suggest, the specific problem of defining a more precise social role for the postwar American poet would remain an engaging

intellectual issue throughout his career. Revealed to Olson by the extreme elitism of Pound's political theories was an intellectual failure that contained as many social concerns as it did aesthetic ones. In fact, in Olson's terminology, these two categories of thought rarely operated independently.

In reading Olson's notes on Pound's trial, one is struck primarily by the manner in which so much of his aesthetic judgement is continuously informed by various issues of social reform. The full intellectual implications of Pound's incarceration demanded more than a formal critique of his poetry; just as they could not be resolved by the permanent withholding of his political rights. Rather, a new method of evaluation seemed necessary to comprehend more accurately Pound's unique brand of cultural reform. Invoked by his aesthetics was a very explicit symbolic struggle, a cultural imperative based, as it were, upon the inherent social attributes of all art practices. For this reason, few academic literary studies of Pound's circumstances, whether they favoured his acquittal or not, in Olson's view, could hope to resolve this dilemma. Determined by an institutional agenda of their own, and, therefore, uninterested in issues of reform that originated outside the academy, most dominant cultural programmes seemed ill-equipped to assess or even interpret Pound's strange mix of politics and art. In their own way,

formalist critics such as Allen Tate and John Crowe Ransom, by confining their evaluations of Pound to the poems themselves demonstrated a narrowness of vision similar to that of the various civic and federal authorities who were interested solely in his political actions. In Pound, Olson had perhaps encountered the one writer who best approximated the "decisive, careless, productive, and direct...politician [as] true intellectual" he often championed in his notebooks of this time. Few writers exclusive of Pound, it seemed, conveyed successfully what for Olson remained the necessary social challenges informing all serious art. Unfortunately, while in Pound's writing there may have once been a genuinely "careless," i.e. unrestricted relationship to the various social and political structures surrounding his work, at the time of Olson's interviews, only a destructive zeal for cultural domination remained evident.

As Robert Creeley notes in his introduction to *Selected Poems of Charles Olson* (1993), Olson's methodological interests in art were inspired less by an artistic sensibility, then by a concern for general social change.²⁸ To analyse the particular "vision" that emerges in Olson's poems is to consider, above all, an unrelenting, almost "ethical" passion for what seems

²⁸ It might be noted here that in his introduction and choice of poems Creeley may be following a political agenda of his own, responding, in part, to the

best described as the liberating potential of human creation. Creeley further qualifies this motivation as a general disdain for "systems" of any kind, a theme that clearly includes the political as well as the aesthetic. Already disenchanted with most mainstream cultural and academic movements due to their disciplinary orientation, Olson received perhaps his clearest sense of their inability to provide a truly socially relevant aesthetics while witnessing the mishandling of the Pound case. Faced with this discrepancy, Olson continued to question the social implications of cultural reform as represented in revisionary modernism.

Like Pound decades earlier, therefore, Olson struggled in his work to devise an especial aesthetic methodology able to address cultural reform as a new and open question. In contrast to Pound's more radical formalism, however, Olson zealously refused to interpret this question as essentially one of structure or technique. In this equivalence, Olson reasoned, it was not entirely ironic that Pound seemed to enjoy his greatest support from those academic and publishing networks that encouraged a completely apolitical, methodical theory of art. In fact, more than the threat of political treason, in Olson's view, the cultural danger of Pound's poetics lay chiefly in

aggressive attacks on cultural funding propagated during the Reagan and Bush administrations.

their social irrelevance. The abstract, generalising nature of such frameworks, whether they derived from the specialised knowledge of academic disciplines or the politically obsessive visions of writers like Pound was problematic for one primary reason: they were completely socially unavailing. The failure to address this particular quality of Pound's work, accordingly, did not so much condone one poet's political misbehaviour as it risked losing sight of the social destructiveness inherent in much modernist art in general. In a letter to Creeley, published in *Mayan Letters*, he writes, "I keep thinking, it comes to this: culture displacing the state. Which is my guess as to why Ez sounds so flat, when he is just talking, when he is outside *The Cantos*" ("Mayan Letters," SW 83). For Olson, the displacement of any form of political government by aesthetic theory not only invoked a politically coercive, propagandistic or "flat" art, it also implied the severe loss of all authentic social vision. The "state" as a complex medium of social interaction could not be reduced to any one aesthetic theory. Moreover, to his dismay, after reviewing the Pound case, Olson, too, would have to admit that the intellectual mediocrity and authoritarian perspectives prevalent in his experience of modern politics also guided much American culture in general. If Olson hoped to secure a more vital engagement with his society, it was clear that he would require an altogether different aesthetics than that informing

these art practices. The literary culture surrounding Olson at this time appeared intrinsically abstract, and, for this reason, offered little beyond the absolutism he had come to associate with all political discourse. As stated above, the social and racial totalitarianism featured in Pound's poetics only confirmed Olson's worst suspicions about the "generalising" culture that had, in his opinion, been in development "at least since 450 BC" ("Human Universe," SW 53). Olson would elaborate on this point in his essay "Human Universe" (1953):

[generalization] has had its effects on the best of men, on the best of things. Logos, or discourse, for example, has, in that time, so worked its abstractions into our concept and use of language that language's other function, speech, seems so in need of restoration that several of us go back to hieroglyphs or to ideograms to right the balance. (The distinction here is between language as the act of the instant and language as the act of thought about the instant.) But one can't any longer, stop there, if one ever could. For the habits of thought are the habits of action, and here, too, particularism has to be fought for, anew. ("Human Universe," SW 53-4)

Leaving Pound to the political consequences of his insurrection, then, Olson would continue his own explorations in methodology throughout the 1950s with a renewed sense of some of the social implications of his work. Like Duncan, he strongly repudiated the ideological and formal abstractions dominating much modernist verse, i.e., the ever-present "willingness to

make a 'universe' out of discourse" ("Human Universe," SW 54); This anti-universalist stance, Olson reminds his readers, remained highly distinguishable from most mainstream cultural activity where the discourse of abstract logic had not only been able to maintain its grip upon Western literature but had continued to expand into more and more areas of human activity. The source of this discourse remained, in his opinion, abstract or platonic idealism -- what he described as the invention of a "world of Ideas, of forms as extricable from content" ("Human Universe," SW 55). Olson elaborates:

Plato may be a honey-head, as Melville called him, but he is...treacherous to all arts, and where, increasingly my contemporaries die, or drown the best of themselves. Idealisms of any sort, like logic and like classification, intervene at just the moment they become more than the means are, are allowed to become ways as end instead of ways to end, END, which is never more than this instant, than you or this instant, than you figuring it out, and acting, so. If there is any absolute, it is never more than this one, you, this instant in action. ("Human Universe," SW 55).

Attentive in his thinking to both the social and epistemological dangers of instrumental reason, Olson effectively updates Ginsberg's earlier summary of social displacement in *Howl*, this time clearly demarking the actual source of his generation's anger and sense of failure. The intellectual distance Olson sought from traditional party politics and most mainstream,

academic networks of intellectual development seemed always on the verge of becoming a much more comprehensive and permanent form of personal exile.

Despite these theoretical apprehensions, however, Olson was far from alone in his scepticism; and while the actual practice of effective social reform continued to elude all easy definition, Olson was able to maintain contact with other similarly disenfranchised intellectuals in the late 1940s and the early 1950s. Both he and Duncan, for example, were aware of each other's work and, in fact, wrote to each other as early as 1946. Given these early exchanges and similarities in cultural objectives, it was not surprising they would eventually meet face to face less than a decade later.

Chapter Six

The Ecocentric Poetics of Charles Olson

The writing or intellectual community most conducive to Olson's poetic aims was the experimental college at Black Mountain where Olson served as Rector from 1950 to 1956. Black Mountain began as an independent post-secondary institution in 1933 under the directorship of philosopher and teacher John Rice. Isolated, as it was, both geographically and socially, from its very beginning the College evoked a strong renegade reputation. There was no formal grading and exams were given only to those who desired to specialise in a particular field. As a result, Black Mountain never actually became accredited and its standing as a bona fide post-secondary institution remained perpetually unstable. Instead the college evolved as an innovative, "educator-run" institution for the liberal arts. As we will see in this chapter, although seemingly always on the verge of either an administrative or academic crisis, Black Mountain College quickly acquired a wide reputation for progressive learning and intellectual freedom. In direct opposition to the corporate elitist organisation of mainstream college programmes, Black Mountain sought to establish an open, diverse and community-based approach to education and art. As a new

aesthetic and pedagogical model, Black Mountain exemplified the intellectual sensibility of the various scenes uniting the country's more radical artists and writers throughout the 1950s.

When Rice and his colleagues began to plan their pedagogy, few fixed agendas were actually in mind; chiefly, a more intimate, less schematic approach to education was stressed. As Martin Duberman recounts, "[a] central aim was to keep the community small enough so that members could constantly interact in a wide variety of settings - not only at meals, but on walks, in classes, at community meetings, work programs, dances, performances, whatever. Individual lifestyles, in all their peculiar detail, could thereby be observed, challenged, imitated, rejected - which is, after all, how most learning proceeds, rather than through formal academic instruction" (41). Theoretically, therefore, the various bureaucratic hierarchies prevalent in most academic institutions were actively discouraged from forming at Black Mountain. The students, themselves, were given an unusually strong formal voice in much of the decision-making. Interaction between them and the faculty was encouraged at all levels - even meals, which were taken together.

In general, the very concept of education was interpreted in an extremely holistic manner. Rather than the intellect alone, Black Mountain sought to shape what it considered to be

the entire person. A communal form of lifestyle was encouraged where social responsibilities could be explored alongside academic ones. Pluralistic, intuitive, and open to constant change, this particular stream of vanguard thought paralleled much progressive intellectual activity in general, making Black Mountain a fertile seedbed of artistic activity. From its beginnings in 1933, the college provided a place of support for intellectuals and artists shunned by the dominant cultural movements of their societies. Opening within months of Hitler's accession to power in Germany, the college offered refuge first for the Bauhaus movement, followed by various other European art groups who suffered persecution under the Nazis.

After World War II, Black Mountain began to attract a large number of US revisionary writers who, like the New Left, felt disenfranchised with traditional socialist doctrine and aesthetics. At Black Mountain, accordingly, one can glimpse an exemplary model of the new, "post-radical" intellectual, the writer who shunned matters of politics and ideology for a revitalised metaphysics of the organism. By the mid-1940s, such thinkers had successfully initiated an entire series of experimental creative arts programmes that continued to attract the work and energy of a new generation of vanguard artists. The workshops and courses to which this generation gravitated took place mostly during the summer months, earning them the

collective moniker of "the summer institute." Among the first participants in this institute were visual artists Robert Motherwell and Erwin Brodkey, composer John Cage, choreographer Merce Cunningham, and sculptor and architectural theorist Buckminster Fuller. While each artist would, of course, later go on to distinguish himself individually within the post-war American avant-garde, much of what originally drew him to Black Mountain was a similar interest in an open and progressive aesthetics that was not confined by any ideological imperatives. Cage, for example, had heard of Black Mountain as early as the late 1930s when he originally wrote to ask if they had any possible teaching openings. By that time, he had already begun his experiments in musical structure based on radical temporal shifts as opposed to conventional notions of harmony and tone. In Cage's words to the college, he was more interested "in time than in harmonics"; his music was "structured according to duration in time, every small unit of a large composition reflecting as a microcosm the features of the whole" (Duberman 278). These were new principles of construction and integration that Cage thought would be intuitively appreciated at a college like Black Mountain. In 1948, when he and Merce Cunningham were busy touring their performances across the country, Cage arranged for a special visit to the school. As Duberman recounts, "that first meeting in 1948...was a huge success on all

sides. One student felt it illuminated the college both in creation and in response, providing one of those rare moments of excitement when 'one's own deepest aims are befriended by the activity or words of another...' (Duberman 278-9). Clearly, much of the cultural ethos then being explored by the "community" at Black Mountain seemed predisposed to accept and value Cage's experiments in musical composition. Cage and Cunningham would return, of course, in the 1950s as more or less permanent fixtures of the College's summer institute. Indeed, both artists would always consider their time at Black Mountain to have been one of the most important periods in their respective careers. As a site of activity and learning, the school generally constituted a vital stage in Cage's and Cunningham's aesthetic development. In addition, impressed by the general openness to innovation and experimentation evident in the students there, each artist did much to encourage further and more elaborate visits by New York's rapidly developing avant-garde scene. As Duberman comments,

When Cage and Cunningham returned to New York after their spring visit to Black Mountain, they brought such "tales of wonder and delight" that some of their artist friends - especially those on a comparable level of starvation - wanted to go back with them for the summer session. Willem and Elaine de Kooning were the first to sign on (at that time they were very poor, despite his recent one-man show at Egan Gallery). Cage asked the college if the sculptor

Richard Lippold and his family could come along, too. (Duberman 281)

From 1948 until the College's closing in 1956, the summer institute at Black Mountain quickly developed into one of the most important sites of revisionary art and writing within the entire country. Like San Francisco's own burgeoning counterculture, Black Mountain became a potent draw for those artists, writers and other intellectuals who continued to search during this period for new theoretical strategies in their work. Black Mountain, by 1948, featured a well-established network of cultural reformists, such as R. Buckminster Fuller, Ray Johnson, and Josef and Anni Albers, teaching young energetic students an array of new art practices. Within this milieu, the emerging visual art movement of abstract expressionism, with its ecocentric sensibility, quickly found some of its earliest supporters. Extended stays by Robert Rauschenberg and Franz Kline in the 1950s followed De Kooning's visit, while attempts were made to attract Jackson Pollock as well.

As Duberman points out, Black Mountain College was at mid-century well situated within a much larger series of countercultural movements then developing in various American cities. Strong similarities in aesthetic vision were then readily apparent between the different movements, he writes:

The determination to break the hold of previously accepted models in behaviour and

art, the outcry against penury and politesse - and the attendant épatez-frenzy - was emerging in various places and in many "disciplines" during the early fifties: in San Francisco and New York as well as Black Mountain, with Jackson Pollock and Franz Kline in painting, Cage in music, Cunningham in dance, Ginsberg and Kerouac in writing. There was a search on simultaneous fronts for the personal voice, for the immediate impulse and its energy, for the recognition of (even surrender to) process, to the elements of randomness, whimsy, play, self-sabotage. (Duberman 337)

Significantly, while Duberman tends to blur what were and are, in fact, important differences between these various methodologies (the poetics of Ginsberg, for example, should certainly be distinguished from the strategies of abstract expressionism), he offers little analysis of the cultural context behind this larger transformation in the arts. For one thing, Ginsberg's expressive evocation of subjectivity contrasts with the practical eradication of agency by abstract painters like Pollock and Kline. Duberman is correct, however, in delineating this new aesthetic sensibility as a type of dynamism, a subordination of structural concerns in favour of "immediacy," "process," and "randomness." As we saw in Chapter Five, discouraged by the lack of effective ideological alternatives to what they perceived to be the status quo, many intellectuals began to adopt a more or less apolitical stance within their work. A fairly widespread rationale of innate

cultural value influenced artists and writers on both coasts of the country.

Once again, the clearest theoretical expression of this rationale derived primarily from ecological theory and the relativist epistemology it propagated. In art, abstract expressionism seemed to capture best the new cultural sensibilities quickly expanding throughout American society. Abstract expressionism first emerged during the Second World War, when American painters like Jackson Pollock and Robert Motherwell rejected both realism and the prevailing abstract styles in favour of surrealism. Abstract expressionists' interest in surrealism emphasised the technique of automatism, or the effort to paint spontaneously in order to allow the structures of the unconscious to manifest themselves as the subject of art.¹ In surrealism they found an innovative, highly inspiring breakdown between the subject and the physical world. The space of the unconscious represented for painters like Motherwell, William Baziotes, Pollock and Willem de Kooning, a unique, ever-fluctuating expanse where identity and phenomena completely mixed until it was impossible to differentiate between the two. Adapting the method of automatism to their needs, these American painters nonetheless maintained their

¹ In the first "Manifesto of Surrealism" (1924), Breton had called for an art based on "pure psychic automatism." See *The Autobiography of Surrealism*, ed. by Marcel Jean (1980) 118-26.

distance from surrealists like Breton and Dali. They preferred the more abstract and automatic paintings of Joan Miró and André Masson to the carefully rendered dreamscapes of Salvador Dali that Breton favoured. Rather than explore strange symbolisms of the unconscious, the abstract expressionists envisioned such psychic journeys more as spontaneous exchanges of energy between the subject and his or her world. In this manner, it seems more accurate to compare their works to an ecocentric epistemology rather than a surreal one.

Little popular interest can be said to have nourished any one particular avant-garde poetry movement or scene, yet, as can be seen in the work of Robert Duncan and Charles Olson, a similar discourse of value seems highly influential in their respective aesthetic development. As with Cage, the rumours and testimonials surrounding the community at Black Mountain College easily intrigued Olson. His own career still quite uncertain, Olson likely recognised in the college the possibility for a fresh start among many like-minded individuals. George Butterick, in his introduction to *The Post Office*, notes that Olson was especially disappointed at this time at his recent failure to publish his memoirs of his father.² The *New Yorker* had just returned his completed manuscript only one week after he

² George F. Butterick, Introduction, *The Post Office: a Memoir of his Father*, by Charles Olson (Bolinis, California: Grey Fox Press, 1975) iii.

had submitted it.³ Likewise, Fielding Dawson, in his own account of Black Mountain culture during the "Olson" years, comments on how the year 1948 signified an important turning point in the career of the future rector of the school. With his book on Melville just published, when Olson accepted the College's formal invitation to lecture on it, Dawson writes, "he took a step into his future and left a past behind him that concerned him being a writer...he went through the experience of being a writer and came out a poet" (22). While clearly an exaggeration, Dawson is right to emphasise how, like Duncan and, to a certain extent, Cage and Cunningham, Olson found little engagement within conventional cultural disciplines. As Dawson notes, Olson knew "[h]e couldn't achieve [his aesthetic objectives]...in prose for he had been bound to a single-minded journalistic mode that was how writers wrote and because he feared to bring to narrative his whole attack, it would upset everything he couldn't comprehend..." (22). In poetry, Olson was certainly freer to experiment; yet, here, too, his most valued models seemed generally incomplete and problematic. His largest single disappointment in poetics remained centred, as we have seen, in Pound's dramatic fall. The abstracted and, in his opinion, wooden quality of Pound's own revisionary aims was exactly what Olson wished to avoid in his work. Olson's interest in a new

³ Butterick, introduction iii.

poetics expressed itself, accordingly, as a more vaguely defined "vitalism" or restless attraction to movement. Writing to Cid Corman, he characterises his literary vision as essentially a form of "confrontation," a resistance to several key, conventional structural precepts, including

- (a) The old deductive
premise of form - and
that goes for *poems* as
well as *essays* as well
as *stories* (mark you)
- (b) That art & culture
are somehow separated
from the other planes
of energy on which a
people express
themselves (economics,
politics, films,
television,
or whatever
"entertainment")⁴

"For years," Olson continues with his point, "the best prose I read was not tseliot but in work of zelig hecht, clarence graham & other physio-psychologists working on such things as the rods and cones in a pigeon's eye."⁵ By the end of the 1940s Olson was well aware, as he told Corman, of similar aesthetic interests and innovations being attempted on both sides of the coast. Cage's experiments with chance procedures and the erratic dynamism of the Abstract Expressionists quickly appealed to his

⁴ Charles Olson, Letter To Cid Corman, 1951, *Charles Olson and Cid Corman: Complete Correspondence 1950-1964* 5.1, ed. George Evans (Orono: National Poetry Foundation, 1987) 38.

⁵ Charles Olson, Letter To Cid Corman, 1951, 41.

sensibility. Most importantly, however, when Olson first admonishes Corman in 1951 for ignoring the new, anti-institutional ethos germinating around the country, Olson is already well established at Black Mountain, in the midst of the same vanguard community that had previously impressed de Kooning, Fuller and so many others. At Black Mountain, discipline and tradition were "formally" repudiated in favour of spontaneous activity and constant interactive growth. Olson had found an ideal framework in which the aesthetic principles of projective verse and proprioception could be better developed.

Olson arrived at Black Mountain in 1949 at the suggestion of Edward Dahlberg who, after a short, unpleasant try as lecturer in literature and writing, pleaded with the poet to replace him. Olson had sworn he would never teach again, having had become, after a brief stint in Washington D.C., virulently critical of all academic institutes. Black Mountain College's unique reputation, however, was by the late 1940s able to penetrate even Olson's entrenched scepticism. An arrangement was set up in which Olson agreed to appear for three consecutive days each month if provided with travelling expenses and a stipend of \$120. Even given this light schedule, as Duberman notes, Olson rarely observed his responsibilities; once he skipped a month entirely, often he hung around for a complete

week (Duberman 307). Despite his unstable commitment, Olson quickly established a strong presence at the college.

Olson came on - at Black Mountain as everywhere - like a force of nature. His enormous size, energy and verbal pyrotechnics made him instantly impressive...His blazing conversation, his fascination with telling people 's fortunes with the tarot deck, and his striking dance-pantomime production of Garcia Lorca's *Lament for Ignacio Sanchez Mejias*, all helped make him an immediate cult-figure. Thus as replacement and transient, Olson entered a community that he was soon to dominate - and continue to dominate - until it closed its doors in 1956. (Duberman 308)

Likely, Olson received as much stimulation from the college as he, in turn, gave it, and it is difficult upon reflection to separate works like "The Kingfishers" from the special environment in which it originated.

Both the pedagogy of Black Mountain College and Olson's aesthetics at this time were iconoclastic, continuously questioning the conventional aesthetic principles of high modernist poetry. At stake in Olson's poetics, thus, appears the social possibility of knowledge itself, since the widespread inability to engage with one's environment only led, in his opinion, to empty, superficial examples of expression. "These are the false faces," he wrote in "Human Universe" (1951), "too much seen, which hide and keep from use the active intellectual states, [of] metaphor and performance..." (SW 56).

At Black Mountain, accordingly, Olson would finally be able to develop his writing free from the disturbing legacy he associated with Pound. Simultaneously inspired and menaced by the older poet's ongoing dissatisfaction with most customary modern uses of language, Olson began to investigate his former mentor's past linguistic research. As Olson summarised in 1951, "language is a prime of the matter and...if we are to see some of the laws afresh, it is necessary to examine, first, the present condition of the language" ("Human Universe," SW 53).

Olson's interest in language and its representation within various media had been consistent since his work for the OWI during World War II. At Pound's personal suggestion in 1944 Olson turned first to Fenollosa, and his work on the Chinese ideogram. Pound made no secret of the importance of the ideogram in his own poetics. Infact as Hugh Kenner emphasises, in the ideogram Pound believed that he had discovered the one existing writing system able to capture the inherent dynamism of human culture. Kenner comments,

The Descartes who (Boileau complained) had "cut the throat" of poetry, and the Locke who made poetry a diversion of relaxed or enfeebled minds, lived among learned men...[who thought] of words naming things, and words as many as there were things, and language a taxonomy of static things, with many an "is" but ideally no verb. And it was just such notions...that Ernest Fenollosa, encouraged by ideograms, set out to refute, on behalf of "the language of science which

is the language of poetry...." (*The Pound Era*
224-5)

At stake in Fenollosa's research is more than merely a new aesthetics; much of the import behind the ideogram derived from ideological concerns. In the ideogram, Fenollosa and Pound found a system of representation that exceeded the limitations of empiricism. For Kenner, much of Pound's motivation as a poet derived from a fundamental scepticism towards all forms of empirical abstraction. Hence, both his and Fenollosa's view of language emphasised its essential autonomy, i.e., its non-"symbolic" qualities as well as an interest in technical form. In Pound, writes Kenner, one finds a "new clarity of English...a language which, to the degree that you master its usages and trim your thought to its regnant norms of elegance, compels you to behave as if you were a rational animal, giving your mind to prescribed linkages between thing and thing" (*The Counterfeiters* 39). Pound's own reasoning behind his concept of the ideogram also stresses the social need for clarity in language, and he closely follows Fenollosa in accepting linguistics research as essential to the project of cultural reform. In a 1934 essay on modern literary criticism, Pound reasons,

As language becomes the most powerful
instrument of perfidy, so language alone can
riddle and cut through the meshes used to
conceal meaning, used to blur meaning, to
produce the complete and utter inferno of
the past century...against which, SOLELY a care

for language, for accurate registration
avails. And if man too long neglects it,
their children will find themselves begging
and their offspring betrayed. ("Date Line,"
LE 77)

Kenner further associates Pound's experiments with aesthetic form with a certain crisis in epistemology. The root of Pound's linguistic playfulness, he argues, rests at least partially in the writer's respective distrust of signification and its ability to mediate a transparent objectivity. As Pound himself noted in 1934, however, the failure to locate within any current discourse this promised objectivity constituted a serious set of moral dilemmas. For Pound, the ideogram not only registered past evidence of concealment, it also corrected and regenerated the cultural effects of such blindness. What Kenner identifies as a poetics of scepticism re-emerges in Pound's criticism and theory, accordingly, as a more fundamental set of political and ethical questions.

This especially modernist interest in linguistics as a source of social transformation is also highlighted by Robin Blaser in an essay exploring the influence of Alfred North Whitehead on Olson's thought: "[i]t is of singular importance that among poets the effort to regain a world-view is also a search for a different stance in language."⁶ Blaser goes on to

⁶ Robin Blaser, "The Violets: Charles Olson and Alfred North Whitehead," *Line* 2 (Fall 1983): 65.

remind us that Olson demonstrated throughout his career a similar interest in linguistics, exploring the Hopi language, first through the anthropology of Benjamin Lee Whorf, followed by a personal study of Mayan hieroglyphics on the Yucatan Peninsula. Before reading Whorf, however, Olson, too, found much that was valuable in Fenollosa's studies of writing and language use. In particular, Fenollosa's notion of the sentence as a medium for the transference of cultural energy appealed strongly to Olson's sense of language as a source of community interaction and social praxis. In Fenollosa, the act of writing is characterised as a rather fluid, unfixed process of mediation. Accordingly, the one grammatical component to receive the most attention from either Fenollosa or Pound was, of course, the verb. Due to its inherent association with physical activity, the verb, for these poets, operated as the most useful phonetic representation of the social real. Both Fenollosa's and Pound's epistemology stressed the essentially active nature of phenomena. To engage with objects in language was to investigate and delineate how the object functioned. In *The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry* (1936), Fenollosa makes clear the significant role of verbs in providing language with its primary structural coherence. Fenollosa writes,

One superiority of verbal poetry as an art, rests in its getting back to the fundamental reality of time. Chinese poetry has the

unique advantage of combining both elements. It speaks at once with the vividness of painting, and with the mobility of sounds. It is in, in some sense, more objective than either, more dramatic. (13)

A similar evaluation of this lexical element's linguistic potential figures prominently in Olson's own idea of "projective verse" or "composition by field," though no corresponding dependence on a foreign script emerges. In "Projective Verse," Olson writes

A poem is energy transformed from where the poet got it,...by way of the poem itself to, all the way over to, the reader, okay. Then the poem itself must, at all points, be a high energy - construct and; at all points, an energy discharge. (16)

The operative principle here is the notion of fluctuation, or constant movement -- an important element, as we've seen, in all of Olson's poetic thought. While this emphasis upon motion would be moderated in his subsequent work, in 1951 Olson scrupulously criticises the historical and conceptual constrictions he considers endemic to most writing and artworks. Instead, as I pointed out in Chapter One, Olson emphasises writing as process or an infinite movement of form where "one perception must immediately and directly lead to A FURTHER PERCEPTION." Form, conceived in this manner, operated ostensibly as a function or performance of content, and not as an abstract category for its containment.

Most countercultural American poets (such as the Beats or the Berkeley renaissance poets, Jack Spicer, Blaser and George Stanley), throughout the 1950s, continued to use Eliot's poetics and the New Criticism as a point of contrast to their own positions and aesthetic theories, and Olson, as "Projective Verse" makes clear, was among Eliot's strongest detractors. However, while Pound's experimentalism exemplified for the avant-garde, in general, an important cultural statement, Pound's extreme right-wing views constituted an ongoing source of aesthetic and political malaise for Olson. In Pound's poetics, Olson found a metaphysics of form similar to Eliot's, especially with reference to his view of history.

Pound's focus on the ideogram proposed a type of absolute objectivity, much as Eliot invoked a transcendental order of history in his criticism. Olson subsequently repudiated the abstract formalisms implied in both methodologies. Like Pound, Olson pursued a revisionary approach to American culture; yet the urgency to remedy the current state of arts and writing did not inspire in Olson the successive need to construct or even identify a new, totalising cultural order. Rather, the key to a more active and vital discourse of art lay just as much in a society's or community's ongoing use of language as a dialogistic movement of development as it did in the reconstruction of the medium itself. Unlike Pound, Olson

refrained from condemning completely the contemporary cultural landscape surrounding him, for he refused to entertain any permanent standards of assessment and interpreted culture instead as a more fluctuating, constantly changing environment. Olson's writing presents his readers with a veritable tableau of cogent cultural meanings, each of them derived from his own experience of contemporary language and social interaction.

As a result, Olson's poetry appears more disjunctive than either Pound's or Eliot's difficult; his efforts to capture what he termed to be the natural fluidity of human experience demanded much innovation and constant experiment with technique. Because Olson's lines evoke primarily fluctuation and impermanence, individual readings of these earlier pieces reveal how even a single set of references can evoke a wider, disparate series of identities.

Once again, this particular sense of language as a type of ever-shifting semiotic field of social interactions contrasts to Pound's deference to permanent aesthetic principles. Perhaps the most significant difference between the two poets' respective visions of culture lies in Pound's ongoing fascination with the specific economic components of different art and literature movements. The value of a particular cultural discourse, in fact, operated for Pound much like any other form of capital. He wrote in *ABC of Reading* (1934),

Any general statement is like a cheque drawn on a bank. Its value depends on what is there to meet it. If Mr. Rockefeller draws a cheque for a million dollars it is good. If I drew one for a million it is a joke, a hoax, it has no value. If it is taken seriously, the writing of it becomes a criminal act. (25)

Here Pound demonstrates little beyond his own innocence of the economics behind consumer credit and deficit spending, but a more careful reading emphasises the direct connection between the representation of wealth and the generation/distribution of social power. Pound alludes in this comment not only to the significant class differences between himself and tycoon, George Rockefeller, but also to how these differences present themselves in each person's respective concept of the economic role of culture. Indeed, had Pound known of Rockefeller's support of the arts he might have added how, when this particular family invested in a painting, it automatically became culturally significant, whereas if Pound expressed interest in a canvas, a very different value would be generated. Nevertheless, culture and capital would remain, throughout the poet's life, inextricably linked. He continues: "Your cheque, if good, means ultimately delivery of something you want. An abstract or general statement is GOOD if it be ultimately found to correspond with the facts" (ABC 25). Abstract knowledge did have its own value, if it corroborated real phenomena. In

contrast to Olson's view of culture, Pound believed that aesthetics could provide general principles of knowledge as well as social legislation. A central objective in Pound's writing is to provide a more durable, if not permanent set of cultural standards for his society, and such a goal, for Pound, necessarily implies certain economic as well as political assumptions. Accordingly, Pound continued to express his aesthetics with an explicit penchant for ideal principles and categories. In order for a society or civic community to benefit completely from artistic knowledge, any theory of aesthetics should move towards its own absolutism. Pound's own works demonstrate the practice of this theory. The titles themselves ("How to Read," 1930; *ABC of Reading*, 1934; *Guide to Kulchur*, 1938) unambiguously stress the intense pedagogical and social role Pound envisioned for his poetics. If this ambition on Pound's part inspired a formal set of cultural principles in much of his work, it was justified, he felt, by its own political ends: the total cultural rejuvenation of the western nation-state — what he labelled a new "Paideuma." Pound writes,

Abomination of desolation and may hell
rot the whole political ruck of the
19th century as lasting on into our
time in the infamy which controls
English and U.S. finances and has made
printing a midden, a filth, a mere
smear, bolted down by the bank racket,
which impedes the use of skill and
implements for the making proper books

or of healthy populations. The first step toward a new Paideuma is a clearance of every prelate or minister who blocks, by diseased will or sodden inertia, a cleaning of the monetary system. (*Guide to Kulchur* 184)

Like Olson, therefore, Pound associated the transformation of his cultural milieu with experiments in aesthetic technique.

Where Olson proposed a more active interdependence between the form and content of a work, in Pound's poetics, the clear subordination of a piece's composition to its structure is evident. A new Paideuma or cultural order functioned literally, for Pound, as an ideology first, and an aesthetics second.

Before a society could fully respect his poetics, Pound felt, it would need to generate a new political framework. By contrast, formal structure in an Olson poem or prose piece did not necessarily depend upon ideology, but evoked instead a variety of different organisational principles. Olson's principles of poetic composition operate, in other words, as a complete alternative to political legislation, not as one of its sub-categories. To compose by field is to attempt to move theoretically beyond ideology, to access an altogether different paradigm of order.

As we saw in Chapter One, Olson's first major poem to incorporate these ideas is "The Kingfishers" (1950). Of the poem's importance as a professional milestone, Olson himself

commented, "if you don't know kingfishers, you don't have a starter." Immediately evident in this work is a plethora of prose fragments similar to those found in Olson's essays. Sentences rush forward in quick succession, invoking various scenarios, while just as rapidly avoiding any permanent set of references. Consequently, the reader receives few fixed references in the poem. No narratological guide will appear to help structure each respective reading, no figure of Tiresias. "Around an appearance," declares Olson at the conclusion of "Part I," "one common model, we grow up/ many" (7).

Evidence of Olson's discomfort with fixed literary meaning is apparent in the very first line of the poem.

What does not change / is the will to change
(5)

The "/" symbol separating "change" and "is" is Olson's personal signifier of the physical activity of drawing in breath (though Pound used it before him for different purposes). No mere caesura, the pause of breath here discloses instead a completely natural, even elemental breakage in narrative structure. The act of breathing, that is, emphasises not just the need for clarity and coherence when performing a specific piece, it translates, in this instance, into an entirely new component of syntax. An extra space has been wilfully inserted into the sentence as form, but rather than merely interrupting the continuity of

conventional grammatical structures, a much larger, more innate continuity is being described.

Once again, the inherent cultural power of the typewriter emerges as vital element in this new aesthetics. Olson explains, "[i]f [the poet] wishes a pause so light it hardly separates the words, yet does not want a comma — which is an interruption of the meaning rather than the sounding of the line — follow him when he uses a symbol the typewriter has ready to hand..."

("Projective Verse" 23). Such breakages, again, aim not to disable permanently traditional reading strategies (as Olson argued Pound sought); rather Olson's efforts at interruption imply in this case an altogether different sense of meaning or narrative flow as an ongoing cognitive process rather than a set of fixed identities. Hence, in pausing between "change" and "is," Olson enacts not so much a moment of discontinuity as a particular set of congruencies in motion.

The opening reference to Heraclitus, while recalling a common dictum from an historically sanctioned, classical work, simultaneously presents itself as a new "Heraclitus-like" moment of observation, a new contemporary experience of Heraclitus's own engagement with discourse. Where Pound sought the categorical inclusion of current poetic discourse within some larger, separate Heraclitian framework of art, for Olson, the continuity of Heraclitus's ideas (and meaningful philosophical

discourse in general) required the re-use of Heraclitus's language itself. This projectivist use of Heraclitus's fragment at the beginning of "The Kingfishers" exemplifies thus a new reading process, one that aims, in part, to re-enact, and not merely to reproduce, the cultural significance of the original expression. Once again, in contrast to Pound, Olson's methodology implies an immediate, less formalised conception of technique. General principles of syntax that still operated in Pound's works as distinct, independent linguistic strategies appear in "The Kingfishers" as dynamic processes in themselves. The opening line, in this way, can be read as an explicit attempt to combine technique with performance in order to present a more active, hence, integral vision of human learning.

There are many such combinations or hybrids throughout the poem. From its very beginning, Olson shifts and rummages between a complex variety of seemingly unrelated discourses. At one point, for example, he interrupts a brief reference to Mao with fragments directly lifted from ornithology. From the *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Olson notes:

The features are, the feebleness of the feet
(syndactylism of the 3rd and 4th
digit)

The bill, serrated, sometimes a pronounced beak, the wings when the color is, short and round, the tail inconspicuous. (6)

The fact that such empiricism remains the most culturally respected in the present day is never lost throughout the poem. Other discourses, he realises, such as "...legends, are / legends. Dead, hung up indoors...." Neither "genre," however, whether it be legend or fact, alone seems capable of summarising the complex actuality of the "kingfisher" as an historically evolving "object," a "kingfisher," in other words, as a process. There can be, for this reason, no simple re-claiming of some past, fixed discursive meaning as envisioned by Eliot and the New Critics in their efforts to re-invest contemporary empiricism with a form of trans-historical value.

Olson repudiates the notion that any specific history or narrative should appeal to some fixed set of values given some past coherence or social potency. Hence, none of the textual sources chosen for "The Kingfishers" individually reference a larger permanent framework of cultural truth; rather only in the wilful act of engaging with each fragment does Olson intend for some type of trans-historical meaning to emerge. What conventional mythical references appear in this poem do so primarily as quick historical cues instead of permanent foundations for thought. As Sherman Paul comments, "This was Olson's advice to students in the Greek tutorial when they confronted Homer and the other great writers who appeared later in the fifth century BC: 'take both backwards and outsidies even,

not yet caught in that culture trap of taking them forwards, as tho all that we are depends on em'" (46). To prevent a poem's emphasis from slipping away from the present readerly moment and into an array of idealised historical ones, a single "/" mark, it appears, can assume much thematic significance.

Olson's consistent desire to simulate a more concrete, i.e. "non-verbal," reading process effectively charges the spaces separating each textual fragment in the poem with as much meaning as that possessed by the fragments themselves. Much of the thematic coherence within "The Kingfishers," therefore, continues to rely upon the many discontinuities operating within it, for these breakages reveal a distinct vision of historical process as Olson sees it. Rather than representing or somehow referencing a specific historical paradigm in his work, Olson demonstrates his own ongoing relationship to history as a vital process of constant engagement. If a single congruous narrative voice appears among the complex tangle of texts, it speaks a position of contrariness above all else, emphasising movement over position. No two fragments can be said to be complementary, with each one detailing, as they would in Eliot, a different aspect of a single issue or idea. Instead, the reader encounters an ongoing series of contradictions, or as Olson puts it "a discrete or continuous sequence of measurable events distributed in time" ("The Kingfishers" 9). The different text fragments

represent Olson's own personal reading process: to watch him in the act of assemblage, to witness the process of interpretation as it happens is an essential quality of his poetics. Olson is not interested in these early poems in preserving fixed patterns of meaning; rather, he realises that texts, as with all objects, inspire different ideas, different messages at various times.

...Else how is it,
if we remain the same,
we take pleasure now
in what we did not take pleasure? Love
contrary objects? ("The Kingfishers," SP 9)

It is by this sense of incongruity, however, that Olson hopes to evoke the particular ethos of his social reality. "Change," Olson maintains, constitutes, perhaps, the most elementary feature of human activity. The sum total of one's social and historical significance derives, in his view, directly from the many aspects of transformation and flux that contributed to its development. Olson continues:

To be in different states without a change
is not a possibility

We can be precise. The factors are
in the animal and/or the machine the factors are
communication and/or control, both involve
the message. And what is the message? the message is
a discrete or continuous sequence of measurable events
/distributed in time (9)

As one can see in the text, such a fluid, indeterminate understanding of cultural "meaning" as a "continuous sequence" resists most conventional forms of representation, including

those associated with the visual arts. The instability of the poet's line structure is matched, by his radical sense of presentation. Projective verse was, Olson wrote – using the unpaired, open parentheses that became his trademark – "projectile (percussive (prospective" ("Projective Verse," SW 15). That is the poem was a projectile: an object thrown by the poet like a ball or a rock in a transfer of energy to the reader-listener; it was percussive, oriented toward sound rather than sight; and it was prospective: exploratory, its objectives uncertain and unplanned at the outset. Hence the lines appear to come at the reader from all angles and perspectives, the lengths varying, some reaching across the page, others pointed downwards in short, snappy fragments. Not surprisingly, as Eniko Bollobás reports, Olson always insisted on editorial precision on the placement of each syllable or line fragment. The poet was especially vigilant over the actual printing process, paying strict attention to the reproduction of spacings and graphics (44). Consistent with his use of the "/" mark to evoke certain breath-like qualities he associates with the writing process, no single aspect of presentation could be overlooked. Not only might the poet's actual breath be signified in the work, the relation of the spacing of the text registers the interaction of this breath with the component of speech. "Breath is the physical vehicle, of projective verse," Olson writes, "directly

transporting what the poet receives during the act of composition" ("Projective Verse," SW 22). Bollobás, accordingly, interprets all space within an Olson poem as one of its most important syntactic elements, comparing it to the fluid strokes of action painting and Sino-Japanese calligraphy ("Projective Verse," SW 25). As I noted in Chapter One, the influence of eastern thought on Olson poetics certainly bears some comment. Yet as we saw with Robert Duncan's early comparisons of proprioception to gestalt theory and action, a much wider, more extensive western context is apparent.

Aside from his interest in spacing and presentation, Olson made a profound use, in his poetics, of etymology and semantics. In "Projective Verse," he argues that the "syllable...is the king and pin of versification, what rules and holds together the lines, the larger forms of a poem ("Projective Verse," SW 17). The key to the syllable's supremacy as a poetic medium, however, lay in its ability to indicate etymology. One might recall here Olson's elaboration of the linguistic "roots" of the verb "to be."

"Is" comes from the Aryan root, *as*, to breathe. The English "not" equals the Sanskrit *na* which may come from the root *na*, to be lost, to perish. "Be" is from *bhu*, to grow. ("Projective Verse," SW 18)

In the syllable Olson saw nothing less than an entire history of language. Linguistic traces of important cultural genealogies

formed, in this way, a trans-historical set of links that in turn outlined one particular, continuous line of thought, or "meaning." By isolating the semantic traces of *bhu* or "growth" within each use, no matter how momentary, of the verb "to be," the poet is able to manifest a fuller, more complete sense of the verb as a specific linguistic process. Olson declares, "[i]t is from the union of the mind and the ear that the syllable is born" ("Projective Verse" 18). Syllables, it would appear, evoke successfully both the abstract, phonetic aspects of language, as well as the non-verbal, gestural qualities that Olson continued to seek for his revisionism. This interest in the syllable inspired subsequently a looser, less controlled use of semantics and general sentence structure. Olson insisted on the poet's need to trust the unconscious leanings of the mind and ear in collaboration, letting the syllables flow automatically and accepting an unconscious sense of their fitness. One particular example occurs near the end of the poem:

Despite the discrepancy (an ocean courage age) (12)
The words in brackets seem to break up before the reader can finish reading them. "Ocean" and "courage" might evoke similar images of immensity and grandeur; yet there is also "age" or time which when separated from "courage" produces "cour" or heart, suggesting a different, more intimate sense of prosperity. Each syllable is able to connote a wide range of

different meanings, constructing, hence, a complex web of contexts. Further, the article "an" might be isolated from the word "ocean" leaving "oce," a syllable suggestive of sight or eyes - in this way, balancing the "ear"/"hear" ("here"?) in heart. To forge out of these disparate bits of information some unified, permanent schema, however, is to misread many of Olson's arguments, for there is no single, underlying meaning guiding his choice of images. No authorial reference uniquely connects the notion of courage with an ocean and some sense of discrepancy. Yet the words "heart" and "courage," "eye" and "discrepancy" (12) do suggest specific patterns and ideas, especially if one stays focused on the multiple connotations and complex intermingling of sounds and meanings presented by these lines. Throughout "The Kingfishers," Olson zealously pursues several distinct themes, both aesthetic and societal.

Chief among them is the relationship between writing as discursive form and writing as ongoing process. As they appear in the poem, such civic virtues as courage, heart, and even age, do suggest particular moralisms or discourses of value; while the disjunctive presentation of these qualities continues to evoke their difficult, even problematic relation to human interaction in general. Working through the puzzling, fragmented structure Olson has built, the reader continues to confront a plethora of intellectual conflicts surrounding not only the

content of each phrase or line, but the actual presentation of this content as well. Out of "The Kingfishers," an unresolved antagonism between virtue and abstraction, between idealism and doctrine quickly emerges. No single issue or perspective is able to install itself paradigmatically. As soon as any object or idea begins to reveal itself in the poem, it just as quickly dissipates, i.e., loses its object-ness, its formal coherence upon being read. Identities and appearances shift incessantly from section to section, offering as many views and outlooks on the poem's particular themes as can be experienced at the moment of writing.

This more immediate, direct sense of symbolic exchange prefaces, for Olson, an entirely new epistemology, one that originates in the development of the natural sciences of the nineteenth century. At that time, Olson notes,

An idea shook loose, and energy became as important a structure of things as that they are plural, and, by matter, mass. It was shown that in the infinitely small the older concepts of space ceased to be valid at all.... Nothing was now inert fact, all things were there for feeling, to promote it, and to be felt.... ("Equal that is to the Real itself," SW 47-8)

Olson abandons a conventional object-oriented perception for a more relativistic, internalised sense of things, what he called "proprioception." Duncan in his own numerous reflections on this methodology also linked it to specific epistemological shifts in

scientific thinking, what he labels the evolution of "Heisenbergian" physics. As Duncan notes, "it would sound like he had just gotten the most popular idea, indeterminacy, But what the poet knew is that the point at which Heisenberg had found the indeterminacy meant the presence of all of us as an agent, meant the agent was present" ("Projective Project: Charles Olson" *Sulfur* 36 [Spring 1995]: 26). In such readings, therefore, far from signifying a permanent dissolution of meaning, Olson's theoretical bid for epistemological flux and uncertainty derives from a fairly consistent cultural discourse in itself. Duncan earlier elaborated on the inherent dynamism and corporeality of this discourse or "proprioceptive" way of seeing in a 1972 introductory piece.

The great drive West was for Olson toward the Idea of Man, toward the vision of what each of us as Man is. Proprioception then, how we get the appropriate idea of, what we are (who we are) in the feel of what the body is, how the body knows itself, is the ground work of any right language of what Man is. ("As an Introduction: Charles Olson's Additional Prose," ASP 149)

Likewise, Stephen Fredman attributes to Olson's methodology the integral holism of a "spiritual discipline," a programme which "sends the initiate...on a journey from the egotistical surface of what Thoreau calls 'gossip' to a bottomless sense of self as founded on inexhaustible mystery" (34). Robin Blaser also defines these themes and consistencies in Olson's poetry as "spiritual"

in the sense that they outline a type of "cosmology." In his essay on Whitehead and Olson, Blaser contends that "the most striking matter of these poetics...is the fundamental struggle for the nature of the real. And this, in my view, is a spiritual struggle, both philosophical and poetic."⁷ As both Fredman and Blaser point out, that which might be designated as "spiritual" in Olson's poetics derives most evidently from the many issues of cosmology that permeate his work. However, where such issues inspired Pound to investigate alternate political solutions, Olson's ongoing theoretical interest in defining a more dynamic cultural ethos produces much more hostile, antagonistic relation to epistemology. The resulting discursive structure repudiates all easy summary. Each statement made within the various contexts and sections of "The Kingfishers" offers little in the way of resolution or synoptic expressions, condemning the very concept of the factual as both superficial and limited.

In the corporate industrialism of World War II as well as in Pound's intellectual forays into neo-fascism and moral dogmatism, Olson had already glimpsed the more disturbing social ramifications of an uncritical, propagandistic use of aesthetics. The politics of Olson's poetics suggests, accordingly, a very different agenda. On guard against any

⁷ Robin Blaser, "The Violets: Charles Olson and Alfred North Whitehead," *Line* 2 (Fall 1983): 62.

overtly politicised use of culture, i.e., propaganda, for social change, Olson remained sceptical that revolution and poetry even mixed. A proprioceptive writing, due to its ambivalence towards all categorical schemas, immanently, that is, by definition, resisted explicit ideological censure. As Fredman writes, "[Olson's] political program...proposes that an individual who locates the true facts of his or her own condition can be of tremendous use to the community as a resistant factor, sustaining the value of the local and the actual against the state, the universal, and the eternal..." (34). What these "true facts" actually are remains, for the most part, decidedly unclear in both Olson's prose and Fredman's criticism. However, both ideologically and philosophically wary of abstracting his poetic devices to a level of dogmatic certainty, Olson did continue to stress the importance of negation as a primary discursive strategy in works like "Projective Verse." "The Resistance" (1948), this prioritisation of antithesis and contradiction is, once again, strongly associated with the corporeal body and a more material sense of experience. He writes, "[i]t is his body that is his answer, his body intact and fought for, the absolute of his organism in its simplest terms, this structure evolved by nature, repeated in each act of birth, the animal man; the house he is, this house that moves,

breathes, acts, this house where his life is, where he dwells against the enemy, against the beast" ("The Resistance" 13).

Consistent with this less formal, almost visceral sense of cultural value, Olson found much to "negate," of course, within the new, media-saturated environment of postwar America. Even without Pound's naive import of European anti-liberalism, much American culture at this time betrayed to Olson a strongly limited, even dishonest set of objectives. In "The Resistance" one explicit source of this intellectual and artistic hollowness appears to be modern consumerism: "When man is reduced to so much fat for soap, superphosphate for soil, fillings and shoes for sale he has, to begin again, one answer, one point of resistance only to such fragmentation, one organised ground, a ground he comes to by a way, the precise contrary of the cross, of spirit in the old sense, in old mouths" ("The Resistance" 13). The new mouths, for Olson, conveyed a fundamental scepticism toward much popular culture in general – not just political pamphleteering. Likewise, the old "spirit" or spiritualism continued to imply the doctrinal brand of cultural reform exemplified in Pound's work. The question of an effective, truly progressive counter-culture would necessarily look beyond all moralism as a discourse of reform, viewing it as an inherently limited, "closed" model of elitist persecution. For Olson, Pound's anti-Semitic condemnation of 20th century

commercialism was the inevitable outcome of all such narrow "closed" models of thought. Yet while precluding most revolutionary activity, Olson's emphasis on negation did not imply social complacency. As has been shown, an alternate, more capacious assessment of what comprises a discourse's social legitimacy inspired in him a correspondingly holistic paradigm of language use in general. Though disjunctive, unstable, and almost continuously in motion, Olson's dynamic sense of symbolism evoked its own rather specific agenda of reform. The new mouths were far from silent; Olson's rejection of Pound's extremist views did not imply a corresponding rebuff of all forms of cultural revision. In Olson's vision, resistant factors still figured prominently in poetry. Even the typewriters were breathing, especially the ones that escaped FBI detection.

Additional comments and reflections on the contemporary crisis in intellectual work would continue to surface in both his poetry and prose. In the first volume of *The Maximus Poems* (1953) in the section titled "Maximus to Gloucester Letter 2" the dire social situation faced by all artists is specifically identified as a "pejoracracy" — a Poundian hybrid of corporate capitalism and totalitarian social structure. Pessimistically he notes, "The true troubadours/are CBS. Melopoeia/ is for Cokes by Cokes" ("Maximus to Gloucester Letter 15" 252). Evidently trapped in the corporate, mass media network of popular culture,

Olson appears accordingly: "Holes/ in my shoes, that's all right, my fly / gaping, me out / at the elbows" ("Songs of Maximus," SW 231). Although in some ways comparable to Pound's own self-portrait in canto III: where he "sat on the Dogana's steps / For the gondolas cost too much that year," Olson's stance espouses an active resistance. Despite the fact that the modern troubadour, especially when deprived of a "CBS" payroll, is often forced to "take the way of / the lowest," he is advised nevertheless, in Olson's vision, to "go contrary / go sing" ("Songs of Maximus," SW 232). This Roman stance of proud impoverishment constitutes, in itself, a form of social activism, for it emphasises the need among poets for a conscious engagement with their environment. Where Pound deliberately confines his troubadour figure to an attitude of historical reflection, a pose of patient resolve, organising what knowledge and possessions he might own in preparation for some future activity, Olson attempts a more fluid act of continuous performance. In canto III, Pound's humble perspective from the Dogana's steps transforms itself into the epic struggles of The Cid, emerging from exile to secure his family's as well as his personal suzerainty over the Moorish kingdom of Valencia.

And he came down from Bivar, Myo Cid,
With no hawks left there on their perches,
And no clothes there in the presses,
And left his trunk with Raquel and Vidas,
That big box of sand, with the pawn-brokers.

To get pay for his menie;
Breaking his way to Valencia (canto III)

Similar to Odysseus's mythical travels, The Cid's successful homecoming (i.e., the reclaiming of land for catholic Europe from the Islamic infidel) presents a fairly unambiguous narrative of triumphant opposition. No such paradigm of epic heroism inspires Olson's troubadours. "CBS" will not be routed or vanquished as easily as El Cid's Moors. Instead, a subtler, less implacable plan of resistance appears in Olson's "Songs of Maximus." Epic and mythological narratives of universal Roman retribution such as those informing Pound's own poetic project have little place in Olson's plan. In *The Cantos*, the drama and catharthis associated with the history of The Cid might be meaningfully appropriated as an ideal form or model of poetic agency. Pound re-submits the tale of The Cid to his readers in an effort to invest his own narratives with the same formal integrity and value he associates with these earlier structures. Again Pound's notion of culture is primarily ideological: a fixed set of politically homologous discourses is explicitly invoked as a type of prior investment from which the poet currently hopes to draw some interest. In other words, Pound's poetics remains formally dependent upon a distinct sense of permanent literary and cultural foundations functioning here much like principal capital. Comparable to property or precious

metals, neither the *Odyssey* nor The Cid's epic actions will ever, in Pound's view, depreciate in discursive value. By contrast, Olson holds few historical discourses to be inherently more valuable than whatever narratives might currently define American culture. The contemporary song of "CBS," hollow and delusive though it may be, will not succumb easily to a set of even older, less relevant myths and legends. If such discourses are to be countered, Olson maintains, the resulting oppositional stance must engage with these structures on their own terms. The new troubadours, that is, the new "mouths," must remain ever wary of all formal, fixed visions, regardless of their cultural or historical origins.

Despite the ongoing erosion of the poet's social significance within the context of consumer capitalism and the growth of mass media, Olson's work refrains from any direct attempts at political restoration. In fact, the tendency of mass culture to abstract and trivialise the lived experience of people and social communities made Olson by this time extremely sceptical of political frameworks in general.

This repudiation of fixed ideological structures and containment also appears in Olson's interest in Mayan glyphs. Pound's and Fenollosa's earlier study of the ideogram strongly impressed upon Olson the importance of technical precision in aesthetics. Laszlo Géfin, in fact, formally groups such writings

into a single genealogy he calls the "ideogrammic stream" (xvii). The use of the ideogram signals to Géfin more than a common imaging technique, it implies a wider thematic search for an increasingly naturalised discourse of the Real. In Pound's hands, the ideogram provided the most coherent formal model of successful composition. Many of the specific aspects of cultural reform Pound pursued in his poetics depended on the technical integrity of the ideogram. In Olson's own methodology, such a search operates projectively "by way of the syllable" as an even more exact mediating device. "It would do no harm," he writes in "Projective Verse," "as an act of correction to both prose and verse as now written, if both rime and meter...were less in the forefront of the mind than the syllable...I say the syllable [is] king" ("Projective Verse," SW 18). To focus on the syllable is "to engage speech where it is least careless - and least logical." As a means of communication that demonstrated the process of its own development, the ideogram, defined the common basis between writing and experience.

Pursuing this interest in the ideogram, Olson travelled to Mexico to study Maya glyphs. In contrast to abstract, modern "phonetic" languages, Olson believed that the ideogrammic quality of the Maya glyphs situated their meanings in a material reality. Olson understood them as both recording and constructing Mayan life. He saw evidence in the glyphs of the

disposition of psychological energy encouraged by the culture. The glyphs were "ideographic" and not "pictographic," Olson wrote, and so "kept the abstract alert" without descending to the "stereotype" and formalism of complete abstraction ("Mayan Letters," SW 110-11).

Similarly, Olson's projective verse invoked a sense of "realness" which stood in contrast to formal syntax or linguistic principles, and it is according to this premise that Olson specifically substitutes objectivism with his own concept of "objectism." "Objectism," Olson explains, "is the getting rid of the lyrical interference of the individual as ego, of the 'subject' and his soul, that peculiar presumption by which western man has interposed himself between what he is as a creature of nature (with certain instructions to carry out) and those other creations of nature which we may, with no derogation, call objects" ("Projective Verse," SW 24). In the eyes of an "Objectist," the very nature of the real demanded a more immanent, indwelling sense of structure, one that automatically rejected all abstract speculation as evidence of a false universal. For this reason, especially in his earlier years as poet, Olson consistently refrained from attaching any formal conditions to the objectivity of his verse; a poem's legitimacy, instead, continued to derive from an almost intuitive notion of the real particular. It may be argued that

Olson's pedagogical interests would inspire more abstract speculation in his poetry in later years. Within his earlier work, however, even the original Cartesian boundaries of subjectivity seem newly arbitrary. Olson's kinesthesia effectively retires all formal conceptions of subjectivity as a fixed sensorium dialectically engaged with some separate objectivity.

Another important source behind Olson's thinking on language, representation and experience, as we've seen is, the philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead. In Whitehead, Olson discovered exactly the type of cultural vision and aesthetic sensibility he felt was necessary to counter such grandiose visions as those propagated by writers like Pound. Olson detested the absolutism of Pound's pedagogy, and so felt challenged to procure a new basis of study for western culture.

The formal result, as inspired by Whitehead, first appeared as a special interdisciplinary project he called the Institute of the New Sciences of Man. Operating within Black Mountain College as a type of independent school of research in the humanities, the INSM was designed to attract a representative portion of the West's most advanced thinkers in all fields of the arts and social sciences. The first choice of participants included Carl Jung in the field of psychology and other similarly progressive theorists in anthropology and sociological

research. Those considered exemplary in these latter fields were, not surprisingly, usually drawn from the new ecological school of thought then developing around the country. Writers such as Carl Sauer and various Sauer protégés were invited to help develop this programme. Here, as Ralph Maud suggests, Black Mountain could conceivably engender "a smaller Princeton Institute for Advanced Studies," a functioning think-tank, informed by an entirely new pedagogy and historical outlook.⁸ In 1952, Olson prepared a programme outline, combining lectures in anthropology, history, archaeology, and aesthetics to produce an revised framework of humanist thought. The draft appeared as follows:

1875, the pivot year (Schliemann having opened way by opening Hissarlik-Troy 1868, but without archeological method: that method worked out by Dörpfeld, at Olympia, 1875

so,

I. (base science) ARCHOLOGY (the re-opening of the backward horizons of man as man NOT an anthropoid:

ex. Of distinction - discovery 1879 of cave of prehistoric paintings, decisive date 1895, Riviere's proof that these were of the Ice Age, 200th century BC

so,

II. emergence of, CULTURE-MORPHOLOGY (the new, & still essentially unadmitted science)

⁸ Ralph Maud, *Charles Olson's Reading: a Biography* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1996) 69.

Ancillary to both, and on either side of each, are:

(of ARCHEOLOGY):

III. GEOGRAPHICAL SCIENCES (the earth, climate, soils, crops, etc.)

IV. BIO-SCIENCES

(ontogenetic, phylogenetic, etc)

(of CULTURE-MORPHOLOGY):

V. PSYCHOLOGY (Freud, & post)

VI. MYTHOLOGY⁹

What is important to note here is the especial historical framework evoked throughout Olson's programme. Olson ends his series with the topic "mythology" in an effort to outline a wider cultural totality, running from Cro-Magnon cave painting throughout western proto-history and into the modern world. After this project prematurely ended, the poet began to focus more squarely on his continent, and, prompted by Edward Dorn, in January 1955 produced A *Bibliography on America for Ed Dorn* (San Francisco, 1964).

In Robert Duncan's view, it is here, in the poet's unique conception and use of history, that the influence of Whitehead on Olson's thought is most evident. Many other writers working closely with Olson at this time affirm this perception, including Robert Creeley who categorises his colleague's

⁹ George Butterick, ed., *Olson: the Journal of the Charles Olson Archives* 10 (1978): 3.

interest in history as one of his "dominant concerns." His most detailed analysis of the topic, Duncan informs us, evolved out of a specific seminar Olson delivered at the college in 1956 entitled, "A Special View of History." Less than a year later, Olson re-developed and expanded some of the seminar's preliminary points into a five lecture series presented in San Francisco. As a theoretical focus, Olson concentrated on Whitehead's *Process and Reality* (1929), a work he first read in 1955, though he had been acquainted with Whitehead's philosophy since 1948 through the work of Williams. Duncan also attributed to Whitehead many core ideas of Projective Verse. In fact, *Process and Reality*, according to Duncan, permeates "projective verse, it enlarges the idea of field.... When Charles talked in San Francisco, it was the Whitehead view of history as past and future, and the fact that we're at the point of genesis and that the end of this is back of us." An ambiguous comment, admittedly, yet even a rudimentary comparison of the text of *A Special View of History* (published as a book in 1970) and Whitehead's earlier work reveals significant homologous concerns. In fact, Duncan's summary of Whitehead's sense of history "as past and future" captures well several of Olson's own theoretical preoccupations with time and non-linear modes of thought.

As the title of this seminar immediately suggests, Olson's definition of history runs counter to most traditional "views" of the subject. At its most fundamental level, history operated for Olson, as it did for Duncan, as a specific mode of human experience. In history Olson would find the majority of materials, themes and perspectives for his poetry. The very act of writing of poetry necessitated for Olson an intense engagement with historical narratives, literary or otherwise.

In his relationship to history, Olson's clearest point of reference was here, too, the work of Ezra Pound. Much of the strength in Pound's poetry, Olson believed, derived from the potentially transformative effect it had on historical discourse — though its structural rigidity eventually prevented it from conveying the past's contemporary or current values. History appeared in works like *The Cantos*, William's *Paterson* and Olson's *Maximus Poems*, coincident with the facts and experiences of the contemporary everyday, creating images not through analogy or metaphor, but through synecdoche and parataxis. In his *Mayan Letters*, Olson similarly discusses history as operating outside of time, transcending conventional records of the past. History did not equal a separate order of events, in this perspective; rather, it constituted its own contemporaneous way of looking at things. To consider objects and ideas from an

historical point of view invoked more a special interest in the present than any need to preserve the past.

As with "The Kingfishers," Olson announces *A Special View of History* with a reference to Heraclitus: "man is estranged from that which he is most familiar." The epigraph re-emphasises Olson's conviction that a unique cultural and intellectual tie exists between the current moment in American history and the time period in which Heraclitus existed. "For all this," Olson writes, "I know increased my impression that man lost something just about 500 BC and only got it back just about 1905 AD" (15). Nothing less than a new epistemology seems to be in operation; an especial sensibility long thought dormant in western culture has somehow re-emerged within the modern psyche. Olson has in mind not only new principles of aesthetic integration, but a revitalised cultural harmony, and in Heraclitus he appears to have found its first historical precedent.

Linking the metaphysical dynamism of his own epistemology with the philosophy of Heraclitus, Olson establishes both a distinct genealogy for Projective verse and a conceptual framework to support this lineage. It is this framework, furthermore, that effectively constitutes Olson's theory of history: a metaphysical monistic epistemology as opposed to a culturally and politically distinct archive of interrelated social actions and events. As Olson states,

Like it or not, see it or not, history is the *function* of any one of us.

It is this sense that, today, one has to regard history not at all as (1) events of the past, (2) as a "fate" (Mussolini crying, when the troops hit Anzio, "history has got us by the throat") or (3) that we are making it, that horrible fallacy of the present which spews itself out of all radios newspapers magazines mouth, as though it was a damn fire-spitting dragon. (*Special View* 17)

In Olson's view, the "historical" need for a more Heraclitan perspective is all too apparent. Between Heraclitus's time and his own present day, two and one half millennia of oppressive, philosophical abstraction has intervened to dominate western aesthetic vision. To counter such habits of thought Olson presents a theory of knowledge more directly derivative of actual lived experience, a history as "life process." Once again, Heraclitus, with his emphasis upon the innately fluctuating nature of all social processes, exemplifies this improved mode of interpretation. Olson reads his search for the familiar as a quest for a more in-depth knowledge of reality, eschewing the errors of abstraction for a proper appreciation of detail. The history that Olson outlines in these lectures remains anchored to an ethics of authenticity, a sense of immanent value in phenomena itself. History operates here as a "natural" function of the actual objects under consideration rather than some separate, abstract framework of analysis.

"There is a natural proper or characteristic action of anything," Olson writes, "that is its function. As of a human life I say it is its history. It is the how" (*Special View* 18).

Olson further distinguishes this alternate, more object-oriented sense of history, by situating it within a wider range of philosophical and cultural contexts, all of them linked by similar theoretical interests. In "Human Universe," as we saw in Chapter Five, Olson recalls Melville's less than complimentary moniker for Plato, namely: "Honeyhead." A similar criticism of platonic idealism appears in these earlier lectures,. The loss of what Olson considers to be a proper sense of history remains directly traceable to Socratic thought. According to Olson, "an enormous fallacy called discourse, invented by Socrates, drove science, myth, history and poetry away from the center, substituting in imagination and faith's place politics, government, athletics, and metaphysics" (*Special View* 21). Subsequently, the cultural significance of Heraclitus as a pre-Socratic text seems all the more apparent, especially since it pre-dates by about a century the fixed discursive categories of thought introduced in Plato's texts. The combined intellectual effect of Socratic discourse, according to Olson, was the increased institutionalisation of all inquiry, whether it originated in the sciences or the arts. Detached from any actual realm of experience, the massive political frameworks of

knowledge envisioned by Socrates prioritised concerns for orthodoxy over all interests in communication or expression. A metaphysical system was put into practice, according to which all texts, both written and oral, were subsequently evaluated. "What Socrates did," Olson notes, "was to isolate the value and thus raise and isolate the man-time from space-time. What he performed was a removal from the particular...." (*Special View* 27).

Olson's initial response to this dilemma is to dismiss critically and without hesitation all formal frameworks of language. He begins this task with what he feels to be the mistaken division between writing and speech. The notion of history as a mythology, he explains, did not originally require any functional distinction between its oral sources and its verbal ones. To speak in general was to produce a history or mythos, an activity distinguishable in both form and function from something done. In Olson's view, this common conflation between the written and the oral necessarily elevated the spoken word to the type of cultural standing usually accorded only what is written. This sense of immanent public value in oral communication not only inscribed spoken text with a particular social significance, it engendered a type of narrative or history that remained closely linked to its own material sources. History, in the pre-Socratic sense of the term, had not

yet acquired, in other words, its theoretical distance from the actual phenomenal process of producing it. Its validity derived almost solely from its unique and very visible association with its surrounding context. In Olson's view, "there are two estrangements, the permanent one, from that which is sloping in the grass without moving a leaf of grass's top; but this other one, the contingent, of touch on all sides - of the company of the living, that, they are 'distraction and dispersed" (*Special View* 25). Such are the terms of Olson's search for a more authentic use of language, a practice that remains rooted in its process, a practice that communicates rather than abstracts.

The re-discovery of the Heraclitian or pre-Socratic mode of history, though, has already been realised to a large extent in Olson's poetics. This characteristic optimism in his writing continues to constitute a major difference between projective verse and those methodologies discussed in Chapter One, such as Pound's theories of the ideogram and Zukofsky's objectivist strategies. Where Pound and Zukofsky tended to view their work in a more absolute fashion, Olson has little trouble situating his interests within a much larger, more active contemporaneous framework of like concerns. The concept of projective verse appears to extend, even at this early date, into a wide variety of different cultural texts and movements. At times, Olson, in fact, seems almost passive in his conception of his new poetics,

as if in using language he is not directing, but participating in patterns of western thought. While Pound took a more active role in supervising the development of language, Olson saw his task as bearing witness to an essential truth of experience both within and exterior to his aesthetics.

In this sense, Olson's *Special View of History*, far from conveying the poet's estrangement from specific traditions in western thought, firmly aligns his thinking with a set of core cultural beliefs. An especial ideological vision continues to guide the trajectory of his thought. If Heraclitus serves as one foundational pillar of this tradition, then its primary co-founder remains Alfred North Whitehead. Olson introduces Whitehead's metaphysics fairly early in his lecture series, qualifying it in no uncertain terms as a new mode of thinking, one that would "reset...man in his field...giving him back his 'time'" (*Special View* 27). The theoretical significance of this epistemology, for Olson, derives from the philosopher's unique, yet consistent focus on sensual processes. Whitehead's engagement with empirical phenomena in his writing satisfied well Olson's own theoretical pre-occupations with finding some way to rectify the West's cultural "estrangement" from lived experience. As Olson explains it, "[o]ur advantage is that a century and a half after Keats, the universe as seen by Heraclitus' naked eye and mind has been restored; and restored

with full knowledge and precise ones of the content and its behaviour" (*Special View* 33).

Whitehead's philosophy evokes a complex and extremely oblique metaphysics, configured, as it were, over the course of his entire life. A summary or even the briefest of excursions into its workings cannot possibly be accomplished here; in fact, Olson's own interpretation of these writings might be criticised for attempting to perform exactly that function. The homologies that Olson manages to draw between his work and that of both Whitehead and Heraclitus were not, Olson believed, a product of the philosophy itself so much as its derivation from a common social formation or ethos. Olson appropriates much in his thinking from Whitehead's own terminology. Allusions to the "actuality" of objects as an epistemological goal closely resembles Whitehead's own musings on the "Actual" and the possibility of absolute knowledge. As well, when Olson further divides his epistemology into two specific modes of observation, namely: the experienceable and knowable, the poet has clearly been influenced by Whitehead's earlier sub-categorisation of knowledge into what is perceived sensually and what is objectively demonstrable.

In Whitehead's view, the interpretation of reality necessarily contains metaphysical presuppositions, conceptions that constitute an implicit sense of the Real. These

"[m]etaphysical categories are not dogmatic statements of the obvious;" he argues, "they are tentative formulations of the ultimate generalities (*Process and Reality* 8). A metaphysical grounding of the Real remains central to Whitehead's philosophy. All epistemological contentions, in order that they contain some validity, must be based in an absolute framework. Without this grounding, of course, no two observations or statements can be said to presuppose the same view of reality. In his theses Whitehead demonstrates little beyond the general tenets of phenomenological idealism. Rather Whitehead's specific contribution to metaphysics stems from his analyses of perception and the relationship of sensual observation to the ideal sphere.

In Whitehead's work, the metaphysical goal of absolute knowledge remains purely speculative as empirical perception, i.e. that which is concretely perceived by the individual subject can never be fully theorised as an essential category. Attempts to do so merely "conflate actuality with speculative abstraction, and in philosophical discussion the merest hint of dogmatic certainty...is an exhibition of folly" (*Process and Reality* xiv). As Whitehead writes,

Philosophers can never hope finally to formulate these metaphysical first principles. Weakness of insight and deficiencies of language stand in the way inexorably....

...putting aside the difficulties of language, deficiency in imaginative penetration forbids progress in any form other than that of an asymptotic approach to a scheme of principles, only definable in terms of the ideal which they should satisfy. (*Process and Reality* 4)

Whitehead maintains thus a strict "ontological" gap between perception and essential truth. There can be no final knowledge, only progress in discovering the limitations of past observations.

The primary function of philosophy, in Whitehead's understanding, is to criticise and, if possible, work to counter the tendency towards excessive abstraction in thought. Concrete actuality, he reasoned, can give rise to a wide variety of abstractions, but none of them, either separately or taken together, can ever capture the richness of that actuality. Whitehead's phenomenological idealism holds the essential usefulness of synthesis as a mode of truth, yet only through hypothesis can one construct a fuller knowledge of experience. Yet, the final, absolute comprehension of the actual world can, in his opinion, never be procured. Configured by the intrinsic limitations of sensual observation, human subjectivity remains permanently dissociated from the metaphysical ideal. To conflate mere abstraction with philosophical speculation invites the error Whitehead calls "the fallacy of misplaced concreteness." According to Whitehead, the fallacy of misplaced concreteness

compounds two distinct, but related errors: (1) the confusion of the thing itself with any number of its physical aspects; and (2) mistaking this object with its ideal form. Such are the primary errors, Whitehead maintains, behind all reductionist thought in science as well as popular sensibility.

To counter these errors, Whitehead introduces specific strategies of speculation, in an effort to navigate more consciously the irrepressible gap between actuality and concrete experience. "The final problem," Whitehead states, "is to conceive a complete fact" (*Adventure of Ideas* 58). If metaphysics can achieve a general description of those elements that are always "there" in every actual fact, the observer will gain an important insight into how all of our abstractions — whatever their source — attend only to some aspects of actual things. For Whitehead, the essential value of philosophy derived solely from its ability to limit abstraction by suggesting the existence of other aspects of actuality that must inevitably be there. Whitehead's metaphysics seeks to maintain, in this way, a distinct relationship to the material particularity of the everyday. It envisions an immanent complexity within the framework of all sensual experience; yet rather than confront this complexity as a conventional metaphysics might do with an explicit overarching absolutism Whitehead's sense of the Ideal effectively absorbed all notions of difference. The result,

according to one critic is that "our knowledge of our experience takes on depth and harmony in place of shallowness and conflict" (Hosinski 6).

This especial accommodation of the concrete in Whitehead's thought constituted its distinct appeal to Olson, given the poetics and pedagogy he was developing at Black Mountain College towards the mid-1950s. In *A Special View of History*, Olson outlines what he calls "the actual" as a new epistemology or mode of observation. Able to qualify one's experience of the concrete without necessarily theorising an abstract ideal, "the actual" delineates that which is able to fulfil its essential motion or activity such objects constantly evoke. Actuality, he writes, "is in good usage, and has an exact meaning: involving acts or action" and is "opposed to potential, virtual, theoretical, hypothetical, etc." (*Special View* 53). In the idea of movement, Olson locates a completely revised metaphysics, one able to resolve the ruinous division between phenomena and the ideal that has plagued western thought for fifteen hundred years. The objects of Olson's system convey their being solely through their action. Reality, accordingly, remains essentially in motion. "Indeed," Olson writes, "it all comes down to a matter of speed. To what, in this range of 'life' unquote, dubbed human, is called vivid" (*Special View* 34).

Similarly, Whitehead argues, the metaphysical universe is to be conceived as being made up of occasions of experience. All the "final, real facts," he notes, which constitute actuality are not to be thought of as substances, but as "processes, occasions of becoming, events of "self-construction" (*Process and Reality* 7. The true state of being is to be in constant motion. Only theoretical abstractions render existence as composed of fixed structures. A better appreciation of what he calls the concrete fullness of actuality must be willing to repudiate all static representations of the real in favour of a set of ever-shifting relations between matter and thought.

Throughout *The Special View of History* Olson makes ample use of Whitehead's metaphysics, redefining the very notion of history as more or less a branch of his speculative philosophy. Where Whitehead's thought defined itself at a fundamental level as "the critic abstractions," Olson's notion of history aims to rediscover the essential principles of development behind all objects. This dynamic sense of objectivity, as suggested above, tends to idealise function, and is supported by Whitehead's notion of process. Olson writes:

One can therefore wrap it up in one package: PROCESS — what Heraclitus tried on as "flux" — is reality; therefore, means or method is going toward and will become the object of its attention (nature or God, say, as of physics and logic). But the

unadmitted further half of the truth is that, the moment this happens, the object is changed because it is revealed to itself as much a part of process as it is of being. So the poles, then, are not quite such fixed terminals as they appear but are also developing and continuous things as is process or method or belief itself.
(*Special View* 42)

In the concept of "process," Olson follows Whitehead closely, outlining what he considers to be the most basic premise of existence. All objects, regardless of their structure or origin remain grounded, identity-wise, in process. This fundamental contention of Whitehead's constitutes what he calls the "philosophy of organism"; in Olson's work, it becomes a core principle of Projective verse. Both writers, however, consistently emphasise the wider cultural presence of this specific rationale. Olson considers the ubiquitous nature of this particular vision evidence of "a new cosmology" with Whitehead's concept of "organism" being one particular expression of a general shift in the "western image of order." Other exemplars of the present sensibility included, of course, Carl Jung and his notion of mythic unconsciousness and Albert Einstein, who in 1954 wrote a letter of reference for the school testifying to its cultural significance as a "smaller institution" where "a vivid personal relationship between all

working together..., students as well as teachers" could be encouraged.¹⁰

Consistent with his own epistemological relativism, Olson provides no ultimate reason for this change in cultural perception other than the observation that the previous cosmology, being seriously error-filled, seemed destined to weaken in social influence. The new vision or optics stands revealed, thus, as more a movement of return, of re-capturing that which was only misplaced, than a completely unprecedented mode of interpretation. "I am suggesting," Olson writes, "that a period has closed in which any known previous vocabulary applies. It is idle to talk of destruction or of the contemporary slow-wits much better in fact those who take it as void; they at least have gone clear of the old progressive hidden assumption, they at least are working with negatives of creation, collapses; and are not shoring up tropes of man reality to forefend what is in reality the insides of those who stay progressive, and still defend a cosmology which is dead as the birds they hung around their necks" (*Special View* 48).

The trope most useful to Olson in outlining the passing of one era into another, therefore, is that of collapse; and, as is evident in "The Kingfishers," this notion of decay or

¹⁰ Martin Duberman reproduces Einstein's letter in *The Black Mountain Book* (New York: Croton, 1970) 122.

dissipation informs much of his poetry. The actuality of the object is realised partly here through its disappearance, just as the materiality of reality is most resonant in the process of decay. To evoke "process" in reality, therefore, Olson must confront and disassemble the substance of his objects. Images that suggest randomness or chance, accordingly, figure prominently in his poetics. Chaos becomes an important marker of authenticity, capturing, as it does, the fundamental changeability of nature itself.

Searching for the actual, Olson consistently avoids in his poetry explicit references to any schematic structures or orders. Olson seeks, in other words, not to provide his readers with a fixed framework so much as he enjoins them to abandon what methodologies they might already have acquired. Hence, his themes remain in continuous transformation. Deriving "method" etymologically from "*meta hodos*," meaning "the way after, " Olson evokes an almost Taoist vision of interoperation. In *A Bibliography on America for Ed Dorn* he writes,

But let's go back to root: to methodos, and look!

With a way,
With a via, with a path (way, that
which died, and

Does
Not die, which it is any man's job - and the
moreso now,
When the old
Way is dead, long live the methodology in
other words,

The science of
The path - what could be more exactly what
we are in-
Involved in - it is
Not the path, but it is the way the path is
discovered! (8-9)

Methodology is invoked here as process, first. One will not discover in Olson's writings a set of permanent identities so much as a different sense of perception altogether. That which can be observed in his poetics appears perpetually on the edge of fragmentation. Only when the process of decay has begun to set in do his images, in general, attain any presence.

In "As the Dead Prey upon Us" (1953), Olson links an abstract, impotent sense of the past with "the dead in ourselves." In order to live again, such a condition needs to be actively refuted by those who remain most victimised by it:

Awake, my sleeping ones, I cry out to you,
disentangle the nets of being!
(*Selected Writings* 205)

Similar to "The Kingfishers," "As the Dead Prey upon Us" is composed of short narrative fragments in uncertain relation to each other. What continuity there is derives from the Dantesque theme of spiritual descent into a sort of netherworld populated by lamenting souls. The narrator does not need to travel nearly

as far as his predecessors once did, however, to reach this particular realm; for in this poem it is the damned who have access to this world as opposed to him being able to enter theirs. What boundaries there may have existed between the world of the dead and the everyday appear to have long vanished. Thus, the poet emphasises the current lack of vitality within contemporary western culture - a condition he likens to being

...caught in the net, in the immense nets
which spread out across each plane of being, the
multiple nets
which hamper at each step of the ladders as the angels
and the demons
and men
go up and down. (206).

The immediate context of the poem centres upon the living room of his mother who, despite being dead "returns to the house once a week, and with her / the throng of the unknown young who center on her / as much in death / as other like suited and dressed people did in life" (206). The past returns here, though in a dynamic manner; yet the images suggests not so much the encroachment of death upon the living as death's interminable failure to escape its encasement within a static life. Even the dead are not free, Olson seems to suggest. A mutual psychological paralysis i.e., an "immense net," exists between past and present states of being. So inclusive is this entrapment that any existential distinction between the two states has long since eroded. Olson's dead mother appears "as

alive as ever she was," which is to say, "asleep." The state surrounding these characters is nothing short of a form of "death in life," a dying where the victims are condemned "never to die." The protagonist, presumably Olson, wants to awaken his mother with her bizarre entourage of the dead, for to do so would be free them to die finally and permanently, to allow them to return not to these unfinished moments of their past lives, but to a more natural transitional state where transformation is still possible.

In a paradoxical twist on this theme of awakening, it is not life that Olson seeks to preserve, but death.

The vent! You must have the vent,
or you shall die, Which means
never to die, the ghastliness

of going, and forever
coming back, returning
to the instants which were not lived

O mother, this I could not have done,
I could not have lived what you didn't
I am myself netted in my own being

I want to die. I want to make that instant, too,
Perfect (209)

Death, expressed as such, conveys Olson's peculiar historical imperative, his desire to evoke a past still alive, i.e., highly engaged with the present. Olson asks for a death, in other words, evocative of a particular purity, a death that is regenerative, even fertile as opposed to merely unfinished.

Likewise in "The Distances" death also appears as a unique source of reformation, one slightly erotic.

Death is a loving matter, then, a horror
 we cannot bide, and avoid
by greedy life

 we think all living things are precious
 — pygmalions. (221).

Olson goes on to describe in this work the necrophiliac coupling of a German inventor and dead Cuban girl in Key West. In the poem such a gothic image is meant to evoke on one level a profound fidelity between two lovers, one able to transcend both the spatial and temporal distances associated with physical death. Here then is "a special view of death." The metaphysical holism informing Olson's vision initiates in his poetry a new, interdependent relationship between states of decay and states of birth, between death and life. Death signals a moment of intense transformation, an instance of change. To search for decay, therefore, is to seek the very essence of existence. Not only is death a "loving matter," i.e., an affair of love, in "The Distances," but death can even be interpreted as a pretext for loving matter. If such a philosophy inevitably inspires a bizarre necrophiliac sensibility, its perverse character derives primarily from the West's traditional demonisation of all natural processes of loss. Once again, the act freeing death from life, of re-inscribing decay with a cultural significance

all its own appears as a central motif in Olson's poetics. Olson loves matter; the ethics of authenticity, however, demands of such passion the wilful negation of any permanent identity being ascribed to this matter. There can be no compromise, or, rather, all is compromise. The metaphysical presupposition of the concrete real implies first its continuous destruction. To reason with matter is to witness and, in Olson's case, possibly celebrate its inevitable decay.

Death is also a prominent feature in Whitehead's categorical speculations. In repudiating the abstract, Whitehead, in fact, reforms most principles of objectivity, emphasising an essential metaphysical coherence between one's faculty of reason and one's ability to perceive. As Whitehead notes,

All modern philosophy hinges round the difficulty of describing the world in terms of subject and predicate, substance and quality, particular and universal. The result always does violence to that immediate experience which we express in our actions, our hopes, our sympathies, our purposes, and which we enjoy in spite of our lack of phrases for its verbal analysis. We find ourselves in a buzzing world, amid a democracy of fellow creatures...
(*Process and Reality* 24).

In an attempt to capture or at least suggest the "buzz" of this world, Whitehead also finds it necessary to address subjectivity in terms of the more primitive elements of human experience,

particularly the experience of existing within nature. "But the body," he writes, "is part of the external world, continuous with it. In fact, it is just as much a part of nature as anything else there — a river, or a mountain, or a cloud. Also, if we are fussily exact, we cannot define where a body begins and where external nature ends (*Modes of Thought* 21). The natural body, thus, operates in Whitehead's method, as the primary departure point for all speculation. Subsequently, one's perception of the concrete real tends to emphasise these so-called processes of nature, including, of course, movements of decay and generation. For Whitehead, metaphysics originates solely within occasions of experience. In the continuity of matter, in the ongoing dispersal and reconstruction of all objects in nature lies the basic principles of identity within the universe. The theoretical framework constituted by such movements and their perception refers fundamentally to the transfer of physical energy, for example, processes of entropy and empowerment. In Whitehead's words, the structure of experience "can be otherwise stated as the vector-structure of nature. Or otherwise, it can be conceived as the doctrine of the immanence of the past energising in the present" (*Adventures of Ideas* 88). Once again, as with Olson's poetics, the past supplies the observer with the very fundamentals of being. The fact that an object perpetually evokes some form of temporal

shift, that no state of matter is permanent, defines for Whitehead a unique coherence in itself.

Far from indicating the loss of a stable identity, the continuous dispersal or breaking apart of forms exemplifies here a higher, more organic truth. Whitehead qualifies this particular unity as "self-creation," i.e., a form of concrescence in which past and present interpretations of an object mingle to produce a more or less unitary set of determinations of cause and effect. The subject must actively integrate, in other words, a plethora of physical and conceptual feelings about a certain object, and this process of interaction and reflection, allows knowledge to self-create itself. No identity is ever secure, accordingly, as different occasions of determination vary widely in intensity and completion. The process of concrescence in this particular epistemology is invariably fluid. "What does not change / is the will to change."

Given this sense of a constantly shifting epistemology of the present, it is not surprising that the past as an "immanent" source of energy occupies as vital a place in Whitehead's philosophy as in Olson's poetry. Only once "being" identifies itself as a form of "becoming, once the living immediacy of the present "perishes" into the past can actual entities operate as "objects" per se. The past, thus, remains the sole receptacle of

all objectivity; history, the single most important record of concrescence.

A core homology between the work of Olson and that of Whitehead might be unidentified, thus, as a more or less ongoing pre-occupation with the process of decay or passing. Both projective verse and Whitehead's Organic philosophy circumscribe a specific metaphysics of decline or entropy. Whitehead writes,

...there is not any perfect attainment of an ideal order whereby the indefinite endurance of a society is secured... Thus a system of "laws of determining reproduction in some portion of the universe gradually rises into dominance it has its stage of endurance, and passes out of existence with the decay of the society form which it emanates. (*Process and Reality* 91).

It is the act or process of decay, signifying as it does the ultimate relativity of identity, that guarantees value — not an object's endurance. Subsequently, Whitehead elaborates his ontology often with various images of dissipation or breakage. The "intensity" in Whitehead's words, "of a subject's experience and satisfaction often derives directly from the innately fragile and vulnerable nature all living processes share. Hence, the value of history within epistemology: as Olson notes,

I see history as the one way to restore the familiar to us — to stop treating us cheap: Man is forever estranged to the degree that his stance toward reality disengages him from the familiar. And it has been the immense task of the last century and a half

to get man back to what he knows. (*Special View* 29)

The movement of reform as described by Olson here tends to be oriented, thus, towards the past. It is a re-capturing of sorts, a retrieval of lost ground. History in this framework remains an engaging testament to the fragile relativism and changeability of any given moment of experience as well as the potential of that moment to operate and, in many ways, constantly affect the present. In history, reality as process remains concretely apparent.

-Conclusion-

Many of Whitehead's philosophical responses to history, especially his concept of the past as "immanent energy," clearly appealed to Olson's sensibility, and as other poets testify, the period in which he wrote *A Special View of History* found him heavily occupied with *Process and Reality*. It is worth recalling however, that no one work or writing singularly guided his poetics at Black Mountain, especially during the college's final years. In fact, as we've seen, many of his poetic objectives are consistent with the art of Black Mountain and ecological thought in general. The conceptual use of chance procedures in the work of John Cage and Merce Cunningham, for example, easily complements Olson's own interest in natural, unstructured processes. As well the persistent metaphysical holism in Olson's

poetics consistently paralleled the work of writers like Buckminster Fuller. A wider sense of aesthetic harmony in almost every activity performed at Black Mountain appears throughout Fielding Dawson's memoir.

We were so important to each other we dared not say so. *Dared* not! There were strange developments, changes, maybe transitions of the most intense and sustained complexities day and night in cycles where things got so intricate we could play music on it.... So many deep and vivid connections and bonds and difficult dizzying prospects... (Dawson 133)

Thus, as Olson maintains in *A Special View of History*, the poet participates within, rather than outside, a new cultural vision. Dawson situates Olson's work, as he does his own, within a particular tradition or aesthetic spirit. "Olson," he writes, "caught a particular freshness. [Philip] Guston, too. In the background, way back there, was a desire to in part define through the establishing of its foundation and structure what had gone on and in a natural followthrough, tear it apart and rearrange it. Part of that effort is the re-arrangement of narrative, by way of a single voice being in truth multiple..." (Dawson 151). The key tropes that Dawson associates with the aesthetics of Black Mountain College are multiplicity, disjunction and flux. To work within the artistic network of Black Mountain was to engage in constant re-arrangement and multiple perspectives in which aesthetically valuable

experiments constantly questioned established structures and forms. The very concept of a single voice was anathema to the college's pedagogy.

Hence Olson's poetics strongly influenced many of his students; Dawson was one of his earliest admirers. In Dawson's words:

In June of 1949 Albers and the classical figures behind Black Mountain left. I never met them. I arrived a month later, in July. Buckminster Fuller was there with his group from Chicago. I liked Fuller. I had never met anyone like him. Or any one like Charley....

So going into the Fall of 1949, to me it was Charley's school.... He envisioned a commitment of his own making - his creative ego - it paid off immediately: he got a second Guggenheim for research in Yucatan, and like a man liberated, Charley wrote, and talked - he wrote with such intensity his ideas - if he thought it, it appeared on paper. (Dawson 210-11)

Both Olson's work and his demeanour captured the essential aesthetics of the college, particularly after 1949. Yet, even Olson could never be said to be the sole creative source behind the school. His distinctive approach to art and writing would always have important antecedents in the work of Buckminster Fuller, Franz Kline, and of course, Cage and Cunningham. When Dawson isolates in Olson's aesthetics a formal predilection for disjunction, multiple perspectives and a more inclusive use of

space, he is also describing a core set of strategies general to the school itself. The writers and artists who continued participating in Black Mountain's summer programme shared with each other an interest in re-defining or re-shaping the conventional institutional approach to visual art and creative writing disciplines. Like Olson, Fuller and Kline, too, sought to break apart and re-order traditional pedagogies in both the humanities and the sciences. Yet, not only was there a common will towards opposition among the Black Mountain community; what differentiated this particular counterculture from previous oppositional movements was their distinct association of their work with the emergence of a new social formation or sensibility. Accordingly, Black Mountain artists did not envision their work as an actual source of revolutionary cultural change. No new political order was forthcoming from the hills of North Carolina. When Dawson credits the school with breaking time open and "killing history," he outlines a pedagogy that repudiated the formal construction of any new aesthetic framework. To work at Black Mountain was to avoid explicit doctrine in all disciplines. Olson routinely taught his students not to abstract from their readings; at the same time, the very environment in which they lived and studied also emphasised the intellectual and spiritual dangers of possessing too fixed an aesthetic vision.

At Black Mountain, decay held a special significance; it permeated the college landscape much as it remained central in the poetry Olson composed there. The intellectual atmosphere Dawson and most other students valued also seemed rooted in a logic of disintegration or disjunction rather than the institutional qualities of the college as a place of education or accreditation. In fact, only where the college's administration functions began to break down did any higher sense of structure emerge. The aspect of the college Dawson enjoyed most, he says, was its coarseness: "and on those long, dull nights with no money, nothing to drink, no food, it was as if the earth rose up, folded us down into itself, and we shed our manners, our frills, and culture, and became...different" (Dawson 112). In this process of "shedding," of fragmenting, there lay an important transformation. Meaning was to be found beneath structure, below culture, inside the earth where an ethics of authenticity might finally be accessed. Such was the general atmosphere of the college at this time. In Duberman's words,

By late 1952, Olson had converted Black Mountain into the "arts center" Albers had argued for during the 1948-49 upheaval. But with a difference: much more emphasis on the literary than the visual arts, and an ever more dishevelled physical plant; a place distinctive, in other words, no tin endowment, of experience, a frontier society, sometimes raucous and raw, isolated

and self-conscious, bold in its refusal to assume any reality it hadn't tested – and therefore bold in inventing forms, both in lifestyle and art, to contain the experiential facts that supplanted tradition's agreed-upon definitions. (112-13)

Here, within this "more dishevelled" college, there continued to gather a specific contingent of writers and visual artists, all of them equally intrigued with the aesthetic possibilities of breaking up traditional forms and exposing what substance might lie beneath their common surface.

In ecological theory, this interest in the aesthetic, in moving beyond the veneer of form with what they considered to be the "rawness" of experience had begun to influence a variety of disciplines within the humanities, including philosophy and anthropology. Black Mountain, more than any other institution, however, made use of this anti-establishment stance in determining its core pedagogical principles. The college liberally and relentlessly drew upon the new ecological theory informing so many practices of the time. Like an ongoing banquet or feast, the college remained an especial source of attraction. Here a final escape from institutional hierarchies seemed firmly at hand. "Black Mountain was freedom," Dawson notes, "And within that freedom I and others developed a discipline in drawing and writing that involved listening, and seen with such continuous intensity it became my way of life.... The pure, open space we

lived every day, was a lot like paradise: not involved in the accepted world, the understood geopolitical sense of reality" (Dawson 7).

Alternate to any conventional "geopolitical sense of reality," i.e., an increasingly bi-polarised world divided into two warring ideological spheres of influence, there developed at Black Mountain a unique blend of artistic experiment, intellectual exploration and democratic community. The pedagogy and arts practices celebrated by writers like Dawson emphasised innovation and spontaneous individual pursuit over structure and protocol. Likewise, Olson imagined poetic forms representative of the inherent disjunction, randomness and relativism of human experience. Process signalled here both the beginning and end of all art practices at Black Mountain, preserving, Olson reasoned, an authentic vision of human interaction in stark contrast to the oppressive frameworks of ideology.

Olson learned from thinkers like Whitehead that a truly accurate sense of social relations centred upon movement itself or shifts in energy over a specific duration. Robert Duncan wrote, "referred to its source in the act, the intellect actually manifest as energy...is the measure [of a poem's power]" ("Notes on Poetics Regarding Olson's Maximus," FC 68-9). As I indicated in Chapter One, Duncan also compared projective verse to abstract expressionist gesture painting on this basis -

pointing out "the difference between energy referred to (seen) as in the Vorticist and Futurist work...and energy embodied in the painting (felt), which is now muscular as well as visual, contained as well as apparent: [in] the work of Hofmann, Pollock, Kline..." ("Notes on Poetics Regarding Olson's Maximus,")
FC 71.

Whitehead's philosophy parallels ecological theory, especially in its emphasis on movement and relativism as an antidote to all empiricist/abstract systems of thought. Like Whitehead, both Bateson and Grossinger similarly rejected authority and embraced cultural relativism. The ecologist Atkinson encapsulates ecocentrism when he advocates relativism over the terrors of

universal rationality and dualistic, reductionist, analytic thinking... Social science, whether positivist or Marxist, as ideological adjunct to this social and political system acts as a legitimisation of instrumentalism. Its "discovery" of the function behind non-instrumental cultural manifestations represents a simple hegemonic denial of the validity of other cultures or non-instrumental cultural attributes. (210)

Ecocentrism, by contrast, is keen to acknowledge the equal value of other cultures and ideas — of "otherness." The radical relativism of Bateson thus forms a potent counter position to traditional Enlightenment reason. Once free of the intellectual confinements of the Enlightenment, Bateson argued, the West

could reconstruct society according to a more egalitarian, progressive, peaceful model.

Images of the type of society he envisioned following the inevitable disintegration of corporate industrial society appear throughout his work in the 1950s and 1960s. In *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (1972), he describes an ecological epistemology, i.e., the ecological organisation of ideas as fundamentally communal, centring upon not individual concepts, but their interaction with each other. To think ecologically, declares Bateson, is to try and situate ideas within a larger web or multiplicity of related concepts and beliefs. No idea, Bateson notes, is ever completely autonomous. Rather, ideas always derive from specific contexts, evoking meanings and nuances that cannot be separated from the multiplicity of identities surrounding them. In his words, "characteristically, the scientist confronts a complex interactive system...[when] he observes a change in the system., the scientist then explains the change by giving a name to a 'fictitious' cause located in one or another component of the interacting system" (*Steps to an Ecology of Mind* xxii). Thus Bateson describes empiricism. Ecological thought, by contrast, focuses on the interactive quality of these systems — the importance of context in determining any meaning or set of identities. Bateson called all the non-verbal or contextual aspects of communication, which

express the on-going relations of the participants, "metamessage," or "metacommunication." In his view, "there is a gulf between...metamessage and message...which is of the same nature as the gulf between a thing and the word or the sign which stands for it, or between members of a class and the name of the class. The...metamessage classifies the message, but can never meet it on equal terms" (*Steps to an Ecology of Mind* 247).

Hence, Bateson's identification of message and context, and his belief in their interdependence and essential holism also created a tension. That is, how could the integrity of phenomena within their context be preserved in writing or any media form? In other words, how could phenomena be described critically such that their natural unity was maintained? The solution, Bateson maintained, was in establishing a controlled setting where communication could be studied within a specific natural or social environment rather than a closed system of transmission and reception.

Bateson's interest in close-knit interactive communities where messages were understood holistically as part of their environment parallels much of the actual social dynamic of Black Mountain College. Dawson himself stresses the communal atmosphere of the college in his personal descriptions of his time spent there, as do the many other poets and writers who worked together and shared common poetic concerns. Creeley and

Duncan, for example, seemed interested in the potential communal aspects of countercultural art movements years before setting foot on Black Mountain College's grounds.

Creeley likely first heard of Black Mountain from his wife, Anne, when she was a student there in the mid-forties. In 1944, Creeley actually visited the campus to spend time with her, yet met few of its writers and artists. His first contact with Olson came by way of Cid Corman who had passed onto Creeley several of Olson's poems in an effort to have them published. Creeley had moved to New Hampshire and was that same year attempting to start a literary magazine of his own. The magazine failed as a project and Creeley was forced to return Olson's work, but not without the added comment: "you seem to be looking for a language" (Duberman 388). Olson was less than pleased with the evaluation, and thus began an intense correspondence between the two poets lasting two decades until Olson's death in 1970.

The professional collaboration that followed is well known and requires little commentary here, save the barest of outlines. In many ways what would later be known as the "Black Mountain School of Poetry" literally began with the correspondence between Olson and Creeley. Through the arguments and exchange of ideas that began to flow in their letters, several publishing ventures were initiated, including Creeley's own Divers Press, begun in the Canary Islands in 1952 and,

following that, *The Black Mountain Review* (1954-1957). In 1952, Creeley had not personally met Olson, although he had been formally invited to the college, and was, in fact, announced as a teacher in the official brochure for that year's summer session. Creeley chose to remain in Majorca where printing costs were significantly lower. There he produced many early Black Mountain works, including Olson's *Mayan Letters*, "In Cold Hell, in Thicket;" Paul Blackburn's *Proensa* and *The Dissolving Fabric*; Larry Eigner's *From the Sustaining Air*; and Robert Duncan's *Caesar's Gate*. The only other organ then distributing these writers in any professional manner was Cid Corman's periodical *Origin*. Creeley's press can be, in this way, considered one of two primary sources for this particular aesthetics, aligning him with the college some years before he actually joined its faculty.

Creeley did eventually take his place on the premises, moving there with his wife, Anne, and three children in 1954. At this time he became engaged in possibly the most significant venture to unify Black Mountain's divergent strains of thought into a single aesthetic, assuming editorial duties of *Black Mountain Review* in its fourth year of publishing

That a strong, inclusive aesthetics continued to operate at Black Mountain, especially over the course of its last decade, can be easily discerned in both its writing and visual art

practises. Certainly, one source of this aesthetic lay in the oppositional stance these writers and artists took towards previous high modernisms that continued to dominate the mainstream. In the visual arts, this opposition focused on the stylised, late cubisms and neo-realisms of the 1930s, while the New Criticism represented the dominant cultural movement in literature. When Olson first formally presented his conception of the *Review* to the board for funding, he defended its relevance by arguing the crucial need for a literary alternative to break "the hold of the New Criticism and give needed support to literary expression with quite different concerns" (Duberman 389). Subsequently, the first issue contained scathing reviews of work by Theodore Roethke and Dylan Thomas, questioning their popularity in a "large proportion of what passes for critical writing in America."¹¹ Black Mountain aesthetics continued thus to offer powerful invective against what writers at the college saw as a detached, institutional elitism. As Creeley described it,

We were trying to think of how a more active sense of poetry might be got, and that's the coincidence we share, or rather the coincident commitment: that each one of us felt that the then existing critical attitudes toward verse, and that the then existing possibilities for publication for general activity in poetry particularly were

¹¹ Martin Seymour-Smith, "Where is Mr. Roethke," rev. of *The Waking*, by Theodore Roethke, *Black Mountain Review* 4.1 (Spring 1954): 8.

extraordinarily narrow. We were trying in effect to think of a base, or a different base from which to move. And though we've all, each one of us, I think, come up with distinctive manners of writing...what's taken to be the case in writing is something we're given to do rather than choose to do; that the form an actual writing takes is very intimate to the circumstance and impulses of its literal time of writing;...that the modality conceived and the occasion conceived is a very similar one.¹²

This metaphysical fusion of context and medium, of form and content resembles Olson's own radical injection of material space into the medium of reproduction. Creeley cites the prominence of "Olson as a locus," while remaining equally certain of projective verse's wider, more inclusive appeal. Creeley's own intuitive sense of his spatial surroundings stretched beyond Olson's influence. Like Olson, Creeley too demanded a new, more dynamic sense of the concrete in his writing. He considered, consequently, Olson's projectivist poetics to be one expression (albeit a very important one) of a much more fundamental search for this vital coincidence between writing and place.

Robert Duncan also easily became interested in what he perceived at Black Mountain to be an intense experiment with material space, community integration and art production. His actual stay at the college was very brief, coming literally at

¹² Taped interview with Creeley conducted by Martin Duberman March 10, 1967,

the very end of its last term. Duncan arrived to teach in April 1956 and stayed through the final summer session. By Autumn of that year, Duncan was once again in San Francisco, directing his own set of workshops for the study and development of poetry, "The Poetry Centre at San Francisco State," where Olson delivered his lectures on Whitehead. By the late 1950s, the San Francisco Renaissance was at its height. Ginsberg had published *Howl* in 1955. Jack Spicer began his infamous "Poetry as Magic" group. With the Spicer group achieving local recognition, and the Beats and the jazz scene gaining more cultural notoriety across the country, the city and the Bay Area in general became an increasingly powerful draw for artists and writers seeking a countercultural poetics.

For this reason, Duncan's work provides the strongest cultural link between the Black Mountain School and the San Francisco scene of the 1950s and 60s. In his own aesthetic search for a more vital community of writers and poetic values, both Black Mountain San Francisco are at their most convergent. Each locus, though very different scenes, provided Duncan with a similar vision. In fact, since Duncan's stay at Black Mountain was so short, it seems accurate to suggest that, for all practical purposes, Duncan never left the San Francisco scene. By 1950, he had met the painter Jess Collins who would become

his life partner, providing the poet with his first source of stability in his nomadic life. As well, Jess's painting, especially his "expressionist" appeal to motion, feeling and dynamism in art, helped further define Duncan's own aesthetic interests, giving him a alternate visual or iconographic paradigm with which to express them. In an essay written especially for one of Jess's shows, Duncan explains, "So, in Jess's painting, we are led to see, permeating the world of representations that meet our eyes, the primary world of actual paint and of the painter's work in painting out of which his representations rise...The painter works not to conclude the elements of the painting, but to set them into motion, not to bind the colors but to free them" ("Iconographical Extensions: On Jess," ASP 181-82).

Continuously attentive to poems and paintings comparable to his own work, Duncan grew increasingly interested in the work that began to flow from the pages of Cid Corman's *Origin*, where he first saw Denise Levertov's poetry ("The Shifting," *Origin* 6 (1954)), and later Creeley's *Black Mountain Review* (1954). As we saw in Chapter Five, Duncan had briefly corresponded with Olson in 1948 after Duncan's visit to Pound at St. Elizabeths Hospital. The fact that they shared aesthetic concerns likely first became evident in their common interest in the older poet, yet Duncan did not really pursue much contact with Olson until

the 1950s. By then he had already considered his work to be part of the unique scene Olson was organising. He and Jess joined Creeley, Larry Eigner and Ed Dorn, among others who constituted the Black Mountain School of Poetry as it appeared in *The Black Mountain Review* between 1954 and 1956.¹³

The attraction or interest Duncan felt for writers like Pound and Olson certainly went beyond their respective poetics: "The goods of the intellect are communal; there is a virtue or power that flows from the language itself, a fountain of man's meanings, and the poet seeking the help of this source awakens first to the guidance of the meanings and dreams that all who have ever stored the honey of the invisible in the hive have prepared" (*HD* 2.10.60 64). Somehow the work at Black Mountain satisfied the metaphysical requirements of language Duncan pursued in his own poetics. His creative inspiration lay grounded not in "synthesis but a mêlée; violence,...I make poetry as other men make war or make love or make states or revolutions: to exercise my facilities at large" ("Pages from a Notebook," *ASP* 19). As he wrote in his essay, "Ideas of the Meaning of Form," "I can have no recourse to taste. The work of Denise Levertov or Robert Creeley or Larry Eigner belongs not to my appreciation but to my immediate concerns in living. That I

¹³ Olson reportedly considered Duncan poetry an important precedent for his own work. In Faas's biography, Duncan describes his poetics in the 1950s as

might 'like' or 'dislike' a poem of Zukofsky's or Charles Olson's means nothing where I turn to their work as evidence of the real.... Taste can be imposed, but love and knowledge are conditions that life imposes upon us if we would come into her melodies." (ASP 36).

Olson's poetics held a strong influence over Duncan's own work, yet, given the latter poet's sensibility, it seems that he was in fact psychologically and emotionally predisposed to respond favourable to Olson's vision. As he himself noted, his sense of meaning had always been "communal." Thus, Duncan continued to seek out artistic value in larger networks and scenes of shared perspective. To write poetry, he declared, was not so much an act of creation as one of "derivation," as what truth a poem might convey inevitably had its source in some wider "community of meaning."

Duncan's motivation to travel and participate in Black Mountain was, in many ways, ecocentric. He found and subsequently responded to a strong communal, anti-institutional dynamic in the work done at Black Mountain. At times, Duncan even considered himself and his contemporaries to be engaged in a single project: "It had been awfully important to me to feel that Denise Levertov and Robert Creeley and Charles Olson and

"an intermediate between [the new poetry of Olson and Creeley] and the poetry of the generation of the masters" (280).

myself were a kind of movement and that they took care of a lot of areas that I even by temperament wouldn't be likely to cover..." This communal interpretation of Black Mountain Poetry, moreover, was perfectly commensurate with the school's own vision of itself. That a dynamic, interactive sense of poetics informed the work of Black Mountain is also apparent in Olson's poetics. In his "Introduction to Robert Creeley" (1951), Olson attributes the value of Creeley's writing to its confrontational directness — the manner in which it engages an audience. He writes,

For his presence is the energy. And the instant? That, too, is he, given such methodology. For his urgency, his confrontation is "time," which is, when he makes it, ours, the now He is time, he is now, the force.

Which is multitude. It is human phenomenology which is re-inherited, allowed in, once plot is kissed out. (CP 284)

Thus, when Olson invokes the ideas of process or dynamic movement in his work, one might easily intuit Duncan's own sense of poetry as an especial, ongoing activity in which the writer is called to participate rather than to order. In other words, Olson's vision of the concrete as a form of energy is parallel to what Duncan himself described as "an instinct for words" ("Pages from a Notebook," ASP 19). For Duncan, "natural mystery" operated within and beneath language, the awareness of which constituted the poet's primary role: "We do not understand all

that we render up to understanding" ("Pages from a Notebook," ASP 19).

Consequently, in the early 1950s, four years before Duncan actually joined the college, a similar dynamism seems present in both his and Olson's verse, as can be seen in "Imagining in Writing" (1952).

So we went up to the bedroom from all daily
hungers and pleasures to enter the dream,
to enter together we said entwined as in
death, as in love, in unknowing otherness
we anticipated, stretcht out each his own
eachness upon his own frame without space
or time stretching, changing and rechanging
form, deformed, enormities of pitiful
sleep. (SP 31)

Almost immediately one finds here an attitude to place similar to Olson's. The erotic nature of the scene Duncan describes evokes more than shared emotions between two lovers, it involves a distinct transcendence of the immediate environment into a more transient, more immediate sense of space-time. The movement of the two lovers literally "stretches" into an essential, all-consuming presence, away from the "hungers" of the everyday, towards a distinct "otherness." Also, similar to Olson, this metaphysics seems to hinge upon states of decay. An eroticised awareness of death informs Duncan's poetry as much as it does proprioception in general. Images of severe rupture and violent breakage dominate "Imagining in Writing.."

The violence of a face cut open bleeding.

The violation of a form in a chin receding.
The violin of a figure
disfigured for music, a crude
visual reminder, crackt, warpt,
bloated.
An obscenity. A disembowelling.
(SP 31)

Using alliteration, Duncan derives his disfigured violin music from images of violence and violation. Forms rendered split and divided appear often to be on the verge of dissipating completely. What essential energy or movement Duncan hopes to convey in this work depends, it would seem, chiefly upon a telos of destruction.

Again, as with Olson, the sense of order we find in Duncan most explicitly resembles that which is outlined in Whitehead's philosophy, where nature is described as being "never complete" (*Process and Reality* 340). Duncan consequently developed an evolutionary theory of art: "In writing I came to be concerned not with poems in themselves, but with the life of poems as part of the evolving and continuing work of poetry. I could never complete — a poetry that had begun long before I was born and that extended beyond my own work in it.... My search for a poetry that was not to come to a conclusion, a mankind that was in process not in progress...leads me on to a view of language, world and order, as being in process, as immediate happening, evolving and perishing, without any final goal — the goal being in the present moment alone" ("Man's Fulfillment in Order and Strife,"

FC 113-14). Similar to Whitehead, rather than dispute the various elements of discord one might encounter within everyday experience Duncan seeks to harmonise them. Once again, what might at first appear in his poetry as pure images of deconstruction are simultaneously sources of ultimate unity and meaning. In *Process and Reality*, Whitehead writes that a literature that will not admit chaos cannot achieve such a harmony: "the right chaos, and the right vagueness, are jointly required for any effective harmony" (*Process and Reality* 181). Far from signifying failure or even a temporary lack of meaning, violations of order carry their own especial significance. The principles behind Duncan's poetry continued to prioritise movement and dynamism above all other qualities. Objects and actualities described in his work remain perpetually on the point of dissipating, continuously threatening to transform before the reader's eyes.

Certainly Whitehead's cosmology underscores Duncan's poetics as well as it helps place Olson's work in the mid-1950s. Whitehead's sense of his own identity derives from his interaction with his context, entities being but cells within larger, natural orders. In breakages and signs of limitation, therefore, can be glimpsed important insights into an ultimate design, and this is precisely what Duncan's poetics often seeks to reveal. Yet Duncan was not well read in Whitehead's

metaphysics before he actually worked with Olson at Black Mountain. His ongoing struggle into the mid-1950s to avoid what he considered to be abstract, readymade solutions in his art derived from his own sceptical sensibility. Confronted, as many poets of his generation were, with an earlier modernist vision of poetry as finished, purposefully contrived creations, Duncan continued to pursue his own intuitive set of responses. Even before they met, Duncan shared with Olson a prominent concern for the elements of discord endemic to his cultural surroundings. Where earlier modernists like Pound and Eliot attempted to resolve both formally and conceptually the cultural fragments in their poems into larger mythic histories, Duncan accepted discord as a necessary condition for aesthetic harmony. Mistakes and limits once considered symptoms of aesthetic failure, were tolerated, even encouraged, by Duncan as signs of a greater metaphysical will or primordial pattern. Led by a more immanent and immediate sense of a universal dynamism informing all cognition, Duncan had no reason to reject or avoid disjunction in his poetry. As we saw in Chapter Five, constant movement from city to city and from poetry scene to poetry scene marked Duncan's early years as a poet. No single group of intellectuals, cultural vision or urban location was ultimately satisfying to him. In his writing, this restlessness manifested itself in the highly fragmented and disjunctive structure of his

poetry as well as in his interest in revision. As Duncan reflected on his many drafts of *The H.D. Book*,

My revisions are my new works, each a poem a revision of what has gone before. In-sight. Re-vision.

I have learned to mistrust my judgement upon what I have done. Too often what I thought inadequate proved later richer than I knew; what I thought slavishly derivative proved to be "mine." ("Pages From A Notebook," ASP 13)

Not even his own work, as "open" and inconclusive as it formally seemed, could be deemed actually finished. To even posit a final version of any one poem, in fact, was anathema to his sensibility. Which is to say that Duncan demonstrated, in his own way, a particular fidelity to his poetic principles, believing wholly that in chaos and incompleteness lay a profound truth.

Accordingly, Duncan's vision can be aligned with Whitehead's metaphysics. He himself would later categorise his work as an "organic art."¹⁴ Yet as his own preference for constant interaction with his context and with other poets implied, no single source of inspiration ever completely organised or guided his work. Duncan was especially receptive to other, separate aesthetic practices and ideas. While the derivative quality of his work certainly invites comparisons with a large number of other cultural developments, it is

¹⁴ Robert Duncan, "HD Day-Book 6," *Southern Review* 21.1 (January 1985): 27.

critically inaccurate to limit these influences to any one set of aesthetic movements. Duncan may have produced work that was symptomatic of Whitehead's philosophy, but he did not consciously seek out specific sources any more than he considered himself to be a student of Pound's. Duncan's personal understanding of "organic art" signified a general sense of the primordial more than any theoretical alignment with Whitehead. Organic art, he argued, "rises from a deep belief in the universe as a medium of forms, in man's quest as a spiritual evolution. In contrast, conventional art, with its conviction that form means adherence to an imposed order where metric and rhyme are means of conformation, rises from a belief that man by artifice must win his forms...against his nature..."¹⁵ If Whitehead's philosophy of organicism comprises the most succinct summary of Duncan's work, it is more a function of the discipline of philosophy in which Whitehead wrote than any direct theoretical connection. Likewise, for Olson, Whitehead provided an important philosophical basis upon which he could more fully develop his poetics; yet both poets considered the philosopher to be one source of influence, albeit a significant one, among many.

This fairly generic appreciation of Whitehead inspired, at times, a loose interpretation of his highly complex metaphysics.

¹⁵ Duncan, "HD Day-Book 6," 27.

Duncan's derivative vision was never interested in performing a rigorous study of the philosopher. Rather, Whitehead, like most other sources of inspiration, lent himself to a more intuitive approach to knowledge, knowledge as fragments of a much larger, unfinished cosmic vision.

Likewise, Black Mountain exemplified for Duncan not only an especial source of creativity from which he, himself, might develop, but a network of co-visionaries deliberately setting out towards similar poetic ends. As he noted to Ekbert Faas, Olson did not so much serve as a mentor as he did a literary link (Faas 60). In his emphasis on links between writers, Duncan also shows us how fissures can be generative rather than destructive. To obtain universal meaning in a poem, a writer could not be restricted to his or her efforts alone. Emphasising the very idea of poetry as process, Duncan continued to envision all his creative work as a type of collective enterprise – an active, ongoing engagement with both his surroundings and his friendships.

Hence, the nomadic, restless quality of Duncan's work and life did not signify indecision so much as it did an increasingly centred vision of place and contacts. Duncan's holistic sense of his own work (and of poetry in general) allowed him to interact with almost any environment; in fact, such connections were vital to his concept of the creative

process. Inspiration, he argued, would continue with or without him, regardless of where he might physically be at any given moment: "There is trickery in the very nature of creation itself; innovation can only come from what we do not know" ("The Truth and Life of Myth," FC 53). Duncan was never out of his element, appropriating from wherever he felt some sense of attachment, no matter how vague this connection might at first seem.

The resulting texts and sense experiences that constitute Duncan's approach to art tend to appear, for this reason, as homologous texts, each one supplementing the other while providing an important source of feedback. A shared sensibility so informed the writing and thought of poets like Duncan and Olson that an almost unitary language can be seen flowing between their texts. Key terms in this language remain easily identifiable, based, as they are, upon a dynamic of flux, process and integration.

For the most part, this metaphysics constitutes the core principles of ecology as defined by a large number of cultural and sociological fields in the 1950s. Rejecting Western Enlightenment's traditional ontological isolation of the human subject from its environment, the ecological sensibility emphasised complete integration between all living organisms. As William Leiss, a prominent ecological thinker in the early

postwar period, noted, "the employment of technological rationality in the extreme forms of social conflict in the twentieth century — in weapons of mass destruction, techniques for the control of human behaviour, and so forth — precipitates a crisis of rationality itself; the existence of this crisis necessitates a critique of reason that attempts to discover (and thus to aid in overcoming the tendencies uniting reason with irrationalism and terror" (*The Domination of Nature* 146). From an ecocentric perspective, Homo Sapiens no longer lies at the centre of all things. An ecocentrist understands the human species as part of a natural community, a society that includes the entire organic environment surrounding it. Offering a general critique of human reason as an innately violent and oppressive system of control, ecocentrism reconfigured the pursuit of knowledge as a set of ever-shifting relations with the point of human observation functioning as one more variable among others.

The political origins informing this shift in epistemology, as I've suggested, seem readily apparent. Writers as diverse in interests as Gregory Bateson, Charles Olson and Dwight Macdonald all cite the ideological failure of traditional empiricism to bring about a better, more meaningful society. It is inaccurate, however, to attribute the ecocentric position solely to crises in technology and political violence of the 20th century, as

significant as these factors may be. Critiques of empiricism, especially in the context of unchecked industrialisation and the political misuse of technology, Roderick Nash reminds us, have been a consistent component within romantic philosophies of wilderness for at least two centuries. The idea of wilderness as a non-anthropocentric perspective on nature presupposed many core concepts of ecocentrism, including the theory of nature as a better source of value than human culture. In *Wilderness and the American Mind*, Nash argues that the concept of wilderness has endured in American philosophy from Thoreau to postwar sociology, political theory and aesthetics.

Given its anti-empiricism and critique of ideology, the poetics of Olson and Duncan also involves several core ideas of wilderness philosophy. Duncan's prioritisation of intuition and pluralism in his poetry effectively confronts earlier tendencies in American writing towards absolutism. In Duncan's work, as in ecological theory, there appears a strong moral imperative to de-value abstract thinking and the Cartesian ego. As well, like his fellow writers at Black Mountain, Duncan remained profoundly sceptical of art's ideological functions. Political objectives in poetry, in Duncan's view, were anathema to aesthetics. The space of meaning that both Duncan and Olson hoped to access in their respective works lay far beyond either the goals of politics or individual agency. For Duncan this sense of

aesthetics invited a highly ludic approach to language. He writes, "[t]he poet is not only a maker in the sense of the maker of the poem, but he makes up his mind, he makes up a world within a world, a setting of elements into play, that carries over into a maturity the make-believe, where, too, certain misunderstandings and mistakes led not to disaster but to fruitful pastures" ("The Truth and Life of Myth," FC 34). The emphasis here remains upon collage, word play and integration as opposed to definition. No position or statement, therefore, is meant to convey a final, fixed evaluation, regardless of how powerfully or certain the poet himself might feel.

Such a metaphysics, Duncan, and Black Mountain in general, considered to be ultimately more progressive than any specific social doctrine. As Whitehead argued with respect to his own cosmology, "God's role is not the combat of productive force with productive force of destructive force with destructive force. It lies in the patient operation of the overpowering rationalism of this conceptual harmonisation. He does not create the world, he saves it; or more accurately, his poet of the world, he saves it; or more accurately, he his poet of the world, with tender patience leading it by his vision of truth, beauty, and goodness" (*Process and Reality* 408). Whitehead's idealism invokes, as we've seen, an immanent discourse of value that by almost every aspect lies completely outside the

political, cultural and economic spheres of the everyday. With regard to hegemony, this discourse, accordingly, offered withdrawal as opposed to open contestation. It sought consensus where previous sub-altern positions sought conflict. A profoundly sublimated sense of metaphysical monism, ecology countered political disenfranchisement with the will to harmonise rather than rebel.

Ecological theory helped initiate an effective symbolic consensus able to integrate not only various previously unrelated cultural movements (like anthropology and poetry) with each other but such movements with the state apparatus as well. The underlying focus on process and dynamism apparent in these disciplines fostered, thus, an orthodoxy of its own, one that subordinated difference to a concept of mutual reinforcement. Separate texts and works became homologous expressions of a communal disposition, allowing a poet like Duncan to consider the fissures and gaps in his projects to serve as important opportunities for either himself or other writers to enlarge and develop new ideas.

In Luc Ferry 's analysis of postwar culture as "the new ecological order," the discourse of ecology has continued to expand in influence since the end of World War II (xvi). In tandem with the increased hostility of cold war politics and the development of newer, more potent weapons of mass destruction,

the ecological values of intuitive knowledge, communal spirit and cultural authenticity achieved an altogether revised realm of theory and practice. Various ecological theorists and sociologists like Polanyi, Bateman and Murray Bookchin, along with Olson and Duncan, were confident that they represented nothing less than a new consciousness. As Bookchin phrased the cultural objectives of this particular sensibility:

Without renouncing the gains of earlier scientific and social theories, we are obliged to develop a more rounded critical analysis of our relationship with the natural world. We must seek the foundations for a more reconstructive approach to the grave problems posed by the apparent 'contradictions' between nature and society. We can no longer afford to remain captives to the tendency of the more traditional sciences to dissect phenomena and examine their fragments. We must combine them, related them, and see them in their totality as well as their specificity.¹⁶

The complex metaphysical, hence moral quality of this discourse inspired in its theorists and practitioners an intense emotional commitment. It remains to be seen however how such a sensibility actually evolved within the arts and human sciences, providing, as it did, an increasingly homologous discourse of value for intellectuals across the US.

Recalling Gramsci's concept of symbolic or passive revolution, the growth of ecological theory as a political

ontology certainly seems to parallel what Gramsci refers to as the idealisation of philosophy: when "any conception of the world, any philosophy [becomes] a cultural movement, a 'religion,' a 'faith,' forms of practical activity or will deriving from this philosophy cannot help but reveal 'implicit theoretical premises'" (328). What in other contexts and circumstances may be identified as a fragmentary collection of unrelated ideas and opinions suddenly appear to express common purpose and values. On one level, as Gramsci notes, the implicit nature of these discourses can be usefully critiqued as a form of ideology, yet such a designation fails to convey the highly sublimated character of cultural movements as political apparatuses. "One might say 'ideology' here," Gramsci admits, "but on condition that the word is used in its highest sense of a conception of the world that is implicitly manifest in art, in law, in economic activity and in all manifestations of individual and collective life" (328). Indeed, ecology continues to make claims to high moral purpose. As well, the interdisciplinary quality of Olson's projective verse and Duncan's "derivative" poetics certainly indicates a level of idealism beyond the traditional scope of politics and ideology.

¹⁶ Murray Bookchin, "The Concept of Social Ecology," *CoEvolution Quarterly* (Winter 1981): 16.

In Gramsci's view, the war of position operates primarily at a cultural level. Consequently, the problem of preserving within the modern state "the ideological unity of the entire social bloc" involves forms of political coercion that effect human will more wholly than previous appeals to class and economic unity.

As we have seen in the work of Duncan and Olson, not to mention the socio-anthropologies of Polanyi and Bateson and the philosophy of Whitehead, the ecological sensibility of postwar thought produced a significant number of immanentist philosophies, each one based upon a form of phenomenal dynamism. Where modernist revisionary thought produced intellectual conflicts over class and political disenfranchisement, postmodern, ecocentric writing emphasised a new, "dynamic" interest in the everyday and the problems of authentically capturing it. To criticise conventional bourgeois art and thought in an ecologically enlightened manner, would be to emphasise each discipline's respective failure to transcend its own anthropomorphic conceits. The major problem behind Pound's aggressive poetics, according to Olson, resulted from his egotism — the same fallacy that reconfigured the human sciences into faulty abstractions of one culture's perspectives into universal truths. Rather than dismiss all claim to metaphysical knowledge, however, the political ontology informing these

criticisms merely substituted one universalism with another. The "ecocentric" quest within Olson's and Duncan's work for the authentic appear, by contrast, uniquely tolerant of multiple perspectives within culture as well as the ongoing changes a society undergoes in time.

The concept of hegemony or the symbolic constitution of power played an important role both in Olson's poetics and in his teaching at Black Mountain. From the first day of his rectorship to the school's closing six years later, the poet worked diligently at dismantling what strands of ideology and institutional bias he felt still haunted American art, education and thought. During the final years of the college, the ongoing drive for intellectual autonomy, among its teachers and students culminated in one of the most fascinating projects of American counterculture: the non-institutional institution. Yet by 1956, even this contradiction would eventually play itself out according to the cultural logic of ecocentrism. Olson's final act of dismantlement, it can be argued, was of the college itself — a move of destruction not entirely inconsistent with Olson's poetics of "process." The fundamental flow or process of the Black Mountain community, as historians like Duberman note, was in motion. Artists and writers were continuously arriving and vanishing; few faculty tenures seemed even remotely fixed or permanent. So, faced with the rising costs of maintaining an

autonomous post-secondary college, Olson began systematically selling off portions of the college almost from the beginning of his appointment. Likewise, Olson's poetry remained firmly tied to the idea of decay or decline. In order to survive, Black Mountain was obliged to consume itself. Yet this dualistic/interdependent movement of decline and regeneration did not imply intellectual failure for the community. Opposed from its beginning to all forms of institutional hierarchy, the Summer Institute ended in a strangely fitting manner. Even Duberman's account of its passing emphasises the natural, almost rhythmic quality of this particular period of development.

During its last two years, in fact, Black Mountain may well have been more an informal learning environment than a formal community. That is, Black Mountain no longer had much in the way of community organization, government, ritual, even co-operation; each person sought his path, did his work, turned to others as resources when in need of comfort, guidance, association; met collectively when some decision of moment - like Forbes's foreclosure - threatened them all. Indeed, the lack of formal organization was probably one of the aids to learning. Neither institutional structures, nor barriers of age and "position" stood in the way of continuous dialogue. (407)

In Duberman's view, the college's dismantlement became vaguely suggestive of its unique authenticity as a place of learning and experience. Bound in ways that encompassed a much wider sphere

of experience of shared values than could be contained within the hills of North Carolina.

Both Olson and Duncan strove for dynamism in their poetry; and such a precept seemed to demand continuous movement. For Duncan, this meant a return to San Francisco and the various poetry projects he had temporarily left behind. Olson returned to the site of his own "origins," the family home in Gloucester, Massachusetts, to develop further his epic of "Maximus."

This neo-romantic, anti-modernist sense of necessary dispersal strongly echoes not just the anti-institutional sensibility of the Black Mountain community, but the wider ecological vision of much contemporaneous intellectual practice. Similar to Olson's poetics, the primary focus of ecological theory was process itself and that implied an area of studies that stretched beyond the confines of any one discipline. As a political ontology, the ecocentric sensibility of the postwar American intelligentsia did not need an explicit institutional framework from which to organise its criticism. A highly intuitive sense of belonging continued to inform much of the community's interaction, regardless of its professional affiliations. Within the post-modernist, ecocentric sensibility, potential areas of social conflict did not signify failure, but rather new opportunities for community or cultural "feed-back." Argument and friction among community members fuelled growth

instead of rupture. Movements of accumulation and privation were regarded equally as natural symptoms of "change." The search for a common language necessitated such symmetry within one's writing, as older ideas of progress gave way to a newer vision of process.

Abbreviations

Works by Robert Duncan

- ASP *A Selected Prose*. Ed. Robert J. Bertholf, New York: New Directions, 1995.
- FC *Fictive Certainties: Essays by Robert Duncan*. New York: New Directions, 1985.
- SP *Selected Poems*. Ed. Robert J. Bertholf, New York: New Directions, 1993.

Works by T.S. Eliot

- SP *Selected Prose of T.S. Eliot*. Ed. Frank Kermode. New York: Harcourt, 1975.
- SW *Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism*. London: Methuen, 1932.

Works by Charles Olson

- CP *Collected Prose*. Ed. Donald Allen and Benjamin Friedlander. Berkeley: California UP, 1997.
- HU *Human Universe and Other Essays*. Ed. Donald Allen (San Francisco: Grove Press, 1965.
- SW *Selected Writings of Charles Olson*. New York: New Directions 1966.
- SP *Selected Poetry of Charles Olson*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993.

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