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Charles Olson, Antonio Damasio, and Ontic Immediacy, a Phenomenological Interpretation of poem-in-the-world

The following car example is a didactic scenario devised by cognitive scientist Antonio Damasio to illustrate what is going on within the mind—and the body it is a part of—moment by moment:

Imagine yourself crossing a street, and now picture an unexpected car driving fast in your direction. The point of view relative to the car that is coming toward you is the point of view of your body, and it can be no other. A person watching this scene from a window on the third floor of the building behind you has a different point of view: that of his or her body. The car approaches, and the position of your head and neck is altered as you orient in its direction, while your eyes move conjugately to focus on the rapidly evolving patterns formed in your retinas. A world of adjustments is in full swing, from the vestibular system, which originates in the inner ear, has to do with balance, and serves to indicate body position in space, to the machinery of the colliculi, which guides eye and head and neck movement with the help of brain-stem nuclei, to the occipital and parietal cortices, which modulate the process from high up. But this is not all. Having a car zooming toward you does cause an emotion called fear, whether you want it or not, and does change many things in the state of your organism—the gut, the heart, and the skin respond quickly, among many others. . . . Notice that I am not saying they are the means for you to *experience* organism perspective yet, which would be the same as

knowing of it. Experience or knowledge of something, in a word,
consciousness, comes later. (The Feeling of What Happens 146)

Recent developments in Damasio's field have interesting correlations with Charles Olson's poetry and his poetic. For example, Olson's "Letter 9" demonstrates his postulation that in order to live a more authentic life, one must pay attention to the body's interaction with the immediate environment. "Letter 9" is emblematic of Olson's radical localism: whatever possesses his eye-view (a plum, a bee) is enacted and thus measured by the poem-in-the-world:

1

the flowering plum
out the front door window
sends whiteness
inside my house

.....

2

it puts a man back
to find out how much
he is busy, this way,
not as his fellows are
but as flowering trees
turn several greens
(as many greens as there are greys
of their several trunks

it was the reds of buds
sent me this spring,
lighting up the valleys

as now the fruits do,
and these pages have come in,
of a white so right
the print is brown

I, dazzled

(Maximus 45-48)

Olson exposes a biological process that has been overlooked up until this point. The form's movement on the white page mirrors the content's movement all around Maximus' world and within his mind. Olson's poem is similar, too, to Damasio's car example; the interactions, both physical (outward processes) and visceral (interior processes), of the speakers are selfsame. But in the poem Olson is sensitive to the ebb and flow of individual experience and thus enacts the rapid movement in his projective poem to illustrate his idea in "Human Universe," "of the literal speed of light by which man absorbs, instant on instant, all that phenomenon presents him" (Collected Prose 161). Yet Olson's suspicions come years before the scientific proof provided by the recent inquiries of men such as Damasio and Daniel C. Dennett. In Kinds of Minds, Dennett's easy-to-read explanation provides support for Olson's theories:

Animals are not just herbivores. They are, in the nice coinage of the psychologist George Miller, *informavores*. And they get their epistemic hunger from the combination, in exquisite organization, of the specific epistemic hungers of millions of microagents, organized into dozens or hundreds or thousands of subsystems. Each of these tiny agents can be conceived of as an utterly minimal intentional system, whose life project is to ask a single question, over and over and over—"Is my message coming in NOW?" "Is my message coming in NOW?"—and springing into limited but appropriate action whenever the answer is YES. (82)

Such attention to the biological nature of ontic immediacy is also found in Olson's favorable treatment of the Mayans at the end of "Human Universe":

My assumption is, that these contemporary Maya are what they are because once there was a concept at work which kept attention so poised that (1) men were able to stay so interested in the expression and gesture of all creatures . . . It was better to be a bird, as these Maya seem to have been, they kept moving their heads so nervously to stay alive, to keep alerted to what they were surrounded by. (159-64)

Furthermore, in “Projective Verse” Olson shouts, “MOVE, INSTANTER, ON ANOTHER” to enact the human’s motional and emotional process as it happens in the individual’s immediate reality (Collected Prose 240).

In “Letter 9” Maximus mirrors the movements of the birds and Maya to enact a reality whereby an authentic discovery can be made. The enactment of a projective verse—the movement of verse in lines and stanzas across the white page—not only displays the content in terms of form (just as Olson’s shouting appears in all capitals above), but also avoids the “suck of symbol which had increased and increased since the great Greeks first promoted the idea of a transcendent world of forms” (“Human Universe,” 161). Maximus writes the moment down while it is still hot, still heated by the ontic immediacy of his body, before a form, such as a sonnet, forces the uniqueness of the particulars into a box.

In The Feeling of What Happens Damasio introduces his neuropsychological theories on how human emotion and consciousness are formed and why they are beneficial to each individual to which they belong: “For every person that you know, there is a body . . . No body, never mind. For any body, nevermore than one mind” (142-43). This apparently self-evident information is far from trivial; Damasio is reminding the reader that the mind-body team exists in a particular time and specific space. The opening car example captures two

completely different experiences and outcomes for the two beings perceiving the situation (and a third if an emotional mother was watching her child cross the street for the first time). Thus the car example highlights the importance not only of the individual and the object, but also the relationship between the two as emotion and consciousness are introduced into the process. As Damasio notes, the peculiarity is the fact that humans never come to understand the complex mechanisms that are the driving forces behind their identities, their processes of discovery, and exactly how each human feels that one is indeed aware of the fact that one is aware. But modern man is beginning to solve these mysteries using a combination of old and new scientific thought.

There are interesting correlations in Martin Heidegger's phenomenology and Damasio's work dealing with the mechanisms of consciousness. Damasio's statement, "Consciousness . . . is the unified mental pattern that brings together the object and the self" may sound mundane, but it is revolutionary in regard to contemporary religions and philosophies that posit dualisms of body and mind and thus contribute to the modern sense that men are estranged from the world. Cognitive science supports the claims of both Heidegger and Olson that re-admission of the familiar world using simple rules of the phenomenally-based senses allows a reality and union that is attainable for all individuals.

Damasio also finds that emotion plays a role in bringing together, or unifying, the individual and the object. Going further than weddings, funerals, and sunsets, findings in cognitive science show that emotions assist in the maintaining of the individual's life (51). As in the car example, the biological functions of emotion are to produce very specific reactions to situations and thus regulate the internal milieu so that specific reaction can and will happen (53). Emotions, in the form of chemical and neural responses, regulate the body

and maintain life by automatically providing behaviors that will ensure the survival of the individual. Yet emotion is not simply coded for the extremes in the individual's survival. Damasio posits that emotions are connected with every object or situation the individual experiences. His claims tend to support Olson's poetic:

Emotion is critical for the appropriate direction of attention since it provides an automated signal about the organism's past experience with given objects and thus provides a basis for assigning or withholding attention relative to a given object. Simple organisms initiate wakeful behavior by having image-making capabilities and minimal attention, as a result of which the following happens: first, processing of objects can take place; second, emotion can ensue; third, further enhancement and focusing of attention can occur, or not occur, under the direction of emotion. In organisms capable of consciousness, the above list of events still applies, but the second step would read as follows: "Emotion can ensue and become known to the individual having it."
(273)

Just like the Maya and Olson's nervously attentive birds, a phenomenological poetic mimics and measures the individual's biological functions by keeping attention poised on the objects they come in contact with. And once value is re-placed and re-shifted back to the local and locale of the body-in-situation (being-in-the-world), the abstractions and dualisms of metaphysical thinking are negated and replaced with the awareness of unity and potential joy associated with the simple process of living/being because the individual is conscious of it. Damasio ends his book: "Consciousness is valuable because it centers knowledge in the life of an individual organism" (304).

And yet, before Damasio's scientifically based postulations were Olson's instinctual beliefs based on the yardstick he had on hand: his body. Olson's friend Robert Creeley is perhaps the best suited to describe the goal of Olson's poetic/existence:

There is finally no reason to be impartial here at all. One is fighting for one's life and always was. I miss so much the ranging, particularizing, intensely conjecturing mind he had. Sans mind, no direction—just a rudderless drift . . . There are few collections of anything as powerfully engaged as are his sorties here, his impeccable propositions, his insistent engagement with what one *can* know, given attention and the heart to keep it particular. (Collected Prose xvi)

In The Special View Of History Olson tries to explicate his poetic engagements and explain his newly minted understanding of what a postmodern philosophy may encompass. He states that “MAN IS A CONTINUOUS CHANGE IN TIME,” and that this change is primarily based in the actual phenomenal occurrences of the individual's life (33). “PROCESS . . . is reality,” he concludes (42). Olson's charge is to justify his philosophical stance toward reality for his “actual willful man” (16). *Maximus* is indicative of Olson's actual willful man because he uses his body to measure the changes in time in his particular locale. Repeatedly The Maximus Poems present a body measuring, interacting, perceiving, and teaching the man who lives with it the lessons that can make life more authentic, creative, and emotional.

In the poem, “*Maximus to Gloucester, Letter 27* [withheld],” Olson again asserts his claims against the Greek metaphysical system modern man has found himself living within:

No Greek will be able

to discriminate my body.

An American

is a complex of occasions,

themselves a geometry

of spatial nature.

I have this sense,

that I am one

with my skin

(Maximus 185)

Here, as in the above Damasio passages, Olson repudiates philosophical dualism, and thus separation of mind and body. In Causal Mythology Olson again places value on the phenomenal and concrete, “*that which exists through itself is what is called meaning. . . .* The Earth, then, is conceivably a knowable, a seizable, a single, and *your* thing” (2, 5). And again Maximus enacts Olson’s theories to place value on what he can know and what is local, particular, and immediately surrounding him: “My shore, my sounds, my earth, my place” (438). But perhaps out of the context of The Maximus Poems the above line of poetry may seem vague or abstract. In numerous other places Olson’s particulars are very well situated:

Sunday, January 16, 1966

Golden life, golden light on Western Harbor
out my west window at least 35 minutes after
sunset—

and brightest (silver) nearest
me, just over the edge of
the Playground

Glow dying by 5:20
 PM
 40 minutes after sunset

light in house now almost
 reduced so I cannot see
 to write

Evening then is
 at the most 40 minutes long

(485)

The title emphasizes the uniqueness and importance of the particular moment of time and the exact details emphasize the importance of the objects and events that happen to his body during his experiences, i.e., his knowable reality that each individual has access to. Again and again Olson reminds himself and the reader what is actually important to the body:

an actual earth of value to
 construct one, from rhythm to
 image, and image is knowing, and
 knowing, Confucius says, brings one
 to the goal: nothing is possible without
 doing it.

(584)

Here Confucius' advice is not hearsay or a covering over of discovery because the advice is for each individual to discover for itself the earth by doing. For Olson, doing is acting is constructing is enacting an earth of actual value based on the body's processes. Perhaps the most unclear line in the above poem is the "image is knowing" line. This is easily understood in terms of how Olson's poetry is similar to Heidegger's postulation of the unity of being-in-

the-world: “What happens at the skin is more like than different from what happens within. The process of image . . . cannot be understood by separation from the stuff it works on. Here again, as throughout experience, the law remains, form is not isolated from content” (*HU* 162). Olson’s “image” begins to be “known” at the skin. Again this unity of man and the world is supported by Damasio’s findings. Olson takes it a step further by transferring this unifying process to the page. Notice the bird in Olson, turning nervously to interact with the car coming at him and take it all in:

On my back the
 Harbor and over it the long arm’d shield Eastern
 point. Wherever I turn or look in whatever direction,
 and near me, on any quarter, all possible combinations of
 Creation even now early year Mars blowing
 crazy lights at night and as I write in the day light snow
 covering the water and crossing the air between me and
 the City. Love the World—and stay inside it.

Concentrate

one’s own form, holding
 every automorphism

2 Feb. 1968

(582)

Olson’s surroundings are the only ones of importance because only they are his; his process of engagement is his reality, the reality he exists in and is unified with; his attention is focused so that he is conscious of the importance of the moment within his life, his short span; and part of the reason his attention is so poised is because he lets the emotional aspect of living according to the rules of an organic body, which possesses emotions, become felt as an emotional impact: “Love the World.” “Love the World” as Olson, i.e., his body, does. In other words, as he states in his lectures in Poetry and Truth, “If I understand this thing that I am seeking, speaking, seeking to carry here, it is that efficaciousness is in matter” (58).

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