Topological Transformation in Olson's Maximus

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"I think that Olson is—a great spirit. I don't think that he is willing to be as delicate as his sensibility may be emotionally and he's extremely conscious of the Pound heritage and of saying the important utterance, which one cannot always summon up and indeed is not particularly desirable most of the time."

 O'Hara, Edward Lucie-Smith, An Interview with Frank O'Hara," 13 [1965]

"I take SPACE to be the central fact to man born in America, from Folsom Cave to now. I spell it large because it comes large here. Large, and without mercy."

        --Olson, <u>Call Me Ishmael</u>

O'Hara might easily have had Olson's opening salvo in *Call Me Ishmael* in mind here. BIG SPACE, of course, doesn't necessarily call up Big Utterance, but here in Olson it does for sure. It's a sublime moment, but the kind of thing from which one eventually might want some relief. O'Hara, of course, isn't exactly shy about the grand poetic pronouncement

himself; one way to get at his greatness as a poet is to note the zero to sixty speed with which he gets there:

> I stop for a cheeseburger at JULIETS
>
> CORNER. Giulietta Masina, wife of
>
> Federico Fellini, *e bel' attrice.*
>
> And chocolate malted. A lady in
>
> foxes on such a day puts her poodle
>
> in a cab.
>
> There are several Puerto
>
> Ricans on the avenue today, which
>
> makes it beautiful and warm. First
>
> Bunny died, then John Latouche,
>
> then Jackson Pollock. But is the
>
> earth as full as life was full, of them?
>
> And one has eaten and one walks . . .

I do this I do that chit chat turns on a dime here into elegy, space shot through with wonder (there's a poem in which Emily Dickinson, spooked by the same incommensurability, calls a grave "a wilderness of size"). One might be reminded of that topological oddity the Mobius strip: if one way to say it is that the daily and the local morph with startling speed here into the cosmic, it might be better to say that they were always already each other, two edges or surfaces that turned out to be one. It's probably not quite the point to suggest that the result is that O'Hara can get away with a lot of Important Utterances that, if more clunkily staged, might seem simply purple, but I think it's

a fact.

Something similar, I want to argue, turns out to be true of Olson. Grand and intimate scenarios morph into each other repeatedly in his work, which at its frequent best is characterized by precisely the emotional range which O'Hara claims rarely to find there. Yet in Olson, more insistently and palpably than in O'Hara, this tonal range intertwines with what we might call spatial range, in an oddly literal sense. I have in mind the sort of mobile or Mobius-strip-like space I just adduced as a plausible trope for the crucial twists in O'Hara's work; in Olson it's a pervasive preoccupation. Something like that space is a central subject, as I understand it, of Olson's wonderful short essay on Melville, ''Equal, That Is, To the Real Itself,'' which is a bit like O'Hara's great essay on Jackson Pollock: explaining in terms that feel oddly intimate the work of another artist he's galvanized by, each poet seems implicitly to be describing his own work, and the sense of the world it emerges from, as well.

I need to make a big disclaimer. Olson's essay concerns Riemann and non-Euclidian geometries, and about the only thing I can say truthfully about them is that if space indeed turns out to be elliptical, and non-parallel lines intersect not once but at least twice, then maybe next time a talk takes place where Tenney and non-Euclidean geometry cross paths, he'll know what he's talking about. So what follows is avowedly, though I hope not grotesquely, impressionistic; I'm not sure, but it's my sense that Olson is being pretty impressionistic too in his transactions with the mathematical theory he adduces. The most impressionistic way to characterize these impressions—concerning how Melville, especially

in *Moby-Dick*, responds to and carries over a drastically altered sense of the real, of space and how things fill it and take place in it—might be to say that in Melville, in a way that for Olson accords with the century's new geometries, space becomes a field of pulsating energies rather than a blank grid, in which hitherto unthought transactions take place and can be mapped. Thus Olson characterizes Melville's as "the first art of space to arise from the redefinition of the real, and in that respect free, for the first time since Homer, of the rigidities of the discrete" (47). This universe is conspicuously, sometimes startlingly, transformational: "An idea shook loose, and energy and motion became as important a structure of things as that they are plural, and, by matter, mass. . . .Nothing was now inert fact . . . . Reality was without interruption" (47 & 48). This cadenza soon slides toward something a little more specifiable, which might be characterized as an altered sense of measure, or, less poetically, measurement: "one more thing: the measurement question. What did happen when the rigidities dissolved . . . What is measure when the universe slips and no part is discrete from another part except by the flow of creation itself, in and out, intensive where it seemed before qualitative, and the extensive exactly the widest, which we also have the powers to include? Rhythm, suddenly . . . was a pumping of the real, so constant art had to invent measure anew" (48).

Both shape and size might end up as morphable parameters in such a pulsing and pumpable universe, and that's exactly where Olson soon flows. His key working terms in this section of the essay are topology and congruence, but I think (I'm not positive!) we can make useful and legitimate appeal here to the notion of "homotopy equivalence" as well. "No one," remarks Olson, "has yet tried to say how Melville does manage to give the

flukes of the whale immediacy as such. It is easier to isolate his skill over technology than to investigate the topological both in his soul and in his writing, but it is my experience that only some such sense or form as the topological includes . . . explains Melville's unique ability to reveal the very large (such a thing as his whale, or himself on whiteness, or Ahab's monomania) by the small" (49). Olson goes on to relate the primacy of topology and topological transformations to an altered sense of congruence, the criteria according to which any two bodies in space, whether abstract or concrete, might be thought of as in some sense equivalent: "The new world of atomism offered a metrical means as well as a topos different from the discrete[:] Congruence, which there, in mathematicians' hands, lifted everything forward . . . . Congruence was spatial intuition to Kant, and if I am right that Melville did possess its powers, he had them by his birth, from his time of the world, locally America. As it developed in his century, congruence, which had been the measure of the space a solid fills in two of its positions, became a point-by-point mapping power of such flexibility that anything which stays the same, no matter where it goes and into whatever varying conditions (it can suffer deformation), it can be followed, and, if it is art, led, including, what is so important to prose, such physical quantities as velocity, force and field strength" (49). I'm pretty sure, as Olson seems to suggest, that "deformation," in particular, isn't a permissible transformation within classical notions of congruence: you can copy a triangle, then translate or rotate it and plunk it down elsewhere and have the new one still be congruent to the old one, but you can't stretch it, squish it, or distend one of its legs while shrinking the others and still fill the bill. But all these operations, it turns out, still leave one shape the homotopic equivalent of the other. Take a look at the silly, but instructive, Wikipedia donut and coffee mug dance for a moment, a display of two homotopically equivalent shapes that sure aren't congruent in the old sense [see

"Homeomorphism" html attachment: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Homeomorphism]. Such shapes can also be called "homeomorphic" and, as Wikipedia goes on to explain, "from a topological viewpoint they are the same.   Roughly speaking, a topological space is a geometric object, and the homeomorphism is a continuous stretching and bending of the object into a new shape. Thus, a square and a circle are homeomorphic to each other, but a sphere and a donut are not. An often-repeated joke is that topologists can't tell the coffee cup from which they are drinking from the donut they are eating, since a sufficiently pliable donut could be reshaped to the form of a coffee cup by creating a dimple and progressively enlarging it, while shrinking the hole into a handle.   Intuitively, a homeomorphism maps points in the first object that are "close together" to points in the second object that are close together, and points in the first object that are not close together to points in the second object that are not close together. Topology is the study of those properties of objects that do not change when homeomorphisms are applied." Note too, of course, that a tiny circle and a gigantic one, or a tiny circle and a giant square, are homeomorphic or topologically equivalent, or in the terminology I understand Olson to be using, "congruent" in the new sense nineteenth century non-euclidean geometry had begun to emphasize.

If we go back from here to one of the essay's more impressionistic formulations which we've already glanced at, we might argue that for Olson a mind (or is it a proprioceptive apparatus?) especially attuned to such transformational possibilities would ipso facto be especially attuned to the real: "Rhythm, suddenly . . . was a pumping of the real so constant art had to invent measure anew."

For Olson, as we've seen, one of the conspicuous features of this transformational, pulsing universe is the startling homotopic equivalence between the very large and the very small. That would seem to mean that vast stretches of space, vast energies and objects, can be registered right here, traversing and filling the local and the intimate, not by way of analogy but as "spatial intuition" attuned to the passing of large and small structures—and attendant energies—into and through one another. Praising Melville's peculiar ability to track such deformations, Olson might be describing the space of his own poetry as well: "Melville's unique ability to reveal the very large . . . by the small" turns out to be a shared trait, just as the following might apply to *Maximus* as well as to *Moby-Dick*: "Melville's prose does things which its rhetoric would seem to contradict. He manages almost any time he wants to, for example, to endow a more general space than other writers, than anyone except Homer I find. . . . The point is also the overall 'space' of *Moby-Dick*. . . . I conclude that Melville could not have achieved what amounts to elliptical and hyperbolic spaces . . . if he were not using transformations which we have not understood and which only congruence makes possible" (49-50). The ability to "endow a more general space," I take it, is in part a function of the scalar transformations we have just been noticing, the passing of the large and the local into and through each other via homotopic identification.

I need to be quick here, but I want to make the further suggestion that in Olson's work— as probably in Melville's—the body—the projective body—functions as a crucial site of such relays. One would have to work through the ways in which, in the Projective Verse essay, the sense of the "projective" proprioceptive body rhythmically articulated via breath signatures, on the one hand, and the field of objects registered in the poem, on the other

hand, interact reciprocally with each other. I take the following central formulation from the Projective verse essay to be an assertion at once about the energy field of objects and the energy field of the projective body (there's a striking similarity here, by the way, to O'Hara's remarks on the role of the artist's kinetic energies in Pollock's action painting): "The objects which occur at every given moment of composition . . . must be handled as a series of objects in a field in such a way that a series of tensions (which they also are) are made to *hold*, and to hold exactly inside the content and the context of the poem which has forced itself, through the poet and them, into being.

Because breath allows *all* the speech-force of language back in (speech is the 'solid' of verse, is the secret of the poem's energy), because, now, a poem has, by speech, solidity, everything in it can now be treated as solids, objects, things . . . each of these elements of a poem can be allowed to have the play of their separate energies and can be allowed, once the poem is well composed, to keep, as those other objects do, their proper confusions" (20-21)." Proprioceptive body and breath become here, I think, the site through which a potentially infinite number of homotopic transformations can pass. Keats, whom Olson loved, lurks happily here, in an open, kinetically alert field freed from mere knowing: "or if a Sparrow come before my Window I take part in its existence and pick about the Gravel" (53).

Well. All this was supposed to be preamble to pay-off, theory opening up into wonderful close reading. But there's time for mere *obiter dicta* instead. In lieu of close analysis, I'll settle for quoting here a few of the passages—mostly ones I read last night—from *Maximus* that seem to me to be conspicuously animated by the sorts of homotopic transformations

I've been trying to describe. In all of them, I think, the poet's kinetic (and speech!) energies play an implicit role as measure, registering the transformations. Felt equivalencies are conspicuously, and wonderfully, unruffled by deformations of size, shape, or specific material. And the very large and the small, the cosmic and the intimate or local, pass into and through one another with great aplomb, the topological transformations tracked by tonal ones:

> With a leap (she said it was an arabesque
> I made, off the porch, the night of the
> St. Valentine Day's storm, into the snow.
> Nor did she fail of course to make the point
> what a sight I was the size I am all over the storm
> trying to be graceful Or was it? She hadn't seen me
> in 19 years

("Letter # 41 [broken off]")

>   This morning of the small snow
> I count the blessings, he leak in the faucet
> which makes of the sink time, the drop
> of water on water as sweet
> as the Seth Thomas
> in the old kitchen
> my father stood in his drawers to wind (always
> he forgot the 30th day, as I don't want to remember
> the rent
>   a house these days
> so much somebody else's,
> especially,
> Congoleum's

("Song 3"

> I know a house made of mud & wattles,
> I know a dress just sewed
>   (saw the wind
> blow its cotton
> against her body
> from the ankle
>   so!
> it was Nike
>
>   And her feet: such bones
> I could have had the tears

that lovely pedant had
who couldn' upwrap it himself, had to ask them to, on the schooner's deck

and he looked,
the first human eyes to look again
at the start of human motion (just last week
300,000,000 years ago

                                    She
was going fast
across the square, the water
this time of year, that

scarce

And the fish

                                                            ("Song 4")

It is undone business
I speak of, this morning,
with the sea
stretching out
from my feet

                                          ("Maximus, to himself")

Trolley-cars
are my inland waters
(Tatnuck Sq, and the walk
from the end of the line
to Paxton, for May-flowers

or by the old road to Holden,
after English walnuts

And my wife has a new baby
in a house at the end of
such a line, and the morning after,
is ready to come home, the baby too,
exceptionally well & advanced

Or he and I distinguish
between chanting,
and letting the song lie
in the thing itself.
I plant flowers
(xenia) for him,
in the wet soil, indoors,

in his house

As I had it in my first poem,
the Annisquam
fills itself, at its tides, as she did
the French dress, cut
on the bias,

      my neap,
my spring-tide, my
waters

1

Between Newton and Tatnuck Square the tracks
go up hill, the cars
sway, as they go around the bend
before they take, before they go down to
the outer-land
(where it is Sunday,
   I am small, people go off
   what strikes me as questionable
   directions. They are large,
   going away from my father and me,
   as cows on that landscape

   he and I seeming
   the only ones who know
   what we are doing, where
   we are going

Now I find out it is the Severn
goes from Worcester to Gloucester to
: Bristow, Smith called it,
what sticks in me as the promised land
those couples did go to, at right angles
from us, what does show
between Gloucester and Boston, the landscape
I go up-dilly, elevated, gtenement
down

2

It rained,
gthe day we arrived.
And I have rowed gthe harbor since,
out the window of Johnny's Candy Kitchen,

through that glass and rain through which I looked
the first time I saw
the sea.

         She was staying,
after she left me,
in an apartment house
was like cake

              When I found her
--the people in it like Macomber
who lived under me on Charles St—next door
a man in a bowler hat scutted away,
the same man had fired a bullet
into her ho-ho.

             Or it was Schwartz,
the bookie, whose mother-in-law
I'd have gladly gone to bed with

    Her room (the house
was a *dobostorte),* the door
high up on the wall,
48,
small,
like an oven-door

The harbor the same,
the night of he St Valentine
storm: the air
sea ground the same, tossed
ice wind snow (Pytheus) one

             cakes falling
as quiet as I was
out of the sky as quiet
as the blizzard was

3

When I woke
in the toy house I had headed for, the look
out my window
sent me, the whiteness
in the morning sun, the figures
shoveling

I went home
as fast as I could,

the whole Cut
was a paper village my Aunt Vandla
had given me, who gave me,
each Christmas,
such toys

As dreams are, when the day
encompasses. They tear down
the Third Ave El. Mine stays,
as Boston does, inches up.
I run my trains
on a monorail, I am seized
--not so many nights ago—
by the sight of the river
exactly there at the Bridge

where it goes out & in

I recognize
the country not discovera,
the marsh behind, the ditch that Blynman made, the dog-rocks
the tide roars over

        some curves off,
when it's he river's turn, shoots
calyx and corolla by the god
                                                        (August,
the flowers break off

         but the anther,
the filament of now, the mass
drives on,

          the whole of it
coming,
to this pin-point
to turn

          in this day's sun,

in this veracity

there, the waters of the several of them the roads

here, a blackberry blossom

<div align="right">("The Twist")</div>

To head back toward where we started, it's worth noting that these passages are at once grand and tender, epic and lyric.   They also sometimes turn, perhaps surprisingly, on fleetingly registered, intimate memory, dream, or anecdote. I thus hoped to have time to evoke here another, ostensibly impertinent topography, in honor of our faintly Buddhist Olson conference, that of the Buddha's three bodies. Suffice it to say that in passages like those I've been quoting, the lability of the *sambhogakaya* mediates between the fixities and definites of the *nirmanakaya*—and *Maximus* is an exuberant *nirmanakaya* poem—and the "mighty mildness of repose in swiftness," to quote Olson quoting Melville, of the *dharmakaya* that repeatedly shines through it. "S*ambhogakaya*," the Australian-American Zen teacher and poet John Tarrant explains, "seems both numinous and intensely personal. . . . One of the features of the *sambhogakaya* that derives from its mediate and transitional nature is the instability of the landscape. It is the domain of those fleeting, unstable, and haunting experiences that seem both to be located in the body and to transcend the bounds of the body (*Beneath a Single Moon* 305-06?)." In *Maximus*, I think, such fleeting registrations blur into and out of the renderings of multifarious, discrete phenomena and sudden, vast stillness—as mobile and delicate as any New York School poet could wish.