

TRUTH AND METHOD ON BLACK MOUNTAIN: THE HERMENEUTIC
STANCES OF CHARLES OLSON, ROBERT CREELEY,
AND ROBERT DUNCAN

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DISSERTATION ABSTRACT
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This dissertation examines the poetry and poetics of three poets (Charles Olson, Robert Creeley, and Robert Duncan) who taught at Black Mountain College, an experimental art school, in the 1950s. It examines these poets' work through the lens of the hermeneutic ontology developed by Martin Heidegger and his student, Hans-Georg Gadamer. Besides uncovering a number of similarities regarding each of these thinkers' "stance toward reality" (as Olson terms it), this dissertation shows how Black Mountain poetry and poetics can be better understood through the perspective that Heidegger and Gadamer provide. More than a few critics have discussed both Olson and Creeley in terms of Heidegger's thought, but no one has yet made extended reference to the work of Hans-Georg Gadamer when interpreting these poets. In the case

of Duncan's poetry, no one has yet made an extended study of how his work can be interpreted in the light of hermeneutic ontology. Thus, this dissertation contributes to the ongoing critical discussion on how Olson and Creeley can be seen within the framework of Heidegger's thought, and it extends beyond that discussion by including the poetry of Robert Duncan and the thought of Hans-Georg Gadamer.

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INTRODUCTION

“A Whole New Series of Recognitions”

“Verse now, 1950, if it is to be of essential use must, I take it, catch up and put into itself certain laws and possibilities of the breath, of the breathing of the man who writes as well as of his listenings” (Olson, “Projective Verse” 239). With this, the initial sentence of his manifesto “Projective Verse,” Charles Olson inaugurated a major school of postwar American poetry—the Black Mountain School. Originally published in *Poetry New York*, Olson’s manifesto began attracting major attention after it was published in Donald Allen’s important anthology, *The New American Poetry, 1945-1960*. In his anthology, Allen grouped Olson with a number of younger poets who eventually became known as “The Black Mountain School” because of their association either with Black Mountain College or with its publication, *The Black Mountain Review*. Allen explains that some poets in this group never had any official relationship with the college (such as Denise Levertov, Paul Carroll and Paul Blackburn), some were students at the college (such as Joel Oppenheimer and Ed Dorn), and three (Charles Olson, Robert Creeley, and Robert Duncan), were at some point employed as faculty at the college (xii). Allen devotes the most space in his Black Mountain grouping to the three faculty members, and these three poets have consistently been linked together as important poets whose poetry

was shaped, at least in part, by their experiences together at Black Mountain College.

Because this study of the poetry of Olson, Creeley, and Duncan is focused upon philosophical affinities between these poets and the important Continental philosophers Martin Heidegger and Hans-Georg Gadamer, a detailed exploration of the historical situation of Black Mountain College and the poets' relationships to each other and the college would be an unneeded detour. However, I use the "Black Mountain" as a label for these poets not merely for the expediency and economy such labels afford, but also because of the descriptive weight the term carries as it implicates these poets in a project that has its roots in the American avant garde. Some critics have questioned the term "Black Mountain" as an effective label because of the obvious differences in style and technique employed by these poets.¹ However, Martin Duberman explains, in his history of Black Mountain College, the historical contingencies associated with the mere existence of the college was without a doubt a strong force behind the literary production of these writers (388-9). For instance, Olson decided to publish *The Black Mountain Review* as a way to gain publicity for the college since its enrollment had been shrinking and the college was desperate for income. The *Black Mountain Review*, in turn, became an outlet for many writers who are now often classified under the term "Black Mountain." Thus, regardless of differences in style and ideology, the label "Black Mountain" does seem appropriate, especially for Olson, Creeley, and Duncan, each of whom worked for the college.

However, the link between these three poets is not primarily rooted in their experiences together at Black Mountain, but rather in their convictions about art, which

Donald Allen describes as “a total rejection of all those qualities typical of academic verse” (xi), that positioned them all firmly against the prominent New Critical aesthetics of the time and that placed them all at Black Mountain College where experimental artists had been welcomed since the 1930s. Olson was drawn to the creative energy of the college in the late forties, and Olson, himself, was the main attraction for Creeley and Duncan to come to Black Mountain, since Olson, acting as rector of the college, invited them to join the faculty in the mid-fifties.

Creeley, in an interview with Martin Duberman, describes some of the basic contours of the poetry of Black Mountain writers, and his statement also shows how important Olson was in shaping those contours:

We did use Olson as a locus without question. [. . .] [W]e were using a premise which he of course had made articulate in projective verse. We were trying to think of how a more active sense of poetry might be got, and that’s I think the coincidence we share, or rather the coincident commitment: that each of us felt that the then existing critical attitudes towards verse, and that the then existing possibilities for publication and general activity in poetry particularly, were 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 share very much. That is, we each feel that 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. (qtd. in Duberman 390)

Though Creeley is speaking here of the various writers classified under the Black Mountain name, his description could more specifically apply to the artistic aims of himself, Duncan, and Olson. Creeley, in the above statement, refers to the temporal aspects of writing—the attention the writers pay to “the circumstance” of “the literal time of writing,” which is what Olson proclaims as a key ingredient of “projective verse,” as opposed to the more academically oriented “closed verse” when he says,

This is the problem which any poet who departs from closed form is specially confronted by. And it involves a whole new series of recognitions. From the moment he ventures into FIELD COMPOSITION—puts himself in the open—he can go by no track other than the one the poem under hand declares, for itself. Thus he has to behave, and be, instant by instant, aware of some several forces just now beginning to be examined. (“Projective Verse” 240)

One of the key ingredients of what I will call in this study the hermeneutic stance of each of these poets is their insistence on a temporal, historically contingent perspective. They do not seek to produce an art of ideals, where art becomes an ideal realm removed from time and the contingencies of history or the moment at hand. Instead, as Brian Conniff writes of Creeley’s poetry, “the poet’s situation *within* the actual world undermines any sense of an aesthetic mastery that might transcend the world’s disorder” (*The Lyric and*

Modern Poetry 116). These writers insist on being in their writing, in the experience of the world around them as they write. They are left open, vulnerable, at risk of the danger of the surrounding world, or at risk of their own error. The poet's perspective, then, must incorporate humility and respect vis-a-vis the environment he finds himself within.

Though these poets differ stylistically, those differences are ultimately secondary to their similar philosophical positions. Olson, himself, in "Projective Verse," states that what is most urgent for writers is the adoption of a certain "stance toward reality" that "involves, for example, a change beyond and larger than, the technical, and may, the way things look, lead to a new poetics" (239). This "stance towards reality" Olson terms "objectism," which involves the humility of seeing oneself as temporally a part of the surrounding world, as an object in it among other objects. Olson writes that

Objectism 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 which we may, with no derogation, call objects. For man is himself an object [. . .] ("Projective Verse" 247)

The humility of being in the writing moment-by-moment and of understanding one's unmitigated temporality calls for a removal of the individual ego from poetry. Poetry cannot, therefore, merely be self-expression. Edward Halsey Foster, in the context of discussing differences between Duncan, Olson, and Creeley, says perhaps their most important similarity was their understanding "that the poem could be much more than lyrical expression," and that this notion was based on their common conviction that

poetry should not take the individual ego as its basis (129). In this context, I believe Charles Altieri's statement about Olson applies to Creeley and Duncan as well when he says that Olson's poetics is more basically an ontology, so that a poet is more of a philosopher of being than an "artificer or self-expressive genius" ("Olson's Poetics" 178).

Given these Black Mountain poets' preoccupation with issues of being, or ontology, it is not surprising that a substantial number of critics find have consistently found links between Black Mountain poetry and poetics and Heidegger's philosophy, since Heidegger sometimes describes his philosophy as "fundamental ontology." The ensuing chapters in this study draw upon these critics as they uncover some of the major similarities between these Black Mountain poets and Heidegger's exploration of ontology. My use of Heidegger to examine or illuminate certain issues relevant to Black Mountain poetry and poetics is indebted to the work of these critics. My main contribution to the study of these poets is to show how not only Heidegger's ideas, but also those of his student, Hans-Georg Gadamer, can be relevant to the study of the Black Mountain poets. Before I explain in more detail the specific ways in which I develop this exploration of the continuities between the Black Mountain poets and these two Continental philosophers, I will first briefly describe the basic ideas and relevance of Heidegger and Gadamer.

Whether or not Heidegger is "the single most important philosopher in the twentieth century," as Michael Gelven asserts (xi), is more properly a matter of debate for philosophers, but without doubt, Heidegger is at least *one of* the most important

thinkers of the past century. Heidegger presents the main objective of his magnum opus, *Being and Time*, as the effort to “raise anew *the question of the meaning of Being*” (19). He further states, “Our aim in the following treatise is to work out the question of the meaning of *Being* and to do so concretely. Our provisional aim is the Interpretation of *time* as the possible horizon for any understanding whatsoever of Being” (19). Heidegger analyzes being in its exteriority, that is, as being-in-the-world. For Heidegger, the meaning of being is not found in static properties, nor in some idea that corresponds to reality, but in being’s temporal situation amongst other entities in everyday situations. Charles B. Guignon explains this basic aspect of Heidegger’s project this way:

Heidegger holds [. . .] that philosophers starting with Plato have gone astray in trying to answer this question [of the meaning of being] because they have tended to think of being as a property or essence enduringly present in things. In other words, they have fallen into the “metaphysics of presence,” which thinks of being as substance. What is overlooked in traditional metaphysics is the background conditions that enable entities to show up as counting or mattering in some specific way in the first place. (370)

The condition for the meaning of being is time, being’s finitude, its being caught up in the flux of time.

Perhaps a brief look at the term Heidegger uses to describe this exteriorized temporal being in the world, *Dasein*, can further clarify some basic aspects of Heidegger’s philosophy. *Dasein*, which can be translated as “being there” (a

combination of the German words *Da*, or “there,” and *sein*, or “to be”), emphasizes the notion that being is a happening that occurs in time, in a given context, or world, and that it is always already involved with this context and the entities within it so that, as an interpreting being, Dasein can never remove itself from its being-in-the-world to produce an objective understanding of being.² Heidegger, in his own brief description of the term Dasein, says it is “this entity which each of us is himself and which includes inquiring as one of the possibilities of its Being” (27), and goes on to say that Dasein is being whose own “Being is an issue for it” (32). At one point, Heidegger’s analysis focuses on how “Dasein’s Being reveals itself as *care*” (227). For Heidegger, no exploration of the meaning of being can be disinterested. For Heidegger, Dasein is always already involved, and its understanding of being comes about within an immediate context of its world that it is already situated within and cannot distance itself from. Heidegger’s analysis of the meaning of being throughout *Being and Time*, whether of tools (what being means in light of objects at hand), or moods (how being comes to be understood in certain moods and what it means to be in a mood), or even truth itself (truth as an uncovering, an event in which understanding occurs), takes the finite temporal nature of being as its basic condition. Being is an event that occurs in time.

Heidegger’s later works often deal with language and art. In these later works, Heidegger understands language, as well as time, to be a condition in which Dasein comes to understand itself. Language is not merely something beings develop or use; instead, beings come to be in and through language so that language speaks beings into being, rather than, as is typically thought, beings speak language. The work of Hans-

Georg Gadamer, perhaps Heidegger's greatest pupil, seeks to develop Heidegger's later works. In fact, Gadamer, himself, has stated that his own work is in some sense an explication of the later works of Heidegger. He writes, "My philosophical hermeneutics seeks precisely to adhere to the line of questioning of this essay [Heidegger's "The Origin of the Work of Art"] *and the later Heidegger* and to make it accessible in a new way (qtd. in Dostal, "Gadamer's Relation" 263). Gadamer's hermeneutics takes as a fundamental idea that understanding is an event of being, and that, to quote Gadamer's most notable sentence, "Being that can be understood is language" (*Truth and Method* 474). Gadamer speaks of "the universality" of hermeneutics, drawing upon Heidegger's notion that Dasein is always involved in coming to understand its own being-in-the-world. For Gadamer, one is always already engaged in the event of understanding one's being-in-the-world. Gadamer describes language as "the fundamental mode of operation of our being-in-the-world and the all-embracing form of the constitution of the world" ("The Universality" 3). For Gadamer, then, to quote his translator Joel Weinsheimer, "understanding is not governed by method: it is not susceptible of control, being something that happens to the interpreter" (*Philosophical Hermeneutics and Literary Theory* x-xi). Humanity is situated within language and cannot achieve a perspective that is outside of language in order to objectively understand any event or phenomenon. For Gadamer, truth is an event of understanding that happens in time, in language, and is not the byproduct of some method, scientific or otherwise.

Gadamer's major work, *Truth and Method*, explores the idea that "[t]he phenomenon of understanding and of the correct interpretation of what has been

understood is not a problem specific to the methodology of the human sciences alone” (xxi), and Gadamer goes on to state that one of the aims of *Truth and Method* is to produce “a critique of aesthetic consciousness in order to defend the experience of truth that comes to us through the work of art against the aesthetic theory that lets itself be restricted to a scientific conception of truth” (xxiii). For Gadamer, truth is an event that occurs in language, and therefore it cannot be objectively or methodologically verified.

The notion that truth is a happening, an event of being, ties together hermeneutics and ontology.³ One principal element of the hermeneutic ontology developed by Heidegger and Gadamer that becomes important for the poetics of the Black Mountain poets is the need all of these writers see to move beyond the perspective of subject/object and/or mind/body dualism so prevalent in western thought. Michael Gelven articulately explains how Heidegger “reestablishes a unified account of what it means to be” apart from a perspective that separates perspectives into subjective and objective, where truth is a matter of objective logic or method, and values are entirely subjective (13). Gelven explains that for Heidegger

It is impossible to argue that the world is objective, and the knower merely the subject set over and against the object, for it is palpable upon reflection that I am already in the world. To be a subject *and* to be an object presupposes that we are already in the world. The world cannot be my representation, for I am already a part of the world. Being in the world is thus a characteristic of my existence; the world is not “outside” of me; rather I am in the world. When I talk about Being, therefore, I must talk

about what it means to be in the world. But to be in the world is *already* (i.e. *a priori*) to care about certain things, to concern myself with others, to recognize the ways in which I matter, not only to myself but to others. It is not the case that my existence is somehow neutral, that values are somehow made-up, and that facts are merely discovered. Rather, to be at all is to be as meaningful, to matter, to care. [. . .] The establishment of a fundamental discipline, which Heidegger calls “Fundamental Ontology,” must precede all distinctions between fact and value [. . .]. (13)

Gadamer, building on Heidegger’s ideas, also seeks to escape subject/object dualism. In fact, G. B. Madison, in his explication of Gadamer’s hermeneutics, says “The central thrust of phenomenological hermeneutics is to move beyond *both* objectivism *and* subjectivism” (297). To avoid subject/object dualism, Gadamer describes subjectivity as dialogical, the product of an ongoing conversation in language. In other words, subjective consciousness is historically situated, and it comes to understand the world in language that is not its own but is mediated to it by others. Madison explains that Gadamer’s philosophy represents a “movement away from the paradigm of (monological) consciousness to that of (dialogical) intersubjectivity” where truth is found neither in the object nor in the subject, but in dialogical interchange in which understanding occurs as an event in language (315).

As the many volumes of critical work on the philosophy of both these philosophers attests, and as I hope my own work in the following chapters suggests, the works of Heidegger and Gadamer are rich and varied. Thus, I cannot provide anywhere

near a full summary or analysis of their works in this introduction. The brief explanations of both these philosophers provided above are intended only as preparation for some of the ideas presented in the following chapters. In each chapter I attempt to explain various aspects of their work as the poetry of the Black Mountain poets brings up certain issues relevant to their philosophies. My hope is that this study illuminates important aspects of Black Mountain poetry and poetics by exploring the continuities between the poets' works and the hermeneutic ontology proposed by Heidegger and Gadamer.

In each chapter I attempt to demonstrate how a particular Black Mountain poet takes up what I call a hermeneutic stance. In the light of the hermeneutic ontology developed by Heidegger and Gadamer, I show how Olson, Creeley, and Duncan, in their own idiosyncratic ways, either poetically enact or advocate a perspective that can be properly called "hermeneutic."⁴ Each poet's stance emphasizes different elements of hermeneutic ontology, but each poet participates in key elements of this hermeneutic outlook. Those key elements include 1) the basic conviction that one's perspective, and hence one's poetry, is limited by one's temporality and finitude; 2) that one is embedded within language, and that one does not so much use language as a tool as much as one's own speech, even one's own subjectivity itself, arises out of the language in which one is always already involved; 3) that along with language, one is also already embedded in the history that language carries with it so that one cannot escape history or tradition completely to objectively analyze it, but rather one's understanding is always formed out of a history that one cannot escape; 4) that in the humility of understanding oneself as

temporally situated, one ought to be open to one's surroundings, to the moment at hand, so much so as to put oneself at risk, to be vulnerable to that environment. Overall, each poet attempts to create an art that avoids manipulation of being (either their own or that of other entities in the surrounding world), in an attempt to write in such a way that the ego is "washed out" to use Olson's phrase, and a dialogical relationship with the otherness of the world is brought forth.⁵

Each successive chapter emphasizes the key characteristics of these poets' hermeneutic stance while also exploring in detail many other features which could be labeled "hermeneutic." For example, in the first chapter I examine Charles Olson's poetry in light of key elements of hermeneutic ontology, such as the notion of the hermeneutic circle, which I see in Olson's early poem "The K." Olson's technique of placing his readers in *medias res* is a kind of enactment of the way Heidegger and Gadamer show humanity to be always already situated in an event in which we must come to understanding, and must act out of that limited understanding. In my examination of Olson's "The Kingfishers," I demonstrate that, against the views of some critics, Olson does not seek a destructive relationship with tradition. Instead, he views himself as inescapably situated within it, and he engages it even as he seeks to expand his horizons to find solutions for the present. Gadamer's idea of openness helps us to understand Olson's image of the poet who "forever wavers" in "In Cold Hell, In Thicket"; and I show how Heideggerian notions such as authenticity and circumspection are relevant in Olson's poems "Concerning Exaggeration, or How, Properly, to Heap Up," and "As the Dead Prey Upon Us." I end the chapter with a look at some of the

hermeneutic aspects of Olson's epic series, *The Maximus Poems*. In his epic work Olson articulates his disdain for Descartes's mind/body dualism, which plays into some key aspects of Olson's stance. Also, among other things, my examination of *The Maximus Poems* makes the case that Gadamer's idea of phronesis, or practical wisdom, helps us to understand Olson's role as a pedagogue in his poetry in a more positive way than is sometimes seen by critics who view Olson as too overtly didactic.

In the second chapter, I examine Robert Creeley's poetry in terms of some of his central themes: truth, time, language, art, and love. Creeley's treatment of each theme in his poetry reveals how he takes up his hermeneutic stance, and Heidegger and Gadamer are called upon to illustrate aspects of that stance. For instance, Creeley's struggle with ideas of truth in "Four Days in Vermont," can be understood within the frame of the understanding of truth as unconcealment (in Heidegger's terms), or an event of understanding (to use a phrase more akin to Gadamer). Heidegger's distinction between authentic time and inauthentic "clock time," helps us understand Creeley's struggle to maintain an intense being-in-time in three of his poems from his volume *Hello*. The hermeneutic approach to language as fundamental to being-in-the-world helps illustrate how Creeley understands language in poems like "The Charm" and "The Pattern." Also, Gadamer's writings on the ontology of the artwork as "transformation into structure" as well as his analogy of art and festival illustrate important aspects of Creeley's consistent use of the term "echo" to refer to the work of art in his poetry. I also utilize Gadamer's ideas on the dialogical and/or intersubjective nature of consciousness to show that Creeley's love poems do not treat love merely as the expression of an individual ego, but

treat it as an event that occurs between individuals through hermeneutical openness to otherness.

My exploration of Duncan's poetry, in chapter three, begins by emphasizing the importance of recognizing the many similarities between Duncan and his Black Mountain colleagues since some treatments of Duncan concentrate on how much he differs from Olson and Creeley. Since some critics describe Duncan as a kind of neo-Platonist, I demonstrate that Duncan's poetics, like Olson's and Creeley's, appeals more to a Heideggerian recognition of humanity's fundamental temporality than to Plato's notion of eternal forms. I examine Duncan's determination to write a necessarily imperfect poetry—imperfect because he understands himself as limited by his being situated temporally within language and history. I demonstrate how Duncan's use of the metaphor of eyesight as a mode of understanding interestingly employs both Heidegger's and Olson's quite different uses of the same metaphor. Duncan's work, as a whole, often tends to reflect upon the nature of poetry itself. Thus, a point of emphasis of this chapter is how Duncan's view of art coincides importantly with both Heidegger's and Gadamer's ideas on aesthetics. I show how Duncan's consistent use of the imagery of light and darkness can be understood within Heidegger's description of the artwork as an act that both reveals and conceals aspects of the truth of the event of being. Also, I show how Duncan's poetics can be understood as mimetic, in the primordial sense of the term as Gadamer describes it in his essay "Art and Imitation."

Taken individually, much criticism already exists on each of these poets. However, little work has been done that looks at these poets together in a single study.

Edward Halsey Foster's book, *Understanding the Black Mountain Poets*, justifies itself as merely an introductory study suitable for undergraduates or non-academically oriented readers.⁶ A more intense study is Stephen Fredman's *The Grounding of American Poetry*. In this work, Fredman examines the Black Mountain poets' relationship to American transcendentalism. The majority of the study focuses on Olson's relationship to Thoreau, but Fredman includes a chapter on the Emersonian impulses of Duncan, and he concludes with a very brief chapter on similarities between Creeley and Whitman. In his study, Fredman mentions both Heidegger and Gadamer briefly, but the focus is, of course, on the parallels in thought between these more contemporary poets and what he sees as their nineteenth-century forefathers. Fredman's work makes some excellent points, and my study is not in any way a corrective of his work but should be seen as an expansion, a broadening of his efforts to show how these poets' work is involved not just with ideas important to the "grounding," to use Fredman's term, of American literature, but also with some of the most complex ideas in twentieth-century Continental philosophy.

As I mention in my summaries of the relevant criticism of these poets at the outset of every chapter, some work has already been done which recognizes affinities with Heidegger in these three poets. William V. Spanos, Paul Bové, and Judith Halden-Sullivan have written large studies linking Heideggerian ideas with Olson's poetry, and many smaller studies link Creeley with Heidegger as well. Duncan has received less attention along these lines. Aside, then, from demonstrating how Duncan's poetry can also be seen as at least somewhat Heideggerian, my work enriches the available criticism

of the Black Mountain poets by showing how the ideas of Hans-Georg Gadamer should also hold some currency in reference to their poetics. Though Gadamer is mentioned by Spanos, Halden-Sullivan, and Fredman, the treatment is very brief, and it is always secondary to the main emphasis on these poets' relationships to other thinkers.⁷ I hope to show that Gadamer's ideas can be a key referent for further studies on these poets.

Furthermore, taken broadly, major criticism of these poets tends to proceed by evaluating a poet's development and breaks that poet's work into stages that emphasize the differences between parts of the poet's career; but this approach tends to de-emphasize important continuities within the poet's entire body of work. Each chapter of this study, however, examines poems that cover nearly every phase of each poet's career. In doing this, I believe this study fills an important gap in the scholarship on these poets by emphasizing the continuity of vision these poets establish. Also, criticism of these poets seems to find the differences between the poets more interesting than the basic similarities; I believe that my approach broadens current scholarship on the Black Mountain poets by focusing on the important ways each poet's practice was similar to those of his poet-colleagues of Black Mountain College.

Overall, these poets have not been ignored by academic scholarship. However, I believe that more work needs to be done to examine the important ways these poets' ideas reflect larger concerns of philosophy. If the work of these mid-twentieth-century avant-garde poets is to remain interesting to readers of the twenty-first century, scholars must demonstrate that their writings on art and on life still offer relevant challenges to our thinking about philosophical issues such as the nature of human existence, time, and

art. I hope that my study demonstrates that the Black Mountain poets can still challenge our thinking on these issues. My aim for this study is to keep these poets current so that as long as the ideas of Heidegger and Gadamer remain relevant (and a quick survey of books and articles addressing their ideas would suggest that they still are), so will the poetry and poetics of the Black Mountain poets.

CHAPTER ONE

“A Complex of Occasions”: Charles Olson’s Hermeneutic Stance

Olson’s manifesto, “Projective Verse,” has at least as much to do with what he calls a “stance toward reality” as it does with particular aesthetic concerns. Indeed, several scholars and critics have stated that Olson’s poetics is rooted in a radical philosophical commitment.⁸ Much scholarly attention has been given, then, to Olson’s philosophical concerns; however, this study aims to deepen the critical understanding of Olson’s poetry by designating his stance as primarily hermeneutic in nature and by focusing attention on the thematic elements of Olson’s poetry that reveal his stance rather than just his prose statements. The insights of the hermeneutic ontology of Martin Heidegger, whose work has already been linked with Olson’s by more than a few critics, and of Heidegger’s student, Hans-Georg Gadamer, will provide the philosophical context for this examination of how Olson’s hermeneutic stance is thematically manifested in his poetry.

Of the important critical books on Olson, only Sherman Paul’s and Paul Christensen’s explicitly align Olson’s work with Heidegger, and neither scholar pursues the connection very far; they merely mention in passing the two writers’ philosophical affinity.⁹ William V. Spanos, whose career is partially defined by his insistence on Heidegger’s importance for literary criticism, first explores in detail Olson’s

Heideggerian concerns.¹⁰ In his book, *Repetitions: The Postmodern Occasion in Literature and Culture*, Spanos focuses on Olson's quotation of Keats's idea of negative capability to show that Olson destroys metaphysics "to retrieve for the present a phenomenological understanding of language as the act of its occasion, as a process of discovery" (110). Olson's destruction of metaphysics is properly Heideggerian, according to Spanos, in its driving phenomenological "descent" into the "fallenness" of mankind's temporal condition—a willingness to allow for "the mystery of being" in a recognition of the complex "multiplicity, dispersal, absence, temporality" that language, as a temporal act, is on any occasion (146-7).

Paul Bové, a student of Spanos, argues that Olson's poetry (along with Whitman's and Stevens') "is marked by its historical openness to the world and by its hermeneutically subversive orientation toward the language and forms of the past" (xiii). Bové's book is nearly dogmatic in its insistence on the ineptitude of the tradition of literary criticism handed down by New Criticism. He marshals Heidegger and Olson into his theory of poetic destruction where "all authentic uses of language are interpretation, specifically destructions" of normative or traditional forms or uses of language (53-4). New Critical and Bloomian types of criticism, according to Bové, represent a "closed" rather than "open" perspective because of their reliance upon tradition and forms of the past (53-4).

The only book-length study of Olson's relationship to Heidegger's thought is Judith Halden-Sullivan's *The Topology of Being: The Poetics of Charles Olson*. Taking on the challenge of showing how Olson's concerns can be understood within a

Heideggerian framework in a book-length project allows Halden-Sullivan to take perhaps a more neutral, less parochial approach than those taken by Spanos and Bové. Her thesis is, simply, that Olson's poetics is intimately related to Heidegger's hermeneutic ontology and that they share very similar perspectives on "notions of the world, the human mode of being, and language" (1). She claims that Bové and Spanos do not adequately address Olson's and Heidegger's similar understanding of language and of "the reader's role in interpretation" (18-19). Halden-Sullivan's insights will serve my own study as I demonstrate how Olson's poetry presents Heideggerian themes. Though Halden-Sullivan's work is a useful corollary to this study, I hope to push forward from her work, which she admits focuses upon Olson's prose (33). She discusses at length only a couple of Olson's poems, and it is the poetry of Charles Olson that is my primary concern in this chapter.

Finally, in regard to Olson scholarship, though the Heideggerian link has been developed and even thoroughly explored in book-length form, no scholar has emphasized how the insights of Heidegger's famous student, Hans-Georg Gadamer, relate to Olson's poetry in any extended fashion. Spanos and Halden-Sullivan both point out, very briefly, positions shared by both Olson and Gadamer.¹¹ Stephen Fredman, who approaches Olson from the perspective of American transcendentalism, actually makes the most well-developed link between Olson and Gadamer by showing how they take a similar perspective on poetic recognition. Beyond these insights, I hope to explore more fully how Gadamer's hermeneutic ontology can serve as a useful context in which to understand some of the themes of Olson's poetry.

Two of Olson's early poems, "The K" and "The Kingfishers," both published in the 1940s before Olson articulated his poetics in "Projective Verse," provide insight into a few of the most basic aspects of his hermeneutic stance. Both poems could be described as political poems.¹² "The K," which Tom Clark tells us was originally entitled "Telegram" (93), is Olson's poetic response to the call to leave his political future in the Democratic Party behind. Olson gives the political life his "answer" in a telegram that obliquely explains why he must leave that life and follow poetry. "The Kingfishers" is not rooted in any personal decision regarding the political life, but instead points toward a renewal of political vision in the form of Mao Tse Tung's revolution against the opening backdrop of the "fetid" ruins of Washington D.C. But though both poems can rightly be labeled political, they, like many of Olson's poems which demonstrate a multivalent complexity, can also be read as representative of Olson's basic hermeneutic stance, both technically and thematically.

For instance, on a technical level, "The K" works by placing the reader in a disorienting position. This is a common Olson technique. He begins in *medias res*, even though the poem is relatively brief. The poem begins, "Take, then, my answer" (*CP* 14).¹³ Nowhere in the rest of the text is there an explicit statement of the question at hand. This placement of the reader into the middle of a conversation is reflective of a certain hermeneutic understanding of being.

A basic element of hermeneutic theory throughout the centuries has been the notion of the hermeneutic circle. The hermeneutic circle reveals that interpretation of texts is circular. An understanding of a part of a text depends upon one's understanding

of the whole text, but one understands the whole text only in light of one's interpretation of individual parts. Textual interpretation involves, then, a constant movement between part and whole. But the hermeneutic circle also reveals that interpretation itself can never fully escape circularity—every interpretation depends on another interpretation. James Bohman writes that “Heidegger and Gadamer radicalize this notion of the hermeneutic circle, seeing it as a feature of all knowledge and activity” (378). In fact, Heidegger claims in *Being and Time* that philosophical ontology must “leap into the ‘circle’ primordially and wholly, so that even at the start of the analysis of Dasein we make sure that we have a full view of Dasein’s circular Being” (363).¹⁴ Failing to make this leap into the hermeneutic circle in an attempt to disclose being results, as Heidegger says, in “a failure to recognize two things: (1) that understanding as such makes up a basic kind of Dasein’s Being, and (2) that this Being is constituted as care” (363). Later on in this chapter, more will be said about care as an essential element of Olson’s hermeneutic stance. For now, though, in terms of Olson’s technique in “The K,” it is important to notice the emphasis placed on the recognition of the circular nature of understanding. Olson’s technique of placing the reader in *medias res* disallows any comfortable relationship a reader might try to develop with the speaker of the poem as a Cartesian “I” who is removed, reflective, and who communicates to the reader thoughts or emotions recollected in tranquility that aptly or innovatively describe a past moment. Instead, the speaker’s stance is immediate, involved, energetically a part of the world, and the speaker invokes in the reader a kind of the same energy. The reader must become active in the world of the speaker, must “take” his answer. Heidegger once again

critiques the position of those who wish to escape the hermeneutic circle by obtaining “objectivity” when he writes, “If, in the ontology of Dasein we ‘take our departure’ from a worldless ‘I’ in order to provide this ‘I’ with an Object and an ontologically baseless relation to that Object, then we have presupposed not too much, but *too little*” (*Being and Time* 363). Olson’s hermeneutic stance, as evidenced by the opening lines of “The K,” takes that primordial leap into the circle of understanding and does not presuppose a subject/object dichotomy such that a speaker could transmit descriptions of objects of experience, but rather relates the immediacy of being in experience while also attempting to take the reader along for the ride.

Circularity is a major theme of “The K.” First, there is the cycle of the tides, mentioned twice in the poem. The term “full circle” is used twice, and Olson uses the image of the “copernican sun,” which indicates not only the sphere of the sun itself, but the circular revolution of the earth around the sun. Also, there is mention of the “return” of “The salts and minerals of the earth” in their elemental cycle. “The K” places humanity primordially within these cycles, or circles, of being.

Olson does not present “a worldless I” that stands toward being with objective distance, but instead is involved in “the affairs of men” and understands himself as part of a specific place in time:

The affairs of men remain a chief concern.

We have come full circle. I shall not see the year 2000
unless I stem from my father’s mother,

break the fatal male small span. (*CP* 14)

Olson's speaker is involved in the circle, part of the cycle, unable to extricate himself from his contingent position, from the affairs of the world around him, from his genetics. Later in the poem Olson writes, "Full circle: an end to romans, hippocrats, and christians. / There! is a tide in the affairs of men to discern" (*CP* 14). "The Kingfishers" will echo this poem's seeing an end to the Roman worldview, which is described in that poem as an essentially calculating, objectifying worldview. Perhaps Olson sees Washington D.C., where he was living at the time he wrote this poem, and the capitol's politics he was escaping (career-wise, anyway), as part of the Roman tradition. Hippocrats, which could be read as "rule by horses"¹⁵ (underscoring Olson's distaste for Roman imperialism since horses are typically seen as the most important animal used in warfare in the ancient world) or as an aural neological combination of hypocrite and bureaucrat, describes the dire situation of the American political scene, a scene that will be described in ruinous terms in "The Kingfishers." Christianity, as an extension of the Roman Empire, also draws Olson's ire from time to time as an idealism that, in order to favor an eternal perspective, distorts the truth of the immediate, temporal moment.

Olson's calls for an understanding of subjectivity that sees the self as involved in the primordial hermeneutic circle in such a way that one must discern the affairs of men and have an answer. Olson sought a way of understanding different from the Roman/Christian perspective, and his stance is evidenced in the poem's last section:

Shallows and miseries shadows from the cross,
ecco men and dull copernican sun.

Our attention is simpler

The salts and minerals of the earth return (*CP* 14)

As Robert von Hallberg comments, Olson returns “to geocentric simplicity” from a “heliocentric,” cosmological perspective (*Charles Olson* 6). The Copernican, heliocentric, Roman model objectifies, orders the universe according to a plan. “The K” emphasizes the immediacy of existence in the earthly, elemental world.

“The K,” like many Olson poems, is about being, or how one comes to be. And part of that coming to be involves an understanding of where one is (involved in the hermeneutic circle); but if the hermeneutic circle requires a constant interpretive movement between parts and the whole, what is the whole against which Olson’s speaker interprets the parts of his being (such as the affairs of men, or turning to the elements of the earth)? Heidegger sees the apprehension of one’s death as the clue to one’s basic temporality that provides the whole against which the parts, or individual elements of one’s existence, are interpreted. He states that anticipation of death forces Dasein “into the possibility of taking over from itself its ownmost Being, and doing so of its own accord” (*Being and Time* 263-4). We have seen how the speaker of “The K” understands his place in a particular time, and how he understands the limits of his existence: “I shall not see the year 2000” (*CP* 14). The last lines of the poem also indicate an understanding of unremitting, impending death: “The night has a love for throwing its shadows around a man / a bridge, a horse, the gun, a grave” (*CP* 14). The poem, then, ends with the grave—that ultimate end which provides the hermeneutic situation of being a whole by which to interpret the parts of existence. It is the speaker’s death—what Heidegger calls

“the possibility of the impossibility of any existence at all” (Being and Time 307)—that enables Olson’s speaker “to discern” the stance he shall take, the “answer” he shall give.

In “The K,” then, Olson takes a hermeneutic stance in his recognition of the circular nature of understanding being. But, leaping into the circle, seeing oneself as contingent, part of the world one speaks of, Olson uncovers what Heidegger says is “a positive possibility of the most primordial kind of knowing” (195). In other words, Heidegger claims that hermeneutic circularity is not vicious circularity wherein no new or better understanding can be uncovered. Instead, the movement between understanding the temporality of life through one’s end in death and one’s place in a particular moment in history yields insight for Dasein. Olson’s speaker, for instance, takes a resolute stance as a result of his leap into the hermeneutic circle:

Take, then, my answer:
there is a tide in a man
moves him to his moon and,
though it drop him back
he works through ebb to mount
the run again and swell
to be tumescent I (*CP* 14)

These opening lines demonstrate the movement of understanding of being “to the moon” and back—from a view of the end, the whole, back to a particular reality, and the tone is one of forthright resolve, which is appropriate in one’s encounter with one’s own temporality, or one’s own death. One takes ownership of one’s existence when faced

with the whole of one's existence.

Of Olson's poems from the 1940s (pre-"Projective Verse"), the most acclaimed is "The Kingfishers." Ralph Maud, who has written a book-length study on the poem, agrees with Edward Halsey Foster and Thomas F. Merrill, both of whom state that "The Kingfishers" realizes in verse what "Projective Verse" proclaims in prose.¹⁶ Besides exemplifying the poetic techniques described in "Projective Verse," "The Kingfishers" also deals with some of the same philosophical issues Olson's seminal essay raises—specifically issues of ontology, of being, and knowledge of being—issues that Halden-Sullivan uncovers in her Heideggerian analysis of the poem. Halden-Sullivan argues that part of Olson's purpose in the poem is to invite "readers to examine the dimensions of their relationship to the world by shifting between ontic and ontological modes of being, in other words, the dichotomy apparent in human experiences between a thing as a *thing* and its *meaning*" (38). She states that Olson juxtaposes his encyclopedic and/or scientific descriptions of the kingfisher's physical nature with the bird's "significance in folklore" (39), its various meanings within legend or superstition in order to demonstrate the ultimate insufficiency of either mode of being/knowing. The so-called objective stance of science cannot, in Halden-Sullivan's words, "show what an entity means," while legend obscures the actual factual dimension, or "thingliness" of the bird through "the hardening *logos* of accreted tradition" (41). Only by escaping both traditional ways of knowing, she argues, to get to the thing itself subjectively (not with any pretension to scientific or any other objectivity) can Olson achieve the stance he is after.

Maud describes the poem, broadly, as essentially political: “Let us state unequivocally, then, that at the core of ‘The Kingfishers’ is the issue of politics” (41). In his epilogue Maud states, quite succinctly, what might be called his paraphrase of the poem:

All right, the poem is about America. The maggots are here; America is putrifying. It was brutalized from the start by a conquistador who predicted ourselves and our perjuracracy. How can we reverse the situation? How can we get some sweetness and light out of it? One, we can look for the most creative, energetic political model available. For Olson in 1949 this was China. Two, we can study the origins of American history and face up to the offenses against the aboriginal populations, and the cannibalistic-genocidal impulses involved. Three, we can look long at our own society until it reveals its shamefulness, and search for something other than what we have had from Greece and Rome to rectify our stance toward the future. Lastly, as individuals, we can try to understand our changing natures and enduring moral structure, to offer resistance to any change but the change we will into being. The poem, in my understanding of it, is a thoughtful response to the problem of being a sensitive American. (123).

For my purposes of demonstrating Olson’s hermeneutic stance, I will draw on both Halden-Sullivan’s and Maud’s approaches. Though each critic presents important interpretations of the poem (Halden-Sullivan by seeing it within the framework of

hermeneutic ontology and Maud by fully explaining its thematic range as didactic literature), neither emphasizes enough the way in which Olson explores the complex relationship between being and tradition, which I believe constitutes an important thematic component of the poem.

Maud's broadly political understanding of "The Kingfishers" is instructive because it locates the poem's beginning in America, specifically Washington D.C. (Olson's home at the time of its composition), where the Prufrock-like Fernand is "sliding along the wall of the night, losing himself / in some crack of the ruins" (*CP* 86).¹⁷ The poem is born out of the "ruins" of a decayed western civilization. Olson quotes Mao Tse Tung (who at the time was marshaling support for his communist revolution) whom he translates as saying "The light is in the east. Yes. And we must rise, act" (*CP* 91). Olson can find no way forward from out of the "perjorocracy" (an important neologism that Olson uses for the first time in this poem) of western civilization; neither can he turn to the tradition or heritage of Greece and Rome: "I am no Greek, hath not th'advantage. / And of course no Roman" (*CP* 92). Olson has to expand his horizons, look outside "the Western Box" to Mao's China and to the Yucatan.¹⁸ It is the act of uncovering other traditions to which Olson's last line refers: "I hunt among stones" (*CP* 93). In the Yucatan he must uncover the tradition from the stones toppled by conquistadors who "tore the eastern idols down, toppled / the temple walls" (*CP* 91). His last question, "Shall you uncover honey / where maggots are?" (no line break—*CP* 93) points to the need to expand the horizon of the tradition of the West, to "hunt" for another way.

In the second section of “The Kingfishers,” Olson moves from Fernand’s discourse on the kingfisher, lost as he is among the ruins, to what Halden-Sullivan describes as an “ontic” or objective description of the bird and its nesting habits:

It nests at the end of a tunnel bored by itself in a bank. There, six or eight white and translucent eggs are laid, on fishbones not on bare clay, on bones thrown up in pellets by the birds.

On these rejectamenta

(as they accumulate they form a cup-shaped structure) the young are born. And, as they are fed and grow, this nest of excrement and decayed fish becomes

a dripping, fetid mass (*CP* 87)

Within the logic of the entire poem, the “fetid” nest is what has become of western civilization. Such an image would seem to lend credence to those who see in Olson an impulse to utterly destroy tradition in order to make way for new modes of being and thought. But Olson does not advocate getting rid of the nest in this poem. Instead, he immediately follows that image with the words of Mao Tse Tung (from a speech he delivered in France) “nous devons / nous lever / et agir!” (*CP* 87), which can be translated “we must rise up and act!” So the young, or future possibility, born into a nest of ruins, must rise up out of the ruins. Possibility is necessarily shaped by a past, a tradition, though possibility is not necessarily completely determined by that tradition.

The image of the fetid nest out of which the kingfisher young are born is representative of the problem at issue in the entire poem: How can one create out of a ruined tradition? In Hans-Georg Gadamer's hermeneutics, tradition plays a necessary role in any event of understanding. For, as he states, "Understanding is, essentially, a historically-effected event" (300). Tradition acts as a bridge connecting the past to the present situation. Pure objectivity is impossible because one cannot jump off the bridge of tradition, so to speak, to gain a purely objective, or unprejudiced, understanding of the present situation. However, though tradition cannot be fully objectified and discarded in the event of understanding, tradition itself is not, in Gadamer's terms, "a permanent precondition" (293). He goes on, "rather, we produce it [tradition] ourselves inasmuch as we understand, participate in the evolution of tradition, and hence further determine it ourselves" (293). Our experiences constantly work to shape and re-shape the tradition out of which we understand any particular situation at hand.

The context for the above quotation from Gadamer, interestingly enough, is a discussion of the hermeneutic circle as described by Heidegger. A fatalistic interpretation of the hermeneutic circle would see it as a vicious circle: if every interpretation depends on a previous interpretation (or a tradition), then how can any new, relevant understandings come about? Gadamer seeks to show how the hermeneutic circle is still, in Heidegger's terms, a "primordial" precondition for understanding, but yet is still not a vicious circle because it is constantly being reformed with every new present experience. We have seen how Olson, in "The K," takes his readers with him in his "primordial" leap into the hermeneutic circle by which he sees himself as part of the

cycles of history. In “The Kingfishers” Olson shows how a hermeneutic stance does not bind one permanently within those cycles; rather, one works out of tradition such that tradition is reformed as one will “rise, act” and expand one’s horizons.

Olson’s effort to look to Mao Tse Tung’s revolution and to the pre-colonial Yucatan cultures suggests his willingness to expand his horizons in order to work creatively towards finding solutions for the ruined West. Gadamer, in writing about the interrelationship of horizon and tradition, speaks, I believe, to Olson’s effort in “The Kingfishers”:

The horizon of the present is continually in the process of being formed because we are continually having to test all our prejudices. An important part of this testing occurs in encountering the past and in understanding the tradition from which we come. Hence, the horizon of the present cannot be formed without the past. (306)

Olson does the work of testing his prejudices, coming to an understanding of the past through painstaking investigation that shows his heritage to be the product of an ugly “dripping, fetid mass” of colonialism, of perjoracracy. Thus Olson writes,

The light is in the east. Yes. And we must rise, act. Yet
in the west, despite apparent darkness (the whiteness
which covers all), if you look, if you can bear, if you can, long enough
[. . .]
so you must, and, in that whiteness, into that face, with what candor look
(CP 91)

Though Olson expands his horizons to revise that tradition out of which he can interpret and act, he is “Yet / in the west,” in the darkness of it. He cannot destroy that tradition out of which he comes, and no amount of revision will make it new again; but he can rise up and act in an informed way to try to create a new future, better than what is a present available. Such an expansion of horizon and reformation of tradition, however, could only occur by, in Gadamer’s terms, “encountering the past and in understanding the tradition from which we come.” Olson recognizing the ruinous nature of the western colonial tradition, emphasizes the difficulty of encountering this past, the ugly “whiteness” that spread over the American continents: “if you look, if you can bear, if you can, long enough” // [. . .] “so you must.”

Olson’s willingness to stare into the ugly “whiteness” of the “face” of the history of western civilization, as well as his willingness to look to the East to expand his horizons, speaks to his sense of participation in what Gadamer calls “the evolution of tradition” (293). Any time one leaps into the hermeneutic circle primordially, one’s stance is bound to be on shifty ground. Olson does not view the past as a static monolithic structure to be either admired or destroyed. Nor is it a storehouse of information that was discovered “back then” and can be useful now. In other words, Olson realizes the hermeneutic stance involves a non-identical appropriation of the past as one is open to future possibilities. One’s sense of the past evolves as one exists in each moment, opening up new horizons. In “The Kingfishers,” Olson’s use of the pre-Socratic philosopher Heraclitus speaks to his sense of “the evolution of tradition”: “Into the same river no man steps twice” (*CP* 89). The past is always involved in a synthetic

combination with the present such that it can never be static.

Olson was, among other things, a historian. Just a quick overview of *The Maximus Poems* evidences Olson's acute knowledge of the history of Gloucester, as well as the North American colonies as a whole. Olson's sense of the shifty nature of the past has implications for how he envisions any possible future. Olson's hermeneutic stance does not involve any notion of progress. In "The Kingfishers" Olson is after "not accumulation but change" (CP 89). Olson does not envision a world that can use the past (much like a storehouse of information) and its accumulated knowledge in order to build a more and more sophisticated, intelligent, and tolerant society. His sense of the proper use of history is much like Gadamer's in *Truth and Method* when he speaks of historical research: "Modern historical research is not only research, but the handing down of tradition. We do not see it only in terms of progress and verified results; in it we have, as it were, a new experience of history whenever the past resounds in a new voice" (284). David E. Linge says that Gadamer's project enriches our understanding of the past so that it appears as "an inexhaustible *source of possibilities of meaning* rather than as a passive object of investigation" (xix). Likewise, Olson's hermeneutic stance is productive rather than reproductive. In "The Kingfishers" Olson sets out to seek how the past can resound with a new voice. This is why he expands his horizons beyond Greece and Rome to incorporate Mao Tse Tung's China and the history of the Yucatan.

Olson's reference to Greece and Rome near the end of "The Kingfishers" demonstrates that he wished to move beyond a static sense of a western tradition, a storehouse of information or of texts that can be depended on as a foundation for the

present. The hermeneutic stance that Olson takes necessitates an openness to existence that lays one open to risk in a way that a static vision of tradition will not allow. He writes,

I am no Greek, hath not th'advantage.

And of course, no Roman:

he can take no risk that matters,

the risk of beauty least of all. (*CP* 92)

Olson's derision of the Roman is clear, but his attitude toward Greece in this passage is less clear. Ralph Maud's interpretation, that Olson's elevated, Elizabethan diction is intended as mocking verbal irony (so that it's not *really* an advantage to be a Greek), seems to fit with Olson's overall approach to post-Socratic Greek thought. For instance, in "Human Universe," Olson writes, "We have lived long in a generalizing time, at least since 450 B.C." (155). He accuses Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle of introducing the dangers of logic, idealism, and classification into our thought in such a way that we tend "to make a 'universe' out of discourse," (156) allowing concepts to distort things and events as they are in themselves. Things and events, in the thought of these Greeks, become serviceable toward ends outside the bounds of temporal existence. Olson wishes to discard this discourse, which is "language as the act of thought about the instant," for a temporally grounded "language as the act of the instant" (156).

Romans make their way into Olson's writings less frequently than Greeks, but he evidences distaste for their imperialistic culture in his play "Apollonius of Tyana." In this play, Olson discovers two problems with Rome: first, "unity was crowding out

diversity” and second, unity was seen “as a goal (making Rome an empire, say)” (146). Thus, Olson’s hero, Apollonius, attacks the very idea of universals, whether in the form of empire, or simply as the basis for discourse that seems to provide a safety net, a false sense of security in ideals that Olson’s stance won’t allow him to adopt.

Heidegger shares with Olson a distaste for the legacy of the Roman Empire, and he sees humanism as an ideal that is formed in proximity with the ideal of empire.

William V. Spanos argues that Heidegger discloses “the origins of the humanist discourse of truth in the Roman reduction of the originary thinking of the Greeks [. . .] to a derivative thinking intended to serve the imperial project” (*Heidegger and Criticism* 170). Spanos founds this portion of his argument on the basis of Heidegger’s insistence that “the rootlessness of Western thought” begins with the transition of Greek philosophical terms into Roman equivalents that are used to educate the imperial citizenry in Roman virtues. According to Spanos, by detailing the “technological” takeover of Greek thought (technological in that “the end determines the process of inquiry”—see page 141 of *Heidegger and Criticism*), Heidegger “implicates the discourse of humanism and the sociopolitical practice of modern democratic/humanistic states with Rome’s imperial project” (*Heidegger and Criticism* 140).

Whether or not Heidegger intended such an implication is secondary to his overall concern with humanism and how such hierarchical, generalizing thought distances humanity from temporal being. Heidegger, in “The Age of the World View,” describes how reliance on scientific methodology for an idea of truth reduces the world to an objectifiable picture, or view. This objectification of truth, of the world itself,

necessitates a more powerful notion of a subject who does the viewing. Heidegger then states that “It is no wonder that humanism arises only when the world becomes a view” (13). He says, “the more completely and thoroughly the conquered [i.e. objectified] world stands at our disposal, the more objective the object seems to be, the more subjectively—that is, the more prominently—does the subjectum rise up, and the more inevitably do contemplation and explanation of the world and doctrine about the world turn into a doctrine of man” (12-13).

In “Human Universe” Olson says “science has run away with everything” (160). In the objective world view of science, humanity loses its “peculiar responsibility” (160) for the earth, or as he calls it in “The Praises,” “respect for / the materials” (*CP* 100). In a letter to Robert Creeley, Olson says that “what we have had as ‘humanism’” places “man, out of all proportion of, relations,” so that man is “mis-centered” (“Mayan Letters” 112). In “The Kingfishers” Olson writes,

When the attentions change / the jungle
leaps in
even the stones are split
they rive

Or,
enter
that other conqueror we more naturally recognize
he so resembles ourselves (*CP* 88)

Facing up to the necessity of change is risky. There is a tendency, these lines suggest, to fall back on the ideals of humanism (that which “so resembles ourselves”) when faced with the need for change, when “the jungle / leaps in” and threatens the stability of our discourse, of our ideals. Essentially, Olson’s insists, in “Human Universe” and in his other writings, that generalizing, universalizing, hierarchical forms of thought keep humanity in “the fetid nest” of traditional forms. Thus, Greece and Rome and the resulting discourse of science and humanism, as tradition, must be, not destroyed, but taken up into a new horizon of possibility.

If in “The Kingfishers” the poet finds himself in the “dripping, fetid mass” of western civilization, the poet finds himself in a no less unhappy place in the Dantean hell of “In Cold Hell, in Thicket.” But the poet’s struggle in “In Cold Hell, in Thicket” is not how to create a new vision out of a corrupted tradition; instead, the poet is concerned more with how to create art in more general terms. The poem basically deals with the aesthetic problem of the combination of form and content in the artwork. However, just as in “Projective Verse” Olson branches out from his aesthetic concerns into a hermeneutic ontology, or “stance toward reality” that could embody his aesthetics, so does “In Cold Hell, in Thicket” begin with aesthetic concerns only to move towards a stance that embraces Olson’s difficult aesthetic.

In hell, form has become cold, lifeless, cut off from content. Content, likewise, is chaotic, cut off from form that makes it useful. Olson begins the poem,

In cold hell, in thicket, how
abstract (as high mind, as not lust, as love is) how

strong (as strut or wing, as polytope, as things are
constellated) how
strung, how cold
can a man stay (can man) confronted
thus? (CP 155)

For the poet caught in this hell, the question is, “What has he to say?” Olson goes on, “In hell it is not easy / to know the trceries, the markings” (CP 155). It is hard to be precise, to make some good use out of chaos. But that is the poet’s task: the poet “who, in this brush, stands / reluctant, imageless, unpleasured, caught in a sort of hell, how / shall he convert this underbrush [. . .]?” (CP 156). Olson continues with the question of how to make use of the chaos of the thicket throughout the next section of the poem: “How can he change, his question is / these black and silvered knivings, these / awkwardnesses?” (CP 156). He needs to make some use of the surrounding chaos, “for a wagon, for a sleigh, for the beak of, the running sides of / a vessel fit for / moving” (CP 156).

Olson uses the verb “raise” multiple times in the poem. The thicket of recalcitrant content must be raised, must be melded to form, or else it is not of any use: “The branches made against the sky are not of use, are / already done, like snow-flakes, do not, cannot service / him who has to raise” (CP 156). And just a few lines later he asks, “how sufficiently far can he raise the thickets of / this wilderness?” (CP 156). Robert von Hallberg states that Olson often derided abstraction and generalizing while his verse and prose both consistently rely upon numerous abstractions (“Olson, Whitehead, and the Objectivists” 94). Von Hallberg shows that Olson, himself, through

Whitehead and other sources, believed in the necessity of abstraction despite his polemical rhetoric against it. He quotes from a Whitehead passage that Olson underlined to show Olson had a sense of abstraction's necessity: "Thus the actual world is built up of actual occasions; and by the ontological principle whatever things there are in any sense of 'existence', are derived by abstraction from actual occasions" (qtd. in von Hallberg 95). Von Hallberg goes on to quote another passage from Whitehead that perhaps more clearly points to Olson's notion of the use of abstraction, or form in relation to content: "Abstraction expresses nature's mode of interaction and is not merely mental. When it abstracts, thought is merely conforming to nature—or rather, it is exhibiting itself as an element of nature" (qtd. in von Hallberg 95). Abstract thought for Olson is "an element of nature." The problem Olson has with the "generalizing" of the Greeks is the positing of an ideal that nature, humanity, or any activity must conform to. But abstraction as part of the process of nature, of humanity, of activity, is a necessity.

The problem of abstract form versus chaotic content is symbolized further through a reference to the Egyptian sky-goddess, or goddess of space, Nut, who makes love to her brother, Geb, a god of earth: "the mountings by which space / declares herself, arched, as she is, the sister, / awkward stars drawn for teats to pleasure him, the brother" (*CP* 155). In this passage Olson collapses the notion of abstraction into space. The wedding of form (abstraction/space) and content (here, earth) is an act wherein space nourishes earth, wherein form or abstraction raises content, provides for it. Olson's famous opening sentence of *Call Me Ishmael* may be relevant here: "I take SPACE to be the central fact to man born in America" (11). Melville, in *Moby-Dick* at least, was a

writer who could “ride on such space” (12). Olson goes on to comment in that same section of the book that space “gives trajectory” (12). Olson’s poet/speaker in “In Cold Hell, in Thicket” must find a way to “ride” space, find a way to give the content of the thicket trajectory, a way forward. Abstraction, for Olson, when used in a positive sense, means space, an opening outward into which content can be nourished, can have room to grow, to be “raised.” The reason the content of the thicket must be “raised” or extended into form (“form is never more than the extension of content”) is so that it can be of use for the given moment. In “Human Universe” Olson’s problem with post-Socratic Greek generalization is the entropic loss of energy that occurs when an event or object is made to fit into a pre-given, abstract formulation or classification. He writes “that a thing, any thing, impinges on us by a more important fact, its self-existence, without reference to any other thing, in short, the very character of it which calls our attention to it, which wants us to know more about it, its particularity. This is what we are confronted by, not the thing’s “class,” any hierarchy, of quality or quantity, but the thing itself, and its relevance to ourselves who are the experience of it” (157-8). Metaphysics makes the “error” of being “descriptive” (162), which means classifying things, putting hierarchical value on events, objects mechanically—applying an exterior rule to them. But science is not a corrective for metaphysics because science pretends an objectivity that is alien to humanity’s function. Olson still advocates valuation of materials. That is why he derides science; it cannot evaluate what is of use for any given moment: “science has upset all balance and blown value, man’s peculiar responsibility, to the winds” (160). The “human universe” avoids pre-given formulas in order to stay active in the moment, but

does so with an eye towards valuation so that each moment can be made useful.

Obviously, Olson's form/content dilemma requires more than a merely aesthetic solution. A stance is required, a hermeneutic ontology that avoids metaphysical abstractions, but still concerns itself with valuation, or in Heidegger's terms, "the meaning of being." In Part II of the poem, Olson asks four "how" questions that center on how the poet can meld form and content. But he cannot reach an answer until he answers the question of who he is himself—how he should understand his own being-in-the-world. Thus, the first strophe of Part III of the poem asks the question, "Who / am I?" (*CP* 157). His answer is strikingly similar to his explanation of objectism in "Projective Verse." Just as in his famous manifesto, Olson begins with aesthetic issues of form and content and ends up writing about the ontological notion of objectism—seeing oneself as one object among other objects in a "field" (247)—so Olson in this poem begins with aesthetics and ends with ontology. He writes, "Who am I but by a fix, and another, / a particle, and the congery of particles carefully picked one by another" (*CP* 157). This peculiar "objectism," this way of understanding oneself as merely an object is the subject of the remainder of the poem.

The key feature of objectism, as Olson describes it in "Projective Verse" 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 (247).

The idea of a soul, or an interior, non-temporal aspect of being is alien to Heidegger's hermeneutics and Gadamer's as well. For both philosophers, being is always being-in-time, totally temporal. Heidegger's ontological analysis demonstrates being as continually exteriorized in a web of relations, or what Olson calls in "Projective Verse," "the larger field of objects" (247). The basic idea is that being is not set "in here" (within the self, soul, or ego) against a world "out there," but is always "out there" part and "particle" of the world, caught up contingently within it, in its history and place. Thus Olson writes,

[. . .] but hell now
is not exterior, is not to be got out of, is
the coat of your own self, the beasts
emblazoned on you. (*CP* 158)

The poet caught in hell must realize his position as an object, not so much caught *in* the thicket as *of* the thicket, not so much caught in hell as part of hell himself.

Once the poet takes his stance as object, once he sees himself as intimately part of his environment, opened to it instead of closed off against it, possibilities open up; poetry can now happen. Where before he was afraid to move, seeing himself trapped in the cold mud—"he is frozen, not daring / where the grass grows, to move his feet from fear / he'll trespass on his own dissolving bones"—*CP* 156)—he begins to move in an open field:

He shall step, he
will shape, he
is already also

moving off

into the soil, on to his own bones

he will cross

(there is always a field,

for the strong there is always

an alternative) (*CP* 159)

However heroic the poet's decision to take this open stance, hell is not thereby transformed into heaven. Uncoiling from the closed-off position that allowed the "interference" of the soul or ego, and allowing one's being to be exposed to the surrounding world means that one becomes vulnerable. Olson's next line reads, "But a field / is not a choice, is / as dangerous as a prayer, as a death" (*CP* 159). He becomes like the thicket he is part of: "roots lie, on the surface, as nerves are laid open" (*CP* 157). Vulnerable, nerves fully exposed to the environment—that's how poetry is made for Olson. In "Projective Verse," Olson says the stance of objectism allows one to achieve "an humilitas sufficient to make him of use" (247). He goes on to say that man's usefulness "lies in how he conceives his relation to nature," and that this relationship—conceived as the humilitas of objectism—will allow him "to listen, and his hearing through himself will give him secrets objects share" (247). Poetry comes from listening, from being open to one's surroundings by seeing being as temporal, as

primarily exteriorized in time as a participant in a field of other objects.

Openness has been distinguished as one of the hallmarks of Gadamer's hermeneutics. Gerald Bruns perceptively states that Gadamer's openness is "not the open-mindedness of liberal pluralism," but an "exposure to the other, in which our self-possession, or say our existence, is at stake" (195). For Gadamer a hermeneutic experience means one's being is put into question. Toward the end of *Truth and Method* Gadamer says that an infinite mind cannot have a hermeneutical experience (486) because the vulnerable, temporal position of being put into question is not available to such a mind. But to temporal being, being caught up inescapably in a particular history, unable to get beyond either history or language to gain pure, objective understanding, the hermeneutic, open, vulnerable stance is available. Gadamer writes, "The hermeneutical situation is not a regrettable distortion that affects the purity of understanding, but the condition of its possibility" (472). He writes that in the hermeneutic stance one is "prepared for it [Gadamer is here speaking of a text] to tell him something" (269). One is open to what experience is before one; one is open to being questioned. Gadamer states, "The essence of the question is to open up possibilities and keep them open" (299). But this openness to possibilities risks stability. What one brings to a new experience, one's "prejudice" (to use Gadamer's terminology), is put at risk in the openness of the question: "In fact our own prejudice is properly brought into play by being put at risk. Only by being given full play is it able to experience the other's claim to truth and make it possible for him to have full play himself" (299).

This desire to risk stability, to put one's tradition, one's prejudices at risk has

been shown in Olson's "The Kingfishers." The end of "In Cold Hell, in Thicket" also demonstrates a Gadamerian openness that allows oneself to be put into play. Olson's term in the poem is "waver." The poet, vulnerable, open to his surroundings, "will forever waver" in the contingency of his historical, temporal condition, never able to come to full closure:

as even snowflakes waver in the light's eye

as even forever wavers (gutters
in the wind of loss)

even as he will forever waver

precise as hell is,
precise
as any words, or wagon,
can be made. (*CP* 160)

The poet is precise because he is so open to the world around him. Thereby he can provide an accurate measure for the world that is "of use" (to return to a favorite Olson term). Just as any measuring instrument is more accurate the more it allows itself to be influenced by that which it is measuring (in this case, the more it can bend or waver with the wind), so the poet must let go of all ideas, forms that he might wish to rely on as eternally true, and allow himself to be influenced by his environment so that the measure

he provides will be precise—a perfect melding of form and content. The stance that allows the poet to waver is what Olson calls objectism, and objectism is very much a hermeneutical stance.

Olson again speaks of the melding of form and content in relation to the poet's openness in "Concerning Exaggeration, or How, Properly, to Heap Up." Speaking of dignity (which, going back to Indo-European roots, comes from the verb "to receive," which, of course, requires openness), Olson writes

however much it [dignity] does lie
in particulars—as distorted as an instant is, is
content. And its form? How shall you find it
if you are not, in like degree, allowable, are not
as it is, at least, in preparation for
an equal act? (*CP* 210)

The dignified stance of the poet is the stance that is open to contingency, vulnerable to the vicissitudes of the instant at hand. The poet that is "allowable" is able to be a precise instrument, as in "In Cold Hell, in Thicket," as only by such a stance can the poet "find" the form that precisely measures the content of the instant.

Gadamer's ideas on openness basically come from Heidegger's notion that humanity's use of language is not just a product of the will, or an ego-controlled event, but is a product of humanity's being situated in language to begin with, or humanity's "listening" to language. Gadamer writes, "Language is not just one of man's possessions in the world; rather, on it depends the fact that man has a *world* at all" because "man's

being-in-the-world is primarily linguistic” (443). He also says, “What is true of understanding is just as true of language. Neither is to be grasped as a fact that can be empirically investigated. Neither is ever simply an object but instead comprehends everything that can ever be an object” (404). Language is that out of which understanding arises; thus, our understanding can never fully objectify language. The necessity of openness, or to use Heidegger’s term, “listening,” stems from our inability to step outside of language (and the understanding that can only come to us by this language) in order to understand it objectively. The prejudices that come with any temporal understanding can only be put into play, or questioned, when one is so “allowable.”

In Heidegger’s essay “On the Way to Language,” he argues that, primordially, language is “Saying” and that Saying can be understood phenomenologically as showing, or bringing to light. This showing of the Saying of language involves a kind of “owning,” or Heidegger also calls it “appropriation,” which is a bringing into presence of being (127). Heidegger then demonstrates that human speech is not an original product of the mind, but is rather a response to language itself as saying or showing. In other words, speaking, for Heidegger, cannot be separated from the listening that it always already is. He writes, “In our speaking as a listening to language, we say again the Saying we have heard” (124). Thus, language appropriates humanity by the movement of Saying into speech. Or, in other words, language speaks humanity, not vice-versa, because Saying comes into speech by appropriating humanity to itself. Near the end of the essay Heidegger writes, “Language is the house of Being because language, as

how can you avoid the conclusion, how
can you be otherwise than
a metaphor? (*CP* 211)

The most basic definition of metaphor given by Webster's is a figure of speech. Each person, situated within language, is, in an essential way, a figure of speech. If "Being that can be understood is language," that is, whatever one can understand about one's own existence is understood only in language, then the way one understands oneself is as a figure of speech. But this cryptic phrase of one's being a metaphor can be understood another way. "Concerning Exaggeration" is bookended by strophes that emphasize the need for poets to be "circumspect." The first strophe states

About blood, he said, be
more circumspect, for that matter,
these days, about anything
has been cried in the streets. (*CP* 208)

The poem may be thought of, in basic terms, as a meditation on how one, as a projective poet, can be circumspect and still write from out of one's own breath, as Olson advocates in "Projective Verse." Though the poet recognizes himself as situated within time, language, and place such that he cannot gain objective perspective, he must still be "circumspect," and not simply think that poetry is merely a record of his own egocentric experience in that world. He must, to take the word circumspection literally, "look around," listen, and thereby speak. Thus, the poet cannot see himself as otherwise than metaphor of what he writes. He cannot take a purely subjectivistic, egocentric

perspective, but he cannot, as well, take a purely objective perspective as if he can be so removed from the world. What he writes is of himself, but by circumspection. One's life is turned into the metaphor, the likeness, of one's listening/speaking. The poem as the allowable listening/speaking of the poet makes for a poem that is the poet's life without being an ego-centric, overly self-conscious or self-absorbed affair; nor does it become ego-dominated, willful manipulation of the world into a poet's idea, or a pathetic fallacy in which the world stands for the poet's own emotional state. Instead, the poet's speech is his life absorbed in the language of the world.

Circumspection, for Heidegger, is the mode of being in which one looks at an object, not as an object for study or meditation, but for use. Circumspection puts one in a primordial relationship with objects such that a practical understanding of one's relationship to other objects is achieved. In the section of *Being and Time* that deals with circumspection, Heidegger writes, "the less we just stare at the hammer-Thing, and the more we seize hold of it and use it, the more primordial does our relationship to it become, and the more unveiledly is it encountered as that which it is" (98). It is important here to note that Olson calls his stance toward the world "objectism," not "objectivism" (which was, of course, a literary movement of a generation past). Objectivism is too ego-oriented in that in attempting to depict the surrounding world objectively, the poet fails to realize his "containment" (to use a favorite Olson term) within time and language. The proper stance, "objectism," recognizes one's own limitations as bound by language and time, as relating to objects by circumspection—not theoretically, but in such a way that objects are always already impinging meaningfully

upon one's own being-in-the-world.

“Concerning Exaggeration, or How, Properly, to Heap Up” ends this way:

To speak of blood
is so very willful,
or self-incising. In any case,
he who is presented with her answer [referring to the Cenozoic beast] is
that answer: the mephitic
is only confirmatory. Yet
the vapor of those instants
–blood, breath, head, what–
require like circumspection

(was what he said,
at that point of
his time) (*CP* 211)

The poem speaks to the necessity of a stance toward the world that recognizes oneself as situated within a particular time, and within a particular language (thus the wording of the last lines within the parentheses). The poet's relationship to the world is one of openness (being “allowable”) and circumspection such that the poem is not willful speech that seeks to manipulate the world into a representation of the poet's feelings, but is instead the poet's listening to the world in intimate, even perhaps vulnerable, relation to it. Thus, the poet's life is nothing else than metaphor—a figure of speech, a being that

is caught up in language.

“As the Dead Prey Upon Us” demonstrates, yet again, how Olson recognizes one’s being as being caught up in history. The title of this poem might suggest that the Paul Bové is right in his analysis of Olson’s stance that sees tradition as purely negative. However, the poem disallows such an easy dismissal of the past as only negative:

As the dead prey upon us,
they are the dead in ourselves,
awake, my sleeping ones, I cry to you,
disentangle the nets of being! (CP 388)

In these, the first lines of the poem, Olson recognizes what Gadamer might call “historically effected consciousness,” or consciousness that recognizes that “*Understanding is, essentially, a historically effected event*” (301). The dead are “the dead in ourselves,” that which has gone before us, but that impinges significantly upon our understanding of the present moment. One might, at first, understand Olson’s call to “my sleeping ones” as a call to other individuals to avoid being preyed upon by dead tradition; however, later in the poem, a connection is made between the dead that prey upon us and the sleeping ones. It seems “the dead in ourselves” are also the “sleeping ones” Olson attempts to awaken:

O souls, in life and in death,
awake, even as you sleep, even in sleep
know what wind
even under the crankcase of the ugly automobile

lifts it away, clears the sodden weight of goods,
equipment, entertainment [. . .]
lifts the sodden nets (*CP* 391)

Olson calls for an awakening of “the dead in ourselves,” a use of tradition in such a way that we can be open to possibility. Like the accurate instrument in “In Cold Hell, in Thicket” that “forever wavers,” so must souls awaken to “know what wind” can do, to be held open to the possibility of the contingency of being-in-time, of being historical. The problem in “As the Dead Prey Upon Us” is not the dead, but sleep—the allowance of “equipment, entertainment” and other such “goods” to loll us into unawareness of our entanglement in “the nets of being.”

And what are “the nets of being?” The problem of the nets, it seems, is the problem of being situated in time:

[. . .] men and angels
stay caught in the nets, in the immense nets
which spread out across each plane of being, the multiple nets
which hamper at each step of the ladders (*CP* 389)

The nets keep us “hampered” in being, not away from it. In the nets we cannot get outside of the world in such a way as to make metaphysical or objective pronouncements about it. The key for Olson is not to ignore the nets (fall asleep in them) or to pretend we can simply throw them off as if they do not hamper us; instead we have to disentangle the knots, each knot at each moment:

O souls, go into everything,

let not one knot pass
through your fingers
let not any they tell you
you must sleep as the net
comes through your authentic hands (*CP* 394)

Olson doesn't often use the word "authentic," but it is a key word, of course, for Heidegger, and it fits well here. Olson counters what might be called "inauthentic" sleep in "the they" (another Heideggerian term) with an authentic, or "resolute" taking up of one's own being-in-the-world. Actually, Heidegger's analysis of "the they" as a mode of being that one falls into—a "leveling down" of all possibilities of Being" that "disburdens" and "accommodates" and makes things convenient¹⁹—is a good description of the sleep of the dead in the opening section of "As the Dead Prey Upon Us." Linking the dead to the inhabitants of the cave in Plato's famous allegory, Thomas Merrill suggests that the dead are caught up in an unreal existence of inhuman "equipments" (124). Olson places the dead amongst "the beam of the movie projector, some record / playing on the victrola" as well as "posters and presentations / of brake linings and other automotive accessories, cardboard / displays." They are "poor and doomed / to mere equipments." But it is not so much the unreality of this sleep that Olson emphasizes but "the tawdriness of their life in hell" (*CP* 388), or what Heidegger describes as the "leveling down" of being.

Olson calls for an authentic existence that is awake to the entanglements of the nets of being. Olson shows in this poem that we cannot get beyond the nets, take a stance

outside them to know things perfectly or objectively. One aspect of the sleep Olson derides in the poem is the notion of eternity and the ideas of perfection that come along with that notion. Being is not eternal, but is determined by time. Olson writes, “the nets of being / are only eternal if you sleep as your hands ought to be busy” (CP 395). One must awaken from the drowse that a metaphysical perspective can bring to one’s existence. Elsewhere in the poem Olson writes, “The death in life (death itself) / is endless, eternity / is the false cause” (CP 392). Here Olson explicitly denounces a perspective that would put a teleological value on existence—in other words, a perspective that would determine the worth of one’s being-in-the-world by a measurement outside that being, that is by an eternal measure or metaphysical categorization. The above lines can be interpreted many different ways: one way is to understand Olson to say that death is the end—that’s it. One cannot pretend there’s an eternal life after death—death is endless. Another way to interpret this passage, though, and one that is in keeping with a Heideggerian analysis, is to see the “sleep” of the dead that “prey upon us,” the “death in life” as involving an understanding of existence that doesn’t recognize temporality as primary. For Heidegger, the meaning of being is time, and seeing one’s being as caught up in time, primarily, is the key to gaining authentic understanding of existence.²⁰ Thus, for Heidegger, “being-towards-death” becomes a principal mode of authentic being. Existing in the face of one’s own finite temporality allows one to resolutely take up one’s being-in-time, so to speak, to realize that one’s being is one’s own (Heidegger says, “Death is in every case mine”—*Being and Time* 284), and thus escape the ease of falling into “the they.”

Whether it be a heaven of eternal joy, or a place of abstract, pure forms, or a way of perfectly categorizing all the material of life, Olson denies the perfection of metaphysical perspectives in favor of life lived in the contingency of the moment. He writes that “perfection / is hidden” (*CP* 390) in the hindrances of the nets of being, and that “Purity // is only an instant of being” (*CP* 389). The knots of the nets of existence, though, present the challenges that come with living life in each contingent moment rather than experiencing each moment in the light of a supposed eternity, or within the categories laid on top of each moment by metaphysical systems. Olson describes what happens when a hermeneutic rather than metaphysical stance is taken towards “the nets of being”:

What passes
is what is,
what shall be, what has
been, what hell and heaven is
is earth to be rent,
to shoot you
through the screen of flame which knot
hides as all knots are a wall ready
to be shot open by you. (*CP* 394-5)

Here is existence caught up in the possibility of each moment as it arises out of “what has been” and is directed toward “what shall be.” Olson, earlier in the poem, describes more fully these knots that contain within them the possibility for being-in-the-world. After

saying “eternity / is the false cause,” Olson says

The knot is other wise, each topological corner
presents itself, and no sword
cuts it, each knot is itself its fire

each knot of which the net is made
is for the hands to untake
the knot’s making. And touch alone
can turn the knot into its own flame. (*CP* 392-3)

The knots of the nets of being are nothing more, or less, than the instant of existence itself. A knot is “its own flame,” and “each knot is itself its fire.” The key for Olson is to be “equal, that is, to the real itself” (to borrow a title of one of his essays), to take a stance that is sufficiently open to experience that does not, either by the categories of metaphysics or the pretended objectivity of science, distort any instant of “the real.” Attempting to disentangle the knots is an image of devoting proper attention to the task of living, moment by moment.

The Maximus Poems

In “Projective Verse” Olson states that “A poem is energy transferred from where the poet got it (he will have some several causations), by way of the poem itself to, all the way over to, the reader” (240). Olson emphasizes a relationship between place, poet, poem, and reader. The title of the opening poem of the epic Maximus series

demonstrates Olson's concern for such relationship: "I, Maximus of Gloucester, to You." The poem, by way of its title, involves poet, place, and reader. The poem will be the "high energy-construct" that will bring poet, place, and reader into a closer bond.

The "of Gloucester" in the title is a clue to the emphasis on place that is apparent throughout *The Maximus Poems*, and just as in his individual lyrics, the hermeneutic stance Olson takes in this series involves an openness to place, to one's environment—especially to what might be called "natural" or "elemental" features of that environment. The opening lines of "I, Maximus of Gloucester, to You" demonstrate this openness to environment:

Off shore, by islands hidden in the blood
jewels and miracles, I, Maximus
a metal hot from boiling water, tell you
what is a lance, who obeys the figures of
the present dance (*MP* 5)

Paul Christensen suggests that Olson seeks in these lines a breaking down "of barriers of subject and object" so that "I," "Gloucester" and "You" can be in more intimate relation (121). The boundary between Maximus and his environment is blurred. The islands offshore are "hidden in the blood." He takes his energy, his heat, from that which surrounds him, so that he is "a metal hot from boiling water." And, despite the apparent didacticism (Maximus will "tell you / what"), the position he takes is, ultimately, one of obedience to "the present dance" of the elemental environment. Sherman Paul writes that Maximus "emerges as a teacher" that teaches love and "obedience not in opposition to

the ‘present dance’ of reality,” but in “harmony with it, as the rhyme of ‘lance’ and ‘dance’ indicates” (121).

Without doubt, Olson is pedagogue in *The Maximus Poems*. Von Hallberg’s *Charles Olson: The Scholar’s Art*, as the title suggests, goes so far as to characterize Olson’s poetics in general as pedagogical (4). The problem with seeing Olson as a teacher (and a particularly pedantic one at that) is that this view tends to undermine the sense of openness towards existence that Olson seeks not only in the first lines of *The Maximus Poems*, but also in many other places in his work. Shahar Bram characterizes the problem well when he says Olson’s didacticism “is incompatible [. . .] with Olson’s stance against authority and hierarchy” (31). Thomas Merrill even predicts that Olson’s stringent didacticism will keep his poems from achieving long-lasting canonical status and says that his poems “demand as much allegiance to the rigid doctrines that support them as any orthodox religion” (214). Judith Halden-Sullivan, however, sees Olson’s pedagogical poetics in a more charitable light. Like Paul, she sees Olson’s efforts as motivated by love, care, and however stringently he may demand allegiance to his particular stance, his stance is ultimately one of *humilitas* (one of Olson’s favorite terms): of listening, of openness, and of vulnerability to the surrounding environment. Halden-Sullivan says that Olson’s approach to education “relinquishes the modern tendency to impose control [. . .] over material in favor of being receptive and responsive to it, to learn from it as it happens” (135-6).

The teacher Halden-Sullivan recognizes, one who teaches openness and responsiveness, appears vividly in “Maximus, to Gloucester: Letter 2.” It begins “. . . .

tell you? ha! Who / can tell another how / to manage the swimming?” (MP 9). As the poem continues, however, Olson does “tell you” how, implicitly, through stories of the heroism of fishermen as they encounter treacherous seas. The poem suggests that it is impossible to give someone, through intellectual discourse, useful knowledge of “how / to manage the swimming.” There is no objective reference point available for discursive, intellectual, or objective knowledge of how to manage difficult waters. Olson shows that the heroic fishermen have a kind of knowledge that is not objective, not gathered from discourse about the subject, but from standing vulnerably open to the elements. He writes in the poem, “they know // it is elements men stand in the midst of” (MP 10). There can be no directives, no eternal, abstract form to abide by, to teach about; in Olson’s classroom it is sink or swim. Knowledge is gained through an organic, open relationship to the environment—a responsiveness in action that equals the demands, the contingencies, the natural world brings forth. One cannot be removed from the world and take up Olson’s educational challenge; the hermeneutic stance requires one to recognize that one is always already involved in a place, in a history, in a language, and one cannot remove oneself from that position to obtain an objective, removed viewpoint. Thus, Olson writes in “I, Maximus of Gloucester, to You”

in! in! the bow-sprit, the bird, the beak
in, the bend is, in, goes in, the form
that which you make, what holds (MP 8)

The hermeneutic stance requires one to be intimately involved with, not removed from, one’s environment. Olson recognizes that useful knowledge is only acquired through

such involvement.

Perhaps the problem with Olson's stance in *The Maximus Poems* is that it involves both openness—a standing “in the midst of” the elements—while it also involves a deep-seated resistance to the modern American culture Olson saw encroaching upon his once relatively isolated city of Gloucester. Olson names this modern culture “perjorocracy”—literally, “worse rule”—and says that it is full of “deathly mu-sick.” Critics such as Merrill and Bram, while admiring Olson generally, see him as too closed off to society, too dogmatic in his rejection of modern culture. But Paul and Halden-Sullivan more charitably see Olson's didacticism as leading to an openness towards experience that is unavailable within the confines of perjorocracy or “mu-sick.” Olson, it seems, is aware of the difficulties of advocating his idea of openness to the surrounding world while at the same time calling for resistance to certain aspects of culture. One passage in “I, Maximus of Gloucester, to You” demonstrates Olson's conundrum:

facts, to be dealt with, as the sea is, the demand
that they be played by, that they only can be, that they must
be played by, said he, coldly, the
ear! (*MP* 6)

Here Olson is clearly advocating his stance of openness, of standing in the world such that one is vulnerable to its contingencies, playing life by ear, so to speak, not by a predetermined script. But in the very next lines, Olson recognizes the difficulty of this kind of existence when perjorocracy is at hand:

By ear, he sd.

But that which matters, that which insists, that which will last,
that! o my people, where shall you find it, how, where, where shall you
listen
when all is become billboards, when all, even silence, is spray-gunned?

when even our bird, my roofs,
cannot be heard

when even you, when sound itself is neoned in? (*MP* 6)

The question for Olson is how to stand “in” existence, open to the world, when one does not wish to be sucked into the “mu-sick” of perjorocracy?

The answer may not easily be found. Admiring critics, such as Merrill and Bram, agree with Altieri that Olson’s “poems rarely fulfill the promise he held out by his prose” (182), which is close to what Bram states about Olson’s didacticism in *The Maximus Poems* being inconsistent with the openness toward existence he advocates. But perhaps one way to bring together Olson’s openness with his resistance to perjorocracy is to see Olson’s poetics as an ethics, or as Fredman names it, a “spiritual discipline” (34). Gadamer, in *Truth and Method*, says that hermeneutics has three parts: interpretation, understanding, and application.²¹ Gadamer discusses the legal system in terms of hermeneutic application. A judge obviously does not have good understanding if he fails to apply the law appropriately in a given case.²² Olson’s hermeneutic stance not only involves the attainment of proper perspective (which calls for good interpretation and

understanding), but it also involves proper application of understanding, or right action. The idea of application involves the concept of propriety—one can apply understanding rightly or wrongly. Olson’s railings against perjuracracy and its “mu-sick” are simply intended to show how to apply one’s understanding in an appropriate way. That is, not every way to take a stance will be appropriate. For instance, giving oneself over to the perjuracracy, to the unconcerned, dislocated “they,” or living inauthentically will not do, for Olson.

In an essay on one of his literary heroes, D. H. Lawrence, Olson writes that Lawrence “chose the advantage of moral perceptions to those of the intellect” (“D. H. Lawrence” 135). And, in an essay on Melville, Olson opposes the notion of reason with “Right Reason”—which he says is the “application of intelligence” to the particularity of phenomena (“The Materials and Weights” 116). Olson sees how ethics is involved in the stance towards reality the poet must take up, and his ideas are close to those Gadamer speaks of when he discusses application as part of his philosophical hermeneutics. Turning to Aristotle, Gadamer looks at the distinction made in *Nicomachean Ethics* between phronesis (which can be translated as “practical wisdom”—or some might say “Right Reason”) and techne. Basically, both Aristotle and Gadamer say that the best approach to the ethical life is not “technical” or rule-based, but open to the contingencies of existence such that one can meet the demands of ethical situations by dwelling in notions of what is possible rather than on expected outcomes based on predetermined rules.²³ The basic thesis of Olson’s essay “Against Wisdom as Such” is that whenever wisdom is seen as preset precepts for behavior, “because of some outside concept and

measure of ‘wisdom,’” then “it damn well has to go, at least from the man of language” (261). Instead, Olson advocates a sense of wisdom that is like *phronesis*—not rule-based, extrinsic measure of people and their actions, but an ability to exist in the possibility of the moment at hand and act according to the shifting demands of the occasion. He writes, “I take it wisdom, like style, is the man—that it is not extricable in any sort of a statement of itself,” and that wisdom is “As his skin is. As his life. And to be parted with only as that is” (261). Charles Altieri writes that Olson founds morality not upon conceptual knowledge, “but in qualities of attentiveness, the only kind of knowledge or contact that matters” (177). The openness Olson advocates in *The Maximus Poems*, then, does not allow one to simply accept anything as good or to avoid decisions about right or wrong. Olson’s is a hermeneutic stance, and therefore it involves application—a careful attentiveness to one’s surroundings in order to decide rightly in any given situation. In demonstrating the application of understanding his stance demands, Olson, in Halden-Sullivan’s words, “helps human beings to achieve their full potentiality to be by enhancing their flexibility to pursue themselves in many ways as a changing ‘projection’” (89). In other words, Olson’s ethics teaches us to “play it by ear.”

Olson, the teacher, begins with the “neoned in” 1950s Gloucester, but his lessons extend back into the very beginnings of European interaction with the Americas. The perjuracracy, it seems, had its beginnings there. In “Stiffening in the Master Founders’ Wills,” Olson links the settling of Boston with Descartes’ philosophy (which was roughly contemporaneous). The poem begins “Descartes, age 34, date Boston’s settling” (*MP* 132). The “new world” was ripe for new life, for openness to possibility, but from the

start the abstract, mechanizing egocentric philosophic systems of the European settlers began to “stiffen” the new world into the will of its “founders.”

The Cartesian mind/body dualism is part of the problem. John Osborne writes that “For Olson, whatever spirit there is informs a body; whatever infinite there is informs the finite; whatever intangibles there are inform the actual; whatever ideal there is informs the real” (168). And Eniko Bollobas states that one of Olson’s overarching concerns is to make his readers “aware of the unmanageable gaps that dualisms create and/or sustain, and “to be able to explain historically these civilizational disjunctions, to desire to go back intellectually to those roots and origins where the gaps do not yet exist, and to recharge the energies through which original unities can be reestablished” (98). Linking Descartes’s dualism (where spirit or mind is separated from the body and exists to manipulate it) with the Puritan foundation of the American colonies is the historical root Olson wants to go back to in order to find and heal the gap or wound created in the wake of dualism. Olson finds in Descartes’s philosophy a distortion of reality, since the mind, or ego, is allowed to escape outside the world, and is able to place an abstract grid on it to make it ready for manipulation. Descartes, according to Olson, doesn’t recognize the limitations of temporality, that the mind exists always within time and cannot be objectively removed from it. He writes, “Stop / right there, said time, Descartes / ’s holding up another hand” (*MP* 134).

The Cartesian duality of mind over body allows for a manipulation of the material abundance of America by merchants:

The apple

on Tenhill farms' boughs
[. . .] was now
already merchandise, not merely sowing,
reaping, building
houses and out houses,
streams, neat Rother

beasts–Canaan
was Cane's, and
all was faulting,
stiffening in the master
founders' wills–
the things of this world. (*MP* 134)

Notice in these lines the emphasis on the material, the physical, “the things of this world” (and the sensuality of the apple, from Judeo-Christian lore) that is being shoved to the side, not noticeable for its own sake, but only a means to the end of profit. Such is the use of Descartes's dualism for Olson.

The abstract, dualistic philosophy that allows “the things of this world” to “stiffen” into merchandise also does the same to the native peoples of the “new world.” In “Maximus to Gloucester: Letter 14” Olson links imperialism with the philosophizing that lets the mind make a conquest of reality instead of seeing the self as one object among other objects, caught up in time. “Letter 14” relates the story of the Hawkins

family, who were known for the establishment of England's slave trade. Basically, Olson says that William Hawkins, the father and original explorer of the family, did right: he got to know the natives and was respected by them. He had a sense of proportion—he had a respect for place and laid himself open to the world around him. His son, however, had different ambitions. Olson writes

He [William] paid goods
for goods
he did not grab them,
as his son did, trading
on his father's welcome. (*MP* 67)

John Hawkins, William's son, built up the slave trade, and, as Olson relates, "It was the son / was knighted, the father, / I restore" (*MP* 67). But John's son, Richard, is even worse. He has imperial dreams of total conquest of the "new" lands. Towards the end of the poem, Olson alludes to Romulus and Remus, the mythical founders of Rome, raised by wolves, to describe what becomes of the Hawkins' family enterprise in the Americas: "Wolf-tits, the even row of it / fit to raise / feral children" (*MP* 69). In "Letter 14," as in "The Kingfishers," Olson demonstrates his antagonism for the imperialism the Roman Empire stood for. Like that empire, John and Richard Hawkins imposed an abstract plan upon the materials of reality. They attempted to lay a grid over the world to order it into a profitable form for them. They did not have the humility of their father to get to know the natives, to listen to them and the surrounding world.

Earlier in the poem, Olson mentions Euclid and describes the problem with his stance. Like Descartes, like the later Hawkins boys, Euclid's line is an abstract distortion of reality. He writes,

seeking,
like Euclid,
the ape's line,
the stance
fit for crowds, to watch
parades, never
to tire. (*MP* 65)

Euclid's line is an abstract idea placed artificially upon reality. In reality, lines shift and are rarely straight; and they certainly do not go on infinitely toward an arbitrarily fixed point. Euclid's line is "the stance / fit for crowds," or "the they" in Heidegger's terms, caught up in the everyday, what Olson might call the perjurocracy of normal American life, watching parades. The crowd never tires; it exists, as Heidegger explains, inauthentically in an eternal now, unaware of the reality of temporality. But Olson's stance involves activity in the world, outward existence that meets reality, not attempting to conform it to the abstract notions of the Cartesian, or objective mind, or the will of the ego. Such a stance does require rest. It is tiring to live actively in the world.

On a much smaller scale than American or global imperialism, Olson criticizes the literary efforts of his friend, Vincent Ferrini, for much the same reasons he criticizes the founders' abstract mercantilism. Ferrini, though, unlike John or Richard Hawkins, or

the Roman Empire, for that matter, is innocent; he doesn't want to be imperialistic or make a conquest of nature. However, Olson sees in Ferrini the same basic stance, even if it is not willful—a stance that does not recognize the proper limitations, or proportion of the human mind. Olson tells Ferrini, in "Letter 5," "Limits / are what any of us / are inside of" (*MP* 21). Ferrini does not seem to recognize the temporality of human existence, how it is limited by its place in time. Thus, he names his magazine "Four Winds." Olson, speaking of that name, says,

Winds, Ferrini,
which are never 4, which have their grave dangers (as writing does)
just because weather
is very precise to
the quarter it comes from (as writing is). (*MP* 29)

The implication is that Ferrini does not have the proper perspective to see things in proportion, to be "equal, that is, to the real itself." Ferrini distorts the natural world because he doesn't recognize human limitations. Olson, in the same vein, teasingly refers to the title of one of Ferrini's volumes of poetry, *The Infinite People*, and then states, "as though there were anything / the equal of the context of now!" (*MP* 26). Again, Ferrini's title shows that he does not recognize the limitations of temporality. There are no "infinite people," only people in their context, just as there can never be four winds.

The last lines of the poem are, for Ferrini, probably the harshest as Olson links him with the rest of America's opportunistic perjorocracy:

It's no use.
There is no place we can meet.
You have left Gloucester.
You are not there, you are anywhere
where there are little magazines
will publish you. (*MP* 29)

Ungrounded in the limitation of place and time, lacking a proper stance, Ferrini is nowhere. He exists in the mind, like the infinite Euclidean line, or the Cartesian grid. Ferrini's stance, perhaps unwittingly, makes him a manipulator of the surrounding world, just as the younger Hawkins's proved to be. Thus, Olson includes an implication of opportunism ("where there are little magazines / will publish you").

As his criticism of Ferrini demonstrates, one of Olson's key concerns in *The Maximus Poems* is the work of the writer, or artist. Just as Olson admits no dualistic separation of mind and body, in art he wants no separation of form and content. There can be no abstract form that forces content into order. At the same time, form does exist. Olson writes in "Letter 22" that "chaos / is not our condition" (*MP* 100). The problem is that form tends to become an abstract, or extrinsic measure of "the things of this world," that enables a removed, objective manipulation of things. In "Letter Five" Olson presents the measure he believes is superior to the abstract forms of Descartes, Euclid, or Ferrini. He writes, "I can't get away from the old measure of care" (*MP* 26). Of course, "care" is an important term for Heidegger. He writes, "Dasein's Being reveals itself as care" (*Being and Time* 227), and Division I of *Being and Time* culminates in a section

entitled “Care as the Being of Dasein.” In his Heideggerian analysis of *The Maximus Poems*, Bové relates the importance of care to Olson’s poetics this way:

“Care” is not merely the proper attitude toward objects in the world, but most importantly, is the only authentic stance toward the creative circuit. In effect, the authentic person is potentially capable of expanding the horizon of meaning only through the “careful” completion of the artistic process. (278)

Bové’s book makes several polemical attacks on the supposedly disinterested aesthetics adhered to by the New Critics, but his analysis is useful for any understanding of Olson because his adherence to “the old measure of care” does eschew any type of “objective” or “disinterested” stance toward art, or anything else. In “I, Maximus of Gloucester, to You” he writes, “love is form” (*MP* 5). Form, in Olson’s stance, involves intimacy, relationship. One cannot stand at distance, objectively removed from experience and create good form. Love, care—the opposite of removed abstract universals and objective scientific method—these are what makers use, what artists use.

“I, Maximus of Gloucester, to You,” is a poem about making—specifically, making a nest. In the poem’s last section, after mentioning “the beak” which “goes in” to make the nest, Olson writes,

[. . .] the form
that which you make, what holds, which is
the law of object, strut after strut, what you are
what you must be

what force can throw up, can, right now hereinafter erect (*MP 8*)

Forming the nest involves going “in”—being involved, active, open, vulnerable to the world. The form of the nest involves “the law of object”—the facts that must be met in the moment. He writes, “form only comes / into existence when / the thing is born” (*MP 7*). Form and content are born out of each other intrinsically. There is no exterior measure to which life or art must conform.

The intrinsic measure of care is able to properly recognize objects without placing them in a manipulative system. Olson’s hermeneutic stance lets him “get rid of the lyrical interference of the individual as ego, of the ‘subject’ and his soul” (“Projective Verse” 247), by recognizing the “limits” he is “inside of”—specifically time and place. This sense of limitation, this intrinsic measure of care (against the abstract, metaphysical, or objective stances he mentions) is illustrated nicely in “Letter 6,” which begins “polis is / eyes” (*MP 30*). This cryptic phrase is illuminated in the last lines of the poem when Olson writes, “There are no hierarchies, no infinite, no such many as mass, there are only / eyes in all heads, / to be looked out of” (*MP 33*). The hermeneutic stance, intimately involved in and exposed to the shifting surrounding environment, cannot abide hierarchies, cannot think of infinity when it is caught up so completely in each passing moment.

The polis Olson desires Gloucester to be requires strict attention to each moment, much as an artist must be immersed in his or her materials. Life in this polis is not governed by long-range plans, but by what is needed in the moment at hand. This artistic sense of measure, “the old measure of care” will be the form of the government of

Olson's polis. In many ways, from "The Kingfishers," through his lyrics, to *The Maximus Poems*, Olson attempts to form community, or polis, by instructing his readers in this careful measure. The closing lines of "Maximus to Gloucester, Letter 27 [withheld]" can serve as a summation of Olson's attempt at instructing us in how to take up a proper stance toward reality:

An American

is a complex of occasions,
themselves a geometry
of spatial nature
I have this sense,
that I am one
with my skin

Plus this—plus this:

that forever the geography
which leans in
on me I compell
backwards I compell Gloucester
to yield, to
change

Polis

is this (*MP* 185)

Olson's polis derives from a stance toward reality that does not separate mind from body,

subject from object. And this stance, Olson hopes, compels Gloucester, or any of his readers in 1950s America, to change, to take up this “spiritual discipline” (as Fredman has termed it), to recognize one’s limitations in time and place (as “a complex of occasions”) and thus to care for the world in one’s activity, one’s making, and not merely manipulate it.

CHAPTER TWO

“What to Say / When You See Me”: Robert Creeley’s Hermeneutic Stance

Charles Olson dedicated his *Maximus Poems* to “ROBERT CREELEY—the Figure of Outward” (4). Olson recognized that Creeley’s art is based on “a stance toward reality” (as Olson phrased it) that stays immediately involved out in the world, that refuses a removed, metaphysical, or even a so-called objective perspective. In this chapter I will examine what I call the hermeneutic stance of Robert Creeley by examining a number of poems across his entire career. In doing so, I will demonstrate how Creeley’s poems advocate a being-in-the-world, an outwardness or exteriority that disallows the domination of what Olson calls “the individual as ego, of the subject and his soul” (“Projective Verse” 247). The poems thus coincide with many of the key ideas of the hermeneutic phenomenology of Martin Heidegger and Hans-Georg Gadamer. After all, Olson does say that Creeley’s method (NARRATOR IN) allows “human phenomenology” to be “re-inherited” (“Introduction to Robert Creeley” 284). This chapter will seek to show the various ways Creeley re-enacts the phenomenology of being in his art.

Turning to Creeley’s poems after reading Olson, one cannot help but notice major stylistic and thematic differences. In Olson’s poems one encounters forces of nature and

a large expanse of history and culture. Words are spread across the page with a high degree of variability in line length. With Creeley, however, one encounters short poems with short lines (many times comprised of only one or two words) that rarely venture outside the immediate situation of the speaker. A number of critics mention Creeley's minimalist aesthetic: Wyatt Prunty famously criticizes Creeley's purposeful formal and thematic limitations as "emaciated poetry" (122-125), and Christopher Lambert, in a rather ambivalent review, scolds Creeley for "an irritating kind of tunnel vision" and says his "is a poetry of the microscope" (255). In discussing the differences between Creeley and the other Black Mountain poets, Thom Gunn writes, "Where their [Olson's and Duncan's] ambitions were epic, expansive, inclusive, drawing upon whole libraries of external material, his [Creeley's] were doggedly narrower, drawing almost entirely on the irregular pulse of the personal" (404). But as vastly different as their poetry is, Creeley and Olson share a very similar philosophical disposition toward art, language, and being that, however differently, informs their poems.

Olson, himself, is the most perceptive commentator on the key differences and similarities between himself and Creeley. He writes in his "Introduction to Robert Creeley" that there are two methods of writing that can radically displace the ego, its descriptions (and hence manipulation) of reality, and thus achieve what he calls "RE-ENACTMENT":

(1) what I call DOCUMENT simply to emphasize that the events alone do the work, that the narrator stays OUT, functions as pressure not as interpreting person, illuminates not by argument or "creativity" but by

master of force [. . .]. In other words, his ego or person is NOT of the story whatsoever. He is, if he makes it, light from the outside, the thing itself doing the casting of what shadows. (283)

This is the Olson of “Projective Verse” and his “objectism,” which is “the getting rid of the lyrical interference of the individual as ego” (247). It is a fair depiction of his own method. But the other method, he says, is just as radical in its riddance of the ego through an intense stripping down of the story so that the ego is left completely bare—it’s the only tool of the artist. This is Creeley’s method, which Olson calls “NARRATOR IN”:

the total IN to the above total OUT, total speculation as against the half management, half interpretation, the narrator taking on himself the job of making clear by way of his own person that life is preoccupation with itself, taking up the push of the single intelligence to make it, to be—by his conjectures—so powerful inside the story that he makes the story swing on him, his eye the eye of nature INSIDE (as is the same eye, outside) a lightmaker. (“Introduction to Robert Creeley” 283)

Creeley’s art is the activity of an intelligence that attempts to remain immersed in experience, even as he engages in the seemingly distanced act of writing about it.

Creeley interestingly rephrases Olson’s description of his method of dismantling the ego in his conversation with Allen Ginsberg. He says he attempts a kind of nakedness in his writing. He says he wants “to feel” the writing “with the intensity of all the perception that I . . . that the ego bit can recognize, and then destroy the ego by its own insistence”

("Contexts" 39). Lambert is only half right, I believe, when he says that Creeley's poetry is "elaborately egocentric" (257) and that he desires "selflessness through an obsessive, one might say neurotic, focus upon himself" (259). Creeley strives to dispose of the ego by stripping the ego of its defenses and leaving it utterly naked in its expression. The poetry doesn't focus upon the self so much as it exposes the self for what it is (and isn't) in each moment. Echoing Olson in discussing Creeley's eye, William Navero says Creeley's poetry "takes unto itself the physical measure of the eye locating the world" (351), and that its use of language "presents a graph of its own possibilities as a mode consonant with the essential flux of Being" (349). In other words, Creeley's poetry registers the intensity of each moment—the nakedness of intellect and language coming to grips with its place in a particular place and time.

Creeley often underscores the need for an intense involvement in each moment of the writing experience by comparing writing to driving an automobile. In an interview with Charles Tomlinson, Creeley speaks of "the awfully precarious situation" of writing "composition by field,"

because you can obliterate everything in one instant. You've got to be utterly awake to recognize what is happening, and to be responsible for all the things you must do before you can even recognize what their full significance is. It's like going into a spin in your car—you use all the technical information you have about how to get that car back on the road, but you're not thinking "I must bring the car back on the road," you are bringing the car back on the road or else you're over the cliff. ("Robert

Creeley in Conversation with Charles Tomlinson” 26)

This is Creeley’s way of describing the poem as an act of an instant. It demands rigorous attention to the moment at hand. Removing oneself from the flux and activity of the moment to “think about” writing the poem would add a mediating layer of discursive thought that disallows immediate access to the instant. Another interesting driving metaphor reveals more about Creeley’s hermeneutic stance as a writer. In his essay “Notes Apropos ‘Free Verse,’” he says,

The simplest way I have found to make clear my own sense of writing in this respect is to use the analogy of driving. The road, as it were, is creating itself momentarily in one’s attention to it, there, visibly, in front of the car. There is no reason it should go on forever, and if one does so assume it, it very often disappears all too actually. When Pound says, ‘we must understand what is happening,’ one sense of his meaning I take to be this necessary attention to what is happening in the writing (the road) one is, in the sense suggested, following. (493-4)

Here Creeley once again emphasizes paying strict attention to the vagaries of the moment at hand when writing. However, in this statement, Creeley interjects an interesting thought about the impossibility of the road going on endlessly, and the danger of assuming it might. Creeley’s poems often involve, as a thematic element, the struggle of the individual mind to exist fully in each moment rather than to project onto reality a false, metaphysical perspective that sees the now in relation to eternity. “I Know a Man,” Creeley’s most celebrated work, is a poem about driving (and thus, also, about writing),

and it also involves the speaker's struggle to avoid the metaphysical perspective in order to exist more fully in the moment at hand. It reads,

As I sd to my
friend, because I am
always talking,—John, I

sd, which was not his
name, the darkness sur-
rounds us, what

can we do against
it, or else, shall we &
why not, buy a goddamn big car,

drive, he sd, for
christ's sake, look
out where yr going. (*CPI* 132)²⁴

The speaker in “I Know a Man” becomes very concerned with the future; one could even say that his perspective turns, ultimately, metaphysical. He says, “the darkness sur- / rounds us, what / can we do against / it.” The speaker is caught, to some extent, in a teleological perspective in which he has become somewhat unconcerned for the present situation in order to plan for a future. He has gotten out of his body; he is

attempting to view life from above, so to speak, to understand what must be done about this supposed “darkness.” Instead of simply existing in the moment at hand, the speaker feels the need to stand “against” this darkness. However, the speaker’s interlocutor and friend warns him, “drive, he sd, for / christ’s sake, look / out where yr going.” The speaker has lost touch with his body, with where he is in the moment as he takes up a teleological or metaphysical stance. The hermeneutic stance, however, requires that one stay in the body. Immediately following the above quote regarding writing and driving in “Notes Apropos ‘Free Verse,’” Creeley speaks of the necessity of the body in writing. He says,

In that way there is nothing mindless about the procedure [i.e. writing]. It is, rather, a respect for the possibilities of such attention that brings Allen Ginsberg to say, “Mind is shapely.” Mind, thus engaged, permits experience of “order” far more various and intensive than habituated and programmed limits of its subtleties can recognize. (494)

Mind must be “shapely,” that is, involved intensely in the action of experience in the body, not disconnected, abstract, imposing a perspective of reality on the body. The problem of the speaker in “I Know a Man” is that he allowed, for a moment, his mind to get beyond his body, and he lost track of the road. Writing, or living, or anything done authentically, requires constant attention, or “recognition,” as the Black Mountain poets often say, which requires one to “look / out where yr going.”

Francis Burch, in a short article, makes a compelling connection between “I Know a Man” and Jack Kerouac’s novel, *On the Road*. Creeley, for a time, was quite

close to Kerouac, and certainly knew the novel well. Burch claims the poem is Creeley's rendition of a possible scene between the novel's narrator, Sal Paradise (a thinly disguised Kerouac), and Dean Moriarty, who, is "always talking." Interestingly, as Burch makes clear, the line in "I Know a Man" about the speaker's friend, John, "which is not his / name" can be explained in two ways if John is taken to be "Jack" Kerouac, or even "Jean" Kerouac ("Jean" was Kerouac's name given at birth, as he was born in French-speaking Canada) [229]. Though these connections with the novel are compelling, what's more interesting, especially when paired with Creeley's analogy of writing and driving, is a certain thematic connection between, not only "I Know a Man," but all of Creeley's poetry and poetics and Kerouac's *On the Road*. In the novel, many of the characters are explicitly in search for that indefinable "IT," which, when they seem to grasp it, quickly slips through their fingers again and again. At one point in the novel, Dean and Sal actually achieve the "IT" that they have spoken about as they talk to each other in the backseat of a car as they hitchhike: "The car was swaying as Dean and I both swayed to the rhythm and the IT of our final excited joy talking and living to the blank tranced end of all innumerable riotous angelic particulars that had been lurking in our souls all our lives" (197). "IT" cannot easily be identified since it belongs to a classification of those "impon-de-rables," as Dean tells Sal. However, Dean, in the moment of IT they achieve while hitchhiking, finds the antithesis to IT in the people in the front seat who were nice enough to pick them up. Dean tells Sal, "we know what IT is and we know TIME and we know that everything is really FINE" (197). But their knowledge of IT is distinguished from the people who picked them up:

Now you just dig them in front. They have worries, they're counting the miles, they're thinking about where to sleep tonight, how much money for gas, the weather, how they'll get there—and all the time they'll get there anyway, you see. But they need to worry and betray time with urgencies false and otherwise, purely anxious and whiny, their souls really won't be at peace unless they can latch on to an established and proven worry and having once found it, they assume facial expressions to fit and go with it, which is, you see, unhappiness, and all the time it all flies by them and they know it and that *too* worries them no end. (197)

Like the speaker in "I Know a Man," these people Dean describes are worried about what will happen and what they must in the future do about it; but Dean and Sal have found the answer to such "darkness" in the IT of the moment at hand.

Creeley's poems are often an attempt, it seems, of a man attempting to grasp the "IT" of the moment—the moment of truth. Hermeneutic philosophers like Heidegger and Gadamer attempt to demonstrate that truth can be found only in a moment. Truth, for them, is not removed from existence, from time, but is primarily temporal. The speaker in "I Know a Man" (whether or not he is meant to be Dean or Sal) begins, in a time of discouragement, to desire a plan, to predetermine existence, to fight the darkness with a fixture of his own—"a goddamn big car." But the friend's wisdom is simply to "drive" and "look out where yr going." The answer to metaphysical or any other darkness is simply to exist in the moment, to pay attention to the revealed truth of this moment "on the road," and see if in the next the horizon yields a different understanding. Almost

undoubtedly it will; and those who are too busy looking ahead to future plans that have no root in the present moment will simply miss the next new horizon.

Criticism

Two single-author monographs on Creeley have been written, both published in 1978. Cynthia Dubin Edelberg's *Robert Creeley's Poetry: A Critical Introduction* traces Creeley's career from *For Love* through *Pieces* and to some of his poems from the early seventies. She emphasizes Creeley's development from a poet who, in *For Love*, seeks to "withdraw from the world" in order to "emerge seemingly superior to it," and who is intent on protecting "his vulnerability" (31) through a distanced, "analytical" approach to the world (52-3), to one who, in *Words*, demonstrates the limitations of analytical thought (55), and finally, to a more grounded, mature poet who, in *Pieces*, experiences a kind of existentialist freedom (135). Focusing on what I see as the basic integrity of Creeley's poetics throughout his career, I hope to show that Creeley, from his poems prior to *For Love* through the end of his life, demonstrates an openness toward temporal existence in the world, not the closed-off, analytical stance Edelberg finds in Creeley's early poems.

Arthur L. Ford's book, entitled *Robert Creeley*, also traces Creeley's career by examining *For Love*, *Words*, and *Pieces* separately. Ford is more apt to see similarities in Creeley's separate volumes than Edelberg, but his approach is more focused upon formal concerns than mine. When Ford mentions Olson's "Projective Verse," he points to Olson's pronouncements on "the syllable and the line" rather than on "objectism" or the more philosophical aspects of what I see as Olson's and Creeley's shared "stance

toward reality.”²⁵

Many writers have included Creeley in their books on contemporary poetry. Perhaps most notable is Joseph M. Conte’s examination of Creeley’s poetic form as an expression of postmodernism and Lynn Keller’s investigation into how Creeley was both indelibly shaped by modernism (specifically the poetry of William Carlos Williams) and how he also sought freedom from what she calls “the modernist tradition.”²⁶ But two critics in particular have examined Creeley in the light of Heideggerian phenomenology in their major books on contemporary poetry: Charles Altieri and Stephen Fredman. In *Enlarging the Temple: New Directions in American Poetry*, Altieri designates postmodern poetics as immanentist, and differentiates this mode from the modern tendency toward symbolist poetics (17). He writes that postmodern, immanentist poets reject the modernist emphasis “on the mind reflecting on its own structures” and he compares their poetry to the work of Heidegger and Wittgenstein, who both recover “parallels between poetic and philosophical thought” (21). He argues that these philosophers share with postmodern poets like Creeley the conviction that

the proper mode of activity for the creative self is not the creation or interpretation of values but the labor of disclosure, not the mind’s attempt to understand its own acts of imaginative creation nor the pursuit of some principle of incarnation reconciling word and world, but the discipline of attending carefully to the mind’s concrete place in immediate existential contexts. (22)

Altieri’s chapter on Creeley insightfully examines many aspects of Creeley’s poetics,

especially in terms of how Creeley's poetry deals with the void, or absence of presence in being. By utilizing Gadamer's insights into the nature of tradition and the ontology of the artwork, I hope to build on some of Altieri's insights on the phenomenological nature of Creeley's art.

In a later work, *Self and Sensibility in Contemporary American Poetry*, Altieri, by now perhaps less enamored with Heideggerian approaches, evaluates Creeley's work in light of John Ashbery's and Adrienne Rich's, and finds his "poetics of conjecture" wanting. Concerned with effective, even ethical representations of selfhood, Altieri states that Creeley's "taut, ascetic language" actually "impoverishes the sense of self we need to connect the abstractions [i.e. the challenging ideas found in Creeley's work] to experience" (130). Stephen Fredman, in his book *Poet's Prose: The Crisis in American Verse*, challenges Altieri's valuation of Creeley. Fredman states that Creeley's is indeed a "poetics of conjecture," but he goes back to Altieri's first impression of Creeley by using Heidegger to show that Creeley's conjecturing "goes beyond Altieri's conception of conjecture as simply the playful differentiation between systems [of thought] and includes hermeneutic and phenomenological speculation" (63-4). Though Fredman's insights are stimulating, he focuses almost entirely on Creeley's prose work. In this chapter I take Fredman's comment on Creeley's use of "hermeneutic and phenomenological speculation" as fundamental to my investigation of his work. However, I will focus almost entirely on analyzing Creeley's poetry.

Pertinent to my concerns in this chapter are the special issues of the journals *boundary 2* and *Sagetrieb* devoted to Creeley. Of the various contributors to the

Sagetrieb special issue on Creeley (later published as *Robert Creeley: The Poet's Workshop*), Harald Mesch and Brian Conniff emphasize Heideggerian themes in Creeley's verse, such as his insistence on standing *in* existence in his poetry rather than using poetry as a way of taking a metaphysical or even an objective perspective on the world.²⁷ William V. Spanos, tireless promoter of Heidegger's philosophy as a useful lens through which to read American literature, edited the special double issue of *boundary 2* that focused on Creeley. Thus, many of the articles in that collection (especially those of William Navero, Paul Diehl, William Sylvester, and Robert Kern) discuss Creeley in terms of Heideggerian notions of temporality and the interrelationship of ontology and epistemology.²⁸ These articles, however, rarely mention Heidegger explicitly (and they never mention Gadamer), though they obviously are involved with key issues in hermeneutic phenomenology. In this chapter, I will occasionally turn to these articles as I apply aspects of Heidegger's and Gadamer's philosophical understandings to my explication of Creeley's poetry.

Finally, William V. Spanos, more than any other critic, has explicitly aligned Creeley's work with Heideggerian philosophy. His 1978 interview with Creeley is rife with citations and allusions to Heidegger's works (he even tells Creeley he should read Heidegger's "The Origin of the Work of Art" at one point).²⁹ Though Creeley is seemingly able to process Spanos's persistent philosophical jargon during the interview, he admits later on that he still had not "read his [Spanos's] primary sources" (Covi 74). Though Creeley's knowledge of Heidegger and Gadamer is more than likely minimal (restricted, probably, to his conversations with Heideggerian interviewers like Spanos),

his enthusiastic responses to much of what Spanos suggests about poetry and philosophy demonstrates that Creeley's concerns are not far removed from those of phenomenological hermeneutics.³⁰

Spanos's interview is perhaps the most important document extant that deals with Creeley's relationship to hermeneutic philosophy. Much of what Spanos suggests as he leads Creeley through his questions are closely related to ideas I will explore in this chapter, such as Creeley's decision to distance his art from what Spanos calls "the metaphysical," and Creeley's support for Spanos's suggestion that Creeley's work pushes toward a notion of immediacy such that it could be called "occasional" poetry. After noting that the word "occasion" etymologically involves the verb "to fall," Spanos states that Creeley desires a poetry that "involves the fall into time, into temporality," (qtd. in Creeley "With Bill Spanos" 129)—a poetry of "dispersal." Spanos elaborates on this notion by saying, "It's a dispersal, a dispersal of the logos [. . .]—that sense of disintegration of the One, of metaphysical One into the many, eternity into time, stasis into process" (130).

The above notions are central to Creeley's hermeneutic stance. However, at one point in the interview, Spanos attempts to link Creeley with a part of Derrida's project when he speaks of how "the logos is infinitely deferred" (130). Spanos has written elsewhere of how Creeley's poetry participates in the decentering of tradition ("The fact of firstness" 6-8). Just as in his work on Olson, Spanos sees Creeley as what he calls a "de-structive" poet—one who is out to destroy inherited forms of discourse.³¹ However, Creeley, even in his interview with Spanos, is not as enthusiastic about Spanos's notions

of destroying tradition. In this chapter, I hope to show how Creeley's poetry and poetics can be seen in terms of Gadamer's notions of continuity, how language—the bearer of tradition—always already informs our being-in-the-world, and how being thus achieves some sense of continuity with the past through language, and even through the language of art.

Spanos's interview, as well as many other sources (some of which were discussed in the above paragraphs) will serve to buttress some of my readings of Creeley's poetry. In this chapter I approach Creeley's poetry from the standpoint of phenomenological hermeneutics by examining thematic ideas important to both Creeley and the hermeneutic philosophers. These themes are truth, time, language, and art. After examining these themes, I look at two more major themes in Creeley's poetry (love and the poet) cycling through earlier insights into Creeley's hermeneutic stance to read the poems that deal with those themes. Besides this thematic element, my approach to Creeley's poetry is unique in two ways: 1) Though some criticism of Creeley's work utilizes a Heideggerian perspective, no critic or scholar has mentioned how Gadamer's ideas may be relevant to an understanding of Creeley's poems. 2) Most longer critical works on Creeley (such as Edelberg's and Ford's monographs) emphasize the differences between each of Creeley's volumes, or they demonstrate how Creeley poetry has "developed" throughout his career. Many shorter articles only examine one or two poems, or perhaps one volume of poems. By juxtaposing poems from different volumes from different parts of his sixty years of poetic production, my approach underscores the basic continuity of Creeley's artistic vision over his entire career.

Truth

Harking back to “I Know a Man” we recall that the injunction to “look out where yr going” is an important part of the recipe of Creeley’s poetics. It’s a recipe that finally eschews metaphysical notions of truth and which attempts to uncover the truth of each moment, the happening of right now. Much the same can be said about the hermeneutic philosophies of Heidegger and Gadamer. Gerald Bruns, commenting on the place of reason in Gadamer’s work, says that *logos*, for Gadamer, is not “subsumptive reasoning,” but is instead “a way of taking something now this way, now that, in all of its irreducible singularity, as if moving horizontally, piloting on the ground toward endlessly opening horizons, rather than vertically by means of non-contradictory statements toward a pyramid of ideas” (53). This statement parallels Creeley’s notion of writing as driving; truth is uncovered by paying attention to where one is on the road at each moment, as each new moment reveals a new horizon.

Though the title of Gadamer’s major work is *Truth and Method*, it is interesting that, as Robert J. Dostal comments, “Gadamer never provides a definition of truth” in this work (254). In the same statement, though, Dostal says it is clear that regarding the idea of truth, “Gadamer situates himself within a Heideggerian framework” where “[t]ruth is an event that happens in the encounter with the thing in language” (254). In *Being and Time*, Heidegger contrasts his existential analysis of truth with the traditional philosophical understanding of it. He states that the traditional understanding of truth has been “the agreement of knowledge with its object,” (258), but that in his analysis truth is more akin to the Greek word “*aletheia*, or uncovering: “‘Being-true’ (‘truth’) means

Being-uncovering” (262). Heidegger’s understanding of truth is perhaps most clearly stated in his essay “On the Essence of Truth” where he states that truth is “not the mark of some correct proposition” (this would be the traditional understanding of truth as knowledge in agreement with its object); instead, truth is “the revelation of what-is” (309). Richard Palmer, commenting on the importance of truth to Heidegger’s concept of poetry says, “truth is not a matter of correspondence to an already perceived nature of a thing; it is a matter of placing that thing in the light of understanding for the first time” (82). Basically, Heidegger’s analysis refuses to separate truth from being-in-the-world; truth is an act of uncovering. Gadamer, speaking of the availability of truth for ethics, says, “Knowledge is not an aggregate of anonymous truths, but a human comportment” (“On the Possibility” 18). Truth happens when one is paying attention to what is going on in the moment, able to discover “the revelation of what is.” And it involves a “comportment,” a way of being-in-the-world, more so than an understanding or knowledge of certain propositions.

One of Creeley’s later poems, “Four Days in Vermont,” provides an interesting perspective on Creeley’s view of truth. This relatively long poem in eight parts begins with an in-depth description of a maple tree. Eventually, in the third section, Creeley’s thoughts turn to ideas of truth. He asks, “What is truth *firm (as a tree)*” (*CPII* 500). He eschews, as expected, metaphysical notions of truth, or egocentric ideas about truth as correspondence of thought and experience: “All persons saying things conforms confirms” (*CPII* 500). In other words, people confirm what they want to confirm. Creeley’s truth centers on what the object is—almost a completely materialistic view at

this point in the poem: “This is a maple, is a *tree*, as a very truth firm” (*CPII* 500).

Creeley aims to get outside egocentric categories and into “the revelation of what-is.”

In the next section, Creeley wonders whether “it has all gone inside / myself become subject” (*CPII* 500-1). Has he categorized his surroundings, become dominating subject that can create an “objective,” removed perspective, so much so that “it has all gone inside”? He then asks,

Do I dare go out
be myself specific
be as the tree
seems to look in. (*CPII* 501)

To “be as the tree,” to be “firm truth,” full of truth, or truthful, Creeley must “go out,” take the hermeneutic stance to become, to borrow from Olson’s terminology, an object among other objects; he must be, like an object, “specific” to a place in time. As he says in the next section, this truthful stance is a being-in-time. It is a “waiting”–

For whatever time comes
herein welcome
Wants still
truth of the matter. (*CPII* 501)

This stance of “firm truth” recognizes temporality, welcomes the flux of time, the specifics of each “matter,” of each situation to respond to a new set of truths, of facts that surround one. Truth is always in a situation, in time; truth is never outside of time, standing still, awaiting some eternity.

The last section of the poem is difficult because, as with many of Creeley's poems, it is a drama in which the speaker is coming to terms with being-in-the-world. Sometimes he speaks of his desires that are at odds with authentic being-in-the-moment. It seems that in this last section Creeley feels a nagging desire to "Believe" in a metaphysical, eternal kind of truth about life and death. The last lines of the poem read,

No one's absent in mind None gone
Tell me the *truth* I want to say
Tell me all you know Will we live
or die As if the world were apart
and whatever tree seen were only here apparent
Answers, live and die. Believe. (*CPII* 502)

This part of the drama is set up by the second section of the poem in which Creeley meditates on the death of his dog. Here, Creeley wants something that he knows is impossible to have because "the truth" he wants is about, it seems, life after death, about things of the future, not of the moment at hand. The truths Creeley *wants* to "Believe" in this last section are not specific to the present moment, but would be metaphysical truths. In this metaphysical perspective, Creeley imagines, truth would be "As if the world were apart / and whatever tree seen were only here apparent / Answers." Truth, in this perspective, posits the world, the tree that was in the hermeneutic stance so "specific," as only an "apparent / Answer" toward a question about a reality that is "apart" from the temporal world in which the tree exists. The tree becomes a Platonic shadow, or an allegorical truth, not truth in time, the temporal truth of the instant that Creeley, in earlier

sections, relied on. Thus, he ends this section, and the poem, with the word, “Believe.” Instead of clearing away metaphysical perspectives to understand oneself as an object among other objects in a particular place in time, Creeley, at the end of “Four Days in Vermont” struggles with the notion of metaphysical truth, of accepting the possible legitimacy of belief in a kind of eternal truth. Other poems we will study in this chapter will show Creeley taking a more aggressive stance against metaphysical perspectives. However, “Four Days in Vermont” demonstrates that Creeley, throughout his career, continued to present honest struggles with philosophical issues, refusing to simply put them on the shelf and rest in his already formed opinions. Despite his struggles and his honest openness, he consistently relies on the basic features of the hermeneutic stance that attempts to stand fully within each moment, open to possibility that would be closed off by metaphysical or objective notions of truth.

Time

A number of critics comment upon Creeley’s strong sense of the temporal nature of existence. Keller, for instance, writes that Creeley is “[p]reoccupied with time’s passage and with mortality,” and thus he “is increasingly aware that his life’s only inevitable ordering is as a succession of moments” (174). Conniff, describing Creeley’s poetry from a formal perspective, calls his poetry “temporally grounded” and demonstrates how it challenges conventional understandings of the lyric by refusing status as an aesthetic object that is removed from time into some ideal realm (292). Spanos, though, in his interview with Creeley and in his other writings, frequently and

explicitly ties Creeley's concerns with temporality into Heidegger's hermeneutic project. He says Creeley's "is a poetry which involves the fall into time, into temporality [. . .] into finiteness [. . .] in *beingintheworld*" ("With Bill Spanos" 129); and in another place he states that understanding Creeley's poetry "requires a hermeneutic in which temporality is ontologically prior to self-contained or bounded form, beginning to end, being to Being, logos as speech to Logos as The Word, in short, a new hermeneutic as dis-covering" (Editor's Note 747). Each of these critics points to an important part of Creeley's hermeneutic stance vis-a-vis the notion of time: human existence as conditioned by time (Keller), the experience of the artwork in time (Conniff), and one's authentic stance toward existence understood as temporal (Spanos). In three poems from *Hello*, a volume of poems that mirrors a travelogue, each of these understandings of Creeley's sense of time can be seen.

Wilfried Raussert states that as one moves through the various travel poems in *Hello*, one senses that Creeley's "central concern" is how "to stay within the flux of time" so that he can develop "a sense of appreciation for the intense experience of the instant" (132-5). In *Hello*, Creeley, as in many of his poems, Creeley presents a drama in which he struggles to be fully in each moment, fully in his body in a particular place in time. The short poem, "Clock," explicitly discusses time itself and the difficulty of living authentically in the face of a routine existence based on the necessities of following a "clockwork" schedule. It reads,

How to live
with some plan

puts the days
into emptiness
fills time
with time?
*
Not much
left to go on—
it's moving
out. (CPII 74)

“Clock” interestingly recounts the problem of a teleological understanding of existence, and also underscores Heidegger’s view of “clock time” as inauthentic time as opposed to an authentic understanding of temporality as being-in-time. Heidegger says that the mechanical understanding of time, “clock time,” is inauthentic because it refuses the actual temporality, the actual flux of each moment of being that takes its meaning from its ultimate finitude. The clock reduces the qualitative possibilities of future and past (retrieved in present recollection) into the mechanical measurement of “how much” that can be read on the homogenizing map of the clock face. Heidegger says that the inauthentic concern of clock time “incessantly comes back to the now; it says: now, from now till then, till the next now” (*The Concept* 17E). He expounds on this idea by saying, “The clock shows us the now, but no clock ever shows the future or has ever shown the past. [. . .] If I determine by the clock the point at which a future event will occur, then it

is not the future that is meant; rather, what I determine is “how long” I now have to wait until the now intended” (*The Concept* 17E). Thus, “time is already interpreted as present, past is interpreted as no-longer-present, future as indeterminate not-yet-present: past is irretrievable, future indeterminate” (*The Concept* 17E). To explain Heidegger’s notions more concretely, one might wait, say, for five o’clock—a time when one gets to do something fun. But five o’clock is the same in meaning as any point on the clock—the anticipation of five o’clock reduces this present moment in time, and each moment before five, to a meaningless, mechanical interval; and measuring the “fun” of five o’clock by the “how long” of clock time, such as “it lasted for one hour,” reduces the meaning of that time to an empty interval as well. In the mechanical understanding of time, past and future lose their qualitative meaning for existence in the present moment; one loses one’s sense of the finitude of existence and is tricked into thinking of time as an eternal now.

In “Clock,” Creeley suggests living “with some plan / puts the days // into emptiness, / fills time / with time?” Instead of the fullness of living authentically in each moment, Creeley’s speaker lives teleologically toward some goal which saps the intrinsic meaning of each moment to put all meaning in some imagined future which is never really here. Each moment in time, then, is filled with merely more time—i.e. a waiting for a future “now.” Creeley’s speaker then says, “Not much / left to go on— / it’s moving / out.” Time is moving out from under him, and he’s not got “much to go on” as each moment is drained of its meaning for his being.

Another poem in *Hello*, “Men,” includes a clock. In this poem, Creeley is in Singapore, and he is feeling groundless:

Getting fainter, in the world,
fearing something's fading,—
deadened, tentative responses—
so hours without eating,
scared without somebody to be
with me. These empty days. (*CPII* 32)

He, in a strange place, is tentative, afraid to exist open to the world around him. In the other sections of the poem, Creeley searches for ways to break his empty, inauthentic existence. The first way he tries is art. He describes a painting that tells of “a day // in the life of the world. / It tells you, somehow, / what you ought to know” (*CPII* 32). He looks to the painting to create, for himself, a place to be and a way to be in it. Like Heidegger, who discusses how art creates a space in which authentic being can dwell, Creeley is, in this foreign place, looking to art to provide a place to dwell.³²

In the longest section of the poem, Creeley attempts to recover his past so that he can ground his projective possibilities. He describes his days of army service in Burma:

fascinated, in jungle,
happily not shot at,

hauling the dead and dying
along those impossible roads

to nothing much could help.

Dreaming, of home, the girl

left behind, getting drunk,
getting laid, getting beaten

out of whorehouse one night.

So where am I now. (*CPII* 33)

According to Heidegger, recovering the past establishes a meaning for the present that can ground future possibilities.³³ Creeley's retrieval of some of the most intense moments of his life, followed by the question/statement "So where am I now" indicates that he is trying to establish a ground for meaning for being where he is at the present moment, but is struggling to do so since the place is so foreign.

After struggling to create a meaningful being through art and through the past, Creeley, in the last section of the poem, recalls a "huge clock somewhere" that displays the different times for cities around the world. But the key for Creeley is that they are all "going / around and around" (*CPII* 33). Again, Creeley is searching for a way to understand being-in-the-world in the place he's at, and to do so, he comes back to the fact of his temporality—that time is constantly moving as he moves. No matter where he goes, whether it be Singapore, Burma, or his homeland in the United States, his temporal existence is inescapable. It is fitting, too, that Creeley ends the poem with the image of the "huge clock." Neither the art or the memories he describes in the earlier sections can escape temporality. Art is not timeless, and the past is not fixed; all is subject to

temporality, the constant flux of each moment.

In “Men,” Creeley offers no sense that he has triumphed over the difficulties of living inauthentically. Even though he looks to art and to the past and understands all as conditioned by temporality, the days continue in emptiness, as far as the reader knows. But in “Cebu,” another of many poems in *Hello* that describe Creeley’s travel in various cities, Creeley comes through his experience in a foreign place more positively. In this poem he ruminates on the “thatched roofed” houses that are not meant to last forever, “that could be gone in a flash, / or molder more slowly // back into humus” (*CPII* 40).

This meditation turns on his own mortality, and he says,

[. . .] One doesn’t
finally want it all forever,

not stopped there, in abstract
time. Whatever, it’s got to

be yielded, let go of, it can’t
live any longer that it has to. (*CPII* 40)

The idea in these lines is to be with time, in time, to yield to the flux, to the contingencies of being-in-the-world. Recognizing his ultimate finitude, that there is no “forever,” Creeley refuses the eternal “now points” of abstract, clock time. After admitting he sometimes fears death, Creeley says, “That’s all right, and I can // dig it, yield to it, let what / world I do have be the world” (*CPII* 41). And this yielding to time, at the end of

the poem, allows for the care (Creeley generally uses the term “love”) that is so critical to the hermeneutic stance: “as I am here, with these green // walls, and the lights on, and / finally loving everything I know” (*CPII* 41). In his recognition of his finite place in the world, Creeley feels the necessity of fully being in the world, rather than removed from it by abstract, teleological plans for his existence. He has come to love, to care for the world as part of it.

A key word in this poem is “finally.” By contrasting Creeley’s two uses of it, we can see how he emphasizes his coming into care, into authentic being. Earlier in the poem, Creeley begins the second line of a couplet with the word as he says, “One doesn’t / finally want it all forever.” The negative use of “finally,” there, is involved in the stoppage of time and contingency; but, the use of “finally” at the end of the poem, as, again, the first word in the second line of a couplet, is positive, and it involves acceptance of where the poet is in his place and time. It illustrates his coming into the recognition of temporality which establishes his care-ful existence with other objects in the world: “finally loving everything I know.”

Language

Linda W. Wagner argues that Creeley’s power as a poet comes not through his idiosyncratic formal arrangements, but in his basic “attitudes toward language” which involves what she calls a “hesitation stance” toward expression (313-4). Robert Hass is a bit more explicit in his characterization when he says Creeley’s “is a poetics which addresses the tension between speaking and being spoken through language” (397).

Robert Kern, approaching Creeley from a Heideggerian perspective, says that for Creeley the poet is more “medium” than “maker,” more “humble witness” than “organizing manipulator” (212), and he goes on to say that Heidegger, Olson, and Creeley see “language not as a reflective medium but as a direct manifestation of the being or activity of the world” (217). Each of these critics point out important aspects of Creeley’s hermeneutic stance as it involves language, and some of Gadamer’s insights on the nature of language can help further our understanding of Creeley’s notions of language as they are manifested in some of his poems.

Gadamer’s basic ideas about language are similar to those expressed in Heidegger’s late writings in which Heidegger investigates how humanity is spoken by language rather than how humanity speaks language. Gadamer’s memorable statement “Being that can be understood is language” (*Truth and Method* 474-5), is further explained in his essay “The Universality of the Hermeneutical Problem” when he writes, “Language is the fundamental mode of operation of our being-in-the-world and the all-embracing form of our constitution in the world” (3). In other words, we come to know ourselves as human beings in and through language. On this point Heidegger and Gadamer are in complete agreement. Both Heidegger and Gadamer emphasize that language is not primarily a tool for human use or something that we can objectively study. However, where Heidegger focuses on the ways being is disclosed to those who listen to language, Gadamer focuses on how language discloses possibilities for existence by its transmission of tradition. Gadamer writes, “For language is not only an object in our hands, it is the reservoir of tradition and the medium in and through which we exist

and perceive our world” (“On the Scope” 29).

This idea of language as a bearer of tradition, and the idea that tradition and language as those things that are beyond our conceptual consciousness are key for Gadamer. In any event of understanding, we are always already possessed by tradition (manifested in whatever prejudices or biases we have) as it has come to us in language. Our prejudices are constantly being modified as we experience new events and come to new insights.³⁴ The key point is that we can never get to a place where language, and the tradition that it carries to us, can ever be fully objectified so that we can study them objectively, or even use them objectively. For Gadamer, tradition is an event that occurs in language and is not a substantive thing that lies behind being; in its disclosure in the event of being, it cannot be objectified (Linge liv). Thus, Gadamer writes, in perhaps his most succinct statement of his project, “The nature of the hermeneutic experience is not that something is outside and desires admission. Rather, we are possessed by something [language] and precisely by means of it we are opened up for the new, the different, the true” (“The Universality” 9). Tradition (and even our own prejudices, neither of which we can choose to escape) are necessary and “productive grounds” for understanding rather than impediments to understanding that as past hermeneutic philosophers had reasoned (Linge xiv). Gadamer states it this way in *Truth and Method*: “Time is no longer primarily a gulf to be bridged because it separates; it is actually the supportive ground of the course of events in which the present is rooted” (297).

Creeley, himself, has written a statement that seems close to Gadamer’s project. He writes, “language is that possibility most specific to our condition as human beings”

("I'm Given" 501). And in "The Charm" Creeley's understanding of how language possesses us prereflectively (to use a Gadamerian term), and how tradition transmitted to us in language mediates between new insights and things already understood. It reads,

My children are, to me,
what is uncommon: they are dumb
and speak with signs. Their hands

are nervous, and fit more for
hysteria, than goodwill or long
wintertime conversation.

Where fire is, they are quieter
and sit, comforted. They were born
by their mother in hopelessness.

But in them I had been, at first,
tongue. If they speak,
I have myself, and love them. (*CPI* 43)

Presumably as yet unable to speak, the children are, still, surrounded by language, situated in language and in part determined by the particular tradition it comes with by way of their parents. Language, in this poem, seems to foster a sense of continuity, commonality. We have seen how Gadamer states that hermeneutics should not be seen

as attempting to construct a bridge over the inevitable gaps of time and differences in uses of language that interpreters must somehow breach, but that hermeneutics ought to be understood as always already having at its disposal a ready-made bridge to other texts and even other peoples—a bridge made of the language and the tradition it carries. Even in dealing with a presupposed I / Thou encounter, in which the self is alienated from the other, Gadamer writes that

a common understanding always precedes these situations. We all know that to say “thou” to someone presupposes a deep common accord.

Something enduring is already present when this word is spoken. When we try to reach agreement on a matter on which we both have different opinions, this deeper factor always comes into play, even if we are seldom aware of it. (“The Universality” 7-8)

Gadamer is interested here in getting beyond the notion of the “I” and the “Thou” as foundational realities into the “description of a comprehensive life-phenomenon that constitutes the ‘we’ that we all are” (“The Universality” 8).

The above statement is representative of what G. B. Madison sees as the hermeneutic move in twentieth-century philosophy “away from the paradigm of (monological) consciousness to that of (dialogical) intersubjectivity” (315). Situated within language, human beings are always involved in the give and take of what Gadamer calls “conversation.” Istvan M. Feher states that for Gadamer, “Language is present as the conversation in the communality of the many” (65), and Gadamer shows that we don’t so much decide to conduct this conversation, but rather “we fall into” it

(*Truth and Method* 383). The understandings arrived at in this conversation, Gadamer writes, are beyond the subjectivity of the partners (*Truth and Method* 368), and thus coming to understanding within conversation is “not merely a matter of putting oneself forward and successfully asserting one’s point of view, but being transformed into a communion in which we do not remain what we were” (*Truth and Method* 379). In “The Charm,” Creeley begins by emphasizing the alienation the speaker feels in relation to his children who are “dumb” and “uncommon” to him. Language is lacking. The distance, however, is closed by language—when they speak, so does the father, and he loves them. Language, here, brings a kind of redemption, a transforming into community (to shift Gadamer’s language a bit). The children, at the start of the poem, besides being called “dumb,” are characterized as “nervous” and “fit more for / hysteria, than for goodwill or long / winterside conversation.” But language brings community, connection, and love. The speaker/father recognizes the children as bearers of a tradition not their own, one that is inevitably shaped and to be shaped by mother and father. This is a communion through language that demonstrates the intersubjective nature of human existence. Language is the bridge between subjectivities that can make authentic experience in the moment what Gadamer calls the “all-embracing harmony of beings within the world disclosed by language” (“The Nature” 81).

Another poem that speaks to the relationship between language and subjectivity is “The Pattern.” This poem presents the notion that language, or more specifically, linguistic patterns, provides a boundary for or in some way determine subjectivity. The poem begins,

As soon as

I speak, I

speaks. It

wants to

be free but

impassive lies

in the direction

of its

words. Let

x equal x, x

also

equals x. (*CPI* 294)

Each person is inescapably bound by language. No one can be free from it either to know language objectively, or to know one's own identity (as it is situated within language) objectively. In this poem, the I wants to be free but cannot be free from words (*Words*, by the way, is the title of the volume of which this poem is a part). However, there is a playful freedom of variation available as "I speak" is made into "I speaks" so that the I is in its typical first-person position to begin, but is then irregularly conjugated with "speaks" placing it in a third-person position. The subtle shift Creeley makes in his

equation is also of interest here. At first (“Let // x equal x”) x is a direct object of an implied subject. In the second statement of the same equation, however (x // also / equals x”), x is the subject of the sentence. This playful shift in perspective and in object/subject positioning demonstrates that while subjectivity is indeed inescapably bound by language, it can also realize, in this limitation, ground for new possibility within language. We are indeed limited by language in being situated within it, but realizing our place within language can open realms of understanding that can help us not to make objectivity, or a removed, manipulative stance, our goal.

Edward Halsey Foster believes this poem suggests that speech is “the way in which the *I* asserts itself in the world” (110). Though this poem is difficult, the idea of an assertive ego is not only opposed by Creeley in his other writings, but it also goes against the grain of the statement that the I “wants to / be free but / impassive lies // in the direction / of its / words.” Arthur Ford more correctly, I believe, says this poem is about the role of the poet who ought to be a passive “third party agent to the creative process” (68). Read in this way, the poem thematically realizes Creeley’s sense that he is “*given* to write poems.” (“I’m Given to Write Poems” 496). Creeley’s notions of language and subjectivity, revealed in “The Charm” and “The Pattern,” demonstrate that he is attempting a poetics in which the poet listens to language as one situated and determined in part by it rather than merely manipulating it as if it is a tool at his disposal.

Art

Robert Creeley’s most memorable statement on poetics, famously borrowed by

Olson for his essay “Projective Verse,” is “Form is never more than the extension of content.” Some of Creeley’s early poems (written in the midst of heavy correspondence with Olson) are poetic attempts to come to grips with this statement. “Divisions” is one of these early *ars poetica* poems that explores issues of form and content. The poem is divided into two sections (the title partly implied the shape of the poem). The first concerns ideas of order. It begins,

Order. Order. The bottle contains
more than water. In this case the form
is imposed. (*CPI* 33)

The form of the bottle does not fit the “content,” the water it is meant to hold. The tension in this first section of the poem is between an abstract, imposed form and what Creeley calls a “sloppy” or formless wandering. The last three strophes of the section read,

To make it difficult, to make a sense
of limit, to call a stop to meandering—
one could wander here

in intricacies, unbelted, somewhat sloppy.

But the questions are, is it all there
or on some one evening

will I come again here, most desperate and all questions,

to find the water all
leaked out. (*CPI* 33)

Imposed form is not of use because it is not fitting for the content. But an absence of form allows the water, or content, to escape. What is needed for a poem is an organic unity of form and content, and the second section of the poem considers how to arrive at such a unity.

The second section begins with a consideration of the concrete, the particular, the “intricacies” mentioned in the first section:

Take it, there are particulars.
Or consider rock. Consider hardness not as elemental but as
stone. The stone! And just so
invincible.

Which is to say, not a damn thing but
rock. [. . .] (*CPI* 33)

The main thrust here is a concern for a statement that will properly attend to the particular instance at hand. Creeley pushes away from adjectives such as “elemental” into tangible nouns such as “rock” and “stone.” These words, it seems, are appropriate forms, or extensions of the content of “hardness” whereas “elemental” is not, perhaps, specific enough, tangible enough to provide an appropriate form for “hardness.” To borrow a bit more from Creeley’s language in this poem, “elemental” does not provide enough of “a sense of limit” for the occasion of “hardness.”

The next strophe concerns the role of thought in writing a poem:

Or if only to consider, don't.

Loss exists not as perpetual but, exact, when the attentions
are cajoled,
are flattered by their purport or what they purport
to attend. (*CPI* 33)

Thought must be of use for form, and thought is an act of providing form. Thus, another way to state the first line might be, “don't engage in thought for the sake of thought alone.” The intention of thought becomes problematic when it does not “attend” specifically enough to its occasion, its instant, and instead is “flattered by their purport.” In other words, thought becomes too self-congratulatory of its own abilities and begins to intend things for itself rather than to make forms appropriate for its particular situation.

The last strophe of the poem reads

Which remains not, also not, definition.
But statement. But, very simply, one, just so, not
attend to
the business not
his own. (*CPI* 34)

The point is not to define but to state. Definition, it seems, has a more general function than statement. Definition creates an abstract field around entities that may not necessarily be of moment to the particular instant. However, statement comes in a moment, is used to enact. It's the word of “one, just so”—of one person in one moment.

In these last lines the poem is negatively focused: “not / attend to / the business not / his own.” The key is to limit form’s range; it should not have free reign over particulars or else it will become useless. But if form is contained, properly unified with content, merely an extension thereof, it will avoid being excessive to itself, and will attend only to its own business.

“Divisions” demonstrates Creeley’s insistence on giving one’s full attention to the moment at hand, attending to it with care; thus, he eschews words such as “elemental” in favor of “rock” or “stone” in order to present the urgency of the moment. He accepts the responsibility of being-in the writing rather than taking a more removed, objective, or even metaphysical stance toward reality. However, the first section of “Divisions” also brings up an aspect of Creeley’s art that is often overlooked. After addressing how neither imposed form nor formlessness are appropriate for the “water” or content, he says, “will I come again here, most desperate and all questions, / to find the water all / leaked out.” This question is a clue to Creeley’s notion of how art is able to exist in a unique way, throughout time, if it achieves a proper relationship of form and content. The problem in the first section of divisions is that the imposed form and the formlessness cannot properly keep the content contained through time. The poem will lose its ability to speak to another occasion because it lacks sufficient form.

There is a balance in Creeley’s art between his preoccupation with what might be called the dispersal of the instant and the gathering into the continuity of time. Critics who have taken a Heideggerian approach to Creeley’s work, especially Spanos, tend to focus exclusively on how Creeley emphasizes “dispersal” and “rupture” of tradition or

anything that might attain to stability in his poems. In fact, during his interview with Spanos, Creeley makes a statement that seems to challenge much of what Spanos insists on regarding dispersal and the de-centering impulse of postmodern literature. Creeley says, “What I’m saying only is that there are lives one lives in relation to the accumulation of historical patterns thus stabilized or recognized, the *histories* that permit people to have locations other than the moment to moment existence” (“With Bill Spanos” 168). Though Creeley takes a stance toward reality that remains involved and refuses to endorse a teleology that would determine each moment of existence from a perspective removed from that moment of existence, he still recognizes that life is involved with patterns, and that our moment-to-moment existence is in part determined by the “histories” (Gadamer would say “tradition”) we carry with us. Poems and art of all kinds can be stabilizing forces; they can provide continuity in life from moment to moment; a poem can enrich a present moment by bringing to that moment the history the poem itself bears with it.

Creeley’s sense of the artwork’s ability to provide continuity within temporal existence perhaps explains why he is so preoccupied with the word “echo.” One of Creeley’s volumes of poetry is entitled *Echoes*, and he uses the word “echo” or “echoes” in the title of thirty-three poems. For Creeley an echo is the return of a form of a moment, a moment of truth. Artworks can attain the ontology of an echo. They can resonate in such a way with a person that they return again and again to enrich a person’s experience of other moments in time. One of Creeley’s poems entitled “Echoes” reads,

In which the moment

just left reappears or
seems as if present
again its fact intact–

In which a willing
suspension of disbelief
alters not only the judgment
but all else equally– (*CPII* 452)

The first quatrain describes the moment of encountering an echo—something reappears “as if present again / its fact intact.” One’s judgment is altered in one’s re-experience of whatever is echoed (the reference to Coleridge’s “willing suspension of disbelief” is a hint that this echo is an artwork).

Later in the poem, Creeley speaks of the “singular clarity” made available by this artistic echo, and the poem’s last stanza demonstrates how the echo of art provides a sort of continuity for experience through the echo’s clarity:

In which these painfully small
endings shreds of emptying
presence sheddings of seeming
person can at last be admitted. (*CPII* 452)

Authentic existence, giving oneself fully to each moment, losing one’s ego in the community of the moment is given significance in the echo that “reappears” to the speaker. He finds a place where his struggles for existence “can at last be admitted” by

the echo and its ability to make the past significant in the present moment.

Gadamer's ideas on the ontology of the artwork may be instructive here. Art, for Gadamer is the "transformation into structure" of human play (*Truth and Method* 110). Play is that which "has its telos in itself" or that which exists for no ulterior purpose outside its own being (*Truth and Method* 113). When this play is transformed into structure, it achieves a kind of transcendence over time in that its structure allows it to be seen or read in particular ways throughout time. Still, though, art does not escape temporality. Its very being as an artwork depends upon its being presented to people in particular places at particular times. To explain this concept, Gadamer writes, "The specific temporality of aesthetic being, its having its being in the process of being presented, comes to exist in reproduction as a distinct, independent phenomenon" (*Truth and Method* 134). Gadamer describes the artwork as a festival—it is something that can be repeated, but each repetition is unique (*Truth and Method* 122-3). A particular festival has an identity, a certain structure. But each year the festival is repeated; it is a unique festival within that structure. Thus, Gadamer writes that

art is not a timeless present that presents itself to a pure aesthetic consciousness, but the act of a mind and spirit that has collected and gathered itself historically. [. . .] Since we meet the artwork in the world and encounter a world in the individual artwork, the work of art is not some alien universe into which we are magically transported for a time.

(*Truth and Method* 97)

Art is temporally grounded, and the experience of art is a temporal experience, but the

form of an artwork gives it the character of a festival, or in Creeley's terms, an echo, that can come back again and again in different times and circumstances to present the truth of experience. Lawrence K. Schmidt writes of Gadamer's notion of art that "The ontological valence of a work of art refers to its capacity to bring forth its subject matter in different temporal situations" (3). The echo of art is a revelation of the truth of the work in a new way, in a new time. Thus, Creeley struggles to be open to experience, to take the hermeneutic stance that resists resting in distanced objective or metaphysical perspectives, the "sheddings of seeming / person," can find refuge in what is echoed back to him in art.

Love

One could fairly categorize Creeley as a love poet.³⁵ The title of his most successful volume, *For Love*, straightforwardly announces the book's theme. Many of Creeley's poems, from *For Love* through his entire career, deal with love and "the give and take of human relationships," which Cynthia Edelberg early on identified as Creeley's "major theme" (34). However, when examined in light of his hermeneutic stance, Creeley's basic interest in love relationships can reveal a number of interesting insights into the nature of being-in-the-world.

One of Creeley's most frequently anthologized poems, "The Business," offers an interesting vision of love:

To be in love is like going out-
side to see what kind of day

it is. Do not
mistake me. If you love

her how prove she
loves also, except that it

occurs, a remote chance on
which you stake

yourself? But barter for
the Indian was a means of sustenance.

There are records. (*CPI* 138).

Love, in this poem, as in Creeley's poems generally, is not an autonomous gesture springing forth from the depths for a "true self" or soul. Love is an occurrence, a happening, an action that has content and form, and an environment (Creeley is fond of using the word "context"). Recall Olson's description of objectism as "the getting rid of the lyrical interference of the individual as ego, of the 'subject' and his soul" ("Projective Verse" 247). By emphasizing "records," and what "occurs," love can be seen in this poem as exterior act, much as Olson characterized his own poetry as "DOCUMENT," against the typical sense of poetry as flowing out from the subjective consciousness. Heidegger's statement in "The Origin of the Work of Art," serves much the same

purpose, it seems, as Olson's definition of objectism: "in existence, man does not proceed from some inside to some outside; rather, the nature of *Existenz* is outstanding standing-within" (65). Creeley's hermeneutic stance takes seriously the notion that human existence is an exterior act; thus, instead of reading this poem as merely an example of Creeley's cynicism towards love relationships at this time in his life (as Edelberg and Ford do), when read from the perspective of Creeley's hermeneutic stance, the poem is a demonstration of love as a "record" of what "occurs."³⁶

"The Business" also displays another aspect of Creeley's hermeneutic stance—that of the intersubjective nature of experience in the world. In the poem, love is intersubjective: "If you love // her how prove she / loves also." Love is reciprocity ("barter" that sustains life), a communication that occurs between individuals in a particular context. And it is on this occurrence, in this meaningful dialogue, that self takes on significance: "a remote chance on which you stake // yourself?" Creeley, in an interview, speaks to the intersubjective nature of experience in the world, and thus of subjectivity in general, when he says that

what we experience—place, time, condition, organism—is not divisible, that nothing is more nor less in the world, and that it all is in some way literally related. We are forms particular and separate in terms of apparent containment, but . . . we die, we molder and that kind of image, we are not separate in some decisive sense from all other life-forms. The situation then is that insofar as the ego becomes decisive, the ego has to experience itself as distinct consciousness, as division from that other existence. You

know, the business that Olson at times speaks of with some bitterness, of “the universe of discourse” where thought becomes thought about thought as opposed to the act of thinking, which is not divided from the totality. So that objectism is to realize that each is in the world as each is, and is not more or less than that. (“Brendan O’Regan and Tony Allan: An Interview with Robert Creeley” 132)

Creeley references Olson’s idea of objectism in the context of speaking of the interconnectedness of all things, and he demonstrates his sense that the individual ego cannot be seen as truly autonomous.

David E. Linge writes that the individual ego, or the idea of the autonomous self is at odds with the hermeneutic phenomenology of Heidegger and Gadamer. He writes that in their philosophies “the basic relation is not man’s relation to himself (i.e. his self-consciousness, his subjectivity) but his relation to and immersion in the event of being in which beings manifest themselves” (liv). This is Heidegger’s “outstanding standing-within” as individuality realizes itself as only itself in contingent relation with other beings in the event of being. A number of poems throughout Creeley’s oeuvre take up this basic notion of being-in-the-world as primarily intersubjective, or an act of reciprocity, as being comes into being in the conversation that is language.

“Circle” is a relatively long poem made up of several separate poetic fragments. Throughout the poem, Creeley emphasizes the exteriority of love as well as the intersubjective nature of the experience of love. These lines are from the beginning of the poem:

your body sans error.

*

Pounds the musculature
where flesh joins bone—
hangs loose, thus
relieves.

Several melding persons,
one face (*CPI* 612)

Creeley celebrates the body without error, physical existence without judgment or without placing mental categories onto experience. He also notes the shifting nature of subjectivity, how a single person is a complex of “melding persons.” Twice in the poem Creeley uses the adjective “generous” to describe the body of his lover. The strict boundary between self and other is exposed as porous in this poem. Subjectivity is consistently described in terms of its openness to otherness and to mutability. The shifting sea provides an analogy for this outward, temporal, generous, and mutable being:

sea’s plunging forms
and sounds, rock
face, the white, recurring

edge of foam—
love’s forms

are various. (*CPI* 613)

Able to be shaped to the contingencies of the moment, the form of love is organic, an act of being-in-the-world, not an interiorized status, mental or otherwise.

In a disjunctive section of the poem (entitled “KID”), the speaker includes a dialogue:

“What are you doing?”

Writing some stuff.

“You a poet?”

Now and then.

*

Woods, water,

all you

are. (*CPI* 615)

Creeley’s poem demonstrates his notion of a dialogical intersubjective self that comes to being in the conversation event of language not only through the content of his words and images (implying here an interconnection with the environment—“woods, water”), but also by allowing multiple voices into his poem. The poet, open to the question of the other, is himself shaped by the question, the back and forth of the conversation he has with an other. Thus, in allowing his interlocuter’s voice to become part of the poem, the interlocuter becomes part of who he is. Near the end of the poem, Creeley uses the phrase “Love’s watery condition” (*CPI* 616); “Circles” emphasizes the open subjectivity

that can admit otherness and adapt, like water, to whatever is its environment.

Many of the same notions underlying “Circle” are also evidenced in “For Love,” the final poem of the volume that bears the same title. The tension in this poem is the ego’s resistance to ego-less existence in the moment. Creeley’s speaker struggles with the lack of autonomy of the intersubjective self, the lack of control that is experienced when one is intimately involved with one’s environment. This poem demonstrates Altieri’s view of Creeley as constantly locked in the struggle between his desire to exist fully in the world, as ego-less part of it and to maintain a safety net of stable identity (*Enlarging the Temple* 172-3). Toward the middle of the poem Creeley writes

[. . .] Can I eat
what you give me. I
have not earned it. Must
I think of everything

as earned. Now love also
becomes a reward so
remote from me I have
only made it with my mind. (*CPI* 257)

The speaker realizes that if he only accepts that which he earns, love is merely a reward for his ego; he’s “only made it with [his] mind” so that it is actually quite “remote” from his place in time in the moment. In the lines immediately following the ones quoted above, he elaborates on the discordant self-centered nature of his egocentric posture:

Here is tedium,
despair, a painful
sense of isolation and
whimsical if pompous

self-regard. But that image
is only of the mind's
vague structure. (*CPI* 257-8)

The reward for his ego leads only to “tedium, despair” and a sense of self that he realizes is merely “pompous” and out of touch with the reality of existence as he knows it to be—open, exterior, involved intimately with others.

The end of the poem records the speaker's decision to take up the hermeneutic stance toward reality and his love relationship. He says,

Let me stumble into
not the confession but
the obsession I begin with
now. [. . .] (*CPI* 258)

The confession is too egocentric; it begins with the “I,” as in “I have sinned,” to clear one's own conscience. But the obsession is the losing of self in love. No more is the speaker isolated, removed from the world—he is now immersed in experience. The last lines read, “Into the company of love / it all returns” (*CPI* 258) underscoring the intersubjective nature of the experience of being-in-the-world in a posture that is fully

open to experience and to otherness.

The end of Creeley's poem "The Rain" offers one more example of Creeley's hermeneutic stance in terms of his "major theme" of love, and it should call into question Foster's thesis that Creeley's is a "poetics of solitude," and that for Creeley "In solitude there is indeed salvation" (117). In "The Rain," Creeley's speaker, once again, struggles with the dominance of his ego:

What am I to myself
that must be remembered,
insisted upon
so often [. . .] (*CPI* 207)

The speaker is distraught over his inability to get beyond himself, to exist fully in each moment and be open to otherness. He asks, "am I to be locked in this / final uneasiness." The answer is not clearly given in the poem, but it is intimated. The speaker turns to his lover and makes a request (and this is how the poem ends):

Love, if you love me,
lie next to me.
Be for me, like rain,
the getting out

of the tiredness, the fatuousness, the semi-
lust of intentional indifference.

Be wet

with a decent happiness. (*CPI* 207)

Love is a matter of what is happening. “Love, if you love me” registers the openness to contingency necessary to life lived in the moment. The speaker cannot depend upon the eternal love of a “soul mate.” The speaker’s request is not for an internal or soulful will to love, but for an exterior act of love: “Be wet / with a decent happiness.” This statement recalls the analogy of love and water given in “Circle”: “Love’s watery condition” (*CPI* 616). Neither love nor happiness are located inside the bounds of skin; they are of the skin. The speaker’s “insistent” unease is the result of his (and perhaps also his lover’s) commitment to a hermeneutic stance, to an openness to the world and to others that allows for vulnerability. The happiness Creeley speaks of here deeply involves risk because it is always open to the possibility of no longer being in love. The question of “if you love me” is always open.

The Poet

To conclude this chapter, I want to examine three poems that I think illustrate the main features of Creeley’s hermeneutic stance, especially as it regards his work as a poet. “I Keep to Myself Such Measures . . .” illuminates Creeley’s concern with how the mind tends to dominate the body by turning experience into egocentric abstraction that is available for mental manipulation. The beginning and the ending of the poem, however, demonstrate Creeley’s insistence that he not allow the mind to remove him from being fully in existence each moment. The poem reads,

I keep to myself such

measures as I care for,
daily the rocks
accumulate position.

There is nothing
but what thinking makes
it less tangible. The mind,
fast as it goes, loses

pace, puts in place of it
like rocks simple markers,
for a way only to
hopefully come back to

where it cannot. All
forgets. My mind sinks.

I hold in my hands such weight

it is my only description. (*CPI 297*)

For Creeley, the mind tends to make abstract markers out of reality; it attempts to abstract principles from reality that it can use to conceptualize all experience. However, Creeley says that the mind (because it is temporal) can never get back to the place where it first drew out principles for abstraction. The mind is caught in the flux of reality and cannot

escape no matter its attempts.

Kevin Power, in an interview with Creeley, successfully identifies this need to stay within the flux of time when he asks, “So it’s this sense of continuous frustration of not being in what you’re doing or where you are?” To which Creeley replies, “Right. I hate to be beside myself” (para 79). The first and last lines of the poem show that Creeley is determined not to allow the mind to subsume experience into its abstractions. He will be in experience, keeping “such / measures as I care for.” The stance of care, of love, disallows the being “beside oneself,” of the removed, abstract perspective. The last lines demonstrate Creeley’s notion that measure is not “locked in the mind past all remonstrance” (to quote from Creeley’s poet-hero William Carlos Williams),³⁷ but that it is in the hands, in exterior existence out in the world. The mind sinks into the hands; thinking happens in the world like hands happen to grapple and move and create. In the hermeneutic stance the mind does not determine the body, manipulating, and predetermining all action mechanically, but is part of one’s being “care”-fully out in the world. Recalling Gadamer, knowledge is “a human comportment” not a set of “anonymous truths” (“On the Possibility” 18).

In “The Dogs of Auckland” Creeley’s speaker looks to a pack of canines to be his muses as he struggles to resist taking a metaphysical or removed stance towards reality. He attempts to take up a properly involved stance toward Auckland, a distant and unfamiliar place. The poem reveals how the speaker is able to truly come to be “here, where I hadn’t known” (*CPII* 502)—how he is able to exist fully in the now of a particular place.

The poem begins, however, with the speaker disconnected from the immediacy of his surroundings because of his teleological perspective. The opening lines read

Curious, coming again here,
where I hadn't known where I was ever,

following the lead of provident strangers,
around corners, out to the edges,

never really looking back but kept
adamant forward disposition, a Christian

self-evident resolve, small balloon of purpose" (*CPII* 502)

With his teleological perspective, or metaphysical stance, each moment of temporal being is mutated into an empty image of a supposed future. Thus, later in the same section he says, "I must be the way life is, like they say, a story // someone might have told me" (*CPII* 502). Here the speaker is merely "following the lead of provident strangers," inauthentic, directed by a predetermined pattern, or purpose, a narrative box for life to fit itself within.

As the poem moves into the second section, the speaker begins to question his sense of being in this strange place. Perhaps memories of prior visits to Auckland twenty years previous would help his being take proper shape in this unfamiliar place. He asks, "How to stay real in such echoes [memories of friends he had met twenty years ago]?"

How to be, finally, anywhere the body's got to?" (CPII 503). He is not able to let the mind "sink" into the body as in "I Keep to Myself Such Measures . . ." He seeks to "mask the grimace with a smile" all the while saying to himself, "I can. *I think I can*" (CPII 503-4). He is trying hard to meet predetermined expectations. Instead of living fully in the moment to do what he can in the moment, the speaker admits to thinking about what he has to do. He motivates himself from without. He is following a formula—the little engine's predetermined form for success in difficult situations (thus the italicized "I think I can"). The words come not from his being steeped in the need of the present situation, but from a lack of imaginative response to his situation such that he has to fall back on simplistic, even childish formulas for how to think about dealing with problems.

In the third section of the poem, the speaker says he tried "to learn 'New Zealand' (I thought) as if it were a book simply" (CPII 504). Here he is exhibiting a removed, objective perspective that doesn't allow for temporal being in the moment. Instead of jumping into the world, leaping into the hermeneutic circle, he approaches existence through the lens of books, relying on the forms of experience of others rather than on simply opening himself up fully to experience so that he can in each moment be fully there.

Creeley's speaker understands, however, that regardless of his present problems within a metaphysical stance, or of approaching the world from the removed, objective perspective of books, that "scale's intimate" (CPII 504). He knows that the poet cannot find proper measure, proper scale in books, or in any other way than leaping into

experience. Enter then, the dogs of Auckland, muses that aid the poet in his effort to “get back to the body where I was born” (a line Creeley often quotes from one of Allen Ginsberg’s poems).³⁸ In the fifth section, Creeley states, “I have still the sense / I’ve got this body to take care of, a thing someone left me in mind // as it were. Don’t forget it” (*CPII* 506). Amidst this thought of his body, and how he must not leave it behind, not forget it in pursuit of abstract thoughts about experience or teleological plans, the poet sees a woman, at first simply caught up in her everyday affairs, who becomes enamored with a group of dogs as she sees them. She loses her teleological existence in a moment of pure being there:

[. . .] The dogs were there when I went
up to the head of the street to shop for something to eat and a lady,

unaggressively but particular to get there, pushes in to pay for some small
items she’s got, saying she wants to get back to her house before the rain.

(*CPII* 506)

So far, the lady is fixed in her purposeful existence, refusing to exist fully in the moment at hand. But then she sees the dogs, the muses of Auckland:

she’s stopped to peer into some lot has a board enclosure around it,

and there are two dogs playing, bouncing up on each other.

Should I bounce, then, in friendship, against this inquisitive lady,

bark, be playful? One has no real words for that.

Pointless otherwise to say anything she was so absorbed. (*CPII* 506)

Creeley's speaker immediately sees in the dogs and in the woman a kinship, and he wants to connect with this rapt attention, this pure being-in-the-moment that the woman and the dogs exhibit.

The dogs, in the sixth section, are "specific to the given streets," (*CPII* 506) fully inhabiting the moment of their environment. They are muses for the poet, as they "led the way, accustomed" (*CPII* 506). They have no purpose other than their immediate circumstance: "Nothing to do with sheep or herding, no presence other than one cannily human, / a scale kept the city particular and usefully in proportion" (*CPII* 507). The speaker has finally found that intimate scale he couldn't get to in books about New Zealand. The dogs, as muses, have led him to a measure that is specific to the place and the time of the poet's existence, and thereby he attains a stance that provides a perspective that allows him to use the appropriate measures.

The speaker, in his time in New Zealand, had wanted "all of it, but can't get it" (*CPII* 506). He had wanted to "call across it, see it as a piece" (*CPII* 506), but he can't gain that full metaphysical perspective. He cannot see in the present moment the end that he wants to make of it. He cannot have the world for himself, for his own perspective. He mockingly asks, later in the poem, "You thought, for even one moment it was Your World?" (*CPII* 508). The hermeneutic stance allows him to see himself as open to the world, a part of it no more special than any other part, not able to separate mind and body to gain an objective, dominating perspective, but to dwell in the world as part of it, fully.

In the rest of section six and through section seven, the speaker recalls earlier moments that become of use to him in his moment now. His world becomes more specific; he becomes more of a part of this world so that he can say, conflating himself with the dog in the story he recalls,

[. . .] I am the one

in the story the friend told of his Newfoundland,
hit by car at Auckland city intersection, crossing on crosswalk,
knocked down first, then run over, the driver
anxious for repairs to his car. I am the Dog.

Open the sky let the light back in. (*CPII* 508)

He is led by the dogs to realize the open nature of being, being vulnerable to others, willing to live fully in a dangerous world. To end the seventh section, Creeley's speaker condemns his earlier, more metaphysical perspective, or the teleological perspective of the woman he meets shopping before they both had their epiphany by seeing the dogs, or more broadly, the human tendency to take up a removed stance toward the world. He speaks, here, from a dog's perspective:

Your ridiculous, pinched faces confound me.

Your meaty privilege, lack of distinguishing measure,

skill, your terrifying, mawkish dependence–

You thought for even one moment it was Your World?

Anubis kills! (CPII 508)

Anubis is the god in Egyptian lore who has the head of a jackal (a type of wild dog) that leads men to judgment. The dog's judgment "kills" that of those humans who take the metaphysical perspective because, in taking a hermeneutic stance, realizing that "scale's intimate" rather than trying to seek a removed, objective perspective, the dogs will always judge correctly, always fully specific to each occasion, whereas the metaphysical or objective perspectives will skew the occasion in favor of some end extrinsic to the moment at hand.

Creeley's speaker, with the dogs as his muses, has found the measure, the skill needed for the occasion of his time in Auckland. He states in the first lines of the last section of the poem that "'Anubis rhymes with Auckland" (*CPII 508*), thus connecting what he has become, the dog, Anubis, and the place in which he exists, Auckland. And in the final section of the poem, he thanks these muses of Auckland for "the kind accommodation, / the unobtrusive company, or else the simple valediction of a look" (*CPII 509*). He thanks them for always being appropriate in each place, always in the body of the moment.

I would like to end this chapter with a look at another of Creeley's love poems because it so strongly emphasizes some key aspects of Creeley's hermeneutic stance, and it properly returns us to his volume *For Love* and to the kind of poem for which Creeley

is most celebrated. In “A Form of Women,” the tension in the poem derives from the struggle between a removed, autonomous self, and the desire for love—an involved, open, even vulnerable stance toward the world and/or otherness. Harald Mesch argues that love in Creeley implies “complete openness on the part of the subject vis-a-vis the object” (64). “A Form of Women” nicely demonstrates Creeley’s understanding of the difficulty of love as it involves the risk of openness toward otherness.

The poem is suffused with an ethos of fear. The poem begins with the speaker taking a walk in the night alone, and he sees

[. . .] trees

and shapes more fearful

because I feared

what I did not know

but have wanted to know. (*CPI* 152)

He bemoans his loneliness, and is fearful of the loss of love. He says,

I could not touch you.

I wanted very much to

touch you

but could not. (*CPI* 152)

His uncertainty in the face of love is problematic, but perhaps even more so is the loss of identity he also fears. One of Creeley’s more famous poems, “The Immoral Proposition” nicely characterizes Creeley’s problem: “If you never do anything for anyone else / you

are spared the tragedy of human relation- // ships” (*CPI* 125). The problem is that Creeley desires love, he desires contingent existence in the now, but he also knows that such contingency, such openness, leaves him vulnerable to “tragedy.” Even his own identity is threatened. He says,

My face is my own.

My hands are my own.

My mouth is my own

but I am not. (*CPI* 152)

Here Creeley reveals an interesting problem of the hermeneutic stance. One’s being is “outstanding standing-within,” as Heidegger puts it. Thus one’s mind can “sink” into one’s hands, one’s outward existence. But in that outward “standing within,” one’s autonomous individuality is lost in what Mesch calls “complete openness on the part of the subject.” The “I am not” of the above quoted lines carries a double meaning. It can be read as both “I am not my own” and “I am nothing, a void.” Subjectivity, according to Creeley’s hermeneutic stance, is intersubjective; it involves an openness that does not allow for an autonomous self. An autonomous self cannot exist so that “I am nothing, a void” can be read; but, more positively, the line can be read as the speaker’s coming to understand that “I am not my own.” The problem is that the speaker is afraid of both options. The fear of a more open, intersubjective self is reasonable—one is left open to the vicissitudes of human relationships, of others that may harm. But the other alternative is to be nothing at all. In the end, the speaker chooses love. The poem’s final stanzas demonstrate the fear and anguish of the speaker’s choice between love, openness,

and vulnerability on the one hand, and utter annihilation on the other:

Moon, moon,
when you leave me alone
all the darkness is
an utter blackness,

a pit of fear,
a stench,
hands unreasonable
never to touch.

But I love you.
Do you love me.
What to say
when you see me. (*CPI* 152-3)

The fear in the first of these stanzas is utter annihilation of self in the void. There is no way to be significantly alone in the world. But the offering of love in the last stanza is left open without the comfort of knowing whether the speaker's declaration of love will be favorably received. The uncertainty of the situation is palpable ("What to say?"). But such uncertainty, such radical openness to contingency, is an indelible part of Creeley's stance as a poet. He chooses love beyond all else, an involved, intimate relation with otherness, with the world around him. His stance, as Olson declared is, indeed,

“NARRATOR IN.”

CHAPTER THREE

“Open Out Like a Rose”: Robert Duncan’s Hermeneutic Stance

Studies of Duncan and his work often focus on his relationship to other poets. Such scholarship is interesting because his relationships with other poets were often as intellectually fruitful as they were full of emotional strain and dissension.³⁹ Dennis Cooley makes an interesting point when he says that Duncan has an ambivalent relationship with “poetic coteries” because he has a “simultaneous desire to join with others to fight for the preservation of an imaginative life on the one hand, and to maintain his own exposure and vulnerability on the other” (60). Black Mountain College constituted one of these “coteries” for Duncan in the mid-fifties, and there is no doubt that there were, at times, disagreements between Olson and Duncan. However, critics sometimes overemphasize the supposed rift between these two major poets.⁴⁰ Nathaniel Mackey is right when he says that Duncan’s life is characterized “by the strikingly contentious character of his relationships to the poets, both present and past, from whom his work is derived” (“The World-Poem” 599), but what is important in Mackey’s suggestion is the influential nature of those “contentious” relationships on Duncan. Duncan did admit that he “played heretic often to Olson’s position” at Black Mountain (Cohn and O’Donnell 516), and critics often use Olson’s famous essay “Against Wisdom

as Such” (written as a sort of warning to Duncan about tendencies in his poetics) to emphasize the differences between the two poets. But, as evidence of the solidarity between Olson and Duncan, preeminent Duncan scholar, Robert J. Bertholf, notes that “Charles Olson, Robert Creeley, and Denise Levertov were the three he claimed again and again as his contemporaries of the poetic line” (Introduction viii). Duncan, himself, actually names Olson one of his poetic masters, along with Pound and Zukofsky, and calls Creeley and Levertov his “companions” (qtd. in Olson, “Casual Mythology” 63). And in a relatively late interview, Duncan responds to the suggestion that the “Black Mountain Movement” no longer has any relevance for him. He says, “I think that the Black Mountain Movement is no longer current; consequently, I’m not current because it’s very much what I do” (Cohn and O’Donnell 525). There are, of course, important differences between Duncan and Olson, and there are some fine studies on this matter, but in the spirit of solidarity evidenced by Duncan in the above statements, this chapter will examine Duncan’s poetry and poetics as a Black Mountain phenomenon.⁴¹ The points of continuity between Duncan’s poetry and that of Olson and Creeley will not be explicitly emphasized, but by examining his work in the light of the hermeneutic ontology of Heidegger and Gadamer, the implicit similarities will be evident.

Unlike the criticism of Olson and Creeley, which often turns to Heidegger for theoretical support, very little of the criticism on Duncan deals with Heidegger.⁴² This is somewhat ironic since Duncan is the only one of these Black Mountain poets who said he read Heidegger and was enthusiastic about his reading.⁴³ Though Heidegger plays a role in the overall conception or direction of the larger works of critics Stephen Fredman and

Charles Altieri, Duncan is examined as almost a contrasting figure to the general thrust of these works overall, and Heidegger is never used to explicate Duncan's poetry or poetics, specifically. Fredman, in his book *Poet's Prose*, says that while both Creeley and Duncan are committed to a poetry of process, Creeley is more interested in how process poetry can lead to phenomenological presence where Duncan is more interested in how this process leads him to apprehension of "quasi-theological" absence (99-100). In his discussion of postmodern "immanentist" poetry that he reads as in line with Heidegger's project, Altieri seems to have trouble with Duncan and what he sees as the difficult demands Duncan places on readers when his poetry is "so thoroughly conceptual and remote from ordinary existential problems and needs" (163). He sees Duncan as an allegorist who makes use of "the traditional analogical vision of the world as the book of God" (130).

Fredman and Altieri do not go so far as to call Duncan a neo-Platonist. Duncan's claim that he is a Romantic poet, along with his interest in all kinds of religious and mythological lore, leads some critics to put him squarely in the tradition of neo-Platonic thought. While it is true that Duncan sometimes mentions "the beyond," or "cosmic orders," and even speaks of "Poetry," with a capital "P," ultimately his stance is anti-metaphysical, anti-teleological.⁴⁴ Critics such as Engler, Foster, and O'Leary make the mistake of associating Duncan with the Platonic tradition without emphasizing that Duncan's idea of cosmic order or a form beyond forms is always evolving, never static, and never fully comprehensible to the poet situated in language and history.⁴⁵ Thus, in this chapter, part of my task will be to demonstrate that Duncan does reject metaphysical

and teleological understandings of existence, and indeed takes up a hermeneutic stance.

Throughout this chapter I will borrow from a variety of critics, many of whom, like Thom Gunn, see Duncan not as a neo-Platonist Romantic, but as, what Gunn calls, a “Romantic Modernist” who defined Romanticism not in terms of fixed ideals, but as “the intellectual adventure of not knowing” (“Adventurous Song” 17). Most critics see in Duncan a radical openness to the surrounding world, and an understanding of subjectivity as always already caught up in language and history. Thus, critics generally speak of Duncan’s idea that poetry is not self-expression because the poet does not merely use language like a tool, but comes into language, listens to what it gives him.⁴⁶ Throughout this chapter, as I discuss aspects of Duncan’s poetry through the lens of philosophical hermeneutics, such as his notions of truth, of eternity and temporality, and the ontological significance of art, I will draw upon these ideas and the various critics who express them, as well as Duncan’s own statements about his poetics. The main contribution this chapter makes to existing Duncan scholarship is its demonstration of the close relationship of Duncan’s ideas to notions of existence and of art put forth by the hermeneutic philosophies of Martin Heidegger and Hans-Georg Gadamer.

Some basic aspects of Duncan’s hermeneutic stance can be found in his long essay, “The Truth and Life of Myth.” He writes “three forces move to incarnate themselves in the poem.” There are “words,” which are “the reservoir of our humanity.” There is “the life experience and imagination of the poet,” which Duncan says is “the reservoir of his craft and recognitions.” Finally, there is “the actual body of the poet,” which Duncan describes as “the reservoir of his lifestyle” (18). In this passage Duncan,

first, recognizes language as “the reservoir of our humanity,” which is a key aspect of both Heideggerian and Gadamerian hermeneutics. Language is that out of which we gain or understand our being, not something that we simply utilize. Secondly, Duncan mentions the craft of poetry, and many of his poems revel in the poetic process and speak of what art itself is and does. Notice how craft is intimately connected with the experience, imagination, and recognition of the poet. Thus, poetry grows, organically, out of those experiences and recognitions. Finally, the experience of the body, not just the mind or imagination of the poet, is important to Duncan’s hermeneutic stance.

Duncan is praised for his courageous, straightforward presentation of his homosexuality both in his poems and in his prose essays, but beyond this more personal aspect of the use of the body in his poems, Duncan’s philosophical stance, his hermeneutic stance, depends upon an intimate, physical involvement with what surrounds him in the world.⁴⁷ Against the pervasive mind/body dualism so profoundly present in Western thought, Duncan proposes a unification of the mind and body; Duncan presents a holistic understanding of the world and of the poet in the world.

Duncan admits that his mature efforts in poetry are most fully evident in *The Opening of the Field* and the volumes that follow.⁴⁸ *The Opening of the Field* was the first full volume Duncan published after his time at Black Mountain College. However, before Duncan met or even heard about Olson or Creeley his poetry demonstrated a particular “stance toward reality” that would draw him toward the poetry of Black Mountain. Perhaps the earliest indication of Duncan’s own unique hermeneutic stance may be found in a poem he wrote in his early twenties: “Fragment: 1940.” He writes,

I am liable in the late afternoon
lingering to remember in the various cities
the familiar streets, clock tower, magnolias,
to remember, reconstructing yet not
faultlessly as then, for the singular vision
has departed, reconstructing the cities
in sand, not faultlessly, roughly,
impatiently. (*The Years* 15)

Olson's "Projective Verse" emphasizes the "speed" with which the poet goes about his constructions—the complete involvement in the moment of composition—not removed, reflective, or relaxed, but involved, intense, perhaps even "impatient."⁴⁹ Duncan says his reconstructions are rough, faulty, "for the singular vision / has departed." Duncan's speaker jumps into the sand to make these reconstructions of cities, but he doesn't do so from a removed, objective perspective that will produce seemingly faultless designs.

Perhaps more than any other Black Mountain poet, Duncan dwells upon the thought that the hermeneutic stance, the involved stance, gives up on the ideal of perfection. The hermeneutic stance opens itself up to rough, somewhat faulty or awkward constructions. But these concessions are necessary limitations for any maker who understands himself as temporal, limited in his or her own nature. At the end of the poem, the speaker says his position in this act of construction is

hopelessly bounded, on all sides
the primal limitations of a single court,

the first gateway endlessly repeated

so that the beyond is always beyond. (*The Years* 15)

Duncan finds in this aptly named poem (“Fragment”) the sense of the “primal limitations” of temporality and of a stance that takes up a perspective that understands itself as temporal. The stance does not allow for a “singular vision” that will bring all things under its dominion—as do both subjective metaphysical and objective technocratic perspectives. The hermeneutic stance, in Duncan’s view, allows “the beyond” to truly be “the beyond” because it does not attempt to escape the bounds of history by achieving a timeless perspective. It comes to experience ever fresh, open to whatever the experience of the moment has to offer. Thus, Duncan writes of “the first gateway” that is “endlessly repeated.” Duncan’s poetry does not intend to lead readers to a certain “end”; his poems do not lead people to conclusions by which they can judge their lives, their experiences. Instead, his poems seek a return to a “primal” state that is open to the newness of experience.

In an early poetic sequence entitled “Eye Sight,” Duncan explores the idea of vision as a metaphor for how we come into an experience of the world. Duncan’s use of this metaphor in these poems, however, is ambivalent. There is a striking similarity, in fact, between Duncan’s approach and the differing ways Heidegger and Olson speak of vision, or eyes, as metaphors for understanding. Heidegger sometimes uses the metaphor of eyesight as a way to describe the work of the Western metaphysical tradition. William V. Spanos says that Heidegger’s use of eyesight as a metaphor sees “the eye as privileged agency of knowledge in the ontotheological tradition” (*Repetitions* 121). Heidegger’s

sense of eyesight is something like Emerson's transparent eyeball which seeks a kind of totalizing universalism that brings all diversity into order. It is a removed eye that sees and orders experience from a distance. In Heidegger's "The Age of the World View" he writes that the impulse of the removed eye is toward calculation, a static objectification of experience that renders things useful for technological manipulation:

This objectification of the existent takes place in a re-presentation which aims at presenting whatever exists to itself in such a way that the calculating person can be secure, that is, certain of the existent. Science as research is produced when and only when truth has been transformed into such certainty of representation. (9)

Olson shares essentially the same Heideggerian concerns, but he doesn't use the metaphor of eyesight in the same way. In fact, he uses eyesight in such a way that eyes demonstrate a being-in existence in a very physical sense. Olson's "Letter 6" famously begins, "polis / is eyes," (*MP* 30) and ends with "There are no hierarchies, no infinite, no such many as mass, there are only / eyes in all heads / to be looked out of" (*MP* 33). Obviously, the intent here for Olson is not to extol the kind of distanced, objectifying vision Heidegger repudiates, but to emphasize an intensity of being in the moment that only this earthly, limited sense of vision (only eyes in heads, not eyes in the skies, so to speak) allows.⁵⁰

"Tears of St. Francis," one of the poems in Duncan's "Eye Sight" sequence, presents the image of a distanced, domineering eyesight. The poem reads,

The eye is lion of these wastes. Whose vision

tears the carcase loose from life, to ravage:
the spirit! the spirit! Vultures of our feeling
swim blinded out of the sun.

Heart-stench entrances clubs of hyenas.
With pure love of the bestial delicacy.
the animals descend to into the precincts of
St. Francis. He goes out into the heat,
wrapt in layers of his devotion, saintly
insect, bewildered by conversation with
his friends, the fish.

Seraphic hostesses!
survivors of the last safari!
The devout
return burnd black by the sun.
He lifts
sightless eyes into the blaze.

Father! Father! the animal sun! (*Caesar's Gate* 15)

The distancing vision creates a dualistic mind / body split (“tears the carcase loose from life”) that turns the physical body into a waste and ravages “the spirit.” The first lines demonstrate that the eye Duncan speaks of here is distanced from the body, from being-

in-the-world, and that it takes up a metaphysical stance. The last line of the poem connects the sun with the “Father,” the first person of the Trinity—also the person of the Trinity most associated with the all-seeing, dominating metaphysical gaze that Heidegger distrusts. This all-seeing, removed eye, a sun, which is also Father, wreaks havoc on the more physical aspects of existence. It “tears the carcass loose from life.” St. Francis appears as the protagonist of the poem, devoted to animal nature, willing to exist in the strange contingency of physical, animal life, “bewildered by conversations with / his friends, the fish.” He has been blinded by this metaphysical sun, so that, sightless, he can exist in harmony with animal nature and resist the urge to control it. St. Francis subverts the typical religious notion of “Father Sun”—God the Father as the sun, the all-pervasive center of life (and in medieval times, the universe), the metaphysical, all-seeing, dominating eye—by making this Father “the animal sun.” St. Francis calls upon physical nature to burn out the metaphysical eye and take up the body, the immediate, the contingent, as his vantage point. Duncan seems to admire St. Francis as a man who sought for God, not in realms above, but in physical nature.

Other poems in this section of *Caesar’s Gate*, such as “Bon Voyage!” discuss the negative notion of eyesight as a domineering, ordering, and oppressive force. In this poem, Duncan combines this idea of metaphysical eyesight with modernization in an apocalyptic fashion when he writes,

[. . .] The eye
sails toward the end, casting its lines
toward its own vanishing point.

No more. No more.

O poem of the rising tower,

of the ravages of victory.

Beyond our rapture there is.

No more. We have come to. O. (*Caesar's Gate* 27)

In a Heideggerian manner, Duncan's metaphor for modernization, the rising tower, is linked with an eyesight that is "casting its lines" across the universe ordering everything under its controlling vision. But there is nothing beyond this vision of order but a vanishing. Once "the victory" is achieved and all, supposedly, is known, there is simply "No more." Duncan's "O," as the poem's last, groaning word, could also be read as zero. The world, understood from the removed, objective perspective, is reduced to zero, to nothing. Spanos, again drawing upon Heidegger's "Age of the World View" as well as Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*, says that a distinguishing feature of the "vision" of "metaphysical epistemology" is

its ability to *see* or *re-present* the differential temporal process as *integral* and *inclusive* picture (table, blueprint, grid, design, strategic map, etc.) or, negatively, to lose sight of and forget difference, in the pursuit of the certainty (distance) of logocentric order. This intuition, in turn, enabled the transformation of the over-sight of the metaphysical overview (survey) into a pervasive methodological or disciplinary instrument for the discreet coercion of difference into identity [. . .]. (*Heidegger and Criticism* 139)

At the end of the metaphysical vision, "We have come to. O." Or zero. There is no

mystery any more in being, no room for existing in the contingency of the present moment. All has been coerced by the removed, teleologically motivated eye.

Duncan entitles two poems of this sequence “Eyesight.” The first, “Eyesight I,” presents the distanced, metaphysical stance already seen in “Tears of St. Francis” and “Bon Voyage.” “Eyesight I” presents the universalizing, metaphysical stance figured as a devouring worm. It reads,

The mute bird rots within the shell.

The worm coild in the closed bird’s eye
grows fat upon sight and expects to see.

He sings as he grows,
consuming all substance of sight.

So the worm in the world turns,
rotting the fruit before it grows ripe.

White as day he devours his night time,
turning and turning in the universal eye. (*Caesar’s Gate* 23)

The worm of “the universal eye,” is pernicious because it disallows the ripeness of the hermeneutic perspective, a perspective that is intimately involved in the contingencies of each moment. We see in this poem as well Duncan’s sense that this universalizing, distanced, metaphysical stance is at odds with an understanding of being as primarily temporal. The worm “devours his night time.” Duncan seems to sense that in the metaphysical perspective, time becomes spatialized, and the flux of being becomes fixed,

able to be manipulated by the distanced, objective eye of technology. Spanos, once again drawing on Heidegger's "Age of the World View," says that Western philosophy, from Plato on, "has privileged this visual sense" because it allows for a "reification of existence" that is "a spatialization of time" which "constitutes a willfully coerced metamorphosis of temporality into simultaneous image or picture" (*Heidegger and Criticism* 32). Duncan's worm in "the universalizing eye," rots "the fruit before it grows ripe" by, in Spanos's words, bringing forth a "flattened-out or depthless representation of the world in miniature, an in-clusive "world picture" [. . .], in which everything, including human being, has been reduced to the derived-timeless and 'worldless'-mode of present-at-handness" in which the things of the world in their immediacy, in their diversity and flux "are in fact seen as a systematized totality at a distance from their lived context—as located (identified and permanently fixed) within a hierarchized grid of mathematically or geometrically determined coordinates" and in which "they are rendered fully certain, predictable, manipulable" (*Heidegger and Criticism* 33).

But, even as Duncan presents the universalizing, teleological vision as disgusting, turning all the world into what it "expects to see," sight itself is not the problem. In "Eyesight II" Duncan presents the contrasting notion of sight that we have seen presented by Olson's "eyes in all heads / to be looked out of"—vision contained within the physical, temporal limits of the moment. "Eyesight II" begins,

The eye opening is the mouth seeing,
an organ of sight gasping for air.
Love in the eye corrupts the seed,

stirring new freaks of vision there.

How wonderful in the new sight the world will appear!

(*Caesar's Gate* 25)

The “new sight” Duncan celebrates is intimately connected with the body; it is an “organ of sight” that is described as “opening,” and Duncan uses synesthesia to have this organ “gasping for air.” This kind of eyesight is not fearful of the anomalous or contingent as “new freaks of vision” are born out of it. Duncan finds this sense of eyesight refreshing, able to bring the wonder back into existence that had been coerced into the “flattened-out” predictability of the metaphysical viewpoint.

Albert Gelpi locates one of the more fascinating and complex features of Duncan’s poetry in the idea of dualism, which Gelpi says stems from the gnosticism Duncan’s parents instilled in him as a youth (180). But, as Gelpi notes, Duncan did not finally come to believe in the strictly dualistic ideas of gnosticism. Where gnosticism creates an impenetrable divide between spirit and matter, Duncan is more incarnational. Duncan says, vis-a-vis gnosticism: “I read the Gnostics with great fascination but with no total feeling because [in gnosticism] the body is the spiritual body” and because of “the Gnostic picture of rescuing spirit and soul from its flesh and matter” (qtd. in Gelpi 196). In Duncan’s poetics, as he himself states, “the Word is incarnate, living, suffering in the flesh, is Man, then. The Ideal has no other ground in which to be but our passional life in historical time.” He then quotes Olson, who says, “The ‘soul’ then is equally ‘physical’” (“As an Introduction” 149). So, dualism fascinates Duncan, and he makes use of it in his poems (there is a lot of light/dark imagery, for instance), but, ultimately, Duncan’s

hermeneutic stance requires a breaking down of mind/body, spirit/matter dualism to present an enactment of being-in-the-moment, of exterior existence out in the world of action. In the context of writing poems, Duncan writes, “What we enact comes into being in the act itself, has no other place to be [. . .]. We have no other ‘consciousness’ except the consciousness of the act” (“As an Introduction” 150).

Gelpi recognizes that Duncan often plays out his dualistic fascinations in his war poetry, since war is an inevitable feature of the dualistic imagination he inherited from his parents’ gnosticism, and, Gelpi says, Duncan sought a harmony of this rough, strife-ridden dualism in the poetic imagination (190). An early poem, “A Spring Memorandum: Fort Knox,” seeks a unification of flesh and spirit, body and mind. Written in 1941, after Duncan was discharged from military duty (after having served for a short period), due to his admitted homosexuality, “A Spring Memorandum” speaks from the perspective of a reluctant soldier who sees himself as “a fox / caught, baited and clamped” (*The Years* 17). The speaker cannot abide the mechanized, technocratic military life that forces the body to obey rigid, dehumanizing orders. The opening section of the poem reads,

The beginning of this year in spring is twisted,
closes in my mind with a perspective, clear
and precise as a medieval fortress, a map of walls and towers,
painted tents and geometries of distance. Here
the tree
that from my heart sprang quick and green

dies from the throat. And as I turn
from these disorderd leaves toward the immediate scene,
the dust
shifts, and the landscape burns the root
in its unyielding light. The guns
are new devices in the mind for absolutes, excite a curious art.
We lie uneasy on our bellies in the blaze. The eye
tires and the target—lung or chest,
bursts
shivers on the level edge of the front sight. And death
we see there painted as precisely as a medieval rose.
The target
man has unreal clarity. (*The Years* 16)

The guns have become the mind's absolute. One must make oneself into the image of the soldier who follows orders to march and kill. The body must become subject to this authoritarian order. Whatever is of the moment, of the body, is shunned, stunted, and killed off: "Here / the tree / that from my heart sprang quick and green / dies at the throat." Poetry is impossible here. True speech that recognizes the truth of each moment will not be allowed an audience. The hermeneutic perspective is necessarily "disorderd," and "immediate," but the guns, the orders to kill, produce a mechanized "absolute" and paint death "precisely" with "unreal clarity." The technocratic, removed, objective perspective does produce clarity, but it is unreal. Such clarity abstracts from each

moment “the disorderd leaves” and the shifting dust of each landscape. It turns man into a two-dimensional killing machine, disposable himself. He writes, in the poem’s second section,

The eye and the hand which trembled
when it first took the pistol grow steady
and directed to murder. In his two dimensions
the flat man is easily shot. (*The Years* 17)

The last sections of the poem presents the speaker’s anguished reaction to the objectifying terror of this military experience. In his desperation, the speaker seeks a removed, metaphysical position that is perhaps as pernicious in the long run as the distanced, objective position of the military. He speaks, for instance of his desire to escape his body:

[. . .] I will claw my way free
from the flesh, spring the lock at the wrist,
leap out there, leap away, power-dive to the darkness,
if the flesh is this nature.
I am not of this kind. (*The Years* 17)

In the above lines, from the poem’s penultimate section, obviously expresses suicidal desire as a part of the dream of escaping the body, but in the poem’s final section, the speaker expresses his desire for an “Always” and his “dream of tomorrow.” His perspective here is dangerously removed from the contingencies of the moment at hand. The world around him could be manipulated into his own dominating, timeless ideal of

an eternal tomorrow, just as it is twisted into the objective, technocratic image of the warmongers. However, the poem ends with the speaker's need to create a harmony of mind and body. He remembers the "Imago" he and his friend saw. Like that insect, escaped from its shell, the speaker says they are "slipt from our bodies." They "are vacated, / left in discard with a hunger no universe of love / can feed nor Calendar of Days fulfill" (*The Years* 18). Escape from the body, from temporal existence in the now to create an ideal—a metaphysical perspective—leaves one as empty as the military. The moment offers "no universe of love," no "Always." Life cannot be made to fit a proper "Calendar of Days." Mind must not seek to dominate, but to meld with the body. The last lines speak to this melding: "And yet, / each day the substance rises in the hornhide tree of self, / twists and reaches and seeks to flower in the light" (*The Years* 18). In this image, the body (substance) finally finds harmony with spirit or mind (light) in which it can "flower." And this body "twists," which is not an image of removed efficiency, but of a body fitting into the immediacy of the contingent situation, which sometimes demands the roughness of a twist.

In "An Essay at War," a very long poem that Duncan at one point said "proposed pretty much the process of my later poetry" (qtd. in Johnson 61), Duncan begins by speaking not of the war, but of the making of the poem:

The design of the poem
constantly
under reconstruction,
changing, pusht forward;

alternations of sound, sensations;
the mind dance
wherein that shows its pattern:
a proposition
in movement (*Derivations* 9)

Ian Reid argues that none of Duncan's war poetry is about protest or even about war itself; instead it is about struggle. Poetry, love, war all involve struggle, so they make up common thematic elements of his poetry (169). Similarly, Nathaniel Mackey reads "An Essay at War" as a "poetics-espousing poem" that "is less concerned with declaring itself either for or against the war than with declaring itself in favor of its own procedures" ("Gassire's Lute" 113). However, I believe that Mark Andrew Johnson and James F. Mersmann are right to say that "An Essay at War," as Johnson puts it, "proposes a contrast between military orders and the larger orders of poetry" (61).⁵¹ We see in "An Essay at War" two basic stances toward reality. One stance, mostly associated with war in the poem, could be called "perfect." The other, mostly associated with poetry, could be called "imperfect." As in "A Spring Memorandum," "An Essay at War" associates war with a distanced, objectifying stance that seeks to coerce experience into a particular order. Duncan writes, at one point, "The war is a mineral perfection, clear, / unambiguous evil within which / our delite, our life, is the flaw" (*Derivations* 23). The distanced perspective of the war is "clear" and "unambiguous," but the poetry Duncan desires is of the "cloudy stone," difficult to read, full of surplus meaning that distracts readers intent on singular, clear experiences in language: "The imperfection proposed,

studied / in the cloudy stone, claims adoration” (*Derivations* 15). Against military clarity, the notion that “Only a plan, a unanimous war, can win,” Duncan says, “Let there be no substitute for surrender to this / ever about-to-be-realized, this / imperfection in the cloudy stone” (*Derivations* 21).

Mackey says that “Duncan’s word dance” in “An Essay at War,” his polysemous constructions, are meant as therapy for “the dis-ease of war”: “He puts to work an otherwise renegade sense of the world as overwhelmingly charged with overtone and insinuation, rescuing the soul from the immobilization of semantic deficit and one-directional reference” (“Gassire’s Lute” 101). Speaking of Duncan’s poetics in general, Cooley explains why Duncan avoids “niceties of expression” for a more imperfect poetry. He says that Duncan doesn’t choose words

to serve as discursive and generalized comment on events at some point of removal from them. The seemingly haphazard poems avoid the plain and studied manner suitable for clarifying and refining accepted truths.

Instead, they are informed by a tortuous style appropriate to intense and uncertain groping. (57)

These insightful comments help explain two important aspects of Duncan’s hermeneutic stance. First, Duncan’s commitment to an imperfect poetry of process recalls Gadamer’s statement that “the hermeneutical experience would not be available to an infinite mind” (*Truth and Method* 486). Duncan’s poetics seeks not removal from the contingency of being-in-the-world, but celebrates the necessary imperfection that openness to contingency brings about. Another important aspect of Duncan’s hermeneutic stance

revealed in the above statements is Duncan's abiding sense that he does not utilize language like a tool, but that he is caught up in language, always already situated in it, unable to objectively analyze it or "use" it with full knowledge of all its implications. Cooley, I think, accurately characterizes Duncan's relationship to language as "intense and uncertain groping." Gadamer and Heidegger both see humanity as inescapably bound by language. Duncan has said, "I'm a development in language," (Cohn and O'Donnell 537) and in "An Essay at War," he writes that "the key" to poetics

[. . .] lies in the speech
about us. At ready response. And within us.
It is in the air.
Everywhere. (*Derivations* 21)

We are situated in the world, in language, and the product of our poesy must meet each contingent instant of this existence, not pretend that it is a perfect product of "an infinite mind" that exists outside language as a manipulator of it.

Though the gist of "An Essay at War" lies in the notion of the dichotomous perfect / imperfect stances, another key aspect of the poem displays Duncan's preoccupation with the elemental metaphors of darkness and light. Duncan entitled one of his collections of prose *Fictive Certainties*. This title displays Duncan's interest in the notion that art is both truth and fiction, light and dark, revelation and mystery.

Heidegger, in his work after *Being and Time*, often discusses the same notion by setting up a metaphorical distinction between the terms "earth" and "world" when discussing the nature of the artwork. Basically, the term "world" corresponds the process

of revelation, of clearing and light while the term “earth” corresponds to concealment and darkness. But Heidegger mentions that there is no simple dichotomy between the two: “The earth is not simply the Closed but rather that which rises up as self-closing. World and earth are always intrinsically and essentially in conflict, belligerent by nature. Only as such do they enter into the conflict of clearing and concealing” (“The Origin” 53-4). Heidegger’s notion of art basically has to do with art’s ability to open up a space in which being is allowed to be fully in itself. Art enacts an authentic moment of truth in which the earth stands revealed as what it is in itself. Heidegger, writing of the temple as a work of art, says “It makes visible the invisible space of air. [. . .] It clears and illuminates, also, that on which and in which man bases his dwelling. We call this ground the *earth*” (“The Origin” 41). The artwork reveals earth for what it is in itself so that earth is revealed in its unconcealedness. Heidegger writes, “The earth is essentially self-secluding. To set forth the earth (which is what occurs in the “world” or clearing of the artwork] means to bring it into the Open as the self-secluding” (“The Origin” 46). In other words, the world of the artwork reveals the nature of the earth as unconcealed, mysterious, unable to be fully known, objectified, or manipulated. In his reading of Heidegger’s writing on art, Gadamer says, “In the work of art, we experience an absolute opposition to this will-to-control,” so that good art is not a “means of representation that conceives of things in their perfect state,” for that “would negate this standing-in-itself of beings and lead to a total leveling of them. A complete objectification of this kind would no longer represent things that stand in their own being. Rather, it would represent nothing more than our opportunity for using beings” (“Heidegger’s Later Philosophy”

226-7). Therefore, Gadamer says, the truth of a work of art “is not its simple manifestation of meaning, but rather the unfathomableness and depth of its meaning. Thus by its very nature the work of art is a conflict between world and earth, emergence and hiddenness” (“Heidegger’s Later Philosophy” 226).

Duncan seems to recognize the play of revealing and concealing in his own prose writing about art.⁵² In “The Truth and Life of Myth” he writes that fiction, or art in general, has the ability to wake us up from the spell of “the work-a-day world” (what Heidegger might call the “averageness” of the everyday), so that this “waking consciousness casts a spell of its own in awakesness, at once revealing the true nature of things and concealing it” (9). Interestingly, in the same essay he uses the term “earth” in a strikingly Heideggerian way when he speaks of how many critics abuse the work of art by attempting to turn it into simplistic statement, or as Gadamer says, the “simple manifestation of meaning”: “When such critics would bring the flight of imagination down to earth, they mean not the earth men have revered and worked with love and awe, the imagined earth, but the real estate modern man has made of Earth for his own uses” (22).

Duncan’s concern for this reciprocal relationship between world and earth, the simultaneous work of revelation and concealment in an artwork, is apparent in much of his poetry. Many times this relationship is figured in the interplay of light and dark. In “An Essay at War,” Duncan’s light is often figured as fire; and in a Heideggerian way, this fire clears a space for being: “a dimension surrounding us, the fire / itself surrounding us, / the light, the glow” (*Derivations* 10). Later on, Duncan links this poetic

light with love—a love that is also painful because it is involved in the pain of the war: “It is the first named incarnation of Love. We burn with / it. The fire of Hell. Pain. [. . .] But it is also light” (*Derivations* 11). The poem is light, a fire, love. He writes, “It is Love. It is a hearth. / It is a lantern to read war by” (*Derivations* 11). Duncan uses this imagery to demonstrate that a poem should not function like a war, with an aim towards removed, objective perfection “without rage planning campaigns, / organizing, ordering, giving orders until / the blood flows red from each page” (*Derivations* 23). A poem should reveal, not obey, the destruction of war by the burden-bearing (painful) light of love, the mysterious, impenetrable, imperfection of beings being in the world. This is a love that discloses rage as flaw, as what it is in itself—the mysterious flaw that makes for the imperfect poem Duncan is after:

the elegiac moment,
the too-perfect-in-tone-to-be-sanctimonious
moment of our pleasure in living grief,
or living regret, the clear immutable pitcher
flawd by our rage. No calm
unbroken by variations of the line
or by the rime just off beat, repeated
tokens for the listening ear of the endeavor
to shape war. (*Derivations* 23-4)

In these lines near the end of the poem, we see Duncan taking up the hermeneutic stance by recognizing the necessity of imperfection, of flaw, in living and in art (throughout the

poem the “pitcher” is regarded as an artwork).⁵³ Being-in-the-world means being in proximity to suffering, bearing the emotions of grief and rage and love. It is the fire of love that reveals the flaw as flaw, as the mysterious uniqueness that resists the ordering impulse of war. The fire of love, the “lantern to read war by,” provides the light that sets forth the earth, the mystery of things. Duncan’s is a flawed art. Its imperfections and inscrutability are recalcitrant to the clarifying, one-dimensional, us-versus-them logic of war. And Duncan celebrates the errors, or “untruths” of his art. In another remarkably Heideggerian passage from “The Truth and Life of Myth, Duncan says, “the work of art is itself the field we would render the truth of.” And the artist working in this field, “faces the possibility of error and seeks truth in the possibility of the untruth of his statement” (48-9). “An Essay at War” demonstrates Duncan’s sense of his art’s revelation of truth by setting forth the mysteries (as well as the inexplicable flaws) in his art that resist the calcifying, objectifying perception of those who would have us make war.

Duncan is perhaps most celebrated for his “Passages” poems, a sequence that begins in *Bending the Bow*, published in 1968.⁵⁴ In “Passages” 21-25, Duncan addresses specific, recent political issues, such as free-speech and civil rights demonstrations. He mentions by name Lyndon Johnson and Barry Goldwater as well as a number of other, less memorable government officials and university faculty. Peter Michelson writes that in these politically motivated poems, Duncan too easily “falls into polemic” (29), and it is true, I think, that the tension in these poems is sometimes less subtle than most of Duncan’s work. For example, government officials are labeled “not men but heads of the

hydra / his false face in which / authority lies" (*Bending* 70), and Johnson and Goldwater are linked, explicitly, with Satan:

 this black bile of old evils arisen anew,
 takes over the vanity of Johnson;
 and the very glint of Satan's eyes from the pit of the hell of
 America's unacknowledged, unrepented crimes that I saw in
 Goldwater's eyes
 now shines from the eyes of the President
 in the swollen head of the nation. (*Bending* 82-83)

Though the tension is less than subtle in these lines, and thus the poetry perhaps less intellectually stimulating or challenging, Duncan still, in these more political poems, is taking up a hermeneutic stance of a poet who is involved in "the polis," (to use one of Olson's favorite terms), one who takes up responsibility for providing that which is needed in the given moment.⁵⁵

Duncan, in writing to Denise Levertov about political poetry, writes, "The poet's role is not to oppose evil, but to imagine it"; and he goes on to write, "It is a disease of our generation that we offer symptoms and diagnoses of what we are in the place of imaginations and creations of what we are" ("Letter 452" 669). Duncan's work is not meant to be used as a tool measured for its usefulness in achieving any political end; instead, it should be able to exist usefully in itself as an act of imagination and creation for those who hear or read it. Duncan believes that his poetry, even in dealing with contemporary political events, speaks out of history and out of a self involved carefully

with that history. He believes his poetry will stand, not as a political instrument for attaining certain goals, but as the voice of a man caring for his country, his polis, making that which must be made, shaping that which grows from the soil he tends.

In these political “Passages” poems, the most interesting tension is not between the evil government and the angelic peace protesters, but between the individual will and the communal will. Even as Duncan engages in scornful polemic, he weaves in to the poems more challenging notions of what it means to be an individual in a community attempting to exist in a careful, yet open way with his surroundings. Levertov, in writing of the infamous disagreement between herself and Duncan, locates one of the main problems in their relationship in Duncan’s anarchist sympathies and in his distrust of “group action” (111). Levertov’s depiction of Duncan’s distrust of groups may be a bit reductive (she goes so far as to say that his political consciousness “remained static” because of his anarchist distrust, 112), but Bertholf’s analysis of Duncan’s anarchist thinking is surely correct when he says, “Duncan was always against the coercion of group action, or a movement with a cause, as fiercely as he was an advocate for individual volition and cooperative action” (“Decision at the Apogee” 11). Bertholf makes clear that though Duncan was passionately against the war, he could not abide what he saw as coercive forces within the anti-war movement itself. Thus, Duncan’s political consciousness does not include a blanket distrust of “group action” as Levertov puts it, but instead seeks a meaningful conjunction between individual “volition” (to use Duncan’s terminology) and group action so that true “cooperation” (another of Duncan’s key terms) occurs. Near the end of “The Multiversity, Passage 21” he writes,

Evil “referred to the root of *up, over*”
simulacra of law that wld over-rule
the Law man’s inner nature seeks,

coils about them, not men but

heads and armors of the worm office is

There being no common good, no commune,
no communion, outside the freedom of

individual volition. (*Bending* 72-3)⁵⁶

Evil is “*up, over*,” an over-ruling, a removal of law from the contingencies of momentary circumstances, an abstraction that dominates, a distanced, non-involved, non-caring perspective. Men, in this stance, cease to be men and are merely “heads and armors of the worm office is.” The hermeneutic stance seeks a unification of mind and body, but Duncan sees in the politics of his time a removal of men from their bodies into an ugly, metaphysical officiousness, a dissolving into disembodied talking heads, or a mutation of men into useful armor to shield the state, mere tools, expendable means toward an end.

The last lines quoted above, which speak of community and individual volition, are considered in “In Place of a Passage 22.” Unlike “The Multiversity,” in which Duncan posits the problem of individual will against the obvious evil of the war machine, in this poem the tension between individual will and community concerns is more complex because the overarching “communal” will is not so obviously destructive as the government’s coercion in “The Multiversity.” Duncan considers how there can be an organic form for individual will and community needs such that individual freedom does

not become metaphysical, domineering platitude and that community need does not also become overbearing and authoritarian. He begins "In Place of a Passage 22" with an attempt to blend, organically, these two forces:

That Freedom and the Law are identical
and are the nature of Man–Paradise.

The seed I am knows only the green law of the tree into which
it sends out its roots, life and branches

unhindered, the vast universe
showing only its boundaries we imagine. (*Bending* 74)

The individual volition depends upon the ground of the community in which it exists to give it living purpose, life itself. To abstract "Freedom" as universal law does not do justice to that which makes freedom what it is in practice, an individual branching out from the roots of the community. To assert community needs above all else, to make abstract principle thereof, does not allow for branching out; it restricts growth unnecessarily in its short-sighted attempt to grow in teleologically pre-determined directions. The tree of individual volition, rooted in community, branching out organically as fit for what happens in the moment at hand is the image Duncan uses to end "In Place of a Passage 22":

yet
having this certain specific agent I am,

the shadow of a tree wavering and yet staying
deep in it,
the certain number of his days rendered uncertain,
gathering,
animal and mammal, drawing such milk
from the mother of stars. (*Bending* 75)

Though Duncan ends the poem with cosmic imagery, it is important to note that here, as in other poems, Duncan does not give up being-in-the-world in favor of a metaphysical stance ultimately removed from temporal existence. Existing in the world is the only existence. He, as this tree, stays “deep in it,” deeply involved with the world around him and the community as he “wavers” in his branching out, reacting sensitively to what surrounds him.

Mackey suggests that a fair criticism of Duncan’s war poems could be what he calls Duncan’s “poetic bias,” which Mackey explains is Duncan’s “sense of poetry as a fundamental fact of life” that “makes him regard experience [even war] as at all points a pretext for and a revelation of poetic process” (“Gassire’s Lute” 111-112). Duncan’s poetry is often quite self-reflexive, and Duncan himself suggests that the poem is made by paying attention to the poem itself. Poetry is not a matter of imitating external experience, but of digging, as Duncan says, “deeper and deeper into the experience of the process of the poem itself” (“The Truth and Life” 34). At this point, I want to examine Duncan’s poetics, revealed self-reflexively in his poems, in terms of the notions of the artwork set forth by Heidegger and Gadamer.

Duncan's lines also speak to another element of the ontology of the artwork that is a part of Duncan's hermeneutic stance. He says that the poem is an "increasing," but "This is not an increasing in mere size but a more / and moreness of pressure and precedence." Earlier in the poem, Duncan writes that the poem is "Loaded with meaning which is gathering the / former tenants. Loaded with the former tenants speaking" (*Derivations* 74). And at the end of the poem, he writes that the "loaded" poem is "An anthology of human beings. A loaded folding up in which history is folded" (*Derivations* 74). Jayne L. Walker says that this poem demonstrates Duncan's sense that "univocal utterance" is impossible, and that "words explode into multiplicity because [. . .] they come to him 'loaded' with their history, their prior uses in the literary tradition" (32). Gadamer's notion of language and the tradition it inevitably carries with it as an inescapable pretext of any utterance is obviously at work here in Duncan. But also at work here is Gadamer's idea that in every presentation of an artwork, that which is presented experiences an "increase in being." Gadamer writes that "the presentation or performance of a work of literature or music is something essential, and not incidental to it, for it merely completes what the works of art already are—the being there of what is presented in them" (*Truth and Method* 134). Gadamer, in this context, speaks of "[t]he specific temporality of aesthetic being, its having its being in the process of being presented" (*Truth and Method* 134). Lawrence K. Schmidt explains that "The ontological valence of a work of art refers to its capacity to bring forth its subject matter in different temporal situations" (3). And, as David Carpenter explains, for Gadamer, a presentation of a work of art is not a copy of some more authentic original experience, "a

mere diminution of being,” but, “through being presented it experiences, as it were, an increase in being” because “[e]very such presentation is an ontological event” (100-1). Each presentation of any work of art is an event in which human beings participate and experience the artwork, are challenged by its claim to truth. What is presented in the artwork joins in the storehouse of traditional materials, comes into the common language of humanity. It will continue to play in “An anthology of human / beings,” as “A loaded folding up in which history is folded.” The artwork, by being brought into the common language of humanity in its presentation, will live on in the history language brings with it even in its contemporary use.

Duncan’s poem “Metamorphosis,” illustrates an interestingly Gadamerian position on aesthetics. This aesthetics understands that one essential aspect of art is its mimetic character, but that mimesis does not simply mean copying or imitating aspects of natural or physical existence. Gadamer argues that mimesis is fundamental to the experience of art, but he harkens back to a perhaps more primordial understanding of mimesis that does not hold art up to an external standard (such that a picture of a tree is better or worse depending on how much it actually looks like a real tree). For Gadamer, art is autonomous in the sense that its purpose and its meaning cannot be dissociated from its existence. If an artwork ceased to exist, then so would its meaning or purpose; in other words, an artwork is not a means to an end that is external to the artwork in which it finds its fulfillment or meaning, but the artwork is autonomous in that it produces its own meaning. Gadamer writes, “the work of art is no mere bearer of meaning—as if the meaning could be transferred to another bearer. Rather the meaning of

the work of art lies in the fact that it is there” (“The Relevance” 33).

Mimesis, then, for Gadamer, primarily involves the artwork’s making present of something that we recognize. But this recognition has little if anything to do with distinguishing what we recognize from that which exists in external reality: “Recognition confirms and bears witness to the fact that mimetic behavior makes something present. However, this does not imply that when we recognize what is represented, we should try to determine the degree of similarity between the original and its mimetic representation” (“Art and Imitation” 98). Gadamer goes on to explain why recognition does not seek to differentiate between what is represented and its representation in art:

For what is recognition? It does not mean simply seeing something that we have already seen before. I cannot say that I recognize something if I see it once again without realizing that I have already seen it.

Recognizing something means rather that I now cognize something *as* something that I have already seen. The enigma here lies entirely in the “as.” [. . .] When I recognize someone or something, what I see is freed from the contingency of this or that moment of time. It is part of the process of recognition that we see things in terms of what is permanent and essential in them, unencumbered by the contingent circumstances in which they were seen before and are seen again. This is what constitutes recognition and contributes to the joy we take in imitation. For what imitation reveals is precisely the real essence of the thing. (“Art and Imitation” 99)

It is important here to note that Gadamer is not saying that the aesthetic experience is a metaphysical experience that takes human being out of time into an eternal present. We have already seen in this chapter how Gadamer speaks of the “specific temporality of aesthetic being” which depends upon its presentation as an event of being in a particular time. But Gadamer also describes art as “transformation into structure.” Every work of art has a form that it carries with it through its history; thus, it is experienced not in an identical way throughout time, but through its form it can be experienced in similar ways by various people in their various circumstances.⁵⁷

In the essay cited above, Gadamer goes on to argue that modern art, and even so-called “non-representational” art, demonstrates not that mimesis or representation are outmoded aesthetic notions, but that the power of art’s mimesis never was in its ability to “fool the eye” or represent physical details of a thing or an event. Instead, mimesis is at work even in the modern art of fragmentation and “non-representation” in the primordial sense of art’s representation of the human experience of order. Even in seemingly disordered, fragmented, or chaotic artworks, what can be recognized is an experience of order that is fundamental to the human condition—by serving up chaos, the art still points to order in its lack of order. Gadamer writes that “mimesis in its most original sense” is “the presentation of order,” and he says, “it is irrelevant whether or not a painter or sculptor works to produce objective or nonobjective art. The only relevant thing is whether we encounter a spiritual and ordering energy in the work” (“Art and Imitation 103”). To underscore his point, Gadamer goes on to suggest that

Testifying to order, mimesis seems as valid now as it was then [in ancient

culture], insofar as every work of art, even in our own increasingly standardized world of mass production, still testifies to that spiritual ordering energy that makes our life what it is. The work of art provides a perfect example of that universal characteristic of human existence—the never-ending process of building a world. In the midst of a world in which everything familiar is dissolving, the work of art stands as a pledge of order. (“Art and Imitation” 103-4)

Duncan, in his essay on poetics, “Towards an Open Universe,” sounds very similar to Gadamer when he says, “It is not that poetry imitates, but that poetry enacts in its order the order of first things” (81). And he later says, “Central to and defining the poetics I am trying to suggest here is the conviction that the order man may contrive or impose upon the things about him or upon his own language is trivial beside the divine or natural order he may discover in them” (81-2).

If Gadamer and Duncan in these passages seem to wax spiritual or metaphysical at times, it is important to remember that between Olson, Creeley, and Duncan, Duncan is by far the one most concerned with the spiritual or, to use one of his favorite terms, “the cosmic.” Thus, some commentators, of whom I spoke toward the outset of this chapter, see Duncan as a kind of Platonist. However, it is important to realize that for both Gadamer and Duncan, that whatever cosmic or spiritual order may exist does not mitigate the primarily temporal and ontological significance of the work of art as an event, or an enactment. Noted Italian philosopher Gianni Vattimo says that readings of Gadamer are often reductive in that they fail to notice the ontological significance of his

hermeneutics. They see his hermeneutics as a way to interpret the world in the way of a mirror, but with the understanding that we are limited in our objectivity by temporality; but Vattimo shows that Gadamer's hermeneutics deeply involves ontology because there is an "identification between the act that interprets the world and the act that changes it" so that in any act of understanding, "one is first of all changing oneself" (299). Gerald Bruns, who extols Gadamer's notion of openness, says that experiencing the work of art, for Gadamer, involves "being historical" and "being able to change" (65). And he quotes Gadamer, who says, "the work of art has its true being in the fact that it becomes an experience that changes the person who experiences it" (qtd. in Bruns 65). These theorists recognize that Gadamer's aesthetic philosophy is firmly rooted in the here and now, in the event of being that occurs in a person's interaction with an artwork.

Similarly, when Duncan speaks of things such as the cosmic orders of the universe, he typically does so in order to underscore human finitude, human limitation in the consciousness of being-in-the-moment. For instance, after he speaks of "the divine or natural order" man may discover in things in "Towards an Open Universe," Duncan explains that this order is beyond "our conscious design" (82). Duncan does not seek in his work a Platonic form, or to present forms that represent some notion of a perfect eschatological end; his sense of the cosmic reveals to him his inescapably temporal, contingent situation. As Thom Gunn argues, Duncan is not a Romantic poet identifiable with neo-Platonic thought because his Romanticism is "the intellectual adventure of not knowing" ("Adventurous Song" 17). Thus, Duncan writes, "Our engagement with knowing, with craft and lore, our demand for truth is not to reach a conclusion but to

keep our exposure to what we do not know, to confront our wish and our need beyond habit and capability” (“Towards an Open Universe” 87). Mackey states that a Duncan poem typically contains both a sense of “worldliness” and “cosmicity,” but that it is more worldly than cosmic because the poem, in its worldliness, “conforms to rather than transcends the fate to which all earthly things are prone.” On the other hand, his poems “can do no more than allude” to the cosmic (“The World-Poem” 612). “The beyond” in Duncan always points us back to human finitude, the realization that we are never beyond, but always wrapped up in the here and now. Once again, Duncan’s early poem “Fragment:1940,” is instructive. The poem is “hopelessly bounded, on all sides / the primal limitation of a single court, / the first gateway endlessly repeated / so that the beyond is always the beyond” (*The Years* 15).

Duncan’s “Metamorphosis” intimates an understanding of a Gadamerian notion of the ontology of the artwork and of the centrality of mimesis. The first strophe reads,

There is no noise as the stars turn. Lustrous signs

they advertise themselves to themselves.

Powers, intelligences, sensualities

do not emerge from the closets of light.

What emerges burns there, as it emerges,

helpless communicant, thwarted swart stars

exalted in the thresholds of being seen. (*Derivations* 104)

The stars, like artworks, are autonomous in the sense that they do not point to a significance outside their own burning, their own act of shining, or “of being seen.”

They are not properly measured by an exterior standard, but they are their own measure. But their autonomy does not involve their removal from time. The self-measuring stars are always in the act of burning, “of being seen,” thus they are placed fully in the temporal moment. They are constantly held open “in the thresholds” of new moments, “of being seen” differently than before, though they themselves have a structure that carries them through time with relative continuity.

The stars are seen in terms different from the way the “tiger, seeking in vain his image” sees. The tiger in this poem looks for mimetic images that represent reality exterior to the image:

A single tiger, seeking in vain his image, sees
in three arranged mirrors such dissonant verities of his aspect,
face to face, vis a vis, side to other side,
in turning, a cacophony of him, a disassociation
of tones, and departs therefrom. From
three literal renderings unlike in likeness. (*Derivations* 104)

The tiger does not find in this copy a closeness, an intimate relationship in the presentation itself with what is represented (as Gadamer suggests happens in the event of the artwork), but rather “a disassociation.” The tiger looks at his “literal renderings” in three mirrors that show three different aspects of his physical being. But the tiger’s search for his image is “in vain,” and he “departs” from the “three literal renderings unlike in likeness.” Mimetic art that seeks to render a copy of physical reality or attitudes toward art that demand that art look to a reality outside its own representation

for its standard are destined to produce merely “disassociation” and not the deep connection of art and life that both Duncan and Gadamer find available in the artwork’s representation of its own order.

The poem moves from this strange but fruitful contrast of authentic, autonomous stars and an inauthentic mirror-image of a tiger into “a watery conversation” between three men. Duncan’s use of the adjective “watery” to describe the conversation reveals a key notion of Duncan’s regarding the nature of language and subjectivity within language. The conversation is fluid as each subjectivity partakes of each other subjectivity so that distinctions are blurred. Singular subjectivity becomes lost in conversation; it becomes intersubjective.

Intersubjectivity, as I mentioned in my discussion of Creeley’s work, is a notable aspect of Gadamer’s hermeneutics. Lawrence K. Schmidt states that understanding, for Gadamer, occurs in “the temporally bounded, linguistic horizon of the participants of the dialogue” (2), and Gadamer writes that self-understanding occurs “in a kind of dialogue” (“On the Problem of Self-Understanding” 57). In *Truth and Method*, Gadamer says the conversation in the language we are always already involved in is something we “fall into,” not something we direct in a predetermined fashion (383). Notice how Duncan, in the following lines, blurs boundaries, makes singleness seem as if it is also plurality as the three men begin their conversation on the moon:

[. . .] at odds each one,
emerging as if from an enlightened singleness
into all contradictions realer upon the real

–‘The discourse . . .’–no longer feel
distinctions but see each in the discourse
his innerness, a single man
divided against himself at one, made whole (*Derivations* 105)

Examining the above passage with the following passage from the same section of the poem, it seems that Duncan sees subjectivity as a sort of union of otherness and self:

It is from their exhaustion of themselves
that the otherness, the whole self of a moon, rises,
holds for her sake alone conclaves of their hearts
–heart to heart to heart—a spell. (*Derivations* 105)

The moon, the subject matter of the conversation, unites these subjectivities in “An aboveness” beyond their own individualities into the connectivity that is language. Gadamer says, in his essay “On the Problem of Self-Understanding,” that “self-understanding only realizes itself in the understanding of a subject matter and does not have the character of a free self-realization. The self we are does not possess itself; one could say that it ‘happens’” (55). And, for Gadamer and Duncan, this almost negative sense of self-understanding always occurs in language that extends beyond the present back into the past and that carries the past within it—language that is, for each conversant, that out of which he understands being, world, and being-in-the-world.⁵⁸

This language that Duncan describes reveals being, but as we have seen already in Duncan’s poems, revealing language always itself remains at least partially concealed. Therefore, in the poem’s last stanza, Duncan brings forth the notion that in language’s

revelation there still exists a concealing darkness, what he calls “a lighter dark.” Just as a new moon can be seen in the night sky as a dark object standing out from a darker darkness, so it is that the being of conversants is revealed, but not fully, always contingently, always with a tinge of mystery as if a threshold of newness is always about to open up. The last lines of “Metamorphosis” describe all of this in terms of poetry in general:

A derived poetry!

There are only such reserves as no will of ours
knew how to follow. Hollows
of understanding revealed in all arrangements.

The design, the drawing draws from us

the secret of a dark from our darkness. (*Derivations* 106)

Poetry is derived from a language that is living and has lived, that carries the past within it, and Duncan’s poetry is derived organically out of the circumstances of its making in language, in time. Poetry is not the removed ego expressing its own subjectivity, for “no will of ours” is capable, alone, of understanding or even of speaking as one isolated voice or will. “The design” of language that surrounds us, that speaks us (as Heidegger claims) when we but open ourselves to listen, “draws from us” authentic being-in-the-moment—a being that as it reveals itself, reveals a darkness, or the existence of an unknowable “secret” that stands forth in its own revelation.

In a later poem, “Passages 31: The Concert,” Duncan continues to explore some of these same notions of the ontology of art. Just as in “Metamorphosis,” Duncan turns

obedient to tongues (sparks) (burning)

speech-flames outreaching the heart's measure. (*Ground Work* 16)

The work the musician composes comes into being and is performed in the contingency of a moment; “freed from [its] origins” as a thing in itself, the work’s form, its “transformation into structure,” brings it anew into new contexts with differing sets of contingencies. In this contingent state, the work resonates meanings that exceed “what we understand” as we ourselves are captive to this instant. Gadamer writes that no single performance of a work of art can completely fulfill or exhaust its possible meanings. Even if a poet reads his own poem, that reading does not eliminate the possibility of other valid readings of the work because “the text has acquired an ideality that cannot be obviated by any possible realization” (“Aesthetic and Religious Experience” 146). Art, in the hermeneutic stance, is always inexhaustible because it is understood that limitations stand not within the form of the artwork, but in the historical situatedness of the person experiencing the artwork. Human temporal limitations allow art to always exceed us as its form will carry it on into new times where new meanings can be found as well as old ones.

At one point in “The Concert,” Duncan quotes Olson’s “Projective Verse” as he demonstrates the complexity of subjectivity within the hermeneutic stance: “the Poet, his heart urgent, / leaping beyond him, writes: ‘MOVE, INSTANTER, ON ANOTHER!’” (*Ground Work* 16). Throughout the poem, Duncan displays a sense of subjectivity that is profoundly communicative, open, porous with regard to its boundaries, able to be shaped and molded by the contingencies of the moment. Hence, we see the poet’s heart

moving “upward, // ascending to where the beat breaks,” and “his heart urgent, / leaping beyond him.” Images of Pentecostal heteroglossia occur throughout the second half of the poem, fittingly emphasizing “the concert” of human subjectivity in language (the self as dialogical, or intersubjective)—a sounding of more than one voice in time.

By way of an extended conclusion to this chapter, I would like to read three of Duncan’s longer poems that each come from different volumes in order to re-emphasize some important features of Duncan’s hermeneutics stance. “The Propositions,” from *The Opening of the Field*, reveals Duncan’s stance not as a proposition of the intellect alone, but of what he names “love.”⁵⁹ Marvin Bell calls Duncan “the poet of ardor” (qtd. in Board 311), and Gunn recognizes love as Duncan’s “central theme” (“Homosexuality” 145). In “The Propositions” and elsewhere, love seems to be analogous to Olson’s “old measure of care”—it’s the hermeneutic notion that to pretend to have an objective perspective, a position of thought removed from the contingencies of the surrounding world, is to have, as Heidegger puts it, “‘presupposed’ not too much, but *too little*” (*Being and Time* 363). We are always already in a position of having to understand, to interpret, and to act. Thus, “Being is constituted as care,” according to Heidegger (*Being and Time* 363).

Duncan entitles the first section of the poem “SKILL,” and he writes that “The poem / suggests skill is not sufficient” (*The Opening* 30). In this part of the poem, Duncan’s character, Dr. Sea, is presented as technically brilliant, but his “skill is not sufficient,” because it lacks “the measure of care” love brings. Duncan begins the poem by praising skill, and he demonstrates a certain admiration for Dr. Sea throughout this

Impressed by Dr. Sea, Duncan poses the above question. But his answer throughout the rest of the poem is a resounding “No!” Skill is necessary, but as Duncan has already stated, it is “insufficient.” He writes, “It is a gathering of crows, / omens, that animates the artifice” (*The Opening* 32). Duncan wishes to go deeper than skill, mere artifice, to reach what animates that which is so skillfully done. He will exist in mystery, in the omens, directly a part of the animation, involved, not distanced from experience. The last lines of the first section demonstrate, again, how Duncan sees the insufficiency of Dr. Sea and his stance:

Skill rises, a sensibility, a
discrimination.
How many books did Dr. Sea consume?
The Teaching guides his hand—restrains
accident
imperative.
He cuts the meat but sees
anatomies. (*The Opening* 33)

Dr. Sea is caught up in, and blinded by, his technologically minded, distanced stance. He can only see what his science teaches him to see in the lives he shapes. He sees merely “anatomies,” not the animating, mysterious force within them.

Gadamer has written that we are more susceptible to manipulation by technological means because of our “Enlightenment-based self-understanding,” which sees itself as basically disinterested, able to pursue truth objectively” (“Truth in the

Human Sciences” 30). “[R]espect for things, Gadamer says, is more and more unintelligible in a world that is becoming ever more technical.” But poetry “remains true” to the things of the world, exists care-fully towards them (“The Nature of Things” 71). Gadamer, in explicating Heidegger, says that the unconcealment of the artwork keeps it from being completely objectified, for “In the work of art, we experience an absolute opposition to this will-to-control” (“Heidegger’s Later Philosophy” 227). I believe Duncan’s portrayal of Dr. Sea fits in well with these statements. His skill is “not sufficient” for the poem because of its inability to exist in an interested, rather than a disinterested, relationship to the things of this world.

The second section of the poem, entitled “LOVE,” represents Duncan’s decision in the poem to risk the “rain” that the skillful physician is “steeld against.” Love is a downward-driving force, unlike the skill that was described as rising. The section begins, “LOVE then: / might I deny the force that drove me to the ground / prime reality?” (*The Opening* 33). Unlike Dr. Sea, who rejects affection in favor of impersonality, this love involves grief:

Have you never come to grief
in which love holds reciprocal pain
of heart? Tears

in natural flood that verifies? (*The Opening* 33)

Duncan relates this love also to sex, tenderness, and desire—what he calls, at one point, “be-longing.” He writes, “It is life / that tenders green shoots of / hurt and healing we

name love” (*The Opening* 33). Healing comes into the poem at the point of love, as it was strangely absent from the realm of Dr. Sea, the physician.

The last lines of Duncan’s “LOVE” section are suggestive as he mentions Nietzsche and the void:

Nietzsche’s portrait where all has fallen into the black
I hang upon my wall.

Love sets its triumphs in the void,
commands the real. (*The Opening* 35)

These lines represent an interestingly Heideggerian understanding of being as thrown projection. According to Heidegger, Dasein (Heidegger’s impersonal term for a singular human existence) is thrown into a world not of its own making, not according to its own will. When Dasein understands its own being as being-in-time, totally temporal, it realizes that its own temporality is the shifting ground on which it projects its future possibilities.⁶⁰ This being-towards-death, this peering into the void, instills an authentic resolve for Dasein to create, to make a space for authentic being. Dr. Sea could be said to “command the real,” by his manipulations of “objective” reality, but Duncan’s love “commands the real” from a different perspective—from the void. Dr. Sea commands and manipulates from the relatively safe and removed perspective of objective science. He has goals, and his commands come forth from the position of the intellect (“propositions”) in order to fulfill the intellect, to increase its actuality. But Duncan’s command from love issues from a void. As he writes in the next section, “There are no

instructions” (*The Opening* 36). This is an existence that risks the contingency involved in each moment, that has no definite endpoint or goal to guide what happens. In the next section, again, Duncan says, from the stance of love: “In the field of the poem, the unexpected / must come” (*The Opening* 35).

The last section of the poem continues to meditate upon love, or the “old measure of care,” that describes the basic hermeneutic stance. In this section, the title, “Propositions,” becomes important because we see that Duncan is concerned with the intellect. The hermeneutic stance is not anti-intellectual; it uses the intellect and it uses skill. However, its involvement in and with the surrounding world is not primarily intellectual, nor are its makings primarily products of mere skill. Dr. Sea was guided by the mind in such a way that body and mind became separate, and mind and skill rose above the body in a commanding, hierarchical fashion. Duncan calls for a kind of incarnation, a return to the magic, the mystery of the body and the blood. In his last section he writes,

I would not confuse the elements.

It is from longing my making proceeds.

When I summon intellect it is to the melody

of this longing. Thy hand,

Beloved, restores

the chords of this longing.

Here, in this thirst that defines Beauty,

I have found kin. (*The Opening* 36)

Duncan's making comes from longing, a desire that indicates Duncan's involved, loving stance within the world. Being-in, being-with, is a desire, an affection. It is more than an intellectual proposition; it is a proposition of love.

This desire, though, does not ravish and seek to dissolve difference, as Dr. Sea does. Instead, the desire is for the ever-new, the next moment in all its freshness; and the longing seeks to act, to make in each new moment an authenticity. Duncan describes the phenomenology of his hermeneutic stance in the next lines:

Nerves tremble upon its reaches.

Sinews of the act have tone under its laws.

What I call magic proceeds from the heart:

the blood there in its courses

has the pulse in this longing. O melody

immaculately carrying pulses of this longing! (*The Opening* 37)

In these lines Duncan reveals how act takes on meaning within the context of care. Blood "has pulse in this longing," in this measure of care. In this measure blood comes into the meaning of its courses, of its acts. Things are revealed in their purposes, in their elemental significance, which is why Duncan writes, "I would not confuse the elements." Duncan does not manipulate the elements of his surroundings so that they obtain a certain, subjective meaning, but he, in his involvement, becomes an object among other objects (to borrow from Olson), allowing elemental meaning to be revealed. But, as always for Duncan, in the revealing is a "magic," or a mystery that stands forth as

concealed. It is “magic” that “proceeds from the heart.” Duncan’s hermeneutic stance, then, becomes, in the poem’s last lines, the dance “Whose bonds men hold / holy : the Light // life lights in like eyes” (*The Opening* 37). Duncan takes a stance that understands itself to be fully within the “bonds” of the dance. Within these bonds, mystery is allowed to exist instead of being dominated by the impulse to sameness seen in the technological skill of Dr. Sea.

Duncan’s “Apprehensions,” from *Roots and Branches*, uses the familiar imagery of the interrelationship of light and dark as it illustrates some interestingly Heideggerian notions of the artwork and the artwork’s significance for being. It begins, “To open Night’s eye that sleeps in what we know by Day” (*Roots* 30). Here is the light/dark imagery that often stands for the mystery, the concealment that occurs in any revelation in art. The first part of the poem is about digging, excavation, going deeper to find what mystery lies beneath the surface, to see what “Night” lies hidden in “Day.” The first section, then, sets up much of the thematic movement of the poem as it discusses ideas of disclosure and of how poems or artworks or architectures of any kind open up worlds, make possibility possible. Also, Duncan speaks of the digging down of the grave, the recognition of death which lays open one’s possibility for being.

Near the end of the first section, Duncan establishes the notion of being-towards-death which opens up authentic possibility by acknowledging being’s finitude or temporality. As Heidegger writes, “When, in anticipation [we might use the term “apprehension,” here], resoluteness has caught up the possibility of death into its potentiality-for-Being, Dasein’s authentic existence can no longer be outstripped by

anything (*Being and Time* 355). One of the key “apprehensions” of this poem is of death.

Duncan writes,

And the soul was revealed where it was
fearful, rapt, prepared to withdraw
from knowing,
looking down into the six-foot pit where . . . (*Roots* 32)

In the poem’s second section, Duncan goes on to write,

a grave expectation

provides for the dome of many-colored glass,
jeweled light (*Roots* 33)

The grave-expectation—the realization of one’s finitude—is connected with the light of the artwork. Being-towards-death awakens an authenticity that is an openness towards experience that allows for the revelation of the truth of the artwork. And the various revelations or disclosures that occur in the poem do so from the light opened by the space provided by the boundaries of form. For instance, in the second section Duncan writes,

THE DIRECTIVE

is a building. The architecture of the sentence
allows
personal details, portals
reverent and enchanting,

constructions from what lies at hand

to stand

for what rings true. (*Roots* 32-3)

In the poem, a building, an opening up of space, occurs that allows for the standing-forth of truth. The artwork, whether in words or in bricks, presents the truth of its own form in its rising up organically to fit its occasion. Recalling Heidegger's "The Origin of the Work of Art," in which Heidegger speaks of the temple as the artwork that "clears and illuminates [. . .] that on which man bases his dwelling" ("The Origin" 41). Duncan also speaks of a temple, as well as other artistic architectural structures in this poem. Duncan shares with Heidegger the notion of art as "the letting happen of truth," (Palmer 83) where truth is temporal, an uncovering. Werner Brock's explication of Heidegger's idea of truth seems to "ring true" for Duncan in light of "Apprehensions": "truth is the exposition of human life into the overtness of the things around him 'in the whole'" (156). Duncan's hermeneutic stance places him firmly in the temporal realm, existing as object among other objects in a relationship of care, or love. Eric Mottram is right to identify one of the major questions of the poem as "What is making within the natural?" And he is also right to see that all the art, the made things in the poem, whether poetry or architecture, "are the results of Love" (126).

Toward the end of the poem's second section, Duncan emphasizes humanity's being as a place in time that is growing out of time, enveloped in language and the history or tradition that is inscribed within it. Whatever he does or makes is an outgrowth of what has been. Duncan writes,

I found monument of what I am
around me as if waking were a dream,
a house built in the ancient time
when man like a salmon swam

in the currents of fire and air, in what he was,
leapt to the ladders of desire
and read in the stream before there were letters
deep reflections of his cause. (*Roots* 34)

Being is a swimming in being's past—accumulations of language and history that one
always already is a part of—which is why Duncan continues with these lines:

There must be a pool, dark and steady mood,
stone and water, where this magic crossing,
this ray of a star, catches in flow
another time of what we always are,

from which we start up into the live jewel,
see joy hid where death most is,
ready like a seed encased in its shell.

O let the shadows and the light rays mix! (*Roots* 34)

Duncan seems to be saying that we “always are” of “another time” in that our being
brings past into present; and the dying away of each moment, the openness to such

contingency, such death, is where joy hides in being—an ability, then, to fully be in each moment. In this authenticity, this being revealed, being also stands forth in its mystery (notice the dark/light imagery in the mixing of “shadows” and “light rays”), its concealment in its own intrinsic purposefulness. Such being resists manipulation by ideals that seek to drive being toward some end other than its own expression in each occasion.

Duncan has written that poetry must be an “involvement that will not let the past go but must bring all into the present demand for consciousness in action. And action, the truth of action, brings us into the Primordial, into the place where the New is yet to happen” (“As an Introduction” 150). The next section of “Apprehensions” presents man’s being as temporal, an exterior existence that meets the demands of the moment, and a melding of body and mind that resists hierarchic mind-over-body dualism. Duncan, in this section calls for a return to “the Primordial” in the present moment:

Theosophists teach that primeval man is a vast dispersed being
having as much intelligence in the sweep of his tail
as in his claws or those ravening jaws, back of whose
row on row of teeth ripping the meat

a brain like a child’s first pushing those eyes; (*Roots* 36)

There is a unity rather than duality of mind and body here. Duncan continues,

and see the force of intellectual hunger

focus, ravening towards such rest

a diamond has in structure, sustained by pressure. Man

so exclusively defined he is

a figure of light. (*Roots* 36)

Here is an image of the mind taking over, attempting to find “rest” in structuring reality a certain way. Humanity then becomes “enlightened,” and “a figure of light” who can reveal all mystery and conquer all contingency, level down all disquieting difference in the sameness of the grid of the objective intellect. But Duncan’s stance does not try to achieve rest in structure. His rest comes only in dwelling among things and working so that rest makes one ready to meet what comes next. The structure or form he finds will come out of each contingent moment and will “bloom” into an authentic being that has intrinsic purposefulness:

Then hunger be stem

from what I am,

and the hero bloom as he will toward that end

the poem imitates by admitting a form. (*Roots* 36)

Once again, in the context of organicism and the authentic autonomy of intrinsic form, mimesis is invoked. The artwork is an imitation in that one can recognize in it the presentation of an order that is intrinsic to the being of the work in the moment of its presentation; thus, it is this organic, intrinsic order itself that humanity recognizes in the mimesis of the artwork. But for Duncan, this order is not “an overriding order” that “overcomes our limited sense of shifting time, place, and boundaries” as Johnson argues is the case in “Apprehensions” (93). Mackey is right to see in this poem, and in Duncan’s poetics in general, the notion that form (or order) is about the “ongoingness of

creation” which is why Duncan so often emphasizes the “inconclusive” and the “imperfect” (“Gassire’s Lute” 109). Duncan’s creations are orders that are in the act of “blooming” toward form. This form, for Duncan, is ultimately true to the universe itself which, according to Duncan, is constantly evolving into what it is—the “Cosmos” that constantly “seeks to realize itself” (*The Years* xi). Thus, Cooley’s explanation of the forms of Duncan’s poems is apt. He states that Duncan’s forms are “expressions of an ever-moving, asymmetrical universe. Because that existence is continuous, without beginning or end, so is the poetry that records it” (54). Duncan’s forms, or orders, do not represent a terminus, but the temporal fact of the form of existence in the flux of time.⁶¹

Key to Duncan’s idea of order in his poetry is that this ever-evolving order of the cosmos is beyond “conscious design” (“Towards an Open” 82). Poetry involves, then, what Olson called “the getting rid of the lyrical interference of the individual as ego” (“Projective Verse” 247). Foster is right, in his discussion of Duncan, to suggest that the major commonality between Olson, Creeley, and Duncan is their belief that the poem is not an expression of the individual ego (129). Duncan’s “Dante Études,” a long set of poems from his late volume, *Ground Work: Before the War*, demonstrates this important aspect of his hermeneutic stance. Johnson sees in this set of poems Duncan’s “consistent themes” of “the surrender of the ego, the transgression of boundaries, the freedom that is only to be found in obedience to larger orders” (134). Duncan celebrates what he has called “A derived poetry!” (*Derivations* 106) that comes not from the individual ego but from a dialogical subjectivity always steeped in a language in which history, inflected

with the voices of uncountable others, is embedded. Mackey, writing in part about the “Dante Études,” says that foundational to Duncan’s poetics “is the notion of language, both written and spoken, as a communal, or communalizing act” (“Uroboros” 185-6). Duncan explains this impulse towards a communal act of language in his introduction to *Bending the Bow*: “I’d like to leave somewhere in this book the statement that the real ‘we’ is the company of the living, of all the forms of Life Itself, the primal wave of it, writing itself out in evolution, proposes. Needs, as our poetry does, all the variety of what poets have projected poetry to be” (*Bending* iii-iv). “Dante Études” demonstrates Duncan’s hermeneutic openness to “variety,” to otherness, and what comes forth is a “projection,” not of an individual ego, but of a dialogical subjectivity open to the immediacy of his surroundings. In this case, Duncan’s immediate situation involves his reading of Dante’s prose, so that he says these études represent “attention to the truth of the moment in reading” (*Ground Work* 98).

Duncan begins this long set of poems with “We Will Endeavor,” which displays Duncan’s concern with a perspective that is intimately involved in the world and an epistemology that shuns mind / body dualism to find mind fully within the body. Duncan describes “a world we wanted to go out into // to come to ourselves into” (*Ground Work* 99). He reveals a kind of knowing that is “animal” and “instinctual”:

From the beginning, color
and light, my nurse; sounding waves
and air, my nurse; animal presences
my nurse; Night, my nurse .

out of hunger, instinctual
craving, thirst for “knowing”,

toward oracular teats. (*Ground Work* 100)

Duncan sucks in experience, ravenous for it. He proclaims this open stance as

being primary,
natural and common,
being “milk”,

is *animal* (*Ground Work* 100).

Duncan’s emphasis on exterior existence, being open out in the world in a kind of “animal” immediacy runs throughout the études. In a later poem, Duncan writes, “It’s in his animal communication Man is / true, immediate, and / in immediacy, Man is all animal” (*Ground Work* 102). And in that poem (“A Little Language”) Duncan even challenges Dante’s model of the universe “that would set Man apart.” He writes that “Dante’s religion” is a force which “damns the effluence of our life from us” (*Ground Work* 102). In other words, Dante’s Christianity prevents us from fully experiencing the more “animal” aspects of intimately being-in-the-world.

Duncan, later in “A Little Language,” seems to say that Dante was able to work in a mode of immediacy despite his religious understanding of humanity because of his openness to the language in which he exists, “this speech in every sense / the world

surrounding him” (*Ground Work* 103). Duncan writes Dante’s intense linguistic awareness within a dogmatically Christian world represents in each authentic listening to language, an awakening

[. . .] from deepest sleep
upon a distant signal and waits
as if crouching, springs
to life. (*Ground Work* 103)

Dante’s speech is an immediate response to that which surrounds him. He lies within it, as part of it, vulnerable to it. And out of his intense listening comes a speech that is able to meet the demands of the moment as they impinge upon him. The last lines of “We Will Endeavor” illustrate the active openness within language Duncan admires in Dante:

lungs sucking-in the air, having
heart in it, rhythmic; and,
moving in measure,
self-creating in concert

–and therein,

noble. (*Ground Work* 100)

Not bound to any teleological expectation or goal for existence, Duncan’s hermeneutic stance abides in an intrinsic measure that grows organically out of one’s relationship to the environment in a given moment. Thus, Duncan’s stance allows for a “self-creating in

concert”—a self that is created out of openness to the “concert” of the surrounding world.

Duncan explores the nobility of the hermeneutic stance in many poems throughout the set. But in “Secondary in the Grammar,” he presents the less noble stance of “those masters of grammar,” who are

–professional, not noble,
being learned,
reflective, particular,
rereading, instead of memory,

as if to mediate the immediate (*Ground Work* 100-1)

These are the professional grammarians who, in Dante’s time, criticized his decision to use the vulgar Italian for his poetry instead of the “professional” poetic language of Latin. Duncan’s opening lines criticize the professional force that criticizes Dante:

Secondary is the grammar of
constructions and uses, syntactic
manipulations, floor-plans,

spellings and letterings of the word (*Ground Work* 100)

Here we see Duncan’s complaint against a perspective that sees humanity as outside language, able to use it like a tool for manipulation. He ends the poem by calling the grammarians “Insufferable” because they “have denied their illiterate nurses. // Out of dry dug of their own? // Clonkt lightning!” (*Ground Work* 102). The grammarians deny the illiterate, the animal, refusing that primary and common and natural milk. Thus,

they can produce only “Clonkt lightening” whereas, Duncan writes, those who take in what is primary can

make our passage that

the structures of rime extend into

the fit of the parts at the finger tips

gathering the thunderhead

in which Zeus moves the measures. (*Ground Work* 101)

The distanced stance of the grammarians who seek a codified language that they can use as a tool for manipulating the world produces “Clonkt lightening,” while those, like Dante, who take up the more noble stance of being open to that language in which they exist produce an organic verse that partakes of a godly thunder.

“The Whole Potentiality,” another of the “Études,” speaks to the process of creating this organic verse. The poem reads,

“that the whole potentiality of
the first matter
may always be
in act”,

the speculative intellect
whose devotions being
to the general the good
of the total design thereof

feeling his way

extends into the actual
as the practical intellect

to practice the good of the whole
the end of which is *doing* and
making, enactment
and poetry,
intending the very
movement of his hand so
the Creative, Man
enters into the Process of *Man*. (*Ground Work* 112)

This short poem demonstrates Duncan's consistent emphasis on a poetry of process. Temporal being is an ever-unfolding event. The individual person is not a product, finished, completed; nor, then, can a person's poem be totally finished. It takes its place within the language of humanity which, in Duncan's politically incorrect terminology, is "the Process of *Man*."

"The Whole Potentiality" speaks of "the practical intellect" and "the good of the whole" as part of poetry's aims, and like Dante, who included contemporary political matters in his *Inferno*, Duncan speaks to his contemporary political scene in the "Études." Later études get more specific regarding contemporary politics, but earlier ones, such as "Of Empire," engage more general ideas about community and the good of civilisation. "Of Empire" is reminiscent of some of Duncan's "Passages" poems wherein he speaks of the need for an organic relationship between individual volition and communal needs and purposes:

The individual man having his own nature and truth
and appropriate thereto his household

outlined in relation to groups he finds
himself in freely attending, changing,
electing, or joining to carry forward
the idea, the insistent phrase,
the needed resonance into action,

seeks to realize harmonies in his district
(his order of life amongst the orders, savoring
variety, seeking out his space and time,
his life-style)

a tuning

(his appropriateness)

and in the city develops themes
coordinations, names places and times,
draws perspectives, advances horizons,
humanities, public works,

and in the nation (thus, Olson in MAXIMUS)

to initiate

“another kind of nation” . (*Ground Work* 109-10)

Duncan’s “individual man” is not an isolated ego. His actions come not from an isolated,

mental will, but from an inspiration gathered from being open to his surrounding environment. Duncan's noble individual is active in the orders of the day, of the community, the empire, even, that he is a part of. But his actions do not stem from a mind bent upon dominating the external world; they stem, instead from "a tuning," a being in tune with his community through his stance of openness that allows him to fulfill in his actions what is needed. Thus, this authentic individual brings about, by appropriately filling community needs, a new order, "another kind of nation."

In a more overtly political poem, "Where the Fox of this Stench Sulks," Duncan bemoans the state of world affairs. He writes of the "worship of the Presidency" and "the heart of each man [President] in turn grown in that power, each will in turn / fattening upon the power, each mind / sick with the swill of long accumulated crime and mounting pride" (*Ground Work* 130). Congress merely contributes to the sickness of the nation with "the mounting flow of guns, tanks, planes, fires, poisons, gases" that they appropriate, and "America's industries" are "feeding the abcess" (*Ground Work* 131). There is a palpable contrast between the state of America and the picture of civic harmony represented in "Of Empire," in which the individual acts freely out of an openness to his environment and is able, in an organic fashion, to meet the needs of his environment. In "Where the Fox of this Stench Sulks," individuals are leveled down to merely "the milling electorate, the millions at work" who are "consuming their lives at the churning factories of war-goods and / stacks of commodities / feeding their energies into the vast machine of the emptying production" (*Ground Work* 131). These individuals are not able to stand nobly as volitional agents in the community, for they are

“drownd in the undertow, all, ever, / gulping at the medium for air, breathing the fumes of the soupt-up tide” (*Ground Work* 131). In patriotic despair Duncan cries out, “O where is my beloved Nation?” America may indeed be a hopeless case. However, just as Duncan told Levertov that a “poet’s role is not to oppose evil, but to imagine it” (“Letter 452” 669), near the end of the “Dante Études” Duncan attempts to imagine a better political and social environment. In the penultimate étude, “In My Youth Not Unstaind,” he writes of

ennobling song, truth’s clarion,
beauty rendered lasting in the mind,
obedience to our common cause
stirred once again,
that music that to orders larger than
mankind
restoreth man. (*Ground Work* 134)

Duncan’s hermeneutic stance calls for individuals to find proper placement by existing in “obedience,” in openness to the surrounding world. He calls on individuals to get out of the manipulative, distanced positions embodied by America’s insistent dominance and to get into a more humble posture that allows individuals to see themselves as temporal objects among other objects, caught up in language and the history embedded in that language. Thus, the hermeneutic stance allows individuals to be connected intimately to the world, not distanced from it by a presupposed idea of objectivity, or by a more subjective idealism that seeks to create the world according to some predetermined

notion of the good.

The last étude is entitled “And a Wisdom as Such,” which obviously refers to Olson’s essay “Against Wisdom as Such” in which he warns Duncan of his tendency to rely on wisdom as “some outside concept” that one must write or behave in accordance with (“Against Wisdom” 260). Olson goes on to claim that wisdom cannot be a goal, something aimed at, but, if it be anything for the poet, must be “the man” himself, embodied in his action, as he stands in the world exposed. Else, Olson warns, “God does rush in” and art is lost and becomes religion (“Against Wisdom” 262). Perhaps the best way to understand Duncan’s response to Olson through this final poem of his “Dante Études” is to borrow from Fredman’s dichotomous characterization of Olson as the “chaste” poet of “containment,” and Duncan as the “promiscuous” poet of “permissiveness” (*The Grounding* 94 and 100). In “Against Wisdom as Such,” Olson declares that any wisdom a poet might have is not in some external code of logic or ethics, but is “contained” within himself as a temporal being. Olson’s is a wisdom in action that is circumscribed by the boundaries of a person’s temporal and spatial locus. Olson, to use Byrd’s terms, is a “literalist,” who focuses on the facts, while Duncan is a “fictionalist” who is open to the truth that can lie in fiction, in error, in myth (38-9). Hence, Duncan names his longest, most important essay on poetics, “The Truth and Life of Myth,” and titles a collection of essays *Fictive Certainties*. Duncan’s stance is quite similar to Olson’s in that he also does not believe in a teleological wisdom as a goal for thought or behavior. However, as both Fredman’s and Byrd’s analyses suggest, Duncan’s stance may indeed be more open, more permissive than Olson’s, and that is

what Duncan's poem "And a Wisdom as Such" suggests as well. Openness, a losing oneself in "a loosening of energies" is thematically central to the poem. Ultimately, Duncan's openness is a realization of his temporal existence as being-toward-death: "Open out like a rose / that can no longer keep its center closed / but, practicing for Death, lets go" (*Ground Work* 135). Duncan's self is not contained, but is ecstatic, losing itself in its temporal moment of unfolding:

the rapturous outpouring
speech of self into the silence of the mind
comes home, and, even the core
dispersed, in darkness of the ground
is gone

out from me, the very last of me,
till I am rid of every rind and seed
into that sweetness,
that final giving over, letting go,
that scattering of every nobleness . . . (*Ground Work* 135)

The poet must "let go" of everything, even nobleness, in this position of openness.

Duncan ends the poem, and the "Dante Études" as a whole, with this quote from Dante: "the seed of blessedness draws near de- / spatched by God into the willing soul" (*Ground Work* 135). Olson's "containment" keeps the poet attuned to the moment at hand so that idealisms or religious notions such as "God" cannot "rush in" and direct the poet's being-

in-the-moment toward any end other than itself. “And a Wisdom as Such,” especially the last line, emphasizes that for Duncan, the poet must be so open that he may allow that “rushing-in place of ‘God’, if it be!” (*Ground Work* 135). He can, in his temporal openness to the moment, even be open to idealisms and religious notions. Duncan’s poems allow for the inclusion of fiction alongside fact, myth and religion alongside science, beauty alongside awkwardness. Duncan, who said he often played heretic to Olson’s position while they were together at Black Mountain (Cohn and O’Donnell 516), by taking up a stance toward reality that is perhaps even more radically open to possibility than Olson’s, may have surpassed Olson’s own capabilities to sustain a truly hermeneutic stance toward reality.

CONCLUSION

“Limits / are what any of us / are inside of”

The preceding chapters have, I hope, demonstrated that there are clear parallels between the poetics of the Black Mountain poets and the hermeneutic ontology of both Heidegger and Gadamer, and that, by exploring the ideas of these German philosophers, avenues for understanding the poetry can be opened that allow for perhaps a more ample reading of what these poets attempt to accomplish with their verse. Though I believe each chapter contributes significantly to current scholarship on the poet examined therein, this study’s philosophical approach carries with it certain limitations. My hope is that the limitations of this project do not put up barriers to further investigation on these poets, but rather act as stepping stones, so to speak, for new creative approaches to these poets; for there is little doubt in my mind that more work should be done on the work of these writers. Thus, this conclusion aims to examine briefly the inconclusive nature of this project—how it, in addressing philosophical concerns, does not address other important issues that could perhaps be examined by further scholarship or critical work on these poets.

Robert Duncan’s poetry may serve as the best example of the limitations of my approach. Duncan’s lyricism is rich and allusive, and he includes many diverse elements

within single poems. For example, his “Poem Beginning with a Line by Pindar” includes such diverse material as the myth of Cupid and Psyche, Walt Whitman, and twentieth-century American presidents within a matter of a few lines, not to mention allusions to Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, Charles Olson, and Pindar later in the poem (*The Opening* 62-9). My readings of Duncan’s poems, while perhaps helpful on a philosophical level, do not provide much in the way of a guide through the minefield of allusions Duncan sets for his readers—to follow up on them all would be a gargantuan task. Timothy Materer’s examination of certain mythical elements in Duncan’s poetry is more helpful in this way than my study, but much more work needs to be done to provide readers a better context for understanding Duncan’s many sources and his use of them.⁶² Creeley is not a highly allusive poet, though George Butterick has examined how Creeley uses past poetic sources in some of his poems.⁶³ Olson, like Duncan, is highly allusive, but Butterick’s massive *Guide to the Maximus Poems* already provides an excellent source for readers seeking to understand Olson’s many allusions.

Another limitation of my approach, and one that I hope might spur on further scholarship on these poets, is that I do not provide much literary-historical context in my readings. Though a lot of biographical work has been done, especially on Olson and Creeley, more needs to be written on how these writers’ ideas, specifically regarding some of the philosophical issues I discuss in this study, place them in relation to other poets and other movements in twentieth-century poetry.⁶⁴ Once again, Robert Duncan serves as an example of how the limitations of this study might lead to further critical work. For instance, De Villo Sloan’s essay in *Sagetrieb* details Duncan’s distaste for

much of what has been called Language poetry. Sloan focuses his attention on the differences between Duncan's and the Language poets' view of the role of the self in poetry.⁶⁵ It would be interesting to explore issues of subjectivity in Duncan's work and in Language poetry in light of hermeneutic ontology. Perhaps placing some of the philosophical ideas explored in this study more thoroughly into literary-historical contexts would deepen our understanding of what is at stake philosophically in the literary relationships—or disputes—these poets fostered.

The best recent article on Duncan is Eric Keenaghan's "Vulnerable Households: Cold War Containment and Robert Duncan's Queered Nation," and this article indicates another limitation of my approach to these poets. Keenaghan examines Duncan in light of two factors: cold war domestic ideology (which Keenaghan labels "containment" ideology—a very conservative ideal based on logic and fixed forms in which women have their fixed roles, men have their fixed roles, children must be this and do that, etc.), and queer theory. Keenaghan says that Duncan "queers" cold war domestic notions of selfhood and political agency. He writes, "Duncan disrupts the general logic of containment culture. By emphasizing the subject's passivity and vulnerability, he breaks down bounded senses of personhood" [passivity and vulnerability are the key "queering" elements in Keenaghan's sense of the term (para. 21)]. Keenaghan's reading makes use of many of the features of Duncan's poetics I use to illustrate his hermeneutic stance. For instance, Keenaghan speaks of Duncan's openness and his notion of language not as a thing he uses but as that which he is used by. He writes that "[Duncan's] openness fashions him into a desirable medium through whom language emerges and whom

language shapes, rather than as an agent who actively affects social constructs through a measured control of language or a defense of meaning's boundaries" (para. 20).

Keenaghan focuses on Duncan's long poem "Apprehensions" to demonstrate Duncan's "queering" of cold war ideology. Whereas my reading of "Apprehensions" in the preceding chapter focuses on Duncan's sense of organic form and his notions of being's ultimate finitude and temporality, Keenaghan argues that this poem has in store for us a "Cold War lesson" which he says "lies in ["Apprehensions"] illustration of the value of testing and queering those systems of meanings that trap us within contained identity structures" (para. 43).

Though my approach to these poets does allow for brief forays into the cultural and political issues of the Cold War and Vietnam War eras in which these poets worked, I was not able to investigate fully the implications the hermeneutic stances of these poets might have had in relation to pressing political issues of that time. Keenaghan's essay not only is able to discuss in depth how Duncan's poetics addresses notions of political action in the Cold War era, by discussing Duncan in terms of queer theory, it also touches upon the implications Duncan's poetics holds for cultural issues important to our time, such as matters involving gender and sexual identity. My hope is that future studies can make use of insights I have made into the philosophical orientation of these poets in order to, as Keenaghan does, demonstrate how those poetic and philosophical notions might be used in service of ethical or political critiques of American culture, literary or otherwise.

This is not to say that scholars have ignored certain political and/or cultural implications of the Black Mountain poets. Sexism in Olson and Creeley is part of the subject of Andrew Mossin's recent article on Charles Olson's early career, as he traces what he calls "discourses of masculinity" that "play a central role in Olson's formative development as a poet" (para. 12) in terms of his correspondence with both Frances Boldereff and Robert Creeley. Even an ardent admirer of Olson, such as Michael Rumaker, admits that during Olson's rectorship at Black Mountain College, women were relegated to second-class status. He says, in an interview with Martin Duberman, that Olson "felt that women just weren't that good writers [sic], that they didn't belong in writing; they should be home tending the kids, tending the house, cooking and so forth" (qtd. in Duberman 380).

Rumaker's description of Olson's sexism may be extreme. For example, Francine du Plessix Gray, a student of Olson's at Black Mountain College, gives a somewhat tender account of Olson as a mentor. Though she compares Olson to her oppressive father and describes his teaching as dictatorial, she recalls how Olson cared for her writing and how he helped her become a better writer. Still, she does admit that she fared well with Olson only because she was a bit of a tomboy with thick skin developed from her formative years of dutifully obeying a similarly authoritarian father. Andrew Mossin could have used the following statement from Olson which Gray quotes as representative of how he spoke to her in his study of Olson's "masculinist discourse": "'Girl,' he'd say pressing his five fingers hard into my scalp until it hurt, 'if you get the high falootin' Yurup and poh-lee-tess and stuck-up schools out of that noggin and start playing Gringo

ball you'll be okay'" (304). Olson's speech here is the type of linguistic machismo that Mossin says Olson used, whether consciously or unconsciously, to appeal to male poets and not to females.

However interesting, or troubling, the sexism of Olson and Creeley, or of Black Mountain College in general under Olson's leadership, may be, I feel it lies outside the limited philosophical approach of this study. I bring up the issue of sexism not only to point out another limitation of my approach, or to point out yet another area of Black Mountain studies that needs more attention, but also to point out the irony that arguably the most successful writer often given the title "Black Mountain poet" is a woman: Denise Levertov. One might criticize this study for the absence of a detailed examination of Levertov's work, perhaps even citing it as one more instance of Black Mountain sexism. My reasons for leaving Levertov out of this study, however, are threefold: 1) Practical issues of time and length for the kind of project a dissertation ought to be. 2) The historical bond between Levertov and Black Mountain College and Charles Olson is not nearly as strong as it is in the cases of Creeley and Duncan. In fact, Levertov never set foot on the campus of Black Mountain College. Her linkage with the poets has to do instead with her publishing history in magazines such as *Origin* and *The Black Mountain Review*, as well as the strong friendships she shared (at times) in her career with Creeley and Duncan. Historically speaking, including Levertov in this study would open up the question of why other poets with similar friendships and similar publishing histories were not included. Limiting the study to Olson, Creeley, and Duncan makes sense from a historical standpoint because they are the only major poets who taught at the college in

the fifties. 3) Most importantly, Levertov is not included in this study because over the course of her career, her poetics seems to diverge from some of the key aspects of the hermeneutic stances of these poets as I have discussed them in this study. Early on, influenced by William Carlos Williams, Levertov's poetry had much in common with the other Black Mountain poets, but as she develops her poetics in the sixties and begins articulating aspects of her own aesthetic, she begins to differ sharply from the stances of Olson, Creeley, and Duncan, especially with regard to the salience of the ultimately temporal nature of being, an aspect of philosophy that is crucial to each of these poets.

Perhaps the best place to turn for an example of Levertov's departure from the hermeneutic stances of the Black Mountain poets is in her key essay, "Some Notes on Organic Form," first published in 1965. In this essay she revises the famous statement of Creeley's, "form is never more than the extension of content," into "form is never more than a *revelation* of content" (73). The difference between these two statements lies, I believe, in Levertov's differing view of the temporal nature of being. For Levertov, who begins her essay by referencing the theological poet Gerard Manley Hopkins's ideas of *inshape* and *instress*, there are "essential characteristics both in single objects and [. . .] in objects in a state of relation to each other" (67). The poet of organic form must find the "inherent, though not immediately apparent, form" (67). Thus, for Levertov, in organic poetry form is a Platonic revelation. Through intense observation of the world and of being in the world, what she calls "apperception," the poet is able to perceive the "true" forms of objects and experiences.

Levertov's organicism, as it concerns the technical process of writing the poem, is not much different from methods prescribed by Olson or Creeley: intense attention to the moment of writing itself, giving one's own breath, one's own body, heed in terms of where or how to break lines and stanzas. But behind the similar technique lies a very different "stance toward reality," because Levertov's reality is essentially static. Truth, for Levertov, seems to be a static entity, whereas for the Black Mountain faculty, truth is the event of understanding that occurs in the moment at hand. Levertov writes, in "Some Notes on Organic Form," about the need for "precise adherence to truth" and "a religious devotion to truth" in poetry (73). But her truth is the *revelation* of an already determined content, a form that is not made as an extension of content, but a form that is found, revealed by the poet's intense study and perception, not the recognition of an ever evolving cosmos, as Duncan describes it. Ultimately, I believe Levertov takes more of a metaphysical than a hermeneutic stance, though certainly she still shares much in common with Olson, Creeley, and Duncan. Perhaps my study might serve as a springboard for further investigations into how Levertov's poetics fits within the larger framework of the poetics developed by the faculty poets of Black Mountain.

Another ironic aspect of the apparent sexism of Olson and Black Mountain College is that among the poets writing today, two of the more successful poets who seem to have been significantly influenced by Olson and Black Mountain poetics are women: Susan Howe and Sharon Doubiago. For Howe, as Jahan Ramazani notes, Olson's typography is particularly appealing (688). Howe's long poem, "Thorow," has sections which look quite similar to parts of Olson's "Proprioception" essays and some of

his later Maximus poems, with words spread seemingly haphazardly (almost as if hastily pasted) across the page in diagonals and other various angles and directions.⁶⁶ “Thorow” also strives for Olson’s expansive range, a casting over large stretches of history and culture, juxtaposition of many diverse materials, as well as a tendency to philosophize and include self-reflective ideas about poetry in the poem.

Sharon Doubiago is even more explicitly influenced by Olson. In her *Contemporary Literature* interview with Jenny Goodman, Doubiago consistently invokes the names of Olson, Duncan, and Black Mountain, sometimes as positive sources of information and inspiration, other times as imposing father figures whose inherent sexism she struggles against. Much like Francine du Plessix Gray’s account of her ambivalent relationship to Olson (in which she credits Olson with liberating her writing, paradoxically, through his dictatorial teaching style), Doubiago speaks of Olson’s “gross sexism” but justifies it by saying that his sexism is merely a knee-jerk reaction to his deeper embrace of femininity (para. 48). As Lyn Keller explains in her study of Doubiago, Olson and his speaker Maximus (Doubiago uses the name Maximus for the name of a husband character in one of her short stories), are liberators, “[b]ut their liberation does not extend to their understanding of gender or their attitudes toward women” (*Forms of Expansion* 30). At the end of her celebrated epic, *Hard Country*, a poem that is partially about the liberation of a female identity, she invokes the opening lines of *The Maximus Poems*: “off-shore by islands hidden in the blood / jewels and miracles” (258). Keller explains this invocation as a reformation of Olson’s masculinist poetics as “she redefines the values central to his epic tradition” by “revisionary

emphases in her use of traditional myths, by reconceiving gender traits, and by combining genders with entities traditionally regarded as exclusively male or female” (*Forms of Expansion* 31). Thus, Doubiago incorporates Olson and the sexist tradition out of which he writes into her “antipatriarchal” poem, and most impressively “creates a complementary dynamics between herself and Olson as female and male authors participating in the same literary tradition” (31). In pointing to poets like Howe and Doubiago in this conclusion, my hope is that further studies will be able to trace the legacy of Black Mountain poetics to examine how poets of a later generation, perhaps drawing inspiration from these poets but also inevitably struggling against certain of their foibles, create “complementary dynamics” between themselves and the hermeneutic stances of the Black Mountain poets.

Charles Olson writes in “Letter 5” of *The Maximus Poems*, “Limits / are what any of us / are inside of” (21). Being is grounded in the limitations of temporality, of being in one place at one time, situated within a particular history and language. Recognition of temporal limitations is key for the writer. Olson warns his literary friend, Vincent Ferrini (who titled a volume of his poetry “The Infinite People”), that there is no infinite, “as though there were anything / the equal of / the context of / now! (no line breaks—MP 26). My hope is that by recognizing the limitations of my approach to these Black Mountain poets and by identifying ways in which these limitations can serve as the ground for further work on these poets and their inheritors, I am working with the same “old measure of care” Olson speaks of in *The Maximus Poems*—the care that by recognizing limitations allows the work to be more attentive, and thereby more relevant, to the issue

at hand. The vision I seek to provide into the poetry and poetics of the Black Mountain poets is not that of Emerson's transparent eyeball that, ungrounded, pretends to see all; it is instead Olson's "eyes in all heads, / to be looked out of" (*MP* 33), situated in time, in history, in the world, on the ground. Thus, like Duncan, I can extol the incomplete and imperfect, and can say, with Creeley, "What I come to do / is partial, partially kept" (*CPI* 118).

NOTES

1. Cynthia Dubin Edelberg and Linda W. Wagner, both in the context of writing on Creeley's work, state that the label Black Mountain is of questionable significance (see Edelberg 15 and Wagner 312-3). Also, Martin Duberman explains the difficulties involved in placing writers under the name "Black Mountain" (387-8).
2. Robert J. Dostal's translation of Dasein, is, I think, useful. According to Dostal, Dasein means "there (*Da*) where being (*Sein*) appears ("The Experience of Truth" 51).
3. David E. Linge writes that "The task of philosophical hermeneutics, therefore, is ontological" (xi), and Nathan A. Scott, Jr. states that "for Gadamer, the discipline of hermeneutics is a form of fundamental ontology" (630).
4. Generally, the term "hermeneutic" refers to a particular mode of interpreting texts or even sense impressions or perceptions of the surrounding world, or to a way of contextualizing information or perceptions so that they can be better understood. In this general sense of the term, every poet, presumably, has a "hermeneutic" or even a "hermeneutic stance." In the context of this dissertation, however, I use terms "hermeneutic" and "hermeneutic stance" to refer more specifically to the ways in which the hermeneutics of these poets are related to particular aspects of the hermeneutic ontology developed by Heidegger and Gadamer.
5. Olson commands writers, in "Proprioception," to "Wash the ego out" (181).
6. See Mathew J. Bruccoli's "Editor's Preface" to *Understanding the Black Mountain Poets* (ix).
7. Of these critics, Fredman makes the least brief and most interesting connection between Gadamer and these poets when he describes what he calls "the poetics of recognition" at work in both Gadamer and Olson. See Fredman's "Chapter Four: The Poetics of Recognition" (*The Grounding of American Poetry* 73-93), or for more specific focus on Gadmer's notion of recognition, see 78-82.
8. See, for example, Charles Alterieri 178, and Sherman Paul xviii and 43 explicitly; however, Paul's entire book, entitled *Olson's Push*, explores Olson's attempt at "reconceiving the nature of the cosmos and the nature of man" (xviii). Of course, the scholars that take as their main task an exploration of Olson and a major philosopher like

Heidegger or Whitehead also understand Olson's poetics to be philosophically motivated. The Heidegger/Olson scholars that I mention in this chapter include William V. Spanos, Paul Bové, and Judith Halden-Sullivan. The scholars that deal primarily with the Olson/Whitehead connection that I use in this chapter are Robert von Hallberg and Shahar Bram.

9. See Paul xviii and Christensen 8, 44, and 45.

10. See chapter three of Spanos's book, *Repetitions: The Postmodern Occasion in Literature and Culture*, entitled "Charles Olson and Negative Capability: A De-structive Interpretation."

11. See Spanos' very brief mention of Gadamer in *Repetitions* 115, 127n, and 225-6. Halden-Sullivan somewhat more deeply engages Gadamer in her explanation of what the term "experience" means for both Gadamer and Olson in her book, 82.

12. Such is Maud's characterization in his *What Does Not Change*, 37.

13. All quotations from Olson's poems come either from *The Collected Poems of Charles Olson*, or *The Maximus Poems*. Page numbers will be given for these citations prefaced by either *CP*, for *The Collected Poems*, or *MP* for *The Maximus Poems*.

14. The word *Dasein* is used by Heidegger as an impersonal, phenomenological way of talking about individual human being-in-the-world. The word, in German, is a combination of *Da* (There) and *Sein* (Being). Robert J. Dostal describes *Dasein* as "there (*Da*) where Being (*Sein*) appears" (51).

15. Von Hallberg writes that "Hippocrats" more literally means "government by horses," but then says that for the poem, the word is "a truer rhyme to hypocrites than to Houyhnhnms" (*Charles Olson* 6).

16. See Maud, 13; Foster, 45; and Merrill, 64.

17. Both Paul, 13, and Maud, 25, see a resemblance between the character of J. Alfred Prufrock and Olson's Fernand.

18. I take the phrase "the Western Box" from Joon-Hwan Kim's book, *Out of the "Western Box": Towards a Multicultural Poetics in the Poetry of Ezra Pound and Charles Olson*. Kim, himself, takes the phrase from Olson's "Mayan Letters," in which he writes that Pound, unfortunately, restricted himself to "the Western Box" in his *Guide to Kulchur* (129). Kim's argument, a bit removed from my own concerns with Olson, is that Olson critiques "Pound's Enlightenment narrative of History and the centrality of the poetic Self," which are essentially what make up Pound's "western box" (7).

19. For this description of the mode of existence in "the they," see *Being and Time*, 165.

20. Heidegger mentions this notion of temporality as the meaning of being throughout his work, but he does so poignantly in a section in which he also discusses being-towards-death when he states “temporality makes up the primordial meaning of Dasein’s Being” (*Being and Time* 278).
21. See *Truth and Method*, 307-311, for a detailed discussion of application in hermeneutics.
22. Gadamer references the hermeneutics of jurisprudence throughout *Truth and Method*, but particularly 324-30, where he attempts to show the fundamental unity of legal, theological, and historical/humanities-based hermeneutics. In another place Gadamer states, “discovering the meaning of a legal text and discovering how to apply it in a particular legal instance are not two separate actions, but one unitary process” (*Truth and Method* 310).
23. Gadamer’s most important discussion of phronesis and techne can be found in *Truth and Method*, 312-324. Other helpful explanations of phronesis and techne can be found in Martin Ostwald’s glossary in his translation of *Nicomachean Ethics*, as well as Roger Crisp’s introduction to his translation of that Aristotelian text. David P. Haney’s article, “Aesthetics and Ethics in Gadamer, Levinas, and Romanticism: Problems of Phronesis and Techne,” is a brilliantly insightful look at the relationship of phronesis and techne in literature and literary theory. Also, my own article on phronesis in *Huckleberry Finn* extends some of the ideas briefly mentioned here (see N. S. Boone’s “Openness to Contingency: Huckleberry Finn and the Morality of Phronesis.”)
24. All poems cited in this chapter come from one of Creeley’s two volumes of his collected poems. Poems from *The Collected Poems of Robert Creeley: 1945-1975* will be cited as *CPI*. Poems from *The Collected Poems of Robert Creeley: 1975-2005* will be cited as *CPII*.
25. See p. 58 of *Robert Creeley* for an example of how Ford uses Olson’s projective verse to elucidate aspects of Creeley’s poetics.
26. See Conte’s *Unending Design: The Forms of Postmodernist Poetry* 87-104, 202-8, and 231-7; see Keller’s *Re-Making it New: Contemporary American Poetry and the Modernist Tradition* 137-83.
27. See Mesch’s “Robert Creeley’s Epistemopathic Path” and Conniff’s “The Lyricism of This World.”
28. See Navero’s “Robert Creeley: Close. In the Mind. Some Times. Some What,” Diehl’s “The Literal Activity of Robert Creeley,” Sylvester’s “Robert Creeley’s Poetics: I know that I hear you,” and Kern’s “Composition as Recognition: Robert Creeley and Postmodern Poetics.”

29. See Robert Creeley's "With Bill Spanos" 151.
30. In another interview from 1978, Creeley says that he never read Heidegger (Power para. 25).
31. See Spanos's "The De-struction of Form in Postmodern American Poetry: The Examples of Charles Olson and Robert Creeley," especially 386-390 and 400-404.
32. Though Heidegger's insights into how the work of art creates a space for authentic being are not quite in the purview of this chapter, they can be found in his "The Origin of the Work of Art" and other essays in the collection *Poetry, Language, Thought*.
33. For a basic explanation of what he calls "the triadic structure of existential time," see Jacques Taminiaux's "Philosophy of Existence I: Heidegger" 51-2.
34. In "The Universality of the Hermeneutical Problem" Gadamer succinctly describes his basic notion of prejudice: "Prejudices are not necessarily unjustified and erroneous, so that they inevitably distort the truth. In fact, the historicity of our existence entails that prejudices, in the literal sense of the word, constitute the initial directedness of our whole ability to experience. Prejudices are biases or our openness to the world. They are simply conditions whereby we experience something—whereby what we encounter says something to us" (9).
35. For a brief jaunt through criticism that emphasizes Creeley's role as a love poet, see Charles Bernstein "Hearing 'Here': Robert Creeley's Poetics of Duration," Cynthia Edelberg in various sections of her book *Robert Creeley's Poetry: A Critical Introduction*, Ross Feld "The Fate of Doing Nothing Right," Thom Gunn "Small Persistent Difficulties," and Leslie Scalapino "Thinking Serially in *For Love, Words, and Pieces*."
36. See Edelberg 29 and Ford 78-9
37. The quote from Williams is from the poetic preface to *Paterson*: "'Rigor of beauty is the quest. But how will you find beauty when it is locked in the mind past all remonstrance?'" (3). Creeley's relationship to Williams has been explored by a number of critics, but the following works deal most extensively with this relationship: Keller's *Re-Making it New* 137-183, Paul Mariani's "'Fire of a Very Real Order': Creeley and Williams," and Alice Entwistle's "'For W.C.W.,' 'Yet Complexly': Creeley and Williams."
38. This quote from Ginsberg serves as an epigraph for Creeley's volume *Pieces*. See *CPI* 378.
39. For instance, a recent collection of essays investigates Duncan's friendship, correspondence, and eventual falling out with Denise Levertov over his reaction to her

poetry during the Vietnam War (see *Robert Duncan and Denise Levertov: The Poetry of Politics, the Politics of Poetry*). Also, Andrew Mossin's article in *Contemporary Literature* discusses Duncan's dispute with his friend, Robin Blaser, over Blaser's translations of Gerard de Nerval (see "In the Shadow of Nerval: Robert Duncan, Robin Blaser, and the Poetics of (Mis)Translation").

40. Edward Halsey Foster's chapter on Duncan in *Understanding the Black Mountain Poets* suffers by making too much of the differences between Olson and Duncan without also discussing their many similarities. For example, he says Duncan's poetry left Olson "ill at ease" (128) but does not mention how much Olson admired Duncan's work—evidenced primarily by the fact that he asked Duncan to teach at Black Mountain. Michael Rumaker, in a memoir, says that Olson would read Duncan's latest poems aloud to his writing classes at Black Mountain (before Duncan arrived to teach there), and that Olson's "energetic affection for the poems was [. . .] contagious" (3). Years later, Olson comments upon Duncan's "Passages" sequence by saying that Duncan had achieved lasting status as a poet: "He's become a BIG poet, like Yeats" ("On Black Mountain" 72).

41. The most important study of the differences between Olson and Duncan (given in the context of their obvious admiration for each other) is Don Byrd's "The Question of Wisdom as Such" in *Robert Duncan: Scales of the Marvelous*. Drawing on Byrd's essay, Stephen Fredman makes some interesting comparisons and contrasts between Olson and Duncan in *The Grounding of American Poetry: Charles Olson and the Emersonian Tradition* (especially 94-101). Fredman also examines differences between Duncan and Creeley in his *Poet's Prose*. Alice Entwistle examines differences and similarities between Duncan and Creeley in "Robert Creeley and Robert Duncan: A World of Contradiction."

42. Only Carl D. Esbjornson, in two separate essays, makes use of Heidegger's philosophy to directly explain aspects of Duncan's poetry, but even he only briefly mentions Heidegger. See "Tracking the Soul's Truth: Robert Duncan's Revisioning of the Self in Caesar's Gate," especially 262; and "Mastering the Rime: Strife in Robert Duncan's Poetry," especially 84.

43. See Cohn, Jack R., and Thomas J. O'Donnell. "An Interview with Robert Duncan" 529.

44. One of the most prolific commentators on Duncan's work, Michael Davidson, says that only "[a] naive reading of Duncan's poetic statements [. . .] might see him yearning toward some totalized scheme of correspondences whereby time [. . .] is at last stilled or transcended" ("Cave of Resemblances" 287-8).

45. See Bernd Engler's "In Search of Primordial Knowledge: Robert Duncan's Poetics," especially 329-33; Edward Halsey Foster's *Understanding the Black Mountain Poets*, especially 127-30; and Peter O'Leary's "Prophetic Frustrations: Robert Duncan's

Tribunals,” especially 138-9 and 146-7.

46. The following is a list of critical essays that emphasize these aspects of Duncan’s aesthetics: Michael Bernstein’s “Bringing It All Back Home: Derivations and Quotations from Robert Duncan and the Poundian Tradition”; Dennis Cooley’s “The Poetics of Robert Duncan” (probably the best essay on these issues); Burton Hatlen’s “Robert Duncan’s Marriage of Heaven and Hell: Kabbalah and Rime in *Roots and Branches*”; Mark Andrew Johnson’s *Robert Duncan*; Eric Keenaghan’s “Vulnerable Households: Cold War Containment and Robert Duncan’s Queered Nation” (the best recent essay on Duncan); Nathaniel Mackey’s “The World-Poem in Microcosm: Robert Duncan’s ‘The Continent’”; Timothy Materer’s “Robert Duncan and the Mercurial Self”; and any of the essays on Duncan written by Michael Davidson, especially “A Book of First Things: The Opening of the Field,” and “Cave of Resemblances, Cave of Rimes: Tradition and Repetition in Robert Duncan.”

47. See Thom Gunn’s “Homosexuality in Robert Duncan’s Poetry.”

48. In his 1972 preface to *Caesar’s Gate*, a collection of poems that were written in the late forties and early fifties, Duncan says that it was not until 1956 (when he was at Black Mountain), when he conceptualized his volume *The Opening of the Field*, that “the force of the poetics I had pursued had overtaken me” (xii).

49. Olson writes, “get on with it, keep moving, keep in, speed, the nerves, their speed, the perceptions, theirs, the acts, split second acts, the whole business, keep it moving as fast as you can, citizen” (“Projective Verse” 240).

50. Spanos addresses the Olsonian idea of the eye versus the Heideggerian idea in his book *Repetitions: The Postmodern Occasion in Literature and Culture*. For the full discussion, see 107-47. For a short version of how Olson’s notion of the eye does not contradict his basically Heideggerian stance, see 126-129.

51. Mersmann reads “An Essay at War” in essentially the same way as Johnson, as he says Duncan creates an opposition between the “bad poem” (182), that “operates under an entirely opposite poetic” (181) of the poem Duncan is trying to construct. For Mersmann’s reading of “An Essay at War,” see *Out of the Vietnam Vortex*, 179-85.

52. Carl D. Esbjornson, the only critic who explicitly addresses Heideggerian concerns specific to any of Duncan’s poems, speaks briefly of Heideggerian revelation and concealment in Duncan’s work. See his “Mastering the Rime: Strife in Robert Duncan’s Poetry” 84, and “Tracking the Soul’s Truth: Robert Duncan’s Revisioning of the Self in *Caesar’s Gate*” 262.

53. Mackey provides an extensive reading of the pitcher as it relates to the notions of perfection and imperfection in “An Essay at War.” See *Paracritical Hinge* 107-110.

54. Johnson calls “Passages” “Duncan’s fullest realization [. . .] of the possibilities of poetry” (98). And these poems have garnered much critical attention, especially in Reid’s “The Plural Text: ‘Passages,’” Mackey’s “Gassire’s Lute: Robert Duncan’s Vietnam War Poems” in *Paracritical Hinge*, 71-178, Mersmann’s *Out of the Vietnam Vortex*, 159-204, and Joseph M. Conte’s *Unending Design*, 47-69.

55. I borrow this thought from Johnson, who writes of Duncan’s stance in these political poems, “‘political poetry’ is, for him, poetry concerned with the *polis*, the city, and what it means to be a good citizen” (98).

56. Duncan’s spacing of lines is difficult to adequately represent on the page when one is attempting to follow the *MLA Style Guide* since he uses many different kinds of spacing. MLA suggests double-spacing everything, even lines of poetry. But in order to properly “score” Duncan’s lines in relation to each other, I will make use of single-spacing, when necessary, in order to allow for more flexibility in representing the poems.

57. Gadamer discusses “transformation into structure” and the interpretation of an artwork over time in *Truth and Method* 110-121.

58. Burton Hatlen, in his reading of *Roots and Branches*, also recognizes, to some degree, the dialogical nature of subjectivity in Duncan’s poetry, though he approaches the poetry from a Bakhtinian perspective. He states, at one point in his analysis, that Duncan’s work, like Bakhtin’s “dialogical novel” allows “the voice of the Other to speak” (225).

59. Michael Davidson is the only critic I found who analyzes “The Propositions” substantively. Davidson suggests that Duncan’s title refers to Alfred North Whitehead’s distinction between judgment and proposition. He says, “Rational decisions, made under the terms of judgments become tools of the logician,” whereas “[p]ropositions imply a multiplicity of choices” (“A Book” 69). While I, like Davidson, see the poem addressing the negative aspects of the objectifying logic Davidson links with judgment, I do not see the term judgment in the poem. I feel Duncan is more likely playing on the multiple meanings of “proposition.” For instance, a proposition could refer to a proposition of love, as in a proposal (or even the pejorative sense of a sexual proposition), but I think Duncan allows the word proposition to mean a logical proposition as well. For Davidson’s reading see “A Book of First Things: *The Opening of the Field*,” 68-70.

60. Jacques Taminiaux provides a brief, enlightening summary of the basic aspects of Heidegger’s explication of Dasein as “both thrownness and project” (51). He also discusses “how temporality is the ground of the ontological constitution of Dasein (51). See his “Philosophy of Existence I: Heidegger,” especially 38-57.

61. This notion of form is perhaps underscored by Cohn and O’Donnell’s interview with Duncan in which he said there are “no terminal experiences” (534).

62. See Materer's "Robert Duncan and the Mercurial Self."
63. See Butterick's "Robert Creeley and the Tradition."
64. The major Olson biography is Tom Clark's *Charles Olson: The Allegory of a Poet's Life*. The major Creeley biography, though it does not include much detail on Creeley's last thirty or forty years, is Ekbert Faas's *Robert Creeley: A Biography*. Duncan's major biography, now under contract with University of California Press, is Lisa Jarnot's *Robert Duncan: The Ambassador from Venus*.
65. See Sloan's "'Crude Mechanical Access' or 'Crude Personism': A Chronicle of One San Francisco Bay Area Poetry War."
66. See Howe's "Thorow," and Olson's set of essays gathered under the title "Proprioception," especially the section entitled "GRAMMER—a 'book,'" (191-3). It is impossible for me to adequately represent the kind of typography presented either in either Howe's "Thorow" or Olson's "Proprioception" because of the limitations of this word processor.

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