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# Poems to the Sea and Painterly Poetics: Charles Olson, Robert Creeley, Cole Swensen

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**PAINTERLY POETICS:**

CHARLES OLSON, ROBERT CREELEY, COLE SWENSEN

by

**PETER GILLIES**

**CONTENTS:**

**INTRODUCTION / 102**

Chapter One: **CHARLES OLSON / 126**

Chapter Two: **ROBERT CREELEY / 213**

Chapter Three: **COLE SWENSEN / 252**

**BIBLIOGRAPHY / 284**

## **INTRODUCTION**

1. Body: Voice / Arms Sweeping Wide
2. Ideogrammic Composition
3. Context: Energy and Process
4. Summary: New Possibilities

## 1. Body: Voice / Arms Sweeping Wide

Filmed by Richard O. Moore in Olson's Fort Square apartment in Gloucester in March 1966, Charles Olson ends his reading of his poem '*Maximus to Gloucester, Letter 27* [withheld]' with arms outstretched, waving his fingers, hands and arms as he conducts each enunciation from his chair:

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 <sup>1</sup>

To watch this footage in Henry Ferrini's documentary *Polis Is This* (2007),<sup>2</sup> is to see Olson unite gesture and meaning in his presentation for the camera. The viewer can't help but be drawn towards the force of his roaming consciousness; captivated and enthralled by the choreography of his words as he drives home the point of the poem, 'Polis / is this': 'this' city, 'this' situation, 'this' life, and most importantly, 'this' body.

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Olson, '*Maximus to Gloucester, Letter 27* [withheld]', *The Maximus Poems*, ed. George F. Butterick (London: University of California Press, 1983) pp. 184-185 (p. 185).

<sup>2</sup> *Polis Is This: Charles Olson and the Persistence of Place*. Dir. Henry Ferrini & Ken Riaf, Ferrini Productions, Gloucester MA, 2007. The original footage of Olson reading this poem was taken from *USA Poetry*. Dir. Richard O. Moore, National Educational Television Network, 1966.

Tilting his head side to side, swaying his torso before reaching forwards and upwards, Olson is transported through his own rhythms of speech. Eloquently marked by each consecutive breath, the poet's energy is literally pulsing in his insistent repetition of 'Plus this – plus this'. In full kinetic flow, Olson's physically projected voice is incantatory: the elemental force of his syntactical dance with 'the geography / which leans in' allows him to vocalize (previously in the poem) 'all those precessions, the precessions of me', in his search for origins. Instinctive utterance, 'no strict personal order / for my inheritance', constitutes Olson's auditory field.<sup>3</sup>

The poem fluently integrates memory and myth, the past and the present, the universal and the local, as well as moving between what is subjective and objective, ambiguous and explicit. In these digressions, Olson refuses to detach Gloucester's history from its geography in his proclamation of it as an active, reinvigorated city-state. His articulation propels the content of 'Letter 27' forwards to go 'backwards' as the verse strives to find its own future through the lens of Olson's autobiographical imagination, remembering 'so young' when he 'played baseball / into the summer darkness until no flies / could be seen and we came home / to our various piazzas where the women / buzzed'.<sup>4</sup> Olson is like an Abstract Expressionist painter applying his exuberant word sounds as visual strokes, spreading them intuitively across his sonic canvas. Seeing becomes surveying through musical phrasing and lineation, all the more exaggerated as Olson gesticulates on film outwards with alternate arms as he visualizes the coastline of Cape Ann: 'to the left the land fell to the city, / to the right, it fell to the sea'.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Olson, 'Maximus to Gloucester, Letter 27 [withheld]', *The Maximus Poems*, p. 184.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 184.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 184.

What Olson enacts through his poetics bears comparison with the foremost abstract painters of his day: their emphasis on gesture and process; the energy of the human body as expressed through the physical act of putting colour onto a surface. Olson asserts the same vastness of possibility I find present in Willem de Kooning's abstract landscapes (1960-63), many of which were inspired by 'the dazed kind of light'<sup>6</sup> and diffused watery atmosphere the painter found while walking along the beach at Long Island Sound. As a viewer of these works, one can follow the swift arc of de Kooning's arm in a loaded pink brushstroke which glides the entire width of the image. One can track clean but oily white paint brushed through intense passages of yellow and ultramarine, wet-into-wet, to create soft tonal shades of lemon, lavender and grey that maximize their luminous effects. One is struck by the liquidity: drops that have poured down as a result of de Kooning's method of rotating the painting in the process of its making.

An Olson poem and a de Kooning painting are concentrations of action performed on their materials. The tradition of these 'sister arts' proposes that the verbal and the visual function in separate dimensions: poetry unfolds in time while painting remains static for it sits within space. Olson and de Kooning cut across these temporal-spatial divides. As a poet, essayist, teacher, and particularly in his role as rector of Black Mountain College, Olson advocated the inter-connectedness of all artistic practice. At the college, his projective aesthetic extended between poetry, music, theatre, dance and the visual arts. In aiming to remove the boundaries between those disciplines, he recognized that the body and the gesture are contingent with form and content. In this

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<sup>6</sup> Willem de Kooning, in conversation with Harold Rosenberg [1972], cited in John Elderfield, *De Kooning: A Retrospective* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2011) p. 341. Paintings in this series include *Spike's Folly II*, 1960, Private Collection; and *Rosy-Fingered Dawn at Louse Point*, 1963, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam.

search for a unifying essence, Olson's agile syntax and breath-based lineation is analogous to the spontaneity and gestural improvisation of many Abstract Expressionist paintings. Equivalent to reconfigured painterly forms and densities of colour that endlessly shift in register, the projective poem, in every word, phrase and line that is written or spoken, understands itself to be an ongoing and continuous process of discovery.

Despite the ambiguous relations between writing and image-making, modernist poets seeking the immediate and the essential, readily found value in comparative study of the two disciplines. Contemplating Paul Cezanne's paintings, Rainer Maria Rilke writes 'the good conscience of these reds, these blues, their simple truthfulness, it educates you ... it's as if they were doing something for you'.<sup>7</sup> Rilke converts the variations of the colour blue into nuances of his own experience to respond with a 'dense quilted blue', a 'listening blue', a 'thunderstorm blue' and a 'bourgeois cotton blue'. Rilke's process as both writer and viewer is participatory in that he refuses to adopt the detached stance of an intellectual observer.

Visual art played a vital part in the poetics of both Ezra Pound and Wallace Stevens. In the case of Pound who recognized 'the sense of freedom from time limits and space limits; that sense of sudden growth, which we experience in the presence of the greatest works of art',<sup>8</sup> the 'image' remains key to the essential ideas within a poem, as well as a vehicle to convey them. He states that 'the image itself is the speech. The

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<sup>7</sup> Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letters on Cezanne* [1907], ed. Clara Rilke, translated by Joel Agee (London: Vintage, 1991) p. 50. Written to his wife Clara, these letters refer to Rilke's many visits to the Salon d'Automne, Paris in 1907 to view a memorial exhibition of work by Paul Cezanne.

<sup>8</sup> Ezra Pound, 'A Few Don'ts by an Imagiste [1913]', *Poetry Magazine*, March 1913, from <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/article/335>, [accessed 15.10.14].



image is the word beyond formulated language'.<sup>9</sup> Pound was drawn to examples of writing composed of visual imagery and one of his revelations was his discovery of the Chinese ideogram as a suitable means for instant poetic expression. For Pound, the role of the image was to turn the intangible idea into something viable and concrete. This development was crucial to modern and contemporary American poets' engagement with the material world and consequently Pound serves a considerable influence on the three poets chosen for discussion in this thesis.

If Pound focuses attention on both visual images and texts as materially made things, reinforcing a sense of process, then Wallace Stevens sees that in both art forms there exists a 'mystical aesthetic' that informs their alliance:

I suppose, therefore, that it would be possible to study poetry by studying painting or that one could become a painter after one had become a poet ... Just as poets can be affected by the sayings of painters, so can painters be affected by the sayings of poets.<sup>10</sup>

Stevens proposes that poetry and painting are situated where imagination and reality intersect, a place where 'reality changes from substance to subtlety'. Through this 'subtlety' the poet or painter can create 'a new reality, a modern reality'. What Stevens was proposing in 1951 had already become 'a new reality' at Black Mountain College.

This thesis argues that a new projective model of painterly poetics emerges in the writing of Charles Olson and is extended, via the Black Mountain legacy of exchange

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<sup>9</sup> Ezra Pound, 'Vorticism [1914]', *The Fortnightly Review*, no. 96, 1<sup>st</sup> September 1914, from [fortnightlyreview.co.uk/vorticism](http://fortnightlyreview.co.uk/vorticism), [accessed 16.10.14].

<sup>10</sup> Wallace Stevens, 'The Relations Between Poetry and Painting [1951]', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, ed. Frank Kermode and Joan Richardson (New York: The Library of Congress, 1997) pp. 740-751 (p. 741). From a lecture Stevens initially presented at the Museum of Modern Art, New York in 1951.

and connection between the arts, in the poetry of Robert Creeley and Cole Swensen. These three poets are a vital part of an extensive conversation that continues to operate between these two means of expression: their writing reflects upon the capability of poetry to gain an active voice through engaging with the visual.

## 2. Ideogrammic Composition

To comprehend the work of Olson, Creeley and Swensen in terms of painterly poetics, this thesis is especially concerned with the visual work of Cy Twombly, a painter relevant to all three poets. Process always begins with an action, and the compositional field thus shaped by the energy stream of the poet or painter.

Twombly's series of *Bacchus* paintings (2005-08)<sup>11</sup> are a form of writing that has monumental scale and voice. As projective, ideogrammic compositions, the *Bacchus* paintings connect with the poetics of Olson, Creeley and Swensen, and the ideas they inherited from Pound. Standing in a room at Tate Modern surrounded by these vast works, one is aware of a vigour exuding from the painting's surface, as if the artist's bodily force is engrained into the weave of each canvas.

Euphoric both in their mood and appearance, vermillion hoops swirl across a flesh-coloured ground in Twombly's floor-to-ceiling calligraphy. The emphasis here is on process, for as Tacita Dean notes, 'what Twombly is working on, and working out, is how to make a painting'.<sup>12</sup> These *Bacchus* paintings have the same potency about them as Olson's *Maximus* poems. Composed of the breath line, they retain the essence of Olson's open-field poetics: a formula that moves from the 'heart' to the 'breath' to the 'line'. Like Olson's verse, the *Bacchus* paintings are projective in the sense of moving outward from the artist's energy source; in Olson's words, 'energy transferred' in 'each moment of the going'.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Cy Twombly, *Untitled V, VII & VIII (Bacchus)*, 2005, shown in the final room of the 2008 retrospective at Tate Modern 'Cy Twombly: Cycles and Seasons'. In 2014 three paintings *Untitled (Bacchus)*, 2006-08, were donated to Tate by Twombly's estate and now feature as part of the Twombly Room in the display 'Energy and Process'.

<sup>12</sup> Tacita Dean, 'A Panegyric', *Cy Twombly: Cycles and Seasons*, ed. Nicholas Serota (London: Tate Publishing, 2008) pp. 32-41 (p. 35).

<sup>13</sup> Charles Olson, 'Projective Verse [1950]', *Collected Prose*, ed. Donald Allen and Benjamin Friedlander (London: University of California Press, 1997) pp. 239-249 (p. 242).

Facing the redness of Twombly's rolling script head-on, one is aware of the body sharing the processes of nature: this overwhelming impulse to set the line in motion even when the paint trails off; the desire to let the interweaving brushstrokes overlap or fall in on themselves. What becomes evident is the analogy between a projective poem and a projective painting each of which, as understood by Laszlo K. Gefin, unfolds according to itself when 'process is enacted as process'.<sup>14</sup> In his insightful book *Ideogram: Modern American Poetry* (1982), Gefin describes how for the projective poet, 'words, images, signs, and phrases are continually mixed, joined, and separated to bring about a multiplicity of active relations'.<sup>15</sup> Gefin observes that 'each potent element touching and igniting the rest'<sup>16</sup> is halted only when the content demands it.

Composed of layered, oscillating outlines, each *Bacchus* painting unravels in its own time. Synonymous with any given poem from *Maximus*, Twombly uses repetition, variation and interval to release and amplify the rhythm of the content, and like an Olson poem, the painting pulses with the volatility that resonates within all of us. As a group, a fervent presence of red fills the whole gallery space bringing to mind Pound's call for precision in making an image: 'Get your "red" down to rose, rust, cherry, if you want to know what you are talking about'.<sup>17</sup> As with a poem by Olson, Creeley or Swensen, the language of a *Bacchus* painting is projective, as if spoken out to the front, so that each arc of a gesture is allowed to percussively ring as it hits the

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<sup>14</sup> Laszlo K. Gefin, *Ideogram: Modern American Poetry* (Milton Keynes: The Open University, 1982) p. 107.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 107.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 107.

<sup>17</sup> Ezra Pound, *Selected Prose, 1909-1965*, ed. William Cookson (London: Faber and Faber, 1973) p. 92.

air. The distinctive rhythm of the painting makes every oval stroke essential to the cohesion of the whole.

The accumulated runs of paint that cascade downwards, pooling near the bottom edge, stress the verticality of the image, setting up a tension against the ascending waves of swirling loops. In his essay 'Syllabary for a Dancer', Olson traces the lines of force in the body's vertical position, for the dancer's body is 'both the object and the action, is the content'.<sup>18</sup> Thinking is in the action, in the doing, in the making and therefore the 'dancing thinker' is free to speculate, knowing that 'the body holds in itself its own metaphysic'.<sup>19</sup>

Supporting his poetics of Imagism, Pound had absorbed Ernest Fenollosa's study of the Chinese ideogram which identified the sense of movement in 'shorthand pictures of actions and processes', a form of non-phonetic notation that does not distinguish between verbs and nouns: 'Like nature, the Chinese words are alive and plastic, because *thing* and *action* are not formally separated'.<sup>20</sup> Olson makes direct reference to this in his essay 'Projective Verse', adopting Fenollosa's ideas about energy transfer and the power of the verb:

the sentence as first act of nature, as lightning, as passage of force from subject to object, quick, ... in every case, from me to you, the VERB, between two nouns.<sup>21</sup>

The strong action of the verb provides a condensed image: each '*thing*' makes

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<sup>18</sup> Charles Olson, 'A Syllabary for a Dancer [1952]', in *Maps 4*, ed. John Taggart (Storrs: University of Connecticut, 1971) pp. 9-15 (p. 9).

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 9-10.

<sup>20</sup> Ernest Fenollosa, 'The Chinese Written Character as the Medium for Poetry', ed. Ezra Pound [1920] in Jon Cook, *Poetry in Theory: An Anthology* (Oxford: Blackwell Publ., 2004) pp. 116-128 (p. 123).

<sup>21</sup> Olson, 'Projective Verse', *Collected Prose*, p. 244.

the linear 'action' spatial. For Olson, everything is related, and everything is moving: he equates language with the inter-connectedness of space, time and processes of nature. In the *Bacchus* paintings, Twombly's brushstrokes are the 'verbs'. Alluding to formative writing, these palimpsests are not entirely abstract or exactly representational. As images they epitomise Abstract Expressionist values, for according to Barnett Newman, the painterly act should communicate 'the emotion of an experienced moment of total reality'.<sup>22</sup> At Black Mountain College in the 1950s under Olson's leadership, this intention of developing a painterly language melded with Olson's desire for poetry to reclaim an American awareness of space, as he writes in 'Letter 27':

... the generation of those facts  
which are my words, it is coming

from all that I no longer am, yet am,  
the slow westward motion of

more than I am

There is no strict personal order

for my inheritance.

No Greek will be able

to discriminate my body.

An American

is a complex of occasions,

themselves a geometry

of spatial nature

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<sup>22</sup> Barnett Newman, 'Reply to a review by Clement Greenberg [1947]', *American Artists on Art: from 1940 to 1980*, ed. Ellen H. Johnson (New York: Harper & Row, 1982) pp. 16-19 (p. 19).

I have this sense,  
that I am one  
with my skin<sup>23</sup>

Here the emphasis of Olson's poetic task is to assert his concern with the 'spatial nature' of the body. His 'words' of the poem are 'coming / from all that I no longer am, yet am', acknowledging how the self lives and shifts from second to second, in a ceaseless state of mutability and perpetual flux. Maximus's body functions as 'a complex of occasions'<sup>24</sup> for which there exists 'no strict personal order' in the 'imposing' of what has come before, 'the generation of those facts'.<sup>25</sup>

This convergence informs Olson's admiration for ideograms, formalized in his study of Mayan glyphs, indicating ways of liberating poetry from syntactical constriction. In his book *The Culture of Spontaneity: Improvisation and the Arts in Postwar America* (1998), Daniel Belgrad argues that the Abstract Expressionist painter reaches to 'articulate experience without recourse to the ready-made ideas provided by language'.<sup>26</sup> He suggests how, by creating paratactic images that avoided metaphor, 'Olson was foremost in developing the implications of the ideogram for a poetry of spontaneous associations'.<sup>27</sup> Bringing together poetry and visual art, the image is the basic form of ideogrammic composition. Gefin describes how Pound caused Olson to shift towards a paratactic method of writing where:

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<sup>23</sup> Olson, 'Maximus to Gloucester, Letter 27 [withheld]', *The Maximus Poems*, pp. 184-185.

<sup>24</sup> Olson appropriates the line 'The human body is indubitably a complex of occasions which are part of spatial nature' by Alfred North Whitehead, in *Adventures of Ideas* [1933], p. 243-244.

<sup>25</sup> Olson, 'Maximus to Gloucester, Letter 27 [withheld]', *The Maximus Poems*, p. 184.

<sup>26</sup> Daniel Belgrad, *The Culture of Spontaneity: Improvisation and the Arts in Postwar America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998) p. 79.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 87.

asyndetic juxtaposition of linguistic (or pictorial, spatial, tonal) particulars which the mind of the reader (onlooker, listener) will organize into a coherent whole just as he or she does with particulars in the real world. Not only are connectives relics of an outmoded transitional practice, but they are redundant, in fact, because they are not present in nature.<sup>28</sup>

Studying at Black Mountain at the height of Abstract Expressionism, Twombly recalls that even for a painter at the college, ‘everything sort of evolved around Olson’.<sup>29</sup> Olson and Swensen focus intensely on Twombly both in poems and prose pieces: in 1952, ‘by this other sort of will’ and ‘in the act of paint’ Olson writes that Twombly makes ‘canvases boldly behave as two dimensions and yet makes forces present ... let this man tell you, there is nothing to fear’;<sup>30</sup> while in 2008, Swensen states that Twombly is involved in ‘an act of serial reaching, always outward ... where the line turns to language’.<sup>31</sup> Creeley’s contact with a number of Abstract Expressionist artists, at Black Mountain as well as further afield, became a vital part of his development, showing him ‘that a *process* – again to emphasize it – might be felt and acted upon as crucial in itself’.<sup>32</sup>

Twombly’s late paintings reach outwards particularly to Olson, reiterating his desire to be close to original sources of culture. Viewing them in the new ‘Twombly Room’ at Tate Modern in 2014, one is immersed in the same expanding and contracting, quickening and slowing of present-tense experience that is generated in ‘*Letter 27*’; that one’s condition is concurrent with Twombly’s and Olson’s combined sense ‘that

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<sup>28</sup> Gefin, p. xvi.

<sup>29</sup> Cy Twombly, ‘History Behind Thought: Interview with Nicholas Serota [2007]’, *Cycles and Seasons*, pp. 43-53 (p. 44).

<sup>30</sup> Olson, ‘Cy Twombly [1952]’, *Collected Prose*, pp. 175-178 (p. 178).

<sup>31</sup> Cole Swensen, ‘Cy Twombly, *Hero & Leandro* 1981-84 [2008]’, *Noise That Stays Noise: Essays*, pp. 140-143 (p. 142).

<sup>32</sup> Robert Creeley, ‘On the Road: Notes on Artists and Poets 1950-1965 [1974]’ in *Claims for Poetry*, ed. Donald Hall (Michigan: The University of Michigan Press, 1982) pp. 62-71 (p. 70).



I am one / with my skin'.<sup>33</sup> The equilibrium of the paintings is arrived at not through stillness but through bodily motion and process. What emanates from the force fields of the *Bacchus* paintings is endemic to my research project: the qualities of movement and space, and the overall music of the paintings that characterises the poems of Olson, Creeley and Swensen.

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<sup>33</sup> Olson, 'Maximus to Gloucester, Letter 27 [withheld]', *The Maximus Poems*, p. 185.

### 3. Context: Energy and Process

Although *ekphrasis*<sup>34</sup> provides an essential context for my research, particularly in relation to Cole Swensen, it is not the central proposition of this critical thesis.

Philosophers, writers and artists have long been interested in the relationship of poetry and painting, revealing both their generic similarity and their material difference.

Horace's Latin phrase 'Ut pictura poesis' equating with 'as for the image, so for the poem'<sup>35</sup> implies an equality between poetry and painting. However, over the

centuries, a type of theorizing has developed that pushes word and image apart:

painting is experienced as silent, still and set into space in contrast with the speaking,

moving and temporal qualities of poetry. The result has been a discourse of paragonal

difference that continues to characterize most conversations about the long-standing

practice of ekphrasis, as in the works of Murray Krieger, James A.W. Heffernan and

W. J. T. Mitchell. To various degrees, each is influenced by Gotthold Ephraim

Lessing's *Laocoon: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry* (1766) that argues

painting operates within the spatial realm, whereas poetry functions within a span of

time, therefore causing an open divide between word and image.<sup>36</sup>

In his book *Ekphrasis: The Illusion of the Natural Sign* (1992), Krieger attempts to

resolve the spatial-temporal duality between the two modes by seeing ekphrasis as

essentially static, where the poet attends to an artist's 'plastic object as a symbol of

the frozen, stilled world of plastic relationships which must be superimposed upon

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<sup>34</sup> As a rhetorical device, *ekphrasis* dates back to ancient Greece. The constituents of the word *ek* and *phrasis* translate as 'out' and 'speak': therefore ekphrasis literally means to speak out.

<sup>35</sup> Horace, *Ars Poetica* [~20 B.C.] I. 361, translated by Ben Jonson in *Works* [1640]. Horace's 'Ut pictura poesis' becomes 'As painting, so is poesy'. From <http://www.d.umn.edu/~jjacobs1/utpictura/horace.htm>, [accessed 04.09.14].

<sup>36</sup> Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Laocoon: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry* [1766], translated by Edward Allen McCormick (New York: Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1984) pp. 91-97.

literature's turning world to "still" it'.<sup>37</sup> Similarly in *Museum of Words: The Poetics of Ekphrasis from Homer to Ashbery* (1993), Heffernan's approach depends upon conflict between the 'narrating word' and the 'fixed image' caught in 'the struggle for power – the *paragone*'.<sup>38</sup> In *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (1994) Mitchell outlines three states he labels 'indifference', 'hope' and 'fear', describing how the poet has to negotiate 'the interplay of these three "moments" of ekphrastic fascination ... a working through of ekphrastic ambivalence'.<sup>39</sup>

Issues of movement and stillness in relation to the visualized object are the preoccupations of the most frequently discussed ekphrastic poems. Without resorting to mere representation, poets have continually focused on paintings, sculptures, ceramics or other art objects, due to their aesthetic, symbolic or ornamental values. For example, Krieger uses John Keats's 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' and Wallace Stevens's 'Anecdote of the Jar' where the focus is upon utilitarian objects, whereas Heffernan concentrates on ekphrastic poems that feature paintings such as W. H. Auden's 'Musee des Beaux Arts' and John Ashbery's 'Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror'. Mitchell uses similar examples of canonical poems to explore the complexities that exist in the relationship between language and visual art, acknowledging that 'all media are mixed media, and all representations are heterogeneous; there are no purely visual or verbal arts'.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Murray Krieger, *Ekphrasis: The Illusion of the Natural Sign* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992) p. 266.

<sup>38</sup> James A.W. Heffernan, *Museum of Words: The Poetics of Ekphrasis from Homer to Ashbery* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993) p. 136.

<sup>39</sup> W.J.T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994) pp. 152-168 (p. 156).

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

In his book *How Poets See the World* (2005), Willard Spiegelman identifies an anxiety about the potential of non-representational imagery for the contemporary poet: how seeing an abstract artwork ‘both provokes and inhibits response: we wish to say something, but what shall we say?’<sup>41</sup> In his assured analysis of the ‘varieties of ekphrastic experience’ Spiegelman praises, for example, Charles Wright’s poem ‘Summer Storm’ inspired by Mondrian’s painting *Composition – Gray Red*, and Jorie Graham’s poem ‘For Mark Rothko’ based upon her memory of one of his large colour-fields, yet he maintains that ‘most poets shy away’ from abstract painting: this reluctance he puts down to a fear of ‘nakedness of sheer form’<sup>42</sup> prescient within non-representational art. Overcoming this requires a particular kind of descriptive, emotional or metaphorical approach where ‘to write about it requires an equal commitment to action, process, the “how”, and to product, material, the thing-itself’.<sup>43</sup>

Despite the above, three recent books reach beyond the division of antagonism or mere description. Rather than presenting a set of texts that share indicators of approach, theme and narrative content, these critics see it as a practice that connects with its origins: a liberating poetic means for the vividness and immediacy of language. The term ekphrasis originally encompassed descriptions of experiences, events, people, places and objects. Whether naturally observed or conceived in the mind, its purpose was to recreate these visual impressions in words. In her book *Ekphrasis, Imagination and Persuasion in Ancient Rhetorical Theory and Practice* (2009), Ruth Webb argues that for the audience of ancient Greek and Latin texts, it was of little consequence if the subject was actual or imagined, for ‘the key to the

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<sup>41</sup> Willard Spiegelman, *How Poets See the World: The Art of Description in Contemporary Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005) p. 128.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 132.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 135.

nature and function of ekphrasis is its defining quality of *enargeia*, the vividness that makes absent things seem present by its appeal to the imagination’.<sup>44</sup>

Leonard Barkan in *Mute Poetry, Speaking Pictures* (2013) tends to affirm Webb’s view, that the essence of ekphrasis is *enargeia*, a rhetorical requirement described by Aristotle as providing for the receiver some pictorial effect, some vivid imagery recreated in words, a demand that ‘the poet “should put things before his eyes ... as if he were actually present”’.<sup>45</sup> According to Barkan, whose study is limited to works from antiquity to the Renaissance, the problem for many writers is a further ancient Greek term *skiagraphia*, an illusionistic method often using light and shadow that enables painters to enhance, but ultimately confuse, issues of realism. Writers soon learned from the painters that this technique could be employed as a means of deception, turning *mimesis* (the imitation of reality) into a negative means, which was an implicit part of Plato’s argument against poetry, a pursuit he saw as a kind of madness. Countering Plato again, Barkan paraphrases Aristotle to maximum effect, advocating that ‘mimesis produces the greatest pleasure of all when it inspires the longest arc between the thing represented and the representation’.<sup>46</sup>

Focusing on contemporary British poetry in his book *The Ekphrastic Encounter in Contemporary British Poetry and Elsewhere* (2012), David Kennedy proposes that such an engagement is still possible. He cites many examples where ekphrasis is operating again as a poetic strategy rather than as a minor literary genre of poetry that seeks simply to describe a particular painting. Discussing possibilities for ekphrasis

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<sup>44</sup> Ruth Webb, *Ekphrasis, Imagination and Persuasion in Ancient Rhetorical Theory and Practice* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009) p. 193.

<sup>45</sup> Leonard Barkan, *Mute Poetry, Speaking Pictures* (Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2013) p. 137.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 92.

beyond mere representation, Kennedy advances the classical idea of ‘an account of a thing and the experience of it’ and both its ‘tangible and intangible qualities’.<sup>47</sup> As a rhetorical device, these are powerful images ‘designed to play on an audience’s emotions and so make listeners more receptive to an analytical or narrative account’.<sup>48</sup> Like Webb and Barkan, Kennedy values the ekphrastic application of *enargeia* ‘which is variously defined as vigour, activity and purposeful movement’.<sup>49</sup>

Collectively, the three authors cited value ekphrasis as energy and process. Operating in this strategic manner, according to Webb, it can regain its original significance to offer possibilities for language to work ‘an immediate impact on the mind of the listener, sparking mental images of the subjects it placed before the eyes’.<sup>50</sup> Like the most stimulating and strongest examples of art criticism, ekphrastic poetry has the potential not only to go beyond commentary to provide interpretation but also to offer a sense of continuation, expansion and enhancement of the real or imaginary art object that is being focused upon.

Of the scholarly work discussed above, I have found Kennedy’s book to be the most useful. While focusing principally on the British context, Kennedy declares his admiration for poetry as modes of seeing and thinking: poetry concerned with the process of perception, of putting ambiguous propositions into language. He too includes Ashbery’s poem, as well as Frank O’Hara’s ‘Why I am Not a Painter’ using

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<sup>47</sup> David Kennedy, *The Ekphrastic Encounter in Contemporary British Poetry and Elsewhere* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012) p. 25.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25.

<sup>50</sup> Webb, p. 193.

these two influential American examples to illustrate the potential of ekphrasis that occurs once the writer decides to abandon simple means of description and adopt ‘the idea that a deeper meaning is “concealed” in an image’,<sup>51</sup> in other words, to search for the subject underneath the subject.

Kennedy is fascinated by Ashbery’s use of ekphrasis to create motion through reflection and distortion in his response to Parmigianino’s curved mirror self-portrait; how the painting within the poem ‘produces reminder after reminder of time’s and life’s “breathless speeds”’.<sup>52</sup> In an impressive and engaging reassessment of the poem, Kennedy quotes Richard Stamelman who sees Ashbery’s object of attention as ‘perpetually in movement, swerving in and out of the poet’s consciousness’.<sup>53</sup>

Kennedy’s rationale is perfectly embodied not only in Ashbery’s poem but to some extent, in all of those included in his book for discussion: a shared understanding between certain poets and visual artists that everything is abstract, an agreement that all acts of representation are flawed, that the pictorial is always an illusion. To emphasize the point most appropriately he quotes Jean-Francois Lyotard about how in any abstract artform ‘the unrepresentable exists’ and operates ‘to make visible that there is something which can be conceived and which can neither be seen or made visible’.<sup>54</sup>

Having established a crucial American influence, Kennedy spends the bulk of his book showing how certain British poets have explored both semi-figurative and abstract images as a way of looking into their own poetic practice. Their emphasis on

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<sup>51</sup> Kennedy, p. 1.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 44.

<sup>53</sup> Richard Stamelman in Kennedy, p. 8.

<sup>54</sup> Jean-Francois Lyotard in Kennedy, p. 155.

the visual for inspiration attempts to harness a response within sites where meaning is continually in play and unfixed, for as Kennedy explains, ‘the image is only ever temporarily at rest’ within their act of writing, with the potential to ‘evoke substance and insubstantiality simultaneously’.<sup>55</sup> Despite including Krzysztof Ziarek’s notion of a work of art as the interplay of forces where there is always ‘a dynamic occurrence’,<sup>56</sup> there is no mention of the influence of Olson or the significant convergence of ‘Projective Verse’ with Abstract Expressionism at Black Mountain College. There is only a paragraph on Creeley who like Olson, understood the move in abstract painting towards the non-pictorial and the implication of this for poetry. I address these absences in Kennedy’s book by concentrating on three American writers – Olson, Creeley and Swensen – whose poetic impetus comes from the visual tradition.

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<sup>55</sup> Kennedy, p. 62.

<sup>56</sup> Krzysztof Ziarek in Kennedy, p. 31.



#### **4. Summary: New Possibilities**

Rather than enter a contest between word and image – the ‘paragonal’ struggle that predominates the theory and tradition of ekphrasis as previously discussed – Charles Olson, Robert Creeley and Cole Swensen aim to create new possibilities of meaning and understanding of the creative process, particularly in their acts of looking and making, discovering what is offered by the parallelism of words and images, language and visuality, poems and paintings to create a dialogue between the two.

Throughout this thesis, while considering three modern American poets from successive generations, I examine three related types of engagement with visual art. Creeley and Swensen have both been influenced by Olson’s theories of language and open field poetics as expressed in his practice of projective verse. This investigation concerns itself with the compositional processes they have pursued in order to engage with visual art and visual artists. I interpret how each poet attends to the details of their poetic practice, how they overcome constraints and seek out openings for change.

The first chapter on Olson is the longest of the three chapters. Olson’s open field poetics allows one perception to directly follow another, together with the idea, co-opted from Creeley, that form is never more than an extension of content. In this chapter, examples of Olson’s writing are compared with the approach of several Abstract Expressionist painters who contributed to the culture of experimentation and spontaneity that emerged under Olson’s leadership at Black Mountain College in the early 1950s.

My discussion of Creeley's and Swensen's writing in chapters two and three delineates the ways in which they extend Olson's poetics. Chapter two on Creeley considers the role of visual art in his poems that emerge from his proximity to both art and artists: from his friendships with painters; from his critical writing on visual art; and from one of his many collaborative book projects where he worked with a specific artist. I therefore conclude with a third chapter on Swensen that analyses how she builds upon established critical methods to achieve what she calls 'a side-by-side, a walking-along-with' relationship between the poem and the artwork.

Olson, Creeley and Swensen are concerned with visual art not simply as a means to read fixed images: they are interested in compositional and painterly strategies that are equivalent to an artist's studio practice. They are probing and making coherent the actions, ideas and thought processes that inform that practice. This allows them to further investigate their own methodology: the relationship between the way they 'make' the poems and the poems themselves; the significance of the energy inherent both in their own bodies and the materials they use when doing this. Therefore Olson, Creeley and Swensen are engaging with a content of movement, motion and flux, rather than stasis.

As my research makes evident, there is a need to define a new relationship between poetry and painting. Poetic practice can simultaneously explore a visual image and a creative process. Olson, Creeley and Swensen are each interested in visual art as a model for the writing process – as a means of seeing, thinking and perceiving – and yet all three also avoid the dominant ekphrastic method of making a poetic representation of a visual representation.

Olson, Creeley and Swensen present a means to explore underlying relationships and issues across different media, allowing them to discuss poetry and poetics, to find a way to theorize their own practice and craft. This thesis examines how specific poems work and identifies the motivation derived from visual art practice that drives them. I discuss how Olson, Creeley and Swensen, each with their own distinctive voice, offer poetry of immediacy, insight and reflection. In my close reading of several poems I show how each writer uses their engagement with visual art or, in the case of Olson and Creeley, with visual artists themselves, to enter a comparative process where, through the intensity of their seeing, sensing and thought, they have accepted in Spiegelman's terms 'invitations to speculate' upon the 'sensuous immediacy of images'.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Spiegelman, p. 129.