

THE BREATH-GROUP AS A CONSTRUCTIVE ELEMENT IN CHARLES OLSON'S "PROJECTIVE VERSE"

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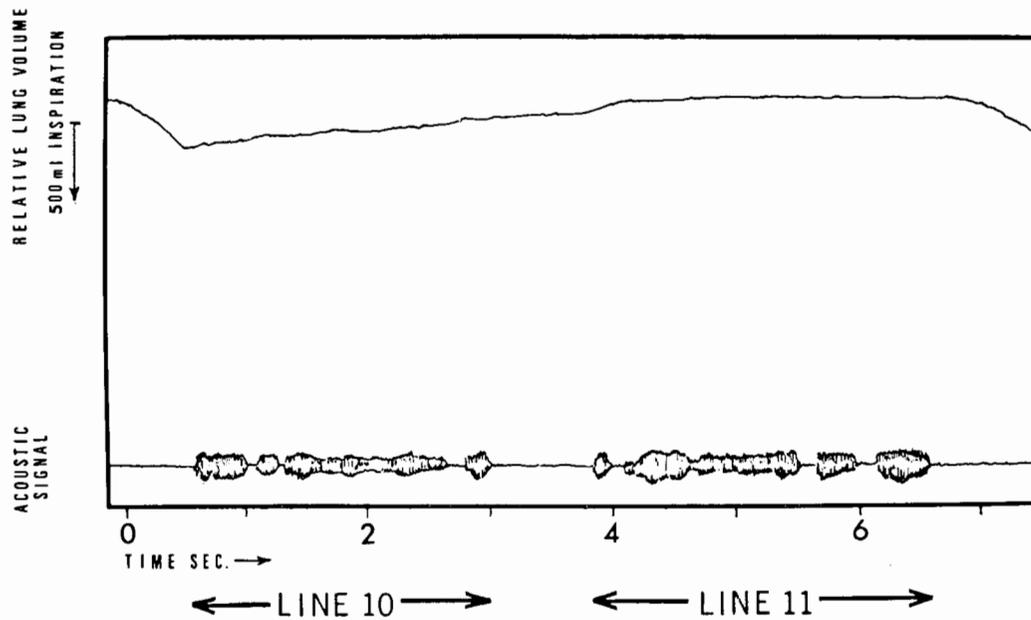
In 1950 Charles Olson proclaimed certain principles that govern what he called "projective" verse. Olson regarded the poetic line as a dynamic element that is shaped, in part, by the pattern of the poet's breath, that is, "the line comes from the breath, from the breathing of the man who writes... only he, the man who writes, can declare at every moment, the line, its metric and its ending — where its breathing shall come to termination" (Olson 1959).

Olson's theory has been interpreted (Bowering 1964) to mean that each line in an Olson poem, no matter how short it may be, is delimited by a unitary breath, i.e., one breath per line. These critics also imply that Olson presumably would have produced longer lines if he had not suffered from mild emphysema. In his essay, Olson himself noted that the logic and syntax of language constrain the role of the poet's breathing in the formation of the line structure of the poem, and that a balance must ultimately exist in any poem between "the LAW OF THE LINE, which projective verse creates... and the conventions which logic has forced on syntax" (Olson 1959:8). Olson's premises were tested, using the techniques of phonetic analysis.

Approximately forty-five minutes of readings of the poetry of Charles Olson were obtained from a reader, George Butterick, who was Charles Olson's student. A temperature-stabilized volume plethysmograph was used to record the reader's respiratory activity. The reader's voice was simultaneously recorded with the air volume signals by using a multichannel FM tape recorder. The recordings were monitored by means of a Sanborn chart recorder. The reader also read a representative example of "traditional" verse, Keats's ode "On Autumn".

In Figure 1 the volume tracings of two lines from Keats are displayed together with the envelope of the speech signal. Note that lines 10 and 11 both were produced on the same expiration. In Figure 2 we have presented a number of lines from this poem. The broken lines beneath the words have been inserted to indicate words that were produced on the same complete expiration, that is, on the same breath-group (Lieberman 1967). The reader in this poem uses the breath-group as a phonetic feature that groups words together into sentences.

In Figure 3, two readings of Olson's poem "the ring of" are displayed. One of



To Autumn I,

Fig. 1. Relative lung volume and acoustic signal for lines 10 and 11 (c.f. Fig. 2) of Keats's "To Autumn". The upper trace represents the respiratory activity of the reader. Inspiration occurs when this trace moves downwards while expiration is characterized by an upwards deflection. Time is represented on the horizontal for both traces. Note that lines 10 and 11 both were produced for the same expiration.

these readings was derived from a tape recording of a reading made by Olson. Note that neither reader produces each line on a separate breath. Olson, for example, reads lines 1 to 5 on the same breath-group. Though breath-groups are sometimes used in these readings to unite logically related words to form sentences, they are also used to delimit lines even when the lines end at syntactically inappropriate points. Line 15, for example, constitutes a complete breath-group. Note that both readers use breath-groups to delimit sentences across line boundaries when the semantic interpretation would otherwise be extremely difficult, as, for example, in lines 17, 18, and 19. Where the semantic interpretation is not too difficult, the readers are 'free' to use the breath-group as a line-defining element.

When he was speaking in prose on this tape recording, Olson sometimes used expirations that last more than six seconds. His poetical theory thus would not appear to be a consequence of a pathological shortness of breath, as Bowering and other critics have suggested.

In Figure 4, the breathing pattern of speaker GB is plotted for lines 2-6 of stanza two of Olson's poem, "Maximus at the Harbor". This breathing pattern contrasts with the relatively regular breathing pattern that characterizes the reading of the Keats poem, as is apparent when this pattern of respiratory activity is compared with

TO AUTUMN

I

- 1 Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness,
Close bosom-friend of the maturing sun;
- 3 Conspiring with him how to load and bless
With fruit the vines that round the thatch-eves run;
- 5 To bend with apples the moss'd cottage-trees,
And fill all fruit with ripeness to the core;
- 7 To swell the gourd, and plump the hazel shells
With a sweet kernel; to set budding more,
- 9 And still more, later flowers for the bees,
Until they think warm days will never cease,
- 11 For Summer has o'er-brimm'd their clammy cells.

II

- 1 Who hath not seen thee oft amid thy store?
Sometimes whoever seeks abroad may find
- 3 Thee sitting careless on a granary floor,
Thy hair soft-lifted by the winnowing wind;
- 5 Or on a half-reap'd furrow sound asleep,
Drows'd with the fume of poppies, while thy hook
- 7 Spare the next swath and all its twined flowers;
And sometimes like a gleaner thou dost keep
- 9 Steady they laden head across a brook
Or by a cyder-press, with patient look,
- 11 Thou watchest the last oozings hours by hours.

III

- 1 Where are the songs of Spring? Ay, where are they?
Think not of them, thou hast thy music too,—

Fig. 2. Keats's "To Autumn", reader G. B. The broken lines beneath the words indicate words that were produced on the same complete expiration. Lines 1 and 2, for example, were produced on the same expiration as were lines 3 and 4.

that in Figure 1. In Figure 5 we see lines 2-6 in the context of the entire poem. Note that logical, that is, syntactic function of the breath-group is still manifested in this reading even though individual lines are often set apart by individual breath-groups. The disturbance of the listener's expectations that occurs when a breath-group terminates a line in violation of syntactic constraints, gives emphasis to the line. The listener has to attend more closely to the line to reach a semantic interpretation.

THE RING OF		THE RING OF	
Reader C.O.		Reader G.B.	
1	<u>it was the west wind caught her up, as</u> <u>she rose</u>	1	<u>it was the west wind caught her up, as</u> <u>she rose</u>
3	<u>from the genital</u> <u>wave, and bore her from the delicate</u>	3	<u>from the genital</u> <u>wave, and bore her from the delicate</u>
5	<u>foam, home</u> <u>to her isle</u>	5	<u>foam, home</u> <u>to her isle</u>
7	<u>and those lovers</u> <u>of the difficult, the hours</u>	7	<u>and those lovers</u> <u>of the difficult, the hours</u>
9	<u>of the golden day welcomed her, clad her, were</u> <u>as though they had made her, were wild</u>	9	<u>of the golden day welcomed her, clad her, were</u> <u>as though they had made her, were wild</u>
11	<u>to bring this new thing born</u> <u>of the ring of the sea pink</u>	11	<u>to bring this new thing born</u> <u>of the ring of the sea pink</u>
13	<u>& naked, this girl, brought her</u> <u>to the face of the gods, violets</u>	13	<u>& naked, this girl, brought her</u> <u>to the face of the gods, violets</u>
15	<u>in her hair</u> <u>Beauty, and she</u>	15	<u>in her hair</u> <u>Beauty, and she</u>
17	<u>said no to zeus & them all, all were not or</u> <u>was it she chose the ugliest</u>	17	<u>said no to zeus & them all, all were not or</u> <u>was it she chose the ugliest</u>
19	<u>to bed with, or was it straight</u> <u>and to expiate the nature of beauty, was it?</u>	19	<u>to bed with, or was it straight</u> <u>and to expiate the nature of beauty, was it?</u>
21	<u>knowing hours, anyway,</u> <u>she did not stay long, or the lame</u>	21	<u>knowing hours, anyway,</u> <u>she did not stay long, or the lame</u>
23	<u>was only one part, & the handsome</u> <u>mars had her And the child</u>	23	<u>was only one part, & the handsome</u> <u>mars had her And the child</u>
25	<u>had that name, the arrow of</u> <u>as the flight of, the move of</u>	25	<u>had that name, the arrow of</u> <u>as the flight of, the move of</u>
27	<u>his mother who adorneth</u> <u>with myrtle the dolphin and words</u>	27	<u>his mother who adorneth</u> <u>with myrtle the dolphin and words</u>
29	<u>they rise, they do who</u> <u>are born of like</u>	29	<u>they rise, they do who</u> <u>are born of like</u>
31	<u>elements</u>	31	<u>elements</u>

Fig. 3. Two readings of Olson's "The Ring Of". One reading was derived from a tape recording of Charles Olson at Berkeley in summer 1965. Note that though breath-groups are sometimes used in these readings to unite logically related words to form sentences, they are also used to delimit lines even when the lines end at syntactically inappropriate points. Lines 6 and 15, for example, constitute complete expirations in the reading of speaker C. O.

An aspect of Olson's Projective verse that has perhaps been obscured by the novelty attending its use of breathing as a line-defining element, is its use of the breath-group to achieve a rhythmical function. In normal prose, breath-groups can delimit smaller phrases of the derived constituent structure of an utterance. Olson makes use of this

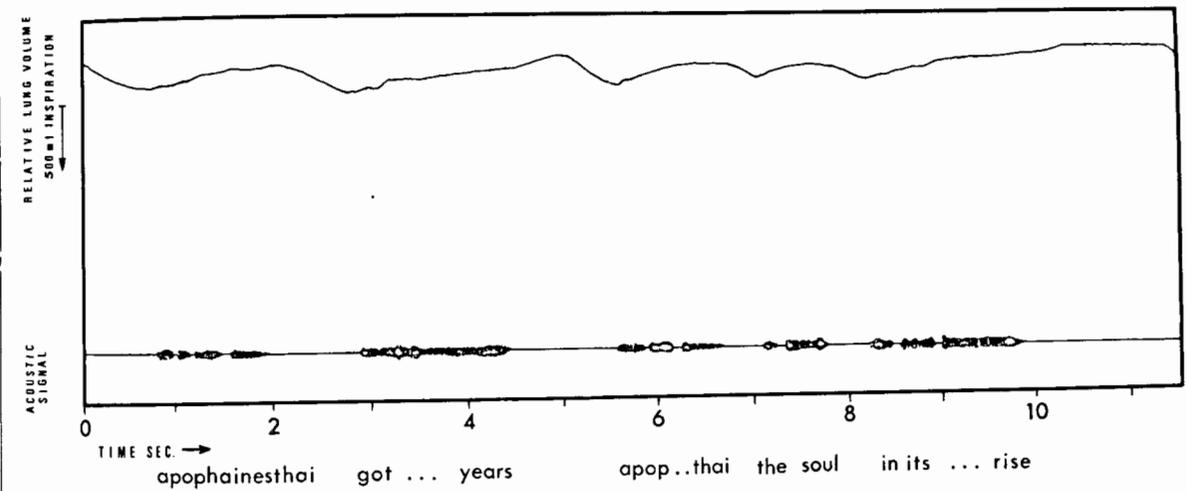


Fig. 4. Relative lung volume and acoustic signal for lines 2-6 of stanza two of Olson's "Maximum at the Harbor". Note the contrast in breathing pattern between this reading and that of 1 for Keats.

option to achieve a dynamic rhythmical texture by using breath-groups of different lengths. In Figure 6 we have reproduced part of the poem "An Ode on Nativity". Note the rhythmical alternating sequences of short and long breath-groups that occur. Lines 8 to 15, for example, consist of a sequence of three long breath-groups followed by a short one, then by a terminal sequence of a long, short, and a final long breath-group. The rhythm established by the alternation of breath-groups of different lengths is complex, and changes in the course of the poem. Lines 16 to 20 can be characterized, in part, by a more regular breath-group tempo which changes the 'voice of the poet'.

In conclusion, Olson's claims are borne out by our examination. Whereas a breath-group always plays a syntactic role in traditional verse, it may play a structural prosodic role in Olson's Projective verse. Olson uses breath-groups to delimit and emphasize lines in violation of grammatical constraints. He also uses breath-groups as a device to establish rhythm; in no sense can Olson's theory be characterized as a simplistic sequence of breath lines that each delimit a single line. Nor does the use of breath control appear to be a consequence of a pathologic shortness of breath on Olson's part. Olson's theory of Projective verse in fact introduces breath control as a structural prosodic element.

Maximus, at the Harbor

1	Okeanos rages, tears rocks back in his path, Encircling Okeanos tears upon the earth to get love loose, that women fall into the clefts of women, that men tear at their legs and rape until love sifts through all things and nothing is except love as stud upon the earth	1	it tore at Watch House Point
3	love to sit in the ring of Okeanos love to lie in the spit of a woman a man to sit in her legs (her hemispheres loomed above me, I went to work like the horns of a snail Paradise is a person. Come into this world. The soul is a magnificent Angel. And the thought of its thought is the rage of Ocean	3	II apophainesthai got hidden all the years apophainesthai: <i>the soul</i> , in its progressive rise
5	roared the great bone on to Norman's Woe; apophainesthai, as it blew up a pool on Round Rock shoal; apophainesthai it cracked as it broke on Pavilion Beach apophainesthai	5	in its progressive rise
7		7	apophainesthai passes in & out of more difficult things and by so passing apophainesthai
9		9	the act which actuates the soul itself — she loomed before me and he stood in this room — it sends out on the path ahead the Angel it will meet
11		11	apophainesthai its accent is its own mirage
13		13	III The great Ocean is angry. It wants the Perfect Child
15		15	
17		17	

Fig. 5. Reading of "Maximus at the Harbor". Note that the syntactic function of the breath-group is still maintained in this reading even though individual lines are often set apart by individual breath-groups.

from An Ode on Nativity

II	
1	The cries rise, & one of us has not even eyes to see the night's sky
3	burning, or the hollows made coves of mist & frost, the barns
5	covered over, and nothing in the night but two of us following the blind highway to catch all glimpses
7	of the settling, rocking moon

December, in this year

9	is a new thing, where I whisper bye-low, and the pond
11	is full to its shores again, so full I read the moon where grass would not reveal it
13	a month ago, and the ducks make noises like my daughter does, stir
15	in the crèche of things

17	(His mother, 80, and we ate oysters after the burial: we had knelt with his sister, now Mary Josephine, in the prayery of the convent of the church where my mother & father had been married And she told us tales of my family I had not heard, how my grandfather rolled wild in the green grass on the banks of that same now underground river to cool himself from the steel mill's fires stripped down to his red underwear
21	
23	
25	
27	she was that gay, to have seen her daughter and that the two of us had had that car

Fig. 6. A section of Olson's, "An Ode on Nativity". Note the presence of sequences of short and long breath-groups which generate a dynamic rhythmical texture.

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DISCUSSION

BREND (Ann Arbor, Mich.)

Just a comment that your study is reminiscent of Kenneth Pike's earlier mark on poetry — especially of his comments in his *Language...Behavior* on the reading of the same poem by three people, and the interrelationship of breath (and other phonological features) with semantics. He also has a later article in *College English* ("Language where Science and Poetry meet" [1965]) in which he further discusses the same topic, and to a lesser extent, there is some comment in his "Beyond the Sentence" (*College Composition and Communication* [1964]).

LIEBERMAN, M.

This study focuses on respiration, whereas Pike is also concerned with stress. Because our specific purpose was to test (experimentally) Olson's theory of Projective Verse we had to concentrate on the part played by the breath in readings of his poetry. Since Olson, as a poet, wanted to remove concern for stress, for poetic 'feet', and to restore 'breathing' as a major element of prosody, our focus is somewhat different, although Pike's studies are, of course, interesting and relevant.

ELERT (Umea)

Have you tried to get skilled poetry readers not acquainted with Charles Olson's verse structure to read his poems? It would be interesting to know if they will conform to the principle of the breath-group as a structural element in poetry.

LIEBERMAN, M.

Your suggestion is most valid; I hope to continue this work, and it would be interesting to see whether readers unacquainted with Olson's theory (or readers not of his school, since many skilled poetry readers, at least in the U.S., will probably be aware of Olson's work) employ breathing in conformance with his theory.