

Where I suppose Olson can be said to have gone further than Pound—or rather, turned the argument about poetics in a new direction altogether—was in his attempt to provide poets with a *method*, a kit of practical rules for the composition of ‘projective verse’. Where Pound and Aldington offered a few general guidelines for poets, Olson offered, or seemed to offer, a set of *compositional* rules, both complete and specific; as he presented them, these appeared to be grounded on scientific or quasi-scientific notions. I say quasi-scientific, because the connexions between the arguments and the poetic subject depend so much on one’s willingness to accept that they exist. They are not all so simple as, for instance, his analogy between physics and poetry, by which the poem is called ‘a high energy-construct . . . an energy-discharge’. Of course, it is easy to think of a poem in terms like these, if one chooses to do so. It is not so easy, for me, at all events, to conceive this ‘energy-discharge’, what Olson calls ‘the poem itself’ as an autonomous process. We all understand, in our experience of writing, how from time to time the work seems to ‘take over’, how it seems ‘of itself’ to determine what the author must do; but it seems to me a false emphasis, simplistic and misleading, when autonomy is transferred like this from the poet to ‘the poem itself’.

What I am calling Olson’s rules, along with the style of discourse characteristic of the author, have continued to fascinate younger poets—the more talented and more experienced may have gained something, I don’t know; many have gained little but the feeling of being in the trend—where they would have been, whatever the trend was. I shall try to summarise these rules, as well as I can make them out. I shall mix in a good deal of comment of my own, for what interest it may have.

I’ve mentioned what Olson calls the Field. This is where the poet is said to find himself when he abandons ‘closed form’. In this Field he finds all the objects or images; all the perceptions which he will assemble into an ‘open form’ poem. He also finds *himself*, as an object among all these objects: ‘objectism’ is in fact another word for the theory of ‘open form’ or ‘projective’ verse. It is not clear (I think it is not meant to be clear) to what extent the objects in the Field spontaneously assemble themselves, so that the poem, so to speak, *makes itself*, while the poet submits himself and follows the *track* (Olson’s word) and the track can only be (Olson’s words again) ‘the one the poem under hand declares, *for itself*’ (my italics). The role of the poet as *agent* is referred to very guardedly. Olson’s grammar at this point is peculiar, and his terms have a kind of oracular ambiguity. He tells us that the poet ‘has to *behave*, and be, instant by instant, aware of some several forces just now beginning to be examined’. But the emphasis is fairly clear; it is on the poet