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Tension and time in Charles Olson's poetry



Kasowitz, Daniel M.

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Title	Tension and time in Charles Olson's poetry
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Description	<p>The primary act of nature is the transfer of energy. One thing passes its energy on to other things. This is how life survives. Each thing is receiving energy from other things and transferring its own energy to still other things. Nature is like an unending transitive sentence. If nature is transitive then poetry also must be transitive. For the poet receives energy from certain objects and transfers that energy via the poem over to the reader. The poet must be a conductor of the energy. He must be like a nerve connecting the object to the reader, making sure that all the impulses he receives from the object will be picked up and transmitted to the reader. He wants to give the reader excitement equal to the excitement the object stimulated in him. He does not want to lose any of the original power and spirit of the object in transferring it to the reader. To keep the object alive the poet must enact the object. He must allow the object to transfer its energy, its identity, over to the reader. The poet helps this process by trying to coincide with the object and experience the object from the inside-out. He tries to apprehend the very growth-urge and motivating principle of the object, what causes it to act the way it does. He intuits the shape of the object, what it looks like. He even tries to grasp the object's "intentions" (its tendencies) and desires. Once he has identified with the object then his imagination goes to work. He lets the object act out its desires. He lets it fantasize. He enters a dream with the object where the object is allowed to become whatever it "wants" to become. It grows out of itself. It transforms into various images that seem to be the direct descendants of itself. The imagination allows the object to continually dissolve and re-create itself and thus play out its inherent fate. Through imagination the object performs itself and acts itself out for the reader. And the poet must write at the speed of imagination if he is to conduct all the split-second images that issue from the object. To identify with the object the</p>
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poet must first get into tension with the object. Every object, whether it be concrete or emotional, has tension. The tension of an object is its force of form. The way its parts are pulled into one another and cohere. Tension, in other words, is tropism. It is the way the object behaves and grows. The poet must identify with the object's tension. He must find the same tension in himself. He must feel the pull and strain of the object in himself. His whole body must be tense with the object. His heart must imitate the rhythm of the object and his throat imitate the squeeze of the object in order to squeeze it into words. If the poet writes a poem about a tree, he does not contemplate what words go with "treeness"; rather he begins imitating the tension of the tree. And imitating the tension of the tree creates a vortex into which the words are naturally pulled. The words that erupt will send forth not especially the look of the tree but the emotional pull of the tree, its tension. The words will be tense with the nerve of the tree itself. This is the act of metaphor, the words leaping immediately from the object to the reader. The poet, then, does not try to embalm the object, but to "enact" it. He does not try to paralyze the object, to photograph it (as a still picture) but to let the object evolve as if it were a movie picture. He wants to dramatize the object, to make it act out its fate. The poet does not want to analyze the object into its separate parts, but feel the cohesion of those parts, their tropism, and follow the tendencies of that tropism into speech and imagery. The poet does not seek to abstract any transcendental "essences" from the object, but rather release the object itself into action, thus liberating any "essences" it may partake.

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Tension and time in Charles Olson's poetry, the inflection point enlightens the

