

SOME MAJOR CONCERNS IN THE WORK OF CHARLES OLSON

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Some Major Concerns in the Work of Charles Olson

At the time of my writing this paper there has not been published a full-length study of Charles Olson's poetic theory and practice, particularly in regard to The Maximus Poems. We have, however, Ann Charters' book, Olson/Melville: A Study in Affinity, which sheds some light on the man and his work as a Melville scholar. The only other criticism we have exists in the form of brief reviews which accompanied the appearance of his books, and a few essays. Among these one must mention the reviews written by Robert Creeley (a poet and former faculty member at Black Mountain College during Olson's term as rector of that school) and Edward Dorn's essay, "What I See In The Maximus Poems." Although Creeley's and Dorn's writings are not intended as explanations, they are important and helpful to the student because they indicate Olson's major concerns.¹

In the absence, then, of anything approaching a full-length study of Olson's poetry (and in light of the relatively limited exposure of that work), I consider my task to be one of introducing and explaining what I see as his central concerns. My intent is not to conduct an analysis of The Maximus Poems, but rather to indicate the rationale which

underlies them as that is revealed in Olson's essays and letters.

Among the topics I will consider here is Olson's declaration of American independence from the European, or western, cultural tradition. This is done more by implication than by explicit statement in that much of my discussion is concerned with Olson's criticisms of that tradition. He maintained that its assumptions about man's relationship to the natural world resulted in a loss of perspective of man's relation to it, thereby causing, in turn, a condition of psychological estrangement from it. He tried to expose the modes of thought and action which brought about this condition, his concern being to restore to man that lost perspective of his place in the universe, and a sense of responsibility for his acts in it.

Such a discussion of Olson's criticisms of western ways of thought is, I think, central to an understanding of his rather unusual theory of "projective verse" and his equally unusual poetry, The Maximus Poems, for both of these are based on assumptions about man's place in the universe that are contrary to those of the western tradition. There is a concept operative in The Maximus Poems, for example, which represents a mode of thought and action which aims at defeating estrangement by focusing attention on the particulars of one's life and experience. This concept, that is, emphasizes

the total context of one's life, including the literal, geographic place where one lives. Although this aspect of Olson's work will be made clearer in the course of the following discussion, I would indicate here that this emphasis on place is a major part of Olson's whole push to bring man back to the particulars of his life, "the absolute condition of present things."² Only by such a program can estrangement be defeated.

Two of Olson's prime concerns are indicated in his description of himself as both a poet and an historian and -- by way of introduction to his work -- I would like to consider briefly the two parts of that description recognizing, of course, that they are not mutually exclusive disciplines in Olson's work. That is to say, there is a single conviction underlying both activities, which is that we, as Americans, must cease to think of ourselves as descendents of European culture. As Ann Charters points out, "Like Emerson and Thoreau, Olson is fiercely involved in the uniqueness of the American experience."³ I might add, however, that his involvement is itself unique as is indicated in Call Me Ishmael when Olson states:

I take SPACE to be the central fact to man born in America, from Folsom Cave to now. I spell it large because it comes large here. Large and without mercy. It is geography at bottom,⁴ a hell of wide land from the beginning.

The reference is to the brutal fact of this wilderness

and its effect on the Old World consciousness. Anne Bradstreet, for example, said that when she migrated to this country, she found "a new world and new manners, at which my heart rose."⁵ We might also conjecture that it was this fact which caused William Bradford's young wife, Dorothy, to "fall" from the deck of The Mayflower while it was anchored in the still waters of Cape Cod Bay, off the coast of Provincetown, Massachusetts.⁶ It is the same fact which Frederick Jackson Turner emphasized (in "The Significance of the Frontier in American History") as that which cut Americans off from the European backgrounds and which forced the men of the frontier to deal with the land on its own terms as they moved westward.

Olson was quite taken with Turner's thesis because of its emphasis on the "death" of Europe, at least as far as Americans were concerned. They were, in this sense, a new people in a new land, or as Olson says, "the last 'first' people."⁷

It is this belief in the uniqueness of the American experience, and the separation from Europe, which led Olson to declare that the "American will more and more repossess himself of the Indian past,"⁸ a conviction which motivated his study of the ancient Mayan civilization of Central America. That is, however, only partly the reason for his investigation of them. As I said before, Olson was convinced that the "old deal" (by which he meant the basic philosophy of life

inherent in the western cultural tradition, and the mode of action which proceeds from it) "is dead," and that an alternative must be found. His belief in this is nowhere better seen than in his evaluation of what the technological push has bred, which is what Olson refers to in The Maximus Poems as "pejorocracy."

The notion of fun comes to displace work as what we are here for. Spectatorism crowds out participation as the condition of culture. And bonuses and prizes are the rewards of labor contrived by the monopolies of business and government to protect themselves from the advancement in position of able men or that old assertion of an inventive man, his own shop. All individual energy and ingenuity is bought off -- at a suggestion box or the cinema. Passivity conquers all

...To say that in America the goods are as the fruits, and the people as the goods, all glistening but tasteless, accomplishes nothing in itself, for the overwhelming fact is, that the rest of the world wants nothing but to be the same. Value is perishing from the earth because no one cares to fight down to it beneath the⁹ glowing surfaces so attractive to all.

This is the condition Olson was trying to expose and thereby defeat in both his essays and his poetry. Although the above quotation is quite strong in its denunciations, implicit in it is Olson's firm belief in man's inherent possibilities and potentialities, which man for some reason chooses to ignore. Olson insists always that "no where in man is there room for carelessnesses."¹⁰ The alternative mode of thought and action, he felt, was contained in the ancient Mayans' civilization and their assumptions about

their place in the universe of things -- their disposition toward the context in which they lived. Olson maintained that although the Mayans among whom he lived were guilty of some of the same carelessnesses as modern technological man (they simply did not possess the means by which to perfect their carelessnesses), they revealed some of the graces of their ancestors as these, in turn, are revealed in what remains of that civilization. As historian, Olson was trying to uncover the assumptions which produced these graces, and to bring them into the present for our use.

One might say, then, that Olson as historian was acting out his desire to be "... an historian as Herodotus was, looking / for oneself for the evidence of / what is said."¹¹ For the main thrust of Olson's work as historian was to find out for himself how the ancient Mayans used themselves and their world and, closer to home for Olson, the seventeenth-century settlers of Gloucester, Massachusetts (the "setting" of The Maximus Poems).

One might say that Olson as poet, on the other hand, was acting out his belief that "art is the only twin life has -- its only valid metaphysic. Art does not seek to describe but to enact."¹² For one of the main concerns of his work was to arrive at a means of expression that would enact, not describe, the experience which was its content. He was trying to find an alternative to what he called "classical-representational" art, that is, the European practice of art

as description. What he hoped to substitute was a kinetic art, art as enactment which, in regard to poetry at least, demanded "language as the act of the instant" rather than "language as the act of thought about the instant."¹³ This is what Creeley refers to when he says that "Olson would insist that language be returned to its place in experience, neither more nor less than any other act."¹⁴

The two disciplines -- history and poetry -- begin to merge at this point, for Olson's investigations of the Mayans (their hieroglyphics in particular) yielded an entirely different consciousness from that of the European culture, thus confirming Olson's belief that an alternative could be found. Because these people stayed so interested in their context, Olson maintains, not only was their daily life itself "a dignity and a sufficiency," but also their art enacted their experience rather than describing it. This connection between the two is precisely the point Olson emphasized in the essay entitled "Projective Verse" wherein he established some principles by which kinetic art is to be achieved. He maintained there that the important thing to realize was that the technical aspects of the theory (which will be considered later in this paper) and what they implied toward the reality of the poem itself, involved "a stance toward reality outside the poem" as well. I consider this a prime concern in Olson's thought, whether he is talking about poetry or the conduct of human life -- both depend on how one conceives his

relation to the reality outside himself. Olson's point is that "the use of a man, by himself and thus by others, lies in how he conceives his relation to nature, that force to which he owes his somewhat small existence."¹⁵

What this means with regard to the conduct of human life is best seen in the following passage in which Olson argues that man's inner processes so closely parallel nature's processes that, in terms of what man does in his immediate environment, the two had better be taken as one. Olson maintains that:

If man chooses to treat external reality any differently than as part of his own process, in other words as anything other than relevant to his own inner life, then he will ... use it ... for arbitrary and willful purposes which, in their effects, not only change the face of nature but actually arrest and divert her force until man turns it even against herself, he is so powerful, this little thing. But what little willful modern man will not recognize is, that when he turns it against her he turns it against himself, held in the hand of nature as man forever is, to his use of himself if he choose, to his disuse, as he has.¹⁶

The same balance between the inner and outer processes applies as well in regard to the poem, for if it is to enact an experience it must enact as well the energy of the experience. This can only be accomplished if the poet possesses the ability (that is, the stance toward reality) to come to terms with that experience so as to lose none of its energy in the transformation from object to image. As pointed out already, Olson maintained that "the use of a man ... lies in

how he conceives his relation to nature."

If he sprawl, he shall find little to sing but himself, and shall sing, nature has such paradoxical ways, by way of artificial forms outside himself. But if he stays inside himself, if he is contained within his nature as he is participant in the larger force, he will be able to listen, and his hearing ... will give him secrets objects share. And by an inverse law his shapes will make their own way. It is in this sense that the projective act, which is the artist's act in the larger field of objects, leads to dimensions larger than the man. For a man's problem, the moment he takes speech up in all its fullness, is to give his work his seriousness, a seriousness sufficient to cause the thing he makes to try to take its place alongside the things of nature.¹⁷

Olson, thus, places perception at the crux of the matter in both the conduct of life and the practice of verse, and perception is to Olson as much feeling as it is seeing.

As I stated earlier, however, Olson maintained that the inherited formulations and their assumptions about man's relation to external reality (especially the ego-centric concept of man as "the center of phenomenon by fiat or of god as the center and man as god's chief reflection")¹⁸ constituted a stumbling block to such an engagement with experience as Olson outlines. They were, therefore, the chief obstacle to both discovering a new means of expression and a method for correcting man's carelessnesses. Not only are those assumptions responsible for man's loss of perspective of his place in the universe of things but, because they had

so worked their way into western man's thought (and thus his actions) they had blunted his ability to deal with experience and had caused a condition of estrangement from it. I would like to discuss this matter of estrangement next, for it is a main part of Olson's attempt to find an alternative to the "old deal." Man must cease to be estranged before significant changes can be made in his habits of thought and action. By considering the ways in which man might be said to be estranged, I can better demonstrate Olson's criticisms of the inherited formulations and the ways in which he says they interfere with man's experience.

This matter of estrangement is a theme which underlies a series of prose works which Olson wrote between 1950 and 1956. This series includes "The Gate and the Center," "Human Universe," "The Escaped Cock," "Apollonius of Tyana," "The Resistance" and The Special View of History.¹⁹ It was not until the last of these works that Olson actually used the term "estranged," which he introduced by way of the epigraph of this work, "Man is estranged from that with which he is most familiar." The statement derives from the pre-Socratic philosopher Heraclitus and Olson adopts it as the best description of what has been the condition of western man (at least since 500 B.C.). Olson's intent in this series was, first of all, to account for man's misuse of himself and his universe, and secondly, to try to correct this condition by familiarizing man with himself and his place in the uni-

verse. Although Olson does not discuss estrangement as such until the last work in the series, I believe the discussions in the preceding works are based on the assumption that "Man is estranged..." and that this is the main reason for his abuse of himself and his world. My intent here is not to trace the development of this theme through these works, but rather to indicate in a very general way the meaning of estrangement and its effects on man's perception, because -- as I have already indicated -- the quality or efficiency of perception is essential to Olson's theory of projective verse and its practice, and also to his theory of the conduct of human life.

When Olson maintained that "Man is estranged from that with which he is most familiar" he meant primarily that man is estranged from the context in which he lives and acts: that is, from his place and from his time (which, as always, is the present). This is where man's attention should be focused, for this is where his acts have effect. With regard to this Olson says:

Idealisms of any sort ... intervene at just the moment they become more than the means they are, are allowed to become ways as end instead of ways to end, END, which is never more than this instant, than you on this instant, than you, figuring it out, and acting, so. If there is any absolute, it is never more than²⁰ this one, you, this instant in action.

This is the "absolute condition of present things" on which Olson insists and with which he opposes the Aristotelian

system of logic and classification which, he maintains, keeps language from assuming its proper place in experience by relegating it instead to the universe of discourse and making it serve the end of passive contemplation. As already pointed out, Olson insisted that "language be returned to its place in experience," that it be "the act of the instant" (rather than "thought about the instant"), and by action Olson means projective action -- the "artist's act in the larger field of objects."²¹

It is this same "absolute condition of present things" which Olson presents in argument against the Christian philosophy which places the end of a man's life outside life itself. "Life," Olson argues, "is preoccupation with itself":²² "you figuring it out, and acting, so."

This is one way in which to interpret this concept of estrangement, but there are other ways in which the inherited formulations have interfered with man's discovery of himself and his relation to nature, and this has to do with the process of perception discussed earlier. For Olson meant the Heraclitean epigraph to refer to man's estrangement from himself as an organism, "a creature of nature." Olson maintains that man is "a thing among things," "an object, whatever he may take to be his advantages."²³ I consider these views as the reason for Olson's emphasis on the wholeness and integrity of the body, the very place of experience and, thus, of discovery.

(This emphasis is especially strong in the short essay "The Resistance.") What I think Olson is reacting against, first of all, is the dualistic concept of man, for when man began to look upon himself in dualistic terms (that is, when he saw his structure as separable into mind and body, or soul and body) and ceased to see himself as an integral, inseparable unit, he interfered with his own experience. Furthermore, the divided sense of self involved him in a continuing and ever-widening process of separation, the end result of which was that he came to see himself as completely separate from the natural world. In dualistic terms, this is a separation into the knower and the known, or subject and object.

These, of course, are concepts belonging to the universe of discourse (logic and classification) and as such they are not arguable. It is what they lead to when taken as final discipline ("ways as end") that Olson disputes. When they are taken as final discipline they lead to a psychological estrangement from the universe of things and in that way they interfere with perception. Olson maintains that this is a highly artificial way to try to come to terms with experience, for the process of perception (what Olson calls the process of image) is a total, physical process which "cannot be understood by separation from the objects it works on." A man must "comprehend his own process as intact, from outside, by way of his skin, in, and by his own powers of conversion, out again."²⁴ This is why Olson says (in the passage quoted

earlier) that a man cannot treat external reality in any other way than as relevant to his own inner processes, his own inner life.

The main point to note in this argument is the intimate relationship it establishes between man and nature, for this is precisely the point at which the matter of estrangement is crucial -- with regard to what man does with external reality. Olson maintains that a man is what he does, or as Creeley states in this regard, "Men are ... consistently the face they wear, and the things which they do, in the place given them."²⁵ In other words, their acts have effects which stay with them in the context in which they live, and this is why Olson argues that when man mistreats nature he mistreats himself, "held in the hand of nature as man forever is." Therefore, the more man is estranged from himself (and the universe) the less responsibility he comes to feel for his actions, considering them to be somewhere out there "in the universe."

Olson's point is that man is responsible "to more than himself"²⁶ and to more than God, and it is this contention which places Olson in opposition to the assumptions of the inherited formulations, the Greek and Christian philosophies of man. As I have already noted, Olson felt that these philosophies led man to lose perspective of his place in the universe. What these assumptions are, and the way in which

they cause this loss of perspective are best seen in the following quotation from "Human Universe" (part of which has already been quoted):

The trouble with the inherited formulations ... (the notion of man as the center of phenomenon by fiat or of god as the center and man as god's chief reflection) is that both set aside nature as an unadmitted or suppressed third party.... The result we have been the witnesses of: discovering this discarded thing nature, science has run away with everything. Tapping her power, fingering her like a child, giving her again her place, but without somehow, remembering what truth there was in man's centering the use of anything ... in himself, science has upset all balance and blown value, man's peculiar responsibility, to the winds.²⁷

What Olson is attacking here (and in his view of man as a "thing among things") is the ego-centric concept of man, the base of the "old humanism" he is trying to break down. As he indicates in the above quotation, that concept of man leads not only to a separation from nature, but also to the exploitation of her. This is a tendency which Olson found to be absent from the ancient Mayan civilization. The Mayans improved on nature only to the extent to which it was necessary for their survival, an attitude quite different from just living off nature. This is the proper respect and source of value. Olson says in this regard that the Mayans

had a very ancient way of not improving on nature, that is, that it is not a question of either intelligence or spirituality, but another thing, something Americans have a hard time getting their

minds around, a form or bias of attention which does not include improvements.²⁸

This, then, is estrangement and its causes -- "the real issue of what has been." It can be defeated, Olson maintains, if we "find ways to hew to experience as it is, in our definition and expression of it ... [and] not be led to partition reality at any point, in any way."²⁹

Olson's argument for a direct engagement with the world is akin to the Romantic poets' emphasis on the childlike response to the world. For example, Shelley, in his essay "On Life," says that as children, "We less habitually distinguished all that we saw and felt, from ourselves. They seemed as it were to constitute one mass. There are some persons who, in this respect, are always children."³⁰ Freud described the child's response as "polymorphic perverse," by which he meant that the child's relationship with his world is a totally sensual, almost erotic, response of the entire body. Likewise, Gestalt psychology, also known as the field theory of perception, describes perception as a total and unanalyzable response, a whole response. I think each of these theories is similar to Olson's contention that perception is a total response and his emphasis on the wholeness of the body. Furthermore, this is the stance toward reality outside a poem that he makes so necessary to projective verse and the conduct of human life. But, again, in order to change the habits of action, the habits of thought must be changed too, "for the habits of

thought are the habits of action."³¹

Such a restructuring of thought, however, is a difficult task to perform and Olson admits this in a letter to the poet Cid Corman in which he says, "to this very day I have not broken beyond to anything like a sustained life in the universe beyond the universe of discourse (and I don't mean at all any asiatic passivism). I mean that there is a temptation of the mind which also has to be thrown back, thrown, in."³² This "temptation of the mind" is what makes the task so difficult; it is what Olson calls (in the essay "Projective Verse"),

...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. For a man is himself an object, whatever he may take to be his advantages, the more likely to recognize himself as such the greater his advantages, particularly at that moment he achieves an ³³humilitas sufficient to make him of use.

Here is an aspect of Olson's thought worth emphasizing, if only briefly. When Olson asserts that there is a bond between man and nature, a oneness, he is not setting forth a doctrine of "asiatic passivism." As I indicated before, his concern is always with man's action, and not with contemplation of nature akin to Eastern philosophy. Knowledge

must be put to use, not stored up for contemplative purposes. What Olson is asserting when he speaks of the oneness of man and nature is nothing more than what twentieth-century definitions of the structure of the universe imply with respect to that relationship. Because this "redefinition of the real," as Olson refers to it, bears directly on the foregoing discussion of estrangement and man's relation to the natural world, and provides, furthermore, a culmination to that discussion, I would like to present this new theory of the structure of the universe on which so much of Olson's thought is based. In addition, such a discussion sets up a proper background from which to consider the terms of Olson's theory of "projective verse."

In the essay "Equal, That Is, to the Real Itself" Olson summarizes the way in which the real came to be redefined. He says that the definition began to take shape in the nineteenth century as the result of the work of two geometers (Bolyai and Lobatschewsky) who, in 1822, tried to arrive at an alternative to "Euclid's picture of the world." Thirty-one years later, the German mathematician, Riemann, defined "the real as men since have exploited it: he distinguished two kinds of manifold, the discrete (which would be the old system, and it includes discourse, language as it had been since Socrates) and, what he took to be more true, the continuous."³⁴ Einstein's work in the twentieth century added

even more to this redefinition. In the excerpt to follow we have Olson's summary of the results of these conjectures, at the same time getting a good statement of his view of man's place in the universe, including an idea of what he means when he says (in the essay "Projective Verse") that "nature has given /man/ size, projective size."

All things did come in again, in the 19th century. An idea shook loose, and energy and motion became as important a structure of things as that they are plural, and, by matter, mass. It was even shown that in the infinitely small the older concepts of space ceased to be valid at all. Quantity -- the measureable and numerable -- was suddenly as shafted in, to any thing, as it was also, as had been obvious, the striking character of the external world, that all things do extend out. Nothing was now inert fact, all things were there for feeling, to promote it, and be felt; and man, in the midst of it, knowing well how he was folded in, as well as how suddenly and strikingly he could extend himself, spring or, without even moving, go, to far, the farthest -- he was suddenly possessed or repossessed of a character of being, a thing among things, which I shall call his physicality. It made a re-entry of or to the universe. Reality was without interruption, and we are still in the business of finding out how all action, and thought, have to be refounded.

Taking it in towards writing, the discrete, for example, wasn't any longer a good enough base for discourse: classification was exposed as mere taxonomy; and logic (and the sentence as poised on it, a completed thought, instead of what it has become, an exchange of force) was as loose and inaccurate a system as the body and soul had been, divided from each₃ other and rattling, sticks in a stiff box.

This is the condition of things, and the contention here that man is "a thing among things" defines his condition as

well. It is the opposite view to that offered by the "old humanism" which placed man, disproportionately, at the center of things, and thus estranged him from himself and the universe. When man sees his true relation to the universe, or more properly speaking, when he feels that relationship, he makes "a re-entry of or to the universe." Man is, from this point of view, responsible to more than himself and God.

The above quotation is also a good picture of that "field" of which Olson speaks in the essay "Projective Verse," just as it is a fine statement of that "stance toward reality outside a poem" from which projective verse proceeds. The universe is now seen as kinetic as is the process of man's experience of it and, as Olson says, "There is only one thing you can do about kinetic, re-enact it....And if man is once more to possess intent in his life, and to take up the responsibility implicit in his life, he has to comprehend his own process as intact, from outside, by way of his skin, in, and by his own powers of conversion, out again."³⁶ With regard to the poem, this means that if it is to re-enact an experience, the poet must be efficient in his use of language so that none of the kinetic energy of the experience is lost in the transformation from object to image.

Olson's intent in the "Projective Verse" essay was to set down some notes that might make a beginning toward such a use of language. One of Olson's basic assumptions in that

essay is that just as a man interferes with perception if he presumes anything about his position in the universe other than that he is "a thing among things," the poet likewise interferes if he fails to stay in the condition of things and allows the "lyrical interference of the individual as ego" to come between him and the experience which he hopes to bring into form. The process of the poem must be accurate to the efficiency of the process of perception. This can only be accomplished if the poet sees himself as an object in a field of force.

I do not want to over-emphasize the technical aspects of Olson's theory of projective verse, primarily because he declared in that essay that the stance which produced verse of this order involved "a change beyond, and larger than, the technical," thus removing the emphasis from the technical and placing it on the stance. In addition, Olson indicated in a letter to Cid Corman that he desired "to pass on to something else." I will, therefore, only indicate the main points of the technical aspects of this theory.³⁷

Olson begins by setting down "some simplicities that a man learns, if he works in ... COMPOSITION BY FIELD." First of all, the poems must be seen as "energy transferred from where the poet got it ... by way of the poem itself ... all the way over to the reader." The poem, therefore, "must, at all points, be a high energy-construct and, at all points,

an energy-discharge." The second point Olson establishes is based on the principle that "form is never more than an extension of content" and that "right form," therefore, "in any given poem, is the only and exclusively possible extension of content under hand." To proceed on any other assumption is to presume that form and content are separable. The poet cannot approach the experience with a pre-conceived form for his content. Thirdly, Olson defines the process of the projective poem in the following way: "one perception must immediately and directly lead to a further perception." Olson goes on to say that the syllable is "the king and pin of versification" because, "It is by their syllables that words juxtapose in beauty, by these particles of sound as clearly as by the sense of the words which they compose." The final point of Olson's theory is his emphasis on the breath as a unit of control for the length of the line (as opposed to a "too set concept of foot"): "the breathing of the man who writes as well as his listenings." This is what ultimately gives shape to the poem, for in transcribing it via the typewriter the poet can "indicate exactly the breath, the pauses, the suspensions even of syllables, the juxtapositions even of parts of phrases, which he intends. For the first time the poet has the stave and the bar a musician has had."

This is a fair summary, I think, of the main technical aspects of Olson's theory of projective verse -- the way

"what is said" gets said. But what I think is equally important, especially in regard to The Maximus Poems, are Olson's views on the content of the poem. At the outset of this paper I maintained that in The Maximus Poems there is an emphasis on the significance of where one lives, and that this emphasis aims at defeating estrangement by focusing attention on the particulars of one's life. In the discussion of estrangement, furthermore, I maintained that Olson's whole push was to repossess man of his context, to restore the familiar to him. What it reduces to is that it is a matter of care for the total expression of one's place, and this is the crux, I believe, of the following advice which Olson offered the poet Cid Corman in a letter:

you must cease instantly to think of a poem as anything but an expression of
THAT WITH WHICH YOU ARE A SPECIALIST --
which has to be, if it is a poem, YRSELF,
YR THINGS, no one else's

And later in the same letter he says:

a man can only express that which he knows.
Now the further difficulty is, we think we know. And that too is a mare's nest: we don't even know until we bend to the modesty to say we have nothing to say. Then we offer our conjectures abt what it is we have found to wonder abt: that's what a poem is, a conjecture abt an experience we are, for what reason, seized by -- BUT I MEAN SEIZED. It has to be something on our mind, really on our³⁸ mind, at the heart of us -- where it hurts.

I believe that these are the assumptions underlying The Maximus Poems. Furthermore, they are consistent with Olson's

statement that man is an

object in field of force declaring self
as force because is force ... & can
accomplish expression of self as force
by conjecture, & displacement in a con-
text best ... seen as space more than time.³⁹

This view of man's context as space devoid of time is just one more example of Olson's constant emphasis on the context of now, a concept which is central to the methodology of The Maximus Poems. We can get a better view of that methodology by considering Olson's remarks regarding the work of two poets who came before him and from whom, it would appear, he learned much. These two poets are Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams.

Olson admired Pound's method in The Cantos of cutting through historical materials and thereby destroying time. Olson says of this method that Pound's

...single emotion breaks all down to his
equals or inferiors (so far as I can see
only two, possibly, are admitted, by him,
to be his betters -- Confucius, & Dante.
Which assumption, that there are intelli-
gent men whom he can outtalk, is beauti-
ful because it destroys historical time, and

thus creates the methodology of the Cantos,
viz, a space-field where ... though the
material is all time material, he has driven
through it so sharply ... that he has turned
time into what⁴⁰ we must now have, space and
its live air.

Olson's desire to be rid of historical time is to free ourselves of the notion that we are tied to all that has gone before us and that, therefore, our present and future depend

wholly on the past. This is particularly relevant to Olson's declaration of independence from the western cultural tradition, and his emphasis on the context of now; for it is his contention, I believe, that we can only cease to be estranged if we separate ourselves from that sense of "history." We are not tied to the assumptions of western culture even though these are what have been the ruling forces in our way of thought and action. There is no sanction for saying that western culture is what we must have. Furthermore, the more we free ourselves from the deterministic view of history, the more we are able to make use of historical materials. Since we are not tied to any one history, we can be eclectic in our choice and use of those materials. Olson felt that although Pound's method was a step towards accomplishing this, the materials of history that he chose were no longer useful, ingrained as they were in categories of East and West.

As I said before, Olson appears to have learned something from the work of William Carlos Williams too. He admired Williams' emphasis on the local and particular in Paterson, for he felt that that kind of engagement with experience led to an awareness of space more than of time. Out of such an engagement spring acts based on that experience, rather than on traditional assumptions about what one does when so confronted. This is what Olson means when he says that the only absolute is "you on this instant ... you, figuring it out, and acting, so." The alternative to the western culture,

Olson maintains, is to be found in "our own lives and references" -- our own contexts.

Olson's methodology might be said to combine the best of both Pound's and Williams' work. Olson took from Pound the method of throwing all historical materials together so that historical time is destroyed, and from Williams he took the emphasis on the local and particular. Olson's methodology might be described, therefore, as localism of space and time (meaning that he concentrates on place and the time of experiencing it), and its epigraph might be as follows (from a letter to Corman):

...the particular is a syntax which is
universal, and ... it can not be dis-
covered except locally, in the sense
that any humanism is as well place as
it is the person⁴¹

I chose this as the epigraph of The Maximus Poems for the following reasons: first of all, it adequately represents the emphasis on the local and particular throughout Olson's work, but especially in The Maximus Poems; secondly, I think this is the metaphysical principle associated with the glyph printed on the title-page of The Maximus Poems, which the publisher describes as "'The Figure of Outward' striding forth from the domain of the infinitely small...." Both this and the statement from the letter to Corman express the principles of Olson's concept of projective space and man's projective potentialities: "how suddenly [man can] extend himself, spring or, without even moving, go, to far, the

farthest...." For "the littlest is the biggest, if you look at it."⁴² Thirdly, the epigraph I propose states exactly the combination which we have in The Maximus Poems -- person and place.

Gloucester, then, must be seen as the field of force in which Olson declares himself by conjecture, which (as was seen in the passage from the Mayan Letters quoted earlier) is the proper way for man to declare himself. Because man is so intricately a part of the universe of things, this method of declaring self is more proper than the method man has so far used -- the imposition of will over not only nature, but over his fellow men as well. Furthermore, Olson is the poet-historian of Gloucester, "looking ... for the evidence of what is said," and making that total context "start up / to the eye and soul / as though it had never / happened before."⁴³

This is what Olson meant when he said that "life is pre-occupation with itself" -- that one is childlike in his response to his context. A man must make himself familiar with it, and to the extent that he does he ceases to be estranged.

In regard to such an engagement with the local as The Maximus Poems represent, Creeley says:

The Maximus Poems are ... the modulation of a man's attentions, by which I mean the whole wonder of perception. They are truth because their form is that issue of what is out there, and what part of it can come into a man's own body. That much is not sentimental, nor can anything be sentimental if we make it that engagement. The local is

not a place but a place in a given man -- what part of it he has been compelled or else brought by love to give witness to in his own mind. And that is the form, that is, the whole thing, as whole as it can get.

I think we will be fools to be embarrassed by it.... At some point reached by us, sooner or later, there is no longer much else but ourselves, in the place given us. To make that present, and actual for other men, is not an embarrassment, but love. ⁴⁴

It is in this sense, I think, that Olson's advice to Cid Corman is relevant to his own practice in The Maximus Poems, for the city of Gloucester is that with which Olson is a "SPECIALIST" and it is that with which he is "SEIZED."

Footnotes

¹ Ann Charters, Olson/Melville: A Study in Affinity (Berkeley: Oyez, 1968). Robert Creeley's reviews of Olson's work are included in his collected essays, A Quick Graph (San Francisco: Four Seasons Foundation, 1970), pp. 151-194. Edward Dorn's essay is not as readily available as these two works. It was first published as a pamphlet in an edition of 200 copies in 1960, then reprinted in Kulchur 4, 1961, pp. 31-44.

² This phrase is actually part of a letter from Melville to Hawthorne: "By visible truth we mean the absolute condition of present things." Olson quotes this in the essay "Equal, That Is, to the Real Itself," in Human Universe and Other Essays, ed. Donald Allen (New York: Grove Press, 1967), p. 118. All references to Olson's essays are to this edition, hereafter referred to as HU.

³ Ann Charters, Olson/Melville, p. 17.

⁴ Charles Olson, Call Me Ishmael: A Study of Melville (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1967), p. 11. This was Olson's first book, published in 1947, which edition is now out of print.

⁵ Anne Bradstreet, The Works of Anne Bradstreet, ed. Jeannine Hensley, foreword by Adrienne Rich (Cambridge: Harvard, 1967), p. 241.

⁶ For an account of Dorothy Bradford's death which makes a similar conjecture as to its cause see George F. Willison, Saints and Strangers (New York: Reynal and Hitchcock, 1945), pp. 156-157.

⁷ Call Me Ishmael, p. 14.

⁸ This statement is quoted by Robert Creeley in his "Preface" to Mayan Letters, p. 6.

⁹ "Human Universe," HU, p. 8.

- 10 This is taken from "Letter 7" of The Maximus Poems (New York: Jargon/Corinth, 1960), p. 32. All references for quoted material are to this edition.
- 11 "Letter 23," The Maximus Poems, pp.100-101.
- 12 "Human Universe," HU, p. 10.
- 13 Ibid., p. 4.
- 14 Robert Creeley, "Introduction to Charles Olson: Selected Writings II," in A Quick Graph, p. 184.
- 15 "Projective Verse," HU, p. 60.
- 16 "Human Universe," HU, p. 11.
- 17 "Projective Verse," HU, p. 60.
- 18 "Human Universe," HU, p. 8.
- 19 Olson's The Special View of History is actually a series of lectures which he delivered at Black Mountain College in the spring and summer of 1956. It was recently published under the editorship of Ann Charters, whose introduction to the edition supplies information regarding its background.
- 20 "Human Universe," HU, p. 5.
- 21 "Projective Verse," HU, p. 60.
- 22 "Human Universe," HU, p. 3.
- 23 These phrases are from two essays: the first and third are from "Projective Verse" and the second is from "Equal, That Is, to the Real Itself."
- 24 "Human Universe," HU, p. 10.
- 25 Creeley, "Some Notes on Olson's Maximus," in A Quick Graph, p. 172.
- 26 "Human Universe," HU, p. 11.

- 27 ibid., p. 8-9.
- 28 Olson, Mayan Letters, p. 40.
- 29 "Human Universe," HU, p. 5.
- 30 Percy Bysshe Shelley, "On Life," in Selected Poetry and Prose of Shelley, ed. Carlos Baker, Modern Library College Editions (New York: Random House, 1951), p. 459.
- 31 "Human Universe," HU, p. 4.
- 32 Charles Olson, Letters for Origin: 1950-1955, ed. Albert Glover (New York and London: Cape Goliard, Grossman, 1970), p. 54.
- 33 "Projective Verse," HU, pp. 59-60.
- 34 "Equal, That Is, to the Real Itself," HU, p. 117.
- 35 ibid., pp. 118-119.
- 36 "Human Universe," HU, p. 10.
- 37 The essay "Projective Verse," appears on pp. 51-61 of HU. Olson's statement regarding his desire to pass on to something else in the way of a poetic is found in Letters for Origin, p. 134.
- 38 Olson, Letters for Origin, p. 119 and p. 120 respectively. For the sake of space, I have not reproduced the actual layout of these two quotations.
- 39 Olson, Mayan Letters, p. 67.
- 40 ibid., pp. 26-27. The parenthetical statement in this quotation is left open. I have, therefore, split the paragraph as in the edition used.
- 41 Olson, Letters for Origin, p. 127.
- 42 Olson, A Bibliography On America For Ed Dorn (San Francisco: Four Seasons Foundation, 1964), p. 13.

43 Olson, "Maximus to Gloucester," The Maximus Poems,
p. 107.

44 Creeley, "Charles Olson: The Maximus Poems, 1-10,"
in A Quick Graph, pp. 157-158.

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SOME MAJOR CONCERNS IN THE WORK OF CHARLES OLSON

by

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AN ABSTRACT OF A MASTER'S REPORT

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requirements for the degree

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Department of English

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The purpose of this paper is to introduce and explain some of the major concerns in the work of Charles Olson. In order to impose some limitation on such a general topic, the emphasis here has been placed on Olson's arguments against the main assumptions on which western man's thought and action are founded. Olson's primary concern was to state an alternative to those assumptions, and since this preoccupation is evident throughout his work, including The Maximus Poems, it is the opinion of this writer that a discussion of his arguments will, therefore, shed some light on the rationale underlying Olson's poetic theory in general, and The Maximus Poems in particular.