

**Spatial Poetics, Proprioception and Caring for Country in Charles Olson's *The Maximus Poems***

by

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27<sup>th</sup> June, 2017

A dissertation submitted in fulfilment  
of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy  
at the University of Sydney,  
Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences

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## **Statement of Authorship and Originality**

I certify that this thesis has been written by me, and reserve my rights as the author of this work.

I certify that all sources of information and assistance used in the research for and writing of this thesis have been properly acknowledged.

I certify that the work in this thesis has not been previously submitted, whole or in part, for the requirements of any other degree.

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27<sup>th</sup> June 2017

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**Abstract**

This thesis looks at the significance of space and place within Charles Olson's poetics of the archaic postmodern, as a means of clearing a field within which a poetics of custodianship is enunciated. It applies and extends the concept of "nomadology", formulated by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, to argue that Olson's protagonist in *The Maximus Poems* can be seen as an exemplification of Pierre Joris' concept of "a nomad poetics". Olson's triad of "topos, typos and tropos" helps structure the thesis and provides a means to approach and explain the Maximus gestalt as human geography: an organic entity arising from and embodying space in order to redefine place. This poesis needs a fully articulated sense of being and a poetics that can encompass human activity in a myriad of dimensions: physics and metaphysics, languages, images and sounds that express a full, corporal sense of the myths and history that Maximus embodies and re-enacts to ensure the survival of a liminal polis, or community of attentions. A specific scene of reading in this respect is Aboriginal Australia, as the thesis expands on tropes that connect ancient cultures to postmodern poetic concerns, and demonstrates that Olson's ultimate aim is akin to that of recreating country itself. It should be noted that the recreation of country and ownership of the ground upon which Olson's poetry and poetics are enacted remain the preserve of the original owners, and that his sense of recreation and expansion of a poetic field is not to be conflated with a desire for appropriation, while acknowledging that these operations are inevitably taking place in colonised locations. The thesis concludes by proposing that with due respect to these considerations, the Maximus project remains of vital relevance to a twenty-first century, international readership.

## Acknowledgments

I would like to begin by thanking my supervisor, Peter Minter, for his patience, generosity and skill in guiding the focus of this thesis. His input and inspiration have been vital in discerning and developing a sense of direction from an initially tangled array of ideas. His concept of “transnational projectivism” has been fundamental to my understanding of Charles Olson’s poetry and poetics when viewed from the contexts within which this thesis operates. Specifically, as a result of his supervision, I have been privileged to receive insights into approaching the knowledge and wisdom contained in Aboriginal Australian culture. It is with this in mind that I would also like to extend my respect to all Indigenous people named in this thesis: writers, academics and custodians of Country, past and present.

Gratitude is also due to my assistant supervisor, Mark Byron, for indicating the transnational potential of my work, and for encouraging me to participate more widely in the academic community, both here at the University of Sydney and overseas. I would also like to thank both David Brooks and Bernadette Brennan for inspiration: David introduced me to Olson’s poetry through a series of inspirational seminars, and both he and Bernadette lent their support to my application when the ideas for the thesis were in their formative stages. Thanks also to Bruce Gardiner, who kindly and proactively provided advice when the thesis was at a critical stage.

I would like to acknowledge the work done by all the staff within the Department of English, the School of Literature, Arts and Media and the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, which has helped facilitate the progress of the thesis, and afforded me the opportunity to contribute to the field of study. I remain grateful for the funding that has enabled me to travel and participate at conferences both within Australia and abroad, both from the university and the Commonwealth of Australia, and it is to the latter that I am indebted for the Australian Postgraduate Award, which enabled me to undertake research on a full-time basis.

More broadly, I would like to acknowledge and thank members of the international academic community, whose input has provided motivation and inspiration at various stages of my research. Foremost among these is the late Ralph Maud, for the warmth of his welcome to the field of Olson studies. I would also like to thank Jeffrey Gardiner, whose comments on my paper presented at the American Literary Association conference were perceptive and of great assistance in understanding Olson's later poetics. Gary Grieve-Carlson, who chaired the panel for my initial presentation to the association, provided sources that have also been helpful for my work. My thanks also go out to Melissa Watterworth-Batt, curator at the Olson archive at the University of Connecticut, for her kind assistance during the stimulating and productive time I spent there.

Finally, a sense of appreciation beyond that which words can adequately express is reserved for family: Katinka and Barney Pree, for their unconditional love and consistent moral support, and to my wife, Aya Murasawa, for looking after me in so many ways during this time. I dedicate this thesis to the memory of my father, Barry Pree, who taught me how to love reading, and in remembrance of Alan Seymour, whose friendship saw me through so much. This one's for the both of you.

**Spatial Poetics, Proprioception and Caring for Country: the Archaic  
Postmodern Gestalt of Charles Olson's *The Maximus Poems***

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## Key to Abbreviations for Frequently Cited Works

*CP:* Olson, Charles. *The Collected Poems of Charles Olson, Excluding The Maximus Poems* Ed. George F. Butterick. (Berkeley: University of California Press), 1997.

*CPR:* Olson, Charles. *Collected Prose*, Ed. Robert Creeley, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997.

*ML:* Olson, Charles. Ed. Robert Creeley. *Mayan Letters*, London: Jonathan Cape, 1968.

*MP:* Olson, Charles. *The Maximus Poems*, Ed. George F. Butterick, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983.

*MU:* Olson, Charles. *Muthologos: Lectures and Interviews*. Ed. Ralph Maud, Revised Second Edition (Vancouver: Talonbooks). 2010.

*N:* Deleuze, Gilles and Guattari, Felix. *Nomadology: The War Machine*, Trans. Brian Massumi, New York: Semiotext(e), 1986.

*OC:* Olson, Charles and Creeley Robert: *The Complete Correspondence*, Vol. 1-10, Ed. George F. Butterick, Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow Press, 1985.

*OL:* Olson, Charles. *OLSON: Journal of the Charles Olson Archives*, Storrs, CT: University of Connecticut, 1974-1978.

## Introduction

It was said of Charles Olson the poet that his way of projection and articulation comprised “full body reading.”<sup>1</sup> It was noted that from the perspective of a student, just as the pre-Socratic Heraclitus contemplating a stream of water, it was impossible to step into the same Olson lecture twice.<sup>2</sup> These comments reflect the impact of his presence, the spontaneity of his nature and the quite literal expanse of his themes. On being presented, late in his life, with a copy of French philosopher Gaston Bachelard’s *The Poetics of Space*, his first reaction was to exclaim: “that’s my title!”:<sup>3</sup> not a charge of plagiarism, as not only were the writers probably unaware of one another’s existence, but more likely admiration for a phrase that he saw as a succinct way of expressing his own life’s work and concerns. Investigations into the movement and morphology of space: bodily, externally and through the vectors and conduits of both natural and human construction, comprised the basis for some his century’s most startling and original poetry, not to mention his seminal essays on poetics. Yet, if anything, the brevity of that title would be insufficient to summarise the multitudes that went into composing the poet and his most imposing creation, Maximus.

Olson’s *The Maximus Poems* spiral out from the two mid-twentieth century decades they took to compose, and represent a life’s work of cosmic preoccupation and epic proportions. The protagonist or avatar of Olson’s long poem, or sequence of poems, takes his name from the Neo-platonic philosopher Maximus Tirus (or Maximus of Tyre). Little survives of this Maximus in historical records, other than his *Dissertations* and *The Philosophical Orations*,

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<sup>1</sup> Iain Sinclair, “On the Back of the Elephant: Riding with Charles Olson” in David Herd, Ed. *Contemporary Olson* (Manchester; Manchester University Press, 2015), 306.

<sup>2</sup> Guy Davenport, *A Geography of The Imagination*, (London: Picador, 1981), 82. Heraclitus provides Olson with other fragments and aphorisms used extensively in his teaching and poetry, and in this case the ironic but also appreciative observation from Guy Davenport draws on Olson’s usage and adaptation of the concept that one cannot step into the same river twice, or as rendered in translation of the original: “As they step into the same rivers, different and (still) different waters flow upon them”, Heraclitus, *Fragments: A Text and Translation with a Commentary by T. M. Robinson* Trans. T.M. Robinson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987), *Fragment 12*, 17, as well as: “We step and do not step into the same rivers; we are and are not”, Heraclitus, *Fragment 49a*, 35.

<sup>3</sup> Charles Boer, *Olson in Connecticut* (Chicago: Swallow Press, 1975), 108.

and speculation has it that he could have been one of several personages of that time, leading to the observation that “‘Maximus’ is, moreover, a common name, even for philosophers.”<sup>4</sup> He does appear to have followed, or at least espoused, an ascetic way of life. Olson’s understanding and use of this Maximus may derive in part from such largely unconfirmed fragments.<sup>5</sup> The ambiguity over the precise identity and origins of the historical Maximus suits Olson’s purposes well, for the philosopher and postmodern protagonist alike may also be regarded as a subspecies of sorts; a composite *Homo Maximus*,<sup>6</sup> representative of the world’s “last ‘first’ people” (*CPR*, 19) and an embodiment of Walt Whitman’s assertion that “a man is a summons and a challenge.”<sup>7</sup>

Regarding his most famous protagonist, Olson refers to “this creature ‘Maximus’ [who] addresses himself to a city, which in the instance is Gloucester”. As this thesis will show, Gloucester is conflated with Tyre, the hometown of the historical Maximus, who Olson defines at greater length as

a 2<sup>nd</sup>-century dialectician. At least, on the record, what he wrote was *dialetheia*, which we have, I guess, in the word ‘dialectic’, meaning intellectual essays or essays on intellectual subjects. And he mostly wandered around the Mediterranean world from the old capital of Tyre, talking about one thing, Homer’s *Odyssey*. I don’t have much more impression of him than that. I’ve tried to read his *dialetheia*, and I’ve found them not as interesting as I expected. But he represents to me some sort of figure that centers much more than the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD. In fact, as far as I feel it, like, he’s like the navel of the world; and in saying that I’m not being poetic or loose. We come from a whole kind of life which makes Delphi that center. (*MU*, 15)

In what is arguably his most influential single poem, “The Kingfishers”, Olson reflects on “the E on the stone” (*CP*, 87) which, though enigmatic in meaning, appears to reference the Oracle at Delphi, as metonymic for admittance to a world of unlimited knowledge, access to the secrets of mythology and interaction

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<sup>4</sup> Maximus of Tyre, M.B. Trapp, Trans. and Ed., *The Philosophical Orations* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), xii.

<sup>5</sup> A notebook in the Charles Olson Archive contains the question: “Why Tyre?” and although indistinct, the phrase: “giant as ascetic” (undated manuscript, Storrs), Box 24.

<sup>6</sup> Olson acknowledges Robert Duncan for this term: “the phrase is enough to have done what it did do, put me back on the rail” (Letter, 31 May, 1955, Storrs), Box 51.

<sup>7</sup> Walt Whitman, “Song of the Answerer” in *Leaves of Grass* (London: Penguin Classics, 1986), 130.

with ancestral spirits. The lettered stone, the *omphalos*, also locates the burgeoning of Olson's poetic thought in geo-historical terms at a particular axis of Europe and Asia, encompassing the proverbial polarities of the Occident and Orient, and it is within these parameters and the primordial depths of human existence itself that this avatar is conceived. His genesis can also be seen as commensurate with the idea if not practise of open field poetics. As Jed Rasula, in his ecological critique remarks: "open form poetry is much engaged with the old lore as a legacy affording access to the remote past. The lore ranges from Greece and the Ancient Near East through native cultures around the planet."<sup>8</sup>

The complexity of this interchange and meeting points of culture, poetics and being, reconceived in the postmodern era, is articulated through the course of *The Maximus Poems*, which represent a benchmark for the extended articulation of a particular mode of projectivist poetics, as articulated by Olson himself as he started in on the sequence. The six hundred pages comprise journeys of discovery, missions of recovery and the creation of a unique post-modern stance. They change in style, register and typographical presentation through the course of the three volumes they comprise. Nevertheless, their importance lies in that they convey a brilliantly idiosyncratic, and as this thesis will argue, an urgent and necessary voice. Through the reincarnation of Maximus, Olson relocates the postmodern poet as topologist, scholar of myth and history and builder of bridges between cultures separated by apparent extremes of time and space.

Additionally, and crucially, the poet creates through his epic a gestalt to operate as custodian of place, of law and the enunciation of a poetic duty of care. Gestalt here is taken to mean the incorporation of environment into a being – human or otherwise – attentive to its holistic nature. The concept of "Gestalt Therapy" was developed by intellectual and social philosopher Paul Goodman, who taught regularly at Black Mountain College; the institution with which Olson is most commonly associated. Paul Christensen argues that: "It is Goodman's thesis ... that through the full participation of the organism with the field of its

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<sup>8</sup> Jed Rasula: *This Compost: Ecological Imperatives in American Poetry* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2002), 49.

environment, the self is created, a conception that is at the heart of Olson's poetic theory".<sup>9</sup> The postmodern, Maximus gestalt my thesis refers to is based on this definition, but also extends it to incorporate consideration of Olson's proprioceptive energies, that of the self in participation with its own dynamic, and how the resultant entity can be applied to an environment that can be considered as a range of manifestations, from the subatomic to the transnational. This extension also includes an area of ancient and ongoing cultural being closely aligned to Olson's poetic concerns, yet so far hardly examined, that of Aboriginal Australia.

Maximus performs his epic, or "neo-epic" work in Olson's adopted home "fishing town" of Gloucester, Massachusetts, from where the poet watches the now proverbial rubble of progress being blown. Gloucester, cherished location of childhood summers, became a site of personal significance that took on a spiritual dimension, with the poet acting as custodian of that place and community. Taking his cue from William Carlos Williams' *Paterson*, a protagonist inextricable from place, Maximus the created entity voices a call for the recognition and preservation of polis as a condensed mode of attentiveness and concentration: a psychic bulwark against the mass culture that has degraded the wider continent. The voice of Maximus seeks to recreate the original sense of a polis: a dynamic and self-sufficient entity, an aggregate of people and ideas. For Olson, despite the use of the Greek etymology this is a pre-Classical concept, as his avatar looks "back to an older polis" (*MP*, I.20). As this thesis will demonstrate, Gloucester represents a paradox in that it is central to Olson's poetry, yet also metonymic for any number of liminal, vulnerable and generative locations. There is also the contradiction implicit in a descendant of settlers appearing to claim possession of colonised space. The intensity of the poet's attachment is genuinely felt, however, and operates on a variety of valid levels. Early in the epic, Maximus defines the settlement as a meeting point of place, thought and community, and furthermore one that is continually involved in the process of being thought out or into existence and becoming:

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<sup>9</sup> Paul Christensen, *Charles Olson: Call Him Ishmael* (Austin and London: University of Texas Press, 1979 edition), 30.

Eyes,  
& polis,  
fishermen,  
& poets  
    or in every human head I've known is  
    busy  
both: the attention, and  
the care  
    however much each of us  
    chooses our own  
    kin and  
    concentration  
(MP, I.28)

To this end, and from wild aggregates of poetic information, piles of words at first seeming disjunctive, emerges a finely tuned paradox of trans-historical and transnational presence inextricably linked to his particular location. This presence is one that he both inherits and recreates.

Maximus thus functions as a mouthpiece and presence to articulate the role of a poet, and *poiesis* more generally, against the backdrop of his troubled times. He warns of his community's decline, and in a wider sense that of the concepts and practice of western civilisation. A century after Whitman sang his body electric, Olson sings his; only one that is "dark, drugged and on the edge of collapse."<sup>10</sup> This body is in its own turn metonymic for society itself: a polis beset by erosion and lined with cracks in a "destitute time", when "the ground fails to come",<sup>11</sup> as Martin Heidegger expresses the age in which Maximus has been recreated. The dilemmas of the poetic imperative in this time include whether it is "to attend, singing, to the trace of the fugitive gods",<sup>12</sup> or to relocate that body as part of a broader yet more precise field of attention, as a component of the world, not its centre. If poetry still comprises a valid and effective means of retrieval and rejuvenation of thought and the rediscovery of things, it demands reconsideration of older forms - in particular those that immediately precede the

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<sup>10</sup> David Brooks, Seminar, *Major Movements in Contemporary Poetry* (The University of Sydney, 22/07/2010).

<sup>11</sup> Martin Heidegger, trans. Albert Hofstadter, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, (New York: Harper Perennial Modern Thought, 2013), 92.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.* 92.

misleadingly called free verse - to express its radically changing content. This need not imply lost causes. Olson may be a poet in a time when people have become alienated or “estranged from that with which they are most familiar’, but he also asserts that “any POST-MODERN is born with the ancient confidence that, he *does* belong”, (*O/C* 7, 115)<sup>13</sup> this being to a world where meaning is not absent if the faculties exist to recall it in fragments that can reassemble its totality. *Dysmoron*, or a lack of measure, is a feature of modernity, so the poet’s task is also one to attend to contours and measurements. And a rhapsodist, or “song-stitcher” reassembles fragments into a new chant of coherence.

Through Maximus, Olson works to return a sense of belonging through the articulation of “the his-story of acts of attention which, in *The Maximus Poems*, constitutes his weaving, [and] the very act by which he restores the fabric, the familiarity of place.”<sup>14</sup> The poet proposes that such a restoration involves a search through history, myth, poetry and the roots of language, not only for coherence, but a sense of “inner inherence” which can be achieved once “the WILL TO COHERE is admitted, and its energy taken up” (*CPR*, 172). This involves a gathering of psychic fragments and the restoration of an identity reconstituted through old and new language expressed through individual and communal songs of creation. The polis is inextricable from place, and its fabric, the very text of its existence necessitates a location for the collective energies that enunciate its continued survival. For this to succeed, the entity that is Maximus needs to incorporate the community, its location and mapping as part of his overall gestalt, or holistic sense and expression of being.

This thesis aims to focus on how *The Maximus Poems* enunciates a sense of this gestalt, or wholeness, comprising a character made up of a collection of these disparate elements, and which can be appraised from local, transnational and trans-temporal, perspectives. It takes a comparative view of Olson’s epic, finding

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<sup>13</sup> In this correspondence from 20 August 1951, Olson can be credited with one of the first uses of the term “post-modern” in the context of poetry and poetics (*italics in original*), although his first recorded mention of the term is slightly earlier, in a letter from 9 August the same year, referring to “the post-modern world” as the cumulative effect of voyages of discovery from the Renaissance era and the Industrial Revolution. (*O/C* 7, 75)

<sup>14</sup> Sherman Paul, *Olson’s Push* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1978), 107.

modes of comparison with Australian Aboriginal Art, which engender parallels corresponding to Olson's research into Ancient Mayan culture and the expression of which complements his eccentric and at times ambiguous second-generation settler stance. This extended reading, building on work by Peter Minter,<sup>15</sup> identifies areas of affinity in which re-generative potential for poetry, poetics and community in the wider sense may be found. His passion for Gloucester and his determined stance of custodianship over this location can be seen as essentially nomadic, and his stance unpacked by examining the apparent paradox of transcultural localism. Read at a distance this provides renewed relevance to a voice that may otherwise be assumed to exist either in the margins of post-war American poetics or in an area too esoteric for pragmatic unpacking. Therefore, this thesis shows Olson's universality and even accessibility, and that his avatar of Maximus was far from indulging in intellectual snobbery or seeking to continue T.S. Eliot's concept of a poetics of difficulty.<sup>16</sup> Instead, his tropic acts are those of a poet seeking, and at times stumbling, through a cultural thicket of a changing physical and psychic landscape, of which his being also forms an essential part. His aim is not to confound but create a particular postmodern gestalt, which reaches out to incorporate archaic and indigenous sensibilities. It is in these dimensions; temporal, spatial and corporeal, that the poetry needs to be read.

Maximus embodies a mode of attention that attempts to restore archaic modes of consciousness, leading away from modern to a postmodern reflection of poetic meaning from earlier times. Olson's approach to poetics has been defined as one that attempts to express "the archaic postmodern",<sup>17</sup> extending historian Arnold

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<sup>15</sup> Peter Minter, "Transcultural Projectivism in Charles Olson's "The Kingfishers" and Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri's *Warlugulong*" Herd, Ed., 257-272.

<sup>16</sup> "It is not a permanent necessity that poets should be interested in philosophy, or in any other subject. We can only say that it appears likely that poets in our civilization, as it exists at present, must be *difficult*. Our civilization comprehends great variety and complexity, and this...playing upon a refined sensibility, must produce various and complex results. The poet must become more and more comprehensive, more allusive, more indirect, in order to force, to dislocate if necessary, language into his meaning." T.S. Eliot, "The Metaphysical Poets" in *Selected Essays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1972 3rd Ed), 289. Olson's rejoinder to this use of "dislocate" would be that language, like those who create it, needs location, yet would concur with the sense of those difficulties inherent in functioning as both historian and poet. (See *ML*, 91)

<sup>17</sup> Ralph Maud, "Charles Olson's Archaic Postmodern", *Minutes of The Charles Olson Society*, Vol. 42 (September, 2001), 15.

Toynbee's original concept of the post-modern to incorporate time frames of particular interest to the poet, which he saw occurring in significant, and not necessarily linear shifts. As a poet involved with his "special view of history",<sup>18</sup> his task in clearing the field for his polis to exist entails resistance to the mass culture which has resulted in the predominance of modern state models. Reacting against these, and their concomitant sense of stagnation, gravity or heaviness, habits and practices of lightness, mobility and celerity assist in the search for inner and outer energies to bring about individual and collective coherence.

Despite, or as a result of, its chronological and mythological sweep the concerns of *The Maximus Poems* relate to the present, which is in a perpetual state of coming into being. For example, the mythological Odysseus is not so much a hero, but a man in the process of becoming a hero, and this process depends on the current attentiveness of a reader who is prepared to be educated in Homer. This Odysseus, Maximus, or any other epic figure, is one with a need to recreate and continually contest the ground they stand on. Maximus employs strategies through his poetics to engender and use a form of imaginative violence, in his struggle to prove himself the legitimate custodian of the spaces he inhabits, and that he has the right to call and recall these into being. This contest is one that involves both others and one that takes place within his being. Maximus needs to find his legitimacy as a spokesman for a place he was not born in, and which, as a resident of European descent, he occupies. His struggle is also to find the language, the images and the song to validate his work of custodianship, and to do this, in fact, "in order to be a new American one has to face the Conquistador in the mirror."<sup>19</sup> This mirror for Maximus is internal, and his reflective, confessional voice is one that requires extrapolating from the array of actions and names he presents.

In his breakthrough poem "The Kingfishers", Olson examines how civilisations collapse through a loss of hold on their current world and the one they inherit.

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<sup>18</sup> Olson, *The Special View of History* (Berkeley: Oyez, 1970).

<sup>19</sup> Maud, "Archaic Postmodern", 18.

Olson feels his own civilisation's grip on itself has loosened to the extent that it might come apart and collapse. His purpose is to demonstrate the value of attentiveness to the fundamental needs of the polis, as opposed to the spurious offerings from the new era of advertising through mass media, which diminishes concentration and collective attention spans. His mission is one of urgency, given that a host of other civilisations have disappeared, and this could also happen in turn to his corner of contemporary America, metonymic for a continent that extends beyond national boundaries. Failure to attend to the polis, to clean and restore the stones of its structures, is to invite either the jungle to come back and push in the walls of the entire literal and cultural edifice, or for it to be overwhelmed by the concrete, neon and "mu-sick, mu-sick, mu-sick" (*MP*, I.3) of car parks and shopping malls.

In response to these cultural depredations, Maximus as narrator also functions as observer and gleaner: of debris scattered in the open field, cracked mosaic beneath a mass of boot soles and the ancient drip and flow somewhere under the pavement. Olson is telling his readers to look and listen for the neglected particles of history and above all to sense them. As David Herd points out:

He wanted to emphasize the idea of shaping forces, drawing on the term's meaning in physics. He wanted, crucially, to establish the poem as a means of attending to 'all participants'.... Following the catastrophic disregard for human society that constituted the Second World War, and building on his profoundly cross-disciplinary study of political and economic space in nineteenth-century literature, was a conception of the poem grounded in relations; an aesthetic that made relatedness (of people, objects and ideas) axiomatic to the poem's form and creative practice.<sup>20</sup>

Akin to Whitman narrating his "Song of Myself", Maximus the created entity contains multitudes. Also like Whitman's, his voice is "orotund sweeping and final"<sup>21</sup>, sometimes to the extent of appearing overwhelming. He demands of the world to know the mythological and actual place of the human being as a self-object created by and in turn with a hand in creating the places he inhabits.

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<sup>20</sup> Herd, "Introduction", in Herd, Ed, 3.

<sup>21</sup> Whitman, "Song of Myself", in *Leaves*, 73.

Maximus is intended to represent a man through which others can be known, he embodies a storehouse of both the epic and mundane, and releases figures from the past that converse with the living and dead alike. He is both a resurrection and a summons of his predecessors, and by extension an embodiment of the unique world-moments that have engendered his existence. It is then the task of both poet and reader to actively recognize that each historical and mythological manifestation of the protagonist is on one level an interpretation of world and self as “only a single moment in a universe he creates as it creates him.”<sup>22</sup> It is incumbent upon human beings to interact with the world and be open to it, to develop a mode of attention that Olson argues is often obscured. The task of those who take up this challenge is to investigate that which, in Olson’s words, “is sewn in & binding/ each seam” (*MP*, III.564) of existence.

Through this specific creation, Maximus, a partly historical and partly mythological avatar, Olson examines the physical, temporal and moral erosion of Gloucester, before employing his mythologist’s faculties to restore its psychic integrity. Maximus operates by weaving together the strands and piecing together the fragments of its origins, which are exemplified and presented as nothing less than the universal origins of all human migration and settlement. Fragments and threads are by their nature brittle and easy to lose. The energies embodied in Maximus consist of the urge to protect and gather eroded yet surviving self-objects for the creation of a poetics of custodianship in order to recreate an uneasily settled place. It is this project, with all its apparent and inherent contradictions that comprises the core of *The Maximus Poems* along with the Projectivist and proprioceptive poetics that prepare the way for the full elaboration of Olson’s postmodern epic.

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<sup>22</sup> Charles Altieri, “Olson’s Poetics and the Tradition” in Matthew Corrigan, Ed., *Boundary 2* (1-2), (Binghamton, New York: State University of New York, 1974), 182.

### Reading *The Maximus Poems* from Aboriginal Australia

The introduction of an Australian context to a reading of Olson is through consideration and application of Aboriginal ideas regarding space, place, myth and cosmology. The complexity of a primordial world in which the interactions of self-objects, including human beings, with their environment determined virtually every aspect of existence, resonates with the sophistication of Olson's technique and the astonishing range Maximus encompasses. The term "self-object" here is intended in part to reflect Olson's references to the concept of "Objectism", referring to a sense of phenomenology through which to understand the natural environment in the wake of mid-twentieth century physics and concepts of non-Euclidian geometry.<sup>23</sup> In this context it takes on additional meaning, where human beings, along with all animate entities can be seen as objects, and be in possession of, or even part of, objects in their environment which define them and function as a repository for both their ontological and epistemological being. These self-objects in the Aranda language, for instance, are referred to as *Tjuringa*, and this has become akin to a general definition in English. Anthropologist T.G.H. Strehlow refers to the presence among the Aranda of "stone and wooden sacred objects" and notes that the term also applies to relevant myths and songs, and that "the possession of these sacred objects...brings with it the ownership of the legend, that chant, and the ceremonies associated with them".<sup>24</sup> Everyone in the community has, or is represented by, such *Tjuringa*. Carefully stored in special locations, typically caves, they would on occasions, such as initiation ceremonies, be shown to young men to indicate their embodiment of an ancestor, even in the sense that: "this is your own body from which you have been re-born."<sup>25</sup>

Although it must be acknowledged that Olson would not have had anything like the depth of knowledge required for a full understanding of the role of the *Tjuringa* among the Aranda and other Aboriginal Australian societies, it was certainly a term he was aware of, as evidence from his notebooks shows. Olson's

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<sup>23</sup> Christensen, 19.

<sup>24</sup> T.G.H. Strehlow, *Aranda Traditions* (Carlton, Vic.: Melbourne University Press, 1947), 85.

<sup>25</sup> in Strehlow, 116.

references to Australia and Aboriginal culture are visible, although tantalisingly few. Maximus himself does not make any such reference. Among Olson's papers at Storrs there are some documents of interest that evidence the possibility of this connection. An unpublished poem, cryptic in its nature but striking in its directness of expression and ontological statement, will be examined in Chapter Two when considering inscription and the concept of Law. More directly related to the *Tjuringa* are handwritten notes, including on one sheet of notepaper: "Who's got the churinga?" and "How's your churinga"? as two clearly identifiable, albeit rhetorical questions.<sup>26</sup> The graphology on the rest of the page is less clear, although there is a reference to "elephant feet", which has implications for later sections of this thesis, given Olson's own physical size and his conceptions of other bodily dimensions. The word "shepherd" also seems to be discernible, which indicates that Olson's pastoral, or nomad sense (as explained below) was also on the poet's mind when drafting these notes.<sup>27</sup>

Olson refers to *Tjuringa* in a series of lectures from 1953, where he mentions "churinga" as something sacred, made of wood or stone, and guarded carefully in caves "from secular contagion." He gives his audience to understand "churinga" as part of "a *procession*" which in turn is an aspect of the "celebrations" of "the modern primitive" (*OL* 10, 32) The idea of a procession "with the objective a cave or crevice on rocks in which are stored sacred objects" is then followed in his lecture by his enumeration of a second "celebration", in which the practitioners "take a *winding path* to the cave in memory, they say, of the first divine ancestor to reach the earth; and they compare the ground-paintings of these paths to the coilings and cocoons of grub and chrysalis." (*OL* 10, 32) This speculation is not made with specific reference to Aboriginal Australia, but it follows directly from his interpretation of *Tjuringa*. One can safely assume that he implied Aboriginal art in the above comment, and connections between this ancient form of *poiesis*

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<sup>26</sup> Notes among Olson's papers at Storrs. Box 23. Olson's variation in spelling is retained here, as is Strehlow's (*tjurunga*) below.

<sup>27</sup> Whereas Olson's handwriting is clearer than those of certain Modernist predecessors, notably Pound, it still remains problematic in places. Although the Olson Archive at Storrs used to have a graphologist in situ, at the time of my visit it was up to myself and the efforts of current curator Melissa Watterworth-Batt to decipher some of the more ambiguous areas of Olson's handwritten script.

and Olson's poetry and poetics is a predominant theme in this thesis. Additionally, the presence of the "grub" and "chrysalis" implies the presence of nourishing and transformative non-human presences and life, possibly totemic or ancestral in their activities. Strehlow confirms this with his observation: "The sons and the witchetty grubs and the tjurunga associated with the witchetty grubs are one and the same thing",<sup>28</sup> and that they exemplify a system in which: "They are all visible embodiments of some part of the fertility of the great ancestor of the totem in question."<sup>29</sup> In terms of a poetics in which the human being is connected to all of its "predecession and precessions" (*MP*, II.14) this further explication by Strehlow represents additional interest for a comparative reading:

Every cell, if we may be allowed to phrase it thus, in the body of the original ancestor is a living animal or a living human being: if the ancestor is a 'witchetty grub man', then every cell in his body is potentially either a separate living witchetty grub or a separate living man of the witchetty grub totem.<sup>30</sup>

Totemism and related tropes are the subject of discussion in Chapter Four. As for the presence of the cave, this is will be revealed as a locus of special meaning when considering the concept of proprioceptive Country. A page later in Olson's lecture transcript he refers to "churingas" again, this time giving the definition as "spirit-houses" (*OL* 10, 33), which indicates he had an idea of their function as receptacles for a form of being; one which comprises a mode of psychic habitation that finds similarities in an Algonquin myth of a man with his house on his head, to be discussed later in this thesis. Also from First Nations America, comes the observation by scholar and writer of mixed English, Irish and Osage ancestry, William Least Heat Moon, that before European settlement,

the people who walked here believed stones to be alive because they carried heat, changed their forms, and moved if you watched long enough. To them, rocks were concentrations of power and life; all over the world,

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<sup>28</sup> Strehlow, 16.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.* 17.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.* 17.

where people have not forgotten the wisdom of primitivism, they touch sacred stones to bring fertility.<sup>31</sup>

This implies a universal sense of animism, although the specifics related to each separate culture need separate consideration.

On another notepad in Storrs is the heading: “Imago Wanjina”, although the exact contiguity of these two words is open to interpretation. “Wanjina” or *Waninga* has been defined as “a sacred object emblematic of some totem animal”,<sup>32</sup> and may also include a spear, or lance, (arranged with cross-bars into the shape of a raft)<sup>33</sup> recalling the initial emblem of the *Maximus* epic. It is also a Dreaming being, and as such its figure may not be used improperly. Why Olson has taken the English translation and used it alongside the Latin for “image” can be explained as follows. Of importance to Olson’s poetics of the body, and the Maximus gestalt, in the notes that come beneath this heading, which comment on Leonardo da Vinci’s investigations into autopsy, concluding, in Olson’s paraphrase, that “the organization of our body is such a marvel that the soul, although a ‘thing divine’ only separates itself with the greatest suffering from the body that it has inhabited.”<sup>34</sup> Etymologically, autopsy refers to the observation of the self: sacred and everyday, and a source of a range of sensations, it is this self in concert with its habitation that comprises the overall gestalt.

As mentioned, such comparative assumptions need to be approached with care, despite such apparent elements of affinity. Had Olson left evidence of having been more extensively versed in Aboriginal Australian theology, for instance, he might well have related to the idea that: “Much of Aboriginal religion has to do...with the problems of human beings in their spatial and temporal environment .... There is reassurance from the past, and hope for the future, an

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<sup>31</sup> Least Heat Moon also laments that in contemporary America, “when a ... farmer lines his fields with ‘inert’ granulated rock, in his chemistry there is no informing poetry, no myth. Yet, to think of rock can be to dream origins and be reminded of the old search for the philosopher’s stone, that elixir basic to all substance.” William Least Heat Moon, *PrairyErth* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1991), 160.

<sup>32</sup> Baldwin Spencer and F.J. Gillen, *The Arunta: A Study of a Stone Age People* (London: MacMillan, 1927), Vol. 1, 184.

<sup>33</sup> Spencer and Gillen, Vol. 1, 190.

<sup>34</sup> Storrs. Box 50.

affirmation that man is not entirely helpless, whatever hardships he may suffer at times.”<sup>35</sup> His invocation of salient self-objects, such as the bird and the flake racks for drying fish in Gloucester function as personal connections to place that borders on the concept of totemism. In other words, the animate and even inanimate presences in his locality are of literally metaphysical importance, and as such not dissimilar from certain tropes and participants in ritual performances in Aboriginal communities and ceremonies.

Olson was not alone among his contemporaries in creating poetry and poetics that finds correlatives with this particular sense of being. Contemporary poet and friend of Olson’s, Robert Duncan, wrote about the poetics inherent in Aboriginal Australian mythology and ritual, including those directly involving the body and sacred objects, which will be discussed in this thesis. Duncan also makes a telling comparison in this context with the pre-Socratic philosopher who did more than perhaps any other to influence Olson’s beliefs:

Here [in an emu myth of the Aranda] the *altjiranga mitjina*, the ones living in a dream of time more real than the mortality of the time past, invade the immediate scene. For the Australians as for Heraclitus, ‘Immortal mortals mortal immortals, their being dead is the other’s life.’ The things lost in time return and are kept in the features of the place.<sup>36</sup>

This example, and Duncan’s interpretation, could almost form a paraphrase from which the treatment of comparative mythology and the fusion of body and place are expressed in *The Maximus Poems*. A contemporary to discern a more direct link between Olson’s poetry and poetics and those of Aboriginal Australia is Jerome Rothenberg, whose journal *Alcheringa* put forward in a “Statement of Intention”, aiming to “emphasize by example and commentary the relevance of tribal poetry to where we are today”, and to incorporate the promotion and study of such poetry and poetics as a way of effecting a reconciliation with the archaic nature of human existence.<sup>37</sup> The “Preliminaries” section immediately

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<sup>35</sup> Ronald M. Berndt and Catherine H. Berndt, *The World of The First Australians* (Dee Why, NSW: Lansdowne Press, 1982), 288.

<sup>36</sup> Robert Duncan, *The H.D. Book* (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 2011), 163.

<sup>37</sup> Jerome Rothenberg and Dennis Tedlock, Eds., *Alcheringa: Ethnopoetics*, Vol. 1 (1) (New York: Stony Brook Poetics, Fall 1970), 1.

following cites anthropologist W.E.H. Stanner, whose work *White Man Got No Dreaming* will be discussed extensively in this thesis. Rothenberg cites Stanner's definition of the Dreaming as the first of these "Preliminaries", as including: "a kind of narrative of things that once happened; a kind of charter of things that still happen, & a kind of principle of *logos* of order transcending everything significant",<sup>38</sup> in other words the generative force behind creativity and creation. At the bottom of the page is an excerpt from Olson's essay "Human Universe": "O they were hot for the world they lived in these Maya - hot to get it down the way it was - the way it is, my fellow citizens."<sup>39</sup> It is using this comparative mode, including Olson's studies into Ancient Mayan culture, and with the impulse to preserve and respect Indigenous poetry and poetics that this thesis aims to juxtapose aspects of Aboriginal Australian poesis with the whole Maximus project.

Maximus as custodian of occupied place embodies a fundamental paradox: that of a settler enunciating a concept of Country that is traditionally the domain of its Indigenous inhabitants. Academic and writer Professor Kenneth Lincoln, who was adopted into an Oglala Sioux family, notes somewhat ironically: "American poets long to be *Native American*", including Olson with Snyder, Duncan, Rothenberg and Creeley. He admits this also applies to non-Americans: "Marx and Engels on the communal Iroquois. Kafka on the back of a disappearing Indian pony. Dylan Thomas, on his hands and knees, playing Indian in the Welsh gorse."<sup>40</sup> Reading Olson from a comparative perspective with the arts of Aboriginal Australia serves both to highlight and resolve the issues of poesis involved. At first, glance, his intense attachment to locality, largely as an individual, and over the course of a single lifetime, does not appear remotely comparable with communal bonds to country developed over millennia. Having acknowledged this, elements of his voice embody a function which can be described as recalling or singing out to Country, and finds parallels with

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<sup>38</sup> in Rothenberg, *Alcheringa*, Vol. 1 (1), 2.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid. Vol.1 (1), 2.

<sup>40</sup> Kenneth Lincoln, *Sing with the Heart of a Bear, Fusions of Native and American Poetry 1890-1999* (University of California Press; Berkeley, 2000), 136.

prominent contemporary readings of Australian Aboriginal poetics.<sup>41</sup> Academic and specialist in environmental humanities, Deborah Bird Rose, cites Paddy Fordham Wainburranga, of Arnhem Land, recalling that he was taught to address Country as a way of regarding it attentively, realising its actuality, immanence and the interconnectedness of all species with the human being.<sup>42</sup>

The concept of Country is complex, especially when seen through the eyes of non-Indigenous scholars. Not only is a range of its specific and tangible elements included in the singular form of the word, but it is also the cultural preserve of ancient societies, which are still subject to the effects of ongoing political, cultural and linguistic colonisation and acculturation. Rose defines it in the following terms:

Country is multidimensional: it consists of people, animals, plants, Dreamings, underground, earth, soils, minerals and waters, surface water, and air. There is sea country and land country; in some areas people talk about sky country. Country has origins and a future; it exists both in and through time.... A fundamental proposition is that ... the living things of a country take care of their own.<sup>43</sup>

Aboriginal art is inextricably linked with Country, and although this provides potential ground for a multi-dimensional understanding of the art arising from it, also poses a problematic in that the Dreaming myths that create Country are not readily understandable to non-Aborigines. The recurrent and eternal nature of such myths does imply certain universal tropes and themes, but these are often and inevitably present, and presented, within the context of a poetics of difficulty. Originally articulated by Eliot, as mentioned above, this is can more recently be discerned in the poetry and poetics of Lionel Fogarty, arguably the most well-known contemporary Australian Aboriginal poet, who deliberately conflates languages and disrupts grammatical patterns. Fogarty's background and aim in doing this is obviously and markedly different from his non-

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<sup>41</sup> The terms "talk to the country" and "singing out" to Country come from Indigenous interviewees in Deborah Bird Rose, *Nourishing Terrains: Australian Aboriginal Views of Landscape and Wilderness* (Canberra: Australian Heritage Commission, 1996), 14.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.* 14.

<sup>43</sup> Rose, *Reports From A Wild Country: Ethics for Decolonisation* (Sydney: University of New South Wales, 2004), 153.

Indigenous American predecessors, with his stated aim to resist social and linguistic colonisation.<sup>44</sup> Nevertheless, a similarity of technique and a certain impulse of intention can be detected in some of the less accessible passages in the second volume of *The Maximus Poems*, that demand both time and a willingness to explore not only esoteric knowledge but alternative modes of being, also exemplify a situation where additional attentiveness is required of a reader to uncover the layers and unpack the paradoxes of poetry created by the descendant of settlers, as a attempt to recreate inclusivity and cultural meaning in an invaded and appropriated landscape.

It is important to note that Country refers to process as much as place, and comes about from a state of continual origin in which all life rises from the land, making the land itself a map, and that this mapping is a representation or more accurately re-enactment of the mysterious and often misunderstood concept of creation known as Dreaming, as mentioned by Rose in the extract above. Dreaming, or to use the Arunta or Aranda term *Alchera* or *Alcheringa*,<sup>45</sup> relates to the origins of life on earth as understood by Indigenous Australians, but it is not simply an imagined or idealized past but an ongoing, continual state of affairs. As Peter Sutton points out: “The use of the English word *Dreaming* is more a matter of analogy than of translation.”<sup>46</sup> The English word can imply a dichotomy which contrasts it with wakefulness, whereas in Indigenous terms this could not be further from reality. Sutton goes on to observe that: “In traditional Aboriginal thought, there is no central dichotomy of the spiritual and material, the sacred and secular, or the natural and supernatural.”<sup>47</sup> This correlates to how Olson presents his particular landscape: not only the centrality of place to his poetics and the special, specific nature of places that might otherwise appear featureless to an untrained eye, but the acknowledgment implicit in the poetry, as this thesis will show, that the land is holy and everyday, specific and universal, and above

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<sup>44</sup> Fogarty states: “I see words beyond any acceptable meaning, this is how I express my dreaming” in Lionel Fogarty, *New and Selected Poems, Munaldjali, Mutuerjaraera* (South Melbourne: Hyland House, 1995), ix.

<sup>45</sup> See Spencer and Gillen, 72/3 and W.E.H Stanner, *White Man Got No Dreaming: Essays, 1938-1973* (Canberra: Australian National University, 1979), 23.

<sup>46</sup> Peter Sutton, *Dreamings: The Art of Aboriginal Australia* (New York: Viking and Asia Society Galleries, 1988), 15. Italics in original.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid. 16.

all else fully alive. To Stanner, the Dreaming constitutes “a kind of *logos* or principle of order”,<sup>48</sup> to which Rose adds that it has “enduring qualities” as a “particular kind of map”<sup>49</sup> which can be used with reference to all known time frames. For Olson, this form of reference and these concepts find parallels in his approach to Gloucester and its surrounds.

Country holds truth and memory, and this needs to be acknowledged before consideration of human metaphysics, which cannot exist in isolation, in an abstract or theoretical way. Swain reasserts: “If there is one principle permeating the Law it is *geosophy*: all knowledge and wisdom derives, through Abiding Events (Dreamings), from place.”<sup>50</sup> The stress on place differentiates it from the notion of a unified, singular space, which in itself would be disembodied and abstracted from locality. Place is vital as it combines a sense of the practical and mythological, cosmic and local. As Swain states regarding the creation of the places that comprise the lived cosmos: “all that was not localised was discarded. There was no possibility of a Utopia....All cosmology focused on discrete, known, observed sites.”<sup>51</sup> As such, it needs to be noted and reiterated that not only the expression but precise, scientific recreation of the human being within socially reconstructed Aboriginal place, including the use of these self-objects as representations of vital, internal processes, finds a counterpart in Olson’s use of Alfred North Whitehead’s philosophy and Martin Heidegger’s phenomenology, as will be demonstrated later in this thesis.

Significantly, the word “Country” is used without a definite article or possessive pronoun as it is “not only a common noun but also a proper noun ... a living entity with a yesterday, today and tomorrow, with a consciousness, and a will toward life.”<sup>52</sup> Sea, sky and landscapes alike comprise this concept of Country, which is in constant correspondence with those who approach it closely enough

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<sup>48</sup> W.E.H. Stanner, *White Man Got No Dreaming: Essays 1938-1973* (Canberra, Australian National University Press, 1979), 24.

<sup>49</sup> Rose, *Dingo Makes Us Human: Life and Land in an Aboriginal Australian Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 44.

<sup>50</sup> Tony Swain, *A Place for Strangers: Towards an Australian Aboriginal Sense of Being* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 25.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.* 29.

<sup>52</sup> Rose, *Nourishing*, 7.

for such a dialogue to take place. This thesis will show that considering locations as superficially disparate as those inhabited by Fordham Wainburranga in the Northern Territory of Australia and Olson on the eastern seaboard of America, the modes of poetic attention they engender can be seen comparatively, through recreation of spaces that exist in a mode that is absolutely present, immanent and Indigenous.

Admittedly, Australia as a site for a comprehensive reading of *The Maximus Poems* may at first appear unlikely. Precedents for the reception let alone recreation of an Antipodean, Olsonian poetics were few and unpromising among Australian responses during the poet's lifetime. Essays by non-Indigenous Australian poets on their American counterparts collected as *The American Model* include Robert Gray's disparaging comments on Olson's tendency towards "quasi-mystical overstatement",<sup>53</sup> contrasting his achievement unfavourably against that of Pound and claiming his theories had been derived from those expressed and practiced by D.H. Lawrence. In the same work, Vincent Buckley is more conciliatory, pointing out the usefulness and validity of a spatial poetics which creates meaning by locating the human being in a place and simultaneously "specifying home, the place of roots, by moving outward across or up the enabling continent".<sup>54</sup> He implies that for both Australia and America, where the country in the sense of a state has become synonymous with the continent itself, that such a poetics is of significance in understanding the interplay between poetry, poetics and national culture.

Buckley's essay goes further, pointing out that Olson and other seemingly unrelated schools of poetry, such as those associated with the later work of Robert Lowell and Ted Hughes contain ""transverse or lateral statements which are also perceptions of *things* and, in being so, perceptions of the significance of human life which the successive transverse moments, in their very process,

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<sup>53</sup> Robert Gray, "Poetry and Living: an Evaluation of the American Poetic Tradition", in Joan Kirby, Ed., *The American Model: Influence and Independence in Australian Poetry* (Sydney: Hale & Iremonger, 1982), 129.

<sup>54</sup> Vincent Buckley, "Ease of American Language", in Kirby, Ed., 151.

arrive at, step by step.”<sup>55</sup> This implies, in other words, a fluidity which is not overtly didactic but which attempts to inculcate a mode of being through example, as well as embodying the essence of a projectivist and nomadic poetics, as will be explained below. To argue over whether other key works connected to place, such as *Paterson*, the British poet Basil Bunting’s *Briggflatts* or by implication Olson’s epic are more geographical or historical in scope is to miss the more universal point that “geography is the map of history, and history the very backbone of a landscape (that is where history is known or knowable).”<sup>56</sup> Buckley goes on to indicate how Olson’s poetics are especially relevant to an Australian context, “in which a record of habitation up to the last 200 years is in some important senses non-historical: not at all concerned with specifiable events, still less with causal links between them, but with all the eventfulness gone into an a-historical world of myth and ritual.”<sup>57</sup> Like the geographical perceptions of the protagonists Maximus and Paterson, the mid to late-twentieth century Australian poetic gestalt is informed by that apparently paradoxical merging of the intensely local and sweepingly transcontinental outlook that comprised Olson’s main influences. Even present-day Australia, after all, remains sparsely populated, much like the New England of Olson’s time, and certainly during the critical years that determined the colony’s survival, trans-continental and local politics were both vital concerns.

Situating the resistance put up by Olson and his contemporaries against mass culture finds current and urgent relevance on a continent inhabited by what has now been proved to be the oldest continual human culture on earth. Within this context the messages derived from and speaking through the Olsonian human universe become actual and contemporary. Contemporary American society where “the towns have died at their centers and thrown up a circular scab around themselves, a commercial carnival”,<sup>58</sup> as Davenport notes, finds a parallel development occurring on an ancient land mass now infected by the “five teeming sores” of the major cities on its surface, as Australian poet, A.D. Hope

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<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.* 152.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.* 157.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.* 154.

<sup>58</sup> Davenport, 87.

acerbically observes.<sup>59</sup> Both these despoiled areas therefore provide, however tragically and ironically, a palimpsest for a singer, artisan and architect such as Maximus, to work at the recreation of the essence of a continent through an appreciation of the self and place, or self within a set of places.

Topos, Typos, Tropos

The triad that constitutes: topos, typos and tropos was first mentioned by Olson in his “Letter to Elaine Feinstein” of 1959, as: “The basic trio ... 3 in 1. The ‘blow’ hits here, and me, ‘bent’ as born and of sd one’s own decisions for better or worse .... if this sounds ‘mystical’ I plead so.” (*CPR*, 252) The last page of a notebook at Storrs, dated ca. 1963, consists of the following explication:

|             |                            |         |
|-------------|----------------------------|---------|
| mathematics | Topos<br>(physical         | to give |
| de anime    | Typos<br>(print            | to give |
|             | Tropos<br>(direction       | to give |
|             | interpolated               |         |
|             | (portions of <sup>60</sup> |         |

A mathematics of the soul can be readily explained by his 3 in 1 formulation, and may well constitute a hearkening to his religious, Catholic upbringing. However, another triad which he appended to a letter to the faculty of Black Mountain College as early as 1952, indicates how he saw mathematics: “In the syntax of the sentence of the universe, one can distinguish three sciences: *physics* as noun (nature), *mathematics* as verb (‘to learn’), and that adverbial function, *metaphysics* (‘beyond’ physics).” (*OL* 8, 33) The topos and typos addenda seem

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<sup>59</sup> A.D. Hope, “Australia”, in *Selected Poems*, Ed. David Brooks (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1992), 71.

<sup>60</sup> Olson notebook, at Storrs, ca. 1963, Box 24.

straightforward in their definitions. The tropes, or directions will be explored later considering his self-confessed turning or twisting between his birthplace and the town where he finally settled. The phrase “interpolated portions of” remains problematic. Legible, and written immediately underneath the triadic formulation, it probably constitutes a reminder that these are not just abstract terms, but denote real, tangible insertions and interjections into both life and the text of an epic that was already well under way.

The triad has been summarised by Catharine R. Stimpson as constituting a “maneuver [a]s the descent into and the ascent from the dark cave of the self, during which we discover the sun within and the sun without.”<sup>61</sup> This has significant implications for the creation of a proprioceptive self, which Olson was to outline in more detail a decade later, and also for the formation of a Maximus gestalt. This is the expression of a created, holistic entity which comprises the outcome of a project whereby he initially articulates a particular sense of *topos*, in which the land and its custodians create one another as part of an ongoing, dynamic inter-relationship. The ground that is physically and psychically traversed is then built on with words, creating a specific form of *typos* with reference to written as opposed to oral language. On ground that has become striated, by contrast with smooth, original space, there are also cracks in the brickwork of words and the physical and cultural edifices it supports. Olson’s task includes the attempt to create a unity – or gestalt - from multiple strands and tropes within this particular sense of being. In his own words: “tropism to my mind...when I knew there was a sun, I mean a helio inside myself, so that everything, that every other human being, that every thing in creation, was something that I could see if I kept that experience.” (*MU*, 247) Charles Altieri sees the triad as an attempt to bring together metaphysics and the archetypes of myth to recover a sense of cosmic unity:

Topos, a term behaviourists might equate with environment, refers to the energy of a place as it pushes its way into proper names; it is quite literally the effect of the ground upon consciousness (*PT*, 42) Typos refers to those energies deriving from the metaphoric book we read to find

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<sup>61</sup> Katharine R. Stimpson, “Charles Olson: Preliminary Images” in Corrigan, Ed. 168.

names; it calls our attention to recurrent forms, be they psychic archetypes or 'imprints' of nature (*PT*, 55)..... Finally, Olson uses the idea of tropos to describe the force that reconciles the energies of place with the forms of typological consciousness. Tropos is tropism, a dynamic force at once 'ourselves' in our response to the influx of cosmic energy and the power by which we obey cosmic laws; it depends on the deepest response of particular beings, yet demands as well obedience to cosmic rhythms."<sup>62</sup>

Altieri is prescient in identifying elements of Olson's triad that remain of relevance to a transnational reception of *The Maximus Poems* nearly half a century further on, as well as a reading that hinges on a less time dependent consciousness. This is one that operates in unity with its environment, arising from it but never relinquishing its energies derived from and thus comprising its embedded response to place. The archetypes and natural imprints outlined are arguably Western forms of naming a far older mode of being and reflective practice associated with that way of existence. Consciously or not, not long after Olson's death, Altieri was effectively outlining an Indigenous scene of reading, where the "deepest response" combines the application of human geography, via morphology of human beings and their landscapes, to the creation of a holistic entity that truly stands for the primordial origins as well as the continuity of the species.

For Miriam Nichols, the terms constitute the creation and enunciation of a field in which history from the archaic on overlaps with space and place, resulting in:

a shareable human universe, and subjectivity with singular troping on this field. *The Maximus Poems* articulate typos as the enduring, mythical component of psychic and cultural morphology; topos as complex geo-social history; and tropos as the response of the individual to these existential givens.<sup>63</sup>

This thesis acknowledges these critical responses, and also puts forward the idea of typos as being dependent on the construction of language, which is in turn dependent on the constructs that create the notion of topos, as articulated by Altieri. Furthermore, it extends Nichols' definition of tropos to include the

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<sup>62</sup> Altieri, "Tradition", 180/1.

<sup>63</sup> Miriam Nichols, "Myth and Document in Charles Olson's *Maximus Poems*", in Herd, Ed., 28/9.

essential idea of the individual being constructed out of “existential givens” as a precondition for his or her response to these. In any event, the poetry and poetics that he creates from this strategy bring together the body, ground, country and acts of poetic maintenance into a gestalt that comprises modern and pre-modern loci with concepts of living beings as place, language and recreation.

### Nomadology

Among the most important philosophical and critical theories that will be looked at closely in this thesis are those provided by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, which have yet to be discussed in depth with regard to Olson. These extend and bring together strands of consciousness relating to ways of regarding space, within contexts of both the archaic and postmodern. They also investigate interactions between outer and inner space, and the articulation of a poetics that exists in the porous and liminal areas between these can be effectively examined through their frameworks. The two volumes of their major collaborative work, published as *Anti-Oedipus*<sup>64</sup> and *A Thousand Plateaus*,<sup>65</sup> and specifically the treatise *Nomadology: The War Machine*,<sup>66</sup> contain ideas and an overall theory of space that can be applied to a new critical evaluation of Olson as topologist. Although Deleuze and Guattari commenced these closely connected works shortly after Olson’s death, and cannot be seen as entirely contemporaneous, they contain and elaborate on concerns fundamental to *The Maximus Poems*. Pierre Joris states that “it is clear that the one thinker in Europe who, without knowing Olson, expanded on Olsonian themes is Gilles Deleuze (w/Félix Guattari)” and of *A Thousand Plateaus* comments that it is “a book I am certain Olson would have delighted in.”<sup>67</sup> Jed Rasula concurs, proposing that as a result of “what...Deleuze calls nomad thought...we see that each saying [needs to be]

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<sup>64</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem and Helen R. Lane (University of Minnesota, 1983, London: Continuum, 2004).

<sup>65</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Trans. Brian Massumi (University of Minnesota, 1987, London: Continuum, 2004).

<sup>66</sup> Originally published as part of *A Thousand Plateaus*, re-issued as Deleuze and Guattari, Trans. Massumi, *Nomadology: The War Machine*, (New York: Semiotext(e), 1986).

<sup>67</sup> Pierre Joris, *Justifying the Margins*, (Cambridge: Salt, 2009), 150.

bound up with its unsaying. The classical image of civilized citizen allows only certainties. Charles Olson, following John Keats, proclaims the necessity of *persisting in doubt and uncertainties*.<sup>68</sup> Joris himself provides a corollary to the work of Deleuze and Guattari with his book *A Nomad Poetics*,<sup>69</sup> which provides an invaluable strand linking it to Olson. There has, as yet, been no comprehensive study of this connection.

The themes of space and human construction and care of place as articulated by Deleuze and Guattari contribute to an understanding of *The Maximus Poems* that builds on existing criticism of Olson's work and demonstrates that Olson's achievement is more extensive in its scope than previously acknowledged. Of particular interest is the Second Axiom proposed by their *Nomadology* treatise, that: the creation of a war machine by nomad societies consists of "three aspects, a spatio-geographic aspect, an arithmetic or algebraic aspect, and an affective aspect." (N, 49) This finds an affinity with Olson's inclination to order pronouncements on poetics into sets of three, and hints at a methodology to adumbrate the three volumes of *The Maximus Poems*. The topological and typological aspects of the poems are presented most clearly in the first two volumes, whereas the "affective" or mystical and metaphysical voice is arguably more evident in the poems that comprise the final volume, written towards the end of the poet's life. Tropic activity brings an integrated universe into being through the use of space and imprints upon it together with both projective activity and a proprioceptive stance as a perpetual recreation of a person within and in conjunction with a network or set of places constructed from sacred and everyday space. Therefore this reading of Olson makes it necessary to consider the meeting points at which the smooth space (to use the Deleuzian term) of the ocean meets ground that can be seen as settled or occupied country. This is a generative area of poetic space, and combined with the coastal location and

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<sup>68</sup> Rasula, 179. Rasula provides here a definition of Keats's concept of "negative capability", which was influential on Olson's thought, namely that the creation of space inside the self is necessary to more thoroughly and objectively apprehend ideas and space from without. For the original formulation see Keats: "Negative Capability, that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason", *The Letters of John Keats 1814-1821*, Ed. Hyder Edward Rollins in 2 Vols (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1958), 193.

<sup>69</sup> Joris, *A Nomad Poetics* (Middleton, CT.: Wesleyan University Press, 2003).

construction of Gloucester, results in *The Maximus Poems* articulating what I term a liminal polis.

### Background

Olson was born in Worcester, Massachusetts, as the son of a postal worker: an early photograph shows him in his father's mail sack.<sup>70</sup> Growing up, Olson would also carry mail as a summer job. Both carrying and having been carried around with the letters remained a lasting trope for his life and work – such embodiment and responsibility for the circulation of words in his locality fits in well with the idea of custodianship: doing the rounds to ensure the continuity of a literate community and a literary place. Ideas won through walking formed a basis for his outlook on history and culture, that of finding out for oneself, or *'istorein*: a concept not only learned from Herodotus,<sup>71</sup> but put into practice through the physical affirmation of an area by literally pacing it out.

Childhood summers were spent in Gloucester, and formed the basis of his passionate, lasting attachment to the place that became his permanent home during the latter part of his life. One of the most significant areas in the town is Stage Fort Park, an area overlooking the harbour where Olson spent most of his childhood summers, and which recurs in no fewer than a dozen of the poems, Stage Fort itself being mentioned in fifteen, and other geographic stage referents

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<sup>70</sup> First published (posthumously) as the cover for Olson's collection of three short stories, *The Post Office* (Bollinas, California: Grey Fox Press, 1975).

<sup>71</sup> Olson refers to his way of discovery for and through one's own self as *"'istorin"*, Anglicizing the original Greek (see for example his "Letter to Elaine Feinstein", *CPR*, 251) Herodotus is sparing with explicit reference to his methodology. He is willing to admit the differences between his own conjectures, and information derived from hearsay in contrast to what he claims to have ascertained first-hand. Interestingly in the context of Olson's reading, Herodotus strongly asserts the evidence of his own observation in terms of the geography and specifically geology of North Africa, and how these affect cultural morphology, which finds parallels in the significance Olson accords to work done in the same fields by his own contemporary and abiding influence, Carl Ortwin Sauer (see below, also Herodotus: *The Histories*, trans. Aubrey de Sélincourt, (Penguin Classics, 2003) 99/100. John Marincola, editor of this edition, adds that whereas Herodotus would employ different methods suited to each location and set of events, and that secondary sources were sometimes the only information available, he also implied that the evidence of his own eyes, or literally "autopsy", constituted the preferred basis of his conclusions. This comment also has relevance when considering the work of proprioceptive cultural and historical dissection undertaken by Maximus (Op.cit. "Introduction"), xx.

in as many again. From a practical perspective, the stages of Gloucester were simply constructed as areas for cleaning and drying fish. In *The Maximus Poems* there is the implication that their presence implies not only a correlative for the living, open space before them, but also designated space for performative and custodial activity, which gives the community its sense of identity and through which it survives.

Olson attended Wesleyan and Harvard universities. He completed coursework for a PhD in American Civilization at Harvard, but did not go on to write a thesis. His Master's dissertation, *The Growth of Herman Melville, Prose Writer and Poetic Thinker* (Wesleyan, 1933), provided the initial impetus for his breakthrough prose piece, *Call Me Ishmael*, eventually published over a decade later. Olson, *Call Me Ishmael* (New York: Reynal & Hitchcock, 1947, and collected in *CPR*). The essay is a startling, original push against Melville's Ahab as representative of a struggle for the psychic health of humankind depending:

not on the development of this separatist consciousness, as exemplified by Ahab, but on the reintegration of consciousness into the unconscious, as exemplified by Ishmael, whose destiny is to return at will and in obedience to the circumambient mandala of the vortex. From Coleridge, Goethe and Melville, to such major contemporary artists as Frank Lloyd Wright, D.H. Lawrence, Henry Moore and Jackson Pollock there has been, in our patriarchal and fiercely technologic time, a powerful re-expression of maternal, primitivist imagery.<sup>72</sup>

This is in response to ego-maniacs like Ahab, in his "wilful, vengeful...solipsism" (*CPR*, 66) representing the culmination of the westward-seeking settlers, and who: "is Western man at the limit of himself and his extricable past, no farther west to go but to dig in deeper where he stands."<sup>73</sup> As Olson concludes, towards the end of his piece: "Ahab is full stop." (*CPR*, 105) The implications and contradictions inherent in this statement will be reflected through examination of Olson's bodily poetics later in this thesis. The value of Olson's essay also lies in his attempt to see Gloucester from a vantage point of the earliest possible migrations his research is able to detect. This may be why scholar George

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<sup>72</sup> Martin Pops, "Melville: To Him, Olson", in Corrigan, Ed. 80.

<sup>73</sup> Butterick, xxi.

Butterick notes that: "The scope of *The Maximus Poems* is all outlined in the last pages of *Call Me Ishmael*."<sup>74</sup>

According to Butterick's chronology, initial ideas for *The Maximus Poems* were also conceived in 1947 during a trip to Gloucester.<sup>75</sup> Melville's influence is evident in evocations of a seafaring community and the ocean, although unlike his mentor Olson was forced to admit: "The sea was not, finally, my trade" (*MP*, I.52). In fact, Olson left academic circles briefly to work in the Foreign Language Division of the Office of War Information, and was integrated sufficiently into this environment to be referred to in retrospect as a political "New Dealer."<sup>76</sup> Yet, this government bureaucracy was not his ultimate calling either, and in the wake of Roosevelt's death and Truman's accession, heralding the socially conformist 1950s and its attendant mass culture, Olson found himself if not actively seeking out then being almost naturally drawn towards full time writing and the peripheries of mainstream academia, as evidenced by his eventual position as rector at the experimental Black Mountain College (1951-1956): an exercise in alternative cultural and communal living.

It was not until Olson was in his late thirties that his first collection, *y & x*, came out.<sup>77</sup> Addressing expansive themes of history, time and space, elements of *y & x* prefigure *The Maximus Poems*. The first of *The Maximus Poems*, "I, Maximus of Gloucester, to You" was written in 1950. The epic occupied most of Olson's energy until his death in 1970 and there are indications that even then he considered it unfinished. The first poem from the second volume, "Maximus from Dogtown - I", was written in 1959, and the following year a selection was given prominence in the landmark *The New American Poetry*.<sup>78</sup> The second volume was eventually published as *Maximus IV, V, VI*, in London, in 1968, although the

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<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.* xxi.

<sup>75</sup> Butterick notes in his "Chronology" section under 1947: "Visit to Gloucester in June, lunch with Alfred Mansfield Brooks, director of the Cape Ann Historical Society: the [*sic*] *Maximus Poems* conceived." (lxii).

<sup>76</sup> Robert Von Hallberg, *Charles Olson: The Scholar's Art*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978), 5. Olson's position in the Office of War Information has drawn more recent accusations of his tacit role in actually contributing to the spread of US Imperialism, an issue which will be addressed in detail below.

<sup>77</sup> Olson, *y & x* (Paris: Black Sun Press, 1949).

<sup>78</sup> Donald M. Allen, ed. *The New American Poetry: 1945-1960* (New York: Grove, 1965).

poems themselves had been completed, and read in their entirety, five years previously.

Olson's prose is also reflective of the late starter, whose output gathered momentum once the initial works came to completion. A key date is 1950, which saw the publication of the landmark essay "Projective Verse" in *Poetry New York*. This essay had a significant and lasting influence on a diverse range of contemporaries and it remains a seminal text on postmodern and free verse poetics. It also is responsible for the fact that his reputation remains based on his pronouncements regarding poetic technique. Ironically, Olson's poems, many of which can be considered accessible to a wider readership than his methodology might imply, are known to comparatively few. As with Melville, recognition for his magnum opus during his lifetime was scant, and the extent of his achievement with *The Maximus Poems* is yet to be fully appreciated.

### Poetics

Olson wrote "Projective Verse" and the first volume of *The Maximus Poems* a century on from the previous benchmark for the American epic, Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*. Whitman's *magnum opus* had as its inspiration and point of departure the greater Romantic lyric, involving the presentation of experience already had, through poetic recollections and contemplation. These in turn typically lead to a conclusion which might state the meaning of that experience; a retrospective voice, in other words. The open or "projective" poem, by contrast, can be said not to know where it is going nor where it may end, and involves the projection of the self into an area which may not contain more than clues as to its route or destination. The poem thus becomes a way of discovering and perceiving, rather than a way of recording what has already been apprehended. Or to put it another way, what the poet is looking for is already in the mind, hence the importance of archetypes and the archaic as elements of poetic creation.

In “Projective Verse”, Olson puts forward a typical cluster of three concepts, or proposals: “(projectile (percussive (prospective)” (*CPR*, 239). Poetry is to be launched, it is to be heard and it functions as a way of finding things out, not least itself. The field is not so much a space upon which a poem has been composed, but an essential element of its composition. Every human element is connected, therefore so are all aspects of language formation, movement, action and expression:

the HEAD, by way of the EAR to the SYLLABLE  
the HEART, by way of the BREATH, to the LINE  
(*CPR*, 242)

Poetic measure is to be arrived at through the natural yet variable rhythm of breathing, and its prosody achieved through the cadence of the same, rising and falling with the extension of human movement and length of its attention span. Singing, of course, can happen in silence, just as a dance can arise from an unlikely source and articulate itself without physical motion, but sitting down in one spot, taking small, psychic leaps.

However cryptic such a formulation may appear, its aim is towards the reverse, that of un-concealment, or in the classical expression: *aletheia* (disclosure or truth). Projective acts seek to discover and name things, as if for the first time, without having preconceived their presence in the poem. Phenomena have their identities, and these are constantly waiting to be named, just as their territory is there to be charted. In the words of Martin Heidegger:

Only this naming nominates beings *to* their being *from out of* their being. Such saying is a projecting of the clearing, in which announcement is made of what it is that beings come into the Open *as*. Projecting is the release of a throw by which unconcealedness submits and infuses itself into what is as such.<sup>79</sup>

Poetic creation is therefore a venture, a release and projection into unknown territory, where the poem itself resides. Taking a phrase from Heidegger, Judith

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<sup>79</sup> Heidegger, 71 [italics in original].

Halden-Sullivan expresses Olson's mode as encompassing "the topology of being"<sup>80</sup> and argues that he "does not see the world as a metaphor for the human mind but as a totality of meaning that each human inherits and in which all humans are integral, non-privileged parts."<sup>81</sup> Although Olson values the quality of ecstatic experience, his is concerned with the human being as a part of a wider sense of Being in the world. It is an understanding of Being, in the historical sense and also as it presents itself in the form of the world, its human modalities and language, that recreates the ground that both Olson and Heidegger attempt to retrieve from the abyss. Heidegger's theory of *Abgrund*, or abyssal consciousness, gives rise to consideration of notions of unstable foundations in topology, typography and by extension human thought in *The Maximus Poems*. In his book, *The Grounding of American Poetry*, scholar Stephen Fredman claims that "the most profound aspect of poetics methods like containment, circling, and repetition is their ability to honor and even make use of groundlessness while simultaneously compensating for it. This is the most telling fact about American poetry."<sup>82</sup> This compels poets to create what he calls "provisional groundings, while at the same time restlessly overstepping the limits of a constituted ground."<sup>83</sup> This activity will be demonstrated as a vital aspect of Olson's particular mapping of place and enunciation of its inhabitants. The fragility, or vulnerability of liminal place is an aspect of the poems that requires further investigation, as it is essential to an understanding of the poetry and poetics that arises from the role of Maximus as custodian of the polis. Moreover, as the ground (as space) creates being, so being recreates ground (as place). Heidegger credits poet Rainer Maria Rilke with a reference to nature as: "the *Urgrund*, the pristine ground, because it is the ground of those beings that we ourselves are. This suggests that man reaches more deeply into the ground of beings than do other beings. The ground of beings has since ancient times been called Being."<sup>84</sup> This concept of existential reciprocity corresponds to the view from Australia, as this thesis will focus on showing, with reference to: "a logic, not of causality, but

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<sup>80</sup> "Poetry that thinks is in truth / the topology of Being", *Ibid.* 12.

<sup>81</sup> Halden-Sullivan, 17.

<sup>82</sup> Stephen Fredman, *The Grounding of American Poetry: Charles Olson and the Emersonian Tradition* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 5.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.* 6.

<sup>84</sup> Heidegger, 99.

with a more poetic logic of interval, movement, multiplicity of layers folding over each other in a heterotopic and variable space.”<sup>85</sup>

Olson can be regarded as a philosopher and anthropologist as well as a poet, and was also renowned as a teacher, most notably at Black Mountain College, where in his capacity as rector he made a considerable contribution to its varied and unorthodox curriculum. His name remains the one most commonly associated with the school. During his time there, and also in the course of a formative trip to Yucatan, Mexico during the first months of 1951, he developed further his philosophical concerns. Central to these is the notion that, in twentieth-century society, people generalise and live as observers not participants in the world, and that this started with the articulation of *logos* and the classifications of Aristotle and Socrates. According to Sherman Paul,

We are no longer organisms in an environment (to use the terms of pragmatism and gestalt psychology Olson may have adopted) and language is no longer an instrument...enabling us to experience.<sup>86</sup>

A society where experience and expression alike are mediated by prescribed forms of language is one which has become estranged from its roots, and one which is in need of recreation within open space: mental, psychic and physical, or indeed, a concept of space that encapsulates all of these.

The coincidence (if it really is such) of Olson’s thought with that of Heidegger is adumbrated by ideas from other European philosophers. The phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty provides material for this thesis (discussed below) as does a triadic formulation by Walter Benjamin that would have appealed to Olson : “Work on a good piece of writing proceeds on three levels: a musical one, where it is composed, an architectural one, where it is constructed, and finally a textile one, where it is woven.”<sup>87</sup> This provides an interesting point of

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<sup>85</sup> Stephen Muecke, *Ancient and Modern: Time, Culture and Indigenous Philosophy* (Sydney; University of New South Wales Press, 2004), 92.

<sup>86</sup> Paul, 82.

<sup>87</sup> Walter Benjamin, *One-way Street and Other Writings*, Trans, J.A. Underwood (London: Penguin Classics, 2009), 65.

comparison to some of Olson's own triadic pronouncements, especially given the importance attached to music and weaving at Black Mountain College, and the parallels with certain types of architectural practice that can be made with Olson's technique.

From post-war trauma to the development of mass culture from the 1960s on Olson embodies a stance whereby: "We repossess place in repossessing the experience of it",<sup>88</sup> as Paul asserts. To this statement should be added the assertion that Olson not only repossesses, but recreates marginal and liminal aspects of Gloucester, and that this work is one of enunciation and pragmatic action combined. In this sense, his work can also be informed by consideration of Stephen Muecke's writing on the recovery of fundamental aspects of Indigenous Australian Country, and his observation that the nomad experience is markedly different from that of the migrant, whose leaving or arrival is typically abrupt, sometimes forced and unwilling. By contrast:

The nomad is, in fact, the one who doesn't leave the country. The migrant might leave a country embittered, never to return, and then try to appropriate the nomadic spaces of another country. In this the nomad is different from the migrant. S/he is always coming and going, but more or less in the same place.<sup>89</sup>

This contrast is of special relevance to the first volume of *The Maximus Poems*, and the settlement of Olson's adopted fishing town, which is never quite a stable home. Writers such as Michel de Certeau, whose careful yet passionate enunciation of the poetics of urban space,<sup>90</sup> provide a mode of thought Olson would have recognized as akin to that of Deleuze and Guattari, especially given the development that had started overtaking Gloucester by the poet's death. De Certeau's concerns reflect Olson's practice of consistent care for the polis and the self as inherent part of the community. Regular and careful attendance to a place performs the functions of enunciation and renewal. It is a nomadic act in relation

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<sup>88</sup> Paul, 256.

<sup>89</sup> Krim Benterrak, Stephen Muecke and Paddy Roe, *Reading the Country* (Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1984), 224.

<sup>90</sup> Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Trans. Steven Rendall, (Berkeley: University of California Press), 1988.

to a settlement and shows how both everyday and sacred places have the potential to be rediscovered, if not re-founded, and their origins recovered.

Prominent among the philosophers, writer and theorists, and with arguably the most tangible influence on archaic, archetypal and mythological themes in *The Maximus Poems* is the influence of Carl Gustav Jung, who Olson invited, urged even, to teach at Black Mountain College (although, unfortunately, Jung declined). It has been already observed by several scholars that of the many volumes in Olson's library, Jung's books are among those with the most annotations and marginal commentary. Arguably the most important of these works for Olson was *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*.<sup>91</sup> In this work, Jung and Olson's thought on universal poetics tropes, shared deep imagery and gestalt coincide. Other works, such as *Psychology and Alchemy*,<sup>92</sup> are important in amplifying the mystic elements of migration and metempsychosis, as well as their representation in the form of mandalas: for example, those that reflect the presences of early explorers, their immanence alongside more contemporaneous figures in the poems and the psychic forms of mapping that result. Additionally, *Aion*<sup>93</sup> provides further insights into Olson's unique fusion of historical and religious sensibility, and complements the other books in providing a means to approach the concept of an archaic postmodern gestalt.

The development of Olson's particular stance, consisting of the literal incorporation of primordial and contemporary archetypes and realities, found an early opportunity for contextualisation in Mexico. Like D.H. Lawrence and Josef and Anni Albers before him,<sup>94</sup> Olson hoped that in spending time among the cultures of Central America that he would be able to discern fundamentally important elements of daily and sacred life that had become obscured by the incursions of mass culture into his own community. Olson's time in the Yucatan

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<sup>91</sup> C.G. Jung, Trans. R.F.C. Hull, *The Archetypes and The Collective Unconscious* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1959).

<sup>92</sup> Jung, Trans. R.F.C. Hull, *Psychology and Alchemy* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1953).

<sup>93</sup> Jung, Trans. R.F.C. Hull, *Aion* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1959).

<sup>94</sup> Lawrence was another key influence on Olson's thought, whose significance will be discussed in following chapters. The Albers preceded Olson as formative presences at Black Mountain College, from 1933 to the late 1940s.

resulted in the eventual publication of *Mayan Letters*,<sup>95</sup> derived from a series of epistolary observations and speculations about local myths and culture, ideas that would influence *The Maximus Poems*. The importance of these letters and the sojourn that inspired them is pivotal to a complete understanding of the epic, and Olson's relationship with Gloucester, and by extension America, was further informed by what he regarded as his fieldwork in Mexico. The centrality of the Yucatan experience can be summarised with reference to Olson's special uses of history, myth and archetypes. In *Mayan Letters*, the coastal town of Lerma appears to parallel the history and culture of Gloucester, one that is both in decline, and threatened by the mass culture of modernity, but which also contains elements of vitality and discernible traces back towards its pre-modern origins. These origins in turn are part of a wider pre-modernity shared by superficially disparate cultures, and Olson's work of poetic archaeology uncovers tropes of migration and transformation that form part of a worldwide affinity. It has to be noted that the motivations behind some of his work in Mexico has been recently questioned, as has the validity of his methodology, and these questions will be discussed below. However, and in particular, his examination of Mayan glyphs has notable implications for his modes of articulation as Maximus, in that this archaic form of linguistic expression stands as a valid, multi-dimensional embodiment of self-things, or self-objects, and as such can find forms of comparative expression with Australian Aboriginal poesis, rather than attempts at more conventional, limited, linear and two-dimensional representation and interpretation.

Robert Creeley, Olson's correspondent during his time in Mexico, was crucial in inspiring the work that became "Projective Verse", not only putting himself forward as a sounding board and platform for the older poet to try out ideas, but also providing encouragement and empathy at a critical time in Olson's career. His intense and extensive correspondence with Olson was largely responsible for helping engender the latter's pronouncements on poetics. For example, Creeley was the first to articulate the dictum that "form is never more than an *extension*

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<sup>95</sup> Olson, *Mayan Letters* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1968) is based on a selection of letters to Creeley during Olson's stay in the Yucatan from January to July, 1951.

of content”,<sup>96</sup> which Olson acknowledged, extended and made into a key argument in “Projective Verse.” Creeley in turn is credited in the epigraph to the first volume of *The Maximus Poems* as “figure of outward” (*MP*, frontispiece). This enigmatic expression foregrounds the presence of Creeley, who although mentioned only briefly in the epic itself (and not until the third volume) is epitomised as an embodiment of the focus and attentions the epic aims at articulating. Butterick identifies the source of the “epithet” as a dream Olson had during his time at Black Mountain, and provides the following from a notepad of Olson’s:

the Figure of Outward means way out way out  
*there*: the  
‘World’, I’m sure, otherwise  
why was the pt. then to like write to Creeley  
daily?  
...  
...And so to *forward* a  
motion I  
make him.<sup>97</sup>

Creeley, outliving his collaborator by more than three decades, reflected in his introduction to Olson’s *Collected Prose* on the similarities of their background, growing up inland, with “the ocean out there beyond either one of us with its incessant, shifting ‘place.’” The journey from space to that deliberately posited “place” to create the complete human sense of being is one of reciprocity, by no means limited to the two poets but at the same time one which their unique relationship clearly exemplifies. The making of one another, the recreation of the archetypal, maximal gestalt is an endeavour that remains ongoing, and will be evaluated in the conclusion of this thesis through the incorporation of Olson’s more prominent successors.<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> Charles Olson and Robert Creeley: *The Complete Correspondence, Volumes 1-10*, Ed. George Butterick (Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow Press), 1985, Vol. 1, 79 and 85 [italics in original].

<sup>97</sup> Butterick, 3.

<sup>98</sup> An alternative, although not contradictory explanation of the “figure of outward” is suggested by Michael Davidson, who refers to Creeley’s intensity in short furious “love poems”, either trying work a way through their composition or “expressing that which cannot be controlled in the world’s terms. A poetics of rage acts *on* the world, not *within* its terms. It may be for this reason that Olson called Creeley ‘the figure of Outward’, to mark his willingness to force introspection beyond himself.” Davidson, *On the Outskirts of Form: Practicing Cultural Poetics* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2011), 157.

Creeley remains the contemporary most commonly associated with Olson, and the depth of their friendship, not to mention the extent of their correspondence, shows an unusually strong connection, given that the older poet was often seen as an outsider in poetic circles of the day. Younger associates, such as Allen Ginsberg, whose use of the breath-line parallels if not directly imitates Olson's technique,<sup>99</sup> welcomed him into their circles – and Ginsberg ended up reading *Kaddish* at Olson's funeral. Creeley, along with Denise Levertov and Ed Dorn are names that recur in conjunction with the term "Black Mountain Poets", but these poets actually wrote in a style markedly different from Olson's, certainly when considering *The Maximus Poems*. Creeley's deceptively simple, spare lyrics recall those of Gary Snyder more than his older friend, only Snyder himself had limited regard for Olson. Interviewed in *Alcheringa*, Snyder accused Olson of being part of an elitist, East Coast America, implying that the immigrant poet of Swedish and Irish descent was overly Eurocentric and esoteric in his outlook.<sup>100</sup> Although Snyder distanced himself from this statement later on,<sup>101</sup> this thesis will demonstrate that his initial appraisal of Olson, although not confined to Snyder alone, constitutes a fundamental misunderstanding of his poetry and poetics.

In a similar vein, *The Maximus Poems* were subject to criticism from practitioners of a modified version of Deep Image poetics, including Robert Bly, who famously

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<sup>99</sup> In "Projective Verse" Olson states: "the line comes (I swear it) from the breath, from the breathing of the man who writes" (*CP*, 242). Ginsberg stops short of acknowledging Olson as the primary influence for his own use of breath as a way of regulating line and meter. Like Ginsberg and the Beats, Olson points out the effect of jazz, and specifically that of Charles Parker: see Olson's note to Creeley on Parker, (known as "Bird") re: his stated method of looking through breath to get form from content...a "profitable analogy" (*O/C* Vol. 1, 157). Summarising technical aspects of his peers in 1960, Ginsberg writes: "Short lines in William Carlos Williams are balanced mainly by relative weight of phrasing – speech-size, special emphasis, weight as mental imagery, silences indicated, etc. In Olson the lines may be said to bear equal weight in that each is a unique particle of energy in spontaneous composition. In Creeley, discrete short rhythmic entities are separated by breathstop to form new type couplets." Ginsberg, "What Way I Write", in *Deliberate Prose: Selected Essays 1952-1995* (New York: HarperCollins, 2000), 256.

<sup>100</sup> See Nathaniel Tarn "From Anthropologist to Informant: Interview with Gary Snyder", in *Alcheringa*, Vol.1.4 (Autumn, 1972), 111.

<sup>101</sup> In an interview with Ekbert Faas, Snyder states: "I haven't studied Olson as deeply as I might have or should....And what I have read seemed to reflect a predominantly Atlantic and ultimately Occidental focus, which wasn't where my specific interests lay. My thinking comes together with Olson's direction when we come into prehistory and the Pleistocene.... Evidences [*sic*] of a kind of international prehistoric culture. Olson's insights into this were interesting, but only point the way to some amazing possibilities that should be investigated further: prehistory." Snyder, in Faas, *Towards a New American Poetics* (Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow Press, 1978), 105.

referred to it as “the worst book of the year.”<sup>102</sup> On a superficial level, there would seem to be scant connection between the short stanzas of Bly and the more loosely controlled breath-lines of Maximus. On closer examination, salient aspects of the original Deep Image poetics can be found in Olson’s work. The concept of the Deep Image was articulated throughout the 1950s by Rothenberg and fellow poet Robert Kelly, with the former referring to: “a series of propositions & compositional experiments dealing with what I was then calling ‘deep image’ & would describe later as ‘a power, among several, by which the poem is sighted & brought close.”<sup>103</sup> Rothenberg points out that the term itself has undergone various interpretations both during and since the debates over poetry and poetics in that decade, and that this process underlines the multiplicity of layers and influences involved. He implies that the eagerness of critics and scholars to “assert a ‘difference’ – was from the earlier avant-gardes & from those anonymous tribal & subterranean predecessors whose voices were to figure so largely in my later work,”<sup>104</sup> and that the main idea of the Deep Image concept was direct engagement with phenomena through the use of a “visionary consciousness”<sup>105</sup>, which hearkens back beyond the twentieth-century avant-garde to William Blake and John Donne as original figures of inspiration. Any poem, written either in so-called free verse or classic metre, has the capacity to move among phenomena, vision and form: the latter, therefore ought to be seen as emergent “from the act of vision: completely organic. Olson too in Projective Verse (tho differently oriented) seem to say the same: [which is] why I find it surprising when other projectivists treat it almost as a closed system.”<sup>106</sup>

Bly and other practitioners of a more tightly controlled form of Deep Image poetics were working in the plains of Minnesota, at a physical and avowed psychic distance from Olson’s Gloucester. Nevertheless, their poetry is also intimately and explicitly bound with inner and outer space, as well as the archetypes that connect apparently disparate communities across wide reaches

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<sup>102</sup> Robert Bly in William McPherson, ed., *Charles Olson: The Critical Reception, 1941-1983, A Bibliographic Guide* (New York: Garland, 1986), 20.

<sup>103</sup> Jerome Rothenberg, *Pre-Faces & other Writings* (New York: New Directions, 1981), 52.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.* 56.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.* 57.

of space and time. Olson pushed his poetic boundaries to their limits, sometimes at the risk of the “inner inherence” he sought, yet also grounded his flights by recalling primordial images from buried strata imperceptible to the mass culture of modernity. Bly recalled a saying from the mystic Jacob Boehme, that “we are all asleep in the outward man”.<sup>107</sup> Olson’s mission includes the imperative to awaken or recreate the “figure of outward” as a vehicle to set the ancient archetypes back into motion, to resurrect forms that convey the essential content obscured from contemporary consciousness. It is important to note that this aim does not imply a contradiction of the vital interplay of these collective archetypes with their own internal resonance, and that in Olson’s philosophy, the outer shell of any being owes its existence to the inner substance, and it is the latter that determines the former’s shape and external appearance. As this thesis will reveal, for Olson, in a similar vein to the practitioners of the Deep Image, this implies a creative interplay between concepts of inside and outside, word and world:

To me, as Olson would say, the cutting edge is always at that place where the inside moves to the outside or confronts the outside or vice-versa, that edge where the message of that outside is experienced, is transmitted.<sup>108</sup>

This relationship between places and notions of space, which too many critics have preferred to see in terms of polarities, are in fact indicative of Olson’s varied, and essentially nomadic lines of thought, resulting in a vital and original poetry and poetics.

Preceding Creeley and the Black Mountain poets are the mentor figures of Pound and Williams, with their epics *The Cantos* and *Paterson* respectively acknowledged as forerunners to *The Maximus Poems*. Hugh Kenner’s seminal work on Pound’s milieu, *The Pound Era*, also helps add to an understanding of Olson’s poetry and poetics.<sup>109</sup> Olson’s dialogues with Pound, and his subsequent

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<sup>107</sup> Jacob Boehme, epigraph to Bly, *Silence in the Snowy Fields*. (Middletown, CT.: Wesleyan, 1962), frontispiece.

<sup>108</sup> Creeley, in Joris, *Margins*, 74.

<sup>109</sup> Hugh Kenner, *The Pound Era* (London: Faber and Faber, 1975 edition).

disavowal of the paternal figure have already been the subject of extensive commentary.<sup>110</sup> Having said that, his attitude towards Williams, who he defended vehemently against slights by Pound, was also inconsistent, particularly towards the end of his life, when he declared that he owed nothing to *Paterson*.<sup>111</sup> Harsh though this seems, this attitude could reflect the idea that his multi-dimensional approach to language owes as much to his studies in Mexico as it did to the dictum “no ideas but in things”<sup>112</sup> inherited from Williams.

Nevertheless, *The Maximus Poems* is intended to be a long poem “centered on a single city”,<sup>113</sup> and in this sense should acknowledge Williams’ *Paterson*, if not as a progenitor text, then at least a significant precursor, in which the figure of Doctor Paterson projects historical, mythological and contemporary scenarios onto the town on the River Passaic.<sup>114</sup> As Von Hallberg points out, both *The Maximus Poems* and *Paterson* unfold from “the relationship between the American poet and his particularly American background.”<sup>115</sup> Pound’s *The Cantos*, with their astounding temporal and geographical range were also hugely influential, although if anything, Olson felt that Pound did not reach back far enough into history. Unlike *The Maximus Poems*, Pound’s epic does not anchor a protagonist in a particular place, and its structure, prosodic features and frequent use of Chinese ideograms all create a sense of distance from Olson’s style. Regarding other influences from American practitioners of the long poem, the incantatory elements of Maximus’s rhetoric also reach back to Whitman, and at times the intense, confessional voice bears with it undertones of Hart Crane

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<sup>110</sup> Olson’s recollections of his visits to Pound during the latter’s incarceration at St Elizabeth’s have been collected and edited by Catherine Seelye, *Charles Olson and Ezra Pound: An Encounter at St. Elizabeths* by Charles Olson (New York: Grossman, 1975). These include the poem “A Lustrum for you EP” which addresses his former mentor with pointed bitterness. Olson’s prose piece: “GrandPa, GoodBye (1948) recalls the instance when he decides to permanently part company with Pound, prompted by the latter’s racially-charged, derogatory remarks about Williams (*CP*, 148). As things eventuated, Olson and Pound met for the last time at Spoleto, Italy, in 1965.

<sup>111</sup> In conversation with Boer, Olson is reported to have said: “I got nothing out of Paterson...I owe that Bill Williams *nothing*.” in Boer, 83 (Italics in original).

<sup>112</sup> William Carlos Williams, *Paterson* (New York: New Directions, 1963), 6.

<sup>113</sup> Von Hallberg, 57.

<sup>114</sup> Williams, *Paterson*, written between 1946 and 1958, published as a single volume (New Directions, 1963).

<sup>115</sup> Von Hallberg, 56.

and *The Bridge*.<sup>116</sup> Still, it is the dichotomy between the influences of Pound and Williams that influences *The Maximus Poems* most directly. One analogy invoking *The Odyssey* has Maximus attempting to steer a course “between the Scylla of Pound’s *The Cantos* and the Charybdis of Williams’ *Paterson*”.<sup>117</sup> Even without that Homeric metaphor, it would be fair to place Olson’s work on a ground of its own, although deriving from and able to be placed between the inter-continental forays of Pound and the localised methodology employed by Williams’ protagonist.

Of specific interest to this thesis is an evaluation of Pound and Williams from a Native American perspective, which has a bearing on how Olson may be read as an acknowledged successor, or proponent of “High Modernism.” Lincoln, writing on the transnationalism of Pound concludes that through his poetry “Confucius complements Homer, *The Analects* adds to *The Odyssey*, something deeper in the human psyche circles the globe.”<sup>118</sup> Pound “followed neoclassical suit in our own century’s arts, looking to indigenous and interglobal literacy for an American model. Renaissance means *renewing*, making the word new again by bringing the past into the present, and everyone gets a say in this country.”<sup>119</sup> Lincoln credits Williams with devoting himself to the expression of “the mixed-blood, spoken aesthetics of local places”,<sup>120</sup> and in a remarkable passage of evaluation, situates him in a milieu where:

The global modernist sifts back and forward through the recovered ‘papyri’ of history – Sapphic bits in mummy guts and crocodile stuffing, Frobenius scooping up a potsherd, the Altamira caves and Le Trois Frères opened in 1917 in the French Pyrenees....and history advances not back to, but toward ‘the primitive’, that is, the essential, whether for medicine man, epic singer or modernist poet. If Pound is the bearlike poet as warrior-teacher, Williams is doctor-bear, the poet-as-realist-healer with the cleansing north wind.

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<sup>116</sup> Hart Crane, American lyrical poet, whose epic *The Bridge* (Black Sun Press, 1930) recalls Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* and foreshadows elements of *The Maximus Poems*.

<sup>117</sup> James Michael Cocola. *Topopoeiesis: Contemporary American Poetics and the Imaginative Making of Place*. (University of Virginia), 2007, 104.

<sup>118</sup> Lincoln, 57.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid. 61.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid. xviii.

Less windily proselytizing than Pound, but no less pagan, Williams held out for the local detail, the daily dialect, the ‘ground sense necessary’ to stay put and create from the given. Words were his healing compost, speech a tribal rhizome<sup>121</sup>

Lincoln goes onto compare Williams to Sioux leader and “Medicine Man Poet”, Sitting Bull, reflective of a high degree of respect.

Other literary forebears include Henry David Thoreau and his classic *Walden*, which influenced a range of twentieth-century literature, not least with its contrast of local pastoralism set against the corrupted, urban circles of Europe. In the postwar context of *The Maximus Poems*, this reading of Thoreau found credence not only with Olson but also the Beatniks. Interestingly, alongside consideration of negative capability and negative dialectics, comes a more recent, related phrase from Robert E. Abrams, that of “negative geography”,<sup>122</sup> which scholar Paul Giles interprets as not so much a one-sided psychic or transcendental resistance to some external authority but more a reflection of “Thoreau’s landscapes [as] multi-storied in terms of both their spatial and temporal aspects, so that his writing involves not so much an investment in the local but, rather, a complex rhetorical calibration of proximate and distant, near and far.”<sup>123</sup> This evaluation of Thoreau’s landscapes chimes with Mellors’ reference to Olson’s “complex and contradictory troping”<sup>124</sup> which involves not only the acceptance but also constructive use of uncertainty in terms of the poet’s and protagonist’s position in terms of both time and space. The lacunae that exist in human epistemology that reveal themselves through immersion in primordial locations are therefore sources of inspiration and space in which the poet can perform his manoeuvres.

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<sup>121</sup> Ibid. 192

<sup>122</sup> Robert E. Abrams, *Landscape and Ideology in American Renaissance Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 1-18.

<sup>123</sup> Paul Giles, “Antipodean Modernism: The Retrodynamic Arts of Time Management”, paper given at Transnational Modernisms Conference, University of Sydney, 16th December 2014, 1.

<sup>124</sup> Anthony Mellors, “Futtocks”, in *Herd*, 206.

## Critical Reception

Foremost among the critical milieu in relation to Olson's poetry and poetics was the Welsh scholar Ralph Maud, Emeritus Professor of English at Simon Fraser University, British Columbia. Maud had been researching and publishing on Olson for over five decades, as well as editing the journal *Minutes of the Charles Olson Society*. As a friend of the poet, his approach could be personal to the extent of including biographical detail over and above critical evaluation of the poems themselves, as well as defending Olson against detractors.<sup>125</sup> A point of interest is Maud's publications on early ethnographers of the Pacific North-West, which parallel Olson's investigations into the anthropology of the original inhabitants of New England. Maud is also to be credited for applying the term "archaic postmodern" to Olson's work.<sup>126</sup>

George Butterick's *A Guide to the Maximus Poems of Charles Olson* remains the most comprehensive single reference work available to point scholars and readers towards the many external sources, historical and mythological, which comprise so much of the epic. Butterick, like Boer, was a student of Olson's who later became a friend. His work therefore conveys a profound understanding of Olson and a deep commitment towards the dissemination of his epic. Butterick's work looks at the poems in minute detail, and is primarily intended to indicate the varied sources Olson drew on to compose the entity that is Maximus. As such it may be viewed as primarily encyclopaedic in its scope and ambitions. Butterick also provides invaluable insight into the genesis of the poems, as well as the background of the historical Maximus and the parallel figure of Apollonius of Tyana, whose significance will be discussed later in this thesis.

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<sup>125</sup> Maud's biography: *Olson at the Harbor* (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 2008) is a deliberately "reactive" work, aiming to refute elements in the earlier work by Thomas Clark, *Charles Olson: The Allegory of a Poet's Life* (Norton, 1991), which Maud felt to contain excessive and at times inaccurate personal criticism of Olson. Having said that, Clark's biography is a useful and groundbreaking source of detailed information about the poet's life, and should not be entirely dismissed

<sup>126</sup> See Maud's article: "Charles Olson's Archaic Postmodern", *Minutes of the Charles Olson Society*, #42 (September 2001), 15-24.

Significant groundwork for scholarship of *The Maximus Poems* took place in the 1970s, with critical works by Don Byrd and Paul Christensen specifically on Olson, and others by Charles Altieri and Guy Davenport looking at Olson together with forerunners and contemporaries. More recent scholarship has continued investigations into Olson's use of geography and history: his debt to Carl Ortwin Sauer has been widely discussed, yet remains pertinent to this thesis. Sauer's special focus was on the morphology of landscapes, and the cultural implications thereof, and this informs a renewed evaluation of Olson's transnational, spatial poetics. As for the historical processes that occur within the spaces Maximus inhabit, the guiding influence of mathematician and philosopher, Alfred North Whitehead remains vital. References to Whitehead's *Process and Reality* occur repeatedly in Olson's correspondence, and his voice has been identified in key passages of *The Maximus Poems*. His emphasis on the importance of studying the concept of process in order to perceive the dynamic elements that constitute a reality that is at once ancient, ongoing and universal is central to any reading of Olson's poetry and poetics. Whitehead's works also influenced Olson criticism in its formative stages: that of Robert von Hallberg<sup>127</sup> among the most notable, and continue to inform contemporary readings of his poetry. Von Hallberg identifies Whitehead's significance in expressing the concept of "a living society",<sup>128</sup> which functions through the process of repeating original responses to phenomena. In such a community: "life turns back to society: it binds originality within bounds, and gains the massiveness due to reiterated character."<sup>129</sup> This statement finds a correlative with Olson's enunciation of the ideal polis: one that is in need of constant recollection and naming and also arising from organic origins and then reflected, or more accurately refracted within its individual components: human beings or other self-objects. Von Hallberg describes this as: "the inward turn of the shaping force",<sup>130</sup> which provides an early and significant summation of the proprioceptive nature of Olson's poetry and poetics.

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<sup>127</sup> Von Hallberg, *Charles Olson: The Scholar's Art* (Harvard University Press, 1978).

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.* 4.

<sup>129</sup> Whitehead, in *Ibid.* 4.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.* 4.

Byrd, focusing on the background and stages of creating the epic, looks closely at the elemental background of Olson's language, how its kinesis co-ordinates as text, and puts forward the theory that the syntax and grammar throughout *The Maximus Poems* is directly influenced by the poet's research into ancient concepts of geometry and topography, observable within the human being as well as in relation to external phenomena.<sup>131</sup> Byrd proposes that Olson derives his energy for Maximus from space, which consists of the elemental cosmic components as identified by pre-Socratic philosophy, wherein the central concept of Logos relates to fire. Olson's strategy is to use this parallel: "to deny the sham clarity of the Apollonian intelligence, in an act of love...allow the forms which move in the fire to have their own voices."<sup>132</sup> The fire that engenders Maximus, as: "a metal hot from boiling water" (*MP*, I.1) is present not by name but as an impulse towards kinetic coherence, with his constituent atoms and molecules moving within generative space. This activity corresponds to a form of metalogical dance, which Maximus performs and transposes onto the page. This dance is a way of marking out territory, and supports the centrality of a nomad consciousness within his poetry and poetics.

Byrd is also one of several Olson scholars who argue that the energy for his poems "comes inward from the external world, not outwards from the lyric soul".<sup>133</sup> This notion appears to be supported by Olson himself, nowhere more explicitly than his dedication to Creeley at the outset of *The Maximus Poems*. The idea of a push outward, and the presence of recurrent poetic vectors through apparently empty space imply that it is the internal, personal voice that is being released onto a physical landscape simultaneous to the sources of energy that are derived from the outside world. This process will also be seen as the restoration of a psychic balance and care within a society that has been battered

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<sup>131</sup> Don Byrd, *Charles Olson's Maximus* (University of Illinois Press, 1980). Byrd notes that whereas Olson turns away from the Apollonian consciousness, which as defined by Nietzsche in relation to Ancient Greek thought emphasises the primacy of form and structure, he nevertheless avoids entirely embracing its opposite, the Dionysian, which would imply a loss of analytic control, action based purely on instinct and resultant chaos.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.* 15.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.* 32.

and reduced to the ruins of modernity, and which needs to rediscover essential modes of expression.

Christensen's work is important in that it constitutes another early piece of Olson criticism that spells out a key concern for this thesis, namely to highlight the message that human beings have become estranged, not only (and famously) "from that with which they are most familiar"<sup>134</sup> but from "their own primal energies."<sup>135</sup> Describing *The Maximus Poems* as a "noble and eccentric masterpiece",<sup>136</sup> Christensen paves the way for a reading of Olson as an urgent and original voice, and his premise that Maximus is an entity that is intended to restore a polis both of careful attention but also with a certain "unruly vitality"<sup>137</sup> intact, came as a necessary counterbalance to accusations of Olson being overly esoteric and elitist. Sherman Paul's contemporaneous work<sup>138</sup> also identifies the need for the poet as self-described "archaeologist of morning" (*CPR*, 207) to return to the primal sources of human energy and active involvement with the recreation of their environment and society. He notes that both Olson and Heidegger both saw the redefinition of Logos in the time of Socrates as being the point in time where the estrangement that arises from the predominance of form and taxonomy over essential human nature was rationalised and codified into society and its laws. Therefore, according to Paul, Olson's "push involved...reconceiving that nature of the cosmos and the nature of man",<sup>139</sup> and doing so with attendant concentration and consideration of the polis through his nominated mythological mouthpiece, Maximus.

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<sup>134</sup> The original aphorism is from Heraclitus, also translated as: "They are separated from that with which they are in the most continuous contact." Heraclitus, *Fragments: A Text and Translation with Commentary*, Trans. T.M. Robinson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987), *Fragment 72*, 45. Olson reprised this fragment to reflect on his brief experience at sea with the swordfishing fleet as a correlative for his professional life before poetry: "The was not, finally, my trade. / But even my trade, at it, I stood estranged / from that which was most familiar." (*MP*, I.52)

<sup>135</sup> Paul Christensen. *Charles Olson, Call Him Ishmael*. (University of Texas Press, 1979, 2nd Ed.), 22.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.* 23.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.* 21.

<sup>138</sup> Sherman Paul. *Olson's Push: Origin, Black Mountain and Recent American Poetry* (Louisiana State University Press: Baton Rouge, 1978).

<sup>139</sup> Paul, xviii.

Also writing in the 1970s, Altieri looks at Olson in relation to the canon. After positing the theory of Wordsworth as an exponent of an immanent poetry and poetics, and noting Coleridge's primary influence was on the *Symbolistes*, he then admits a more fluid interpretation of these terms for their application to the postmodernist poetic environment. He describes Olson as essentially immanentist, but also implies that his poetics is a continuation of Coleridge's poetic ideal as "a state of doing" as distinct from Wordsworth's as a "state of being."<sup>140</sup> Wordsworth's relevance to discussion of Olson is mainly to do with the importance to the latter of direct, unmediated perception, derived from "the cutting edge where the energies of man and world are in perpetual interchange."<sup>141</sup> This theme and Altieri's flexibility are also evident in his argument that there are features shared by Olson's poetry with that of the Deep Image, a mutual preoccupation being:

The poet must return to the energies manifest in acts of intense perception and must locate the sources of personal value and dignity in the field of energies where subject and object can be seen as interpenetrating one another.<sup>142</sup>

Olson's development of ideas from the Romantic tradition is also evident, Altieri claims, in his application of "the Coleridgean idea that there is a unique poetic logic distinct from the discursive logic of rational thought"<sup>143</sup> to the twentieth-century context. Like Altieri, Charles Doria also situates Olson in relation to canonical thought in the same issue of *Boundary 2*, evaluating Olson's poetry and poetics in light of the Classical Tradition. He concludes that: "what interested Olson when he confronted Antiquity were the survivals – what could be recovered of the Pleistocene condition and its struggle to fashion a world solely through mindedness."<sup>144</sup> This reinforces the centrality of direct perception as mentioned by Altieri, together with the ideas of Byrd, Paul and Christensen regarding the urgency of the poet to shed the prescribed models of knowledge and being inherited through fundamental misuse of the Tradition, from the

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<sup>140</sup> Altieri, *Enlarging the Temple* (Cranbury: Associated University Presses, 1979), 39.

<sup>141</sup> Altieri, "Olson's Poetics", 174.

<sup>142</sup> Altieri, *Temple*, 8.

<sup>143</sup> Altieri, "Olson's Poetics", 174.

<sup>144</sup> Charles Doria, "Pound, Olson and the Classical Tradition", in *Boundary 2*, 142.

Classical era on. This push is expressed succinctly by Olson himself, that regarding influence and methodology, the most valid sources are located “(I) from Homer back, not forward; and (II), from Melville on, particularly himself” (*CPR*, 207). This leads to the isolation of what Altieri encapsulates as “the particular charged with numinous force”<sup>145</sup>: in other words, recurring energies, arising from a fundament that pre-dates human systems of taxonomy and expresses a more primordial consciousness. It is in relation to this latter point the Altieri also notes the importance of D.H. Lawrence to Olson’s development as a poet, that: “Lawrence’s gods, for example, are universal forces: yet they do not descend bringing the Law of the Logos but emerge from the darkness of the soil.”<sup>146</sup> This concept is of vital significance when evaluating Olson’s sense of pre-Classical metaphysics and its relevance to the postmodern world, which this thesis looks at in more detail below.

Davenport, in his collection of eloquent essays *The Geography of the Imagination*,<sup>147</sup> portrays Olson as a medium through which elements of the archaic may be represented in a time of modernity, and how the ills associated with this time may be healed. He emphasizes the importance of Heraclitus, the pre-Socratic philosopher who represents “a *genius loci* everywhere.”<sup>148</sup> Davenport also notes Olson’s debt to Sauer regarding the morphology of landscape, reminds the reader that Olson was writing on the drift of continents shortly before his death and proposes that he “is modern enough to know that nature’s monuments are not really eternal; they are simply much longer than those of civilizations.”<sup>149</sup> Overall, Davenport’s assessment of *The Maximus Poems* and Olson in general is one of admiration but pessimism regarding the issues at hand: “He is our anti-Whitman (like Melville before him). He is a prophet crying bad weather ahead, and has the instruments to prove it.”<sup>150</sup> The poets and

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<sup>145</sup> Altieri, *Temple*, 42.

<sup>146</sup> Altieri, *Temple*, 42.

<sup>147</sup> Davenport’s *The Geography of the Imagination* comprises a collection of essays published from 1954.

<sup>148</sup> Davenport, 21. Heraclitus contributes the first two lines of “The Kingfishers”: “What does not change / is the will to change” (*CP*, 86), and see a more concise literal translation of the original fragment: “While changing it rests”, Heraclitus, *Fragment 84a*, 51.

<sup>149</sup> Davenport, 18.

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.* 87.

thinkers that are able to perceive and incorporate the archaic in their own time have done so with effort and difficulty, and the places and landscapes they reach out to are subject to erosion and in a process of retreat. Their lineage may well remain obscure. By contrast, Faas, in his appraisal of Olson, regards *The Maximus Poems* as an essentially life-affirming text, which draws together strands of history and myth to sing and celebrate the manifold human spirit.<sup>151</sup> His work is important in foregrounding Olson, much like Donald Allen the previous decade. His collection of essays and interviews effectively sets Olson – by then deceased – into a renewed conversation with his peers, allowing for a comparative view of his poetry and poetics alongside those of Duncan, Snyder and Ginsberg, among others.

More recent appraisals of *The Maximus Poems* include works by Enikő Bollobás and Miriam Nichols. Although Bollobás could be accused of adopting a stance of uncritical obedience to the works of a poet-creator, “charged by that active, obeying relationship to their context,”<sup>152</sup> her work is valuable to reminding the contemporary reader of the value inherent in a poetics which upholds “self-things” on the peripheries of mass culture. Nichols’ work, arguably a more balanced appraisal, focuses on Olson’s “poetics of outside.”<sup>153</sup> This element of *Maximus* is validated by the poems themselves, but needs to be further developed to incorporate the internal and subjective that inform its deeper shades of meaning. Of particular relevance to this thesis is her view that: “If typos is the well-beaten path, then topos is the ‘wilderness’ on either side of it, a dense geohistory there to be adapted to.”<sup>154</sup> She notes that Olson’s triads are a way of going beyond either relativism or positivism, and “represent a major push to restate human agency in a way befitting the position of the species as one of many on the planet.”<sup>155</sup> Olson’s value is in how he cultivates the expression of the

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<sup>151</sup> Ekbert Faas,, *Towards a New American Poetics: Essays and Interviews*. (Black Sparrow Press), 1978.

<sup>152</sup> Enikő Bollobàs, *Charles Olson* (New York: Twayne, 1992),118.

<sup>153</sup> Miriam Nichols, *Radical Affections: Essays on the Poetics of Outside* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press), 2010.

<sup>154</sup> Nichols, “Myth”, 31.

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.* 33.

human species, foregrounding “affective response” over the dogma and precision implicit in the orthodoxies of taxonomy and epistemology.<sup>156</sup>

Nichols regards Olson’s poetry as part of a necessarily anti-establishment periphery, therefore fundamentally sympathetic to marginalised cultural discourse. Not all appraisal of Olson from women critics has been as approving. The poet’s supposed phallogentricity has been the subject of pointed responses, such as Rachel Blau du Plessis’ *Purple Passages*, in which Olson’s work is seen as a continuity of the patriarchy even in its eccentricity, and as such imbued with a unavoidably male-oriented edge.<sup>157</sup> Admittedly, there is evidence to support this viewpoint, as even a random glance through his unpublished notepads and sketches held at the University of Connecticut archive can confirm. Having said that, it is important to recognise both the context of societal repression of sexuality in Olson’s time as well as his genuine desire to incorporate a complete expression of all generative aspects of what he termed the “Human Universe” (*CPR*, 155) That his language would at times slip into informal, sexualised Beatnik-derived idiom to express these can be accepted more as a mark of his enthusiasm and drive towards inclusivity of multiple voices in his oeuvre, and not anything more than occasional and slightly crass sexual connotation. Nevertheless, as Charles Bernstein observes, even the more reflective passages in *The Maximus Poems*, such as the protagonist considering himself in a poem titled simply: “Maximus of Gloucester”: with “my balls rich as Buddha’s” and the observation: “The only interesting thing / is if one can be / an image / of man, “The nobleness, and the arete” (*MP*, III.101) Bernstein claims that Olson’s use of the term “arete” implies manliness or “virility”,<sup>158</sup> and Butterick gives the definition as: “goodness, manly excellence (similar to ‘virtue’)”<sup>159</sup>, which taken together with the poetry itself implies the dominance of a certain masculinity compared with the comparatively scant presence of women’s voices in the epic. The latter, according to Bernstein, when regarded as not only “a product of

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<sup>156</sup> Ibid. 33.

<sup>157</sup> Rachel Blau DuPlessis, *Purple Passages: Pound, Eliot, Zukofsky, Olson, Creeley, and the Ends of Patriarchal Poetry* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2012)

<sup>158</sup> Charles Bernstein, *Content’s Dream: Essays 1975-1984* (Los Angeles: Sun and Moon Press, 1986), 326.

<sup>159</sup> Butterick, *Guide*, 608.

biological gender but of socially-mediated attitudes, circumstances, syntaxes – are completely marginal to *The Maximus Poems*. The image is of men speaking to men – all who fall outside that discourse are simply inaudible.”<sup>160</sup> It is worth noting that towards the end of his life’s work, when the above lines were written, Olson had undergone, and arguably been the cause of, a notable degree of distress in his sexual relationships. It may seem either apt or an avoidance of the issue to separate Olson’s personal life (and his treatment of the women close to him) from his poetry and poetics. It seems evident, from either perspective, that his personal, inner life was unconventional, complex and exists to a greater extent and in more complexity in *The Maximus Poems* than may be recognised. Certainly, the entire Olson gestalt, with its attendant fault-lines, is vital to an integral understanding of his outward projection.

More overt recent criticism has come in response to Olson’s language, and its apparent impenetrability, notably from current scholars, such as Susannah Lang Hollister, who suggests that the poet loses his readers at critical points of the epic sequence. She acknowledges that Olson’s use of language is deliberately constructed to represent the physicality of geography, taken “at every scale, as a model for poetic language.”<sup>161</sup> Hollister addresses this issue briefly, yet it is one of significance in the expression of Olson’s whole concept of typos, and requires examination in more depth. This thesis demonstrates that Olson’s language is more accessible, emotive and lyrical than he is given credit for, even though an understanding of his approach is a pre-requisite for an in-depth appreciation of the *minutae* and eccentricities of his lexical and grammatical choices. Although he did not consistently succeed in his expressed aim to close the gap between words and the objects they stand for, and despite breakdowns in coherence throughout the poems, they contain images that are both evocative and resonant of the times and places they express. What may at first appear to be linguistic offcuts, or debris, constitute a necessary reminder of the erosion of place. Their presence in *The Maximus Poems* correlates to the sediment, rubble and patchwork nature inherent to the location in which his protagonist operates.

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<sup>160</sup> Bernstein, *Content’s Dream*, 326.

<sup>161</sup> Susannah Lang Hollister, *Poetries of Geography in Post-war America* (Yale, 2009), 24.

Olson's chosen location has, perhaps ironically, give rise to criticism from a poststructuralist perspective. Andrew Ross observes that the multitude of references (in twenty separate poems) Maximus makes to the canal known as "The Cut", dividing Cape Ann from the mainland, and his resentment directed at the bridge that reconnects it, under which "the summer people / kid themselves / there's no noise, / the Bridge / 's so high. / Like hell." (*MP*, I.149) suggest an inherent contradiction between custodianship and dissociation. Ross observes a building sense of disillusionment stemming from and expressing: "a series of cumulative associations with Gloucester's *detachment*",<sup>162</sup> geographical and metaphorical, evidenced by Olson's own partial physical presence, and indeed departure at the end of the second volume of the epic: "I set out now / in a box upon the sea" (*MP*, II.203). This in turn leads to his perceived need for a form of mythological reanimation, regardless of appropriateness or consistency.

This appraisal forms part of a series of recent critical responses to Olson's oeuvre on the grounds of inaccuracies or inconsistencies in scholarship and methodology. Ross makes a direct, if harsh accusation: "For the professional historian, his pseudoscholarship will be that of the crankish novice, while the mindful poet will shy away from the loud pedantry of his high didactic performance",<sup>163</sup> and uses Olson's research activities in the Yucatan to exemplify what he sees as "his Adamic interest in the figurative rather than phonetic characters, because they suggest more direct and nonabstract relations with the object world, relations which Olson patronizingly believed that the Mayans enjoyed."<sup>164</sup> In this analysis, Ross equates Olson's perceived defects with those of Pound in being disingenuously selective when interpreting language systems of which they had limited understanding. Similar criticism of Olson's academic credentials has also emerged from a recent interview with his regular correspondent, poet Jeremy Prynne, who refers to the Black Mountain College group as a domineering clique, and whose "knowledge of scholarship and ...

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<sup>162</sup> Andrew Ross, *The Failure of Modernism: Symptoms of American Poetry* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 109.

<sup>163</sup> *Ibid.* 109.

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid.* 101.

understanding of things outside the ambience of personal interest and behaviour, was extremely casual” and the college journal the *Black Mountain Review* as “grossly erroneous.”<sup>165</sup> Although editorship of the journal was largely in the hands of Creeley, Prynne insists that Olson “vandalised his intellectual equipment as his career went along”<sup>166</sup>, conflating mythologies without being able to properly read the texts and languages he claimed to understand, such as Old Icelandic.<sup>167</sup> As for Olson’s Mayan research, Prynne, like Ross, claims that this consisted of “a romantic, liberational idea for him, but ... took leave of historical record rather early and rather freely.”<sup>168</sup>

A more conciliatory tone, acknowledging these charges but also indicating certain research restraints comes with the publication of Dennis Tedlock’s monograph *The Olson Codex: Projective Verse and the Problem of Mayan Glyphs*. Tedlock states his work as follows: “In my reconsideration of Olson’s letters, I have brought him deeper inside the Mayan world than he could have gone at the time.”<sup>169</sup> He also makes the observation that: “From the point of view of *method*, Olson was on the right track. While he was speculating about the glyphs in Lerma, philologist Yuri Knorosov was deciphering them in Leningrad, finding matches between visible content and linguistic sounds”,<sup>170</sup> but the political climate at the time represented an impediment to communication or even acceptance of Knorosov’s findings in the United States until decades after Olson’s death.<sup>171</sup> Tedlock also provides a reminder that in the early 1950s there were only a limited number of glyphs that were readable, and Olson had limited resources available for his research. Nevertheless, he also finds fault for Olson either not using or referring to the ethnographic sources that he could have conceivably consulted, such as Robert Redfield’s *The Folk Culture of Yucatan*,

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<sup>165</sup> Jeremy Prynne, interview with Jeff Dolven and Joshua Kotin, *Paris Review* (New York: No. 218, Fall 2016), 183.

<sup>166</sup> *Ibid.* 184.

<sup>167</sup> *Ibid.* 185.

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid.* 185.

<sup>169</sup> Dennis Tedlock, *The Olson Codex: Projective Verse and the Problem of Mayan Glyphs* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2017), xxvi.

<sup>170</sup> *Ibid.* xxiii.

<sup>171</sup> *Ibid.* 7.

published in 1941 and regarded as a classic in the field.<sup>172</sup> He also makes a pertinent observation in light of criticism mentioned below: “Olson never mentions Lerma’s Mayan name, [Tixbulul].”<sup>173</sup>

This point resonates with criticism levelled at Olson’s research from a Mexican perspective: that of writer and admittedly, according to the blurb on the cover of his book, *The Empire of Neomemory*, “provocateur”, Heriberto Yopez.<sup>174</sup> Yopez accuses Olson of propagating imperialism both politically, through his work for the Office of War Information, and more broadly through his statement urging a move into space from, and in preference to, time: Olson’s early poem “La Préface” states, ironically in view of Yopez’ criticism: “Put war way with time, come into space.” (CP, 46) In relation to the former charge, Yopez is scathing: “Olson’s verbal talent and his patriotic imaginary made him a perfect fit as an intellectual bureaucrat of the American propaganda machine.... a key employee in the apparatus of petty propaganda.”<sup>175</sup> Regarding the latter, his observation that empires prioritise space, whereas resistance to imperialism, and thus colonialism, hinges on memory, i.e. time, is more balanced, albeit largely unsubstantiated.<sup>176</sup>

Yopez observes of Olson’s background as son of a postal worker: “It all begins with a man wanting to deliver a letter.... Words he doesn’t know”<sup>177</sup>, and this informs his letters from Lerma and the epistolary voice which occurs throughout *The Maximus Poems*. “He was a man who only seemed to think by means of *correspondence*,” Yopez claims,<sup>178</sup> although one might wonder why this is presented in such a negative light, and indeed whether this contradicts his critical premise to some extent. Yopez could be suggesting Olson’s letters have no recipient, and that his attempts to reach out to and comprehend the salient aspects of archaic practice render him an exemplar of: “The (Modern) writer as

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<sup>172</sup> Ibid. 49.

<sup>173</sup> Ibid. 3, 51.

<sup>174</sup> Heriberto Yopez: trans. Jen Hofer, Christian Nagler and Brian Whitener. *The Empire of Neomemory* (Oakland and Philadelphia: Chainlinks, 2013).

<sup>175</sup> Ibid. 36.

<sup>176</sup> Ibid. 79.

<sup>177</sup> Ibid. 11.

<sup>178</sup> Ibid. 11.

*failed technician of the sacred.*"<sup>179</sup> Therefore, Olson's famous line with which he ends "The Kingfishers": "I hunt among stones" (*CP*, 93) is according to Yepez, a misconstrued claim:

"that his search will be in the direction of the ancient, the original, the direct, the natural. It is no accident that he considered it a searching among *stones*, that is, among the symbolic elements of the natural and the primitive, and not among *ruins*, that is, among the cultural remnants in which Olson actually searched. *Olson hunted along archives*. Olson wanted to appear as a hunter in nature, an archeologist of *dawns*, when / in truth he was an archeologist of *knowledge*, a library-dweller trying to pass for an aboriginal."<sup>180</sup>

This is an extraordinary statement in itself, and although on one level it would appear to corroborate the remarks made regarding Thomas and Kafka's "Red Indian" childhood games, it also implies a serious allegation of misappropriation, and one that this thesis refutes. As it will show, Olson was aware of the contradictions and complexities inherent in the role and tasks he created for himself, and at no point attempted to conflate himself with an archaic spokesperson or elder, but instead repositioned a range of mythologies in a context where he felt they were urgently needed. Yepez does, however, despite the occasional vehemence of his comments, acknowledge the value of Olson's work, and even appears to see him in a sense as metonymic for the continent itself.<sup>181</sup>

The most recent collection of critical essays devoted to Olson and his work: *Contemporary Olson*,<sup>182</sup> features work essential to the development of this thesis as well as an up-to-date summary of studies and contemporary criticism. These combine to evaluate Olson's relevance to the current century, and examine salient aspects of his work and influence that this thesis also develops. By

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<sup>179</sup> Ibid. 43.

<sup>180</sup> Ibid. 62.

<sup>181</sup> "All of us are Olson. Each one of us constitutes an avatar of the United States." Ibid. 100. As an addendum to consideration of Yepez's work, it is worth noting an article by Thomas Bertonneau, "Life in the Human Universe", *Sagetrieb* 13.3 (Orono, ME: 1994), reflecting on Olson's research into the Maya as implying "a study of the primitive, using that term in its purely chronological rather than in its moralistic sense." (Op. Cit. 126) Bertonneau asserts that "Olson knew of the violence of Maya myth and culture, and he appears to have *approved* of it," (Ibid) despite evidence of human sacrifice and similar atrocities committed during warfare at that time.

<sup>182</sup> David Herd, Ed. *Contemporary Olson* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015).

contrast with some of the pessimistic interpretations of the Olsonian voice, Tim Woods typifies a more hopeful stance with his summation: “Riven by striking tensions and fissures, *The Maximus Poems* is nevertheless an optimistic narrative of adventure and edification, a journey of the modern spirit that is preoccupied with the possibility of its own structure and being.”<sup>183</sup> The editor, David Herd indicates the influence of Olson on younger, British poets and points out the existence of a critical neologism to describe the intense, albeit self-enclosed world of Olson studies – “In his recent study *Fieldworks: From Place to Site in Postwar Poetics*, Lytle Shaw coins the term ‘Olsonian’ to describe the critical manifestations of this self-enclosed world.”<sup>184</sup>

Another relatively recent work with potential to inform a contemporary understanding of *The Maximus Poems* is Wai-Chee Dimock’s investigations into literary, and specifically epic contexts. These look at the concept of Deep Time as:

a crisscrossing set of pathways, open-ended and ever multiplying, weaving in and out of other geographies, other languages and cultures. These are input channels, kinship networks, routes of transit, and forms of attachment – connective tissues binding America to the rest of the world.<sup>185</sup>

As with *Nomadology*, this indicates a connection to Olson that the critic and academic herself does not make, yet which has the potential to act as a lens through which the poetry may be seen anew. The connections this engenders are through affinity, sometimes over a wide range of time and space, where “likeness...has less to do with common ancestry than with a convergence of attributes, issuing from environments roughly similar but widely dispersed.”<sup>186</sup> Of critical importance here, Dimock argues, is the presence of

a phenomenal field of contextually induced parallels. Born of the local circumstances that shape them and echoing other forms shaped by

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<sup>183</sup> Tim Woods, “‘Moving among my particulars’”: the ‘Negative Dialectics’ of *The Maximus Poems*”, in Herd, 233.

<sup>184</sup> Herd, “Introduction”, in Herd, 11.

<sup>185</sup> Wai-Chee Dimock, *Through Other Continents: American Literature across Deep Time* (Princeton, 2006).

<sup>186</sup> *Ibid.* 74.

circumstance more or less alike, they make up a decentralized web, something like what Deleuze and Guattari call a 'rhizome.'<sup>187</sup>

Through consideration of this definition, which broadens and repopulates the field of Deleuzian rhizomatic activity, conditions are created for a twenty-first-century reappraisal of Olson's work alongside that of scholars investigating the open poem alongside modern epics of place and displacement. Among these, Jahan Ramazani's *Transnational Poetics* supports the idea of poetic correspondence across time and space otherwise considered unconnected or unbridgeable. Ramazani contends that poetry has the potential to "span distances among far-flung locales, frame discourses within one another, and indigenize borrowed forms to serve antithetical ends."<sup>188</sup> Like Pound before him, Olson employs such considerations in his poetic creation. His cosmopolitanism is of a truly transnational nature, and Ramazani's work can be read as confirmation that Olson, among other poets of his milieu, proposed an inter-cultural form of globalism, before this term's corruption and misuse in political and economic contexts.

### Maximus: Construction and Gestalt

*The Maximus Poems* can be regarded as either a sequence of poems, or as a single long poem of incidents and episodes, mythological, historical and confessional that originate from Olson's spiritual and (later in his life) residential centre of Gloucester, and which convey an ambition to span the world itself and its known entities. More specifically to the poet's time and place, the genesis of *Maximus* was in letters to friends, and as Olson wrote early in its development: "I guess these Maximus 'letters' – this poem – is the attempt to come to grips with this country which plagues us all, to try to run it down."<sup>189</sup> The first volume of *The Maximus Poems* is explicitly addressed to Gloucester, and makes extensive use of local history and civic records to create a matrix of people, buildings and events,

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<sup>187</sup> Ibid. 74.

<sup>188</sup> Jahan Ramazani, *A Transnational Poetics* (Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 2009), 4.

<sup>189</sup> Olson to Frances Boldereff, 29 August 1953, cited in Butterick, xxxvi.

or a lattice, as evidenced in the multiple references to containers of various sizes and functions early in the text. Notable among these are nests and houses, and their symbolism will be evaluated further on in the thesis. The tropes of containment and the meshes that permeate Olson's project hint at the vastness of historical and topographical sweep, of the poet's ambition to create "not a city, but City" (*MU*, 434), to represent an intrinsic significance to humankind as a migratory act stretching back to the Irish and Viking seafarers, and through to Venice and Tyre. The importance of these early presences on the eastern seaboard for Olson's poetry and poetics is in the traces linking continents and paths of migration, which Maximus follows and weaves into a skein of recreation. What can also be extrapolated from their persistent naming in poem is the language, culture and mythology that goes into his overall gestalt.

The trope of migration is also substantiated by the regular appearance of birds in the text, and it is their nests that not only symbolise containers for the placing of poetic phenomena, but also represent the act of building as custodianship of place. The temporal nature of the nests symbolises a form of nomadism connected intrinsically to a specific place, and we will also see that this apparent paradox is critical to a fuller understanding of Olson's intention to create a multi-layered epic. This does not only chart the construction and development of Gloucester and weave strands of mythological association leading towards some form of mystical climax. Instead, *The Maximus Poems* embody something more personal, if not confessional then a skein to unravel and a lattice to contain elements far from random and extraneous in their mythology, but which relate to the core of their collector's psyche and as such are inextricable from his upbringing and life experience.

Reaching towards a past integrity that has been built over in his time, Olson explores a further trope, of cracks, in the calking of ships and in weatherboard houses, and which widen as the decline of the fishing town continues. Fish also recur throughout the *Maximus* volumes, both symbolically and real as energy and plenitude in indigenous and initial European years of settlement, and in Olson's time their traces can still be imagined swimming underneath the

buildings themselves. The tensions implicit in the discovery of a so-called new world and the presence of and interactions with the Algonquian inhabitants represent a challenge to the integrity of the polis and the aptitude of a poet to create moral truth from the strands and patterns of recorded and memorized time.

In his persistent attempts to address history through poetry, a task he identifies as problematic, Olson adopts “the mode of the mythologist”<sup>190</sup>, which comprises an effort to explore the roots not only of Gloucester as a migratory endpoint but those of civilization itself. This is generally associated with the second volume of *The Maximus Poems*, and marked by increased typographical freedom, using the blankness of the page for the poetics of the open field, with at times no more than a few words in its space. Olson observed that this volume also represents a “new start”, reaching out from the end of the first *Maximus* poems, retracing the “oblique, northwest tending line” of human migration as part of his project to solve a dilemma: “man is either going to rediscover the earth or is going to leave it” (*MU*, 440). Compounding the sense of place given by the localised history that permeates the first volume, figures and tropes from world myths populate these poems, emerging alongside the recreation of historical figures from the Cape Ann community.

In an example from Gloucester, the tale of the “Handsome Sailor”, Jack Merry, is set on the hill of Dogtown Common, overlooking the town, and the drunken protagonist’s goring by a bull is elevated into a fight of heroic, mythological proportions. This magnification is central not only to Olson’s project, but to the affirmation of Olson as a man in the context of this place and time. This is a personal and communal embodiment, conveying and recreated by the poetry in a fusion which more generally seeks to align and combine voices of “all those antecedent precessions, the precessions/of me” (*MP*, II.14) Olson not only uses these to express a consciousness that predates conventional notions of Western

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<sup>190</sup> Thomas Merrill, *The Poetry of Charles Olson: A Primer* (East Brunswick, N.J.: Associated University Presses, 1982), 193.

culture, in order to create “models of aboriginal humanity”,<sup>191</sup> as Merrill states, but also seeks to site himself in real time and space. The oblique fragments Olson puts onto the page can be read as reflective of a highly personal desire to comprise, not simply a gestalt aesthetic in relation to the Jungian concept of the Collective Unconscious, but as he expresses it, to the “kosmos inside a human being.”<sup>192</sup> In this sense, *The Maximus Poems* can be seen not just as a random collection of myths that articulate similarity, conscious or otherwise, but the desire to escape from what must have been at times a vertiginous feeling of rootlessness. If not entirely successful in expressing social and cultural unity, there remains evident a consensus between individual personalities and archetypes engaged in vital, projective acts in an open field.

The final composition, and current version of *The Maximus Poems* epitomises some of the issues involved with this thematic unity as well as typographic and editorial coherence. The third volume was compiled posthumously, in chronological order, for want of definitive indication as to the poet’s intended sequencing of the poems. This undertaking was assisted by Olson’s habit of meticulously dating all his papers, including the random scraps of paper that he often wrote on, yet a sense of uncertainty remains as to how *The Maximus Poems* may have developed or even concluded had he lived longer. Appropriately, in the sense of their nomadic function, a number of the later poems were strewn in a number of unexpected locations and some were found as tiny fragments of brittle paper, and although dated were often bewildering in their organisation. Butterick, who with Olson’s executor, Boer, was responsible for this task, emphasises the difficulties inherent in the project: “It is a rare thing, certainly, in literary history that a significant part of the major work of a poet is put together by hands and intelligences not the poet’s own. It would be like completing *The Faerie Queen* from stanzas ... left behind at Spenser’s death.”<sup>193</sup> Butterick refers to the “*massa confusa*” of Olson’s papers, the poet’s allusions to an “alternate” book of *Maximus* poems and also other poems which refer to the figure of Maximus,

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<sup>191</sup> Ibid. 198.

<sup>192</sup> Olson, *Special View*, 53.

<sup>193</sup> Butterick, xliv.

but which are so intensely private in their theme and tone that it could be questioned whether they were intended to be included in the overall work.<sup>194</sup>

The later poems are notable for themes of loss and yearning for recovery, possibly correlative to Olson's own approaching end. These show Olson seeming to contradict his earlier voice in places, although contradiction and paradox were typical of the man as well as his work. Furthermore, there is consistency of a nomadic, custodian and confessional sensibility that becomes evident on close reading of the final poems. At times during his final months he would claim to have finished his epic, but also pleaded with his doctors to give him another ten years in order to do so.<sup>195</sup> Olson scholars agree that this volume continues the mythological and archetypal concerns of its predecessor, although it switches from the hill of Dogtown to West Gloucester as a location of significance. Less noted is the creation of what is almost a mandala, within which a journey from East Gloucester to Dogtown to West Gloucester becomes apparent and traceable, and this gives structural unity to *The Maximus Poems*, as well as an element of a highly personal pilgrimage despite the impression of incompleteness. This journey and its nodes of grounding are central to how the poems can be understood.

### Space/Place

Olson has long been a poet associated either with Gloucester or Black Mountain, and regarded as inextricably linked to either or both places. Roger Gilbert goes so far as to claim that the theory of Projective Verse and its foregrounding of the action and process involved in poetic creation, means that "Olson's poems remain tied to the scene of their composition", and that the resultant "solipsistic immersion in one's own thought"<sup>196</sup> implies a dissociation from direct experience. What Gilbert does not mention is that in projecting the process of his

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<sup>194</sup> Ibid. xlv, xlix.

<sup>195</sup> Ibid. xlvi.

<sup>196</sup> Roger Gilbert, *Walks in the World: Representation and Experience in Modern American Poetry* (Princeton, 1991), 13.

thought onto space and using this not only to explore and inhabit but recreate this constantly shifting physical and psychic space, Olson is indeed a nomad poet.<sup>197</sup> A nomad poet in this sense is one whose attachment to place is almost primordial in essence: deriving from *nomos* – or field in Greek – nomadism refers to the care of country and the reciprocity that country in turn extends to those who treat it with commensurate care. Olson's care for Gloucester is in no way contradictory with his mental restlessness and imaginative flights towards other places. Pacing the narrow streets and paths of his community while envisaging presences from other times and spaces within its environs is all part of Maximus' work. Indeed, his psychic leaps are no less evident than those undertaken by the practitioners of the Deep Image school, and his projective poetic wanderings participate in an experience that is equally direct as the paths undertaken by re/creators of urban restlessness, such as Frank O'Hara, or the natural flux that winds through the poems of Snyder. The precursor uniting these strands is Whitman, with his untrammelled experience and his all-encompassing sweep which seeks to cover and care for all people and places, and articulates the notion put forward by Heidegger that a poet is "a shepherd of being",<sup>198</sup> and it is primarily to this call that Olson, through Maximus, responds.

Complementary to the concept of a nomad poetics and Olson's theory of projective verse is Deleuze and Guattari's theory of the rhizome: "a rhizome has no beginning or end; it is always in the middle, between things, interbeing, *intermezzo*...the fabric of the rhizome is conjunction."<sup>199</sup> This concept parallels Olson's insistence on leaving open spaces in his poem, sentences unfinished and fragments that are made up of porous material gathered from across time and space. Although the idea of rhizomatic form may appear contradictory, Olson's dictum that "FORM IS NEVER MORE THAN AN EXTENSION OF CONTENT" (*CPR*, 240) allows for his own work to stand as a structure which is constructed with sufficient space in its bricks and building blocks of language to allow for entry

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<sup>197</sup> Joris, in *A Nomad Poetics*, creates the following collocation: "what is needed now is a nomadic poetics", differentiating this from the concepts of "collage" or "the aesthetics of the fragment", (*Op. cit.*, 5).

<sup>198</sup> Heidegger, cited in Gray, 131.

<sup>199</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *Thousand Plateaus*, 27.

and interpenetration from all sides. Deleuze and Guattari's concept of assemblages, and the paradox of their being "not principally linguistic", yet "a form of content that is simultaneously inseparable from and independent of the form of expression" can also be discussed in similar terms.<sup>200</sup> Their concept of assemblages, consisting of bodies in a state of flux with both a sense of exteriority and their own internal cohesion and dispersion, are quite literally marked by transformation, where assemblage "formalizes contents" and creates "forms of content",<sup>201</sup> resulting in a situation where "form of expression is no longer really distinct from form of content."<sup>202</sup>

In *Nomadology*, Deleuze and Guattari propose the concept of space as either smooth or striated, stating that the former is characteristic of space inhabited by nomads and the latter is that of cities, built up and enclosed areas. They make reference to space as defined by Euclid, and how this implies, through his theory of parallels, that:

the force of gravity lies at the basis of a laminar, striated, homogeneous and centred space; it forms the foundation for those multiplicities termed metric, or arborescent, the dimensions of which are independent of the situation and are expressed with the aid of units and points. (*N*, 33)

This is characteristic of striated space, overlaid with the constructs and measurements of control, literally space that is claimed and occupied, and therefore expressed in terms that validate the appropriation. Paradoxically, this engenders alternative forms of expression using the same cultural terms it imposes on country, but in a way that reclaims the agency and imperative or custodianship through using the devices, idiom and signs of superimposition against itself.

By contrast with the notion of striated space, Olson's field of operation can be seen as a desire to recreate smooth space, one where the poet gets his language out into the open and keeps it on the move: in other words, the basis of

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<sup>200</sup> Ibid. 123.

<sup>201</sup> Ibid. 155.

<sup>202</sup> Ibid. 157.

projectivism. Nomadism, in this sense, encapsulates that which Deleuze and Guattari refer to as “ambulant sciences...*following the flow of matter, tracing and connecting up smooth space.*” (N, 38. Italics in original) Smooth space corresponds to an environment before structures of mass mechanization and the infrastructure defining modern cities, where organic connections are made through “the linking of proximities... effected independently of any determined path.” (N, 34) It forms a space defined by its potential for contact, and marked by the presence of sounds and movement, whereas Euclidian, striated space implies a more visual and therefore distant mode of attention. Importantly, too, agents operating within smooth space “do not meet the visual condition of being observable from a point in space external to them” (N, 34), and this allows each to function as a “figure of outward” whereby they embody an independent exteriority of their own. It is as if Deleuze and Guattari have created here their own, albeit unconscious definition of projectivist poetics: providing a way to further open the field of action and perception, and through this a connection to Olson’s poetry and poetics:

Smooth space is a field without conduits or channels. A field, a heterogeneous smooth space, is wedded to a very particular type of multiplicity: non-metric, acentered, rhizomatic multiplicities which occupy space without ‘counting’ it and can ‘only be explored by legwork.’ (N, 34)

Despite this, it ought to be considered whether Olson is operating in quite the same way, or what the implications of “legwork” are in his case. His early part-time work as a postman certainly seems apt as a corollary for this: a form of custodianship in the community, taking letters on their rounds. It is in response to a wider, implied paradox, namely that of the existence of a modernist or postmodern, nomadic poetics, that early lines in *The Maximus Poems* that express Olson’s own poetic technique of “how to dance/ sitting down” (MP, I.35), can be read as a thesis statement for his technique. He is a nomad poet, but his creations are not what Gilbert calls “walk poems”, which aim to “erase the difference between text and experience, to assert and sustain an absolute coincidence of

language and bodily sensation.”<sup>203</sup> Rather, Olson allows the text and experience to create themselves through projective acts and then be placed together on the page. The poet at his writing desk may be static, but his words and the objects and acts they represent are not, as they are constantly calling themselves into being.

The application of Deleuze’s and Guattari’s concept of “nomadology” with their attendant phrase, “the war machine”, may at first seem misplaced, given the implied socio-political commentary, if not activism. Having said that, the war machine concept proposes that the alterity of nomad societies has more to teach the contemporary world than the conformism of mass culture. Despite the destruction and cruelties resulting from the act of war, it is the warrior gestalt that “brings a *furor* to bear against sovereignty, a celerity against gravity” (*N*, 2) and embodies a stance of psychic and physical health, as opposed to the crippled human beings trapped in the artificial discipline imposed by modern cities. War is a “supplementary or synthetic object” (*N*, 120) that the war machine may or may not encounter, whereas it is the entire gestalt it exemplifies and the figures it calls forth that reveal its true purpose. An example of such a figure, apart from Maximus himself, is the Cretan war god Enyalion: dubbed “beautiful”, he is also “possibility” (*MP*, III.38) and appears in the second and third volumes of *The Maximus Poems*, as a nomad presence from mythology, whose presence forms a vital part of Olson’s proprioceptive creation.

There are other aspects of *Nomadology* that do not appear to match Olson’s concerns, at least not directly, and it is worth noting that sections that extend a psychoanalytic critique of capitalist society reflect the co-authorship of the treatise. Nevertheless, Olson would have certainly been in agreement with the concept that, in Muecke’s interpretation comprises:

a way of representing things (in discontinuous fragments, stopping and starting). It is an aesthetic/ political stance and is constantly in flight from ideas or practices associated with the singular, the original, the uniform,

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<sup>203</sup> Gilbert, 4.

the central authority...without for all that ascribing to any form of anarchy.<sup>204</sup>

A disclaimer of sorts also needs to be made, given the application of the term and its associated implications to a transnational and, in particular, an Aboriginal Australian context. While it is worth noting that nomadology as a concept “aims to describe practices, ways of living, while avoiding the pretense of describing a *whole* people”<sup>205</sup>, as a word it is literally made-up:

It stands in for all those transcendent and general terms like Truth, Fact, the Dreamtime, Authority, Origins, Law and Order. And, of course, it is applied inappropriately to Aboriginal cultures...It indicates the inappropriate application of any *singular* word to the lifestyle of a whole people.<sup>206</sup>

As such, it cannot be regarded as a way of determining the values and beliefs of any one culture, particularly one that can potentially be misrepresented as a single, homogenous culture when Aboriginal Australia actually consists of specifics and multiplicities in aspects such as language, ritual, arts, poetics and history: matrices which form arguably the oldest surviving cultures in existence. It is therefore more useful to see nomadology as an admittedly approximate and artificial term to designate an aesthetic and cultural way of regarding aspects of nomadism, which “not endemic to race... is embodied in the way of life of a people and this way of life is a culturally acquired thing. It is the existence which is most suited to the country, to smooth spaces like desert, steppes and the sea.”<sup>207</sup> As will be demonstrated in the first two chapters of this thesis, this view of space and a concurrent nomad sensibility is applicable to Olson’s mid-twentieth century Gloucester as well as to the more archaic and open spaces he evokes.

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<sup>204</sup> Benterrak, et al. 15

<sup>205</sup> Ibid. 15

<sup>206</sup> Ibid. 217

<sup>207</sup> Ibid. 223

## Preview

The first chapter of this thesis considers space in various forms relevant to *The Maximus Poems*, particularly oceanic, riverine and liminal topographies within which the work is situated. The first chapter also discusses varying dimensions of these spaces, alongside the dialectics of inner and outer space, in order to examine the porosity and interplay of spaces within and without the gestalt Maximus creates. Consideration is also given to the morphology of space, in particular landscapes, and how this influences the migratory patterns that result in the community Maximus composes. Gloucester, as Olson's site, from which Maximus operates, is situated between parallel immensities of space – that of the ocean, initially written into his consciousness by Melville, and the continent with its former wilderness behind him. This is the position from which the *topos* is enunciated and made real by Maximus viewing it through his unique perspective.

Chapter Two focuses initially on Olson's use of *typos* - how space is imprinted and represented. Through blows and vectors space becomes visible and transformed. Techniques for achieving this include experimental uses of typography to the application of non-Euclidian geometry, and ideas from mid-twentieth century science. Foremost among these are Whitehead's "prehensions", which help represent self-objects as part of an integrated cosmos, in which human beings form part of the text and maps. This can be applied to early and contemporary conventional forms of cartography, which is then compared and contrasted with an ancient, multi-dimensional and dynamic form of recording Country. This comparative view from Aboriginal Australia elaborates some of the ambiguity and also urgency of Olson's response to the settler appropriation and mismanagement of Gloucester. His special use of *typos* is therefore contrasted with forms of geometry and mathematics that constitute ownership, as a way of reclaiming the formative and fundamental stages of settlement in place and its expression.

The third chapter constructs a combination of *topos* and *typos* by placing and interpreting musical and imagistic elements in *The Maximus Poems*. Musical

influences on Olson, such as Pierre Boulez and serial music, alongside the work of John Cage, are sited as an essential part of Olson's expression of place, also reaching back to Maximus of Tyre and the concept of creating a city out of sound. This enunciation is complemented by the creation and siting of images notable for their inherent musicality, portability and special use. This includes a transcultural examination of *Tjuringa* in the context of Olson's environment. This in turn leads to consideration of multidimensional and transnational forms of language, and in particular the solidity and specificity of glyphs, as researched by the poet as part of his work with Mayan culture.

Chapter Four names and examines the recurring vital and animate self-objects of the epic, along with their inter-relationship with the concepts of topos and typos. These include non-human presences, namely birds and fish, and their implied metaphysical dimensions. The bird as *bricoleur* performs acts of gathering and weaving, which constitute elements of the triad formulated by Benjamin, which adumbrates the topos, typos and tropos which provides the main structure for this thesis. This parallel formulation looks at the process of weaving as a culmination of the musical and constructive elements that the previous chapter has introduced. Additionally, the foundation of Gloucester on fishing introduces a primary trope, linking the community with that in the Yucatan and looking at its symbolism as well as immanent significance.

The final chapter examines the fusion of these presences and how salient tropes combine to create the overall *Maximus* gestalt. Olson's concept of "proprioception" will be examined in a bodily and spatial context, with application to the individual, society and the integration of these into a more universal dimension. Proprioception and Aboriginal Australian Country provide a context for a combination of topos and tropos to be evaluated using ceremony, kinesis and typographical, human vectors. Their multidimensionality on the pages of *The Maximus Poems*, as objects, tropes and archetypes results in potential for recreation of a contemporary re-reading of the poems in a transnational and Indigenous setting of relevance for a twenty-first century readership.

## Chapter One

### Towards a Spatial Poetics

Towards the end of his life, Olson expressed interest in the national space program as well as admiration for the 1969 landing on the moon. In particular, as his friend and literary executor Charles Boer recalls, it was the feat of Buzz Aldrin, as “the coupler of two ships”<sup>208</sup> that impressed him. By contrast, when asked to contribute some of his own “space” poems to a local magazine in Gloucester, he observed with some irony that it was foolish to think that “the astronauts were into something that we, as poets, don’t already know.”<sup>209</sup> Olson was quite aware that his own life work was not only inextricable from the infinite nature and shifting dimensions of space, but also that these could not be reduced to simple concepts of inner and outer space. Furthermore, although the idea of outer space was nothing new, his poetry and poetics had taken giant steps in locating this within a gestalt that could incorporate both the molecular constituents of sentient beings and the entire cosmos within which these circulate.

Developments in space exploration provided a fitting correlative to the centrality of space in Olson’s poetry and poetics. “Space is the mark of new history, and the measure of work now afoot is the depth of the perception of space, both as space informs objects and as it contains, in antithesis to time, secrets of a humanitas eased out of contemporary narrows,”<sup>210</sup> he mused. Not only was outer space of interest to his project but also the way space is organised internally, within bodily and psychic limits. During his lifetime, advances in physics and astronomy paralleled exploration of physiology and space within the mind, creating a composite of sensations which inevitably had to be seen as acting on one another. This condition results in a mode of spatial organization and expression constituting a tendency such: “as Freud might have used it to describe his physical sensations of that cask, the ‘Gemüt’, man’s Heidelberg tun; in short, as

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<sup>208</sup> Boer, 45.

<sup>209</sup> Ibid. 46.

<sup>210</sup> Olson, “Man is Prospective”, in Corrigan, Ed. 2.

any intense investigator of any aspect of experience is now organically forced to use it.”<sup>211</sup> The “tun” refers to a vessel, or vat, that could contain more than a single human being, together with the German “Gemüt”, denoting “mind.” As mentioned, the idea of a vessel is congruent with that of the mind, which seeks to provide a space within which ideas may be engendered and forms recreated. To reach a point from which this gestalt could be made, it is necessary to first look at more conventional forms of space that create the environment within which Maximus operates, and how they are subject to change in their nature, through morphology of landscape and human activity. Therefore concepts of smooth, striated and liminal space in the context of the ocean, landscape and riparian surroundings of Olson’s formative years need initial consideration.

### Spatial Background and Types

As discussed in the Introduction, Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of smooth versus striated space provides original and compelling theory through which Maximus may be understood. Essentially, Olson’s protagonist seeks to reclaim the former while being forced to operate within the limits imposed by the latter. An understanding of how these two ideas of space relate to each other provides a template for an assessment of the kinetic co-existence of the fragments that comprise *The Maximus Poems*. Equally important is consideration that smooth space does not exclusively apply to the unmarked and shifting domain of the ocean, but also to inland and primordial areas. In this respect, Olson extends the spatial poetics that he inherited from his mentor, Melville, to encompass not only the projective space of vast distances and the proprioceptive space inside a maximal living organism, but also to find and recreate areas of space within which free movement may exist in his specific, familiar yet unsettled locations.

By contrast with the mariners traversing the untrammelled pelagic spaces in Melville’s epic, it is liminal, offshore and contested coastal space and the ambiguity of how and where it ‘lies’, that is essential to Olson’s epic work. The

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<sup>211</sup> Ibid. 2.

seascape and the space defined by riverine and glacial activity combine into a palimpsest for the tropic acts of his avatar. With regard to Gloucester, the concept of the stage as a way of claiming space for performative actions, with that of fishing as a correlative, is of significance. Furthermore, space is shown to be transnational and unstable in its *ur*-essence, from shifting tectonic plates, whereby continents themselves move, through ancient trade and migration routes to the settlement of the American seaboard. Apprehending these movements requires an understanding of the concept of the westward drift of civilisations, as well as Olson's push back to meet it in a shifting and generative arena.

The concept of smooth space works as a surface on which the origins of *The Maximus Poems* are charted and where they work themselves out. An understanding of smooth as opposed to striated space is essential in order to comprehend the canvas on which the epic is conceived, where its salient aspects take shape and shift, and the significance of how the words themselves are written. This implies a need for attention to the genesis not only of Olson's poetry and poetics but to broader concepts of time and space. Early in his career as a writer, Olson leaves the reader in no doubt as to the importance he attaches to this, and although the prosodic elements of the phrase, "smooth space" may sound deceptively quiet to the ear, those enunciated by Olson belie any gentleness:

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.  
(*CPR*, 17)

This statement, with its typically unambiguous use of upper case letters to highlight a central concept, forms the starting point for his literally ground-breaking prose work, "Call Me Ishmael", typically ambitious in appearing to attempt to encompass geographic and historic universals in its sweep. Its

importance consists in that it not only breaks but prepares the ground upon which a distinctive form of poetics may be charted.<sup>212</sup>

The vertiginous aspects of space, and their centrality to American culture are not limited to the ocean, nor to the spaces of Olson's childhood, but also encompass spaces before and beyond either of these. On the other side of the ocean's immensity, it is the plains Olson refers to as America's "fulcrum...half sea half land, a high sun as metal and obdurate as the iron horizon" (*CPR*, 17). In evoking such a dreamscape he is clearing his poetic field, reaching towards an archetype of space containing its own marvels and terrors. It is here, as in the oceanic depths that the sense of an Orphic dimension attached to those seemingly endless grasslands becomes evident. His account recalls James Fenimore Cooper's *The Prairie*, where the space of the plains is likened to the sea, with "the same waving and regular surface, the same absence of foreign objects, and the same boundless extent to the view."<sup>213</sup> This is a kind of space where travellers find themselves adrift, subject both to attack from roaming tribes, and in a more abstract sense, becoming nomad themselves: incorporating the transformative ground they traverse, while at constant risk of being boarded.

From the point of view of those already living in this environment comes a form of empathy with more recent settler arrivals:

Perhaps a sea crossing was still in the minds of the newest immigrants. And maybe also, their words [prairie ocean, seas of grass, prairie oyster] expressed a prescient awareness of the tug between coming and going ... Perhaps those people of the land knew the cycle (Whitman's 'perpetual transfers'): that time mineral, this time vegetable, next time animal, sometime man.<sup>214</sup>

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<sup>212</sup> Creeley's rejoinder: "No European has SPACE; they wouldn't know what you are talking about .... You can say to them, Space, etc. It won't come in on anything but geometry. Out this window, - speckles of the fields, houses, etc. Walking back in the woods, here, - old ruins of houses, etc. Like that .... The back of our place there in NH was a totally different reality." (in *O/C* Vol. 9), 224.

<sup>213</sup> James Fenimore Cooper, *The Prairie: A Tale* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1963), 6.

<sup>214</sup> Heat Moon, *Blue Highways*, 270. Heat Moon's work is epic in its own right, taking the prairie of Kansas as his palimpsest upon which to recreate local history and imbue it with personal meditations on the nature of time and space.

Sometime man equates to proprioceptive man, rising from these elements and this meeting point of literal bewilderment and simultaneous incomprehension. These largely unacknowledged transfers begin to form the gut of the Olsonian gestalt, within the psyche staked out in the Plains. William Least Heat-Moon, a writer and historian of English, Irish and Osage ancestry, adds to the understanding of this eventual gestalt in how he articulates this space: "I came to understand that prairies are nothing but grass as the sea is nothing but water, that most prairies life is *within* the place: under the stems, below the turf, beneath the stones. The prairie is not a topography that shows its all but rather a vastly exposed place of concealment."<sup>215</sup> Concealed and revealed spaces form part of the paradox that forms part of the gestalt. Revelation requires space, that of the unconcealed, yet this has to come out of the cavities that are frequently hidden from view. The poet's task in this sense is akin to that of topographer. Certainly, Olson's aim in comparing the respective spaces of the ocean and the plains is to reflect on the absence of clear borderlines in defining American space, to indicate its vertiginous nature and potential for inter-penetrability. The horizons, which appear to delineate space, indicate human origins and migrations as pelagic. Human settlement needs to cross the limen of coastlines and other shifting geological frontiers on the edge of vast and often indeterminate territories where apparently infinite space engenders and reflects an uncertain ontological consciousness.

In spite of the ocean's vertiginous aspects there also exist sources of sublimity and ways of release. The ocean, much like the plains in their original state, shares features belonging to its nearest counterpart on land, namely the desert, where

there is no line separating earth and sky; there is no intermediate distance, no perspective or contour, visibility is limited; and yet there is an extraordinarily fine topology that does not rely on points or objects, but on haecceities...it is a tactile space, or rather 'haptic', a sonorous much more than a visual space. (*N*, 53)

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<sup>215</sup> Heat Moon, *PrairyErth*, 28.

It is questionable if there really is no line of separation, and if it exists, whether it is apparent in relation to other environments as well. The idea of a horizon, indeed the word itself, is conspicuously absent from *Maximus*. The idea of outer space that replaces it is that of the stage. Likewise, for Maximus the sea is “stretching out/ from my feet” (*MP*, I.53). Jed Rasula sees this as a continuum from Pound’s *The Cantos*, with “Maximus as Archanthropos, whose eyes also look out to sea... twittering to ocean and literal place and Okeanos as imaginal location.”<sup>216</sup> As open, marked space, what is evident throughout the stages of *Maximus* is “the variability, the polyvocality of directions” (*N*, 53) and the potential for projective travels over and through the pages. If the edge of a page can be likened to a horizon, and its surface to a miniature stage, then the kind of kinesis Olson releases on it results in a blurring, an indistinctness that corresponds to the sense of sublimation hinted at, where boundaries merge and cancel each other out and the poet’s vision expands.

The presence of these spaces, and the ways they define the movements of those who traverse them are equally applicable to Maximus in Gloucester as to itinerant settlers on the prairie. The spaces the migrant pioneers and Maximus inhabit determine and defy the nature of claims or settlement made on them or in their vicinity. Instead, the early European inhabitants of Gloucester, their fishing ships and other craft, the waterfront buildings and the fish racks of Olson’s city are all gathered into an interactive congruence through the function of the ocean. Likewise, on the prairie, the animals and Native Americans and settlers “circle each other through interlocked zones. Sioux in chase of buffalo, spied on by Ishmael and his brood.”<sup>217</sup> The effect of the horizon in both spaces is not only on the creation of that space but the form and patterns created by activity undertaken within it, where “man...is no where; he is in motion, driven, a looped and windowed thing.”<sup>218</sup> Even in the vastness of a space with its promise of an eventual and tangible frontier, it is possible to feel confined within oneself.

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<sup>216</sup> Rasula, 114.

<sup>217</sup> Richard Grossinger, “The Four Badlands”, in Grossinger, Ed. *An Olson-Melville Sourcebook, Volume 1: The New Found Land, North America* (Plainfield, VT: North Atlantic Books, 1976), 53.

<sup>218</sup> Olson, “Exodus” (unpublished essay), cited in Robert Bertholf, “On Olson, His Melville”, in Grossinger, 19.

As a substitute for that promise, the horizon itself, claims Olson, is what Melville understood to be the fundamental means of creating a stage. It is upon this stage, a macrocosmic palimpsest extending both over ocean and plains, where Maximus acts out his epic.

The concept of space as palimpsest is of additional importance in reclaiming a sense of proximity to this very space. Olson states parallels in his and Melville's activity towards this end, and this push to reconnect with primary poetic impulses should of necessity be applied to *The Maximus Poems*. In "Call me Ishmael", Olson outlines the reason for a protagonist needing to reclaim a sense of spatial poetics:

Logic and classification had led civilization toward man, away from space. Melville went to space to probe and find man. Early men did the same: poetry, language and the care of myth...grew up together. (*CPR*, 19)

The archaic human corresponds to the figure of Maximus, heading toward the source of phenomena, drawn towards a buried continent, where "from passive places his imagination sprang a harpoon." (*CPR*, 19) The image of the lance, genesis, and the transposition of open spaces are directly evident in the first lines of the first *Maximus* poem, the narrator poised to throw this at the reader, to "tell you/what is a lance" (*MP*, I.1), as an interjection at the outset, with its point directed at unfathomable depths.

Olson takes both *Moby Dick* and Melville's diaries as texts from where his own spatial poetics develop. He focuses on his mentor's voyage to the Mediterranean after he had written his famous novel, and from where upon his return, his "natural sentences, as outward as gestures" name the fundamentals uncovered by his journey: "light house, monastery, Cross, cave, the Atlantic, an afternoon, the Crimea: truth, celibacy, Christ, the great dark, space of ocean, the senses, man's past" (*CPR*, 82). It is as if, in splitting the words "light" and "house" he is deliberately implying a sense of weightlessness and impermanence about human habitation when set against the vastness of a space that resonates with a wider and wondering consciousness. Indeed, Melville after writing *Moby Dick* moved

towards mysticism and found significance in his visits to holy sites around the ancient centre of the known world, yet in so doing:

missed his own truth. The Atlantic, the Pacific and the Mediterranean formed a trinity more natural to him, as *poète d'espace*, than that other Trinity, that desert that he chose to wander to and fro in, his last forty years. (*CPR*, 83)

To comprehend Olson's critique of Melville it is necessary to ask what he means by referring to the latter as a poet of space. In her comparative study of Olson and Melville, Ann Charters asks this pertinent question: "What precisely is a 'poete [*sic*] d'espace?'" and if Melville was such a poet, how did he, and by implication, Olson, become one?<sup>219</sup> She answers her own question obliquely by stating that, "Olson offers his own intuitive comprehension and belief as sufficient argument" and refers to a conversation with the poet where he claimed; "I just made that phrase up. I put it in French just to get away with it".<sup>220</sup> The latter statement is typically disingenuous and an explanation is still lacking. Charters indicates the recurrence of the word "space", throughout "Call me Ishmael", yet without offering her own definition of Olson's cryptic phrase.

Of the oceanic "trinity", it is worth noting that Olson showed a preference for the Atlantic, not only because it forms the porous boundary with his side of the continent, but also by contrast with the Pacific. According to Boer, he saw the latter as a primal source: generative and disruptive. It seems as if he trusted the proximity of the Atlantic as opposed to the expanse which unfurled from the other extremity of the landmass. Maximus states that "the Atlantic is a bottomed / Pacific"; (*MP*, II.51) a more stable area, familiar in its role as conduit for culture and a source of migration, flow and escape. The Pacific, on the other hand is almost oppressively fecund, an *ur-space*, but not one for his own sense of forwarding. Boer recalls: "The Pacific, you said, was the womb, and primitive, and the moon came out of it. You were a man for Atlantic waters only."<sup>221</sup> It is a curious statement in light of Olson's intense interest in archaic cosmologies and

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<sup>219</sup> Ann Charters, *Olson/Melville: A Study in Affinity* (Berkeley: Oyez, 1968), 48.

<sup>220</sup> *Ibid.* 49.

<sup>221</sup> Boer, 127.

development of a poetics in which concepts of the primitive and the significance of celestial space are prominent. It may be that the Atlantic formed an essential part of his stated “color” and “self” (*MP*, III.229) as he approached the end of his work and life; the comments of a man embracing familiar space in its purest essence to the exclusion of any others.

Another aspect of the oceanic environment of particular significance to the development of Olson’s writing on history and culture is its impression of timelessness or erasure of linear time in the experience of those who traverse its space. History that exists is that made “on deck in the micropolis of the ship.”<sup>222</sup> By contrast:

Olson’s Melville would make history an ‘Atlantis, the buried place. The Pacific was ‘father’, older than America...older than Asia and Abraham; objects in space (the Pacific) are post-historic. Olson reads Melville’s Pacific as pushing time back before recorded history (primordial) and forward as ‘end of the UNKNOWN’<sup>223</sup>

The Pacific is also the locus for Melville’s Ishmael, whose fate at the end of *Moby Dick* can be compared to Maximus at the end of the second volume, who states: “I set out in a box on the sea.” (*MP*, II.203) Unlike Maximus, though, who floats out with an ostensible sense of purpose, enclosed and taken out with the tide, Ishmael is in a predetermined space of death, despite the buoyancy of Queequeg’s coffin. The conclusion of this section of the poems is a return to sources of his epic, a closing of the loop in his cosmic quest. Melville’s protagonist is passive and at the mercy of the elements, saved coincidentally by the crew of a ship searching for another. He is at the end of his voyage, whereas Maximus appears expectant, having clearly willed his course. The mists of the tenebrous waters where the presence of the huge shoals of cod that gave life to the early migrants to New England represent a direct contrast to the imagined cold blue space of an unfathomable past.

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<sup>222</sup> Dan Featherston, “The Sphinx Reversed: Some Thoughts on Olson’s Melville” in Gary Grieve-Carlson, Ed., *Olson’s Prose*, (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2007), 12.

<sup>223</sup> *Ibid.* 12.

Melville's spatial achievement, according to Olson, lay not with the articulation of any particular ocean, or even sea space in general, but something more precise, to have made "all space concentrated into the form of a whale." (*CPR*, 18) Olson refers to the chapter in *Moby Dick*, "The Tail", as one of the purest pieces of non-Euclidian writing.<sup>224</sup> This body part, designed for movement, shows the free movement of atoms in a space that is both contained by the animal's skin but which in another sense is almost limitless, as the elements that constitute its means of propulsion are themselves in a constant state of motion and change. Melville describes this paradox as "the confluent measureless force of the whole whale...concentrated to a point".<sup>225</sup> The space apparently enclosed within the whale's body takes on a poetic dimension which is infinitely greater, and vaster in its purely physical implications than Olson himself explicitly stated. Melville puts it thus: "Could annihilation occur to matter, this were the thing to do it."<sup>226</sup> This statement evokes cataclysm and sublimity alike, and also provides a partial answer to the question of what is meant by a *poète d'espace*. In the *personae* of both Melville and Olson can be found a capacity for limitless extension of the self, in internal and external space. Either way, Melville's space and physicality refer to "a non-Euclidian deformation of space; it is extensive, elliptical and hyperbolic."<sup>227</sup> The precarious balance aboard the now proverbial ship of state is one that finds a natural, as well as nautical, correlative coursing along the porous coastline and watery fields of the republic.

Space, specifically the processes that comprise the realisation of its non-Euclidian sense, is a precondition for the creation of Maximus, and an essential

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<sup>224</sup> Olson, letter to Robin Blaser, in *Selected Letters*, 242. Olson's reading of mathematician Bernard Riemann was formative for his application of the concept of non-Euclidian space from geometry to language and by extension poetry and poetics. Olson interprets Euclidian space as being a product of the post-Socratic intellectual world of taxonomy and classification, whereas non-Euclidian space embraces an alternative (and return to previous) mode of thought which emphasizes the primacy of continuous process over analysis of inert forms. He famously states in "Human Universe" that: "There is only one thing you can do about the kinetic, re-enact it", (*CPR*, 162) and that conversely: "If man chooses to treat external reality any differently than as part of his own process", his energy will be dissipated in "arbitrary and willful purposes" (*CPR*, 163). Melville's writing and the whale's tail are both invested with the kinetic properties inherent to and expressive of non-Euclidian space.

<sup>225</sup> Melville, 418.

<sup>226</sup> *Ibid.* 418.

<sup>227</sup> Michael Jonik, "Congruence and Projective Space in Melville and Olson", in Grieve-Carlson, Ed. 141.

source of the vitality within the poems. It is this space within which “manifesting experience” gathers the phenomena of dreams, thoughts and other subjective experience into a mobile vertical axis that has the potential to traverse and explore the more traditional “manifest” axes that determine horizontal ideas of space.<sup>228</sup> This use of space, in other words, creates an original framework, or lattice, where the salient aspects of the epic can be measured and unpacked. Furthermore, once enough psychic space has been opened, there is room for objects to co-exist kinetically, to sharpen their energies and become manifest in their clear and precise meaning. These objects include the organic, animal and by extension, human, and when they reach their fully expressed embodiment, according to Byrd: “the energy for the poem comes inward from the external world, not outward from the lyric soul.”<sup>229</sup>

Where Byrd’s thesis could have continued, and where Deleuze’s and Guattari’s treatise seven years on provides an additional framework for regarding *Maximus*, is that this energy from external sources is projected onto both inside and outside space: creating the landscape that stretches out from his perception into the distance, and simultaneously locating its corporeal equivalent in the body of the protagonist:

Off-shore, by islands hidden in the blood  
jewels and miracles, I, Maximus  
(*MP*, I.1).

Here is defined the fundamental locus, inside and out, shifting and molecular, human or whale, from which projective acts can occur. It is space that requires initial naming and placing, the poet sizing up the extent of his psychic reach.

This offshore location and the islands in the protagonist’s bloodstream imply a logical contradiction. To consider the dialectics of inside and out that inform the creation of an entity that enunciates a nomad poetics, it is necessary to relate this to the more conventional space in which Maximus operates. The eastern

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<sup>228</sup> The terms “manifest” and “manifesting axes” are taken from Benjamin Whorf, in Byrd, *Maximus*, 26.

<sup>229</sup> *Ibid.* 32.

seaboard of the United States has long been fertile ground for consideration of how, poetically and epistemologically, the creation of islands and archipelagos happens, how stone becomes island becomes continent becomes meta-archipelago. Olson was familiar with T.S. Eliot's lines from "The Dry Salvages" (the third *Quartet*, concerning water, with Gloucester associations): "The river is within us, the sea is all about us", and the presence of his jewels and miracles, like Eliot's "hints of earlier and other creation"<sup>230</sup> are placed in the poetry as newly discovered, recovered objects, atoms and molecules bristling with kinesis from the forge of the poetic genesis. Olson's found objects and images are portable and performative, yet also function as islands surrounded by a narrative and at times discursive stream, which assists in connecting them within the poem.<sup>231</sup> They are points within spatial reference, and exemplify Ed Dorn's concept of "the inside real and Outsiderreal",<sup>232</sup> while remaining images that are freshly forged, and star-like, created particles within human beings, while also remaining afar, to glimmer forth at the epic's outset.

### Spatial Morphology

The eastern coastline of America, or of any continent for that matter, is potentially infinite. The connection between islands and continent is submarine, defined by cracks and faults that are hidden from view, yet upon which civilisations are constructed. Atlantic might be a metaphor but the Cabot Fault is real. Maximus straddles it thus:

One leg upon the Ocean one leg  
Upon the Westward drifting continent  
(*MP*, III.37)

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<sup>230</sup> T.S. Eliot, *Four Quartets* (London: Faber and Faber, 1952), 25.

<sup>231</sup> Here, a comment on the poetics of Derek Walcott is also worth noting, given their similarity to Olson's layout of *The Maximus Poems*, which consist of fragments like islands that function as "apparently disjunct units linked by repetition and, by implication, physically joined below the water." Paula Burnett, *Derek Walcott: Politics and Poetics* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2000), 40.

<sup>232</sup> Ed Dorn (Black Mountain College poet and teacher), *Slinger* (Berkeley: Wingbow Press, 1975), frontispiece to "Book III." Not paginated.

The nature of the spaces he appears in and attempts to span can appear random and chaotic, and Maximus is involved in a deliberate contest with the immensity and difficulties inherent in roughly delineated and shifting space. This makes the astral presences in their poetic microcosm more than simple affect: they function as a constellation within the psyche to parallel those by which the ancients navigated.

In Olson's landscape, that which he shares with Eliot, the older presences in the form of its wildness still exist, and the coastline, rivers and fields are all contingent on the constant movement of water and the particles of sand and stone that make up the illusion of solid ground. This is evident, particularly in its merciless movements offshore where Maximus observes:

Island, of all sand spits  
upon the globe, and terror  
of blown or dragged or dropped  
earth in the midst of  
water – shoals, worse

than rock because  
they do blow shift lie,  
are changing as you sound –  
on this crooked sand (*MP*, I.121)

Nature in this liminal space is more than rough, it is potentially deadly for a fishing community, and a glance at the records of any hunter-gatherer society or polis confirms not only the combination of awe and fear in which it is held, but also the need to know its movements. The importance of this knowledge, together with the recreation of the ocean's movements in this instance, is highlighted by the poet's uncharacteristic use of multiple verbs, in sets of three in lines in each stanza above. Knowing how the space around one moves is vital for survival, and with unpredictability of the shifting and blowing elements comes the "terror", and highlights the significance of the poetic art in response, to devise a means by which it can be comprehended. This art is that of the nomad sensibility, and significantly is located in a sequence of *The Maximus Poems* concerned with the hunt, more specifically fishing. Only in contrast with earlier

artists, the animals themselves are absent from the poet's tabula, where instead of cave walls the "crooked sand" forms a less permanent, literally unsettled, backdrop against which Olson opens the field for his more pictographic imagery.

The extract above also indicates the kinetic properties inherent in sound. The diphthong that connects "globe", "blown", "shoals" and again "blow" suggests that the controlling idea in this passage is of geographical features, on a large or small scale that are essentially loose and rhizomatic, subject to dispersal by the elements. These oceanic features are deceptive; shifty, as well as simply unstable. They form an inexhaustible tableau upon which the poetry can move, unconfined, but are also crooked and lie; typical Olsonian homonyms bestowing human traits on the landscape and vice-versa. The landscape constitutes an open yet untrustworthy space, one of immediate contest, an ideal and uncertain ground for an epic.

The ambiguous nature of the shifting seascape is also evident in the tectonic splits and shifts that have created continents and resulted in slow, steady movement of the ground beneath, ever since "the earth started to come apart at the seams." (*MP*, II. frontispiece) Maximus' attentiveness to these geological patterns is also a measure of his role as custodian, by spelling out the space around a place he inhabits that by its very nature is also on the move:

the coast goes from Hurrian Hazzi to Tyre  
the wife of god was Athirat of the Sea  
borne on a current flowed that strongly  
was taken straight through the Mediterranean  
north north west to Judas waters  
home to the shore  
(*MP*, II.98)

The "Judas waters" on one level seem to support the idea of the ocean's potential for treachery; the space that can bear migrant people and their places may also have the inclination to undo them, although they may also simply be indicative of an early, mystical naming of place and used by Olson as a form of poetic and

mythological affinity.<sup>233</sup> Human beings move together with the spaces they inhabit, here taking with them and recreating the coast of the place that is theirs to attend to.

The sea as a vector of migration as well as exploration is fundamental to discussion of Olson's poetry and poetics, but so are the meeting points of water and land. Tropes of human migration and the morphology of landscape in *The Maximus Poems* show the influence of geographer Carl Sauer, whose work in these fields elicited admiration from the poet. Sauer's comparative approach to early societies shows a sensibility similar to Olson's placing of non-contiguous communities, their languages and myths in his poetry. Indeed, Olson went so far as to refer to Sauer as a father figure, alongside Pound, fisherman Lou Douglas, "the hero of my poem", former teacher Wilbert Snow and his biological father.<sup>234</sup> The following, from "A Geographic Sketch of Early Man in America" could well stand as a thesis statement for Olson's spatial and historical poetics:

The far corners of the New World are jumbled but real museums of the remote antiquity of man. Here, in the contemporary populations, common primordial traits, physical and cultural, are preserved by which waves of colonization may be traced that spread southward from the Alaskan gateway and began within the Ice Age.<sup>235</sup>

In fact, Olson's poetics were multidirectional, as was his sense of an inherited cultural memory, and this consistently informed his stance. Taken with the oceanic migrations, however, Sauer's work provides a kind of psychic, demographic hydraulics, irrespective of the difference in linear time between the initial population of the Americas and the migratory routes across the Atlantic. Sauer points out that the "environmental range required for human emergence"<sup>236</sup> is much narrower than that of other hominid species, and that therefore the Rift Valley in East Africa with its self-contained abundance provided an ideal node from which the migratory vectors of early human beings

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<sup>233</sup> Butterick notes that the "Judas waters" could also refer to an apparition glimpsed by St Brendan in the seas around Iceland, 120.

<sup>234</sup> Boer, 87.

<sup>235</sup> Carl Ortwin Sauer, ed. John Leighly, *Land and Life: A Selection from the Writings of Carl Ortwin Sauer* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1963), 245.

<sup>236</sup> *Ibid.* 297.

spread. For Olson, this narrowness and these vectors function as threads and routes, which from their span across oceans and continents come together as a matrix from which his chosen polis is constructed.

Olson indicates through his use of cultural referents, especially in the second volume of *The Maximus Poems*, that his span of attention encompasses theories as outlandish as that which claims the eastern seaboard to have been populated via underground conduits from the mythical city of Atlantis itself. Whether he actually believed this theory is doubtful, but he would have agreed with the proposition that “[t]he earth...is mythologically as well as geographically round.”<sup>237</sup> European migration to America sees the former western frontier that faced Columbus, the ocean, and then the coastline beyond it become east, and the frontier shift again, the prairie encompassing the new oceanic edge of the world. Leslie Fiedler observes that in mythological terms, “our whole vast land (becomes)...a Passage to India.”<sup>238</sup> As Maximus embarks on the concluding section of his epic, he expresses this as:

the earth  
rushing westward  
...  
the nation rushing to melt  
in the Mongolian ice  
(*MP*, III.37)

This accelerated movement of space, “rushing” where previously it had commenced its westward movement ponderously, out of “Pytheus’ sludge” (*MP*, I.78) suggests a vortex before sublimation and the quietude of later *Maximus* poems. The Atlantic is a space that engenders flux and creation, and when these energies pass into and over the American continent they eventually dissipate.

Importantly, the focus here is on the earth as generative and transitory, an apparent dichotomy that is ultimately complementary and which leads to the works of a poet like Olson creating an integral expression of this state and flux.

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<sup>237</sup> Leslie Fiedler, *The Vanishing American* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1968), 27.

<sup>238</sup> *Ibid.* 27.

Sauer states that this is fundamentally Herodotean: “modern geography is the modern expression of the most ancient geography”,<sup>239</sup> and argues for the need to see all objects in a landscape as inter-related. A precondition for this stance is the acceptance of the landscape itself being dynamically involved with itself: continents as kinetic constituents engendering its own gestalt, for which the poet and geographer provide their respective modes of articulation and representation.

The same process applies to migrations as to voyages of discovery, the differences being primarily those of speed and scale. In their essential, spatial activity there is scant distinction between the movements of settlers toward Gloucester and the Hittites invading Egypt millennia before:

who came out of their marshes likewise  
to change the commerce of NW shifting  
man – it ends, as Stefansson couldn't  
stomach the dead end of his own prop-  
osition, in the ice  
(MP, I.146)

For Olson, the importance of Vilhjalmur Stefansson, Arctic explorer of the twentieth century, is in his work, *Northward Course of Empire*, which builds upon the theories proposed as *translatio studii* and *translatio imperii* in the Middle Ages, namely that knowledge and power have been shifting westward in search of *loci* for evolution, leaving older, formative cultures redundant in their wake. The movement to meet this is ambivalent: whereas the migratory impulse is universal, pursued by most sentient beings, involves mythopoetic dimensions and can engender a *polis* of attention as a result of the settlement it finds, so too comes the potential destruction of culture and communities with which it collides. The end of his “proposition”, enjambed and broken in the text, is something the explorer and writer feels in a psychic and well as historical sense: a theory of universal movement reduced to a means of support, or “prop-” when faced with solid, frozen space which puts an end to that particular cycle of spatial history.

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<sup>239</sup> Sauer, *Land and Life*, 321.

If civilisation may be characterised by the concept of a westward drift, and if Olson can be seen directing his attention outward to meet it, such a sense also helps follow its traces back across the ocean to ancient Greece and Sumeria, entering into and recreating tropes of his precursors' voyages. His summons of Ishmael, as *ur*-ancestor, is calling to a presence that adumbrates Maximus himself, as well as providing impetus for tropes of physical and psychic interpenetration. This for example, is also a feature of *Moby Dick*, with cobblestones taken aboard whaling ships from the streets of Nantucket, to be used as missiles in the event of all lances or harpoons being lost, and conversely an observation that the grand houses of the eastern seaboard were themselves "harpooned and dragged hither"<sup>240</sup> from the bottom of the world's oceans.

### Space, Estranged and Familiar

Olson's poetics also distinguish other vectors of migratory direction and movement, some of which are internalised and imperceptible, relating to personal concepts of space. The movements of Maximus, like those of Melville's Ishmael, can be explained by the poet's peripatetic outlook and life, with a precarious footing on the proverbial ship of state and the complicated fusion of a personal and collective quest. Throughout his life Olson appeared to inhabit space where both physical and psychic tectonic plates were in a state of collision. His own shifts and movements reflect those of the land itself, and through his recreation of Maximus, become representative for those of civilisation and city, in their *ur*-sense, and progression towards and within his fishing town. Therefore, these cannot be dissociated from the polis overall, and Paul hints at the implications of these:

The horizontal belongs to the conquest of space, here to the discovery of America and the subsequent westward movement...the course of post-

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<sup>240</sup> Melville, 36.

Sumerian history...dispersion, loss of center and coherence. Horizontal movement, accordingly, no longer serves 'the last first people.'<sup>241</sup>

Within this context, the westward drift of civilisation, from its starting point in Sumer, becomes not only a defining movement of human demographics, but also one which started the abstraction and generalization of language by removing it from a particular place. Gloucester as the centre for *The Maximus Poems*, Byrd claims, is essentially arbitrary: "not a place as such but an engagement of attentions which is necessarily located."<sup>242</sup> Byrd understates this necessity, given that Gloucester was the specific location where Olson's childhood memories were stored, and thus a place which spoke to him on an almost visceral level. Maximus himself asserts that he is American primarily as a "complex of occasions" (*MP*, II.15) that has to be given a national identity. In more general, spatial terms, this identity could be described as one pertaining to an East Coast location, where the notion of topos goes hand-in-hand with a poetics of erosion and psychic loss.

For Olson in Gloucester, and Maximus as self-appointed custodian of the polis, one with the world he knows behind him, and the other with his culture back over the water and in time, the ocean extends before them, their business yet to be done. At their backs is the demarcated world of the mid-twentieth century, with its prescriptions and restrictions and before them the idea of unlimited space. It is within the area between these two fields that Maximus seeks to operate, within what can be called an unstriated, pre-linguistic space of the mind, creating projective size within himself and upon which he can release the poetry and poetics that make up his story.

In other words, the space initially traversed by Melville, and recalled by Olson, corresponds closely to the definition of smooth space as given by Deleuze and Guattari. It is the elements of outside that when observed in their limitless motion within the body, or poetic figure, convey a breakdown of parallel structures in thought and permit the dreamscapes that are made up of minuscule

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<sup>241</sup> Paul, 134/135.

<sup>242</sup> Byrd, *Maximus*, 64.

elements to achieve limitless proportions. These seep into the typography, and correlate to Maximus' own dreams of infinity. They correspond to the oceanic space that is underneath human settlement, where sailors go down to in their ships and which brings in the winds and currents which force them back into the no-man's space of shoals and breakers that smash their craft. It is a space that holds up mariners, that keeps them afloat, yet one that is vulnerable by the very physics of this equilibrium when considering the variable forces that comprise the balance:

... the vertical  
                  Through the center of buoyancy of a  
floating body  
                  intersects  
the vertical through the new  
center made...  
  
when the wind,  
  
or the nature of the cargo  
  
or a rip  
(*MP*, l.38)

It is of significance that further along in the poem, a shipping mishap is almost caused by the presence of a captain who salvages floating lumber from the sea in order to build a garage for his home. The intersection that Olson refers to is brought into play as a plank too large to control almost sinks the ship. Where human construction meets the ocean comes a balance not only fraught with danger, but constant reminders of the fragility and liminal nature of all habitation. The first volume of *The Maximus Poems* dedicates several letters to shipwrecks, including one which destroyed virtually a whole fleet in one night off the treacherous Georges Bank, with significant loss of life. Olson's impressions of that liminal seascape, where currents combine with its shifting, unstable space, so hard to apprehend, have already been noted. The "1<sup>st</sup> Letter from Georges", mainly given in prose, starts with a tense, abbreviated continuation of his previous lyrical evocation of the shifting sand spits:

February night, or August  
on Georges the seas

are short, the room's  
small. When the moon's

fullest the tidal currents  
set fastest  
(*MP*, I.136)

The tone, when compared to the more lyrical stanzas cited above, conveys a sense of hushed fear, sounding when read aloud like a ghostly chant; the assonance of "August" and "George" continuing with the pairs of "room /moon" and "fullest /fastest." This section serves as a prequel to the accounts and lists of dead mariners that follow in the prose section of the poem. It serves to remind the reader that the terrors of the ocean are not inherent to that space, they arise from the seafarer's contact with those elements within it that have come close to land, and these encounters can stop the words in their throat. In response to this area where land and sea combine, and become in places indistinguishable, the poetry itself moves from lyrical to minimal to prose. The result is a poetics of a space neither smooth nor striated, but one comprising an indeterminate zone, neither known nor entirely strange, and to be approached with circumspection. Maximus has chosen this space to operate in, deliberately because it defies the categories that can be deployed to describe it. Whether controlled by rhythm and cadence or by factual recount, the language itself shifts in tone, reflective of the changing aspects of the ocean, and as a means to express the responses of those who encounter them.

The European colonisers of the coastal area of Massachusetts were fishermen, and fishing is an activity which requires both unstriated space, and a base on land that is necessarily claimed, and demarcated. Maximus enquires:

where fishing worke  
was first set up, and fourteen men  
did what with Gloucester's nothing space  
and all her harbor?  
(*MP*, I.102-103)

A land with nothing is in a perpetual state of becoming. Olson's question is rhetorical, and like a large proportion of his rhetoric one feels it is deliberately unanswerable. His riddles come in shorter, cryptic outbursts than these sections, where he attempts to unpack history and space, yet it will be seen further on that by way of answer he presents the reader, or listener, with objects in place of discourse, things he positions in space recalled, to await his own acts of possession and retrieval.

The initial band of fourteen men evokes an apostolic sense given their number and activity. Olson attempts to recall how their experience of this space would have felt from what he realizes is a perspective overlaid not so much by time but construction and development of that space, where for them "probably the ocean/ate deeper in the shore, crashed further up at Cressy's". (*MP*, I.106) He acknowledges his own inability to experience the untrammelled space they did, but points out another aspect of significance:

...that as I sit  
in a rented house  
on Fort Point,  
the Cape Ann Fisheries

out one window,  
Stage Head looking me  
out of the other  
in my right eye

...

Gloucester can view  
those men  
who saw her  
first  
(*MP*, I.107)

The place itself, not only the polis of attentive coherence, is shown here as a living entity. Olson noted that for Melville the presence of the horizon equated to that of a stage, and in this extract he uses this correlation, in one of many references throughout *The Maximus Poems* to loci defined by the idea of a stage. Stage Head is a point outside Gloucester, and it appears to have the poet

transfixed, unsteadily sited as he is, between the fisheries and the skyline. The horizontal space is literally staring him out, and behind him he senses the area that was to become Gloucester also invested with this power of sweeping sight.

Therefore, like the community, Maximus the protagonist, is from the viewpoint of the westward moving vectors of civilisation, using a sense of panoptic vision: there is the act of looking east, which can be seen as an impulse towards the direction of decay and lost causes, and facing a natural, cosmic order from a vantage point which is liminal and unstable. Nevertheless, the sea, which might otherwise be a shifting, vertiginous mass, represents a vector that leads to a turning point whereby he can face around and re/discover America. In a poem widely regarded as a precursor of Maximus, "The Librarian", Olson calls out to

The landscape (the landscape?) again: Gloucester,  
the shore one of me is (duplicates), and from which  
(from offshore, I, Maximus) am removed, observe  
(*CP*, 412)

The uncertainty of the landscape contrasts with the more explicit offshore locus, where this early mention of Maximus in Olson's work is presented as a being solid in his parentheses and his duplication as inhabitant of oceanic and coastal space simultaneously, with only solid ground as an area where he is unsure, or onshore. There is potential for uncomfortable ambivalence and the implication of split personality in this act, but also one of creation. From the locus already mentioned, "Astride/the Cabot/fault" (*MP*, III.37), the epic protagonist attempts to pull together the elements that make up his habitation, and thus comprise himself: "to build out of sound the wall/of a city." (*MP*, III.37) Maximus represents a recovery of cohesion and confidence in achieving this, by moving, as Paul puts it, "in two ways and from two directions...from the East with the discoverers in the outer (and inner) sea to the New World and by moving from the West, from Worcester, his 'inland waters', to Gloucester".<sup>243</sup>

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<sup>243</sup> Paul, 156.

Maximus enigmatically states that it is the trolley-cars of his birthplace, Worcester, that correspond to these “inland waters”, and recounts a childhood excursion with his father, observing the cars moving uphill and away from him, “before they take, before they go down to/the outer-land” (*MP*, 1.83). His recollection is also a re-enactment; as an adult he is able to bring the waters back, along with the landscape itself and transpose other places and acts onto his childhood spaces:

Now I find out it is the Severn  
goes from Worcester to Gloucester to  
: Bristow, Smith called it,  
what sticks in me as the promised land  
those couples did go to, at right angles  
from us, what does show  
between Gloucester and Boston, the landscape  
I go up-dilly, elevated, tenement  
down  
(*MP*, 1.83)

The river Severn in England is metonymic for Maximus or Olson himself, and his journeys from the town in which he grew up to the coast with the “promised land” as a notion taken with him. The “right angles” themselves indicate the presence of a grid, a map of the roads and place that the path of the river itself cannot encompass, fixed as it is by its course, and terminating at the coast. The landscape as protagonist is familiar but infused with the tension of a need to move more freely, if not escape.

Worcester itself is often overlooked as a place of meaning for Olson, both in and outside the context of *The Maximus Poems*. The extract above is from “The Twist”, one of the longer poems in the *Maximus* sequence. A poem that is not part of the *Maximus* sequence, “An Ode on Nativity”, also gives prominence to the poet’s birthplace, but by contrast casts it as a mysterious winter, with potential for rebirth in “the crèche of things” (*CP*, 246), but also where a sense of the uncanny creates the poet and an unnamed interlocutor finding a way through

the hollows  
made coves of mist & frost, the barns

covered over, and nothing in the night but two of us  
following the blind highway to catch all glimpses  
of the settling, rocking moon  
(CP, 246)

There is a sense of questing; there is the presence of bird life, with ducks which have a “surface” to “walk on” (CP, 248) the frozen waterscape, and the familial togetherness at a mystic place and time. The concept of “crèche” also evokes a place of terror, which the city itself moves away from and where, in a flash of horrific vision, can be heard the cries of burning horses, as the poet recalls a lumberyard catching fire, these animals, along with the guiding light of the moon itself:

fallen through the floors  
into the buried Blackstone River the city  
had hidden under itself, had grown over  
(CP, 245)

Here, the inland waters appear enclosed forever, and light and birth uncertain in their advent. Like passages in *The Maximus Poems* which presage the ghostlier areas of Olson’s topography, this presence of place is one of uncertainty and confinement, yet also an eerie evocation of spectral beauty and the potential, however distant, for renewal and change. Olson himself, after reading “An Ode to Nativity” at the Berkeley Poetry Conference in 1965, commented: “I’m moved. Wow I never wrote about Gloucester like this...I’ve been wrong all this time. I belong in - I belong – my subject is Worcester!” (MU, 144)

Olson was hardly wrong. The enclosure of his childhood waters in Worcester seems to have had deep resonance for the underlying flow of the *Maximus* sequence, and may also account for the significance of the free flowing watery spaces, the “proverbial seashore”<sup>244</sup> of Gloucester, as a means towards reclaiming an earlier sense of liminality and freedom. The interaction between inner and familial space as evidenced by Olson’s poetry addressed to Worcester

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<sup>244</sup> Creeley, cited by Jim Fay, “Worcester: Olson’s Place of Nativity”, *Minutes of the Olson Society*, #44 (March 2002), 12.

is paralleled by his early references to Gloucester in “The Librarian”, where after having sited Maximus as the offshore protagonist, he continues:

In this night I moved on the territory with combinations  
(new mixtures) of old and know personages: the leader,  
my father, in an old guise, here selling books and manuscripts.  
(*CP*, 412)

These lines evoke a nomadic sense of movement, advancing on territory to claim it, and bringing family or notions of the same. The presence of his words, carried and distributed by his father, in the “old guise”, may be likened to an elder, or ancestor with whom the stories of the family, or by extension, community are preserved in its wanderings. The direction taken by Maximus in “The Library” is from outward back in, and in “The Twist”, these movements continue through his remembered spaces of Worcester, and those of his father and grandfather, and culminate in the protagonist moving out and on towards Gloucester and Boston, completing an ellipse which brings him back to the unenclosed Annisquam river in Gloucester. This movement brings a resolution “in this veracity/there, the waters of several of them the roads/here”, (*MP*, I.86) merging adult and childhood spaces, connecting psychic waterways and bringing together time and space through the truth of poetic recollection.

It has been seen that civilizations in general, along with their individual components, come to be defined not only by their own migratory patterns but by the features of the transitory places they inhabit. Maximus states that human beings and geographical *loci* both have the potential to contain all created space within themselves:

Gravelly Hill says  
leave me be, I am contingent, the end of the world  
is the borders  
of my being (*MP*, II.161)

The exterior world and the physical aspects of Olson’s Gloucester define his own internal space: on a road through the hill of Dogtown “there’s a big rock about ends my being” (*MP*, II, 161), and:

I can even tell you  
where I run out; and you can find  
out. I lie here  
so many feet up  
from the end of an old creek  
which used to run off  
the Otter ponds (*MP*, II.161)

The shorter lines above, with verbs, nouns and particles in swift succession imply a corresponding rapidity in the transference and interchange of states and locations they describe. The sense of Maximus running out, dissipating in this way implies an overlap in both finitude and leakage, that in the abundance around him

from where I do end northerly, and from my Crown  
you may in fact observe Jeremiah Millet's  
generous pasture (*MP*, II.161)

there is both an excess of and limitations to spatial existence. In this epic so frequently punctuated by geographical referents and defined with a protagonist defined in many ways by his own dimensions, this sense of overflow and of limits, which "are what any of us/are inside of" (*MP*, I.17) is part of his, and the poems' fundamental, and paradoxical nature, where "a bridge/of old heavy slab stones/still crossing the creek" (*MP*, II.161) that he not only observes but into which incorporates himself recalls the islands in the bloodstream and also inland, his own archipelagic nature. This activity of process and reflection engenders a profound connection to the place he is part of, and his naming of it is partly what constitutes his overall gestalt. The water, land and rocks become the world which is indistinct from his being, as well as that of his contemporaries: they share the same limits and are defined using similar combinations of common and proper nouns.

## Riparian Space

The presence of rivers in Olson's poetry is relatively unexamined, with the notable exception of "The River Map and we're done", in the second volume of *The Maximus Poems*. Their topological significance is in the creation of channels through space and their morphological implications in relation to the landscape. In terms of poetry they constitute vectors akin to veins in the body and lines through the topography of Being, with their own particular potential for imprint and tropic activity. Their flow can be observed or entered into: superficially restrained by their banks, rivers are in constant flux, and lead to the upwelling of the open spaces into which they empty themselves. A riverine poetics embodies tropes akin to those outlined by Deleuze and Guattari, for whom the act of following (as opposed to simply observing from the bank) takes place when:

...one is in search of the singularities of a matter, or rather of a material, and not out to discover a form; when one escapes the force of gravity to enter a field of celerity; when one ceases to contemplate the course of a laminar flow in a determinate direction, to be carried away by a vortical flow... (N, 36)

Rivers form striations in the landscape, but also help articulate the idea of a psychic ellipse, creating additional conduits connecting actual and mythological centres, be they Worcester, Gloucester or subterranean settlements. The peregrinations of Maximus are facilitated by these channels to give additional fluency – or fluidity – to his activity as well a sense of dynamism and flow to his special form of mapping, which forms the focus of the following chapter of this thesis.

Casey reminds us of a Sumerian Epic:

in the *Enuma Elish* no earth whatsoever is present at first, not even an earth 'without form and void'. Instead, we find *two bodies of water in a shared elemental matrix*. For Apsu (ocean; literally, 'abyss') and Tiamat (primeval waters) are the names of primeval regions in which sweet and

bitter waters resides respectively. From these waters 'silt precipitated'; that is, earth came to be.<sup>245</sup>

The fields of Connecticut, a feature of Olson's later years, form a space of flow and return, bisected by rivers which recall his inland waters. In psychic terms this locus is a borderline shift, to where the mythical frontier of the prairie is pushed back by fenced and watered farmland. The striations in this space combine forces of nature and human agency. A geographical loop of sorts is effected, from his birthplace, to Cape Ann and finally into a landscape that reminded him both of names and topographical features from the so-called Old World. The presence of England is prominent in what were to be his final meditations on topography: according to Boer, the area around the University of Connecticut recalled that of coastal England, and this observation extended to the relationship of buildings to their environment. Boer remembers that the attraction of these for Olson lay in that "their exposure on the land was so like the seaward exposure in Devon."<sup>246</sup> This landscape, with its houses and rivers "absorbed" the poet, who wrote one of his last poems in praise of "long gifted generous northeastern / Connecticut stone walls",<sup>247</sup> these being indicators of older lines underneath

through which 18<sup>th</sup> century roads still pass  
as though they themselves were realms,  
the stones they're made up of  
are from the bottom such ice-age megaliths<sup>248</sup>

This sedimental conjecture then extends to the notion

that one is suddenly walking  
in Tartarian-Erojan, Geaan-Ouranian  
time and life love space<sup>249</sup>

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<sup>245</sup> Casey, 43.

<sup>246</sup> Boer, 109.

<sup>247</sup> Olson, in Boer, 110.

<sup>248</sup> Ibid. 110.

<sup>249</sup> Ibid.111.

Mythical and archaeological sensibilities combine to create space that has become unconfined, emergent from the depths of time and immanent from the trans-continental viewpoint of space. From documented memory to time preceding Antiquity, riverbeds emerge as veins in the strata of the earth itself.

Their subterranean presence, when summoned to the surfaces upon which the poetry is laid, evokes a sense of calm, of potential reconciliation with the outer, oceanic spaces previously conjured up in all their sound and fury. Towards the end of the second volume, in “The River Map and we’re done”, Maximus expresses a sense of serenity between himself and the space that surrounds him. As in “Letter 27 [withheld]” the structure of the poetry indicates that he is taking his surrounds into himself, the winding lines representing his voice as the river, and shortening as it finds direction towards the sea:

in both directions    ledge only  
at one point Rocky Hill    and Castle Rock  
   a few yards further  
   than Cut Bridge enabling sand  
   to gather  
  
   off mouth  
   a Table  
   Rock  
   Like Tablet

(MP, II.201)

Within the river are rocks and sand, as markers of place, or gathered in its bed, as script that its movement, or projective course is creating. The section above is linked to that below in typography that may also explain the link between “tablet” and the following reference to “kun”:

   Between Heaven and Earth  
kun    and    on any side    Four  
  
directions    the banks  
and between them the River Flowing  
   in North and South out  
   when the tide re-

fluxes

(*MP*, II.201)

The word “kun” can represent either a Chinese ideograph, which originally would have been written on tablets or in sand. In Arabic, it stands for the act of creation, as uttered by Allah. The arrangement of lines on the page creates a shape similar to that of the Arabic word, and deliberate as Olson was about the exact typographical reproduction of his poetry, this is unlikely to be accidental. If only from an aesthetic point of view, both Arabic and Chinese, convey a sense of fluidity and dynamism in their written characters.<sup>250</sup> Both scripts are mutable, a word or character’s shape depending on its position within a word. Their often, and especially in the case of the former, filigreed appearance is aesthetically, at least, suggestive of ornament: this reminds the reader of the outset of Maximus, with “jewels and miracles” (*MP*, I.1). This decorative aspect suggests a sense of portability, separate word-jewels set into motion through the coastal landscape, where in the

inspissate River  
times repeated  
(*MP*, II.202)

and with the use of an adjective specifically designed to repeat its curved “s” sounds, recalling again “Letter 27 [withheld]” and the prosody of “Polis/is this” (*MP*, II.15) comes the sense of perpetual action, a constant calling into being of the hills, rocks, houses, fields. Finally, an impermanent settling of primary elements as “Rocky Marsh” (*MP*, II, 202) is suggested as the map draws itself to an end.

This is where Maximus sets out as mentioned, in his box, drifting into generative space. It is the meeting point of flow and upwelling, a confluence of types of

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<sup>250</sup> Olson’s sense of language in this respect, and particularly with reference to Chinese, was influenced by Ernest Fenollosa’s foundational essay from the turn of the Twentieth Century, as disseminated by Pound, in which it is claimed: “a large number of the primitive Chinese characters ... are shorthand pictures of actions or processes.” Fenollosa, Ed. Pound, *The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry* (San Francisco: City Lights, 1986), 9.

space and energy directions. It creates a poetics of fusion, a merging of two forms of fluidity:

There is indeed such a thing as measured, cadensed rhythm, relating to the coursing of a river between its banks or to the form of a striated space; but there is also a rhythm without measure, which relates to the upswell of a flow, in other words to the manner in which a fluid occupies a smooth space. (*N*, 22)

As previously mentioned, the River Annisquam that divided Cape Ann from the rest of the continent, through its course between islands inland, shifting mud flats and more permanent granite banks, has been bridged as it enters Gloucester Bay, at a place called The Cut. Olson recalls an earlier time, the condition of its course unaltered by the imperatives of commercial traffic. The eternal river abides, as an expression of spaces meeting, and through them the interchanges that occur in the poet's field of history and the expansion and contractions of time.

The transnational aspects of such interchanges have been indicated as crucial to understanding *The Maximus Poems*. Not only is there is the mix of languages in "The River Map and we're done", and also the influence of Eliot, whose "The Wasteland" is run through by the Thames, but also upon this poetic mapping are overlaid regions from the Mediterranean and South Asia. Although Olson's poetry is intensely local in the precision of naming the very rocks, twists and turns that comprise the watercourses of Cape Ann, similar transnational elements – that also verge on the cosmic – are discernible in this poetry of place. Indeed, it would be apt to apply Ramazani's term, "translocal"<sup>251</sup> to rivers, which by their very nature have more or less precise points of emergence, flow and dissipation, yet are always in motion or flux. This gestalt, so to speak, of their geography, somewhere between tidal and continental consciousness incorporates tropes of binding and traversal, thus making them ideal conduits for the enunciation of a nomadic, local poetics.

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<sup>251</sup> Ramazani, 14.

Another precursor can be seen in Langston Hughes' "The Negro Speaks of Rivers", where a transhistorical and transcultural persona akin to Maximus narrates and flows "freely across temporalities and metrical limits, on Whitman's example."<sup>252</sup> Across deep time and "rivers ancient as the world and older than the flow of human /blood in human veins" the poet moves from the Euphrates to the Mississippi, repeating the refrain: "My soul has grown deep like the rivers".<sup>253</sup> His recollection of the rivers forms another link between Eliot and Olson in their ambiguous, paradoxically confined habitation on the edge of a psychic or spatial continent and their need for channels and living vectors of release.

On completion of this river map, Maximus ends his second volume, the mythological following that of his fishing town and lets himself go:

I set out now  
in a box upon the sea  
(*MP*, II.203)

And this is how the volume ends, with the two lines above on their own, otherwise blank page, part of yet separate from "The River Map" itself: the ambiguity appears intentional. The positioning of this poem is of significance, given that the original edition of the second volume, *Maximus IV, V, VI* was published without page numbers. The protagonist embarks on an unspecified mission into smooth space, leaving behind conventions such as pagination or cartography. Deleuze and Guattari note: "In free action, what counts is the way in which the elements of the body escape gravitation to occupy absolutely a nonpunctuated space" (*N*, 79), and Maximus casting off into the ocean is a perfect embodiment of this theoretical statement. At this juncture, he has also returned to his primary offshore locus, the sea, which also contains something more purely ineffable: according to Melville's contemporary, Baudelaire: "twelve or fourteen leagues of moving liquid suffice to provide the noblest idea of beauty

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<sup>252</sup> Ramazani, 33.

<sup>253</sup> Langston Hughes, "The Negro Speaks of Rivers", in Richard Ellmann, ed. *The New Oxford Book of American Verse* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), 694.

that is offered to man in his transitory habitation.”<sup>254</sup> More practically, for an evaluation of the ever-shifting locations occupied by Maximus is the sense of his on-going proximity to “large, nonmetric aggregates, smooth spaces such as the air, the sea or even the earth (*magnae res*).” (*N*, 22)

“The River Map” is also significant in that it marks a high point in Olson’s prosody, and showcases his ability to achieve both measure and rhythm, in contrast to other, notably discordant passages in *The Maximus Poems*. That this is achieved in a poem so closely bound to both the river and the sea is worth unpacking in detail. Deleuze and Guattari acknowledge that the sea is problematic in terms of evaluating its measure and rhythm, and that these aspects are “always distinct.” (*N*, 22) Measure, or form, is made up of the fluctuations it contains. As such, and in places, Olson’s verse is less free and more atomic. His words move at speed and in apparently random ways, even when placed in his more tightly controlled stanzas:

With the water high no distance  
to Sargents houses Apple Row  
the river a salt Oceana or lake  
from Baker’s field to Bond’s Hill  
(*MP*, II.202)

In other places, and notably soon after the poem’s outset, their ebb and flow is more apparent and creates a sense of rhythm synchronized to its subject:

Island    granitite  
base    river    flowing

(*MP*, II.201)

Here the rhythm is allowed to create itself in a projective kind of response to the phenomena it seeks to express. When contained in the more conventional, closed verse form it attains a greater degree of measure, but at the expense of this rhythm. It is at this point in the poem that Maximus, after having attempted with

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<sup>254</sup> Charles Baudelaire, trans. Norman Cameron. *My Heart Laid Bare and Other Prose Writings* (London: The Soho Book Company, 1986) LVI, 194.

four tightly-controlled stanzas, to contain the energies he has summoned, ends up loosening the form, abandoning measure for the rhythmic, open patterns which bookend this poem, with the interspersed objects, which performs a similar function for the entire epic:

right through the middle of the River  
neap or flood tide

inspissate River  
times repeated

old hulk    Rocky Marsh  
(*MP*, II.202)

Maximus employs the form of “cadensed” rhythm referred to by Deleuze and Guattari above in his journey downriver, and from clearly delineated banks to the zone of indistinction and then onward into an open realm of possibilities. By naming and navigating around the objects he finds, or places in this indeterminate, intermediate zone, Maximus takes advantage of the spaces he has recalled and is able to find a sense of measureless integrity as he allows this phase to close without closure, with a quietly expectant protagonist floating adrift.

If Maximus’ disappearance is enigmatic, and hard to read, then this can be explained by the nature of the space in which he exists, which contains a certain paradox in “its simultaneous visibility and elusiveness”,<sup>255</sup> and that for Olson its apprehension is a fundamental aspect of his aim to acquire total knowledge. The physicality of geography includes examples in *The Maximus Poems* of the coastline represented as human skin, and this, once Maximus resurfaces in the third volume, is also a model for poetic language:

The sea  
is right up against the skin of the shore with a tide

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<sup>255</sup>Hollister, 15.

as high  
as this one, the rocks  
stretched, Half Moon Beach  
swallowed (to its bank)

This poem, "December 22<sup>nd</sup>", concludes:

...the rocks  
melting  
into the sea, the forests,  
behind, transparent  
from the light snow showing  
lost rocks and hills  
which one doesn't, ordinarily,  
know, all the sea  
calm and waiting, having  
come so far  
(*MP*, III.107)

This passage is notable for a reprise of the initial offshore islands in the bloodstream of the epic, here reduced to the rocks dissolving into the marine body of the poetic landscape. Olson's choice of "melting" seems an anomaly in this extract, as the idea of heat, or volcanic activity, which although relevant to tropes of alchemical creation, (with loose reference to Jung), and formative in the creation of the geology of Cape Ann, appears incongruous in a passage which conveys a sense of quietude and abeyance. More effectively apparent are elements of classical Chinese wilderness poetry, which inform the Deep Image permeating these lines, and convey a palpable sense of *phanopoeia* with the presence of transparency found in ink brush painting, without the subject of this permeability being fixed.<sup>256</sup> Objects are placed on the page and gathered there by the sea, in a phase of respite, or stasis. The landscape allows itself to be seen as a

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<sup>256</sup> In his anthology, *Classical Chinese Poetry* (Farrar, Strauss and Giroux: New York, 2008), David Hinton refers to "the spiritual ecology of early Taoist thought...arising from the emptiness and disappearing back into it." (xxiii/xxiv) Olson's poem cited above merges human and environmental consciousness in a like way. The tidal nature of the seascape, with its cycles of immanence and disappearance can be seen in Taoist philosophy as part of a process whereby: "consciousness...participates as an organic part of the cycle of dynamic processes of the cosmos, for thought appear and disappear in exactly the same way as presence's ten thousand things. And the generative emptiness from which thoughts arise is nothing other than absence, the primal source." (Hinton, xxiv) As will be seen in the following chapter this finds similarities in creation myths of relevance to *The Maximus Poems*, including points of reference to morphology of landscape in Australian Aboriginal concepts of creation.

living entity, its dynamic elements apprehended in this tableau, these visual manifestations of its own self-acts.

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It has been seen that intimate and open spaces both contain their respective immensities. For the mariners on Melville's "Pequod", or the vanishing horsemen of the plains, SPACE is indeed merciless, the paradox of an open enclosure as well as an environment that has to be traversed and lived. Olson is an example of a poet whose life was marked by a special kind of solitude that a consciousness derived from this realization helps engender, a psychic loneliness that impelled him to seek out and gather the presences which create place from space and which constitute their habitation. Proximity and distance co-exist in a manner that can be both vertiginous and a source of psychic grounding. In Bachelard's words: "For each object, distance is the present, [and] the horizon exists as much as the centre."<sup>257</sup> Naturally, for Olson, and other phenomenologists, the world of objects includes, *ipso facto*, human beings. Concepts of outside and inside do not exist, therefore, as reciprocals or opposites, but convey a more nuanced sense of being.

The influence of Sauer's "The Morphology of Landscape" on Olson's concept of geography as "the study of *changes* in landscape"<sup>258</sup> has implications for the extension of his own poetics of space. The changes observable in the shifting boundaries between land and seascapes, resulting both from natural processes and human activity, are paralleled by the poetic body acting as a conduit for knowledge through direct experience, where the distinction between perceiver and object ideally disappears. The thing that remains is to be stripped of abstraction. Tropic self-acts go on to further create the landscape, and to bring it back.

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<sup>257</sup> Bachelard, 203.

<sup>258</sup> Hollister, 28 (*italics in original*).

Olson's poetics of size and space encompass the ocean, rivers, landscapes and the settlement of Gloucester as they merge with each other, and his peregrinations through the landscape have been considered as projective, observant flow. Now it is necessary to extend this consideration to the "map-poems" in *Maximus*, in which the typography is almost cartographic, and which take in the seabed of the harbour as a way of sounding the depths "at the archaic threshold to a New World."<sup>259</sup> The typography of Olson's arrangements and the significance of their musicality and portability form instruments for tropic acts in the open field to engender the full proprioceptive gestalt.

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<sup>259</sup> André Mark Spears, *America, America: the Return to the Archaic in the Writings of D.H. Lawrence, Antonin Artaud and Charles Olson* (New York University, 1993), 376.

## Chapter 2

### Forms of Mapping

Writing to Cid Corman, editor at *Origin* and responsible for the publication of the first ten *Maximus* poems, Olson showed all the passion, inter-personal eccentricities and attention to detail that marked his correspondence in general. In a letter from 1952, he urges: “my cry is, the beloved thing, make it, perfect”,<sup>260</sup> and then goes on to rebuke himself for not having done more to educate Corman in the art of Cy Twombly, whose scarified canvases influenced the poet’s sense of marking and making more than any other Abstract Expressionists of that time.<sup>261</sup> “The fact that you don’t know Twombly is – directly – my fault”, Olson addresses Corman, before continuing: “But it is one of those lesions of attention that would not happen if you were constantly stuck with open space in *Origin* simply because you were not convinced that Morse or that gas station owner of any of those European poets deserved your space”.<sup>262</sup> This is the poet speaking as pedagogue or demagogue, or a fusion of all three roles in one, so to speak, without the filters of convention, simultaneously introducing, entreating, scolding and defending. Olson’s instructions and exhortations, both pointed and rambling, on the respective roles of space and inscription comprised a form of text in themselves that Corman despite (or because of) the detail, must have found bewildering.

Olson’s typography is highly technical. A poem is literally a makeshift thing, where the type is shifted and set, or in Olson’s case, often unsettled, to express the nature of its content. This chapter shows how content arises from space, and more particularly place: landscape, sea-scape and settlement. An intense personal relationship to place and its enactment are vital modes of transmission

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<sup>260</sup> Olson, *Letters for Origin*, Ed. Albert Glover (London: Cape Goliard, 1969), 98.

<sup>261</sup> Olson’s essay “Cy Twombly”, also from 1952, refers to how the painter’s “twin methodology...documentation...show[s] how accurate his penetration of the reality bearing down on us is: these are the artifacts he find surrounding himself in the same diggings out of which he is digging himself” (*CPR*, 177). Olson’s conception of himself as an archaeologist matches this observation of a painter as creating inscriptions from the inside, and with his being, in a sense breaking through canvas from the reverse as well as obverse plane.

<sup>262</sup> Olson, *Origin*, 99/100.

between place and representation. Planning and mapping out place from space involves Olson using “prehensions”, as derived from Whitehead and examined below, as a way of sensing geographic and physical phenomena and placing them with precision on the page. Archaic, ancient and Aboriginal forms of mapping as inscription and poesis also inform the special typography of the postmodern epic.

Olson’s insistence on the validity of his unique typography reflects its importance: not only is it as significant as the content – it is the content. The lines that shift across the page and break at unexpected points comprise the very essence of *The Maximus Poems*, indicating the liminal, broken and contingent nature of that country: holding on and breathing, in fits and starts, however hard to articulate at times, the unchanging nature of movement as its constant finds its counterpart in the textual and spatial lines on the page. Likewise, the montage or mosaic creates a constellation that not only connects the self-objects in these lines, but enables them to retain their integrity as discrete entities, without being subject to the conceptualisation of contemporary logic.

Olson’s use of typography and space corresponds to the physicality of his noun clusters and numbers, musical and imagist language and the meticulous arrangement of these on the page. *The Maximus Poems* contain co-ordinates of language; word-maps laid out within deliberately shifting margins expressive of the liminal borders of the land, mind and seascapes the protagonist traverses. The unorthodox typesetting reflects the literally makeshift nature of the poetry composed on and across the portable tectonic plates of his poetic canvas, subverting the imposition of pages and fixed cartographic grids. This poetics includes a particular sense of geometry, whereby words become not readily separable from the nature of that ground they describe and at the same time function as stepping stones laid out across energy flows.

Olson’s idiosyncratic and apparently erratic typography represents a potential source of frustration for scholars, especially with the difficulties inherent in its accurate reproduction as the sequence became harder to trace posthumously,

yet this visual element of *The Maximus Poems* provides deeper insights into their spatial and projective meaning than has been made explicit so far. It has been noted by several scholars that the epic contains poems that refer to maps and others that may be called “map poems” in their form of construction. Byrd notes that the Maximus of the first volume works with multiple surfaces, collects local history and “steps off the property lines of the first settlers, in an attempt to bring the city to coherence.”<sup>263</sup> The specificities that recur throughout the poems reflect, much like the tail of Melville’s whale, a certain technique: “The expanse of the nation is mapped, by way of a non-Euclidian deformation, to a point”.<sup>264</sup> Christensen sees his meticulous attention to the details of his terrain as “part of the risk Olson is willing to take both to diversify the whole and to strain the formative powers of his composition.”<sup>265</sup> Von Hallberg refers to “On First Looking out through Juan de la Cosa’s Eyes” as a “Maximal trope”,<sup>266</sup> turning from Keats and Chapman’s book to a live creation of space, maps that also move northwest along the migratory paths they replicate. The map as a living, kinetic entity is created through the breath lines of projective poetics and also, as will be seen by the Indigenous Australian scene of reading, in a parallel world by calling out, singing or utterance. With this in mind, Olson’s arrangements on the page take on a dimension that is constructed in spaces informed by transnational and transhistorical presences, creating a consciousness and where the aural and imagistic intersect.

His almost obsessional insistence on editors reproducing every feature of his text exactly as stipulated in his drafts was notorious. Corman was on the receiving end of a succession of detailed instructions and at times complaints, over infractions which varied from those arguably significant, such as capitalization and line breaks, to others which could be seen as relatively minor. The importance that Olson attached to the minutiae of this textual reproduction is an indication that the typography of the poems is of critical importance when approaching concepts of moving and movable characters against a backdrop of

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<sup>263</sup> Byrd, *Maximus*, 59.

<sup>264</sup> *Ibid.* 60.

<sup>265</sup> Christensen, 142.

<sup>266</sup> Von Hallberg, 131.

smooth space. He admits: "I have a damn irritating style of punctuation",<sup>267</sup> but also explains his rationale behind his typographical care. Describing the letters "i" and "l" as "thin" he claims that when these occur too frequently in textual combinations they create a situation where the effect is like "a tremendous hole in the word, and generally gives a loose and porous look to the page".<sup>268</sup> The significance of margins is another case in point. He warns Corman that by contrast with tradition, which "calls for the overhung line to go all the way back to the left margin", his own purposes need it to be placed in the right margin, "the end of the word or phrase coinciding with the end of the line which it is organically a part."<sup>269</sup> A note specially written for the Creeley-edited *Selected Writings* indicates what his sense of purpose was in this regard:

The lines which hook-over should be read  
as though they lay out right and flat to the  
horizon or Eternity<sup>270</sup>

The overall message is that the poem constitutes a potentially fragile structure which can fall apart if insufficient care is taken to inscribe it onto the space of the page: script as contours and tracks, words as integrities or worlds.

So far it has been seen that Olson's typography is of a very particular nature. The imprint he makes upon the liminal polis is represented, in the outsiderly tradition where:

Poets of the composting imagination remain on that rim, still seeking, like Whitman, *types* (and Olson would alter extend this to the typewriter, then trace it back to the Greek word *typos* to suggest the groove on the page that is the material residue of the blow of the type).<sup>271</sup>

Rasula argues that in this sense, on of the achievements of *The Maximus Poems* is how it: "internalizes the local, enacts its location, sustaining evidence of the outermost in syntax rather than reflection (the old sublime), trope as grammar

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<sup>267</sup> Olson, *Origin*, 40.

<sup>268</sup> Ibid. 40.

<sup>269</sup> Ibid. 39.

<sup>270</sup> Olson, *Selected Writings*, Ed. Robert Creeley (New York: New Directions, 1966), 158

<sup>271</sup> Rasula, 63.

unbound.”<sup>272</sup> What is perceived to be in mainstream parlance eccentricity are but marks that indicate a process of formation within the circumference of the epic and its creation, and these can serve to further guide the reader who is alert to the conditions of their existence. Therefore, despite the difficulties the typography engenders in its reproduction and the apparent random nature of its composition, it nevertheless constitutes a poetic response to a specific set of sensibilities and circumstances. It is designed to give a metalogical and almost at times paralinguistic interpretation of phenomena, self-objects and *kinesis*, within and overlapping the framework of the page. Olson states with some force: “I don't think there is any typology except for archetypology. It's inexcusable to use the word except as a 'blow' or 'imprint' which is upon creation.” (*MU*, 109) By implication, then, there is no text but *arche*-text, arising from no ground but *ur*-ground. This train of thought leads to the chosen scene of reading from one of the oldest original sites of ground and inscription in the world.

### Typos / Vectors and Mathematics

The layout of *The Maximus Poems* contains jagged indentation in places, along with occasional diagonal text, irregular columns linked by arrows and in the third volume a diagram where the handwritten text is reproduced as a photocopy, and not converted into type. The last of these examples notwithstanding, the overall effect of these features can be disorienting, and this appears deliberate, as a ploy to slow the reader down in places to convey a type of space that relates to the limen, whether sunken or raised, but which is immanent along a constantly shifting margin or borderline.

The first example of diagonal text in *The Maximus Poems* occurs in the second volume, with “LEAP onto/the LAND, the AQUARIAN/TIME” (*MP*, II.10), on a page which also sees the phrase “...the soft/(Coal) LOVE” (*MP*, II.10) represent the furthest indentation to the right in the sequence thus far. It is conceivable that

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<sup>272</sup> Ibid. 73.

Olson remains relatively conventional in the first volume to represent, or permit, the fishing town to be poetically grounded, and then uses the mythological aspects of *Maximus IV, V, VI* to express a sense of non-linear direction, the instability of the leap, the corresponding incline of the land and the release of his own subconscious.

An aggregate of words that is jumbled if not jagged occurs shortly afterwards in the second volume. The poem, titled “A Maximus” appears to be an attempt to disentangle the people and politics of his work, starting with the name, “Pound”, initially centred on the page and then continuing down the left margin with names of early men of relevance to Gloucester. Meanwhile the right side of the page contains the following pattern of words:

fish  
ships  
fishermen

houses  
finance  
wood (ekonomikos)  
sculpture

marine  
architecture

(MP, II.23)

The language that falls down the right hand side of the page, corresponds to a psychic area which Olson sees as:

the overwhelming place where the verticals jam up, where the real weight gets in / that is, any positionalism (even that of the tenacious self) is behind, in the sense that, the INSTANT is such a pouring that the tenacity is in how the SYNTAX is so set, by the noun and the verb that the old assumption...that a sentence is a complete thought (which is a sort of single assertion of the self)...while you or I take up the INSTANTER perception which follows from its origination, and from its declared directional - we move on, instantly, to what pours in, and thus, the density, the massive, the thickness which is THE SINGLE INTELLIGENCE (O/C 7, 111)

The vertical intelligence builds in the extract above from fish down to architecture, implying a timeline and strand of causality through the instinctual side of the brain. The language is vertical and concise, nouns that are portable, transferable and pieces of an overall picture that can be viewed from top down as well as read horizontally. This is an example of Olson's push against the world culture which commenced as soon as "the axis of ... language shifted from the vertical of the basic pictogram, and became, in the Sumerian case, syllabic (*O/C* 10, 101) He notes that exceptions remain: the Chinese as well as the Mayan and Egyptian glyphs, lamenting that the "Egyptian stayed hieroglyph and essentially vertical until it died with Egyptian civilization, about 400 AD." (*O/C* 10, 102)

This suggests that the side of the brain accepted by psychoanalysis as being fully awake is aware of the conventional history of Gloucester, as the list continues down the margin, with the names of John White and John Winthrop. Meanwhile, the subconscious is occupied with the tropic acts that comprise the polis. The jagged features of the text may also reflect a more direct view of the landscape, especially as the founders came across it. John Babson's account of the settling of Gloucester, one of Olson's primary historical texts, mentions: "The surface of the town is uneven, and its peculiar character strikes every beholder ... with astonishment. Bald, rocky hills, bold and precipitous ledges of rock".<sup>273</sup> It is therefore conceivable, that psychological factors aside, the typography is used to express dimensions of local geography accurately – or if more approximately, then with an appropriate sense of comparison – a mode that will be examined with further examples later in this chapter.

When calculating the distances, dates and numbers that are scattered within and which punctuate Olson's text it makes sense to refer to the nomad theorists and their concept of "nomad mathematics":

the numbering number is no longer subordinated to metric determinations or geometrical dimensions, but has only a dynamic

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<sup>273</sup> John J. Babson, *History of the Town of Gloucester, Cape Ann, including the Town of Rockport* (Gloucester: Procter Brothers, 1860), 3.

relation with geographical directions: it is a directional number, not a dimensional or metric one. Nomad organization is indissolubly arithmetic and directional: quantity is everywhere...direction is everywhere...(N, 66)

Deleuze and Guattari divide mathematics, along with other academic disciplines, into what they term either “royal” or “nomad” science, in other words, referents to systems of knowledge which support the construction of a hegemonic state versus those which give rise to a polis, nomadic, but as has been expressed, necessarily located. The state and the mass culture it engenders and which it comes to rely on appropriates the polis, and in return, the polis and its essentially nomad science is involved in releasing and reconfiguring the contents of state, royal or Euclidian science. The discourse of parallels and the confinement of space is thus unsettled and a flow is created, or recreated, which allows for greater fluency and space for expression to move. Ultimately, “[a]t the limit, all that counts is the constantly moving borderline.” (N, 28) Poetically, it is on the page where the names and places gather, and at the margins and between phases and separate strophes of the epic the space into which they disperse and where their acts are carried out. This sense of motion also recalls Olson’s statement when working on his topos, typos, tropos triad, that mathematics is essentially a verb.

Regarding mathematics, it is useful at this point to consider an Aristotelian distinction expressed in contemporary terms: “Number is sharp-edged and clean shaven. Time is not.”<sup>274</sup> Olson’s continuum is punctuated by specifics, *ad hoc*s and apparently random statistics, especially in liminal, terrestrial geography and his use of existent cartography of Gloucester. The porous spaces and variable depths of the harbour correspond in spatial terms to Dimock’s notion of time as “a sinuous overlap, a fold within a voluminous fabric, registering the continual emergence of relations”,<sup>275</sup> yet this is a fusion also measured by points or *puncta*. Thus, Olson’s special view of cartography can be seen as an amalgamation of nomad mathematics and concepts of transnational deep time.

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<sup>274</sup> Dimock, 126.

<sup>275</sup> Ibid. 126.

The mathematics employed by Olson corresponds to how Dimock sees that of Claude Levi-Strauss, or at least what the latter was aiming to detect, namely a system “that is robust across the scales, keeping track of kinship at every level”.<sup>276</sup> Olson’s work predates more famous studies into fractal geometry, as made by Benoit Mandelbrot in the 1980s, and it may necessitate a leap of the imagination to accept that as a discipline it comprises “the lost twin of anthropology”,<sup>277</sup> as Dimock claims. Nevertheless, when approaching *The Maximus Poems*, consideration of these eccentric geometries has potential to find parallels in poetic terms with their generative mesh of relations that can be considered in structural terms, if not necessarily as a system, given the consistency of affinities they produce.

Either way, in “Letter 2, May 1959” Olson appears to be operating somewhere between smooth and striated space. If smooth space is essentially “vectorial, projective or topological...and... *striated* [is] metric space” (*N*, 18), Olson is projecting his own measurements onto a blank canvas, in the knowledge that this is spread over a real town, with all its attendant striations, that he is trying to recreate in its essential nature. On one hand, he seems to be simply occupying space, without the need to measure or enumerate, but at times this is impossible to do without losing coherence or essential points of reference. In this case, he has to employ a method whereby either “space is occupied without being counted,” or “space is counted in order to be occupied.”<sup>278</sup> In some instances, both strategies appear viable in relation to his project. The quotation here is notable in that it comes from Pierre Boulez, who Olson acknowledged as an influence on his poetry and poetics and whose impact on the Maximus gestalt is considered in the next chapter.

One aim Olson hopes to achieve through his creation is to bypass obstacles, logical and textual, that impede his sense of free flow. This corresponds closely to the conception of science as articulated in *Nomadology*, which outlines the salient features that differentiate non-Euclidian, Archimedean geometry, “a

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<sup>276</sup> Ibid. 78.

<sup>277</sup> Ibid. 78.

<sup>278</sup> Pierre Boulez, trans. Susan Bradshaw and Richard Rodney Bennett *Boulez on Music Today* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971), 85.

projective and descriptive geometry defined as a minor science,” (N, 23) from that which is characterized by metric and governmental controls:

...the problemata are the war machine itself, and are inseparable from the inclined planes, passages to the limit, vortices and projections. It would seem that the war machine is projected into an abstract knowledge formally different from the one that doubles the State apparatus. It would that an entire nomad science develops eccentrically, one that is very different from the royal or imperial sciences. (N, 19)

Olson’s themes and textual organization, as well as Deleuze’s and Guattari’s treatise relate closely to the articulation by phenomenologist Edmund Husserl, of “a protogeometry that addresses vague, in other words vagabond or nomadic morphological essences.” (N, 27) The apparent randomness of Olson’s textual choices is indicative of a search for coherence. Like protogeometry, Olson’s technique is “anexact, yet rigorous”, (N, 27) resulting in the paradox of tightly-controlled typography, which at the same time seems to spill over the edge of the page or trail off unfinished into the page’s otherwise empty centre. In a longer poem in the third volume of *The Maximus Poems*, Olson employs broken and upside down circles of text, which suggest an intention to create multiple entry points into the poem, but which also makes the reader unsure of where, or indeed if, the unpunctuated phrase begins or ends. Resultant ellipses and the overall importance ascribed by the poet to roundness derive from his interest in the work of Norbert Wiener on Cybernetics,<sup>279</sup> and also reflect his interest in the Moebius Strip, as a shape at once “vague and fluent” (N, 27), and its suggestion of both bounded and unfinished kinesis and structure expressed in the form of an object.

Maximus himself does not make overt reference to geometry, but his “lines of flight”<sup>280</sup> through and across landscape create their own geometric planes both on and off the page. His is not the Euclidean model but rather an attempt to

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<sup>279</sup> Norbert Wiener wrote on the cyclical nature of the stars, solar system and cosmos, as in turn affecting the overall shape of events and time: “The music of the spheres is a palindrome, and the book of astronomy reads the same backward as forward.” (*Cybernetics, or Control and Communication in the Animal and the Machine* (Cambridge, MA: M.I.T. 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, 1962), 31.

<sup>280</sup> This term was formulated by and is used frequently in the work of Deleuze and Guattari, see for instance: “a social field is defined less by its conflicts and contradictions than by the lines of flight running through it.” *A Thousand Plateaus*, 100.

create shapes out of words and other textual features that contain gaps and multiple entry points corresponding to the terrain where they are located. His Tyrian namesake upholds geometry as a noble science, admitting that:

the earth would not be worse inhabited though it should not be accurately recorded by needy husbandmen...but its proper employment, like a certain remedy which sharpens the dianoëtic power, consists in imparting to this power a strength by no means ignoble in its contemplation of the universe.<sup>281</sup>

This dianoetic, or power of reasoning, is exemplified, fittingly given its connection with Olson's Gloucester, by a ship. Geometry, claims Maximus of Tyre, is unappreciated by the majority of people, who would also fail to see that to appraise a ship at its moorings in a harbour is to misunderstand the structure and function of the vessel, which depends on its context, or the space in which it moves to be fully comprehensible. Extending the metaphor, he claims that an understanding of geometry leads to a parallel understanding of the "pure and tranquilly-flowing sea of real beings."<sup>282</sup> This phrase finds its counterparts in Olson's phenomenology, and affirms the link between inner and outer space and the use of ancient and well as modern conceptions of science to apprehend it.

Recollection of the salutary words from Maximus of Tyre serves to highlight how by the mid-twentieth century science had effectively moved away from the Euclidian model and way back from its anthropocentric predecessors, to add to and expand the work of pre-Socratic Greek thinkers (Heraclitus, Anaximander, the atomists), "who were all but buried under Platonic idealism and scholastic logic. 'Poetry agrees with science and not with logic', proclaimed Fenollosa, and modernist poetry can be seen as confirmation of that agreement."<sup>283</sup>

The operations of Olson's protagonist in open, or smooth space enable his variables in direction and the eccentricities of his typography, some putting a

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<sup>281</sup> Maximus Tyrius, Thomas Taylor Trans. and Ed. *Dissertations*, (London: R. H. Evans, 1804), Vol.II, 9.

<sup>282</sup> Ibid. Vol. II, 10.

<sup>283</sup> Laszlo Géfin,, *Ideogram: Modern American Poetry* (Milton Keynes: Open University, 1982), 135.

highly personal poetic style on the page, and others seeming to disperse into its peripheries. In many instances throughout *The Maximus Poems* his typography can be likened to a form of cartography, as if he is plotting co-ordinates that correspond to a voice that is calling out to the country if not calling it into being. Boer remembers Olson telling him that he had been mapping his entire life, and that toward its end, somewhat enigmatically, that he had only “five more miles and my map will be complete.”<sup>284</sup> In his hotel room near the University of Connecticut, Olson would closely examine large-scale maps of the surrounding area to identify particular geographic features that had roused his interest.

Such microscopic attention to the cartographic representation of landscape finds parallels in Olson’s meticulous insistence on typographical accuracy, or the accurate reproductions of his own eccentric typography. The differences between smooth and striated space also apply here. Indeed, the action of flows within space can be seen from a range of viewpoints: forms in process of change or glimpsed for an instant as a pattern of text on a page:

One no longer goes from the straight line to its parallels, in a lamellar or laminar flow, but from a curvilinear declination to the formation of spirals and vortices on an inclined plane: the greatest slope for the smallest angle. (*N*, 18)

With this statement Deleuze and Guattari echo Olson’s projective method, and provide the reader with an example of an Olsonian template, if such a device can be said to exist. Indeed, the following section discusses his technique not as imitative but as a mode of investigation inextricably linked to process.

To round off this section, it is worth noting some enigmas of space and the background behind Olson’s non-Euclidian idea of projective size. The degree to which space possesses solidity as an entity has always elicited disagreement in the history of science. The Euclidian framework whereby internal relations within space would remain constant even in the hypothetical event of the universe changing size afforded a sense of epistemological reassurance. However, as Middleton and Woods point out, twentieth-century developments in

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<sup>284</sup> Boer, 91.

geometry resulted in parallel uncertainty regarding the overall nature of space, and the implications for a species that was developing the capacity to destroy or permanently alter large areas of the planet in an alarmingly short period of time:

As far back as the 1950s, Charles Olson liked to say that we lived in a postmodern age as a result of such developments. He could call D.H. Lawrence 'post-modern' because the postmodern era had begun half a century earlier, around 1870, when the mathematicians Nikolai Lobachevski and Georg Friedrich Riemann developed the first non-Euclidian geometries. Like many other twentieth-century thinkers, he realised that the seemingly abstract theories of these mathematicians helped bring about a profound shift in our relations with the world.<sup>285</sup>

These influences aside, the single most important scientific concept developed by his contemporaries – or immediately “postmodern”-predecessors, was that of “prehensions” as formulated by Whitehead, which is the subject of the following section.

### Prehensions

It has been observed that Olson’s typography consists of painstakingly precise points and spaces reflecting contours and depths that mark physical and psychic geography. Yet the paradox is that these indicators are never intended to be fixed, given that his “primary concern is phenomenological: to create a poetry as close to perception and cognition as possible. The score for such processes was a page that resembled, as closely as possible, physical acts of writing, speaking, and walking.”<sup>286</sup> Therefore, Olson’s work included developing a typography through which places and entities are not static, but instead acts or process, first in becoming and then becoming something else, which can be noted with reference to Whitehead’s “prehensions”. The notion of “prehension” and Whitehead’s philosophy more generally on Olson’s poetry and poetics cannot be understated. Whitehead’s influence on the application of Projectivism to a wider

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<sup>285</sup> Peter Middleton and Tim Woods, *Literatures of Memory: History, Time and Space and Postwar Writing* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 137.

<sup>286</sup> Michael Davidson, *Ghostlier Demarcations: Modern Poetry and the Material World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 14.

and deeper sense of poetic being has significant implications for the understanding of a transnational, archaic postmodern gestalt. It also helps illuminate Olson's mode of inscription. According to Whitehead the world is composed of entities, which can be considered in virtually unlimited ways, and which consist of abstract and specific components. Taking this concept further:

The analysis of an actual entity into 'prehensions' is that mode of analysis which exhibits the most concrete elements in the nature of actual entities. Each actual entity is 'divisible' in an indefinite number of ways, and each way of 'division' yields its definite quota of prehensions. A prehension reproduces in itself the general characteristics of an actual entity: it is referent to an external world, and in this sense will be said to have a 'vector character'; it involves emotion, and purpose, and valuation, and causation.<sup>287</sup>

In other words, these "prehensions" are tangible and by implication visible. They connect the world's constituents in molecular, atomic and sub-atomic constellations. They have an intuitive and definite feeling for each other, and create vectors, or lines of connection between self-objects in the process of perceiving one another. The connections that they make constitute "nexūs" (the plural form of nexus). Whitehead goes on to state that, "the ultimate facts of immediate actual experience are actual entities, prehensions and nexūs. All else is, for our experience, derivative abstraction."<sup>288</sup> This concept is crucial for Olson, and also for a reading of his poetry from an archaic or Indigenous standpoint. Real, particular connections from sub-atomic particles onward form material which is immanent and which can be converted into inscription and presentation. To represent such material in abstract terms that derive from arbitrary systems of classification dissociated from immediate perception of the constituents of Being is of lesser or negligible poetic validity.

Towards the end of the third volume of *The Maximus Poems* an untitled poem finds Olson in his house, presumably at Fort Point, Gloucester, describing the "combination" of the place's features as seen through the window and door: the harbour, city, point and hill. In a state of wonderment he observes:

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<sup>287</sup> Whitehead, *Process and Reality* (New York: The Humanities Press, 1957), 28.

<sup>288</sup> *Ibid*, 29/30.

Wherever I turn or look in whatever direction,  
and near me, on any quarter, all possible combinations of  
creation even now  
(*MP*, III.188)

In this condition it appears that even though he is endowed with the capacity to move, the same views, the same combination of topographical aspects will be there with him, as if an inextricable part of his gestalt. Shahaar Bram notes:

No partition separates Olson/Maximus from space – he is part of space and, in this sense, he is ‘mapping’ himself: Maximus fuses and identifies with space. Gloucester grows with Maximus and vice-versa.<sup>289</sup>

Or, in other words, Maximus prehends Gloucester, and in doing so creates events, separate and inter-connected, that are in themselves prehensions and agglomerates of prehensions. Maximus as gestalt is composed of these prehensions. The reader may be reminded here of the famous “Letter 27 (withheld)” where the protagonist defines his relationship to the place through “a complex of occasions” (*MP*, II.15) which includes “those antecedent predecessions, the precessions” (*MP*, II. 14) of himself. What else would these consist of but prehensions?

Another *Maximus* poem where prehensions are felt is the recount of an Algonquin story of the man with a house on his head. The man has obtained this house from another who was also carrying it on his head, in exchange for a racoon skin given in trade for helping another couple fell a tree. The man is at first wary of his new acquisition, but when trying it on, finds it to be “as light as a basket.” (*MP*, II.31) At night he rests and finds his house to be comfortable and stocked with food, but as he reaches out to the food it snows, his blankets melt and he turns into a partridge. The story ends with him flying up to the “birch boughs” on which the food is hanging. (*MP*, II.31) He has transformed, and it is Spring. Looking into the myth from Whitehead’s theory of prehensions, it can be seen that the lightness is not just by way of contrast with his former, earthbound

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<sup>289</sup> Shahaar Bram, *Charles Olson and Alfred North Whitehead: An Essay on Poetry* Trans. Batya Stein (Cranbury, NJ: Rosemount Publishing ), 58.

condition, but forms part of a bodily transformation which is projective and which prehends. A system of correspondences is in concert, creating a nexus of active components in synchronicity with seasonal renewal, with the protagonist coming up from the earth as well as feeling light enough to lift off from it. This use of prehension exemplifies a statement made by Olson: “So one gets the restoration of Heraclitus’ flux translated as, All things are vectors. Or put it, All that matters moves!”<sup>290</sup> It also recalls Thoreau’s notion of houses representing “the life of the inhabitants whose shells they are”,<sup>291</sup> extensions of the mobile, meditating self.

Growth thus arises from presence, where the body feels immediately and immanently home. This is not an abstract concept for either Olson or Whitehead. As Bram puts it: “The human being springs from space, and this is always concrete: the myth is always concretized in a specific territory.”<sup>292</sup> Bram notes that the story of the man with the house on his head is a story of a local in a locality. This is an important observation in light of Olson’s nomad poetics: as will be exemplified below, the nomad is someone who belongs to a particular space and has responsibility for its upkeep and articulation. Olson shows with his close retelling of the Algonquin fable a feeling of affinity with the original story and a sense of its significance to his overall work.

### Ancient Inscription

When evaluating how Olson’s poetry and poetics may be considered from the perspective of Indigenous Australia, his typography invites a parallel reading with Aboriginal art and forms of mapping. Like Whitehead and Olson, Anthropologist W.E.H. Stanner notes an aspect of Aboriginal perception of the world that has much in common with Whitehead’s idea of prehension, namely the presence of particularities throughout, and the significance of their inter-

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<sup>290</sup> Olson, in *Charters*, 85. Based on a lecture on Whitehead, given at Black Mountain College, 1956.

<sup>291</sup> Henry David Thoreau, *Walden and Civil Disobedience* (New York: Penguin Classics, 1986), 90.

<sup>292</sup> Bram, 37.

relationship with each other, human society and artistic expression through sign and inscription. Stanner points to the presence and significance of:

*design* in the world; design in the sense of pattern, shape, form, structure, *given* design that seemed to them to point to *intent*....Pattern, shape, form, and structure, occurring in what we call 'nature', constituted for them a world of signs for men.<sup>293</sup>

As for Olson and Whitehead, nothing is unrelated or devoid of meaning: prehensions are immanent as *nexūs*, which are joined by tracks and strands that may be at times appear imperceptible, but which are anything but generalised or abstract. Connections have been made recently between Olson's poetry and poetics and this ancient and ongoing mode of being by Peter Minter, whose term "transcultural projectivism" indicates a line of correspondence between the fine art of Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri and Olson's "The Kingfishers." Minter refers to the "totemic geography"<sup>294</sup> evident in Possum Tjapaltjarri's work, which shares an affinity with Olson's poetic technique:

in moving around the canvas and shifting the scales of narrative and history according to location, perspective and memory, "The Kingfishers" synthesises nodes of experience, ideation and historical depth within the projective gestalt of the poem.<sup>295</sup>

The canvas and the page alike provide a multi-dimensional surface that acts both as a filter and site of transference and transformation. It is on this surface that Olson's typos and Possum Tjapaltjarri's pointillism function as finely tuned receptors and indicators of meaning.

Minter's work on the poetics of Aboriginal Australia stands alongside that of Deborah Bird Rose, whose studies include consideration of "the mythic and cosmological structures of orientation, horizon, narration, and culturally defined 'deixis' ... that constitute an architecture of geographical ways of knowing."<sup>296</sup> Just as there are "Songs of Maximus" – a sense of musicality that will be

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<sup>293</sup> Stanner, 117. Italics in original.

<sup>294</sup> Howard Morphy, *Australian Aboriginal Art* (London: Phaidon, 1998), 106.

<sup>295</sup> Minter, in Herd, Ed. 267.

<sup>296</sup> Rose, *Reports*, 37.

evaluated in the next chapter – there is also the activity of weaving, or – interweaving of the epistemological and ontological strands that lead into and back out of his gestalt. Complementary or as a final addition to the construction of this gestalt is the architectural sense Rose mentions; layers of actual and cultural sediment that shift and settle upon on another to create what Rose observes with reference to Mikhail Bakhtin as “time-space co-ordinates”.<sup>297</sup> It is also worth noting that Rose, along with Dimock and Ramazani, points out that although Bakhtin’s concepts are usually applied to the study of novels, they are also applicable to the scope of the postmodern epic.

Olson’s version of the epic derives an essential aspect from those of the ancient world, namely the land as living mythology. He refers to Berard’s work on Homer for its indications of morphology between landscapes and the species they support – a headland on Circe’s island as a hawk, for instance – as one example of how Berard shows: “Homer’s inventions of his incidents & personages rest entirely on an animation of geographical features which sailors after sailors had noticed until the names of ‘remarkable’ rocks, headlands, etc. had got fixed as nouns characterizing said shapes.” (*O/C* 5, 118) From using Berard as a way to open out topography through Homer comes a significant series of steps – or stepping stones - to channel Homer through Chapman and Keats to arrive at Juan de la Cosa (as detailed below).

Olson expands on this further by linking across to the first European American to have seen Yellowstone, “mountain man”, Jim Bridger:

Homer, if Berard is right – and he makes more sense than anyone – raised any *character* from the physical characteristic of *the place* (Circe comes from the fact that the headland where the action takes play [i.e. place] was a sky-hawk’s rendez-vous: Cyclops emerges from the pock-holes of old volcanic fissures – as tho Yellowstone had been come on by you & me instead of by Jim Bridger!; etc. (& all this from the Phoenician sailors’ directions.... (*O/C* 8, 200)

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<sup>297</sup> Ibid. 37.

The connection he emphasizes between character and characteristic is significant in terms of Proprioception and the final Maximus gestalt, which for now can be seen as an expression of the land creating the human being as well as human perception and interaction with the land's morphology and other created entities.

Similar, epic and transformative, projective potential in the Australian landscape is expressed in the work of Minter, Rose and Muecke: engaging with a space that is ancient and modern, seemingly empty but also full of life, and like Olson's America, vast enough to bewilder and overpower unthinking invaders. For Muecke, "nature is second nature and history is transformative potential (*a range of hills is always becoming a woman lying down is always becoming a blue-tongue lizard*)",<sup>298</sup> these processes occurring across time and defining sets of relations that articulate the concept of Law, the capitalization of which takes on similar significance to Aboriginal Country and Olson's SPACE. The Law is how the equilibrium of prehensions that arise from and make up country is simultaneously and eternally preserved in its specific yet tensile arrangements, of which only a careful reading will allow a comprehensive approach to the poetics within.

Interestingly enough, Olson also capitalizes this concept, spelling it large, as he does space:

THE LAW // The advantage (and it is altogether recent) is, that the answer to a question (which is ultimately the life question) which has increasingly borne in on recent man / (DHLawrence came around always to calling it 'ancient science' ... that is, how did other men than the modern (or Western) ground the apprehension of life (was there a different base, and if so, what was it, as distinguishable from value & the disciplines of value as we have known them) (O/C 7, 233/4)

To this he adds in a slightly later letter to Creeley a refined definition that includes the idea of laws arising from location and space and incorporating the

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<sup>298</sup> Muecke, *Ancient*, 4.

human being as a tangible and quantifiable result of these mytho-spatial processes:

I get more and more certain that if location in time and space is exactly determined, one gets, by such relevances, those priorities of succession & importance which can now be called LAWS. We have this gain, that several of the newer sciences – archaeology, anthropology, mythology, bio-chemistry, and the several geographic sciences, an example of which is meteorology – arm us more than our predecessors were armed, to measure the back of man in order to see the front. (*O/C* 9, 145)

As with Aboriginal Australia, there is nothing random in the shaping of human beings or Country. Tony Swain puts forward the idea that the Aboriginal world is constructed according to the “so-called Dreaming” in a class of “*rhythmed events*”,<sup>299</sup> and also tentatively refers to a collocation that also occurs in the second volume of *The Maximus Poems*: “eternal / events” (*MP*, II.5) “Following Strehlow’s rendering of the original Aranda meaning, ‘eternal events’ approaches the reality but perhaps still harbours too many unjustified time referents.” Swain concludes with his nearest version: “words that I find most applicable in English are *Abiding Events*. Collectively, I suggest these form an *Abiding Law*.”<sup>300</sup>

With reference again to etymology, Swain points out that abiding has the literal meaning of:

‘residing in a place’. ‘Law’, too, probably derives from the Old Norse *lag*, a due or fitting place, and thus shares the connotation....the tragedy of ‘Dream Time’ is not so much the inaccuracy *per se*, but rather the fact that it has blinded us to the realisation that the true significance of the concept behind the word is not temporal but spatial.<sup>301</sup>

This statement is of significance when looking comparatively at Olson’s poetry and poetics from this scene of reading. It reinforces the notion of a shared sense of *poiesis* that not only points to a shared aesthetic but also attempts to articulate the most fundamental aspects of human origins and ongoing existence. It also

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<sup>299</sup> Swain, 22.

<sup>300</sup> Ibid. 22. Italics in original.

<sup>301</sup> Ibid 22.

helps to give literal substance to strands and frameworks that might otherwise appear to be tenuous or coincidental.

For example, Swain refers to: “the historical coexistence of two spiritual principles in Australian Aboriginal Law. On the one hand there is the ‘waterhole’: a site-based life potential co-joined with specific human beings. This is immanent and radically pluralistic.”<sup>302</sup> By contrast, there is also a more abstract, transcendental continuum to which he gives the term “Heaven.” On the other side of the world, there is a remarkable, unpublished poem in Olson’s manuscripts at Storrs, which is worth citing in its entirety, as an illustrative example of this kind of affinity:

It isn’t true  
what the Jewish girl told her,  
when she was seven, claiming  
it happened in the synagogue,  
that if a fly flies three times  
around a girl’s head, she’ll  
fall down dead

What’s true  
is a swimming hole  
in the Australian bush

The desire  
is locus,  
not logos,  
placement, not  
statement.<sup>303</sup>

Place takes precedence over rumour and abstracted speech. Is the swimming hole a randomly selected place? Probably not. It appears to be an immanent, present site in an ancient landscape where the body can immerse itself, contrasted with a site constructed for organised religion – also of an ancient time, thus indicating the differences are not temporal so much as conceptual. Age and number – the most common indicators of time and quantity are less

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<sup>302</sup> Ibid. 1.

<sup>303</sup> Olson, “It Isn’t True”, ca 1953, in Storrs, Box 22.

important than emplacement in a world that abides. Existence overrides expression. As Swain explains:

If time is shunned...space can endure. It is thus that Aboriginal thought was not fettered by the Euclidian notion of homogeneous abstracted Space which, since the time of the Deists, is well represented even in Christian theology. Instead, there is the structured world, unmeasured and unnumbered.<sup>304</sup>

Geography in this context is a therefore combination of pragmatic and social aspects, as well as those mythological, and to an outsider enigmatic, dimensions that give Olson's poem its sense of esoteric inscrutability. One might also argue that is a microcosm of comparative metaphysics and "placement", however minute in scale, of living beings that make up country. In ancient European cultural terms, the hole can be seen as chthonic or oracular – Delphi and the omphalos from "The Kingfishers" come to mind. However, here Olson creates a poem which forms a point of comparison with sites of conception in Aboriginal Australia. In his lecture series from 1953, as referenced earlier, he mentions this explicitly: "churingas, for example, were thought, among the Australians, to be magic of conception when they were left in the sacred hole of the Rainbow Serpent, the water-hole" (*OL* 10, 38) This ancestral being is one of immense power and influence, and both the "desire" and "locus" can be said to derive power from such a presence, even through cross-cultural implication.

Olson would not have been aware of specific Aboriginal Australian contexts, as, with work on the Maya, many had not been studied or published during his lifetime. One that he might well have found of interest is anthropologist and teacher John Bradley's *Saltwater People* which looks into the realm of the Yanyuwa people of northern Australia, who live in a liminal, coastal zone, which is in need of constant recreation through attentiveness and song.<sup>305</sup> Not only do the Yanyuwa create fluid lines of song, aligned to their Country's riverine systems, but also recognise the presence of "ardirri or 'spirit children' [who] are

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<sup>304</sup> Swain, 28.

<sup>305</sup> John Bradley with Yanyuwa Families. *Singing Saltwater Country: Journey to the Songlines of Carpentaria* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2010).

the life potential for all Yanyuwa people – all who have been, and are yet to be.” They dwell, or are placed in stretches of water, and the country incorporates receives a certain power from their Dreaming.”<sup>306</sup> When they are said to die they return to Country, which in this instance is inland water, typically the “wells, lagoons and rock-holes from where it first came.”<sup>307</sup> Given the importance ascribed by Olson to both coastal and inland water, these myths could have comprised a correlative of significance for his mythological concerns.

An inter-cultural observational with both comparison and contrast to the above comes from the placing of another Algonquin myth in *The Maximus Poems*; that of an adulterous woman and her relationship with a powerful but venomous serpent who lives “in a pond in a deep wild place / in the woods.” (*MP*, II. 21) She seeks it out and makes love to it. The myth proceeds:

She sat down and sang a song, a great foam  
or froth rose to the surface and in it appeared the back and tail  
of a great serpent, an immense beast. The woman  
who had taken off her clothes, embraced  
the creature, which twined around her, winding inside  
her arms and legs, until her body was one mass  
of his.  
(*MP*, II.21)

The mythological creature’s venom eventually passes via the woman through the village, until eventually she has to be returned to scene of her transgression: “They sunk her in the pond / where the snake lived” (*MP*, II. 21), which is finally evident as a place both of creation and destruction. Similarly, for the Yanyuwa, not all serpent Beings are benign. The Rainbow Serpent as an ancestral creator is acknowledged throughout Aboriginal Australia, but there are places where it has a power and exists in a state where human beings may not easily approach it. There is a Yanyuwa legend about a Rainbow Serpent at a location called Walala, and this, according to one of Bradley’s informants, a Yanyuwa Elder,

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<sup>306</sup> Ibid. 54.

<sup>307</sup> Ibid. 54

'is not a benign Blind Rainbow Serpent; it is a proper Rainbow Serpent – one that is full alive. The old men and women used to tell us, 'It is all right to get water from the northern end of the lake but do not go and get water from the southern end of the lake because the stone is there.' They used to call the Rainbow Serpent a stone, not by its name because that is dangerous. Walala is a strong place. The spirits of the old people are here too and we come here we should walk slowly and quietly.'<sup>308</sup>

The commensurate attentiveness and care that needs to be taken around Country are exemplified by these parallel myths, and now some salient, underlying concepts need to be examined in detail.

As outlined in the introduction, two main concepts of Aboriginal Being are Country, and the concept that can only be approximately translated as "Dreaming", "Dreamtime" or "Alcheringa". These elements form a dynamic synthesis whereby, according to Stanner, the Aborigine "moves, not in a landscape, but in a humanised realm saturated with significations."<sup>309</sup> Aboriginal mapping is sometimes assumed to take place through the medium of fine art, yet it is necessary to understand that it goes beyond the extent of any canvas and into areas that could be more correctly referred to as totemic and conceptual. A map is therefore not any form of two-dimensional representation, but instead consists of a constant realignment of a practitioner within an environment, one attuned to a particular process or duty of care. Each conscious individual, as mapmaker, recreates himself through continually creating a personal relationship to the land. This process is inextricable from that of previous generations, indeed, "the whole of creation, all of human life, is mapped on the landscape, to which ancestral beings are inextricably connected."<sup>310</sup>

Dogtown, the generative site the second volume of *The Maximus Poems* contains multiple instances of what may be termed, if by elective affinity only, Dreaming, and the presence of Dreamings. The man with the house on his head can be seen as one of these, creating a site where a similar aesthetic of creation and transformation may be noted and retold. As an individual instance of Dreaming,

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<sup>308</sup> Yanyuwa Elder in conversation, in Bradley, 240.

<sup>309</sup> Stanner, 131.

<sup>310</sup> Morphy, 108.

if he may be seen as such, he also exemplifies the importance of place, being quite literally inextricable from it. It is this essential characteristic that also makes him part of the overall fabric, as well as a mobile, individual entity. He creates his landscape as the landscape recreates him, and this interchange finds parallels in what Sutton refers to as “the natural species projected in the totemic designs, and the topographic features of the landscape.”<sup>311</sup> The map continues as the partridge flies out from the space he carries and creates another line of flight which continues the trajectory and his presence which follows it as part of his Indigenous, American Dreaming.

If the man with the house on his head can be identified as something akin to Dreaming and Dogtown Commons as Country, then this fits in with the definition provided by Rose:

Country in Aboriginal English is not only a common noun but also a proper noun. [like a person] .... Country is not a generalised or undifferentiated place...rather country is a living entity with a yesterday, today and tomorrow, with a consciousness, and a will toward life.<sup>312</sup>

Dogtown also fits the concept of Aboriginal country in that it is bounded by others, of which it is a part and from which it is also distinct. Its boundaries and its difference, more than being legally defined, are a matter of common local and cultural knowledge, or least, they were in the formative time during and through which Maximus operates. Just as Dreamings operate as plural entities, so too can Countries, without contradicting the overall concept. Additionally, as will be shown in Chapter Four, it is not only human beings, but other species which possess an understanding of Country as they operate as essential constituents, or self-objects, within it. This network of sentient beings and topographical elements therefore combine to form what Rose summarises as: “clusters of alliance networks, Dreaming tracks and ceremonies, trade networks, tracks of winds and movements of animals.”<sup>313</sup> Importantly, as will be drawn out below, this comprises a system which “can be known to exist way beyond one’s own

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<sup>311</sup> Sutton, 16.

<sup>312</sup> Rose, *Terrains*, 7.

<sup>313</sup> *Ibid.* 12.

countries, but no one ever knows the full extent of it all because knowledge is of necessity local. The fact of localised knowledge is itself Law.”<sup>314</sup>

Olson said of Gloucester that he saw it as an “image of creation and of human life for the rest of the life of the species” (*MU*, 439), pulling together temporal and spatial strands to locate an arising and eternal place as event. His place and his vision for it, therefore can be seen as akin to Stanner’s definition of Dreaming as “a poetic key to Reality.”<sup>315</sup> As Olson’s above comment implies, nothing less than the future of the species is at stake, and his epic, like the Aboriginal creation tales, are crafted to bring about this reality and to ensure that it recurs. Singular, definitive entities working together as prehensions comprise this key, within which there is no space for abstraction: “everything has meaning” (*Epama epam* – i.e. nothing is nothing)” as an Aboriginal interviewee of Sutton’s puts it, in another deceptively simple formulation.<sup>316</sup> The world is made of signs and “the presumptive principle is that there is no alien world of mere things beyond the signing activity of sentient, intelligent beings.”<sup>317</sup>

Dreamings can thus take human or animal or other form in their peregrinations across the landscape. As part of this process, and much like in the Homeric epics: “Many of them ‘made themselves’ or ‘turned themselves’ into an aspect of the physical environment and thus imbued it with social relevance.”<sup>318</sup> If the Dreaming can be said to consist of deities, these were figures who shaped the land so that ordinary human beings could comprehend and make use of it. Rose points out that this maintenance of Country does not dispense with the concept of boundaries, but that these are inclusive and ways of keeping mythological and social order:

Every country is identified by and with its localised Dreamings .... There is no hierarchy of process; it is necessary both to maintain and to demolish boundaries. If they become lost, the ability to define one’s self clearly in relation to country is lost. If they become rigid, what is lost is flexibility

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<sup>314</sup> Ibid. 13.

<sup>315</sup> Stanner, 29.

<sup>316</sup> Sutton, 13.

<sup>317</sup> Ibid. 13.

<sup>318</sup> Ronald M. Berndt and Catherine H. Berndt, *The Speaking Land: Myth and Story in Aboriginal Australia* (Ringwood, Vic.: Penguin, 1989), 6.

and the ability to maintain autonomy through mobility. When we look at the past from the vantage point of the present we see a cognate system collapsing into single lines.<sup>319</sup>

So, both singleness and plurality define the existence of self-objects, which as Stanner explains, are: “set up once-for-all when, in *The Dreaming*, the universe became man’s universe.”<sup>320</sup> This expression immediately reminds the Olson reader of his *Human Universe*, and the immanence of phenomena in daily life, as observed from the Maya. Similarly, the vital nature of the Aboriginal world-view uses the “poetic key” as a means of transformation, “which is expressed in the idiom of poetry, drama and symbolism, into a principle that *The Dreaming* determines not only what life *is* but also *what it can be*.”<sup>321</sup> The essential dynamism of *Dreaming* in the recurring present is therefore one way of reading into Olson’s statements on Gloucester.

The *Dreaming* universe is therefore inextricably linked with lived, enunciated place, and consists of human beings as self-objects, structures arising from a matrix of kinship and country, that in its complexity almost eludes apprehension or a concise definition. Whitehead’s concept of prehensions comes close to providing a potential methodology that scholars from a conventional, Western background might employ to commence an approach to the poetics within a context that in its immensity is indeed maximal. Minter’s definition cited here should be considered at this point as providing a link between *Dreaming*, Country, law and poetics, as well as citing Olson’s *Mayan Letters*, linking the essential elements of *poiesis* across the continents and providing another strand to the Olsonian gestalt:

Australian Aboriginal cultures have been intact for tens of thousands of years, their modes of expression actualising a real-time proprioceptive account of the *Dreaming*, its ‘totemic geographies’ and its lawful ‘character’ in *Dreamtime* story, song and art.... The great oeuvre of Australian Aboriginal art...succeeds in substantiating a *poiesis* that synthesises the *Dreaming*, its emergence and manifestation in space and time, and the contemporary lived experience of its ethos and genealogy.

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<sup>319</sup> Rose, *Dingo*, 209/210

<sup>320</sup> Stanner, 29.

<sup>321</sup> *Ibid.* 29. Italics in original

Not unlike Olson's poethics in 'The Kingfishers' and his sense of the potential in the hieroglyph, Aboriginal art is contiguous with the body, the breath, perception and ideation '...precisely as intimate as verse is. Is, in fact, verse. Is their verse. And comes into existence, obeys the same laws that, the coming into existence, the persisting of verse, does.' [ML, 43]<sup>322</sup>

This recollection and citation of *Mayan Letters* shows universal aspects of poetic creation, and more broadly exemplifies parallels that can be drawn out in the "proprioceptive" sense, to be considered in Chapter Five. This is also a reminder that Dreaming is a presence: "Neither map nor inspiration to action, Dreaming is the source which makes possible all maps and celebrations – life in its variety, particularity and fecundity."<sup>323</sup> In the context of a Human Universe it can be seen that archaic beings are believed to have designed a system out of a formless world, and live on as conscious presences that retain and renew specific forms of energy. These beings are the progenitors of culture, and they constitute a lineage that has been subject to reverse translation, for example: "In the harsh desert of the Lake Eyre region, the concept of the Dreaming or ancestor is spoken of in English by the local Aboriginal people as 'History.'"<sup>324</sup> As with Olson, this loaded word, "History", and the constructs associated with it, refuses to be dismissed. As Sutton points out: "The Ancestral Beings themselves are the 'Histories', and the sacred sites are 'History Places.'"<sup>325</sup> Furthermore; "The land is already a narrative – an artefact of intellect – before people represent it. There is no wilderness."<sup>326</sup> Country has already been inscribed, and further inscription involves skill and knowledge in careful reading as much as any concept of artistry and expression on the part of human intervention.

Consideration of the Algonquin myths above and Aboriginal Dreaming shows how First Nations cultures survive in ways that are similar and self-affirming. This sense of similarity can be seen in the multiplication and amplification of prehensions into an intelligible and projective sense of being. Nature and culture are interdependent, as the man with his house on his head conveys the notion of

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<sup>322</sup> Minter, in Herd, Ed. 268.

<sup>323</sup> Rose, *Dingo*, 44.

<sup>324</sup> Sutton, 19.

<sup>325</sup> *Ibid.* 19.

<sup>326</sup> *Ibid.* 19.

not only domesticity, but a permeable, nomadic and inscribed presence on the landscape. His situation corresponds to Sutton's notion of an "interior scene with an expansive 'outside' beyond four walls"<sup>327</sup>, as a feature of life and culture in Indigenous Australia.

At this point it is worth making a further comparison with Heat Moon's *Deep Geography*, through his mapping of Kansas, using a related form of home and inscription. The four walls of his house correspond to the edges of a cartographic map, which he unfolds in his home to prepare for the explication of country that is *PrairyErth*. Folding the corners of the map inward leads him to the point where he is; an obvious seeming statement, yet one which belies the portability of the document itself and the marks that the walking cartographer may later make upon it. Heat Moon listens to the underside of his proverbial canvas as well as the winds that blow over it. Yet, he acknowledges that this kind of representation is in some way alien, or at least incomplete. He wishes for it to unfurl

like a Chinese scroll painting or a bison-skin drawing where both beginnings and ends of an event are at once present in the conflated time of the American Indian. The least I hoped for was a topographic map of words that would open inch by inch to show its long miles.<sup>328</sup>

Once again the map returns to forms of inscription, boundaries, singularities and difference, and eludes definitive claims to authenticity of representing or expressing place.

Boundaries define the location of country, and this in itself consists of what Rose calls "an organised geography of difference".<sup>329</sup> She goes on to note that: "Aboriginal boundaries, however, while they promote and rely on difference, mark difference primarily in order to overcome it. Boundaries are permeable, flexible, rarely monolithic".<sup>330</sup> Therefore, their presence observes and records both continuous and discontinuous modes of being and representation. The

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<sup>327</sup> Ibid. 18.

<sup>328</sup> Heat Moon, *PrairyErth*, 15.

<sup>329</sup> Rose, *Terrains*, 45.

<sup>330</sup> Ibid. 45.

boundaries of Dogtown, shifting between Indigenous, settled and transnational/cosmological, as well as those implied by the man with the house on his head indicate a sense of interchangeable ownership.

The place occupied by the man with his house on his head occupies its own cultural and ontological singularity. It is to be found somewhere between the types of place beautifully described by Muecke:

the world is replete with places, from the strongly settled, such as cities, to the more ephemeral places that shimmer into being as they are created by a dividing line, a wall or a hollow in the ground where a kangaroo might have spent the night.<sup>331</sup>

The man with the house on his head, as a representative of *Homo Maximus*, bridges ways of knowing space, as place and places where meaning may be uncovered. This bridging occurs within Gloucester, and from the shifting settlement to an earlier version of itself, in another locality superimposed upon the space it previous occupied, to become another place, in the overall array of places. The lightness of the partridge, or the kangaroo referred to by Muecke, however impermanent, is also a form of inscription, which is waiting to be converted into text, and once noticed, no longer coincidental, if indeed it ever was.

The image of ground left behind by the animal recalls a feature of Indigenous Australian art which create a network of inter-related, sentient beings comprising humans, animals and the landscape itself. Painting achieves this by a process of “repeating the same set of geometric elements...to mark the presence of different ancestral beings at key sites in the landscape. As such, they act as a mnemonic for place.”<sup>332</sup> Such elements, and forms of representation, typified by circles, u-shapes and lines through the landscape find points of correspondence with the geometry and geography of *The Maximus Poems*. The kangaroo, partridge, man with his house on his head, as well as numerous other beings in Olson’s work conform to what Swain explains as a “basic tenet” of Aboriginal

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<sup>331</sup> Muecke, *Ancient*, 13.

<sup>332</sup> Morphy, 120.

creation: arising from, traversing space and returning to Country, as represented in pictorial terms by artists he has observed:

Graphically, Desert societies render this by employing two basic iconic elements: the concentric circle representing sites and lines standing for tracks between sites. In the boldest of terms, Aboriginal ontology rests upon the maxim that a place-being emerged, moved, and established an abode...<sup>333</sup>

This can be seen in the striking work of Possum Tjapaltjarri, whose *Bush Fire Dreaming* shows a landscape which corresponds remarkably to Olson's harbour and seascapes in terms of the vectors of movement and their typographical representation. Fire, water, earth: these are the contexts, creative and destructive in their cyclical operations that act as agents of and background to the expression of the stories, the journeys, the dance. In the painting it can be seen how sentient beings are leaving precise, individual tracks across the landscape, and that these tracks are crossed with thin, dark, almost perpendicular lines, that recall styli, pens or spears.

Significantly, the lance, masts and bowsprit at the outset of *The Maximus Poems* indicate tropic activity to do with the sustaining environment, and are thus given precedence in the epic and named with due respect. In the Aboriginal Australian context, Sutton recalls a trip from his experience of working with an Aboriginal community that draws together salient aspects of these apparently unconnected forms of poesis:

On a hot October day...Aboriginal people were moving along the remote Kirke River in Cape York Peninsula, pointing out to me the locations and significance of the named places there. We were 'mapping the country' ... an old man in our party, Jack Spear, had stripped and was bathing in the cool waters of his mother's clan country, speaking to its ancestral spirits and asking for their tolerance and protection.<sup>334</sup>

The name of the old man creates a sense of coincidence with Maximus' lance, plunging with care into the water, addressing an environment wherein nothing

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<sup>333</sup> Swain, 32

<sup>334</sup> Sutton, 13.

is nothing. His movements are deliberate, the waterway is to be bodily prehended and mapped as well as the land. Sutton also recalls a conversation with an Aboriginal man, Galarrwuy Yunupingu, whose father warned him against carelessly dragging his spear point along the ground. Such an action unwittingly marking the ground, goes beyond thoughtless doodling, for under the ground is a whole delicate layering of history, and also ancestors' bones. The earth is only to be marked when performing or gathering food.<sup>335</sup> Moreover, once the earth is marked and made into performative and instructive maps, these are, according to Elder Jack Jangari, permanent: "he can't wash out, that map. He's on the ground, map. You know, map in the paper, he just wash out, he got to go make another one."<sup>336</sup>

### Geo-Typos

The mythological and archetypal aspects of making maps is rooted within, and applied to the poetic expression of myth and the morphology of the external landscape, and in a wider sense the morphology of all living things. The influence on Olson of two other masters: Jung and Sauer, creates the concept an enduring and universal code that is differently expressed in each individual entity. Nichols observes: "Myth is ... significant for Olson as a kind of social-psychic DNA, discernible in master narratives and common patterns of human behaviour. This line of thinking leads him to a provisional, dynamic form of structuralism that allows for analogy between different orders of reality."<sup>337</sup> As Olson wrote Creeley: "I hammer again that, what we are after is, to offer methodology – and today it comes out that, the methodology of expression proves that the implicit law that everything arises from and simultaneously moves toward is, by its own necessities, mythological." (*O/C* 6, 70) It is the genetic aspect of this, which Nichols identifies as constituting the substance that binds the myths, the influences and the protagonist who embodies these as part of the active stance.

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<sup>335</sup> Ibid. 14.

<sup>336</sup> in Rose, *Dingo*, 56.

<sup>337</sup> Nichols, "Myth", 27.

Ground is a palimpsest for stories inscribed on the earth, enunciated to the waters and written onto representations of the planetary surface, which “is itself a parchment, and to scratch the surface is almost certainly to come across a prior attribution for everything discovered. A life already in momentum. All there is to be found has been lost and recovered before.”<sup>338</sup> Here Rasula effectively paraphrases meeting points already detected between Olson’s poetics and Indigenous modes of recreation, and it is by way of these recollections that we return to the very beginning of Maximus’ journey as he tells us: “what is a lance, who obeys the figures of / the present dance” (*MP*, I.1). It can be realised that when rereading this announcement, the protagonist is preparing not only the ground but also the reader for the inscriptions to come, as well as the difficulties inherent in achieving typographical coherence when operating in way that seeks to “prehend” the land and seascapes directly and with a minimum of intermediary representation. This is arguably most evident in “Letter, May 2, 1959”, which starts in conventional stanzas, recounting claimed land in West Gloucester, and the names of the settlers who appropriated properties between Oak Grove cemetery and Kent circle. The poem then continues with a diagrammatic and geometric map of older spaces in the vicinity, namely a marsh or marshes, repeated, and an “old stonewall” (*MP*, I.145) abutting a question that runs up the right hand margin, as to the movements, and by implication legitimacy of claim, by a certain Eveleth:

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<sup>338</sup> Rasula, 12.

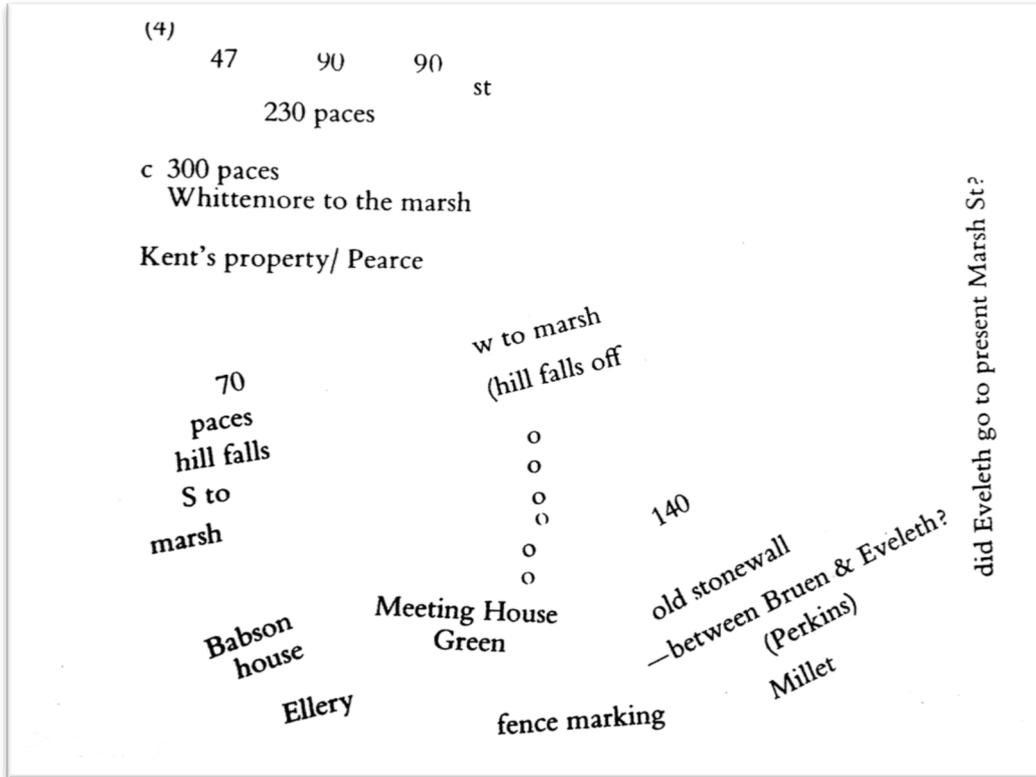


Figure 1: *MP*, I.145

The poem concludes with a remarkable page where stanzas become paragraphs of highly nominalised chants, enunciating salient names and places as a means of approaching Gloucester Harbor. The topography is given as follows:

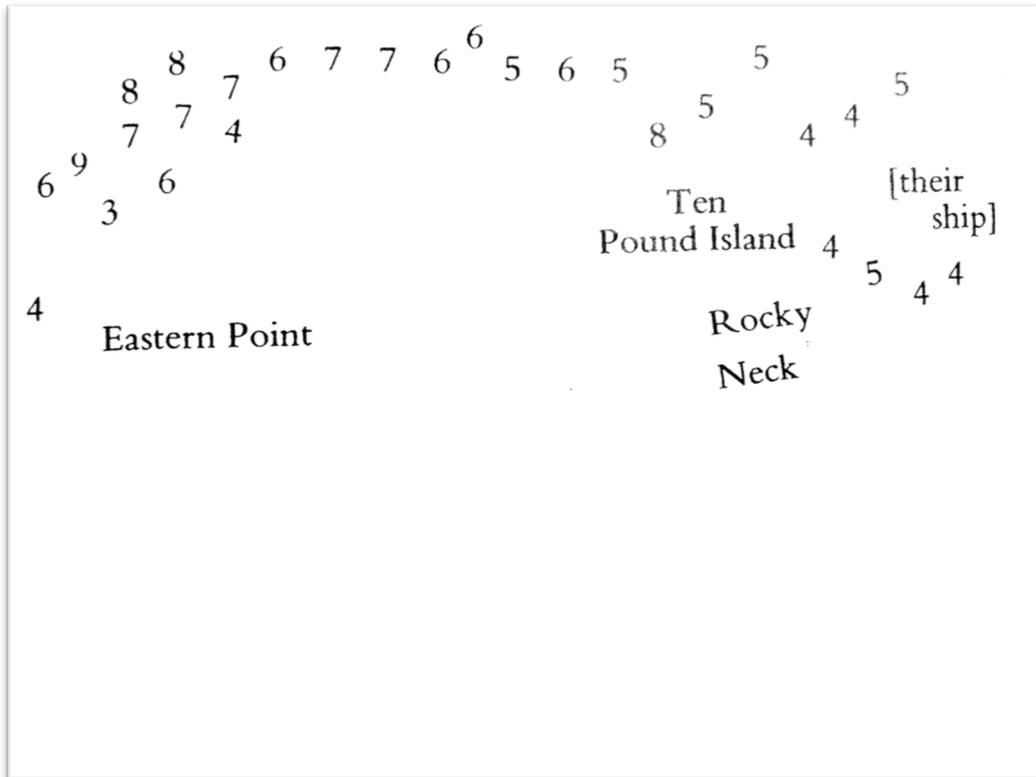


Figure 2: *MP*, I.151

This is taken from a map of the harbour, *le Beau Port*, made by French explorer Samuel de Champlain in 1606.<sup>339</sup> Olson precedes his verbal and numerical reproduction of this chart with an allusion to the “old European business”, where initially: “the river and marshes show clearly and no Indians along the Beach”, but where “wigwams” are eventually detected and the said “Indians” seen around “East Gloucester Square” (*MP*, 1.151) This situation prepares the ground for a possible clash, with the harbour co-ordinates now almost superimposed by the land above them, from the reader’s perspective. The “business” taking place onshore is expressed in dense prose, recounting a tense and strategic situation arising from a confused sense of ownership and resultant conflict, contrasting with the numbers below, presented without connotation or association, but through their positioning and function as measurement, inextricably linked to the dynamics of the incursion.

<sup>339</sup> in Butterick, 221.

In the map-poem of Gloucester harbour, Olson's mariners and settlers emerge from somewhere beyond the margin of the page and move across onto it from the overhang that is the edge of the paper. Their tracks are recorded in terms of depths and contours in the liminal space to which they are asserting – if somewhat roughly and approximately - their claim. The notion of offshore, the mode of inscription that implies the lance, and the figures etched out by their exploration becoming the present dance all combine to give the poem its typographical depth and significance. The mast and the lance trope in similar ways: from “this firm though self-constructed foundation arises a force that Olson characterizes as phallic, a projective or generative energy, like a mast arising from a sound hull.”<sup>340</sup> The sound that creates a city will be looked at in the next chapter. Meanwhile, the hull of the boat can be perceived as a ground of sorts, which gives rise to the impetus of forwarding.

A form of mapping deriving more from shifting syntax and typographical idiosyncrasies, also expressing a mode of presenting and subverting divisions, is apparent in the second volume, centered around the spaces of Dogtown and its surrounds. Maximus presents an untitled poem:

|                         |   |                  |
|-------------------------|---|------------------|
| a map of Dogtown: St    |   | cod via          |
| Sophia, Fishermans      | / | racks            |
| Field, Fishermans       | / | in a field       |
| 2 acres on which to dry |   | like snow        |
|                         |   | fences or tables |
|                         |   | at a lawn        |
|                         |   | party            |

(*MP*, II.56)

A different form of poetic map is created here from those evident in the first volume. On the left hand side the space is defined by names relating to metaphysical and daily practice. The single number indicates an area of claimed space, but without any geographic or geometric connection to the other elements of this map. It is on the right hand side of the page that its features take on their cultural, even mythological significance. The cod appear as if viewed from above,

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<sup>340</sup> Fredman, 36.

and as they are drying in lines one can almost perceive their shapes against the backdrop of the field. Pointillist paintings can also be considered in this way, with a bird's eye view of a particular landscape and its meaningful aspects. The tables and especially the fences are an imposition, stranger than the fish themselves on land. The former comprise colonial furniture, in an outside setting that has been manicured and brought under control. The latter indicate the striation of space that is necessary for Western cartography to be drawn in its grids. The cod are life giving and as such sacred, eternal presences whose almost floating presence on this tableau makes practical and mythological sense. They are separated from the wider landscape, though, as indicated by the two backslashes and the parallel presence of racks and lines. Therefore, the images in this special form of map- poem combine to form a picture of both open and settled space, where the "eternal events" of Dogtown take place but which is also scarred and superimposed by a new set of contingencies.

An example from the final volume indicates an alternative geometric aesthetic and a form of mapping that has become minimal, direct and consonant with the ending of the entire work. The untitled poem represented as:

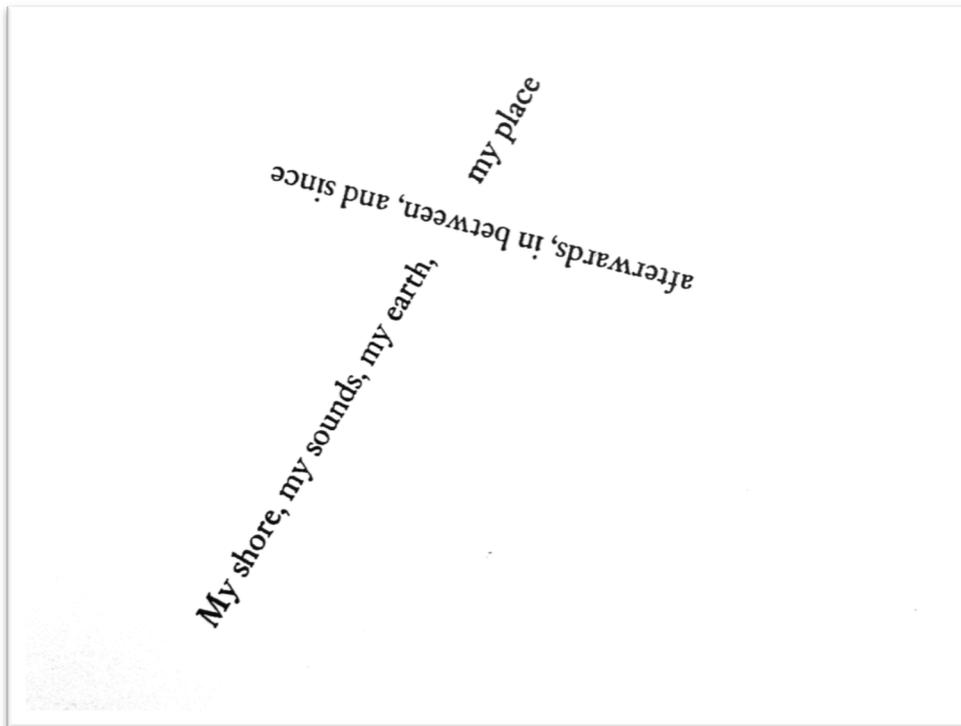


Figure 3: *MP,III.110*

occupies an entire page, with the space/time axes appearing to indicate North East and Westerly directions respectively. Like a verbal compass, Olson has assembled a similar set of significant objects and ideas almost as a prefiguration of his final poem. If there is a needle it appears to be pointing back in the direction of the conqueror and the shadowy seas from which the ships came. The lateral axis is that of all time on a single meridian, a westward motion that is at once historic and ongoing, including as it must not only the movements of sentient beings on earth but the earth's rotation itself. This is crossed with the liminal coastline, and the sounds from which the city is created, as the following chapter of this thesis reveals. The earth and the poet's place ground the other elements, resulting in a poetic device he can use to find and retain his bearings. The blank space of the page lacks any other notation, and it is impossible to state with any certainty whether the reader should be looking down at a seascape or up at the sky.

It has been seen that Olson uses space to emphasize phases and patterns of human geography, history and migration. It also acts in a way to support this notion of "geo-typography", evident in how it punctuates and delineates the epic. An example can be seen in a pair of blank pages at a point in *The Maximus Poems* where one might not expect to find them (MP.II, 178/81), where there is no sectional break indicated. On one side of this gap is the poem "Maximus to Gloucester, Letter 157", which contains the following presences:

The Tarentines  
were the pests

of the coast, a bunch of shore Indians  
who raided as far south

as Gloucester, and were themselves conceivably  
parts among the Algonquin people

of them there 1000 AD Wikings:  
as these Sicilians

talk an Italian  
which is Punic. For the Tarantinos

were Micmacs, first spotted off La Have,  
and had been dealing,

before they got down here,  
as traders with fishermen  
since the beginning  
of the occupation of the coast  
(*MP*, II.177)

Maximus notes that the Tarentines were to be found at Penobscot Bay (*MP*, 11.178), the last words of the poem before the two blank pages. This location, on the central Maine coast is thus separated from the far side of the blank space where there is a poem situated in Gloucester, featuring a personal acquaintance:

Paul Oakley,  
directly, from Main Street down Water  
over the water  
at the other side of the inner harbour

on the other side of

over and above  
the masts, looking down on the Older Scene

gardens ran  
to the water's edge (on East-facing appropriated  
quarter-plots  
(*MP*, II.181)

Oakley, clearly a settler, has a place marked by appropriation of the land: "Water" is also a street.<sup>341</sup> The more generic water is a shifting presence in the land-meeting-sea scape and the winding lines of text where the arrivals seek some sort of purchase, on the other side of oceanic space. The Mediterranean Tarentinos are conflated with the Indigenous Tarentines, creating an overlap of culture and claims to place which coexist with this space, in its immensity, pushing further out as if resisting textual and territorial incursion. Meanwhile, Atlantic and Mediterranean histories jostle for position on the edge of the

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<sup>341</sup> see Butterick, 478.

continent, pushed together and separated by turns, regardless of the conventions of linear measurement. In creating the two-page gap between these ostensibly proximate places, and linked if not immediately contiguous presences, “Olson creates a peculiar effect of an ocean within the text, an ocean of white space, and at the same time, a singular earth, where multiple oceans of white space correspond and overlap with very real, terrestrial spaces.”<sup>342</sup> This notion of spatial poetics supports Olson’s formulation of an “argument, that I have, for some years...felt that it was just about 1200 BC that something broke, that a bowl went smash, and that, as a consequence, this artificial business of the ‘East’ and the ‘West’ came into being” (*O/C* 2, 84) The textual layout of *The Maximus Poems*, as has been demonstrated, supports this theory.

Considering modes of the transcontinental, even recently chartered space can be considered equally indistinct and vertiginous. Olson’s mapping reflects a modernity without mercy, which confounds attempts to make sense of it in discrete portions of time or grids of cartographic space. At the beginning of the century, William James had observed the blurring of past time, noting that for children this is natural, but that adults also do this “whenever times are large”, and that

It is the same with spaces. On a map I can distinctly see the relation of London, Constantinople and Peking to the place where I am; in reality I utterly fail to *feel* the facts which the map symbolizes. The directions and distances are vague, confused and mixed. Cosmic space and cosmic time, so far from being the intuitions that Kant said they were, are constructions as patently artificial as any that science can show. The great majority of the human race never use these notions, but live in plural times and spaces, interpenetrant and *durcheinander*.<sup>343</sup>

It is the last sentence here that resonates most with Olson’s feeling for the geographical. Unlike James, he deliberately sets out to “feel” the realities represented within their cartographic grids, refusing *Maximus*, or Bigmans (the avatar through which he approaches *The Epic of Gilgamesh*) as means to encompass the pluralities mentioned by James. To effectively demonstrate how

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<sup>342</sup> Michael Peters, “The Ocean of Thought: Waves of Potential/Waves of Gravity in Charles Olson”, in Grieve-Carlson, 158/9.

<sup>343</sup> William James, *Pragmatism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975), 87.

this mixing, or intersection of time and space on their axes actually works is harder. If it is difficult to intuit notions of cosmology, then arguably it is also problematic to see where and when certain timeframes and spatial areas cross. As Sauer observes, it is not easy to know what a so-called natural area consists of:

Hence the preference for the study of islands and areas that simulate insular conditions in their sharpness of outline. If we can agree on what is a natural region, we are still faced by the fact that cultural units are likely to straddle the boundary zones of physical contrasts. Boundaries rather than centers of physical regions are likely to be centers of cultural areas.<sup>344</sup>

This may further explain Olson's attachment to the Cape Ann peninsula. The meeting point of topographical insularity with trans-continental and trans-oceanic interchange and flows provides such a "boundary zone" as both a cultural and mythological centre.

### Circling the Local and the Past

The difficulties inherent in identifying and naming natural areas can be seen in ancient ideas of mythical, even supernatural space, that appears to defy definition or delineation. Ancient, pre-Socratic Greece or the archaic societies that existed anywhere on earth provide Olson with references to points in terrestrial space that he joins not in a conventional cartographic sense but as a constellation or prism of language. For instance, the idea of *Ultima Thule* was originally a concept of ancient geographer, Strabo, as a region north of the British Isles, where no distinction exists between sea, air and water, but "a mixture of the three like sea-lung, in which he says that land and sea and everything floats, and this [that is, the mixture] binds all together, and can be traversed neither on foot nor by boat."<sup>345</sup> It finds parallels in *The Maximus Poems* specifically by comparison between the offshore banks, "which the Basques,

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<sup>344</sup> Sauer, *Land and Life*, 363.

<sup>345</sup> Vilhjalmur Stefansson, *Great Adventures and Explorations*, in Butterick, 94.



boundless proportions.”<sup>346</sup> Something similar applies to the “shoved moraine” upon which Gloucester was founded, “when the ice moved off/or was melted” (*MP*, II.149) and with particular reference to the origin of its now outer inland reaches, Dogtown, with shifting sediments bearing traces of ancient granite and ice flows from a time when the land was below the current sea level:

ice had dropped  
Banks in the water, kame of the bottom, fish orchards and gardens,  
Tenements  
messuages of the billions of generations of halibut paralleled  
settlers’ lives  
(*MP*, II. 51)

The Middle English “messuages” (denoting land intended for domestic use, that is, a house and any adjacent land or outbuildings) paraphrases the collocation “fish orchards” and lends a certain confusion to the text, where the features listed, heavily and confusingly nominalized, come across as jumbled and discordant. “Kame”, a geological term referring to a sharp or steep ridge, appears out of place on “the bottom”. The intention may be to convey the impression of a dreamscape where inundation has caused a temporary shift in layering and where through the porosity of a coastal consciousness the original oceanic elements are still apparent. The use of “billions” to designate the lives of fish appears hyperbolic, and compounds the exaggerated, rhetorical effect that can intrude into his poetic rhythm, yet the number also emphasises the time span and continuous recreation it implies. It is also worth noting, as Casey observes: “the boundary of a garden can be obscured and even removed at the limit, but the garden as such is already and always a liminal presence.”<sup>347</sup>

This evocation of uneven landscape with its unexpected juxtapositions supports the notion that the earth takes in a wider sense of world as articulated in its ungrounded entities: adrift in an unsettled space, these recall a phrase from Heidegger: “the world grounds itself on the earth, and earth juts through the world.”<sup>348</sup> This can explain the fish coming to rest in the fields and groves around

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<sup>346</sup> Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, Trans. Maria Jolas.(Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), 24.

<sup>347</sup> Casey, 155.

<sup>348</sup> Heidegger, 47.

Gloucester, and the hill of Dogtown creating itself through a mound of stone and dirt pushing itself up through the ice in which the westward flow has found itself arrested. Paradoxically, though, the space that extends to the west is still in the process of becoming, and its depths yet unknown:

the Atlantic is a bottomed  
Pacific  
(*MP*, II.51)

A transnational comparison can be made here with the “bog poems” of Seamus Heaney, and their evocation of shifting, uncertain ground, its ancient aspects overlaid with watery palimpsest. Despite Olson’s assertion above, there is no guarantee of solid ground in the sediment of the Cape Ann peninsula and “poetic archaeology”, as Ramazani explains in relation to Heaney, is ironic in that it acts to deterritorialize the notion of ground, uncovering transatlantic, transoceanic flows, but also having to contend with “Atlantic seepage” where “the wet centre is bottomless.”<sup>349</sup> Nevertheless, as in Heaney’s “Bogland”, Olson’s imaginative topography is constructed along similar lines in its recreation of unstable, contested and stratified land. Heaney, like Olson is engaged in a project of poetic renewal, in his case recreating “the *dinnseanchas*, the Irish place-name topos, by revealing the transnational sedimentation of the Irish ground.”<sup>350</sup> Ramazani claims that Heaney’s revelation of the Irish landscape becomes fully perceptible and “readable only by the help of topographic diacriticals imported from across the Atlantic.”<sup>351</sup> As a result, the reader is returned to the Deleuzian concept of deterritorialisation – or the paradox of possession through a lack that requires repeated enunciation. Olson in his role as “Archeologist of Morning” has to contend with the fact that “poetic archaeology ironically deterritorializes the ground, which is found to be ever ‘melting and opening’.”<sup>352</sup> From the Atlantic, across the liminal shoreline to the plains and eventually the Pacific, the concept of a stable bedrock is illusory, and excavations of the poetic nature have to contend with instability at their base, or else no fundament whatsoever.

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<sup>349</sup> Ramazani, 40.

<sup>350</sup> Ibid. 39.

<sup>351</sup> Ibid. 39/40.

<sup>352</sup> Ibid. 41.

This transnational experience of naming, mapping and representing place can be elucidated by consideration of the experience and impressions of the non-English migrants, whose sense of tenure on the land was even more uncertain than the first European settlers in New England. For these arrivals, regardless of the century in which they disembarked, the land was an entity imagined as much as charted, the interior largely inconceivable and coastal settlements, even established cities areas of uncertainty. Robin Blaser notes that for European migrants, American population centres would have been “imaginary, like oceans. The name of a man would be a town.”<sup>353</sup> The Gloucester of Olson’s imagination conveys a similarly precarious sense of being. This sense of dislocation may explain the nature of the map “showing the location of the early settlers,” as published in Babson’s *History*.<sup>354</sup> This document shows a map of the settlement organised by the claims of prominent residents: where one might expect to see streets and landmarks, and with the exception of “Governor’s Hill” and “Fisherman’s Field” the other terrestrial features consist of names. This appropriation is something that Olson clearly had in mind when composing *The Maximus Poems*, for his geography is consistent with such a superimposition on the features, both natural and communal, of the area.

There is little static in such human, geographic inscription: on the contrary, it engenders the tropic activity known as psychogeography, or the construction of a place through essential, defining actions that comprise a highly personal together with an apparently objective stance. The term “psychogeography” derives from a group of primarily London-based writers, and takes as its original inspiration the poetics of place as articulated in prose by Daniel Defoe and in poetry by William Blake.<sup>355</sup> In the Twentieth Century this was preceded by a

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<sup>353</sup> Robin Blaser, *The Fire: Collected Essays of Robin Blaser*, Ed. Miriam Nichols (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 7.

<sup>354</sup> As reproduced in *Minutes of the Olson Society*, #42, 5.

<sup>355</sup> Psychogeography has also been explained in the following terms: “We might think about the act of looking west in terms of its symbolic richness: how an orientation aligned with the setting sun would acquire its own cosmic grandiosity, establishing a ‘psycho-geography’ (to use the terminology of Allen S. Weiss) in which the moment of sunset – the visible merging of solar orb and terrestrial horizon – marked the line of colonial advance.” Martin Edward Thomas, *Artificial Horizons: Imagining the Blue Mountains* (Carlton, Vic: Melbourne University Press, 2003), 53 and

French group known as “Situationists”, whose practice of the *dérive* and *détournement* (or diversion and turning) sought to engender patterns and habits of life in open rebellion against mass culture and in favour of free movement upon built over, or striated, space. Psychogeography stems from a similar sensibility and seeks via poetic mapping of the polis to create works that tap in to underground and marginal areas of the city, following ancient ley lines and other conduits from pre-modern times and according to mythological sensibility. A psychogeographer of significance, who acknowledges Olson as an influence, and whose prose work *American Smoke* is largely dedicated to the Gloucester poet, is the British writer Iain Sinclair. Sinclair comments on Olson’s contemporary and friend Peter Anastas’ research into the Algonquian forefather of the Gloucester area, that recalls Paterson as man and place but reaches back to a deeper progenitor area:

Glooskap the man becomes Gloucester the town. By sound, by sonar echo, by necessity. Olson, writing about his childhood and his father, the Worcester mailman, calls the story ‘Stocking Cap’... Glooscap, Stocking Cap. A nod to elective Swedish ancestors, to Vikings.<sup>356</sup>

Sinclair puts forward another obscure link in the person of scholar S Foster Damon, whose *A Blake Dictionary*, was acquired by Olson in 1968. Damon’s own poetry was published under the pseudonym “Samuel Nomad”. Sinclair notes that in 1954, as *The Maximus Poems* were gathering momentum, Damon’s play, *Witch of Dogtown*, was performed in Gloucester.”<sup>357</sup> This presence, channelling both local and literary history constitutes another element of the Olsonian matrix and its strands of transnational affinity and trans-temporal geography.

Olson’s mentor for the development of his topographical and typo-geographical poetics, Sauer, writes on the universality and history of geography. He points out that the subject itself preceded the name for it, a comment that resonates with Olson’s priorities: the nature of a thing or process having meaning before and

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Allen S. Weiss, *Unnatural Horizons Paradox and Contradiction in Landscape Architecture* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1998), 87.

<sup>356</sup> Sinclair, *American Smoke: Journeys to the End of the Light* (London: Penguin, 2014), 6.

<sup>357</sup> Sinclair, *Smoke*, 298.

apart from its representation. Sauer observes in a passage of particular relevance to Olson's project:

The literature of geography in the sense of chorology begins with parts of the earliest sagas and myths, vivid as they are with the sense of place and man's contest with nature. The most precise expression of geographic knowledge is found in the map, an immemorial symbol. The Greeks wrote geographic accounts under such designations as *periplua*, *periodos*, and *periegesis* long before the name geography was used.<sup>358</sup>

A map is a form of description - literally, formal description - overlaying content, which is often irregular. Maps can include topographical features that are not necessarily fixed, and features that are not conventionally topographical. Sauer claims that "geographic description may be applied to an unlimited number of phenomena",<sup>359</sup> which sounds like a spatial corollary to Olson's theory of the open poem. The *ur*-map, so to speak, would be one that manages to express: "primordial topography - a *chorography*, a 'tracing of place' - at one with the most intimate layers of our physical lives. Topoanalysis is designed to fathom and describe these layers."<sup>360</sup> Casey adds:

The topotropism of Homer and Joyce, Cervantes and Dante, also appears in the earth epics of the Western Apaches, not to mention the Australian Aborigines, the Navajo, the Salteaux, and the Lakota Sioux. In these diverse epical traditions, Western and non-Western alike, memorable journeys consist of events in places. Hearing of such journeys, we come to know places with as much right and as much insight as we know the time in which they have transpired.<sup>361</sup>

Olson's approach to history and exploration, derived in the first place from his readings into and understanding of ancient societies. As already observed, care for the polis involves the practice derived from Herodotus of "istorin", or actively discovering place. Herodotus represents one of Olson's primary influences from Antiquity, the poet claiming that, along with Heraclitus he embodies a practice of acting and discovering which subsequently became lost in

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<sup>358</sup> Sauer, *Land and Life*, 317.

<sup>359</sup> *Ibid.* 357.

<sup>360</sup> Casey, 312.

<sup>361</sup> *Ibid.* 277.

the wake of taxonomy and classification post-Aristotle. Herodotus embodied the ideal thinker and writer for Olson, one who works by using immediacy and intuition, not attempting to fit a world view into a prescribed framework, but instead making observations with as much precise, particular details as possible. In *The Maximus Poems*, a counterpart for the Greek historian is evident in the explorer Juan de la Cosa, whose mapping of the New World was based on his first-hand observations of the coastline, and not on conjectures, nor any information passed on to him by predecessors. “On first Looking out through Juan de la Cosa’s Eyes”, Maximus mentions two topographical terms of significance:

(As men, my town, my two towns  
talk, talked of Gades, talk  
of Cash’s

drew, on a table, in spelt  
with a finger, in beer, a  
portulans

But before La Cosa, nobody  
could have made  
a mappemunde

(*MP* 1.77)

The poem’s title derives from John Keats’ “On First Looking into Chapman’s Homer”, and as well as conveying an element of assonantal similarity, is also significant in its change of pronouns: “out of” for “into” expresses Olson’s continuous push towards exteriority and his desire to place another “figure of outward”, (*MP*, frontispiece) or several of these, in his work. Looking into is investigative, whereas looking out implies active participation in the experience. What unites the two poems is the sense of wonder that comes from discovering a new world, “its pure serene”,<sup>362</sup> and also serves as a reminder of the “negative capability” that Keats formulated and that Olson highlighted in his statements on poetics. As observed in the Introduction to this thesis, negative capability refers

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<sup>362</sup> John Keats, “On First Looking into Chapman’s Homer”, in Margaret Ferguson, Mary Jo Salter and Jon Stallworthy, Eds. *The Norton Anthology of Poetry, Fifth Edition* (Norton, 2005), 905.

to the deliberate emptying of the self, a form of *kenosis*, or spiritual uncluttering, that allows this wonder access to and a conduit through the receptivity required to convert sensed or 'prehended impressions into poetic expression.

Juan de la Cosa's experience, "when a new planet swims into his ken",<sup>363</sup> is mirrored by another early explorer of the new world, John Smith. Both men in Olson's conception of them embody attentiveness and a receptive desire to observe, listen to and learn from the world even as they were discovering it. Olson states: "It's a difficult thing to feel a coast...an ancient thing this Smith had, what men had to have before Pytheas to move" (*CPR*, 320). For Olson, such examples from history reveal human beings that are outstanding, and furthermore teach a lesson that "a path is never prescribed by one individual for another. Olson's cardinal commandment reads: 'No man should impose his mode of life on others.'"<sup>364</sup>

Maximus, later on in his sequence, defines his activity as akin to that of de la Cosa and Smith:

I am making a mappemunde. It is to include my being  
It is called here, at this point and point of time  
Peloria  
(*MP*, II.87)

Etymologically, the name "Peloria" refers to powers of earth and sky fusing in ancient festival rites celebrated in honour of these primitive earth-potencies.<sup>365</sup> Butterick goes on to note another connotation of interest, that of Webster's Dictionary definition as: "an abnormal regularity of structure occurring in normally irregular flowers".<sup>366</sup> This implies parallels with cartographic grids that overlay terrain, and represent a sense not only of claiming but also confining territory. Its presence is evident not only laid over but also within the natural world, in the concept of the quincunx, a regular geometric shape with five points

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<sup>363</sup> Ibid. 905.

<sup>364</sup> Halden-Sullivan, 82.

<sup>365</sup> Butterick, 369.

<sup>366</sup> Ibid. 369

and sides, as formulated by the Renaissance philosopher, Sir Thomas Browne whose observations on its frequency of occurrence are echoed by Davenport. Browne detects the quincunx pattern in a range of phenomena to the point where it can be considered as a defining pattern of the natural world and replicated in human construction.<sup>367</sup> Jung, whose influence on Olson is more apparent also refers to the quincunx as “the ground structure”<sup>368</sup> of a depiction by artist P. Birkhäuser, of the mystical fourth dimension, which he notes is “only apparently symmetrical, in reality it is asymmetrical – a problem that it is of importance both to nuclear physics and to the psychology of the unconscious.”<sup>369</sup> It is also more than likely to be significant to the structure of visual representation in poetry and art. Native American and Aboriginal Australian art employs a similar structure to indicate the presence of nests, honey and fire patterns,<sup>370</sup> motifs that recall Olson’s “The Kingfishers”. Davenport notes how it can be detected in culturally important works of art, such as Grant Wood’s *American Gothic* (1930). From a few years earlier in Europe comes the Surrealist *Painting* by Yves Tanguy, in which Jung identifies a quincunx as an “enigmatic” but defining structure hanging over a landscape that could comprise the sea, a planetary surface or an unidentified harbour city.<sup>371</sup> Interestingly, in light of his stringent criticism of Olson, Yepez also refers to a Mayan definition: “The quincunx is a model for how phenomena are produced. A model that synthesizes the process by which reality gestates and appears”,<sup>372</sup> and that connects and delineates the patterns and series of events deriving from this, which make up nothing less than the totality of documented or remembered existence. In general, the combination of the strangely or estranged familiar with the idea of a grid that either consciously or otherwise seeks to capture topographical existence within its delineations represents a framework that the

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<sup>367</sup> Thomas Browne, “The Garden of Cyrus: or The Quincunciall, Lozenge, or Net-work Plantations of the Ancients, Artificially, Naturally, Mystically Considered”, in *Selected Writings*, Ed. Geoffrey Keynes (London: Faber and Faber, 1968), 157, 162.

<sup>368</sup> Jung, *Civilization in Transition*, Trans. R.F.C. Hull (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1964), 391.

<sup>369</sup> Jung, *Civilization*, 392/3.

<sup>370</sup> Sutton, 21.

<sup>371</sup> Jung, *Civilization*, 395.

<sup>372</sup> Yepez, 166.

poet may not be able to avoid working within as much as he tries to resist its formal and ontological implications.

Throughout the epic there are poems which invoke the voice of a seafarer or cartographer, and which “constitute a periplum, a chart of the coast to be checked against our own experience”.<sup>373</sup> The notion of the “periplum”, also mentioned by Sauer above, recalls Pound, and his adverbial formulation of a journey, or *periplus*, which suggests an oceanic mode of *‘istorein*, that only those in the midst of the journey are able to ascertain where, in space, they are:

Periplum, not as land looks on a map  
But as sea bord seen by men sailing<sup>374</sup>

This form of coasting implies a certain degree of uncertainty, for if the land looks “periplum” it is on the move itself. There is also, quite literally, a sense of vagueness, or wandering,<sup>375</sup> one that confirms the critical offshore location for the purpose of projective, poetic perspective. The etymology of another triad: “Strand / Stand / Stretch” is worth mentioning. “Strand” from Germanic languages designates the littoral, or beach. This is perceived by poet J.H. Prynne as proximate to “Stand”: Prynne’s interest in and correspondence with Olson started at around the same time the latter was developing his proprioceptive poetics.<sup>376</sup> From the stance, comes the stretch, or extension, outward, projective back from proprioceptive, in other words. Michael Kindellan credits Prynne for his evocation of this “cosmological aspect ...in relation to the first two volumes of *Maximus*, as participating in ‘the condition of coast’, a ‘going out and a coming in’, a circular, ‘curving rhythm.’”<sup>377</sup> This is certainly an apt way in which to approach a form of mapping which includes the human being as a vital element of the map itself.

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<sup>373</sup> Paul, 190.

<sup>374</sup> Pound, *The Cantos* (Faber, 1975), 324.

<sup>375</sup> Olson’s keen interest in etymology would make this definition and, given the French origins of the word, its synonymous meaning of “wave” especially apt in this instance.

<sup>376</sup> Michael Kindellan, “Poetic Instruction” in Herd, Ed. 98.

<sup>377</sup> *Ibid.* 98,

Western cartography in the 15<sup>th</sup> Century was far from exact. It was a time when “knowledge failed, legend supplied islands to be placed upon the expanse of the sea, especially to the west.”<sup>378</sup> In other words, maps were created by *muth*, islands of the mind, in the eyes of the voyagers looking into their Homer but out through the eyes of Juan de la Cosa, in other words through a process of interpenetration and multidirectional mapping. This appears to have been one which includes the maker out on the watery routes creating destinations by movement, later to be constructed as image and sound.

Olson’s recollection of Smith, Stefansson and, going back even further, the Ancient Greek geographer and explorer Pytheas, is consistent with Hugh Kenner’s opinion that “this is almost a twentieth-century American *topos*, this effort to recapture the sensations of the early explorers.”<sup>379</sup> Kenner identifies this as a feature of Williams’ chapter on Columbus in *In the American Grain* and notes its recurrence in American literature during subsequent decades. He observes a desire on the part of American writers to recapture the sensations that a first European may have felt on encountering the New World, its shores famously “commensurate to his capacity for wonder.”<sup>380</sup> He also warns that these are feelings of displacement: twentieth-century views, not those of the original explorers themselves. Olson tries to look through their eyes, which might imply an improbable feat of the imagination. Kenner argues that as soon as the notion of finding Asia through America was given up, then as a result: “it meant also to conceive that the great Earth Island, Eurasia-Africa, on which all men were clearly children of Adam, could no longer be what it had always been, the One World.”<sup>381</sup> Olson’s frontispiece to the second volume of *The Maximus Poems* shows a rough map of Gondwana, which he foregrounds as the origin of humankind, “before Earth started to come apart at the seams” (*MP, II*, frontispiece). Keeping faith with this concept of genesis, it is unproblematic for Olson that America was already inhabited when the Europeans arrived: this fact poses less difficulty for him than for those who had given up on such an idea. For

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<sup>378</sup> Sauer, *Northern Mists* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), 1.

<sup>379</sup> Kenner, *A Homemade World: The American Modernist Writers* (William Morrow and Company, New York, 1975), 28.

<sup>380</sup> F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (London: Penguin Classics, 2000), 171.

<sup>381</sup> Kenner, *World*, 29.

Olson, the north east coast of America, rather than being a *locus* populated by human beings of uncertain origin, ready either for eradication or conversion, was a place rich in myth and legend able to be interwoven into strands the sailors brought with them on their craft.

The early maps, such as de la Cosa's from 1500, represent the first instance of America in western cartography, and inevitably contain errors inherent in calculating latitudes, for instance, according to celestial bodies as viewed from low lying craft. John Cabot in 1497 claimed "an unknown locality" for England, possibly New England itself, and then by following its coastline for another month "confirmed the attainment of a mainland, inferred as Asiatic".<sup>382</sup> Likewise, back in the Twentieth Century, it needs to be pointed out that Olson was not academically and professionally trained as a geographer, and whereas his research into Gloucester was meticulous and appears to have been mostly accurate, attempting to encompass and recall statistics from wider afield implies that he was either glossing or working with data based on speculation. Olson's glosses and approximations create a certain rhetorical effect, but also a problem in that his style comes across as insistent and declamatory, and appears to demand that his claims be taken as literal truth. Olson's lack of geographic credentials was certainly noticed by Sauer himself, who ignored much of the poet's correspondence. It is better to regard Olson's forays into this region, as Davenport suggests, as the ongoing creation of a stance that can be seen as a "geography of the imagination",<sup>383</sup> and to remember that the *Maximus* project is a work of imagination, a *livre composé* which includes factual presences but which cannot be expected to contain precise scientific methodology.

The poem "Letter, May 2, 1959" has already been examined in structural terms, and it is also instructive for its use of local history. From the topography of landmarks such as Meeting House Hill, and presences such as the early settlers, it functions as a mapping of the timeframes as well as *loci* of significant dwellings and landmarks. As will be seen below, these are under threat. The settlers who

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<sup>382</sup> Sauer, *Mists*, 42.

<sup>383</sup> Davenport, 3-16.

“enclosed both the local and the past” (*MP*, I.46) did so on unstable ground, and their houses are like the earth they stand on, coming apart in ever-widening cracks. This is intimate space, for Olson, and as such, according to Bachelard, it “is unwilling to remain permanently enclosed. It deploys and appears to move elsewhere without difficulty; into other times, and on different planes of dream and memory.”<sup>384</sup> In light of this, from the span of his transcontinental sweep to the nest he constructs in the domain of the local, Maximus shifts, out of necessity, between contrasting projections of size. Intimate space implies a paradox: it struggles to express itself, and often overreaches its limitations, sometimes at the expense of coherence, but also needs to be contained and carried around with its owner. It becomes part of unstriated space, as its size enables it to be taken over, and this implies the limits within which human beings are contained.

The details and attempts at precise surveying occur here more notably than anywhere else in the entire epic, almost as if by way of presenting proof of the poet and his protagonist’s legitimacy, their right to be there. This is one of the longest poems in the epic, and intends to function as a way of framing many people and places within it as possible: “enclosed both the local and the past”. (*MP*, I.146) The poem moves in and out of time and space with what can be disconcerting rapidity, unless the reader is willing to slow down. Only with a certain intensity of concentration can the tracking of its leaps and contours make sense of the vertical as well as horizontal and indeed circular movement on the page.

The overall impression is one of a discontinuous narrative meeting song and the odd physical somersault. Indeed, Olson operates with not so much a case of unorthodox conjunction, as a “grid of disjunction.”<sup>385</sup> This technique is highly deliberate and reinforces the concept of unsettlement, or in other words of bringing the reader along with the near-physicality of the noun clusters that fall upon each other in rapid and at times over-ambitious succession:

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<sup>384</sup> Bachelard, 53.

<sup>385</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 41.



and “step”, “nation” and “The sea”, “rush over” and “The ice”. Kenner notes that the typographical space is

among the last written symbols to be invented; for centuries it seemed sufficient to set down a phonemic tune from side to side of the parchment, unbroken.<sup>386</sup>

Olson uses this space frequently, to render his images distinct, current and visible. On this excursion back in time, he employs his own version of a phonemic tune:

Stefansson’s ice, what trade replaced Pytheas’s sludge with, man goeth  
novo sibirskie slovo only a Chinese feeling not Canton silk or Surinam  
Rose-Troup to you, Gloucester...  
(*MP*, I.151)

The next stanza begins:

the river and marsh show clearly and no Indians long the Beach forest  
on Fort Point wigwams again at Harbor Cove in fact all up between what  
1642 became the harbour and the town...  
(*MP*, I.151)

Here, a few spaces come in to punctuate this thought stream; they refuse to be excluded, and the poet uses them to draw breath and retain a semblance of control over the names and events that close in around him, that he is compelled to engage with just as he would have them give way in their turn.

“Letter 2, May 1959” concludes with a crude and mainly numerical expression of a nautical chart, mapping the depths of the harbour, and locating three geographical features, along with the expression “[their ship].” (*MP*, I.151) The poem ends with the arrival of the settlers whose presence is given at its outset, also in noticeably numerical terms, to complement and reinforce the desired solidity of the landscape it measures and attempts to frame. This conveys the same attempt at precision as the beginning of the poem, which seeks to measure

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<sup>386</sup> Kenner, *Pound Era*, 90.



through incorporating its vital statistics into the *Maximus* gestalt. However, it needs to be noted that Olson is both an insider and outsider in relation to Gloucester, by dint of his family history and ancestry alike. His default position is intimate but also ex-centric, which can explain his sense of psychic affinity with the explorer, Smith. When one reconsiders Olson literally on all fours over the maps in his Connecticut hotel room, one arrives at the conclusion that he was effecting an intensely personal, *subjective* superimposition over the colonial grid, for somewhat different purposes. In the last few months of his life he was in effect continuing a life-long project, nothing less than a full-body mapping of his known world.

This activity aside, it is important to note that all Western geographers followed the Euclidian imperative. Apart from Sauer, Olson lauds: “Brooks [Adams] for his overwhelming conviction of GEOGRAPHY, and a 20<sup>th</sup> century (as well as archaic) geography at that ((Ez’s stays Copernican, & his geometry Euclidian))” (*O/C* 9 54). Pre-modern Western maps are notably different from their twentieth century counterparts – as has been noted already, their tendency is to show the human being:

The old charts  
are not so wrong  
which added Adam  
to the word’s directions

which showed any of us  
the center of a circle  
our fingers  
and our toes describe  
(*MP.I*, 60)

This shows the protagonist sited within the domain, creating it by being, not claiming more than can be reached and made tangible. This is in marked contrast to the “all-encompassing, godly perspective”<sup>388</sup> of modern maps. Even if this sounds exaggerated, the modern map has a lack of inner depth and a uniformity

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<sup>388</sup> Ross Gibson, *South of the West: Postcolonialism and the Narrative Construction of Australia* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), 6.

that precludes the communication of more than a superficial sense of place. Least Heat-Moon summarises the difference using terminology that could well be applied to Maximus:

Two-dimensional Rand McNally travelers who see a region as having borders will likely move in only one locality at a time, but travelers who perceive a place as part of a deep landscape in slow rotation at the center of a sphere and radiating infinite lines in an indefinite number of directions will move in several regions at once.<sup>389</sup>

Least Heat-Moon decries the decline of mapping, from the days when cartography expressed a certain curiosity about the world and was ready to admit to subjectivity and error:

*Our maps have indeed grown less speculative, less interested in the elemental possibilities of the Earth's skin. They are drawn by computers from satellite photos, and that suggests that the Earth has lost its capacity to keep secrets. The natural features are buried underneath the gridwork of roads and the blur of names. Maps become a means of getting past things, of threading the ganglia and writ of modern life. We tend to look at them for what we want to avoid, rather than what, in good fortune, we might discover.*<sup>390</sup>

He adds a citation that resonates with *The Maximus Poems*: “*There is not much fable in a landscape we cannot enter*”.<sup>391</sup>

A meeting point between the pre-modern and modern concepts of map-making seems to have been evident in the lead-up to Renaissance times:

Until the sixteenth century the angle on the land was more like that accorded to a viewer located atop a mountain or hill overlooking the domain. There was a sense that the observer was critically distanced from the land at the same time as he or she was also part of the scene under scrutiny. Such maps show a mentality on the cusp, so to speak, between a nonmodern and a Western intellect.<sup>392</sup>

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<sup>389</sup> Least Heat Moon, *PrairyErth*, 246. Italics in original

<sup>390</sup> Ibid. 354. Italics in original

<sup>391</sup> Peter Steinhart “Names on a Map” (1986), in *PrairyErth*, 354.

<sup>392</sup> Gibson, *South*, 6/7.

Such a position would also describe Maximus atop Dogtown, including himself in the mythological mapping of the area, while maintaining his authoritative, yet outsider's stance.

Gibson also reminds the etymologically minded reader that "geography" literally refers to writing the earth, and as such constitutes

a thoroughly modern discipline [which] embodied a fundamental upheaval in the relationship of human beings to their environments. Once space had become something to fill with multifarious systems of knowledge external to the person who was looking at it...the space outstripped the subjective limits of the observer/occupier.<sup>393</sup>

This is a consequence the projective and proprioceptive Maximus attempts to reverse. As Gibson posits:

Unless the occupant of a space were to develop a non-modern, ritualistic understanding of the location, the territory could be known only by means of an 'alienated', rational engagement with space. It had come to pass, therefore, that the modern mentality had a relationship *with* the land, while a non-modern mentality might be said to be *in* and *of* the land.<sup>394</sup>

It is the latter sensibility that Olson's protagonist definitively supports and articulates.

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Olson's poetry and poetics have been shown to demonstrate an affinity with the creative expression that marks Australia: "Site-based, mythic representations in Aboriginal art are landscapes of landscapes, or conceptual maps of designs already wrought, not views of nature", and as a Cape York man exclaimed to Sutton: "'The land *is* a map!'"<sup>395</sup> Regarding methodology, it is important to reiterate that even though Olson may have felt something similar, he was not

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<sup>393</sup> Ibid. 6.

<sup>394</sup> Ibid. 6.

<sup>395</sup> Sutton, 19.

trained as a geographer, nor would he have had an in-depth knowledge of Aboriginal Australian art. Indeed, even students of the genre indicate potential dangers of oversimplification when trying to draw analogies between Aboriginal painting and maps. The existence of complex and largely concealed sign systems, with the implication of multiple entry points, or *puncta*, suggests caution is needed when taking this comparative approach. Morphy points out that “each section of [an individual] painting may have its own geographical orientation”<sup>396</sup> Each section of *The Maximus Poems* also has its geographical orientation, yet it is important not to conflate this with the sacred inscriptions of the Dreamings. Olson constructs his maps. Nevertheless, like pointillist paintings, his poetic expressions find integrity through their incorporation of myth, and Morphy’s assertion that “the painting is able to be a map precisely because it represents the transformation of mythic action into landforms,”<sup>397</sup> finds particular resonance with Olson’s typography in general and his map poems in particular.

In his typography as well as his approach to space, Olson thus confronts the imperatives and the difficulties inherent as a son of immigrants in a country of ancient and un/settled space. His epic project encompasses lessons learned from predecessors along with his own special view of place, which attempt to bring together all the “precessions” of his own self (*MP*, II.14), while acknowledging that the country itself comprises more than these. Maximus attempts toprehend time as recurrent and eternal, and directs his attention towards origins, replacing these on, off or over his pages. He is a local presence, who performs a sedentary dance, and who, like Tyana in relation to Apollonius, creates his dance as synonymous with place. Naturally, human beings are also distinct from place, in that their movements are more noticeable, occur upon it and are of a profoundly distinct albeit ephemeral form. Rose expresses this concisely and poetically:

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<sup>396</sup> Morphy, 105.

<sup>397</sup> *Ibid.* 131.

Contrasts between the concreteness of place and the elusive quality of the signatures of our lives become provocatively vivid as we learn to understand our lives as tracks....These tracks are always located.<sup>398</sup>

Yet, it had also been seen that the concept of prehensions undermines the idea of any aspects of the universe as being fixed in time and place. The following citation from Rose on Aboriginal cosmology could just as well have come from Whitehead, and indeed could serve as a précis for how prehensions work:

Each part of the cosmos has within it the potential to expand; each is potentially a runaway part, pushing and testing until it is stopped by others. But each part, as it becomes active triggers other parts which are interconnected to it and which stop the runaway process. Human beings have a responsibility to intervene where they consider intervention necessary and to leave things alone where they consider that necessary.<sup>399</sup>

For now, it is time to look at how other forms of inscription work towards the full recreation of the *Maximus* gestalt. Prehensions meeting archaic forms of mapping place create a layer on top of the poet's original perception of space. Additional to this palimpsest is the sense of multidimensionality in the utterances and words that are thus inscribed. In the next chapter it will be shown that this positioning of the self in space and on the page is augmented by sound, a special sense of construction and use of imagery to create a multi-dimensional gestalt. This results in an approach to poetic language which promises to fulfil the idea expressed in Olson's poetics, that the animate self-objects of his poems be given the shapes and fullness of meaning that makes them stand out from simple representation.

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<sup>398</sup> Rose, *Terrains*, 163.

<sup>399</sup> Rose, *Dingo*, 97.

## Chapter 3

### Singing, Building, Making

It is time to consider the triad shadowing *The Maximus Poems*, and how it acts as a filter through which the topos, typos and tropos can be read. The work that is sung, and then on another level constructed, and subsequently woven, has been identified as integral to a methodology of effective writing. These mechanics do not necessarily apply in the same order to Olson as to Benjamin, but there are similarities in terms of influence and activity that help illuminate and ultimately explain the formation of the *Maximus* gestalt. The music which underscores Olson's text may not be immediately obvious, but the mode of creativity is analogous in certain important aspects. The discipline of architecture matches, not by metaphor alone, the role of Maximus as a bridger of cultures. And from influences as diverse as Anni Albers and quasi-totemic birdlife comes the trope of weaving to complement the singing and building of the language.

A formula from a predecessor in the visual arts may elucidate some of the main aspects this chapter examines. In the early Twentieth Century Wassily Kandinsky outlined:

“The essentially immutable means (of artistic expression) are:  
music – sound and time  
literature – words and time  
architecture – line and extension  
sculpture – extension and space  
painting – color and space”<sup>400</sup>

His concept of literature appear to be connected closely to music: “Words are inner sounds. This inner sound arises partly – perhaps principally – from the object for which the word serves as a name.”<sup>401</sup> Abstraction, he goes on to imply,

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<sup>400</sup> Wassily Kandinsky, *Complete Writings on Art, Volume One (1901-1921)*, Trans. and Eds. Kenneth C. Lindsay and Peter Vergo (London: Faber and Faber, 1982), 89.

<sup>401</sup> *Ibid.* 147.

mitigates this effect, and it is the solidity and integrity of the object that gives rise to its sonic as well as graphic, linear and spatial expression.

It has been seen that Olson's mode of creation involves the making of multidimensional maps and that these are a form of typography meeting enactment. The language that surrounds and permeates this spatial and embodied expression needs consideration in its salient structural elements and *minutiae*. In addition to the words, the spaces, some consisting of almost an entire page, are of significance when looking at how the poet uses sounds and musicality to help add to the dimensions explored in space and through his special use of typography. A modernist problematic, as posed by Kenner, consists of the idea that words are often indistinct, that morphemes can carry as much or even more meaning, and that a word is "the most artificial element in prosody," so:

how alien to normal speaking is a cutting between word boundaries? And except when they handle things and name them, are a people without writing aware of 'words'? The space was among the last written symbols to be invented; for centuries it seemed sufficient to set down a phonemic tune from side to side of the parchment, unbroken.<sup>402</sup>

Kenner's expression, "the phonemic tune" is of particular relevance here. Although the musical and imagist components of *The Maximus Poems* are often overlooked, they need attention for they combine with the typography to prepare the ground further for an articulation of the overall gestalt. The Dreaming tracks that have been demonstrated to form parallels with Olson's poetics are sung, performed and otherwise ritualised. Territory is defined and reaffirmed with special language, which can include sacred and "singing" worlds. As Berndt explains with reference to Arnhem Land:

Because nearly all sacred myths and corresponding actions are connected with specific localities, sometimes with sacred objects as well, the songs help people to remember the appropriate details. Nearly every site that is important in some way – waterholes for instance, particularly in the

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<sup>402</sup> Kenner, *Pound Era*, 90.

desert – or has some remarkable feature, such as a special rock formation or an oddly shaped hill, is connected with a myth or section of a myth.<sup>403</sup>

The place and objects in question imply potential for comparison between Olson's located self-objects in Gloucester and Dogtown and the inscribed sacred objects, or *Tchuringa* of Aboriginal Australia, as well as the enigmatic poem on the location of truth as a waterhole in the bush. It is a fusion of these sensibilities and methods of *poiesis* which marks Olson's approach to glyphic writing, to "necessarily located" language: a coalescence of phenomena and the mind that apprehends it. It is the creation of the specifics of this language, its aurality, visibility and multi-dimensional form that is to be examined next.

Olson's language parallels the techniques used in music, architecture and other crafts of construction, and on the pages of *The Maximus Poems* can be detected the presence of crafts and activities constituting and reconstituting phenomena from material objects through to movements and sounds. These can be read in conjunction with the "collective bodies" of Deleuze and Guattari, which operate in "sometimes quite unforeseen forms – in specific assemblages such as building bridges or cathedrals, or rendering judgments, or making music, or instituting a science, a technology." (*N*, 27) From these sciences and concepts of construction it is necessary to consider ways of regarding creation and recreation, where the language is looked at through less solid and more sensory modes of expression, before returning to the glyphs that re/unite the density (and porosity) of objective materials with the ephemerality (and eternity) of sound and abstract expression.

### Sound and Space

It has been acknowledged that although Olson's typography has invited comparison with the features of a map, the examples given imply a degree of approximation in terms of his use of numbers and co-ordinates. To what extent

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<sup>403</sup> Berndt, *First*, 242/3.

his map-poems are successful in achieving the cartographic precision he both subverted and desired is perhaps a question peripheral to this thesis. Something they do convey is a sense of musicality, and indeed, the string of co-ordinates that ends "Letter, May 2, 1959" is also comparable to the layout of a musical score. This has analogies with the concept of the breath-line and implications for the gestalt to be created out of a conjunction of the senses with the poetic aesthetic represented on the page. The result is a fusion of the senses. According to Buckley:

Olson's language of 'the breath' specifies one component of physical engagement – the physiological. There are other components: visual, aural, tactile, for example; and, in some way which we do not yet grasp, the ear is the central organ for implicating the body in this conjoining of languages. Where the common language incorporates these bodily habits it may constitute a pre-poetry, a language given to or apt for poetry.<sup>404</sup>

The ear as the central organ recalls the original outset of *The Maximus Poems* in Allen and Tallman's anthology, as a pronouncement of technique to start the poem itself, a statement on poetics to begin the poetry of a new age. Sound itself is a form of poetic linking, or connection. This is evident, according to Joris in even the most minimal areas of expression: the words "tesserae" and "commissure" that comprise a page and a poem can also be read or sounded as notes: "I would argue that those two Olsonian words could stand as metahodos...the tesserae are the mosaics of quote and the seam/seamless commissure's [*sic*] are their linkage through sound."<sup>405</sup> It is also a condensation of how the ancient epics were remembered and transmitted, literally "by ear". Additionally, not only was an epic to be sung or recited but implied the assumption of a moral stance incumbent on its keepers. The singer held the fragments in memory and through performance these would cohere. Moreover, to take the ancient Indian epic *Ramayana* as an example, control of all the senses was required to not only recall its poetry but to become the uttered text, to become Brahmin in other words. It seems hardly coincidental that positioned not far along from "tesserae" and "commissure", comes an improvisation on Vedic

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<sup>404</sup> Buckley, 158.

<sup>405</sup> Joris, *Margins*, 133.

chant: “Veda Upanishad edda than” (*MP*, II.128) which given its pronounced assonance, is also clearly intended to be read aloud. When considered together, these fragments function as mosaics of sound, lifted from archaic texts and grounds and reincarnated through the process of sound.

Just as Olson looks for his polis in the realms of pre-Antiquity, so he also listens out for an ancient poetics. This notion is also supported by Blaser, who observes that “rhymes and older metered patterns did not originally close lines, but open their silence”,<sup>406</sup> and that it was the silence and absences on a page that implied the generative tension that created poetic impact. The silent expanses that surround the incantations above can be seen as a case in point. They create an aural space around that which is spoken, making or rather strengthening the bonds of *poiesis* that create the joining, or “commissure”. In this way, to use Blaser’s proposition, language “is not a consciousness of ourselves, but rather an inherence in the world.”<sup>407</sup>

This inherence, or binding of energies is intimately connected to what Charles Bernstein identifies as the “aurality” of Olson’s poetry, which he distinguishes from the “orality” of spoken language. This corresponds to the concept of proprioception, that the breath-line and projective (either spoken or written) language needs to be supported by something more fundamental from within: “Aurality precedes orality, just as language precedes speech. Aurality is connected to the body – what the mouth and tongue and vocal chords enact – not the presence of the poet; it is proprioceptive, in Charles Olson’s sense.”<sup>408</sup> Sound implies a pure sense of physicality, its immanence is indisputable, it is motion and becoming at once, like the human body in its state of bounded subatomic particles. This is important for poetry in general and specifically for Olson’s conception of Maximus. “Sound is language’s flesh, its opacity as meaning marks its material embeddedness in the world of things. Sound brings writing back from its metaphysical and symbolic functions to where it is at home, in

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<sup>406</sup> Blaser, 27

<sup>407</sup> Ibid. 27.

<sup>408</sup> Charles Bernstein, “Introduction”, in Charles Bernstein, Ed. *Close Listening: Poetry and the Performed Word* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 13.

performance.”<sup>409</sup> As will be seen later, it is this performative aspect that is crucial in using the sounding of language to assist in the recreation of the self with the integrity of its senses and Country.

The musical elements in *The Maximus Poems* can also be evaluated against the famous dictum engendered through correspondence between Olson and Creeley, which was eventually honed down to the oft-cited statement from the Projectivist manifesto, that form is an extension of content. Creeley adds a note of interest regarding the process of getting the shape of this content onto the page: “& try this on, /right form/is the precise and correct extension of/content under hand.” (*O/C* 1, 85) Olson then develops this idea in a letter back to Creeley where he evaluates metre in the latter’s verse, and comments that: “we only bother to use the metronome when we can’t discover the/musical phrase.” (*O/C* 1, 124) A conscious search for rhythm, then, is a contingency to be employed only when the poem’s natural, projective prosody breaks down. Olson confirms this at further length, asking rhetorically whether or not in the projective field of composition, sounds determine the length and nature of the lines employed:

is [*sic*] not the variants in field comp NOT the base metaphor or the base proposition but SOUNDS? In other words, can you not, once you have your speed up, move across any area of thing proposed, swing through any arcs of image, but, the law, the confinement, the declaration of the END, when you have it, is, the exhaustion of the possible sounds therein declared?<sup>410</sup>

To appreciate the prosody in *The Maximus Poems*, it is necessary to take advice from Olson’s precursors and regard the musicality of the poems not in terms of harmony and not at all for hearing any kind of harmonic resolution within or between stanzas; “but to the articulation of a complete serial structure. ‘Prosody’, as Pound writes in another passage which Olson quotes with approval, ‘is the articulation of the total sound of the poem.’”<sup>411</sup> In keeping with the vectors that comprise the outset of the epic:

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<sup>409</sup> Ibid. 21.

<sup>410</sup> Olson, in *Olson and Creeley; The Complete Correspondence, Missing Letters*, in *Minutes of the Charles Olson Society, Volumes 59/60/61* (2006), 16.

<sup>411</sup> Byrd, “The Possibility of Measure in Olson’s *Maximus*”, in Corrigan, Ed. 42.

Poetry speaks phallic direction  
Song keeps the word forever  
Sound is moulded to mean this  
And the measure moulds sound<sup>412</sup>

If the shape of sound is thus reliant on measure, there is a link that needs to be drawn out between the mapping and the music, the archaic and postmodern.

Rothenberg notes that repetition and distortion function as aspects of so-called “primitive” songs, typical practice being

to repeat (often also to distort) the one line indefinitely – or as long as the dance and ritual demand – then go on to a second song.... [Etc.]...Lines & series will often seem disconnected except that they’re performed and happen together. The impact of this for own time can’t be ignored.”<sup>413</sup>

This can be observed on occasion in *The Maximus Poems*. Olson’s staccato like repetition of key phrases, irregular yet insistent eccentricities in line length and other forms of typography as well as making the content dictate whatever form appears on the page are all indicators of this connection. From his tender dedication at the outset of the second volume: “Bet / for Bet / for / Bet/ / For Bet” (*MP.II*, frontispiece) to the whole votive section of a poem:

he who walks with his house on  
his head is heaven he  
who walks with his house  
on his head is heaven he who walks  
with his house on his head  
(*MP*, II.141)

through to the blunt repetition of a coarser phrase: “fucked / by the (spirit of) the mountain” (*MP*, II. 22,143, and 188) as part his recount of another section of the myth concerning the same Algonquin woman mentioned previously, which punctuates the second volume, are instances where the language could conceivably be accompanied by a hand drum and break into a chant.

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<sup>412</sup> Pound, in Kenner, *Pound Era* (who refers to this as Pound’s “last apology for poetry”), 104.

<sup>413</sup> Rothenberg, *Technicians of the Sacred: a range of Poetries from Africa, America, Asia and Oceania* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1968), 398.

Going back to the origins, or heart of the word, is impossible to avoid with Olson, and Bram reminds us of the Greek etymology in the word "*mousike* [which] means not only music but also 'the state of self-organization and intensity of attention which the bard must attain.'"<sup>414</sup> This is of course to be contrasted with the "mu-sick" (*MP*, I.3) of a society where these attributes have become obscured. The *mousike*, by contrast refers to the rhythm essential within the story and the teller for effective and accurate communication. The historical Maximus speaks on the uses of music and its benefits: "the true harmonies, sung by the chorus of the Muses under the leadership of Apollo Musgetes, preserve the individual soul, preserve households, preserve cities and ships."<sup>415</sup> Music is part of the community, "a good fellow citizen"<sup>416</sup> of the polis, which works with the same efficacy as medicine, and tellingly, construction. Olson's more immediate precursor, Pound, was adamant in the necessity of musical awareness for the making of poetry, opining: "I would almost say that poets should never be too long out of touch with musicians. Poets who will not study music are defective."<sup>417</sup> Although he posits his notion of phanopoeia, or visual poetics as leading to greater precession, the uses of melopoeia, or musicality in poetry consist of its creation of: "poetry on the borders of music and music is perhaps the bridge between consciousness and the unthinking sentient or even insentient universe."<sup>418</sup> By the middle of the Twentieth Century, according to Davidson: "In their recuperation of an oralist, phonocentric imperative, poets hoped to suture together a social body by recovering a private body of significant sounds."<sup>419</sup> He notes the varying levels of achievement among genres to this effect, and that "this divided character of orality ... informs the paranoid testimony of Ginsberg's 'Howl,' the self-tracking of Kerouac's novels, and the epic apostrophe of Olson's *Maximus*."<sup>420</sup> Whether the transference of the "private sounds" that comprise the

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<sup>414</sup> Bram, 100.

<sup>415</sup> Maximus, *Orations*, 294.

<sup>416</sup> *Ibid.* 296.

<sup>417</sup> Pound, *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*, Ed. Eliot (London: Faber and Faber, 1963), 437.

<sup>418</sup> *Ibid.* 26.

<sup>419</sup> Davidson, *Ghostlier*, 199.

<sup>420</sup> *Ibid.* 199.

*Maximus* gestalt can be comprehensibly communicated to a wider audience is a pertinent question, and one that the conclusion will address.

Olson showed himself to be interested in the experimental forms of music contemporaneous to the writers Davidson somewhat acerbically assesses. Of particular interest was the pentatonic scale, comprising

the heart of folk melody, these close intervals, which, if I am not mistaken – like the enharmonic tetrachord – are the close intervals of the human voice not that artificial and logical arbitrary, the octave (what is, again, one of the things the West has to undo, of her own making. (*O/C* 6, 180)

This view of musical influence on his own poetics remained consistent: an interview with Gerald Malanga in 1969 includes the following conversation:

Malanga: Does Pound's teaching bear any relevance to how your poems are formed on the page?

Olson: No. In fact, it's evident my masters here are pre-Pound. They're Webern and Boulez....  
(*MU*, 375)

Composer Anton Webern, who also influenced Black Mountain College resident John Cage and helped create the latter's "indeterminate" musical style, is credited with the development of serialism and atonality within classical music of the early Twentieth Century. His scores show notes in apparent isolation from one another, much like certain noun-objects in *The Maximus Poems*. Webern's serialism consisted of creating unity out of the fragmentation of melodic lines often consisting of leaps of over an octave. Olson's typographical leaps and line gaps, scattered with words and numbers at varying and seemingly exaggerated degrees of separation, look remarkably like a Webern stave. Pierre Boulez built on Webern's influence and his work and career was marked by both musical and mathematical aptitude. In Olson's poetry a fusion of these elements and influences is evident.

In the Black Mountain scene, Cage figures as prominent during the period before Olson's tenure, yet his ideas on Zen Buddhism and notions of "unimpeded"

interpenetration<sup>421</sup> constitute points of reference with Olson's work. His admiration of Webern forms a bridge of sorts between Cage's experiments with what might be termed musical haiku and the more strident, serial forms of expression that derive from the Austrian composer's influence. A brief presence at the college, Lou Harrison, seems to have created such a bridging in his composition *The Glyph*, as part of an interchange on this linguistic idea which Olson had brought from his Mayan research. Harrison's music, together with Ben Shahn's drawing and Katherine Litz's dance formed a synthesis of "Glyph Gifts"<sup>422</sup> which sought to express the multi-dimensional and shared qualities of language and paralinguistic expression that *The Maximus Poems* were also intended to develop.

As with the fusion of other disciplines and areas of learning, the inter-relationship between poetry, poetics and music is far from straightforward, or in the case of the serial composers and musicologists even a bit uncomfortable. Boulez was a presence at Black Mountain College, and Boer notes Olson's pleasure when listening to a recording of Boulez's *Le Marteau sans Maître*, but also an observation that the composer was "divided against himself",<sup>423</sup> and that this constituted something erroneous, apparently enough for him to make a note on the record sleeve itself.

Among notes from Olson to Creeley are observations on the parallels between his writing process and the influence of Boulez, as he sees the composer's practice. He refers to a sense of verticality which is outlined in his later theories of proprioception, and which gives a valuable insight into how his musical sense help him generate this essential aspect of his poetics: "When I go horizontal – literally fall, lacking, the standing-up ----- / If I could once more write vertical as I take I Boulez has, in, that 2<sup>nd</sup> Sonata – as, indeed, I take it I did In Cold Hell...which I'll inscribe to Pierre Boulez for his 2<sup>nd</sup> Sonata..." (*O/C* 7, 120) He adds in a subsequent letter that the French composer's "sound also has gesture

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<sup>421</sup> Martin Brody, "The Scheme of the Whole: Black Mountain and the Course of American Modern Music" in Vincent Katz, Ed. *Black Mountain: Experiment in Art* (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2013), 255.

<sup>422</sup> in Brody, 261.

<sup>423</sup> Olson, in Boer, 39.

or plastic act in it by way of *the hands* / that is ...here wld argue that the hieroglyphic holds in itself an implicit respect for experience outside as non-aesthetic and magical, say, and the phonemic is both (because it is inside, the human, act).” (O/C 8, 63) This communication links the incipient proprioceptive consciousness to both music and glyphic language, the significance of which is examined below.

A later mention in his correspondence with Creeley goes on to cite the composer with a repeated emphasis on structure, with implications for both the construction of the epic and the human being: “Boulez goes on directly: ‘Furthermore, serial structure of notes tends to destroy the horizontal-vertical dualism, for ‘composing’ amounts to arranging sound phenomena along 2 coordinates: duration and pitch.” (O/C 10, 154) The abdication of reliance on classical, harmonic structures parallels his poetic method, and moreover is not limited to the notion of the breath line (duration) or free verse. Blaser notes similarities between serial music and poetry in general terms, as well as the concept of a “serial poem”, wherein such divisions within the self may be perceptible, as evident in his analogy between a serial poem and “a series of rooms where the lights go on and off.”<sup>424</sup> Furthermore, he identifies:

a special analogy with serial music: the voice or tongue, the tone, of the poem sounds individually, as alone and small as the poet is...but sounded in series, it enters a field. In this way the dictation and the serial form join to bring the poet, his voice, tone, and stance into a dimension where he is either lost or found. A ‘necessary world’ is composed in the serial poem.<sup>425</sup>

The poet may feel *ipso facto* isolated, yet this is balanced by the concept of the necessary world, which is reminiscent of the duty of care Olson charges himself with, and the responsibility undertaken by archaic societies to preserve sites of significance through similar forms of composition.

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<sup>424</sup> Blaser, 119.

<sup>425</sup> Ibid. 119/120.

In his conversation with Malanga, Olson also states he has no predisposition or aptitude to write cantos, like Pound. Instead, he embarks on prosodic flights, which are evident from the outset of *The Maximus Poems*, with its loose stitching together of rhapsodic lines, cries and exclamations as he calls up his beloved fishing town. His prosody, he claims, involves “another condition of song which is connected to mode, and has therefore to do with absolute actuality”, wherein “the nouns are wild” (*MU*, 375). In light of the latter statement, an influence largely unacknowledged so far is Igor Stravinsky, even though Olson wrote “An Homage” (*CP*, 75) to the Russian émigré composer outside of *The Maximus Poems*. The unrestrained nouns and profusion of exclamation marks right at the beginning of the epic have their counterpart in the ecstatic crashes and the thumps that mark *The Rite of Spring*: “the bird! the bird!/And there! (strong) thrust, the mast!” (*MP*, I.1) the bracketed adjective could also function as a dynamic on a musical stave - *forte* or *fortissimo* - as the first section of “I, Maximus of Gloucester, to You”, finishes with the resounding clatter of: “And the flake-racks/of my city!” (*MP*, I.1) ahead of a quietude to begin the second section with “love”, “perforce” and “feather to feather added” (*MP*, I.1), ahead of another build up and climax that marks the section’s end, and which apart from the presence of sound, gives a clear indication of the movement and direction that characterise the time and space dialectic in the poems. The end of second section shows an extension of present time into space, characteristic of both poet and composer:

(o lady of good voyage  
in whose arm, whose left arm rests  
no boy but a carefully carved wood, a painted face, a schooner!  
a delicate mast, as bow-sprit for

forwarding

(*MP*, I.2)

The build up of images, the repeated “arm” and this image extended into the “bow-sprit” of a fast ship conveys a reaching out into space through extending time, pushing it out to accommodate more self-things from the left-aligned single bracket as a cradle to the edges of the right-hand margin. Ever alert to an

additional dimension of the craft, Olson reminds his audience at Berkeley that: "Ketch' is an old name for a sloop...a new boat. But they spell it in the record 'catches', and, you know, 'catches' is songs." (*MU*, 194)

The effect of this separated "forwarding", in itself directional, is to open more space, on the page and in the reader's consciousness. The poet claims space and the reader is taken into it. Unity of content and form is in the margins. In his poem of homage, "Igor Stravinsky", Olson locates both of them:

On the edge of woods  
(as we are)  
the advance, retreat of both  
man as nature, nature as more than man  
(*CP*, 75)

The phrase "on the edge" is repeated another three times in as many stanzas, as the human being and landscape merge.

Olson's appreciation of the typewriter is well-known, but in this context it is worth recalling his precise words:

For the first time the poet has the stave and bar a musician has had. For the first time he can, without the convention of rime and meter, record the listening he has done to his own speech and by that one act indicate how he would want any reader, silently or otherwise, to voice his work.  
(*CPR*, 245)

Observing a link between the poetics outlined in "Projective Verse" and Stravinsky's compositional methods, a contemporaneous article by the scholar of languages and music, writer Roger Shattuck, suggests that Olson was effective in getting this message across:

many young poets have arranged their typography with a sense of notation. Charles Olson made it all explicit...in one of the few intelligent statements about the direction poetry is moving. Poetry still wants to be music - sound, score and performance.<sup>426</sup>

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<sup>426</sup> Roger Shattuck, "Marking Time: A Study of Stravinsky, Proust and Sartre", *The Kenyon Review*, Vol.25 no.2 (The Kenyon College, Spring, 1963), 250.

Furthermore, he notes that in the notes of serial music, as in the words and spaces between the words of projective poetry, the landscape underscores everything, and for the attentive reader, so too “for a keen ear the map of the terrain is given in the opening row of notes. They yield every valley and plain, every rock and rill.”<sup>427</sup> Whether it embodies the spontaneous memory of novelist Marcel Proust or the attentiveness of philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre, as observed by Shattuck, a key aspect of the relationship between projective poetry and music is that they both operate outside of established patterns in order to create their own direction and scale. This in turn creates the landscape they express.

Considering Stravinsky’s *Firebird*, Shattuck notes that “lyrical and violent passages...full of a frenzied resourcefulness that finally seem to exhaust the possibilities of further musical statement” result in a shift where there is “no more music to play, except the simplest triads in parallel motion”.<sup>428</sup> Similarly, in “I, Maximus of Gloucester, to You”, the third section ends with this sense of exhaustion and closes the bracket which at the top of the page opened the ship’s “forwarding”:

...a man slumped,  
attentionless,  
against the pink shingles

o sea city)  
(MP, 1.2)

Immediately, out of the seeming impasse, or slump, comes the shift, with a poetic version of music triads working its way down the following page:

one loves only form,  
and form comes  
into existence when  
the thing is born

born of yourself

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<sup>427</sup> Ibid. 261.

<sup>428</sup> Ibid. 258.

of hay and cotton struts,  
of street-pickings, wharves, weeds  
you carry in, my bird

of a bone of a fish  
of a straw, or will  
of a color, of a bell  
of yourself, torn

(*MP*, I.3)

These stanzas move away from the atonality, and loose form of the wild chants that characterise the previous sections of the poem. They bear closer resemblance to the organization of a musical stave, contain more overtly melodic elements and are more tightly controlled in terms of their form. The word “form” itself, along with “born”, “straw” and “torn” create a sonic flow controlled by the same diphthong that is also present in the sound of a horn, announcing the form that is engendered by birth through deliberate repetition of a key sound. These lines, and in particular the genitive aspect of the third stanza cited, lead up to another crescendo, which sets a sonic pattern of building up and falling away through this first poem of the *Maximus* sequence that approaches the symphonic. This implies a prosodic equivalent to the Deleuzian description of the essential forces at work: “From *turba* to *turbo*: in other words from bands or packs of atoms to the great vortical organizations.” (*N*, 18) Birth giving rise to outward form, carefully balanced by the bird bringing objects in from the outer world, create these chords that sustain the song, the first chant of Maximus, and from the outset add this aural dimension to the dialectics of inner and outer space.

Patterns in *The Maximus Poems*, like other modern epics - Woods identifies Louis Zukofsky’s *A* as a salient example - result in assemblages of sentences and stanzas that are musical in their development. Woods notes: “Olson’s sentences develop like musical themes: they break apart and turn in on themselves in a continuing helix of variations.”<sup>429</sup> They contain contradictions and spells where the prosody grates or seems to fall apart entirely. Significantly, given the way the epic is patched together in the final volume, there is little in the way of prosodic

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<sup>429</sup> Woods, 238/239.

resolution in its individual sections, certainly not “an affirmation, or ‘final cadence’. The contradictions are explored, picked apart, unravelled; they are not resolved.”<sup>430</sup> Myth and music, or musical scores appear to have a certain similarity: that of their difficulty in being read or comprehended as continuous sequence. Levi-Strauss proposes:

we have to read the myth more or less as we would read an orchestral score, not stave after stave, but understanding that we should apprehend the whole page and understand that something that was written on the first stave at the top of the page acquires meaning only if one considers that it is part and parcel of what is written below on the second stave, the third stave and so on. That is, we have to read not only from left to right, but at the same time vertically, from top to bottom. We have to understand that each page is a totality. And it is only by treating the myth as if it were an elaborate musical score, written stave after stave, that we can extract meaning out of the myth.<sup>431</sup>

Once again, verticality is of the essence: like many archaic and some contemporary languages, this is the required direction for the reader to take. As Olson also argues, this is necessary to comprehend a dimension of artistic expression that incorporates its fully expressed being. There is the need to feel or prehend all parts of a symphony together, or be able to do so to understand its totality, despite the presence of a controlling structure, or form. Thus, a kind of subconscious superimposition occurs on the part of the listener to create or recreate layers of meaning:

there is a continuous reconstruction taking place in the mind of the listener to music or the listener to a mythical story. It’s not only a global similarity. It is exactly as if, when inventing the specific musical forms, music had only rediscovered structures which already existed on the mythical level.”<sup>432</sup>

With reference to specific mythology within Olson’s sphere of interest, the parallels between music and myth are demonstrated in archaic Mexico. The deity Quetzalcoatl, prominent also among the Maya, has the role of singing master among the Toltecs, as well as being “the teacher of the screenfold scribe. In the

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<sup>430</sup> Ibid. 238/239.

<sup>431</sup> Claude Levi-Strauss, *Myth and Meaning*, (London: Routledge, 2001), 40.

<sup>432</sup> Ibid. 44.

Nahua language ‘to utter a flower’ and ‘to paint a song’ are phrases which well illustrate the degree to which this reciprocity was felt between the two media.”<sup>433</sup>

Although not known as a singer or musician, Olson was a noted orator, and his ability to read both his own and other poetry aloud could create a mesmeric effect on audiences. Boer recalls asking him about this, after hearing him recite Whitman’s “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry”, in tones of a “magisterial depth and richness”<sup>434</sup> to a class of graduate students. Olson acknowledged in response the influence of the pianist, David Tudor, who he stated quite simply, had told him “how to read.”<sup>435</sup> Recalling Tudor at Black Mountain in 1953, he wrote in a letter to Boer that Tudor had used the poems of Antonin Artaud to help him read, or read into, the score of Boulez’s *Deuxieme Sonate*. Tudor himself had told Olson to simply “read what’s written on the page”, and the poet approved this with a typical exclamatory “wow!”<sup>436</sup> Boer includes a diagrammatic addendum on the envelope in which Olson sent his reply, which shows the poet recommending the adoption of “a preferable sonic condition.”<sup>437</sup>

There is certainly a distinct rhetorical energy or tension in arguably the most well-known of *The Maximus Poems*. “Maximus to Gloucester, Letter 27 [withheld]” starts as local and family reminiscence and is expressed as relatively straightforward oral narrative, albeit with unusual collocation to describe the place where his father played “scabby golf” and the “piazzas where the women/buzzed.” (*MP*, II.14) This narrative is interrupted mid sentence and the word “this” emphasizes a different mode of address:

...had made a pass at  
my mother, she laughing, so sure, as round  
as her face, Hines pink and apple,  
under one of those frame hats women then

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<sup>433</sup> Gordon Brotherston, *Image of the New World, The American Continent Portrayed in Native Texts* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1979), 260/1.

<sup>434</sup> Boer, 61.

<sup>435</sup> *Ibid.* 62

<sup>436</sup> Olson in Boer, 62.

<sup>437</sup> *Ibid.* 63 (underlining in original)

This, is no bare incoming  
Of novel abstract form, this

Is no welter of the forms  
of those events, this,

Greeks, is the stopping  
Of the battle  
(*MP*, II.14)

Olson is seated in front of a figurative musical stave once more, he deliberately repeats the word “form”, and goes on to use “this” three more times, and “those” twice. In beating out this rhythm, his mode is indicative, he defines and nominalises, these functions superseding his role as storyteller. The nouns contain the energy, coiled up, that he has previously allowed to unwind through the narrative section, and now, he reminds the reader, it is time to pack this up again, into smaller and portable units that comprise the polis of which the word “this” is its bare definition.

### Architectural Space

A practice, or artisanal science, where music finds a complement in its unfinished and finished stages alike, is architecture. A philosopher whose ideas imply the wish to span time and continents alike, Henri Bergson, supplies a form of confirmation in discerning in architecture:

certain effects analogous to those of rhythm. The symmetry of form, the indefinite repetition of the same architectural motive, causes our faculty of perception to oscillate between the same and the same again, and gets rid of those customary incessant changes which in ordinary life brings us back without ceasing to the consciousness of our personality<sup>438</sup>

However distant from the concept of proprioception this may seem, it is worth remembering the sense of construction that the “architectural motive” implies as correlative to individual human physiology (a series of singular entities,

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<sup>438</sup> Henri Bergson, *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness* Trans. F.L. Pogson (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1950), 16/17

reproducing and repeating) and that “ordinary life” comprises a proprioceptive constellation of events providing the sense of solid, perceptible patterns alongside consideration of apparently random occurrences of phenomena. Architecture, as discipline or impulse, is therefore worth consideration in terms of Olson’s poetry and poetics, shadowed by Benjamin’s formula for writing, and the second stage during which a work is built, after it has been sung and before it is woven.

Architecture and weaving combine to create, or recreate a sense of home, which Bram defines as an object located in the immanent spatial dimension referred to as the World. He goes on to observe:

Olson goes even further in his thinking: the building is a re-enactment of yourself, of the world, of the story. Olson knows that ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ are one; he knows that every act of becoming in the poetic unit re-enacts/rebuilds the act of previous experience, and only thus are the world, the city, the poem, built.<sup>439</sup>

The things Olson collects, both at the start of his epic with building materials brought in by his bird, and at the end with these movable and disappearing entities, need constructive activity to fix them on the page, if not entirely in the poet or reader’s conception. Considering the second stage of Benjamin’s formula, it can also be seen that Olson provides a cryptic clue as to its significance for his overall gestalt: “until we realize that each one of us is as hard as we’re made or can make ourselves – and that’s the stone...it’s one of the things that got me over, beside proprioception, to tonight is that I heard...it was Melville’s *Pierre* that put him and Jack on.” (*MU*, 177) “Jack” refers to Kerouac, whose use of the breath-line in his prose works had already been shown to derive from jazz. As for *Pierre*, as Peter the rock, this implies a metaphysical foundation of sorts, but possibly also an acknowledgement of the mysteries within the material:

*the manner in which it linked the cosmic order with our own inner search for order, that accounts in large part for its architectural importance. Stones, gems, to be understood, must be dreamt about, and whereas the*

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<sup>439</sup> Bram, 87.

*flexibility and adaptability of wood allows us to use it without understanding its basic nature, stone demands that we think of origins.*<sup>440</sup>

Heat Moon's choice of source here provides another link to Maximus, with the juxtaposition of stones and gems. The attentive reader will recall jewels and islands in the blood, as well as the implications for micro and macro in the epic. Olson's interest in alchemy went further than simple references to the earth as "Big Stone." (*MU*, 123) It is the "watered rock" (*MP*, II.2) that provides a foundation for dwelling, for construction and for the communal life of the world, of the species. Featherston points out that: "Buildings are emblems of power that occupy a middle zone between the mortal and the divine, the natural and the spiritual. ... Listening closely Goethe called architecture frozen music."<sup>441</sup> Bachelard points out that, whereas "a house in a big city lacks cosmicity"<sup>442</sup>, a house that consists of a poet's reveries and incorporates these into its construction is a structure including vitality. He cites poet René Cazes: " 'I should like my house to be similar to that of the ocean wind, all quivering with gulls.'"<sup>443</sup> Similarly, Olson's apartment at Stage Fort Point was said to have an air of this tensile and shivering, yet sonorous and expressive impermanence about it, open to all directions, permeable and clad in relatively thin weatherboard. Olson refers to "a whole series of inheritances the Americans have been for all their centuries the chief carrier of (that is, the NE wooden house, etc. – MOVE OVER...)" (*O/C* 8, 150) The reference here is to his poem, "Move Over", which contains the following lines:

north and east  
the carpenter obeyed  
topography

As a hand addresses itself to the care of plants  
and a sense of proportion, the house  
is put to the earth."  
(*CP*, 66)

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<sup>440</sup> J.B. Jackson "Stone and its Substitutes" in Heat Moon, *PrairyErth*, 139. Italics in original.

<sup>441</sup> Featherston, in Grieve- Carlson, Ed. 6.

<sup>442</sup> Bachelard, 27.

<sup>443</sup> René Cazes, in Bachelard, 51.

Certainly, it would seem that the mode of architecture Maximus uses and inhabits can be also be seen in terms of the forces he resists. Architecture implies its own imperialism, expressed by attempts:

to suppress a participational sense of built place, much as in the young child's cognitive development an initially topological grasp of space gives way to projective and finally to Euclidian modes of spatial organization. The child anticipates the history of architecture, since the Euclidian never triumphs entirely over the topological but enters into a complicated dialectical exchange with it that lasts into adulthood.<sup>444</sup>

Olson was a pedagogue as well as a poet, and if his creation pontificates, it may be that he is essentially a means for establishing connections, a bridge-builder, or secular form of a *Pontifex Maximus*. This mode of construction has relation to Olson's typography, where sentences can be split between pages as if to facilitate the reader's crossing, to act as a means of not only bringing what I would term "word banks" together, but creating these banks through the act of textual bridging itself.<sup>445</sup> In terms of spatial poetics, bridge building implies the identification and maintenance of links between spaces that are superficially separated by time. When asked why he looked for myths in other cultures, Olson replied: "I just thought I bridged the cultures." (*MU*, 132) The practice of bridging thus relates to both topography and tropic acts. The structure, the built thing, thus creates a change in the topography. The land itself, the space, has been gathered closer together and rearranged into a new dynamic inter-relationship. Just as Heidegger's bridge "guides and attends the stream through the meadows,"<sup>446</sup> so Olson's attends to his own topographic domain. Olson's bridge-work, as it was for Crane, is more in the psychic realm, a process aimed not so much as creating a structure, but a mode of concentration to make more meaningful connections, essentially an act of hope.

It has been mentioned that the poem "Letter, May 2<sup>nd</sup> 1959" comprises seven pages devoted to an explication of salient geographical features of Gloucester,

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<sup>444</sup> Casey, 142.

<sup>445</sup> This idea comes from Heidegger: "The bridge...does not just connect banks that already there. The banks emerge as banks only as the bridge crosses the stream. The bridge designedly causes them to lie across from each other," 150.

<sup>446</sup> *Ibid.* 150.

ending with a dense, erratically punctuated summary of its history, condensing and grouping place names and names of people, buildings and commodities. Another salient aspect is that, by the end of the poem, the *locus* has shifted offshore, into the harbour, and the typography acts as a bridge to connect land and water by stripping the language of anything but numbers to measure depth and geographical features. (see *Figure 2* above) The presence of the ship acts as conveyance between water and land, placed here in brackets as incidental to the mode of bridging, or as a contingency should that act fail. Another textual feature that states the act of bridging, or uniting, is the poem that simply states: “*tesserae//commissure*” (*MP*, II.99). The first word refers to fragments, typically those that comprise a mosaic. The second means the act of putting together. The surrounding blank space could represent water. The previous page ends without a full stop and expresses a coastline and an unfinished quest, or business.

These extracts can be taken to show the marine and coastal preoccupations of Maximus, with the stone fragments searching for unity, to be bound together to create a bridge between the shifting coastline with its deceptive, mirage-like visions and the land where ships are gathered, counted and bound, and from where artists regard the expanse before them. The question remains as to whether these stones are effectively put together into a bridge, or if Maximus is simply aligning a pair of psychic stepping-stones. The word “commissure” also recalls Jung, whose theory of the astrological sense of this word, its fish connotations and their relationship to *The Maximus Poems* will be explored to advance the argument that the process of fitting together involves not only the will to cohere, but the skill to create cohesion from elements that are constantly on the move.

In general, the practice of building involves working with stones, and the practice of stonemasonry can be regarded as

inseparable from on the one hand a place of projection at ground level, which functions as a plane limit, and on the other hand a series of successive approximations (squaring), or variable shapings of voluminous stones. (*N*, 23)

This can be applied to “The Kingfishers” where Olson declares: “I hunt among stones” (*CP*, 93), but, he goes beyond simply operating around them, to creating them in the guise of text. The technique of stone-cutting and bridge building alike is one which finds its equivalent in Olson’s poetics, seeking to create, name and place, consciously attempting to work without metaphor. As Deleuze and Guattari state: “One does not represent, one engenders and traverses.” (*N*, 23)

### Crafting Universal and Specific Words

Olson’s selection of vocabulary, at times astounding in its lexical range and varieties of register, along with his unconventional use of grammar complement the distinctive prosodic features of *The Maximus Poems*. This constitutes a deliberate push towards the achievement of a fuller, more immediate sense of language than that afforded by grammatical and syntactical norms. With regard to his spatial poetics, he uses: “border-crashing syntax and grammatical elisions [to] evoke the place-enjambling potentialities of both poetry and modernity.”<sup>447</sup> Olson’s syntax of parataxis, where images and ideas follow each other as they might in nature, and not according to predicative logic, functions as a challenge to locate the reading of his poetry in an uncertain and contested space. Referring to H. L. Mencken’s *The American Language* (1919), Olson asserts: “what I should like some publisher to do, is to break the whole palsy of Western culture on language at the other end ... Mencken has done the breaking on this end – has made it clear, that the American language is open, and driving out, at this end, inventing like mad.” (*O/C* 6, 81/2)

Part of this invention relates to the kinetic and musical aspects of his creation: “what Maximus is is of course a verb.” (*MU*, 373) This is supported by his reading of Fenollosa, as mentioned above, and the latter’s refutation of static language “by positing that ideographs corresponded with actions. His ... originality stemmed from his conviction that the unit of thought was less like a noun than a

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<sup>447</sup> Ramazani, 14.

verb, and that Chinese signs therefore denoted processes.”<sup>448</sup> Michael Bernstein points out the link between Olson, Pound and Fenollosa in terms of the ideogrammatic agreement with science instead of logic, that: “the Chinese sign is built up out of a series of root perceptions, each of which retains, through a kind of visual onomatopoeia, an intimate link to a natural process.”<sup>449</sup> On the etymology and luminosity of the lance, the Chinese ideogram “sincerity” refers to a radical comprising a word in which the sun’s lance comes to an exact point, so its meaning is that of focus. “These are luminous intrusions,”<sup>450</sup> Kenner states, and Olson’s creation only makes them more so.

Parataxis, apposition and a poetics of collage have been identified as relevant to Olson’s poetics by Joris in his book chapter “The Seamlessly Nomadic Future of Collage”, arguing a certain loss of visual coherence, then on a verbal level it deliberately loses fixed logical connections “between word groups in favour of those of similarity, equivalence, and identity. In collage, hierarchy gives way to parataxis, in which all areas of a canvas, or page, are of equal significance.”<sup>451</sup> Joris takes an unexpected example, that of Pablo Picasso’s writing as an exemplification of a style:

unhampered by the sedentarizing effects of normative grammar, syntax and discursive forms...To use the terms of Deleuze and Guattari, the lines of flight of a Picasso poem...are never reterritorialized, are never reinscribed onto the grid of just ‘literature.’<sup>452</sup>

He predicts that this will remain a trend, and that the crossover potential of poetry and psycho-topography has already been realized in works such as those of Allen Fisher’s *Place*.<sup>453</sup> A poem involving the grammar of collage implies an extension of the Olsonian projective and processual poetics, involving exteriorization and wrenched juxtaposition of historical, personal and inscribed materials. The result on the page is a typography that reflects not only the

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<sup>448</sup> Kenner, *Pound Era*, 225.

<sup>449</sup> Michael Bernstein, *Tale of the Tribe* (New Jersey: Princeton, 1980), 37.

<sup>450</sup> Kenner, *Pound Era*, 452.

<sup>451</sup> Joris, *Margins*, 25.

<sup>452</sup> *Ibid.* 27.

<sup>453</sup> Allen Fisher, a British poet, acknowledges Olson’s influence on his long poem, *Place* (London: Reality Street Editions, 2005), comprising a poetic and psycho-topographic exploration of London.

process of the poem but the morphology of its subject matter. The pictorial approximation of a fractured Gondwana as frontispiece for the second volume of *The Maximus Poems* thus compares and contrasts with the more precise cartographical representation of Gloucester Harbor that binds together the first volume, prefiguring content that eventually unravels or comes apart like the continents themselves.

Indeed, all the *Maximus* volumes were issued in bindings that reproduce a map of the Gloucester area, and likewise Olson's words act as co-ordinates, albeit shifting referents of liminal *loci*, in his project to map the course of the human polis. The ambition and difficulties inherent to this undertaking are evident, as is the need for discontinuity and leaps of language: if language itself "were made to obey the laws of physical congruence rather than the conventions of discourse"<sup>454</sup> the risks of linguistic incoherence increase. In the case of *The Maximus Poems*, this is a valid point. The first volume contains numerous instances of what may be termed anti-grammatical clauses, let alone sentences. The other volumes extend this tendency over entire pages, comprising text that is not only ungrammatical but devoid of clear, logical meaning. Christensen makes the point that Olson's use of English "is not in open rebellion against the basic laws of grammar, only the simple declarative sentence."<sup>455</sup> Christensen, and probably Olson, would argue that coherence can be regarded in a wider sense, as organic and located in the body itself. A poet attentive to the rhythm of footsteps and breath embodies the urge to cohere, and like Williams' Paterson, "the walking observer in the park takes his thought from the rhythm of his paces; the coordination of the musculature engages the thinking mind as well."<sup>456</sup> Fenollosa's claim is that: "Valid scientific thought consists in following as closely as may be the actual and entangled lines of forces as they pulse through things."<sup>457</sup> As a result: "Rather than submitting the process of the poem to

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<sup>454</sup> Christensen, 59.

<sup>455</sup> Ibid. 82.

<sup>456</sup> Ibid. 74.

<sup>457</sup> Fenollosa, 12.

simple historical sequence....The language is made to register the poet's own grammar."<sup>458</sup>

It is of interest to note that Olson's own attitude towards the use of grammar in his poetry seems to have shifted between the publication of "The Kingfishers" and later in his life. An interview and reading broadcast by the BBC in 1969, where Olson discusses his poem, "The K", contains his statement that the poem is "based on uninterrupted statements" in which "the syntax is clear and decent, and the image is not permitted to either ascend or descend" (*MU*, 290), a comment that is worth considering by way of contrast to a number of examples in the poems where the syntax is often unconventional and the images in flux. One example is as follows:

I'm looking

at how the Virgin  
does dominate  
her Hill and place  
between the Two Towns

from the East to North fall  
of Main, at Water, right angle  
Paul Oakley, directly down Main she  
in the same direction & picking up the same light

as 90 Middle, the gambrel  
which is sliced off,

the shape of light

the lay,  
of flowers  
(*MP*, II.181)

This extract shows how Olson as Maximus moves, typically, down a page, through a section of a poem, starting a phrase using conventional syntax, then in the next stanza mixing it up, highlighting directional points and loci at the expense of logical, discursive progression and concluding both the poem, and the penultimate section of *Maximus VI* with two noun phrases seemingly

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<sup>458</sup> Byrd, "Measure", 44/5.

disconnected from the previous stanzas, the former abstract, and almost dreamlike – note the indentation which takes it over to the right, or subconscious area of the page – and the other almost incoherent with its use of the comma and refusal to end what admittedly was never a sentence in the first place. However, it can also be seen that his poem has a notably Cubist dimension in its form, as determined by the meaning of its content, which in turn is that of sacred construction. Overtly describing a building, on one level, on another, Olson creates his own version of a glyph. What can be referred to as his idiolect, or personal grammar also involves a musical sensibility. Gavin Selerie notes the presence of: “Olson’s middle voice, intermediate between active and passive, a means of expression aware of itself.”<sup>459</sup> This can be said to derive from lessons learned from Boulez, Tudor and other musicians at Black Mountain College.

The “shape of light” and “lay, of flowers” mentioned above imply the presence of found things, of substance or immaterial. Olson claimed that his self-imposed task was to reclaim language for poetry. This comes with the risk that his language may sound unfamiliar and strange to his listeners or readers alike. As already observed with regard to his typos, Christensen refers to Olson’s “jagged aggregates of words,”<sup>460</sup> as if this is terrain the reader has to traverse in order to extricate from the thicket of a particular use of language fragments of meaning that survive and retain their potential to illuminate, especially, as will be seen, in their multiple dimensions of objective potential.

The languages themselves in Olson’s poems vary, unsurprisingly for a poetics which bridges eras and cultures, but to a lesser extent than in Modernist predecessors, notably *The Cantos*. Joris summarises the effect of the varied typographical aspects, linguistic and cross-disciplinary practices that can also be applied to a typical Olson poem:

A nomadic poetics will cross languages, not just translate, but write in all or any of them...as a material flux of language matter, moving in and out of semantic & non-semantic spaces, moving around & through the

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<sup>459</sup> Gavin Selerie, “From Weymouth Back; Olson’s British Contacts, Travels and Legacy”, in Herd, 116,

<sup>460</sup> Christensen, 9.

features accreting as poem, a lingo-cubism that is no longer an “*explosante fixe*” as Breton defined the poem, but an “*explosante mouvante*”.<sup>461</sup>

Olson’s chants, his explosions of sound, unlike Pound’s *The Cantos*, are presented nearly always in English. Words from other languages are evident in some of the denser passages of *The Maximus Poems*, and notably in the two-word page presenting the fragments as “tesserae” and then adding the “commissure”, or joining. This use of Latin, for instance, recalls the idea of a mosaic that has scattered and emphasises the formality implicit in the task of reassembling.

Another function of etymology is the act of returning. Landscape is what Olson returns to, and he does this by dragging it back into his periphery, his cycle, his ken. Maximus declares: “I compell / backwards I compell Gloucester / to yield, to / change” (*MP*, II.15), which in addition to the common interpretation of surrender, as if the city should bow to his will, also suggests the production of natural gifts, a harvest or bounty, as if the poet is urging the place itself to procreate. Additionally, the Oxford English Dictionary notes that in Middle English it was used as a synonym for “answer, a greeting or the like” as well as to render or return, albeit in the implied sense of a favour or something received.<sup>462</sup> Whatever Olson’s intention with this word choice, not to mention the unusual spelling of “compell”,<sup>463</sup> commensurate with this is the act of restoring original meaning to words is how Olson operates in coming “back to the geography of it” (*MP*, II.14). Olson also refers to his tropic acts: “I drag it back: Place” (*CPR*, 252), and notes the etymology of the landscape, which derives from Middle Dutch, back to the German *landschaft*, which can be broken down to *land* and *schaffen* – the latter a verb meaning to manage and create:

factors of naming  
- nominative power - & landschaft  
experience (geography)  
which stay truer

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<sup>461</sup> Joris, *Nomad Poetics*, 38.

<sup>462</sup> C.T. Onions, Ed. *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, Vol. 2, (London: Oxford University Press, 1983), 2590.

<sup>463</sup> The *OED* notes that this derives from the prefix “com” attached to *pellere*, which, brought into Middle English from Latin, means “to drive”, Vol 1., 382.

to space-time  
(*CPR*, 200)

The act of naming correctly is an essential component of bringing back landscape and its preservation through continual recreation and management. It also implies resistance to the imposition of prescribed language and form. Consideration of Olson's success in relating his use of language to typography and the uses of space are crucial to an effective consideration of his achievement.

Naturally, etymology is of importance in the naming of the protagonist himself. The word "Maximus" serves as: "an onomastic indicator of an inclusive, powerful speaking subjectivity, for (as with Olson as a person) 'nature has given him size, projective size.' A figure so named is a glyph for wholeness – without having to do more with the relation of parts than use this name."<sup>464</sup> DuPlessis refers to the poem: '*A Maximus*', from which the extract above is taken, as "a sketch of proper nouns, rubrics ('marine / architecture'), and private (not exfoliated) associations ... the conceptual act of planning becomes the 'epic' action of the poem – the magnetic gesture of writing as heroic act. Olson is the epic griot of his own poesis."<sup>465</sup> Her use of inverted commas to designate the epic suggests a certain irony in the placing of nouns, untranslated and unabridged on the page, trusting that Olson's reader (much like she does hers, with the use of "griot" for historian or bard) will trust and accompany these specific modes of language use.

If one is to consider the function of translation, ostensibly between languages but also a way of carrying experience across space, Maximus is not only a bridge builder but also a translator. Language in his context functions as a way of tracing the oceanic and migratory currents that define the American experience, and as such is inextricably linked to location. As a lecturer at the University of Connecticut, Olson reminded his students that ancient languages and scripts, such as runes and the old Icelandic of seafaring epics, were fundamental to understanding "the immediate condition" and that to understand poetics it was

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<sup>464</sup> DuPlessis, "Olson", 140.

<sup>465</sup> Ibid. 140.

necessary to “imagine words inside.”<sup>466</sup> This understanding, he argued, comes from the same intuition that discerns parallels between topographical features such as the tributaries of rivers in England and those meeting at Mansfield. Landscape and location thus act as psychic modes of conveyance for fundamental parts of speech across centuries, even millennia. The imagination that can incorporate words as “inside” is also one that can approach the idea of a fully articulated and interpenetrant gestalt.

The rationale behind some of the mixed language usage in *The Maximus Poems* is not always obvious. Sometimes the intention can be presumed, such as the inclusion of a devotional word or phrase, which in order to achieve full integrity is given in the original:

The soul is a magnificent Angel.  
And the thought of its thought is the rage  
of Ocean : apophainesthai

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  
it tore at Watch House Point  
(*MP*, II.70-71)

The word “apophainesthai”, referring to phenomena becoming apparent or emerging, is hard to translate, but also difficult for a reader without a knowledge of Greek to pronounce, thus limiting the success of this poem to the condition of its being read aloud. It does indicate the importance of its placing within topographical features and even for a reader deprived of the full meaning of the individual word, its presence in the poetic landscape creates a flow of sound around the buildings, rocks and water, adding to the sense of these nouns in motion as they are called out to come forth.

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<sup>466</sup> Olson, in Boer, 58.

Where the use of words from other languages corresponds more closely to communal identity is in a form of naming which is sparser, less ceremonial or rhapsodic and at first glance randomly scattered. Closer inspection shows them to be located more deliberately in his landscape. The first instance of this in the epic is when Maximus addresses

my NovaScotians  
Newfoundlanders  
Sicilianos  
Isolatos”  
(*MP*, I. 12)

as a progression of names, English meeting European, sharing the quarto-syllabic rhythm in their grouping, that found the new land of Gloucester, as people cut off from their original places, to form a polis which itself, in its early years, was isolated. They pile up upon each other, creating the sense of a rudimentary glyph, a tablet upon which and within with the people of the settlement converge.

This constitutes an important aspect of his epic contest, namely the idiosyncratic recreation of an Aristotelian viewpoint where the epic functions as a form of linguistic mapping, taking language from its peripheries and streaming them into “an ongoing loop of interaction” which sees “unfamiliar words spring up on the horizon and slowly filter in, changing the shape of the common tongue and recombining it on a different terrain.”<sup>467</sup> Gloucester and its lingua franca – now English – is in the conventional cultural and political sense an established place, yet it ought to be remembered that recreation is a crucial part of Olson’s project, and this involves participating in and recording the transformations of Country through language; the language that makes up his world, no less. Foreign, or “loan words”, according to Aristotle’s *Poetics*, are suited to the epic genre,<sup>468</sup> and in *The Maximus Poems* are of particular relevance and convey a special energy and force in the liminal, kinetic spaces of the seaboard. English has become the

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<sup>467</sup> Dimock, 81.

<sup>468</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics*, Trans. and Ed. Stephen Halliwell (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), Section 22, 115.

dominant language, yet it is Olson's task to remind his reader of the presence of foreign words, neologisms, half-words and inflections grafted onto the tongue that speaks the status quo, to continually resuscitate the glimmering shards and fragments that indicate points of cross-cultural contact and departure. Pops observes: "He will use arcane words such as usufruct, variant spellings like hurrickans, and abbreviations, like N.G., all of which are sufficiently strange to the eye so that one is impelled to sound them on the tongue."<sup>469</sup>

Therefore, it would appear that by compelling his mother tongue to relinquish absolute control (and there is no evidence that suggests Olson was either bilingual or even close to fluency in any of the languages that took his interest) he is letting go of a certain culturally derived, conventional centrality or cohesiveness in his work, in order to replace it with something more complex. Deleuze and Guattari refer to a similar process with reference to Heinrich von Kleist, who they see as attempting to free language from systems of external control, creating a

bizarre anti-Platonic dialogue...where one speaks before knowing while the other relays before having understood: this, Kleist says, is the thought of the *Gemüt*, which proceeds like a general in a war machine should, or like a body charged with electricity, with pure intensity. (*N*, 46)

This intensity and process seek their own meanings, beyond representative or abstract denotation. The mind's thought, through linguistic connections, vectors of bridging, ceremonial sounds and images creates a certain approach – or syntax of apposition – and these are features shared with Olson. As Kleist is recorded:

'I mix inarticulate sounds, lengthen transitional terms, as well as using appositions when they are unnecessary' The necessity of not having control over language, of being a foreigner in one's own language, in order to draw speech to oneself and 'bring something incomprehensible into the world'. Such is the form of exteriority (in *N*, 46/7)

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<sup>469</sup> Pops, 58.

Notions of external control to be resisted and the forms of exteriority to be embraced and harnessed, as figures of outward, such are just some of the apparent paradoxes of projective expression. It is as if words can operate in relays, not replacing images, as Deleuze and Guattari posit, but conveying them, and every bit personal as political.

In a similar spirit, Olson's work is punctuated by eccentric, non-standard speech, and this, in conjunction with his reach back into time, indicates that he is aiming at occupying and articulating a space where the Deep Time concept intersects with that of the archaic postmodern. The further back he travels in time, the further he extends what Dimock calls "the *lexical* axis of the epic [which] serves also as a *temporal* axis."<sup>470</sup> This allows him to connect and converse with periods conventionally thought to be spanned by unfathomable reaches of time, and to instigate a poetic relationship of coherence between a present that has been overlaid with multiple tongues and cultural signifiers, and a past which though in recession still sends out clear points of reference.

That Olson's particular epic quest may not achieve full coherence easily is reflected in the alteration of a few letters in the inflection of a single word to indicate a sense of strangeness in relation to this unfamiliar territory:

I recognize  
the country not discovera,  
the marsh behind, the ditch Blynman made, the dog-rocks  
the tide roars over  
(*MP*, I.85)

The nouns that he recognises and recalls, all with their definite article attached, show a strong sense of possession on his part, and the precision of his naming Blynman's ditch indicates a definite claim where others struggle to articulate such, having to use the word that sticks out, "discovera", uncomfortable in this group of names, half-way between English and another tongue.

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<sup>470</sup> Dimock, 84.

Contested space, between Maximus and a group of early settlers out to despoil the new land is also expressed by means of Olson's protagonist putting not only discomfort, but a sense of idiotic rapacity into their mouths:

Nuth Nuth'East o Cally-o Bilbao Bilbow St Kitts  
Well make a buck with Indian truck  
or corfish  
for the Spicks  
(*MP*, I.110)

The rhymes here come across as over colloquial, childish even, and the language is one that belongs to English, but a type explicitly contrasting with Maximus' own reflections, and that conspicuously lacks care or precision. Evidently, this is a medley of assumed voices, those of the European invaders talking at cross-purposes and against themselves. As the passage continues, the use of Latin and French is put down slapdash to further accentuate this vulgar use of expression and a careless appropriation of these languages with their connotations of high culture, as well as the territory itself:

We'll hang off Stage Head  
nine weeks & do and do and do  
we're for Virgini-ay Fayal and Surinam  
to pick up optimis generis  
what sauvages the French have left  
we'll sell, we'll grab...  
(*MP*, I.110)

One type of occupier will do things, picking up things, "optimis generis" (or good stock), and images any old how, and one intends to name and represent in the interests of ownership, as opposed to an uncomprehending encounter with the "Spicks" and "sauvages". The latter word recalls the "Dry Salvages" offshore, where Eliot's river god flows out to meet them, and Olson's juxtaposition of idioms at odds with each other indicates an uneasy confluence, reinforcing the sense that he is attempting to settle in an unsettled *locus*, looking both ways, at his polis and the invader, the conquistador in the shifting, refractory mirror of the sea.

By way of contrast with such confusion and jumbling of terms comes a naming integral to Maximus' sense of custodianship and incorporation. He acknowledges the pioneering Portuguese fishermen:

Tierra,  
de bacalaos, out of  
  
waters                      Massachusetts  
   my newfoundlanders  
   My Portuguese: you  
  
(MP, I.79)

Once again reminding his reader that the land and sea are not always distinct from each other, and a significant vector that links them is the act of fishing. The cod, "bacalaos", belong to the land as well as the water, and the alliterative start to each line to the right of the page denotes an insistence on that which belongs to Maximus, the founders and the territory: he claims them all. The fish are in themselves a form of totemic being for Maximus, as will be explored in detail in the next chapter.

Maximus' acts of claiming extend to pre-European languages, although Olson is careful not to misappropriate these himself. It is as much the poet's voice as that of his created entity, and as evidenced below, that states:

To speak in Yana-Hopi about these matters  
with which I, as Maximus, am concerned  
(which is Gloucester, and myself as here-  
a-bouts, in other words in *Maximus* local  
relations are nominalized)  
...  
Hopi is a language peculiarly adjusted to  
the topological as a prime and libidinal  
character of a man, and therefore all of his  
proximities: metric is then mapping, and so,  
to speak modern cant, congruent means of  
making a statement)  
(MP, I.144)

This language, as studied by Benjamin Whorf, is recognised as one in which the naming of objects in their landscape is of primary importance, and if these

objects are not evident, they cannot be named and therefore do not exist. Important in terms of this connection to Olson is Whorf's work with the language of the Maya, who the latter insists: "were the only fully literate people of the aboriginal American world,"<sup>471</sup> and whose glyphs could be approached using contemporary linguistic methods in order to discern whether they included a form of phonetics or a system of written syllables. Incidentally, Whorf's Mayan studies were not that enthusiastically received in mainstream academia: not unlike Olson at his most manic, "one has the suspicion that Whorf occasionally allowed himself too many liberties in arraying together ideas which to another would appear totally unrelated."<sup>472</sup>

Olson's reference to Yana and Hopi is of relevance in another sense. Had he been able to speak Yana or Hopi, two distinct languages which his hyphen has made appear congruent, the concomitant size of his world and the solidity and permanence of the self-things within it would increase and further validate his custodianship. The two languages may appear randomly chosen, especially given that neither is from the New England region. Closer inspection reveals Yana as a language that is heavily nominalised, whereas in Hopi most words are verbs. This implicit noun-verb pairing corresponds to the main dialectics at work in *The Maximus Poems*, notably those of inner and outer space, and stasis versus movability of the words and images themselves.

For Whorf, as for Olson, language is key to localised identity: "I find it gratuitous to assume that a Hopi who knows only the Hopi language and the cultural idea of his own society has the same notions often supposed to be intuitions, of time and space that we have, and that are generally assumed to be universal."<sup>473</sup> He also states, as part of the same hypothesis, and making an interesting connection to Olson's view of geometrics: "Just as it is possible to have any number of geometrics other than the Euclidian which give an equally perfect account of

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<sup>471</sup> Benjamin Whorf, Eds. John B Carroll, Steven C. Levinson, and Penny Lee, *Language Thought and Reality* (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2012), 221.

<sup>472</sup> John Carroll, in Whorf, 30.

<sup>473</sup> Whorf, 73.

space configurations”,<sup>474</sup> so different localities possess equally valid, if differing accounts of time, space and myth. Whorf contrasts the Hopi view of the world with that of modern physics, foregrounding its linguistic importance, and more specifically, the significance of verbs over nouns. Nouns, he proposes, are a feature of modern, Western discourse, whereas verbs help create a universe of mobile, proprioceptive beings and a world of events. In this way, Whorf provides correlatives in the field of linguistics to Olson’s development as a poet.

### Glyphs

The language arguably of most significance when evaluating Olson’s poetry and poetics is carved into (or out of) stone as Ancient Mayan glyphs. Searching for and studying these was the poet’s mission in Mexico, and although they are not explicitly referred to with any frequency in *The Maximus Poems*, they constitute a form of expression that reinforces the multidimensional meaning of Olson’s work. His attraction to the glyphs is in their vitality and immediacy. Their very presence, or immanence, shows the beholder what they represent, without the obfuscation of generalization and abstraction. As portable, living nouns they exemplify the lessons learned from Fenollosa, and have the potential to operate as key words in an archaic postmodern epic. Like the runes of Ancient Scandinavia and the *Tchuringa* of Aboriginal Australia they convey a special mode of expression that embodies nomad discourse, kinesis and locatedness. This is language as a form of science, which summons into being what Austrian Modernist writer Hermann Broch calls: “the ‘totality of the world’, as does the work of art whose ‘task is the constant recreation of the world.’”<sup>475</sup> It is both a cosmological and also supremely practical craft.

The necessity of poetic language is that it be sufficient to express with precision, the (literally) particular elements of life as theyprehend one another and shape

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<sup>474</sup> Ibid. 74.

<sup>475</sup> Hermann Broch, in Hannah Arendt, *Men in Dark Times* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1970), 112. In an interesting parallel, given Olson’s relatively late start in poetry and his ambivalent attitude towards his other trades, Arendt notes that Austrian Modernist Broch was “a poet in spite of himself.” (Op cit. 111)

themselves into self-objects for human recognition. Glyphic writing fulfils these requirements by stripping away metaphor and connectors to create a syntax focused on objects in their pure state, which also demands an obviation of time. As already cited in the Introduction, Olson proclaimed in “La Préface”: “Put war away with time, come into space.” (*CP*, 46) This finds support from Broch, in Arendt, who notes:

what is essential about language is that it syntactically indicates an abrogation of time ‘within the sentence’ because it necessarily ‘places subject and object in a relationship of simultaneity.’<sup>476</sup>

Moreover, it is the task of the speaker, poet or singer:

“‘to make cognitive units audible and visible,’ and this is ‘the sole task of language.’ Whatever is frozen into the simultaneity of the sentence – to wit, thought, which ‘in a single moment can comprehend wholes of extraordinary extent’ – is wrenched out of the passages of time.”<sup>477</sup>

To make sense of the Mayan glyphs and shards Olson employed his specific means of finding out – or “istorin” – by his very being there, projected into the mythological and archaic, with the force of his presence seeking to obviate differences and discrepancies of time, language and culture: sensing, or prehending, implicit meaning, despite his limited knowledge of that particular form of language. Rather than complete comprehension, it appears Olson was after confirmation that “the signs were so clearly and densely chosen that, cut in stone, they retain the power of the objects of which they are images”, (*CPR*, 159) which corresponds to his methodological statement in “Projective Verse” that

every element in an open poem (the syllable, the line, as well as the image, the sound, the sense) must be taken up as participants in the kinetics of the poem just as solidly as we are accustomed to take what we call the objects of reality; and that these elements are seen as creating the tensions of the poem just as totally as do those other objects create what we know as the world.

(*CPR*, 243)

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<sup>476</sup> Arendt, 133.

<sup>477</sup> *Ibid.* 133.

Olson was aware of his limited understanding of the glyphs and expressed the desire for even a basic dictionary to help with decoding through them at least: “the *geography* in which the old maya lived / ...the nature of this language of which the glyphs are the most beautiful expression.” (*O/C* 5, 100) Still, Olson, like Rothenberg, would readily acknowledge the value in poems from vastly different and archaic cultures being presented verbatim, and without translation or explication in some cases:

Taking poems straight in that sense is like the Australian aborigines who (wrote W.E. Roth) would borrow whole poems verbatim ‘in a language absolutely remote from (their) own, & not one word of which the audiences or performers can understand the meaning of’: an extreme case of out-of-context reading but (where the culture’s alive to its own needs) completely legitimate.<sup>478</sup>

Such a method recalls the concept of a poetics of difficulty, and serves to direct comparatively minded readers to contemporary Indigenous Australian usages, for instance in the works of Fogarty. This need not imply loss of comprehension: Kenner refers to an essay by Pound on the language skills of sculptor Henri Gaudier-Brzeska whose aptitude across artistic forms of expression enabled him to ÷

read the primitive forms of many Chinese radicals at sight. Is a natural poetic language conceivable, based on such natural signs? Did the first men know mostly clearly what pertains to men? Pound once drafted an essay, ‘L’uomo nel Ideogramma’, which began by noting the contents of the first men’s world, earth, plants, sun, sky, moon, and went on to note the dominance of the human body in radical after radical.<sup>479</sup>

Rothenberg’s examples include untranslated/-able Navaho rain chants set alongside Vedic Upanishads, citing Malinowski’s “co-efficient of weirdness”<sup>480</sup> as a factor that links them in a universal dimension of archaic poetry and poetics, which: “may involve (1) purely invented, meaningless sounds, (2) distortion of ordinary words and syntax, (3) ancient words emptied of their (long since

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<sup>478</sup> Rothenberg, *Technicians*, xxv/ xxvi.

<sup>479</sup> Kenner, *Pound Era*, 104.

<sup>480</sup> Rothenberg, *Technicians*, 386.

forgotten) meanings, (4) words borrowed from other languages and likewise emptied.”<sup>481</sup> This is language of the spirits, of human beings in the process of metamorphosis and transformation, and as such directly applicable to the eccentricities of expression Maximus uses to communicate with other beings, deities and aspects of his own incomplete self.

The principal value of Olson’s study of glyphs therefore lies not in the sense of academic achievement or even accurate translation, but in relation to his theory of projective verse, with implications for his creation of the archaic postmodern gestalt. In her article on what she refers to as the “Phenomenology of Projected Verse” Jessica Lewis Luck detects “a subtle shift in his poetics under the influence of the glyphs.”<sup>482</sup> She goes on to imply that the term “projected” not “projective” verse, as she applies it to the poetry of Larry Eigner, may well apply to Olson post-Yucatan, in other words, directly to *The Maximus Poems*. Olson’s immersion in the three-dimensional glyphs, much like his interest in Norse runes, suggests a physiological poetics that amplifies and goes beyond the theories outlined for Projectivism, to include the physicality of a poetic gestalt to reflect the vitality of language in multiple dimensions – a theory that concludes this thesis. Olson’s description of his own depiction of the Mayan glyphs, that “the very dimensional advantages of relief have been carried over by pen on to paper”,<sup>483</sup> would appear to bear this out. The poetry is thus able to utilize glyphic language to project its energy as object and force both onto the page and into a three-dimensional, non-Euclidian field of perception. Time and space are given this dimension on the page and received by ear joined to the eye as agents for a proprioceptive poetics. This process goes beyond the placing of glyphs or ideograms, treating each noun “as the symbol of a complex internal structure, not a mere surface, [which] by virtue of its inner structure ... exhibits its own integrity. In *Maximus*, the inner-structure of language recapitulates the inner-structure of the world.”<sup>484</sup> Thus, by direct implication, the noun with its kinetic

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<sup>481</sup> Ibid. 386.

<sup>482</sup> Jessica Lewis Luck, “Larry Eigner and the Phenomenology of Projected Verse” in *Contemporary Literature* Vol. 3, 53 (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2012), 468.

<sup>483</sup> Olson, in Luck, 468.

<sup>484</sup> Byrd, “Measure”, 43.

properties properly recognized and synchronized recapitulates the inner structures of the human being in the world. Olson expresses this as the need “to push beyond that old perspective confinement and the newer false freedom – of the visual surface” (*O/C* 10, 106) into the three-dimensional human and cultural sphere.

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In conclusion, from a spatial perspective, Olson’s typography represents a fusion of High Modernism in its “categorical refusal to produce texts intent upon trying to organize the space within which they are disseminated, and their radical displacement of ‘stabilized and bounded being’”,<sup>485</sup> with a glyphic sense of syntax inspired mainly by Ancient Mayan language. Having said that, the predominance of English in *The Maximus Poems* reflects closer ties with Williams than attempts to emulate Pound’s globalism. Dogtown is of equal importance to Maximus as transcontinental flights. Nevertheless, the roots of the American polis are varied, and language, in general, according to Joseph Kockelmans, “contains many dimensions and regions”<sup>486</sup>, it is these that a poet is to gather and keep safe. This means taking care of language and through it the self. Essential to this process is consideration of languages and modes of expression thought archaic or extinct, for the dimension they add to this project is not purely or even predominantly linguistic. Olson’s investigations into Mayan cultures as part of the generative groundwork for his epic is also an exercise in discovering the tangible presence of, and attempting to interpret, pre-linguistic elements of consciousness. As will be seen, these incorporate what Dimock refers to as “other bodily registers”<sup>487</sup> in order to produce a multidimensional poetic expression. They also, in their disavowal of the purely logical – or linear logic for its own sake – carry with them a historical sense of operation, that of inherited tactics and practices of resistance. Then again, if, at times, the plot and its coherence fall apart this may

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<sup>485</sup> Paul Giles, *Transnationalism in Practice* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), and Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit, in *Op.cit.*, 46.

<sup>486</sup> Joseph Kockelmans, *On Heidegger and Language* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1972), 32.

<sup>487</sup> Dimock, 162.

be an unavoidable side-effect of working within “smooth spaces of the rhizome type”, (*N*, 53) while simultaneously (and inevitably) marking, or striating that same space in its microcosmic, paginated form with the markings, patterns and ultimately restrictions of text.

The process itself gives rise to a language that of necessity needs precision, in the way that constructing a bridge, a work of music or a body allows for little in the way of unacknowledged error, unless the drafts and outtakes be allowed their due, undisguised on the page. Script, whether “by ear” or on a page, exhumed from an ancient site or brought in the wake of a colonizing power, lends itself in all its forms to direct reporting from text. Around the core words, their sonic value and rhythm, their style as intended by their archaic creators is the flesh that makes up the overall gestalt. Lévi-Strauss refers to a “mythical value” in the retelling of stories where the story itself censures a valid, functional language: “Myth is language, functioning on an especially high level where meaning succeeds practically at ‘taking off’ from the linguistic ground on which it keeps rolling.”<sup>488</sup> Thus Levi-Strauss, with whom Olson might not have agreed, yet where the structuralism of the former meets the poetics of the latter in ways that seem close enough to appear more than coincidental.

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<sup>488</sup> Lévi -Strauss, *Structural Anthropology*, Trans. Claire Jacobson and Brooke Grundfest Schoepf (London: Allen Lane, Penguin, 1968), 210.

## Chapter Four

### Totemic Spatial Presences

It has been seen from Aboriginal Australia that place is of central and fundamental significance, and that images and representations of images and language itself are all intrinsic to their location. This means that even religious representations, such as *Tjuringa* can be seen as landscapes in their own right. Works of art can thus “belong on a continuum of manifestations of the Dreaming, together with the artists who made them,”<sup>489</sup> and these manifestations may not necessarily be human. Country, as the result of activity carried out by “Dreaming Beings”, includes “elements of a much larger system of meaning”.<sup>490</sup> What applies to this system of interpretation can also be transferred to a reading of Olson’s metaphysical and non-human poetics.

An assembly of non-human and metaphysical elements is manifest in *The Maximus Poems*, exemplifying and reinforcing transformative, and mobile tropes, assisting with the poetic bridging of time, body and space in the recreation of the polis of attentions. In particular, the presence of bird and fish life forms such intense strands of attachment to the protagonist that these could be seen as totems. Totemic entities can be seen in differing ways according to the cultures involved, so an outline of their significance for those through which this thesis examines Olson and those which were linked to his surroundings is called for. In the context of Aboriginal Australia, according to Stanner:

A totem is in the first place a thing; an entity an event, or a condition ... an existent. Virtually anything perceivable can serve; plants and animals of all kinds ... wind, rain, storms, thunder ... tools and weapons, fresh water and salt, almost anything of the human body.”<sup>491</sup>

This allows for a wide range of phenomena beyond conventional animate presence, although one qualification is that totems are intrinsically connected to

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<sup>489</sup> Sutton, 16.

<sup>490</sup> Ibid. 16.

<sup>491</sup> Stanner, 129.

signs, either as self-objects or totem-places. Stanner enumerates these as follows: “In that function [Totemism] there are three elements; (i) living men, (ii) signs (the totems and totem-places), and (iii) the significations or sign-objects (the marvels). The signifying of the marvels to living men is the function of the signs.”<sup>492</sup> This concept may not be shared by all cultures, but it is all-embracing: any member of a particular totemic species or style is universal, “without respect to space or time.”<sup>493</sup> For example, according to an Elder interviewed by Stanner: “There are Honey people all over the world.”<sup>494</sup> Having said that, there are particular and specific rules which govern how totems operate. As Rose explains:

With land-based totems there is a three-way relationship between the people, the species and the country. The totemic relationship invariably requires that people take responsibilities for the their relationship with another species and learn that their own well-being is inextricably linked with the well-being of their totemic species.<sup>495</sup>

The universal aspects come with attendant responsibility, and reciprocity of care and identity.

Returning to Olson’s lecture which included his remarks on *Tjuringa*, these also concern the concept of totemism, which is inextricable from the sacred objects, which “are believed to hold in union divinity-animal-man, including the recent dead as well as those awaiting incarnation.” (*OL* 10, 32) He also refers to cave paintings of “the Karadjeri (W/Australia), who cherish the rainbow serpent” (*OL* 10, 33) and that these paintings were “made or retouched by initiates of each totemic division” (*OL* 10, 33) and this process maintains ancestral connections. Ancestral bodies themselves have the power to change into features of the landscape, which are then named accordingly, and find correlatives in the sacred stones. Strehlow notes that these objects are used ceremonially, and that when “rubbed together until some of their dust is scattered abroad, each grain of this rock dust will enter into the ground and turn into a living animal, belonging to

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<sup>492</sup> Ibid. 131.

<sup>493</sup> Ibid. 132.

<sup>494</sup> in Stanner, 132.

<sup>495</sup> Rose, *Nourishing*, 28.

the totem which is represented by the stones in question.”<sup>496</sup> This process of transformation, the reanimation of culture through ancestral substance recalls an implicit message in the activity of “The Kingfishers.” The protagonist who hunts among the stones, has the titular bird as totem, vector of increase and one needing correct treatment – if “Dead, hung up indoors”, (*CP*, 87) for instance, it loses its inherent power.

“The Kingfishers” is intrinsically influenced by the culture of the Ancient Maya, whose world-view was also informed by totemic beings. According to anthropologist David Adamson, “their world had a depth and complexity for which imagination is not quite the right word. It was too real for that; at times their animistic belief in the magic existence of animals seems almost prosaic.”<sup>497</sup> Communication with the supernatural through the animal world was not an extraordinary activity, although it could well have engendered a similar sense of the respect and awe that encultured human beings may sense in contemporary encounters with presences whose import is immanent if not immediately explicable. As Adamson expressively puts it: “It was the ancestor of the excited shock we sometimes get when a fox runs through a hedge at dawn and stares at us, or a plover twists in flight like a key in the sky.”<sup>498</sup> This sense of awe is not limited to the animal world, but also encompasses phenomena in the wider universe, such as the stars and the messages that could be divined, or hinted at in the changing yet immutable aspects of their formations. Mayan culture and religion also supplies a potential correlative to what Olson may have understood as the Rainbow Serpent image, with a unique and strange presence in Gloucester Harbor, which is examined below.

The animal presence occupies a particular yet under evaluated place in Olson’s poetry and poetics. *The Maximus Poems* teem with life: the birds and fish in particular giving an added sense of Being to the sky and sea country that comprise both the margins and unconfined space within which the liminal polis

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<sup>496</sup> Strehlow, *Aranda*, 52.

<sup>497</sup> David Adamson, *The Ruins of Time: Four and a Half Centuries of Conquest and Discovery among the Maya* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1975), 24.

<sup>498</sup> *Ibid.* 24.

is recreated. By placing as opposed to symbolizing these presences, Olson allows their direct and multi-dimensional existence an immediate and autonomous expression on the pages they traverse. They work as carriers of found things, as *bricoleurs*, as literally meta-physical self-objects that assist in the enunciation and replenishment of the spaces that comprise the *Maximus* and Gloucester gestalt. Their placing in the realm of topos is deliberate and connected to their function as agents of typos, leaving their imprint on the place and the page. The tropic activity of weaving continues its significance with the placing of nests on the palimpsests of the houses in the polis.

In Gloucester, the bird life overhead encircles and the fish offshore help sustain the community. Hence, Maximus is especially tender in naming, at the outset of his epic:

The roofs, the old ones, the gentle steep ones  
On whose ridge-poles the gulls sit, from which they depart,

And the flake-racks

of my city!  
(*MP*, I.1)

Here, he calls out an essential aspect of his inner topos, the roof, and follows this with an exclamation as to the significance of fish to the polis. These can be seen as images of "*felicitous space*", and investigation into them as exercises in "topophilia".<sup>499</sup> The shape of the roofs is something that evokes an instinctual sense of clarity. Their geometry is solid and pleasurable, and reflected from ground level up by the slant of the fish-racks coming up, as it were, to meet their downward slope. It is in this space, of course, that nests are constructed, and this tropic activity is fundamental to *The Maximus Poems*. Also essential is the coastal location, where the land falls from high points down to the sea, and where atop the church a ship is cradled in the protective arms of the statue of Our Lady of the Good Voyage; a location where birds arrange their temporary craft.

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<sup>499</sup> Bachelard, xxxv (*italics in the original*).

The heightened sense and awareness of non-human presence, evident from this beginning of Olson's epic, is also mentioned in the work of the nomadologists. Deleuze and Guattari refer to how an archaic protagonist of the war machine they articulate might become, ritualistically and performatively an animal presence. The animal consciousness exists as an affect, or more precisely "the deterritorialization velocity of affect", (*N*, 9) which operates on a subconscious level, shared with early childhood, family and deeper metaphysical states of existence. This constitutes projective movement allied to the continuity of kinetic energy, such as that associated with horseback riding: note Kafka's "wish to be a Red Indian"<sup>500</sup>, in juxtaposition with the horse-riders of the nomadologists' war machine, where it is the very speed of the horse that is crystallised and conserved, "and no longer its proteins (the motor, and no longer the flesh)." (*N*, 77) From the outset of *The Maximus Poems*, it is the kinetic energy of the gulls that is preserved on the page, their lightness and energy corresponding to imaginary strokes of the pen akin to those producing the dynamic Chinese characters that intrigued Fenollosa: a form of movement that acts as a primary vector from the first page of the epic.

### Bird Space

In Olson's account of his time on the Yucatan Peninsula, his initial observations give a detailed account of a frigate bird he and his wife rescued from local children who had attacked it with stones. (*ML*, 9-11) Bird life shadows the remainder of the letters. It is a presence apt for a poetry and poetics which imagines a living correlative for the self and its familiars. Lincoln notes of Olson's contemporaries that through "Williams' dead feather as a fallen sparrow and Ted Hughes's enigmatic crow, poets dream of flight, angelic transcendence, melodic transfiguration."<sup>501</sup> Although their musical and transformative activities are in

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<sup>500</sup> Kafka: "The Wish to be a Red Indian", *The Complete Short Stories*, Ed. Nahum N. Glatzer (London: Vintage, 2005), 390.

<sup>501</sup> Lincoln, 214.

one sense transcendental, they are also pragmatic and functional. The historical Maximus provides an example:

There was a man from Proconnesus whose body lay prostrate, still animate, but faintly and in a fashion no far removed from death. At the same time, his soul, escaping from his body, travelled through the air like a bird, surveying all beneath it – land and sea, cities and races of men, events and natural phenomena of every kind; then, re-entering his body and raising it up again, it used it like an instrument, to expound the different sights and sounds it had experienced in different nations of the world.<sup>502</sup>

The bird here is a vector and a messenger, located and abroad, essentially nomadic. Olson identifies with this presence in a similar capacity, writing to rival poet and close associate Vincent Ferrini, Gloucester's first "Laureate", in 1957: "I return to the city and my first thought, Ferrini, is of you who for so long has been my body here and I a shadow coming in like gulls."<sup>503</sup> Olson is looking back on his conception and inception of the first *Maximus* poem, and his identification with the birds is strong enough to imply a sense of totemism that informs the tropic activities this presence performs.

The initial proposition of *The Maximus Poems*, that "love is form" (*MP*, I.1), addresses the work and content of the poem, as well as—"the act to which it summons us: the gathering and weaving to the end of creating a haven (nest-house-polis-poem)."<sup>504</sup> This is a cosmic and sacred act of making: the nest, which is related to the founding act of self, the "tender" mast, and the city, all re-enact an alchemical and ecstatic sense of creation. Maximus' joyful exclamation, "the bird! the bird!" (*MP*, I.1) at the outset of his epic calls forth the totemic presence that is involved with the vital act of gathering things for and of the polis, things it may have placed "around the bend/ of the nest" (*MP*, I.1). The bird thus invoked immediately brings things together with a sense of abundance that recalls the edenic plenitude of the progenitor text, *Paterson*, which creates a similar environmental gestalt at its outset:

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<sup>502</sup> Maximus, *Orations*, 86.

<sup>503</sup> Olson, *Selected Letters*, Ed. Maud (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 251, and also published as a planned, but omitted, *Maximus* poem, "Maximus Part II" in *OL* 6, 61.

<sup>504</sup> Paul, 125.

the spray -

brings in the rumors of separate  
worlds, the birds as against the fish, the grape  
to the green weed that streams out undulant  
with the current at low tide beside the  
bramble in blossom, the storm by the flood –  
song and wings –<sup>505</sup>

Bird life is a generative presence, and creates sources for several threads that *The Maximus Poems* hang on. It is a commensurate role of the human beings in the settlement to recognise and respond:

(o Gloucester-man,  
weave  
your birds and fingers  
new  
(*MP*, 1.3)

Things are not so straightforward, though. The thing that is or may be called the nest, is also located “around the head of, call it / the next second” (*MP*, I.4). In terms of the subconscious, Bachelard notes that “a nest house is never young”, and it is therefore hidden to some extent; we dream of coming back to it, bestowing it with loyalty and care. This engenders the “sign of return” which Olson places at the beginning of his epic and which “marks an infinite number of daydreams, for the reason that human returning takes place in the great rhythms of human life, a rhythm that reaches back across the years, and through the dream, combats all absence.”<sup>506</sup> The epic fights against absence and to restore the presence of a lost home, using the circular nest image to combat linearity of time, and in going back to the idea of origin and first home, “a sort of musical chord would sound in the soul of the reader.”<sup>507</sup> The bird’s only tool is its beak – like the prow for forwarding, like the spear – a way of creating typos on the surfaces of the town where its footprints would leave only the faintest trace.

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<sup>505</sup> Williams, *Paterson*, 25.

<sup>506</sup> Bachelard, 99.

<sup>507</sup> *Ibid.* 100.

Bird territory is liminal and contested: trees, at the water's edge and in holes beneath human feet. Their activity is that of care and custodianship. Birds gather debris and weave nests. The trope of weaving is one that underlies not only *The Maximus Poems*, but which draws together strands of influence from Anni Albers and her presence at Black Mountain College. Albers' influence at Black Mountain as a weaver as well as her journey to the Yucatan with husband and fellow teacher at Black Mountain, Josef, well ahead of Olson in the 1930s, is worth a brief mention here. In the art of weaving, Albers found: "an art that linked her to a distant past. Among the ancients, she admired most the pre-Hispanic weavers of Peru. The beauty and inventiveness of their works transcended any functional purpose."<sup>508</sup> She also discerned the importance of glyphic writing in its power to obviate difference between language and form when communicating the essence of content. A result of her own exploration of Yucatan archaeological sites and the glyphic shards she uncovered was that: "For the first time Anni gave her work titles. *Ancient Writing* invokes her understanding that, like the glyphs, the designs in ancient Peruvian textiles were an eloquent substitute for written language."<sup>509</sup>

The act of weaving, therefore, is shown to comprise elements of communication, parallels to glyphic language and provide a psychic home for all living beings. The bird like activity of weaving encompasses a process of going outward and also back inward, so a nest, like a moebius strip, for example, or by extension the world and the cosmos is never entirely complete; instead, being continually called into existence. Bachelard cites Boris Pasternak on

'the instinct, with the help of which, like the swallow, we construct the world – an enormous nest, an agglomerate of earth and sky, of death and life, and of two sorts of time, one we can dispose of and one that is lacking.'<sup>510</sup>

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<sup>508</sup> Brenda Danilowitz, " 'We are not Alone': Anni and Josef Albers in Latin America", in Danilowitz and Heinz Liesbrock, Eds. *Albers: Latin American Journeys* (Josef Albers Museum and Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2007), 18.

<sup>509</sup> Ibid. 23.

<sup>510</sup> Pasternak in Bachelard, 104.

This is also an apt way to describe Olson's Gloucester, where the present agglomeration commencing with twigs and fired mud, the Innisfree of the unconscious once again, is infused with the world of all ages.

The bird is therefore by nature a trans-temporal and trans-locational *bricoleur*, bringing together materials of construction and *rejectamenta*, the constructed and discarded, recyclable:

...born  
of hay and cotton struts,  
of street pickings, wharves, weeds  
you carry in, my bird  
(*MP*, I.3)

An occupant of smooth space, builder of the polis, yet always on its periphery: (neither firmly located nor completely dislocated) the bird represents an ideal correlative for Maximus, or perhaps a totemic presence. If it is accepted that the totem also gives back care bestowed upon it, it is worth briefly noting in a story crafted by Olson's contemporary further to the South, Jorge Luis Borges, that a flock of birds save an amphitheatre from destruction by their repeated visits and attentiveness.<sup>511</sup> Arguably, Olson's bird that sweeps low over the Gloucester rooftops is engaged in a similar psychic maintenance.

It has been seen that the transformation of the man with his house on his head into a partridge has expressed the sense of an open, nomadic being in the world. A mythological comparison that Olson would have known from his reading of Robert J. Casey's *Easter Island: Home of the Scornful Gods* is that of the bird-man cult on Rapa Nui, one of the most isolated places on Earth, surrounded by thousands of leagues of ocean and also known in the local language as "The Navel of the World".<sup>512</sup> Yet, it is not so much the idea of translation that Olson would

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<sup>511</sup> Jorge Luis Borges, "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius", in *Labyrinths* Trans. James, E. Irby (London: Penguin, 2000), 39.

<sup>512</sup> The original written language of Rapa Nui has now been forgotten, and its few remaining fragments, attesting to the only Indigenous Pacific island script, are considered indecipherable. Yet, there remains solid evidence via petro-glyphs and surviving myths of an elaborate system of belief in which the bird and human being as gatherers and re/creators interact on a profoundly metaphysical level. The Ancient script is said to resemble in appearance certain hieroglyphs of

have taken from his reading of Casey, but that of transformation. An annual ritual on the island involved men competing to fetch a petrel's egg from a rocky islet offshore. The winner became that year's bird-man – “a holy and terrible personage” – but also one vital for the continual regeneration of the community.<sup>513</sup> His status was of supreme importance: he lived in isolation for that year amid the petro-glyphs on a remote rocky outcrop, and the process of becoming-bird was one of custodianship, which dissolved the boundaries between species and the polis. Jung indicates that this transformation is also related to the Polynesian concept of *mana*: the belief that an external and wide-ranging external force is responsible for such psychic effects:

Everything that exists acts, otherwise it would not be. It can be only by virtue of its inherent energy. Being is a field of force. The primitive idea of *mana*, as you can see, has in it the beginnings of a crude theory of energy.”<sup>514</sup>

One's *mana* is the spiritual and practical energy that derives from the correctly observed and cultivated balance of subatomic particles within, hence another connection between the so-called primitive world and the archetypes of Jung, and with the scientists of Olson's age who influence his epic.

In the context of Gloucester, it is the modest figure of the fisherman Burke who embodies this *mana* as correlative for this sense of transformation and correspondence between ancient and twentieth-century activity and a psychic fusing of species:

...all of us  
like birds in a cote, and he the leader  
as he well was, he was that good a professional, his eyes  
as a gull's are, or any Portygee's,  
and the long visor of his cap more of a beak  
than even the same we all wore

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the Middle East. The tablets upon which it was written were the preserve of the holy *rongo-rongo* men, who could mediate between human beings and the deity, *Makemake*, a synthesis of man, bird and fish. According to Robert J. Casey, attempts by a Tahitian cleric to translate the glyphs representing *Makemake* and other significant symbols led to interpretations of such irregularity and divergence that these were soon abandoned. Casey, 207.

<sup>513</sup> Casey, 230.

<sup>514</sup> Jung, *Civilization* 69.

(MP, I.27)

Becoming animal, becoming bird, are not just simile but fusion, a form of poetic grafting from cap to beak, enacting a poetics of transformation ahead of the hunt in wide open space. The process of becoming bird also has the potential to fuse the polis and the bird: a poem from later in the sequence draws from language found on an ancient Cretan clay disk - the *Phaistos* Disk –which Olson interprets as conjoining sound, through a horn, together with the town and a bird. His poetic recreation indicates a vector of homing, from sea to shore, and definition:

the bird or 'ku' is town;  
kr-ku (Her headland, over  
the sea-shore  
(MP, III.50)

A sense of onomatopoeia is conveyed at the start of the second line, as if the bird itself, singing out, has entered the poem, conveying the additional, amplified dimensionality that Olson's poetics seeks to express. Olson received indicators as to the Ancient language from Cyrus Gordon, to the effect that "kr-ku" combines the meanings of "bird" and "horn", reassembled as "town", apparently a combination appearing often in Eteocretan.<sup>515</sup> This recalls the concept of building a city out of sound, for which task the bird appears as a vital agent.

In the world of ancient Sumeria, from where birds, boats and death form a transnational trope through to the Americas. The concept of a death ship is prominent in Babylonian literature: Olson was particularly drawn to *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, whose protagonist used such a ship to travel to the island of his ancestor, survivor of the deluge. This idea of this ship of death was, according to McKenzie, taken as a myth by ancient seafarers, from near Eastern ports through East Asia and the Pacific to the American continent, and in the other direction, north west to Olson's ancestral territory and other site of mythological interest, Scandinavia. McKenzie claims:

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<sup>515</sup> Cyrus Gordon, letter to Olson, March 1964, in Butterick, 557.

The bird-boats of death of the Dyaks and Red Indians have a history rooted in the land in which boats were invented. Closely related to these boats of death (as goddess womb-symbols) are the boats used by the favoured few who escaped death during the flood."<sup>516</sup>

Whether escaping from an old world or presaging one to come, the bird and ship combination seems to have an uncanny affinity with Olson's poetry and poetics. Certainly, it is worth nothing that the absence or demise of birds, in this as in a range of other cultural and historical contexts, indicates the underworld and sites of death. It is not coincidental that a mass dying of birds happens at a point in the sequence that sees Maximus in difficulty and pain:

phalaropes  
piled up on Thatchers  
  
(struck in the night  
of September 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1899  
  
and 800  
  
to 1000 of them  
  
killed themselves  
against the lights between  
  
12:30  
and 4 A.M.  
(*MP*, II.112)

He is at a point midway through the second volume, and appears to have become lost in a thicket of words and mythological propositions that pile up on themselves. The previous poem contains no fewer than nine question marks in the space of less than half a page of sparsely conjectured "Phonician notes", and the next poem dissolves into doggerel.

By contrast, territory which affirms bird presence, and which the poet can also observe from Fort Point, is an islet in Gloucester Harbor, unclaimed yet diamantine: in its depiction:

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<sup>516</sup> Donald A. McKenzie, *Myths of Pre-Columbian America* (London: Gresham, 1923), 142.

The Cormorant  
and the Spindle  
which marks Black Rock  
(*MP*, III.68)

This is diamantine, in the sense that the dark shining image holds forth in its sparse enunciation: water present and unnamed. The named presences are nominalized and placed, contiguous and glyphic in their *poiesis*: a point on a map, if one prefers to see it that way, or a form of mapping that owes nothing to metaphor. The bird exists as a vector in a place precisely located and which forms a word of its own that merges the bird, the stone and the location where water and more solidified molecules interact. An initial and abiding image, the bird is one of preservation and stands as leitmotif of recollection and guardianship, its nesting and flights as tropes of enactment. Becoming part of the landscape, as in the extract above, it shares this fundamental role with that of the fish that also form part of *Maximus* Country and the metaphysical presences that oversee them in turn.

### Fish Town Tropos

Fishing has connotations that span the ages, and constitutes an archetypal act, so much so that Jung states:

There may be consummate fools who do not understand what fishermen do, but the latter will not mistake the timeless meaning of their action, for the symbol of their craft is many centuries older than the still unfaded story of the Grail. But not every man is a fisherman, Sometimes this figure is arrested at an early, instinctive level, and then it is an otter, as we know from Oskar Shmitzs' fairytales.<sup>517</sup>

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<sup>517</sup> Jung, *Archetypes*, 24. Jung also notes additional transformative properties: "The alchemists, too, speak of a strange fish in the sea, the 'round fish lacking bones and skin,' which symbolizes the 'round element', the germ of the 'animate stone', of the *filius philosophorum* of alchemy. This water is extolled as 'vivifying', besides which it has the property of dissolving all solids and coagulating all liquids. The Koran commentaries state that on the post where the fish disappeared, the sea was turned to solid ground, whereon the tracks of the fish could still be seen." (Jung, *Op. cit.* 140).

The latter part of this statement is of interest to its more specific, totemic implications when it comes to reading *The Maximus Poems* from a more pointed, archaic perspective. In *Mayan Letters*, Olson writes: “The fish is speech. Or see / what, cut / in stone /starts. / For //when the sea breaks, watch / watch, it is the / tongue” (*ML*, 53). It is language, and also solidity, or immanence. As Creeley observes regarding Olson’s “objectism”, his aim is

to be as ‘firm as fish is’ as he says in one of the Maximus Poems: that the poem should be as firm as fish, like a physical event, as actual as that, not metaphorically but substantively it should be an issue of a physical condition – that true.”<sup>518</sup>

The fish is therefore an active agent and a self-object in one, and its energies transfer to the sphere of maximal human operation.

Clayton Eshleman, writing on connections between Olson, Snyder and Zen Buddhism, notes that there could be a certain sense of enlightenment in knowing that nature operates actively upon human life, as opposed to the Romantic idea of nature as an object of human perception. He cites the presence of a leaping salmon in *The Maximus Poems* as an instance of “nature affirming us...equated by [Zen master] Dogen with enlightenment.”<sup>519</sup> The salmon appears in stages, entering the throat and breast of Maximus in one poem, then later in the sequence acting as spatial and cosmic vector more completely:

the salmon of  
wisdom when,  
ecstatically, one  
leaps into the Beloved’s  
love. And feels the air  
enter into  
strike into one’s previously breathing  
system  
(*MP*, III.187)

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<sup>518</sup> Creeley, interview in Faas, 172.

<sup>519</sup> Clayton Eshleman, “Notes on Charles Olson and the Archaic” in *Minutes of the Charles Olson Society* #52, April, 2004, 14.

Nature moves into the lovingly receptive human bodily domain, space becomes a protagonist no less than the poet as object – object materially and of perception from the outside. This perhaps, is another of Olson’s under-discussed cosmic truths: the poem “OCEAN, and we shall fall...”, discarded from *The Maximus Poems* implies oceanic space represents the entirety of creation: “Ocean is stags cut on a reindeer horn/with salmon entangled under their feet” (OL 9, 35) This describes another glyph, cut into living matter, combining land and water country, and showing what Olson describes as “all these essential two or three fish and animals [if that many]” in a combination that exposes an instance of “both the inorganic & the organic as organism, and autonomy.”<sup>520</sup> This is in other words a means of approaching a fundamental understanding of the universe and its vital, original constituents as expressed through a form of *ur*-mythology derived from a Paleolithic bone carving.

As with birds, fish evoke the idea of life in its plenitude, as well as comprising life forms on the limen, inhabiting: “the land and the sea. They are figures which join land and sea, fantasy and reality, images and writing, absence and presence. The paradox of there and not-there is the paradox of nomadism. Forms are always in emergence, a state of play.”<sup>521</sup> Olson claims: “all this started fr a fish (the INTRODUCTORY GLYPH), and it will come flying home, fins & all.” (O/C 5, 103) Gloucester comprises a magical and sacred place, and the fish form a vital part of this: “a place of the numen which readily fed the men who would cooperate with its orders.”<sup>522</sup> In his article, “Charles Olson and the Vatican”, William Aiken points out that: “Olson chose to settle down on the shores of Gloucester, famous for its fishing, some 60 miles north-east of his birthplace, which is about the distance and direction from Nazareth to Galilee.”<sup>523</sup> If this observation may appear coincidental, it would probably have stimulated Olson’s interest at the very least, if not approval.

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<sup>520</sup> Olson, letter to Creeley, 12 November, 1967, in Butterick, 577.

<sup>521</sup> Benterrak, et al. 145.

<sup>522</sup> Frank Davey, “Six Readings of Olson’s *Maximus*” in Corrigan, Ed. 300.

<sup>523</sup> William Aiken, “Charles Olson and the Vatican” in Corrigan, Ed. 34.



Maximus binds this circle closer when he compares the “old” and “new” worlds through the trope of fishing, siting it in his poem “for Robert Duncan,/who understands/what’s going on/- written because of him/March 17, 1961.” Maximus imagines a walk through Dogtown and along with the reflections his measured paces give rise to, calling: “-Wordsworth be with me in this line,/whose Preface is a ‘walker’ for us all (*MP*, II.37). This, incidentally, is one of his few direct mentions of walking as a way to make poetry, and an indicator of its ritual nature. As his footsteps measure “the distances”, “so small” in feet, acres and topographical rises, he remembers “meadows on which we saw/fish being cured” (*MP*, II.38) as late as 1960, recalling a time

when fishing was to Gloucester as fishing  
was to Europe, then: green fields  
to dry the silver wealth in steady  
sweetening sun  
(*MP*, II.38)

Fishing connects continents and activates the area, the “green fields” of the fledgling polis the solid ground to confirm its “silver wealth” spread out on dry land, portable, light and a validation of the human activity in its place. By contrast, the poet’s own time sees a “decline of fishes” (*MP*, II.38), the “silvermine” (*MP*, III.64), on the plenitude of which settlements are founded, and with its disappearance founder. Maximus observes the children of his time are unable to differentiate between fish species, which have been processed into images “on the covers of TV dinners / to let children know that mackerel is a different / looking thing than herrings” (*MP*, II.38). This indicates that a new generation is faced not only with a loss of plenitude but recognition, and with this erasure comes a loss of connection that threatens the existence of these very same places. Hence, Maximus’ need to engage in constant recollection: the fish did not represent abstract wealth, they were the specific currency on which the settlement had been founded. This is now threatened by loss of identity as much as over-fishing and mass production: if people are unable to recognize them as individual self-objects then they cannot call out to them, summon them or keep them as part of the life-giving cycles that used to sustain the polis.

The plenitude, then, is not to be partaken of by all. By Olson's time, with real buckskin and silver also having given way to

a nation fizzing itself  
on city managers,  
mutual losing banks,  
(*MP*, I.114)

whose lines of credit have replaced those used to haul in the tangible marine harvests representing the last vestige of gain Gloucester citizens can hope to attain for themselves by their own hands:

They should raise a monument  
to a fisherman crouched down  
behind a hogshead, protecting  
his dried fish  
(*MP*, I.114)

declares Maximus; such a memorial could complement the existent, prominent statue of the seaman at the helm of a fishing schooner on the waterfront, and could serve as an reminder that going out into vertiginous space is only part of the battle: keeping hold of the catch involves another contest in political space. Indeed, the famous landmark is dismissed as "that bad sculpture of a fisherman." (*MP*, I.152) and it is a disillusioned Maximus who also claims "Fishermen/are killers" (*MP*, I.150), and notes how easily fish can now be caught en masse, how he is left to survey scenes of exhaustion and extermination.

His task in the face of this downward slide finds expression in rhetorical questions, towards the start of his epic as he ponders the founding of Gloucester:

...was it puritanism,  
or was it fish?

And how, now, to found, with the sacred & the profane – both of them-  
wore out  
(*MP*, I.45)

The repetition of the diphthong that builds up a crescendo of greeting and hope, through "how, now" and "found", dips with the final "out", energy slumping into

resignation, an attempt held in abeyance, his beak on his breast. Despite evidence that

The beak's

there. And the pectoral.  
The fins,  
for forwarding

But to do it anew, now that even fishing...  
(*MP*, I.45)

Given that the activity that perpetually and dynamically links land and sea is in decline, the success of his mission is under threat. The phenomena through which the protagonists can be experienced, although boldly stated and definitively punctuated, are less visible as vital presences and fade into the shadows past the ellipsis.

The above synthesis of body parts – beak, pectoral and fins, suggests a fusion of elements that has implications for the proprioceptive gestalt, and also recalls a *Maximus* poem of mysterious if not mythological note: “The Feathered Bird of the Harbor of Gloucester”, recounting the appearance of a creature in the harbour with the attributes of a snake or caterpillar, fast-moving, yet: “when he chose he settled directly / like a rock”. (*MP*, III.59) Solid, yet almost incredible, it was observed by around two hundred settlers in 1817, and previously by mariners in the seventeenth century. This is an inexplicable presence, yet one which performs a similar function in the poems. The title implies the joining of sky with land and seascapes: combining to form a being that is pure phenomena, the existence of which is unclassified and cannot be explained by anything other than its immanence.

Another mysterious animal presence is the following:

Condylura  
cristata  
On Atlantic

Street West  
Gloucester  
spinning on its  
star-wheel  
nose,  
in the middle of the  
tarvia  
(*MP*, III.26)

The creature, given its scientific name – increasing the sense of esoteric or even affective presence, but also creating an effective and almost chant-like assonance, is the star-nosed mole. Its placement on the road suggests danger and obstruction: “in the middle of the/tarvia”, a neologism suggesting a fault line of time and space, a modern and hostile coating across an old word for way. That it is “spinning” on its nose suggests an impulse towards flow and escape, looking for a link to places underground, another dimension of outward:

...drilling  
itself into the  
  
pavement  
(*MP*, III.26)

A line of nothingness separates the action from the surface, impenetrable space atop a substance imposed on Country. Maximus releases the mole into adjacent marshland, hoping that it might escape from “what was wrong with it, that the highway / had magnetized the poor thing” (*MP*, III.26). Non-human life also has to contend with the presence of striated space, drawn to prescribed demarcations of movement as if by invisible force. Rescue gives a temporary sense of quietude, an enunciation of the places that are outside, spreading out and away from the road:

and off the marshes  
of Walker’s Creek fall  
graduatedly so softly to  
the Creek and the Creek to  
Ipswich Bay an arm  
of the Atlantic Ocean  
(*MP*, III.27)

It is in these spaces, unfolding, unclenching creeks as veins that a sense of release can be found in the reuniting animal spirit with the amphibious elements that receive it. This mole; “the loveliest animal I believe I ever did see”? (*MP*, III.27) has something symbolic (if not totemic) about it, in its urgent attempt to return to its rightful place in Country.

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Olson’s grouping of these presences can appear random and at times perplexing in its scope, yet this in itself is part of his poetics, and approach towards the *Maximus* gestalt. His methodology has parallels in Rothenberg’s observation on archaic thought as “coherent and directed, but the coherence isn’t based on consistency of event so much as covering the widest range of possible situations.”<sup>527</sup> These non-human presences are inextricably linked to “the geography of it” (*MP*, II.184), where the abstract “it” refers to the dimensions of a space within which alternative presences interact with human voices and create a multiple, nomadic space of enunciation. Rothenberg also makes an important statement regarding immanence and clarity in mythological poetics, regardless of inevitable variations of names and terms: “The important thing was for any account to hit home – to present the god’s doings as image of how-it-is”.<sup>528</sup> This in itself reads as a potential paraphrase for how projective poetics can meet the metaphysical and proprioceptive.

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<sup>527</sup> Rothenberg, *Technicians*, 444.

<sup>528</sup> *Ibid.* 444.

## Chapter 5

### Archaic Postmodern Gestalt

Olson's creation of *Homo Maximus* has been demonstrated to consist of an approach towards the embodiment of a particular form of Being. Through the articulation of space, delineations of place, and the placing of presences within that space for its preservation and defence, Maximus continually recalls and reshapes this Being. The postmodern poetics involved in his creation, rather than implying a development in time after Modernism, makes a move in a less conventionally linear direction away from the centres of modernity and towards a present, immanent and shared sense of human origin.

Byrd reminds the reader of the methodology applicable to *The Maximus Poems* that in part informs this thesis, and as outlined by Olson himself:

|        |   |
|--------|---|
| topos  | place   |
| typos  | blow, impression, model<br>from <i>typein</i> , to strike, beat |
| tropos | turn, way, manner, style" <sup>529</sup>                        |

The argument remains, though, as to what exactly Maximus comprises. Is he a self-contained entity, whose form is inseparable from his own content, or is he inextricably dependent on the variables and vicissitudes of time, space and place? An answer relevant to contemporary readers would arguably – and literally - incorporate both. As Byrd claims:

If experience is grasped with the heat of attention Maximus demands, both ego and sequential time, like rational form, appear as mere apparent clarities which dissolve in space, and the self, the fully individuated potential of the human being, emerges as a location in socio-temporal reality.<sup>530</sup>

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<sup>529</sup> Byrd, "Measure", 49

<sup>530</sup> Ibid. 53

The presence of the embodied human is a result of the space and place out of which it arises. This chapter looks at this proprioceptive aspect of Maximus as the essential and definitive scene of reading for the poems: that is, the body being created out of space, enunciating its place and then turning, or troping, to fill, occupy and reiterate that sense of being, nomadic, archaic and located.

Olson's defining idea from the latter stages of his life is that Projectivism can have a side where the process incorporates the soul, gives the soul a place or space in which to exist that is constantly being called, or calling itself into being. The process remains that of the constant creation of reality. For this to take place, the notion of "DEPTH" – like "SPACE", Olson spells it big – needs to be foregrounded:

Neither the Unconscious nor Projection...have a home unless the DEPTH implicit in physical being – built-in space-time specifics, and moving (by movement of 'its own') – is asserted, or found-out as such. Thus the advantage of the value 'proprioception.'<sup>531</sup>

It is the "proprioceptive" that is of critical importance in embodying and creating the conditions for a new and continued reading into *Homo Maximus* and its gestalt. Supernatural and metaphysical beings play a vital role both in mythical times and the postmodern in monitoring and maintaining the course of sacred, and ipso facto, everyday events. This course of action, this necessary consciousness is a trait of archaic postmodern as opposed to the modern, mass-cultured human being. As Davidson points out:

What Olson sees as the destruction of the regional and particular in New England coincides with his desire to return poetry to the local body – the breath and musculature of the poet – as he develops the theme in 'Projective Verse' and other essays. For Olson the social body and the poetic body are conjoined in a search for a *polis* of the immediate and particular.<sup>532</sup>

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<sup>531</sup> Olson, *Additional Prose: A Bibliography on America, Proprioception and Other Notes and Essays* Ed. Butterick (Bolinis: Four Seasons Foundation, 1974), 18.

<sup>532</sup> Davidson, *Outskirts*, 4.

In terms of the *Maximus* gestalt, proprioception can be applied to the place he is part of, the community of attentions he seeks to reinvigorate and the concepts of topos, typos and tropos that define his activity towards these ends.

### Proprioceptive Body

Olson wrote “Human Universe” in the early 1950s, and it took him well over a decade to formalise an extension, or even a form of riposte, which he defined as:

a prose book of very, very almost resistant pieces, which is called *Proprioception* and with some deliberateness, because I am of the belief that the area of the body which is really just not felt or thought of at all or even experienced, the area which lies between the organs of the inside and its skin, is the tremendous, transmissive, transmission area properly called ‘proprioception’ (*MU*, 464/5)

“Proprioception”, unlike Olson’s earlier, seminal works, received relatively few plaudits, criticized by Tom Clark, for example, as “highly unsystematic speculative writing and prime documents of the unrestrained conjectural skeet-shooting that characterized Olsonian ‘thought’ during these years”, although he admits the vitality of the work, which he summarises as “a philosophy of proprioceptive Immanence, a positioning of self and soul inside the living ‘cave’ of the body.”<sup>533</sup> More recently, Eugene Vydrin reads it more accurately, from a contemporary perspective, in observing: “Like much of Olson’s ... poetry, *Proprioception* offers a phenomenology of perception whose seat is the individual body, whose testing ground is language, and whose horizon is human movement across the earth.”<sup>534</sup> There is certainly more to the work than met Clark’s eye. Concise and condensed, it comprises a push to locate, or place the unconscious, as Olson puts it: “instead of it wallowing around sort of outside, in the universe, like, when the experience of it is interoceptive”, referring to what he calls the “old psychology of feeling”, whereas by contrast *Proprioception* uses

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<sup>533</sup> Tom Clark, *Charles Olson: The Allegory of a Poet’s Life* (New York: Norton, 1991), 278.

<sup>534</sup> Eugene Vydrin, “Open Field Scholarship: Charles Olson’s *Proprioception*”, in Grieve-Carlson, Ed. 177.

a heightened sense of movement or kinaesthesia and a awareness of what he refers to as “the data of depth sensibility” to give rise to “SENSIBILITY WITHIN THE ORGANISM BY MOVEMENT OF ITS OWN TISSUES.”<sup>535</sup>

Through this movement and these tensions the body lends what Byrd calls “its own continuity to the fleeting flow of perception and modulates the contents of consciousness with in-*form*-ation from the suppressed self which would otherwise be lost.”<sup>536</sup> Attentiveness to this process allows the dream life to merge with bodily receptors and sensations in order to become part of the literal and literary landscapes within which the protagonist operates, and of which “The Twist” is a prime example. From the “inland waters” already noted emerges a dreamscape of the self in contiguity with others, such as his father and anonymous couples in a landscape “what sticks in me” (*MP*, I.83). He wakes in “the toy house I was headed for” (*MP*, I.84), an inversion of the man whose house is on his head, and “the whole Cut / was a paper village my Aunt Vandla / had given me.” (*MP*, I. 85) It is as if Maximus is moving around within himself, and taking his landscape, or lived environment with him. The miniatures, the bewildering modes of transport and the osmotic flow of water, combine to create an effect Ed Dorn evaluates as: “the sheerings and simplicity of immediate knowledge which resides together in what is more felt, the searching substantives of the inscribed field of Gloucester....It has a nice closeness. The compounds, Olson and me, or whoever.”<sup>537</sup> The human elements involved can be conscious or subconscious, and articulated on a physical scale that reflects this. In these ways, proprioceptive energies receive knowledge of a different nature than that picked up by the conscious ego through its conventional five senses. As Merrill puts it:

The bodily sense of things – proprioception – is ...the seat of a personality that possesses a distinct “otherness” in respect to the conscious ego. This

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<sup>535</sup> Olson, *Additional Prose*, 17.

<sup>536</sup> Byrd, *Maximus*, 51.

<sup>537</sup> Dorn, “What I see in *The Maximus Poems*”, in Allen and Warren Tallman, Eds. *The Poetics of the New American Poetry* (New York: Grove Press, 1973), 306.

implies a kind of sixth sense of being a 'thing (or self-thing) among things' without the 'lyrical interference of the ego,' in a word, 'objectism.'"<sup>538</sup>

This stage in the development of Olson's poetics parallels a turning point in Maximus' development and articulation of himself. To use Byrd's phrase: "he is, at once, totally dependent on the external – space and history – *and* the absolute determinant of his form," and therefore the internal and external, corresponding to "subjective" and "objective" thus indicate "locations which events assume in the process of becoming".<sup>539</sup> Events that are seen on one level to occur objectively, in outer space can be, should be prehended internally, and known in the same terms as the body itself. As Byrd summarises it: "The identity gained, in the loss of the ego, is the unity of earth itself which, like the physical body, is an instance of archaic reality."<sup>540</sup>

This appears to support the Jungian concept of the collective unconscious and archetypal images. Despite this, some facets of Olson's poetics, including the proprioceptive, elude this interpretation. According to Snyder, for instance, Jung's theories are not entirely sufficient to explain the multi-dimensional aspects of mythology, which refer to:

an inner thing that is almost biological and in a sense almost pre-cultural. Mythology also is man's most archaic lore and which culture by culture incontrovertibly binds men together. It both liberates and binds. And you use those images as they come out of your own body.<sup>541</sup>

The body forms a cavity, or circumference, that incorporates more than the imprint of readily explicable archetypes. Within this space occur the configurations of the outside world, or cosmos. To employ Rasula's apt paraphrase: "Things hold together like the clutch of organs in the bodily cavity, proprioceptively poised."<sup>542</sup> Creeley observed of the first edition of *The Maximus Poems* that they express "truth because their form is that issue of what is out

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<sup>538</sup> Merrill, 137.

<sup>539</sup> Byrd, Maximus, 117. Italics in original

<sup>540</sup> Ibid. 117.

<sup>541</sup> Snyder, "Interview with Gary Snyder", in Faas, 139/140.

<sup>542</sup> Rasula, 76.

there, and what part of it can come into a man's own body."<sup>543</sup> Places need to be embodied, in other words, for them to make sense. Creeley concludes: "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."<sup>544</sup>

Considering this sense of entirety, in proprioceptive terms the soul becomes physical in its relation to the self, creating an expanded awareness of the sensory system that feeds into consciousness. A body with such a heightened charge is therefore able to determine the nature of its experience by its own movement, interpenetrant with the tensions of the contrariness and unity of Being that recall Paul Goodman and his notion of the "mercurial configurations we call 'self'", and that: "The self does not know beforehand what it will invent, for knowledge is the form of what has already occurred. The complex system of contacts necessary for adjustment in the difficult field, we call 'self.'" <sup>545</sup> Knowledge of events that have already occurred and that keep recurring recalls fundamental tenets of Aboriginal Dreaming and its relevance as a scene of reading to this contemporary, Olsonian gestalt. Goodman's hypothesis draws commentary from Christensen, who sees it in the following light: "that through the full participation of the organism with the field of its environment, the self is created, a conception that is at the heart of Olson's poetic theory and of his philosophy of experience."<sup>546</sup> The aim of "Proprioception" can be seen in equivalent terms as the desire to provide a secular poetics based on Jung's universal unconscious. As in depth psychology, what is unknown, what must be known, if people are to recover a sense of wholeness, integrity and health, is the world in its entirety, through allowing the unconscious as the universe an unimpeded flow on the inside of the self. To reiterate a central idea of this thesis, the mythological figures and dream worlds contained in *The Maximus Poems* do not represent an attempt to recapture personal or archetypal repositories, but

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<sup>543</sup> Creeley, *The Collected Essays of Robert Creeley* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 104.

<sup>544</sup> *Ibid.* 104.

<sup>545</sup> Goodman, *Gestalt Therapy*, (New York: Julian, 1951), 367, 373.

<sup>546</sup> Christensen, 30.

present scenes of a world from which modern human beings have become estranged.

Paul identifies the early poem “Tyrian Businessses” as a work which involves “the substance of a meditation on tropos, the inward-arising motion, the twisting and turning common to organic growth and verse”.<sup>547</sup> Tropos is self-action – “how to dance / sitting down” (*MP*, I.35) and its linguistic complement is “what musicians call / the middle voice, the voice of ‘*proprious-ception*’ / one’s own’-ception.”<sup>548</sup> The poem itself engages in crosswise leaps and troping between the archaic myths of the Middle East and the Maya and contemporary America, including a near disaster at sea wedged in between commentaries on the internal structure of ships. As du Plessis observes:

The work is impulsive, unsettled. It is not even a ‘*record* of struggle’; the reader sees the struggle in real time. With ‘the defects inherent’, *The Maximus Poems* and Olson are disorderly, determined, aroused, orbsessive. That’s it: ORBsessive. Taking the whole world, the whole earth, even the whole universe in and correlating it, co-real-relating it. Olson is, as he said late in the work, ‘hungry for every thing’<sup>549</sup>

It has been observed that Maximus, as his creator, receives from nature the gift of what can be called projective size. On the naming of Maximus, du Plessis remarks, “A figure so named is a glyph for wholeness – without having to do more with the relation of parts than use this name.”<sup>550</sup> The key factor is the energy that goes into the Maximus gestalt. The process, as previously mentioned, is one of continual recreation, and towards this end: “If that energy requires new categories for thought and feeling, it will devise them as needed. And discard them as well. This approaches what Olson earlier called ‘proprioception’ – which may be defined as thinking for oneself inside the self.”<sup>551</sup> This process, in Olson’s case, was one which took on a typical intensity. Duncan observes, in relation to the accusations against his friend made by Bly, that: “Olson’s great contribution

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<sup>547</sup> Paul, 136. Italics in the original.

<sup>548</sup> Olson, *Additional Prose*, 18.

<sup>549</sup> Du Plessis, “Olson and his *Maximus Poems*”, in Herd, 136

<sup>550</sup> *Ibid.* 140.

<sup>551</sup> Doria, 139.

which Bly overlooks is that he relates technique to the body. The most important contribution Olson made is that he studies poetry almost at the medical level, at the morphological level.”<sup>552</sup>

This heightened sense of the self’s physicality, and the liminal zone within the body between the organs and the skin, corresponds to a sense of cross-reading, or chiasmus, and involves the re/presentation of individual bodies and universal archetypes in their processes of becoming. This process not only involves the archetypes per se but also the universe in its physical totality. As Merleau-Ponty in his essay, “The Intertwining – The Chiasm” notes: “The thickness of the body, far from rivaling that of the world, is on the contrary the sole means I have to go unto the heart of things, by making myself a world and by making them flesh”<sup>553</sup>

This flesh comprises atoms and their flow through the body, the co-existence of subatomic particles that construct and maintain the body as, “a patterned integrity, a knot through which pass the swift strands of simultaneous ecological cycles, recycling transformations of solar energy”, as Kenner observes, and this makes an interesting parallel with Olson’s remark concerning the “helio inside ourselves.”<sup>554</sup> Contemporaneous advances in physics discuss the interweaving of all matter, and how this may “inhibit radiant expansion” within the self.<sup>555</sup> Within Olson’s framework there is no such contradiction implied – the weaving and unpicking of strands is not in opposition to the systems and constellations of the universe, in which transformational events and systems are being created beyond our knowledge. Acceptance of this condition implies that the individual incorporates societal and by extension universal phenomena, and this process creates what might be called reality.

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<sup>552</sup> Duncan, “Interview with Robert Duncan”, in Faas, 70.

<sup>553</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, Trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 135. In typical, exuberant (and incorporative) manner, Olson referred to receiving the philosopher’s ideas as: “like a birth!” (*MU*, 108)

<sup>554</sup> Kenner, *Pound Era* 146

<sup>555</sup> *Ibid.* 153.

## Verticalisms

Olson's stance, in relation to this so-called reality, has been expressed through a number of key pronouncements, and perhaps those with potential to be most misunderstood involve variants on the notion of emerging from time into space. Space, as a construct may often be conceived of as a plateau, smooth or striated, stretching toward a horizon. However, another dimension of space, essential to an understanding of the proprioceptive poetics, is one which emerges vertically, and literally expresses the Maximal stance. This is sometimes overlooked in Olson studies, given the relatively late articulation of this dimension by the poet himself. Along with the idea of proprioception, the sense of verticalism is generally considered to be a later manifestation of Olson's poetics, yet it is evident from correspondence during his time at Black Mountain that it was to become a central preoccupation:

so the verticalisms, which I have abhorred (because, I imagine, they have been the mark, and still seem to me the mark of our world's conscious attention – why flight, & saints, I have abhorred) now make more sense as those lines of force, which hold, which do the bending" (*O/C* 6, 158)

These verticalisms are more than mere abstractions derived from his readings into mathematics and physics through Whitehead, but indicators of how a proprioceptive poetics is conceived and applied to his epic. Bram points out that: "Already in 'Projective Verse', Olson had conceived the poem and the word as a physical act, attesting to one entity, to poetry as an event: breathing in and out, experiencing the world."<sup>556</sup>

This entity combines spiritual and physical elements – physics and metaphysics being fundamentally linked. Blaser refers to an essay by Margaret Mead describing "a human instinctual need for a perceptual relation to the universe.' This is the scientific basis for the proprioceptive process which Charles Olson speaks of."<sup>557</sup> By looking at archaic physics in a postmodern context Olson sees "man being repossessed of a physicality which allows him to re-enter the

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<sup>556</sup> Bram, 32.

<sup>557</sup> Blaser, 6.

universe – the stage is curved, and force of gravitation is replaced by geometry in itself – this allows people to extend into and as part of more flexible universe.”<sup>558</sup> In other words, the way he views and relates to his environment is inextricably linked to how he creates his own self. This environment is also a living entity, composed at its base level of Whitehead’s prehensions meeting self-objects and ancestral presences. Bram identifies the result as

a finite but borderless ... expanding universe – [turning]Olson into Maximus: multidimensional, growing expanding, influencing the world and influenced by it. In non-Euclidian geometry, the individual does not tower beyond space, observing it from outside or from above, projecting himself on it, and space itself is no longer absolute; the world is multiplicity within unity, meaning that human beings are merely part of that multiplicity, and at the same time participants in building its unity.<sup>559</sup>

From the geography that pushes in on him, that he has to contend with, comes an internal sense of geometry that builds him up. The identification of nomad sciences by Deleuze and Guattari are implicitly involved in this construction of the self, and corroborate this statement by Olson: “Simply because they all defy the horizontal (kill ‘history’), are each sciences of perpendicular penetration (thus archaeology as the essential sign), they are instruments of any one of us in our own penetration of our own self & experience. (OK, that flat!)” (*O/C* 10, 47) A few years later, Maximus declares that “no Greek will be able to discriminate my body” (*MP*, II.14/15), in the famous letter “withheld”, not because he needs time to construct a carapace, so much as an intricate articulation of his own inner existence, that in turn creates the form in which it is finally (to misplace an adverb) clad. Moreover, the meeting points of horizontal, vertical and flexible lines of construction take time to work themselves into coherence. Olson himself identifies a key problematic and its solution in the same area:

that the directional of the line is one thing – one axis – but that the accomplishment of the force (due to the whipping, say, of the line, the flex of it, the pushing around of its elements) is another axis, is a vertical movement / and that because it is, all people who speak are properly in size, because only the vertical is the measure of human force (*O/C* 10, 66)

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<sup>558</sup> Bram, 39.

<sup>559</sup> Bram, 39/40.

As mentioned in Chapter Three, Olson takes Boulez as an example of how to write standing up, an example of the proprioceptive in that he composes with his entire being: "Christ, does he come *straight* from himself, compose as a man, with none of the shit of 'music' or experiment" (*O/C* 7, 111) The same applies to a chapter of bikers dubbed "Lordly Isolate Satyrs"; living figures riding on "the Easter Island / they make of the beach" (*CP*, 384) as glyphs in motion. Other examples include Ancient Cretan horseman Enyalion, and the Algonquin with his house on his head, having in common a desire to create and recreate themselves on and arising from a planet which is alive and receptive to their needs and desires. Mythological figures also meet contemporary realism in Olson's example of Iroquois construction workers, scaling heights to build skyscrapers for the cities of the United States, who, like the old-time whalers, have no choice but to work with their entire being: these are people who embody dimensions different from the diminished human beings of the mid- twentieth century, and also exemplars of the integrity linking self and work. In brief: "if you don't have your body as a factor of creation, you don't have a soul." (*MU*, 447) Bram observes:

The body is the home, is the ship. Both expressions recur throughout *The Maximus Poems*, and since Gloucester is a fishing village and the history of various ships features prominently in the poem, the body of the city is also ships. The body as Whitehead says is a projection toward the future."<sup>560</sup>

The construction workers and whalers, figures of the "human race when everything mattered" (*MU*, 445) attain such projective size that when they die they appear larger than those people who no longer possess this sensibility, even if they "look the same and fit the same box." (*MU*, 446) This implies a need for a different sized coffin, fit to set out on the sea, to accommodate the living body of Ishmael as he pulls himself into Ahab's outer shell and unquiet, mobile place of restlessness. Adrift on the ocean, the smooth space of water and sky, Maximus as Ishmael has scope to recall those "predecessions" and "precessions" articulated in that famous letter, withheld. The latter term is noted as significant by

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<sup>560</sup> Bram, 79.

Middleton, who points out that, by contrast with the more familiar “predecessions”,

‘precessions’ has a different semantic range. This largely scientific term ... is used in astronomy to describe the shifting of the axis of the earth’s rotation over long periods of time, a process that results in changing views of the heavens. ‘Precessions of me’ implies that the poet’s self is as solid a point of reference, despite its slow cyclical changes, as the earth itself.<sup>561</sup>

Olson outlines his stance further in a later prose piece: “The spiritual is all in Whitehead’s simplest of all statements; Measurement is most possible throughout the system. That is what I mean. That is what I feel inside. That is what is love.”<sup>562</sup> Byrd refers to Olson’s aim here in the following terms:

to reveal the prosody and syntax of what D.H. Lawrence calls the vertebrate intelligence in its relation to that other primal condition which Olson discovers so clearly in *Moby Dick*: ‘...things, and present ones, are absolute conditions; but they are so because the structures of the real are flexible, quanta do dissolve into vibrations, all does flow, and yet is there, to be made permanent, if the means are equal.’<sup>563</sup>

This vertebrate intelligence, feeling through the backbone, creates the sense of symmetry and interpenetration that recalls the tail of Melville’s whale: that perfect example of non-Euclidian space, as mentioned, which also allows the attentive reader to see

how beautifully he goes in & out of any of his objects & their space loci, how ‘free’ (and I mean precisely fourth-dimensional) his pushing & pulling and entering of anything in the continuum is ... it is the *interior* penetration (the old Ionian physics: respect for, inhabitation of, the elements as constituents...) (O/C 9, 178)

The whale’s tail exemplifies how to know something from the inside/out, not as mirror image, but as multi-dimensional points of energy:

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<sup>561</sup> Peter Middleton, “Discoverable Unknowns: Olson’s Lifelong Preoccupation with the Sciences”, in Herd, Ed, 46.

<sup>562</sup> Olson, “Conditio”, in *Io* Vol. 8 (Cape Elizabeth, Maine, 1971), 274.

<sup>563</sup> Byrd, “Possibility of Measure”, 40.

Non-Euclidian topological forms, such as Riemann's geodesic lines ... would each seem to be extrinsic, if not esoteric to a discussion of Melville's writing should we not consider the fundamental inability of Euclidian geometry to account for curved or complex spaces. Foremost among such spaces is the body. The body seems better served by a non-Euclidian thinking – one that is not encumbered by metaphysical inside-outside distinctions, which can address the other points on the whale, its touch-hole, its points of discharge, points which are neither inside nor outside but themselves extensive and projective.<sup>564</sup>

What applies to the whale, also applies to Maximus. His size contains space for multitudes, in a state of kinesis within the assemblages and essential porosity of his body. We are reminded of the corollary to the body the Greeks may not “discriminate”, which is that “An American /is a complex of occasions/ themselves a geometry/of spatial nature.” (*MP*, II.15)

Olson's investigations into archaic, glyphic language reveal its influence on his poetics in terms of the articulation of a manifesting world on a vertical axis. Although it should be reiterated that Olson was not an expert in linguistics, and does not substantiate his conclusions with empirical evidence, he associates this vertical axis with a dimension ignored in western thought: one that reunites myth and history and allows the human as a physical being to re-enter the world as a familiar place. As Byrd notes: “The vertical is the dimension of stance.”<sup>565</sup> In correspondence with Creeley, Olson proposes that

W[estern] M[an] bred what he was – what he has been – Abstract Man – when, in two instances, the axis of his language shifted from the vertical of the basic pictogram, and became, in the Sumerian case, syllabic....the Egyptian stayed hieroglyph and essentially vertical until it died with Egyptian civilization, about 400 AD. (*O/C* 10, 102)

The poet assuming the difficult and multiple roles of linguist, mythologist and historian looks to reconstitute human Being as an amalgam of language used, events experienced and physiology in motion. Concerning matters of the cosmos, by implication, as Whorf proposes: “the sky and stars, what is known and said about them is suppositious, inferential – hence, in a way, subjective – reached

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<sup>564</sup> Jonik, 146.

<sup>565</sup> Byrd, *Maximus*, 26. See also Whorf, 57-64.

more through the inner vertical axis and the pole of the zenith than through the objective distances and the objective processes of vision and locomotion.”<sup>566</sup> Crucially, in terms of his influence on Olson’s thought comes the hypothesis that corresponds most directly to the proprioceptive concept:

the dim past of myths is that corresponding distance on earth (rather than in the heavens) which is reached subjectively as myth through the vertical axis of reality via the pole of the nadir – hence it is placed BELOW the present surface of the earth, though this does not mean that the nadir-land of the origin myths is a hole or cavern as we should understand it.<sup>567</sup>

This also relates to an Aboriginal sense of ancestral beings rising from the earth, with their stories in a continual process of, crossing over and interpenetrating strata of existence otherwise known as skies and water, and then returning to complete a traverse or loop of being.<sup>568</sup>

This activity finds parallels with the verticalisms used by Maximus and noted by Whorf, that from the subjective, vertical axis spread horizontal intersections, which are to be seen as spatial, not temporal, creating a dialogue, or grammar, contingent on distance, not time: or rather; “Its DISTANCE includes what we call time in the sense of the temporal relations between events which have already happened.”<sup>569</sup> Whorf’s research with the Hopi led him to the conclusion that as a society they “conceive time and motion in the objective realm in a purely operational sense.”<sup>570</sup> Likewise, the operations effected by Maximus, the twist and tropes, afford a means of approaching time and space in a pragmatic way, to understand and use what Middleton refers to as “the law-like workings of the human universe, the manner in which a series of thoughts, both daylight and dream thoughts, can twist themselves into a complex point.”<sup>571</sup> By contrast, over-reliance on a consciousness that separates these into entities and concepts that cannot be instinctively felt, or “prehended” only serves to slow down the uptake

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<sup>566</sup> Whorf, 81/82.

<sup>567</sup> Ibid. 82.

<sup>568</sup> For more on the process of ancestral emergence, interaction with landscapes and return to the generative ground, see Morphy, 68/69.

<sup>569</sup> Ibid. 80.

<sup>570</sup> Ibid. 80.

<sup>571</sup> Middleton, in Herd, 49.

of receptors that are otherwise on offer to a poet attentive to the interpenetrant strata of the subconscious. Given access to its heightened sense of receptivity, “The self creates a geometry of the actual whose view takes man to the top of Dogtown or any other mountain situated in the center of a human universe.”<sup>572</sup>

The (literal) type of poetic expression to reconfigure this reality and the stance from which this view derives, needs a corresponding shape, or form. Olson’s search is for “scientific and mythical data that supports the ‘hardness’ of the Real, the vertical aspiration of the Maximal Self its quest to keep on growing like the Diorite Stone of Hurrian myth.”<sup>573</sup> This self-object derives from the Hittite “The Song of Ulikummi”, about a being which, initially aborted, begins to grow from the bottom of the ocean, attaining such size that the gods are forced to confront it. Olson evaluates the myth in the following terms: “this Diorite figure is the vertical, the growth principle of the Earth.” (*MU*, 123) Maximus has already noted that the Atlantic has a bottom, or base – and it is directly from this ground that: “I stand on Main Street like the Diorite / stone” (*MP*, II.51)

With the idea of such a construct in mind, it is important to reiterate that the vertical entity is one that is mobile and composed of subatomic particles which move within the forms they create and within which they are held, sometimes as if permanent seeming. The growth of the Diorite figure is contingent on movement within space, and although a counterpart in the Dogtown landscape (discussed below) appears fixed in its topographical location, it is worth noting, as Joan Retallack observes, that

if space-time is to be understood as fractal surface (a scalar complexity) rather than an archaeological accretion (time’s vertical monument to sticky molecules), then dynamic equilibrium can replace the double-ended arrow of depth and transcendence as working trope. This has immense implications for the way we think about history and aesthetics.<sup>574</sup>

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<sup>572</sup> John Scoggan, “Gravel Hill”, in Corrigan, Ed. 338

<sup>573</sup> Anthony Mellors, *Late Modernist Poetics: from Pound to Prynne* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), 105.

<sup>574</sup> Joan Retallack, *The Poethical Wager* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 27.

It also has implications for how Olson's *Maximus* gestalt operates, and the forms of kinetic energy that will be first defined, then related to specific forms of transnational dance, and then considered with respect to how they recombine to create meaning out of a proprioceptive sense of Country.

### Kinesis

Olson once stated: "There is only one thing you can do about the kinetic, re-enact it. Which is why the man said, he who possesses rhythm possesses the universe.... Art does not seek to describe but to re-enact." (*CPR*, 162) Re-enactment is also fundamental to the ongoing survival of Australian Aboriginal culture, and arguably all surviving Indigenous culture. Olson realises that contemporary mass culture threatens to separate the artist from the scene and the interior and exterior essence of his activity, and that this leads to an urgent question: 'Can one restate man in any way to repossess him of his dynamic?'" (*CPR*, 160)

More pertinently, with regard to Aboriginal Australia, are working notes towards the initial lines or pages of *The Maximus Poems*, as detected by Butterick in Olson's "working copy" for their initial publication in *Origin*:

the dancing 'floor'  
the labyrinth the  
churinga-act  
the threshing-  
floor, the / crawling  
floor the...pathways of  
the 'present dance'<sup>575</sup>

These lines were eventually discarded, unfortunately and inconsistent with the idea that roots – as in influences – should be left either "hanging on" or as evidence of the scaffolding that has taken place in the overall construction. Their value is evident, in that they bring together Indigenous, and specifically

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<sup>575</sup> in Butterick, 11.

Aboriginal concepts, with European tropes and referents. Contemporary America expressed with a mystic, Blakean tone – the “dancing floor” recalls the “watr’y shore”,<sup>576</sup> and the “threshing-floor” segues into something inherently unstable as ground, and area of instability in its “crawling” in place of groundedness, something that has Heideggerian resonance. Neither floor is entirely stable as the speech marks and hyphenated enjambment indicate. As for the “present dance”, also put into speech marks, as if ascribed to another voice, is this reflective of Olson’s initial push to go as straight and far back as possible into human consciousness from the outset of his epic, with the implication that the self-objects of worth found there may or may not warrant reanimation in today’s tawdry time?

There is certainly evidence enough that poems within the second and third *Maximus* volumes appear to be influenced by a reinvention of archaic, pre-Christian image and thought, expressed with a typography that seeks to follow dream sequences, psychic contours and an attempt at instinctual, organic grammar. The words themselves act as kinetic co-ordinates, taking the kind of leaps that Bly also advocates as vital in poetic expression, and enacting the aesthetic of contemporary dance, as developed by Cunningham. This reflects the essential mobility of the human universe: “societies don’t stand except by having feet. Two. They walk, they talk, they are mobile” (*MU*, 328), reflecting the three-dimensional aspects of language Olson propounds: “The hieroglyph...is a world in dance; the man of obedience accepts the unintelligibility of the hieroglyph and learns to dance.”<sup>577</sup> Pops adds: “A man who dances lives like a part of the poem of the world.”<sup>578</sup> Given his focus on the Olson/Melville connection it seems fair to say that Ishmael and the ancestors alike can be expressed in terms of this language, however obscure its meaning, especially for those who grow up late in a slow time, having to learn last things first.

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<sup>576</sup> William Blake, “Introduction – Songs of Experience”, in Geoffrey Keynes, Ed. *Poetry and Prose of William Blake* (London: Nonesuch Press, 1967), 65.

<sup>577</sup> Pops, 71.

<sup>578</sup> *Ibid.* 79.

Olson in his manifestation as dancer fits his own proprioceptive mould: in “Letter 14”, addressed to Gloucester, Maximus observes how people “tend to move / as though drawn” (*MP*, I.60) and this is an active sense of the word, not the passivity that might be implied by the participle. As Pops interprets this phrase: “Dance is the art of obedience: ... the insignia of wholeness: the mandala of the ripe sun-flower, Adam configured as a perfect circle. Dance is the discovery of stance, of posture.”<sup>579</sup> Olson’s movement, as explained to Creeley and reinforced in the early stanzas of *The Maximus Poems*, is: “If I have a way to go, it will be round the swoop of a bend impinging centripetal towards the centre. The straight course is hacked out in wounds, against the will of the world.” (*O/C* 4, 36) Olson credits Lawrence with this push against the latter, in that “It’s something of this Lawrence attacked, calling it the ‘straight line’ and making his own way, against it, hinge in, on himself, that pull, ‘swoop of a bend impinging centripetal towards the centre.’” (*O/C* 4, 79) Lawrence, considering the Etruscans, as well as his fascination with pre-Columbian Mexico, notes of the former that, underlying the enigmatic origins and evidence of a highly animated sense of existence,

was a vision, and a even a science of life, a conception of the universe and man’s place in the universe which made men live to the depth of their capacity. To the Etruscan all was alive; the whole universe lived; and the business of man himself was to live amid it all. He had to draw life into himself, out of the wandering huge vitalities of the world.<sup>580</sup>

This stance also chimes with the influence of Williams, and his notion of dance as ultimate rite, evident at the end of *Paterson*: the “‘measured dance’,<sup>581</sup> [which] is the rite and play of primitive men and women who seek an integration lost to the modern, fragmented world.”<sup>582</sup>

Olson and Cunningham worked together at Black Mountain, significantly organising an initial “happening”, as Creeley explains, where

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<sup>579</sup> *Ibid.* 77.

<sup>580</sup> D H. Lawrence, *Mornings in Mexico and Etruscan Places* (London: Penguin, 1960), 146/7.

<sup>581</sup> Williams concludes “Book Five” of *Paterson*, the final completed volume, with: “We know nothing and can know nothing / but / the dance, to dance to a measure / contrapuntally, / Satyrically, the tragic foot”, 239.

<sup>582</sup> Audrey T Rogers, *Virgin and Whore* (McFarland, 1987), 120.

In their ideas about dance they were both inspired by Primitive culture [and] their dances are a spontaneous re-enactment of cosmic forces, uncontrolled by any mental principles or preconceived patterns; where each dancer is 'allowed to be himself' alone in the midst of the phenomenal world raging and yet apart.<sup>583</sup>

This connects with Lawrence and his observations of Native American dances, in which he found expression of art and its procedural energies that maintained its core meanings, and kept them, at least externally, alive.

Such expression of mythologies learned from Lawrence inspired Olson in terms of movement, within the self and through the world as the self. Looking towards a fusion of archaic language and contemporary energies, Olson muses: "if I could put any of these present dancers (say, Litz...) in front of Mayan glyphs, the intervals of the gestures and miming and conversions would extend these dumb American bodies in the direction of their implicit possibilities): that the organism itself is mythological" (*O/C* 6, 69) His time at Black Mountain College saw collaborative work between Olson, Katherine Litz and Cunningham, in which the focus to restore a sense of the mythological via the body in space was a prominent theme. Olson's play, "Apollonius of Tyana" distils this preoccupation into the form of two characters: "*The dancer, Apollonius / The voice, Tyana, or place*"<sup>584</sup> Tyana is also the voice of Proprioception:

If there is any truth at all, it is only you yourself, you who was born on four legs, who found out how to walk on two and who would wish - so he hopes - to manage his strength that he will stay erect, will not have to come down to end as we all began almost on all fours. At least you will try to avoid being forced down hill so that you will not have to, like some Australian creature, go to the grave on three.<sup>585</sup>

What is meant by this "Australian creature" is unclear, as is the poem that posits truth as the waterhole in the bush. The obliqueness is not intended to obscure, although perhaps to provide a sense of difficulty, if not esotericism for its own sake, then a riddle like a far Eastern *koan* - a Zen puzzle to which the answer

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<sup>583</sup> Creeley in Faas, 49.

<sup>584</sup> Olson, "Appolonius of Tyana" in *Selected Writings*, 133.

<sup>585</sup> *Ibid.* 136.

may come later, or around the bend, so that: “Tyana’s turning should have this quality of legs in the earth, and none of the nonsense of clay, or return to dust, or of roots as black and wet and gross. Just black.”<sup>586</sup>

However obscure some of these referents and conclusions may appear, as Olson points out to Creeley, it is not any sense of esoteric vanity nor intellectual curiosity that motivates his offbeat explorations into the world of syncretic religion and myth, but the importance to assert:

an original, greater and more important reality through which the present life...fate and work of mankind are governed, and the knowledge of which provides men on the one hand with motives for ritual and moral acts, on the other with directions for their performance. (*O/C* 3, 135/6)

This statement helps explain why his work lends itself to parallel interpretations, and transnational reading, where the connections are through a certain willed, or at least willing, consciousness, rather than being simply coincidental.

### Butoh

An area of interest, given the significance of dance and the Zen-like images and tropes in the later *Maximus* poems, can be made with Japanese contemporary dance, *Butoh*, a metamorphic and metalogical form of open-ended dance, deriving its energy from darkness, chaos and fragments of communally remembered pre-Buddhist culture. Like Olson’s poetry and poetics, *Butoh* developed in the aftermath of World War Two, and its founders share similarities with Olson in their origins and concerns. The father of Kazuo Ohno, or “The Soul of Butoh”, was a fisherman with the salmon fleet, and the salmon motif found its way into Ohno’s performances, along with other significant presences such as rivers, birds and flowers, notably in his dance, *Dead Sea*. Tatsumi Hijikata, known as “The Architect of Butoh”, from the north east of Japan sought to revive in his practice of the dance a direct, folkloric expression linking

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<sup>586</sup> Ibid. 148.

people to place, which he felt was being eroded by the language and invasive presence of a largely imported and commercial modernity. These parallels, admittedly coincidental in some respects, nevertheless add a complementary scene of reading and way of approaching the epic.

As Olson was writing *The Maximus Poems*, Japan was experiencing a revival of pre-war Expressionism, Dadaism and Surrealism, partly as a form of resistance to US hegemony (and in direct contrast to early twentieth-century Orientalism). Notably, in the post-war context, the arts in Japan focused on action and arose from issues relating to the body and place. In the words of dance professor Sondra Fraleigh and professor and *Butoh* dancer Tamah Nakamura, *Butoh* arose from “physical and site-specific works [which] examined the relationship of the appropriate body expression with the elements of place and environment”,<sup>587</sup> and developed this synthesis of action, process and kinetic energy to express the interaction between the individual and place. Fraleigh and Nakamura see a link between *Butoh* and the expressionist origins of what they refer to as the “objective dance” of Cunningham.<sup>588</sup> *Butoh*, however, takes postmodern dance expression into different areas, creating a typically gothic, cross-gender and cross-cultural aesthetic,<sup>589</sup> which results in an eclectic amalgamation with its origins in a traditionally intensely localised and closed society. If such a society has experienced disruption, cultural anxiety or schism, then *Butoh* practitioners have stated the dance has the power to restore the health and integrity of “the community body.”<sup>590</sup>

Like the operations of Maximus, *Butoh* was and still is enacted in liminal sites; foreshores and beaches being favoured areas for its performance.<sup>591</sup> “I come

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<sup>587</sup> Sondra Fraleigh and Tamah Nakamura, *Hijikata Tatsumi and Ohno Kazuo* (London: Routledge, 2006), 74.

<sup>588</sup> *Ibid.* 16.

<sup>589</sup> *Ibid.* 16.

<sup>590</sup> Kasai Akira, in Fraleigh and Nakamura, 39.

<sup>591</sup> Susan Blakeley Klein: *Ankoku Butō; The Premodern and Postmodern Influences on the Dance of Utter Darkness* (1988, Cornell University East Asia Papers, Number 49), 34. *Butoh* scholar Susan Blakely Klein writes on the use of the pre-modern to transcend the modern in *Butoh*, and that part of this process involves an aesthetic which sees the dancers: “appropriating the marginal, outcaste position of Japanese actors in general ... particularly interested in appropriating the position of the Edo Kabuki actors who...in the early days lived and performed on dried out

from the mud”,<sup>592</sup> asserted Hijikata, foregrounding the importance of unstable material as a generative and temporary surface for the inscription of ritual signs and performative instructions. Hijikata’s insistence on the importance of the dance’s origins, was, interestingly, in its contrast to the “verticality of Western dance”.<sup>593</sup> Despite this, in a remarkable if unconscious spatial connection to Olson’s New England and also the British landscapes of Basil Bunting’s *Briggflatts*, *Butoh* teacher and performer Yoshioka Yumiko believes that Hijikata employed “his sense of place as a universal metaphor: ‘There is a Tohoku in England...Northeast is everywhere.’”<sup>594</sup> “‘Inside this one body’, Hijikata says, ‘there are various mythic things that are still sleeping intact...The work is how to excavate them at the actual site.’”<sup>595</sup> This statement recalls Boehme’s epigraph to Bly’s first *Deep Image* collection, as mentioned in the Introduction. Another prominent *Butoh* practitioner, Ichikawa, enters into dialogue with the Western phenomenology of Edmund Husserl, Sartre and Merleau-Ponty, and then takes “their work further on Eastern grounds. His thesis is that the body we live in is much closer to what we understand by the word ‘spirit’ than it is to matter or biology, as Hijikata’s *butoh* also challenges the materiality of the body through a non-dualistic route.”<sup>596</sup> Hijikata’s scrapbooks bear similarities to Olson’s notebooks at Storrs, containing an “eclectic assemblage of visual images...from prehistoric cave paintings to twentieth century street graffiti, including works from all five continents.”<sup>597</sup> This bricolage of photocopies and scribbles on topics from nature to architecture is notably Olsonian in its insistently non-linear recording of pointers and indications towards the idea of what may never be a finished production.

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riverbeds, the most temporary (therefore the most marginal) of spaces in Edo Japan.” Blakely Klein refers to the dancers’ evocation of pre-modern “yami” or “the dark”, where things are anti-linear, contradictory, in flux yet in balance, settled and disturbed: “In the mythical world of primitive thought there is no contradiction between chaos and cyclical repetition, between constant change and absolute equivalence.” This results in what she calls a “Metempsychotic” model of time. (Op.Cit, 40)

<sup>592</sup> in Fraleigh and Nakamura, 11.

<sup>593</sup> Fraleigh and Nakamura, 19.

<sup>594</sup> Ibid. 19.

<sup>595</sup> in Fraleigh and Nakamura, 43.

<sup>596</sup> Fraleigh and Nakamura, 49.

<sup>597</sup> Ibid. 52.

As dance, *Butoh* is intrinsically involved with the body, and as philosophy with similar post-war consciousness of movement and ceremony as needed to reclaim culture in the wake of invasion and mass destruction. This makes the apparently esoteric, yet upon closer consideration, universal ethic of the dance of darkness contingent with Olson's *Maximus* project. The body stands erect and expresses its identity through its grounding in an area which has a universal transnational sense, which is also unstable and liminal in its fundamentals.

### Proprioception/Country

Proprioception as applied to Country involves the merging of an individual body with the whole, or in Olson's terms, the polis. The notion reinforces the concept that an individual, comprised from a set of unique subatomic particles and possibly bound to a specific totem, remains the mouthpiece for a narrative of the necessarily located self, making up Country. This concept, not unique to Aboriginal Australia, is also found on the American continent, where Olson attempts to encompass space. Lincoln refers to the ancient ways seen through a Modernist eyeglass:

Mary Austin called an *American rhythm* buried anciently in the landscape, felt in local native dialects, resurfacing transculturally in the pulse, gait and speech of westering migrants, still skirting indigenous cultures long settled in the land? How would modernists speak of this pace? 'Rhythm is form cut into TIME,' Pound insisted on space-time elements, 'as a design is determined SPACE.'"<sup>598</sup>

For the descendants of those migrants, Olson attempts to put the cave paintings into their proper perspective – his admonition to move from time into space has been mentioned, yet the supposition that the cultures referred to above may not survive the writing of them has not. The dimensions under discussion may have found a more succinct articulation in Olson's lectures:

You will note, then, a complex: painted cave, & objects with  
localized portions according to

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<sup>598</sup> Lincoln, xix.

clans

masked dances, with women, and  
with burials of red ochre bones  
under the paintings

the cave both birth and death, and  
thru each related to ancestor who  
is divine

hands at the gate of the cave

a winding path to it

& a processional to reach it

(OL 10, 34)

This formulation provides a link between the Olsonian project and the notion of Country as explained by Australian theorists. The painted cave, be it in Altamira or a secret location in Australia symbolises the proprioceptively balanced body, with its organs poised as the “localized portions” mentioned above. The dances, or ceremonies have been examined as vital components of the culture, complemented by the visual signs, or language, which are again directly related to the body, with hands as extension and process, creating a language of immanence to aptly designate the content and purpose of the area. Country is marked by a pathway which, as “processional”, not static or enclosed in grids on a map comprises a route which is defined by the process of its coming into being.

Olson’s concept of “Proprioception” can find parallels in an Aboriginal Australian scene of reading *poiesis* and Country. As mentioned, although there is little published material linking Olson to this scene, there is evidence of a desire to form such a connection. Some of his notes could have been intended towards the creation of a longer poem, which hints at the idea of a pathway marked by his “elephant feet”, although this is of course speculative. As the introduction has shown, he was aware of the existence and basic functional elements of *Tjuringa*, whereby sacred objects, ritual and inherited, correspond to a life, or parts of one. The question already asked in Olson’s notes: “Where’s my Churinga?” may be

one that Maximus attempts to answer, through the identification of significant objects in his environment. One such object is almost a fusion of the mythological Diorite Stone with something more personal, on a familial level, and that is Whale-Jaw Rock in Dogtown:

There is this rock breaches  
the earth; The Whale's Jaw  
my father stood inside of

I have a photograph, him  
a smiling Jonah forcing back those teeth  
Or more Jehovah, he looks that strong  
he could have split the rock  
as it is split, and not  
as Marsden Hartley painted it  
so it's a canvas glove  
(MP, I.32)

The Biblical references are clear enough: the father as fighter or supreme creator, the ultimate *Homo Maximus*. The other presence mentioned, painter and poet Marsden Hartley, is an interesting choice given Olson's accusation that his intervention on canvas has reduced the size of this special site, and not only softened its material, but made the idea of living whale's skin into an unwanted occlusion, or covering. Another male progenitor is mentioned directly preceding this extract, namely Pound, and an object of significance attached to his body: the turquoise stone earring he wore when visiting England, "to let them know, here / was an American savage." (MP, I.32) This presence is seemingly unrelated, although given Olson's care for typography, the juxtaposition is unlikely to be accidental. The archetypal wild man and the effete painter therefore bracket Olson's tropic activity in the landscape, or rather a specific, almost totemistic aspect. Olson's *ur*-progenitor, Melville, also adumbrates this scene. The choice of "breaches" suggests the dynamic of the rock formation, the presence of the whale itself, with phallic vertical energies implicit in its surge through the earth, to be met by an equivalent human impulse. The rock, or stone, is a material in which mythic space is solidified, regardless of scale. Olson as mythologist proposes: "Give me geology / then we don't have to worry about soft human history."<sup>599</sup>

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<sup>599</sup> Olson, in von Hallberg, 126.

Here, the Whale-Jaw rock meets the Mayan glyphs and the letter carved on the *omphalos*<sup>600</sup> in a fusion of mythologies and fittingly enough at the apex of the moraine which overlooks the overall place, or object, of Maximus' care; the polis of Gloucester.

Having said that, In an interview from 1966, Olson claims that this image is from a childhood memory, that it was intended as a joke: "he's just shoving the ... jaws aside like big powerful Olson men are supposed to" (*MU*, 213). He also claims not to have revisited that place since, which is conceivable, as it involves a hike to the very top of the moraine. However, it makes a reappearance in *The Maximus Poems*, in "The Cow of Dogtown", where mythology meets morphology of landscape. The summit of one the "great moraines" is also rumoured to conceal "a covered Viking ship / and burial", (*MP*, II.148) left behind "on to this shoved moraine / when the ice moved off / or was melted." (*MP*, II.149) Norse mythology has a cow licking primeval ice as the beginning of creation, and this juxtaposition again hardly seems coincidental: the thrust of the rock and the vessel buried in a hollow somewhere, hidden, with its creation stories intact. If the Whale-Jaw Rock is an equivalent for Olson's "Churinga", some elements match. The personalisation, the living landscape, the wider mythologies that comprise his heritage, and not least the element of something precious and mythological kept underground. This all comprises "land I am shod in, / my father's shoes" (*MP*, II.137) – these lines from a *Maximus* poem titled "proem", an historical précis of the founding of the settlements on the Cape Ann peninsula, ending with the lines quoted above, with the body incorporating history and mythology in an unambiguous conjoining. In his father's shoes refers to a place that he has somehow inherited, but also in a sense, going further back, been imposed upon: the land is what he assumes and what he cannot disconnect himself from – barefoot, a meeting point upon Indigenous soil.

A parallel trope concerning Aboriginal Australia may be considered here, via the island of Niue in the Pacific Ocean, and a story recounted by Muecke, concerning

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<sup>600</sup> See "The Kingfishers" (*CP*, 88).

English mariner and explorer Captain James Cook, which is conveys enough ambiguity for it to be considered history or myth:

Captain Cook may or may not have landed on the East coast of the island (official and local accounts are in conflict). And there he may or may not have left his shoes on the beach for the locals to collect and try to cook ....The absence of a recipe and the continued indigestibility of these travelling artefacts left me plenty of room for speculation about postcolonial theory. Shoes – precisely what a sailor doesn't need in his footless conveyance. The colonialism of their wearer as agent of Empire – precisely what a small Pacific island doesn't need. For the islanders the shoes represent, then, the intolerable, the indigestible, something they cannot swallow.<sup>601</sup>

Maximus is shod in the country he needs, his shoes are the land, these are his dead father's absent shoes those of a barefoot son of immigrants meeting Indigenous land. Incidentally, the name "Captain Cook" is metonymic in some accounts for the invasive presence of European settlers in Australia, and the laws they brought with them that have displaced the original Law.

As indicated, Minter has made an initial evaluation of Olsonian tropes with reference to the specific links between the concept of proprioception and equivalent tropes in Aboriginal culture. He writes: "Movement through the material cosmos and historical space time produces a corporeal home 'woven out of the old and new – a compound of reception and anticipation.'"<sup>602</sup> The idea of projective poetics is transnational and corporeal, and its location can be discerned in the genealogical depths of the interiority of the individual and collective body, and as such it has distinct similarities with Aboriginal culture, particularly in the domain of visual artworks, which are "simultaneously genealogical and concrete, as both substance and a history of substance. As such they are generically projective, insofar that they represent *and actualise* the fusion of the proprioceptive senses and the kinetic flow of semiotic intensity."<sup>603</sup>

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<sup>601</sup> Muecke, *No Road*, 258.

<sup>602</sup> Minter, 258.

<sup>603</sup> *Ibid.* 261.

Like Mayan glyphs, Aboriginal artworks, created from the ground up, rising from country, seek to retain the power of the objects of which they are the images. Referring to the context of “The Kingfishers”, Minter points out that: projectivism’s corporealisation of history, which has its vanishing point in the genealogical depth of the interiority of the body (individual and collective) and its biophysical and linguistic materialisations, shares a *poethical* gestalt with Australian Aboriginal art.<sup>604</sup> Therefore, “Aboriginal art is contiguous with the body, the breath, perception and ideation,”<sup>605</sup> and like Olson’s observations of the Maya, is a highly charged and intimate form of expression, which in order to be perceived, to exist, requires a stance of obedience to the laws of the external, ancestral and mythological world as incorporated into the human being. He also draws together a strand linking the Abstract Expressionism of works such as Jackson Pollock’s *Blue Poles* with significant Aboriginal artworks, such as Possum Tjapaltjarri’s *Warlugulong*: “Not unlike Pollock’s reduction of classical scale, perspective and depth to the projective actualisation of the action of the body, Possum Tjapaltjarri’s painting (painted, like Pollock’s with the canvas on the ground) emerges at the confluence of the body of the painter and the site of expression.”<sup>606</sup>

These parallels reflect a close, proprioceptive connection between the artist and ground of creation. Arguably Pollock’s most famous statement came after being advised to look at nature: “I *am* nature.”<sup>607</sup> He not only painted but sought to become part of the painting, using his body and non-conventional implements to scratch and gouge the canvas, often working while moving around the surface or lying on the floor, where he said: “I am more at ease. I feel nearer, more a part of the painting, since this way I can walk around it, work from the four sides and literally be *in* the painting.”<sup>608</sup> Along with other Abstract Expressionists, Pollock shared an interest in Jungian archetypes and “symbolic languages which could communicate across temporal and cultural boundaries...such cosmologies could

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<sup>604</sup> Ibid. 258.

<sup>605</sup> Ibid. 268.

<sup>606</sup> Ibid. 263.

<sup>607</sup> Pollock, in Evelyn Toynton, *Jackson Pollock* (Yale University Press: New Haven, 2012), 20.

<sup>608</sup> Ibid. 55.

be found in Native American or ancient myths”,<sup>609</sup> although their ultimate aim was to create affinities in a contemporary, international context. Therefore, they “cited and modified archetypal images drawn from elsewhere in the process of inventing their own distinctive modern ‘ideographs.’”<sup>610</sup> Toynton notes that although early works by Pollock owed their influence to European-derived Cubism, they also include

imagery ... from Native American, African and prehistoric art...[and] huge male and female figures, highly abstracted but still barely recognizable. Flanking the wholly non-figurative central panel, they are imposing, totemic presences, who might be the priest and priestess of some ancient religion.<sup>611</sup>

Pollock also showed an active appreciation of Native American art, and its practitioners, “in their understanding of what constitutes painterly subject-matter. Their color is essentially Western, their vision has the basic universality of all real art.”<sup>612</sup> Toynton also makes an interesting connection between Pollock and Olson, with the former stating the vastness of space, as “the central fact to man born in America.”<sup>613</sup> This recalls Olson on *SPACE*, in its immensity, and Pollock elaborates in an interview from 1944, a year before Olson started writing “Call Me Ishmael”: “I have a definite feeling for the West: the vast horizontality of the land, for instance; here only the Atlantic ocean gives you that.”<sup>614</sup> In terms of the land giving size, in the sense of psychic transference, it is worth noting the following lines from a long poem by Paul Metcalf, Melville’s great-grandson and friend of Olson:

The western hemisphere is a man: Patagonia – pie grande – the foot:  
tahuanacu – between the legs, the two cordilleras – the generative: mas al

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<sup>609</sup> David Joselit, *American Art since 1945* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2003), 18.

<sup>610</sup> Joselit, 19.

<sup>611</sup> Toynton, 33.

<sup>612</sup> Pollock in Francis V. O’Connor, *Jackson Pollock* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1967), 32.

<sup>613</sup> Pollock in Toynton, 59. Toynton also includes a reference to Robert Hughes’s notion of Pollock’s connection via his drip paintings to Whitman’s “vast something...which is there in there prairies” (in *Op. cit.* 58)

<sup>614</sup> Pollock in O’Connor, 32.

norte – brazil, etc. – the cuerpo: and u.s.a., the head, the sense of it all ... it is with this geographic man that, as hombre Americano, I am possessed<sup>615</sup>

Country is embodied and the body takes in the land, the attentive practitioner of space and place becomes the land itself, and the only differences are those of scale. Not only is space a central fact, but the continent is also returning to incorporate those who walk on it with care, and who acknowledge they are clad in its Being.

Considering the concept of proprioceptive Country, renewed attention needs to be given here to the size, significance and problematics of Maximus' coastal location as a site of cultural and poetic regeneration. Sauer indicates that coastal communities face historical decline once their *locus* of arrival and dispersion becomes a site of restraint than of movement. Maximus observes that once the ships of the initial explorers have left the settler community slips into a state of stagnation despite the fact that "for the long early time...the sea gave the best advantages for the beginnings of technics and society."<sup>616</sup> Indeed, Olson made similar observations about the coastal Maya communities in 1951.<sup>617</sup> Sauer contends that surviving hunter-gatherer societies of his, and Olson's time, were mainly located "in arid areas of scant and uncertain food and water where they survive by intimate knowledge of where and when to find both" and adds that: "The Australian aboriginals stay put as much as possible."<sup>618</sup> We have seen that Muecke concurs that nomadism does not imply moving haphazardly from one place to another, and this point of view is also corroborated by the experience of academic and writer Stuart Cooke, who recounts his personal experience of the Lurujarri Heritage Trail, in north-western Australia, and his observations of "the trail's custodians, the Gurulaburu people, [who] invite interested members of the public to take part in the walk with them."<sup>619</sup> Cooke notes that by making this a public event, although the "public" here consists primarily of visitors with an academic background, its significance lies in the fact that

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<sup>615</sup> Paul Metcalf, *Patagoni*, (New York: Jargon Society, 1971), 117.

<sup>616</sup> Sauer, *Land and Life*, 312.

<sup>617</sup> Olson: "*this is a culture in arrestment, which is no culture at all*", *ML*, 22, (italics in original).

<sup>618</sup> Sauer, *Land and Life*, 306.

<sup>619</sup> Stuart Cooke, *Speaking the Earth's Languages; a Theory for Australian-Chilean Postcolonial Poetics* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1993), 8.

walking the trail demonstrates not only the movement of the nomad but also some of the communicative strategies nomads might use in order to show that they do not want to *move* from their country. By returning to walk the path of the cycle, the Gurulaburu people are reaffirming their connection to country and, by performing the song cycle, they are ensuring that the country remains healthy.<sup>620</sup>

This form of nomadic movement, therefore, as observed by Cooke and Muecke, and proposed in Olson's time by Sauer, is one that forms an intrinsic connection to a place, which can consist of a path, trail, or song cycle as much as a given and permanent appearing place on a map. This is almost the polar opposite of the migrant experience.

The contrast between nomadic practice and the migrant experience is a salient point. Both the eastern seaboard of America and Australia were settled by European arrivals, displacing the inhabitants who had their towns and settled spaces already in place. This dislocation was nothing less than a removal of the ground and a disruption of complex socio-economic and cultural relationships, all of which were dependent on affiliation with place. Movements were seasonal, ceremonial and restricted by Law. As Sutton points out: "no one person, before colonization, could move at will across Australia."<sup>621</sup> Additionally, like most ostensibly nomadic cultures, Aboriginal Australians seek to preserve rather than slash and burn, and this is derived from a sensibility that pre-dates sedentary societies and political thought. This applies to all forms of life, past and present. As Swain points out:

It is essential to note that the Ancestors do not move *from* one place *to* another but rather that they link sites by a common intentionality of place ....The movement of the Ancestors should therefore not be seen as a shift from pre-form to form so much as it should be understood to reveal that place has inherent extension and hence that places are related through structural networks.<sup>622</sup>

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<sup>620</sup> Ibid.

<sup>621</sup> Sutton, 7.

<sup>622</sup> Swain, 33.

These networks bring together individuals within a community and create a precondition from which may be constructed the tale, or “epos” of the tribe, from which the epics derive, “as constitutive elements of its own consciousness.”<sup>623</sup>

It needs to be considered that the existence of certain proscribed areas were not intended to exclude, but to bring together, according to the Aboriginal concept of what the tracks and songs that comprise boundaries are to be used for. These tracks, according to Rose, are connectors, indicating social relationships and codes, which are of necessity located:

These are the ‘boundaries’ that unite. The fact that a Dreaming demarcates differences along the line is important to creating variation, but ultimately a track, by its very existence, demarcates a coming together. Dreaming creativity made possible the relationships which connect by defining the differences that divide.<sup>624</sup>

Another point to note is that what Europeans often took to be *terra nullius*, or unoccupied wilderness may have been in many cases what Muecke describes as “neglected Aboriginal ‘gardens’. While I use the term ‘garden’ to suggest cultivation, there is clearly no horticulture in the European sense. ‘Cultured landscape’ might be a better phrase than ‘garden.’”<sup>625</sup> As for the word “neglected”, it might be more accurate to emphasize that as indicating the idea of the land being temporarily unoccupied and unexploited on a seasonal basis. Neglect of the landscape according to the sense of wilful disregard would be an inconceivable standpoint, or one with serious consequences. Survival in Country depends on attentiveness and “not just on the right sort of physical treatment of the country, but also on what one says about it, writes about it, and the images one makes of it.”<sup>626</sup> Hence the importance of Olson’s correct and meticulous *poesis* and inscriptive representations of his own place, his fishing town, which he puts forward as: “An image of creation and of human life for the rest of the life of the species.” (*MU*, 439) Gloucester is metonymic for America, which in turn is

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<sup>623</sup> Bernstein, Michael, *Tale*, 9.

<sup>624</sup> Rose, *Dingo*, 52.

<sup>625</sup> Muecke, *Ancient*, 51.

<sup>626</sup> Benterrak, et al, 23.

but one example of occupied space. This explains the urgency for cultural preservation and recreation.

This viewpoint also finds support from Deleuze and Guattari, who refer to another observation, this time from historian Arnold Toynbee as referred to in *Nomadology*, that a nomad is someone who does not move, and this refusal to depart from Country is an essential part of being and belonging. In their words: the true nomad is one “who clings to the smooth space left by the receding forest, where the steppe or the desert advance, and who invents nomadism as a response to this challenge.” (N, 51) Incidentally, Toynbee is credited with having invented “post-modern” as an historical term, and Maud contends that the meaning of this sense as applied to the historical period post-1875 is the one that Olson referred to when referring to “the post-modern world” in correspondence to Creeley from the Yucatan.<sup>627</sup> So, if a nomad is one who stays, and a migrant is one who leaves. Migration and location become linked through tropism, flow and the sense of what Sauer terms a *Standort*, a place defined by stance, by literally standing upon it. If this ground is continually moving, or coming into being then standing upon it is ipso facto an act of nomadism, and the concern of a *poète d'espace* like that of the “human geographer is to identify where human events take place and to make sense out of their localization.”<sup>628</sup> This reads very much like a statement of methodology as applied to Olson’s poetry and poetics. Thus, the main value of Sauer’s contribution can be seen in terms of two aspects of geography: morphology and chorology, as well as providing another set of terms for the etymology-hungry Olson: namely, the German *Landschaftskunde*, referring to knowledge of landscape, as opposed to *Erdkunde*, or science of the earth in more general terms.<sup>629</sup> The causal, mythological nature of the landscape that chorology implies is made evident in its dynamic and organic qualities, which make it necessary “to comprehend land and life in terms of each other.”<sup>630</sup>

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<sup>627</sup> Maud, *Olson’s Reading*, 91.

<sup>628</sup> Sauer, 296.

<sup>629</sup> *Ibid.* 317.

<sup>630</sup> *Ibid.* 322. Interestingly, if only from an etymological and / or homophonic point of view, Sauer claims: “The term ‘morphology’ originated with Goethe, and expresses his contribution to modern science. It may be well to recall that he turned to biologic and geologic studies because he was interested in the nature and limits of cognition. Believing that there were things

Therefore, like a poet, Maximus or an Aboriginal practitioner, “The historical geographer must therefore be a regional specialist, for he must not only know the region as it appears today; he must know its lineaments so well that he can find in it the traces of the past.”<sup>631</sup> This stipulation recalls the gigantic delineations outlined by Williams, as previously mentioned. Sauer continues: “One might say that he needs the ability to see the land with the eyes of its former occupants, from the standpoint of their needs and capacities.”<sup>632</sup> This in turn recalls Olson’s axiom, “polis is / eyes.” (*MP*, I.26) Sauer acknowledges the difficulties inherent in this approach to history and/as geography: “This is about the most difficult task in all human geography: to evaluate site and situation, not from the standpoint of an educated American of today, but to place oneself in the position of a member of the cultural group at the time being studied.”<sup>633</sup>

Dogtown is obviously a prime site for such evaluation, given its role in combining mythological and modern geographies: “based upon an actual geometry of chthonic (physical) events that take place within the known area of a Human Universe. A-real geometry, Carl Sauer would say.”<sup>634</sup> Not only Whale-Jaw Rock, but cellars where women would hide out with their dogs, streams, swamps and other topographical features scattered in this town above the town bear the names of deities, imported and Indigenous as well as those of settlers. The importance of all these names is not to be underestimated, as they add a certain, if not necessarily final touch to the map. Casey observes: “an entire branch of mapmaking is devoted to ‘toponymy’, in England one could until recently make a living as a toponymist.”<sup>635</sup> This applies all the way back to Homer: “in his epic the land and sea are at once sources of names and ethical preserves, realms of values and virtues as well as mnemonic resources. For archaic Greek bards as for

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‘accessible and inaccessible’ to human knowledge, he concluded: ‘One need not seek for something beyond the phenomena; they themselves are the lore (*Lehre*)’ (Op. cit.), 326/7.

<sup>631</sup> Ibid. 362.

<sup>632</sup> Sauer, 362.

<sup>633</sup> Ibid. 362.

<sup>634</sup> Scoggan, 339.

<sup>635</sup> Casey, 23.

contemporary Western Apache storytellers, places provide permanence, a bedrock basis for situating stories in scenes that possess moral tenor.”<sup>636</sup>

Having said this, one among several apparent paradoxes with Olson remains his stance of custodianship towards Gloucester. As Muecke states regarding nomadology: “The nomad does not try to appropriate the territory, there is no sense of enclosing it and measuring it as did the early surveyors.”<sup>637</sup> Olson may have a nomadic sensibility, but he also comes from a wave of Western immigration, and this history cannot be ignored. In an American context it has been observed that: *History is a social expression of geography, and western geography is violent.*<sup>638</sup> With reference to Australian settlement, it is the occupation of the surveyor with “the surveyor’s vessel [to] anticipate the triumph of Euclidian geometry, with its idealised forms, over the lumps and bumps of country.”<sup>639</sup> This activity results in a situation where from the mid-twentieth century on, with the proliferation of touring maps for automobiles, a network of roads serviced by identical looking parks and retail outlets, “all places are essentially the same: in the uniform, homogenous space of a Euclidian-Newtonian grid, all places are essentially interchangeable. Our places, even our place for homes, are defined by objective measures.”<sup>640</sup> Olson’s contribution, in the proprioceptive sense, is to restore a particular sense of Being and belonging. His literal and mythological familiarity with his field of operation results in a renewed conception of the local area and the wider world.

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In attempting to restart a community, by calling it out and writing it with myth, the poet inscribes shared space: everyday and sacred, smooth and striated, expressing personal and societal concerns, with the aim of re-founding and re-grounding. It needs to be remembered that some societies, including those

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<sup>636</sup> Ibid. 277.

<sup>637</sup> Benterrak, et al., 224.

<sup>638</sup> Arthur Edward Stilwell ‘I had a hunch’ (1928), in *Heat Moon, PrairyErth*, 220. Italics in original.

<sup>639</sup> Thomas, 22.

<sup>640</sup> Cisco Lassiter, “Relocation and Illness: The Plight of the Navajo”, in Casey, 38.

brought into the orbit of *The Maximus Poems*, can be seen as “stubbornly resistant to the idea of founding.”<sup>641</sup> Marcel Detienne, an historian specialising in the Ancient World, gives the example of Japan as a society defined by an ongoing sense cosmogony and myth, which was nevertheless subject to both interruption and entropy:

It therefore became necessary to regenerate the world and restore it with the live forces of the Beyond. At regular intervals, temples were rebuilt, domestic sanctuaries were remade, and boundaries were redefined. There was no refounding, for the very good reason that there has never been any founding.<sup>642</sup>

Another instance of a culture without such foundation is that of Vedic India, which is put forward as an early example of a sedentary society that remained in psychological terms at least, nomadic. Detienne claims: “The notion of a fixed place revolted them. Vedic India presented an open space with no individualized temples or sites. One and the same space was everywhere.”<sup>643</sup>

In his *Dissertations*, the historical Maximus puts forward a corporeal simile to describe the ideal city, as:

a thing mingled from the cooperation of all: just as the necessity of the body, which is manifold, and is indigent of many things, is preserved by the parts contributing to the good of the whole: the feet support, the hands operate, the eyes see, the ears hear; and ... each performs its proper office.<sup>644</sup>

This sounds very much like Olson’s ideal polis, humanistic and proprioceptive. Nevertheless, It also needs to be remembered, as Nichols observes, that: “Maximus is not the *representative* of his tribes in the manner of archaic heroes, or reducible to the *exemplum* of a precept; nor, as a member of the *human* universe, is he an oracle of unmediated perception. He is, rather, an allegory of

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<sup>641</sup> Marcel Detienne, *Comparing the Incomparable* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), 26.

<sup>642</sup> Ibid. 26.

<sup>643</sup> Ibid. 26.

<sup>644</sup> Maximus Tyrius, *Dissertations*, Vol.1, 54.

the ontogenetic process.”<sup>645</sup> It is the process and the stance that is to be believed in over and above the persona that populate the poems. Olson famously proclaimed in his *The Special View of History*, that following Keats, “a man’s life is an allegory”,<sup>646</sup> and he returns to this thought later when he says that “man is no trope of himself as a synecdoche of his species, but is, as actual determinant, each one of us, a conceivable creator.”<sup>647</sup>

Woods identifies a similar push, linking Olson’s imperative to see “the hinges of civilization to be put back on the door” with Theodor Adorno’s “‘negative dialectics’”. In both cases there is an attempt to rethink the relations between subjects and the world in such a way that the methodology and poetics become a means to allow civilization to move freely.”<sup>648</sup> The human body being metonymic for that civilisation, this movement, or kinesis, is of critical importance. Woods adds that: “Olson’s poetics is a struggle to reintegrate kinesis with human perception, as a means to preserving subjective activity in objective experience.”<sup>649</sup> We return therefore, of necessity, to the “physiology he is forced to arrive at.” (*CPR*, 174) Heidegger informs us that the placing of the gestalt indicates this sense of arrival:

The strife that is brought back into the rift and thus set back into the earth and thus fixed in place is figure, shape, Gestalt. Createdness of the work means: truth’s being fixed in place in the figure...What is here called the figure, Gestalt, is always to be thought in terms of the particular placing (Stellen) and framing or framework (Ge-stell) as which the work occurs when it sets itself up and sets itself forth.<sup>650</sup>

The final clause indicates that this arrival comes with a premonition of departure, and that the movements within and without the body to create the gestalt never cease. Were they to do so, the edifice that is Maximus would crumble, for the content in an artificial state of stillness would no longer exist.

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<sup>645</sup> Nichols, “Myth and Document”, 27. Italics in original.

<sup>646</sup> Olson, *Special View*, 28. The original by Keats, reads as follows: “A man’s life of any worth is a continual allegory – and very few eyes can see the mystery of life...Shakespeare led a life of allegory: his works are the comments on it”, in Rollins, Ed. Vol. 2, 67.

<sup>647</sup> Olson, *Special View*, 17.

<sup>648</sup> Woods, 237.

<sup>649</sup> Ibid, 237.

<sup>650</sup> Heidegger, 61/2.

The protagonist may only be aware of this solid-seeming life through liminality and unrest.

There are certainly psychic and proprioceptive implications apparent in Olson's move from Worcester to Gloucester, as mentioned in Chapter One, with the poet leaving an inland city and moving eastwards to a coastal town. According to Kenneth Warren: "each city is a structural event and stronghold of irrational perception."<sup>651</sup> Furthermore, the suffix of both settlements refers to the concept of a fort, or castle, and this observation can be related to that of Jungian archetype: the four-gated city in the head, corresponding to the integrated self, the totality of conscious and unconscious experience. It has been seen that the concept of a fort, although prominent in *The Maximus Poems*, is one, which in an apparent paradox, relates to Olson's seemingly continual unstable and temporary habitation. Maximus would ideally take this fort, or stronghold with him, a portable habitation, as his recount of the myth of the man with his house on his head shows, where the house is full of plenitude yet still "light as a basket" (*MP*, II.31). Housing is contingent on the body which bears it, and forms part of the proprioceptive flow. As Casey points out: "We deal with dwelling places only by the grace of our bodies, which are the ongoing vehicles of architectural emplacement."<sup>652</sup>

Proprioception, then, has been shown to involve multidimensional aspects and practices. The body itself is defined by stance and movement contained within a continually changing form. The *Maximus* gestalt comprises the poetic enunciation of how this body is composed, in its kinetic and vertical constructions, and how these relate to its formation in and of Country, which in its turn can be considered proprioceptive. In other words, the body is a creative agent: "My lived body is the locator agent of lived places, the subtender of sites, the *genius loci* of all that has come to be called 'space' in the West."<sup>653</sup> The subject of creation is nothing less than the human universe. For Merleau-Ponty: "The

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<sup>651</sup> Kenneth Warren, "Charles Olson's Grail of Intuition". *The Worcester Review* (Worcester County Poetry Association, Vol 31, 1-2, 2010), 103.

<sup>652</sup> Casey, 132.

<sup>653</sup> *Ibid.* 105.

body is our general medium for having a world.”<sup>654</sup> He expresses a resolution of the contradictory aspects and apparent paradoxes of the interrelationship between body and space: “Far from my body’s being for me no more than a fragment of space, there would be no space at all for me if I had no body.”<sup>655</sup>

Within the vastness of America, and Australian space, such use of the body and its ability to break space down into the liveable size that is place is vital. In turn, the proprioceptive community, or polis of attentions, is formed. Recreation of place is thus contingent on its inhabitants, who assume a corresponding set of responsibilities for its preservation, in cultural as well as environmental terms. For this to be effected, the artist as mythologist, historian and practitioner of culture needs to become part of the art being made, and the sites from which it derives and upon which it is inscribed and expressed.

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<sup>654</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, Trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge, Kegan and Paul, 1974), 146.

<sup>655</sup> *Ibid.* 102.

## Conclusion

In one of his later lectures, Olson revisits the concept of merciless and all-consuming space, as outlined several decades previously in “Call Me Ishmael.” Space is something that he appears to view as an entity changed by human activity, rendered less terrifying but also of less import. Looking at the immediate post-war years from the vantage point of the later 1960s, he reflects: “indeed the advantage to me of that thing is that we were a new physical, naked, or open aboriginal space, which we have, in a sense, now miserably filled competently, but I think now uninterestingly” (*MU*, 463). Human beings were that space, past historic, by clear implication no longer so. Time, by contrast, now exerts a more powerful pull. He reminds his listeners of his aphorism: “we are the world’s last first people”, and muses that this constitutes an ambiguous achievement, although: “one which I would think that we would be advantaged to not abandon, despite the obvious nonism of the accomplishment.” (*MU*, 463) It is tempting to see this as a literally world-weary statement from a man whose life was drawing to a painful and laboured close, and looking to find in the world around him a correlative for his own condition. However, such a conclusion would do an injustice to Olson’s sense of perception and raw honesty when evaluating the human condition, self within space within self: open, interchangeable and immanently proprioceptive.

The very length of *The Maximus Poems* is an indicator of the importance of both space and time, or as DuPlessis spells it large: “I take SPACE/TIME to be the main element of this poem, and (as Ron Silliman has intimated) of any long poem.”<sup>656</sup> Both elements are used as a way of mapping boundaries, their flexibility, elasticity and permeability. Within and between the open spaces of which the ocean and prairie are topographical and psychic exemplars, are lines: on the ground, on paper representing that ground, on the body and in the mind. Space and time permeate the sounds, constructions and inscriptions that make up the epic, and in doing so create the protagonist’s gestalt. The place that derives from spatial awareness and a mission of custodianship informs the metaphysical

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<sup>656</sup> DuPlessis, “Olson”, 145.

aspects and presences in the poems, and also serves as a ground from which tropes of performative reiteration and resistance are released. The result is the cumulative effect of process itself, and this process becomes evident in the bodily concrescence of the *Maximus* gestalt: tangible yet unreal, spanning millennia and traversing the tectonic plates of ancient and contemporary continents, yet also determinedly localised: the soul of the world enclosing the heart of the human *poiesis*.

Space has undoubtedly diminished – wilderness areas are shrinking as this thesis is being written, just as the prairies had become definitively and irreversibly enclosed by the 1950s. Does this mean that human beings can no longer incorporate space in themselves, and are there ways to reinvigorate the notion of being the world’s “last first people” to recover a sense of Being that seems to have died under those shining, macadamized surfaces on which the automobiles skim over the bones of the dead? What can be read into Olson’s more pessimistic statements?

Initially, it is important to state that he succeeded in mapping space in his own terms, using cultural referents from other ages and making of these a poetry and poetics that in turn creates an expression of space that reflects its openness, its receptiveness to human perception and its fundamental anarchy, that

suffers from no imposition of a foreign ownership, totalitarian logic or omnicomplete culture .... Olson is opening a space that doesn't refer to anything other than its own doings. Its own intelligibility. He is sharing that space with us. What more can be asked?<sup>657</sup>

People are space, or have been space, and this animate space has its *poiesis*, components and life cycles. To fully understand its “intelligibility” is an enormous task, and one which Olson did not claim to have accomplished. The measure of his achievement lies more in his articulation of a process by which such an understanding may arise.

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<sup>657</sup> Scoggan, 335.

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The influence of Melville, compressed into the proprioceptive, non-Euclidian force of the whale's tale, parallels Rimbaud as recalled in "The Kingfishers", with the unnamed self-object, "slain in the sun." (*CP*, 93) Through slaughter and sacrifice come the features of human relations that endure through the ages. Significantly, this is true "despite the discrepancy." (*CP*, 92) As Herd observes: "The discrepancy, or difference (of time, geography, social context and personality) is not overcome. It is, nonetheless, the basis for dynamic and interconnected human activity, Olson formulating his version of human agency through, with and in relation to, Rimbaud."<sup>658</sup> His neo-platonic being, Maximus, is created in the open space that is prairie-ocean-desert, much like Rimbaud forms his adult self in the wasteland of Harar. The difference here, if one seeks a direct comparison, is that at an equivalent age the one renounces poetry and the other takes it up. The self creates itself, in a strange land, as an immigrant seeking footholds, in the spaces of the subatomic self and the space within and around it:

yet rimbaud saw (no?) that the individual is able to be responsible to more than himself only by way of himself, which renews the question, for the native use of self (which means, principally, however interesting are, stars, some others) involvement of, others, which where the blood is broken, is complicated (I'd hunch that Rimbaud settled for ma & sis, and the most extraneous others, for the sky, grey, leaves, down and i am full of blood  
(*O/C* 5, 184)

The salt water roaring inside and the "native use of self" both rely on osmosis for survival, through a process which is difficult for the protagonist to make out, if

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<sup>658</sup> Herd, "Introduction", 6.

not espy the “jewels & miracles” (*MP*, I.1) that make up the islands in the bloodstream, which coalesce into the formation of a conscious human being. The internal as created in a such a way is the poesis of proprioception. Poetry is something that: lives *out of itself*, that doesn't look for justification in things outside it. This we call *dichtung* [*sic*] - & it's that we're after.” (*O/C* 4, 30) Its proponents go outward, for this is what they deliver. This internal to external movement is at the edge of Olson's poetics, for as the inspiration comes in from the external world, so it is sent out again, from and into unique sites of Being. This reaffirms the totemism of unity, that interpenetration is not an isolated event, despite the human isolates, the language of separated-ness, the scattered idioms. “Out of itself” implies a path which avoids a scenario where places are seen as separate microcosms, but instead seeks to affirm their unity through a shared inner sense of recognition of existence. In societal terms, as Swain notes with reference to Australia: “Aboriginal people avoided a scenario in which each country became a self-sufficient microcosm which replicated, in miniature, some spatially unified macrocosm. Had they done so, they might have reverted to a monadology of sovereign, isolated yet identical, atoms of place. This they did not do.”<sup>659</sup> An acknowledgement of outsiderly voices and poetics constitutes a moral engagement, not with any outdated or ill-defined idea of the other, but the co-existence of past and present generations, and by extension eras, within a contiguous space.

In the world of Aboriginal Australia, Country “is still not divided into eight ‘states’ or territories, it is criss-crossed with tracks. The smooth space of these invisible and secret tracks has been violently assaulted by the public checker-board grid of the states.”<sup>660</sup> This is another way of expressing the striated space that Olson, through Maximus, compels outward, to revert to its original Being. The striation of space has been accompanied by a process of cultural as well as societal invasion, whereby:

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<sup>659</sup> Swain, 50.

<sup>660</sup> Benterrak, et al. 219.

All the non-Euclidian creatures and their stories have been cast far out of the totalitarian universe, covered over by layers and layers of philosophy, culture, history and the church. The 'last first' men of recent day face imprisonment. They are forgotten, the lost originals. We don't even know what they mean.<sup>661</sup>

In such a situation, a societal issue that Maximus is confronted with yet tends to evade is how exactly he becomes the shaman or "ritual worker"<sup>662</sup> of the community which he seeks to guide. His action in setting out in his box on the ocean almost appears contradictory, or at least self-defeating. As Bram observes: "without a crew, without the townspeople and the readers as his fellow workers, he cannot function as a teacher or as a poet. Without them his ship has no purpose."<sup>663</sup> Bram goes on to contend that: "A sense of failure and seclusion is already visible in the second volume [when] Olson/Maximus retreats to Dogtown, a deserted place."<sup>664</sup> The question arises again; who is Olson writing for, and who is Maximus addressing? It could well be argued that as custodian he starts offshore and ends by leaving his place: in a sense making a return in the third volume after death.<sup>665</sup> As teacher or guide he lacks an obvious following, and even as a postman on his rounds, the letters themselves have no clear recipients or precise addressees, unless it is the town in a general sense, or himself.

This conundrum can be in part ascribed to the post-war cultural environment, where the idea of a tradition among readers of poetry, was if not ruptured, could not be assumed to have survived such humanistic upheavals entirely intact. It is worth noting Theodor Adorno's much-discussed statement that to write poetry in the wake of the extermination camps of the Holocaust would be "barbarous",

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<sup>661</sup> Scoggan, 336.

<sup>662</sup> Bram, 133.

<sup>663</sup> Ibid. 137.

<sup>664</sup> Ibid. 136.

<sup>665</sup> This can be seen as exemplifying the paradox of "unyoking ... imagination from place" (Arjun Appadurai, in Giles, 160) as feature of transnational modernity. Olson's flight from his community at the end of the second volume of *The Maximus Poems* implies a strong imperative to use imagination to re/create a place, especially if his conclusion is that to do so one has to leave it, and continually return in order to keep on creating to know it through renewal and constant creative contact.

i.e. literally necessitating forms of language hitherto un-invented or alien.<sup>666</sup> This statement, although open to contestation, reflects a feeling that any previous assumptions about a society composed of poetry, makers and readers, no longer inspire as much credence, if any, with a consequence for poets, that: “if they cannot identify a ‘tribe’ to tell the tale of, as Pound thought possible – then they must either reinvent the concept of community or talk to themselves.”<sup>667</sup>

As if in response to such difficulties, Olson creates a mythologist and historiographer in one incarnation: to continue the work done from the mid-nineteenth century, and looking back to a time when myths served to educate the elites. If he is writing for an educated coterie, then he is simultaneously seeking to expand through their consciousness a revival of a consciousness that may in its turn assist in the transmission of messages from remote and peripheral communities, in space and time, for the benefit of his contemporary world. Eliade expresses a very similar idea from across the Atlantic: “The goal is no less than to revive the *entire past of humanity*. We are witnessing a vertiginous widening of the historical horizon.”<sup>668</sup> Eliade argues that this can be achieved through a form of “historiographic *anamnesis*”, by which “man enters deep into himself. If we succeed in understanding a contemporary Australian, or his homologue, a Paleolithic hunter, we have succeeded in ‘awakening’ in the depths of our being the existential situation and the resultant behaviour of a prehistoric humanity.”<sup>669</sup> This is the mode of the mythologist, and another way of expressing a technique employed by *Homo Maximus*, whose attempt is, as a summation of Aboriginal philosophies expresses it: “all about keeping things alive *in their place*”<sup>670</sup>, as a fundamental prerequisite for survival.

This thesis has demonstrated Olson’s intuition of a peopled space called Country, referred to as such, without the conventional article in English, by the oldest living society on Earth. Country is maintained by human beings in their role as

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<sup>666</sup> Theodor Adorno, “Cultural Criticism and Society” Trans. Samuel and Shierry Weber, in *The Adorno Reader* Ed. Brian O’Connor (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 210.

<sup>667</sup> Nichols “Introduction”, in Blaser xii

<sup>668</sup> Eliade, *Myth and Reality*, Trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Harper and Row, 1968), 136.

<sup>669</sup> *Ibid.* 136.

<sup>670</sup> Rose, *Reports*, 26 (italics in original).

“the footprints of the ancestors who died and who still nurture the country and their descendants.”<sup>671</sup> Maximus, clad in his father’s shoes, enumerates the self-objects that comprise his Country, aware that its survival is intrinsically connected to his own, and by extension of all beings. His poetic technique needs to be commensurate to the task. Modernism, objectism and projectivism cannot exist on their own, just as individual species cannot survive in isolation. Olson once referred to: “the indissoluble union of Mr Pound and myself at the *pratigiano* or something of the skin of being, which is as true in poets’ loves for each other, and in parenthood, as it is in the whole forms of life, anyhow, trees, ferns, and eventually far rocks in the earth.” (*MU*, 387) The elements of Country cannot be separated from the practitioners that call out to its Being and if successful, call it into existence. Conversely: “Failure works back in time as well as forward. To kill off chunks of species and connectivities that form the matrix known as country is to start a process that works to erode the traces of the life that preceded us.”<sup>672</sup> As Bram correctly observes about *The Maximus Poems*, they constitute a multitude of stories from an incredible variety of sources, whose “common denominator is the place that engendered them or that accepts them and takes them into its (territorial-geographical) bosom.”<sup>673</sup> Acknowledging this acceptance is crucial to an understanding of how country works, and these myriad origins, elements and species all have their role to play in the *Maximus* gestalt.

If Olson’s achievement in relation to the concept of Country could be summarised from the point of view of his own epistemological and ontological background, it would consist of his success in articulating an integrated sense of body and place. The stories that Maximus collects and interprets are central to this role. As Muecke explains:

In Aboriginal country bodies are integrated with places via stories...Consider this cosmology as radically distinct from the Western philosophy in which, says Edward S Casey, ‘By the seventeenth century

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<sup>671</sup> Ibid. 175.

<sup>672</sup> Ibid. 175.

<sup>673</sup> Bram, 131.

place is largely discredited, hidden deeply in the folds of the all-comprehensive fabric of space.' The early modernists were in thrall to the infinite and space was composed of geometric abstractions relatable only to the mind, not the body. In this period, Aristotle's thought that place 'has some power' was forgotten, because the arguments that nature and place make to us were ignored in favour of masterful cognition.<sup>674</sup>

Conversely, Olson's "ALTERNATIVE TO THE EGO-POSITION" (*ML*, 29) sees a re-evaluation of philosophies of space. Moving from continental to universal consideration of space, he speculates that instead of humankind moving out into the universe, three years before to the first landing on the Moon, that

the actual universe as a geography has turned around and is moving toward us, at the very moment the species thinks it's going out into space. Actually space is coming home to occupy us – in fact, to re-occupy earth. Creation is turned the other way. (*MU*, 219)

At the outset of the second volume Maximus rejoices in the mythological connections between the ages he encompasses and the powers of nature that continue to engender his voice and his being:

Vast earth rejoices,

Deep-swirling Okeanos steers all things through all things,  
Everything issues from the one, the soul is led from drunkenness  
To dryness, the sleeper lights up from the dead,  
The man awake lights up from the sleeping  
(*MP*, II.2)

The poetry recalls Blake and Whitman in its Romantic, incantatory lines. Earth returns, in the sense that Blake's address invokes it,<sup>675</sup> and "Okeanos, the one which all things are and by which nothing / is anything but itself" (*MP*, II.2) is affirmed as the active spatial force which creates, restores and reunites the worlds of the senses and metastases. From unstable, liquid states of existence to a terra firma of the soul's awakening, a grounding and illumination, this process conveys a mystic experience of transformations in space, with the primal

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<sup>674</sup> Muecke, *Ancient*, 50.

<sup>675</sup> Blake, "O Earth, O Earth, return!", 65.

elements as the controlling vector of such movements. Part of this process is the realisation, as with the morphology of space above, that primordial spaces have the power to approach and identify human beings.

If, as Williams claimed, there are “no ideas but in things”,<sup>676</sup> it needs to be admitted that these comprise a collective of some variety, and in Olson’s oeuvre nothing less than the eternal and ongoing span of creation:

To return to things themselves is to return to that world which precedes knowledge, of which knowledge always *speaks*, and in relation to which every scientific schematization is an abstract and derivative sign-language, as is geography in relation to the countryside in which we have learnt beforehand what a forest, a prairie or a river is.<sup>677</sup>

The world before knowledge is infinite, and its phenomena exist apart from contemporary metaphor. As such it would appear almost impossible to poeticize, unless through naming, with the voice from the body to the “Ding / (an sich)”, as Olson echoes Heidegger in a poem omitted from the second volume of *The Maximus Poems* (OL 9, 37), or thing-in-itself, precision achieved through relinquishing claims of omniscience, bodily, proprioceptive transmission. According to Least Heat-Moon, the past is the communal equivalent of dreams, which prevent individuals from living an existence without meaning, and through which: “the listener, the traveller, can imagine he sees links between smithereens; from that hallucination, everything that we value arises. I’m speaking about shards and grids and crossings, about that great reticulum, our past.”<sup>678</sup> Through this reticulum ride mythological beings like Enyalion, creating the reticule as he passes through Country, gathering with a device that consists both of woven lines and empty space.

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<sup>676</sup> Williams, *Paterson*, 6.

<sup>677</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology*, ix. (italics in original).

<sup>678</sup> Least Heat-Moon, *PrairyErth*, 336.

The polis Maximus sings is liminal – on the edge of a continent for which it is metonymic: a community clinging to its craggy outcrop, facing the expanse that separates it from the civilizations that it was in part intended to extend and replicate, and with its back to an immense and complex space it has yet to understand. The irony is that its paradoxes and constraints are also the source of its flowering, from inauspicious sites of arrival. Adorno’s “negative dialectics” developed from and helped form a consciousness deriving from the post-War effect of “statelessness”, which introduced the implausibility of “mainstream race thinking”, arguably for the first time in twentieth-century discourse.<sup>679</sup> As has been observed, the human population of Maximus’ polis is enumerated in a mixture of languages and scattered names, as “isolatos” of indeterminate ethnicity, contingent on their next phase of migration. Olson’s vision of Gloucester may see it as a resting place for an extended movement of humanity, yet within the precariously placed settlement, its inhabitants’ activity, spelling out a subatomic to superhuman universe, is as edgy and urgent as ever, and related in its concerns to similarly located places worldwide.

It has been discussed that the shifting site Gloucester occupies also makes it an ideal location from which to carry out the essential Maximal tropes of bridging and crossing. Olson’s achievement can be regarded as having created: “an image of polis as a series of crossings.”<sup>680</sup> The outward directions, offshore location, reverse migration, and the Jungian voyaging in search of integrity are matched by journeys within, interpenetrations and prehensions, crossings that curve around and bisect the polis as a body of attentions. The protagonist, body and poem all migrate and realise these crossings through putting them into action and then closely observing this projective and proprioceptive process. As Herd also points out, there is also the crossing that is evident “in the poem’s method, and its imagery of interaction, each object being constantly engaged in and by a field of other objects.”<sup>681</sup>

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<sup>679</sup> Herd, “The View from Gloucester: Open Field Poetics and the Politics of Movement”, in Herd, Ed. 280.

<sup>680</sup> Ibid. 284.

<sup>681</sup> Ibid. 284.

## In/Completion

Olson's push towards the revival of archaic consciousness, or at least awareness of the archaic, situates his epic definitively in the American canon. Rasula claims the deciphering of the Rosetta Stone in the early Nineteenth Century represents a point from which a particular lineage developed in this respect: "Emerson, Thoreau, Melville, Hawthorne, Poe and Whitman can be read as inaugurating an imaginal bibliographic recovery of the oldest written records."<sup>682</sup> Olson can be placed in this continuum, whereby: "American poetry is the first full opening of a field of archaic, scattered, incomplete and scarcely surmised literacies from that compost library unearthed in the nineteenth century."<sup>683</sup> This work was also undertaken by those of Olson's successors - notably Doria and Boer, as well as Metcalf and Anne Waldman - who found inspiration in his lectures as well as in the *Maximus* project, and whose poetry and poetics also took part in "the archaic, restored exercises of *Homo projectivis*."<sup>684</sup>

As his health declined, Olson certainly expressed a sense of failure at not having completed *The Maximus Poems*, pointing out to his doctors that he would need another ten years of life in which to do so.<sup>685</sup> Whether Olson actually failed to complete his epic or not is a point that has yet to be agreed on, along with the more open question as to what exactly constitutes success and failure. Moreover, and given the transgressive aspects of his poetry and poetics, the achievement or even idea of a solution is arguably less important than the process through which it may be obtained. As Williams notes, that given writing is ultimately to do with the words themselves, Olson's productivity was commensurate with his ambitions, regardless of the final shape of his product. Good writing, Williams claims, consists of words which: "have a contour and complexion imposed upon

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<sup>682</sup> Rasula, 13.

<sup>683</sup> Ibid. 14.

<sup>684</sup> Rasula, 14, paraphrases Gustaf Sobin, *Luminous Debris: Reflecting on Vestige in Provence and Languedoc* (Berkeley: University of California, 1999), who in his chapter: "Reading Prehistory", states: "We are creatures, indeed, of interval, of innate longing. Locked into a continuous instant of projection, we as *Homo projectivis*, (if such a neologism can be permitted) finally come to the point where we can claim ourselves." Op. cit., 20.

<sup>685</sup> Boer, 149.

them by the weather, by the shapes of men's lives in places."<sup>686</sup> This is of more value than the fixed dimensions of a completed work. Besides, as Rasula aptly puts it:

In the tropics of American poetry, trope is the composting engine, a fundamental dislocation, forge or furnace of a different locus: the unpropertied space germane to language. Not the mysticism of another world, but another economy (another *oikos* or household) of language-in-production, words in emanation, not nation.<sup>687</sup>

Still, Olson admits to the need for tangible output, indicating a sense of under-achievement, while simultaneously pointing to how his later prose works in particular, and by implication the final *Maximus* volume, may be approached and utilised:

I'm happy that the book *Proprioception* was published.... I sat in Gloucester, suffering ... I didn't want to lose my world ... I wrote those essays – they're incongestible, or something. They're not readable. If they're interesting they can be dug up as signs, that's what I mean. (*MU*, 170)

Maximus is still in the contest, however, and his self-deprecatory "incongestible" [*sic*] comes across as disingenuous given the real weight behind his phrase "dug up as signs", which conveys a fuller sense of that happiness he refers to, that the archaeologist of morning has put his artefacts in a place where they can continue to create signage and exist in themselves after his own passing. If the book is an object, and Olson's language the start of an archive, then as Matthew Corrigan observes, reproducing a Lingsberg Rune on the cover of the *Archaeologist of Morning* is apt.<sup>688</sup> For the non-specialist reader, the rune is a fragment, which although visibly manifest, with its own discrete form and beauty, is still unclear with regard to meaning. That rune stands as emblematic of Olson's overall work, where there are guidelines, but these swirl around one another and double back to hint at an impasse in accessing the more obscure areas of his poetry unless the reader is prepared to take on his task as a sustained commitment. A poetics

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<sup>686</sup> Williams, *Imaginations*, (London, MacGibbon and Kee, 1970), 355.

<sup>687</sup> Rasula, 124.

<sup>688</sup> Matthew Corrigan, 'Materials for a Nexus' in Corrigan, Ed. 208.

where a semi-articulated and in some areas incompletely researched (from the poet's side) set of semantic and semiotic symbols creates lacunae in the process of understanding and mutual recreation. This involves the danger of making: "a thing half-realized, a massa confusa with a few guidelines for the mind to connect with another time. His craft may have taken its chief sense of itself from the archaeological: rootings and scrapings. Reading Olson can deteriorate into cryptology (game of). Sometimes the effort is worth it, sometimes not."<sup>689</sup>

Crafting a postmodern epic, taking an archaic genre and making its form contingent on twenty-first century content, invites charges of poetic paradox and asks for patience from the reader or recipient. The single-authored work, which contains so much material from outside sources, contains a multitude of voices expressed through a necessarily limited, local and partial perspective. Another part of the mission is to make it original and relevant to generations ahead, to unite a sense of historical and mythological forces to those that drive personal and familial consciousness. Reconciling individual and communal experience, family and the broader world, as in the famous "Letter 27, (withheld)" is a stance for recommencing as much as "the stopping / of the battle" (*MP*, II.14), a response to: "a "problem Olson called 'methodological', and its implications are as much moral as technical and as much political (in the broadest sense) as aesthetic."<sup>690</sup>

Myth supersedes history in *The Maximus Poems* not as a concept, but as the name for a process by which the human universe is restated, and its significance is

not only because it reveals patterns in human behaviour and therefore says something about the species, but because it gives the living planet weight and agency in a way that history alone does not when nature is recoded as a standing resource and cultural others are obstacles to be overcome.<sup>691</sup>

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<sup>689</sup> Ibid. 208.

<sup>690</sup> Bernstein, *Tale*, 272.

<sup>691</sup> Nichols, "Myth", 34.

Olson's special take on history, from the mythologist's viewpoint, is one that may struggle to be accepted in the post-1960s world, and the contemporary multi-narratives of the digital age. The question that remains largely unanswered is whether Olson's epic can find a readership in the twenty-first century. If it is accepted that Olson created an archive of language and a document that is *The Maximus Poems*, the issue remains that the latter is incomplete and that the former relies on a reader's recognition or "affective engagements that are as immeasurable as they are ineluctable."<sup>692</sup> Olson's elective affinities remain those of his choosing, and it is the prerogative of the reader to agree with their relevance in a context outside of the poet's immediate ken. Given the breadth of his use of mythology, history, geography and linguistics, it seems hardly surprising that Olson had no time to explore these fields in as much depth as he would have liked. The details from these disciplines that he extricates and puts on the page give nuance and immediacy to the stories that animate Maximus in his engagement with both his community and the world. Still, there seems to be a subliminal plea on the part of the poet for the reader to take him at his word. A sourcebook would only come posthumously, with Butterick's own epic work.

Olson's engagement with the sciences exemplifies these problematics. His affinities with Whitehead, for instance, are repeatedly given through textual references and borrowing, but then something seems to stop short. Middleton observes that Olson: "never explains directly why the sciences matter so much to him as a poet. It is no accident that 'Projective Verse' does not use the words 'science', 'scientific', or 'scientist', though it repeatedly alludes to these concepts."<sup>693</sup> At the time of its writing, physics was the discipline of power: held responsible for winning the war: "Physics claimed that it only was able to provide complete nomological explanations of what all matter, and by easy extension, the entire universe and everything in it, was made of. Physics was philosophy, ontology and epistemology rolled into one."<sup>694</sup> It is tempting to speculate that Olson ran with prevailing thought, and found in Whitehead an ideal vehicle to express the prevalent *Zeitgeist*. Having said that, Olson was also

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<sup>692</sup> Ibid. 35.

<sup>693</sup> Middleton, "Discoverable Unknowns", 40.

<sup>694</sup> Ibid. 41.

far from shy when it came to criticising and railing against his contemporaries, and his take on physics was far from orthodox, more open to the role of chance as well as its meta-dimensions, rather than seeking to claim expert knowledge of its processes. Olson would observe a space, or a place, and then attempt to explain what was happening there, content to assume that the processes and self-objects within that space or place could be taken as means through which to define it. The influence of Jung is also relevant in Olson's use of physics, harnessing the Jungian concept of "synchronicity" to his poetics, using it as a potential:

principle of composition: common link between such otherwise different modes as chance poetry, automatic writing, 'deep' image, projective verse, etc., & between those & the whole world of non-sequential and non-causal thought. That modern physics at the same time moves closer to a situation in which anything-can-happen, is of interest too in any consideration of where we presently are.<sup>695</sup>

As Rothenberg also acknowledges, there are problems here with the subjective role of the composer and potential for "indeterminacy"<sup>696</sup> with a certain sense of randomness taking over rules and principles of structure. The balance between creative expression and conforming to the systems that enable clarity of such expression is one that often seems precarious throughout Olson's work.

Despite such concerns, the actual words that Olson puts on the page fulfil his mission to make the text itself proprioceptive: to rise and travel a required distance over the terrain formed by the human being reading and recalling it, before returning to its site of grounding, through text, as an entity summoned, built and woven as the multitudinous aspects of its recreation. The glyphs and images derived from the Maya represent the concentration required to extricate them and interpret that process in itself, let alone their original meaning, in that proprioceptive sense: "of, how, the composing is, a matter of, the man behind any given stela – the 'syntax' or prose narrative." (*O/C* 5, 167)

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<sup>695</sup> Rothenberg, *Technicians*, 490.

<sup>696</sup> *Ibid.* 490.

As has been demonstrated, a field of study where Olson operated passionately yet also on its peripheries is that of linguistics, and specifically archaic representations of language. Olson was enthusiastic about Sumeria, for instance, seeing it as the cradle for Indo-European languages, and even went so far as to apply for a grant to visit Iraq to conduct research into Sumerian script. One problematic related to Olson's enthusiasm for Sumerian, as noted by Grieve-Carlson, is that: "Sumerian itself has proven difficult to place in any of the known language families."<sup>697</sup> From learning a language to consideration of related culture, this issue persists. Olson's insistence that the Sumerian, among other archaic cultures, was one which cultivated human dignity and where everyday life was imbued with a sense of natural order, law, spirituality and sufficiency also appears to evade empirical analysis. It is also worth reiterating his bypassing of the warlike tendencies of the Ancient Maya. Grieve-Carlson's critique can admittedly be applied to any number of poets around Olson's time, and would arguably be of more pointed relevance to some of his west coast contemporaries. Nevertheless, the charge stands: "The hard question he never fully faces is whether or not the Sumerians or the Maya or Pleistocene Man ever actually lived in such a culture. Olson's idea is interesting, but it suggests a romantic primitivism that he never entirely shakes off."<sup>698</sup>

Grieve-Carlson does, however, mention the "antidote" to such a tendency, assuming that in Olson's case it indeed was a threat to his *Maximus* project, namely, grounding: the same kind of grounding that is reflected in the use of language, deriving "primitive" and its cognate "primordial" from the base concept and word: "primary."<sup>699</sup> In Olson's own words: "I mean of course not at all primitive in that stupid use of it as opposed to civilized. One means it now as 'primary', as how one finds anything, pick it up as one does new – fresh/first."<sup>700</sup> Although the term postmodernism has come to stand for a variety of mixed microgenres and concerns, for Olson and those who understood him in personal

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<sup>697</sup> Grieve-Carlson, "Charles Olson and the Poetics of Postmodern History", in Grieve-Carlson Ed.103.

<sup>698</sup> Ibid. 103.

<sup>699</sup> Ibid. 115.

<sup>700</sup> Olson, *Selected*, 28.

as well as academic sense, such as Maud, the term's original meaning, now often distorted, consisted of "a new recognition of belonging in a primordial, tribal *sensus communis*, freed from the disintegration of the modernist self."<sup>701</sup>

If, as with any other cultural era, not only Antiquity but also the Pleistocene traditions can be looked at through canonical and methodological filters, then, according to Doria:

the methodological proves the more valuable. After we have stopped looking at cave paintings, reading excavation reports, and getting chronologies and blood-types straight, the habits of learning and reporting, the consideration of how things were done discretely and on a human scale in the Pleistocene, is what will remain. And what will re-shape our attention and restore to us our language and humanity.<sup>702</sup>

This is an era in which human beings need to create themselves, as in Norse mythology, from the ice. Their success or otherwise determines the existence and shape of the home, polis and overall gestalt. Postmodern human beings may appear to have had this process worked out for them, but its continued existence is contingent on their individual and collective memory. It is this combination through which Maximus exists, and which in turn he is determined to maintain, using these very "habits of learning and reporting" that Doria refers to above. The ability of Maximus to cultivate these habits determines his make up, the constituent elements of his being within the place he inhabits; in other words his and by extension the world's survival.

These habits can be detected in Olson's use of musicality and rhythm, which according to Bram are absent from *The Maximus Poems*. Yet, as this thesis demonstrates, Olson is a multi-faceted poet, who manages to incorporate a diverse set of techniques with success into his work. Bram is right to identify: "The element of repetition in Olson's poetry takes into account the textual framework and the transformation of speech into an 'object' in the world

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<sup>701</sup> Mellors, 196.

<sup>702</sup> Doria, 138.

through its writing”,<sup>703</sup> but it should be noted that this is not only a characteristic of Olson’s writing. His use of chants, musical elements and a distinctive prosody that uses and acknowledges influences ranging across cultures and historical eras has also been made evident. He admits that he is unable or not predisposed to writing cantos, like Pound, and refers to that structure as one which puts the song into “boxes.” (*MU*, 374) He is consistent in referring to Boulez and the serial composers as influences, and interestingly, although cryptically, refers to the game of Go in the same breath as serial music, unconsciously previewing the supposition of the nomadologists that chess and Go represent opposing strategies for writing, music and art on different sides of modernity.<sup>704</sup>

Considering the visual arts, Olson’s strategies can be seen in similar terms, and in some aspects their success is more immediately evident. In his lecture published as “Beauty and Truth”, Olson characteristically (over) stated: “I believe that the American painters, namely Mr Pollock and Mr Kline, in 1948, and I’m of their time, solved the problem of how to live. The problem since has been how to be at all.” (*MU*, 224) Affinities between Pollock and Olson have been noted, and the presence of former Bauhaus and later Abstract Expressionist painters at Black Mountain was a strong influence on the latter’s poetics. The canvas used by the above visual artists, as well as Twombly, for instance, constitutes a field upon which active attributes such as velocity, force, tensile strength and Deleuzian lines of flight are placed, and forms a contemporary link between the non-Euclidian prose of *Moby Dick* and the pages of *The Maximus Poems*. Like Olson, the Abstract Expressionists focused on the process of painting, recording the stages of how it came into creation, with the glitches and passages of doubt left

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<sup>703</sup> Bram, 109.

<sup>704</sup> Deleuze and Guattari compare the prescribed form of chess to the more fluid movements allowed by the game of Go. Chess pieces “have qualities...Each is like a subject of the statement endowed with a relative power, and these relative powers combine in a subject of enunciation, the chess player himself or the game’s form of interiority. Go pieces, in contrast, are pellets, disks, simple arithmetic units, and have only an anonymous, collective of third person function: “It” makes a move. “It” could be a man, a woman, a louse, a elephant.” (*N*, 3) If chess is a game for the state then Go is a form of resistance, movement against stasis, negative capability versus the sublime egotistical. Go is the anonymous id, the self of centre and circumference. Go pieces can be said to bookend Maximus: and the offshore islands in the blood are comparable to Go pellets. The objects listed here by Deleuze and Guattari correspond uncannily to those at the end of Olson’s epic: “my wife my car my color and myself” (*MP*, III. 229), and see below.

on the canvas, just as Olson's errata and less convincing moments of poesis also remain evident on the page.

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Maximus seeks to be the custodian, personified *genius loci*, or caretaker of the spirit, or vital essence of a place. His success in this field is beset with problems and contradictions, as for one thing: "the genius, i.e. the unique Gestalt of traits that make a place *this* place, is not simple in itself, nor is its working ever simple."<sup>705</sup> Casey goes on to mention an example that can be linked back to Olson's endeavours: "William Least-Heat Moon devotes over six hundred pages in his *PrairyErth* to the thick description of Chase County, Kansas, while admitting he has not fathomed the place."<sup>706</sup> Casey does not make a connection with Olson, but it is worth noting that *PrairyErth* approximates the same epic length as *The Maximus Poems*: commensurate with care, attentiveness and also mental restlessness, beset by the inevitable inquietude that arises with work unfinished, always a step away from completion, unfinished while there is still breath that animates the organic body that it seeks to become.

Olson also referred to Benjamin's famous essay on the camera and mechanical reproduction producing a static, finished product, replacing the more desirable and lifelike process of "continual making and creation." (*O/C* 5, 163) As he articulated further:

The hunger of man is to act, not to know, and he will act mechanically – inevitably – if knowing or literacy is valued for one moment except as he can discharge it in his own instrument of action, not by any separation of that action and some machine – a dialogue or a bolt of goods except as he can wear it as he wears his skin. (*O/C* 7, 239)

The living form that is comprised of content therefore manifests itself as language, objects, and the aforesaid "instruments of action." There is thus an

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<sup>705</sup> Casey, 303.

<sup>706</sup> Ibid. 303.

urgency to make these explicitly apparent in the whole gestalt of *Homo Maximus*, in order to explicate and educate practitioners of the polis.

Olson once claimed that all his works were aimed to end with a sense of the vehicular.<sup>707</sup> This can be interpreted as no ending, with the wheels or other devices of conveyance taking the reader along with the poet into the field of another volume, or around the peripheries of what has already been surveyed. Having said this, a field is traditionally ploughed, and a vehicle is most often associated with a car, or at least carriage over land which either bisects or circumvents space used for farming. Olson's early career friend, Edward Dahlberg, offers a comparison that has an ironic resonance in terms of the poet's personal life, if not poetics: "the plough is a sign of peacable ground-workers, but the rubber-tire is a tool of a nomadic, apathetic class that is constantly moving away from debts, marriage and boredom."<sup>708</sup> A century back, the fundamentals for this apparent cynicism are outlined by Ralph Waldo Emerson in "The Poet": "all symbols are fluxional; all language is vehicular and transitive, and is good, as ferries and horses are, for conveyance, not as farms and houses are, for homestead."<sup>709</sup> From "The K" to the last page of *The Maximus Poems*, Olson has these symbols directly in place, and their import is examined below.

Not opposed to contradiction, Olson is also on record as stating what appears to be the polar opposite:

And I would push on to this proposition: that the act of restoration (that anything – color, line, sound, a word, whatever – has to be returned to where we found it ((this strikes me as the same principle as ... there ain't no material except in human actions – that a man's own actions are not very interesting except as he forces them to conclusion – that merely he acts has been grossly 'dramatized' by most (*O/C* 8, 240)

It could be that having worked out the projective process to his satisfaction, Olson then perceived a sort of reverse corollary, or a sense of dissatisfaction at

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<sup>707</sup> Olson to Boer, see citation and reference below.

<sup>708</sup> Edward Dahlberg, *Alms for Oblivion*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1964), 84.

<sup>709</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Selected Writings*, Ed. William Gilman, (New York: American Library, 1965), 322.

the thought of work left hanging, particles in suspense, a lack of resolution. Maybe he was also allowing expression of counter-argument, or voicing an inner desire for completion as a way of validating his efforts, if only to himself. Whatever the case, it is an exceptional statement.

It needs to be stressed that for *The Maximus Poems* in particular: “No poem is an end product. Each is a controlled transformational process. As the cables of a suspension bridge graph a system of stresses, the words on the page plot stabilized energies.”<sup>710</sup> The process of production therefore takes on as much, or arguably more importance than the finished product itself: the very concept of finished being one contingent on accident and illness not intentional closure. The language used reflects this in its incomplete sentences and lack of punctuation indicating the flux that is being expressed, showing as many stages of its development as necessary to achieve integral success, or inherence. Benjamin Friedlander observes that for Olson, language “was not a tool for acquiring knowledge, but one of the sites where knowledge is acquired. Knowledge, then, is located (in language, in history, on the earth), and methodological rigor requires that one attends to this location.”<sup>711</sup> This location is far from static, as has been observed from the parallels connecting Olson and Indigenous knowledge of Country. As a result, a static object, even a book, appears insufficient to express the salient links comprehensively. Pops refers to a sense of tensions created by the presence of adjacent white pages and an high overall proportion of blank space in the epic, creating dynamism in their symmetry and engendering

realization that the white page is integral to the shape, that it has real existence as a complement of the design, as created space. A conventional book does not exist in such space, and *Call Me Ishmael*, which does, means not to be a book, but an object.<sup>712</sup>

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<sup>710</sup> Kenner, *Pound Era*, 171.

<sup>711</sup> Benjamin Friedlander, “Introduction”, in Grieve-Carlson, Ed. viii.

<sup>712</sup> Pops, 61.

As Olson wondered: “Where’s my Churinga?” Is it the composite of his creation in book form, is it a glyph on the Dogtown common or a found object among his possessions at 28 Fort Square, Gloucester?

### Final Self-Objects

Implicit in the creation of a nomad poetics, and especially considering a nomad epic, is a certain onus on the reader to respond to and accept the contest between typographical logic, or fixity, and the integrity and mobility of the objects positioned in the text. This positioning itself implies a paradox: the text is of necessity fixed, or located, just like Olson’s polis. The objects that bookend *The Maximus Poems* convey a mixed sense of fixity versus movability. The first lines, convey a tangible sense of *kinesis*, especially given the additional presence of newly forged metal, with its atoms still to settle from the “boiling water”, which itself is in motion, and finally, “the present dance” (*MP*, I.1). The first volume ends with an undisclosed object being brought in from outside the polis to the main street of Gloucester. *Maximus IV, V, VI* picks up from this “With a leap...an arabesque / I made, off the porch,” (*MP*, II.1) a form of movement appropriate to the filigree influence on Olson’s writing and text. The volume concludes with his movement away from land, in the floating box on the sea. The final volume starts with two dynamic verb phrases: “having descried the nation / to write a Republic” (*MP*, III.1), which constitute two out of only three lines which comprise the first poem (and page).

At the end of the final volume, Maximus calls forth four final self-things: “my wife my car my color and myself” (*MP*, III.229). The reader is confronted with a question: are these nouns to be taken as movable, given the sense of motion inherent at the beginning and end points mentioned, or do they represent a stasis that he has been working towards, with the increasing nominalization as the work progresses? Of these final words, the most cryptic is arguably his “color.” Does he mean to emphasize he is white, like Ahab’s whale, or is there more beneath the surface? If the whiteness of Maximus is to be his final word,

then he may be informing his reader that he has overcome the ship of state, and remains undefeated. This colour is unarguably that of the terrain on the page which surrounds these solitary words, a double space between each image. If white is his colour then he has incorporated himself into his poetic landscape and inscribed himself onto it simultaneously, declaring an end to his epic endeavours. These final images in *The Maximus Poems* appear fixed in their landscape, even though Olson appeared to be far from finished with his epic at the time of his death. This renders them as movable and transient as the space in which they are sited, given that the final volume consists largely of found objects; poems that were retrieved from unlikely locations, such as scribbles on receipts or beer mats. Their authenticity has been attested to, and their imagery is consistent with earlier poems, but the final words remain as unsettled as any other in the sequence.

When considering these four nouns at the end of *The Maximus Poems*, an aspect that differentiates them from the other beginning and end poems is the space between them, the spaces or interstices which surround them and to which the reader's eye is inevitably drawn. On one hand, the space can be said to represent a sense of quietude, that "the wild profusion of existing things"<sup>713</sup> (to use Michel Foucault's phrase) that characterizes the passage with the disembodied vowels has settled onto a single plane, into a composite order that underlines the sequence to end it. It is as if Maximus has moved out of his *heterotopia*, a world wherein the confused and unexpected assortment of things has defined his peregrinations through his own text, to a *utopia* of unfolding calm and order. On the other hand, this is obviously a place without locality, and therefore this is where the epic poem must end. The effect of the *heterotopia* has been to "desiccate speech, stop words in their tracks, contest the very possibility of grammar at its source",<sup>714</sup> and if we can accept, along with Foucault, that the effect of *heterotopias* is to "dissolve our myths and sterilize the lyricism of our sentences",<sup>715</sup> then this also appears to be Maximus' fate.

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<sup>713</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* (London: Tavistock, 1970), xv.

<sup>714</sup> *Ibid.* vxiii.

<sup>715</sup> *Ibid.* xviii.

A paradox involved in using the poetic body, and having as the final word, “myself”, as a conduit for knowledge through direct experience, where the distinction between perceiver and object ideally disappears, is that the thing that remains is to be stripped of abstraction. Olson aimed consciously to work with concrete and tangible objects, to place these into his poetry in ways that would help counteract what he sensed as the expanding gap between words and the things they purport to represent. Hollister refers to his desire to eliminate the encumbrance of the abstract, and “make English a language of a single grammatical case, a language in which all nouns are nominative and most things are nouns.”<sup>716</sup> Olson is on record as having made any number of outlandish statements on language, linguistics and poetics, but this particular stated aim remains unsubstantiated. Nevertheless, it has been shown that key areas in the *Maximus* sequence are densely nominalized, and nowhere more so than at the end. Olson’s intention seems more to have been to use language in a way which fuses nouns and verbs, giving nouns kinetic properties and verbs the solidity of nominalization, or “a historical form coherent with the density of [their] own past.”<sup>717</sup> Foucault points to the increasingly reflexive nature of things, and therefore the ending of *The Maximus Poems*, with a single word pointing out himself parallels the notion of western man entering a field of knowledge, as kinetic object in place of, and displacing, representation.

The final assemblage of words may also imply a challenge or an invitation to pick up these remaining, portable self-things and find out how they respond. The “color” could take an attentive reader back to its outset, and move through the same poetry again, albeit with a slightly altered sense of space, one where the depth of field can be further comprehended by the mobility of essences informing the synesthetic response. Enyalion the warrior-poet has his unspecified “color” – that of “beauty” – so perhaps, as Bram speculates: “Color is part of the armor of the poet, the warrior; he is the one shaping reality in his own measure.”<sup>718</sup>

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<sup>716</sup> Hollister, 34.

<sup>717</sup> Foucault, xxiii.

<sup>718</sup> Bram, 61.

The wife, the car, the colour and the self: the words that end the epic as it stands, take on additional resonance in such a context, to which may be added Sinclair's anecdote, namely: "Olson's car didn't do reverse. When a friend ... asked how Charles managed this thing ... the poet said 'Never go backwards.'"<sup>719</sup> It was, by all accounts, a large, white car. As at sea, so on land, a quest may be marked by these signs, if not metaphors. In "The K", he writes: "there is a tide in a man", and finishes with a set of four self-objects to presage if not parallel the ending of *The Maximus Poems*: "a bridge, a horse, the gun, a grave." (CP, 14) A bridge for the pontifex, a horse as a symbol for nomadic mobility, the gun for death (with its definite article) and a grave, floating on the Pacific for the orphaned Ishmael.

The vehicle as trope for the body and poem alike is central to an in-depth understanding of *The Maximus Poems*, at least in terms of speculation about the ending and its validity, which may have more in the way of cohesion and closure than acknowledged. In recalling the final stages of Olson's life, Boer remembers asking the poet whether the end of the second volume – the departure "in a box upon the sea" [MP, II.203] constituted the end of the epic itself. Olson denied that it was, and added, somewhat rhetorically: "you don't understand that. Don't you realize that *all* my books end with an image of the vehicular?"<sup>720</sup> This vehicular image is evident in the box, or floating coffin resurfacing on the ocean for Ishmael, it is also a psychic fulcrum in Olson's own personal life, with his second wife dying in a car accident. He refused to countenance a Volkswagen afterwards, the make that Betty Kaiser had been driving: a form of sailorly superstition, so to speak, with his own tragedy a correlative of sorts for those which beset the wider epic of the pathways towards modern America.

It is also worth observing the presence of the vehicle in relation to the practice of *bricolage*: for example, a car is on the surface engineered but on closer inspection made up of components and subject to alteration, such as a clothes hangar made into its aerial. As a car is made to conclude Olson's epic, so a bird, as *bricoleur*,

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<sup>719</sup> Sinclair, *Smoke*, 7/8.

<sup>720</sup> Boer, 91 (italics in original).

begins it again, effecting a bookending of sorts. The nomadologists define the activity of *bricolage* in the following terms:

the activity of roaming in the ruins of a culture, picking up useful bits and pieces to keep things going or even make them function better. The opposite, it has been suggested, would be engineering, the achievements of which seem to stand alone, made out of nothing deriving from the past.<sup>721</sup>

Bricolage is pragmatic and additive in its nature, seeking to build and repair in the face of a culture that jettisons and replaces its objects. The mystique of the car, and the engineering that engendered it, is countered by the notion that, logically speaking, only a deity can make something from nothing: a car, just like a human being, has its components, and an identity contingent on its relation to others. Nevertheless, a poet performs a related function: “A poet is a time mechanic not an embalmer. The words around the immediate shrivel and decay like flesh around the body. No mummy-sheet of tradition can be used to stop the process. Objects, words must be led across time not preserved against it.”<sup>722</sup>

Objects are also, as this thesis has demonstrated with regard to Olson’s community and those through which his poetry and poetics have been considered, not simply individual but also societal entities. As Anne Day Dewey observes, with particular reference to Olson’s use of Whitehead, the former:

came to see categories of perception (such as color, softness, and even fact – etymologically ‘made thing’) as products of public consensus. Although Whitehead emphasizes that these categories are humanly made rather than inherent in the physical world, he assigns them a reality at least equal to that of the material world, terming them ‘eternal objects’<sup>723</sup>

In this way, the list becomes a concluding chant, prosaic objects are invested with meaning that outlasts their temporary forms and the poetry ends with a sense of solemnity and ceremony.

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<sup>721</sup> Benterrak, et al. 148

<sup>722</sup> Richard E Palmer, in Blaser, 148.

<sup>723</sup> Anne Day Dewey, *Beyond Maximus: The Construction of Public Voice in Black Mountain Poetry* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), 39. See also, Whitehead, 40.

In summary, this ending of *The Maximus Poems* with the recitation of what have been demonstrated as votive objects: everyday and sacred, personal and communal, is a response to the problem for most human beings – or the “average man” not having:

the time to allow his car/chair/wife et al to exert nature, exactness of: their own force. Man living in exact relation to these: air ground water bird animal fire distance woman child smell taste feel/ etc, etc, will have plot for forces of such objects, will have the relation of their force in his own hand. But, lacking room, or space for the play of the force of ‘objects’: can’t allow such. Makes for aridity in prose... (O/C 3, 20/1)

Prose aside, the dynamics in the pages of Olson’s epic allow plenty of space for these objects to co-exist. Placed in an otherwise blank expanse, the final nouns are positioned in an almost ritualistic way, and with enough resonance to make it relatively unimportant that it was Boer and Butterick who actually put them there, acting not as Maximus himself, but on their intuition as intimate readers.

### Maximal Achievement / Country and the Transnational Archaic

Inherent to the achievement of the *Maximus* project is the incorporation of myth as enacted publically and with ceremony. As Rothenberg points out:

The tribe, the community, celebrates creation in story and rite because if it did not, creation would stop. Everything would fall apart, collapsing upon itself ....The importance of the public act of witnessing and honoring creation is that it lays bare and reconfirms the patterns of the world.”<sup>724</sup>

He warns: “We are in one phase now (the created), but we could easily return into the other (the uncreated) if we do not make adequate provision through our science, our myth, and its transmission.”<sup>725</sup> This recalls the message of “The Kingfishers”, as reiterated by Maximus, that attention is needed to forestall chaos

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<sup>724</sup> Rothenberg, “Introduction”, in *Origins*: Eds. Jerome Rothenberg, Charles Doria, Harris Lenowitz. (New York: Anchor Books, 1976), xix

<sup>725</sup> *Ibid.* xx.

and preserve culture, and that the primary mythological constituents of society are to be renewed for precisely this reason.

For Maximus, recollection of society and the self through re-enactment is more important than historical or theoretical knowledge, and despite all the specifics that comprise the text, this is where he never wavers. The point in time where he finds himself is as much a starting point as the conclusion of a sequence of events. When Eliade proposes: “We shall later see the consequences of archaic man’s thus deciding, at a certain moment in his history, that he would continually relive the crises and tragedies of his mythical past”<sup>726</sup>, he is referring to the present seen from the past, the past from its own viewpoint and the future from now. Olson notes that in the collective memory of humankind, “there are old tricks, old events and the oldest dreams and fears, persistent, underneath religion, science and that newest rigidity, collectivism, held there, needing to be registered.”<sup>727</sup> He credits predecessors in the field of anthropology for helping illuminate and explicate these, and surprisingly, given the infrequency of Sigmund Freud in his writing, acknowledges Jung’s erstwhile mentor for his work in helping people apprehend “what men have been reluctant to see through the eye of the poet, the depth of darkness behind man’s own image of himself.”<sup>728</sup> This is with the aim of recreating what is essentially a primordial stirring, what Rasula notes with reference to Duncan as: “primary animation of cosmos by deliberately tampering with boundaries, loosening psychic materials by mouth, myth muthologistics.”<sup>729</sup>

These operations take place within and help to recreate the concept of “sacred geography”, in First Nations America and Aboriginal Australia alike, despite the distinctions in how their respective mythologies are conceived of and expressed. Visual art, music, ritual and the presence of sacred objects, specifically the *Tjuringa*, form part of this recreation and its enunciation. This is primarily achieved not through individuals, but through a process which arises from and

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<sup>726</sup> Eliade, 91.

<sup>727</sup> Olson, in Corrigan, Ed. 4.

<sup>728</sup> Ibid. 4.

<sup>729</sup> Rasula, 47.

forms its own reality. Michael Bernstein observes: “To Olson, Maximus is not any one particular man, but himself a ‘process’, a part of a long heritage which reveals a way of responding to the world.”<sup>730</sup> Where Maximus is located is less important than what he represents, nothing less than “the poetic imagination itself, in its interaction with the landscape *of the entire earth*, that becomes the real ‘hero’ of the poem.”<sup>731</sup> This is the basis for invocation to figures of outward, islands in the blood and geography to be pushed back, as well as the value of votive objects or totems, be they large or small, conventionally animate or otherwise. Limits may constitute habitation within or without the self, and the poem in its entirety becomes “the Gestalt of what it can assimilate.”<sup>732</sup> As Heidegger proclaims: “Towering up within itself the work opens up a *world* and keeps it abidingly in force.”<sup>733</sup> This allows for it to be constructed as an amalgam of projection and proprioception.

As his health declined, and with the irony of the poet who wrote “proprioception” having “his mobility limited to the insides of cars”,<sup>734</sup> Olson went out west again. A further irony is that the vector that took him “west” had commenced in California, following a series of poetry readings. Sinclair recounts how the scene must have appeared, the New England poet being driven through the desert landscape of Arizona, on the way to recuperate at his friends’ ranch. Sinclair speculates how Olson, “perched like a huge crow”<sup>735</sup> (Clark’s simile has him “Buddha-like”),<sup>736</sup> would have regarded the country around him. A mountain would have been visible, the Baboquivari Peak, which, “Clark tells us, was sacred to the Papago Indians. They knew it as the centre of the world.”<sup>737</sup> By way of conclusion, Sinclair refers to another Olson triad, the one which occurs immediately before the epics final words: “He fingered three terms and laid them out like counters,”<sup>738</sup> Sinclair writes: “Mother Earth Alone” (*MP*, III.226).

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<sup>730</sup> Bernstein, Michael, *Tale*, 245.

<sup>731</sup> *Ibid.* 267.

<sup>732</sup> Kenner, *Homemade World*, 185.

<sup>733</sup> Heidegger, 43.

<sup>734</sup> Clark, 340.

<sup>735</sup> Sinclair, *Smoke*, 57.

<sup>736</sup> Clark, 341.

<sup>737</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>738</sup> Olson in Sinclair, *Smoke*, 57.

Across the continents, both those apparent and those overlaid with “deep-swirling *okeanos*” (*MP*, II.2), and considering a European contemporary of Olson’s, Joris identifies a similar trait linking the continents and poetics of Olson and Paul Celan:

a something that has to do with a stance, a way of being, a verticality... Celan wrote... ‘When I read my poems, they grant me, momentarily, the possibility to exist, to stand.’ That stance, that verticality, so important to the tall American Olson, so important, yet so slippery to the slight and burdened European – who let go, went with the horizontal flux of the water.<sup>739</sup>

Both poets died in early 1970, as Joris puts it: “leaving us to finish the century and imagine the next one.”<sup>740</sup> The bridging work is incomplete, for there are always more names that demand addition, as well as lives and landscapes that remain in need of recreation and reaffirmation. The stance that remains is MAXIMAL (and I spell it large here, for it comes without compromise).

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<sup>739</sup> Joris, *Margins*, 145.

<sup>740</sup> *Ibid.* 145.

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