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The Logos of *Maximus*: History and Storytelling in Herodotus and Charles Olson

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American poet Charles Olson expounded his theory of history in a 1956 lecture series, *The Special View of History*. There, he used the term *'istorin*, borrowed from Herodotus and meaning 'finding out for oneself'. This term would again appear in his poetry years later in "A Later Note on Letter #15", in volume two of his modern verse epic *The Maximus Poems*. Though Olson will claim Herodotus as the exemplar of this historiographical method, Olson's understanding of the concept is most informed by classicist J.A.K. Thomson's treatise *The Art of the Logos*.

Much of the scholarship on Olson's use of *'istorin* cites either the relevant passages from his aforementioned works, or those paragraphs from Thomson cited in George F. Butterick's annotated *Guide to the Maximus Poems*. This diminishes Thomson's affect on Olson's concept of history, as well as his understanding of storytelling in the oral-epic tradition and Herodotus. Here I explore more fully Thomson's theories of Logos, orality, and archaic storytelling traditions in an attempt to better support the role of breath and orality in Olson's 'projective verse' poetics.

The intended outcome of this presentation is to demonstrate that Olson's epic is reflective of much of what Thomson expounds in his research beyond the term

'istorin. I conclude by appealing to Ernst J. Bakker's distinction between conceptually and medially oral/literary discourses to argue that though *The Maximus Poems* were mechanically composed holographically and via typewriter, Olson's epic is best understood as being orally conceived.¹

Author

Matthew L. Kroll earned his BA (Philosophy) from Purdue University, and MAs (Continental Philosophy, Creative Writing) from the University of Essex. He is currently a PhD candidate in the Philosophy & Literature Program at Purdue. His dissertation examines American poet Charles Olson's relation with ancient Greek thought.

¹ In his *Poetry in Speech: Orality and Homeric Discourse*, Bakker argues, "[a] discourse that is *conceptionally* oral (such as a conversational narrative) is often *medially* oral as well, but it is also possible for such a discourse to be written. And a medially oral (phonic) discourse is often conceptionally oral, but instead it may be fully literate as to its conception (as in the case of an academic paper read out loud)" (8, italics in original).