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# Poems to the Sea and Painterly Poetics: Charles Olson, Robert Creeley, Cole Swensen

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## Chapter One: **CHARLES OLSON**

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## 1. Introduction

On at least four separate recorded occasions, while reflecting on his period of tenure at Black Mountain College, Charles Olson referred to the significance of Abstract Expressionist painting. Describing the writer Herman Melville who ‘as an American was a first practicer’ making ‘the first art of space’, Olson writes in *Chicago Review* that:

He [Melville] was already aware of the complementarity of each of two pairs of how we know and present the real – image & object, action & subject – both of which have paid off so decisively since. At this end I am thinking of such recent American painting as Pollock’s, and Kline’s, and some recent American narrative and verse ...<sup>1</sup>

In a seminar at SUNY Buffalo, Olson recounts how Franz Kline had ‘seized the advantage of putting the paint out on the world. Black and white were colors of such vitality after say 1948 ...’.<sup>2</sup> This is the year he began teaching at Black Mountain and one to which he makes consistent reference.<sup>3</sup> During a televised interview, Olson states ‘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’.<sup>4</sup> In a further interview conducted at his Fort Square apartment in Gloucester, where a reproduction of a drawing by Jackson Pollock was kept fastened to his fridge, Olson claims ‘it is necessary to produce action and things, all of which are explicit in their condition’.<sup>5</sup> Continuing to connect the time-span of his work at the college with specific generational ties, he then observes that:

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Olson, ‘Equal, That Is, to the Real Itself [1958]’, *Collected Prose*, ed. Donald Allen and Benjamin Friedlander (London: University of California Press, 1997) pp. 120-125 (p. 124).

<sup>2</sup> Charles Olson, in John Clarke’s notes for Olson’s Mythology Seminar [1965], *Collected Prose*, p. 411.

<sup>3</sup> Olson joined the faculty at BMC in 1948 after the departure of Edward Dahlberg who suggested Olson as his replacement. Olson continued to teach at the college in 1949; 1950 (briefly); and for the extensive period 1951-57 (with only short leaves of absence) when he served as rector of the college.

<sup>4</sup> Olson, Interview [1966], Charles Olson, *Muthologos: The Collected Lectures & Interviews*, ed. George F. Butterick (Bolinas: Four Seasons Foundation, 1979) Volume 1, p. 194.

<sup>5</sup> Olson, Interview [1968], *Muthologos*, Volume 2, p. 102.

in the group of men that I – that again are part of the break-out of 1956 – say a painter like Kline, a painter like Pollock, the so-called American abstract-expressionist painters. For them it was to make paintings that were so explicit ... and with the painters, it happened ten years – we were on to this whole question from, say, around 1948 on.<sup>6</sup>

Situated in the western hills of North Carolina, Black Mountain College was associated with collaboration and experiment in the arts. Running an interdisciplinary programme from 1933 to 1957, it brought many writers and visual artists into close proximity. As rector and guiding influence in the 1950s, Olson encouraged a spontaneous, quixotic culture of self-expression and creative freedom, collaborating with John Cage, Merce Cunningham, Robert Rauschenberg and Katherine Litz on a number of compelling interactions and performances. Poets were invited to make and respond to visual art, while artists became involved in the reading and writing of poetry. Prominent members of the New York School of painters such as Kline, Willem de Kooning and Robert Motherwell, as well as the critic Clement Greenberg, came to teach and participate in the summer sessions at the college. Students and staff made regular trips into the metropolis to visit studios, exhibitions, bars and readings, the gathering places for New York painters and writers.

The great diversity of Olson's preoccupations, both as a poet and as a teacher, is reflected in four comprehensive books documenting the life of the college: Martin Duberman's *Black Mountain: An Exploration in Community* (1974),<sup>7</sup> Mary Emma Harris's *The Arts at*

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., pp. 102-103.

<sup>7</sup> Martin Duberman, *Black Mountain: An Exploration in Community* (London: Wildwood House, 1974).

*Black Mountain College* (1988),<sup>8</sup> Vincent Katz's *Black Mountain College: Experiment in Art* (2002),<sup>9</sup> and Caroline Collier's and Michael Harrison's *Starting at Zero: Black Mountain College 1933-57* (2005).<sup>10</sup> Although rich in biographical information and anecdotal recollections from some of those involved, each of these studies incorporates only limited critical discussion of Olson's interactions with various visiting writers, painters, dancers and musicians, all of who contributed to the new aesthetic of spontaneity in progress at Black Mountain and beyond. Of the four books, Duberman most vividly portrays the intense creative atmosphere: for example, describing how Olson made the college:

an even more dishevelled physical plant; a place distinctive, in other words, not in endowment, numbers, comfort or public acclaim, but in quality of experience, a frontier society, sometimes raucous and raw, isolated and self-conscious, bold in its refusal to assume any reality it hadn't tested – and therefore bold in inventing forms, both in lifestyle and art, to contain the experiential facts that supplanted tradition's agreed-upon definitions.<sup>11</sup>

Ralph Maud's *Charles Olson at the Harbor* (2008)<sup>12</sup> is, according to the author, 'a reactive biography' repudiating the spread of 'misinformation' in Tom Clark's *Charles Olson: The Allegory of a Poet's Life* (1991),<sup>13</sup> although both books are only useful in providing a chronological guide to the principle events that shaped Olson's life. Far greater attention to Olson's theory of projectivism is given in Paul Christensen's *Charles*

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<sup>8</sup> Mary Emma Harris, *The Arts at Black Mountain College* (London: MIT Press, 1988).

<sup>9</sup> Vincent Katz, *Black Mountain College: Experiment in Art* (London, The MIT Press, 2002).

<sup>10</sup> Caroline Collier and Michael Harrison, *Starting at Zero: Black Mountain College 1933-1957* (Bristol: Arnolfini, 2005).

<sup>11</sup> Duberman, p. 355.

<sup>12</sup> Ralph Maud, *Charles Olson at the Harbor* (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 2008).

<sup>13</sup> Tom Clark, *Charles Olson: The Allegory of a Poet's Life* (New York: Norton, 1991).

*Olson: Call Him Ishmael* (1975),<sup>14</sup> Sherman Paul's *Olson's Push, Origin, Black Mountain and Recent American Poetry* (1978)<sup>15</sup> and Robert von Hallberg's *Charles Olson: The Scholar's Art* (1978).<sup>16</sup> With a narrower focus, Don Byrd's *Charles Olson's Maximus* (1980)<sup>17</sup> addresses some of the sources and approaches relevant to how Olson's poems were generated.

My specific concern is with Olson's compositional process but in contrast to Christensen, Paul, von Hallberg and Byrd, my focus lies with the evolving interconnectedness of poetry and visual art. In this chapter I argue that Olson expresses this relationship within his writing of the early *Maximus* poems. Closer to my own view is a line of critical interpretation that regards Olson's poetics as part of a larger unifying paradigm that formed the post-war American avant-garde. This ethos can be found in Daniel Belgrad's *The Culture of Spontaneity* (1998),<sup>18</sup> an overview of the arts in avant-garde circles (including Black Mountain) describing how 'the interaction of body, emotions, and intellect' became prevalent across artistic media during the late 1940s, so that 'spontaneity embodied a strategy of entering into improvisational "dialogue" with one's materials'.<sup>19</sup> Similarly, Olson's visual enactment of open-field poetics to create 'a more expansive page' as discussed in Kathleen Fraser's essay 'Translating the Unspeakable:

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<sup>14</sup> Paul Christensen, *Charles Olson: Call Him Ishmael* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1975).

<sup>15</sup> Sherman Paul, *Olson's Push, Origin, Black Mountain and Recent American Poetry* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1978).

<sup>16</sup> Robert von Hallberg, *Charles Olson: The Scholar's Art* (London: Harvard University Press, 1978).

<sup>17</sup> Don Byrd, *Charles Olson's Maximus* (London: University of Illinois Press, 1980).

<sup>18</sup> Daniel Belgrad, *The Culture of Spontaneity: Improvisation and the Arts in Postwar America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

Visual poetics, as projected through Olson’s “field” into current female writing practice’ (2000)<sup>20</sup> has influenced my reading of *Maximus*. The notion of the empty page becoming a ‘canvas or screen on which to project flux’<sup>21</sup> has informed my own position, and consequently, this chapter provides further research regarding the analogy that Fraser offers.

Of the key preoccupations with Olson’s work that are critically examined in the recent book *Contemporary Olson* (2015), the essays by David Herd and Peter Minter focusing on Olson’s presentation and negotiation of space, have been the most useful for my project. Herd observes how ‘the suppleness and scale with which [Olson] is able to figure the complexity of inter-relationships (whether between people, between people and the world or between areas of knowledge) makes him necessary reading’ appropriate to our own time.<sup>22</sup> Minter’s reading of a modern aboriginal painting through Olson’s projectivism provides a stimulating reassessment of the ‘transculturalness’ of open field composition.

Although most critical interpretation and literary scholarship emphasises the linguistic innovation pioneered by Olson, very limited research has been published regarding the actual influence of gestural abstract painting on Olson’s writing or on the convergence of

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<sup>20</sup> Kathleen Fraser, ‘Translating the Unspeakable: Visual poetics, as projected through Olson’s “field” into current female writing practice’, *Translating the Unspeakable: Poetry and the Innovative Necessity* (London: The University of Alabama Press, 2000) pp. 174-207.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 176.

<sup>22</sup> David Herd, ‘Introduction: Contemporary Olson’, *Contemporary Olson*, ed. David Herd (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015) pp. 1-21 (p. 3). Herd’s essay: ‘The view from Gloucester: Open Field Poetics and the politics of movement’, pp. 272-285. Minter’s essay: ‘Transcultural projectivism in Charles Olson’s ‘The Kingfishers’ and Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri’s *Warlugulong* pp. 257-271.

Projective Verse, Abstract Expressionism and modern dance, despite Olson's proximity to the practice of these art forms during his time at Black Mountain. Robert Duncan's contemporary review 'Notes on Poetics Regarding Olson's *Maximus*' (1956)<sup>23</sup> was the first, and remains one of very few evaluations to have made this connection. The critic who provides the most nuanced discussion of a link between projective verse and gestural painting is Ekbert Faas. In his essay 'Charles Olson' (1979),<sup>24</sup> Faas sees Olson's projective writing as sharing 'a common impulse' with various kinds of action painting, 'as in Sino-Japanese calligraphy and *Sumi-e* painting which flow from the autonomous spontaneity of the artist's bodily movements'.<sup>25</sup> He cites Pollock as an artist empathetic to Olson's realization that, as Faas puts it, 'the essence of reality is its life-force, and poetry as well as the other arts has to partake of this vitality in order to re-enact it'.<sup>26</sup>

My literature review has revealed that apart from this essay by Faas, there has been only limited literary or critical precedent for comparing either Olson's theory of open-field poetics, or his poetry, to Abstract Expressionist painting. In this chapter, I discuss my own reading of examples of his poetry and prose writing from the early 1950s in the context of his experience of Black Mountain and the congruent development of abstract painting by members of the New York School. Seen in parallel to the approach of these painters, 'composition by field' I will argue, is Olson's core principle. I will therefore examine how his compositional ideas correlate with other formulations of artistic

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<sup>23</sup> Robert Duncan, 'Notes on Poetics Regarding Olson's *Maximus* [1956]', *The Poetics of the New American Poetry*, ed. Donald Allen and Warren Tallman (New York: Grove Press, 1973) pp. 187-195.

<sup>24</sup> Ekbert Faas, 'Charles Olson', *Towards a New American Poetics: Essays & Interviews* (Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow Press, 1979) pp. 39-51.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 46.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 48.



expression where movement, direction and shape 'by-field' are guided by an enhancing discharge of energy to capture the moment of automatic gesture.

In the subsequent seven sections of the chapter, I focus on how Olson's methodology emerges and then is refined within individual poems and essays. These include several early *Maximus* poems and his writing on the artist Cy Twombly, all of which were completed in the vicinity of gestural abstract painting, reflecting and illuminating many of its attributes. By bringing his compositional practice closer to the concerns of painting and dance, Olson demonstrates a similar kinetic precision in his enactment of process, within a comparable projective space. Through juxtaposing literary and painterly considerations, I explore Olson's interaction with various visual artists and their work.

## 2. The Convergence of Projective Verse and Abstract Expressionism

Started in May 1950 and written over a period of three years, Charles Olson's first volume of ten *Maximus* poems was published by Jonathan Williams in October 1953. Using a local printer in Stuttgart, Germany where Williams was stationed in the American military, Olson's sequence appeared under the title *Jargon 7*, in a small edition of 350 copies. As a former student of Olson's at Black Mountain College, Williams was driven by an enthusiasm for both literature and visual art, especially the inventive new forms to emerge when these two disciplines either blend or collide. He therefore provided the printer Dr. Cantz with a calligraphic rendering of the word 'Olson' so that *The Maximus Poems 1-10* would have an Abstract Expressionist motif for the book's first cover.<sup>27</sup>

Praising these early *Maximus* poems in the journal *Origin No.12* (Spring 1954), Robert Duncan recognises Olson's awareness of the role of the body as fundamental to the action of writing poetry: 'a very structure of act, a speech as learned in the hand-ear-to-mouth as walking, an athletic language'.<sup>28</sup> Two years later in *Black Mountain Review, No. 6*, Duncan extends his appreciation and analysis of *Maximus* to note that Olson's poems return us to 'source in the act, the intellect actually manifest as energy, as presence is doing'.<sup>29</sup> Later in the same issue he goes on to describe the 'bravura brushstrokes' of the Abstract Expressionists and draws attention to 'the power and movement of the arm itself

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<sup>27</sup> Cover of Charles Olson, *The Maximus Poems 1-10*, reproduced in Katz, p. 277. Details about printing described in Christensen, p. 206.

<sup>28</sup> Robert Duncan, 'Near-far Mister Olson [1954]', excerpt in Christensen, p. 184.

<sup>29</sup> Duncan, 'Notes on Poetics: Regarding Olson's *Maximus* [1956]', *The Poetics of the New American Poetry*, p. 188.

... the involvement of the painter in the act'.<sup>30</sup> By juxtaposing poetry and painting as intelligence 'manifest as energy', Duncan identifies in Olson an American aesthetic of spontaneity, immediacy and bodily perception. For Duncan, a poet's emphasis on using language as an action upon the real corresponds to a painter's concern to make the application and materiality of the actual paint the experiential source of each work. He writes of the 'energy embodied in the painting (felt), which is now muscular as well as visual, contained as well as apparent: as in the work of Hoffman, Pollock, Kline ...'.<sup>31</sup>

Duncan's explorative ideas about the inter-connectedness of poetry to painting were shared by the close-knit group of experimental writers and artists who congregated at Black Mountain in the early 1950s. Publishing the work of Olson, Duncan, Robert Creeley, Denise Levertov, Paul Blackburn, Ed Dorn and others who are now collectively labelled as the Black Mountain Poets,<sup>32</sup> the journals *Origin* and *Black Mountain Review* reflected the ideas and practices circulating at the college that would contribute significantly to the arrival of a new sensibility in American poetry. All paid close mind to Olson's method of 'COMPOSITION BY FIELD' presented in his essay 'Projective Verse' (1950)<sup>33</sup> where he identifies what can be gained from his three guiding principles: movement, so that energy can be transferred; openness, so that form is never more than an extension of content; and process, so that one perception must immediately and directly lead to a further perception. Olson's poetics encouraged the writer to 'USE USE

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<sup>30</sup> Robert Duncan, *Black Mountain Review*, No.6, Spring 1956, cited in Harris, p. 182.

<sup>31</sup> Duncan, *The Poetics of the New American Poetry*, p. 188.

<sup>32</sup> Faculty at BMC included the writers Robert Duncan (1956) and Robert Creeley (1954, 1955 & 1956). Creeley was the editor of *The Black Mountain Review* for all seven issues 1954-57. Ed Dorn was a BMC student (1950-51 & 1954-55) and ran the printing press at the college.

<sup>33</sup> Charles Olson, 'Projective Verse [1950]', *Collected Prose*, pp. 239-249.

USE the process at all points, in any given poem always, always one perception must  
must must MOVE, INSTANTER, ON ANOTHER!<sup>34</sup>

Especially alert to the visual arts, the Black Mountain writers were involved in a joint venture of applying and positioning an emerging poetics. By entering a territory shared with Abstract Expressionist painters who were determined to keep a direct link between form and content, Olson and Creeley in particular, found the impulse to engage with similar issues of open-ended process. Their close proximity to the practice of Pollock, de Kooning, Motherwell and Kline, as well as Helen Frankenthaler, Philip Guston and Joseph Fiore, many of whom were directly involved with the college as teachers or as visitors,<sup>35</sup> encouraged Olson and Creeley to bring their poetics closer to concerns already fully present in the gestural language of abstract painting.

First published in *Poetry New York No. 3* in October 1950, Olson's essay 'Projective Verse' emphasized the rhythms of bodily perception. Connecting poetic language with nature, Olson championed 'the *kinetics* of the thing', a poetry concerned with 'energy transferred from where the poet got it, by way of the poem itself to, all the way over to, the reader'.<sup>36</sup> He appropriates Ernest Fenollosa's understanding of 'things in motion, motion in things',<sup>37</sup> especially how the ideogrammic process depends upon verbalising each action, keeping the language as flexible and alive as possible. 'Speech' for Olson

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<sup>34</sup> Olson, 'Projective Verse', *Collected Prose*, p. 240.

<sup>35</sup> Faculty at BMC included the painters Willem de Kooning (1948); Robert Motherwell (1949, 1951); Joseph Fiore (1949-56); and Franz Kline (1952). Visitors included Helen Frankenthaler (1950) and Philip Guston (1950).

<sup>36</sup> Olson, 'Projective Verse', *Collected Prose*, p. 240.

<sup>37</sup> Ernest Fenollosa, 'The Chinese Written Character as the Medium for Poetry', ed. Ezra Pound [1920] in Jon Cook, *Poetry in Theory: An Anthology* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004) pp. 116-128 (p. 119).

‘is the secret of a poem’s energy’ while everything in the poem ‘can now be treated as solids, objects, things’, each having ‘the play of their separate energies’. Considerations of time and space are tensions to be kept ‘immediate, contemporary to the acting-on-you of the poem’.<sup>38</sup>

What is crucial, as Olson realized, is the energy and direction of movement, the ‘energy transferred’ from poet to reader. He theorizes his own practice as one based directly upon the breath of the poet, whose verses would take shape ‘BY FIELD’, rather than in the lines, stanzas and ‘closed form(s)’ of tradition. Convinced, like Pollock, de Kooning and other Abstract Expressionist painters, that the work in hand shows all the processes of its creation, Olson seeks to make of his art a field or ground in which:

ONE PERCEPTION MUST IMMEDIATELY AND DIRECTLY LEAD TO A FURTHER PERCEPTION. It means exactly what it says, is a matter of, at *all* points ... get on with it, keep moving, keep in, speed, the nerves, their speed, the perceptions, theirs, the acts, the split-second acts, the whole business, keep it moving as fast as you can, citizen.<sup>39</sup>

The imperative of Olson’s ‘open-field’ poetics is ‘the process of the thing ... so to shape the energies that the form is accomplished’. Consequently, ‘projective verse is made’ when the poet recognises qualities such as immediacy, spontaneity and freedom. This open-ended approach to trust in pure process informs an almost daily exchange of letters between Olson and Creeley in the early 1950s, as they resolved questions of field poetics. This exchange of letters provided them with the mechanics and materials for Olson’s *The*

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<sup>38</sup> Olson, ‘Projective Verse’, *Collected Prose*, p. 244.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 240.

*Maximus Poems 1-10* and Creeley's *For Love: Poems 1950-1960*. Three examples from their early letters reveal the mutuality of influence – firstly, on June 21<sup>st</sup> 1950, Olson writes about:

The big baby, LINE / it's the whole damned problem, in / COMPOSITION BY FIELD, this / keeping of the line PURE ... we must hammer each line out as purely as each SYLLABLE, / or we're dead ducks.<sup>40</sup>

Then before receiving Olson's letter Creeley writes:

abt method / the line. Well to be straight with you / it's only my breathing as I write ... In these three months, or so: you've put down, by example, and straight speech: a whole logic for a line, attention to line. What others have said (the doc) but somehow haven't: quite made clear. The breathing.<sup>41</sup>

Thirdly, again Creeley, on August 23<sup>rd</sup>:

That's the kick – to TIE IN with the PRESENT, to have all the action / detail / development: just on the, that hinge: well to have NO THING but what is becoming / not, not: as a 'story' becomes but as, only as, the whole damn gig: becomes ...<sup>42</sup>

Mirroring the Abstract Expressionist's attention to the brushstroke and the application of paint, 'what is becoming' for both Olson and Creeley as reflected in these letters, is their concentration on the breath and the syllable in the making of the poem, to achieve the pure cadence of 'straight speech: a whole logic for a line'. The primary emphasis of the letters is the creative process itself: how it is within the line and the syllable that the poem actually moves. This continual state of 'becoming' applies equally to both poets and painters when they are focused on the language of gesture; where they are watching how things work, while relying on the authenticity that their energy provides.

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<sup>40</sup> Charles Olson to Robert Creeley [1950], *The Complete Correspondence, Volumes 1-10*, ed. George F. Butterick (1-8), Richard Blevins (9-10) (Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow Press, 1980-96), Vol.1, p. 126.

<sup>41</sup> Creeley to Olson [1950], *The Complete Correspondence, Volume 1*, p. 150.

<sup>42</sup> Creeley to Olson [1950], *The Complete Correspondence, Volume 2*, p. 106.

In 'Projective Verse', according to Olson, the page becomes a field in which 'the poem itself must, at all points, be a high energy-construct and, at all points, an energy-discharge'.<sup>43</sup> Similarly, in Abstract Expressionism the painting coheres through gesture and reach: the flow of energy from the artist's wrist, elbow and whole arm that meets the resistance of the canvas. Whether occupied with the application of words or paint, the point is how to express the movement of one's own consciousness. Fraser draws attention to the excitement Olson generated about 'the event of *making*' a poem where 'the mind moves and how the senses take note'.<sup>44</sup> The sense of moving outward from an energy source into an expansive space allows for 'the hands-on construction of a poem being searched out, breathed into and lifted through the page'<sup>45</sup> where every component is shifting, about to give way to the next in a constant flow of imagery.

Duncan argues that Olson's poetics in 'the action of the language' does more than simply restate Ezra Pound's Imagist manifestos from four decades earlier: that Olson's poetic intent starts with the image that is 'embodied in the language, a speech in which the eye works, and moving by means of the embodying in the language of the "act" toward the act – in taking hold.'<sup>46</sup> Olson's personal incorporation of the poetics of Pound and William Carlos Williams was reflected in his particular concern of how best to deal with contemporary reality, a sense that was shared by poets and painters alike who wanted to encapsulate the distinct nature of American experience, each as 'a complex of occasions'

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<sup>43</sup> Olson, 'Projective Verse', *Collected Prose*, p. 240.

<sup>44</sup> Fraser, p. 175.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 176.

<sup>46</sup> Duncan, *The Poetics of the New American Poetry*, p. 189.

with their own 'geometry of spatial nature'.<sup>47</sup>

Creeley refers to the interaction and 'close rapport', as he puts it, between poets and painters at Black Mountain; with painting providing 'a reassuring parallel' to the way poems were being written.<sup>48</sup> As a community for Olson, Creeley and Duncan, the College was a place for forming friendships; for exchanges of ideas and cross fertilisation, through teaching and dialogue. Olson pushed himself, his faculty colleagues and his students to find cross-references between disciplines: to be aware of limitations that had to be responded to and then overcome. The kinds of affinities and associations that occurred is best illustrated by Abstract Expressionist sculptor John Chamberlain's experience of Olson's literature class:

I didn't write poems. The rest of the people brought their poems and read them, and I brought four drawings ... When I made those drawings, I couldn't figure out how to deal with the edge of the page. I'd make a drawing and it would get tight, staking the borders. So I made sure I went off the edge, and then I could do it. I had to teach myself.<sup>49</sup>

Whether in writing, drawing or dance, Olson believed in the expansive, expressive gesture rooted in direct experience: one was obliged to push against boundaries to move outward and beyond them.

Under Olson's influence and leadership at Black Mountain, the emphasis on movement,

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<sup>47</sup> Charles Olson, 'Maximus to Gloucester, Letter 27 [withheld]', *The Maximus Poems*, ed. George F. Butterick (London: University of California Press, 1983) pp. 184-185 (p. 185).

<sup>48</sup> Robert Creeley in 'Robert Creeley in Conversation with Charles Tomlinson [1964]', Robert Creeley *Contexts of Poetry: Interviews 1961-1971* (Bollinas: Four Seasons Foundation, 1973) pp. 13-28 (p. 25).

<sup>49</sup> John Chamberlain, from an interview (2001) with Vincent Katz in 'Black Mountain College: Experiment in Art', Katz, pp. 13-236 (p. 210). Chamberlain was a BMC student (1955-56).



openness and process through experimentation and interaction with the material world promoted an improvisational poetics, while similarly embracing the notion of a perceptual field, full of infinite creative possibility. Duncan summarizes Olson's understanding of how the projective field is shaped by the internal relations between one element of the composition and another:

The point: just as the ear and eye have been incorporated in the act of making in language, the locomotor muscular-nervous system is being called into the adventure. The disciplines of the ear and eye are primary – soundings and focusings – in order to be prepared in this work.<sup>50</sup>

To this Duncan adds 'the discipline of movement', for the potentiality of what is being said is, for Olson, analogous to acts of bodily motion, as poet and resulting poem go from point to point with as much energy as possible. These same concerns are especially present in the gestural painting of Motherwell, de Kooning, Kline and Fiore who are teaching at Black Mountain in this period, and exemplified by the energy and vast spaces of Pollock's "all-over" canvases.

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<sup>50</sup> Duncan, *The Poetics of the New American Poetry*, p. 191.

### 3. Rhythm is Image: Charles Olson and Jackson Pollock

Rhythm, as an individual signature of the poet or painter, contributes significantly to the intuitive aesthetic of both Olson and Pollock. Olson's key demand for the arts was that 'kinesis' should replace 'mimesis' through the kind of 'intent and attention' that the artist is capable of, in their concern for the 'IMAGE of possibilities implicit in the energy, given the METHODOLOGY of its use'.<sup>51</sup> Faas points out that Pollock's paintings 'were well known to Olson', although in terms of field poetics, 'no other poet or artist before him has discussed the evolving new aesthetics in more far-ranging and comprehensive terms than Olson himself'.<sup>52</sup> David Anfam writes that Olson's conception of the poem as an energy field was 'stimulated by Pollock's extemporizing approach'.<sup>53</sup> Reflecting upon Olson's sense of trying to maintain a direct relation to the poem under hand, Creeley proposes that in each instant 'there can be no prior determination of the form except that which is recognized as the writing occurs'. Creeley considers this to be parallel to Pollock's method 'where what you are thinking about is constantly to try to articulate that responsibility which what you see demands'.<sup>54</sup>

Throughout his career, Olson insisted upon immanence as perceived through the senses. In 'Projective Verse' he connects the poet's physiology to the process of composition, wanting to make the poem into a field of action in which to transcribe every creative move, while at the same time, engaging with the poem as an improvisational event. For the 'projective' poet or painter, artistic creation becomes a simple release of natural

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<sup>51</sup> Charles Olson, 'The Gate and the Center [1951]', *Collected Prose*, pp. 168-173 (p. 172).

<sup>52</sup> Faas, p. 39.

<sup>53</sup> David Anfam, *Abstract Expressionism* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1990) p. 192.

<sup>54</sup> Creeley, *Contexts Of Poetry: Interviews 1961-1971*, p. 26.

forces, a natural event in itself, or as Olson puts it: ‘from the moment he ventures into FIELD COMPOSITION – puts himself in the open – he can go by no track other than the one the poem under hand declares, for itself’.<sup>55</sup> It is this impetus of Olson’s to work ‘in the open’ which Faas identifies as offering an affinity with the impulse of action painting. Similarly aware that the poetic of ‘field composition’ can be extended across the arts, Christensen states that the rhythms of the writing process itself, rooted in Olson’s facts of experience, erode the divisions between subject and object as part of bringing the poem into being:

The poet and his poem are one thing in that the poem is a fact of his total responsiveness, integral and unmodified; it is a precise projection onto paper, through the means of language and typography, of the poet’s surfaces of awareness.<sup>56</sup>

Olson emphasized how poetic speech, what he called ‘the “solid” of verse’<sup>57</sup> depends on its fidelity to the poet’s rhythm of breathing and their rhythmic patterns of thought. Olson’s adherence to these rhythms of embodied perception as the basis of artistic composition has a special relevance and relationship to the rhythmic mobility that characterised Pollock’s invigorating approach to painting.

Set out in the form of a poetic list (1950), Pollock’s aims concur with Olson’s projective model of poetic process:

States of order –  
organic intensity –  
energy and motion

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<sup>55</sup> Olson, ‘Projective Verse’, *Collected Prose*, p. 240.

<sup>56</sup> Christensen, pp. 81-82.

<sup>57</sup> Olson, ‘Projective Verse’, *Collected Prose*, p. 244.

made visible –  
                  memories arrested in space,  
human needs and motives –  
acceptance –<sup>58</sup>

Pollock's absolute concern in his breakthrough 'poured paintings' of 1948-50 was 'energy and motion / made visible'. The kinetic of a word, phrase or poetic line is its energy and motion and Olson accepts that 'from all over the place, the syllable comes, the figures of, the dance ... I say the syllable, king, and that it is spontaneous'.<sup>59</sup> Responsive only to the present moment, to the 'projective act', Olson's understanding affirms aspects of Pollock's earlier statement (1947) about being immersed within the process of composition, when he famously says:

When I am *in* my painting, I'm not aware of what I'm doing. It is only after a sort of "get acquainted" period that I see what I've been about. I have no fear of making changes, destroying the image, etc., because the painting has a life of its own. I try to let it come through. It is only when I lose contact with the painting that the result is a mess. Otherwise there is pure harmony, an easy give and take, and the painting comes out well.<sup>60</sup>

This ambition to be '*in*' the present moment, '*in*' the process, '*in*' the work as it is being made is comparative to Olson's projective theory: both Pollock and Olson want to connect composition to the body. Pollock's comments about his exploratory, open-ended manner of process and gesture informed Harold Rosenberg's fascination with the creative act as an existential, risk-laden moment of self-revelation:

At a certain moment the canvas began to appear to one American painter after another

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<sup>58</sup> Jackson Pollock, handwritten statement [1950] found among Pollock's studio papers, *Jackson Pollock: Interviews, Articles, and Reviews*, ed. Pepe Karmel (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1999) p. 24.

<sup>59</sup> Olson, 'Projective Verse', *Collected Prose*, p. 242.

<sup>60</sup> Pollock, 'My Painting [1947]', *Possibilities*, Winter 1947-48, *Jackson Pollock: Interviews, Articles, and Reviews*, pp. 17-18 (p. 18).

as an arena in which to act – rather than a space in which to reproduce, re-design, analyse, or ‘express’ an object, actual or imagined. What was to go on the canvas was not a picture but an event.<sup>61</sup>

If Pollock’s canvas was a single arena for his impulsive, undivided attention, then in the first *Maximus* poems that emerged from the poetics of ‘Projective Verse’, Olson saw the empty page ‘as an arena in which to act’. *Maximus* offered Olson potential, as Fraser observes, for ‘the visualized topos of interior speech and thought – that full or fully empty arena of the page imagined into being’.<sup>62</sup> Olson’s attention to the immediacy of open-field composition correlates with Rosenberg’s understanding of Abstract Expressionism as ‘action’ painting. In the ‘act’ of self-projection, the painter becomes a *Maximus*-like figure where, for Rosenberg, ‘each confrontation of the drawing board or canvas is a singular situation calling for a new act – and the act and the artist are one’.<sup>63</sup>

The compositional process Olson articulates in his correspondence with Creeley is extraordinarily close at times to an action painter’s sensibilities, when he claims, for example, that his creative impulse involves ‘trying to throw the materials I am interested in so that they take, with all the impact of a correct methodology’.<sup>64</sup> In another letter he writes about achieving a poetry where ‘the proportion, the distribution of weight given same parts as all, seems, exceptionally, distributed & accurate’,<sup>65</sup> a clear analogy to

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<sup>61</sup> Harold Rosenberg, ‘The American Action Painters [1952]’, *Art News*, December 1952, Harold Rosenberg, *The Tradition of the New* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1994) pp. 23-39 (p. 25).

<sup>62</sup> Fraser, p. 175.

<sup>63</sup> Rosenberg cited in Belgrad, p. 109.

<sup>64</sup> Charles Olson to Robert Creeley [1951], ‘Mayan Letters’, *A Charles Olson Reader*, ed. Ralph Maud (Manchester: Carcanet, 2005) p. 93.

<sup>65</sup> Olson to Creeley [1951], ‘Mayan Letters’, *A Charles Olson Reader*, p. 99.

Pollock's "all-over" effect. These letters reveal how Olson shares with Pollock a trust in the action and unity that arrives in the practice of making.

Theories about Pollock's work rely heavily on the documenting of his working processes by Hans Namuth. His iconic black and white photographs of Pollock working in his barn studio at Springs, some with Lee Krasner watching, were taken on weekends through the summer and autumn of 1950, coinciding with the publication of Olson's 'Projective Verse' in the October. Pollock had declined an invitation from Black Mountain to join the faculty for the summer sessions. The previous year *Life* magazine had run the notorious 'Is He the Greatest Living Painter in the US' article, bringing Pollock unprecedented exposure. Namuth's photos had enormous cultural influence and impact in creating the popular image of Pollock that defined Abstract Expressionism, for as Evelyn Toynton observes:

The Pollock whom Namuth presented to the world was a shaman figure, charged with uncanny force, engaged in a ritual dance in which the man and the painting become one, just as all the disparate elements within the painting coalesce into a unified whole.<sup>66</sup>

As a revealing record of an abstract painter's process, these black and white stills offer a telling equivalence to Olson as he tracks the flux of energy to spontaneously generate a number of lines for the poem 'I, Maximus of Gloucester, to You' in a letter to Frances Boldereff, dated 17<sup>th</sup> May 1950. Moving seamlessly from a prose sentence into verse lineation, Olson writes:

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<sup>66</sup> Evelyn Toynton, *Jackson Pollock* (London: Yale University Press, 2012) p. 77.

... One loves only form, and form only  
comes into existence when the thing is born. And the thing may lie around  
the bend of the next second. Yet, one does not know, until it is there,  
under hand.

the thing may lie  
around the bend of the nest  
second, time slain, the bird! the bird

there, strong, thrust, the mast, flight, o kylix! <sup>67</sup>

Acting on ‘the obedience of his ear to the syllables’,<sup>68</sup> Olson manipulates ‘around the bend of the next second’ to become ‘around the bend of the nest / second, time slain’ to arrive at the key image for the poem: ‘the bird! the bird’ that will roam the visual field. The drafting of each line provides a sense of the writer listening carefully to himself, focusing intently on the emerging sound of each syllable forming into each phrase as an event.

‘Instant by instant, aware of some several forces’<sup>69</sup> both poet and painter are dealing with a series of new circumstances, in their explorative process of composition: ‘this push’ as Olson puts it in ‘Projective Verse’. Similarly shaping and advancing both the poetic and visual imagination of the 1950s, Olson’s writing of the poem is analogous to Pollock’s ‘poured paintings’ of the same period. In parallel with the trace of the painter’s movement that dominates Pollock’s image-making, ‘I, Maximus to Gloucester, to You’ charts directional shifts in Olson’s mind as he circles around the two overlapping ‘fields’ of Maximus and Gloucester. Likewise, in Namuth’s images of Pollock, the artist is

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<sup>67</sup> Charles Olson to Frances Boldereff [1950], typescript reproduced in Maud, *Charles Olson at the Harbor*, p. 140.

<sup>68</sup> Olson, ‘Projective Verse’, *Collected Prose*, p. 241.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 240.

rhythmically circling the laid out canvas, working from all sides, varying the pace between precise and more frenetic applications of paint. Marks range from thicker raised lines spooled from sticks or poured directly from the tin, to brushed or splattered gestures of thinner densities of colour, all demonstrating Pollock's virtuoso ability to control his materials.

With a similar sense of perpetual motion in 'I, Maximus of Gloucester, to You', Olson uses phrasal rhythm to accelerate and expand individual lines. To read the poem is to have a sensation of energy and movement, as if each phrase is a new opening that reaches out towards a fresh image. This allows each stanza to weave its own pattern, develop its own complexity, as in the closing lines of the first section:

o kylix, o  
Anthony of Padua  
sweep low, o bless

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!<sup>70</sup>

Deborah Solomon astutely describes the qualities of Pollock's tapering line, how he 'can make it tauten, slacken, halt, plunge, soar, race and fly'<sup>71</sup> in the act of composition. Seeing one of these paintings in the flesh, the viewer is keenly aware of the volatile animation of paint, the layering of oil and enamel on unprimed canvas; there is both the rawness and fineness of charged calligraphic lines frequently switching direction; and

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<sup>70</sup> Charles Olson, 'I, Maximus of Gloucester, to You', *The Maximus Poems*, pp. 5-8 (p. 5).

<sup>71</sup> Deborah Solomon, *Jackson Pollock* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987) p. 207.



there is the emphasis on lyrical, bodily gesture to create this material energy displayed on the gallery wall. Toynton describes this overwhelming presence of Pollock's work as 'one of immense power, a raw, explosive aliveness'.<sup>72</sup>

It is this impulse of energy and action that drives 'I, Maximus of Gloucester, to You'. Olson's hero by 'that which matters, that which insists, that which will last'<sup>73</sup> is charged with the responsibility of rediscovering the 'sea city' of Gloucester, Massachusetts. This is a search for the energies that shape the personal experience of the poet and the social history of its citizens. One thought displaces another as Olson's projective word, phrase or line seizes the immediacy of its situation, as across sections three and four of the poem where Maximus tells us:

... the water glowed,  
black, gold, the tide  
outward, at evening

when bells came like boats  
over the oil-slicks, milkweed  
hulls

And a man slumped,  
attentionless,  
against pink shingles

o sea city)

one loves only form,  
and form only comes  
into existence when  
the thing is born

born of yourself, born

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<sup>72</sup> Toynton, p. 52.

<sup>73</sup> Olson, 'I, Maximus of Gloucester, to You', *The Maximus Poems*, p. 6.

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 <sup>74</sup>

Like Pollock's paint flowing from his sticks and brushes, Olson's syllables stream spontaneously as one word, one thought triggers the next. Words, phrases, figures of speech might occupy the same space, the page; and yet they seem apart, dispersed, as if within this sudden accumulation of thought, sensation and feeling. The gathering 'of a bone of a fish / of a straw, or will / of a color' as materials for the nest, parallel the poet's own inclusive thought processes. Olson could continue in any possible direction where, as the speaker instructs in section one, 'the thing you're after / may lie around the bend', as if to say that, all of it is happening now, in an ongoing, continuous present.

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<sup>74</sup> Olson, 'I, Maximus of Gloucester, to You', *The Maximus Poems*, pp. 6-7.

#### 4. Figure and Field: Olson's *Maximus* and Pollock's *Autumn Rhythm*

Evoking what is physical and spatial in the American continent itself, the work of Olson and Pollock is exuberant, epic and expansive. 'I take SPACE to be the central fact to man born in America', Olson writes for the opening of his study of Herman Melville (1947), adding that 'it is geography at bottom, a hell of wide land from the beginning'.<sup>75</sup> In Olson's subjective sense of geography and history, attending to the visual field is an elliptical process of mapping: part of a continuous energy stream that is rippling outwards from the body of the writer into 'the push of the line under hand at the moment'.<sup>76</sup>

Through bodily gesture which starts with the breath, that 'push' is an integral part of projective poetics that aims to hold the inter-connectedness of space, time and nature. Between Olson's theory of poetic utterance as a dynamic energy field and the methods refined by Pollock in his 'poured paintings', there are several overlaps concerning how they employed the relationship of 'figure' to 'field'.

In writing *Maximus*, Olson mirrors Pollock's achievement of creating a gestural open field where there can be no preordained limitations imposed on the 'projective act'. The experiential texture of the verse created through Olson's use of open syntax, extreme fluctuations of line and frequent caesuras, create an overwhelming energy. This is defined by Faas as a body-based organisation of language where 'the poet's "projective act" resembles the gestural autodynamics of action painting'.<sup>77</sup> In his surrender to the physical energy of the field, Olson's soundscape is comparable to Pollock's "all-over"

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<sup>75</sup> Charles Olson, *Call Me Ishmael* [1947], *Collected Prose*, pp. 1-105 (p. 17).

<sup>76</sup> Olson, 'Projective Verse', *Collected Prose*, p. 243.

<sup>77</sup> Faas, p. 46.

image: the inflection in the speaker's voice in the poem equal to the variation of the painterly trace or gesture in the painting. In the movement and music of the *Maximus* poems where the breath rhythm, according to Faas, 'determines the sequence of sounds', the reader or listener will:

relive the process of creation and share the dance of cosmic forces that has found a voice in the poem's words and rhythms ... The poem like a painting by Pollock, has 'a life of its own', its creator simply trying to 'let it come through'. Rather than the poet writing the poem, the poem writes the poet.<sup>78</sup>

Throughout his multi-decade sequence, Olson puts Maximus in the position of taking up the dynamics of his situation requiring, as Duncan notes, a 'keen sense of what eye and ear need be. Sights and soundings'.<sup>79</sup> The ability to see with 'eyes / as a gull's are'<sup>80</sup> and then to 'look right straight down into yr pages, into the pages of this sheet'<sup>81</sup> is a priority for Maximus, as well as the importance of hearing all that might be revealed:

facts, to be dealt with, as the sea is, the demand  
that they be played by, that they only can be, that they must  
be played by, said he, coldly, the  
ear!

By ear, he sd.  
But that which matters, that which insists, that which will last,  
that!<sup>82</sup>

Set against the continuous and energizing power of the sea, 'that which matters, that which insists' will be heard and 'dealt with'. The speaker's emphatic tone driven by the

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<sup>78</sup> Faas, p. 47.

<sup>79</sup> Duncan, *The Poetics of the New American Poetry*, p. 194.

<sup>80</sup> Olson, 'LETTER 6', *The Maximus Poems*, pp. 30-33 (p. 31).

<sup>81</sup> Olson, 'LETTER 5', *The Maximus Poems*, pp. 21-29 (p. 22).

<sup>82</sup> Olson, 'I, Maximus of Gloucester, to You', *The Maximus Poems*, p. 6.

percussive rhetorical repetition of ‘they be’, ‘can be’, and ‘must be’, proposes that all oppositional forces can be held in check. Duncan refers to Olson’s ‘discrimination of speech’ and his ‘gift of spirit and of tongues’.<sup>83</sup> With regard to Pollock, Anfam asks:

Is this amazingly mutable line that constellates such myriad allusions and possibilities the line of the mind, the eye, or the hand? Namuth’s revelation that Pollock was “not drawing on the canvas so much as in the air above it” implies vistas in the mind’s eye. Yet these virtuoso traces also betray great physical discipline.<sup>84</sup>

Anfam argues that Olson’s awareness of Pollock’s methods led to his emphasis on the bodily basis of creativity.

In *Maximus* the body similarly operates as an instrument of the eye. Olson is involved in a balancing act of recalling an image from memory at the same time as making it seem present, so as to produce a simultaneous image informed by a sense of time, history and place. Charting the fields of contemporary and historical Gloucester is for Olson ‘a primary act’ of having ‘been there’, for as Creeley observes:

Again and again he comes “back to the geography of it”, that human “landscape”, which must be given “out ... of this low eyeview, size”. He is manifest of an *inside* that of necessity bears itself, discovers its own measure, maps a world “not discovera” unless initial in fact ... to make a record of the fact of having witnessed one’s self, or heard, or felt, or seen, something uniquely specific to the fact one hoped to make particular.<sup>85</sup>

What Creeley describes as ‘record of the fact’ is equal to Olson’s conception of document: in Olson’s field, Gloucester is a dynamic cultural organism whereby his

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<sup>83</sup> Duncan, *The Poetics of the New American Poetry*, p. 192.

<sup>84</sup> David Anfam, ‘Pollock Drawing: The Mind’s Eye [2005]’, *No Limits, Just Edges: Jackson Pollock Paintings on Paper*, ed. Susan Davidson (Berlin: Deutsche Guggenheim, 2005) pp. 22-34 (pp. 33-34).

<sup>85</sup> Robert Creeley, ‘Introduction’, Olson, *Collected Prose*, pp. xi-xvi (p. xii).

‘witnessed’ particulars are assembled in the act of ‘forewarding’. Utilizing the kinetic of the poem to rove, birdlike, from one thing to another in a non-linear progression, the speaker discovers:

feather to feather added  
(and what is mineral, what  
is curling hair, the string  
you carry in your nervous beak, these

make bulk, these, in the end, are  
the sum.<sup>86</sup>

Over seventeen-feet-long and almost nine feet tall, *Autumn Rhythm: Number 30*<sup>87</sup> is one of the three immense canvases produced by Pollock in late summer and autumn of 1950. Arcs of dominant black paint rise then fall, twist around and around before unfurling into a cumulative flurry of free improvisation. In the process, Pollock’s most prominent pourings and strokes become the impetus for elaborating new forms with more black paint, while erasing surplus lines with floating gestures of white, or patches and smears of ochre and pale blue. It is as if Pollock’s vast pictorial handwriting had gained aerial momentum. Seeing the canvas first hand, so animated is the dance of *Autumn Rhythm*, that it defies one’s belief that the whorls and strands of paint are not moving. Pollock’s great innovation with this painting is the totality of the image, which Pepe Karmel argues is achieved through:

his refusal to let the eye rest for more than an instant: guided by the picture’s hidden structure, it moves continuously from point to point across the surface. New contours

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<sup>86</sup> Olson, ‘I, Maximus of Gloucester, to You’, *The Maximus Poems*, p. 5.

<sup>87</sup> Jackson Pollock, *Autumn Rhythm: Number 30*, 1950, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. The painting was included in the exhibition *Jackson Pollock* at the Tate Gallery, London (now Tate Britain) March-June 1999.

emerge as old ones merge back into the web. Form comes momentarily into being and then dissolves.<sup>88</sup>

In his study (1999) of Namuth's photographs of Pollock at work on *Autumn Rhythm*, Karmel builds a composite digital image showing the floor-stretched canvas at an early stage of development. His research reveals that Pollock began the work with an ideogrammic image of three figures, fluidly made with poured and dripped lines, that are dispersed across the painting. In amongst the initial splashes and splatters that tie the composition together, these rhythmical configurations suggest an archaic depiction of three twisting, balletic human figures.

Using something from the world as a starting point, then through a variety of applications responding to the different viscosities of enamel and oil paint, Pollock allows the materiality of his medium to dismantle his original representations. The dancing figures dissolve beneath layer upon layer of his intuitively choreographed freewheeling lines, although their initial rhythm continues to be felt in the finished painting. Confronting *Autumn Rhythm* to consider what Pollock's actual painting process involved, Kirk Varnedoe is reminded about:

how often the application of fluid paint entailed a variable-speed, calligrapher's control of thicks and thins, manipulated in close quarters at only the tiniest separation from the canvas, and with a near-obsessive meticulousness.<sup>89</sup>

The painting negotiates the maximum push of Pollock's poured lines into expansiveness, and the counteraction of some of these lines trailing off or pulling back. Olson provides a

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<sup>88</sup> Pepe Karmel, 'Pollock at Work: The Films and Photographs of Hans Namuth', *Jackson Pollock*, ed. Kirk Varnedoe and Pepe Karmel (London: Tate Gallery Publishing, 1999) pp. 87-133 (p. 131).

<sup>89</sup> Kirk Varnedoe, 'Comet: Jackson Pollock's Life and Work', *Jackson Pollock*, pp. 15-77 (p. 52).

similar to-and-fro in his verse where a full statement is implied by the long poetic line lunging across the page, but the complete sense of the line is withheld, caused by an abrupt ending, and then a further rush of thought applied to the page with improvisatory spacing. Ideas emerge through action as Olson searches for the co-existence of stability and spontaneity, revealing his affinity with Pollock's supple grace and balancing instincts:

... the form  
that which you make, what holds, which is  
the law of object, strut after strut, what you are, what you must be, what  
the force can throw up, can, right now hereinafter erect,  
the mast, the mast, the tender  
mast!

The nest, I say, to you, I Maximus, say  
under the hand, as I see it, over the waters  
from this place where I am, where I hear,  
can still hear<sup>90</sup>

Olson's line is flexible, for Maximus is involved in the primary acts of dancing and building, 'the law of object, strut after strut', as he distributes his words on the page. Lending a texture to the poem, the rich gathering then weaving together of themes and images produces sudden contrasts: for example, that between the intimacy of what is 'under the hand' and seeing 'over the waters' at a distance. Sections of *Autumn Rhythm* shift between a diffused, impressionistic rendering before Pollock's line re-establishes itself as a more defined coil or contour. In their effort to find the primordial roots of the image-making process as the thing to be projected, both Olson and Pollock are prepared to let the representational figure move back and forth within the pictorial depth of the

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<sup>90</sup> Olson, 'I Maximus of Gloucester, to You', *The Maximus Poems*, p. 8.



compositional field with a heightened lyricism. The force of creativity is underlined throughout *Maximus*: how visual inspiration can be solidified into words or paint or body language, the exciting sense of movement that brings a poem or a painting or a dance onwards, the ‘forwarding’ that drives it into being. Olson’s is a sonic art form as much as it is an art of meaning, and *Maximus* communicates its sense partly through his modifications of syntax and cadence. Visual accords and discords arise out of Pollock’s painting, as well as an intangible sonic dimension that is both musical and rhythmical in its resonance with the viewer. There is something about *Autumn Rhythm* that invokes a hum, as though it might suddenly reverberate more violently at any second. With its appearance as a translucent field of agitated atmosphere, forceful and ethereal by turns, the painting can be compared to an ocean, whose array of sounds may accumulate and accelerate into the tumultuous roar of a breaking wave. In *Maximus*, Olson captures the same sense of vitality and freshness of sea-air over saltwater, which is interwoven with the harshness and heroism of maritime life in his ‘sea city’ of Gloucester with ‘its stories / as good as any of us are’.<sup>91</sup> This human connection to the sea is palpable in every single poem.

As Olson states in “Projective Verse”, on entering ‘into the FIELD’, every aspect of the poem, ‘the syllable, the line, as well as the image, the sound, the sense’ must be managed in relation to one another, ‘taken up as participants in the kinetic of the poem’<sup>92</sup> enabling *Maximus* to ‘tell you / what is a lance, who obeys the figures of / the present dance’.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> Olson, ‘LETTER 5’, *The Maximus Poems*, pp. 21-29 (p. 23).

<sup>92</sup> Olson, ‘Projective Verse’, *Collected Prose*, p. 243.

<sup>93</sup> Olson, ‘I, Maximus of Gloucester, to You’, *The Maximus Poems*, p. 5.

Metaphors of the pen as a 'lance' and syllables as dancing 'figures' roll off the speaker's tongue as Pollock's enamel falls from the can or brush onto the canvas: the vocation of the writer or painter is to act. In his dance of syllables, Olson allows his diffused 'off-shore' subject of 'I, Maximus of Gloucester, to You', to slowly evolve from the poetic field with the potential of the human-in-space for action which, according to the closing lines of the poem, is more:

than memory, than place,  
than anything other than that which you carry

than that which is,  
call it a nest, around the head of, call it  
the next second

than that which you  
can do!<sup>94</sup>

Olson sustained his writing of *The Maximus Poems* over the course of two decades (1950-1970). After establishing Maximus as a figure within the field of the opening poem, Olson had to address the conventions of compositional framing that generally remove the poet from the position of his or her own immediate experience. To retain his closeness of contact with Gloucester, according to Byrd, Olson had to overcome the problems of:

aesthetic distance, historical perspective, and scientific objectivity ... History, geography, archaeology, economics, and political science are all, no less than the aesthetic, disciplines of distance.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> Olson, 'I, Maximus of Gloucester, to You', *The Maximus Poems*, p. 8.

<sup>95</sup> Byrd, pp. 77-78.

Olson realized that having created this field within which his hero Maximus and his 'root' city coincide, that if subject and object are to merge more fully, then the sequence required a recovery of sources. Olson's impulse was of digging into where you are, to deal fully with the particulars of the field in close-up. This entailed accumulating an immensity of detailed information about Gloucester as a fishing port, undertaken with an obsessive yet informed degree of scholarship.

Duncan's observation of 'source in the act' in 'an aesthetic based on energies'<sup>96</sup> that he found in *Maximus*, was certainly present under Olson's leadership at Black Mountain, where staff and students became increasingly involved with the visual potential of the field's entirety, whether on the canvas or on the page. Olson's commitment to an enquiry of epic scale is equally reflected in the painting practice of Robert Motherwell.

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<sup>96</sup> Duncan, *The Poetics of the New American Poetry*, pp. 187-188.

## 5. Source in the Act: Olson and Robert Motherwell

As a long unfinished poem that begins as individual letters and sets of letters of varying length and scope, *Maximus* is at once singular and plural. It opens with the epigraph ‘all my life I’ve heard / one makes many’.<sup>97</sup> Within an American tradition reaching beyond Pound and Williams to Walt Whitman, Olson created an active, flexible open form that allowed him to commit to a circular manner of working whereby each letter or poem relates to his wider cycle of creation. Olson’s acute visual sensibility allowed him to contribute to, and be informed by, the poetic-painterly aesthetic that preoccupied those Abstract Expressionists teaching at Black Mountain. Within this mutually enriching experimental community, Olson’s pronouncements on open-field poetics link directly to the open form compositional ideas that prevail in the work of Robert Motherwell.

The guiding principle that Olson shared with all these painters, but with Motherwell in particular, according to Belgrad, was ‘the imperative to integrate the free play of the unconscious with an empirical “reality principle” in order to arrive at truth’.<sup>98</sup> Mary Ann Caws observes how ‘the strongly American poetry’ of Olson resonates ‘in various moments’ with ‘the kind of grittiness and innate force that Motherwell’s best paintings show’.<sup>99</sup> Caws suggests Olson and Motherwell have an equivalence in their shared sense of vigour, fluidity and monumental gesture in the way they set out towards achieving greater breadth and lyricism in their respective media. The ‘various moments’ of comparison Caws only hints at in her reading of Motherwell can be more emphatically

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<sup>97</sup> Olson’s epigraph for *The Maximus Poems* follows the dedication ‘for ROBERT CREELEY – the Figure of Outward’.

<sup>98</sup> Belgrad, p. 37.

<sup>99</sup> Mary Ann Caws, *Robert Motherwell: With Pen and Brush* (London: Reaktion Books, 2003) p. 157.

drawn when considering Motherwell's fiercely present and expansive images for his two extended series of paintings titled *Elegies* and *Opens* (both unfolding over several decades) in relation to Olson's poems for *Maximus*.<sup>100</sup> Motherwell's constant exploration of collage to express subjective experience within the visual field is similarly in accord with Olson's approach.

From the early 1950s onwards, many of the paintings in the *Elegy* series were given the generic title *Elegy to the Spanish Republic* to evoke the tragic events of the Spanish Civil War (1936-40) while alluding to a larger collective struggle for freedom of expression.<sup>101</sup> Composed of pure energy, these are vast canvases in which the repeated black oval-shaped forms are variously pushed and transformed against an almost white field of partially marked out rectangles. One is reminded that like the *Maximus* poems, these paintings were conceived as statements of conviction that reach a heroic scale. To stand in contemplation before one of Motherwell's *Elegies* is to become witness to the painter's process of composition.<sup>102</sup> The painting has been made as a field of response so that the initial impulse of thought, the source of action, remains present in the final image. One is especially aware how Motherwell modulates the field with exact nuances of pigment and different weights of colour, getting the right liquidity and quantity of his massed black;

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<sup>100</sup> Started in 1950 and continually added to until his death in 1970, Olson's *Maximus* consists of over 340 poems published in 3 volumes: *The Maximus Poems* (1960); *Maximus Poems IV, V, VI* (1968); and *The Maximus Poems: Volume Three* (1975).

<sup>101</sup> Worked on from 1947 up until Motherwell's death in 1991, the *Elegy* series totals over 200 paintings. In *Elegy to the Spanish Republic No.1*, 1948, his original motif accompanies Harold Rosenberg's poem 'A Bird for Every Bird'. The motif was scaled-up for *At Five in the Afternoon*, 1948-49, titled after the alternating line in Federico Garcia Lorca's poem 'Lament for Ignacio Sanchez Mejias' which mourns the death of a bullfighter.

<sup>102</sup> Examples from both the *Elegies* and the *Opens* were shown in *Robert Motherwell: A Centenary Survey of Major Works* at the Bernard Jacobson Gallery, London, January-March 2015.

how energy is generated by combining his emotional, intellectual and visual experience in the act of ‘making’ the painting.

Robert Hughes uses poetic analogy to describe the ‘breadth, grace, discipline and lucidity’ in Motherwell’s measured voice, considering him an artist of ‘superb though admittedly fitful balance who has managed to raise a magisterial syntax of form over an undrainable pond of anxiety’.<sup>103</sup> Hughes emphasizes the concentrated presence in the severity of Motherwell’s brushwork, the emotional charge of his impasto, observing how each *Elegy* painting had to be ‘located in the world of feeling, of feeling about the world’, that his work was meant to be ‘an art of subject-matter’.<sup>104</sup> An imposing authority is gained by repetition and rhyme: in the *Elegies* Motherwell achieves assonances through deploying associative edges of shapes for their visual and emotive power. As the defining motif of the black ovoid is reiterated and reprised, there is a rhythmic sense of vast glyphs being held in space and time, as in an over-magnified segment of a musical score. Dore Ashton remarks upon the harsh sonorous tones that frequently emanate from Motherwell’s densely applied paint in the *Elegies* describing him as an expressionist ‘who knows the corrective of geometry and measure. There is in him the *grito* (cry) of pain and pleasure ... He strains to expel the blackest of sounds, but also the trill’.<sup>105</sup>

In terms of the ‘blackest’ audible music registering across a relational field; the exact

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<sup>103</sup> Robert Hughes, ‘Robert Motherwell [1983]’, *Nothing If Not Critical: Selected Essays on Art and Artists* (London: Collins Harvill, 1990) pp. 290-294 (p. 291).

<sup>104</sup> Robert Hughes, *American Visions: The Epic History of Art in America* (London: The Harvill Press, 1997) p. 495.

<sup>105</sup> Dore Ashton and Jack Flam, *Robert Motherwell* (New York: Abbeville Press-Albright Knox Art Gallery, 1983) p. 30.

same juxtaposition of deathly shadow and heat of the bullring; the same intense  
'thereness'; all are at the heart of Olson's poem 'This' (1951) coalescing into the 'plain  
danger' the speaker knows 'is going on at all time / as of you or anyone since':

... wood, a  
bowl of gray wood, of  
an afternoon, already  
shadowed (4  
pm: very fast, high, sharp  
rockets, a crazy trumpet  
of a band, few  
people, sloppy  
cowboys picadors matadors bulls

*but out there, on that dirt, in front, directly  
before your eyes, more, yr existence:*

*death, the  
possibility of same, the certitude  
right there in front of yr  
eyes, god damn yr  
eyes<sup>106</sup>*

Just as the formidable spatial demarcations in an *Elegy* painting advance and accentuate the drama, Olson brings out the full force of each emphatically rendered word: '*the certitude*' of life-taking is seen and experienced '*directly*' as a spectacle that can't be avoided, so '*god damn yr / eyes*'. This evocation of mortality is '*put before your eyes*' in the same black-and-white terms as Motherwell's visual shorthand of opposites where light and shadow represents life and death, while expansion and contraction equates with freedom and confinement. Olson's contrast is just as sharp and elemental in its assertive immediacy, for '*out there, on that dirt ... yr existence / death ... the certitude / right there*'. Motherwell's spatial clustering is reflected in Olson's intricate recapitulation of

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<sup>106</sup> Charles Olson, 'This', *Archaeologist of Morning* (London: Cape Goliard Press, 1970) pp. 29-30 (p. 29), (my numbering as the volume was issued without pagination).

words key to the content – ‘there’ and ‘in front’ and ‘yr eyes’ – to constitute a verbal chain that projects in two lines across the page to the right before variously receding in further lines towards the left hand margin.

Olson’s writing of the early 1950s, both in poetry and in prose, not only shares Motherwell’s accumulation of creative energy and largeness of expression, but also reflects his pictorial practice. For Motherwell, the content of painting becomes ‘the feeling “body-and-mind” ... an event in reality, the interplay of a sentient being and the external world’.<sup>107</sup> At Black Mountain as rector of the college, Olson promoted certain organising principles that he summarises as ‘function, process, change ... interaction and communication’.<sup>108</sup> Knowledge gained from a communal artistic energy put towards making art informs part of the second poem in his sequence ‘ABC’s’ (1951), where the speaker tells us of those:

... who lie  
coiled or unflown  
in the marrow of the bone

one sd:  
of rhythm is image  
of image is knowing  
of knowing there is  
a construct

or to find in a night who it is dwells in that wood where shapes hide<sup>109</sup>

In writing a poem or making a painting, action is about moving towards form: the poet or

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<sup>107</sup> Robert Motherwell [1944], *The Collected Writings of Robert Motherwell*, ed. Stephanie Terenzio (London: University of California Press, 1999) p. 32.

<sup>108</sup> Charles Olson, *OLSON: The Journal of the Olson Archives 2*, Fall 1974, p. 11.

<sup>109</sup> Charles Olson, ‘ABCs (2)’, *The Collected Poems of Charles Olson* (London: University of California Press, 1997) p. 173.



painter locates instances of experience that both put form to knowledge, and make form from knowledge, through the creative act. With everything in a condition of self-realization, these lines of the poem read as a formula of causal relationships on which Olson's theory of 'Projective Verse' rests: of how rhythm as 'image / of image' leads inevitably to 'a construct', in other words, a particular of reality, which is one of many objects occurring in the field 'at every given moment of composition'.<sup>110</sup> Seventeen years later 'in gloom on Watchhouse / Point' Olson is still grappling with how, from 'an actual earth of value' Maximus might best 'construct' his poem:

... from rhythm to  
image, and image is knowing, and  
knowing, Confucius says, brings one  
to the goal: nothing is possible without  
doing it.<sup>111</sup>

In Olson's remapping process, 'image is knowing, and / knowing' about one's locality, enabling him to vision and re-vision the field of Gloucester as a terrain of both factual and imaginative detail. In 'MAXIMUS, FROM DOGTOWN – II', for example, the speaker 'in stately motion to sing' draws strength from syntactical repetition of proper nouns set against moments of elemental wonder:

... loving in the snow  
and sun  
                                    the weather

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<sup>110</sup> Olson, 'Projective Verse', *Collected Prose*, p. 243.

<sup>111</sup> Charles Olson, untitled fragment, dated March 6<sup>th</sup> 1968, *The Maximus Poems*, p. 584.

on Dogtown  
is protogonic but the other side of heaven  
is Ocean

filled in the flower the weather  
on Dogtown the other side of heaven  
is Ocean

Dogtown the under  
vault heaven  
is Carbon Ocean  
is Annisquam

Dogtown the under  
vault – the ‘mother  
rock: the Diamond (Coal) the Pennsylvanian<sup>112</sup>

Olson’s repetitive naming of particulars is the catalyst for the activation of space, achieving what Creeley called ‘a location constantly occurring’: an apprehension of forms gained in the actual process of writing.<sup>113</sup> Occurring at every compositional moment, Olson believed that these particulars:

must be handled as a series of objects in field in such a way that a series of tensions (which they also are) are made to hold, and to *hold* exactly inside the content and the context of the poem which has forced itself, through the poet and them, into being.<sup>114</sup>

Byrd, von Hallberg and Fraser all acknowledge Olson’s accumulation of facts and particulars; how his handling of these ‘objects in the field’ is the action of the poem. Byrd argues that the openness of *Maximus* ‘as a process of revelation’ arises from the interplay of two simultaneous relationships that ‘are at once syntactical and spatial’.<sup>115</sup> He notes that Olson brings a poem ‘to an immediate coherence by developing concrete

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<sup>112</sup> Charles Olson, ‘MAXIMUS, FROM DOGTOWN – II’, *The Maximus Poems*, pp. 179-180 (p. 180).

<sup>113</sup> Robert Creeley cited in Kevin Bezner, ‘A Location Constantly Reoccurring’, *Oyster Boy Review 11*, *Poetry Annual*, 1999, p. 3.

<sup>114</sup> Olson, ‘Projective Verse’, *Collected Prose*, p. 243.

<sup>115</sup> Byrd, p. 62.

associations' with 'images answering to images'.<sup>116</sup> According to von Hallberg, what Olson seeks here is a poetic field where 'expression must be inclusive, and not gracefully so; the parts and pieces should show'.<sup>117</sup> Fraser describes how the energy of the projective poem is an investigative means that engages 'an alchemy of colliding sounds and visual constructions, valuing irregularity, counterpoint, adjacency, ambiguity'.<sup>118</sup> All three critical readings articulate how Olson seizes upon the benefits of working in the open: how by discarding 'inherited line ... the "old" base of the non-projective'<sup>119</sup> as Olson sees it, the line becomes the rhythmic measure of the poet's own breath 'as the poem is getting made, the attention, the control, that is right here'.<sup>120</sup> Byrd emphasises how Olson's 'literal biological mechanism of speech' overcomes 'the veil of syntax' that causes rhythm and gesture to separate.<sup>121</sup>

The form of address in *Maximus* involves both personal and public declaration: for a poem to be projective, Olson states in his essay, it has to be 'projectile', 'percussive' and 'prospective'.<sup>122</sup> 'Projective Verse' reads like an expansion of Olson's basic premise of taking a deep breath to activate 'swift currents of the syllable'<sup>123</sup> in poems that have an openness of utterance. As a manifesto, it shares a great deal about intention with Abstract Expressionist painting, especially the way it is explained by Motherwell who through his writing, editing and lecturing activities, became the intellectual centre of the

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<sup>116</sup> Byrd, p. 34.

<sup>117</sup> von Hallberg, p. 140.

<sup>118</sup> Fraser, p. 176.

<sup>119</sup> Olson, 'Projective Verse', *Collected Prose*, p. 239.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 242.

<sup>121</sup> Byrd, p. 63.

<sup>122</sup> Olson, 'Projective Verse', *Collected Prose*, p. 239.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 243.

group of painters.<sup>124</sup> With de Kooning, he established a lecture programme and roundtable discussions at the renowned ‘Studio 35’ in East Eighth Street. By the time Motherwell came to teach at Black Mountain, he had already adopted several ideas about automatic drawing and painting. His focus on the relationship of gesture to open form emerged after visiting Mexico for six months with the Chilean painter Roberto Matta. Analysing the new aesthetic that was developing in his work, he writes:

I think there is a certain austere, highly formalized mystery in them as a result of the tension between the automatic images (which are ... highly associative patches of color) and the abstract structure.<sup>125</sup>

Motherwell’s instinct was to explore what Olson later termed the ‘kinetics’ of experience: the spontaneity in ‘our management of daily reality as of the daily work’<sup>126</sup> that presents an unmediated path to unconscious thought. Abstract Expressionism for Motherwell, as he theorized it, affirms many of Olson’s principles and convictions, for the content of his images is similarly concerned with energy and process:

And how do you determine what’s the form and what’s the content of energy, ... I love the way Matisse talks about color as forces ... All that we abstract expressionists were doing was shifting from the object to forces ... its half-blind probing ... its emphasis on “process”.<sup>127</sup>

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<sup>124</sup> As a writer, editor and teacher, as well as a practitioner, Motherwell was the primary theorist of Abstract Expressionism. From 1944-51 he was founding editor of the important series *The Documents of Modern Art*. He edited the influential *The Dada Painters and Poets: An Anthology* (1951). In 1948, with fellow New York School painters Mark Rothko, Barnett Newman and William Baziotes, he co-founded the informal art school ‘The Subjects of the Artist’.

<sup>125</sup> Robert Motherwell to Meyer Schapiro [1942], in Susan Davidson, *Robert Motherwell: Early Collages* (New York: Guggenheim Museum Publications, 2013) p. 34.

<sup>126</sup> Olson, ‘Projective Verse’, *Collected Prose*, p. 240.

<sup>127</sup> Robert Motherwell, ‘In Conversation [1979]’, *Robert Motherwell & Black*, ed. Stephanie Terenzio (London: Petersburg Press, 1980) pp. 125-147 (p. 130).

The force-field of energy Motherwell describes is inside the image where the material, historical and poetic aspects all overlap with the visual. Primary or earthy colours are often coupled with black as a means to explore and speak of elemental experience. Some elements within the composition may open out and go beyond themselves or, one aspect will be pressing against another in the process of breaking open or breaking through towards elsewhere. In both his paintings and his collages Motherwell sought a synthesis between ‘the conscious (straight lines, designed shapes, weighed colour, abstract language) and the unconscious (soft lines, obscured shapes, automatism)’.<sup>128</sup>

Combining the chosen with the accidental and the geometric with the organic, Motherwell used collage to improvise with the physical world, exploring varying textures of paper: Gauloise packets, beer labels, torn pieces of text and sheet music, wrappings or stamps from packets and letters, etc, each resonating as an instance of autobiography. In transcribing the sensation of everyday experience, according to Motherwell, ‘all the decisions are ultimately made on the grounds of feelings’.<sup>129</sup> In a Motherwell collage, all the disparate elements come together to create what he referred to as ‘inner correspondences’. In terms of the emotive effect of these crosscurrents, Mel Gooding understands that for Motherwell:

the denser the image, in terms of the overlap of elements – visual, historic, phenomenal and poetic – the better, the more so where this layering of memories, recollections and references is organised into a formal coherence within whose dynamic they are perfectly assimilated.<sup>130</sup>

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<sup>128</sup> Motherwell [1944] in Belgrad, p. 37.

<sup>129</sup> Motherwell [1946], *The Collected Writings of Robert Motherwell*, p. 37.

<sup>130</sup> Mel Gooding, *Robert Motherwell: Collage* (London: Bernard Jacobson Gallery, 2013) p. 22.

Like Motherwell's collages, Olson's *Maximus* is composed of diverse sources of knowledge and opinion, as spontaneous juxtaposition offers him the means to explore subjective experience within the open compositional field. Assuming an organic, living, 'projective' quality through its construction, each poem determines its own growth, its own scale, exerts its own exacting demands for both the writer and the reader, without imposing a single theme. Often manipulating found material he circles around the Puritan beginnings of New England, westward expansion and journeys of exploration, heroism at sea, the choice between politics and poetry, ecological collapse, social decline, mass-media vacuity, and the problematic economic life of the declining Gloucester fishing industry. Although the letters, poems, documents and other fragments are associative in content, there is no contrived or pre-arranged destination where any of these elements can be resolved. In addressing his own evasive digression, *Maximus* admits:

He sd, "You go all around the subject". And I sd, "I didn't know it was a subject". He sd, "You twist" and I sd, "I do".<sup>131</sup>

The 'twist' in open composition is the intention to take into account the multi-various immensity of reality. Gloucester serves as the major structural device for the developing *Maximus* but the sequence still remains open and organic in the poet's assimilation of place. Whether informed by observation, memory, dream, historical event or local legend, everything within the field is included in Olson's quantitative approach, for all of these materials are vital to the 'projective' formation of each poem. Fraser acknowledges

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<sup>131</sup> Charles Olson, 'Maximus, to Gloucester LETTER 15', *The Maximus Poems*, pp. 71-75 (p. 72).

how Olson's accumulative page functions 'as a kind of ledger accounting of how all parts of history and human nature move and talk with each other'.<sup>132</sup>

Indicating the power Olson found in the materials he worked with for *Maximus*, in 'LETTER 7' he juxtaposes a range of references from Gloucester's maritime history to project his unwavering belief in the example set by various pioneer settlers. Of particular importance is the shipwright William Stevens, whose attention and care shows when 'hands are put to the eyes' commands':

That carpenter is much on my mind:  
I think he was the first Maximus

Anyhow, he was the first to make things,  
not just live off nature

And he displays  
in the record, some of those traits  
goes with that difference, traits present circumstances  
keep my eye on

for example, necessities the practice of the self,  
that matter, that wood<sup>133</sup>

Olson's sensory engagement with language-as-material parallels the conflated figures of Maximus and 'that carpenter' whose practices depend upon 'that matter, that wood' to deal directly with 'things': the lived moments essential to making the soundscape of the poem. The abundant inclusiveness of Olson's collage allows Maximus (as maker, joiner, measurer and recorder of 'traits') to keep watch on the 'circumstances' of the field as distances dissolve between Gloucester's past and present. Using collage as a ready

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<sup>132</sup> Fraser, p. 179.

<sup>133</sup> Charles Olson, 'LETTER 7', *The Maximus Poems*, pp. 34-38 (p. 35).

means of juxtaposing disparate historical episodes of archetypal or heroic significance, Olson intensifies his connection with the contemporary moment. Insisting on the visual, on the ability to ‘keep my eye on’ and witness this expanse of time and space, Olson places immense trust in Maximus’ directness of seeing.

The prime importance of visual awareness in Olson’s compositional field is made clear in ‘LETTER 5’ and ‘LETTER 6’, through the recurring images of ‘eyes, / & polis, / fishermen, / & poets’.<sup>134</sup> To establish a potential for action, ‘eyes in all heads, / to be looked out of’ as well as ‘the attention, and / the care’,<sup>135</sup> are crucial. The challenge for the poet is to draw upon the totality of the field, be ‘that good a professional, his eyes / as a gull’s are’.<sup>136</sup> In ‘stories / as good as any of us are’, the Gloucester fishermen and their catch provide the speaker with a model image of poetic and perceptual exactness, a need for:

... the will to be as fine as  
as fine as fins are  
as firm as  
as firm as a mackerel is  
(fresh out of water)<sup>137</sup>

Combining monumental ambition with minimal means, the field Maximus enters is the ‘firm’ reality of Gloucester, the open yet ‘firm’ city he fronts, the place of his attentions making him a figure of gravitas and size. Applying spare, precise vocabulary, Olson’s

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<sup>134</sup> Charles Olson, ‘LETTER 6’, *The Maximus Poems*, pp. 30-33 (p. 32).

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 32.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 31.

<sup>137</sup> Charles Olson, ‘LETTER 5’, *The Maximus Poems*, pp. 21-29 (p. 24).



percussive incantatory repetition of ‘as fine as / as fine as’ and ‘as firm as / as firm as’ shows how meaning through poetic gesture can presently be reformulated and insisted upon ‘each moment of the going’.<sup>138</sup> Olson’s language here draws attention to itself in the way that Motherwell’s precise yet painterly brushstrokes characterise his works that appear increasingly atmospheric due to the opacity of his paint. The emphasis for both poet and painter is to be in direct dialogue with the properties of their respective media, which Olson sees as integral to the projective: ‘I propose this advantage to composition in field: the word can bear in where the word was not used to go’.<sup>139</sup>

The reorganisation of visual space in Motherwell’s series of *Opens* functions as a telling counterpart to Olson’s revision of poetic space in *Maximus*.<sup>140</sup> Invoking external spaces of open atmosphere and the brightness of marine light, the paintings express emotional and chromatic intensity. In each canvas a small, freely drawn yet carefully measured rectilinear motif (open, semi-open or closed) is held in balance against the expanse of a single colour. Throughout the series, colour and form fit naturally together as Motherwell reconciles the projection of the window motif with the extension of the visual field. He recalls how many of the images were prompted by discoveries ‘under “open”, in the *Random House Unabridged Dictionary*, in a series of eighty-odd definitions that I find to be a prose poem’.<sup>141</sup> The evocative phrases of definitions 75 to 80 illustrate the importance of Motherwell’s ‘found’ poem to the colour fields of the *Opens*: how ‘those

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<sup>138</sup> Olson, ‘Projective Verse’, *Collected Prose*, p. 242.

<sup>139</sup> Charles Olson, ‘Notebook 1, September 15<sup>th</sup>, 1957’, *OLSON: The Journal of the Charles Olson Archives 5*, ed. George F. Butterick, Spring 1976, p. 61.

<sup>140</sup> Started in 1967, the *Open* series paintings occupied Motherwell for almost 20 years, making it his most sustained exploration of form after the *Elegy* series.

<sup>141</sup> Motherwell [1972], *The Collected Writings of Robert Motherwell*, p. 212.

entries are the most beautiful, filled with all kinds of associations, all kinds of images':<sup>142</sup>

an open or clear space

the open air

the open water, as of the sea

[his is] the situation of one who does not use or seek concealment: *All of his dealings are in the open.*

an opening or aperture

an opening or opportunity<sup>143</sup>

In alliance with Gloucester's fishermen, Maximus pushes outward from the coast towards the infinity of the horizon line and the open sea, 'I look out as a wind / and water man, testing / And missing / some proof ... with the sea / stretching out / from my feet'.<sup>144</sup>

As well as adopting this panoramic view, Maximus projects downward into the density of land and location, 'Dogtown the under / vault heaven / is Carbon Ocean'.<sup>145</sup> While researching Gloucester's history, geography and geology, Olson's process is to open out his sources so as to improvise upon his own memories, connections and sense of place.

In describing how Olson's poems and Motherwell's paintings convey a similar quality of openness, Caws observes that in Olson, it is 'the tone, the optimism and the general largeness of the thought and expression' that coincide with the vision Motherwell explores and refines through his work as a visual artist, for they both share:

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<sup>142</sup> Motherwell [1977] in H.H. Arnason, *Robert Motherwell* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1982) p. 163.

<sup>143</sup> Definitions 75-80, taken from Motherwell's copy of *The Random House Unabridged Dictionary*, reproduced in Mel Gooding 'Robert Motherwell: The Poetic Vision', *Robert Motherwell Open* (London: 21 Publishing, 2009) p. 108.

<sup>144</sup> Charles Olson, 'Maximus, to himself', *The Maximus Poems*, pp. 56-57 (p. 57).

<sup>145</sup> Olson, 'MAXIMUS, FROM DOGTOWN – II', *The Maximus Poems*, p. 180.

[a] setting-out-ness, if I can put it like that. For Abstract Expressionism, as he [Motherwell] conceived of it and theorized it, has a great deal in common with Olson's formulations. It is as if Motherwell's Provincetown, open to the water, were in communion with Olson's Gloucester.<sup>146</sup>

For Caws, both poet and painter adopt the same experimental attitude to the mechanics of composition, especially in the recognition of form as a natural extension of content. She affirms that 'Projective Verse' as a manifesto 'speaks authentically of a certain moment, coeval with the principle excitement of the New York School. It is about pragmatics: "USE, USE, USE"'.<sup>147</sup>

According to Fraser, 'the excitement Olson generated' was in the 'making' of the poem, a compositional process accounting for what is visually and physically present, a world that, 'fragment by fragment, from the archaeological layers of each individual's peculiar life – revealed the complex grid of the maker's physical and mental activity'.<sup>148</sup> This proposition surveys the subject matter that is equally at the heart of gestural painting and most prominent in the work of Cy Twombly who was taught by Motherwell at Black Mountain.

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<sup>146</sup> Caws, p. 158.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid., p. 158.

<sup>148</sup> Fraser, p. 176.

## 6. Ancient and Modern Archaeology in Olson and Cy Twombly

Poets and painters at Black Mountain were engaged with expressing an immediate sense of reality through their respective media. Olson's project was to examine primary experience as if to see it and comprehend it for the very first time. He wanted to articulate the materiality of history by celebrating the actuality of the present, the only place where an authentic past can exist. Central to Olson's projectivism, as Peter Minter observes, is a desire 'to rehabilitate the modern'. In Olson's poetic practice, this can only be achieved by 'recuperating a primal mode of sentience in which the body and sensation, cognition, language and history are poetically substantiated'.<sup>149</sup> Minter points to Olson wanting us 'to pick up, to take up, to get back, in order to get on'.<sup>150</sup>

In *Maximus* Olson dramatises his gathering of sources to create an analogue of social history, recasting Gloucester as an emblem of place 'where polis / still thrives'.<sup>151</sup> To apprehend the expanding moment with a projective sensibility, his approach to language avoids orderly representation, preferring instances where grammatical convention is wrenched apart to fit the condition of living. Christensen emphasises how Olson 'enjoyed the way in which Creeley seemed to suppress any control over form in order to register perception exactly as it happened to him'.<sup>152</sup> This is especially true in Olson's theoretical works and applies to his writing on the painter Cy Twombly who at the time

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<sup>149</sup> Peter Minter, 'Transcultural Projectivism in Charles Olson's 'The Kingfishers' and Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri's *Warlugulong*', *Contemporary Olson*, pp. 257-271 (p. 265).

<sup>150</sup> Charles Olson, 'The Gate and the Center [1951]', *Collected Prose*, pp. 168-173 (p. 168).

<sup>151</sup> Olson, 'LETTER 5', *The Maximus Poems*, p. 26.

<sup>152</sup> Christensen, p. 43.

was a student at the college.<sup>153</sup> As the first to endorse Twombly's work, Olson produces an exhibition preface for him that fluctuates in form between an essay and a prose poem. In terms of rhythm, the gestural prose of 'Cy Twombly'<sup>154</sup> is Olson's attempt to be true to his subject while simultaneously emulating and reacting to the raw vitality of Twombly's new paintings.

Most significantly for his *Maximus* poems-in-progress, Olson notes Twombly's exploration of the elemental to find continuity between the ancient and modern worlds, the same continuity he wants to consolidate in *Maximus* by connecting present day Gloucester with its past. The paradoxical need of the speaker who has to go backwards to go forwards, if the form is to be opened out, suffuses the piece:

There came a man who dealt with whiteness. And with space. He was an American. And perhaps his genius lay most in innocence rather than in the candor now necessary. In any case, he was not understood.

What seems clear is, that two dimension as surface for plastic attack is once more prime. And with all perspective as aid gone, the whole Renaissance. Even line gone. And maybe color – as too easy.<sup>155</sup>

In his quest for liberation Olson advocates a return to the syllable and the line as basic poetic elements: he wants to get to the syllable by way of the ear; and to the line by way of the breath. Physically in tune with this flow through the body, those working in the open field will gain new territories of perception to explore. By revisiting pre-Renaissance perspective and knowledge, both the poet and the visual artist can reach far

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<sup>153</sup> Cy Twombly was a BMC student (1951 & 1952).

<sup>154</sup> Charles Olson, 'Cy Twombly [1952]', *Collected Prose*, pp. 175-178.

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 175.

beyond the dictatorial realms of reason to deal ‘with whiteness. And with space’. To dispense with closed form means to be rid of established fixtures: ‘the whole Renaissance. Even line gone. And maybe color – as too easy’.

Like all the major exponents of Abstract Expressionism, for a certain period of time, Twombly paints using only black and white. ‘There came a man’ who was Herman Melville who is now Twombly, ‘who dealt with whiteness’ but there is also another figure (Twombly again) ‘gone into the whiteness as that other man had’.<sup>156</sup> No doubt Olson is presently aware of Robert Rauschenberg working on his series of purely white paintings at the college at this time in 1951, images later credited by John Cage as the inspiration for his composition 4’33’’.<sup>157</sup> Olson worries that Twombly has ‘slipped off the wire any of us in all of the arts walk over space on these days’ and yet at the same time realises that ‘an artist has to cross over’.<sup>158</sup> He continues ‘what I like about Twombly is this sense one gets that his apprehension – his *tien* is buried to the hips, to the neck if you like’.<sup>159</sup>

Although not a protégé of Olson’s, like Ed Dorn for example, Twombly takes his early bearings from Olson. As a student at Black Mountain, Twombly moves between starkly calligraphic paintings influenced by his tutors Motherwell and Kline, and images of primordial, fetish-like forms. Olson shares with Twombly an interest in past cultures,

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<sup>156</sup> Olson, ‘Cy Twombly’, *Collected Prose*, p. 176.

<sup>157</sup> Faculty at BMC included John Cage (1948, 1952 & 1953). Robert Rauschenberg was a BMC student (1948, 1949, 1951 & 1952).

<sup>158</sup> Olson, ‘Cy Twombly’, *Collected Prose*, p. 176.

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 177.

especially in artefacts, fragments and examples of ancient writing. In Twombly's textures of bitumen and house paint, Olson finds: 'the dug up stone figures, the thrown down glyphs, the old sorells in sheep dirt in caves, the flaking iron – there are his paintings'.<sup>160</sup>

Looking at work in his studio space, particularly the glyph paintings, Olson writes:

I knew what Twombly was fighting for, even in this canvas. It is always what he is trying to get down, what he so often does so succeed in getting in to what he is confronted by – into that rectangle – that honor & elegance are here once more present in the act of paint.<sup>161</sup>

Olson was fascinated by the interplay between the visual and the written in hieroglyphs, ideograms and ancient writing whereby these objects and images make manifest the intensity of the present moment that is integral to the emergence of meaning. In his appreciation, he therefore defines Twombly's work as 'documentation' that shows:

how accurate his penetration of the reality bearing in on us is: these are the artefacts he finds surrounding himself in the same diggings out of which he is digging himself.<sup>162</sup>

Olson sees elemental and archaic qualities in these thickly impasto layers of black and white and realizes how Twombly is tapping into history and myth with a directness compatible with his own poetic strategy.

Twombly's work complies with Olson's own interest in the roots of writing, notably the condensed Mayan glyphic form he had recently studied during his six month stay in the Yucatan in Mexico during the first half of 1951, when he writes:

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<sup>160</sup> Olson, 'Cy Twombly', *Collected Prose*, p. 177.

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 176.

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 177.

i take it, a Sumer poem or Maya glyph is more pertinent to our purposes than anything else, because each of these people & their workers had forms which unfolded directly from content (sd content itself a disposition toward reality which understood man as only force in field of force containing multiple other expressions ...<sup>163</sup>

Olson's field work in Lerma deciphering hieroglyphics among sites of Mayan ruins allowed him to qualify his core principles of projectivism. His discovery of the living archaic in 'forms which unfolded directly from content' supported the social ideals of his essay, while here too was verification of an unfolding process, where one perception immediately follows another perception, with human consciousness operating in direct accord with the phenomena of nature. Finding 'a concept at work which kept attention so poised', the cultural imagination of the Maya connects with Olson's own aesthetic, for they:

invented a system of written record, now called hieroglyphics, which, on its very face, is verse, the signs were so clearly and densely chosen that, cut in stone, they retain the power of the objects of which they are the images.<sup>164</sup>

Olson responds to the Mayan glyph as a model for language because the signs and symbols of its ideogrammic figuration are marks of energy that situate meaning in a material reality. Impressed by the 'mass and weight' the Maya ascribed to time, these structures in Mayan art revealed a healthy system of social relations where, for Olson, self-expression is declared 'as object in field of force'. Given its proportionate 'weight' as 'in this glyph-world', each object will be 'exceptionally, distributed & accurate'.<sup>165</sup>

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<sup>163</sup> Olson to Creeley [1951], 'Mayan Letters', *A Charles Olson Reader*, p. 101.

<sup>164</sup> Charles Olson, 'Human Universe [1951]', *Collected Prose*, pp. 155-166 (p. 159).

<sup>165</sup> Olson to Creeley [1951], 'Mayan Letters', *A Charles Olson Reader*, pp. 99-100.



This interaction between the Maya and their natural environment presented an alternative to the superficiality of consumerist American culture that was developing in the post-war years. Enhancing his humanist values while resisting the dominant view, Olson's studies in the Yucatan allowed him to reach backwards and to reach downwards, to see history as becoming space. By retaining the power of experience, the glyph served a people in touch with the primal force of the energy field, a society similarly concerned with human balance and proportion. Consequently in *Maximus*, Olson advocates reliving these origins whereby a city can become 'a coherence' enabling one 'to join knowledge to culture', and this advance will in turn 'shape dignities of economics and value sufficient to make daily life itself a dignity and a sufficiency'.<sup>166</sup>

Olson always goes back to the roots and origins of things, testing them as names by breaking them down, 'listening to the syllables must be so constant and scrupulous ... I say, king, and that it is spontaneous'.<sup>167</sup> Consistently returning to Fenollosa's conception of the ideogram, Olson notes the 'resistant primes in our speech' that 'put us back to the origins of their force not as history, but as living oral law to be discovered in speech as directly as it is in our mouths'.<sup>168</sup> Exposing linguistic relationships by focusing on the syllable informs the way Olson collects the materials of Gloucester as he strives to rejuvenate the city as 'an older polis, / who has this tie to a time',<sup>169</sup> while his writing similarly indicates a growing obsession with the processes by which collective culture

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<sup>166</sup> Olson, 'The Gate and the Center', *Collected Prose*, p. 170.

<sup>167</sup> Olson, 'Projective Verse', *Collected Prose*, p. 242.

<sup>168</sup> Olson, 'The Gate and the Center', *Collected Prose*, p. 169. Valuing the syllable as 'king' in 'Projective Verse' he paraphrases Fenollosa: "'Is" comes from the Aryan root, *as*, to breathe. The English "not" equals the Sanscrit *na*, which may come from the root *na*, to be lost, to perish. "Be" is from *bhu*, to grow', p. 242.

<sup>169</sup> Olson, 'LETTER 5', *The Maximus Poems*, p. 24.

develops. The Mayan glyphs, Belgrad argues, set a precedent that would direct Olson's poetry 'toward a philological project that involved recovering (and in the process, disclosing) the material history of word-concepts'.<sup>170</sup> The constant attention given to listing, cataloguing and indexing in *Maximus* to discover 'what holds' creatively on the page indicates the exhilaration that drove his transformative archival approach.

The poem 'For Cy Twombly Faced with His First Chicago & N.Y. Shows' that accompanies Olson's exhibition preface for Twombly, likewise reflects the cross currents of influence between them:

Ashurbanipal. Or the stern view  
of a whaler, (Male, who conserves  
she who generates). Wrought iron  
turns black stone, pours  
as the cement of the earth's rocks  
stilled, when the cooling came,  
the hottest hugest cooling

Painting heats, or is caused to flow  
in his hands, causes  
what is, which is who  
he is, how dwelleth  
where the two forever are  
who in their meeting make  
what is, and so, what was

form,  
&  
what the A hides, the abstract of  
what each of us bends  
the eye around<sup>171</sup>

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<sup>170</sup> Belgrad, p. 91.

<sup>171</sup> Olson, 'For Cy Twombly Faced with His First Chicago & N.Y. Shows', *The Collected Poems of Charles Olson*, p. 244.

Here Olson's preoccupation with gaining access to an ancient pictorial language is compressed into a single word statement 'Ashurbanipal'. This naming of the Assyrian king whose library of clay tablets and cuneiform writing was a major archaeological find is then immediately juxtaposed with a second pivotal image of 'the stern view / of a whaler'. Both the energy of the sea and, in a further reference to Melville, the immediacy of a whaling voyage, gets reduced down to the briefest of utterance. The remainder of the stanza suggests a field with industrial, geological and alchemical forces at play: wrought iron / turns black stone, pours / as the cement of the earth's rocks / stilled, when the cooling came'.

This head-on confrontation with stark images of formation, the same blackness of 'wrought iron' and 'stone' set against the yellow-white of mortar dominates Twombly's work of the early fifties such as *MIN-OE*,<sup>172</sup> painted at Black Mountain in 1951. Seeing the painting up-close, one gains a visceral sense of raw materials shifting violently about, as in their initial application: the image therefore appears to be in a creeping state of erosion. Emphasising the immediacy of his agitated touch on the canvas, as well as his handling of the resistant bitumen covered surface, Olson's elemental surge and aliveness to the archaic is exemplified within the space of Twombly's painting. Referencing corroded iron artefacts and the totemic forms of Luristan bronzes, the image has a symmetrical discomposure to it that Kirk Varnedoe sees as a 'heraldic confrontation between near-identical "personages"'. Despite the apparent monumentality of its instinctive double glyph that fills the composition, *MIN-OE* was based on 'the rusted

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<sup>172</sup> Cy Twombly, *MIN-OE*, 1951, Robert Rauschenberg Foundation. The painting was included in the exhibition *Starting at Zero: Black Mountain College 1933-57* at Arnolfini, Bristol, Nov-Jan 2005-06. It was also shown in the first room of the 2008 retrospective at Tate Modern *Cy Twombly: Cycles & Seasons*.

crusts' of small, ancient Iranian metal ornaments. As Varnedoe notes, in this depiction of excavated iron 'Olson saw that a feel for such aged and soiled textures underlay the particular poetics of Twombly's painting'.<sup>173</sup>

Olson's preoccupation with the splintered glyphs that occupy Twombly's paintings of this period informs the direction of the poem, 'and so, what was // form, / & / what the A hides, the abstract of / what each of us bends / the eye around'. With their broken forms, worn surfaces and spindly graphic lines abrasively incised into impasto fields of semi-dry house paint, the poem expresses Twombly's own engagement with archaeological excavation which like Olson's writing, is transposed into the living present: 'painting heats, or is caused to flow / in his hands, causes / what is, which is who / he is'. The speaker's contemplation of 'the stern view', whether to or from the whaling ship, finds a possible gloss in the final paragraph of Olson's short essay 'The Present is Prologue' where he again pronounces against the rigidity and patterns of conformity preserved within the Western literary tradition, finding it 'awkward to call myself a poet or a writer'.<sup>174</sup> Struggling to define his identity, he equates the role of the archaeologist to the condition of the artist, explaining that:

the work of the morning is methodology: how to use oneself, and on what. That is my profession. I am an archaeologist of morning. And the writing and acts which I find bear on the present job are (i) from Homer back, not forward; and (ii) from Melville particularly himself ...<sup>175</sup>

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<sup>173</sup> Kirk Varnedoe, *Cy Twombly: A Retrospective* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1994) p. 14.

<sup>174</sup> Charles Olson, 'The Present is Prologue [1952]', *Collected Prose*, pp. 205-207 (p. 206).

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 206-207.

Olson aims for a projective synthesis of history, geography and archaeology where, as Minter notes, ‘proprioceptive sensation in the present moment is fused with a genealogy or archaeology of locality and its lived archive’.<sup>176</sup> In the same way, Maximus’s journey is a process of excavation, for as the sequence develops, objects and images cohere across a field of collapsing space and time:

far enough up into the North  
for the Atlantic to be known

Portuguese  
are part Phoenician (?  
Canary Islanders  
Cro-Magnon

Islands,  
to islands  
headlands  
and shores

Megalithic  
stones

Stations  
on shores  
And Sable

Then England  
an Augustine  
land<sup>177</sup>

As each line passes through space, it forwards to the following moment of discovery, yet despite the momentum, these comparative steps are as vast and solid as ‘Megalithic / stones’, every inter-related element of the visual field appears simply where it is. With a

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<sup>176</sup> Minter, ‘Transcultural projectivism in Charles Olson’s ‘The Kingfishers’ and Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri’s Warlugulong’, Contemporary *Olson*, p. 267.

<sup>177</sup> Olson, “‘View’: fr the Orontes’, *The Maximus Poems*, p. 251.

spatial imagination open to migratory forces, this seaward 'Islands, / to islands' motion allows Maximus to dig outside of Gloucester towards a global path. Reflecting on creative possibility, Olson writes that 'knowing well how he was folded in' he sees 'the striking character of the external world, that all things do extend out. Nothing was now inert fact, all things were there for feeling, to promote it, and be felt'.<sup>178</sup> The expansive texture of the verse field maps a series of compelling, paratactic moves from and to 'Stations / on shores'; from 30,000 year old Palaeolithic remains at the 'Cro-Magnon' cave, to Saint Augustine's 6<sup>th</sup> century plans for a Christian 'England'.

The questioning humanist spirit promoted through interdisciplinary exchange at Black Mountain during Olson's tenure provided Twombly with the freedom to follow his intuition, as well as offering an intellectual grounding. Olson's insistence that the 'human-in-space' harmonises their relationship with nature is compatible with Twombly's sequential experimentation throughout the 1950s. His instinctive engagement with place through the projective act emerges most strongly in his twenty-four *Poems to the Sea*,<sup>179</sup> a series of diagrammatic responses to the coastal light at Sperlonga in Italy. Although written not in words, each sheet of paper (33 x 31cm) becomes a site of activity, 'a high energy-construct',<sup>180</sup> where kinetic instances of brief, abstract notations and scrawled fragments are seen in the act of forming. These visual poems evoke phenomenological conditions in water and light that infuse the atmosphere; offer a sense of being 'within' the actual seascape, for as Twombly writes of his methods:

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<sup>178</sup> Olson, 'Equal, That is, to the Real Itself [1958]', *Collected Prose*, pp. 120-125 (p. 121).

<sup>179</sup> Cy Twombly, *Poems to the Sea*, 1959, Dia Art Foundation. The series was included in the exhibition *Cy Twombly: Cycles & Seasons* at Tate Modern, June-September 2008.

<sup>180</sup> Olson, 'Projective Verse', *Collected Prose*, p. 240.

‘each line now is the actual experience with its own innate history. It does not illustrate – it is the sensation of its own realization’.<sup>181</sup> Proposing that the achievement of American painting in formal terms needs to be ‘understood on the basis of interdisciplinary influences’, Marcelin Pleynet identifies in Olson and Twombly a common rationale of ‘organizing the coincidences of gesture and thought in function of their history’.<sup>182</sup>

Discussing the relation of Twombly’s art to Olson’s projective theory of poetic language, Pleynet observes:

Twombly’s line by field seizes the immediacy of its situation in such a way that a suggestion ... can, according to its possibilities, find its way and its chances in the denseness of an experience open to everything.<sup>183</sup>

These early visual works signal the beginning of Twombly’s lifelong investigation into the relation of word to image and writing to drawing. John Berger notes that the status of words for Twombly is the same as for any writer, where language is

a terrain full of illegibilities, hidden paths, impasses, surprises, and obscurities ... its self-effacement comes about for many reasons – because of the way words modify each other, cancel one another out.<sup>184</sup>

The example of Olson’s process driven projective style encourages Twombly to exploit the materiality of each letter that forms his half-drawn, handwritten words. Layered into these palimpsests of superimpositions and erasures are the very qualities that produce Twombly’s enigmatic illegibility, a form that becomes uniquely and recognisably his

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<sup>181</sup> Cy Twombly, ‘Signs [1957]’, in Varnedoe, *Cy Twombly: A Retrospective*, p. 27.

<sup>182</sup> Marcelin Pleynet, ‘Cy Twombly: Designs in Letters, Numbers, and Words or Painting by Ear [1976]’, *Writings on Cy Twombly*, ed. Nicola Del Roscio (Munich: Schirmer/Mosel, 2002) pp. 74-87 (p. 82).

<sup>183</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 82-83.

<sup>184</sup> John Berger, ‘Post-Scriptum [2002]’, *Audible Silence: Cy Twombly at Daros*, ed. Eva Keller (Zurich: Scalo, 2002) pp. 45-47 (p. 45).

own in works he describes as ‘a synthesis of feeling, intellect etc. occurring without separation in the impulse of action’.<sup>185</sup> Faced with words or images, the projective poet simply has to attend to the objects in the field, ‘a matter, finally’, Olson insists, ‘of OBJECTS, what they are, what they are inside a poem, how they got there, and once there, how they are to be used’.<sup>186</sup>

In the evolution of these new aesthetics at Black Mountain when Olson was the epicentre of ideas, the imperative in poetry, painting, dance and music became to spontaneously investigate the malleability of artistic form. That said, it is the case that while Olson’s work informs Twombly, the inverse is also true that Twombly’s work informs Olson. Twombly’s breakthrough works of the 1950s comply with Olson’s emphasis on the presence of natural forces within the compositional process; and the advancing of a poem or painting or any creative work through experimentation and the practice of engaging with the material world. As Creeley notes in his review of Olson in the summer of 1951:

His language is exact, hangs tight to the move of his thought ... if poetry is to get further, develop, it will depend on those who, like Olson, make use of its present gains, push these beyond. Olson’s work is the first significant advance.<sup>187</sup>

In his piece ‘Cy Twombly’ Olson confirms the relationship he sees between the aural and visual arts by explaining how the forces at work in both painting and dancing are so evenly aligned with those fundamental to the act of writing:

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<sup>185</sup> Twombly, ‘Signs’, *Cy Twombly: A Retrospective*, p. 27.

<sup>186</sup> Olson, ‘Projective Verse’, *Collected Prose*, p. 243.

<sup>187</sup> Robert Creeley, ‘Charles Olson: Y & X [1951]’, *A Quick Graph: Collected Notes & Essays*, ed. Donald Allen (San Francisco: Four Seasons Foundation, 1970) pp. 151-153 (pp. 152-153).



Take it flatly, a plane. On it, how can a man throw his shadow, make this the illumination of his experience, how put his weight exactly – there? (In my business it comes out how, by alphabetic letters, such signs and their syllables, how to make them not sounds but my sounds, my – what are not any more sounds than is a painter’s objects or a dancer’s movements – my ‘voice’; to say what I got to say ...<sup>188</sup>

By articulating this interplay of independent forces in the field of the writer’s, painter’s or dancer’s experience, Olson asks how careful he or she must be, to ‘put his weight exactly - there?’ on the appropriate creative path to discover their own distinctive, authentic ‘voice’. Recognizing how Twombly’s canvases ‘do respect facts, the accidents of same’ while making ‘forces present’, Olson wants to push him further: ‘you can do it, because you are the only / round thing left, whatever the dirt / squeezing you, or horses hooves’.<sup>189</sup>

The key issue for Olson is the writer’s compulsion to use gesture to map each kinetic event in the field so that everything is put in motion within the poem. With one object acting on another, relationships have to occur within the field of the page. Energies are transferred ‘from where the poet got it, by way of the poem itself to, all the way over to, the reader’, and forms emerge naturally from content as ‘the reason why a projective poem can come into being’.<sup>190</sup> These fundamentals of projectivism are manifest in Olson’s preoccupation with the dance poetics that were operating at Black Mountain. His concerns are both the materiality of dance and the ‘direct necessity’ of dance as work that pivots on process.<sup>191</sup>

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<sup>188</sup> Olson, ‘Cy Twombly’, *Collected Prose*, pp. 175-176.

<sup>189</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 177-178.

<sup>190</sup> Olson, ‘Projective Verse’, *Collected Prose*, p. 240.

<sup>191</sup> Charles Olson, *OLSON: The Journal of the Olson Archives 2*, Fall 1974, p. 55.

## 7. A Thinking Dancer: Olson's 'Tyrian Businesses'

While all of the first ten poems of *Maximus* represent Olson's immediate response to the environment of his native Gloucester, of these 'Tyrian Businesses' and 'LETTER 9' most clearly assert his experience as rector, teacher and aesthete at Black Mountain where the specific nature of all the arts studied there, can only be understood on the basis of interdisciplinary influences. Olson sought nothing less than a radical restructuring of knowledge that, according to Cole Swensen, rejected 'the Greco-Roman tradition of discourse, which he felt made language into a shield against actual experience'.<sup>192</sup> As Byrd notes, both poems explore the nature of the artistic process itself, by which the poet, painter or dancer 'becomes the centre at which creative accidents are recognized and become factors in the growth of consciousness'.<sup>193</sup> For Olson, a poem, painting or dance should be generated through felt experience where utilising the body's knowledge becomes paramount. By bringing his compositional practice closer to the concerns of modern dance, 'Tyrian Businesses' emphasises the self-originating kinetic of the poet.

Dance and rhythm are Olson's favourite metaphors to describe not only poetry, but also activity in the creative arts in general, for as he states: 'there is only one thing you can do about kinetic, re-enact it. Which is why the man said, he who possesses rhythm, possesses the universe'.<sup>194</sup> Olson's interest in the body, its gestures and its movement, characterises both Abstract Expressionist painting and modern dance. Namuth's short documentary film of Pollock working outdoors on a now-lost red canvas laid out on the

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<sup>192</sup> Cole Swensen, 'Olson and the Projective [2008]', *Noise That Stays Noise: Essays* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2011) pp. 16-20 (p. 16).

<sup>193</sup> Byrd, p. 88.

<sup>194</sup> Charles Olson, 'Human Universe [1951]', *Collected Prose*, pp. 155-166 (p. 162).

floor has been claimed by Roger Copeland to be a film essentially about dance.<sup>195</sup>

Acknowledging the significance of the film, the way it captures Pollock's rhythmic movement of body and medium in his painting method, Copeland believes it reveals that 'the fundamental impulse behind abstract expressionism was the desire to transform painting into dancing'.<sup>196</sup> Searching for a similar sense of authentic personal expression, Creeley explains how the body 'is the "field" and is equally the experience of it' and the writer has to aim 'to experience oneself as *in* the world, thus, through this agency or fact we call, variously, "poetry"'.<sup>197</sup>

The aesthetic of Pollock's open gestural field dominates the choreography of Merce Cunningham who taught dance at Black Mountain in the early 1950s. Developing a vocabulary of moves congruous to those of Abstract Expressionist painters, Cunningham encouraged his dancers to bend, stretch, reach, tilt and squat to let their individual style emerge naturally through improvisation. Avoiding any illustration of a pre-arranged narrative, his all-over compositions allowed the dancers to interact and intersect as bodies in space, often emanating an intense emotional charge that initiated conversations of new movements between them. Cunningham looked towards what the body does everyday: leaning, walking, twisting, turning, pushing, running and jumping, etc. Finding their own rhythmic forms and compositional structures, his dance pieces are about the actions of daily life, about the medium of dance itself.

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<sup>195</sup> Hans Namuth's film (made with Paul Falkenberg) was shot in The Springs, East Hampton Sept-Nov 1951. It shows Pollock painting in the landscape outside his studio while he narrates the experience of making the work. The film was shown most recently in the exhibition *A Bigger Splash: Painting after Performance* at Tate Modern Nov-Feb 2012-13.

<sup>196</sup> Roger Copeland cited in Belgrad, p. 158.

<sup>197</sup> Robert Creeley, 'I'm given to write poems [1967]', *A Quick Graph: Collected Notes & Essays*, pp. 61-72 (p. 64).

In his personal practice, Cunningham saw how ‘the spirit’ moved through his limbs ‘to extend its manifestations into space, with all its freedom and necessity’. His own ‘dancer’s discipline, his daily rite’ depended upon the kinetic impulse that begins in the body. Regarding the ‘fact’ of his legs, Cunningham senses:

they are infused with energy that can be released in movement (to appear to be motionless is its own kind of intoxicating movement) ... a human is a two-legged creature – more basically and more intimately – than he is anything else. And his legs speak more than they “know”.<sup>198</sup>

Anticipating the ultimate reach of ‘Projective Verse’ not only for a new poetics but also for ‘new concepts from which some sort of drama ... may emerge’,<sup>199</sup> Olson collaborated with Cunningham and the dancer Katherine Litz, as well as Cage and Rauschenberg. At the college they performed what is widely accepted by critics as the first ‘happenings’ in the history of modern art: interdisciplinary encounters where for Olson ‘the mark of it is in the jointure of speech–sound–motion, projection–melody–gesture’.<sup>200</sup> These multi-media collaborations initiated an open field of sound, vocal ingenuity and body language to determine the character of the work, releasing forces that explore both the self-reflexivity of the human body and the immense potential for non-narrative representation. Recognising the body as a receptacle for unconscious knowledge, Cunningham, Cage and Rauschenberg continued to experiment together, developing performance pieces that explored the boundaries between art and real life.<sup>201</sup> Often shaped by elements of chance,

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<sup>198</sup> Merce Cunningham [1952], in Alma Guillermoprieto ‘Merce Cunningham & the Impossible’, *The New York Review of Books*, Feb. 9<sup>th</sup> 2012.

<sup>199</sup> Olson, ‘Projective Verse’, *Collected Prose*, p. 239.

<sup>200</sup> Olson cited in Harris, p. 160.

<sup>201</sup> The Merce Cunningham Dance Company was formed at BMC in 1953. John Cage was the musical director and Robert Rauschenberg was the set and costume designer. Their ethos as a group was that dance, music and visual art could exist together in performance, rather than be coerced into relying on one another.

new compositions were developed to utilize the motion, sound and handling of everyday objects.

Discussing Olson's support for dance as a highly prized medium of expression, Paul argues that:

[Olson] invokes the dance not in the service of the transcendent but the immanent, as a practical discipline of body-consciousness of proprioception, posture, movement. He invokes dance because for the dancer - he speaks always as a participant and not as an observer - it is projective art, the paradigm of stance and movement-in-space and of the truth he so highly prizes, that 'we use ourselves'.<sup>202</sup>

As projective arts, an analogy can be drawn between the physical space of the dance and those of the canvas and the page. Like the projective art of poetry, Olson sees dance as an expansion of consciousness: through participation, the poet or dancer will draw in immediate experience; be present and acutely aware of the constantly changing condition of existence. The 'Tyrian Businesses' presented to Maximus allow him to contemplate what constitutes his most valuable work when the language of expression proves to be so resistant, has 'the odor of / the dead night'.<sup>203</sup> The writing under hand is 'the exercise for this morning' whereby in order to think, the speaker must learn 'how to dance / sitting down': to move while rooted in place; be responsible only to the present moment in their inhabited space.

Olson poetics of self-awareness and self-discovery stresses the need to be conscious of the body's role in all that one says, does, and thinks for 'limits / are what any of us / are

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<sup>202</sup> Paul, pp. 88-89.

<sup>203</sup> Charles Olson, 'Tyrian Businesses', *The Maximus Poems*, pp. 39-44 (p. 41).

inside of'.<sup>204</sup> In 'A Syllabary for a Dancer' (1952), the companion essay to 'Tyrian Businesses', Olson delineates the human figure as 'a thing which simultaneously thinks and dances'.<sup>205</sup> For 'a thinking dancer' their own body both as an object and an action, becomes the content. Olson sees affinities between the two means of composition in poetry and dance because the poet projects the self outward into the language of the poem with 'the kinetic as the act of life: literally to move. Thus dance the base of the discipline, and its syllabary the source of any other.'<sup>206</sup> Duncan states that Olson's awareness of 'metrics, as it coheres, is actual', for the expressive energy of *Maximus* is incorporated in the measure of each line of the poem, an event forming on the page through:

[his] sense of language in terms of weights and durations (by which we compare in moving). This is a dance in whose measured steps time emerges, as space emerges from the dance of the body. The ear is intimate to muscular equilibrium. The line endures. It "feels right".<sup>207</sup>

'Tyrian Businesses' is about the connection of the poet's physical body to the means of composition. Finding clauses in which sound and meaning breathe compellingly back and forth, Olson's commitment to a process of intuitively 'measured steps' allows open-ended units of thought and resolution to rise and fall; be dispersed across the white space:

... (what musicians call  
the middle voice, to command it  
is to be in business.

There may be no more names than there are objects  
There can be no more verbs than there are actions

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<sup>204</sup> Olson, 'LETTER 5', *The Maximus Poems*, p. 21.

<sup>205</sup> Charles Olson, 'A Syllabary for a Dancer [1952]', *MAPS 4*, ed. John Taggart (Storrs: University of Connecticut, 1971) pp. 9-15 (p. 9).

<sup>206</sup> Olson, 'A Syllabary for a Dancer', *MAPS 4*, p. 12.

<sup>207</sup> Duncan, *The Poetics of the New American Poetry*, p. 190.

It is still  
morning<sup>208</sup>

Olson's intellectual dance requires the music of 'names' and 'verbs' to 'command' the direction of the poem and in so doing, gains what Duncan sees as muscular balance and 'rightness' of composition. Asserting his 'middle voice', the writer achieves *tropos* which enables him to depict, as Paul suggests, 'the inward-arising motion, the twisting and turning common to organic growth and verse'.<sup>209</sup>

During 'the first hours' of the day motivation is central for 'the seedling / of morning: to move the problems (after the night's presences)'.<sup>210</sup> All of Maximus' effort is put towards participation while his emergence, according to Paul, depends upon 'moving himself, when so much around him is unfavourable to growth. His scholarly morning work dramatizes this'.<sup>211</sup> For Olson the essence of reality has to be its life-force which gets expressed directly in the poem. The question of how best to join passivity to intense action leads Maximus towards the role of the heart:

a hollow muscular organ which, by contracting vigorously, keeps up the

(to have the heart

(a whorl of green bracts at the base

(ling

she is known as

Weather

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<sup>208</sup> Olson, 'Tyrian Businesses', *The Maximus Poems*, p. 40.

<sup>209</sup> Paul, p. 136.

<sup>210</sup> Olson, 'Tyrian Businesses', *The Maximus Poems*, p. 41.

<sup>211</sup> Paul, p. 135.

comes generally  
under the  
metaphrast.

(When M is above G, all's  
well. When below, there's  
upset. When M and G are coincident,  
it is not very interesting)<sup>212</sup>

Both the heart and the dancing body are involved in growing from the 'whorl of green bracts at the base', therefore poetry like the other arts participates by drawing upon this vitality, 'to have the heart' in order to enact, construct or compose; to move 'vigorously' according to Olson's high energy projective model. The movement of Olson's elliptical poetic language depends upon the adjacency of images to give account of the body's knowledge and sense of its workings; in this case, how both the heart and the body grow as a flower. This word-to-word association occurs 'under the / metaphrast' who finds balance in the aggregation of meaning: 'when M (metacentre) is above G (gravity), all's / well. When below, there's / upset'. Rather than rely on the luck of the 'weather' and the sudden abundance of cod ('ling') in the sea, Maximus seeks an accurate measurement of reality, to go beyond the point where metacentre and gravity merely coincide, knowing that both poem and dance can grow from sheer energy and instinct, having established their ability to float.

In the second half of 'Tyrian Business' Olson becomes fixated on definitions taken from an edition of *Webster's New International Dictionary*, processing his accidental discoveries into the energy field of the poem. He proprioceptively engages with the

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<sup>212</sup> Olson, 'Tyrian Businesses', *The Maximus Poems*, p. 40.



material appearance of both the word and the world through his senses, as each considered object registers in his consciousness. For example, his ‘nose-twist’ from smelling a nasturtium compliments his visual construction of a tropical bird as he records their definitions: ‘climbing pungent / with lobed or dissected / And showy, e.g. so variously coloured, a garden species, the // totipalmate / is the toc And so vain’.<sup>213</sup> Maximus considers ‘the mind also / an apparatus’,<sup>214</sup> where thoughts dance among words in the action of naming. A series of whole or part definitions drawn from *Webster’s*, referring to *metacentre*, *nasturtium*, *tropaeolum* and *eudaemonia*, are offered without the originating noun. These are situated alongside other partially explained terms, including ‘totipalmate’, ‘futtocks’ and ‘fylfot’, as single images woven into the fabric of the poem. His resourcefulness with words allows Maximus to find his own equilibrium: by defining *metacentre* he discovers how ‘the vertical / through the centre of buoyancy of a / floating body / intersects / the vertical through the new / centre made’.<sup>215</sup>

At Black Mountain, Olson felt that visual artists and dancers (particularly Cunningham, Litz, and Nataraj Vashi to whom ‘A Syllabary’ is addressed) excelled in applying to their work the expressive potential of the human body.<sup>216</sup> Sharing the same self-reflexive enactment of process associated with Abstract Expressionism, the impulse of the projective poet or dancer was to converse with the basic properties of their medium. In all three disciplines at the college, the body became an instrument for artistic creation

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<sup>213</sup> Olson, ‘Tyrian Businesses’, *The Maximus Poems*, pp. 40-41.

<sup>214</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 39.

<sup>215</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 42.

<sup>216</sup> Faculty at BMC included: Merce Cunningham (1948, 1952, 1953); Katherine Litz (1950, 1951, 1952); and Nataraj Vashi (1949, 1952).

with its potential for renewal, movement and growth. Byrd argues that when Maximus experiences the vertical dimensions of space, he realizes ‘an instant is not a mechanical duration but a coincidence of consciousness and space which can be concentrated or expanded indefinitely by use’.<sup>217</sup> This spatial awareness enables Maximus to reconnect with what he is most familiar, his own physicality and the natural world. His verticality creates the energy flow by which he can restore language to its origins in the human body by ‘EAR’ and by ‘BREATH’ to rejuvenate its usefulness, for ‘all parts of speech suddenly, in composition by field, are fresh for both sound and percussive use’.<sup>218</sup>

Connecting Aristotle’s term *eudaemonia* (well-being) with ‘buoyancy’, Olson promotes Maximus as a vital figure whose roots are strengthened by his verticality. His upright stance is fed by his life-force, while his ‘maximal’ dance over words reflects the power inherent in his body to make art. Such states or ‘felicities’ for Maximus can only be ascertained through a life of activity and construction:

Definition: (in this instance,  
and in what others, what  
felicities?

“The crooked timbers  
scarfed together to form the lower part of the compound rib are

futtocks,  
we call ’em

But a fylfot,  
she look like,

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<sup>217</sup> Byrd, p. 67.

<sup>218</sup> Olson, ‘Projective Verse’, *Collected Prose*, p. 244.

who calls herself

(luck <sup>219</sup>)

The curved wooden timbers ‘futtocks, / we call ’em’ are the ribs that support the hull of a boat which, like any other ‘floating body’, must be vertical and self-righting in all seas and all weathers although in this instance, the projective image of a glyphic flower, ‘a fylfot, / she look like’, signals good luck. In Olson’s agility of naming and notating the dynamics of the human body, its energy flow, as well as the role of the spine, the heart, the ribcage (and by inference, the lungs), these images prevail as the governing factors in making the poem.

This gathering together of almost random particulars by dancing across the dictionary and processing these technical terms, especially *eudaemonia* and *metacentre*, into the compositional field of the poem illustrates Olson’s striving for coherence. His binding methodology for the continuation of the poem, to include what is happening as a series of moments, replicates his effort towards a more coherent Gloucester, a need to concentrate on its locality before opening out the city as a more utopian field. Christensen notes how Olson sets ‘Tyrian Businesses’ out as an example of creative practice, one that can be applied through:

the act of making a poem literally from words found at hand, while at the same time bringing Gloucester experience into its form. Maximus has danced in his own mind, amid experience and the meaning of words, ... <sup>220</sup>

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<sup>219</sup> Olson, ‘Tyrian Businesses’, *The Maximus Poems*, p. 44.

<sup>220</sup> Christensen, p. 127.

The essence of renewal for Olson is always movement: how to attend ‘to the kinetics of words’ as he writes in ‘A Syllabary for a Dancer’; to attend ‘to the syllables as the eyes and fingers of his medium, to the nouns & verbs as the torso and limbs, to the connectives as the ankles and wrists of speech’.<sup>221</sup> Reviewing his collaborative work with Litz at Black Mountain, Olson draws attention to how her choreography utilises ‘the body as instrument’; how the physicality of dance ‘is in front of you so clean of all reference that it is like when the finest painter confronts you with paint in the power of itself as pigment’.<sup>222</sup>

Dealing with material at hand, the properties of a medium – words or paint or a dancer’s body – became the priority. With an emphasis on bodily gesture bringing the expressive aims of painting and dance closer together, Olson writes in 1953 of an early performance by Cunningham’s dance company coinciding with an exhibition of Abstract Expressionist paintings. Staged at the college as events towards a ‘fund drive’, Olson refers to ‘a show by Kline, de Kooning, Tworkov, Vicente, Guston (the space cadets, who have all been here the past two years)’.<sup>223</sup> Of the gesture-field painters who were connected with Black Mountain, the work of de Kooning and Fiore underlined the ‘painterly’ relations of writing to painting prevalent in Olson’s *Maximus*, especially evident in ‘LETTER 9’.

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<sup>221</sup> Olson, ‘A Syllabary for a Dancer’, *MAPS* 4, p. 10.

<sup>222</sup> Olson, cited in Belgrad, p. 159.

<sup>223</sup> Olson [1953], *Letters for Origin 1950-1955*, ed. Albert Glover (London: Cape Goliard Press, 1969) p. 127. Apart from the aforementioned Kline, de Kooning and Guston, the Faculty at BMC included Jack Tworkov (1952) and Esteban Vicente (1953).

## 8. Painterly Process: Joseph Fiore, Willem de Kooning and Olson's 'LETTER 9'

By committing to his *Maximus* sequence in the wake of Pound's *Cantos* and Williams's *Paterson*, Olson's focus becomes the advancement of the Great American Long Poem that attends to the particulars of everyday life. Olson's image-making in *Maximus* is related to questions of visual perception, his own remaking of what he sees. To establish the meaning of Gloucester, he has to amalgamate its present with its past, juxtaposing his childhood memories with issues surrounding both the original settlement and the contemporary economic situation related to the declining fishing fleet. With landscape providing points of reference and departure, the gestural paintings of Joseph Fiore and Willem de Kooning present continuous fields of active, uncompleted shapes. Shifting back and forth in space, these irregular forms are a fusion of linear and painterly energy. In work Fiore and de Kooning developed while teaching at Black Mountain, their loosening of line into paint inspired Olson's process of amplifying a painterly image with a projective phrase, which allows the poem's content to veer instantaneously into focus.

What Olson observes, what he thinks and what he reads is meshed before being projected from the conscious mind of Maximus, emphasizing what Christensen defines as Olson's 'open, speculative intelligence'.<sup>224</sup> Creating a large-scale poetic text that portrays the historical palimpsest that is Gloucester, this intelligence shows how, in every texture and detail, 'he is at one with the phenomena he confronts'.<sup>225</sup> Included in this process, either in diffused or luminous colour, are sense impressions and painterly images of the flow and rhythm of life that pertains to Gloucester. There is an affinity not only between the

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<sup>224</sup> Christensen, p. 40.

<sup>225</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 48.

kinetic energy that characterises both the *Maximus* poems and gestural-field paintings of Fiore and de Kooning of the same period, but also how in both there is the sense of a surface being built-up, previous versions being erased, and a coherence emerging through layering and the reiteration of crucial elements.

Olson was convinced that ‘art is the only twin life has – its only valid metaphysic. Art does not seek to describe but to enact’. Conscious of a need to go beyond the limits of description, he understood that his poetic process, had to be ‘intact, from outside, by way of his skin, in, and by his own powers of conversion, out again’.<sup>226</sup> The necessity to remain open and move according to nature is prioritised in ‘LETTER 9’ where Maximus contemplates the arrival of spring:

the flowering plum  
out the front door window  
sends whiteness  
inside my house

as the news that the almond  
was in bloom Mallorca  
accompanied the news  
that that book was in print  
which I wish might stop  
the workings of my city  
where so much of it  
was bred <sup>227</sup>

The spring-like condition of creativity is termed as equivalent to ‘the flowering plum’ and moments of revelation when ‘the almond / was in bloom’. This flowering fulfils the writer’s desire to see the shape of actual experience. By gaining access to these painterly

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<sup>226</sup> Olson, ‘Human Universe’, *Collected Prose*, p. 162.

<sup>227</sup> Charles Olson, ‘LETTER 9’, *The Maximus Poems*, pp. 45-48 (p. 45).

images of *tropos* as the essence of reality, Maximus considers his own public service to enhance the ‘workings’ of his city as the fruition of springtime in Gloucester. The poem dramatizes a blossoming not only in the sense of a tree, but also of Olson’s collection of poems *In Cold Hell, In Thicket* (1953) which Creeley had recently published in Mallorca: ‘those self-acts which have no end no more than their own / are more as plums are’.<sup>228</sup> Well aware of how the fruitful promise of his efforts may well not be fulfilled for ‘the world does not stop / for flowers’,<sup>229</sup> Maximus must remain resilient and persistent, for as Paul points out, whether towards self-development or book publication, ‘flowering’ is claimed as ‘an end in itself. And what interests him now is not extrinsic success but rather his own emergence’.<sup>230</sup>

Barnett Newman argued that Abstract Expressionist painters arrived at ‘new unsuspected images’ by developing ‘a kind of personal writing without the props of any known shape’. He writes that their impulse for the painterly act was ‘to bring out from the non-real ... something that evokes a memory of the emotion of an experienced moment of total reality’.<sup>231</sup> This impetus to enact subjectivity, in keeping with Olson’s aspiration for the poet to make ‘an expression the equal of the original fact’,<sup>232</sup> was adopted by Fiore who, after studying with de Kooning, ran the fine art programme at Black Mountain

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<sup>228</sup> Olson, ‘LETTER 9’, *The Maximus Poems*, p. 48.

<sup>229</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 46.

<sup>230</sup> Paul, p. 138.

<sup>231</sup> Barnett Newman, ‘Reply to a review by Clement Greenberg [1947]’, *American Artists on Art: from 1940 to 1980*, ed. Ellen H. Johnson (New York: Harper & Row, 1982) pp. 16-19 (pp. 17-19).

<sup>232</sup> Olson to Creeley [1951], *The Complete Correspondence, Volume 6*, p. 69.

during the Olson years.<sup>233</sup> Experimenting with spontaneous brushstrokes to create an optical movement of colour, many of Fiore's lyrical paintings of 1951-54 resemble the spring-like imagery Olson presents in 'LETTER 9'. Exploring ideogrammic forms of notation in common with the composition of *Maximus*, Fiore also completed a series of illustrations that were used in Olson's college seminars during 1953.

Fascinated by the changing light and atmosphere of a passing or awakening season, Fiore invests paintings of this period, such as *Untitled, No.2*, *Untitled painting*, *Yellow Field* and *Painting*, with a gentle but luminous intensity.<sup>234</sup> Retaining a suggestion of geological presence in his expressive handling of paint, Fiore arrived at a personal calligraphy of broad painterly gestures set in shallow pictorial space. His tendency to fragment and partially accentuate an incomplete graphic line is derived from de Kooning's way of dividing shapes. In *Untitled painting*, every twist of Fiore's fraying line is forcefully visible within the patterning of his compositional field. Emphasising the organic unity of these works, how they are imbued with a coherence that reflects the natural world, Fairfield Porter observed that Fiore painted 'relationships' instead of 'objects'. He achieves it by 'focus(ing) on a fragment of Nature's whole' and consequently, with 'a transparency of colours on canvas through thinned oils and rubbing, the colour harmonies glow with inner life'.<sup>235</sup> Fiore's *Painting* is the

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<sup>233</sup> Fiore came to BMC as a student in 1946, studying with Ilya Bolotowsky and de Kooning. He was a faculty member from 1949 until the college closed in 1957. During this time he taught courses in painting, drawing, collage, design and colour.

<sup>234</sup> Painted at BMC, the series includes *Untitled*, 1951; *No.2*, 1952; *Untitled painting*, 1952; *Yellow Field*, 1954, all Mary Fitton Fiore, New York; and *Painting*, 1954, University of Connecticut. Of these, *Untitled painting* and *Painting* were shown in the exhibition *Starting at Zero: Black Mountain College 1933-57*.

<sup>235</sup> Fairfield Porter [1960], *Art In Its Own Terms: Selected Criticism 1935-1975*, ed. Rackstraw Downes (Cambridge: Zoland, 1993) p. 115.



culmination of this series of colour-fields from the early 1950s. Condensed patches of sap green, green-gold and indian red, pulse and flicker beneath planes of yellow ranging from lemon to gamboge to ochre, a few of which are dappled, striated or more fully shaded-over with olive, tan, or blue-grey. Fiore creates balance and rhythmic cohesion in his active rendering of paint, while his sensuous response to landscape could be termed 'Abstract Impressionism'.<sup>236</sup>

In the second section of 'LETTER 9', while referencing Pound and Williams with a vivid image of a plum, there is a sense Olson is mapping across different colour intensities in a manner reminiscent of Fiore's painting practice:

it puts a man back  
to find out how much  
he is busy, this way,  
not as his fellows are  
but as flowering trees  
turn several greens  
(as many greens as there are greys  
of their several trunks

it was the reds of buds  
sent me this spring,  
lighting up the valleys

as now the fruits do,  
and these pages have come in,  
of a white so right  
the print is brown

I, dazzled

as one is, until one discovers  
there is no other issue than

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<sup>236</sup> Not to be confused with Abstract Expressionism, the term 'Abstract Impressionism' has been used by several critics to describe examples of more lyrical abstract painting such as the early work of both Philip Guston and Sam Francis.

the moment of  
the pleasure of  
this plum,  
these things  
which don't carry their end any further than  
their reality in  
themselves<sup>237</sup>

Different shades establish these springtime events, setting 'several greens' against 'the reds of buds' but Olson goes further to organise a coherence of colour where 'as many greens as there are greys / of their several trunks' interact with a degree of redness 'lighting up the valleys / as now the fruits do'. Maximus's vision jumps from these complimentary coloured particulars of spring to the facts of a new volume of poetry, printed on pages 'of a white so right / the print is brown'. Submitting to chance in what becomes the immediate occasion of the poem, Olson renders this shift of event through parataxis. In this sharply visible configuration, he conjures up a celestial brightness in the movement of colour, shape and light, 'dazzled / as one is'. With a painterly, gestural rhythm reminiscent of both Fiore and de Kooning, the writing shares their loosely defined sense of form, structure, and especially interval, which can be built upon, as well as celebrate, certain colour relationships. What is in view here reflects the exhilaration of writing out-of-doors, expressing through the transitions of colour – greens to greys to reds to white to brown – the vitality of growth happening in front of your eyes. The poem acknowledges that the creative life like any other is subject to accidental discovery. Sometimes revelation is included in this, as in 'the moment of / the pleasure of / this plum'.<sup>238</sup>

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<sup>237</sup> Olson, 'LETTER 9', *The Maximus Poems*, p. 46.

<sup>238</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 46.

Involved with integrating the distance of landscape with the intimacy of the human figure, de Kooning's provocative approach to image making had great influence and made a lasting impression at Black Mountain. His studio methods, as well as his teaching style, had a profound effect not only on several of his faculty colleagues and painting students, but also on many of those that subsequently followed in their place. His residency at the college in 1948 proved to be a key period in his work as he moved backwards and forwards between abstraction and gestural figuration. Reflecting on this fluctuation, de Kooning states:

forms ought to have the emotion of a concrete experience. For instance, I am very happy to see that grass is green ... Content is a glimpse of something, an encounter like a flash. It's very tiny – very tiny, content.<sup>239</sup>

A series of paintings, several initially titled after the nearby town of Asheville, marked a new phase in de Kooning's work, emerging from the sense of creative possibility and enrichment that working at Black Mountain could provide. For example, Cunningham remembers de Kooning discussing with Cage, Buckminster Fuller and himself, ideas about the nature of space in composition, as well as their shared interest in new perceptions and new mediumistic possibilities.<sup>240</sup>

According to Elaine de Kooning, his process involved making pastel drawings, 'working feverishly on one after the other for a couple of weeks until the walls were covered in

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<sup>239</sup> Willem de Kooning [1963], *American Artists on Art: from 1940 to 1980*, pp. 21-23 (pp. 21-22).

<sup>240</sup> Duberman, p. 284.

them'.<sup>241</sup> These sheets were ripped-up and reassembled, working with the unexpected relationships thrown up as the fragments were superimposed and taped together. In resulting paintings such as *Ashville*, *Sail Cloth* and *Abstraction*, de Kooning achieves a sense of continuity in the sweeping abstract shapes only partially contained by fluid, sinuous black lines.<sup>242</sup> In these images Hughes sees 'a shallow grid torn and reconstructed by the wristy' action of de Kooning's line, while his vigorous shapes turn 'with a jostling density'.<sup>243</sup> As a student of de Kooning's prior to working with him in New York as a studio assistant, Pat Passlof recalls the *Ashville* paintings as work-in-progress at Black Mountain, emphasising how 'he wanted the paint to appear as if it had materialised there magically, all at once, as if it were "blown" on'.<sup>244</sup> In paintings where incomplete abstract shapes share a field with fragmented images that are shifting towards human form, Passlof remembers how de Kooning referred to these unexpected transitions as 'leaps of space'.

In accord with his ideas of field composition where the flow or direction of a poem can alter with every new word, phrase, line or stanza, the dynamic placement of horizontal and vertical 'leaps' in 'LETTER 9' are comparable to such a painting's activated surface or field. Scoring the stanzas with exact spaces but various lengths of margin between

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<sup>241</sup> Elaine de Kooning, cited in John Elderfield, *De Kooning: A Retrospective* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2011) p. 195.

<sup>242</sup> Willem de Kooning, *Ashville*, 1948, The Phillips Collection, Washington D.C.; *Sail Cloth*, c.1949, Private Collection; *Abstraction*, 1949-50, Museo Thyssen Bornemisza, Madrid. The first was painted at BMC, the latter two at de Kooning's studio in New York. Originally, three other works containing related kinds of imagery were also titled *Ashville*. Asheville was the nearest town to BMC but de Kooning appears to have misspelled the name when giving titles to his work.

<sup>243</sup> Robert Hughes, 'Willem de Kooning [1984]', *Nothing If Not Critical: Selected Essays on Art and Artists*, pp. 312-316 (p. 314).

<sup>244</sup> Pat Passlof, cited in Elderfield, p. 196. Passlof was a BMC student (1948).

them, Olson uses the typewriter to realize the poem across the dimensional reach of the full page. The overall use of space in a painting by de Kooning or Fiore, the sense that it will continue expanding onwards and outwards in all directions, is comparable to Olson's sense of the projective, to make the area of the poem large enough for the 'objects which occur at every given moment of composition'.<sup>245</sup> With regard to how the words of a projective poetic line are to be dispersed onto the page, Olson theorizes in 'Projective Verse' that it is:

the advantage of the typewriter that, due to its rigidity and its space precisions, it can, for a poet, indicate exactly the breath, the pauses, the suspensions even of syllables, the juxtapositions even of parts of phrases, what he intends.<sup>246</sup>

This emphasis on the visual aspect of the poem, the ability to create indented patterning, makes the typewriter a key instrument in making specific delineations to bring maximum visual stress, excitement and movement to the verse. Referring to Olson's inventive engagement with the space of the page, David Herd observes:

by the way Olson indents, centres, left and right aligns, by the way he uses the typewriter to open the poetic page up to the kind of dynamics one associates with painting, he disrupts the tendency to simply read the poem straight through. The natural consequence of such visual prompting is that the reader goes back and forth, ... the reading of one thing back into another, was fundamental to Olson.<sup>247</sup>

Not only in the practice of 'Projective Verse' but in the theoretical essay itself, Olson's attention to the relation of type and space becomes vital. Providing weight, volume and most crucially 'scale', Martin Pops defines Olson's sudden and effective capitalization of

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<sup>245</sup> Olson, 'Projective Verse', *Collected Prose*, p. 243.

<sup>246</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 245.

<sup>247</sup> David Herd, 'Introduction: Contemporary Olson', *Contemporary Olson*, pp. 1-21 (p. 5).

important words as ‘a poet’s device, a kind of shout, or a painter’s, a way of implying the scale of a word’s significance by an equivalent physicality’.<sup>248</sup>

Again displaying the influence of Pound and Williams, the third section of ‘LETTER 9’ reveals Olson’s desire to be even more of a colourist, laying word against word, phrase against phrase, listening emphatically to the sound of each as if he is putting paint down on the page. Again the poem bears comparison with Fiore’s paintings at Black Mountain in which, according to Katz, ‘direction relates to actual landscape’. Discussing *The Harbor*, the final piece Fiore worked on at the college, Katz explains ‘how paint has taken precedence over form. There is a wandering quality to the image’.<sup>249</sup> In the poem, using the visual impulse to engage with local colour, light and the sea, Olson creates a similar sense of place through the projective act:

It’s the condition in men  
(we know what spring is)  
brings such self-things about  
which interests me  
as I loll today  
where I used to,  
atop Bond’s Hill

with both the inner, and the outer, harbor  
the Atlantic, back of the back-shore,  
the Annisquam and her marshes, Ipswich Bay  
all out before me in one view

And such colors as spring is, plus  
the colors men’s buildings are, the differences  
the whitenesses are,  
the tidinesses

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<sup>248</sup> Martin Pops, ‘Charles Olson: Obeying the Figures of the Present Dance’, *Home Remedies: Essays* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1984) pp. 37-48 (p. 43).

<sup>249</sup> Katz, p. 192.

he uses greens for, the bricks  
he lights his city up with <sup>250</sup>

There is a sense of wonder around the speaker's childhood, with reference to the western part of Gloucester where Olson spent summers as a boy, 'such colours as spring is'. The place that formed him needs to be a place of well-being, somewhere for Maximus to dig into, consolidate his position with 'the bricks / he lights his city up with'. The three stanzas offer a visual field of the coastal landscape as synonymous with the field of the page as Maximus not only surveys Cape Ann but quantifies his own spring-like condition to write, talking of 'such self-things' as this projective poem underway.

Olson's *Maximus* poems continue to concern themselves with the condition of their making in the manner that the paintings of Pollock, Motherwell, Twombly, de Kooning and Fiore concern themselves with the conditions of their making. He brings the practice of writing closer not only to the concept of painting, but also to that of dance. In Olson's natural arena for the 'projective' moment, he identifies 'the larger field of objects' in which the artist can act with 'dimensions larger than the man'.<sup>251</sup> By employing his own body as a measure, Olson is able to relate this to his whole being through the musicality of the breath. Towards the end of 'LETTER 9', Maximus asserts his purpose:

I measure my song,  
measure the sources of my song,  
measure me, measure  
my forces <sup>252</sup>

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<sup>250</sup> Olson, 'LETTER 9', *The Maximus Poems*, p. 47.

<sup>251</sup> Olson, 'Projective Verse', *Collected Prose*, p. 247.

<sup>252</sup> Olson, 'LETTER 9', *The Maximus Poems*, p. 48.

Herd argues that the open field for Olson is ‘a space of recognition ... governed by the dynamism of participation’; his poetic impulse is ‘to register objects as and where they stand’.<sup>253</sup> Olson’s responsiveness to the open field is to map the colour intensities before him, then put them into motion by mapping himself. His task is to combine the intuition of ‘my song’ with the scholarly research of ‘the sources of my song’. To ‘measure the sources’, the poet must find the appropriate line, phrase, word or syllable: such ‘forces’ in Olson’s ‘song’ are always in a process of formation, part of the overall gestural field. Formed by the history and geography of Gloucester, the all-seeing Maximus is able to ‘recognise’ particulars of place, one object acting upon another, for ‘there are only / eyes in all heads, / to be looked out of’.<sup>254</sup>

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<sup>253</sup> Herd, ‘The view from Gloucester: Open Field Poetics and the politics of movement’, *Contemporary Olson*, pp. 272-285 (p. 277).

<sup>254</sup> Olson, ‘LETTER 6’, *The Maximus Poems*, p. 33.