

## Charles Olson's *Maximus*: A Polis of Attention and Dialogue

Don Byrd in his *Charles Olson's Maximus* says this about Olson's interest in more traditional academic work, "His problem was simple: how does the writer manage to *finish* a project when every day he discovers information which changes the entire picture?" (3). This is how I feel about my own work with Charles Olson, every page of *Maximus*<sup>1</sup> seems to open new angles on Olson, on the world, on reality and on myself.

What draws me to Olson's work is his ability to hold in tension two apparently opposing messages. The first is that "life is strangled by systems" (Christensen 212) and the second is the importance of "making a mappemunde" that includes his "being" (Olson *M II* 87). While Olson clearly desires to join with Nietzsche and others in toppling the "whole line of life that makes Delphi that center," (Butterick 7) he does not simply create a mass of ruins. Rather, he takes those ruins and creates a mythology and cosmology out of them. However, these creations are not a Ptolemaic system of perfect circles. Instead, it is a wild, open, becoming, creative, imaginative, unfinished mythology that asks readers for their attention and participation.

A example in nature of this process of both destruction and creation is a terminal moraine—the geological deposits left at the end of a glacier's journey. It contains everything that the glacier consumed in its path. This image works on many levels with *Maximus*. First, on a literal level, the section of Gloucester known as Dogtown is actually a "terminal moraine" as Olson says in "Maximus from Downtown—I." Second, *Maximus*, itself, can be seen as a terminal moraine created by the movement of Charles Olson—a glacier of a man, whose interests included:

Hopi language, Mayan statuary, non-Euclidean geometry, Melville's fiction, the austere thought structures in Whitehead's philosophy, the fragmentary remains of the Sumerian and Hittite civilizations, Norse, Greek, and Egyptian mythology, numerology and the Tarot, the history of human migration, naval and economic history, the etymology of common words, pre-Socratic philosophy, the historical

origins of the New England colonies, the development of the fishing industry off the coast of Massachusetts, accounts of the conquest of Mexico, the collapse of the Aztec and Mayan civilizations. (Christensen 5-6)

Finally, the image of the terminal moraine also resonates with the view of the mythologist, Joseph Campbell, who used this image as a description of the state of myth in our time. Campbell imagined that individuals in the twentieth century were standing on a terminal moraine containing the fragments of thousands of years of myth.<sup>2</sup> And from this great treasure chest of myth he encouraged individuals to create their own personal mythology by picking and choosing from what lies about them. It is with a similar sentiment that Olson writes *Maximus*.

What holds this mass of fragments together for Olson is the actual city of Gloucester “where he grew up summers as a boy and where he would settle following the closing of Black Mountain College in 1957” (Butterick 8). It is the central geographical and historical focus of *Maximus*. For Olson, Gloucester is his polis, his “city-state, esp. in ancient Greece; *spec.* such a State considered in its ideal form” as defined by *The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*.

While the Greek polis is certainly the best known and largest organization of city-states, which at one time numbered “some 1500 independent states” (Griffith and Thomas 31), it is not the only culture where this type of government could be found as the book, *The City-State in Five Cultures*, makes clear. In fact, Sumer, one of Olson’s favorite subjects is the earliest culture identified as having city-states. In Sumer there was a democratic process which “was in perfect harmony with the Sumerian understanding of the world of celestial beings, who made all of their crucial decisions through a celestial assembly from decisions to create or to destroy, promote or demote” (Griffith and Thomas 17).

By looking at the city-states across these various cultures, one finds four characteristics that can be considered defining points. First, there was a defined core, the city, which was usually enclosed by walls or surrounded by water. Second, the city-states strove for economic self-sufficiency. Third, there was a fundamental sense of shared language, culture and history. And finally, each polis regarded itself as an independent, self-governing polity.

If one turns to *Maximus* and playfully considers it in light of these four characteristics, one can see that the poem seemingly possesses a number of them. First, it has a defined core—Gloucester—around which Olson tries “to build out of sound the wall / of a city,” (*M III* 37). Second, when readers step into the walls of *Maximus*, they become citizens of the poem who share its language, culture and history. And finally due to the breadth of subject matter of *Maximus* Olson is able to give the reader the sense that the poem is an independent and self-governing polity with its own history and sociological structure.

Within *Maximus*, itself, Olson offers his own perspectives on the notion of polis. In “Letter 3” of *Maximus* Olson writes, “As the people of the earth are now, Gloucester / is heterogeneous, and so can know polis / not a localism.” Later, in that same letter, he writes, “I speak to any of you, not to you all, to no group, not to you as citizens / as my Tyrian might have. Polis now / is a few, is a coherence not even yet new (the island of this city / is a mainland now of who? who can say who are / citizens?” (*M II* 10).

Before turning to Olson’s apparent answer to this question, an exploration of the citizenship criteria of the Greek polis reveals that the citizens of those poleis were also a “few.” In fact one estimate of the percentage of people living within a Greek polis who were actually voting members, states that there was a “2.63 percent citizenship for Sparta and 13.6 percent for Athens” (Griffith and Thomas 47). In Greece the two main factors for polis citizenship were “that an individual belonged to both a community of people and community of place: the first proof was offered through descent and the second was attested by means of ownership of property” (Griffith and Thomas 48).

For Olson the polis could include a much more diverse collection of individuals, such as “Nova Scotians, / Newfoundlanders, / Sicilianos, / Isolatos” (*M I* 12). What these people had in common was the quality of their “eyes,” the quality of their attention. Olson writes:

polis is  
eyes  
...

Eyes,  
& polis,  
fishermen,  
& poets  
        or in every human head I've known is  
        busy  
both:  
the attention, and  
the care  
        however much each of us  
        chooses our own  
        kin and  
        concentration  
  
...  
  
so few  
have the polis  
in their eye

¶ (MI 26)

Byrd, calls this quality of attention, “a radical phenomenology . . . The fishermen provide a model of perceptual precision and care for both the city . . . and the poet. . . Maximus insists upon the absolute primacy of the visual” (81). Attention is so important to Olson that Paul Christensen calls Olson’s Maximus “the apostle of total awareness” (123).

With attention as the key criteria for citizenship in Olson’s polis, it leads to a reality in which “there are no hierarchies, no infinite, no such many as mass, there are only / eyes in all heads, / to be looked out of” (MI 29). This lack of hierarchy connects back to the original Greek poleis, which were governed by the people and asked much of those individuals. Each polis “demanded and received direct participation . . . The *polis* had assumed certain responsibilities for the welfare of its members; but, lacking an elaborate administrative structure, it demanded the time and expertise of its citizens to execute those responsibilities” (Griffith and Thomas 67).

This level of involvement was a new experience for these citizens and so required new skills, such as the ability to express oneself well in public. It was to address this need that the Sophists came into being:

The Sophists were Greece’s first professional teachers, and they originated in response to the rise and spread of democracy, which made it important for

citizens to learn how to express themselves well in the forum of public opinion (public opinion does not exist in an authoritarian state nor would it have existed in Plato's ideal Republic). Their aim was therefore practical: to teach abilities that would enable citizens to lead a good social life in a free society. (Madison 1982 245)

This description certainly doesn't sound like the Sophists for whom sophism—a “plausible but fallacious argument, *esp.* one intended to deceive or to display ingenuity in reasoning”—was coined. The definition of a “Sophist” from *The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* is slightly more inclusive in its description and actually contains a synopsis of the changing perspective on the Sophists. It states, “In ancient Greece, a scholar, a teacher; *spec.* a paid teacher of philosophy and rhetoric, *esp.* one associated with specious reasoning and moral skepticism; *gen.* (now *rare*) a wise or learned man. Now, a person using clever but fallacious arguments; a specious reasoner, a casuist.” So if the Sophists were teachers trained to help individuals carry out the duties of a democracy, how did the change in their reputation occur? How did they become associated with “fallacious arguments”? Well, as the saying goes, “Winners write history.” Many of the Sophists were contemporaries with Plato and were in conflict with him as is evident from the *Dialogues*, in particular *Gorgias* and *Phaedrus*. And since Plato's writings survived and “no writings survived from any of the sophists . . . we have to depend on inconsiderable fragments and often obscure or unreliable summaries of their doctrines. What is worse, for much of our information we are dependent upon Plato's profoundly hostile treatment of them” (Kerford 1). The contemporary postmodern philosopher G. B. Madison describes it this way:

So thorough was Plato's victory that today the word sophist is synonymous with dishonesty and specious argumentation; sophistry designates any form of plausible but fallacious argument. The sophist, we say, is one who through slick talking can make someone believe that black is white; he is interested only in his own personal gain and, as Plato said of one of the greatest of Sophists, Gorgias, he respects probability more than truth, make trifles seem important and important points trifles by the force of his language, dresses up novelties as antiques and vice-versa, and argues concisely or at interminable length about anything and everything. (1982 244)

But this was not simply a battle between two schools of philosophers, in many ways it was a battle over the nature of Truth and Reality. Plato through the *Dialogues* and the powerful imagery within them, created an eternal realm of Forms of which our experiential world is a mere reflection, an imperfect shadow. While most people have to be content with mere shadows, the philosophers (Plato being the pre-eminent philosopher) were “capable of apprehending that which is eternal and unchanging,” while others were incapable of this, and so were lost and wandered amid the “multiplicities of multifarious things” (484b). Philosophers were the only ones able to “fix their eyes on the absolute truth, and always with reference to that ideal and in the exactest possible contemplation of it establish in this world also the laws of the beautiful, the just, and the good” (484b). Not a bad spot to be in if you are a “philosopher.” Because of this special access to the Truth, Plato determined that the leaders of his republic should be philosophers. Plato’s notion of Truth is the beginnings of what now is known as a referential or representational view of reality. In this view of reality, reality is separated from language and from those using language. This separation allows language to have the task of mirroring reality. Therefore, words are judged true or false by their ability to accurately mirror an objective reality. For Plato it was philosophers who could “see” reality and so describe it accurately. For today’s society it is scientists who seemingly have taken over the role as keeper of the “accurate” picture of reality.

The Sophists, on the other hand, were quite “postmodern” and did not claim to have access to the Truth. Due to their work with people, the Sophists came to realize that each person to some degree possessed a new sense of reality, a new set of absolutes, and it was the task of the Sophists to help people express that vision most clearly and persuasively. And so they

envisioned an incomplete, ambiguous, and uncertain world, interpreted and understood by means of language. According to the sophists, truth and reality do not exist prior to language but are creations of it. . . . The sophists valued figurative and poetic language in particular because of its capacity to appeal directly to the senses through images, thus providing alternative possibilities for seeing and doing. (Foss, Foss and Trapp 3)

The Sophist's interest in "poetic language" was not all they shared with poets, who were also viewed quite contemptuously by Plato. For Plato the Sophists' notion of truth as uncertain, ambiguous, incomplete, filled with interpretation did not fit in his neatly organized republic. And neither did poetry's version of truth, since he had "come to see that we must not take such poetry seriously as a serious thing that lays hold on truth," but instead must be on our guard "fearing for the polity" of our soul (Plato 608a-b).

So if one sketches this debate that started with Plato as a debate between representational, objective Truth versus poetic, interpreted truth, one can easily see on what side of the debate Olson places himself. His attempt to define a poetic that creates an open stance toward reality is his response to the debate. In the essay "Human Universe," Olson writes with urgency about Plato and the danger of his version of Truth, "His world of Ideas, of forms as extricable from content, is as much and as dangerous an issue as are logic and classification, and they need to be seen as such if we are to get to some alternative to the whole Greek system" (SW 1967 55).

Olson places this issue right in the center of *Maximus* with the choice of Maximus of Tyre, a second century A.D. Greek philosopher as the "figure of speech" for his epic. Olson describes Maximus of Tyre as "some sort of a figure that centers much more than the second century A.D.—in fact, as far as I feel it, like, he's the navel of the world. In saying that I'm not being poetic or loose. We come from a whole line of life that makes Delphi that center . . . and this I think is the kind of a thing that ought to be at least disturbed" (Butterick 7). In the Preface to the writings of Maximus of Tyre that Olson read just before beginning *Maximus*, we find these words:

He cultivated philosophy, and principally that of Plato; and that he was one of those sophists who, like Dio Chrysostom, united philosophy with the study of rhetoric, and combined sublimity and depth of conception with magnificence and elegance of diction.

I have said that he *principally* cultivated the Platonic philosophy, because from the twentieth dissertation it appears that he preferred the cynic life to that of all others, thus placing the end of life in *practical* and not in *theoretic* virtue. (Butterick 6)

So Maximus is a “sophist” and a thinker who preferred rhetoric and practical reason, which are in direct opposition to the lineage from Delphi, the line of Apollo, the line of reason, logic and order. Within *Maximus*, itself, Olson addresses this split by speaking of the split between *muthos* and *logos*. Olson sees this as a split that was not there in the beginning, but only acquired its current sense of myths being “fictional” and logos being “factual” following the work of Plato. At an earlier time there was no distinction between these two terms as Olson discovered from a work he used as reference, “For some reason Homer avoids Logos, preferring Muthos; but Muthos with him means ‘what is said’ in speech or story exactly like Logos in its primary sense. . . . The question of truth or falsehood did not arise” (Butterick 146). These ideas in turn find their way into Maximus’ “Letter 23” as he speaks of how Pindar said, “‘Poesy / steals away men’s judgment / by her *muthos*’ [...] / ‘and a blind heart / is most men’s portions.’ Plato / allowed this divisive / thought to stand, agreeing / that *muthos* / is false. *Logos* / isn’t-- was facts” (Olson *MI* 100).

Plato’s approach to reality is “divisive” because it undermines the ability of individuals to discover truth for themselves and it reduces all diversity to uniformity. Truth becomes something to which certain people (philosophers, politicians, scientists, theologians, etc.) can have special access. Truth becomes something locked away in facts, theories and abstractions; it becomes static, absolute, eternal, univocal and unchanging. And Truth becomes something that “cannot but result in dogmatism . . . [which] is oppressive since it legitimates ‘expertocracy’ and ‘rationalist terrorism,’ i.e., the tyranny of those who claim to be ‘in the know’” (Madison 1992 9). Olson clearly had no patience for a society of experts to whom he would turn to for answers; instead, he engaged the texts from an enormous range of disciplines and created his work from these studies. A glacier moves all things in front of it. It does not need expert land moving engineers to get the job done. This notion of “expertocracy,” which the modern world is deeply in the midst of during the last part of the twentieth century, is reminiscent of the words of another philosophic American writer, Walker Percy, who wrote, “Indeed everything is too important to be left to the specialist of that thing, and the layperson is already too deprived by



the surrendering of such sovereignty” (10). For the Sophists no one had special access to truth, since through their work they could see “that there are about as many ‘ultimate realities’ as there are speculative philosophers and theorizers. Each theorizer, Gorgias remarked, thinks that he has the secret of the universe, but what one sees is only a host of theories pitted one against the other” (Madison 1982 245).

While the Sophists may have been exploring this perception of truth 2500 years ago, due to the success of Plato and the “line of life” from Delphi, it is only since Nietzsche that this notion has become re-energized and explored again. While everyone may know Nietzsche’s famous, “God is dead” statement, religion was certainly not his only target. In many ways his target was Truth and Reality—both written here with capital letters to express the view of these notions as absolutes. Nietzsche desires to tear down those absolutes and leave the safety of “land” behind:

*In the horizon of the infinite. – We have left the land and have embarked. We have burned our bridges behind us—indeed, we have gone further and destroyed the land behind us. Now, little ship, look out! Beside you is the ocean: to be sure, it does not always roar, and at times it lies spread out like silk and gold and reveries of graciousness. But hours will come when you will realize that it is infinite and that there is nothing more awesome than infinity. Oh, the poor bird that felt free and now strikes the walls of this cage! Woe, when you feel homesick for the land as if it had offered more *freedom*—and there is no longer any “land.” (180-181)*

For Nietzsche freedom does not come from the land, from ideal Forms, from dogmatic beliefs. True freedom comes when one is brave enough to leave that certainty behind and venture forward away from land into the “Okeanos the one which all things are and by which nothing / is anything but itself” (Olson *M II* 2). In order to move away from the land, Nietzsche feels he must destroy it, and so he offers himself up as an explosive, “I am no man. I am dynamite” (quoted in Madison 1992 3). Yet, Nietzsche does not merely see himself as a destructive influence, a source of nihilism. Rather, he sees himself as a “cultural physician” (Ahern 10) who sought to destroy faith, but also restore it:

First, he set out to *destroy* faith in the values he knew would sustain neither himself nor tomorrow’s generations. Second, he sought a means to *restore* the

strength humankind would require to once again say a yes to life and recapture the vitality that had been undermined by the instincts of decadence. (Ahern 147)

What Nietzsche creates to help restore this vitality are a collection of truths, a “movable host of metaphors” (Ahern 189) that can assist individuals as they create their dance on the edge of the abyss. The modern Greek writer Nikos Kazantzakis (a creator of a massive modern epic himself) describes Nietzsche’s message this way:

What had this prophet done? What did he tell us, above all, to do? He told us to deny all consolations—gods, fatherlands, moralities, truths—and, remaining apart and companionless, using nothing but our own strength, to begin to fashion a world which would not shame our hearts. Which is the most dangerous way? That is the one I want! Where is the abyss? That is where I am headed. What is the most valiant joy? To assume complete responsibility! (329)

Now the question that must be asked is this, “Is Nietzsche’s metaphoric gospel any different than the systems he hoped to destroyed?” Kazantzakis’ answer to this question is quite clear:

Even Nietzsche gave way to terror for an instant. Eternal Recurrence struck him as an interminable martyrdom, and out of his fright he fashioned a great hope, a future savior, the Superman. But the Superman is just another paradise, another mirage to deceive poor unfortunate man and enable him to endure life and death. (339)

The charge that Kazantzakis levels against Nietzsche is in some ways unfair perhaps. The purely heroic vision of humankind may see humanity dancing fearlessly on the abyss. However, many other postmodern visions (including Kazantzakis’ mythology in which individuals must save God) have recognized the need for stories, for mythology, which “could have the power of making a real difference to our lives. . . . [and] actually help to bring reality into being” (Madison 1992 14-15), without having to see those stories as dogmatic fact.

Nietzsche is important for this study because he provides a background, a legacy that anyone writing about truth and reality in this century much deal with, must cope with. Two such writers who have had to cope with the legacy of Nietzsche are Martin Heidegger and Alfred North Whitehead. Heidegger is important because, like Nietzsche, he too is a figure of this century that one much work through, and secondly, when reading Heidegger at times one would

swear that they are the words of Olson. Whitehead's importance is due to his direct and important influence on Olson.

Heidegger's work is immense and extremely complex, but if one turns to his essay on "The Origin of the Work of Art," one can find some interesting descriptions of truth and the role of the artist in the revelation of that truth. The essential aspect of truth for Heidegger is "unhiddenness," which Heidegger uncovers within the traditional Greek term for truth, *aletheia*. It is this sense of truth that Heidegger refers to when he writes,

The art work opens up in its own way the Being of beings. This opening up, i.e., this deconcealing, i.e., the truth of beings, happens in the work. In the art work, the truth of what is has set itself to work. Art is truth setting itself to work. (390)

For Heidegger, art creates an opening out of which truth is unconcealed. Thus, for Heidegger, much like Olson, truth emerges in the openness of a field created by art, by poetry. In a passage that seemingly could have come from Olson, we hear Heidegger say,

What poetry, as illuminating projection, unfolds of unconcealedness and projects ahead into the design of the figure, is the Open which poetry lets happen, and indeed in such a way that only now, in the midst of beings, the Open brings beings to shine and ring out. (72)

Reality, being, truth only emerge in the Open, not within the confines of a clearly delineated system of classification and identification, which stagnates life. The nature of the Open allows for the freedom of creation necessary to bring art to life—an art not of measure and control, but one of freedom and creativity:

The more poetic a poet is—the freer (that is, the more open and ready for the unforeseen) his saying—the greater is the purity with which he submits what he says to an ever more painstaking listening, and the further what he says is from the mere propositional statement that is dealt with solely in regard to its correctness or incorrectness. (216)

In this passage from “. . . Poetically Man Dwells . . .” Heidegger could have been talking about *Maximus*, since it certainly requires a “painstaking listening” and cannot be judged on a basis of “correctness or incorrectness.” It also clearly relates to the nature of reality that Olson is striving to give voice to and create a space for—a reality that demands “painstaking listening” and “eyes,” and cannot simply be measured, organized or classified.

Unlike Heidegger whose direct influence on Olson was minor, Olson calls Alfred North Whitehead “my great master and the companion of my poems” (Butterick 358). Whitehead’s work, like Heidegger’s, is quite immense and complex, yet if one simply looks at the first section of Whitehead’s *Process and Reality*, which is entitled “Speculative Philosophy,” one finds some important perspectives regarding the notion of truth and reality that this study has been pursuing, as well as a strong resonance with Olson. The first thing one notices about Whitehead’s writings is that he is not a philosopher who wants to destroy metaphysical systems. Instead, he strives to create a system that recognizes its limitations, but still attempts to be a formulation of “ultimate generalities” (8). He opens this section with these words, “Speculative Philosophy is the endeavor to frame a coherent, logical, necessary system of general ideas in terms of which every element of our experience can be interpreted” (3). But Whitehead does not start his “speculative philosophy” with a mere abstraction, a mere speculation, he turns to experience (as does Olson), to the elucidation of immediate experience as the “sole justification for any thought, and the starting-point for thought is the analytic observation of components of this experience” (4). But for Whitehead this method does not lead to a simple system of generalization, because of the nature of the experience that is being examined. For Whitehead while observation may begin with experience, imagination plays a central role in discovering the “ultimate generalities.” He writes, “The true method of discovery is like the flight of an aeroplane. It starts from the ground of particular observation; it makes a flight in the thin air of imaginative generalization; and it again lands for renewed observation rendered acute by rational interpretation” (5). Therefore, for Whitehead metaphysics is not something that is mere abstraction, rather metaphysics is “nothing but the description of the generalities which apply to all the details of practice” (15).

What Whitehead uncovers in these flights of imagination grounded by experience is a “philosophy of organism.” Within the philosophy of organism the “ultimate is termed ‘creativity,’” which is quite different from the traditional monistic philosophies where the “ultimate is illegitimately allowed a final, ‘eminent’ reality” (7). Whitehead goes on to say that “the philosophy of organism seems to approximate more to some strains of Indian, or Chinese

thought, than to western Asiatic, or European, thought. One side makes process ultimate; the other side made fact ultimate” (7). For Whitehead and Olson process is central, and it is from the understanding that the process of any one entity “involves the other actual entities among its components” that the “obvious solidarity of the world receives its explanation” (Whitehead 7).

However, Whitehead does not want to make exaggerated claims for the philosophy of organism because he sees “overstatement” (7) as one of the chief errors of philosophy. For Whitehead, metaphysical categories are “not dogmatic statements of the obvious; they are tentative formulations of the ultimate generalities” (8). One of these philosophical processes, “rationalism,” has been yoked with a level of certainty that Whitehead calls, “static dogmatism” (9). But for him rationalism is “an adventure in the clarification of thought, progressive and never final” (9). This lack of finality, this openness makes the categories of true and false (recall the false distinction between *muthos* and *logos*) “largely irrelevant for the pursuit of knowledge” (11).

So for Whitehead philosophy is a never-ending process of exploration, it is a process in which one tries out new ideas and discovers their core of truth in the crucible of practice, and in this search the “proper test is not that of finality, but of progress” (12). The uncertainty, the limits, the process that is at the core of Whitehead’s thought creates what he describes as a speculative boldness “balanced by complete humility before logic, and before fact” and avoids the disease of philosophy “when it is neither bold nor humble, but merely a reflection of the temperamental presupposition of exceptional personalities” (17). A final word from Whitehead brings us back to the notion that the destruction of eternal, unchanging absolutes is also an undermining of “expertocracy”:

Philosophy is the welding of imagination and common sense into a restraint upon specialists, and also into an enlargement of their imaginations. By providing the generic notions philosophy should make it easier to conceive the infinite variety of specific instances which rest unrealized in the womb of nature. (17)

Turning again to Olson one can see that there are many parallels between these perspectives on truth and reality and his own work. Like Nietzsche, Olson viewed the world that

he found as needing repair, needing change. As quoted earlier, Olson believed that Plato's world of Ideas was "as dangerous an issue as are logic and classification, and they need to be seen as such if we are to get to some alternative to the whole Greek system." This alternative for Olson consisted in positing a new absolute, an absolute that is not final, but is changing moment to moment, individual to individual. It is an absolute that "is never more than this one, you, this instant, in action" (Olson *SW* 1967 55). Olson describes in some detail this alternative a few paragraphs later, "It is not the Greeks I blame. What it comes to is ourselves, that we do not find ways to hew to experience as it is, in our definition and expression of it, in other words, find ways to stay in the human universe, and not be led to partition reality at any point, in any way" (*SW* 1967 55). When individuals create partitions and then make comparisons between those separations, they fail to realize that a "a thing, any thing, impinges on us by a more important fact, its self-existence, without reference to any other thing, in short, the very character of it which calls our attention to it, which wants us to know more about it, its particularity" (Olson *SW* 1967 56). It is this particularity that Olson cares about not a "thing's 'class,' any hierarchy, of quality or quantity, but the thing itself, and its relevance to ourselves who are the experience of it" (*SW* 1967 56). Olson wants people not to live their lives out of a scientific mode of being in which they constantly identify entities and then categorize those entities and experiences into pre-ordained genera. Instead, he pushes people to pay attention to the particularity of each experience. One of the factors that prevents individuals from this quality of experience is the structure of language. As Paul Christensen states, Olson "was fond of observing that the mere syntax of the simple sentence in English implied a contrived reality of cause and effect; worse, it constrained us from rendering what lay beneath the surface of our immediate awareness" (8). And it is Whitehead's philosophy of organism that provides Olson a metaphysics that is able to abandon the "subject-predicate forms of thought so far as concerns the presupposition that this form is a direct embodiment of the most ultimate characterization of fact" (Whitehead 7).

By undermining the subject-predicate nature of language one also undermines the subject-object nature of reality. What Olson puts in its place is a new stance towards reality which he calls "objectism." Olson describes objectism this way:

Objectism is the getting rid of the lyrical interference of the individual as ego, of the "subject" and his soul, that peculiar presumption by which western man has interposed himself between what he is as a creature of nature (with certain instructions to carry out) and those other creations of nature which we may, with no derogation, call objects. For a man is himself an object. (*SW* 1967 24)

For Olson this new reality creates a new way of being that discovers its truth between objects: "At root (or stump) what is, *is* no longer THINGS but what happens BETWEEN things, these are the terms of the reality contemporary to us—and the terms of what we are" (*HU* 1967 123).

In these words we hear Olson echo another contemporary philosopher, Martin Buber, who expressed in his concept of the I/Thou the ontological reality of the "between." For Buber this "between" took place when there was a genuine encounter. Living within this "between" is not easy, since a momentary lapse of attention can move one out of the "between" and into the realm of separation, the realm of subject and object, the realm of I/IT. For Buber this "between" takes place not just between humans in dialogue, but can take place in encounters with all objects, even a tree:

Once the sentence "I see the tree" has been pronounced in such a way that it no longer relates a relation between a human I and a tree Thou but the perception of the tree object by the human consciousness, it has erected the crucial barrier between subject and object; the basic word I-It, the word of separation, has been spoken. (74-5)

By understanding perception as an experience between a human consciousness and an object, one sets up a cosmology of separation in which there exists "It's" for the control and classification by "I's." However, if one sees perception as an encounter between equals, between an I and a Thou, there are "no borders. . . . Whoever says Thou does not have something; he has nothing. But he stands in relation" (55). The I/Thou is a worldview in which

measure and comparison have fled. The encounters do not order themselves to become a world, but each is for you a sign of the world order . . . The world that appears to you in this way is unreliable, for it appears always new to you, and you

cannot take it by its word . . . It cannot be surveyed: if you try to make it surveyable, you lose it. (83)

Like the other thinkers described above, Buber does not describe a system that creates a sense of certainty or control. It is not a system at all, it is a way of being in relation and it does not provide solutions:

We have come close to God, but no closer to an unriddling, unveiling of being. We have felt salvation but no "solution." We cannot go to others with what we have received, saying: This is what needs to be known, this is what needs to be done. We can only go and put to the proof in action. And even this is not what we "ought to" do: rather we can—we cannot do otherwise. (160)

The understanding that Nietzsche, Heidegger, Whitehead, Buber and Olson all speak about is not one of specific knowledge or specific answers. Rather, it is an attitude towards reality, an attitude of openness and attention that brings one back to the notion of polis that Olson described as “eyes,” “attention,” “concentration.”

Olson’s first major work was *Call Me Ishmael*. In his analysis of this work Paul Christensen describes that Olson saw Ishmael as “the first Westerner of the new consciousness, a creature so open to the world that his ego is dissolved in the breadth of his attention” (36). This description seems to fit Olson just as well. It also summarizes an attitude, a way of being that emerges from the view of reality described above. Eniko Bollobas describes this connection between Olson’s new stance toward reality and the quality of attention it requires:

Attention, “the source of our very existence as human beings,” makes subject and the world coincide: “only if there is a coincidence of yourself / & the universe is there then in fact / an event” (from “The Lamp”). Life only happens when one is interested, concerned, open to experience, in a condition of alertness. . . . In other words, only concern, attention, interest, a turning toward the world can make life happen, or bring about events. And the world lying around us can only be known and understood compassionately, through this attentive concern. (40)

This quality of attention is not a controlling one, but instead it is quality that is in conversation with the field that one finds oneself. It is a conversation that is a true dialogue and perhaps includes many more than two participants. It is a conversation in which all participants are open to the other and recognize that no one has access to the final truth. Instead, these participants realize that truth and reality is conceived within the dialogue, within the debate. The dialogue is



about what happens between the participants. American philosopher Calvin Schrag describes this “between” of dialogue:

So long as one thinks with someone, manages some species of dialogue, keeping the conversation going, one remains in that delicate situation of the “between.” One is “between” affirmation and denial, acceptance and rejection, agreement and disagreement, consent and disavowal. (129)

Poetry is the perfect medium to produce this type of dialogue, this type of conversation, especially poetry that takes as its focus the open field, because meaning cannot be certain, rather meaning is discovered in the “between” in the “PLAY of the mind” (Olson SW 1967 19). This play is essential because it does not fix meaning, but allows meaning to emerge. The contemporary philosopher David Michael Levin describes the importance of play, in his writing about “poetizing discourse”:

In poetizing discourse, both sound and sense require a theory of truth which understands and appreciates their ‘ecstatic’ play within an open field. In the *phonological* dimension, there must be a field for the play of sounds: echoes, resonances, overtones and undertones, onomatopoeia, polyphony, emotionally evocative sounds. Similarly, in its *semantic* dimension, the dimension of signifiers, there must be a field for the play of meanings: ambiguities, allusions, metaphors, shades of meaning, adumbrations of what is to come. Truth as correctness, truth represented in the discourse of statements, assertions, propositions, cannot do justice to the interactive processes essential to poetizing discourse. Truth as *aletheia* can, because it is hermeneutical: it lets sound and sense play in the interplay of presence and absence, identity and difference. To the poetizing process, the process of bringing experience as it takes shape into words that further shape it, *aletheia* gives a multi-dimensional field in which to unfold. (437)

For Levin poetry requires a particular “theory of truth,” thereby echoing Olson’s recognition that he was not simply writing poetry, but was describing a new stance toward reality, a new theory of truth, that creates a space, a field in which sound and meaning can play. Within the confines of representational truth, truth as correctness, the truth of Plato there is no room for play, no room for nuance. There is only right or wrong. Either the words accurately mirror reality or they distort it. Words certainly do not create reality. However, if one sees truth as *aletheia*, as unhiddenness, and words as fundamental elements of shaping experience, then there is a “multi-dimensional field” in which being and meaning may unfold.

The forming of this field is an “interactive process,” a conversation between objects (objects being people as well as traditional “things”); it is a conversation that gives shape to Olson’s poetry and our lives. The postmodern political notion of “communicative rationality” defines conversation as an essential element of reason:

The most prominent characteristic of non-dogmatic, communicative rationality is that, unlike dogmatic, theoretical reason, it is not a form of intellectual problem-solving which seeks to “discover” supposedly objective truths or values, ones, that is, which are believed to exist prior to, independent, or outside of the reasoning process itself (the very existence of such “truths” is, the skeptical critique of dogmatic reason maintains, an undemonstrable article of faith on the part of dogmatic reason). Rather, as rhetorical theory ever since the time of the Sophists has maintained, it is the process by which people “reason together” in order to arrive at and maintain agreement among themselves in regard to all matters having to do with the organization of their collective lives and endeavors. . . . Communicative reason knows no absolute other than the will to communicate, to resolve differences, and to seek mutual, uncoerced agreement.  
(Madison 1986 217-8)

For Madison, the liberal political tradition is founded on this understanding of communicative rationality. He perceives it as the only version of reason that gives individuals the freedom to express and develop their own stories, their own truths. This type of reason is not just important on an individual level, it is also the essential foundation for peace as humanity faces the ever-growing diversity of cultures and viewpoints that are part of today’s postmodern society.<sup>3</sup>

In *Maximus*, Olson continues this tradition of freedom by creating a space where readers can join with him and “reason together.” Each reader is invited into the enormous space and scope of *Maximus* to engage fellow objects, fellow stories and begin a never-ending conversation. In “Maximus, to himself” Olson writes,

I have made dialogues,  
have discussed ancient texts,  
have thrown what light I could, offered  
what pleasures  
doceat allows

(*MI* 56)

These dialogues, these conversations do not convey a specific story; they tell a history. But that history is not an “objective” history that could be told by “the latest finest tape-recorder, or any

form of record on the spot / – live television or what – is a lie.” Rather, it is a concept of history as a “verb, to find out for yourself: / ‘istorin, which makes any one’s acts a finding out for him or her / self” (Olson *M II* 79).

Olson does not simply tell his readers "to find out for yourself." Instead, he forces them to make those discoveries on their own. He does not provide simple answers or solutions. How could he, if he truly believed in the centrality of process and the fluidity of absolutes? By using unorthodox sentence structures, incomplete statements, obscure references, original layout techniques, Olson forces readers to engage the text in an attentive, conversational, dialogical manner in which new meaning is created in the opening of the poem. One cannot assume that the next word will follow from the previous. Each word has to be attended to and given the space to play. Readers must work; they must use their eyes, ears, breath and bodies to engage the text. If they do not pay careful attention to the text and its nuances and participate in a open, transforming dialogue with it, then they will miss its meaning completely, and will fail to create the “polis of the self” (Christensen ix) that it challenges them to create. Eniko Bollobas describes the participatory nature of reading Olson in the following way:

The rich texture of Olson’s poem demands a participatory (creative) reading from the reader rather than “literate” passive listening. Also, it demands from this reader a certain openness and a willingness to resist and ignore prior expectations, preconceptions, prejudices, and routines of apprehension. The multivalent text, the text characterized by free syntactic and semantic valencies, seems a more faithful transcript of the creative moment, and at the same time promises a more active, activating reading experience. (62)

Olson, in fact, gives readers a hint on how to engage his text by how he uses texts within *Maximus*. Olson makes the texts he reads (e.g. an Algonquin legend in *M II*, 21) his own by incorporating them into his poem. He may change a word or two, but that is all. However, the new context Olson creates for the story gives it new meanings of which the Algonquins probably never dreamed. Through juxtaposition with other stories and repetition (Olson repeats this legend in *M II* 142) the meaning of the story is unleashed from its indigenous roots and allowed to float within the readers’ lives where it can possibly plant new roots. In this way Olson

demonstrates that reading is not a passive process, but is an active and integrative process in which readers are challenged to unleash *Maximus* and make it their own in order to give “daily life itself a dignity and a sufficiency” (Christensen ix).

Even the incompleteness of *Maximus*, which was only gathered together in its current form after Olson's death, provides yet another entrance, another challenge for the reader. In some ways *Maximus* begs for the reader to complete it. Or perhaps more correctly expressed, to continue it. By engaging the text and attempting to continue it, to make it their own, readers become part of an ongoing conversation, a never-ending process of creating a “mappemunde” out of the terminal moraine on which they dwell.

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### Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Within the text I will follow Butterick's abbreviations and use *M I* for the first collected volume of poems, *The Maximus Poems* (1960); *M II* will stand for *Maximus Poems IV, V, VI* (1968); *M III* will stand for *The Maximus Poems: Volume Three* (1975). I will use *Maximus* to make reference to the entire work.

<sup>2</sup> This is a reference I am sure I read in a work of Campbell's many years ago, however, I have never been able to find it again. This sentiment though can certainly be found in his work entitled *The Masks of God: Creative Mythology*, New York: Penguin Books, 1976.

<sup>3</sup> For a discussion of this point see Madison's article "Philosophy and the Pursuit of World Peace," *Dialectics and Humanism* (Poland) 11, nos. 2/3 1984.