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Patrick Barron

"The actual universe as a geography": Charles Olson's explorations of Dogtown in *The Maximus Poems*

The actual universe as a geography has turned around and is moving toward us, at the very moment that the species thinks it's going out into space. Actually, space is coming home to occupy us—in fact, to re-occupy earth. Creation is turned the other way. (Olson, *Muthologos* I: 189)

In 1915, the poet Charles Olson spent the first of many family summer vacations in Gloucester north of Boston on Cape Ann. The locus of much of his creative activity and at the core of *The Maximus Poems*, Gloucester became Olson's permanent residence in 1957, where he lived between sporadic reading tours and teaching posts until his death of cancer in 1970. Here "the actual universe as a geography" turned around, began moving toward, and enveloped him, becoming the encircling means and ends of most of his poetry. Olson's record of this intense relationship in and with "space" come "home to occupy us" is one of the most detailed and ambitious poetic undertakings of the twentieth century to understand and depict the environment. As Matthew Cooperman argues, Olson's work contains a "deeply environmental perception that sees the place of our being as inseparable from its unfolding" and articulates "Being as both a bodily and spatial term" (223). Likewise, Sherman Paul claims that, according to Olson, "to practice space in time is to live in the awareness of this limit, but it is also to live without estrangement because one's lifetime has the universe, all time and space, for its context" (108).

In this paper I examine Olson's preoccupation with space in the second volume of *The Maximus Poems*, where Olson's attention shifts away from the sea and Gloucester to the wooded ruins of nearby Dogtown, an abandoned settlement on Cape Ann filled with glacial deposits, said to have taken its name from the dogs that were kept for protection by widows and elderly women who lived there during the latter half of the eighteenth century (Butterick, *A Guide* 36). This move is driven in part by Olson's disgust with the commercialistic cheapening of Gloucester, and in part by his desire to widen his spatial explorations from urban center and coast to the wildish periphery and woods.

Playing the role of village historian (as well as geographer and archaeologist), with Maximus acting in the text as a sort of alter-ego, Olson guides the reader of *The Maximus Poems* through myriad visible and invisible paths imprinted upon and erased from the surrounding palimpsest-landscape. Quoted or slightly altered passages from books on local geology, history, climate, natural history, and folklore make frequent appearances, as well as excerpts from archival documents from the seventeenth to the twentieth centuries, including census reports and property maps. Olson attempts to

authenticate the relevance of these documents to the current landscape through hands-on fieldwork—a term that here indicates an investigation into place by all possible “documentary” means. His most common research activities include pacing out former property lines and collapsed stone walls, searching for the abandoned foundations of houses, exploring nearby woods and geologic formations, and speaking with elderly residents.

When Olson shifts his focus to Dogtown, as Paul notes, he is confronted with the challenge of “how to stay put, dig in and down . . . in the old, misused, and cast-aside—‘the waste and ashes of pioneering’” (256). Olson’s dictum, as Paul puts it, is that “We repossess place in repossessing the experience of it. *Polis is eyes*: caring and attending are the best means of urban renewal. It is possible even with the sacred and profane worn out. By digging in (a) place we recover not only America but all origin, and doing this we remake our places” (256). Olson examines such constantly (if almost always incompletely) over-written space as a vigorously produced entity—one that is alive, in process, and yet also unfortunately in danger of degradation due to insensitive and unwise industrial and urban development.

In “*Letter, May 2, 1959*,” which contains a wonderful example of word-cartography (words laid out to indicate former inhabitants’ traces and Olson’s inquisitive wanderings upon the landscape), the problem of cultural and environmental decline comes to a head. The area that Olson projectively maps at the beginning of this poem covers two roughly adjoining sites of early settler activity: Meeting House Plain (“just east of the Annisquam River and about a mile north, via Washington Street, of the harbor”) and nearby Meeting House Hill. These sites are now dominated by the Route 128 traffic circle and bridge, both constructed in the 1950s (Butterick, *A Guide* 204, 207). The poem functions similarly to a report of “rescue archaeology” and augurs Olson’s redirection of interest inland in the second volume, whose central themes stretch from local history of the past 300 years to geologic history of the past 125 million years, and from the two main roads in Dogtown to plate tectonics and Gondwanaland. Olson’s disgust with the devastation caused by the then-new road soon becomes evident:

Take the top off
Meeting House Hill
is 128 has cut it
on two sides
the third
is now no more than
more Riverdale
Park
and the fourth?
the west?
is the rubbish
of the white man (l: 149)

As his immediate urban surroundings succumb to the machine-driven pressures of contemporary America, Olson turns away from the town, its port, and the sea, to take scornful refuge in the nearby, brushy and boulder-strewn Dogtown to pen stinging jeremiads—a move boldly announced in “MAXIMUS, FROM DOGTOWN—II”:

the Sea—turn yr Back on
the Sea, go inland, to
Dogtown: the Harbor
the shore the City
are now
shitty, as the Nation
is—the World
tomorrow unless (II: 9)

Olson embraces Dogtown as an originary life-well, what Paul calls, “the hole in the earth that opens to the mysteries” (186). His drive to re-inhabit space, to construct a spatial knowledge of his environs, increases in the second volume, whose “statistical or metrical base,” as Olson describes it, “is the two roads of Dogtown”—a foundation connected to the underlying theme of “the earth as it was when it was *one* in Devonian time” (*Muthologos* I: 190).

In contrast to the U.S. Coast and Geodetic survey map of Gloucester Harbor on the cover of the first volume of *The Maximus Poems*, the second volume shows a rough cartographic representation of “the Earth (and Ocean) before Earth started to come apart at the seams, some 125 million years awhile back—and India took off from Africa & migrated to Asia” (*The Maximus* 166). What by the mid-twentieth century had become a small, largely passed-over town on the northeastern seaboard, Gloucester was once an important outpost on the early American frontier. This boundary of conflict in time, as Olson posits in *Call Me Ishmael*, was carried across the plains to the “Pacific [which must be understood] as part of our geography, another West, prefigured in the Plains, antithetical” (13). The area can thus be seen in three ways: a former joining seam, a separating frontier, and a portal to the most local as well as far-reaching aspects of space. Explored firsthand, it confirms Olson’s belief that, “when the universe comes in, it declares its limit—which is the principle of creation, not the expansion. That it *defines* space, and also time” (*Muthologos* I: 191).

Located at the edge of this former frontier, Dogtown at first glance seems a center of nothing. Look a little further, and centuries-old traces of its former Native American and European occupants come to light. The area also contains scattered geologic evidence of the Earth’s glacial and tectonic movement over millennia. In *The Maximus Poems*, Olson neither broods over the migratory end of the continent nor over the end to westward expansion, such as the Pacific Coast poet Robinson Jeffers is famous for. Instead, his scrutiny is on the other end—the passed over, Europe-pointing, and well-worn one. Olson pursues his interests West across the continent into the Pacific, and

back again to where they reside (and root) most intimately—to a site connected with his origins, and one left behind centuries ago in the colonial struggle over territory. No longer either a frontier or a "seam" in the joined mass of continents—but showing ample evidence of both—Dogtown is the perfect site for exploration of space in both intimately local and terrestrially universal terms.

As Olson describes it in "MAXIMUS, FROM DOGTOWN—I,"

Dogtown is soft
in every season
high up on her granite
horst, light growth
of all trees and bushes
strong like a puddle's ice
the bios
of nature in this
park of eternal
events is a sidewalk
to slide on, this terminal moraine:

the rocks the glacier tossed
toys

Merry played by
with his bull (II: 5)

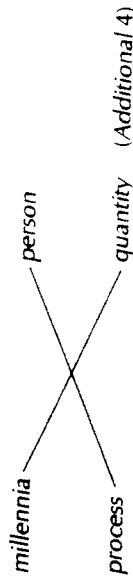
In this poem of origins (of birth and death centered in the earth), Olson juxtaposes a dizzying collection of images and stories. Among others, he includes references from Hesiod's *Theogony* and various goddess beliefs (such as the cult of Mayael, the Mexican goddess of the intoxicant made from the maguey), the geologic and natural history of Cape Ann, eighteenth-century tales about a Dogtown brothel run by Molly Jacobs, and the story of James Merry, a former sailor who in 1892 died in Dogtown fighting a young bull he had raised for the purpose—when he was drunk and the bull almost full-grown (Butterick, *A Guide* 242). Such a motley mix of the global-mythological and the local-historical is typical of the Dogtown poems, which attempt to rejoin Maximus (Olson) to both to his "place" as well as the earth as a whole.

This embracing of the landscape as a palimpsest of both human and nonhuman activity is especially relevant to his notion, as expressed in "A Bibliography on America for Ed Dom," of the *Results*, as of historical study:

- (a) it is not how much one knows but in what field of context it is retained, and used (*millennia, & quantity*)
(b) how, as yourself as individual, you are acquiring & using same in acts of form—what use you are making of acquired information (*person, & process*) (*Additional* 3)

These "*Results*" occur when, in Henri Lefebvre's words, "knowledge of space (as a

product, and not as an aggregate of objects produced) is substituted for knowledge of things in space" (104). In other words, what is needed is a dynamic understanding of space as a perpetually occurring rhythmic process *in situ*, rather than a static cataloguing of isolated, place-less parts (buildings, roads, mountains) divorced from their context, and all somehow existing in a sterile space conceived of as an empty container. The landscape must be examined as an organic and shifting field of context of which the observer is part and parcel. In order to sustain the level of "attention" essential to construct such evolving, active knowledge—the degree necessary to push history back into the spatial, or the point at which "the local loses quaintness"—Olson posits that all four of the following principles must be applied "at once":



A key point, Olson believes that "The local . . . becomes crucial once the crossed-stick of these axes is used to pick it up" (4). Often the results of this challenging reevaluation of his everyday surroundings are incomplete, occasionally based on chance, and most likely as bewildering as they are orienting. However, this element of chaos, in addition to fitting well within Olson's definition of postmodernism as a practice having "a high tolerance of disorder," is characteristic of any landscape, if examined closely enough (Butterick, "Charles" 4).

Much of "A Bibliography" is dedicated to defining the four terms "millennia," "person," "process," and "quantity," as well as to discerning their interaction within the attention of the poet. Distilling them as best I can, "millennia" refers to deep history (geographical and geological, as well as archaeological and mythological), which in the second volume of *The Maximus Poems* is given special emphasis. "Person" can be read as the involved poet, as an object amidst all the other objects of the universe (understood best as a tenet of Olson's "objectism"), actively saturating her "place," and in turn being psychologically, physically, and spiritually saturated by it. "Process" is many things, from the projective methodology itself, to the belief "THAT ALL THINGS ARE IN MOTION INCLUDES the human" (*The Special* 33). "Quantity," the least well-defined of the terms, seems to refer to the careful examination and use of what Lefebvre terms the "enumerations and descriptions" of space—such as are found in more traditional documentary sources and studies (104). In a related sense, the term can also be read to mean works of economic geography and environmental history, or even such odd documents as "*The Account Book of B Ellery*" (1744-1825), a merchant entries from an account book belonging to Benjamin Ellery (1744-1825), a merchant who lived in Dogtown and sold supplies to sea captains (Butterick, *A Guide* 292);

vessels
goods
voyages
persons
salaries

conveyances (II: 34)

Olson's excavation and exploration of space in the Dogtown poems utilize all four principles, and in so doing, root Olson to his site—his projected field of enacted attention. This nearly pastoral "placement" is made clear in "Maximus, March 1961—2," in which Olson yearns for a mix of local, personal, and unmasking grounding-in-place:

by the way into the woods

Indian otter
"Lake" ponds

^{urgent}

show me (exhibit
myself)

(II: 33)

In another example of this placement, a poem at the crux of his exploration of the spatial nature of Dogtown, "for Robt Duncan / who understands / what's going on /—written because of him / March 17, 1961," Olson records his methodical pacing-out of long-abandoned property lines, woodlots, house foundations, and orchards. In it he traces a network of "important places," all connected within the nexus of Dogtown's two main roads (Dogtown Road and Commons, or the "upper" Road), and begins with the indication that,

to go up & around Gravel Hill the road goes SE to
Jeremiah Millett's (which is my other kame)

and precisely by where his house was shoots NE passing,
on the north side, my personal 'orchard'
where I wrote with a crab-apple branch

stamp for Michael McClure . . .
at my 'writing' stand-
(II: 37)

The poem continues to plot out the terrain of Dogtown, from its entrance at Gravelly Hill to other important sites and boundaries. Olson is guided by a parish map from the mid-eighteenth century that he discovered in the Massachusetts State Archives. In an interview with Richard Moore, Olson describes it as

an engineer's map, locating each of the inhabitants of Dogtown . . . each one of them [entries on the poet's map] is the extent of the property of each of the

houses that I was able to start with, the exact location in rods and poles of the marvelous fellow named Batch-elder, who did this with chains [and rods] . . . I just found that I could be extremely precise about something. (*Muthologos* I: 188)

Olson's discipline in rediscovering these forgotten edges reveals his fourfold axes of attention at work: in his excavation (or the "processing") of these limits (or "quantities"), he simultaneously dives his "person" into them and also projectively pulls "millennia" out of them. In short, as he describes the methodology in "The Animate Versus the Mechanical, and Thought," "Cosmology-Mythology has led me—Dogtown, and Hesiod, *Maximus Poems* IV, V, VI—to believe ends and boundaries . . . are 'space-activities' in, Creation. . . that one cannot 'think' even—because one cannot 'act' even—without such limits as the 'lines' of being, both in the plant and animal meaning, 'animate'" (*Additional* 74).

These plots and boundaries initially revealed by the engineer's map lead to traces of the long-deceased residents of Dogtown, the ruins of their houses, stonewalls, passages, and pathways. They also guide Olson to gateways into the mythological underworld and geological origins of the earth—the most important of which is a pile of rocky glacial debris called Gravelly Hill that Olson refers to as the town's entrance. In addition to helping him understand the spatial layout of the former community, his appraisal of the cartographic record also provides clues as to why the site was chosen for settlement. In its hilly, inland position, Dogtown was relatively far for early settlers from the key source of livelihood: the sea and Gloucester's central fishing economy. As Olson puts it,

My problem is how to make you believe
these persons, who lived here then, and from these roads
went off to fish or bought their goods I mile and a half
further north, at George Dennison's store, or were
mariners—sailors—and a few farmers (though farming
was pasturing, and actually the older generation's
use of Dogtown before these younger persons chose
to live there) . . . (II: 38)

Perhaps the reasons behind Dogtown's location were in part based on the avoidance of pirates and government war ships—whose unwelcome visits to coastal towns along the eastern seaboard were not uncommon (Butterick, *A Guide* 305). But perhaps, too, many of Dogtown's residents chose to leave Gloucester for reasons much like Olson's: to seek refuge from the larger town's stifling economic and political pressures, especially those associated with commerce and its oftentimes exploitative "merchants" and "shop-keepers." Olson's tension with the commercial degradation of the harbor becomes especially evident towards the end of this poem, whose last three pages are a long quotation from John Josselyn's 1674 "Two Voyages to New England," which complains of the deceitful practices of the "Massachusetts merchants."

Although the second volume is technically divided into three sections, in terms of its central spatial theme, according to Olson, "there's two sets, two pairs [of poems] in this book. It opens with 'MAXIMUS, FROM DOGTOWN—I' and 'MAXIMUS, FROM DOGTOWN—II,' and it practically ends in another double set—'Gravelly Hill,' which is the entrance of Dogtown" (*Muthologos* 1: 191). In effect, Olson here describes a large, circular map, endlessly wrapping from beginnings to endings—which are really more beginnings leading ever onward into familiar, and universal, space.

Maximus Poems IV, V, VI, as Olson implies above, are really one very large poem (and in effect, the center of the larger work). It can be roughly compared to the Ionian philosopher Anaximander's map in which the world, as Olson describes it in *Call Me Isthmael*, "was locked tight in River Ocean which circled it . . . like a serpent with tail in mouth" (118). In like manner, in Olson's "map," Gravelly Hill is the entrance to Dogtown, which is surrounded by birthing "WATERED ROCK" (II: 2). The hill is also the exit, leading once again to the ocean—which is exactly where Olson ends up at the close of this volume (after a brief exploration of coastal Stage Fort Park). Water, the source of all life, intermixed with earth, begins and ends Dogtown, sustaining as well as containing it:

subterranean and celestial
primordial water holds
Dogtown high

And down

the ice holds
Dogtown (II: 3)

Olson sinks down into this life-well, drawing upon myth and the local to create what he calls his "mappemunde"—his map of Dogtown and the terrestrial, mythological, and historical world:

I am making a mappemunde. It is to include my being.
It is called here, at this point and point of time
Peloria. (II: 87)

In ancient Greek, "peloria" appears to indicate the powers of both the earth and sky (gods), especially portents in the form of "[t]hunder and lightning, wind and rain, storm and temper" (Butterick, *A Guide* 368). Accordingly, the second volume's first third is dominated by inspections of the archaeological earth; its relatively short, second third delves into ancient myth, continues the ground work, and introduces the importance of air, in particular the act of "viewing"; and the last third returns to the earth, specifically Gravelly Hill as a portal to the underworld, and eventually leads to the sea—the encircling "River-Ocean."

Near midpoint in the volume Anaximander makes the following brief reappearance:

Aristotle & Augustine
clearly misunderstood Anaximander
And in doing so beta'd
themselves (II: 113)

This quirky, brief verse with its humorous word play (beta'd, baited, or bettered) goes to the heart of Olson's exploration of spatial origins and evidence. From what little has survived of Anaximander's work, Olson seems to have been drawn to his "first principle," which describes "an endless, unlimited mass . . . subject to neither old age or decay, and perpetually yielding fresh materials for the series of beings issued from it" (Butterick, *A Guide* 405). This embracing and generative view of what Olson sees as the personally- and locally-accessible universe (so clearly manifest in Dogtown), remains in accordance with his belief that "my memory is/the history of time" (II: 86). This memory is made up of not only Olson's personal thoughts, but those literally imbedded in the earth of his place. Aristotle and Augustine apparently misinterpret Anaximander's first principle as a sort of primal chaos—for them a primitive and perhaps repugnant belief, centered in the shadowy earth. Overemphasis on the Logos prohibits them from recognizing this first principle as the originary, and inescapable life-well from which the earth's multifarious forms are born, or as Olson put it, "life spills out" (II: 3)—and into which all beings inevitably fall, as does Merry when killed by the bull:

. . . the sun
in the morning
covered him
with flies

Then only
after the grubs
had done him
did the earth
let her robe
uncover and her part
take him in (II: 6)

Olson envisions this doorway as a hole on the slope of Gravelly Hill. "the source and end (or boundary' of / D'town on the way that leads from the town to Smallmans" (II: 160). Also evident is a play on a line from Hesiod's *Theogony*, which begins and in effect names the poem: "at the boundary of the mighty world" (160). Hesiod's boundary, or "katavóθρα," as it is later named in the poem, is "one of the many deep rifts in the strata of the Greek rocks," which allow passage into the underworld, or Hades (Butterick, *A Guide* 457). Olson hints at the location of this hole, stating (in the voice of Gravelly Hill itself) that

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

This "end of the world / is the borders / of my being," says (the hill through the voice of) Olson, recalling the short poem "Maximus, March 1961—2," written in the same month two years earlier, which describes Olson's entrance into and orientation within both place and self.

The opening in Gravelly Hill is also related to Dogtown's former square and makeshift cemetery, housing the dead and cast off (such as Merry): like its Greek counterpart, it is located in rocky outcroppings:

this source and end of the way from the town into
 the woods is only—as I am the beginning, and Gaia's
 child—*katavothra*. Here you enter
 darkness. (II: 162)

The rotting remains of the past inhabitants of Dogtown sink down into this "mouth," while the newly born rise up out of it. Olson explores its depths in order to better understand how, by way of the local, the landmasses and oceans of the planet are so tightly interwoven. In this way, as Lefebvre describes the function of the mundus (a rubbish pit and passageway into the underworld), Olson is able to join "the city, the space above ground, land-as-soil and land-as-territory, to the hidden, clandestine, subterranean spaces" (242). With Hesiod's *Theogony* and assorted Norse, Egyptian, and Hindu sources as his guides, Olson then "disappears" into "this paved hole in the earth," plunging deeply not only into chthonic space, but also into time, to "a century or so before 2000 / BC" (II: 162, 163). As he descends, the local is tied to the global, Dogtown to the world; the earth is conceived both as lived-upon surface space, and as underworld birthing/decomposing space.

"MAXIMUS, FROM DOGTOWN—IV," written just after "at the boundary of the mighty world," recounts this journey, and is followed by a short verse describing the interwoven nature of the earth's underbelly, containing the continents, oceans, and skies:

I looked up and saw
 its form
 through everything
 — if its seen
 in all parts, under
 and over (II: 173)

This vision recalls the volume's original cover, depicting Gondwanaland. However, instead of the floating eyes of the aerial cartographer, here the sunken eyes of the subterranean geologist view the warp and weft of the world's biotic and mineral fabric. Olson's construction of space thus not only includes the three-dimensional, human-inhabited surface of the earth, but also its deepest composition of cultural as well as geological, originary elements.

In the few poems left in the second volume, Olson is swept through underground streams out to the harbor to wander the coastal areas once again—especially Fort Point. His spatial fieldwork, which takes him first through the intricacies of Gloucester, then to the hilltop viewpoints, surface labyrinths, and inner bowels of Dogtown, finally expels him back upon the border of sea and land—literally his own doorstep. The appearance of "Maximus to Gloucester, Letter 157," the first such address to the town since "Maximus to Gloucester, Letter 27 [withheld]," marks an important, if bitter-sweet reconciliation for Olson. In it, he explores the various groups to raid Gloucester, most notably the Tarantine, or Micmac Indians, who dominated the territory in the early seventeenth century. The poem plays on the etymological origins of Olson's Italian neighbors' surname, the Tarantinos, focusing on the vulnerability and the mixed racial nature of oft-invaded port cities such as Gloucester. It ends with a reference to the yellow fever that killed many of the Micmacs, a fact that helps explain the common belief that phantasms inhabit the area, reported in the beginning of the poem:

an old indian chief as hant
 sat on the rock between
 Tarantino's and Mr
 Randazza's and scared the piss out of
 Mr Randazza so he ran back into
 his house

The house I live in, and exactly on the back stairs
 is the sight

of the story
 told me by

Mr Misuraca, that,
 his mother, reports

that, the whole Fort Section, is
 a breeding ground of the ghosts of,

dogs, and that, on those very steps, she saw,
 as a girl, a fierce, blue, dog, come at her,

as she was going out, the door (II: 177)

This "letter" contains not only references to death—notably Olson's explorations of the cleft in Gravelly Hill—but also indicates a shift towards the autobiographical, or in the terminology of his four-fold methodological axes, the "person." The focus in this poem on cultural flux, especially on conflict, raiding, and annihilating disease, emphasizes the instability, even impossibility, of Olson's beloved notion of polis. Dogtown, with its connections to both local (if abandoned) and mythological space, offers poetic and spiritual inspiration, but little personal succor—and certainly not a home. The ghost dog once seen by Mr. Misuraca's mother on Olson's back stairs recalls the deathly nature of Dogtown, as well as Olson's own mortality, and in the following years, impending death. The poem also indicates the inevitable return from the untamed heights and depths of Dogtown, to the difficult, quotidian reality of Gloucester.

After his locally-urban and then extra-urban explorations of space, in the closing pages of the second volume, and throughout the third volume, Olson increasingly speaks of his own life, or the personal-urban. This is especially true in the ways he is wedded to Gloucester, for better or for worse. This bond—including the creative urge centered in it—produces both accomplishments (the poetry itself, however incomplete and lacking of a true polis) and shortcomings (the terrible feeling that he had wronged both his father, and his last wife, Betty Olson). But perhaps above all, Olson's choice to ground his life and poetry in Gloucester brings a great deal of loneliness. In the later poem, "Maximus to Gloucester," Olson-Maximus states:

Only my written word

I've sacrificed every thing, including sex and woman
—or lost them—to this attempt to acquire complete
concentration. (III: 101)

The final two poems of the second volume foreshadow this dual relinquishment-attainment when Olson, after wandering briefly along the coast and encountering Gloucester once again, creates one last map—"The River Map and we're done." The poem's attempt to chart the spatial nature of Gloucester is in many ways representative of *The Maximus Poems* as a whole—in this case, focusing on Gloucester's "mouth," or the point at which its rivers flow into the ocean. "The River Map," in fact, explores the spatial layout of the land surrounding the Squam River and Gloucester's harbor. It is based in part on William Saville's early nineteenth-century maps of the two locations, in part on the *I Ching*'s "River Map," and in part on Olson's own observations. Its title, as Paul points out, "reminds us of mappemunde which is in fact the case, since 'River Map,' as Jung explains it, is a drawing revealing the laws of the world order, made, according to Chinese legend, by a dragon who dredged its signs from a river. This map is a mandala, and with it Maximus tells the wholeness he has achieved" (213). This sense of Olson's circular, moving position between coastal Gloucester and hilly Dogtown in tune with the rhythmic nature of his surroundings—especially the shifting tides

and hydrological cycle—is particularly evident when the poet situates himself

Between Heaven and Earth
kun and on any side Four

directions the banks
and between them the River Flowing
in North and South out
when the tide re-
fluxes (II: 201)

Olson's "concentration" here is intense, almost, as he puts it, "complete." Reflecting the overall motion of the second volume, this penultimate poem enacts the passage of water from the ocean up into the land, and from there—especially the hilly woods of Dogtown—down through strata and streams, to the coast once again:

With the water high no distance
to Sargents houses Apple Row
the river a salt Oceana or lake
from Baker's field to Bonds Hill
nothing all the way
of the hollow of the Diorite
from glacial time to this soft summer night
with the river in this respite solely
an interruption of itself (II: 202)

Perhaps drawn back into the cyclical flow through which he so recently passed, like Melville's Ishmael, Olson then declares in the concluding poem that:

I set out now
in a box upon the sea (II: 203)

An act of migration, rebirth, abandonment, and departure linked to an inevitable return, this setting out into the element of water, just as the exploration of the earth just undertaken, is a journey into space to find space. A journey that is intensely personal and local, and yet also communal and universal, it extends in all directions, into every nook and cranny of his immediate surroundings—and through these openings to the rest of the world. It remakes place by exploring place. In challenging perception by scouring the endless stream of "real" evidence that he uncovers in Gloucester and

This "letter" contains not only references to death—notably Olson's explorations of the cleft in Gravelly Hill—but also indicates a shift towards the autobiographical, or in the terminology of his four-fold methodological axes, the "person." The focus in this poem on cultural flux, especially on conflict, raiding, and annihilating disease, emphasizes the instability, even impossibility, of Olson's beloved notion of polis. Dogtown, with its connections to both local (if abandoned) and mythological space, offers poetic and spiritual inspiration, but little personal succor—and certainly not a home. The ghost dog once seen by Mr. Misuraca's mother on Olson's back stairs recalls the deathly nature of Dogtown, as well as Olson's own mortality, and in the following years, impending death. The poem also indicates the inevitable return from the untamed heights and depths of Dogtown, to the difficult, quotidian reality of Gloucester.

After his locally-urban and then extra-urban explorations of space, in the closing pages of the second volume, and throughout the third volume, Olson increasingly speaks to Gloucester, for better or for worse. This bond—including the creative urge centered in it—produces both accomplishments (the poetry itself, however incomplete and lacking of a true polis) and shortcomings (the terrible feeling that he had wronged both his father, and his last wife, Betty Olson). But perhaps above all, Olson's choice to ground his life and poetry in Gloucester brings a great deal of loneliness. In the later poem, "Maximus to Gloucester," Olson-Maximus states:

Only my written word

I've sacrificed every thing, including sex and woman
—or lost them—to this attempt to acquire complete
concentration. (III: 101)

The final two poems of the second volume foreshadow this dual relinquishment-attainment when Olson, after wandering briefly along the coast and encountering Gloucester once again, creates one last map—"The River Map and we're done." The poem's attempt to chart the spatial nature of Gloucester is in many ways representative of *The Maximus Poems* as a whole—in this case, focusing on Gloucester's "mouth," or the point at which its rivers flow into the ocean. "The River Map" in fact, explores the spatial layout of the land surrounding the Squam River and Gloucester's harbor. It is based in part on William Saville's early nineteenth-century maps of the two locations, in part on the *I Ching*'s "River Map," and in part on Olson's own observations. Its title, as Paul points out, "reminds us of mappemunde which is in fact the case, since 'River Map,' as Jung explains it, is a drawing revealing the laws of the world order, made, according to Chinese legend, by a dragon who dredged its signs from a river. This map is a mandala, and with it Maximus tells the wholeness he has achieved" (213). This sense of Olson's circular, moving position between coastal Gloucester and hilly Dogtown in tune with the rhythmical nature of his surroundings—especially the shifting tides

and hydrological cycle—is particularly evident when the poet situates himself

Between Heaven and Earth
kun and on any side Four

directions the banks

and between them the River Flowing

in North and South out

when the tide re-

fluxes (II: 201)

Olson's "concentration" here is intense, almost, as he puts it, "complete." Reflecting the overall motion of the second volume, this penultimate poem enacts the passage of water from the ocean up into the land, and from there—especially the hilly woods of Dogtown—down through strata and streams, to the coast once again:

With the water high no distance
to Sargents houses Apple Row
the river a salt Oceana or lake
from Baker's field to Bonds Hill

nothing all the way
of the hollow of the Diorite
from glacial time to this soft summer night
with the river in this respite solely
an interruption of itself (II: 202)

Perhaps drawn back into the cyclical flow through which he so recently passed, like Melville's Ishmael, Olson then declares in the concluding poem that:

I set out now
in a box upon the sea (II: 203)

An act of migration, rebirth, abandonment, and departure linked to an inevitable return, this setting out into the element of water, just as the exploration of the earth just undertaken, is a journey into space to find space. A journey that is intensely personal and local, and yet also communal and universal, it extends in all directions, into every nook and cranny of his immediate surroundings—and through these openings to the rest of the world. It remakes place by exploring place. In challenging perception by scouring the endless stream of "real" evidence that he uncovers in Gloucester and

Dogtown, Olson brings space to us. And even if his heroic urge to "compell Gloucester /to yield, to/change" into an ideal polis does not ultimately succeed, Olson's gift is a truly compelling account of the deeper spatial nature of his chosen home—from which all poets, archaeologists, geographers, and other examiners of space, have much to learn (II: 15).

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Laura Jehn Menides

The Sense of Place in Kunitz, Bishop, and Olson

Delivered at the Stanley Kunitz Symposium, Clark University, November 5, 2005

This paper is about the sense of place—a specific place, Worcester, Massachusetts—and about three poets who changed their attitudes and opinions about that place— from various degrees of negative to various degrees of positive. The three, Stanley Kunitz, Elizabeth Bishop, and Charles Olson are mentioned by Kunitz himself in his "Foreword" to Michael True's 1972 book, *Worcester Poets*: "All poets are brothers and sisters under the skin of language," Kunitz writes, "and I have long known that two of my most admired colleagues had at least a birthplace in common with me."¹

Yes, all three were born in Worcester about the same time—Kunitz in 1905, Olson in 1910, and Bishop in 1911—but never met in Worcester, which makes Kunitz speculate about Worcester in the 20s and 30s as follows (and Bishop scholars will note an echo here, a speculation about staying home):

Suppose...we had stayed home—what would have become of us? In that parochial climate, given our different backgrounds, would we have managed to find one another?

Kunitz continues his musings, which I quote at length:

All three of us, curiously, developed an inordinate love of place, but not of *that* place. Elizabeth Bishop's early attachment was to Nova Scotia and, in recent years, to Brazil. I recall her saying once that she was born in Worcester "quite by accident" and did not linger long. Charles Olson identified himself with Gloucester, the half-mythic seaport of his poems. My own preference is for Cape Cod, after years of rural existence in Connecticut and Pennsylvania. New York, where I spend the winter months, is only a habitation, to be endured, not cherished.

Later, in the same 1972 "Foreword," Kunitz writes:

Elizabeth and Charles were able to forget Worcester. I doubt that I ever shall. Perhaps it scarred me more.

Kunitz is mistaken in his statement that "Elizabeth and Charles were able to forget Worcester." Their poems and prose pieces, especially those written late in life, attest to the contrary. In their poetry, all three returned to their place of birth and to their childhood experiences, seeking to find the origins of their adult selves.

Yes, all three were scarred by Worcester, and all three left for other places. Yet—and this is the topic of my paper—despite the scars, each of the poets, later

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