

Introduction: Contemporary Olson

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Composition by field

When Charles Olson published the essay 'Projective Verse' in *New York Poetry* in the Spring of 1950, he issued a set of findings that had been long in development. Although with only one slim volume of poetry, *Y & X*, to his name, and with his first major poem, 'The Kingfishers', still awaiting publication, by the time he laid out the principles of what he variously termed (in his subsequent 'Letter to Elaine Feinstein') 'Projective Open or Field Verse', Olson had given extensive thought to the situation of contemporary poetry (*CPr*, 250).¹ In part circumstantially, but also characteristically, Olson's thinking about poetry had crossed and been informed by various intersecting practices and disciplines. As a graduate student at Harvard in the 1930s he had altered the field of Melville studies, both as archivist (re-assembling Melville's library) and through his radical re-contextualisation of *Moby-Dick*.² The resulting book, *Call Me Ishmael*, published in 1947, dug deep into the political economy of mid-nineteenth-century New England, presenting Melville's novel as the period's focal point, what Ezra Pound would call a vortex.³ Between graduate study and the publication of his research, Olson was politically engaged in the war effort, working in the Foreign Language Division of the Office of War Information and rising to a position of seniority in Roosevelt's Democratic Party. For two years after the war he visited Pound at St Elizabeth's.⁴ In October 1948 he was appointed visiting lecturer at the experimental arts institute, Black Mountain College. *Y & X*, published in 1949, was a co-publication with the artist Corrado Cagli, to whose drawings of Buchenwald Olson's poems issued a response. Written and revised in collaboration with Robert Creeley and Frances Boldereff, 'Projective Verse' appeared in *New York Poetry* on 3 April 1950. Noting the essay's moment of publication in his introduction to Olson's *Selected Writings*, Creeley observed, 'The date is significant' (*SW*, 6).

In insisting on the significance of the date, Creeley, writing in 1965,

was in part underlining Olson's own assertion in correspondence with Donald Allen that the year 1950 (not some earlier modernist moment) was the appropriate start date for what Allen called the New American Poetry.⁵ Indebted as it undoubtedly was to modernist models, Olson's view was that poetry after the war had to be understood to be irrevocably different from what had gone before. There were continuities but unquestionably, also, there had been a rupture, to describe which Olson coined the term 'post-modern'.⁶ But when Creeley wrote, without qualification or explanation, that the publication date of 'Projective Verse' was significant, it was not primarily to underscore a literary historical narrative. What mattered, as he saw it, was simply that with the appearance of the essay a change had been effected; that the possibilities of poetry, and creative thought more generally, had been decisively altered.

Looking back from the present vantage point, after the many readings and counter-readings generated by the essay's welter of terms, with knowledge of the major body of work that emerged out of it, and also with the poet's personality clearly in view, it can be difficult to get a fix on Olson's central findings, on what he was really introducing when he announced his new approach. It is useful, therefore, to go back to the central term itself, to the 'field', the metaphor on which all of Olson's innovations hinged. A glance at the dictionary gives a series of partly overlapping, partly disconnected meanings that in the combination of their relatedness and un-relatedness speak to Olson's aesthetic intent. A field, to work from the ground up, is an 'area of open land', though one might note immediately that the designation of a given 'area' is on some level at odds with the definition's basic assertion of openness.⁷ An important sub-meaning of this first definition, stepping away from the term's pastoral implication, is that of land 'rich in a natural product such as oil, or gas'. A second meaning of the term is that of 'a branch of study or sphere of activity'. A third meaning indicates 'the space or range within which objects are visible from a viewpoint or through a particular apparatus'. In sport, not to be disregarded, the field means 'all the participants in a given event'. In physics the term defines the region in which 'a force such as gravity or magnetism is effected'. In mathematics it points to 'a system subject to two binary operations analogous to those for the multiplication and addition of real numbers, and having similar commutative and distributive laws'.

When Olson used the term 'field', when he spoke of 'the moment' that the poet 'ventures into FIELD COMPOSITION' (Olson's emphasis), all of the above meanings were, in some measure, in play (*CPr*, 240). As in his book about Melville, in which he presented it as the 'central fact', he meant to make space (the space of the page and the space of

the person inscribing the page) central to the new poetics, both as a common property but also as a site of potential conflict.⁸ He meant to signal diverse spheres of practice and knowledge and, more particularly, their connections and intersections. He meant to raise the limitations and difficulty registered by the fact of a framing view. He wanted to emphasize the idea of shaping forces, drawing on the term's meaning in physics. He wanted, crucially, to establish the poem as a means of attending to 'all participants'. To say it in a single sentence: what Olson set out in 'Projective Verse', following the catastrophic disregard for human society that constituted the Second World War, and building on his profoundly cross-disciplinary study of political and economic space in nineteenth-century literature, was a conception of the poem grounded in relations; an aesthetic that made relatedness (of people, objects and ideas) axiomatic to the poem's form and creative practice. As he says in the essay:

let me indicate this, that every element in an open poem (the syllable, the line, as well as the image, the sound, the sense) must be taken up as participants in the kinetic of the poem just as solidly as we are accustomed to take what we call the objects of reality; and that these elements are to be seen as creating the tensions of a poem just as totally as do those other objects create what we know as the world.

(*CPr*, 243)

One of the premises of this book, one of its primary arguments for re-visiting Olson, is that the suppleness and scale with which he is able to figure the complexity of inter-relations (whether between people, between people and the world, or between areas of knowledge) makes him necessary reading in our own politically and economically conflicted moment. It will be necessary later to consider why, as is the case, his thought and writing slipped from critical view in the decades following his death in 1970, an evolution that tells us something about Olson but also something about the history we have lived and are living through. It will be important also, in presenting a contemporary Olson, to indicate how, and with what degrees of reservation and respect, he should now be read. Before setting those literary historical issues out, however, I want briefly to consider how the question of relations and inter-relatedness developed in his thought and writing, from his first major poem 'The Kingfishers', through his spoken and written poetics, to his epic of human labour and engagement, *The Maximus Poems*.

As several writers in this volume, including Charles Bernstein and Peter Minter, observe, 'The Kingfishers' remains a poem of great historical and aesthetic charge. Completed in 1949, though not published until late 1950, the poem is composed as if from the ruins, presenting a series of fragments that in their heft on the page read like the abandoned

monumental stones with which the poem concludes. The poet hunts among stones, but so does the reader, trying to make sense of a situation whose meaning is not readily disclosed. As both acts imply (both the poet's hunting and the reader's), a central question for 'The Kingfishers' is the question of human agency. We need to be careful about the phrasing, however, because 'The Kingfishers' is not concerned with human agency in the externalized way a philosophical essay might be. Instead the poem dramatizes the issue, or, more fully perhaps, affords it form. From the opening line and its quotation from Heraclitus ('What does not change / Is the will to change'), the matter of agency is entirely integral to the poem's procedure, to its mode of expression, its way of being (*CP*, 86).

Again, the phrasing needs to be qualified. All reading involves agency, some measure of intellectual re-assembly; the act of reading, in this respect, was hardly introduced by any version of the avant-garde. The matter of agency was, however, emphasized by modernist innovators, such that *The Waste Land* calls on the reader to engage more actively than, say, 'In Memoriam' in its process. The further difference between the agency implied by Eliot's poem and Olson's, however, is not so much a matter of degree as a matter of kind. To clarify what this means, whereas in Eliot the question of readerly engagement is framed by, but also subordinate to, the poem's over-riding interest in the value of the tradition, in 'The Kingfishers' the question of agency is itself the writing's animating concern. What Olson wants to know, what he wants to give formal expression to, is how we act, but also, crucially, how in acting we depend and bear on others. There is all the difference in the world, then, between the way a post-structuralist theorist such as Roland Barthes figures the freedom of the reader, and the way Olson, in 'The Kingfishers', articulates the inter-relatedness that frames human potential and responsibility. What makes it a great poem, in other words, is the way in which, in its postwar moment, it simultaneously invigorates agency and discerns its limits.

Such a negotiation of agency and its limits, an ultimately epic balancing that echoes Karl Marx's lifelong inquiry into the way people make history but not in the circumstances of their own choosing, can be said, as Stephen Fredman has suggested, to be Olson's abiding theme.⁹ Subsequently, in *The Special View of History*, Olson took the term *'istorin* from Herodotus to articulate the necessity, as he saw it, for individuals to engage directly with the sources and materials that make up their worlds.¹⁰ Similarly, *The Maximus Poems* is, among other things, an extraordinarily rich poetic history of the forces that shape but also bear the impression of human action, telling the story not just of

Gloucester, Massachusetts, but also more generally, in presenting that story, documenting the drives and narratives that result in the emergence of place. It is in 'The Kingfishers', however, that such a balancing first comes into view, Olson's animation of agency in that poem intersecting directly with his shaping of the work in terms of the field.

The clearest sense of the poem as field in 'The Kingfishers' lies, as is well documented, in its use of the space of the page itself. In the simplest sense, 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, actively setting and re-setting encyclopaedic accounts of the physiology of the kingfisher alongside records of Aztec burial rituals alongside fragments from the pre-revolutionary speeches of Chairman Mao. Such reading back and forth, the reading of one thing back into another, was fundamental to Olson. In 'The Kingfishers' he called it 'feedback' but later, in *The Special View of History* in particular, he would give the process its classical rhetorical name of 'chiasmus' (CP, 89).¹¹ Like readerly agency, chiasmus (indicating an inversion in a second phrase or clause of the word order of the first, but meaning more fundamentally 'crosswise arrangement') was hardly new to poetry. But no poet before Olson had rendered it quite so central to expression. The ongoing reciprocity and interference that the process implies was critical to the way he articulated the complexity of human relations.

The way Olson uses the page to produce a field of inter-related elements, thereby calling for a reading that cuts back and forth across space and time, is undoubtedly fundamental to his poetic practice. It should also be understood, however, to be of the order of a visual clue. What we are asked to understand is the way that visuality figures relations, especially human relations, how the reciprocity and interference of feedback inform both human agency and historical change. One can read Olson's understanding and expression of change into any line, or set of corresponding lines, in the poem. Consider, for instance, the way a phrase collaged from Mao gains meaning through displacement; the phrase's first appearance in Section I, Part 2 ('nous devons nous lever et agir') referring the reader to its original rhetorical context; the phrase's second appearance, in translation in Section II, aiming to invigorate the social and political context of the poem's own moment ('And we must rise, act. Yet / in the west') (CP, 87, 91). Or take the beautiful variation with which the poem ends:

It works out this way, despite the disadvantage.
 I offer, in explanation, a quote:
 si j'ai du goût, ce n'est guères
 que pour la terre et les pierres

Despite the discrepancy (an ocean courage age)
 this is also true: if I have any taste
 it is only because I have interested myself
 in what was slain in the sun

(*CP*, 92–3)

Immediately one reads this passage one has to go back, to a line in the fourth part of section I of the poem: 'Around an appearance, one common model, we grow up many' (*CP*, 89). It is this variation through common-ness, through the shared field of human relations, that 'The Kingfishers', in all its collisions and historical correspondences, seeks to give form.¹² It is precisely in this spirit that the poem's closing lines record the way Olson, as poet, grows through his engagement with Rimbaud. The lines in French are the opening of Rimbaud's poem 'Hunger', part of the section 'Alchemy of the Word', from *A Season in Hell*. As with his later variation on Rimbaud's 'Ô saisons, ô châteaux' in 'Variations Done for Gerald Van De Wiele', Olson's version of the couplet from 'Hunger' is in no sense readable simply as translation, except in the sense that Olson preserves the definition of translation that means moving from one place to another. Where a literal translation of the couplet reads, 'If I have any taste, it is / For earth and stones – not much besides', in Olson's hands Rimbaud's lines give rise to a whole new statement: 'if I have any taste / it is only because I have interested myself / in what was slain in the sun'.¹³ What matters in these lines, though, is not just the degree of variation Olson explicitly presents between his version and Rimbaud's original, but the human relation that variation proposes, a relation the poem catches in the explanatory phrase 'Despite the discrepancy'. It is a crucial phrase. The discrepancy, or difference (of time, geography, social context and personality) is not overcome. It is, nonetheless, the basis for dynamic and interconnected human activity, Olson formulating his version of human agency through, with, and in relation to Rimbaud. It is this image of agency that composition by field allows Olson to articulate, where the field of relations both conditions and enables human actions, and where the object of his poetry's expression is, as Robert Creeley put it, 'that variousness on which our humanity must finally depend' (*SW*, xii).

As his friend, collaborator, correspondent and editor, it is entirely appropriate that, in his introduction to the *Selected Poems*, Creeley

should have set Olson's practice in its most respectful light. There is no question, however, that in aspects of his practice, as he set out to build a poetics grounded on the shared field of discrepancies, he sometimes failed (sometimes very badly) to execute the measure of tension and balance he could elsewhere so beautifully inscribe. As Rachel Blau DuPlessis rightly states in her essay in this volume, one such area of failure, a blindness in Olson's field of vision, was the difference of gender. More specifically, as DuPlessis also discusses, Olson's willingness to cross over into other fields and disciplines could result in a lack of appropriate professional decorum, as when for instance he mishandled artefacts (and therefore cultural difference more broadly) in Mayan archaeological sites. Such criticisms will be returned to, both in this introduction and in the volume as a whole, the clear expression of them being crucial to any contemporary account of Olson.

Before getting to those larger debates, however, it is worth sketching the ways in which Olson's sense of the poetic field evolved as his work developed. One signal expression of the idea was his 1965 'Reading at Berkeley', the transcript of which Ralph Maud presents in his volume of lectures and interviews, *Muthologos*. The interest of the 'Reading at Berkeley' in this context is partly, as Lytle Shaw has recently discussed, that Olson used the occasion to present something like a real-time performance (it might now be called an installation) of composition by field, but partly also that, as the performance played out late into the night of 23 July 1965, it showed the poetic persona and the poetic method to be at odds with one another in significant ways.¹⁴ In a polite note by way of preface to the transcript of the reading, Maud observes that 'Some people present dissented' (*MUTH*, 137). What they dissented against was the scale but also the vigour of the performance. The reading at the Berkeley conference came two years after the conference at Vancouver, at which Olson had confirmed his prominence among the generation of poets Donald Allen had gathered in *The New American Poetry*, an anthology that had been instrumental in establishing Olson's authority. By the time of the Berkeley reading, then, Olson was at the height of his reputation and also, as Maud suggests, at the height of his powers. As a demonstration in speech of his intellectual method it is unquestionably a bravura performance, a live construction (in time rather than space) of argument, as Shaw points out, through 'independent clauses'.¹⁵ The problem was that in commanding the room the way he did (and so often could) Olson allowed his view too readily to prevail, such that the ideal society he imagines himself to be addressing at Berkeley comes too easily to seem centred around Olson himself. One consequence of such performances was that Olson's attention to 'discrepancy' was obscured,

the scope and manner of some of his pronouncements over-riding the manifold elements out of which they were generated.

It is possible to read the poems like this, *The Maximus Poems* in particular, as if Olson, in his address, were delivering a lecture, either to the reader or the inhabitants of Gloucester with whom his poem would partly speak. The opening of the first poem, 'Letter 1', 'I, Maximus of Gloucester, to You' would seem to encourage such a reading:

Off-shore, by islands hidden in the blood
jewels & miracles, I, Maximus
a metal hot from boiling water, tell you
what is a lance, who obeys the figures of
the present dance.

(MP, 5)

The lines are difficult in their array of materials, but one thing seems clear, that they are governed by a central figure, 'I, Maximus', whose function is to tell people things; things like, for instance, 'who obeys the figures of / the present dance'. In its spoken setting, then, this opening poem seems to cast forward to such occasions as the 'Reading at Berkeley', to a time when, with his authority established, Olson would command the room.

To read the poem like this, even the opening of the poem, is, however, to overlook a number of its defining factors. One such factor, straightforwardly, is that Maximus is a persona based on the actual historical personage of Maximus of Tyre, a peripatetic Greek philosopher of the second century AD. There is not a great deal known about Maximus, and therefore Olson's poem does not rest much on his original context. The crucial point, however, is that Maximus is not Olson, but rather a way Olson has of mobilizing his poem. Against which it could be contested that the difference between poet and persona (perhaps only ever slight) drops away quite quickly, as Olson plainly enters his own poem, not least when in conversation with contemporaries such as Paul Blackburn and Amiri Baraka (as Simon Smith and Michael Kindellan discuss here). Even so, even if one collapses the difference between Olson and Maximus, to read the poem as Olson's address neglects determining elements of its framework.

A first such element is the view. In Olson's thought, the view was a significant category, dealt with at length in the series of seminars delivered at Black Mountain College in 1956 (the transcriptions of which were subsequently published as *The Special View of History*). This text is treated in a number of essays in this collection, so it is sufficient to say here that the purpose of Olson's seminars was to gain an understanding of the concept of a human view, to grasp the historical and geographical forces that combine to shape it. Crucially, though, the

view is *a* view, its definition and limitation being precisely what makes it one among many. When, at the beginning of his poem, Olson presents Maximus, ‘Off-shore, by islands’, what he is precisely presenting is a view, a strictly limited perspective. One could contrast the opening of *The Cantos*, which gives us no view. In Olson, authority is questioned from the outset.

A second element of the framework of *The Maximus Poems* too easily obscured by a reading of the work as Olson’s address, is the field, to which the view, as the dictionary reminds us, is intimately related: ‘the space or range within which objects are visible from a viewpoint or through a particular apparatus’. In the terms of this definition, Maximus is the viewpoint, or even, perhaps, the apparatus through which the world of Gloucester, Massachusetts – its politics, industry and environment – become visible. To re-introduce the field at this point (Olson’s contemplation of which term, as the visual form of the opening poems reminds us, coincided with the writing of the earliest Maximus Poems) is to recall the emphasis on the range of the field’s participants. Olson’s epic, this is to say, unlike *The Cantos* and much more fundamentally than William Carlos Williams’ *Paterson*, is founded in dialogue: actual dialogues between actual people, as well as the multiple exchanges and intersections that emerge from Olson’s collaging of the poem’s documents.

Finally, what a reading of *The Maximus Poems* as Olson’s address overlooks is that, as much as the beginning of the poem looks like speech, it is in fact writing; subject, or rather, alive to, all the differences and ambiguities that writing makes available and that oratory, however deftly attended to, can so easily close down. Such discrepancies are felt from poem to poem, as when the second poem, ‘Letter 2’, ‘Maximus to Gloucester’, repudiates ‘Letter 1’:

... tell you? ha! who
can tell another how
to manage the swimming?

(MP, 9)

It is not only between poems, however, that such differences and discrepancies are registered, but critically (and throughout) at the level of the line. To whom, for instance, does the ‘who’ of the final clause of the opening stanza of *The Maximus Poems* refer? Is it, as it most immediately seems, the ‘you’ who is being ‘told’, or is it, as the syntax does not rule out, the ‘I’ who is doing the telling? And so Olson’s exploration of human agency in all its complexity and multiplicity, opens up, his poem embarking on an epic inquiry into the labour of a community, the conditions and prospects for collective action.

Critical views

Few twentieth-century poets have been as fortunate in the editorial commitment and calibre of scholarship they have attracted as Olson. This, it should be understood, was part of the project. In so far as it was Olson's intention to develop a poetic that, after the catastrophe of the Second World War, might be able to think through the limitations of Western culture, to think outside 'the western box', he needed collaborators.¹⁶ Charismatic aesthetic and pedagogical leader that he was, Olson understood himself to be engaged in a shared intellectual project, one that depended substantially on the energies and abilities of others. Edward Dahlberg, and more so Robert Creeley, are credited as crucial voices in the development of 'Projective Verse', although Frances Boldereff's important contribution (as Robert Hampson observes in this volume) was kept from view.¹⁷ Creeley remained a collaborator throughout and his editorial engagement with Olson's work was crucial to its reception, giving shape to a body of work (in *Selected Writings* and *Selected Poems*) that defies easy bibliographic presentation.

From an early point, though, the editorial presentation of Olson was itself an ongoing collective project. Among others, Cid Corman at *Origin*, Jonathan Williams at *Black Mountain Review*, LeRoi Jones at *Yugen*, Don Allen at *Evergreen Review* and in *The New American Poetry*, strategically ensured the transmission of Olson's work and ideas. Similarly in the UK (where Olson's work was crucial to a generation of writers seeking new intellectual bearings after the war) Elaine Feinstein then Jeremy Prynne at *Prospect*, Andrew Crozier and Tom Clark at *The Wivenhoe Park Review*, John James at *The Resuscitator*, Gael Turnbull and Michael Shayer at *Migrant*, and Barry Hall and Tom Raworth at *The Goliard Press*, all circulated his work.¹⁸ Prynne's role, in particular, must be emphasized, his work for Olson in the archive not only feeding directly into the form of the poem itself, but enabling him to communicate the importance of *The Maximus Poems* at a very early stage in its reception. Prynne's unequalled grasp of the poem's scale was subsequently set out in the lectures he gave at Simon Fraser University in 1971, a statement that remains one of the most important critical articulations of the scope of Olson's aesthetic.¹⁹ Subsequently the editorial work has largely taken the form of a number of sustained scholarly projects: George Butterick's editions of *The Maximus Poems*, *The Collected Poems of Charles Olson (excluding the Maximus Poems)*, of Olson and Creeley's *Complete Correspondence*, and his *Guide to the Maximus Poems*; Ralph Maud's *Charles Olson's Reading: A Biography*, his edition of *Selected Letters*, and of *Muthologos: Lectures and Interviews*; and Ben Friedlander and Don Allen's edition of *Collected Prose*.

The degree to which, as a consequence of such sustained scholarship, we know how to read Olson remains a moot point. Invaluable as the scholarship has been to the understanding of his work, one side-effect of its comprehensiveness has been that a fundamentally collaborative aesthetic project has come to appear as a somewhat self-enclosed poetic world, with the effect that Olson can too easily seem a separate, albeit rich and rewarding, field of study. In his recent study *Fieldworks: From Place to Site in Postwar Poetics*, Lytle Shaw coins the term ‘Olsonian’ to describe the critical manifestations of this self-enclosed world. Recognizing, as he does, precisely how the Olson project gave rise to such attentions, he is nonetheless clear about the limitations that have resulted:

Even within the pantheon of cosmological masters ... Olson’s is an extreme position. This is because the legibility of his cosmology depends – even more so than most examples – not merely on understanding the texts of which it is comprised but on mastering Olson’s highly eccentric takes on them. Coupled, then, with Olson’s drive to ‘find out for oneself’ is the contradictory drive, within Olsoniana, to find out what a particular text meant for Olson. This latter drive become necessity works to contain much Olson criticism within his own idiosyncratic terms (as Charles Altieri noted as long ago as 1973).²⁰

Shaw is one of a number of important new writers and critics, including Steve Collis and Miriam Nichols, for whom it now seems necessary to re-visit Olson’s project. In doing so, Shaw’s response to the idiosyncratic critical language that Olson has given rise to is, as he says, to read Olson ‘against the grain’.²¹ The reading of Olson’s site-work that results is rich and highly stimulating. One can, however, query the passing implication that in Olson the grain goes one way. As one of its legacies, Olson’s work can and should lead to an investigation of sources. Equally, however, as Creeley pointed out, the point of the source in Olson is not that one remains faithful to it. As Creeley observes, with respect to Olson’s reading of Rimbaud in ‘Variations Done for Gerald Van De Wiele’:

To call such a poem either translation or adaptation is to mistake how Olson uses the initiating work as material, not as a static accomplishment to be related by presumptive report or description.

There is another accuracy which Olson far more valued, a reading competent to hear all that the source might provoke.

(SP, xv)

This is only to observe that in Olson the grain goes different ways, and that if one route through his oeuvre is towards an investigation of the poetry’s sources, another is to put his writing to the kind of creative re-use (‘USE USE USE’ as ‘Projective Verse’ has it) that characterized his dialogue with others (*CPr*, 240).

Shaw is certainly right to observe that the idiosyncratic critical language that developed around Olson is one reason his writing was gradually marginalized in the decades following his death in 1970. Miriam Nichols gives another account of that process of marginalization in *Radical Affections: Essays on the Poetics of Outside*. Nichols' argument is historical, relating Olson's posthumous reception to the emergence in the 1960s first, of the politics of identity and second, of the sceptical reading of phenomenology that found expression in deconstruction.²² This argument relates back to Olson's intellectual development in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, the crimes of which made it necessary for philosophers, writers and policy-makers alike to develop a vocabulary of shared humanity; witness Hannah Arendt's *Human Condition*, Olson's own essay *Human Universe*, as well as the issuing in 1948 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. By the mid-1960s two shifts had occurred. First, as Nichols observes, the vocabulary of shared humanity had itself come under severe but necessary scrutiny, both from the activists of different identity politics and from deconstruction. The changing political environment does not go un-registered in Olson's writing, as in the important Maximus poem 'I have been an ability – a machine' in which, as Michael Kindellan discusses here, Olson takes stock of an American national discourse that so excludes his friend, the poet LeRoi Jones (*MP*, 495–9). Equally, by the 1960s the balance of Olson's pre-occupations had tipped, becoming less political (less to do with the history of labour in Gloucester and the development of social organization he termed the 'polis'), and more to do with an expression of shared humanity at the level of myth. For this mix of reasons Olson's poetry, as Nichols puts it, became 'unreadable for a time'.²³ Undoubtedly true as this account is of the North American context, it is less so for the UK, where, as Gavin Selerie's essay documents, a number of important poetic projects of the 1970s and 80s, notably those of Allen Fisher, Jeremy Prynne and Iain Sinclair (as well as Selerie's own) continued to take Olson as an 'initiating work'. Even so, the combined effect of changing political and theoretical priorities along with the tendency of Olson criticism to emphasize the eccentricity of the work, had the consequence that in the decades following his death, albeit with some notable exceptions, his writing seemed to stand at a remove from the shaping currents of intellectual exchange.

The situation has changed. If, from the mid-1960s onwards, it seemed possible to characterize the postwar period in terms of the dissolution of the humanist subject and the commodification of culture, for the last decade such an account of postmodernity has seemed increasingly obsolete. With wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the re-shaping of

geo-politics through continued migration, and now the renewal of collectivist action in the form of the Arab Spring and the Occupy movement, the questions of shared vocabularies, of the definition and re-definition of political space, and of individual and collective human agency, are firmly back with us. The priorities of intellectual discourse have altered accordingly, such that Arendt's language of the *Human Condition* and her assessment of the failings of what she (like Olson) termed the polis, have been re-framed by Giorgio Agamben in his ongoing study of the exclusions of national sovereignty and bio-politics.²⁴ One consequence of these historical shifts is not just that Olson, with his emphasis on ethical agency and political relations, is readable again, but that his thought seems once more a necessary intellectual resource.

This is not, of course, Olson's historical moment. It is, though, as the Canadian poet Steve Collis suggests, at the beginning of his recent history of the Vancouver occupation, a moment for which Olson's terms can be of use – a moment in which it is timely to revisit the intellectual resources Olson's poetic inquiries set in place.²⁵ To do so requires that he be read critically, and also that we understand clearly the degree to which he was caught in his own contemporary nets of thought. What the essays of this book necessarily contemplate, therefore, is where Olson criticism should be looking next.

Contemporary Olson

Conceived as both a re-assessment of Olson's place in recent poetic history, and also as a way into his work for those not already familiar with his writing, this book invited three kinds of contribution. First, there are contextualising chapters, discussions that situate Olson's thought and work (by Robert Hampson, David Herd, Dan Katz, Anthony Mellors, Peter Middleton, Will Montgomery, Miriam Nichols, Reitha Pattison, Karlien Van Den Beukel). Second, there are chapters that have as their focus individual Olson poems, whether from *Maximus* or shorter lyrics (by Stephen Fredman, Michael Grant and Ian Brinton, Ben Hickman, Michael Kindellan, Ralph Maud, Sarah Posman, Simon Smith). Finally, there are essays by writers for whom Olson has proved a crucial interlocutor (Charles Bernstein, Rachel Blau DuPlessis, Elaine Feinstein, Gavin Selerie, Iain Sinclair).

Across these permeable formal divisions, and in aiming to explore what a contemporary Olson criticism can look like, the book has the question of dialogue at its heart. Broadly speaking that dialogue itself takes three forms. In the first place, a number of essays renew our sense of Olson's contemporary moment by recalling his exchanges with

writers outside his immediate circle and with figures and ideas from other disciplines. The overarching purpose of this kind of contribution (for instance Smith's discussion of Olson's intermittent conversation with Paul Blackburn, or Middleton's investigation of his inquiry into contemporary science) is to break up the formations of Olson's reception and so to re-insert him in his own period. The second kind of dialogue involves contesting certain spoken and unspoken positions in Olson, positions for which contemporary criticism must hold him to account. In developing this kind of dialogue (witness Blau DuPlessis' discussion of the absence of women's labour in Olson's polis, or Mellors' critique of his partial engagement with ancient sources), the volume speaks to one of the points Benjamin Friedlander placed on the Olson agenda in 2006, that 'scholars should take Olson, as he took himself, as an object lesson, and examine his ideas, assumptions, and experience with a critical eye. He is not, God help us, a hero to be defended against all combatants.'²⁶ Finally, several essays consider ways in which Olson's body of work helps us to think through issues and questions that are pressing in our own moment (for instance, Minter's reading of recent aboriginal representations of 'country' through Olson's projective poetic, Hickman's account of Olson's understanding of historical agency, and my own consideration of the way Olson frames questions of human movement and polis). Such essays read Olson in dialogue with current discourses and so help to recover the collaborative impulse at the centre of his inquiry.

These different kinds of engagement with Olson are grouped according to key themes and preoccupations within his work. The essays of the first section probe Olson's relation to Knowledge, dwelling in particular on the way he looked to make poetry answerable to other ways of knowing. Miriam Nichols' essay is pivotal in this regard, exploring the defining tension in Olson that arises from his commitment to both myth and document as forms of knowledge. Showing how the two terms sustain one another in the knowledge production of *Maximus*, Nichols' essay considers how we can read Olson's investment in myth in an anti-mythological moment, suggesting in particular that myth in *Maximus* should be understood to function not like a body of belief but as a disposition towards the non-human universe. For Peter Middleton, the form of knowledge in question is science, Olson's interest in which has been much observed but less discussed. Tracking that interest back to the elemental thinking of 'Projective Verse' and also to Olson's construction of the curriculum at Black Mountain, Middleton shows precisely how procedures of observation and reflection in Olson's poetry demonstrate his willingness to absorb the implications of the

dominant intellectual discourse of his moment. If poetry was to have a place on the curriculum, as Middleton shows, then for Olson it had to understand its relation to contemporary forms of knowledge. Reitha Pattison's consideration of 'cosmology' pursues that Olsonian requirement. One task that a contemporary Olson criticism must undertake, as Pattison rightly observes, is to scrutinize and re-assess key elements of his lexicon. Working through source and etymology, Pattison relates Olson's articulation of 'cosmology' in his poetry to the matter first of 'space', then of 'breath', thus clarifying the function that all three terms ('cosmology', 'space', 'breath') have in his prosody, demonstrating, as she acutely puts it, how 'Olson's insistence upon the concrete and literal condition of all cosmic forms in his prose permits a more accurate sense of the textual space the writer heralded in *Projective Verse*'. Finally, in this section, in Michael Grant and Ian Brinton's essay the same preoccupation in Olson with space and breath is translated into a consideration of void and voice, as the poet's emphasis on the implied physicality of voice is placed under scrutiny. Providing a scrupulous account of 'In Cold Hell, in Thicket', Grant and Brinton read Olson's postwar image of hell in relation to Eliot's Dantean exploration of voice, 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock', thus testing Olson's understanding of the physically projected voice against the absence that for Eliot constituted the real knowledge of vocalisation.

The essays in the section on Knowledge underscore the degree to which Olson's work was founded in dialogue: with myth, with science, with poetic antecedents. The second section, on Poetics, brings the matter of dialogue to the fore. In his essay on Olson and Jack Spicer, Daniel Katz provides a reading of the poets' often fraught relationship that shows clearly how questions of poetics crossed lines of affiliation. Katz's essay is important not only as a reading of these significantly different poets but also as it requires us to reassess Olson's position in poetic arguments of the 1950s and 60s, reframing his standing and influence by recovering his dialogue with an often antagonistic contemporary. For Michael Kindellan, the question of dialogue itself is under scrutiny. Focusing on the Maximus poem 'I have been an ability – a machine', and in particular on the relation between the manuscript and George Butterick's published version, Kindellan considers Olson's insistence on the typewriter as a means of determining reading. Crucially, as Kindellan observes, the reader is not invited to participate in the making of an Olson poem, a stance which does not (as his reading of the poem shows) preclude exchange, but which indicates that for Olson such exchange was dependent on the clear enunciation of a given view. In 'Reading Blackburn reading Olson', Simon Smith documents

the evolution of the Olsonian view through his intermittent but decisive correspondence with Paul Blackburn. As Smith observes, with particular reference to 'Maximus, to Gloucester: Letter 15', what the Olson-Blackburn correspondence confirms is not just the centrality of the form of the letter itself to Olson's poetic practice, but the degree to which, for both poets, aesthetic development depended on frank and urgent readings of others' work. Olson's didacticism, in other words (to take Kindellan's term), is founded on his exchanges with leading contemporaries. For Gavin Selerie, Olson's value can be understood not least through his influence on subsequent writers, and his essay documents the exchanges that enabled his work to speak in the British context. His reflection on his own engagement with Olson is an important case study in trans-Atlantic reading, showing how distance itself can facilitate the distillation of a writer's principal ideas. Finally, Elaine Feinstein's essay recalls the moment when Olson's poetics first intersected publicly with British poetry. Catching Olson in full flow, Feinstein's letter to Olson prompted a reply that became one of the most important statements of his stance. Reflecting on what it meant to receive such a communication, Feinstein confirms Smith's sense that Olson's was fundamentally an epistolary aesthetic. He wrote to and for the interlocutor.

This is to paraphrase a point made by Rachel Blau DuPlessis, in the first of the essays under the heading *Gender*. As DuPlessis observes, a 'root genre of Maximus is the epistle, a genre playing to Olson's strengths by transposing an informal, casual, intense rhetoric into a public intervention'. The question arising is what kind of public, or polis, Olson considered himself to be intervening on. As a consideration of, among other things, the long poem as genre, DuPlessis's essay contributes compellingly to this book's discussions on poetics. It is important, though, if we are to have a contemporary account of Olson, that the issue of gender – which can be framed as a preoccupation with masculinity – should be addressed directly. As DuPlessis observes, in its detailed attention to the world of work, Olson's poem of process is defined, among other things, by its singular lack of attention to women's labour. Such inattention is compounded by the fact that, as Robert Hampson documents, Olson's advances in poetics were made possible just as much by his intellectual relationship with Frances Boldereff as by his extended correspondence with such prominent male writers as Robert Creeley. The recovery of Boldereff's contribution to his thought is important as acknowledgement, not least as she directed him to such key sites of interest as Sumerian culture. As Hampson suggests, it also helps explain the fact that, as he cites Kathleen Fraser as observing, for all the focus on masculine agency in his writing, his formal inventions

have proved crucial to the work of subsequent women poets. Like Fraser, Susan Howe has been clear in her acknowledgement of Olson's influence. As Will Montgomery shows, the third party of Herman Melville, whose marginalia have been crucial to both poets, mediates that influence. Following his discussion of Howe with a consideration of the British poet Redell Olsen, Montgomery explores differing ways in which the formal and procedural legacy of Olson has given rise to bodies of poetry sharply different from his own. None of this redeems Olson's gendered view of culture. It does indicate, however, as Howe (cited by Montgomery) has said, that:

[T]he feminine is very much in his poems in another way, a way similar to Melville. It's voice ... It has to do with the presence of absence. With articulation of sound forms. The fractured syntax, the gaps, the silences are equal to the sounds in *Maximus*. That's what Butterick saw so clearly. He printed Olson's *Space*.²⁷

If the feminine emerges in Olson as a discernible absence, his concern with History is plain. Like Pound, he took the epic to be a poem containing history, a position he modified by the exploration of historical agency he characterized as *'istorin*. In the context of this volume, the question of history surfaces in various ways. In Stephen Fredman's reading of 'The Lordly and Isolate Satyrs', the focus is on Olson's relation to his own moment. As scholarship has directed critical attention to Olson's sources, his relation to the fabric of his own historical context has been obscured in a way not true of, say, Ginsberg or O'Hara. Setting Olson's poem alongside the Robert Frank photograph that Donald Allen printed on the cover of the *Evergreen Review* in which the poem first appeared, Fredman argues for a contextual reading of Olson's poetry, one that clearly locates his cultural claims in the limits of his own historical moment. How those limits are negotiated is the subject of the next two essays. For Anthony Mellors, it is necessary to question Olson's own partial reading of history, not least his reading of Sumerian culture. For Mellors, Olson's project should cause us to interrogate the implied relation between poetry and scholarship, both as scholarship mediates the work (notably in the form of Butterick's *Guide to the Maximus Poems*) but also as Olson's own scholarship continually returns us to the problem of authority. In this respect, as Mellors argues, Olson's break from modernism is incomplete. In Ben Hickman's essay, the question of authority is related to the issue of historical agency. In a reading of 'As the Dead Prey Upon Us', Olson's elegy to his mother, Hickman explores the terminological pressure that builds as the poet considers how it is possible to articulate the 'will to change'. If Olson's poetry contains

history, what it also contains, as Hickman observes, are individuals and groups struggling and managing to effect change. It is not least in such sustained attention to questions of agency, as Hickman suggests, that Olson's poetry speaks to our moment of developing crisis. For Sarah Posman, considering Olson's dialogue with European historiography, the image of change Olson became able to express poetically can be closely related to the articulation of duration and fictiveness found in the work of Henri Bergson. Exploring that affinity through a reading of Olson's poem-letter to Rainer Gerhardt, Posman again presses Olson into productive dialogue with an intellectual tradition not obviously his own. Tim Woods' essay is similarly concerned with Olson's historiography, although as he tracks Olson's understanding of history to his enactment of subjectivity, Woods speaks equally instructively to questions of ethics and perception. Starting with an account of the experience of reading Olson's ambiguous grammar, in all its restless mobility, Woods presents a compelling reading of the poetry's refusal to settle for linear historical narrative. Discussing him in relation to Benjamin and, more particularly, Adorno, Woods presents a poetic sensibility founded on the fact of difference. Olson's achievement, as Woods emphatically shows (underlining this book's emphasis on dialogue) lies in his ongoing animation of the subject's dependency on others. Finally, in this section, Charles Bernstein returns Olson's major early poem 'The Kingfishers' to the postwar scene of its composition. The war, as Bernstein vividly reminds us, was the background to Olson's radical formal experiment, the historical circumstance, as this Introduction has observed, to which his poetic inquiry was a considered intellectual response.

Critical to that response, as Bernstein observes, and as this volume concludes by considering, was the matter of relations within and across space. Like Bernstein, the Australian poet Peter Minter takes 'The Kingfishers' to be axiomatic, showing how the forms of cognition Olson arrives at in that poem help understand the spatial imagination at work in Aboriginal, especially contemporary Aboriginal, art. Taking Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri's *Warlugulong* as an example, Minter reads the painting and Olson's poem through one another to arrive at a consummate sense of the way Olson re-imagined the relation between people and their environment. Here, as much as anywhere in the volume, open field composition is presented as a resource for contemporary use, as a way of picturing our relation to the world grounded in reciprocity and limit. In my own essay, the space in question is not environmental but that of political geography. Linking Olson's presentation of the space of the poem in 'Projective Verse' to the politics of *The Maximus Poems*, the essay shows how Olson makes movement, and in particular the figure

of the crossing, central to his articulation of the polis. As with Minter's essay, what this discussion proposes is that the enduring value of Olson's writing rests deeply on the degree to which it re-negotiates space. What that renegotiation itself partly depends on, as Karlien van den Beukel records, is Olson's life-long interest in dance, especially ballet. Central to the Black Mountain curriculum, dance was also pivotal to the way Olson construed artistic inquiry, affording him a basis, in the period after the war, for re-imagining the limits and possibilities of human physiology. The last essay of this section, Iain Sinclair's recollection of the effect of reading and encountering Olson, returns us to 'the geography of it' and to Olson's position in Gloucester, at the sea's edge. What Sinclair catches above all is the arc and sweep of Olson's thought in *The Maximus Poems* – his determination to reacquaint us with the ground on which we stand.

In conclusion, Ralph Maud returns us to that ground, to the Cape Ann coastline that was the vantage point for much of his major writing but also the setting, as Maud observes, for Olson's first poem. The point of Maud's short commentary is to re-assess Butterick's interpretation of the archive and to wonder if the draft of 'Purgatory Blind' is not a better candidate for Olson's first poem than the revision. What Maud underlines is that Olson should and must be re-read, but also that it is precisely in the principle of the draft, of the ongoing work-in-process, that Olson found a poetic which could speak both to and beyond its moment of composition. As Melville put it before him, 'This whole book is but a draft–nay, but the draft of a draft.'²⁸ Melville's insight, offered via Ishmael, was that the consciously incomplete work, the work that understands itself to be in process, is the work that continues to stimulate and enable thought. Or as Olson put it:

It is undone business
I speak of, this morning,
with the sea
stretching out
from my feet

(MP, 57)

This is 'Maximus, to himself', arriving at an understanding, where 'undone' means ongoing, the necessity of engaging once more. In the entirely affirmative way Olson means it here, reading his body of work is an ongoing process. The essays of this volume help make him contemporary again.

Notes

- 1 Charles Olson, *Y & X* (Washington DC: Black Sun Press, 1949).
- 2 For a detailed account of Olson's life see: Tom Clark, *Charles Olson: The Allegory of a Poet's Life* (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2000).
- 3 Charles Olson, *Call Me Ishmael* (New York: Reynal and Hitchcock, 1947).
- 4 For a full account of Olson's exchanges with Pound during this period see Catherine Seelye (ed.), *Charles Olson and Ezra Pound: An Encounter at St Elizabeths* (New York: Grossman/Viking, 1975).
- 5 Allen refers to Olson's letter in his 'Afterword' to the 1999 edition of the anthology: Donald Allen (ed.), *The New American Poetry, 1945–1960* (Berkeley & London: University of California Press, 1999).
- 6 Olson first used the term, referring to the 'post-modern world', in a letter to Creeley dated 9 August 1951.
- 7 All definitions given here are from the *Concise Oxford English Dictionary*.
- 8 As Olson writes, 'I take SPACE to be the central fact to man born in America, from Folsom cave to now' (*CPr*, 17).
- 9 'Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past.' Karl Marx, 'The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte' in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Selected Works in One Volume* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1980), 96. For Stephen Fredman's excellent discussion of the theme of 'containment' in Olson see Stephen Fredman, *The Grounding of American Poetry: Charles Olson and the Emersonian Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).
- 10 For Olson's extended treatment of the term 'istorin, which he paraphrases as the act of finding out for yourself, see Charles Olson, *The Special View of History*, ed. Ann Charters (Berkeley: Oyez, 1970).
- 11 Olson's reference to 'feedback' is a prime example of his willingness to explore other disciplines in his construction of the language of the poem. As Ralph Maud observes, the term is taken from Norbert Wiener's pioneering work, *Cybernetics: Or Control and Communication in the Animal and the Machine* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1948). See Ralph Maud, *What Does Not Change: The Significance of Charles Olson's 'The Kingfishers'* (London: Associated University Presses, 1998), 179.
- 12 As Maud notes, the line is from Heraclitus, cited by Plutarch in 'On the E at Delphi'. See Maud, *What Does Not Change*, 73–4.
- 13 The translation is from Jeremy Denbow's *Season in Hell: An English Translation from the French* (Lincoln, NE: iUniverse, Inc., 2004), 59.
- 14 Lytle Shaw, *Fieldworks: From Place to Site in Postwar Poetics* (Tuscaloosa, AL: The University of Alabama Press, 2013), 65–6.
- 15 Shaw, *Fieldworks*, 49.
- 16 As Maud notes, Olson first uses the phrase 'Western Box' in *Mayan Letters*, with reference to Pound's Guide to Kulchur in the context of an annotated bibliography (*SW*, 129).

- 17 The credits to Creeley and Dahlberg are explicit: ‘Or so it got phrased by one, R. Creeley, and it makes absolute sense to me First pounded into my head by Edward Dahlberg’ (*CPr*, 240).
- 18 I am very grateful to Ian Brinton for sharing his detailed understanding of Olson’s early circulation and reception in the UK.
- 19 J. H. Prynne, ‘On *Maximus IV, V, VI*, *Minutes of the Charles Olson Society* 28 (April 1999).
- 20 Shaw, *Fieldworks*, 53.
- 21 *Ibid.*
- 22 Miriam Nichols, *Radical Affections: Essays on the Poetics of Outside* (Tuscaloosa, AL: The University of Alabama Press, 2010), 2–4.
- 23 Nichols, *Radical Affections*, 1.
- 24 See in particular Agamben’s trilogy: *Homo Sacer* (Stanford, CA: The University of Stanford Press, 1995); *State of Exception* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2005); *The Kingdom and the Glory: For a Theological Genealogy of Economy and Government* (Stanford, CA: The University of Stanford Press, 2011).
- 25 ‘In September 2011 I sat down to write a book about change. The words of the poet Charles Olson were at the forefront of my mind: “What does not change / is the will to change”’, Steve Collis, *Dispatches from the Occupation: A History of Change* (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 2012), xiii.
- 26 Benjamin Friedlander, *Olson Now*, posted 27 May 2006, accessed 23 July 2013, <http://olsonnow.blogspot.com/2006/05/benjamin-friedlandercharles-olson-now.html>
- 27 Howe, and Edward Foster, ‘Talisman interview,’ in *The Birth-mark: Unsettling the Wilderness in American Literary History* (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1993), 180.
- 28 Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick*, with an introduction and notes by David Herd (Ware: Wordsworth, 2001), 120.