

*Jim Cocola*

## **Olson as Educator**

1

Olson as educator: in spite of himself. As “Maximus, to Gloucester: Letter 2” has it:

...tell you? ha! who  
can tell another how  
to manage the swimming?<sup>1</sup>

Yet he told, and told, nevertheless: leading forth, seeming not to lead, leading.

2

Olson as educator: following, as my title implies, in the tradition of Schopenhauer as educator. “Through Schopenhauer,” Nietzsche explained, “we are all *able* to educate ourselves *against* our age—because through him we possess the advantage of really *knowing* this age.” So, too, through Olson, who understood, as Schopenhauer understood, per Nietzsche’s formulation, that “the state never has any use for truth as such, but only for truth which is useful to it whether it be truth, half-truth, or error.”<sup>2</sup>

3

Olson’s suspicions “against this abusive, vulgar, cruel, remorseless and useless country”: his sense that “we are in the hands of a huge Propaganda Office”; “that we’ve been riding for a long time with a history which is manipulated”; that “we think of America being ruined by a lot of realtors.”<sup>3</sup> To Charles Doria, “Olson’s interest in the past was not for its own sake, was not scholarly in that sense; rather it sprang from his hatred and distrust of the present, especially the political and economic distortions of modern capitalism.”<sup>4</sup>

4

Olson as autodidact: finding out for one’s self. Turning to the poem as a container for history, in the mode of Pound, Olson set himself a formidable challenge, for as he acknowledged, “it is very difficult to be both a poet and an historian.”<sup>5</sup> More difficult still, Olson did not accept the role of historian in a contemporary academic mode. Instead, he resolved to “be an historian as Herodotus was, looking / for oneself for the evidence of / what is said.”<sup>6</sup> In Anne Waldman’s formulation, Olson’s most fundamental pedagogical move is to inspire you “to find out for yourself...what he was finding out for himself.”<sup>7</sup> Plus this—plus this: to find out for yourself after the manner of his finding.

5

Olson as un-educator: contra institutions. On Matthew Brady's battlefield photos, encountered in childhood, transforming Olson's understanding of the Civil War: "these too, school did not give me."<sup>8</sup> Meanwhile, "the universities," Olson concluded, "are sties"; "the college system a dread and dangerous featherbed and property, of nepotism, deadness, and the club of colleagues and gerontology."<sup>9</sup> "KNOWLEDGE," as he put it, "either goes for the CENTER or it's inevitably a State Whore—which American and Western education generally is, has been, since its beginning." In such a context, "a straight man has to uneducate himself first, in order to begin to pick up, to take up, to get back, in order to get on." Insofar as the process of un-education occurred outside of institutions, it depended upon "the poet," whom Olson saw as "the only pedagogue left, to be trusted. And I mean," he clarified, "the tough ones, only the very best...."<sup>10</sup>

6

Olson at Black Mountain: the eye of the hurricane. In his "Introductory Statement for Black Mountain," he explained that the institution was heretical precisely because of its core belief that "the student, rather than the curriculum, is the proper center of a general education." And yet, in practice, perhaps the teacher was at the center: teacher as student, exemplifying. "A good teacher," Olson explained, "is always more a learner than teacher, making the demand of everyone to be taught something...teachers in a place like this, where education is taken seriously, should always bear in mind that they are the central problem; *that we would provide the students with a liberal education if we merely gave them the privilege of looking on while we educated ourselves.*"<sup>11</sup>

7

Olson in the course catalogue: at Black Mountain, for a seminar on "The Act of Writing in the Context of Post-Modern Man":

The effort is definitely non-literary. Neither is the reading in "literature," like they say, nor is the writing "composition." The amount of either is not at all the question. The idea is to enable the person to achieve the beginnings of a disposition toward reality now, by which he or she can bring himself or herself to bear as value....

Or, again, at Black Mountain, for a seminar on "History and/or Culture":

The attempt of the course is to cut through and across any of the known previous disciplines for measuring event. That is, the premise is that history as such, politics, government, sociology, psychology, anthropology, archaeology, culture morphology, mythology and philosophy, as well as the exact sciences, are not any longer sufficient when applied (or learned), in separation from each other.... Open to anyone, but with immense reading required. Or at least very fast, trained reading....

8

Olson as preservationist of knowledge: sometimes doctrinaire. “I ought to let you moderns know,” he explained, “how conservative (or reactionary, if you choose) I am.”<sup>12</sup> Duncan’s sense, upon teaching *Maximus*, that the poem functioned as “a recipe that had to be followed.”<sup>13</sup> Among Olson’s many pedagogical documents is his “DOG-MATIC CURRICULUM, NON-OPTIONAL,” which begins with “the Rig Veda and certain Upanishads” and also draws on the Celtic, Hittite, Hopi, Norse, Persian, Spanish, Sumerian, and Trobriand traditions.<sup>14</sup>

9

Olson’s orientation toward disposability, coupled with his sense of eroding environmental awareness. His prediction, in *Maximus*, that

it won’t be long, with fish sticks, pictures  
will be necessary on the covers of the TV dinners  
to let children know that mackerel is a different  
looking thing than herrings<sup>15</sup>

Ferrini’s injunction to “know fish,” compared with Olson’s conclusion that few will.<sup>16</sup>

10

Olson as miseducator: per George Butterick’s view of Olson as a big believer in what Freud designated “truth in error,” or parapraxis.<sup>17</sup>

11

Olson the pedagogue: “I am obviously,” he claimed, “by my work alone a pedagogue.”<sup>18</sup> Of a very specific type, per Robert von Hallberg’s reading Olson as “nearly alone in his admiration of Pound the poet-pedagogue.”<sup>19</sup> That admiration was, evidently, reciprocated: at one stage, Pound suggested that Olson might take up the matter of his son Omar’s education, though nothing in particular seems to have come of it.<sup>20</sup>

12

Olson’s first university position: at Clark, as a young man, in the 30s. Teaching the university as an institutional structure to his first-year writing students. Assigning reference works on appreciation, enjoyment and taste for literature. Tests including: character identification, fill-in-the-blank, matching, multiple choice, and true-false questions, grammatical exercises, thematic prompts, comparative essays—and at the foot of the test: “clarity, accuracy, even beauty of expression is expected. No paper carelessly written will be considered satisfactory, in spite of content.” Meta-prompts. “Define philology,” and “Write an essay on the essay.” A tough grader: 1 A, 3 A-, 4 B+, 9 B, 6 B-, 13 C+, 15 C, 13 C-, 8 D+, 6 D, 8 D-, 5 F.

Miss Reid—

Due to a change in our plans this exam is much longer than we'd planned.  
Forgive me. I hope you'll have no trouble with my scrawl.

Gratefully,

CJ Olson Jr.<sup>21</sup>

### 13

Olson as bibliographer: maker of lists. Pointing again and again to those he called “men worth anyone’s study.”<sup>22</sup> Preparing a tremendous bibliography, on Homer and the Greek roots of oral poetry, drawn up for a graduate seminar at SUNY-Buffalo. And then there are more tailored instances: most prominently, in “A Bibliography on America for Ed Dorn,” where Olson pointed to a foundational set of sources from Herodotus to Brooks Adams, “plus-always-geography.” Olson as fox, but also as hedgehog, arguing that the “best thing to do is *to dig one thing or place or man // until you yourself know more abt that than is possible to any other man.... And then U KNOW everything else very fast: one saturation job (it might take 14 years). And you’re in, forever.*”<sup>23</sup> Sometimes, more specific directives, issued to whomever cared to listen:

I cldn’t advise you than to study more the  
13th century especially the 1st half  
& particularly the contrast (4th Century Athens!)  
of the 2nd half<sup>24</sup>

And elsewhere, a return to touchstones: Pausanias’s *Description of Greece*, Eric Havelock’s *Preface to Plato*. Not only what Olson emphasized, and included, but also what he omitted. Recalling the library at Black Mountain, Robert Duncan noted that there was nothing of Sigmund Freud: no Henry James, no James Joyce, no Virginia Woolf.<sup>25</sup>

### 14

What could Olson have taught us, here? Would he, or his analogue, be here at all? On the occasion of the Melville Society’s “One Hundredth Birthday Party” for *Moby-Dick*, held at Williams College, Olson prepared a “Letter For Melville 1951,” which he explicitly noted as “written to be read AWAY FROM” the event, in order “to expose it for the promotion it is,” undertaken as it was by those Olson saw as “a bunch of commercial travellers from the several colleges.”<sup>26</sup>

### 15

Olson as meatball. The first Ph.D. candidate in Harvard’s American Civilization program, he won a Guggenheim, and dropped out, clearing the field for scholars such

as Leo Marx and Perry Miller.<sup>27</sup> Later seeking the Ph.D. on the strength of his unconventional study of Melville, *Call Me Ishmael* (1949), his submission was found insufficient for the purpose. Olson, in turn, found Harvard insufficient for the purposes of his own education, tracing the institution's corruption back to Nathaniel Bowditch, a self-educated actuary and honorary alumnus who, in Olson's view, "(later) ran Harvard," turning the college toward, "the several cankers of profit-making / which have, like Agyasta, made America great." Projecting this movement forward from that point of origin, Olson held that

Harvard  
owns too much  
  
and so its President  
after destroying its localism ("meatballs,"  
they called the city fellers, the public school  
graduates) Conant destroyed Harvard  
by asking Oregon<sup>28</sup>  
to send its brightest

Distinct from Oregon's brightest, Olson was also distinct from the so-called "white men" and "gray men" of the upper and upper-middle classes that filled out most of Harvard's student body. Born and raised in Worcester, the son of an Irish mother and a Swedish immigrant father, graduated at Worcester's Classical High School, he fit this stereotype of the "meatball" to a T, which James G. Hershberg later summed up as "the ambitious, lower-middle-class local students, the first- and second-generation ethnic immigrants who worked overtime to overcome prejudice (and quotas) so as to enter the establishment at Harvard and then, with their degrees, the outside world."<sup>29</sup>

## 16

Olson as Teaching Fellow: with students including JFK. Upon Kennedy's election, Olson framed John F. Kennedy not as the President but rather as "Bill Snow's third cousin"; in a telling line of succession, Snow had taught Olson as an undergraduate at Wesleyan, and Olson had taught Kennedy as an undergraduate at Harvard. "Oh, he was a C student, just a C student," Olson later recalled to Charles Boer. Had he kept Kennedy's papers? "I never keep a C paper," Olson replied.<sup>30</sup>

## 17

Olson as antinomian. In a withheld letter to the *Gloucester Daily Times*, he claimed to "hold BAs MAs and PhDs galore,"<sup>31</sup> despite the actual numbers: 1, 1, and 0. Asked in a SUNY-Buffalo faculty survey about his time spent on work matters, he wrote "24 Hours Every Day"; when asked who might be expected to make demands on his faculty expertise, he replied, "NO ONE BUT HIMSELF."<sup>32</sup> Yet he held closely, in Buffalo, to his copy of the *Regent's Rule on Subversive Activities*. When offered a faculty position

at the University of Connecticut, he suggested that he would prefer to be president or provost.<sup>33</sup>

## 18

Olson's rites, as an "ex-priest":<sup>34</sup> presenting himself as someone outside of and, in some ways, opposed to, science, insofar as "neither history (to find out for oneself) nor literature (what is said) is science."<sup>35</sup> And in *Maximus*:

I believe in religion not magic or science I believe in society  
as religious both man and society as religious<sup>36</sup>

For Olson the three branches of study were nothing so basic as reading, writing, and arithmetic, but, rather

epistemology—how do you know  
theology—what is crucial  
politics—how do you act<sup>37</sup>

To extrapolate an analogy suggested, though not explicitly outlined, in one of his letters to the Black Mountain faculty:

BLACK MOUNTAIN : THE INSTITUTE OF ADVANCED STUDY ::  
CHARLES OLSON : J. ROBERT OPPENHEIMER.

To understand this analogy would be to understand a great deal about intellectual history in twentieth-century America. Does the correspondence work in parallel or in perpendicular? Conceiving of Black Mountain and IAS as comparable institutions, and implying their fundamental distinction in the process of that comparison, Olson urged the Black Mountain Faculty to apply Oppenheimer's language about the study of neurons to the study of the human.<sup>38</sup>

## 19

Olson's tenacity, in two sentences. 1) "It's a scandal how lazy all have been for a century on what went on in the U S for the previous two centuries"; 2) "...there is only ...a small body (of whom Dorn is an example) who really want to know."<sup>39</sup>

## 20

Olson's doubters: Paul Breslin, for one, who concluded that "we all have lives to lead, and we cannot spend them re-living Olson's."<sup>40</sup>

## 21

Olson the dreamer: drawing up notes for a Beat University in Venice, California, somewhat after the fashion of Alexander Trochhi's notion of the "spontaneous univer-

sity”: planned spontaneity. Ginsberg as President. Olson as Comptroller. Creeley as Chairman of the Board. Selected courses of instruction to include: Haunts—Olson; Habits—Burroughs; Characterology and Will—Creeley; Play—Kerouac; Theater—Duncan and Wieners; Orientology—Snyder; World History—Whalen; American History—Dorn; Magic—Lansing; Morphology of Landscape—Sauer; Theology and Vocation—Ginsberg; Numbers—Instructor TBD; Genetics—Staff of Cal Tech.<sup>41</sup>

## 22

Olson, to his students: in Vancouver, holding that “self expression is not enough,” and that “the *single intelligence* / combines analytic, descriptive, possessive”; in Connecticut, presenting a seminar on “language & geography / etymology & topology / narrative & image / word & text,” and endorsing the notion that “there is a referable reality.”<sup>42</sup> Recalling Black Mountain, Fee Dawson explained that “the major thing that I learned was how to resent, which I can thank Charley...for.”<sup>43</sup> His classes at Black Mountain tended to begin just before or just after midnight, running until 4 am, and sometimes past dawn. Francine du Plessix Gray recalled them as seminars of 4 or 6 or even 8 hours: “sitting through them was like seeing an archaeologist through a tantrum in a richly-endowed museum.” Highlighting his “militant insistence on subjectivity,” she discerned “much redneck Yahoo posturing in this Harvard-educated scholar.”<sup>44</sup>

## 23

Olson, at large: promptly answering and welcoming the prospect of a visit from Champaign-Urbana by Illinois graduate students Carolee Schneemann and James Tenney, and walking the beach at Gloucester in their company, laying a foundation in the form of a provocation.<sup>45</sup>

## 24

Olson’s many unseen effects: the powerful impression that he left on countless auditors. One student at SUNY-Buffalo, attempting to enroll in one of his courses, sent him a six page letter: “I have little to recommend me or qualify me for the seat in your class except perhaps that I am among the living and you appear to be very much interested in life. ...The great care you take in speaking and in being spoken to, in order that meaning be preserved, is a joy to me. I am very much elated by your idea that men once KNEW things wholly [sic] insted [sic] of in partitioned segments surrounded by question and doubt and that accord with nature was the key to this Knowing.” The writer, Larry Griffis; one of his bequests, to us: Buffalo’s Griffis Sculpture Park.

## 25

Olson as aphorist: “It’s all right to be difficult, but you can’t be impossible”; “Take the earth in under a single review”; “Love life until it is / your own.”<sup>46</sup>

## Notes

1. "Letter 2," in Charles Olson, *The Maximus Poems*, ed. George Butterick (Berkeley: U of California P, 1983): I.5; hereafter as *M*.
2. Friedrich Nietzsche, "Schopenhauer as Educator," in *Untimely Meditations*, ed. Daniel Breazeale, trans. R.J. Hollingdale, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997): 125–194; 146, 190.
3. Charles Olson, *Muthologos: The Collected Lectures & Interviews*, ed. George F. Butterick, 2 vols. (Bolinas: Four Seasons Foundation, 1978): II.152; Olson, *Collected Prose*, ed. Donald Allen and Benjamin Friedlander (Berkeley: U of California P, 1997): 339; hereafter as *Prose*; Olson, *Muthologos* I.15, II.155.
4. Charles Doria, "Charles Olson: Against the Past," in *American Writing Today*, ed. Richard Kostelanetz (Troy: Whitston, 1991): 146-54; 147.
5. Charles Olson, *Selected Writings*, ed. Robert Creeley (New York: New Directions, 1966): 130.
6. "Letter 23," in *M* I.100. George Butterick notes Olson's use of Herodotus's "istorin," from the Greek for "finding out for oneself." See Butterick, *A Guide to the Maximus Poems of Charles Olson* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1978): 147; hereafter as *Guide*.
7. Anne Waldman, qtd. in Richard Duckett, "Poet Olson Still Casts Long Shadow." *Worcester Telegram and Gazette*, March 21, 2010.
8. *Prose* 219.
9. Charles Olson, "It Is a Nation of Nothing But Poetry," in *The Collected Poems of Charles Olson: Excluding the Maximus Poems*, ed. George F. Butterick (Berkeley: U of California P, 1987): 562-3; Charles Olson, "A Draft of a Plan for the College," in *OLSON 2* (Fall 1974): 50-58; 53.
10. *Prose* 168; 170.
11. Charles Olson, "Statement for Black Mountain Catalogue," in *OLSON 2* (Fall 1974): 25-6.
12. Charles Olson, "The Chiasma, or Lectures in the New Sciences of Man," in *OLSON 10* (Fall 1978): 3-113; 25.
13. *Guide* 296.
14. Charles Olson, "DOGMATIC CURRICULUM, NON-OPTIONAL" (October 1962), Folder #30, Charles Olson Research Collection. Archives & Special Collections at the Thomas J. Dodd Research Center, University of Connecticut Libraries.
15. *M* II.38-9.
16. See Vincent Ferrini, *Know Fish: Volume 1; Book I: The Lady of Misbegotten Voyages*, and *Book II: Da Songs* (Storrs: U of Connecticut Library, 1979); *Know Fish: Volume 2; Book III: The Navigators*. Storrs: U of Connecticut Library, 1984); *Know Fish: Volume 3; Book IV: The Community of Self*, and *Book V: The Illuminations*. (Storrs: U of Connecticut Library, 1986); *Know*



*Fish, Volume 4; Book VI: Shadows Talking, and Book VII: This Other Ocean* (Storrs: U of Connecticut Library, 1991).

17. *Guide* li.
18. Charles Olson and Andrew Leinoff, "On Black Mountain (II)," in *OLSON* 8 (Fall 1977): 66-107; 76.
19. Robert von Hallberg, "The Poets' Politics: A View from the Archives," in *Chicago Review* 28:1 (1976): 147-57; 156.
20. Catherine Seelye, *Charles Olson & Ezra Pound: An Encounter at St. Elizabeth's* (New York: Grossman, 1975): 119.
21. Charles Olson, Teaching Materials from Clark University, Folder #258, Charles Olson Research Collection. Archives & Special Collections at the Thomas J. Dodd Research Center, University of Connecticut Libraries.
22. *Prose* 188. In this case, the "men worth anyone's study" include Edward Sapir, Edward Carpenter, Carl O. Sauer, Aleister Crowley, Ernest Fenellosa, B.L. Whorf, L.A. Waddell, Edward Hyams, Victor Berard, and Cyrus Gordon.
23. *Prose* 306-7.
24. Charles Olson, *Archaeologist of Morning* (London: Cape Goliard, 1970): n.p.; "A Note For Anyone Able To" *matter* 2 (July 1964): 2. Elsewhere, Olson reiterated the importance of "the 50 years 1200-1250, to turn the corner / of what has been all we've known: Aquinas / Eckhart Bacon etc etc." See Olson, *Additional Prose: A Bibliography on America, Proprioception, and Other Notes and Essays*, ed. George F. Butterick (Berkeley: Four Seasons Foundation, 1974): 25-26.
25. Charles Olson, *The Special View of History*, ed. Ann Charters (Berkeley: Oyez, 1970): n.p.
26. *Prose* 233. Olson later repeated this language, labeling it as a document "written to be read AWAY FROM all comers, peyoracrats, media phenomena, political parties, past present future governments, hierarchically organized anything period, & that song I'd void my ear of, the music-racket of all ownership." See his posthumously published *New Man & Woman* (Gloucester: Millenia Foundation, 1972): 1.
27. Tom Clark, *Charles Olson: The Allegory of a Poet's Life* (New York: Norton, 1991): 50-52; Francine du Plessix Gray, "Charles Olson and an American Place," in *The Yale Review* 76.3 (Spring 1987): 341-352; 341.
28. *M* 1.72; 1.47.
29. James G. Hershberg, *James B. Conant: Harvard to Hiroshima and the Making of the Nuclear Age* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1995): 80. Nevertheless, Harvard proved a relatively welcoming place for meatballs in comparison to Yale: see Jerome Karabel, *The Chosen: The Hidden History of Admission and Exclusion at Harvard, Yale, and Princeton* (New York: Houghton Mifflin 2005): 205-6.

30. *Prose* 349; Charles Boer, *Charles Olson in Connecticut* (Chicago: Swallow P, 1975): 43-44.
31. Qtd. in Olson's *Maximus to Gloucester: The Letters and Poems of Charles Olson to the Editor of the Gloucester Daily Times, 1962-1969*, ed. Peter Anastas (Gloucester: Ten Pound Island Book Co., 1992): 104.
32. Charles Olson, Faculty Survey at SUNY-Buffalo, qtd. in *Minutes of the Charles Olson Society* 13 (February 1996): 25.
33. Boer 47.
34. *Muthologos* I.112.
35. *Prose* 341.
36. *M* III.55.
37. *Muthologos* 47; Pauline Wah, "Notes from Olson's Classes at Vancouver," in *OLSON* 4 (Fall 1975): 64-69; 68.
38. Charles Olson, "Writings From Black Mountain 1951-1954: A Letter to the Faculty of Black Mountain College," in *OLSON* 8 (Fall 1977): 26-33.
39. *Prose* 349; 352.
40. Paul Breslin, "Black Mountain: A Critique of the Curriculum," in *Poetry* 136 (July 1980): 219-39; 230.
41. Charles Olson, "Notes on a University in Venice, CA" *OLSON* 2 (Fall 1974): 65-68. On Olson's sense of Trochhi's "spontaneous university," see Olson and Leinoff 106.
42. Clark Coolidge, "Notes Taken in Classes Conducted by Charles Olson at Vancouver, August 1963," in *OLSON* 4 (Fall 1975): 47-65; 51; Wah 64; John Cech, *Charles Olson in Connecticut: Last Lectures* (Iowa City: Windhover P, 1974): 13; 20.
43. Fielding Dawson, *The Black Mountain Book* (New York: Croton P, 1970): 2.
44. Gray 342-4.
45. Carolee Schneemann, "Maximus at Gloucester: A Visit to Charles Olson," in *Imaging Her Erotics: Essays, Interviews, Projects* (Cambridge: MIT P, 2002): 52-3.
46. Qtd. In George F. Butterick, *Editing the Maximus Poems: Supplementary Notes* (Storrs: U of Connecticut Library, 1983): iii; *M* III.192; III.215.

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In research and in teaching, Jim Cocola focuses on intersections between geography and the humanities, primarily in the field of modern and contemporary American literature and culture. His most recent study examines place making in American poetry and poetics through a comparative, multiethnic, and transnational lens. Jim Cocola. All articles by this author. April 1, 2011. Online Only. Is Venice modern? At a glance, the scarcity of automotive traffic would seem to suggest against it. Foreign Affairs. Letter on Venice. Jim Cocola.Â The Thinking Man's Guide to The Pervert's Guide to Cinema. Jim Cocola. Read More. Email Newsletter. Get n+1 in your inbox. Email Address. Follow Us. Keep your eyes on your devices. Jim Coca is on Facebook. Join Facebook to connect with Jim Coca and others you may know. Facebook gives people the power to share and makes the world