

CHAPTER 3

The Maximus Poems – The Fragmented Whole

The Maximus Poems is regarded as Olson's magnum opus, even though his theoretical essay "Projective Verse" received immediate popularity. This collection contains more than 300 poems in the series written over a period of twenty years. *The Maximus Poems, Volume I* was published in 1960, *Maximus Poems IV, V, VI* in 1968 and the last one in the series *The Maximus Poems: Volume Three* was published posthumously. Now all the three volumes are available in a single book, *The Maximus Poems* (1983) edited by George F. Butterick. Initially, the poems began as a sequence of 'letters' to the poet Vincent Ferrini, who lived in Olson's native place Gloucester, and through Ferrini he addresses the whole city. At a certain stage, when the integration of person and place, man and his earth is achieved, the identity of Olson and Maximus, becomes insignificant. George F. Butterick comments: "The Maximus series is certainly ambitious in its own right focusing as it does on a single locality that serves as a microcosm by which to measure the present and the nation and which grows to encompass earth, heaven, and hell" (*A Guide* xix). In 1945, Olson withdrew himself from politics for his intension to

become a writer and at that time, he proposed a long poem *West*, that stands for the entire Western World, and the American West, to him, was an imaginative and geographical culmination. Olson formulated the concept of a Maximus figure and he incorporated this figure to Gilgamesh of Ur (which also means from an *ur* – world), the culture-hero he was aware of, and also to another figure, “Bigmans”, a specific prototype of Maximus. The poems in this volume appear to be fragmentary, but they constitute one whole epic unit.

The Maximus Poems is a book-length poem with independent pieces lacking uniformity in terms of ‘size’. It is a significant poem of epic proportions in the tradition of American ‘long poem’ of which its roots extend to Walt Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass*. Whitman provided Olson materials for an innovative poetic treatment of history in which the individual poems, in the form of letters, attain epic dimensions when placed in connection with one another. The poems progress in a non narrative manner and they never adhere to any linear sequence and they demonstrate directly and imply organic correlations. Olson’s intention was to achieve the completeness of life through his poems, but left the readers with the duty of reconstructing the theme in an effort to attain the status of “an archaeologist among undecoded glyphs” (Bollobas 112).

In his study on Melville, *Call Me Ishmael*, Olson announced Maximus

as the ‘prospective’ hero, since the principle of ‘*storian*’ by Maximus and the ethics of Ulysses, Homer’s hero – “search the individual responsibility to himself” – go hand in hand (118). “Maximus, by the sheer boldness and grandeur of his title, is Ahab come *full stop*” (Butterick, *A Guide* xxi), because of the grandeur of his title and boldness of his character. Butterick continues:

He is western man at the limit of himself, who no longer has a frontier other than himself and his extricable past, no farther west to go but to dig in deeper where he stands, with the result that Gloucester is taken back “compelled” to its founding in 1623 by migrating European man, back to the old Norse and the Algonquins, even farther back to the ice and Pleistocene man. (*A Guide* xxi)

Olson discusses the scope of the Maximus at the end of *Call Me Ishmael*.

“The Kingfishers” is one of Olson’s major achievements and it can be read as an introduction to *The Maximus Poems*. Originally, it was a part of a longer poem “Proteus” written in 1949. His another significant poem “The Praises” collected with “The Kingfishers” in *In Cold Hell, In Thicket* also has one of the same sources; Plutarch’s “On the E at Delphi”. “The Kingfishers” is a response to the “diffident negativism” (Butterick, *A Guide* xxiv) of Eliot’s *The Waste Land* and *Four Quartets*, the echoes of which are prominent

throughout the poem and it is an inversion of Eliot's "Fisher-king" from the "Holy Grail" legend. Eliot's poem is symbolic of the degeneration everywhere – "a monument to the destructive power of this new world" (Alvarez 38), while Olson's poem ends with a ray of hope when he says, "I hunt among stones" (*Selected Poems* 12). These stones are something of the past, same as the one at Delphi with the archaic 'E' inscribed on it, or the ones that Olson found at Yucatan with glyphs on it. In the "Letter to Robert Creeley, 17th March 1951," collected in *Mayan Letters*, Olson writes: "christamiexcited getting that load off my heart, to you, thursday, did a trick. for i pulled out ..., dug out my 1st hieroglyphic stone! Plus two possible stela (tho, no crowbar, so no proof) ..." (*Selected Writings* 90). *The Kingfishers'* conclusion is not symptomatic of "the existential despair" prevailing in *The Waste Land* or the "Kierkegardian era" (Butterick, *A Guide* xxv) of post World War II. It is an "opportunity as the will to change, to act 'by seizure' to recover values of the past, 'possible usages' of the present, which had been allowed to 'dribble out' unused" (Butterick, *A Guide* xxv). Olson was concerned with the magnitude of the large poem that he was going to compose. His essay "Projective Verse" concludes with a proposal for an epic, as a solution to this problem and he found Pound, Williams and Eliot quite insufficient as they were totally non-projective. In 1945, during his stay at Key West, he wrote:

May be Pound discloses to you a method you spontaneously reached for in all this talking and writing. What about doing [on] a smaller scope – the West? But he has already taken the same frame, as you will note from your notes on the poem to be called “west” you wrote 4 yrs ago. (Butterick, *A Guide* xxvi)

In his letter to Robert Creeley, Olson wrote both Pound and Williams as representing two extremes – Pound was limited by the “irresponsibility” of his ego and Williams by a naively pastoral view of the city, ignoring the depth of time and history (*Selected Writings* 81-4).

Hart Crane, the 20th century American poet, associated himself with what he called “the logic of metaphor” and for “bold and drastic emotional energy” (Rosenthal 331). His intention was to incorporate these gifts into poetic sequences with “all the celebratory fireworks” he could put together and his efforts ran counter to his talents and due to his untimely death, he could not follow through “complex balancing of affective dreams”. Crane was haunted by an outmoded “structuralist ideal” (Rosenthal 332) during his time, while Olson moved in another direction. Olson’s interest was to achieve a hero and a place together. He wanted his hero to be of “projective” size.

The Maximus Poems (1960), *Maximus Poems IV, V, VI* (1968) and *The Maximus Poems: Volume Three* (1975) are Olson’s major works started during

the initial stages of his poetic career and continued until the end of his life. It was a trend among the twentieth century American poets to compose a long poem to prove their talent and intelligence. Olson began *Maximus* sequence in imitation of Pound and Williams, and his real intention was to outdo his 'elders'. *The Maximus Poems* are heavily indebted to *The Cantos* and *Paterson*, and thus, a "feast for his detractors" (Christensen 120). But Olson's works stand in par with the works of his great predecessors that more critics are turning to them. While viewed as a whole, we can observe that they are skillfully drafted sequence of poems which brought a new and distinctive imagination to American literature. The second and third volumes are inspired with Olson's idiosyncrasies and intellectual gifts. The first two volumes of *The Maximus Poems* can be considered as first and second triads and the final volume as a long undivided sequence. The final volume is different in terms of form and procedure – "it is a weave of ideas, moods, items of research" (Christensen 120).

In "The Special View of History" Olson confesses: "I do go in circles, in fact believe that only if one does one finally suck up the vertu in anything" (35). He follows the same technique in *Maximus*. "The epic rarely proceeds in straight lines but rather moves in spirals, picking up subjects and themes again and again, each time from a somewhat different approach," says Thomas F.

Merrill (177). Maximus, the protagonist of this series of poems, communicates to Gloucester and to himself through ‘letters’ this constitutes the poem’s basic structure. Each ‘letter’ is unique in itself, that is they do possess an ‘open’ projective coherence and its implication is perceived through their interconnection with other ‘letters’.

Olson owes his title to Maximus of Tyre, a Neoplatonic philosopher of the 2nd century AD, who resided in the coastal town of some ancient city, and thus, he is a seeming parallel to Olson’s Maximus who also belongs to some coastal town. Though both men are “secular” in their outlook, the reach of their thought is towards the “spiritual” (*Call Me* 120). The poems are composed in an epistolary style that is unique to Olson – a loose form in which so much of the work is cast. *The Maximus Poems* is a sequel to the “Columbiad”, *Song of Myself*, *The Cantos* and *Paterson* and it is an expedition for an “American equivalent of the epic” (Pearce 83). The intensions of Olson are grand from the opening dedication to Creeley to the “unleashing of its mythic obscurities” (Merrill 161). The remnants of an ordinary conversation that Olson picked up from Black Mountain’s kitchen – “All my life I’ve heard / one makes many” (Merrill 161) – serves as its epigraph and it is a challenge to *Paterson*’s ambitious program “... in distinctive terms; by multiplication a reduction to one” (Williams 2).

Maximus is the epic hero who interrelates the entire *Maximus* sequence. George F. Butterick says that Olson relates the “Handsome Sailor” Merry, the archetypal figures like Orion, Hercules, Gilgamesh, Samson, Odysseus, Theseus etc. to Maximus. These figures are described as “Bigmans types or ‘Sons’, with their monstrous opponents (such as Merry’s bull) ‘the libido hung up on MA – specifically, the Terrible Mother of Jungian interpretation” (*A Guide* xxix). Butterick continues that “Maximus Anthropos” stands outside these heroes and monsters as the “MODEL of man without STRIFE” (sic). Maximus is identified with numerous names and guises throughout the poems – “shipwright William Stevens, the androgynous John Smith, Enyalion, the Perfect Child, Odysseus, Hercules Melkaart, James Merry, Manes/Minos, even a whelping mother” (*A Guide* xxix). Irrespective of all these comparisons, Maximus is a person in the very same notion of what the theologians speak of divinity as a person and at the same time he appears as an abstraction or principle, or a leading force.

“The Maximus Poems I” comprises ten letters and here Maximus is in confrontation with the town of Gloucester as “a multitude of particulars” and Olson’s intention is to perceive them with a form. The opening letter is addressed to Vincent Ferrini, the poet and writer, and Maximus expresses his love towards the neglected suburb of Boston which was once hailed as the

“productive fishing port” of the world. *Maximus* is not taken aback by the “shabbiness and deterioration,” of this city, whereas a vision of a new *polis* appears to him and Gloucester gets transformed into the “humble substrate of the ideal city”. *Maximus* is presented as an “instrument of war and reform” and he arrives as a newly sharpened sword to materialize his purpose. There is a sudden shift in the metaphor and the solid “lance” is now a feather that *Maximus* brings to Gloucester.

from where I carry you a feather
 as though, sharp, I picked up,
 in the afternoon delivered you
 a jewel,
 it flashing more than a wing,
 than any old romantic thing,
 than memory, than place,
 than anything other than that which you carry

 than that which is,
 call it a nest, ... (*Maximus Poems* 8)

The poem aims at attaining uninterrupted formal entity out of the disorder prevailing in Gloucester. Initially, it was the sword, a weapon capable of

reforming the town that was thought of; but in the second metaphor it plays a different role:

Maximus is the mothering bird, who brings a feather to help bind up the loose particulars into that ancient symbol of wholeness, the vehicle of new life, the bird's nest, itself circular, cup-shaped, crafted out of the lifeless oddments the eye of the bird can see drifting over the surface of earth. (Christensen 121)

The poet's own mental process is reflected here and his imagination could visualize the informal items pre-occupying human mind and he links them into poetry. The total outlook of Gloucester is mingled into an intricate metaphor in such a way that "Maximus stands outside of" and at the same time "the substance of his own interiors" (Christensen 121). The poet desires to make Gloucester to become a continuous entity with himself so that the barriers of subject and object are totally eliminated and the result is that the "dream of the new *polis*" is realized.

Maximus, the hero who is a genius from Gloucester, emerges in a dignified manner in the poem:

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 (*Maximus Poems* 5)

Sherman Paul remarks: “The ebullience with which Olson assimilates this birth to that of American folk-heroes is notable, but even more is the fact that Maximus belongs to Olson’s biography, and his emergence recalls the similarly late emergence of Whitman, whose simmering genius Emerson had brought to a boil” (*Olson’s Push* 115). Maximus greatly resembles his predecessor Dr. Paterson and is a “gigantic, omniscient extension of his creator; he is observer, historian, social critic, correspondent, mail carrier, voyeur, and poet” (Merrill 161). He is not a persona or a mask, but a model created in such a way to “shape the self”. He is capable of even challenging his predecessors. Maximus’ birth is a second one and he is “Olson’s desire to be born another way, to follow Buddha’s instructions, to shape himself before he dies, to shape a shape out of him” (Paul, *Olson’s Push* 117). But often, the question was raised: “How does the long poem or sequence achieve an overall unity? How does *Maximus*, an alleged literary entity, distinguish itself from merely thematically related collections such as Olson’s own *The Distances* or even *Archaeologist of Morning*?” (Merrill 162). Olson’s problem was different from that of Pound and Williams, he wanted to prove that Maximus extended the “push” beyond the “half-success” of *Cantos* and *Paterson*.

Such a demonstration was not an easy task and peripherally, Maximus appeared to be too “derivative”. Olson’s theme is the estrangement of the modern man from everything that he is familiar and it reminds the readers of Paterson’s lament over the decline of values in twentieth-century mechanized culture and also an evocation of the cultural divorce typical of a modern man. The epics identify their estrangements and divorces in language. Williams’ “divorce” theme and Pound’s “economic obsession” seem to foreshadow Olson’s “diatribes” against “musik” and “pejorocracy” (*Maximus Poems* 7). A cautious reader can identify parallels in *Paterson* and *Maximus Poems*. Williams characterizes his “enterprise” as a “basket” in *Paterson*, a container for “particulars”. Apparently, this may be the suggestion that prompted *Maximus* series of “nests, kylixes” and other “containers” that are filled with the “hay and cotton struts / of street-pickings, wharves, weeds / you carry in my bird ...” (*Maximus Poems* 7). Olson is concerned with ‘place’ and the same concept is elaborated by Edward Dorn and it can be read along with Williams’ observation that “place is the only reality, the true core of the universal” (qtd. in Merrill 162). These sorts of similarities along with the patent kinship of the epic heroes could lend some credibility to Marjorie Perloff’s view that “Olson’s poesy is a pale imitation rather than a creative advance over Pound and Williams” (300).

Olson makes his historical material, *The Maximus* series devoid of all sorts of forms and this is one of his major claims as an innovation that he has experimented with *Maximus*. He was interested in demonstrating his epic with “absolute clarity that time is done, as effect of work in hand” (*Selected Writings* 28) and thus he says that it was a mistake on the part of Pound that he tried to defeat historical time with “the beak of his ego ... [turning] time into what we must have, space & its live air” (*Selected Writings* 27). He is of the view that,

Pound’s single emotion breaks all down to his equals or inferiors (so far as I can see only two, possibly, are admitted, by him, to be his betters – Confucius, & Dante. Which assumption, that there are intelligent men he can outwalk, is beautiful because it destroys historical time, and thus creates the methodology of the Cantos. (*Selected Writings* 26)

Gloucester exceeds all concepts of time according to Olson. Gregory Corso, one among the Beat Generation writers, once enquired him why he was writing about something that was going to vanish, and Olson replied, “I consider her a redeemable flower that will be a monstrence forever, of not a city but City” (“I Know Men” 9). Williams chose Paterson as the basis of his epic due to its formal and geographical convenience. Olson considered

Gloucester as a “redeemable flower” and “she wasn’t urbanized” (“I Know Men” 9) and once he commented to Herbert Kenny, his neighbour, that Gloucester on Cape Ann was “an image of creation and of human life for the rest of life of the species” (“I Know Men” 19). He found “intrinsic” significance for this place: “I regard Gloucester as the final movement of the earth’s people, the great migratory thing ... The migratory act of man ended in Gloucester. And I think the migratory act of man is the fillet of the rose, is the fire of the energy patterns.” (“I Know Men” 19-20).

Gloucester is not a mere ‘city’ but ‘City’ itself as it represents the “final movement of the earth’s people” and is present “here and now” (“I Know Men” 19). Looking at his “locus” from this perspective, Olson could evade the illusion of past-time. To Olson, this “evading of past time” was to “get rid of nomination” (*Selected Writings* 26). It is a tendency of “nomination” to “lock” historical material into time and as its alternative, he suggests looking for “etymon” which enables one exit from the “universe of discourse” and capable of bringing back the familiar. Olson says:

And that thing is where we really have a chance to put our hand out and grab hold of something. Otherwise we’re simply getting caught in the event either of society, which is one form of what’s boringly called history, or the event of ourselves, which is also

that damn boring thing called personal history. (“On History”
43)

All activities emphasized in Maximus like looking, hearing, smelling, moving etc. are the present means to find out one’s self among the materials immediately available before the senses. This is the distinguishing feature of Maximus (poems) from its predecessors. “... it is truly an epic committed to the methodology of Herodotus’s *’istorian*, finding out for one’s self and rendering the results as present ‘story’ rather than historical ‘report’” (Merrill 164). The protagonist Maximus can be compared to Olson’s Mayan neighbors in Lerma, “hot for the world ... hot to get it down the way it was – the way it is” (*Human Universe* 15). He is splendidly “oracular” and he “obeys the figure of the present dance”.

The opening poem begins with the announcement of a quest.

the thing you’re after
may lie around the bend
of the nest
... the bird! The bird!

And there! (strong) thrust, the mast! Flight (*Maximus Poems* 5)

The quest is quite strong. The bird represents the figure of creative discovery,

and it is collecting “the stray particulars of the city” in order to furnish its nest. The “nest” acts as a connecting link between creative movement of the bird to an epic voyage upon a ship for the crow’s nest is on the “mast”. Immediately, it is revealed that the ship’s prow is adorned by the “lady of good voyage”.

The epic enterprise is guided by the “lady of good voyage” (*Maximus Poems* 6) due to some uncertain obedience to “the demand” (*Maximus Poems* 10) even though “the deathly mu-sick” (*Maximus Poems* 11) tries to drown it out. The ship itself rides on “facts”, particulars, which must not be dealt with analytically or historically, but “by ear” (*Maximus Poems* 6), as “things spontaneously confronted and heard for the first time” (Merrill 166-67). From the very outset, the goal of the quest is obvious. The familiar facts, that are unadulterated by the linguistic state of ‘mu-sick’, degenerates the once-proud glory of man to “... a man slumped, / attention less, / against pink shingles” (*Maximus Poems* 6).

“What does not change / is the will to change”. This is how Olson’s poem “The King Fishers” begins and this is one of the recurring themes in many of his poems. Olson’s ‘Maximus, to Gloucester’, Letter 2, also focuses almost the same theme.

... tell you? Ha! Who
can tell another how

to manage the swimming?

he was right: people

don't change. They only stand more

revealed. I,

likewise (*Maximus Poems* 9)

In one of his conversations, Olson suggested that this was the opinion of his early friend and mentor Edward Dahlberg: “His [Dahlberg’s] argument & justifications – we never change - same agonies, same urges, same aberrations, same pains at 40 as at 20. Only we acquire power to illuminate ourselves ...” (qtd. in Butterick, *A Guide* 16) This belief stayed with Dahlberg most of his life. In his letter to Olson on November 24, 1954, he wrote: “You know how changeless man is. I am always the same, only more of it” (qtd. in Butterick, *A Guide* 16).

Letter 2, “Maximus, to Gloucester”, presents “a chiaroscuro of the city, arranging the whites and blacks into an emphatic moral tableau” (Merrill 168). In the midst of ‘light’, the poet makes references to ‘black’; “they hid, or tried to hide, the fact the cargo their ships / brought back / was black (the Library, too, possibly so founded” (*Maximus Poems* 9). The reflected light of the

houses emphasizes the ‘hidden darkness’ associated with Gloucester’s past.

‘Tansy’ sequence is one of the most lyrical letters of Maximus. The poet, here makes a passionate indictment of all “mu-sick” makers, that is, those “who use words cheap” (*Maximus Poems* 13). It resembles Shakespeare’s King Lear’s touching appeal on the heath to seek revenge to those who deliberately destroy the civilization:

Let the great gods,
That keep this dreadful pother o’er our heads,
Find out their enemies now. Tremble, thou wretch.
That hast within thee undivulged crimes,... (*King Lear* 3.2 49-
52)

Olson addresses the city of ‘Tansy’ in ‘Letter 3’: “o tansy city, root city / let them not make you / as the nation is” (*Maximus Poems* 15). This is not the comprehensive group of citizens that the ancient Maximus of Tyre really addressed:

..... Polis now
is a few, is a coherence not even yet new (the island of this city
is a mainland now of who? Who can say who are
citizens? (*Maximus Poems* 15)

Maximus is actually addressing

Only a man or a girl who hear a word
 and that word meant to mean not a single thing the least more
 than
 what it does mean (not at all to sell any one thing, to keep them
 anywhere
 not even
 in this rare place (*Maximus Poems* 15)

Tansy, the aromatic medicinal flower, is put to the task of eliminating “the smell of all owners” (*Maximus Poems* 13) from the land of Gloucester. It is a pastoral avenger, and is against any kind of duplicity. It is quite specific to restore cultural integrity, even to the basic workings of language. Tansy acquires the faith of the “lady of good voyage” with the intension of arousing the little coherence of native people, who constitute ‘polis’ to fight against the slave owners who

would keep you off the sea, would keep you local,
 my Nova Scotians,
 Newfouldlanders
 Sicilianos,
 Isolators (*Maximus Poems* 16)

The air is turbulent in “The Songs of Maximus”, but there is more an intimate,

personal tone. It is an echo of the frustrations of the protagonist.

And words, words, words
all over everything

No eyes or ears left
to do their own doings (*Maximus Poems* 17)

According to Maximus, the “colored pictures of all things to eat”, that is the advertising placards in street-cars are “dirty post cards”. They are the symbols of “visual mu-sick”: “..... all / Invaded, appropriated, outraged, all senses / Including the mind, ...” (*Maximus Poems* 17). Even Maximus is a victim to it. He says, “I too covered with the gurru of it” (*Maximus Poems* 17). As a typical modern man devoid of any purpose in life, he laments:

..... where
shall we go from here, what can we do
when even the public conveyances
sing?
how can we go anywhere,
even cross-town
how get out of anywhere (the bodies (*Maximus Poems*
17)

Maximus asks to himself, "... all buried / in shallow graves?" (*Maximus Poems* 17). He is reminded of all the difficulties and hardships in life even when he "count the blessings" (*Maximus Poems* 18). The unending bracket reminds the readers of the emptiness shrouded upon the generation. In Olson's ascetic view, "there is virtue in the natural obstacles and challenges of everyday life that contemporary progress, with its 'mu-sick' and 'Congoleum' have all but blotted out" (Merrill 171).

"Song 3" also presents some common domestic problems in a typical projective manner. The poet successfully utilizes the advantages of a typewriter here. The blank spaces in between the lines add special meaning to the poem.

... I don't want to remember
 the rent
 a house these days
 so much somebody else's,
 especially,
 Congoleum's

Or the plumbing,
 that it doesn't work, this I like, have even used paper clips

as well as string to hold the ball up And flush it
with my hand (*Maximus Poems* 18)

Towards the end of “Song 3”, Maximus presents a cultural insurgence and it cannot be discarded as mere perversion of his nature.

In the midst of plenty, walk
as close to
bare

In the face of sweetness,
piss

In the time of goodness
go side, go
smashing, beat them, go as
(as near as you can

tear

In the land of plenty, have
nothing to do with it (*Maximus Poems* 18-9)

This “emerges from a primal source deep beneath the gurry, from the distant recollection of some Innisfree of the Unconscious where ‘a house made of mud & wattles’, innocent of Congoleum, surely exists” (Merrill 171). The

natural difficulties of life, not the ease that gives life its integrity and meaning, and this is why ‘authentic verse thrives best with need’. “you sing, you / who also / wants” (*Maximus Poems* 20).

Olson was a man of honour and self respect. His belief was that principle goes before friendship. Vincent Ferrini was Olson’s longtime friend, but Olson’s attack on him in *Four Winds*, Issue 3 appears to belie this fact. Olson felt deeply offended by the editorial orientation and he held Ferrini also as among one for what he considered “one more outlet for mu-sick”. Olson wrote to Corman: “These new Maxies rough up Vinc considerably – I was shocked by both the choice of things, & their putting together ...” (qtd. in Merrill 172). Olson alleged that *Four Winds* lacked provincial details and like all contemporary “mu-sick”, it was afflicted with subtle fraudulence which could compromise the essentials of real Gloucester and even the world. Olson thinks that Ferrini should have possessed: “... the will to be as fine as / as fine as fins are / as firm as / as firm as a mackerel is ... as vulnerable / (as vulnerable as I am (*The Maximus Poems* 24). The whole *Maximus Poems* revolves around the notion of ‘polis’. It is the core of true believers, a model, a compliance, an honor and a prime of value. This poem is also noted for Olson’s use of open ended brackets which earmark the fact that this is an ‘open’ field poem.

“Letter 6” begins with an explanation of ‘polis’: “polis is / eyes” (*Maximus Poems* 30). “Letter 7” celebrates the American artist and poet, Marsden Hartley, who painted the Gloucester landscape in 1931. He is also a distinguished member of “polis” and a centerpiece for a gallery of “polis” types. Olson says “polis is / eyes”, and it is Hartley’s eyes and those of his local painter friend, Helen Stein, that set the theme: “(Marsden Hartley’s / eyes – as Stein’s / Eyes” (*Maximus Poems* 34). The vision of these two are associated with

... that carpenter’s
 who left Plymouth Plantation
 and came to Gloucester,
 to build boats (*Maximus Poems* 38)

The reference here is to William Stevens, a shipwright who came to Gloucester in 1642, and he was a freeman who boldly spoke against the “royal interference in local government” (Butterick 50). All the above three – Stevens, Hartley and Stein share an “integrity of craft” that the vision of ‘polis’ affords them in general. Stevens was more concerned with his substantial performance and Olson says: “That carpenter is much on my mind / I think he was the first Maximus” (*Maximus Poems* 35).

There is a gap of eight years between the publication of *The Maximus*

Poems (1960) and *Maximus IV, V, VI* (1968), and the difference is visible especially in the character of Maximus. It is a collection of tactfully articulated poems but still Olson is interested in maintaining its unfinished quality. Many a time, the poems seem as independent entities rather than part of an organic whole. George F. Butterick writes: “There is an effort to drive back to roots both of Gloucester as the end of migrating Western man, and of man himself, back to the deglaciation and the sources of civilization” (*A Guide* xi). In *Maximus IV, V, VI*, he begins again: “History has brought him to impasse and for the time being exhausted his historiographical impulse” (Paul, *Olson’s Push* 181). This volume is composed with much care and attention – the poet juxtaposes poem to poem and in this process, they attain a dynamic structure. The volume comprises of even blank pages and they function as part of a particular design that is an echo of his projective theory. Olson was interested in introducing a new mind and what led him was his present mind. He considered a poem as a place of action which was much above an expression or rhetoric. The poems find primary articulation in myth and geology, and Maximus employs the technique of mythical thinking. When the poem progresses, Maximus remarks the change from history to myth; he reverses the title of an earlier poem – “History is the Memory of Time” changes to “My Memory is / the History of Time”. “History is perspectival, always limited by

the necessary selectivity of the historian, but myth, the memory of the collective unconscious, is ever present (eternal) and includes all time” (Paul, *Olson’s Push* 182). So Maximus turns more to myth. His problem is more theoretical than practical – that is involving Jung and Whitehead together. Maximus accomplishes the same when he says,

... the dream being
 self action with Whitehead’s important corollary: that no
 event
 is not penetrated, in an intersection or collision with, an
 eternal
 event (*Maximus Poems* 183)

Maximus IV, V, VI is different from *The Maximus Poems*; it has a different innovative starting with variety and the objective is clear. Here, the “anchor is hoisted, Gloucester, as an historical reality, recedes, and the reader confronts an open, unpainted sea inhabited by almost unlimited primordial serpents and beasts and mythical heroes and deities” (Merrill 194-95). Olson’s vision is magnified and he is “getting rid of nomination” (*Selected Writings* 26) and the poem struggles to achieve the required size. There is a slight shift in locus, Gloucester to Dogtown and this can be considered as an instance of the poet looking for an appropriate nurturing ground for a universe of archetypes.

During his conversation with Herbert Kenny, Olson said: “So that the last polis or city *is* Gloucester. Therefore I think that in a sense we’re – man now is either going to rediscover the earth or is going to leave it” (“I Know Men” 20). The intension of Maximus is to rediscover the earth and this needs an expedition in the opposite direction. Thus Maximus undertakes a pledge:

Plus this - plus this
 that forever the geography
 which leans in
 on me I compel
 backwards I compel Gloucester
 to yield, to
 change

Polis

is this (*Maximus Poems* 185)

Maximus is a mythic magnification and he is directly linked to the other heroes of the *Maximus* series. The magnification that he achieves is a matter of celebration for man, not for the kind of man he is supposed to be, but as one he could be and as one he had been. In this sense, the mythic gods included in *Maximus* among the conventional representatives of Dogtown cannot be thought of as superior to men but just the models of indigenous humankind. At

this point, Olson says: “gods are men first ... and how many generations does it take to turn a hero into a god?” (*Human Universe* 17). As such, he comes to this assumption: “I have this dream, that just as we now cannot see & say the size of these early HUMAN KINGS, we cannot, by the very lost token of their science, see what size man can be once more capable of” (*Human Universe* 21). Olson complains that “we long ago lost the POINT & PURPOSE of myth” (*Human Universe* 21) and thus killed it. It was killed by formalizing it into dead fiction other than some vital act. For Olson, myth is the “spoken correlative of the acted rite, the thing done” (*Special View* 21). The purpose of myth is not to proclaim but to do things to us. The ritual of myth makes man aware of the fact that he is “more than just himself” (Merrill 198). Olson has a broad vision towards myth and he says that it synonymous with history, poetry and religion. *Maximus IV, V, VI* is noted for this type of mythic magnification and the aim of this collection is to achieve this seminal ideal. It possesses a new start as it intensifies the earlier *'istorian* into mythic act. This ‘intensification’ is so deep and authentic that it marks Olson’s beginning of a new commitment to the doctrines of a true ‘Human Universe’. Since it is a reorientation of basic suppositions and attitudes, it is apt to address it as ‘religious’.

“Religious” is not the apt word to use with *Maximus*, as he once turned

away from the face of God.

I have known the face

of God.

And turned away,

turned,

as He did,

his backside (*Maximus Poems* 88)

Olson himself proudly admitted that he has devised a “cosmology and mythology”, “without letting God in” (*Special View* 55). His opinion was that a religious attitude is expressive of one’s submissive nature to the “slow westward motion of / more than I am” (*Maximus Poems* 14).

In the *Human Universe*, Olson raised a pertinent question: “Can one restate man in any way to repossess him of his dynamics?” (*Selected Writings* 59). Olson’s quest to find a reasonable solution to this problem has risen to the status of a myth in *Maximus IV, V, VI*. Myth is a means of reenacting ancient rites and thus it symbolizes not merely the repository of the personal motives of an author, but also of the primordial motives of men from time to time. Only through myth can one have access to the “archetypes that make up the Collective Unconscious” and thus go in “the potency, size and power” that the “primordial matrix” (Merrill 201) could offer. It could find remedy to the

“shallowness and perversity of our collective modern psyche” and “its psychic anemia dispelled by an inrushing of primordial blood” (Merrill 201). In *Maximus IV, V, VI*, Olson displays a procession of archetypal events that hold the human motives emerging from the collective mankind and they interact with diverse people and evolve with magical charm.

We can compare Olson’s continuous search for “that with which we are most familiar” to Jung’s quest for “primordial awareness through the process of individuation” (Merrill 201). The objective is similar for both Olson and Jung and thus it quickens the collective motives of those who experience it through myths. The following poem in *Maximus IV, V, VI* aims to tap the power inherent in the “primordial images”. It is a typical poem that expresses the mythic mode.

I forced the calm grey waters, I wanted her
 to come to the surface I had fought her,
 long enough, below. I shaped her out of
 the watery mass

..... The sea does
 contain the beauty I had looked at
 until the sweat

stood out in my eyes. The wonder is
 limitless, of my own term, the compound
 to compound until the beast rises from the sea. (*Maximus Poems*
 202)

Often, the readers may find this poem as an allegory. It hums the resonances that are generated by the words “water, sea, serpent, and beast”. It touches not only the fairy tales we have been told, the sagas we have experienced, the epics we have read, but it also evokes even deeper recollections that go beyond our conscious memories. Thus, it is natural to assign allegorical interpretations to the serpent, water and sea to obtain a dominating impact above the feeling that the poem imparts in the minds of the readers. The ancient cultures and traditions considered the serpent as the personification of the destructive elements as well as life-giving power of water “and the story of man was the story of his attempts to free himself” (Jacobi 146) from the clutches of this beast. Psychologically speaking, it symbolizes “the state of primordial unconsciousness” (Jacobi 146) and it commonly likes to haunt caverns and such dark places. It also embodies the “raging serpent” that is conquered by “Marduk, the sun hero” (Jacobi 147). The poem is a struggle or a conflict that emerges from such a shared archetypal environment.

Maximus IV, V, VI is a ‘new start’ with much variety and varied

purpose. In *Maximus Poems*, the quest was limited to a local scene and things are clear to Maximus.

The nest, I say, to you, I Maximus, say
 under the hand, as I see it, over the waters
 from this place where I am, where I hear,
 can still hear (*Maximus Poems* 8)

Olson, during one of his conversations with Butterick said, “the poem [MP] is a voyage, and I want a good voyage” (*A Guide* 11).

(o my lady of good voyage
 in whose arm, whose left arm rests
 no boy but a carefully carved wood, a painted face, a schooner!
 a delicate mast, as bow-sprit for

forwarding (*Maximus Poems* 6)

Even though “the lady of good voyage” is well equipped with “a carefully carved wood, a painted face, a delicate mast” etc., and is about to “forwarding”, she never leaves the shore. She cannot leave since she is the icon of New England. The whole scene drifts in *Maximus IV, V, VI*, “. . . , the anchor is hoisted, Gloucester, as an historical reality, recedes, and the reader confronts an open, unpaginated sea inhabited by almost unlimited primordial

serpents and beasts and mythical heroes and deities” (Merrill 195). Gloucester, “the final migratory act of man,” can be considered as a new point of departure in the quest of Maximus, when viewed from a different angle. Olson finds this place as the last polis or city and “man is either going to rediscover the earth or is going to leave it” (“I Know Men” 20). Maximus aspires to rediscover the earth and this compels him to opt for a reverse journey, which earmarks “the motion upon the earth” (“I Know Men” 20).

The Maximus Poems is a discovery, an indispensable connection that establishes a firm grip in the on-going form. In “Further Completion of Plat” Maximus observes,

Lt James Davis 14 acres 1717 and to share 4
more 1728/9 with his son-in-law James
Stanwood – all on the east side of the lower
road, defining therefore that stretch: the first
10 acres, May 23, 1717 are “of land and Rocks
between Joseph Ingarsons and Bryants”. (*Maximus Poems* 212)

Maximus attains the role of the process which he initiated. At times, he performs dual roles – minutely local and cosmic. A careful reader can identify the tendency of the poem to break into two halves. The mapping of Dogtown and the emergence of earth as an archetypal form forms the chief centers of

action in the second volume and they are held together in relationships through the first two books by the clarity of Maximus' voice. The narrative is that "Maximus must consciously witness his own dissolution, gather himself from his dispersed particularity, re-father himself, and be reborn of Earth" (Byrd 113).

"Letter #41 [broken off]" has a catchy opening with a counter-thrust – "equal and opposite reaction to the thrusting up of the mast" (Byrd 113) in "I Maximus of Gloucester to You": "With a leap (she said it was an arabesque / I made, off the porch, the night of the / St Valentine Day's Storm, into the snow" (*Maximus Poems* 171). The scene is based on the Valentine's Day snowstorm of 1940. The leap has its beginning from the known into the raging opposites of his psyche. Maximus leaps into the snow and this earmarks the beginning of his dissolution, which is a reenactment of the Pleistocene cultures in Asia Minor and the reversal of continental drift: "The war of Africa against Eurasia / Has just begun again. Gondwana" (*Maximus Poems* 171). The poem continues with an upward thrust in its creative and destructive aspects and it is telluric.

... Nobody else will grant
 like he said the volcano anyone of us does
 sit upon, in quite such a tangible fashion

Thus surprise, when Yellowstone kicks up

Fuss (*Maximus Poems* 171)

Olson himself has suggested in 1968 that the reference here is an early work by Jung:

‘Normal’ man convinces me, even more than the lunatic, of the powerful autonomy of the unconscious. . . . What is actually happening in the world is due not merely to ‘dim remnants of formerly conscious activities’, but to volcanic outbursts from the very bottom of things. (12)

Olson takes Jung in a literal manner, and identifies his volcano with the celebrated geyser known as the ‘Old Faithful’ of Yellowstone National Park. Earth is ‘universal unconsciousness’ in the *Maximus*.

Hesiod’s *Theogony* forms the central source of *Maximus IV, V, VI*, but Olson contributes his own innovations to Hesiod’s work. In his cosmology, Okeanos is the first born of Earth and Sky. “*Maximus from Dogtown I*” begins,

The sea was born of the earth without sweet union of love and
Hesiod says

But that then she lay for heaven and she bare the thing which

encloses

everything, Okeanos the one which all things are and by which

nothing

is anything but itself, measured so. (*Maximus Poems* 172)

The sea is directly related to primal chaos or void. It is born without the sweet union of love, and as such, is formless. The desire being formal, the formed world appears to be an issue of passionate encounter. Oceanus' force is unique in the sense it is "directional, formal flowing in currents rather than merely surging" (Byrd 174). "The volcano, anyone of us does sit upon" (*Maximus Poems* 172) is the majestic Oceanus ("Okeanos") and he is capable of flooding "all gods and men into further nature" (*Maximus Poems* 172). Nature represents both essence and physical world in this passage, and Okeanos is active in both of these realms.

The second volume of *Maximus* is dualistic in the sense that it stands between the failed attempts to bring Gloucester to coherence in the first and the deliberate attempt to bring it to coherence in the third. *Maximus* is Odysseus, the figure of energies reborn, and he uses this energy for local concerns. Olson's effort here is to bring in parallel Odysseus' frantic movement with *Maximus*' precise observation of the "turning of country roads". His journey from Gloucester to Dogtown rhymes with the larger,

cultural quest. Maximus is “very large in the very small”, and thus, has enough time to map the way to Dogtown and this is his primary concern in most of the poems in *Maximus IV, V, VI*.

“Maximus, from Dogtown II” presents Dogtown as a deserted village that lies north east of Gloucester in the interior of Cape Ann. Until the Revolution it was a thriving farming village and as the Gloucester harbor grew, it began to decline. With what remains from the past, Maximus establishes a new center with his own polis in Dogtown. Since it is totally deserted by its inhabitants, its present stage is deplorable. Olson’s anger is at its peak, when he says: “Dogtown: the Harbor / the shore the city / are now / shitty, as the Nation / is - the World / tomorrow ...” (*Maximus Poems* 179). Modern world is corrupt and even Dogtown is not an exemption. Thus the poem gathers motifs which are carried on to the rest of the poems. The previous poem, “All My Life I’ve Heard About Many”, is a chronology and here it is further exemplified with the whole history set in an astrological context. The identity of the earth and the philosopher’s stone become more prominent. Maximus’ experience at this town corresponds to Melville’s experience at the Pacific: “Pacific was to Melville an experience of SPACE most Americans are not only entering on, 100 years after Melville. Of waters, as Russia of land, the Pacific gives the sense of immensity. She is HEART

SEA, twin and rival of the HEARTLAND [sic]" (Byrd 120). Maximus turns into earth's interior and discovers "the subterranean rock" that is the source of life. He finds flowers, flowers that are carbon beneath Dogtown: "flowers are / Carbon / Carbon is / Carboniferous" (*Maximus Poems* 179) and they belong to the Pennsylvanian age.

Maximus Poems are difficult that most of the action takes place at the intersection between 'topos' (the relationships between human / natural landscape) and 'tropos' (the deep inhering forms). Maximus describes his stand in the "The Twist".

I run my trains

on a monorail, I am seized

- not so many nights ago -

by the sigh of the river

exactly there at the Bridge (*Maximus Poems* 89)

He continues:

the whole of it

coming,

to this pin-point

to turn

in this day's sun
 in this veracity
 there, the waters of several of them the roads

here, a blackberry blossom (*Maximus Poems* 89-90)

This twist is enacted in *Maximus Poems IV, V, VI*. “Maximus is simultaneously turning inward and confronting the outward thrust of the Diorite Stone, simultaneously decomposing, along with Merry, and reforming as the representative of the new age” (Byrd 122).

In the second volume, Maximus renders an exaggerated version of Gloucester. It is an exercise in magnification of myths. For Olson, myths are large pictures or enlargements of original copies. In “The Special View of History”, he says: “A reenactment, as Malinowski learned from the Trobriands, does enlarge in that it celebrates what men have selected from what their ancestors did which seemed to them useful” (57). Maximus draws the attention of the readers to the stony wastes of Dogtown. The figures of horror appear to be handsome to him. “Christ o Christ pick the seeds / out of yr teeth – how handsome / the dead dog lies! (horror X” (*Maximus Poems*

179). Maximus being aware of the real facts, says ‘horror X’. The inhabitants of Dogtown’s moraine constitute mythical figures like Hittite, Norse, Algonquin etc. The following lines set the pattern for this mode:

WATERED ROCK

of pasture meadow orchard road where Merry
 died in pieces tossed by the bull he raised himself to fight
 in front of people, to show off his

Handsome Sailor ism (*Maximus Poems* 172)

This story has a mythical backing with specific reference to Hesiod, Heraclitus and Erich Neumann. Merry receives an ‘enlarged’ treatment and thus Maximus confers him a mythical status:

And down

the ice holds
 Dog town, scattered
 boulders little bull
 who killed
 Merry

who sought to manifest
 his soul, the star
 manifest their souls (*Maximus Poems* 173)

Olson's 'methodology of magnification' is a cultural imperative and not a mere literary trope. Maximus' intention to present the real facts in a way that is more than himself is his genuine effort to restore the potential size of men that the "Greek mind has reduced and limited". He is free of all sorts of limitations when he announces, "There is no strict personal order / for my inheritance" (*Maximus Poems* 184) and declares "No Greek will be able / to discriminate my body" (*Maximus Poems* 184-85). Maximus' enterprise is quite ambiguous, it is a ceasing of all wars that the Greeks waged, and that which continues till date against the realization of man's original potentialities. It is his mission to go on with "the precessions of his own" so that he could articulate himself in a louder tone.

This is not the first instance that Olson presents such ideas. Much before *Maximus IV, V, VI*, Olson discussed them splendidly in "The Gate and the Center": "We are only just beginning to gauge the backward of literature, breaking through the notion that Greece began it, to the writings farther back" (*Human Universe* 20). He further admits that human beings have no measure of their capabilities and they keep away from all "apparent magnifications"

that myths and epics include. Maximus functions as an ultimate epic and he is related to all the heroes of the entire *Maximus* sequence. Achieving such magnification is the celebration of man and a human universe, not as man is considered to be, but as he can be and once had been. In this context, the mythical gods that Maximus includes among the archetypal figures are no more superior to man, but a representation of the naïve human kind. Myth acts as a catalyst on the process of magnification, but has “long ago lost the POINT & PURPOSE of what we call – and thus kill – the act of myth” (*Human Universe* 21).

Another peculiar nature of Olson’s poems is his adherence to ‘fishing’ and related topics. In each book of the second volume of *Maximus Poems*, there is a poem associated with the fishing areas of the coast of Maine. These poems require individual attention since they appear to be disconnected from the environment that they occur. Geographically speaking, fishing forms an inseparable entity of Gloucester as a city, its major concern which haunts it throughout, and so pervasive is its influence. Maximus speaks of “NW shifting man” in “Letter, May 2” and here he traces out the persistent forms of historical evidences traced out by the routes of migration:

... possibly old Venetian

who came out of their marshes likewise
 to change the commerce of NW shifting
 man - it ends, as Stefansson couldn't
 stomach the dead end of his own prop-
 position, in the ice (*Maximus Poems* 151)

The reference here is to the Vilhjalmar Stefansson, the Arctic explorer presented as a modern Pythius in Maximus. Pythius is modern as he possesses extreme power in the North that is the “unformed sludge of the cosmos” for him. The poems are noted for the presentation of the north western shift of man and the impending threats aimed at those who testify against it.

The central concern of the fifth book of Maximus is the cultural center's mobility towards the West and it has seeming parallels with the second book. In occasional allusions, some of the poems in the second volume reveal the connections back to Tyre and the Sumerian coherence which lies behind it. There is a reference to Columbus in “The Song and Dance of” as the connecting link between the Mediterranean and the New World. “Letter, May 2, 1959” is also noteworthy that Maximus finds the people of Gloucester as the barbaric “Peoples of the Sea” who conquered the east Mediterranean between 1225 and 1175 BC, by destroying the Hittite Empire, Tyre and Phoenician power. Maximus V unfolds by realizing this story that is yet to be

revealed. It also covers the period of “Maximus’ gestation” through these events. The poems present in detail the migration of Indo-European culture to Gloucester and it is Maximus’ prenatal experience together with the Phoenicians, the builders of cromlechs, menhirs, the Algonquins, Pytheas and Pausanias, that turns out to be agents to this genetic constitution. Maximus approaches time in an intensive manner and whatever has already happened still recurs. Even if an event, a place or a person is forgotten or neglected, the evidence of primordial reality is present everywhere in “Maximus V”. “The whole world rises vertically from the blank whiteness of the page, ‘the calm grey waters’, the forgotten recesses of the organism” (Byrd 138).

Maximus VI begins with the vision of a city: “The earth with a city in her hair / entangled of trees”. The city is an extension of earth and not an intrusion upon it. It is not the casual Gloucester that Olson happened to live. It is a visionary city even though it has some resemblances to the literal city of Gloucester and this concept shapes the aesthetic part of the poem. Here Olson follows the same strategy like that of Homer. It is quite natural with him that he understands himself or interprets himself after the fact. Homer confronts with a cultural dissolution after the Trojan War and Olson was enormously pleased once he identified his problem almost the same like that of Homer’s. Olson was influenced by Eric Havelock’s book *Preface to Plato* where he

analyses the problems of migrating Greeks who left the mainland.

But the tradition, the continuity of law, custom and usage must be maintained, or the scattered groups would disintegrate and their common tongue be lost. The essential vehicle of continuity was supplied by a fresh and elaborate development of the oral style, whereby a whole way of life, and not simply the deeds of heroes, was to be held together and so rendered transmissible between the generations. (119)

The people found it their responsibility to maintain their heritage and cultural identity. Maximus' Gloucester discusses about an immediate present that retains all the privileges that the present had lost and its mission was educational.

The sixth book has a slow beginning. Page 292 has only one line, "Barbara Ellis, ramp" followed by page 293 with just three lines – "the diadem of the Dog / which is morning / rattles again" in the next page. Maximus is trapped within the limits of a created world and he needs to find a cosmos. The Tyrian hero begins to merge with Tyre, the Norse god of battle who lost his hand in a bargain. Maximus is maimed in his effort to bring forth a cosmic shape. "*Veda upanishad edda than*" (*Maximus Poems* 298) – the first three words form three bodies of sacred learning: the Vedas, from the Sanskrit

for “knowledge”, and the words in which knowledge embodies, are Upanishads, the oldest texts of Hindu religion. “Eddas” are the primary sources for our knowledge of Old Norse mythology. The word “than” anticipates a comparison, but there is not any comparison as such and it means their incomparable superiority to each and everything.

Olson is indebted to Hesiod’s *Theogony* for the title “Gravelly Hill”. The poem, in its literal context, introduces the story of Typhoo’s battle with Zeus. For Maximus, this event marks the loss of the intimate relationship between the cosmic principles and earthly adherence to such principles. In “Letter, May 2, 1959”, Maximus identifies that the earth has been made strange, but after his careful mapping, Maximus rediscovers its coherence. The Earth is merely “a plot of a few acres”. “Gravelly Hill” appears as an insignificant location or an extended figure of speech to Maximus due to his extreme proximity with it. It is the cosmos that Maximus defines and he merges with the landscape that is the motive force behind his biological processes and poetic intuitions.

Maximus is an ideologist when he says:

It is not bad
to be pissed off

where there is any
 condition imposed, by whomever, no matter how close
 (*Maximus Poems* 330-31)

He is interested in a world that is strictly private. It is difficult to brand him as the leading spirit of Gloucester. His world borders two other conditions and not intertwined with the “rigidity of ego-privacy”. It lies between the underworld on one side and the city on the other.

It is Hell’s mouth

where Dogtown ends

(on the lower

of the two woods.

I am the beginning

on this side

nearest the town

and it - this paved hole in the earth

is the end (boundary

Disappear. (*Maximus Poems* 331)

Gloucester is totally destroyed and now it is ‘no place’. Maximus becomes the hero of the city by virtue of the world he has inherited.

Maximus Poems, Vol. III presents innumerable textual problems. They were edited by Charles Boer and George Butterick by Olson's request. Some of these poems were published before Olson's death in 1970. This volume provides a conclusion to the *Maximus* in the general sense and the readers feel that it is the end. The process of the poem and the process of life are inseparable in such a way that it is improper to go for another ending. "To look, to listen and to write" were the imperatives that Olson stood for and his whole life was a declaration of such ideas. By virtue of his knowledge of "eye and ear", Olson had identified that "men were oblivious to their possibilities". Olson, during the time of his illness said to one of his friends that he needed at least a decade's time to complete his book. The poems are different that they progress with their "ever-expanding exploration" (Byrd 166) of complexities.

Volume III develops concerns specific to the first and fourth books. The mission of *Maximus* here is to "write a Republic / in gloom on Watch-House Point" (*Maximus Poems* 377). *Maximus* is rooted in the persistent belief that a poet is man of power. The focus of Volume I is political faith – the faith in the political power of the poem, whereas the rest of the poems is an account of the gradual loss of this faith.

The poet depicted in Volume III is only a diminished figure of the poet presented in the earlier volumes. He is not the civic gadfly of the first volume,

or the lord of creation who mark off the boundaries of the cosmos of the second volume. There is an apparent transformation in Maximus' persona and he rather appears as a lonely pathetic figure haunting Gloucester often at night and he is under the constant watch of the police cruisers. The poem resembles Homers' and the poet's role as "democratic bard" vanishes totally. Maximus says:

I as bold, I had courage, the tide tonight
and the Fort swimming in summer wetness from a southerly
and turning southwest onshore wind around
10 knots, I am reminded
(even visiting Pineys wharf the whole town
gone to sleep) the nights I crossed
the Harbor etc ... (*Maximus Poems* 612)

The poet has great pity in Maximus' account of him dying:

as Homer did that last night on Smyrna's
edge hard on the road-side ruts from
having spent too long watching
& eating too little ... (*The Maximus Poems* 612)

Maximus is related to his material in a Homeric manner, not like that of the romantics. The Romantics sought to revive the conception of the poet as

prophet and seer possessed of a unique vision of reality and a unique insight into things temporal. Homer conceived these powers in an alien manner. The third volume is devoid of any sort of rhetoric or excitement. Maximus is “a ward / and precinct / man myself and hate universalisation”. He finds himself as a victim of “The Big False Humanism” (*The Maximus Poems* 379).

Like his predecessors, Olson also was obsessed with the idea of Beginning and in this context he identified Adam and the Edenic landscape as his source. His intention was to return to the source that has been lost in the past. Olson solved this puzzle in a radical way – that is American Literature finds its beginning in *Maximus Poems, Vol. III*. Olson should not be assessed in relation to Pound, Whitman or Melville; he retains his own unique identity. It is to be recognized that after Olson there is no need of going back to anything. We are still bound with history, but we no longer need to recover it; it is still there (Byrd 170). There is no point in the re-enactment of myths of lost innocence or to retrieve lost Eden. The Olson/Maximus is not a mere beginner; he has already ‘begun’. The light that Maximus has been waiting for, begins to shine

among the edges

of the pagoclase

Imbued

with the light
 the flower
 grows down
 the air
 of heaven. (*Maximus Poems* 385-86)

The presence of Olson as an inhabitant of the world that he has created is felt largely in the third volume. But Olson as Maximus is rarely associated directly or closely with the larger action of the poem. Once the tone changes, Maximus writes in gloom. The death of Betty is nowhere directly discussed, but it haunts all the poems. It is an occasion of grief and Maximus is quite vulnerable to it – something different to the poem. Maximus wears the veil of a historian and questions Mrs. Tarentino –

You have a long nose, meaning

 you stick it into every other person's
 business, do you not? And I couldn't
 say anything
 but that I
 Do (*Maximus Poems* 386)

Maximus has varied roles to perform. He is a tour guide who points places for

sight-seeing in Gloucester: “I told the woman / about the spring /on the other side of Freshwater” (*Maximus Poems* 382). Personal life in this material world is not easy, even though it is carried out in a dominion where “ecstatic insights and moments of beautiful, alert restfulness are possible” (Byrd 172).

“Astride / the Cabot / fault,” (*Maximus Poems* 404) re-envision the energy referred in Letter #41. “Nobody else will grant / like he said the volcano anyone of us does / sit upon, in quite such a tangible fashion” (*Maximus Poems* 171). It is retold as the literal movement of the earth’s ever changing crusts and it is Maximus who holds together both the halves of the earth. He is both the victim to such power and also a witness to it. He is maimed in his task of bringing the earth to coherence like “the Diorite Stone / to be lopped off the left shoulder” (*Maximus Poems* 404). It is possible for Maximus to become an image of the perfections of earth that can coincide with his own.

The ideas of “Some Good News”, “Stiffening, in the Master Founders’ Wills” and “Captain Christopher Levett (of York)” (*Maximus Poems* 120-37) reverberate in “7 years & you cld carry cinders in yr hand”. John Winthrop, the leader of the Puritan emigration of 1630 and the Governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, who is dismissed in the first volume as a mark of Cartesian firmness is restored and he appears as a representative of the

maimed hero.

he was broken

on the wheel his measure

was broken Winthrop's

vision was broken he was broken the country

had walked away. (*Maximus Poems* 408)

John Winthrop's restoration begins with Book II itself: "and as those words go down they set free, he / is non-referential in that moment this John Winthrop." (*Maximus Poems* 305) Winthrop attains a different identity here – he is John Wanax, the High King of Mycenaeans who is bearer of archaic vision. He is quite audible, for his resurgence in the figure of Maximus permits him a language that was lacking till that time. The strength of Wanax specifically depends on the image of polis as how it is related to the earth as it evolves in his speech.

"Maximus VII" is a ritual celebration of Maximus' success. The concept of love attains a geographical dimension:

To have the bright body of sex and love
 back in the world - the moon
 has her legs up,
 in the sky of Egypt. (*Maximus Poems* 419)

Maximus's religion has more of humanistic adherence – “I believe in religion not magic or science I believe in society / as religious both man and society as religious” (*Maximus Poems* 422). The ‘Nut’ and ‘Geb’ referred in ‘MAX PROMPT’ reappears in Gloucester as a mere ‘view’: “The sky, / of Gloucester / perfect bowl / of land and sea” (*Maximus Poems* 424). As he has felt in Vol. II, Dogtown appears as a city of granite under the sky to Maximus: “the diorite / with the granite / of the poles” (*Maximus Poems* 176), and again, “Dogtown under / City Dogtown granite” (*Maximus Poems* 58). Maximus reveals his identity at this juncture: “I am the / Child, Jupiter / furens-Ocean’s / Child; I am / Round Rock Shoal (*Maximus Poems* 58). Maximus comes into a sense of being that he becomes the embodiment of the City as political and sacred, a situation were one is saved and made a citizen by the same rite.

“Maximus III” deals with the great migration. He encounters it as the determining factor. “The hero-father can know only the earth, the body which is, for him, the center of earth, and the City, which is an organization of men

and women, each, likewise, centers to themselves” (Byrd 179). In “Cole’s Island”, Maximus confronts death: “I met Death-he was a sportsman-on Cole’s / Island. He was a property-owner. Or may be / Cole’s Island, was his. I don’t know” (*Maximus Poems* 436). The meeting happens in a very casual manner: “He didn’t bother me, or say anything. Which is / Not surprising, a person might not, in the circumstances; / Or at most a nod or something” (*Maximus Poems* 436). Maximus is a little bit uncomfortable, but still retains his presence of mind:

... My impression is we did -
 That is, Death and myself, regard each other. And
 there wasn’t anything more than that, only that he had appeared,
 And we did recognize each other or I did, him, and he seemed
 To have no question
 About my presence there, even though I was uncomfortable.

(*Maximus Poems* 436)

The blurb on “The Maximus Poems: Volume Three” insists that the Republic is successfully constructed, the Golden Flower attained and Gloucester stands revealed as a “perfect monsterness forever”. Byrd could not believe on this as such, when he says, “The triumph of the *Maximus* is very real and important, but to exaggerate serves only to confuse and possibly to obscure what Olson

does genuinely manage to accomplish” (192). “The Maximus Poems: Volume III” opens with a striking passage:

This living hand, now warm and capable
Of earnest grasping, would, if it were cold
And in the icy silence of the tomb,
So haunt thy days and chill thy dreaming nights

(Maximus Poems 177)

There still remain some questions whether Olson wrote these lines as part of *Maximus*, but they are quite appropriate. The mythical figure of Maximus of Tyre has lost one hand, but the other one is still capable of undertaking tasks. It reaches out like the eye. Often, hands and eyes mean the same in Maximus – “a man’s hands / as his eyes / can get sores” (*Maximus Poems* 404). In “Human Universe”, Olson talks about the need to grasp our knowledge so that experience is returned to two universes, “that of himself as organism and that of his environment, the earth and planets” (*Human Universe* 4). *The Maximus* has some suggestions to be located in a place where all knowledge is totally local, graspable and relevant to the inner workings of the self.

Towards the end, *The Maximus* seems more fragmentary, and the ideas are held loose. They lack in harmony and images and insights are juxtaposed in somewhat contradictory way. He speaks about an unusual phenomenon,

“The sea’s boiling, the land’s boiling, all the winds of the earth are turning the snow into sand” (*Maximus Poems* 586) etc. and immediately after that, he discusses of “the salmon of wisdom when, / ecstatically, one / leaps into the Beloved’s / love” (*Maximus Poems* 581). The whole of the *Maximus* focuses on what Olson has discussed in ‘*Maximus to Gloucester, LETTER 2*’ – “he was right: people / don’t change. They only stand more revealed. I likewise” (*Maximus Poems* 9). There isn’t any apparent change in all the three volumes of the *Maximus Poems*. Olson had in mind, three abstract terms – “space, fact and stance”. The final lines of the poem

the Blow is creation
 & the Twist the Nasturtium
 is any one of ourselves
 And the Place of it All?
 Mother Earth Alone (*Maximus Poems* 631)

is his attempt to explain these terms. Olson talked about his sense of place in 1968: “in the same sense I think names are almost always proper, of the earth, and that literal globe or orb is our lamp or clue to the whole of creation, and that only by obedience to it does one have a chance at heaven” (*Poetry and Truth* 34). The last line – “my wife my car my color and myself” was identified as the last poem of the *Maximus* series. The poem can be a

catalogue of losses or concerns that occupied the poet's mind during his last days (Butterick, *A Guide* 750).

The crucial factors like the mapping of the landscape, figure and an enduring pattern play a major role in Maximus's success in finding a coherent order, despite his initial failure to make Gloucester itself to fit together. In *The Maximus Poems*, the honesty with which the poet portrays both illumination and finally, a faltering sense of self-worth touches with acute relevance on contemporary struggles with subjectivity. Olson has created his projective field out of his direct and immediate response to the occurrences and happenings of the outside world. A cautious reader can understand and derive pleasure out of Olson's *The Maximus Poems* if they adhere to an approach that contradicts all prevailing reading strategies, that is the reader should be preoccupied with the notions of Olson's 'open field theory' and 'projective techniques'. A serious reading of the poems will render the readers an exhilarating experience with the work alternately plunging into incoherence and abruptly ascending to the frivolous heights. Still, their fragmented texturing and lack of adequate reference limits their appeal. They appear to be clear, easy and self-revelatory once their didactic thrust and celestial rhetoric are under control. *The Maximus Poems* stand as a landmark in the history of American Literature with their wide scope along with the great risk

undertaken by the poet in composing such elaborate volumes of poems.