

Charles Olson and the Nature of Destructive Humanism By Craig Stormont

Charles Olson's anti-traditional poetic stance, as it is expressed in the seminal essay "Projective Verse," written in 1950, profoundly influenced poetry of the mid-twentieth century and beyond, yet his greater legacy may be the respect for the natural world and its processes that he so vehemently fought to foster and preserve. In his epic *The Maximus Poems*, Olson catalogues, chronologically, how values disintegrated in Gloucester, Massachusetts, which is intended to serve as a microcosm of the world. Essentially, Olson's *Maximus* project strives to delineate how human experience became what it is for the vast majority of Americans, regardless of whether or not they acknowledge it as such: a profit and property-centered drudgery that unnecessarily sacrifices the well being of our natural environment. Olson's environmental concerns are central to his anti-traditional position, in both poetics and politics, and they may well have been the motivating factor in his adoption of that stance. Although Olson's focus often extends beyond the ecological, reckless disregard for the natural environment epitomizes the dissolution of values that he finds so detrimental.

Olson defines his agenda in his 1951 essay "Human Universe" as "a restoration of the human house" (1966, 57) and his intended goal is to familiarize his readers with truths integral to human experience that have been long forgotten. He recognizes that those truths the human species has become divorced from beg rediscovery. The actual relationship between the earth and the human species has been buried under layers of a profit-centered, private property-based culture, and Olson, as an archaeologist, digs for truths in hope of inspiring beneficial change. As he states in the conclusion of "The Kingfishers":

I pose you your question:
shall you uncover honey / where maggots are?
I hunt among stones (1966, 173)

For Olson, failure to respect the natural environment is emblematic of our divorce from truth and real value. Ecocriticism is an important aspect of his work that has not been given adequate attention, and an astute reader of Olson will recognize that environmental concerns are paramount in terms of his poetics and politics.

Robert von Hallberg, in *Charles Olson: The Scholar's Art* (1978), suggests that Olson's work is not based on "conservationist concerns," and he claims that Olson considers himself someone

who found other live beings more interesting than
nature, that is, what city folk call nature,
trees, fields, or
clucking hens (122-23)

These lines, from Olson's poem "Adamo Me...", are taken out of context by von Hallberg, and their true meaning is revealed when the lines that precede them in the original text are considered:

Man built daringly
by water, there stayed
because there were always those (Olson 1987, 185)

When read as intended by Olson, the above lines are of prime importance. Olson is stating that the onset of man's divorce from nature can be tracked to the formation of ancient cities, and he may be tracing the beginning of humanism to that occasion. Contrary to von Hallberg's opinion, Olson is actually rejecting the simple view of nature as "trees, fields, or clucking hens." Olson dismisses that interpretation of nature, recognizing that its inception coincided with the appearance of cities, or what has been deemed progress by most. Olson interprets nature as a process, and he recognizes that humanity's unfounded privileging of itself has had an adverse effect on the natural mechanisms we rely on. Olson consistently attacks commercialism in *The Maximus Poems* because it hides truth for the sake of profit. He advocates the real.

Poems written prior to the *Maximus* sequence offer insight into Olson's objectives, and an examination of "The Praises" clearly suggests an interest in linking ecological concerns with his criticism of commercialism:

Avert, avert, avoid
pollution, to be clean
in a dirty time

O Wheel, aid us
to get the gurry off

You would have a sign. Look:
to fly? a fly can do that;
to try the moon? a moth
as well; to walk on water? a straw
precedes you

O Wheel! Draw
that truth
to my house

[...] on all detractors, piss, o advertised earth! (1987, 99)

In light of these lines by Olson, the suggestion that he has no conservationist agenda seems preposterous. His concern for pollution is clear, as is his disdain for commercialism. Olson's mention of "a sign" is intended to signify a billboard. The proliferation of advertisements depicts our divorce from nature, which he characterizes as a depreciation of value in human experience. The "walk on water" comment is intended to humble those responsible for cheapening human experience at an environmental cost, and it may also be intended as a reference to our Puritanical roots and the role Americans adopted for themselves as God's chosen nation, which is laughable as far as Olson is

concerned. In all of his writings, Olson is highly critical of the elevated position mankind allots itself in relation to other natural objects, or what he defines as humanism, yet, in “The Praises,” Olson links what he terms “the lyrical interference of the individual as ego” (1966, 24) with environmental destruction.

Olson’s critique of the unfounded elevation of the ego, or our opinion of ourselves in relation to other objects, resulted in his formulation of “objectism.” Objectism is Olson’s approach to experience, in which he suggests that in the hierarchy of the universe, man is no more important than a tree or a stone:

Objectism is the getting rid of the lyrical interference of the individual as ego, of the ‘subject’ and his soul, that

peculiar presumption by which western man has interposed himself between what he is as a creature of nature (with

certain instructions to carry out) and those other creations of nature which we may, with no derogation, call objects.

For a man himself is an object, whatever he may take to be his advantages, the more likely to recognize himself as

such the greater his advantages, particularly at that moment that he achieves an humilitas sufficient to make him of

use. (24-25)

Olson introduced his anti-humanistic stance in the essay “Projective Verse,” which, on the surface, appears to be an argument against traditional poetic forms, yet it functions metaphorically as criticism of inherited culture and tradition as well. Christopher Manes states in reaction to humanism:

We must contemplate not only learning a new ethics, but a new language free from the directionalities of

humanism, a language that incorporates a decentered, postmodern, post-humanist perspective. In short, we require

the language of ecological humility that deep ecology, however gropingly, is attempting to express. (17)

Olson believed that humanism, along with its resulting traditions, revealed a reckless disregard for the environment to such an extent that the poet was compelled to create the new form of language that Manes refers to—projective verse—in order to counter it. In light of the assertions made by Manes, the claim that Olson’s work is firmly grounded in deep ecology is beyond refute.

Following the composition of “Projective Verse,” Olson visited the Yucatan in order to study Mayan hieroglyphs, and he would use what he observed in that locale as further justification in his argument against humanism. It’s important to note that Olson was developing these ideas at the height of the Cold War period in which a sensibility of incertitude, or anxiety, was pervasive. The possibility of nuclear warfare was real; many feared that the earth would be annihilated at any moment. As Donald Worster notes of the Cold War period, “Humans were now playing God” (1994, 343), and Olson’s anti-humanism is a reaction to that historical context. His work involves searching for an

alternative, and as far as the environment is concerned, Olson believes that the future of the planet is at stake.

Olson was inspired to write "Human Universe," in 1951, by his observation of the descendants of the Maya, whose view of themselves, as he notes, is not "exaggerated." Olson illustrates this point by explaining how they would never "pull-away" whenever he was accidentally "rocked by the roads against any of them" while sharing a bus ride (1966, 57). They convinced him that "Value is perishing from the earth because no one cares to fight down to it beneath the glowing surfaces so attractive to all" (59):

. . . they do one thing no modern knows the secret of, however he is still by nature possessed of it: they wear
their flesh with that difference which the understanding that it is common leads to.
When I am rocked by
the roads against any of them—kids, women, men—their flesh is most gentle, is granted, touch is in no
sense anything but the natural law of flesh, there is none of that pull-away which, in the States, causes a man
for all the years of his life the deepest sort of questioning of the rights of himself to the wild reachings of his own
organism. (57)

As his friend and associate poet Robert Creeley observes, the Maya served as a living, breathing alternative to the ego-centered approach dictated by Western humanism:

The alternative to a generalizing humanism was locked, quite literally, in the people immediately around him, and
the conception, that there had been and could be a civilization anterior to that which he had come from, was no
longer conjecture, it was fact. (1989, 102)

For Olson, the Maya serve as evidence of the validity of objectism because they display no lyrical interference of the ego. He never directly states that the ancient Maya were more ecologically centered than his contemporaries in the United States, but he does allude to that idea by suggesting that they utilized energy more efficiently:

If man chooses to treat external reality any differently than as part of his own process, in other words as anything
other than relevant to his own inner life, then he will [...] use it otherwise. He will use it just exactly as he has used
it now for too long, for arbitrary and willful purposes which, in their effects, not only change the face of nature
but actually arrest and divert her force until man turns it even against herself [...] But what little willful modern
man will not recognize is, that when he turns it against her he turns it against himself. .
. . (1966, 62)

Although “Human Universe” is primarily concerned with discrediting humanism, it also serves as a pro-ecological argument. Olson’s belief that the future of nature rests in alternatives to humanism is clear. He comments that the descendants of the Maya are failures in the modern age because “They have lost the capacity of their predecessors to do anything in common” (57). Their lost communal society has left them to struggle individually. *The Maximus Poems* should be read, at least in part, as a critique of Western civilization for the same reason.

The Maximus Poems began as a series of letters to fellow Gloucester poet Vincent Ferrini, and in the first poem in the sequence, “I, Maximus of Gloucester, to You,” Olson is highly critical of what he perceives to be the effects of humanism in Gloucester. He emphasizes counter action in the poem: “that which / you can do!” (8). For Olson, direct perception is an indicator of truth, but he is infuriated by the falsity of commercialism that alienates the “polis” of Gloucester from the natural world. He states that “cheapness shit is / upon the world” (138), and his goal is to motivate his fellow citizens to “kill kill kill kill kill / those / who advertise you / out” (8).

Olson’s project involves a rethinking of history. Olson admired the ancient civilization of Sumer, which he valued for the “coherence” that marks the joining of “knowledge to culture,” because it had “ONE CENTER, Sumer” (1997, 170). He admired the Sumerian economy due to the fact that it was able to thrive as a result of that centralization. Sumerian culture exemplified coherence, but as Joseph Riddel notes, a shift occurred: “The historical civilizations which followed in Greece and Rome tried to stabilize this coherence, by locating the center in an idea of man, in humanism” (1979, 355). As far as Olson is concerned, the distasteful commercialism he observes in Gloucester indicates a divorce from the natural environment, as well as an economy that fails to prioritize conservation of it. He attributes the situation in Gloucester to that wrong turn. There is no centralization in Gloucester; only a small contingent in power motivated by profit.

Olson supports his indictment of humanism by closely analyzing the history of Gloucester, in its entirety, from a Whiteheadian point of view. Ralph Maud notes that Olson referred to Alfred North Whitehead as “my great master and the companion of my poems” (130), and a true appreciation of Olson’s undertaking in *The Maximus Poems* cannot be acquired without an understanding of Whitehead’s cosmology as it is outlined in *Process and Reality*. Much of Olson’s work as a poet and essayist is an application of Whitehead’s speculative response to relativity theory. The central theme of *Process and Reality* is that our world, or nature itself, is a living organism characterized by interconnectedness. In Whitehead’s “Categoreal Scheme,” our reality is defined as many “actual entities,” or “chunks in the life of nature”:

“Actual entities”—also termed “actual occasions”—are the final real things of which the world is made up. There is

no going behind actual entities to find anything more real. They differ among themselves: God is an actual entity,

and so is the most trivial puff of existence in far-off empty space. But, though there are gradations of importance,

and diversities of function, yet in the principles which actuality exemplifies all are on the same level. The final

facts are, all alike, actual entities; and these actual entities are drops of experience, complex and interdependent.
(1941, 27-28)

The interdependency that Whitehead mentions is integral to an understanding of his explanation of process. Actual entities – our reality – are constantly involved in a process of “becoming,” and how and what they become depends on the way they act on one another: “‘How’ an actual entity ‘becomes’ constitutes ‘what’ that actual entity ‘is’ [...] Its ‘being’ is constituted by its ‘becoming.’ This is the ‘principle of process’” (34-35). Whitehead’s scheme dismisses the humanist’s placing of him or herself at the center, and it suggests that Olson’s doctrine of objectism is valid. As William Rueckert notes:

Properly understood, poems can be studied as models for energy flow, community building, and ecosystems. The

first Law of Ecology – that everything is connected to everything else – applies to poems as well as to nature.

The concept of the interactive field was operative in nature, ecology, and poetry long before it ever appeared in criticism. (1996, 110)

When Rueckert’s comments are considered, Olson’s poetic innovations concerning “COMPOSITION BY FIELD” and his idea of the poem as “an energy discharge” suggest that he should be regarded as a significant forerunner to current ecocritical efforts (1966, 16). The creative adaptation of Whitehead’s ideas in addition to his own interdisciplinary approach—incorporating poetry, ecology, history, philosophy, geology, mythology, archaeology, and psychology—attest to the groundbreaking nature of Olson’s work. An understanding of the underlying ecological concerns that motivated him is necessary for a thorough comprehension of his *Maximus* project.

Whitehead’s ideas serve as evidence for Olson in his own rejection of humanism, but they play a far greater role in his epic *Maximus Poems* than many critics appear to realize. Whitehead regards actual entities as microcosms of a greater reality; similarly, in his elaborations on Gloucester in *The Maximus Poems*, Olson is, in effect, commenting on the world at large. According to George F. Butterick, Olson’s editor, the poet read *Process and Reality* in 1955 (1980, 358), but his interest in the idea of singular acts defining the aggregate well preceded that date. The epigraph to *The Maximus Poems*—“All my life I’ve heard one makes many”—suggests that Olson’s interest in that motif was established long before he became familiar with Whitehead’s work. It can be traced to his association with F.O. Matthiessen as a Doctoral Fellow at Harvard. Matthiessen, in his landmark work titled *American Renaissance*, delineates Walt Whitman’s “conception of the One and the many” (Matthiessen 1941, 591), accounting for Olson’s reference to Matthiessen, his friend and former professor, as “the cause, the cause,” in the poem “Diaries of Death” (Olson 1987, 144). In *The Maximus Poems*, Olson analyzes past events related to Gloucester in order to understand how it became what it is in the present. His epic is a study of what Whitehead termed “concrecence” in Gloucester: “‘Concrecence’ is the name for the process in which the universe of many things acquires an individual unity” (Whitehead 1941, 321). Olson investigates both historical

and current events in Gloucester, or actual occasions, in order to decipher how and why the Western course has proven to be destructive in its treatment of nature.

Olson's research on Cape Ann found him literally immersed in Gloucester's past and present, and that being the case, he was well aware of how Dogtown functions as a metaphor. Olson's Dogtown poems are the literal and figurative center of his *Maximus* project. Geographically, Dogtown is the heart of Cape Ann, but borders are largely undefined in many areas. Several maps of the area are available in Gloucester, yet each is quite different. In Olson's mind, Dogtown represents unbridled energy without confines, in contrast to postmodern American experience, in which "All individual energy and ingenuity is bought off—at a suggestion box or the cinema. Passivity conquers all. Even war and peace die (to be displaced by world government?) and man reverts to only two of his components, inertia and gas" (1966, 58-59). Following his illustration in *The Maximus Poems I* of what he deems detrimental to his contemporary Gloucester, his attention centers in the *Maximus Poems IV, V, VI* on Dogtown, which serves to represent the antithesis of what he interprets as the limiting borders permitted through a reverence to humanism. Olson illustrates his displeasure at such limitations in an untitled *Maximus* poem that focuses attention on "Gravelly Hill," officially known as Gravel Hill, or one of the roads from which the Dogtown area is accessible:

It is not bad
to be pissed off

where there is *any*
condition imposed, by whomever, no matter how close

any
quid pro quo
get out. Gravelly Hill says
leave me be, I am contingent, the end of the world
is the borders
of my being

I can even tell you
where I run out; and you can even find
out. (330-31)

Dogtown functions as a symbol of the possibilities existing beyond the limiting Western approach, and the mention of "quid pro quo" is a clear reference to the political influences that contribute to those limitations. Olson wants his readers to "find out" for themselves instead of merely accepting whatever traditional dictums they have been taught to accept as truth, which he refers to as "eatable shit" in "Mayan Letter 13" (1966, 113). By diverting his reader's attention to Dogtown, Olson's intention is not only to illuminate how past and present literally collide there but also to raise awareness that truths can be arrived at through analyzing the archaic.

Olson steers his reader to Dogtown—the primary metaphor in *The Maximus Poems*—for a variety of reasons, yet the fact that the area is the site of a terminal moraine has not

received adequate attention in critiques of the Dogtown poems. Olson's poetic intention, as outlined in "Projective Verse," is for the poem to act as an energy transfer, and that being the case, the metaphorical significance of a location strewn with remnants of the last glacial meltdown cannot be overstated. The boulders—some of which are huge—provide tangible evidence of nature's power and serve as the type of natural energy Olson hoped to inspire through his poems. It is also significant that Olson grounds his poetry in local geography. Olson knows Dogtown intimately, and he was known to have frequented the area often. Dogtown also serves as an historically significant location since the widows and children of early Gloucester fishermen lost at sea, along with widows of the Revolutionary War, were banished to live marginal lives there, guarded by their dogs, resulting in the name Dogtown. Henry David Thoreau sauntered through Dogtown in September, 1858, by which time it had become a ghost town, and his visit is noted in his journal:

At Annisquam we found ourselves in the midst of boulders scattered over bare hills and fields [...] they abound

chiefly in the central and northwesterly part of the Cape. This was the most peculiar scenery of the Cape [...]

We could see no house but hills strewn with boulders, as if they had rained down, on every side, we sitting under a shelving one. (1984, 179)

The natural oddity of Dogtown was clear to Thoreau, as it was to Olson, yet a link between the earlier naturalist and Olson's anti-humanistic, ecocritical position has been overlooked. A quote from *Walden* reveals that the suggestion of a connection is valid. As Thoreau states:

The earth is not a mere fragment of dead history...but living poetry like the leaves of a tree, which precede

flowers and fruit, - not a fossil earth, but a living earth; compared with whose great central life all animal and

vegetable life is merely parasitic. (2004, 347)

Like Thoreau, Olson recognizes that when compared to the immense power of nature, any notion of the centrality of the human species is vehemently disproven.

The appropriation of Dogtown in the *Maximus Poems IV, V, VI* permits Olson to present it as a metaphorical binary to the political and financial systems that he deems artificial and harmful where nature is concerned. In "MAXIMUS, FROM DOGTOWN – I," Olson refers to the location as a "park of eternal events" (1983, 175) since the past and present literally collide there. He bolsters his anti-humanistic posture in this particular poem through reference to James Merry (d. 1892), a fisherman who was killed when his drunken hubris led him to fight a bull he had raised from a calf in Dogtown. Merry is intended by Olson to be interpreted as a metaphor for the entirety of humanity in its treatment of and relation to nature; he epitomizes what Olson terms "THE BIG FALSE

HUMANISM” (1983, 379). When the following lines included in “MAXIMUS FROM DOGTOWN – I” are considered, the correlation is clarified:

the rocks the glacier tossed
toys
Merry played by
with his bull (175)

In comparison to the power exhibited by nature, the human species is merely another element involved in her processes. Natural disasters – hurricanes, earthquakes, mud slides, tsunamis - likely are related to the growing problem of global warming, thereby underscoring the importance of Olson’s valid concerns for environmental matters. In the *Outtakes from the NET Film Series* (1966), in which Olson is interviewed, the poet expresses concern that the human course of action will involve “de-naturing nature” by the twenty-first century, and his foresight in recognizing and prioritizing that problem warrants acknowledgment. His incorporation of the “Okeanos” creation myth, in “MAXIMUS, FROM DOGTOWN – I,” is intended to offer an alternative vision of humans’ relationship to nature that contrasts with the widely held Western religious beliefs concerning creation. It can also be interpreted as an attempt to motivate the formulation of new myths that inspire a renewed respect for the natural processes that do not rely on the presence of the human species. Okeanos, or Oceanus, was believed by the ancients to be “the great stream of water that encircled the world” (Zimmerman 1971, 178). Olson refers to it primarily for the purpose of illustrating the tremendous overall power of nature, yet it also serves as a legitimate type of the alternative myth he struggled to raise recognition of and sought to inspire.

Despite the historical and geological significance of Dogtown, scant information concerning the location is currently in print. When one ventures up “Gravelly Hill,” a sign reading “Dogtown Common” soon becomes visible. The thoroughfare eventually becomes a dirt road, and driving is prohibited beyond a certain point; visitors must walk or ride a mountain bike in past the entrance to a shooting range and a compost dump. Olson states in the *NET Outtakes* that the first field one comes to is the site of Merry’s bullfight. Michael McClure, in his Foreword to the initial publication of “MAXIMUS FROM DOGTOWN – I” (1961), discusses visiting that particular field in Dogtown with Olson in November 1959. He states: “Charles told me the story of the handsome stocky man – pointing to a rock & patch of ground – ‘Here’ he said ‘where the bull’s enclosure was.’” Where Olson uncovered this information is unknown, but considering the value he placed on Dogtown, as both a location and a metaphor in his epic, his knowledge on the subject can be accepted as reliable.

John J. Babson’s *History of the Town of Gloucester, Cape Ann* (1972), recognized as the primary source for information concerning the early history of the area, devotes only one page to Dogtown, discussing the number of houses and residents inhabiting the area in the eighteenth century. During that period, Babson states that forty dwellings provided

shelter for sixty residents who were mostly impoverished. He notes that the last resident, Abraham Wharf, in 1814, “sought relief from poverty, and the accumulated sorrows of more than threescore and ten years, by putting an end to his existence, under a rock, where he had crawled for that purpose” (450). Conspicuously, there is no mention of Dogtown as the site of a terminal moraine in Babson’s historical text, but that fact is emphasized in what is presently one of the most useful sources for information concerning Dogtown, Thomas Dresser’s booklet entitled *Dogtown: A Village Lost in Time* (1995). Mark J. Carlotto’s *Dogtown Guide* (2007) provides an abundance of information that will prove extremely helpful to any who may visit the area.

Fortunately, Dogtown is now permanently protected public land that cannot be built on or used for any commercial purposes. As Dresser notes, “The protection of the watershed has essentially been accomplished, due in large part to the efforts of local historian and author Peter Anastas” (25). Anastas, the former Chair of the Dogtown Advisory Committee, would more than likely be the first to admit that his concern for preserving Dogtown stems from his friendship and association with Olson while they both lived in Gloucester, and he is widely regarded as the foremost authority on matters related to Olson in Gloucester. Anastas, the author of *No Fortunes* (2005), *Broken Trip* (2004), *At the Cut* (2002), and *Glooskap’s Children* (1973), which focuses on the predicament of the impoverished Penobscot Indians of Maine, as well as other works, is one of the most reliable and knowledgeable sources alive today for information concerning Olson. Olson consistently expressed his concerns, ecological and otherwise, in letters to the editor of the *Gloucester Daily Times*, and Anastas has painstakingly collected and published them, along with his own invaluable insights, in *Charles Olson: Maximus to Gloucester* (1992). Anastas includes a letter dated January 11, 1968, that illustrates the high priority Olson placed on ecological concerns:

Is there no sense in the City that her beauty by nature and the support of man, is not to be slashed and gone forever
simply to accommodate business men, who are no matter how progressive and that virtue, also profit-makers
and so immediately or eventually greedy. And devouring. I BEG AGAIN for action.
(114)

Olson is not specifically referring to Dogtown in the letter; he is expressing concern for the Mansfield house, a structure built in 1832 that was eventually demolished to accommodate Gloucester’s urban renewal project, which the poet vociferously opposed. In conversation, Anastas frequently mentions that “the archaic” was of prime importance to Olson, which clarifies the poet’s staunch opposition to the city’s destruction of its past. For Olson, actual knowledge is derived from analyzing the archaic and tracing human experience through time. When all remnants of the past are obliterated, that cannot be accomplished.

In what can be deemed only an absurd turn of events, the current Gloucester mayor, Carolyn Kirk, is attempting to change the zoning laws concerning Fort Square, the section of Gloucester where Olson lived. She is an advocate for the construction of a Marriott hotel near the entrance to the neighborhood, which would, no doubt, eventually result in the demolition of Olson's former residence at 28 Fort Square. Fortunately, her efforts have met widespread resistance from Anastas and many other Gloucester residents who have been fighting to keep the integrity and historical character of the city's waterfront intact. Kirk's proposal is indicative – specifically - of the type of ignorance regarding the values Olson fought to instill and preserve. When the reaction to Kirk's proposal is considered, the suggestion that an individual CAN evoke change on a grassroots level is difficult to dispute.

Olson's ecological concerns have not been adequately focused on in many of the texts covering his work, but they are an important element of the nature/culture conflict that underlies much of his writing. Sherman Paul states that the poet's goal was to "recover those times and places when myth itself arose" in order "to begin again with the primary issue of human experience" (1978, 255-56). Paul's claim that Olson's interest lies in starting anew is plausible, but the suggestion that Olson views human experience as primary is highly debatable; it contradicts Olson's doctrine of objectism. Olson's central focus is on the binary opposition of nature and culture. The dismal condition of the entire planet, including that of its inhabitants, is the spur that motivates Olson. As Olson states in "Human Universe":

. . . the more I live the more I am tempted to think that the ultimate reason why man
departs from nature
and thus departs from his own chance is that he is part of a herd which wants to do
the very thing which
nature disallows—that energy can be lost. When I look at the filth and lumber which
man is led by,
I see man's greatest achievement in this childish accomplishment—that he damn well
can, and does,
destroy destroy destroy energy every day. (1966, 63)

Paul's commentary concerning the value Olson placed on tracing the origins of archaic myths is accurate. Olson concludes "Human Universe" with a translation of a Mayan hieroglyph concerning the Sun and Moon myth in order to inspire acknowledgment that approaches contrary to those largely abided by do exist. As with all of Olson's writing, the intended purpose of incorporating the myth is to inspire alternatives.

In *Prairy Erth* (1991), William Least-Heat Moon quotes his friend Venerable Tashmoo stating, “The real imposthume is dualistic thinking: splitting and separating things rather than seeing the web” (619). Olson certainly viewed the relationship between nature and culture in binary terms, but as a student of Whitehead and an ecological thinker, he possessed a clear comprehension of the interconnected aspect of our reality as well. His study of Mayan culture revealed that they did not place themselves in opposition to nature, as Western civilization has, and his ultimate goal was to inspire a sensibility similar to that of the Mayans here and now.

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