

FOREWORD TO *MAXIMUS TO GLOUCESTER*:

*The Letters and Poems of Charles Olson to the Editor
of the Gloucester Daily Times 1962-1969*

When in 1960 Harry Martin and I arranged a reading for Charles Olson at the house of John Hays Hammond, Jr. (later called "The Hammond Castle Museum"), and the event was announced, on homemade posters we distributed throughout Cape Ann, and in the local newspaper, as a "reading from the *Maximus* and other poems," Charles was not happy with this announcement. He would have preferred it be emphasized that what he was going to read would be *letters*, missives addressed to the citizens of his city, the *polis* of Gloucester, Massachusetts. That the work was so *addressed* was a particular of his attention.

Like the volumes of *Maximus Poems*, this volume of newspaper letters, unique throbs of anger and love, is witness of the scope of Olson's care, the range of his gaze. "Polis is eyes," he wrote, and in the man as in the work that act of attention bristled.

It was eyes I noticed and was noticed by when I first came on the man sitting behind the kitchen table at 28 Fort Square. You climbed the paint-cracked wooden stairs outside the 2nd-floor apartment and through the glass of the door you saw the kitchen table, crowded with books, dishes, coffee cups, saucers of spent cigarettes, newspapers and manuscripts. But from behind the kitchen table an enormous pair of eyes seized you, held you. The eyes welcoming while fully attentive. *Encompassing* eyes. Owl-like? Then came an awareness of size, the whole big man.

Later, in the course of frequently walking the streets of Gloucester with Charles, along the bank of the Annisquam River by the high school, paths of Dogtown, I became aware how thorough was the attention he gave to whatever object we stopped to look at. And to the words of our

talk: one of Charles's most common expressions was "I hear you" when the quality of your own articulated attention matched his and the sound was true. Always he listened intently to what you offered. And attention to his own thought, rephrasing it and explicating it so as better to be understood.

Like Whitman it seems to me, he took with grace whatever was presented to him and rolled it over in his consideration, dream constellations as well as the dreck of the streets. If one thought in terms of sacrament (and as a child Charles had absorbed an awareness of sacrament) it was a kind of sacrament of the "chance" presentation of existence that he met anew every day. Martin Buber, in an essay that I read when I first knew Charles, expressed what seemed to me a truth about Olson: "The man of sacramental existence is no magician...he exerts no power but performs a service, *the service*... What is important (in the sacramental sense)? The answer: 'Whatever a man happens to concern himself with.' And the momentary, when it is taken seriously in its momentary, unique contingency, proves to be that which cannot be anticipated or prepared for. The man of sacramental existence is aided by no acquired rules and rhythms, by no traditional methods, no special knowledge or aptitude: he must continually withstand the unforeseen and unforeseeable moment; he must continually, in the outflowing moment, offer release, fulfillment to a thing or creature encountered. And he can effect no selection, no division, since it is not for him to decide what will come his way and what will not..."

Unlike W.B. Yeats, Charles did not desire, I think, to be a magician; nor did he claim any power that was not magnified human power; he wished to be *unaware*, and remained unaware, in a kind of negative capability, of the services he performed; and because he did not fear self-indulgence he gave himself without stint, to the painful point of sacrifice.

If one does not choose to use a Judeo-Christian vocabulary of sacrament the heedfulness I saw as a special quality of Olson's being can be otherwise and perhaps more satisfactorily described, in terms of the phenomenology of attention and simple mindfulness in Buddhist, Taoist, and some Hindu Tantric traditions. For students of Olson's work a better understanding of and sympathy with his methodology (archaeology of morning) can be gained from Merleau-Ponty's *The Phenomenology of Perception* than from the static logical categories of Whitehead's *Process and Reality*. And when I lent Charles a great essay on Organomic Functionalism by Wilhelm Reich he returned it only half read, saying it was too close to the heart of his work for him to deal with it at that time.

Reading these public letters written in quick response to contingencies of living in a small New England port city in the 60s makes one eerily aware of the presence of the future in the past. They are prophetic of themes that now more fully impinge upon our consciousness, of history and place, ecological continuities and values. The exactness of social topography that informs them makes them speak strongly to us now. If we can only listen... ?