

Place and the Passage of Time in Charles Olson's *Maximus Poems*

مفهوم المكان والزمان في قصائد ماكسيمس لچارلس اولسن

ا.م.د. نادية علي اسماعيل

كلية اللغات /جامعة بغداد

البريد الإلكتروني: nadeaali@colang.uobaghdad.edu.iq

رقم الهاتف: 07717873752

Assist. Prof. Dr. Nadia Ali Ismael
College of Languages/University of Baghdad
nadeaali@colang.uobaghdad.edu.iq
07717873752

Abstract

This paper focuses on Charles Olson and his poetry collection, The Maximum poems. His work is not traditional in any sense. It is a rare and nebulous creation of moments that he captured in time takes readers through a continuum of the place Gloucester. The paper will show how the poet breaks from conventions that helps him to suspend the idea of space, time and place in his poetry. The Maximus poems are about a place and a person. They are divided into three large volumes and are meant to be read as one single long poem. It is a series of poems that can also be read through politics, personal and lyrical context. However, this paper focuses on the idea of time and place. The Maximus work from Olson shows mapping of a landscape, people, and patterns independent of the place and time. It establishes a coherent order. The research intends to see how these poems reflect the cities and time. The poems from Olson are an attempt to bring the history of a place and also of human thought.

Key Words: Gloucester, land, Maximus, place, time.

المخلص

يركز البحث على قصائد ماكسيمس للشاعر جارلس اولسن. تعتبر هذه القصائد ابداع غير تقليدي ونادر حيث استطاع الشاعر من خلالها ان ياخذ القارئ في عمليه مستمره لشخصيه واحده في مكان واحد وهو جلوسستر. ان قصائد ماكسيمس مقسمه الى ثلاث مجلدات تقرأ كقصيده واحده. تقرأ هذه السلسله من القصائد بسياق شخصي وسياسي ووجداني. تركز الدراسه على فكرة الوقت والمكان حيث تظهر القصائد بانوراما من المناظر الطبيعيه والاشخاص والنماذج بصوره مستقله عن الزمان والمكان لتكون في النهايه ترتيب متماسك. تهدف الدراسه الى اظهار اهمية الزمن والمكان في قصائد ماكسيمس في محاوله الشاعر احظار تاريخ المكان والفكر الانساني.

الكلمات المفتاحيه: جلوسستر, الارض, مكسيمس, المكان, الزمان.

Introduction

Throughout the literature, different places are shown through different purposes in poetical form. They create a sense of place, space, or *topos* (Bollobas, 1992,P.40). They are ambivalent phenomena as, on the one hand they give a sense of adaptation, stability, and adaptation. They can also generate instability, motion, and lack of adaptation. Charles Olson is one of the poets that use the concept of place and time. During the period between 1950 and 1960s his innovative work influenced many other writers. In his works he contends that the poems are energies transferred from where the poet found it, causations, and then make its way all to the reader. His poems are all high energy construct and at all points a high energy discharge. The form of a poem is the extension of content and to show time and place; it requires the right form, which is possible exclusively on the underhand content (Butterick, 1980,P.50).

Olson believes that any poem must move from one instant to another. Hence all the conventions that logic has put on the grammar and syntax must be broken and made open very quietly so that it sets feet to old times. He rejected the academic verse as it had alleged artifice and closed forms. The use of poetry by man and others show how he has his relationship with nature. If a man is contained within nature, he is a part of larger power. He will be able to listen and react and understand the space and time in nature, and by extension, in poetry. Nature comes from reverence. One of the proudest acts of man is language (Butterick, 1980). The main aim is to get back on the sources of meaning, which are anterior to one's own civilization and so recover the sense of place, time and personality which the state has throttled.

Olson's poetry is not traditional poetry or writing. It is a rare and nebulous creation of moments that take readers through a continuum. One major thing to notice is Olson wrote on a typewriter which according to him due to its rigidity and restrictions, helps the poet to suspend the idea of space, time, and place in his poetry. The Maximus poems according to Olson are about a place and a person. They are divided into three large volumes and are meant to be read as one single long poem (Christensen, 2012,P.66). It is a series of poems about the town that was printed in the newspaper. The poems can also be read through politics, personal and lyrical context. However, research intends to see how these poems reflect the cities and time.

Charles Olson's Maximus Poems in the context of city and passage of time

The Maximus poems are a series of ambitions in their own narrative. It focuses on all localities that serve as a microcosm through which the reader can measure the present and place. Olson's idea in work is that a local "fact" about Gloucester, Massachusetts and the reader's actual mental and physical presence in the place. These two aspects are analogous to each other and to the geological motions of individual explorations that come before them. The inclusiveness of the person is based on the exclusive, and the individuals and geography share a mythological relationship with one another, and the Maximus poems highlight these two factors through a very intense reckoning of the poems(Von Hallberg, 1978,P.70).

Olson owes the title of the Maximus poems to the Maximus of Tyre, who was a Neoplatonic philosopher from the 2nd century AD. He resided in a town on the coast in some ancient place, and so it appears to be parallel to the Maximus in Olson's poems. Both these men have a secular outlook. They reach for the spiritual in their approach. The poems are composed in a style of isolation which remains unique to Charles Olson. The Maximus poems are also a sequel to song of Myself, Columbiad, The Cantos, and Paterson. It is one exception to the equivalent for an epic in American Literature.

Olson's ambitions are grand from the beginning of the poetry collection, where he dedicates the work to Creeley with "*unleashing of his mythic obscurities*" that are the remains of the simple conversation that the poet picks up from the kitchen in Black Mountain. Here he says:

"All my life I've heard

One makes many" (Olson, 1983,P.12).

This work serves as the epigraph and poses a challenge to the ambitious program from Paterson in very distinctive terms by multiplication and then reducing it to a single unit. The major inspiration of Olson's The Maximus poems also drew inspiration from the gloomy narrations of the Wasteland by Eliot. This work for Olson showed a fractured conscious soul of European civilization that had lost its religious roots. Williams, on the other hand, proposed to use his own hometown Paterson in his epic poem (Von Hallberg, 1978,P.14). He, too, insisted that an authentic American poet like Whitman must start with using the local energy. Olson agrees with Williams. Both the authors admired work by Ezra Pound, Cantos.

In the case of Charles Olson's poems, this reckoning is called a "projective verse." It composes through the energetic repetitions that one can see in Walt Whitman's poetry, on the changes of time and space as present in Pound's Cantos and from the attention to detail as present in Paterson by William Carlos Williams'. The work from Olson mimics the documents to the narration of his subject – Gloucester. Through the use of idiomatic phrases and tones of voice the poems set the modern and ancient times aside. He presents through a series of poem notations, typographical placements, and subjective open parentheses and breaks lines, thus giving an unpremeditated collage of the exotic and mundane data of Gloucester and the experience of the author himself.

Olson's moral outlook also appears throughout the Maximus Poems. This outlook is in his opinions about human behavior and poetry in general. It elaborates on the Williams' viewpoint of "no ideas but in things." Olson associates his work to be as close as it is possible to the fact that names should be objects, and the verbs must be actions. The songs must be a lie in the think itself. The poem must remain in the middle of actions. This loyalty to the basic is the foundation of virtue and freedom for Olson which he contrasts with the individual selfishness. This individual selfishness is the source of profit-seeking and slavery, and these have ruined the politics in Gloucester (Faas, 1978,P.44). It has also made the resolve of the people weak. Olson's hero is a true "fisherman" who is able to eschew success that usually is taken by the people who can manipulate it with their power and money. They also manipulate people. "*Ships have always represented large capital investment, /And the manning and provisioning of them has always been costly*" (Olson, 1996,P.22)

Olson imagines a cruel form of capitalism that is practiced by the people. It angers Olson that people do not travel but rather go for ownership. The things that matter are replaced by spray adverts and billboards. The commercial work and ties have replaced the natural associations that were brought by voyaging and fishing. These unnatural ties that come from commercialization cannot nourish a person's individuality and uniqueness. These bonds which preserve the uniqueness and individuality of a person led Olson to find structure in its unity. In the Maximus poems IV, V, and VI, he calls this structure similar to the ocean which steers the things from all other things. He does not use a fixated approach in a flowing narrative. Olson believes that through breaking of narrative, experience of place for the reader becomes more evident and it aligns this experience to time.

The Maximus poems are a story of a man's experience and the events related to the man's experience. It is a long poem resembling an epic. The poem is in projective verse as the

author believes that this verse will help solve the problem of a larger context and thus help in understanding larger forms. In the verse of “*I, Maximus of Gloucester*” the voice is modulated and is not pitched to personal passion. It leaves an impression which is in coherence with the epic poem of this largeness. Olson contends that the abstract syntax words establish their relation to the objects that they represent, and they form a myriad of possible relations to each other. When one bows down to the rules of syntax the poet is at risk to fall into the same traps of metrical schemes and trying to bring the essence in poetry through abstract rules. The first poem presents an excellent example of Olson’s work. The lines in the poem go like:

“*Flight
of the bird
o kylix, o
Antony of Padua
sweep low, o bless
the roofs.*” (Olson, 1996,P.55)

As the poet has given up on syntax, there is a clear perception that follows it one after the other. There is an increase in scope and vigor that is similar to the possibility which was brought by the Free verse. The specific abandonment of the ordinary tense use in verbs also allows bringing a mythological aspect in time. It brings the reader to eternal present time. It can be seen in the poem *Maximus from Dogtown - I*. The poem describes a bull who is waiting for Merry, a sailor who is about to arrive as it already stands over the “full-blown” body of merry.

“*waiting
not even knowing
death
was in his power over
this man who lay
in the Sunday morning sun*” (Olson, 1996,P.68)

There are sudden changes in the voice that makes following the syntax rules difficult. It is a matter of juxtaposition. There are widely varying material, mythological, historical, and scientific which can all be brought into an instant association with the different layers of importance. The Maximus poems also changed from the justified left margin in order to show shifts and digressions in thought similar to what William Carlos Williams started to do in Paterson. In Letter 23, Maximus leaves his thoughts midway. he speaks,

“*I would be an historian as Herodotus was, looking
For oneself for the evidence of
What is said.*” (Olson, 1987,P.70)

He later breaks off this and picks up again with an expression of many digressions. There is a lack of narrative lines in these poems. When noticed closely, there is no sense of time as they do not move in the forward direction. Instead the writer keeps the time underway, and time begins to move in place and slowly takes possession of place. The poem involves the current time. Gloucester “now” and the urgency of the poet to leave, to work in, to move, to find out the terms that chart the area and will help him to tell the “*fables and the wills of man.*”

These ideas have a thematic significance as binary things comprising of opposing elements. Each binary pair clusters with the other bring a range of values that the poet has. The primary significance is given to the geographical pairs like sea and land, the directional pair – inwards vs. outwards, the occupational pair – fishing and poetry vs. capitalism, the politics’ pair

– pejorocracy vs. polis, the economical pair – absentee vs. local, the stances pair – measure of care vs. carelessness, the applications pair – sloth vs. work and the goals pair – euphoria vs. eudaemonia. Olson dramatizes the binary problem and speaks in the Maximus poems that at any moment a person is making a choice between two things.

The most significant concern for these poems is also in the subsequent readings, which puts in the practice of self. In the earliest poems in the first volume, Olson expresses personal and public urgency. He works on the idea of how to act. In the Sings of Maximus, Letter 3, the poet speaks: “*And I am asked – ask myself (I, too, covered/with the gurry of it) where/shall we go from here, what can we do.*” (Olson, 1996,P.72)

This question is particularly associated with art in the form of action, and it finds a response in “Letter 5” which is the longest most scornful and reproving poem in this book. Olson is addressing Vincent Ferrini in the poem, which he feels has not taken his task properly and bungled it very badly like the escapist who abandons two men in a storm at sea.

In the first volume of poems by Olson, the past and present are at juxtaposition. They are in the process of founding and refounding. The sense of time vanishes. The past becomes the present, and the present turns to become the past. The agents of construction like Endecott turn to destroy the beneficent founders like Conant. The history that the poems allude to may be taken as a prologue to a conflict of destruction, aggressive oppositions, and it is all alive in the eyes of Olson because when one dispossesses history, he also dispossesses self. The relative personal theme is about a reverie of a past, the author’s imaginative reclamation of the place, which is the true place that he refers as “my countree” that is well and the one which he closes.

The second volume of Maximus poems, is also called Maximus II sometimes. The cover of the book reflects the main idea of the book. The cover is a map of Gondwanaland. It is a unified name that many researchers call the unified or primordial continent which was present much before today. In this volume of poems Olson continues to investigate specific historical past of Gloucester. He also moves in the inner land to find out more about a section of the town called Dogtown. When he worked in an open field, he delved deeper into the unprecedented past where he found himself face to face with nature and the pre-historical forms of awareness, which we know as myths. He also believed the myths to be the archetypes of collective consciousness which he expresses in the lines:

*Everything^{issues} come fr the
Black chrysanthemum
& nothing is anything but itself
Measured so* (Olson, 1996,P.75).

This volume of poems IV, V, and VI examines ways of mystical consciousness associated with a place through time. It also examines how these myths are embedded with the necessary human information and transform into permanent forms of experience. Olson was a firm believer in Jung’s theories.

Later in the poems, he advises Edward Dorn to saturate or exhaust one place until he knows more about it than anyone else he knows. It comes from Olson’s directive to self in his many years of studying Gloucester. It also facilitated a rearrangement of the remaining world in what he found out about the origins (Boer, 1975,P.68). Immediately as he declares that his memory is the history in time in the second volume of Maximus poems, he takes on another more difficult work. He wishes to make a map of the world so as to include his individual in it. This obligation demanded that Olson not only explores history and mysteries but also derivative fields like geography, archeology, paleontology, anthropology, and geology.

The Maximus IV, V and VI poems became a recapitulation of the development and origin of human consciousness in relation to the place. This is such a great task that the structure of the poem cannot sustain itself under its burden and almost collapses. Only a few literary conventions can be seen as the language in the poetry becomes more private and dense. The transition that Olson makes between the poems is either absent or so personal that they are impossible decipher. The work shows that the poet found inspiration in Process and Reality by Alfred North especially in the process, which appears in several poems. Olson suggests that the way in which material is arranged is similar to a mosaic that takes shape to any way of a finished narrative outcome.

The earlier sections of the Maximus IV, V, and VI do not have a fictive voice as Olson keeping up to his own notion of projective verse did not include the lyrical interference as he found it to be similar to ego. The volume of poems is a major example of what Olson calls as objectivism. The arrangement of mythological, historical, and other details in the poems are completely undetectable. The facts speak for themselves, and the poetic structure complements it. Olson avoids any sense of myth and history to occur in a clean and tidy sense, which happened in Campbell's work, *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*. There is no synthesizing form that could even remotely be compared to fictive or imaginative fact arrangements. Even if Olson read all the fourteen volumes of Jung's psychology, he did not impose any type of boundaries or structure in his own work. He defined American to be

"a complex of occasions/Themselves a geometry/Of spatial nature" (Olson, 1996,P.90)

In this definition, he explained the feeling of oneness that he felt with the world. He further adds in the poems, *"I have this sense/That I am one/With my skin"* (Olson, 1980,P.88)

In the whole volume of Maximus IV, V, and VI poems Olson kept coming back to the local geographical aspects and avoided any intellectual classification of any type. His foundation in Gloucester became a standard from which he began to see the world.

The Maximus Poems Volume III was never completed by Olson. The thoughtful arrangement of this incomplete work was made by Charles Boer. Olson had already decided the first and last poems in the collection. Boer and Butterick followed the same order that was used by Olson in the first two volumes. Many poems in this collection remain unrevised. This collection of poems has dramatically changed in its structure. Many poems in his collection have taken to be a more personal nature. It reflects the private crisis that Olson was experiencing. It was especially related to the death of his wife in an accident in 1964.

This volume of Maximus also continues to see deeper into the local history of Gloucester, but the poems repeatedly show the essence of earth itself. Unlike Robert Duncan and Wallace Stevens, whose imaginations extend to certainties in fiction, Olson does not trust the powers of imagination and thus searches for the metaphysical. In his poem 143, *The Festival Aspects*, Olson rehearses different phases of humanity's decline and its separation from sacred consciousness. He states directly, *"I believe in God / As fully physical"* (Olson, 1999,P.80)

Maximus suggests that the steadiness of force of human awareness will eventually redeem the people who are fallen and bring them together with a power similar to telekinetic powers that come through consciousness. Maximus poems have a continuous suggestion of human attention that is needed to focus on the place so that we may be eventually able to redeem it. Olson also rages against all actions that are dehumanizing to a place. These are encroachments to progress. Places offer a deeper understanding and result in acceptance of the necessary mysteries that lay at the foundation of existence. It is evident when the poet says: *"Praise the mystery/Of creation,/That is matter alone"* (Olson, 1980,P.94)

Through the analysis of volume III, the concerns and love that Olson has about places especially Gloucester become evident. The poet during this time was dying due to liver cancer, and he imagines himself to be a stone. He also puts a final location on himself, from the origin to the destination in the final penultimate poem of the Maximus volume III. It is titled “Mother Earth Alone.” There are only eight words in the final poem of the work. These final words give a brutal summary of how aware he was about the end days of his life. He speaks: “*My wife my car my color and myself*”

As the poet feels haunted by the death of his wife, and slowly consumed by the disease of cancer, he comes back to the source of his life as a poet. He finds his own personal consciousness, and through this consciousness the entire world of Maximus poems emerged. When it comes to volume III, the poems speak more about time as the poet has a short of it. He speaks of the past and the present frequently. For instance Olson says:

it is the undone business

I speak of”.

And then speaks

“I had to learn the simplest things

Last (Olson, 1999,P.38)

He also speaks

that we grow up many

And the single

Is to easily

Known (Olson, 1996,P.39)

Through all these lines, Olson is encapsulating in partial and fragmentary observations, which are the reason for his emotional attachment to time and place in his master plan. Even when considered in parts, time and essence of the time being lost is visible. Parts of the poem show whole and whole seem to be incomplete. The Maximus poems have continuously eluded artistic form and definition. The incidental and even unexpected characteristics of Olson’s works really show how strong heart is that of a man. Olson died in 1970, and he had a great foundation claim in the 1950s for the high-end construct and open structure. It is a technique that both is allusion to Pound and Williams and advanced than Beats. In these poems, the nature and edge of American place – clouds, weeds, and children are the reflection in the minds of people that exist for good. He was a profound chronicler of the adventures that he took himself into and was a miniaturist of having an enthused spirit that always moved towards pastoral or mountainous solitude. There was a gentle soul beneath his cantankerous persona.

Conclusion

The Maximus work from Olson shows the mapping of a landscape, figures, and patterns irrespective of the place and time. It establishes a coherent order in spite of Olson’s failure to fit the entire Gloucester together. The poet shows honesty and finality in the illumination of the place. There is a flattering sense of self-worth, which adds to the acute importance of modern-day struggles with abstract ideas and subjectivity (Christensen, 2012,P.40). Olson has developed this projective area out of his straight and immediate answer to happenings and occurrences that surrounded him and in the world that he observed.

When reading with caution and attention, the reader can see and understand the pleasure that the place has in Olson’s work. In order to understand one needs to give up the approaches that are adhered to the current reading and writing strategies of poetry. Instead of these, the reader must be preoccupied with the ideas of The Maximus Poem’s projective techniques and

open field theories (Bollobas, 1992,P.50). This sort of reading will give an exhilarating experience of time and place that will lead the reader into understanding of depths. He will be able to plunge deep into experiences and then rapidly ascend into heights.

The poems' fragmented texturing and absence of proper reference adds to the appeal of these poems. These poems are easy, clear, and self-explanatory when the reader gets a hold of their didactic and rhetoric. The Maximus poems are a landmark in the history of American literature with the range of description and scope that is presented by the poet after taking large risks (Christensen, 2012,P.54). The Maximus Poems is a multi-volume collection of poems that have single unique pieces that do not have uniformity in size. The work is significant in terms of length and works closely to an epic. The individual poems, some in the form of even letters, get epic lengths when they are read in juxtaposition with one another. The poems go on in a non-narrative manner, and they do not stick any regular or linear sequence. They create direct and put on organic correlations. The intention of Olson was to get the completeness of life, the time he lives in, and the place with the help of his poems and he managed to do so. He managed to get the title of "*an archeologist among undecoded glyphs*" (Olson, 1996,P.66).

Thus the poems from Olson are an attempt to bring the history of a place and also of human thought. The work shows twenty years of dedication and is grounded in a combination of letters, songs, and poems. Even if the poem is based on Gloucester, remains a poem specifically about a place but has and displays multiple levels of meanings. The work is a humanistic autobiography of a person, and a chronology of a place interweaved with the poet's personal experiences (Butterick, 1980,P.15). The collection of poems is personal, archival, nautical and geographic which shows the sentimental nostalgia of the poet. There is a great level of dedication required in order to see the underlying themes in the poem, and once the reader does it, the poems present a conversational tone. Charles Olson is one of the poets that thus uses the concept of place and time in the entire three-volume work.

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