

ANN CHARTERS

CHARLES OLSON AT BLACK MOUNTAIN COLLEGE: THE PERSISTENCE OF HISTORY

my memory is  
the history of time  
Charles Olson, *Maximus*

In June 1957, I graduated as an English major from the University of California in Berkeley. If I had known then about Black Mountain College, the experimental arts college in North Carolina, I might have thought about applying there as a graduate student to take classes with the poet Charles Olson. Contact with him and other American writers such as Robert Creeley and Robert Duncan, who also taught at the college, would have been so different from the staid approach of my professors teaching the academic canon at Berkeley that the heady breath of fresh air at Black Mountain might well have changed my life. But it was the wrong time. I was too late to study at Black Mountain College with Charles Olson. A year before my graduation, the college had stopped accepting new students.

Actually, Olson's views were available to me much closer to home. In February and March of 1957, after his job ended as rector of Black Mountain, he visited San Francisco and Berkeley to give seminars on what he called "The Special View of History." I didn't know about Olson's lectures to a select group of local California poets, so I missed my chance to hear him. I had only seen copies of *Black Mountain Review* for sale at City Lights Bookshop in San Francisco's North Beach, where I'd browsed through the literary magazines. It took a decade before the idea of Olson's teaching at Black Mountain College began to gradually take hold of me. More than half a century later I find the idea still "alive and kicking" in my imagination.

Like many other readers, in 1966 it was Donald Allen's anthology *The New American Poetry 1945-1960* that introduced me to the achievement of the Black Mountain poets such as Olson, Duncan, and Creeley. This

groundbreaking anthology of 454 pages featured avant-garde rather than academic poets. As an editor at Grove Press, Allen was sympathetic to experimental writing in the United States and saw it as “closely allied to modern jazz and abstract expressionist painting, today recognized throughout the world to be America’s greatest achievement in contemporary culture.” He made a similarly large claim for the new American poetry, which he thought was “now becoming the dominant movement in the second phase of our twentieth century literature [after the work of William Carlos Williams, Ezra Pound, H.D., and Wallace Stevens and others] ...” (Allen 12).

Allen grouped the new American poets into different geographical sections of the United States, including the Beat poets in New York City and several poets of the San Francisco Renaissance. He presented the writing of the Black Mountain poets first in his anthology. Allen didn’t write any introductions to the different sections of his book, but he included many of the writers’ statements on poetics as an appendix. It was here that I first read Olson’s “Projective Verse” essay, which I found to be a challenging aesthetic manifesto. I wasn’t sure I understood exactly what Olson was saying in his dense text, but I was impressed by his urgent tone and his intense engagement with his topic.

Reading Olson’s poetry in the Black Mountain section of the anthology, however, was different. I immediately responded to the mixture of spontaneity and toughness in his voice, as well as his stance, which couldn’t be clearer. In his poetry, Olson seemed to know me better than I knew myself. As a young member of America’s 1960’s counter-culture strongly opposed to America’s escalating war in Vietnam, I felt that he had me in mind when he wrote in one of his early “Songs of Maximus”:

In the land of plenty, have  
 nothing to do with it  
 take the way of  
 the lowest,  
 including your legs, go  
 contrary, go  
 sing (Allen 13)

In Olson's confident assertion of his nonconformity, I caught echoes of the tradition of his spiritual ancestors, the New England Transcendentalists Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau. Reading Olson's words in this song and in his other Maximus poems in the anthology seemed to encourage my potential for creativity. Even before I admitted it to myself, I wanted to become a writer. Unconsciously, I had begun the process of taking Olson as my "courage teacher," as Whitman is described in Allen Ginsberg's poem "A Supermarket in California."

In 1967, my husband Sam and I became friends with Robert Hawley on our trips to Berkeley, where Sam was working as a producer for Vanguard Records with the band Country Joe and the Fish. They had composed an anti-Vietnam War song, "Fixin' To Die Rag," that was a hit around the world. Sam and I were collecting books by Beat Generation authors, and Robert had started a small press called Oyez, funded by his job in Oakland as a bookseller. With his small press, he published exquisitely printed books and broadsides of poetry by Olson, Duncan, Creeley, William Everson, Mary Fabilli, Jack Spicer, and other San Francisco Renaissance poets.

A decade earlier, Robert and his wife Dorothy had been Olson's students at Black Mountain College, and they were dedicated supporters of his writing. At Black Mountain, Olson had encouraged Hawley to pursue his interest in the subject of Western Americana and helped him to begin his career in the book business by giving him the task of cataloging the books in the library before the college closed down.

Late in 1967, Hawley furthered my engagement with Black Mountain by suggesting that I write a book for Oyez. He proposed a study of Olson's first book, *Call Me Ishmael*, his reading of Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*. Two years earlier, I had completed my doctorate in American Literature at Columbia University with a dissertation that included a chapter about Melville's life in the Berkshires, where he wrote his most famous novel. Hawley believed I had the necessary academic knowledge of Melville's work to elucidate Olson's radical view of the nineteenth century writer.

I didn't have the good fortune of experiencing first-hand the free-spirited atmosphere of creativity and independence at Black Mountain, but apparently Hawley had internalized it after his years with Olson at the college. He was willing to publish my neophyte's study of Olson

and Melville as an Oyez book without subjecting my manuscript to an academic review. Hawley was also willing to give me Olson's address at 28 Fort Square in Gloucester, Massachusetts. I could write to the poet if I had questions about his involvement with Melville or his interpretation of *Moby-Dick*. After Hawley sent me the address, I was on my way. My first letter to Olson from my home in Brooklyn Heights, New York was dated January 7, 1968, and the poet answered it three days later. With Olson's help, my writing about *Call Me Ishmael* went quickly.

On June 13 we met for the first time when I visited him in Gloucester and spent the night in his home. It was a one-bedroom, cramped, poorly insulated apartment in a shabby wooden two-story building, where – thanks to Olson's personal charm – I almost immediately felt welcome. I also met George Butterick, his doctoral student at SUNY Buffalo, who would become his editor. During the hours I spent with Olson, we never stopped talking. I managed to ask him the few questions I had left about Melville and also photographed him as we took a walk together in his neighborhood. Oyez published my study and my photographs of the poet and his Gloucester environment in *Olson/Melville: A Study of Affinity* later in 1968.

Before I met Olson, I had spent several months analyzing his thoughts about Melville, so I was familiar with his independent spirit and intellectual approach. After our day together, his personal style readily re-enforced my image of the free-wheeling educational experience that had been Black Mountain College in the 1950s. That was when Olson took over its leadership from the German artist Josef Albers (1888-1976).

If I'd ever been fortunate enough to meet Albers, I don't think I would have thought of him as an embodiment of Black Mountain, though actually he was associated with the college much longer than Olson. An international pioneer of twentieth-century modernism, Albers came from the Bauhaus in Weimar, Germany to Black Mountain College at its founding in 1933, stayed on until 1949, and then for several years became the chairman of the Department of Design at the Yale University School of Art.

After I witnessed Olson's raffish lifestyle in his modest apartment in Gloucester, he seemed to epitomize the spirit of Black Mountain to me. To begin with, Olson was physically a large man, a flesh-and-blood, exuberant

Maximus figure, great and untidy enough to personify my romantic idea of what an experimental arts college might have been like in rural North Carolina. As I described my first sight of him in my book *Evidence of What Is Said*:

Olson stood before me framed in the doorway [to his kitchen]. He was dressed in a light blue, un-ironed cotton short-sleeved dress shirt and a pair of baggy slacks. Obviously he hadn't been awake for very long. He was as tall as Hawley had described him, but I didn't find his size menacing. He had gray stubble on his plump cheeks, and behind his large glasses his blue eyes seemed kind, if a little puzzled to see me. He sized me up quickly, remembered who I was, and welcomed me inside. When he spoke, I noticed that his accent sounded less pronouncedly Massachusetts than Jack Kerouac's, though both men had been born in cities – Lowell and Worcester – in the same state. (Charters 15)

My passionate interest in the writing of Kerouac and Olson had developed after I completed my doctorate. I obviously felt a fatal attraction to bohemians. Perhaps it was a reaction against the many years I had sat quietly in the classroom, keeping a low profile while I docilely completed the requirements for my academic degrees. Or perhaps I felt an immediate rapport with Olson when I discovered in Gloucester that he was as much an educator as a poet. He was particularly adept at carrying on simultaneous multiple conversations with his visitors, focusing without apparent effort on whatever topic they brought to him. It was a skill he used more brilliantly than any professor who taught my classes at UC Berkeley or Columbia University.

In our conversations, Olson's thoughts ranged freely and widely from subject to subject, beginning with literature and continuing into art, especially the local artists in Gloucester such as Fitz Hugh Lane. He reigned over his kitchen table as if he were conducting a graduate seminar, offering endless big cups of black coffee and small glasses of Cutty Sark scotch to lubricate the hours we spent excitedly exchanging ideas.

As Olson wrote in a poem nearly a year later, on March 7, 1969, he was lonely in Gloucester after the death of his wife Betty in an automobile accident, and his mind was "hungry for everything" (Olson, *Maximus* 604). But on a deeper level, as Duncan understood, Olson "saw education as a

spiritual attack. ... He wanted things to happen in his students spiritually. ... Ginsberg shares it. This is actually Charles' alchemy" (Wagstaff 248).

The second time I visited Olson in August 1968, I also went next door to the apartment that George Butterick was occupying, surrounded by the open boxes of Olson's manuscripts that Butterick was attempting to organize. On his desk, I saw many worn manila folders containing loose pages of Olson's typescripts and handwritten manuscripts. I noticed some pages about Melville, as well as many pages that seemed to be part of a series of lectures Olson had delivered during the last months of Black Mountain College in 1957. He'd called it "The Special View of History."

While I was reading material in this folder, Olson appeared in the doorway, and I asked him if I could borrow the pages where he discussed Melville for my book about the Olson/Melville affinity. I didn't realize it, but this was the beginning of the second project I did with the poet, my editing of the manuscript of his lectures comprising "The Special View of History." This text is the one that links him most closely in my mind to his teaching at Black Mountain College.

Olson first came to Black Mountain in the fall, 1948, and he visited once a month, for a week at a time, during the rest of the year. He was also there in the summer and fall, 1949, and lectured during an evening in May, 1950. His most extended teaching began in the summer, 1951, continuing with short leaves of absence until Black Mountain closed in the fall of 1956 ("and on for another year," he later recalled, "to settle its affairs, until July, 1957") (Charters 117).

Robert Duncan, who taught there during the spring and summer, 1956, when Olson lectured on "The Special View of History," refers to the years in the early 1950s, before the college began to run down financially, as the period of its most illustrious writing students – John Wieners, Jonathan Williams, Ed Dorn, Joel Oppenheimer, Michael Rumaker, Fielding Dawson – and the beginning of the *Black Mountain Review*.

Robert Creeley, who first edited and published the *Review* in Majorca, came to Black Mountain in March, 1954 for about two months, then returned a year later in June, 1955, and stayed until January, 1956, leaving just before Duncan arrived. When asked about his theories of education before becoming rector of the college, Olson answered, "I came with no ideas; Black Mountain did it all" (Charters 117).

Both Duncan and Creeley regarded Olson's interest in history as one of

his dominant concerns, both as an educator and as a poet. It was at Black Mountain, preparing “The Special View,” that Olson fully realized how “a man’s life is an act of giving form to the condition or state of reality (concerned obviously as a moving thing himself) at the exact moment of his birth – So therefore error or truth in the execution of that imperative is the whole shot!” (Charters 86). According to Butterick, the specific impetus for Olson’s lectures on history at Black Mountain goes back before 1954; at that time, for Olson, it was “Letter 23 Maximus broke it” – the poem ending

I would be an historian as Herodotus was, looking  
for oneself for the evidence of  
what is said.... (Olson, *Maximus* 104-5)

Olson later explained his reference to Herodotus in his talk “On History” at the Vancouver Conference, 29 July 1963:

Obviously the word “history” is a word – unless you take it to root. ... And the root is the original first use of it, in the first chapter if not the first paragraph of Herodotus, in which he says “I’m using this as a verb ‘*istorin*, which means *to find out for yourself*.” After all, Herodotus goes around and finds out everything he can find out, and then he tells a story. It’s one of the reasons why I trust him more than, say, Thucydides, who basically is reporting an event. ... (Butterick 147).

To find out for yourself, Olson’s demand is always the active voice, that we use history, not that we be used by it. As Creeley told me when I interviewed him in Annisquam, Massachusetts, Olson offers a stance diametrically opposed to existentialism in rejecting that view of history as something “you’re stuck with in some inexorable manner and it grinds you out, you’re always too late because it all happened last year. It’s an awfully sad way to think” (Olson, *Special View* 12). Olson takes a more positive, much broader sweep in defining history as “whatever happens, and if it is significant enough to be recorded, the amount of time of the event can be *minute*” (Charters 124).

In his preface to his notes on “The Special View of History,” written at Black Mountain in 1956, Olson stated that his lectures proceeded from

a “concept of man with the dynamic first proposed in *Projective Verse*” (Olson, *Special View* 13). In theory and in action, history held a continuing fascination for him; he expressed in his work his deeply personal sense of discovering what had happened in the past, often turning his immersion in history into the creation of a poem.

On January 13, 1962, for example, Olson wrote the Maximus poem “A Later Note on Letter #15” that expanded on his interpretation of history as a personal commitment to action:

which was a verb, to find out for yourself:  
 ‘istorin, which makes any one’s acts a finding out for him or her  
 self, in other words restores the traum: that we act somewhere  
 at least by seizure, that the objective (example Thucidides, or  
 the latest finest tape-recorder, or any form of record on the spot  
 live television of what – is a lie  
 as against what we know went on, the dream: the dream being  
 self-action with Whitehead’s important corollary: that no event  
 is not penetrated, in intersection or collision with, an eternal  
 event

The poetics of such a situation  
 are yet to be found out. (Olson, *Maximus* 249)

Olson began *The Special View of History* with an epigraph quoting the poet John Keats, the Romantic poet’s famous diary entry in 1817 defining what he called the human quality of Negative Capability, “that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason – Coleridge, for instance, would let go by a fine isolated verisimilitude caught from the Penetralium of mystery, from being incapable of remaining content with half knowledge” (Olson, *Special View* 14).

When I interviewed Duncan in San Francisco on June 5, 1969 about teaching at Black Mountain College, he emphasized that he, Olson, and Creeley were linked by their belief in Keats’ Negative Capability, or as Duncan put it, by their shared belief that an individual’s action involves the acceptance of imagination and mystery. This concept values intuition and uncertainty above reason and knowledge. “It’s the imagination,” Duncan



told me, “the revelation of something as dream, as magic. Whereas the literalists [the academic poets] will plug along as if the most solid thing was solid, [not] making out the magic experience as the poem” (Wagstaff 240).

On September 19, 1968, I wrote Olson that I would like to examine the folder of his papers comprising “the lecture series” on history at Black Mountain. “If you could possibly send them, or Xeroxed copies, it would be great. There is, I think, much there to get into. And perhaps put this material together for publication. IT SHOULD BE PUBLISHED. It’s great, rich stuff, containing many insights into your work” (Charters 71). Olson replied on September 20<sup>th</sup> that he welcomed my idea “of looking over the whole back-load of material. . . . It will certainly put you in whatever they mean by the cat-bird’s seat. That is, I’m sure the material would be most successful if severely (practically) edited” (Charters 73).

The process of transcribing and editing “The Special View of History” took nearly a year. After I examined Olson’s papers more closely, I wrote him on April 10, 1969 that I wanted to prepare a second book for Oyez consisting of perhaps 50-60 pages, with “The Special View of History” at its center. I’d write an introduction, and then ask Duncan and Creeley if they’d like to contribute something “on what they remember of being with you there. My idea of this book is to follow a pencil outline of the ‘History’ seminar I found in one of the folders” (Charters 112-113).

I also had access to notes taken by the young poet John Wieners, who had attended Olson’s series of lectures on history at Black Mountain. I suggested that Olson help me organize the contents of the book. “There might also be a chart or two, a reading list, some loose notes that you used to get into the lectures, etc. Whatever you’d like too. If you want such a book, let me know soon – for then I’ll type out what I have and send it to you for going-over” (Charters 113).

The first week of June 1969, I went to San Francisco to interview Duncan about Black Mountain College. On June 23, 1969, unaware that Olson’s health was rapidly deteriorating – he was already suffering from the liver cancer that left him only six more months to live – I wrote him another letter about the Black Mountain project, and we spoke on the phone the following day. I sent him some questions about the lectures, and he answered all of them by letter on June 27, 1969.

I visited Olson for my third and last time in early July 1969, when I returned the folder of materials about “The Special View of History” that he’d lent to me. I also left him a Xerox copy of my edited material. I had hoped to go over my text with him in Gloucester, but he preferred to take a walk and talk to me instead. After I told him about a dream I’d had about my young daughter, I remember him saying to me on that day, “You have a real talent for dreams.”

Creeley was then living in near-by Annisquam, Massachusetts, and I interviewed him about Black Mountain College on July 7, 1969. Three days later, apparently having read the Xeroxed manuscript I’d left of my version of “The Special View of History,” Olson sent a telegram to me in Brooklyn Heights with the words “Just change the word crucial to nexal and send it off. Good luck and Happy voyage. Love, Charles” (Charters 120).

Olson wrote his last letter to me on July 28, 1969, ending it “Yrs with love & continuing success -- & approbation, Charles” (Charters 124). He died at New York Hospital on January 10, 1970 before Oyez published the slim volume I had pieced together to comprise *The Special View of History*. Olson never got to tell me what he thought of it. He had liked the photographs I had included in my earlier book *Olson/Melville*, saying “You’ve really caught my physicality.” I hoped he would at least have liked the new book’s cover, a black and white photograph of the dramatic Jean Charlot mural at the College of a barefoot peasant enfolded in a hooded garment, reading a manuscript page. After Olson’s death, I had traveled from New York City to the deserted college buildings in North Carolina to photograph the mural.

In Olson’s papers deposited at his archive in the Dodd Research Center at the University of Connecticut are the original documents comprising “The Special View of History.” In 2005, the late Olson scholar Ralph Maud spent some time with them and concluded on the evidence of several manuscripts that Olson had probably revised his original Black Mountain lectures on history at least twice, once to write an article for *Origin* magazine, and a second time to present the material as his series of five lectures in San Francisco in 1957. Maud tried to interest another publisher in re-issuing “The Special View of History” with these amendments and additions, but this project was never realized.

I cherish my memories of working with Olson on the two books I completed for Oyez, but I am most happy with a piece about looking for Herman Melville in the Berkshires that I wrote in February 1969, an imaginative construct combining Melville's words with my own. It is included in my recent book *Evidence of What Is Said*. Though I never attended Black Mountain College, I believe that I couldn't have written about Melville so freely without the influence of Olson's "alchemy," his passionate belief in chance and indeterminacy. His example was sufficient for me to break through the stranglehold of my academic inhibitions and take to heart, finally, his advice to answer a creative work with a creative work.

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