To clear the gunk out:
knowledge and meaning in the work of Charles Olson

This brief text attends to the matter of knowledge embedded in an æsthetics of patterns of connectedness and uses as an example an aspect of the work of Charles Olson. It makes direct use of the research made available by Ralph Maud and Tom Clark. It was given as a conference paper at University of Kent in 2010 and subsequently declined from publication by Manchester University Press because of its extensive use of quotations.

'Art translates inward meaning into visible form; it uses the creative skill of man to free it from the limitations of life.' Josef Strzygowski.[1]

Charles Olson knew that direct engagement with knowledge involved the complexity of what was being said, both from involvement and imaginative understanding, along with conveyance of energy as part of a process of discovery and learning. Olson's flux of knowledge provided the substance for his proposals. These proposals were made in classes and private correspondence, at places of education, public conferences and texts and more significantly in his poetry. To give evidence of this can be difficult, fraught with interpretations of what is said, transcribed and written, fraught with presumption and expectation and made obscure by the shift from its first attention to today's context. These notes use attention given to Olson's ideas of knowledge often by his students and often by those that have followed.

Looking at the texts Olson was introduced to in the late 1940s and early 1950s, and celebrated by him, helps to recognise his stance. One of these is Josef Strzygowski's *Origin of Christian Church Art,* another is J.A.K. Thomson's *The Art of the Logos.* Both texts open for Olson his comprehensions of the knowing necessary to poetic propositions, the knowing to proceed and provide these notes with a summary of the importance of his position.

'There may be not a few who would care to know how the problem of the origin of Christian art ... presents itself to-day to an investigator with more than thirty years of unremitting labour in the East behind him. That no claim to finality can be made will be readily understood by all who reject easy movement along the ruts prepared by some chosen School, preferring to break their own way through obstacles to the truth...'[2]

Optimum for Olson at the time of reading this in the late 1940s was the understanding of incompletion, 'no finality,' and, as importantly, a break from the logical rut 'preferring to break their own way' to the truth.

[1] Josef Strzygowski (1923) *Origin of Christian Church Art.*

[2] Strzygowski 1923: vii.

This is emphasised, again by Strzygowski, in his statement, 'The history of art must work itself free from the mere comparative study of monuments; it must concentrate upon the work of art and its values, absolute and evolutional, and so find a path of its own.'[3]

Charles Olson's poetics involve intricate processes of learning, thus knowing and then proposing. He uses poetry, the writing of poetry as the vehicle for his poetics. Olson, the knower, through his poetry, merges these processes of knowing and proposing directly to the exaltation of ordinary life. The notes below derive from the period of Olson's work at Black Mountain College and then at Buffalo, from 1951 through to 1963, the period in which he was writing the early parts of *The Maximus Poems* through to the second volume. The notes also include a review of letters, transcribed conversations and other texts generated in this period.

One such conversation summarises Olson's position in 1963 and has been presented as 'ON HISTORY' in the first volume of *Muthologos*, a collection of Olson's lectures and interviews. The text is based on a public conversation with Robert Creeley, Allen Ginsberg and Philip Whalen, recorded 29 July 1963 and transcribed by one of his students, Ralph Maud. At this occasion Olson read from, 'Place; & Names' and was challenged by Ginsberg, 'I don't understand what you're saying.' Olson answers, 'Well, I immediately state it. Obviously the word "history" is a word–unless you take it to root–which doesn't have any use at all. 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*…'[4] Further into this reply Olson notes, '"Story" in the sense that the only thing that really counts, again, is what's exciting. 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 I trust him more than, say, Thucydides, who basically is reporting an event.'[5]

The pivot here is what Olson chooses to insist on, that Herodotus uses the verb *'istorin,* in order to mean *to find out for yourself.* The translations from Herodotus' Greek text that Olson owned do not give him this. Ralph Maud notes Olson's ownership of the Henry Cary translation and his review of the Aubrey de Selincourt translation in 1954. Maud notes with regard to Olson's review that, 'the latter historian' [Thucydides] 'always talking of men and things, not of societies and commodities, wins.'[6] Herodotus' *'istorin,* J.A.K. Thomson showed in *The Art of Logos*, 'meant "finding out for oneself." "*'Herodotus is looking for the evidence'*–is it ever anything else that we such men who listen to Stories, *who*

[3] Strzygowski 1923: ix.
[4] Charles Olson (1978) *Muthologos, The Collected Lectures & Interviews, Volume 1,* edited by George F. Butterick, Bolinas, California: Four Seasons Foundation, 3.
[5] Olson 1978.
[6] Ralph Maud (1996) *Charles Olson's Reading. A Biography,* Carbondale and Edwardsville: South Illinois University Press, 112 and 272.

make them up, are looking for?" Post-modern poets like himself, Olson suggested, had to proceed as Herodotean explorers of reality, creatively annihilating the Platonic dissociation of *muthos* and *logos* ("fictitious narrative" vs. "fact") which had been so determined for so long.'[7] Crucial to the proposal in this thesis is that Olson wants *to find out for* him*self* and that is the basis of his knowledge. Clearly, it could be argued, he uses others to make this possible, but that does not change his basis and is the engine that projects his proposals.

Thomson refers to 'istorin in his notes to chapter one, 'istorin to him appears to mean "finding out for oneself," instead of depending on hearsay. The word had already been used by the philosophers. But while these are looking for truth, Herodotus is looking for evidence.'[8] In chapter one, Thomson writes, 'The Attic writers generally call a Fable simply a Logos, but sometimes they call it a Muthos, and, later, an Apologos or Apologue. Herodotus calls Aesop a Logopoios, and is himself called by Aristotle not that, but 'the *Muthologos*.' What it all comes to is this, that for the audiences, which hearkened to the Stories, a Muthos was a Logos, and a Logos a Muthos. They were two names for the same thing.' (1937: 19) Herodotus' business, notes Thomson, 'is with the Logos as such rather than with the truth of it. He puts the matter ... this way. *I am bound to say the things that are said; I am not in any way bound to believe them.*'[9]

In 1948 Edward Dahlberg had handed in his notice as a lecturer at Black Mountain to the acting rector, Josef Albers. As his replacement, Dahlberg suggested Olson. In October 1948 Olson 'agreed to come once [to the college] and deliver three lectures. The option to return one week a month through the remainder of the year was left open to him.'[10] 'On his first visit he conducted several classes for writing students in the Studies Building and delivered three open lectures, generous, far-ranging "public goes" offered after evening meals in the college dining hall. Both classes and lectures were distinguished by a speculative expansiveness that would mark all his Black Mountain teaching. Drawing unexpected connections with breathtaking speed, he leaped across space and time, linking Troilus and new astronomy, Frazer and Freud, field physics and Frobenius, projective geometry's "gains of space" and epic poetry's timeless mythic archetypes, creating an open-ended architecture of knowledge that placed twentieth-century man (sic) in vivid relation to cosmic patterns of eternity. "We are a perpendicular axis of planes," he declared, "constantly being intersected by planes of experience coming in from the past–coming up from the ground, the underground tide–going out to the future …"'[11]

[7] Tom Clark (1991) *Charles Olson. The Allegory of a Poet's Life,* New York & London: W.W. Norton & Co., 220-221.
[8] J.A.K. Thomson (1935) *The Art of the Logos,* London: George Allen and Unwin, 237.
[9] Thompson 1937: 23.
[10] Clark 1991: 140.
[11] Clark 1991: 142-143.

'At the request of rector Albers and college treasurer Theodore Dreier... [Olson] produced a short promotional statement titled "Black Mountain as seen by a writer-visitor." ... In it, he held up the winding "sidehill road" between the college dining hall and Studies Building–emblematic of Black Mountain's unique nonlinear, Moebius-like progression toward knowledge–as an image of "traffic of human society" that would one day prove more important in the history of American education "than Mark Hopkins' log." In his choice of a renowned nineteenth-century New England educator as phantom competition there was special personal meaning, as there was in his designation of a discontinuous, post-Euclidean "principle of intensification" as Black Mountain's alternative to the entrenched humanistic education system: it has also his own first principle as both teacher and writer.'[12]

The concept of the moebius strip recurs in Olson's structure for knowledge. The strip was discovered independently by the mathematicians August Ferdinand Möbius and Johann Benedict in 1858. Olson often aligns the concept with projective and non-Euclidean geometry. In December 1949, Olson 'introduced an American University exhibition of Corrado Cagli's 'Drawings in the 4th Dimension' with a lecture on projective geometry, Cagli's Moebius experiments, space and poetry.'[13] Olson's concept of knowledge is further elaborated by his distrust of the received Western philosophical tradition. He briefly traced cultural degeneration after 'Socrates, Aristotle and Plato, with invention of a discourse system based on logic, generalization and classification.'[14] 'The bad habits bred by this system of discourse, Olson contended, had cut man (sic) off from elemental contact with the phenomenal world, integrating and unifying embodiment of the "only two universes which count ... that of himself, as organism, and that of his environment, the earth and planets."'[15] Olson writes in *Human Universe,* '... such an analysis only accomplishes a *description*, does not come to grips with what really matters: that a thing, any thing, impinges on us by a more important fact, its self-existence, without reference to any other thing, in short, the very character of it which calls our attention to it, which wants us to know more about it, its particularity. This is what we are confronted by, not the thing's "class," any hierarchy, of quality or quantity, but the thing itself, and its *relevance* to ourselves who are the experience of it (whatever it may mean to someone else, or whatever other relations it may have).'[16] Thus his proposal derived from Herodotus, *to find out for yourself,* is given a breadth of clarity by his breadth of research.

Brilliantly Olson then linked *'to find out for yourself'* with 'Man is estranged from that with which he is most familiar,' a paradox from Heraclitus 'he'd made a motto in [his] personal and historical investigations of ... [1952], was again the keynote of his latest and most extensive effort to refound from archaic makings a culture

[12] Clark 1991: 144.
[13] Clark: 158.
[14] Clark: 199.
[15] Clark: 200.
[16] Olson (1967a) *Human Universe and other essays,* edited by Donald Allen, New York: Grove Press, 6.

for the "mythological present": a series of eight lectures for his 'New Sciences of Man Institute', delivered on Sunday nights in February and March to highlight the new college session. The lectures, drafted hurriedly in the first weeks of 1953,[17] offered "a chance for me to draw together all the sort of 'research' I've started the last five years." With characteristic long reach he set out to address "the totality of the problem of the phenomenon of man" through the related "sciences" of archaeology, culture morphology and mythology. For the hard evidence to back up his ambitious conjecture he had hoped to be able to rely on a panel of distinguished experts, including Carl Sauer talking on Place, English archaeologist Christopher Hawkes on Culture, Carl Jung on Mythology.'[18] Ed Dorn subsequently observed in his essay 'What I See in *The Maximus Poems*,' "The nouns seem to calm themselves here, and take on the sheerings and simplicity of immediate knowledge which resides together in what is more felt, the searching substances of the inscribed field of Gloucester,"'[19]

Knowledge for Olson is further complexed by his clear statement that it needs to be methodological if it is to be of any use. This was clarified by his 1953 statement,

'... nature is only conceivably observable in one of two ways – from one of two vantage points. Either she is primarily known (as she is known) as any one of us alive human creatures issue from her

(I am being literally generic)

or she becomes what

she also but only, for us, secondarily is: environment, that which surrounds us, indeed, even to the inclusion of any other human being, mind you. Which is the first way to define the objective; that it is anything OUTSIDE any one of us. This is knowable. Most of us stop at the fact that it is experiencable. But the other half of it is that it is knowable, in the only sense in which knowledge makes sense, that is methodological. It can be used.'[20]

Knowledge for Olson thus involves *'to find out for yourself'* coupled to the understanding, needing to take into account in the process of understanding, that 'Man is estranged from that with which he is most familiar.' This combination can then be made propositional. In autumn 1953, 'While Creeley took care of the literary end of the curriculum that term, Olson himself conducted a current-affairs class on "the reasons, causes and consequences of the present."'[21] This came to the fore in 1956, on Olson's return to Black Mountain and the arrival of Creeley's successor in the job, Robert Duncan, who noted that Olson '... "caught fire," making up for lost time by conducting his remaining handful of student disciples and a few new ones on a seven-hour lecture tour through the origins

[17] *Olson, The Journal of the Charles Olson Archives,* number 10, 1978.
[18] Clark 1991: 233.
[19] Clark: 236.
[20] Olson (1970) *The Special View of History,* edited from 1956 lecture by Ann Charters, Berkeley: Oyez, 29-30.
[21] Clark: 243.

and history of language and culture, accounting for recent advances into the post-modern ("what went out in 1945 and has come on since") by reaching all the way back to the Sumerians. His reliance on the Samuel Noah Kramer materials passed on to him by Frances [Boldereff] made the lecture "sound as much y[ou]rs as mine," he told her.'[22] 'In March, while Duncan came in to take over the writer-instructor chores,' Olson 'turned to the bigger conjectural picture, highlighting the season with ten days of lectures on "The Special View of History." The expanded philosophical outlook of the lectures was largely the result of Olson's reading in recent months of Alfred North Whitehead's *Process and Reality,* a work in which he found sketched out the cosmic dimensions of an enlarged creation–a park of "eternal/events" in which matter, space and time were essentially interrelated and in which there was ample allowance for the poet's habitual disposition to "stay fluid" because there were no partitions and no closure, only the continuous revitalizing flow of process. Olson recognized at once the majestic setting of a cosmological poetics as well as a new view of history...'[23] Whitehead was the 'British metaphysician who had "cleared out the gunk / by getting the universe in" and was now to become for Olson the "great master and companion of my poem[s]."'[24] Whitehead, along with conceptions of negative capability (from John Keats) and 'the uncertainty principal' (from Werner Heisenberg) complexed into a new important conception, '... for Olson as poet, the condition of unknowingness often paradoxically proved the most fertile.'[25] Olson had noted as early as 1947, '... you can take an attitude, the creative vantage. See her as OBJECT in MOTION, something to be shaped, for use. It involves a first act of physics. You can observe POTENTIAL and VELOCITY separately, have to, to measure THE THING. You get approximate results. They are usable enough if you include the Uncertainty Principle, Heisenberg's law that you learn the speed at the cost of exact knowledge of the energy and the energy at the loss of exact knowledge of the speed.'[26] Like Melville, as Olson put it himself, 'reading is a gauge of him, at all points of his life. He was a skald (a composer and writer of poems honouring heroes and their deeds), and knew how to appropriate the work of others. He read to write.'[27] It is what, Olson noted, Dahlberg calls originality.[28]

'An essay done on Melville for the *Chicago Review* at the time, "Equal, That Is, to the Real Itself," reflected his ongoing thinking on the central formal questions posed by his long poem. How would the post-modern epic creator, swamped by a universe of boundless energy and motion, deal with the mass quantity of data before him? How, further, could he include history at all without succumbing to

[22] Clark: 252.
[23] Clark: 253.
[24] Clark: 254.
[25] Clark: 262.
[26] Clark: 68.
[27] Olson (1967b) *Call me Ishmael, A Study of Melville,* London: Jonathan Cape, 37.
[28] Olson, 1967b: 38.

the hypermaterialistic supermarket culture of the present...'[29] 'I have been "rushing" sort of, stealing all the time I could get all my life ... It has always been a race ... I had so much to learn ...' (Charles Olson's undated letter to Kate Olson.[30] For Olson that learning is the basis of his knowing and provided him with the necessity of his propositional art.

One of Olson's activities with knowledge was through history. Olson used archaeology, manuscripts and writing by historians to give his work an impetus from which his enquiries and the process of these enquiries are an intricate part of his poetry.

Maximus 'Letter 23', started in 1953, asks about the beginnings of Gloucester, where Olson grew up. He drew from the writings of historians like Frances Rose-Troup and (*John White, The Patriarch of Dorchester and the Founder of Massachusetts, 1575-1648,* [1930] and *Roger Conant and the Early Settlement of on the North Shore of Massachusetts* [1926]) and John J. Babson (*History of the Town of Gloucester, Cape Ann, Including the Town of Rockport* [1860] and *Notes and Additions to the History of Gloucester: Part First: Early Settlers* [1876]) During the notation of some of what Rose-Troup and others gave as history, Olson addresses his old Harvard tutor, Frederick Merk, in the poem. He had already written to him and Merk had supplied what he had asked for, a list of pertinent titles giving the state of knowledge regarding this early settlement of Gloucester. 'What we have here–literally in my own front yard, as I sd to Merk,/asking him what delving, into "fishermans ffield" recent historians . . ./ not telling him it was a poem I was interested in, aware I'd scare him/ off...'[31] He immediately then shifts into noting that he, Olson, is Herodotus and not Thucydides. He refers to what J.A.K. Thomson had noted in *The Art of Logos, 'muthologos* has lost such ground since Pindar'.[32] and leads on into saying 'that *muthos*/is false. *Logos*/isn't–was facts. Thus/Thucydides//I would be an historian as Herodotus was, looking/for one self for the evidence of/what is said: Altham says/Winslow/was at Cape Ann in April,/1624 ...'[33]

In January 1962 Olson started 'A Later Note on Letter # 15' and set out this important aspect of his poetics, iterated above, in which Olson the knower, observing nature from the outside, merges directly to the exaltation of ordinary life. 'In english,' he writes, the poetics became meubles – the furniture...'[34] He follows on to say that after 1630 'Descartes was the value//until Whitehead, who cleared the gunk/by getting the universe in (as against man alone//& <u>that</u> concept of history (not Herodotus's,/which was a verb, to find out for

[29] Clark 1991: 272.
[30] Clark: 274.
[31] Charles Olson (1983) Letter 23, *The Maximus Poems,* Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 104.
[32] Olson 1983: 104.
[33] Olson, 1983: 104-5.
[34] Olson (1983) Letter 15, 249.

yourself://'istorian, 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 an form of record on the spot//–live television or 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'[35] He concludes, 'The poetics of such a situation/are yet to be found out'[36]

[35] Olson 1983: 249.
[36] Olson 1983: 249.