**Charles Olson (1910-1970)**

Actively writing in the 1950s and 1960s, poet and critic Charles Olson is a key figure of both the New American Poetry and the Black Mountain School. He is best known for articulating the idea of an open field poetics opposed to inherited stanza form in his essay “Projective Verse” as well as his exploration of the long poem in *The Maximus Poems*. His poetry draws from the earlier work of poets such as William Carlos Williams and Ezra Pound as well as writers from his own generation like Robert Creeley and Robert Duncan. Olson’s influence is felt across the North American poetic spectrum, but most notably in the work of the Vancouver-based TISH group (George Bowering, Daphne Marlatt, Fred Wah, among others) and American poets like Susan Howe and Rachel Blau DuPlessis,

Over the course of his career, Charles Olson produced extensive amounts of poetry, criticism, and correspondence, leaving behind an unwieldy and influential body of work. Key to an understanding of his work is the 1950 essay “Projective Verse,” published originally as a pamphlet and republished more widely in Donald Allen’s anthology *The New American Poetry* (1960) and Olson’s essay collection *Human Universe and Other Essays* (1967). Olson’s “projective” verse is counter-academic in the sense that it seeks to resist the then-dominant formalist poetics favoured by the New Critics. In the essay, Olson argues for a perceptual poetics rooted in the breath of the poet, taking as key compositional units the syllable and the line (rather than the foot and stanza). For Olson, poetry turns away from finished product and toward kinetic process as the poem becomes a record of the poet’s perceptions of the world – a world the poet is not separate from (as a detached observer treating the world as an object to be described) but instead is a part of. Olson’s key poetic text is perhaps the three volume long poem *The Maximus Poems*, which takes the town of Glouchester, Massachusetts as its subject. The poem is wide-ranging both in terms of form and content. Olson sets the historical events and figures of Glouchester against present day considerations of the town, at the same time shifting voices and styles from personal lyric to documentary to historical epic.

Framed by editor Donald Allen in his anthology *The New American Poetry: 1945-1960* as one of the key figures of the “Black Mountain School” alongside Robert Creeley, Robert Duncan, and Denise Levertov, among others. In this group, Allen includes the poets “closely identified with the two important magazines of the period, *Origin* and *Black Mountain Review*” (xii). The name of the group also connects to the group’s association with Black Mountain College in North Carolina, particularly Olson’s role as college rector. Olson’s influence can be felt both among his peers and in poets of the following generation. One key moment where we can view this influence directly is the 1963 Vancouver Poetry Conference, where Olson, Creeley, Duncan, Levertov, and Beat writer Allen Ginsberg co-taught a summer course at the University of British Columbia organized by Warren Tallman that has become a key moment in Canadian Literature because of the cross-border

Key Texts

Poetry

*y & x* (1949)

*In Cold Hell, In Thicket* (1953)

*The Distances* (1960)

*The Maximus Poems* (1960)

*The Maximus Poems IV, V, VI* (1968)

*The Maximus Poems Volume Three* (1975)

*The Maximus Poems* (Collected) (1983)

*The Collected Poems of Charles Olson* (1987)

*A Nation of Nothing But Poems: Supplementary Poems* (1989)

Criticism/Poetics

*Call Me Ishmael* (1947)

*The Mayan Letters* (1953)

*A Bibliography on America for Ed Dorn* (1964)

*Human Universe and Other Essays* (1965)

*Casual Mythology* (1969)

*The Post Office: A Memoir of his Father* (1974)

*Muthologos: Lectures and Interviews* – Revised Second Edition – Ed. Ralph Maud (2010)

Correspondence

*Charles Olson and Robert Creeley: The Complete Correspondence* – Eds. George F. Butterick and Richard Blevins (1980-1996)

*Charles Olson and Cid Corman: Complete Correspondence 1950-1964* – Ed. George Evans (1987)

Online Resources

A wide array of sound recordings at PennSound: <http://writing.upenn.edu/pennsound/x/Olson.php>

A short film from 1966, part of a documentary series called *USA: Poetry* by Richard Moore – in two parts:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dr_4xN4iZmM>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3SeTGRfgfXk>