

**“...More Careful Zones and Strata”:
Charles Olson’s Parallax Poetics in *The Maximus Poems*.
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“The Earth is the geography of our being.”
—Charles Olson, audio track of Henry Ferrini’s “Polis is This”.

Like Jacques Lacan’s Real, geographic terrain always escapes full symbolization. Regardless of the precision or detail of a cartographic representation, distortion and incompleteness haunt every map, rendering it a merely asymptotic approach to its object-referent. And yet, maps *ground* subjects in alien land; maps offer both their makers and readers situational coordinates, placing cartographic subjects relative to geographic objects in an imagined field. Since accurate maps are a strategic necessity to any negotiation with geographic terrain, especially a colonial interface with inhabitants as in the discovery of the “new world” by Europeans, the desire for a precise representation of area is as powerful as that for the land itself. This recursive relationship of cartography and its object produces maps as signs of desire, as unconscious representations of arrogance and ignorance, and as interpretable traces of the perception of space over time.

Throughout *The Maximus Poems*, Charles Olson researches a historical dynamism between the European discovery of terrain and its representation. By including historical navigators and cartographers in his epic poem of place, Olson innovates a poetics of second-order mapping that engages with the history of geographic discovery and cartographic imagination, describing the space of the present with reference to the history of its discovery and the subsequent socio-spatial dialectic that inevitably configures both the space and its inhabitants. In *Maximus*, Olson’s obsessive, idiosyncratic focus on specific spatial objects allows his formal arc to span both his immediate surroundings in the present, and the planetary patterns of migration throughout history.

This unconventional production of spatial juxtaposition and disjunction is one reason mainstream criticism has had, as Walter Kalaidjian puts it, “a good deal of trouble deciding just what to make of [Olson’s] poetry” (*Languages of Liberation*, 68). But Olson offers an instructive mapping of mapping with his brief but dense reflection on the significance of the ancient “Vinland Map,” a representation of present day Newfoundland created by Norse explorers sometime in the 10th to 12th centuries (*Collected Prose*, 326). Indicating his second-order relationship to the material traces of early exploration, Olson called the Vinland map “the latest discovery of discovering” (*CP* 327). Olson’s exploration of the Norse explorations is later added to the long list of navigators and cartographers in *The Maximus Poems*, and ultimately assists in decoding the spatial register of that epic series.

The Vinland Map is a document of the 10th century adventures of “the ‘Swedes’ or Northmen” as they “threw out three huge drives from the Polar North down on to the three legs of the future: on to Europe, east to Rus (Swedish word) -sia, and *West*—to Greenland AND VINLAND”(CP, 326). “[T]hese new ‘discoveries’ emphasizing Norse occupation of Newfoundland, at the end of

the 10th century,” Olson wrote, “have the advantage of adding ‘Zone’ firmness to ‘Strata,’ in what shall continue, increasingly, to be an interest, in both England and the United States, in basal matter of both nations”(333). Olson is asserting that the foundational, “basal” substance of these nations is extant in this cartographic material, and requires a spatio-temporal study he feels poetry is optimally suited for:

“The care anyway, ... is to improve or re-gain an attention [to geographic history], which off-hand would seem to have been lost. No wonder poets care for finding out a better sort somewhere lower, and deeper, and in more careful Zones and Strata than their quite recent counterparts.” (*Collected Prose* 335)

In what follows, I’ll unpack the distinction Zone/Strata, attending to the geographic history Olson practices in a poetics that ultimately involves competing visions of world views, or what Fredric Jameson calls “cognitive mapping” — a represented/imagined totality which includes the subject’s relationship to that global structure.

1. Zones/Strata.

The “zones-and-strata” metaphor was first developed in the 1920s by controversial Australian geographer Griffith Taylor to illustrate his theories of human evolution and migration. Via spatio-temporal abstraction, "Taylor's zones-and-strata block diagrams provided an impression of underlying structures (strata) and allowed him to illustrate his theory that more recently evolved races overtook more primitive races over time and across space” (*Visionary* 96).

I speculate here that Olson’s *zone*, like Taylor’s, refers to geographic space, while *strata* refers to the layered accumulations of history. The Vinland Map adds geographic data to a vague, discursive historical record. The addition of geographic specifics to the static legend of the past is an imperative Olson developed out of his appreciation for Herodotean mythic history, as opposed to the Thucydidean model of “scientific” chronicles taken for granted as fact. Olson interpreted Herodotus’s method as “finding out for oneself,” an approach Kalaidjian asserts “resists the static periodization of the past imaged as world picture” (*Languages of Liberation*, 76). I argue that in *Maximus* and other work, Olson is seeking in zone data this “better sort somewhere lower and deeper” in a process of defining subjectivity. For Olson, finding out for oneself blends inevitably into *finding oneself*.

Just as the Vinland map effectively expands a (literal) worldview at a discrete historical moment, I want to examine how a world picture or totality functions in *The Maximus Poems*. I will specify this function further as I argue that Olson’s complex deployment of geographic history generally and spatial representation in particular can be described, in Slavoj Žižek’s terminology, as parallax.

For Olson, Zones and Strata together create a representation of totality or world picture. But in the *Maximus* we find many world pictures, mapped and re-mapped in Non-Euclidean space: as Don Byrd notes in his 1988 talk on Olson entitled “A Sequence of Events Measurable in Time,”

[the] world pictures themselves in the *Maximus* are temporary and almost decorative: some are traditional ... and some are idiosyncratic [...] The *Imago Mundi* is dynamic. The *Maximus* does not exhibit an image of the world, rather it shows a succession of images....
(*In Relation*: Acts 10, 141-42)

Here Byrd intuits the meta-level of Olson's work: part of the poet's intellectual project is to bound across and effectively map these successive world images onto a larger moving picture of human striving after knowledge, grasping toward *scientia*.

I argue we should begin to see Olson's work as a systematic cognitive map—in Fredric Jameson's terms, a picture of the totality which includes the subject's relationship to that global whole. Borrowing the concrete orientation Kevin Lynch deployed to theorize what made an environmental image legible or confusing, Jameson's cognitive mapping uses space as allegory for the complex interrelationships of subjects. Studying "the ease with which its parts can be recognized and can be organized into a coherent pattern," Lynch asked what made certain urban environments easy to orient and navigate in (*Image of the City*, 2-3). Similarly, Jameson is asking what effect the symptoms of cultural postmodernism have on the totality.

2. Map versus Terrain: periplum and parallax

Maximus is suffused with generative, if often oblique, references to early cartographers and navigators: Ptolemy, Eratostenes, Pytheas and Odysseus appear from ancient history; Juan de la Cosa and John Winthrop contribute discoveries of the Americas; and modern-day navigators are plucked by Olson from Gloucester's role of heroic sailors and fishermen. Although Olson may be obsessed as much with the personae of these characters as with their discoveries, their aggregation in the *Maximus* generates a poetic representation of representation: Olson tracks the discovery of discovery, the same meta-data he read in the Vinland Map.

To take just one example, the cover image of *Maximus* Volume Three is "a *periplus* of the coast of Massachusetts from Gloucester to Marblehead, said to have been drawn by John Winthrop from the deck of the *Arabella* as he sailed south toward Boston in 1630" (*Maximus III*, 5). This schematic record of travel creates an interface of space and place; the *zone* of geographic discovery simultaneously reveals the historical *strata* of European exploitation of the "new world." The map, like the Vinland chart, expands the known cosmos at a particular historical moment, and details the particulars of safe passage for the purposes of colonial gain.

Winthrop's map distills the parallax situation of cartography: the spatialization of area by moving through it horizontally in first person creates a chart imagined as an objective top-down view, even while it is actually the product of idiosyncratic, subjective distortions. The subjective view is known as *periplum*, a concept Olson borrows from Ezra Pound: geography 'not as land looks on a map / but as sea bord seen by men sailing' (*Cantos*, 324). Periplum is closely related to the horizontal engagement with topography that de Certeau calls a *spatializing* process: *place*, the aerial character of maps, becomes *space* via subjective movement through area. All maps are produced (and consumed) via this oscillation between two distorted views: what we can see from our limited perspective, and what we posit as the view from an imagined perspective from above.

Between these visual extremes lies the parallax gap, an ideal conceptual tool for determining how the psychology of space affects the interaction of spatial subjects and objects. “Parallax” describes the visual effect on an object of a change in observational position; for example, the apparent difference in position of an object when alternately closing one eye. Slavoj Žižek describes a parallax gap as “the confrontation of two closely linked perspectives between which no neutral common ground is possible” (*Parallax View*, 4).

In *Maximus*, Olson discloses and compares some of the very earliest historical maps and navigations of the world. Eratosthenes’s estimation of the size of the Earth, the Vinland Map of Norse exploration, the *mappe monde* that La Cosa draws: each of these examples grapples with a profoundly disorienting problem: how to represent geographic details not fully understood, nor directly observed. “On first Looking out through Juan de la Cosa’s Eyes” is a primary example of Olson’s sustained meditation on the mapping of unrepresented land:

Behaim—and nothing
insula Azores to
Cipangu [...]

(As men, my town, my two towns
talk, talked of Gades, talk
of Cash’s

drew, on a table, in spelt,
with a finger, in beer, a
portulans

But before La Cosa, nobody
could have
a mappemunde(81)

This sequence relates the “completion” of the *mappe monde*, Behaim’s version of which contained blank space between the Atlantic and Pacific. The portulans, shared via improvised map or spoken anecdote, is an ancient means of generating social space, propagating geographic details to those who have yet to confirm them with their own eyes. Before La Cosa there was no full world map; after La Cosa, the vague shapes of continents are filled in, but the Lacanian Real of geographic terrain still escapes. What La Cosa made was a document of distortion, and therefore of desire:

the 1st to navigate

those waters

thus to define

the limits

of the land. (251)

The shapes on La Cosa's or Winthrop's map are representations of an imagined perspective: in the related gap between the marks on the page and the actual terrain lies periplum, subjective motion through the object field, used to generate the illusion of order seen from above—even when no human eye had taken in that aerial view. Periplum and the maps that result are primordial responses to a deep subjective disorientation, detectable in both the void of unrepresentable terrain, and the unfathomable lack which constitutes the subject.

3. Disorientation—“Pytheas's sludge”

The impulse to map is given substance in *Maximus* in the form of a disorienting mist or sludge, described by the ancient explorer Pytheas as an indistinguishable mix of air, water, and land. This blending of elements in a mystical obstruction may be thought of as disorientation allegorized; an imagined obstacle at the edge of mapped space. For Olson, the “The new land” appears to La Cosa “out of the mists / out of Pytheas's sludge // out of Mermaids & monsters // (out of Judas-land...” (78). At the extreme of disorientation is *terra incognita*, unknown, unexplored territory, an obscene (in the sense of *off-stage*) outer limit which both compels and frames cartography. In Lacanian terms, this disorientation functions as desire. The will to explore and navigate and map is drive. At the edge of early maps of the Earth is a limit: *Ultima Thule*, a concept Olson chased through ancient cultures in his research around *The Mayan Letters*, following it back past the Greeks “to the Phenicians, Cretans, Sumerians” (*Mayan* 46).

For Olson, the “outermost reach of the world” is that which is necessarily absent from the map; data unthought, cognitively unmapped. In the itineraries and cartographic representations that diagram the “subject-centered or existential journey of the traveler,” in Jameson's words, we see a profound *terra incognita* which always persists as the terrifying, disorienting background of subjectivity (*Postmodernism* 51-52). In this way, maps posit an *outside* for the representation of our position in the totality. Literal mapping and cognitive mapping intersect here. *Ultima Thule* needn't exist, but it must occupy a place in the imaginary organization of space; an organization itself made legible by the overarching view which takes in everything, even that farthest point.

Olson's poetic cognitive mapping charts a secular, materialist universe of cosmological mystery, represented as much *in* as *by* space. Fredric Jameson's call for art that performs cognitive mapping is one that Olson has already answered: his spatial poetics represents a means of conceptualizing an epic quantity of spatial and historical data, representing the world totality of

economic, spatial and historical relations, and simultaneously studying the production of a mapping subject in their interface.

Returning to where I started, with the manifold meanings of the epigraph, of course the Earth is the geography of our being, the “there” of *being-there*; but in an important sense this phrase also applies to the shaping of subjectivity through a planetary perspective. We have no choice but to think of our subjectivity in terms of space: as a constant triangulation of our relative position in a larger totality. In later *Maximus*, as Olson wants to “take the Earth in under a single review / as Eratosthenes as / Ptolemy...” he imagines the perspective of the sun, observing from its merciful/menacing distance the procession of our turning world. Perhaps this perspective is Olson’s *Ultima Thule*, forming and informing the subject of his position, intuited via a false-objective outside point. “The Earth is the geography of our being.”

As Olson’s parallax poesis engages with the history of the will to orientation and totalization, he ultimately shows that geography is to Earth as the subject is to being; each is a *terra incognita* which both frustrates and impels discovery.

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