

The Collected Letters
of **CHARLES OLSON**
and **J. H. PRYNNE**

EDITED BY **Ryan Dobran**

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Charles Olson and J. H. Prynne**



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Introduction

This volume contains nearly all of the letters written from 1961 to 1970 between American poet Charles Olson (1910–1970) and English poet J. H. Prynne (b. 1936).¹ Prynne initiated the correspondence by writing to Olson on November 7, 1961 in search of work for *Prospect*, a small literary magazine published in Cambridge, England. Prynne also closed out the correspondence with a dedicatory epigraph to *Fire Lizard*, a short poem sequence written on New Year's Day, 1970, that would reach Olson just days before his death. I have collected the letters from two sources: the Charles Olson Research Collection in the Thomas J. Dodd Research Center at the University of Connecticut, and Prynne's private archive in Cambridge.

The Charles Olson Research Collection is well-trodden territory, containing an expansive and well-lit archive of the poet's notes, letters, and manuscripts as well as books from his personal library. Olson's archival materials have been a wellspring for frequent posthumous publications, including the reconstructed third volume of his *Maximus Poems*. The many volumes of correspondence, essays, and poems testify to the enthusiasm and diligence of scholars such as George F. Butterick and Ralph Maud, among others.

Prynne's private collection of correspondence and manuscripts is scarcely known at all, and does not yet exist as an archive available to a scholarly public, although several letters to others besides Olson have been published in small magazines such as *The English Intelligencer*, *Grosseteste Review*, *Parataxis*, and *Quid*.² That said, Prynne took care to organize these correspondence materials

1. I have excluded Olson's letter to Prynne dated September 9, 1965, because it seems quite obviously to have been addressed to him by mistake. I have also left out Prynne's brief, confused reply of November 21, 1965.

2. A comprehensive bibliography may be found in the relevant section of Tencer, *The Bibliography of J. H. Prynne*.

chronologically, which made reconstructing a timeline of their exchange relatively straightforward. Prynne also photocopied his letters prior to sending them, and even transcribed some of Olson's early letters to ease his consultation of the older poet's notoriously turbid script. Prynne's letters to Olson have long been available at the University of Connecticut, but, with one exception, this is the first time Olson's letters to Prynne have been published.³

For those familiar with the cavalier, mischievous, and omnivorous attention paid to various discourses by both writers, the fact that these letters are dappled with citations from and allusions to various source materials—from Anglo-Saxon chronicles to quantum field theory—should come as no surprise. Indeed, one of the most distinguishing characteristics of this correspondence is the quantity of texts and bibliographical information that Prynne sent to Olson.⁴ Because it is not possible to reprint such materials in full, I have supplemented any missing bibliographical details in the notes for each accompanying letter; when such materials were sent under separate cover without an attached note, I have given the bibliographical details in italics within the body of the text. In many instances, Prynne's own citation made additional reference superfluous. My own citations correspond to items listed in the bibliography.

If Olson and Prynne share a passion for knowledge, they share much less in terms of style. The difference in the two poets' sentence structure, punctuation, and handwriting is remarkable. Prynne typed the majority of his letters onto Gonville and Caius College letterhead, though there are some postcards and several letters from elsewhere: nearby Grantchester, Kent, and even Buffalo, New York, where he taught during the summer of 1965. Olson wrote the majority of his letters by hand on whatever seemed readily available, including advertisements for his own poetry readings and construction paper. In my transcriptions, I have attempted to produce a readable book while retaining idiosyncrasies that seem to express authorial intent. I have not converted Olson's abundant use of plus signs (+) to ampersands (&), and I have maintained his peculiar use of prose line breaks only when it seems to have been rhetorical, rather than a consequence of page margins. I have also silently corrected what seem to be obvious spelling or typing errors by both writers, and preserved underlining rather than converting it to italicization.

The letters are arranged chronologically according to the date of composition or postmark, although this retrospective order sometimes disturbs the interpersonal timeline of sending and receiving letters across the Atlantic. The

3. Olson's letter to Prynne dated May 14, 1966, appears in Olson, *Selected Letters*, 361–62.

4. See Maud, *Olson's Reading*, 153–56 for a partial list.

transmission delays, however minor, often resulted in one writer's initiating a new line of inquiry before the other had the chance to respond. Notably, there is a general decline in their letter writing from 1967 to 1970, which, I would suggest, is a direct consequence of the poets meeting in England in the autumn of 1966. For all of their mutual admiration and intimacy, as demonstrated in these letters, they did not seem to get along in person. Despite several trips to Europe during the 1960s, including extended visits to London and Dorchester, it seems that Olson never made it to Cambridge.

Various scholars on both sides of the Atlantic have recognized and written about the Prynne-Olson connection. Robert von Hallberg's monograph on Olson mentions the elder poet's influence on Edward Dorn and Amiri Baraka, as well as Prynne.⁵ Butterick's "Editor's Afterword" to his edition of the collected *Maximus Poems* acknowledges Prynne's assistance with the typescript preparation of the second volume.⁶ The revised second edition of *Muthologos* reveals Prynne as a guide for Olson's thought in both "Reading at Berkeley—The Day After" and "The *Paris Review* Interview."⁷ In his biography of Olson, Tom Clark refers to Prynne as Olson's "loyal, assiduous poetic research assistant."⁸ Maud's polemical follow-up biography, *Charles Olson at the Harbor*, which takes aim at the evidence in Clark's, mentions Prynne once in passing.⁹ Despite these mentions, the transatlantic relation between Prynne and Olson remains somewhat obscure, though this is changing.¹⁰

Often loosely assembled via Eric Mottram's term the "British Poetry Revival," Prynne and his contemporaries were eager to renovate the stagnant ironies of the Movement poets prominently on display in postwar England. One instrument of breaking the hegemony of official verse culture was reading, discussing, teaching, publishing, and distributing postwar American poetry and prose. Very early on in these letters, Prynne mentions the condescension with which the English university and "Betjeman's England (the logical successor to Auden's) sees modern US writing" (November 26, 1961). For Prynne, as for so many of his generation, it is that loosely affiliated but dynamic organon of queer, anticapitalist, mythopoetic, new age, and anachronistic attitudes and forms nominated by Donald Allen in his anthology *New American Poetry* that catalyzed new forms of expression after 1960.¹¹

5. See von Hallberg, *Charles Olson*, 208–10.

6. See Olson, *Maximus*, 637–45.

7. See Olson, *Muthologos*, 193–203 and 355–414, respectively.

8. Clark, *Charles Olson*, 299.

9. Maud, *Charles Olson at the Harbor*, 200.

10. See especially the work of Brinton, Mellors, Owens, Rodríguez, Sheppard, and Sutherland.

11. See Hickman for a discussion of the influence of this anthology.

But even before the occasion of that anthology, Olson had already touched down in Cambridge. The English poet and novelist Elaine Feinstein founded and edited the Cambridge literary magazine *Prospect*, and she had reached out to Olson in 1959 to ask for a statement of poetics, which was later published in *New American Poetry* alongside the highly influential essay “Projective Verse.” Olson’s poetics, focused on the poet’s body as a verse-making instrument, as well as on the equivalence of history and experience, continued to crystallize throughout the 1960s in *Prospect* and the subscriber-only worksheet *The English Intelligencer*.¹² Olson had also been in communication with the Cambridge-educated Scottish poet Gael Turnbull as early as June 1957 concerning his plan to view the seventeenth-century English merchant records pertaining to Gloucester, Massachusetts, where Olson spent summers as a child and later settled. Olson would not arrive in England until nearly ten years later, at that point having already received Prynne’s detailed notes and microfilm of the relevant Port Books from the Public Records Office in London.¹³

Prynne’s first exposure to Olson may have been through having seen the latter’s work in earlier issues of *Prospect*, though his yearlong fellowship at Harvard provided an invaluable introduction to the American scene by way of Gordon Cairnie’s Grolier Poetry Book Shop. Prior to writing to Olson, Prynne had corresponded with the poet and editor of *Origin*, Cid Corman, himself an extensive correspondent with Olson during the 1950s and 1960s. At this point, *Prospect* had passed to Prynne, and in 1961, he was actively writing to American poets for new work, among them Robert Creeley, Robert Duncan, and Edward Dorn.

Prynne had already achieved some recognition as a poet—enough, at least, to land him a spot on Peter Orr’s BBC radio program, *The Poet Speaks*. Shortly after this correspondence began, Routledge & Kegan Paul published Prynne’s *Force of Circumstance and Other Poems* (1962), but it is clear that this was not the type of poetry that Prynne wanted to write. In a letter to Olson dated September 28 of that year, he refers to his book as “96% of no interest to me. Zip-fastener type of thing—dead as no door-nail would be, given any decent chance.” Prynne’s second stage of “early work,” written between 1965 and 1968 and split between *Kitchen Poems* (1968) and *The White Stones* (1969), is informed by Olson’s dedication to the use of source materials, but delivered in a languid, philosophical style, furnished out of the moral ecology of English and German romanticism. From the current vantage, with over a half century of retrospective distance, this era in Prynne’s work appears to

12. See the thorough study by Alex Latter.

13. Olson, “Reading at Berkeley—The Day After,” *Muthologos*, 194n2.

be epiphenomenal to the vast body of rhapsodic, often militantly paratactic experimentation that comprises the bulk of his poetic career from 1969 to the present.

When considered at all, the transatlantic transmission of attitudes, forms, and ideas about this poetry has been viewed largely as an eastern linear movement from Olson to Prynne, from American to British poetics. The overwhelming prestige of modern American poetry has perhaps obscured the entanglement. In this regard, these letters suggest various ways that Prynne influenced the course of Olson's thinking in the last decade of his life: by making large swathes of information readily available for consultation, by providing an initial typescript for his *Maximus Poems IV, V, VI* (1968), and by articulating Olson's own poetics to the older poet. One of the first published mentions of their relationship is embedded within Olson's wild interview with Gerard Malanga that appeared in the *Paris Review* in 1969. Now that the full recording has been transcribed and published, it's curious to read just how much time Olson spent gushing about Prynne, who had just mailed his review of *Maximus Poems IV, V, VI* to Gloucester.

Prynne is "knowing like mad," Olson remarks to Malanga.¹⁴ In his review, Prynne seems to have articulated something about *Maximus* that Olson did not or could not see. When asked about the relation between Gloucester and the concept of knowledge, Olson defers to Prynne, "who today in a review has answered it immaculately."¹⁵ When asked about his "care with such matters as line units and indentation," Olson brings in Prynne again:

Wow, if I only knew I did it, it would be marvelous! . . . I read that piece of Prynne's, and, I mean, he says everything right, accurately, and I'm sitting here and I'm thinking, 'Isn't it terrible? You know, until somebody says it to you, I don't know nothing, I didn't know I did any—I didn't know what he says I did. Then I know I did what he said I did.' It's that wonderful business. Are you following me?¹⁶

Throughout the letters, Prynne's eloquence and resourcefulness as an interlocutor seem to invert Olson's typically authoritative position, while Olson's Promethean ambitions about the powers of poetic writing seem to drive Prynne's own consideration of language not as the material out of which verse gets made, but as the condition of being that emerges with writing. One of the most interesting

14. Olson, "The *Paris Review* Interview," in *Muthologos*, 357.

15. Olson, *Muthologos*, 359.

16. *Muthologos*, 377.

passages in Prynne's review casts light on Olson's practice, as well as the power Prynne sees in Olson's *Maximus Poems*, which is "not secondary assemblage, but primary writing; with this difference, that man's current position of knowing what he does brings in the great unifying sentimentalities of dream as surely as it offsets merely naive forward narrative. The result is a lingual and temporal syncretism, poised to make a new order."¹⁷ Prynne's use of the concept of syncretism allows for a generous reading of a text infatuated with details that will not be put into order, a text whose creator oscillates between a desire for positivist facts and the flux of lyric invention. But then again, from very early on, Prynne's experience of reading Olson was uncanny: as he writes in the opening paragraph of the inaugural letter, "reading your various things was like reading for the first time the back of my own hand." And as he would remark later in his "Draft Bibliography on England," dated September 25, 1964, Olson's writing is "where the rich, pure language took on its new (and maybe only) life into this century."

Prynne wrote the review between January and February of 1969, well after the beginnings of his misgivings about the anarchic foundationalist research that galvanized Olson's *Maximus*. In a letter to Olson written on December 29, 1964, Prynne describes this paradigm shift in his thinking as a kind of degradation of confidence in the prospect that origins (cultural, linguistic, cognitive) could be *grasped* for poetic practice; he has "less sense now that I know the ground on which the thing might proceed." Part of his reluctance to participate in the wild reconstruction of culture active in Olson's imagination is that he does not know Greek, nor any of the ancient languages (Assyrian cuneiform, Sanskrit) that would be necessary for such a philologically sound reconstruction to take place. How can one know despite not knowing? "That is, to get at the coming to know, by weighing the language against its ethical and physical substance, you do need to be very close. Or I would need it."

Prynne's uncertainty seems to issue from a fundamental priority about the relation between language and knowing. Language must be a condition of being prior to the "coming to know," so that the condition whereby knowledge is possible means foremost knowing the language the way an artisan knows materials. It also requires the capacity to test the linguistic materials against the various uses to which they can be put: that is, not merely writing, but speaking. It is speech that does the work of ethical comportment within the poem because it is the breathing body that inspires the text. The poet must leverage the linguistic order not to conceptualize a subject position, but to negotiate the dimensions of knowing via the embeddedness of larger social and natural movements, which

17. Prynne, "Review of *Maximus*," 66.

cannot be furnished by a translated corpus. Prynne is interested in something “perhaps more local and less historicist.”

Olson would reply emphatically: “Lord, Jeremy, I don’t know Greek myself” on January 6, 1965. While he concedes that “one has no basis of experience of poems or anything of that sort in a language unless that language is your own,” he nevertheless views etymology as a kind of linguistic archaeology necessary to uncover the roots.

Both poets are dedicated to the power of etymological derivation to augment poetic writing. By summoning an entire string of language development, the poet can mobilize the speculative reconstructions of root-word senses. Instigated by Olson’s mention of derivation in his letter to Elaine Feinstein, Prynne brings up Indo-European philology in his very first letter, an interest that continues throughout the decade, amid other discursive fields: runic inscription, transformational grammar, the origins of merchants’ proper names, geography, archaeology. In this view, the language corpus is not only a kind of world, but also a partial index of a world that is no longer. That’s why Julius Pokorny’s *Indogermanisches etymologisches Wörterbuch* sits on Prynne’s “shelf like a bomb, ready to explode at a touch with the most intricately powerful forces caged up inside, a storehouse of vectors.”

Maximus is not a futural project, but an ancestral one. Its atavistic tendencies are of a peculiar kind, however, because its principal aim is not a restitution of culture, but its construction. In any such project, there is a necessary tension between the desire for an intelligible ground of understanding that yields facts and the daunting if ineluctable problem of historical transmission via material culture; and between a transhistorical model of ideation that supervenes upon a latent collective spirit, and a philological materialism sensitive to the vicissitudes of text interpretation.

In his own poetry of this period, Prynne shies away from the grandiose and iconoclastic structure of *Maximus*. He largely rejects the hyperfocus on specific historical facts for adumbrations of the experience of knowledge as song:

I am moved
by the condition of knowledge, as the
dispersion of form.¹⁸

One dimension of these adumbrations is the fluency between thinking and landscape. Enclosing “Moon Poem” in his letter of March 3, 1966, Prynne writes that

18. “Quality in that Case as Pressure” in *Poems*, 78–79.

it was written from a “quiet of spirit & desire.” It is a nocturne inscribed to elaborate “a community of wish” against the narrow ossifications of “the mercantile notion of choice.” This quiet poem registers the pleasure of wishing as love, and the recognition of such love as knowledge. Prynne’s desire for “knowledge of the unseen” has no object.

We disperse into the ether
as waves, we slant down into a precluded notion
of choice which becomes the unlearned habit of
wish: where we live, as we more often are than
we know.¹⁹

Emotional acts such as hoping, wishing, and desiring metamorphose into diffuse spaces of becoming. Prynne’s focus on “wish” is consistent with his transformation of apparently abstract nouns into toponyms. Olson would register this when he wrote back to Prynne on March 11 to praise the enclosure: “What delights me here in your new poem (which you well yourself know, for the gravity as well of your recognition, in yr letter to me the next day, of the place the vocabulary has, in your hands, turned itself to the possession of. . . .” It may have been “Moon Poem” to which Olson referred when he proclaimed in an interview conducted on that same day, “A poem was sent to me [last week], and I went for it hook, line, and sinker. And I couldn’t really tell you what the fucking thing all amounted to, but, good god, was I hooked!”²⁰

Elsewhere in *The White Stones*, Prynne would adopt some of the Olsonian methods of using scholarly resources in his poetry, particularly in “The Glacial Question, Unsolved” and “Aristeas, in Seven Years,” both of which include a list of references. Temporally distant cultures are brought into sharp relief; the historical divorce is consoled not by Olson’s “primary writing,” with its map of names, but by the realization of nonhuman timescales and the intrication of mortality and place. Throughout *The White Stones*, assertions such as “the history of person / as an entire condition of landscape” and “the Pleistocene is our current sense, and / what in sentiment we are” testify to the refusal of the distance presumed by historicism, but equally to history as a mode of experience.²¹

One of the most obscure historical nooks within these letters involves the Weymouth Port Books, which give (and refuse) details about the various ships that may have entered into Gloucester harbor, particularly those operated by

19. *Poems*, 53.

20. See Olson, *Muthologos*, 214n12.

21. Prynne, *Poems*, 69, 66.

Matthew Craddock and Maurice Thomson, two English merchants involved in the Massachusetts Bay Company's colonization of the Cape Ann area. The letters reveal an asymmetrical interaction concerning the Port Books, not only because it is Olson who asks if Prynne knows any Cambridge scholars clued in to the provenance of the ones not yet accounted for in the pioneering scholarship of Frances Rose-Troup, but also because of Olson's lack of response to Prynne's research. When Olson wrote to Prynne on September 24, 1962, to inquire about these matters, he did not know what he was in for.

In "The Reading at Berkeley—The Day After," a talk with Richard Moore of National Educational Television and Edward Dorn recorded after the Berkeley Poetry Conference in July 1965—during which Prynne was teaching at Olson's own institution in Buffalo as a visiting lecturer—Olson recounts the excitement and dread that accompanied his receipt of Prynne's Port Books research: "And the frustration and just some night of just feeling bad led me to sit down and write to Prynne, and, you know, it was the worst mistake you make. This guy is the greatest researcher, and I haven't ever heard of anything like it."²² The sheer quantity of information seems to have been too much for Olson to handle. It was the type of comprehensiveness that silenced the ludic, para-epistemic modes of thinking necessary for Olson's writing practice. Because Prynne "found all the goddamn records of all the boats that crossed the Atlantic Ocean after Columbus that might have bearing on entering Gloucester harbor," Olson wrote the poem "And now let all the ships come in." It was a direct response to abundance: the "ships" were iconic of the transmission of the Port Book materials mailed by sea from Cambridge to Gloucester.²³

Throughout 1965, Dorn and Prynne pleaded with Olson to visit them for research and friendship. But it was not until late 1966 that Olson finally did so. He arrived in London and visited Essex, where Dorn taught. It is likely that Prynne met Olson in Essex at Dorn's house, and probably also in London. Not long after his arrival, Olson made his way to West Berlin, where he wrote to Prynne quite regularly. He was back in London at the beginning of 1967, traveling to Dorchester for research in May of that year and then back to Gloucester a month later, only to return to London for the much-publicized poetry reading with Allen Ginsberg and others at the Albert Hall in July.²⁴

Olson's first volume of *Maximus* and his most influential prose works had already been published by the time he received Prynne's first letter. In a sense, the decade of the 1960s reveals Olson's institution as a significant influence

22. *Muthologos*, 194.

23. See Olson, *Maximus* II, 290.

24. For details of Olson's travels in England, see Clark, *Charles Olson*, 332–36, and Selerie.

on many of the younger New American Poets, and also his decline in health and lyric powers. In his lectures, letters, and essays, he gives the impression of rancorous and boisterous exhortation strung together with wild frames of reference. He did things fast and with large strokes. Olson's rapid scrawl, which pulled in ready-to-hand surfaces, contrasts starkly with Prynne's meticulous penmanship and lapidary style. For Prynne, these letters reveal a committed experimentation with Olson's theories about poetry writing, as well as a thinking through of European modernity. I hope that the presentation of these texts allows for greater attention to postwar poetry written in English, particularly regarding Olson's reception by an entire generation of poets on the other side of the Atlantic, including Roy Fisher, Tom Raworth, R. F. Langley, Peter Riley, John James, Lee Harwood, John Hall, John Temple, and Andrew Crozier, among numerous others.

From the inception of this project, I have felt a lingering temptation, undoubtedly exacerbated by these two poets' omnivorous desire for information, to fill all of the possible referential gaps found within the letters, so that even the most obscure referents appear transparent. Yet, the converse of this apparent generosity is that letters principally about poems and poetics become easily overburdened by narrow biographical inference and speculations about unknowable intentions. What makes the present collection interesting is not what these letters offer in terms of personal details, but rather the way they bind knowledge and writing, information and composition, feeling and articulation, history and poetry. Furthermore, there is something to be said for a presentation whose editorial heuristic avoids preloading a reference before the reader has had a chance to think about what is written. Throughout, I have erred on the side of letting a term or name stand alone, rather than supplying a reference easily gleaned by any curious reader with an Internet connection.

I would like to extend my gratitude to Jeremy Prynne for his support of this project. When we began discussing it in 2012, he provided candid advice concerning the scope of the letters and its requirements. He made the consultation of archival materials at Gonville and Caius College entirely comfortable. I would also like to thank Melissa Watterworth Batt for her assistance during my visit to the Thomas J. Dodd Research Center at the University of Connecticut in Storrs; my consultation of the archive was funded by a Strohartz Travel Grant. Matt Hofer and Elise McHugh gave this project a home at the University of New Mexico Press, for which I am grateful. Katherine Harper's editorial suggestions were invaluable. A special note of thanks to Jacqueline Frost for her loving encouragement during the final stages of this book.

{ CHAPTER 1 1961 }

Gonville and Caius College
Cambridge
November 4, 1961

Dear Charles Olson,

You won't know who I am, but I have just taken over as editor of PROSPECT, which published two of the Maximus letters when Elaine Feinstein was running the show.¹ Being immoderately reticent, I have for a long time been looking for a pretext on which to write, and now I have one: I hope you will send us something if and when you feel disposed to waste time with the English, rotting in a provincial squeamishness that seems inescapably built into the present situation. I spent last year in Boston, and via the angelic ministrations of Gordon Cairnie, found the wrought world of the mind and voice unfurling as I followed.² It will surely sound foolishly ecstatic, but you cannot imagine the sense of fabled release, the expansiveness, the new air. Most of it was new; but reading your various things was like reading for the first time the back of my own hand. IN COLD HELL, IN THICKET speaks for me out of the fast centre, I know why the tracteries and knots and topology of the imagination, the arching spaces, the instant that flows, the law of outward and object, the care and use of one's eyes, I know why they turn as they must, fill out their necessary & musical spaces: you cannot imagine what intense excitements I have been drawn to—RECOGNITION. Switch to Anna Karenina: Levin discovers himself saying "The answer has been given me by life itself, through my knowledge of what is right and what is wrong. And this knowledge I did not acquire in any way: it was given to me as it is to everybody—given, because I could not have got it from anywhere."³ True,

1. *Prospect* (1959–1964), a Cambridge-based magazine founded by Elaine Feinstein and later edited by Tony Ward and eventually by Prynne, ran for six issues. Prynne refers to Olson's *Maximus Poems*, published in three volumes between 1960 and 1975, the last of which was constructed by Charles Boer and George F. Butterick after Olson's death.

2. Gordon Cairnie (1895–1973), owner and proprietor of the Grolier Bookshop in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

3. Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina*, 832.

but to learn the sounding of one's own depth, the reach of one's own limbs and eyes, the outward pressure of real concern—the revelation of others can support and further the whole endeavor, by setting its own fierce limits. Each must follow his own grammar, I suppose, the syntax of his personal station, but learning as he can & must from the push of another's desperate honesty. I don't know whether you consider that all the small detail of Projective Verse still stands; but "to be as clean as wood," it rings (or should) perennially through the air, choked here with such wan confusion.⁴

All of which bloated paean is simply by way of gratitude—and interest. I am permanently astonished by the malicious blindness of English Bloomsbury (still in the saddle here); Tomlinson (Charles) comes the closest to seeing his way out, but though his review of the *Maximi* was carefully intelligent, he has written me that he sees no coherence there, only "angry jabber."⁵ So there are wrongs to right; I shrink to recall the *Spectator's* wagging a reproving finger at Distances, out of their blessed English sanity (including a lordly gesture towards "someone called Creeley").⁶ Perhaps I shall be able to get a review of Rbt. Creeley's collection into the next PROSPECT; I sure as hell hope so.⁷

I am waiting to see MAXIMUS IN DOGTOWN with maximum concern; and if you can spare time to put down any new directions or shapings you are currently interested in, I should be pleased to hear from you. Incidentally, you talked about tracking words along their lines of force, back to their roots; this is an aspect of the whole speech complex which I had hoped to see more in action in the big Grove Press anthology. And I don't know if anyone answered your query about a new dictionary of roots, which has in fact been done; by Julius Pokorny, *Indogermanisches Etymologisches Wörterbuch* (Franke Verlag, Bern und München, 1947–1959).⁸ The dictionary is now complete, the introduction, notes & technical preamble still awaited. Pokorny has drawn on all the Celtic tongues, Tokharin and Hittite, and a whole range of little-known Romance dialects: Phrygian, Thracian, Messapian, Venetian, Illyrian, Ligurian &c; it makes tremendously exciting reading. In the section given to KAR-, for example, with a root signification of 'hard' or 'rough,' he shows an astonishing range of derived cognates embracing European words for 'rock,' 'crab,' 'shell, peel, nut,' 'strong, bold, heavy, difficult, firm,' perhaps also 'cliff, crag, crevice,'

4. Olson, "Projective Verse," in *Collected Prose*, 247.

5. Tomlinson, "From Both Sides of the Atlantic," 352.

6. "Names and Things," *Spectator*, July 28, 1961, 149.

7. Prynne's review of Creeley's *For Love: Poems 1950–1960* (1962), entitled "Its Own Intrinsic Form" (written c. December 1962) remains unpublished. See Edward Dorn Papers, I.A., Box 19, Folder 328.

8. Probably a reference to Olson's comment in "The Letter to Elaine Feinstein" (1959) regarding the need for "some 'dictionary' of roots which wld include Hittite at least." See Olson, *Collected Prose*, 250.

'stone, scarp,' 'cairn, burial-mound, temple.' And it merely confirms my own feeling to find 'keel, hull, ship' also included here; part 6 of the first Max. letter reveals the rationale behind this. Pokorny's whole book sits on my shelf like a bomb, ready to explode at a touch with the most intricately powerful forces caged up inside, a storehouse of vectors. But perhaps you know about this already. For myself, having learned German & Anglo-Saxon and tried to do the same with Old Icelandic, I have always felt this deep drive at the heart of all north-European languages, this reservoir of latent energy never quite fully discharged even by the most direct of sentence-constructions (though I have absolutely no knowledge of the Slavonic group).

Finally, though the nature of this place makes it necessary to pretend that PROSPECT is respectable & harmless, I hope to print some genuine kinetics now and then, if not more often. Not that I can expect much of this order from hereabouts; but if you know of anyone new that might be interesting, I should be thankful if you would put him on to us.

Best,
J. H. Prynne

P.S. I should be interested to hear whether you see anyone on the English scene that there may still be hope for. Have you seen any of Tomlinson's things, and do you think them completely stifled by their own prissy carefulness . . .?

28 Fort Square
Gloucester, MA
November 9, 1961

My dear J. H. Prynne:

I'm terribly gratified to have your letter—and to learn of Pokorny's word-book, which you are the first to tell me of, and delighted that you did treat that question as non-rhetorical.

Right off the top like this there isn't any new poem which comes to my mind to send you, mostly because most of them recently sit inside the poems which followed Maximus from Dogtown I (which is the one you refer to, and I hope you can get—it was published by Auerhahn, in San Francisco, and is a 6 or 7 page one. The longer ones tend to seem so relentless, and I should imagine dull, and the rest come out so small—2 or 3 lines, almost—I hesitate to assume they will seem anything but slight. But maybe the moment I think about it, or look, I'll have something, and surely send it.—Actually that whole feeling of derivation seems to have overtaken me more than any projection; or better the projection

has become literal (the more usual meaning, which I certainly didn't have any known awareness of, when I used the word, as you will know from projectile etc—that sense of outward push), and the sense of where anything comes from into one, seems to have taken me over in the last few years. . . . or with some deliberateness I let it, or had to, or tried to. And am not at all happy.

By the way Robt. Duncan has just sent me a remarkable good old fashion essay (mind you with all new powers via some crazy use of what one does mean by old fashion . . . classical English prose or something) called, IDEAS OF THE MEANING OF FORM—it's 10 pages mimeographed on legal size paper, and might therefore be too much, but if you wanted it and could get it from him I believe you'd have something like what would fit happily into Prospect, and give the scene a look-on. For he does a thing here—or starts a thing, he plans to do two more such pieces, this one is clearing the ground of reason and convention, and from 1492 and the 17th century there in England to Miss [*Marianne*] Moore Mr [*Robert*] Lowell and W C Williams here. It's superb. His address, in case it does interest you, is 3735 20th St San Francisco 10, California.

Also, do you know the current mimeographed house organ coming out of NY the past 6 months, Floating Bear? (O by the way if you wanted to reprint that thing of mine in FB called Grammar a Book it wld be more of what you catch so quickly of what that derivation matter does lead on towards).⁹ In any case the editor Leroi Jones is hot as hell, and in hell too, and he was doing some translations of the African story from [*the Leo*] Frobenius Atlantis collection, as well as a long Notes on Dante's Inferno, one part of which brought the Post Office down on the magazine!¹⁰ His address, and of FB, which you ought to feel free to ask for the whole lot—some 20 maybe to date—is: 324 East 14th, NYC 3.

I wanted also to call your attention to the work of Edward Dorn, in case it may not yet have come your way. He's a triple or quadruple threat man, and if he has anything it wld be worth your time: address Barton Road, Pocatello, Idaho.—I also hear that John Wieners, the young poet who had two bad years, is now writing again, and his address is (Can't find it. try? Milton Ave,) Milton, Mass.

Also there is a short story writer who hasn't yet shown much but what he has printed you may have seen: it seems to me much of what you do mean by kinetic, and that's Michael Rumaker, whose address is 66 North Broadway, Nyack, New York.¹¹

OK. Not to snow you, and it may be you'd rather I suggest to these they send to

9. "GRAMMAR—a 'book'" was originally published in *Floating Bear* 7 (1961) and collected in *Pro-prioeption* (1965). See Olson, *Collected Prose*, 191–95.

10. An excerpt from Leroi Jones, *The System of Dante's Hell*, appeared in *Floating Bear* 9 (1961).

11. Michael Rumaker (b. 1932), American prose writer, graduated from Black Mountain College in 1955.

you, and will when and if I am in touch with any of them but they are scattered, and in any case I am now writing you and shoot the wad. Creeley of course. His address you probably have: 1835 Dartmouth NE, Albuquerque, N.M. And Mike McClure: his new address is: 229 East 4th St apt. 2, NYC 9.

As of England I'm very fond of Michael Shayer's work (do you know it? Worcester).¹² You've probably seen Tom Raworth's *Outburst*, from London?¹³ I don't know Tomlinson's poems at all, alas, and was hoping he'd have his say about *The Distances* as well as he did abt *The Maximus*: it was a pleasure to have him speak up, and though I dig he does think the *trouvaille* is what it does amount to he cld I believe be persuaded that picking one's way (among debris, was it?) was, at least, a possibility—then. I don't much any more think it is allowable, art suddenly has to be as straight as such thought as Levin utters, there isn't any time or place except for the goods delivered into public place to sit and stare for ever right there in front of all our eyes; and each of us to heat our life at those most ordinary fires¹⁴. The back of our hand for sure.

I appreciate hearing from you, as you will judge. Hope I haven't gone on too much, and please write again. I'll be happy to do anything on this side which I can, or you may ask of me. Any of your own further thoughts on the etymological, or runs like you send of KAR-, wld stir me up as this does. Certainly word-wise it ought to jump the system for years ahead, and what you say of sentence-construction is really where the work hasn't even begun. (In that *Grammar a Book* piece I felt as though I was at least pushing into parts of speech—the thing, as I recall, comes on strong on demonstrative pronouns, and on the old lost middle voice (Of Greek); but none of us—or maybe the effects are already taking place?—seem to front to the sentence (?). (I note that Duncan makes a big pitch for linguistic science, in the IDEAS mentioned above. He says it beautifully, tying it to a Carlyle quote from the *Hero as Poet*: “Carlyle's thought going toward the inner structure of Nature had intuitions of the inner structure of language. The science of [Edward] Sapir and [Benjamin Lee] Whorf has its origins in the thought of The Hero as Poet.”¹⁵

Because you brought the word up in front of me let me leave it then with the whole open question of derivation: what does that mean? where [one] does come from?

Best, and many thanks,
Charles Olson

12. Poet and coeditor of *Migrant* with Gael Turnbull.

13. Between 1961 and 1963, Raworth published three issues of *Outburst*.

14. Olson refers to Prynne's quote from Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* in the previous letter.

15. Duncan, “Ideas of the Meaning of Form,” in *A Selected Prose*, 26.

Also did a thing called Proprioception—what seems to be a part of derivation—in Kulchur (N.Y.) Spring 1960.

28 Fort Square
Gloucester, MA
November 24, 1961

My dear Prynne:

I like the enclosed very much—and hope you will.¹⁶ At least it gives me something fresh to send you, and it wld seem to be so law-abiding on its face that none of the established wld do anything but think it harmless XXX? I shld think so.

Ok, am spreading word of yr editorship: heard back fr Creeley, and John Wieners by accident came here the day before yesterday, and I now have his correct address—165 Eliot St Milton, Mass.

Hope all goes well, and look forward to hearing fr you again.

Charles Olson

109 Grantchester Meadows
Cambridge
November 26, 1961

Dear Charles Olson,

Very many thanks for yours, which was strangely exciting to have down here in the depths of the museum. I have written off to Robert Duncan to ask for his IDEAS, which sounds full of interest; but I doubt I could hope to print it. You can have no idea how hostile the parochial mediocrity of an English university can be—hence I intend giving the wiseacres no foothold in prose theory. I would rather work to a private circulation & print what needs to come out (like ORIGIN), but don't have the choice as things are. So my main hopes are for high and various quality in the verse itself, where readers will have to earn their insights. I just can't begin to convey how Betjeman's England (the logical successor to Auden's) sees modern US writing: its prime aim is to convert it into a kind of freely available slapstick garrulity, or else to patronise it by feigning 'interest.' And so I look for the verse carapace, not the vital but soft underside of theory, think I must do this, the way things stand. Cid Corman put me on to the FLOATING BEAR; I have been getting it since # 3 (just

16. Olson included a typescript of "Going out of the Century," dated November 19, 1961, which Prynne published in *Prospect* 6 (1964), and which later became part of *Maximus IV*, V, VI. See Olson, *Maximus II*, 244.

in time to catch Ed Dorn's vastly moving *The Landscapes Below*), and indeed saw your GRAMMAR—a “book.” My concerns are very close to yours here, but perhaps at a slight angle: thus I am launched into the derivation problem, and hope you will bear with it.¹⁷

I am struck with the need to readjust parts of THE CHINESE WRITTEN CHARACTER, as a chap-book, towards some sense of the hinges in European language or its northern groupings considered in general. “The transference of force from agent to object,” writes Fenollosa, “which constitute natural phenomena, occupy time. Therefore, a reproduction of them in imagination requires the same temporal order.” Here EP interposes the gloss, “Style, that is to say limpidity, as opposed to rhetoric.”¹⁸ Hence the simple declarative sentence with one transitive & active verb, furnishes the kinetic type. But where are the sources of this force, how is access to them won out of the ambient silences which surround the man on the brink of speech? From the things themselves has been the answer, and in the final reckoning always must be. Things are nouns, and particular substantives of this order are storehouses of potential energy, hoard up the world's available motions. But there are other energies: the compelling human necessities, the exhaling of breath, the sugar which feeds the muscles of the diaphragm & lung. It seems probable that this source was channeled into speech simultaneously with if not before, the substantive pictogram or derived lexigraph. To sing is to modulate and make audible the breathing, declare the body's functioning, its various rhythms, like shouting or the groan of agony. Phonetic and imagistic unit in this way may have evolved side by side, as Doblhofer suggests: “Until quite recently it was believed that all writing without exception originated from a pictorial representation of concepts subsequently evolving, as was the case in the East, ‘from the image to the letter.’ Today we are inclined to believe that the letter existed from the very outset and that the principal creators of ‘Western’ writings (Anatolian, Alpine and possibly Old Iberian) had already discovered the isolated sound by the time the Greeks adopted and adapted the Phoenician alphabet, bringing about a reciprocal fusion and fecundation of the image and the letter.” (*Zeichen und Wunder*)¹⁹

Even Chinese is not as exclusively visual an idiom as one might have assumed from THE CHARACTER; phonetic compounds appear very early, and are

17. Cid Corman (1924–2004), poet, translator and editor of *Origin*, corresponded extensively with Olson, and also with Prynne.

18. Ernest Fenollosa and Ezra Pound, “The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry” (1919), in *Ezra Pound's Poetry and Prose: Contributions to Periodicals*, III, 491. The first phrase should read: “The transferences of force from agent to agent.”

19. Ernst Doblhofer, *Zeichen und Wunder: die Entzifferung verschollener Schriften und Sprachen* (Berlin: Paul Neff, 1957). Prynne's translation.

very extensive. Thus the name of a tree might be borrowed to make up a new compound, shedding its tree determinative, just for its sound ([*pi*] for example). Complex abstract notions are, it seems, commonly formed in this way, on the basis of transferred or borrowed sound values. Similarly unusual are the ‘cematic’ elements in the Chinese vocabulary, less numerous but much more common than the ‘plerematic’ elements. These function not as representational signs but as grammatical, syntactical, modal structuring agents; number, gender, case, person, tense, mood are cematic functions, as are conjunctions, correlatives, causal, temporal, conditional, interrogative and other such constructions. Only the plerematic words (though the categories overlap) function primarily as content-words, and it is these that THE CHARACTER most considers—the substantive furnishings of the universe, the nouns among which and the verbs along whose lines we live. But a language must accommodate both these aspects (‘locative’ & ‘instrumental,’ perhaps), and as [*W.A.C.H.*] Dobson points out, Chinese is no exception: “In a language in which the pitch and contour of words is part of their intrinsic phonetic shape, pitch and contour (‘intonation’) if used as an emphatic or modal device, cannot be imposed on the word itself, but is, as in the case, imposed upon a class of morpheme in its environment, existing specifically for that purpose.” (*Late Archaic Chinese; a Grammatical Study*) Thus it makes a difference to write

WINDS : BENDING TREES
rather than

THE WINDS ==> BEND ==> THE TREES

but we are still in Fenollosa’s world with either version. But the human agent, once on the scene, immediately introduces his own impalpable forces. I BREAK THE TREE depends for its kinematics on our belief in the ‘I’ as a source of the necessary energies, in the pitch and contour of his actions. The agent must be grounded in some credible forcefulness, so fixed down and planted that his exertions can have direction outward and away from himself. In a more fluid medium, for example drifting through sea-water, the human agent may take his choice between I BUMPED A PIECE OF DRIFTWOOD or I WAS BUMPED BY A PIECE OF DRIFTWOOD or simply CONTACT OCCURRED BETWEEN ME AND A PIECE OF DRIFTWOOD.

What makes the difference then, so articulates the sentence that it may move with purpose & effect along its own line, outward from the agent, the object, the lungs? Its continued momentum, it seems to me, past and round and athwart changes in course and direction, and the credible certainty of its starting point. The two depend inseparably one upon the other. The movement founds the origin and the origin impels the movement: equal and opposite reaction perhaps.