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## David Jones and Charles Olson in Time and Space

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⊙ Charles Alexander

Chax Press / University of Houston-Victoria

**Abstract:** David Jones and Charles Olson concern themselves with large issues of space and time, and how humans are entwined with both. This essay seeks to show that Olson's project of space and Jones's with time are very much of the same mettle, that both poems offer a kind of transcendence of one-dimensionality, that time expands to become space, and that, in space, one is confronted with the presence of all time as a simultaneity. The essay addresses Jones's *The Anathemata* and a few of his maps and paintings, as well as Olson's *Maximus Poems*, particularly its visual / spatial poetics

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Here, at 37,000 feet, over the plains of west Texas, giving way to the Big Bend of the Rio Grande River and soon the Organ Mountains of southern New Mexico, midway through the air path from the gulf port of Houston to the Sonoran Desert city of Tucson, wet rhymes with dry, time with space, Tucson with Houston, in an anagrammatic sort of way, and I read *The Anathemata* by David Jones for perhaps the sixth time, during which I find space collapsing into time. For Jones, landscape is timescape.

Terrain  
Place  
Space  
Landscape  
Field  
Geology  
Archaeology

When one begins to list such terms within discussions of poetry, where does the mind turn except to Charles Olson, author of big books, and within whose small books words might be big?

I take SPACE to be the central fact to man born in America from Folson Cave to now. I spell it large because it comes large here. . . . It is geography at bottom. (*Call Me Ishmael* 11)

About the same time Olson is writing the beginning poems of Maximus, after he has written “Projective Verse” and *Call Me Ishmael*, across the pond in England, an older poet (by fifteen years), who apparently Olson did not read, and who apparently did not read Olson, is writing *The Anathemata*. Jones had already written a work about the *field*, one in which that field, the field of the Battle of the Somme in the World War I, takes the place as well for the field of battles for the Roman army, and for the field of battles of Arthurian history and lore. Across the European chalk of space, those limestone formations that define Europe, across the limes and the lines of boundary that armies keep pace with, *In Parenthesis* unfolds.

It is in the understanding of space and place that these poems make marks unlike anything that has come before or since, yet within such concerns the vision of Jones differs considerably from that of Olson. Remember that Jones comes to poetry in the 1920s and 1930s as an already mature visual artist, one with a distinctive and stunning vision. Jones’s best paintings involve multiple picture planes, where visions outside windows are inseparable from what is inside, perspective breaks down, and the space of the painting gives way to something else, a sort of natural growth that implies and sometimes directly invokes time and history. *Space* gives way to *time*. Olson asks, instead, the reader to leave time and come into space. In short, in Jones, space reveals time; in Olson, time releases one into space.

In David Jones’s painting *Manawydan’s Glass Door*, blue flows everywhere. It enters from the outside, water through the door; it hovers throughout the inside, floor pattern and wallpaper and architectural elements outside flows in; structure gives way to emotional vision. The fluency in the brushwork has been described by art critic Paul Hills, who also notes the relationship to Matisse, Bonnard, and Ben and Winifred Nicholson (Hills 47-48). The elements of blue paint roam and dominate the dream-like mystical painting and are more captive of the eye than is the scene pictured, yet Jones manifests a spatial logic, an equivalency of outdoor and indoor, of water and air. The painting relates to the territories of Cubist spaces, yet it also proclaims Manawydan’s space, Manawydan from the foundational Welsh tales of *The Mabinogion*, who takes the head of Bendigeld Vran, the son of Lyr, to be buried in London, so that Ireland will no longer be plagued by invaders. The door of Manawydan was one to never be opened; as long as unopened, Manawydan and his company would be oblivious to every sorrow and loss, and unaware of the passage of time. Yet the very inclusion of Manawydan, of the flow of the sea and air, enables Jones in this painting, while being quite modern in his use of space, stroke, and color, to invoke history and time. Also at the time he creates this painting Jones becomes a poet and begins to write *In Parenthesis*. Already an accomplished and mature visual artist, he finds that the space of a painting cannot hold the time of his vision, and he turns to the more time-based art of poetry. He can, in poems, do more with the likes of Manawydan, with the palimpsests of history and time, with the expansion of the spatial field via time’s ever-open door.

(Figure 1 below: Manawydan's Glass Door, painting by David Jones)<sup>2</sup>



Figure 1 Manawydan's Glass Door, 1931

In one of Olson's foundational poems, "La Preface," time begins again. After the Holocaust, after Hiroshima, we must begin again. Surviving scraps of writing from the death camp of Buchenwald become the present's new instance of the cave paintings of Altamira, where man becomes maker of signs all over again.

"I will die about April 1st . . ." going off  
 "I weigh, I think, 80 lbs . . ." scratch  
 "My name is NO RACE." address  
 Buchenwald new Altamira cave  
 With a nail they drew the object of the hunt.  
 (*Collected Poems of Charles Olson* 46)

Time is the matter of concern in this Olson poem, one of the first of his mature period, invoking the job he is to continue to explore throughout his life as a poet. Time informs the problem, i.e. with the sheer destruction of 20th century warfare, an entire cycle of time has brought about its own undoing. Yet the call is finally not to enter time, to explore history as passage. The call is not to be as poetry has traditionally been, the place of memory, elegy, mark of time's passing. Rather,

Put war away with time, come into space. (46)

The imperative is critical here, as Olson is compelled to command a new way of being, command it of poets, of public, of polis, and of the earth itself. It is, in this poem, a quiet command, almost a prayerful command, yet it is unquestionably the "initiation / of a new kind of nation," the excavation of a place where time gives way, and one suddenly walks in space without time's killing anchor.



Yspaddadan Penkawr.

Properly organized chemists can let make more riving  
power than ever Twrch Trwyth;  
more blistered he is than painted Troy Towers  
and unwholer, limb from limb, than any of them fallen at Catraeth  
or on the seaboard-down, by Salisbury,  
(Jones, *In Parenthesis* 155)

Jones thus sees the very earth as the lap of Arthur, which leads him to see the entire scene of the present war in terms of *Kulhwch ac Olwen*, a Welsh tale included in *The Mabinogion*, a tale in which “Four white trefoils sprang up wherever she trod,” a tale that includes the Giant task-setter Yspaddaden Penkwr, also called Kaw of North Britain, who “came and shaved his beard, skin, and flesh, clean to the very bone from ear to ear.” Twrch Trwyth also appears, the mysterious beast that even Arthur’s hosts could not tame or conquer. Not only mythic time, but historical time in Wales are included in present time and battle space, in those “fallen at Catraeth,” which refers to 300 Welshmen destroyed in a raid into Britain, a subject of the 6th century Welsh Poem *Y Gododdin*, attributed to the poet Aneirin. In the older poem, three men alone escape death, and one of them is the poet. *Y Gododdin* thus stands as the great parallel to *In Parenthesis*, particularly in the character of John Ball (David Jones) and the creation of *In Parenthesis*. Yet by standing so, it marks *In Parenthesis*, despite Jones’s poem’s detailed mapping of troop movements and spatial relations leading to and defining the battle, as a poem about time, and about parallels in time. Space allows, invokes, and gives way to time.

In Olson, much mapping also appears. Yet an important part of what is mapped is not surface, the plane of the earth upon which human history passes and makes its timely mark, but depth. Olson is *Archaeologist of Morning*, and his poems perform an unearthing. In times when the bones of earth are shown, when “The earth is dug down to low,” something revelatory takes place, the earth’s very physical being is present.

this Ragged Arse Rock Earth  
divine  
(*The Maximus Poems* 593)

Or, at times in Olson, thinking is thinking about spatial relations,

same thought — 2

got to get that  
goddamn pencil &

compasses to  
make such shapes etc  
in the universe I

rushed home here all  
ready — and such

dividers: parallel  
protractors also so  
course equally is  
equals: likes to  
likes

efficacy

(505)

where “efficacy” is the appropriate division of space as well as the appropriate tools to divide space.

Perhaps one of Olson’s clearest declarations of the essential geographic nature of the poem, and of being, is in “*Maximus to Gloucester, Letter 27* [withheld],” which begins, “I come back to the geography of it,” then quickly moves to memories of what has occurred on that geography in the poet’s life. But these memories, these instances in history, are transformed into things, into facts, into place-holders, into a geography or geometry, where the order is spatial, not personal.

There is no strict personal order  
for my inheritance.

No Greek will be able  
to discriminate my body.

An American  
is a complex of occasions,  
themselves a geometry  
of spatial nature.

(Olson, *The Maximus Poems* 184-185)

In other words, even time-bound events become spatial. In taking cognizance of the process, in understanding the spatial nature of time, one can change the nature of being.

Plus this — plus this:  
that forever the geography  
which leans in  
on me I compel Gloucester  
to yield, to  
change  
Polis  
is this.

(184-185)

In Olson, time lets go in order to become space. Everything in Olson becomes space. The size of the book, the placement of language, sometimes a few small words as an island on the oceanic space of the page, all make us conscious of physicality, geography, and geometry. Olson's end of Maximus, "my wife my car my color and my self" are counters, as in his friend and colleague Robert Creeley's "A Piece."

One and  
one, two,  
three.

(352)

Not that such markers of the human are any less personal and emotive because of their transformation into spatial elements; in fact, when one understands that the invocation of space in Olson is the invitation to an ultimate sense of physically *being* in the universe, personal details are all the more powerful for occupying the order of space rather than the order of time.

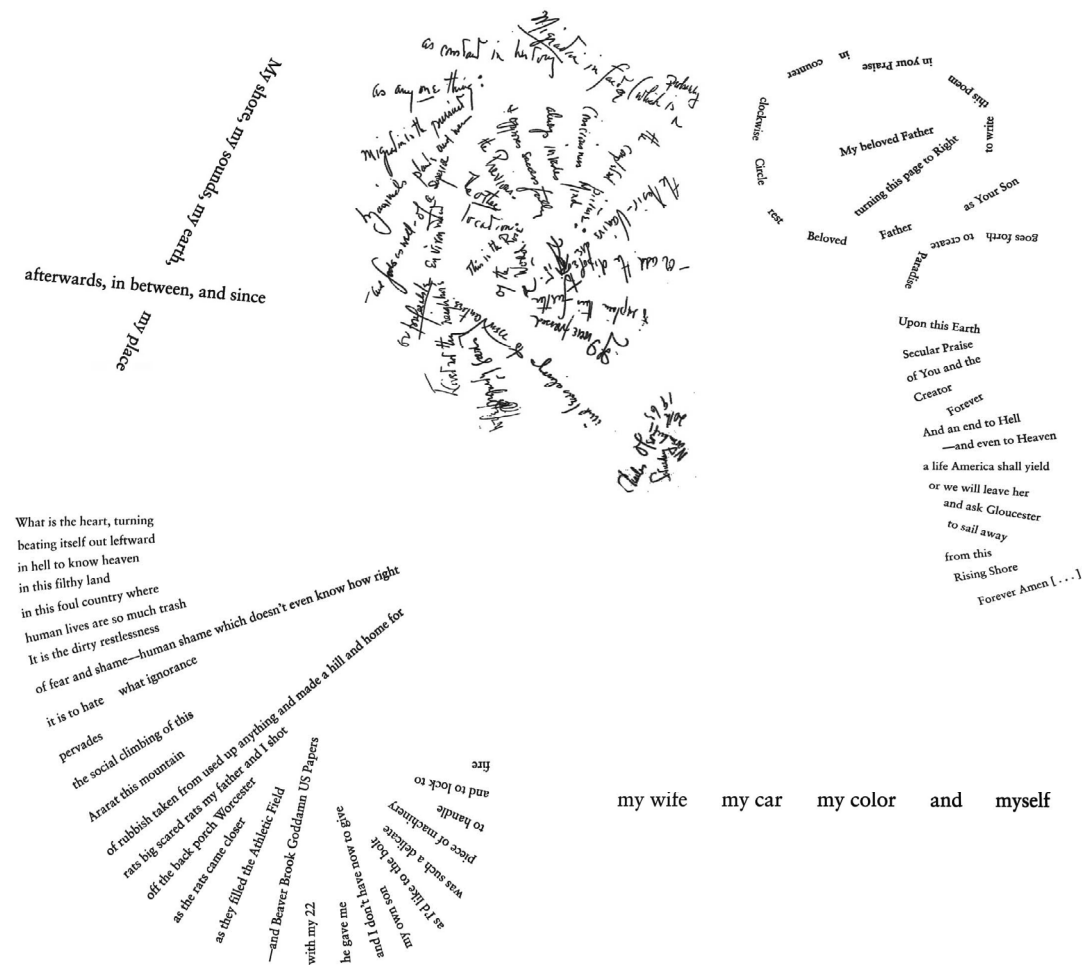
Where I began, over Texas, reading Jones's *The Anathemata*, there is a passage where one can perhaps most clearly see a process in which the poem moves through space, only for the reader to find herself moving through time. Landscape as timescape.

From the Two Sticks an' a' Apple to Bride o' the Shandies' Well over the Fleet; from Hallows-on-Wall to the keel-haws; from the ditch without the Vicinal Gate to Lud's hill; within and extra the fending circuit, both banks the wide and demarking middle-brook that waters, from the midst of the street of it, our twin-hilled Urbs. At Martin miles in the Pomarary (where the Roman pippins grow) at winged Marmor miles, gilt-lorica'd on his wheat-hill, sticking the Laidly Worm as threats to coil us all. (127)

Here the place names connote times. From one place to another, through the miles, space is alive. The "Bride o' the Shandies' Well" is Brigit, the goddess of dawn, who provides candles and fire in shrines at various places. She is associated with spring, fertility, healing, poetry, and smithcraft. At one point All Hallows was London's wall, the city's farthest extent north. The Vicinal Gate to Lud's Hill was where one entered Roman London. The whole of this trip through London relates one time to another, present London to past and mythic past, and London to Rome, for London consisted, according to Jones's note on this passage, of "two hills separated by a wide stream (the Walbrook), that the Fleet and waters running into it skirted the west side, that the whole site was well watered with springs and that, like Rome, London was famous for its fresh water" (*In Parenthesis* 126). Marmor is an earlier form of Mars, the Roman God of War, which relates him in the poem to St. Michael, a leader of armies. One can hardly take a step in the space of *The Anathemata* without it being a step in time, both real time and mythic time. Space is no less real, but more fully loaded, because it carries the weight of time. Jones's understanding of space would release us into time, into the presence of all history at once. Every mark or point in space, for Jones, is a time-shape. All history is a time-shape occurring in space, and we can only understand space by understanding time. Particularly since the space of England is the space of Arthur, which is both past and future (there will be a return).

Perhaps all history at once is also all space at once. In Olson’s markings in *Maximus*, time may be notated but it is space that not only opens up, but in a particular and thrilling way, the poem becomes space. A few months ago I printed visual poems and parts of poems from *The Maximus Poems*. Set in type, or cast as plates in polymer, the physicality of language cuts a shape, often a fairly consistent pattern of shape, with similar indentations, similar spaces among and between lines and words. Yet it is in the several poems that themselves are shaped that Olson particularly impresses upon us his belief that shape itself has meaning. It takes us one step closer to perceiving the poem immediately, and it takes the poem a step closer to impacting us physically rather than through the process of reading and understanding. Often, that impact itself has a spatial dimension, in terms of what is being visually presented.

Here are just a few of the Chax Press prints of Olson’s physical language. There was generally no attempt in these prints to alter what Olson wanted to accomplish, rather to enlarge it and to emphasize the nature of page as field by enlarging the page as well. These prints were all about 13 inches by 22 inches. The images below are details of 5 prints (Figures 3-7).



Figures 3-7 Olson images from *Charles Olson: Language as Physical Fact*. Chax, 2008.



Both David Jones and Charles Olson create visual, physical works, but out of different imperatives. Jones is as well-known as a visual artist, as he is as a poet, and the two qualities nearly meet in his famous inscriptions, such as “Vere Dignum” (Figure 8).

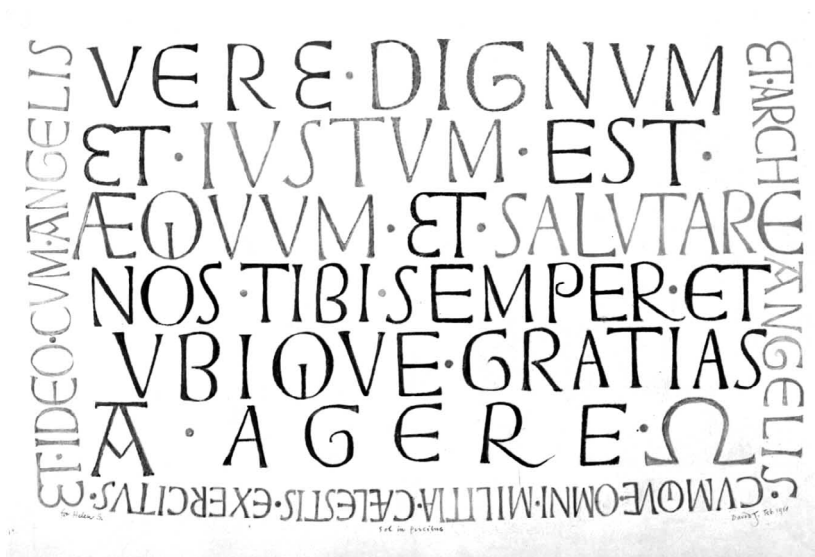


Figure 8 The Tate Gallery, “Vere dignum....” 1961.

Jones’s language as physical fact invokes past letter forms and a sense of language as memorializing time. The visual in Jones erupts as an artist’s vision in the poem or inscription, a creation of signs that are related to signs throughout human history, and specifically to the signs of the sacrament, as well as a vision of space as sacred because it includes time’s memorials. The visual in Olson is a conception of language as physical fact. It cannot be coincidence that perhaps the three greatest long poems of the 20th century (*In Parenthesis*, *The Anathemata*, and *The Maximus Poems*), written by two very different poets, are primarily concerned with relations of time and space. It is the century of Einstein, of coming to terms with uncertainty, atomic reality, and the time-space continuum. We are still just beginning to read both poets, particularly in the case of Jones. We need both of these poets’ visions to figure out where and who we are. These are mappings that take place throughout time; they are reckonings that locate us in space.

The picture I have painted here of space and time in Jones and Olson should not be taken, however, as absolute in any way. Their concerns for space and time are inseparably intertwined. Olson indeed says to step out of time and “come into space,” but time, in Olson, contains space, and vice-versa. Time opens up to reveal space, what Olson might consider “the real.” Space in Jones contains time. It opens up to reveal time, the form / formal, the sign, the spiritual presence in history. So for the two, it is finally the physical in Olson, the spiritual in Jones. But that may be too simply said (as I said, all is intertwined), for in late *Maximus*, walking in space becomes stepping in time, indeed in a kind of cosmic spiritual time. In “I live underneath / the light of day,” one moves through “wood-lots or further passage-ways, further farms,” yet suddenly is not in such physical space at all, rather

that one suddenly is walking  
 in Tartarian-Erojan, Geaan-Oouranian  
 time and life love space  
 time & exact  
 analogy time & intellect time & mind time & time  
 spirit

the initiation

of another kind of nation

(Olson, *The Maximum Poems* 633)

I am not at all certain that this isn't, as well, where Jones ends, where historical time has become all time as a simultaneity, thus time expanded, having taken on the characteristics of space, where it no longer makes sense to see time as separate from space. Olson and Jones, in key ways, writing the same poem from opposite directions, meeting in the middle. We, as readers, occupy that middle, read through time and space.

### Notes:

1. The broadside suite by Chax Press, *Charles Olson: Language as Physical Fact* (2008), was produced with the permission of the University of California Press. Texts in this suite are taken from *The Maximus Poems*, copyright 1983 by the Trustees of the University of California Press.
2. All Olson images from *Charles Olson: Language as Physical Fact*. Chax, 2008; David Jones images are from Manawydan's Glass Door, 1931, Private Collection; Map of themes in the artist's mind, 1943, The Tate Gallery; Inscription: "Vere dignum..." 1961, Helen Sutherland Collection.

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