

**Paterson, Gloucester, Anonymous Cities  
of Eponymous Citizens: William Carlos Williams's  
*Paterson* and Charles Olson's *The Maximus Poems***

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Life is an affair of people not of places. But for me life is an affair of  
places and that is the trouble.

(OP, 58)<sup>1</sup>

Wallace Stevens's aphoristic adage, may well feature compelling issues addressed by postcolonial criticism such as the amoebic, dialogical relation of "places and people" as signifiatory of local immediacy and globality, of setting and, simultaneously, transcending boundaries. Homi Bhabha articulates such a problematic as follows: "Must we always polarize in order to polemicize? ... Can the aim of freedom of knowledge be the simple inversion of the relation of oppressor and oppressed, centre and periphery, negative image and positive image?" (*The Location of Culture*, 19). The response the above series of questions engenders, in turn, entails the pivotal concept of "hybridity" in culturalist theory: "The language of critique is effective ... to the extent to which it overcomes the given grounds of opposition and opens up a space of translation: a place of hybridity ... of elements that are *neither the One ... nor the Other ... but something else besides*" (*Location*, 25, 28). Drawing on the larger poststructuralist implications, the notion of "hybridity" critiques metaphors of purism as modes of representation of individual identities and collective cultures. It provides for what Bhabha refers to as an "agonistic space" (*Location*, 121) which calls into question culturally determinate hierarchies and binarisms of the past: westernness/cultural otherness, colonizer/colonized, center/ periphery.

It is in this context of a postcolonial discourse undoing purist, hegemonic polarities, that I wish to employ "hybridity" as an interpretative device for the study of two modern(ist) American texts: William Carlos Williams's *Paterson* and Charles Olson's *The Maximus Poems*. In particular, I propose to focus on "hybridity" as a representational mode consisting in both mechanisms of "appropriation" and "resistance" (*Location*, 120). I will argue, in other words, that the texts in question "appropriate" so as to "resist"

modernism from within and that in so doing they provide an alternative to the literary hegemony of the Eliotic tradition. Within such a reading perspective, *Paterson* and the *Maximus Poems* emerge as “hybrids” of sorts. They partake of the high modernist project of a transcendental subject raised to the level of the mythical while, at the same time, resisting modernism by confining this subject to the bounds of locality. Williams’s now clichéd “No ideas / But in things” (CP, II, 55)<sup>22</sup> as well as Olson’s case for a writing subject coming into being as an “object” in the process of writing itself, in his poetic manifesto “Projective Verse” (SW, 24),<sup>3</sup> signify a new Americanist poetic countering the universalism and abstract discourse of high modernism. The texts these writers produce, in essence, re-position aesthetic and ideological categories of the Eliot-Pound school by way of shifting focus from a universalist sameness resolving all difference to the idiosyncratic, retaining difference. Among such categories, the modernist centre-periphery metaphor savours metropolitanism and cosmopolitanism. It evolves as a polarity, which is to say, it privileges the “centre” over the “periphery” predicating a relation of supremacy and subordination, of colonizer and colonized. Eliot and Pound, therefore, anathematize American literary and cultural ruggedness as provincialism. Their way towards a modernist renaissance of arts and letters is internationalism, more often than not, translated into a European-based elitism. The mission the modernist expatriates assume is to move centripetally from an impoverished “periphery” towards a culturally abundant “centre” in search of a common European patrimony. It is the route of this canonized trend of modernism that Williams and Olson set out to detour. Theirs is a centrifugal movement from metropolitan England to a rugged “peripheral” America; their texts, accordingly, celebrate the bareness and vastness of such a peripheral landscape as an infinitely promising new frontier. *Paterson* and the *Maximus Poems* constitute the American narrative which realizes itself through the process of its own making so as to represent America as a nation in its emergence. Versed in the nationalist tradition of an Emersonian “self-reliance”, Williams’s and Olson’s text “narrates” America as a periphery-become-centre.<sup>4</sup>

Neither of the “centre”, then, nor of the “periphery” but “something else besides” in Bhabha’s words, the two texts still lay claim to the high modernist concern over rescuing the contemporary world from cultural bleakness. At the same time, they disclaim the internationalism of the Eliot school by initiating a poetic and politics of the local scene. Williams compiles his narrative *Paterson* as collage thus making the city of Paterson into a synecdoche of a fragmented modern world. As a modernist writer, Williams, too, rails against such fragmentation; he invokes a “new” language to encompass the colorations and possibilities of life in a newly emergent world. The *Maximus Poems*, in turn, a series of verse letters Olson addresses to his friend Vincent Ferrini, work their way through the origins of a European settlement in America to a “new”, yet locally rooted, Gloucester of Massachusetts, a “New” England fishing town where the poet spent a good part of his life. Both *Paterson* and the *Maximus*



*Poems* are what Olson termed in his text: “poem[s] of a person and a place”, the hybridized compounds “of places and people” decentring literary-cultural hegemonies.

The name “Paterson” denotes the “city-citizen” compound. Dr. Paterson is the local physician of the homonymous town and a poet—Williams himself both as head pediatrician of the industrial town Paterson, New Jersey, not far from his hometown Rutherford and as an idiosyncratically American poet. In this double capacity, Dr. Paterson “reads” and “writes” local history and culture; he both diagnoses and remedies the wrongs of his town. In this Williams likens his hero to a poet; i.e. in the act of writing as a “physician works upon a patient, upon the thing before him, in the particular to discover the universal” (P, iii). Much in the way of his hero, Williams renders the city of Paterson the “particular” locus of his modernist “universal” concerns; he renders his narrative *Paterson* the space which localizes human identity: “the city / the man, an identity—it can’t be otherwise—an interpenetration, both ways” (P, 3).

Similarly, Olson’s *Maximus Poems* provide for a space of intersection of “root person” and “root place” (MP, 16). The hero is Maximus of Tyre of the second century A.D. Though he approximates to a Poundian character discovered through a search into world history and literature, Maximus is still “rooted” in Gloucester, Massachusetts, an American stronghold of European immigrants. For, as Olson contends in his study of Melville’s *Moby Dick*, it is “SPACE ... [a] central fact to man born in America ... [t]hat made the first American story ...” (CI, 15). Therefore, he goes on, Melville “probes” into space rather than time to find the “individual man” rather than “man as a group” (CI, 18-19). It is this space-logic, signifying open-endedness as opposed to linearity, that informs much of an American poetic and politics of the local shared by Williams and Olson. Quite unlike Whitman’s “song” of the “self” as a collective identity (“And what I assume you shall assume, / For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you”, *Leaves of Grass*, 32), Williams’s and Olson’s “probing” into man consists in situating the “I” into a specific locale, i. e. in objectivizing the subject. Dr. Paterson, the encompassing image of a healer, and Maximus, an atemporal omnipresence, write—and are being written through—the compendium of two virtually unheard of (if compared to the metropolises of their authors’ contemporaries) “places”. Flickering subjects then both figures gain certainty when embodied in a geography of the local.

Paterson and Gloucester become synecdochic versions of America itself. The former represents the industrialization of the American landscape following an exploitation of the Indian culture; the latter, a multicultural and multilingual mosaic that stands for America’s immigrant parentage. Gloucester, Massachusetts adds to a “new” topology and topography. Charted as “New England”, Gloucester represents a break from its European origin and its simultaneous emergence into a dis-placed, and hence, new centre. Olson’s “heterogeneous present” and his rejection of the “old homogeneity of the

Founders, and the West" ("The Present is Prologue", AP, 39) readily declare his independence from the modernist poetics of the Eliot-Pound kind. Hence his orator's—Maximus—address that "the thing you're after / may lie around the bend / of the nest" (MP, 5, I. I.) Similarly, Williams begins his narrative as follows: "To make a start, / out of particulars / and make them general, ..." (P, 3). Paterson, thus, is made into a "giant city" and Gloucester into an authenticated center, a "polis" of the "last 'first' people".<sup>5</sup> Both places serve to "restore", in Olson's words, the "locality", long-lost in a discourse of the infinite and the eternal and thus alleviate what this poet frequently refers to as man's "estrangement" with that which he is most "familiar" with (MP, 56, SVH, 29).

The question is whether this "person-place" compound—the subject-object, self-world "hybrid"—in William's and Olson's poetics yields an objectivized subjectivity or an abstract objective world. Is it a case of universalizing the local, then, or of locating the universal in the particular? Does Williams's favourite allusion to John Dewey's "[t]he local *is* the only universal, upon that all art builds" (P, iii, emphasis mine) radically differ from the metaphoric equivalence of Whitman's individual and national self? Does it differ from Emerson's seemingly paradoxical "universal" self-reliance and his pursuit of the new American "genius" which he, in the process, identifies with the "Aboriginal Self" ("Self-Reliance")?

It is to something of this line of questioning that Bhabha's concept of "hybridity", used interpretatively, functions as an aporetic response in the sense that it answers by means of inconclusiveness and irresolution. Specifically, "hybridity" effecting what Bhabha delineates as a mode of simultaneous "appropriation" and "resistance" can perspectivize *Paterson* and the *Maximus Poems* as texts which (dis)continue both the Eliotic internationalism and the Emersonian nationalism. Williams and Olson "appropriate" the universalist rhetoric of abstraction of the Eliot canon which, however, when used to narrate the particular is not entirely able to sustain itself. If the result is a deviation from the Europeanized modernist text and a focus on the American scene—a tradition tracing to Emerson and his call for an American, though with "Saxon Breasts", genius ("Self-Reliance")—the same textual politics of appropriating a certain discourse so as to resist it from within is still at work. Williams and Olson align themselves with an Emersonian Americanness; yet they dodge its homogeneity and its one-sidedness bringing to the forefront comments that concern a subsuming "I": "The world is nothing, the man is all" ("The American Scholar").

The hybridity that informs the Americanness Williams and Olson narrate can be analogized to something of a vacillation between an "infinite I AM" of high romanticism and a sort of "negative capability" registering both a centripetal movement towards the perceiver and a centrifugal movement from the subject to the object perceived. Such a dispersal of the subject outwardly and the subsequent movement back to a homogenizing centre further points to the analogy of the centre-periphery debate. Each end of this debate breeds and



contradicts the other, the two coexisting in a state of conflict rather than the one resolving into the other; each works as a mechanism which repositions the other, as an “enzyme” determinate of that “unresolved” and “unresolvable” condition of hybridity (Greenblatt, 4). In *Paterson* and the *Maximus Poems*, the centre-periphery “hybrid” helps re-define well-worn dichotomies surfacing in these texts: subject/object, mind/body, citizen/city, Europe/America, Eliot’s ahistorical modernism/Williams’s avant-gardism of engagement. More than just another text of self-and-world revolving round ontological and epistemological concerns, more than merely an Americanized text countering the Europeanized text of the Eliot-Pound canon, *Paterson* and *Maximus* call into question, even as they invoke, the ideological position of both “centre” and “periphery” of high modernism. They dis-lodge the centre and, in turn, yield a pioneering colony. In an attempt to move away from the cultural wealth of a European past—Eliot, the metropolis—they end up re-colonizing the periphery. Williams’s and Olson’s text, therefore, constantly slips away from either end, centre or periphery; it evolves by way of falling back on itself.

*Paterson* and the *Maximus Poems*, Roy Harvey Pearce contends, aim at producing an “American equivalent of the epic”(61, 83). The end-result could only be an “equivalent” for, in addition to inverting the epic conventions of unity, wholeness and elevated style, these texts also “narrate” a nation in its coming into being. In place of a commonly shared past as a national bond, they narrate the compulsive “newness” of America:

The American epos, 19-  
...  
To celebrate  
how it can be ...  
...  
    (o Statue  
o Republic, o  
Tell-A-Vision, the best is soap. The true trobadours  
are CBS. Melopoeia  
    is for Cokes by Cokes out of  
    Pause  
(MP, 75, I.71)

The above lines afford a postmodernist dehierarchization of values: the high modernist principle of Pound’s melopoeia, as energizer of language, at the service of the mass-culture phenomenon of advertizing a national product. More importantly, they make for a synecdoche of the American nation at the turn of the century as the “new empire”.<sup>6</sup>

A new rhythm in language and life, then, comprises an integral part of that “new”, and therefore, American idiom (P, 225) which is to sustain modern experience. To this end, Williams’s and Olson’s objection to language as a static

form and their subsequent decline of “explicit sentences” in favour of “verbal sequences” (P, 189), or of “grammar generally” (SW, 21), frequently result in poems such as the following quoted in full here:

“home”, to the shore  
 Bu-te pu-bu bu-nu-su  
 bayt. “house,”  
 to the  
 shore  
 pa-ba pa-’i-to “Phaistos”

pa, as in a for  
 Apple  
 tu tuppûh

and bird or ku is “town”:  
 kr-ku (Her headland, over  
 the sea-shore  
 (MP, 417, III. 50)

According to the comprehensive “guide” George F. Butterick provides for reading the *Maximus Poems* and their obscurities and eccentricities, the above is a decipherment of the pictographs on the clay disk discovered in the Minoan city Phaistos. Yet Olson’s choice to include such material as a finished poem in his collection affords a sample of a text, which de-forms rather than forms meaning, of the kind Stevens circumscribes as follows: “The poem must resist the intelligence / Almost successfully” (CP, 350). In *Paterson* Williams includes part of an interview where the interviewer manages to deduce the answer he wants to his truth-claiming question “can you tell me, simply, what poetry is” by citing part of a poem by Williams himself: “2 partridges / 2 mallard ducks / a Dungeness crab / 24 hours out / of the Pacific / and 2 live-frozen / trout from Denmark ...” Williams does agree with the interviewer’s comment that this is not a poem but a “fashionable grocery list” instead, only to conclude that, after all, “[a]nything is good material for poetry” (P, 224-225).

Visual artifacts and experiments with language, the above excerpts— which Olson and Williams find, rather than *originally* compose— also figure as antecedents of what is to develop in the 70s and 80s as “Language Poetry”.<sup>7</sup> Though it appears tautologically redundant (as the title indicates), merely reiterating commonplace issues such as an old Shelleyan “defence”— that “language itself is poetry” (“A Defence”)— this trend stands as an overt case of poetry challenging linguistic transparency and the autonomous presence of the subject. Gertrude Stein’s famous line “[t]he difference is spreading” (*Tender Buttons*, 9), still fueling much of what happens in the poetry of the 80s (Hartley, 2, 4-5), might as well figure in Williams’s and Olson’s poetics of particularism as



retaining difference.

Moreover, it is this “spreading”, as opposed to representing, that constitutes difference as a source of meaningful experience. For Williams it is a slip of the imagination “from one thing to another” (I, 14) that safeguards him against the danger of association; while the projectivist superimposition of one perception on another<sup>8</sup> is Olson’s way against the falsity of “symbology” (SW, 56). This is how each poet proposes that the peculiarity of the object be retained; that the object be the experience itself rather than a translation of it. Accordingly, the text they produce – *Paterson, Maximus* – is not quite the “melting pot” homogenizing difference into comparison or referentiality, i. e. into sameness, but a space which contains “those inimitable particles of dissimilarity” (I, 18).

What really contributes to this end is the length of this text. According to Margaret Dickie, the reason why the American modernists moved from the lyric structured on imagist principles – brevity, accuracy, “direct treatment of the thing” – to the “long poem” is the “unidentifiability” of this genre as a means of turning them loose from the limitations they themselves imposed on language and form (4, 6). With respect to *Paterson* and the *Maximus Poems*, it is the inability to “identify” which of the “dissimilar” components featured prevails that makes the specific “long poem” an indeterminate space. This is the space where a quest towards self-realization takes place through the subject’s simultaneous imposition on, and submission to, the object, to the local realities of *Paterson* and Gloucester. It is a text which (de)constructs the subject in other words; one which unfolds in the cutting edge between a speaking subject and the private experience spoken of.

That *Paterson* is a text that sustains such dissimilarity is a common view among critics. The terms they use to describe it as such, however, often indicate an “anxiety” for resolution of one dissimilar component into another. Thus, *Paterson*, according to criticism, is a proposal towards a “synthesis”, a “discontinuous poem” unfolding through its “continuous stages”, or even an “organization of irrelevance”.<sup>9</sup> Williams himself can have generated this kind of criticism with comments referring to *Paterson* as “pretty loose stuff” though tied together with a “thread” (SL, 253). Only, the “thread” of this “mass of material” points to “composition” (SL, 234); to *Paterson* as the text about composition in the twofold sense of writing out *Paterson* the city and being written in and through its local realities. After all, conflicting critical views which consider this text a long poem about the incompatibility of “private language” and “public themes” (Dickie, 5), on the one hand, and of “giant ambitions and private experience” (Tapscott, 223), on the other, only justify the element of unidentifiability of the con-fusing sets “subject-object” and “public-private” (or universal-local). *Paterson* is the long poem retaining incompatibility, in Williams’s words, a poem about the “power” of “discover[ing] ... dissimilarity” (I, 18). Thus it calls for a new reading of incompatibility as trespassing rather than respecting long-established divisive lines such as the centre *versus*

periphery. An assemblage of the most randomly assorted material—letters, interviews, newspaper articles, long excerpts from books, even a geological survey for an artesian well—in a pastiche of prose and verse styles, make up the polyglot mosaic of “Paterson” the city and the narrative. Notwithstanding a good number of critics considering *Paterson* a collage of “dissimilarities”, Carl Rapp’s comment—that Williams’s material derives from the most “heterogeneous sources” and is “yoked together by violence” (104)—is of particular interest. It seems as though the critic is not at ease with this use of Williams’s “violence” on his material when, in fact, this is how the poet shatters the notion of “naturalness” and discloses the fallacy of sustaining any “togetherness” at all and its subsequent by-products: a unified text of an equally unified subject. Rapp, rightly continues to point out that anything goes on in this text: passages and quotations cited can be shifted around, expanded, deleted without really changing the character of the poem. But this is precisely what results from Williams’s act of “violently” (or arbitrarily rather than “naturally”, in any case) presenting his material in a state of randomness so as to represent experience in a state of unselected flux. Hence, Williams dismantles the idea of a sequence, in the Hegelian sense, in *Paterson*:

For the beginning is assuredly  
the end—since we know nothing, pure  
and simple, beyond  
complexities.  
(P, 3)

The lines echo similar modernist views on the fluidity and indeterminacy of experience and its textual representation: Eliot’s “In my beginning is my end” of *The Four Quartets*, Stevens’s interrelated “naked Alpha” and the “hierophant Omega” of the poem “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven” (“Alpha continues to begin / Omega is refreshed at every end”, CP, 469).

The question of unity in a long poem,<sup>10</sup> in a sense, itself implying an undermining from within, is particularly apt for *Maximus*. Neither time, nor the local history of Gloucester are easy to chart here. Olson’s text includes anything from one-line to ten-page poems comprising an epic (told through a series of letters), diffuse in its scope, source and delineation of character of archetypal proportions. Projectivist, in essence, the *Maximus Poems* unravel as *periploi*, in the Poundian context, literally tracing to the practice of drawing navigational charts based on first-hand experience acquired during voyages (*Guide*, xxiii). As a travel-literature text, too, recording the experience of “seeing” (“polis / is eyes”; “so few / have the polis / in their eyes”, MP, 30, I. 26 32, I. 28), the *Maximus Poems* result in shocking shifts of focus from image to image, context to context, on the part of the reader-as-viewer of the *periplum* charted out by the writer. In fact, the “power of dissimilarity”, to continue with Williams’s usage of the term, here reveals itself throughout the diachronic development of



the text, in the gaps that is, that (dis)connect the three separate volumes of *Maximus*.

I would be an historian as Herodotus was, looking  
for oneself for the evidence of  
what is said: ...  
(MP, 104, I. 100 - I05, I. 101)

This is what Olson does in *Maximus I*; he follows the Herodotean principle of *istorin*, an act of “finding out for oneself”, contrary to hearsay, so as to tell a “story” rather than simply “report” an event.<sup>11</sup> Yet, the second volume, *Maximus IV, V, VI* shows a drastic shift from the Herodotean historian to a “frightfully abstract” (by Olson’s own account), “mythologist”.<sup>12</sup> The mode of *istorin* “navigates” the act of discovering and commenting on the local referent: local attractions of Gloucester among whom Vincent Ferini, poet and editor of a magazine, the painters Marsden Hartley and Helen Stein, William Stevens, the shipwright—the politics of the recurrent “pejorocracy” and “mu-sick”<sup>13</sup> as forms of political and language interference with the life of a local community. *Istorin*, as writing a geographically rooted story gives way to an excess of myth threatening to encompass the entire nation and the entire world. The “I Maximus of Gloucester, to You”, the authorial voice addressing fellow citizens and Olson’s readers, thus, allowing for the possibility of identifying epic hero and poet, gives way to the depersonalized “Maximus of Gloucester”:

... It is not I,  
even if the life appeared  
biographical. The only interesting thing  
is if one can be  
an image  
of man ...  
(MP, 473, III.101)

A similar concern over the relation of “image” and its referent Williams airs in his prefatory note to *Paterson*: “to find an image large enough to embody the whole knowable world”. Seemingly, the difference in the “body politics”,<sup>14</sup> also determining a poetic of the particular, of the two poets lies in this: that Olson disembodies image and material referent, whereas Williams seeks to “embody” the one in the other. What surfaces in either approach is the physical signifier: Olson names it the “particularity” of the object (SW, 56) or, a life of the “instant” in his essay “The Present Is Prologue” (AP, 48). Both remarks strikingly parallel Williams’s on “that peculiarity which gives an object a character by itself” (I, 14) or, on a time-and-space bound life of “the here and now” (SE, 196). Moreover, what renders these poets’ respective texts “hybrids” of the material and the abstract is a to-and-fro flow from the one to the other,

whether such movement becomes evident in the synchronic juxtaposition of the two at each point and time in *Paterson* or in the diachronic development from *istorin* to myth, i.e. from the material to the abstract in the *Maximus Poems*; whether it is the local-become-universal, as in Olson's case, or the universal in the local in Williams's.

A "hybrid", in itself, of the local-and-universal, one might claim, the Williams-Olson pair foregrounds a dialectic of inclusion and exclusion in the new American poetic. Such is the inherent duplicity in this simultaneous complementing and contradicting, "appropriating" and "resisting", which for Bhabha determines a "janus-faced" discourse "narrating" a "nation": "Nations, like narratives, lose their origins in myths of time" (*Nation and Narration*, 1). The culturally and locally specific is not entirely exempt from abstraction and myth. *Paterson*, Gloucester—textual tropes for industrialization and European migration in America "narrating" America in its emergence—also compel a commitment to the common cause of intervening in the town's debased contemporary life as well as a commitment to a common past. Maximus-of-Gloucester, in particular, both as Herodotean historian and mythologist searches for "origins" in Tyre, migrating Europe, even the Norse and Algonquins (*Guide*, xxx). A commonly shared past constitutes Gloucester a site for communal rather than individual life. At the same time, bound to a geographically and historically specific locale, Gloucester resists total resolution of individuality into collective identity. Hence the contradictoriness evident in the ostensibly simple compound "local community". Gloucester as local community divides even as it binds together; a hybrid of individuality and anonymity, Olson describes it throughout his *Maximus Poems* as "polis":

Isolated person in Gloucester, Massachussetts, I Maximus,  
address you  
you islands  
of men and girls.  
(MP, 16, I, 12)

(or let me call it "Island",  
or something more exact —  
"Gloucester", just that flat,  
making my polis yours  
(MP, 28, I, 24)

Gloucester, an island "polis", separated from the mainland by a river, and only later joined to the nation by a highway and bridge (*Guide*, 8), equips Olson with a comprehensive analogue for undermining continuity and unity, on the one hand, and privileging the notion of autonomy and self-sufficiency, on the other. Gillian Beer, in her article "The Island and the Aeroplane",



interestingly parallels the significance the cultural concept of the “island” bears with that of the “city” of Ancient Greece. A composite of water-surrounded land, the island is a “safe place” from which to “launch the building of an empire” (261, 271). Yet, the island is also a body snipped off from a *main-land*, a colony diffracted from the empire, part of a hydrocephalic centre dispersed into a multiple periphery. Its texture—a “water-sorrounded land”—encases both notions of transcending as well as establishing borders. A compound of a “nation” as uniting and “state” as separating, Gloucester, the island polis—moreover, the polis as “city-state” in the Ancient Greek context—is the space where both dissolution and retention of dividing lines, both the collective and the individual, meet. Butterick points out that in an unpublished essay Olson equates “polis” with the “State”, the “System”, “totality” in general, urging for its inversion “by discovering the totality of any—every—single one of us” (cited in *Guide*, 25).

The familiar Olson who favours heterogeneity, projectivism of the subject as object, “the many”, seemingly retracts such tenets in *Maximus Poems* where Gloucester is made into the ideal “polis” that Maximus-as-civilizer aims at. The text could be construed this way only if read as resolving the individual into the communal, the local into the universal rather than as a flow from the one to the other. It is this simultaneous attraction to and repulsion from the “polis”, a simultaneous centripetal and centrifugal movement, that marks that “janus-faced” rhetoric, indeed, of the many-as-one; of the self as Self of the Emerson-Whitman American tradition echoing, however, its English past—an Arnoldian concept of the corporate state as “centre” of light and the pursuit of a national-as-best self. What Williams and Olson add to this American tradition is the retention of both the individual and the uniform. The difference between them is the way they effect their end: namely, the trajectory that the “one-many”, or “centre-periphery” compound follows for each poet. Olson forewords his *Maximus Poems* with the remark “All my life I’ve heard / one makes many” which seems to read as a palinode of Williams’s comment forewording *Paterson*: “by multiplication a reduction to one”.

Williams’s intent to “embody” the world in the image of the “giant city” ends in the “reduced” image of the “atom”:

Uranium, the compex atom, breaking  
down, a city in itself, that complex  
atom, always breaking down  
to lead.  
(P, 178)

Is this “reduction”, however, doing away with “multiplication”? Does it mean deafitism for Williams’s attempt at making *Paterson* the image of a “giant city”?

A dissonance  
in the valence of Uranium  
led to the discovery

Dissonance  
(if you are interested)  
leads to discovery  
(P, 176)

Paterson — as city and narrative — is, itself, a “discovery” of “dissonance”. The breaking down of the giant into the atom, the atomic fission that follows, in turn, mean an inconclusive diffraction of the one into the many sustaining, therefore, “dissonance”.

Williams’s “discovery” of a “gigantism of the atom”, so to speak, is not far apart from Olson’s “discovery” of a “polis” in Gloucester. Such “dissonance” of the large-and-small or of the universal-and-local, respectively — both standing for tropes of the centre-periphery “dissonance” — means negotiation rather than negation, in Bhabha’s terms (*Location*, 25). Williams and Olson “negate” the familiar centre/periphery dichotomy of high modernism to “negotiate” a re-ordering of its terms. They neg(oti)ate (the “hybrid” word might be) the old binary opposition by means of producing a new hyphenated compound: what the poet-physician of Paterson aptly describes as running off “toward the peripheries / to *other centers*” (P, 36, emphasis mine).

Williams invests his European avant-garde streak in and for a poetic of the American local scene; hence his local as “embodiment” of the universal, or as his “neg(oti) ated trope of the “giant atom” in *Paterson*. Olson, founder of the literary community of Black Mountain, North Carolina, a “polis” of sorts in the American periphery of the South, leads the way to the new poetry of projectivism. What follows is a cross-pollenization in poetry with the two as *American* antecedents, this time, for a host of British poets. Williams and Olson challenge an old contradiction in terms — the Eliotic tradition of the new — to foreground another — the new canon of an American poetic of the particular. Theirs is a message launched from the periphery to the centre. Their city, thus, as “body” of their poetics is neither the “unreal” “Jerusalem, Athens, Alexandria / Vienna, London” of the *Waste Land* nor the modernist metropolis of the unknown emigré, but a periphery of writers of a new centre: Paterson and Gloucester, the peripheral centres.



### Notes

1. References to Stevens's poetry and prose are from *Collected Poems*, cited in the text as CP and *Opus Posthumous* as OP.
2. References to Williams's work are from the following editions cited in the text in abbreviated form: *The Collected Poems* (CP, I, II), *Imaginations* (I), *Paterson*, (P), *The Selected Letters* (SL), *Selected Essays* (SE).
3. References to Olson's work, hereafter cited in the text in abbreviated form are from: *Additional Prose* (AP), *Call me Ishmael* (CI), *The Maximus Poems* (MP), *Selected Writings* (SW), *The Special View of History* (SVH).
4. In line with my overall argument regarding *Paterson* and *Maximus* as texts fashioned on "hybridity", it is not until later that I specifically refer to the terms "nation" and "narration" in the context Bhabha places them in his collection of essays *Nation and Narration*, i.e. the context of the ambivalence of a language appropriated for the construction of an equally ambivalent formation, the "nation" (most extensively dealt with in Timothy Brennan's essay "The National Longing for Form" of this collection). However, I also employ these terms frequently throughout this paper as amply suitable for describing *Paterson* and *Maximus* as texts about the emergence of a periphery into a centre; Williams's and Olson's America, in other words, as compared to an Eliotic European-bound metropolitanism, or Paterson and Gloucester as compared, say, to New York.
5. "... I regard Gloucester as the final movement of the earth's people, the great migratory thing ... migration ended in Gloucester. The migratory act of man ended in Gloucester... the motion of man upon the earth has a line, an oblique, northwestending line, and Gloucester was the last shore in that sense" (Olson's conversation with Herbert Kenny recorded in the *Guide*, 7). Geographical literality here—Gloucester as the last shore for the European migratory wave—apart, I find Olson's specific comment particularly apt for addressing the issue of the European immigrant forming a new settlement, i.e. the issue of the American nation as periphery-become-centre.
6. The significance of the specific year 1902 Olson alludes to in the above lines, Butterick, shows, is twofold. It marks a possible date for the start of "that special American phenomenon, PROMOTION ... sometime, say, around the beginning of the 20th century, a principle of pumping up wants, of turning them into cravings, of creating artificial or super-abundant human wants" ("History") and the date of Brooks Adams's study of America *The New Empire*, which Olson reviews in the *Black Mountain Review* in 1954 and to which he overtly alludes in *Maximus III*, 66-67 (*Guide*, 106, 569-570). Reference to Olson's allusion here pertains to my thesis on *Maximus* as the American "epos" of the periphery emerging as a "new empire".
7. See further on this, George Hartley, 19-21 and Douglass Messerli, 2.
8. In Olson's projectivist view, writing is a process during which "one perception must ... MOVE, INSTANTER, ON ANOTHER" (SW, 17).
9. Reference is to Stephen Tapscott, 223; Margaret Dickie, 4 (though her focus on the continuity/discontinuity play pertains to the "modernist long poem" in general); Carl Rapp's citing Randall Jarrell's well-known comment on *Paterson* as an "organization of irrelevance" by way of backing up his own claim that *Paterson* is a poem of "miscellaneous pieces" put together by "violence", 104-105.
10. Thomas F. Merrill's response, for instance, entails an account of *Maximus* as an epic

structured on the Herodotean methodology of *istorin*, an act of “finding out for oneself” which, according to the author, distinguishes Olson’s sequence from Williams’s time-bound history of Paterson (163-165). Don Byrd, in turn, parallels the Olson of *Maximus* to the poet as a “stitcher of songs”, a “rhapsodist”, etymologically derived from *rhaptein* and *aidein* (90-91; see also “Letter 15”, 72, I. 68). In line with my thesis as regards “hybridity”, I focus on the technique of broken composition as retaining dissimilarity, which I see these critics’ approaches disclose, rather than as an attempt resulting in unity.

11. For a full account of Olson’s modes of the Herodotean historian and of the mythologist in his *Maximus* see Merrill, 165-175, 193-214.
12. “What I am about to say will seem, I’m sure, frightfully abstract if you don’t see that I am making pictures—that I am what I am interested in: a mythologist” (Olson, SVH, cited in Merrill, 193).
13. “mu-sic”, punning “music”, part and parcel of “pejorocracy”, i.e. of the debased political and cultural life of Gloucester (“those who use words cheap, who use us cheap”, MP, 13, I.9), may compare with Williams’s analogous descriptions of language as failing the citizens of his “debased city” Paterson (P, 81): “The language is missing them / they die also / incommunicado. / The language, the language / fails them ...” (P, 11).
14. Reference is to David Kellogg’s article “Body Poetics, Body Politics: The Birth of Charles Olson’s Dynamic”, an interesting account of some of Olson’s shorter poems as manifesting a “bodily” dimension. My focus on part of the wording of the title concerns an extension that I see possible of such “body politics” to include Williams’s stance on the body as locus of individuality underlining a poetic of the particular (“cities are a second body for the human mind”, Santayana, P, 94).

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