

## STEPHEN COLLIS, TONY POWER & JASON STARNES / An Interview with Ralph Maud

*Ralph Maud is Professor Emeritus in the Simon Fraser University English Department, founder of the Bennett Library's Contemporary Literature Collection, and a leading scholar on poet Charles Olson. Author of Charles Olson's Reading (Southern Illinois University Press 1996), an edition of Olson's Selected Letters (University of California Press 2000), and Charles Olson at the Harbour (Talonbooks 2008), Maud has assembled a replica library of all the books Olson is known to have owned (in the same editions, and in some cases the original copies), as well as numerous archival documents and copies of Olson's manuscripts. These interviews took place in the Kitsilano office where Maud has worked on his archive for a number of years. In 2010, the donated Charles Olson Library will be opened in SFU's Special Collections, Bennett Library.*

### Part One

March 29, 2006

Tony Power: We thought we could talk about the beginnings of your Olson collection and SFU Library's Contemporary Literature Collection, hear about its origins—shrouded in the mists of time now. It goes back almost to the beginning of the University, was it 1965?

Ralph Maud: Well yes, but it goes back to '63, when I met Olson in Buffalo—at the State University of New York, formerly the University of Buffalo, which used to be a nice place! I came from Harvard to Buffalo to do the Dylan Thomas notebooks. Buffalo had the best modern poetry collection because the librarian, Charles Abbott, was a Rhodes Scholar at the time that Auden and Spender and C. Day-Lewis were at Oxford, and he got the idea that he would collect manuscripts of these and other living authors. Nobody had thought of that! In the fifties, Yale stole William Carlos Williams away from him. But Abbott got the notes for *The Sea and the Mirror* from Auden, and many, many interesting things, including Dylan Thomas's notebooks, for

which he paid—well, he wouldn't normally pay for manuscripts, because he didn't want people manufacturing them for payment, so he refused to pay—but there came an offer from Bertram Rota in London, and it came through the wires during the war, and they had a big conference and ended up paying for them, £5 apiece for these notebooks. Big decisions involved here! And Dylan Thomas in a letter to somebody said, "I've just sold my notebooks for the price of a packet of Players' cigarettes." Then something happened in '63, which was suddenly this nice, private little university that depended on the city of Buffalo... well, one of the duties of the younger faculty, the male faculty, was to accept invitations as the "extra man" at dinner tables downtown at the various houses of the rich of Buffalo, just to go and be extra men and be witty and charming, because the funds for the university depended on you! So this was one of those duties I kind of liked. Then in 1963—it wasn't even sold to the state, there was nobody to sell it, but it just sort of *changed* into the State University of New York. Weird. But one of the consequences was that there was suddenly plenty of money, and suddenly all kinds of sharp career people started coming in and changing the atmosphere. But one of the great things that happened was Olson came. As you recall, the summer of '63 was the conference in Vancouver, which was prepared for by Creeley, who Warren Tallman had got to come to UBC for the whole year preceding that so they could get things organized, and they did a summer school, and they had, as you know, Ginsberg and Duncan and Levertov and a few others, and it changed Canadian poetry forever. All the young poets like Bowering and Kearns and Wah were around and they couldn't help but be influenced; they'd done *TISH* before, and Warren Tallman had got the thing going—his university within the university. Now Albert Cook became the new chairman at Buffalo; he knew enough that as soon as he heard about Olson teaching at UBC for a summer he phoned him and said, "I've got an offer you can't refuse, come to Buffalo for one semester"—ten thousand dollars or something. And Olson said gee, my wife is having tooth troubles, I gotta pay for a dentist, so yeah, I'll accept it. He hadn't worked since Black Mountain College in '57. He'd just been in Gloucester, experiencing Gloucester and doing *The Maximus Poems* and not giving himself out as a teacher. So he was ready—his arrival in Buffalo was full of a tremendous energy. But I wasn't at all prepared because I was in the academic school of poetry: I'd come up through the "New University Wits" of Britain, Kingsley Amis and Philip Larkin and all those people, and I'd come to North America and got in with followers of Robert Frost. There was that anthology that Donald



Hall did, *New Poets of England and America* (1957), which contained none of the poets that Donald Allen had in the *New American Poetry* (1960). The two anthologies were entirely separate, but I knew the Donald Hall people!

Stephen Collis: Was Allen's anthology a direct response, do you think, to the Hall anthology? There wasn't much time between them....

RM: Well, as the editor of Don Allen's letters I can say that it wasn't *really* a response. But he was representing a real-life division, and I always remember hearing Robert Frost around that time, visiting Harvard and so on, saying, "I get a lot of poetry books, you know, and if they have regular metres and rhymes and stanzas, I keep 'em; if they've got long lines and no rhymes I send them to Carl Sandburg." And so I was a part of keeping the stanzas and the rhymes.

SC: How did you move from the Hall to the Allen?

RM: It was an issue of Olson's personality. You can't meet a genius without being affected by it. I found this just before you came—a little magazine I edited at Buffalo, for which I got somebody to review Donald Allen's anthology. John Simon, who of course is a hatchet man, he just made fun of it completely. Right at the end he says: "Oddly enough, there are even a few true, well made poems in the anthology...but as far as the majority of Mr. Allen's poets, these are kids who took up poetry the way one takes up marijuana, Buddhism, switchblade knives, wife swapping, or riding in boxcars, neither more nor less seriously than other kicks. As poets they are neither born nor made, except possibly by one another." John Simon became a reviewer in New York, had a career of tearing down things. When I finally met Don Allen, I had the embarrassment of wondering if he'd remembered this review, and I think he did; but he was a very polite guy, he didn't bring it up. Well, my meeting with Don Allen is interesting—it's an anecdote which I think sums up a lot. I was still doing my Dylan Thomas work—the notebooks were out from New Directions and they even got reviewed in *TIME* magazine. I thought I would take a copy out to Olson—I'd met him a couple of times; I was impressed. The first time I was really impressed; somebody came rushing in saying you've got to meet this new poet, he knew Woody Guthrie! That was how Olson came on the scene—he knew Woody Guthrie. Well, you can see the mindset we were in. I must've been ready for a change—that's been proven. But

I was lucky that I was the first person that Olson saw when he arrived on the Buffalo campus. I was driving down onto Main Street in my open Morris Minor, with my pith helmet on. And Olson saw my round face and remembered it. It was a kinship.

SC: He had the same kind of helmet, maybe.

RM: Or he had the same kind of mother, maybe. Harry Keyishian came down and said to me, "You gotta meet this new poet! He knew Woodie Guthrie!" We were left-wingers; with Woodie Guthrie, there was a real bridge to Olson. And we were fighting the Feinberg Certificate at that time—where you had to sign that you hadn't been a communist. And if you had been a communist, you told the president of the university about it. Very funny. Some people signed and some didn't. Four hundred people signed it and five didn't. And Harry was one of them and I was one of them. And we went up to the Supreme Court—you can look it up, it's "Keyishian v. the State of New York." We let Harry's name be up there because he had the most to lose—he was just starting out. That was the first issue: when I met Olson, I must have given the impression that because he knew Woodie Guthrie, he wouldn't be signing the Feinberg Certificate. But he went home and typed out three single-spaced pages of answer to me, which he never sent.

SC: Have you ever seen the document?

RM: Oh yeah, it's at the University of Connecticut library. I could show you a copy of it.

SC: What was his response, then, about the Feinberg thing?

RM: *What is real political action?* he's asking. That sort of hurt, when I finally read it. *Where were you all the years when the Feinberg Act was on the statute books? You're now protesting it? In 1947 it went on. Are you living in a kind of polis where you're aware and making it something you can really live in, or are you just responsive to events?* And this was quite telling, of course. He accused us of "thin" politics. And in those pages he talked about his own political action. In the letter he did send, there were only two questions: "My dear Ralph, What is a civil liberty? And what is the party of your affiliation?" Ahh. And I didn't reply for a year.

TP: So not much contact at all?

RM: Not much contact. That is, it built up during that year in public appearances. The first meeting where I got the measure of Charles Olson—it follows his own career. He began with Melville, and could've become a scholar of Melville if he'd wanted to be. And Lyle Glazier had a student who was doing a Ph.D. on Melville, and Lyle had the idea that the dissertation defense could be a public event where Olson responded to it. And lots of people turned up—sixty or seventy people—and it was a marvelous evening. And the young man, who didn't know what he was getting into really, told us what his thesis was about, and I can still see it. When Olson was called upon, he stood up near the back of the room and started walking down the aisle and talking about Keats returning from the Christmas party and writing a letter about...

SC: ...negative capability?

RM: Negative capability, right. And Olson got to the stage and I thought, Gee, this is something—making leaps between Keats and Melville.

SC: He'd probably already seen Melville's copy of Keats, no?

RM: Right, and he'd also written about it. So it wasn't as impromptu as it might've seemed. But I loved him as an intellectual. He was a great intellectual—he could imagine solutions and astound you with his knowledge. And then he did a few faculty seminars, you know, the *crème de la crème* kind of thing. So by the time months passed I came to know him, and I've forgotten how I replied to the letter but I know I did, eventually.

SC: Where was Olson living at the time?

RM: Wyoming, New York, which was an hour out of Buffalo. Olson got a very good deal—it was a country house with this little guest cottage. Well, he got the guest cottage—it was a millionaire's estate. I don't know...poets know how to live, right? I got there—I didn't announce my arrival, but I thought, 2:30 in the afternoon on a Sunday would be alright, you know, I'd just go for a ride. It was probably apple cider time—lovely cider mills outside Buffalo—we'd go get some cider, just drop in, casual enough. So Betty was in the kitchen, and Olson was there with Donald Allen, who I didn't expect, and we met and he just sort of disappeared, not in any bad way, he just seemed to disappear. But there was something a bit strange about it because, well, the fireplace was full of ashes. The fire had just died down. And it dawned on me



that, of course, they'd been up all night. This is the way Olson lived—he'd been up all night talking to Don Allen. Later on I did have my own all-night session with Olson. But that was it: I was coming at breakfast time after an all-night session—no wonder Donald Allen disappeared, he couldn't meet anybody at that point. But Olson had this recuperative power. "Come on, we'll go for a walk"—and we did, we walked down the field. And that was the occasion on which he stubbed his foot into a ploughed rut—"Indians," he said, "they're my people." The Seneca Indians. And that's what got me onto Charles Hill-Tout and the Salish people, and all the work I've done here. I mean, that's called teaching—when in a phrase you can just open up a whole world to somebody. So that's what I mean by "genius." But I didn't catch on right away, of course... I was deep in the other world. I was newly married, and so I didn't stay out all night. Jack Clarke was the one who got close to Olson in Buffalo. Jack was a wonderful person—a Blake scholar. He'd been a jazz pianist in bars in Toledo, Ohio; he'd gone through Bowling Green University on the basis of playing jazz piano. So he'd stay up till 3 or 4 in morning, drive around a bit till 5 just to come down off the high. This is what he and Olson did in Buffalo.

Then I came out to Simon Fraser in 1965. Ron Baker, the academic planner for the whole thing, was marvelous. And he couldn't find anybody better than himself to be head of the English Department, and in a sense that was true enough. He was marvelous because he made us all feel that if we put our shoulders to the wheel, we could get what we wanted out of this place. Fred Candelaria wanted to edit *West Coast Review*, and he got to do that. Stanley Cooperman got a chance to show off with these big classes—two hundred, three hundred people...

TP: I was in one of those. English 102 with Stanley Cooperman.

RM: Well, there you go! What more could a show-off want than what Stanley got? Well, I got the Contemporary Literature Collection. I said I wanted to record what was happening right now, what I had discovered in Buffalo.

TP: I heard there was at first just a bibliography?

RM: Well, once I decided I was going to teach Olson when I got to Simon Fraser, I was reading *The Maximus Poems* a lot—I didn't understand them at all—so I bugged Olson two or three times. I was the one asking him specific questions—what did *that*

mean? what did *that* mean? And he'd come up with the answers! Nobody seems to have done that—they were all too scared to indicate that they didn't know what the poems meant, I guess, or they thought it was beneath his dignity to answer simple questions. But he liked it. And when he knew that I was coming out west and I would make a detour to Berkeley, for the Berkeley conference in July '65, he said, "Do you want to be my scholar?" Each of the principal people performing at Berkeley were given an extra ticket for somebody; in other words, they could each bring a scholar. Well, I was Olson's official scholar.

SC: Don't leave home without your scholar!

RM: It's even down there as Olson's "Scholar"—I've got the ticket somewhere. And, you know, you get in free, and you have a kind of status, and of course it was just another example of Olson...which he did for everybody...he treated them in the way in which they would want to be treated if they were living at their best. I mean, if you're living at your best, this is the way you would be and this is the way somebody should be treating you, acknowledging who you really are and who you wanted to be. And it's a real wonderful gift. So he made me his scholar. And here we are. So I did turn up at Berkeley. I heard the "Causal Mythology" lecture and lots of other things; he gave a series of seminars. What I didn't hear was the long Berkeley reading, and I think I'll put on record the reason I didn't—it's because I had to get to Salt Lake City where my wife and son were. My son was having his fourth birthday party, so I drove all night to get to it. And I guess that was worth it. What it meant was that I had to leave before the big reading, and I didn't care much about it—I thought, Oh, he'll just read the poems, you know! But Olson that night I missed did something remarkable. He opened his arms to being a public figure; but he didn't read so everyone could admire him. He said at one point, "I want to abandon my powers." He was a very powerful figure. In high school and college he was a master debater. He won all his debates. And he went into politics with Franklin Roosevelt. He was persuasive in political situations, in the back rooms, knocking on doors and everything. A very persuasive, powerful guy, but he knew that was only one part—it was the right hand, and he was interested in the left hand as well. How can somebody this powerful not be powerful, especially before an audience? Well, he proved how to get that other value in, and he sort of fell on his face, as it were. And this is where Dorn and Creeley and a few others, Duncan—well, Duncan left halfway through—Creeley stayed, Dorn



stayed, but they were embarrassed and they expressed that, and they fueled Tom Clark's book with that embarrassment... as if Olson had somehow failed, become a pathetic figure. And I believe that's because they didn't understand what he was doing, and in fact listening to that tape, as I've done a hundred times, I kind of hold the feeling that there's a human being who is showing us how to go into the future, where domineering power is not what we're after anymore.

SC: It was more performative—more about the performance?

RM: Well, it was revealing parts of the psyche that you keep to one side when you're in your public persona, but he wanted to bring out everything.

SC: So after that July in Berkeley, you're on your way up to Vancouver, your first semester at SFU...

TP: Did you arrive with the idea of starting a collection of Olson and the New Americans?

RM: Sort of! I picked up, at Cody's Books in Berkeley... Cody's put out a little pamphlet which contained the books of all the principal poets at the Berkeley conference—a bibliography for the occasion. When I arrived here I went over to UBC and looked in the catalogue and none of them were there. None of them!

SC: Even with Warren Tallman there?

RM: Well, I went to Warren—I said, "What have you been doing?!" He said, "Oh, I gave up long ago on the librarians... they wouldn't get these books, so," he said, "what I did is I got them in my home and made it a lending library for all the young poets in Vancouver who wanted to come be part of this!" And that's what happened! That's what I always said—a university within a university, that's what Warren did. But what an opportunity, in that case—UBC absolutely ignored all these people who were rising. So SFU gave them a chance.

TP: Well, Allen, in his preface to the anthology, talks about how hard to come by, how unpublished these writers were. They were being published in the anthology without being published elsewhere. It sounds like at the time the stuff was just not readily available.



SC: Even with Duncan, his first trade paperback book of poetry was coming out at the same time as the anthology. For twenty years he'd been publishing with small presses.

TP: There seems to be such a schism there—on the one hand the “academic” and on the other, whatever you call them, the New Americans. They seem to be on complete opposite poles.

RM: Well, this is my particular attribute. I'm a trained Ph.D. at Harvard and I have published widely in academic journals not only in the modern field. So when I take up the “madmen,” then at least I can get away with it a little bit—people say oh, there must be something to it! In other words, I applied the prestige of “academia”...and I was able to command a budget of \$10,000 a year—part of the library's budget just for the CLC—which I spent!

TP: Your starting point was to collect around the *New American Poetry* anthology, wasn't it?

SC: And around the Berkeley Conference?

RM: It was, indeed, but when I told Olson what I was planning to do, in a letter, that I would start a collection with Black Mountain people in it, and so on...he wrote back, again one of those insights: “Ralph, I think you'd be better off sticking with me.” And he was absolutely right—I have been like a two-person machine. I did Dylan Thomas and then I switched to Charles Olson. I have not been an authority in my field—I've been a scholar of particular people. And there's a total difference. Literary criticism requires you to be an authority in your field. Well, sure. That's one thing. A scholar is somebody who knows everything about a few things. So I took that as permission to just make Olson the centre of this collection.

## Part Two

July 1, 2009

SC: When did you begin trying to reconstruct Olson's library? What spawned that? What brought you to a project of this scale?

RM: I'm just wondering if I actually knew how much Olson had done with Melville's source books. I must have had some inkling of that—so I was just imitating Olson, as I've done all along. I can't think of anything I've done that I didn't borrow from Olson, that didn't imitate him. Just a simple consequence of what he proposed. We looked at *The Maximus Poems* together, Olson and I, a couple of times; I caught him at breakfast—2:30 in the afternoon, he'd be having breakfast before he went down to his seminar at 3:30, having been up all night—and I asked him some specific questions, terribly easy questions like "What is spelt?" Well, we all know what spelt is now, but I didn't know what spelt was. And I'd ask about the exercises he did when he was training to be an actor in the Gloucester summer theatre. And he told me the answers in a straightforward way, but of course this led immediately to his sources, and I could see that once you knew what he was talking about this was very, very simple poetry. This was denotative; this was telling you about things. It wasn't metaphorical; I was used to puzzling out metaphysical poetry by the methods of New Criticism. I could spend some time telling you what it was like *before* Charles Olson—there was Philip Larkin in England, and Kingsley Amis, and I began a little magazine at Leeds in 1953 through 1954, called *Poetry and Audience*.

TP: You have a run of it in your bathroom, I just noticed.

RM: It's not there for toilet paper, you know, old chap! It's just... my files have crept into the bathroom. Then when I came to Harvard, back to graduate school, I curtailed the name to *Audience*. I can't resist publishing little magazines—my latest one being the *Minutes of the Charles Olson Society*. And who was around? The great figure was Robert Frost, then Richard Wilbur who was on the staff at Harvard—a beautiful poet. I mean you don't have to knock these people just to propose that they're lacking something else. And Richard Wilbur right now is writing beautiful, graceful poems like he always did. And Donald Hall was there, coming out one day from his study excitedly saying, "I found a way to use the word *transubstantiation* in a poem!" These



are the kinds of goals that you have if you're a university wit! I'm trying to figure out in my mind at what stage this was, but as soon as you knew that you had to know what Olson was talking about, then you had to have the source books. And so I naturally, in Buffalo, began doing that. And then it became an obsession, and the book *Charles Olson's Reading* grew out of the collection. I couldn't have written on Olson's reading without having the books to refer to. What's here is not in libraries, a lot of it. You had to have picked it up in obscure bookstores. I suppose the crowning moment for me was when Merton Sealts—he's the one who did what Olson was going to do before Olson decided to be a poet instead. He tracked down Melville's source books, the actual books that Melville owned, and wrote up his report for the *Harvard Library Bulletin*, and then published it separately with the University of Wisconsin.

SC: He acknowledged Olson's work in that field too, didn't he?

RM: Well, not enough. After the fact, years later, when he did the *Pursuing Melville* book, then he published his correspondence with a lot of *mea culpa, mea culpa, mea culpa!*—"I should've known this, I should've beaten the Brooklyn library people over the head until they let me look at the stacks and check up on Olson." Olson had gone to the Brooklyn Public Library and got out Thomas Wharton and a few other likely things, and they were Melville's copies that'd been dumped! On a hunch. Sealts failed to follow up on that.

SC: Olson even went to one of Melville's nieces, I believe—knocked on her door and said, "Got any old books?" and recovered about ninety of them that day or something.

RM: The two granddaughters, especially the one in Orange, NJ, where he found Melville's Shakespeare...

SC: ...the goldmine.

RM: He was attached to Harvard at that point, as a graduate student, so he naturally said to her, "You'd want to donate to Harvard, I expect," and she said, "Yeah, you can give them to Harvard once you've got what you want out of them." So he did donate them to Harvard with a clause of exclusive use for himself for ten years. Which they respected, with a little bit of clownish aberration at the end, which I write about. This all gets very complicated, I can tell you!

SC: It does! It was a simple question...

RM: I had the greatest pleasure of being complimented by Merton Sealts when he said, about my book on Olson, which I did try to make into a narrative of how the books were used—it was an intellectual biography—and Sealts said, “I wish I’d done that. I wish I could’ve gotten it together to do that for Melville.” He just lists books.

TP: It sounds like gathering Olson’s books was a natural product of your scholarship, but did you have a moment where you thought, Aha, I will reconstruct this to the absolute best of my ability and actually obtain Olson’s books? Or did it just evolve?

RM: Well, to complete it as an object in and of itself, yeah, I think that sort of focused itself on maybe getting the chance of buying Olson’s home, 28 Fort Square, in Gloucester. So the idea was that if you had a replica of Olson’s library you would restore 28 Fort Square with fidelity to what it was like when Olson was there. And that was in my mind for quite a few years.

SC: I’m interested in the whole issue of *use*—you were saying that it might not have been much use sitting in a museum in Gloucester, whereas up at SFU it can hopefully be of a little more use. And one thing that connects to that is the fact that you’ve not only carved out a facsimile library, but you’ve got a facsimile archive. You’ve got all these binders with all this material in it; you’ve got a mini facsimile Storrs archive here.

RM: Well, not only Storrs but other libraries that have Olson material. This is it—it’s all there in three-ring binders—and that’s the issue, you see. If people ask me what I’m doing these days, I just say, “Oh, I’m clearing my desk.” There’s a lot on my desk; it’ll take me years. And the main effort—and I want to have you as my witnesses—my main effort is to put these three-ring binders, which contain the letters that Olson wrote, the photocopies of letters and poems and prose and ephemeral things, in chronological order. I’ve got to make it seem as though it can be used by other people besides myself. It’s not on a computer, folks! Can anything today that’s not on a computer be taken seriously? Three-ring binders? Nah, we’ll toss ‘em. Well, you’ll toss them at your peril, Power!

TP: I think at worst they might get scanned...but not tossed.



SC: Here's something else I'm interested in, Ralph. Going back over your trajectory of Olson collecting, you started CLC with Olson at its centre, but then you sort of broke off your relationship with that project at some point, more or less.

RM: Just a lovers' quarrel.

SC: Exactly. And in researching the book on Olson's reading, you began assembling this incredible facsimile archive, but in a very non-institutional space. You've got it in this little apartment that you rent in Kitsilano, the basement of a large, old house; you've got a room that contains this library. It's not an institutional space—it's a private space. It's been of use to you and your scholarship; you've allowed some people to come do work in here; I came in when I was working on my Susan Howe book and used Olson's Emily Dickinson books.

RM: And that was so nice! That was almost the first time it's been used by anyone other than myself, and it was very gratifying!

SC: Gratifying for me too! But now it's moving back into an institutional space. How do you feel about it going back now to SFU, back into that institutional space and becoming a kind of archive that a wider community of scholars can use for various purposes and ends?

RM: I don't think there's an issue there, Steve. It's just gratifying to know that it's going to be used. That's the main thing.

SC: That's very Olsonian of you—to say that you want it to be of use.

RM: Well yeah, of course it is! I suppose there was another stage where it was going to go to the Cape Ann Historical Association, and those were people I was worried about, in terms of security. I feel more confident about Simon Fraser University than anything else that's come along, if that's an answer to your question.

SC: To follow this archival line along, I'm going to quote you something from Ben Friedlander, who wrote this little piece also around 2006, around the time we last met with you. It was called "Olson Now," and it was before the website *Olson Now*...anyhow, he has these four categories he goes over briefly: OLSON'S LEGACY, OLSON'S PRESENT USE FOR POETS, WHAT THE SCHOLARS SHOULD BE DOING, and WHAT NEEDS TO BE SET ASIDE IF WE ARE GOING TO ACCOMPLISH ANYTHING OF

VALUE. And I'm going to quote from Friedlander here: "In his final years, Olson abandoned the book as ultimate horizon and worked instead to produce an archive. Poems and essays, yes, but also notes, notebooks, correspondence, marginalia in books, the books themselves, files of articles, maps, and recordings of readings, lectures, and interviews." So he's suggesting how dispersed Olson's reading was, how he was working on so many different fronts and if you want to sum up Olson's work in the later period you've got to look at the entire archive. You can't point to a single book, even though *The Maximus Poems* is sort of a putative archive itself, isn't it? I'll go on a little bit with Friedlander—this sets up his question about what the scholarship should be doing, and he suggests the scholarship should be reading the archive: "...because it is only by taking the measure of this material that we can recover a description of Olson's practice, which is only partially discernible from his discrete works." In some ways I think you've already answered—but I'm still hovering around this question of what scholars should and can be doing with Olson and what this archive should allow. To turn this into a specific kind of question, do you still think that we're in need of a full, blow-by-blow, traditional biography of Olson? Or have the ways that you've approached Olson's biography, via his reading, via your blow-by-blow countering of the Clark biography—are we still in need of a fully-fleshed biography?

RM: Oh, we'll get one. And there's a need for everything—there's even a need for literary critics.

SC: Heaven forbid!

TP: Is there one in the works, that you know of?

RM: Oh, there's been a few. You've got to make a fuss—if someone like Olson comes along, you've got to make a fuss of him in whatever way you can. It takes me back to the editing of *The Maximus Poems Volume Three*, you see. Charles Boer and George Butterick had the archive, but all they could think to do was to make... oh, what I called a forgery. That is, to make it like *Maximus Poems IV, V, VI*—include longer poems interspersed with shorter poems, make it the same size, generally give it the same effect. But I called it an *allowed* forgery because Olson had asked them to do it. And he didn't give any further instructions—just take as a basis what had already been published and do it. But I think the great contribution that Olson was making, like Friedlander is talking about, is all the disparity. It's a day-by-day process; you move



from one thing to another and you don't constrain yourself that much. He wasn't constraining himself; he was just doing what he had to do and he knew his time was short. He just moved in on whatever. And it's that kind of adventurousness that I thought should have gotten into *The Maximus Poems Volume Three*—an adventure of day-by-day stuff, whatever it is that came up. You don't edit it to make it tidy. And this, of course, defies normal scholarship because we tidy up! But I think Olson's last five years in Gloucester were a step forward into some new thing that we haven't got the means to portray properly. Yet.

SC: So you don't think it's strange that he didn't give more specific instructions? You think it's more in tune with the process of writing the latter parts of *Maximus*, which were incredibly dispersed, daily, going in multiple directions. There would've been no way to envision or think of a kind of, you know, Here it is, sum it up, guys—go ahead and tidy it up for me.

RM: I'd be suspicious of any instructions he'd given, because he was so mischievous. He would just shake people up. Jason and I have been looking at misprints in *The Maximus Poems*, things that should have been corrected, and the reason there are such things is mainly because Butterick was so scared of Olson that as an editor he couldn't correct simple names, like "Richelieu," which Olson didn't know how to spell and didn't bother to look up. Any editor would correct an historical personage's name, but Olson sort of scared him by this mischievousness. He once submitted something to the *Niagara Frontier Review*, which had the word "Marx" mistyped as "Mrax." And they asked him, "Should we correct this?" What would you say if you were asked? He said, "No! Of course not! Leave it the way it is."

SC: It's the scholar's job to get it right.

RM: We've got to come in and impose our standards, but at the same time with terrific respect for what is actually happening. And there is something to be said for the fact that in our time, Marx has become Mrax; I mean, he's been turned all around! He's done a pratfall in the Soviet Union! These accidental things, synchronicity, it happens all the time to people who are living in a certain way, on a certain seam of invisible universe.

TP: I was just recalling you yourself agonizing over whether to remove the -ums and -ers from the '65 Berkeley reading (or non-reading) transcript.

RM: Absolutely. Transcribing tapes is something in itself; I mean, if it's a real event where there's something at stake or something being created in the middle of muddle, you've got to get it all there. You can't skip anything. And the -ers are part of it. But maybe when you think it over there's enough hesitations—you don't need to put *all* the -ers in. There's enough uncompleted sentences. Just a little guidance there, folks! I am not Charles Olson, of course...let's understand that. I'm not creating here a thing that will have beauty forever. I am a servant of the master, and this is the way it gets done. If you die too soon, Olson, you end up leaving it to people like me! And we can approach it with great respect, but we're not you...we're not up to that.

Jason Starnes: So we've heard about the founding of the CLC, and we know the history of the first forty years of that collection and some of the uses that the material and your own library and archive have been put to. And I'm wondering, following on the ideas of use that kept coming up, use of the collections that you've gathered....You have mentioned in the past a list of things that have yet to be done on Olson's work—editorially or in terms of the brand of Harvard scholarship that you've brought to Olson studies. I'm wondering what you would like to see happen in the next forty years of the collection and the next forty years of Olson studies?

RM: Well, maybe we don't have to be so quick. You know, Jeremy Prynne has annoyed me tremendously by not sending me the letters that Olson wrote to him. I saw them when I went to visit his study in Cambridge; they were all on a lower shelf, all neatly xeroxed. He believes in three-ring binders too. And I thought we'd had a meeting of minds, but he is deliberately thwarting me on principle. The principle being that we've got to leave something for people a hundred years from now, when they may be better equipped in some funny way—maybe they'll have three eyes by that time, I don't know. But Prynne, a marvelous, tough guy intellectually, ruling the roost there in Cambridge, sending some of his students over to Olson in Buffalo—Andrew Crozier, chiefly—but the way he got people interested in Olson was not by lecturing on Olson. He once told me, "My method is to teach Fulke Greville and bore them so much with the minor Elizabethan writers that if I mention something in passing about Charles Olson, they'll just run off and read Charles Olson." His method seems to have worked. He did acknowledge, however, when he came here—he was one of our very first people to give a formal lecture at SFU, which is transcribed as one of the few acts of literary criticism that Prynne has allowed into print. He told me on the side, "Well, Ralph, I can see"—I



mean, this was on very little evidence, but he must have got the feeling that our audience at Simon Fraser was not as highly selective as the one that was placed in front of him as the tutor at Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge. He said, "I can see, Ralph, that you might have to lecture on Olson to get it through, because if you just lectured on Fulke Greville, it wouldn't do, it wouldn't work." So he knew...he understood that North America was a different problem. But I may be coming around a bit. Oh, people can do what they like, you know. Time will pass and it'll build its dome, somehow or other.

TP: Something that's related—Olson's reputation and his literary stock. It seemed to me, as a student in the mid-70s, that his stock then was very, very high. Nowadays you see someone like Jack Spicer, whose stock seems to be rapidly rising. Literary reputations go up and down. Olson's has dipped somewhat since then. Do you see it coming back up—some sort of revival coming about?

RM: The job now is for someone to go to Cambridge [Massachusetts]—maybe Jason will do this—but to go and wine and dine Helen Vendler and get her to change her mind. I tried—it was just a brief lunch...well, it was a long lunch, actually. And maybe there was wine...no more than a glass, though.

TP: Change her mind about...?

RM: About Olson. Helen Vendler left him out of the *Harvard Anthology of Modern Poetry*, and people have taken that cue ever since. So we can do a lot of dancing around, if we like, but her recalcitrance—she said "What should I read? what should I read?" so I told her what to read—I said read the whole of the *Selected Writings*, read as much of it as you want to...Creeley's selection is just as good as anything I can think of. And I said to begin with, "As the Dead Prey Upon Us" and the "Mayan Letters," and so on. And ten months later she came back...she said, "I still don't get it." If there was enough fuss about Olson I think she would've gotten it, but there hasn't been. So we're waiting for a new Helen Vendler to register Olson. Richard Ellmann put him in the *Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry* without any struggle.

SC: Maybe I could piggyback a question here...looking toward the future, and to the near future with this Olson conference we've got coming up. What do you hope to have come of this event?

RM: I don't know—I don't even know if I'll come to this one! It's painful, in a way. It's painful to hear other people talk about someone who you know so well and they haven't got it quite right. Or they're just making it fit into some categories they've created in order to make a career out of categories. That sometimes happens. I mean, maybe you should appoint me commentator on every paper? I can be the litmus paper?

TP: Maybe the same feeling that writers have when conferences are held on their work. I've heard it can be quite painful, though gratifying or flattering on one level...

RM: Well, your emotions are involved in ways which are maybe not justified; it's like if you're watching some close relative making a fool of themselves in public, or about to. I think immediately of the Berkeley reading—it caused disaffection in close people like Creeley and Dorn. They were so close to Olson that they took that event, where people walked out and Olson said things about them walking out—from some people's point of view it was all rambling on. They were embarrassed; they felt it very strongly. It was a crucial thing, that event. And the drama of that could be written from several points of view. Duncan actually left for intermission and didn't come back after intermission. The loyal ones came back, but it was an embarrassment. Yet when you listen to the tape, you don't feel it; it's just because they were close and they were having to go through that moment in real time. And so maybe I'll be better off if I listen to recordings of these sessions.

SC: It can be arranged.

RM: Then I won't have to call from the back of the room—"Check your facts!" "What do you know!"

SC: You can be the official heckler.

RM: I mean, you don't have to do that. You can just keep quiet and be confident in your superior knowledge!! It's okay. Don't worry. A conference is a very limited, lame thing! But I wouldn't do without it, either. There isn't an expectation of any single thing happening, like even being moved, for instance, by something—this might happen or it might not. This is what we can do, and we do it because we can. And that's my commendation to you.