

Tom Clark: On "Cole's Island"

The remainder of the summer of 1964 was otherwise devoted mostly to poetry, now to be Olson's final, enduring close companion. Working from Jeremy Prynne's typescripts, he assembled, and in September sent off to Jonathan Williams, a text of Maximus IV, V, VI, the difficult, unwieldy, cosmic-exploratory midsection of his epic, representing the central effort of the past six years of his life. Meanwhile new verse of the summer, variously somber and agitated in reflection of the psychic trauma of recent months, yielded fragmentary groundwork for the epic's third and last volume. Most notable was the muted, ominous "COLE'S ISLAND," a document of a dream run-in with an allegorical specter of death in the wilds of Essex Bay backcountry. In the dream Death was dressed up as a country gentleman strolling his property, encountered by the wandering poet in the midst of investigations of local topography. The dream poem seemed an omen, another tacit warning of the dangers of infringing carelessly on the domain of mortality--something the obsessive researcher had been doing much of his life, though only lately had he learned something of the stiff penalties such trespassing could bring. In "COLE'S ISLAND," when landowner Death and intruder Maximus sized one another up, Death seemed much less unsettled than the poet by their sudden, chilling propinquity.

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Author:

Tom Clark [3]

Poem:

Cole's Island [4]

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