"The Kingfishers"--an Early Poem of Charles Olson's

Since the publication of Guy Davenport's "Scholia and Conjectures for Olson's 'The Kingfishers'" in the Olson issue of boundary 2 (Fall 73/Winter 74), it has become a matter of reassurance to have the presence in Olson studies of such a distinguished critic. But when Robert von Hallberg states in his Charles Olson: The Scholar's Art (Harvard University Press 1978) that Davenport provides "a full explication of this poem" (p. 223), any alternative explication must willy nilly have the appearance of pitting itself against a received, authoritative one.[1] Taking this necessity as an advantage, I have written the following essay, and expect that it will be read, in conjunction with Davenport's.

First, I should state my opinion that "The Kingfishers" is not a canto, but a manifesto. It is not really ideogrammatic, but argumentative. And the kingfisher of the poem is, whether one likes it or not, a symbol, a symbol in the old workaday sense of standing for something (in this case, Western civilization), in order to make a point about it (i.e. the West is declining into a "dripping, fetid mass"). I think the somewhat contrived nature of this symbol caused Olson later to react against the poem. In a reading in Vancouver in 1963, he could not get through the first part, and stopped with the remark: "I'm not with that one."[2] Though "energetically influencial" (Davenport's useful phrase), "The Kingfishers" is not Charles Olson's greatest poem. I detect from Guy Davenport's bemused tone that he would agree with me that our formidable reserves should probably be mustered elsewhere. Fate, in the form of The New American Poetry anthology--which put "The Kingfishers" up front as the prime demonstration of the movement--decrees we continue to pay undue attention to this conspicuous, but limited poem.[3]

As to the poem's genre, I do not think that it is a Romantic meditation on ruins. Olson had not yet been to Yucatan, and

was not meditating on ruins in anticipation. Mexico comes into the poem only with Cortez, via Prescott's The Conquest of Mexico, which is quoted at length to demonstrate how violent were the beginnings of European civilization in America. "Aztec vs Conquistadores" was to have been an episode in "a long poem" to be called "West" that Olson was planning in May 1948.[4] During February and March of 1949 the long poem had the title "The First Proteid," which implies epic.[5] But at some point, possibly in April 1949, "The Kingfishers" as we now know it was cut out of that schema, with part III fixing the poem in the genre of personal political statement. The "Proteus" theme of historic change in America becomes: "Who am I? Where do I stand? What am I to become?" The opening line:

What does not change / is the will to change[6]

narrows its range, by the end of the poem, to the poet's personal possibilities.

(1)

Unless George Butterick comes up with something from the Olson Archives, the "Fernand" of the poem will remain, to use Davenport's word, "a mystery." He cannot be Fernand Léger, who could not speak English. It is not Olson's friend from Paris, Jean Riboud, because--stating the most decisive reason--Jean Riboud's name is not Fernand. It could be an acquaintance of Riboud's at a party in Riboud's New York apartment. But where in New York are there ruins for a Fernand to lose himself in? Or, for that matter, in Washington D.C., or Black Mountain, or any other feasible location? What Butterick might come up with, from Olson's dream notebooks, is that this party, like similar parties in "The Librarian" and "As the Dead Prey Upon Us," is not real but dreamt. The business of putting the birds into their cage has a dream-like quality too, reminiscent of the blue deer in "As the Dead Prey Upon Us." The two episodes of the birds and the party are, after all, what the "he" remembers upon waking. More likely than not they are actual dreams. They are so peculiar that their starting off a poem of some importance would be otherwise inexplicable. As dreams, they are important, if one attaches importance, as Olson did, to the

indisputably <u>given</u>. "Dreams are an amulet," Olson wrote to Vincent Ferrini from Washington on 22 April 1950, "we have forgotten how to wear 'em."[7] In a less well-known statement, around the time the poem was being written, he speaks of "dreams as the myth of the individual. . . and the sum of dreams the archetype source of the myth and faith of the race."[8] If we have in part 1 the primal stuff of dream, then the macabre episodes partake of the mythic, and the kingfisher symbol is not really contrived, at least not in its origins.

But how can this narrative be anything but dream? Just as there are no actual ruins for Fernand to lose himself in some crack of, so there is no "wall of the night" for him to slide along. There were no kingfishers in the pool at Chichen Itza; no Aztec-Mayan commerce in kingfisher feathers. The lisping talk of Albers and Angkor Vat, despite a plausible specificity, is improbable. The alliteration, the repetition of phrases, the automaton-like behavior of everybody, all these are the trappings of dreams. In an atmosphere of decadence, birds are caged, kingfishers are lamented. These are the indisputable images, given prior to any discourse. In January 1950, Olson sent out a small poem:

> These days
> whatever you have to say, leave
> the roots on, let them
> dangle
>
> And the dirt
>   just to make clear
>   where they come from.

Part 1 gives us the origin of "The Kingfishers," where it came from.

(2)

> I thought of the E on the stone.

There is no evidence that Olson studied A.B. Cook's three-volume <u>Zeus</u>. Olson came to this poem from a reading of Plutarch's essay, "On the E at Delphi," included in the C.W. King translation, which he probably bought in Washington in September 1948.[9] The complexities of Plutarch's attempted analysis of the inscribed letter "E,"

however, are irrelevant to "The Kingfishers," where the E signifies the east, or dawn, or birth. It is well known that Delphi means "womb"; and Olson wrote the words "on the E at Delphi" in the margin of his copy of Jung and Kerenyi's Essays on a Science of Mythology at the paragraph which discusses Delphi as "a symbol of the uttermost beginning of things."[10]

The juxtaposition of the E and Mao at the beginning of part 2 indicates the kinship Olson sees between the Chinese revolution and the birth of our own civilization in the Mediterranean. Our present degenerated state, symbolized by the kingfisher's nest "of excrement and decayed fish,"[11] is a contrast to both the distant Greek past and the Chinese future. In order to credit Mao as a positive element in the poem's argument we might have to exercise some historical imagination, and realize that, in 1947, a book like Robert Payne's The Revolt of Asia was a startling clarion call for a new attitude to the Chinese and other imminent Asian revolutions:

> In this new world the stakes could not be higher. The marriage of East and West was the dream of Alexander the Great; it has taken more than two thousand years to come near to fulfillment. When we have realized that the Asiatics are our kin, and that we complement each other, when our attitude toward the Asiatics has changed from indifference to sympathy and understanding, we shall be nearer to peace. The prize is conquest--that each man may own the whole world (p. 11).

Olson was a close friend of Payne's, and responded at length to The Revolt of Asia early in 1948.[12] His letter is not extant, but the nature of his concern is contained in a sentence from an unpublished essay of around June 1948: "The will of Asia is already dictating the shape of prospective man's society on the earth."[13] This becomes the hidden topic sentence, as it were, of part 2 of "The Kingfishers."

It should be added that to have Mao's words in French is not pretentious, but accurate. The speech to the December 1947 Congress of the Chinese Communist Party was not, of course, in French; but,

as Olson told it in conversation, the first reports to arrive in Washington were via French news sources, and by using the language in which he first experienced the historic moment, he hoped to communicate in the poem something of the excitement he then felt.

(3)

Most of part 3 is taken from William H. Prescott's History of the Conquest of Mexico.[14] First we have the inventory of the rich gifts that Montezuma offered to Cortez, and then the description of Aztec priests in panic as Cortez destroys the images of their gods. The only problem lines in this section are:

> (and, later, much later, a fine ear thought
> a scarlet coat).

Olson is not known to have had a high opinion of Southey's ear (as has been suggested). Pound's, yes; but if Pound ever had a thought about a scarlet coat, it has not been brought to our attention. This puzzling parenthesis has as its context the giving of fine gifts; so perhaps the most pertinent question to ask is: what color was the coat that Henry Murray sent to Olson in May 1949, thinking it would fit him, and that, according to a letter in the Olson Archives dated 5 June 1949, caused Olson "to shine (or for the shine to shine) in Constanza's eye!"?

(4)

Plutarch's "On the E at Delphi," chapter XVIII, is a disquisition on the Delphic dictum, "Know thyself!" It asks how can we know ourselves when we are creatures of change, and identity is an illusion? At this point, the needs of explication are best met by putting on record the whole of that chapter, from the C.W. King translation, which was the poet's source, in order to allow the interested reader to see how extensively Olson borrowed from it here.

The few lines of part 4 not drawn from Plutarch's ancient discussion of "What is Man?" are taken from the most recent book on the topic, Norbert Wiener's *Cybernetics: or, Control and Communication in the Animal and the Machine* (New York: John Day 1948), available even before publication in galley proofs, through Natasha Goldowski at Black Mountain College. From *Cybernetics* Olson took the concept of feed-back in its modern, technical sense, and also a modern, technical definition of a "message": "The message is a discrete or continuous sequence of measurable events distributed in time" (p. 8).

Olson does not seem to be quoting either Plutarch or Wiener with enthusiastic approval. Change, he seems to be saying, is not the last word on the human condition. It is a theoretical, abstract notion, inaugurated by Greek philosophy and leading only to artificial intelligence. Rather than be involved in the comparative methodology of identifying by means of differences, Olson would rely on an instinctive sense of a person, the "very thing you are," which cannot be analyzed, or "grasped" in the vice of logic, without loss. The "Human Universe" essay a little later (1951) dealt with these ideas at length. For instance:

> All that comparison ever does is set up a series of *reference* points: to compare is to take one thing and try to understand it by marking its similarities to or differences from another thing. Right here is the trouble, that each thing is not so much like or different from another thing (these likenesses and differences are apparent) but that such an analysis only accomplishes a *description*, does not come to grips with what really matters: that a thing, any thing, impinges on us by a more important fact, its self-existence, without reference to any other thing, in short, the very character of it which calls our attention to it, which wants us to know more about it, its particularity. This is what we are confronted by, not the thing's "class," any hierarchy, of quality or quantity, but the thing itself, and its *relevance* to ourselves who are the experience of it (whatever it may mean to someone else, or whatever other relations it may have).
>
> There must be a means of expression for this, a way which is not divisive as all the tag ends and upendings of the Greek way are. There must be a way which bears *in* instead of away, which meets head on what goes on each split second, a way which does not—in order to define—prevent, deter, distract, and so cease the act of, discovering.

Olson has not yet found a way to incorporate modern physics into his human universe. Science it still the enemy:

> discovering this discarded thing nature, [science] has run away with everything. Tapping her power. . .science has upset all balance and blown value, man's peculiar responsibility, to the winds.[16]

It is not helpful, therefore, to jump to 1958 and the essay "Equal, That Is, to the Real Itself," by which time Olson had been able to develop an understanding of relativity useful to him. The words "discrete" and "continuous" find their way into the later essay with increments of meaning from Herman Weyl's Philosophy of Mathematics and Natural Science, a much used gift from a Black Mountain colleague in 1956; ~~but this later development can be no part of an explication of the 1949 poem, "The Kingfishers," where Olson can see neither Greek nor modern science, with their logic and classification, as giving us anything but "another fetid nest."~~

Could see Encyclopedia Britannica 11th ed. XI.727

It remains to say that the line "Not one death but many" does not need two sources. Plutarch is quite sufficient. Olson was not inspired by Neruda's "Macchu Picchu" poem. There is no evidence that he read it ~~in English, never mind in the Spanish, which was the only version available at the time.~~

(II)

Part II begins with three images on the East-West theme, two of them from Prescott's Appendix, "Origin of the Mexican Civilization--Analogies with the Old World." Prescott is arguing a connection between Asia and pre-conquest America: "Who can doubt the existence of an affinity, or, at least, intercourse, between tribes, who had the same strange habit of burying the dead in a sitting posture?" He refers to the lunar calendar of the Hindoos: "Seven of the terms agree with those of the Aztecs, namely, serpent, cane, razor, path of sun, dog's tail, house." Prescott quotes from Sahagun to show similarities between Aztec baptism and Christian. The midwife "placed herself with her face towards the west. . .After this she sprinkled water on the head of the infant," praying to the goddess

Cioacoatl, "who presided over childbirth."

To Prescott's arguments for the Asian origin of the American Indians Olson can add the more recent evidence of the "Mongolian louse." Olson did not get this from a printed source, but from the lectures of Frederick Merk, Professor of History at Harvard University. Olson took the one-year course, "History 62 The Westward Movement," during 1937-38 when enrolled in the American Civilization program there. Under the heading "Evidences of Indians coming from the Mongoloid branch," Merk spoke of "similarities in parasites that prey upon them--Mongolian louse on pre-1492 Peru mummies."[17]

The three facts that begin this section--the poem, at this moment, ideogrammatic, if you will--are a preamble to a reintroduction of the idea of part 2 that the new China's vitality is putting to shame the decadence of the West. But now Olson goes far beyond the kingfisher symbol, and asks us to look closely into the face of our own society, at some length and with candor. The words "whiteness" and "candor" in this passage may remind one of a certain line early in Pound's Pisan Cantos; but in Olson's poem, the whiteness is not Confucian. It is a whiteness "which covers all," covers the darkness of our world like a layer of chalk on a pasteboard mask. Yes, this is exactly the paradox that Melville made so much of in Moby Dick, in the chapter on "The Whiteness of the Whale":

> all deified Nature absolutely paints like the harlot, whose allurements cover nothing but the charnel-house within. . .the wretched infidel gazes himself blind at the monumental white shroud that wraps all the prospect around him. And of all these things the Albino whale was the symbol. Wonder ye then at the fiery hunt?

When, in April 1948, Olson adapted this passage for his own "Fiery Hunt" (a posthumously published verse-dance), he wrote that, "in this blank morning or our year,"

> this color without color locks us in
> a palsy, new-found fear.
> This white that stares me in the face
> looks at me like a dusted enemy more fierce
> than Ahab or than death. . .[18]

What is it that Olson expects us to see in that white face ~~of death?~~ It will be something similar to what Melville saw in Moby Dick, the greed of whaleship owners reflected in the cannibalism of the sea; or to what Prescott writes about: man's inhumanity to man, slavery, human sacrifice, and literal cannibalism, where human flesh can be called (by Marco Polo, quoted by Prescott) the most delicious savory in the world. Behind these lines are the extermination camps of Hitler, exposed to light not very long before they were written. The "old appetite" in our own time walks more mutedly, perhaps, in the guize of injustice, bad government ("pejorocracy"--Pound's word), and violence in the streets.

Part II, then, presents a grim picture of the world we have inherited. What light there is seems to be about to shine out from China. As for the West, there are a couple of pockets of relief. Antithetical to Cortez, there was among the conquistadores one who healed. Cabeza de Vaca was to have been a key figure in the projected book Red, White and Black:

> I propose to open with the extraordinary and little known story of CABEZA DE VACA, to "name" him, to cause us to place him in our experience, to fix him as predecessor, and thus to learn, by the addition of him, how to name ourselves. . .1528 he sets his foot on Florida and starts his passage of eight years west, the first man to cross from coast to coast . . .He managed it by an amazing association with the indians, first as their slave, then as miracle-working medicine man. The detail and terror of this union is of the essence of my book. But even as much to the purpose is the fact that Cabeza was accompanied by a Negro, that most striking first of his race here, ESTAVAN, a Spanish slave.[19]

All this lies behind the simple phrase, "one healed."

Another "guide" is mentioned, as one who looked long and fully into the society of his time:

> as long as it was necessary for him, my guide
> to look into the yellow of that longest-lasting rose.

The yellow sempiternal rose of Dante's <u>Paradiso</u>, made up of the concentric angels of the thrones, was the divine source of power necessary to produce a unified vision of the world. Dante beheld "into one volume bound" the leaves that "the universe holds scattered through its maze."[20] But we cannot expect to experience Dante's bliss at seeing "the form that knits the whole world." At this point "The Kingfishers" comes near to being a wicked poem in the way <u>Moby Dick</u> was, in its author's view, a "wicked book." The poem, while admiring Dante, ignores his road to salvation, and turns the image of the rose upside down. What we will find "under these petals in the emptiness" is violence and dirtiness and "what crawls below." Olson's repugnance at the imperfect state of the world he has to find a place for himself in is clear.

But if Olson is not writing a <u>Paradiso</u>, in what sense is Dante his guide? When Olson said to Frances Boldereff in a letter of 11 May 1948 (in the Olson Archives) that he was "back on Dante," it was the <u>De Vulgari Eloquentia</u> he had turned to. His manuscript, "More Notes Toward the Proposition: Man is Prospective," of about the same date, is heavily dependent on this Latin prose work of Dante's for a concept of "a morphology of man."[21] But more than that, Dante was his guide in seeking the means to a successful "common speech" for his writing:

> there is a revolution of language which is not yet examined despite the thoro work of Ezra Pound. . .[Dante's] examination is of such profundity that it behooves any of us to know and apply it to present needs.[22]

Part III's tone of reasonableness may be some indication of Olson's having found his middle voice of common speech.

(III)

In part III Olson seems to be genuinely trying to clarify his position, even though, as it stands, the conciseness of the verse produces a cryptic effect. In the first quatrain, for example, "I am no Greek. . .And of course, no Roman" is a straightfoward enough statement in its implications; but "hath not th'advantage" is not clearly attached, even grammatically, to either the "I" or the "Greek"--

one form of ellipsis maybe?

Certainly, the usual "anacoluthic" jump.

and if to the latter, what can it possibly mean? The various manuscripts of the poem, when George Butterick has completed his work on them, may help elucidate what now remains a puzzle. One useful insight he has already given us: "Notes on back of an early draft indicate that Olson considered it an 'Anti-Wasteland'";[23] the first stanza, therefore, could be a way of ruling out Eliot and his view of tradition. In any case, the second quatrain establishes Olson's kinship with Pound, by including a direct quotation from the first page of Guide to Kulchur, where Pound is expressing his intention to commit himself on as many points as possible: "Given my freedom, I may be a fool to use it, but I wd. be a cad not to." Without naming Pound, Olson calls him his "next of kin"; which strikes one as extraordinarily generous, considering that Olson had broken with him earlier in the year, writing in "Grandpa, Goodbye" (probably February 1948) that, "because of the use he had put nostalgia to," Pound has "made of himself the ultimate image of the end of the West"[24]--along with Ahab, and the kingfishers, we might add. Olson was able, however, to separate his animadversions from his admirations. In the "Man Is Prospective" typescript, where we have found a great deal of what was on Olson's mind during the composition of "The Kingfishers," he sees Pound as a later guide in the matter of "common speech":

> My own impression is, that neither Eliot or Joyce lead anywhere but that Pound's prose. . .1928 on. . .is the most important prose in the language and has as many prospective possibilities as all are agreed his verse and critique had from 1910 to 1928.[25]

Pound's, he continues, is the one prose which has not separated from "the purposes of speech as 'vulgar eloquence.'" It is from one of Pound's best vulgar and eloquent pages that Olson quotes in order to establish, despite everything, his kinship.

Another writer Olson feels kin to is Rimbaud, who is also quoted, as an "explanation" or "epigraph." I borrow Davenport's translation of the couplet:

If I have any taste,
It is for earth and stone.

Rimbaud is thus to be the measure for Olson's own appetite.

An ocean separates them; and his courage and youth distinguish Rimbaud from the American typing the poem in Washington D.C.; but, through Rimbaud, Olson is apparently able to get down to certain basics. The appeal of Rimbaud to other writers is possibly inexplicable to those who do not share in it--a thought expressed somewhere in the long study Henry Miller published in the New Directions annual for 1946. Once Olson even went so far as to list Rimbaud along with his obvious masters, Melville, Dostoevsky, and Lawrence, as one who "projected what we are and what we are in."[26] The "first long poem" he ever wrote, he told Frances Boldereff in a letter of 14 March 1950 (in the Olson Archives~~, Storrs~~), was called "The True Life of Arthur Rimbaud." Wallace Fowlie's Rimbaud, probably purchased by Olson on its publication in 1946, added fuel to the fire. A certain sentence caught his attention: "Rimbaud moved on to the despair which lies beyond sin and then sought what lies beyond despair" (p. 42). Olson reformulated this as a question attributed to Rimbaud: "What's on the other side of despair?" and used it more than once in his work.[27] It is likely that the question lies behind "The Kingfishers," which is a poem of despair at Western society's dying condition. The question Olson actually asks at the end is:

shall you uncover honey / where maggots are?

~~Is there honey at the other side of despair? Can a poetry of sweetness and light come from the carcase of civilization?~~

As Davenport points out, the image of the dead lion and the bees derives from the Samson riddle of Judges 14:14-18. There may also be an echo of the Pisan Cantos line, "that maggots sh/ eat the dead bullock." For Mussolini, referred to in sorrow there by Pound, is more likely in Olson's mind to be a symbol of the cowardice and degredation that Europe had fallen to but a few years before. Pound himself, the fascist supporter, could also be seen in the same robe, a dead lion's skin. I do not, however, think that Pound is being addressed. This is not a taunt, but the poet's serious examination of his own purposes. The "you" of the line would be the poet addressing himself, as he often did in his notebooks, challenging himself as to his aims and methods.[28]

But the reader must also take this as his question, or the argument of the poem cannot be entered.

What does it mean to "hunt among stones"? An early draft of the poem is useful at this point. After the Rimbaud lines about having a taste for earth and stones, Olson wrote:

> In other words, on ~~another~~ this continent,
> what was slain in the sun.[29]

"What was slain in the sun" can more clearly be seen here as the American counterpart to Rimbaud's earth and stones. It is probably not meant to be as melodramatic as it sounds in the published poem. What Olson really had an appetite for at that time was American history itself. Prescott's book, for instance, had taken him back to the bloodshed, both Aztec and Spanish, by which America was inaugurated. It is a terrain he must, as an American historian of "Red, White and Black," be interested in. If the Spanish conquest produced a waste land, both then and now, it is among its rubble that poet-historians must hunt.

And the poet's commitment will make sure that something comes of this effort. It is probably correct to feel a tone of affirmation in the poem's last line. At least, the first draft certainly was positive, ending with the healer, Cabeza de Vaca:

> I invoke one man, he who was shipwrecked on this shore
> lost Europe's clothes, was naked how many winters,
> lived on shell-fish, was lacerated feet and skin, was slave,
> first trader, learned what tribes these were, walked,
> walked, found deer skin, clothed himself, walked
> as the doe walks, white man, white
> a second time
>
> a second time, and he only, of all, no one else, reborn!

This kind of thing is useful — is there more?

The poem was revised to leave the implication of rebirth less definite. Presumably it was on the day after sending the above draft to Caresse Crosby in London that Olson wrote the following to Robert Payne:

> I had locked myself in for three weeks in an attempt to do a 1st long poem. Yesterday I put it together and looked it over, compared it to THE WASTELAND, and decided, as a practicer of the gentle craft, I better do more work at the last.[30]

We can surmise that the lines on Cabeza de Vaca were dropped partly because they are too elegant. An "Anti-Wasteland" cannot be written by trying to match Eliot's suavity. Aiming even below "common speech," Olson wanted to be positively awkward. We know this because of his admiration for the Sienese painter, Giovanni di Paolo, whose paintings in the National Gallery had impressed him very much. After seeing those in the Philadelphia Museum, he wrote in July 1948:

> he stands as an oppose, for us, I think, to the suavity of art and spirit, as much in our time as in the Renaissance that followed him. . . It is G di P's awkwardness that holds a value for us, an awkwardness I'm tempted to think is permanently the clothes of the spirit.[31]

Olson's poem coming out of these experiences of Giovanni's painting, "Sienna," ends with the line: "we who are awkward ask." It was in this mood that he cut off the legs of his poem and substituted an awkward question about uncovering honey and his final picture of the unaccommodated archaeologist of morning.

One further point should be made in order to place "The Kingfishers" properly in Olson's corpus. It is an early poem. To explain to the Vancouver audience why he was not "with" it, he said: "I wrote this poem before I got into trouble." Chronology is of the essence. "The Kingfishers," for all its awkwardness, was part of a surge of power, which was later valued less. In a notebook of 1947, Olson had set himself a plan of action:

> The job, given the obvious I am a writer, to be as decisive, careless, productive, and direct as I was as politician! How to do that![32]

The poem, as we have seen, asks the same question: how to marshall one's forces. At the Democratic National Convention in Philadelphia, July 1948, he played out his last act of a long career in party politics. But his plan was to transfer that righthandedness to his writing, and for the following ten years the Maximus poems came out as entirely political. The second volume of the Maximus Poems is quite different from the first, except for "Letter 27," which was "withheld," and looks back to the time when he wanted to "compel Gloucester to yield to change." On the back of an envelope postmarked

2 December 1959 he pens his revulsion at the outcome:

Agh Gloucester / you are ugly / your streets are / your buildings / your young / you have gone / out 128 / to the nation / & you stink / as it does. . .[33]

This is some indication of the trouble Olson was in. The story of pride leading to a fall is told, not too obliquely, in "Maximus, From Dogtown--I" (of 20 November 1959), in which we get the first reference to Alfred North Whitehead's concept of "eternal events."[34] It is beyond the scope of this essay to say more about the subsequent story. For our purposes here, it should only be said that "The Kingfishers" is pre-Whitehead; the "eternal events" pertain as much to the later period as the fight for polis does to the earlier.

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Footnotes for "The Kingfishers"

[1]Davenport's explication was collected with other pieces in his The Geography of the Imagination (San Francisco: North Point 1981) pp. 87-99. See also the behind-the-scenes update, "The Scholar as Critic," reprinted from Shenandoah in his Every Force Evoloves A Form (San Francisco: North Point 1987) pp. 84-98.

[2]Tape-recording of Olson's reading at the University of British Columbia, 16 August 1963, in Simon Fraser University Special Collections Library (by courtesy of Fred Wah).

[3]See Donald M. Allen ed. The New American Poetry: 1945-1960 (New York: Grove Press 1960) pp. 2-8. In the revised edition, edited by George Butterick, The Postmoderns (New York: Grove Press 1982), Allen allows "The Kingfishers" to take second place.

[4]~~"The Long Poem"~~ "WEST" OLSON No. 5 (Spring 1976) ~~pp. 38-~~p. 40.

[5]George F. Butterick A Guide to the Maximus Poems of Charles Olson (Berkeley: University of California Press 1978) p. xxiv.

[6]Despite the use of Heraclitus later in the poem, I do not see the necessity of assigning this first line to Heraclitus just because it sounds a bit like one of his fragments. For this poem, it is clear that Olson used only the Heraclitus quoted by his source, Plutarch, which does not quote the fragment cited by Davenport.

[7]Quoted in Origin 1 (Spring 1951) 42.

[8]"Notes for the Proposition: Man is Prospective" boundary 2 II. 1 & 2 (Fall 73/Winter 74) 4. (This issue will be cited as "the Olson issue.")

[9]See the listing in "Olson's Reading" and Butterick's comment, OLSON No. 5 (Spring 1976) p. 74.

[10] C.G. Jung & C. Kerenyi Essays on a Science of Mythology (Princeton University Press 1969) p. 51. Olson owned the Pantheon Books edition, published in 1949, which has different pagination.

[11] These words and many other phrases in the description of the kingfisher are directly culled from the Encyclopædia Britannica (11th edition, 1910-11) vol. 15 p. 808. That the information comes from a reference work rather than the poet's own experience adds to our impression of the symbol as rather artificial.

[12] See Butterick's note to the listing of Revolt of Asia in "Olson's Reading" OLSON No. 5 (Spring 1976) p. 72. "The Kingfishers," it may be added, ultimately went to Robert Payne as editor of Montevallo Review, and was published by him in the issue of Summer 1950.

[13] "About Space" (typescript in the Olson Archives, Storrs, Connecticut).

[14] Olson owned the "Aztec Edition" of Prescott (Denver: Tandy, Wheeler & Co. 1873). There are many editions, usually well indexed, so that the reader should have little difficulty finding the quotations in his or her own.

[15] "Human Universe" Selected Writings of Charles Olson (New York: New Directions 1966) p. 56.

[16] "Human Universe" Selected Writings p. 59. The word "science," omitted in error from the Selected, is supplied here from other printings.

[17] These quotations are from notes of Professor Merk's lectures in the Fall 1930, made by a student Joseph C. Borden (deposited in Harvard Library Archives). See Ralph Maud ed. Merk and Olson (mimeographed 1970) p. 8.

[18] The Fiery Hunt & Other Plays (Bolinas: Four Seasons Foundation 1977) p. 24.

[19] "Operation Red, White & Black" OLSON No. 5 (Spring 1976) pp. 27-28.

[20] Olson owned The Portable Dante (New York: Viking Press 1947); the quotations are from p. 542. A reference to the "yellow of the Rose" is on p. 527.

[21] "Further Notes" boundary 2, the Olson issue p. 5. It is not clear which edition of De Vulgari Eloquentia he used.

[22] "Further Notes" p. 5. That Pound is the guide in these matters, after Dante, is reaffirmed in the next section.

[23] Guide to the Maximus Poems p. xxiv. Butterick adds that we might therefore be encouraged to read the title, "The Kingfishers," as "an inversion of Eliot's use of the Fisher-King." There appears to be no evidence that, though apt, the poet was consciously aware of this possibility.

[24] Catherine Seelye ed. Charles Olson & Ezra Pound (New York: Grossman/Viking 1975) p. 99.

[25] "Further Notes" in the Olson issue of boundary 2 pp. 5-6.

[26] In Stanley J. Kunitz ed. Twentieth Century Authors: First Supplement (New York: H.W. Wilson 1955) p. 742.

[27] George Butterick ed. Additional Prose (Bolinas: Four Seasons Foundation 1974) p. 81.

[28]The switch from "I" to "you"--while still speaking of himself--occurs, for example, in the poem "Variations Done For Gerald Van De Wiele": "My life has been given its orders" becomes in the second part, "your life has its orders." (These variations, it may be noted parenthetically, were written by Olson on lines from another Rimbaud poem.)

[29]This draft, which he described as "the day's work today," was in a letter to Caresse Crosby, written in the spring of 1949 (Morris Library Special Collections, Southern Illinois University, Carbondale).

[30]Undated letter, in possession of the late Robert Payne.

[31]Letter to Henry Murray, 20 July 1948 (Olson Archives, Storrs). Notes towards an essay "Giovanni di Paolo (1403-1483)" exist in the Olson Archives, University of Connecticut, where he refers again to "awkwardness as cloth of spirit--set against suavity." There are several other references of this nature in letters at this time.

[32]Quoted by Seelye in the Introduction to Charles Olson & Ezra Pound p. xxiii.

[33]Quoted in Butterick's Guide to the Maximus Poems p. 233.

[34]See Butterick's Guide p. 246. Olson purchased his copy of Process and Reality in 1957--see "Olson's Reading" OLSON No. 6 (Fall 1976) p. 88.

UNIVERSITY AT BUFFALO
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DATE: April 3 1989

TO: RM

FROM: JC

RE: KFs

Here's an obvious initial clean-up on xerox of yr pgs. You may see more. Not having lots of space (as you see from 1st issue) we have to tighten things up. You have here 10 pages. We cld cut Plutarch's page, but I like it. See if you think all the Prescott entries are crucial. Don't do anything until you've seen #1 for flavor & tone of it, of what I'm doing here. Then, whatever you decide, send new xerox of yr emendations etc., ok?

intent. back from printers on Fri. the 7th, so mailing shld go out after Duncan leaves a week later - tomorrow is 1st memorial lecture - Susan Howe reads tonight - also Brakhage shows a new film - etc., so full 2 wks here, Harvey & Glove staying, & Peter Middleton from UK in town at Motel, Sanders maybe...

Fred was here 4 days last week, & we got a lot done, w/out me leaving home, in fact have not, so do event by tape, e.g., Rene Thom also last week in from Paris for Massey conf. on 'particularities.' I'm working on fractals etc. at the moment.

Let me hear, after you've seen intent. Best, Jack

Jack

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Notes on "THE KINGFISHERS" Ralph Maud

~~The Kingfishers [pp. 167-173]~~

In a notebook of 1947, Olson set out to put himself to the test: "The job, given the obvious I am a writer, to be as decisive, careless, productive, and direct as I was as a politician" (quoted in Seeley, Introduction to Charles Olson & Ezra Pound p. xxiii). "The Kingfishers" is the most conspicuous result of the poet's translating into writing his concern for the affairs of men, the winds of change in the world. Olson was always annoyed when people called the poem "Poundian." Though its form might superficially suggest the ideogrammic method of the Cantos, it is really an argument made out of images and swathes of history, a personal political manifesto. In the words of a letter to the critic M.L. Rosenthal, it is "an examination-confrontation of America as such versus predictions of and from the East Wind" (letter of 5 March 1968, quoted in Guide p. xxvi). Mao Tse-tung is a figure of the future in the poem; and the kingfisher is, on that political level, a symbol of Western civilization in decline. The poem asks what can the individual do about it. The answer is positive: he can marshall his forces: "What does not change / is the will to change."

Begin → Olson ~~originally~~ intended a poem of epic proportions: "Proteus" and "The First Proteid" ~~were~~ are titles on surviving manuscripts ~~(Guide p. xxiv)~~. In a letter of 24 February 1949, Olson announced to Robert Payne (who would eventually publish the poem in Montevallo Review Summer 1950): "I am locked in what looks like my first long poem and what is my first attempt to grapple with the issue [politics]. The proposition, and 1st line is: 'What does not change / is the will to change.'" On the back of a page of those early drafts is a note which indicates that Olson considered the poem an "Anti-Wasteland" (Guide p. xxiv); he perhaps wanted it to be as important for his own time as T.S. Eliot's "The Waste Land" had been for his. And indeed, after as vigorous a remaking as Eliot's poem received, Olson's "The Kingfishers" achieved something like that desired ~~status~~ impact, being read through the decade of resurgence 1960-70 ~~by the youth of America~~ as the lead poem in Donald Allen's influencial anthology The New American Poetry (1960).*

*In the revised edition, edited with George Butterick, The Postmoderns (1982) "The Kingfishers" takes second place.

~~p. 167 He woke, fully clothed. . .Otherwise? Yes,~~ Fernand

The "tale of the guy and the birds" (as Olson put it in a letter to Corman 30 May 1953) and Fernand's insistent talk about kingfisher feathers turn out to be parts of the same event, a party in an artist's studio in Washington. We can perhaps even pin down the date, for , in a letter to Caresse Crosby of 10 October 1948, Olson mentions having been to "Peter Blanc's Friday night." Or it could, of course, have been a similar party early in 1949. Peter Blanc could not give George Butterick the date of the party in question, but he remembers a John Gernand, an art curator associated with the Phillips Gallery, "un uomo gentile, introverso,"* who under the influence of drink kept repeating, as he remembered it, "The blue--the blue of the kingfisher feathers," before leaving indisposed. ~~Olson remembered more; and changed the initial letter of the name.~~ Peter Blanc also told Butterick that his wife had two pet parrots at the time, which were often out of their cage, one blue, and one green with a limp. Olson must have arrived early at the studio, and helped put the birds back.

~~The event behind the words stands clearly revealed, but~~ why should a Washington artist's party, ~~with~~ its inconsequential talk of Joseph Albers (that this painter was at Black Mountain would not be significant in this context) and Angkor Vat, ~~stand at the door of an important poem~~? One could talk of an appropriate tone of futility in the anecdote; but I prefer to think of what Olson once told me about the beginnings of some of his poems being like the preliminary strumming of a few chords of the guitar and the patter of the singer before the song starts, sometimes telling how the song came to be written. At the end of 1949 Olson sent out to various people a short poem, which said (Collected p. 106):

> These days
> whatever you have to say, leave
> the roots on, let them
> dangle
>
> And the dirt
> just to make clear
> where they come from.

This first page of "The Kingfishers" shows its roots dangling, makes clear where the poem came from: it was given by an actual experience, and part of the truth of the poem lies not only in its argument but its origin, however mysterious or ordinary it might have been.

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*At the moment the source for this information is a Butterick article published only in Italy.