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ECO-POETICS OF CHARLES OLSON: AN ECOCRITICAL STUDY ON “THE KINGFISHERS”

Melis Mülazımoğlu¹



¹ Assist. Prof. Dr., Ege University, Faculty of Literature, Department Of American Culture And Literature, Bornova, Izmir, TURKEY, E-MAIL: meliserkal@yahoo.com

Abstract

This paper interprets Charles Olson’s poem, “The Kingfishers” (1949) through ecocritical lenses. Although not counted necessarily as an environmentalist, ecopoet or nature writer, many of Olson’s works can be scrutinized within the frame of Ecocriticism, which as a literary theory and critical approach emerging in the Western academia by the 1990s, is mainly defined as the “study of the relationship between the literature and the physical environment” (Glotfelty and Fromm, eds., 1996: xviii). Progressing towards an eco-centric universe rather than anthropocentric in alternative ways that will help continue interaction among species and lead to organic sustainability, Ecocriticism both as a method and practice aims to revitalize the literary conception and representation of human and non-human universes. On the other hand, what triggers Olson’s ecopoetics has been parallel to some of the basic tenets of Ecocriticism: Olson’s works demonstrate his critique of the Western logocentric thinking that undermines, exploits and silences nature as the non-human other. Moreover, his acknowledgement of the primordial cultures of Americas as well as his preoccupation with the fauna and flora of his hometown, Gloucester-Massachusetts serves as an example of “bio-regionalism” in connection with the larger spectrum. Thus, this paper handles the poem “The Kingfishers” with an ecocritical approach in trying to exemplify the ecological awareness in Charles Olson. The entanglement between verse and universe interpreted within Ecocritical discourse will be discussed in terms of subtitles such as “poetry as dwelling,” “bio-regionalism” and “the concept of interconnectedness and theory of rhizome” all of which render service to the ecocritical emphasis on the “sustainability of literature.”

Keywords: *Ecocriticism, projective verse, nature, environment, American poetry.*

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Corresponding Author/ Sorumlu Yazar:
Melis Mülazımoğlu
E-mail: meliserkal@yahoo.com



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1. INTRODUCTION

“Poetry is the place where we save the earth”
(Jonathan Bate, *The Song of the Earth*, 2000:283)

“Every word was once a poem. Every new relation
is a new word.” (R. W. Emerson, *The Poet*, 1844)

According to critic Jonathan Bate, poetry does still matter in saving the world in the twenty-first century as it has mattered to Emerson in the nineteenth. So, to Charles Olson. At the intersection of environment, language and human, Olson had things to say. Although Olson has never defined himself neither as a pastoral poet like Wordsworth nor as a Transcendentalist like Emerson, he owed a lot to this vein of Romantic thinking in becoming the modern Whitman of his generation. He has borrowed a Woodwardian “spontaneous overflow” energy transfer from nature to man and “breath-based verse” from Emerson, and -to some extent “negative capability” from Keats; coming to terms with the cosmic, epic poetry of Whitman for whom Olson once said, “whoever has the rhythm, owns the universe” (Olson, 1965: np). Olson had both. So, how was it possible for Charles Olson to balance human and non-human universes, to start restoration? How did one respond to the environment he was born into? How was it related to other places and species? And how did the concepts of spatiality and materiality work for his eco-poetics? Although never counted as an environmentalist, nature-writer or ecopoet, I argue that Charles Olson’s work, especially his remarkable poem “The Kingfishers” (1949) can be analyzed through ecocritical lenses in answering the above-mentioned questions. In this paper, it is claimed that Olson’s literary representations have been inseparable from environmental thinking therefore his poem can be foregrounded on eco-criticism.

The second-generation American modernist poet, Charles Olson (1910-1970) was a bulky man of six feet eight inches. He was large both in size and on paper. He occupied a good deal of large space in American poetry anthologies through his long works such as the single poem, *The Maximus Poems* (1953-1975) divided into three volumes of more than 600 pages. The collection was regarded as one of the longest poems in American poetry tradition after *Pound’s Cantos*. As Olson claimed in his essay-book *Call Me Ishmael* (1947), “I take SPACE to be the central fact to man born in America, from Folsom cave to now. I spell it large because it comes large here. Large, and without mercy” (qtd in Allen and Friedlander, 1997: 17). Vastness mattered to Olson because it was both a peculiarity of the geography he was born into and that of an aesthetic sensibility he aimed to propose. Bringing together cultural history and archaeology

with that of mythology and literature, Olson aimed to reflect his knowledge of the nautical explorations and excavations beside the fauna and flora of his hometown, Gloucester-Massachusetts as a part of the larger macrocosm, known as the human universe, where he treated mankind merely as an object among the other living and non-living entities. Doing away with the interference of the individual as ego, a defect which he interpreted as the main problem existent in Western logocentric thinking, Olson tried to revitalize energy and change prevalent in human and non-human natures as if he were a “craftsman rather than a poet working with a hammer in his hand and playing with solid stones” (Gillott, 2018: 10) rather than words on a page that he named as the “open field.” He had an attempt to formulate a new poetic theory known as the “Projective Verse” as his purpose was going beyond the Modernist achievements of Pound and Williams, but it was not limited with theory. What gave Charles Olson his fame and made him maxim(us) was owing to his purpose of bringing humankind closer to his environment and thus closing the gap between us and our real home, the human universe.

Charles Olson’s poem “The Kingfishers” is argued to be a suitable example for applying ecocriticism as for the above-mentioned points such as the “critique of anthropocentric worldview,” “objectism,” “interconnectedness,” “bio-regionalism,” and “poetics of embodiment” overlap with some of the key-concepts of Ecocriticism. Therefore, this paper will try to define and exemplify these points in terms of his work, “The Kingfishers.” In the first part of this study, there is a brief introduction about the scope of this article and information regarding Charles Olson’s place as a poet in American poetry tradition. In the second part, theoretical background is put forward, mainly discussing the birth of Ecocriticism as a literary theory, how and when it started and how it was transformed from a mere critical approach to a view of life, sensibility and responsibility towards human and non-human natures. The third part includes the analysis of the poem, “The Kingfishers” in terms of some specific subtitles which parallel the basic tenets of eco-critical thinking. Finally, in conclusion, one can see why Olson’s example poem fits in the eco-critical frame, but more than that how one piece of poetry serves as an example for sustainability in connecting different natures, species, cultures, eras therefore, going beyond dualisms and hierarchical oppositions.

2. CHARLES OLSON AS A POET AND AR- CHAEOLOGIST OF THE MORNING

As one of the major contemporary American poets, Charles Olson (1910-1970) was related with the Black

Mountain College (1933-1957) in North Carolina, an experimental school of arts, music, literature, history and mathematics. At a time when the nation was experiencing political turmoil and social unrest, the college seemed like an oasis where scholars were able to teach freely distanced from the ideological oppression they felt outside. There, becoming friends with Robert Creeley and Robert Duncan, Olson lectured as a visiting scholar (1948-49) then worked as the rector (1951-57) until he left the place for a retired life in his hometown, Gloucester-Massachusetts (Foster, 1995: 6-9). During his Black Mountain years, he formulated a new theory of poetry known as “the projective verse”, “an energy transferred from where the poet got it, directly to the reader” as he briefly expressed in his famous essay *The Projective Verse* (1950). What Olson meant by projective verse was the idea of an “open field of poetry” like that of Whitman’s free structured, unrhymed prosaic verse, far from thematic closures and conventional poetic patterns. For Olson, “projective, percussive, and prospective verse” should come from “the HEAD, by way of the EAR, to the SYLLABLE, the HEART, by way of the BREATH, to the LINE” (Olson, 1950: part I). This technique was also called the “composition by field” whereby poet’s ideas were projected upon a field -a paper- and from there directly transferred to the reader; thus, the whole poetic activity was perceived to be a process rather than a finished product, whose “form was never more an extension of the content” (Olson, 1950: part I).

Poetry for him meant kinetics, a bodily transfer of energy, continued as long as the poet’s breath allowed him to do so. Olson oriented himself in relation with the materiality of the line that equaled the existence of the poem on paper, which was related to rhythm of the body as much as to the rhythm of the universe. Therefore, his poetic style could also be categorized as “poetics of embodiment,” “solid poetry” or “poetry of the body” all of which marked his poetic attempt as “objectist” and “anti-mimetic.” What Olson meant by objectism -not to be confused with Objectivism- was the idea that “man was no more important than a tree or a stone”:

Objectism is the getting rid of the lyrical interference of the individual as ego, of the “subject” and his soul, that peculiar presumption by which western man has interposed himself between what he is as a creature of nature (with certain instructions to carry out) and those other creations of nature which we may, with no derogation, call objects. For a man is himself an object, whatever he may take to be his advantages. (Olson, 1950: Part II)

Just like everything else, the poet himself was an object among the field of other objects. He was not a

prophetic divine source of knowledge living in recluse and meditating upon world from a distance. The poet, with his breath and body was alive and alert for energy flow standing amid all other things that were relational to one another in a larger spectrum. The poet’s role in this interaction was to erase all abstractions and hierarchies once meaningful to man and to see how the separate totalities such as totality of individuals, totality of things- were relational. Only after this, one could start knowing himself, thus his position in the universe. The second point in Olson’s eco-poetics was his anti-mimetic approach related with erasure of subjectivity. By means of “objectism”, he intended to speak from an object position, thus closing the gap between human and non-human universe, between man and his environment. Other than that, he relied on myths and socio-cultural constructs for meaning in his poetry rather than comparing human and non-human universes by means of metaphors. Rather than imitating life (representation), he meant to present reality to the reader.

Olson took the subject matter from his involvement in (his) environment. His longest work “Maximus Poems” and many others were set in his hometown, Gloucester-Massachusetts. Locality was an important motif in his poetry, but he was able to relate the local to global as his attempt was to represent Gloucester as a microcosm for the human universe. Olson articulated not only a powerful human integration with the physical nature he lived in but also with the past civilizations of earlier times. In “The Mayan Letters” (1953) written to Creeley from Mexico, he expressed his grief over the loss of Mayan culture and in his poem “The Kingfishers” he talked about pre-Columbian times before the Spanish conquest of the Aztecs. As for his “Maximus Poems,” it was argued that the work was a topographic and geographic cultural history of America starting from the earliest civilizations such as the Sumerians, Incas, early Greeks and many others- up to the time of contemporary settlers. As Olson argued in “Human Universe,” the problem why man stood alone and selfish in today’s societies and why human existence lacked meaning was because human beings stayed distanced from their real home, nature:

If man chooses to treat external reality any differently than as part of his own process, in other words as anything other than relevant to his own inner life, then he will use it otherwise. He will use it just exactly as he has used it now for too long, for arbitrary and willful purposes which, in their effects, not only change the face of nature but arrest and divert her force until man turns it even against herself, he is so powerful, this little thing. But what little willful modern man will not recognize is, that when he turns it against her, he

turns it against himself, held in the hand of nature as forever is, to his use of himself if he chooses, to his disuse, as he has. (Olson, 1965: 11)

The concept of Humanism, privileging of man, the interference of the individual as ego, subjection of nature, environmental destruction were among the essential reasons why the world lacked spirit as discussed in his essay "Human Universe." As Stormont argued, "the actual relationship between the earth and the human species has been buried under layers of a profit-centered, private property-based culture, and Olson, as an archaeologist, digged for truths in hope of inspiring beneficial change" (Stormont, 1966: 173). In sum, Emersonian ideas regarding the purpose of poetry and Whitmanian features regarding form indicated how Olson took after the Romantic and Transcendentalist traditions with an attempt to go beyond the Modernist achievements of Pound and Williams. Olson, with his grounding of "projective verse," "composition by field," breath-based verse" into American poetry tradition, thought like a historian (of the human universe) and composed like an archeologist (of the morning) to form a mosaic of myth and fact, a sense of place and space, a hold of the local and global, past and present. Having these in mind, he deconstructed the subject position of the individual *es ago* positioning him among the other entities in universe.

3. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND: ECOCRITICISM

Christopher Manes in his essay "Nature and Silence" (1992) asserted nature has been silenced and exploited by the anthropocentric world view that situated the human being as the sole actor of universe, bestowing him with a subject position. Thanks to deep ecologist attempt to challenge this concept of Humanism, Manes came up with his alternative of "getting closer to the egalitarianism of Native American or other primal cultures, with their emphasis on place and locality" (Manes, 1992:1). As previously mentioned earlier in this article, Charles Olson articulated a similar critique of the Western logocentric thinking and Humanism; moreover, he started searching for the interrelatedness of natural history and human history in archaeological and literary imaginations.

Long before Olson's time, narratives with environmental consciousness and eco-centric awareness were being written. Apart from the English Romantics who focused on the idea of pastoral life and wilderness, the first example of nature-writing belonged to American Transcendentalist Henry David

Thoreau (1817-1862) whose work *Walden* has been the primary source for future nature writers. Another nature writer was John Muir (1838-1914) who for the first claimed that rights of nature should be protected. Aldo Leopold (1887-1948) was considered in the same tradition as one of those prominent regional nature-writers of the late nineteenth century. However, it was in 1978 with William Rueckert who for the first time used the term "ecocriticism" in his book, *Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism*. Ecocriticism as a literary theory and criticism was used for the first time by Glotfelty and Fromm who defined the term as "study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (Glotfelty and Fromm, 1996: xviii). Lawrence Buell with his work, *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* (1995) was then regarded as the center of contemporary ecocritical thinking which was maturing in three veins as the First Wave Ecocriticism (emerging by the 1990s) underlined the representation and significance of nature and wilderness beside the interaction between human and non-human worlds. The Second Wave Ecocriticism, emerging by the twenty-first century, was more urban-centered and politically articulated. The Third Wave Ecocriticism carried environmental consciousness from the local, national and natural to the global, transnational and material. Recent claims about ecocritical thinking belonged to critic Scott Slovic, who underlined the necessity of bringing different local narratives together if we really wanted to make a change in saving the Earth; and make more effort to put theory into practice (qtd in Ozdag, 2014).

As it is briefly mentioned above, ecocriticism has been a very significant recent formation since the 1990s, however the roots of ecocritical consciousness are not new. Nature awareness along with nature narratives have always been a big part of the Western literature, especially American literary canon as the concepts of "nature," "wilderness," "wildlife" mattered to American people since the colonial times. Nature was defined in varied ways in different contexts at different time periods, but mostly in a subordinate and dark way, yet sometimes as sublime, but then still in a romanticized way. According to some critics, the reason why man was disunited with nature was because of the imperialist ideology that privileged man over nature so that nature could be silenced and exploited. On the other hand, some claimed that the subjection of nature was caused by the anthropocentric world view which was embedded within the religious discourses of Judaism and Christianity. And to some, nature's inferior position before the human being dated back to the deterministic and scientific understandings of Descartes, Bacon and Newton (qtd in Ozdag, 2005 and 2014). At this point, ecocriticism has emerged offering

new perspectives and solutions for freeing nature from its human-made confinement. However, a remarkable point to be remembered in this article is the balancing of nature and culture and never privileging one over the other. One of the main goals of this article is the acknowledgement of natural and cultural phenomena, local and global spatiality, treating human and non-human universes separately and equally, in a way to recall Olson's similar arguments in his poetics. In the next section, some key concepts of Ecocritical thinking will be defined and discussed in terms of Olson's poem, "The Kingfishers." But before it, let us see if the work fits in Lawrence Buell's checklist for environmentalist reading as he argued in *The Environmental Imagination* (1995), an ecocritical work should contain:

- a) The environment is present not merely as a device but as a presence that suggests human is in there, too (the idea of interconnectedness).
- b) The human interest is not the only interest (move from an anthropocentric approach towards eco-centric).
- c) The human accountability to the environment determines a text's aesthetic value (environmental ethics in a text)
- d) The perception of the environment as a dynamic process rather than a constant, given structure.

These four principles of Buell (qtd in Dunning, 69) determine whether a text is open to eco-criticism or not and this article argues that Olson's poem fits in Buell's standards for the reasons which will be exemplified in the next section.

3.1. The Idea of Interconnectedness and Theory of Rhizome:

As William Rueckert noted, poems could be studied as models for energy flow, community building, and ecosystems. Quoting from Bennett, Rueckert claimed that the first Law of Ecology – that everything was connected to everything else – applied to poems as well as to nature. The concept of the interactive field has been operative in nature, ecology, and poetry long before it ever appeared in criticism (1996: 110). Rueckert's concept of "interconnectedness" could be grounded in Olson's work as the poem was a critique of the Western expansion and imperialist ideology that caused physical/natural damage and cultural deterioration in the land of America. "The Kingfishers," divided into 3 parts, of which the first was subdivided into 4 sections, was told in broken line structures,

freed of any metrical restrictions, articulated in a disjunctive, spontaneous free-verse style. Yet, from word to line, past to present, physical nature to human nature, human to non-human, every single physical and literary formation in Olson's poem was related with one another in a continuum of change. The whole poem was a summary of Olson's urge to portray "the land" in continuum, paradoxically in a continuum of change. As the first line of the poem suggested, "what does not change / is the will to change" (Olson, 1949: Part I, Section 1: Line 1), dynamism and chaos appeared as the essentials operating in between human and non-human universes. The historical allusion to the Greek philosopher Heraclitus showed that "no man ever steps twice in the same river" leading to the idea of change which crystallized the poem's overall meaning that overlapped with a Keatsian "negative capability" reminding us infinite opportunities, ambiguities, unknown sides of the self/society/culture had to confront in life/time/place such as war, peace, life, death, revolution, evolution, consumption, belonging, isolation, etc.... The fragmented structure of the poem was unified by three leit-motifs which were significant in the history of human and non-human natures: the kingfisher bird, the "E" on stone and Mao's speech. Thus, the poem was treated as an open field where varied images were juxtaposed with one another, but still in relation with the general message that lied underneath: entanglement.

Taking its title after the brightly colored, common bird of the American kingfisher, which was previously meaningful for the Aztec and Mayan cultures but lost value now in the Western trade market hence disappeared from encyclopedias, the poem meditated on the loss of symbolic meaning, economic value and linguistic representation of the bird as much as the ruin of earlier civilizations such as the Aztecs who disappeared after the Spanish conquest in America. The first section thus began with the persona's (also Olson's) description of a man waking up from bed with his clothes on after he had been to party which he left unaware as he was occupied by deep thoughts about the kingfisher bird that lost its popularity at present time as "the pool was slime" (1949: Part I, Section 1: Line 16). This section ends with the persona's lamentation over the present situation of the old Aztec capital in New Mexico City, a spot he imagined as the heart of cultural deterioration and death. Yet, in the second section life was portrayed in juxtaposition with death (and rebirth) by contrasting images like the kingfisher nestlings feeding on dead fish, Mao's speech and the "E" stone:

I thought of the E on the stone, and of what Mao said

la lumiere”

but the kingfisher

de l’aurore”

but the kingfisher flew west

est devant nous!

he got the color of his breast

from the heat of the setting sun!

[...]

There,

six or eight white and translucent eggs are laid, on fishbones

not on bare clay, on bones thrown up in pellets by the birds.

On these rejectamenta

(as they accumulate they form a cup-shaped structure) the young are born.

And, as they are fed and grow, this nest of excrement and decayed fish becomes

a dripping, fetid mass

Mao concluded:

nous devons

nous lever

et agir!

(Part I, Section 2: Lines 1-8, 23-30)

What operated in the fauna and flora of old Aztec city (like the kingfisher nestlings feeding on decayed fish destroyed and re-created) influenced the other happenings, thus triggered change in human universe. Mayan hieroglyphs, Greek letters or the Mao’s speech mattered as much as the kingfisher bird. Man needed these motifs to form a solid language ribbed off abstractions. These objects prevailed as images which were clearer than our language of abstractions. The

energy of the poem was derived from these images. When taken together, these unconnected fragments formed a continuum of solid meanings according to Olson. This connection might be furthered in terms of the “rhizomatic theory” underlined by Deleuze and Guattari who noted the concept of assemblages, and the paradox of their being “not principally linguistic”, yet “a form of content that was simultaneously inseparable from and independent of the form of expression. Their concept of assemblages, consisting of bodies in a state of flux with both a sense of exteriority and their own internal cohesion and dispersion, were quite literally marked by transformation, where assemblage “formalized contents” and created “forms of content”, resulting in a situation where “form of expression was no longer really distinct from form of content” (qtd in Pree, 2017: 200-202).

Olson’s theory of the projective verse was similar to Deleuze and Guattari’s theory of the rhizome that “a rhizome had no beginning or end; it was always in the middle, between things, interbeing, intermezzo... the fabric of the rhizome was conjunction [...] This concept paralleled Olson’s insistence on leaving open spaces in his poem, sentences unfinished and fragments that were made up of materials gathered across time and space. Although the idea of rhizomatic form may appear contradictory, Olson’s dictum that ‘FORM IS NEVER MORE THAN AN EXTENSION OF CONTENT’ allowed for his own work to stand as a structure which was constructed with sufficient space in its bricks and building blocks of language to allow for entry and interpenetration from all sides” (qtd in Pree, 2017: 199, 240).

3.2. Bioregionalism:

Bioregionalism was constructed by the relationship between flora and fauna, environment and human beings. It focused on the ecological diversity of a region. It treated human and non-human communities equally but separately unique in their complexity. It centered on the local but considered the global. For Olson, the particular has always been within the discourse of the universal. (45). For that reason, Olson has taken the subject matter for his poems from his involvement in (his) environment. His longest work “The Maximus Poems” and many others were set in his hometown, Gloucester-Massachusetts. Locality was an important motif in his poetry, but he was able to relate the local to global as his attempt was to represent Gloucester as a microcosm for the human universe.

The second section of the poem began with the description of the ancient symbol “E” on an old stone

found at the Temple of Delphi. As the last remnant of an ancient culture, people from time to time have debated on the meaning of stone E; so that the stone has gone beyond time and place and Olson rather than defining the meaning of the stone, tried to show its presence in his poem through language. This section positioned “stone E” among the vitality of the kingfisher bird and Mao’s speech, told in French (translated as “the light of dawn is before us”):

I thought of the E on the stone, and of what Mao said

la lumiere”

but the kingfisher

de l’aurore”

but the kingfisher flew west

est devant nous!

he got the color of his breast

from the heat of the setting sun!

[...] Mao concluded:

nous devons

nous lever

et agir!

(Olson, 1949: Part I, Section 2: Lines 1-8, 23-30)

Olson combined three different civilizations like Mao’s East, Cortez’ West and the Antiquity of the Greeks beside merging natural history (of the kingfishers) with human history. This brought into mind Lawrence Buell’s contention that human history was always implicated in natural history (qtd in Yavaş 2018: 8). By doing so, he tried to show how change and dynamism mattered in cosmos despite the fact that each locality was unique and important in its own way like Mao’ Communist Party overthrowing Imperialism from China in 1948 foreshadowed by his words (trans. “we must rise and act!”); like the Western ideology centering on consumption (of the kingfisher trade) which was not favored anymore; like the Aztecs conferring symbolic meaning to the kingfisher bird which was recently excerpt from language and the Antique Greeks who were occupied with the question of who you were (knowing thyself), “this very thing you are” (Part I, Section 2: Line 35), a philosophy that has mattered as much as the kingfisher

mattered to Aztecs. Whatever was said, nothing could change the bird’s mortal existence that transcended human civilization like that of the E stone which bore a witness to many rise and fall of human civilizations.

The third section of Part I took us to the sixteenth century, to the conquest of Mexico by Cortes, prophesying war yet to come: “and all now is war/ where so lately there was peace,/ and the sweet brotherhood,/ the use of tilled fields” (Part I, Section 3: Lines 26-30). The last section was closed with the remark on change, reminding what Olson has said in the beginning, “to be in different states without a change/ is not a possibility” (Part I, Section 4: Lines 18-19). And this change was of a natural one, a part of life cycle like air and water, birth and death, beginning and end, human and non-human; it included all:

The message is [...]

is the birth of the air, is

the birth of water, is

a state between

the origin and

the end, between

birth and the beginning of

another fetid nest

is change, presents

no more than itself.

(Part I, Section 4: lines 22-32)

All four sections of Part I indicated that Olson emphasized on the idea of change, but he didn’t clarify whether this change meant to be good or bad. Mao’s overthrowing of capitalism in China might have been interpreted as something positive if one took Olson’s critique of imperialism into account. On the other hand, the disappearance of the kingfisher’s popularity from trade market might have been negative for the residents of Mexico City whereas it might have been symbolically positive for the Aztecs who regarded the bird as holly. In short, using different languages and stories operating at different levels of time and place, what Olson tried to underline in the first part of

the poem was the unifying fact that change has been inevitable for continuum in human and non-human histories.

According to Greg Garrard, bioregionalism was the interactions between human societies and landscapes. It was a politics of reinhabitation that encouraged people to explore more deeply the natural and cultural landscape in which they already lived (qtd in Pearson, 2013: 8). From this perspective, Part II was opened with a guided tour around one of the buried Aztec excavations. Olson portrayed the cultural differences between the Western settlers and the indigenous people of the continent through the burying techniques as he said “they buried their dead in a sitting posture/ serpent cane razor ray of the sun/ And she sprinkled water on the head of my child, crying/ Cioa-coat! Cioa-coat!/ with her face to the west” (Part II, lines 1-5). “The west” as the last word of the fifth line confronted with “the East” of the ninth implying Olson’s critique of the Western culture and his urge to “move, rise and act” reminding Mao, so that a substitute might have been found to stop imperialist ideology which has devastated everything, killed so many, controlled and commodified nature in the name of hegemony and civilization. Yet, this was a hard step to be taken; one had to brave enough to face/bare the “apparent darkness/the whiteness which covers all” like the whale of Melville. Meanwhile, the tour guide amid the ruined stones in sunset was admiring the “yellow of that longest-lasting rose” (line 13), symbolizing vitality and change as the sun went down, bearing a new day to be born from the East:

The light is in the east. Yes. And we must rise, act.
Yet

in the west, despite the apparent darkness (the
whiteness

which covers all), if you look, if you can bear, if you
can, long enough

as long as it was necessary for him, my guide

to look into the yellow of that longest-
lasting rose

so you must, and, in that whiteness, into that face,
with what candor, look

and, considering the dryness of the place

the long absence of an adequate race
(Part II: Lines 9-16)

To Buell, bioregionalism respected and restored natural systems while satisfying basic human needs in sustainable ways (qtd in Pearson, 2013: 41). Each place was inseparable from the concrete region in which it was found or defined by physical markers as well as social consensus. He pointed out that we felt attachments to spaces, felt at home. We made place because we did not suffer feelings of alienation or hostility there. So, the world history has been a history of space becoming place (qtd in Pearson, 2013: 6-7) and Olson through his critique of the West tried to find a sense of belonging in human universe, eventually aligning himself with the values of the East, Aztecs and Mayas.

3.3. Poetry as Dwelling:

“How could a work of art, a thing of human making, or, as the Greeks put it, poesies, speak and in speaking ‘save’ the earth? For this, according to Bate, was precisely what eco-poetry could do: ‘If mortals dwelt in that they saved the earth and if poetry was the original admission of dwelling,’ Bate concluded in his book, *The Song of the Earth* (2000), ‘then poetry was the place where we saved the earth’” (qtd in Rigby, 2004: 428). Bate in his book discussed the role of the poet and function of poetry in making a home/ environmental awareness relying on a Heideggerian model of “ecopoiesis.” He privileged poetic writing as it answered to nature’s own rhythms. Poetry, according to Bates, did not name things to make them available for use, but rather to show their presence in language (qtd in Rigby, 2004: 431). Following Heidegger, Bate believed poetry was freed from “technological reasoning/unframing” which treated nature as a standing reserve and became a “poetic presencing” that considered nature in subject positions (qtd in Rigby, 2004: 428-430).

Turning away from anthropocentrism and coming closer to eco-centrism, poetry in that respect has become a medium in the equal treatment of human and non-human natures. Man’s acknowledgement of his place in space formed the poetics of dwelling. Poetry played an important role in forming a sense of belonging. Olson’s act of naming places was similar to Heidegger’s notion of poetry as dwelling. Olson’s poetry brought together human history and natural history, socio-cultural inheritance in a specific land. For him, dwelling was a state humans achieved on earth, space or at a specific location (Starnes, 2002: np) like the way he “hunted among stones” (Part III: Line 19).

The last part of the poem was about Olson’s responsibility as a poet to revitalize what has been lost

in American culture: spirit, authenticity, harmony, unity, etc. As he declared his non-Western roots saying, "I am no Greek, hath not th'advantage/ And of course, no Roman" (Part III: Lines 1-2) he felt akin to the French poet Rimbaud even though they were separated by an ocean, time span and poetic manner. Rimbaud has been a lost soul leaving his country to live in deserts of the Middle East: "If I have any taste, it is / For earth and stones- not much besides" (Trans. lines 11-12). However, unlike the French poet, Olson preferred facing historical facts of the past and problems of the present in his hometown to construct a better future. So, he realized his true heritage far from being ex-patriot or in exile, but dwelling at home, in his own locality by empathizing with the victims of the land like the silenced nature, exploited land, destroyed environment, colonized Aztec, slaughtered Indian: "Despite the discrepancy (an ocean courage age)/ this is also true: if I have any taste/ it is only because I have interested myself/ in what was slain in the sun (Part III: Lines 11-16).

Finally, he came up with the question, "I pose you your question: shall you uncover honey / where maggots are? I hunt among stones (Part III: Lines 17-19). These famous ending lines might have indicated Olson's endeavor in finding the errors of Western thinking/global colonization in a retrospective manner rather than diachronic, as they might also have indicated the remedy to be found among stones, in other words, by returning to basics, to understand and appreciate past civilizations which have been undermined or made into myths by the West. It was expected that the persona/Olson would start to see through things as he reduced himself to the state of an object among others where "mean egotism vanished and man casted off his years, as the snake his slough (Emerson, Nature, 1844: Chp I, par. 4); in other words, he would start saving the universe through his dwelling of the place.

Olson's poetic dwelling was quite post-structuralist as he was considered to be a postmodernist poet familiar with the method of deconstruction and the critique of logocentric thinking. Counter to anthropocentric discourses, Olson as a poet tried to reduce his being to the state of an object among the others, and by relocating the silenced, excluded, oppressed into the text, he brought forward a reconceptualization of the human and non-human universes. Rather than comparing man and nature, human and non-human universes and representing them through figurative language, Olson presented these universes through a solid, non-mimetic language that helped closing the gap between dualities. Relying on myths, hieroglyphs, images, he restored the human universe and in a non-mimetic way formed a homeland. This brought into mind the complex work of the post-structuralist

critic Timothy Morton's "ambient poetics" which was a deconstructive way of exemplifying interconnectedness in the ecology of a text. According to Morton, the idea of nature was a construct. The constructed nature formed the idea of real nature. If we want to save the earth, he said that first we must do away with the reality of nature and focus on a constructed one. Instead of trying to find oneness with nature, we should hold ourselves separate from the environment and explore that separateness (qtd in Pearson, 84) In that sense, the content has become the landscape and the text was treated as ecology. In such presence, all details among words, gaps between lines, marks, punctuations and each single entity mattered as they were interrelated with one another and referential in the ecology of the text.

The difficulty for the readers of Olson's poem found itself in the spontaneous poetic style which flowed disrupted, incoherent, jumpy and juxtaposed; yet all these points formed the "kinetics" of the poem as he has explained in his essay "Projective Verse." The poem, from the beginning to the end was an energy transfer, passed from the poet to the reader, by way of sound measured by the poet's breath which came from his heart, his mind. The unrhymed, free-verse structure of the poem was determined by its content, which was never more than what the poet had to say: quite individual stories, cultural myths, regional matters of specific localities tied to objective and cosmic realities. What Olson told in the poem might have been said for anyone living in this universe. So, "when a bell tolls, it might also toll for thee. No man is an island entire of itself.

4. CONCLUSION

According to Lawrence Buell's checklist, Olson's poem "The Kingfishers" has been suitable for an environmentalist reading as the work challenged the taken-for-granted duality of nature and culture, human and non-human, subject and object. Doing away with such binary oppositions, the poem presented both nature and man as active agents speaking for themselves. Moreover, Olson's treatment of the self as an object among the others by a non-mimetic language offered possibility to the text to speak up for itself. Olson's portrayal of the environment not as a device but as a presence underlined "the idea of interconnectedness" between human and non-human universes where environmental ethics became visible. Moving from an anthropocentric perspective towards an eco-centric, Olson showed that human interests were not the only one that mattered. Finally, the perception of the environment as a dynamic process rather than a given structure liberated the inferior position of the

alienated, excluded and silenced entities in the context of the poem. Other than that, Olson's idea of the "projective verse" parallel to the theory of the rhizome crystallized the text's referential structure composed of fragments, unfinished lines and materials gathered from many diverse sources. The interplay of dialogic voices in the poem enriched the deep structure of the text. As for the legacy of Charles Olson, it can be said that he has been an obsessive Melville researcher, innovative Black Mountain scholar, postmodernist poet, progressive theorist and a historian of the cosmic universe. Although never counted necessarily as an environmentalist, ecopoet or nature-writer, his stance towards nature and human has been quite ecocritical in that he tried to revitalize, reconceptualize and preserve the human universe which he named as "human house." Through his critique of the Western logocentrism and commercialism, Olson has been in an anti-Humanist approach to formulate a poetics to be grounded in Objectism. With his work, "the Projective Verse" Olson has succeeded in offering a poetic and political substitute for a new wave of poetry that transcended the achievements of Pound and Williams. Like poetry, geography, ecology, archaeology and history mattered to him to great extent as he knew that the world was in danger due to the national turmoil at his time in the post-1950s. So, he has composed his works with a socio-political and ecological awareness in finding a remedy for the earth, man and his environment not only for his time and society but a remedy that made it possible at all times. Going back to basics, he has searched for the signs, myths, extinct civilizations that once mattered as they have been simple, direct and closer to nature than the present condition of man.

As it is argued, this paper tried to interpret Charles Olson's poem, "The Kingfishers" (1949) through ecocritical lenses. As underlined in Olson's essay "Projective Verse," the mechanics of the projective verse highlighted not only the will to arrive at the undistorted human reality but also the will to articulate that reality as an alternative to the Western culture. Olson's poem -although not written precisely in an ecocritical manner- included some of the basic tenets of ecocritical thinking such as the concept of interrelatedness, theory of rhizome, bioregionalism and finally, the idea of poetry as dwelling, which altogether disclosed how the poetics of Charles Olson stood as an alternative among the other examples in American poetry tradition.

APPENDIX

The Kingfishers (1949)

I
 What does not change / is the will to change
 He woke, fully clothed, in his bed. He
 remembered only one thing, the birds, how
 when he came in, he had gone around the
 rooms
 and got them back in their cage, the green one
 first,
 she with the bad leg, and then the blue,
 the one they had hoped was a male

Otherwise? Yes, Fernand, who had talked
 lispingly of Albers & Angkor Vat.
 He had left the party without a word. How he
 got up, got into his coat,
 I do not know. When I saw him, he was at the
 door, but it did not matter,
 he was already sliding along the wall of the
 night, losing himself
 in some crack of the ruins. That it should have
 been he who said, "The kingfishers!
 who cares
 for their feathers
 now?"

His last words had been, "The pool is slime."
 Suddenly everyone,
 ceasing their talk, sat in a row around him,
 watched
 they did not so much hear, or pay attention,
 they
 wondered, looked at each other, smirked, but
 listened,
 he repeated and repeated, could not go beyond
 his thought
 "The pool the kingfishers' feathers were
 wealth why
 did the export stop?"

It was then he left

2

I thought of the E on the stone, and of what
Mao said

la lumiere”

but the kingfisher

de l’aurore”

but the kingfisher flew west

est devant nous!

he got the color of his breast

from the heat of the setting sun!

The features are, the feebleness of the feet
(syndactylism of the 3rd & 4th digit)

the bill, serrated, sometimes a pronounced
beak, the wings

where the color is, short and round, the tail
inconspicuous.

But not these things were the factors. Not the
birds.

The legends are
legends. Dead, hung up indoors, the kingfisher
will not indicate a favoring wind,
or avert the thunderbolt. Nor, by its nesting,
still the waters, with the new year, for seven
days.

It is true, it does nest with the opening year,
but not on the waters.

It nests at the end of a tunnel bored by itself in
a bank. There,

six or eight white and translucent eggs are
laid, on fishbones

not on bare clay, on bones thrown up in pellets
by the birds.

On these rejectamenta

(as they accumulate they form a cup-shaped
structure) the young are born.

And, as they are fed and grow, this nest of
excrement and decayed fish becomes

a

dripping, fetid mass

Mao concluded:

nous devons

nous lever

et agir!

3

When the attentions change / the jungle
leaps in

even the stones are split

they rive

Or,

enter

that other conqueror we more naturally
recognize

he so resembles ourselves

But the E

cut so rudely on that oldest stone

sounded otherwise,

was differently heard

as, in another time, were treasures used:

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

“of green feathers feet, beaks
and eyes

of gold

“animals likewise,
resembling snails

“a large wheel, gold, with
figures of unknown four-foots,

and worked with tufts of
leaves, weight

3800 ounces

“last, two birds, of thread and
featherwork, the quills

gold, the feet

gold, the two birds perched on
two reeds

gold, the reeds arising from
two embroidered mounds,
one yellow, the other
white.

hung “And from each reed
 seven feathered
tassels.

In this instance, the priests
(in dark cotton robes, and dirty,
their disheveled hair matted with blood, and
flowing wildly
over their shoulders)
rush in among the people, calling on them
to protect their gods

And all now is war
where so lately there was peace,
and the sweet brotherhood, the use
of tilled fields.

4

Not one death but many,
not accumulation but change, the feed-back
proves, the feed-back is
the law

Into the same river no man steps
twice

When fire dies air dies

No one remains, nor is, one

Around an appearance, one common model,
we grow up
many. Else how is it,
if we remain the same,
we take pleasure now
in what we did not take pleasure before? love

contrary objects? admire and / or find fault?
use

other words, feel other passions, have
nor figure, appearance, disposition, tissue
the same?

To be in different states without a
change

is not a possibility

We can be precise. The factors are
in the animal and / or the machine the factors
are
communication and / or control, both involve
the message. And what is the message? The
message is
a discrete or continuous sequence of
measurable events distributed in time

is the birth of the air, is
the birth of water, is
a state between
the origin and
the end, between
birth and the beginning of
another fetid nest

is change, presents
no more than itself

And the too strong grasping of it,
when it is pressed together and condensed,

loses it

This very thing you are

II

They buried their dead in a sitting
posture

serpent cane razor ray of the
sun

And she sprinkled water on the
head of my child, crying
“Cioa-coat! Cioa-coat!”
with her face to the west

Where the bones are found, in each
personal heap
with what each enjoyed, there is
always
the Mongolian louse

The light is in the east. Yes. And we must rise,
act. Yet
in the west, despite the apparent darkness (the
whiteness
which covers all), if you look, if you can bear,
if you can, long enough

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

so you must, and, in that whiteness, into that
face, with what candor, look
and, considering the dryness of the place
the long absence of an adequate race
(of the two who first came, each a
conquistador, one healed, the other
tore the eastern idols down,
toppled
the temple walls, which, says the
excuser
were black from human gore)

hear
hear, where the dry blood talks
where the old appetite walks

la
piu saporita et migliore
che
si possa trovar al mondo

where it hides, look
in the eye how it runs
in the flesh / chalk

but under these petals
in the emptiness
regard the light, contemplate
the flower

whence it arose

with what violence benevolence is
bought
what cost in gesture justice brings
what wrongs domestic rights involve
what stalks
this silence

*what pudor peyorocracy affronts
how awe, night-rest and
neighborhood can rot*

*what breeds where dirtiness is law
what crawls
below*

III

I am no Greek, hath not th'advantage.
And of course, no Roman:
he can take no risk that matters,
the risk of beauty least of all.

But I have my kin, if for no other
reason than
(as he said, next of kin) I commit
myself, and,
given my freedom, I'd be a cad
if I didn't. Which is most true.

It works out this way, despite the
disadvantage.

I offer, in explanation, a quote:
si j'ai du goût, ce n'est guères
que pour la terre et les pierres.

Despite the discrepancy (an ocean
courage age)
this is also true: if I have any taste
it is only because I have interested
myself
in what was slain in the sun

I pose you your question:

shall you uncover honey / where
maggots are?

I hunt among stones

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ENDNOTES

1. In his “Preface” to Lyrical Ballads (1798) the English Romantic poet William Wordsworth defines poetry as the “spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings,” with that claim, he emancipates lyrical poetry from the earlier metrical restrictions outlined by the 18th century Neo-Classicism. This is similar to Olson’s idea of “projective verse” that underlines poetry freed of any metrical restrictions.
2. Breath-based poetry means the line will run as long as the breath of the poet can sustain it, in a manner of immediacy and spontaneity linked to the rhythm and energy in human body and human universe. This reminds R. W. Emerson’s poetic theory of breath rather than rhyme-meter-stanza -based verse type.
3. First used in 1817 by the English Romantic poet John Keats, “negative capability” means the ability of the writer to perceive truths beyond logic and reasoning; it is the ability of the mind to confront negations, uncertainties, mysteries, doubts and therefore allowing oneself to think and create in a realm of unknown. This is similar to Olson’s (including Robert Duncan’s emphasis as well) poetic idea of “composition by the field” where the page is treated as a realm of infinite opportunities and ambiguities that the poet is welcomed to step in.
4. The first-generation modernists include the leading figures such as William Butler Yeats, James Joyce and T. S. Eliot who are followed by a younger and different vein like Gertrude Stein, Ezra Pound, William Carlos Williams, Marianne Moore, and HD (Altuğ and Denizarslanı, 2016: 837). On the other hand, the second-generation stands for the contemporary schools of experimental poetry emerging in the post-World War II period such as The New York School, The Objectivists, The San Francisco Renaissance, the Language Poets, the Beats and the Black Mountain Poets among whom Charles Olson, Robert Creeley and Robert Duncan can be noticed. According to Creeley, any movement poetry can now make beyond the achievement of Pound and Williams was new, and so was the Black Mountain group; they were even “postmodernist” to some extent; moving away from the subjectivity and symbolism of Romanticism and European dependent-Modernism (Stefon, britannica.com).
5. Maximus, in its Latin origin means large or great. Olson’s book of poetry entitled, “The Maximus Poems” (1953-75) -left unfinished due to his death-embodies a persona named, “Maximus of Gloucester,” who according to some critics reflects Olson’s alter ego.
6. Olson’s book of collected poems entitled “Archaeologist of the Morning” (1971). He names himself as an archaeologist rather than a poet, in pursuit of human and non-human reality, of ancient cultures, of hieroglyphs, of human universe.
7. Olson’s essay entitled “The Human Universe” (1951) is not about the privileged condition of the human in universe, but rather a critique of it. Very generally, Olson in this essay speculates about his discontents with logocentric thinking, the subject position of man as ego and defects of Humanism.
8. Reminds Philip Freneau’s romantic poem, “The Indian-Burying Ground” (1787) which begins with the statement of cultural differences between the whites and Indians through burying techniques as the Indians bury their dead in a sitting position unlike the Whites.
9. Olson’s interest in Melville has been huge. He had started his Melville studies, especially on *Moby-Dick* when he was an MA student, and his thesis was turned into a book *Call Me Ishmael* (1947). Here, whiteness reminds Melville’s whale, symbolizing complete darkness and unknown.
10. Lines taken from the English metaphysical poet, John Donne (*Essay on Meditation XVII*).