

RALPH MAUD / Charles Olson's First Poem

The nail of the Cross
Bit of Constantine's horse
—action was bred
motion was dead
the body bled

Man can live by bread alone
Flesh be no crone,
Not the Divine in Man
but the Man in Man
the Dream be known

Who can speak
When in the throat
Angels squeak?

What image shall float
When, at ship's peak,
Waves Christ's coat?

Cross and Charger beat man down
But Blood again shall be man's crown
That "fabulous formless darkness" raise
Before the Past and the Dream's amaze.

Transcribed by Ralph Maud from the endpapers of Olson's copy of Yeats' A Vision.

The following note is offered to Sharon Thesen as a memento of our many hours at the computer on Charles Olson and Frances Boldereff: A Modern Correspondence. Those were heady days (and years) not only because of the editorial problems involved in a 550-page volume of 328 letters whose chronology had to be determined, but also because of the subject matter of the Olson-Boldereff "riot," which stretched our minds. Such congruences of intellectual life are rare.

Olson always spoke of his "first poems" as written along with an "essay on myth" during the time he was boarding at a house on Kent Circle, West Gloucester. That would be in March 1940, when he was aged thirty. No doubt there were poems from his adolescence which he did not retain in the folder "1949-8—and back" in the Olson Archive at Storrs. None of the earlier typescripts is dated; so we have been inclined to take him at his word that there was a sudden affluence of poetic activity associated with his particular life experience in that house on the Annisquam River.

However, one poem can be separated from the rest as almost certainly earlier, at least by a year. On the basis of the typescript in the Storrs file, "Crown of Nails" was included among the rest of the March 1940 poems in *A Nation of Nothing But Poetry* (1989). Olson's copy of *A Vision* by W.B. Yeats was not available to George Butterick at the time he was editing that collection. It arrived at Storrs later, and we can now see that the poem in question, but without a title, was written out on the endpaper, and that the poem was directly derived from Olson's reading of the volume.

It seems quite natural that Yeats would be the poet to start Olson off. He had written a long term essay on "The Poetry of William Butler Yeats" in his freshman year. His professor, Wilbert Snow, who later supervised Olson's M.A. thesis, kept this A+ paper through the years and deposited it in the archives of Wesleyan University. It is indeed thorough, taking up the Celtic background and marshalling many Irish myth poems to give evidence to its hypothesis, a hypothesis so charmingly strange today that Yeats's youthful poems of reverie were superior to the tougher poems of his old age. This was 1930, and Olson had time to change his mind by March 1939 when he wrote to Van Wyck Brooks (in an unpublished letter at the University of Pennsylvania) mourning the death of Yeats the previous January and quoting Yeats's "The Bronze Head" ("gangling stocks grow great, great stocks run dry") as summarizing "this daily more difficult world."

Olson had probably picked up and read *A Vision* just about this time. In his freshman paper he makes mention of the rare 1921 printing, but he could not have purchased his Macmillan edition until its first publication in 1938, and probably did not do so until he heard on 18 March 1939 that his Guggenheim fellowship had been awarded, when he undoubtedly walked into Grolier Bookshop near Harvard Square and splurged. These circumstances give us the conjectural date for the poem as March 1939, a year before the other “first poems.”

When we look at the beginning of the holograph on the endpaper we see immediately what Olson was doing:

The nail of the cross
Bit of Constantine's nose

These lines are derived directly from page 278 of the text, where Yeats mentions that Emperor Constantine “makes the bit of his war-horse from a nail of the True Cross,” and Olson writes in the margin: “where a nail of the Cross became the bit of Constantine's horse.” On the same page, Yeats quotes a phrase from his own “Two Songs from a Play” (“that fabulous formless darkness”), which Olson before the end brings right into his poem, quotation marks and all.

Olson also incorporates in lines 8-9 of the poem his marginal comment on page 274: “Not the Divine in man, but the Man in man.” He attaches the word “Xty” to this, though I think he means it is the reverse of Christianity.

It is not within the scope of this note to take up any of the problems of explication associated with “Crown of Nails,” but only to distinguish it as probably Olson's first extant poem. Olson acknowledges its derivative nature by not sending it out to periodicals as he did the others, and by not listing it anywhere in his corpus of poems.