

# My Own Private Black Mountain

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I suffer from a peculiar malady: My sense of a poem's aesthetics, and whether or not a poem works, has been determined by my encounters with Black Mountain poets when I was still an adolescent. For all my life as a working poet, I have been unable to appreciate poems outside of a framework given me when, first having realized I was serious about this vocation, I learned what poetry could be.

I have viewed my own poetry, through the ensuing decades, as having been a poetry of accident—because of my adolescent choice to attend a college in Cortland, New York, where I would absorb the precepts and writings of Charles Olson, Robert Creeley, Joel Oppenheimer, Paul Blackburn, and others of their ilk. My shortcoming has proven to be a strong sense of purpose.

In 1965, I attended a creative writing workshop run by a Cortland professor, David Toor. That same year I first set eyes on Donald Allen's game-changing anthology *The New American Poetry: 1945-1960* (1960). Years later I would learn that Allen was being guided by Olson,<sup>1</sup> former rector of Black Mountain College. Allen created the post-World War Two avant-garde "schools" as sections of his book, which he named Black Mountain, New York School, San Francisco Renaissance, Beat, and so on. He gave Olson's essay, "Projective Verse"—whose influence has been enormous, to put it mildly, since it first appeared in 1950—pride of place in the Poetics portion of the anthology. I not only read Olson with the greatest passion, but also Creeley, Oppenheimer, the others—who came to Cortland to read and participate in that workshop. Toor's brother worked alongside Oppenheimer in a Greenwich Village print shop; so first Joel, then everyone else, showed up during my college days. Blackburn would eventually settle there to teach. He, like Creeley and Oppenheimer, would be a mentor to me. Toor was devoted to us students, and he gave us a gift greater than we could possibly have imagined. I fell in love with Stevens, Emerson, Herbert, Donne, and came to appreciate them as I'd read them through the lens of Black Mountain poetics.

I was an athlete who wanted to become a football coach, having enrolled in Cortland's physical education program. I was not the only future writer or artist to be enrolled in it. Somewhat wayward students who had athletic ability had been recruited into it, including the future writer and poet M.G. Stephens, and Ron Edson who ended up as a painter. Both of them were fixtures in the inaugural writing workshops at the St. Mark's Church-in-the-Bowery Poetry Project, which had been created by Blackburn. The Project's first director was Oppenheimer. His secretary and its future director, who would put her indelible stamp on the Project for all time, was Anne Waldman.

Before Toor, I had yet to set eyes on the work of the Black Mountain poets, or any of their forebears such as the Objectivists, or their predecessors among the Vorticists and Imagists such as Pound, Williams, and H.D. (the core of American literary Modernism)—whom Burton Hatlen later called, in a 2004 conversation with me, “The Philadelphia Three” (they having met in or around the University of Pennsylvania when they were still in their teens, in 1905).<sup>2</sup> These three—as well as Stein, Zukofsky, et al.—were not in the anthologies.

The English courses I took—quite other, fundamentally, from Toor's workshop experiences—were steeped in neoRomanticism and driven by New Criticism. The work to be found in the Allen anthology represented a repudiation of academic poetry preceding it. For aspiring young poets like myself, the work was more than merely revelatory. Even before I first met Creeley or read his poems, I heard him read a poem as part of a PBS television film; the poem was simply birds in a tree who are aware of his “presence.” The brief lyric ended with a rhetorical question about them there: “And / why not, I thought to // myself, why / not” (“Like They Say,” circa 1955).<sup>3</sup> I was stunned by the sense that the poem did not end, and its open architecture would be a quality I would come to emulate. The poem's lack of closure undermined the very edifice of the neoRomantic poem that could not accommodate the poetics of a Creeley or Williams (I would discover an even more open-ended quality in Blackburn's poems). The mainstream was facing a challenge—one that, even in the mid-'60s, I had yet to comprehend as that.

What I have called elsewhere “the poets of nostalgia” were being represented in a particularly well-known anthology, *New Poets of England and America*, which appeared just before, and then in a new edition just after, the appearance of the Allen anthology. I doubt its editors—Donald Hall, Robert Pack, and Louis Simpson—were looking outside the mainstream. The poets they selected were celebrated and canonized. *New Poets of England and America* contained work written by not a single poet included in *The New American Poetry*, and vice versa. That Hall-Simpson-Pack anthology is virtually forgotten now, yet it was the standard collection taught in the universities for many years. It lacked the focus within the avant garde upon language in and of itself (as evoked in Creeley's phrase “the thingness of language”).<sup>4</sup> The sense of *words* was coalescing in me during my college days and then when I was living in the East Village, where I attended a workshop led by Oppenheimer.

There's another thing about my Black Mountain legacy. While the poetics grew out of the teaching, writing, and thinking taking place at Black Mountain College in rural North Carolina—and, while participants in that grand conversation arrived there from various points on the globe, many of them rural—one direct outgrowth of the College was the jolt of energy and innovation that dramatically affected arts communities in a number of cities, San Francisco and New York especially. (The story of Basil and Martha King's migration from the College, first to San Francisco, then to Manhattan and

ultimately Brooklyn, is iconic in this way.)

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That the New York School was already establishing its namesake city as the center of the art world, well before the College closed its doors, does not fully account for the breadth and vibrancy of art activity in New York linking back to the College. And, as for poetry—the postwar avant-garde was especially indebted to Black Mountain—*new forms* of poetry, which were alien to the mainstream and radically different, came to the fore in these vibrant urban centers of innovation.

In large measure due to emigration to New York from BMC, the poets connected with it (also Paul Blackburn and a young Amiri Baraka, then LeRoi Jones, whose aesthetic outlook comported with theirs) contributed significantly to a downtown literary scene. This community was made up of the likes of Frank O'Hara, Allen Ginsberg and, along with Joel Oppenheimer, younger people, such as Diane di Prima, who would come to be viewed as a hybrid (according to Donald Allen's categorizations, that is—writers who do not fit neatly into the various schools). Perhaps no more vivid sign of this community, which we might now view as disparate, is the fact that Ginsberg's poem *Howl* was first typewritten by Robert Creeley.<sup>5</sup>

Eventually, out of this downtown NYC scene, the Poetry Project would give birth to its own characteristic poetic practice; in turn, what amounted to a new poetics would sponsor later New York School (Ted Berrigan, Bernadette Mayer, Ron Padgett, Lewis Warsh, et al.), later Beat (di Prima, Waldman), and then *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* poetry (Charles Bernstein, Bruce Andrews, et al.). In common among these new schools' proclivities, all the same, was what I would like to call the *urban lyric*. The benchmark of this poem was the 1967 publication of Blackburn's *The Cities*. The poems in his collection were first disseminated in little magazines of the '50s and '60s. Arguably, it was his Black Mountain poetics, holding imagery to be crucial (in keeping with the precepts of Pound, H.D., and Williams), which gave rise to various evocations of a cityscape.

What the Black Mountain impulse contributed to this new poem of the city was the precise image along with a candid voice. Both can be found in the

work of O'Hara (one of the poets comprising the original New York School); yet the sense of written language as material existence in and of itself, to be found in Black Mountain and earlier Objectivist poetry and poetics, could manifest through a voice embodying the breakdown of statement, as particles of speech came to stand on their own (as in Blackburn's poems).

A poet like Oppenheimer contributed to this emerging complex with a palpably urban grit. The very feel of the city was critical in his poems, as in the title work of his 1962 book, *The Love Bit*:

the colors we depend on are,  
 red for raspberry jam, white  
 of the inside thigh, purple as  
 in deep, the blue of moods, green  
 cucumbers (cars), yellow stripes down  
 the pants, orange suns on ill-  
 omened days, and black as the  
 dirt in my fingernails.  
 also, brown, in the night,  
 appearing at its best when  
 the eyes turn inward, seeking  
 seeking [...].

An explanation of how the younger di Prima was working, having absorbed this aesthetics, and for a time working closely with Jones/Baraka, is encapsulated by remarks she'd make much later about this period: "All my writing was completely predicated on getting the slang of N.Y. in the period in the early 50's, down on paper somehow or another."<sup>6</sup> Here is one of her late-'50s lyrics from her first collection, *This Kind of Bird Flies Backward* (1958; reprinted here from her later, larger book, *Dinners and Nightmares*):

In case you put me down I put you down  
 already, doll  
 I know the games you play.

In case you put me down I got it figured  
 how there are better mouths than yours  
 more swinging bodies  
 wilder scenes than this.

In case you put me down it won't help much. (119)

Communal living and jazz make up di Prima's language here; and the poem proclaims the sense of being free within an alternative way of living (all of this is embodied in her word "swinging"). There is a melody in her verse lines that, echoing both agreements and disagreements the persona encounters through daily happenstance, espouses the democratic.<sup>7</sup>

One final aspect of Black Mountain poetics should be mentioned. There was, not in any obvious way, a philosophical aspect to the poetry of someone like Creeley, so too Olson's and Duncan's poems. But it was Creeley who put together something for me, which I had been observing in North American

avant-garde poetry, though I was failing to see a bigger picture. These poets, along with George Oppen and William Bronk (and Wallace Stevens, who had also appeared in Cid Corman's *Origin* and the *Black Mountain Review* edited by Creeley), grasped the phenomenological implications of quantum mechanics (as evident in some of their work).

Through Oppen's sister June Degnan, then publisher of the *San Francisco Review*, Bronk appeared on the national landscape in 1964 when his collection *The World, the Worldless*, whose manuscript had been edited by Oppen, was

*I have come to realize how  
very much, over the many  
years he was supportive of  
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brought out. Especially of interest in this regard is the fact that Bronk had been the last poet to be cut from the Allen anthology due to space issues.<sup>8</sup> Yet Olson's stunning blurb on the back cover said a lot about what Black Mountain poetics was: "I may have, for the first time in my life, imagined a further succinct life." That comment riveted me as a young poet who was steeped in both Olson's and Bronk's writings. Olson's work was in many ways quite distant from Bronk's—yet not in some fundamental way that, as it happened, went beyond Pound's notion of "condesare" although

comprehending that. In some respects, just as Oppen's work differed from Bronk's on the surface while, nevertheless, the two bodies of poetry shared a vision (as professed in their correspondence), that vision was partaken of by Creeley and others.

Olson and Bronk entertained a fundamental worldview. The word *world* possessed a special heft (for them, but also for Creeley, Stevens, Oppen, and others). They shared, moreover, a certain understanding and appreciation of language that fit with a common cosmology—and of course Creeley was pivotal in this intellectual as well as artistic history; for years, Olson famously carried on an intense dialogue with him (note the fat volumes of their published letters). I'll always cherish what was for me an epiphanic moment when I opened a letter from Creeley containing his permission to quote passages of his work in my then upcoming book on Bronk<sup>9</sup>—he had scribbled an encouraging note on the permission page itself, in the margin. His inscription included an apostrophe in quotes and with the exclamation mark to be found in a line from a poem of Bronk's: "World, world!" The phrase comes from his '50s poem "In Contempt of Worldliness," which he sent initially to Olson in a letter that continued a conversation they'd been having about Oppen; the phrase would later appear in Bronk's 1964 book:

How one comes  
to despise all worldliness! World, world!  
We cling like animal young to the flanks of the world

to show our belonging; but to be at ease here  
 in mastery, were to make too light of the world  
 as if it were less than it is: the unmasterable.

Creeley's imitation *cri de coeur* could well have come from the title of Oppen's poem "World, World —," which concludes his 1965 collection *This In Which*. I mean to suggest, all the same, a bidirectional influence here, as might be seen in letters between Bronk and Oppen, in addition taking into account another poem of Bronk's, "The Arts and Death: A Fugue for Sidney Cox." That poem appeared in his 1956 volume *Light and Dark*, preceding Oppen's poem; there Bronk writes: "World, world, I am scared / and waver in awe [...]." Creeley's inscription confirmed for me what I was already intuiting about our avant-garde poetry; that was something not being comprehended by the poets in the postwar "academic" scene, yet it was something essential within the Black Mountain experience. Creeley was signaling me, making sure I got it all.

Below is a recent poem of mine, which is deeply indebted to him. I have come to realize how very much, over the many years he was supportive of me and my work, my own poetry and intellectual framework were nurtured, rather deeply inflected, by Creeley's (of course, my debt to Bronk, Olson, Oppen is not news):

The World at Dawn

*I wanted so ably  
 to reassure you...*

*...and got  
 up, and went to the window,  
 pushed back, as you asked me to,*

*the curtain, to see  
 the outline of the trees  
 in the night outside.*

—Robert Creeley, from "The World"

Lying still  
 on my bed,  
 I look through  
 my window.  
 Outside, trees  
 stand into  
 the sky, their  
 branches and  
 leaves above  
 roofs, chimneys.  
 The dawn is  
 white. I am  
 looking out  
 on the world.

There is its  
 light. A car  
 goes by not  
 far away.

I might say  
 something like,  
 if I were

dying, “I  
 will leave this  
 world.” The word

*world* is so  
 important  
 for poets —

some knew it  
 was a word.  
 Stevens, Bronk

and Oppen,  
 Creeley are  
 all gone. They

thought about  
 words. They knew  
 how very

desperate  
 words are. Their  
 words are mine.

I lie still  
 and I say  
 that the world,

its light, is  
 out “there” and  
 I want it.

### Notes

1. See David W. Clippinger, *The Mind's Landscape: William Bronk and Twentieth-Century American Poetry* (Newark, DE: Univ. of Delaware Press, 2006); “Redrawing the Boundaries of Poetry: The Small Journal and the Example of *Maps*” (Winter 2001), <http://www.flashpointmag.com/clippinger.htm>; and “Neither Us nor Them: Poetry Anthologies, Canon Building, and the Silencing of William Bronk” (Argotist Ebooks, 2012; <http://www.argotistonline.co.uk/Clippinger%2oessay.htm>).

2. “In 1905 the young Ezra Pound, H.D., and William Carlos Williams—Pound and Williams were students at the University of Pennsylvania, and H.D. was a friend of both—formed perhaps the first important literary fellowship of the new century. Although Pound

and Williams did not come to know and admire Marianne Moore until later, Moore and H.D. were at least aware of one another during the year they spent as fellow students at Bryn Mawr, so we may add Moore to form a unique quartet of 'Philadelphia Modernists.' Around this nexus of personal relationships a new poetic movement would crystallize, although each of the poets in question would arrive at a unique personal voice" (Burton Hatlen, "Foreword," *The Facts on File Companion to 20th-Century American Poetry*, ed. Burt Kimmelman. New York: Facts on File, 2005, vii).

3. Robert Creeley, *For Love: Poems, 1950-1960* (New York: Scribner, 1962), 144.

4. Robert Creeley, "From the Language Poets," *Sunday Review, The San Francisco Chronicle* (28 Sept. 1986), p. 347. Cf. Burt Kimmelman, "The New American Poetry's Objectivist Legacy: Linguistic Skepticism, the Signifier and Material Language," John Woznicki, Ed. *The New American Poetry Fifty Years Later* (Bethlehem, PA: Lehigh Univ. Press, 2014), 231.

5. According to Penelope Creeley in conversation, in June 2012 (Orono, Maine). See also, Tyler Hoffman, *American Poetry in Performance: From Walt Whitman to Hip-Hop* (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 2013), 139.

6. See Anne Waldman's "An Interview with Diane di Prima" in *The Beat Road*, edited by Arthur Winfield Knight and Kit Knight, Vol. 14 of *The Unspeakable Visions of the Individual* (1984), 27-32.

7. See Kimmelman, "From Black Mountain College to St. Mark's Church." *Rain Taxi* (Spring 2002).

8. See Clippinger, "Neither Us nor Them."

9. *The "Winter Mind": William Bronk and American Letters* (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson Univ. Press, 1998).

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