

Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism

TCLC 230

TOPICS VOLUME

Volume 230

Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism

**Commentary on Various Topics
in Twentieth-Century Literature, including Literary
and Critical Movements, Prominent Themes and
Genres, Anniversary Celebrations, and Surveys
of National Literatures**

Lawrence J. Trudeau

Project Editor



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Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism

Topics Volume

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- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author, work, or topic that is the subject of the entry.
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Black Mountain Poets

The following entry presents critical discussion of the Black Mountain Poets, a group of postmodern poets affiliated with Black Mountain College and its literary journal, the *Black Mountain Review*.

INTRODUCTION

Black Mountain College was located in Asheville, North Carolina, and operated from 1933 through 1957. Founded on the principle that artistic education was central to a liberal arts program, the college and its name would later be associated with a varied group of avant-garde, experimental poets who came to be known as the Black Mountain Poets. One of the most important writers associated with this group was Charles Olson, who outlined his ideas about poetry in his essay "Projected Verse," published in 1950. In this work Olson outlined a new way of creating poetry, a method which rejected conventional forms, structure, and meter, and which celebrated instead a natural, organic patterning of poetry based on the composer's determination of what was pleasing to his or her own ear. Olson served as the rector of Black Mountain College from 1951 through 1956, and thus had the ability to shape the curriculum according to his philosophy.

In 1953 Olson proposed the idea of a journal which would represent the nature of Black Mountain College's academic program. Guided by Olson, poet, editor, and publisher Robert Creeley took on the task of launching what would become the *Black Mountain Review*. In his capacity as a publisher Creeley had already begun releasing, through his own press, the works of some of the poets who would be associated with the Black Mountain school of poetry, including Olson. With the launch of the journal, these poets, many of whose work reflected Olson's views on poetry, had a regular vehicle to publish their work. Eventually, partly due to their common ideas regarding poetry composition and partly due to the fact that they collectively published their work in the *Black Mountain Review*, the group began to be viewed as a poetic school or even a movement. In his 1960 anthology titled *The New American Poetry*, Donald M. Allen designated this group of writers as the "Black Mountain School," categorizing and officially labeling them as such for the first time.

Critical discussions of the Black Mountain poets often focus on tracing the history of the Black Mountain School designation, and seek to find the common

ground upon which the work of these various poets is built. Robert Creeley has discussed his own role in the coalescing of the poets into a group, or school and has emphasized the significance of the *Black Mountain Review* in the shaping of the group. Lacy Schutz has also explored the roots of the Black Mountain group, and observed that in general the core group of poets is typically considered those Allen identified in his anthology. The most prominent of these include: Olson, Creeley, Robert Duncan, Denise Levertov, Paul Blackburn, and Larry Eigner. Schutz maintains that as the leader of the group Olson crafted a vision for a new form of poetry. In addition, Schutz has demonstrated the influence of the modernist, experimental approach of Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams on Olson. Anne Day Dewey, too, in her study of Black Mountain poetry, has examined the divergent theories of poetics shared by core Black Mountain members Olson, Creeley, and Duncan. Dewey also outlines the various avenues of analysis by which critics have approached the work of Black Mountain poetry, demonstrating that the critical reception individual members of the group have received is dependent upon whether, for instance, the group is defined by its adherence to Olson's views on form, by its postmodernist character, or by its status as post-World War II poetry. The designation of "Black Mountain poet" can be limiting, Dewey argues, and considering the various paths upon which the individual poets have embarked, is perhaps no longer relevant.

Sherman Paul has surveyed Olson's influential years at the college and studied the way World War II shaped his poetics. Paul additionally offers a detailed look at Olson's poem "The Kingfisher," demonstrating the way in which it reflects Olson's thinking regarding poetic form and structure. The work of Robert Duncan has been examined by critic Edward Halsey Foster in terms of its reflection of Olson's influence. Foster additionally finds that Duncan's poetry is characterized by the particular value Duncan placed on wisdom. Anne Day Dewey has examined both Olson's and Creeley's interest in the idea of place and the way this idea relates to the Romanticism of nineteenth-century poetry. In Dewey's view Olson and Creeley, like their peers Duncan and Levertov, rejected traditional poetic forms and subscribed to the notion that Romantic conventions of the past failed in their efforts to use poetry and language to integrate man and nature, to achieve harmony and balance. Similarly, R. P. Draper has explored the desire of these poets for such an integration. Draper's analysis of Black Mountain poetry and the similarities between

such poetry and the works of D. H. Lawrence and Ted Hughes is rooted in the tenets of Olson's philosophy of poetry as outlined in his essay "Projective Verse." Draper likewise considers the work of Duncan, Creeley, and Levertov in relation to Olson's views. All, in some way, Draper points out, touch on Olson's advocacy of adherence to natural rhythms and patterns, and desire for harmony and integration with nature.

REPRESENTATIVE WORKS

Paul Blackburn

The Dissolving Fabric (poetry) 1955

Robert Creeley

For Love: Poems 1950-1960 (poetry) 1962

Hello (poetry) 1976

Robert Duncan

The Years as Catches: First Poems (1939-1946) (poetry) 1966

Caesar's Gate: Poems 1949-50 (poetry) 1972

Larry Eigner

The World and Its Streets, Places (poetry) 1977

Denise Levertov

**Here and Now* (poetry) 1957

Hilda Morley

"For Constance Olson (January 1975)" (poetry) 1975

To Hold in My Hand: Selected Poems, 1955-1983 (poetry) 1983

Charles Olson

†*In Cold Hell, In Thicket* (poetry) 1953

The Maximus Poems (poetry) 1960

The Maximus Poems: IV, V, VI (poetry) 1968

The Maximus Poems, Volume Three (poetry) 1975

The Maximus Poems (poetry) 1983

*This collection contains the poem "A Silence"

†This collection contains the poem "The Kingfishers"

OVERVIEWS

Robert Creeley (essay date 1968)

SOURCE: Creeley, Robert. "Black Mountain Review." In *Was That a Real Poem & Other Essays*, edited by Donald Allen, pp. 16-28. Bolinas, Calif.: Four Seasons Foundation, 1978.

[In the following essay, originally published in 1968, Creeley explains the origins and development of the Black Mountain Review, and describes how the poets featured in this journal would later become known as the Black Mountain poets.]

In hindsight it is almost too simple to note the reasons for the publication of the *Black Mountain Review*. Toward the end of 1953 Black Mountain College—a decisive experimental school started in the early thirties by John Rice and others in Black Mountain, North Carolina—was trying to solve a persistent and most awkward problem. In order to survive it needed a much larger student enrollment, and the usual bulletins and announcements of summer programs seemed to have little effect. Either they failed to reach people who might well prove interested, or else the nature of the college itself was so little known that no one quite trusted its proposals. In consequence a summer workshop in pottery, which had among its faculty Hamada, Bernard Leach, and Peter Voulkos, found itself with some six rather dazzled persons for students. Whatever the cause—and no doubt it involves too the fact that all experimental colleges faced a very marked apathy during the fifties—some other means of finding and interesting prospective students had to be managed, and so it was that Charles Olson, then rector of the college, proposed to the other faculty members that a magazine might prove a more active advertisement for the nature and form of the college's program than the kind of announcement they had been depending upon.

This, at least, is a brief sense of how the college itself came to be involved in the funding of the magazine's publication. The costs, if I remember rightly, were about \$500 an issue, so that the budget for a year's publication would be about \$2000—hardly a large figure. But the college was in such tight financial condition that it could not easily find any money for any purpose, and so its support of the magazine, most accurately the decision of the faculty to commit such an amount to that purpose, is a deeply generous and characteristic act. Too, it's to be acknowledged that Olson's powers of persuasion were considerable.

The nature of the magazine itself, however, and the actual means of its publication, that is, literally its printing, are of another story which is really quite separate from the college itself. In the late forties, while living in Littleton, N.H., I had tried to start a magazine with the help of a college friend, Jacob Leed. He was living in Lititz, Pennsylvania, and had an old George Washington handpress. It was on that that we proposed to print the magazine. Then, at an unhappily critical moment, he broke his arm, I came running from New Hampshire—but after a full day's labor we found we had set two pages only, each with a single poem. So that was that.

What then to do with the material we had collected? Thanks to the occasion, I had found excuse to write to both Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams. I didn't know what I really wanted of them but was of course deeply honored that they took me in any sense seri-

ously. Pound very quickly seized on the possibility of our magazine's becoming in some sense a *feeder* for his own commitments, but was clearly a little questioning of our *modus operandi*. What he did give me, with quick generosity and clarity, was a kind of *rule book* for the editing of any magazine. For example, he suggested I think of the magazine as a center around which, "not a box within which / any item." He proposed that verse consisted of a constant and a variant, and then told me to think from that to the context of a magazine. He suggested I get at least four others, on whom I could depend unequivocally for material, and to make their work the mainstay of the magazine's form. But then, he said, let the rest of it, roughly half, be as various and hogwild as possible, "so that any idiot thinks he has a chance of getting in." He cited instances of what he considered effective editing, *The Little Review* and the *Nouvelle Revue Française* when its editor gave complete license to the nucleus of writers on whom he depended 'to write freely what they chose.' Williams in like sense gave us active support and tried to put us in touch with other young writers, as Pound also did, who might help us find a company. But with our failure to find a means to print the magazine, it all came to an abrupt end. I remember Pound's consoling me with the comment that perhaps it was wise for "the Creel" to wait for a while before "he highflyz as editor," but things seemed bleak indeed.

Happily, there was what proved to be a very significant alternative. Cid Corman, then living in Boston and having also a weekly radio program there called "*This Is Poetry*," had come to be a friend. I had heard the program, by some fluke, in New Hampshire, wrote him, was not long after invited by him to read on the program, and soon after we were corresponding frequently, much involved with senses of contemporary writers and writing. It was Cid, in fact, who got me in touch with Olson, by way of their mutual friend, Vincent Ferrini—who sent me some of Olson's poems, with his own, for possible use in the magazine that had not yet collapsed. In returning Olson's poems to Vincent, I made the somewhat glib remark that he seemed to be "looking for a language," and got thereby my first letter from Olson himself, not particularly pleased by my comment and wanting to discuss it further, like they say. The letters thus resulting were really my education just that their range and articulation took me into terms of writing and many other areas indeed which I otherwise might never have entered. But the point now is that Cid, once Jake Leed's and my magazine was clearly dead, undertook himself to publish a magazine called *Origin*. Significantly enough, its first issue includes some of the material I had collected—for example, Paul Blackburn's, whom I had come to know through Pound's agency—and features the work of Charles Olson, specifically the first of the *Maximus* sequence as well as other poems and prose.

Origin was, in fact, the meeting place for many of the writers who subsequently became the active nucleus for the *Black Mountain Review*. More than any other magazine of that period, it undertook to make place for the particular poets who later come to be called the "Black Mountain School." In its issues prior to 1954, and continuingly, it gave first significant American publication to Denise Levertov, Irving Layton, Robert Duncan, Paul Carroll, Paul Blackburn, Larry Eigner, myself and a number of others as well. Although I had, for example, published stories in the *Kenyon Review* and the *New Directions Annual*, neither place could afford me the actual company nor the range of my own work that *Origin*'s second issue provided. For me it was an acknowledgement I had almost begun to think impossible, and I am sure that Cid's consistent support of our writing has much to do with what became of it.

The point is that we felt, all of us, a great distance from the more conventional magazines of that time. Either they were dominated by the New Critics, with whom we could have no relation, or else they were so general in character, that no active center of coherence was possible. There were exceptions certainly. *Golden Goose*, edited by Frederick Eckman and Richard Wirtz Emerson, was clearly partisan to myself and also to Olson, and published my first book, *Le Fou*, and would have published a collection of Olson's, *The Praises*, but for a misunderstanding between him and the editors, when the book was already in proof. Both men were much involved with Williams, and made his example and commitment the center for their own. There were also other, more occasional magazines, as *Goad*—whose editor, Horace Schwartz, involved me in a useful defense of my interest in Ezra Pound, just that it helped clarify my own terms of value.

But, with the exception of *Origin*, and possibly *Golden Goose* also, only two magazines of that time, the early fifties, had finally either the occasion or the sense of procedure, which served as my own measure of the possibility. One, *Fragmente*, edited and published in Freiberg, Germany, by Rainer Gerhardt—whose acquaintance I was also to make through Pound's help—was an heroically ambitious attempt to bring back into the German literary canon all that writing which the years of the Third Reich had absented from it. Rainer and his wife, living in great poverty with two young sons, were nonetheless able to introduce to the German context an incredible range of work, including that of Olson, Williams, Pound, Bunting, and myself. I was its American editor but its literal activity was completely the efforts of Rainer and Renate. Their conception of what such a magazine *might* accomplish was a deep lesson to me. They saw the possibility of *changing* the context of writing, and I think myself that this maga-

zine, and also the small paperbacks they were able to publish, effectually accomplished this for present German poetry—despite the bitter fact of Rainer's early death.

In like sense, a group of young writers of various nationalities centered in Paris was of great interest to me. They were led by a lovely, obdurate and resourceful Scot, Alexander Trocchi, and included the British poet, Christopher Logue, and the brilliant American translator, Austryn Wainhouse. Others too were of equal interest, Patrick Bowles, for example, who translated the first of Beckett's French novels into English—and Richard Seaver, who was later to become a decisive editor for Grove Press. Again, what these men proposed to do with their magazine, *Merlin*, and the books which they also published with the help of the Olympia Press as Collection Merlin, was to change the situation of literary context and evaluation. I've given a brief, personal sense of my relation to Trocchi in a novel, *The Island*, where he figures as "Manus," and I was also invited by them to be an associate editor on the magazine—but by that time the funds necessary to continue publication of the magazine were not obtainable. But their translation of Genet and Beckett's work as well as their brilliant critical writing, which extended to political thinking as well as literary, made them an exceptional example of what a group of writers might do.

By 1954 my wife and I were already much involved with a small press called the Divers Press. We had moved from France to Mallorca, and had become close friends with a young English couple, Martin Seymour-Smith and his wife, Janet. It was Martin who first interested us in publishing books, since, as he pointed out, printing costs were exceptionally cheap on the island and so much might be done on a shoestring. But our initial venture together, the Roebuck Press, came a cropper because Martin's interests were not really decisively my own nor mine his. We did publish a selection of his poems, *All Devils Fading*, but our center was finally in writers like Olson (*Mayan Letters*), Paul Blackburn (*Proensa* and *The Dissolving Fabric*), Irving Layton (*In the Midst of My Fever*), Douglas Woolf (*The Hypocritic Days*), Larry Eigner (*From the Sustaining Air*), and, though he comes a bit later, Robert Duncan (*Caesar's Gate*). We also published Katue Kitasono's *Black Rain*, and it is a design of his that is used for the covers of the first four issues of the *Black Mountain Review* as well as another on the credits page. What I felt was the purpose of the press has much to do with my initial sense of the magazine also. For me, and the other writers who came to be involved, it was a place defined by our own activity and accomplished altogether by ourselves—a *place* wherein we might make evident what we, as writers, had found to be significant, both for ourselves and for that world—no doubt often vague to us indeed—we hoped our writing might enter.

To be published in the *Kenyon Review* was too much like being "tapped" for a fraternity. It was too often all over before one got there, and few if any of one's own fellow writers came too. Therefore there had to be both a press and a magazine absolutely specific to one's own commitments and possibilities. Nothing short of that was good enough.

Origin had already done, in some sense, as much as one could hope for, and I remember having doubts about either the use or the practicality of simply another magazine more or less "like" it. I certainly didn't want to compete with *Cid*. But one possibility did seem to me lacking in *Origin*, despite occasional notes and reviews, and that was the *ground* that an active, ranging critical section might effect. I wasn't thinking of criticism finally as judgment of whether or no this or that book might be deemed "good" or "bad." What I hoped for, and happily did get, was critical writing that would break down habits of "subject" and gain a new experience of context generally. If I have any disappointment in the magazine in retrospect, it's only that this part of it does not extend as far as I had hoped. Still, Jung's "The Mass & the Individuation Process" (in the 5th issue)—which I remember he sent to "The Black Mountain Review," which pun, unintentional I assume, was a delight—and Borges' "Three Versions of Judas" (in the 7th issue)—which I read with absolute seriousness, not realizing it was a "fiction"—are some instance of what I was after. But, and here I was much influenced by Olson, the possible *range* of such writing as we conceived of it was never fully demonstrated.

There have been various comments and summaries published with respect to the *Black Mountain Review's* activity as a little magazine. Most lively and helpful, I think, is Paul Blackburn's account which appears in *Kulchur* (Vol. 3, No. 10, Summer 1963), called "The Grinding Down." Among other things, he identifies the initials used by reviewers in the first four issues, and also the pseudonyms used for signature in some other instances. Too, Kent State University Library, in one of its bulletins, provides an accurate and useful bibliography together with a brief note by myself. But now I think it best that the pseudonyms stay pseudonyms, and that initials, if not recognized (I used three sets, for example), be part of the present reader's experience. Often I, or some friend I could quickly get hold of, had to fill blank pages, to manage our length of sixty-four pages, or subsequently the longer format of two hundred and twenty plus. I at times had nightmares of having to write the whole thing myself.

The contributing editors listed in the first issue conform to that sense Pound had earlier made clear: get a center of people you can depend on for consistently active contributions, otherwise you'll have nothing to build with. Olson was to prove that center almost single-

handedly, but Blackburn was also very helpful, with all manner of support including legwork around New York to get the magazine into stores as well as much sympathetic and practical hand-holding. Layton I had come to know through a Canadian mimeographed magazine, *Contact*, which many of us had been involved with as its contents will show. He had an intensive energy and obviously was restless with what was then the Canadian literary milieu. His brother-in-law, John Sutherland, editor of the *Northern Review*, no longer invited him to literary parties because Irving's conduct was too irascible. So he was an unequivocal cohort and wrote, happily, voluminous amounts of verse. If I remember rightly, I also asked others as well—in particular Paul Goodman, who answered he'd prefer being just a contributor, since his other commitments very possibly would not give him time to do more. Rexroth generously agreed although we had little information of each other beyond his own public figure. Less happily, by the time he'd read the first issue, he had realized his error and his withdrawal (as well as that of Paul Blackburn, whose reasons were happily less adamant) is noted at the back of the Fall 1954 issue along with a defensive comment by myself.

Many of the writers who became very decisive to the magazine are not so listed, however. Robert Duncan is very much one of these. His first contribution, sent at Olson's suggestion, was a poem I in turn suggested we print a section of—and Duncan's response was to the effect that if he *had* wanted a section of the poem printed, he *would* have sent it—and I learned much from him also. There was one very amusing confusion involved with a poem of his I did print, in the Fall 1954 issue, "Letters for Denise Levertov: An A Muse Ment." Apparently Denise, for some reason, took it as a parody on her own way of writing, and was thus hurt. And Olson too thought it was some kind of attack on him. I think that poor Duncan and myself were the only ones unequivocally to enjoy it, and it remains for me an extraordinary summary and *exempla* of contemporary possibilities in poetry.

Denise herself, Louis Zukofsky (whom I found thanks to Edward Dahlberg and also Duncan), Jonathan Williams, and Robert Hellman (a close friend first in France, who subsequently came to teach briefly at Black Mountain), all were of great help to me in that they were there to be depended on, for specific writing but equally, for a very real sense of the whole act's not being merely a whistling in the dark but something making a way. God knows one often doubted it. Holding to Pound's sense of letting at least part of the magazine seem wide open, I know I printed work at times that any of them must have been puzzled by. Some things I just liked, for example, Gautier's "The Hippopotamus," which appears in the 5th issue. I still do. However, I've never found anyone to share my pleasure in "The Goat

Man" by Harold Lee Drake, in the 6th issue. He wrote, to put it mildly, extraordinary prose—including one piece involved with masturbating by the seashore, which the condition of censorship in the fifties never permitted me to print. He was one of the contributors who came out of nowhere, and unhappily seems to have returned there, since I've never seen his work printed again.

Of contributors generally, I've defined, I think, the character of one group clearly evident throughout the magazine's publication. These are writers who have either come together earlier, in *Origin*, or who are "found" by the same nature of attention that *Origin's* preoccupations had effected. Louis Zukofsky would be one of these latter as would be also Edward Dahlberg. There are also "occasional" contributors, as Paul Goodman, and those who simply appear with no previous or necessarily continuing sense of relationship, like James Purdy. I think we were, possibly, the first magazine to print his work in America, and that was surely a pleasure. He had found us somehow, submitted the story, and I printed it. The same is true of Sherry Mangan's story (a curious echo from the twenties) in the 7th issue, or of Alfred Kreyborg's "Metaphysical Ballad" printed there as well.

But two other kinds of contributor were particularly significant. Thus far the relation to the college itself must seem the fact that it was paying for the magazine's publication, and that Olson was the rector of the college. Although Hellman, Duncan, and myself were briefly on the faculty, this was somewhat after the fact because the nature of the magazine was determined otherwise and really prior to that fact. But if those contributors are noted who were either students at the college at the time, or had recently been so, then a relation of the college to the magazine, and particularly to Olson's influence as a teacher, becomes very clear. First there is Jonathan Williams—who is certainly not a "student" at this point, but who is much interested in the college and in Olson particularly, as his own publishing (*Jargon*) makes clear. Look at the advertisements for his press in the various issues of the magazine, for further instance. Then there is Joel Oppenheimer, who had left the college not long before the publication of the first issue and so comes into its activity by that fact. Then Fielding Dawson—also absent at this point from the college, in the army in Stuttgart, but again much involved by relation to the college and so to the magazine also. Then there are those literally there: Edward Dorn, Michael Rumaker, and Tom Field. Dorn had published one poem in *Origin*, in an issue edited by Denise Levertov, and his story in the *Black Mountain Review* is, I think, his first published prose—and clear example of what is to be his extraordinary ability in that mode as well as in poetry. Michael Rumaker has his first publication of any kind in the magazine, with two stories I feel to be as fine as ever were published—in fact, "The