The Black Mountain School What came to be known as the Black Mountain School of poetry represented, in mid twentieth-century America, the crossroads of poetic innovation. The name of this poetic movement derives from Black Mountain College in North Carolina, an experimental college founded in 1933. By the time the poet and essayist Charles OLSON became its Rector in 1950, it had become a mecca for a larger artistic and intellectual avant-garde. Until it closed in 1957, the college was the seedbed for virtually all of America's later artistic innovations. A vast array of writers, painters, sculptors, dancers, composers and many other people involved in the creative arts passed through the college's doors as teachers or students.

The poets most often associated with the name Black Mountain are, primarily, Olson, Robert CREELEY and Robert DUNCAN, along with Denise LEVERTOV, Paul BLACKBURN, Paul Carroll, William BRONK, Larry EIGNER, Edward DORN, Jonathan Williams, Joel OPPENHEIMER, John WIENERS, Theodore ENSLIN, Ebbe Borregard, Russell EDSON, M.C. Richards, and Michael Rumaker (a few of whom never attended the college but are associated with the college group because of their poetic styles or their representation in certain literary magazines discussed below). Many other important intellectuals and artists were also involved in what amounted to an artistic revolution.

Today, Black Mountain poetry may seem to contain a great variety of styles and themes. Regardless, there are some common characteristics to be noticed in this poetry: the use of precise language, direct statement, often plain (even blunt) diction, and metonymy rather than metaphor or simile. These writerly tendencies evolved in reaction to earlier poetry that was strictly metered, end-rhymed, filled with aureate diction and monumental subject matter. The reaction by the Black Mountain poets was a continuation of a poetic revolution begun by the IMAGISTS and later the OBJECTIVISTS. In general, Black Mountain poets typically refrain from commenting on their personal appraisal of a scene evoked in a poem, and this strategy can even mean the avoidance of adjectives and adverbs. As Ezra Pound had pronounced early in the century (in describing the poetry of H.D.), poetry should be "laconic speech," "Objective," without "slither—direct," and containing "No metaphors that won't permit examination.-- It's straight talk." Besides its alignment with Imagism and later Objectivism, Black Mountain poetry can be said to descend, especially in its embrace of individualism, from such nineteenth-century New England writers as Henry David Thoreau and particularly Ralph Waldo Emerson. As Edward Foster has written, Emerson's essay "Self-Reliance" gave the many Black Mountain poets, "despite their radical differences in personality, sensibility, and general ambitions, a common apprehension about what a poem might achieve" (xiii). The poem could be an extension of themselves as persons, as individuals standing apart from the ideals of an orthodox past.

Philosophically, Black Mountain poetry also shares a view of reality—of the physical world and humanity's relationship to it—derived from scientific movements of its time, movements that contradicted the view of a stable and predictable universe set forth by Sir Isaac Newton and later Immanuel Kant. Olson, Creeley, Duncan and others were interested in the ideas of Albert Einstein, who formulated the theory of relativity, and Werner Heisenberg who postulated his theory of uncertainty relations, especially. Physical reality was relative to time, according to Einstein; according to Heisenberg, it was simply indeterminate and incomplete. Therefore, Creeley has argued,

The world cannot be "known" entirely. . . . In all disciplines of human attention and act, the possibilities inherent in the previous conception of a Newtonian universe—with its containment and thus the possibility of being known—have been yielded. We do not know the world in that way, nor will we. Reality is continuous, not separable, and cannot be objectified. We cannot stand aside to see it.
The reliance in Black Mountain poetry, and its "objectivist" forebears, on direct statement and metonymy is a symptom of this basic outlook on the world.: What is unknowable finally can nevertheless be beautiful. This poetry, then, poses a fundamental problem of perception. In "Love," an early poem by Creeley, there are the sure "particulars" such as "oak, the grain of, oak," and there are also, by contrast, "what supple shadows may come / to be here." These details hold within themselves a tension between the stable and the radical, the known and the continually evolving.

The literary magazines associated with the Black Mountain school, The Black Mountain Review, Origin and, to a lesser extent the San Francisco Review, were a haven for writers whose aesthetics and point of view were found to be unacceptable by the mainstream journals of the time. Indeed, it is within the issue of these magazines that the Black Mountain sensibility truly coalesces. Edited by Creeley and Cid CORMAN, respectively, the The Black Mountain Review and Origin published now well known figures such as (besides the poets named above) Jorge Luis Borges, William Burroughs (under the name of William Lee), Paul Celan, Judson Crews, René Daumal, Fielding Dawson, André du Bouchet, Katue Kitasono, Irving Layton, James MERRILL, Eugenio Montale, Samuel French Morse, James PURDY, Kenneth REXROTH, Hubert Selby Jr., Kusano Shimpei, Gary SNYDER, John TAGGART, Gael Turnbull, César Vallejo, Philip WHALEN, Richard WILBUR, and WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS. Later issues of Origin, in the 1960s, featured work by Louis ZUKOFSKY, Snyder, Zeami Motokiyo, Margaret Avison, Robert KELLY, Ian Hamilton Finlay, Turnbull, Corman, Duncan, Francis Ponge, Frank Samperi, Lorine NIEDECKER, André du Bouchet, Shimpei, Bronk, Albers and others.

The ars poetica of the Black Mountain movement is usually identified with Olson's 1950 essay "Projective Verse," published in Poetry New York, a magazine that preceded these others—Olson's fully defined formula for poetry being projective or open field verse. In this essay, Olson discusses the importance of composing poetry according the breath of the individual poet or speaker of a poem and not according to a predetermined set form of speech or verse. There are two aspects of a poem, he maintains:

the HEAD, by way of the EAR, to the SYLLABLE
the HEART, by way of the BREATH, to the LINE[.]

The breath of the poet "allows all the speech-force of language […]." Moreover, a poem should never have any slack or, as Olson puts it, "ONE PERCEPTION MUST IMMEDIATELY AND DIRECTLY LEAD TO A FURTHER PERCEPTION." Hence, the poet must "USE USE USE the process at all points" so that a perception can "MOVE, INSTANTER, ON ANOTHER." Perhaps the essence of what Olson is trying to say comes from Creeley's belief, as quoted by Olson in this essay, that "FORM IS NEVER MORE THAN AN EXTENSION OF CONTENT."
The openness of the poetry Olson advocated can be seen in Duncan's poem, "Often I Am Permitted to Return to a Meadow," which begins his volume of poetry entitled, fittingly, The Opening of the Field. In this poem Duncan is involved with the personal creative process and the bid for freedom that poetry (and implicitly Black Mountain poetry) makes possible; writing is a "place of first permission," Duncan asserts. The meadow referred to in the poem's title is possibly real, tangible, yet it exists, more importantly, "as if it were a scene made-up by the mind"; still, it is a place apart from the poem's persona and in fact it is "a made place, created by light / wherefrom the shadows that are forms fall." Duncan's vision of poetic reality is akin, it seems, to a classically Platonic view of the world in which ideal forms reside beyond human perception, with the things humanity can know similar to them but not perfectly the same, much as shadows of objects are like the objects themselves. The point here is that we suppose places we inhabit "as if […] certain bounds [could] hold against chaos" (emphasis added), and therefore the poem stresses how very delicate perception is, and underscores the individual's seeing.

Likewise, Olson creates, in his epic work The Maximus Poems, a towering epic persona, Maximus, who looks out upon a vast geography informed by a historical past. The singularity of this figure is meant to compare with the immensity of Olson's subject, the terrain beneath Maximus' feet grounded in Gloucester, Massachusetts, and the history beginning in ancient Greece and running up through a present American time. There is tangibility, as when Maximus says that there are "facts, to be dealt with"; on the other hand, he asks, "that which matters, that which insists, that which will last, / that! o my people, where shall you find it, how, where"? In Olson's work readers discover an astonishing sweep of history, a breadth of vision, and the eternal verities laid out before us—yet these truths are tried by Olson, tested, and finally undone. Olson is reconceiving both space (physical geography) and time (the history of his civilization) according the new paradigms set forth by Emerson and Thoreau, Einstein and Heisenberg. Yet this grasp doesn't neglect the eternally human condition, and accounts for death and suffering as well as triumph and splendor. Hence, in "The Kingfishers," he observes that human beings are capable of precision: "The factors are / in the animal and/or the machine […]"; they "involve [….] a discrete or

continuous sequence of measurable events distributed in time […]." All the same, Olson says that what endures is change itself, a theme he strikes at the poem's outset and reprises throughout. "What does not change / is the will to change." This concept is perceivable in all things: "hear, where the dry blood talks / where the old appetite walks […]."

Olson's point of view is echoed in Levertov's work. In her poem "Beyond the End" human destiny is constrained by natural forces, yet the point of it all is not merely to "'go on living' but to quicken, to activate, extend." The "will to respond" is a force unbounded by reason, and so we reside always "further, beyond the end / beyond whatever ends: to begin, to be, to defy." What stands out in both Levertov and Olson is the precise stipulation of limits and the recognition of something outside them, which can best be evoked with exacting language. This use of language is nicely exemplified by Joel Oppenheimer, who was a student of Olson, Creeley and others at Black Mountain College. Not only is his work precise, coming out of his student experience; it is also rhythmic according to the measure of a reader's breathing, as was stipulated in Olson's essay. Moreover, Oppenheimer's signature diction is for its time breathtakingly casual and candid, reflecting the social revolution in America that was to reach crisis proportions in the late 1960s. Oppenheimer's poetry is located in the moments of a daily life. In his poem "The Bath," the acts of living, so to speak, are simple, for instance the act of taking a bath. His lover's bathing, Oppenheimer finds, is a ritual albeit one unremarked upon but for his verse—and yet, he humorously points out, "she wants him" (the poem's persona thinks) "unbathed"; he is gratified by her desire. The routine of life is celebrated in the poem by this nexus between the two of them; there is "her continuous bathing. / in his tub. in his water. wife."

Black Mountain College was the soil for virtually all later experimental poetry in America and much of America's later-century art and music. Grounded in the poetry of Pound and Williams—as Creeley writes in his homage to Williams, "For W.C.W.," "and and becomes // just so"—as well as demonstrating great sympathy for the Objectivist poetry of Louis Zukofsky and the others of this school, the later Black Mountain writers continued a tradition of exact perception and an avoidance of metaphor, and of a celebration of the individual that would also emerge in BEAT poetry. The Black Mountain contribution to American poetry and poetics was not merely a new version of these other movements, but rather was original and arguably the pivotal moment in modern American poetic history.

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