The New Criterion

Notes & Comments September 1987

Black Mountain comes to Bard

by *Robert Richman*

On the symposium "Poetry" at Black Mountain College.

Rifle man of the reminiscences of the race and you enslave him.
—Edward Dahlberg in *Can These Bones Live*

From June 26-28, a conference on "Poetry at Black Mountain College: The Emergence of an American School of Poetics" was held at Bard College in Annandale-on-Hudson. Organized by the college's Edith C. Blum Art Institute in conjunction with its fine exhibition "The Arts at Black Mountain College,"[1] the conference consisted of seven sessions devoted to topics such as "Precursors of Black Mountain Poetry: William Carlos Williams and Ezra Pound" and "Is There a Black Mountain Poetry? An Open Forum," as well as readings by poets like Robert Kelly, Jonathan Williams, and Robert Creeley. Nearly all of the conference's twenty-six participants were affiliated with colleges or universities. In fact, ten of the speakers were associated—or once had been —with the State University of New York at Buffalo. The conference also featured a few cameo appearances by people who attended Black Mountain but managed to escape the academy. The star of this group was the popular novelist and journalist Francine du Plessix Gray.

To quote Michael Davidson, one of the conference participants, Black Mountain was "one of the greatest anti-institutions of the twentieth century." It was founded in 1933 by a group of dissenting Rollins College professors, and came to be seen as the premier example of progressive education in America, with an emphasis on creativity and the arts. As Mary Emma Harris reminds us in her catalogue of the exhibition, Black Mountain boasted a faculty that included—at one time or another—Joseph Albers, Merce Cunningham, Franz Kline, Buck-minster Fuller, Eric Bentley, Clement Green-berg, and Elaine and Willem de Kooning, among others. Except for Albers, who was there sixteen years, most of the faculty members had only a brief relationship with the college. Yet this did nothing to diminish the sense of excitement that attended such a daring educational experiment. The experiment itself ended in 1957, when Black Mountain's last rector, the poet Charles Olson (1910-1970), closed the place and sold the property to pay off the college's debts.

Yet here at Bard were professors from around the nation soberly discussing the iconoclastic, "projectivist" verse that thrived at Black Mountain under Charles Olson and attempting to make that verse into so much academic mincemeat. The irony of this exercise was lost on many—one speaker admiringly recalled Olson's advice to the poet Cid Corman that he decline an affiliation with Brandeis University—but not on all. Stephen Rodefer wondered if Olson "might have avoided [the conference] like the plague."

Olson's poetry was as uncompromising as the man himself. Taking off from the poetic precepts of Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams, Olson conceived of verse as a kind of sponge, open to whatever impinged on the consciousness. The classic projectivist poem, as Robert Bertolf described it during one of the sessions, is a "democratic language-event" which lets in "all sorts of information." As Olson wrote in his essay on "Projective Verse" (which Williams printed in his 1950 autobiography), "one perception must immediately and directly lead to a further perception." Here is a randomly chosen page from Olson's unfinished, postmodern sequence *The Maximus Poems*[2]:

> Strod the water's edge & the
> land as though there were some reason to
> do such a thing not going away any further
> to have his eggs than a rail does
>
> [Monday June 23rd

Perhaps the most succinct definition of the projectivist impulse came from Robert Creeley, a disciple of Olson's at Black Mountain and the unofficial dean of the projectivists (he is now Gray Professor of Poetry and Letters at suny Buffalo). Dilating on Olson's ideas, he said, "Form is never more than an extension of content"—that is, the thing perceived dictates the manner of speech. As another speaker, Charles Stein, pointed out, keeping "things in their natural juxtapositions" allowed the Olsonians to dispose with what they deemed to be excess Eliotic baggage. This baggage included ideas, symbols, rhyme, meter, syntax, and irony—anything that revealed a mind seeking to transform scenes and landscapes for the purpose of form or meaning. (Irony was especially galling to the Olsonians. In David Perkins's *History of Modern Poetry*, he remarks that irony "assumes a dissatisfaction with the prevailing condition," and that any complaint about prevailing conditions was, for the projectivists, rank heresy.) Reality—or, in the jargon of these poets, the "event" and its "energy"—was sovereign. The ideal writer of this poetry was, in the words of another speaker, a "breather moving among facts"—devoid of ideas and identity, and usually cut off from the historical and cultural past.

This stress on unadulterated "facts" at the expense of everything else has lost much of

the allure it had ten or twenty years ago.

This stress on unadulterated "facts" at the expense of everything else has lost much of the allure it had ten or twenty years ago. But even in the Sixties and Seventies, when projectivism came into vogue, it was never a very popular movement. The projectivists' wholesale rejection of ideas, subject matter, and the poetic ego, and the almost scientific attention they paid to syllables and "breath units," put them on the very margins of the poetic culture. So did their distortion, for their own ends, of the work of Pound and Williams. And so did their contention—heard more than once during the conference—that they have been the only true purveyors of an "American vernacular." The truth is, projectivist poetry is a specialty language that lives almost exclusively in colleges and graduate schools. And that, as Charles Olson would have been the first to maintain, is no life at all.

One of these academic outposts is Bard, where Robert Kelly, who studied privately with Olson in the Sixties, is professor of English. At the first session, on Friday evening, Kelly introduced Albert Cook, the man who invited Olson to suny Buffalo in 1963 when Cook was chairman of the English Department there. Cook's lecture was entitled "Projections of Measure: the Continued Synergies of Pound and Williams." Using phrases like "isochronic regularities" and "breath clusters," Cook sought to trace the "evolution of a measure" in Pound and Williams and its supposed exploitation by other poets. To this end, he supplied the audience with copies of thirty-one poems ranging from Catullus to Lorine Niedecker. Probably the hardest "convergence" to accept of the many Cook advanced was that of Creeley and Robert Frost. The only interesting part of Cook's lecture was his reading of poems by Olson, Charles Reznikoff, and Louis Zukofsky. For this Cook adopted an "ordinary" American accent which sounded for all the world like the voice of a retarded person. Yet at the same time he emitted each syllable as if the previous one didn't exist, which lent his voice the cadence of one of those computer recordings that supply the phone number when you dial information. Perhaps this jarring fusion of naturalness and artificiality was an example of the "Poundian juxtaposition" Olson set such great store by. Whatever it was, it was a far cry from the "cadences of normal voice" Cook professed to respect in the poet's work.

The following session, on Saturday morning, was called "The Influence of Olson, Duncan, and Creeley." Unfortunately, none of the four speakers—Donald Byrd, Charles Stein, Robert Bertolf, or Michael Palmer —addressed the question of influence in any systematic way. This refusal to nail down particulars of influence no doubt derives from the conviction, as Byrd put it, that there is no "philosophy" behind Black Mountain poetry."It's hard to be an Olsonian," he declared, because "there are no principles" and the poetry "is in no sense aesthetic." Each speaker—except for Charles Stein, whose talk was comparatively jargon-free—endeavored to furnish his subject with a scientific aura. Byrd discussed Poincare, the mathematician, at length, while Bertolf used locutions like "the organism arriving at articulation" (actually a phrase of Duncan's), which is the projectivists' way of saying "a speaking man." Why reducing human beings to "organisms" is permitted while the "clipped hedges and mowed lawns" of Eliot's formalist followers are not—the

phrase is Michael Palmer's—remains a mystery.

Palmer did, however, make an interesting revelation during his talk, which consisted chiefly of readings from letters by Olson and Creeley. He related how Olson tried to break what he called the "elegiac strain" in Duncan's poetry. Since this strain is one of the saving graces of Duncan's verse, one can only be thankful Olson didn't succeed.

The third session, held on Saturday afternoon, was given over to reminiscences by writers who taught or studied at Black Mountain. The novelist and short-story writer Michael Rumaker remembered the freedom of the place, Francine du Plessix Gray recalled the "tradition of disobedience" she acquired there, and *Village Voice* columnist Joel Oppenheimer spoke of the communal style of life he was introduced to at the college: "We gave, we took, we shared," he said. He then offered a telling anecdote. Apparently while at Black Mountain, Oppenheimer read a poem to Olson containing the expression, "Rosa eats it." At first Olson mistook the phrase for Latin, which presumably would have meant an automatic demerit for Oppenheimer since the merest acknowledgement of a foreign culture went against Olson's principles. (To this day, projectivists refuse to pronounce the names of foreign authors correctly.) After Oppenheimer spelled out the phrase for his mentor, the older poet asked his student what it meant in *English*. Among other things, the episode demonstrates just how removed from the world was the man who claimed to be so attuned to it.

The highlight of the fourth session, given on Saturday evening and entitled "The Black Mountain Poets: Exchanges with Younger Poets," was a talk by Ed Sanders, who had delivered the annual Charles Olson Memorial Lecture at suny Buffalo in 1983. Sanders, former lead singer of The Fugs and author of *The Complete Sex Poems of Ed Sanders*, among other works, is the closest thing the projectivists have to a stand-up comic. He spoke of how Black Mountain, which he never attended, represented the "zen concept of the direct transmission of mind." But the place was not without flaws, he informed us. As good as the college was intellectually and spiritually, it offered none of its employees a dental plan or pension. "Albers didn't have a pension," Sanders lamented. Sanders pointed out that today's academic institutions continue to deny their professors satisfactory benefits. "Look around at the poets of America and you see a lot of bad teeth," he declared. Despite such drawbacks, however, Sanders advised the young members of the audience to "crawl through ossified puke to get to where the best minds of your generation are."

The first session on Sunday morning consisted of readings by "Four Later Black Mountain Poets": Donald Byrd, Duncan McNaughton, Thomas Meyer, and Charles Stein. The best reader—or, rather, the one who most ably represented the Black Mountain impulse—was Stein. The Williamsian "plain" scenes of Stein's poetry were invigorated by the contrast in his recitation between stressed and unstressed syllables. Thomas Meyer's love poetry showed a gift for language, too, but what he was doing among the Mountain Men was a puzzle. After this was a forum called "Is There a Black Mountain Poetry?" Richard Blevins, professor of English at the University of Pittsburgh at Greensburg, opened his remarks with: "Black Mountain College is

dead. Long live Black Mountain poetry." His explanation for the persistence of projectivist poetry was that there is still a frontier, an American West, for everyone to "project" themselves into in their unceasing search for data. His answer to the forum's question, he declared, "is Edward Dorn's: Where is the prairie? I mean, how many leaves of grass would feed a herd of buffalo for a week?" "It's a very wide and broad avenue into the mountains," he assured us. David Matlin, a poet and playwright, also focused on buffalo in his commentary. For no apparent reason, he reported that in the 1860s buffalo were shipped down the Mississippi in barges. One couldn't help wondering if Matlin and Blevins were slyly alluding to the eventual spreading of the Olsonian gospel "down the Mississippi" and across the nation from its rural outpost at suny Buffalo, where, one might say, the projectivist buffalo now mainly roam. George Quasha, the publisher of Station Hill Press and a poet himself, offered the most eloquent response to the question. He said: "There was an event; the nature of that event haunts us in various ways," and this is the legacy of Black Mountain. "It was a way of being," he said, "a mode of attention" that provided people with a new way of looking at the world.

A young man in the audience who spoke up during the discussion period following the Blevins-Matlin-Quasha panel hit on what was perhaps the greatest irony of the proceedings—an irony more disturbing, finally, than that of a radical poetic movement finding a haven in the academy. This was the historicizing of a movement whose central philosophical assumption is that the present moment is the only thing that counts. (Quasha had actually touched on the issue as well in his recollection of working on the galleys of *The Maximus Poems* with Olson. How can you ever finish correcting galleys, Olson and Quasha wondered, if yesterday's perceptions are always being superseded by today's?) To discuss the past goes against the aesthetic of immediacy the projectivists espoused. "The past exists to be forgotten," Olson was quoted as saying.

The truth is, this aesthetic of immediacy—which is really an aesthetic of forgetfulness—was evident throughout the three-day conference. In the six sessions I attended (I missed Creeley's Sunday afternoon reading), one could count on one hand the references that were made to the world beyond the lecture hall. If it weren't for a glancing reference to aids, a mention of Nicaragua, and Albert Cook's slap at today's young formalists ("traditionalists-come-lately," he called them), one could have very easily come away from the conference thinking the last twenty years had never occurred. Today's Black Mountain poets, none of whom possess half the raw talent of Olson, have taken the cultural shortsightedness that was his major flaw and magnified it into a great, willful blindness.

1. "The Arts at Black Mountain College," organized by Mary Emma Harris, will be on view at the North Carolina Museum of Art, Raleigh, North Carolina, until October 4, and at New York University's Grey Art Gallery from October 25 through December 19. A catalogue with the same name, written by Mary Emma Harris, has been published by the MIT Press (650 pages, $50). Go back to the text.
2. The complete sequence, edited by George F. Butterick, was published in 1983 by the University of California Press, who will also issue Olson's *Collected Poems* in November {609 pages, $45). Go back to the text.

Robert Richman's book of poems, *Voice on the Wind*, was recently published by Copper Beech Press.

This article originally appeared in The New Criterion, Volume 6 Number 1 , on page 85

https://newcriterion.com/issues/1987/9/black-mountain-comes-to-bard