

Introduction

The Black Mountain poets were a group of mid 20th century innovative writers associated with Black Mountain College, an experimental liberal arts college founded in 1933 near Asheville in North Carolina which became in the early 1950s, a centre of anti-academic poetic revolt. Various avant-garde poets were drawn to this school through the years, chiefly Charles Olson, Robert Duncan, Denise Levertov, Jonathan Williams, Ed Dorn, Paul Blackburn, Joel Oppenheimer and Robert Creeley. Donald Allen's anthology *The New American Poetry 1945 – 1960* (1960) identifies Black Mountain Poets as one among the five leading group of poets like the San Francisco Renaissance Poets, the Beat Generation, the New York Poets and a group of like minded poets like Philip Whalen, Gary Snyder and Le Roi Jones. Black Mountain College was the core of artistic American avant-garde by the time Charles Olson became its rector in 1950 and it was the seedbed for all American artistic innovations until it closed down in 1956. It was a unique educational experiment for the artists and writers who were behind this innovative venture.

The term Black Mountain is often ambiguous and it needs more explanation with its wide-ranging motives in different branches of learning

even though people of diverse talents were unified under one banner – “The Black Mountain College”. In the context of arts, it evoked mixed responses. The College had shifting educational ethics and artistic visions. But the poets associated with this group could identify a common platform in the theory of “composition by field” based on quantum physics in which “the poem was understood to record the moment by moment interaction of conscious mind with forces in its environment” (Dewey iv). Charles Olson, the pioneer of the group, developed this theory in his essay “Projective Verse” (1950) and they engaged in poetic composition and theoretical discussions of free verse measure. These poets grew into maturity through their active confrontation with the contemporary New Critical writers of the mid twentieth century. They could secure a dominant position in the mainstream writing and thus transform the legacy of modernism to post modernism.

Olson’s essay “Projective Verse” is an extension of Ezra Pound’s interest in the historical ‘open’ poetry as illustrated in *Cantos* and William Carlos Williams’ hard objectivist lyrics which encourages a poetics of visual clarity and metrical experimentation. Olson expands the ideas of these writers with a stress on poetic line as an evidence of physiological and emotional contour. He advocated the theory that a poem ought to record the working of the conscious mind without the lapse of a single moment abiding with its environment. His interest was to revive poetic

language by his “composition by field”, in which poetic form proceeds directly from subject matter and each line is a register of momentary attentions. Olson’s belief was that the traditional, metrical way of writing poems left the poet little possibility for developing a historical or critical “stance toward reality beyond the poem,” a stance he wanted to regain, as he felt Pound had done in the *Cantos*. He explored his stance in his *The Maximus Poems* (1983), a long series of poems dwelling on the separation of individual from locale due to the ill effects of entrepreneurial capitalism.

The graphic appearance of Olson’s poems, with lines scattered all over the surface of the page, experimenting with brackets, lines sometimes broken and at other times intended with his own characteristic spellings, leaving even pages blank in between lines, publishing books ‘unpaginated’ (For example, *Archaeologist of Morning* 1973), coining of new words: *pejorocracy* (in “I Maximus of Gloucester, to You”), *borning* (in “The Story of an Olson, and Bad Thing”), idiosyncracies of spelling: *spiritschool* (for spiritual in “The Story of an Olson, and Bad Thing”), *biz-i-ness* (for business in “The Story of an Olson, and Bad Thing”) are vivid expressions of his projective stance. In a visually perceivable way, his poems present the turmoil in his mind during the time of his composition. Olson’s essay reaffirms the advantage of projective or open poems and Robert Creeley admits:

This would seem to me to be a principal advantage of Pro Verse, OPEN FIELD, that: the objects which occur, at the moment of recognition (you had composition – how abt that / same dawn thing), can because of, THE SPEECH, BACK IN (the energy), be treated exactly as they do occur (in their effects, that is, on us, daily, can keep their confusions.

(Butterick, *Olson-Creeley* 60)

A poet will be seeking for a fresh and individual arrangement for each poem while he composes in open form. Such a poem will basically lack a rhyme scheme and the poet has to rely on some other means to sustain the attention of the readers. Open form offers innate possibilities and a poet must possess utmost skill to compose with it successfully. If the poet succeeds, his arrangement of words will exactly convey what he really intended to say. Words will appear at ease in their positions and will flow spontaneously as they are in a sonnet or any other metrical composition. Poetry in ‘open form’ is a modern version of the French *vers libre* (free verse) which indicates the kind of verse free of rhyme and metre. ‘Organic Poetry’ and ‘composition by field’ can also be considered as its substitute names. Olson’s influential essay “Projective Verse” propounds the theory that a poem is both energy construct and energy discharge and the poets compose by listening to their own breathing. The various poetic devices like the figures of speech and metrical elements like rhythm are mere

distractions in the real understanding of a poem. Thus he advises the poets to explore the different possibilities, a machine, “a typewriter” can offer. Even the Mayan hieroglyphs are capable of imparting the exact feelings of a poet’s mind while he is in the process of composing a poem.

The last fifty years has witnessed an incredible growth in the academic attention being paid to the writers associated with Black Mountain College. Since its closure in 1956, articles have regularly appeared in various scholarly journals and a growing number of books have been devoted to the life and works of these writers. Prominent among the articles are Marjorie Perloff’s “Charles Olson and the ‘Inferior Predecessors’: ‘Projective Verse’ Revisited” (*ELH* 40, 1973), Gilbert Sorrentino’s “Black Mountaineering” (*Poetry* 116, 1970), Donald Wesling’s “A Bibliography on Edward Dorn for America,” (*Parnassus* 5, Spring 1977), Fielding Dawson’s “On Olson, with Reference to Guy Davenport,” (*Sagetrieb* 1, Spring 1982), Ling Chung’s “Predicaments in Robert Creeley’s *Words*” (*Concerning Poetry* 2, 1969) and Samuel Moon’s “Creeley as Narrator” (*Poetry* 108, 1966). In 1974, *Boundary 2: A Journal of Postmodern Literature* devoted a twin number of issues featuring Olson with some twenty four articles. *Olson: The Journal of the Charles Olson Archives* also began publishing in the same year. Martin Duberman’s book, *Black Mountain: An Exploration in Community* (1972) is an invaluable document of the College’s eventful history. *A Guide to the Maximus*

Poems of Charles Olson (1978) by George F. Butterick provides scholarship useful for reading these complex and allusive poems. Thomas F. Merrill's *Charles Olson: A Primer* (1982) is an attempt to place Olson within the literary and scholarly spectrum of the fifties and sixties using Black Mountain College as the point of reference.

Several doctoral studies have been carried out in this area and even now serious research is being undertaken by scholars. *The Transformation of Field in Black Mountain Poetry: Poetic Agency and Public Authority in a Culture of Mass Communication* (Stanford University, 1994) by Anne Day Dewey shows the development of Black Mountain Poetry to represent a variety of responses like comprehension, accommodation and resistance to uses of language in a culture of mass communication. Steven A. Mermelstein's *The Creature Self: A Study of Charles Olson's The Maximus Poems* (New York University, 2001) deals with the problematic relationship between self and structure. *Maximus IV, V, VI and Charles Olson's Special View of History* (Columbia University, 1997) by Margaret Jan Bender examines Olson's essay "The Special View of History" and the role it plays in the second volume of *Maximus Poems* and *Maximus IV, V, VI*. William G. McPherson's dissertation *Charles Olson: Towards Another Humanism* (University of New Mexico, 1976) responds to the challenge of providing a systematic account to the idea that Olson's interest in intellectual matters does not exist independent of his poetic performance.

Daniel Rex Featherstan's *Radical Law: Anarchism and Myth in the Poetry of Robert Duncan* (University of Arizona, 2006) investigates the relationship between religious and political radicalism in the poetry and poetics of Robert Duncan. *The Archetypal Feminine in the Poetry of Denise Levertov* (Kansas State University, 1978) by Sandra Jean Block focuses on the symbolic connotations of Levertov's poetry with reference to its source and artistic implications. Green Westervelt Macallister's *Incarnational Poetics of Denise Levertov* (University of South Carolina, 1998) is an attempt to unfold the central mystery of Levertov's career as she wrestles with how best to use the gift of words entrusted to her.

This research aims at presenting 'openness' as the pivotal motif in the study of an influential movement of the twentieth century, the Black Mountain College which opened up varied avenues for the later experimental avant-garde writers. It discusses how 'openness' appears as a theory of poetry and an aesthetic which could dismantle the 'closeness' of the then prevailing poetics and poetry. 'Openness' being synonymous with Olson's projective theory, this work focuses him in detail along with a few more writers who have made substantial contribution within this framework. The Black Mountain Poets deserve attention along with the mainstream American writers and their fame is yet to be identified within the literary circles especially in India. Their theories are less heard and poems less read even among the institutions of higher learning here. The aim of

this research is to bring to light the poetic innovations of the major avant-garde poets associated with this group. The methodology employed is to look at these poets through their literary history, poetic theories and their poems as Black Mountain College was quite experimental in its outlook capable of standing apart from the contemporary educational institutions.

Chapter I will attempt to analyze the prominence of these writers with specific focus on the College's literary history. The approach in this chapter will unveil the eventful history of this innovative institution from the very day of its inception in 1933 until its closing down in 1956. It gives an elaborate account of the College's both literary and historic facets. The topics discussed include the incidents that led to the formation of this innovative institution, the kind of education offered there, how this college was different from the traditional institutions, why it opted to be an experimental one, how its focus shifted from visual arts to literature, along with the transformations that cropped up under the influence of Charles Olson and other Black Mountain poets. It also exposes the complex cultural crisis that led to its final closing down.

The second chapter will study Black Mountain's poetic theories with particular emphasis on Charles Olson, the pioneer among this group. Olson's major ideas on how a projective or open poem comes into being, why a poem is considered to be "an energy construct and energy release" and his concepts on 'composition by field' poetic principles as depicted in

“Projective Verse” are discussed in detail. The effort is to bring in Olson’s literary background and his major influences on poetry, and also to introduce his essay “Human Universe” and *Mayan Letters*. In addition to Olson’s theories, the poetic presumptions of a few more Black Mountain poets, namely Robert Creeley, Robert Duncan, Edward Dorn and Denise Levertov are presented here. Robert Creeley hardly ever attempted any serious defenses of his poetic theories and practice and he was more committed to poetry than any literary criticism or theory. A poem was more of a social obligation and the language of poetry was the echo of the greater language in which the universe was written to Robert Duncan. He was not a blind follower of Olson’s ‘composition by field’ theory, but made poems which were open and at the same time there remained enough space for closed elements. Like other members of the group, Edward Dorn also experimented with free verse that evades regular metrics and rhyme. His free verse was loose structured and the lines are composed in such a way that they appear to magnify the content of the poem. This chapter also studies Denise Levertov’s views on poetry.

Chapter III aims to analyze in detail Charles Olson’s major work *The Maximus Poems*. The study will trace Olson’s motto behind the composition of such a larger volume of poems and his major influences – William Carlos Williams and Ezra Pound. It will attempt to present the disorder prevailing in Gloucester. This chapter develops with the study of

selected poems from the *Maximus* series and all the three volumes are dealt with separately discussing instances of projectivism. It will also help the readers to scrutinize to what extent they can agree with Olson about his superior position over the modern writers and how *The Maximus Poems* gains incomparability.

Chapter IV will study Olson's selected shorter poems. The poems written during the early part of his poetic career are indebted to Pound and Williams, still he is interested in keeping his integrity. The study will illustrate Olson's beginning as an 'amateur' poet to the phase when he achieves artistic refinement. Along with discussing some of Olson's major influences, his disagreement with poets namely T.S. Eliot will also be emphasized. Beginning from "The Kingfishers" this chapter will examine different poems projecting Olson's innovative techniques and their implications. The study will also explicate the leading themes of his collection of poems.

Chapter V is will attempt to study selected poems of a few more pioneers of this group – Robert Creeley, Robert Duncan, Denise Levertov, Edward Dorn and Joel Oppenheimer. Creeley is historically associated with the Black Mountain College and to him poetry comprises fragments capable of forming a whole unit and the complete poem is the form that the experience on poet insists. This concept will be studied in detail. This chapter will also unfold dominant traits of Robert Duncan's poetry that is

dominated by the fallacies of projectivism. He believes in the Black Mountain's poetic concept which is open in exploring all available resources against one unified theme. This chapter will clarify Denise Levertov's various themes along with her experiment in free verse. It will also highlight Edward Dorn as a typical Black Mountain Poet. A student of Black Mountain College, Joel Oppenheimer's poetic style and a few poems will also be discussed.