

CHAPTER 5

The Fellow Black Mountaineers

Other than Charles Olson, the poets most often associated with the Black Mountain are Robert Creeley, Robert Duncan, Denise Levertov, Edward Dorn, Joel Oppenheimer, Paul Blackburn, John Wieners, Jonathan Williams, Paul Carroll, M. C. Richards and Michael Rumaker. Even though a few of these poets never attended the College, they are associated with this group because of their poetic styles or representation in some collaborative literary journals or magazines. This chapter studies the first five writers who often experimented with Olson's principles.

Robert Creeley is historically affiliated to Black Mountain Poets, and he adheres to their concept of poetry which is open in exploring all available experiences against one unified theme. Among the company of contemporary American poets, Creeley stands as one who thinks carefully in the process of composing a poem, specifically in terms of what poetic diction can and cannot achieve. Creeley's writings show great affinities with several precursors of modernism, but he is least influenced by the sensory observation of William Carlos Williams and Zukofsky. He follows a minimalist and paired-down style, and thus, keeps away from the lush

extravagant imagery and metaphors of poets like Wallace Stevens. Now he is considered as a central figure in American Literature.

Creeley became famous as a poet and versatile writer after his association with the legendary Black Mountain group. He shares a common view of metrics as expressed by Olson in his "Projective Verse". The first part of Olson's essay comprises of his letters written to Creeley during the initial phase of their friendship. A key point that Creeley finds in Olson is the notion that "time stands still in a poem, both in its creation by the poet and in its re-creation by the reader or listener" (Ford 32). Both these writers assert that poetry is not something that continues with time from point to point or image to image, but something composed of parts forming a whole, the whole poem being the form that the experience on poet demands. It is similar to a line which is present only as a physical unit of measure; physical in the sense that breathing is physical and also intimate as speaking is an intimate affair, and the rhythmic patterns of the lines determined by the intelligence and feeling of the poet. For Creeley, such a poet works on the field and not through sequence and consequence. Olson's theory is that one perception must lead to another perception, while for Creeley, the poem normally possesses one perception under a delicate point of suspended time.

Many poets either share Creeley's poetic concerns or admire him. He first came to poetry during his years at Harvard and his first poems

were published in *The Harvard Advocate* and *The Wake*. He established himself as a major writer during his stay at Majorca between 1952 and 1955, and his contact and living with the people of the Black Mountain College. Charles Tomlinson, the British poet and artist, was interested in introducing the Black Mountain Poets to English readers, and in 1964, he published a short anthology in the 1964 issue of *The Review: A Magazine of Poetry and Criticism*. The poets such as Olson, Zukofsky, Robert Duncan, Gary Snyder, Ed Dorn, Jonathan Williams, Paul Blackburn, Allen Ginsberg et al. were included in this collection. Black Mountain's magazine, *The Origin*, endowed them with a reliable forum. When asked about the common characteristics of the Black Mountain College in one of the interviews, Creeley commented, "I'd almost say – the loner quality each seems to have. There really isn't a common idiom, so to speak ... I think there was a common feeling that verse was something given one to write, and that the form it might then take was intimate with fact" (Wagner, "A Colloquy" 86). Creeley was against all sorts of literary establishment, and his "antiestablishment penchant" was vigorous during his stay at the school. *The Black Mountain Review* was the result of his genuine effort to publish the writers who were deliberately ignored by the establishment.

Creeley's poetic achievement is often the subject of critical attention but hardly any attempt has been made to trace the development of his recurrent themes, the alterations of his poetic posture, various facets of

organization and his techniques in stylistics. His major volumes of poems include *For Love: Poems, 1950-1960* (1962), *Words* (1967), *Pieces* (1969), and *A Day Book* (1972). Creeley highlights the difficulties of Louis Zukofsky's works in *Contexts of Poetry: Interviews, 1961-1971* and such difficulties are representative of Creeley's own "high strung version of meditative poetry" that poses for the reader: "It is difficult to follow a man when he's thinking very closely. And it's extremely difficult to follow him when he's using all the resources that he has developed or inherited regarding the particular nature of words as sound" (*Collected Essays* 18).

One peculiar aspect of Creeley's poetry is his use of broken 'nervous' lines that express his mood of anxiety. In his earlier poems, such frantic sound nerves commented on their thematic emphasis. His personal problems, especially his disappointment in love, are communicated through his cryptic poems and he does not intend the reader to comprehend his varied thoughts completely, but just let them to overhear something, not to understand everything. His posture is merely pretence, and he often fails to hide his human urge for a loving relationship with his wife and satisfaction from his indebtedness to poetry. His isolated stance could not offer any solution to his ailing heart when his first marriage failed. *For Love: Part II* is a collection of tension filled poems which Creeley confronts his feelings and emotions directly, followed by his self criticism in his betrayal of vulnerability in public. The later poems in *For Love* are his expression of

feelings about love in a very plain straightforward manner. In this volume, Creeley is an impartial spectator of his own life and he acknowledges his involvement with it.

Initially, Creeley was known as “a poet of love and hate – as a poet of the fragile point of contact between people” (Ford 73), and in many of his writings; he examines the uncertain edges of human bondages. Peter Davidson comments, “Creeley has a subtle, almost feminine sensibility, and the best of his poems are those dealing with the intricacies that exist between men and women” (85). He is a man of immediate personal relationships among his lovers and friends; he maintained his identity as an ordinary man. He was more concerned with personal relationships and poetic elements like landscape, weather, architecture and human appearances served only as backdrops. He was quite open in his treatment of love and was honest in his attitude towards it. *For Love* is significant with the way the poems work and not with what they have to convey. Creeley carries the same technique with the subsequent volumes of *Words* and *Pieces*. Robert Duncan could comprehend the importance of Creeley’s poetry fully and he placed them in the long tradition of love poetry.

Creeley explicitly describes his own version of the world as he sees it in his first published poems collected in *For Love*. It is “a world without substance and without meaning, a world devoid of all except – and this ‘except’ is vital because his poetry can be seen primarily as an

amplification of this ‘except’ – human relationships” (Ford 76). Creeley’s endeavour is to make a thorough study of the double nature of this aspect of human relationships, that, on the one hand, it is the duty of the individual to safeguard himself against the void, and on the other, it is evident that such relationships are mixed with pain and suffering. “The Immoral Proposition” puts this bluntly and makes a follow-up with finer distinctions. Creeley sets the lure of the “dispassionate, speculative stance” against the item to be perceived for active participation. The poet’s central theme here is “human relationships”.

If you never do anything for anyone else
you are spared the tragedy of human relation-

ships. If quietly and like another time
there is the passage of an unexpected thing:

to look at it is more
than it was. God knows

nothing is competent nothing is
all there is. The unsure

egotist is not

good for himself. (*Selected Poems* 10)

The first two lines, plus the first syllable in the third line, breaks relationship into two and in the later part, the “unsure / egotist” is also broken. Creeley deliberately breaks relationships, and the focus is on “ships” like “relationships” which are unpredictable in their ways and movements. The break also summarizes Albert Camus, the French novelist, dramatist and essayist, who addressed the isolation of an individual in alien universe and the estrangement of the individual from himself; and Jean Paul Sartre – the exponent of existentialism who propounded the philosophy acclaiming the freedom of the individual, in a very simple manner. The second assertion appears as less assertive and less confident, but still consistent with the first statement. Sections three and four appear to be contradictory with each other, and thus, heightening the need of confidence. The usage “unsure egotist” is somewhat ambiguous since the poet witnesses the world only in terms of relations, and since relationships are unpredictable, they are painful sometimes. Creeley retreats into Paul Valery’s assertion of “Monsieur Teste” (an almost disembodied intellect who knows but two values, the possible and impossible) posture to safeguard his vulnerability that permits him to escape from this material world and to be reborn as one having apparent domination above it. The “unsure egotist” is the poet himself who makes efforts to be in harmony

with this world and also the one trying to be in harmony with his obligations to this world.

Creeley's quest is to attain a personal attitude that can enable him to take the world in his own terms. His "essentially self-centered poems record his attempt to maintain a sense of self-worth in the face of often threatening realities" (Edelberg 25). The poet sustains a cool, passive response to apparent hostility in "The Dishonest Mailman" and it can be considered as an introduction to his defiance. The poet's tone is used to defend his statement and in this course, he makes his comments on the poet and the world around him.

They are taking all my letters, and they

Put them into a fire.

I see the flames, etc.

But do not care, etc. (*For Love Poems* 29)

It is not clear why his letters arouse such public anger and whether the poet possesses necessary "courage" to overcome the crisis. The poet uses very casual diction highlighted with "etc's" in a highly pompous manner. He is expected to possess supreme self-motivation, a philosophical perception in analyzing things and at least a polished way of saying "I don't care, etc." "This is something" directly emerges from "I don't care", "the poem supreme" and "courage necessary"; unfortunately the line takes a

downward turn, with a defenseless “quite different”. All the pretense and sophistication is exposed, revealing the mailman does care to what happens to the letters but not sure whether to admit everything frankly. Creeley’s earlier “relationship poems” are his desperate attempts with an instinctive awareness that one should be prudent enough to protect himself against all disasters in the process. His stand is very fragile and what link him with others are his weak relationships. Even in his concept of the function of poetry, he finds himself as a weak link with others.

The implicit conflict prominent with the discrete intelligence ruminating on its own complexities and the human response that faces the awful contingencies of human life are predominant when Creeley deals with women in his poems. In “The Whip”, Creeley is a person caught between the “art domesticity dilemma” with respect to two women. The poem is about a restless husband and his unsusceptible wife, with his peculiar fantasy of associating “another woman”. The poem begins with a promise that makes his total involvement with the act – “I spent a night turning in bed” (*Selected Poems* 14). But appositional phrases that follow are a matter of concern and frustration – “my love was a feather, a flat / sleeping thing” (*Selected Poems* 14). The last lines of the poem are in the form of an ambiguous statement:

she put

her hand on

my back, for which act
 I think to say this
 wrongly. (*Selected Poems* 14)

It is an expression of the poet's confusion, and the unhappiness he experiences, once he feels himself lonely.

Changes were visible in Creeley's poetry during the later part of the 1950s. Creeley, during an interview with David Ossman in 1961 said that his broken lines were the result of his broken emotions (Ossman 59-60). Once his emotions were less broken, he was quite relaxed and more at ease in his world of poetry. He wrote "For Love Part 2" as his reply to the "disordering collapse" of his first marriage. Creeley has the revelation that there is not anything outside in which he can have the absolute trust. He has the immediate realization that he is basically his own. Five years later, after satisfactorily finding a solution to the question posed in "The Whip", he wrote "The Wife". His answer was that he could have the poetic muse and the domestic woman at the same time.

I know two women
 and the one
 is tangible substance,
 flesh and bone

The other in my mind

occurs.

She keeps her strict

proportion there. (*For Love Poems* 154)

“The Flower” is one among Creeley’s memorable lyrics in Part 2. It is a revelation of his open, ongoing, all persuasive mental affliction which qualifies his complacent attitude that was prevailing in the earlier part of his poetic career.

I think I grow tensions

like flowers

in a wood where

nobody goes. (*For Love Poems* 96)

The background of the poet’s meditation is an isolated wood and it becomes a transformed place of the poet’s “self consciousness”. The flower is a matter of tension for him and once it matures, adds to his burden.

Pain is a flower like that one,

like this one,

like that one,

like this one (*For Love Poems* 96)

The above stanza “testify to his verbal stamina in the face of anxiety which executes itself and perpetuates itself with artless delicacy, as represented by the flower” (Edelberg 35). John Constable’s description of Creeley’s

poems in *For Love* is significant in this respect: “Creeley’s best poems inhabit that area of tension between the inward life of an individual and the outward world of objects” (27). The kind of diction he uses in “I Know a Man,” seems to report the speaker’s direct perception of the moment unprocessed by any of the devices which could transform its raw personal content into a self inspiring literary experience.

As I sd to my
 friend, because I am
 always talking – John I

sd, which was not his
 name, the darkness sur-
 rounds us ... (*Selected Poems* 12)

This poem can be treated as one of Creeley’s idiosyncratic enterprises and often it appears as spasmodic in its movements. The poet liberally uses pauses, reminding the readers of Olson’s ‘projective’ style, to separate the short lines which evoke a different experience in the reader’s mind.

In the poems of Part 3 also, Creeley continues his obsession with the themes of love and marriage. The poems introduce the poet’s radiant hopes, and at the same time, certain confusions that preoccupy his mind once he considers the possibility of being in love again. “The Figures” is a demonstration of the poet’s enchanting music and along with that he

presents one of his serious concerns with poem making. It had a very sensual erotic mood with the involvement of a creative artist and his medium. The sensual effect is acquired with a mysterious mythical scene. The poem opens with the poet's encounter with "chance".

As I was walking
 I came upon
 Chance walking
 the same road upon. (*Selected Poems 29*)

In a strange way, "chance" transforms into a lady.

It was a lady
 accompanied
 by goat men
 leading her. (*Selected Poems 29*)

"The Figures" has more sophisticated authentic erotic environment than the one presented by "Kore". The poet "focuses meditative attention on the creative process, the act of myth making" (Edelberg 44). It is the artist's total yielding to his material, and the oddities and singularities of the final creation will elevate him to a level of extreme satisfaction. The often repeated "still" and "quiet" accompanied with the "stolid alliterations" expose Creeley's open stanzas and explain his realm of poetic forms through which he will analyze his own medium – "words". The poem evokes the experience of a sculptor in relation to his artistic raw material

“wooden-stone”. The very idea that such a “wooden stone” does not exist, never inhibits the poet’s inherent interest to substitute words for a wood and voice for hands in his search for a constant source material for his art. Though the artist lacks a strong base, and total satisfaction not assured, the poem suggests that there is possibility of attaining aesthetic goals. The maker can achieve personal gratification with his involvement in “the act of making” and his way of approaching the material entirely fills the creative activity.

Many of the poems in *For Love* explicate the theme of marriage and poetry, and thinking that evolve from the implicit contradiction between the poet’s rational thinking, and intuition turns out to be the minor theme. The poet analytically explores the moments of his private experience and realizes that his mental exercises won’t support him to find out anything that he could make use of later, in a preplanned systematic manner. This collection is the poet’s archetypal journey from darkness to light. With intense personal honesty, the poems journey through the poet’s experiences with love. It is a demonstration of his crisis and his coping with it. In the general sense, it deals with a pertinent human problem – “how to love and how to accept love”.

Most of the implicit issues like the consequences of Creeley’s disengagement of intelligence and emotion, physical body and mind, reasoning and sensory perceptions, become prominent in “Words”. Creeley

finds this collection as a “touchstone” to measure his accomplishments in the realm of poetry. His interests do not lay in general assessments and vague phrases. The individual poems in this volume are a means to the poet’s self discovery. “It is the way a poem speaks, not the matter, that proves its effects,” says he in “The New World” (*Quick Graph* 207). A poem can communicate through its form and this is what Olson points out as the base of poetry; the syllable and the line. By thorough manipulation of the syllable, syntax and sound are established and through the lines, a poem attains physical “substantiability”; otherwise, if viewed through the “Projective Verse”, “a line determined by the breathing of the poet”.

The primary concern of “Words” is its balancing rhythm, and the poems speak through their rhythmic patterns. A clear study of the poems of early 1960s will illustrate the co-ordination of rhythms, images and statement, and the range and variety of varied rhythmic patterns. The poem “Water” is noted for its careful use of syntax. The first two stanzas are simple in their outlook representing the reflection of sky in water which, in a way is inferior to the original perception of the sky.

The sun’s
 sky in
 form of
 blue sky
 that

water will

never make

even

in

reflection. (*Selected Poems* 52)

Each short line, the syllable in particular, emphasizes the fragmentary nature of both reflection and perception. The poet uses the syllables in a subtle manner. The “sun’s sky” and the “blue sky” in stanza one reflect each other rhythmically, whereas no such parallels exist in the second stanza which insists as such. The shift to human perceptions begins in stanzas with “Sing, song,” an apparent move from one realm to another. It is a parallel to the initial expressions and preliminary to the next expression –“mind’s form”. The last lines, “love’s / error / in water”, also reflect the fragmentary nature of human feelings.

The poem “The Language” serves as a connecting link between “physical object and physical language” and it achieves its meaning from its “actual coming into being”. The statement “I love you” exists in a verbal universe and it lacks physical reality. The speaker is conscious of the emptiness of words and tries to attribute a little bit of reality which also turns to be a verbal reality. “The poem creates a conflict between the verbal reality and its physical counterpart” (Rajnath 38). “Love” is one among the

abstract usages in common expressions. “The poem appears as simple statement but stretches out gently to touch related themes and images, creating a hovering on the page rather than conclusion” (Ford 63). The poet and the words are engaged in a physical repetitive process, and thus, reveal their mutual dependence. The first part of the poem maintains its stand on “pushing and probing”. The poet asks the question, “what is emptiness for?”, and his answer is “to fulfill”. The poem ends with the assertion:

I heard words
and words full

of holes
aching. Speech
is a mouth. (*Selected Poems* 46)

The emptiness is on the nature of “pleasure pain relationship”. Same as love, the concept of “words are holes acting to be filled” forms one of the recurrent images in Creeley. The poem focuses on twin objectives: the physical substantiality of literal objects when the speaker feels “love becomes holes to be filled”; and the physical substantiality of language when he feels “words become holes to be filled”.

Creeley’s 1969’s collection of poems, *Pieces*, deals with the nature of the thinking mind, the poetic process and the love relationship. The poet’s intention here is to reframe his basic themes. He makes genuine

efforts to create a self definition that could assist him to feel at ease with himself at home and at the world that he inhabits. Earlier, he was under the impression that a clear and refined intellect could easily comprehend the details of the mysterious forces that controlled the phenomenal world. He examined the dynamics of his own reasoning power to identify what remained in his experience, accessible to rational thought and what was not. The result was that he found intuition as a means to perception that he could confide and a complement to his mind's logic. Creeley tries to bring a proper balance between "the analytical and the intuitive" in *Pieces*.

One of the dominant themes of *Pieces* is the philosophical significance of the love relationship. Creeley could not give much priority to this aspect in his earlier poems that focused on his tensions with his first marriage, divorce and remarriage. He contemplated his relationship with his second wife in *Words*; he derived comfort and pleasure from this marriage in the general sense, but not in the metaphysical sense. *Pieces* is Creeley's struggle "to reconcile his empirical understanding that he is essentially alone in this world with his recognizably human need to feel a sense of belonging" (Edelberg 86).

Like Olson, Creeley too rejected "the damn function" of figures of speech and word. In his poetry, they existed not as representative of any objects, but as objects as such.

You want

the fact
of things
in words,
of words. (*Pieces* 61)

The poet is of the view that words themselves are real and self-reliant, that is, “the word become thing”. Levertov, while answering the charges against Creeley being “vague and careless”, said that something different happens in his poetry: “Its very sprawl and openness, its notebook quality, its absence of perfectionism, Creeley letting his hair down, is in fact a movement of energy in his work, to my ear, not a breaking down but a breaking open” (“What Made the Shadows” 246). The collection reflects the idea that the poet is obsessed with the idea of “going beyond things to words and beyond the referents of these words to the words as objects, as pieces” (Ford 40).

“As Real as Thinking”, the opening poem of the sequence, introduces different themes in which Creeley is interested. The poet being enthusiastic intends to create a wondrous “sentence” that could be a “present” evolving from the “plan of thought”. The poet maintains an extemporaneous tone in the first section of the poem.

As real as thinking
wonders created
by the possibility-

forms. A period
 at the end of a sentence
 which

began it was
 into a present,
 a presence

saying
 something
 as it goes. (*Pieces* 3-4)

The poet is preoccupied with the thought that he is an inexperienced beginner when he says, “something / as it goes” and he counter argues it with “wonders created / by the possibility – forms” conveyed through the literal and implied allusions in the poem. He is in an excited mood and has some confusion in declaring what his intention is in his project. The poet’s words “a present” is “a presence” reminds us of Whitman’s “He who touches this book touches a man” (*Leaves of Grass*), and the lines, “No forms less / than activity” of Williams’ “No ideas but in things” (*A Sort of Song*).

Creeley deserves recognition primarily as a craftsman and he will be remembered for his technical perfection. Both in his prose and poetry, he possesses absolute control over the rhythm. “The line, the pauses, the hesitations, the syntax and ellipses usually mirror precisely the statement of the poem; in fact, in his best poems and in his best short stories, these elements become the statement itself” (Ford 137). He talks about a world that is shattered and all values lost and his mission is “to give order and value to at least one moment of experience” (Cameron 94). He is bold enough to discover simplicity in his poetic endeavour and to lead his readers towards it. His existential ethics are affirmative, and believe in love devoid of grand methods and statements. He has framed some self imposed limitations upon his poetry and fiction; still his achievements are very impressive. He strikes the reader and viewer as totally open and totally honest about himself, about his poetry, and about his feelings.

Robert Duncan, along with Olson and Creeley, defined the Black Mountain School of Poetry. All the three discovered their mature style in *Black Mountain Review* and *Origin*, and generated poetic forms from within the poem based on Olson’s projective theory. He is the most “literary” of the poets of this group, and like Pound, his works flourish in echoing and alluding to a wide range of classical, European, English and American poets. He was a derivative poet and translated various poetries and traditions into a poetics which can be termed as a “grand collage”, a

combination of multiple ideas. He wrote extensively about his aesthetic theory and the dynamics of the open form poetry than any other writer of his generation and his poems are dominated by the fallacies of projectivism. He possesses certain interests that are unique, and some components of his aesthetic like the obsession with a democratic and communally responsive writing, the concept of creation by field, and the idea of poetry as an open and unfinished process, are shared with some other contemporary poets.

Along with Olson and Pound, Duncan fixes his poetry in a theoretical program that is challenging and, at times, irritating. Some of his poems, too much being dominated by theory, tends to become slack, formless or enthusiastically sentimental. Theory can also be constructive capable of generating a foundation of living forms and thus, arranging an arena for action and to safeguard it from cultural usurpation and open form theories function as such a foundation. Theories of Whitman act as a boundary line against the realities of political and literary history. Still, there prevails a harmonious relation between the visionary openness and history even though their balance is insecure. Duncan is aware of the stimulating effects of the pluralities of poeties and he admits that it is meaningless to adhere to just one doctrine. He was under the impression that his poems were part of an ongoing process and he refused to publish his poems in any anthology that happened to be a major loss for his

potential readers of books. His *Bending the Bow* was published in 1968 and after that he decided not to publish any of his collections until 1983 for he wanted to free himself from the “coercions of publishers’ expectations”.

Duncan began his literary career with a wide range of voices, styles and qualities. He acknowledges three of his earlier poems – “An African Elegy”, “The Years as Catches” and “King Hayden of Miami Beach” – as the epitome of the “disparate strains” of his poetry which include “falseness, exaggerated pretensions, bloated language and derivativeness” (Johnson 42). These poems are recognized as what the poet has to do in art. “An African Elegy” is a celebration of the zone of the “marvelous” as present in the “mind’s natural jungle”. The metaphor of the poem is explicitly stated towards the end: “The halls of Africa we seek in dreams / as barriers of dream against the deep” (*First Decade* 96).

“The Years as Catches” exemplifies Duncan’s adoration for Pound’s poetics and in his explanation of the title, clarifies the eclectic and the inclusive nature of his art. His art is a net of catches for him. The poem opens in a sober mood with a great loss. “This century, an iron bell of joy, has scarcely rung / its first harsh notes of morning, scarcely rung / upon our ears the strident ecstasy in God” (*Selected Poems* 1). It is followed by allusions to Milton and the alliterative lines and the sprung rhythm of Hopkins. This century has scarcely rung its brightness and so “we would make an interim eternity” between “war and peace” that “shall not avail

against the still / unbroken universe of God” (*Selected Poems 2*). The poem ends with a note of ecstasy reminding of Hopkins’ tone and Milton’s humility.

Catch from the years the line of joy

impatient & repeated day,

my heart, break. Eye

break open and set free

his world, my ecstasy. (*Selected Poems 4*)

The fallacies of projectivism also play a problematic role in the writings of Robert Duncan. A detailed analysis of his *Passages* and *Structure of Rime* will reveal a general collapse of mind as encouraged by the projective theory. His early collections are a mix of powerful emotions which are entertaining, and at the same time, thought provoking. One such poem is “Mother to Whom I have Come Home”:

Rooms after death have the same light

left over, beginning the length of the house.

This is the end beginning with you

Long as the light afterwards if noon,

I have taken me to wife

and sleep and death the deep of home. (*Selected Poems 24*)

Duncan uses his unique characteristics like the strangely deliberate rhythm, peculiar skill with words of mobility and the uninterrupted flow of

thoughts. He has an ambiguous tone towards the subject: “tremulous, yet oddly detached, emotional yet narcissistic, self-involved even in its governing concern with the loved object” (Thurley 139). The poem evokes a pressure of emotion and this particular trait distinguishes Duncan from his contemporaries.

The Medieval Scenes, the serial poem, is Duncan’s “first strong long poem” and he addressed it as “my first suite of heresies” (Johnson 48). He wrote this at a time when there was much discussion on medieval romances and mysteries in his circle. It is about an imaginary world, untainted with the kind of knowledge that might create a lot of questions on belief and disbelief. In the preface to *Medieval Scenes*, the poet recollects that the poem was performed “to exhibit mediumistic powers as well as to reach the voice of an oracle beyond”. This collection projects a world of fantasy preoccupied with figures and persons resembling those in the later works like “The Structure of Rime”. Duncan makes genuine efforts to assess the nature of poetry and inspiration that includes the poetic Muse’s power over the poet. “Was it a dream of memory?”, the poet wonders in “The Festivals”. “I do not want the witless rounds of spring / to break this fine enchantment. / The joy unbroken is the lovely thing” (*Selected Poems* 13). The poet expresses his disagreement with the “foolish Muse” saying, “The sleeping joy is best”. The phrase “he murmurs in her dream” interrupts his free flow of thought and the humming words denote the poet’s folly. He is

particular to avoid the “chattering of birds” and dismisses, “Our unicorn is but a gilded ass / adorned by village fools with a single horn / of painted wood” (*Selected Poems* 14). The Muse insists “The joy awake is everywhere”. The last two lines manifest the poet’s terrors of inspiration. “The muse, amused, / awakens the fearful poet to her dream”.

The final poem of the series, “The Albigenses”, presents the competing claims of sex and poetry on one’s energies. “The poet lovers in copulation know / the emergence of the dragon from all things. / They burn in the wrath of the wrathful God” (*Selected Poems* 21). Both sex and poetry add to his apprehension or fearful understanding to choose both senses of the word that enlighten his later writings. In the preface, Duncan comments, “I came upon the mode in which the eternal ones of the poem might come to speak to me, where I consulted with fates that still stand over my work today” (*Selected Poems* vi). Robert Bertholf, in his afterword to *Medieval Scenes*, comments that this series stands as a gate between his early and late poetry (45).

A casual reader may like to read Duncan’s *Opening of the Field* for its excellent short lyrics. The book opens with the poem “Often I’m Permitted to Return to a Meadow”, which Duncan says is made up by mind that actually does not belong to him; at the same time belongs to him! The opening lines evoke Duncan’s recurring concept of a reconciled world.

as if it were a scene made-up by the mind,

that is not mine, but is a made place,

that is mine, it is so near to the heart,

an eternal pasture folded in all thought

so that there is a hall therein (*The Opening 2*)

The world is “a made place” and an “eternal pasture”. The paradoxical statements convey the idea of a different way of thinking in a logical way. The lines, “that is a made place, created by light / wherefrom the shadows that are forms fall,” exemplify “the Platonic roots” of such thoughts. These forms that fall are actually imitations of the “First Beloved”. The poet is often permitted to return to a meadow which presents him flowers which are “flames lit to the body”. Such intertwined images of flames and flowers recur throughout the key passages of the collection. The “flaming flowers” are of great significance to the poet. There is a biblical reference here when the poet talks about the grass and flower. Psalm 103, verses 15-16 say: “As for man, his days are like grass; As a flower of the field, so he flourishes. For the wind passes over it, and it is gone, And its place remembers it no more”. Similarly, the children’s game “ring a round of roses” is a medieval prayer to cast away the plague inverted to a game – “ashes, ashes, all fall down”. Duncan’s poetics move around such type of metaphors: “... blossoming is followed by decay, destruction inevitably follows upon realization and is superseded in its turn by renewal. Dust return to dust

inevitably, but this is a fertilizing decay from which new life, phoenix like, arises” (Johnson 65).

The field is a prominent figure of this collection and it is not static, but an area of activity moving in a multidirectional way, occupying a wide space. The poet’s entry to the poem is limited, but he ought to be an active participant, looking forward to the various chances. That is, the field is “not mine, but is a made place, that is mine”. The exact location of the field is insignificant, and it does not matter where the poet physically is; it is not matter, but spirit that counts.

“Poem Beginning with a Line by Pindar”, can be considered as the single most important poem in this book since it exemplifies most of the qualities of mature Robert Duncan. The poem may appear as a collection of jumbled sentences in the first reading, but it is a collage of allusions, sounds and images that possess internal rhyme and their echoes reverberate throughout. “*The light foot hears you and the brightness begins / god-step at the margins of thought / quick adulterous tread at the heart*” (*Selected Poems* 54). The opening line is a mix of several key motifs. The image of foot, the themes of darkness, light, adultery, and love recur throughout the poem.

The poem calls our attention to the Spanish painter Francesco Goya’s painting “Cupid and Psyche”. These two figures possess a voluptuous grace in Goya’s canvas. “The copper light falling upon the

brown boy's slight body" imparts knowledge and illumination even though it brings separation from the dear ones. Duncan makes use of subtler sound patterns in the opening session. Psyche's sexual longing towards Cupid and Eros are rendered in a physically appealing form of poetry: "Their bodies yield out of strength. / Waves of visual pleasure / wrap them in a sorrow previous to their impatience" (*Selected Poems* 55). The lover's passion is considered as a complex magic that should eternally remain young.

In time we see a tragedy, a loss of beauty
 the glittering youth
 of the god retains – but from this threshold
 it is age
 that is beautiful. (*Selected Poems* 56)

This sort of thinking leads the verse towards other poets and "their unflinching wrongness that has style". Whitman, Williams, Olson and Pound are the older poets whom Duncan mentions here.

The Third section, dedicated to Charles Olson, consciously acknowledges Pound of the Pisan *Cantos* and other poets mentioned in the earlier sessions. Considering the idea of the poet as hero, the story of Eros and Psyche is also linked to them.

In the story the ants help. The old man at Pisa
 mixed in whose mind
 (to draw the sorts) are all seeds

as a lone ant from a broken ant-hill
 had part restored by an insect, was
 upheld by a lizard. (*Selected Poems* 58)

It is followed with Cantos in grand style “Scientia”, but with much banality: “Rilke torn by a rose thorn / blackened toward Eros. Cupidinous Death! / that will not take no for an answer” (*Selected Poems* 60).

“Cupidinous Death!” reminds the readers that irony and wit do not require the total involvement of the poet’s intelligence. Duncan portrays pictorial description of the grass in the sea shore and this passage appears as one of the finest passages in the sequence and it introduces the metaphor of the children. “There the children turn the ring to the left. / There the children turn the ring to the right. / Dancing ... Dancing ...” (*Selected Poems* 61).

Geoffrey Thurley is of the view that Duncan has not efficiently elucidated the exact meaning of the dancing of the children (155). The passage does not appear to be emotive and is rather inconclusive. “Pindar’s art, the editors tell us, was not a statue but a mosaic, an accumulation of the metaphor. The Pindar poem is itself such a mosaic, a collage of pieces of literature, history, fable, and autobiography, which informs and directs the poem” (Johnson 77).

“The ramifications below and above the trunk of vegetative life” forms the theme of Duncan’s book *Roots and Branches*. The title poem “Roots and Branches” is a delightful dance of the “monarch butterfly” in

the measure of its subject. Butterflies are “orange merchants in spring’s flowery markets” and they are “Messengers of March”. That is, they are harbingers of the spring season and the poet thinks that they trace out the “unseen roots and branches of sense” of the tree during their flight. They are so short that they represent “filaments woven and broken”. The poet recognizes “what I am” from what the butterfly perform in that morning and his response is clear: “How you perfect my spirit!” The “intent and easy” fluttering butterfly awakens the poet to an “inner view of things”. The verbal and emotional communication between the poet’s spirit and the beauty of the butterfly makes the “common sense” boundary between the physical reality and the transcendental reality vanishes. The major attraction of the poem is the metaphor of the tree with its natural growth, attendant cycle of budding, coming to maturity, decaying and becoming dormant or dying. It suggests a poetry that involves with the organic process in a similar way; has genuine concern towards “the roots and branches” of the poet and his creations, and his knowledge about the “outer view of things” that compel him to address his position in this world directly. The poet has the rare satisfaction that the “delightful epiphany” proposed by the butterflies on that March morning could not, at least partially, transport his “inner view of things”.

Duncan is very conscious of considering his poetry as *poetry*, and as such, he comments on the poetic process. “The Structure of the Rime” is

his straightforward interrogation of the various forms and processes of poetry. It has 8 sections numbered from 14 to 21. "Rime XX" is so specific in its purpose where Duncan discusses what the "Master of Rime" has told him: "You must learn to lose heart. I have darkened this way and you yourself have darkened. Are you so blind you cant see what you cant see?" (*Selected Poems* 75) The poet stealthily keeps a hidden bird in order to "carry sight into the house". But, he is told that, "the sightless ones" have opened the windows and listen to the songs outside. The "Mother of his Blindness" comments: "*Absence rimes among the feathers of birds that exist only in sight. The songs you hear fall from their flight light like shadows cast among you*" (*Selected Poems* 75). "The Master of Rime" repeatedly advises him to love his heart and to let the beat of his heart go, and to unfold the feeling of an "empty space" from his folded hands. This emptiness can also be identified with the "silence" of Charles Olson. *Roots and Branches* combine a book of poems that challenge and explore the various forms that poetry can make.

Denise Levertov is considered a member of the Black Mountain School of poets, even though she never became part of this experimental community. She was greatly influenced by her friends Charles Olson, Robert Creeley and Robert Duncan and she also closely followed William Carlos Williams. Her friendship with the Black Mountain group of poets, especially Robert Creeley, was instrumental in the publication of her

poems in Cid Corman's magazine, *Origin* and in the *Black Mountain Review*. Her poetry is a mix of her private issues like love, solitudes, divorce, marriage and motherhood to some of the major public events of her time such as the Vietnam and the Gulf wars, nuclear proliferation, degradation of the environment, and even the deadly ailment, AIDS. She experimented with free verse in her poems and is rather appreciated for her craft in poetry. Her essay "Some Notes on Organic Form" (1965) is hailed as a classic in contemporary literary theory. Her poetic voice is plain and simple, and it depends largely on concrete images and vivid language to provide greater insights into everyday experience.

A new sort of phenomenologist poetry developed in America since the Second World War, quite different from the New England conservatism of writers like Marianne Moore whose work distilled moral and intellectual insights from the close and accurate observation of objective detail. Geoffrey Thurley remarks:

In place of the refined poetess sitting isolated among the teacups, socially aligned with her visitors but privately alienated from them, we encounter the poet-father/husband (Kenneth Rexroth) and the poet-housewife/mother (Denise Levertov), whose living-space coincides with their aesthetic space. (119)

The ancient separatism of the avant-garde, where the private world of poetry excluded the real world of social living, got replaced by a uniform continuum. The essence of American writing during this period was that it discarded the concept of artistic avant-garde, though it was representative of the best writing of that time. Levertov is an ideal example of the penetrating idiom of a generation of phenomenologist poets. Black Mountain College had its own contribution in this development, though it maintained its stance on the eclectic tradition of the later Pound. It nourished the imagist ideal of a prosody which was more effective than the rhythmical orthodoxy of the neo-metaphysical poets, and it had very positive influence on Levertov.

Levertov described the early 1950s as a “transitional period” in her literary career. She was a nurse in London during the World War II and during that period, she published her first book, *The Double Image*. She published her first US book, *Here and Now*, in 1957, and the second book *Overland to the Islands*, in 1958. Her first collection for James Laughlin’s New Directions “With Eyes at the Back of Our Heads” appeared in 1959, and over the years she had more than a dozen volumes of poems, two collections of essays, and some translations to her credit. She is widely recognized as one of America’s most innovative, skilled, and intelligent poets and also as an important activist writer.

Levertov came to be identified with the American avant-garde, which emphasizes the substance of day to day life than vision, with the publication of *Here and Now* (1957) and *Overland to the Islands* (1958). By this time she was often linked with Black Mountain College. Olson's theory of "projectivism" has close affinities with Ezra Pound's "Imagism" and "Vorticism" that stressed movement and energy of the interposed images, and the "Objectivism" of William Carlos Williams that identified a poem, as any other form of arts, an object capable of presenting its case and meaning with the same form that it exists. Levertov was greatly influenced by these writers due to her immediate attachment with them. She defines herself as a poet descended from Williams and Pound by way of Olson and Creeley though she never attended Black Mountain College. She was nurtured by modern masters like Rilke, Pound, Hilda Doolittle and Williams; and along with that she shared poetic affinities with Olson, Creeley and Duncan. But she followed her own style from the very beginning and refused to be identified with the categorization of any sort. She declares her stand in "A Poet's View": "I cannot simply enter a ready-made structure; I have to find components and construct my own" (244).

Black Mountain's response to the poetic crisis of the 1950s was to continue and advance with the then marginal figures like Pound and Williams. Levertov's attitude towards her literary predecessors is complex than Olson's rivalry towards them and she is at ease with the line of

succession. Her literary past is neither threatening nor devastating for her and she never makes any exaggerated claims of an absolute break with the past. A deep look into her literary career will clearly reveal the richness and complexity of her development. Her earlier works in the forties were quite traditional in form and romantic in substance; her poetry in the fifties seemed to be innovative since it gained vigour from Pound and Williams; and finally in the sixties to poetry of her own make embedded with magical realism.

Levertov's first book, *The Double Image*, appeared in 1946 when she was just 23. It was the starting point for her poetry noted for the glimpses of a budding artist feeling her way towards technical perfection. The sense of life was a sort of pilgrimage for her and *The Double Image* represented "a failed pilgrimage" (Breslin 59). This collection comprises of two sections, "Fears" and "Promises", and the book is an account of a journey that proceeds from anxiety to acceptance – accepting the double image of life with its little worries, cares and promises. The predominant feelings in most of the poems are some loss and nostalgia – a lament on the absence of vitality and order in day to day life. The opening poems, "Childhood's End" and "They, Looking Back", with their added lamentations, serve as the platform for the poet's voluntary exile from a "miraculous" Edenic world of "love and death". These poems also offer glimpses of a young writer on her way to "technical security". Throughout

this collection, Levertov appears as someone quite at ease with set traditional means which makes her different from her contemporaries like Robert Lowell, Richard Wilbur and William Merwin.

A poem is a “made object, a construction” for Levertov, similar to Olson’s ideal of a poem as “a high energy construct”. “Merritt Parkway” is a description of the monotonous life where nothing changes and nothing is experienced and everyone is remotely controlled. “As if it were / forever that they move, that we / keep moving.” The poem highlights the perpetual movement of the speeding cars that,

keep moving ahead of

us, past us, pressing behind us

and

over left, those that come

toward us shining too brightly

moving relentlessly (Allen 61-2)

It is a parody of her own pilgrimage that delivers her from the “dreamlike” experience to an open world. Her new destination is an abode of fact and movement which is not altogether lost in “copies of old words”, but a reincarnation of “lines alive” capable of producing a poem that is “a dance of words”.

Setting becomes the primary force of meaning and emotional effect in “February Evening in New York”, thus making other elements of the narrative like character and action only of secondary importance. The poem introduces a brief scene with two characters and one is compelled to read character and incident in relation to feelings evoked by the immense energy of New York City’s metropolitan life.

As the stores close, a winter light
 opens air to iris blue,
 glint of frost through the smoke,
 grains of mica, slat of the sidewalk. (Ellmann 868)

The poem lacks spacing after all the syntactical or stanzaic breaks in its lines. Things are highly congested similar to the New York sidewalks that remain packed once “the stores closed” and people are released. The first three ‘sentences’ of the poem begins with “As” that grows in arithmetic progression. Levertov reflects the setting of the poem to its structure. A “woman with crooked heels” represents “a larger encompassing energy” that includes even the sky that is no longer “wedged into avenues”.

“Scenes from the Life of the Peppertrees” can be considered as the most suggestive and accomplished poem in her early books. The poem opens with an exclamation – “The peppertrees, the peppertrees!” (Allen 64) in an ambiguous way without any context and directive syntax. A casual reader will rather be puzzled as the poet has created both tension

and confusion without introducing any direct questions. This tension and confusion get enlarged in the following lines with the description of the peppertrees which is different from the opening line: “Cats are stretching in the doorways, / sure of everything. It is morning” (Allen 64). Since the readers too are not sure of anything, they also can keep “stretching” like the cats for some kind of completion of thought and action.

The poet presents the complex contrasting features of the “peppertrees” and the “cats”. The peppertrees shiver a little whereas the cats are “sure of everything”. The immobile peppertrees that stand aside in diffidence, with berries of “modest red” are capable of casting off “... an air / of lightness; of shadows / scattered lightly” which is a seeming parallel to the confidence of the cats and the sun’s movements. The exact reason behind the shivering of the trees is not clear; it may be due to the leaping “to a low branch” by the “Robust and soot-black” cat. The identities of the cat and the tree merge into one unique unit in the following stanza, each getting hold of vital energy from one another. “Shadows of cats / weave round the tree trunks, / the exposed knotty roots” (Allen 65). The mystery lying behind the poem is not fully revealed, but certain hints are suggested in the final stanza by introducing a human presence. It is presented with the presumption that the readers already know him.

The man on the bed sleeping
defenseless. Look –

his bare long feet together
 sideways, keeping each other
 warm. And the foreshortened shoulders,
 the head
 barely visible. (Allen 65)

They are yet to meet him, and they eagerly look forward to that encounter. He is “defenseless” and vulnerable, and the poet concludes that “He is good / Let him sleep”. But the third peppertree is “restless” and won’t let the man sleep comfortably by “twitching / thin leaves in the light / of afternoon” (Allen 66). It is determined to wake him up.

... After a while
 it walks over and taps
 on the upstairs window with a bunch
 of red berries. Will he awake? (Allen 66)

The tree’s attempt to awaken him can be a homage to the man with its offer of “a bunch of red berries” or suggestive of some impending disaster or threat of the tree that “closed about” the cat with its leaves. The sleeper being a man is supposed to wake up and the mystery lies behind the question, ‘Under what circumstances will he get up from his sleep?’ As Harry Marten points out: “In representing a scene in the natural world even while transforming it into myth, giving a surprising sentience to the tree

and archetypal breadth to the human, Levertov has brought her readers closer to the mysteries that link this world with others” (49).

Levertov had published good poetry even before her going to America. The difference is that America provided her with the fine raw edge while her English verse was shrouded in meter. She wrote the domestic pieces like “Folding a Shirt”, “The 5 Day Rain”, “Matins” etc. after her settling in America. These poems emerge from her ingenious balance of imagism. She dramatizes the dilemma of everyday domestic life in “Matins” with her genuine humour and irony. Here she addresses “The authentic” in a jubilant but ironic way.

The authentic! Shadows of it
sweep past in dreams, one could say imprecisely,
evoking the almost-silent
ripping apart of giant
sheets of cellophane. (Ellmann 871)

Geoffrey Thurley is of the view that “what is ripped apart is that veil of the banal behind which the world hides most of the time” (121). A poet does not expect the poem to recapture the excitement experienced by the “giant sheets of cellophane”. The poem’s pathos and drama lies in the repeated expulsion of “The authentic”. The second section also opens with a cry, but here the tone is different.

The authentic! I said

rising from the toilet seat.
 the radiator in rhythmic knockings
 spoke of the rising steam. (Ellmann 872)

The sudden revelation of authentic in the first section of the poem developed the background for the second exclamation. The banal too was intolerable due to the “ripping apart” of the cellophane, yet “authentic” prevailed in excess, and the poet might have ignored it. She makes a plea to have a firm grip on the value revealed to her. The exclamation mark is dropped here to stress on the lack of excitement. The authentic is not a matter of jubilation now and the understandings of its revelation deepen further.

The poet manages to handle the sound effect skillfully in the third stanza. “The new day rises / as heat rises”. She finds the “knocking in the pipes / with rhythms” a second signal, and feels that it is about to speak of its invention. The invention is going to be real and it is that

... , the new-laid
 egg whose speckled shell
 the poet fondles and must break
 if he will be nourished. (Ellmann 872)

The following section elaborates on this discovery:

A shadow painted where
 yes, a shadow must fall.

The cow's breath
 not forgotten in the mist, in the
 words. (Ellmann 872)

The poet admits that “verisimilitude / draws up heat in us” and the “zest to follow through” derives “transformations of day”. The next section again leads to a domestic scene.

Call the child to eat,
 send him off, his mouth
 tasting of toothpaste, to go down
 into the ground, into a roaring train
 and to school. (Ellmann 873)

Such verses are embedded in authenticity which is true to them. Once the child gets off to school, the poet withdraws to a world of greater comprehension that is something more abstract. The poet makes some more efforts to invoke “The authentic” in the next section, but it “rolls just out of reach”. She addresses the “Marvelous Truth”, that “confronts us at every turn” in the final stanza. “Thrust close your smile / that we know you, terrible joy”. The poet maintains the structure of the poem at ease in a masterly, effortless, but elevated manner.

Levertov's poem “Six Variations” is a typical example of her skill in writing in open form:

Shlup, shlup, the dog

as it laps up
 water
 makes intelligent
 music, resting
 now and then to take breath in irregular
 measure. (*Poems, 1960-1967* 18)

Here she enjoys the rare privilege of breaking off a poem at whatever point she likes, a technique forbidden to a conventional writer who was supposed to strictly follow the prevailing poetic rules. Each line break renders emphasis and the word or phrase used at the line ending compels the reader to take a slight pause. The poet intends to bring to the reader's attention the slight pauses, and the words and the phrases, "the dog", "laps up", "water", "intelligent", "resting", "irregular" and "measure". She successfully utilizes the chances of white space – another means to call attention on things. The words "water" and "measure" are all set alone in a line and they stand out with more energy they normally possess if used in a pentametric line. She makes the readers feel at ease with the rhyme in the beginning and the words "irregular" and "measure" also rhyme with each other. A loud reading of the poem will create the sensation that in each phrase the arrangement of the pauses and stresses is identical. The lengths of the lines appear to be irregular, similar to the pauses a dog takes in between its breathings, resulting in the formation of "intelligent music".

This poem strictly adheres to Olson's projectivist theory: "If a contemporary poet leaves a space as long as the phrase before it, he means that space to be held, by the earth, an equal length of time. If he suspends a word or syllable at the end of a line (this was most Cummings' addition) he means that time to pass that it takes the eye – that hair of time suspended – to pick up the next line" (*Selected Writings* 22-3).

Levertov is noted for her delicate, joyous and exalted tone of verse similar to that of Emily Dickinson, Sylvia Plath and Robert Duncan. Often, her native English sense and the ease of her voice are in competition with the ceremonial tone of Robert Duncan. Her poetry is one of "communion and witness – to contemporary Atrocities and to the divine" (Kimmelman 278). Through her concept of "witness", she informs what it means to be human. Her in depth study of the details of the worries of material human life; its successes and failures, beauties and mysteries, shower light on a clear comprehension of, and provide a means to, coping with such complex intriguing life.

Edward Dorn is identified with the Black Mountain group of poets for his experiment with free verse, and for use of clear and blunt language refined through his personal poetics and "disinterested" affiliation to politics. His close association with Olson at Black Mountain was instrumental in stimulating his interest in geography, and in themes related to non-western traditions and cultures as parallel and authentic ways of

living. In 1968, Dorn dedicated his most ambitious book, *Geography* to Olson from whom he took a “commitment to didactic, discursive poetry” (Pinsky 134). Poetry that takes personal experience, both domestic and psychological, was beyond the reach of Dorn and therefore, the extension of poetic matter counted heavily for him. Olson was enthusiastic of his subject and he always seemed to begin from an unfamiliar territory and his poems were a repetition of the first American story – “exploration”. Dorn’s poems also have great affinity towards Olson’s exploratory and discursive poems. But, often, Dorn found this politics of American exploration in conflict with what he considered as “human”, and it was inconceivable for him to imagine any political poetry trespassing the boundaries of everything “humane”.

Dorn received attention as a poet in the 1960s and his “poetic voice was that of a self-exile standing skeptically outside mainstream culture, intensely distrustful of wealth and authority and its abuses and acutely aware of their effects on national and personal life” (Kimmelman 132). He wrote on varied themes like commercialism of American heritage, exploitation of other cultures in hypocritical way, the plight of the minorities and the environment, along with a keen study of personal and family relationships. Like other Black Mountain poets, Dorn was also influenced by Olson’s “Projective Verse”. He wrote in a loosely structured free verse and the lines seemed to enlarge the content of each poem. Most

of the poems have irregular “enjambment” that renders them an asymmetrical rhythm and dissonant quality, like the “Gloucester Out”:

This is
 the guilt
 that kills me
 My adultered presence

but please believe with all men

I love to be (Ellmann 1004)

The poems have varied lengths from a mere epigram to a whole book, with the tone of poetry “alternately vulnerable, caustically critical, sensitively attentive, and parodic, sometimes changing abruptly within works” (Barker 133).

“The Air of June Sings” is a clear analysis of Dorn’s “political problem” in the form of an elegy in a country graveyard. The poet admonishes himself for having never been to the grave even once, when the poem begins. The poem proclaims the poet’s humanitarian views. His subject is human sentiment, which Olson totally sidelined. The children “whisper and laugh covering their mouths” and the poet is moved to tears as they read the inscriptions like “Darling, we love thee” or “Safe in Heaven” as inscribed in the stones. These inscriptions are of little meaning to the children and they articulate an unknown language of customs which

are strenuous for the children to perceive. Dorn admits that his daughter “reads, some of the markers / reflect such lightness to her reading eyes,” (*Selected Poems* 12) and he also becomes abstract like the stones that become text for her. The poet comes to his own conclusions to the wisdom of the dead in the following lines: “I am going off to heaven and I won’t see you any more. I am / going back into the country and I won’t be here any more. I am / going to die in 1937” (*Selected Poems* 12). The poet highlights the significance of the sandstone to flag which are often “blurred and faded” and that he himself is “walking with”. “Those who buried you should have known / a 6 inch square of sandstone, flush with the earth / is more proper for the gone than blurred and faded flags” (*Selected Poems* 12).

All the thoughts of the poet are natural for a human being and they could not surpass the mortal limitations of an ordinary person. The poet tries to avoid the largest stone, but he acknowledges “that pioneer sticks in me like a wormed black cherry / in my throat”. The tombstone is undated making readers aware of the fact that it “violates” the proprieties of the graveyard. “Sentimentality is a principle for Dorn, a disciplined unraveling of a tangled ideology” (Von Hallberg, “Marvellous Accidentalism” 49). The dead are devoid of sentimentality and so Dorn thinks they are “unpreposterous”.

Gunslinger is a major narrative poem of Dorn, and it possesses great contemporary relevance as it serves as a mirror to the tumultuous period of its writing. Dorn commented it as “a fantasy of certain things” when it first appeared in 1967. It owed little even to his own earlier way of writing; it was a major shift from all the poetic styles of the late sixties. One of the passions of the 20th century was its passion for longer poems. The completed poem, *Slinger* as it is called, is another long quest poem, but not looking deeply for any recovery. The poem is grounded in the manner of a song and this song mode is based on Dorn’s sense of the “intensity” of places. More than declamatory or meditative forms of orations, the songs supply Dorn’s most stable part of reference to the readers. The *Gunslinger*’s quest is more of genetic in nature and he is a mighty hero.

I met in Mesilla

The Cautious Gunslinger

of impeccable personal smoothness

and slender leather encased hands

folded casually

to make his knock. (*Gunslinger* 1)

The slinger is interested in mutations and he is equipped with the awesome 44. When asked whether those rounds in the 44 are of his own making, his casual reply is, “I rarely use ordinary ammunition”. His mission is:

Look, into each chamber

goes one bit of my repertoire
 of pure information,
 into each gesture, what
 you call in your innocence
 “the draw”

goes Some Dark Combination (*Gunslinger* 45)

The poem is highly contradictory in nature, especially in matters of style. The poet employs the method of using pun to generate “signification out of not-meaning” (Von Hallberg, “Marvellous Accidentalism” 71). The result is that this subtle wordplay seals the scope of the poem more as wordplay than as a narrative. “Are you trying / to “describe” me, boy? / No, no, I hastened to add” (*Gunslinger* 29). The following lines succeed in sidelining the plot to the narration and action to language.

And by the way boy
 if there’s any addin
 to do around hee
 I’ll do it, that’s my stick
 comprende? (*Gunslinger* 30)

Usually, the language of narration seems to be subsequent to the events of the plot; that is the events will be introduced first and the telling of them afterwards. Pronouns and puns form the characters of this poem and they immediately respond to the narrator’s language. The language of the

narration occupies a prominent position here and neither the plot nor the characters occupy supremacy over the narrative language. Dorn's inherent interest was "to grasp what the words can mean" and he explains the "unpredictable" possibilities in language by using mutant puns, and this seeking "referentiality" is a constraint that "I" – the "referee" – must get rid of (Von Hallberg, "Marvellous Accidentalism" 72). The language of *Slinger* is used in such a way that it is capable of moving within, without any external stimulus, and it rejects obliging to ordinary signification. Verbally speaking, the poem is a web-like organization of interconnections. The poet skillfully uses the phrases which are often continuations of earlier formulations. The lines:

... I would allude to
 and the very appearance
 of his neurasthemic mare
 lathered, as you can see, with abstract fatigue (*Gunslinger* 8)

describe the horse, while in the earlier part, he said:

... , I have no wish to continue
 my debate with men,
 my mare lathers with tedium
 her hooves are dry (*Gunslinger* 4)

It is not a mere act of holding the statements together, the connections are tactfully done and the poet personifies the words as if they have lives of

their own. Even the metaphors ignore what they ought to do and they transform themselves from the figurative to the literal level. Lil gets confused with the identity of the Horse's large joints and refers to it as telescope and the narrator does not take notice of the fact that her talk was only figurative. "Umm, considered the Gunslinger / taking the telescope / from the Turned On Horse" (*Gunslinger* 35). Such "literalizing" is the poem's custom or a typical "slinger manner" and it is prominent in Dorn's use of puns. Gunslinger's adversary is the "stockholder", since this "unassorted white citizen" is holding stock of a gun.

The dimensions of being are plotted against series of antithesis in Slinger – "language versus being, meaning versus being, thinking versus being" (Von Hallberg, "Marvellous Accidentalism" 77). "Don't bring me down Lil, / we'll be of here by and by" (*Gunslinger* 28). Language desperately seeks it sway after "being" and some still try to let loose a lesson from being.

What does the foregoing mean?

I asked. Mean?

my Gunslinger laughed

Mean?

Refugee, you got some strange

obsessions, you want to know

what something *means* after you've

seen it, (*Gunslinger* 34)

Dorn intends to place the poem at the “very beginning of logic” (*Gunslinger* 23) But a wide field of experience lies before logic, and even language too creates “mutant psyches”. “... *askin so many questions / his eyes had already answered*” (*Gunslinger* 57) is absurd for the poet as it infers the thought that sense experience is directed towards known ends. *Gunslinger* asks whether his readers “inhabit themselves” or “occupy their instant” (*Gunslinger* 93); that he wants to test if one is satisfied with oneself without selecting their target on some distant impossible objectives. The poem is significant in its shift from earlier poetry, and it is an expression of the “multivocal poetics” of 20th century which is highly self-conscious in its outlook and gathers and cites varied sources.

Olson had great hope in Dorn as a new generation poet. But it was displeasing for Olson and Creeley when *Gunslinger* came out as an “antithesis to Olson’s thesis in a dialectical move” (Paul, *Lost America* 154). Both *Gunslinger* and *Maximus* resemble their authors in several important ways. They belong to the tradition of Constance Rourke’s characters in *American Humor*. Rourke was well known as a historian, anthropologist, and critic who revolutionized the study of American culture. Her pioneering “study of the national character” examines such legendary figures as the Yankee, the backwoodsman, and the minstrel singer to show how the popular comic imagination contributed to

America's changing self-awareness. Cassius Maximus Tyrius (Maximus of Tyre) was a Greek rhetorician and philosopher who flourished in the time of the Antonines and Commodus, 2nd century A.D. Maximus's first name, Cassius, is an indication of his opposition to Zeus, the king of the gods, the ruler of Mount Olympus, and the god of sky and thunder in Greek mythology. Gunslinger is a "*semidios*", born in the North East and he carries more than 2,000 year's western experience. He is "marvelously heliocentric" and can be related to Olson – Maximus of *Maximus III* – and to Davy Crockett, the archaeologist of morning who liberated the frozen sun and walked away with the sunrise in his pocket. The western hero, Gunslinger is a witness to the decline of the West and he is not confident whether he is capable of redeeming it. He is a pedagogue like Maximus and he possesses one of the horses of instruction – Calude Levis Strauss. Gunslinger is also a cosmological hero, "the kosmos", like Olson in "From Gloucester Out", whose self is related to the cosmos. Dorn is of the opinion that the poet has to be free of evil; he ought to be linked with "the whole burst of glow in the cosmos".

As far as Dorn's shorter poems are concerned, "The Rick of Green Wood" occurs first in *Selected Poems* (1978). One of his earlier pieces of composition, it is an expression of his first order of maturity and quality. The poem begins with the description of a beautiful wood yard:

In the woodyard were green and dry

woods fanning out, behind

a valley below

a pleasure for the eye to go. (*Selected Poems 3*)

The poet creates a very pleasant world of exchanges. He has his own priorities and he won't go for any compromise on it.

... I don't

want a rick of green wood, I told him

I want cherry or alder or something strong

and thin, or thick if dry, but I don't

want the green wood, my wife would die (*Selected Poems 3*)

The first half of the poem manages to maintain a leading tone and it does not rely on the traditional end rhymes for effect; but on a set of repeated consonants and vowels through certain recurring words. The poem revolves around the speaker's choices "green" and "dry", and they appear immediately before the stanza where the speaker continues his conversation with the woodcutter. "Aye, the wood is some green / and some dry, the cherry thin of bark / cut in July" (*Selected Poems 3*). The speaker is quite loving and caring; he is much concerned about his wife's physical health: "Her back is slender / and the wood I get must not / bend her too much through the day" (*Selected Poems 3*). The poet is in high spirits from the very beginning – he is carried away with the charm of the landscape which is "a pleasure for the eye". He could retain this attitude till

the end by talking pleasantly, irrespective of the “November air” that was “getting colder”. The poem is in free verse and its intricate structure of the recurring sounds conveys to the reader, “the pleasurable fragility of paying attention, of life and thought in and against the world” (Wesling 28). The threat referred to in the poem is a speculation, and the poem has the minimum level of tension and contentiousness, the signs of which are only slightly felt.

Sound recurrences affect the meaning of another early poem, “If It Should Ever Come”, with special emphasis on “yes” and “many”. Life on this earth is beautiful, and it is impossible to attend every experience as if it were the only one or the last, and thus, the poet sighs, “How sad”. The poem presents humans as adversaries of time and prisoners to their specific interests and idiosyncrasies. The devastating counterforce of time, transitions and the ultimate death just ridicule man’s notion of the earth as “your bright pear”. The poem thus focuses on the necessity of our “meaning-making acts of conscious attention” (Wesling 29) as the poet knows little about the reunion after death. He urges for a vision beyond the lapse of perfect attention in humans and squirrels. He attempts to contrast the speculated perfection with the single fatal instance, typical of the lack of foreknowledge of the humans. According to Sherman Paul, the reference here is to Columbus’s discovery, and Dorn strongly believed that “Columbus was not a beginning but an end, that the world he discovered

and squirreled away was not one of many newly fallen acorns, but the only one. So small, an acorn!” (*Lost America* 84). It is possible to estimate the image of a real earth of value though the concept of mankind is that they are ignorant of everything. “You didn’t know you were at the end / thought it was your bright pear / the earth, yes” (*Selected Poems* 23).

Some of the poems listed in the contents of *Edward Dorn: Selected Poems* are songs, and “Vaquero” falls under this category because of its maximum use of verbal equivalences and their tone of open expressiveness.

The cowboy stands beneath
 a brick-orange moon. The top
 of his oblong head is blue, the sheath
 of his hips
 is too. (*Selected Poems* 4)

Casual readers may often get confused with the identity of this cowboy – whether he is a “prefiguration of Gunslinger” or “a cowboy of perception” (Paul, *Lost America* 91). The cowboy is an isolated, cosmically placed figure, and his agony is suggested as a man against the sky. Dorn pictures the cowboy in a peculiar colour and style that the readers may be reminded of Williams’ “To a Solitary Disciple”. “This simplifies its colour scheme to a comic-book vividness, its image and sound sequences to the most basic gestures; it is a stark instance of Dorn’s own category of “language song”

(Wesling 39). “Yi Yi, the cowboy’s eyes are blue” can likely be an allusion to the “Yippie – Yippie – eye eye”, ballads associated with the cowboy life and so the whole poem can be considered as an ironical reference to the myth of cowboy in popular American tradition. Dorn underwent formal training in painting and his passion for blue has been indicated through his poems. “Yi Yi, the cowboy’s eyes / are blue. The top of the sky / is too” (*Selected Poems* 4). In “A Song”, he says, “I have a dark blue sky inside my head” and this poem begins with “There is a blue sky” (*Collected Poems* 126). So the poet envisages a Picasso cowboy of the blue period different from the hunter cowboy in “The Deer’s Eye, The Hunter’s Nose”, not moved by love of animals or love of anything.

Dorn’s accomplishments cannot be properly evaluated if his engagement with ideas is counted as the major measure. Dorn himself has said that “his use of Hedegger and Levi-Strauss is playful, light, and the categorical discriminations that count heavily for didactic poets – between honorable and pernicious behavior, say – double back on themselves and dissolve in *Slinger*” (Von Hallberg, “Marvellous Accidentalism” 85). He does not consider judgment and understanding as ends in themselves, but vehicles of wit and his true muse. He is a spectator to the “fantasies and distractions” of popular American culture and, at least, for a decade, he covered the mass-culture. His note is that of a commentator, not of a teacher or preacher in this endeavour. He finds his writings secondary to

the subject matter and to the soul and mannerisms of the nation. Many may find his poems not very deep or wise, and a few, inconsistent. Even then they are very lively. He utilized this quality as a fine raw material for his poetry.

Joel Oppenheimer was a student of Olson at the Black Mountain College in the 1950s and published in the avant-garde journals such as *Origin* and *Black Mountain Review*. Earlier, he was influenced by E. E. Cummings and Don Marquis and later he achieved the status of a successful poet with the influence of the poetry of William Carlos Williams and the poetic theories of Olson. Along with Olson, Duncan, Creeley and Dorn, he also appeared in the first section of Donald Allen's anthology, *The New American Poetry*. His discursive style and the involvement with open poetry makes him a typical Black Mountain poet, and he never failed to profess the pulse of the time and temper of New York in his writings. He followed a different style while composing a poem, and his experiments with lower case letters remain a unique feature in American Poetry since 1945.

Oppenheimer did not begin writing poems seriously until he joined Black Mountain College, and his formal education as a poet started only in the 1950s. The first period of his poetic career lasted for a decade and during this period he wrote *The Dancer* (1951) as a tribute to the Black Mountain dancer Katherine Litz, *The Dutiful Son* (1956) and *The Love Bit*

(1962). The poems of this period focus mainly on three characteristics: the formal instruction he received at Black Mountain and the influence of personalities like Olson and Creeley; the attention he was paying to the form of poetry; and finally some symbols, motifs and traits which Olson developed in the later stages of his poetic career. Similar to other Black Mountain Poets, Oppenheimer also shares a belief in the importance of the poetic voice, which is “a poem ought to almost be able to read itself.” His notion of voice derives from Olson’s concept of breath as discussed in his “Projective Verse” essay. Gaining “energy” from Olson’s instructions, Oppenheimer insists writing as a total act involving everything “below and above chest” and not merely an intellectual one. In “A Song Before Bed”, he says

what the breath
sounds like is
all i have to know.

what the breath
sounds like. (*The Love Bit*)

Oppenheimer is a curious observer of his own craft and such attitude is apparent in several poems of the first period.

Oppenheimer uses rhythmic words which are non sensical in “The Sliding Pond Sonnet”.

first she come down it ta dum ta dum ta
 straight then she ta ta ta dum ta dum ta
 hung by her heels on fi de fi de de
 her back come down and stopped fi de fi de
 by breaking down against the ta ta dum ta
 sides. (*The Dutiful Son*)

The non-sense words towards the end of each line complete the iambic pentameter pattern, and thus, maintain the consistency. The words also provide a rhyme scheme which serves as an attempt to function within the outmoded “non-projective” form. Oppenheimer’s lines are a parody of the sonnet form which can be considered as his rejection of the older verse forms.

Many of the poems in *Love Bit* express Oppenheimer’s concern with form and his interest to draw the attention of the readers towards this concern. “Formal Verse, Father of Seventy-Three” deserves consideration in this respect. After the first stanza of the poem, he raises the question: “how’s that for a quatrain huh bayby / how’s that for a quatrain” Oppenheimer identified rhythm as a matter of technique and he experiments with it in “Triplets”. In the first part he uses just a word or two in each line and the lines run up to seventeen. With the same words he composed the second section which has hardly three lines, “thus for the

warm and loving heart / the inmost and most private part / shall ever be
sweet eros' dart," whereas the next section comprises of five lines.

thus for the warm
and loving heart the
inmost and most
private part shall ever be
sweet eros' dart.

Similarly, in "Mare Nostrum" also he applies technical experimentation by repeating the same words in different lines. The poem opens with:

a bosom of
green buds,
ass like a
valentine.

and this poem ends with "... a / bosom of green buds, also / an ass like a
valentine, etc." George Butterick, in "Joel Oppenheimer", comments that
Oppenheimer's earlier poems "explore and celebrate the young poet's
world as it begins to form around him" (135).

The years 1959-1971 saw the second stage of Oppenheimer's poetic
career and this period was more prolific. He wrote three volumes of poetry,
other than the writing of three plays and a volume of short stories. The
poems of this period share many characteristics similar to those of the first.
He almost deals with the same themes – the "existence of private

universes, the danger of isolation, the need for love as a means of breaking out of the confines of the rational life” (Thibodaux 25). But there are some significant differences also. These poems are dominated by a new voice capable of exhibiting direct statement of themes and much more graphic sexual imagery being observed in the first period. Not only that, he employs new motifs and symbols to present his innovative themes. His interest lies in “reaching out for new materials, the expanding of horizons, and the getting into social and political areas,” says Whitney Jones, in “An Interview with Joel Oppenheimer” published in *St. Andrews Review* (52). He expands his primary concern of inter personal relations to political and social issues which are “actually the study of human relationships on the larger scale” (Butterick 136). His intention to incorporate larger issues renders new perspectives to his familiar themes.

Oppenheimer’s second period poems are also noted for their direct statement of solipsistic themes. In “Shooting the Moon,” he speaks elaborately on man’s unwillingness to “accept one whit of reality alien / to your own reality” (*In Time* 12). A similar concept is disclosed in “I Think I Need a Drink”:

like any other i believe that
 which i want to, reading, reading
 everything except possibly the
 truth of it into each

separate act. (*In Time* 21)

He speaks directly about the world he has created in “A Five Act Play”.

Another characteristic of the second period poems is the theme of isolation, which is “the individual becoming dangerously isolated in the private world of his own perceptions” (Thibodaux 28). In “Grown Alba”, he employs direct statement:

that mornings are hard when
 there is someone you can't
 talk to i learned long
 enough ago and do not need
 relearning. (*In Time* 48)

“Mea Culpa” is a touching expression of such isolation lacking love, tenderness and caring which is so agonizing.

to listen
 painfully to some sad
 story out of my own
 sad past and not to
 offer some assistance
 that is the sin.

you were *not* tender! you
 did *not care!* you, like me. (*In Time* 31)

Oppenheimer uses the insomniac motif so consistently in the second period poems that it becomes characteristic of the poetry of that period and of all his literary achievements after 1960. He presents a woman sleeping in “Four Photographs by Richard Kirstel: C”:

... i
 wish we could all rest so
 peaceably, i wish our lovers
 would sleep next to us
 with as little worry. (*On Occasion* 76)

He develops the theme of sleep motif in “Book Review”:

the man who sleeps and
 cannot sleep, the man who
 dreads sleep, who dreads
 awakening, who can't go on
 from tiredness and yet cannot
 get to sleep. (*On Occasion* 88)

The persona is of the view that human beings sleep comfortably because of the world that they live in. The sleeper is contented and fortunate, and he is at ease with himself and others. The poet's only concern is that the sleeper sleeps with his back to someone or something and the man in “The Rain” sleeps with his back to the sea. Such an image is an ideal representation of the poet's concept of separation and isolation.

The third period of Oppenheimer's poetic development includes three volume of poems: *The Woman Poems* (1975), *Names, Dates and Places* (1978) and *At Fifty* (1982). Other than these, a few more poems remain yet uncollected. These poems are "occasional poems and discursive monologues" that continue the rambling meditation and honest, earned wisdom that Oppenheimer has consistently sought" (Butterick 140). The poems of this period are structurally similar to those of the first, that is the longer lines and poems of the second period give way to shorter lines and poems in the third. He claims that he was fighting with the lines in the same way he fought with them during the first period and he believes "it's got to sound right" (Jones 51). But the apparent breakthrough in the third period has little inclination to form. Another notable element of the third period is his discovery of the ultimate symbol that unites his ideas towards universe and how man is related to it. It is the symbol of the Great Mother whose presence is quite noteworthy in most of his poems published after 1972, and *The Woman Poems* is devoted to the development of such a symbol. The source of this concept of Oppenheimer is the essay of Robert Bly, the American poet, author, activist and leader of the Mythopoetic Men's Movement in the United States, titled "I Came Out of the Mother Naked" published in *Sleepers Joining Hands*.

Oppenheimer finds the Great Mother as “the necessary symbol of the universe, of the objective world outside the individual” (Thibodaux 50). The Great Mother herself finds a place near the loom in “Weaving Poem”.

she sits at the loom
 quietly, it is the
 goddess’s work
 it clothes us in
 winter, it designs also
 the veils that draw
 us in. (*Woman Poems* 75)

The Great Mother’s rage is not limited to just human existence, but to every facet of existence together. She “brings to birth and nourishes what is born” and is not limited to just people, but to all animate beings as well. Nature’s ways are inappropriate; sometimes she can be awesome and dreadful and human life itself is inconsistent and thus possibility of the existence of “Stone Mother or Tooth Mother” should also be considered. The final link in this cycle is the “Death Mother”.

The manifold elements of the Great Mother are related with the four original elements in “Found Son Poem”.

if water is good,
 death is earth; if
 the fire is

ecstasy, the air
is stone. (*Woman Poems* 34)

Each of the four mothers recognizes themselves as the four seasons in
“Season Poem I”.

... ecstasy
held us all summer, and
death comes now in the
autumn. next we will
hide from the tooth
mother her cold winds
swirling around her head
and no matter how we
hide she will find us.
spring mother, good mother
bring us the light. (*Woman Poems* 67)

The Great Mother transforms into natural order in “Natural Order Poem” and each of her four manifestations are presented as each phase of the life cycle. The poem begins by introducing “spring king” and “good mother” directly related with birth. “...the spring king is / crazy and dying / long live good mother” (*Woman Poems* 62). The second stanza presents “the thunder god” in all his strength and vigour exemplifying the robust nature of youth.

the thunder god is
 blind and dying
 how shall he aim the bolts
 long live death mother (*Woman Poems* 62)

The third stanza with “the stilled” sea god is an expression of the feebleness of old age and the imminent death. “...the sea god is / stilled, not moving, dying / long live stone mother” (*Woman Poems* 62). The fourth stanza is associated with the ultimate reality – death: “the god below the earth / is deaf he cannot hear the flowers growing / long live the mother of ecstasy” (*Woman Poems* 62). The poem thus progresses from birth to youth to old age to death and it follows a natural order with each phase associating with one of the mothers. The repeated “dying” in each stanza emphasizes the fact that death is the end of natural order. But the great mothers like Mother Nature won’t perish, they remain eternal. “In her manifestations, the Great Mother is all the elements out of which the universe is constructed: she is the seasons of the year, the life cycle, the natural order, and the objective reality outside all the private realities” (Thibodaux 53).

Oppenheimer’s poems are also significant in their treatment of sex and love. Sexual desire acts as a connecting link between man and nature in the first two periods, whereas it connects him to the Great Mother in the third period. Often he uses graphic sexual imagery to highlight her as

having sexual relationship with humans. Her “importance as a sexual value” limits her in attaining an abstract status and she continues to remain as “an immediate event” (Bertholf, “On The Great” 35). She is sexually important, she becomes part of another mystic universe, and she is simultaneously part of and separate from the solipsistic universe in which the poet has absolute faith. “Plug Poem” amplifies this idea of Great Mother being in two places at the same time. Oppenheimer affirms sex as a means of uniting all of the solipsistic worlds in “Paranoia Poem”. He reaffirms the role of sex as a means of attaining life in “Written”: “i felt desire / but wanted love” (*At Fifty* 4). In “Aphrodite”, the love goddess complains: “they just want meat / to ease themselves / and not her self” (*At Fifty* 34). His poetry advocates the philosophy that salvation can be attained through love and the Great Mother provides this love in the third period. In “Mother Poem”, he laments, “mother you have / enough love do we?” (*Woman Poems* 27). She functions as “the sustaining ideal in the face of despair, psychic death, and sterile rationality” in the third period (Thibodaux 60). Oppenheimer is a master of occasional poems, and life and the rituals related to it was a matter of celebration for him. So he insisted that life, love, and erotic desires must be celebrated along with marriages, change of seasons and even death.