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The Arrival of *The Black Mountain Review*

You spot a new literary magazine in the rack in a little bookshop in New York City, brushing against the latest *Origin*, in sight of *The Hudson*, *Kenyon*, and *Paris Review*s. *The Black Mountain Review* is emblazoned on the cover over a kaleidoscopic pattern of red and green triangles. Bottom right corner: "Spring 1954 / 75 cents." To the left of the design, three names appear: Charles Olson, Robert Hellman, René Laubiès. Olson's name rings a bell; his poems have appeared regularly in *Origin*,[1] and he's had a few poems in *Harper's* and *Atlantic Monthly*. Several copies of *In Cold Hell, In Thicket*, his first book of poetry – which is, in fact, *Origin* 8 – is now stashed in the Poetry Section between Frank O'Hara and George Oppen. But Olson is best known for a startling essay entitled "Projective Verse" that had been published in 1950 and was subsequently boosted by William Carlos Williams, the kind of boon most avant-garde writers only dream of. Olson's name on the cover conjures a rush of promise, a dash of challenge.

You pluck up the new magazine and thumb through it. The first poem is one of Olson's: "On First Looking Out of La Cosa's Eyes." If you're not yet versed in Olson's style, the experience is certainly surprising and likely bewildering. The poem begins this way:

Martin Behaim – and nothing
between insula Azores
and Cipangu
(Candyn
somewhere there also
where spizerei

and yes,
in the Atlantic, one
floating island : de Sant
brand an

Jarringly unlike popular magazine verse (where *are* the verses?), nothing genteel or sentimental about it. Olson builds on arcane historical references – without providing footnotes, of course. Today's readers can easily look up these references online: Martin Behaim created the first globe of the earth just before Europeans learned of the existence of the lands that came to be called the Americas. On Behaim's globe, Cipangu – that is, Japan – was just around the bend from the Azores. Juan La Cosa, a 15th century Spanish navigator and mapmaker who had sailed with Columbus, constructed one of the earliest world maps that included the New World.

Readers in the 1950s with few quick-reference resources to hand may have stood baffled, gaping at the first poem of this new magazine, not grasping what it was about. They would recognize that the poem's title echoes Keats's "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer" and probably see how both poems consider the experience of viewing new worlds, though Olson shifts Keats's perspective from inward to outward, from the past to the future. They would have seen a scattering of words that make obscure allusions in a peculiar syntax. "On First Looking Out of La Cosa's Eyes" situates the reader in the place / time of emerging knowledge. Poets have handled the subject of navigation to the New World in any number of ways; we might think of Walt Whitman's "Passage to India" or his final poem, "A Thought of Columbus." Whitman did not write in the standard verse forms of his day, true, but his intentions were clear to his readers. Olson is following a rationale for poetry radically different from Whitman's. As he declared in "Projective Verse," "FORM IS NEVER MORE THAN AN EXTENSION OF CONTENT," a phrase he attributed to Robert Creeley, a poet who also appeared in *Origin*. Getting back to the poem at hand, we may venture that it traces the patterns of discovery, the movement from perplexity and ignorance to a hazy comprehension of a new world obscured in the mist, yet one already gained by the poet who stands on the dim shore, beckoning. The poet challenges readers to put the pieces together, to build from clues and fragments, until they participate in a poem that recreates a sense of discovery of the, well, of the New World. Experientially, the form of this poem is an extension of its content.

In this way, the poem is aptly situated as the leadoff poem in a new magazine that introduces another emerging world – the New American

Poetry. Olson's poem both heralds and typifies new possibilities in poetic forms; *The Black Mountain Review* announces itself as a vehicle for new forms, new expressions, and new poets. On first looking into it, one may imagine the reader's "wild surmise."

The Black Mountain Review is one of the most significant publications in US literary history, challenging the contented sphere of New York intellectuals and East Coast establishment poets that held sway in the post-War era. The magazine's seven issues from 1954 to 1957 introduced important new poets who were acknowledged in 1960 in Donald Allen's groundbreaking *New American Poetry* as the "Black Mountain Poets."

The Black Mountain Review did not appear in a vacuum. It was one of dozens of little magazines available in the US in the middle 1950s. Little literary and arts magazines came and went with the seasons, and keeping up with them could be difficult. The delightful or quirky magazine you saw here one month may not be here the next – or ever. The artistic impetus of little magazines was often robust, nevertheless. Specific titles may have been fleeting, but approximately one hundred and ten experimental journals were typically available world wide, a number that remained constant throughout the 1950s (French 548).

At the time of the magazine's conception, Black Mountain College, founded in 1933 in the North Carolina mountains, was on its last legs. The school's faculty had included such luminaries as Joseph and Anni Albers, Willem and Elaine de Kooning, Buckminster Fuller, Merce Cunningham, John Cage, Franz Kline, M.C. Richards, and more. The social and cultural atmosphere of the Depression Era had shifted by the 1950s, however, and experimental, liberal programs sometimes garnered suspicion and disdain from a public growing less tolerant of liberal ideals. There was pressure within the school's administration to foster a more conventional atmosphere, and over time the school's divided identity weakened its appeal. By 1953, the more conventional faction of the school had diminished; by then, though, only fifteen students were enrolled (Erickson 279) and the school was desperately low on funds.

Poet, teacher, and rector Charles Olson planned to reinvigorate the school's vitality. He had been corresponding for years with Robert Creeley whom he invited to edit a literary magazine in the hopes that

such a publication might bring renewed attention to the school. From his current home in Mallorca, Spain, Creeley sought submissions from some Black Mountain College students and from various acquaintances and correspondents and put together the first issue. The inaugural publication had 64 pages: eight poems, one short story, an essay, eight reproductions of René Laubiès paintings, and a sheaf of reviews.

When looking back on the venture years later, Creeley summed up his purpose for the magazine:

> it was a place defined by our own activity and accomplished altogether by ourselves – a *place* wherein we might make evident what we, as writers, had found to be significant… . To be published in the *Kenyon Review* was too much like being 'tapped' for a fraternity. It was too often over before one got there, and few if any of one's own fellow writers came too. Therefore we had to be both a press and a magazine absolutely specific to one's own commitments and possibilities. ("Introduction" vii-viii)

Around 500 copies of the initial run were printed inexpensively in Mallorca and shipped to Black Mountain for distribution. For their circulation, Creeley relied on various friends, such as Irving Layton in Montreal, or poet Paul Blackburn who personally distributed the magazine to New York City bookshops.

Into what kind of cultural atmosphere did the review appear? Marjorie Perloff explains that the most-acceptable, most-successful American poetry in the 1950s was required to be "self-contained, coherent, and unified: that it presents, indirectly to be sure, a paradox, oblique truth or special insight, utilizing the devices of irony, concrete imagery, symbolism, and structural economy." That is to say, that it conforms to the attributes of the New Critical version of good poetry. Perloff identifies certain poems by John Crowe Ransom as exemplifying these traits lauded by Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren in their *Understanding Poetry*. Whitman was not particularly admired. "In those days," Allen Ginsberg recalled in a 1996 interview, "Walt Whitman was considered a jerk." By this, he meant that the established gatekeepers of American literature did not admit Whitman as a particularly significant poet, so he was neither frequently nor amply anthologized. At the same time, William Carlos Williams' poetic

techniques (influenced by Ezra Pound) and subject matter had long since been absorbed and no longer seemed revolutionary. Yet Williams' influence was essential for The Black Mountain Poets and related Beat poets such as Ginsberg, whose success fortified Williams' renewed importance.

Thus, at the time of *The Black Mountain Review*'s first issue, the business of poetry in the United States was conducted primarily by poets who typically adhered to the most frequently published and anthologized styles, typically relying on established forms of stanza, rhyme, and meter. Kathryn Van Spanckeren describes the most well-known poets of the time this way:

> Often they were from the U.S. eastern seaboard or the southern part of the country, and taught in colleges and universities. Richard Eberhart and Richard Wilbur; the older Fugitive poets John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, and Robert Penn Warren; such accomplished younger poets as John Hollander and Richard Howard; and the early Robert Lowell are examples. In the years after World War II, they became established and were frequently anthologized. (n. pag.)

An entirely different way of seeing poetry was in the works. Perloff points to little magazine poetry that had been fomenting beneath the stacks of the mass-market glossy magazines and the university-housed poetry journals. "In this context," she points out, "it must have been wholly exhilarating to pick up *The New American Poetry* (1960) and read, in its opening pages, a poem by Charles Olson called 'The Kingfishers.'" (n. pag.)

The striking difference between Olson's language and style and those of most other poems of the day would certainly have been among the reasons for a reader's exhilaration. The status of US poetry had been fashioned decades before. Lisa Steinman, in *Made in America: Science, Technology, and American Modernist Poets* (1987), writes that

> between 1900 and 1930 cultured readers turned to the high sentiments of American genteel poetry, like that of Trumbull Stickney and Thomas Aldrich, while the average American read the sentimental verse of poets like Edgar Guest and James Whitcomb Riley in the leading magazines of the day, such as the *Saturday Evening Post*. Although such poetry was viewed as a refuge from

> the harsh realities of the world, and so as having an almost sacred character, it was not generally taken seriously. Nor were those who wrote poetry. (15)

While upstart factions of poets sporadically challenged the established traditions of their day, the 1950s, as Perloff indicates, had propagated a particularly conformist atmosphere in Unites States poetry. Social conformism was a natural result of the general solidarity of the war effort, with millions marching in uniforms to defeat a common enemy that in the post-war 1950s mutated to aggressive totalitarianism. Conventional thinking held that pressure from outside its borders would bring adherence to American idealism, while pressure from within to conform to standard norms would sustain the US's emergence as a global power.

The rise of mass consumerism and new technologies emblematic of post-war prosperity helped swell the circulation of popular magazines. In fact, this popularization of mass culture had begun even during the war years. Writing in the *Sewanee Review* in 1945, R.P. Blackmur pointed to this commercialization as an obstacle the "serious writer" has always been challenged to overcome, one that he believed to be growing more manifest: the writer needs to satisfy an audience that demands "something less than he could provide." Blackmur claimed that the situation was worsening because of the increasing development of the mass market, where writers were judged "by the standards of the market and neither by the standards of literature nor by those of the whole society" (293). In 1944, he pointed out, *Time* and *Life* had a combined circulation 4,745,000 while the *Saturday Review of Literature* had 23,000. The *Saturday Evening Post* had 3,393,000 while the *Virginia Quarterly* and *The American Scholar* had 3,000 and 5,000, respectively. Blackmur credited *The Saturday Evening Post*'s descent to "the standards of the new illiteracy" for its great increase in circulation (296). Blackmur also diagnosed the decay-via-growth of a once-solid literary stanchion: "The *Atlantic Monthly* was held to 25,000 through the editorship of Bliss Perry, but … when it reduced its standards to those of *Harper's Monthly*, it began to approach *Harper's* circulation" (296).

For Blackmur, the lack of a supportive center, or "cultural capital" of the sort that had been prevalent in pre-war Europe, prevented the long-term development of young, idealistic poets who periodically form "abortive

and sterile groups" (294). Instead of artistic patronage or cultural support on a national scale, Blackmur argued that the country developed mass but lacked intensity. Given the lack of a cultural center, the marketplace dictated the nature of the product; Blackmur concluded that the "theory of a cultural market does not work" (295). Serious writers could not find a market that rewarded serious artistic creation, nor could serious writers rely on universities to support poets and arts, and in their inevitable failing, writing will be merely imitative of what's gone successfully before: "All's Alexandrian else" (298).

Were the conventional tastes of popular market readership so formidable as to deter poets from writing innovative, daring poetry? In 1952 *The Partisan Review* hosted in its pages a forum titled "Our Country and Our Culture," asking a panel of intellectuals and writers to respond to four questions; the primary ones were these: "Must the American intellectual and writer adapt himself to mass culture?" and as a corollary, "Can the tradition of critical non-conformism … be maintained?" ("Our Country" 285). Norman Mailer, predictably maintaining his personal defiance, decried that older intellectuals and writers had changed their attitudes regarding their relationship with America: "The New Criticism seems to have triumphed pretty generally, PR's [*Partisan Review*'s] view of American life is indeed partisan, and a large proportion of writers, intellectuals, critics – whatever we may care to include in the omnibus – have moved their economic luggage from the WPA to the Luce chain, as a writer for *Time* or *Life* once remarked" (298). Mailer cautions that adaptation to the mass culture is less likely to beget art than "propaganda" (301).

Louise Bogan, another contributor to *The Partisan Review*'s forum, likewise calls out the older generation as both catalyzing and rewarding imitation and repetition rather than innovative movements: "'The modern style,' in the graphic and plastic arts, is now the accepted, 'official style' and modern literature has, for some time past, been hardening progressively into a set of recognizable clichés" (562). In the midst of this cultural calcification, Creeley found that he and the poets who were simpatico to his ideals were dissociated from the established presses and magazines. "Either they were dominated by the New Critics with whom we could have

no relation," Creeley believed, "or else they were so general in character, that no active center of coherence was possible" ("Introduction" vi).

Poet and publisher Allan Dowling continued the exploration of the theme in *The Partisan Review*. He claimed that it was "very difficult for the average artist, or intellectual, because of the extremely high costs of living, to spend his time in the few centers where he may meet and mingle with others of his own craft, and find a market for his product" (293). Though his reference seems directed to urban settings, he may as well have been referring to Black Mountain College. By 1954, the student body there had dwindled to nine students, the dining hall and dormitories were closed, and students lived in cottages and purchased their own food. In effect, Black Mountain, which the drama teacher Wesley Huss described as "a community of subsistence dwellers," became something of an artist colony (Harris 174; cited in Erickson 279). Michael Rumaker, a student at the college who sought a place that might nurture his poetry and also accept his homosexuality, was undaunted by the spartan conditions: "Perhaps I had found a safe place – a rare enclave in America at that time – for my own queer self" (qtd. in Erickson 280). Students and faculty alike were finding, despite the school's financial challenges, a supportive center for their art, a mini-version of the sort called for by R.P. Blackmur. *The Black Mountain Review* served on the one hand as a cultural tool to funnel the poems that grew in such a space as this into the general reading community. On the other hand, the review was itself a space that nurtured poetry and demanded a nonconformist spirit of art.

Out of this space, a theory of poetry arose that matched in intensity and originality the experimentation in the other disciplines for which Black Mountain College was known. Olson had been corresponding for years with Creeley, and together they had hammered out the core ideas that Olson promulgated in his essay on Projective Verse. In prioritizing "open" form poetry, Creeley explained that "forms accepted from another time or usage carry with them a predetermined character which may or may not prove inimicable [sic] to the poem under hand." Instead of relying on traditional notions of poetry centered on forms such as sonnets, or on metrics and conventional rhythms, Creeley and Olson believed the poet ought to rely on the breath, the way a person says a thing (Layton 25). Ultimately, the poem stands as an autonomous whole of its own creation: "a poem suffers

too much if it is considered as anything but the given poem, under hand … a poem is an actual high energy construct" (27). Creeley goes on to say that a poet may use the sonnet form, if that in fact suits the purpose of his poem – if the poet intends irony, for example. "Form is always an extension of content," he maintained.

From this background, *The Black Mountain Review* arrived in the mass-market milieu of the mid-1950s with Charles Olson's leadoff poem and its startling presaging of the magazine's energy. The second poem in the review was written by Thomas White – a pseudonym for Robert Creeley, it turns out. "Song" strains against the ballad stanza ("I would marry a very rich woman / who had no use for stoves / and send my present wife / all her old clothes") much in the manner he had described; a sonnet form may enhance the irony of a poem.

Creeley's core of contributing editors – Olson, Blackburn, Layton, Cid Corman (editor of *Origin* who not only supported the new venture but sent Creeley his mailing list), Kenneth Rexroth, and later Robert Duncan – were all more or less dedicated to the principles of open-form or Projective Verse. The idea of Projective Verse is best seen as a starting point, a concept of how poetry operates, rather than a proscriptive guide for how to write it. Even sympathetic readers did not always firmly understand the poems or stories they were reading. Michael Rumaker, who would publish important stories in *The Black Mountain Review*, initially was perplexed by Creeley and his work when Creeley arrived on the campus in 1954: "He came at you out of nowhere, with no antecedents (as I thought then), with his perplexing sensibilities and acute but difficult perceptions. Whatever was he talking about?" (137). Seasoned poets, too, sometimes struggled to understand Creeley and Olson and their ideas of poetics. Creeley relates that when one of his stories was accepted at *Kenyon Review*, editor John Crowe Ransom said he didn't understand it, and Robert Penn Warren said it didn't have a plot. Creeley was cowed by their response: "It was like being the awful kid at school who was doing something irrevocably wrong" (Faas 167).

Canadian poet and long-time Creeley correspondent Irving Layton put the question directly to Creeley in 1954 in one of his many letters. In this case, he was complaining that he and other interested, intelligent readers struggled to comprehend Creeley's recent review of William Carlos

William's poetry. More generally, he confessed his bafflement at most of what Creeley and Olson wrote in their expository writing, claiming they had "developed a strategy of syntax, a method of leapfrogging nouns and verbs, a detective game of missing connectives which makes the greatest demands upon a reader's alertness. If the aim is to mystify the reader rather than to enlighten him, you succeed admirably." Layton put forth a request: "Why don't you write a simple expressive English which can be read and comprehended without too much straining … ?" (168) If Creeley were to do so, Layton maintained, then he might draw more readers to his verse. Instead, his opaque explanations were prohibitive.

But Layton's retort was mild compared to the critical attacks of poets who were unsympathetic to the Black Mountain poets' Projective Verse / open form poetry. James Dickey on Olson's theories of verse: "One is never sure one understands it! He has all kinds of notions about the relationship of 'the line to breathing and other bodily processes,' and he uses a curious and perhaps private vocabulary to talk about them. … The test of all theories of poetry is the kind of poetry they produce, and this is where Olson and his followers seem to me to fail all but abjectly. Their work has absolutely no personal rhythm to it; it all comes out of the tiresome and predictable prosiness of William Carlos Williams" (196).

Dickey's reaction generally represents the New Critical response to the Black Mountain Poets, but not all readers of the *Black Mountain Review* were steeped in New Critical interpretations, nor were all New Critical-trained readers as hostile. For the next three years, in trying conditions and against the odds, *The Black Mountain Review* was regularly stocked on that rack in the little New York bookshop, radiating the news about the New World. The journal appealed strongly to a new phalanx of poets who were bringing out new poems in new styles.

Notes

[1] Denise Levertov, Irving Layton, Robert Duncan, Paul Carroll, Paul Blackburn, and Robert Creeley had been published in *Origin* by 1954 and would appear in *The Black Mountain Review*.

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