

## (17) Projective Verse and Black Mountain School

Charles Olson, Robert Creeley, Edward Dorn

### Black Mountain School (1950s)

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| Place & Persons  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• a loose constellation of poets who studied or taught at Black Mountain College (1933–1957) in North Carolina and who saw their guide and fatherfigure in <b>Charles Olson</b>, teacher and rector at Black Mountain (1951–1956)</li> <li>• found outlet for their work in the avant-garde magazines <i>Origin</i> (1951–1985, with breaks), edited notably by Sid Corman (1924–2004), and <i>Black Mountain Review</i> (1954–1957), edited while it lasted by Robert Creeley</li> <li>• included <b>Robert Duncan</b> (1919–1988), <b>Edward Dorn</b> (1929–1999), <b>Jonathan Williams</b> (1929–2008) etc.</li> </ul> |
| Ayes & Nays      | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• rejected the prevailing verse mode of the Academic School and its demands on erudition and formal precision, as represented by Richard Wilbur (b. 1921), William Meredith (1919–2007) or Howard Nemerov (1920–1991)</li> <li>• refused also the mainstream Confessional School and its notion of ‘the private-soul-at-any-public-wall’ poetry</li> <li>• valued the work of Modernist poets, as <b>Ezra Pound</b> (1885–1972) or <b>William Carlos Williams</b> (1883–1963)</li> </ul>  |
| Aims & Relations | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• sought a liberation of the poetic ‘I’ from the <b>oppressive rationalism</b> and for adding the projective dimension to the poet’s consciousness, which would revive the sensitivity to internal and external natural and cosmic forces</li> <li>• followed the earlier innovative attempts of Imagism and Vorticism (1910s–1920s) and of Objectivism (1930s)</li> <li>• foreshadowed the Deep Image School (1960s) with its exploration of the irrational aspects of the human mind</li> </ul>   |

### Projective Verse

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| Projective, Percussive, Prospective | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• introduced in the first important post-WWII poetry manifesto, Charles Olson’s essay ‘Projective Verse’ (1950)</li> <li>• the essay contrasts the traditional non-projective verse, or closed verse, which is the kind of verse bred by the contemporary press, and the new projective verse, or <b>open</b> verse, which should become the mode of the future</li> </ul>  |
| Composition by Field                | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• discards the inherited line, stanza and over-all form and suggests a <b>composition by field</b> instead, bases the composition on the possibilities of <b>breath</b> whose pressures are to be attended as much as the acquisitions of ear</li> <li>• considers the two halves of a poem to be the <b>syllable</b>, born from the head by the way of the ear, and the <b>line</b>, born from the heart by the way of the breath; only the syllable and the line together constitute a projective poem</li> <li>• believes the syllable superior to rime and metre and the line superior to tenses, syntax and grammar generally</li> <li>• recommends the use of various spacing to indicate breath, for instance a line indention meaning to hold breath</li> </ul> |
| Projective Principles               | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• in terms of the kinetics, it must <b>transfer the same amount of energy</b> from the poet through the poem to the audience, any slackness takes off attention so rhetorical devices and descriptive functions must be used carefully</li> <li>• with respect to the principle of the projective verse, <b>form must never be more than an extension of content</b></li> <li>• as to the process of composing, <b>one perception must immediately and directly lead to a further perception</b> so that the ideal projective poem becomes more ‘the act of the instant’ than ‘the act of thought about the instant’</li> </ul>   |

### Charles Olson (1910–1970)

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| Dynamic Poetry | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• requires for poetry to be dynamic, ‘art as process’, sought not art as imitation of nature but that <b>art be nature</b></li> <li>• some of his earliest poems from the 1940s already celebrate the movement of nature in ‘full circle’ and attack the tendency to perceive life and literature in closed terms, since the 1950s his poems further develop this view</li> <li>• his later shorter pieces as well as the ‘Maximus Series’ exercise his sense of poems as performative moral acts</li> </ul> |
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| Criticism of Melville | <p><b>Call Me Ishmael</b><sup>1</sup> (1947)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• a critical work on Herman Melville (1819–1891), which declares ‘<b>SPACE</b> to be the central fact to man born in America’, spelled ‘large because it comes large here’, and starts his concern with spatial rather than linear forms</li> <li>• describes the mythological foundations of the American literary tradition, labelling <i>Moby-Dick</i> as a heroic epic</li> <li>• seeks a ‘usable tradition’ in the American continent rather than to turn to European or Asian cultures, follows the <b>nativism</b> of William Carlos Williams rather than the expatriates like Ezra Pound or T. S. Eliot (1888–1965)</li> </ul> |
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| The Poem as a Flow | <p><b>‘The Kingfishers’</b> (1949)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• the poem expresses the author’s belief in serial <b>open</b> forms both in the literal sense and by enacting such forms</li> <li>• assumes that nothing can be said exactly and finally, heavily employs repetition, parenthesis and apposition</li> <li>• metamorphoses recurring figures according to the altered conditions in which they are placed, together with them changes also the line in lively responsiveness, denying to see the poem as anything but a continuous flow</li> <li>• discards the worship of ancient Greek and Roman classics to replace them with local <b>Maya</b> and <b>Aztec</b> cultures</li> </ul> |
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| Poetry Collections | <p><b><i>In Cold Hell, In Thicket</i></b> (1953), <b><i>The Distances</i></b> (1960), <b><i>Maximus from Dogtown</i></b> (1961)</p> |
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<sup>1</sup> The title is the opening sentence of Melville’s *Moby-Dick* (1851). The Biblical Ishmael was a son of Abraham and his maid Hagar.

- Individual Poems **‘The Lordly and Isolate Satyrs’** (1956), **‘As the Dead Prey Upon Us’** (1956), **‘Variations Done for Gerald Van de Wiele’** (1956)
- poems outside of the Maximus series, the last mentioned refers to an art student at Black Mountain College
- Collected Poems ***Archaeologist of Morning*** (1970)
- collected poems, the title reflects the poet’s idea of himself as an ‘archaeologist of morning’ rather than a poet
- Maximus Epic Series ***Maximus Poems*** (1983)
- the author’s own version of the **American epic**, continues the tradition of extended sequences as Ezra Pound’s *The Cantos* (1930–1970) and *The Pisan Cantos* (1948) and William Carlos Williams’s *Paterson* (1946–1958)
  - features the speaker as an omniscient version of his creator, called for the Neoplatonic philosopher of the name
  - introduces the speaker as an ‘Isolated person in **Gloucester**, Massachusetts’, which is the author’s home town, and addresses his fellow citizens as an observer, correspondent, social critic, historian, pedagogue and prophet
  - conceives some of the poems as letters, written to himself and to the world and ultimately to all their readers
- Knowing the Known ***Maximus, to Himself*** (1953)
- aims at a specific reading of the history of the small fishing town of Gloucester to enable a revelation of truth, presents Gloucester as a **microcosm of America**, makes one particular small town or ‘city’ into the ideal ‘City’
  - embarks on a journey which is in search of the near, ‘the thing you’re after / may be around the bend’, seeks to avoid the evasions of modern mass culture and to build a new community based on humility, curiosity and care
  - tries to rediscover the familiar, to deal with the ‘facts’ and particulars spontaneously and as if for the first time
- Unlearning Bad Habits ***Maximus, to Himself*** (1953)
- the poem states that the speaker has ‘had to learn the simplest things / last. Which made for difficulties’, not that truth was intrinsically difficult but because he had become ‘estranged / from that which was most familiar’
  - the habits of mind and language that had been entrenched for centuries have to be unlearned, man must turn his consciousness against itself in order to cure the estrangement of the modern society and to make a new start
- Newspaper Letters ***Maximus to Gloucester*** (1993)
- a collection of letters and poems written to the author’s hometown **newspapers** *Gloucester Times* in the 1960s
  - aimed to keep the town a ‘living entity’, supporting the preservation of historic buildings or saving wetlands
- Robert Creeley (1926–2005)**
- Writing Influences
- born in Plymouth, New Hampshire, travelled widely but never abandoned the sensibilities of his native culture
  - involved with the **free-flowing experiments** of Abstract Expressionism, represented for instance by the painter Jackson Pollock, and modern jazz, performed for example by Charlie Parker, Miles Davis or Thelonious Monk
  - interested in life insofar as it lacked intentional control, viewed the artist as someone immersed in the work he creates, experiencing its energy, involved in its movement and limited in expression only by the nature of the art
  - influenced by what he termed a ‘**New England temper**’, tendency to be hung up, suffer from pain and tension
  - inherited a ‘sense of speech as a laconic, ironic, compressed way of saying something to someone’ and the inclination ‘to say as little as possible as often as possible’, so that the form becomes an extension of the content
- Writing Principles
- fascinated by the way the poem grows out of the active relationship between the perceiver and the perceived
  - seeks a poetry of ‘realisation, a reification<sup>2</sup> of what is’, ‘a process of discovery’ of both vocabulary and vision
  - eschews generalizations, abstractions and colourful comparisons in favour of patient attentiveness, manifests a willingness to follow the peculiar shape and movement of an experience, no matter how unpredictable it may be
  - produces sparse, brittle poems that use their silences just as effectively as their speech and that present the cardinal **sin as cowardice**, a reluctance to resist and challenge the several forces that would imprison us in habit
  - his poems evolve on both a sequential grammatical level and a cumulative linear level, each line reaffirms or modifies the sense of the sentence and the total argument, each word exists in contrapuntal tension with others
- Writing Features
- employs a terse, economic style resembling a sequence of verbal gestures charged with emotional expression
  - his central feeling is pain, but also **humour**, his stammering phrasing deliberately interferes with his **lyricism**
  - his talents are lyrical, the majority of his verse explores his personal, emotional and frequently erotic experience
  - writes brief lyric poems, improvised miniatures of **everyday life** in short free-verse lines and **simple language**
- Individual Poems **‘The Door’** (1959)
- a traditional love poem, uses the door as a metaphor of the elusiveness of the ideal woman and the ideal poem
- ‘A Wicker Basket’** (1959)
- a poem projecting the altered perceptions of a soft-drug user, one of the first poets to succeed with this theme
- ‘I Know a Man’** (1962)

<sup>2</sup> ‘Reification’ refers to the conversion of an abstract concept into something concrete, or, to the viewing of the abstract as concrete.

- a poetic miniature of a seemingly trivial drunken conversation of two friends in a car, uses humour and irony

Poetry Collections *A Form of Women* (1959), *For Love: Poems 1950–1960* (1962), *Words* (1967), *Pieces* (1969), *Hello* (1978), *Later* (1979)

### Edward Dorn (1929–1999)

- Influences & Modes
- the most radical poet associated with the Black Mountain School, author of indignant swiftian **satirical** poetry
  - studied American Indian culture as an alternative to the fake American democracy and American imperialism
  - influenced by Charles Olson in examining the tension of the intended and the actual language communication
  - wrote in a range of modes, including lyric poetry, meditative verse, poetic parodies and language experiments

Poetry Volumes *From Gloucester Out* (1964), *Idaho Out* (1965), *Geography* (1965)

- the titles of his earliest poetry volumes suggest his coping with the influence and concern with space of Olson

### *Gunslinger* (1968–1975)

- Verse Epic Masterpiece
- an extended mock-heroic epic consisting of four books supplemented by two connective prose commentaries
  - parodies the cult of the masculine hero and other myths of American history, including that of the **Wild West**
  - reminds of T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922), William Carlos Williams's *Paterson* or Charles Olson's *Maximus Poems*, unlike Olson however views **time as more relevant than space** whose importance he denies
- Journey to Nowhere
- follows the journey of the uprooted protagonist from a specific New Mexico town along the Rio Grande River to increasingly surrealistic and eventually allegorical locations, as the stereotypical small-town of Universe City
  - features as the Gunslinger's company a horse riding in a coach rather than pulling it, a moralizing lady from a western dance saloon, an extravagant scientist named Dr Flamboyant or the hippie drug addict Kool Everything
  - reminds of the works of postmodernist fiction writers, as Kurt Vonnegut (1922–2007) or Thomas Pynchon (b. 1937), in its exploitation of the entropic threat, fluidity of space and time and stock phrases of popular culture