

Writing with the Label POEM: Forming and Defining a Poem in Creeley and Duncan

Mais N. Al-Shara'h^a, ^aAssistant Professor of English Literature University of Jordan,

Postmodernity is associated with loss, chaos, or the pending-ness of meaning, but postmodernism proposes a local meaning where readers comprehend their own meaning. This paper aims at offering a close-reading to the poetry of two Black Mountain poets: Robert Creeley and Robert Duncan. This paper contributes a study on the Black Mountain poets: Robert Creeley and Robert Duncan. Both poets are generally read through the postmodern deferral of meaning lens; however, this research introduces the underlying literary poetics offered in their poetry. Although Creeley and Duncan offer many contradicting styles of writing, both form and define poetry in the same sense. The researcher offers a thorough analysis of selected poems composed by Creeley and Duncan where comparisons and contradictions are drawn between the two. The outcome of the study attempts to offer a definition for the Black Mountain postmodern poetry, in general, and Creeley and Duncan's definition of poetry, in specific.

Key words: *Poems, Postmodernism, Black Mountain poets*

Introduction

Postmodern poetry is a form of poetry that came around in the 1960's. A number of poets came about during that time, most of them being able to be categorised in what Steven Watson calls the "Rebel Poets of the 1950s" which consists of the Beat Generation, the San Francisco Renaissance, the Black Mountain Poets, and the New York School. Each from their respective locales; Watson states that while some critics looked at them as misfits and "destroyers of language," they were quite the opposite. He claims that "these writers actually read voraciously--both classical and modern literature--and pursued the perennial avant-garde imperative to reinvigorate literary culture by destroying the hackneyed and moribund" (Watson).



Black Mountain consisted of a “group of poets that formed an important part of the avant-garde of American poetry in the 1950s, publishing innovative yet disciplined verse in the *Black Mountain Review* (1954–57), which became a leading forum of experimental verse.” They were led by Robert Creeley, Robert Duncan and Charles Olson, all teachers at the Black Mountain College. Olson could be considered their leader, as they were said to be guided by him through his essay “Projective Verse” and poetry. Olson focused on the process; he thought the creative process of poetry is how the poet would be able to connect the poem and the reader.

Often postmodernity is associated with loss, chaos, or the pending-ness of meaning, but the postmodern overcomes this conflict by proposing a local meaning where meaning is derived from the reader(s). As a reading of Robert Creeley and Robert Duncan, this paper is concerned with defining poetry through a close reading to both Creeley and Duncan’s poems. This paper will focus on the contrast and the uniqueness of the two authors who are from the Black Mountain Poets. Through analysis of some of their works, this paper tries to conclude with a suggested definition of poetry, derived from their perceptions. The paper first discusses Creeley’s identification with poetry, through close reading of lines from each of these poems: “Water Music,” “The Window,” “I Keep to Myself Such Measures,” “The Language,” “The Rhythm,” “For W.C.W.,” “Short and Clear,” and “The Pattern.” Then, this paper reads a selection of Duncan’s poems: “Poetry, a Natural Thing,” “Descriptions of Imaginary Poetries,” “Everything Speaks to Me,” “Poetry Disarranged,” “A Poem in Stretching,” and “Writing as Writing.” This paper will try to analyse both authors and their poetry and develop the meaning of poetry.

Starting with Robert Creeley, who is said to be considered “not only one of the major innovators of postwar poetry, he is one of the great American poets” (Bernstein, 377). Creeley’s relationship with Charles Olson had a huge effect on his poetic future. Though he and Olson taught at the same college, and were bound by the same movement, their styles could be seen as opposite to each other. Whereas Olson focused on content, Creeley’s focus is based on form (Bernstein, 376). Thus, Creeley etched his name in history. Not only is he known for the contributions he made to the postwar poetry, but he is also known for helping “to define an emerging counter-tradition to the literary establishment...” (Riggin).

In “Water Music,” Creeley vocalises the beauty of words and the power they behold. With their musicality and their activeness, words for Creeley loudly bounce in a way where the readers cannot but set their eyes on them, following their motion. Though this bouncing seems disruptive in its nature, the surroundings seem to find it natural. Creeley says:

The words are a beautiful music.
The words bounce like in water.

Water Music,
Loud in the clearing

Off the boats,
Birds, leaves. (Creeley, 354)

The poem “Water Music” provides an artistic compliment, expressing the fluidity of “The words” as with water and music. The qualities that water and the words of Creeley’s poems share are innumerable, however, stating some could assist in managing a definition for Creeley’s poetry. For example, the words in a poem are sometimes still and calm and other times dynamic and explosive; in addition, they have the ability to be flexible and take multiple forms and meanings. When bringing it to the comparison of water (and essentially nature), they both can be thought of as unstoppable natures. The power of either water or words can be great forces where no obstacle would stand in their way. On the other hand, both are patient; both dissolve and break down all forms of objects with time and patience to embrace their deviance. Moreover, physically they both appear as clear and transparent; though they carry within them all sorts of hidden substances; this calls for the observer to delve within them to look beyond the surface or between the lines.

As for the relationship between music and words, their correspondence arrives from individuality. The characteristics that bring music and words together are unidentifiable; this is because of the delicate subjectivity that is depicted in the personal aspect of both; where every individual communicates verbally and nonverbally (i.e., in the case of the poem the verbal aspect is present through the words, and the nonverbal is everything surrounding the word; whether it is a space, a gap, a punctuation mark, etc.) their own mingled up values and qualities that join music and the words of a poem. In addition to this, there is the lyrical condition that bonds both music and the words in Creeley’s poems. Furthermore, the emphasis is on the auditory feature that joins them, where the ear plays a great role. Here, it is noticeable how Creeley stresses the reading and performance of the poem which is very important in bringing meaning to the poem.

In “The Window,” Creeley gives great importance to position; words’ existence in a poem has to be fixed in a location where there is no room for instability though the words’ meanings and surroundings could be unpredictable. He states: “Position is where you/ put it, where it is” and “... It/ all drops into/ place” (Creeley, 284). A poem, as detected from Creeley’s poems, consists of permanently immovable spaces and marks, whether these marks are letters, punctuation, or any other mark. The poem captures its meanings from not only content but also form. The poem is structured with measures; where size, length, and weight are calculated to stand hand in hand with content. In “I Keep to Myself Such Measures,” the poem is restrained to “accumulate position” (Creeley, 297). Further, in “The Language,”



Creeley's emphasis on location demonstrates its importance in his poetry, where location and the physical senses bond causing a dynamic relationship in which words have the authority to say everything. Creeley expresses:

Locate *I*
Love you some-
Where in

Teeth and
Eyes, bite
It but

Take care not
To hurt, you
Want so

Much so
Little. Words
Say everything. (Creeley, 283)

Additionally, to these unique properties of Creeley's poetic style, rhythm and rhyme are great factors when forming his poems. Within the lines of "The Rhythm," Creeley recites how rhythm foresees continuity of the poem; the poem's rhythmic value determines its success. Rhythm, for him, is visual; it is the envisaging of all the forces that form the poem, whether they are seen and/or sensed or hidden, or within the lines of the poem or surrounding them. Rhythm is in the poem as a whole. If the rhythm is off, the poem will not get its point across. Creeley articulates:

The rhythm which projects
From itself continuity
Bending all to its force
From window to door,
From ceiling to floor,
Light at the opening,
Dark at the closing. (Creeley, 266)

Whereas rhythm is every part and whole of the poem, rhyme lays in the specifics. In his "For W.C.W.," Creeley identifies rhyme as the persuasive drive that brings the poem's motive and message to the reader. He reveals that "The rhyme is after/ all the repeated/ insistence" (Creeley, 117).



Creeley's poems are horizontally and vertically short and clear. His lines and stanzas are concise and to the point. The lines' flow and beauty originate from the way they are transferred from poet to poem. In "Short and Clear," Creeley explains to the poem how he wants it to be short and clear; then explains to the readers and to the poem that they should not fear the shortness and clarity of the poem and its meanings. The poem says:

Short and clear, dear—
Short and clear.

No need for fear.
All's here.

Keep it
Short and clear.

*You are the messenger,
The message, the way.*

Short and clear, dear,
All the way. (Creeley, 583)

"The Pattern" reflects on the author's authority over the text. Creeley, when writing the poem, possesses an "I" that allows him to speak and fix the poem in space and time and gives him authority to refer to the poem as his, and because it is his, his effect on it exists within every word and line. In spite of this, as soon as the words are positioned and located, Creeley's "I" become a third person singular which shows how he portrays himself as a singular reader of the poem that provides meanings that are personal and individualistic. This is because of the poem's want to be free. He proclaims:

As soon as
I speak, I
Speaks. It

Wants to
Be free but
Impassive lies

In the direction
Of its
Words. (Creeley, 294)

The poem then is both restrained by the author's control over and governance of it, and limitless and free creating in its turn a vast reception for it.

Bringing Robert Creeley and Robert Duncan together in this paper is for the reason that both writers, though associated with the same school, the Black Mountain School, both have their own separate way of forming and by that setting a definition for poetry, their own poetry. Duncan's remarkable poetry and the diversity of form that he writes his poetry in, show his greatness. Robert Duncan once said that "the shape literature takes depends upon an author's relationship to his environment" (Cooley, 46). We can see that Duncan is proof of this; his spiritual background bleeds through his poetry. In his poem "Poetry, A Natural Thing" his second stanza says:

The poem feeds upon thought, feeling, impulse, to breed itself, a spiritual urgency at the dark ladders leaping.

This beauty is an inner persistence toward the source striving against (within) down-rusheth of the river, a call we heard and answer (Duncan, 53-4)

Here we can see Duncan's view on the importance of the poet and how the poem relies on the poet's relationship with virtually everything. As the title implies, a poem is natural; it comes to the poet causing him to be in a state where he is "blindly making it." The poem has an instinct that allows it to survive and expand, and by that carving beauty that is generated through these inner features that it possesses. The poem calls for Duncan to write it; this relationship between the poet and the poem shows Duncan's heavy insistence that the core of the poem heavily relies on the poet. In Cooley's article, he states that "throughout Duncan's writing there is a constant emphasis on including as such human experience as possible, the documentary as well as the lyrical" (50).

Duncan used this ideology as a means to write poetry. He felt that this relationship between poem and poet was crucial in many aspects. With this logic, not only could a poet say much about a poem, but the same could be true vice versa. In Dennis Cooley's article *The Poetics of Robert Duncan*, he sums up the idea of Duncan being in a deep relationship with his poems and his poems being of natural substance:

It is important to understand that for Duncan the organic form of his poetry suits the pastoral and ecological vision informing it. By breaking away from an assertive, interfering approach toward both artistic and natural creation, an organic poet is able to establish a close and respectful response to what is going on outside and inside himself. That is why Duncan speaks of "a poetics not of paradigms and models but of individual variations and survivals, of the mutual affinities of organic beings and the evolution of living forms" (Cooley, 48). In



“Poetry Disarranged,” Duncan examines the poet/poem relationship. The poet affects the poem; his conscious and unconscious thoughts and feelings are within its lines. The poet, according to Duncan, is in a conversation with the poem; the poem listens to Duncan and words are his influence.

A poet sits in the light of words like a cat in the mote-filled sunlight of a window. Where he is in the sentence; he listens as his poetry pictures his listening. (Duncan, 25)

His “Everything Speaks to Me,” also, enriches this same notion of oneness with the poem. His declaration, “Everything speaks to me! In faith/ my sight is sound ...” (Duncan, 116), refers to his conversation with everything inside and outside the poem. Here, his senses are guided by the poem; where visual words convert his sense of sight to a sense of hearing. “Writing as Writing” is paralleled with these poems in stressing the same views where the relationship between sight and hearing is intertwined in poetry, creating a rhythm that allows the poem to exist with no rhyme. He reveals:

The word in the hand is the sound in the eye is the sight in the listening ear. Listening, do you mind. Mind then solid pattern of all this soundless patter, collected together only in writing. (Duncan, 31)

As the poem transfers sight to hearing, the poet transfers his hand movements on the paper to create the poem, engraving by that signs that follow up to create words. This might be similar to being possessed by the powers of the poem.

As for Duncan’s word diction, his word choices are given visual signs and spelling that are chosen with lots of care and attention. “A Poem in Stretch” handles the process of choosing words; he rationalises this in the following lines:

...Reading water or words, signs are cards in their multiple juxtapositions. Where we read into. Its not really there. Its nothing. A plate of disturbed sand. A landscape or sound, honks, sighs, a sigh. A plain stretch of time in which trees are not green but hesitate. (Duncan, 23)

He defends this rational though explaining that words’ meanings are visible and invisible at the same moment. Words show off with their abilities to misdirect the reader, misleading the readers gives the poem power over them. This causes hesitation to the reader and the poet; the poem utters:

... We are not looking at them. We are not looking for them. They tell us, remind us. Unseen words we have just seen not yet heard tell us. I know now. I know, I mean. I see it all. All.



She is afraid. A game of chance. Shuffle the deck. In the shuffle of words losing the sense we sense. (Duncan, 23-24)

The poet explains his uncertainty when trying to look for meaning in the poem. Words make the reader and the poet lose the rationale they might have formed when reading the poem. This enhances Duncan's highly focus on form; where "... poetry of fixed shapes is one sign of the distance man has put between himself and his environment" (Cooley, 47). The form of a poem is very important to Duncan. According to Duncan, the poem is a piece of art; therefore, it should not be confined to a singular, universal form. Going along with his belief that poetry is a natural and organic thing, he "...writes in open forms with the irregularities that living forms have" (47).

Duncan avoids these organised and total forms, and would much rather have his writing not bound to such things. In an article by Michael Davidson, "A Cold War Correspondence: The Letters of Robert Duncan and Denise Levertov," Duncan, in a letter to Levertov, expresses his anger at "...editors and typesetters who violate the poem's physical form..." (540). Form is essential in the poem's message. Duncan concludes that "...poetics not of paradigms and models but of individual variations and survivals, of the mutual affinities of organic beings and the evolution of living forms" (Cooley, 48). The structure of the words and the display on the paper are voiced in Duncan's "Descriptions of Imaginary Poetry" and "A Poem in Stretching." The gaps, pauses, and the syntax all serve a purpose. Concerning "Descriptions of Imaginary Poetry," the poem explores the reason behind having gaps in a poem. The poet says:

Gaps.

Regular straining.

Great rips in the febrile.

goods

Gapes. A leftover intending. (Duncan, 33)

Gaps in a poem, then, play a great role in making the reader struggle with the poem. This struggle is portrayed as good. The gaps are intended to help the reader get the poet's voice, which can be problematic because the voice the reader hears is different from the poet's. But Duncan finds it is important to implement them into his poem either way. Along with gaps, pauses engage the reader by dissecting them, pulling them apart and helping the reader to focus on specific points. According to Duncan, a poem strikes after pauses; these two are key to a person receiving the message to try and completely grasp the purpose; he states, "... A hesitation. Pausing before striking" (Duncan, 24). The structure may appear strange, even unimportant, to some readers, but these "visual shapes... indicate soundings for the poem as Duncan hears and records it" (Cooley, 56).

As important to structure as gaps and pauses, Robert Duncan's poetry also, according to Duncan, is a form of music. "We cannot afford to 'fill a gap.' As we learn what the force of a poem is, we learn that the gaps must be acknowledged where they are, in the music fold" (Cooley, 46). His poems are not just formed and situated words on a paper, they hold musical/lyrical value. Duncan's poetry is insistent on being 'organic'. In this sense we can describe his works as raw. Not raw as in obscene, but raw as in what you see is what you get. His poetry defines who he is, what he sees, feels, et cetera, without trying to pretty it up. His decision to ignore the idea of appealing to a single form shows us that he is not willing to sacrifice his poetry, and thus himself, so people will accept it easily. His lines vary from being lengthy to being short within the same poem. "Descriptions of Imaginary Poem" presents the variety of line length and structures, where the regular sentence and the irregular serve as constituents of his poems.

Poetry made up of sentences of words. Poetry in its regular irregular lines and divisions. Poetry in its steady revisions of its original vision, an accurate eye correcting its inaccuracies, an image of a man made in his own image inaccurately. (Duncan, 32)

This variety is the cause behind the disrupted meanings of the poem. The poem undergoes "Irregular measures of meaning ..." (Duncan, 33). The poem's design could take the form of paragraphs, where phrases unfold phrases; causing the poet to write it down with pressure which is the result of the packed-ness of the words when the poem calls out to be written. Duncan Says: "The design of the paragraphs is in totalities of of. A pure possession/ possesses in its illusive properties" (Duncan, 32), "Unfolding phrases, like chairs closing into themselves" (Duncan, 33), "I see it. I see all the way thru to the next phrase" (Duncan, 24), "Words have weight in my hand/ as I write" (Duncan, 117), and "A poem stretch out once cramped in the hand" (Duncan, 23). Subsequently, the words form on the page by situating themselves into a location that is the perfect place for the word; he says: "The word has only been left on the page, left after the steady process of developing sentences" (Duncan, 31).

Creeley and Duncan are both great American poets, who represent the spirit of the Black Mountain School; where individuality is the key concept that brings such poets together. Their individuality is the source of their difference from each other, which, in its turn, sets off the foundation for their poetry. In a postmodern context, there seems to be no room for limiting or defining a genre such as poetry; however, the poem is given the label 'poem' and it is placed in a genre called 'poetry.' Thus, following this knowledge, postmodernism is not totally an estrangement. The postmodern is stereotyped to be the chaotic rupture, although it created new forms and ways of looking into definitions. Defining the Black Mountain postmodern poetry is unachievable; it is deferred, yet, giving a local definition for poetry that is based on a reading of Creeley and Duncan is the aim here. As Creeley points out in his



essay “To Define” which is located in Hoover’s *Postmodern American Poetry: A Norton Anthology*: “The process of definition is the intent of the poem” (637). Poetry has been created and recreated to the point that one can come to the conclusion that poetry is what the poet makes of it. These two poets from the same era have contorted poetry to not only fit them but the needs of the reader as well. If poetry is anything, it is a form of communication; a creative form of inviting people to an outside perspective, experience, or thought. Both Duncan and Creeley, renowned as not only two of the great postwar poets, but also two of the greatest American poets, show us not what poetry is, but what poetry can become.



REFERENCES

- Black, M. p. (2013). *Encyclopædia Britannica. Encyclopædia Britannica Online Academic Edition*. Encyclopædia Britannica Inc., 2013.
- Bernstein, C. (2005). Hero of the local: Robert Creeley and the persistence of American poetry." *Textual Practice* 19.3 (2005): 373-77.
- Cooley, D. (1980). The Poetics of Robert Duncan. *Boundary 2*, 45-73.
- Creeley, R. (1994). "To Define." *Postmodern American Poetry: A Norton Anthology*. Ed. Paul Hoover. New York: Norton, 637-39.
- Creeley, R. (1982). *The Collected poems of Robert Creeley, 1945-1975*. Berkeley: University of California.
- Creeley, R. (2006). *The collected poems of Robert Creeley, 1975-2005*. Berkeley: University of California,
- Davidson, M, Robert J. B. and Albert G. (2004). "A cold war correspondence: The letters of Robert Duncan and Denise Levertov." *Contemporary Literature* 45.3 538-56.
- Duncan, Robert, and Robert J. Bertholf. (1993). *Selected poems*. New York: New Directions,
- Lyotard, J.-F. (1993). *The postmodern condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota,
- Riggin, Garrin. "Robert Creeley." *Academy of American Poets*. <http://www.poets.org>
- Watson, Steven. "Rebels: Painters and Poets of the 1950s." *Rebels: Painters and Poets of the 1950s*. <http://www.npg.si.edu>, 10 Dec. 2004.