

## Robert M. West: On Paul Blackburn

Blackburn, Paul, (24 Nov. 1926-13 Sept. 1971), poet and translator, was born in Saint Albans, Vermont, the son of William Blackburn and Frances Frost, a poet and novelist. Blackburn's parents separated in 1930. His father left for California; his mother pursued a literary career, eventually settling in New York City's Greenwich Village. Blackburn was left in the care of his strict maternal grandparents. His grandmother required little pretext for whipping him regularly, and his grandfather, who worked for the railroad, was away from home for long stretches at a time. In late poems such as "My Sainted," he reveals his bitterness about his early childhood.

However, Blackburn is primarily a poet of New York City life, and his contact with the New York literary scene came early. At age fourteen he joined his mother in Greenwich Village, where she lived with her lover, Paul's "Aunt" Carr. The bohemian environment was much more conducive to his creativity than life with his grandparents had been. His mother encouraged his interest in poetry, and Blackburn later acknowledged that her gift of W. H. Auden's *Collected Poems* was particularly helpful in giving him "a formal sense of musical structure." Blackburn entered New York University in 1945, but he left to join the army the following year.

In 1947 Blackburn reentered NYU, where he studied poetry under M. L. Rosenthal, who later became one of his most enthusiastic admirers. He served briefly as the editor of the *Apprentice*, the school literary magazine. It was here that Blackburn began reading Ezra Pound, who proved to be an enormous influence on him. In 1949 he transferred to the University of Wisconsin, where he graduated with a B.A. in 1950.

While studying at Wisconsin, Blackburn occasionally hitchhiked to Washington, D.C., to see Pound at St. Elizabeths Hospital. Pound helped Blackburn secure his first major publication, "The Innocents Who Fall Like Apples," in James Laughlin's *New Directions Annual* (1951). On Pound's advice Blackburn began corresponding with Robert Creeley, which developed into an important friendship. Blackburn's first book of translations, *Proensa* (1953), and his first book of original poems, *The Dissolving Fabric* (1955), were published by Creeley's *Divers Press*.

In his preface to Blackburn's *Against the Silences* (1980), Creeley acknowledges that Blackburn was "a far more accomplished craftsman." Of their first meeting Creeley writes, "I remember him showing me his edition of Yeats's *Collected Poems* with his extraordinary marginal notes, tracking rhythms, patterns of sounds, in short the whole tonal construct of the writing." Throughout his career other poets praised Blackburn highly for his understanding of the craft. In *Big Table* (Spring 1960), Paul Carroll wrote, "I don't suppose any poet our age handles a single line, a stanza, a whole poem with his skill and grace."

Friendship with Creeley led to contact with poets Charles Olson, Jonathan Williams, and Denise Levertov. Blackburn shared with them the ideas about poetry most notably articulated by Olson in his 1950 essay "Projective Verse." Their goal was a new musicality for modern poetry, which they believed suffered from the ascendancy of the metrical foot over the syllable and the breath. They felt a poet could correct this unhealthy emphasis by using the

standardized spacing of the typewriter. A poem could be scored like a piece of music to preserve the poet's unique breath. Blackburn was adept at this technique, adjusting line breaks, margins, and spacing to reflect his desired reading pace and breathing patterns. Olson's gathering of Creeley, Williams, and others at Black Mountain College in North Carolina resulted in this approach becoming known as Black Mountain poetry. Blackburn, who remained in New York, always resisted the label "Black Mountain poet." He did, however, work briefly in the early 1950s as the New York distributor of Creeley's magazine *Black Mountain Review*. To support himself during the 1950s and 1960s he also worked a variety of jobs, including editing encyclopedias and writing book reviews.

Despite his inclusion in Donald Allen's influential anthology *The New American Poetry* (1960), for years Blackburn remained a little-known figure who continued to publish through small presses. His second book of original poetry, *Brooklyn-Manhattan Transit* (1960), contains some of his most memorable poems, including "Clickety-Clack" and "The Once-Over." Here, as in many of his poems, Blackburn plays the semidetached observer: "Clickety-Clack," for example, wryly describes an outrageous pass he makes at a woman on the subway. *The Nets* (1961) and two limited-edition books followed. Not until *The Cities* (1967), his first book issued by a major publisher, did Blackburn gain widespread attention. The only other full-length book of his poems to appear during his lifetime was *In, on, or about the Premises* (1968).

Chief among Blackburn's longer works are *The Selection of Heaven* (1980) and *The Journals* (1975). *The Selection of Heaven*, a mysterious poem commemorating both the death of his paternal grandparents and the breakup of his second marriage, was completed by 1967. *The Journals*, a record of the last four years of his life, including his stoic response to the cancer diagnosed in late 1970, has been faulted for its documentary quality. However, in a review for *Parnassus* (Spring-Summer 1976), poet Gilbert Sorrentino argues that *The Journals* represents a pinnacle, not a relaxation, of Blackburn's art: "That the poems seem, often, the thought of a moment, a brilliant or witty or dark response to still-smoking news, is the result of his carefully invented and released voice, a voice that we hear singing, virtuoso."

Blackburn published poems in little magazines constantly throughout his career. A prolific poet, at his death Blackburn had published or arranged for the publication of the 523 poems found in his *Collected Poems*, and he had written approximately 600 more. Of his eighteen books of original poetry, five were published posthumously.

In addition to writing poetry, Blackburn spent considerable time translating. Frustrated by his inability to read Provençal passages in Pound's epic poem *the Cantos*, Blackburn began to study that language. This led to his translations of the troubadours, collected in *Proensa* (1953; expanded ed. 1978). In 1954 his study of Provençal resulted in a Fulbright fellowship to the University of Toulouse, a city he satirizes in his poem "Sirventes." In 1956 Blackburn moved to Spain, where he bought a copy of poet Federico Garcia Lorca's *Obras Completas*. His translations from it were collected posthumously as *Lorca / Blackburn* (1979). His translations also include *Poem of the Cid* (1966), Julio Cortázar's *Blow-Up and Other Stories* (1968), Cortázar's *Cronopios and Famas* (1969), and Pablo Picasso's *Hunk of Skin* (1968).

Blackburn's translations of the troubadours are provocative and have elicited both high praise and sharp criticism. Much of the debate has centered around their vernacular, occasionally vulgar, language. In an interview with the *New York Quarterly* (repr. in *The Journals*), Blackburn said that a translator must "be willing (& able) to let another man's life enter his own deeply enough to become some permanent part of his original author." Blackburn believed that the translator should strive for clarity above all else and should not fret over his inability to

render into English the ambiguities present in the original text: "Let him approach polysemia crosseyed, coin in hand." Blackburn advised the translator to avoid the stiffness and artificiality that often accompany strict translation: "Occasionally, an adaptation will translate the spirit of the original to better use than any other method ... Much depends upon the translator (also upon the reader)."

Blackburn was enormously generous to others and did much to create a mutually supportive community of poets in New York City. Newcomers found him ready to help them publish, give readings, find jobs, and locate places to stay. He moved the readings at Le Metro Café to St. Mark's Church-in-the-Bowery, where in 1966 he helped establish the Poetry Project (which in 1991 celebrated its twenty-fifth anniversary with the publication of the anthology *Out of this World*). From 1964 to 1965 Blackburn ran a radio show dedicated to poetry. His interest in the individual poet's unique breath led Blackburn to tape the many readings he attended and to popularize poetry recordings. In 1967 he won a Guggenheim fellowship, and he taught at the State University of New York at Cortland from the fall of 1970 until his death.

Despite the increasing readership Blackburn enjoyed at the end of his life, as well as the steady flow of posthumous publications, his poetry has yet to receive the attention his advocates believe it deserves. Aspects of his work that may contribute to this inattention include his frequent obscenity and his treatment of women, which to the feminist reader may seem unpleasant or even cruel. Renewed interest in formalist poetry after his death was probably also detrimental. Perhaps Blackburn's most significant legacy is his sizable contribution to the popularization of poets and of the art of poetry.

Paul Blackburn was married three times: to Winifred Grey from 1954 to 1963 (they had been separated since 1958); to Sara Golden from 1963 to 1967; and to Joan Miller, with whom he had his only child, from 1968 until his death. He died of cancer of the esophagus in Cortland, New York.

Blackburn's papers and recordings are in the Paul Blackburn Archive of the Archive for New Poetry at the University of California, San Diego. Kathleen Woodward, *Paul Blackburn: A Checklist* (1980), is the best single bibliography of Blackburn's writings. *The Collected Poems of Paul Blackburn*, ed. Edith Jarolim (1985), is the definitive collection of Blackburn's poetry. Selected volumes include *The Selected Poems of Paul Blackburn*, ed. Jarolim (1989), and Clayton Eshleman, *The Parallel Voyages* (1987), which offers forty-eight previously unpublished poems that span Blackburn's career. Jarolim's introduction to the *Collected Poems* and her entry on Blackburn in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography* together provide a reasonably detailed biographical treatment. Notable assessments of Blackburn's career include M. L. Rosenthal, "Paul Blackburn, Poet," *New York Times Book Review*, 11 Aug. 1974, and Marjorie Perloff's review of *Collected Poems*, repr. in her book *Poetic License* (1990). An obituary is in the *New York Times*, 15 Sept. 1971.

From *American National Biography*. Ed. John A. Garraty and Mark C. Carnes. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999. Copyright © 1999 by the American Council of Learned Societies.

**Publication Status:**

Excerpted Criticism <sup>[1]</sup>

**Author:**

Robert M. West <sup>[2]</sup>

**Review Process:**

Single Review

**Target:**

Paul Blackburn

---

**Source URL:** <http://modernamericanpoetry.org/content/robert-m-west-paul-blackburn>

**Links**

[1] <http://modernamericanpoetry.org/category/publication-status/excerpted-criticism>

[2] <http://modernamericanpoetry.org/creator/robert-m-west>