

Edith Jarolim: About Paul Blackburn's Poetry

In his later poems, Blackburn came to wear his learning lightly; in his generally short early lyrics, his erudition is still on display. (Pound's example was not likely to have discouraged him in that regard.) The young man who wrote the lovely "Cantar de Noit" and satirical "For Mercury, Patron of Thieves: A Laurel" had clearly done his homework in Provençal and Greek poetics. But he was also taking lessons from such American masters as William Carlos Williams--and he was a natural when it came to picking up the rhythms of New York City streets:

Th' holdup at the liquor-store, d'ja hear?	a detective watch't 'm for ten	
minutes	He took it anyway	Got away down Broadway
Yeah?	Yeah.	

("The
Continuity")

The way the poem had already begun to look on the page, a visual representation or "scoring" of the oral rendition of the poem, showed the influence too of another American poet, Charles Olson. On Pound's suggestion in 1951, Blackburn had written to a "chicken farmer in New Hampshire," Robert Creeley; Creeley in turn introduced him to the ideas and poetry of Olson. Although Blackburn always disliked putting poets into categories, and although he never set foot on the campus of Black Mountain College, he has come to be associated with Olson and the other writers who studied or taught at the experimental North Carolina school. If rather superficial, the "Black Mountain poet" label is not entirely misleading: Blackburn was New York distributor for the Black Mountain Review, the literary magazine established in 1953 to raise money for the floundering institution, and contributing editor to one of its issues. More to the point, of all those associated with the Black Mountain aesthetic, he was arguably the most skilled practitioner of the punctuation, line breaks, and text alignments that define the poetics of "composition by field," as outlined in Olson's 1951 "Projective Verse" essay.

In 1954, newly married and newly appointed Fulbright Teaching Fellow, Blackburn went off to Europe to study the language and literature of the troubadours. He never lost his interest in either, but he heartily hated Toulouse, the wet and provincial center of modern Provence (see his poem "Sirventes" against the city). During the two years he was assigned to teach in Toulouse, he escaped frequently to Spain, eventually settling there for a year. He loved that country's speech, which he heard on the streets and read in Lorca's poetry, the slow rhythms and living traditions of Mediterranean culture, and the nonsacredotal but anchoring rituals of everyday life:

You shall not always sit in sunlight watching weeds grow out of drainpipes or
burros and shadows of burros come up the street bring sand the first one of
the line with a bell Always. With a bell. ("Suerte")

He was right about the limits of his European idyll. When he came back to New York in Fall 1957, ostensibly just to recoup finances, things rapidly fell apart: his marriage broke up, he couldn't find a job, and his mother died of cancer. But hiding out in Brooklyn from his ex-wife and commuting into Manhattan, he began writing the series of subway poems for which he is probably best known, including "Brooklyn Narcissus," "Clickety-Clack," and "Meditation on the BMT." And soon enough he found new loves, new rituals, and a new population for his street observations--the men crowded around the radio listening to the ball game, the secretary dreaming out the window of her office. Truly an urban representative, Blackburn could deftly enlarge the pain of his own situations to encompass wider political contexts, for example, the impingement of impersonal institutions on the individual's life:

After your voice's frozen anger emptied the air between us, the silence of electrical
connections the vacant window pale, the connection broken: :

("AT&T Has My Dime")

By the mid-1960s his politics were more explicit in poems that criticized the U.S. presence in Vietnam ("Foreign Policy Commitments") or looked irreverently at the space program ("Newsclips 2."). But most of Blackburn's energies were devoted to his very nonpolitical activities on the poetry scene in New York. He returned in the late 1950s to find a burgeoning bard nouveau movement in town: poetry readings, sometimes to jazz accompaniment, were springing up in coffeehouses all over the city. He took part in some of these early mixed media programs and was instrumental in organizing two important Lower East Side reading series, at the Deux Megots Coffeehouse and later at Le Metro Cafe. It was Blackburn's idea in 1966 to move the readings at Le Metro to St. Mark's-Church-in-the-Bowery, where the Poetry Project still flourishes today.

It may be at the cost of his own fame that he devoted himself to spreading the word and encouraging the work of so many poets: translator of Julio Cortázar, Lorca, and the

troubadours, among others, he also faithfully tape-recorded local poets at an astonishing number of readings, and gave countless fledgling writers aesthetic and practical advice. There are those who felt he spread himself too thin, dissipating his energies on writers unworthy of attention. Perhaps. But these activities very movingly attest to Blackburn's remarkable commitment to the ideal of a democratic community of poets.

And, for at least part of the decade anyway, Blackburn seemed to have energy to spare: he was at the height of his powers in the early to mid-1960s, producing, in addition to his political poems, such masterful mythic pieces as "The Watchers" and "At the Well." By mid-decade, however, the ambivalence about love, always a presence in the poems, became stronger, and the alert observing persona seems more a lonely voyeur, often sitting with other men in a bar and talking about the futility of love, or maybe not talking at all:

It is March 9th, 3:30 in the afternoon

The loudest sound in this public room is the exhaust fan in the east window or
the cat at my back asleep there in the sun bleached tabletop,
golden shimmer of ale .

("The Island")

In September 1967, his second marriage having broken up a few months earlier, a distraught and seemingly disconsolate Blackburn boarded the S. S. Aurelia for Europe. "The Glorious Morning," the account of the ensuing shipboard romance with his third-wife-to-be, marked Blackburn's first foray into the more loosely constructed, freewheeling records of daily life he came to call "journals." Although they were selective records, and his by-then ingrained sense of poetic form always kept them under aesthetic control, he distinguished them from the "poems" he continued to write during this period. He never felt entirely confident about the form, but it allowed him the space and latitude to write such long, cumulatively powerful pieces as "From the November Journals: Fire," as well as the freedom for such quick takes as "Along the San Andreas Fault."

A new, more flexible poetic style, a settled relationship, a first child, and a teaching job at the State University at Cortland, in northern New York--life seemed good in 1970, the year Blackburn learned that he had inoperable cancer of the esophagus. Up until a month before he died, on September 13, 1971, he continued to record, without self-pity and without denial, his honest reactions to the news: memories triggered of his body when he was 15 years old, of places he loved, and, characteristically, of poets and poetry and poems.

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