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An Introduction to the Cambridge and Black Mountain School of Poetry

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This paper attempts to introduce two important Schools of postmodern poetry. First, the paper focuses on the Cambridge School of poetry and its pioneers like J H Prynne. In order to sketch the important characteristics of this school, I analyze Prynne's poem 'The Numbers'. Second, I briefly describe the Black Mountain School of poetry and the poets who belong to the School. I analyze poems of Charles Olson, Hilda Morley and other important poets of this School. In this paper, I try to investigate the intellectual and political factors responsible for the formation of these Schools. Another aim of this paper is to analyze in detail some of the poems that are seldom read by the general public.

The poems that we often read under the rubric postmodernism are complex and deeply rooted in the political and intellectual movements of the UK and the USA. One of the best ways to understand the postmodern poems is to relate them to the intellectual contexts of the twentieth century. The early decades of postmodernism, in terms of poetry, were full of poets belonging either to the Cambridge school or the Black Mountain School of poetry.

The Cambridge school is an informal term to denote a set of poets belonging to the Cambridge University. Jeremy Prynne is one of the notable poets of this school and he has many books and critical works to his credit. Wendy Mulford, Ian Hamilton Finlay, Bob Cobbing and Tom Raworth are some of the important poets of this School. This school also critiqued the basic tenets of the Movement poets and tried to revive the poetic ideals of early Modernism.

In this paper I attempt to explain one of the important poems of J H Prynne 'The Numbers'. It is one of his *Kitchen Poems*. The poem is not only about some of the intricacies of a known landscape but a typical example of the role of language in the formation of a subject. In general, the rules are not constituted only by the grammar of the given language but by mutually shared signs and systems. Wittgenstein explains similar points in his thesis, language games. This grammar [shared grammar or rules] restricts the freedom with which we use the language by giving references to the subject and object and pronouns in the context of English languages is the best example. Collectively, these are called the demonstrative pronouns as they perform the function of demonstrating the subject and sometime the object of the sentences. The function of the demonstrative pronoun seems to be simple that often a regular speaker forgets the importance of these tools. And we tend to forget that these are highly dependent on the nouns.

The poets of a given period may follow their intellectual fathers and then dissect them with the help of conscious break/rupture. The conscious rupture/break means the succeeding poets go on investigating the conventions that were created by their predecessors. This break is an unconscious effort on the part of the poet. What necessitated the writing of the above things is

that till twentieth century, most of the poets clearly depicted the speaker in the form the egoistical subject 'I'. With the help of this 'I', the speaker and the referent dichotomy is formed which further helped the readers in identifying many related objects in the poem. Most postmodern poems including Prynne's 'The Number' started questioning the "I".

Demonstrative pronouns are dependent on the nouns. The twentieth century poetic-linguistic sensibility removed this dependency of the pronouns and disturbed the referential quality of the English language. In the context of the poem we can see many pronouns and also some verbs corroborating the pronouns do not exactly refer to any nouns. These pronouns and verbs go on denoting a kind of absence which is assumed as presence by the reader before reading the poem.

Prynne, in his poem, consciously tries to create a new idiom which is devoid of ideology. Though the intention of the poem is to speak of the politics, the mode or the language that carries the intentionality is politically neutral. 'The Numbers' is full of the demonstrative pronoun 'we' in the poem. These numbers signify sometimes a majority numbers playing a significant role in a decision making process and other times the minority or a marginalized group with less in numbers persisting to have their own voice. This idea easily gets its impetus from the words 'elect' and 'election' that are quite often used throughout the poem. The poet's intention always shifts from the majority to minority and vice versa.

The first line of the poem, "The whole thing it is, the difficult/ matter: to shrink the confines/down" (56). The line exactly starts with an emphatic and assertive statement that shrinks within the confines that surrounds and follows other sets of the contradictions like "...rain/open or without.... light in delight" (56).

Prynne, tries to play with the numbers—majority and minority. In this poet, the poet opines about the general tendencies in which the politics takes the shape. Next, the contradiction starts like "the decision as knowledge and/above all, trust" (57). But this decision cannot be easily termed as the best as this is again dependent on 'silver' and its brightness. With this idea the poet suddenly turns the matter from the realm of metaphysics to geography. The idea of speaking about geography is indicated by the phrase, "Danish insistence" (57). This refers to the political turmoil that happened in Denmark and the reaction of the people towards it. Denmark was against to the British England for quite a long time and the same incited many forms of resistance. The "the risk/of exception" (57) constitute the Danish efforts of protecting the Jews eventually facing the wrath of Germany. The poem again steadily declares that we [the minority] should have the land or a geographical identity that the group owes by taking the risk of saving the marginalized.

The poem uses parenthesis to indicate a semantic as well as syntactic shift. As a device of stylization, parenthesis was used especially to remove the oral tones. The opening of the bracket is indicating a shift and that attributes the quality of the speech to words that are written. The shift does not enclose within itself and transcends its own boundaries. But this shift does not leave the traces of its prototype; hence the words carry the overtones of the phrases that are used in the last part of the poem. For example in the first part we see, "...rain,/open or without it" (57) and in the second part the same is carried with a different referent like "...Only watch the weather/as the sky does not change"(57).

Prynne's images are derived mainly from geography. For example, map "shrunked" (56) is a representative of the geographical landscape. Again he starts off with the contradiction "...And the plain is wide:" (56) by shifting the concentration from cartography to geography. As the poet is speaking of geography the reference to any proper name would directly refer to the people of the same field and hence William Smith referred in the poem here none other than the father of Geology. His case is curious and not like any other founding fathers. His work of drawing a map and other geological efforts were not appreciated on account of many reasons.

The lines that come after the reference to William Smith do not exactly refer to his work. Yet everyone should move into the election process as it is one of the vital and the most important things to do. The poet slightly hints that election is the way for anyone [for both majority and minority] to climb the ladder of power.

The first part of the poem is interconnected with the second. Words like "wandering star", "terminal systems" and "air" connect the fragmented stanzas. The last stanza of the poem has its essence in the three phrases, "terminal systems...coherence...ligatures" (57). The first two phrases form a coherent order but the word 'ligatures' clearly breaking the coherence. The poem actually ends with elections.

The Black Mountain School of poetry is very crucial to the discussion of postmodern poems. A college by the same name was established by the pioneers of this School. Charles Olson, Hilda Morley, Josef Albers and Eric Bentley are some of the important poets of this School. Hereafter, I try to interpret some of the important poems of the Black Mountain School of poetry.

Charles Olson's 'In cold Hell, In Thicket' re-defines the relationship between an individual and a geographical space that surrounds him. 'Letter 27' urges the importance of going back to the primacy of the humanity which is pure and devoid of a historical reality. Thus, Olson writes "with my skin" (3) a geographical space compels human beings to change and alters the spatial and individual relationship "...the geography / which leans in" (4). According to Olson, The dynamism that results in the alteration of human beings is *polis*.

The School was influenced by the thoughts of American Transcendentalism. Thus the ideas and thoughts of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, their ideas of community and its effects on an individual reflect in the poems of Olson. John Wiener is one of the important poets of the School and for him conjugality is one of the ways in which a person enters into a relationship with the other. John Wiener in his poem 'The Loneliness' tends to depict homosexuality as a way of life and shows it as an experience that makes one to feel for the other. "How can a man have pride / without a wife" (300) and "Feeling like a girl / stinking beneath my clothes" (300) are some of the lines that explicitly show how the speaker is trying for a new kind of pleasure. These lines not only voice homosexuality but also break the normative conception of sex. The verse ends with the feel that the man who is acted upon is trying to feel like a woman. In another poem by the poet, 'My Mother', the filial relationship is not treated in the normative fashion. The speaker is stranger to the mother character and needs to look at her from a distance and yet some of the phrases like "...gets on" (299) indicate the relationship is hassle free. There is a strong inclination that the relationship is anything but filial.

Wiener discusses the notion of *polis* and its importance to an individual. In the poem 'A Poem for the Insane', a shift is seen as the poet speaks for a group that is usually excluded from the society. The insanity is represented in terms of the speaker's connection to the series of the unconnected people like women in Munch. Still the speaker stands different to the subject of the poem and at the end we see a glimpse that the speaker is moving towards someone with whom he can physically connect with. Insanity, in the poem seems to act as one of the elemental forms of human relationship. Here insanity is not glorified like sanity in normal sense but it is depicted as the characteristic feature of the world. In this poem, the poet sees every relationship on the basis of gender and sex. Wiener is trying to identify himself with the communal aspects that are defied in normal sense of the life. One of the reasons might be the disillusionment of the normative relationships or some personal animosity. Wiener's poem can be clearly distinguished from Olson's geo-individual relationship. Insanity is the only way for the poet and a group like his to connect with the geography. But Wiener seems not to take decisive action about the problem that he arises.

Poet Larry Eigner's personal life becomes very important while discussing the idea of *polis*. A sensible reader can experience the apparition of the author and the glimpses of his personal life haunting the activation of meanings. His movement was restricted to a wheel chair for some of the clinical problems and the captivity is reflected in most of his poems. Obviously his relationship with it is not the same as he fails to experience the geography as others. His only medium between *polis* and himself is poetry. With this assumption we take the poem '[trees green the quiet sun]' the things that encounter us are just scattered images only related under a celestial and terrestrial binary of the green tree and the quiet sun (earth and sky, covering the entire cosmology). Within these binaries the images get connected and make some sense to us. At the same time the poet constantly endeavors to give shape to shapeless things like water and air.

'[how it comes about]' deals with the kinetic images whose movements are altered by human intervention. And the human intervention is in terms of experiencing the naturalness. The free flow of images has so much of poetic freedom that the entire poem is not punctuated at all. 'Wholes' is the epitome of limit and transgression that is all the time experienced in human life whenever we speak on confining boundaries. Interestingly the notion of boundary is experienced in terms of a limit to the movement.

Hilda Morley one of the few women poets of the school has something else to say. In her poem 'Curve of the Water' she gives shape to things which the natural elements which are in flux. Shaping and morphing the natural elements reflects an aptitude for building a *polis*. For example water, earth and air recur as images in different forms throughout the poem. The presence of the natural elements is an overtone of the already given geographical reality the poem 'Made out of Links' which has sexual overtones. The 'weight' is not the burden that one carries but longs to carry throughout life. The line "...but forming a circle" (52) shows the sense of completeness that the speaker experiences after the union.

'A Form of Women' by Robert Creeley is a poem that deals about same sex relationships. The lines where he doubts that "...but I am not" (76) clearly says the speaker needs many more things to enter into a relationship and the doubt of being capable enough to be with the other pervades throughout the poem. The poem also ends with an ambiguous tone where the speaker still does not know whether or not to continue the relationship.

Olson's 'Maximus' Gloucester questions the human understanding of nation and landscape. 'Maximus of Gloucester to you' is a poem about journey and understanding something which is not a convention. In the poem the crucial part that we need exactly to support Gloucester as the landscape for the new sensibility is the line, "...one loves only form /and form only comes /into existence when/the thing is born" (14). This is saying that love that bonds appears in form and obviously form is ephemeral and always depends on something to come into shape.

Olson's 'In Cold Hell, In thicket' extends the concept of *polis* which is quite similar to Hilda Morley's conception. Olson in the poem contemplates the externality of the geographical reality. Hell and heaven are the unreal projections of human beings which blur the given geographical reality. The projections supersede the already given geographical reality and cloud the effective dynamism the Olson speaks in one of the *Maximus* poems. Hence Black Mountain School of poetry assumes a pre-given cosmic reality as *polis*.

The Cambridge School of poetry and the Black Mountain School of poetry form a crucial part of the early postmodernism. If the Cambridge concentrates on reviving the tenets of modernism in their own unique way, the Black Mountain focuses more on *polis* and the idea of the nation and nationality.

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