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Black Mountain Poetics and Fredric Jameson's Floating Signifier Theory

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Abstract: This study examines how *The Maximus Poems* by Charles Olson and *The Opening of the Field* by Robert Duncan build on Fredric Jameson's critique of pastiche, offering a more immediate and engaged model of postmodern writing. Drawing on Jameson's reading of Lacan—particularly his use of schizophrenia as a way to describe the breakdown of the signifying chain in late capitalism—the research explores how both poets confront the fragmentation of language and its absorption into commodified culture. Olson's projective verse emphasizes presence and locality, while Duncan's layered syntax and mythic references resist fixed interpretation and invite open-ended exploration. The study uses close reading and theoretical interpretation to show how both poets turn poetic form into a site of resistance, where language—though fractured— still carries meaning and shapes how we see the world. In Jameson's terms, these works function as "symbolic texts," where personal expression and social contradiction intersect. Rather than mirror postmodern disorientation, the poems open up a space for a different kind of awareness—one that moves through the tension between imagination and structure, and points toward the hope and possibility woven into poetic form.

Keywords: Black Mountain; Lacanian Psychoanalysis; Projective Verse; Postmodern Poetry; Signifying Chain.

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1. Introduction

Fredric Jameson's theorization of the floating signifier and the breakdown of the signifying chain offers a critical lens for understanding the linguistic and ontological disorientation that defines postmodernism. Drawing on Lacanian psychoanalysis, Jameson argues that in the postmodern condition, meaning is no longer anchored to any stable referent, but instead circulates in fragmented, self-referential systems (Jameson 26; Ryan 423). This study applies that framework to the poetic works of Charles Olson and Robert Duncan, specifically Olson's *The Maximus Poems*, and Duncan's *The Opening of the Field* and *The Ballad of Mrs. Noah*. These poems exemplify how language, detached from fixed meaning, can still be used as a means of situational awareness, self-perception, and cultural resistance.

Olson's approach to poetry centers on "projective verse," where form is driven by breath and perception rather than inherited metrical patterns. *The Maximus Poems* unfold through fragmented yet spatially grounded language, highlighting his emphasis on locality and the body's role in generating meaning ("Projective Verse" 1; *The Collected Poems* 243). Olson's use of Gloucester as both literal and symbolic space reflects his attempt to create a poetic model of man in relation to place and historical consciousness. His refusal of syntactic closure and traditional form mirrors Jameson's notion of postmodern depthlessness, yet rather than lamenting this fragmentation, Olson uses it to open up new ways of relating to language and experience.

Duncan, in contrast, approaches language as a space of continual unfolding. His poems shift between personal memory, myth, and historical trauma, using open forms and layered syntax to reflect the instability of meaning. In *The Opening of the Field*, Duncan's use of "snake-like syntax" and spatial poetics suggests a field where multiple signifiers circulate without ever fixing meaning. *The Ballad of Mrs. Noah* blends religious myth and domestic detail, displacing traditional narrative structures to emphasize the modular, recursive nature of language. These texts will be examined as poetic experiments that engage with the conditions Jameson describes, showing how fragmentation and signifier-slippage become tools for perception, creation, and critique.

2. Literature Review

Fredric Jameson's theoretical intervention into postmodernism, particularly through his use of Lacanian psychoanalysis and the concept of the "floating signifier," provides a crucial framework for analyzing contemporary poetry. Jameson argues that in the cultural logic of late capitalism, language becomes untethered from stable meaning,

leading to a proliferation of depthless, self-referential forms (Jameson, *Postmodernism* 16). This insight has proven especially valuable for scholars investigating the poetics of Olson and Duncan, whose work confronts this fragmentation through formal innovation rather than retreat.

Several critical studies have addressed Olson's redefinition of poetic form in response to cultural and linguistic crisis. Donald Allen's seminal anthology *The New American Poetry 1945–1960* first positioned Olson as a central figure in the emergence of a postmodern poetic (Allen 16). More specifically, as interpreted from Robert von Hallberg's discussion of Olson in *American Poetry and Culture 1945–1980*, Olson's projective verse suggests a resistance to commodified language through its emphasis on spatial form and breath (98-100). Similarly, Miriam Nichols contends that Olson's attention to locality and mythic structure resists the postmodern collapse of historical consciousness, offering instead a poetic grounded in material presence (78–91).

Duncan's poetics have also received scholarly attention, particularly in relation to his recursive, open-ended style. Lisa Jarnot's biography *Robert Duncan: The Ambassador from Venus* contextualizes his creative evolution within the tensions between mysticism, politics, and language play. (141) Duncan's poetics of "making" has been the subject of critical attention, notably by Peter Quartermain, who interprets Duncan's formal openness as a resistance to linearity and closure (42). While not directly invoking Jameson, such a strategy resonates with post structural notions of deferred meaning. Similarly, Stephen Collis highlights Duncan's efforts to redefine the lyric as a dialogic, communal space, shifting its function away from isolated self-expression (25).

Both poets have been central to discussions of language's role in shaping reality, subjectivity, and cultural memory. Hank Lazer, for instance, notes that Olson and Duncan, though differing in approach, foreground the materiality of language and its role in poetic form (63-65). This emphasis resonates with Lacan's idea of the unconscious as "structured like a language," a formulation Jameson draws on in his broader critique of postmodern discourse.

In more recent critical literature, the ecological dimension of both poets' work has gained prominence. Joshua Corey, for example, situates Duncan's mythopoetic method within an ecopoetic frame, suggesting that his formal openness reflects an ethical responsiveness to complexity and interconnection (49.4). Olson's insistence on "place" and geographic particularity has similarly been reassessed in light of environmental humanities, most notably by scholars like Charles Stein in his preface to *The Secret of the Black Chrysanthemum* (xxi).

What brings these different studies together is the shared sense that, although Olson and Duncan are often labeled postmodern, their work goes beyond simply repeating the fragmentation or pastiche that Jameson critiques. Instead, their poetry searches for new expressive possibilities within language's instability, treating the poem as a space for deep perception and creative openness. This literature review lays the groundwork for my own analysis, which draws on Jameson's concept of the floating signifier to argue that both poets use linguistic uncertainty not as a sign of crisis, but as a resource for reimagining poetic form and cultural engagement.

3. Theoretical Framework

Jameson appropriates Freud's notion of repression and transposes it from the individual psyche to the collective domain, formulating the concept of the "political unconscious." He interrogates the ways in which culture and literature mediate individuals' self-awareness, defining the political unconscious as "the Utopian impulse… repressed by the social superego." In alignment with postmodern thought, which eschews homogeneity and centralized structures, Jameson contends that the fragmented and decentralized nature of postmodern literary forms can nevertheless serve as vessels for Utopian aspirations (Helichi 2). He posits a dialectical relationship between psychoanalysis and Marxism, emphasizing their shared materialist foundations and mutual influence, particularly in their engagement with "the function of narrative" and the "absence… of a concept of language" ("Imaginary and Symbolic in Lacan" 386). To elaborate, Jameson synthesizes Lacan's conception of "the Real"—accessed through the interplay of symbolic and imaginary histories—with Marxism's historical materialism, which frames history as a narrative of class struggle (*The Ideologies of Theory* 104). For Lacan, ideology functions as the mechanism through which the subject is inscribed into the Symbolic and Real orders, realms that remain "as distant and unrelated as possible." The neutralization of oppressive ideological forces, in this framework, is equated with the attainment of "freedom" ("Imaginary and Symbolic in Lacan" 387).

Lacan further delineates the Imaginary as the domain of images, fantasies, and drives, which are subsequently structured and mediated by the Symbolic order. While the Symbolic imposes a semblance of order upon the chaos of the Imaginary, it cannot fully supplant it. Instead, the Imaginary persists as a site of articulation, allowing for the coexistence of these realms while maintaining their radical separation (*The Ideologies of Theory* 101). Jameson extends this framework by interpreting fantasies as mechanisms that illuminate the interplay between wish-fulfillment and realism, enabling individuals

to navigate the obstacles posed by the Real through the medium of dreams (*The Political Unconscious* 167). The Real, in turn, reconstructs the Imaginary via the Symbolic, thereby linking individual desire to broader social and historical forces. This process generates "Symbolic texts" and "ideologemes," which encapsulate the antagonistic discourses of competing social classes (170). Ultimately, Jameson argues that individual literary texts function as reflections of collective social and class discourses, producing polysemic meanings while resolving inherent contradictions through the dynamic interplay of the Real and personal fantasies ("Imaginary and Symbolic in Lacan" 386). In this way, Jameson's theoretical synthesis of Lacanian psychoanalysis and Marxist historiography offers a profound framework for understanding the ideological underpinnings of cultural production and the utopian potential embedded within fragmented postmodern narratives.

The choice to focus on Black Mountain College poetry for applying Jamesonian theory comes from the way both are deeply concerned with personal experience and the independent creation of linguistic rules. Both Jameson's theoretical framework and the poetic output of the Black Mountain School exhibit a profound engagement with the subjective dimensions of language and its production, as well as a deliberate departure from conventional linguistic structures. This alignment is further underscored by their mutual rejection of the dominant twentieth-century paradigm governing the relationship between signifier and signified, a paradigm that sought to stabilize meaning within fixed semiotic boundaries. Jameson's theoretical framework, highlighting the fluid nature of meaning and the ideological forces shaping cultural production, offers a fitting perspective for examining the Black Mountain poets. Their experimental use of language and form challenged established poetic norms and helped pave the way for the development of postmodern poetics.

By interrogating the interplay between individual expression and linguistic experimentation within the Black Mountain tradition, Jameson's theories illuminate the ways in which this avant-garde movement not only challenged the normative structures of its time but also prefigured the fragmented, self-reflexive aesthetic that would come to define postmodern literature. Thus, the application of Jamesonian theory to Black Mountain poetry offers a compelling framework for understanding the movement's pivotal role in the evolution of American literary modernism and its enduring influence on subsequent poetic practices.

This study elucidates the manner in which individuals, situated within a rigidly systematized societal framework, imbue the material world with human significance, both in life and artistic expression. Confined to the parameters of preexisting social relations, individuals are compelled to navigate their "conscious life" in a predominantly "passive" manner, adhering to the constraints imposed by "objective tasks." To counteract the pervasive emptiness of boredom, they must maintain a state of flexible "alertness," a dynamic receptivity to the world around them. The incorporation of linguistic and psychoanalytic frameworks introduces the concept of the "syntagmatic" structure of art, which serves as a mechanism to resist psychological monotony and engender meaning within an otherwise reified existence. In Olson's *Maximus Poems*, this resistance emerges through the spatial dispersal of the poetic line and the emphasis on breath and locality, challenging normative discursive order. Likewise, Duncan's *Opening of the Field* uses mythic layering and syntactic looseness to destabilize fixed meanings and invite associative movement.

Postmodern schizophrenia, as a cultural condition, exacerbates the disjunction between individual experience and social reality, resulting in the collapse of temporal and historical continuity into a ceaseless interplay of signifiers. The dissolution of the stable relationship between signified and signifier precipitates a state of linguistic fragmentation, wherein social norms are reduced to "neutral and reified media speech." As reality becomes a secondhand construct, objects and substances lose their tangible presence, and language itself undergoes a process of objectification. This reification diminishes the capacity for meaningful human interaction and agency, even within the realm of language. Both poets respond to this collapse through poetic forms that foreground process and perception, revealing how fragmentation can become generative. Authentic signification, therefore, emerges not through direct representation but through the mediation of images and the proliferation of metaphorical and metonymic language.

Art, in this context, functions as a critical site where the erosion of symbolic meaning under the weight of excessive signifiers is laid bare. Yet, paradoxically, it is within this very space of fragmentation that the potential for meaningful connections between the individual and society is reconstituted. By foregrounding the interplay of metaphor and metonymy, art reveals how the proliferation of signifiers, while destabilizing traditional modes of meaning, simultaneously creates opportunities for new forms of signification and relationality. Thus, art not only mirrors the disintegration of coherent symbolic systems but also gestures toward the possibility of reimagining human experience within a fragmented and reified social order.

4. Analysis

Olson regarded the College as an invaluable institution, one where "the self of the poet and the self of the reader are both invented and enacted." The college immersed its readers in a web of words that simultaneously construct meaning and existence:

> As soon as
> I speak, I
> speak. It
> wants to
> be free but
> impassive lies.
> "It" may desire freedom, but it remains impassive, moving only "in the direction of its words." — a line that suggests containment rather than release. As Gray notes, "Consciousness [...] and self-consciousness are a function of language; […] the poet sees and situates the self via words" (19).

This notion creates a sense of movement toward something:

> Whatever you have to say, leave
> the roots on, let them
> dangle
> And the dirt
> Just to make clear
> where they come from (*The Collected Poems* 152).

The obscurity inherent in this kind of poetry "fills the mind with its incompletion [...] because its boundaries are unknown, never settling into the clarity that defines totality" (Maynard 5). Olson merges depthlessness with postmodern synthesis, celebrating human interests, nostalgia, temporality, and the erosion of boundaries.

Since a text is historically produced, and reading it is inherently a historical process, the subject becomes fragile, a site of conflicting meanings that are continuously written and rewritten (*The Political Unconscious* 107). Narratives thus become a "socially symbolic act […] an ideological, formal, and immanent response to a historical dilemma" (125). History's imaginary manifestations should not be read as a cohesive, organic whole, but rather in terms of resisting "symbolization absolutely." Consequently, narratives can only approximate meaning in an "asymptotic" mode, always leaving traces of history, much like our imagined perception of the Real World beyond consciousness (*The Ideologies of Theory* 105). The creation of "the pure writerly text" contributes to shifting meanings and "open-field" poetics, without a definitive synthesis (Altieri 94).

The destruction of "human forms" in postmodern arts results in "decreation," from which value arises "through direct engagement with the universal forces of being manifest in the particular" (612). Language, now bound to "the experience of things," accelerates the erosion of traditional canons (Altieri 629).

4.1. Charles Olson

Cultural development is expressed through artistic production, which articulates a new order of things and new possibilities. Black Mountain poets, led by Olson, sought to achieve "field composition" through "projective" verse. This form urged poets to "compose in the sequence of the musical phrase, not in sequence of a metronome" (Olson, "Projective Verse" 1). Art, conceived as part of everyday experience, became a medium to "restore continuity between the refined and intensified forms" of our interaction with the environment (Dewey 207).

Charles Olson, an Objectivist and postwar avant-garde poet born to working-class parents, reflected on the alienation of society and humanity in his work (Olson, *The Distances* 26). He emphasized "openness," local and physical spaces as integral to culturally relevant poetry, meaningfully reflecting the world ("Projective Verse" 248). By linking poetry with manual labor, he criticized objective language and the allusive poem. The structure of his poetry underscores "the immediacy of the poem as event," focusing on the relationship between form and meaning. In his work, there is no predetermined container for ideas, and breath becomes a central concern, more significant than rhyme, meter, or sense. One "perception" must immediately lead to "a further perception" (Olson, "Projective Verse" 1).

Olson's "Projective Verse" focuses on locality rather than the dialectical potential of serial poetic forms. His work emphasizes vision's role in understanding perception. Referring to himself as a "greenhorn," Olson explored man's perception in different moments, proposing that poetry could suggest alternative conceptions of individual identity (*Selected Writings* 19). He advocated for the syllable and the line as fundamental units of poetry, led by the ear and breath, utilizing metonymic language and suspending words or syllables at the line's end. Rejecting "inherited line, stanza, overall form," syntax, and grammar, Olson demonstrated what projective or OPEN verse is, as illustrated in the following excerpt:

> *"HE IS THE DEVIL..."*
> He is the Devil. He whores Nature. Love is a word in his mouth. He has no mouth, no part of a man. He hates Woman, knows everything he doesn't want.

> He wants—nothing. He only seeks to lead others astray, from the Path. He uses Love. He Hates. He uses Words, and Every Person. He believes in no Word, no Person. He is brilliant. When he coils, he is handsomer than anything that exists (Olson, *The Collected Poems* 87). Olson dispensed with the "lyrical interference of the individual ego, of the 'subject' and his soul," which he called "Objectism" (*Selected Writings* 19).

This active use of language infused his poetry with a palpable sense of place. Olson and his Black Mountain peers, including Robert Duncan, approached projective orality not just as a stylistic shift, but as a way to historicize speech—turning to the rhythms and language of non-elite, localized voices (Perloff 33). In a postmodern moment where surface replaces depth and meaning flickers between signs, Olson's poetry resists that flattening by rooting itself in the physicality of the body. In *The Maximus Poems*, this comes through clearly: broken lines, uneven spacing, and jarring syntax echo the movement of breath and thought as they happen. His version of projective verse isn't abstract—it's built on presence, motion, and the body's own sense of measure. When Olson writes that "man is himself an object" among other objects (*The Collected Poems* 243), he's not theorizing distance but insisting on embeddedness—in the town, on the page, and in the line. Gloucester isn't just a setting in these poems; it's the pulse and pattern of the work. By mixing formal and colloquial tones, Olson deliberately erases the line between written art and lived experience. "Polis is eyes" (*Maximus I*.1) isn't metaphor; it's instruction: to see is to participate. The theory lives not in definition but in the doing—on the page, line by line.

> This sense of immediate situational awareness is captured in Olson's letter-poem *"To Leroi Jones"*:
>
> *THE HUSTINGS*
> A poem written to Leroi Jones
> two days after the election
> of John Fitzgerald Kennedy
> to the Presidency of the
> United States
>
> The future sucks
> all forward, the past
> has been removed
> by progress Cuba. (Olson, *The Collected Prose* n. p.).

Olson's work emphasizes language as a mirror of the unconscious, where it functions as a storehouse for signifiers and fragments of fantasy (Rabate 86). The "virtual dramatization of the linguistic process" results from the subject's detachment from fantasy (Jameson, "Imaginary and Symbolic in Lacan" 83). Olson's assertion that "you can't use words as ideas" represents his own *ars poetica* (The Collected Prose np). His poems, including "The Hustings," develop unique structures based on various contexts, marking a departure from traditional poetic forms. In this poem, the broken syntax and shifts in tone suggest a language shaped more by affect and intuition than by rational design. Rather than presenting a clear argument, "The Hustings" lets meaning surface indirectly, as if emerging from somewhere beneath conscious intention.

Olson's focus on "OBJECTS, what they are, what they are inside a poem, how they got there, and, once there, how they are to be used" (*The Collected Poems* 243) underscores the challenge of transferring poetic energy from the source to the reader (Olson, "Projective Verse" 1). Olson's poetry, particularly in *The Maximus Poems*, represents a cultural epic that highlights Objectism and "composition by field" (*The Collected Poems* 243). In this open poetry form, every element participates in the "kinetic of the poem," with each line emerging from the breath of the poet at the moment of writing.

With a geographical focus on Gloucester, "Maximus" serves as an image or model of man (Dorn 297). Through an autobiographical lens, Olson illustrates man's direct relationship with the world:

> *polis is*
> (Moulton cried up that day,
> "Where'd you get those glasses?"
> after, like a greenhorn,
> I'd picked three swordfish out of the sun-blaze
> where no regular could afford to look,
> to waste his eyes seeking a fin in that place. (Olson 234).

Olson's works embody the linguistic and social constructs that shape the world of fantasy, fulfilling the desire for a lost object (Jameson, "Imaginary and Symbolic in Lacan" 361). The concept of reification allows Olson and the Fishermen to work together under a reified labor sign, highlighting the "commodity fetish of the sun-blaze," which transforms nature into commodity, thus defining class identity (Blasing 4). Shared experiences between the poet and reader allow for a deeper understanding of the intended order of the lines, demonstrating that no "crucial words" are beyond reach (The Collected Prose n.p.).

The Maximus poems, with their emphasis on the locality and breath, reveal the poet's exploration of the human universe, as encapsulated in lines like:

> the blow is Creation
> & the Twist the Nasturtium
> any one of ourselves
> And the Place of it All?
> Mother Earth Alone […]
> (Olson, *The Collected Poems* 220).

This work uncovers human motion and perspective toward the world as actual, tangible earth, signifying the "innate voluntarism of life" (Merril 70). In Olson's poetry, the operations of the mind mirror the operation of language. The floating signifier reflects the immediacy of man, the universe, and their fluctuating conditions, underscoring the ephemerality of names and the mutable relationship between words and reality (*Selected Writings* 240). The Maximus poems, along with Olson's broader work, emphasize the fluidity and changeability of human relations, transforming words into things and revealing the limits of signification. Through these explorations, Olson challenges traditional notions of language and meaning, pushing poetry into new realms of possibility.

4.2. Robert Duncan

Olson's "Projective Verse" had a significant influence on subsequent Black Mountain poets, including Robert Duncan (1919–1988). Described as "'a bridge-building, time-binding, and space-binding imagination,'" Duncan became one of the most influential postwar American poets (Maynard 2). His poetry, characterized as "multi-layered and four-dimensional," transforms the page into a field of language activity that goes beyond traditional margins and spacing. Duncan believed that anything, from "a prose quotation, a catalogue, a recipe," could be integrated into poetry, drawing various sources and materials together into a dense fabric (Olson, "Projective Verse", n. pag.). This "'multiphasic' experience of language," with its "complexity and open-ended seriality," reflects the pragmatist poet's goal to "redeem the totality of human experience" (Maynard 15-16).

Duncan sought to clarify the poet's relationship to language, emphasizing that a poem, "as a wholeness," develops in a "process of meaning that is potentially endless and inexhaustible." Like the universal and enduring human story, Duncan's poems function as extended picture narratives that create variants of continuity across time and cultures (Duncan, *Collected Essays* 144). As Duncan writes, "The artist […] works with all parts

of the poem as polysemous, taking each thing of the composition as generative of meaning, a response and a contribution to the building form" (Duncan, *The Collected Later Poems* 299). He utilizes spatial language in terms of other spaces, embodying an "intriguing performance of choreography and design" (33). Duncan did not view himself "as a maker of things," but rather, "if maker, a maker of a way." His goal in composition is "to keep our exposure to what we do not know" (Olson, "Projective Verse," np).

His poetry, described as "a dynamic state of abundance," unfolds in an endless "process of meaning," revealing the excessive nature of words and the "transformational nature of the real." It offers a comprehensive exploration of linguistic representations, aiming to develop a poetics that can address the pluralistic complexities of reality, while illustrating the importance of "social-revolutionary desire as the driving psychological force of the poem" (Maynard 36). Duncan's "multiphasic form" of poetry, which serves as an open-ended totality, is grounded in his belief that the poet's social role resembles that of a shaman, ritually reawakening the American public to more expansive forms of consciousness (Maynard 34).

Duncan's approach to poetry is characterized by free-form construction and personal expression. His syntactic choices illustrate how the movement of language can reflect structural, syntactic, and universal imagination within current geographical and cultural contexts (*Selected Writings* 16). For Duncan, the poem is "more an occurrence of the language itself speaking forth rather than spiritual forces," as it embodies "the roots of all revolution" (Maynard 70). The process occurs "as 'The force that words obey in song, the rose and artichoke obey, in their unfolding towards their form'" (Maynard 89). Time, space, and geography shape this language, which "obeys flares tongues in obscure matter" (86). Duncan's focus on heterogeneity, flux, and the breakdown in the signifying chain produces a shift in values and a form of schizophrenia, which is a central theme in his poetry. The poem's lines "are articulated into phrases so that phases of its happening resonate where they will. Or lines stand as stanzas in themselves of our intention. The sentence remains. But related to a multitude of laws" (296). The "snake-like beauty" described in the line "I saw a snake-like beauty in the living changes of syntax" (Duncan, *The Opening of the Field* 12) represents these struggles and the erasure of syntactic connection.

Through his boundless imagination, Duncan stimulates the absolute by creating "a sign" of its failure and representing it as "the trace of a retreat." All parts of the poem are interrelated, with no hierarchy among them; each part is a signifier of the whole. The

text neither begins nor ends, so its meaning remains "indeterminate," allowing one to enter the text at any point. This creates "an open-ended, modular, and constantly shifting architecture with a plurality of entrances" (Maynard 143). The poem *A Poem Slow Beginning* exemplifies universal imagination in geographical, historical, and cultural contexts:

> Slow Beginning
>
> remembering powers of love
> and of poetry,
> the Berkeley we believed
> grove of Arcady —
> that there might be
> potencies in common things,
> […]
> (Duncan, *The Collected Later* 10)

In one of his poems, Duncan describes how "the sinister eye sees the near... the right eye fuses all that is immediate to sight" (Duncan, *Collected Later Poems and Plays* 10). This unusual perception of vision mirrors his approach to language: not as a transparent carrier of meaning, but as something that moves and shifts— "like the ploughing of the field," always back and forth (13). As several critics note, Duncan often treats words as connotative and relational, shaped as much by context as by intention (Maynard 80; Perloff, *Robert Duncan and the Pragmatist Sublime* 40).

Robert Duncan views myth as a living symbolic system, describing it as a "symbol of the historical sublime" that structures both memory and imagination (Perloff, *Robert Duncan and the Pragmatist Sublime* 88). In *The Ballad of Mrs. Noah*, he uses biblical imagery to evoke personal vulnerability, as in the plea, "Save me a little, Lord, I pray'd on my knees" (Duncan, *The Collected Later Poems and Plays* 213). His poetics embrace what Lisa Jarnot calls "beautiful profusions" and dissonant harmonies that resist fixed meaning (154). Duncan constructs his poems with modular, open-ended forms that invite multiple interpretive paths and remain deliberately unresolved (Quartermain 134). He often employs chiasmus and temporal layering to reflect a belief in poetic form as processual and recursive (Duncan, *Fictive Certainties* 59). While his poetics are clearly postmodern in their resistance to closure and hierarchy, they remain grounded in a deeply personal vision of poetry as a space for existential and spiritual inquiry (Bernstein 131).

The Ballad of Mrs. Noah

Mrs. Noah in the Ark
wove a great nightgown out of the dark,
did Mrs. Noah,

had her own hearth in the Holy Boat,
two cats, two books, two cooking pots,
had Mrs. Noah,

[…]
Mrs. Noah stepped down
into the same old wicked repenting
Lord-Will-We-Ever recently recovered
comfortable World-Town.

O where have you been, Mother Noah, Mother Noah?
[…]
(Duncan, *The Collected Later* 24)

Adrift in Noah's ark, caring for the animals, Mrs. Noah is a prototype for all female figures in Western religious thought. Upon landing, she first asks the cat, the crow, and then her husband, Noah. A deep sense of nostalgia, transcended by the experience of spiritual art, is evident throughout the poem, as exemplified in the line, "Oh, that was a town, said Mrs. Noah, that the Lord in His wrath did up and drown! I liked its windows and I liked its trees" (Duncan, *The Collected Later* 25). The poem's characters and situations are interchangeable, generalized, and updated to reflect the world as it is now. Each person signifies only the attributes that make them replaceable by anyone else. The signifier is divided from the signified in the semiotic chain, creating a subject with an objective, independent function. The subject is figured in "symbolism by a stand-in or substitute," perpetuated through its relationships with other signifiers. The subject mediated by language is irreparably divided because it has been excluded from the symbolic chain the moment it became "represented" within it (Jameson, "Imaginary and Symbolic in Lacan" 362).

Duncan's skill in "tuning the language" reflects his "'double vision due to maladjustment of the eyes,'" a result of childhood injury that left him cross-eyed (Duncan, *The Collected Later* 40). His poetry illustrates Jameson's theory about the signifier-signified relationship. Jameson argues that meaning is not a one-to-one relationship between the signifier and signified, but rather the product of "the movement from signifier to signifier." The signified is a "meaning-effect," an objective mirage

created by the relationships among signifiers. The erosion of the signifier-signified link suggests that "personal identity is itself the effect of a certain temporal unification of past and future with one's present" (Jameson, *Postmodernism* 26). The creation of a "language of acts and things, of devouring and being devoured, of giving birth and being born" unifies man and his world into "one body," with the poem becoming a space for virtual global assembly (163). Words act as communicative currency, losing their value over time. Duncan's focus on the generative power of words challenges current usage, urging that it be measured against the creativity and flexibility of language. For Duncan, the poet's relationship with language is central: "We know that an idea, a novel or a poem may begin at some point or germ, grow, finding its being and necessary form, rhythm and life as the germ evolves in relation to its environment of language and experience in life" (Duncan, *Collected Essays* 6). To capture the diversity of contemporary eras, Duncan envisions poetry as a process of continuous responses, recognizing immanence and inviting individuals to actively participate in the creative process.

5. Conclusion

The works of Charles Olson and Robert Duncan, rooted in the Black Mountain College movement, present a complex engagement with language, identity, and the historical context of postwar America. Through their exploration of "Projective Verse" and "multiphasic" poetry, they challenge traditional poetic structures and offer a new way of perceiving reality—one that emphasizes the fluidity of meaning, the relationship between form and perception, and the importance of locality and lived experience. Their innovative approaches to language reflect a broader cultural shift in the mid-20th century, responding to the fragmentation of societal norms, the erosion of clear boundaries, and the collapse of traditional identities in the face of postmodern uncertainties. By rejecting fixed meanings and embracing the open-ended, ever-evolving nature of language, Olson and Duncan provide a powerful commentary on the dynamic, shifting nature of both personal and collective histories.

In Olson's *Maximus Poems,* history is not a static account but a layered geography of voices, place-names, and fragmented memory, reshaped by the speaker's presence in Gloucester. Similarly, Duncan's use of myth and dream imagery in *The Opening of the Field* dissolves linear chronology, allowing private experience and collective memory to intermingle fluidly. Their work, rooted in the socio-historical challenges of their time,

continues to resonate today, offering valuable insights into the ways in which art and literature can engage with, reflect, and transform the social fabric. Through their exploration of the intersections between language, history, and identity, they underscore the importance of continually questioning and reimagining the world around us.

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