

Black Mountain College

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Journal of Black Mountain College Studies

Volume 15: RE/WEAVING (Fall 2024)

Article URL: <https://www.blackmountaincollege.org/journal/volume-15/mullenneaux>

Published online: October 2024

Published by:

Black Mountain College Museum + Arts Center

Asheville, North Carolina

<https://www.blackmountaincollege.org>

Editor:

Thomas E. Frank, Wake Forest University

Production Editor:

Kira Houston, Black Mountain College Museum + Arts Center

Note:

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Additional Note:

This article originally appeared in *The New England Review*, vol. 36, issue 4, 2015

Hilda Morley: Lost on Black Mountain

Lisa Mullenneaux

In her twenties, the New York poet Hilda Morley visited Hilda Doolittle, her namesake and mentor, in London. “Don’t publish too early,” H.D. advised her. How acutely Morley heeded her advice: she was sixty when her first collection, *A Blessing Outside Us*, was published in 1976 by Pourboire, a small press in Woods Hole, Massachusetts. Shortly afterwards, Morley’s young publisher killed himself, and she found herself bereft of an early advocate but at the same time “stuck with distribution problems.” “Do you know any bookstores?” the poet asked friends.

That Morley’s exquisite poems could, nearly forty years later, still be seeking readers can only partly be explained by her friend Stanley Kunitz’s comment that she was “unaggressive about her work.” At her death in 1998, she had five published books; many more of her poems remain unpublished, awaiting excavation by literary expeditioners. Her colleague and admirer Denise Levertov remarked in her collection of essays *Light Up the Cave* (1981) that Morley had been keeping her poems up her sleeve. “When they see the light, it is in full ripeness. We fall silent before them.” men.” She quotes Olson as saying, “it’s nice, isn’t it, that we have the women we care about doing them for us—and it’s always been natural for them, too.”

Big men with big ideas at Black Mountain were miles away, however, from the atmosphere among artist friends in Manhattan. In “The Eighth Street Club,” a chapter in her unpublished memoir of Wolpe, Morley recalls the joyous energy of the painters and musicians she and her husband socialized with in a loft on East Eighth Street—Jackson Pollock and Lee Krasner, Elaine and Willem de Kooning, Edgard and Louise Varèse, Franz Kline, Ad Reinhardt, and Mercedes Matter (who founded the Studio School). Some of them she met through her second husband, Gene Morley, who had been a classmate of Pollock at the Art Students League.

In the same memoir, Morley compares Willem de Kooning’s idea of visual space with Wolpe’s similarly inventive idea of musical space. “The painters of the Club were opposed to the use of illusionist space, and the possibility of creating another kind of perspective... was of challenging urgency.” The European Wolpe and his worldly wife

found an affirming home among the “explosive” talk of American artists, “in that atmosphere of loving elation, in that exhilaration, where it seemed that anything could be tried out.” The need for a “stockade” of like-minded artists was even more dramatic when rich collectors were received in unheated, cold-water studios in the Bowery.

For Morley the Abstract Expressionists’ solidarity was as necessary as that of the early Impressionists who gathered at Paris’s Café Guerbois. “Competition hadn’t set in. The art world belonged to the artists,” is how Elaine de Kooning described the era. And the master they emulated, according to Morley, was Cézanne, a painter obsessed with the problem of space and how to represent the conflict at the heart of nature, “the thrill of [nature’s] permanence along with the appearance of all her changes.” Her study of his importance for twentieth-century art has, says Morley, “never stopped and has brought me again and again to a clarification of what Stefan [Wolpe] achieved and what I aim for in my poems.”

While at Black Mountain in 1955, Morley found in the craggy hills of North Carolina the “light Cézanne was / thankful for continually.” In her poem “In Provence” she explores the painter’s devotion to natural light as well as his challenge to render that which is ever-changing:

So he
slept always by nine o’clock and rose with dawning.
And that light
filled his eyes and hands and therefore
one must be exact, he said.
What so clearly
time describes on the flesh, in the eyes’
wrinkles, on the throats and the backs of hands,
must be rendered again, with time itself wrested away, and the
appalling drop of the soul through space in
gravitation. (*To Hold in My Hand*, 28-29)

In Morley’s universe, the “stars / Hilarious in their wheeling violence blow / air from our lungs, / blood from our bodies, / rock our bellies sick—.” The mountain “reaches for your face” and the “last leaves carry a message.” She crystalizes the energy of inanimate objects in this passage from “Still-Life,” based on late Cézanne watercolors:

All that is physical
& weighted, or might be
subject to decay
turns into
a vapor, a cloud,
an energy
of movement, of light in itself,
but vapor
that's solid,
cloud that's tangible
light that's substance
& I say—Praise,
praise is what it is, making
the apples, the flask, the bottle
& the wall behind them soaring
& full & luminous at once,
filling
the spaces in our body with movement
& light, no single
interstice untouched. (To Hold in My Hand, 10)

Morley devours light as a painter devours light and—with Barbara Guest, Frank O'Hara, John Ashbery, and others of the New York School—cast her lot with the artists whose work she loved and learned from. In “That Bright Grey Eye,” the eye is Turner’s at seventy-six:

“brilliant as
the eye of a child”
who grew his thumbnail
in the shape of an eagle’s claw,
the better
to use it in painting. (To Hold in My Hand, 71)

What would that great colorist have done with a fiery late August sunset over the Hudson River, a spectacle Morley wishes Turner could have seen and “given back to us”:

rich in color
as Venice seen by Guardi—more aflame even,
the sky moving in a pulse,
its fire breathing
in a pulse verging on danger—mane of a lioness
affronted.

poetry. But it is emotional rebirth as well. After Wolpe died in 1972 of Parkinson's disease, his widow struggled to live without him.

most frail of all new moons
shows in the southwest corner
of the sky & lifts my breath to it:
that it
can dare to begin as new as that,
as fragile, as pale,
so I too
am become a single thread
tossed forward
into nothing:
a beginning ("A Single Thread," 10)

Her title poem "The Turning" (35) ends:

there is only
the language of a voice which turning
on itself says
(the dark streaking
itself with glimmering)
words of
that voice saying
(The only one in
this dark place)
begin,
begin again.

Stanley Kunitz claims in his preface to *To Hold in My Hand* (1984) that Wolpe's death "liberated" Morley to focus on her own career, not her husband's, to "set that power moving." And, in fact, the poems she wrote after his death treat renewal and fulfillment more than loss and despair, and celebrate the will to start over. Morley embraces the joy of invention, "Where something is being made is / where joy is" ("The Last Rehearsal"). The first section of *To Hold in My Hand* is titled "Makers," the last "Beginning Again." Fittingly, for this book Morley received the Capricorn Award given to a poet over forty in belated recognition of excellence.

The irony to those of us lucky enough to know her work is that the poet Robert Creeley called "a milk maid," and Duncan and Olson ignored, created "projective" poetry

In another “organic” poem, Ibsen’s famous heroine is rendered, chillingly. Hedda

A fine snow falling
Quickly. Crystals.
Crackling underfoot.
A season
for bonfires fires in the light
wind (move, move faster
As cold as Norway
where she strode up & down
the garden
All fences
down inside her, nothing
to burn but paper
in the blowing
of the light wind
A wasting
of swiftness
away, spattering
of pistols in a garden
knotted with fences
Tinsel of vine-leaves
& the wreath awry
Dark dark rotting
of garlands in the mud
Dark,
dark the wreath uncoiling
in redness the frozen hair (*Cloudless at First*, 119)

Using jagged half-lines as spare as a light wind, Morley suggests Hedda Gabler’s powerlessness, a “wasting of swiftness,” of meeting her fate in the garden with “all her fences down,” of her lover’s vine leaves rotting in mud, and after her suicide of a red “wreath uncoiling” around her frozen hair. The snow is fine and falling fast, but Hedda’s fate is moving even faster (“move, move faster”). By breaking the line after “A wasting” she emphasizes decay, not “swiftness,” which follows it; by breaking after “dark dark rotting” she stresses death, not “garlands,” which follows it. In the end there is no life in Hedda’s garden; it is as frozen as her hair.

Perhaps Morley’s greatest achievement—distilling all the pain of love found and lost, the terror of aging and living alone, and the surprise of renewal—is her poem “The

Shutter Clangs” (*To Hold in My Hand*, 174). A meditation on Donne’s “Goodfriday, 1613. Ryding Westward,” it asks how she as an artist can integrate past and present. She remembers of Wolpe, “your diamond eye: / that precision tool / compounded of air & fire—a Venetian / eye” and feels herself torn between his memory (the East) and her future (the West). As she is pulled back by grief, she resists “saying / to myself—absent thee, / absent thee from felicity / a while—.” She needs to still the pain in order to tell her story.

How can she find courage to go on when her beloved, and most of her contemporaries, are gone? The “new . . . rises out of the mist” but will she meet it?

What use can we
make of terror & our losses,
so loss itself may
clarify the eye & make it shine in
unhealedness,
& what we know of terror
heighten our space, our leaning
into newness:
& the eye teach itself
a boldness out of
what thwarted it?...
What was hollowness
in me shapes to
an opening.
Icicles
that bled my veins thaw:
something
edges into green....

“The Shutter Clangs” treats the struggle to survive one’s losses, to free oneself from the “deaths / knives plunging / in unforeseeable places,” to lean into the distance with arms outstretched, to ride westward. But it also affirms how an artist transcends pain by using it. As in so many of her elegies, Morley poses the question of survival directly to her beloved:

Can I ride away
from where you are,
as I lie dying with you,
you of “the clear sky”
in whom
no anger lived,
whose fire
was gaiety & the “Coeur très fort
TRÈS FORT”
Unlike you, I have held to bitterness: each inch of
death encroaching
opened swamps at my feet.
You of
the “clair bones,” the uttermost
tip of the tree,
from your eyes I gather
flakes of light warmer
than any stars
in these years that have blinded me.
The shutter clatters,
clangs and lifts
& I move forward
my roots in darkness still—
but
riding westward . . .

Morley criticism is almost nonexistent, but in 1993 Brian Conniff reassessed the legacy of Black Mountain poetry in light of her work. As mentioned, Morley and Wolpe taught at the college from 1952–1956, although she was not only denied equal status, she was known as “Stefan Wolpe’s wife.” (For example, see Tom Clark’s *Charles Olson: The Allegory of a Poet’s Life*.) Conniff compares her marginal status—the worshipful treatment of Olson in an early tribute—to the self-sufficiency of her later poems, especially those that appeared in *Cloudless at First* (1988).

Like Levertov, Conniff recognizes how well Morley’s work exhibits Olson’s principle of kinesis: “One perception must immediately and directly lead to another perception.” He notes Morley’s “care and irreverence” for the past, that conflict she describes in “The Shutter Clangs” that fortifies her lines so that even when they describe a bird they are as volatile as quick-silver. She wants

to lay hold upon whatever
quivers inside the bird-calls,
the dripping
of tail of wings—
to know it
inside my hand where power
of that sort lives
& in my fingers
wakes and becomes
an act of
language.

Conniff also quotes one of Morley's most intriguing poems about the creative process, "The Last Rehearsal."

language.
Where something is being made is
where joy is,
where something
begins—
the bare bones
before flesh has covered it
or the innards
of the body where things begin to
work,
where the cell begins
to stretch itself, the nucleus
to multiply.
It is a scaffolding,
but one that trembles, (To Hold in My Hand, 212)

In this and other later poems, it is not ideas that renew the speaker, especially the speaker as artist, but joy in the physical world, in life as process, a refusal to bring down the curtain, and in fact to peek behind the curtain at the actors preparing their roles. In "With Cavafy," Morley borrows a line from the Greek poet to explain how living "at a slight angle to the universe" allowed her to see more clearly. She could

accept myself more easily, for the angle
moved with me,
was pliable,
elastic, could become many things— (The Turning, 43)

Her separateness is more than shyness; it is a part of her identity, a bridge from fear of the unknown to “what was there to be made over.” This process of seeing the physical world from an odd angle with full awareness of what’s at stake is the subject of “Stop Look Listen.”

Look where the everything
grows and leaps up
heaping itself into more Let the eye then, eye
take, take everything
it can. Never give over.
Pull the world inside Wedge it
against your space . . . (Cloudless at First, 160)

This stretching of the senses to “pull the world inside” requires constant shifting. Morley describes this act of consciousness in her statement of poetics in *The Turning*, where she compares the mind’s reactions to its world to her spacing of words on a page. Making art means paying attention to the “ticking, swirling, heaping, sliding” world.

Like so many New York poets of the 1950s, Morley paid attention—to the revolutionary ideas that swirled around her, to the (often unheralded) experiments of the painters and musicians she loved. She perfected the elegy as nature poem and prized friendships because they buffer the agony of loss. Morley’s elegies spring from senses awakened to the physical world by having loved Wolpe, “the man I loved / who made the imagination / more real & more so / than what the world calls real” (*The Turning*, 117). Once attuned to that world, her voice found its own music, her eyes saw “a blue-Leonardo sky” with light behind it.

This article originally appeared in *The New England Review*, vol. 36, issue 4, 2015

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