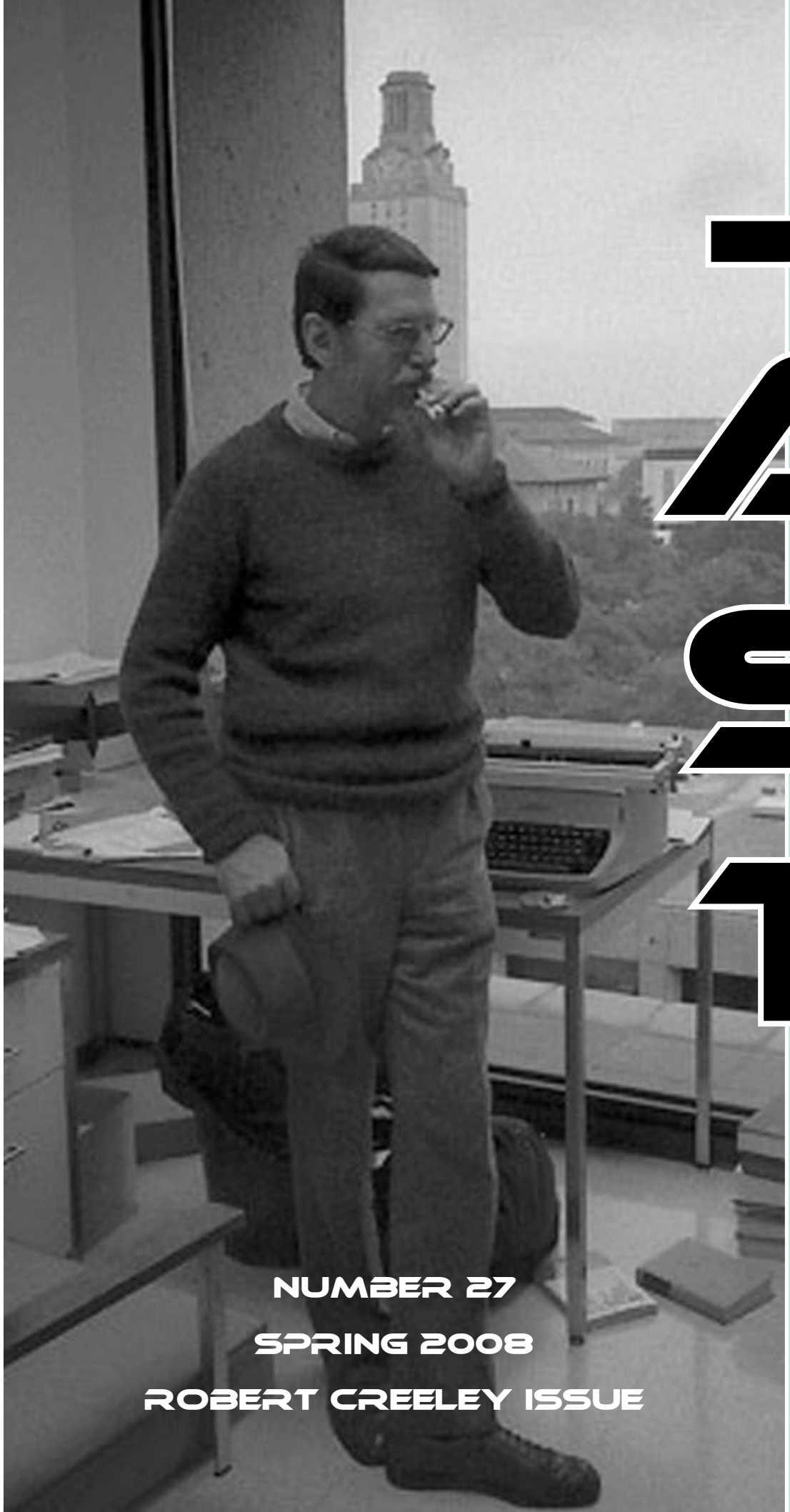

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# Journal of American Studies of Turkey

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# "So, onward my friend!"

Barış Gümüşbaş

While I was working towards my M.A. in American literature at Hacettepe University, in 1989, David Landrey from Buffalo State College was a visiting Fulbright scholar in Ankara. Himself a poet and one of the most dedicated and inspiring teachers one can ever meet, David opened a course on "Postmodern American Poetry." Among others, our reading list included Charles Olson, Robert Duncan, Denise Levertov, and Robert Creeley. The small group of students taking the course was mainly composed of the newly recruited TAs of the department, and although most of the class members had BAs in American Literature, they had only a vague familiarity with the names on the syllabus. Having majored in linguistics and taken only a few courses in American literature, it was even a stranger terrain for me. David not only admired Creeley's poetry but, living and teaching in Buffalo, had a personal acquaintance with Creeley as well. Despite the historical and poetic affinities among the poets on our syllabus, Creeley's poetry certainly had a different feel to it. To begin with, his poetry was a "hard walnut" to break into (as we say in Turkish) behind its deceptive simplicity. With its economy of words and compact form, imbued with a spectrum of human conditions and emotions, ranging from agony to a simple joy of existence, his poetry was reminiscent of that of another New Englander, Emily Dickinson. (Years later, my then classmate now my colleague Ayça Germen would write her Ph.D. dissertation on the Dickinson and Creeley affinity). In those days, smoking was allowed in graduate seminar rooms. Although David Landrey was a nonsmoker, out of kindness and also perhaps to help us concentrate, he suffered the infernal fumes in great patience. So, we all sat there, covered in a cloud of smoke and tried to find an entry into those small labyrinthine poems of Creeley.

At the end of the semester, the course was over but our interest in Creeley was not. When I completed my course requirements, I decided to write my M.A. thesis on Creeley's poetry. By that time David Landrey had already returned to Buffalo. My advisor at the department did not really share my enthusiasm for my choice, but she finally gave her consent. It was still the age of snail mail; the internet was about a decade away, but dear David helped me get books and material from the US and generously guided and encouraged me with his

long letters. Finally I completed my thesis, and with David's help, I sent a copy to Creeley as well. Some time later, I received a very kind letter from Creeley, which I still keep. There were more surprises in store for me.

To celebrate the 10th anniversary of our department, we had been brainstorming for ideas for a series of events. The American Embassy's branch USIS gave the good news about the availability of funds to cover for the travel and lodging expenses of an American writer that the department wished to invite. Upon David Landrey's suggestion, who was back at the department again, and with the support and encouragement of our chairperson, Professor Gönül Uçele, Creeley was contacted. Creeley not only accepted the invitation, but by way of some rehearsal, USIS also arranged a teleconference with him, during which a few students and professors asked questions and Creeley answered. I myself asked a question, which I do not remember now, but what I clearly remember is how his voice reached and filled the room across thousands of miles. And a short while later, the man whose poetry we had discussed passionately for hours was among us. During his stay in Ankara, Creeley met faculty and students, gave informal lectures, read his poetry and answered questions. He visited several other cities and universities in Turkey as well before returning home. About a year later, I was granted a scholarship by the Turkish Higher Education Council. In order to be able to use the grant, the applicant had to get an acceptance letter within a few months or the grant could not be used the following year. Most American universities had already processed the graduate applications for the fall semester. Even if some might have not, there was not enough time to contact them to complete all the paperwork. David Landrey stepped in miraculously; contacted Creeley through phone (no internet then!) and Creeley helped me obtain the required acceptance letter from University at Buffalo, English Department. A few months later, I arrived in Buffalo. Creeley became my academic advisor at the department and would remain so until I changed my course to steer towards Herman Melville. During my four year stay in Buffalo, I would enjoy the honor and privilege of his company and friendship.

UB English Department had a very strong Poetics Program, and Creeley was one of the names (like Susan Howe, and Charles Bernstein) that attracted graduate students from across the U.S. and abroad. There were students and aspiring young poets who came to UB only to have a chance to study with Creeley. Yet this did not create a sense of authority or superiority in him; on the contrary, such popularity only made him more modest and kind.

He liked being on equal and human terms with others and treated his students with utmost care and respect. Talking with him, one felt that poetry was, more than being anything else, a context for human communication, just as books were for him, first of all, physical objects with some magical power inside. In that sense he could be called old-fashioned, in all the positive sense of the term. I never forget that once, while he was (or both of us?) complaining about the intimidating and ostentatious language of the academic criticism, he simply said "they don't love books!"

One semester I was taking Creeley's graduate seminar on Charles Olson. There were about six or eight of us listening open-mouthed to this man who was giving us the first-hand account of one of the most interesting and productive periods of American poetry. There was no way of getting any closer to the scene than that. If it was partly the content that made us fully attentive to every word he said, it was also partly due to the way he spoke. Those who knew how Creeley spoke would remember his pleasantly meandering manner. I think what he called "the analogy of driving" to illustrate his sense of writing could be applied to his verbal expression as well. Using that metaphor in "Notes Apropos 'Free Verse'," Creeley says that "the road, as it were, is creating itself momently in one's attention to it, there, visibly, in front of the car. There is no reason it should go on forever, and if one does so assume it, it very often disappears all too actually" (*CE* 493-494). And thus, listening to him or riding with him was like getting into all those interesting byways; taking sudden turns in different directions, or sometimes stopping or making a detour for a breathtaking scenic view. It certainly was not your usual smooth and all-too-predictable ride on the interstate highway, with all the signs and markings to give you a sense of direction and security, but a totally different adventure. When you tried to draw a cognitive map of all those points covered in that trip, not only would you find yourself safe and sound at a concrete and particular destination, but you could also realize all those amazing connections.

In 1996, I completed my Ph.D. and returned home to teach at Hacettepe University. I kept correspondence with Creeley, though I now regret that not as often as I should have. I particularly remember our correspondence during the early days of the war campaign against Iraq. Turkey's position and political situation at that period was very precarious. The U.S. administration had asked the Turkish government to grant permission for the deployment of the U.S. forces on the Turkish side of the Iraqi border to launch a ground operation through the border. There was a strong public opposition to the demand in Turkey, and the Turkish parliament was to vote the government's motion to

procure the said permission on March 1, 2003. During the hours of voting at the parliament, there was a protest rally (in which I also participated) against the U.S. demands from the Turkish government in Ankara. Finally, the government was unable to find the majority and the grant was denied. It was the beginning of perhaps the tensest period in the history of the Turkish-American relations. However, not all Americans were disappointed by the rejection, and if the political discord caused bitterness between some Americans and some Turks, it only fostered the already existing friendship between some others. Creeley had already been passing to his friends a petition through e-mail to be signed and sent to the United Nations to take initiative to stop an imminent war in Iraq. I knew that Creeley was not a political poet in the sense some of his fellow poets had been, like Charles Olson, Denise Levertov, or Allen Ginsberg. I think, this was partly because he was always more interested in questions than in answers, just as he says in "Caves," "Like all good questions, / this one seems without answer," (*OE* 36) which made him, one can say, a moral man without being a moralist. Still, as his poetry attests, he was most sensitive to all human conditions, private or public, that engendered pain and suffering. He felt responsible for his community, whether it was the immediate neighborhood (I knew how proud he felt about living in Buffalo) or the much larger geography of the mind and the heart where his friends and fellow human beings happened to be. Being aware of Turkey's delicate position in those circumstances, in an e-mail message he sent me during the days of increasing tension, Creeley expressed his serious concern with wry humor by saying "our countries seem to be drifting together toward the abyss. Maybe we should start our own, like bring your shovel and a saw," and almost in an apologetic tone, he added: "I hope you all are ok—with friends like US (pun intended), you don't need enemies?"

It was in such a frame of mind, and probably during the very same days, he must have written the poem "Help!" that was to be published posthumously in *On Earth: Last Poems and an Essay*. As far as I know, this is the only (if not one of very few) Creeley poem that contains such a direct and open political statement. Still, the poem raises the issue in most everyday and human terms by taking an anti-war stance not in a highly dramatic or declamatory tone, but in a very simple and matter-of-fact manner. Creeley's use of rhyme in the poem, not a very usual feature of his poetry, can also be related to this appeal to the ordinary, or perhaps the common sense. Considering the urgency of the message Creeley must have intended it to be as accessible and memorable as possible. The opening stanza is almost lighthearted with its reference in the final two lines to the speaker's own difficulty with rhyming. It's like a playful paternal voice first attempting to draw the attention and relieve the anxiety of his children

whom he is going to scold within minutes. Initially the addressee seems to be a nondescript soldier "Sitting in a bunker," but as the poem proceeds, especially after the fifth stanza, the identity of the addressee is blurred so as to implicate anyone who would sit back and do nothing to stop an unjust war. Reminding some fundamental ethical precepts such as "It's wrong to kill people" or "Wrong to blast cities," in a language as simple and direct as that of "Thou shall not kill," the poem then turns to the images of family, home, and human relations, which is the favorite domain of Creeley's poetry. These images not only make the moral center of the poem, but where they occur (stanzas seven through nine), is *literally* the center of the seventeen stanza poem. Starting with the ninth stanza, there is a clear shift in the tone of the speaker, who now wishes to raise the spirits and the courage of the addressee to shake him out of his conformism. Thus, "Thou shall not kill" becomes, so to speak, "Thou shall not fear," and the final two stanzas tell what is to be done:

> Sing together!
> Make sure it's loud!
> One's always one,
> But the world's a crowd
>
> Of people, people,
> All familiar.
> Take a look!
> At least it won't kill you. (24)

In its blending of sympathy and resentment, its alternating moments of compassion and criticism, the poem achieves what all good literature, to me, attempts to achieve: to bring us to the brink of a disturbing ambivalence. If I had come to know the poem before Creeley's death, I would have written to him to check another poem, "The Strangest Creature On Earth," by the famous Turkish poet Nazım Hikmet. (*On Earth* also being the title of the posthumous Creeley collection!). Although Nazım Hikmet was a communist and had absolute faith and hope in the virtues and the potential of the common man, in this poem he does not spare his words to criticize the indolence and cowardice of his hero. In the English translation of the poem, the speaker begins with the words "You're like a scorpion, my brother, / you live in cowardly darkness / like a scorpion," continues with the same mixture of sympathy and anger as in Creeley's poem,

and concludes by saying "I can hardly bring myself to say it, / but most of the fault, my dear brother, is yours."[1] Such a conclusion is also the gist of Creeley's "Help!" and I am sure he would have been delighted to read Nazım's poem.

Talking about the sense of responsibility towards one's community and fellow human beings, it certainly need not always manifest itself under extraordinary circumstances or in a grandiose manner. Actually just like the minimalism of his poetry, I think, unpretentious acts and deeds better suited Creeley's character. In some sections of the poetry courses I taught to our undergraduates at Hacettepe, Creeley was certainly on our syllabus. After our readings and discussions of his poetry, sometimes I encouraged my students to contact him through e-mail for questions and comments. I knew that only a few would have the courage to write to him, but I also knew he would respond to all who cared to write. In a message he wrote after such an interaction, Creeley sounded pleased: "meantime I had a charming note from a student there, asking for help with a poem I had written, 'Chasing the Bird,' and its relation to jazz and Charlie Parker etc, etc. I replied and got heartfelt thanks." To some this may look like a gesture of no significance, but for students it meant a lot. One of the most noted American poets (perhaps even the first poet from any nation they ever personally contacted!) took time to write back to answer their questions or hear their comments. It was an act of true generosity, a heart warming instance of human communication, and an invaluably transforming educational experience for them; and, I could refer my students to Creeley without any hesitation because I knew that Creeley cherished all these values.

The last time I heard from Creeley was before he went to teach at Brown University. In a message he sent in January 2001, he was telling about the changes in the Poetics Program at the University at Buffalo and sounded somehow tired but still humorous: "myself, I am trying to disappear very gradually and unobtrusively. So if you see me hiding behind the proverbial tree there in Ankara, don't tell anybody!" Although I knew through some common friends that he had been having health problems for some time, it never occurred to me then to read these lines as an early farewell message. Now, so it seems. Strangely enough, just the night before I received the sad news both from Scott Pound and David Landrey, I had been re-reading *Tales Out of School: Selected Interviews* and had put the book in my backpack in the morning to continue reading at

[1] I cite the poem from <http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/the-strangest-creature-on-earth>. The poem in print is in *Poems of Nazım Hikmet*. Trans. Randy Blasing and Mutlu Konuk. New York: Persea Books, 2002.

my office. I'm sure many people were reading Creeley's poetry, and talking or thinking about him on the same day (and not only in the U.S.) without knowing that Bob had already been watching them from the heavens and smiling at them as charmingly as ever. So, this is the proof of a bond, of a community that challenges the limits of time and space. None of those people have brought a "shovel and a saw," as Creeley asked, to start a country of their own, and they do not need to, because they have already found refuge in a republic of common sentiments rising on the foundation of words cut, wrought, and put into their place by people like Robert Creeley.

This issue has been in preparation for a much longer time than planned. When I expressed my intention about two years ago to Robert J. Bertholf about preparing an issue in memory of Robert Creeley, he readily agreed. We started working together, Bertholf in Austin, Texas, I in Ankara. Apart from the long process of submissions and reviews, the change in our editorial team and readjustments put us behind our publication schedule. Life itself intervened in many ways both pleasant and unpleasant, but since we got so far I can say that we have been lucky. So, as we finally got through all, a word of thanks is long overdue. First, on behalf of *JAST*, I would like to thank Robert J. Bertholf , who put all his expertise and support into this project even while he was dealing with health problems (we are all very glad to hear that he is doing well now). Creeley's wife Penelope Creeley, whose warm hospitality in Buffalo I can never forget, generously granted permission to use the copyrighted Creeley material.[2] Likewise, Mark Christal kindly gave permission to use the photographs taken by himself during Creeley's visit to the University of Texas, Austin, in the early 1980s. All contributors deserve heartfelt thanks for their response and the patience they have shown during this long wait. Finally, I also thank Nur Akkerman *JAST* editor in chief, and Bilge Mutluay, editorial assistant for this issue, for their support and help. As Creeley loved saying, "So, onward my friend!"

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[2] All previously unpublished materials by Robert Creeley © the Estate of Robert Creeley.

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# And Then He Bought Some Lettuce: Living into Robert Creeley's Poetics

Robert J. Bertholf

It must have been the fall semester 1963 when Robert Creeley came to Eugene to give a reading at the University of Oregon. *For Love: Poems 1950–1960* had been published the year before. The writing program at the school held generous views about Creeley's poetry and *For Love* had already brought in equally generous reviews. I went to the reading with great anticipation, mainly because as a second-year graduate student I was feeling free from Longfellow, Hawthorne and what I thought of as the pernicious New England mind; this was a chance to hear a poet speak directly to an audience and to get a sense of what was being talked about as the "New American Poetry." The reading began with enthusiasm and went on with the high energy of Creeley's tightly stretched observations about here and there, the isolation of self and longing for a community, the cry for the commune of love, and the insistence for exploring the abilities of language to express thought. About half way through the reading I was flooded with the terrifying anxiety that Creeley was propounding ways of seeing and thinking that I had fled New England to escape. "This guy's from New England," I said to a friend sitting beside me, and left. Creeley's remark on the subject read years later would not have given me much comfort after leaving the reading:

> At various times I've put emphasis on the fact that I was raised in New England, in Massachusetts for the most part. So placing myself, I've argued that that fact clarifies my apparently laconic way of saying things, expecially [especially] so in my early poems. (*CE* 572)

That was not the end of it, of course. Creeley came to a Creative Arts Festival in 1974 at Kent Sate University, where I was teaching, and then when I moved to Buffalo as the Curator of the Poetry Collection in 1979, Penelope and Robert gave a party to welcome me to town in their upstairs apartment at 400 Fargo Street. It was just the beginning. Creeley died in March 2005 but that event was another beginning of what I see now as an interminable review/investigation of his poetry and poetic thinking. For all of those years I was caught, and am still caught, in Creeley's dilemmas of the old New England trap: longing for love

and the full sensuous enjoyment of living followed by the guilt for having the pleasures which such living produces, the need to remain an isolated, determined person cancelled but not negated by the equally strong need for inclusion in groups of friendly people, and especially the strident obligation to realize even the smallest potential as a human being. Avoid every excess of emotional and material possessions, and likewise every excess of emotional depression and material poverty. Don't waste anything, strive forward to find what is inside because it is impossible to determine accurately what waits outside.

There is a grimness in all this, even though the New England religious traditions offer up an abstracted spiritual salvation, but that does not equal or compensate for the denial of self—and in the strictest sense the denial of creating when only God can create—necessary to join that spirituality. Denial and the persistent drive for fulfillment cannot be reconciled, even within the particularized speculations that drove Creeley's poetry from *For Love* (1962) to *If I Was Writing This* (2003). A huge seriousness surrounds Creeley's insistent obligation to articulate the immediate perceptions of place and intelligence which then provokes the insistent obligation in others to escape being caught through explanations of the intellectual pleasure of being engaged in the contraries of an operative poetics. Wallace Stevens added other dimensions to these obligations:

> The mind has added nothing to human nature. It is a violence from within that protects us from a violence without. It is the imagination pressing back against the pressure of reality. It seems, in the last analysis, to have something to do with self–preservation; and that, no doubt, is why the expression of it, the sound of its words, helps us to live our lives. (*NA* 36)

Of course, it took many years to unscramble and perhaps explain the initial reactions to Creeley and his poetry, but when I read through *For Love* again and again I was a bit amazed that the themes I'd recognized in the reading were operative aspects of the poetry. The poignant situation of personal isolation and lack of purpose in the poem "The End" stayed with me for years:

> When I know what people think of me
> I am plunged into my loneliness. The grey
>
> hat bought earlier sickens
> I have no purpose no longer distinguishable.

A feeling like being choked
enters my throat. (*CP* I 133)

The situation of the poem in the whole book of poems is familiar as the dilemma of being caught between two ideas in the poem "The Whip." There the speaker lies in bed with a woman sleeping next to him and imagines another woman on the roof; when after his sigh "Ugh" the sleeping woman rouses and puts "her hand on / my back" (*CP* I 146), the speaker is lead into a faulty statement by his own thinking, the intervention of a cognitive function in an imaginative process. Similar dilemmas of the mind's allegiances appear throughout the volume. "The Plan" calls this sort of dilemma "this / damned muddle" (*CP* I 212). The trapped speaker in the poem, "The Hill," rejects one attitude which turned his "head into a cruel instrument," but he still confesses even the pattern of walking away from an attitude is itself disturbing. He will "not allow it / to reappear—" but even such determination does not relieve the constraints of the dilemma; personal perversity makes the resolve, binding the speaker in "magnanimous cruelty":

Saith perversity, the willful
the magnanimous cruelty,
which is in me
like a hill. (*CP* I 202)

Such perversity leads, as it does in the poem, "And," to a sense of being cut off from the past, family and traditions, the insignificance of life itself: "They are all dead now" (*CP* I 191). The accumulation of such dilemmas and the resulting grim view of life itself caught in its own patterns runs through these poems. It is part of their signature.

*For Love* begins and ends with a citation to Hart Crane's poem "The Broken Tower," first in the poem 'Hart Crane," "And so it was I entered the broken World" (*CP* I 110) and last in the poem "For Love," "Into the company of love / it all returns" (*CP* I 258).

And so it was I entered the broken world
To trace the visionary company of love, its voice
An instant in the wind (I know not whither hurled)
But not for long to hold each desperate choice. (Crane 106)

Hart Crane's tormented life in some sense becomes a framework for Creeley's persistent struggle to articulate his immediate perception of life and love, as well as his struggle with the language to reveal himself in poetic forms.

As part of that persistent struggle, the poem—and now a famous poem—"A Form of Women," begins with a speculation about what the speaker has known and not been able to know, even though the reality of what it is looks at him "through the open door." Now the speaker walks into the moonlight, the presence of love, and sees forms of loves, "shapes more fearful / because I feared" in the trees. The longing for love is countered by the fear of finding or not finding it. Love itself gives shape (even form) to physical events, in this case, trees, and by extension to a form of women. The poem then turns the meditation back to very particular facts, "My face is my own, I thought." His face is in fact his, but thinking, a cognitive assertion of order, as other poems in the volume consider, for example, the lines from "Young Woman":

> I think, and
> therefore I am not,
> who was to have been, as you,
> something else. (*CP* I 238)

does not clarify self-identity, and instead makes a division between the fact and the idea of the fact that thinking produces. "A Form of Women" continues:

> But you have seen it
> turn into a thousand years.
> I watched you cry.

The poem addresses another, unnamed person and says that person, he/she, has seen "it," "My face" or the thought, which turns into a thousand years of explications, justifications, rationales, bringing not the joy of understanding love but crying. The speaker is unable to touch the other person, caught in his own restraints, even though he "wanted very much to / touch you." He now gives the warning that even though it will be dark when he gives the poem to the other person, that person should be mindful of it "when the moon shines," because in the same way that the moon as love gave shape and form to the trees, the moon can particularize the sense of love in a way that his assertions of his own physicality can not. The speaker's physicality asserted here is not the same as the assertion of personal identity—"but I am not."

My face is my own.
My hands are my own.
My mouth is my own
but I am not.

Moon, moon,
when you leave me alone
all the darkness is
an utter darkness,

a pit of fear,
a stench,
hands unreasonable
never to touch.

But I love you.
Do you love me.
What to say
when you see me. (*CP* I 152-53)

The speaker's life without love is "utter darkness, / a pit of fear," an isolation with "a stench," which is not removed by the following assertions that despite all that I've said here "I love you." He will be as speechless, or inarticulate, when he meets the other person as he has been in stating his sense of love to the other person in this poem. He has been trying to find "A Form of Women," not *the* form of women, so the poem ends without a final definition but with the demonstration of a process of articulation that has found a version of women; and other points of perception, echo (memory), and immediate contact will produce other versions. In the end the process of writing the poem is more important than a teleological definition.

"A Form of Women" shifts its focus from the speaker to the addressed person, "you," and thereby removes the obligation of the poem as a personal confession of any position.[1] Creeley uses this plan of misdirection in other poems as well. The poem "The Letter" addresses the "you" in the first line: "I did not expect you / to stay married to / one man all your life." The conclusion of the poem, "as to how much was penitence" (*CP* I 195) in the relationship, depends

[1] See Kenneth Cox, "Address and Posture in the Early Poetry of Robert Creeley." *Boundary* 2 6.7 3.1 (Spring/Fall 1978): 241–262.

on the responses of the unidentified "you," so its statement is a result of the writing out of the occasion, the moment of inception and articulation, and not the report of an old conversation or argument. The poem "Saturday Afternoon" begins with a stanza about "a monster" coming home to a dinner, and then the second stanza shifts the address to a "you":

> The monster you love is home again,
> and he tells you the stories of the world,
> big cities, small men
> and women.

It is as if a narrator had entered the poem to direct its attentions away from the speaker to the unnamed woman in the poem, and in the final stanza to exhort her to better behavior from a narrative distance:

> Make room for the furry, wooden eyed
> monster. He is my friend
> whom you burn.
> amen. (*CP* I 207)

The main point here is that the poem does not describe what was said between the monster and the woman, or specify the possible differentiation between the monster and the speaker; it creates a small interactive drama as a version of what could have happened and what could have been said.

"The Rain" also redirects the poem's address away from the direct statement of the speaker, away from a speculation about the effects of "this quiet, persistent rain" which, despite the generalized idea of the soothing effect of rain at night, has "locked" the speaker "in this final uneasiness."[2] Another exhortation follows:

> Love, if you love me,
> lie next to me.
> Be for me, like rain,
> the getting out

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[2] Marjorie Perloff, in her article on Creeley's *Collected Poems*, "Robert Creeley's Radical Poetics," *electronic book review* (2007): npgs, offers what might be an exhaustive reading of "The Rain"; she also offers informative views on Creeley's place in contemporary American poetry.

of the tiredness, the fatuousness, the semi-
lust of intentional indifference.
Be wet
with a decent happiness. (*CP* I 207)

The exhortation actually asks "Love," as an idea, and then as you, "if you love me," to please remove the falsifying personal desires and then transform me in the way rain is reputed to do toward a "decent happiness," "wet"' with sexual satisfaction. The indirection of the address to "Love" removes the center of charged emotional stress from a personal location to a distanced rhetorical structure.

Creeley has additional plans to hide the turmoil in his private self. Early in his writing life, he wrote to William Carlos Williams to ask for poems for a new magazine he and Jake Leed were planning.[3] The actual reason, however, was to make contact with a poet he had begun reading and analyzing very carefully as a model for his own sense of rhythm—measure as he would later call it—of creating rhythmic structures with breaks of lines involving a hesitation of stopping or not stopping at the end of the line. In this period Creeley was also schooling himself in other forms of the poem, especially the love lyric. In his review of Williams's *Selected Essays,* (*CE* 34–39), he quotes a complete poem by Thomas Campion, "Kinde are her answeres" and then a poem by Williams, "The World Narrowed to a Point," but the concern of the review is to establish the importance of measure in Williams's poetics. There is more to be said about Williams's place in Creeley's poetics, but now Creeley's use of Campion's songs of love in his own poetry has a place in the strategies or plans of the poem.

The poem "Air: 'Cat Bird Singing'" begins with a statement about the cat bird singing and the trees at night "with huge eyes" which pose a threat to the secrecy of the speaker's speculations. The tenseness of the moment gets subverted, or redirected, by another aside, this time to "My love / is a person of rare refinement" who has "another air" when she speaks, another kind of song, "what Campion spoke of / with his / follow thy fair sunne unhappie shadow . . . ." The poem concludes with a supplication for support from a "lady," a figure for a woman from the courtly love tradition which informed Campion's love songs. Creeley is not subscribing Campion as a source for his poetry, rather taking him along as a companion, a fellow poet confronting the same difficulties

[3] See Jacob Leed, "Robert Creeley and *The Lititz Review:* A Recollection with Letters." *JML* 5.2 (April 1976): 243–259.

of articulation as Creeley does; and "my love" refigured as the "lady" creates a figure to make his speculation very proper, modest perhaps, and to allow him to get out of his speculations.[4] Here:

> O lady hear me. I have no
>
> other
> voice left. (*CP* I 165)

The appeal is to the lady for a kind of sanction from Campion's context, and then a kind of confession that he has only his voice, or that of the cat bird as his voice, with the implication that he is doing the very best he can to approach her in language, song. Furthermore, the speaker distances himself from the confession with the indirection of the address to the "lady," and so avoids a sentimental, and thus personal, conclusion to the poem.

Other of Creeley's early poems use addresses to the lady with similar effect. "Ballad of the Despairing Husband" begins with a rendition of a break-up of a marriage which leads to the termination of the ballad stanzas:

> She was. I know. And she is still,
> and if I love her? then so I will.
> And I will tell her, and tell her right . . . .

A supplication to the "lovely lady" follows, then to the "most lovely lady," finally to the "loveliest of ladies." The finale comes in the lines which remove the discussion of the divorce to the mediating authority of the lady in a tradition of the love song:

> Oh, lady, grant me time,
> please, to finish my rhyme. (*CP* I 174)

The lady does not respond. This is also the case in the poem "Lady Bird" which begins with a report of a conversation with the lady and then moves to the complicating dilemma of Creeley's early poems, longing for love but knowing also its agonies:

> To be happy
> now she cries, and all things

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[4] See Robert Duncan, "After *For Love*." *Boundary* 2 6.7 3.1 (Spring/Fall 1978): 233–239 for more comments on Creeley, Campion, and the lady.

turn backward
and impossible.

The speaker claims his love for the lady and his willingness to comfort her despite the obvious conflict of longing and agony:

but the invention is
a parallel sufferance.

Mine for hers
hers for mine. (*CP* I 187)

The invention of the discourse with the lady now appears as a disguise for an actual relationship between the speaker and a woman, and the success of that relationship depends upon the "sufferance" between the speaker and the women; but the intensity of the conflict remains hidden in the invention of the conversation with the lady, and so personal statement remains unnecessary in the protection of the speaker from his own faults.

The poem "for Robert Duncan," "The Door," is a central one in the use of the invention of the lady. The poem begins with a description of a wall and a door which leads into a garden with the "scent of wild flowers," but the speaker's mind is at times in torment, and even though he can see the wall and the door, he cannot go to the door and enter the garden. In the developing narrative of the poem, a supplication to the lady follows: "Lady, do not banish me / for digressions. . . . "Lady I follow." In another time, the speaker recounts, he left his tormented self and "found the Garden," found a woman and seduced her, a kind of coming into adulthood not actually in a sexual act but in an imaginative one. The "mighty magic" (*CP* I 199) of the seduction in the following speculation can lead to the renewal of the race, and even though "the garden echoes across the room," haunts his memory. He objects to submitting himself "in the ridiculous posture of renewal, / of the insistence of which I am the virtue." But the woman, "you," will not respond, and though the speaker is distraught in screaming at the "you," there is nothing for him to do "but to get up," to end his pleas, imagining that the Lady has moved to the next town" along with the "you" (*CP* I 200), the lover of one night in the garden. The speaker then imagines "the Graces in long Victorian dresses," as his grandmother he had mentioned, but he is not allowed back into the garden with his lover, so shifts his address to the lady:

But the Lady is indefinable,
she will be in the door in the wall
to the garden in sunlight.
I will go on talking forever.

I will never get there.
Oh Lady, remember me
who in Your service grows older
not wiser, no more than before.

The speaker poses himself as the wronged but dedicated and sincere lover asking the Lady to intercede on his behalf to return to the imaginary garden behind the imaginary wall. He will do what distressed lovers do—"I will sell myself in hell, in heaven also I will be"—in order to gain the garden. Even the excessive pleas will not work, and in the final stanza the speaker returns to his own mind and its memories of the Lady:

In my mind I see the door,
I see the sunlight before me across the floor
beckon to me, as the Lady's skirt
moves small beyond it." (*CP* I 201)

He imagines his recall to the ideality of love in the garden, but remains always outside, alone, a pleading supplicant to love's care.

The supplication to love, or another person, takes a different direction and reaches a different conclusion in the volume's final poem "For Love." The speaker wants to speak of love, but "what is it that / is finally so helpless, / different, despairs of its own / statement," or refuses to allow articulation even refuses itself as a "reward":

Here is tedium
despair, a painful
sense of isolation and
whimsical if pompous

self-regard. But that image
is only of the mind's

vague structure, vague to me
because it is my own.

Love, what do I think
to say. I cannot say it. (*CP* I 257-58)

Ineffectual statements of love produce "isolation" and despair in the speaker for his inabilities, force him into the realm of speculation as a replacement for direct speaking, and then into an appeal to love that has the same address as the others to the "Lady":

Let me stumble into
not the confession but
the obsession I begin with
now. For you

also (also)
some time beyond place, or
place beyond time, no
mind left to

say anything at all,
that face gone, now.
Into the company of love
it all returns. (*FL* 160)

Knowing his own inability to express his love, the speaker appeals for an abstracted position beyond time and place for himself and his lover. In the end, all his directives and appeals return to the "company of love," where, finally, his isolation is absolved into the community of love.

In 1974 when Creeley remembered leaving Black Mountain College in North Carolina, and going to San Francisco in 1956, he wrote:

> —and so I had headed west, for the first time, thinking to be rid of all the 'easternisms' of my New England upbringing and habit." (*CE* 567) . . . come June, and I was restless again, and so headed back to New Mexico, . . . (*CE* 570)

So Creeley and I had been on the same journey to shear away New England and find a fresh start in the West. He was not successful and followed his restlessness to New Mexico. Changing his surroundings and going to new places became a recurring activity in his subsequent life, right to the final fellowship trip to Marfa in west Texas. I imagined I had cleared away the New England rubble to such an extent that people could no longer hear my Bostonian accent. The intellectual strife and guilty pressures in reaching up for a different life were always around the edges of life even in the late 1960s in the Emerald Empire around Eugene. I had used some of Stevens's violence to keep New England in check. So when I came back to read the early poems of Creeley again and again, I was stunned each time by how intense the poems were and how they were so intensely driven by the old dilemmas. Even in leaving the reading, I had taken on an obligation that even forty years of reading and reconsidering could not mitigate.

## II

In his emergence as a poet and prose writer in the late 1940s, Creeley surveyed the field of writers presented to him as models and decided quickly against the emerging "New Critics," namely Robert Penn Warren, John Crowe Ransom, and Allen Tate. "The work we were otherwise given was," Creeley wrote in an essay "A Note on Ezra Pound," "on the one hand, Auden—wherein a socially based use of irony became the uselessly exact rigor of repetitive verse patterns—or perhaps Stevens, whose mind one respected, in the questions it realized, but again whose use of poetry had fallen to the questionable fact of device" (*CE* 25). Stevens's early poems would have another place in Creeley poetics, but it was mainly Pound and Williams who provided the immediate foundations for his writing. "For my generation the fact of Ezra Pound and his work is inescapable, no matter what the particular reaction may be"(*CE* 25). Creeley met Brom Weber at Harvard which made Hart Crane a poet he read and studied but it was the work of William Carlos Williams that stands most directly and influentially behind Creeley's poetry and poetic thinking[5] as Creeley wrote later "to make clear the persistent and extraordinary value of William Carlos Williams's work as a writer" (*CE* 48). So Pound and Williams are the most

[5] Brom Weber was soon to write, *Hart Crane: a Biographical and Critical Study* (New York: The Bodley Press, 1948) and edit *The Letters of Hart Crane* (New York: Hermitage House, 1952).

influential predecessors; and then the contemporaries make up the company of writers most important to Creeley: Charles Olson, Robert Duncan, Louis Zukofsky, Allen Ginsberg and Denise Levertov.[6]

Creeley wrote to Williams. Williams wrote to Olson, with whom he was already corresponding, and then Olson wrote to Creeley, rounding off the links that changed the way the "New American Poets" thought about and wrote poetry.[7] Cid Corman had a radio program in Boston which featured contemporary poets, and as he started up *Origin* he became another invaluable link for the emerging poets. Creeley and Olson also appeared in the first issues of *Origin*, and Olson was featured in the second issue; Samuel French Morse's essay on Wallace Stevens occupied the fifth issue.[8] It is crucial to note here that the correspondence among this group (each writing to the other poets and then back to each other) to launch a new poetics—Williams, Olson, Creeley, Duncan, Corman then Levertov—provided the forum to work out the terms and situations of this new writing. This project of poetry had a visceral and factual basis in Williams's poems and his advice in letters. Olson had published his essay "Projective Verse" in 1950, and that essay was based in part on an intense correspondence with Robert Creeley. Olson called it the "most important correspondence of my life" in April 1950. In his essay Olson distinguished his ideas of writing as "composition by field," as opposed to writing in predetermined structures—"inherited line, stanza, over-all form, what is the 'old base' of the non-projective" (*CP* 239), and poems which reported or described experience instead of enacting experience within the poem. The pivotal principle of the essay, which Olson acknowledges as coming from Creeley, got stated as "form is never more than the extension of content." This principle also became a crucial principle of Creeley's poetics. It is worth setting out how this idea came into the poetic thinking of the time.

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[6] Only a brief sketch is possible here. For fuller statements about the sources of Creeley poetics in relation to Williams see: Paul Mariani and George Butterick.

[7] I am referring here to the anthology edited by Donald Allen, *The New American Poetry*. The poetic traditions from Pound and Williams to Olson, Duncan, Denise Levertov, Paul Blackburn, and Robert Creeley are the most telling arrangement in the anthology. Allen Ginsberg and other writers from San Francisco Renaissance and the Beat Movement were also children, as it were, of Pound and Williams. But the immediate interactions among Creeley, Olson, and Williams produced the provocative documents that would be crucial for many other poets, mainly Duncan and Levertov.

[8] Samuel French Morse, "The Motive for Metaphor—Wallace Stevens: His Poetry and Practice," *Origin* 5 (Spring 1952): 3–65.

In the correspondence with Olson, Creeley reports that he read a statement by Wallace Stevens in *The Partisan Review:* "Poetic form in its proper sense is a question of what appears within the poem itself . . . . By appearance within the poem itself one means the things created and existing there . . . ." (*OP* 314; *CO/RC* 1.22)[9] Creeley then wrote to Olson on June 5, 1950 that:

> Anyhow, form has now become so useless a term/ that I blush to use it. I wd imply a little of Stevens' use (the things created in a poem and existing there . . . ) & too, go over into: the possible casts or methods for a way into/ a "subject": to make it clear: that form is never more than an extension of content. An enacted or possible "stasis" for thought. (*CO/RC* 1. 79)

Olson used the line "form is never more than an *extension* of content" in his essay "Projective Verse," so one of the direction-altering principles of the new poetry derived from Wallace Stevens via Creeley to Olson.

Other principles of Olson's essay also came over into Creeley's writing. Olson insisted on two other primary principles, calling the three, including Creeley's contribution, "the dogma." He considered a poem a structure of "kinetics": "The poem itself must, at all points be a high energy-construct and, at all points, an energy discharge." And then the third insisted on the process of the poem: "One perception must immediately and directly lead to a further perception . . . always one perception must must must move, instanter, on another" (*CP* 240). Olson also discussed what Creeley had called "measure, "By ear," and other matters of musical rhythms, "The law of the line." A statement from the second section

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[9] *The Partisan Review* article is now reprinted in *OP*, 312–315. Creeley cited the passage from Stevens in a letter to Olson dated 28 April 1950; and he cited the same article by Stevens in a review of Olson's small volume *Y & X* in the summer of 1951 (*CE* 97): "There is, however, a usage with respect to form as if form were a derivative of plastic shape"(*SE* 97). Creeley read Stevens's early poems with some attention. The early Creeley poem "divisions" moves forward from Stevens's "Anecdote of the Jar": "the bottle contains / more than water. In this case the form / is imposed" (*C* 33) and the same poem is quoted in the final section of Creeley's poem Histoire de Florida" (*CP* II 483). In an interview Creeley recalled the writing of the poem and Stevens's place in his poem: "I also like that it comes back at the end, that it resolves on a parallel with a poem by Wallace Stevens which was a, crucial poem for me as a young man, "Anecdote of the Jar." "I placed a jar in Tennessee," etc. And so I put an inter-linear pattern with that and my jar is in Florida, that's all. But the whole imagination is Stevens's" (Obermayer 17). A line from "Anecdote of the Jar" appears as an epigraph for the poem "For John Duff" in *Later*. The poem "The Immoral Proposition," in the lines "God knows / nothing

of the essay needs to be pointed out. Olson called for the need to adhere to the objective presentation of the poem, to get "rid of the lyrical interferences of the individual ego, of the 'subject' and his soul." Olson continues:

> If he [the poet] sprawl, he shall find little to sing but himself, and shall sing, nature has such paradoxical ways, by way of artificial forms outside himself. But if he stays inside himself, if he is contained within his nature as he is participant in the larger force, he will be able to listen, and his hearing through himself will give him secrets objects share. (*CP* 247)

The poet must consider himself as a participant of the field of action in which the poem takes place and write out the perceptions of his engagement, without the interference of his ego, but with the kinetics of that field as the guiding force. He must objectify his perceptions. And when he followed instructions, then he became a spokesman for the field and not his own biographer.

Olson's thinking in "Projective Verse" was a revelation to William Carlos Williams who earlier had written an essay, "The Poem as a Field of Action," which anticipated in part Olson's views of the subject (Williams *SE* 280–91). Olson's essay also implicitly acknowledges the poetics of Ezra Pound, Alfred North Whitehead's grand study, *Process and Reality,* as well as the emerging "action painters" of the New York School, mainly Jackson Pollock. Williams thought so well of Olson's essay that he quoted a large section of it in his *Autobiography* (*A* 329–332 ). The reprinting gave Olson's and therefore Creeley's poetics a credibility that made "Projective Verse" a launch point for the New American Poetry.

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is competent nothing is all there is" contains a reference to Stevens's poem "The Snow Man," in the lines, "And, nothing himself, beholds / Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is" (*CP* I 10). There is also the Creeley poem "Thinking of Wallace Stevens" (*CP* II 428). In another letter to Charles Olson (25 june 1950), Creeley brings up Stevens's position on what Olson had named "by ear" and Creeley had named measure: "Well, under the stress method of establishing beat / flow: is the: breath, as you have it. It is the words/ against the ear: as they are in Williams, despite the often / seeming: eye-logic. Cummings: a digression, for the most part: but the thing held strong in Stevens, who was always going by the ear / what else" (*CO/RC* 2.14). Pound and Williams are without a doubt the principal precursors of Creeley's poetry and poetics, but Stevens also has a place in the derivation, especially in the influential statement "Form is never more than an *extension* of content." Ben Lerner in a recent article also recognizes the importance of Wallace Stevens to Creeley's poetry. Michael Davidson also mentions Creeley's quotations from Stevens in his letters to Olson.

## III

In *For Love*, Creeley comes to terms with his own sense of the poetry he could write. After more than a decade of studying his ancestors, mainly Pound, and increasingly Williams—earlier *The Wedge* (1944), *Paterson*, and later *The Desert Music* (1954) and *Journey to Love* (1955)—and with an extensive correspondence with Olson, Duncan, Levertov and many others, he arrived at his own conception of the lyric poem. In his later volumes Williams introduced the three-part line, but even in that use he provided Creeley with examples of how to break a line to induce rhythmic patterns and how to measure both the line and the situation of the poem itself. His primary concern was *measure*, as Williams had asserted earlier, "The only reality that we can know is MEASURE." (*SE* 283). Creeley shunned the term rhythm in favor of *measure*, and he meant by the word a musical arrangement of repetitive sounds that grew up out of the writing immediately at hand. "Measure, then, is my testament," Creeley replied in an essay. "What uses me is what I use and in that complex measure is the issue" (*CE* 488). The musical structure was never preconceived; it was realized in the actual process of writing the poem. He was mainly concerned with the form of the poem, and he was guided by his own statement "form is never more than an extension of content," a statement which rejects preconceived ideas, theoretical or practical, of form, and also a disjuncture between form and content, or any divisive statement of an objective or subjective value of a poem. Like Louis Zukofsky, his senior by some twenty years, he worked toward a concept and accomplishment of the poem as an objectified statement. His intention was to get away from the poem as a confession of personal emotive states (Olson's "lyrical interference"), and never to leave a collection of poems as bits of biography to be strung together later as his conclusive summary. He used other strategies like the shift of the point-of-view in the poem to another unnamed person, "you," or the "lady," to misdirection of the poem away from a statement of personality to an articulation of sight or insight of the moment. Poems also frequently abstract themselves following a process of thought as another way of avoiding the personal, confessional stance. Instead, he focuses on the poem of perception and memory (echo) of an immediate physical or psychic moment. Like Stevens, he conceived of a poem as an "act of the mind," the enactment of the mind (the cumulative powers of the mind including the imagination) conceiving thought in words.[10]

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[10] Heather McHugh in "Love and Frangibility: An Appreciation of Robert Creeley" writes: "At their best, Creeley's poems move with a rhetorical care capable of palpably reminding us

Just as he rejected predeterminations of poetic structure, he also rejected predeterminations of ideology, political, religious, or socially activist, to make a poem. As he wrote in the essay "A Sense of Measure":

> I am wary of any didactic program for the arts and yet I cannot ignore the fact that poetry, in my own terms of experience, obtains to an unequivocal order. What I deny, then, is an assumption that that order can be either acknowledged or gained by intellectual assertion, or will, or some like intention to shape language to a purpose which the literal act of writing does not itself discover. (*CE* 486)

His own experience, his own process of writing, asserts an order. Allowing an ideological position to ordain a message that orders experience imposes an order that is not inherent in the perception of present reality. External orders dominate the mind. Like Duncan he determined the freedom of the mind to perceive and articulate as the poem's highest virtues. "It must be loose," Duncan wrote of the mind's activity. Creeley's poems more often than not begin and stop without a beginning, middle or conclusion referring to the beginning. At times a narrative of the mind's activity takes over, with subsequent misdirection into another person followed by a statement abstracted from the immediate event of the poem. Because, therefore, Creeley rejected the dictates of ideology, the poems were not obligated to maintain the tenants of any structured intellectual or cultural position. Poems were not required to tell *the truth* about any ideological position, only to tell the truth of their occasion. The poems at times looked like fragments, language without structure; however, the subject of the poems was not the subject at hand but actually the processes of conceiving thought in words:

> I do not feel the usual sense of *subject* in poetry to be of much use. . . . I feel that "subject" is at best a material of the poem, and that poems finally derive from some deeper complex of activity. (*CE* 486.)

They followed the process of thinking where it went and did not move around to the conclusion of a point of ideology. And part of the rejection of ideology was a similar rejection that a poem should have a "poetic" language and even a "poetic" subject matter. Duncan helped him find this principle as Creeley reports in "Preface" to *The Charm*:

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how mind finds its own forms in language" (16). McHugh offers a brilliant discussion of Creeley's writing especially in an exhaustive reading of his poem "The Window," which, alas, is beyond the scope of my essay.

> Another friend, Robert Duncan, has always insisted, with high intelligence, I think, that poetry is not some ultimate preserve for the most rarified and articulate of human utterances, but has a place for *all* speech and *all* occasions thereof. (*CP* I 4)

All kinds of language, all kinds of information, and all kinds of events will come into the poems without prohibitions.

Earlier Olson had announced in the essay "Human Universe": "Art does not seek to describe but enact" (*CP* 162). Description takes place after an event of perception or awareness, but instead of being a recall of that event Olson and Creeley, as well as Williams, thought that the poem was the event itself. In Duncan's words a poem is an "event" in language.[11] Creeley cited Williams's comment on his own poem *Paterson*:

> The poet does not, however, permit himself to go beyond the thought to be discovered in the context of that with which he is dealing: no ideas but in things. The poet thinks with his poem, in that lies his thought, and that in itself is the profundity. The thought is *Paterson*, to be discovered there. (*A* 390–391)

Especially in his later books, Creeley titles many poems "Here," and concentrates or controls the scope of the poem to the immediate physical facts in his view and also the "echoes," or memories in his experience that pertain to the immediate scene. So the poems give an instance of the mind conceiving and following thought in words. A Creeley poem does not reach out to other sources for its verification, so even when he cites Campion, Williams, or Emily Dickinson he is writing with other poems not deriving his poems from them.

## IV

*For Love* collects poems written 1950–1960. *Words* collects poems written 1961–1966. The first volume's collection contains Creeley's attempts to come to terms with the poetics he inherited, the influence of William, Pound, Olson

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[11] Duncan wrote in "The H.D. Book": "Poems are not objects but events of Poetry, of our consciousness of making a universe of feeling in language. Is it the celebration of a mass, at once to enter the intensity of such a passion of the word and at the same time to release the hold of a need the word has over us?" ["The H.D. Book"]: "Section Two," *Credences* 1.2 (July 1975): 58.

and then his contemporaries Duncan and Levertov. Creeley accumulated a conglomerate poetics of many parts, some even fighting against one another, but for the most part attempting to objectify the process of writing, and to disengage the thinking and values of the poem, however emotionally, with the contractions of ideas of love, isolation and community. Especially his own egotistical statements. He often confused the power and dependability of thinking, which he saw as analytic thinking, with the power of the mind as an inclusive agency including the imagination and the echoes of memory. He isolated himself and his poetics from natural change, even the processes of the mind, at the same time that he longed for the community or inclusion posited in loving another person, often an ideal woman. He was, therefore, caught within the dilemmas of excess that brought few solutions and many frustrations.

The poems in *Words*, on the other hand, examine and challenge his conglomerate poetics, then attempt to change old habits of thinking and writing, set out a path forward to the poems in Pieces, and then point a direction to the accomplishments of *Later* at the end of the next decade. The titular poem "Words" gives an introduction to his new attitude toward intellect and words in the poetic process. The poem begins with a statement that the words have always been with him, but in "the twisted / place" of his present disposition words have a "rotten" taste on his tongue, though he remembers when they were "food, when hungry." He has relied on the strident intellect for defining his perception too much, so the poem closes with a wish, perhaps, of another source and value of words themselves:

> words like a
> clear, fine
> ash shifts,
> like dust,
>
> from somewhere. (*CP* I 332)

Comments on the limitations of the intellect appear in other poems. "The Mountains in the Desert," for example, begins with a statement of geographic fact in his head, but he concedes his "mind" is "locked / in seeing it," and the poem concludes:

> Tonight let me go
> at last out of whatever
> mind I thought to have,
> and all the habits of it. (*CP* I 269)

The mind moves so fast that he is unable to keep up with its perceptions, so in the poem "'I Keep to Myself Such Measures . . .'" it leaves "rocks simple markers" of what it has known, but in the end it is not able to recover the perceptions and he is left holding the stones. "All forgets. My mind sinks" (*CP* I 297). In "Some Place" he thinks he has found a secured center in his world, a house," but that fixed point denies the processes of weather, and so he says "I am / more than thought, less / than thought. A house /with winds" (*CP* I 317). It is really the changes of the mind's abilities to conceive thought and the power of that process that so strikes against the fixed idea of the house or any other construct of the mind. He is moving away from the idea of the analytic intelligence as the power to define immediate situations and perception and toward a more inclusive concept of the total power of the mind without the divisions of intelligence, imagination, perception, and conception.

If he suspects intellect, then he also must suspect the process of writing, words, and language. An unease and even anxiety infects these poems. On one hand he fears the possibility that the next formulation in words will come "and then a quiet, a dull / space of hanging actions," or the end of writing itself. He then shifts the address to the speaker watching the process of stasis creeping in, the poem ends, in avoidance of the old ways of thinking, but the need to keep risking the chance of the final statement:

> God help him then
> if such things can.
> That risk
> is all there is. (*CP* I 270)

The issue becomes serious when the perceived failures of intellect and processes of writing threaten the expression of love. The poem "The Language" is a pivotal statement of the dilemma. He locates "I love you" as a physical act in the "teeth and / yes," and even though he says "words / say everything" (*CP* I 283), emptiness can be conceived as quickly as the feeling of love, so words stand equally for the expression of love and the non-expression of love posited in the intellect's location. Creeley in this volume moves away from the idea of love as sustaining his life and poetry to a different idea of finding ways to be more specific in the expression of love as a unique human feeling. These ideas appear in the eight-part poem "Enough." The poem begins with the positive assertion, "It is possible, in words, to speak / of what has happened" (*CP* I 359). But in the process of recalling previous moments, a distance appears between what was seen and known then and what is known now, and that distance cannot be

overcome with words, though the desire is for that solution. Fantasy of what the bodies looked like in dancing is one solution, but that is a making of the mind, intellect, not the account of things seen directly. The process is intact:

> One
> by one
> the form
>
> comes. One
> thing follows
> another. One
>
> and one
> and one. Make
> a picture
>
> for the world
> to be. It
> will be (*CP* I 362)

Another speculation of here and there, now and memory leads to an address to bodies, "Your body is a garbage can. / Your body is white . . . my body so / tentative," leading to a fundamental conflict of the poem: the viability of words in memory against the immediacy of words in the present— "do I / like the pain / of such impossible understanding" (*W* 127). The speaker is thus caught in the dilemma of his own speculation and then the final situation:

> I vow to my life to respect it.
> I will not wreck it
>
> I vow to yours to be
> enough, enough, enough. (*CP* I 363)

The speaker vows that her white body will be enough to sustain his life, his sense of her, but the three "enoughs" in the final line could also be read as "enough" of this speculation ("enough already" in the common idiom); it has actually decided nothing and has opened up the dilemma of words in the present and past, bodies in present and the past, the conflicts of pleasure and pain, in fact, the credibility of intellect in the process of poetry itself.

In the six-part poem "Anger," a narrator begins with a description of the scene of a night-long argument between a man and a woman, the anger and seeming verbal violence between the two people. The second section:

> I think I think
> but find myself in it.
>
> The pattern
> is only resemblance,
>
> I cannot see myself
> but as what I see, an
>
> object but a man,
> with lust for forgiveness,
>
> raging, from that vantage,
> secure in the purpose,
>
> double, split.
> It is merely intention,
>
> a sign quickly adapted,
> shifted to make
>
> a horrible place
> for self-satisfaction.
>
> I rage,
> I rage, I rage. (*CP* I 307-08)

The narrator's description changes to the speculation of the husband, who in his rage for forgiveness alienates more, and in his desire to have the argument over isolates himself in "self satisfaction" filled by contradiction of loving and hating simultaneously. Two sections of accusation follow as the husband accuses the wife of causing the argument, then demanding that she face him in the dark, he admits that:

The rage
is what I
want, what
I cannot give

to myself, of
myself in the world. (*CP* I 309)

The two argue through the night, and in the morning light some resolution appears in the final section:

All you say you want
to do to yourself you do
to someone else as yourself

and we sit between you
waiting for whatever will
be at last the real end of you. (*CP* I 309)

The man has the final word, as is mostly the case in Creeley's poems, in depicting the woman as a divided self and the man and woman sit between her parts, and in contention, waiting for the part of torment in the whole of loving to end. And there is no hint here of love redeeming the scene, only the persistent divisions and dilemmas of love itself.

In *Words*, Creeley also introduced new habits, some of which stayed with him through his writing life. The poems have a greater concentration on line breaks, and the subsequent hesitation of stopping or not stopping at the end of a line that makes an internal, rhythmic structure, in perfect measure is the poem "Song" (*CP* I 378) for example. Creeley makes his own syntax, often ungrammatical, to move the energy of the writing forward, and to assert rhymes of sound and sense sustaining the measure within the writing process. Objects were not as significant as measure and rhythm in the poems. The book also concentrates on short poems, individual and separate perception of physical fact or the mind's memory, which are not held together by a narrative. Instead they project the action and speed of the mind moving from one perception to another. This feature of the book particularly irritated Louis Simpson who wrote:

> . . . everything is style; there is no subject but the poem talking to itself. Such visible objects as were present in his early poems are missing here. These are syllables, breathing pauses, whispers. (Simpson 90)

There are several of these poems, including "Here," "The Farm," "Indians, "The Box," "Was," "Song," and "A Piece." The last one for example:

> One and
> one, two,
> three. (*CP* I 352)

has been noted by several reviewers, but it was also noticed by Creeley:

> When *Words* was published, I was interested to see that one of the poems most irritating to reviewers was "A Piece"—and yet I knew that for me it was central to all possibilities of statement. (*CE* 42)

Another variation of the short, independent poems was the appearance of longer poems divided into sections—"Enough" with eight, "Dimensions" with three, "Anger" with six, and "The Dream" with five. Creeley's intention as he defined it in a "Preface" to the book: "Intentions are the variability of all these feelings, moments of that possibility" (*CP* I 261). Creeley moves through various possibilities of statement and form in the poem as he "began to try deliberately to break out of the habits described" (*CE* 42) into modes of expression that mature through *Pieces* into Later.

## V

The form of *Pieces* is very different form the diverse collection of poems in *Words*. The poetics likewise has changed. Creeley is no longer afflicted with the contests between the community, love and the isolation without it, followed by senses of guilt of being in love and of being isolated, nor with love as a redeeming factor in living. The personal needs of a "self," a demanding "self," have subsided, and the drives to overcome the differences between "here" and "there" changed into a generative creative process. In the poem "The Puritan Ethos," he writes:

Happy the man who loves what
he has and worked for it also.

There is a lake of clear water.
There are forms of things despite us. (*CP* I 414)

Happy is the man who has realized all his potential as a human being; he feels no sense of guilt for the failure to do so. And there are events that take place without human beings, who, then, are not the only makers of the world we live in. No guilt here either. The freedom from such old obligations makes a radical change in the poetics of the poems possible.

Creeley has moved into the form of sequences, as the poem, "here," indicates:

My plan is
these little boxes
make sequences . . . . (*CP* I 440)

The sequences of the volume move forward without a narrative plot. The individual parts, individual poems and then sequences of poems, also move without a coherent narrative and predetermined ideas of poetic structure. In a review of *Pieces*, Louis L. Martz noted Creeley's "mental world of shifting, momentary, unstable, apparent forms" (Martz 241), but failed to see there was an underlying process in the poems. Creeley has refocused his attentions to language, as well as to the power of the mind and imagination to create versions of primary fact, either views of objects or views of the imagination. The poems present a perception in words and then the next one gives another perception. The moment in fact is one of the points here. The poems are short, and so are some parts of poems. Passages like the ones following caused even serious readers to pause in reconsideration:

Here I
am. There
you are.
.
The head
of a
pin on . . .

Again
and again
now
also. (*CP* I 389)

Make time
of irritations,
looking for the
recurrence—

waiting, waiting,
on the edge of its
to be there
where it was, waiting. (*CP* I 436)

Reed Whittemore, for example wrote:

> I found the fragmentation of *Pieces* oppressive. Instead of the sense of informality and immediacy that the pedagogue was beaming my way I got a sense of emotional and experimental emptiness. (Whittemore 237-38)

Whittemore did not recognize the process of writing nor value the speed language must keep up to accommodate the speed of the mind creating words. The perception of reality of the external world and of the mind's creations is an action of the present moment but it also continues one perception after another endlessly. The process of the mind creating in words then becomes a sustaining action of the poems in this volume. Instead of the isolating effect of perception without external modifications framed by the necessity of the poetics to focus on an individual event, these poems make the movement, the processes of perceiving, the motivation for articulation. Somewhere back of this freedom of expression Charles Olson's directive sounds: "Art does not seek to describe but to enact" (*CP* 162). Creeley's version comes out as:

Moving in the mind's
patterns, recognized
because there is where
they happen. ("The kick of the foot against . . ." *CP* I 437)

Heal it, be
patient with
it—be quiet. ("Four" 438)

In the volume, some poems have titles, some do not. The poems are separated by three dots and sections of individual poems are separated by one dot. All the poems run together with neither a formal beginning nor a formal ending. The creation of form out of words is still a central impulse:

The way into the form,
the way out of the room—

The door, the hat,
the chair, the fact. ("Having to—" *CP* I 382)

Even though the emphasis has shifted to the making of form, the poems do not neglect the objects directly in sight, but the change comes in considering the revelations of the imagination as facts as well, because they occur in language, in the poem. It is a world of words now, and the accumulation of that statement in the poems also brings the perception that the made up notions of the imagination are also a reality. The perceptions exist in words. And the perceptions have the power, in the present, to dissolve completely that old barrier between here and there, and thereby celebrate the mind's abilities to create:

This point of so-called
consciousness is forever
a word making up
this world of more
or less than it is.

* * *

. . . . So

to make you
mine, in the mind,
to now you. ("Two" *CP* I 397)

One poem of the sequence "Numbers" gives a succinct summary of the issue:

> There is no trick to reality—
> a mind
> makes it, any
> mind. ("Zero" *CP* I 405)

Creeley does reserve a place for the longer meditation, seen in the early poem, "The Door," and everywhere the mode in the poems in *Later* and after. Here the meditation and movement of "The Finger" are crucial to the statement of the whole volume.

"The Finger" is a meditation ratifying the processes of the mind, or a possibility of conceiving and then following the mind's perceptions of a moment into the implications of the original perception; that possible perception manifests itself in the image of a woman, then changes into avatars of Aphrodite and Athena, then into a mother figure, and a dancer:

> She was laughing, she was
> laughing, at me,
> and I danced, and
> I danced
>
> Lovely, lovely woman, let
> me sing, *one to*
> *one to one*, and let
> me follow. (*CP* I 388)

Unlike earlier poems, the movement in this one is not misdirected by an address to another person, or shifted off into an abstract speculation; rather the speaker enters the action of his own poem, dancing, and remains eager to follow the original perception where it leads. There is no split between here and there, no anxiety about the status of the "self," in or out of the meditation. So the end of the poem is not a conclusion, only the running out of the first perception, an example, then, of the form of the poem as an extension of its content.

In his review of Pieces, Russell Banks characterizes the poems accurately: "*Pieces* is a book of individual poems, yes, but it reads like a single, book-length

poem, e.g. sequentially" (Banks 248).[12] The sequence of poems is in fact a series of poems, a kind of poetic form first advanced by William Carlos Williams in *Spring and All* and then "The Descent of Winter;" and later also advanced by Ezra Pound's *The Cantos*, and Zukofsky's A. Charles Olson proposed *The Maximus Poems* and Robert Duncan proposed "The Structure of Rhyme" and "The Passages Poems" as series of poems which started without entertaining a determined conclusion. *Pieces* is Creeley's first contribution to *serial form.* In an interview, Creeley recognized the emergence of a new kind of form in the entire book:

> *Pieces* is the most recent book that I think has been a *book*. But I really didn't know this until we'd gone down to Mexico happily for a week or two; while we were there I wrote and the poems gathered into a sequence. When I came back, I remember feeling that this situation of writing was concluded." (Gerber/Mazzaro 12)

In Creeley's, Olson's and Duncan's ideas of serial form, the individual poems are allowed to begin and end without obligations to the unities—a beginning, middle and conclusion which refers to the beginning. The poems at times appear as fragments, as some in *Pieces* show, but since they are part of a larger sequence of poems whose major intention is to demonstrate the process of the mind conceiving thought, they stand as statements of the mind's present views, which can change instantly. Individual poems appear in sections, numbered or unnumbered; in Creeley's case this presentation makes it possible to move from one perception of an idea to another rapidly, in an attempt to keep up with the speed of the mind's perceptions. The series can appear "shifting" and "unstable" as Martz contends, because that is precisely how it does appear in a series which does not have a narrative, or a plot, to provide the cohesion and continuity that a plot would require. A series is not a strict logical structure. In a series there can be repeated reference, like words, here/there, the present moment, and love in *Pieces*, but these references are not forced into structural roles. They sustain the process of the mind, which resists containing orders almost completely, in Creeley's formulation, the process of the mind articulating thought in words.

[12] Cynthia Dubin Edelberg, "Creeley's Orphan Lines: The Rhythmic Character of the Sequences," recognizes the sequence as a factor of Creeley's poetics but she still wants to impose the limits of the unities and coherence on them.

[13] Warren Tallman, in an early essay on Creeley's prose, and the poems in *For Love*, came close to identifying the propositions of serial form in the volume when he wrote: "Individual poems are phases of the ONE poem he is always writing, just as, in a larger sense, all the poems and tales ever written are parts and parcels of the one song and story named Man" (Tallman [7]).

## VI

The two travel books/journals *A Day Book* (1972) and *Hello* (1978) following *Pieces* and preceding *Later* have an important place in tracing out Robert Creeley's poetics and the emergence of *serial form*. Both volumes were written as journals on long reading trips and both have the characteristics of the immediacy and rush of travel, its flashing of new vistas and flow of different people, the necessity to keep moving on. Many of the poems are fragments, many are short poems of perceptions of events and proposals of the day. *A Day Book* contains a section of prose entries and a section of poems, which was collected under the title "In London." *Hello* contains poems written in New Zealand and published in a limited edition under the same title in 1976. Both volumes have some of the features of the *Pieces*, but they have their forms enforced by the simple facts of travel and daily composition. Both volumes carry forward the technical and rhetorical ingenuities of the *Pieces*, as well as the persistent poetics of the poem as an enactment of thought in words. They lead forward, from the final poem of *Hello*, entitled "Later," to the publication of *Later*, as a full volume with new meditative modes

Creeley proposes *Later* as a book of poems in serial form with a pervasive reflective or meditative mode. In the poem "Myself," the same poem in which he quotes Shelley's "Triumph of Life," Creeley writes:

> I want, if older,
> still to know
> why, human, men
> and women are
>
> so torn, so lost,
> why hopes cannot
> find better world
> than this. (*CP* II 95)

The quotation could be taken as the mission of the book. The tone is neither the strident one from *A Day Book*, nor the aggressive one from *Words*, but a reflective, even a meditative tone that will allow a more relaxed examination of many of the issues that appeared in the previous volumes. The statement is a subjunctive one— "if older." Creeley is in fact older but here poses the question as a supposition. This poem, and indeed the poems in this volume, admit that

he has not arrived yet at the situation of gaining the wisdom of age, nor realized through experience the essential nature of human activity in the world. A similar statement appears in the poem "After":

> I'll not write again
> things a young man
> thinks, not the words
> of that feeling.
>
> There is no world
> except felt, no
> one there but
> must be here also. (*CP* II 104)

Complexity remains, persistently remains, and he resists the temptation to move into an abstraction where the details of contrasting complexity would be absorbed, neutralized. Creeley's ideas of measure have expanded from a concern for metrics and rhythm to a concern for what is important to know as a person in the world. The poem "The World" ends with the same idea in the indirection of a question; "What / matters as one / in this world" (*CP* II 97)?

While a concern for *here*, the present moment, and the current place appear as a recurring theme—as in "Later" above—the need for continuity to counter the passage of time also moves forward as a deep concern. "The House" contains both concerns, the presentation of the details of the house and its location come first then a speculation about the place and its effect on the lives of people in the past, and what it would take to regain the former significance. "The white blossom / of apple / still make the song" (*CP* II 99) as a sign of the inherent energy of the place. "Place' adds another dimension to the theme in the acknowledgment that love "can't make love a way out" (*CP* II 103), or he no longer relies on the redeeming power of love; he must instead return to the gritty particulars of the commonplace as a way to negate the solace of an abstract conclusion:

> I need the oldtime density,
> the dirt, the cold,
> the noise through the floor—
> my love in company. (*CP* II 103)

As in earlier poems, the present moment, the immediate perception, stands essential, but Creeley is "learning;" *here* which was previously a physical place, can now be a place in the mind, as Robert Duncan's poem "Often I Am Permitted to Return to a Meadow" has it, "a place made up by the mind." Recognizing the place of the mind also moves toward claiming the materiality of language as a defense against "the swirl / of these apparent facts"; words can "gleam clearly / there, now here— / in mind" (*CP* II 156). The event and facts seen in the present and the memories of yesterday mix in the poem "The Place," but both receive the same direct, clear articulation. The physical place is a manifest necessity to this flow of speculation; however another view of the mind as the location, in words, of place itself, enters:

> This thinking
> is a place itself
>
> unthought, which comes
> to be the world. (*CP* II 156)

The mind is powerful enough to counter the power of change. But in its contest, the processes of generating versions of the particular still need support, some sense of continuity. Creeley has always noticed natural cycles, but in the volume figures it into his poetics. Morning claims the position of the signal to begin again, a fresh start to make the world of the mind work. In "This World," "The morning / opens with light / at the window" (*CP* II 96) while in "Morning" the sun dissipates the shadows of the start of the day:

> where I'm sitting, writing,
> feet on cold floor's
> tiles, watching the light. (*CP* II 114)

While in "Morning (8:10 AM)" the points of the physical place become clear "In the sun's / slow rising / this morning" (*CP* II 174) and in still another poem titled "Morning":

> Light's bright glimmer,
> through green bottle
>
> on shelf
> above. Light's white

fair air,
shimmer,

blue summer's
come. (*CP* II 141)

Spring also, the morning of the year, is a time of starting the process of making verbal fictions begin again:

. . . .The sun

came with springtime—*la*
*primavera*, they'll say, when
we've gone. But we came.
We've been here. (*CP* II 126)

Other points of continuity appear in this volume. In the poem "The House" the speaker notices the physical facts of the house and its geography, and even though it is now decayed the house was once the center of genuine human activity; the apple blossoms inspire the continuity of song, not the people, now gone. But the desire for continuity appears in other ways in Later, in the memory of his "Aunt Bernice" (*CP* II 131), and his mother and her advice to him in "Four Years Later." In subsequent volumes, Creeley's family history and his autobiographical information come into the poems after the beginning references in *Later*.[14] There are also instances of the passing on of information from one generation to another, the "great stories" in "Childish" (*CP* II 116), and then the stories recounted in "Cronin's Bar" (*CP* II 143), the older generation to

[14] Reviewers and critics of Creeley's poetry have noted, some with irritation, the large number of names of people appearing in the poems. In just *Later*: Pen, R. B. K., Walter Benjamin, Tom Pickard, John Chamberlain, Mother, Aunt Bernice, Yeats, Rosalie Sorrels, B. B. Eddie, Mr. Connealy, Rene Ricard, Basil Bunting, Patrick Kavanagh, Peter Warshall, Mr. Gutierres and son Victor, John Duff, D. H. Lawrence, Henry Purcell, Jack Clarke, Raphael Lopez-Pedraza. Creeley said that the "company" of poets and artists was a necessity for his poetic thinking, so the names of Lawrence, Bunting, Tom Pickard and John Chamberlain appear in the volume. Creeley also said that the poem itself was an immediate activity in words, and that he had no interest in leaving an autobiography in his poems. Perhaps another possible view of the subject is that he left an autobiographical statement outside his poems with the names, in much the same way that Joel Oppenheimer keeps his social and political views for the articles in *The Village Voice* to keep his poems free of them.

the younger, followed by the news from his mother that "the name Creeley was Irish" (*CP* II 144), which provided another kind of continuity past his family to the Irish poetic traditions.

Through the rehearsals of familiar themes and the performance of metrical and rhythmic care, the reflective, the meditative poem, asserts the signature accomplishment of *Later*. There have been meditative poems before; "The Door," for example in *For Love* and "The Finger" in *Pieces*, but in this volume, the meditative mode, its ease of expression and statement, spreads through all the poems. Two in particular, "For Pen" and "The Table" stand out. In "For Pen" the speaker notices the particulars of the present room, its "dear company," and then acknowledges:

> I want the world
> I did always
> small pieces
> and clear acknowledgments.

He would not have the scene as "echo," a memory of the past, but gives himself a piece of advice, as his mother would have given him:

> so sing this
> weather, passing,
> grey and blue
> together, rain and sun. (*CP* II 104-05)

The shift to giving advice redirects the final lines away from a moral or mindful summary, so avoiding the chance of a sentimental ending. A similar pattern appears in "The Table," which sets out the physical setting, "sky's grey again" (*CP* II 114),[15] notes the things on the table, and the activity of the present moment, then the concluding remark refuses to make more of the scene than the scenes itself presents:

> It's a day we may
> live forever, this
> simple one. Nothing
> more, nothing less. (*CP* II 115)

The ease of expression and the assurance of the meditative mode distinguish these poems from those in *A Day Book* and *Pieces*.

But there is another aspect of the meditative mode which informs these poems. The poem, "For John Duff," begins in a familiar pattern with the notice of the geography and the situation with the neighbors in New Mexico, and then turns to a meditation of the scene and John Duff which leads to:

> when you're gone,
> I'll remember
>
> also forever
> the tough clear
>
> sentiment, the clarity,
> of your talking, the care.
>
> And this it
> you gave us:
>
> *here*
> *is all the wonder,*
>
> *there*
> *is all there is.* (*CP* II 170-71)

The "wonder" matters most, as the tenth poem of the series "Later" says:

> But now—
> *but now* the wonder of life is

---

[15] In Buffalo, NY, in winter, the sky is grey for days at a time. In this poem and in the poem "This World" Creeley states the sense of the grey very accurately:

> This grey, dulled
> morning the sky
> closes down on
> the horizon to make
>
> one wonder
> if a life lives more
> than just looking,
> knowing nothing more. (*CP* II 175)

*that it is* at all,
this sticky sentimental

warm enclosure,
feels place in the physical

with others,
lets mind wander

to wondering thought,
then lets go of itself,

finds a home
on earth. (*CP* II 151-52)

It is not the theory of living that matters most, just the simple apprehension of life itself that incites the "wonder," which is a monumental change in the strident, restrictive poetics of the early poems. The final poem of the volume, "Prayer to Hermes," confirms this change as well as the reluctance to make final conclusions exceeding the perceptions in a single poem or the incomplete wisdom of the actions of living:

. . . . Imagination

is the wonder
of the real, and I am
sore afflicted with

the devil's doubles,
the twos, of this
half-life,
this twilight.

What I understand
of this life, what was right
in it, what was wrong,

I have forgotten
in these days
of physical change.
I see the way

of knowing, of
securing, life grow
ridiculous. A weakness,
a tormenting, relieving weakness

comes to me. (*CP* II 183-84)

*Later* expands the possibilities of serial form. Short poems, perhaps even fragments, appear throughout the volume—"Speech," "Beach", "Nature," "Night Time," "Sparrows," "End," "Heaven," "July: Fargo Street," "Thinking of Yeats," "B.B.," "Talk." The poem "Later" has ten numbered sections each chasing the speed of the mind coming to articulation. The short poems and the poems in sections have places in the overall design of the book. The process of perception and articulation, now in the meditative mode, enacting thought coming into words, stands as fundamental to the volume as the process of finding measure, or value in the activities of living. And the growing sense of the materiality of words, the power of the mind to create and value its own place, its own sense of *here*, reinforces the assertion of the *serial form* of the entire volume. The poems refuse to reach final conclusions and judgments, deferring, as it were to the next morning or the next chance to articulate the vitality of the present moment. The poems therefore extend the old contention between the desire to know and the physical and moral restriction against acquiring the wisdom of age. Christopher Lambert also recognized the new mode of the poems:

> Creeley has at last found a tonality consonant with the drive of his poetic attentions. The dignity of his persona; testament (as with many poems in the volume) has none of the persistent ambiguity with which one has come to associate his work. (Lambert 331)

The new mode of meditation expands the range of themes the poems can entertain as well as the range of modifications that enter the speculations. And the new mode contains an accumulation of Creeley's practical and rhetorical

structures, his personal syntax and pattern of line breaks producing rhythms on each side of the break. The intricacy of the interrelationships—including syntactical and rhythmic relationships— between the poems becomes more complicated, as does the process of meditation, honoring the imagination's abilities to associate past and present into an immediate perception. Creeley expands the idea of here away from the restrictions of the immediate facts of reality and the mind, the present moment in time, but also the imagination's time along with references to the poetic traditions and his family history. Some of the old contradictions between love and isolation, desire and guilt appear in the poems, but the speeding activity of the mind's act of creation instigates and sustains the whole volume as a *serial poem*. *Later* as a *serial poem* expands the forms of *Pieces* and provides an introduction for the next twenty-five years of Creeley's writing.

The achievement of serial form in *Pieces* combined with the accumulated technical graces and the meditative processes of *Later* create a pivotal point in American literature. Wallace Stevens in his later long poem, for example "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven," as well as Williams in his earlier *Spring and All*, provided very active antecedents for the emergence of *serial form*. Charles Olson's *The Maximus Poems* and Robert Duncan's "The Passages Poem," and then Creeley's *Pieces* all generated examples of this new concept of form for longer poems far different from the epic-based structures of the American long poem. Creeley, Duncan and Olson provided the literary permissions for the next group of poets to create new versions of serial form:—Ted Enslin, John Taggart, Susan Howe, Michael Palmer, and Nate Mackey—in the 1970s and after. So this reading of Creeley's poems which began with a rejection of *For Love*, for very personal reasons, has turned into a reconsideration of the contemporary literary history in which Creeley wrote. It is one exercise to study the poems in the privacy of a library, but a very different exercise to hear the poems read in public over a period of forty years. Other poets read their poems during this period as well, so the context of Creeley and many others provokes an awareness of a great poetic achievement. It is astonishing, really, to hear it happen and then to know later that what I/we heard was the assertion of *serial form* as the major proposal and accomplishment of American poetry in the later twentieth century.

**End Part I**

## Afterword

Robert Creeley was a stimulating presence as a poetic force and a person in Buffalo for many years. He was the first Director of "The Poetics Program" at the University Buffalo, a friend to students and faculty alike, and a zealous supporter of the arts. Conversations with him were often intense, always illuminating. For whatever cause, we met now and again over the years on Sunday afternoon in the grocery store where the talk of poetry and the arts went right on. For him, there was no distinction between the life of poetry and common, ordinary living. One such conversation took place in the vegetable section. After about thirty minutes it just stopped, Creeley bought some lettuce, and we went about the business of our households.

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# A Note on Robert Creeley, New England, and "This"

Edward Foster

The novelist Mark Jacobs tells us that one evening as he and Robert Creeley were leaving a restaurant in İzmir, they passed "the statue of Atatürk. [Creeley] raised his finger in a sign of approbation that was almost a blessing and told me, 'This.' One of my graven memories is the look on his face when he said it, a mix of complicity and delight" (Jacobs 5). That moment and gesture in Izmir seem to me pure New England, a recognition of present fact which is at the center of what it means to be a "Yankee" as well as the generative core of Creeley's work—i.e., a capacity to live in the here and now with all its multiple complexities that in turn can make a New England sensibility, wherever transported, delight in, and be complicit with, what it encounters.

Creeley spent most of his boyhood in Acton, Massachusetts, at that time a rural farming community, and as a young man, he himself operated a small farm in Littleton, New Hampshire. He lived in other communities in New England and is buried in Cambridge, Massachusetts, near the town of Arlington, in which he was born. "He was an old Yankee who loved New England," said the poet C. D. Wright as quoted in Creeley's obituary in the *Washington Post* (Holley). Creeley himself made no secret of his Yankee origins and identity, prominently pointing them out, for example, in his autobiography, included in Tom Clark's *Robert Creeley and the Genius of the American Common Place*.

For me, the wonder of a Creeley poem lies in its presentation not of something for which one might wistfully desire but of exactly where the speaker is at the moment the poem occurs. That itself proves sufficient for wonder: "this," a Creeley poem says, will suffice. The capacity to step out of the daily swirl and see the moment for itself may be one of the most important things Creeley integrated into his poetry from his New England boyhood and education.

One can't know New England, at least the New England of poets, until one knows Emerson, not simply as the seedbed of a regional aesthetic (though there is that, too), but as a force against which generations of New England's writers have defined their own perceptions—much as did Thoreau, for example, who, rather than imagining himself, like Emerson, to be "part and parcel of God," examined the particulars of a sandbank defrosting in the spring to discover—

now that he was quite literally down to earth—"that Nature is 'in full blast' within" (Thoreau 298).

The objective for an anti-Emerson writer like Thoreau was, and is, precision, specificity, exactitude. The root of that objective in turn is not Kant, Coleridge, and German Idealism, such as we find in Emerson, but Francis Bacon, a thinker of critical significance to New England beginning with the earliest colonial settlements. The New Englander felt called on by his or her God to confront, as did Bacon, the evidence of what is seen rather than what is merely imagined or thought or desired. It is Bacon, widely studied in early New England, who stands behind, say, the Rev. Edward Hitchcock, the respected nineteenth-century Massachusetts geologist who, despite his pious trust in the Bible, recognized that stone outcroppings in his region had been striated by glaciers eons ago, long before the devout among his contemporaries commonly thought time had begun.

Hitchcock's close family friend Emily Dickinson, that most precise of poets, famously decided not to go to her brother's home next door to meet the great Emerson but to remain closeted in her room with her words and her ability to record in poems things as they are rather than envision some omniscient divinity.

That quiet room is where Creeley himself might have chosen to remain or, on the other hand, perhaps he would have gone to the gathering next door if only to see what "this" great man had to say. As James Russell Lowell—another writer who was as much a Yankee as he was unEmersonian—put it: "We do not go to hear what Emerson says so much as to hear Emerson" (Lowell 378).

In any case, Creeley would surely have been a wise and compassionate observer, accepting Emerson the thinker as well suited to Emerson the man, even if that did not make him the oracle others wished him to be. If Creeley was preeminently a poet of fact, he was also a forgiving and generous man, and his poems show it: there is not a shred of unkindness.

And so, returning to that moment in İzmir when Creeley, passing the Atatürk statue, "[raises] his finger in a sign of approbation that was almost a blessing and . . . [says], 'This,'" I sense in his gesture and word the particular value of one culture meeting another not to judge it but critically, to see it as sufficient. And doing this—to borrow Creeley's words from "The Pool"—requires, simply, "the ability / to take quietly / what comes to me" (Creeley 239).

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# Robert Creeley, Turkey, and Me

David Landrey

In Iowa City in 1978, I attended a celebration of the life of Charles Olson. My life and the lives of many at Buffalo State were altered forever—by many writers associated with Black Mountain indeed, but, so gradually as hardly to be noticeable, mostly by Robert Creeley, by the man and his work. That hardly makes us unique. Still, we have only our own experience for testimony

Several people in Turkey were also affected, in particular Barış Gümüşbaş. In the Spring Semester of my last year in Hacettepe—it was 1992— Barış learned from department head Gönül Uçele that he could receive a grant for extended study in the United States, but it was contingent upon being accepted into a university graduate program. The problem: the dates for application were well past.

Three years earlier, at the beginning of the spring semester of my year at Bilkent University, I had accepted an offer to teach a course in Post-Modern Poetry at Hacettepe. How could I have known how transforming that experience would be? One result of it would be that Barış would write his Masters thesis on Creeley and send it to him. Creeley was delighted.

So on that spring afternoon in Gönül Uçele's office in 1992, as we pondered how on earth Barış could use the grant, I wondered what a call to Creeley might do. I knew that he was an early riser (the time in Buffalo was, as I recall, between 7 and 8 AM), so, yielding to the excitement of the moment, I called. As swiftly as I can tell the story, he assured me, "Tell him that he's in"; and by late afternoon all of Barış's credentials had been faxed to the graduate department of the University of Buffalo. He would spend four years there and write his dissertation on Herman Melville. My transforming pleasures continued when I was asked to sit on his examining committee.

Bob Creeley came to Turkey in 1992, during my Fulbright grant, brought at my request by the USIS. Bob Bertholf and Ed Foster came the same year. Students for whom English was a second language could, better perhaps than native speakers, cut though usual associations and see his language for the special presence that it afforded them and for anyone who could truly hear.

Class discussions of his work opened vistas not just for them, but for me and, I'm certain, especially for Bob, who marveled at forces in his work of which he had not, perhaps, been fully aware. And then he offered to work with the English language poetry of several of the students, doing so one morning well past lunchtime. At 1:30 or so, no one seemingly left with whom to talk, we had gathered our things to go to lunch when a young woman arrived with a manuscript. I had already locked my office door and began to explain that we needed to leave, but Bob insisted that I unlock so that he and the student could work. Small wonder that the students were charmed.

The day Bob arrived in Turkey, he asked Gönül Uçele to guide him to true Turkish food. We all went to Tunalı Hilmi, where he plunged passionately into the food and the life of Ankara, as he would continue to do for two weeks. One glorious two-day portion of his visit took us to Cappadoccia at Easter. Also on the trip were John Newbury and his family from England as well as Simon Pettet, English poet long resident in New York City, who had taught at Ege University in 1988-89. John, who was working as a producer for the BBC and is an ordained minister, performed an impromptu, swift, and beautiful ceremony in one of the rock churches at Cappadoccia. The entire visit was sublime except for the moment when, three floors down in the ancient caves, Bob fled in a claustrophobic panic.

In April of 1992, at the Turkish-American Association, Bob gave one of his finest readings, a spellbinding rendering of his poetry and a vibrant example of how the spoken language can unite a diverse audience. As far as I know, nobody since has heard the recording of that event. Such hearing is overdue.

The last part of Bob's visit to Turkey was spent in İzmir, as the guest of Mark Jacobs, then presiding over the last days of a USIS presence in that city. Bob and Mark instantly forged a friendship, one that would continue back in the USA and include both families. While with Mark, Bob gave a reading in the amphitheater at Ephesus. I'll never cease regretting the decision to remain in Ankara and take care of classes instead of being on that sacred ground for the reading.

As all who knew him and his work will testify, he was, in his own words, "given to write poetry." For him, the craft was sacred and a connection to the entire history of art, so the Ephesus reading was especially fitting. In the remaining space here, I'll try to capture other ways his life and sensibility impinged upon and shaped so much of my own.

Lucy Kogler, former student at Buffalo State and now manager of Talking Leaves Books, Elmwood Ave. in Buffalo, when she was taking a graduate seminar

at The University of Buffalo with Creeley, wrote the following in a notebook: "I respect his way of knowing." There's the essence of it—not what he knew, though that was large, but the unique way. His characteristic use of adverbs is vivid testimony to that. It was the "way"—the Tao, perhaps—that reached us in so many contexts. There are four instances from my experience that speak of the man and his work. I know that one should be cautioned against hagiography; Bob himself said in class, and Lucy wrote in one of her notebooks: "We should be concerned with the poet as she/he is present in the poem, not who he/she is." Nevertheless, the man as man, reached deeply inside me just as surely as the man as present in the poems did.

During a poetry gathering at Cleveland State many years ago, Bob was a couple of people behind me in a lunch line. Hearing that I was not sitting with anybody, he joined me. I quickly realized that I would insulate him against hovering groupies as he focused on our conversation with a laser intensity. Bob was to be on my Ph.D. committee, one formed years after my departure from UB's program, a revival of sorts intended to enhance my credibility. After two years of work on the Olson archives in the University of Connecticut library and after sixty or so pages of writing a language I hardly recognized as my own, I had decided to quit once and for all. I told Bob; he rose and embraced me. I needed such warm authorization.

At Buffalo State, I offered a variety of courses dealing with Black Mountain and the Whitman Tradition; several times I taught a course called "Creeley and Olson," and during one such class, Bob visited with Warren Tallman. To this day, students from that class recall the illumination of that moment, as they listened to the two men reminisce and in so doing lead the way into the soul of the poetic life.

But finally, there was the class Lucy was taking in the Spring Semester of 1982, wherein she filled pages with Bob's special phrases. He kindly permitted me to sit in. In February, my son was killed in an automobile accident, and I was profoundly lost. A couple of weeks later, on the night of his class, he appeared at my door and insisted that I return to his group. I did, of course, and on the way to UB, he told me of the death of his own daughter, of attempting to dig her from a collapsed arroyo in New Mexico. I rediscovered the annealing force of shared tears; nor have I ever forgotten that night and his gift of life.

In 1995, at Hallwalls, Bob said of living in Buffalo:

*—that you don't have to worry, that the minute you draw breath you're on your way*

So I wrote for him, with love:

He came ‘round to
the necessity to be
    someplace
a center so that “you are
where you are at
    all points”
all the years a vortex
a draft drawn down
around a
    round of
love and death his
daughter     my son
drowned in sand and
snow whirled across
roads and tears frozen
fixed circle of grief.

So it is in the best of worlds that a man’s life and art and locale merge and, in so doing, weave a tapestry of the lives around them.

Buffalo, New York, September 2007

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# Small Spaces of Existence: Robert Creeley's Poetry

Marie Weinel

Robert Creeley's poetry undertakes to examine the place occupied by an individual, both emotionally and physically, at a given instant. His work explores the notion that each person experiences the world around him or herself through distinctly personal sensations and perceptions and that, in this sense, we might all be considered to live within the confines of our unique "spaces" of consciousness and physical being. Creeley's poems—crouched vulnerably within the smallest of literary spaces—are frequently as slight in poetic form as they are "slight" in their ostensible subject matter: the small world of the individual private life. Yet it is in this intimate arena, Creeley argues, that life is at its most personally significant. To make the dimensions of one life "actual" to others is, he enigmatically claims, "not an embarrassment, but love" (*A Quick Graph 34*). In his humane attentions to the small spaces of existence, Creeley magnifies his modest poetry into something of larger import; the domestic is challenged to be profound. Creeley's poems thereby aspire to reach beyond the confines of their fragile forms and bring the small space of one man's existence to the attention of others in the hope of achieving meaningful connection.

To be in one place is not to be in another. If we are defined by the space we occupy, then we are also defined by the negative space which we do not.

Creeley's writings frequently refer to the "darkness" of the surrounding world. If we each inhabit our own unique space, his poetry implies, then how can we truly know what lies beyond? Unfamiliar positions are "somewhere else"; other people are, likewise, mysterious "others." Creeley's poetry feels the separation this implies keenly; a fundamental need to reach "elsewhere" runs through his work.[1] Even so, this sensitivity to "otherness" is not solely a source of despair. The sense of distance experienced between things isolates and denies contact, but it also offers opportunities to locate and define oneself in the dark

[1] He phrases this feeling in "Please" as "I want to be elsewhere, elsewhere" (*CP* 156). All further quotations of Creeley's poetry are taken from *The Collected Poems of Robert Creeley 1945-1975*. (Los Angeles: U of California P, 1982), which will hereafter be referred to by the abbreviation *CP*.

"emptiness" of the outside world. By placing the self in relation to other things and other people, Creeley is able to trace the dynamics between different entities. His poetry enacts this process. Distance can, in this way, be experienced as a space for interaction rather than mere empty space.

Creeley's poetry seeks to inhabit "the intimate fact of one life in one place at one time" (*A Quick Graph 69*). In his work the intense instant of experience must be placed within the context of 'reality' as an indivisible whole: "Reality is continuous, not separable, and cannot be objectified" (*A Sense of Measure 116*). The world exists in a state of flux and Creeley is concerned that his poems should progress accordingly. In line with Charles Olson's stress on the need to "keep moving" in his essay "Projective Verse" ("ONE PERCEPTION MUST IMMEDIATELY AND DIRECTLY LEAD TO A FURTHER PERCEPTION"), Creeley's poetry registers (and often takes delight in) the progression inherent within even the briefest instants of existence (Olson 17).[2] The pleasure of following linguistic movement is much evident in his work. In "Here"—a poem so slight that its status as such is contentious—the poet gleefully disorientates his readers as he takes them from "here" to "there":

> Here is
> where there
> is. (*CP* 547)

Within five words Creeley marks a shift in time and place. The "Here" of the poem proves impossible to locate; no sooner has one the chance to consider the present than it has already changed into the once-future "there" (the positioning of the final "is" mischievously suggesting that "there" is about to subside into a new "here"). The poem's rhyming of "here," "where" and "there" brings about the sense of transformation, as one word aurally (and visually) mutates. The sensitivity to the continuous, not static, nature of reality found in "Here" is representative of the poet's approach. The extreme brevity of Creeley's verse lines is, in part, a reflection of his anxiety to "keep moving" and allow the "here" to become the "there."

For Creeley, as for William Carlos Williams (one of his literary heroes), writing is a means of making contact with the real. It is in his poetry that he feels experience become its most accessible. The writing of poetry, for Creeley, is a revelatory process which uncovers the actuality of personal existence: as he puts it, "I feel very actual in writing, a realization, reification, of what is" (*A Sense of*

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[2] This statement is attributed to Edward Dahlberg.

*Measure* 109). He sees his work as an extension of the life he experiences insofar as it affords him the opportunity to enter, rather than escape from, the world. Writing clarifies, intensifies and makes sense of experience. Whilst excited by its revelatory possibilities, Creeley is troubled by the idea that poetry falsifies experience in its attempts to understand and express it. In allegiance with William Carlos Williams's mantra "No ideas but in things," Creeley is insistent that reality is a "real matter" and that accordingly his poetry should be grounded in the actual experience of living (Olson 5). Poetic expression, the imagination and even rational thought processes are all removed from the moment of experience. To think is to take oneself out of the world of actual existence and to internalise experience. Whilst acknowledging that the world cannot be experienced except through individual consciousness, Creeley is concerned that thought obstructs direct sensation. In common with Robert Duncan (his onetime colleague at Black Mountain College), he longs for immersion in a place beyond conscious thought:

> Is there a place for us,
> do you know it well
> enough that without thought
> it can be found? ("Young Woman" *CP* 238)

As in Duncan's "Often I Am Permitted to Return to a Meadow," the poem itself hopes to become this longed-for place of open experience beyond rational thought:

> a scene made-up by the mind,
> that is not mine, but is a made place,
>
> that is mine, it is so near to the heart (44)

There is a frequent tension in Creeley's work between the aspiration to transcend thought and the realisation that there can be no sensation without consciousness. If thought is the death of experience then it is also its very essence. Poetry, likewise, is an extension of life in the problematic sense that it is both a part of and apart from reality.

Creeley's work often longs for a direct contact with the real beyond the limitations of words. This desire manifests itself in his poetry's notorious reticence (visually conspicuous in its formal emaciation). As he acknowledges the gap between experience and expression, he might be seen to choose the ambiguity of silence over inaccurate statement. Creeley's work constantly questions his own reliability: implicitly through humour and obscurity, and explicitly in his

disingenuous disclaimers and mocking self-portrayal. In one sense this can be viewed as refusal to take responsibility for his work, yet in another the poet is taking full responsibility for the inaccuracies of language and limitations of perspective necessarily present in his work. In the open acknowledgement of his poetry's limitations Creeley asks readers to bring their own judgement to the poem rather than simply accept his own.

"As real as thinking . . ." ponders the difficult relationship between reality and perception. Of particular interest is its preoccupation with "forms." Poetic and physical forms are compared to the more abstract concept of the form of perception (that is, what lies inside and what outside one person's space of experience). The first four stanzas, quoted below, celebrate the possibilities of imaginative thought and linguistic expression, but, at the same time, one remains conscious of the opening line's sceptical dualism; maybe thought constitutes experience, and yet the phrase retains the suggestion that to be "As real as thinking" is to be detached from reality:

> AS REAL as thinking
> wonders created
> by the possibility—
>
> forms. A period
> at the end of a sentence
> which
>
> began it was
> into a present,
> a presence
>
> saying
> something
> as it goes. (*CP* 379)

The poem delights in the "wonders created" by virtue of the imagination. In a similar spirit to the poem "Here" (discussed above) Creeley considers language's capacity to impart meaning through the semantic movement of a sentence. The action of the sentence creates a "presence" in the reader's thoughts: a form within the mind. The pleasure of communication is evident in this poem, but the persisting influence of the first line forces one to question

the legitimacy of what has been created. If the "forms" of the poet's language are "As real as thinking," then they are only subjectively 'real' to whoever is doing the thinking.

This line of enquiry is developed in the poem's second section. Thinking creates "forms" within the mind, but such forms are necessarily the limited products of limited perception:

> No forms less
> than activity.
>
> All words—
> Days—or
> Eyes—
>
> or happening
> is an event only
> for the observer? (*CP* 379)

Whatever we experience in our small spaces of existence, there lies an unperceived beyond. All experience ("words," "days," "happening" and so on) is confined to the form dictated by the outer limits of perspective. In this case, the poem asks, is experience only as "real as thinking"? Is there a reality beyond the thoughts of the conscious self? Creeley is all too aware of the risk of falling into a solipsistic mindset: as the poem asks, "is an event only / for the observer?" The poet's use of the word "observer" in these lines returns readers to the concern that thought is removed from the direct experience of reality, and therefore that acceptance of an internal reality of the mind reduces the individual to a passive "observer" who is never in direct contact with the real. The ambiguous final stanza of the second section in one sense reiterates the solipsistic view queried above, yet it also introduces a contradictory desire to transcend the divisive "forms" of perception and bring everybody's reality into one place:

> No one
> there. Everyone
> here. (*CP* 379)

It is this second sense which Creeley chooses to follow, as he rejects solipsism to look instead with curiosity towards what lies beyond the reaches of one's own perceptions.

In the third section of "AS REAL as thinking . . ." outward human form takes on a strange blankness. "Small facts" of physique are depicted as desperately insubstantial:

face

looking like a
flat painted
board. (*CP* 379)

Outer form, as it is depicted here, is merely the impenetrable 'reflection' of another in the eyes of the observer. The blonde described in these lines is, herself, as if unknowable. There is, even so, a palpable sense of curiosity in these lines. Creeley uses the final section of the poem to reach out, tentatively, with "one hand" in the hope of pushing beyond the formal containment of "inside / and out" (with all its sexual connotations). The optimistic mood of the gesture is caught in Creeley's muddling of "inside" and "outside" through deliberately inopportune line and stanza breaks. The self-contained unit of the word is broken and suggestively joined with its opposing state:

reaching in
from out—

side, out
from in—

side (*CP* 380)

"Impossible locations" are thereby examined through textual manoeuvres.

Although Creeley's poetry explores many different types of relation between the self and the world, human relationships are his major—and perhaps his most interesting—preoccupation. It is in his personal relationships that "the world is at its most evident and intense" (*Sense of Measure* 100). Friendship or company is an important concept in his writing. Heterosexual relationships in particular become embodiments of his desire to reach out of the small space of one's own existence and feel, literally and emotionally, the presence of another. In Creeley's poetry the need for connection between two people represents the hope that shared feeling and understanding may be reached between individuals.

Reaching this desired state of intimacy, however, proves difficult; his poems are anguished by relationship failures. Distance within relationships painfully re-emphasises his poetry's original awareness of isolation.

When reading Creeley's poetry one is made forcibly aware of the barriers which confine individuals and prevent contact. On the one hand, the author seeks shared experience and, to this end, affords readers intimate knowledge of himself through reference to his autobiography; on the other hand, readers are constantly teased and frustrated by his reticence and evasiveness. Much is suggested within the space of a Creeley poem, but expression is deliberately inconclusive and often incomplete. Creeley constantly questions the adequacy of language to fully communicate one person's sensations to another. Just as his writing addresses relationship failures, so his poems can be viewed as broken acts of communication. Poems break off abruptly in mid-sentence and expire into the suggestive silence of an "etc." or ellipses. Language is always ambiguous, and meaning is further confused by awkward line breaks, idiosyncratic punctuation and distressed syntax. In this sense readers are not only kept at a distance from the poetry, but also denied access to the author's autobiographical space. Furthermore, Creeley is consistently willing to expose the limitations of his own art within his writing. The poet coyly distances himself from full responsibility for his work by frequently referring to his own incompetence. A characteristic Creeley-ism is to add self-conscious disclaimers to his poems. The suggestion of error—either accidental or deliberate—contained in cryptic phrases such as this forces the reader to question the reliability of the author's perspective, the accuracy of his powers of expression and the integrity of his motivation—while simultaneously making it clear through provocative self-analysis that he knows precisely what he is up to. Creeley's disingenuous stance prevents the reader from making any easy judgements as to the intended profundity or otherwise of his work. Self-mockery of this kind and his widespread use of comedy generally, proves disarming in its open display of vulnerability. In a sense, Creeley undermines his own hopes for connection by enacting their inevitable failure in his texts; yet, though the mechanics of Creeley's poetry are frequently distancing, the experience of reading his work is arguably one of involvement. The incorporation of absence and doubt within his poems sets one the challenge of filling in the gaps, and thereby denies readers a passive role. Different perspectives may, in this way, be brought together within the space of his texts.

"The Whip" is in many ways the quintessential Creeley poem in its candid examination of personal relationships through a characteristically elusive

poetic mode. Humour is played against pathos and intimate self-exposure against linguistic ambiguity and obscurity of reference. Through this complex framework the poem considers the sense of distance which may exist between individuals—even as they lie in bed.

> I spent a night turning in bed,
> my love was a feather, a flat
>
> sleeping thing. She was
> very white
>
> and quiet, and above us on
> the roof, there was another woman I
>
> also loved, had
> addressed myself to in
>
> a fit she
> returned. That
>
> encompasses it. But now I was
> lonely, I yelled,
>
> but what is that? Ugh,
> she said, beside me, she put
>
> her hand on
> my back, for which act
>
> I think to say this
> wrongly. (*CP* 146)

The poem recounts an intimate situation in which physical proximity only serves to emphasise a lack of emotional mutuality. Although the couple are in bed together, from the outset there is a clear division between them. While the poem's speaker turns in a manner suggestive of mental preoccupation (or restless libido), his "love" sleeps peacefully, oblivious to his turmoil. He is an active, conscious presence in the poem, while she is presented as an inaccessible other. His description of his lover as "a feather, a flat / sleeping thing" both idealises her and turns her into an inanimate object. Indeed the speaker's

subsequent—somewhat obscure—reference to a second woman above "on / the roof" whom he has "also loved" emphasises if nothing else the replaceable nature of his present lover. In contrast to his current companion, the second woman is nostalgically brought to mind as someone who "returned" his "fit" (the word "fit" suggesting compatibility and perhaps anatomical "fitting together" as well as passionate agitation). The poem's protagonist is thus lonely and unsatisfied even in this supposedly intimate context.

To break his loneliness, the speaker yells out and wakes his partner (whether deliberately or in involuntary panic remains ambiguous). If he hopes that in doing so the sense of separation between them will pass, then he is disappointed by her reaction to his cry. She merely grunts a semi-conscious response, "Ugh," and places her hand on his back. The delicate myth of the sleeping woman is upturned in her inelegant, ineloquent reply and Creeley's desire for intimate connection ends in bathetic comedy. Her return is hardly the reciprocal "fit" after which he reminisces. If there is a hint of misogyny in this representation, then this is partly counterbalanced by the haplessness of the poet's male alter ego. The teasing prospect of intimacy (including the erotic speculation encouraged from the poem's opening line: "I spent a night turning in bed") ends in the sexless anticlimax of his partner's indifference. In the absence of either emotional or sexual intercourse, love itself has become the dormant object referred to at the beginning of the poem:

> my love was a feather, a flat
>
> sleeping thing. (*CP* 146)

Intimate self-exposure of the sort recorded in this poem can be personally compromising. The poet's apparent candour leaves him vulnerably exposed before his readers. There is a frequent tension in Creeley's poetry between the desire to articulate and the defensive impulse to hold back highly personal details from public inspection. A direct parallel may be drawn between the relationship problems depicted in the content of his work and this hesitancy to allow the reader intimate contact with the space of his own personal life. Creeley's dilemma as a poet is one faced by many of his poems' protagonists; namely, whether or not to risk reaching out to the unknown other. Creeley's characteristically evasive style of writing can thus be seen as a complex interplay of invitations of intimacy and strategies to exclude. His candid self-exposure entices readers, only to subsequently estrange them. By constantly undermining

his own profundity through means including self-mockery, humour, formal ambiguity, incomplete expression and obscurity of reference, Creeley protects himself from the voyeuristic scrutiny of his audience whilst, paradoxically, inviting the very same. Partial revelations and uncertainty solicit speculation and thus draw the reader even further in.

Such strategies are clearly demonstrated in "The Whip." The comic interplay of the two lovers is finely balanced between humour and pathos. Humour forces the reader to question seriousness of intent, but it also accentuates the gap between the wished-for state of intimacy and the demonstrated reality of division. In a similar manner, profundity is both hinted at and undermined in the oddity of some of Creeley's phrasings. This is particularly evident in the poem's riddling final stanza:

> I think to say this
> wrongly. (*CP* 146)

Plausible interpretations of this stanza include: a despairing admission of poetic inadequacy ("I meant to say this, but I've said it wrongly"); a proclamation of the poet's malicious intention to misrepresent ("I'm deliberately going to say this incorrectly"); and an apologetic confession of guilt ("It is wrong of me to want to say this"). The poetry is equally open to the suggestion of resentment as it is affection, of tenderness as intentional cruelty. The tone of emphasis swings from naïveté to cynicism from one word to the next. It becomes impossible to judge the author's final position with any certainty. In this manner Creeley simultaneously offers readers intimate access to his personal space and keeps them at a distance from it.

Creeley's poetics of intimacy and distance are taken to an even further extreme in "Eros":

> Also the headache of
> to do right by feeling
> it don't matter, etc.
> But otherwise it was one, or even two
> the space of, felt
>
> and one night I said to her, do you
> and she didn't. (*CP* 55)

"Eros" is a broken act of communication. The poem does not begin at the beginning; a stanza which commences with the word "Also" implies that there was a preceding thought which has been left unwritten. The first stanza is broken off into the unresolved silence of "etc." Meaning—nebulous at best—is further clouded by irregular punctuation, disjointed syntax and a general reluctance to elucidate. Most obstructive of all are Creeley's stuttering line breaks. Awkward breaks jeopardise meaning and in one instance swallow the end of a phrase:

> and one night I said to her, do you
> and she didn't. (*CP* 55)

The anticipation present in the run-on of the sixth line is crushed by the sudden break into silence and the subsequent anticlimax of the woman's brief, negative response. Unconscious comparisons between the second and third stanzas are encouraged by similar stanza patterns (an extended line followed by a much shorter one) and rhyme ("one […] two" / "one […] do you"); Creeley thereby heightens the reader's sensation of the sixth line's curtailment by ending it somewhat earlier than one might be led to expect (it is two syllables shorter than the fourth line). The sense of broken rhythm is compounded by the mis-rhyming of "didn't" with "felt," which ends the poem on a note of profound irresolution.

Physical intimacy is often used as a metaphor (or substitute) for wider concepts of emotional or existential connection in Creeley's poetry. In "Eros" there is a deliberate ambiguity of this sort played upon the word "feeling." In light of the poem's title, the speaker's rejection seems likely to be of a dually sexual and emotional nature. The hope of abolishing distance in both of these senses is found in the second stanza. Creeley tentatively raises the possibility that one might feel the space another occupies (both in terms of physical form and emotional presence):

> But otherwise it was one, or even two
> the space of, felt (*CP* 55)

In light of the final stanza, however, the space his speaker is brought to feel is ultimately the distance of separation. For all the stumbling caution of his self-conscious approach, his protagonist's proposal is cut off by a swift, concise refusal (with comic effect as well as pathos). Eros has evidently missed his shot.

The evasive strategies Creeley uses in "Eros" and his emphasis on the unwritten enact the failure of connection which takes place within the poem. Readers might feel excluded from the poem's failed disclosures, just as the

speaker's rejection divides him from his female addressee. The silence of broken communication is as integral a part of the poem as what has actually been written. Although incomplete expression alienates the reader it also, curiously, offers the opportunity of heightened personal involvement. The aesthetic response critic Wolfgang Iser has proposed that the reception of any literary text depends upon a "dynamic *interaction* between text and reader" (107). According to Iser the success of a text depends upon its ability to activate and guide the reader's own faculties of perception and processing. The words on the page are, in this case, merely a set of "governing rules" which structure the reader's imaginative response to a text without fully controlling it. 'Eros' encourages readers to fill in textual gaps with his or her imaginative suppositions. The reader is actively involved in the creative process and therefore intimately engaged with the poem. The provocative charge of the poem's suggestively broken-off question, "I said to her, do you," is achieved through this tantalising invitation to speculation.

Creeley has spoken of his delight in the one-to-one relationship involved between reader and author: "[writing's] most active possibility lies for me in that fact" (*Collected Essays* 523). Through its ability to convey individual perspectives, the poem offers the possibility of allowing one person to experience the space of another's existence. Moreover, the poem can become an intimate space where the perspectives of reader and author meet and interact. Creeley has described communication as a "mutual feeling with someone, not a didactic process of information"; his best poems arguably succeed in achieving mutual feeling – and, in so doing, are able to transcend their own small spaces of existence (*Sense of Measure* 90).

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# What Gets Said

John Landry

for Bob Creeley

a scarf holds my breath through
walks against the wind's grain
snow catches in filter woven there
is no place to avoid New England
when that's where your there is
the snow the cold won't let up

to obstacle the way we meet
and cherish the treat of such
company in which to dwell
is more than one can ask for
more than one deserves as if we
deserve anything another can provide

what one loves well remains the
rest is shadow in the corner of
a photograph we laughed about
the angle of the approach the
longing in an eye focused on going
such are such loves on the move and
and one knows what comfort is

what the world has come to
be or offer the loyalty of, say,
animals, or friends, say, as in
how are you, my friend ?
runs up from the heart to the
gullet no stopping the mouth

but to kiss a lip goodbye it is
the need to say what you mean

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# Interview with Robert Creeley[1]

Hedwig Gorski

**HG:** In a recent interview, the poet Joseph Brodsky described his trial in Russia for writing literature which was considered disturbing to the security of the State. What kind of threat do poets in this country pose to our government? Does the ruling class really care what poets write?

**RC:** It has been a threat, for example, during the Vietnam War. Thanks to the Freedom of Information Act, Lawrence Ferlinghetti gained access to FBI files on himself and discovered that the federal government had devoted incredible time and effort to detailed surveillance of his activity. At that time at least, poets and artists generally had, I think, a decisive rapport with and found sympathy in people's dispositions and feelings. In times of crisis, that is extremely true. Yet, I wonder, sadly, whether poets in my situation or in the great broad middle class spectrum, let's say, do have influence. Robert Bly and Denise Levertov and Allen Ginsberg have given an awful lot of time and human effort trying to bring people to some consciousness of their own determinations and decisions and responsibilities. Then again, old friends like Amiri Baraka have an absolute effect, and not simply to the ethnic group to which they relate. LeRoi Jones certainly had a profound effect. In Europe, the situation has been a little different in that they are far more at home with and find more significance in their artists and writers than people in the United States. When talking to people like Yevtushenko, we find that the poet in Russia is part of an extremely tenacious and long tradition, oral and what not. In the situation of poet Mendlestein, Stalin thought him important enough as an influential poet, though he had something like twenty poems only in print. Thousands of people knew his work by word of mouth and oral tradition. Well, Stalin actually called Pasternak and asked him if this poet was a genius because if he isn't a genius, we can screw him without problems. But, if he is a genius and is felt to be one by his peers and the public, then we've got trouble here.

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[1] The interview was televised live on KLRU-KLRN TV program *Artbeat* and conducted at the University of Texas at Austin on Feb. 8, 1983.

**HG:** It seems, though, that the general person on the street has no like nor need for poetry, despite any worry the government may exhibit about it.

**RC:** I think that has a lot to do with the categories that poetry has been defined by. Years ago, Michael McClure, an extraordinary poet, did a piece for Rolling Stone on Bob Dylan called "The Poet's Poet" and rehearsed all of Dylan's relation to the poets of my generation, and his influence during the sixties, particularly in relation to poetry. Dylan himself would not claim speciously to be a poet, but, yeah, he is. With our academic tradition, there is always a question about the art which is popular. We have an awful sense of high art and low art, so that we're fearful of common art as being in some sense degrading to the potential of the art. So, we tend to disregard whole areas of active performance or composition simply because it isn't high art. Jazz, for instance, suffered in this position for a long time and was considered to not be, quote, serious in the same way extraordinary poets such as Dylan were not considered as such because they didn't appear in standard academic anthologies.

**HG:** The activity in the fifties bridged the gap a bit when writers actively promoted poetry itself as well as creating poems.

**RC:** The people who have the most access to poetry and its powers, let's say, are the young. Those for whom feeling is still a decisive possibility—who haven't yet been sadly locked into some habituating pattern of employment or use. "Minds like beds, always made up," as Williams said, and/or those who are in some intensive shift in political or social circumstance: e.g., the Black and Hispanic communities in New York produce some powerful poets, or the Chicanos of the Southwest.

**HG:** Black and Latino poets have a defined social-political content about which they can talk, which is built into their communities.

**RC:** Or the Jewish community.

**HG:** Right. But, what about the large numbers of white academic poets who dominate what is considered good poetry? What do they have to talk about? I've heard so many complaints from among the academic-minded writers that this is just a lot of trivial garbage.

**RC:** I think that's slightly right. (Laughs) Not to condemn, quote, my people, but I remember some years ago, a really bright student at Buffalo who came from a classic old-time, orthodox, working-class Jewish family in New York. He would ask me, not teasingly but accurately, who did I consider my constituency to be. For whom was I writing? Although I was a person of this

massive segment of our population, its blandness and status quo situation was very hard to move or to engage. I think, therefore, that the act got stuck with style. I mean, it became a question of who could manipulate the agency most attractively or dazzlingly. Who could dance or put on a dress that most seemed to be a jazzy use of the thing. Poetry seems to me the articulation of the most significant and heartfelt emotions that any group is having. Pound's point is that poetry is the antennae of the race.

**HG:** With this in mind, can a person get some sort of academic training to write poetry?

**RC:** I never felt that. I think that as with an art, the more one knows of its resources, the more potential one has in using the art or performing with it. In other words, the more a musician, for example, knows about the resources of his or her music, the more material he or she is able to do in contrast to some who don't read or hear other poets' work—for fear they're going to be contaminated or influenced, as they say. It seems to be an absurd dilemma to put themselves into. You don't want to hear music for it might change their ways of playing, or whatever.

**HG:** I'm curious about the benefits of an insulated environment like Black Mountain was, in terms of enforcing one's need to create by isolation from the mainstream.

**RC:** It was not insulated, by the way. Think of what it was: a highly self-determined clutch of people who'd come primarily from the big cities. The group had no economic authority in the community where they were situated. Black Mountain was the home town of Billy Graham. North Carolina, to this day, is not a particularly hospitable state for large liberal political thinking. So, Black Mountain was known as *pink mountain*. There was the constant fear of being burned out by the townspeople, a tremendous difficulty in getting common services, such as doctors, because the town was very hostile. But we certainly were not isolated from the public event. For example, in the forties, Black Mountain had no problems in exchanging with the black communities, which, indeed, isolated them from the more authoritative white community. The performances in and with the black communities were very successful, and, of course, the student population was not exclusively white. So the exchange was real. Black Mountain jumped all the habits of southern disposition, and that, of course, angered the local community. So, you see, we weren't insulated but extremely vulnerable. We had no money, no authority that could say this is a good thing. Now, of course, Black Mountain is a kind of minor industry in the state of North Carolina. I mean, historians collect artifacts of the time, etc.

**HG:** One of the more recent readings you have done was at the Jack Kerouac Festival in Boulder during July. What were the successes of that festival in your mind, other than honoring the man?

**RC:** Jack Kerouac is now an obvious hero of public interest, among the young people, too. There was a time shortly after his death, roughly about ten years after his greatest influence, that my literature students did not know his work or who he was. He was a great writer without exception. Now, happily, it's different. I recall before I got to the conference talking with friends Ted Berrigan, Allen Ginsberg, and others, and we intended to shift the interest of the public from simply making Jack a folk hero into a return to actually reading his books, which was, after all, the point of his writing. To get it off the level of "Gee, I remember the night he did this, that, and the other thing": to make it a little less anecdotal and more engraved with what this man wrote. Because that, frankly, is Jack Kerouac now and forever—what the books say. I felt in that respect it was successful. I was certainly moved and delighted and impressed by what they had done. It was lovely. I never met Abby Hoffman before then and enjoyed the way he was talking about Jack. Clark Coolidge had come. He's an extremely good poet. It is extraordinarily moving to think of America in Jack's terms.

**HG:** Do you think that poetry needs to be re-defined somehow in order to make it more accessible to the general public? The Small Press Movement has been effective in presenting diverse work which would never see print otherwise because of old standards or similar hegemony that determines value.

**RC:** The Kerouac Festival, again, recalls some of the feeling of solid community which the Small Press Movement is. I keep in touch with Allen and Mike McClure, and, happily, Gary Snyder again, and Denise Levertov. There's always a nexus, happily, in poetry of community. Certainly, there has been in my life. At times, people apart from it will say, "You poets simply scratch each other's back. You publish each other's work, and so forth." But it doesn't really matter. I mean, it's like playing music for those who want to hear it, and those are very often other musicians. The point being that anything which helps the art survive in a time that's not particularly interested in it is useful. Small presses make no money. They serve no other interest except the possibilities of keeping a text of poetry available for those who care about it. But it isn't a privileged situation. It's a question of how much money you can lose for how long. And as Ezra Pound suggested to me, just make it count as much as possible.

**HG:** How do you feel about the drifting of poetics which includes media, theatrics, dance, etc. along with or instead of words?

**RC:** Well, I had been involved with that possibly more in the sixties when media events were more common--intensively at times with very sophisticated people, e.g., John Cage and Merce Cunningham, and others. We did two weeks of media in New York, and that was extremely interesting to me. On the other hand, I am a poet whose particular art is not only committed but is habituated to sounds and rhythms and fields of emotion, and it is gestural. Its information particularly is words. Frankly, I love words as material because you don't have to buy them; you don't have to go out and haul them home. They're common to all people; they are the most intimate activity of people in terms of something specifically human. They carry all the increment of their use and associations therein. And everyone can afford them, so to speak. It doesn't cost anything. Again, the oral tradition is so terrific because you don't even need paper or pencil. So the community always seemed to be extremely solid. I suppose the only thing I regret is not so much an indifferent public, but a disposition that wants to take a rather unaggressive circumstance and make it a privileged authority. Tell you the right way to read or write a poem so that after the usual high school training, no wonder people run for the woods. I'd hate to think of reading poetry as though there was some awful test coming. And asking: "did you understand?"

*Understanding Poetry:* that title alone is enough to freak you. The students think there is something they should understand, and if they don't understand it, they're let out. If they don't get it or somehow come up with the right answers, they have failed in their experience of it. I think that's a very hostile way to look at poetry. I mean, I don't understand a lot of things in the world, e.g., trees or weather, or feeling, utterly complex. I could have a whole model as to why Harry hit me over the head with a club. Reasons, but it still would be inexplicable to me. Why did he do that to me? I remember most interestingly and horribly in the Second World War, my first experience of being shot at. I thought, "Oh boy, I've never done anything. Why are these people shooting at me?" I don't know to this day. Why shoot? What does that seemingly ever solve? So the pretense that one has to, quote, understand poetry in some intellectually determined way is, to me, entirely out to lunch.

**HG:** Yes. Students expect, even demand it seems, to be told what a poem means.

**RC:** I love Pound's point that nothing counts save the quality of the affection, and only emotion endures. Poetry is primarily an agency of feeling, and it says

things in order to promote and/or articulate feeling. It doesn't explain them necessarily, nor does it define them. But if it works in my imagination of it, it moves me. Or it can bring a person to tears or to laughter. Or it makes a particular circumstance somehow both more explicit and more articulate and accessible.

**HG:** Is there a common frame of mind that compels poets to write?

**RC:** Yes. I was reading in a magazine about a special school in New York for kids who have strongly evident capabilities in various arts or who are professionals at age ten or eleven, whether musicians or actors or dancers. The article told of one wild kid who grew up in a classic poor Puerto Rican family in New York. While the parents were at work, she was left with this woman who had a piano. By age four, this kid is playing away without any lessons. The parents don't think it's remarkable, but she was heard by someone who could define her abilities. This kid proved to be a veritable genius. So they set to work training her. Well, there's no one who could say why that kid did that. Mike Wallace asked Williams in an interview: "Tell me, why does one want to write a poem?" Williams replied, "Because it's there to be written." Then he asks, "Well then, what sets it off?" Williams answers, "I am that he whose mind is scattered aimlessly." In other words, I have not purpose necessarily definitive. I feel that poetry is engaging, endlessly interesting, like the ultimate Rubik's Cube. It's something that costs nothing to play with. It's like swimming. It's like something you feel like doing. And it endlessly provokes, satisfies, and engages your attention. Again, as with music, no one's defined why it is that music makes us feel. There is no psychology of music, for instance. Unhappily, there is a psychology of literature, which is probably out to lunch. Its explanations are simply one model of possibility and by no means the conclusion. In any case, I like to listen to people, to hear them talking. I was looking over a woman's shoulder on the bus, and she was writing a report about a motorcyclists' convention and how her father was having trouble adjusting to the death of his wife. She was writing this really remarkable human document, almost inarticulate but extremely moving. She wrote nothing intellectual in those statements that would be extraordinary, but trying to say exactly how it was her father was feeling and how she was trying to help him. I enjoyed sitting there and reading over her shoulder into her world of expression. Another example might be my visits to relatives in usual and very common mental hospitals. I talk not only with the persons I visit but with other people commonly and sadly there. It's not that one is being objective or speciously observing, but the language! It's fascinating to hear how words take place in all these diverse human situations. They're an accessible report about people, along with gesture.

**HG:** Allen Ginsberg said that poetry is the way people speak.

**RC:** Yeah. That's interesting in every respect.

**HG:** Jorge Louis Borges said that he would be happy, or consider himself a successful poet, if generations after him continued to remember three or four of his lines and incorporated them into daily language.

**RC:** And couldn't remember who'd written them. That would be ideal. Would no one be moved by those words and that way of putting them? It wouldn't really matter at all who said them. Some words have extraordinary effect with, on, and rapport with people's feelings.

**HG:** As if they had to be said and someone had to say them. How would you consider yourself a success as a poet?

**RC:** Well, I've been generously treated. I certainly had no authority as a younger man that would give me a comfortable position. I have an old friend, Donald Hall, who as a younger man did have very useful and significant introductions to people like Eliot, and did have a very clear privilege in the relationships and the approval of his elders. It hasn't made his life as a poet easier. My determinations in poetry as a poet were far more personal and initially difficult. There was no audience or respect for what I was doing. It was very lonely at times to have so little rapport, seemingly, with what people obviously respected as poetry. I began to gradually accumulate a respect, or more accurately, a use for what I was doing. As that began to happen, I discovered old-time friends one had in no sentimental sense not met, people who had really been moved by your writing.

**HG:** So your success is the fact . . .

**RC:** That people haven't killed me. I'm still here. (Laughs)

**HG:** That a lot of people read your intimate thoughts.

**RC:** Critics who really want to dump on me refer to me as a popular poet, and that's the sneer of condescension, that this person somehow finds a popular interest in his writing. It certainly isn't reflected in sales, but it's true. I haven't been isolated as a poet by virtue of social or intellectual or class disposition towards reading and writing. Some people have. I think John Ashbery has overcome it by the power of his own writing.

**HG:** Do you think that terrible gap between what large numbers of the reading public enjoy and what is considered treasure in literature can be bridged?

**RC:** I don't know that in fact it can. I one time had a job teaching children on a coffee plantation in Guatemala. The mother of some of these kids simply bought automatically all the books that showed up on the *New York Times* best-seller list. That was index for reading material. She considered herself in active rapport with the literate interests of this country, forgetting entirely that the books were sold as commercial products. My wife, who is a New Zealander and was trained the usual British way, was aghast at the author's writing and cheap tricks used in *The World According to Garp.* It's not that he's a, quote, bad writer, but his writing has nothing to do with the potential or powers of the art. He is a popular writer. He's usefully so. But Brautigan, let's say, in earlier instances of that kind of popularity, is an extraordinarily trained and skilled writer, comes from a very different tradition of experience and would have the respect of other writers. The simplicity in Brautigan is a highly complex ability.

**HG:** Do you think that Ann Waldman's and Ginsberg's rock and roll recordings could be considered gimmicks to approach a commercial market in some sense?

**RC:** No, no, no. Allen is delighted with it. Some years ago, Allen determined to sing Blake's songs, composed a rudimentary pattern of assigned tonal values to each of the vowels, and used that pattern. He sang gloriously like some old-time Jewish uncle and recorded Blake. He's almost servile in his affection for and respect of Bob Dylan. I remember he introduced me to Dylan one time, who jokingly told me to take care of this guy because he might be our next hit. For Allen, it was a fascinating way to particularize the sound structure and the rhythmic structure of what one wrote. He was fascinated by the way singing particularized the duration and value of words. Ed Sanders recognized during the sixties that if you sang poems, people heard them far more insistently and remembered them better than if you simply said them. This is a very powerful mode of communicating. So Ed had the Fugs in the sixties. That was a powerful political agency then, which had a lot to do with public thinking about censorship. To hear people singing "River of Shit" was a great moment in my life. No, it's not a gimmick. I was delighted two years ago when an old friend, Steve Swallow, composed music to about ten of my poems. Allen is fascinated by the abruptness and punch and common access that punk rock has. It isn't that he's trying to persuade a large constituency of his own authority, but he's trying to think of how you can get the word to as many people as possible. I was talking, recently, with a composer about the dilemma of words and music. Various composers have worked with my poems in a classic/modern manner. It was interesting but even farther from the public access than the poems themselves.

**HG:** The key is in the ability of words to move as much as the music, as I think you imply. Print poetry doesn't always translate because its poetics can be too much a silent type of music.

**RC:** Ezra Pound, regardless of his horrible political and social dispositions at times, was a great mentor of our generation in ways of thinking about language and poetry. His point was that whenever poetry gets too far from music, it begins to atrophy and fall apart into purely intellectual disposition. He says listen to the sound that it makes. That's the key to its authority, not what it's saying, but the sound it's using to make a form. That's what's interesting and where the skill is largely obtained. One friend uses the human voice as an instrument . . .

**HG:** Like performance artist Laurie Anderson is doing.

**RC:** And there again, there's a very clear instance of how words are always moving into the situation of music. Zukofsky defined his poetics as being a function with the upper limit music and the lower limit being common speech or conversation. And poetry operates in the agency between those two poles. It either moved into pure sound, or else it moved primarily into statement, like "pass the butter" or "I'm hungry," or things of that sort.

**HG:** I like to call poetry written only for performance "performance poetry," like visual art designed only for performance is called "performance art." Either one can use music, or not, but each comes from a different set of aesthetic priorities and history, too. That's why Laurie Anderson is not a poet. Right?

**RC:** Yes, exactly. That's fascinating. And Dylan can be.

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# Body, Breath, World: Robert Creeley's Phenomenological Poetics

Gabrielle T. Raymond

*Consciousness is something located, bound to a place and a reality that it cannot escape—it is something essentially corporeal.*
James Dodd, *"Editor's Introduction"* to *An Introduction to Husserl's Phenomenology*

*Here, here,* the body
screaming its orders,
learns of its own.
Robert Creeley, "Mazatlan: Sea"

In "Massachusetts" Robert Creeley writes, "You place yourself in / such relation, you hear / everything that's said" (*Selected Poems* l 4-6). To discuss Robert Creeley's poetics, consider the poet and poem in *relationship*, each an object in an object-filled world. Now add the reader. Since the poem is experienced through our bodies and because our bodies are never in stasis, the poem is also never in stasis. The creative act is not a singular act but an interrelated act*ing*, thus the poem becomes an experienc*ing*. Creeley takes into account the movement of a corporeal, temporal artist through a corporeal, temporal world, a world wherein the artist is an object acting in relation to other objects. As writes Charles Olson in *Human Universe and Other Essays* (1967), "It is a matter, finally, of OBJECTS, what they are, what they are inside a poem, how they got there, and, once there, how they are to be used" (20). It is the relationships between the world, poet, poem, reader, and the *words themselves*, that charge Creeley's work. Speaking phenomenologically, it is therefore through these relationships that Creeley has access to the order of the world.

Of course, a poetics about relationships is nothing new—think Projective Verse. For Charles Olson, what breath achieved was in question. For him, breath is both physiological and philosophical, thus Projective Verse is created through the "possibilities of the breath" (*Charles Olson* 16). Projective verse is phenomenological because the foundation is the body. It is only because we are corporeal that can we experience, posits Husserl. Projective verse, then, because it involves bodily experience, expresses a particular "stance toward reality"

(*Charles Olson* 15). This stance, Olson proposed, would change the way things looked on the page and "lead to new poetics and to new concepts" (*Charles Olson* 16). It relied on the body, breath and consciousness for its realizations, and thus led to a poetics based on experience. In "Introduction to Robert Creeley" in *Human Universe,* Olson states that Creeley is, "constituting himself the going reality and, by the depth and sureness of his speculating, making it pay, making you-me believe, that we are here in the presence of a man putting his hands directly and responsibly to experience which is also our own" (*Human Universe* 128). Olson continues that Creeley uses his presence merely "to keep the going going, to make the reach of what is happening clear. For his presence is the energy" (*Charles Olson* 128). Creeley brings energy to the page because of his ability to see the ordinary as extraordinary. This openness is Husserl's intentionality. Husserl proposes that "The conditions for the possibility of knowledge are found not in the object, but in the openness of the subject to the object, an openness that is always prior to the manifestation of the world" (qtd. in Patocka xiii). Creeley thus has a certain "access to the order of the world" in that he is an active participant with the world, and also with the words and readers he needs for his poetry to reach its form (xiii). Charles Altieri posits of Creeley that his "aim is not so much to interpret experience as to extend it by making a situation simply the focus for overlapping reflexive structures" (518). His poetics considers the poet, reader, and the poem, as both subject and object. As with the objects in the world itself, each object is a unique and essential component of making meaning in Creeley's poetic world and beyond.

Projective Verse is best understood as a particular approach. The poem is a tangible object, but is also *beyond* inanimate because of what the poem is and *does*. Olson stresses three important characteristics in Projective Verse, the first involving kinetics. "A poem is energy transferred from where the poet got it (he will have some several causations), by way of the poem itself to, all the way over to, the reader" (*Human Universe* 16). The poem, then, necessarily involves several consciousnesses. In phenomenological terms, each "world" is an extension of consciousness, or what Husserl deems intentionality, "that unifying bond that to which the experience of consciousness is not a rhapsody of impressions or other phenomena but rather a unitary meaningful process" (64). If the perceiver is open to experience, then this will manifest as a particular experience in the consciousness of the perceiver and as an experience that reveals something about the world. As contends Husserl, "For to be aware of life as the horizon of knowledge means to recognize as one's own precisely the general movement of revealing the order of the world" (xi). Therefore, the purpose of the poet is to reveal the order of the world.

Olson's second characteristic of Projective Verse is the well-known phrase "FORM IS NEVER MORE THAN AN EXTENSION OF CONTENT" (16). The syllables in a poem provide a spatial, mental, and aural structure. The poem, as an extension of the poet's consciousness, is always an object present in consciousness prior to the writing of the poem. The poem itself is a context, an object among objects in and of the world. Any context, as Dodd states in his introduction to Patocka's book, "is nothing over and above the thing, but intrinsic to it; to have something to do with something, to handle it or understand it, is to always be at the same time moving in the horizon of its significance" (Patocka xiv). The objects of the world are always in relation to other objects. Human consciousness is a context. The words in a poem, like objects in the world, work in relation to each other providing a context, moving to the page while holding the energy of experience. The words also hold energy as language. Words in English are temporal. Verb tenses, for instance, indicate time and space. Form happens on the page because of this transaction of energy. As writes Creeley in the introduction to *Words*, "Words will not say anything more than they do . . ." (qtd. in Diehl 335). As Paul Diehl continues in "The Literal Activity of Robert Creeley," words, for Creeley, are thus both "things" and "events" (337). The energy transferred in the relationships between the world, poet, words, and reader is responsible for shaping the poem. As Husserl would note, *poem*, like any other context, is experience.

Olson's third premise is, "the *process* of the thing." He adds that, "ONE PERCEPTION MUST IMMEDIATELY AND DIRECTLY LEAD TO A FURTHER PERCEPTION" (*Human Universe* 16-17). Words in the poem point to other words. This pointing of words, referencing both to sound and experiences, move the reader through the poem. A poem works because its parts sustain the energy. Olson's notion is that because the poem is a kind of consciousness, the poem must always be moving as consciousness is always moving. As relays Husserl, "an experience is a reference to a further experience" (163). Consciousness operates by continually pointing, connecting previous experiences to new ones. A poem such as "Supper" refers to a single experience, but Creeley demonstrates that one experience is full of many perceptions. Creeley further emphasizes the necessity of perception through his use of, or omission of, punctuation. The energy produced by each perception is what moves the reader through the poem.

Thus in terms of approach, Creeley's poetics is about new realities. Creeley states in *What is Poetry: Conversations with the American Avant-Garde,* "I'd agree with Williams that 'A new world is only a new mind,' that what one calls 'imagination' is the means by which we experience 'reality,' any reality" (Kane

59). Husserl too believes that it is in imagination where true perception, and thus meaning, lies. For him, the order of the world will only be revealed to one who lives as a perpetual child, looking with the openness and willingness to see things as they are and as they could be. Consciousness, for Husserl, is intentional. All meaning is a joint product of the world and the subject. As the experience is rendered on the page, it is the line that gets, as Olson states, "the attention, the control, that it is right here, in the line, that the shaping takes place, each moment of the going" (*Human Universe* 19). This control is not tyrannical, a poet controlling words. Instead, the line, for Olson, is shaped because of the attention paid by the poet. The poet must listen to the words and allow the form to be shaped by the words, not the other way around. Charles O. Hartman in *Free Verse: An Essay on Prosody* and Robert Hass in "Listening and Making" state that the line pulls the reader into a kind of attentive consciousness. Hartman writes, "A poem is the language of an act of attention" (12). Therefore attention must be paid to every syllable, the smallest unit in a poem. Olson's credo, "the HEAD, by way of the EAR, to the SYLLABLE / the HEART, by way of the BREATH, to the LINE" holds true in phenomenological terms (*Human Universe* 19). If a word is made up of individual units of sound it is the experiencing of those sounds that affects the breath and rhythm in the poem. For Olson, syllables are first experienced in the mind of the poet. He writes, "I am dogmatic, that the head shows in the syllable. The dance of the intellect is there, among them, prose or verse" (*Human Universe* 19). Therefore, the syllable is showing what the mind does (*Human Universe* 19). A projective verse poem establishes balance between the actions of the mind. Writes Olson, "I take it that PROJECTIVE VERSE teaches, is, the lesson, that that verse will only do in which a poet manages to register both the acquisitions of his ear and the pressures of his breath" (*Human Universe* 17). The poet must concern her/himself with listening and speaking, the balance providing the poem with sufficient energy to sustain itself. For Creeley, sounds are what lead and organize the verse. He states, "I guess that if I needed to choose one precept that most served my senses of poetry over the years, it would be Pound's injunction: 'Listen to the sound that it makes!'" (64). Eleanor Berry, in "The Free Verse Spectrum" (1997), writes, "It is the relation to phonological phrasing, rather than to syntax, that determines whether or not we feel a line as enjambed, fragmented, or both, and, if so, how strongly" (886). The line is thus a series of sounds that produce a rhythm, and the rhythm produced by the sounds is what projects the line forward, pushes it back, etc. Thus, for Creeley, the line shapes through the listening act. As Husserl would note, listening is an important, active, temporal and corporeal experience in phenomenological terms. One listening experience for the poet (and the reader, of course) necessarily leads to the next listening experience.

The line is also where the poet meets the reader. Creeley's lines range in length and breath, but this is less an experiment in the line and more the realization of the line. That is, Creeley allows the words to shape the context and the reader to shape the experience. Louise M. Rosenblatt states this nicely in *The Reader, The Text, The Poem,* when she contends, "the text is the stimulus that focuses the reader's attention so that the elements of past experience—concepts linked with verbal symbols—are activated" (11). This, of course, echoes Hartman and Hass, but it also adds another element—the idea that verbal symbols are connected to experiences. Sound itself constitutes an experience, Husserl would contend. The poem is an object of sound. Sounds are made with the breath, and this returns to the body as locus of orientation. If the line is experienced through the body, then that body is affected by these movements. Breath and rhythm are physiological experiences. Paul Diehl writes,

> By attending closely to pulse or breath or to some other activity, we attend closely to emotion. What the poet does is to make an 'emotion literal,' is to create a complex of linguistic activities which share the same essential characteristics as a complex of physiological activities to make possible two 'literal events' with the same essential form: one the 'emotion' which resides in the body, the other 'emotion literal' which resides in the language. (340)

It is impossible to breathe during the reading of a poem without noticing the body, and it is through the body that the poet influences emotion. Remember Husserl posits that experience is only possible because we are corporeal. The breath allows Creeley to play with energy and emotion. When the reader reads in "Mazatlan: Sea," "The sea flat out, / the light far out," it is much different than "the / blobs of dark clouds / seem closer" (1-5). Lines that are not enjambed feel different to the reader than lines that are enjambed. Each line takes a different amount of energy and feels different emotionally. If one thinks of the line as an energy transaction, as Olson contends, then it is through the breath that the poet controls how much energy is expended. Creeley influences the body's direct, immediate physiological and emotional experience through what he calls the "'syntactical environment'" (qtd. in Diehl 339). The poet's responsibility, as Creeley puts it, "is to make the 'emotion literal in the poem,' so that it becomes literal in its transmission" (qtd. in Diehl 339). Thus Creeley's poetics is phenomenological in that the experience of the poem is shaped by physiological concerns that occur only because we are corporeal. Without corporeality, the relationships between world, poet, poem, and reader are impossible.

For the phenomenologist, then, all consciousness is consciousness of something. Consciousness operates only because there is an entity, in this case a poet and a reader, to experience a "something." There is perhaps no better Creeley poem that relays the movement and process of consciousness than Creeley's "Do you think…" The poem is far more than a poem about thinking. Rather, it is a poem that shows the thinking process at work. It is a poem that shows both Creeley and the reader thinking in relation to each other, and in relation to the words on the page. As writes Patocka on Husserl's theory of the body, "In contrast with other material objects and processes, the body is a center of orientation, the point zero of an ordered sequence which we bear with us or, better, which we are" (Patocka 144). Human beings are our bodies, and this creates a particular notion of experience for a poet such as Creeley. Creeley places different objects before the reader and asks the reader to think about the object, which is what most poems do. But Creeley influences how we think about the object through his meticulous attention to syllabication and lineation. Through the syntactical environment, Creeley influences the reader physiologically. When we breathe differently, when we pause, move faster, slow down, this does not merely affect our bodies. This also affects our thinking, our consciousness. As posits Diehl, "The mind takes its own breaths which sometimes are joined by the body's. And when we breathe at places other than these natural opportunities for breath, we show that our mind has also breathed a different way" (341). Remember, phenomenology posits that the fact that we are corporeal, our bodies our constant locus of orientation, means that anything we perceive, think about, imagine, first comes into reference through our bodies. Thus when Creeley moves the reader through the poem in a certain way he is not only affecting our bodies, he is affecting our minds.

The title "Do you think . . ." is Creeley's first association. The title functions as a question and a suggestion to do something, in this case to think. The [. . .] connotes action. Thinking, for Creeley, is about movement that involves the body and the mind. The verbs "do" and "think" bring into association body (do) and mind (think). Repeating the phrase as the first line of each stanza, "Do you think that if," corresponds to each of Olson's three Projective Verse requirements: energy transfer, form as extension of content, and perception to perception. The repetition of the line constantly calls the reader back to the first association of body/mind and serves three functions: 1) The phrase gets the reader involved in the process of the poem by asking her/him to participate, to think, along with Creeley. As Creeley thinks, so will the reader, thus Olson's need as an energy transfer is emulated here. It is also a plea for openness, Husserl's intentionality. The word "you" is a direct address. The word "if" asks for openness so Creeley

can place an object in the reader's consciousness. The line repetition influences the reader to participate in the intentional and temporal world of the poem. Remember that for Husserl, all consciousness, all thinking, is thinking of something; 2) the phrase itself acts as both a question, "Do you think," and a suggestion, "that if." The reader is first called to engage her/his mind with the word "think" and then to think about something specific—the intended object. Putting the call to think in one line and the object in the next line shows Creeley wants the reader to see each, the act and the object, as important—each has emphasis because each has earned its own line. Form is an extension of content because the act and object are separated in successive lines but also linked by enjambment; 3) the phrase also allows Creeley to imitate the phenomenological processes of imaginary variation. Each object is placed before the reader in a particular form and then this form is varied. Specifically, Creeley asks the reader to imagine the object differently. Once Creeley has the reader's attentive consciousness in one stanza with one object, he is able to put more objects in front of her/him and ask the reader to think of the object in this similar way. Creeley moves the reader from perception to perception as each stanza gets its own object. Thus, all three of these ways in which the title functions comply with Olson's definition of projective verse, and thus are also phenomenological.

Creeley also transfers energy from the world to the reader through the use of lineation, enjambment, syllabication, and punctuation (or lack thereof). The first stanza is comprised of only three lines, but the fourth stanza is six lines. Each of the successive stanzas adds one line, thus on the page and in reading, the lines expand, growing as the energy builds.

The building energy is also a reflection of content. "Do you think that if" points the reader toward the object *within a context.* As writes Erazim Kohak in *An Introduction to Husserl's Phenomenology,* "Things are never meaningful in themselves, only with others; they point to a context [. . .] As such this context is nothing over and above the thing, but intrinsic to it; to have something to do with something" (xiv). In each stanza, Creeley places objects in front of the reader, the effect of which is that each object functions both within the context of the stanza and in conjunction with the other successive objects and their contexts. Each stanza exhibits Husserl's imaginary variation in that each line represents a step toward the relief of the object, the suspension of "one's everyday understanding of what the object is" (x). With each line, Creeley suggests the reader think of the respective object as it currently exists within the reader's consciousness and then to think of the object in a different way. The process is repeated in each stanza using a different context.

One object of focus introduced in the second stanza is "apple." The apple works well for imaginary variation because the apple is a simple, easily recognizable object. The apple is first placed before the reader in the simplest of terms. "Do you think that if / there's an apple on the table" (l 4-5). Creeley suggests to the reader to imagine an apple upon a table. The image earns its own line, acts as one step in the imaginary variation. The line is also enjambed. Thus the line earns a pause because it comprises one line, but it also has a slight push into the next line. The line is also read on the same breath from line one. The breath is not exhausted yet, but the reader feels a bit of a tug from the energy created by the breath and the enjambment.

In the third line, however, Creeley adds "and somebody eats it . . ." (l6). Creeley accomplishes several things with this line. First, "somebody" is added to the context and within that context the "somebody" is doing something particular—ingesting the apple. Secondly, the apple is removed from the original context. The reader placed the object on the table and then removed the object from the table within her/his imagination. At the end of the first act of imaginary variation, Creeley uses the first comma in the poem. This is a more pronounced pause, and the reader takes the second breath of the stanza here. The pause in breath also represents a pause in thought. Creeley gives the reader a moment to change the imagined picture. Because of the more pronounced pause in the line (the first stanza is all read on one breath), the reader feels that something important is about to happen. It is as if Creeley is preparing the reader for something to be revealed. In the final line of the stanza he writes, "won't be there anymore," referring back to the "it" of the previous line (l 7-8).

The "there" points in two directions—back toward the table, the apple's original "there"—and forward toward the "there" within the reader, that is the "there" of the reader's imagination. Because "there" is connected with the mind through the imagination, Creeley connects the apple to the larger context of being, as he does with want in the first stanza. In other words, "there" functions as both a kind of tangible picture in the mind and as an abstract concept. Does the apple exist if it is no longer in the mind? Because Creeley is bringing into question the notion of human want in the first stanza, it is not too much of a leap to assume that Creeley is concerned with existence itself here, and he is using the apple to first make the context simple in order to change it, in order to put it in a different relation. By putting the small, simple object within the context of existence itself, he is able to set the apple into relief—when connected with the notion of existence, apple is not mere physical object. *Apple* is now somehow different. First, *apple* has a singular existence. Then it is its

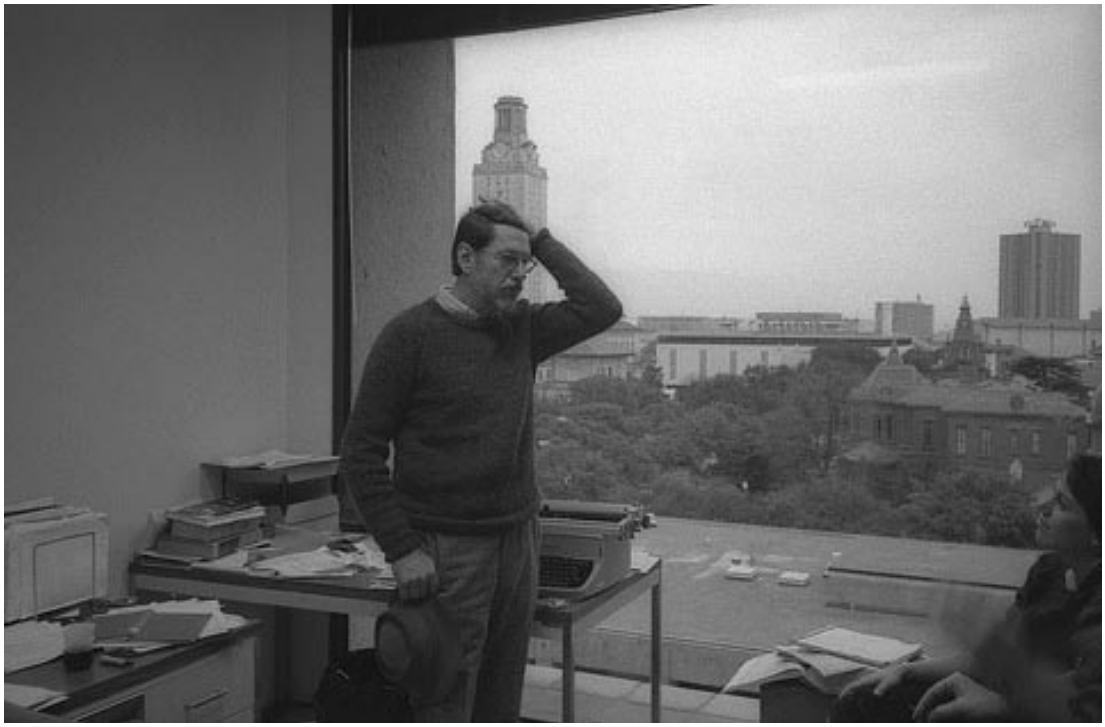
own entity that can be "there," that is, can have existence or non-existence. This represents the shift of the individual ego to the transcendental ego, the second stage of reduction. Creeley encourages the reader to think of the apple as unto itself, if you will, with its own existence removed from its relationship to the individual ego. Second, because of the new association, the existence of the apple points to human existence. Through imaginary variation, Creeley is able to make strange connections. As Husserl notes, connections always lead to other connections, experiences to further experiences. The apple necessarily leads the reader to ponder existence itself because Creeley has called her/his attention to the apple in this particular way. If the existence of the apple is different, then is all existence different? Again, Creeley encourages the reader to move from the individual ego (my existence) to the transcendental ego (existence itself). As with the first stanza, the lines read as questions, yet the punctuation at the end of each stanza is a period. The reader is left not with one specific question—is the apple still there—but with as many thoughts as this particular notion will give rise to. Closing with a question mark implies that Creeley wants the reader to think merely about the apple, that one specific question. Closing with a period implies that this is the end of one thought, and, as Husserl would note, all thoughts lead to other thoughts.

In the third and fourth stanzas, Creeley further pushes the reader in form and content. In the third stanza, the lines push toward the margin, forcing the reader to breathe in a particular way, to force the breath. As previously noted, there is no internal punctuation besides the comma at the end of the second line, thus the last three lines are meant to be read on a single breath, controlling the reader's temporal experience of the stanza. The lines are also meant to imitate the act of thinking; this "pushing" occurs in the mind as well. Thus, as the thoughts become increasingly complex or strange, the lines build in pace and content. As with the apple, Creeley encourages the reader to think of "love" in a new way. Creeley again presents the object, love, in a singular, simple way first. He writes, "Do you think that if / two people are in love with one another," (l 8-9). Then he adds a complication: "one or the other has got to be / less in love than the other at" (l 10-11). As with the apple, love is changing here. The line "two people are in love with one another" is straightforward, conjuring a predictable picture in the imagination, like "there's an apple on the table"; this is the standard version of love (l 9, 5). Yet with the addition of the line "less in love than the other" the typical notion of love has changed. It becomes more complicated with Creeley's final line of the stanza, "some point in the otherwise happy relationship" (l 10-12). Through imaginary variation, Creeley encourages the reader to see love in this new way. The two people are not in love or out of

love, happy or sad. Instead, the two people may still be "otherwise happy" in a relationship where love fluctuates, one being more in love than the other at different times.

Through this singular image of two people in love, Creeley, again, brings the reader into the poem and also into her/his own imagination. The two people are not named. Thus the reader is encouraged to come up with her/his own imaginary scenario—who the people are, what they look like, and so on. The lines depend upon the reader making a mental picture of two people in love and *then* adding the complications that Creeley suggests. Once the reader's imagination is challenged to see these two particular people in love in a different way, then *love itself* comes into question. Like the apple, *love* here is set into relief in both Creeley's imagination and the imagination of the reader. The stanza is not just about those two people, obviously, but love itself. Creeley is again encouraging the reader to move off the page. What brings the reader back is the fact that the poem is not yet finished.

In the final stanza, Creeley pushes the reader to her/his limits both with breath and with content. There are even more lines after the single mark of internal punctuation in the second line, "you once take a breath," (l 14). The punctuation functions as a signal. The reader knows what follows will be



an expansion; to this point, each of the stanzas has pushed the line on the page, thus pushing the breath. Moreover, the content has required the reader to stretch mentally. Creeley's object, *breath*, is again singular and deliberately simple. Yet immediately, even more so than in the previous stanza, Creeley adds complication. The complications begin in the second line, rather than the fourth. This creates an even greater intensity with the breath, and the intense content follows. He writes, "you once take a breath, you're by / that committed to taking the next one / and so on until the very process of / breathing's an endlessly expanding need / almost of its own necessity forever" (l 14-18). In these lines, Creeley overlaps the complications—the imaginary variations—within the lines themselves. The first variation begins in line fourteen but carries over into the fifteenth: "you're by / that committed to taking the next one" (l 14-15). The final three lines of the stanza come in a flurry, each variation connected to the previous variation. The lines function as a fast-moving, ever-expanding thought. And this, of course, is directly related to what Creeley states about breath itself—form mirrors content here. The second and third variations are: "and so on until the very process of / breathing's an endlessly expanding need" (l 16-17). Notice that the beginning of the third variation comes in the same line as the end of the second variation. Creeley is asking for a real stretch here, both physically and mentally. The third and final variation is found in the last line of the poem: "almost of its own necessity forever" (l 18). What Creeley has accomplished is taking the object, *breath*, from a singular, simple notion and connecting to both the existence of the reader and the existence of *breath itself*. In the first variation, the reader is asked to imagine breath as connected to her/his existence; breath here is still thought of as controlled by the reader, breath is connected to her/his life—"you're by / that committed to taking the next one" (l 14-15). In order to live, one must be committed to breathing, taking breath after breath. But in the second variation, breath is to be imagined as a process directly related to human need. In this way, breath is different than mere function, the reader taking breath after breath. Instead, breath is in control of the reader; the reader needs it, is dependent upon it. In the third and final variation, breath is changed still further. Creeley posits here that *breath* may be separate from the body of the reader when he writes, "almost of its own necessity" (l 18). *Breath*, like *want, apple,* and love, has its own existence. *Breath* needs to breathe, has a purpose all its own beyond the body of the reader/person. This is certainly a new way to imagine breath—it is beyond personification. Rather, the objects have

been set into relief beyond the mind of the reader, and thus beyond themselves. In this manner, the imagination moves from the poem outward, off the page, and into the world.

This intentional movement of Creeley's is, therefore, similar to what Pearce posits about Stevens, writing, "the poem, the creative act, must be made continually to point beyond itself to the problems of belief which its existence raises" (380). The reader of a Creeley poem must participate in the poem, use her/his intentionality, to both make the poem work and to form new associations beyond the page. This acute attention to temporal notions, rhythm and breath, and the attention to the corporeal body, allow Creeley to move the reader through the poem and then move the reader from the poem to life.

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## Appendix

"Do you think . . ."

Do you think that if
you once do what you want
to do you will want not to do it.

Do you think that if
there's an apple on the table

and somebody eats it, it
won't be there anymore.

Do you think that if
two people are in love with one another,
one or the other has got to be
less in love than the other at
some point in the otherwise happy relationship.

Do you think that if
you once take a breath, you're by
that committed to taking the next one
and so on until the very process of
breathing's an endlessly expanding need
almost of its own necessity forever.

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# The Ballad of the Despairing Reader

Zeynep Özdeş Orakcı

I sat all night silently
Waited for ideas to come rapidly
But Creeley is not an easy bite
Reading his poems is like an international flight

I read all his poems one by one
He has a language as bright as the sun
But writing a response is not easy
After three hours I am feeling a little dizzy

I began with "Chasing the bird"
OK, I understand it's about hurt
But then what does the title mean?
It's apart from the poem, as the pea is from the bean.

The second poem was "The Flower"
The words in it have great power
I especially loved the last lines
Where Creeley said "like this one, like that one's"

"Wow," I said when I read "The Door"
It's four lines but I wanted more
I understand why the door cries,
Why the tears fall down from his eyes.

I was going to write a response on "Trees"
The feeling it gave me was like a strong breeze
Is it really true that poets are all alone,
Destined to live in a dangerous, solitary zone?

Language is the only thing you own
To describe what you feel from flesh to bone
In “A Token” words are the only way
For the poet, to take his lady’s heart away

The mind is a kind of picture frame
In which the truth and memory are no longer the same
“The Mountains in the Desert” are the pictures in it
What the poet once saw and kept in, are tightly knit
The other poem is called “The Revelation”
The train won’t come just because you wait at the station.
Not all the outcomes have a simple purpose
You should see the things hidden under the surface.

I should better end this poem now
Can somebody please tell me how?
Please tell me, please tell me…
Oh, Robert Creeley, you see what you’ve done to me?
Oh, Robert Creeley, I really need to drink a cup of tea.
Oh the talented Mr. Creeley, can you teach me how to write?
Oh, the talented Mr. Creeley, I promise I’ll be alright.

Oh the talented poet, the time is getting late.
Oh the talented poet, I’m ready to serve my poem on a golden plate
Oh the most talented poet, the lines are already written down
Oh the most talented poet, to end I need a rhyming noun.

Oh sir, give me a few minutes to think.
Here it is! I’m finishing with a blink.

Ankara, 2004.

YAHOO! Mail

**Date:** Fri, 19 Mar 2004 08:35:07 -0500
**From:** "Robert Creeley"
**To:** "zeynep ozdes"
**Subject:** Re: ballad of the despairing reader

Dear Zeynep Ozdes,
I am very sorry not to have thanked
you for your terrific poem/take on my "Ballad of the Despairing Husband" long before this. It's wonderful! Ezra Pound said that doing something like that was the most active form of criticism possible, and I well believe it, reading what you were able to get done. So onward -- and take good care of yourself in this bleak time. I'm depending on you!

Best to you,
Robert Creeley

P.S. My best wishes also to old friend Baris Gumusbas -- would that we were all in some comfortable cafe there, just talking about the world around us as ever.
--

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# Talking about Collaboration:Personal Memories and a Critical Study of Robert Creeley's Collaboration with artist Arthur Okamura[1]

Barbara Montefalcone

I first met Robert Creeley in 2004 on a hot October Indian summer afternoon. Walking through Brown University's elegant campus, heading to Creeley's office, I experienced a bizarre feeling of both fear and excitement. I was about to meet the "subject" of my doctoral dissertation. Someone who, up to that moment, had only been a picture in a book and a voice recorded on a file, downloaded from the Internet.[2]

Once in front of his office door I waited a few minutes before knocking. Robert Creeley was there, waiting for me, listening to my confused steps outside the door and wondering if I would ever have the courage to enter. Finally I did, and all at once everything became so evident. Creeley was sitting in his extremely simple office, a few books, a laptop on his desk. He didn't need anything more–a quiet and luminous place with some important books and the Internet to keep in touch with his Company. On that occasion, he signed and offered me a copy of *Tandoori Satori and Commonplace,* the catalogue of his last collaboration with painter Francesco Clemente: it was a welcome gift he said. I felt that I was the luckiest person in the world.

Only several months later, when Creeley unfortunately was no longer living, did I truly realize the actual meaning of his gift. By offering me the catalogue, he was not, at least not only, welcoming me: he was creating a place for us to be. He was making me part of his company: he was making room for me. He was showing me that a book is not just a book, but that it is, above all, a

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[1] I would like to thank Robert Creeley and Arthur Okamura for their kindness and generosity.

[2] Thanks to an exchange program between Brown University and Université Lumière-Lyon 2, I was able to spend the fall semester of 2004 at Brown working on my research project focused on Robert Creeley's collaborations under the supervision of Creeley himself. My research lead to a doctoral dissertation, defended in December 2006, and whose title is *The "Eye" and the "Company": Robert Creeley's Collaborations, 1953-2004.* It is available online at: <http://demeter.univ-lyon2.fr/sdx/theses/lyon2/2006/montefalcone_b>.

place in common, a place to be. This is what I mainly remember about him: he was always trying to create a place (material or abstract) where a dialogue could be engaged. That is why I think he collaborated so much. That is why he was fond of the Internet. That is why, driving to The Rose Art Museum (Brandeis University) to give a reading of his poems written for Clemente, he insisted that I go with him and his wife Penelope, sharing the back seat (he didn't want to sit in the front!) of the beautiful Cadillac sent by the Museum to pick them up. He was creating the ideal place for conversation, a conversation that always had to be "moving," to cover—if possible—the whole world, and to have rhythm. And what better than a group of people talking inside a car driving quickly down the highway? He could have written a poem about it.[3]

What I also learned about Robert Creeley while working on my research project at Brown, was the importance of rhythm in his life and art. Rhythm was fundamental, of course, to his poetry inspired by the syncopate prosody of jazz. But it seemed to me even more central to his collaborative practice: when looking at a painting/photo/sculpture Creeley was, to me, mainly trying to seize its inner rhythm. He would then try to convert it into something as a poem, or a text, which would, somehow, contribute to the inner harmony of the collaborative book.[4] Thus, when collaborating, Creeley favoured those images capable of challenging his own visual perception. What seemed to count for him once in front of his collaborators' artworks was the shift from indifference to recognition: that moment when the observer recognizes the forms finding a place for them in his own universe. It is the moment when they finally "appear:"

> The clue is not movement, not displacement in time or space (nor its false opposite, tenacious local realism) BUT IS RECOGNITION, the function of you *find* form, have already *found* form, because you are cultural (in Alber's sense of, the capacity to recognize same. (Butterick 88-89)

French philosopher Herny Maldinay, in his book *Regard, parole, espace,* explaining the nature of what he calls "the apparitional moment of forms" suggests an interesting theorization of this phenomenon. According to him

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[3] See also "I Know a Man," one of Robert Creeley's most famous poems, where he constructs a particularly meaningful image of two people intensely talking while driving down the highway. (*The Collected Poems* 132).

[4] See Barbara Montefalcone. "An Active and Defining Presence: Le visible et le lisible dans l'oeuvre collaborative de Robert Creeley" *Reuve Lisa/Lisa e-Journal* 5.2 (2007) <http://www.unicaen.fr/mrsh/lisa>.

visual artworks' specificity is due to the fact that "the essential function of an image is not to imitate but to appear." The "apparitional moment of forms" does not depend on the object but on the gaze. The observer plays a fundamental role since his perception is at the same time personal and affected by the structure of the artwork (Maldinay 155).

Creeley was extremely conscious of his role as an observer when collaborating. He was aware of the combination of a subjective and a guided reading of an artwork. Moreover he was interested in the inner movements and rhythms of a painting. He favoured those images capable of kaleidoscopically proposing themselves to the observer, always appearing new, and thus joining the idea of the so called "opera aperta" theorized by Italian scholar Umberto Eco (Eco 46). He also seemed to be passionate about those forms caught in a moment of passage and transformation as his collaborations with Donald Sultan (*Visual Poetics,* 1999), Susan Rothenberg (*Paintings from the Nineties,* 1999), Francesco Clemente (*It*, 1989; *Life & Death,* 1993; *There*, 1993; *Anamorphosis*, 1997; *Tandoori Satori and Commonplace,* 2004) and Arthur Okamura testify.

Creeley's passion for such dynamic images was a product of his refusal of stasis and contemplation. "An art which attempts to staticize its world, or to bring all to stasis and completion, would terrify me!"[5] he once said. Most of his collaborations testify to this assertion. Among them, *1°2°3°4°5°6°7°8°9°0°*, realized in collaboration with artist Arthur Okamura, seems to perfectly embody the "apparitional moment of forms" defined by Maldinay and, at the same time, to clearly attest to Creeley's passion for the inherent movement of images. To me, *1°2°3°4°5°6°7°8°9°0°* is one of Creeley's collaborations where his interest for visual rhythm and desire for company are best testified.

## 1°2°3°4°5°6°7°8°9°0°

Completed in 1971, *1°2°3°4°5°6°7°8°9°0°* is composed of a sequence of Arthur Okamura's[6] drawings alternating with the stanzas of "People," a long poem written by Creeley. As is the case for most of his collaborative projects, Creeley's text is a response to pre-existing images. Within the book, the poem and the drawings are printed respectively on the front and the back of the same

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[5] See Appendix 1, "Creeley on Okamura."

[6] Arthur Okamura, artist (Long Beach, 1932). He lives in Bolinas. He studied at the Art Institute of Chicago and met Robert Creeley in Mallorca (Spain). His work has been shown at the Museum of Modern Art of San Francisco and at the Whitney Museum of American Art.

sheet. The book cover reproduces one of Okamura's drawings in a coloured version (all the original drawings are black and white).[7]

Using the shape of a miniaturized feminine silhouette as a basis, Okamura builds up a series of complex structures inspired by flora and fauna.[8] By repeating and varying this extremely simple form, the artist constitutes a series of animal and vegetal architectural formations whose simplicity and precision contrast with the fragility of their provisory structure. Okamura stresses his drawings' instability by indicating, through the arrangement of the silhouettes, the direction that the most complex structure is going to take or the place from which it seems to come from. Through this technique, he enhances the instantaneous aspect of the image he is creating.

As a consequence of their complexity and internal movement, Okamura's drawings allude to the tradition of "hidden images," characteristic of Victorian decoration and Art Déco where forms seem to hide some other images that become visible only after sharp observation. As Creeley pointed out during one of our discussions, this technique was also used by celebrated illustrators such as Palmer Cox and Arthur Rackham whose drawings for *The Zankiwank and The Bletherwitch* (1896) evoke Okamura's silhouettes' lightness and quickness.[9]

Okamura insists, however, much more on the hidden aspect of his images as well as on the impression of movement one can suggest by drawing. This interest in the process of appearance and disappearance of forms, corresponds to Okamura's passion for parlour tricks and optical illusions allowing an immediate passage from one image to another. "I often look to illustrate the effects of camouflage, especially those that exist in nature, e.g., when you don't see it, and then, in a moment, you see it, e.g. disruptive patterning, contour elimination, mimicry, illusion, etc,"[10] he explains. The pleasure generated by these phenomena is a consequence of the shift from contradiction to enlightenment: our usual perception of things is put into question by creating doubt and incomprehension in order to subsequently re-establish the previous order and allow us to integrate the contradiction into our common thinking habits. The transition from the invisible to the visible is exactly what interests Creeley and, at the same time, what characterizes the notion of "apparitional

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7 See Fig. 1, Appendix 2.

8 See Plates, Appendix 2.

9 See Appendix 1, "Creeley on Okamura."

10 See Appendix 1, "Okamura on Creeley."

moment of forms" elaborated by Maldinay: forms are caught in the process of their metamorphosis and in between a contractive and expansive movement. Occultation is thus replaced by discovery, contradiction is succeeded by reconciliation (Maldinay 171).

This rhythmical movement characterized by contraction and relaxation is already suggested by the title Okamura chose for this collaboration. On the one hand, the numbered sequence suggests a rhythmical scansion characterized by repetition and variation; on the other hand, by replacing number 10 by a 0, Okamura also insists on the circular movement characterizing the numerical system, so that the enumeration seems to go on endlessly. The artist wants to put forward the internal movement of his drawings and in doing so he inserts them into a temporal structure marked by their sequential disposition. At the same time, every "instant" of this temporal and visual sequence is isolated from the others by the use of a typographical sign (°) indicating a temporary pause of the enumeration. Every numeral (and every drawing) can thus be appreciated for its own qualities besides its relationship to the whole series. Moreover, within the collaborative book, these pauses seem to correspond to the stanzas of Creeley's poem that, by alternating with Okamura's drawings, also separate the one from the other. Thanks to this arrangement, the drawings, even though connected one to the other by continuity, can be still appreciated individually.

The fluidity of the shift from one form to the other is assured by a quick and precise style obtained by a methodical sketching practice focused on the shape of the feminine silhouette used as the structural base of these drawings. As Okamura explains, at the beginning of the collaborative process he chose a masculine silhouette that he subsequently abandoned since its rigidity and consistency turned to be an obstacle to his spontaneous drawing approach:

> At the beginning of these drawings I tried to include both male and female figures but found that the male forms were too boxy and not as fluid as the female forms, which had a fluidity I liked and relating to the spontaneity of fluid drawing. Toward the end I was drawing the female forms as spontaneously as I am now printing.[11]

This spontaneous technique seems to contrast with the drawings' definiteness, but it is exactly this apparent incompatibility that fascinates Creeley, who responds to Okamura's work by filtering the pictorial theme through his

[11] See Appendix 1, "Creeley on Okamura."

own subjectivity. He thus creates a world where childlike curiosity and adult wisdom coexist:

> I knew where they were,
> in the woods. My sister
> made them little houses.
>
> Possibly she was one,
> or had been one
> before. They were there,
>
> very small but quick,
> if they moved.
> I never saw them.

The "people" evoked in the title are imaginary creatures that the poet situates in the woods and who represent an alternative to human society. The mystery and magic suggested by the poem contribute to the construction of an ideal childish world associated with the woods and that seems to be part of Creeley's memories:

> I recall there being endless things to learn and do of that kind, slingshots, huts (as we call them) in the woods, traps, and a great proliferating lore of rituals and locations, paths through the woods, secret signs, provisions for all manner of imagined possibility including at one point the attempt to make a glider out of bed sheets and poles tied together. So it's probable that what I most wanted was a world, if not of that kind, at least of that place. (*Autobiography* 34-35)

The poet, as well as the artist, creates an ideal model of humanness that does not correspond to common hierarchies: man is not at the centre of this world but he is an atom, a microscopic part of a vaster physical universe. Okamura and Creeley conduct a sort of hierarchic reconstruction, as to re-establish man's place in the universe and to criticize his presumption. In doing so they focus on size and relativity. After stressing, in the first three stanzas, the fluidity and quickness of Okamura's silhouettes, the poet underlines how size and dimension relationship vary according to the shift of the point of view from which things are observed:

How big is small. What
are we in. Do
these forms of us take shape, then.

Creeley measures his body's relationship to the world and in doing so he shifts the focus from the interior to the exterior of forms, passing from wide-fields to close-ups. Moving back and forth between occultation and discovery, which characterizes Okamura's drawings, is thus retraced by Creeley in the poem. After presenting man as microcosm, he introduces an aerial shot of a crowd that, perceived from above, seems to draw the outline of a human silhouette:

Stan told us of the shape
a march makes, in
anger, a sort of small

*head*, the vanguard, then
a thin *neck*, and then,
following out, a kind of billowing,

.

loosely gathered *body*, always
the same. It must be
people seen from above

.

have forms, take place,
make an insistent pattern,
not suburbs, but the way

.

they gather in public places,
or, hidden from others,
look one by one, must be

.

there to see, a record if
nothing more.

The choice of the italic for such words as "head," "neck," and "body" makes the human shape suggested by Creeley even more visible, thus creating a relief-like effect. Just as some of Okamura's silhouettes detach themselves from the

vegetal architectural forms he constructs and become visible as part of a more complex structure, the italicized words acquire additional visibility and allow the image suggested by the poet to emerge from the text.

Compressed or expanded, man's body is always the same according to Creeley who seems to want to abolish the border between the individual and the collective, the "I" and the "others" in order to assert, just as Olson did in his *Maximum Poems*, "that one makes many."[12] Olson and Creeley's common reference to the "e pluribus unum" is however ironic: Creeley is not exalting his nation's value but, just as Olson, he criticizes the concept of hierarchy:

> "In a tree
> one may observe the hierarchies
>
> of monkeys," someone says. "On
> the higher branches, etc." But
> not like that, no, the kids
>
> run, watch the wave of them
> pass. See the form of their
> movement pass, like the wind's.

To the strict and structured form of the genealogical tree, Creeley opposes with a moving form: that of a group of running children whose trajectory seems to imitate that of Okamura's drawings. These drawings thus embody the idea of *Gestaltung* (a "forming form") whose importance is stressed by Henry Maldinay. Aesthetic forms, Maldinay explains, create their referential system during every single moment of their self generation. An artwork functions as a world to him: it is not something existing in space and time, but space and time are existing in it (Maldinay 156).

By the repetition of the feminine forms and by the way they are concentrated or dispersed on the paper, Okamura tries to transpose time compression and expansion. When the silhouettes' density increases, their movement seems to accelerate whereas when the spaces between them are wider they seem to move more slowly. The instantaneous appearance and disappearance of the silhouettes

[12] Olson uses this sentence for the epigraph of the *Maximum Poems* where he transforms the original sentence "out of many, one" (*e pluribus unum*) and writes "one makes many."

seem to be the main principles on which these drawings are founded: Creeley perfectly grasps their structure and tries to transpose it onto the page. He thus mainly focuses on the use of verbs and makes a transition from past to present. When the lyrical voice uses the past tense evoking his childhood and introducing the themes of size and relativity, the verses seem to become more discursive:

> Some stories begin,
> *when I was young-*
> this also. It tells
>
> a truth of things,
> of people. There used
> to be so many, so
> .
> big one's eyes went
> up them, like a ladder,
> crouched in a wall.
>
> Now grown large, I
> sometimes stumble, walk
> with no knowledge of
> what's under foot.

On the other hand, when the tense shifts from past to present, the stanzas seem to reduce their length and to stretch, as if the words were imitating the movement and the shape of Okamura's silhouettes. Every single word, isolated in the verse, looks like a feminine silhouette: we can grasp its meaning but it has much more value as part of a more complex structure, that of the poem, that it contributes to construct. The economy of words, the syntactical reduction and the typographical structure characterizing these stanzas are strategies used by Creeley to mirror the "apparitional" rhythm of Okamura's forms. The pauses stressed by the punctuation as well as by the enjambed syntax seem to follow the forms' progressive deceleration also reflected by the words' isolation:

> Some small
> echo
> at the earth's edge

recalls
these voices,
these small

persistent
movements,
*these people,*

the circles,
the holes they
made, the

one
multiphasic
direction,

the going,
the coming,
the lives.

The typographic structure of these extremely concise verses confirms the poet's awareness that every perceptive structure is a visual model that concerns the objects as well as the spaces between them. These spatial gaps correspond to temporal pauses whose organization mirrors the rhythm of the visual work. Creeley's writing has to integrate both the rhythm of the visual forms he observes and that of his own breath: in this collaboration these two rhythms seem to run together since the quickness and the slowness of the forms correspond to the contraction or expansion of the text. Thus in this last part of the poem, by playing with blanks and suspensions, Creeley makes the silence as well as the space between the words, more palpable.

By the typographical structure of his poem, Creeley does not want only to create a visual architecture but also to suggest to his reader the way he has to read his poem: "For myself the typographical context of poetry is still simply the issue of how to score—in the musical sense—to indicate how I want the poem to be read" (*Tales Out of School* 29). Silence is fundamental for the organization of aural rhythm just as empty spaces contribute to the whole structure of a painting: "Problem of music (vision) only solved when silence (non-vision)

is taken as the basis," John Cage writes in *Theme and Variation* thus perfectly synthesizing the visual and the aural. By reproducing within his text Okamura's drawings' internal intervals, Creeley allows us to grasp their rhythm by the simple reading of his poem.

"People" ends on a melancholic tone which restates, on a thematic level, the opposition between the ideal condition of humanness described at the beginning of the poem and the actual condition:

*I*
fails in
the forms

of them, I
want
to go home

Creeley also points to the opposition between the individual and the common (I-them). In the last stanza of his poem, the personal pronoun acts as a third person character detaching himself from the lyric voice. As the poet explains, any form of individuality, represented by the "*I*," seems to fail in front of the community represented by the "others." Creeley's poems can thus be considered as complementary to "The Immoral Proposition," one of Creeley's first collaborative poems, where he asserted: "the unsure egoist is not good for himself." In both poems, the author is criticizing a solipsistic position doomed to isolation and indirectly celebrating a reunion of the "I" and the "others" embodied by the collaborative "us".

## Conclusion

My personal memory of Robert Creeley, as well as this study of Creeley/Okamura's collaboration, emphasize two main elements of the poet's collaborative career: the importance of rhythm and that of "others." To me, this is finally what he was looking for by practicing collaboration: he was exploring a way in which he could integrate his personal rhythm with that of his "Company." He wanted the two rhythms to coexist in the same space (the space of the book or that of the Museum) and engage in an active dialogue by constantly stimulating each other, just as a group of jazz musicians do during a jam session. Every single collaborative book can thus be considered as a musical phrase capable of

existing for itself but, at the same time, contributing to the whole harmony of Creeley's "collaborative song."

Rhythm and Company. Here are two words whose importance I learned by reading and meeting Robert Creeley. Looking back at those three months spent at Brown in 2004, I still have this incredibly meaningful image of our drive to the Museum where Creeley's last collaboration was going to be celebrated. If I had to picture him today, I would definitely see him inside a car, intensely talking to his Company while heading somewhere.

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## Appendix 1

### Robert Creeley and Arthur Okamura: A Double Interview

Barbara Montefalcone

In Autumn 2004, during my doctoral research at Brown University on Robert Creeley's collaborations, I was able to discuss Creeley and Okamura's collaboration *1°2°3°4°5°6°7°8°9°0°* with both the writer and artist. This double interview is a product of these discussions. Creeley was so kind to type up his answers to my questions on his laptop (he said he wanted to do a good job!). Arthur Okamura generously mailed me his own thoughts and answered some of my questions. They were both thrilled to be talking about their common experience as collaborators.

#### Okamura on Creeley

I was not, at first, aware that the book would be collaborative. The drawings for *1°2°3°4°5°6°7°8°9°0°* were done during a time when I was having difficulty with finishing my paintings. I decided to work in other media and forms and my first project was drawing the tiny nude forms that became the basis for a book. One of the partners of Shambala publications saw the drawings and offered to publish them, but all along I felt a need for a text. Bob Creeley happened to be in town on a reading tour and I asked him to look at the drawings and perhaps write something in conjunction with them. Shortly thereafter his poem "People" was written and the wonderful long, (for him) poem arrived and perfected my first venture into book publishing and collaboration. I have since done many others.

[. . .]

My work habits have changed through the years. (I'm seventy two years old). I have actively made art in some form since infanthood (a one man show in kindergarten), but professionally (paid) since age fifteen in Chicago in a poster shop (silk screen). I spent long hours doing commercial posters, etc., while also painting oil pictures in a range from magazine illustration realism to abstract expressionism, all as early beginning practice.

My demeanour and nature is basically spontaneous in my life and work. The older I get, the more spontaneous the work becomes. Thus I seem to work in "spurts," usually, on more than one thing at a time . . . perhaps a series or a sequence.

[…]

*What attracts you in Creeley's art?*

Creeley's unique use of language and space, as in some paintings.

*If you had to define the nature of the desire which pushes you to collaborate with another artist (a writer in particular), what would you say?*

Sharing a vision and a bridge of sorts, with specific and particular energies becoming one thing.

*Robert Creeley, talking about your work, pointed to the factor of "hidden images," i.e., the Victorian and Art Deco habit (for two) of embedding images within images, "hidden" in that sense. Do you agree?*

I often look to illustrate the effects of camouflage, especially those that exist in nature, e.g., when you don't see it, and then, in a moment, you see it, e.g. disruptive patterning, contour elimination, mimicry, illusion, etc.

*Robert Creeley also told me you have been fascinated by "parlor tricks" for years. Could you tell me something about that?*

This relates to the above, when, through natural physics, a contradiction occurs and then an enlightenment.

*Which sense of humanness were you trying to present through your drawings? How do you think Creeley's poem responds to it?*

At the beginning of these drawings I tried to include both male and female figures but found that the male forms were too boxey and not as fluid as the female forms, which had a fluidity I liked and relating to the spontaneity of fluid drawing. Toward the end I was drawing the female forms as spontaneously as I am now printing.

The bodies, their sequence and various groupings seemed to develop their own kind of gravity and humanness. Bob's poem brings it forth.

*What was your first reaction when you read "People" for the first time?*

Magical enlightenment of a place, as it is.

*Can you tell me something about the title 1°2°3°4°5°6°7°8°9°0°?*

Sequence, movement, time, circles.

*What do you think Creeley's poems add to your images?*

An archetype.

*Do you know of some other collaborations realized by Creeley? If yes, which ones? What do you think about them?*

His book "Numbers" with Robert Indiana. His early note on Franz Kline realized a way of writing about seeing painting. *Black Mountain Review*.

*Why do you think so many different artists wanted to collaborate with Robert Creeley?*

Collaboration with Creeley creates a very unique and special place and there are not many others like it.

*November 2, 2004*

**Creeley on Okamura**

*What attracts you in Okamura's art?*

I guess it's his deft modesty, the articulateness of his means back of a very quiet presentation—though he's neither conscientiously "tidy" nor contained in his thinking. He's one of the most engaging "Romantics" I've ever known, in fact—a lovely mind and a great, great heart. And he is endlessly curious.

*How did you get to know Okamura and why did you decide to collaborate?*

As Arthur would tell you, he is my oldest friend on earth—we have known each other since first meeting in Mallorca in the early fifties. He had a fellowship and had just married. His friend and fellow artist (also a friend of mine), John Altoon, thought to spend time in Mallorca and persuaded Arthur to come too. Arthur, for example, did the silkscreen for the Divers Press publication of Paul Blackburn's first book of poems, *The Dissolving Fabric,* and John Altoon does the cover for the *Black Mountain Review's* next to last issue.

*How did the collaboration take place? Did he send you the drawings and then you wrote the poem?*

I think at that point we were all living in Bolinas, California—at least that's where Arthur and I were most able to hang out together. Shambala, the publisher, may have instituted the project via Arthur (you could ask Arthur for his sense of things). In any case, I wrote the poem from fact of the drawings and ideas for their use Arthur then had.

*Who chose the title?*

I am pretty sure Arthur chose the book title—my poem, as you know, is called "People."

*There seems to be a stronger interaction between the words and the images than in your other collaborations.*

I'd question your emphasis, just that there is a very direct relation between words and images in En Famille, for instance—also in the twenty-five entries done for Clemente's Guggenheim show (I call them now "Clemente's Images"). Then *Numbers* with Indiana is certainly a direct response of words to image. In other words, when I am working from the ground and proposal images constitute, the words are pretty directly a consequence of that fact, one way or another.

*It's very interesting to see how somewhere in the text the line traced by the painter turns into "letter" and joins your own words in the constitution of significances. What do you think about that?*

What might be interesting here is to think about the factor of "hidden images," i.e., the Victorian and Art Deco habit (for two) of embedding images within images, "hidden" in that sense. Lots of illustrators used it, either as suggestion or as fact—like the British illustrator, Rackham. Then there is the tradition represented by Palmer Cox's Brownie books, so that's another line, so to speak. Arthur has been for years fascinated by (and very adept with) "parlor tricks," the classical magic of sleight of hand and illusion. In any case, I am "seeing" the images in reading them the way I do with the poem, and Arthur gives me the lead in his transformation (or use) of one image to become another, the figures into numbers, etc.

*Okamura's drawings are simple and, at the same time, mysterious: the more you look at them the more you discover new details so that the viewer's eyes constantly adjust to focus on the multitude of shapes he is confronted with. How did you write your poem? Did you look at the drawings for a long time so to assist their metamorphosis or you wrote down your first reaction to them?*

I think I wrote the poem pretty straight-forwardly, i.e., straight off. I knew these images of Arthur's in various guises before this specific sequence and conjunction became a possibility. Your response to the images, incidentally, is the classic one of someone seeing a work with "hidden images" and then recognizing their presence.

*It seems that you are fascinated by the work of artists who demand from the viewer an active role during the process of perception. Clemente's images, as well as Okamura's and Sultan's constantly metamorphose so that everyone is free to read them as they wish. Their world is in a perpetual state of flux. What do you like about this process of visual readjustment their images demand and how did you deal with it while writing "People"?*

So is mine, I guess, i.e., "in a perpetual state of flux." An art which attempts to staticize its world, or to bring all to stasis and completion, would terrify me! For my part, I take off, so to speak, on whatever aspect of the art provides that possibility. I am not, in that way, providing a judgement or conclusion—I am responding at a particular time, in a particular place, with particular concerns and habits—all variable.

*The "risk" is that if you look at one of these images in two different moments of the day it can provoke very different emotions and inspire you different things. Have you ever written some lines and then, coming back to the image some time later, felt that they actually didn't fit anymore?*

Why should that be a "risk," one wonders—why can't it be simple "more," as would be the case in real life? Does one have a fixed and unchanging disposition toward anything? Is at an attempt to "end the discussion," so to speak? *Odi et amo*, as Catullus wrote. If there were sufficient impulse provoked in later looking at the image, I'd hope to include it, else write another poem. In *Numbers*, for example, you find multiple senses of the "seed" number or situation so defined: *one by one, one after one, one with one, one for one, one to one, one as one*–etc.

*People seem to focus on this process of metamorphosis Okamura's images are subjected to: the content of your statement shifts from the world of plants to the human world just as Okamura's images deal with both, do you agree?*

I think we are both involved with presenting a sense of "humanness" which makes it part of a system of physical universe, not an abstract presumption of "control"—again I am following Arthur's lead with my own history, call it—my sister's little houses etc.

*Man is not the center of Okamura's universe, he presents human beings as small "atoms" who constitute much more complex structures. Paradoxically, human beings who are deprived of their primary power and are reduced to fragments of reality appear more pure and naïve than they are in everyday life. What do you think about that?*

As said, it's my own imagination as well—far from the old concept of "The Great Chain of Being" taught us as children. The experience of WWII, together with that of the atom bomb (and all the parallel "existential" thinking of the time), blew away "humanism" pretty much forever, at least from my own world. I don't know that people now seem either "more pure" or "naïve," thinking of our present political circumstances.

*There's also a strong sense of solidarity in these drawings, a feeling of what it means to work together to build up something beautiful, isn't it?*

It was a provocative and happy occasion—as working with Arthur always is. We used to do little broadsides for the grammar school commencement there in Bolinas, Arthur's images, my poems—you'll find them in my Collected Poems, p. 651, 'For the Graduation" etc—three in all, I see.

*You also stress how everything changes just by shifting the point of view from which we look at the world: small is big if we look at things from inside so that we finally understand "how big is small." How did you deal with your own perception of size in this specific collaboration?*

I don't recall any particular sense of doing other than musing on just such questions—and staying with the imagination of "people" Arthur's images made evident.

*In the last part of the poem you become quite nostalgic, you talk about how different your perception of things was when you were young and how hard it is now to look at the world in the same way. Could you tell me something about that? Why suddenly the tone is so different? Could you explain your last verse? (I / fails in / the forms / of them, I / want / to go home).*

Well, the end of the poem—as with vacation, or life itself – is the end. One reenters the given world as the case—and ours, even then, is bitterly unpleasant in its insistences and distortions of what humans are or might be. The Sixties (into the early Seventies, when this was written) seemed to have real alternatives for a time, sadly, as now, rejected. "I"—as a singular, isolating imagination of "world"—always "fails" formally. It just won't work in the fact of a collective, unless, as Olson writes in the motto he uses for The Maximus Poems, "All my

life I've heard that one makes many…" and that "many" is realized and entered. I am so sick of the American manipulation of "individualism," "independence," all the terms that lend themselves to the simplest use of the device of "divide and conquer . . ." Anyhow I was suddenly sad to be leaving that transforming place the poem had come to, thanks to Arthur's invitation—a home indeed.

*October 15, 2004*

## Appendix 2

## Plates

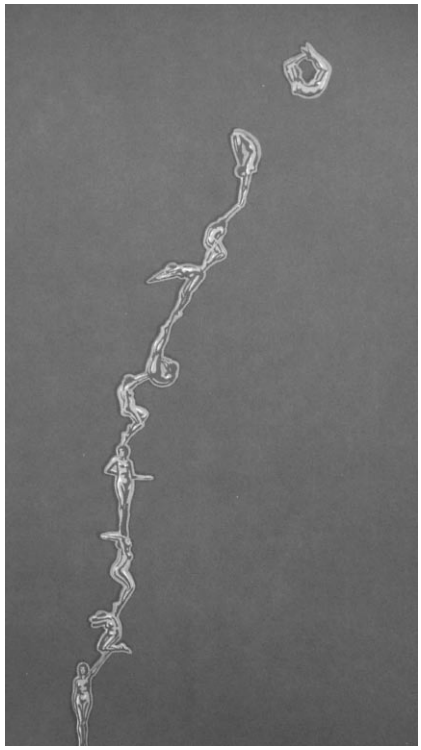

Fig. 1. 1°2°3°4°5°6°7°8°9°0°. Bookcover.
John Hay Library, Brown University.

Fig. 2. 1°2°3°4°5°6°7°8°9°0. Okamura's drawing.

Fig. 3. 1°2°3°4°5°6°7°8°9°0. Okamura's drawing.

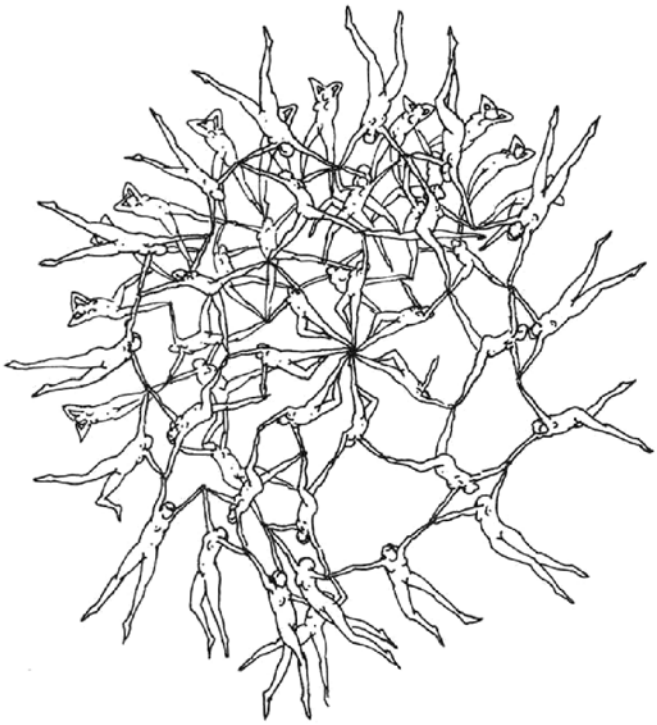

Fig. 4. 1°2°3°4°5°6°7°8°9°0. Okamura's drawing.

Fig. 5. 1°2°3°4°5°6°7°8°9°0. Okamura's drawing.

Fig. 6. 1°2°3°4°5°6°7°8°9°0. Okamura's drawing.

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# "all happening visually as well as intellectually": Robert Creeley and the Act of Writing

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The quotation in my title is from Robert Creeley's essay, "Contexts of Poetry," which was originally delivered as a lecture in the 1963 Vancouver Poetry Conference, with Allen Ginsberg, published by *Audit* in 1968 and was later collected with nine other interviews on a range of different subjects in the edition entitled *Contexts of Poetry: Interviews 1961-1971*. The issues Creeley discusses in the lecture illustrate the problems he faced in relation to his writing life at that point. The lecture testifies to a turning point in Creeley's writing as he conveys in his interview by Robert Sheppard. Creeley pleasantly remembers trying to explain his dissatisfaction with his writing habits, that they were "exhausted," upon Olson's teasing questions like, "What's this I hear about you guys saying that you're bankrupt as poets, that you've come to some weird dead-end?" or "What is this weird self-commiseration that you're engaged with?" (Sheppard 43). He felt his life and poetry were closing upon him, that his poetry was losing the discursiveness and openness which his early prose used to have (Sheppard 44): "So how much space was in any given situation, either emotionally or physically, became peculiarly crucial . . . Constantly checking what you've got with you. Who are you? Where are you? What are you? Who's that person? Who's this person? So that, not backing off, but finding a mode that would deal with that but at the same time would admit a far more open condition" (Sheppard 44). So, in "Contexts of Poetry," Creeley interrogates his habits of writing and experiments with new modes. Thus, forcing or introducing a change in the context of writing comes up as a solution in finding a way to enlarge the field for the poem to admit a multiplicity of other worlds.

For Creeley and his fellow poets, such as Charles Olson, the immediate material and physical circumstances that accompany the act of writing have primary importance since the process of creation, for them, is a part of the physical context. As a verb, context means knitting or weaving together of words or texts, implying a whole new creation, a contexture. As a noun, it refers to the passages which surround and serve to illuminate quotations. By implication, context also has the meaning of a multiplicity of interwoven conditions in which a singular event comes into being. Hence, the context has a lot to do with

both the singular and the concept of multiplicity at the same time, as Alfred North Whitehead states in another context: "A multiplicity merely enters into process through its individual members. The only statements to be made about multiplicity express how its individual members enter into the process of the actual world. Any entity which enters into process in this way belongs to the multiplicity, and no other entities belong to it" (29). Thus, by bringing together singularities in the form of a multiplicity, the context provides the condition in which the poet connects to the physical, collective and historical world, i.e. as Whitehead puts it, "the process of the actual world."

In "Contexts of Poetry," Creeley discusses his own habits of the physical context in which to write poetry, as well as the historical context that informs his consciousness and affects the way he writes poetry. Context is charged with all the meanings as discussed above. Therefore, rather than an understanding of context as mere decoration or "back"ground, the physical and historical context is a force in the field of composition—to evoke the vocabulary of Olson's "Projective Verse" and Robert Duncan's "Towards an Open Universe." It is also worth inquiring why Creeley uses the preposition "of" instead of "for" in his title. The latter preposition has the primary sense of equivalence, implying an equal value of context and poetry. Or, when "for" is taken in the sense of moving towards, contexts for poetry would signify an arrival at an understanding of poetry or the poem by paying attention to the way in which it is written. But then, contexts would simply be read as backgrounds necessary for an understanding of poetry. On the other hand, Creeley might be using the preposition "of" in his title to give a sense of belonging, the way a fossil or a skeleton belongs to its actual body that once lived in a certain type of community, geography, history and climate. So that, when one examines the poem, as the archeologist does a fossil or a skeleton, one acquires a kind of knowledge, a state of consciousness about the context and the process of how that singularity has come into being from among a multiplicity of circumstances, and how it has functioned in the actual world.

The majority of criticism on Creeley's works highlights the singularity of the subject matter; and the general interpretation is that Creeley focuses less on the collective issues than on the emotional states of the singular and isolated subject. Peter Cooley, reviewing *Pieces* (1969), says that "Creeley gives up . . . the framework of narrative, history, persona, or landscape for a concentration on the self and its words over time, calling into question the validity of expressing the self at all in words" (255). For Christopher Lambert, "[h]is is an elaborately egocentric poetry. And it is precisely this collision of the private with the public

requirements of language and audience that determines Creeley's characteristic posture, the tightrope walker" (323).

But one step ahead of this preoccupation with the self, there is "life preoccupation with itself," as Olson comments in his review of Creeley's stories (283). As early as 1951, a little after Olson and Creeley made the first contact through *Origin*'s editor Cid Corman and Olson's poet friend from Gloucester, Vincent Ferrini, Olson reviewed the narrative technique in Creeley's early fiction: "the NARRATOR IN . . . the narrator taking on himself the job of making clear by way of his own person that life is preoccupation with itself, taking up the push of his own single intelligence to make it, to be—by his conjectures—so powerful inside the story that he makes the story swing on him, his eye the eye of nature . . ." (283). Creeley's focus is less on the singular self but on the self growing towards multiplicity as the meeting edge of the inside and the outside. Later critics, like Harald Mesch, evaluate Creeley's poetry as concerned with the way the outside relates to the inside as the inside relates to the outside, since the self is fundamentally understood as their coincidence: "Subject and the world have their origin in mutual encounter; they shape each other" (70).

Robert Duncan, in his review of Creeley's *Thirty Things* (1974), comments that the "field" "projected" in Creeley's poems are "still life" (306). Referring to the "kinetics" of the writing act which Olson emphasizes in "Projective Verse" ("USE USE USE the process at all points, in any given poem always, always one perception must must must MOVE, INSTANTER, ON ANOTHER" [240]), Duncan states that, rather than a kinetics of "instanter," Creeley's poems give the sense of an "instant arrest" and emphasizes the multidimensional presence of the world as perceived from Creeley's corner: "It is true to this arrest of motion that the doubling of worlds and meanings in one nexus appears. There is no springing from here to there, but 'there' is 'here.' Where in Olson we have to do with a dialectic, in Creeley we have to do with a developing exposure" (306). The spatial and temporal are superimposed in the field of the poem. This space-time superimposition, or the multiplicity of the context, occasions the particularity and singularity of the poem. A similar sense of multidimensionality and multiplicity about Creeley can be seen in Olson's dedication to him as "the Figure of Outward" (*Maximus Poems* 3). Additionally, in his poem, "Maximus, to himself," Olson refers to Creeley as the friend who guided him into the simple beauties of life: "But the known? / This, I have had to be given, / a life, love, and from one man / the world" (56). The way both Duncan and Olson read Creeley is in terms of a plurality, a multidimensionality, a connectivity with the rest of the world. This extra-personal quality about Creeley's poetry manifests his

attention to the context, the way texts, words, people and lives are interwoven or knit together. The "contexts of poetry," in this sense, provides an insight into the act of writing as a means of participation with the actual (social and historical) world.

Creeley's "developing exposure," as Duncan puts it, gives a close-up of the context where the external and the internal collide, and where the singularity is transformed into the multiplicity. This close-up manifests Creeley's attention to the context in which the action informs the form, to the process whereby the content becomes visible as form. Central to Creeley's attention to the context is the notion that form and content are interconnected, which Olson quotes in "Projective Verse" (240), as Creeley once articulated it, "form is never more than an extension of content." In the interview by William Spanos, Creeley criticizes the way content is understood as "mental furniture"[1] (22). To clarify, the poet dramatizes content in its process of becoming and in its relationship to form and action: "what happens when you take a glass of water and just dump it on the floor? The fact of water the content inherently of water discovers a form a form specific to its 'nature' to put it loosely on the surface it meets with"[2] (22). The substance of the floor, the glass and the occasion of the dumping are to be considered as parts of the context, and water as the content. So, an examination of the context will signify the process of becoming, be it a poem, a cultural expression or natural phenomenon.

Creeley's discussion on the "contexts of poetry" objectifies what is otherwise a purely abstract and aesthetic process. He *maps* the experience; in other words, he concretizes the writing experience so that the tangible elements of the context are recognized in relation to this emotional/mental act of writing. These tangible elements of the context, such as pen or paper or the room are partially arbitrary and partially conditional. They inform the way the poem, with its spacing and typography, comes into being. In the context these conditions create, the poem finds its own occasion. The poem's spacing and typography/topography thus has a notation that responds to the context in which it is born. The process of the poem's becoming is, in a sense, a kind of knowing. In "A Foot Is to Kick With," Olson illustrates this process: "It's as though you were hearing for the

[1] Also see Olson's "A Later Note on Letter #15," where the opening line is "In English the poetics became meubles—furniture—" (*Maximus Poems* 249).

[2] Spanos deliberately preserves the spaces between words and phrases, eschewing the proper spacing and punctuation, to match the text to the particular occasion of the conversation with its hesitations, repetitions and pauses (74).

first time—who knows what a poem ought to sound like? until it's thar? And how do you get it thar except as you do—you, and nobody else" (269). The poet knows what is supposed to be on the page *after* the poem gets to be written.

Knowing is one of Creeley's major concerns, especially as it is related to physical experience and act. He is fond of quoting Olson saying "we do what we know before we know what we do," and continues, "it's where our bodies return to our minds" ("Inside Out" 557). On the surface, knowing is a state of consciousness, but Creeley dissects it so exhaustively that its ties with act, actuality and experience are revealed. He defines actuality through experience: ". . . the tree is real, but when you hit it, it's actual" ("The Creative" 543). For the tree to be conceived as an actuality, one has got to be in a field, a-walking, not really seeing where he is going to. The tree, when hit, thus becomes an actuality, along with the body, the act of walking and the field on which the body walks. It is then the mind knows the body, the movement, the ground, and the tree. Creeley's early poem from *For Love* (1962), "I Know a Man," illustrates the "actuality" the poet refers to. The process in which the real becomes actual for the actors in the poem is dramatized as follows:

> As I sd to my
> friend, because I am
> always talking,—John, I
>
> sd, which was not his
> name, the darkness sur-
> rounds us, what
>
> can we do against
> it, or else, shall we &
> why not, buy a goddamn big car,
>
> drive, he sd, for
> christ's sake, look
> out, where yr going. (*Collected Poems* 132)

In Creeley's experience of writing, action anticipates intention and conscious knowing. His assumption is that "writing could be an intensely specific revelation of one's own content, and of the world the fact of any life must engage . . . what engages in the writing I most value is a content which

cannot be anticipated which 'tells you what you don't know'" ("I'm Given" 504): "I didn't know what I could do. / I've never known it / but in doing found it / as best I could" (*Collected Poems* 438). Writing may start at a definable point but it proceeds into "the darkness," the unknown by virtue of Keatsian Negative Capability. The state of knowing is only then achieved.

This is why Creeley begins his lecture *Contexts* with the most elementary issues of "writing as a physical act": "how I write . . . what is involved in writing for me" (526). The "*orders* of thought" (529) are conditioned by this literal context. Examining the material context of writing, Creeley's point is that ". . . the particular habit of writing that you begin to develop will have, curiously, a great significance to what you write" (530). For example, the poem's rhythm is informed by the kind of music the poet is listening to as he writes, and is different when he is writing in accompaniment to Bud Powell from John Coltrane. Depending on his own experiences, Creeley argues that the context has to do with the most literal, most material of conditions in which he writes, such as the positions, sizes, colors, textures, shapes, etc. of the paper and the qualities of the pen, pencil or the typewriter.

In a sense, the context conditions form and content by closing/opening the way for certain experiences and feelings. This conditioning is a form of "limitation" as Creeley further examines the elements of the context. Reflecting on his strict privacy requirements as he works, he criticizes his self-consciousness, which he finds imprisoning at times: "I'm not satisfied with the habits of limit that I create for myself, because not only have I given myself a million excuses for doing nothing nine-tenths of the time, but I've created a context in which only—I realize now—only certain kinds of feeling can come" (534). Such habitualized environment, what Creeley sometimes depicts as giving a "sense of security," might obstruct the creative strife, the genesis of disorder. But on the other hand, one cannot eliminate the limits: "At the same time . . . one is struck with one's actuality . . . this is the only point I can begin, this is the place where my feelings are most present" (534). One is immediately reminded of Olson's lines from the *Maximus* "Letter 5," "Limits / are what any of us / are inside of" (21). These limits, Creeley implies, are necessary and fruitful, but can also be suffocating. Towards the end of his talk, he makes the point that ". . . this [material] aspect of your activity ought to be, you ought to be aware of it, simply that you should begin to feel as rangingly all that is issuing as a possibility . . . If you find yourself stuck with habits of articulation . . . try shifting the physical context" (534-35), thus making a parallel decision with Duncan in "breaking up the orders I belong to in order to come to alien orders . . ." ("Order and Strife" 112).

By focusing on the material conditions of writing, Creeley explores the way the experience of the evolving context relates to the process of creation. One aspect of this relationship concerns *proprioception*; the way motor skills, muscular orientation relate to knowing, the complex conscious processes. Olson in "Proprioception" says, "the 'body' itself as, by movement of its own tissues, giving the data of depth," and adds, "the 'soul' . . . is equally physical" (182). The body is spiritual as the soul, just as the soul is physical as the body. Although definition separates the physical and the spiritual, the "soul" and the "movement of tissues" are not disconnected in terms of function. "Human Universe" makes the same assumption of the body-mind connection in a simpler way: "what happens at the skin is more like than different from what happens within" (Olson 162). Creeley's attention to *proprioception* is evident:

> Looking for a way
> the feet find it.
>
> If mistaken, the
> hands were not.
>
> Ears hear. Eyes
> see everything.
>
> The mind only
> takes its time. (*Collected Poems* 466)

With great care, Creeley focuses on the "meeting edge of man and the world" (Olson "Human Universe" 162); and this "cutting edge," as Olson says, "is where he is responsible more than to himself" ("Human Universe" 162). Such is the ethics of the writing man: "nakedness," loyalty to what he is experiencing, intelligent and emotional sincerity towards what is happening to his own self in relation to what is happening outside. The "nakedness" of knowing is a state "that all start up / to the eye and soul / as though it had never happened before" (Olson *Maximus* 111). Referring to the same Olson poem, Creeley himself reflects that "[i]n order to be in that state of nakedness, I have to be where . . . I can open up this equally small thing, and feel it with the intensity of all the perception that I . . . that the ego bit can recognize, and then destroy the ego by its own insistence" (*Contexts* 533). Nakedness, knowing, and the act of writing, where "all is happening visually as well as intellectually" (Creeley *Contexts* 529), in this sense, becomes the way in which the poet participates

with the outside world, "destroying the ego." It is the process whereby the singularity is transformed into the multiplicity. Duncan's search for "a morality of knowing *what you do* (or coming to know)" (*Letters* 612) in his art is such a transformation from the singular to the plural. This transformation also has an ethical value, since it relates to the others in the actual world. It was also Duncan who defined the "responsibility" of the poet as "becoming aware of the order of what is happening" ("Towards" 82).

Thus "contexts of poetry," informing the process of creation, concern human relationships. Creeley's attention is to the process of cognition—reaching an awareness of the physical and mental *habitat* of writing. At this point, Duncan's preoccupation with awareness is complementary: ". . . I seek an art of coming to know what I do" (*Letters* 612). The "*image of man* in writing" (Creeley "Was That a Real Poem" 575) is conceived in terms of his interaction with the *universe* he is in. The "man in writing" is affected by the way he interacts with the society as well as by the way the skin of his hand touches the paper, or by the friction between the tip of his pen and the kind of sheet he is writing on. The process of "coming to know what I do" works the same way on both personal (poetic) and social (extra-poetic) levels. The context of writing thus has a historical, geographical, social, political value and significance. James Scully's insight into the connection between politics and the way poetry gets to be written (or read) might serve useful at this point: "Textual gestures or alterations are assumptions about the way a work functions in the world, which is precisely its functioning as a poem. A piece of versified writing is not a poem but an aging, historically weathered and weathering occasion for one. The poem is what that writing, as text, is *doing*" (117).

As Creeley tells in his lecture he knows what feels right, appropriate and in its place when he is writing, he makes the point that he is not able to define what a poem is (531). He explains this impasse in terms of the profound cultural change: "I cannot tell you what I think a poem is. I think that has to do with the fact that all the terms of consciousness are, at the moment, undergoing tremendous terms of change. There is an alteration of a very deep order going on in the whole thrust or push of the consciousness, literally the Negro consciousness, which has been for years relegated to a kind of underside" (531). Perhaps, the "Negro consciousness" metaphorically covers all those realities and consciousness that are forced into the underworld. Creeley captures the moment in which the "Negroid" order manifests itself as strife against the old order. This emerging order, i.e. the repressed consciousness, has existed in "a world unresponsive to [the Negro] reality" (531) until the former could no longer ignore the changing

reality: "Now, this reality, which has become *the* dominant reality in the States today, is the Negro reality . . ." (532).

How can the definition of what a poem might be affected by an "alteration" in the consciousness that thrusts itself forward after being suppressed in the whole culture for so many years? The question of "what a poem is, or can be?" is another way of asking how the poem functions, as Scully conveys, in the world. The profound change in the world order, and the change of consciousness that it brings make it difficult for Creeley to define what a poem is in this historical context. Creeley explains how he writes the poem with precision; however, he faces difficulty in defining it in available terms and tools. What is a poem as a historical artifact informed by such alterations in the world order and in consciousness? Creeley makes his allegiance with the poets of the former generation like Ezra Pound, William Carlos Williams, H.D., Basil Bunting and Louis Zukofsky, and contemporaries like Olson, Duncan, Denise Levertov, Allen Ginsberg and Philip Whalen. He feels that his writing does not fit in the conventional forms, rhythms and the "appropriate" subject matter of poetry.

This change of feeling, or change of heart, coincides with the changing consciousness, perceptions and valuations which Creeley attributes to a collective experience. This collective experience is World War II and the atomic bomb. Poetry carries the imprint of this war experience. In Scully's words quoted above, this imprint is the "historically weathered occasion" of the poem. Elucidating the effects of the war, Creeley conveys: ". . . the change which is occurring now [1963] is more significant than the Second World War by far, because it's the residue of that war in reference to the atom bomb and, equally, the shift in all terms of human relationship that have been habitualized since . . . thousands of years" (532). Duncan, too, in his essay, "Towards an Open Universe" affirms that "It is a changing aesthetic, but it is also a changing life"[3] (88). It is a matter of recognizing that the singular personal consciousness is responding to what is happening in the actual world. Accordingly, when experiences change, poetry changes as well—in very much the same manner in which the size of the sheet affects the poem.

Creeley aptly refers to Pound's statement that "the artists are the antennae of the race" (532) and points that the only sensible action would be to respond to the changing terms of reality by acknowledging it (532). However, recognizing and acknowledging are less competent states of consciousness than knowing.

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[3] Though Duncan and Creeley are both referring to the same cultural and aesthetic shift, "Towards an Open Universe" dates one year later than Creeley's *Contexts of Poetry*.

This might be the reason why the time was not ripe for definitions in 1963. As Creeley was discussing these issues, the United States had not yet begun the air raids on Vietnam, and the black leaders Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr. were still alive. The events that motivated Duncan to write his *Passages* poems grouped as *Of the War*, among which was "Up Rising," had not yet taken place. These prove how accurate were Creeley's measures, which he laid on the context-consciousness relationship.

This "painful strife" between the white and black consciousness has its "fruit" as well (Duncan "Order and Strife" 112). It is a new awareness of what is happening, as Duncan says; a new order where the hitherto ignored order is finally acknowledged. This is to the advantage of the imagination. Creeley articulates this idea from the angle of poetry:

> It simply is, it's a big change, it's a deep change in consciousness, and I'm curious to see what's going to happen—which is a mild way of putting it. Indeed! But you have a poem, Allen [Ginsberg], in which you say, "Where all Manhattan that I've seen must disappear." And this for me is what is happening in the States in a different relationship, in a different context—where all the terms of consciousness that I grew up with must disappear, are disappearing momently, daily. The terms of reality are changing. Even the terms of this course are changing . . . by which I mean this course would have been impossible ten years ago, by definition. Senses of writing would have been impossible to present in this fashion ten years ago. We were, happily, involved with a reorganization of premise that gives us our particular occasion. (532)

The key phrases in this passage appear as "a reorganization of premise" and "particular occasion." In the historical context to which Creeley's lecture belongs, the consciousness "that must disappear" refers to the way the establishment functions: institutionalizing intellect and imagination under control within the academy; communicating with the public in terms of an ideology of progress; offering mediocrity, confinement and conformity to pass as public good, harmony and security; and separating art from practical life so that literature becomes a genteel practice rather than a social one. The cultural change in the late 1950s, in which Creeley locates himself, articulated the need for a re-definition, a re-situation and re-distribution of power according to a different order. Since this emerging order contradicted the establishment, the

distribution of this aesthetics and awareness was necessary for its continuity, applicability and usefulness.

It was this vital necessity that made available a form of social organization alternative to that of the establishment. The culminating energy of the resistance against the establishment and academicism required more reciprocity and connectivity. Within the specific context of the community of poets small press publishers, un-academic societies and scholarship, reading events and festivals provided this alternative form of organization and communication. Correspondence was also vital since the letters served as "laboratories" where new ideas were originated, developed, shared and discussed. The most notable instance for this "particular occasion" of the emerging order can be seen in the collectivity, friendships, politics and poetics which became life sources for a particular community. What Creeley means by the "reorganization of premise that gives us our particular occasion" is this context, created by the network of communities, little magazines and different educational institutions, such as the Black Mountain College. This context manifested their presence and the way they responded to reality. The little magazines, for example, were vital for the emerging poets, as Gilbert Sorrentino remembers, because they proved "the proposition that with the end of the war [World War II] the dominance of an effete, academic, and European-oriented literature was also ended" (68). They also nurtured the sense of community in which a "public trust," as Duncan says in his essay, "The Homosexual in Society," of respectability was established. What Creeley means by "our particular occasion" has to do with a community where its members were "respected . . . for what one knew in one's heart to be respectable" (Duncan "Homosexual" 233), and "having the dignity of *their* own statement, not the dignity of *one's* own statement in a hostile context. . ." (Sorrentino 69). Gilbert Sorrentino praises Creeley's editorial work for the *Black Mountain Review*, which created the post-World War II "particular occasion": "Creeley clumped together the most disparate literary intelligences of the time, clear in the knowledge that they formed a true configuration of the new letters . . ." (69).

From a bird's eye point of view, Creeley explores, by way of his own experience, the poetic and extra-poetic implications of the term, context. He first discusses the effect of the material context on the form and content of the writing that results. The principle is the contingency of the context and the creation/phenomena. Then, he shifts the discussion to a larger and public level: the changing terms of reality and consciousness, which interferes with his attempt to define what a poem is. The changing terms of consciousness also

provides him with the grounds and tools to articulate the "senses of writing" in the way he does (532). This is the moment when the private is linked to the public; the singular is opened up to the plural/multiplicity. Creeley defines the element of the context that triggers this complex change as "the residue" of World War II (532). The terrors of the atomic bomb did not surface immediately after its dropping. As briefly discussed above, the "residue" signifies the way the small community of poets experienced the cultural change. This historical "context of poetry" is the on-going displacement and restoration of contending powers.

Context, in the way Creeley discusses it, ceases to be understood as separate from the contending powers, or as an entity in itself enveloping this strife or connection between one subject/object and another. Rather, it comes to be perceived as the process of the event itself. For instance, it is not that the 8 ½ by 11 inch paper that Creeley uses to write his poems is the context. The context includes not only the physical and historical circumstances that lead the poet to use the writing materials he does, but it also includes the emotional/mental state he is in during the process and the *proprioceptive* experience he undergoes. At this point, Gregory Bateson's definition of context in biological terms might serve as a useful analogy. Bateson defines the context in terms of process as opposed to its frequently used meaning, "background," which is passive and receptive:

> The progressive increase in size and armament of the dinosaurs was, as I saw it, simply an interactive armaments race—a schizmogenetic process. But I could not then see that the evolution of the horse form *Eohippus* was not a one-sided adjustment to life on grassy plains. Surely the grassy plains themselves were evolved *pari passu* with the evolution of the teeth and hooves of the horses and other ungulates. Turf was the evolving response of the vegetation to the evolution of the horse. It is the *context* which evolves. (155)

Focusing on the evolving context is another way of repeating Creeley's much quoted statement "form is never more than an extension of content." As understood from Bateson's observation, context is not a static "back"ground. Each element of the context is active—acting upon the event of creation, as much as being acted upon by it. Here, the subject and object lose their values as oppositions, because the grass and the horse are both the subjects and objects of *change*. The change in their forms is the essential factor in the way they influence

the external reality. The mutual effect that the elements of the context have on each other might well be thought of as "creative strife," as Duncan explores in his essay, "Man's Fulfillment in Order and Strife." A result of this strife, new forms emerge. In a similar way, in Creeley's essay, strife is between, say, the habit of using 8 ½ by 11 inch paper and the necessity of using legal size sheet caused by the fact that he was in Spain where printing was cheaper. On a different level, the same strife is between the white and black consciousnesses. Creative strife manifests itself as the "uprising" of the "Negro reality" which forces the white mainstream consciousness to come to terms with its actual presence.

Context can also be understood in terms of the poet's life as it relates to the act of writing. The poet's presence or life creates the "contexts of poetry." A life, projected through the medium of writing, is man's existence arriving at a plurality, multiplicity or collectivity:

> The DEATH of
> one is
> none.
> The death of
> one is
> many. (*Collected Poems* 479)

A life in writing is not trapped within an ego-based subjectivity. It manifests itself as the context, in the process of participating within the world surrounding him: "I want to give witness not to the thought of myself—that specious concept of identity—but rather to what I am as a simple agency, a thing evidently alive by virtue of such activity" ("A Sense" 488). For Creeley, the subject inherits presence and actuality, which is to say, it has the time and space dimensions or depths: "The local is not a place but a place in a given man" ("A Note" 479). "A given man," by the token of his life, provides the multiple dimensions of time and space. In this sense, this "given man" is more a multiplicity than a singularity. The writing man, therefore, writes from that singular context of multiplicities and thus, leaves a record: "a record, a composite fact of the experience of living in time and space" ("Was That a Real Poem" 575). It is only when man writes; the poem manifests itself as a testament of that historically particular experience.

Such are the issues implied in Creeley's lecture, "Contexts of Poetry," which he gave at the Vancouver Poetry Conference. As briefly pointed out at the beginning of my article, this lecture marks one of the turning points in Creeley's writing life, where he affronted his writing habits and shared this

transition with the audience on the Wednesday morning of July 24, 1963. His attention to the context opened up "the possibility of *scribbling*, of writing for the immediacy of the pleasure and without having to pay attention to some final code of significance" (Creeley *Contexts* 535). The casualty, spontaneity and arbitrariness of "scribbling," in a way, relieved Creeley from the self-containment and isolation about which he was much displeased: ". . . when you've got the fort, like all the guns mounted and ready to blast until you're utterly safe, and you let out this little agonized thing . . . it skips around the room, you know, and you're embarrassed, you hear someone move in the kitchen, think Oh my God they're coming . . . no wonder the poems are short!" (*Contexts* 534). The transition from isolation to participation, or from singularity to multiplicity, comes with Creeley's pondering on "contexts of poetry." This transition manifests itself simultaneously in the act of writing and the content of the poem. In his 1968 postscript to the "Contexts of Poetry," Creeley cites the poem, "A Piece," from *Words* (1967) as being "central to all possibilities of statement" (*Contexts* 535). The brief poem reads: "One and / one, two, / three" (*Collected Poems* 532). This can be read next to the series of poems entitled, "Numbers" in *Pieces* (1969), most particularly, "Three" among them. Three is a significant number since it implies a community. One is singular, two, though plural, allows only for a bilateral occasion. But it is three that can provide the beginning of a community, multiplicity, a "circle," where "forms have possibility":

> They come now with
> one in the middle—
> either side thus
> another. Do they
> know who each other
> is or simply walk
> with this pivot between them.
> Here forms have possibility.
>
> •
>
> When either this
> or that becomes
> choice, this fact
> of things enters. What had been
> agreed now
> alters to

two and one,
all ways.

•

The first
triangle, of form,
of people,
sounded a
lonely occasion I
think—the
circle begins
here, intangible—
yet a birth. (*Collected Poems* 397-98)

Context, as Creeley explores, is a participation in the multiplicity. What Creeley does through his lecture is to prove, by way of his own experience as an example, that this "extra-poetic" aspect of this process is not irrelevant for poetry or writing. The "contexts of poetry" signify the process in which the poet meets with the actual world and creates a record of experience to be read historically and socially. It is the attention to the context of writing which would provide an "opening of the field," a relief from the egotistical boundaries or habits of experience. An examination of writing as an act, and a social act, at the same time, is an examination of the process in which the multiplicity of the context evolves. This examination provides a kind of knowing, which, in Creeley's case, is a kind of coming to a consciousness of the relationship between what he writes and the context in which he writes. As soon as he acknowledges the multiplicity of the writing context, his poetry opens up to the heterogeneity of the world. This is a kind of knowing in the process of experience; within the act of writing.

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# Relationship, Place, and Company: A Conversation with Robert Creeley about Robert Duncan[1]

James Maynard

The following conversation with Robert Creeley took place on February 18, 2002. That semester a number of graduate students in the University at Buffalo's Poetics Program were engaged in "Opening the Field: A Group Reading of Robert Duncan" with the assistance of Robert J. Bertholf, and Creeley—who at that time was no longer actively teaching at the University—graciously agreed to speak with us about his relationship with Duncan (1919-1988). On a cold winter's night he generously talked with us for over two and a half hours, weaving together a multitude of anecdotes in response to our sporadic questions, and as is evident these stories implicate their teller as much as their ostensible subject. Those present included then Buffalo students Chris Alexander, Barbara Cole, Patrick Durgin, Lori Emerson, Sandra Guerreiro, Greg Kinzer, James Maynard, Anna Reckin, and Kyle Schlesinger, and also Dan Featherston, who was visiting from the University of Arizona. The event took place in Patrick Durgin's apartment on 383 Summer Street, across from a carriage house that just happened to be one of Creeley's many former residences in Buffalo.

Creeley often began his sentences in one direction only to pause and then continue with a modification of either what he was going to say or what had just been said. These patterns are indicated mostly through ellipses, which also signify his habit of trailing off the ends of sentences. Other repetitions and hesitations have been edited out. There was a great deal of laughter throughout, but these moments have not been noted.

**Robert Creeley:** Many things went on I remember. For example, the great cathedral in Palma de Mallorca, and the thing about it is it has these Gaudí windows, Gaudí being the great architect and what not in Barcelona,[2] and in Mallorca, unknown to me entirely, were these very interesting windows in this

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[1] Transcribed and annotated by James Maynard. Special thanks to Chris Alexander for providing part of the recording used in this transcription.

[2] Antonio Gaudí (1852-1926) was a Spanish-Catalan architect whose unfinished masterpiece is the Roman Catholic basilica *La Sagrada Família* in Barcelona.

church. Moments after Robert Duncan had seen them, he said, "Let's go look at the windows," and I thought what windows? And he said, "The windows of the cathedral," so we went, and Robert so charmed the priest, who was our tacit host, that the priest took us not only to see the windows but took us to see these relics of the true cross and all the stuff that he had stashed away in the church in a very hidden manner.

He didn't suffer fools kindly, so that there are great stories of him and great instances where he really got into an argument. The classic one in New York once he got into an argument with I think it was the Museum of Modern Art, I believe, and they were having a series sponsored by the Academy of American Poets . . . I believe it was there; it was in some venue like that . . . the point was that the venue was not remarkably either impressed or even interested in the people who were coming to read. Poetry was not their basic interest; they were pleased to have the facility used, but other than that, forget it. There was always this sense of being an outsider, of being a poor relation, and in this case part of the institutional pattern was just to tape the readings. And they set up, and Robert was very particular about his reading, he wanted it to be not just a décor, but he wanted it to be silent, he wanted it to be able to be focused, he wanted it to be able to be heard, et cetera et cetera. And he did not like any other distractions or interruptions to be the case. And so their setting up began to be offensive to him, and he tried to overrule them and said "Now stop," and they just wouldn't do it, so it turned into a great sort of tug of war. I can't remember if he walked out, but he did something very particular.

He had for years an awfully hard time with [Barrett] Watten. There's an incredible scene where Barry is talking about Charles Olson,[3] which I think he . . . what's he doing, he's talking about Zukofsky.[4] I thought Barry wrote a very interesting book . . . Anyhow, he's talking in this case about Louis Zukofsky,

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[3] A poet known for his epic *The Maximus Poems* (1953-1975), Charles Olson (1910-1970) was an important figure in post-World War II American poetry. His essay "Projective Verse" (see note 81) is a defining manifesto of projectivism or field poetics, and as a teacher and rector of Black Mountain College he had a large influence on a number of younger poets and writers.

[4] Barrett Watten (1948- ) is a poet, critic, and editor associated with Language Poetry. From 1971 to 1982 Watten edited the poetry journal *This*, initially co-edited with Robert Grenier, and later *Poetics Journal* (1982-1998) with Lyn Hejinian. Duncan's infamous exchange with Watten took place at the San Francisco Art Institute on December 8, 1978 during a memorial event for Louis Zukofsky sponsored by The Poetry Center at San Francisco State University.

and Robert's up in the audience with a friend about his age apparently whose skill is to listen to the universe for sounds in outer space that could possibly be instances of intelligence. So finally Robert's on his feet interrupting very vigorously and saying that his friend here, who after all listens to this very curious stuff, says that he can make more sense of it than he can make of you. And so there's a complete tug of war. Barry in those days, in that situation, he had virtually no sense of humor whatsoever so this would frustrate and irritate Duncan immensely that A, he didn't want to play, and B, he certainly didn't want to play in this manner, he didn't want to contest. He just wanted to dismiss Duncan and get him the hell out of there. Robert in that situation could become hyper-charged, you know.

I think he was probably one of the most . . . I think of John Wieners, I think of Gregory Corso, I think of George Oppen[5]—I think of writers or poets who are entirely that, almost nothing else that they primarily do. If you think of Duncan's way of proceeding in his own life: he goes to college, not to get a degree, but he's not even not getting a degree. He just goes to college as a ritual of getting out of his home/household, but once there he begins to simply pay attention to the company and the information that attracts him. And when it doesn't attract him any more, he goes, and then he comes back again and writes, and it's almost like he's going there to do research . . .

There's another great sort of Robert . . . when he was supporting them. For some real time, when Jess was working as a painter but getting no sales,[6] Robert was effectually supporting them by typing. Robert was like [Jack] Kerouac,[7] one

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[5] Born in Boston, the poet John Wieners (1934-2002) studied at Black Mountain College. Gregory Corso (1930-2001) was a New York Beat poet associated with Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac. George Oppen (1908-1984) was a central Objectivist poet whose *New Collected Poems* was published in 2002.

[6] Born Burgess Collins (1923-2004) but known later simply by the name "Jess," he and Duncan lived together as domestic partners since 1951 and shared a fascination with many of the same sources of Romanticism, myth, and fairy tale. As Creeley recounts later in the conversation, Jess was trained and practiced as a physicist before becoming a celebrated artist known in particular for his large collages. For a retrospective of his work see *Jess: A Grand Collage,* 1951-1993, organized by Michael Auping (Buffalo: Albright-Knox Art Gallery, 1993).

[7] A widely popular and influential poet and prose writer, Jack Kerouac (1922-1969) was a leading figure of the Beat Generation, a movement whose style and values were in many ways defined in Kerouac's autobiographical novel *On the Road* (1957).

of the great typists. So he was doing classic typing of dissertations, and all, for people in Berkeley, and there's a great story when we actually picked up one of the graduate students whose dissertation he was typing, which was on himself. The guy said, "You're Robert Duncan, and you're typing my dissertation?" It was true. And Robert said, "Yeah, thanks for the ride." He was hitchhiking. He used to hitchhike, and I don't think he ever drove, or he didn't drive when I knew him, ever.

**James Maynard:** When was the first time you met him?

**Creeley:** I met him in Mallorca. It must have been early, about '53 or '52.[8] He and a pleasant friend of his, Harry Jacobus,[9] who was another painter and drove a cab in San Francisco for a living, and Jess. It would be Jess's first time going to Europe to see museums and all. They had contrived to get, I can't remember quite how the money would come, but they had enough money to spend a year effectually in Europe. So they decided, he and Jess, and Harry, came first to Mallorca. Within ten minutes of meeting Robert I was intrigued by him, and somewhat scared. I was a New England Puritan, straight, and here was West Coast, gay. I didn't know whether I could measure up to his . . . not even to his interests, but to his habit. I knew that he and Olson were close at that point. It was Olson who effectually said Duncan should come into *The Black Mountain Review* . . . that we should start to use him. I had on the other hand read "An African Elegy," and I had not liked it.[10] The rhetoric was too heavy for me. It sounded not like [Vachel] Lindsay, whom I did like in a weird way, but I didn't like the voodoo jumping about in the jungle stuff.[11] To a person from Massachusetts, it was . . . I was scared. I didn't know what to do with it. Robert on the other hand loved Edith Sitwell,[12] whom I grew to love too, but . . . In my habits everything was not simply stripping down but it was trying

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[8] Duncan traveled to Mallorca, Spain in March 1955, and after visiting France and England returned to the U.S. in March 1956.

[9] Harry Jacobus opened the King Ubu Gallery along with Duncan and Jess in San Francisco, 1953.

[10] The poem first appeared as "Toward an African Elegy" in Circle 10 (Summer 1948): 94-96, and was later published as "An African Elegy" in *The Years as Catches: First Poems (1939-1946)* (Berkeley: Oyez, 1966), 33-35.

[11] Vachel Lindsay's infamous poem "The Congo" (1914) uses a heavy emphasis of rhythmic sounds in its controversial depictions of Africa.

to be as straightforward and as unembellished as possible. Just plain Bob and nothing more—just zoom. Robert was just leaping about with his extraordinarily interesting and extensive rhetoric. So anyhow, we met, I remember, we were on the trolley coming into the place where we lived just on the edge of the city and I remember Robert saying to me, "You're not interested in history, are you?" And I thought, yes I am, yes I am. And I knew what he meant. I wasn't interested in the kinds of tracking that he and Olson particularly had the habit of. I was absolutely engaged with what was there, but momently. It didn't provoke me . . . whereas Robert would do that with great...He was very proud of his personal library, not as the book collector but as the functioning system of information. He had I don't know how many thousands of books. He had a substantial . . . and all very particular. So that kind of . . . whereas mine was very sort of picked up on the run or quick affections, where this book, someone leave a book in the house you read it, but it had no such inherent design as Robert's. So Robert was really an extraordinary reader, and we had come back to our house, which was a suburban house with two parts, like a duplex . . . and had a wonderful sort of sitting situation around the fireplace. The fireplaces in Mallorca were great, so you sat down with a little canopy over you . . . move benches leading out from the fireplace. We were sitting in that kind of situation, Jess, Robert, and me, and I was telling him something not hysterical but energized with the whole business and I wanted to make a point about this or that, and I remember I was trying to say that X was someone I certainly didn't much approve, and I said suddenly, "Oh, you know he's like some cross-eyed son of a bitch who couldn't tell his ass from a hole in the ground." I suddenly thought, uh oh, that was not a wise way to put it. I remember Jess went white and suddenly froze with irritation, and I remember Robert looked at me and started laughing and said something about "You had to say it, didn't you?" or something like that. I had one eye, so I mean it wasn't as though we were unknown to each other, but it was just that sense of like a tooth that's aching. You want to see how bad is it? How good is it? Take a look. And we became peculiarly, extraordinarily good friends indeed.

He had brought with him, characteristically . . . this remember was a trip for about a year . . . the first work of Zukofsky I ever really saw or knew. He had a copy of that, he had H. D.'s *War Trilogy*, for example, which I hadn't remembered seeing before, and then he had things like [William Carlos] Williams's take on

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[12] Dame Edith Sitwell (1887-1964) was an English poet and critic who often collaborated with her younger brothers Osbert (1892-1969) and Sacheverell (1897-1988). Her *Collected Poems* was published in 1957.

Zukofsky,[13] which was very interesting. That aspect of him, he was not pedantic nor was he heavy. Like Olson I think he really didn't like, so to speak, academics who rested on their laurels. He thought universities were a place where you could find out everything, but in fact if anybody knew anything they wouldn't tell you, because they were afraid of losing its authority. That kind of scene. Basically he trusted particular people who worked in the university and didn't trust a whole bunch more. The whole "Multiversity," which is a poem,[14] isn't attacking the university specifically, but that's the reference underlying it as far as I can see. That's the frame. The codification of information into static becomes hostile to that which would inquire. Robert and Olson both were extraordinary talkers. I think Robert could talk nine or ten hours of monologuing. And Olson, I remember, had a class that started at 7:00 in the evening and ran until 1:00 the next afternoon, nonstop. Well, how did you resolve your needs to talk, when you worked with each other? And he said, "Well, we sort of decided we'd both talk at once," and he said it worked.

He for example had a quirky and queer perception of Kerouac. He would go up and down I think in the ways that he felt about him, and the same with Allen [Ginsberg].[15] There were aspects of Allen that he didn't like, and questioned. He felt that Allen was too . . . not so much generalizing, but was too vulnerable to senses of populist . . . Because Robert was very fierce about . . . The argument he has with Denise,[16] for example, is what he feels is Denise's persuasion because of the sentimentalized . . . not so much sentimentalized, as though poetry as an

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[13] An extremely important source for Duncan and the inspiration in part for "The H. D. Book" (see note 101), H. D.'s (Hilda Doolittle, 1886-1961) *War Trilogy*—later published with the title *Trilogy*—is comprised of *The Walls Do Not Fall* (1944), *Tribute to the Angels* (1945), and *The Flowering of the Rod* (1946). William Carlos Williams (1883-1963) was an enormously influential modernist American poet who emphasized a poetics of local particulars in works like his long poem Paterson.

[14] Duncan, "The Multiversity, Passages 21," in *Bending the Bow* (New York: New Directions, 1968), 70-73.

[15] Allen Ginsberg (1926-1997) was the central poet of the Beat movement in New York and San Francisco.

[16] Born in England, the poet Denise Levertov (1923-1997) moved to the United States in 1948 and was later associated with the writers published by Robert Creeley in *The Black Mountain Review*. Her poetry is known for its religious themes and radical politics. She and Duncan were close friends until their falling out over the relationship between poetry and politics during the Vietnam War. With her husband Mitchell (Mitch) Goodman (1923-1997) she had a son Nikolai (Nik).

art had somehow to justify or have an attachment which justified its occasion. One time I remember Denise said to him that she felt a poem he had written was beneath his dignity as a poet (it was about a butterfly or a spider—it was like Whitman[17]) and she thought this was not a fit subject for his genius. And his point was simply anything is possible in poetry; you don't make exclusions on the grounds of the seriousness of the subject. And so I think in like sense he felt that Denise's bringing poetry to serve in such a determined way the humanly legitimate and understood horrors of that moment, the protest, were to Robert a . . . not a forfeit, because Robert was writing poems which one would presume were of like kind, but the point was he wasn't writing them in the commitment of that interest, whereas Denise really was. She was on the road . . . Robert would be on the road occasionally to read with groups that protested, but he wouldn't sign up in the same way that Denise did. There's to be, and you've probably noticed, a publication of their letters which will be extremely useful really for both.[18] Denise felt that she was curiously produced by Robert over a long time; he was Svengali and she was his instrument.[19] And it's true that Robert felt extraordinarily identified with Denise; she was like his alter ego. She was all that he wasn't, not so much in terms of ability, but she was the person he could not be, so she was magical and extraordinary for him. The weird question: what happened? What Robert had done was again talking too much; he was being interviewed and he brought up this qualification of Denise's poetry or commitment of it to the war protest. The interviewer said, "What do you think about Denise Levertov's poems protesting the war in Vietnam?" and he said "Well, I think she's caught by demos, I think she's demonic. She's been pulled past any sense of poetry into almost a violence of emotional anger which the poetry serves and consumes to survive but it's not the point of poetry to be as possessed."

**Dan Featherston:** Isn't that ironic though, if on one hand Duncan's trying to be inclusive in the largest sense, and then . . .

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[17] Commonly viewed as an originating source of a distinctly American poetics, Walt Whitman's (1819-1892) poetry is distinguished by its celebration of all aspects of modern life.

[18] Duncan and Denise Levertov, *The Letters of Robert Duncan and Denise Levertov*. Eds. Robert J. Bertholf and Albert Gelpi (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2004).

[19] Svengali: one who controls another to do what is desired, after the hypnotist character in George du Maurier's novel *Trilby*.

**Creeley:** Well, his quick point would be . . . Do you remember in "The Venice Poem" . . . where he says, "What do these avail, when this art . . ."[20]—or as Olson puts it, "As though art weren't enough to pay attention to."[21] So it isn't that Robert feels that art has no moral steady or moral condition. What he does mean is that you cannot make art—of this art, poetry—you cannot make it serve a purpose it does not itself discover and/or determine. You can't go to work for city hall just because you may believe in it. You can't make poetry into a function that can be as committed. In some ways it almost sounds holier than thou or something, but for this person who all his life had done what he did insofar as poetry . . . he committed it, or he didn't commit it . . . and who began, actually, with a very strong political disposition. If you think of Jackson, who's the same age; I mean Jackson in some ways is parallel, you see. Okay Jackson, why aren't you out there on the street? There's no one more involved than Jackson Mac Low.[22]

**Patrick Durgin:** I asked him today, why, when we were reading his work together last year, why he would have kept bringing up, telling me to read Robert Duncan. He said, "I have no idea." But he did mention his first meetings with him as well as being at the anarchist-pacifist meeting.

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[20] Duncan's "The Venice Poem" was first published in *Poems* 1948-49 ([Berkeley]: Berkeley Miscellany Editions, [1949]), 21-52. The lines Creeley is remembering are:

> All that we value:
> order, remembrance,
> human nature and conduct,
> natural coherence—
>
> What do they avail when this art
> dictates its laws? (47)

[21] In "Against Wisdom as Such," *The Black Mountain Review* 1, no. 1 (Spring 1954): 35-39; *Collected Prose*. Eds. Donald Allen and Benjamin Friedlander. Intro. Robert Creeley (Berkeley: U of California P, 1997), 260-264, Olson writes: "As though art were not enough for any of us to behave to!" (261).

[22] Jackson Mac Low (1922-2004) was a poet known particularly for his use of chance operations as compositional methods. His *Representative Works*: 1938-1985 was published in 1986 by Roof Books. Mac Low first met Duncan in the beginning of the 1940s at an anarchist meeting in New York City.

**Creeley:** When I told Jackson my son had been much involved with [Ralph] Nader,[23] and also I voted for Nader, because I really couldn't vote for . . . he said "That's ridiculous." I said, "What do you mean?" He said, "Politics is the art of the possible, Bob, not going out and making judgments, forget it." Which was the old Jackson, see. You rectify what can be rectified, unless you have to pass over it . . .

**Featherston:** Yeah, he was in Tucson about a year ago and I saw him there, and he was having a big argument with somebody who had voted for Nader, saying it was the lesser evil . . .

**Creeley:** Well then you say, "Who did you vote for, Jackson?" And he voted libertarian, probably, I'm pretty sure. He certainly didn't vote for Gore or . . . maybe he did, but I don't think so.[24] There was this part that you couldn't put A against B, knowing that A had no chance at all; you couldn't offer that as a real choice. You might want to vote for A for other reasons, but not for that one.

Anyhow, Denise really felt that . . . she did have that curious nineteenth century or European sense of poetry in the service of, and Robert did not want poetry to be in the service of any other thing. It wasn't that he wanted it to be pure, but he didn't want it to be signed up before it was written. That's all. He certainly wrote poems of extraordinary craft and power against the war. So I think Denise was very shocked and hurt, because I think she felt that he too was very engaged with protesting the war, and why did he so curiously find what she was doing not acceptable. And he said it in public. He said it in company first, but then very different to read it in a magazine. And then I remember asking Robert, why couldn't they sort of patch it up, and he said, you know, he could, but it would just break again because the basic proposal in poetry was finally quite different.

**Durgin:** I think a lot of us were at your reading at [the] Albright-Knox [Art Gallery] the other night, when you read "The Door."[25]

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[23] Ralph Nader (1934- ) is an American consumer rights and political activist who ran for President as the nominee of the Green Party (1996, 2000) and later as an independent candidate (2004).

[24] Democrat Al Gore (1948- ) served as Vice President of the United States under President Bill Clinton from 1993-2001. In 2001 he lost a highly contested Presidential election to George W. Bush.

[25] Creeley's poem "The Door," dedicated "for Robert Duncan," appeared in *For Love*: Poems, 1950-1960 (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1962), 101-103.

**Creeley:** That was my attempt to tell Robert how much I love him.

**Durgin:** I was curious, we've just been reading *Roots and Branches*, and he has his "Thank You for Love," "(for Robert Creeley)."[26]

**Creeley:** I think he wrote that before . . .

**Durgin:** Did he beat you to it?

**Creeley:** Yeah, I believe so.

**Durgin:** I was wondering if there was anything like imitation going on. There's an idea of form that's easier for me to take with Duncan than his rhetoric . . .

**Creeley:** He does have . . . anything that's shiny or glitters, he picks it up. Again, the sense of being didactically original or determining your style without reference to anything else. I mean, Robert would be an incredible collage. There was a wonderful poem of his called "For An A Muse Meant."[27] Both Olson and Denise separately thought it was a parody of their work, literally, and so they were very defensive. But it wasn't. It was actually a homage to Denise that was supposed to be "for an amusement." But she thought it was an attack. I thought it was a wonderful poem. I thought that that litany of where you can get things, of what his own procedures truly were, this incredible collaging of velvet . . . just pleasure. His incredible ability just to include . . . At the same time, I think it's the year before, where he has that charming homage to Zukofsky. It's affection. This is probably one of two or three poems he ever writes in this manner. Zukofsky did it—"For ABC," it's called[28]—and so does Allen. I would write poems using that modus. I remember writing a poem for some personal celebration of [William] Bronk where I'm trying to get the balance of the depression together with the kind of Wallace Stevens line.[29] It's not phony,

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[26] Duncan, "Thank You for Love," in *Roots and Branches* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1964; New York: New Directions, 1969), 115-116.

[27] Duncan sent the poem unsigned to Denise Levertov in June 1953 with the title "An A Muse Meant." It later appeared with the same title in *The Black Mountain Review* 1, no. 3 (Fall 1954): 19-22 and then as "For A Muse Meant" in *Letters*: Poems 1953-1956 (Highlands, NC: Jargon Society, 1958; Chicago: Flood Editions, 2003), 1-4.

[28] Creeley is perhaps referring to the "ABC" section of Zukofsky's "I's (pronounced *eyes*)" in the 1963 book of the same title. See Louis Zukofsky, *Complete Short Poetry*. Foreword Robert Creeley. (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1991), 216.

[29] William Bronk's (1918-1999) career as a poet began when he was published by Cid Corman in *Origin* magazine, who also published his first two books of poetry. Wallace Stevens (1879-1955) was a major American poet whose works investigate the complex relationship between imagination and reality.

I was just hearing him and writing in that mode. I did another thing like that quite recently where I'm effectually hearing the modus of the friend and using that as the instrument, and it's fun.

I would be curious at some point in your happily reading and thinking about this, the way he not so much imagines himself and his own position . . . he is a poet for whom, and it's rare, really, the poem is finally the only legitimate "subject," but it's a constant reference and presence. I mean Robert really composed books . . . really right down to the typing and all that constituted it. He isn't a ringmaster at this position, or is it simply a master of ceremonies, but he's conducting the situation very determinedly and very specifically. It's not a collection, it's a design. He, for example, in his very last books . . . this one, for example [he takes out a book] . . . no, it's the one before, *Ground Work* . . . where he's typing and he becomes so frustrated with the translation of the type to letterpress, was throwing off his own sense of the cadence and measure that he might otherwise be making clear.[30] Both he and Olson were significantly frustrated by the poems and typography, and translating the initial text to type.

**Durgin:** Another connection with Jackson.

**Creeley:** Yeah. 'Cause he felt that this is the score, this is the completed work, this is the means to hear the work, and if you can't sound it then you've not really got to where it's accurate. He felt you had to not just read in some public performance, but you had to join the dance, which was the sound of what was written. He was very much involved with sounds. He also had those wonderful, playful . . . *Writing Writing*, for example, the whole involvement with Stein.[31] He was one of the initial people for me using Stein very comfortably and affectionately, really. Not simply as a means, but almost as a response. When he says "I can't remember if I read it or I wrote it," that gives a sense of where he's at. Years ago there was a pleasant fellow, young, first employment in the university, and he was writing particularly on *The Yellow Book*, on Beardsley and

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[30] Duncan's *Ground Work: Before the War* (New York: New Directions, 1984; reprinted in *Ground Work: Before the War/In the Dark.* Eds. Robert J. Bertholf and James Maynard. Intro. Michael Palmer. [New York: New Directions, 2006]) was produced directly from a typescript.

[31] Duncan, *Writing Writing: A Composition Book for Madison, Stein Imitations, 1953* ([Albuquerque]: Sumbooks, 1964; Portland: Trask House, 1971).

all that cluster of people.[32] He was doing a lot of research, it was his first year here, and his head was flooded with stuff. He was writing, and lo and behold, there's suddenly a charge that he's plagiarized, you dig, that he's actually used some material in his work that he hasn't sufficiently identified as quoted. I used to have an office near him, and to this day I believe it just all melted in his head, that he couldn't weirdly remember what he had read and what he had thought himself. He ended up teaching at the University of Singapore, and then drifted off to Japan I believe . . . There's a great scene when the Buffalo contingent are arrested for protesting the war, and his mother who's back in Texas suddenly sees him in something like *The New York Times* listed as a person who's now in jail for breaking the law, and he said he got Leslie Fiedler to write his mother a letter to say he was okay,[33] that her son was not turned into some awful creature. He was a very sweet man, but he got . . . I'm sure with Robert . . . people would at times come up and say quite spiritedly and quite smugly, "Did you know that that wasn't Olson's own thinking, he took that from so and so?" Yeah he did, didn't he. He had whole poems which would be effectually translations or adaptations. Who can stop and give credits to everything? You start getting up in the morning and it's "Thank you god" all day, which would probably keep you safe and sound . . .

**Lori Emerson:** That's what I wanted to ask you about . . .

**Creeley:** Plagiarism? Poetry loves plagiarism.

**Emerson:** . . . especially about how Duncan thought about the self in relation to writing. In *A Quick Graph* you say, in relation to Duncan, "to 'return' not to oneself as some egocentric center, but to experience oneself as in the world,"[34] and then I was thinking about that against what [Robert] Bertholf was saying about Duncan's response to Olson . . .

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[32] Aubrey Beardsley (1872-1898) was an influential English illustrator whose work is known for its Art Nouveau style. He was also the first editor of *The Yellow Book* (1894-1897), a British periodical that published a wide range of stories, poems, essays, illustrations, and paintings.

[33] Leslie Fiedler (1917-2003) was an influential critic of American literature and a former Professor of English at the University at Buffalo.

[34] Creeley, "'I'm given to write poems,'" in *A Quick Graph*. Ed. Donald Allen. (San Francisco: Four Seasons Foundation, 1970), 61-72. The full statement reads: "That body is the 'field' and is equally the experience of it. It is, then, to 'return' not to oneself as some egocentric center, but to experience oneself as in the world, thus, through this agency of fact we call, variously, 'poetry'" (64). The essay is reprinted in *The Collected Essays of Robert Creeley*. (Berkeley: U of California P, 1989), 496-504.

**Creeley:** "Against Wisdom as Such."[35]

**Emerson:** . . . he said that "you've given myself back to me,"[36] but these seem like two really different pictures of the self . . .

**Creeley:** Well they're each . . . I'm trying to get into the world. I had fallen deeply under the spell of Pound's, you know, "man standing by his word,"[37] and nothing but the most . . . the whole idea of poetry and using language other than in the most explicit and timid sense of the reality you can recognize. It wasn't that I was necessarily humorless, but I was doggedly honest. Robert used to tease me . . . one of my greatest respects and delights as a "young reader" was Jean Cocteau,[38] I really dug his work. And Robert used to tease me by saying, "Oh, Cocteau says that literature is the out of line." I couldn't say, oh no, he would never say that. It wasn't that we were coming at different ends; we were each of us trying to locate and enter a world made possible. Not simply accommodating what we were doing, but in which what we were doing found relationship, place, and company, a companion. When Olson's dying and he's gone to see him, and he says to Olson, "We've been upon a great adventure."[39] That's what

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[35] See note 20.

[36] A paraphrase of a letter Duncan wrote to Charles Olson in October of 1957.

[37] One of the most important poets of the twentieth century, Ezra Pound (1885-1972) was a complex figure known an the central proponent of such movements as Imagism and Vorticism, as the author of the epic long poem *The Cantos*, and as a controversial political supporter of the Mussolini and Fascism. In the notes that accompany Ernest Fenollosa's *The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry,* foreword and notes Ezra Pound (London: Stanley Nott, 1936), Pound describes the Chinese character for sincerity or truth—composed of the figure for "man" next to the figure for "word, speech"—as "Man and word, man standing by his word, man of his word, truth, sincere, unwavering" (47). In "A Note," in *Collected Essays*, 477-478, Creeley writes: "I believe in a poetry determined by the language of which it is made . . . . I look to words, and nothing else, for my own redemption either as man or poet. Pound, early in the century, teaches the tradition of 'man-standing-by-his-word,' the problem of *sincerity*, which is never as simple as it may be made to seem" (477).

[38] Jean Cocteau (1889-1963) was a French poet, novelist, dramatist, and filmmaker known for his visionary Surrealism.

[39] In a number of published interviews Duncan recounts his final words with Olson which took place in New York Hospital just prior to Olson's death on January 10, 1970. In a letter to Jess written January 4, 1970 and published four years later in *Olson: The Journal of the Charles Olson Archives* 1 (1974): 4-6, Duncan writes that he said to Olson that "I see him always ahead along a way (the way or quest of what those of us who set out in 1950 with a mission in poetry were promised to)" (5).

one wanted in my case or in his, a sense of company, response; not simply understanding, but others . . . not simply doing things or writing poems in some sense of collecting eggs . . . not even sharing but present in this way the world might be and seemingly was, at least in this company. It wouldn't be anything more dramatic than hanging out with musicians if you were a musician. Just people who dug music . . . not just, but people who did this thing and probably delighted . . . in the conditions of being in the world. I really keep thinking of that first poem "Often I Am Permitted to Return to a Meadow."[40] That's his great one, that's the first poem in *The Opening of the Field.* I think both of us were, not to make an easy conjunction, but I think we were each of us in our particular ways trying to both invent and discover a world which would include us. I came from a displaced household, mother worked as a nurse, et cetera, father dead . . . I don't know, I was a relatively happy and engaged child, but I felt like an outsider, because of, well, my one eye, or, but even more to the point, I didn't really feel that I was where I was. So I get this scholarship to a school at fourteen, which changes a lot just in company. I went to my fiftieth grammar school reunion and there's everybody as affectionate and recognizable as ever, all passion spent. It's sort of terrific. And I hadn't seen them since they were literally kids, and now I was seeing them when they're old, sixty five, so all the *Sturm und Drang* of adulthood had long since faded, it was sort of wonderful. You grow up and you're all human in the most fabulous way. I think with Robert . . . cause he says in that . . . I wish to hell I could find quickly where he says it, but remember he says "I practice poetry the way other men practice war; to exercise my faculties at large."[41] To exercise my faculties at large is really what I'm trying, as they say, to get to as point. Poetry for him was a modus, a way of being Robert Duncan, not just the person with a name, but the full faculty of what that was. I think that's why again he was wary of Denise's "signing it up," as he called; even good causes nonetheless distract and confine.

**Maynard:** Maybe a related question is, could you talk about the influence of Jess's work on Duncan, and their collaboration?

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[40] Duncan, "Often I Am Permitted to Return to a Meadow," in *The Opening of the Field.* (New York: Grove Press, 1960; New York: New Directions, 1973), 7.

[41] In "Pages from a Notebook," excerpted in *The New American Poetry 1945-1960.* Ed. Donald Allen. (New York: Grove Press, 1960; Berkeley: U of California P, 1999), 400-07, Duncan writes: "I make poetry as other men make war or make love or make states and revolutions: to exercise my faculties at large" (407). First published in *The Artist's View* 5 (July 1953): [1-3] and collected in *A Selected Prose*. Ed. Robert J. Bertholf. (New York: New Directions, 1995), 13-22.

**Creeley:** Well . . . there's a great story . . . Jess and Robert met at some kind of gathering, and apparently Jess went home and got a phone so that Robert could call him. Jess was one of the most extraordinary and complexly literate people I think I've ever known. His basic training, like they say, which he actually practiced, he was one of the initiating atomic physicists out of Long Beach, California, and he was trained as such. He had that habit, attention, capability, he could work that precisely and not recognizing of things. But he was obviously far more attracted to art, which to him was an endlessly sort of wearing, collecting, physical and mental business. If you know his work it's just extraordinary and painstaking. He builds up the surface of the painting exceptionally, and has this extraordinary layered and echoing and inter-resonant field of endless print and circumstance . . . and thing referred to . . . incredible. So that aspect was very shared between them. They were both polymaths in ways, and they both delighted in this kind of old time . . . it wasn't going back to childhood, but again, if you read "The Truth and Life of Myth,"[42] that's a wonderful, clear sense of Robert's take on initiation as a child. There's a great story told of him by an old friend Warren Tallman. Robert had been in Berkeley at the same time that Ellen Tallman, Warren's wife, was there and they were good friends at that time.[43] In any case, some years later Robert was invited to come to I think a conference of high school English teachers and he was there to talk and possibly read a bit of his poetry. Warren had driven him over to the high school, this is a big high school in San Francisco, and they were having some problems finding just what room they were to be. So Robert suddenly spotted some people going into a room, so he went in with them, presuming that's it, to discover the subject of interest was children's literature. Robert started talking and fascinated all the people. People were taking notes . . .

[Interruption as someone enters]

We were just talking about Duncan and this high school business where he's supposed to be giving a lecture on poetry and passes a room where all

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[42] Duncan, *The Truth and Life of Myth: An Essay in Essential Autobiography*. (New York: House of Books, 1968; Fremont, MI: The Sumac Press, 1968); reprinted in Fictive Certainties. (New York: New Directions, 1985), 1-59.

[43] Warren (1921-1994) and Ellen (King) Tallman, who had known Duncan in Berkeley since the 1940s, left the United States in 1956 for Canada to teach in the English department at the University of British Columbia. In 1963 they organized an important poetry conference in Vancouver, the first occasion where Denise Levertov, Charles Olson, Robert Duncan, and Robert Creeley were all present at the same time along with such other poets as Allen Ginsberg, Philip Whalen, and Margaret Avison.

these people are going in and he just gets in line with them to discover they're discussing children's literature and he takes off. He loved writers like George MacDonald, for example.[44] I remember I was trying to write something on Jack Kerouac's *Book of Dreams* and I suddenly thought of Robert's Wynken, Blynken and Nod, Mrs. Noah,[45] the whole sense of not just fantasy but he was quite serious, moving in that childhood world of visions and immanences and presences and echoes of as yet unrealized things. At nighttime that dream world which for Duncan was very substantial, as it was for Olson, too . . . so, what am I talking about?

**Maynard:** Jess and collaboration.

**Creeley:** Yes, so all of that content . . . there was an initial, perfect show here. You should be able to get hold of it easily. It's a large catalogue of his work . . . that will tell you, just take a look.[46] It has a lot of not simply literary allusions, but the mind . . . the way Jess sees the world is very coincident with Robert's. I don't think he was instructed by Robert, but there's certainly a coincidence in the way they both felt. Robert really venerated and loved and had absolute pleasure . . . Robert knew a lot about painting. Robert, for example, had given me a rundown once on basic painters then . . . Hassel Smith and Clyfford Still . . . the first real information on Clyfford Still I ever got was from Robert . . . Ed Corbett . . . He also had been close friends with very interesting people like [Wallace] Berman and George Herms.[47] There's a time when Robert and those households get very involved with magic. I don't think it's tales out of school or something, I just don't think I know enough about what factually all that was. I had friends in common who were there. It was not a coven, exactly, but a particular conjunction of households which were practicing magic . . .

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[44] George MacDonald (1824-1905) was a Scottish writer of fantasy, fairy tales, and romance fiction including *The Princess and the Goblin* (1872) and Lilith (1895).

[45] Jack Kerouac, *Book of Dreams*. (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1961). "Wynken, Blynken, and Nod" (1889) is the title of a children's poem written by Eugene Field (1850-1895). Duncan's poem "The Ballad of Mrs. Noah" appears in *The Opening of the Field,* 24-26.

[46] See note 5.

[47] Hassel Smith, Clyfford Still (1904-1980), and Ed Corbett were all San Francisco artists. Still and Corbett were both teaching at the California School of Fine Arts where Jess enrolled as a student in 1949. Wallace Berman (1926-1976) and George Herms (1935- ) are two California visionary artists associated with Berman's magazine *Semina; see Semina Culture: Wallace Berman & His Circle*. Eds. Michael Duncan and Kristine McKenna. (New York: D. A. P., Inc., 2005).

Duncan would endlessly sort of expand and contract; he did things which were mind blowing. For example told me once that when he was living in the east he got this curious job which was simply going around representing the comic book distributor, and he'd go to venues which were selling comic books and check and rehearse with them their stock and sales. He said at one point he discovered checking the stock that this retailer had ripped off something like five hundred copies of *Donald Duck*, and he, Robert, was now having to report this. And the guy's practically on his knees saying "You'll ruin me, you can't tell them"...And Robert says, "I've got to." He quit the job just afterwards. Ruining a man's life over X number of copies of *Donald Duck*—he couldn't do it. He did a lot of things, though. He told me one little story about when he was working for . . . oh god, I mean Robert's associations are just dazzling . . . Anaïs Nin,[48] when he was working as her ostensible literary secretary, and . . .

[Tape switch]

Lots of . . . he told me for example in New York once together . . . that for a time he was worried and working as a male prostitute. He said what would happen would be . . . the best possible scene would be he and the mark would have their sexual congress and then the person would go home, would go off to his otherwise real life leaving Robert with the room, a place to sleep and be comfortable. He said there were nights when nothing at all would happen, and so what he would then do would be to stay . . . a couple let's say coming back from the movies or whatever and they're going into their residence or hotel or apartment, and he said there's a moment when they've cleared the hall but the door hasn't quite clicked . . . that's what you want. You go in there and you . . . you go right to the very top of the building, just before you go out onto the roof. The heat rises, and you can sort of curl up there on the edge of the stairs and sleep the night and go off in the usual manner in the morning. But, lots of stuff like that. He had a very real life. It never occurred to him not to do what he had to do . . . not had to do as though it were some compulsive . . . but he didn't really worry about that, having sold his very body for lucre. He sold it for a very practical reason—a new pair of pants or something. It wasn't that it was without moral concern, but it was a practical solution to a problem he then had and he seemingly enjoyed the sex as much as the guy or whatever, so . . . He told

[48] Anaïs Nin (1903-1977) was a French-born writer known for her erotica and diaries. Duncan knew Nin in the early 1940s when he briefly was a member of her circle in New York City.

me otherwise a story once about a friend, he said he hadn't seen him really for a long time, and he had been an extraordinarily handsome young man, and now he did see him again, and he looked extraordinarily bad, like an old prizefighter. And he couldn't imagine what happened. He said the fellow showed him his drawer with a lot of diamonds in there. And he said this fellow with whom he had been living had a quite violent temper, and what he would do is he'd flare up and suddenly slug this other fellow, and then as apology he would give him a diamond. So now he had a lot of diamonds but not much face left . . .

But his knowledge, I remember one time when I was visiting him in San Francisco, I was interested to know more about music, contemporary music, particularly modern so-called music, and he played to me and demonstrated to me procedures, recognitions, breakthroughs in music beginning after Mahler, certainly, but [Boulez?] and the whole range through Stockhausen et cetera et cetera. I remember Robert's taping from his collection. But that kind of order he had remarkably . . . it was not a didactic order, it was like, again, like Jackson's is a curious parallel or complement to his kind of intelligence.

And that's what he gave to me in response I always felt. I remember again one time a friend, a painter named John Altoon, was . . . we were all in Mallorca.[49] John Altoon's background had been growing up in a usual sad, displaced Armenian family at that time. And the mother was dying slowly of cancer, and they were the social outcasts of Los Angeles. He said he remembered going to visit friends' houses as a kid, and the mother would say, "Now let's see, your name is Billy Smith, and you belong to so and so, and what is your name?" He says, "John Altoon." "And how do you spell it?" And then there would be a kind of break in the affability because they really didn't like these kids to be around with their kids. Anyhow, John Altoon was telling us this, and I remember Robert saying, "Do you know anything about the Armenian empire?" He said, "My family lost everything . . . when my father went back there wasn't an Armenia any more; it wasn't there any more, it was gone." And so he said, "I don't know, empire?" And so Robert rehearsed to him over a period of about two hours, three hours, the whole history literally of the Armenian empire including its major figures et cetera et cetera. And John, you could see him visibly swelling with pride and fascination as this extraordinary antecedent became evident.

There were wonderful moments. For example, I was supposed to be lecturing in Berkeley once and I'd come with Robert, and we . . . oh gosh . . .

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[49] John Altoon (1924-1967) was a painter who collaborated with Creeley on the book *About Women*. (Los Angeles: Gemini Ltd., 1966).

I don't remember, maybe Thom Gunn[50]. . . being asked about projective verse or something like that, and there was a blackboard, and I had just moved to try to make some thing that could be used for reference, and I remember Robert saying "I think I can help with that," coming up from the back of the room—he's off, man, he's off. There's another at MLA, where the next session was literally pounding on the doors to get in while Robert . . . the particular piece where he's talking about the sense of self in contemporary literature and what not.[51] It's not that he wouldn't be shut up, but he would not edit or confine to the convenience of the social terms.

The age old question, I'm thinking back to how this got started, is . . . how does one come into the world . . . and how does one come into the world in a way that is not simply defended where you come in ready to fight off anything that might want to take a look at you. You'll hear it not as idiocy or old-ageism, but one of the things I . . . you can't advise people to do this, but one of the things I do remember doing as a young man . . . Thinking of Jackson, it was the first time I ever cast eye on Jackson. We were over at I think it was The Open Door; it couldn't have been The Five Spot, but I think it was The Open Door, and there had been this wonderful evening—it was Thelonius Monk,[52] I'm not sure—and he was sitting way back on the side by himself, as I was sitting in some like situation, and I don't think I even spoke to him, I just knew it was him. And then afterwards everyone was going off about their businesses. It's now quite late at night, 2:00 or 3:00 in the morning, and I hit the street. I could walk back to a place, somebody was letting me crash on Spring Street, but I'm all wired up with what I was hearing. I see five people getting into a car and I just got in line with them and got in. I remember them saying, "Who the hell are you?" Introduced each other, and we went down to the Fulton Street Fish Market and drank, and I remember anyhow one of the fellows came back to this place, I had offered him a place to sleep, and so were reciting really until dawn he recited for me the whole of "The King of Harlem," Lorca's terrific poem.[53] He was from the West Indies, Spanish.

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[50] Thom Gunn (1929-2004) was an English poet who moved to San Francisco in 1960. In 1972 Duncan wrote and published privately as a typescript edition *Poems from the Margins of Thom Gunn's "Moly*," written in response to Gunn's *Moly* (1971). These poems later appeared in *Ground Work: Before the War*.

[51] Published as "The Self in Postmodern Poetry," in *Fictive Certainties*, 219-234.

[52] Thelonius Monk (1917-1982) was a famous jazz pianist. The Open Door and The Five Spot Café were live jazz clubs in New York City.

[53] Federico García Lorca's "El Rey de Harlem" ("The King of Harlem") appreared in *Poeta en Nueva York* (1930).

It's very hard to know when . . . I don't know if the choices are ever clear. I had great love for Robert because it wasn't just that he took chances but that he followed anything that thus led him without any seeming confusion. I think Olson did too, and Denise certainly did. The wonderful great story about her and Mitch, they were trying to leave Paris and their son Nik was then still a babe in arms, and they had all their battered stuff in boxes and things falling apart and all their modest junk, and they were headed from Paris out to the boat, the boat train, and they were walking along the street and Denise suddenly sees gendarmes berating and in some physical way trying to contain a group of workers protesting, and they were beginning to arrest them, and without even thinking she hands the baby to Mitch and joins the fray. And the next thing he sees is her being taken away by the police, and he's got the luggage and the baby and the boat is leaving, and that's Denise. She would act with extraordinary clarity of impulse. I remember coming down once, we were—Mitch and she and I and my wife then Ann—were riding these pretty old bicycles down that long three mile hill as you come into Aix-en-Provence past Cézanne's old studio. It's like a real chute and suddenly the brakes on her bike just gave out—they were those ones that gripped the tire—and off she went, man. She went down the hill like that at incredible speeds. It was just around 5:00 in the evening and our plan was to get some quick dinner and then go hear this Mozart concert. And she went through the whole damn city at breakneck speed . . . way across and ended up in the railroad station and then peddled back. It didn't seem to faze her at all. It certainly concerned her, but . . . We went off to hear the concert, that was it. It wasn't that she was cool, just here and now was her seeming . . .

I think too with Robert there's a sense of . . . it isn't that he's fantasizing and making it up, but that sense of first place. I love the poem "A Poem Beginning with a Line by Pindar."[54] It seems to me an extraordinary nexus of all of Robert's extraordinary abilities and practices. This was first place in his grandfather's time, you know the...I think that's a . . . not wonderful in some sacrament way, but there's an extraordinary getting hold of the dilemmas between knowing something and not knowing something.

One of these things I brought with me I realized had suddenly, charmingly [he takes a book out from his bag] . . . It says *a little endarkenment and in my poetry you find me*.[55] This was printed here in Buffalo, I believe, sponsored

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[54] Duncan, "A Poem Beginning with a Line by Pindar," in *The Opening of the Field,* 62-69.

[55] Duncan, *a little endarkenment and in my poetry you find me.* (Buffalo: Poetry/Rare Books Collection / Chicago: Rodent Press / Boulder: Erudite Fangs Editions, 1978). The quotation that follows comes from page [7].

partly by Rodent press in Chicago. It says things like [he reads from the book's opening note:] "Mr. Duncan was both easy to interview and tantalizing to follow in an interview situation. He answered questions courteously and at length, but often started new sentences before the conclusion of the previous one." People used to freak out at that. Pauline Butling, who was Fred Wah's terrific friend and wife,[56] said the first time she heard Robert, the first hour she thought she never heard anything more brilliant in her life, the second hour she began to lose track, and by the third or fourth hour she couldn't understand a word. He would, if you listened to him . . . Joel Kuszai had for some real time that really useful site when he was out in San Diego still which let you hear[57] . . . There was a great lecture that Robert gave on Pound, for example, and you can hear that pattern he uses. It was beautiful. [He continues to read from the note.] Again, that's Robert's shtick. He doesn't present himself in some sort of defensive way stylishly, but he's a stylish person and he's very particular. This is a good . . . [He begins reading from the interview.] I wish we had the tape to this . . . [continues reading passages from the interview.] That's very classic of him. Again, Robert I think despite all the apparent emphasis not on "me" but on all that comes out of him . . . an extraordinary tack of this really often very engaging information . . . his . . . not his humility . . . but it is a humility, his wanting to be in the world all together, not to be sort of stuck in mid-passage or have it halfway in or halfway out. I think that's the persistent face or question that occupies all of these various writers.

As with Denise's sense of what constitutes response to and recognition of and place for, one's self involved with world and how do you stay true or how do you keep the faith or how do you treat the world with care. Then coming herself from curiously a complexly religious background, father a Hassidic scholar and Jewish convert to Anglicanism, of all things, although friends subsequently told me that he probably converted more Anglicans to Judaism than the other way around. Then her mother comes from a line of Welsh mystics, so that Denise certainly is very parallel to Robert; not the same agency, but very parallel in the sense of a world immanent or obtaining or being there if one knew how to enter it or to admit it.

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[56] Pauline Butling wrote a doctoral thesis focusing in part on Duncan at the University at Buffalo, and has since published books on the Canadian poet Phyllis Webb and on experimental Canadian poetry. She is married to the Chinese-Canadian poet Fred Wah (1939- ), who studied with Creeley at the University of New Mexico and at the University at Buffalo.

[57] Joel Kuszai is a graduate of the Poetics Program at the University at Buffalo, the editor/publisher of Meow Press, and a co-founder of Factory School (factoryschool.org).

**Featherston:** And yet he talks so often about the theosophical as being a sort of disgrace, or that it informed his early life, but . . .

**Creeley:** Remember, being a disgrace is not necessarily unpleasant for Robert. Not to be aggressively disgraceful but he in fact loves the kitsch. So I remember when Allen Ginsberg had sadly died and there was this Buddhist ceremony for him and it was tacky beyond belief or storefront seeming. The whole procedure was attended and very respectful but somehow people were still tacking up banners and what not as you came in for this . . . Everyone was sitting primarly, zazen. I thankfully managed to get a chair. I remember at one point I was sitting next to Elsie Dorfman and her husband saying "God this is tacky,"[58] but Allen would have loved it. The tackier the better, he loved that stuff. Robert didn't love tackiness so much, but Allen loved excessive numbers, just as I would be scared of them. But Robert loved incredible style. His cape, for example; he was one of the few friends who ever wore a factual cape and pulled it off. He wasn't phony, he was absolutely for real. He wasn't aggressive, he didn't hurt people. He wasn't kidding. He took himself seriously but he also had an extraordinary sense of humor about himself. He wasn't protective of himself.

He used for years the fact of Jess's . . . not quite being a hermit but really not wanting to deal with . . . I mean wanting the house because he worked there to be basically socially settled and secure. He didn't want people rushing in, he didn't want people getting drunk in there, he didn't want parties. He had a lot of fragile stuff about, but even more to the point he just didn't like the sudden blast of quite possible social scenes rolling through and he particularly didn't want to deal with people whom Robert didn't like. Because it could get pretty messy if Robert got energized or suddenly took off and let him have it, not just physically but verbally. He didn't want scenes, so it was almost a rule of thumb that no one, no one literally was ever casually admitted into Robert's house, and Jess's house, and the constant excuse that Robert would use was that Jess did not want them to come in. That ploy was used endlessly. Sometimes it was true, but many times it wasn't; it was Robert who didn't want them in. So people like James Schevill,[59] I remember, would drive Robert home but not be able to come

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[58] Elsa Dorfman (1937- ) is a photographer who collaborated with Creeley on the book *En Famille*. (New York: Granary Books, 1999).

[59] A poet, novelist, dramatist, and biographer, James Schevill (1920- ) was director of San Francisco State University's Poetry Center from 1961-1968. Duncan was the Assistant Director in the winter of 1956/57.

into the house. "You know how Jess is, so . . . " They would humbly deliver Robert and then go home thinking it was sad he couldn't come in but Jess was Jess. It was just a wonderful economy; no one really felt that hurt by it because it was Jess who was doing it, and everyone knew Jess was so hermetic that you wouldn't tend to see him anyhow. He was a very pleasant and bright man, thankfully. But anyhow, the point is that Robert was very volatile sometimes.

But ask me some questions so I don't just wander on.

**Anna Reckin:** I have a question actually that connects with the household, the domestic, and I was looking to the "Preface" to *Selected Poems* where you've said "With Robert Duncan I am committed to the hearth, and love the echoes of that word. The fire is the center."[60] And I want you to put together the anecdotes that you have about Duncan's wildness, for want of a better word, as a young man with his sense of a householder and the hearth and the settlement.

**Creeley:** Well . . . I should have known better because Robert had his biography written by Ekbert Faas, and I had the stupidity to . . . Ekbert Faas said he had this really interesting plan that he'd begin with young Robert Duncan, and because of Jess's refusal to have any life examined after they meet, so he didn't want Ekbert or anyone else researching or digging around their actual life together, so Robert agreed that the biography therefore should stop with his meeting of Jess and that's it. And that's where it ends. So Ekbert thought, well what I'll do is I'll make Robert's segment be the first of this situation. I'll then move to you, and you'll be the sixties, the fifties-sixties . . . I think Robert, that's about at the end of the forties that cuts off, so then I'm used to begin the fifties, and then the sixties will be Olson.[61] So that's what I thought would be the case for years. I thought the biography he did of Robert was interesting in detail. I didn't think he got it all, so to speak, but that paradoxically wasn't the point of it. He did locate at that time at least a lot about Duncan that was very interesting to know. Not prurient, but particular. Anyhow, somehow in the years since he came out with this absolutely, aggressively hateful biography on me. It's on Amazon.com, this fellow, bless him, has written in and speaks of me as the most generous, sweetest, says what a terrific guy to give such a biographer complete license to say whatever he wants. Only Dylan does that and so and

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[60] Creeley, "Preface" to *Selected Poem*. (Berkeley: U of California P, 1991), xx-xxi.

[61] Ekbert Faas, *Young Robert Duncan: Portrait of the Poet as Homosexual in Society*. (Santa Barbara, CA: Black Sparrow Press, 1983), and with Maria Trombacco, *Robert Creeley*: A Biography. (Hanover, NH: UP of New England, 2001).

so.[62] He thinks some kind of heroic permission I've given this person . . . He finally says, but you know, he leaves out all the 80s and the 90s, that's kind of curious. And then he says maybe he doesn't get it, and that's very useful to me to have him say.

So, the question with Duncan . . . I would think that Duncan in those early years . . . I know that Duncan is as practical, as much a dignified survivor, let's call it, he's not just scrambling . . . he's living a life as particularly as he always does, and that the sexual probably at that time was much more out than it is subsequently. He's also got to locate a person also as he's homosexual. I think "The Homosexual in Society" is a terrific . . . Dwight Macdonald, he was a very pleasant man too, whom Robert knew I think through the political circumstance, asked Robert if he would do something on the political situation of the minority.[63] And he certainly didn't know that Robert was going to choose to write about being homosexual, the homosexual in society. But then he does, and it's the first manifest of its kind, of that order, that open . . . not just open to detail but open as a common world. It's an extraordinary document, and it has real effects. John Crowe Ransom had, I believe, taken "The Venice Poem" for publication, one of the great poems of that time by a young writer, young poet, and was completely blown away. And then of course after this article came out they began to read it all as a homosexual camp, you know, secret language, and the poem was not published by them.[64] So he paid real dues on it. I remember he said he got a letter from [W. H.] Auden saying it's not wise to talk about sexual circumstances in public like that,[65] just come to New York and we'll fix you up. It was like, we'll see that you're taken care of, but stay off the street.

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[62] Mixing together elements of folk music with rock and roll often to create songs of social protest, Bob Dylan (1941- ) is an American icon, a singer-songwriter who has been releasing commercially successful and critically acclaimed albums since his self-titled debut in 1962.

[63] "The Homosexual in Society" was published in Dwight Macdonald's Politics 1, no. 7 (August 1944): 209-211. A revised version of the essay (1959) was eventually published in *Jimmy & Lucy's House of "K"* 3 (January 1985) and reprinted in *A Selected Prose*, 38-50.

[64] The Duncan poem that was initially accepted and then subsequently rejected for publication by John Crowe Ransom—an influential poet, literary critic associated with New Criticism, and editor of the *Kenyon Review*—was not "The Venice Poem" but "An African Elegy."

[65] Wystan Hugh Auden (1907-1973) was an enormously influential poet, playwright, and essayist who moved from England to the United States in 1939.

I remember during the time of Robert's distaste . . . not distaste, but Robert would have curiously interesting rules for himself. He wouldn't say how come you published an anthology, he would say anthologies are impractical places to be published in. They are nine times out of ten no honor to anybody. They jumble stuff together alphabetically, they take chunks of this and put in chunks of that. There's no coherence in their condition whatsoever, so if anyone of any real interest is going to depend upon an anthology for an introduction, then forget it, they're not serious. They may be looking like theater bills or something quick, but they're not really a place at all. So we really had to argue for his inclusion in *The New American Poetry*,[66] I remember. Don [Allen] had really to persuade him that it was going to be okay. Then later Don and I edited *New Writing in the USA*,[67] and we wanted very much to include his "Apprehensions,"[68] but he was not hostile just said no, I just don't want to be published in it. But I remember one anthology he did want to be published in was Auden's . . . had done a particular selection of then writers . . . and he thought that was interesting.[69] But by and large he didn't like the Norton anthologies, that kind of stuff. For a long time resisted . . . Robert would do things that were very interesting in that way. Like for fifteen years he doesn't publish. Which cost him, if you're thinking about the public identity of the poet. To not publish for fifteen years is a real time.

**Durgin:** He wasn't thinking about that . . .

**Creeley:** No, no, not at all. He just didn't want to be engaged in the public rapport . . . he didn't want to have that phase him.

**Sandra Guerreiro:** Didn't he publish like in small . . .

**Creeley:** Yeah, he published in magazines, so he wasn't gone . . . He and I both . . . One time we were talking about the early feminist movement. Diane di Prima was a really good friend of Robert's.[70] They liked each other; he liked

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[66] *The New American Poetry 1945-1960.* Ed. Donald Allen. (New York: Grove Press, 1960; Berkeley: U of California P, 1999).

[67] *The New Writing in the USA.* Eds. Donald Allen and Robert Creeley. Intro. Robert Creeley. (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1967).

[68] Duncan, "Apprehensions," in *Roots and Branches*, 30-43.

[69] Duncan's poems "The Reaper" and "Hero Song" were included in The Faber Book of Modern American Verse. Ed. W. H. Auden. (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1956).

[70] Diane di Prima (1934- ) is a poet and one of the few female writers directly associated with the Beat movement. Many of her own experiences form the basis of her novel *Memoirs of a Beatnik* (1969).

her very much. I remember he and I had been walking somewhere with her, and she had now gone off on her own and both of us were really thinking about how impressive she is. That she has lived a life with this extraordinary family, children and very particular relations from time to time. But when she's come and gone from them there's never a sense of victim, or of Diane being dumped on the street with the kids. She has had an extraordinary independence equal to that of any males et cetera as she's lived her life.

So in any case Robert was saying about the . . . I don't know how we got into it . . . he was talking about the fact of the woman and usual social condition blah blah blah. And I remember Robert said, well, he'd been down someplace in San Diego, and he'd been on a panel I believe, and his point was that insofar as women characteristically ruled the hearth. That's a peculiarly neglected authority which women have had for a long time—their ability to say who comes in or out of the cold and who doesn't, and who gets to sit by the fire or who comes into that nexus of a warmth and relationship. It can be overpowered or attacked, or raped or pillaged, but it can't be . . . you can destroy it, but you can't curiously create it. And that sense of again Wynken Blynken and Nod or Robert Louis Stevenson or George MacDonald or all that writing which is that lovely float of being secure in a place.[71] Someone was telling me recently that Rudyard Kipling, being an orphan, when he writes *The Jungle Book*, that the stories always begin "Best beloved." It sounds too good to be true, but the person who was telling me this was saying that being an orphan he wanted whoever read this story to a kid to begin with that emphasis you are best beloved and then start the story.

I remember Robert Graves[72] . . . not dumping on me, but diminishing me substantially by saying "of course he's a domestic poet. He's ruled by the household and the confirmation of that fact."

**Durgin:** Saying you are?

**Creeley:** Yeah, yeah, despite all the raging about. I was all things to all persons, apparently. I stayed home; maybe they wished more that I got the hell out of there, but wasn't easily evicted. Yeah, Robert was a domestic poet too. He loved that kind of sense of . . . Robert and Jess used to read in bed and stuff like that.

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[71] Robert Louis Stevenson (1850-1894) was a Scottish poet, novelist, and travel writer popular for such novels as *Treasure Island* (1883) and *Kidnapped* (1886)

[72] Robert Graves (1895-1985) was an English poet, scholar, and novelist who was married for a time to the poet Laura Riding. *The White Goddess* (1948), Graves's study of poetic myth, was an important text for Duncan.

**Durgin:** Actually that's funny, because I was going to ask you about the world-poem. In the relationships he had, maybe we can't call them imitations, but the poem is going back and forth and everyone is keeping tabs on one another and there's a great deal . . . you don't take one another for granted because it's about coming into the world and that implicates maybe more than the poem per se or some sort of public identity, so . . . were you, was it ever a little bit frightening to be part of Robert Duncan's world?

**Creeley:** No, it was extraordinarily generous for me . . . I remember for example when my marriage had sadly collapsed I had then gone back to Black Mountain [College] and held there say from June until the early winter. And then just around the turn of the year I had headed to New Mexico where I had an old friend from the east, college days, who was now living there, two friends, so I effectually was heading there to regroup or crash on them until things were more clear. So I got that far, and stayed there for several months, and then the Dorns, Ed and Helene Dorn,[73] had in the meantime moved to California and were living in San Francisco. I was determined to go out and visit them. I was looking for ways, not to freeload, but where could I begin to get my head together. So I went and stayed with them, but before I had arrived Robert in the meantime was back at Black Mountain teaching as I had been, and he gave me a list of, yeah, he just simply alerted his friends, and gave me a list in common to get in touch with once I was there. I particularly remember Kermit Sheets,[74] for example, an extraordinary friend. Jimmy Broughton was an impeccable friend.[75] And there was one younger friend from that same circle. Madeline Gleason, for example.[76] But the so-called cluster of friends, poets that he had been with, became these extraordinary . . . really just old time, terrific friends. If I needed help finding a place, or if I needed this, or if I sat too long alone, come to dinner. Just a very affectionate sort of thing. I stayed friends all my subsequent life.

The world one entered with Robert was very unthreatening in that way. They didn't just take care of you, but no one was going to get you. In some ways

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[73] Edward Dorn (1929-1999) was a student at Black Mountain College and the poet of the mock epic *Gunslinger*, the first section of which appeared in 1968.

[74] Kermit Sheets (1916-2006) was an actor/director who co-directed several films with James Broughton. Sheets and Broughton, who were lovers for a time, founded Centaur Press in San Francisco.

[75] James Broughton (1913-1999) was a San Francisco poet, playwright, and avant-garde filmmaker.

[76] Madeline Gleason (1903-1979) was a poet and dramatist in San Francisco whose organized readings in the late 1940s prepared the way for the San Francisco Renaissance.

Robert's impatience with the Beat scene that came in subsequently, and then with the Language poet scene that came some years after that, was just the . . . It wasn't that his situation had been necessarily less competitive with others, but it was domestic, whereas you certainly couldn't call the Beat scene domestic. It happened at home, but it left a lot of people smashed . . . *The Hotel Wentley Poems* was one of the great books of that century, at least in my life[77] . . . but it's hardly the sense of a happy life, or something one wants to emulate and find means to have too. Heartbreaking, an incredible book.

The Beats as Robert would say weren't really local. They were not just outlanders or something, but they really weren't located, they were constantly . . . And that was the story—On the Road was really the sad story of their lives.[78] Jack, for example, Spicer,[79] was certainly a strong presence all through this. I think of Jack and Robert as being . . . they're like twins who can't quite ever accommodate or find whatever the imaginal room is necessary for the other. Robin [Blaser][80] is the younger, not markedly younger, but younger, so Robin gets sort of bounced between their two fiefdoms in a weird way.

**Durgin:** Which could be a good thing or it could be a bad thing, depending on . . .

**Creeley:** Well, it's hard on Robin, because he's sort of tacitly suppressed or . . . I was reading just before coming over Robert's take on Robin's translations of Nerval.[81] Which I thought were . . . but Robert is absolutely hostile to these. Why is he so peculiarly hard on these translations? There doesn't seem to be anything in the translations themselves quite justifying . . . Robin's not a casual poet or translator.

**Emerson:** When did Blaser and Duncan meet?

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[77] John Wieners, *The Hotel Wentley Poem.* (San Francisco: Auerhahn Press, 1958).

[78] Jack Kerouac, *On the Road.* (New York: Viking Press, 1957).

[79] The poet Jack Spicer (1925-1965) knew Duncan and Robin Blaser in the late 1940s in Berkeley, California.

[80] Involved in both the Berkeley and San Francisco Renaissance, the poet Robin Blaser (1925-) later moved to Canada where he taught at Simon Frazer University in Vancouver. He also edited *The Collected Books of Jack Spicer* (1975).

[81] Duncan, "Returning to *Les Chimères* of Gérard de Nerval," *Audit/Poetry* 4, no. 3 (1967): 42-61.

**Creeley:** I think when they're all in college at Berkeley. And Jack too, I think. He was an incredible poet. You sort of need Jack as complement to Robert to see what . . . they contest and fit not just socially but intellectually in the ways they resolve what it is a poet is and what poetry is. They really . . . one informs the other. I don't think Robert ever gets to that level of engagement with Denise, ever. Denise is not really interested . . . she's not engaged with that kind of questioning. Jack really is, and so is Robert. What is poetry, and what is the order that it demands and confers upon those who practice it. I think both Jack and Duncan profoundly take on that question not to come to the end of it but [to] give themselves a tally up to it. I don't think Denise paradoxically really does, although she's a poet almost by breath. She has always some kind of charming, semi-religious reason why it's a good thing to be a poet, and she invests it with these curious distractions. If you want to really get a hit on Denise see what she does to Olson's "Projective Verse."[82] I remember I was in a session with her once, and she wouldn't let me bring a text of Zukofsky's into the room. She said that ingrate or that ingrateful person. It was a long, rancorous business about his not being ostensibly grateful enough when she contrived to have his *All* published by Norton.[83] She didn't want him to bow down but she did think he could have been a little more grateful, which he wasn't, because he wrote the poems, he knew they were very good, and didn't see any reason to be grateful, at least not ostentatiously. So she then began to think that he's just an arrogant and useless person. Denise was capable of those kinds of things. She wouldn't let Allen and Peter come out to where they lived in New York, their apartment. Allen lived with Peter Orlovsky, and Peter had published a piece in *Fuck You* in which he described, not vigorously or offensively, masturbating.[84] And Denise then said we have a son who's twelve years old or something who shouldn't be around such people. No one's going to disturb that terrific kid. She ran a tight ship, in some ways, and in other ways she just would leap off the roof in delight, which was a curious . . . anyhow.

**Maynard:** You said before that you didn't originally like Duncan; you thought he was too rhetorical.

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[82] Olson, "Projective Verse," *Poetry New York* 3 (1950): 13-22; *Collected Prose*, 239-249.

[83] Zukofsky, *All: The Collected Short Poems, 1923-1958*. (New York: Norton, 1965).

[84] Peter Orlovsky (1933- ) is an American poet who was Allen Ginsberg's companion from 1954 to Ginsberg's death in 1997. *Fuck You / A Magazine of the Arts* (1962-1965) was a provocative mimeographed magazine started by Ed Sanders.

**Creeley:** I was intimidated by him.

**Maynard:** You said the poetry was, when you first came to it . . .

**Creeley:** Well that's true, I said . . . but this is not not liking Duncan. I was put off, as they say. I was put off by the rhetorical base. I was trying to get something . . . not simply common, but something unadorned, something that would have no increment of . . . that would be as stripped as possible, that would be as unobtrusively put as possible . . . that would not so much not bother anybody, but would not signal its own condition in any rhetorical manner. And Robert of course was coming from the opposite end of the scene. He was being literally stylish, and intending to be, as Allen was somewhere in the middle with a different rhetorical base. Allen has a poem "Two bricklayers . . . " which is very, very explicit and clear . . . anyhow very stripped, very quiet, and then another poem momently begins "What labyrinthine..."—incredible Hart Crane rhetoric.[85]

But Robert was much more involved with the imaginal world and the recognition of the immanence of the world that was inherent in what he felt was the phenomonality and physical fact of one's own existence. I think he's terrific. I didn't have a copy in the house but would have much liked to have brought *Fictive Certainties*, his selected essays, which I think is a great book, or Robert Bertholf's subsequently re-edited *Selected Prose*.[86] Duncan's one of the great essayists, and very clear. "Ideas of the Meaning of Form" is extraordinarily clear on what the whole imagination of form and the enactment of it seemingly creates . . . what it comes from and where it's going.[87] One thinks of Language poetry not simply as a metaphor descriptive of the time, but one can think certainly of the coincidence obviously with the basic philosophies, employments of scientific inquiry and resolution, of how it is the imagination of epistemology is being extraordinarily re-ordered, et cetera et cetera. So that Language poetry begins to . . . it's not an outside of anything, it's almost the style of the period. In terms of that period's own needs and circumstances.

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[85] Allen Ginsberg, "The Bricklayer's Lunch Hour," in *Collected Poems* 1947-1980. (New York: Harper Perrenial, 1984), 4. The second poem has not been identified. Hart Crane (1899-1932) was an American poet known for his rhetorical verse as demonstrated in his epic *The Bridge* (1930).

[86] Duncan, *Fictive Certainties.* (New York: New Directions, 1985); *A Selected Prose*. Ed. Robert J. Bertholf. (New York: New Directions, 1995).

[87] Duncan, "Ideas of the Meaning of Form," in *Fictive Certainties*, 89-105.

**Guerreiro:** Do you know anything about his affiliations with European writers?

**Creeley:** Yeah, with particular ones?

**Guerreiro:** I mentioned this to the group before, this Portuguese poet, and I managed to track the book that I mentioned, it's actually a book called *Magics*, and it was published one year before Duncan died. And it starts with a poem from Duncan. I have to get a hold of it, have somebody ship it to me here, and then I will try to translate it, but . . .

**Creeley:** I know for example he taught himself effectually French . . . Bertholf will give you . . . because of his information of the correspondence and all.

**Guerreiro:** Because this poet did not give a lot of interviews, was always very reclusive about giving information, was just publishing, he is publishing. And there's a rumor that they actually met, that [?] met Duncan in Paris.

**Creeley:** When Duncan was in Paris he was staying with [R. B.] Kitaj.[88] Kitaj and his wife, the painter Sandra Fischer, were living in the old Jewish quarter of Paris, which suddenly gave resonance and understanding to a lot that Kitaj hadn't previously really recognized. Where they were was this curious nexus for the information of that world and that time, so that Dante had come in, and all curious and extraordinary people had shown up there not just to go to Paris and have a good time, but because that was the center of a kind of distribution of information and it was particularly centered in the old Jewish quarter and the fact of that language and habit and culture. Duncan stays with him . . . this poetry is done then. "Illustrative Lines" was the series that he and Duncan published as an eventual portfolio. Duncan wrote poems and Kitaj is drawing him. I'll try to recall the names . . . there's several painters, close friends of Kitaj's . . . I mean one for example I remember, a brilliant painter, is amazed that Robert knows *The Zohar* so well,[89] which is not something his own

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[88] Ronald Brooks Kitaj (1932-2007) is an American-born artist who eventually moved to England, where he was elected to the Royal Academy in 1991. The poem "Illustrative Lines" from *Ground Work II: In the Dark* (New York: New Directions, 1987), 86-88, republished in *Ground Work: Before the War/In the Dark,* 268-70, was published separately as part *of A Paris Visit: Five Poems,* drawings and afterword R. B. Kitaj ([New York]: Grenfell Press, 1985).

[89] *The Zohar* is an important set of books of Jewish mysticism first published in the thirteenth century by Moses de Leon. Reflecting on such topics as the nature of God, the structure of the universe, and the creation of language, it was a major source of inspiration for Duncan's poetry and poetics.

background . . . I mean Bakersfield, California . . . hermeticism. But Duncan had been drawn to that information long before. Duncan would set out also each morning to do . . . Kitaj was completely dazzled that Duncan would send out word to various booksellers in the city, and find though friends who had what. He was very specific about the books; they weren't contemporary . . . lore. He would then go walking across the city to do a comparative pricing of each, like a person doing shopping, the cheapest prices. It was an incredible time. I remember seeing him not long before and not long after. Because of his appetite, this extraordinary, self-taught . . . Olson had that equal in a very parallel way. They both were . . . Olson had gotten a PH. D. and all, but...Many people we know and you will know, we'll know them, once they learn what they need to learn, that's it. I remember being in an elevator in British Columbia with the chair of the department and his wife, and his wife is telling us brightly, you know, Frank here is working so hard, he hasn't read one book all year. And this is the chair of the English department; not that he should be reading books, you understand, but it would be sort of reassuring if he did. So that the sense of knowing things, knowing what you had to learn, now you're free to go. Robert was endlessly acquiring or learning. It wasn't that he was out to beat anyone, it's just A led to B led to C led to D and it just went on and on and on, it was wonderful. He was endlessly delighted and intrigued.

He had otherwise these very . . . we were in residence with him and he'd ask you, it would be something not quite like a McDonald's, but something that certainly wasn't much more expensive, and Robert would ask you, "Can I have the check?" Yeah sure. The bill. Not that he's going to pay it but he wants the receipt for taxes. Or I remember being in London with him and taking his clothes out to the Laundromat to get them done, sitting there with the laundry stained. He was not frugal but . . . he told me a great story of Jonathan [Williams],[90] that one time when they were all in San Francisco Jonathan came to them and asked if he might borrow some small amount of money. He said a specific sum, it was fifty dollars, which he said to their household was a lot of money. They managed to get it together and they gave it to Jonathan and that evening they said come to dinner, so he came and he had a twenty dollar bottle of wine, which Robert never forgot. He just loaned this guy fifty dollars and he spent twenty of it on a bottle of wine. He wasn't tightfisted but he was very particular; he was not frugal, but money in their handling of it . . . they had lived so long on so little.

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[90] An American poet, publisher, and photographer, Jonathan Williams (1929- ) has had a long career as the editor of Jargon Press, known for its editions of Black Mountain and other innovative writers including Duncan's own volume of poems *Letters* (1958).

A hundred bucks a month was the mother's provision, plus what Robert could . . . and that was actually the good times, before that Robert was managing just on what they could earn through the occasional sales of Jess's painting, but particularly Robert's working as a typist. Virginia Admiral they had that scene with, Robert DeNiro's momma.[91] She and Robert were typing away together at one point, a typing service.

**Reckin:** Building off Sandra's question, you mentioned Edith Sitwell. Can you say more about what you think she meant to Duncan and what she's meant to you?

**Creeley:** He loved the . . . I need to be reminded of the name of the big extensive piece she does . . .

**Reckin:** *Façade*,[92] the musical piece?

**Creeley:** *Façade*, he liked that. He loved the...I thought she had a terrific ear, I thought she was an extraordinary . . . He loved the fact of the performance, again, the style, the extraordinary economy of sound lapping. He also liked the curious, singular, almost gutsiness of her writing. It was fashionable in a kind of public sense. It certainly wasn't in the usual sense popular, although it had a great sort of public rapport. But the poets of that time and place didn't know what to do with it. The Sitwells were first of all three people: there was Sacheverell, Osbert, and Edith. And they were formidable. They had a kind of style that no one could quite say no to. They were overbearing . . . not overbearing, but overpowering as a presence. And her décor was just terrific. The other person that I think of that had a décor like that in terms of her style was Louise Nevelson,[93] who one time her friends said saw her go swimming and all her makeup just suddenly went . . . hard to recognize her. Charles Bernstein tells me he's never seen his mother without makeup.[94] I don't know

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[91] Virginia Admiral (1917-2000) was a painter whom Duncan first met when they were both students at the University of California, Berkeley in 1937-1938. Together they published one issue of the magazine *Epitaph* (1938). She married the painter Robert de Niro with whom she had a son, the actor Robert de Niro.

[92] First published as a text in 1922, Edith Sitwell's *Façade* was later set to music by William Walton. See her *Collected Poems* (London: Macmillan Publishers Limited, 1982), 110-158.

[93] Louise Nevelson (1899-1988) was a Ukrainian-born sculptor known for her flamboyant appearance.

[94] Charles Bernstein (1950- ) is a Language poet, critic, and former editor of the magazine *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E*. From 1989 to 2003 he was the David Gray Professor of Poetry and Letters at the University at Buffalo where he directed the Poetics Program.

if she's Edith Sitwell, but . . . It was the high style that she carried off with such panache and such good nature. And she really was a poet. "Still Falls the Rain" and all . . . I can still quote it by heart.[95] And Robert really loved that. He used to say that Swinburne,[96] whom both of us liked, had logorrhea—he just couldn't stop. And Robert said in some ways that was a possibility he had to consider. He was sensitive to it because there is a writing that just gets rolling and you cannot stop it. And that economy is curiously hard then to manage to learn how to shut up, how to shape it. Swinburne, he's wonderful, he can go forever. Incredible what he can do, thinking of getting exhausted. There's another poet who was really interested recently, a friend John Ashbery was fascinated by his double-sestinas,[97] Swinburne, which are really pretty jazzy. He's a great poet in this curious manner.

I think one wanted some kind of "energy" or some kind of intensity, and Edith Sitwell was not the only game in town by any means, because there was obviously Williams and H. D. and Pound, et cetera, but she was there. If you want a curious, real sense of Edith Sitwell, a friend of that time, Seymour Lawrence,[98] managed to persuade her to do an anthology. It was called *The Atlantic Book of English Verse*,[99] and she writes brief, sort of qualifying comments on various of the materials that she uses, and poets, and I was very moved by that book. I mean she's sensible, she's absolutely clear as to her own . . . I mean she's a poet, so she's interesting, and she's a good one. But we'd had the same dilemmas earlier with Hart Crane; no one wanted to read Hart Crane because he's so . . . all these words, and who knows even what they mean. I thought that Edith Sitwell was a breath of fresh air at that time, although I'd be terrified to try to write like that.

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[95] Sitwell, "Still Falls the Rain," in *Collected Poems*, 272-273.

[96] Algernon Charles Swinburne (1837-1909), an English poet known for his excessive versification and rhyming.

[97] John Ashbery (1927- ) is a popular and critically acclaimed American poet. His book-length poem *Flow Chart* (1991) not only incorporates the form of the double sestina but also maintains the same end words as Swinburne's.

[98] Seymour Lawrence (1926-1994) was an independent publisher of American and international writers.

[99] *The Atlantic Book of British and American Poetry*. Ed. Dame Edith Sitwell. (Boston: Little, Brown, 1958).

Any other . . . ? Time to go to bed. So long.

[Dinner break]

**Barbara Cole:** You spoke before about Duncan's conception of the book as not a collection but a design. And that's something that as a group we've been talking a lot about. I'm wondering if you could elaborate more on the distinction between a collection of poems versus a design, or how Duncan conceived of the book as a whole thing or totality?

**Creeley:** Well, Robert, the . . . at least particularly towards the end of his life . . . well, "Passages" obviously is a serial poem . . . it has to have an economy inherent in the relation of its parts. Not simply its logic, but its occasion as a design . . . you therefore have to make its . . . That's why he doesn't like anthologies, because there's no rhyme or reason to them except the dates or alphabetical orders. Anyhow, he wants the materials to accumulate and illuminate or interact, but he isn't remarkably interested in having that be the case from, say . . . I don't think you'd ever find a book of Robert's entitled something like *San Francisco Poems or Mexico City Blues*.[100] Whereas personally I would. I would write until I felt an exhaustion in some way and then cut that off and start over. I think almost every time I published I used the most obvious and simple sense of proposition, just A, B, C. I've used dates. I don't think Robert uses that that way quite at all. He'll sometimes use it; I mean it is a progression, but it's . . . he writes . . . all I can say is it's a design. I remember when he was working, he would have, characteristically, as I'm sure is evident in the collection of his materials,[101] notebooks in which he'd be working simultaneously from A to B, whatever, which were various places, rather than do this and then do that. They were places where his mood or need would be most served or most articulate. And so he kept a constant web or interaction of thought and response. "The H. D. Book,"[102] again, the way that proliferates or expands almost as though it becomes a skin or a place of his actual life. It's not a subject book, you know. I mean people going to "The H. D. Book" thinking that they're going to find out all they'll need to know about H. D. will find that but they'll also find so much

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[100] Lawrence Ferlinghetti, *San Francisco Poems.* (San Francisco: City Lights Foundation, 2001); Jack Kerouac, *Mexico City Blues.* (New York: Grove Press, 1959).

[101] The majority of Duncan's papers are located in The Poetry Collection, The State University of New York at Buffalo.

[102] "The H. D. Book," Duncan's critical study of and tribute to the poet H. D., was published serially in various little magazines from the 1960s to 1980s.

more that will be far, far more complicated to resolve in its nature than, say, simply a book about wine. I guess I'm faint in answering that because I've not been able to design books in the way that Robert has. So it's hard to tell you why and how he really does it. I mean I experienced him doing it but I just . . . I can't . . . It's wonderful . . .

Robert had begun being published by Scribner's. Let's see how many titles I managed to bring out. They list his earlier poems here: *The Opening of the Field,* published by Grove Press, and then he comes to Scribner's. It seems to me he has two books published by Scribner's.[103] And by the second one he's absolutely offended and irritated with them. Although I know the editor he has who's a well-intending person but just doesn't get it. And Robert's particularly irritated with the setting. So if you put stuff like this, he doesn't like the intrusion of the décor upon the text. So he leaves, which no one can quite at the time understand. Just that hey, Scribner's is a very impressive publisher, and they really like Robert, they think he's terrific, but that doesn't interest him at all. He goes to New Directions, who in some ways were very interested to have him, but the fact of being published by New Directions is certainly not at this time as authoritative as Scribner's. But it is to poets, very much so. As with Pound and Williams and all the great tradition. That he cares about . . .

I wish Robin were here to speak more particularly of both design and also Edith Sitwell. I feel comfortable with Edith Sitwell, because I shared in his . . . I remember hearing first that recording I believe at Robert's house . . . *Façade*.

**Durgin:** I have a weird one for you.

**Creeley:** Yeah?

**Durgin:** What does Duncan think of Charlie Parker?[104] What's his listening like? I come to Duncan thinking or reading through [Nathaniel] Mackey,[105] so I come to some rhythms that seem really odd in terms of that kind of listening that I would imagine he would have been doing or have done. Or there's the relation to you when he tries out your sort of . . .

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[103] Duncan had only one book published by Charles Scribner's Sons: *Roots and Branches* (1964).

[104] Charlie Parker (1920-1955) was a famous jazz saxophonist and founder of bebop, an intricately rhythmic style of jazz improvisation.

[105] Nathaniel Mackey (1947- ) is a poet, prose writer, critic, and editor whose critical and creative work explores the juxtapositions of innovative, improvisational form and pan-African culture.

**Creeley:** I don't think either Olson or Duncan had any ostensible . . . I mean Olson speaks of Baby Dodds, et cetera, drumming, but it's like Williams speaking of [Samuel] Johnson or something; there's not really that interest.[106] I think Robert's interest as far as I can remember never really quite gets to jazz as a formal agency or fact. He likes the reference, the jazz bands and stuff—maybe; I don't know even that. I can't ever think of him . . . and had he wanted to there would have been a lot of it to hear in San Francisco. He told me once he was . . . in fact almost as a kind of instance he told me during the fifties there were various sort of jazz and poetry scenes. Let's see, who has one . . . [Kenneth] Rexroth does a little bit of it.[107] Rexroth is a long acquaintance and ally of Duncan's, and the two wives, particularly Marthe and then his wife before that. That's an interesting conjunction. For a long, long time Rexroth is really . . . not as an elder patronizingly but as an ally a little older, very much respecting Robert as the fellow occupant of the city. He doesn't really take to jazz and poetry. He told me once he'd heard that Kenneth Patchen was to give a performance,[108] a reading with jazz, and he said, "Oh my god, his life has become so penurious that he's taken to passing the hat at these weird musical numbers." He said he felt in support of Patchen, who was an old friend, that he ought to show up and pay for his ticket and sit down. So he did, and he said he got in there and he suddenly realized that the place was absolutely packed. He said there were people just jamming the place, and obviously Patchen did not need his support specifically at all. Now he felt really irritated because he paid money, which wasn't really necessary. So he began parodying all the activity as it then occurred. So he's making great fun of the thing squeaking and laughing to his neighbor, who's being amused by what's just happening...

[Someone sneezes]

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[106] Warren "Baby" Dodds (1898-1959) was an important early jazz drummer. As a poet, essayist, biographer, and writer of one of the first English dictionaries, Samuel Johnson (1709-1784) is a renowned figure of English literature.

[107] Kenneth Rexroth (1905-1982) was a leading figure in the San Francisco Renaissance whom Duncan knew from their anarchist meetings in San Francisco during the late 1940s. Marthe Rexroth was his third wife.

[108] Kenneth Patchen (1911-1972) was an American poet and novelist whose eclectic work ranged from visual poetry to live performances accompanied by jazz musicians. He married Miriam Oikemus in 1934. Duncan first knew Patchen in New York during the 1940s through Anaïs Nin.

God bless you god bless you god bless you. And then he said when it was over he suddenly realized that Miriam Patchen had been sitting right in front of him, had heard it all and wasn't very happy, got up and looked at him with irritation. And his point was never go to any place you don't want to on conscience. If you don't want to go, don't go. Because if you do go only because you think you ought to go, that's what will happen. That's the only time I heard him speak about jazz. I mean he listened intently to lots of music . . . I think the whole jazz scene didn't for whatever reason really get to him. It barely got to Allen Ginsberg. Kerouac it certainly does.

**Durgin:** I don't see . . . thinking about the way the line breaks and the rhythms that come out of that, like I said, I didn't see it in Duncan but it would be something that I would have reference to in reading your work, for instance.

**Creeley:** Yeah, well, it did. I listened to a lot of . . . I really sat . . . I had friends who were very articulate jazz musicians. That was certainly an influence. To me it was a great relief from the sort of didacticism and sense of formal necessities and conditions that would be classically east coast, Ivy League whatever—you did it the right way or forget it.

**Featherston:** Duncan was very drawn to classical, like Stravinsky . . .

**Creeley:** Yeah, he loved that. Mahler . . .

**Featherston:** I wonder if in some sense it was, going back to the demotic or the populist, if . . . was it your sense maybe he felt some animosity with the younger poets, the Beats who were using a more popular format, the performative jazz with the poetry?

**Creeley:** At least in the immediate scene, I think that he felt that their . . . not that they'd had a pleasant thing going there, so to speak, but I think he felt the Beat was a distraction. He certainly respected and liked Allen. I think one of the early responses or senses of Kerouac I got was from Robert. So it wasn't simply a cut-off. But I do think that what had been the intense sort of basically almost domestic pattern of the San Francisco cluster was now overwritten by this energetic . . . He was very fond of John Wieners. Very moved and . . . He was also very close to many of the poets who he was very respectful . . . Although I don't think they ever had all that much social occasion, he certainly acknowledged clearly Gary Snyder, for example.[109] And Gary Snyder likewise him. There was

[109] An associate of the Beat poets, Gary Snyder (1930- ) is an American poet whose writing is known for its Zen Buddhism and environmentalism.

a very particular respect for Robert among that cluster. He becomes crucial in the next generation, so to speak. Michael Palmer is probably as taught by Robert as any poet otherwise.[110] Michael Palmer begins with a particular instruction, let's say, from Williams and me, and then becomes absolutely centered on what Robert can teach him and provide for him. And then there are many kinds of echoes, like his and Jess's relation to Stan Brakhage, the filmmaker, is another crucial pattern. Jazz was perfect for my needs—both emotionally, socially just right—and it stays pretty much so ever since, but it just didn't serve Robert's habits and interests in any way. There's no evidence, though. It doesn't seem to have connected. Sad . . . you can't have everything. That's the one subject I never heard him really take off on.

It's funny, trying to think of the ones that do . . . Paul Blackburn,[111] certainly, in particular. Allen liked Thelonius Monk et cetera but I don't really hear much . . . my friend a jazz musician was at the recording, and you had to take Allen saying "Now, Allen, now"; that somehow inherently he wasn't tracking as they presumable could.

So you're just starting out with this terrific poet. What happens? You're going to all quit university? It's a great . . . I have utter pleasure and respect . . .

**Durgin:** We're not sure what we're doing yet, so don't be so quick to respect us.

**Creeley:** Kyle will remember the reading of Olson last semester, and it was delicious to be in any circumstance where inquiry and increment are the patterns rather than you will know this and there will be a test on so and so on Monday.[112] You know that kind of packaging. I think the only hope either for the poetry per se or for that which it can be used to illuminate is that there not be a closed book. I remember once hearing some years ago a sudden discussion of . . . it was up in Maine, and suddenly this wonderful guy, Portuguese, started talking about Pound and Marx. It was wonderful; he pointed out the particular involvement both of them have had with money as an event, a physical . . .

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[110] Michael Palmer (1943- ) is a contemporary American poet whose innovative writing is both philosophically informed and lyrically inflected.

[111] An American poet known for his translations of Provençal poetry, Paul Blackburn (1926-1971) served briefly as a contributing editor to *The Black Mountain Review*.

[112] During the previous semester (fall 2000), Creeley directed a student reading group on Charles Olson and Herman Melville. The syllabus from this study later appeared as "Call Me Ishmael: Olson & Melville" in *Minutes of the Charles Olson Society* 54 (2005): 5-6.

how closely their thinking paralleled or mirrored one other, how the social circumstances of each was very coincident in how one thought of the world in which each was living. How it wasn't simply a metaphor to compare A with B but was in fact the social and economic pattern that he was in his own way tracking and making a material. It was just terrific, and then the audience characteristically . . . this was in some ways a cluster of old Poundians . . . there was real consternation that you could speak of Marx and Pound as other than hostile to one another. It was tacitly ludicrous. And yet, somehow, thinking of economics and Pound's dependence on it as a thinking device, it was immensely useful to have it be used in reference to Marx who gave a whole other . . . not just background but a whole other place to think of as parallel. It was extremely useful, and no one had ever really done that or thought to do that. It was almost like saying let's look at it this way. And if things get locked in, it's awfully hard to have that inquiry occur. I remember when I was in college trying to get interested in the classes . . .

[Tape switch]

neo-fascists or something; just take a look, sir.

**Kyle Schlesinger:** Was that at Harvard?

**Creeley:** That was at Harvard. I had a terrific professor F. O. Matthiessen. On one hand F. O. Mathiessen was both respectful of Olson and in some ways an ally in certain situations, but if you look at *American Renaissance* how small is Olson's acknowledgment vis-à-vis Melville.[113] One wonderful piece of gossip was that when Olson was trying to secure a publisher for the book [*Call Me Ishmael*] and presumed that Matthiessen was his ally, it turns out that actually Matthiessen had axed the book with the publisher.[114] I'm getting this from Ezra Pound, no less. He said from his point of view it was a book that would save you the trouble of reading Melville . . . this is the great Ezra. Ezra Pound you know didn't like Melville, he didn't like Dostoevsky, he didn't like a lot of great novelists. So he said it saved him the time of reading Melville. And he said he had to get T. S. Eliot to sponsor the book, whereupon that impressed the publisher more than did Matthiessen's demure. Help! There was just no room for that kind of thinking there. Olson's book at the time . . . you can imagine

[113] A historian and critic who helped create the field of American studies, Frank Otto Matthiessen (1902-1950) is best known for his book *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman.* (New York: Oxford UP, 1941).

[114] Olson, *Call Me Ishmael.* (New York: Reynal & Hitchcock, 1947; San Francisco: City Lights, 1947).

what a furor . . . The book before it had been, god, Robert Penn Warren's book about *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*,[115] I believe. Again, those patterns are fascinating just to see what the vibes were for that moment, that it was a series of . . . popular critical books. They went into the popular market but they would be criticism so everyone could get one and read it and feel terrific, that they were really with the swing of things. Because criticism at that moment has probably more authority than any other form of writing. More than poems, more than . . . yeah. It's a great book.

Robert is what, he's about ten years back of Olson? Not that . . . he's nine years older than I am, and he's six years younger than Olson . . . I think that's how it is. Would that he were here. He could tell us much, much more.

I wonder if we're supposed to forget. Not forget Robert, but forget other than what he does tell us, so to speak. [He reads from *Roots and Branches*:] "We are not any wiser than the book we have written." "(In a mimeographt "Lesson", of Dr. Quimby / On the Subconscious, I find / 'He also calls it "the book" / and he said / *We are not any wiser than the book we have written*')."[116] I don't know if that's entirely true. I think the book that we write is wiser than we who write it. That's more often the case.

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[115] Robert Penn Warren (1905-1989) was an American poet and New Critic. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, illus. Alexander Calder, with an essay by Robert Penn Warren (New York: Reynal & Hitchcock, 1946).

[116] From "After Reading H. D.'s *Hermetic Definitions*," in *Roots and Branches*, 84.

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# George C. Edwards III. *The Strategic President: Persuasion and Opportunity in Presidential Leadership*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2009. 256 pp.

Feryal Çubukcu

Presidential power is not the power to persuade, as Presidents cannot reshape the contours of the political landscape to pave the way for change by establishing an agenda and persuading the public, Congress, and others to support their policies. In *The Strategic President,* George C. Edwards III aims at exploring leadership and two categories of leader: the "eventful man" and the "event-making man," as he calls them. In this terminology he is attempting to improve on such worthy predecessors as James M. Burns, who in his 1978 book on leadership makes a distinction between "facilitators" and "directors of change."

"Eventful man" accepts political conditions as given and fashion a campaign and a set of policies best suited to existing conditions. "Event-making man," on the other hand, tries to change the matrix of political forces amid which they operate. The major questions Edwards poses are: What are the essential presidential leadership skills? Under what conditions are they most effective? How can such skills engender change? In addressing these questions, chapters two and four focus on Lincoln, Roosevelt, Johnson and Reagan as political giants, while chapters three and five focus on presidents governing under typical circumstances in an attempt to determine whether those presidents who led fights for the most significant changes in public policy succeeded by persuading others to support their policies or whether their success rested on recognizing and exploiting existing opportunities for change.

This is a well organized and meticulously written overview of recent leadership stories. It contains the clearest and most complete information to be found on the subject. Indeed, the book seems to be written from a very objective perspective: Edwards first discusses whether presidents can persuade the public or not and proceeds to claim that presidents are unlikely to change public opinion; but he asserts that skilled presidents who understand the nature of public opinion may be able to use it as a resource to further their goals. At the core of this strategy is choosing the issues they wish to emphasize and the

manner in which to present their initiatives. From the perspective of the White House, the key to successful advocacy is controlling the public agenda. As a result, it invests substantial amounts of time and energy in focusing the public's attention on issues it wishes to promote, and encouraging the public to see its proposals for dealing with those issues in a positive light. Edwards even suggests that a president may increase his chances of success by framing proposals in such a way as to emphasize their consistency with the public's existing views, clarifying the public's wishes and showing how they are in fact consistent with his policies, and exploiting the fluidity or indifference of public opinion on a given issue.

Each chapter comes complete with a summary of primary points to spur discussion. This intriguing work captures the reader's imagination with memorable adages such as "A statesman cannot create anything himself. He must wait and listen until he hears the steps of God sounding through events;" or "The successful policy entrepreneurs are those who wait for an opportunity and then ride the wind." Whatever your views may be on the question of political leadership, and on whether presidents create opportunities by persuading people to support their policies or whether they facilitate change by recognizing opportunities and fashioning strategies, *The Strategic President* is worth reading. Not only is it entertaining reading by any definition, it is also highly informative.

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# *Conformism, Non-Conformism and Anti-Conformism in the Culture of the United States* (Vol. 1). Eds. Antonis Balasopoulos, Gesa Mackenthun, and Dora Tsimpouki. Heidelberg, Germany: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2008. 330 pp.

Tanfer Emin Tunç

*Conformism, Non-Conformism and Anti-Conformism in the Culture of the United States* is the product of the European Association for American Studies (EAAS) Biennial Conference held at the University of Cyprus in Nicosia in 2006. This first volume of selected papers from the conference employs a transdisciplinary approach to illuminate cultural manifestations of conformity, non-conformity, and anti-conformity in the United States. Drawing on a wide range of epistemologies including history, sociology, film studies, cultural studies, visual culture and literary theory and criticism, the collection investigates the socio-political complexities that define conventional authority and the ways in which Americans have resisted, transgressed, subverted, and sabotaged hegemonic discourses. The volume itself is divided into five major sections: "Conceptual Contours and Analytic Prospects," "Regions of the Past," "Contemporary Textualities," "Stakes of the Visual," and "Investing in Non-Conformity." Collectively the sections cover a broad spectrum of themes and regional approaches. The first section, "Conceptual Contours and Analytic Prospects," focuses on the theoretical underpinnings of American Studies in Europe and the notion of American exceptionalism in the contemporary world. It also explores conformism and non-conformity as categories of analysis within literary criticism. "Regions of the Past," which begins the volume's foray into specific applications of the conference theme, consists of essays on antebellum Southern manufacturing, Transcendentalism, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Herman Melville's *Pierre: or the Ambiguities*. "Contemporary Textualities," "Stakes of the Visual," and "Investing in Non-Conformity" include works on violence in (post)modern American culture and literature, Annie Dillard's *Fraying at the Fringe*, Holocaust comedies, human-animal representations in poetry, globalization and technology, and essays on film, photography and 1950s Madison Avenue advertising.

The volume's strengths lie in its intriguing theme and its transdisciplinary approach, which is accentuated by the international scope of its contributors

(authors include Donald Pease, Heinz Ickstadt, Susana Delfino, Albena Bakratcheva, Marek Wilczynski, Johannes Völz, Marc Amfreville, Andrew S. Gross, Yves-Charles Grandjeat, Thomas Pughe, Susanne Rohr, Peter Loizos, Dimitris Liokaftos, Hilaria Loyo, Alexandra Ganser, Karin Hoepker, Frank Mehring, Berndt Ostendorf, and Arthur Redding). One of the most appealing qualities of the volume is that it provides an excellent overview of the range of American Studies topics currently being examined by European scholars. It is clear that European academics are invested not only in rereading, reinterpreting, and to a certain extent deconstructing "classic" American writers and their texts, but also in making significant contributions to international intellectual trends such as the growing interest in post-modernism, ecoliterature and criticism, and metafiction. However, the volume's specificity is also one of its major weaknesses. Its "microstudies" of American culture and literature sometimes elide the theme of conformism, non-conformism, and anti-conformism. Moreover, almost all of the essays marginalize major categories of analysis such as gender, race and class. Given its focus, one would expect to encounter selections on the major American ethnic and racial minority groups (e.g., African-Americans, Asian-Americans and Native-Americans) or on groups that have traditionally been excluded from the American national project (e.g., women, immigrants and gays/lesbians). Such collectivities and the ways in which they have reinforced or challenged conformity are unfortunately only mentioned in passing. None of the works included in the collection specifically focuses on any of the aforementioned groups (one only hopes that they will be examined in Volume 2). Additionally, many of the selections are either embedded in, or somehow connected to, the white Anglo-Saxon Protestant male canon, which, to a certain extent, positions this collection as conformist in and of itself. Those essays that examine visual representations (i.e., film, advertising, and photography) and Jewish-American culture and literature come closest to meeting the collection's goals.

Despite its limitations, *Conformism, Non-Conformism and Anti-Conformism in the Culture of the United States* can be used within the classroom setting. The volume is suited to upper-division undergraduate or graduate courses in American culture as well as to courses specifically designed around the collection's theme. Specific essays can also be extracted and used in literature and literary theory courses, as well as courses on film or visual culture. Moreover, the volume and its detailed bibliographies (included at the end of each selection) can serve as important resources for further research, especially for those interested in the topics covered by the collection.

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# *The Other Boleyn Girl* (Justin Chadwick 2008)

Joanne Hall

This sumptuous-looking film tells the story of two sisters, Mary (Scarlett Johansson) and Anne Boleyn (Natalie Portman), and their respective, though overlapping, relationships with England's King Henry VIII (Eric Bana). The first, a love affair born out of forced concubinage, the second, an overly manipulated mismatch fuelled by ambition and political intrigue. Thus, the narrative is pared down to a rivalry between two sisters, at the expense of examining how these relationships shaped a nation. Peter Morgan's screenplay is adapted from the novel of the same name by bestselling author, Philippa Gregory, and the aforementioned simplifying approach is arguably a feature of the adaption process; however, the film's tendency to compress time, events, and even people, occasionally leads to moments which, at worst, do not make sense, and, at best, create the impression of carelessness on the behalf of story and continuity supervisors.

Yet, *Boleyn Girl* is notable for its transatlantic affiliations: it is based on a text by a best-selling UK author re-telling a period of British history beloved of the historical novelist, while being unashamedly a US studio production showcasing the dramatic prowess of American starlets. Indeed, the performances of both Portman and Johansson are to be praised. Johansson provides her usual ponderously thoughtful turn, which, in this context, appears as dullness next to Portman's brittleness. Thus, the sisters' respective lack of artifice and shining vivacity are successfully portrayed and contrasted. However, individual performances achieve greater impact than the collective effort that the film represents. Though it is clearly a member of that exciting subgenre know as the "bodice ripper," it does not capitalise fully on the sources and subject matters available to it, and, as a result, is merely adequate, rather than outstanding.

The most interesting and problematic elements of the piece reside in its representation of the central love triangle. Though Anne willingly enters into a courtship with Henry, the relationship descends into acrimony and sexual violence before the marriage, suggesting that her "spell" is broken. In spite of her family's objections, Anne pursues Henry and appears to choose to begin the relationship. However, her feelings seem to be born out of her desire for revenge

and her need to chastise her sister. This is implicitly contrasted with Mary's relationship with Henry, which, though entered into unwillingly, is represented as loving. Mary's objections to her forced concubinage are brushed away when Henry reveals he empathises with her feelings of being overshadowed by an older sibling. Thus, in an alarmingly simplistic and unproblematised manner, elements of familial coercion and royal decree are forgotten, love blossoms and sexual interaction is framed as consensual. The representation of romantic love and freewill, not the feuding sisters, becomes the central tension of *Boleyn Girl*. However, this is a conflict that the film both creates and struggles to represent in its full complexity. Indeed, this missed opportunity embodies *Boleyn Girl*'s privileging of style at the expense of substance.

The Editors welcome submission of material for consideration as an article, as a review, as a comment on articles previously published in *Journal of American Studies of Turkey* or as a note about past events, announcing coming ones, or constituting calls for papers. The articles should be approximately 3000-5000 words in length (12-20 double-spaced pages); the reviews should not exceed 500 words (two double-spaced typed pages). The articles should be consistent with the objectives and scope of *Journal of American Studies of Turkey*. All articles are subject to stylistic editing.

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