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10th September 1996

Creeley Among Others: An American Poetics in Context

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Creeley Among Others: An American Poetics in Context

Robert Creeley's writing career now spans almost half a century. His lasting friendship with Charles Olson led, in the mid-fifties, to his involvement with the 'Black Mountain School' of poets. Scholars find it convenient to sustain this association even though Creeley's 'open form' poetry has never fitted easily into such categories: the tenets of his poetics emerged, gradually, from more heterogeneous origins. The purpose of this account is to examine the complexities of Creeley's response to those writers who, by his own admission, guided his poetic development. Such relationships offer an interesting context for the investigation of his resolutely idiosyncratic poetics. To demonstrate this, the study focusses on seven other American poets: Ezra Pound, Wallace Stevens, Hart Crane, William Carlos Williams, Louis Zukofsky, Charles Olson and Robert Duncan. They make a diverse company, yet each has been important to the evolution of a highly sophisticated poetic idiom. A prolific letter-writer, Creeley's lengthy correspondence with Charles Olson (published in 9 volumes so far and still incomplete) and the unpublished (hitherto largely unexamined) letters found among the papers of recipients have been rich source material. Interviews with Creeley himself, including one conducted by the author in August 1994, were equally helpful in establishing what, and how, each writer contributed to the development of his poetics.

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Particular thanks go to Robert Creeley himself, Gareth Reeves for his tireless guidance and encouragement, my parents and Tom.



In the singular  
the many cohere,  
but not to know it. (Pieces)

A suspiciously simple sense of life is that it is,  
in any one man, conclusive. (The Island)

### **Creeley Among Others: An American Poetics In Context**

Robert Creeley is commonly regarded by the critical establishment as a loner. An itinerant lifestyle has fuelled this reputation: born in West Massachusetts in 1926, Creeley has lived and worked all over the American continent and beyond, rarely staying anywhere for long. A long and productive writing life has resolutely witnessed personal, rather than public, change: the joys and difficulties of three marriages, dislocating hardship in southern France, the arid and isolating beauty of New Mexico, and paralysing loneliness in London. Notoriously self-absorbed, his reticent poetry is fiercely individual in style and solipsistic in outlook. Like the poet, a man of few words, wryly humorous and intelligently self-contained, his poems seem determined "to say as little as possible as often as possible."<sup>1</sup>

To call Creeley a solitary is to mistake him. He admits that "I tend to be a person who feels best in some kind of privacy"; but then, "Writing doesn't require that you be present."<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless he insists, "Poetry is primary community, primarily communal" and his own work reveals the security and stimulus he has always found in the company of other people:<sup>3</sup>

I am given as a man to work with what is most intimate to me--these senses of relationship among people. I think, for myself at least, the world is most evident and most

intense in those relationships. Therefore they are the materials of which my world is made.<sup>4</sup>

Creeley's "senses of relationship" with other writers (as he puts it, "the company I've kept") has framed or accompanied the development of his poetics.<sup>5</sup> An oeuvre which now spans half a century, while never simply derivative, owes more than has been properly acknowledged to a large variety of writers, embracing and reworking their disparities into an original but by no means independent poetic idiom. Such writers offer a context for enquiry into Creeley's poetry, on which (leaving aside the considerable achievement of his prose) I have chosen to focus. While commentaries often address the importance of one, or perhaps two, of these relationships, wider and more searching surveys of the plural influences on his writing are largely absent. In tracing Creeley's "senses of relationship" with seven major American poets and their work, I have endeavoured to preserve a coherence which would not have been possible had this account been widened to embrace the broader, more eclectic tastes which his letters record.

Typically pragmatic, Creeley readily acknowledges that no writer can work in isolation,

free of the influence of those whom he may respect in his own art and why 'originality' should imply, in any sense, that he should, is hard to follow. . . . In poetry, as in other arts, what is learned is first learned by the example.<sup>6</sup>

Moreover, in the inclusive compass of Walt Whitman's work he finds proof that "American poets", in particular, "can no longer assume either their world or themselves in it as discrete occasion."<sup>7</sup> However "discrete" Creeley's poems might look and sound, however phenomenological their stance might seem, his poetic enterprise has never been exclusive. As Charles Olson exclaimed (in his first use, George Butterick suspects, of "post-modern") in a letter to Creeley:

how come we are so involved in the kinetic problem,  
except as this means is the only one to poise - to  
balance, accurately - the very expansions which post-  
modern life have involved us in . . .

9th August 1951 (Charles Olson and Robert Creeley:

The Complete Correspondence [CC] vol. 7, 77)

Those relationships signalling "the very expansions" of Creeley's "post-modern" poetics reflect, and therefore confirm his place in, the "distinct American tradition" which he detects "in the experience of people in a very diverse . . . unstructured . . . dispersed [society]."<sup>8</sup> Similarly diverse and dispersed, the cluster of American poets examined here, to whose society Creeley turned for tutelage as a young writer, offered his emerging poetics an equally unstructured, equally enriching and expansive context.

So far, scholarship has only succeeded in affirming Wallace Stevens' recognition that "the character / Of Tradition does not easily take form."<sup>9</sup> Amid the careful

indeterminacy which characterizes current literary thought, it is reassuring to find that, to Creeley, tradition simply means "feedback". He reminds an interviewer that "'tradition' comes from a root that means what one group surrenders to another."<sup>10</sup> He is relaxed enough about such "feedback" to admit to another, with refreshing honesty, that he reads to learn:

it would be rather regrettable and a little dumb not to make use of the full context of what's been done, in the light of the available material the poet has to draw upon . . . . [Writers read] to find suggestions and possibilities for their own activity. I read for pleasure . . . but . . . also to find out what's possible and who's got some useful answers.<sup>11</sup>

Each of the writers examined here broached different "suggestions", "possibilities" and "answers" for Creeley's own work. He considers imitation as a valuable "way of gaining articulation" which need not preclude an individuality of which he has always been protective and which his "senses of relationship" important as they are, reassert rather than compromise:

coming as I do from a rural background where learning how to plow and seeing if you can imitate, literally, his way of doing it [gains] the use of it for yourself. But what you then plow--whether you plow or not--is your own business. And there are many ways to do it.<sup>12</sup>



As he hints, Creeley usually maintains some distance from his "saints". In 'Robert Creeley and the Tradition', a sympathetic and useful, if necessarily limited, overview, Butterick correctly determines that Creeley "is neither bound to [the tradition] slavishly nor so foolish as to seek to shun it altogether, which is a squandering of another order."<sup>13</sup> In her comprehensive evaluation of the relationships between a number of leading American poets, Lynn Keller points out the "usual conflict between imitation and rebellion"; shrewdly, she explores "both impulses--toward continuity and toward discontinuity . . . ," and her analysis therefore escapes any "illusorily sharp demarcation between continuities and discontinuities".<sup>14</sup> Both critics clearly respect the kind of equivocation which qualifies and makes complex (and therefore interesting) Creeley's "senses of relationships" with his chosen examples.

The inclusive approach for which both Butterick and Keller argue accords with Creeley's strongly held view that "nothing will fit if we assume a place for it"; he warns particularly against shaping forms to "the context of an overt pattern, a symbolism, an explanation again anterior to the instance."<sup>15</sup> In response, I have avoided enlisting restrictive New Critical orthodoxies, or resorting to the "reductiveness" of the post-structuralist readings which Marjorie Perloff censures for "a critical stance that, far from moving beyond the New Criticism, seems to be haunted by its most characteristic gestures."<sup>16</sup> Instead, I have sought

to keep in mind the implications of a line from Basil Bunting's 'Briggflatts', "The sun rises on an acknowledged land" which pleases Creeley:

I love that way of putting it, simply that it's not a land coerced, it's not an earth or a world, let's say, that's thus brought to some demanding sense of order. It's an earth found in recognizing its existence.<sup>17</sup>

While I have not sought to "coerce" the texts under discussion into "some demanding sense of order," nor can I overlook Creeley's recognition of a native lineage in those poets whom he regards as his antecedents:

I think it's a deep honor to be an American poet, not in any simple sense, but because the clarity of one's forbears is so explicit.<sup>18</sup>

For example, his own poems testify to his admiration for "the dryness of Poe's intelligence and yet the sensuality of his experience."<sup>19</sup> His poetic idiom continues to recall Whitman's "instruction that one speak for oneself [since it] is, paradoxically, the personal which makes the common insofar as it recognizes the existence of the many in the one."<sup>20</sup> He has even been described as "some sort of hip Emily Dickinson";<sup>21</sup> she, interestingly, was "the first poet who made an impression, in high school":

I love the disparity and I love the clarity, and I love the quickness of her mind . . . her emotional ranges were intended to be private, and so intensive . . . sensual,

but sensual in the intelligence, not in the sensory, not in the hands or feet.<sup>22</sup>

In a letter to Olson, Creeley once confided:

American poetry is as sprawling, as inchoate in its bulk, as that of any other country. But there is, contained in it, the work of some men who maintain a basic sense of integrity, who do not allow themselves the convenience of distortion. Their work is all that matters.

c. 15th October 1951 (CC8 50)

Although reluctant to "make a hierarchy of persons", Creeley's numerous interviews and essays repeatedly home in on "the work of some men", which, in inspecting, I have grouped under three broad headings.<sup>23</sup> Treating these relationships in separate chapters has permitted a (loosely) chronological approach, the writers appearing in roughly the order in which Creeley encountered them. Three of his "forbears", Ezra Pound, Wallace Stevens and Hart Crane, although quite different writers, lent a nascent poetics some sturdy foundations, but in each case their active "influence" waned as Creeley's skill increased. The significance of both Pound and Stevens was considerable, but in each case was too short-lived to merit lengthy treatment, hence their improbable partnership here.

Pound's special interest in language lent Creeley's diction its now characteristic precision, while the emphasis he placed on the emotional, "affectual" character of poetry

continues to qualify Creeley's poems. Perhaps the most surprising of the selection, Stevens' appearance is justified by his contribution to Creeley's famous form/content dictum, which has hitherto been unexplored, and by a challenging intellectualism which Creeley found alluring if ultimately unusable. Crane's entrepreneurial example offered a more attractive and accessible, if less coherent, technical brilliance. Crane's linguistic power and creative courage represented achievements and failures which Creeley simply could not ignore, and in which he continues to take pleasure.

As "teachers", both William Carlos Williams and Louis Zukofsky encouraged Creeley with practical instruction; their thinking remains discernible even in Creeley's most recent poetry. Williams has been widely recognised as Creeley's chief "influence"; alongside the techniques endorsed by his prosodic example, the potential extracted from word and line, I have also explored the less well-documented effect Williams had on the ideas which Creeley was formulating in the early fifties alongside Charles Olson: the "single intelligence", the concept of "recognition", and a dauntingly complex "sense of measure". Louis Zukofsky's impact on Creeley, meanwhile, was, in fact, no less significant than Williams, but has received much less attention. The more interactive teacher, Zukofsky's guidance focussed on the poetic principles of "sight, sound and intellection." Inventive and cerebral, his own poems dismember language, exhaustively exploring and

exploiting each word for its sound, structure and multiple associations.

Perhaps most importantly of all, Charles Olson and Robert Duncan were "companions" in whom Creeley found not only help but the supportive intimacy he craved, in sustained and sustaining friendship. Olson, his letters published alongside Creeley's in the invaluable Charles Olson and Robert Creeley: The Complete Correspondence, has proved a consistently sensitive guide to the evolution of Creeley's poetics, having himself contributed much to a process which his own work underpinned almost from inception. My account concludes by considering what Duncan's kaleidoscopic imagination prompted in a much narrower field of vision. To Creeley's careful finesse, Duncan brought a deeper recognition of the circularities which lend Creeley's later poems, in particular, a larger and more inclusive perspective on the persistently personal dilemmas which they articulate.

As Creeley says, "these relationships . . . begin to accumulate. . . . there begins to be increasing focus . . . never complicated by a literal geography. . . . We began to realize ourselves, to get location, to realize what other writers were particular to our own discriminations."<sup>24</sup> His words echo Ezra Pound's assertion of the organic nature of a poet's development, the way that an individual poetics emerges from the cumulative disorder of the traditions which can constitute his context:

he is never a disconnected phenomenon, but he does take some step further. He discovers, or, better, 'he discriminates'. We advance by discriminating . . .<sup>25</sup>

Without altering his conviction that "relationships . . . continue, serving a common need for survival and growth", Creeley usually remains semi-detached from his examples, peculiar to himself.<sup>26</sup> For him, the task is "to manage a use of that which those back of you have given in such fashion that you will both honor them and those differences which the nature of time seems to insist upon."<sup>27</sup> This, more or less, is the purpose of my enquiry: rather than delineating or defining the "context" of Robert Creeley's poetics, simply to take account of it. As he says:

for me and my company, this is finally all that matters: how you've come to know what you know, and how you've learned it. It matters to tell it, whether or not it's understood, because it is the clearest way of respecting what has come before and what will follow.<sup>28</sup>

Notes:-

1. David Ossman, ed. The Sullen Art: Interviews with Modern American Poets (New York: Corinth Books, 1973) 63.
2. Robert Creeley, 'With Linda Wagner,' Tales out of School: Selected Interviews (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan, 1993) 62-67.
3. 'Preface to Robert Duncan: A Descriptive Bibliography, by Robert J. Bertholf,' The Collected Essays of Robert Creeley (Berkeley: U of California, 1989) 155.
4. 'With Linda Wagner,' Tales 47.
5. Preface, Robert Creeley: Selected Poems 1945-1990 (London: Marion Boyars, 1991) xix.
6. 'Why Bother?', Collected Essays 484.
7. 'Introduction to Penguin Selected Whitman,' Collected Essays 10.
8. 'With Bill Spanos,' Tales 185.
9. 'Recitation after Dinner,' Opus Posthumous, ed. Milton J. Bates (Revised edn. New York: Vintage, 1990) 114.
10. Brendan O'Regan and Tony Allan, 'An Interview with Robert Creeley,' Contexts of Poetry: Interviews 1961-1971, ed. Donald Allen (Bolinas: Four Seasons Foundation, 1973) 133-34.
11. 'Robert Creeley,' The Poet's Craft: Interviews from The New York Quarterly, ed. William Packard (New York: Paragon House, 1987) 161.
12. 'With Linda Wagner,' Tales 70.
13. Robert Creeley: The Poet's Workshop, ed. Carroll F. Terrell (Orono: National Poetry Foundation, U of Maine, 1984) 133.
14. Re-Making It New: Contemporary American Poetry and the Modernist Tradition (Cambridge: Cambridge U P, 1987) 7-8.
15. 'Introduction to The New Writing in the USA,' Collected Essays 89-90.
16. 'Can(n)on to the Right of Us, Can(n)on to the Left of Us: a Plea for Difference,' Poetic License: Essays on Modernist and Postmodernist Lyric (Evanston IL: Northwestern U P, 1990) 21-22.
17. 'With Bill Spanos,' Tales 126.
18. 'From the Forest of Language: A Conversation with Robert Creeley,' ed. Philip L. Gerber, Athamor 4 (Spring 1973): 14.

19. 'Edward Dorn's Geography,' Collected Essays 165.
20. 'Introduction to Penguin Selected Whitman,' Collected Essays 3.
21. 'With Michael André,' Tales 109.
22. 'From the Forest of Language . . . ,' Athanor 4: 11.
23. 'With Linda Wagner,' Tales 69.
24. 'With John Sinclair and Robin Eichele,' Tales 14-17.
25. 'I Gather the Limbs of Osiris,' Selected Prose of Ezra Pound 1909-1965, ed. William Cookson (London: Faber, 1973) 25.
26. 'Olson and Others: Some Orts for The Sports,' Collected Essays 110.
27. *ibid.*, Collected Essays 107.
28. Robert Creeley, Preface, Tales x.



## Chapter 1: "one looks about for forbears . . ."<sup>1</sup>

### Creeley, Pound and Stevens

#### Ezra Pound: a continuity of possibility

Pound has given so many possibilities just in his work that it will be a long time indeed before they're exhausted.<sup>2</sup>

Creeley says that the "first person who introduced me to writing as a craft, who even spoke of it as a craft," was Ezra Pound.<sup>3</sup> He is candid about the debt he owes Pound, who spoke of the literal condition of the writing, and it was he I used as guide--and continue to now . . . , because his advice proved facts of perception as active to my mind now as when I first came to them.<sup>4</sup>

Creeley was only 20 when he discovered Pound's Make It New; by 1950 he was admitting to Olson that "for the past five years have been going, regularly, to the three bks: Make It New/Pavannes & Divisions/ Polite Essays . . . [for] a WAY IN to Ez".<sup>5</sup> Make It New in particular, with its dogma of innovation and experiment, and refreshingly practical approach, "was a revelation to me insofar as Pound there spoke . . . of what writing itself was engaged with, not what it was 'about.'"<sup>6</sup>

In fact, Pound

emphasized the whole condition of writing as a craft, and as a craft separated usefully from academic uses of it or from even, say, senses of literary tradition in an academic context.<sup>7</sup>

Pound's "energetic contempt for almost all of that critical writing which had been my reference in college," must have been reassuring, and liberating, to a young man who never graduated.<sup>8</sup>

With the words, "Great literature is simply language charged with meaning to the utmost possible degree", Pound prompted Creeley to explore the "possible" for himself:<sup>9</sup>

This is where I probably was very much influenced by Pound, because his way of proceeding was to be as aware of what had happened and what could happen as you could possibly be.<sup>10</sup>

A sense of "possibility" colours Creeley's poetics:

All one knows, and knows  
upon the possibility of knowing,  
knowing some-

thing, a thing  
that, driven, in-  
sists upon its

knowledge.

'For Lewis, to Say It', In London  
The Collected Poems of Robert Creeley: 1945-1975 [CP] 507

Marjorie Perloff has ably demonstrated how Pound's influence pervades twentieth-century literature.<sup>11</sup> Several of the writers under discussion here belong to a Poundian "tradition" and, as examples themselves, were often enlarging on or reiterating Pound's instructive groundwork; much of what follows is treated in more detail in later chapters. Pound's contribution to the development of twentieth-century poetics

has generated an immense critical canon: in exploring Creeley's response to him, I can only gesture at this scholarship, and at Pound's oeuvre. Creeley himself takes a usefully selective lead:

I like the echo Pound takes from Agricola, that poetry's possibilities are to teach, to move and to delight.<sup>12</sup>

# **I     To teach: "Pound is literally instruction"**

An ebullient and unorthodox teacher, Pound derided the strictures of theory and convention: "Damn your taste! I'd like if possible to sharpen your perceptions after which your taste can take care itself . . ."<sup>13</sup> With such authorizations, as Creeley's friend the poet Denise Levertov explains, Pound gives the practicing poet not a rigid syllabus . . . but examples of various virtues and possibilities against which we may learn to test our own predilections [and] . . . powers (in writing) . . . by precept and example-- Pound teaches me not to accept received ideas without question, but to derive my own from concrete detail observed and felt, from my individual experience . . . [He] stirs me into a sharper realization of my own sensibility. I learn to desire not to know what he knows but to know what I know; to emulate, not to imitate.<sup>14</sup>

Although Creeley always preferred "to emulate, not to imitate", Pound's injunctions shaped the earliest principles of his poetic technique, in particular the tenet of economy:

"Use no superfluous word, no adjective which does not reveal something".<sup>15</sup> Pound claimed:

Good writers are those who keep the language efficient.

That is to say, keep it accurate, keep it clear.<sup>16</sup>

Accordingly, Creeley developed a discriminating poetic idiom which remains loyal to a Poundian "cult of exactitude, of a stubborn literalness", as Perloff puts it.<sup>17</sup> His 'Poem for Beginners' manages an "efficient" opening:

. . . and I could see in the clearing	
beside the axe and the tree	(fallen)
I'd cut before dinner	(morning)
a squirrel and I ran for . . .	(problem)
	<u>The Charm</u> CP 9

The three words set aside at the right hand margin, each further isolated within parentheses, at first seem extraneous. Yet, as they comment guardedly on the "action", the poem's spareness is emphasised but not compromised, and Creeley achieves something of the clarity which Pound urged.

In an unpublished 'Note on American Poetry: 1951', arguing for "concision of presentation", Creeley admires in Pound "the phenomenon of a man committed to particulars".<sup>18</sup> In the event, 'Poem for Beginners' proves less concise and particular than its first lines promise, their economy lost in the repetitions which follow. However, the first stanza reappears at the end, its last line now complete: "and I ran for my gun". Solving the "problem" obviates the word's presence, explaining its excision.



Even so, the closing words (lacking a full stop) retain an unPoundian imprecision which hints at the independence which Creeley would preserve from his example: "& the other / somehow immaculate".

'Love' recalls Ernest Fenollosa's work on the ideogram, the "pictorial visibility, . . . vigor and vividness" from which evolved Pound's innovative "ideogrammic method":<sup>22</sup>

presenting one facet and then another until at some point one gets off the dead and desensitized surface of the reader's mind, onto a part that will register . . . this writer's aim being revelation.<sup>23</sup>

Creeley recalls how, "rather than tell me about some character of verse, [Pound] would give the literal instance side by side with that which gave it context. This method is, of course, an aspect of what he calls the ideogrammic-- it presents, rather than comments upon."<sup>24</sup>

Pound's ideogrammic method reached fruition in the disjunctive and distended project of 'The Cantos'. As Chapter 5 discusses, "revelation" proved similarly significant to the "conjectural" method which Creeley went on to develop with Olson, causing William Spanos to associate him with those poets who, like "the Pound of the Cantos . . . explore in the dispersed world, the divided, the occasional world in search of a new or rather a renewed measure".<sup>25</sup> The somewhat

whimsical 'Something for Easter', published in 1952, seems to confirm this:

I pulled the street up as you suggested  
--and found what?

1 nickel  
2 pieces gum

etc.

But we are practical  
--but winter is long & however much one  
does save, there is never  
enough.

The Charm CP 32

Easter celebrates renewal; Creeley's humorous determination, and the (albeit brief) Poundian catalogue of numbered "things" which he presents, make "Something" new possible, even if he concludes that this is unrealistic, because "there is never / enough."

Pound found in music a guiding metaphor for the aural "mechanics" of prosody which he called melopoeia:

wherein the words are charged, over and above their plain meaning, with some musical property, which directs the bearing or trend of that meaning.<sup>26</sup>

Donald Davie demystifies this much-debated concept by arguing, I think rightly, that Pound meant

real sounds in sequence, an actual melody, whereas the idea of music which fascinated Mallarmé and Valéry was precisely that--the idea of music, the idea of a poetic art that should be non-referential or self-referential like the art of music. . . . What Pound had in mind was

a marriage of the two arts, not an analogy between them;  
 . . . each in its distinctness collaborating with and  
 enriching the other.<sup>27</sup>

In such a "marriage", the musical "sequence" of the words can  
 be shaped only by the line which, for Pound, directs pace,  
 phrasing and "rhythm by what I would call the inner form of  
 the line. And it is this 'inner form', I think which must be  
 preserved in music . . ."<sup>28</sup>

Creeley himself describes an "ordering that is taking  
 place as one writes, which one follows much as he might the  
 melodic line of some song."<sup>29</sup> To Olson, echoing 'Projective  
 Verse', he remarks:

abt method/ the line. Well, to be straight with you/  
 it's only my breathing as I write. And the residue of  
 the formal, that hangs. I wd like some day, to write a  
 line with this grip of stress: Love god, we rather may,  
 than either know him, or by speech utter him.

24th June 1950 (CC1 149)

He went on to use Pico Della Mirandola's "beautiful" words  
 (quoted by Pater) in 'From Pico & the Women: A Life':<sup>30</sup>

Love God, we rather may, than  
either know Him, or by speech  
utter him . . . Disuse, good father,  
 these things have rusted and  
 we know a man who speaks more  
 freely of these and other, of



all wonders. We have hands,  
 now, and can hold all wonders.  
And yet had men liefer, good

father, by knowledge never find,  
 good father, that which they  
seek . . . These words are twisted.

The Charm CP 15

The stately phrasing of the poem's archaic language infects Creeley's interpolations. Although rejecting these "rusted" injunctions, Creeley courteously ("good father") defers to their measured pace. The interchange of old and new cadences gives, as Pound instructs, a "simplicity and directness of utterance, which is different from the simplicity and directness of daily speech . . . more dignified."<sup>31</sup>

To illustrate the three different kinds of 'melopoeia', Pound turned to the medieval poets he loved, Cavalcanti, Dante and Villon; Creeley followed. 'Guido, i' vorrei che tu e Lapo ed io', sent to Olson in September 1950, takes its title from Dante's Sonnet VI, to Guido Cavalcanti, but unlike 'Pico' develops, rather than responds to, its source.<sup>32</sup> It is a lament: "I would that" is unaffectedly old-fashioned and sounds even more hopeless for it. The three companions seem unable to escape across the gulf which lies between "this" and the safety of "some other wood":

were out of this  
   had got to the reaches  
 of some other wood.

The Charm CP 22

Again unlike 'Pico', more adventurous (and unpunctuated) lineation qualifies and clarifies the 'movement' of the words.

The "song sung" seems threnodic, not least because of the evocative Italian, until its melancholic tone turns ugly:

Deadness  
                   is echo  
 deadness is memory

The heavily phrased repetitions imbue the "song" with the "emotional correlations" which Pound sought with 'melopoeia': the words "echo" each other joylessly, "& their deadness is / petulant". Now unpleasantly ironic, the "song" momentarily shrinks into a malevolent (not just "petulant") ditty-like rhyme: "gone / dead in their heads."

The poem resumes in gentler mood to admit the aural (and therefore emotional) sterility of echoes, since

. . . all that they foster  
   is dead in its sound  
 has no ripeness  
 could come to its own.

This explains the bitterness. The poem regrets its own vulnerabilities, the enfeebled infertile language upon which it depends but by which it is trapped, echoing unmusically:

They have twisted  
                                   the meanings & manner  
 the force of us out of us  
 left us the faded

The final lines explicitly suggest that refuge can be found in "the actual", through making "musick / the sound of the

reaches". Or, as Creeley affirms, "'Listen to the sound that it makes,' said Pound. Fair enough."<sup>33</sup>

Most of all, Creeley confesses that "logopoeia--head trips--are what I'd be into".<sup>34</sup> Defining logopoeia as "the dance of the intellect among words", Pound says this "takes count in a special way of habits of usage, of the context we expect to find with the word, its usual concomitants, of its known acceptances, and of ironical play."<sup>35</sup> His words neatly define Creeley's poetics of reasoning, "stimulating the associations (intellectual or emotional) that have remained in the receiver's consciousness in relation to the actual words or word groups employed." Creeley's poems continually scrutinize their own substance, probing the complex synergy of word and meaning, "object" and association, intention and interpretation. In 'Guido', an embattled speaker is forced to struggle on with a residue of "faded" language while 'Pico' is resigned: "these words are twisted".

The skimpiness of Creeley's poetic idiom can prove usefully cryptic, as in the abrupt opening of (another) 'Love': "Not enough. The question: what is." Trying to define itself, the poem seeks to answer the unanswerable: "What is love?" Creeley turns to "the particulars: oak, the grain of, oak" but, in refusing to overlook "what supple shadows may come / to be here", also briefly reasserts his difference from Pound. He often uses an unexpected adjective to surprise, amuse or discomfort, challenging interpretation:

why is the hand "crouched"? Who (what) is "indefatigable"? Lack of certainty permits freedom of interpretation: the hand might be crouching in self-defence, submission or ready to pounce, whereas "indefatigable" might describe the questioner, his emotion, or his interest in love.

As Pound suggests, Creeley's (logopoeic) poetry freely uses irony (often humorous) to destabilize meaning. In 'After Lorca' a corrupt church is shown to be perpetrating a social injustice on its strangely unperturbed followers: "And the poor love it / and think it's crazy." Here, "love" and "crazy" are resonant with meaning, and not least because they evoke a distinctly American idiom; thus, by "stimulating the associations . . . in the receiver's consciousness," such words tell us much more than they actually say.

His description of logopoeia as "head trips" betrays Creeley's fascination with his cerebral processes. 'Chasing The Bird' adjusts Sir Edward Dyer's famous words: "My mind / to me a mangle is." A later poem, 'The Pattern', dwells on the interaction between speaker and thought to reveal how the mind depends upon the man to utter "its words":

As soon as  
I speak, I  
speaks. It

wants to  
be free but  
impassive lies

in the direction  
of its  
words.

Creeley seems startled by this: "I / / speak to / hear myself / speak?" His question recalls one posed by Joshua Whatmough, in Language, a book to which Creeley often refers: "Is knowledge itself coextensive with language? Or can anything be known that cannot be said?"<sup>36</sup>

The opening words of Pieces ambiguously rehearse Creeley's pleasure in the activity of thought:

As real as thinking  
wonders created  
by the possibility--

Pieces CP 379

This unpunctuated fragment revels in the powers of an active (wondering) mind, which in "thinking" can "create" and make the "wonders" of thought "real", rich in "possibility". The same collection includes the long and extraordinary poem 'The Finger', described by Creeley (echoing Pound) as "dancing in the delight of thought, not the agony of thought as fixed pattern. But it's the delight of thought as a possibility of forms."<sup>37</sup>

Provoked by a powerful and memorable LSD trip, 'The Finger' is an extended meditation on the continually shifting but sharpened perceptions of a drugged mind, acknowledging at the start that "Either in or out of / the mind, a conception / overrides it." Far from being befuddled, Creeley's "thought" seems to be experimenting with itself as it luxuriates in a transient otherworldly experience, in which knowledge arrives without the paraphernalia of logic or reasoning:

I was told,  
it was known to me, my  
fate would be timeless.

CP 384

In this state, Creeley's physical senses have become so acute that they are almost painful as he struggles to absorb the mysteries of a synaesthetic and oxymoronic world:

The quiet shatter of the light,  
the image folded into  
endlessly opening patterns--

had they faced me into  
the light so that my  
eye was blinded?

The woman featured here (artist Bobbie Creeley, Creeley's second wife) becomes the transfiguring focus of this "endlessly sensual" poem. Creeley's mesmerized celebration of her unearthly beauty "braced like a seabird, / with those endlessly clear grey eyes" must invoke mythic Greek deities, Aphrodite and Athena, for assistance. In this trance-like state of awareness, anxious references to "Hermes, in dark glasses" go unexplained, but messages do not seem to get through ("as if / one talked to the telephone, / telling it please to listen--") because Creeley seems suddenly unsure of his powers of utterance:

is that right, have I said it--  
and the reflecting face echoes  
some cast of words in mind's eye,  
attention a whip of surmise.

And the power to tell  
is glory. One unto one  
unto one. And though all  
mistake it, it is one.

CP 385

Relieved by the "echoes" which suggest comprehension in "the reflecting face", Creeley takes an almost physical pleasure in the triumphing of thought, "attention a whip of surmise", which seems to attest to his poetic (godlike) omniscience. He glories in a monistic vision which is less trite than it seems because the bizarre workings of his mind offer a disconcertingly manifold reality: "Are there other times? / Is she that woman, / or this one?" His dancing intellect, delighting in its own powers, interprets perceptions as it chooses, "as thinking knows it".

The "intensive circle" of the unlearned jig he performs before the woman is mirrored in her enigmatic smile of "some deepening knowledge." She is still the focus of the poem, and "the manny / who jiggled a world before her / made of his mind." Vulnerable to her powers, Creeley can recognise in her an elusive Everywoman:

She was young,  
she was old,  
she was small.  
She was tall with

extraordinary grace. Her face  
was all distance, her eyes  
the depth of all one had thought of,  
again and again and again.

CP 387

Like the Lady of 'The Door' (discussed in Chapter 6), this woman's "distance" is temptingly erotic but even in his excitement and arousal, despite the hungry intensity of a gaze which comes, distractedly, to rest on "her hand with its

fingers", Creeley is wonderingly respectful of her power over him. He consents:

I will--as mind is a finger,  
pointing, as wonder  
a place to be.

Creeley's logopoeic poetics follow, marvelling at, the wondering (and wandering) "pointing" mind which offers him "a place to be". Concluding 'The Finger', newly conscious of the colourful and voluptuous possibilities of his intellect, he warningly ridicules the empty complacency of assumption: "what thinks it knows / and cannot see".

Prompting Creeley towards a poetic idiom which continues to be spare, suggestively phrased, and carefully alert to its own possibilities, Pound's "inescapable" example taught him how to write. It was impossible to avoid the insistence he put on precisely how the line goes, how the word is, in its context, what has been done, in the practice of verse--and what now seems possible to do.<sup>38</sup>

## II To move: the "complex of emotion"

To Olson, Creeley railed angrily against the "curse" of composure which dictated, in his view misguidedly, "Dont [sic] be emotional. Control yrself. Sentimental. Yr feelings are excessive. Enthusiasm. Childish . . . Keep yr head. No use getting excited." He goes on to observe, resentfully, that as a result



a direct reaction from the THING, was blocked by such  
 shit, we began to fumble, & slop/ sophistries. True: how  
 cd an 'emotion' be BUT excessive when the least tear: is  
 suspect. . . Men/ as women/ as children: should be ABLE  
 to be moved/ to cry. 16th June 1950 (CC1 104)

This outburst confirms Creeley's respect for Pound's belief  
 that "Only emotion endures," and "Nothing counts save the  
 quality of the affection". Since a poem is "a complex of  
 emotion", Pound's two rules

offer to me two precise terms of measure for what the  
 possibility of a poem can be . . . that emotion which it  
 offers, and . . . the quality of the articulation of that  
 emotion--how it is felt, the fineness of its  
 articulation, . . .<sup>39</sup>

Creeley's recognition that a poem's emotion convinces by  
 the way it is uttered also emulates Pound: "One 'moves' the  
 reader only by clarity. In depicting the motions of the  
 'human heart' the durability of the writing depends on the  
 exactitude."<sup>40</sup> In exploring the colour that emotion lends to  
 the possibilities of experience, Creeley's poetic idiom  
 strives, after Pound, to be "austere, direct, free from  
 emotional slither."<sup>41</sup> Although 'To the One in the Gray Coat'  
 (written before 1950) hopes "I have / called to mind for him,  
 / have suggested by language, / a world of inner warmth", such  
 "signs of inadequate love" seem self-conscious and laboured.  
 As Creeley observes:

language must be more insistent in its articulations than ever, must be more articulate in all ways, so as not to lose the possibility of saying what one feels in a world which has been given such assumptions that at times it's a nightmare to think how to confront them with sufficient energy and definition to embarrass them . . .<sup>42</sup>

The challenge to fulfil "the possibility of saying what one feels" (without any "emotional slither") lies behind the five experimental variations of 'Stomping with Catullus'. The first section is elegant, its hesitance movingly doubtful:

My love--my love says  
she loves me.  
And that she would never have  
anyone but me.

Though what a woman tells  
to a man who pushes her  
should be written in wind and quickly  
moving water.

The Charm CP 68

The colloquialisms of the next, much shorter, variant do not succeed in disguising a continuing air of doubtful anxiety:

My old lady says I'm it,  
she says nobody else cd ever make it.

But what my old lady says when pushed to it,--  
well, that don't make it.

The third is even more casual, converting "old lady" into "goofed up chick", in cheerful contrast with the aggressive woman of the next, whose quick-paced couplets seem defensively hostile. The final variant overtly (and genially) advises: "make it, don't just flip yr wig." Despite language which

rigorously denies "emotional slither", in 'Stomping With Catullus' each speaker's emotion "endures" and each version, in its own way, moves.

In Davie's view, Pound worked with language "not as a specialist or a savant, but as a lover"; as Canto LXXXI declares, "What thou lovest well remains, / the rest is dross".<sup>43</sup> Creeley's first major collection, For Love, secured his reputation as a poet absorbed by emotion, a contemporary Troubadour. Having sparked his interest in medieval romance poetry, Pound also put Creeley in touch with Paul Blackburn in 1952, "really the first poet I ever knew", who was translating those ancient lyrics into a contemporary idiom.<sup>44</sup> His work was expert and accessible, intelligent and lively:

I was immensely impressed by what Paul was extending with Pound's . . . authority. I was fascinated . . . by the condition of interaction melodically, structurally . . . I didn't speak Provencale . . . so I was suddenly involved with a poet who was of that authority and subtlety and who was just wild; and he also had this kind of teasing reflective humour that I really loved.<sup>45</sup>

In For Love, Creeley toys with medieval forms and diction, sometimes striking a (medievally) romantic attitude only to debunk the emotion with bantering or caustic humour. 'Lady Bird' wittily juxtaposes the anciently respectful ("Lady") with the casual, even demeaning ("Bird"). In this poem, Duncan heard "Pound's rendering of Cavalcanti's great

'Donna Mi Prega' in 'Canto XXXVI', but although the first lines match, and some antique syntax hints at Pound's traditional idiom, little else is comparable.<sup>46</sup> Creeley refuses the tenderness sought of him, his reserve formal and distancing: "I would tell". The distraught "lady", briefly glimpsed, almost softens him:

To be happy  
now she cries, and all things

turn backward  
and impossible.

For Love CP 187

There is tension in the proximity of "happy", removed by its line break, and "cries". Creeley's own strain is evident in a line which he struggles to control "and all things / / turn backward" until, his strength seemingly renewed by the stanza break, he accepts the "impossible". Their "parallel sufferance" binds the lovers into a mutual emotional sacrifice, an exchange:

Mine for hers,  
hers for mine.

Paul Diehl presumes that Creeley seeks "some bridge between emotion in the man and emotion in the poem, some phenomenon common to both body and language."<sup>47</sup> Intense and sophisticated, 'Air: "The Love of a Woman"' seems to bear him out:

The love of a woman  
is the possibility which  
surrounds her as hair  
her head, as the love of her

follows and describes  
 her. But what if  
 they die, then there is  
 still the aura

left, left sadly, but  
 hovers in the air, surely,  
 where this had taken place?  
 Then sing, of her, of whom

it will be said, he  
 sang of her, it was the  
 song he made which made her  
 happy, so she lived.

For Love CP 240

The speaker's emotion, his wistfully elegaic tone, "endures", like the lingering "aura / / left, left sadly" which "hovers in the air". Joy and yearning are balanced in mournful celebration of the fragility which attends powerful love, constant as the happiness which "the / song he made" contrives. This elusive poem relives the emotion it recollects, just as the lover's song perpetuates "her" happiness, "so she lived."

Apparently concurring with Diehl's proposition, Creeley explains:

I didn't necessarily begin writing a poem about something to discover what I felt about it, but rather I could find the articulation of emotions in the actual writing, I came to realize that which I was feeling in the actual discovery possible to me in the poem.<sup>48</sup>

Among his most powerful poems, 'Anger' evokes this process. The poem begins with slow menace, the atmosphere of the "open, descriptive" implicitly vulnerable house charged with silent

tension. When it breaks, the "black light" of fury,  
 "convulsively darkening", is as suddenly destructive as the  
 "hated" truck which shatters the stillness.

The "open / hole of horror" of rage which engulfs Creeley  
 is explicitly dualistic: he seems to greet it with a mixture  
 of relief and terror, as he

fills it  
 with himself,

yet watches on  
 the edge of it,

Words CP 306

This yawning hole of anger seems bottomless; when the row  
 explodes, "the darkness, / . . . stands empty". He finds no  
 relief in seeking to define "some odor . . . a face / which is  
 rage", because he is consumed by its energy. Emotion has even  
 deposed the powers of thought:

I think I think  
 but find myself in it.

'Anger' demonstrates Creeley's continual fascination with  
 "the way people think and feel (thinking is feeling and  
 feeling is thinking and so on.)"<sup>49</sup> The poet "double, split",  
 is sundered by the emotion which grips him even as, his "eye  
 locked in / self sight", he experiences it; more cerebral and  
 internalised, perhaps, than Pound's, such emotion affects and  
 endures.

### III To delight: "to write anything is always pleasure"

Introducing For Love Creeley admits, "How much I should like to please! It is a constant concern," and adds, "I write poems because it pleases me, very much--". In an early letter he reminded Olson:

as P[ound] put it/ almost the whole 'law & gospel'; . . .

'd'écrire franchement ce qu'il pense--seul plaisir

d'un écrivain'

22nd May 1950 (CC1 35)

In the same way, Creeley's "open field" poetry depends upon emancipation: "that place where one is open, where a sense of defensiveness or insecurity and all the other complexes of response . . . can be finally dropped."<sup>50</sup> 'Joy' captures his absorbed delight in "an empty hole", the possibility that it "will collect things":

There is  
an infinite emptiness  
placed there.

Words CP 350

Freedom makes Creeley's defining aim possible, to "Make new : is the kick."<sup>51</sup> Like Pound, he believes that "without constant experiment literature dies":<sup>52</sup>

Pound is so insistent in the basis of my own critical estimations of my own circumstance. That quote he has from Remy de Gourmont, "Freely to write what one chooses is the sole pleasure of a writer." That is so true. So that as soon as it becomes programmed in any way, in the sense that it isn't momentarily recognized, it's a very very problematic context in which to try anything.<sup>53</sup>

While de Gourmont's statement "continues for me the only actual measure of the occasion I am aware of", Creeley explains that as a young man he felt freedom "to propose senses of experience and of the world I was necessarily not in possession of--something in that way one might escape to." In taking "'freely' to mean 'without significant limit' and 'chooses' to be an act of will", he consequently misunderstood such "limits" to be a frustration of possibility rather than the literal possibility they in fact must provoke. Despite Pound--or rather, because I could not hope to gain such means as he had--I had to find my own way, and at first I was completely ignorant of what it might be.<sup>54</sup>

However, he came to see that limit also promises capacity: "How does one know, as Pound says, until one thus pushes limits to experience where they are actually occurring."<sup>55</sup> Creeley's poems test limits only in the intention to outstrip them:

Imaginal sharp distances we  
push out from, confident  
travelers, whose worlds are  
specific to bodies--

'Apostrophe', Echoes 107

Always pleased by individuality, Creeley is most interested by his own limits: "each according to his nature again, to quote from Pound's quote of the Confucian text."<sup>56</sup> He remarks:

Everybody's original in the sense that each person is  
possessed of his own uniqueness, by the fact of being



himself. . . . It's how you articulate that specific thing you are.<sup>57</sup>

His poems reflect an "insistent sense . . . that one must depend upon oneself to learn whatever proved requisite. There was no one else to do it for you."<sup>58</sup> What he came to dub the "single intelligence" (discussed in Chapters 3 and 5) stamps an individual's defining integrity on his work. In an undated letter to Levertov, Creeley exclaims:

a man is an idiot, of a definite sort, to base himself on anything but, himself; he is the condition of change, or that place where he will know it to have been possible.<sup>59</sup>

Creeley was determined to avoid "the distortion that can come in with an over-emphasis or mistaking of EP's thought".<sup>60</sup> For example, he suspects Pound of a carelessness conferred by "freedom":

Ez, being so caught by the 'objective,' i.e., that one cd, by the looseness of such, come to believe the eye cd, or the ear, cd, exist free of its forces . . .

1st May 1951, (CC6 32)

In reply, Olson warmly applauds the "wonderful picture you draw, of his ear, or his eye, sort of wandering around with its own private existence!"<sup>61</sup>

Creeley's generation was also naturally suspicious of the Europeanism which divided Pound from them. D. H. Lawrence

described the "slow smouldering patience of American opposition" to "the old master" Europe, asserting, "Somewhere deep in every American heart lies a rebellion against the old parenthood of Europe."<sup>62</sup> Unable to comply with Pound's self-styled Europeanism, in an echo of Williams' famous rejection of The Waste Land, Creeley declared:

I am sick to death of this deadness. I want not the slightest part of it, Ez or any of it. . . . I want the straight thing. The straight open breath of it, the freshness, the love, exact & living. . . . Ez could never push but backwards . . . could never give a straight thing but with a back hand . . .

6th September 1950 (CC2 126)

Later, he is more brutally dismissive:

You can't renounce Ez, you can only leave him sitting in the dust, which is where: exactly where, he should be left.

3rd October 1950 (CC3 75)

Although Creeley never attempted to overlook or excuse those unorthodoxies which finally compromised the example 'Ez' offered, he could nevertheless acknowledge something courageous in the image of Pound himself, "singular, isolate, fighting for coherence and survival . . ."<sup>63</sup> He loyally reminds Jonathan Williams of Pound's insistence on

a man's right to have his ideas considered one at a time-  
-which seems true to me . . . I distrust and dislike very much [his] antisemitism, and his fascism, and his hail

hail the gang's all here-ism, etc. But how can I deny the use of his insights, or of his ideogrammic method, . . . or the literal capability he shows as a poet?<sup>64</sup>

Recognising the aesthetic importance of innovation ("What does one know of creation except that insistent "Make it New" which Pound so emphasised?"),<sup>65</sup> Creeley felt unable to

discard . . . "experimentalists" . . . [nor,] however right their method may be for their own apprehension of form, . . . ignore its example in our own dilemmas.<sup>66</sup>

As he muses to Spanos, the drive of his private aesthetics suggests something larger about the character of his native literature:

I wonder if the American habit of being young is a necessary factor of person and of being innocent, . . . in some curious sense of pristine condition and therefore possibility.<sup>67</sup>

### **Wallace Stevens: "Things exactly as they are"**

Encouraged by Pound to explore the experimental literature disregarded by academic authorities, Creeley discovered Wallace Stevens. It seems an unlikely choice. Stevens' lyrical cunning, openly courting abstraction, opposed Pound's promotion of the "particular", for whom "any tendency to abstract general statement is a greased slide."<sup>68</sup> Creeley,

sometimes accused of being "abstract", cautiously defines the term as

removed from its condition . . . to drag away, literally, as with a tractor. That kind of abstraction I've always felt a great uneasiness about; but when . . . some thing . . . is left to exist in its own intensity and in its own organisation, then I don't feel an abstraction is involved.<sup>69</sup>

Creeley's determination to acknowledge (and preserve) the difficulties of leaving "some thing . . . to exist in its own intensity and . . . organisation," can be mistaken for abstraction. This perhaps explains his affinity with Stevens, whose poetry declares itself to be concerned with "Things exactly as they are". Stevens confided:

It is difficult for me to think and not to think abstractly. Consequently, in order to avoid abstractness, in writing, I search out instinctively things that express the abstract and yet are not in themselves abstractions.<sup>70</sup>

For his part, Creeley admits to having

learned a lot from his thinking, I loved the way his mind worked, and I loved the play of his intelligence in his work. It was to me extraordinary and very, very pleasing.<sup>71</sup>

Stevens' habitual pursuit of the abstruse and the complex contributed to Creeley's interest in the delicate relationship between form and content upon which his poetics came to depend, in the effort to realize "things exactly as they are" in words.

## I Form and "The idea of order"

George Butterick explains that Creeley's poem 'Divisions', published in 1951, started out in 1949 as part of an explicit response to Stevens entitled 'Notes on Poetry'.<sup>72</sup> The poem examines the prosodic interdependence of form and content which Stevens taught Creeley:

Order. Order. The bottle contains  
more than water. It is surrounded  
In this case the form is imposed.

Butterick's brief discussion shows how an initially rigid form, with "stiff, indeed self-conscious, symmetry", was later relaxed:

Order. Order. The bottle contains  
more than water. In this case the form  
is imposed. 'Divisions', The Charm CP 33

With revision, the poem's questioning of its own physical casing becomes sophisticated. The restructured second line pushes out beyond ("more than") the limits described by the first line, and begins to challenge the "order" for which Creeley hopes. Now, as Butterick points out, the word 'form'

"is emphasized, suspended for our attentions to seize". The second stanza, as if entertaining itself with its own insolence, goes (belligerently) further:

As if the air did not hold me in  
and not let me burst from what have you or inveterate  
goodwill!

The poem dramatises the 'Divisions' which it investigates, its "order" deriving from a pliancy of form which, necessary to make sense of "meandering . . . intricacies," only emerges when released, "unbelted":

To make it difficult, to make a sense  
of limit, to call a stop to meandering--  
one could wander here

in intricacies, unbelted, somewhat sloppy.

The revised title also recalls Stevens' difficult aesthetic which, L. S. Dembo notes, "finds its final expression not in dualism but in paradox."<sup>73</sup> 'Divisions' touches on a paradoxical sense of 'order' proposed in 'Connoisseur of Chaos', quoted to Olson by Creeley:

A. A violent order is disorder; and  
B. A great disorder is an order. These  
Two things are one . . . 27th May 1950 (CC1 54)

His abiding pleasure in Stevens' idea of order was revealed to Robert Basil in a class taught by Creeley years later:

One morning, we read Stevens' 'Anecdote of the Jar,' "The Stevens IDEA," he said. "What: he places a jar, in

Tennessee." He looked at a space on the table, and, one hand still against his cheek, he capped his own "idea-jar" with his other, and laughed, "There! Order!" He hooted.<sup>74</sup>

In 'Anecdote of the Jar', the jar's self-sufficiency, isolated in the surroundings over which it presides, implicitly interrogates some common assumptions about poetic form and content. Enigmatic and inviolate, this "idea-jar" begs attention but shuns inquiry or interaction:

The jar was gray and bare.  
It did not give of bird and bush,  
Like nothing else in Tennessee.

The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens [WSCP] 76

Details are telling: for example, each two-lined sentence is neatly end-stopped, made orderly and exact. The jar itself is contrived with an air of calm stateliness, its smooth curves revealed in the slow harmonies of "round upon the ground / And tall and of a port in air." In an "idea-jar" (itself a complex metaphor) which embraces and tames its peculiarly hostile "dominion", Stevens celebrates order constructed amid disorder, and formality contrived within informality. Creeley seems to have been struck like Louis Martz by how, for Stevens, "order" is found "by the poet in moments of supreme awareness, when one object, one scene, one person, one idea, is firmly grasped by integrated mind and sense."<sup>75</sup>

In reconciling "order" with "form" in 'Divisions', like Stevens (according to Cid Corman) Creeley uses "paradox in order not to suspend the truth between two poles but to see it as inseparable from a resolution of its parts."<sup>76</sup> Yet, while exploring the idea "that any form, any ordering of reality so implied, had somehow to come from the very condition of the experience demanding it", 'Divisions' also signals a departure from Stevens' example.<sup>77</sup> The bottle, Creeley's "idea-jar", instead of imposing a Stevensian order upon a "slovenly" aesthetic landscape, is created by the stuff of its immediate environment:

There are . . . writers who think of form as something you give the poem, that you take and shape it the same way you might shape a piece of wood to form a boat or whatever. I question that. Imposition of form upon words is always a problem for me. . . form for me is something that's found in activity.<sup>78</sup>

Unlike Stevens (whose jar seems proudly self-possessed) Creeley is typically nervous of what he risks, which lends 'Divisions' a personal anguish absent in 'Anecdote of the Jar':

will I come again here, most desperate and all questions,  
to find the water all  
leaked out.

In answer, the second part of 'Divisions' is business-like, even Poundian:



Take it, there are particulars.  
 Or consider rock. Consider hardness not as elemental but  
 stone. The stone! And just so /as  
 invincible.

Which is to say, not a damn thing but  
 rock. But, just so, that hardness, which is to say:  
 the stone.

Engaging with "not a damn thing but / rock", the poem forges  
 the same tensile "hardness" which makes the stone "invincible"  
 and, finding an "order" inherent in its form, recalls 'Notes  
 Toward a Supreme Fiction':

To discover an order as of  
 A season, to discover summer and know it,  
 To discover winter and know it well, to find,  
 Not to impose, not to have reasoned at all  
 'It Must Give Pleasure,' WSCP 403-04

In concluding, 'Divisions' claims: "Which remains not,  
 also not, definition. / But statement." Creeley's claim that  
 "form for me is something that's found in activity" briefly  
 recalls Stevens: "To fix it is to put an end to it. Let me  
 show it to you unfixed."<sup>79</sup> Prompted, if not shared, by  
 Stevens, the apprehension of form as process, the physical  
 creation (or procreation) of a continually energetic  
 character peculiar to, and made self-evident in, the poem  
 itself, has been seminal to Creeley's poetics. In April 1950,  
 in his second letter to Olson, Creeley remarked:

Thinking of Stevens, who slipped into P[artisan]  
 R[evue], with this: '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 . . . ' Basic.

28th April 1950 (CC1 22)

The letter which included the famous form/content dictum, written just over a month later, confirms Stevens' "basic" contribution to Creeley's belief in form which reflects, and preserves, the material of which a poem is composed (realizing "things as they are"). Similarly, the letter itself anxiously qualifies and requalifies its terms, as if Creeley is writing himself into an understanding of his emerging ideas:

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.

5th June 1950 (CC1 79)

Frequently asked to amplify why "form is never more than an extension of content", Creeley uses a helpful analogy:

If you spill water on the floor it has a form; . . . .  
Or you can give things form, you can pour water into a glass, but the water has form in the glass insofar as it is water; if you pour other things into the glass perhaps they won't take that form: ice cream for example. So that form is peculiarly the situation of the content, that is being form, or gaining form or having form.<sup>80</sup>

He might have borrowed this from Pound, who said: "I think there is a 'fluid' as well as a 'solid' content, that some poems may have form as a tree has form, some as water poured into a vase."<sup>81</sup> 'Divisions' argues the same point. Other early poems try to use water to express the possibilities of form. 'A Poem' attempts a fleeting synthesis ("If the water forms / the forms of the weeds,") which is more successfully realized in:

The form of the grasses against  
 the water is reminiscent, a total reminiscence  
 of the water in motion  
                   'The Total Parts of a World', The Charm CP 72

'A Wish', written almost a decade later, is still hoping that

A man of supple  
 yielding manner  
 might, too, discover  
 ways of water.

For Love CP 225

Instinctively suspicious of form which threatened to dictate, constrict, or paralyse the "supple / yielding" elements of a poem's form, Creeley distrusted any external tightness, having more to do with the poem's pattern than with the movement of its sense. And it's this same tightness which Stevens has damned by implication: "There is, however, a usage with respect to form as if form were a derivative of plastic shape."<sup>82</sup>

When his own poetry is described as "verbal miniature sculpture", Creeley demurs, recalling this "lovely thing in

Wallace Stevens" and adding uneasily, "I think the word sculpture is a little assumptive."<sup>83</sup> Form cannot be moulded, like plastic, to assume an unnatural shape. For Creeley, only authenticity of form can predicate a poem's substance. As Olson told him in 1951:

verse has a matiere which is as differentiable as a painter's paint or a carver's wood: sounds, can be alive or thin, played with or taken very seriously. And once taken so, they become the medium of a man who writes to make clear certain premises, certain emotions, certain characters of idea. 15th November 1951 (CC8 138)

'The Figures', written about "a really moving New Mexican, sadly but lovely drunken sculptor [who] used to peddle these little santos figures . . . mainly for drink, and he finally burnt to death," corroborates Olson's words:<sup>84</sup>

The stillness  
of the wood,  
the figures formed

by hands so still  
they touched it  
to be one

hand holding one  
hand, faces  
without eyes,

bodies of wooden  
stone, so still  
they will not move

from that quiet  
action ever  
again. Did the man

who made them find  
a like quiet? In  
the act of making them

it must have been  
 so still he heard the wood  
 and felt it with his hands

moving into  
 the forms  
 he has given to them,

one by singular  
 one, so quiet,  
 so still.

For Love CP 245

This poem has the dignity and quietude of a still life, gravely recalling Keats' 'Ode On a Grecian Urn'. Though sculpted the figures seem to be poised in mid-action, endowed with movement and grace by the veracity of their modelling. The words of the poem, the lines languidly enjambed, capture and reflect the carving's life-like air of arrested motion. The craftsman has carved himself into his carving, his skill betrayed in the sensitivity of his worksmanship: "formed / / by hands so still / they touched it / to be one / / hand holding". As Creeley tells Ekbert Faas, this is "self-revelation more than self-transcendence". The words, simply and directly delivered, also capture the trance-like repose of the figures: "so still / they will not move / / from that quiet / action ever again." Though immobile, these figures seem neither "plastic" nor insensible. Creeley imagines them imparting their tranquillity to their maker, guiding and participating in his act of creation even as they emerge from it. His poem, moreover, suggests that he has experienced the same phenomenon. As he respectfully (almost devoutly) honours the artist and his achievement, his tribute marks an achievement of the same order.

An earlier poem, 'After Mallarmé', impassively realizes its own intractability; grimly self-protective, it gives nothing away but, like Stevens' jar, its dispassionate resistance is also provocative. Creeley's tone is equivocal, perhaps ironic, despairing or even triumphant:

Stone,  
like stillness,  
around you my  
mind sits, it is

a proper form  
for  
it, like  
stone, like

compression itself,  
fixed fast,  
grey,  
without a sound.

For Love CP 250

Whether "you" apostrophizes stone, Mallarmé himself, or an absent lover, the words are stiffened, like Creeley's brooding mind, by the adamant "stillness" (perhaps signifying emotional resilience) which "Stone" projects. This fascinates but daunts him, the weight a responsibility. Therefore Creeley's mind "sits" with a heavy passivity borrowed from the comma's subsequent pause. Although stone secures the mind "fixed fast" upon it, this "proper form" makes an unappealing paradigm: static, impervious, "grey, / without a sound", stone seems lifeless and hope shortlived. This taciturnity frustrates the poet's only vocation, to articulate. By dint of its form, the poem dismisses its own ideal (with whatever relationship is consequent upon this) in order to liberate itself.

'After Mallarmé' preserves the marmoreal inscrutability of its metaphor, without falling prey to its own criticisms, to make plain Creeley's distrust of form which threatens the composure so effectively preserved by 'The Figures'. Strangely ambivalent, the poem might be a tribute to Mallarmé, a complex attempt to define a poetic state of mind, or a yearning for the serenity that a loving relationship can bring. It may be the deliberately vague synthesis of all three. In fact the poem is a misnomer: as Creeley recalls with amusement, it should have been called 'After Jouve'.<sup>85</sup> He admits to having "read Mallarmé, but only in a kind of scattered way" and adds drily, "Rexroth once referred to me as the corn-fed Mallarmé."<sup>86</sup> Even so, just as its title suggests, this poem flirts irresolutely with the symbolic.

Perhaps because of Stevens' early influence, whose Symbolist leanings Albert Gelpi retraces to Valéry and Mallarmé, Creeley's Objectivist agenda sometimes seems to waver.<sup>87</sup> Pound, Creeley recalls, "warned against the muzziness that can come of a too conscious fuddling of symbolism", and urged "a very clear demarcation between a symbol which in effect exhausts its references as opposed to a sign or a mark of something which constantly renews its references."<sup>88</sup> If Creeley's open form poetry can and does exploit a traditional symbolist vocabulary, such "symbols" as appear remain, after Pound's fashion, cleverly imprecise, their (self-renewing) centrifugal energies denying any reliably totemic significance.

In the apparently symbolic 'The Rose', Creeley the troubadour depicts the first awkward but eventually ecstatic moments of a serious relationship. But the title's "listless" and hackneyed emblem is liberated when the poem's studied disquiet grows confident:

And all about a rosy  
mark discloses  
her nature  
to him, vague and unsure.

There roses, here roses,  
flowers, a pose of  
nature, her  
nature has disclosed to him.

For Love CP 246

When the lovers are tranquilly united ("quiet quiet air / as breath"), the "rosy / mark" bespeaks a peaceful but sexually suggestive atmosphere, heightened by self-conscious curiosity "vague and unsure". In the profusion implied by the repetitions we sense rising passion; the flowers seem to open, releasing the fragrance which signifies "her nature", and the emotion of the moment. Afterwards, "her flowers" become a metaphor for the secure loving relationship he seeks "to come home to". Like 'After Mallarmé', 'The Rose' subtly capitalizes on its symbolic aspect.

While Creeley's interest in the Symbolist movement was limited, he was struck by Valéry's intriguing declaration: "What is 'form' for anyone else is 'content' for me."<sup>89</sup> He reminds Charles Tomlinson that

The Art of Poetry, makes a comment on, or definition of, lyric poetry, where the form and content, he says, are



inextricable and where the form is being discovered at each instant, where there can be no prior determination of the form except that which is recognised as the writing occurs.<sup>90</sup>

Form for Valéry was a regenerative process reflecting the energies passing to and fro between language and meaning, defining and redefining shape and ideas, ideas and shape; the poem "has as its sole issue, its sole form, the very form from which it proceeded."<sup>91</sup> Stevens, whose links with Symbolism were anyway ambivalent and tenuous, put this differently:

form derives its significance from the whole. Form has no significance except in relation to the reality that is being revealed.<sup>92</sup>

In other words, poetic form should seek to reproduce "things exactly as they are".

## II The poem as "the cry of its occasion."

For Stevens, "The real is only the base. But it is the base."<sup>93</sup> 'An Ordinary Evening in New Haven' proposes that "Reality is the beginning not the end", and illuminates "the never-ending meditation" which compels Stevens' search for

The poem of pure reality, untouched  
By trope or deviation, straight to the word,  
Straight to the transfixing object, to the object

At the exactest point at which it is itself,  
Transfixing by being purely what it is,  
A view of New Haven, say, through the certain eye,

The eye made clear of uncertainty, with the sight  
 Of simple seeing, without reflection. We seek  
 Nothing beyond reality.

'An Ordinary Evening in New Haven', WSCP 471

Prosodically, these stanzas disguise their own abstractions by means of a series of straightforward repetitions: "pure . . . purely"; "straight to the . . . / Straight to the . . . object, to the object"; "it is itself, / . . . what it is"; and "the certain eye, / / The eye made clear of uncertainty". It is a ruse: the words deliver the difficulties embedded in the poem with a reassuring directness which makes us the reader to grasp them. The conceit demands that the universally poetic "certain eye" transcend the myopic "vulgate of experience" to permit the fusing, "without reflection", of reality with the imagination, while illuminating and informing the synthesis. The poetic privilege of "simple seeing" is as disingenuous as the poem, transfiguring by metamorphosis.

For Stevens the imagination "does not create except as it transforms", so there is nothing simple in the "seeing" or the "reality" he supposedly seeks:<sup>94</sup>

Sometimes I believe most in the imagination for a long time and then, without reasoning about it turn to reality and believe in that and that alone. But both of these things project themselves endlessly and I want them to do just that.<sup>95</sup>

As Dembo saw, "If his realism is modified by his impulse toward idealism, his idealism is held in check by his abiding sense of realism."<sup>96</sup>

Inevitably, Creeley grew wary of what Charles Altieri calls Stevens' "intricately dialectical mind".<sup>97</sup> Creeley's contrasting account of an immediately personal reality required the purism and precision for which Pound had argued, since

a reality not literally made a presence, given actuation, in the content, is a direct sapping of that writing's to-be-respected DEMAND on the reader's attention.<sup>98</sup>

Careful of the recondite, Creeley came to insist "let us accept the actual, as opposed to the . . . real, the real being for me always the imagination", since:<sup>99</sup>

The so-called form that things have in the world is the particular and peculiar instance of their own occasion in the world. Premises or senses of form otherwise seem to me descriptive rather than what I call loosely experiential and actual.<sup>100</sup>

Yet, perhaps inadvertently, he is echoing 'An Ordinary Evening', where the poem asserts itself through its own energies, the poet standing apart and instructed by the activity:

The poem is the cry of its occasion,  
Part of the res itself and not about it.  
The poet speaks the poem as it is.

John Vernon's helpful gloss has shown how Creeley's poetics can be read as "the cry of its occasion".<sup>101</sup> His poems explore a sudden reality which, for him, is "the specific content of an instant's possibility" in which observer and observed coalesce, the poet standing apart from the "res" even though he himself, as much part of the activity as the poem, belongs to the "res".<sup>102</sup> The speaker in 'For A Friend' thinks both "to himself" and "as himself"; his moment of agonised recognition is the cry of the poem itself, a suddenly desolate apprehension of isolation and profound loneliness, the wretched tone of which is brutalized by an axiomatic brevity:

Who remembers him also, he thinks  
(but to himself and as himself).

Himself alone is dominant  
in a world of no one else.

For Love CP 188

Recorder of his own circumstance, Creeley is rarely absent from a poetics which is determinedly dependent only upon his fundamental (and defining) immediacies, as has already been noted:

For myself, writing has always been the way of finding what I was feeling about, what so engaged me as "subject" and particularly to find the articulation of emotions in the actual writing.<sup>103</sup>

The horrified "cry" of 'The Sign Board' is his own urgently actual "scream", the words crammed into one desperate line: "come here you idiot it's going to go off." The one-

dimensional "figure of silence" on the board is pictured as a complex of dualities arising from the collision of positive reality and negative unreality:

A face that is no face  
but the features, of a face, pasted

on a face until that face  
is faceless, answers by

a being nothing there  
where there was a man.

For Love CP 227

In 'Two Ways of Looking in a Mirror', Creeley explores the dualities of a relationship (seen from the "mediate perspective") reflected in the dichotomy which is himself. On one level he tells it dispassionately "as it is", seemingly divorced from the scene he is witnessing. Yet he is also part of the "res" he is examining: a mirror permits him to scrutinize himself, apparently in the act of making love. Consequently we watch him watching himself as he participates in the "union". In the "cry of its occasion," this poem recognises that no "union" (whether sex act or relationship) can fully blend its separate elements. Although part of "us", the "flower of my mind" inspects the relationship's superficialities with a matter-of-fact, oddly disembodied candour:

And about us, rayed out in a floral wall-  
paper-like pattern, the

facts of our union. Bliss  
is actual, as hard as  
stone.

The Charm CP 39

The "facts" nourishing the poem's form create their own "wall- / paper-like pattern". To make his "bliss" properly "actual", Creeley returns to the intrinsic resistance of stone which can only be adapted by erosion; his simile permits the abstract concept of bliss the concrete identity of the final word, obdurate and uncompromising. This is "the fact of things in the world however they are."<sup>104</sup>

Creeley tells Ekbert Faas that "The world breaks open in a beautiful way when there can't any longer be assumptions about it."<sup>105</sup> Therefore:

I am more interested . . . in what is given to me to write apart from what I might intend. I have never explicitly known - before writing - what it was that I would say.<sup>106</sup>

As a result, he is persistently attempting to articulate that responsibility which what you see demands. It's an awfully precarious position to be in, because you can obliterate everything in one instant. You've got to be utterly awake to recognize what is happening, and to be responsible for all the things you must do before you can even recognize what their full significance is.<sup>107</sup>

In the internalized processes of 'Walking', his meticulous self-scrutiny converges with this larger purpose, to realize the moment as an active instant of possibility:

In my head I am  
walking but I am not  
in my head, where

is there to walk,  
not thought of, is  
the road itself more

than seen. I think  
it might be, feel  
as my feet do, and

continue, and  
at last reach, slowly,  
one end of my intention.

Words CP 282

Free of "device" or plan the poem is deliberately undeliberate, as much a present participle as its title. Creeley seems to be working blindfold; unable to control the words pacing tirelessly round his head he must record them uncomprehendingly. His thought processes merge with the similarly relentless processes of the poem until the two are indistinguishable. By trying to capture the words on paper, he seeks to marshal them somehow into an order which can be explored: the very fact of the poem requires that the words stop walking and stand revealed. Just as Creeley cannot walk within his head, where "the road itself" is "more than seen", so his thoughts can only be properly expressed outside his mind. The struggle for articulation is humiliating and arduous; in pursuit of his thought, he must feel his way with his feet, persisting with cautious determination. His hesitancy is expressed in the poem's uneven rhythms: "and" is isolated at the end of the line from "at last", and "slowly" qualifies the quietly triumphant final line so that the word "intention" is reached slowly. When only "one end" is

attained there is no sense of failure or dissatisfaction, only pleased relief. It is as if the "intention" evolves with the poem, emerging in conclusion to be "given" to the poet.

The introduction to Words, in which 'Walking' is found, confirms

what I feel, in the world, is the one thing I know myself to be, for that instant. I will never know myself otherwise.

Intentions are the variability of all these feelings, moments of that possibility. How can I ever assume that they must come to this or that substance? I am trying to say that what I think to say is of no help to me--

CP 261

Creeley's friend, painter Franz Kline, said:

if I paint what you know, then that will simply bore you, the repetition from me to you. If I paint what I know, it will be boring to myself. Therefore I paint what I don't know.<sup>108</sup>

Creeley echoes: "And I write what I don't know, in that sense." Of his poem 'The Old Woman and the Statue', Stevens says in apparent sympathy:

I wanted to apply my own sensibility to something perfectly matter-of-fact. The result would be a disclosure of my own sensibility or individuality, . . . certainly to myself. . . . [This poem] has an automatic



aspect in the sense that it is what I wanted it to be without knowing before it was written what I wanted it to be, even though I knew before it was written what I wanted to do.<sup>109</sup>

The difference, however, lies in Stevens' more clinical approach. He is dispassionately engaged on another experimental stunt, impersonally inspecting the stuff of his poetry at arm's length as it were, whereas Creeley's stance is consistent with his poetics: both he and his poems remain resolutely unassuming.

While Stevens maintained that "Poetry is the statement of a relation between a man and the world", he was less interested in the complexities of the 'man' than in the unfathomable dialectic of his poetic 'relation' with the world:<sup>110</sup>

I was the world in which I walked, and what I saw  
Or heard or felt came not but from myself;  
And there I found myself more truly and more strange.

'Tea at the Palaz of Hoon', WSCP 65

Stevens' 'Americana' courts the same dilemma as 'Two Ways', but where Creeley reconciles so as to concentrate the singularities he explores, in his poem Stevens dismantles the "divisions" in order to examine them:

A man that looks at himself in a glass and finds  
It is the man in the glass that lives, not he.  
He is the image, the second, the unreal,

The abstraction.

Opus Posthumous 121

The man, for Stevens, is interesting for the complexities reflected by his image: "The abstraction". Creeley, however, would find him interesting rather for those innate (human and emotional) complexities, the reality, which the mirror cannot reflect.

As Eliot said of Valéry, Stevens was "perpetually engaged in solving an insoluble puzzle - the puzzle of how poetry gets written".<sup>111</sup> His poems are always self-aware:

Poetry is the subject of the poem,  
From this the poem issues and

To this returns.

'The Man with The Blue Guitar', WSCP 176

Perhaps this is why Stevens can seem didactic where Creeley is solipsistic, showy where Creeley is modest, and knowing where Creeley is unaffected. The brittle "cry of [Creeley's] occasion" also differed from the confident manner of Stevens who, as Rod Townley says, could preserve "a seemly decorum in his verse, a conventional, even granitic, exterior" which eluded the nervier Creeley.<sup>112</sup>

The diffidence of Creeley's early letter to Olson, reluctant to do more than "imply" that he has only borrowed "a little" from Stevens, and the hesitant phrasing, anticipates these idiomatic disparities. Increasingly dissatisfied with an urbane and emotionally aloof rhetoric driven by self-consciousness, towards the end of July 1950 he was telling Olson: "Stevens aint got the push, any more. It is a

method/holds him up. NOT a content."<sup>113</sup> As a prosodic example, Stevens eventually proved unusable:

In trying to achieve an effective line, I was extending it--the result of my interest in Wallace Stevens and respect for him--in ways that my own energy couldn't sustain. I tended to speak in a short, intensive manner.<sup>114</sup>

This hampered progress, and Creeley had to abandon the attempt:

The period, the rhythmic period that he was using, just wasn't intimate to my own ways of feeling and speaking. And so, much as I respected him, I couldn't use him at all.<sup>115</sup>

In spite of a "mind one respected, in the questions it realized, . . . [his] use of poetry had fallen to the questionable fact of a device."<sup>116</sup> In spite of a "wild reflective ability to think", and his "brilliant, teasing bright mind", Creeley found Stevens crucially wanting:

curiously, emotionally he was not forthcoming, so to speak. . . . [He] didn't feel in ways that I "wanted" him to, not that he didn't agree with me, but that he didn't respond, . . . the writers that one studies . . . that are necessarily attractive are those who make a ground for feeling.<sup>117</sup>

Nevertheless, Creeley's enjoyment of Stevens' poetry survives, as Robert Basil's story confirms. 'For John Duff', prefaced by the opening line of 'Anecdote of the Jar', recalls Stevens' juggling of reality and the imagination in "a house, / explicit, of the mind, / / both thought / and the senses provoke it--". Echoes includes a moving tribute to Stevens:

After so many years the familiar  
seems even more strange, the hands

one was born with even more remote, the feet  
worn to discordant abilities, face fainter.

'Thinking of Wallace Stevens', Echoes 61

This poem rediscovers the old parallels with a writer who sought an epistemological reconciliation of the poet with his poem:

Can I say the whole was my desire?  
May I again reiterate my single purpose?

No one can know me better than myself,  
whose almost ancient proximity grew soon tedious.

The joy was always to know it was the joy,  
to make all acquiesce to one's preeminent premise.

The poem gently evokes Stevens' "epicurean" (Gelpi's word) and inquiring articulacy: Creeley seems to be rehearsing old inadequacies as he recollects, with quiet admiration, the sharp sagacity of an intellectual example which he can still respect:

The candle flickers in the quick, shifting wind.  
It reads the weather wisely in the opened window.

So it is the dullness of mind one cannot live without,  
this place returned to, this place that was never left.

## Notes:-

1. Robert Creeley, "To Charles Olson," 4th July 1950, Charles Olson and Robert Creeley: The Complete Correspondence, ed. George F. Butterick, vol. 2 (Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow P, 1980) 46-47. [CC]
2. 'With Linda Wagner,' Tales 40.
3. *ibid.*, Tales 69.
4. "I'm given to write poems," Collected Essays 502.
5. 28th June 1950, CC2 25.
6. 'With Linda Wagner,' Tales 69.
7. The Poet's Craft 153-54.
8. Robert Creeley, Introduction, Collected Essays xiii.
9. Ezra Pound, 'How to Read,' Literary Essays of Ezra Pound, ed. T. S. Eliot (London: Faber, 1954) 23.
10. Cottonwood Review, [Lawrence, Kansas] 1968 N.pag.
11. 'The Contemporary of Our Grandchildren: Ezra Pound and the Question of Influence,' Poetic License 119-44.
12. 'With Bill Spanos,' Tales 122.
13. "Mehr Licht . . . ," Collected Essays 401.
14. 'Grass Seed and Cherry Stones,' The Poet in the World (New York: New Directions, 1973) 251.
15. 'A Retrospect,' Literary Essays of Ezra Pound 4.
16. ABC of Reading (New York: New Directions, n.d.) 32.
17. Poetic License 122-25.
18. 28th August 1951, CC7 145.
19. 'A Note on Ezra Pound,' Collected Essays 27.
20. 'With Bill Spanos,' Tales 128.
21. Unpublished letter to Levertov, (n.d) found among her papers, Special Collections Department, Stanford University, California.
22. The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry, ed. Ezra Pound (San Francisco: City Lights, 1968) 24.

23. 'Zweck or the Aim,' Guide to Kulchur (Norfolk CN: New Directions, n.d.) 51.
24. 'A Note on Ezra Pound,' Collected Essays 26.
25. 'With Bill Spanos,' Tales 178.
26. 'How to Read,' Literary Essays of Ezra Pound 25.
27. Donald Davie, Pound, Modern Masters Ser. (Glasgow: Fontana-Collins, 1975) 43.
28. 'I Gather the Limbs of Osiris,' Ezra Pound: Selected Prose 1909-1959 38.
29. 'Notes Apropos "Free Verse",' Collected Essays 494.
30. 24th May 1950, CC1 41. Creeley writes: "'Love God,' Pico writes to Angelo Polit[i]an, "we rather may, than either know Him, or by speech utter Him. And yet had men liefer by knowledge never find that which they seek, than by love possess that thing, which also without love were in vain found . . .'"
31. 'I gather the Limbs of Osiris,' Ezra Pound: Selected Prose 1909-1965 41.
32. Dante's Lyric Poetry vol 1, ed. K. Foster and P. Boyde (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967) 30-31. Their translation begins: "Guido, I wish that you and Lapo and I could be taken by magic and placed in a boat that, whatever the wind, was carried over the sea wherever you and I chose to go, unhindered by tempest or any foul weather--our desire to be together in fact always increasing, living as we would in unceasing harmony." See Creeley's letter of 12th September 1950, CC2 146 for his version.
33. 'Form,' Collected Essays 592.
34. The Poet's Craft 167.
35. 'How to Read,' Literary Essays of Ezra Pound 25.
36. Language: A Modern Synthesis (London: Secker and Warburg, 1956) 6.
37. 'With Lewis MacAdams,' Tales 100.
38. 'A Note on Ezra Pound,' Collected Essays 26.
39. 'With Linda Wagner,' Tales 41.
40. 'How to Read,' Literary Essays of Ezra Pound 22.
41. 'A Retrospect,' Literary Essays of Ezra Pound 12.
42. 'With Linda Wagner,' Tales 35.

43. Pound 101.
44. The Sullen Art 58. At the time, Blackburn was working on the translations which Creeley published as Proensa in 1953.
45. A. S. Davies, personal interview, 15th August 1994.
46. 'After For Love,' Boundary 2 vol. 6, No. 3 and vol. 7, No. 1 (Spring/Fall 1978): 233.
47. 'The Literal Activity of Robert Creeley,' Boundary 2: 340.
48. 'With Linda Wagner,' Tales 45.
49. *ibid.*, Tales 48.
50. *ibid.*, Tales 63-64.
51. 27th May 1950, CC1 54.
52. 'Prefatio aut Cimicium Tumulus,' Polite Essays (New York: Books for Libraries Press, 1937) 151.
53. 'With Linda Wagner,' Tales 58.
54. "I'm given to write poems," Collected Essays 503.
55. 'With Lewis MacAdams,' Tales 95.
56. 'With Linda Wagner,' Tales 31.
57. Cottonwood Review, N. pag.
58. Introduction, Collected Essays xiii.
59. Found among her papers at Stanford University, California.
60. 18th May 1950, CC1 30.
61. 4th May 1951, CC6 41.
62. D. H. Lawrence, Studies in Classic American Literature (London: Penguin, 1971 edn.) 10-11.
63. 'H. D.,' Collected Essays 82.
64. Unpublished letter to Jonathan Williams, 9th February 1961, found among papers at the Poetry / Rare Books Collection, SUNY at Buffalo.
65. 'The Creative,' Collected Essays 542.
66. 'Charles Olson: Y & X,' Collected Essays 97.
67. 'With Bill Spanos,' Tales 181.

68. 'Introduction to Charles Olson: Selected Writings II,' Collected Essays 125.
69. 'With Linda Wagner,' Tales 41.
70. "To Ronald Lane Latimer," 5th November 1935 Letters of Wallace Stevens, ed. Holly Stevens (London: Faber, 1967) 290.
71. The Poet's Craft 154.
72. George F. Butterick, 'Robert Creeley and the Tradition,' Robert Creeley's Life and Work: A Sense of Increment, ed. John Wilson (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1987) 219.
73. L. S. Dembo, Conceptions of Reality in Modern American Poetry (Berkeley: U of California P, 1966) 106.
74. Robert Basil, 'Creeley Teaches in Buffalo,' The Poet's Workshop 305.
75. Louis L. Martz, 'Wallace Stevens: The Skeptical Music,' The Poem of the Mind: Essays on Poetry / English and American (London: Oxford U P, 1969) 187.
76. 'The Motive for Metaphor, Wallace Stevens: His Poetry and his Practice,' Origin 5 (Spring 1952): 47.
77. 'On the Road: Notes on Artists and Poets, 1950-1965,' Collected Essays 368.
78. 'With Michael André,' Tales 104.
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## Chapter 2: "The kick / of the foot against"

### Creeley and Crane

Reading Crane these days. . . . To learn: one can learn  
a good bit from HC/ that I cant see he can pick up  
elsewhere. I.e., in Ez & the Doc/ Stevens (those noted  
before) we have not this: pushing way out/ that is in  
Crane. Who begins: say, already well beyond most eyes.

20th June 1950 (CC1 112)

In his technically entrepreneurial example Hart Crane  
"pushed" Creeley into the distinctive lyricism of some of his  
early poems. Crane's bewitching diction and expressive  
rhythms haunted and astonished Creeley with the currents of  
emotion such language betrayed. As he has said, indicating  
the furious pencil-markings in a dog-eared copy of Crane's  
poems, "I loved his writing . . . I was always taught to take  
care of books so I didn't usually write in them at all, but  
this one's written in a lot, or it is for me."<sup>1</sup> At the same  
time, in Crane's indomitable personality, Creeley saw and  
identified with the brilliant but tragically isolated figure  
honoured in the two 'Hart Crane' poems which he wrote in the  
early fifties. Significantly, Creeley's respect for Crane's  
prosody was always mixed with his instinctive sympathy for  
Crane's personal dilemmas, as he explained to Olson in 1950:

for me, that's got to be the center. I take it: so  
often/ a case of feeling close to/ someone who seems from  
the same center you hold to. 26th June 1950 (CC2 19)

Crane, who was driven by unrealized ambition and tormented by uncompleted purpose, shared Creeley's powerful sense of his own inadequacies. Creeley found his private struggles towards a self-imposed ideal were matched, with reassuring fallibility, by Crane, whose poetic achievement was intensified, for Creeley, since his very "'failure' regained the possibility of our response to what we are given to feel".<sup>2</sup> Struck by the potent metaphor of Crane's suicidal "leap", Creeley resented the poet's subsequent marginalization by the literary establishment:

[Hart Crane] seems oddly out of it/ for so many, at a time when he is of very apparent use, from many angles. It is also odd/ our reactions/ to one of 'us' who does jump. 20th June 1950 (CC1 112)

Two important poems of Creeley's early career record the development of his increasingly individual poetic idiom, and mark, in very different ways, his curious relationship with Crane. In each, Crane is drawn with sensitivity and humanity, Creeley's customary narcissism redirected towards a tortured figure in whom he glimpses himself. His sense of a shared "center" vibrates in the intimacy of his tone:

...And so it was I entered the broken world

Hart Crane.

Hart

'Hart Crane', For Love CP 110

I     **"The push / beyond and / into"**

'Hart Crane' (1950) and 'Hart Crane 2' (1951) pay overt tribute to the "pushing way out/ that is in Crane", and show how Creeley sought to assimilate into his own idiom Crane's knowledge of the elusive and independent character of poetic language. These poems movingly illustrate why the challenge of Crane's writing, the "push" he represented, the "leap" which he took, proved so alluring to Creeley:

A statement: there is no better poet than Hart Crane/  
August 15, 1951.

I can't, this morning, get over it:

. . . We have walked the kindled skies  
Inexorable and girded with your praise,  
By the dove-filled, and bees of Paradise.

Damit/ isn't that gentle!

But went on into marble that does not weep.

How that hits!

How finely it damn well stamps! . . . Is there anything  
finer in our poetry? Anything, more inexorable?

15th August 1951 (CC7 98-100)

As the excited emphases of this letter show, it is Crane's craftsmanship with words and sounds which holds Creeley's attention. It is an old enthusiasm; introducing Whitman's Selected Poems, Creeley records writing a paper about Crane while at college which, to his disbelief, was not well-received:

But didn't they hear, I wanted to insist, the pacing of the rhythms of those lines, the syntax, the intently human tone, or simply the punctuation? Couldn't they read? Was Crane to be simply another 'crudity' they could so glibly be rid of?<sup>3</sup>

However, if the two Crane poems share much with each other, they are not mirror images. The less abstract, more emotional 'Hart Crane' explores the struggle to reconcile the polarities of motion and paralysis with which language as a raw material, the poem as the artefact, and the poet as the artist, must engage and finally define. Crane brings focus to this inescapable dilemma: Creeley seems determined that his extraordinary poetic legacy should be acknowledged, if only in our appreciation of the perpetual paradox which resides in the power of the word:

like a bird, say, wired to flight, the  
wings, pinned to their motion, stuffed.

Words draw Creeley to Crane. Resonant diction, "consonantal shadings" and emotional intensity compel the eye along, and the ear through, an intricate mesh of sounds, into and ultimately beyond the dimensions of its paraphrasable meaning: this is the aesthetic Creeley admires and seeks to reproduce.<sup>4</sup> In his 'General Aims and Theories', Crane (mis)quoted Blake's 'Auguries of Innocence' to illustrate this:<sup>5</sup>

We are led to believe in a lie  
When we see with not through the eye.

Creeley's poem is dedicated to Slater Brown, another early hero who became a curious father-figure: "the first real writer I was to know."<sup>6</sup> Creeley was awed to discover in Brown, who also features as "B" in Cummings' The Enormous Room, a close friend of Crane who could restore the man in the poet:

It was so reifying to have someone who actually knew what this person had for breakfast, you know, knew him. . . . there were lovely, endless stories.<sup>7</sup>

Brown impressed Creeley as "one of the few people consistently sympathetic to Crane's situation," and they subsequently grew close: "he paid me the respect of taking me seriously in my intentions. He was a very good friend indeed."<sup>8</sup> The triad of friendship gives Creeley's poem a complex emotional dimension. Samuel Moon detects that "Creeley sees himself in Crane's struggle with words, his struggle through words to sustain a friendship with Slater Brown. He shares Crane's vision of a mystery, a 'simplicity,' beyond what his words are competent to express."<sup>9</sup> The poem draws together a mosaic of fragments of reality into an equally fragmented quasi-biographical story, as George Butterick explains:

The final version is a weaving of thinking-out-loud (pushing with the head) and remembered comments by Brown about Crane in a discontinuous narrative, a conversation between Creeley, Brown, and the reader, alternately.<sup>10</sup>

The use of verbs in the first six lines repays attention. Crane is first seen (or is he heard?) to be "stuttering". With this word Creeley causes communication (language), which is defective and graceless, to be associated (perhaps by using the word gutter, combined with the natural link between "stutter" and "stagger") with motion, similarly graceless in the pathetic unsteadiness of a drunk. Recalling Crane's "slumbering gaze" and the "glozening decanters that reflect the street" in 'The Wine Menagerie', perhaps he is imagined stumbling away from the same speakeasy? Yet "Stutter" does not imply movement, but hesitancy. This hopeless figure, curiously defenceless and without even the crutch of speech to help, excites pity. "Wired", "pinned" and "stuffed" merely affirm his helpless insecurity. Crane is damaged, paralysed; a victim. Pity is forestalled, however, by a swift reminder of his artistic virtuosity and eloquence in what is also an effective description of the poem itself:

and for each, several  
senses.

"It is very difficult to sum up  
briefly . . ."

For Love CP 109

Within parentheses, the straightforward quatrain form of the opening lines returns, as if to provide something of the security so far absent. The verbs are active, but the opening subjunctive is ambiguous: it could be either Crane or Creeley (or both) appealing to a friend and mentor for advice, guidance and, finally, the loving security of "home". The characters are made carefully indistinct to give the poem an



intellectual cunning, the "several / senses". Similarly the word "letters" has "several senses": this might simply compare the inadequacy of correspondence with direct speech, but isn't Creeley (or is this Crane's voice?) also noting the weakness of individual letters with which the words of a language are physically constructed and isn't this therefore an expression of Creeley's limits, as well as Crane's own inarticulacy? In such parallels, the two poets begin to seem to share one personality.

It is, importantly, Slater Brown who is seen as the "still centre", at "home" and in control: he seems to embody resolve, strength and even inspiration for both writer and subject alike. He has "the words" to which "the mind" will be able to "hang"; sufficient where Creeley/Crane is not, he has the answers to their separate predicaments: Creeley's sense of inadequacy, and Crane's insecurity. Slater can help Creeley to reach beyond himself in the way that Crane did, to "push to any kind / of conclusion" and can perhaps bring reassurance and sanity to Crane, whose "mind cannot hang". Creeley seems to assume Crane's confidence in Slater's ability to know how to escape the limits which Creeley/Crane is encountering. His ambition and determination is qualified and frustrated by helplessness, irresolution, weakness. Like a stuffed bird, "wired to flight" but motionless, Creeley/Crane's head seems trapped within "what I have here to work with": his "ineptness / cannot bring [any details] to hand," but reminds us, poignantly, that this poem also laments foreshortened life and

unfulfilled potential. Creeley's humility is also revealed: he is pained by the "ineptness" which sends him to Slater's judicious example.

The closing bracket concludes the plea and the intimate confiding tone of this section but Creeley's compassionate identification with Crane inevitably colours the remainder of the poem. Creeley's poetic ambitions are now explicit: he wants to reach "the ways beyond / ", he wants to be able to "push" to conclusions, and to "bring them to hand". In other words, he wants to follow Crane's example (challenging his own as well as our assumptions) by physically grappling with words which have been made palpable and vigorous. Hence the curious reverence of:

Men kill themselves because they are  
afraid of death, he says . . .

It is irrelevant that we cannot know who says this (one suspects more evidence of Slater's omniscience). That it is reported secondhand, in a recollected conversation, is significant enough. The mind, like Crane/Creeley's mind, must "hang" to the tautological import of this unfinished remark.

The first section is completed by the elegant turning motion of:

The push  
          beyond and  
into

This lies, architecturally and emotionally, at the centre of the poem. Like the spiralling currents of a whirlpool, "the push" propels the mind, while drawing the eye after it, round and down at the same time. The phrase works in several ways: it expresses Creeley's understanding of, and admiration for, Crane's artistic idiom; it also describes Crane's final leap, or "push", a sadly apposite image of his poetic achievements, it acts as an epitaph; finally it takes on an independent significance in its centrality not just to the poem but to Creeley's poetic idiom and creative goal.

The shorter second section begins anecdotally, and the word-play continues. Creeley is respectful of Crane's respect: the stress on the opening word is not accidental. He emphasizes that "While Crane sailed to Mexico I was writing": even as Creeley began his writing life, Crane was about to end his. The italics of this comment are matched in Creeley's concluding quotation ". . . And so it was I entered the broken world", which is taken from 'The Broken Tower', Crane's superb final poem. The words recall his ecstatically despairing tone as well as the moments of uncanny foresight which make the poem so poignant. The stanza from which Creeley borrows (and will borrow again, in 'For Love') utters its own transience: "its voice / an instant in the wind (I know not whither hurled) / But not for long to hold each desperate choice." Creeley seems to imagine, for the purposes of his poem's obsessive circularity, this as "the push": Crane's surrender to his desperation, his leap, led Creeley to push into, to

attempt to enter, the emotional "broken world" which Crane had abandoned. Creeley's almost crippling sensitivity to his own and other people's discomfort, is captured in the literally broken phrasing of:<sup>11</sup>

He slowed  
                     (without those friends to keep going, to  
 keep up), stopped  
                     dead and the head could not  
 go further  
                     without those friends

This illustrates the early sophistication of Creeley's handling of the poetic line and the words which constitute its character. "Slowed" is a slow word (the "w" draws out the length of its sound), and the gap lengthens the word more, making it significant in the space left carefully around it. In contrast, "those friends" who abandoned Crane are crowded into line, and forced on across the line end, just as they would have helped Crane to "keep going". Yet the solitude of the "slowed" suggests that Crane is literally left behind on the line. "Stopped" brings the line to a premature (in the light of the previous line's length) halt. "Dead" follows the loaded pause of the hiatus, which separates the two words and the two lines, with grim certainty, but without the relief of a full stop. Even in death Crane was pushing into himself, facing the ultimate challenge and his deepest fear because "the head could not / go further": Creeley is relentlessly alert to the struggling of intellect and emotion. As Crane himself put it, in 'The Bridge of Estador', "some are twisted with the love / Of things irreconcilable,--". This line seems

to try, pitifully, to "go further" (the length almost matches that of the "friends"). The next line progresses, does "go further", on from the "stopped /        dead", (another long pause) "without those friends". Crane's epitaph seems to explore Creeley's own suffering: the phrasing is overwrought, full of silences and unspoken sympathy. Butterick has noted the textual changes Creeley made to this poem:

Its original ending was less effective, more hurried:

And so it was I entered the broken world  
Hart Crane Hart

-which becomes more deftly choregraphed in the final version:

Hart Crane.  
Hart

(without final punctuation, so that the name - and possibly its homonym "heart"- reverberates on and on). All of Crane's verse and presence is summoned into that penultimate (in the original version), italicised line-taken from Crane's "The Broken Tower"- in preparation for the end when Creeley's poem lifts from its ground in a self-sustained, all-encompassing mixture of cry and statement of fact: "Hart." A single word, a simple awe.<sup>12</sup>

For Olson, the poem reflected Creeley's early poetic skill:

the one of Slater & he and the sidewalk: that still seems to me the finest, . . . such visual or dramatic

projection of events (plots like shots) as the HART, with that sort of space getting in, & so a sort of speech traction being very clear, being, not by the speech but by the incisiveness of you, standing clear . . .

31st January 1952 (CC9 66)

Creeley's "incisiveness" exposes the interdependence of Crane's emotional and poetic vulnerability, and celebrates his peculiar heroism. Creeley remembers, "he said he was self-destructive, but he was immensely attractive . . ." <sup>13</sup> Given the poem's tenderly uncritical tone, it is fitting that it should stand as the first poem of For Love. As Creeley told Olson:

Had been thinking, after the poem to Slater, of HC, and then went back to the poems. Too much/ those things. I mean: of the heart, that which can be tracked--how? By feel. It is the way there;                      16th June 1950 (CC1 103)

He goes on to repeat, "You know: that Hart Crane used to go by feel, and what else." The pun on "feel" suggests that as well as an emotive appeal, Creeley found in Crane something instinctual, even tentative, which already characterised his own writing. When asked by Faas whether, in his opinion, 'The Bridge' fails, Creeley's response is decisive:

Well, it doesn't fail. I had the experience of teaching it . . . last spring, sort of leading these tender students into this incredible chaos . . . what does this mean? It's like walking through the sky or something.

What are all these clouds doing here? And then we'd refer to Crane's sense of his purpose, . . . and, you know, forget it. Yes, I think, had he let it move on impulse and trusted that impulse, he would have had an extraordinary thing . . .<sup>14</sup>

Too often, perhaps, Crane's instinct was contradicted by his intent. But then, as he has reiterated, Creeley is forgiving of Crane's "vulnerability. I was so tired of, you know, secure heroes."<sup>15</sup>

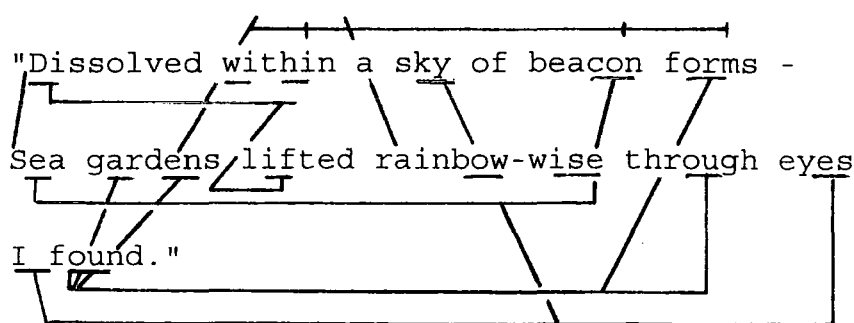
Where 'Hart Crane' confronts the paradoxical power of language and words, and finds an emotional parallel, 'Hart Crane 2' asserts Creeley's "incredible sense" of Crane's use of sound. This poem is equally ambitious: it pushes, as Crane did, beyond itself, beyond definable meaning and beyond, in places, exegesis. In it, Creeley reproduces those energies which attracted him to Crane in the first place:

the push that makes things/ that sounds out, deep. . . .  
To cut to a language/ with color, & dimension, beyond its  
'sense': that's the job, or so I take it.

16th June 1950 (CC1 104)

A delightful letter sent to Olson at Black Mountain, written about four months after the poem, records Creeley's rediscovery of the imperative of sound in Crane's poetry. His renewed enthusiasm turns him into a half-crazed archaeologist, awed by the significance of his finds:

Well, I couldn't believe it. So much has been put on Yeats, et al . . the vowels, of the consonantal shadings - and so much, too, granted Crane, of the same mastery, one does not look to confirm it. The damn loss. I took it then, last night, with a pencil, reading, and as fast I could, marking it in, there, on the page. And this morning, looking back, see, that even at that, I had not got half of it.



[side note: (& only stop, at that, because such a diagram gets so messy; it shows nothing of the modulations, the shiftings within, & thru.) 14th August 1951 (CC7 99)

Creeley's "messy" exercise betrays his pleasure in the layered complexities of Crane's prosody, the endless "shadings", the subtle interplay of the vowel relationships. Similar aural intricacies soon appear in his own poetic idiom. 'Hart Crane 2' is, consequently, a difficult if eloquent poem. Unfinished brackets and half-completed thoughts strewn across the page make a complex mesh of its structure. Without grammatical signposts, save for colons and commas, question is smoothly interwoven with answer. The fluid internal movement robs the poem of any defining dynamics, pushing the meaning out beyond the constraints of the usual limits, so that it



"sounds out". Does the poem (or poet) demand an answer to the questions being articulated? Of whom? Hart Crane himself? Or is the poem itself an "answer" to an unheard question?

The poem falls into three distinct parts, loosely linked like a set of variations: each comments on and opens up the preceding section, each "cut[s] to a language / with color, & dimension, beyond its 'sense'", and each acts as the lyrical foundation for the following one. In exploring the dimensions of sound in the poem, Creeley does not attempt to reproduce it but accepts that, like the wind, it is somehow indefinable. The wind, itself a sound, can be described by its effect on trees, but any attempt to define the actual nature of the wind's motion, without any manifestation of that motion, fails, interrupted by a restatement of the original problem. The rambling second line is embarrassed by the swift brevity of the central question, neatly placed across two lines, in which "sound" occupies its own space, islanded:

the wind, shakes the trees & moves with the movement of  
(what is  
    sound

I am again, and no more than  
it was

The Charm CP 23

The opening bracket protects this last phrase, holding it apart to catch our attention but confounding us since the closing bracket is absent. A completed pair of brackets would bring an inappropriate sense of resolution: the idea has no neat solution: "no more than / it was". Having proved the

circularity, the poet tries again, only to be halted again,  
having failed to get as far this time:

when the wind, when the trees, what  
(is the sound of  
sound

As insubstantial as the wind, itself little more than sound, any definition of sound must seek to capture, not just explain, the animating energy of the noise, which is impossible. Creeley resorts to the hopeless inadequacy of truism.

The ill-fated energies of the first section contrasts with the cryptic reserve of the following four lines:

(Sd he: the miracle  
is it not, in our bath  
like a lump of sugar  
we don't dissolve

This is an early sign of the "typical" voice and form of Creeley's later collections like Pieces and Words, and of poems like "I Know a Man". The literalness and unpredictability of Crane's poetic idiom has always delighted Creeley.<sup>16</sup> In sometimes riotously contrary diction, the magnificence of language and the vibrancy of the world which it represents can be rediscovered. Of Donne's 'The Expiration', Crane said:

What I want to get is just what is so beautifully done in this poem, --an "interior" form, a form that is so thorough and intense as to dye the words themselves with

a peculiarity of meaning, slightly different maybe from the ordinary definition of them separate from the poem.<sup>17</sup>

Thus, written in memory of Ernest Nelson, 'Praise for an Urn' contrives the poised constraint of "the dry sound of bees / Stretching across a lucid space."

In an argument which depends upon such prosaic material (a lump of sugar and a bath), albeit without Crane's flourish and confidence, Creeley casually ridicules the limits which language imposes upon experience. We control language by the foolish and unnecessary delineation of meaning; luckily it does not dissolve like the sugar. With similar complacency we overlook a routine "miracle" in assuming that we will not dissolve in water. Crane would have enjoyed the wittiness of this idea. Moreover, colloquialism gives this section a humorous reality which is missing from the rarified abstract atmosphere of the rest of the poem.

The final section takes up the challenge of the humour which precedes it. The sliding lines and weaving rhythms introduced in the first section are refined and made deliberately more abstract. The intellectual demands now being made of the reader are captured in three curious words: "incorporeal" "apocryphal" and "apocalyptic". A thesaurus was a familiar tool for Crane, as Creeley observes:

Then/ 'composition by field'/ with him: out of the  
Thesaurus/ he was looking for (NOT SENSE) but the sound,

color, and WORD: that cd make the (basic) sense. By  
feel.

16th June 1950 (CC1 105)

In his poem Creeley seems to ape this, perhaps keen to ensure that we think he also has a thesaurus at hand. The kind of vocabulary in the final section is so foreign to Creeley's naturally understated poetic idiom (in spite of its relative immaturity) that the words shock. Is this Creeley's way of finding "(NOT SENSE) but the sound, color, and WORD: . . . By feel"? Irreverence is replaced by a certain slow elegance which "makes incorporeal even / their lightest phrase". The word "incorporeal" lightens, or makes insubstantial, the "real" which is a physical part of the word itself. It also "dissolves" the levity, like "a lump of sugar".

The "certainty" of this concluding section - the increased confidence of the tone, the grandeur of the diction, the completed parentheses - seems to have been initiated by the central section and its sense of discovery. Increasingly abstract, the poem takes up and pushes the ambiguity of the opening lines out beyond its own limits: the final lines ring with a potential missing from the earlier parts. Possessed of a hidden, mysterious and indefinable power - note the parentheses - sound is self-perpetuating. The lines, stepping away, physically push out from the confines of the rest of the poem, unconfined by any full stop which might jeopardise the elating limitlessness which the rest of the poem explores. They are also a powerful tribute to Crane, acknowledging his

artistic integrity, his "love" and his persistent pushing at the confines of the poem.

We see here, with Creeley's awe, how and why Crane has succeeded in breaking "the thing". As in 'Hart Crane', Creeley recognises the paradoxical force of love. With love, Crane broke poetic language and conventions apart to reveal the illimitable potency at the core, his emotion generating the intensity of his diction; his capacity for love was magnetic, drawing a "company", Creeley for example, towards his odd vulnerability and courage. Why "apolaustic"? Perhaps Creeley's much-quoted letter explains it:

But here is one man, then. To make of something very like a search, but one ended, to make of that, again with the bare hands, some faith, and some simple fantastic belief, in god knows what. 15th August 1951 (CC7 99)

Crane is a poet who allows language to flourish without compromising its precision. He reduces statement to sound ("makes incorporeal even / their lightest phrase") with an apparent effortlessness which enchants Creeley, certain that such ingenuous revivification should be the purpose of all art:

It may well be that in the absence of such allusive society as European literature, in its own condition, has necessarily developed, the American in contrast must so realize each specific thing of his own--"as though it had never / happened before."<sup>18</sup>

Reviewing Edward Dahlberg's Sorrows of Priapus, he summons Crane, among others, as evidence that "the American writer has constantly to refind, and, equally, to redefine wherein lies the value of the words he uses."<sup>19</sup> R. P. Blackmur concurs that Crane "habitually created his words from within, developing meaning to the point of idiom . . . the meanings themselves are the idioms and have a twist and life of their own . . ."<sup>20</sup> Refinding and redefining is as natural to Creeley's poetic idiom as it is to Crane's. The intricate blending of language, sound and sense in Crane's poetic idiom, his undaunted efforts to "realize each specific thing 'as though it had never / happened before'" explains his centrality to Creeley's "calendar of saints", and is finally, the measure (in all its meanings) of Crane's artistic achievement. No wonder Creeley is so determined that Crane should be read and heard by contemporary audiences.

## II The "total pattern of meaning"

I suggest that Crane's use of language . . . will invariably be attached to an emotion which can and will sustain them in a total pattern of meaning.<sup>21</sup>

Creeley's letters, essays and interviews display his maturing response to Crane. They focus on the synthesis of emotion with technical workmanship which yields a "total pattern of meaning". The two 'Hart Crane' poems affirm his admiration for the congruent elements of Crane's poetry,

always underpinned by the emotional cast brought to the impulse ("push") of the language. Creeley was anxious to gain the same cohering energy in his own writing: "The primary exercise I've had as a poet is, what does it feel like to be human?"<sup>22</sup> Crane's very human and "feeling" example is dramatized, for Creeley, in the emotional response this elicits from the reader which, he tells Linda Wagner, constitutes "the most signal characteristic that a poem possesses":

the measure of a poem is that emotion which it offers, and that, further, the quality of the articulation of that emotion--how it is felt, the fineness of its articulation, then--is the further measure of its reality.<sup>23</sup>

While Creeley's enthusiasm for Crane's poetry is not unqualified, his continuing respect is shored up by his belief in those two Poundian adages: "Nothing counts save the quality of the affection" and "Only emotion endures". Creeley cannot help but respond to the barely contained emotion of, for example:

Afoot again, and onward without halt,--  
Not soon, nor suddenly,--no, never to let go  
My hand

In yours,  
Walt Whitman--

so--

'The Bridge', Hart Crane: Collected Poems [HCCP] 91

In 1951, Creeley can be found passionately exhorting Olson, by now teaching at Black Mountain College, to make his students acknowledge the power of Crane's poetic example:

propose this - that you take one of those occasions, when you are talking to those people, to give them force them to hear: an evening in this man.

15th August 1951 (CC7 98-100)

He recommends specific poems for a reading: 'The Mermen'; 'Island Quarry'; 'Imperator Victus'; 'And Bees Of Paradise'; 'Lachrymae Christi'; 'For The Marriage Of Faustus And Helen'; 'At Melville's Tomb'. Moreover, he insists, Olson should read them "with no comment, but: you are going to hear, if you can but listen, can but, in any sense, hear, sounds as incredible, as finely knit, as any man ever wrote them."

The selection comprises some of the most resonant moments of Crane's canon and displays the breadth of his prosodic achievement. In 'The Mermen', for example, through Crane's richly sensuous imagination the prosaic finds an exotic hue, "Buddhas and engines serve us undersea;" and the words themselves rock suggestively, awash with sybillance and assonance. The throb of Elizabethan violence (promised in the poem's Shakespearean preface) which swells within a blank verse couplet, is punctured by a passionately interjected monosyllable:

Gallows and guillotines to hail the sun  
And smoking racks for penance when day's done!

No--

HCCP 140



The archiac and the rarified, "we finger moidores of spent grace", are yoked to the deliberately simple emotional appeal of "still with a human Face!", the deity subtly elevated by the capitalisation.

In 'Imperator Victus', meanwhile, Crane's conversational exploitation of the "Indianised" pidgin idiom ironically pictures the social fissures opened up by the Spanish conquistadors, the harsh paradox of the hidden agenda ("The Dollar from the Cross") inflicted by the brutalizing "civilization" of the settlers upon the continent's powerless indigenous inhabitants and their culture. Creeley, with a keen ear for the expressiveness of common speech, must have appreciated the strange beauty of this poem, the candid brevity of the three-line stanzas, the eloquent self-possession of the language. The piquant diction is overturned when the rhythmic thuds of the guns nudge, in the final stanza, at the alluringly plangent apostrophes they abut, such lush sonorities finally unable to mask the grimly "plain" sentence being delivered: "Big guns again, / Atahualpa, / Imperator Inca-- / / Slain."

In 'At Melville's Tomb', extravagant diction so distends the outline of the quatrain that the words appear to threaten the very shape of the poem, their connotative reverberations almost impossible to contain:

Then in the circuit calm of one vast coil,  
 Its lashings charmed and malice reconciled,  
 Frosted eyes there were that lifted altars;  
 And silent answers crept across the stars.

The poem's complex aural interceptions exaggerate the luxuriant diction, "wrecks" is echoed in "calyx", "scattered", "circuit calm" and finally in "sextant". Yet, although the phrasings escalate ("A scattered chapter, livid hieroglyph, / The portent wound"), 'At Melville's Tomb' finally closes on a note of extreme tenderness, having imperceptibly shifted from heroic lay into the soothing lament of a lullaby. In each of the poems chosen by Creeley, Crane's humanity animates his synthesizing of the sensuous, the aural and rhythmic muscularity of his prosody, with the emotional. As Creeley almost breathlessly observes in that letter to Olson, "These sounds are put into an incredible sense. We have no other poet of this kind."<sup>24</sup> Unsurprisingly, much that he admired in Crane's "incredible" prosodic engineering was soon reflected in the fibre of his early canon.

Analogous with the meshings of the "very very wonderful" 'At Melville's Tomb', for example, is Creeley's 'The Death of Venus'. In this poem, his manipulation of linguistic sound is elaborate, his vocabulary unusually effusive and adventurous. Recognizably "Creeleyesque" in its glancing understatement, the poem depends upon an exotic and mythical narrative in which the dreaming Creeley's habitually taciturn style is transformed:

I dreamt her sensual proportions  
had suffered sea-change,

that she was a porpoise, a  
sea-beast rising lucid from the mist.

The sound of waves killed speech  
but there were gestures--

of my own, it was to call her closer,  
of hers, she snorted and filled her lungs with water,

then sank, to the bottom,  
and looking down, clear it was, like crystal,

there I saw her.

For Love CP 134

For Creeley, this is almost impassioned; lyrical language gives the poem an hypnotic otherworldliness, heightened by a carefully composed network of vowel chimings and "consonantal shadings". Thus, "dreamt" is echoed in "sensual", and "proportions" is recalled in "porpoise", modified in "sea-beast rising" and "speech", and echoed in "call her", "snorted", "water" and the concluding "saw her". Another pattern emerges in "lucid", "mist", "killed", "filled", and is finally resolved in "clear it was, like crystal". The washing to and fro of sounds, accompanied by continuous sibilance, recalls the ceaseless regenerative movement of waves, where the breaking of one merely heralds the approach of another and the retreat of a third, giving the poem its languid mood. At the same time, the indolently sensual internal "motion" reproduces the peculiar time suspension of a dream, as in the rise and fall of "rising lucid from the mist." The rhythms are themselves sleepy, falling gently into the shapings of stanzas and lines which, only eliding in two places, mainly coincide with punctuated breaks.

As well as the cohering musicality of the diction, the poem is studded with individual words which themselves carry

an aural significance: this is arguable evidence of Creeley's manipulation of Crane's "logic of metaphor", by which words "are often selected less for their logical (literal) significance than for their associational meanings [to create organic] metaphorical inter-relationships".<sup>25</sup> Thus, I find "lucid" connotative of "sluice" and so evocatively suggestive of water running off, "sluicing", the smooth sides of the strange and beautiful "sea-beast" as it appears out of the mist. The word's crisp brevity is also redolent of the sharp clarity of the apparition which contrasts with the obscuring "mist" in which it has been hidden; later, "clear it was, like crystal" makes the same distinction.

Creeley defends his understanding of the "total pattern of [Crane's] meaning" in a fine essay, 'Hart Crane and the Private Judgment,' written in 1953. Taking a courageously unfashionable stance for the early fifties, (not even Olson could wholly share his enthusiasm) Creeley reproaches the paucity and unfairness, as he sees it, of the critical response to Crane's technical craftsmanship. Arguing the contemporaneity of Crane's writing, he traces how a poetic idiom rooted in the dualities of Symbolism matured into independence and charismatic individuality.

The currency of this poetry for Creeley himself is shown in his apprehension of Crane's often abstruse prosody. His analysis is not only technically acute, minutely exploring "how the lines begin to attain to an effect of meaning for

me," but sensitive, forgiving of Crane's quixotic personality and appreciative of the paradoxes which characterise his poetic flair.<sup>26</sup> He deplores the dearth of comment on "Crane's sense of rhythm, although it is, for me, one of the most dominant aspects of his work". A footnote reminds that "All Crane's work is best read aloud. The reader can't pick up the sounds or the rhythms sufficiently otherwise. . . . He is one of the most verbal poets in the English language." We recall the verbal transitions of 'To Brooklyn Bridge,' the powerful sense of impulse bursting out of the confines of each line:

And thee, across the harbor, silver-paced  
 As though the sun took step of thee, yet left  
 Some motion ever unspent in thy stride,--  
 Implicitly thy freedom staying thee!

HCCP 63

Creeley, whose respect for the verbal derived from Fenollosa via Pound and Olson, engages with a similarly dense verballity in 'The Herd'. In the poem motion, perceived at a distance, is slowed down until it barely seems real; Creeley depicts the scene as if it is being "recorded" in slow-motion, so that time itself suddenly finds itself a victim of space, and must struggle "to succeed":

Way out they are riding, it is an old  
 time's way to continue to succeed  
 in recorded passionate hoofbeats,  
 animals moving, men before and behind them.

The Charm CP 87

Several elements of this short poem recall Crane's poetics. The sudden, almost presumptuous, gesture of the opening phrase, "Way out", is both archaically inverted and

casually modern, almost an interruption, implying a physical imperative, a wave of the arm perhaps. Crane frequently inverts subject and predicate in the main clause at the beginning of a poem, giving "Square sheets--" in 'Island Quarry' dramatic emphasis for example, or (like 'The Herd') introduces the main clause with a preceding prepositional phrase, as in 'At Melville's Tomb'. The double infinitives of the second line sound percussively rhythmic, like "hoofbeats". The word "passionate" seems foreign, too ornate, at first, but gives the sound of the hooves an urgency which seems to carry across the intervening distance to the watchers. The word lends the sight of the moving herd a clarity and intensity which somehow brings the "animals moving" nearer into focus and allows us to make the men out for ourselves.

Early on, Creeley detected Melville at work in Crane's mastery of rhythmic nuance:

Here's some conjecture/ what abt the tie-in: Hart Crane  
with Melville. I mean: language & beat: & head/ similar  
(if we are listening below the words). Much the same  
with these two.

20th June 1950 (CC1 112)

For example, Melville's 'The Maldive Shark' is elegantly pictured as "phlegmatical one, / Pale sot of the Maldive sea," attended faithfully by the pilot-fish which "liquidly glide on his ghastly flank / Or before his Gorgonian head; / Or lurk in the port of serrated teeth / . . . / Eyes and brains to the dotard lethargic and dull, / Pale ravener of horrible meat".<sup>27</sup>

The malevolent weightiness of the shark's floating corpulence compares with Crane's equally evocative, violently rhythmic pity, in 'O Carib Isle!', for the plight of:

those huge terrapin  
Each daybreak on the wharf, their brine-caked eyes;  
--Spiked, overturned; such thundering in their strain!  
And clenched beaks coughing for the surge again!

HCCP 138

For Creeley, 'Island Quarry' is "an almost perfect instance of form" which further condemns the critical neglect of Crane's "very effective handling of the line . . . with the undulation of the lines, almost opening and closing like actual breathing, to end with the line pulling in, stumbling, unmistakable in its emphases."<sup>28</sup> He shows the rhythmic and structural subtleties of the poem, highlighting the skilful "vowel leadings" and the interdependence of rhythm and line-use. The measured tread ("a double stroke", he calls it) of the opening spondee relaxes into an iambic rhythm which seems to carry the impulse forward into "Flat prison slabs" before lengthening the extent of the third and fourth lines which, still unpunctuated until the pause of the comma after "stone", consequently seem to "quarry" the "straight" route deep into the resistant rock of the mountainside:

Square sheets--they saw the marble only into  
Flat prison slabs there at the marble quarry  
At the turning of the road around the roots of the mountain  
Where the straight road would seem to ply below the stone,  
that fierce  
Profile of marble spiked with yonder  
Palms against the sunset's towering sea, and maybe  
Against mankind. It is at times--

In dusk, as though this island lifted, floated

HCCP 143



Asked about the impact of Crane's writing, Creeley responded:

the poems most useful to me would be the shorter ones; I love [Island Quarry] . . . I mean, Pound said, you know, that "trochaic heave" and whatnot, I can understand it. . . . I thought that's--wow--[laughs] that's really jazzy. You see, no usual critical qualifications of the poem would even mention that. I was fascinated by the, for example, "I wanted you, the embers of the cross climbs etc. . . . Rhythmically, you see, I was fascinated."<sup>29</sup>

Writing to Olson, Creeley declares "that fierce / Profile of marble spiked with yonder / Palms" "unbudgeable", and describes the final lines of the passage quoted here: "Wild wild movement, wild damn thing."<sup>30</sup>

In fact, Crane's rhythmic dexterity and manipulation of form, especially his use of the quatrain, has not escaped later commentators. Albert Cook usefully dismantles the way in which "Crane handles the design of the rhymed tetrameter quatrain" to illustrate how breaks and changes in tone and texture disappoint "formal expectations" "at points so crucial that he throws the whole poem into a different key."<sup>31</sup>

Herbert Leibowitz focusses more closely on Crane's rapid "cultivation" of the quatrain, tracing the "disciplined freedom" thus brought to the canon, and showing how the curious objectivities of the Key West poems, for example,



"press down against the sequential order of the quatrain and create a unique tension and an ominous calm."<sup>32</sup>

Creeley has always favoured the quatrain and handles it, as in the overwrought constraint of 'For Love', with expressive skill; Leibowitz's analysis echoes Creeley's own explanation of the form as

both a semantic measure and a rhythmic measure . . . I remember Pound in a letter one time saying, "Verse consists of a constant and a variant." The quatrain for me is the constant. The variant then can occur in the line, but the base rhythm also has a constant which the quatrain in its totality indicates. I wanted something stable, and the quatrain offered it to me; . . . this then allowed all the variability of what could be said and indicated as rhythmic measure.<sup>33</sup>

The title poem of Creeley's most popular collection wrestles with the weakness inherent in powerful love. The need to articulate inexpressible feelings is so frightening that the attempt seems doomed. Even the emotion itself apparently gives up, "despairs of its own / statement, wants to / turn away, endlessly / to turn away." Anxious juggling with the conditional "if" brings little consolation: prevarication is irrelevant. So profound is Creeley's inarticulacy that he begins to wonder, with Donnean rigour, if he has imagined the strength of his own feelings, yet in doing

so knows that he risks cheapening the very thing he holds most precious:

. . . Now love also  
 becomes a reward so  
 remote from me I have  
 only made it with my mind.      'For Love', For Love CP 257

Writing the poem deadens the elusive emotion he is trying to proffer; acidly, he observes himself sliding, despite every effort, into "whimsical if pompous / self-regard" which merely distances him from his own emotion. Everything seems obscured, even his self-criticism falling prey to "the mind's / vague structure, vague to me / because it is my own." But he battles on, conscious that the struggle towards definition must help to define the indefinable if only by engaging with the dilemma, or in demanding the courage to make the attempt. After all, as Lear observed, "Nothing will come of nothing":

Nothing says anything  
 but that which it wishes  
 would come true, fears  
 what else might happen in  
  
 some other place, some  
 other time not this one.  
 A voice in my place, an  
 echo of that only in yours.

The attempt itself serves to make "the obsession" explicit, even if this is clouded as Creeley "stumble[s]" through his "confession" and comes dangerously close to the faltering nonsense he risked from the start: "no / mind left to / say anything at all". He concludes with relieved ambivalence, seeming to embrace Crane's "company of love" with

delight: having survived the ordeal and won the prize of "love", made precious by its acknowledgement, he is glad to be welcomed into an emotional community.<sup>34</sup> Yet this might be interpreted as despair, the "company of love" offering little help or counsel, the shared vulnerability made no easier in the final realization of an inescapable predicament.

The quatrain, which dominates For Love, increases the emotional atmosphere of this eponymous poem. Though even-tempered, the impulse of the first stanza is delayed by the intervening procrastination, itself interrupted by a stanza break. Sympathetic at first, we are tantalized by the speaker's circuitous route to his point; the form helpfully dramatizes his difficulties. The technique is repeated in the second stanza, although the comma ("finally so helpless,") this time ensures that the momentum is increased by the stanza break, to be resolved in the repeated despair of the third quatrain. Here, a short tense line emphasizes the speaker's hopeless recognition that lack of language has defeated him: "turn away, endlessly / to turn away."

Gradually the quatrain becomes more inflexible, which underlines the poem's increasing incoherence, as phrase tumbles inconclusively after phrase, and threatens to dissolve into nonsense. As the speaker gets more excited, his sentences get shorter but the quatrain never relaxes, interposing with stern effect, for example, between "not / / now." As the speaker regains his self-control, more coherent

sentences fall in with phrasings which are now frequently end-stopped. Although the penultimate quatrain does "stumble" along with the speaker, the hesitancy is beautifully resolved in a tranquil conclusion; apparently exhausted by the laborious efforts to say how he feels, the speaker finds himself suddenly secure in the rewarding "company of love", and even the quatrain form seems to embrace this as "it all returns."

In 'Hart Crane and the Private Judgment,' Creeley is always anxious that the reader apprehend the fuller "total pattern of meaning" towards which Crane strove. He explores the remaining traces of the early interest in Symbolism, "a poetry dependent on irony, on the dissociations possible in the very surfaces of language, on a quick and nonpassive verbalism," which brought to "the surface character" or style of Crane's poetry:

the rapidity of image, the disparateness, the whole sense of 'words' being used almost for their own, single character.<sup>35</sup>

Crane argues the need to be deferential to language:

One must be drenched in words, literally soaked with them to have the right ones form themselves into the proper pattern at the right moment.<sup>36</sup>

Creeley's expert and sensitive unravelling of that "proper pattern" of words confirms that his response to Crane is

informed by the emotional circumstance and effect of the poetics:

Yes, tall, inseparably our days  
 Pass sunward. We have walked the kindled skies  
 Inexorable and girded with your praise,

By the dove-filled, and bees of Paradise.

Crane and the one he speaks to share a time together which is passing, . . . this time has been, to put it very simply, happy. . . . So--the images, etc. The first, "our days pass[ing] sunward" with the further sense of "tall, inseparably," engenders in my mind an effect of dignity (from the "tall"), of a close love (from the whole complex of "our days pass sunward," with the echo of "sun" as life-giving, high, a source of nobility and godhead). To bypass, the next sentence comes to me as a statement of fulfillment, that they have, together, come to a sense of complete fulfillment. . . . Now one might argue, how can he talk about walking up in the sky if he has just said that his days (an apparent possession) pass sunward? How can they do that, if he is up there, etc.? And--who is "inexorable" and "girded," etc.? But doesn't that really come to quibbling--if an effect is achieved and sustained in rereading?<sup>37</sup>

Creeley saw in Crane an unmanageable, if inspiring, artistic example, and he can be equivocal about this "saint".

Quick to defend Crane from the critics, Creeley was also irked by aspects of his writing:

there's a selfconsciousness in C . . . just, what's trying to be said. Now, HC, often, I take it, lapses into a selfconscious taking of himself. As Slater has documented it: he had that thing abt what people were thinking of his verses. . . . Just to note: what finally puts me off . . .

26th June 1950 (CC2 19)

The obliquities of Creeley's letter-writing style make these comments difficult to interpret. Focussing on Crane's "self-conscious taking of himself", Creeley seems dismissive of the overblown rhetoric and architectural goals which can distance Crane from his credible "feel" for poetry, as in the critical absence of instinctive "impulse" in 'The Bridge'. Crane's ill-conceived efforts to mask his insecurities were antithetical to the painful honesty which Creeley was already developing for his own poetry: "In writing I'm telling something to myself, curiously, that I didn't have the knowing of previously."<sup>38</sup> Like Olson, drafting and redrafting 'Projective Verse' at about the same time as the above letter was written, Creeley was eager for poetic carefulness. He applauded the courageous enterprise of 'The Bridge', which might even be described as "projectivist" in its conception, but could not ignore the diffusion of the poem's energy, the falterings in the "push":

That tentativeness, which is an odd comment, to make abt the Bridge, but the thing splays, IS NOT: red hot

content. Just isn't. For me. Here & there: break  
thru/s to same, but NO constant. It's got to be.

26th June 1950 (CC2 19)

Perhaps Olson's doubts about aspects of Crane's prosody  
re-inforced these misgivings:

what I say abt, Hart's feet: the curves of the narrations  
are, cut off. Result, the emotions are, too long, too  
curved. Not: decisive. Leading to false ambiguity.

2nd May 1951 (CC6 33)

The same point is made again in 'Projective Verse'. Although  
Olson applauds "the singleness of [Crane's] push to the  
nominative, his push along that one arc of freshness, the  
attempt to get back to the word as handle," he notices

a loss in Crane of what Fenellosa is so right about, in  
syntax, the sentence as the first act of nature, as  
lightning, as passage of force from subject to object,  
quick, in the case, from Hart to me . . . Does not Hart  
miss the advantages, by such an isolated push, miss the  
point of the whole front of syllable, line, field . . .<sup>39</sup>

Olson later wrote to Creeley: "What still bothers me, is,  
the lifting - the allowing, the phrase, to rise - instead  
(exactly instead) of what I was getting at (above) of  
pointering & then, instantly, because there is so much,  
pushing on . . ."<sup>40</sup> Yet although he admits "i [sic] never  
drew, on hart/ don't know why", he encourages Creeley's

interest, "sure you're right on hart, for yrself."<sup>41</sup> Nor do Creeley's doubts prevent him from advocating Crane's relevance:

I don't know, I don't get why, say, this isn't of use.  
Or I know why, in some part, but stimulus is not just the  
method, etc. That one can use it, or even should,  
directly.

29th March 1952 (CC9 203)

The following year, Olson concedes "i [sic] also have the sense that crane & bill are more naturally of my predecession than some others".<sup>42</sup>

Creeley's admiration for Crane's "pushing way out . . . already well beyond most eyes" suggests that he (himself dubbed "the figure of outward" by Olson) saw Crane's poetics in a "projective" light. Arguably, Crane was to Creeley what Melville, one of the (many) motivating forces behind 'Projective Verse', was to Olson. The opening paragraphs of Call Me Ishmael observe:

It is geography at bottom, a hell of wide land from the beginning. That made the first American story (Parkman's): exploration.

Something else than a stretch of earth - seas on both sides, no barriers to contain as restless a thing as Western man was becoming in Columbus' day. That made Melville's story (part of it).<sup>43</sup>



Creeley seems to have seen in Crane "as restless a thing" as Olson recognized in Melville's heroic efforts to penetrate and then project his own image upon the American space, realizing that the "geography at bottom" constituted himself just as much as the pioneering Columbus. Olson, though, did share Creeley's recognition of Crane's final "leap" as a majestic metaphor for his poetic achievement, remarking that, in a poem he once wrote about Crane:

I called hart, new archeopteryx. And do have that feeling, that he was, somehow, some marvelous throw-back, a vestigia, forward, in that sense, surely. [Added in ink:] ("To one of 'us' who does jump." Yes. I had it, this way: You who made a bridge / leaped"

23rd June 1950 (CC1 144)

Creeley also likes to depict Crane as an impossibly brave figure, naively appealing in his readiness to confront and attempt to pull together, to "bridge", the disintegrating fragments of the "given world". He quotes a letter from Crane in order to defend the conceptual importance of 'The Bridge': "a link connecting certain chains of the past to certain chains and tendencies of the future. In other words, a diagram or 'process'."<sup>44</sup> Therefore, Creeley concludes:

'The Bridge' 'failure' though it was and still may seem to us, was a 'process' or policy', an attempt to direct attention to a significant content in the American corpus, both historical and mythic, and to posit

juxtapositions and methods of dealing with this material which might prove fruitful.

To Spanos, Creeley reiterates the value of Crane's writing as a "process" when he recalls Yeats' foreboding comment, "things fall apart; the centre cannot hold." He goes on to explain this as the Modernist "sense of failure",

in so far as the world can not be made to cohere. Hart Crane is for me an extraordinary Modern artist in so far as he proposes and deliberately attempts a metaphysical resolution of a given world.<sup>45</sup>

Again, this suggests Creeley's compassion for a writer the incoherence of whose words gave rise to a "total pattern of meaning".

Although his defence of Crane, taken as a sad emblem of the modern dilemmas of critical "judgment", is robust, Creeley remains scrupulously fair. While making his own enthusiasm for Crane's poetry clear, he is careful to insist that the individual resist established notions of "good" and "bad", in order to reach a valid personal judgement. Creeley's essay reveals him as a reluctant partisan, whose faith in Crane finally depends upon the "total pattern" of Crane's writing, flaws and all. He is not simply being generous when he comments:

The 'failures,' 'mistakes,' 'flaws,' etc., of Hart Crane's poetry have seemed to me intimate with the successes equally demonstrable.<sup>46</sup>

Creeley admires Crane because of, not in spite of, the writer's "faults." Years later, he repeats this to Ekbert Faas:

It's very hard for me to speak objectively about Crane, I was so moved by what he was trying to do. His incoherence to me is really attractive.<sup>47</sup>

### III Rehearing Crane

I come back to him. I sit and rehear him . . .<sup>48</sup>

Although Creeley's early enthusiasm had waned by the late fifties his affection for Crane remains strong today. His "rehearing" of Crane's poetry over the years has left traces on his poetic idiom. The disordered fragmentation of much of Pieces is thrown into relief, for example, by the easy intricacies and rhythmic fluency of 'Mazatlan: Sea':

The sea flat out,  
the light far out,  
sky red, the  
blobs of dark clouds  
seem closer, beyond  
the far lateral of  
extended sea.

\*

Shimmer of reflected  
sand tones, the flat

ripples as the water  
 moves back--an oscil-  
 lation, endlessly in-  
 stinct movement--leaves  
 a ribbing after itself  
 it then returns to.

Pieces CP 434

The level restraint of the end-stopped opening lines creates a smooth flat landscape which is unhurriedly resolved into a deeper perspective, the "far lateral", of the calm sea stretching away into the distance; the reader's eye follows Creeley's as it travels with lazy awareness along the horizon. In the second stanza, the peaceful mood is scarcely altered by the changes in focus, yet the rhythms ensure that the soporific heat haze mirrors, and is mirrored by, the endless tiny motions of the water. The diction is made more musical by the double consonants following the 'i' of "shimmer", "ripples", "oscillation" and "ribbing". The circularity of the motion of small breaking waves is implicit in the line breaks which split "oscillation" and "instinct", ensuring that each word begins again. Such control is reminiscent of Crane's technical imagination: Creeley's own voice is heard in a judiciously even tone and, though expressive, unfussy diction.

As the poem's location recedes, and as the poet begins to reach his intended point ("a locus / of experience"), the opening sinuosity is gradually distilled and lyricism slowly tightens into a telegrammatic imperative: "Here now-- / begin!" Creeley's rhymes still work primarily through the sensual interplay of "vowel-leavings" which lend a relatively

straightforward form inner fluidity. Creeley told Faas that he wrote the whole section "in a conscious state of experience that was to me absolutely delicious," which is vividly realized in the poem's visionary character.<sup>49</sup> The poem also recalls the oceanic, ponderously rolling swell of 'Voyages':

--And yet this great wink of eternity,  
Of rimless floods, unfettered leewardings  
Samite sheeted and processioned where  
Her vast undinal belly moonward bends,  
Laughing the wrapt inflections of our love;  
'Voyages II', HCCP 55

Creeley's puritanical poetics, his taste for simple diction and phrasings, can sometimes disguise the skill of his craft, as in 'As You Come':

As you come down  
the road, it swings  
slowly left and the sea  
opens below you,  
west. It sounds out.

Dense internal rhymings, which are obvious enough, give this tiny poem a calm but irresistible momentum: when "the sea / opens below", as the poet intended, "It sounds out."

Creeley continues to recognise the potent physicality of "words voluptuous / as the flesh", and openly acknowledges the risks of entertaining internalised feeling and emotion:

Not to speak them  
makes abstract  
all desire  
and its death at last.

'Love', Later 18

In each collection, the reverence for language which Creeley learnt from, as Warren Tallman put it, "Dr Crane, our distinguished vocabularist", is plain in diction which always exploits its own rhythmic and aural potential.<sup>50</sup> When, in bitter grief, Creeley rails helplessly at an airport delay which prevents him from attending Max Finstein's funeral in Nevada, the angry staccato of "Dumbass clunk plane "American / Airlines" (well-named)" ironically mocks the aeroplane's stolid inertia.<sup>51</sup> In 'Classical' the diction seems to wallow in its own florid weight, pompous and stifling:

One sits vague in this sullenness.  
Faint, greying winter, hill  
with its aged, incremental institution,  
all a seeming dullness of enclosure

above the flat lake--oh youth,  
oh cardboard cheerios of time,  
oh helpless, hopeless faith of empty trust,  
apostrophes of leaden aptitude, . . . Memory Gardens 58

Even the quickening rhythm at "cardboard cheerios" seems to strike a false note, as awkward and inappropriate as the "leaden" rhetoric which follows.

Memory Gardens also contains a "calendar" of poems written for each month to comprise a graceful cycle which proves that Creeley has not lost his instinctive lyricism. For example, in '"Whan That Aprille . . ."' Creeley amplifies Chaucer's introduction to 'The General Prologue', rendered in a generous and flexible quatrain which is sensuous and musical. Creeley obediently follows Chaucer's rhythmic example, apparently enjoying the discipline this exerts, and

produces some wonderfully antique-sounding but lively lines, like "sunk under snows had covered them, / week after week no sun to see, / / then restlessness resolves in rain". In 'Helen's House' he revels in the abundancies of "goldenrod, marigold, yarrow, tansey"; and later in Windows more mysteriously sonorous names are gathered together as if in the colourful profusion of a flowerbed:

Clumped Clares  
Asphobellies  
Blumenschein.

'Fleurs', Windows 25

Amid predominantly everyday language, Creeley's poetry can still surprise or stir the reader with an exotic or incongruent word-choice, or a fleeting oddity of phrase. At times, the figure of Crane himself seems to haunt the poems, as in the somewhat melodramatic dualities of 'Prayer to Hermes' in Later. The repeated emphases on the "crossed existence", "the devil's doubles", Creeley's "half-life, / this twilight" are dramatized by, and reflected in, the typically unspecific but atmospheric blur of the surroundings: "the grey / suffusing fog" and "the grey, diffusing / clouds." Creeley's labouring under a "physical sentence" ("must I forever / walk on, walk on--") brings the original 'Hart Crane' to mind:

my melodious  
breath, my stumbling,  
  
my twisted commitment,  
my vagrant  
drunkenness, my confused  
flesh and blood.

Later 121

Perhaps coincidentally, Crane's presence is also evoked by 'The Drunks of Helsinki', found in Windows (published in 1990) in ways which seem too numerous to be purely accidental. My conviction is not prompted by the poem's focus on its drunken protagonists, nor an unusually expansive vocabulary, dramatised by words like "maledictive", "semblable" and "panegyric", wielded within a closely knit quatrain. The bold but undemonstrative opening "Blue sky," is Cranean, as is the near-synaesthesia of "the foetid stink of human excess" and, later, "slabbering whine". It seems equally significant that the scene is located in a "lurching tram" much like Crane's "street-car device" in 'For The Marriage of Faustus and Helen', "the most concrete symbol I could find for the transition of the imagination from quotidian details to the universal consideration of beauty,-- the body still 'centred in traffic,' the imagination eluding its daily nets and self-consciousness."<sup>52</sup> Perhaps more convincing is Creeley's tenderly uncritical distinction between the self-conscious reserve of "the quiet company", the "securing friends" who "know our routes / and mean to get there," and the pathetic, "plaintive" "loss of determinants" for the unresistant drunk beside him, who "lurches, yet stays stolidly there."

Creeley is sympathetically alive to the elusive dreams of such misfits, pursuing "a world / just out of a bottle" in order to find "ease in / the fragile world." He senses a tragic projectivity in this, as they insistently intrude on the limited world of the tram carriage:



maledictive,  
muttering words, fingers pointing,  
pointing, jabbed outright across

Windows 133

At the same time, he is a reluctant witness, watching "a man keep slamming the post / with his fist, solid in impact, measured blows." Somehow this act is given a dignity which asserts its peculiar heroism, just as with Crane's suicidal leap in his earlier poem. Like the isolation he recognized and pitied in Crane, too, Creeley sees in the company of drunks a gathering of individuals, separate in their solitude, "each talking alone."

As ever, his emotional response qualifies and colours his language; in this case he seeks to communicate his pity explicitly if only because he can make himself understood, unlike the figures he is observing. He is startled into his emotionally charged response by the "human / if unexpected resonance" of each drunken "panegyric". He draws a contrast between the reticently "careful friends" whose comfortable muteness suggests only emotional dishonesty and human inadequacy, and the incoherent noisy ramblings of the drunks, who unintentionally "speak for us" with vigour and honesty, confronting the truth of the human condition without the support of the "compact consensus" whose closed ranks exclude them. Creeley depicts in civilized isolationism a far greater threat than the indomitable outcasts he sees around him.

Finally, Creeley's usually terse poetic idiom can sometimes, if infrequently, give way to an ecstasy which rings with the echo of Crane's heroically projective "kick" and seems an implicit tribute to his pioneering poetic example:

At least to stand forth--  
walk up the path,  
kick the goddamn rock.

Then take deep breath  
and cry--  
Thank god I'm alive

'The Last Mile', Later 113

Notes:-

1. Interview, 15th August 1994.
2. "I'm given to write poems," Collected Essays 502.
3. 'Introduction to Penguin Selected Whitman,' Collected Essays 4-5.
4. August 15th 1951, CC7 99.
5. Hart Crane, 'General Aims and Theories,' Modern Poets on Modern Poetry, ed. James Scully (London: Fontana, 1966) 164.
6. 'With John Sinclair and Robin Eichele,' Tales 7.
7. Interview, 15th August 1994.
8. 'With John Sinclair and Robin Eichele,' Tales 7.
9. Samuel Moon, 'The Springs of Action: A Psychological Portrait of Robert Creeley,' Boundary 2: 259.
10. 'Robert Creeley and the Tradition,' The Poet's Workshop 122-24.
11. Michael Rumaker, 'Robert Creeley at Black Mountain,' Life and Work 49-66. See also Martin Duberman, Black Mountain: An Exploration in Community (New York: E P Dutton, 1972).
12. 'Robert Creeley and the Tradition,' The Poet's Workshop 122-24.
13. Interview, 15th August 1994.
14. Towards a New American Poetics 171.
15. Interview, 15th August 1994.
16. 16th June 1950, CC1 105. Creeley writes: "Slater had told me, that he & HC, started to learn Spanish together. And abt that time the Prez of Mexico had come out against the Catholics, which excited Crane, much, so he decided to write a letter to the Prez congratulating him on his 'stand [,]' and began it (how else): Caro Presidente . . . And cdn't see: what was wrong. Well, what cd be, with such a man. I mean : one word/ there was never more than the ONE word. Coupled in him, as S/ had it: the literal, & (impossible): the Crane/ what he cd feel/ see/ find : in any word." In another anecdote, Brown finds Crane's landlady trying to prevent him throwing his typewriter out of the window for the seventh time, while writing 'The Bridge'. Creeley adds, "tho the explanation for why he was throwing it out, was, it wdn't write Spanish. Things: real things: for HC. Everything came into him."

17. "To Sherwood Anderson," 10th January 1922 (no. 85) The Letters of Hart Crane: 1916-1932, ed. Brom Weber (Berkeley: U of California P, 1965) 77.
18. "I'm given to write poems," Collected Essays 502.
19. 'Edward Dahlberg: The Sorrows of Priapus,' Collected Essays 230.
20. Language as Gesture: Essays in Poetry (London: Allen and Unwin, 1954) 301.
21. 'Hart Crane and the Private Judgment,' Collected Essays 19.
22. Interview, 15th August 1994.
23. Tales 41.
24. 15th August 1951, CC7 99.
25. 'General Aims and Theories,' Modern Poets 164. Amplified in Crane's famous defence in a letter to Harriet Monroe reprinted after the essay, 167-72.
26. 'Hart Crane and the Private Judgment,' Collected Essays 18.
27. Donald Hall, ed., American Poetry: An Introductory Anthology (London: Faber, 1991 edn.) 52.
28. 'Hart Crane and the Private Judgment,' Collected Essays 20.
29. Interview, 15th August 1994.
30. 29th March 1952, CC9 203.
31. Prisms: Studies in Modern Literature (Bloomington IN: Indiana U P, 1967) 91-92.
32. Hart Crane: An Introduction to the Poetry (New York: Columbia U P, 1968) 200-04.
33. 'With Linda Wagner,' Tales 30.
34. 'The Broken Tower,' Complete Poems of Hart Crane, ed. Brom Weber (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1984) 173.
35. 'Hart Crane and the Private Judgment,' Collected Essays 17-18.
36. "To Gorham Munson," 26th November 1921 (no. 82) The Letters of Hart Crane 71.
37. 'Hart Crane and the Private Judgment,' Collected Essays 18-19.
38. 'With Linda Wagner,' Tales 26.

39. Modern Poets 277.
40. 20th August 1951, CC7 114.
41. 23rd June 1950, CC1 144-45.
42. 20th August 1951, CC7 110.
43. Call Me Ishmael: A Study of Melville (London: Jonathan Cape, 1967) 15.
44. 'Hart Crane and the Private Judgment,' Collected Essays 15.
45. 'With Bill Spanos,' Tales 124.
46. 'Hart Crane and the Private Judgment,' Collected Essays 14.
47. Towards a New American Poetics 170.
48. Interview, 15th August 1994.
49. Towards a New American Poetics 189.
50. 'Haw: A Dream for Robert Creeley,' Boundary 2: 462.
51. 'Oh Max', Mirrors 83.
52. "To Waldo Frank," February 7th 1923 (no. 131) The Letters of Hart Crane 120.

### Chapter 3: 'For W.C.W'

#### Creeley and Williams

why I likewise revere Williams - . . . his 'authority' has never been more, or less, than his presence? The present of him, each time? 3rd August 1951 (CC7 51)

Creeley has recalled that "both Pound and Williams at the time I was in college, let's say, were really my imagination of what writing could be."<sup>1</sup> He found in William Carlos Williams' work, "pruned to a perfect economy", an instructive example for, as Olson showed him, his instincts:<sup>2</sup>

. . . when I was still quite young, just beginning thus to write, Charles Olson pointed out to me one of my dilemmas. In trying to achieve an effective line, I was extending it . . . in ways that my own energy couldn't sustain. I tended to speak in a short intensive manner. My thought, the line of my thought, Olson generously said, was rather long; but the statement of my thought was characteristically short and intensive.<sup>3</sup>

Introducing his selection of Whitman's poetry, Creeley explains his taste for restraint:

I had grown up, so to speak, habituated to the use of poetry as compact, epiphanal instance of emotion or insight. I valued its intensive compression, its ability to "get through" a maze of conflict and confusion to some center of clear 'point.'<sup>4</sup>

For Williams, this is precisely "what makes a writer worth heeding:"

that somehow or other, whatever the source may be, he has gone to the base of the matter to lay it bare before us in terms which, try as we may, we cannot in the end escape. . . . The difficulty is to catch the evasive life of the thing, to phrase the words in such a way that stereotype will yield a moment of insight.<sup>5</sup>

Cautious of "mistaking . . . the Dr's [thought,] . . . I'm capable of recognizing its misuse in the hands of others", Creeley's respect for Williams did not alter the independence at which an early letter to Olson hints:<sup>6</sup>

In the case of the Dr.: we come close because we take him to be a focus for these matters. But always, our own way, has to be it. 11th May 1950 (CC1 25).

'For W.C.W.' affirms both Creeley's respect and independence:

The pleasure of the wit sustains  
a vague aroma

The fox-glove (unseen) the  
wild flower

To the hands come  
many things. In time of trouble

a wild exultation.

For Love CP 126

A useful prelude, this enigmatic poem captures Creeley's respect for the self-effacing "authority" of "W.C.W." without underrating their differences. Williams' "presence" is made

perceptibly "present" by a dextrous "wit", and a direct and energetic manner, but the ambiguities, even as he admires a concrete and sensual perception, are Creeley's. Exploring his response to Williams, anticipating any response he in turn may prompt, Creeley questions the validity of both by making the reader's autonomy plain.

Where this poem tantalizes, in the intriguingly "vague aroma", the "fox-glove" concealed "unseen" within parentheses, the imprecise "many things" and a "time of trouble" without any article, it deliberately defeats. The dialectics at its core (between the writer and his words, his active intellect and passive senses, and finally between both poets and the reader) unravel to reveal Creeley's "open" aesthetics. He warns against the sterility of hardened assumption; unfettered ideas and images trail provocatively away. The first two couplets have no punctuation: thus freed from constraint, the elusive possibilities of each word are discovered. Obedient to "W.C.W.", the words are phrased "in such a way that stereotype will yield a moment of insight."

In this poem art depends upon the intellect, ours and the poet's: the "wit sustains" (prolongs) the poem's self-defining "vague aroma", and affirms Creeley's continuing pleasure in Williams' inspirational, self-renewing poetry. The opening couplet yokes the scent to the cerebral process arrested in the act of analysing it. Creeley's attempt to realize an insubstantial sensual response in words (which seem no more



inadequate to their task than the intellect which, after all, succeeds) mirrors this. Word-play on the "unseen" (gloved) fox-glove, which Williams might have enjoyed, reminds that "insight", not assumption, permits us to "see" as well as scent the fox-glove and the more general "wild flower", isolate in its own line, which shares the fragrance.

To the mind came the "vague aroma" which triggered inspiration and, likewise, "To the hands come / many things": things made active, and received passively in four simple monosyllables. Perhaps nodding at Williams' "trade", Creeley acknowledges the physical dexterity and strength of hands, which receive and interpret sensation (also perhaps a tribute to Williams' poetic discretion). To the poet with insight comes pleasure or inspiration, from "many things"; to the reader comes a shared delight in the sensual world, and the appraisal of one's own sensuality. Ambiguity encourages a reader to interpret the poem for himself, promising "a wild exultation" in return. The closing lines match the naive exuberance of Williams' 'Danse Russe', their fatalistic triumph borrowing the artistic courage which Williams found in Red Eric's "Let the hail beat me. It is a kind of joy I feel in such things."<sup>7</sup> Creeley says:

I found a great energy field and paradoxically a great interest in voices that had extraordinary and sometimes painful difficulty . . . situations of extraordinary crisis. And that is what I think I meant by the great exultation. Williams did really seem not merely to



"The thing comes / of itself" only because the "action" or "story" of the poem has been relieved of any securing context, so that the "thing" arrives without irrelevant superfluities. Stillness of atmosphere and simplistic vocabulary bely the violence of a scene which is equally at odds with the title. For Creeley, who admits no prior assumptions about the traditions of love poetry, this gives the poem a distinct colour. He explains:

A title to me, at least in earlier writing, was most often present to locate a context which was my imagination of the location of the emotional situation being set. . . . It was a way of signalling . . . that the poem was going to be involved with this particular context.<sup>12</sup>

This untraditional love poem shows the primitivism of love as integral to natural order; the opening bracket, while distancing us from the violence, makes the command confiding. The cat, unsentimentally absorbed in ancient instincts, presents nature as an ideogram, raw and brutal. The archaic fact of the struggle between victor and victim, hunter and hunted, supremacy and subordination is captured with a hard-edged beauty: "torn, a red thing, / and the other / somehow immaculate." Against these words standing "clean" on the page, the squirrel's bloody remains acquire an almost sacrificial significance, not only because death, like love, is integral to the rhythm of living, and something therefore to which ritualism easily fastens. Here, love and death seem

macabre twins, the extinction inherent in each repeating Williams' belief in the "necessity of destruction" to art. Finally, the poem itself becomes "somehow immaculate"; the thing has imperceptibly come "of itself". Creeley explains:

I'm fascinated by the way you state something and this very curious activity, not merely compressing, . . . creates an entire, not merely possibility but . . . activity in the statement.<sup>13</sup>

Creeley's refusal to take words for granted, as in 'For W.C.W.' and 'Love', echoes a point which Williams often made: the difficulty is all with words. With worn and broken words we are trying to do the same that men with new, sharp-edged words have done before.<sup>14</sup>

Words fascinate Creeley:

There are times when I am absolutely engaged by the disposition of the words as activities or as "things in themselves." And I think that's always in part the interest.<sup>15</sup>

The destructive story of 'Love' dramatises "the disposition of the words" as "things in themselves". The word emerges from the struggle victorious, having been cleansed of tainting assumption after "the Doc's way. . . . Strip & make clean," in Creeley's shared enthusiasm for the word made new:<sup>16</sup>

It's the words, the words we need to get back to, words washed clean. Until we get the power of thought back

through a new minting of the words we are actually sunk.<sup>17</sup>

His preoccupation with the word survived to become Creeley's trademark, as well as his albatross. Ironically, his habitual paring-away of diction made him notorious for inaccessibility, even obscurity. Bereft of locational devices, a reader often does become disoriented, bewildered by a "compact, epiphanal instance of emotion or insight", but only because Creeley usually means us to confront, rather than recreate or try to retrieve, the context of each individual word. 'A Token' offers, with Elizabethan courtesy, "My lady / fair with / soft / arms", "words, words / as if all / worlds were there." Much can be elicited from this small cameo: a nervous tone mixes fear of inadequacy with the confident intimacy of the "soft / arms". The economy is polished and effective: "worlds" echoes the sound of the "words, words" wherein they are contained, so that the gift resonates with the richness of this possibility. As "worlds" implies, there is nothing greater.

For all Creeley's "love of clean words and sharpness", purified of everything except an absolute context words remain a resistant medium.<sup>18</sup> He finds this irresistible:

Words will not say anything more than they do, and my various purposes will not understand them more than what they say.

Preface, Words CP 26

Paul Diehl explains how this comment works in "two ways: first, that words will not say anything more than they say and second, that words will not say anything more than they perform. And in one clause Creeley has shown us that words of course do both."<sup>19</sup> Asked about being "frankly and selfishly interested in words", and his belief that writing is "primarily the experience of language" and poetry "determined by the language of which it is made", Creeley draws on Ludwig Wittgenstein's 'words are all acts':

. . . the structure of words that one composes, that one comes to compose, constitute reification rather than revelation, and reification of some specific situation of the human. I mean they bring news of that order.<sup>20</sup>

Therefore, to Charles Altieri he can seem "the most original of Williams' many followers because he alone alters the objectivist aesthetic from emphasis on concrete perceptions of objects and events to concrete renderings of complex movements of the self-reflexive psyche."<sup>21</sup> Edward Dorn is rather more direct:

Creeley's advancement on Williams has been radical: he discharged the soft locus of that attention and proceeded directly to the bone of human transaction.<sup>22</sup>

Words make language, and Williams exhorts: "listen to the language for the discoveries we hope to make."<sup>23</sup> Creeley is as keen to plunder language, its limits and its plurality, for the significance it accretes through speech, as he is to allow

a word to operate within its own context. He seeks "language that never forgets that it is language".<sup>24</sup> 'The Language' shows how, while familiarity and preconception disfigure words, the repetitive nature of language, its referentiality, perpetuates the dilemma.

An overused phrase which falls prey to disfigurement is "I love you". It is impossible to "Locate I / love you somewhere in / / teeth and / eyes", because words are referents, no more part of the mouth that speaks them than what they describe. We cannot "understand more than what they say". "I / love you" means no more than that. Yet nothing can lessen the emotion charging these familiar words, which assume a curiously "metaphysical" symbolism, a physical significance. Since emotion of any kind transfigures the face, it is brought into sharp focus as proof of love is sought there. Always greedy for detail of lips, mouth, eyes and so on, love seeks the outward expression of internal feelings, the physical reflection of the words' meaning: "I / love you". Perhaps, therefore, a "location" for the phrase can be recognised as it is spoken.

Coloured by irony, the words reify "some specific situation of the human": we can "bite / it but / / take care not / to hurt". Each word's resources are enriching: "bite / it" implies that love offers emotional sustenance. The gently sexual connotations of the following stanzas suggest another kind of hunger which is both nourished and assuaged by love.

The quickening rhythm of "you / want so / / much so / little", reinforcing the sexual undertones, also bespeaks emotional desperation, a sense of inadequacy in the face of need. This is resolved by a truism: "Words / say everything". They do, and they do not, as they "will not say anything more than they do":

I heard words  
and words full

of holes  
aching.

Words CP 283

Somehow 'The Language' succeeds in defying its own insubstantiality. Creeley, determined to ensure that these words are reified, fills "emptiness" with comprehension. For if "Speech / is a mouth", is it not rendered physical, just as the phrase "I / love you" has a physical "disposition"? The opening irony returns to confuse the final optimism. Has the poet been defeated by the physicality he insists upon in language? The spoken word is inadequate because "Speech / is a mouth". As language is transmitted by the mouth (an empty hole) so speech, or a phrase like "I / love you", is also empty. We are reminded of Williams:

Do we not see that we are inarticulate? That is what defeats us. It is our inability to communicate to another how we are locked within ourselves, unable to say the simplest thing of importance to one another . . .<sup>25</sup>

'The Language' probes the dilemmas of the secondhand nature of language: the gap between words as words and words



as comprehended in speech (or poetry). Even with "language which never forgets that it is language", the poet must contend with how it is interpreted, with how it looks or is expected to look, for all the hardwon physicality. Since Creeley's "various purposes will not understand anything more than what [words] say", all other implications must be evinced in that "compact, epiphanal instance of emotion or insight".

Creeley seems intent on closing the gap between writer and reader, word and understanding, subject and object in the fragments comprising Pieces:

You want  
the fact  
of things  
in words,  
of words.

CP 429

Mannered piece of navel-gazing, statement of poetic conviction or epigrammatic exposure of "the fact / / of things" (or all three), this poem's lean appearance immediately disconcerts. Is this a five stanza poem, each stanza a single line of two words or a five-line poem in double-spacing? Each brief, rhythmically perfect line is nothing but an intellectual cul-de-sac; the whole seems little more than an emotional cul-de-sac. The spacings giving each monosyllabic word its separate identity and importance make the poem reticent: what is it that "you" want? What is "the fact / / of things"? Is the speaker talking to and about himself, or talking to and about

someone else, or both? Has a relationship concluded, now only a "fact" as bare of emotion and lyrical possibility as this poem? Can words be facts as well as words?

For all its skeletal rigidity, this poem is unexpectedly pliant, each line cohering individual words into flexible units of possibility, working in contrast to or conjunction with other lines, and governing the movement (or lack of it) of the whole poem. Hiding nothing, the poem is, in its entirety, "The fact / / of things / / in words / / of words." As facts, the words become a monument to themselves, drawing their own shape on the page, the poem a figure of its own meaning. The precise crafting, each word positioned without distortion or compromise, recalls Williams:

When a man makes a poem, makes it, mind you, he takes words as he finds them interrelated about him and composes them . . . into an intense expression of his perceptions and ardors that they may constitute a revelation in the speech that he uses. It isn't what he says that counts as a work of art, it's what he makes with such an intensity of perception that it lives with an intrinsic movement of its own to verify its authenticity.

The Wedge, WCP2 54

Williams was as militant about the poetic line as he was about the word, as Creeley reminded Olson:

have been thinking abt yr grip on line-use. You'll know, of course, of the Doc's exhortations along this center.



The Desert Music, a favourite of Creeley's, appeared in 1954 to demonstrate this "broader basis"; the "variable foot", from which issued the spacious triadic lines which, together with Williams' rambling explanations, have frustrated commentators ever since:

I am wide  
 awake. The mind  
       is listening. The ear  
                   is alerted. But the ear  
 in a half-reluctant mood  
       stretches  
           .       .       and yawns.

'The Orchestra', WCP2 251

This lineation has undoubtedly been "broken open", even if opinion is divided over how and why. Williams insisted that he followed an aural impulse, but Marjorie Perloff has used two versions of a much earlier poem, 'The Nightingales', to prove her suspicion that he "never quite understood the workings of his own prosody".<sup>27</sup> Williams' explanation of his revisions, mistaking the visual for the aural, persuades her of what "so excites Williams: The look, of course." In the typographical symmetry she sees "stability against which the words of the little poem push and jostle. . . . The visual shape also directs our attention to particular words and the relationships between them." Without denying the poem's "heard" qualities, Perloff reasserts a claim first made by Kenner that Williams was writing "stanzas you can't quite hear . . . stanzas to see".

Written some thirty years after 'The Nightingales', 'The Orchestra' at first seems to rebuff Perloff by proclaiming its own sonority:

We half close  
our eyes. We do not  
          hear it through our eyes.

But the "alerted" ear is drowsily indolent because listening is done in the mind not the ear. Each simple sentence is arranged over two lines, subject separated from verb to emphasise the processual present tense "is". Each line is split by a caesura, but the full stops belong to, rather than interrupt, the pattern, ushering in the next short sentence. When the "reluctant" ear disrupts this, phrase and line elongate, yawning towards conclusion.

In my view, Williams certainly intended that "the look" of a poem's lines should shape, and perform, an aural effect which would otherwise be lost. Rejecting any "false opposition created between sight and sound, space and time", Jonathan Mayhew thinks that the contradiction of "fixity and flux", semantically inherent in the term "variable foot", shows that Williams "deliberately subverts the distinction. [The] notion of a relative meter . . . destroys any neat division between the grammar and the rhetoric of prosody."<sup>28</sup> As Mayhew points out, rhetoric is aurally derived. Since "no one element is made the grammatical base of prosody", in the indistinction must lie "the very essence of his technique."

In 'The Orchestra', visual and aural repetitions interweave with equal effect:

                                  it is a principle of music  
to repeat the theme. Repeat  
                  and repeat again,  
                                  as the pace mounts. the  
theme is difficult

                  but no more difficult  
                                  than the facts to be  
resolved. Repeat  
                  and repeat the theme

Creeley himself pre-empted the scholarly debate summarised here in a letter to Olson which begins to ponder:

the stress method of establishing beat/flow: is the:  
breath . . . the words/against the ear: as they are in  
Williams, despite the often/seeming: eye-logic . . .

25th June 1950 (CC2 14)

Spotting the tension Williams, consciously (as Mayhew would have it) or otherwise (as Perloff suggests), had contrived between the "ear-logic" and the "eye-logic" of a poem, Creeley is struck by his

use of words, as SOUND, . . . words were getting  
attention mainly as carriers of: meaning, limited, oddly,  
by the associational tag. It was a head: biz, purely.

[But the word] is: almost as strong as sense: a SOUND  
instrument.

25th June 1950 (CC2 14)

Thus, "What IS important is that we grip the RANGE (possible) of the phrase/ which builds to the unit: LINE . . ." A second

poem called 'For W.C.W.', written at least a decade after the first, decides that:

The rhyme is after  
all the repeated  
insistence.

There, you say, and  
there, and there,  
and and becomes

just so. And  
what one wants is  
what one wants,

yet complexly  
as you  
say.

Let's  
let it go.  
I want--

Then there is--  
and,  
I want.

Words CP 273

This is the kind of poem which infuriates Creeley's critics. With scarcely a noun in sight, it offers neither visual feature nor exterior detail. If the opening rhyme's "repeated / insistence" illustrates itself (sound repeating sense), the next words seem garbled; "you" say nothing that makes any sense:

There, you say, and

In context, perhaps punctuated by accompanying gestures, the word "There" becomes dogmatic, driving some elusive point home. As the phrase "builds to the unit: LINE", the words lack any obviously logical progression of thought; apparently

arbitrary line-endings confuse the eye. Heard, however, with natural speech inflections, they do make sense: the ear-logic works against the eye-logic and the lineation, designed to give the argument aural definition, underlines its rhetorical purpose: "There, you say, and / there, and there, / and and becomes / / just so." The attention is returned to the place of each word on the line, and the possibilities radiating from both: "And" emerges (as Williams and then Louis Zukofsky urged) from its traditionally conjunctive role to enjoy a fresh and meaningful independence.

'The Language' affirms Williams' craftsmanship by putting Creeley's inadequacies on show. His stammering speech is shown up by Williams' fluently demonstrated skill: how "and becomes just so". However, in drawing the contrast, Creeley's very inarticulacy becomes slyly expressive. After all, the poem is composed of his "repeated insistence[s]", thoughtful lineation allowing each word (like "and") a singularity which never imperils the whole. In the third stanza, the mirroring of "what one wants" is climactic; the desire to learn from Williams prevents Creeley from completing his sentence, so he begins again, tails off into "yet complexly" and then gives up: "Let's / let it go". Unable to "let it go", his temerity increases even as his words desert him, petering out into unresolved yearning:

Then there is--  
and,  
I want



'For W.C.W.' suggests how Williams aided Creeley's progress towards lineation which informs, rather than proscribes, the emancipated energies of "words washed clean", both seen and heard.

Paradoxically, Williams can be held partly responsible for the technical cohesion, the synthesis of word and line for which Creeley is known. This conflicts less than expected with the sense of dilation in "opening up": the "necessity of destruction" cleared the way for new parameters and possibilities, loosening comfortably didactic conventions of metre and rhythm. Unconstrained by assumption, as in 'For W.C.W.' ("The pleasure of the wit . . ."), words "made clean" can hold sway over a relaxed line. As Creeley told Olson:

when we can come clearly . . . to such an attitude toward  
line, word and base stress: we open it up, wide open/ and  
make possible: anything/ that the head (particular) can  
get to.

25th June 1950 (CC2 15)

Williams' expansionist poetics extended beyond technique: openness was central to his aesthetics. This was how the new world was discovered, how America came alive, the theme of In The American Grain; he saw the poet not just as a passive receptor (bringing insight), but as initiator, an artistic pioneer, a frontiersman, a Red Eric, Columbus or Daniel Boone. Williams was, moreover, tirelessly open to the human:

Was I not interested in man? There the thing was, right  
in front of me. I could touch it, smell it. It was

myself, naked, just as it was, without a lie telling  
itself to me in its own terms.<sup>29</sup>

Williams' characteristic openness affirmed Creeley's  
sense of poetry as discovery:

it falls for me into place; . . . that he is so, open;  
. . . man sitting on ground, trees abt, starts to hack,  
clear the circle, which is Williams for me. . .

7th December 1950 (CC4 73)

The creative urge to "clear the circle," to "hack" a way out  
from a given centre, meeting any exigency that might arise on  
its own terms, corresponds to the improvised art of jazz, for  
example. Creeley says that his poems are always "telling  
something to myself, curiously, that I didn't have the knowing  
of previously" and Williams' precedent was therefore  
reassuring:<sup>30</sup>

Exact difference, I suppose, between Ez & Williams, that  
Ez never left himself that open, or that way of being  
open. But its a funny biz, that thing in Williams. Even  
as simple as: am I not the happy genius of my household.  
But not that simple. 25th October 1950 (CC3 128)

In "the happy genius" (albeit often beset by profound doubts),  
there was an amplitude Creeley, instinctively reserved, could  
not share, an exuberance where he felt only nervous anxiety,  
and ingenuous transparency where he was embarrassed. His

abiding respect for Williams' work never bridged their difference of temperament.

## II Locating the self: single intelligence and recognition

A man can find only his own; I see nothing else, and see, too, in that, all the gain possible.

16th August 1951 (CC7 101)

Openness (of himself, the line and the poem) lent Creeley's poetic idiom a breadth which his minimalism might have denied. It also led him, circularly, back to himself. To understand why, we must return to the pressure of the "single intelligence", bringing everything "dead center under the will", and "the absolute singleness which must be for any union to ever be/ between anything and anything else."<sup>31</sup> His review of Pictures From Brueghel focusses on this aspect of Williams' poetics:

There is no simple way to speak of this book. It is so singularly the work of a man, one man, that it moves thereby to involve all men, no matter what they assume to be their own pre-occupations.<sup>32</sup>

In an important exchange of letters with Olson in 1951, Creeley allies himself with Williams, whose openness heightens the unifying power of his single intelligence. The flurry was provoked by remarks made by Williams in a letter to Cid Corman [Appendix 1]. Vexed at being thought "unformed and

searching", and having already pronounced Williams (like Daniel Boone) "too 'local' for his own good",<sup>33</sup> Olson retorted, "Bill misses what is in front of his eyes, despite how sharp those eyes are (or ears, for still, I stick to that notion, that Bill, by searching for a language misses it."<sup>34</sup> In reply Creeley, flattered by the attention, defended Williams:

I am unformed: and I know it - and it has no fear for me at all . . . he does sense the place where I am. I know it so deeply in myself, I forget that it's not, by that, apparent to others. Unformed, is the word. It's not, here, certainly a question of disparagement, and even if it were, it would remain true . . . he cares, he cares very much; and that is honest - as fine as anything I might hope for, because I do love him for what he has written.

16th August 1951 (CC7 101)

He goes on to employ an interesting image:

I can't see Williams as saying unformed, as of style, or method; to me, it has the meaning as of, the living; that one is now new, & wet, like any bird so coming out of the nest, . . . .

Vulnerable, we might add, or open.

Creeley's defence fixes on the "single intelligence" of Williams' work, pointing to Paterson where "the reversion is continually to the one man, that ground, and it is again, that

field, and that field only, we deal with?" Olson, he thinks, should concede the significance of this:

I cannot see that one can have a better example than parts of this same book; is there any other premise at work here but the very one we have both been intent on - the instant? That seems the very actual worth, the incredible occasion. And I hate to see it muffed. I don't honestly think Pound has ever done this, what Williams does here - . . . has ever stood this open . . .

14th August 1951 (CC7 93-94)

Paterson, for all its shortcomings, is too strong a precedent for Creeley to dismiss the poem, or its author:

it matters to me, this book, on these grounds: 1) that it is governed, its coherence, by the proposition: one thing is everything; 2) an attention is the only instrument; 3) nothing remains but what is . . .

Olson's "we are the last first people" causes Creeley to note that "space is our condition, all we have . . . there we sit, there we damn well sit, and we make, we move, with what we have . . ." For him, Williams confirms this:

I believe there's only one speech, very truly. Simply one. Either it is that, or it is nothing. Either one sit, in, and altogether open, or there is no good talking about it. With Williams, I believe . . . this way of it, very much there. I want that to get notice, never to be lost.

Anchored in his private locality but eager to be "altogether open", Paterson resolves a dilemma Creeley senses in himself:

on the one hand: a man as the accumulation of acts which rise in a sort of priority, some giving way to others, a heap from which can be taken, examples, or markers of worth, and the man never more in the present than in the past, because he has lived - . . . and for us, it is not that at all - is only, what is, now, on this one point, of whatever you call it, instant, present, or simply, now. That is all we can have, and all I want.

For Creeley, the private man is essentially open, exposed in the immediacy of his environment; thus the "local" becomes in fact, the reverse of, Ez & that line backwards, or as Williams might have made it riding it back to, beyond, city, a street, & beyond street, a house, & beyond house, a room, & beyond room, a chair, and beyond the chair, the man, the goddamn man, sitting, precise, in same.

1st May 1951 (CC6 32)

A doctor's scientific habits of observation and analysis, and a prodigious curiosity, made Williams' poetry "precise". His evidence lay in Rutherford, defining the physical, emotional and intellectual extent of his life: "the total province of [his] world". Likewise, for Creeley "poetry isn't a discretion, [but] . . . ultimately the realization of an entire world."<sup>35</sup> Calling Creeley "a man who also contrives a

world (of his own mind)", Robert Duncan noted, "Williams is, in this, [his] master - not his superior, but his teacher."<sup>36</sup> It is therefore in self-defence, as much as out of loyalty to Williams, that Creeley remonstrates with Olson:

You say there: "then by god he has to stand to the real thing, that, all he finds, or is capable of finding, by the premises of his own process, is his own language . . . ." What more is there? 16th August 1951 (CC7 101)

Creeley's desire for openness was tempered by his instinct for introspection. As he admits to Olson, all he can feel certain of knowing is the locality lying within himself, at any particular instant:

I must hold to myself. Being, what else? That if I am not I, then I am, by rigor of definition, nothing.

The collision of the two apparently contradictory forces nearly ended in self-defeat. Williams died in 1963; by the late 1960s, with two major collections enjoying popularity, Creeley's reputation was established. Increasingly "open", his poems now became so fragmented as to risk confounding their own purpose.

Pieces attempts to render the incoherence of experience, "what happens when . . . we break and move into different patterns".<sup>37</sup> Words collect into forms scarcely recognizable as "poems", like the "Pieces of cake crumbling / in the hand trying to hold / them together". Fragments are dispersed at

random, in apparent compliance with the same insecurity which regulates existence, the insouciant pattern of destiny:

Things  
     come and go.  
 Then  
     let them

'A Step', Pieces CP 382

Confusingly, the poems are sometimes titled, sometimes not. They can be self-contained, like 'The Family':

Father  
 and mother  
 and sister  
 and sister  
 and sister

\*

Here we are.  
 There are five  
 ways to say this.

CP 381

Often though, one ill-disciplined "piece" spills haphazardly into the next, each ending another beginning; a section which looks whole may belong to a larger one, clarifying preceding parts and clarified in turn by what follows. Thus, as Creeley explains, "the concept of poems as set instances of articulate statement yields to a sense of continuity".<sup>38</sup>

In the sequence 'Numbers', digits are shown both as single "pieces", but also as gatherings, pieces of greater numbers, like the book. Each number is described by a series of associations which, finding a composite identity, amplify their 'parent'. Creeley derives security from the symmetry inherent in 'Four', reflected in the pleasingly angular



conformity of a table. He is first reminded of his dog before stream-of-consciousness leads him to the pleasures of friendship and a "circle" of companions. With each new dimension of thought, the apposing of square and circle is neared, eventually achieved in the "return, / reunion," on which the poem closes. Only the final (solitary) quatrain, a solid "four" itself, deconstructs "four" into its constituent digits.

In both structure ("My plan is / these little boxes / make sequences") and concept, the book echoes Paterson's proposal, "in the particular to discover the universal."<sup>39</sup>

In the singular  
the many cohere,  
but not to know it

Pieces CP 439

"Simply a recording instrument" of transient impressions, like the "Sudden openness of summer--everything seems to hang in the air", Creeley observes himself with dispassion:<sup>40</sup>

Inside  
and out

impossible  
locations--

reaching in  
from out-

side, out  
from in-

side--as  
middle:

one hand.

Pieces CP 380

He seems crippled as much by the recognition of his own inability as by the singularity of the "one hand" with which he tries to grasp the subject (himself) from different perspectives. It is as if he is turning himself inside out, reaching "in / from out- / / side, out / from in- / / side". The line-endings are powerfully disjunctive, splitting words open to turn meaning upside down and inside out. Thus, "side" becomes as important as "in" or "out", each participating in the activity of the poet and the poem like a visual aid. Absorbed in self-regard, Creeley detachedly turns his material (himself) over to examine it from all angles, undaunted by his impossible task. The poem itself proves his success; how far seems irrelevant. It is the process which engages him, the same solipsistic processes which the book charts, and which deny consistency just as human nature does.

In Pieces, Creeley is more remote than in Words or the explicitly personal For Love. The reflexive subject of his own experiments, he inspects the workings of his senses, magnifying every stimulus and response. Vision (his own, of course, seriously impaired by losing an eye in early childhood) is especially crucial to the cohering processes of recognition and perception (or insight) which he probes. He enjoys Melville's "The eyes are the gateway to the soul," explaining:

. . . the brain surfaces in the eyes directly. The physical eye is like the brain surfacing. It's where the brain comes literally. Outward from its own physical

place. If you put your finger in your eye, you put your finger in your brain.<sup>41</sup>

Williams, who told Louis Zukofsky, "Eyes have always stood first in the poet's equipment," seems to have anticipated this enthusiasm:<sup>42</sup>

The loss of an eye has been important for you[,] and for us all[,] concentrating your attention on the singl[e]ness of your purpose to see, see, see to the fullest extent.<sup>43</sup>

Asked for his "strongest characteristic", Williams declared "My sight. I like most my ability to be drunk with a sudden realization of value in the things others never notice."<sup>44</sup>

In Pieces, "eye-logic" dominates "ear-logic" in the untidy appearance of the poems, and the indistinctness of endings and beginnings; while the book is crowded with brief visual impressions, descriptive detail is mostly absent:

a road, going by,  
cars, a truck, animals, in crowds.

Pieces CP 382

Yet 'The Moon' is startlingly visual. Presiding over daily mundanities (supper, chat, television, bed) of human relationships, (love-making merely one of the "businesses of the / evening") and sharing her beauty with Creeley's lover, the moon has power beyond her omniscience. Under the intense "attention" of his mind her beauty is enhanced by her

solitude. So much a part of his life she is almost wife-like, the moon is isolated, as he is, as all humans are despite relationships. He draws comfort from this. As the poet's eye engages with what is singular and important to him, the "pieces" cohere in an interior, emotional landscape: this is the "fullest extent" of Creeley's seeing, the "human transaction" noted by Dorn.

Amid the prevailing loneliness, the vacuum, of human experience ("this-- / emptiness / with its incessant movement"), the eye rescues vague glimpses of "Grey mist", "leaves showing green", and "dark trunks of trees--" seen "out the window":

The eye sees, the  
head apparently records  
the vision of these eyes.

What have I seen,  
now see? There were  
times before I look now.

Pieces CP 427

An impression of the huge resources of intellect, inadequately harnessed, lingers as Creeley struggles to process the scene:

Look around. What do you see  
that you can recognize.

Pieces CP 432

These words expect no answer; the certainty of tone anticipates only an inner response. Expressed as a statement, the question carries with it recognition, as the Latin stem "cognosco" reminds us: 'becoming re-acquainted with'. A question mark would undermine this conclusive tone. Creeley

says "I tend to use question marks when there is otherwise no indication that the thing being said is a question"; to him, an omission can indicate "a resolution in the speaker's mind who doesn't really want to hear an answer, just wants to experience this person's presence. . . . If you put a question mark, then you do want an answer."<sup>45</sup> "Look around" shares a passive receptiveness with "recognize"; the eye stays open to anything that "What . . . you see" might present. Williams maintained that "by our eyes we shall prove ourselves better men than those who would block perception".<sup>46</sup>

Recognition, precious to both Creeley and Olson, is at issue in many of their wranglings, and fuels the exchanges of 1951 about Williams discussed here. For Olson, recognition is intrinsic to the single intelligence:

(1) . . . what's exactly in front of yr eyes  
 . . . is, at anytime, in any place, at that  
 instant, the whole fucking business

(2) . . . anytime and anyplace is not disclosable by  
 the terms of that time and place at all . . .

(3) . . . the clue is not movement, not displacement in  
 time or space (nor its false opposite, tenacious local  
 realism) BUT IS RECOGNITION      10th August 1951 (CC7 88)

Olson claims that "the whole modern notion of search-to-find" (which Williams describes as the "present status in

America") should be "exposed for what it is - a loss of the function of RECOGNITION", denying "form ex content" and contradicting the quasi-mythical figure of Daniel Boone in In the American Grain who "(know it or not), is RECOGNITION". Williams' "search" undermines "the whole 'argument' on which PAT is based", because "he can't have it both ways"; his "lack of intellect is sabotaging, in this way, all our positions, of all, the central one, of, the Single Intelligence".<sup>47</sup>

Creeley, however, returns: "he is not us, he is not to be convinced by what we project", arguing, "Recognition is as much a substance of his work, as it was of Boone's whole life. I cannot see these two faces as separate." Williams on Poe ("What he wanted was connected with no particular place; therefore it must be where he was") reinforces the point:<sup>48</sup>

That cleared much, for me; it destroyed, in my own mind, the conception of the place, Paterson, as being anything more than this implied use of it. I cannot read the poem any other way, frankly . . . 16th August 1951 (CC7 102)

Moreover, Creeley recollects that Williams "premised his disclosures. . . on the attentions of himself. Isn't that the same music, the very sound I know of?". Recognition is important "somehow as the displacement in the attentions, in the very entity they somehow are, somehow there resting, to become." Since "an attention" is "the base condition of a man's very presence", in Paterson, Williams' attention is disclosed by the poem's "displacement".

Creeley eventually agrees that "search" implies something looked for, rather than anything, inviting a specificity he had overlooked:

[in the] loss of the function of recognition. It seems that the senses, so intent on their burden, call it, of a possible object, over-ride, and so lose, that which certainly must otherwise have offered itself--

16th August 1951 (CC7 106)

Even so, for him, Williams' openness is beyond question:

I test, as I can, my own perceptions; I want them to declare weights as they may, do, find things of such possibility. And it had seemed, does still, that Williams had this similar sense . . . 16th August 1951 (CC7 105)

He concludes, "what made the poems, . . . so beautifully free of, search, so many of them. . . . Desire/ that isn't search. The will to recognition?" Defining recognition as "attention to the moving face of reality anywhere", he seems to anticipate the project of Pieces.

Creeley has since remarked that "articulation is the intelligent ability to recognize the experience of what is so given, in words."<sup>49</sup> He calls Williams' sequence 'Spring And All':

a way of thinking in the world, a way of perceiving--not decided upon but met, . . . choice does not exist except as recognition. Williams says that that sequence is

moving among the recognitions that are given him of the perceptions he can offer. . . . I am interested in . . . not simply why does he say this, but how he says it, how he gives it credence, how he gives it recognition.<sup>50</sup>

The powers of recognition can exhilarate: "I was given that / sight gave me myself, / this was the mystery / I had come to-- / / . . . I felt, as though hearing / laughter, my own heart lighten." But, as ever, introspection moderates Creeley's openness, distancing him from Williams' generous curiosity: recognition can frustrate when "what was a road / turns to a circle / with nothing behind", and frighten with an inescapable knowledge of isolation:

There is no one precedes--  
look ahead--and behind  
 you have only where you were.

'Here', Pieces CP 441

Williams would say that "a man, an artist, wants a world to be different from what he finds it. So he finds himself lonely."<sup>51</sup> But even when Creeley avers "This singleness / you make an evidence / has purpose. / / You are not alone, / however one--not / so alone", the final words, ironically isolated, belie him.

Marooned In London, although disorientation and "Interrupt- / ions" heal eventually into re-coherence and recognition, at first words like "place", "separation", "space", "limit" and "edge" dominate Creeley's circumspection of his new environment:



The room's spaces make the place  
 of the two persons' sitting seem  
 years across. One might accept  
 the "place" of one moving off as  
 in films a double image per-  
 mits that separation to be realized.

In London CP 449

The "room's spaces" and the severed "per- / mits" (made  
 uncertain) reflect "that separation", whether physical, an  
 imminent departure, or emotional. Creeley seems thoughtfully  
 aware of his detachment:

the so-called poet of love  
 is not so much silent as absorbed.  
 He ponders. He sits on  
 the hill looking over . . .

In London CP 454

Sometimes he collides with his environs with a physical  
 impact, as in 'A Wall':

I had walked into a wall, not  
 through but against it, felt my  
 shoulder hit its literal hardness.

In London CP 457

Moreover, insecurity breeds a debilitating sensitivity to  
 sensation: "A wind I can / hear outside shifts / the mind,  
 day, eye's / center." Apparent panic ("The wind rises in a /  
 fucking, endless volume"), turns to stoicism ("Neither sadness  
 nor desire / seems the edge: this precipice") and then joy  
 ("Delight dances, / everything works"), within a few lines. .

As the environment grows familiar, the poems assume a  
 more concrete shape, and Creeley, relaxing, unleashes his  
 emotions: "Love-- / let it / / Out, / open up / / Very

voraciously-- Everywhere, / everyone". 'The Edge' recollects, with new resolve, the limitless power of emotion to requalify experience, to "make the space of it", summoning Williams ("He saw the stain of love / was upon the world,") to remind that emotion tints knowledge:

a selvage, a faint  
 afteredge of color fading  
  
 at the edge of the world,  
 the edge beyond that edge.

YOU THINK in the circle  
 round the whole.

In London CP 453

Like chromatography, the "stain" spreads out from a central point into blurred but distinguishable bands of colour.

Likewise, Creeley's thought (like emotion) radiates from its centre (always himself); the punning on "whole" scarcely seems uncontrived.

Creeley went on to attempt "writing that simply says: the road is going this way down the hill and there are trees here. I mean sit down and deliberately say I want to make a statement of what seems to be physically actual in this place, and I really don't want to involve more than that in the statement."<sup>52</sup> Accordingly, his next collection, Thirty Things is prefaced by "It is. It is the thing where it is" from 'The Descent of Winter'. It includes the succinct and cinematic 'As We Sit':

There is a long  
 stretch of sky  
 before us. The road

goes out to the channel  
of the water. Birds  
fly in the faintly

white sky. A sound  
shuffles over  
and over, shifting

sand and  
water. A wind  
blows steadily

as we sit.

Thirty Things CP 545

The road extends across the stanza break into the distant perspective of the water and a vaguely discerned (colourless) horizon. The rhymes are close and intricate in "fly in the faintly / / white sky", and expressively indistinct in: "sound / shuffles over / and over, shifting / / sand and / water."

These are Williams' tricks. Compare the following poems:

Under a low sky--  
this quiet morning  
of red and  
yellow leaves--

a bird disturbs  
no more than one twig  
of the green leaved  
peach tree

'Silence', The Wedge WCP2 91

Wind lifts lightly  
the leaves, a flower,  
a black bird

hops up to the bowl  
to drink. The sun  
brightens the leaves, back

of them darker branches,  
tree's trunk. Night is still  
far from us.

'Wind Lifts', Mirrors 34

Each moves from a sketchy background, Williams' "low sky-  
 - / this quiet morning", Creeley's slight breeze, towards the  
 foreground detail. The visual/aural closeness of "bird  
 disturbs" is matched in Creeley's "hops up", and the symmetry  
 of "drink" and "trunk". The poems share a delicate clarity.  
 The lightly poised negative "no more than one twig" depicts  
 the balancing bird; the "green leaved / peach tree" is  
 brightly assonantal. Creeley's syntax "lifts lightly / the  
 leaves" has an equally subtle effect, like the sunny frame he  
 contrives for "the leaves, back / / of them darker branches,"  
 a tranquil reminder that "Night is still / far from us".

The determinedly "single intelligence" of Creeley's "open  
 form" poetics permits him to reconcile two important but  
 conflicting ideas to which he was introduced by Williams'  
 poetry: reassuring knowledge of the cohering "self" with a  
 compulsion for openness. Both impulses reside in Creeley's  
 inquiring but introspective poetry, each qualifying the other.

### III The Complex of Measure

Poems are a complex . . . structure of sounds and rhythms  
 which cohere to inform the reader . . . with a  
 recognition of their order.<sup>53</sup>

Pattern, or order, is inherent in the idea of  
 recognition. Patterns of thought, behaviour, sensation and  
 experience may be private and particular: 'The Plan Is The

Body' sees in "each moment a pattern. / . . . The mind is in the head." The mind discovers such patterns for itself:

Moving in the mind's  
patterns, recognized  
because there is where  
they happen.

Pieces CP 437

There is also patterning, however, in the plurality of the human condition:

Simple, to be said, a life  
is nothing more than itself,  
and all the bodies together  
are, one by one, the measure.

Pieces CP 418

"Measure" is a word of profound and complex resonance for Creeley, emphatic that "there is an absolute necessity for some kind of coherence, rhythmical or otherwise" to be recognised by a poet, for all his openness:

I want to give witness . . . to what I am--as simple agency. . . . Measure, then, is my testament. What uses me is what I use and in that complex measure is the issue. I cannot cut down trees with my bare hand, which is measure of both tree and hand. In that way I feel that poetry, in the very subtlety of its relation to image and rhythm, offers an intensely various record of such facts. It is equally one of them.<sup>54</sup>

The preoccupation with "measure" stems from Williams, whose demands for a "new measure" grew stronger as he grew older. Williams tended to be imprecise in his use of the term, but

the poets who attended the (seminal) Berkeley conference in 1965 agreed that their shared interest in measure originated in his "questioning of what he had come to and . . . what this particular art might place itself as being responsible to."<sup>55</sup>

Broadly speaking, Williams seems to have understood measure as "relation". Misleadingly decisive, he once told Richard Eberhart that "by measure I mean musical pace."<sup>56</sup> To John Thirlwall, however, he explained:

Measure serves for us as the key: we can measure between objects; therefore, we know that they exist. Poetry began with measure, it began with the dance, whose divisions we have all but forgotten but are still known as measures. . . . the measure by which the poem is to be recognized has [been] lost in the confusion which at present surrounds our lives.<sup>57</sup>

This sense of "measure" goes beyond prosody'; in flabby, "unmeasured" poetics, Williams senses a troubling absence of relation between his own generation and earlier ones which threatens the poetry to come.

Williams' ideas found widespread currency among younger poets like Creeley, for whom the implications also extended beyond prosodic technique to his poetics. Williams' belief that measure derived from "the whole pattern of the age", and even Shakespeare was "in his measures the child of his own epoch, bound to this pattern", affirmed and was affirmed by

Creeley's belief in the engendering of form from content.<sup>58</sup>

As an artisan, a poet draws his material from his environment, the context to which he belongs, in which he finds relation, and from which his "form" emerges: "What uses me is what I use". Williams' Autobiography prompted Creeley to declare:

use is a relation, and these [i.e. use and relation] determine no adequate symbol or metaphor beyond their very presence. . . . In this poetry has dominance, and a form. It is neither explanation nor description, but actual in such form.<sup>59</sup>

A sense of "relation" or measure gives a poem actuality:

"use", being "relation", shows the cohering energy of "measure" at work.

Reviewing The Selected Essays Creeley finds measure "more at root in [Williams'] sense of structure than even his insistence on the local".<sup>60</sup> He points to 'On Measure--Statement for Cid Corman,' in which Williams complained:

verse has lost all measure. Our lives also have lost all that in the past we had to measure them by, except outmoded standards that are meaningless to us. . . . We must invent new modes to take the place of those which are worn out. . . . No verse can be free, it must be governed by some measure, . . . a measure consonant with our time . . . a purely intuitive one.<sup>61</sup>

He added: "Relativity gives us the cue". In a comparison denied, at first, by Williams, Creeley recalls Thomas Campion's "attention to the words and the rhythms which they carried in them, to be related as they occurred" (my italics), proving:

it is not metrics that are the fact in any of this, since, to compose 'metrically' would oblige one literally to an assumption of the 'foot' and the patterns then possible well before any poem could be written.<sup>62</sup>

Creeley finds the "measure" of Campion's poem particular to its context; measure, less an "authority" than a "presence", is not responsible for but to the poem's occasion, like form (of which it is an aspect).

As Paul Mariani points out, the ideas to which Creeley is so alert in his first review of Williams did not qualify his own poems at first.<sup>63</sup> At Berkeley, he struggles to explain the permutations of his "intensely various" sense of "measure":

I'm taking it as metric, in Olson's sense of metric as mapping . . . a response to the actual, almost the topography, [or of] the actual ground, in no metaphoric sense, of where it is that one is moving, or in relation to what one is moving. . . . How do you get to ground, as Olson would say? . . . [but] not only as metric, . . . the way verse may be reported to have rhythmic activity, but I want measure in the full sense that it offers. I



want it in terms of "measuring cups." I want it in terms of "to take stock of oneself." I want it in all the relational qualifications it seems to offer: a sense of measure.<sup>64</sup>

The hints of existentialism ("where it is that one is moving, or in relation to what one is moving") do not negate the prosodic importance of measure as "rhythmic activity". Like Williams, Creeley's sense of measure embraces "all the relational qualifications" of the term.

As a process, measurement was present in Creeley's earliest poems:

Like  
(not to be laughed at) the quarters  
of a pie (or where the dollar goes . . .), it is  
the graph, the locus of change.  
'Littleton, N.H', The Charm CP 24

His friend, sculptor John Chamberlain, observed of Words, "The whole action of the poetry is measuring. How big is this? How small is that? Everything is a persistent preoccupation with measure: dimensions".<sup>65</sup>

Little places as  
size of  
one hand, shrink

to one finger  
as tall  
as, I am

sitting  
down even  
smaller.

'Dimensions', Words CP 323

Creeley' interest in numbers and serial order (he has said that "mathematics are perhaps the most insistent occasion for intuition") lies behind the avant garde 'A Piece':<sup>66</sup>

One and  
one, two,  
three.

Words CP 352

He told Faas, "I love patternings that can be situated in numbers. I don't have any sophisticated information in numbers but I'm fascinated by conditions in which numbers can be used either to demonstrate or describe."<sup>67</sup> "Measure" is inherent in number; any digit depends upon its "relational qualifications" for an identity:

This issue of numbers is not simply a description of an activity, but its particularity in its insistence would seem to imply that this activity does have this insistent relational possibility or grouping.<sup>68</sup>

Creeley goes on to explain that measurement is not about quantification alone: "to measure something is to be involved with what it is or what its conditions are". 'For Joel' describes his familiar and persistent need to engage with, to "measure" his private existence, and the complex environment which defines it:

Measures--  
ways of being in one's life,  
happy or unhappy, never dead to it.

Words CP 370

In 'I Am Held By My Fear Of Death', he is "useless, impotent". Unable to relate, or "measure up", to the demands made upon him, he seeks "to take stock of [him]self". In 'They (2)', the failure to "measure up" under pressure precipitates an emotional crisis:

They were trying to catch up.  
But from the distance

between them, one thought  
it would be a long time

even with persistent  
running. They were walking

slower and slower  
for hours and hours.

Words CP 355

The spatial separation implied in 'distance' reflects an internal absence of relation. In the growing "distance / / between them" we infer an emotional gulf. The valiant but inadequate attempts to close the gap merely dramatize the failure to measure up to the dilemma: "their" exhausting predicament seems interminable. Creeley externalizes and sympathetically calls into question the emotional response he has sketched.

As 'They (2)' warns, a measured life is secured and made coherent by self-awareness; Creeley hugs the recognition to himself:

I keep to myself such  
measures as I care for,  
daily the rocks  
accumulate position.

There is nothing  
 but what thinking makes  
 it less tangible. The mind,  
 fast as it goes, loses

pace, puts in place of it  
 like rocks simple markers,  
 for a way only to  
 hopefully come back to

where it cannot. All  
 forgets. My mind sinks.  
 I hold in both hands such weight  
 it is my only description.

'"I Keep to Myself Such Measures . . ."', Words CP 297

Relation, if non-referential, is implicit throughout the poem, as in the conditional "such" which suffices for the weight Creeley holds. How "the rocks / accumulate position" is not explained, nor under what conditions, nor where, but that they succeed is important. Through discipline, the poet attempts to make thought "tangible", the reverse of the effect of "thinking". Creeley, who "would not want to get away from the pleasure that thinking can be", often seeks to reify thought in words.<sup>69</sup> As Williams famously said, "The poet thinks with his thought, in that lies his thought, and that in itself is the profundity."<sup>70</sup> Robert von Hallberg notes how "like Williams, Creeley intends his poems to display "all the complexity of a way of thinking".<sup>71</sup> Aided by imagined marker rocks, he can secure his elusive thoughts. Made heavy, lending his words a physical "weight", the rocks induce a reality which is his "only description"; grasped in this literal way, the "measures" of his mind make him part of his own "accumulated" pattern. The patterns made from thought hold the poem's interior movement, from marker rock to marker

rock, in place, and bind the whole into a logical (if self-defeating process), seeking "a way only to / hopefully come back to / / where it cannot." Externally, the words cohere in "rhythmic activity"; for example, the faltering "mind / fast as it goes, loses / / pace, puts in place of it". Aurally, an evenly monosyllabic "pace" describes its own activity.

At Berkeley, Creeley is careful to replace "metric" with "rhythmic activity"; elsewhere he is dismissive of common "academic" assumptions of metric "in relation to iambs and like terms because linguistics has offered a much more detailed and sensitive register of this part of a poem's activity".<sup>72</sup> In essays, and reviews of Williams' later works, he discusses how the "rhythmic activity" and "the relational qualifications" of the poetry issues from its "occasion"; in Williams' 'The End of the Parade', he first "heard the fact of the poem's statement as well as understood its meaning."<sup>73</sup> If Robert Hass is right, when Creeley began reading this poetry "there was no professor to tell one how to read William Carlos Williams, [so] he simply assumed that all of Williams's lines were end-stopped". The syncopated rhythms produced by the "odd emphasis on the last word in the line", presumably influenced his response to Williams' measure.<sup>74</sup>

However, Creeley has also said that "sympathetically interesting" writers like Stevens or Williams used "a rhythmic order that . . . didn't particularly deal with the shifts of the nervousness of the impulses of altered timing that I

really was hooked on".<sup>75</sup> For him, the "weights" accrued by words in the immediate context of the line give "a rhythmic possibility, an inherent periodicity in the weights and durations of words to occur in the first few words, or first line, or lines, of what [he is] writing."<sup>76</sup> At Berkeley, he explores the "sound weights" of "somehow":

in different environments it will have different possibilities . . . I would always be embarrassed to assume that, that word has a stable condition . . . "writing somehow doesn't count," in that context . . . the two parts have almost an equivalent weight . . . but . . . "somehow writing doesn't count," if you shift this word to the beginning of the sentence, you have a different balance. So any proposal for this word which says it will always have this weight reveals the awkwardness . . .<sup>77</sup>

In "I hold in both hands such weight", the gravity of the firmly stressed "I hold" gives a solemn restraint, the final two words made ponderous by the natural "weight" of the line-ending. Creeley doesn't cling to, or grab, "such weight". Like the line he seems meditatively impassive, inscrutable.

Creeley has also commented:

What device, means, rhythm, or form the poem can gain for its coherence are a precise issue of its occasion. The mind and ear are, in this sense, stripped to hear and organize what is given to them, and the dance or music

Williams has used as a metaphor for this recognition and its use is that which sustains us . . .<sup>78</sup>

Williams used "dancing" to describe the new measure which the closing lines of 'The Desert Music' celebrate:

I am a poet! I  
am. I am. I am a poet, I reaffirmed, ashamed

Now the music volleys through as in  
a lonely moment I hear it. Now it is all  
about me. The dance! The verb detaches itself  
seeking to become articulate .

WCP2 284

The formality which dancing (archaically a "measure") shares with music attracted Creeley. The shape or composition of a dance is dictated by the movement, or shape, of the music on which the dancing is dependent and from which its character is borrowed. The form of the dance emerges from the content of the music, as 'They' shows:

I wondered what had  
happened to the chords.  
There was a music,

they were following  
a pattern. It was  
an intention perhaps.

. . .

Words CP 338

The "music", or "pattern", derives from a forceful "intention" which denies the poem independent movement; "any / discretion is useless", and the measure, "each / one in his place, / an endless arrival", is remorseless. The poem broods on (as

Creeley puts it) "that music which informs our lives with a coherence beyond their intention or apparent significance":

The dance, the acts of a life, move to that music, the life itself, and it is these which it is the poet's peculiar responsibility to acknowledge and recover by his art . . . when it all coheres, and each poem, or instance, takes its place in that life which it works to value, to measure, to be the fact of.<sup>79</sup>

The use which each writer made of the "dance" metaphor reaffirms their differing poetics. In 'The Dance' Williams is confident that "only the dance is sure!", and offers smooth supple phrases which glide, almost regardless of intruding commas, even across stanza breaks:

your lover follows  
there are always two

yourself and the other,  
the point of your shoe setting the pace

WCP2 407

His line effortlessly slips along after the shoe tip. Even the "bare twigs have an actuality of their own" which is lissom, delicately vulnerable to:

this flurry of storm  
that holds us,  
plays with us and discards us  
dancing, dancing as may be credible.

In contrast, Creeley's 'Dancing', written in 1966, shows him gracelessly making "[his] own way", unable to quell the expressive "shifts of the nervousness" in his movements. He



too writes in quatrains, but his are brittle, the phrasing broken, each line an uneven outburst "jerking" awkwardly into the next. His "dismay" at his own inhibitions is manifest, as in the self-conscious clumsiness of "to let my legs and arms / move", where the repeated "m" impedes the soundflow at the turn of the line. Self-censuring, his embarrassment is palpable as he seeks to escape himself:

or could leave

itself to itself  
 whatever it is, dancing,  
 or better, a jerking leap  
 toward impulse.

Words CP 372

The "impulse" of ungainly and irregular rhythms suggest his improbable dancing. The line lengths are in constant flux, expanding and contracting into a jagged shape on the page which also figures the poem's movement.

While he found the "dance" metaphor useful, Creeley has also remarked that, "for myself the primary term is that words can move in the measure of song, although I do not wish to confuse poetry with music."<sup>80</sup> Many of Creeley's poems share the word "song" (or a word meaning "song") in their titles, or are simply song-like. As a poetic form, the song's measure can incorporate a constant and a variant element, (equivalent to the balance of words with music) just as Pound advised:

I use the quatrain or . . . some very simple and standard measure of time and rhythms within it to be a constant and then I can - much like the measure in music - with

that as a locus, . . . play or move as variously as I  
feel.<sup>81</sup>

The short-lined quatrain below finds "a measure /  
resistant" within which Creeley can "play", splitting the  
participles across the line-endings into the constituent  
weights of each syllable. The resulting sound-pattern brings  
deliberation to the rhythmic progress (measure) of each line:

The grit  
of things,  
a measure  
resistant--

times walk-  
ing, talk-  
ing, telling  
lies and

all the other  
places, no  
one ever  
quite the same.

'Song', Words CP 274

In later collections like Windows, such songs become  
mournful, plaintively measuring mortality:

What's in the body you've forgotten  
and that you've left alone  
and that you don't want--

or what's in the body that you want  
and would die for--  
and think it's all of it--

'Song', Windows 3

This litany seems angry, resentful of the limits which fence  
in (measure) existence. Similarly, 'Paterson V' observes in  
the passage of time the final constant, or measure, of life:

--Learning with age to sleep my life away:  
saying .

The measure intervenes, to measure is all we know

. . . .

Paterson 239

Likewise, Creeley's 'The Measure' argues that the  
"relational qualification" imposed by time upon human  
existence is an inescapably private crisis; he finds refuge in  
justifiable solipsism:

I cannot  
move backward  
or forward.  
I am caught

in the time  
as measure.  
What we think  
of we think of--

of no other reason  
we think than  
just to think--  
each for himself.

'The Measure', Words CP 290

Perceiving the complexities of Creeley's sense of  
measure, and the versatility it brought his writing, Williams  
wrote:

You have the subtlest feeling for the measure that I  
encounter anywhere except in the verses of Ezra Pound.<sup>82</sup>

Although, as Duncan knew, "the superlative does not clarify",  
Creeley's sense of measure tempers not only the technique of  
his "open" prosody and self-aware poetics, but the aesthetics  
of recognition which he seeks to articulate.<sup>83</sup> Although he

takes "his own way", he is happy to acknowledge in Williams his "largest example".<sup>84</sup> He reveals to Faas:

in points of my own despair or even delight it's been  
extremely useful to me to be able to read Williams' poems  
. . . I find them valuable simply because they give me  
information about where I'm at. They don't teach me but  
they give me companionship.<sup>85</sup>

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3. 'From the Forest of Language . . . , ' Athamor 4: 10.
4. 'Introduction to Penguin Selected Whitman, ' Collected Essays 3.
5. The Autobiography of William Carlos Williams (New York: New Directions, 1951) 358-59.
6. 18th May 1950, CC1 30.
7. In The American Grain: Essays (New York: New Directions, 1956) 3.
8. The Poet's Craft 168.
9. 'With John W. Gerber and Emily M. Wallace,' Interviews with William Carlos Williams: "Speaking Straight Ahead", ed. Linda Welshimer Wagner (New York: New Directions, 1976) 26.
10. Peter Quartermain, 'Robert Creeley: What Counts,' Boundary 2: 331.
11. 18th May 1950, CC1 31.
12. The Poet's Craft 163-64.
13. *ibid.*, 167.
14. "afraid lest he be caught in a net of words," The Embodiment of Knowledge, ed. Ron Loewinsohn (New York: New Directions, 1974) 107.
15. Robert Sheppard, 'Stories: Being an Information, An Interview,' The Poet's Workshop 45.
16. 31st May 1950, CC1 64.
17. William Carlos Williams, 'Al Pound Stein,' Selected Essays of William Carlos Williams (New York: Random House) 163.
18. ca. 28th May 1950, CC1 57.
19. 'The Literal Activity of Robert Creeley,' Boundary 2: 335.
20. Towards a New American Poetics 173-4.
21. 'Placing Robert Creeley's Recent Work: A Poetics of Conjecture,' Boundary 2: 519.

22. 'Of Robert Creeley,' Boundary 2: 447.
23. 'The Poem as a Field of Action,' Selected Essays 290.
24. Towards a New American Poetics 176.
25. In the American Grain 361.
26. 'The American Spirit in Art,' A Recognizable Image: William Carlos Williams on Art and Artists, ed. Bram Dijkstra (New York: New Directions, 1978) 219-20.
27. '"To Give a Design": William Carlos Williams and the Visualization of Poetry,' Williams: Man and Poet 159-86.
28. 'William Carlos Williams and the Free Verse Line,' Williams: Man and Poet 287-300.
29. Autobiography 357.
30. 'With Linda Wagner,' Tales 26.
31. 31st May 1950, CC1 64.
32. 'The Fact,' Collected Essays 44.
33. 8th August 1951, CC7 64.
34. 10th August 1951, CC7 82.
35. 'With Michael André,' Tales 102.
36. 'After For Love,' Boundary 2: 235.
37. Towards a New American Poetics 177.
38. *ibid.*, 186.
39. Author's Note, Paterson (London: Penguin, 1983 edn.) [vii].
40. Towards a New American Poetics 193.
41. The Poet's Craft 167-68.
42. "To Louis Zukofsky," 5th July 1928 (no. 73) The Selected Letters of William Carlos Williams, ed. John C. Thirlwall (New York: New Directions, 1957) 102.
43. 'Excerpts from Letters to Robert Creeley,' 3rd January 1960 Life and Work 30.
44. Bram Dijkstra cites as The Little Review (May 1929) 87. Introduction, A Recognizable Image 1.
45. The Poet's Craft 170.

46. 'The Poet in Time of Confusion,' A Recognizable Image 173.
47. 10th August 1951, CC7 85-88.
48. In the American Grain 221.
49. 'A Sense of Measure,' Collected Essays 487.
50. 'With Linda Wagner,' Tales 47-48.
51. 'With Gerber and Wallace,' Interviews 13.
52. The Poet's Craft 166.
53. 'Poems are a Complex,' Collected Essays 489.
54. 'A Sense of Measure,' Collected Essays 488.
55. 'A Sense of Measure: An Occasion at the Berkeley Poetry Conference, 23rd July 1965,' ed. Douglas Calhoun, Athamor 4: 35.
56. "To Ralph Nash," 23rd May 1954 (no. 209) Selected Letters 326.
57. "To John C. Thirlwall," 13th January 1955 (no. 214) Selected Letters 331-32.
58. 'A Sense of Measure,' Athamor 4: 35.
59. 'The Release,' Collected Essays 31.
60. 'William Carlos Williams: Selected Essays,' Collected Essays 36.
61. Selected Essays 337-39.
62. 'William Carlos Williams: Selected Essays,' Collected Essays 38.
63. '"Fire of a very real order": Creeley and Williams,' Boundary 2: 183.
64. 'A Sense of Measure,' Athamor 4: 36-38.
65. 'Stories . . . , ' The Poet's Workshop 44.
66. 'A Sense of Measure,' Athamor 4: 44.
67. Towards a New American Poetics 188.
68. 'A Sense of Measure,' Athamor 4: 46.
69. The Poet's Craft 166.
70. Autobiography 390-91.

71. 'Robert Creeley and the Pleasures of System,' Boundary 2: 374.
72. 'A Sense of Measure,' Collected Essays 488.
73. "paradise / our / speech . . . ," Collected Essays 51.
74. 'Creeley: His Metric,' Life and Work 391.
75. 'Stories . . . ,' The Poet's Workshop 39.
76. 'Notes Apropos "Free Verse",' Collected Essays 494.
77. 'A Sense of Measure,' Athamor 4: 43.
78. 'The Fact,' Collected Essays 45.
79. *ibid.*, Collected Essays 45-46.
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81. 'Stories . . . ,' The Poet's Workshop 49.
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83. 'After For Love,' Boundary 2: 234.
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## Chapter 4: "something / by which / to measure / all else"

### Creeley and Zukofsky

Creeley first saw Louis Zukofsky's name "in the dedications of two books crucial to my senses of poetry, Ezra Pound's Guide To Kulchur ('To Louis Zukofsky and Basil Bunting strugglers in the desert') and Williams' The Wedge ('To L.Z.')." <sup>1</sup> However, he adds that, "I didn't really come upon Zukofsky's work until I was certainly older." With Dahlberg urging him to pursue Zukofsky for the Black Mountain Review, when the poems (and Williams' percipient and enthusiastic review of Anew) accompanied Duncan to Mallorca in 1954, they made an immediate impression upon Creeley: "when I actually held the work in my hands it was instantly something I could use. Its economy, its modality was absolutely attractive to me." <sup>2</sup>

By the time the two poets met in 1955, Zukofsky had joined the elite of Creeley's "elders in the art": "despite a chaos of restrictive generalization, we had nonetheless the active, persistent functioning of example." <sup>3</sup> As "an extraordinary stylist", Zukofsky brought consistency of purpose ('An Objective') and a methodology as excitingly precise as Williams' ideas had been excitingly vague. <sup>4</sup> From the first, his "poetry apprehending, intense, disinterested," became a touchstone to which Creeley would return throughout his own writing career; moreover Zukofsky's intellectual eclecticism, the determination that "poetry if anything has a

sense for everything", continues to compel Creeley as  
'Touchstone', "for L. Z." makes decisively clear:<sup>5</sup>

"Something  
by which  
all else  
can be measured."

Something  
by which  
to measure  
all else.

'Touchstone', Later 107

The poem leaves us in no doubt that Creeley's enthusiasm, as ever, is tempered by his individuality. Typically he offers a subtle interpretation, rather than simple imitation, of the ideas with which Zukofsky's example challenged him. Despite its dedication, this poem respectfully rearranges Zukofsky's words, revisiting in order to reinterpret them, and thus emphasizes, as Zukofsky might have done, "all else". This recalls the Objectivist's characteristic "interest in pregnant little words" as Kenner puts it.<sup>6</sup>

Creeley's initial esteem came to be coloured by the deep (and mutual) affection with which he talks of Zukofsky: "Always that shy, intensive warmth, that dear, particular care."<sup>7</sup> Celia Zukofsky in turn declared Creeley "one of his dearest friends . . . there was this rapport, this philosophical and metaphysical closeness. And when I say Creeley, I mean Creeley's work."<sup>8</sup> To Carroll Terrell, she recalled that "Louie took to Creeley's work almost instantaneously and he has never waived [sic] about Creeley's gift as a fine writer."<sup>9</sup> The affinity was very

important to both writers. 'Touchstone' brings to mind the movingly personal memoir contributed by Creeley to the Zukofsky memorial issue of Paideuma:

If I try to isolate my sense of Louis Zukofsky from those memories now, I neither can nor can I see the reason to. He taught me so much, in so many ways. Without the least trying, so to speak, the measures of person, of conduct, of art, which he constituted, are all of a factual piece.<sup>10</sup>

# I The Objective and 'sincerity'

It is a peculiar virtue of Zukofsky's work that it offers an extraordinary handbook for the writing of poems.<sup>11</sup>

Recalling "the viability and energy" of Zukofsky and his generation, Gilbert Sorrentino has called them "A ground to walk on, a force, an encouragement for all young writers who felt themselves to be disenfranchised."<sup>12</sup> Zukofsky's compelling essay 'An Objective', which accompanied the 1931 'Objectivist' issue of Poetry he edited for Harriet Monroe, quickly became a totem for the dispersed and dissatisfied poets of Creeley's and Sorrentino's generation. 'An Objective' justifies the poetic rigour which first charmed Creeley. A closely-argued plea for "sincerity" (which, as Kenner has it, constitutes the "composer's care, dedication and scrupulousness")<sup>13</sup>, the essay declares "the more precise the writing, the purer the poetry--".

Zukofsky defines "objectification" as "the apprehension satisfied completely as to the appearance of the art form as an object". Intent upon an "objectively perfect" poetics, he urges the "interest in clear and vital 'particulars'" upon which the poem (and the process of objectification) depends for the "totality . . . necessary only for perfect rest". He concludes, "poems are only acts upon particulars. Only through such activity do they become particulars themselves-- i.e. poems":

The world's earth a rose,  
                     rose every particle  
 The palm open,  
                     earth's lily,  
 One will see  
                     gravel in gravel  
 Stray bits  
                     of burnt matches  
 Glass,  
                     disused rubber,  
 Scrape heels of shoes,  
                     and not trip,  
 Not that one will get, see  
                     more than particulars,

'A'-6 28

This world seems to open up, like a rose or the palm of a hand, to the delicate associations of juxtaposed words, which remain nonetheless separate so that we see each different noun like a petal. As Fielding Dawson notes, Zukofsky's writing is powerful for the "way he put[s] things together keeping them apart".<sup>14</sup> Each word coheres, "inextricably the direction of historic and contemporary / particulars", and yet "every particle" is preserved apart, and made self-evident by that: the isolation of each noun so that in itself it is an image, the grouping of nouns so that they partake of the

quality of things being together without violence to their individual intact natures, simple sensory adjectives as necessary as the nouns.<sup>15</sup>

Demanding of the sensibility and intelligence, this poetry is not prescriptive or expectant of a response; it requires alertness to, and participation in, the myriad possibilities opening up before us. Only as discrete particles, each "particular" in its own right, can words be apprehended in the same way as "the perfect line of occasional drawing, the clear beginnings of sculpture not proceeded with".

Kenner has remarked how "Nothing, ideally, is persuasion for Zukofsky, all is attention".<sup>16</sup> An attentive reader, Creeley's appetite for the particular, for "facts", governs his writing:

I can think of no man more useful to learn from than Zukofsky in that he will not "say" anything but that which the particulars of such a possibility require, and follows the fact of that occasion with unequaled sensitivity.<sup>17</sup>

Furthermore, Zukofsky's exhaustive ("every word can't be overdefined") scrutiny of the "components of the poetic object" suggested a conception of form which closely resembled his own. Creeley observes, "Zukofsky feels form as an intimate presence, whether or not that form be the use or issue of other feelings in other times, or the immediate

apprehension of a way felt in the moment of its occurrence."<sup>18</sup>

As Zukofsky saw, "Poetry convinces not by argument but by the form it creates to carry its content":<sup>19</sup>

Natura Naturans -  
Nature as creator,

Natura Naturata -  
Nature as created.

He who creates  
Is a mode of these inertial systems -  
The flower - leaf around leaf wrapped  
                                around the center leaf,  
  'A'-6, 22-23

The poet strives for a balance between "creator" and "created". Always subject to the superior power of Nature herself, who provides, or shapes, the material from which the poem originates, he can, however, contrive that the form of the flower appears to be recreated in words which spiral around each other, as if spaced around a stem: each "leaf around leaf wrapped / around" architecturally suggesting the physical reality of the flower. Surely, if the "poet's image is not dissociable from the movement or the cadenced shape of the poem", it follows that "form is nothing more than an extension of content". As Creeley notes, Zukofsky "proposes poetry to be evidence as to its own activity".<sup>20</sup>

Zukofsky was adamant that there was no such thing as "Objectivism", merely Objectivists, each being "one person, not a group, . . . interested in living with things as they exist, and as a "wordsman", he is a craftsman who puts words

together into an object".<sup>21</sup> The prosodic purpose of 'An Objective' brought to Creeley's developing poetics a clarity hitherto lacking. A natural "wordsman", Creeley found in "objectification" an instructive and useful parallel to Williams' "No ideas but in things". Following Zukofsky's resourceful and erudite lead, his prosody gradually began to acquire what might be called an increasing discretion (particularizing) of thought. Written at the end of 1959 and dedicated to Zukofsky, 'The House' is an accomplished example of Creeley's sense of "objectification".

Zukofsky was directly involved with this poem. Creeley remembers that he "changed it . . . the poem in fact becomes his reading of it":

In the initial poem I sent, I recall first of all the lines were substantially, not remarkably, longer, but there were more words - so that what he had done was to take off . . . some of the articles but all of the descriptive adjectives, maybe with one or two exceptions, but he'd primarily taken off all the attendant descriptive agents . . . and he also picks up and focusses on cadence - he brings, he puts, he locates the rhythm[,] . . . --"mud put / upon mud"-- his ear is absolutely terrific . . . he's reading it [and] showing the sound relationships . . . how it depends on the sounds, [and it] was fascinating that he thus heard it.<sup>22</sup>

The suggestions are pencilled on the original (a) which Creeley sent.<sup>23</sup> The two versions make for interesting comparison:

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| <p>a) Mud put<br/>upon mud,<br/>lifted<br/>to make room,</p> <p>(a) house (in)<br/>(form of) cave,<br/>(cool quiet)<br/>and/ colder night.</p> <p>To sleep<br/>in, live in,<br/>to come in<br/>from heat,</p> <p>all form derived<br/>from (need and) kind,<br/>built (hard)<br/>with that in mind.</p> | <p>b) Mud put<br/>upon mud,<br/>lifted<br/>to make room,</p> <p>house<br/>a cave,<br/>and<br/>colder night.</p> <p>To sleep<br/>in, live in,<br/>to come in<br/>from heat,</p> <p>all form derived<br/>from kind,<br/>built<br/>with that in mind.</p> |
|---|--|
- 'The House', For Love CP 237

Judiciously pruned by Zukofsky, in its final version the poem preserves a delicate and cautious air: Creeley is self-consciously constructing it out of his own aesthetic process. Four short-lined stanzas frame the quatrain; with never more than four syllables to a line the poem seems uncluttered. The house emerges from words as unelaborate, and short blunt lines as solid, as the mud bricks they depict. Zukofsky has merely removed the extra "flesh" on this skeleton; under him the poem grows tauter, its lines cleaner, its shape more rigid. The eventual structure is meticulously crafted: the opening "u"s interlock like building blocks into a mass which is then "lifted", the word supporting the two preceding lines, like a joist or beam, "to make room". A reader is "objectively"



conscious of word being fixed atop word, each line planted squarely on the next, to create a physical (and intellectual) edifice which proves how: "the word is so much of a physiological thing that its articulation, as against that of other words, will make an 'object'".<sup>24</sup>

The last two stanzas divert attention from the physical substance of the "house / a cave" to the security and restorative comfort which it offers. In spite of an initially 'objective' air, the emotion which cements 'The House' together obliquely recalls the kindness which Zukofsky showed the incredulous "tentative, confused and literally penniless" Creeley at their first meeting.<sup>25</sup> In his unhesitating and unassuming concern, Creeley found warmth, company, reassurance and practical support; here was refuge, a place "to come in / from heat", and offered without expectation, as the deftly worked (Zukofskian) conclusion gratefully affirms:

all form derived  
from kind,  
built  
with that in mind.

As Creeley has observed of Zukofsky's poem 'Mantis', 'The House' "makes clear a context of possibility and response itself a manifest of the poem's writing".<sup>26</sup> In this lies its projective character. Creeley, finding an analogy to illustrate projectivity, describes

[a] way of building wherein the house occurs not only in relation with the ground but almost as a situation of the

ground itself. I lived in New Mexico where houses are made of adobe, where there is an absolute confirmation between the condition of the house and the soil on which it occurs. Or simply, I delight in seeing a house actually the projection of the people who live in it and the condition of the ground where it takes place; where a house grows, for example, with the condition of the family.<sup>27</sup>

Having long considered the "battle, between the objective and the subjective", Creeley was determined to prove their co-existence in the province of the 'objectively perfect' poem. To Olson he compared the "early Elizabethan biz, wherein object & force of same, is functioning as a natural, get the most out-croppings of force (man & object)" with:

force of objects in say, the early Imagist work . . . If & when, style (manner) gets gluey, messes : relation of man to object, emphasis will go to: object . . .

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In 1953, still unaware of Zukofsky's essay, he was insisting in one of his own, 'A Note on the Objective', that the subjective is inescapable, making it "[i]mpossible to write anything, lacking this relation of its content to oneself." Any attempt to distinguish between the two impulses becomes a "useless fight", since, while "abstracting the experience as objective data", the writer cannot but be "concerned with keeping it as subjective impulse". Poetic objectivity, which

"amounts to the wish to transmit, free of imprecise 'feeling,' the nature of 'that' which has moved one to write in the first place . . . an impetus for the act of writing itself - simply what's pushing", seems therefore self-defeating. He who copies "objectification" because it is modish, "the apparent trademark of the careful mind . . . the air of the cool head", merely mistakes himself for:

one capable of confronting divers phenomena in their own particulars, rather than as extensions of one's own senses. . . .<sup>28</sup>

Calling for "understanding of the subjective in a more basic character, i.e., 'belonging to, or of, or due to, the consciousness . . . '", Creeley's essay concludes:

Best to junk both terms, or at least to understand this necessary balance, one with the other. . . . a man and his object must both be presences in this field of force we call a poem.<sup>29</sup>

Disdaining, like Zukofsky, the "strained metaphor" which "carries the mind to a diffuse everywhere and leaves it nowhere", Creeley (who dislikes "as--the damn function of simile, always a displacement of what is happening")<sup>30</sup> insists "Description does nothing--it neither hates nor loves."<sup>31</sup> If 'The Flower' seems evasive (its "object" never described in so many words), the precision and placing of the words attain a shape without disguising the "tensions" of the speaker who both "hates and loves". His subjective feelings, though

agonisingly restrained, imbue the objectification at work in the poem:

I think I grow tensions  
like flowers  
in a wood where  
nobody goes.

Each wound is perfect,  
encloses itself in a tiny  
imperceptible blossom,  
making pain.

Pain is a flower like that one,  
like this one,  
like that one,  
like this one.

For Love CP 194

Written in 1958, this poem captures something of what Tomlinson called the "exact pleasure" of Zukofsky's writing, but remains strikingly original.<sup>32</sup> In Creeley's poem we focus on the particular "tiny / imperceptible blossom" of the flower: the pain it represents is objectified and offered for our inspection. The final stanza gestures at both 'A'-6 (quoted earlier) and the lines of 'A'-2 which Creeley singles out for attention in his introduction to 'A' 1-12. Here, the other flowers in the "wood where / nobody goes" are carefully, even accusingly, pointed out. But the singsong repetition also suggests that single petals are being picked off one single flower, (so that each flower, and "each wound", appears to be merely part of the original flower of the title, growing from a central pain), and are then being solemnly discarded one by one, like a child's game.

We are invited to participate in the "activity" of the poem, apparently accompanying Creeley into his "wood where / nobody goes" and watching him point out "Each wound". Yet he begins by ingenuously admitting that this air of reality is an elaborate externalization of the psychological, emotional "tensions" he is growing. His flower attempts a "perfect" reification of the internal pain which has become the palpable object of the poem: "things open again as things seen". Each private flower "making pain" is separately realized to force a reader to engage with its own particular fact, over and over, regardless of Creeley's presence. Irven Ehrenpreis describes how:

on the poet's uncorrupted mind the world of sensible particulars imposes its fresh objects; these the poet grasps, giving them meaning as he embeds them in his associations . . . <sup>33</sup>

Creeley's acknowledgement of the subjective in the objective develops Zukofsky's observance of "sincerity", upon which the 'objective' depends for its "rested totality", and in which

shapes appear concomitants of word combinations, precursors of (if there is continuance) completed sound or structure, melody or form. Writing occurs which is the detail, not mirage, of seeing, of thinking with things as they exist. . . . Shapes suggest themselves, and the mind senses and receives awareness.<sup>34</sup>

As Zukofsky explained to Dembo, "Sincerity is the care for the detail . . . objectification is the structure. I like to think of it as rest, but you can call it movement."<sup>35</sup>

Movement, we notice, rather than motion. When asked about "sincerity", Creeley usually recalls Pound's transliteration of the Chinese:

that ideogram that he notes: man standing by his word.

That kind of sincerity has always been important to me, and is another measure of my own commitment to what I'm doing.<sup>36</sup>

He adds that sincerity "can be a refuge of fools. . . . The zealot is often sincere". Von Hallberg mistakes Creeley's "use of sincerity" for simple conviction ("steadfastness"); he therefore deems it "tricky" in permitting "outrageous liberties" such as "the artlessness of simple repetition".<sup>37</sup> On the contrary, it is tricky in the way that Creeley's poetry resists such artlessness or over-simplification.

(Interestingly, Creeley now dismisses 'The Flower' as: "a very coy piece of writing finally, and it is not one of my favourite poems by any means. I'd stand by it, having committed it so to speak. It's not an attitude of myself that I much enjoy. . . . The last lines . . . have to do with a coy sense of victory . . ." <sup>38</sup>)

Von Hallberg rightly associates sincerity (implicitly) with the Poundian belief discussed earlier: "Nothing counts save the quality of the affection". Rather than the artifice

Von Hallberg suspects, the ideogram dramatizes Creeley's response to Zukofsky's plea for poetic sincerity, endorsing how "the man and his object must always be presences in this field of force we call a poem". The man, his emotion and his passions, is exposed in his poetic object, and should be acknowledged and affirmed by it. Creeley therefore returns to himself, his own resources and integrity: a "man standing by his word", and declares: "to me art itself is the objectification of my own experience."<sup>39</sup> This, however, does not conflict with Zukofsky's "objective" because

I don't think it means the object in the sense of "get rid of all distractions". I mean I think he is extraordinarily ambivalent as to what he means by 'objective', . . . he wrote that business about the objective, and then he goes ahead and writes 'A' . . . which is highly subjective . . . an immensely complex and . . . fantastic "autobiography", and it certainly isn't objective in the sense that it eschews all authorial or personal terms or preoccupations.<sup>40</sup>

'The Traveller' celebrates Creeley's innate "sincerity". This poem impersonally objectifies its own dilemma, but with paradoxical intimacy. A highly personal experience, it is an ongoing (present tense) and therefore wholly subjective process:

Into the forest again  
whence all roads depend  
this way and that  
to lead him back.

Upon his shoulders  
 he places boulders,  
 upon his eye  
 the high wide sky.

'The Traveller', For Love CP 169

At first the Traveller's presence is unacknowledged, even though the essentially concrete fact of his difficulty is observed by us through him as it unfolds, is realized or "objectified", before him. His indecision and confusion is ours as we confront the choice he faces at the crossroads ("this way and that"), all options obscured by "the forest" from where, it seems, he came. Just as his physical presence remains implicit, the poem is also oddly remote, free of any straightforward terms of reference: it seems timeless, even fairytale-like. In spite of the regularity of rhythm and rhyme, like that of a harmless nursery rhyme or ditty, the scene of his/our disorientation is itself disturbing, bare of detail. The "forest / whence all roads depend", is vague, dislocated and baffling. Creeley seems to be drawing directly on poems like Frost's 'Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening', only to reject the presumptuous self-satisfaction of "Whose woods these are I think I know."

In the second, more abstract, stanza, the Traveller is transformed into a quasi-mythical figure (reminding us of Atlas, or the one-eyed Cyclops), assuming an identity which no longer seems out of place in a peculiarly elusive landscape. As he labours under a self-inflicted burden towards some undefined and apparently limitless horizon, Creeley appears to be articulating something fearful (or perhaps exhilarating)



about the nature of freedom, and even ambition. The poem's carefully distanced dilemma might frighten or encourage the ordinary man in the Traveller, whose lack of purpose or direction is betrayed in his glance up at "the high wide sky", the reflection of which falls literally "upon the eye". In crossing "this way and that", the roads confusingly "lead him back" and the boulders of his load, placed immediately below rather than above the shoulders, so to speak, seem to drag the words down with their cumbersome weight.

Yet the poem's mood remains enigmatic, like the context: the glance at the sky could as easily be hopeful as hopeless. The roads could be nothing more than the imaginings of a confused and frightened mind, the boulders a sign of intense mental uneasiness, and the sky a concluding metaphor for psychological disorientation. The sincerity of the man who stands alongside the words offers the poem a focus ("a shape suggested") and a transcendence of that focus, a new ontological dimension. Like the quandary which the poem embraces, and which comes to define the figure at its centre, Creeley cannot be separated from his writing because he is finally made particular by it:

I think there is a need to see what the fact of oneself  
in the world is.<sup>41</sup>

Zukofsky respected Creeley's habitually unpretentious self-examination, applauding The Whip for:

not counting up to the "conceit" of rhetoric, which a generation or so ago misnamed "metaphysical", whose thought presumed more hope than the voice of a limited body.<sup>42</sup>

In assuming "the voice of a limited body", he surely approves the self-interested "affective" emotional presence standing by the words. Sometimes Zukofsky himself called Creeley's writing "metaphysical", as in a letter of 1955 referring to The Gold Diggers:

The newness of it: the metaphysics that takes on a "shape"--not the running argument that's found in most "literature" that accompanies a form. That is new--and along with it, the thoughtfulness that makes the shape--the metaphysics of loneliness--. . .<sup>43</sup>

Habitually precise in expression, Zukofsky's use of "metaphysics" here must be carefully judged; he is not trying to ascribe any accepted interpretation of seventeenth century aesthetics to Creeley's writing. On the contrary, the "thoughtfulness" which he describes there lends "shape", an ontological existence which is opposed to any "running argument" with which "metaphysics" might normally be associated.

Creeley's poems achieve a physical independence from argument which does not exclude thought, but rather isolates thoughtfulness ("the metaphysics of loneliness") as an

independent process congruent with objectification. Struggling to explain how this occurs, "not translating but transposing or transmitting from one corporeal situation through agency of mind and thinking, embodying . . .", Creeley enlists Williams:

"the poet thinks with his poem, in that lies his thought," that to me is the constitution of a metaphysical poet-- . . . not that he describes, not that he or she makes a structure simply but that he or she thinks.<sup>44</sup>

He repeats Zukofsky: "what's difficult with mind I'll say in speech" which he takes to mean "to translate the physical with thinking and to do it by various devices, but to make the activity of language have an affectual and substantive presence".<sup>45</sup> In an essay, Zukofsky detects in Williams's work "a definite metaphysical concept: the thought is the thing which in turn produces the thought."<sup>46</sup> Creeley remembers how "both Louis and Celia gave me reassurance that I could think capably and with some interest, and that they found it interesting, but I had no objective sense of my abilities to think."<sup>47</sup>

Creeley admits to being "by nature and circumstance a very literal man".<sup>48</sup> In 'Hello', written in 1964, he strips away the context of associations which stultify an expression ('to catch the eye') with familiarity, to permit it a raw and vivid new character. "Objectified", an everyday incident

takes on a startling (but, we learn, intrinsic) literal force. The encounter depicted is immediately reified: the "jump" physically leaps over the ending of the first line, "quick" making the action swift and cruel, the pain inflicted as the corner of the woman's eye ruptures is prolonged, stretched over "down" and across the line ending:

it tore, down,  
ripping.

Words CP 286

We almost wince in sympathy. Once he has "caught" the woman's eye, Creeley clings on to the flesh in his grasp, as if he is unwilling to let the idea go. The violence of the gesture indicates a barely suppressed sexual desire suggested by words like "it tore" as well as "shuddered", "assault", "vantage" and "flesh". The dangerous, even exciting, potential disguised in a friendly glance and an apparently innocuous greeting is exposed; a tired cliché is transformed, objectified, into an dramatic seduction, or brutal rape.

As Michael Heller has noticed, the three notions of sincerity, objectification and rested totality, [which] were to become the parameters by which Objectivist poetry was to be defined . . . imply less a stance or a method from which poems are to be constructed than a set of boundary markers in the proximity of which poetic activity may be said to take place and, in a sense, to be measured. Around these terms, the poet [can interweave] his . . . own field of possibility.<sup>49</sup>

Creeley's maturing poetics preserve the objective "terms" which Heller describes, not least in the dextrous minimalism which has prompted so much critical attention, even censure:

Here is  
where there  
is.

'Here', Thirty Things CP 547

A concentrated simplicity confirms the logic of the poem's apparent paradox, while the "meaning" remains ambiguous. Creeley seems to imply that there is no "here" at all, only "there", an everywhere in which everything "is" in the present tense. However the final "is" phenomenologically suggests that if "there / is" being, it can only be "here". The debate multiplies despite (because of) the rigid restrictions imposed by the poem's physical limits, which recalls Wittgenstein's "a point in space is a place for an argument." To me, Creeley called this "sweetly metaphysical". To Faas, recalling the same observation, he mused that the "person who turned me on to him was Zukofsky".<sup>50</sup>

## II Sight, sound and intellection: "All of a factual piece"

I'd say the business of writing is to see as much as you can, to hear as much as you can, and if you think at all to think without clutter; then as you put the things together, try to be concise.<sup>51</sup>

Zukofsky remarks that when "my eye is compelling something or my ear is compelling something, the intellect is

always working with words."<sup>52</sup> Like him, Creeley always looks for "the range of pleasure [poetry] affords as sight, sound and intellection. This is its purpose as art."<sup>53</sup> In the coalescence of these three elements his poems find some of the manifold complexity which characterises Zukofsky's prosody. Profoundly near-sighted but always ready "to see" as much as he could, Zukofsky begins 'An Objective' by targetting "what is seen":

(Optics)--The lens bringing the rays from an object to a focus. That which is aimed at.<sup>54</sup>

Bottom: On Shakespeare stresses the "clear physical eye against the erring brain" to assert a distinction which Zukofsky's poetic practice continually reaffirms:

Black waters'  
November  
clouds  
high afternoon  
reflections  
fold, draw up  
wrinkle and  
web  
currents  
to white the  
plate steel  
cruiser

'Hill', I's (pronounced eyes), All 211

Such poetry proves that it is possible to realize an "object", that is to say a "particular" three-dimensional presence, in words, of words. The black clouds which are reflected in the water become part of the white waves churned up by the cruiser.

Creeley himself readily accepts that "the sense of the lens' capacity to focus upon does make objective".<sup>55</sup> Deprived of one eye, he has always been preoccupied by sight and vision. Fascinated by the perceptive powers of the human (and therefore humane or sincere) eye as sensor and receptor, he probes how he sees, and responds to, shape and form. In 1954, soon after Zukofsky's poems had reached Mallorca, Creeley first visited Black Mountain where, coincidentally, he recalls:

I became very intrigued . . . by the visual, what's seen in the world and how all that can be complex. Because I'd been so involved with the economy of words as experience of sound and rhythm that suddenly it was like having things open again as things seen . . . we were making things in the materials particular to our own experience of things . . .<sup>56</sup>

Subsequently, as in 'The Flower', his poetry increasingly seeks the "detail, not mirage, of seeing, of thinking with the things as they exist . . . . Shapes suggest themselves, and the mind senses and receives awareness." Yet Creeley the emotional man remains standing by the objective shapes of his words, lending the poetry a sincerity which impressed Paul Diehl at a reading in 1969:

The lines were felt shapes and the line ends, instead of ending a count, created the substance of emotion. Felt shape. Substance of emotion.<sup>57</sup>

Conscious that the power of sight, like the other senses, can define (or delimit) the human potential to comprehend experience, Creeley can often be found not only "seeing as much as he can", but watching himself do so, and objectifying the process. The subjective precision of 'The Flower', which found an impersonal ambivalence in 'The Traveller', becomes cryptic in 'A Form of Women' ("I have come far enough / from where I was not before"). Written in 1956, in this poem the line between external, observed knowledge, and internal knowledge which is unique, private and self-conscious, is blurred in the effort to apprehend "the visual, what's seen in the world and how all that can be complex". He seems anxious to confront, and engage (singlehandedly, as it were) with, the immediate "particulars" around him in order to test his powers of recognition:

and have walked tonight  
by myself  
to see the moonlight  
and see it as trees

and shapes more fearful  
because I feared  
what I did not know  
but have wanted to know.

For Love CP 152

The sought-after privacy proves as threatening as it is precious: such exclusive self-knowledge denies the means of comprehending others, and vice versa, making the interaction of any human relationship terrifyingly unpredictable. Vision, which is dependent upon observed "particulars" (like the moon and the trees, even his own face) can only be partial (one-dimensional) knowledge. The discovery that sight is deceptive



exacerbates, rather than allays, emotional doubt, heightening vulnerability and confusion:

But I love you.  
Do you love me.  
What to say  
when you see me.

Creeley recognises that the powers and inadequacies of sight are matched by, and find emotional significance in, its partner, "insight". 'The Friend' (1958) coolly assesses the interdependence of sight and insight. Strangely dispassionate (knowing perhaps?), Creeley explores his failure to help a friend in spite of, or because of, their intimacy:

What I saw in his head  
was an inverted vision,  
and the glass cracked  
when I put my hand in.

For Love CP 155

"What [Creeley] saw", his insight, seems to have turned the friendship upside-down; as he vividly perceives, it is too fragile to withstand the well-intentioned offer of a "hand". Unable to penetrate the other man's head, he can only externalize the "inverted vision", so that the brittle facts of their flawed relationship are clinically displayed: "the glass cracked". Self-critically studying his face in the mirror, he notices how the outward appearance of normality masks his feelings: "the face / is an ornament", and wistfully contrasts this with the emotional depth he discerns in his companion. Perhaps a lover, gazing into the same mirror, she has: "eyes / so wide they grow / deep as I watch."

Creeley has said that the physical eye is like the brain surfacing. It's where the brain comes literally. Outward from its own physical place. If you put your fingers in your eye, you put your finger in your brain.<sup>58</sup>

In 'The Friend' he longs for a world where he can experience, and engage with, emotion like hers, "with your eyes for real lakes", without inhibition (perhaps by diving into those "real lakes"?), but retreats into himself, saddened by his failure of his friend. Although insight permits him to focus beyond the image in the mirror, he remains powerless.

The exclusiveness of "objective" optics troubled Creeley who, questioning Zukofsky's typically conscientious and orderly coherence, noted that:

'A' has a very diverse and specific sense of structure. . . . Louis has . . . a very strict sense of formal composition that he is working to realize whereas I was fascinated to know what happened if you accumulated rather than designed and determined, that is, if you made the accumulation the crux of the situation . . .<sup>59</sup>

The "accumulation" of Pieces does become "the crux" of the book's "situation". Always the object of his own regard, Creeley considers his departure from Zukofsky's example, en passant, towards the end of the book:

Want to get the sense of "I" into Zukofsky's 'eye' - a locus of experience, a presumption of expected value.

\*

Here now--  
begin!

B---

Crazy kid-face  
skun, in water--  
wide hips. The white,  
white skin--a big  
eared almost feral  
toothed woman--  
lovely in all particulars.

Pieces CP 435

He improvises an immediate and lively portrait of his wife, Bobbie ("B---"). The tone is intimate and affectionate ("crazy kid-face") but Creeley's warmly appraising "eye" is also uncompromising, his delight in this "big / eared almost feral / toothed woman--" not simply sensual appreciation of her physical womanliness, her "wide hips" and "white / white skin". His tone implicitly celebrates the private emotional relationship between the observant "I", the man rather than his "eye", and what he regards: "lovely in all particulars." As Russell Banks says, this moment is pivotal: "here, almost at the end of the book, he's finally got it all together and the last poems are demonstrations of this."<sup>60</sup>

Creeley points out that Zukofsky used "writing as a way of getting to or realizing or arriving at that which gives the hardened piece, and I . . . do believe in that; to write in order to realize what brings you to rest."<sup>61</sup> At the end of

Pieces he has "arrived at" a writing which is characteristic of his mature poetic idiom, relaxed, deliberate and alert:

The mind  
again, the manner  
of mind in the  
  
body, the  
weather, the waves,  
the sun grows lower  
  
in the faded  
sky. Washed  
out--the afternoon  
  
of another day  
with other people,  
looking out of other eyes.  
  
Only the  
children, the sea,  
the slight wind move  
  
with the  
same insistent  
particularity.

Pieces CP 442

Approaching his fiftieth birthday in 1976, "the / same insistent / particularity" qualifies Creeley's writing. Arriving in New Zealand, it is the brilliantly limpid light which impresses itself on his puritan consciousness:

light--intense, clear particularizing, ruthless . . . it brought all things factually to stand in the light, and that's where finally one wants to see them.<sup>62</sup>

Although Zukofsky instructs the writer to "hear as much as you can", his recognition that "the eye is a function of the ear and the ear of the eye," demands that the poem reflect this interdependence:<sup>63</sup>

How much what is sounded by such words has to do with what is seen by them-- and how much what is at once sounded and seen by them crosscuts an interplay among themselves--<sup>64</sup>

In 'A Statement for Poetry' Zukofsky confides that the poet: looks, so to speak, into his ear as he does at the same time into his heart and intellect. His ear is sincere, if his words convey his awareness of the range of differences and subtleties of duration.<sup>65</sup>

It was Pound who, consulted by Zukofsky on reading Propertius, responded: "Look into thine owne eare and reade".<sup>66</sup> These words begin 'Peri Poetikes', echoing Sydney's "look in thy heart and write."<sup>67</sup> Serving to distill the complex interrelation of sight and sound in Zukofsky's poetics, they do not warrant M. L. Rosenthal's dismissal as "two candidates for the worst lines of verse ever written".<sup>68</sup> Quick to hear how Zukofsky's manipulation of sound provoked a "particular" resonance and substance in his words, Creeley was always emphatic that:

hearing is immediately necessary in reading Zukosfky's work insofar as meaning is an intimate relation of such sound and sense. It can be as close as--

Crickets'  
thickets

light,  
delight . . .

. . . one hears what is so said, not merely deciphers a  
 "meaning" . . .<sup>69</sup>

For Zukofsky, who often seems less poet than composer,  
 like Pound, the poem is "a context associated with 'musical'  
 shape, musical with quotation marks since it is not of notes  
 as music, but of words more variable than variables, and used  
 outside as well as within the context".<sup>70</sup> The poem, whether  
 "Spoken . . . Declaimed . . . Intoned or Chanted . . . [or]  
 Sung," must approximate with music in order to find a  
 visual/aural "shape" or movement. Placing speech and song at  
 opposing ends of an aural "scale", Zukofsky graphically  
 depicts their synthesis (like a composer writing different  
 melodies on different registers which nevertheless harmonize)  
 as if on a stave, complete with "clef":

I'll tell you  
 About my poetics--

$$\int \begin{matrix} \text{music} \\ \text{speech} \end{matrix}$$

An integral  
 Lower limit speech  
 Upper limit music

'A'-12, 138

From the brief and graceful lyrics of All to the huge fugue-  
 like sequence that is 'A', Zukofsky's poems resolutely pursue  
 "The melody, the rest are accessory-".

Creeley's poems rarely find the "musical horizon" where  
 Zukofsky imagined divorcing "speech of all graphic elements,

to let it become a movement of sounds".<sup>71</sup> Sometimes however, as in 'The Method of Actuality', he exploits subtle aural refrains ("unbent" "inconsequent" and "gentle" or "mother", "anyone", "young" "sudden", "uncombed", "sullen" and "son"). Elsewhere the sibilance of 'Here', which "slurs and recurs", is liquidly redolent of lapping waves in the warmth of a late afternoon:

The sun drops. The swimmers  
grow black in the silver  
glitter. The water slurs  
and recurs. The air is soft.

Pieces CP 441

As Creeley says of Zukofsky: "to hear it--is necessary"; he tells Charles Tomlinson that Zukofsky takes

distinctions of both ear and intelligence to a fineness that is difficult. It is difficult to follow a man when he's thinking very closely. And it's extremely difficult to follow him when he's using all the resources that he has developed or inherited regarding the particular nature of words as sound . . . [,] the total effect in terms of sound and sight of a given piece of poetry - these aspects are handled by Zukofsky as by no one else.<sup>72</sup>

Less of a virtuoso than Zukofsky, Creeley is nevertheless alive to the "particular nature of words as sound"; in 'Water Music' he observes: "The words are a beautiful music." The emotional power of music is confirmed in the 'Still Dancers', entranced by "love's old sweet song--":

Let the faint, faded music  
 pour forth its wonder  
 and bewitch whom it will,  
 still dancers under the moon.

Mirrors 54

Obedient to 'A Statement for Poetry', Creeley also seeks musicality in form which, "as movement and tone (rhythm and pitch) approaches in varying degrees the wordless art of music as a kind of mathematical limit". He has said:

I feel poetry as a complex of sounds and rhythms, which move in a parallel to music. In fact I believe it is just this complex that makes poetry to be the very singular fact of words which it is.<sup>73</sup>

In 'Canzone' (written, in 1951, before Creeley knew of Zukofsky's work), expressively varied line lengths visually and aurally suggest a violinist's bowing, accenting and shaping the phrasing (the movement) of his music just as the lines mould the movement of the words:

(is not even sound  
 since sound has a shape in  
 the ear and this has no shape)

or  
 him & his violin

The Charm CP 25

Here is Kenneth Cox, explaining the two-word lines of 'A'-19:

The poem is perceptible . . . as itself the piece the violinist plays . . . the two words are produced by the down-stroke and up-stroke of the bow, with an extra down-stroke at the end of each strophe.<sup>74</sup>



Significantly, the highly conscious forms upon which both poems depend gesture at Zukofsky's assertion that:

forms are achieved as a dynamics of speech and sound, that is, as a resolution of their interacting rhythms-- with no loss of value to any word at the expense of the movement.<sup>75</sup>

As Faas reminds us, Creeley, "[who] does not wish 'to confuse poetry with music', has repeatedly drawn attention to the emotion underlying and informing 'the order and movement of sound' determining the form of his poems."<sup>76</sup> The "quiet testament" of 'A Song' (1951), dedicated to his first wife Ann, is uneasily hopeful, like "A murmur of some lost / thrush, though I have never seen one." The sincerity of the song, making it more precious, is to be preserved: "Which one sings, if he sings it, / with care." His watchfulness would have pleased Zukofsky, who warned:

The cadence, if emotional integrity is tenuous, becomes too facile. The words are too often carried along in a lull of sound (of no intrinsic value) till they lose their connotative meanings. Or, the lines become banal.<sup>77</sup>

The emotional flux of 'Air: "Cat Bird Singing"' (1955) is uttered by lines which alternately lengthen and recede as the tone switches between hope and uncertainty. The poem finds an aural "shape" in these continual surges, as the lines swell (crescendo) or contract (diminuendo). This is mirrored in

lines which stop and start: "watch, certainly, what" or "are huge eyes. They". The "movement" of the form prompts yet simultaneously grows from (is never more than) the "movement" of the content. Longer and more graceful lines juxtaposed with shorter, uglier companions visually imagine Creeley's "unhappie shadow" trailing his lady, "a person of rare refinement", ever aware of his inadequacy beside the "fair sunne" of Campion's brilliance:

with his  
follow thy fair sunne unhappie shadow . . .

The cat bird's lonely music, "insofar as meaning is an intimate relation of . . . sound and sense", seems to reflect Creeley's anxious insecurities. Even the trees threaten him: "goddamn them, / are huge eyes". His coarse self-pity parodies Campion's more elegant, more musical, insecurity ("another air, / melody"), the vulgarity ("goddamn") of his outburst alienating him further from the "person of rare refinement", who seems more suited to Campion than Creeley. To Edelberg he explains:

I chose Campion's poem because it had to do with a sense of definition of where I felt myself to be . . . It's that sense of a very complacently self-demeaning reality . . . a courtly, pre-Elizabethan trip to that point where to me it's a deliberately chosen mask . . .<sup>78</sup>

He goes on to quote Walter Davis's introduction to The Works of Thomas Campion: "the primary poet of the auditory

imagination is due to his combining the roles of poet and composer."<sup>79</sup>

Creeley's taste for jazz can sharpen the sonority of his poetry without destroying its emotional colour. Jazz, "a very active admission of the world as it's felt and confronted, or met with" seemed to equate with poetic forms "found in activity".<sup>80</sup> "Charlie Parker and Miles Davis and Thelonious Monk and those people . . . seemed to have only the nature of the activity as limit".<sup>81</sup> Almost impertinently flouting prescriptive notions of conventional form, their "rhythmic and sound structure . . . [gained] a primary coherence in the total organization of what's being experienced."<sup>82</sup> For Creeley,

hearing "things said" in terms of rhythmic and sound possibilities . . . made clear how subtle and how sophisticated . . . how refined that expression might be.<sup>83</sup>

As he remarks of Zukofsky, "One hears in the possibility another has articulated what thus may bring clear one's own."<sup>84</sup> Jazz devises, and is sustained by, its own spontaneity, contrived out of the variations improvised upon, "projecting" from, an original "root" melody which, however far its variants appear to stray from, or modify, the mood, tone, texture or key, is always preserved. As Creeley once explained to Olson:

What [Charlie Parker, "the Bird"] does, is to pit, there, against base pattern (stress) he is able to invert, delay, push back & forward, the PARTICULAR sound, each, that he can make: what this does, is to push meaning into such as are so used. 25th June 1950 (CC2 15)

The individual movements of 'Broken Back Blues' (1954), among the best of Creeley's jazz-poems, linked by intricate rhymes and rhythmic patterning, acquire a "musical shape" composed "of words more variable than variables". Apparently disorganized, the poem disguises (like jazz) its careful design: the first stanza is repeated in the second, the third is a variation. Interjections like "(take it take it / uncle john", dupe us into thinking this a live performance, until the matching "(watch it watch it / me man" show that, like the "heh heh heh"s, the interruptions are a chorus, integral to the poem's movement. Thus, "john" is echoed in "all nite long", just as "man" rhymes with "can", which is why the parentheses are never closed off from the rest of the text.

The pace is relentless, scarcely pausing for breath, constantly urging the ear forward (like a melody being passed swiftly and smoothly between soloists) and the dynamics of the language are forceful enough not to need punctuation. Words are written as they should sound, as in "moo-oove" and "doo-oor". Casual spellings ("yr", "nite", "rite") give a "live", informal feel to the poem, hastening the powerful rhythm, and the colloquial diction also dramatizes the rich versatility of

the jazz idiom. A turn of phrase, "same beat groove", is suggestively ambiguous: the rhythm or dance (record track) seems routine (rut-like), its creative potential literally restricted; hence the "broken-back" blues. Such specific, rather pedantic, textual riddles finally contribute to a larger irony: words once written down cannot be spontaneous. These blues are "broken-backed", flawed, despite rhythms which jauntily undercut the traditional "bluesy" pessimism of "a hopeless world."

Creeley's jazz-poetry reconciles the visual with the aural alongside what Zukofsky described as "lower limit speech / upper limit music". 'Hi There!' blatantly experiments with a central "motif" which, strictly speaking, is nothing more than a soundless typographical design. This, which seems to require our improvising sounds for it, describes an unheard ad-libbed chorus, suggested by "(oo)". A letter from Creeley to Olson which attempts to dissect how jazz is composed, arguably indicates a link with 'Hi There!':

as series of (basick) chords which can be extended in a strict (gripped) manner, inverted, wound, pitched & heaved, or let's just--go. so we go, like: la do de da: becomes oo oo de la oo/ (oo) da ee oo/ (different but the same . . . . : There is nothing being put down that can match/ that timing: Bird's. It is: flight/ on sound & sense . . . push & sense, of limit . . .

24th June 1950 (CC1 156)

'Hi There!' pushes at (overturns) our assumptions with its "flight/ on sound & sense" and a chorus which, dependent on an unknowable element, casually flourishes on the "surface of a pedestrian / fact". Having to join in the chorus, while at liberty to choose how, we must acknowledge the artistic validity of the unexpected, the "new . . . day" when it "springs / from" the ordinary. Each "stanza" adds a new element to the pattern of the "refrain" which incrementally enlarges, becoming each time a variant of itself. Seeking the "intellection" of this sound, reified as noise, Creeley achieves an invitingly creative unpredictability by means of sight, sound and intellection all at once. He might have been talking about himself when he said of Zukofsky: "He really isn't satisfied until all the elements of the statement are for him utterly working in congruence."<sup>85</sup>

In 'Massachusetts', Creeley is prompted by "gentle echoes, / half heard sounds" to admit:

I began wanting a sense  
of melody, e.g., following  
the tune, became somehow  
an image, then several,  
and I was watching those things  
becoming in front of me.

In London CP 496

His prosody is, here, detached from a poet who is no more than an observer; as if watching television, Creeley seems to be passively "following / the tune" of his writing, somehow both engaged and disengaged. Nevertheless, the poem reiterates a

Zukofskian interdependence of ear and eye, and is strongly reminiscent of the fragment Creeley quotes when reviewing All:

The lines of this new song are nothing  
 But a tune making the nothing full  
 Stonelike become more hard than silent  
 The tune's image holding in the line.

All 97

Animated by the tune making "the nothing full", the "Stonelike" particulars are dependent upon the "song" for movement and character: "the tune's image holding". The sound reifies the poem itself; the words, spoken and seen, both substantiate their own identity, and are equally responsible for the poem's singular "intellection".

An earlier poem of Creeley's, 'A Method', unsentimentally deconstructs itself to expose the process of thought from which it grows, even as it happens, as Zukofsky instructed, "without clutter":

Patterns  
 of sounds, endless  
 discretions, whole  
 pauses of nouns,

clusters. This  
 and that, that  
 one, this  
 and that. Looking,

seeing, some  
 thing, being  
 some. A piece

of cake upon,  
 a face, a fact, that  
 description like  
 as if then.

Words CP 339

The poem asks us to consider its own process, the pattern made out of the "clusters" of its words. Most of the lines are visually splintered and broken up by punctuation, two-word phrases spanning line junctures, into shifting "endless / discretions" which are reflected in the halting phrasing. After "whole", the movement pauses at the line ending just as the words do before the cluster "of nouns". Each noun is picked over: "This / and that, that / one, this / and that." The next lines are more fluid, the participles growing naturally out of each other: "Looking / / seeing, some / thing, being / some . . .". The poem self-consciously proves that each word is an autonomous "fact" in its own right and yet, like the separate notes on which a piece of music depends, coheres into the "pattern" of the whole poem. As Zukofsky has remarked:

In poetry the poet is continually encountering the facts which in the making seem to want to disturb the music and yet the music or the movement cannot exist without the facts, without its facts.<sup>86</sup>

Subjective "care", or "sincerity", colours Creeley's synthesis of sight, sound and intellection. 'Water' (1961) meditates upon the peaceful harmony of the natural world, and contrasts the status quo of its serenity with Creeley's self-interested emotional turbulence:

The sun's  
sky in  
form of  
blue sky  
that



water will  
 never make  
 even  
 in  
 reflection.

Sing, song,  
 mind's form  
feeling  
 if  
 mistaken,

shaken,  
 broken water's  
 forms, love's  
 error  
 in water.

Words CP 268

Simple aural and visual echoes ripple through the poem, in adjacent words like "Sing, song"; adjacent lines as in "mistaken / / shaken, / broken"; the near rhyme of "even" and "never"; and finally when "broken", "forms" and "error" seem to form a column of association. The intensity of the sky's reflection is caught in the stillness of the water (barely rocking, like the lilt of "Sing, song") into which is cast the hesitant dread of "feeling / if / mistaken": the poem lurches with the comparatively violent motion of "shaken, / broken" as doubt eddies destructively through the final stanza, breaking it up just as the emotion destroys the peace of love.

'The Answer', meditating upon the power of language (as sound) to move, confirms how "the sound and pitch emphasis of a word are never apart from its meaning".<sup>87</sup> Speech, visualized as a physical force, superficially likens breath to the wind, but its energy is complex: since language communicates with rather than to, in imparting, or responding

to, information (the anticipated "answer"), words can also convey feeling:

Will we speak to each other  
making the grass bend as if  
a wind were before us, will our

way be as graceful, as  
substantial as the movement  
of something moving so gently.

We break things in pieces like  
walls we break ourselves into  
hearing them fall just to hear it.

Words CP 322

The "fact" of language only becomes visible when betrayed by its effects, like the wind "making the grass bend". Line endings reflect this physical movement: "will our" bends gracefully over the stanza break, like grass before the wind. The opening question also "moves" us, its touchingly hopeful tone lightly captured, like the breeze, in "something moving so gently." The language of the first two stanzas is made affective in the same way as the wind. With equal subtlety, the word sounds delicately echo each other, the assonances often confined within the line, as in the opening "speak" and "each", "wind" and "will", and "way" and "graceful". In the closing stanza, the mood swings sharply into despair. Lack of punctuation creates an intensity of feeling in contrast to the poise and tranquillity of previous stanzas. The words seem to tumble out passionately. The hard consonant "k" in "break" and "like" is tempered by the gloomy assonance of "walls" and "fall" which, in contrast to the earlier sounds, punctures the lines and breaks up the phrasing (visually and aurally) just as the sense suggests.

### III A Touchstone: "it All is"

Creeley always recalls the compassionate largesse of Zukofsky's "extraordinarily dear" diminutive figure, his humanity and generosity:

He was very reclusive apparently, but he really wasn't; he was terrific[ally] shy, very shy . . . one had to reassure him of one's attention . . . that you were utterly open to whatever he had to say or do.<sup>88</sup>

Similarly, Zukofsky's capacious but often recondite poetics demands attentive openness. Reviewing Zukofsky's work as a relatively young writer, Creeley is at great pains to stress his inadequacy to the task before him. He demonstrates how, unpresumpting, Zukofsky articulates the possibilities of the smallest of our words, "the", "one", "all"; "A" consequently becomes, as Creeley says, "what one might call initial, and initiating".

Something of the compound character of Zukofsky's poetics survives in Creeley's contemporary poetics. Sight, sound and intellection remain the "three primary conditions of a poem's activity. And I would much respect them."<sup>89</sup> 'Klaus Reichert and Creeley Send Regards' ("In memory L. Z.") adopts the tenderly humorous affection of the earlier 'Touchstone'. The poem plays on a naively suggestive remark (made originally by Zukofsky's son Paul) which Creeley has always treasured: "See: / My nose feels better in the air."<sup>90</sup> In doing so, he

amusedly imitates, but more importantly honours, Zukofsky's imaginative and sensitive probing of the semantic versatility of language:

Nowhere up there enough  
 apart as surmised see my  
 ears feel better in the  
 air an after word from Romeo's  
 delight spells the and a  
 aged ten forever friend  
 you'll know all this by heart.

Windows 128

In this context, "you'll know all this by heart" is a moving reminder of Zukofsky's strangely innocent (childlike) but compendious knowledge of, and care for, language.

Although Creeley can be doubtful of "the visual aspects of my work. It really isn't something I can do with much confidence," much of his later work is sharply observant:<sup>91</sup>

Patches of grey  
 sky tree's

lines window  
 frames the

plant hangs  
 in middle.

'Focus', Windows 72

His 1984 collection, Mirrors, prefaced by Bacon, makes the cohering agency of sight, a dynamic and revelatory process, explicit:

In Mirrours, there is the like  
 Angle of Incidence, from the object  
 to the Glasse, and from the Glasse  
 to the Eye.

Creeley's latest poems, moreover, seem as carefully  
perspicacious as ever:

I hadn't noticed that  
building front had narrow  
arrowlike division going  
up it the stairwell at  
top a crest like spearpoint  
red roofed it glistens  
with rain the top sharply  
drawn horizontal roof edge lets  
sky back there be a faint  
blue a fainter white light  
growing longer now higher  
going off out of sight

'Eyes', Echoes 17

Absence of punctuation, even in closure, suggests how the  
details crowd into Creeley's (avid) frame of vision, the  
intensity lessening and blurring towards the eye's periphery:  
"growing longer now higher / going off out of sight". Yet the  
diction is precise, the "narrow / arrowlike division" cleanly  
effecting the sharp angularity of the roof's "crest like  
spearpoint".

Ever respectful of Zukofsky's poetic "ear" ("No poet of  
time can so sound the resources of language, so actuate  
words to become all that they might be thought otherwise to  
engender,") Creeley continues to mimic Zukofsky's jigsaw-like  
wordgames:<sup>92</sup>

Out one  
ear and  
in the  
other ear  
and out  
without it.

'Ears Idle Ears', Windows 102

In 'Gnomic Verses', he manipulates sound, adeptly working the words, like clay, into malleability:

Little bit patted pulled  
stretched set let cool

'Toffee', Echoes 53

While his prosody retains the texturing which was Zukofsky's technical legacy, Creeley's poems also preserve a distinctly "objective" air as he examines, ever scrupulous and critical, 'The World' in which human existence is played out:

all in  
flat particular light  
each sunlit place so placed.

Windows 11

The poem attempts to graph the workings of a mind which seems somehow divorced from any emotional personality; a factual manner and lean diction allows a detached precision which might be mistaken for indifference.

Elsewhere, somewhat ruefully, a disarmingly metaphysical piece of self-examination shows his awareness of this tendency:

I've thought of myself  
as objective, viz.,  
a thing round which  
lines could be drawn--

'Thinking', Windows 124

He seems to stand disbelievingly outside himself, struck by self-sufficiency of the very thought processes upon which his writing is dependent. In conclusion, the poem ponders the mysterious relationship between the creating mind and its

creation, finding a parallel between words and pictures which, in proving that language is both referential and non-referential, begs questions about words and their meanings:

Amazing what the mind makes  
out of its little pictures,  
the squiggles and dots,  
not to mention the words.

Daily growing older, however, Creeley's dulled senses now frustrate his access to the objective:

Are these memories already?  
Does it seem to me I see what's there.  
Have I particulars still to report,  
is my body myself only?

'Old', Echoes 10

Time blunts neither his curiosity, nor his capacity for feeling or sincerity. He never ceases to wonder at, nor get enough of, his world of immediate "particulars" even as, receding from his grasp, they remind him of his regrettably exclusive mortality. His chief concern continues to be his aging self, the "finite physical person" of 'Alex's Art', complex, thoughtful and vulnerably subjective in an intransigently objective world. The "particularizing" 'White Fence / White Fence' wonders, "where place the person, / the absent, / in this ring of focus?" and notes, with "wistful security", the regularized:

way all plays to pattern,  
the longed for world  
of common facts

Echoes 37

Finally, the word "all" gathers significance in Creeley's poetics, affirming the Zukofskian expansiveness which he so enjoys, like the "great phrase, 'raise the hem of the extended world'; that to me was it and I love [his] 'the more so all have it.'"<sup>93</sup> Like Zukofsky, Creeley finds "all" powerfully collective and helpfully non-specific. Both noun and adjective, "all" can embrace people and things, or yoke the immediate with the distant. In a generalizing gesture, "all" can enfold a single man in the world which is his context, or assimilate a community into its wider environment. This is the unifying vision of 'A'-12:

Together men form one sky.  
 The sky is a man,  
 You must know this to understand  
 Why places are different  
 And things new and old  
 ...  
 One sky is rich in each of us,  
 Undivided.

'A'-12 178

Michael Heller, admiring Zukofsky's "remarkable rigor within a generosity and openness", calls this "a poetics which seeks to be of the world and yet be a world."<sup>94</sup>

Sharing Zukofsky's purist collectivism, the fastidious "desire to place everything - everything aptly, perfectly, belonging within, one with, a context," Creeley is committed to the breadth which this demands of his poetic idiom.<sup>95</sup> 'Prayer to Hermes' confirms his (ironically isolating) need to "tell":



All who know me  
 say, why this man's  
 persistent pain, the scarifying  
 openness he makes do with?

Agh! brother spirit,  
 what do they know  
 of whatever is the instant  
 cannot wait a minute--

will find heaven in hell,  
will be there again even now,  
 and will tell of itself  
 all, all the world.

Later 121

Isolated from "All who know me" by his "persistent pain, the scarifying / openness", Creeley seems impatient of their bewildered questioning: the urge to know and pass on "whatever is the instant" appears to be irresistible. Self-disclosure permits him, paradoxically, to gain access to larger possibilities, "heaven in hell" and "all, all the world."

Creeley rarely loses sight of the singularity which is so precious to him (and his poetic idiom), but he likes to reveal how the common and the diverse coalesce in the individual. Driven to locate himself in an often indifferent world, he finds landmarks to signpost and clarify his existence, quietly reassured by the plural possibilities which he continually senses converging and cohering around him:

the place of body's

home, ground, grass,  
 trees, sky, water's

listance, books, all  
 one in this clear place.

'For a Bus on its Side and the Man Inside It', Away CP 618

Thus a later poem, 'You', can conclude (albeit doubtfully) that "oneself is real. There is, presumably, / all that is here to prove it."<sup>96</sup> Another 'You' is more confidently and more intimately monistic:

All was seen in  
a common mirror, all  
was simple self-  
reflection. It was me  
and I was you.

Windows 71

Don Byrd has discerned in Zukofsky's All "an effort to trace a way through the immediate and local to an inclusive vision from a single point of view."<sup>97</sup> Something similar is achieved in the revolving abstractions of Creeley's 'Wheels':

One around one--  
or inside, limit  
and dispersal.  
  
Outside, the emptiness  
of no edge, round  
as the sky--  
  
Or the eye seeing  
all go by  
in a blur of silence.

Windows 89

His wheeling vision, embracing both "limit / and dispersal", sights a panoramic "emptiness" within which "all" is loosely gathered, and turns "one around one". His eye can watch but fails to record or process the details, helplessly reduced to registering "all" in "a blur of silence".

Reviewing All in 1966, Creeley described Zukofsky's work as founded on the "premise that all that is, as whatever has spoken it, may occur as it is, each time it is spoken." Zukofsky's Autobiography remarks, "As a poet I have always felt that the work says all there needs to be said of one's life."<sup>98</sup> In the same spirit, as Creeley recalls, he was convinced "that a poet writes one poem all his life, a continuing song, so that no division of its own existence can be thought of as being more or less than its sum. This is to say, it all is." As the reverent tone of 'Touchstone' makes plain, Zukofsky offered Creeley an example "by which / to measure / all else". "All" that Zukofsky wrote about was to "make clear", finally, to Creeley "all" that he might liberate in his "own field of possibility".

## Notes:-

1. 'For L. Z.,' Collected Essays 69.
2. The Poet's Craft 154.
3. 'For L. Z.,' Collected Essays 69.
4. Interview, 15th August 1994.
5. 'Poetry,' Prepositions: The Collected Critical Essays of Louis Zukofsky (London: Rapp & Carroll, 1967) 11-12.
6. A Homemade World: The American Modernist Writers (New York: William Morrow, 1975) 164.
7. 'For L. Z.,' Collected Essays 70.
8. 'From "A Commemorative Evening for Louis Zukofsky",' Life and Work 39.
9. 'Louis Zukofsky: An Eccentric Profile,' Louis Zukofsky: Man and Poet, ed. Carroll F. Terrell (Orono: National Poetry Foundation, U of Maine at Orono, 1979) 73.
10. 'For L. Z.,' Collected Essays 70.
11. 'Louis Zukofsky: All: The Collected Short Poems, 1923-1958,' Collected Essays 56.
12. 'From "Black Mountaineering",' Life and Work 67.
13. A Homemade World 165.
14. 'A Memoir of Louis Zukofsky,' Louis Zukofsky: Man and Poet 106.
15. 'An Objective,' Prepositions 21.
16. Foreword, Prepositions: The Collected Critical Essays (Expanded edn. Berkeley: U of California P, 1981) vii. All other references to Prepositions are from the earlier edition.
17. "paradise / our / speech," Collected Essays 52.
18. 'Louis Zukofsky: All: The Collected Short Poems, 1923-1958,' Collected Essays 56.
19. Cid Corman cites as 'A Test For Poetry' (without further reference), 'In the Event of Words,' Louis Zukofsky: Man and Poet 314.
20. 'Louis Zukofsky: All: The Collected Short Poems, 1923-1958,' Collected Essays 54.

21. 'Sincerity and Objectification,' Louis Zukofsky: Man and Poet 268.
22. Interview, 15th August 1994.
23. Unpublished letter from Creeley to Zukofsky, 24th December 1959, found among Zukofsky's papers at the Humanities Research Center, University of Texas at Austin.
24. 'Sincerity and Objectification,' Louis Zukofsky: Man and Poet 267.
25. 'For L. Z.,' Collected Essays 70.
26. 'Louis Zukofsky: All: The Collected Short Poems, 1923-1958,' Collected Essays 55.
27. The Archive 83.3 (Spring 1971): 68.
28. 'A Note on the Objective,' Collected Essays 463.
29. *ibid.*, Collected Essays 464.
30. Pieces, CP 419.
31. 'To Define,' Collected Essays 473.
32. Charles Tomlinson, Some Americans: A Personal Record (Berkeley: U of California P, 1981) 48.
33. 'A World of Sensible Particulars', Life and Work 177.
34. 'An Objective,' Prepositions 20.
35. 'Sincerity and Objectification,' Louis Zukofsky: Man and Poet 271.
36. 'With Linda Wagner,' Tales 32.
37. 'Robert Creeley and the Pleasures of System,' Boundary 2: 377.
38. Cynthia Edelberg, Appendix, Robert Creeley's Poetry: A Critical Introduction (Albuquerque: U of New Mexico P, 1978) 166.
39. Douglas Flaherty and James Bradford, 'An Interview with Robert Creeley,' Contexts 177.
40. Interview, 15th August 1994.
41. Flaherty and Bradford interview, Contexts 176.
42. 'What I Come To Do Is Partial', Life and Work 77.
43. Louis Zukofsky, 'A Letter to Robert Creeley,' 11th October 1955, Life and Work 32.

44. Interview, 15th August 1994.
45. *ibid.*; this originates in Shakespeare, Creeley says, but I have failed to locate the exact source.)
46. 'American Poetry 1920-1930,' Prepositions 132.
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Chapter 5: "we are only / as we find out we are."

Creeley and Olson

Creeley doesn't have to know anything! Look at how immaculately he proceeds to find out what he does know.<sup>1</sup>

Early in the correspondence with Creeley which he initiated in 1949, Charles Olson suggests: "let's make a picture of CREELEY, shall we?". Almost mischievously, he goes on:

he's got a head with a long stride in it . . . thinks good, and the cadence of his thot is long & intricate . . . but just as his head is long, his breath is quick & short, AND . . . any man who goes fast can't go without, etcs, which are shorthand for the fastest sort of juxtapositions:

it's JUXTAPOSITIONS, that mean by quick breath, and that you are not yet getting in at least in the verses

8th June 1950 (CC1 86)

This is sound and pragmatic advice. For all his impact on the development of his own and later generations, examples of such practical guidance from Olson are rare (preserved for the most part only in letters to his immediate circle). His words resonantly summarize the impact he was to have upon Creeley's work and, moreover, reflect the impulse of his own poetics, first understood, says Creeley, by Williams, who perceived that Olson had somehow shifted the whole concern of poetry to something apart from any descriptive term.

That is, poetry was not to report or not to talk about or not to tell you things in this sense, but was an activity intrinsically evident in its own structure.<sup>2</sup>

Creeley interprets this as "the thing to be said tends to dictate the mode in which it can be said. I really believe [Olson's] contention that there's an appropriate way of saying something inherent in the thing to be said."<sup>3</sup> Distinguishing between Creeley's characteristically long, often involuted, train of thought and the hesitant mannerisms of a prose style which gasps and staggers with commas and qualifications, Olson had exposed an important conflict between writer and activity. But having spotted Creeley's struggle against his "inherent" idiom, Olson also recognised that only Creeley could discover it for himself. He always insisted

that we are only  
as we find out we are

'Maximus, at Tyre and at Boston', The Maximus Poems 95

The changes which Olson's friendship with, intellectual regard for and sponsorship of Creeley gradually wrought upon the younger writer's poetics, were founded, as Creeley knew, on this precept:

He taught me how to write by so reading me that my own writing became clear to me. I don't mean simply that I understood what it meant. In some inexplicable manner he gave me my writing so that I saw its particularity. I saw how it took place.<sup>4</sup>

In apprising Creeley of his own "particularity" as a writer, Olson was endorsing that particularity. Far from an abdication of responsibility on Olson's part, it was the kind of generous, generative act which won him the affectionate respect of his admirers; it was also reflected the thrust of his campaign to undermine the outdated and ossifying traditions of Western aesthetics, a battle waged continuously until his early death in 1970. As Butterick says, the young Creeley soon became a willing accomplice in the "effort to find an alternative to the dominant and oppressive forms of the day . . . he and Olson were partners in restlessness."<sup>5</sup>

Olson's influence was perhaps most powerful during the unsettled years of Creeley's mid-twenties before they had even met, long before Creeley began to take himself seriously as a poet. Preceding chapters amply demonstrate Olson's centrality to the development of Creeley's poetic idiom, not least in the repeated references to the Complete Correspondence. His ideas pervade all of the "senses of relationship" discussed here: Creeley sooner or later filtered through Olson most of the writers whom he respected or held dear; Olson's response consequently often coloured the extent of their impact.

From the first an important catalyst, Olson roused Creeley to realize his own possibilities by insisting that he confront them. The complexities of this process are explored in a passage which pinpoints what he found in, rather than brought to, Creeley's writing:

The difficulty of discovery . . . is, that definition is as much a part of the act as is sensation itself, in this sense, that life is preoccupation with itself, that conjecture about it is as much of it as its coming at us, its going on. In other words, we are ourselves both the instrument of discovery and the instrument of definition.<sup>6</sup>

Olson's portrait of Creeley exposed this duality, encouraging him towards an early consciousness of, and preoccupation with, "discovery" and self-definition. Take, for example, Olson's admiration for the "use of the parentheses in THE EPIC EXPANDS--wow they are wonderful, AND ARE TO BE LEARNED FROM, by Creeley as well as by me . . .":<sup>7</sup>

So will the epic expand (or be  
expanded by) its content. So will  
words throw (throw up) their meaning.  
Words they have used (will use) are  
the sound (of sound), what gets us.

The Charm CP 18

The parentheses ensure that the poem is continually revealing or, on the other hand, discovering itself. The "epic" keeps a self-conscious eye on the implications of its "meaning"; clarifying those possibilities, it cautiously expands its own content and coheres as it does so.

'The Awakening', which introduces the final section of Creeley's popular collection For Love, is dedicated to Olson:

He feels small as he awakens,  
but in the stream's sudden mirror,

a pool of darkening water,  
sees his size with his own two eyes.

For Love CP 205

The "awakening" seems to be Creeley's, still "small" (perhaps this hints at a contrast to Olson's notorious physical bulk as well as his intellectual "size") but reaching slowly towards self-consciousness, and a recognition of his own "size". The reference to his "own two eyes" implies that Creeley is looking into the "stream's sudden mirror": thanks to Olson, his heightened self-regard allows him to look beyond his sightless eye, to acknowledge not only the eye he is looking out of but also the reflected eye with which he looks back at himself. Creeley has the same potential as anyone else.

The wider environment seems hostile: the surrounding forest "in which he finds himself thus lost" is dense and stifling, until the narrative flow is interrupted "when the door bell rang". The juxtaposition of story with normality, of narrative with dialogue, of the dramatic lyric with the conversational prosaic is startling. Earlier stanzas are cast in a new, more fantastic, light by the casual tone, as if projected on a screen and therefore distanced from us: we feel taken in by "another story", but recognize that the poem has successfully eluded any (forest-like) limits we might have unconsciously imposed upon it.

An "awakening", apparently, permits a return to "the same place" with a "freshening" perspective which (inexplicably) is held to be "a woman's impression" and queries some fundamental

assumptions. As Creeley likes to recall, through Olson:  
 "Limits / are what any of us / are inside of".<sup>8</sup> Now, "strong breezes" release the earlier "inswept" atmosphere and the air itself brightens, becomes "whiter". The next stanza invokes a non-specific deity to hint at a pastiche of classical pastoral poetry. Over-elaborate diction jars with the mostly simple vocabulary preceding it. Yet we "would err to concur" with prerogatives of any sort: we should remain awake only to our senses. The poem declares itself unknowable, like God "not / a conclusive concluding / to remote yearnings." Lurching for independence, still "awakening", Creeley moves awkwardly; we "stumble breathlessly" after him, persisting "because you must." Olson's invigorating example awakes both Creeley and his poem to their own potential, as Creeley knows:

Olson, I believe, was a decisive influence upon me as a writer, because he taught me how to write. Not how to write poems that he wrote, but how to write poems that I write. This is a very curious and very specific difference.<sup>9</sup>

# I **Form and content: "Making a way for oneself"**

a logos, a power of method, derived from (form) (from content) / that lays bare: yr center

17th June 1950 (CC1 106)

Creeley's "beautiful, and most USABLE" assertion that form is never more than an extension of content" affirms the

process of discovery as a primary aesthetic impulse.<sup>10</sup>

Olson's "picture of Creeley" asserts the consequent nature of the relationship between poet and poem: Creeley's writing cannot be more than an extension of his own content. Richly suggestive, the form/content formula not only offered a useful prosodic approach but (paradoxically), in pointing to the cohering power of the poet's "single intelligence", justified his instinctively "subjective" idiom. The discussion of how best to handle the delicate relationship between form and content dominates Olson's early correspondence with Creeley, is central to the intricate web of ideas from which Creeley's poetics grew, and is an obvious starting point for an exploration of his "senses of relationship" with Olson.

In context, picture and formula are closely linked: Olson's "picture" appears in his exuberant response (June 8th 1950) to Creeley's letter of June 5th in which the formula first appeared. Borrowed by Olson for 'Projective Verse', the formula became one of the most significant contributions to poetic debate in the mid-century. Yet Creeley himself is "very sure it was my restatement of something that he [Olson] had made clear for me."<sup>11</sup> The formula might easily have originated in the defensive remonstrances of Olson's very first letter, which suggests that, like a poem, a man's language "lays bare" his character, or "center":

i says, creeley, you're  
off yr trolley:

a man god damn well has to come up with his own lang.,  
 syntax and song both, but also each poem under hand has  
 its own language, which is variant of same ((THIS IS THE  
 BATTLE

21st April 1950 (CC1 19)

Creeley's response to this "BATTLE" cry was to applaud what he immediately saw as a "movement beyond what the Dr., Stevens, etc., have made for us."<sup>12</sup> He was disparaging about the contemporary poetic scene:

The 'formal' has killed what the head: might get into: in  
 that it has put into menial/ enclosed/ work: what it sd  
 have been determining, ONLY, as an extension of its  
 center. . . . Of a piece: it has to be . . . neither sd  
 usurp.

31st May 1950 (CC1 63)

Creeley's pursuit of such a balance, first in prose and later in poetry, caused him to reject the (then current) debate over poetic "objectivity". In a draft of his first application for a Guggenheim award (albeit about prose), he insisted:

I cannot give the reader 'facts'. I have no wish to. What I can give him is the movement of my own mind, my language, that flux which can get him to his own, can find him these 'things' in a frame open to his own present. Form is the extension of content. For the writer, the content is precisely in, inside.

28th September 1950 (CC3 47)



He knew, for example, that his own rather aloof prose style betrayed the peculiar reserve of the New England idiom:

the whole push for that kind of writing, has come, in my case: from the 'freedom,' supposed or otherwise, that the frame gives. I have a liking for the play abt the thing, around & over: touching at angles. What they call, or have called: obliquity. . . . [Being] brought up in the country, on a farm, and the language, the way I speak: is, or has to do with that, slowness & slow laps, say, around a center . . .

11th June 1950 (CC1 95-96)

In Creeley's view a writer's credibility, whether in poetry or prose, rested upon "making a way for oneself: to 'make' there oneself: the tempering of method. . . . A man, each man, is NEW. If his method, his form, IS the logic of his content: he cannot be but: NEW/ 'original.'" Olson's poems were an irresistible precedent:

yrself, one of the damn few concerned with a method/ that can get to the shape, be the shape, of yr content . . . for that reason, is my respect. 21st June 1950 (CC1 118)

Fluidly playing on language and line, as in the sinuous immediacies of 'The Moebius Strip', Olson demonstrates how "Art does not seek to describe but to enact":<sup>13</sup>

Their bare and lovely bodies sweep, in round  
of viscera, of legs  
of turned out hip and glance, bound  
each to other, nested eggs  
of elements in trance.

The Collected Poems of Charles Olson [CPO] 55

Creeley was especially struck, in 'La Preface', by:

the 'simple' condensation of WHAT'S HAPPENED. And/or  
 'not only "comment" but container.' The compression,  
 without DISTORTION . . . and through all of this, you  
 make your own rhythms, language, always the POEM. With  
 all the deadwood around, & all the would-be 'form,' etc.,  
 I take these things as coming head-on.

28th April 1950 (CC1 22)

His appreciative comments (perhaps unconsciously) echo 'The  
 Praises':

What is necessary is  
 containment,  
 that that which has been found out by work may, by work,  
 (without due loss of force) /be passed on  
 for use

USE

CPO 100

Gradually, Olson's principles found their way into  
 Creeley's early poems. A comparison of the original draft of  
 'Still Life Or' (sent to Olson in a letter), and the final  
 version as it was published, first in Wake (No.9 1950) and  
 subsequently in Le Fou, shows Creeley learning to work his  
 ideas with increasing surety and skill:

mobiles: that the wind can  
 catch at, against itself, a  
 leaf or a contrivance of  
 wires, in the stairwell, to  
 be looked at from below.

We have arranged the form  
 of a formula here, have  
 taken the heart out, and  
 the wind is vague emotion.

To count on these aspirants,  
 these contenders for the  
 to-be-looked-at part of  
 these actions, these most  
 hopeful movements, needs  
 a strong & constant wind.

That will not rise above  
 the speed which we have  
 calculated, that the leaf  
 remain, that the wires  
 be not too much shaken.

1st June 1950 (CC1 71)

This first draft stands in four solidly built stanzas of roughly similar length, (of four, five and six lines), each a self-contained unit closing with a full stop. The line lengths are also roughly regular, mostly five or six syllables, making for a visual compaction which contributes to the somewhat ponderous character of the original poem.

In contrast, the published version has been literally aerated, the revised lineation making the poem spacious and shapely, precisely as the content suggests:

mobiles:

that the wind can catch at,  
 against itself,

a leaf or a contrivance of wires,  
 in the stairwell,  
 to be looked at from below.

We have arranged the form of a formula here,  
 have taken the heart out

& the wind  
 is vague emotion.

To count on these aspirants  
 these contenders for the to-be-looked-at part  
 of these actions  
 these most hopeful movements  
 needs  
 a strong & constant wind.

That will not rise above the  
/speed

which we have calculated,  
that the leaf  
remain  
that the wires  
be not too much shaken.

'Still Life Or', The Charm CP 20

Visually, this version of the poem differs considerably from the original, although the diction is in fact identical and the punctuation has been altered only by the removal of some commas. What was a dense mass has been broken up by varied line-lengths and longer phrasings which continue across stepped line-breaks to create an airier and more supple structure. The "mobiles" hang suspended above the body of the poem ("to be looked at from below"), distanced from the moving "wind" by the colon and the step of the line-break. The wind is somehow given motion by the space which precedes it, as if it is blowing across the line, but the sense and phrasing are barely interrupted by the downstepping line, and the fragile mobiles are therefore subtly associated with the turning and collision of "catch at, / against itself". It is curious to see how the original stanza has been preserved, although the break is now indistinct amid the reconstructed lines. The form of the poem has changed almost beyond recognition, and a new sensuality colours the content, now more adventurous, more exciting and more alluring.

The poem delicately interrelates form and content, both explicitly ("We have arranged the form of a formula here") and implicitly, in its recreation (with wind and mobiles) of,

paradoxically, "still life". In this way, 'Still Life Or' "enacts" the complex and difficult relationship between form and content, which exactly mirrors, and is mirrored by, the relation of subject to object as well as poet to poem; the balancing of these elements is, in the words of the poem, imperative:

that the leaf  
remain  
          that the wires  
be not too much shaken.

Although he first saw himself as a prose writer, Creeley soon came to admit to Olson that "the compression & push of poetry: toward a single 'action' of comprehension: is damn attractive".<sup>14</sup> He argued for a "method" which assured "the compression of poetry, must smack of the single intelligence [SI]: must be deadcenter under the will", while conceding the difficulty of this:<sup>15</sup>

It is a hard thing to say straight/ it comes to: SI is  
the usable content of a man. It is his: coherence. It  
is that which makes possible: relation between men. It  
is that which makes untrue: a speech for men/ other than  
as oneself is a man/

7th August 1950 (CC2 100)

The "single intelligence" implies a powerfully singular sense of self-definition; as his formula suggested, Creeley's "usable content" inevitably in-forms his writing method, his instinctive idiom. When, in August, Olson finally asked "just

how you understand yr phrase THE SINGLE INTELLIGENCE", the reply was complex but conclusive:<sup>16</sup>

S.I.: is the base unit. . . . All force, as it works to form, to 'coherence' establishes its 'singleness.' As, as so: the man/ IS force & instrument for force/ is : single. (Intelligence: I take as the ability to cohere within a man, any). . . . Again the SINGLE INTELLIGENCE is/ the 'is' of the process. As it is instrument/ so is it, also, container/ that thru which moves: . . . the SI/ makes a head for center. To center.

7th August 1950 (CC2 99)

Olson was convinced. In June 1950 he was at work on what became 'The Story of an Olson, & Bad Thing', "& is it not of yr doin'?"<sup>17</sup> The poem includes these lines:

(is it not the wind we obey, are  
kept by?  
as good a word as any is  
the SINGLE INTELLIGENCE

. . . /

. . . I, an olson

in the l'univers concentrationnaire the flesh  
(is it not extraordinary that, when a wound  
is healing, we call, what it throws off, proud  
flesh?) flesh, rose flesh

must also be thrown in.

CPO 180

The single intelligence is interpreted, in Olson's typically adventurous way, as both defining and being participant in "l'univers concentrationnaire". The words acknowledge the agency of "I, an olson", whose "proud flesh" necessarily

invades the poem. In this context, "rose" takes on a manifold character: as a simple adjective but one which recalls, implies, the noun, or in its verbal sense to stand, or elevate, which amplifies the sense of self-respect, the lofty tone of the extract. The duality of the interaction between subject and object is implied by the clever conjunction of "throws off" with "thrown in."

Reviewing The Maximus Poems some years after Olson's death, Creeley paid tribute to "the persistent beauty" of his poetry:

It has been a constant wonder to me how various and particular was Olson's genius in the literal practice of his craft. His formal invention is constant and inevitably particular to the factors of statement. In short, he says things. But even that extraordinary grace might prove fragile were it not that he shares with D. H. Lawrence a prescient information, a power of intuition but, more accurately, of perception that can "see" as feeling, that knows it knows.<sup>18</sup>

These remarks suggest that, for Creeley, Olson's "craft" was made tensile but sensitive by the activity of a "subjective" intelligence, colouring and cohering with its "prescience". The self-aware, self-governing "intuition" which Creeley describes in Olson's poetry seems to permit a further dimension, through "perception that can 'see' as feeling".

The parallel with Lawrence, whom Creeley has always admired, is also interesting; in the preface to his 'Poem for D. H. Lawrence', Creeley is sternly categorical: "I would begin by explaining / that by reason of being / I am and no other." Although the poem is an immature one, not among Creeley's best, it finds an appealing indolence in its overly-conscious "obliquity", so that "the figure drawn by the window / by its own hand" is somehow circled, in Creeley's words, in "slow laps, say, around a center." We witness a self-witnessing. Although naive, the poem attempts to declare and celebrate the activity of the poet's "single intelligence", articulating Creeley's resolution to remain "in" his poetry, just as Lawrence does:

the self is being, is in being and  
because of it. The figure is not being  
nor the self but is in the self and  
in the being and because of them.

The Charm CP 7

'Poem for D. H. Lawrence' is a reminder that Lawrence's Mornings in Mexico was a central text for Creeley, a book to which he made frequent reference in letters to Olson. He singles out: "Sonio io! say the Italians. I am I! Which sounds simpler than it is."<sup>19</sup> Self-preservation, which evolves into self-sufficiency, can be compromised by alienation. More recently Creeley, whose single (and subjective) intelligence continues to sharpen his poetry, has signalled his sense of isolation with increasing vehemence:

Here I am.  
Here I am.

'Lights', Windows 67



The form/content dictum, Creeley's relation of subjective and objective, and his recognition of the cohering energy of the single intelligence which informs this, coalesce in the guiding principle of his poetics: the purity of the poem's form as an immediate experience, intrinsically true, by its very nature, both to itself and its creator.

## II Projective Verse: "What lets in AIR"

it is a craft, that, like any tool, instrument, the particular uses of it, must be learned. The ways.

16th June 1950 (CC1 103)

Olson spent the summer of 1950 revising 'Projective Verse' to embrace Creeley's form/content statement and, inevitably, the essay resounded with implications for Creeley:

Olson's . . . early senses of how I might make the line intimate to my own habits of speaking--that is the groupings and whatnot that I was obviously involved with-- [were] of great release to me. . . . curiously enough in the Projective Verse piece . . . the part about from the heart to the line, where he's explaining his sense of the line and the relation to the breath.<sup>20</sup>

The thrust of 'Projective Verse' lies in Olson's determination that "the projective act, which is the artist's act in the larger field of objects, leads to dimensions larger than the man". The argument for a movement of energy radiating from

within the poet and opening out across the field of a poem's composition, a movement which belongs to an outward process (a projective activity), is a partial restatement of Creeley's form/content formula. Composition by field, after all, requires the poet, once "in the open--[to] go by no track other than the one the poem under hand declares for itself."<sup>21</sup>

The centrality assumed by the poet, the self-consciousness, which 'Projective Verse' demands is arguably implicit in Creeley's original formula. In seeking to reverse prosodic traditions in order to embrace "a whole new series of recognitions", Olson was merely repeating the essence of his advice to Creeley:

And the line comes (I swear it) from the breath, from the breathing of the man who writes, at the moment that he writes . . . only he, the man who writes, can declare, at every moment, the line its metric, and its ending--where its breathing, shall come to, termination.

Only the poet can "find out" how to write the poetry which he writes. Accordingly the "Single Intelligence" must be "Boss of all", governing the central synthesis at work in a poem:

the HEAD, by way of the EAR, to the SYLLABLE  
the HEART, by way of the BREATH, to the LINE

For Creeley, frequently consulted throughout the drafting of the essay, Olson was articulating a valid and powerful alternative to traditional "non-projective" forms, not least

in the forceful insistence 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."

Often, commentators (like Roberta Berke and L.S. Dembo) profess to be bewildered by Olson's equation, complaining that instead of clarifying the principles of "composition by field" he succeeds only in obscuring them. Even Robert Von Hallberg deems Olson's "less than adequate" statements "fuzzy", although he concedes that there is some purpose in this.<sup>22</sup> The confusion seems disingenuous. The aligning of dynamic phrasing with the head via "the EAR" merely recognizes the intellectual importance of word-choice represented at root by "the smallest particle of all, the syllable." Diction, or word-choice, is a highly conscious activity which affirms the consequence of each syllable in each word in every poem. Nor does the assumption that the emotional dimension of the poem is directed by the poet's breathing, betrayed in the structure and pace of the emergent line cadences, seem far-fetched: the pulse rate has always been taken for an emotional indicator. In a letter to Creeley, Olson rephrases his rule to clarify the point:

the SYLLABLE the sign of  
intelligence,  
the LINE the sign of the  
heart

22nd June 1950 (CC1 143)

In turn, this brings new significance to Olson's description of "what creeley's [sic] got, and can trust, the slow, antient hart." <sup>23</sup>

Creeley applauded, in the essay's words, the "usableness, in practice" of a logic which penetrated "inside the machinery" of the increasingly projective poetics which he was beginning to pursue:

you've put down, by example, and straight speech: a whole logic for a line, attention to line. What others have said (the doc) but somehow haven't: quite made clear.

The breathing.

24th June 1950 (CC1 150)

He readily accepted Olson's analysis, which isolated the poem's constituent parts in order to demonstrate the value of each to the whole, thus explaining and justifying the poet's manipulation of them. In a letter, Creeley wrote: "What IS important is that we grip the RANGE (possible) of the phrase/ which builds to the unit: LINE."<sup>24</sup> Later, he correctly noted that what marks Olson's ideas out from those of his predecessors is a logic which extends to the physical character of the line itself: "the line/ how it moves . . . how you pull it out/ make a logick thru it, not in spite of it."<sup>25</sup> Some years after Olson's death, Creeley explained that this poetry

is remarkably qualified by physically hearing it--  
literally hearing how he reads it . . . confusion with  
the visual aspects of the poems would be remarkably

simplified if someone could hear him reading these lines  
 . . . to get clear the authority he's giving them and  
 what he's doing with them.<sup>26</sup>

In emphasizing an inherent, rather than imposed, poetic logic, 'Projective Verse' prodded Creeley into adjusting his own poetic line:

What you have made clear for me/ what lets in AIR, after  
 3 yrs, INTO the poetry. 26th June 1950 (CC2 32)

He welcomed Olson's sense that the line could (should) engender the emotional character of a poem according to the emotion of the poet himself (betrayed, of course, by his breathing):

you have got hold of the ONLY workable 'dynamic' for  
 experiment with line. . . . I get, absolutely, its logic  
 . . . you can see in the few poems sent you/ the impact  
 of your own apprehension of the line's use, on me.

25th June 1950 (CC2 13)

The sense of relief which colours these remarks is implicit in Creeley's more elastic lineation, found, for example in 'Le Fou'. One of his finest early poems, this was written in the same summer as Olson was busy with 'Projective Verse'. In it, Creeley renders the three central points of open verse just as the essay recommends: in "the kinetics . .

the principle . . . [and] the process of the thing." The playful irony of the title (both a wry comment on the manifest

folly of writing experimental poetry, and a humorously self-critical glance at the poet himself which, as Sherman Paul has noted, also implicates Olson as the poem's dedicatee) rescues the poem from the perils of taking itself too seriously.<sup>27</sup>

'Le Fou' describes itself taking place; Creeley ("who plots, then, the lines") apparently records the kinetic processes of composition even as they occur: "(moving slowly at first". The kinesis is instantly made evident and active in the continuous present tense of the verbs and their attendant participles, as well as in opening brackets which remain tantalizingly unresolved, and finally in the lineation. The verbs lend the poem a further sense of animation, calling 'Projective Verse' to mind again:

Do not tenses, must they not also be kicked around anew,  
in order that time, that other governing absolute may be  
kept, as must the space-tensions of a poem, immediate,  
contemporary to the acting-on-you of the poem?

'Le Fou' remains deliberately alert to the edicts of 'Projective Verse', as if to prove that they work. The whole movement of the poem is projective and not only in the gradual migration of its lines towards the righthand margin of the page. The swift glance back at the stationary trees might be celebrating Olson's attempts to change the contemporary poetic agenda:

we are moving

away from

(the trees  
the usual

For Love CP 111

More obviously, though, 'Le Fou' shows Creeley putting the technical principles of 'Projective Verse' into practice. He is openly relaxed, attentive to

the breath  
which is slow--

This phrase, stretched over two lines with an added hiatus after the line break, is given a palpable languor which the suspension suggested by the final dash only prolongs. There are subtleties in the diction, too, which create a sense of continuous motion, in the shift from "talking" to the adjacent "taking", and in the more protracted transition from "moving" to "waving" (which picks up "way" and is echoed again in "away"). The repetition of words suggests some kind of irresistible rhythmic impulse, carrying the poet off, and the inexact refrain of "slowly", "slow", "slowly", "slowly", and eventually "slower" gives this impulse a restless variance.

At the same time, we are made aware that Creeley is subject to the dictation of the poem's process, "taking, always the beat from / the breath". Nevertheless he seems sanguine, shrugging off any responsibility because "it is that way." The process may seem laborious, but is as inevitable as the poem's unstoppable progression across the page which culminates in the triumphant flourish of "(we are moving!". An exclamation mark is rare in Creeley's poetic idiom. In contrast the final "goodbye", slyly echoing the earlier "(go by", is returned to the left hand margin where it seems to

In July 1950 Creeley enclosed a draft of 'Le Fou' with an adjacent gloss, for Olson's approval, complaining as he does so at the loss of "growth of complexity as the end comes . . . what I had liked & wanted was the somewhat choppy introduction of 'counter' positions/ with the static: 'trees . . . ' Wanted it like: coming from all sides/ the 'point . . . '"<sup>30</sup> Below, I have sought to reproduce the marginalia as Butterick presents it in the Complete Correspondence:

## LE FOU

who plots, then, the lines  
talking, taking, always the beat from  
the breath

(moving slowly at first  
the breath which  
is slow --

I mean: graces come slowly.  
It is that way.

So slowly (they are waving  
we are moving  
away from

the usual (go by like grass is green.)  
which is slower than this, is  
goodbye

(here want NOT  
an explanation--  
simply a going  
with, mainly in  
sound: what's up

(wanted it like a train  
starting up here. . .)

(here: that chooooo/ch  
before it starts up,

again: chu chu chu chu,  
etc/ well, something.

'It is that way':

(something to point

(we are moving! to GAP: getting  
bigger/ actual. . .)

[added in pencil:] Thank you--Charles Parker. Et tu--Thelonius  
Bach. 7th July 1950 (CC2 69)

The pencil note preserved by Butterick's cautious editing usefully proves how Creeley's love of, and interest in, jazz coincidentally made him still more receptive to Olson's innovative theories. The characteristic looseness inherent in the "form" of jazz offers a perfect metaphor for projective versification, as I have discussed elsewhere. The line, once



open, resists the circumscribing rigour of traditionally imposed forms, without relinquishing its intrinsic structure. Creeley sums it up thus: "a line is much more interesting in its own continuities, than as the superficial 'shape' of an external object, and/or, an object external to its occasion."<sup>31</sup> Likewise, the jazz musician need not adhere to the "normal" patternings of traditional composition, but remains dependent upon the rhythm and capacity of his 'inspiration' - the natural length of his breath - which will eventually dictate the "shape" of the music he is creating:

what makes the line in any of this, IS, most obviously, the breath--it is a profitable analogy, for the problems of poesy, or--just so/ the bird/within the limit of his sounds/ breath/ is attempting to reach to: form/ from content: just so/ you/I: with our sound/ sense: and TIME.

24th June 1950 (CC1 157)

The analogy is perfect: jazz represents a loosening of musical form and, to adapt the words of 'Projective Verse', thus "from the moment the projective purpose of the act . . . is recognized, the content does--it will--change." Creeley's interpretation of Charlie ("the Bird") Parker's jazz-making shows that

we can take as the base beat like 1/2/3/4, not only that so-called 'base' stress, but, as well, its variants, or the emphases possible within its frame: so . . . in poetry, too: we must not only tag the main stress, but also, what can be played upon it, as variant, & still

keep to the outline, of its stresses. . . . The point is: that when we can come, clearly (as you already have), to such an attitude toward line, word, and base stress: we open it up, wide open/ and make possible: anything/ that the head (particular) can get to . . .

25th June 1950 (CC2 15)

But the balance between an open line and the compression of thought, which Creeley has always regarded as the source of poetic energy, is a difficult one to maintain:

I do know: what that feels like, to see the line shrink on you/ tighten up: horrible, like a cramp. The gimmick: the clearer the head gets on a 'point,' the tighter it wants to make its comment: what IS needed is an attitude that can combine, the tightness of the head/ with the actual extension possible into sounds . . . ibid.

To open the line does not excuse relaxation to the point of carelessness, nor a slackening of the tension in the language. By contrast, the "opening" must not overlook "Tighten[ing]: as the act of 'precision,' being right - NOT cramped."<sup>32</sup> Olson's 'The Kingfishers', while asserting that "What does not change is the will to change", cautions against

the too strong grasping of it,  
when it is pressed together and condensed,  
loses it

This very thing you are

CPO 90

Sherman Paul interprets this as a plea for the Keatsian "virtue" of negative capability; he finds Olson challenging us to participate in the span of time: "not to transcend history (the flux of events) but to enter and use it[,] . . . since history is process its course is never single, never inevitable, and never foreclosed. Process opens possibility . . ."<sup>33</sup> Paul's useful gloss scarcely touches on, and does not explore, the highly-tuned prosodic technique (not unrelated to negative capability) which the same lines also urge: "loses it", hanging uselessly, warns sternly against the stifling construct from which it has emerged, slack and dissipated. Nothing should be permitted to detract, or subtract, from the "very thing you are".

Although jazz proved a powerful precedent for Creeley's attempts to loosen up his own writing, as he continued to seek "that projection to a literal force," he struggled, as he admitted privately to Olson:<sup>34</sup>

It was a godsent, to find you--since things were getting real tight, there, where they should be opening, to let loose: content.

25th June 1950 (CC2 13-14)

Supported by Olson's tireless encouragement, Creeley's poetic idiom began to find the supple and finely-tuned economy which marks it out today. One of his best known poems reveals his synthesis of an open or outward "attitude" with that critical "precision" of expression by which the poem will "let loose: content."

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.

'I Know a Man', For Love CP 132

This poem sounds deceptively conversational, as if we are accidentally overhearing an exchange between two old friends. This is partly due to an anecdotal tone which employs a casual shorthand ("sd" and "yr") and partly due to the fractured phrasing and pace. Though chatty and direct, the poem is in fact one long sentence, coupling together a series of brief and inconclusive clauses. This gives it a distracted air without quite destroying its eventual logic, and reminds us once again of Olson's shrewd remark that Creeley's "head is long, his breath is quick & short." Further tension is subtly contrived in the way that the end of every line splits even the simplest phrase, sundering possessive pronoun from its noun, pronoun from verb, even prefix from stem as in "sur / rounds". For all the fluid and uncomplicated language and the easy colloquialism ("I am / always talking"), the riven and fragmented form makes the voluble speaker seem nervy, less insouciant than perhaps he intended.

Despite the inherent tensions of such broken phrasing, the poem is "NOT cramped" and retains an openness on two levels. The emergent form "lets AIR" into the simplest grammatical unit (largely through lineation) and thus ventilates and extends the content, as well as creating the structural coherence by which that same content is contained. Meanwhile the poem as a whole adopts a projective stance. The speaker acknowledges the fearful and unpredictable profundity circumscribing the immediate and familiar bounds of his life. In wanting to penetrate the surrounding "darkness", to push out beyond the known, he seems courageously ready to confront the alternatives: "why not, buy a goddamn big car, / / drive,". In my reading of Creeley's phrasing (which is also his), the idea "drives" across the span of the interrupting stanza break, physically reinforcing the magnitude of such an act, heightening its drama, and making the speaker seem the bolder for suggesting it. As Creeley tells Michael André, the syntax is deliberately misleading but "someone who reads it in the actual impulse will recognise that . . . it's the "I" of the poem who is saying "why don't we get out of here, the car being one imagination of how we get from where we're stuck, hopefully to some place we won't be."<sup>35</sup>

In contrast, his companion "John" is a pragmatic cipher, the everyman rationalist. Creeley explains that the name is almost "hierarchical for me, I've had very good friends named John . . . [it's] a name for an order, of not merely machismo . . . but some measure of friendship, and a man of that

condition."<sup>36</sup> John's dismay at the speaker's suggestion is predictable, only made guilelessly ironic when in alarm he (apparently unconsciously) merely manages to restate the point:

look  
out where yr going

'I Know a Man' does "combine, the tightness of the head/ with the actual extension possible into sounds/ poetry," showing how Creeley adapted Olson's projective methodology, and reworked it into a poetics of his own. As one of his first letters notes, "These things come to a method".<sup>37</sup> The poem "looks out" of itself towards Creeley's developing poetic idiom, an idiom which even in maturity retains an unconfident air but remains steadily and deliberately projective, intent upon discovery:

Now grown large, I  
sometimes stumble, walk  
with no knowledge of

what's under foot.

'People', In London CP 494

He seems to court the attendant insecurities, as if drawing comfort from the inherently unpredictable nature of freedom:

Rock me, boat.  
Open, open.

Hold me,  
little cupped hand.

Let me come in,  
come on

board you, sail  
off, sail off . . .

'Boat', Windows 51-52

Olson recognised this with admiration and affection,  
dedicating The Maximus Poems:

for R O B E R T C R E E L E Y

--the Figure of Outward

### III Conjecture: "the grope for the open"

A man, as prime, makes use of conjecture to know, to find  
what other forces push the relevance of this prime he is.

10th December 1950, (CC4 79)

Creeley's remark (above) to Olson proposes, conjecture  
makes the pursuit of knowledge active; in prompting him  
towards a "conjectural method", Olson helped Creeley to "find  
out" his own poetic idiom. An idea to which they continually  
returned, both poets understood conjecture to be integral to  
discovery as an aesthetic activity. In writing generally, and  
poetry in particular, to quote Creeley, "conjecture is the way  
to the possible." In its fullest implications, conjecture is  
creative of projective discovery: "the feeling, the grope for  
the open: to be open."

Creeley's admiration for Olson's "there are only / eyes  
in all heads, / to be looked out of"<sup>38</sup> is explained when he  
notes, in Mayan Letters,

a kind of intelligence which . . . looks, out of its own  
eyes. This does not mean that conjecture is to be  
absent, insofar as iacio means "throw" and con,

"together"-- . . . It is a consistent fact with Olson that he does use his legs, and does depend on what his own instincts and intelligence can discover for him. In this way he throws together all he has come to possess.<sup>39</sup>

The restless juxtapositions which constitute the structure and character of The Maximus Poems remain as testament to Olson's fervent belief in a conjectural poetics. Sometimes the poems seem less letters than a series of scrapbooks in which clipping is pasted over postcard abutting photograph, which in turn is found jostling a page torn from a diary, an excerpt from almanac, sea chart, ship's log, textbook or accounts ledger. In these conjunctions, we can witness for ourselves how "Gloucester / is heterogeneous",<sup>40</sup> renewed and refreshed: "that all start up / to the eye and soul / as though it had never / happened before".<sup>41</sup> Like so much of Olson's writing, it makes a powerful example.

Creeley's exegesis (above) also justifies the conjectural method of his own poetics. In "throwing together" words, he seeks a collision creative of a changed perception of those words: a new apprehension of their significance. By means of conjecture a poet can overturn assumption, making language fresh and content energetic and projective. Creeley's recognition of the potencies inherent in "conjecture", its linking of the processes of discovery and definition, is central to his interpretation of Olson's "open form" poetry. His words show how his conjectural prosody embraced the other



aspects of Olson's influence, animating, actively realized in and, most importantly, combining all of the separate strata which I have been exploring:

It is a sense of use, which believes knowledge to be necessarily an active form of relation to term, with the corollary, that all exists in such relation, itself natural to the conditions. It is not, then, knowledge as a junk-heap, or purposeless accumulation of mere detail - . . . . It is knowledge used as a means to relate, not separate.<sup>42</sup>

To return to the original, perspicacious sketch Olson made of Creeley with which I began, it is immediately telling that he refrains from criticizing the tension between Creeley's "head" and "thot". Typically, he suggests instead that this is a source of energy which could be (should be) put to use in a poetic medium. He proposes that it is just this tension which will naturally engender in the complex of the poem what he named (in 'Projective Verse') the "kinetic", the energy of "juxtaposition":

any man who goes fast can't go without, etcs, which are shorthand for the fastest sort of juxtapositions:

it's JUXTAPOSITIONS, that mean by quick breath, and that you are not yet getting in at least in the verses

8th June 1950 (CC1 86)

Olson recognised, in the "etcs" with which Creeley habitually punctuated his prose, the juxtapositions native to Creeley's

idiomatic "obliquity"; his "touching at angles" becomes, almost unconsciously, "a means to relate not separate". Creeley himself has called his writing "alchemistic . . . any two things are so: made something other: by their/ position together."<sup>43</sup> Olson's 'Introduction to Robert Creeley' notes him making

his meanings clear by how he juxtaposes, correlates, and causes to interact whatever events and persons he chooses to set in motion . . . taking up the push of his own single intelligence to make it, to be - by his conjectures - so powerful . . .<sup>44</sup>

Through conjecture a poet can approach, in the words of Melville which Olson liked to repeat, an "apprehension of the absolute condition of present things."<sup>45</sup> As Creeley has remarked, "All that can inhabit the present, is present."<sup>46</sup> In 1965, he told Linda Wagner that he would "almost amend the [form/content] statement to say, 'Form is what happens.' It's the fact of things in the world, however they are."<sup>47</sup> His words recall Olson, denying that content is "THINGS, the TERMS, but WHAT HAPPENS BETWEEN THINGS."<sup>48</sup> In the kinetics of conjecture lies the energy of "what happens between things". The conjectural method can recreate a poetic "present" which is properly aligned with "a world momentarily informed by what energies inhabit it."<sup>49</sup> As Creeley commented of Olson's poetry:

no form can exist as a possibility apart from that which informs it, the content of which it is the issue. . . .

The poems themselves are, then, the issue of an engagement, of an impingement, a location that is constantly occurring. They are not a decision of forms more than such forms may be apprehended, literally gained, as possible in the actual writing.<sup>50</sup>

Olson argues forcefully for the energy of conjecture in 'Projective Verse', implicit in "the kinetics of the thing [which] must, at all points, be a high energy-construct and, at all points, an energy-discharge." A conjectural methodology is an active one both for reader and writer. In "throwing together", in the creative relating of parts, conjecture forces a reader to "find out" and witness the poem's energies, since "ONE PERCEPTION MUST IMMEDIATELY AND DIRECTLY LEAD TO A FURTHER PERCEPTION." As an activity of thought, conjecture discloses and renews the energy inherent in words, to inform (and make projective) the tensions which the poetic line must seek to contain.

Reviewing Y & X in 1951, Creeley explains "the work the line is doing" in Olson's poetry: it "becomes a way to a movement beyond the single impact of the words which go to make it up, and brings to their logic a force of its own . . . [giving] the base pattern which pulls the poem's juxtaposition of action and thing to a common center. . . . Meaning."<sup>51</sup> Olson suggested that "why such words as juxtaposition, correlation, conjecture figure so much in your thought as mine, is, I take it, a will to understand that mass and motion

can be got to only by leaving position in its changes."<sup>52</sup>

Conjecture coheres through collision: as a method it relates, not separates, just as 'Projective Verse' argues:

objects which occur at every given moment of composition . . . must be handled . . . in such a way that a series of tensions (which they also are) are made to hold, and to hold exactly inside the content and the context of the poem which has forced itself, through the poet and them, into being . . . yet each of these elements of a poem can be allowed to have the play of their separate energies and can be allowed . . . to keep . . . their proper confusions.

Conjecture is also, therefore, central to the poetic "compression" which Olson practised:

I pose you your question:  
shall you uncover honey / where maggots are?

I hunt among stones

'The Kingfishers', CPO 93

Olson's imagination of the poet as "hunter" required the reader to participate in the hunting; to seek beneath "stones" for "honey". The confusing compaction of ideas lures the reader toward discovery.

Among the first signs of Creeley's conjectural prosody is an increasing reluctance to explain. A poem like 'The Epic Expands' self-consciously seeks to unravel itself for the

reader. In contrast, 'Hélas', written by 1951, seems deliberately difficult, introverted and resistant. The same involuted subtleties initially risk defeating us until we notice how the activity of the poem is in fact dependent upon its intricacies, upon our sensing, rather than actually grasping, the relation of its constituent elements.

The poem begins simply enough, exploring a contradiction:

The day is the indefinite. The shapes of light  
have surrounded the senses,  
but will not take them to hand (as would an axe-edge  
take to its stone . . .) The Charm CP 21

Daylight can bewilder the senses, posing an indefinite but (in the next breath as it were) concrete threat. The simile of the axe-edge suggests how the unpleasant "shapes of light" might be menacing the perceptions. Meanwhile the sharpness of the axe-edge is juxtaposed with (but contradicted by) the implication that the senses will be smothered when surrounded by the "shapes of light", and therefore stripped of their natural clarities. Creeley is careful to be inexplicit: he merely implies a relation between the two ideas (and not only through the obvious route of the simile), to which we helplessly respond. The ellipsis which completes the stanza is also inconclusive.

It is interesting that Creeley's poem, in which he is "intuitively" reworking Williams' 'The Wind Increases', also echoes part of Olson's 'La Torre' (written in 1950):

To begin again. Lightning  
 is an axe, transfer  
 of force subject to object is  
 order: destroy!

To destroy  
 is to start again, is a factor of  
 sun, fire is  
 when the sun is out, dowsed

CPO 189

Apparently unaware of this link until Cynthia Edelberg drew his attention to it, Creeley accepts her ironic reading of 'Hélas' ("a parody of Olson's ideal man on the instant, figuring it out, going around in circles") as "unintentional, but nonetheless true." He prefers to recognise Pound as his satirical victim. More revealing is his explanation of reference and allusion as "a trick or at least a device I'd picked up from Olson--its apparent use was that it seemed to me you could hold two things in mind."<sup>53</sup>

Like Olson, Creeley depicts the "transfer / of force subject to object", and uses the "axe" as an image of sudden and violent energy. In his poem, however, he refuses to acknowledge the relentlessly brutal relationship between destruction and creation which Olson implies. Instead, he seems sympathetically anxious to answer our queries, but does so only by articulating them for us:

What, now, more than sight  
 or sound could compel it, drive, new,  
 these mechanics for compulsion

(nothing else but

to bite home! there, where  
 the head could take hold . . .)

Thus, as in Olson's poem, the bewildered reader finds that the onus is on him to deduce, or discover, what he can from the substance of the poem, to "hunt among stones". Again, the stanza is full of implicit parallels. The head, already revolving with confusion and uncertainty seeks to "take hold", recalling the earlier "but will not take them to hand" and the axe-edge taking "to its stone". Each activity is similarly decisive and actual, at odds with the dislocating light of the "indefinite" day. Yet the "mechanics for compulsion" are revealed to be "vague", "nothing", and utterly dependent on the "head" taking hold of its own accord (thus, biting). A weak, revolving head can never tap "the mechanics of compulsion" if it cannot resist the wind on its own initiative and free its senses. Instead, it will continue to "take no edge from the wind, no edge / or delight" and will consequently be deprived of sensual perception. The poem seems secretive and self-absorbed, warning off the negligent or unengaged reader.

Olson received the poem, sent early in 1951, with delight; he seems to perceive no irony, pronouncing it:

most most beautiful, most pure, very grabbing. . . .

What Hélas does, is teach . . . the 'hidden' and 'close' or subtle style of composition." . . . Very quiet and tough. Love it very much . . . It's a beauty. Because, all in you, in, yr process--out of it, straight, all of it, the sounds, the image, the feeling of the most dry nouns.

18th March 1951 (CC5 79-82)

Perhaps his pleasure in Creeley's more reticent approach, what he calls in the same letter "the formal organization that hides, & so reveals, the closeness of, the musick", which seems to point to the activity of Creeley's 'conjectural method', is explained in a different Olson poem:

Why the whys are, in fact  
 (last night, as I sd, he nipped me)  
 because they are facts, they are only clues:  
     It is clues, clues that keep  
     sails taut.                'An Olson and a Bad Thing', CPO 180

Ultimately governed by the "single intelligence", conjecture also helps to endorse the subjective colouring of experience. Creeley insisted to Olson that "one is oneself the content, the SI, that form is the extension, that the conjectural method, as you have kept me conscious of it, is that one most useful."<sup>54</sup> In an earlier letter he had related the single intelligence and conjecture:

a man, in the dark, feels with his hands to find, to find the extent of his possible finding. Which becomes infinite in the case of any ONE man: . . . Man looks for RELATION/ or should, looks for his: PLACE. Looks for fix of forces, as he is, & IS, a part. He plots with his only instrument: conjecture . . . The only way he can USE force, is to so: find it.

3rd October 1950 (CC3 71-72)

As ever, his poetry substantiates his theoretical ideas:

I didn't know what I could do.  
 I have never known it



but in doing found it  
as best I could.

Here I am still,  
waiting for that discovery.

'Here', Pieces CP 438

Creeley summed up the significance of "conjecture" to his poetic idiom in a letter to Olson in which he notes (my italics):

All is intimate, by means of, exact, relation. It's a matter of establishing the relevance by conjecture (which is the plot of variation), to find how, in what way, the exactness of their relations make their force, personal, which is the sense of: limit. Relation brings us to circle, by way of the arc, we begin with, we throw out, to have come back to us: complete . . . limit is not its own definition, but is, instead, a matter of the extent of variations, possible: 3rd October 1950 (CC3 71)

His conjectural method is shown to advantage in two sections of 'Enough' which, taken together, offer a longer and more explicit commentary on how Creeley "feels with his hands" to uncover the all-important sense of relation attained through conjecture:

A distance  
separates, ob-

jectively, as from  
shore, water, an

island projected,  
up, against

the sun, a smoke  
haze, drifting,

reflects  
the golden city

now. Your  
head and hands,

your eyes once  
in words were

lakes but  
this is an ocean

of vagueness. The sun  
goes out. I

try to feel  
where you are.

. . .

5

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.

'Enough' 3 and 5, Words CP 360-62

The poem acknowledges the exacting but persuasive force of "conjecture", which liberates by conjunction. Creeley pretends to depict his (we assume) isolation objectively, like the "distance" across which we glimpse him, "an / island projected". However, this hints that the projection does, after all, bridge the separation. Thus he proffers an image of himself as an island which is not quite isolate, and not quite objective, against the sun's indistinct backdrop,

idealised and made improbable as "the golden city". The poet is again throwing together subjective (romance) and objective (reality), and in the process the two elements, just like the objective details of "your" features, blur into "an ocean / / of vagueness" as hazy as the sun, which now "goes out".

Conjecture makes a way for the subjective to be brought to the objective ("One / thing follows / another"), discloses the single intelligence, and works to cohere all these elements into a whole in which the reader, also by conjecture, can participate: "Make / a picture . . ."

This chapter seeks to show how Olson gently "awakened" Creeley to the inherent qualities and strengths of his own poetic voice, which, even in maturity, continues to depend upon the interaction of form and content, and the questing "open form" approach proposed in Olson's 'Projective Verse'. These principles both illumine and are illumined by the "conjectural method" which Olson induced Creeley to practise. Although Creeley always emphasizes the depth and subtlety of his relationship with Olson, the complexities I have attempted to outline are often overlooked. As writers, the two men were not only intimates but equals, their relationship firmly based on a mutual and unswerving intellectual respect and trust. His letters show that Creeley, always loyal friend rather than blindly devoted acolyte, is well aware of what he owes to Olson:

The wonder to me is, that, say, I can take yr premises, can learn so precisely from you, and just because I do,

just because of it, I am able to make a verse which  
remains distinctly my own. 4th August 1951 (CC7 53)

The scales, however, are evenly balanced. In 'Maximus,  
to himself', Olson ruminates on his debt to Creeley:

But the known?

This, I have had to be given,  
a life, love, and from one man  
the world.

The Maximus Poems 52

For Olson, Creeley was just as valuable and sensitive a  
critic; he was always swift to acknowledge Creeley's role in  
his own work, for example on finishing 'The Gate and the  
Center', "for which you took me by the hand so exactly - I  
thank you. Yr notes of objection, and analysis, were so  
exact, and worked, that all I had to do, actually, was to hew  
to them. It is as fine a critique as I have had the  
experience of being offered, my friend. And I owe this piece  
entirely to yr pertinacity . . . ." <sup>55</sup>

Peers were less ready or willing to understand the mutual  
nature of the relationship. Cid Corman, perhaps tactlessly,  
reported a comment made by Ferrini ("nothing good in  
[Creeley's] work that isn't pure Olson") which incensed  
Creeley:

I hate what belittles 1) that precise influence you are,  
and can be; and as well 2) what can deny me, so very  
coily, the actual fact of my own existence . . . these

idiots will never understand 'influence . . .' You have been the only possible influence, for me; you are the only one who can give me that sense of my own work, which allows me to make it my own work.

19 September 1951 (CC7 172-73)

Olson's response to the outburst is unhesitating and obviously genuinely affectionate:

olson is as much or more influenced by creeley than is creeley influenced . . . i just damn well want you to know from him who is supposed to have such influence on you that it is one of the lifes [sic] of his life that you, one Creeley, so completely do stand up as yrself, whatever, that, it is a straight goddamned miracle to me that, we too, who are alike enough to make the life we've had between us this past year and a half, are so clearly . . . ourselves . . . what you did, then in the cases of the P[rojective V[erse] material beforehand, and the G[ate] & C[enter], made them possible.

22nd September 1951 (CC7 175-76)

The measure of Olson's regard for Creeley can be gauged from perhaps the fullest portrait of all, sent from Black Mountain in an attempt to repair relations, always fragile, between Corman and Creeley in November 1951. Olson's humility leaves little doubt as to the depth and sincerity of his respect. A touching tribute, it is also a piece of typically acute analysis:

Creeley is a subtle & beautiful man, worth more than all the rest of us . . . he is a grave and serious man, & his work of an order that causes him to demand back what he gives: utmost care & openness in discussion of it. On top of that, he has, like any of us to whom the thing is already stretching down to our death, a sense of the responsibility of the act of writing by anyone anywhere: that sense of the public domain that only the most serious men ever have, and to which they give, and sacrifice anything. . . . I'd say, learn from him, and in saying it, can tell you that I have learned more from him than from any living man: he is of that sort of dimension that you can well allow - and gain thereby - that you do learn . . . For he is most knowing, in the very interstices of sentences, he can breathe and feel out of all that is worth hearing, worth grabbing on to, of another man.<sup>56</sup>

Olson never attempted to direct or alter Creeley's emerging poetics; his enabling example only reminded that:

people

don't change. They only stand more  
revealed.

'Maximus, to Gloucester', Letter 2 The Maximus Poems 5

## Notes:-

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2. 'A Sense of Measure,' Athamor 4: 37.
3. The Poet's Craft 165.
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5. 'Robert Creeley and the Tradition,' The Poet's Workshop 119.
6. 'Human Universe,' Selected Writings of Charles Olson, ed. Robert Creeley (New York: New Directions, 1966 edn.) 53.
7. 8th June 1950, CC1 86.
8. 'Letter 5,' The Maximus Poems (New York: Jargon-Corinth, 1960) 17.
9. The Sullen Art 58.
10. 8th June 1950, CC1 85-86.
11. 'With Linda Wagner,' Tales 30.
12. 28th April 1950, CC1 21.
13. 'Human Universe,' Selected Writings 61.
14. 1st June 1950, CC1 67.
15. 31st May 1950, CC1 64.
16. 4th August 1950, CC2 92.
17. 8th June 1950, CC1 85.
18. 'Charles Olson's Masterwork,' Collected Essays 149.
19. 22nd November 1950, CC4 38.
20. 'With Linda Wagner,' Tales 67-68.
21. All references to 'Projective Verse' are taken from Modern Poetry 271-82.
22. Charles Olson: The Scholar's Art (Cambridge M.A: Harvard U P, 1978) 95.
23. 8th June 1950, CC1 89.
24. 25th June 1950, CC2 14.

25. 30th June 1950, CC2 37.
26. 'Stories . . . , ' The Poet's Workshop 38.
27. 'Rereading Robert Creeley,' Boundary 2: 390.
28. The Collected Poems of Charles Olson, ed. George F. Butterick (Berkeley: U California P, 1987) 155-56.
29. 'Rereading Robert Creeley,' Boundary 2: 390.
30. 7th July 1950, CC2 69.
31. 16th February 1952, CC9 127.
32. 5th July 1950, CC2 54.
33. Olson's Push: Origin, Black Mountain and Recent American Poetry (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State U P, 1981) 22-23.
34. 16th February 1952, CC9 127.
35. Tales 117.
36. *ibid.*, 116.
37. 24th May 1950, CC1 41.
38. 'Introduction to Charles Olson: Selected Writings I,' Collected Essays 120.
39. 'Introduction to Charles Olson: Selected Writings II,' Collected Essays 123-24.
40. 'Letter 3,' The Maximus Poems 10.
41. 'Maximus, to Gloucester,' The Maximus Poems 107.
42. 'Some Notes on Olson's Maximus,' Collected Essays 112.
43. 5th September 1950, CC2 122.
44. 'Introduction to Robert Creeley,' Life and Work 133.
45. Cited as letter from Melville to Hawthorne (1851) in 'Equal, That is, to the Real Itself,' Selected Writings 47.
46. 'Some Notes on Olson's Maximus,' Collected Essays 114.
47. 'With Linda Wagner,' Tales 30.
48. 1st October 1950, CC3 62.
49. 'Introduction to The New Writing in the USA,' Collected Essays 89.



50. 'Introduction to Charles Olson's Maximus,' Collected Essays 119.
51. 'Charles Olson: Y & X,' Collected Essays 98.
52. 26th June 1951, CC6 76.
53. Appendix, Robert Creeley's Poetry 161-62.
54. 9th October 1951, CC8 28.
55. 1st March 1951, CC5 44.
56. 24th November 1951, Charles Olson and Cid Corman: Complete Correspondence 1950-1964 vol. 1, ed. George Evans (Orono ME: National Poetry Foundation, U of Maine at Orono, 1987) 219.

## Chapter 6: "enclosing the closed in the open"

### Creeley and Duncan

Duncan is a companion who has been with me in a specific way. I've always felt very close to him as a writer, although our modes of writing must seem to readers quite apart. I tend to write very sparely, and Robert has a lovely, relaxed and generous kind of movement. But . . . [he] showed me kinds of content that I hadn't previously recognized.<sup>1</sup>

The 'Coda' of Mirrors is a poem entitled 'Oh Max', prompted by the death of Max Finstein, Creeley's friend and contemporary. Coda, literally "a tail", is a musical term denoting a "passage of greater or less length at the end of a movement to round it off more effectively."<sup>2</sup> Nearing the poem's (and the book's) end, the poet ironically observes his own incapacity for conclusion:

Can't leave, never could,  
without more, just  
one more

for the road.  
Time to go makes  
me stay--

Mirrors 88

In his reluctance to accept that it is, finally, "Time to go", and in trying to delay the poem's closure, Creeley offers his friend a lingering memorial. In 'The Writer's Situation,' he recalls Finstein saying "that one is a poet in the act of writing, not otherwise".<sup>3</sup> Creeley's final tribute only



"Yes, I was afraid / of not seeing you again, of being / taken away, not / of dying". Amidst heavy negatives, the ceaseless cycle of life in death is made hopeful by the recurrence embodied in the poem's process. The diction emphasises this, central words leading one to another: "real" makes a smooth transition into "realm", then suggests "thrall" and "eternal" in a movement which halts finally in "arrest". Similarly, "stirs" introduces "turns in turn". The fluidly orchestrated oppositions of night and day, motion (wind) and stillness, death and life, sleep and waking, which conclude in the contradictory "eternal arrest", add to the layering and density of the passage. The final words, apparently immobile, paradoxically project openendedly into the continuous present to make their conclusion, like 'Oh Max', suggestively irresolute.

Duncan's poetry imagines and explores "a cosmos that's perennial and that's destroyed--the law constantly destroys the law, which is not a dogma but a thing devouring itself and undoing itself, and you will find that in my poetry I undo my propositions."<sup>6</sup> Contemplating what he calls Duncan's "incredible cosmic consciousness", Creeley decides:

Probably it was the West, those very vast sunsets and so on. . . . I've always felt that [his] ability to realize an incredible compass of reality was frankly more expansive than [Olson]'s[,] . . . Robert's are really more like exfoliating this extraordinary extending world, like Whitman's.<sup>7</sup>

And of Whitman, Creeley remarks elsewhere:

I like too that sense of the spherical, which does not locate itself upon a point nor have the strict condition of the linear but rather is at all 'points' the possibility of all that it is.<sup>8</sup>

Creeley's increasing consciousness of, and interest in, the iteration which 'Oh Max' reflects, largely derives from Duncan's poetics, ceaselessly "clockwise and counterclockwise turning".<sup>9</sup>

#### I Opening the Field

One wants to make clear the size he constitutes, both in thinking and in practice . . .<sup>10</sup>

Contradiction and paradox flourish in Duncan's often bewilderingly syncretic poetics:

I have come not to resolve or eliminate any of the old conflicting elements of my work but to imagine them now as contrasts of a field of composition in which I develop an ever-shifting possibility of the poet I am--at once a made-up thing and at the same time a depth in which my being is--the poems not ends in themselves but forms arising from the final intention of the whole in which they have their form and in turn giving rise anew to that intention.<sup>11</sup>

James Mersmann has written about the pressure that Duncan's challenging poetry exerts on the all too limited vocabularies of his hapless commentators.<sup>12</sup> Creeley, though, depicts Duncan with typically economic eloquence: "Because such work as his is all a life, a world and in it, miraculously, all opens, is possible, is there, or not there, meets with limit, breaks apart--to live."<sup>13</sup>

As Creeley knew, Duncan's delight in "contrasts" was not simply an intellectual and aesthetic impulse, embedded in his poetic agenda and realized in his prosodic practice; his consciousness of plurality invaded every aspect of his thought and lifestyle. Being cross-eyed, he could even insist that "whenever I see with both eyes I have contradictory evidence in sight".<sup>14</sup> His remarkable relationship with Creeley, which was important to both men, seems only to have been nourished by the inauspiciously large "contrasts" which first divided them. Sensing the "distance, anyhow, between what I would be after & what I take him to be", Creeley was tellingly equivocal on encountering Duncan's writing: "Reading it, of two minds, to put it that dully."<sup>15</sup>

Brought together by Olson, who had met Duncan in Berkeley in 1947, the initial "distance" between Creeley and Duncan was considerable. Gregarious and self-assured, Duncan thrived on the diversity of the West Coast, rooted in a community such as Creeley, isolated in New Hampshire, then France and Mallorca, had never known. A natural self-publicist, Duncan was not shy

of confrontation; tolerant himself, he sought tolerance in return. The disparities between his poetics and Creeley's were immediate: the flamboyant immodesty of his writing revealed his libertarian instinct for the radical. Where Creeley was dogged, careful, hungry for precision, Duncan was effusive, casually generous and eclectic.

Duncan's 'Heavenly City, Earthly City' (1947), for example, is highly wrought, the tone revelatory, the inflated diction as elaborate as the aesthetics under discussion.<sup>16</sup> Compared to Creeley's characteristic lightness of touch, it smacks of mannered bombast. However, the poem is less pretentious than it seems: the central ideas are both giant (the eternal dualism of the cosmos and the resistant mystique of beauty) and intensely, poignantly personal (homoerotic). If Duncan's mythopoeic poetics suggested an unseemly pleasure in the esoteric, unlike Creeley he was never embarrassed by his own ambitions. Creeley recalls a moment from their first meeting (in Mallorca) with amusement:

We were standing in this trolley with all the people banging around us. I remember Robert . . . turned to me at one point and said, "You're not interested in history, are you?" I kept saying, "Well, gee, I ought to be. And I want to be. But I guess I'm not. You know, I'd like to be but, no, that's probably true."<sup>17</sup>

Fascinated by the archaic and the occult, Duncan's poetics deliberately sought out and dwelt upon the ancient

traditions which weld the spiritual to the historic and animate the cultural. He founded, as Ralph Mills says, "the shape of a mythology both personal and cosmic".<sup>18</sup> Such largesse only dismayed Creeley at first. He commented to Olson, in 1951, of 'Song of the Borderguard':

I didn't make the content, at all, . . . I like his verse, the way of some of it very much; . . . I have the sense of repetitions, and I can't afford them, . . . he's good, damnit, I know that from reading the early stuff, and this too, for that matter; but I don't make the material, here . . . 31st November 1951 (CC8 209-11)

He particularly distrusted Duncan's high-flown rhetoric, and the didactic

use of recurrence, I mean, of the things so coming back, words & their substance, with the effected change. There is a touch, I think, of complacence in his use of such; that it is not an actual touch, each time, but too much the blackboard & pointer, say . . .

13th December 1951 (CC8 246)

Despite his reservations, Creeley could appreciate Duncan's prosodic technique:

Have very honest respect for his line . . . his own sense of craft, call it, but the damn head seems awfully fuzzed most times. Or perhaps I just can't make it.

24th January 1952 (CC9 58)



Even Olson found Duncan a "puzzling lad".<sup>19</sup> He blamed the "diehard, axehead, Puritan in me" for his misgivings ("it is when men, Gerhardt or Duncan, take up continents as their subjects . . . that I am curiously provoked").<sup>20</sup> Don Byrd puts Olson's response down to the inevitable conflict between "the fictionalist [Duncan] versus the literalist [Olson]".<sup>21</sup> However, Olson could also foresee that "the three of us together, represent a push" and it proved to be in him that the two younger poets found a lasting common ground.<sup>22</sup>

The complexity of Duncan's response to Olson is germane to any understanding of what he himself brought to Creeley's writing. For Duncan, Olson was a "creative genius":

Since the appearance of Origin I . . . , my vision of what the poem is to do has been transformed, reorganized around a constellation of new poets . . . in which Olson's work takes the lead . . . has been an outrider, my own Orion.<sup>23</sup>

Having initially mistaken 'Projective Verse' for a plea for reading poetry aloud ("I thought, 'Well, they are catching up in the East'"), Duncan came to see how Olson's manifesto encompassed his own.<sup>24</sup> Composition by field, relaxing the constriction of linear thought to transform the poem from an exclusive dialectic, a progression, into an inclusive and limitless process, could embrace Duncan's "arts of the caprice (which underlie all essential bohemianism)" as readily as

Olson's epic empiricism and Creeley's self-absorbed particularism.<sup>25</sup>

However, Duncan's response to 'Projective Verse', compressed into his own essay, 'Towards An Open Universe', was not straightforward. In an interview many years later, he defended his modification of Olson's ideas:

I'm not going to take Charles's alternatives, I'm not going to take the closed form versus the open form because I want both, and I'll make open forms that have closed forms in them and closed forms that are open.<sup>26</sup>

Duncan's reading dilated Olson's conceptual "field", since "Not one but many energies shape the field."<sup>27</sup> As poet, "participant in the larger force", a mythic, historiographic, even Gnostic curiosity was justified: "the projective act, which is the artist's act in the larger field of objects, leads to dimensions larger than the man."<sup>28</sup> As Creeley puts it, "there is something about the will to purity that really bores him".<sup>29</sup>

Where Creeley's "field" was an intensely private emotional landscape, Duncan's poetics reached beyond the "field" of poet ("artist of abundancies") or poem, just as "the galaxies drift outward to enter a new universe".<sup>30</sup> His conception of an "open universe" could omit or exclude nothing, "the man" no more than his words:

Olson . . . has made us aware that not only heart and brain and the sensory skin but all the internal organs, the totality of the body, is involved in the act of a poem, so that the organization of words, an invisible body, bears the imprint of the physical man . . . the finest imprint that we feel in our own bodies as a tonic consonance and dissonance . . .<sup>31</sup>

Olson's starting point, that "objects which occur at every given moment of composition (of recognition, we can call it) are, can be, must be treated exactly as they do occur therein and not by any ideas or preconceptions from outside the poem", was therefore extended by Duncan to permit "the play of their separate energies and . . . proper confusions".<sup>32</sup> A process which he called "aperiodicity"

pictures the poem as an organic crystallization, its germ or law or form being immanent in the immediate life, what is happening, . . . fulfilled only in the whole work, the apprehension of the work's 'life' springing anew in each realization, each immediate cell.<sup>33</sup>

Thus Duncan arrived, by a very different route, at a sense of form which was peculiarly akin to Creeley's: in "the co-inherence of all parts and all other parts . . . a poem is discovering the actuality of the form it is anyway".<sup>34</sup> His acquisitive poetics marshalled traditionally "closed" forms into agglomerative "polysemous", "multiphasic" poems which reproduced the multi-media collages created by his partner,

artist Jess Collins.<sup>35</sup> This drove Olson to warn, in 'Against Wisdom as Such' in 1954, that "the poet cannot afford to traffick in any other 'sign' than his one, his self, the man or woman he is".<sup>36</sup> But even Olson had finally to concede that "Duncan never has any trouble stealing because he has a visional experience which prompts him to reach out for just what he knows he wants."<sup>37</sup> Duncan was still insisting on his right to do so in Bending the Bow, a collection published in 1971, the year after Olson's early death:

Charles Olson, how strangely I have altered and used and would keep the wisdom, the man, the self I choose, after your warnings against wisdom as such, as if it were "solely the issue of the time of the moment of its creation, not any ultimate except what the author in his heat and that instant in its solidity yield."

Bending the Bow 38-39

The central tenets of 'Towards an Open Universe' are, of course, borne out by Duncan's poems. One of Creeley's favourites is the broodingly retrospective 'Often I am Permitted to Return to a Meadow', which opens the earliest of Duncan's major collections, The Opening of the Field. As the (titular) first line promises, the poem smoothly regenerates itself in wondering self-discovery:

'Often I Am Permitted to Return to a Meadow'

as if it were a scene made-up by the mind,  
that is not mine, but is a made place,

that is mine,

The Opening of the Field 7

The elusive meadow is constructed entirely from reiterated "recurrence[s]"; it is remembered or imagined as an insubstantial but nevertheless physically "made place, created by light / wherefrom the shadows that are forms fall." The poem also embraces larger circularities: the compass of the sky extends from western to eastern horizons to suggest the blending of sunset with sunrise, and the meadow seems timeless, suffused with the age-old innocence of the children at play:

It is only a dream of the grass blowing  
east against the source of the sun  
in an hour before the sun's going down

whose secret we see in a children's game  
of ring a round of roses told.

The game makes a "ring" which is reflected in the familiarly repetitive words chanted by the children, unaware that they are recreating, as they play, a living but historic memorial. 'Often I am Permitted' surrenders itself to new interpretations, like the blowing grass which points towards "the source of the sun" even as it sets. The poem demonstrates how, for Duncan,

Facts or images are not true for me until in them I begin  
to feel the patterning they are true to, the melody they  
belong to. Once this feeling of a patterning begins, the  
work comes to one's hand; the form of the whole can be  
felt emerging in the fittingness of each passage. I am  
no longer thinking or proposing ideas but working with  
them, seeing with them as I work.<sup>38</sup>

In this poem's visionary escapism, we can suddenly see how "to become the poet means to be aware of creation, creature and creator coinherent in the one event".<sup>39</sup> Like the grass, the children become representative of the sunrise of which the poet dreams, their meadow his remembered childhood, their recurring song changelessly exclusive ("secret"), sadly yet hopefully prescient of time's regenerative patterns.

Duncan and Creeley began corresponding in 1954, the year in which Creeley also met Olson and taught, briefly, at Black Mountain College.<sup>40</sup> In the following March, after Creeley had returned home to Mallorca and his foundering marriage, Duncan and his partner Jess Collins arrived, intending to settle on the island. Understandably, Creeley had anticipated their eventual meeting with nervous diffidence:

I was intimidated by what my own limited sense of the world had felt, you know, a confident gay person from San Francisco, what he would be or have in mind.<sup>41</sup>

He was all too aware of his distance from Duncan's exotic lifestyle, as well as their inevitable differences of temperament, of age and experience, of expectation, and moreover, of idiom:

Robert was so sophisticated to my imagination, in my imagination, . . . he had a rhetoric . . . I was a classic, pinched, you know, I was very tight-fisted in those days, and I sure didn't, you know, go with Robert's melodramatic openings.<sup>42</sup>

However, he needn't have worried; today, he recalls with pleasure the strength of a bond which was instantly obvious: "Oh yes, immediately, immediately. We really, I felt utterly at home, the minute we laid eyes on each other." Perhaps most reassuringly of all, the two men even shared a disability:

I was very intrigued when we met . . . he had this wild . . . terrible, one eye was cast in a way which was partially cross-eyed, or could have appeared so; he was really fascinated by his eyes, and I of course with one eye was more than usually so.<sup>43</sup>

Mutual respect quickly deepened into close friendship, played out against the unhappy backdrop of the Creeleys' domestic turmoil. When the marriage finally collapsed in the early summer Creeley fled back to Black Mountain, thereby renewing a correspondence which lasted until Duncan's death. In view of the emotional upheaval of the mid-fifties, it is perhaps unsurprising that Creeley's poetic idiom began to show signs of relaxing even as he departed from Mallorca. He seems to have found in Duncan poetic stimulation, as well as continual emotional guidance and support, in the restless and dislocated years which followed. Sometimes in letters, the two writers can sound very alike:

Its the insistence, the inevitability, the not-to-be-changed gesture of it that I long for . . . I mean that the roaring old mess of me, or of you, of a man - is so absolute a fact that it is a point from which to move, or

in spite of which to move. . . . That becomes a form, a decision.<sup>44</sup>

In his reply, Creeley excitedly repeats another of Duncan's comments (taken from the same letter) which strikes him: "what's on my mind is that to make it anew, and keep what is demanded a vastest field of life for oneself - not as self but as a man, any man . . ."<sup>45</sup> Gently prompted by Duncan, he appears to be loosening his hold on particularity.

In the vulnerable summer months of 1955 which would prove so significant in retrospect, Creeley found new resources in Duncan's poetry. Some years later, he remarked, "I'm trying to think of which poems of yours haven't in one sense or another influenced me, and its not damn well easy", and went on to confess, for example, to having been influenced by really all of 'The Venice Poem' very very deeply, since it was found then in that viciously open time and so had such close terms of feeling as I read it-- . . . if I had to select a section of it most deeply now in me, it would be "Imaginary Instructions" which involves me in all possible senses; but then equally the "Coda" in the same sense.<sup>46</sup>

The agonised speaker of 'The Venice Poem' is condemned to revisit, in self-investigation, that Venetian "vision of rare / exultant cold love, / a monument that / . . . gives despair words", a rite of passage in which he is discomforted to find



himself following Othello's tragic lead.<sup>47</sup> Penitent, he seeks atonement by chanting a repetitive and pointless liturgy of self-castigation: "My jealousy is like a jewel, . . . / cruel and absolute, from which comes my music,". Full of refrain and echo, this long poem is richly lyrical, undercutting its rigorously confessional tone, as if, in plundering the colour and beauty of language, the poet is resolutely refusing to qualify or curb his art.

In 'Imaginary Instructions', the second part which Creeley particularly singles out, Duncan can be found casually sketching his own impotence, with ironic, self-critical pride:

And I can sit upon a throne,  
     cross-eyed king of one thousand lines.  
 In the mirror of poetry I conjure  
     luxuries I can ill afford      The First Decade [FD] 88

This section explores the violent dichotomies which collide in "Love", seen as an emotional maelstrom in which sensuality and vulgarity, tenderness and brutality, ecstasy and despair are whipped up uncontrollably together, "in so many forms, glances, never at rest", to exhilarate and simultaneously destroy its victims. In the chaotic energies of this part, Duncan both celebrates and challenges Love, as he glories in and ridicules the power of human emotion; no wonder Creeley, raw from his own emotional failures, responded.

The poem concludes with 'Coda', in which images from earlier sections are delicately interwoven and juxtaposed, their rehearsal lending the poem an ever-deeper intensity.

The allied beauties of sapphire, rose, and stone are cruel:  
 "Again and again all things return / into the faithless and  
 unfair." The poem derides itself as "doggerel"; its language,  
 in the hands of the "violent" artist, violates those very  
 emotions which the poet attempts to dramatise:

Driven by the language itself  
 alive with such forces,  
 he violates, desiring to move  
 the deepest sound.

FD 102

The sense of controlled frenzy which compels the poem's 'Coda'  
 towards its somehow exultant end is seen to liberate: "but  
 here, here, / all felt things are / permitted to speak."  
 Concluding, the poem's sing-song cadences soothe, even as  
 Duncan returns to the entrancingly cruel beauty of the  
 sapphire, magnetic and repellent.

As Creeley learned to admire the constant "recurrence"  
 which characterised Duncan's poetics, he began to employ it  
 for himself. Soon after leaving Mallorca, he produced this  
 pained reflection upon his ruptured marriage:

She stood at the window. There was  
 a sound, a light.  
 She stood at the window. A face.

Was it that she was looking for,  
 he thought. Was it that  
 she was looking for. He said,

turn from it, turn  
 from it. The pain is  
 not unpainful. Turn from it.

The act of her anger, of  
 the anger she felt then,  
 not turning to him.

'Goodbye', For Love CP 159

Duncan's ideas have been refined into this uncluttered outline: where repetitions lend 'The Venice Poem' both langour and violence, the continually "turning" diction of 'Goodbye' seems desperate, a final bid for articulacy and strength of purpose. He was, Creeley explained when he sent the poem to Duncan, attempting to recreate

the form of it, what it is between us, . . . I felt the form so much in these repetitions. I had your "turn, turn" from 'The Venice Poem', I read that over and over, again, on the boat coming, and it was so much the form which made even the apparently impossible things I was confronted with cohere. In any case, the form here relieves me, very much.<sup>48</sup>

There is none of the beauty of Duncan's larger landscape here, no monuments or bells, simply the two sharply drawn figures, described by their externalised emotions rather than any physical detail. The poem's frigid atmosphere is made palpable by the nervous phrasing of short or incomplete sentences fragmented by line breaks. Creeley's incoherent stammering leaves the poem full of eloquent gaps but bare of descriptive ornament. The "face" is also unadorned, its severity framed by the window, the words aptly marooned in their own tiny "sentence" at the end of the third line. The woman's remote silence emphasizes his repeated pleas that she "turn from it". Her anger is expressed by the heavily stressed negative ("Not turning to him"), her rebuttal of him physical as well as emotional.

Even before they had met, Creeley was acknowledging Duncan's effect upon him:

Your forms are very damn provocative, always. You seem a very precise man, the virtue being you're as precise in this matter of so-called 'humor' as in the also so-called 'seriousness'.<sup>49</sup>

Humour, sometimes bantering, often thinly disguised despair, began increasingly to animate Creeley's less and less "tight-fisted" poetics, as in the droll colloquialisms of 'Ballad Of The Despairing Husband', written in October 1955, or the quick bitterness of 'A Wicker Basket' which appeared in Black Mountain Review in the summer of 1955. Duncan admires both.<sup>50</sup> In the latter the obvious end-rhymes seem careless, like any rowdy drinking-song, and yet the well-observed "hands like a walrus, / and a face like a barndoor's," plays a sharp intelligence off against the stupefaction. Creeley, without excusing his predictable and clumsy attempts at survival ("I make it as I can"), remains aware of his own absurdity even as he loses his perspective on reality, as in the second line of this stanza which somehow gets out of control and escapes:

There are very huge stars, man, in the sky,  
and from somewhere very far off someone hands me a slice  
apple pie, /of  
with a gob of white, white ice cream on top of it,  
and I eat it-- 'A Wicker Basket', For Love CP 161

His wicker basket has been contrived as protection, from his own inadequacies and from the ridicule he deserves; he is only "making it" as best he can.

Soon after separating from his family, Creeley left an equally bleak future at Black Mountain for New Mexico. He says: "it just seemed as though all was pretty much collapsed . . . I wanted a new condition and so went west, where I'd never been, to see if that might be an answer." Eventually, he reached San Francisco

in restless state . . . being really at odds with much in my life . . . in the spring of 1956--and for a writer there was really no place that could have been quite like it, just at this time.<sup>51</sup>

The West Coast proved to be the "answer"; Creeley, immediately and sympathetically absorbed into the artistic community in which Duncan moved, found the sociable lifestyle, which until now he had consciously sought to avoid, startling and stimulating. The writers featured in the final issue of Black Mountain Review represent the invigorating circle into which he was plunged: Jack Kerouac, Madeleine Gleason, James Broughton, Allen Ginsberg, Phil Whalen, Michael McClure, Lee Burroughs and Gary Snyder. As his self-confidence was restored so, Creeley wrote to Duncan, "the writing begins to become clearer and clearer."<sup>52</sup> He felt liberated:

I mean suddenly to find people in the world that were not so much like oneself but . . . recognized what I was doing and thought it was terrific and liked it.<sup>53</sup>

Although Creeley often refers to "the poet's locale", he always refutes any notion of specificity which this might suggest:

I want to avoid "a" sense of "the" poet's locale . . . I mean something like where "the heart finds rest," as Duncan would say. I mean that place where a sense of defensiveness or insecurity and all the other complexes of response to place can finally be dropped.<sup>54</sup>

San Francisco, in late 1955 and 1956, provided an unquestioning, disinterested environment in which Creeley finally learned to drop the habitual "defensiveness" and "insecurity" in which he had been taking refuge. An increasingly relaxed poetic idiom now began to reflect the *laissez-faire* attitude of his newly hedonistic lifestyle (he had a shortlived but passionate affair with Kenneth Rexroth's wife Marthe which particularly alarmed Duncan, before returning to New Mexico where he met and soon after married his second wife, artist Bobbie Louise Hawkins).

Traces of what Michael Davidson calls the "plural narratives" of the West Coast artistic community were now betrayed in Creeley's casual (and effective) appropriation of

stray lines from other poets.<sup>55</sup> This was Duncan's habit, of course: "like a magpie or jackdaw - anything that glittered he brought home".<sup>56</sup> Creeley had borrowed before, respectfully, from Crane ("into the company of love") and Williams ("the stain of love is upon the world!") for example. Now, 'Just Friends' apes Whitman to expose domestic contentment as a fragile illusion enjoyed by those whose naivety clouds their perception of the harsher reality, and 'The Bed' parodies Tennyson, bringing a ruthlessly flippant emphasis to the poem's bitterness and cynical sense of futility.

The loosening of Creeley's "tight-fisted" prosody from 1955 onwards eventually resulted in A Form of Women (1959). In a perceptive response to the appearance of this collection, Duncan garnered lines from those poems which were, for him, the "primaries": 'The Hill', 'Heroes', 'A Gift Of Great Value', 'The Three Ladies', 'The Door' and 'The Hero'.<sup>57</sup> For each choice, his letter intelligently demonstrates "What a key . . . this 'backward' movement is". From the introspective 'The Hill' (1958), he quotes "to what it was had once turned me backwards", to highlight the reversals of the poem: the head as "cruel instrument" rather than instructor; the release of a confession from which you can "walk away, / to come again"; the threatened reappearance of "that form" and the overwhelming "perversity, the willful, / the magnanimous cruelty" rising from, and dominating, the landscape of the speaker's character, "like a hill."

In 'Going To Bed', tormented by his own image (a "dim shattering character of nerves") Creeley struggles physically with his insecurities, aware that his self-defeating dilemmas (like closing the door to let the cat out) are universal. Perhaps impressed by the simple aphoristic force of the paradox, Duncan isolates: "Oh! Look forward to get back." Conversely, in 'And', an inscrutable sketch about the implacable survival of ancestry, Creeley reaches backwards in order to move forward: "She" seems compelled by her family to pursue, as if to release or escape, her history. Again, Duncan's letter quotes, "she lifted it to dig / / back". The stanza break suggests the depth, and the immediate line break which precedes the repetition "and back" suggests a digging motion. In 'Lady Bird', he enjoys the comment "now she cries, and all things turn backward".

Duncan's perspicacity is typical: these poems show Creeley edging closer to the larger, grimmer paradoxes to which he continues to be drawn: the endings implicit in any beginning, the beginnings which lie in any ending; the renewing circularities of human relationships, always framed and governed by the inescapable cycle of Time. In tentatively starting to explore such questions, as Duncan seems to have sensed, Creeley was now "turning" (with habitual caution) towards a broader, if nonetheless private, poetic field.



## II Opening 'The Door'

Robert . . . was real. He created what I'll call a very active context, and my poem 'The Door' is dedicated to him for that reason plus the fact that he's a dear, dear friend.<sup>58</sup>

In 'The Door', among the finest of Creeley's poems, Duncan himself is implicitly pictured as a literal "door", "opening" the "field" of Creeley's thought. Coincidentally in the same year as the conversation with Jerome Mazzaro (above), Peter Quartermain remembers Duncan describing poetry "as a door (the visionary trip, the world of the poem)".<sup>59</sup> Unusually long for Creeley, 'The Door' gracefully combines characteristically delicate diction with "visionary" breadth, chronicling his longing for a romantic world, which he can never quite reach, alongside the prosaic realities he is crying to escape. As he says, this poem's "sequence is determined by an almost rhetorical term of argument", which seems reminiscent of Duncan's poetics:<sup>60</sup>

It is hard going to the door  
cut so small in the wall where  
the vision which echoes loneliness  
brings a scent of wild flowers in a wood. For Love CP 199

The eponymous "door" opens onto the poem itself and onto the otherworldliness of the garden glimpsed beyond it, emphasizing how Creeley's sense of open/closed form is, as he tells Faas, "like Duncan's sense of enclosing the closed in the open . . .".<sup>61</sup> This door frustrates where it invites, "cut

so small in the wall": swinging between the two worlds, it divides yet links. Creeley is tempted by the "scent" of the romantic world denied him, longing for the freedom it offers, he knows that he risks cheating himself: "I walked away from myself." Although he denigrates a mind which, if fallible, is at least down-to-earth and "feels the ground", in trying to escape his own reality he sacrifices integrity along with his identity and knows it.

Sending 'The Door' to Duncan (the day after it was written), Creeley described the poem as

a long rambling 'sight' of the Lady, influenced like they say I think by you, . . . . I am at a loss to figure how much digression can be, abruptly, allowed etc. I may run off at the ends all over the place. But the form no matter allows me to play rhymes the way I enjoy to, loosely, and 'punctually' to obtain insistence, etc. The thing started after breakfast . . . , talking of 'images', and this one I always remember, I must have had it as a kid, etc., of the little door in the wall, and the garden one could see through it, all sunlight, and the sounds of voices and happiness, and the warmth of a woman there too. Like those doors in Alice In Wonderland, I think. A sort of peep hole into heaven. The distance to it I've always felt as a long stone floor, probably flagstones, of a substantial grey - going with three legged stools, and stone fireplaces - and the flat wall, in which the little door is.<sup>62</sup>

mirror), but one must spin around to see it, as participant denied the true perspective of an observer. Even the reflection in the mirror is of light reversed, of shadow, which can itself never be caught, and will always be "behind you". This stanza briefly prefigures the concerns of Creeley's mature work, abbreviated in the titles of his most recent collections: Echoes, Memory Gardens, Mirrors, Windows.

With renewed courage, Creeley now remonstrates more forcefully with his Muse and, as if his sight suddenly clears, she is revealed as immediate, human, fallible, with her own fears of inadequacy. Even so, he is powerless, his resentment repeatedly frustrated by a 'Lady' who is always wily, unpredictable and supreme. Painfully, resigned to defeat, Creeley dispiritedly gives up:

Running to the door, I ran down  
as a clock runs down. Walked backwards,  
stumbled, sat down  
hard on the floor near the wall.

The stanza plays a sense of limit ("door", "sat down / hard", "floor", "wall") off against the tail-chasing circlings of "Running" and the puns on "ran down". Creeley's physical impotence is painful: "hard" dramatizes the resistance of both floor and wall. "How absurd, how vicious" is the futile instinct for love and companionship: "For that one sings, one / writes the spring poem, one goes on walking". He is condemned to "stumble on after" the Lady, vainly trying to gain access to the garden on his own terms and without

does nothing to relieve Creeley's isolation but only prompts him (Duncan-like, and with aptly elevated diction) to confront the broader dilemma at the heart of human existence, expressed in a highly condensed phrase at once menacingly destructive ("Dead night") and constructive ("remembers").

The poem gathers pace: if December, a "ritual of dismemberment" represents gruesome old age and eventual mortality, it also heralds rebirth:

Mighty magic is a mother,  
in her there is another issue  
of fixture, repeated form, the race renewal,  
the charge of the command.

Creeley must accept that the "lady" is also a manifestation of Nature "her"self, omnipotent and mysterious, in "charge of the command". The third line seems to crescendo, as if in rising panic, towards the heavy finality of the fourth: the condition of life and death is inescapable. Creeley seems physically trapped, enveloped by the reverberating comprehension of his (abstract) vision:

The garden echoes across the room.  
It is fixed in the wall like a mirror  
that faces a window behind you  
and reflects the shadows.

CP 200

The garden's image seems to surround "you" wherever "you" stand in this room, thrown back (like an echo) by every wall, and unrelieved by the deliberately unbroken syntax. In the room he describes, there is always a view (a window or a

mirror), but one must spin around to see it, as participant denied the true perspective of an observer. Even the reflection in the mirror is of light reversed, of shadow, which can itself never be caught, and will always be "behind you". This stanza briefly prefigures the concerns of Creeley's mature work, abbreviated in the titles of his most recent collections: Echoes, Memory Gardens, Mirrors, Windows.

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disrupting the tranquil patterning of history which he longs to witness. The only way is through the Muse, 'the door', which exchanges the real, loveless, solitary world for an extraordinary, romantic and beautiful otherworld: "the garden in the sunlight". He wavers, ever conscious of his mortality: "I will go on talking forever. / / I will never get there," but tempted, nevertheless:

I will go to the garden.  
I will be a romantic. I will sell  
myself in hell,  
in heaven also I will be.

CP 201

In conclusion, 'The Door' is left temptingly ajar, opening onto beckoning and sunlit possibility. We recall 'Oh Max' as we guess at the significance of the Lady's diminishing skirt, the word "beyond" finally suspending the door's closure by drawing the mind's eye, like Creeley's, farther than the poem's boundaries. Resolved only in the continued opposition of its paradoxes, openness and closure held in an uneasy balance, the poem leaves us weighing hell against heaven; reality against imagination; present against past; darkness against sunlight; love against lovelessness; companionship against loneliness; liberty against confinement. We might also be reminded of Duncan's love of contradiction:

Hermes, god of poets and thieves, lock-picker then,  
invented the bow and the lyre to confound Apollo, god of  
poetry. "They do not apprehend how being at variance it  
agrees with itself," Heraklitus observes: "there is a  
connexion working in both directions."

The part in its fitting does not lock but unlocks;  
 what was closed is open. Bending the Bow iv

Michael Davidson has suggested that "Duncan's literary genealogy conflicts with [Creeley's] . . . in its feminization of tradition [since] alliances with forbears like Gertrude Stein, H.D, Marianne Moore, Dame Edith Sitwell, Dorothy Richardson, Virginia Woolf, and others conflict with Olson and Creeley's predominantly male line".<sup>64</sup> On the contrary, perhaps Duncan's "line" helps to explain his uncanny sensitivity to Creeley's work. He knew Creeley's prosody intimately enough to admit that his own inclination "to struggle toward your cool, easy, hot, strenuous line" would be doomed: "you have, as in drawing Matisse did, a natural delight in the line that is not to be struggled for."<sup>65</sup> Instead, Duncan borrowed. Among others, there is an explicit tribute to Creeley's 'The Door' in 'A Dancing Concerning A Form Of Women', about "a bold Lady":

Now how good of my friend  
 to go  
 wholly  
 enthrall'd to Her

and yet to remember  
 cannily  
 while dancing  
 to reach round

forward to what  
 is behind and to find

Roots and Branches 25

Although Duncan gestures at those circling intentions by which Creeley seems baffled, his conclusion "reach[es]" towards an unclarified, enabling sense of openness, simply "to find".

The earliest of such tributes occurs in 'A Storm Of White', an elegy for a much-loved cat. The poem concludes with the final line of Creeley's 'Heroes': "Death also / can still propose the old labors." Written in the same year as 'The Door', 'Heroes' treats the prophetic role of the poet, marvelling that words can outlast a life. While neither Hercules, Aeneas, Virgil nor finally Robert Creeley, can cheat death, their art (and heroism) may: "yet to come back, as he said, hoc opus, hic labor est", the line which Duncan also quoted among the selections from A Form of Women. In Duncan's poem, a storm prompts a meditation on the black and white of nature and the "line of outliving", the invulnerable supremacy of death brought painfully home by the cat's loss. Creeley's epigram now becomes a moving epitaph for the "dear gray cat" which teaches that the inevitable destruction of death should be constructive of new "labors".

As Sherman Paul notes in his exploration of their shared romantic impulse, Duncan's respect for Creeley is doubly commemorated in 'Thank You For Love':

the title naming book and act, paying tribute to  
Creeley's prosody by adopting it as his own--the poem  
itself ending in an echo of Creeley's concluding lines  
("Into the company of love / it all returns").<sup>66</sup>



If further proof of Duncan's regard for Creeley's work were necessary, his (as ever densely articulate) reference for Creeley's application for a Guggenheim is convincing:

My "first-hand" information concerning Robert Creeley comes first from my searching out his work wherever I could . . . and then after my meeting him from continued conversations and correspondence. The intensity of both experiences for me--that my work and my life have been vitally touchd--makes it difficult indeed merely to "report" on his qualifications. I realize that it is "abilities" and "accomplishments" which you are concerned with and below I give account of these as I have seen them. Yet if I am to make a full statement I must mark--what you do not ask about--his genius. There are many artists of "high creative abilities" who are without genius. "Ability" is an affair of practice; "genius" is the spirit of the work. What is most important to me is that in Creeley's work, shaping and disturbing, is a genius of my time. . . . What a man is and what he is becoming is intimately linkd with what his speech is and what it is becoming. Writing that vitally influences the speech of others is rare indeed, and Creeley's work is of this order. By disrupting closed syntax, fragmenting statement, projecting tentative structures, his style allows for a greater variety of observation and for the co-existence of possibilities--often "contradictory"--within a sentence response . . .<sup>67</sup>

Creeley still insists that Duncan was "one of the most astute and involved readers I've ever had".<sup>68</sup> The Guggenheim reference, convincing evidence of Duncan's affection for Creeley and his shrewd critical powers, is also interesting for the concluding acknowledgement: that in Creeley's self-conscious, hesitant, apparently introverted idiom resides, paradoxically, a fluidity and flexibility, "the co-existence of possibilities", which is itself fecund, or, lays itself open.

### III "No world / except felt"

we're both very alike in ways of feeling the world.<sup>69</sup>

Creeley's "kinship" with Duncan, who always "played a very important role in my life, both as mentor, very often, and as one whom I feel to share with me in this particular sense of world, and writing, and poetry, which I most deeply respect", continues to qualify his mature poetics.<sup>70</sup> The balance which 'Oh Max' achieves, poised between opening and closure, reflects the struggle to reconcile the tensions of the "felt" world which compels much of Creeley's recent work. Duncan sensed this fascination with circularity and repetition in For Love, finding Creeley

in the quest of the primaries back of the tradition, of depths of self that are also depths of Time . . . so that the old orders of feeling are brought into his own new

orders, so that the immediate moment opens upon other worlds.<sup>71</sup>

Although his rhetoric here chooses to overlook how self-contained Creeley's solipsism can be, Duncan is suggesting that introversion inevitably leads to extroversion. He points out that Creeley's "ways of feeling the world" simply could not stay private, closed, "immediate"; there were always "other worlds", opening upon his own, which had to be acknowledged. Duncan, his sympathetic "ways of feeling the world" perhaps behind his insight, accurately perceived that such ideas underpinned the reticent existentialism of Creeley's earlier work, although they do not appear explicitly for some years:

It is funny--strange--to see the young  
swirl--leaves, they might be  
said to be, in a current of our own.

The limp gestures of older persons,  
the hands unable to hold them, all  
the world in a flaccid attentiveness--

Now it is fall, and one must yield  
again to the end of a cycle, call  
it spring, and its endless instances.

'Fall' In London CP 471

Early in his 1980 collection Later, Creeley meditates with gloomy equanimity (striking what will become a familiar note) upon his increasing age: "I'll not write again / things a young man / thinks, not the words / of that feeling." Yet his "feeling" is, as experience, nonetheless pertinent, self-defining and somehow universal:

There is no world  
except felt, no  
one there but  
must be here also.

'After', Later 16

For Creeley the etymology of "world", derived from "wer" meaning man and "eld" meaning age, affirms how a man's life literally constitutes the sphere of his experience. Just as Duncan anticipated, much of Creeley's mature poetry returns to the clash between the exclusive, self-protective limits defining an individual's private world and the implacably revolving wider context of the universal "World." To Robert Sheppard, Creeley comments:

A man's life is the world. What one has as experience and/or fact of "all else" in a lifetime is his or her fact of the world. So how does one get all these multiple worlds into some human imagination of one? . . . the worlds are not necessarily congruent, . . . can it ever be one world in fact, or in the experience of fact more accurately? I don't know. . . . And if one otherwise tries to get rid of that impinging world of confusion and doubts and despairs and pain, that don't work either! "Is this your suitcase?" It keeps coming back to you! "I think you forgot this." . . . You keep having it returned. [Laughter]<sup>72</sup>

In 'News of the World', the headlines and topical allusions of fragmented narratives are finally seen as subordinate to the "world" of the singular and finite life:

in this "world,"  
wer eld, the length  
 of a human life.

'News of the World', Later 25

Creeley's preoccupation with the inexorable process of his own aging began, in Later, to dominate his writing. This has occasioned criticism. However, in a poetics which always depended upon self-scrutiny, the fastidiously detailed observation of his increasing decrepitude becomes a moving epilogue to the preceding years of self-study. He introduces the collection in stoic mood:

Time comes and goes, and what any of us experiences in  
 that situation will be most particular to ourselves.

There is no eternal clockmaker, keeping it all on time.

Yet we each have time, or do not, in living.

Increasingly I think it necessary to know the time one  
 constitutes, the age, the place.

Preface, Later

Learning to "know the time one constitutes" not only means addressing the difficulties of resolving the "multiple worlds" of a life. Age, representing time lived, ushers in a separate and wholly private dilemma in offering the active mind a constant broadening of experience, only to limit the possibilities of active life as strength and faculties fade. His recognition of another paradox over which he is powerless only intensifies Creeley's instinctive struggle to preserve a meaningful and self-sufficient existence:

Most explicit--  
 the sense of trap

as a narrowing  
cone one's got

stuck into and  
any movement

forward simply  
wedges one more--

'Age', Windows 74

His increasingly desperate efforts to "open" and escape from the private world which he once relished, are frustrated as it continues to "close" relentlessly around him.

Trapped by, and fearful of, age but quietly reassured by his continuing life, Creeley remains acutely conscious of time's dichotomy:

Upended, it begins again, all the way  
from the end to the very beginning,

again. I want it two ways,  
she said, 'For John Chamberlain', Later 49

The poem recalls the hopefully repetitive impulse of 'Oh Max' and echoes Duncan's admission that the "romance of living in perspectives of beginnings and endings has always been strong in my responses . . ."<sup>73</sup> It is this energy that Nathaniel Mackey describes, writing of Duncan, as the "Uroboros impulse, the iterative nature of originality."<sup>74</sup> In a letter to Olson, Duncan refers, with linguistic cunning, to the "whirld", capturing that sense of revolving energy which impels his "ways of feeling the world".<sup>75</sup> In 'Despair', he muses "A long way back I look and find myself / as I was then I am, a circling man". Memories bring fresh insight to

Duncan's "circling" poetic vision, as for Creeley: "Every day that I am here I recall / Early notes in sounding of the late". Memories also deliver an enigmatic threat to his unstated insecurities:

- the boy I was  
calls out to me  
here the man where I am "Look!  
I've been where you  
most fear to be."  
'Childhood's Retreat', Groundwork: Before the War 49

Like Creeley, sometimes Duncan is dryly resigned to his aging, his vanity silenced by reluctant honesty: "All my old youth stretches out to fill my flesh / . . . / This skin addresses the day where I am."<sup>76</sup> In (more characteristically) buoyant moments, he prefers to conceive of aging as an excitingly generative process. Creeley's Thirty Things causes him to observe: "'Age' like 'childhood' exists only as we create it. Oddly enough, how we 'remember' it to be":

The idea of growing old and coming upon death was years ago so lovely in my mind, the seductive line of perspective that sharpened each "thing" in the course of life and drew it toward the remote proposition of a vanishing point and horizon, even as the idea of being a child was lovely, was "ghostly," each "thing" coming forward into life from a point . . .<sup>77</sup>

He seems to be imagining the same repetitive projection of the individual into time which introduces Bending the Bow: "We enter again and again the last days of our own history."

Thus Duncan contrives that this collection is prefaced by a kind of (uroboric) coda, its conventional role reversed to support the truth it utters. His remark can be interpreted in several ways. He proposes the interdependence of present, past and future, fused together in the individual existence. He reminds us of the imminence of death, and the continuing relevance of lived experience ("wer eld"), but acknowledges that memories, though fecund, mark the recession of the past as omnipresent death bears down upon life. Finally, his words suggest the inescapable, endlessly paradoxical, circularity of existence.

Creeley, always more self-absorbed ("What / matters as one / in this world?") than Duncan, sometimes finds his own narcissism stifling: "too / enclosed in myself, / can't make love a way out."<sup>78</sup> He seeks society, yet repulses it; he looks old, but feels young; he knows he has less future than he had, yet cannot help but meditate upon it:

I am no longer  
one man--  
but an old one

who is human again  
after a long time,  
feels the meat contract,

or stretch, upon bones,  
hates to be alone

but can't stand interruption. 'Desultory Days', Later 97

Creeley treats his aging self with honesty. Although he feels indestructible, his powers are diminishing ("now my hands are / / wrinkled and my hair / goes grey") but his curiosity is as



sharp and hungry as ever: "I want the world / I did always, small pieces / and clear acknowledgments."<sup>79</sup> 'Self Portrait' defiantly pictures "a brutal old man," harshly contrary: "His arms, his skin, / shrink daily. And / he loves, but hates equally." His contradictory emotions reflect the sense of paradox which surrounds and defines him, and which he so resents.

Introducing his Selected Poems, Creeley comments, "With Robert Duncan, I am committed to the hearth, and love the echoes of that word."<sup>80</sup> His family, grouped around the metaphorical "hearth", help him to make sense of the passage of time. 'The Table' presents a familiar juxtaposition in the vase of flowers, which "have opened, / two wither and close", containing death ("husks") alongside continuing life ("buds"). The vase is framed by, but fails to affect, the surrounding untidiness of daily life ("Paper, yesterday's, book / to read face down, ashtray, / cigarettes"), to which Creeley's wife "reading / your book" calmly contributes. Reassured, his attention moves to the way that "Sarah's cap on your hair / holds it close--" and, drawing some kind of resolving comfort from this detail, he can conclude on a sanguine note:

It's a day we may  
live forever, this  
simple one. Nothing  
more, nothing less.

Later 29

If his younger wife, and their children, dramatize his age they assure him of continuity and motivate him: "Can walk

/ along." 'If I Had My Way' recognises in his children an intimate memorial to his relationship with their mother: "On / and on then-- / for you and for me." Creeley's private world always opens upon, and embraces, the world which his family inhabits and which he can still share. His children themselves represent the "last days of [his] own history" which Duncan had pondered.

Creeley likes to consider the continual incomprehending present of childhood, absorbed only by the 'here and now'. 'The Children' asks, "How to play today without sun?" It is an innocence which is "recurrent", and the children's figures seem to merge into and mirror one another. The distrustful child who doubts the return of summer anticipates and echoes Creeley's own dependence upon the immediate. Such unconscious sagacity is also qualified by the naivety and ignorance which throws his own maturity into relief:

Not wise enough yet to know  
 you're only here at all  
 as the wind blows, now  
 as the fire burns low.

'The Children', Later 91

Yet, for all the comforting security of "hearth" and family, aging finally remains a personal dilemma and Creeley is not always equanimous, as the somewhat frantic word-patterns of 'Still Too Young' suggest in their irony: "and I thought I was winning / but I'm losing again / / but I'm too old to do it again / and still too young to die." Tirelessly,

even wearily, expectant of imminent death, Creeley's candour remains arresting:

Say it,  
you're afraid

but of what  
you can't locate.

You love yet  
distracted fear

the body's change,  
yourself inside it.

'Box', Mirrors 29

Fascinated by the gradual "closure" of his physical and emotional horizons, constricted by unfamiliar and growing incapacity, Creeley persistently seeks to "open" the box. Always aware, sometimes unhappily, sometimes ironically, that his efforts are doomed, he rarely resorts to spiritual platitudes. Any escape (the preserve of his poetic domain) must, as ever, be contrived from private resources:

The world is a round but  
diminishing ball, a spherical

ice cube, a dusty  
joke, a fading,

faint echo of its  
former self but remembers,

sometimes, its past, sees  
friends, places, reflections,

'Age', Windows 75

'Age' articulates the disconcerting and unstoppable transience of existence, remorselessly governed by time. Whichever way he looks at it, Creeley can never overcome the larger rhythms within which he is locked, and by which his

private development is defined. Instead of struggling with the paradoxes he has uncovered, he must learn to come to terms with them. As in 'Age', Creeley (like Duncan) can be found exploiting the regenerative processes of sight and memory as "ways of feeling the world".

All of Creeley's recent collections (Mirrors, Windows, Memory Gardens and Echoes) are explicitly concerned with reflection. When he resorts to sight as a handhold to locate himself amid the blur of beginnings and endings, we recall his partial blindness. He employs his single eye like a hand, groping fretfully out to "feel" the wider world which extends beyond the window frame, as if in pursuit of some actual, graspable reality from which he feels divorced:

Eye's reach out window water's  
lateral quiet bulk of trees at  
far edge now if peace were  
possible here it would enter.

'Sight', Windows 59

Creeley is, however, also conscious that sight (partial or not) is duplicitous: 'Outside' points out that "what I see / distorts the image" and goes on to note that this can be temptingly, dangerously, deceptive: "Who would accept death / as an end / thinks he can / do what he wants to."

Duncan revelled in the way his impaired vision permitted him to take liberties which resolved the conflict between the imagination and reality, opening each "world" up to the other to achieve a unity which would otherwise be denied him: "Come,

eyes, see more than you see! / For the world within and the outer world / rejoice as one".<sup>81</sup> Being cross-eyed, he once explained, meant that "When I look at something, I see it double and I can never tell which one is the real one--the one which I see with my left eye or the one that I see with my right eye".<sup>82</sup> Creeley, whose 'The View' describes a "place fixed by seeing / both to and from", allows that his sense of vision is closely related to Duncan's:

Robert loves all the double-edged, the double-faceted, the double-faced, he sees as I see "the underside turning" and the double nature of reality, due to the condition of his eyes.<sup>83</sup>

As ever, their shared "ways of feeling the world" expose and resolutely celebrate the dualistic (and difficult) aspects of existence: both writers employ the "double-faced" powers of sight not merely to reflect the dualism but to investigate the difficulties it poses. Double-vision usefully widens the angle, "opening the field" of vision, permitting both poets to escape the narrowness of sight which they dread.

In 'There', when sight fails him, only Creeley's terse brevity hints at his anxiety:

Written word  
once so clear  
blurred content  
now loses detail.

'There', Mirrors 22

However, should sight recede or falter, the restitutive powers of memory can take over. In 'Prospect', the resources of Creeley's sight and memory merge in dreaming contemplation of the scene he describes, until

it seems a subtle echo of itself.  
It is the color of life itself,

it used to be. Not blood red,  
or sun yellow--but this green,

echoing hills, echoing meadows,  
childhood summer's blowsiness, a youngness

one remembers hopefully forever.  
It is thoughtful, provokes here

quiet reflections, . . .

Mirrors 13

Creeley's mind is witnessed in the process of registering, and preserving (he hopes) the idyllic "prospect" before him. As he commits the scene to memory, the future is as much "in prospect" as the "echoing hills, echoing meadows" of the "childhood summer" which the scene summons. In thought, those "quiet reflections", the past, present and future fuse (and reflect each other) in the hiatus of the immediate moment, just as Duncan proposed. As 'B. B.' reminds us: "nothing lost / in mind till / it's all / forgotten."

In Groundwork II, his own death approaching, Duncan's poetic energies are wholly absorbed by the intellectual activity by which his dying is rather poignantly animated: "It is a time of forever asking, forever trying being, forever seeking, of this dying to know even as I go away from knowing."<sup>84</sup> He also knows that his final courageous attempts

to resolve the known and the unknowable will certainly fail,  
but he cannot help but ask.

A constant companion to age, Creeley's memory helps 'The  
Movie Run Backward', acting both to hold time at bay and to  
remind us of its implacable advance. He seems compelled to  
return to these dualities:

Hard to begin  
always again and again,

open that door  
on yet another year

faces two ways  
but goes only one.

Promises, promises . . .  
What stays true to us

or to the other  
here waits for us.

'The Door' (January) Memory Gardens 75

Overtly about mortality, time which "goes only one" way, the  
poem also gestures towards the classical ambiguity of two-  
headed Janus, the god associated with January, the door which  
opens as it closes on the year.

A growing perception of the fundamental interdependence  
between openness and closure has accompanied the development  
of Creeley's poetics. A fascination for contradiction and  
paradox (whether or not prompted, as well as nourished, by his  
association with Duncan) evolved from his pursuit of prosodic  
"openness" into the layered and suggestive sophistication of  
his mature poetry, in which sound is made circular by

repetition or echoes, sight, reflected by mirrors or windows, is returned to the perceiving eye and experience is retrieved (reopened) through recollection. Such circularities illustrate in their turn the balancing of the inconclusive and conclusive, the observation of the universal in the private, and the optimistic discovery of the beginning in the ending.



## Notes:-

1. 'From the Forest of Language . . . , ' Athanor 4: 11.
2. Rudiments and Theory of Music (London: Associated Board of Royal School of Music, 1958) 138.
3. 'The Writer's Situation,' Collected Essays 516.
4. 5th June 1950, CC1 81.
5. 'After Reading Barely and Widely,' The Opening of the Field (New York: New Directions, 1973) 91.
6. George Bowering and Robert Hogg, An Interview with Robert Duncan (Toronto: Beaver Kosmos, 1971) N.pag.
7. Towards a New American Poetics 174-75.
8. 'Introduction to Penguin Selected Whitman,' Collected Essays 9.
9. 'A Poem Beginning with a Line from Pindar, IV,' The Opening of the Field (New York: New Directions, 1973) 69.
10. 'Preface to Robert Duncan: A Descriptive Bibliography, by Robert J. Bertholf,' Collected Essays 157.
11. Robert Duncan, The Years as Catches: First Poems 1939-1946 (Berkeley: Oyez, 1966) x.
12. Out of the Vietnam Vortex: A Study of Poets and Poetry Against the War (Lawrence: U P of Kansas, 1974) 159-62.
13. 'Preface to Robert Duncan: A Descriptive Bibliography, by Robert J. Bertholf,' Collected Essays 157.
14. 'Robert Duncan,' unpublished MS found at Stanford University. n.d. [1955?]
15. 31st November 1951, CC8 209.
16. Heavenly City Earthly City (Berkeley: Bern Porter, 1947)
17. 'With Lewis MacAdams,' Tales 88-89.
18. Ralph J. Mills Jr., Cry of the Human: Essays on Contemporary American Poetry (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1975) 4.
19. 18th September 1951, CC7 169.
20. 27th November 1951, CC8 182-87.

21. 'The Question of Wisdom as Such,' Robert Duncan: Scales of the Marvelous, eds. Robert J. Bertholf and Ian W. Reid (New York: New Directions, 1979) 39.
22. 18th November 1951, CC8 149.
23. 'Nights and Days,' 'The H. D. Book' II (Chapter 1). SUMAC, 1, No.1 (Fall 1968): 102.
24. 'Robert Duncan: An Interview,' Scales of the Marvellous 46.
25. 8th November 1951, CC8 106.
26. Bowering and Hogg, An Interview with Robert Duncan.
27. 'Transmissions' (Passages 33), Ground Work 1: Before the War (New York: New Directions, 1984) 23.
28. 'Projective Verse,' Modern Poets 281.
29. Towards a New American Poetics 184.
30. 'Structure Of Rime' XIII, The Opening of the Field 83.
31. 'Towards an Open Universe,' Robert Duncan: A Selected Prose, ed. Robert J. Bertholf (New York: New Directions, 1995) 11.
32. 'The H. D. Book' II (Chapter 11). Montemara, 8 (1981): 96.
33. 'Nights and Days,' 'The H. D. Book' II (Chapter 4). Caterpillar 7 (April 1969): 40.
34. Bowering and Hogg, An Interview with Robert Duncan.
35. Bending the Bow (London: Jonathan Cape, 1971) ix-x.
36. Black Mountain Review 1.1 (Spring 1954): 36-37.
37. 'Causal Mythology,' Muthologos vol. 1, 72.
38. The Truth of Life and Myth: An Essay in Essential Autobiography (Fremont MI: Sumac, 1968) 43.
39. 'Towards an Open Universe,' A Selected Prose 6.
40. Creeley's first letter defends his editing of the first issue of Black Mountain Review against Duncan's criticisms.
41. Interview, 15th August 1994.
42. *ibid.*
43. *ibid.*

44. Unpublished letter from Duncan to Creeley, 14th August 1955. All unpublished letters from Duncan to Creeley cited below were found among Creeley's papers held at Department of Special Collections, University Libraries, Stanford University, California.
45. Unpublished letter from Creeley to Duncan, 14th August 1955. All unpublished letters from Creeley to Duncan cited below were found among Duncan's papers, held at the Poetry / Rare Books Collection, SUNY at Buffalo.
46. Unpublished letter from Creeley to Duncan, 17th November 1963.
47. All references to 'The Venice Poem' are taken from Duncan's The First Decade: Selected Poems 1940-1950 (London, Fulcrum P, 1968) 81-107.
48. Unpublished letter from Creeley to Duncan, 20th August 1955.
49. Unpublished letter from Creeley to Duncan, 6th December 1954.
50. Unpublished letter to Creeley, 20th November 1959.
51. 'Last Night,' Collected Essays 513.
52. Unpublished letter, 2nd May 1956.
53. Interview, 15th August 1994.
54. 'With Linda Wagner,' Tales 63-64.
55. The San Francisco Renaissance: Poetics and Community at Mid-Century (Cambridge: Cambridge U P, 1989) 6.
56. Interview, 15th August 1994.
57. Unpublished letter to Creeley, 20th November 1959.
58. 'From the Forest of Language . . . ,' Athamor 4: 10.
59. Disjunctive Poetics: From Gertrude Stein and Louis Zukofsky to Susan Howe (Cambridge: Cambridge U P, 1992) 163.
60. 'With Linda Wagner,' Tales 60.
61. Towards a New American Poetics 194-95.
62. Unpublished letter to Duncan, 2nd January 1959.
63. Unpublished letter from Duncan to Creeley, 2nd October 1955.
64. The San Francisco Renaissance 130.
65. Unpublished letter from Duncan to Creeley, n.d. [Fall 1956].

66. The Lost America of Love: Rereading Robert Creeley, Edward Dorn and Robert Duncan (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State U P, 1981) 241.
67. Unpublished letter from Duncan to Creeley, n.d. [January / February 1956?]
68. 'With Linda Wagner,' Tales 68.
69. 'From the Forest of Language . . . , Athamor 4: 11.
70. 'Notes Apropos "Free Verse",' Collected Essays 497.
71. 'After For Love,' Boundary 2: 238-39.
72. 'Stories . . . , The Poet's Workshop 50-51.
73. 'A Reading of Thirty Things,' Boundary 2: 295.
74. Discrepant Engagement: Dissonance, Cross Culturality, and Experimental Writing (Cambridge: Cambridge U P, 1993) 103.
75. Unpublished letter to Charles Olson, n.d [1949?] found among Duncan's papers in the Poetry / Rare Books Collection, SUNY at Buffalo.
76. 'An Alternate Life,' Groundwork II: In The Dark (New York: New Directions, 1987) 2.
77. 'A Reading of Thirty Things,' Boundary 2: 293.
78. 'Place,' Later 13.
79. 'For Pen,' Later 64.
80. Preface, Robert Creeley: Selected Poems, 1945-1990 (London: Marion Boyars, 1991) xxi.
81. Roots and Branches: Poems by Robert Duncan (London: Jonathan Cape, 1971) 50.
82. Towards a New American Poetics 65.
83. *ibid.*, 184.
84. 'At Cambridge An Address To Young Poets Native To The Land Of My Mothertongue,' Ground Work II: In the Dark 20.

### Afterword

"We live forwards and understand backwards."<sup>1</sup>

Creeley's poetics must finally be defined by the contradictions on which this account has frequently touched. His work is problematic: confessedly shy of dogma and dismissive of critical vocabulary, it demands (even relies on) exegesis, challenges the efficacy of non-analytical terms and rewards discussion. Moreover, outwardly miniaturist as the poems appear, Creeley's subtly composite poetic idiom is much more adventurous, the compass of his interests much larger, and the ways in which he chooses to articulate them more varied, than his reputation promises.

In Von Hallberg's view, "Creeley is a minimalist only in the sense that he needs little to work with . . . [his writing is] insistently personal, claustal, small."<sup>2</sup> This is only half right: Creeley may seem to need deceptively "little to work with", but I have attempted to show how much he actually makes use of. His poems are "personal" perhaps; "claustal" and "small", certainly not: Von Hallberg's assumption of a relationship is neither valid nor supportable.

In many ways, the seven writers featured in this account share few characteristics, even though, as Creeley has pointed out, typically his heroes seem "battered":

Williams called "antipoetic", Hart Crane "a failure", Zukofsky "the figment of Pound's imagination" and Pound

himself the fascist anti-Semite, rightfully confined in a hospital for the criminally insane.<sup>3</sup>

However, each proved wanting in some way: Pound's consuming ambition and overbearing self-righteousness was repellent; the stylized rigour ("device") to which Stevens' poetry fell prey was a trap to be avoided; Crane's tragically misplaced, quixotic impetuosity was to be pitied as much as Williams' contrastingly capable certainty was to be admired, but both were strange to Creeley. Just as inaccessible was Zukofsky's inventive word-wizardry, the enormous curiosity behind Olson's aptly named Maximus, and Duncan's intoxicating but exhausting imagination.

As Bill Spanos observes to Creeley, "being human is: being-in-the-world. You can't stand outside it. You've got to be interested. Kierkegaard plays on the etymology of this word "interest" . . . [:] inter esse, in the middle of . . ."<sup>4</sup> Creeley's "interested" senses of relationship apparently collide with his resolute individuality. Earlier in the same interview, Creeley himself describes

the inside condition in being in the world, what seems interior, personal to one's life, and the outside which could be put loosely as all else or all others and/or all else. And to me, as Olson would say, the cutting edge is always at that place where the inside moves to the outside.<sup>5</sup>

The difficulties of Creeley's poems flourish in "that place where the inside moves to the outside." His tireless interest in the pluralities "outside" him is undisturbed by Creeley's sense of his "inside", the singular figure defined by his own language, and the private resources of emotion and intellect dividing "self" from others. As he commented of Williams, "Always our own way, has to be it." In himself, he found the creative energy "to kick with" which Hart Crane's example proposed. His own "single intelligence" yielded a measure equally his own. Likewise, his "objective" instincts are coloured by a subjective sincerity, his conjecture by his own, intensely personal dilemmas and dualities: "That's why . . . my writing constitutes a revelation of myself to myself in ways that I find otherwise very awkward to attain."<sup>6</sup>

Finally, Creeley's defining and influential conviction that "form is never more than an extension of content" is repeated in the recognition on which this investigation rests: "The human entity, person or self, depends on its environment as a context for its reality."<sup>7</sup> This attempt to place Robert Creeley's poetics in context seeks to "acknowledge" that context without the kinds of qualifications about which the poet himself would certainly be doubtful. I have been less anxious to "describe" the context itself than to record something of the complex and changing character of the "senses of relationship" which continually inform it. Creeley himself observes:

Paradoxically I've moved endlessly. . . . Possibly the whole world is just that and one cannot be simply partial. Too, the bards were those travellers from one common place to another, bringing the insistent news of how it was elsewhere, inside or out. Finally the world is round.

Preface, Selected Poems 1945-1990 xxi



## Notes:-

1. Kierkegaard, cited in Tales 131.
2. American Poetry and Culture 1945-1980 (Cambridge MA: Harvard U P, 1985) 53.
3. Tales viii.
4. 'With Bill Spanos,' Tales 134.
5. Tales 130.
6. Towards a New American Poetics 174-75.
7. 'The New World,' Collected Essays 175.

## APPENDIX

Butterick helpfully preserves the following extract from Williams' letter to Corman of 2nd August 1951 (found at the Humanities Research Center, University of Texas) in volume 7 of the Olson/Creeley Correspondence:

Creeley is on dangerous ground. He's very unformed. This makes him susceptible to influence. I'm curious to know what France will do to him. He can't ignore it. Will he fight it? I wonder. I'll bet he ends up by taking in England--and then what will happen? But if he comes back here unchanged, what good will it have done him to go abroad? I like him very much, he has an honest enquiring mind; he puts down what he sees and seems listening internally to his own thinking. I'm interested to see what comes out of it. I wish him luck. It depends on his intelligence, what that comes finally to find. I wonder. He may turn out to be an important man.

The intelligence is the crux of the matter in Olson's case also. What will he find? He's searching and he's making notes? He's got some good thoughts too, valuable thoughts[,] some of which I have already used but I'd like to see them a little more pulled together in firmer terms. I acknowledge that we're all searching, it's our present status in America. But we're the ones who've been destined to FIND.

[endnote 64, CC7 260]

## List of Creeley's poems cited

A Form of Women	<u>For Love</u> CP 152
After	<u>Later</u> 16
After Lorca	<u>For Love</u> CP 121
After Mallarmé	<u>For Love</u> CP 250
Age	<u>Windows</u> 74
A Gift of Great Value	<u>For Love</u> CP 180
Air: "Cat Bird Singing"	<u>For Love</u> CP 165
Air: "The Love of a Woman"	<u>For Love</u> CP 240
Alex's Art	<u>Echoes</u> 63
A Method	<u>Words</u> CP 339
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Anger	<u>Words</u> CP 306
Another Age	<u>Windows</u> 75
A Piece	<u>Words</u> CP 352
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Apostrophe	<u>Echoes</u> 107
A Sign Board	<u>For Love</u> CP 227
A Song	<u>For Love</u> CP 112
A Step	<u>Pieces</u> CP 444
As We Sit	<u>Thirty Things</u> CP 545
As You Come	<u>Thirty Things</u> CP 539
A Token	<u>For Love</u> CP 221
A Wall	<u>In London</u> CP 457
A Wicker Basket	<u>For Love</u> CP 161
A Wish	<u>For Love</u> CP 225
Ballad of the Despairing Husband	<u>For Love</u> CP 173
B--	<u>Pieces</u> CP 435
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Broken Back Blues	<u>The Charm</u> CP 65
Canzone	<u>The Charm</u> CP 25
Chasing the Bird	<u>The Charm</u> CP 60
Classical	<u>Memory Gardens</u> 58
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Desultory Days	<u>Later</u> 95
Dimensions	<u>Words</u> CP 323
Divisions	<u>The Charm</u> CP 33
Ears Idle Ears	<u>Windows</u> 102
Enough	<u>Words</u> CP 362
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Focus	<u>Windows</u> 72
For a Bus on its Side and the Man Inside it	<u>Away</u> CP 618
For a Friend	<u>For Love</u> CP 188
For Joel	<u>Words</u> CP 370
For John Duff	<u>Later</u> 100
For John Chamberlain	<u>Later</u> 49
For Lewis, to Say it	<u>In London</u> CP 507
For Love	<u>For Love</u> CP 257
For W.C.W. ("The rhyme is . . .")	<u>Words</u> CP 273
For W.C.W. ("The pleasure of . . .")	<u>For Love</u> CP 126
From Pico and the Women: A Life	<u>The Charm</u> CP 15
Going to Bed	<u>For Love</u> CP 193

Goodbye	<u>For Love</u> CP 159
Guido, I'vorrei che tu e Lapo ed io	<u>The Charm</u> CP 22
Hart Crane	<u>For Love</u> CP 110
Hart Crane 2	<u>The Charm</u> CP 23
Hélas	<u>The Charm</u> CP 21
Helen's House	<u>Memory Gardens</u> 83
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Here ("Here is . . .")	<u>Thirty Things</u> CP 547
Here ("Past time--those . . .")	<u>Pieces</u> CP 438
Heroes	<u>For Love</u> CP 192
Hi There!	<u>The Charm</u> CP 61
I am Held by my Fear of Death	<u>The Charm</u> CP 49
If I Had my Way	<u>Later</u> 114
I Keep to Myself Such Measures	<u>Words</u> CP 297
I Know a Man	<u>For Love</u> CP 132
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Love ("The thing comes . . .")	<u>The Charm</u> CP 19
Love ("Not enough. . .")	<u>The Charm</u> CP 26
Love ("There are words . . .")	<u>Later</u> 18
Massachusetts	<u>In London</u> CP 495
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People	<u>In London</u> CP 494
Poem for Beginners	<u>The Charm</u> CP 9
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Place "This is an empty landscape . . ."	<u>Later</u> 13
Prayer to Hermes	<u>Later</u> 121
Prospect	<u>Windows</u> 13
Sight	<u>Windows</u> 59
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Still Life Or	<u>The Charm</u> CP 20
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Something for Easter	<u>The Charm</u> CP 32
Song ("What's in the body . . .")	<u>Windows</u> 3
Song ("Love has no other friends . . .")	<u>Mirrors</u> 6
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Stomping with Catullus	<u>The Charm</u> CP 68
The Answer	<u>Words</u> CP 322
The Awakening	<u>For Love</u> CP 205
The Bed	<u>For Love</u> CP 162
The Children	<u>Later</u> 91
The Death of Venus	<u>For Love</u> CP 134
The Door ("It is hard . . .")	<u>For Love</u> CP 199
The Door ("Hard to begin . . .")	<u>Memory Gardens</u> 75
The Drunks of Helsinki	<u>Windows</u> 133

The Edge	<u>In London</u> CP 453
The Epic Expands	<u>The Charm</u> CP 18
The Family	<u>Pieces</u> CP 381
The Figures	<u>For Love</u> CP 245
The Finger	<u>Pieces</u> CP 384
The Flower	<u>For Love</u> CP 194
The Friend	<u>For Love</u> CP 155
The Herd	<u>The Charm</u> CP 87
The Hero	<u>For Love</u> CP 166
The Hill	<u>For Love</u> CP 202
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The Language	<u>Words</u> CP 283
The Last Mile	<u>Later</u> 113
The Measure	<u>Words</u> CP 290
The Method of Actuality	<u>The Charm</u> CP 50
The Moon	<u>Pieces</u> CP 394
The Movie Run Backward	<u>Mirrors</u> 35
The Pattern	<u>Words</u> CP 294
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Wind Lifts	<u>Mirrors</u> 34
You ("You will remember . . .")	<u>Mirrors</u> 18
You ("You were leaving, . . .")	<u>Windows</u> 70

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