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*Restraint and Pressure in Thinking and Expression: The Poems of Dickinson and Creeley**

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Abstract

There are some resemblances between the modes of thinking and expression in Emily Dickinson's and Robert Creeley's poems. To Creeley, behind these resemblances lie the thinking and speaking habits generated by and particular to the New England area to which both poets are native. In Dickinson's and Creeley's poems consciousness appears to be a "Conscious consciousness," one that is aware of itself, with an inherent drive to check its own moves as well as those of the "physical fact" of a person. The restraint and pressure in thinking process extends to the process of speaking as well. In their poems the wish to be open fights against the desire to maintain self-control and the result is a hesitant, faltering style revealing the poet's difficulty in articulation. While this manner of writing breaks the continuity of the rhythm, it renders the possible meanings a part of the process of writing. Consequently, through rhythm Dickinson and Creeley enforce the reader to read words with a renewed attention.

Key words: Emily Dickinson, Robert Creeley, American Poetry

Özet

Emily Dickinson ve Robert Creeley'nin düşünme ve ifade biçimleri bazı ortak özellikler gösterir. Creeley'ye göre bu benzerliklerin gerisinde Dickinson'un ve kendisinin doğup büyüdüğü New England bölgesinin biçimlendirdiği düşünce ve dil alışkanlıkları yatmaktadır. Dickinson ve Creeley'nin şiirlerinde bilinç "kendi kendisinin farkında" olan bir bilinçtir ve denetleme dürtüsü ile hem kendisine hem de şairin "fiziksel gerçekliğine" baskı yapmaktadır. Düşünme süreci için söz konusu olan baskı ve kısıtlama, ifade süreci için de söz konusudur. Söyleme ve söylenileni denetleme dürtüleri birbiri ile çatışır ve şairin üzerinde bir baskı oluşturur. İfadede çekilen güçlük şairde tutukluk yarattığı gibi şiirin ritmini de bozar ama aynı zamanda olası anlamları şiirin yazılma sürecinin bir parçası haline dönüştürür. Sonuç olarak Dickinson ve Creeley şiirlerinde ritm yolu ile sözcükleri alışılagelmiş kullanımlarının dışına taşır.

Anahtar sözcükler: Emily Dickinson, Robert Creeley, Amerikan Şiiri

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I

In the lecture he delivered at San Fransisco College in 1985, Robert Creeley sets a discussion on the resemblances between Emily Dickinson's work and his own on the grounds of their shared New England origins. The lecture, entitled significantly as "The Girl Next Door," presents Creeley's view of Dickinson as a fellow New England poet, his "next door" neighbor, "literally the person who lives there and so familiarly close as that" (47). This affinity which stems from geographical location encompasses behavior patterns and speech habits peculiar to the region as well. Being native to one of those small towns in Massachusetts like Dickinson Creeley claims an intimate knowledge of these patterns and habits, and he claims that he can discern their reflections in Dickinson.

Placing Dickinson before the small-town-in Massachusetts background, Creeley says, echoing Allen Ginsberg, that Dickinson was truly an "eccentric" poet. However, he completely disagrees with the critical outlook intent upon seeing Dickinson as an isolated, "neurasthenic" woman, shunning even the most ordinary human interactions as if "no whiff or factor of usual common existence ever got to her" (1986: 38). He condemns the efforts directed to an autobiographical reading of her poems for being "both offensive and tacitly condescending," adding that to depend solely upon the biographical information to unlock her highly challenging poems is to do a profound disservice to Dickinson studies as such an attitude deliberately underestimates her poetic genius which exceeds far beyond the reaches of her lifetime. To Creeley, Dickinson's "singularity" is the result of her uniqueness of her manner of proposing herself to the world and her exceptional ability to articulate this experience. Besides, being a New Englander himself, he notes that eccentric behavior is so common in New England that it goes almost unnoticed (Creeley, 1986: 38).

In the same lecture, Creeley calls attention to the similarity between Dickinson's speaking habits and his own. Rereading her poems Creeley identifies "that kind of subtlety of hearing [which] began to be insistent and began to be specific from [his] habits as well as those so obviously hers" (38). Although the details of the "subtlety of hearing" are not given in the lecture, it is evident that Creeley uses the term to refer to a peculiar rhythm common to both Dickinson's and his own poems.

This rhythm, as I shall argue later, is produced, above all, by a deliberate word economy, a characteristic of both Dickinson's and Creeley's poems. Creeley explains the tendency to use less but exact words in terms of their New England habit of speaking sparingly and warily. Indeed, the style of writing developed by the New England Puritans is characterized by plainness, simplicity and above all a deliberate word economy. The New England Puritans avoided the overornamented

speech for the simple reason that it would divert the reader's attention from message to be delivered to the manner of delivering it. Though they made much use of literary tropes in their work these devices were employed for the purpose of illustrating a point, not for their own sakes. The tendency to use the exact word that will enable the writer to carry his message across most effectively finds its best expression in William Ames's statement: "I thinke," says Ames, "I should not say in two words which may be said in one, and that that key is to be chosen which doth open best, although if it be of wood, if there be not a golden key of the same efficacy" (qtd. in Miller, 1963: 66).

To Creeley, speaking habits are not their only common inheritance from their New England ancestors. In his famous poem "Desultory Days" he invokes Emily Dickinson-New England association once again, enlarging the scope of familiarity to cover a shared view of existence, which, to him, has its roots in their New England upbringing. "Desultory Days" includes Dickinson's "The Brain, within its Groove" in its entirety but in a different stanzaic pattern. In "Desultory Days," Creeley compares Whitman's, "the 19th century Mr. Goodheart's," "Lazy Days and Ways in which / we might still *save the world,*" with the "existential terror of the New England / countrywoman, Ms. Dickinson" (1979: 96-97), and admits that he is deeply affected by Dickinson's darker view of human mind as reflected in "The Brain" poem, whereas he finds the cosmic optimism of Whitman charming but ultimately unconvincing.

Apparently, Creeley finds a link between the mind's awareness of its own moves and its self-destructive capacity suggested by Dickinson's poem, and the New England habit of soul-searching. Interestingly, in his extensive biography in which he devotes a whole chapter to Dickinson's New England and Puritan heritage, Richard Sewall would argue that Dickinson's inherited Puritan traits may be hard to identify clearly, but "the fierce introspection and the diary keeping of the Puritans surely had a bearing on her mental habits" (23). Introspection was a mental habit of the Puritan New Englanders nourished to a large extent by their staunch belief in predestination. As Richard Ruland and Malcolm Bradbury put it

> Central to the Puritan's life was the question of individual election and damnation, the pursuit by each man of God's works, the relation of private destiny to predestined purpose. . . . For each pious settler, personal life was theater for an inner drama comparable to history of the community as a whole. Each day's experiences could be scrutinized for indications of God's will and evidence of predestination, and so the story of individual lives grew in the pages of diaries and journals. (24)

To attend, to check and to record meticulously each moment of their existence was a part of their struggle for salvation. Significantly, in the seventeenth century

"diary" became one of the major forms of literary expression and had a lasting influence on the minds of the following generations. The great examples of cotton Mather, Samuel Sewall, and Jonathan Edwards generated, in Ruland and Bradbury's words, a legacy of self-scrutiny that was to shape later secular statements of individualism and conscience" (24).

In "The Girl Next Door" Creeley regards Dickinson's "ways of feeling the world," as well as the sounds he hears in her poems as "remarkably familiar" (38). This study is an attempt to explain this familiarity *not* in terms of their common New England background as Creeley does in "The Girl Next Door," as I am convinced that such generalizations as *the* New England way are unrealistic and often misleading, but in terms of the restraint and pressure in their process of thinking and speaking which lead to similar kinds of short, tense, and often elusive poems for which both poets are famous.

II

The Brain, within its Groove—
Runs evenly — and true —
But let a splinter swerve —
'Twere easier for You —

To put a Current back —
When Floods have slit the Hills —
And Scooped a Turnpike for themselves —
And trodden out the Mills — (1960: 270-271)

Dickinson's above poem evokes a semblance between the straight and orderly flow of the mind and of a river. A segment of the mind leaves the regular course within which it has been running smoothly like the rivers in their beds. There is no indication, however, that this deviation might be the result of an external or internal motive or that the step aside the regular course is ultimately directed to an end. Implicit in this swerving motion is disorder, irregularity even deviation from the "normal" and rational. The point here, however, is less the digression from the mainstream than that this digression is uncontrollable, irreversible, and potentially destructive.

Dickinson's attentiveness to the turns of her own mind and her fearful apprehension of its self-destructive power in the above poem as in numerous others seems to have a particular appeal to Creeley who speaks of his own mind in "Desultory Days" and elsewhere as a "nightmare" or a "mangle," tormenting and dismaying him *in extremis*. What turns his mind into a "nightmare" for Creeley is its acute self-awareness and its disconcerting interference into its own processes. In

other words, the mind seems to be deeply engrossed in its activities on the one hand, while rendering the whole process an object for scrutiny on the other. The following lines taken from "Enough" might serve to explicate the double functioning of his mind,

> . . . The
> mind makes
> its own
>
> forms, looks
> into its terror
>
> so
> selfishly
>
> alone. Such
> a fact so simply
>
> managed there is
> no need for any
>
> one else.
> . . . . . (1982: 361)

In the above lines, the mind appears to be terrified as it keeps "looking into its own terror" at the same time. The process of the mind's self-scrutiny becomes so complicated at times that it looks as if Creeley were "playing chess games . . . endlessly in his mind" (Faas 197). While observing its movements with utmost attention on the one hand, the poet's conscious mind exercises a decisive influence over the body and/or senses on the other. The lines below are from Creeley's *Autobiography* and they call attention to this "split" between the mind, and the body/senses;

> I've spent all my life with the nagging sense I had somehow of that curious fact, that is, a substantial *life* . . . to be dealt with no matter one could or couldn't, wanted to or not. This must be what's thought of as Puritanism, a curious split between the physical fact of a person and the thing they otherwise think with, or about, the so-called mind.[1]

The "split" between his mind and body, which Creeley associates with his Puritan heritage, has its immediate counterpart in a Dickinson poem where the "self" and her "consciousness" appear as separate but virtually inseparable parts. As in the following lines, the "self" often becomes a target for the attacks of consciousness. To achieve peace seems possible only through the elimination of consciousness from the affairs of the self:

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1 "Autobiography" is a section of the book entitled *Robert Creeley and the Genius of the American Commonplace*, Clark, 1993: 122.

Me from Myself — to banish —
Had I Art —
Impregnable my Fortress
Unto All Heart —

But since Myself — assault Me —
How have I peace
Except by subjugating
Consciousness?

And since We're mutual Monarch
How this be
Except by Abdication —
Me — of Me? (1960: 318-319)

The inseparability of the "self" from "consciousness," and the realization that there is no escape from the critical judgment of consciousness suggested in the above lines becomes the subject of another poem in which Dickinson remarks, with the same tone of resentment in her voice, "Of Consciousness, her awful Mate / The Soul cannot be rid — (1960: 423). Similarly, in most of his poems Creeley seems to suffer from the mind's pressure and he desperately yearns for quietude. His wish to be relieved, even if temporarily, from the mind's tight grasp on itself, which he considers as a "habit," can be perceived in the lines from "The Mountains in the Desert" where he says, rather exhaustedly, "Tonight let me go / at last out of whatever / mind I thought to have, / and all the habits of it" (1982: 269).

The pressure the mind exerts on itself as well as on what is variously called the "self," "soul" or "physical self" in Dickinson's and Creeley's poems extends to speech and the poet's impulse to maintain control in speech counteracts his/her desire for openness and results in the same broken, hesitant manner of speaking in the following lines from Dickinson,

If he *dissolve* — then — there is *nothing* — *more*
Eclipse — at *Midnight* —
It was *dark* — *before* —
. . . . . (1960: 107)

and Creeley,

I didn't
want
to hurt you.
Don't

stop
to think. It
hurts
to live
like this,
meat
sliced
walking. (1982: 342)

The speakers in these poems attempt to gain articulation while struggling, at the same time against inarticulation. This effect is achieved by the formal elements of the poem, first of all, by verbal economy which produces short, compressed and condensed lines, and next by the interruption of the rhythmic continuity, through the dashes in the first poem, and the strongly end-stopped lines in the second.

The elimination of unnecessary words, sometimes using even lesser words than necessary displays the degree of importance Dickinson and Creeley attach to precision and accuracy in their work. Doubtlessly, the great significance attached to words calls for their sincere handling. Creeley explains this disposition by alluding to Pound's translation of the Chinese ideogram for "sincerity,"

> I believe in a poetry determined by the language of which it is made. . . . I look to words, and nothing else, for my own redemption either as a man or poet. Pound, early in this century teaches the tradition of 'man-standing-by-his-word,' the problem of sincerity, which is never simple as it may be made to seem. . . . Our world has been so delivered to the perversion of language (the word qua trick or persuader that my soul, such as I know it comes to life in whatever clarities are offered to it. (1989: 477-8)

Language, when used as a rhetorical device, turns into an "instrument of coercion, persuasion and deceit." What is more, "the power thus collected is ugly beyond description—it is truly evil" (1989: 578). For this reason, Creeley distrusts the term fiction as it implies feigned appearance or falseness, and thinks that "prose" is a much better term to be applied to this genre.

As "straightforward is forever the only way" for Creeley (1989: 286), "Candor" is "the only wile" for Dickinson (1986: 548). In her poems "thought" and "speech" are assigned a "divine" quality, therefore, they need to be treated with extreme care. In one of her letters Dickinson is warning her cousins against the hazards of speech: "We must be careful of what we say. No bird resumes its egg" (1986: 499). The attention Dickinson pays to accuracy and truthfulness in speech is a characteristic also of Creeley who states in a conversation with Susan Howe that "[a]s a young man writing, I would find myself saying things I couldn't unsay," and that "in writing once it is said it is said forever."[2]

Creeley posits that frugality in speech is a habit he acquired from New England, or more specifically rural Massachusetts where he was brought up. He

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2 Robert Creeley and Susan Howe, "Talk It Out," *Village Voice Literary Supplement*, 124 (April 1994), 22.

recalls, for example, that he was used to hearing the proverb "still waters run deep" quite often when he was a child (Clark, 1993: 31). In one of her poems Dickinson voices the same sustained belief "Declaiming Waters none may dread — / But waters that are still / Are so for the most fatal cause / In Nature — they are full —" (1960: 660). "Still waters" refers to a reserved, dignified silence, itself an indication of seriousness and wisdom. Apparently, Dickinson reveres the quality of reticence in a person whereas she calls a person of useless or idle talk a "haranguer," or "babbler," as in the following poem:

> I fear a Man of frugal Speech —
> I fear a Silent man —
> Haranguer — I can overtake —
> Or Babbler — entertain
>
> But he who weigheth — While the rest —
> Expand their furthest pound —
> Of this Man — I am wary —
> I fear that He is Grand — (1960: 265)

The strict word economy and the "laconic restraint" (Miller, 1988: 159) that has put its stamp on Creeley's and Dickinson's poems prevents the speaker from articulating him/herself with flowing ease. Creeley's voice becomes, in his words, "nervous" and "uptight" especially at moments of high intensity. His difficulty in articulating or communicating his emotions when he most needs to share them puts an unnecessary distance between him and the person he wishes to address. The following lines from "Four Years Later" are quite revealing in that they give voice to his regret, four years after the death of his mother, for not having talked with her "more" and perhaps more openly:

> Looking back
> now, wish
> I'd talked
> more to her
> I tried in the hospital
> but our habit
> was too deep—
>
> we didn't
> speak easily,
> . . . . . (Creeley, 1979: 51)

"I never spoke easily and had to write, for the most part just as adamantly" (1989: 495) states Creeley elsewhere, implying that his deeply embedded speaking habits have ultimately determined the nature of his poems.

There is an unmistakable parallelism between Creeley's broken and discontinuous lines which display the poet's tension and painful effort to utter words in the above poem as in the one that is mentioned earlier in this paper, and Dickinson's wavering style that conveys the speaker's sense of difficulty in articulation. Her style indicates the speaker's quaint position; s/he can neither avoid nor resolve the situation, and his/her speech becomes more cryptic as s/he struggles for articulation. In each poet's work speaking with halts and pauses determine what is being said, in other words, had these lines been written without the dashes or strong pauses at line endings, they would have produced a more smooth-flowing and prosaic rhythm, and an entirely different reading.

The dashes in Dickinson's poem have several functions. They are used as punctuation marks, separating words or word groups, forcing the reader to pause and pay attention to each word that precedes and follows the dashes. They disperse units of meaning into parts and allow multiple and diverse interpretations. They indicate the spaces of silence within the text. Most importantly, however, they break the regularity of rhythm. The "halting, dash-ridden" style in Emily Dickinson's poems leads, as James Olney argues, to "a nervous, jerky, startled creature rhythm, specific to Dickinson that works against, all the while working within the Common Meter," (30) as in the following poem:

> Remorse — is Memory — awake —
> Her Parties all astir —
> A Presence of Departed Acts —
> At window — and at Door — (1960: 365)

The stanza is composed in alternating iambic tetra and trimeter lines as in the common meter, or common measure as it is often called, which she learned from Isaac Watt's hymns. Although she seems to have employed this familiar rhythm in her poem, she breaks or distorts the metrical regularity with her dashes. As Edward Foster rightly observes, breaking the linearity of the rhythm renders "meaning" "something toward which one struggled" (87), that is, possible meaning(s) come(s) out, or become(s) a part of the writing process.

Though Creeley's dictum "form is never more than an extension of content," might seem to be privileging the content rather than the form, Creeley is quick to inform us that by "content" he "mean[s] the *words*—as opposed to content" (Creeley, 1989: 477, emphasis in the original). Like Dickinson's dashes, Creeley's abrupt pauses within lines as well as at line endings make words seem solid, material objects, individual particles with an unbridgeable gap between them. John Vernon suggests that these gaps denote a "movement continually hesitating, being interrupted, breaking off — of each line as a cliff and each sentence with a chasm

between it and the next one" (314). This kind of movement turns meaning to "an accident of the act of language" (313) instead of directing it carefully towards a predetermined route.

In an interview Creeley stated that "I must have learned from Emily Dickinson because she is the first poet that made a particular impression on me" (Gerber, 1973: 11). Later, Creeley would clarify this "particular impression" as his recognition, through a Dickinson poem he read at high school, that "rhythm" is the fundamental constituent of poetry. Though the speech and mode of address are otherwise quite common, Creeley's rhythms enforce the reader to stop and pay attention to each word and not to take its meaning for granted. A somewhat similar remark is made for Emily Dickinson's engagement with words, "as if she were inventing them. In her poetry, language remains itself and becomes at the same time brand new. Everything has to be rediscovered or created" (Conn 1989: 227), an effect she creates by breaking the rhythmic continuity in her poems with her frequent dashes.

In sum, behind the resembling modes of speech in Dickinson's and Creeley's poems lies the poet's inherent desire to control the thinking and speaking processes. This desire exerts a great pressure on the poet blocking the flow of his/her thought and speech. Whether this is a "habit," a deeply rooted moral disposition they commonly inherited, as Creeley is inclined to believe, from their New England Puritan ancestors, is a question that remains open to discussion, but certainly Dickinson and Creeley usher new possibilities of rhythm in their poems by breaking the syntactic unity with this mode of speech, and challenge their readers to develop new ways of reading and hearing.

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