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"So, onward my friend!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Works Cited

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

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