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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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