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Small Spaces of Existence: Robert Creeley's Poetry

Marie Weinel

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

2 This statement is attributed to Edward Dahlberg.

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

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

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

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

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

Creeley's work often longs for a direct contact with the real beyond the limitations of words. This desire manifests itself in his poetry's notorious reticence (visually conspicuous in its formal emaciation). As he acknowledges the gap between experience and expression, he might be seen to choose the ambiguity of silence over inaccurate statement. Creeley's work constantly questions his own reliability: implicitly through humour and obscurity, and explicitly in his disingenuous disclaimers and mocking self-portrayal. In one sense this can be viewed as refusal to take responsibility for his work, yet in another the poet is taking full responsibility for the inaccuracies of language and limitations of perspective necessarily present in his work. In the open acknowledgement of his poetry's limitations Creeley asks readers to bring their own judgement to the poem rather than simply accept his own.

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

AS REAL as thinking
wonders created
by the possibility—

forms. A period
at the end of a sentence
which

began it was
into a present,
a presence

saying
something
as it goes. (*CP* 379)

The poem delights in the "wonders created" by virtue of the imagination. In a similar spirit to the poem "Here" (discussed above) Creeley considers language's capacity to impart meaning through the semantic movement of a sentence. The action of the sentence creates a "presence" in the reader's thoughts: a form within the mind. The pleasure of communication is evident in this poem, but the persisting influence of the first line forces one to question the legitimacy of what has been created. If the "forms" of the poet's language are "As real as thinking," then they are only subjectively 'real' to whoever is doing the thinking.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

> reaching in
> from out—
>
> side, out
> from in—
>
> side (*CP* 380)

"Impossible locations" are thereby examined through textual manoeuvres.

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

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

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

"The Whip" is in many ways the quintessential Creeley poem in its candid examination of personal relationships through a characteristically elusive poetic mode. Humour is played against pathos and intimate self-exposure against linguistic ambiguity and obscurity of reference. Through this complex framework the poem considers the sense of distance which may exist between individuals—even as they lie in bed.

I spent a night turning in bed,
my love was a feather, a flat

sleeping thing. She was
very white

and quiet, and above us on
the roof, there was another woman I

also loved, had
addressed myself to in

a fit she
returned. That

encompasses it. But now I was
lonely, I yelled,

but what is that? Ugh,
she said, beside me, she put

her hand on
my back, for which act

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

The poem recounts an intimate situation in which physical proximity only serves to emphasise a lack of emotional mutuality. Although the couple are in bed together, from the outset there is a clear division between them. While the poem's speaker turns in a manner suggestive of mental preoccupation (or restless libido), his "love" sleeps peacefully, oblivious to his turmoil. He is an active, conscious presence in the poem, while she is presented as an inaccessible other. His description of his lover as "a feather, a flat / sleeping thing" both idealises her and turns her into an inanimate object. Indeed the speaker's subsequent—somewhat obscure—reference to a second woman above "on / the roof" whom he has "also loved" emphasises if nothing else the replaceable nature of his present lover. In contrast to his current companion, the second woman is nostalgically brought to mind as someone who "returned" his "fit" (the word "fit" suggesting compatibility and perhaps anatomical "fitting together" as well as passionate agitation). The poem's protagonist is thus lonely and unsatisfied even in this supposedly intimate context.

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

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

Intimate self-exposure of the sort recorded in this poem can be personally compromising. The poet's apparent candour leaves him vulnerably exposed before his readers. There is a frequent tension in Creeley's poetry between the desire to articulate and the defensive impulse to hold back highly personal details from public inspection. A direct parallel may be drawn between the relationship problems depicted in the content of his work and this hesitancy to allow the reader intimate contact with the space of his own personal life. Creeley's dilemma as a poet is one faced by many of his poems' protagonists; namely, whether or not to risk reaching out to the unknown other. Creeley's characteristically evasive style of writing can thus be seen as a complex interplay of invitations of intimacy and strategies to exclude. His candid self-exposure entices readers, only to subsequently estrange them. By constantly undermining his own profundity through means including self-mockery, humour, formal ambiguity, incomplete expression and obscurity of reference, Creeley protects himself from the voyeuristic scrutiny of his audience whilst, paradoxically, inviting the very same. Partial revelations and uncertainty solicit speculation and thus draw the reader even further in.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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