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Relationship, Place, and Company: A Conversation with Robert Creeley about Robert Duncan[1]

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The following conversation with Robert Creeley took place on February 18, 2002. That semester a number of graduate students in the University at Buffalo's Poetics Program were engaged in "Opening the Field: A Group Reading of Robert Duncan" with the assistance of Robert J. Bertholf, and Creeley—who at that time was no longer actively teaching at the University—graciously agreed to speak with us about his relationship with Duncan (1919-1988). On a cold winter's night he generously talked with us for over two and a half hours, weaving together a multitude of anecdotes in response to our sporadic questions, and as is evident these stories implicate their teller as much as their ostensible subject. Those present included then Buffalo students Chris Alexander, Barbara Cole, Patrick Durgin, Lori Emerson, Sandra Guerreiro, Greg Kinzer, James Maynard, Anna Reckin, and Kyle Schlesinger, and also Dan Featherston, who was visiting from the University of Arizona. The event took place in Patrick Durgin's apartment on 383 Summer Street, across from a carriage house that just happened to be one of Creeley's many former residences in Buffalo.

Creeley often began his sentences in one direction only to pause and then continue with a modification of either what he was going to say or what had just been said. These patterns are indicated mostly through ellipses, which also signify his habit of trailing off the ends of sentences. Other repetitions and hesitations have been edited out. There was a great deal of laughter throughout, but these moments have not been noted.

Robert Creeley: Many things went on I remember. For example, the great cathedral in Palma de Mallorca, and the thing about it is it has these Gaudí windows, Gaudí being the great architect and what not in Barcelona,[2] and in Mallorca, unknown to me entirely, were these very interesting windows in this

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[1] Transcribed and annotated by James Maynard. Special thanks to Chris Alexander for providing part of the recording used in this transcription.

[2] Antonio Gaudí (1852-1926) was a Spanish-Catalan architect whose unfinished masterpiece is the Roman Catholic basilica *La Sagrada Família* in Barcelona.

church. Moments after Robert Duncan had seen them, he said, "Let's go look at the windows," and I thought what windows? And he said, "The windows of the cathedral," so we went, and Robert so charmed the priest, who was our tacit host, that the priest took us not only to see the windows but took us to see these relics of the true cross and all the stuff that he had stashed away in the church in a very hidden manner.

He didn't suffer fools kindly, so that there are great stories of him and great instances where he really got into an argument. The classic one in New York once he got into an argument with I think it was the Museum of Modern Art, I believe, and they were having a series sponsored by the Academy of American Poets . . . I believe it was there; it was in some venue like that . . . the point was that the venue was not remarkably either impressed or even interested in the people who were coming to read. Poetry was not their basic interest; they were pleased to have the facility used, but other than that, forget it. There was always this sense of being an outsider, of being a poor relation, and in this case part of the institutional pattern was just to tape the readings. And they set up, and Robert was very particular about his reading, he wanted it to be not just a décor, but he wanted it to be silent, he wanted it to be able to be focused, he wanted it to be able to be heard, et cetera et cetera. And he did not like any other distractions or interruptions to be the case. And so their setting up began to be offensive to him, and he tried to overrule them and said "Now stop," and they just wouldn't do it, so it turned into a great sort of tug of war. I can't remember if he walked out, but he did something very particular.

He had for years an awfully hard time with [Barrett] Watten. There's an incredible scene where Barry is talking about Charles Olson,[3] which I think he . . . what's he doing, he's talking about Zukofsky.[4] I thought Barry wrote a very interesting book . . . Anyhow, he's talking in this case about Louis Zukofsky,

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[3] A poet known for his epic *The Maximus Poems* (1953-1975), Charles Olson (1910-1970) was an important figure in post-World War II American poetry. His essay "Projective Verse" (see note 81) is a defining manifesto of projectivism or field poetics, and as a teacher and rector of Black Mountain College he had a large influence on a number of younger poets and writers.

[4] Barrett Watten (1948-) is a poet, critic, and editor associated with Language Poetry. From 1971 to 1982 Watten edited the poetry journal *This*, initially co-edited with Robert Grenier, and later *Poetics Journal* (1982-1998) with Lyn Hejinian. Duncan's infamous exchange with Watten took place at the San Francisco Art Institute on December 8, 1978 during a memorial event for Louis Zukofsky sponsored by The Poetry Center at San Francisco State University.

and Robert's up in the audience with a friend about his age apparently whose skill is to listen to the universe for sounds in outer space that could possibly be instances of intelligence. So finally Robert's on his feet interrupting very vigorously and saying that his friend here, who after all listens to this very curious stuff, says that he can make more sense of it than he can make of you. And so there's a complete tug of war. Barry in those days, in that situation, he had virtually no sense of humor whatsoever so this would frustrate and irritate Duncan immensely that A, he didn't want to play, and B, he certainly didn't want to play in this manner, he didn't want to contest. He just wanted to dismiss Duncan and get him the hell out of there. Robert in that situation could become hyper-charged, you know.

I think he was probably one of the most . . . I think of John Wieners, I think of Gregory Corso, I think of George Oppen[5]—I think of writers or poets who are entirely that, almost nothing else that they primarily do. If you think of Duncan's way of proceeding in his own life: he goes to college, not to get a degree, but he's not even not getting a degree. He just goes to college as a ritual of getting out of his home/household, but once there he begins to simply pay attention to the company and the information that attracts him. And when it doesn't attract him any more, he goes, and then he comes back again and writes, and it's almost like he's going there to do research . . .

There's another great sort of Robert . . . when he was supporting them. For some real time, when Jess was working as a painter but getting no sales,[6] Robert was effectually supporting them by typing. Robert was like [Jack] Kerouac,[7] one

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[5] Born in Boston, the poet John Wieners (1934-2002) studied at Black Mountain College. Gregory Corso (1930-2001) was a New York Beat poet associated with Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac. George Oppen (1908-1984) was a central Objectivist poet whose *New Collected Poems* was published in 2002.

[6] Born Burgess Collins (1923-2004) but known later simply by the name "Jess," he and Duncan lived together as domestic partners since 1951 and shared a fascination with many of the same sources of Romanticism, myth, and fairy tale. As Creeley recounts later in the conversation, Jess was trained and practiced as a physicist before becoming a celebrated artist known in particular for his large collages. For a retrospective of his work see *Jess: A Grand Collage,* 1951-1993, organized by Michael Auping (Buffalo: Albright-Knox Art Gallery, 1993).

[7] A widely popular and influential poet and prose writer, Jack Kerouac (1922-1969) was a leading figure of the Beat Generation, a movement whose style and values were in many ways defined in Kerouac's autobiographical novel *On the Road* (1957).

of the great typists. So he was doing classic typing of dissertations, and all, for people in Berkeley, and there's a great story when we actually picked up one of the graduate students whose dissertation he was typing, which was on himself. The guy said, "You're Robert Duncan, and you're typing my dissertation?" It was true. And Robert said, "Yeah, thanks for the ride." He was hitchhiking. He used to hitchhike, and I don't think he ever drove, or he didn't drive when I knew him, ever.

James Maynard: When was the first time you met him?

Creeley: I met him in Mallorca. It must have been early, about '53 or '52.[8] He and a pleasant friend of his, Harry Jacobus,[9] who was another painter and drove a cab in San Francisco for a living, and Jess. It would be Jess's first time going to Europe to see museums and all. They had contrived to get, I can't remember quite how the money would come, but they had enough money to spend a year effectually in Europe. So they decided, he and Jess, and Harry, came first to Mallorca. Within ten minutes of meeting Robert I was intrigued by him, and somewhat scared. I was a New England Puritan, straight, and here was West Coast, gay. I didn't know whether I could measure up to his . . . not even to his interests, but to his habit. I knew that he and Olson were close at that point. It was Olson who effectually said Duncan should come into *The Black Mountain Review* . . . that we should start to use him. I had on the other hand read "An African Elegy," and I had not liked it.[10] The rhetoric was too heavy for me. It sounded not like [Vachel] Lindsay, whom I did like in a weird way, but I didn't like the voodoo jumping about in the jungle stuff.[11] To a person from Massachusetts, it was . . . I was scared. I didn't know what to do with it. Robert on the other hand loved Edith Sitwell,[12] whom I grew to love too, but . . . In my habits everything was not simply stripping down but it was trying

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[8] Duncan traveled to Mallorca, Spain in March 1955, and after visiting France and England returned to the U.S. in March 1956.

[9] Harry Jacobus opened the King Ubu Gallery along with Duncan and Jess in San Francisco, 1953.

[10] The poem first appeared as "Toward an African Elegy" in Circle 10 (Summer 1948): 94-96, and was later published as "An African Elegy" in *The Years as Catches: First Poems (1939-1946)* (Berkeley: Oyez, 1966), 33-35.

[11] Vachel Lindsay's infamous poem "The Congo" (1914) uses a heavy emphasis of rhythmic sounds in its controversial depictions of Africa.

to be as straightforward and as unembellished as possible. Just plain Bob and nothing more—just zoom. Robert was just leaping about with his extraordinarily interesting and extensive rhetoric. So anyhow, we met, I remember, we were on the trolley coming into the place where we lived just on the edge of the city and I remember Robert saying to me, "You're not interested in history, are you?" And I thought, yes I am, yes I am. And I knew what he meant. I wasn't interested in the kinds of tracking that he and Olson particularly had the habit of. I was absolutely engaged with what was there, but momently. It didn't provoke me . . . whereas Robert would do that with great...He was very proud of his personal library, not as the book collector but as the functioning system of information. He had I don't know how many thousands of books. He had a substantial . . . and all very particular. So that kind of . . . whereas mine was very sort of picked up on the run or quick affections, where this book, someone leave a book in the house you read it, but it had no such inherent design as Robert's. So Robert was really an extraordinary reader, and we had come back to our house, which was a suburban house with two parts, like a duplex . . . and had a wonderful sort of sitting situation around the fireplace. The fireplaces in Mallorca were great, so you sat down with a little canopy over you . . . move benches leading out from the fireplace. We were sitting in that kind of situation, Jess, Robert, and me, and I was telling him something not hysterical but energized with the whole business and I wanted to make a point about this or that, and I remember I was trying to say that X was someone I certainly didn't much approve, and I said suddenly, "Oh, you know he's like some cross-eyed son of a bitch who couldn't tell his ass from a hole in the ground." I suddenly thought, uh oh, that was not a wise way to put it. I remember Jess went white and suddenly froze with irritation, and I remember Robert looked at me and started laughing and said something about "You had to say it, didn't you?" or something like that. I had one eye, so I mean it wasn't as though we were unknown to each other, but it was just that sense of like a tooth that's aching. You want to see how bad is it? How good is it? Take a look. And we became peculiarly, extraordinarily good friends indeed.

He had brought with him, characteristically . . . this remember was a trip for about a year . . . the first work of Zukofsky I ever really saw or knew. He had a copy of that, he had H. D.'s *War Trilogy*, for example, which I hadn't remembered seeing before, and then he had things like [William Carlos] Williams's take on

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[12] Dame Edith Sitwell (1887-1964) was an English poet and critic who often collaborated with her younger brothers Osbert (1892-1969) and Sacheverell (1897-1988). Her *Collected Poems* was published in 1957.

Zukofsky,[13] which was very interesting. That aspect of him, he was not pedantic nor was he heavy. Like Olson I think he really didn't like, so to speak, academics who rested on their laurels. He thought universities were a place where you could find out everything, but in fact if anybody knew anything they wouldn't tell you, because they were afraid of losing its authority. That kind of scene. Basically he trusted particular people who worked in the university and didn't trust a whole bunch more. The whole "Multiversity," which is a poem,[14] isn't attacking the university specifically, but that's the reference underlying it as far as I can see. That's the frame. The codification of information into static becomes hostile to that which would inquire. Robert and Olson both were extraordinary talkers. I think Robert could talk nine or ten hours of monologuing. And Olson, I remember, had a class that started at 7:00 in the evening and ran until 1:00 the next afternoon, nonstop. Well, how did you resolve your needs to talk, when you worked with each other? And he said, "Well, we sort of decided we'd both talk at once," and he said it worked.

He for example had a quirky and queer perception of Kerouac. He would go up and down I think in the ways that he felt about him, and the same with Allen [Ginsberg].[15] There were aspects of Allen that he didn't like, and questioned. He felt that Allen was too . . . not so much generalizing, but was too vulnerable to senses of populist . . . Because Robert was very fierce about . . . The argument he has with Denise,[16] for example, is what he feels is Denise's persuasion because of the sentimentalized . . . not so much sentimentalized, as though poetry as an

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[13] An extremely important source for Duncan and the inspiration in part for "The H. D. Book" (see note 101), H. D.'s (Hilda Doolittle, 1886-1961) *War Trilogy*—later published with the title *Trilogy*—is comprised of *The Walls Do Not Fall* (1944), *Tribute to the Angels* (1945), and *The Flowering of the Rod* (1946). William Carlos Williams (1883-1963) was an enormously influential modernist American poet who emphasized a poetics of local particulars in works like his long poem Paterson.

[14] Duncan, "The Multiversity, Passages 21," in *Bending the Bow* (New York: New Directions, 1968), 70-73.

[15] Allen Ginsberg (1926-1997) was the central poet of the Beat movement in New York and San Francisco.

[16] Born in England, the poet Denise Levertov (1923-1997) moved to the United States in 1948 and was later associated with the writers published by Robert Creeley in *The Black Mountain Review*. Her poetry is known for its religious themes and radical politics. She and Duncan were close friends until their falling out over the relationship between poetry and politics during the Vietnam War. With her husband Mitchell (Mitch) Goodman (1923-1997) she had a son Nikolai (Nik).

art had somehow to justify or have an attachment which justified its occasion. One time I remember Denise said to him that she felt a poem he had written was beneath his dignity as a poet (it was about a butterfly or a spider—it was like Whitman[17]) and she thought this was not a fit subject for his genius. And his point was simply anything is possible in poetry; you don't make exclusions on the grounds of the seriousness of the subject. And so I think in like sense he felt that Denise's bringing poetry to serve in such a determined way the humanly legitimate and understood horrors of that moment, the protest, were to Robert a . . . not a forfeit, because Robert was writing poems which one would presume were of like kind, but the point was he wasn't writing them in the commitment of that interest, whereas Denise really was. She was on the road . . . Robert would be on the road occasionally to read with groups that protested, but he wouldn't sign up in the same way that Denise did. There's to be, and you've probably noticed, a publication of their letters which will be extremely useful really for both.[18] Denise felt that she was curiously produced by Robert over a long time; he was Svengali and she was his instrument.[19] And it's true that Robert felt extraordinarily identified with Denise; she was like his alter ego. She was all that he wasn't, not so much in terms of ability, but she was the person he could not be, so she was magical and extraordinary for him. The weird question: what happened? What Robert had done was again talking too much; he was being interviewed and he brought up this qualification of Denise's poetry or commitment of it to the war protest. The interviewer said, "What do you think about Denise Levertov's poems protesting the war in Vietnam?" and he said "Well, I think she's caught by demos, I think she's demonic. She's been pulled past any sense of poetry into almost a violence of emotional anger which the poetry serves and consumes to survive but it's not the point of poetry to be as possessed."

Dan Featherston: Isn't that ironic though, if on one hand Duncan's trying to be inclusive in the largest sense, and then . . .

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[17] Commonly viewed as an originating source of a distinctly American poetics, Walt Whitman's (1819-1892) poetry is distinguished by its celebration of all aspects of modern life.

[18] Duncan and Denise Levertov, *The Letters of Robert Duncan and Denise Levertov*. Eds. Robert J. Bertholf and Albert Gelpi (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2004).

[19] Svengali: one who controls another to do what is desired, after the hypnotist character in George du Maurier's novel *Trilby*.

Creeley: Well, his quick point would be . . . Do you remember in "The Venice Poem" . . . where he says, "What do these avail, when this art . . ."[20]—or as Olson puts it, "As though art weren't enough to pay attention to."[21] So it isn't that Robert feels that art has no moral steady or moral condition. What he does mean is that you cannot make art—of this art, poetry—you cannot make it serve a purpose it does not itself discover and/or determine. You can't go to work for city hall just because you may believe in it. You can't make poetry into a function that can be as committed. In some ways it almost sounds holier than thou or something, but for this person who all his life had done what he did insofar as poetry . . . he committed it, or he didn't commit it . . . and who began, actually, with a very strong political disposition. If you think of Jackson, who's the same age; I mean Jackson in some ways is parallel, you see. Okay Jackson, why aren't you out there on the street? There's no one more involved than Jackson Mac Low.[22]

Patrick Durgin: I asked him today, why, when we were reading his work together last year, why he would have kept bringing up, telling me to read Robert Duncan. He said, "I have no idea." But he did mention his first meetings with him as well as being at the anarchist-pacifist meeting.

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[20] Duncan's "The Venice Poem" was first published in *Poems* 1948-49 ([Berkeley]: Berkeley Miscellany Editions, [1949]), 21-52. The lines Creeley is remembering are:

> All that we value:
> order, remembrance,
> human nature and conduct,
> natural coherence—
>
> What do they avail when this art
> dictates its laws? (47)

[21] In "Against Wisdom as Such," *The Black Mountain Review* 1, no. 1 (Spring 1954): 35-39; *Collected Prose*. Eds. Donald Allen and Benjamin Friedlander. Intro. Robert Creeley (Berkeley: U of California P, 1997), 260-264, Olson writes: "As though art were not enough for any of us to behave to!" (261).

[22] Jackson Mac Low (1922-2004) was a poet known particularly for his use of chance operations as compositional methods. His *Representative Works*: 1938-1985 was published in 1986 by Roof Books. Mac Low first met Duncan in the beginning of the 1940s at an anarchist meeting in New York City.

Creeley: When I told Jackson my son had been much involved with [Ralph] Nader,[23] and also I voted for Nader, because I really couldn't vote for . . . he said "That's ridiculous." I said, "What do you mean?" He said, "Politics is the art of the possible, Bob, not going out and making judgments, forget it." Which was the old Jackson, see. You rectify what can be rectified, unless you have to pass over it . . .

Featherston: Yeah, he was in Tucson about a year ago and I saw him there, and he was having a big argument with somebody who had voted for Nader, saying it was the lesser evil . . .

Creeley: Well then you say, "Who did you vote for, Jackson?" And he voted libertarian, probably, I'm pretty sure. He certainly didn't vote for Gore or . . . maybe he did, but I don't think so.[24] There was this part that you couldn't put A against B, knowing that A had no chance at all; you couldn't offer that as a real choice. You might want to vote for A for other reasons, but not for that one.

Anyhow, Denise really felt that . . . she did have that curious nineteenth century or European sense of poetry in the service of, and Robert did not want poetry to be in the service of any other thing. It wasn't that he wanted it to be pure, but he didn't want it to be signed up before it was written. That's all. He certainly wrote poems of extraordinary craft and power against the war. So I think Denise was very shocked and hurt, because I think she felt that he too was very engaged with protesting the war, and why did he so curiously find what she was doing not acceptable. And he said it in public. He said it in company first, but then very different to read it in a magazine. And then I remember asking Robert, why couldn't they sort of patch it up, and he said, you know, he could, but it would just break again because the basic proposal in poetry was finally quite different.

Durgin: I think a lot of us were at your reading at [the] Albright-Knox [Art Gallery] the other night, when you read "The Door."[25]

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[23] Ralph Nader (1934-) is an American consumer rights and political activist who ran for President as the nominee of the Green Party (1996, 2000) and later as an independent candidate (2004).

[24] Democrat Al Gore (1948-) served as Vice President of the United States under President Bill Clinton from 1993-2001. In 2001 he lost a highly contested Presidential election to George W. Bush.

[25] Creeley's poem "The Door," dedicated "for Robert Duncan," appeared in *For Love*: Poems, 1950-1960 (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1962), 101-103.

Creeley: That was my attempt to tell Robert how much I love him.

Durgin: I was curious, we've just been reading *Roots and Branches*, and he has his "Thank You for Love," "(for Robert Creeley)."[26]

Creeley: I think he wrote that before . . .

Durgin: Did he beat you to it?

Creeley: Yeah, I believe so.

Durgin: I was wondering if there was anything like imitation going on. There's an idea of form that's easier for me to take with Duncan than his rhetoric . . .

Creeley: He does have . . . anything that's shiny or glitters, he picks it up. Again, the sense of being didactically original or determining your style without reference to anything else. I mean, Robert would be an incredible collage. There was a wonderful poem of his called "For An A Muse Meant."[27] Both Olson and Denise separately thought it was a parody of their work, literally, and so they were very defensive. But it wasn't. It was actually a homage to Denise that was supposed to be "for an amusement." But she thought it was an attack. I thought it was a wonderful poem. I thought that that litany of where you can get things, of what his own procedures truly were, this incredible collaging of velvet . . . just pleasure. His incredible ability just to include . . . At the same time, I think it's the year before, where he has that charming homage to Zukofsky. It's affection. This is probably one of two or three poems he ever writes in this manner. Zukofsky did it—"For ABC," it's called[28]—and so does Allen. I would write poems using that modus. I remember writing a poem for some personal celebration of [William] Bronk where I'm trying to get the balance of the depression together with the kind of Wallace Stevens line.[29] It's not phony,

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[26] Duncan, "Thank You for Love," in *Roots and Branches* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1964; New York: New Directions, 1969), 115-116.

[27] Duncan sent the poem unsigned to Denise Levertov in June 1953 with the title "An A Muse Meant." It later appeared with the same title in *The Black Mountain Review* 1, no. 3 (Fall 1954): 19-22 and then as "For A Muse Meant" in *Letters*: Poems 1953-1956 (Highlands, NC: Jargon Society, 1958; Chicago: Flood Editions, 2003), 1-4.

[28] Creeley is perhaps referring to the "ABC" section of Zukofsky's "I's (pronounced *eyes*)" in the 1963 book of the same title. See Louis Zukofsky, *Complete Short Poetry*. Foreword Robert Creeley. (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1991), 216.

[29] William Bronk's (1918-1999) career as a poet began when he was published by Cid Corman in *Origin* magazine, who also published his first two books of poetry. Wallace Stevens (1879-1955) was a major American poet whose works investigate the complex relationship between imagination and reality.

I was just hearing him and writing in that mode. I did another thing like that quite recently where I'm effectually hearing the modus of the friend and using that as the instrument, and it's fun.

I would be curious at some point in your happily reading and thinking about this, the way he not so much imagines himself and his own position . . . he is a poet for whom, and it's rare, really, the poem is finally the only legitimate "subject," but it's a constant reference and presence. I mean Robert really composed books . . . really right down to the typing and all that constituted it. He isn't a ringmaster at this position, or is it simply a master of ceremonies, but he's conducting the situation very determinedly and very specifically. It's not a collection, it's a design. He, for example, in his very last books . . . this one, for example [he takes out a book] . . . no, it's the one before, *Ground Work* . . . where he's typing and he becomes so frustrated with the translation of the type to letterpress, was throwing off his own sense of the cadence and measure that he might otherwise be making clear.[30] Both he and Olson were significantly frustrated by the poems and typography, and translating the initial text to type.

Durgin: Another connection with Jackson.

Creeley: Yeah. 'Cause he felt that this is the score, this is the completed work, this is the means to hear the work, and if you can't sound it then you've not really got to where it's accurate. He felt you had to not just read in some public performance, but you had to join the dance, which was the sound of what was written. He was very much involved with sounds. He also had those wonderful, playful . . . *Writing Writing*, for example, the whole involvement with Stein.[31] He was one of the initial people for me using Stein very comfortably and affectionately, really. Not simply as a means, but almost as a response. When he says "I can't remember if I read it or I wrote it," that gives a sense of where he's at. Years ago there was a pleasant fellow, young, first employment in the university, and he was writing particularly on *The Yellow Book*, on Beardsley and

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[30] Duncan's *Ground Work: Before the War* (New York: New Directions, 1984; reprinted in *Ground Work: Before the War/In the Dark.* Eds. Robert J. Bertholf and James Maynard. Intro. Michael Palmer. [New York: New Directions, 2006]) was produced directly from a typescript.

[31] Duncan, *Writing Writing: A Composition Book for Madison, Stein Imitations, 1953* ([Albuquerque]: Sumbooks, 1964; Portland: Trask House, 1971).

all that cluster of people.[32] He was doing a lot of research, it was his first year here, and his head was flooded with stuff. He was writing, and lo and behold, there's suddenly a charge that he's plagiarized, you dig, that he's actually used some material in his work that he hasn't sufficiently identified as quoted. I used to have an office near him, and to this day I believe it just all melted in his head, that he couldn't weirdly remember what he had read and what he had thought himself. He ended up teaching at the University of Singapore, and then drifted off to Japan I believe . . . There's a great scene when the Buffalo contingent are arrested for protesting the war, and his mother who's back in Texas suddenly sees him in something like *The New York Times* listed as a person who's now in jail for breaking the law, and he said he got Leslie Fiedler to write his mother a letter to say he was okay,[33] that her son was not turned into some awful creature. He was a very sweet man, but he got . . . I'm sure with Robert . . . people would at times come up and say quite spiritedly and quite smugly, "Did you know that that wasn't Olson's own thinking, he took that from so and so?" Yeah he did, didn't he. He had whole poems which would be effectually translations or adaptations. Who can stop and give credits to everything? You start getting up in the morning and it's "Thank you god" all day, which would probably keep you safe and sound . . .

Lori Emerson: That's what I wanted to ask you about . . .

Creeley: Plagiarism? Poetry loves plagiarism.

Emerson: . . . especially about how Duncan thought about the self in relation to writing. In *A Quick Graph* you say, in relation to Duncan, "to 'return' not to oneself as some egocentric center, but to experience oneself as in the world,"[34] and then I was thinking about that against what [Robert] Bertholf was saying about Duncan's response to Olson . . .

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[32] Aubrey Beardsley (1872-1898) was an influential English illustrator whose work is known for its Art Nouveau style. He was also the first editor of *The Yellow Book* (1894-1897), a British periodical that published a wide range of stories, poems, essays, illustrations, and paintings.

[33] Leslie Fiedler (1917-2003) was an influential critic of American literature and a former Professor of English at the University at Buffalo.

[34] Creeley, "'I'm given to write poems,'" in *A Quick Graph*. Ed. Donald Allen. (San Francisco: Four Seasons Foundation, 1970), 61-72. The full statement reads: "That body is the 'field' and is equally the experience of it. It is, then, to 'return' not to oneself as some egocentric center, but to experience oneself as in the world, thus, through this agency of fact we call, variously, 'poetry'" (64). The essay is reprinted in *The Collected Essays of Robert Creeley*. (Berkeley: U of California P, 1989), 496-504.

Creeley: "Against Wisdom as Such."[35]

Emerson: . . . he said that "you've given myself back to me,"[36] but these seem like two really different pictures of the self . . .

Creeley: Well they're each . . . I'm trying to get into the world. I had fallen deeply under the spell of Pound's, you know, "man standing by his word,"[37] and nothing but the most . . . the whole idea of poetry and using language other than in the most explicit and timid sense of the reality you can recognize. It wasn't that I was necessarily humorless, but I was doggedly honest. Robert used to tease me . . . one of my greatest respects and delights as a "young reader" was Jean Cocteau,[38] I really dug his work. And Robert used to tease me by saying, "Oh, Cocteau says that literature is the out of line." I couldn't say, oh no, he would never say that. It wasn't that we were coming at different ends; we were each of us trying to locate and enter a world made possible. Not simply accommodating what we were doing, but in which what we were doing found relationship, place, and company, a companion. When Olson's dying and he's gone to see him, and he says to Olson, "We've been upon a great adventure."[39] That's what

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[35] See note 20.

[36] A paraphrase of a letter Duncan wrote to Charles Olson in October of 1957.

[37] One of the most important poets of the twentieth century, Ezra Pound (1885-1972) was a complex figure known an the central proponent of such movements as Imagism and Vorticism, as the author of the epic long poem *The Cantos*, and as a controversial political supporter of the Mussolini and Fascism. In the notes that accompany Ernest Fenollosa's *The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry,* foreword and notes Ezra Pound (London: Stanley Nott, 1936), Pound describes the Chinese character for sincerity or truth—composed of the figure for "man" next to the figure for "word, speech"—as "Man and word, man standing by his word, man of his word, truth, sincere, unwavering" (47). In "A Note," in *Collected Essays*, 477-478, Creeley writes: "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 man or poet. Pound, early in the century, teaches the tradition of 'man-standing-by-his-word,' the problem of *sincerity*, which is never as simple as it may be made to seem" (477).

[38] Jean Cocteau (1889-1963) was a French poet, novelist, dramatist, and filmmaker known for his visionary Surrealism.

[39] In a number of published interviews Duncan recounts his final words with Olson which took place in New York Hospital just prior to Olson's death on January 10, 1970. In a letter to Jess written January 4, 1970 and published four years later in *Olson: The Journal of the Charles Olson Archives* 1 (1974): 4-6, Duncan writes that he said to Olson that "I see him always ahead along a way (the way or quest of what those of us who set out in 1950 with a mission in poetry were promised to)" (5).

one wanted in my case or in his, a sense of company, response; not simply understanding, but others . . . not simply doing things or writing poems in some sense of collecting eggs . . . not even sharing but present in this way the world might be and seemingly was, at least in this company. It wouldn't be anything more dramatic than hanging out with musicians if you were a musician. Just people who dug music . . . not just, but people who did this thing and probably delighted . . . in the conditions of being in the world. I really keep thinking of that first poem "Often I Am Permitted to Return to a Meadow."[40] That's his great one, that's the first poem in *The Opening of the Field.* I think both of us were, not to make an easy conjunction, but I think we were each of us in our particular ways trying to both invent and discover a world which would include us. I came from a displaced household, mother worked as a nurse, et cetera, father dead . . . I don't know, I was a relatively happy and engaged child, but I felt like an outsider, because of, well, my one eye, or, but even more to the point, I didn't really feel that I was where I was. So I get this scholarship to a school at fourteen, which changes a lot just in company. I went to my fiftieth grammar school reunion and there's everybody as affectionate and recognizable as ever, all passion spent. It's sort of terrific. And I hadn't seen them since they were literally kids, and now I was seeing them when they're old, sixty five, so all the *Sturm und Drang* of adulthood had long since faded, it was sort of wonderful. You grow up and you're all human in the most fabulous way. I think with Robert . . . cause he says in that . . . I wish to hell I could find quickly where he says it, but remember he says "I practice poetry the way other men practice war; to exercise my faculties at large."[41] To exercise my faculties at large is really what I'm trying, as they say, to get to as point. Poetry for him was a modus, a way of being Robert Duncan, not just the person with a name, but the full faculty of what that was. I think that's why again he was wary of Denise's "signing it up," as he called; even good causes nonetheless distract and confine.

Maynard: Maybe a related question is, could you talk about the influence of Jess's work on Duncan, and their collaboration?

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[40] Duncan, "Often I Am Permitted to Return to a Meadow," in *The Opening of the Field.* (New York: Grove Press, 1960; New York: New Directions, 1973), 7.

[41] In "Pages from a Notebook," excerpted in *The New American Poetry 1945-1960.* Ed. Donald Allen. (New York: Grove Press, 1960; Berkeley: U of California P, 1999), 400-07, Duncan writes: "I make poetry as other men make war or make love or make states and revolutions: to exercise my faculties at large" (407). First published in *The Artist's View* 5 (July 1953): [1-3] and collected in *A Selected Prose*. Ed. Robert J. Bertholf. (New York: New Directions, 1995), 13-22.

Creeley: Well . . . there's a great story . . . Jess and Robert met at some kind of gathering, and apparently Jess went home and got a phone so that Robert could call him. Jess was one of the most extraordinary and complexly literate people I think I've ever known. His basic training, like they say, which he actually practiced, he was one of the initiating atomic physicists out of Long Beach, California, and he was trained as such. He had that habit, attention, capability, he could work that precisely and not recognizing of things. But he was obviously far more attracted to art, which to him was an endlessly sort of wearing, collecting, physical and mental business. If you know his work it's just extraordinary and painstaking. He builds up the surface of the painting exceptionally, and has this extraordinary layered and echoing and inter-resonant field of endless print and circumstance . . . and thing referred to . . . incredible. So that aspect was very shared between them. They were both polymaths in ways, and they both delighted in this kind of old time . . . it wasn't going back to childhood, but again, if you read "The Truth and Life of Myth,"[42] that's a wonderful, clear sense of Robert's take on initiation as a child. There's a great story told of him by an old friend Warren Tallman. Robert had been in Berkeley at the same time that Ellen Tallman, Warren's wife, was there and they were good friends at that time.[43] In any case, some years later Robert was invited to come to I think a conference of high school English teachers and he was there to talk and possibly read a bit of his poetry. Warren had driven him over to the high school, this is a big high school in San Francisco, and they were having some problems finding just what room they were to be. So Robert suddenly spotted some people going into a room, so he went in with them, presuming that's it, to discover the subject of interest was children's literature. Robert started talking and fascinated all the people. People were taking notes . . .

[Interruption as someone enters]

We were just talking about Duncan and this high school business where he's supposed to be giving a lecture on poetry and passes a room where all

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[42] Duncan, *The Truth and Life of Myth: An Essay in Essential Autobiography*. (New York: House of Books, 1968; Fremont, MI: The Sumac Press, 1968); reprinted in Fictive Certainties. (New York: New Directions, 1985), 1-59.

[43] Warren (1921-1994) and Ellen (King) Tallman, who had known Duncan in Berkeley since the 1940s, left the United States in 1956 for Canada to teach in the English department at the University of British Columbia. In 1963 they organized an important poetry conference in Vancouver, the first occasion where Denise Levertov, Charles Olson, Robert Duncan, and Robert Creeley were all present at the same time along with such other poets as Allen Ginsberg, Philip Whalen, and Margaret Avison.

these people are going in and he just gets in line with them to discover they're discussing children's literature and he takes off. He loved writers like George MacDonald, for example.[44] I remember I was trying to write something on Jack Kerouac's *Book of Dreams* and I suddenly thought of Robert's Wynken, Blynken and Nod, Mrs. Noah,[45] the whole sense of not just fantasy but he was quite serious, moving in that childhood world of visions and immanences and presences and echoes of as yet unrealized things. At nighttime that dream world which for Duncan was very substantial, as it was for Olson, too . . . so, what am I talking about?

Maynard: Jess and collaboration.

Creeley: Yes, so all of that content . . . there was an initial, perfect show here. You should be able to get hold of it easily. It's a large catalogue of his work . . . that will tell you, just take a look.[46] It has a lot of not simply literary allusions, but the mind . . . the way Jess sees the world is very coincident with Robert's. I don't think he was instructed by Robert, but there's certainly a coincidence in the way they both felt. Robert really venerated and loved and had absolute pleasure . . . Robert knew a lot about painting. Robert, for example, had given me a rundown once on basic painters then . . . Hassel Smith and Clyfford Still . . . the first real information on Clyfford Still I ever got was from Robert . . . Ed Corbett . . . He also had been close friends with very interesting people like [Wallace] Berman and George Herms.[47] There's a time when Robert and those households get very involved with magic. I don't think it's tales out of school or something, I just don't think I know enough about what factually all that was. I had friends in common who were there. It was not a coven, exactly, but a particular conjunction of households which were practicing magic . . .

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[44] George MacDonald (1824-1905) was a Scottish writer of fantasy, fairy tales, and romance fiction including *The Princess and the Goblin* (1872) and Lilith (1895).

[45] Jack Kerouac, *Book of Dreams*. (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1961). "Wynken, Blynken, and Nod" (1889) is the title of a children's poem written by Eugene Field (1850-1895). Duncan's poem "The Ballad of Mrs. Noah" appears in *The Opening of the Field,* 24-26.

[46] See note 5.

[47] Hassel Smith, Clyfford Still (1904-1980), and Ed Corbett were all San Francisco artists. Still and Corbett were both teaching at the California School of Fine Arts where Jess enrolled as a student in 1949. Wallace Berman (1926-1976) and George Herms (1935-) are two California visionary artists associated with Berman's magazine *Semina; see Semina Culture: Wallace Berman & His Circle*. Eds. Michael Duncan and Kristine McKenna. (New York: D. A. P., Inc., 2005).

Duncan would endlessly sort of expand and contract; he did things which were mind blowing. For example told me once that when he was living in the east he got this curious job which was simply going around representing the comic book distributor, and he'd go to venues which were selling comic books and check and rehearse with them their stock and sales. He said at one point he discovered checking the stock that this retailer had ripped off something like five hundred copies of *Donald Duck*, and he, Robert, was now having to report this. And the guy's practically on his knees saying "You'll ruin me, you can't tell them"...And Robert says, "I've got to." He quit the job just afterwards. Ruining a man's life over X number of copies of *Donald Duck*—he couldn't do it. He did a lot of things, though. He told me one little story about when he was working for . . . oh god, I mean Robert's associations are just dazzling . . . Anaïs Nin,[48] when he was working as her ostensible literary secretary, and . . .

[Tape switch]

Lots of . . . he told me for example in New York once together . . . that for a time he was worried and working as a male prostitute. He said what would happen would be . . . the best possible scene would be he and the mark would have their sexual congress and then the person would go home, would go off to his otherwise real life leaving Robert with the room, a place to sleep and be comfortable. He said there were nights when nothing at all would happen, and so what he would then do would be to stay . . . a couple let's say coming back from the movies or whatever and they're going into their residence or hotel or apartment, and he said there's a moment when they've cleared the hall but the door hasn't quite clicked . . . that's what you want. You go in there and you . . . you go right to the very top of the building, just before you go out onto the roof. The heat rises, and you can sort of curl up there on the edge of the stairs and sleep the night and go off in the usual manner in the morning. But, lots of stuff like that. He had a very real life. It never occurred to him not to do what he had to do . . . not had to do as though it were some compulsive . . . but he didn't really worry about that, having sold his very body for lucre. He sold it for a very practical reason—a new pair of pants or something. It wasn't that it was without moral concern, but it was a practical solution to a problem he then had and he seemingly enjoyed the sex as much as the guy or whatever, so . . . He told

[48] Anaïs Nin (1903-1977) was a French-born writer known for her erotica and diaries. Duncan knew Nin in the early 1940s when he briefly was a member of her circle in New York City.

me otherwise a story once about a friend, he said he hadn't seen him really for a long time, and he had been an extraordinarily handsome young man, and now he did see him again, and he looked extraordinarily bad, like an old prizefighter. And he couldn't imagine what happened. He said the fellow showed him his drawer with a lot of diamonds in there. And he said this fellow with whom he had been living had a quite violent temper, and what he would do is he'd flare up and suddenly slug this other fellow, and then as apology he would give him a diamond. So now he had a lot of diamonds but not much face left . . .

But his knowledge, I remember one time when I was visiting him in San Francisco, I was interested to know more about music, contemporary music, particularly modern so-called music, and he played to me and demonstrated to me procedures, recognitions, breakthroughs in music beginning after Mahler, certainly, but [Boulez?] and the whole range through Stockhausen et cetera et cetera. I remember Robert's taping from his collection. But that kind of order he had remarkably . . . it was not a didactic order, it was like, again, like Jackson's is a curious parallel or complement to his kind of intelligence.

And that's what he gave to me in response I always felt. I remember again one time a friend, a painter named John Altoon, was . . . we were all in Mallorca.[49] John Altoon's background had been growing up in a usual sad, displaced Armenian family at that time. And the mother was dying slowly of cancer, and they were the social outcasts of Los Angeles. He said he remembered going to visit friends' houses as a kid, and the mother would say, "Now let's see, your name is Billy Smith, and you belong to so and so, and what is your name?" He says, "John Altoon." "And how do you spell it?" And then there would be a kind of break in the affability because they really didn't like these kids to be around with their kids. Anyhow, John Altoon was telling us this, and I remember Robert saying, "Do you know anything about the Armenian empire?" He said, "My family lost everything . . . when my father went back there wasn't an Armenia any more; it wasn't there any more, it was gone." And so he said, "I don't know, empire?" And so Robert rehearsed to him over a period of about two hours, three hours, the whole history literally of the Armenian empire including its major figures et cetera et cetera. And John, you could see him visibly swelling with pride and fascination as this extraordinary antecedent became evident.

There were wonderful moments. For example, I was supposed to be lecturing in Berkeley once and I'd come with Robert, and we . . . oh gosh . . .

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[49] John Altoon (1924-1967) was a painter who collaborated with Creeley on the book *About Women*. (Los Angeles: Gemini Ltd., 1966).

I don't remember, maybe Thom Gunn[50]. . . being asked about projective verse or something like that, and there was a blackboard, and I had just moved to try to make some thing that could be used for reference, and I remember Robert saying "I think I can help with that," coming up from the back of the room—he's off, man, he's off. There's another at MLA, where the next session was literally pounding on the doors to get in while Robert . . . the particular piece where he's talking about the sense of self in contemporary literature and what not.[51] It's not that he wouldn't be shut up, but he would not edit or confine to the convenience of the social terms.

The age old question, I'm thinking back to how this got started, is . . . how does one come into the world . . . and how does one come into the world in a way that is not simply defended where you come in ready to fight off anything that might want to take a look at you. You'll hear it not as idiocy or old-ageism, but one of the things I . . . you can't advise people to do this, but one of the things I do remember doing as a young man . . . Thinking of Jackson, it was the first time I ever cast eye on Jackson. We were over at I think it was The Open Door; it couldn't have been The Five Spot, but I think it was The Open Door, and there had been this wonderful evening—it was Thelonius Monk,[52] I'm not sure—and he was sitting way back on the side by himself, as I was sitting in some like situation, and I don't think I even spoke to him, I just knew it was him. And then afterwards everyone was going off about their businesses. It's now quite late at night, 2:00 or 3:00 in the morning, and I hit the street. I could walk back to a place, somebody was letting me crash on Spring Street, but I'm all wired up with what I was hearing. I see five people getting into a car and I just got in line with them and got in. I remember them saying, "Who the hell are you?" Introduced each other, and we went down to the Fulton Street Fish Market and drank, and I remember anyhow one of the fellows came back to this place, I had offered him a place to sleep, and so were reciting really until dawn he recited for me the whole of "The King of Harlem," Lorca's terrific poem.[53] He was from the West Indies, Spanish.

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[50] Thom Gunn (1929-2004) was an English poet who moved to San Francisco in 1960. In 1972 Duncan wrote and published privately as a typescript edition *Poems from the Margins of Thom Gunn's "Moly*," written in response to Gunn's *Moly* (1971). These poems later appeared in *Ground Work: Before the War*.

[51] Published as "The Self in Postmodern Poetry," in *Fictive Certainties*, 219-234.

[52] Thelonius Monk (1917-1982) was a famous jazz pianist. The Open Door and The Five Spot Café were live jazz clubs in New York City.

[53] Federico García Lorca's "El Rey de Harlem" ("The King of Harlem") appreared in *Poeta en Nueva York* (1930).

It's very hard to know when . . . I don't know if the choices are ever clear. I had great love for Robert because it wasn't just that he took chances but that he followed anything that thus led him without any seeming confusion. I think Olson did too, and Denise certainly did. The wonderful great story about her and Mitch, they were trying to leave Paris and their son Nik was then still a babe in arms, and they had all their battered stuff in boxes and things falling apart and all their modest junk, and they were headed from Paris out to the boat, the boat train, and they were walking along the street and Denise suddenly sees gendarmes berating and in some physical way trying to contain a group of workers protesting, and they were beginning to arrest them, and without even thinking she hands the baby to Mitch and joins the fray. And the next thing he sees is her being taken away by the police, and he's got the luggage and the baby and the boat is leaving, and that's Denise. She would act with extraordinary clarity of impulse. I remember coming down once, we were—Mitch and she and I and my wife then Ann—were riding these pretty old bicycles down that long three mile hill as you come into Aix-en-Provence past Cézanne's old studio. It's like a real chute and suddenly the brakes on her bike just gave out—they were those ones that gripped the tire—and off she went, man. She went down the hill like that at incredible speeds. It was just around 5:00 in the evening and our plan was to get some quick dinner and then go hear this Mozart concert. And she went through the whole damn city at breakneck speed . . . way across and ended up in the railroad station and then peddled back. It didn't seem to faze her at all. It certainly concerned her, but . . . We went off to hear the concert, that was it. It wasn't that she was cool, just here and now was her seeming . . .

I think too with Robert there's a sense of . . . it isn't that he's fantasizing and making it up, but that sense of first place. I love the poem "A Poem Beginning with a Line by Pindar."[54] It seems to me an extraordinary nexus of all of Robert's extraordinary abilities and practices. This was first place in his grandfather's time, you know the...I think that's a . . . not wonderful in some sacrament way, but there's an extraordinary getting hold of the dilemmas between knowing something and not knowing something.

One of these things I brought with me I realized had suddenly, charmingly [he takes a book out from his bag] . . . It says *a little endarkenment and in my poetry you find me*.[55] This was printed here in Buffalo, I believe, sponsored

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[54] Duncan, "A Poem Beginning with a Line by Pindar," in *The Opening of the Field,* 62-69.

[55] Duncan, *a little endarkenment and in my poetry you find me.* (Buffalo: Poetry/Rare Books Collection / Chicago: Rodent Press / Boulder: Erudite Fangs Editions, 1978). The quotation that follows comes from page [7].

partly by Rodent press in Chicago. It says things like [he reads from the book's opening note:] "Mr. Duncan was both easy to interview and tantalizing to follow in an interview situation. He answered questions courteously and at length, but often started new sentences before the conclusion of the previous one." People used to freak out at that. Pauline Butling, who was Fred Wah's terrific friend and wife,[56] said the first time she heard Robert, the first hour she thought she never heard anything more brilliant in her life, the second hour she began to lose track, and by the third or fourth hour she couldn't understand a word. He would, if you listened to him . . . Joel Kuszai had for some real time that really useful site when he was out in San Diego still which let you hear[57] . . . There was a great lecture that Robert gave on Pound, for example, and you can hear that pattern he uses. It was beautiful. [He continues to read from the note.] Again, that's Robert's shtick. He doesn't present himself in some sort of defensive way stylishly, but he's a stylish person and he's very particular. This is a good . . . [He begins reading from the interview.] I wish we had the tape to this . . . [continues reading passages from the interview.] That's very classic of him. Again, Robert I think despite all the apparent emphasis not on "me" but on all that comes out of him . . . an extraordinary tack of this really often very engaging information . . . his . . . not his humility . . . but it is a humility, his wanting to be in the world all together, not to be sort of stuck in mid-passage or have it halfway in or halfway out. I think that's the persistent face or question that occupies all of these various writers.

As with Denise's sense of what constitutes response to and recognition of and place for, one's self involved with world and how do you stay true or how do you keep the faith or how do you treat the world with care. Then coming herself from curiously a complexly religious background, father a Hassidic scholar and Jewish convert to Anglicanism, of all things, although friends subsequently told me that he probably converted more Anglicans to Judaism than the other way around. Then her mother comes from a line of Welsh mystics, so that Denise certainly is very parallel to Robert; not the same agency, but very parallel in the sense of a world immanent or obtaining or being there if one knew how to enter it or to admit it.

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[56] Pauline Butling wrote a doctoral thesis focusing in part on Duncan at the University at Buffalo, and has since published books on the Canadian poet Phyllis Webb and on experimental Canadian poetry. She is married to the Chinese-Canadian poet Fred Wah (1939-), who studied with Creeley at the University of New Mexico and at the University at Buffalo.

[57] Joel Kuszai is a graduate of the Poetics Program at the University at Buffalo, the editor/publisher of Meow Press, and a co-founder of Factory School (factoryschool.org).

Featherston: And yet he talks so often about the theosophical as being a sort of disgrace, or that it informed his early life, but . . .

Creeley: Remember, being a disgrace is not necessarily unpleasant for Robert. Not to be aggressively disgraceful but he in fact loves the kitsch. So I remember when Allen Ginsberg had sadly died and there was this Buddhist ceremony for him and it was tacky beyond belief or storefront seeming. The whole procedure was attended and very respectful but somehow people were still tacking up banners and what not as you came in for this . . . Everyone was sitting primarly, zazen. I thankfully managed to get a chair. I remember at one point I was sitting next to Elsie Dorfman and her husband saying "God this is tacky,"[58] but Allen would have loved it. The tackier the better, he loved that stuff. Robert didn't love tackiness so much, but Allen loved excessive numbers, just as I would be scared of them. But Robert loved incredible style. His cape, for example; he was one of the few friends who ever wore a factual cape and pulled it off. He wasn't phony, he was absolutely for real. He wasn't aggressive, he didn't hurt people. He wasn't kidding. He took himself seriously but he also had an extraordinary sense of humor about himself. He wasn't protective of himself.

He used for years the fact of Jess's . . . not quite being a hermit but really not wanting to deal with . . . I mean wanting the house because he worked there to be basically socially settled and secure. He didn't want people rushing in, he didn't want people getting drunk in there, he didn't want parties. He had a lot of fragile stuff about, but even more to the point he just didn't like the sudden blast of quite possible social scenes rolling through and he particularly didn't want to deal with people whom Robert didn't like. Because it could get pretty messy if Robert got energized or suddenly took off and let him have it, not just physically but verbally. He didn't want scenes, so it was almost a rule of thumb that no one, no one literally was ever casually admitted into Robert's house, and Jess's house, and the constant excuse that Robert would use was that Jess did not want them to come in. That ploy was used endlessly. Sometimes it was true, but many times it wasn't; it was Robert who didn't want them in. So people like James Schevill,[59] I remember, would drive Robert home but not be able to come

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[58] Elsa Dorfman (1937-) is a photographer who collaborated with Creeley on the book *En Famille*. (New York: Granary Books, 1999).

[59] A poet, novelist, dramatist, and biographer, James Schevill (1920-) was director of San Francisco State University's Poetry Center from 1961-1968. Duncan was the Assistant Director in the winter of 1956/57.

into the house. "You know how Jess is, so . . . " They would humbly deliver Robert and then go home thinking it was sad he couldn't come in but Jess was Jess. It was just a wonderful economy; no one really felt that hurt by it because it was Jess who was doing it, and everyone knew Jess was so hermetic that you wouldn't tend to see him anyhow. He was a very pleasant and bright man, thankfully. But anyhow, the point is that Robert was very volatile sometimes.

But ask me some questions so I don't just wander on.

Anna Reckin: I have a question actually that connects with the household, the domestic, and I was looking to the "Preface" to *Selected Poems* where you've said "With Robert Duncan I am committed to the hearth, and love the echoes of that word. The fire is the center."[60] And I want you to put together the anecdotes that you have about Duncan's wildness, for want of a better word, as a young man with his sense of a householder and the hearth and the settlement.

Creeley: Well . . . I should have known better because Robert had his biography written by Ekbert Faas, and I had the stupidity to . . . Ekbert Faas said he had this really interesting plan that he'd begin with young Robert Duncan, and because of Jess's refusal to have any life examined after they meet, so he didn't want Ekbert or anyone else researching or digging around their actual life together, so Robert agreed that the biography therefore should stop with his meeting of Jess and that's it. And that's where it ends. So Ekbert thought, well what I'll do is I'll make Robert's segment be the first of this situation. I'll then move to you, and you'll be the sixties, the fifties-sixties . . . I think Robert, that's about at the end of the forties that cuts off, so then I'm used to begin the fifties, and then the sixties will be Olson.[61] So that's what I thought would be the case for years. I thought the biography he did of Robert was interesting in detail. I didn't think he got it all, so to speak, but that paradoxically wasn't the point of it. He did locate at that time at least a lot about Duncan that was very interesting to know. Not prurient, but particular. Anyhow, somehow in the years since he came out with this absolutely, aggressively hateful biography on me. It's on Amazon.com, this fellow, bless him, has written in and speaks of me as the most generous, sweetest, says what a terrific guy to give such a biographer complete license to say whatever he wants. Only Dylan does that and so and

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[60] Creeley, "Preface" to *Selected Poem*. (Berkeley: U of California P, 1991), xx-xxi.

[61] Ekbert Faas, *Young Robert Duncan: Portrait of the Poet as Homosexual in Society*. (Santa Barbara, CA: Black Sparrow Press, 1983), and with Maria Trombacco, *Robert Creeley*: A Biography. (Hanover, NH: UP of New England, 2001).

so.[62] He thinks some kind of heroic permission I've given this person . . . He finally says, but you know, he leaves out all the 80s and the 90s, that's kind of curious. And then he says maybe he doesn't get it, and that's very useful to me to have him say.

So, the question with Duncan . . . I would think that Duncan in those early years . . . I know that Duncan is as practical, as much a dignified survivor, let's call it, he's not just scrambling . . . he's living a life as particularly as he always does, and that the sexual probably at that time was much more out than it is subsequently. He's also got to locate a person also as he's homosexual. I think "The Homosexual in Society" is a terrific . . . Dwight Macdonald, he was a very pleasant man too, whom Robert knew I think through the political circumstance, asked Robert if he would do something on the political situation of the minority.[63] And he certainly didn't know that Robert was going to choose to write about being homosexual, the homosexual in society. But then he does, and it's the first manifest of its kind, of that order, that open . . . not just open to detail but open as a common world. It's an extraordinary document, and it has real effects. John Crowe Ransom had, I believe, taken "The Venice Poem" for publication, one of the great poems of that time by a young writer, young poet, and was completely blown away. And then of course after this article came out they began to read it all as a homosexual camp, you know, secret language, and the poem was not published by them.[64] So he paid real dues on it. I remember he said he got a letter from [W. H.] Auden saying it's not wise to talk about sexual circumstances in public like that,[65] just come to New York and we'll fix you up. It was like, we'll see that you're taken care of, but stay off the street.

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[62] Mixing together elements of folk music with rock and roll often to create songs of social protest, Bob Dylan (1941-) is an American icon, a singer-songwriter who has been releasing commercially successful and critically acclaimed albums since his self-titled debut in 1962.

[63] "The Homosexual in Society" was published in Dwight Macdonald's Politics 1, no. 7 (August 1944): 209-211. A revised version of the essay (1959) was eventually published in *Jimmy & Lucy's House of "K"* 3 (January 1985) and reprinted in *A Selected Prose*, 38-50.

[64] The Duncan poem that was initially accepted and then subsequently rejected for publication by John Crowe Ransom—an influential poet, literary critic associated with New Criticism, and editor of the *Kenyon Review*—was not "The Venice Poem" but "An African Elegy."

[65] Wystan Hugh Auden (1907-1973) was an enormously influential poet, playwright, and essayist who moved from England to the United States in 1939.

I remember during the time of Robert's distaste . . . not distaste, but Robert would have curiously interesting rules for himself. He wouldn't say how come you published an anthology, he would say anthologies are impractical places to be published in. They are nine times out of ten no honor to anybody. They jumble stuff together alphabetically, they take chunks of this and put in chunks of that. There's no coherence in their condition whatsoever, so if anyone of any real interest is going to depend upon an anthology for an introduction, then forget it, they're not serious. They may be looking like theater bills or something quick, but they're not really a place at all. So we really had to argue for his inclusion in *The New American Poetry*,[66] I remember. Don [Allen] had really to persuade him that it was going to be okay. Then later Don and I edited *New Writing in the USA*,[67] and we wanted very much to include his "Apprehensions,"[68] but he was not hostile just said no, I just don't want to be published in it. But I remember one anthology he did want to be published in was Auden's . . . had done a particular selection of then writers . . . and he thought that was interesting.[69] But by and large he didn't like the Norton anthologies, that kind of stuff. For a long time resisted . . . Robert would do things that were very interesting in that way. Like for fifteen years he doesn't publish. Which cost him, if you're thinking about the public identity of the poet. To not publish for fifteen years is a real time.

Durgin: He wasn't thinking about that . . .

Creeley: No, no, not at all. He just didn't want to be engaged in the public rapport . . . he didn't want to have that phase him.

Sandra Guerreiro: Didn't he publish like in small . . .

Creeley: Yeah, he published in magazines, so he wasn't gone . . . He and I both . . . One time we were talking about the early feminist movement. Diane di Prima was a really good friend of Robert's.[70] They liked each other; he liked

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[66] *The New American Poetry 1945-1960.* Ed. Donald Allen. (New York: Grove Press, 1960; Berkeley: U of California P, 1999).

[67] *The New Writing in the USA.* Eds. Donald Allen and Robert Creeley. Intro. Robert Creeley. (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1967).

[68] Duncan, "Apprehensions," in *Roots and Branches*, 30-43.

[69] Duncan's poems "The Reaper" and "Hero Song" were included in The Faber Book of Modern American Verse. Ed. W. H. Auden. (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1956).

[70] Diane di Prima (1934-) is a poet and one of the few female writers directly associated with the Beat movement. Many of her own experiences form the basis of her novel *Memoirs of a Beatnik* (1969).

her very much. I remember he and I had been walking somewhere with her, and she had now gone off on her own and both of us were really thinking about how impressive she is. That she has lived a life with this extraordinary family, children and very particular relations from time to time. But when she's come and gone from them there's never a sense of victim, or of Diane being dumped on the street with the kids. She has had an extraordinary independence equal to that of any males et cetera as she's lived her life.

So in any case Robert was saying about the . . . I don't know how we got into it . . . he was talking about the fact of the woman and usual social condition blah blah blah. And I remember Robert said, well, he'd been down someplace in San Diego, and he'd been on a panel I believe, and his point was that insofar as women characteristically ruled the hearth. That's a peculiarly neglected authority which women have had for a long time—their ability to say who comes in or out of the cold and who doesn't, and who gets to sit by the fire or who comes into that nexus of a warmth and relationship. It can be overpowered or attacked, or raped or pillaged, but it can't be . . . you can destroy it, but you can't curiously create it. And that sense of again Wynken Blynken and Nod or Robert Louis Stevenson or George MacDonald or all that writing which is that lovely float of being secure in a place.[71] Someone was telling me recently that Rudyard Kipling, being an orphan, when he writes *The Jungle Book*, that the stories always begin "Best beloved." It sounds too good to be true, but the person who was telling me this was saying that being an orphan he wanted whoever read this story to a kid to begin with that emphasis you are best beloved and then start the story.

I remember Robert Graves[72] . . . not dumping on me, but diminishing me substantially by saying "of course he's a domestic poet. He's ruled by the household and the confirmation of that fact."

Durgin: Saying you are?

Creeley: Yeah, yeah, despite all the raging about. I was all things to all persons, apparently. I stayed home; maybe they wished more that I got the hell out of there, but wasn't easily evicted. Yeah, Robert was a domestic poet too. He loved that kind of sense of . . . Robert and Jess used to read in bed and stuff like that.

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[71] Robert Louis Stevenson (1850-1894) was a Scottish poet, novelist, and travel writer popular for such novels as *Treasure Island* (1883) and *Kidnapped* (1886)

[72] Robert Graves (1895-1985) was an English poet, scholar, and novelist who was married for a time to the poet Laura Riding. *The White Goddess* (1948), Graves's study of poetic myth, was an important text for Duncan.

Durgin: Actually that's funny, because I was going to ask you about the world-poem. In the relationships he had, maybe we can't call them imitations, but the poem is going back and forth and everyone is keeping tabs on one another and there's a great deal . . . you don't take one another for granted because it's about coming into the world and that implicates maybe more than the poem per se or some sort of public identity, so . . . were you, was it ever a little bit frightening to be part of Robert Duncan's world?

Creeley: No, it was extraordinarily generous for me . . . I remember for example when my marriage had sadly collapsed I had then gone back to Black Mountain [College] and held there say from June until the early winter. And then just around the turn of the year I had headed to New Mexico where I had an old friend from the east, college days, who was now living there, two friends, so I effectually was heading there to regroup or crash on them until things were more clear. So I got that far, and stayed there for several months, and then the Dorns, Ed and Helene Dorn,[73] had in the meantime moved to California and were living in San Francisco. I was determined to go out and visit them. I was looking for ways, not to freeload, but where could I begin to get my head together. So I went and stayed with them, but before I had arrived Robert in the meantime was back at Black Mountain teaching as I had been, and he gave me a list of, yeah, he just simply alerted his friends, and gave me a list in common to get in touch with once I was there. I particularly remember Kermit Sheets,[74] for example, an extraordinary friend. Jimmy Broughton was an impeccable friend.[75] And there was one younger friend from that same circle. Madeline Gleason, for example.[76] But the so-called cluster of friends, poets that he had been with, became these extraordinary . . . really just old time, terrific friends. If I needed help finding a place, or if I needed this, or if I sat too long alone, come to dinner. Just a very affectionate sort of thing. I stayed friends all my subsequent life.

The world one entered with Robert was very unthreatening in that way. They didn't just take care of you, but no one was going to get you. In some ways

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[73] Edward Dorn (1929-1999) was a student at Black Mountain College and the poet of the mock epic *Gunslinger*, the first section of which appeared in 1968.

[74] Kermit Sheets (1916-2006) was an actor/director who co-directed several films with James Broughton. Sheets and Broughton, who were lovers for a time, founded Centaur Press in San Francisco.

[75] James Broughton (1913-1999) was a San Francisco poet, playwright, and avant-garde filmmaker.

[76] Madeline Gleason (1903-1979) was a poet and dramatist in San Francisco whose organized readings in the late 1940s prepared the way for the San Francisco Renaissance.

Robert's impatience with the Beat scene that came in subsequently, and then with the Language poet scene that came some years after that, was just the . . . It wasn't that his situation had been necessarily less competitive with others, but it was domestic, whereas you certainly couldn't call the Beat scene domestic. It happened at home, but it left a lot of people smashed . . . *The Hotel Wentley Poems* was one of the great books of that century, at least in my life[77] . . . but it's hardly the sense of a happy life, or something one wants to emulate and find means to have too. Heartbreaking, an incredible book.

The Beats as Robert would say weren't really local. They were not just outlanders or something, but they really weren't located, they were constantly . . . And that was the story—On the Road was really the sad story of their lives.[78] Jack, for example, Spicer,[79] was certainly a strong presence all through this. I think of Jack and Robert as being . . . they're like twins who can't quite ever accommodate or find whatever the imaginal room is necessary for the other. Robin [Blaser][80] is the younger, not markedly younger, but younger, so Robin gets sort of bounced between their two fiefdoms in a weird way.

Durgin: Which could be a good thing or it could be a bad thing, depending on . . .

Creeley: Well, it's hard on Robin, because he's sort of tacitly suppressed or . . . I was reading just before coming over Robert's take on Robin's translations of Nerval.[81] Which I thought were . . . but Robert is absolutely hostile to these. Why is he so peculiarly hard on these translations? There doesn't seem to be anything in the translations themselves quite justifying . . . Robin's not a casual poet or translator.

Emerson: When did Blaser and Duncan meet?

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[77] John Wieners, *The Hotel Wentley Poem.* (San Francisco: Auerhahn Press, 1958).

[78] Jack Kerouac, *On the Road.* (New York: Viking Press, 1957).

[79] The poet Jack Spicer (1925-1965) knew Duncan and Robin Blaser in the late 1940s in Berkeley, California.

[80] Involved in both the Berkeley and San Francisco Renaissance, the poet Robin Blaser (1925-) later moved to Canada where he taught at Simon Frazer University in Vancouver. He also edited *The Collected Books of Jack Spicer* (1975).

[81] Duncan, "Returning to *Les Chimères* of Gérard de Nerval," *Audit/Poetry* 4, no. 3 (1967): 42-61.

Creeley: I think when they're all in college at Berkeley. And Jack too, I think. He was an incredible poet. You sort of need Jack as complement to Robert to see what . . . they contest and fit not just socially but intellectually in the ways they resolve what it is a poet is and what poetry is. They really . . . one informs the other. I don't think Robert ever gets to that level of engagement with Denise, ever. Denise is not really interested . . . she's not engaged with that kind of questioning. Jack really is, and so is Robert. What is poetry, and what is the order that it demands and confers upon those who practice it. I think both Jack and Duncan profoundly take on that question not to come to the end of it but [to] give themselves a tally up to it. I don't think Denise paradoxically really does, although she's a poet almost by breath. She has always some kind of charming, semi-religious reason why it's a good thing to be a poet, and she invests it with these curious distractions. If you want to really get a hit on Denise see what she does to Olson's "Projective Verse."[82] I remember I was in a session with her once, and she wouldn't let me bring a text of Zukofsky's into the room. She said that ingrate or that ingrateful person. It was a long, rancorous business about his not being ostensibly grateful enough when she contrived to have his *All* published by Norton.[83] She didn't want him to bow down but she did think he could have been a little more grateful, which he wasn't, because he wrote the poems, he knew they were very good, and didn't see any reason to be grateful, at least not ostentatiously. So she then began to think that he's just an arrogant and useless person. Denise was capable of those kinds of things. She wouldn't let Allen and Peter come out to where they lived in New York, their apartment. Allen lived with Peter Orlovsky, and Peter had published a piece in *Fuck You* in which he described, not vigorously or offensively, masturbating.[84] And Denise then said we have a son who's twelve years old or something who shouldn't be around such people. No one's going to disturb that terrific kid. She ran a tight ship, in some ways, and in other ways she just would leap off the roof in delight, which was a curious . . . anyhow.

Maynard: You said before that you didn't originally like Duncan; you thought he was too rhetorical.

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[82] Olson, "Projective Verse," *Poetry New York* 3 (1950): 13-22; *Collected Prose*, 239-249.

[83] Zukofsky, *All: The Collected Short Poems, 1923-1958*. (New York: Norton, 1965).

[84] Peter Orlovsky (1933-) is an American poet who was Allen Ginsberg's companion from 1954 to Ginsberg's death in 1997. *Fuck You / A Magazine of the Arts* (1962-1965) was a provocative mimeographed magazine started by Ed Sanders.

Creeley: I was intimidated by him.

Maynard: You said the poetry was, when you first came to it . . .

Creeley: Well that's true, I said . . . but this is not not liking Duncan. I was put off, as they say. I was put off by the rhetorical base. I was trying to get something . . . not simply common, but something unadorned, something that would have no increment of . . . that would be as stripped as possible, that would be as unobtrusively put as possible . . . that would not so much not bother anybody, but would not signal its own condition in any rhetorical manner. And Robert of course was coming from the opposite end of the scene. He was being literally stylish, and intending to be, as Allen was somewhere in the middle with a different rhetorical base. Allen has a poem "Two bricklayers . . . " which is very, very explicit and clear . . . anyhow very stripped, very quiet, and then another poem momently begins "What labyrinthine..."—incredible Hart Crane rhetoric.[85]

But Robert was much more involved with the imaginal world and the recognition of the immanence of the world that was inherent in what he felt was the phenomonality and physical fact of one's own existence. I think he's terrific. I didn't have a copy in the house but would have much liked to have brought *Fictive Certainties*, his selected essays, which I think is a great book, or Robert Bertholf's subsequently re-edited *Selected Prose*.[86] Duncan's one of the great essayists, and very clear. "Ideas of the Meaning of Form" is extraordinarily clear on what the whole imagination of form and the enactment of it seemingly creates . . . what it comes from and where it's going.[87] One thinks of Language poetry not simply as a metaphor descriptive of the time, but one can think certainly of the coincidence obviously with the basic philosophies, employments of scientific inquiry and resolution, of how it is the imagination of epistemology is being extraordinarily re-ordered, et cetera et cetera. So that Language poetry begins to . . . it's not an outside of anything, it's almost the style of the period. In terms of that period's own needs and circumstances.

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[85] Allen Ginsberg, "The Bricklayer's Lunch Hour," in *Collected Poems* 1947-1980. (New York: Harper Perrenial, 1984), 4. The second poem has not been identified. Hart Crane (1899-1932) was an American poet known for his rhetorical verse as demonstrated in his epic *The Bridge* (1930).

[86] Duncan, *Fictive Certainties.* (New York: New Directions, 1985); *A Selected Prose*. Ed. Robert J. Bertholf. (New York: New Directions, 1995).

[87] Duncan, "Ideas of the Meaning of Form," in *Fictive Certainties*, 89-105.

Guerreiro: Do you know anything about his affiliations with European writers?

Creeley: Yeah, with particular ones?

Guerreiro: I mentioned this to the group before, this Portuguese poet, and I managed to track the book that I mentioned, it's actually a book called *Magics*, and it was published one year before Duncan died. And it starts with a poem from Duncan. I have to get a hold of it, have somebody ship it to me here, and then I will try to translate it, but . . .

Creeley: I know for example he taught himself effectually French . . . Bertholf will give you . . . because of his information of the correspondence and all.

Guerreiro: Because this poet did not give a lot of interviews, was always very reclusive about giving information, was just publishing, he is publishing. And there's a rumor that they actually met, that [?] met Duncan in Paris.

Creeley: When Duncan was in Paris he was staying with [R. B.] Kitaj.[88] Kitaj and his wife, the painter Sandra Fischer, were living in the old Jewish quarter of Paris, which suddenly gave resonance and understanding to a lot that Kitaj hadn't previously really recognized. Where they were was this curious nexus for the information of that world and that time, so that Dante had come in, and all curious and extraordinary people had shown up there not just to go to Paris and have a good time, but because that was the center of a kind of distribution of information and it was particularly centered in the old Jewish quarter and the fact of that language and habit and culture. Duncan stays with him . . . this poetry is done then. "Illustrative Lines" was the series that he and Duncan published as an eventual portfolio. Duncan wrote poems and Kitaj is drawing him. I'll try to recall the names . . . there's several painters, close friends of Kitaj's . . . I mean one for example I remember, a brilliant painter, is amazed that Robert knows *The Zohar* so well,[89] which is not something his own

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[88] Ronald Brooks Kitaj (1932-2007) is an American-born artist who eventually moved to England, where he was elected to the Royal Academy in 1991. The poem "Illustrative Lines" from *Ground Work II: In the Dark* (New York: New Directions, 1987), 86-88, republished in *Ground Work: Before the War/In the Dark,* 268-70, was published separately as part *of A Paris Visit: Five Poems,* drawings and afterword R. B. Kitaj ([New York]: Grenfell Press, 1985).

[89] *The Zohar* is an important set of books of Jewish mysticism first published in the thirteenth century by Moses de Leon. Reflecting on such topics as the nature of God, the structure of the universe, and the creation of language, it was a major source of inspiration for Duncan's poetry and poetics.

background . . . I mean Bakersfield, California . . . hermeticism. But Duncan had been drawn to that information long before. Duncan would set out also each morning to do . . . Kitaj was completely dazzled that Duncan would send out word to various booksellers in the city, and find though friends who had what. He was very specific about the books; they weren't contemporary . . . lore. He would then go walking across the city to do a comparative pricing of each, like a person doing shopping, the cheapest prices. It was an incredible time. I remember seeing him not long before and not long after. Because of his appetite, this extraordinary, self-taught . . . Olson had that equal in a very parallel way. They both were . . . Olson had gotten a PH. D. and all, but...Many people we know and you will know, we'll know them, once they learn what they need to learn, that's it. I remember being in an elevator in British Columbia with the chair of the department and his wife, and his wife is telling us brightly, you know, Frank here is working so hard, he hasn't read one book all year. And this is the chair of the English department; not that he should be reading books, you understand, but it would be sort of reassuring if he did. So that the sense of knowing things, knowing what you had to learn, now you're free to go. Robert was endlessly acquiring or learning. It wasn't that he was out to beat anyone, it's just A led to B led to C led to D and it just went on and on and on, it was wonderful. He was endlessly delighted and intrigued.

He had otherwise these very . . . we were in residence with him and he'd ask you, it would be something not quite like a McDonald's, but something that certainly wasn't much more expensive, and Robert would ask you, "Can I have the check?" Yeah sure. The bill. Not that he's going to pay it but he wants the receipt for taxes. Or I remember being in London with him and taking his clothes out to the Laundromat to get them done, sitting there with the laundry stained. He was not frugal but . . . he told me a great story of Jonathan [Williams],[90] that one time when they were all in San Francisco Jonathan came to them and asked if he might borrow some small amount of money. He said a specific sum, it was fifty dollars, which he said to their household was a lot of money. They managed to get it together and they gave it to Jonathan and that evening they said come to dinner, so he came and he had a twenty dollar bottle of wine, which Robert never forgot. He just loaned this guy fifty dollars and he spent twenty of it on a bottle of wine. He wasn't tightfisted but he was very particular; he was not frugal, but money in their handling of it . . . they had lived so long on so little.

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[90] An American poet, publisher, and photographer, Jonathan Williams (1929-) has had a long career as the editor of Jargon Press, known for its editions of Black Mountain and other innovative writers including Duncan's own volume of poems *Letters* (1958).

A hundred bucks a month was the mother's provision, plus what Robert could . . . and that was actually the good times, before that Robert was managing just on what they could earn through the occasional sales of Jess's painting, but particularly Robert's working as a typist. Virginia Admiral they had that scene with, Robert DeNiro's momma.[91] She and Robert were typing away together at one point, a typing service.

Reckin: Building off Sandra's question, you mentioned Edith Sitwell. Can you say more about what you think she meant to Duncan and what she's meant to you?

Creeley: He loved the . . . I need to be reminded of the name of the big extensive piece she does . . .

Reckin: *Façade*,[92] the musical piece?

Creeley: *Façade*, he liked that. He loved the...I thought she had a terrific ear, I thought she was an extraordinary . . . He loved the fact of the performance, again, the style, the extraordinary economy of sound lapping. He also liked the curious, singular, almost gutsiness of her writing. It was fashionable in a kind of public sense. It certainly wasn't in the usual sense popular, although it had a great sort of public rapport. But the poets of that time and place didn't know what to do with it. The Sitwells were first of all three people: there was Sacheverell, Osbert, and Edith. And they were formidable. They had a kind of style that no one could quite say no to. They were overbearing . . . not overbearing, but overpowering as a presence. And her décor was just terrific. The other person that I think of that had a décor like that in terms of her style was Louise Nevelson,[93] who one time her friends said saw her go swimming and all her makeup just suddenly went . . . hard to recognize her. Charles Bernstein tells me he's never seen his mother without makeup.[94] I don't know

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[91] Virginia Admiral (1917-2000) was a painter whom Duncan first met when they were both students at the University of California, Berkeley in 1937-1938. Together they published one issue of the magazine *Epitaph* (1938). She married the painter Robert de Niro with whom she had a son, the actor Robert de Niro.

[92] First published as a text in 1922, Edith Sitwell's *Façade* was later set to music by William Walton. See her *Collected Poems* (London: Macmillan Publishers Limited, 1982), 110-158.

[93] Louise Nevelson (1899-1988) was a Ukrainian-born sculptor known for her flamboyant appearance.

[94] Charles Bernstein (1950-) is a Language poet, critic, and former editor of the magazine *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E*. From 1989 to 2003 he was the David Gray Professor of Poetry and Letters at the University at Buffalo where he directed the Poetics Program.

if she's Edith Sitwell, but . . . It was the high style that she carried off with such panache and such good nature. And she really was a poet. "Still Falls the Rain" and all . . . I can still quote it by heart.[95] And Robert really loved that. He used to say that Swinburne,[96] whom both of us liked, had logorrhea—he just couldn't stop. And Robert said in some ways that was a possibility he had to consider. He was sensitive to it because there is a writing that just gets rolling and you cannot stop it. And that economy is curiously hard then to manage to learn how to shut up, how to shape it. Swinburne, he's wonderful, he can go forever. Incredible what he can do, thinking of getting exhausted. There's another poet who was really interested recently, a friend John Ashbery was fascinated by his double-sestinas,[97] Swinburne, which are really pretty jazzy. He's a great poet in this curious manner.

I think one wanted some kind of "energy" or some kind of intensity, and Edith Sitwell was not the only game in town by any means, because there was obviously Williams and H. D. and Pound, et cetera, but she was there. If you want a curious, real sense of Edith Sitwell, a friend of that time, Seymour Lawrence,[98] managed to persuade her to do an anthology. It was called *The Atlantic Book of English Verse*,[99] and she writes brief, sort of qualifying comments on various of the materials that she uses, and poets, and I was very moved by that book. I mean she's sensible, she's absolutely clear as to her own . . . I mean she's a poet, so she's interesting, and she's a good one. But we'd had the same dilemmas earlier with Hart Crane; no one wanted to read Hart Crane because he's so . . . all these words, and who knows even what they mean. I thought that Edith Sitwell was a breath of fresh air at that time, although I'd be terrified to try to write like that.

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[95] Sitwell, "Still Falls the Rain," in *Collected Poems*, 272-273.

[96] Algernon Charles Swinburne (1837-1909), an English poet known for his excessive versification and rhyming.

[97] John Ashbery (1927-) is a popular and critically acclaimed American poet. His book-length poem *Flow Chart* (1991) not only incorporates the form of the double sestina but also maintains the same end words as Swinburne's.

[98] Seymour Lawrence (1926-1994) was an independent publisher of American and international writers.

[99] *The Atlantic Book of British and American Poetry*. Ed. Dame Edith Sitwell. (Boston: Little, Brown, 1958).

Any other . . . ? Time to go to bed. So long.

[Dinner break]

Barbara Cole: You spoke before about Duncan's conception of the book as not a collection but a design. And that's something that as a group we've been talking a lot about. I'm wondering if you could elaborate more on the distinction between a collection of poems versus a design, or how Duncan conceived of the book as a whole thing or totality?

Creeley: Well, Robert, the . . . at least particularly towards the end of his life . . . well, "Passages" obviously is a serial poem . . . it has to have an economy inherent in the relation of its parts. Not simply its logic, but its occasion as a design . . . you therefore have to make its . . . That's why he doesn't like anthologies, because there's no rhyme or reason to them except the dates or alphabetical orders. Anyhow, he wants the materials to accumulate and illuminate or interact, but he isn't remarkably interested in having that be the case from, say . . . I don't think you'd ever find a book of Robert's entitled something like *San Francisco Poems or Mexico City Blues*.[100] Whereas personally I would. I would write until I felt an exhaustion in some way and then cut that off and start over. I think almost every time I published I used the most obvious and simple sense of proposition, just A, B, C. I've used dates. I don't think Robert uses that that way quite at all. He'll sometimes use it; I mean it is a progression, but it's . . . he writes . . . all I can say is it's a design. I remember when he was working, he would have, characteristically, as I'm sure is evident in the collection of his materials,[101] notebooks in which he'd be working simultaneously from A to B, whatever, which were various places, rather than do this and then do that. They were places where his mood or need would be most served or most articulate. And so he kept a constant web or interaction of thought and response. "The H. D. Book,"[102] again, the way that proliferates or expands almost as though it becomes a skin or a place of his actual life. It's not a subject book, you know. I mean people going to "The H. D. Book" thinking that they're going to find out all they'll need to know about H. D. will find that but they'll also find so much

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[100] Lawrence Ferlinghetti, *San Francisco Poems.* (San Francisco: City Lights Foundation, 2001); Jack Kerouac, *Mexico City Blues.* (New York: Grove Press, 1959).

[101] The majority of Duncan's papers are located in The Poetry Collection, The State University of New York at Buffalo.

[102] "The H. D. Book," Duncan's critical study of and tribute to the poet H. D., was published serially in various little magazines from the 1960s to 1980s.

more that will be far, far more complicated to resolve in its nature than, say, simply a book about wine. I guess I'm faint in answering that because I've not been able to design books in the way that Robert has. So it's hard to tell you why and how he really does it. I mean I experienced him doing it but I just . . . I can't . . . It's wonderful . . .

Robert had begun being published by Scribner's. Let's see how many titles I managed to bring out. They list his earlier poems here: *The Opening of the Field,* published by Grove Press, and then he comes to Scribner's. It seems to me he has two books published by Scribner's.[103] And by the second one he's absolutely offended and irritated with them. Although I know the editor he has who's a well-intending person but just doesn't get it. And Robert's particularly irritated with the setting. So if you put stuff like this, he doesn't like the intrusion of the décor upon the text. So he leaves, which no one can quite at the time understand. Just that hey, Scribner's is a very impressive publisher, and they really like Robert, they think he's terrific, but that doesn't interest him at all. He goes to New Directions, who in some ways were very interested to have him, but the fact of being published by New Directions is certainly not at this time as authoritative as Scribner's. But it is to poets, very much so. As with Pound and Williams and all the great tradition. That he cares about . . .

I wish Robin were here to speak more particularly of both design and also Edith Sitwell. I feel comfortable with Edith Sitwell, because I shared in his . . . I remember hearing first that recording I believe at Robert's house . . . *Façade*.

Durgin: I have a weird one for you.

Creeley: Yeah?

Durgin: What does Duncan think of Charlie Parker?[104] What's his listening like? I come to Duncan thinking or reading through [Nathaniel] Mackey,[105] so I come to some rhythms that seem really odd in terms of that kind of listening that I would imagine he would have been doing or have done. Or there's the relation to you when he tries out your sort of . . .

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[103] Duncan had only one book published by Charles Scribner's Sons: *Roots and Branches* (1964).

[104] Charlie Parker (1920-1955) was a famous jazz saxophonist and founder of bebop, an intricately rhythmic style of jazz improvisation.

[105] Nathaniel Mackey (1947-) is a poet, prose writer, critic, and editor whose critical and creative work explores the juxtapositions of innovative, improvisational form and pan-African culture.

Creeley: I don't think either Olson or Duncan had any ostensible . . . I mean Olson speaks of Baby Dodds, et cetera, drumming, but it's like Williams speaking of [Samuel] Johnson or something; there's not really that interest.[106] I think Robert's interest as far as I can remember never really quite gets to jazz as a formal agency or fact. He likes the reference, the jazz bands and stuff—maybe; I don't know even that. I can't ever think of him . . . and had he wanted to there would have been a lot of it to hear in San Francisco. He told me once he was . . . in fact almost as a kind of instance he told me during the fifties there were various sort of jazz and poetry scenes. Let's see, who has one . . . [Kenneth] Rexroth does a little bit of it.[107] Rexroth is a long acquaintance and ally of Duncan's, and the two wives, particularly Marthe and then his wife before that. That's an interesting conjunction. For a long, long time Rexroth is really . . . not as an elder patronizingly but as an ally a little older, very much respecting Robert as the fellow occupant of the city. He doesn't really take to jazz and poetry. He told me once he'd heard that Kenneth Patchen was to give a performance,[108] a reading with jazz, and he said, "Oh my god, his life has become so penurious that he's taken to passing the hat at these weird musical numbers." He said he felt in support of Patchen, who was an old friend, that he ought to show up and pay for his ticket and sit down. So he did, and he said he got in there and he suddenly realized that the place was absolutely packed. He said there were people just jamming the place, and obviously Patchen did not need his support specifically at all. Now he felt really irritated because he paid money, which wasn't really necessary. So he began parodying all the activity as it then occurred. So he's making great fun of the thing squeaking and laughing to his neighbor, who's being amused by what's just happening...

[Someone sneezes]

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[106] Warren "Baby" Dodds (1898-1959) was an important early jazz drummer. As a poet, essayist, biographer, and writer of one of the first English dictionaries, Samuel Johnson (1709-1784) is a renowned figure of English literature.

[107] Kenneth Rexroth (1905-1982) was a leading figure in the San Francisco Renaissance whom Duncan knew from their anarchist meetings in San Francisco during the late 1940s. Marthe Rexroth was his third wife.

[108] Kenneth Patchen (1911-1972) was an American poet and novelist whose eclectic work ranged from visual poetry to live performances accompanied by jazz musicians. He married Miriam Oikemus in 1934. Duncan first knew Patchen in New York during the 1940s through Anaïs Nin.

God bless you god bless you god bless you. And then he said when it was over he suddenly realized that Miriam Patchen had been sitting right in front of him, had heard it all and wasn't very happy, got up and looked at him with irritation. And his point was never go to any place you don't want to on conscience. If you don't want to go, don't go. Because if you do go only because you think you ought to go, that's what will happen. That's the only time I heard him speak about jazz. I mean he listened intently to lots of music . . . I think the whole jazz scene didn't for whatever reason really get to him. It barely got to Allen Ginsberg. Kerouac it certainly does.

Durgin: I don't see . . . thinking about the way the line breaks and the rhythms that come out of that, like I said, I didn't see it in Duncan but it would be something that I would have reference to in reading your work, for instance.

Creeley: Yeah, well, it did. I listened to a lot of . . . I really sat . . . I had friends who were very articulate jazz musicians. That was certainly an influence. To me it was a great relief from the sort of didacticism and sense of formal necessities and conditions that would be classically east coast, Ivy League whatever—you did it the right way or forget it.

Featherston: Duncan was very drawn to classical, like Stravinsky . . .

Creeley: Yeah, he loved that. Mahler . . .

Featherston: I wonder if in some sense it was, going back to the demotic or the populist, if . . . was it your sense maybe he felt some animosity with the younger poets, the Beats who were using a more popular format, the performative jazz with the poetry?

Creeley: At least in the immediate scene, I think that he felt that their . . . not that they'd had a pleasant thing going there, so to speak, but I think he felt the Beat was a distraction. He certainly respected and liked Allen. I think one of the early responses or senses of Kerouac I got was from Robert. So it wasn't simply a cut-off. But I do think that what had been the intense sort of basically almost domestic pattern of the San Francisco cluster was now overwritten by this energetic . . . He was very fond of John Wieners. Very moved and . . . He was also very close to many of the poets who he was very respectful . . . Although I don't think they ever had all that much social occasion, he certainly acknowledged clearly Gary Snyder, for example.[109] And Gary Snyder likewise him. There was

[109] An associate of the Beat poets, Gary Snyder (1930-) is an American poet whose writing is known for its Zen Buddhism and environmentalism.

a very particular respect for Robert among that cluster. He becomes crucial in the next generation, so to speak. Michael Palmer is probably as taught by Robert as any poet otherwise.[110] Michael Palmer begins with a particular instruction, let's say, from Williams and me, and then becomes absolutely centered on what Robert can teach him and provide for him. And then there are many kinds of echoes, like his and Jess's relation to Stan Brakhage, the filmmaker, is another crucial pattern. Jazz was perfect for my needs—both emotionally, socially just right—and it stays pretty much so ever since, but it just didn't serve Robert's habits and interests in any way. There's no evidence, though. It doesn't seem to have connected. Sad . . . you can't have everything. That's the one subject I never heard him really take off on.

It's funny, trying to think of the ones that do . . . Paul Blackburn,[111] certainly, in particular. Allen liked Thelonius Monk et cetera but I don't really hear much . . . my friend a jazz musician was at the recording, and you had to take Allen saying "Now, Allen, now"; that somehow inherently he wasn't tracking as they presumable could.

So you're just starting out with this terrific poet. What happens? You're going to all quit university? It's a great . . . I have utter pleasure and respect . . .

Durgin: We're not sure what we're doing yet, so don't be so quick to respect us.

Creeley: Kyle will remember the reading of Olson last semester, and it was delicious to be in any circumstance where inquiry and increment are the patterns rather than you will know this and there will be a test on so and so on Monday.[112] You know that kind of packaging. I think the only hope either for the poetry per se or for that which it can be used to illuminate is that there not be a closed book. I remember once hearing some years ago a sudden discussion of . . . it was up in Maine, and suddenly this wonderful guy, Portuguese, started talking about Pound and Marx. It was wonderful; he pointed out the particular involvement both of them have had with money as an event, a physical . . .

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[110] Michael Palmer (1943-) is a contemporary American poet whose innovative writing is both philosophically informed and lyrically inflected.

[111] An American poet known for his translations of Provençal poetry, Paul Blackburn (1926-1971) served briefly as a contributing editor to *The Black Mountain Review*.

[112] During the previous semester (fall 2000), Creeley directed a student reading group on Charles Olson and Herman Melville. The syllabus from this study later appeared as "Call Me Ishmael: Olson & Melville" in *Minutes of the Charles Olson Society* 54 (2005): 5-6.

how closely their thinking paralleled or mirrored one other, how the social circumstances of each was very coincident in how one thought of the world in which each was living. How it wasn't simply a metaphor to compare A with B but was in fact the social and economic pattern that he was in his own way tracking and making a material. It was just terrific, and then the audience characteristically . . . this was in some ways a cluster of old Poundians . . . there was real consternation that you could speak of Marx and Pound as other than hostile to one another. It was tacitly ludicrous. And yet, somehow, thinking of economics and Pound's dependence on it as a thinking device, it was immensely useful to have it be used in reference to Marx who gave a whole other . . . not just background but a whole other place to think of as parallel. It was extremely useful, and no one had ever really done that or thought to do that. It was almost like saying let's look at it this way. And if things get locked in, it's awfully hard to have that inquiry occur. I remember when I was in college trying to get interested in the classes . . .

[Tape switch]

neo-fascists or something; just take a look, sir.

Kyle Schlesinger: Was that at Harvard?

Creeley: That was at Harvard. I had a terrific professor F. O. Matthiessen. On one hand F. O. Mathiessen was both respectful of Olson and in some ways an ally in certain situations, but if you look at *American Renaissance* how small is Olson's acknowledgment vis-à-vis Melville.[113] One wonderful piece of gossip was that when Olson was trying to secure a publisher for the book [*Call Me Ishmael*] and presumed that Matthiessen was his ally, it turns out that actually Matthiessen had axed the book with the publisher.[114] I'm getting this from Ezra Pound, no less. He said from his point of view it was a book that would save you the trouble of reading Melville . . . this is the great Ezra. Ezra Pound you know didn't like Melville, he didn't like Dostoevsky, he didn't like a lot of great novelists. So he said it saved him the time of reading Melville. And he said he had to get T. S. Eliot to sponsor the book, whereupon that impressed the publisher more than did Matthiessen's demure. Help! There was just no room for that kind of thinking there. Olson's book at the time . . . you can imagine

[113] A historian and critic who helped create the field of American studies, Frank Otto Matthiessen (1902-1950) is best known for his book *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman.* (New York: Oxford UP, 1941).

[114] Olson, *Call Me Ishmael.* (New York: Reynal & Hitchcock, 1947; San Francisco: City Lights, 1947).

what a furor . . . The book before it had been, god, Robert Penn Warren's book about *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*,[115] I believe. Again, those patterns are fascinating just to see what the vibes were for that moment, that it was a series of . . . popular critical books. They went into the popular market but they would be criticism so everyone could get one and read it and feel terrific, that they were really with the swing of things. Because criticism at that moment has probably more authority than any other form of writing. More than poems, more than . . . yeah. It's a great book.

Robert is what, he's about ten years back of Olson? Not that . . . he's nine years older than I am, and he's six years younger than Olson . . . I think that's how it is. Would that he were here. He could tell us much, much more.

I wonder if we're supposed to forget. Not forget Robert, but forget other than what he does tell us, so to speak. [He reads from *Roots and Branches*:] "We are not any wiser than the book we have written." "(In a mimeographt "Lesson", of Dr. Quimby / On the Subconscious, I find / 'He also calls it "the book" / and he said / *We are not any wiser than the book we have written*')."[116] I don't know if that's entirely true. I think the book that we write is wiser than we who write it. That's more often the case.

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[115] Robert Penn Warren (1905-1989) was an American poet and New Critic. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, illus. Alexander Calder, with an essay by Robert Penn Warren (New York: Reynal & Hitchcock, 1946).

[116] From "After Reading H. D.'s *Hermetic Definitions*," in *Roots and Branches*, 84.