Journal of American Studies of Turkey
27 (2008) : 73-81

Interview with Robert Creeley[1]

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HG: In a recent interview, the poet Joseph Brodsky described his trial in Russia for writing literature which was considered disturbing to the security of the State. What kind of threat do poets in this country pose to our government? Does the ruling class really care what poets write?

RC: It has been a threat, for example, during the Vietnam War. Thanks to the Freedom of Information Act, Lawrence Ferlinghetti gained access to FBI files on himself and discovered that the federal government had devoted incredible time and effort to detailed surveillance of his activity. At that time at least, poets and artists generally had, I think, a decisive rapport with and found sympathy in people's dispositions and feelings. In times of crisis, that is extremely true. Yet, I wonder, sadly, whether poets in my situation or in the great broad middle class spectrum, let's say, do have influence. Robert Bly and Denise Levertov and Allen Ginsberg have given an awful lot of time and human effort trying to bring people to some consciousness of their own determinations and decisions and responsibilities. Then again, old friends like Amiri Baraka have an absolute effect, and not simply to the ethnic group to which they relate. LeRoi Jones certainly had a profound effect. In Europe, the situation has been a little different in that they are far more at home with and find more significance in their artists and writers than people in the United States. When talking to people like Yevtushenko, we find that the poet in Russia is part of an extremely tenacious and long tradition, oral and what not. In the situation of poet Mendlestein, Stalin thought him important enough as an influential poet, though he had something like twenty poems only in print. Thousands of people knew his work by word of mouth and oral tradition. Well, Stalin actually called Pasternak and asked him if this poet was a genius because if he isn't a genius, we can screw him without problems. But, if he is a genius and is felt to be one by his peers and the public, then we've got trouble here.

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[1] The interview was televised live on KLRU-KLRN TV program *Artbeat* and conducted at the University of Texas at Austin on Feb. 8, 1983.

HG: It seems, though, that the general person on the street has no like nor need for poetry, despite any worry the government may exhibit about it.

RC: I think that has a lot to do with the categories that poetry has been defined by. Years ago, Michael McClure, an extraordinary poet, did a piece for Rolling Stone on Bob Dylan called "The Poet's Poet" and rehearsed all of Dylan's relation to the poets of my generation, and his influence during the sixties, particularly in relation to poetry. Dylan himself would not claim speciously to be a poet, but, yeah, he is. With our academic tradition, there is always a question about the art which is popular. We have an awful sense of high art and low art, so that we're fearful of common art as being in some sense degrading to the potential of the art. So, we tend to disregard whole areas of active performance or composition simply because it isn't high art. Jazz, for instance, suffered in this position for a long time and was considered to not be, quote, serious in the same way extraordinary poets such as Dylan were not considered as such because they didn't appear in standard academic anthologies.

HG: The activity in the fifties bridged the gap a bit when writers actively promoted poetry itself as well as creating poems.

RC: The people who have the most access to poetry and its powers, let's say, are the young. Those for whom feeling is still a decisive possibility—who haven't yet been sadly locked into some habituating pattern of employment or use. "Minds like beds, always made up," as Williams said, and/or those who are in some intensive shift in political or social circumstance: e.g., the Black and Hispanic communities in New York produce some powerful poets, or the Chicanos of the Southwest.

HG: Black and Latino poets have a defined social-political content about which they can talk, which is built into their communities.

RC: Or the Jewish community.

HG: Right. But, what about the large numbers of white academic poets who dominate what is considered good poetry? What do they have to talk about? I've heard so many complaints from among the academic-minded writers that this is just a lot of trivial garbage.

RC: I think that's slightly right. (Laughs) Not to condemn, quote, my people, but I remember some years ago, a really bright student at Buffalo who came from a classic old-time, orthodox, working-class Jewish family in New York. He would ask me, not teasingly but accurately, who did I consider my constituency to be. For whom was I writing? Although I was a person of this

massive segment of our population, its blandness and status quo situation was very hard to move or to engage. I think, therefore, that the act got stuck with style. I mean, it became a question of who could manipulate the agency most attractively or dazzlingly. Who could dance or put on a dress that most seemed to be a jazzy use of the thing. Poetry seems to me the articulation of the most significant and heartfelt emotions that any group is having. Pound's point is that poetry is the antennae of the race.

HG: With this in mind, can a person get some sort of academic training to write poetry?

RC: I never felt that. I think that as with an art, the more one knows of its resources, the more potential one has in using the art or performing with it. In other words, the more a musician, for example, knows about the resources of his or her music, the more material he or she is able to do in contrast to some who don't read or hear other poets' work—for fear they're going to be contaminated or influenced, as they say. It seems to be an absurd dilemma to put themselves into. You don't want to hear music for it might change their ways of playing, or whatever.

HG: I'm curious about the benefits of an insulated environment like Black Mountain was, in terms of enforcing one's need to create by isolation from the mainstream.

RC: It was not insulated, by the way. Think of what it was: a highly self-determined clutch of people who'd come primarily from the big cities. The group had no economic authority in the community where they were situated. Black Mountain was the home town of Billy Graham. North Carolina, to this day, is not a particularly hospitable state for large liberal political thinking. So, Black Mountain was known as *pink mountain*. There was the constant fear of being burned out by the townspeople, a tremendous difficulty in getting common services, such as doctors, because the town was very hostile. But we certainly were not isolated from the public event. For example, in the forties, Black Mountain had no problems in exchanging with the black communities, which, indeed, isolated them from the more authoritative white community. The performances in and with the black communities were very successful, and, of course, the student population was not exclusively white. So the exchange was real. Black Mountain jumped all the habits of southern disposition, and that, of course, angered the local community. So, you see, we weren't insulated but extremely vulnerable. We had no money, no authority that could say this is a good thing. Now, of course, Black Mountain is a kind of minor industry in the state of North Carolina. I mean, historians collect artifacts of the time, etc.

HG: One of the more recent readings you have done was at the Jack Kerouac Festival in Boulder during July. What were the successes of that festival in your mind, other than honoring the man?

RC: Jack Kerouac is now an obvious hero of public interest, among the young people, too. There was a time shortly after his death, roughly about ten years after his greatest influence, that my literature students did not know his work or who he was. He was a great writer without exception. Now, happily, it's different. I recall before I got to the conference talking with friends Ted Berrigan, Allen Ginsberg, and others, and we intended to shift the interest of the public from simply making Jack a folk hero into a return to actually reading his books, which was, after all, the point of his writing. To get it off the level of "Gee, I remember the night he did this, that, and the other thing": to make it a little less anecdotal and more engraved with what this man wrote. Because that, frankly, is Jack Kerouac now and forever—what the books say. I felt in that respect it was successful. I was certainly moved and delighted and impressed by what they had done. It was lovely. I never met Abby Hoffman before then and enjoyed the way he was talking about Jack. Clark Coolidge had come. He's an extremely good poet. It is extraordinarily moving to think of America in Jack's terms.

HG: Do you think that poetry needs to be re-defined somehow in order to make it more accessible to the general public? The Small Press Movement has been effective in presenting diverse work which would never see print otherwise because of old standards or similar hegemony that determines value.

RC: The Kerouac Festival, again, recalls some of the feeling of solid community which the Small Press Movement is. I keep in touch with Allen and Mike McClure, and, happily, Gary Snyder again, and Denise Levertov. There's always a nexus, happily, in poetry of community. Certainly, there has been in my life. At times, people apart from it will say, "You poets simply scratch each other's back. You publish each other's work, and so forth." But it doesn't really matter. I mean, it's like playing music for those who want to hear it, and those are very often other musicians. The point being that anything which helps the art survive in a time that's not particularly interested in it is useful. Small presses make no money. They serve no other interest except the possibilities of keeping a text of poetry available for those who care about it. But it isn't a privileged situation. It's a question of how much money you can lose for how long. And as Ezra Pound suggested to me, just make it count as much as possible.

HG: How do you feel about the drifting of poetics which includes media, theatrics, dance, etc. along with or instead of words?

RC: Well, I had been involved with that possibly more in the sixties when media events were more common--intensively at times with very sophisticated people, e.g., John Cage and Merce Cunningham, and others. We did two weeks of media in New York, and that was extremely interesting to me. On the other hand, I am a poet whose particular art is not only committed but is habituated to sounds and rhythms and fields of emotion, and it is gestural. Its information particularly is words. Frankly, I love words as material because you don't have to buy them; you don't have to go out and haul them home. They're common to all people; they are the most intimate activity of people in terms of something specifically human. They carry all the increment of their use and associations therein. And everyone can afford them, so to speak. It doesn't cost anything. Again, the oral tradition is so terrific because you don't even need paper or pencil. So the community always seemed to be extremely solid. I suppose the only thing I regret is not so much an indifferent public, but a disposition that wants to take a rather unaggressive circumstance and make it a privileged authority. Tell you the right way to read or write a poem so that after the usual high school training, no wonder people run for the woods. I'd hate to think of reading poetry as though there was some awful test coming. And asking: "did you understand?"

Understanding Poetry: that title alone is enough to freak you. The students think there is something they should understand, and if they don't understand it, they're let out. If they don't get it or somehow come up with the right answers, they have failed in their experience of it. I think that's a very hostile way to look at poetry. I mean, I don't understand a lot of things in the world, e.g., trees or weather, or feeling, utterly complex. I could have a whole model as to why Harry hit me over the head with a club. Reasons, but it still would be inexplicable to me. Why did he do that to me? I remember most interestingly and horribly in the Second World War, my first experience of being shot at. I thought, "Oh boy, I've never done anything. Why are these people shooting at me?" I don't know to this day. Why shoot? What does that seemingly ever solve? So the pretense that one has to, quote, understand poetry in some intellectually determined way is, to me, entirely out to lunch.

HG: Yes. Students expect, even demand it seems, to be told what a poem means.

RC: I love Pound's point that nothing counts save the quality of the affection, and only emotion endures. Poetry is primarily an agency of feeling, and it says

things in order to promote and/or articulate feeling. It doesn't explain them necessarily, nor does it define them. But if it works in my imagination of it, it moves me. Or it can bring a person to tears or to laughter. Or it makes a particular circumstance somehow both more explicit and more articulate and accessible.

HG: Is there a common frame of mind that compels poets to write?

RC: Yes. I was reading in a magazine about a special school in New York for kids who have strongly evident capabilities in various arts or who are professionals at age ten or eleven, whether musicians or actors or dancers. The article told of one wild kid who grew up in a classic poor Puerto Rican family in New York. While the parents were at work, she was left with this woman who had a piano. By age four, this kid is playing away without any lessons. The parents don't think it's remarkable, but she was heard by someone who could define her abilities. This kid proved to be a veritable genius. So they set to work training her. Well, there's no one who could say why that kid did that. Mike Wallace asked Williams in an interview: "Tell me, why does one want to write a poem?" Williams replied, "Because it's there to be written." Then he asks, "Well then, what sets it off?" Williams answers, "I am that he whose mind is scattered aimlessly." In other words, I have not purpose necessarily definitive. I feel that poetry is engaging, endlessly interesting, like the ultimate Rubik's Cube. It's something that costs nothing to play with. It's like swimming. It's like something you feel like doing. And it endlessly provokes, satisfies, and engages your attention. Again, as with music, no one's defined why it is that music makes us feel. There is no psychology of music, for instance. Unhappily, there is a psychology of literature, which is probably out to lunch. Its explanations are simply one model of possibility and by no means the conclusion. In any case, I like to listen to people, to hear them talking. I was looking over a woman's shoulder on the bus, and she was writing a report about a motorcyclists' convention and how her father was having trouble adjusting to the death of his wife. She was writing this really remarkable human document, almost inarticulate but extremely moving. She wrote nothing intellectual in those statements that would be extraordinary, but trying to say exactly how it was her father was feeling and how she was trying to help him. I enjoyed sitting there and reading over her shoulder into her world of expression. Another example might be my visits to relatives in usual and very common mental hospitals. I talk not only with the persons I visit but with other people commonly and sadly there. It's not that one is being objective or speciously observing, but the language! It's fascinating to hear how words take place in all these diverse human situations. They're an accessible report about people, along with gesture.

HG: Allen Ginsberg said that poetry is the way people speak.

RC: Yeah. That's interesting in every respect.

HG: Jorge Louis Borges said that he would be happy, or consider himself a successful poet, if generations after him continued to remember three or four of his lines and incorporated them into daily language.

RC: And couldn't remember who'd written them. That would be ideal. Would no one be moved by those words and that way of putting them? It wouldn't really matter at all who said them. Some words have extraordinary effect with, on, and rapport with people's feelings.

HG: As if they had to be said and someone had to say them. How would you consider yourself a success as a poet?

RC: Well, I've been generously treated. I certainly had no authority as a younger man that would give me a comfortable position. I have an old friend, Donald Hall, who as a younger man did have very useful and significant introductions to people like Eliot, and did have a very clear privilege in the relationships and the approval of his elders. It hasn't made his life as a poet easier. My determinations in poetry as a poet were far more personal and initially difficult. There was no audience or respect for what I was doing. It was very lonely at times to have so little rapport, seemingly, with what people obviously respected as poetry. I began to gradually accumulate a respect, or more accurately, a use for what I was doing. As that began to happen, I discovered old-time friends one had in no sentimental sense not met, people who had really been moved by your writing.

HG: So your success is the fact . . .

RC: That people haven't killed me. I'm still here. (Laughs)

HG: That a lot of people read your intimate thoughts.

RC: Critics who really want to dump on me refer to me as a popular poet, and that's the sneer of condescension, that this person somehow finds a popular interest in his writing. It certainly isn't reflected in sales, but it's true. I haven't been isolated as a poet by virtue of social or intellectual or class disposition towards reading and writing. Some people have. I think John Ashbery has overcome it by the power of his own writing.

HG: Do you think that terrible gap between what large numbers of the reading public enjoy and what is considered treasure in literature can be bridged?

RC: I don't know that in fact it can. I one time had a job teaching children on a coffee plantation in Guatemala. The mother of some of these kids simply bought automatically all the books that showed up on the *New York Times* best-seller list. That was index for reading material. She considered herself in active rapport with the literate interests of this country, forgetting entirely that the books were sold as commercial products. My wife, who is a New Zealander and was trained the usual British way, was aghast at the author's writing and cheap tricks used in *The World According to Garp.* It's not that he's a, quote, bad writer, but his writing has nothing to do with the potential or powers of the art. He is a popular writer. He's usefully so. But Brautigan, let's say, in earlier instances of that kind of popularity, is an extraordinarily trained and skilled writer, comes from a very different tradition of experience and would have the respect of other writers. The simplicity in Brautigan is a highly complex ability.

HG: Do you think that Ann Waldman's and Ginsberg's rock and roll recordings could be considered gimmicks to approach a commercial market in some sense?

RC: No, no, no. Allen is delighted with it. Some years ago, Allen determined to sing Blake's songs, composed a rudimentary pattern of assigned tonal values to each of the vowels, and used that pattern. He sang gloriously like some old-time Jewish uncle and recorded Blake. He's almost servile in his affection for and respect of Bob Dylan. I remember he introduced me to Dylan one time, who jokingly told me to take care of this guy because he might be our next hit. For Allen, it was a fascinating way to particularize the sound structure and the rhythmic structure of what one wrote. He was fascinated by the way singing particularized the duration and value of words. Ed Sanders recognized during the sixties that if you sang poems, people heard them far more insistently and remembered them better than if you simply said them. This is a very powerful mode of communicating. So Ed had the Fugs in the sixties. That was a powerful political agency then, which had a lot to do with public thinking about censorship. To hear people singing "River of Shit" was a great moment in my life. No, it's not a gimmick. I was delighted two years ago when an old friend, Steve Swallow, composed music to about ten of my poems. Allen is fascinated by the abruptness and punch and common access that punk rock has. It isn't that he's trying to persuade a large constituency of his own authority, but he's trying to think of how you can get the word to as many people as possible. I was talking, recently, with a composer about the dilemma of words and music. Various composers have worked with my poems in a classic/modern manner. It was interesting but even farther from the public access than the poems themselves.

HG: The key is in the ability of words to move as much as the music, as I think you imply. Print poetry doesn't always translate because its poetics can be too much a silent type of music.

RC: Ezra Pound, regardless of his horrible political and social dispositions at times, was a great mentor of our generation in ways of thinking about language and poetry. His point was that whenever poetry gets too far from music, it begins to atrophy and fall apart into purely intellectual disposition. He says listen to the sound that it makes. That's the key to its authority, not what it's saying, but the sound it's using to make a form. That's what's interesting and where the skill is largely obtained. One friend uses the human voice as an instrument . . .

HG: Like performance artist Laurie Anderson is doing.

RC: And there again, there's a very clear instance of how words are always moving into the situation of music. Zukofsky defined his poetics as being a function with the upper limit music and the lower limit being common speech or conversation. And poetry operates in the agency between those two poles. It either moved into pure sound, or else it moved primarily into statement, like "pass the butter" or "I'm hungry," or things of that sort.

HG: I like to call poetry written only for performance "performance poetry," like visual art designed only for performance is called "performance art." Either one can use music, or not, but each comes from a different set of aesthetic priorities and history, too. That's why Laurie Anderson is not a poet. Right?

RC: Yes, exactly. That's fascinating. And Dylan can be.