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And Then He Bought Some Lettuce: Living into Robert Creeley's Poetics

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It must have been the fall semester 1963 when Robert Creeley came to Eugene to give a reading at the University of Oregon. *For Love: Poems 1950–1960* had been published the year before. The writing program at the school held generous views about Creeley's poetry and *For Love* had already brought in equally generous reviews. I went to the reading with great anticipation, mainly because as a second-year graduate student I was feeling free from Longfellow, Hawthorne and what I thought of as the pernicious New England mind; this was a chance to hear a poet speak directly to an audience and to get a sense of what was being talked about as the "New American Poetry." The reading began with enthusiasm and went on with the high energy of Creeley's tightly stretched observations about here and there, the isolation of self and longing for a community, the cry for the commune of love, and the insistence for exploring the abilities of language to express thought. About half way through the reading I was flooded with the terrifying anxiety that Creeley was propounding ways of seeing and thinking that I had fled New England to escape. "This guy's from New England," I said to a friend sitting beside me, and left. Creeley's remark on the subject read years later would not have given me much comfort after leaving the reading:

> At various times I've put emphasis on the fact that I was raised in New England, in Massachusetts for the most part. So placing myself, I've argued that that fact clarifies my apparently laconic way of saying things, expecially [especially] so in my early poems. (*CE* 572)

That was not the end of it, of course. Creeley came to a Creative Arts Festival in 1974 at Kent Sate University, where I was teaching, and then when I moved to Buffalo as the Curator of the Poetry Collection in 1979, Penelope and Robert gave a party to welcome me to town in their upstairs apartment at 400 Fargo Street. It was just the beginning. Creeley died in March 2005 but that event was another beginning of what I see now as an interminable review/investigation of his poetry and poetic thinking. For all of those years I was caught, and am still caught, in Creeley's dilemmas of the old New England trap: longing for love

and the full sensuous enjoyment of living followed by the guilt for having the pleasures which such living produces, the need to remain an isolated, determined person cancelled but not negated by the equally strong need for inclusion in groups of friendly people, and especially the strident obligation to realize even the smallest potential as a human being. Avoid every excess of emotional and material possessions, and likewise every excess of emotional depression and material poverty. Don't waste anything, strive forward to find what is inside because it is impossible to determine accurately what waits outside.

There is a grimness in all this, even though the New England religious traditions offer up an abstracted spiritual salvation, but that does not equal or compensate for the denial of self—and in the strictest sense the denial of creating when only God can create—necessary to join that spirituality. Denial and the persistent drive for fulfillment cannot be reconciled, even within the particularized speculations that drove Creeley's poetry from *For Love* (1962) to *If I Was Writing This* (2003). A huge seriousness surrounds Creeley's insistent obligation to articulate the immediate perceptions of place and intelligence which then provokes the insistent obligation in others to escape being caught through explanations of the intellectual pleasure of being engaged in the contraries of an operative poetics. Wallace Stevens added other dimensions to these obligations:

> The mind has added nothing to human nature. It is a violence from within that protects us from a violence without. It is the imagination pressing back against the pressure of reality. It seems, in the last analysis, to have something to do with self–preservation; and that, no doubt, is why the expression of it, the sound of its words, helps us to live our lives. (*NA* 36)

Of course, it took many years to unscramble and perhaps explain the initial reactions to Creeley and his poetry, but when I read through *For Love* again and again I was a bit amazed that the themes I'd recognized in the reading were operative aspects of the poetry. The poignant situation of personal isolation and lack of purpose in the poem "The End" stayed with me for years:

> When I know what people think of me
> I am plunged into my loneliness. The grey
>
> hat bought earlier sickens
> I have no purpose no longer distinguishable.

A feeling like being choked
enters my throat. (*CP* I 133)

The situation of the poem in the whole book of poems is familiar as the dilemma of being caught between two ideas in the poem "The Whip." There the speaker lies in bed with a woman sleeping next to him and imagines another woman on the roof; when after his sigh "Ugh" the sleeping woman rouses and puts "her hand on / my back" (*CP* I 146), the speaker is lead into a faulty statement by his own thinking, the intervention of a cognitive function in an imaginative process. Similar dilemmas of the mind's allegiances appear throughout the volume. "The Plan" calls this sort of dilemma "this / damned muddle" (*CP* I 212). The trapped speaker in the poem, "The Hill," rejects one attitude which turned his "head into a cruel instrument," but he still confesses even the pattern of walking away from an attitude is itself disturbing. He will "not allow it / to reappear—" but even such determination does not relieve the constraints of the dilemma; personal perversity makes the resolve, binding the speaker in "magnanimous cruelty":

Saith perversity, the willful
the magnanimous cruelty,
which is in me
like a hill. (*CP* I 202)

Such perversity leads, as it does in the poem, "And," to a sense of being cut off from the past, family and traditions, the insignificance of life itself: "They are all dead now" (*CP* I 191). The accumulation of such dilemmas and the resulting grim view of life itself caught in its own patterns runs through these poems. It is part of their signature.

For Love begins and ends with a citation to Hart Crane's poem "The Broken Tower," first in the poem 'Hart Crane," "And so it was I entered the broken World" (*CP* I 110) and last in the poem "For Love," "Into the company of love / it all returns" (*CP* I 258).

And so it was I entered the broken world
To trace the visionary company of love, its voice
An instant in the wind (I know not whither hurled)
But not for long to hold each desperate choice. (Crane 106)

Hart Crane's tormented life in some sense becomes a framework for Creeley's persistent struggle to articulate his immediate perception of life and love, as well as his struggle with the language to reveal himself in poetic forms.

As part of that persistent struggle, the poem—and now a famous poem—"A Form of Women," begins with a speculation about what the speaker has known and not been able to know, even though the reality of what it is looks at him "through the open door." Now the speaker walks into the moonlight, the presence of love, and sees forms of loves, "shapes more fearful / because I feared" in the trees. The longing for love is countered by the fear of finding or not finding it. Love itself gives shape (even form) to physical events, in this case, trees, and by extension to a form of women. The poem then turns the meditation back to very particular facts, "My face is my own, I thought." His face is in fact his, but thinking, a cognitive assertion of order, as other poems in the volume consider, for example, the lines from "Young Woman":

> I think, and
> therefore I am not,
> who was to have been, as you,
> something else. (*CP* I 238)

does not clarify self-identity, and instead makes a division between the fact and the idea of the fact that thinking produces. "A Form of Women" continues:

> But you have seen it
> turn into a thousand years.
> I watched you cry.

The poem addresses another, unnamed person and says that person, he/she, has seen "it," "My face" or the thought, which turns into a thousand years of explications, justifications, rationales, bringing not the joy of understanding love but crying. The speaker is unable to touch the other person, caught in his own restraints, even though he "wanted very much to / touch you." He now gives the warning that even though it will be dark when he gives the poem to the other person, that person should be mindful of it "when the moon shines," because in the same way that the moon as love gave shape and form to the trees, the moon can particularize the sense of love in a way that his assertions of his own physicality can not. The speaker's physicality asserted here is not the same as the assertion of personal identity—"but I am not."

My face is my own.
My hands are my own.
My mouth is my own
but I am not.

Moon, moon,
when you leave me alone
all the darkness is
an utter darkness,

a pit of fear,
a stench,
hands unreasonable
never to touch.

But I love you.
Do you love me.
What to say
when you see me. (*CP* I 152-53)

The speaker's life without love is "utter darkness, / a pit of fear," an isolation with "a stench," which is not removed by the following assertions that despite all that I've said here "I love you." He will be as speechless, or inarticulate, when he meets the other person as he has been in stating his sense of love to the other person in this poem. He has been trying to find "A Form of Women," not *the* form of women, so the poem ends without a final definition but with the demonstration of a process of articulation that has found a version of women; and other points of perception, echo (memory), and immediate contact will produce other versions. In the end the process of writing the poem is more important than a teleological definition.

"A Form of Women" shifts its focus from the speaker to the addressed person, "you," and thereby removes the obligation of the poem as a personal confession of any position.[1] Creeley uses this plan of misdirection in other poems as well. The poem "The Letter" addresses the "you" in the first line: "I did not expect you / to stay married to / one man all your life." The conclusion of the poem, "as to how much was penitence" (*CP* I 195) in the relationship, depends

[1] See Kenneth Cox, "Address and Posture in the Early Poetry of Robert Creeley." *Boundary* 2 6.7 3.1 (Spring/Fall 1978): 241–262.

on the responses of the unidentified "you," so its statement is a result of the writing out of the occasion, the moment of inception and articulation, and not the report of an old conversation or argument. The poem "Saturday Afternoon" begins with a stanza about "a monster" coming home to a dinner, and then the second stanza shifts the address to a "you":

> The monster you love is home again,
> and he tells you the stories of the world,
> big cities, small men
> and women.

It is as if a narrator had entered the poem to direct its attentions away from the speaker to the unnamed woman in the poem, and in the final stanza to exhort her to better behavior from a narrative distance:

> Make room for the furry, wooden eyed
> monster. He is my friend
> whom you burn.
> amen. (*CP* I 207)

The main point here is that the poem does not describe what was said between the monster and the woman, or specify the possible differentiation between the monster and the speaker; it creates a small interactive drama as a version of what could have happened and what could have been said.

"The Rain" also redirects the poem's address away from the direct statement of the speaker, away from a speculation about the effects of "this quiet, persistent rain" which, despite the generalized idea of the soothing effect of rain at night, has "locked" the speaker "in this final uneasiness."[2] Another exhortation follows:

> Love, if you love me,
> lie next to me.
> Be for me, like rain,
> the getting out

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[2] Marjorie Perloff, in her article on Creeley's *Collected Poems*, "Robert Creeley's Radical Poetics," *electronic book review* (2007): npgs, offers what might be an exhaustive reading of "The Rain"; she also offers informative views on Creeley's place in contemporary American poetry.

of the tiredness, the fatuousness, the semi-
lust of intentional indifference.
Be wet
with a decent happiness. (*CP* I 207)

The exhortation actually asks "Love," as an idea, and then as you, "if you love me," to please remove the falsifying personal desires and then transform me in the way rain is reputed to do toward a "decent happiness," "wet"' with sexual satisfaction. The indirection of the address to "Love" removes the center of charged emotional stress from a personal location to a distanced rhetorical structure.

Creeley has additional plans to hide the turmoil in his private self. Early in his writing life, he wrote to William Carlos Williams to ask for poems for a new magazine he and Jake Leed were planning.[3] The actual reason, however, was to make contact with a poet he had begun reading and analyzing very carefully as a model for his own sense of rhythm—measure as he would later call it—of creating rhythmic structures with breaks of lines involving a hesitation of stopping or not stopping at the end of the line. In this period Creeley was also schooling himself in other forms of the poem, especially the love lyric. In his review of Williams's *Selected Essays,* (*CE* 34–39), he quotes a complete poem by Thomas Campion, "Kinde are her answeres" and then a poem by Williams, "The World Narrowed to a Point," but the concern of the review is to establish the importance of measure in Williams's poetics. There is more to be said about Williams's place in Creeley's poetics, but now Creeley's use of Campion's songs of love in his own poetry has a place in the strategies or plans of the poem.

The poem "Air: 'Cat Bird Singing'" begins with a statement about the cat bird singing and the trees at night "with huge eyes" which pose a threat to the secrecy of the speaker's speculations. The tenseness of the moment gets subverted, or redirected, by another aside, this time to "My love / is a person of rare refinement" who has "another air" when she speaks, another kind of song, "what Campion spoke of / with his / follow thy fair sunne unhappie shadow . . . ." The poem concludes with a supplication for support from a "lady," a figure for a woman from the courtly love tradition which informed Campion's love songs. Creeley is not subscribing Campion as a source for his poetry, rather taking him along as a companion, a fellow poet confronting the same difficulties

[3] See Jacob Leed, "Robert Creeley and *The Lititz Review:* A Recollection with Letters." *JML* 5.2 (April 1976): 243–259.

of articulation as Creeley does; and "my love" refigured as the "lady" creates a figure to make his speculation very proper, modest perhaps, and to allow him to get out of his speculations.[4] Here:

> O lady hear me. I have no
>
> other
> voice left. (*CP* I 165)

The appeal is to the lady for a kind of sanction from Campion's context, and then a kind of confession that he has only his voice, or that of the cat bird as his voice, with the implication that he is doing the very best he can to approach her in language, song. Furthermore, the speaker distances himself from the confession with the indirection of the address to the "lady," and so avoids a sentimental, and thus personal, conclusion to the poem.

Other of Creeley's early poems use addresses to the lady with similar effect. "Ballad of the Despairing Husband" begins with a rendition of a break-up of a marriage which leads to the termination of the ballad stanzas:

> She was. I know. And she is still,
> and if I love her? then so I will.
> And I will tell her, and tell her right . . . .

A supplication to the "lovely lady" follows, then to the "most lovely lady," finally to the "loveliest of ladies." The finale comes in the lines which remove the discussion of the divorce to the mediating authority of the lady in a tradition of the love song:

> Oh, lady, grant me time,
> please, to finish my rhyme. (*CP* I 174)

The lady does not respond. This is also the case in the poem "Lady Bird" which begins with a report of a conversation with the lady and then moves to the complicating dilemma of Creeley's early poems, longing for love but knowing also its agonies:

> To be happy
> now she cries, and all things

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[4] See Robert Duncan, "After *For Love*." *Boundary* 2 6.7 3.1 (Spring/Fall 1978): 233–239 for more comments on Creeley, Campion, and the lady.

turn backward
and impossible.

The speaker claims his love for the lady and his willingness to comfort her despite the obvious conflict of longing and agony:

but the invention is
a parallel sufferance.

Mine for hers
hers for mine. (*CP* I 187)

The invention of the discourse with the lady now appears as a disguise for an actual relationship between the speaker and a woman, and the success of that relationship depends upon the "sufferance" between the speaker and the women; but the intensity of the conflict remains hidden in the invention of the conversation with the lady, and so personal statement remains unnecessary in the protection of the speaker from his own faults.

The poem "for Robert Duncan," "The Door," is a central one in the use of the invention of the lady. The poem begins with a description of a wall and a door which leads into a garden with the "scent of wild flowers," but the speaker's mind is at times in torment, and even though he can see the wall and the door, he cannot go to the door and enter the garden. In the developing narrative of the poem, a supplication to the lady follows: "Lady, do not banish me / for digressions. . . . "Lady I follow." In another time, the speaker recounts, he left his tormented self and "found the Garden," found a woman and seduced her, a kind of coming into adulthood not actually in a sexual act but in an imaginative one. The "mighty magic" (*CP* I 199) of the seduction in the following speculation can lead to the renewal of the race, and even though "the garden echoes across the room," haunts his memory. He objects to submitting himself "in the ridiculous posture of renewal, / of the insistence of which I am the virtue." But the woman, "you," will not respond, and though the speaker is distraught in screaming at the "you," there is nothing for him to do "but to get up," to end his pleas, imagining that the Lady has moved to the next town" along with the "you" (*CP* I 200), the lover of one night in the garden. The speaker then imagines "the Graces in long Victorian dresses," as his grandmother he had mentioned, but he is not allowed back into the garden with his lover, so shifts his address to the lady:

But the Lady is indefinable,
she will be in the door in the wall
to the garden in sunlight.
I will go on talking forever.

I will never get there.
Oh Lady, remember me
who in Your service grows older
not wiser, no more than before.

The speaker poses himself as the wronged but dedicated and sincere lover asking the Lady to intercede on his behalf to return to the imaginary garden behind the imaginary wall. He will do what distressed lovers do—"I will sell myself in hell, in heaven also I will be"—in order to gain the garden. Even the excessive pleas will not work, and in the final stanza the speaker returns to his own mind and its memories of the Lady:

In my mind I see the door,
I see the sunlight before me across the floor
beckon to me, as the Lady's skirt
moves small beyond it." (*CP* I 201)

He imagines his recall to the ideality of love in the garden, but remains always outside, alone, a pleading supplicant to love's care.

The supplication to love, or another person, takes a different direction and reaches a different conclusion in the volume's final poem "For Love." The speaker wants to speak of love, but "what is it that / is finally so helpless, / different, despairs of its own / statement," or refuses to allow articulation even refuses itself as a "reward":

Here is tedium
despair, a painful
sense of isolation and
whimsical if pompous

self-regard. But that image
is only of the mind's

vague structure, vague to me
because it is my own.

Love, what do I think
to say. I cannot say it. (*CP* I 257-58)

Ineffectual statements of love produce "isolation" and despair in the speaker for his inabilities, force him into the realm of speculation as a replacement for direct speaking, and then into an appeal to love that has the same address as the others to the "Lady":

Let me stumble into
not the confession but
the obsession I begin with
now. For you

also (also)
some time beyond place, or
place beyond time, no
mind left to

say anything at all,
that face gone, now.
Into the company of love
it all returns. (*FL* 160)

Knowing his own inability to express his love, the speaker appeals for an abstracted position beyond time and place for himself and his lover. In the end, all his directives and appeals return to the "company of love," where, finally, his isolation is absolved into the community of love.

In 1974 when Creeley remembered leaving Black Mountain College in North Carolina, and going to San Francisco in 1956, he wrote:

> —and so I had headed west, for the first time, thinking to be rid of all the 'easternisms' of my New England upbringing and habit." (*CE* 567) . . . come June, and I was restless again, and so headed back to New Mexico, . . . (*CE* 570)

So Creeley and I had been on the same journey to shear away New England and find a fresh start in the West. He was not successful and followed his restlessness to New Mexico. Changing his surroundings and going to new places became a recurring activity in his subsequent life, right to the final fellowship trip to Marfa in west Texas. I imagined I had cleared away the New England rubble to such an extent that people could no longer hear my Bostonian accent. The intellectual strife and guilty pressures in reaching up for a different life were always around the edges of life even in the late 1960s in the Emerald Empire around Eugene. I had used some of Stevens's violence to keep New England in check. So when I came back to read the early poems of Creeley again and again, I was stunned each time by how intense the poems were and how they were so intensely driven by the old dilemmas. Even in leaving the reading, I had taken on an obligation that even forty years of reading and reconsidering could not mitigate.

II

In his emergence as a poet and prose writer in the late 1940s, Creeley surveyed the field of writers presented to him as models and decided quickly against the emerging "New Critics," namely Robert Penn Warren, John Crowe Ransom, and Allen Tate. "The work we were otherwise given was," Creeley wrote in an essay "A Note on Ezra Pound," "on the one hand, Auden—wherein a socially based use of irony became the uselessly exact rigor of repetitive verse patterns—or perhaps Stevens, whose mind one respected, in the questions it realized, but again whose use of poetry had fallen to the questionable fact of device" (*CE* 25). Stevens's early poems would have another place in Creeley poetics, but it was mainly Pound and Williams who provided the immediate foundations for his writing. "For my generation the fact of Ezra Pound and his work is inescapable, no matter what the particular reaction may be"(*CE* 25). Creeley met Brom Weber at Harvard which made Hart Crane a poet he read and studied but it was the work of William Carlos Williams that stands most directly and influentially behind Creeley's poetry and poetic thinking[5] as Creeley wrote later "to make clear the persistent and extraordinary value of William Carlos Williams's work as a writer" (*CE* 48). So Pound and Williams are the most

[5] Brom Weber was soon to write, *Hart Crane: a Biographical and Critical Study* (New York: The Bodley Press, 1948) and edit *The Letters of Hart Crane* (New York: Hermitage House, 1952).

influential predecessors; and then the contemporaries make up the company of writers most important to Creeley: Charles Olson, Robert Duncan, Louis Zukofsky, Allen Ginsberg and Denise Levertov.[6]

Creeley wrote to Williams. Williams wrote to Olson, with whom he was already corresponding, and then Olson wrote to Creeley, rounding off the links that changed the way the "New American Poets" thought about and wrote poetry.[7] Cid Corman had a radio program in Boston which featured contemporary poets, and as he started up *Origin* he became another invaluable link for the emerging poets. Creeley and Olson also appeared in the first issues of *Origin*, and Olson was featured in the second issue; Samuel French Morse's essay on Wallace Stevens occupied the fifth issue.[8] It is crucial to note here that the correspondence among this group (each writing to the other poets and then back to each other) to launch a new poetics—Williams, Olson, Creeley, Duncan, Corman then Levertov—provided the forum to work out the terms and situations of this new writing. This project of poetry had a visceral and factual basis in Williams's poems and his advice in letters. Olson had published his essay "Projective Verse" in 1950, and that essay was based in part on an intense correspondence with Robert Creeley. Olson called it the "most important correspondence of my life" in April 1950. In his essay Olson distinguished his ideas of writing as "composition by field," as opposed to writing in predetermined structures—"inherited line, stanza, over-all form, what is the 'old base' of the non-projective" (*CP* 239), and poems which reported or described experience instead of enacting experience within the poem. The pivotal principle of the essay, which Olson acknowledges as coming from Creeley, got stated as "form is never more than the extension of content." This principle also became a crucial principle of Creeley's poetics. It is worth setting out how this idea came into the poetic thinking of the time.

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[6] Only a brief sketch is possible here. For fuller statements about the sources of Creeley poetics in relation to Williams see: Paul Mariani and George Butterick.

[7] I am referring here to the anthology edited by Donald Allen, *The New American Poetry*. The poetic traditions from Pound and Williams to Olson, Duncan, Denise Levertov, Paul Blackburn, and Robert Creeley are the most telling arrangement in the anthology. Allen Ginsberg and other writers from San Francisco Renaissance and the Beat Movement were also children, as it were, of Pound and Williams. But the immediate interactions among Creeley, Olson, and Williams produced the provocative documents that would be crucial for many other poets, mainly Duncan and Levertov.

[8] Samuel French Morse, "The Motive for Metaphor—Wallace Stevens: His Poetry and Practice," *Origin* 5 (Spring 1952): 3–65.

In the correspondence with Olson, Creeley reports that he read a statement by Wallace Stevens in *The Partisan Review:* "Poetic form in its proper sense is a question of what appears within the poem itself . . . . By appearance within the poem itself one means the things created and existing there . . . ." (*OP* 314; *CO/RC* 1.22)[9] Creeley then wrote to Olson on June 5, 1950 that:

> Anyhow, form has now become so useless a term/ that I blush to use it. I wd imply a little of Stevens' use (the things created in a poem and existing there . . .) & too, go over into: the possible casts or methods for a way into/ a "subject": to make it clear: that form is never more than an extension of content. An enacted or possible "stasis" for thought. (*CO/RC* 1. 79)

Olson used the line "form is never more than an *extension* of content" in his essay "Projective Verse," so one of the direction-altering principles of the new poetry derived from Wallace Stevens via Creeley to Olson.

Other principles of Olson's essay also came over into Creeley's writing. Olson insisted on two other primary principles, calling the three, including Creeley's contribution, "the dogma." He considered a poem a structure of "kinetics": "The poem itself must, at all points be a high energy-construct and, at all points, an energy discharge." And then the third insisted on the process of the poem: "One perception must immediately and directly lead to a further perception . . . always one perception must must must move, instanter, on another" (*CP* 240). Olson also discussed what Creeley had called "measure, "By ear," and other matters of musical rhythms, "The law of the line." A statement from the second section

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[9] *The Partisan Review* article is now reprinted in *OP*, 312–315. Creeley cited the passage from Stevens in a letter to Olson dated 28 April 1950; and he cited the same article by Stevens in a review of Olson's small volume *Y & X* in the summer of 1951 (*CE* 97): "There is, however, a usage with respect to form as if form were a derivative of plastic shape"(*SE* 97). Creeley read Stevens's early poems with some attention. The early Creeley poem "divisions" moves forward from Stevens's "Anecdote of the Jar": "the bottle contains / more than water. In this case the form / is imposed" (*C* 33) and the same poem is quoted in the final section of Creeley's poem Histoire de Florida" (*CP* II 483). In an interview Creeley recalled the writing of the poem and Stevens's place in his poem: "I also like that it comes back at the end, that it resolves on a parallel with a poem by Wallace Stevens which was a, crucial poem for me as a young man, "Anecdote of the Jar." "I placed a jar in Tennessee," etc. And so I put an inter-linear pattern with that and my jar is in Florida, that's all. But the whole imagination is Stevens's" (Obermayer 17). A line from "Anecdote of the Jar" appears as an epigraph for the poem "For John Duff" in *Later*. The poem "The Immoral Proposition," in the lines "God knows / nothing

of the essay needs to be pointed out. Olson called for the need to adhere to the objective presentation of the poem, to get "rid of the lyrical interferences of the individual ego, of the 'subject' and his soul." Olson continues:

> If he [the poet] sprawl, he shall find little to sing but himself, and shall sing, nature has such paradoxical ways, by way of artificial forms outside himself. But if he stays inside himself, if he is contained within his nature as he is participant in the larger force, he will be able to listen, and his hearing through himself will give him secrets objects share. (*CP* 247)

The poet must consider himself as a participant of the field of action in which the poem takes place and write out the perceptions of his engagement, without the interference of his ego, but with the kinetics of that field as the guiding force. He must objectify his perceptions. And when he followed instructions, then he became a spokesman for the field and not his own biographer.

Olson's thinking in "Projective Verse" was a revelation to William Carlos Williams who earlier had written an essay, "The Poem as a Field of Action," which anticipated in part Olson's views of the subject (Williams *SE* 280–91). Olson's essay also implicitly acknowledges the poetics of Ezra Pound, Alfred North Whitehead's grand study, *Process and Reality,* as well as the emerging "action painters" of the New York School, mainly Jackson Pollock. Williams thought so well of Olson's essay that he quoted a large section of it in his *Autobiography* (*A* 329–332). The reprinting gave Olson's and therefore Creeley's poetics a credibility that made "Projective Verse" a launch point for the New American Poetry.

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is competent nothing is all there is" contains a reference to Stevens's poem "The Snow Man," in the lines, "And, nothing himself, beholds / Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is" (*CP* I 10). There is also the Creeley poem "Thinking of Wallace Stevens" (*CP* II 428). In another letter to Charles Olson (25 june 1950), Creeley brings up Stevens's position on what Olson had named "by ear" and Creeley had named measure: "Well, under the stress method of establishing beat / flow: is the: breath, as you have it. It is the words/ against the ear: as they are in Williams, despite the often / seeming: eye-logic. Cummings: a digression, for the most part: but the thing held strong in Stevens, who was always going by the ear / what else" (*CO/RC* 2.14). Pound and Williams are without a doubt the principal precursors of Creeley's poetry and poetics, but Stevens also has a place in the derivation, especially in the influential statement "Form is never more than an *extension* of content." Ben Lerner in a recent article also recognizes the importance of Wallace Stevens to Creeley's poetry. Michael Davidson also mentions Creeley's quotations from Stevens in his letters to Olson.

III

In *For Love*, Creeley comes to terms with his own sense of the poetry he could write. After more than a decade of studying his ancestors, mainly Pound, and increasingly Williams—earlier *The Wedge* (1944), *Paterson*, and later *The Desert Music* (1954) and *Journey to Love* (1955)—and with an extensive correspondence with Olson, Duncan, Levertov and many others, he arrived at his own conception of the lyric poem. In his later volumes Williams introduced the three-part line, but even in that use he provided Creeley with examples of how to break a line to induce rhythmic patterns and how to measure both the line and the situation of the poem itself. His primary concern was *measure*, as Williams had asserted earlier, "The only reality that we can know is MEASURE." (*SE* 283). Creeley shunned the term rhythm in favor of *measure*, and he meant by the word a musical arrangement of repetitive sounds that grew up out of the writing immediately at hand. "Measure, then, is my testament," Creeley replied in an essay. "What uses me is what I use and in that complex measure is the issue" (*CE* 488). The musical structure was never preconceived; it was realized in the actual process of writing the poem. He was mainly concerned with the form of the poem, and he was guided by his own statement "form is never more than an extension of content," a statement which rejects preconceived ideas, theoretical or practical, of form, and also a disjuncture between form and content, or any divisive statement of an objective or subjective value of a poem. Like Louis Zukofsky, his senior by some twenty years, he worked toward a concept and accomplishment of the poem as an objectified statement. His intention was to get away from the poem as a confession of personal emotive states (Olson's "lyrical interference"), and never to leave a collection of poems as bits of biography to be strung together later as his conclusive summary. He used other strategies like the shift of the point-of-view in the poem to another unnamed person, "you," or the "lady," to misdirection of the poem away from a statement of personality to an articulation of sight or insight of the moment. Poems also frequently abstract themselves following a process of thought as another way of avoiding the personal, confessional stance. Instead, he focuses on the poem of perception and memory (echo) of an immediate physical or psychic moment. Like Stevens, he conceived of a poem as an "act of the mind," the enactment of the mind (the cumulative powers of the mind including the imagination) conceiving thought in words.[10]

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[10] Heather McHugh in "Love and Frangibility: An Appreciation of Robert Creeley" writes: "At their best, Creeley's poems move with a rhetorical care capable of palpably reminding us

Just as he rejected predeterminations of poetic structure, he also rejected predeterminations of ideology, political, religious, or socially activist, to make a poem. As he wrote in the essay "A Sense of Measure":

> I am wary of any didactic program for the arts and yet I cannot ignore the fact that poetry, in my own terms of experience, obtains to an unequivocal order. What I deny, then, is an assumption that that order can be either acknowledged or gained by intellectual assertion, or will, or some like intention to shape language to a purpose which the literal act of writing does not itself discover. (*CE* 486)

His own experience, his own process of writing, asserts an order. Allowing an ideological position to ordain a message that orders experience imposes an order that is not inherent in the perception of present reality. External orders dominate the mind. Like Duncan he determined the freedom of the mind to perceive and articulate as the poem's highest virtues. "It must be loose," Duncan wrote of the mind's activity. Creeley's poems more often than not begin and stop without a beginning, middle or conclusion referring to the beginning. At times a narrative of the mind's activity takes over, with subsequent misdirection into another person followed by a statement abstracted from the immediate event of the poem. Because, therefore, Creeley rejected the dictates of ideology, the poems were not obligated to maintain the tenants of any structured intellectual or cultural position. Poems were not required to tell *the truth* about any ideological position, only to tell the truth of their occasion. The poems at times looked like fragments, language without structure; however, the subject of the poems was not the subject at hand but actually the processes of conceiving thought in words:

> I do not feel the usual sense of *subject* in poetry to be of much use. . . . I feel that "subject" is at best a material of the poem, and that poems finally derive from some deeper complex of activity. (*CE* 486.)

They followed the process of thinking where it went and did not move around to the conclusion of a point of ideology. And part of the rejection of ideology was a similar rejection that a poem should have a "poetic" language and even a "poetic" subject matter. Duncan helped him find this principle as Creeley reports in "Preface" to *The Charm*:

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how mind finds its own forms in language" (16). McHugh offers a brilliant discussion of Creeley's writing especially in an exhaustive reading of his poem "The Window," which, alas, is beyond the scope of my essay.

> Another friend, Robert Duncan, has always insisted, with high intelligence, I think, that poetry is not some ultimate preserve for the most rarified and articulate of human utterances, but has a place for *all* speech and *all* occasions thereof. (*CP* I 4)

All kinds of language, all kinds of information, and all kinds of events will come into the poems without prohibitions.

Earlier Olson had announced in the essay "Human Universe": "Art does not seek to describe but enact" (*CP* 162). Description takes place after an event of perception or awareness, but instead of being a recall of that event Olson and Creeley, as well as Williams, thought that the poem was the event itself. In Duncan's words a poem is an "event" in language.[11] Creeley cited Williams's comment on his own poem *Paterson*:

> The poet does not, however, permit himself to go beyond the thought to be discovered in the context of that with which he is dealing: no ideas but in things. The poet thinks with his poem, in that lies his thought, and that in itself is the profundity. The thought is *Paterson*, to be discovered there. (*A* 390–391)

Especially in his later books, Creeley titles many poems "Here," and concentrates or controls the scope of the poem to the immediate physical facts in his view and also the "echoes," or memories in his experience that pertain to the immediate scene. So the poems give an instance of the mind conceiving and following thought in words. A Creeley poem does not reach out to other sources for its verification, so even when he cites Campion, Williams, or Emily Dickinson he is writing with other poems not deriving his poems from them.

IV

For Love collects poems written 1950–1960. *Words* collects poems written 1961–1966. The first volume's collection contains Creeley's attempts to come to terms with the poetics he inherited, the influence of William, Pound, Olson

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[11] Duncan wrote in "The H.D. Book": "Poems are not objects but events of Poetry, of our consciousness of making a universe of feeling in language. Is it the celebration of a mass, at once to enter the intensity of such a passion of the word and at the same time to release the hold of a need the word has over us?" ["The H.D. Book"]: "Section Two," *Credences* 1.2 (July 1975): 58.

and then his contemporaries Duncan and Levertov. Creeley accumulated a conglomerate poetics of many parts, some even fighting against one another, but for the most part attempting to objectify the process of writing, and to disengage the thinking and values of the poem, however emotionally, with the contractions of ideas of love, isolation and community. Especially his own egotistical statements. He often confused the power and dependability of thinking, which he saw as analytic thinking, with the power of the mind as an inclusive agency including the imagination and the echoes of memory. He isolated himself and his poetics from natural change, even the processes of the mind, at the same time that he longed for the community or inclusion posited in loving another person, often an ideal woman. He was, therefore, caught within the dilemmas of excess that brought few solutions and many frustrations.

The poems in *Words*, on the other hand, examine and challenge his conglomerate poetics, then attempt to change old habits of thinking and writing, set out a path forward to the poems in Pieces, and then point a direction to the accomplishments of *Later* at the end of the next decade. The titular poem "Words" gives an introduction to his new attitude toward intellect and words in the poetic process. The poem begins with a statement that the words have always been with him, but in "the twisted / place" of his present disposition words have a "rotten" taste on his tongue, though he remembers when they were "food, when hungry." He has relied on the strident intellect for defining his perception too much, so the poem closes with a wish, perhaps, of another source and value of words themselves:

> words like a
> clear, fine
> ash shifts,
> like dust,
>
> from somewhere. (*CP* I 332)

Comments on the limitations of the intellect appear in other poems. "The Mountains in the Desert," for example, begins with a statement of geographic fact in his head, but he concedes his "mind" is "locked / in seeing it," and the poem concludes:

> Tonight let me go
> at last out of whatever
> mind I thought to have,
> and all the habits of it. (*CP* I 269)

The mind moves so fast that he is unable to keep up with its perceptions, so in the poem "'I Keep to Myself Such Measures . . .'" it leaves "rocks simple markers" of what it has known, but in the end it is not able to recover the perceptions and he is left holding the stones. "All forgets. My mind sinks" (*CP* I 297). In "Some Place" he thinks he has found a secured center in his world, a house," but that fixed point denies the processes of weather, and so he says "I am / more than thought, less / than thought. A house /with winds" (*CP* I 317). It is really the changes of the mind's abilities to conceive thought and the power of that process that so strikes against the fixed idea of the house or any other construct of the mind. He is moving away from the idea of the analytic intelligence as the power to define immediate situations and perception and toward a more inclusive concept of the total power of the mind without the divisions of intelligence, imagination, perception, and conception.

If he suspects intellect, then he also must suspect the process of writing, words, and language. An unease and even anxiety infects these poems. On one hand he fears the possibility that the next formulation in words will come "and then a quiet, a dull / space of hanging actions," or the end of writing itself. He then shifts the address to the speaker watching the process of stasis creeping in, the poem ends, in avoidance of the old ways of thinking, but the need to keep risking the chance of the final statement:

> God help him then
> if such things can.
> That risk
> is all there is. (*CP* I 270)

The issue becomes serious when the perceived failures of intellect and processes of writing threaten the expression of love. The poem "The Language" is a pivotal statement of the dilemma. He locates "I love you" as a physical act in the "teeth and / yes," and even though he says "words / say everything" (*CP* I 283), emptiness can be conceived as quickly as the feeling of love, so words stand equally for the expression of love and the non-expression of love posited in the intellect's location. Creeley in this volume moves away from the idea of love as sustaining his life and poetry to a different idea of finding ways to be more specific in the expression of love as a unique human feeling. These ideas appear in the eight-part poem "Enough." The poem begins with the positive assertion, "It is possible, in words, to speak / of what has happened" (*CP* I 359). But in the process of recalling previous moments, a distance appears between what was seen and known then and what is known now, and that distance cannot be

overcome with words, though the desire is for that solution. Fantasy of what the bodies looked like in dancing is one solution, but that is a making of the mind, intellect, not the account of things seen directly. The process is intact:

> One
> by one
> the form
>
> comes. One
> thing follows
> another. One
>
> and one
> and one. Make
> a picture
>
> for the world
> to be. It
> will be (*CP* I 362)

Another speculation of here and there, now and memory leads to an address to bodies, "Your body is a garbage can. / Your body is white . . . my body so / tentative," leading to a fundamental conflict of the poem: the viability of words in memory against the immediacy of words in the present— "do I / like the pain / of such impossible understanding" (*W* 127). The speaker is thus caught in the dilemma of his own speculation and then the final situation:

> I vow to my life to respect it.
> I will not wreck it
>
> I vow to yours to be
> enough, enough, enough. (*CP* I 363)

The speaker vows that her white body will be enough to sustain his life, his sense of her, but the three "enoughs" in the final line could also be read as "enough" of this speculation ("enough already" in the common idiom); it has actually decided nothing and has opened up the dilemma of words in the present and past, bodies in present and the past, the conflicts of pleasure and pain, in fact, the credibility of intellect in the process of poetry itself.

In the six-part poem "Anger," a narrator begins with a description of the scene of a night-long argument between a man and a woman, the anger and seeming verbal violence between the two people. The second section:

> I think I think
> but find myself in it.
>
> The pattern
> is only resemblance,
>
> I cannot see myself
> but as what I see, an
>
> object but a man,
> with lust for forgiveness,
>
> raging, from that vantage,
> secure in the purpose,
>
> double, split.
> It is merely intention,
>
> a sign quickly adapted,
> shifted to make
>
> a horrible place
> for self-satisfaction.
>
> I rage,
> I rage, I rage. (*CP* I 307-08)

The narrator's description changes to the speculation of the husband, who in his rage for forgiveness alienates more, and in his desire to have the argument over isolates himself in "self satisfaction" filled by contradiction of loving and hating simultaneously. Two sections of accusation follow as the husband accuses the wife of causing the argument, then demanding that she face him in the dark, he admits that:

The rage
is what I
want, what
I cannot give

to myself, of
myself in the world. (*CP* I 309)

The two argue through the night, and in the morning light some resolution appears in the final section:

All you say you want
to do to yourself you do
to someone else as yourself

and we sit between you
waiting for whatever will
be at last the real end of you. (*CP* I 309)

The man has the final word, as is mostly the case in Creeley's poems, in depicting the woman as a divided self and the man and woman sit between her parts, and in contention, waiting for the part of torment in the whole of loving to end. And there is no hint here of love redeeming the scene, only the persistent divisions and dilemmas of love itself.

In *Words*, Creeley also introduced new habits, some of which stayed with him through his writing life. The poems have a greater concentration on line breaks, and the subsequent hesitation of stopping or not stopping at the end of a line that makes an internal, rhythmic structure, in perfect measure is the poem "Song" (*CP* I 378) for example. Creeley makes his own syntax, often ungrammatical, to move the energy of the writing forward, and to assert rhymes of sound and sense sustaining the measure within the writing process. Objects were not as significant as measure and rhythm in the poems. The book also concentrates on short poems, individual and separate perception of physical fact or the mind's memory, which are not held together by a narrative. Instead they project the action and speed of the mind moving from one perception to another. This feature of the book particularly irritated Louis Simpson who wrote:

> . . . everything is style; there is no subject but the poem talking to itself. Such visible objects as were present in his early poems are missing here. These are syllables, breathing pauses, whispers. (Simpson 90)

There are several of these poems, including "Here," "The Farm," "Indians, "The Box," "Was," "Song," and "A Piece." The last one for example:

> One and
> one, two,
> three. (*CP* I 352)

has been noted by several reviewers, but it was also noticed by Creeley:

> When *Words* was published, I was interested to see that one of the poems most irritating to reviewers was "A Piece"—and yet I knew that for me it was central to all possibilities of statement. (*CE* 42)

Another variation of the short, independent poems was the appearance of longer poems divided into sections—"Enough" with eight, "Dimensions" with three, "Anger" with six, and "The Dream" with five. Creeley's intention as he defined it in a "Preface" to the book: "Intentions are the variability of all these feelings, moments of that possibility" (*CP* I 261). Creeley moves through various possibilities of statement and form in the poem as he "began to try deliberately to break out of the habits described" (*CE* 42) into modes of expression that mature through *Pieces* into Later.

V

The form of *Pieces* is very different form the diverse collection of poems in *Words*. The poetics likewise has changed. Creeley is no longer afflicted with the contests between the community, love and the isolation without it, followed by senses of guilt of being in love and of being isolated, nor with love as a redeeming factor in living. The personal needs of a "self," a demanding "self," have subsided, and the drives to overcome the differences between "here" and "there" changed into a generative creative process. In the poem "The Puritan Ethos," he writes:

Happy the man who loves what
he has and worked for it also.

There is a lake of clear water.
There are forms of things despite us. (*CP* I 414)

Happy is the man who has realized all his potential as a human being; he feels no sense of guilt for the failure to do so. And there are events that take place without human beings, who, then, are not the only makers of the world we live in. No guilt here either. The freedom from such old obligations makes a radical change in the poetics of the poems possible.

Creeley has moved into the form of sequences, as the poem, "here," indicates:

My plan is
these little boxes
make sequences . . . . (*CP* I 440)

The sequences of the volume move forward without a narrative plot. The individual parts, individual poems and then sequences of poems, also move without a coherent narrative and predetermined ideas of poetic structure. In a review of *Pieces*, Louis L. Martz noted Creeley's "mental world of shifting, momentary, unstable, apparent forms" (Martz 241), but failed to see there was an underlying process in the poems. Creeley has refocused his attentions to language, as well as to the power of the mind and imagination to create versions of primary fact, either views of objects or views of the imagination. The poems present a perception in words and then the next one gives another perception. The moment in fact is one of the points here. The poems are short, and so are some parts of poems. Passages like the ones following caused even serious readers to pause in reconsideration:

Here I
am. There
you are.
.
The head
of a
pin on . . .

Again
and again
now
also. (*CP* I 389)

Make time
of irritations,
looking for the
recurrence—

waiting, waiting,
on the edge of its
to be there
where it was, waiting. (*CP* I 436)

Reed Whittemore, for example wrote:

> I found the fragmentation of *Pieces* oppressive. Instead of the sense of informality and immediacy that the pedagogue was beaming my way I got a sense of emotional and experimental emptiness. (Whittemore 237-38)

Whittemore did not recognize the process of writing nor value the speed language must keep up to accommodate the speed of the mind creating words. The perception of reality of the external world and of the mind's creations is an action of the present moment but it also continues one perception after another endlessly. The process of the mind creating in words then becomes a sustaining action of the poems in this volume. Instead of the isolating effect of perception without external modifications framed by the necessity of the poetics to focus on an individual event, these poems make the movement, the processes of perceiving, the motivation for articulation. Somewhere back of this freedom of expression Charles Olson's directive sounds: "Art does not seek to describe but to enact" (*CP* 162). Creeley's version comes out as:

Moving in the mind's
patterns, recognized
because there is where
they happen. ("The kick of the foot against . . ." *CP* I 437)

Heal it, be
patient with
it—be quiet. ("Four" 438)

In the volume, some poems have titles, some do not. The poems are separated by three dots and sections of individual poems are separated by one dot. All the poems run together with neither a formal beginning nor a formal ending. The creation of form out of words is still a central impulse:

The way into the form,
the way out of the room—

The door, the hat,
the chair, the fact. ("Having to—" *CP* I 382)

Even though the emphasis has shifted to the making of form, the poems do not neglect the objects directly in sight, but the change comes in considering the revelations of the imagination as facts as well, because they occur in language, in the poem. It is a world of words now, and the accumulation of that statement in the poems also brings the perception that the made up notions of the imagination are also a reality. The perceptions exist in words. And the perceptions have the power, in the present, to dissolve completely that old barrier between here and there, and thereby celebrate the mind's abilities to create:

This point of so-called
consciousness is forever
a word making up
this world of more
or less than it is.

* * *

. . . . So

to make you
mine, in the mind,
to now you. ("Two" *CP* I 397)

One poem of the sequence "Numbers" gives a succinct summary of the issue:

> There is no trick to reality—
> a mind
> makes it, any
> mind. ("Zero" *CP* I 405)

Creeley does reserve a place for the longer meditation, seen in the early poem, "The Door," and everywhere the mode in the poems in *Later* and after. Here the meditation and movement of "The Finger" are crucial to the statement of the whole volume.

"The Finger" is a meditation ratifying the processes of the mind, or a possibility of conceiving and then following the mind's perceptions of a moment into the implications of the original perception; that possible perception manifests itself in the image of a woman, then changes into avatars of Aphrodite and Athena, then into a mother figure, and a dancer:

> She was laughing, she was
> laughing, at me,
> and I danced, and
> I danced
>
> Lovely, lovely woman, let
> me sing, *one to*
> *one to one*, and let
> me follow. (*CP* I 388)

Unlike earlier poems, the movement in this one is not misdirected by an address to another person, or shifted off into an abstract speculation; rather the speaker enters the action of his own poem, dancing, and remains eager to follow the original perception where it leads. There is no split between here and there, no anxiety about the status of the "self," in or out of the meditation. So the end of the poem is not a conclusion, only the running out of the first perception, an example, then, of the form of the poem as an extension of its content.

In his review of Pieces, Russell Banks characterizes the poems accurately: "*Pieces* is a book of individual poems, yes, but it reads like a single, book-length

poem, e.g. sequentially" (Banks 248).[12] The sequence of poems is in fact a series of poems, a kind of poetic form first advanced by William Carlos Williams in *Spring and All* and then "The Descent of Winter;" and later also advanced by Ezra Pound's *The Cantos*, and Zukofsky's A. Charles Olson proposed *The Maximus Poems* and Robert Duncan proposed "The Structure of Rhyme" and "The Passages Poems" as series of poems which started without entertaining a determined conclusion. *Pieces* is Creeley's first contribution to *serial form.* In an interview, Creeley recognized the emergence of a new kind of form in the entire book:

> *Pieces* is the most recent book that I think has been a *book*. But I really didn't know this until we'd gone down to Mexico happily for a week or two; while we were there I wrote and the poems gathered into a sequence. When I came back, I remember feeling that this situation of writing was concluded." (Gerber/Mazzaro 12)

In Creeley's, Olson's and Duncan's ideas of serial form, the individual poems are allowed to begin and end without obligations to the unities—a beginning, middle and conclusion which refers to the beginning. The poems at times appear as fragments, as some in *Pieces* show, but since they are part of a larger sequence of poems whose major intention is to demonstrate the process of the mind conceiving thought, they stand as statements of the mind's present views, which can change instantly. Individual poems appear in sections, numbered or unnumbered; in Creeley's case this presentation makes it possible to move from one perception of an idea to another rapidly, in an attempt to keep up with the speed of the mind's perceptions. The series can appear "shifting" and "unstable" as Martz contends, because that is precisely how it does appear in a series which does not have a narrative, or a plot, to provide the cohesion and continuity that a plot would require. A series is not a strict logical structure. In a series there can be repeated reference, like words, here/there, the present moment, and love in *Pieces*, but these references are not forced into structural roles. They sustain the process of the mind, which resists containing orders almost completely, in Creeley's formulation, the process of the mind articulating thought in words.

[12] Cynthia Dubin Edelberg, "Creeley's Orphan Lines: The Rhythmic Character of the Sequences," recognizes the sequence as a factor of Creeley's poetics but she still wants to impose the limits of the unities and coherence on them.

[13] Warren Tallman, in an early essay on Creeley's prose, and the poems in *For Love*, came close to identifying the propositions of serial form in the volume when he wrote: "Individual poems are phases of the ONE poem he is always writing, just as, in a larger sense, all the poems and tales ever written are parts and parcels of the one song and story named Man" (Tallman [7]).

VI

The two travel books/journals *A Day Book* (1972) and *Hello* (1978) following *Pieces* and preceding *Later* have an important place in tracing out Robert Creeley's poetics and the emergence of *serial form*. Both volumes were written as journals on long reading trips and both have the characteristics of the immediacy and rush of travel, its flashing of new vistas and flow of different people, the necessity to keep moving on. Many of the poems are fragments, many are short poems of perceptions of events and proposals of the day. *A Day Book* contains a section of prose entries and a section of poems, which was collected under the title "In London." *Hello* contains poems written in New Zealand and published in a limited edition under the same title in 1976. Both volumes have some of the features of the *Pieces*, but they have their forms enforced by the simple facts of travel and daily composition. Both volumes carry forward the technical and rhetorical ingenuities of the *Pieces*, as well as the persistent poetics of the poem as an enactment of thought in words. They lead forward, from the final poem of *Hello*, entitled "Later," to the publication of *Later*, as a full volume with new meditative modes

Creeley proposes *Later* as a book of poems in serial form with a pervasive reflective or meditative mode. In the poem "Myself," the same poem in which he quotes Shelley's "Triumph of Life," Creeley writes:

> I want, if older,
> still to know
> why, human, men
> and women are
>
> so torn, so lost,
> why hopes cannot
> find better world
> than this. (*CP* II 95)

The quotation could be taken as the mission of the book. The tone is neither the strident one from *A Day Book*, nor the aggressive one from *Words*, but a reflective, even a meditative tone that will allow a more relaxed examination of many of the issues that appeared in the previous volumes. The statement is a subjunctive one— "if older." Creeley is in fact older but here poses the question as a supposition. This poem, and indeed the poems in this volume, admit that

he has not arrived yet at the situation of gaining the wisdom of age, nor realized through experience the essential nature of human activity in the world. A similar statement appears in the poem "After":

> I'll not write again
> things a young man
> thinks, not the words
> of that feeling.
>
> There is no world
> except felt, no
> one there but
> must be here also. (*CP* II 104)

Complexity remains, persistently remains, and he resists the temptation to move into an abstraction where the details of contrasting complexity would be absorbed, neutralized. Creeley's ideas of measure have expanded from a concern for metrics and rhythm to a concern for what is important to know as a person in the world. The poem "The World" ends with the same idea in the indirection of a question; "What / matters as one / in this world" (*CP* II 97)?

While a concern for *here*, the present moment, and the current place appear as a recurring theme—as in "Later" above—the need for continuity to counter the passage of time also moves forward as a deep concern. "The House" contains both concerns, the presentation of the details of the house and its location come first then a speculation about the place and its effect on the lives of people in the past, and what it would take to regain the former significance. "The white blossom / of apple / still make the song" (*CP* II 99) as a sign of the inherent energy of the place. "Place' adds another dimension to the theme in the acknowledgment that love "can't make love a way out" (*CP* II 103), or he no longer relies on the redeeming power of love; he must instead return to the gritty particulars of the commonplace as a way to negate the solace of an abstract conclusion:

> I need the oldtime density,
> the dirt, the cold,
> the noise through the floor—
> my love in company. (*CP* II 103)

As in earlier poems, the present moment, the immediate perception, stands essential, but Creeley is "learning;" *here* which was previously a physical place, can now be a place in the mind, as Robert Duncan's poem "Often I Am Permitted to Return to a Meadow" has it, "a place made up by the mind." Recognizing the place of the mind also moves toward claiming the materiality of language as a defense against "the swirl / of these apparent facts"; words can "gleam clearly / there, now here— / in mind" (*CP* II 156). The event and facts seen in the present and the memories of yesterday mix in the poem "The Place," but both receive the same direct, clear articulation. The physical place is a manifest necessity to this flow of speculation; however another view of the mind as the location, in words, of place itself, enters:

> This thinking
> is a place itself
>
> unthought, which comes
> to be the world. (*CP* II 156)

The mind is powerful enough to counter the power of change. But in its contest, the processes of generating versions of the particular still need support, some sense of continuity. Creeley has always noticed natural cycles, but in the volume figures it into his poetics. Morning claims the position of the signal to begin again, a fresh start to make the world of the mind work. In "This World," "The morning / opens with light / at the window" (*CP* II 96) while in "Morning" the sun dissipates the shadows of the start of the day:

> where I'm sitting, writing,
> feet on cold floor's
> tiles, watching the light. (*CP* II 114)

While in "Morning (8:10 AM)" the points of the physical place become clear "In the sun's / slow rising / this morning" (*CP* II 174) and in still another poem titled "Morning":

> Light's bright glimmer,
> through green bottle
>
> on shelf
> above. Light's white

fair air,
shimmer,

blue summer's
come. (*CP* II 141)

Spring also, the morning of the year, is a time of starting the process of making verbal fictions begin again:

. . . .The sun

came with springtime—*la*
primavera, they'll say, when
we've gone. But we came.
We've been here. (*CP* II 126)

Other points of continuity appear in this volume. In the poem "The House" the speaker notices the physical facts of the house and its geography, and even though it is now decayed the house was once the center of genuine human activity; the apple blossoms inspire the continuity of song, not the people, now gone. But the desire for continuity appears in other ways in Later, in the memory of his "Aunt Bernice" (*CP* II 131), and his mother and her advice to him in "Four Years Later." In subsequent volumes, Creeley's family history and his autobiographical information come into the poems after the beginning references in *Later*.[14] There are also instances of the passing on of information from one generation to another, the "great stories" in "Childish" (*CP* II 116), and then the stories recounted in "Cronin's Bar" (*CP* II 143), the older generation to

[14] Reviewers and critics of Creeley's poetry have noted, some with irritation, the large number of names of people appearing in the poems. In just *Later*: Pen, R. B. K., Walter Benjamin, Tom Pickard, John Chamberlain, Mother, Aunt Bernice, Yeats, Rosalie Sorrels, B. B. Eddie, Mr. Connealy, Rene Ricard, Basil Bunting, Patrick Kavanagh, Peter Warshall, Mr. Gutierres and son Victor, John Duff, D. H. Lawrence, Henry Purcell, Jack Clarke, Raphael Lopez-Pedraza. Creeley said that the "company" of poets and artists was a necessity for his poetic thinking, so the names of Lawrence, Bunting, Tom Pickard and John Chamberlain appear in the volume. Creeley also said that the poem itself was an immediate activity in words, and that he had no interest in leaving an autobiography in his poems. Perhaps another possible view of the subject is that he left an autobiographical statement outside his poems with the names, in much the same way that Joel Oppenheimer keeps his social and political views for the articles in *The Village Voice* to keep his poems free of them.

the younger, followed by the news from his mother that "the name Creeley was Irish" (*CP* II 144), which provided another kind of continuity past his family to the Irish poetic traditions.

Through the rehearsals of familiar themes and the performance of metrical and rhythmic care, the reflective, the meditative poem, asserts the signature accomplishment of *Later*. There have been meditative poems before; "The Door," for example in *For Love* and "The Finger" in *Pieces*, but in this volume, the meditative mode, its ease of expression and statement, spreads through all the poems. Two in particular, "For Pen" and "The Table" stand out. In "For Pen" the speaker notices the particulars of the present room, its "dear company," and then acknowledges:

> I want the world
> I did always
> small pieces
> and clear acknowledgments.

He would not have the scene as "echo," a memory of the past, but gives himself a piece of advice, as his mother would have given him:

> so sing this
> weather, passing,
> grey and blue
> together, rain and sun. (*CP* II 104-05)

The shift to giving advice redirects the final lines away from a moral or mindful summary, so avoiding the chance of a sentimental ending. A similar pattern appears in "The Table," which sets out the physical setting, "sky's grey again" (*CP* II 114),[15] notes the things on the table, and the activity of the present moment, then the concluding remark refuses to make more of the scene than the scenes itself presents:

> It's a day we may
> live forever, this
> simple one. Nothing
> more, nothing less. (*CP* II 115)

The ease of expression and the assurance of the meditative mode distinguish these poems from those in *A Day Book* and *Pieces*.

But there is another aspect of the meditative mode which informs these poems. The poem, "For John Duff," begins in a familiar pattern with the notice of the geography and the situation with the neighbors in New Mexico, and then turns to a meditation of the scene and John Duff which leads to:

> when you're gone,
> I'll remember
>
> also forever
> the tough clear
>
> sentiment, the clarity,
> of your talking, the care.
>
> And this it
> you gave us:
>
> *here*
> *is all the wonder,*
>
> *there*
> *is all there is.* (*CP* II 170-71)

The "wonder" matters most, as the tenth poem of the series "Later" says:

> But now—
> *but now* the wonder of life is

---

[15] In Buffalo, NY, in winter, the sky is grey for days at a time. In this poem and in the poem "This World" Creeley states the sense of the grey very accurately:

> This grey, dulled
> morning the sky
> closes down on
> the horizon to make
>
> one wonder
> if a life lives more
> than just looking,
> knowing nothing more. (*CP* II 175)

that it is at all,
this sticky sentimental

warm enclosure,
feels place in the physical

with others,
lets mind wander

to wondering thought,
then lets go of itself,

finds a home
on earth. (*CP* II 151-52)

It is not the theory of living that matters most, just the simple apprehension of life itself that incites the "wonder," which is a monumental change in the strident, restrictive poetics of the early poems. The final poem of the volume, "Prayer to Hermes," confirms this change as well as the reluctance to make final conclusions exceeding the perceptions in a single poem or the incomplete wisdom of the actions of living:

. . . . Imagination

is the wonder
of the real, and I am
sore afflicted with

the devil's doubles,
the twos, of this
half-life,
this twilight.

What I understand
of this life, what was right
in it, what was wrong,

I have forgotten
in these days
of physical change.
I see the way

of knowing, of
securing, life grow
ridiculous. A weakness,
a tormenting, relieving weakness

comes to me. (*CP* II 183-84)

Later expands the possibilities of serial form. Short poems, perhaps even fragments, appear throughout the volume—"Speech," "Beach", "Nature," "Night Time," "Sparrows," "End," "Heaven," "July: Fargo Street," "Thinking of Yeats," "B.B.," "Talk." The poem "Later" has ten numbered sections each chasing the speed of the mind coming to articulation. The short poems and the poems in sections have places in the overall design of the book. The process of perception and articulation, now in the meditative mode, enacting thought coming into words, stands as fundamental to the volume as the process of finding measure, or value in the activities of living. And the growing sense of the materiality of words, the power of the mind to create and value its own place, its own sense of *here*, reinforces the assertion of the *serial form* of the entire volume. The poems refuse to reach final conclusions and judgments, deferring, as it were to the next morning or the next chance to articulate the vitality of the present moment. The poems therefore extend the old contention between the desire to know and the physical and moral restriction against acquiring the wisdom of age. Christopher Lambert also recognized the new mode of the poems:

> Creeley has at last found a tonality consonant with the drive of his poetic attentions. The dignity of his persona; testament (as with many poems in the volume) has none of the persistent ambiguity with which one has come to associate his work. (Lambert 331)

The new mode of meditation expands the range of themes the poems can entertain as well as the range of modifications that enter the speculations. And the new mode contains an accumulation of Creeley's practical and rhetorical

structures, his personal syntax and pattern of line breaks producing rhythms on each side of the break. The intricacy of the interrelationships—including syntactical and rhythmic relationships— between the poems becomes more complicated, as does the process of meditation, honoring the imagination's abilities to associate past and present into an immediate perception. Creeley expands the idea of here away from the restrictions of the immediate facts of reality and the mind, the present moment in time, but also the imagination's time along with references to the poetic traditions and his family history. Some of the old contradictions between love and isolation, desire and guilt appear in the poems, but the speeding activity of the mind's act of creation instigates and sustains the whole volume as a *serial poem*. *Later* as a *serial poem* expands the forms of *Pieces* and provides an introduction for the next twenty-five years of Creeley's writing.

The achievement of serial form in *Pieces* combined with the accumulated technical graces and the meditative processes of *Later* create a pivotal point in American literature. Wallace Stevens in his later long poem, for example "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven," as well as Williams in his earlier *Spring and All*, provided very active antecedents for the emergence of *serial form*. Charles Olson's *The Maximus Poems* and Robert Duncan's "The Passages Poem," and then Creeley's *Pieces* all generated examples of this new concept of form for longer poems far different from the epic-based structures of the American long poem. Creeley, Duncan and Olson provided the literary permissions for the next group of poets to create new versions of serial form:—Ted Enslin, John Taggart, Susan Howe, Michael Palmer, and Nate Mackey—in the 1970s and after. So this reading of Creeley's poems which began with a rejection of *For Love*, for very personal reasons, has turned into a reconsideration of the contemporary literary history in which Creeley wrote. It is one exercise to study the poems in the privacy of a library, but a very different exercise to hear the poems read in public over a period of forty years. Other poets read their poems during this period as well, so the context of Creeley and many others provokes an awareness of a great poetic achievement. It is astonishing, really, to hear it happen and then to know later that what I/we heard was the assertion of *serial form* as the major proposal and accomplishment of American poetry in the later twentieth century.

End Part I

Afterword

Robert Creeley was a stimulating presence as a poetic force and a person in Buffalo for many years. He was the first Director of "The Poetics Program" at the University Buffalo, a friend to students and faculty alike, and a zealous supporter of the arts. Conversations with him were often intense, always illuminating. For whatever cause, we met now and again over the years on Sunday afternoon in the grocery store where the talk of poetry and the arts went right on. For him, there was no distinction between the life of poetry and common, ordinary living. One such conversation took place in the vegetable section. After about thirty minutes it just stopped, Creeley bought some lettuce, and we went about the business of our households.

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