

Robert Creeley, Turkey, and Me

David Landrey

In Iowa City in 1978, I attended a celebration of the life of Charles Olson. My life and the lives of many at Buffalo State were altered forever—by many writers associated with Black Mountain indeed, but, so gradually as hardly to be noticeable, mostly by Robert Creeley, by the man and his work. That hardly makes us unique. Still, we have only our own experience for testimony

Several people in Turkey were also affected, in particular Barış Gümüüşbaş. In the Spring Semester of my last year in Hacettepe—it was 1992—Barış learned from department head Gönül Uçele that he could receive a grant for extended study in the United States, but it was contingent upon being accepted into a university graduate program. The problem: the dates for application were well past.

Three years earlier, at the beginning of the spring semester of my year at Bilkent University, I had accepted an offer to teach a course in Post-Modern Poetry at Hacettepe. How could I have known how transforming that experience would be? One result of it would be that Barış would write his Masters thesis on Creeley and send it to him. Creeley was delighted.

So on that spring afternoon in Gönül Uçele's office in 1992, as we pondered how on earth Barış could use the grant, I wondered what a call to Creeley might do. I knew that he was an early riser (the time in Buffalo was, as I recall, between 7 and 8 AM), so, yielding to the excitement of the moment, I called. As swiftly as I can tell the story, he assured me, "Tell him that he's in"; and by late afternoon all of Barış's credentials had been faxed to the graduate department of the University of Buffalo. He would spend four years there and write his dissertation on Herman Melville. My transforming pleasures continued when I was asked to sit on his examining committee.

Bob Creeley came to Turkey in 1992, during my Fulbright grant, brought at my request by the USIS. Bob Bertholf and Ed Foster came the same year. Students for whom English was a second language could, better perhaps than native speakers, cut through usual associations and see his language for the special presence that it afforded them and for anyone who could truly hear.

Class discussions of his work opened vistas not just for them, but for me and, I'm certain, especially for Bob, who marveled at forces in his work of which he had not, perhaps, been fully aware. And then he offered to work with the English language poetry of several of the students, doing so one morning well past lunchtime. At 1:30 or so, no one seemingly left with whom to talk, we had gathered our things to go to lunch when a young woman arrived with a manuscript. I had already locked my office door and began to explain that we needed to leave, but Bob insisted that I unlock so that he and the student could work. Small wonder that the students were charmed.

The day Bob arrived in Turkey, he asked Gönül Uçele to guide him to true Turkish food. We all went to Tunalı Hilmi, where he plunged passionately into the food and the life of Ankara, as he would continue to do for two weeks. One glorious two-day portion of his visit took us to Cappadocia at Easter. Also on the trip were John Newbury and his family from England as well as Simon Pettet, English poet long resident in New York City, who had taught at Ege University in 1988-89. John, who was working as a producer for the BBC and is an ordained minister, performed an impromptu, swift, and beautiful ceremony in one of the rock churches at Cappadocia. The entire visit was sublime except for the moment when, three floors down in the ancient caves, Bob fled in a claustrophobic panic.

In April of 1992, at the Turkish-American Association, Bob gave one of his finest readings, a spellbinding rendering of his poetry and a vibrant example of how the spoken language can unite a diverse audience. As far as I know, nobody since has heard the recording of that event. Such hearing is overdue.

The last part of Bob's visit to Turkey was spent in İzmir, as the guest of Mark Jacobs, then presiding over the last days of a USIS presence in that city. Bob and Mark instantly forged a friendship, one that would continue back in the USA and include both families. While with Mark, Bob gave a reading in the amphitheater at Ephesus. I'll never cease regretting the decision to remain in Ankara and take care of classes instead of being on that sacred ground for the reading.

As all who knew him and his work will testify, he was, in his own words, "given to write poetry." For him, the craft was sacred and a connection to the entire history of art, so the Ephesus reading was especially fitting. In the remaining space here, I'll try to capture other ways his life and sensibility impinged upon and shaped so much of my own.

Lucy Kogler, former student at Buffalo State and now manager of Talking Leaves Books, Elmwood Ave. in Buffalo, when she was taking a graduate seminar

at The University of Buffalo with Creeley, wrote the following in a notebook: “I respect his way of knowing.” There’s the essence of it—not what he knew, though that was large, but the unique way. His characteristic use of adverbs is vivid testimony to that. It was the “way”—the Tao, perhaps—that reached us in so many contexts. There are four instances from my experience that speak of the man and his work. I know that one should be cautioned against hagiography; Bob himself said in class, and Lucy wrote in one of her notebooks: “We should be concerned with the poet as she/he is present in the poem, not who he/she is.” Nevertheless, the man as man, reached deeply inside me just as surely as the man as present in the poems did.

During a poetry gathering at Cleveland State many years ago, Bob was a couple of people behind me in a lunch line. Hearing that I was not sitting with anybody, he joined me. I quickly realized that I would insulate him against hovering groupies as he focused on our conversation with a laser intensity. Bob was to be on my Ph.D. committee, one formed years after my departure from UB’s program, a revival of sorts intended to enhance my credibility. After two years of work on the Olson archives in the University of Connecticut library and after sixty or so pages of writing a language I hardly recognized as my own, I had decided to quit once and for all. I told Bob; he rose and embraced me. I needed such warm authorization.

At Buffalo State, I offered a variety of courses dealing with Black Mountain and the Whitman Tradition; several times I taught a course called “Creeley and Olson,” and during one such class, Bob visited with Warren Tallman. To this day, students from that class recall the illumination of that moment, as they listened to the two men reminisce and in so doing lead the way into the soul of the poetic life.

But finally, there was the class Lucy was taking in the Spring Semester of 1982, wherein she filled pages with Bob’s special phrases. He kindly permitted me to sit in. In February, my son was killed in an automobile accident, and I was profoundly lost. A couple of weeks later, on the night of his class, he appeared at my door and insisted that I return to his group. I did, of course, and on the way to UB, he told me of the death of his own daughter, of attempting to dig her from a collapsed arroyo in New Mexico. I rediscovered the annealing force of shared tears; nor have I ever forgotten that night and his gift of life.

In 1995, at Hallwalls, Bob said of living in Buffalo:

—that you don’t have to worry, that the minute you draw breath you’re on your way

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So I wrote for him, with love:

He came 'round to
the necessity to be
 someplace
a center so that "you are
where you are at
 all points"
all the years a vortex
a draft drawn down
around a
 round of
love and death his
daughter my son
drowned in sand and
snow whirled across
roads and tears frozen
fixed circle of grief.

So it is in the best of worlds that a man's life and art and locale merge and,
in so doing, weave a tapestry of the lives around them.

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