

“all happening visually as well as intellectually”:

Robert Creeley and the Act of Writing

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The quotation in my title is from Robert Creeley’s essay, “Contexts of Poetry,” which was originally delivered as a lecture in the 1963 Vancouver Poetry Conference, with Allen Ginsberg, published by *Audit* in 1968 and was later collected with nine other interviews on a range of different subjects in the edition entitled *Contexts of Poetry: Interviews 1961-1971*. The issues Creeley discusses in the lecture illustrate the problems he faced in relation to his writing life at that point. The lecture testifies to a turning point in Creeley’s writing as he conveys in his interview by Robert Sheppard. Creeley pleasantly remembers trying to explain his dissatisfaction with his writing habits, that they were “exhausted,” upon Olson’s teasing questions like, “What’s this I hear about you guys saying that you’re bankrupt as poets, that you’ve come to some weird dead-end?” or “What is this weird self-commiseration that you’re engaged with?” (Sheppard 43). He felt his life and poetry were closing upon him, that his poetry was losing the discursiveness and openness which his early prose used to have (Sheppard 44): “So how much space was in any given situation, either emotionally or physically, became peculiarly crucial . . . Constantly checking what you’ve got with you. Who are you? Where are you? What are you? Who’s that person? Who’s this person? So that, not backing off, but finding a mode that would deal with that but at the same time would admit a far more open condition” (Sheppard 44). So, in “Contexts of Poetry,” Creeley interrogates his habits of writing and experiments with new modes. Thus, forcing or introducing a change in the context of writing comes up as a solution in finding a way to enlarge the field for the poem to admit a multiplicity of other worlds.

For Creeley and his fellow poets, such as Charles Olson, the immediate material and physical circumstances that accompany the act of writing have primary importance since the process of creation, for them, is a part of the physical context. As a verb, context means knitting or weaving together of words or texts, implying a whole new creation, a contexture. As a noun, it refers to the passages which surround and serve to illuminate quotations. By implication, context also has the meaning of a multiplicity of interwoven conditions in which a singular event comes into being. Hence, the context has a lot to do with

both the singular and the concept of multiplicity at the same time, as Alfred North Whitehead states in another context: “A multiplicity merely enters into process through its individual members. The only statements to be made about multiplicity express how its individual members enter into the process of the actual world. Any entity which enters into process in this way belongs to the multiplicity, and no other entities belong to it” (29). Thus, by bringing together singularities in the form of a multiplicity, the context provides the condition in which the poet connects to the physical, collective and historical world, i.e. as Whitehead puts it, “the process of the actual world.”

In “Contexts of Poetry,” Creeley discusses his own habits of the physical context in which to write poetry, as well as the historical context that informs his consciousness and affects the way he writes poetry. Context is charged with all the meanings as discussed above. Therefore, rather than an understanding of context as mere decoration or “back”ground, the physical and historical context is a force in the field of composition—to evoke the vocabulary of Olson’s “Projective Verse” and Robert Duncan’s “Towards an Open Universe.” It is also worth inquiring why Creeley uses the preposition “of” instead of “for” in his title. The latter preposition has the primary sense of equivalence, implying an equal value of context and poetry. Or, when “for” is taken in the sense of moving towards, contexts for poetry would signify an arrival at an understanding of poetry or the poem by paying attention to the way in which it is written. But then, contexts would simply be read as backgrounds necessary for an understanding of poetry. On the other hand, Creeley might be using the preposition “of” in his title to give a sense of belonging, the way a fossil or a skeleton belongs to its actual body that once lived in a certain type of community, geography, history and climate. So that, when one examines the poem, as the archeologist does a fossil or a skeleton, one acquires a kind of knowledge, a state of consciousness about the context and the process of how that singularity has come into being from among a multiplicity of circumstances, and how it has functioned in the actual world.

The majority of criticism on Creeley’s works highlights the singularity of the subject matter; and the general interpretation is that Creeley focuses less on the collective issues than on the emotional states of the singular and isolated subject. Peter Cooley, reviewing *Pieces* (1969), says that “Creeley gives up . . . the framework of narrative, history, persona, or landscape for a concentration on the self and its words over time, calling into question the validity of expressing the self at all in words” (255). For Christopher Lambert, “[h]is is an elaborately egocentric poetry. And it is precisely this collision of the private with the public

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requirements of language and audience that determines Creeley’s characteristic posture, the tightrope walker” (323).

But one step ahead of this preoccupation with the self, there is “life preoccupation with itself,” as Olson comments in his review of Creeley’s stories (283). As early as 1951, a little after Olson and Creeley made the first contact through *Origin’s* editor Cid Corman and Olson’s poet friend from Gloucester, Vincent Ferrini, Olson reviewed the narrative technique in Creeley’s early fiction: “the NARRATOR IN . . . the narrator taking on himself the job of making clear by way of his own person that life is preoccupation with itself, taking up the push of his own single intelligence to make it, to be—by his conjectures—so powerful inside the story that he makes the story swing on him, his eye the eye of nature . . .” (283). Creeley’s focus is less on the singular self but on the self growing towards multiplicity as the meeting edge of the inside and the outside. Later critics, like Harald Mesch, evaluate Creeley’s poetry as concerned with the way the outside relates to the inside as the inside relates to the outside, since the self is fundamentally understood as their coincidence: “Subject and the world have their origin in mutual encounter; they shape each other” (70).

Robert Duncan, in his review of Creeley’s *Thirty Things* (1974), comments that the “field” “projected” in Creeley’s poems are “still life” (306). Referring to the “kinetics” of the writing act which Olson emphasizes in “Projective Verse” (“USE USE USE the process at all points, in any given poem always, always one perception must must must MOVE, INSTANTER, ON ANOTHER” [240]), Duncan states that, rather than a kinetics of “instanter,” Creeley’s poems give the sense of an “instant arrest” and emphasizes the multidimensional presence of the world as perceived from Creeley’s corner: “It is true to this arrest of motion that the doubling of worlds and meanings in one nexus appears. There is no springing from here to there, but ‘there’ is ‘here.’ Where in Olson we have to do with a dialectic, in Creeley we have to do with a developing exposure” (306). The spatial and temporal are superimposed in the field of the poem. This space-time superimposition, or the multiplicity of the context, occasions the particularity and singularity of the poem. A similar sense of multidimensionality and multiplicity about Creeley can be seen in Olson’s dedication to him as “the Figure of Outward” (*Maximus Poems* 3). Additionally, in his poem, “Maximus, to himself,” Olson refers to Creeley as the friend who guided him into the simple beauties of life: “But the known? / This, I have had to be given, / a life, love, and from one man / the world” (56). The way both Duncan and Olson read Creeley is in terms of a plurality, a multidimensionality, a connectivity with the rest of the world. This extra-personal quality about Creeley’s poetry manifests his

attention to the context, the way texts, words, people and lives are interwoven or knit together. The “contexts of poetry,” in this sense, provides an insight into the act of writing as a means of participation with the actual (social and historical) world.

Creeley’s “developing exposure,” as Duncan puts it, gives a close-up of the context where the external and the internal collide, and where the singularity is transformed into the multiplicity. This close-up manifests Creeley’s attention to the context in which the action informs the form, to the process whereby the content becomes visible as form. Central to Creeley’s attention to the context is the notion that form and content are interconnected, which Olson quotes in “Projective Verse” (240), as Creeley once articulated it, “form is never more than an extension of content.” In the interview by William Spanos, Creeley criticizes the way content is understood as “mental furniture”¹ (22). To clarify, the poet dramatizes content in its process of becoming and in its relationship to form and action: “what happens when you take a glass of water and just dump it on the floor? The fact of water the content inherently of water discovers a form a form specific to its ‘nature’ to put it loosely on the surface it meets with”² (22). The substance of the floor, the glass and the occasion of the dumping are to be considered as parts of the context, and water as the content. So, an examination of the context will signify the process of becoming, be it a poem, a cultural expression or natural phenomenon.

Creeley’s discussion on the “contexts of poetry” objectifies what is otherwise a purely abstract and aesthetic process. He *maps* the experience; in other words, he concretizes the writing experience so that the tangible elements of the context are recognized in relation to this emotional/mental act of writing. These tangible elements of the context, such as pen or paper or the room are partially arbitrary and partially conditional. They inform the way the poem, with its spacing and typography, comes into being. In the context these conditions create, the poem finds its own occasion. The poem’s spacing and typography/topography thus has a notation that responds to the context in which it is born. The process of the poem’s becoming is, in a sense, a kind of knowing. In “A Foot Is to Kick With,” Olson illustrates this process: “It’s as though you were hearing for the

¹ Also see Olson’s “A Later Note on Letter #15,” where the opening line is “In English the poetics became meubles—furniture—” (*Maximus Poems* 249).

² Spanos deliberately preserves the spaces between words and phrases, eschewing the proper spacing and punctuation, to match the text to the particular occasion of the conversation with its hesitations, repetitions and pauses (74).

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first time—who knows what a poem ought to sound like? until it’s thar? And how do you get it thar except as you do—you, and nobody else” (269). The poet knows what is supposed to be on the page *after* the poem gets to be written.

Knowing is one of Creeley’s major concerns, especially as it is related to physical experience and act. He is fond of quoting Olson saying “we do what we know before we know what we do,” and continues, “it’s where our bodies return to our minds” (“Inside Out” 557). On the surface, knowing is a state of consciousness, but Creeley dissects it so exhaustively that its ties with act, actuality and experience are revealed. He defines actuality through experience: “. . . the tree is real, but when you hit it, it’s actual” (“The Creative” 543). For the tree to be conceived as an actuality, one has got to be in a field, a-walking, not really seeing where he is going to. The tree, when hit, thus becomes an actuality, along with the body, the act of walking and the field on which the body walks. It is then the mind knows the body, the movement, the ground, and the tree. Creeley’s early poem from *For Love* (1962), “I Know a Man,” illustrates the “actuality” the poet refers to. The process in which the real becomes actual for the actors in the poem is dramatized as follows:

As I sd to my
friend, because I am
always talking,—John, I

sd, which was not his
name, the darkness sur-
rounds us, what

can we do against
it, or else, shall we &
why not, buy a goddamn big car,

drive, he sd, for
christ’s sake, look
out, where yr going. (*Collected Poems* 132)

In Creeley’s experience of writing, action anticipates intention and conscious knowing. His assumption is that “writing could be an intensely specific revelation of one’s own content, and of the world the fact of any life must engage . . . what engages in the writing I most value is a content which

cannot be anticipated which ‘tells you what you don’t know’” (“I’m Given” 504): “I didn’t know what I could do. / I’ve never known it / but in doing found it / as best I could” (*Collected Poems* 438). Writing may start at a definable point but it proceeds into “the darkness,” the unknown by virtue of Keatsian Negative Capability. The state of knowing is only then achieved.

This is why Creeley begins his lecture *Contexts* with the most elementary issues of “writing as a physical act”: “how I write . . . what is involved in writing for me” (526). The “orders of thought” (529) are conditioned by this literal context. Examining the material context of writing, Creeley’s point is that “. . . the particular habit of writing that you begin to develop will have, curiously, a great significance to what you write” (530). For example, the poem’s rhythm is informed by the kind of music the poet is listening to as he writes, and is different when he is writing in accompaniment to Bud Powell from John Coltrane. Depending on his own experiences, Creeley argues that the context has to do with the most literal, most material of conditions in which he writes, such as the positions, sizes, colors, textures, shapes, etc. of the paper and the qualities of the pen, pencil or the typewriter.

In a sense, the context conditions form and content by closing/opening the way for certain experiences and feelings. This conditioning is a form of “limitation” as Creeley further examines the elements of the context. Reflecting on his strict privacy requirements as he works, he criticizes his self-consciousness, which he finds imprisoning at times: “I’m not satisfied with the habits of limit that I create for myself, because not only have I given myself a million excuses for doing nothing nine-tenths of the time, but I’ve created a context in which only—I realize now—only certain kinds of feeling can come” (534). Such habitualized environment, what Creeley sometimes depicts as giving a “sense of security,” might obstruct the creative strife, the genesis of disorder. But on the other hand, one cannot eliminate the limits: “At the same time . . . one is struck with one’s actuality . . . this is the only point I can begin, this is the place where my feelings are most present” (534). One is immediately reminded of Olson’s lines from the *Maximus* “Letter 5,” “Limits / are what any of us / are inside of” (21). These limits, Creeley implies, are necessary and fruitful, but can also be suffocating. Towards the end of his talk, he makes the point that “. . . this [material] aspect of your activity ought to be, you ought to be aware of it, simply that you should begin to feel as rangingly all that is issuing as a possibility . . . If you find yourself stuck with habits of articulation . . . try shifting the physical context” (534-35), thus making a parallel decision with Duncan in “breaking up the orders I belong to in order to come to alien orders . . .” (“Order and Strife” 112).

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By focusing on the material conditions of writing, Creeley explores the way the experience of the evolving context relates to the process of creation. One aspect of this relationship concerns *proprioception*; the way motor skills, muscular orientation relate to knowing, the complex conscious processes. Olson in “Proprioception” says, “the ‘body’ itself as, by movement of its own tissues, giving the data of depth,” and adds, “the ‘soul’ . . . is equally physical” (182). The body is spiritual as the soul, just as the soul is physical as the body. Although definition separates the physical and the spiritual, the “soul” and the “movement of tissues” are not disconnected in terms of function. “Human Universe” makes the same assumption of the body-mind connection in a simpler way: “what happens at the skin is more like than different from what happens within” (Olson 162). Creeley’s attention to *proprioception* is evident:

Looking for a way
the feet find it.

If mistaken, the
hands were not.

Ears hear. Eyes
see everything.

The mind only
takes its time. (*Collected Poems* 466)

With great care, Creeley focuses on the “meeting edge of man and the world” (Olson “Human Universe” 162); and this “cutting edge,” as Olson says, “is where he is responsible more than to himself” (“Human Universe” 162). Such is the ethics of the writing man: “nakedness,” loyalty to what he is experiencing, intelligent and emotional sincerity towards what is happening to his own self in relation to what is happening outside. The “nakedness” of knowing is a state “that all start up / to the eye and soul / as though it had never happened before” (Olson *Maximus* 111). Referring to the same Olson poem, Creeley himself reflects that “[i]n order to be in that state of nakedness, I have to be where . . . I can open up this equally small thing, and feel it with the intensity of all the perception that I . . . that the ego bit can recognize, and then destroy the ego by its own insistence” (*Contexts* 533). Nakedness, knowing, and the act of writing, where “all is happening visually as well as intellectually” (Creeley *Contexts* 529), in this sense, becomes the way in which the poet participates

with the outside world, “destroying the ego.” It is the process whereby the singularity is transformed into the multiplicity. Duncan’s search for “a morality of knowing *what you do* (or coming to know)” (*Letters* 612) in his art is such a transformation from the singular to the plural. This transformation also has an ethical value, since it relates to the others in the actual world. It was also Duncan who defined the “responsibility” of the poet as “becoming aware of the order of what is happening” (“Towards” 82).

Thus “contexts of poetry,” informing the process of creation, concern human relationships. Creeley’s attention is to the process of cognition—reaching an awareness of the physical and mental *habitat* of writing. At this point, Duncan’s preoccupation with awareness is complementary: “. . . I seek an art of coming to know what I do” (*Letters* 612). The “*image of man* in writing” (Creeley “Was That a Real Poem” 575) is conceived in terms of his interaction with the *universe* he is in. The “man in writing” is affected by the way he interacts with the society as well as by the way the skin of his hand touches the paper, or by the friction between the tip of his pen and the kind of sheet he is writing on. The process of “coming to know what I do” works the same way on both personal (poetic) and social (extra-poetic) levels. The context of writing thus has a historical, geographical, social, political value and significance. James Scully’s insight into the connection between politics and the way poetry gets to be written (or read) might serve useful at this point: “Textual gestures or alterations are assumptions about the way a work functions in the world, which is precisely its functioning as a poem. A piece of versified writing is not a poem but an aging, historically weathered and weathering occasion for one. The poem is what that writing, as text, is *doing*” (117).

As Creeley tells in his lecture he knows what feels right, appropriate and in its place when he is writing, he makes the point that he is not able to define what a poem is (531). He explains this impasse in terms of the profound cultural change: “I cannot tell you what I think a poem is. I think that has to do with the fact that all the terms of consciousness are, at the moment, undergoing tremendous terms of change. There is an alteration of a very deep order going on in the whole thrust or push of the consciousness, literally the Negro consciousness, which has been for years relegated to a kind of underside” (531). Perhaps, the “Negro consciousness” metaphorically covers all those realities and consciousness that are forced into the underworld. Creeley captures the moment in which the “Negroid” order manifests itself as strife against the old order. This emerging order, i.e. the repressed consciousness, has existed in “a world unresponsive to [the Negro] reality” (531) until the former could no longer ignore the changing

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reality: “Now, this reality, which has become *the* dominant reality in the States today, is the Negro reality . . .” (532).

How can the definition of what a poem might be affected by an “alteration” in the consciousness that thrusts itself forward after being suppressed in the whole culture for so many years? The question of “what a poem is, or can be?” is another way of asking how the poem functions, as Scully conveys, in the world. The profound change in the world order, and the change of consciousness that it brings make it difficult for Creeley to define what a poem is in this historical context. Creeley explains how he writes the poem with precision; however, he faces difficulty in defining it in available terms and tools. What is a poem as a historical artifact informed by such alterations in the world order and in consciousness? Creeley makes his allegiance with the poets of the former generation like Ezra Pound, William Carlos Williams, H.D., Basil Bunting and Louis Zukofsky, and contemporaries like Olson, Duncan, Denise Levertov, Allen Ginsberg and Philip Whalen. He feels that his writing does not fit in the conventional forms, rhythms and the “appropriate” subject matter of poetry.

This change of feeling, or change of heart, coincides with the changing consciousness, perceptions and valuations which Creeley attributes to a collective experience. This collective experience is World War II and the atomic bomb. Poetry carries the imprint of this war experience. In Scully’s words quoted above, this imprint is the “historically weathered occasion” of the poem. Elucidating the effects of the war, Creeley conveys: “. . . the change which is occurring now [1963] is more significant than the Second World War by far, because it’s the residue of that war in reference to the atom bomb and, equally, the shift in all terms of human relationship that have been habitualized since . . . thousands of years” (532). Duncan, too, in his essay, “Towards an Open Universe” affirms that “It is a changing aesthetic, but it is also a changing life”³ (88). It is a matter of recognizing that the singular personal consciousness is responding to what is happening in the actual world. Accordingly, when experiences change, poetry changes as well—in very much the same manner in which the size of the sheet affects the poem.

Creeley aptly refers to Pound’s statement that “the artists are the antennae of the race” (532) and points that the only sensible action would be to respond to the changing terms of reality by acknowledging it (532). However, recognizing and acknowledging are less competent states of consciousness than knowing.

³ Though Duncan and Creeley are both referring to the same cultural and aesthetic shift, “Towards an Open Universe” dates one year later than Creeley’s *Contexts of Poetry*.

This might be the reason why the time was not ripe for definitions in 1963. As Creeley was discussing these issues, the United States had not yet begun the air raids on Vietnam, and the black leaders Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr. were still alive. The events that motivated Duncan to write his *Passages* poems grouped as *Of the War*, among which was “Up Rising,” had not yet taken place. These prove how accurate were Creeley’s measures, which he laid on the context-consciousness relationship.

This “painful strife” between the white and black consciousness has its “fruit” as well (Duncan “Order and Strife” 112). It is a new awareness of what is happening, as Duncan says; a new order where the hitherto ignored order is finally acknowledged. This is to the advantage of the imagination. Creeley articulates this idea from the angle of poetry:

It simply is, it’s a big change, it’s a deep change in consciousness, and I’m curious to see what’s going to happen—which is a mild way of putting it. Indeed! But you have a poem, Allen [Ginsberg], in which you say, “Where all Manhattan that I’ve seen must disappear.” And this for me is what is happening in the States in a different relationship, in a different context—where all the terms of consciousness that I grew up with must disappear, are disappearing momentarily, daily. The terms of reality are changing. Even the terms of this course are changing . . . by which I mean this course would have been impossible ten years ago, by definition. Senses of writing would have been impossible to present in this fashion ten years ago. We were, happily, involved with a reorganization of premise that gives us our particular occasion. (532)

The key phrases in this passage appear as “a reorganization of premise” and “particular occasion.” In the historical context to which Creeley’s lecture belongs, the consciousness “that must disappear” refers to the way the establishment functions: institutionalizing intellect and imagination under control within the academy; communicating with the public in terms of an ideology of progress; offering mediocrity, confinement and conformity to pass as public good, harmony and security; and separating art from practical life so that literature becomes a genteel practice rather than a social one. The cultural change in the late 1950s, in which Creeley locates himself, articulated the need for a re-definition, a re-situation and re-distribution of power according to a different order. Since this emerging order contradicted the establishment, the

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distribution of this aesthetics and awareness was necessary for its continuity, applicability and usefulness.

It was this vital necessity that made available a form of social organization alternative to that of the establishment. The culminating energy of the resistance against the establishment and academicism required more reciprocity and connectivity. Within the specific context of the community of poets small press publishers, un-academic societies and scholarship, reading events and festivals provided this alternative form of organization and communication. Correspondence was also vital since the letters served as “laboratories” where new ideas were originated, developed, shared and discussed. The most notable instance for this “particular occasion” of the emerging order can be seen in the collectivity, friendships, politics and poetics which became life sources for a particular community. What Creeley means by the “reorganization of premise that gives us our particular occasion” is this context, created by the network of communities, little magazines and different educational institutions, such as the Black Mountain College. This context manifested their presence and the way they responded to reality. The little magazines, for example, were vital for the emerging poets, as Gilbert Sorrentino remembers, because they proved “the proposition that with the end of the war [World War II] the dominance of an effete, academic, and European-oriented literature was also ended” (68). They also nurtured the sense of community in which a “public trust,” as Duncan says in his essay, “The Homosexual in Society,” of respectability was established. What Creeley means by “our particular occasion” has to do with a community where its members were “respected . . . for what one knew in one’s heart to be respectable” (Duncan “Homosexual” 233), and “having the dignity of *their* own statement, not the dignity of *one’s* own statement in a hostile context. . .” (Sorrentino 69). Gilbert Sorrentino praises Creeley’s editorial work for the *Black Mountain Review*, which created the post-World War II “particular occasion”: “Creeley clumped together the most disparate literary intelligences of the time, clear in the knowledge that they formed a true configuration of the new letters . . .” (69).

From a bird’s eye point of view, Creeley explores, by way of his own experience, the poetic and extra-poetic implications of the term, context. He first discusses the effect of the material context on the form and content of the writing that results. The principle is the contingency of the context and the creation/phenomena. Then, he shifts the discussion to a larger and public level: the changing terms of reality and consciousness, which interferes with his attempt to define what a poem is. The changing terms of consciousness also

provides him with the grounds and tools to articulate the “senses of writing” in the way he does (532). This is the moment when the private is linked to the public; the singular is opened up to the plural/multiplicity. Creeley defines the element of the context that triggers this complex change as “the residue” of World War II (532). The terrors of the atomic bomb did not surface immediately after its dropping. As briefly discussed above, the “residue” signifies the way the small community of poets experienced the cultural change. This historical “context of poetry” is the on-going displacement and restoration of contending powers.

Context, in the way Creeley discusses it, ceases to be understood as separate from the contending powers, or as an entity in itself enveloping this strife or connection between one subject/object and another. Rather, it comes to be perceived as the process of the event itself. For instance, it is not that the 8 ½ by 11 inch paper that Creeley uses to write his poems is the context. The context includes not only the physical and historical circumstances that lead the poet to use the writing materials he does, but it also includes the emotional/mental state he is in during the process and the *proprioceptive* experience he undergoes. At this point, Gregory Bateson’s definition of context in biological terms might serve as a useful analogy. Bateson defines the context in terms of process as opposed to its frequently used meaning, “background,” which is passive and receptive:

The progressive increase in size and armament of the dinosaurs was, as I saw it, simply an interactive armaments race—a schizmo-genetic process. But I could not then see that the evolution of the horse form *Eohippus* was not a one-sided adjustment to life on grassy plains. Surely the grassy plains themselves were evolved *pari passu* with the evolution of the teeth and hooves of the horses and other ungulates. Turf was the evolving response of the vegetation to the evolution of the horse. It is the *context* which evolves. (155)

Focusing on the evolving context is another way of repeating Creeley’s much quoted statement “form is never more than an extension of content.” As understood from Bateson’s observation, context is not a static “back”ground. Each element of the context is active—acting upon the event of creation, as much as being acted upon by it. Here, the subject and object lose their values as oppositions, because the grass and the horse are both the subjects and objects of *change*. The change in their forms is the essential factor in the way they influence

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the external reality. The mutual effect that the elements of the context have on each other might well be thought of as “creative strife,” as Duncan explores in his essay, “Man’s Fulfillment in Order and Strife.” A result of this strife, new forms emerge. In a similar way, in Creeley’s essay, strife is between, say, the habit of using 8 ½ by 11 inch paper and the necessity of using legal size sheet caused by the fact that he was in Spain where printing was cheaper. On a different level, the same strife is between the white and black consciousnesses. Creative strife manifests itself as the “uprising” of the “Negro reality” which forces the white mainstream consciousness to come to terms with its actual presence.

Context can also be understood in terms of the poet’s life as it relates to the act of writing. The poet’s presence or life creates the “contexts of poetry.” A life, projected through the medium of writing, is man’s existence arriving at a plurality, multiplicity or collectivity:

The DEATH of
one is
none.
The death of
one is
many. (*Collected Poems* 479)

A life in writing is not trapped within an ego-based subjectivity. It manifests itself as the context, in the process of participating within the world surrounding him: “I want to give witness not to the thought of myself—that specious concept of identity—but rather to what I am as a simple agency, a thing evidently alive by virtue of such activity” (“A Sense” 488). For Creeley, the subject inherits presence and actuality, which is to say, it has the time and space dimensions or depths: “The local is not a place but a place in a given man” (“A Note” 479). “A given man,” by the token of his life, provides the multiple dimensions of time and space. In this sense, this “given man” is more a multiplicity than a singularity. The writing man, therefore, writes from that singular context of multiplicities and thus, leaves a record: “a record, a composite fact of the experience of living in time and space” (“Was That a Real Poem” 575). It is only when man writes; the poem manifests itself as a testament of that historically particular experience.

Such are the issues implied in Creeley’s lecture, “Contexts of Poetry,” which he gave at the Vancouver Poetry Conference. As briefly pointed out at the beginning of my article, this lecture marks one of the turning points in Creeley’s writing life, where he affronted his writing habits and shared this

transition with the audience on the Wednesday morning of July 24, 1963. His attention to the context opened up “the possibility of *scribbling*, of writing for the immediacy of the pleasure and without having to pay attention to some final code of significance” (Creeley *Contexts* 535). The casualty, spontaneity and arbitrariness of “scribbling,” in a way, relieved Creeley from the self-containment and isolation about which he was much displeased: “. . . when you’ve got the fort, like all the guns mounted and ready to blast until you’re utterly safe, and you let out this little agonized thing . . . it skips around the room, you know, and you’re embarrassed, you hear someone move in the kitchen, think Oh my God they’re coming . . . no wonder the poems are short!” (*Contexts* 534). The transition from isolation to participation, or from singularity to multiplicity, comes with Creeley’s pondering on “contexts of poetry.” This transition manifests itself simultaneously in the act of writing and the content of the poem. In his 1968 postscript to the “Contexts of Poetry,” Creeley cites the poem, “A Piece,” from *Words* (1967) as being “central to all possibilities of statement” (*Contexts* 535). The brief poem reads: “One and / one, two, / three” (*Collected Poems* 532). This can be read next to the series of poems entitled, “Numbers” in *Pieces* (1969), most particularly, “Three” among them. Three is a significant number since it implies a community. One is singular, two, though plural, allows only for a bilateral occasion. But it is three that can provide the beginning of a community, multiplicity, a “circle,” where “forms have possibility”:

They come now with
one in the middle—
either side thus
another. Do they
know who each other
is or simply walk
with this pivot between them.
Here forms have possibility.

•

When either this
or that becomes
choice, this fact
of things enters. What had been
agreed now
alters to

“all happening visually as well as intellectually”

two and one,
all ways.

•

The first
triangle, of form,
of people,
sounded a
lonely occasion I
think—the
circle begins
here, intangible—
yet a birth. (*Collected Poems* 397-98)

Context, as Creeley explores, is a participation in the multiplicity. What Creeley does through his lecture is to prove, by way of his own experience as an example, that this “extra-poetic” aspect of this process is not irrelevant for poetry or writing. The “contexts of poetry” signify the process in which the poet meets with the actual world and creates a record of experience to be read historically and socially. It is the attention to the context of writing which would provide an “opening of the field,” a relief from the egotistical boundaries or habits of experience. An examination of writing as an act, and a social act, at the same time, is an examination of the process in which the multiplicity of the context evolves. This examination provides a kind of knowing, which, in Creeley’s case, is a kind of coming to a consciousness of the relationship between what he writes and the context in which he writes. As soon as he acknowledges the multiplicity of the writing context, his poetry opens up to the heterogeneity of the world. This is a kind of knowing in the process of experience; within the act of writing.

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