

"The Radical Poetics of Robert Creeley," *Electronic Book Review*, 10 (2007),

Marjorie Perloff

no less than water

no more than wet

--Robert Creeley, "Funny"<sup>1</sup>

The Creeley memorials of 2005-06—festivals, readings, conferences, and especially website testimonials-- have been so overwhelming in their homage and veneration for the late great poet, that we tend to forget that it was not always been thus, that Creeley's distinctive poetics have been the object of curious misunderstandings. For all his bridge building, his geniality and the uncanny ability, in his later years, to persuade friends and colleagues from one camp to accept and work with those of another, Creeley was and remains *sui generis*—a poet who fits uneasily into the very schools he is regularly linked with. A "Black Mountain" poet whose actual poems have very little in common with the work of his mentor Charles Olson or his close friends Robert Duncan and Denise Levertov, a younger friend and strong advocate of the Objectivists, who had little taste for the citational poetics of Zukofsky or the strenuous political/philosophical engagements of Oppen or Reznikoff, an affiliated member of the Beat community, whose spare writing could never be confused with the expansive-ecstatic mode of Allen Ginsberg or Gregory Corso, a composer of dense, abrupt first-person lyric in an age of loose, expansive and encyclopedic "longpoems"—Creeley remains *sui generis*.

How, then, to characterize a Creeley poem? We might begin by considering the arguments made early in the poet's career, and still in

evidence, against Creeley's lyric mode. Take, for starters, M. L. Rosenthal's now notorious commentary on Creeley in the well-known survey *The New Poets, American and British Poetry Since World War II*, published by Oxford in 1967. Rosenthal, himself a poet, was an early admirer of Pound and Williams (he attended many of the famed poetry conferences sponsored by the University of Maine at Orono), but although he found the occasional Creeley poem in *For Love and Words* "touching" and "alive with wit," he dismissed the bulk as "brief mutterings . . . or the few shuffling steps of an actor pretending to dance." Their humor, "especially in his complaints about married life," struck Rosenthal as "too often obvious and easy," and he concluded that "the work "demand[s] too little from its author, though the author demands a good deal of attentive sympathy and faith from the reader."

It is a judgment echoed by the eminent Christopher Ricks, now the Oxford Professor of Poetry, who wrote in the *New York Times Book Review* in 1973 that "Creeley is at the mercy of his own notions. He would seem to be a professional quietist and libertarian, but these conventions (e.g. no regular verse, no standard linear development) turn out to be more cramping than those of a minuet" (7 Jan. 1973, 5, 22) And in the *Yale Review* for Autumn 1977, Helen Vendler, comparing Creeley (the occasion was the publication by Scribners of the *Selected Poems*) to Olga Broumas, the Yale Younger Poet for that year, declared, "Creeley remains so much a follower of Williams, without Williams's rebelliousness, verve, and social breadth, and his verse seems, though intermittently attractive, fatally pinched." And further, "In Creeley, there is a relentless process of abstraction, of "serial diminishment of progression"; he purchases composition at the price of momentum and sweep." Not surprisingly, in the light of these remarks, Creeley was omitted from Vendler's 1985 *Harvard Book of Contemporary Poetry*, which did include such exact contemporaries of Creeley's, as John Ashbery, Frank

O'Hara, Allen Ginsberg, A. R. Ammons, James Merrill, W. S. Merwin, and James Wright.

The publication of the *Collected Poems* in 1982 didn't altogether change this negative mood. "Creeley is not [as claimed by the publisher] a major poet," complained Richard Tillinghast in *The Nation*, for "It has not been his ambition to address in a sustained manner the large human issues that are traditionally associated with major poetry" (19 November 1983, 501). The title of Tillinghast's piece is "Yesterday's Avant-Garde"—yesterday, presumably, because "experimental" poetry in the Pound-Olson tradition was held suspect in the conservative 1980s. Indeed, the language poets had now appeared on the scene, and Tillinghast takes the opportunity to disparage the new movement:

Creeley has become a guru to "language poets"—a term whose equivalent in other arts would be "dancing choreographers" or "music composers" or "food chefs." Literary self-consciousness is as old as poetry itself; every poet is a "language poet." In much of Creeley's work, however, particularly after *For Love*, language itself is the exclusive focus, thereby positing an ideal reader who is a philosopher of language. Wittgenstein would have spent many happy hours with Creeley's poems. My own reactions I can sum up variously, depending on my mood, as: (1) this poetry deliberately avoids communication, for reasons of its own; (2) it is so abstruse that I lose interest; (3) it is simply over my head. (*Nation*, 504)

The last disclaimer may be true, given that marvelously wrong-headed remark about Wittgenstein, who never spent a happy hour with anyone's poems, much less those by one of his contemporaries, although, as I suggested in *Wittgenstein's Ladder*, the reverse was certainly the case: Creeley knew his Wittgenstein well. Other reviewers, in any case, agreed that Creeley's poetry "deliberately avoids communication"; in *The New York Times Book Review*, Alan Williamson observed that for Creeley, "minimalism has become more and more an end in itself. . . . Tautology mingled with

neutral observation in a John Cage-like faith in the inherent value of silencing the interpretive function" (March 9, 1980, 8-9).

Like M. L. Rosenthal, Williamson and Tillinghast are what we used to call academic poets, before the academy, thanks, in no small part, to Creeley himself, began to welcome poets of a very different stamp. A quiet revolution has certainly occurred. But what Charles Bernstein dubbed "official verse culture" –the culture of the leading commercial presses, journals, and prize-giving institutions—has not changed all that much: witness David Lehman's recent *Oxford Book of American Poetry*, published in 2006. Lehman is a poet with New York school credentials and a PhD from Columbia who has held a variety of academic posts but is perhaps best known for his general editorship of the annual *Best American Poetry* volumes, one of which he invited Creeley to edit. In the new anthology, a 1000- page blockbuster, Lehman gives Creeley short shrift. Whereas James Merrill and A. R. Ammons (both born, like Creeley, in 1926) get twenty-three and fifteen pages respectively, Creeley gets a mere five. In his headnote, Lehman notes:

Even poets on the other end of the poetic spectrum admire Creeley, as in Donald Hall's phrase, "the master of the strange, stuttering line-break." Hall observes that if you took a sentence from a late Henry James novel like *The Ambassadors* and arranged it in two-word lines, you would have a Creeley poem worrying out its self-consciousness. Creeley seems often to substitute speech rhythms for imagery as the engine of the poem. (745)

What, one wonders, *is* Creeley's "end of the poetic spectrum," a spectrum Lehman alludes to as just faintly disreputable? One surmises that the term refers to Black Mountain or Beat or, more broadly, the "Pound tradition": Olson too only gets five pages, Duncan, five, Levertov, three, and Ed Dorn is not included at all. To be called "the master of the strange, stuttering line-break" is, in any case, to be treated as eccentric—a poet who has his limitations, of course, but at least has this one talent--a talent that allows

the poet to produce line units that recall “cut up” segments of Henry James. Moreover, Lehman implies, Creeley’s “substitution” of speech rhythms for imagery as the “engine of the poem” is somehow aberrant: imagery, after all, remains, in most accounts, the hallmark of poetry.

From Rosenthal to Lehman, Creeley’s detractors have voiced the same reservation: Creeley’s lyric is too “minimalist” (“cramped” (Ricks) and “pinched” (Vendler), its language too abstract and conceptual, its communicative channel too often blocked, its subject-matter too far removed from the “great human issues.” True, Creeley has invented a new verse form—“the strange, stuttering line-break”—but, we are told, such prosodic invention, employing those speech rhythms that substitute for the resource of imagery, is not enough.

Rosenthal, however, concludes his chapter on Creeley with a remark that points unwittingly in another direction:

Perhaps Creeley’s restraint and cool control is the last stand of genuine sensibility, against the violence and ruthlessness of twentieth-century civilization. But genuine sensibility cannot give up its passion quite so tamely: it all seems a little too confined to settle for just yet.—Perhaps after World War III? If so, Creeley is indeed ahead of his time.

However we want to take this melodramatic comment—and, sadly, the reference to World War III no longer seems so far-fetched-- Rosenthal does seem to sense that Creeley’s “cool control” provides a special measure for the violence and ruthlessness of our own moment. Keeping this notion in mind, I want to turn now to a characteristic poem from *For Love*. Here is “The Rain”:

All night the sound had  
come back again,  
and again falls  
this quiet, persistent rain.

What am I to myself  
that must be remembered,  
insisted upon  
so often? Is it

that never the ease,  
even the hardness,  
of rain falling  
will have for me

something other than this,  
something not so insistent—  
am I to be locked in this  
final uneasiness.

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

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

Rain is, of course, one of the most prominent symbols in poetry, whether as a portent of storm, flood and human destruction, or, conversely—and more commonly—as the source of life, fertility, and renewal, as in English poetry from Chaucer to Eliot, or for that matter in East Asian poetry as well. As a Basho haiku has it:

Spring rain  
leaking through the roof  
dripping from the wasps' nest

In Romantic and Modernist poetry, the association of rain with the longing for sexual fulfillment occurs again and again, from Verlaine's "Il pleure sur mon coeur" to Thomas Hardy's "We Sat at the Window," to Apollinaire's *calligramme* "Il Pleut," with its visual representation of women's voices raining down the page, as if in the poet's memory [figure 1].

## IL PLEUT

il pleut des voix de femmes  
 comme si elle étaient mortes  
 même dans le souvenir  
 et ces nuages cabrés se  
 précipitent à travers tout  
 de ma vie ô gouttelettes  
 écoute s'il pleut tandis  
 que le regret et le dédain  
 pleurent une ancienne musique  
 qui te retiennent en haut et en bas

Closer to home, Creeley surely knew William Carlos Williams's 1930 poem "Rain," which begins:

As the rain falls  
so does  
                  your love  
  
bathe every  
                  open  
object of the world—  
  
In houses  
the priceless dry  
                  rooms  
of illicit love  
where we live  
hear the wash of the  
                  rain—<sup>2</sup>

Here, in what Williams himself once referred to as "the best poem I have ever done" (see CP, 527), rain is associated with the poet's desire for an unattainable love and is contrasted to the indoor world of "dry / rooms / of illicit love"—a "love" associated with the "whorishness" of "metalware" and "woven stuffs." The poem's lineation follows the movement of the rain "falling endlessly / from / her thoughts"; the poet longs to be "bathed" by the "spring wash / of your love / the falling rain." But something fearful or perverse in his nature prevents it from happening: "my life is spent / to keep out love / with which / she rains upon / the world."

Creeley's poem is at once more intimate than Williams's and yet also much more opaque. Written in six quatrains rather than in Williams's spatially organized free verse lines, it begins literally enough with the



sleepless poet's awareness of the "quiet, persistent rain" that has been falling "all night " The eye rhyme "rain" (in the title), "again," "again," "rain," would seem at first to function mimetically, sound repetition conveying the gentle rainfall itself. But syntax undercuts sound, for the second "again" introduces a new clause with a tense shift and inversion of word order. Creeley's is not, in fact, "speech rhythm": to whom and in what context would anyone say, "and again falls this quiet, persistent rain"? The fourth elongated line, moreover, with its alliteration of *t*'s, emphasizes, not regularity of rhythm, but an irritating *persistence*. Indeed, the first stanza swiftly establishes the poem's tone of malaise, dislocation, restlessness.

Hence the shift, in stanza 2, from the rain itself to the poet's intense self-questioning: "What am I to myself / that must be remembered, / insisted upon / so often?" As Creeley's detractors note, the language is abstract and conceptual, the grammar ungainly: the question, "What am I to myself" is guardedly indirect. The key word here is "insisted," which is repeated in stanza 4, where the poet wishes for "something not so insistent" as the falling rain. From "persistent" to "insistent": the two adjectives are close enough to be almost interchangeable, but "insistent" has a more negative connotation. A persistent caller, for example, is not as irritating as an insistent one—a person who demands your attention, who wants something. The poet knows this, knows that he can never respond to the external stimulus—whether it be the "ease" of gentle rain or its opposite, the "hardness of rain falling"—casually or instinctively. On the contrary, it is his condition "to be locked in this / final uneasiness." Never, it seems, can the poet be *easy*.

Note that as readers, we have absolutely no idea why this should be the case. Unlike, say, the Robert Lowell of "Eye and Tooth," whose similar insomnia—

Outside, the summer rain,

a simmer of rot and renewal,  
fell in pinpricks.  
Even new life is fuel—<sup>3</sup>

links the poet's present pain from a throbbing cut cornea to a terrifying childhood memory of something once *seen* ("No ease for the boy at the keyhole"), Creeley does not concern himself with cause and effect, past and present. The world merely *is*; it is everything that is the case, and one has to deal with it as best one can. At the core of "The Rain," as in most of Creeley's poems, early and late, there is mystery—a mystery that no "conceptual" statement can clear up.

And so the lover turns to his woman and pleads with her: "Love, if you love me, / lie next to me." It couldn't be simpler, or could it? It is she who must now supply the "rain" that can get him out "of the tiredness, the fatuousness, the semi-/lust of intentional indifference." Here the clumsy catalogue of abstract nouns with the awkward line break after "semi," provides a terrifying sense of the paralysis and anxiety that haunts the man who speaks. Even his "intentional indifference" (perhaps the lovers have had a quarrel earlier?) is haunted by "semi-lust," a feeling that can't be ignored but is not strong enough to act on either. As for the woman beside him, we have no idea what she is thinking or feeling, and neither does the poet. "If you love me" is a big "if."

After the near breakdown of these two lines—line 21 has thirteen syllables carrying six stresses and two caesurae--, the abrupt conclusion is explosive: "Be wet/ with a decent happiness." "Be wet for me," is a common enough phrase used to arouse one's partner, to strengthen her desire. Yet, if we come back to the rain symbolism of the first five stanzas: the curious thing is the breakdown of the metaphor: the beloved's "wetness" cannot be that of rain falling; the literal image is of a pool or well that receives the speaker's semen: the "hardness of rain," should, in other words, be his. The unsuccessful nature of the union is thus implicit. And

indeed, the lover doesn't ask for ecstasy or erotic transport--only for a "decent happiness." "Decent": the strangeness of the adjective is surely a Creeley hallmark: one can't imagine another poet who would use it in this context. "Decent" means "adequate" or "sufficient" as in "we had a decent crowd last night." It also means "conforming to accepted standards of moral behavior," as in "That was the decent thing to do." And, by a slight shading, it means "kind, considerate, or generous," as in "How decent of her to help him out." As for "happiness," the choice of the abstract noun, echoing as it does the earlier "tiredness" and "fatuousness," is almost as puzzling as that of "decent." Women aren't wet with "happiness" but with desire; happiness comes after fulfillment and even then it is an odd word choice in the context, suggesting that the poet is restrained by rules of conduct and speaks indirectly. He is, in other words, a courtly lover.

What kind of poem, then, is "The Rain"? To note, as is customary in Creeley criticism, that his is a poetry of process rather than product, that it only discovers what it wants to say in the act of saying it, does not get us very far, and neither does the application of Creeley's own famed Olsonian precept that "Form is never more than the extension of content." The choice of stanza form, after all, clearly preceded the individual locutions. Moreover—and here Creeley parts company with the "open field" poetics of Black Mountain—"The Rain" is certainly a *closure* poem: the ending, with its period, is presented as conclusive: this, the reader feels, is how it is, at least for now. Indeed, "The Rain" is a highly formalized poem, even as it defies the dominant conventions of lyric poetry—raw or cooked—at Creeley's moment.

"The Rain" is not, for starters, an autobiographical poem that moves from present to past and back to the present with newly earned insight or epiphany, like Lowell's "Eye and Tooth," or, say, Sylvia Plath's "Cut Thumb." Memory plays little role for Creeley; it is the immediate present that counts.

Self-awareness is difficult to sustain: it is of the moment. Hence the choice of the short—or serial—poem, for the mood cannot sustain itself. Again, the poem's aesthetic is by no means that of "No ideas but in things" (Williams); indeed, things don't much interest Creeley except as the occasion to brood on a particular mental condition or emotion. No red wheelbarrows here and further, despite its title, no rainwater either and certainly no chickens. No sharp, imagistic phrases as in Roethke, no nouns charged with rich symbolic reference as in Eliot, no proper names as in Pound and Olson, no occult references as in Duncan. But no ordinary language as in Frank O'Hara either. On the contrary, Creeley's vocabulary includes precisely those words and locutions others would avoid as "unpoetic": in this case, "insisted upon," "something," "getting out," "tiredness" "wet."

These words—and this is Creeley's signature—are used with a Flaubertian intensity that evidently escaped readers like Tillinghast and Williamson. The "hardness" of rain is desirable because the poet is trying to have a hardon. "Something not so insistent" is longed for as a form of "persistence" that might be more appropriate. "Decent" goes with "wet" in what is a near rhyme; "uneasiness" might give way to "happiness." The imperatives of stanza 5 counter the stagnation of passive and intransitive constructions that have preceded it. The rain, for that matter, is never seen, only heard; its "sound" must be countered by the sound of the poet's own voice, "Love, if you love me...."

A maker of words, then—of *le mot juste*—and also of the syntax that relates the words in question. The poet as grammarian: a poet whose inverted sentences, peculiar word order, and odd use of "literary" constructions, even in his critical prose and in his many interviews, is notable. I have always been struck by the idiosyncratic inflections that characterize what purports to be "ordinary" prose. Here are some examples, culled at random from interviews and essays between 1964 and 1998:

I think this is very much the way Americans *are given to* speak—not in some dismay that they haven't another way to speak, but, rather, that they feel that they, perhaps more than any other group of people upon the earth at this moment, have had both to imagine and thereby to *make* that reality *which they are then given to live in*.<sup>4</sup>

I've always been *embarrassed for a so-called larger view*. *I've been given to* write about that which has the most intimate presence for me. . . . *And I am given as a man* to work with what is most intimate to me.<sup>5</sup>

I had headed west, for the first time, *thinking to be rid* of all the "easternisms" of my New England upbringing and habit.<sup>6</sup>

There in Florida I thought a lot about the social facts of age, *seeing us milling confusedly* in supermarkets, *else risking life and limb* trying to negotiate parking lots in our oversized cars.<sup>7</sup>

Reading these comments, one can hear Creeley speaking (and, thanks to Penn Sound, we can literally do this), not because his phrasing is characteristic of what is called "speech rhythm"—the natural words in the natural order—but because such expressions as "I am given to," "I've been embarrassed for," "seeing us milling confusedly," "else risking life and limb" as well as the repeated use, in his critical prose and interviews, of the adjectives "lovely" "beautiful," "intimate," and the parenthetical adverbs -- "unhappily," "sweetly," "forgetfully"--create an equivocal aura that is uniquely Creeleyan. "There are lovely moments in the world" begins Creeley's 1974 essay "Last Night: Random Thoughts on San Francisco," and the same essay recalls that "The city was humanly so beautiful" (*Real Poem* 86). Most poets of Creeley's generation would regard such value judgments as too soft, too feminine, too gentle—aren't these the adjectives a Girly Man would use? Interestingly, Creeley's female contemporaries—say, Adrienne Rich—weren't given to using the adjectives in question either.

"Lovely," "sadly," "confusedly," "else risking life and limb": it is the

decorum and *politesse* of these old-fashioned locutions that makes the horror and emptiness of everyday life as depicted in Creeley's poems so chilling. In the 1998 collection *Life & Death*, there is a poem called "Edges," in which the poet recalls "want[ing] something":

Beyond the easy, commodious adjustment  
to determining thought, the loss of reasons  
to ever do otherwise than comply—  
tedious, destructive interiors of mind

As whatever came to be seen,  
representative, inexorably chosen,  
then left as some judgment.<sup>8</sup>

Here it is the quasi-Victorian inflection of formal and abstract diction—"commodious," "otherwise than comply," "inexorably"—that makes the poet's fear of old age and death, the "flotsam [another archaicizing word] of recollection" so painful.

"As whatever came in to be seen": Creeley's genius is to take that "whatever" –note that it is no image, no thing, no allusion, no citationall reference—and to *relate* it to all the other words in a given poem, according to the norms of what Aristotle called *to prepon*, fitness or proportionality—the necessary relatedness of item to item and each to the whole . Whether the words in question do or do not relate in the world outside the poem is irrelevant; they relate within it. In "The Rain," for example, the second syllable of "decent" matches, not only the final syllable of "persistent" and "insistent" but also the middle syllable of "intentional" and with, a slight variant, the last syllable of "indifference." *Ent/ence*: it is the Latin suffix denoting actual *existence*, the state of being. The poem's repeated "insistence"/"persistence" defines the "I", "myself" and "me" that appear in the poem, first-person pronouns that fail to cohere into what might be a stable identity. "Quiet," furthermore, almost has the necessary *ent* in it, and so does "wet." But not quite, and therein, to use another

Creeley word, lies the problem. The poem gives us a personal world in fragments or, more accurately, layers, and these layers remain separate.

The verbal and morphemic play in which a poem like “The Rain” engages has a curious relationship to the poetry of the early sixties, when Creeley came of age. On the one hand, as I noted above, it deviates sharply from the Robert Lowell model. On the other, it is hardly a minimalist “concrete poem,” even though Mary Ellen Solt, in her groundbreaking survey, recruits Creeley for the Concrete camp, citing “Le Fou” as an example of the poetic ideogram.<sup>9</sup> But Creeley was no Concretist, as a comparison to Augusto de Campos’s own rain poem, the 1959 “Pluvial” makes clear. For de Campos, the typographic constellation—in this case the morphing of the letters that compose **pluvial** into its cognate **fluvial**—has eliminated all traces of the poet’s ego so as to make a linguistic-visual construct [figure 2]. For Creeley, on the other hand, the lettristic breakdown of a given word itself—in this case **rain**—is hardly enough to satisfy the poet.

p  
pl  
plu  
pluv  
pluvi  
pluvia  
fluvial  
fluvial  
fluvial  
fluvial  
fluvial  
fluvial

But Creeley's own particular blend of linguistic density, elliptical grammar, and semantic charge was to come into its own in the mid-eighties, with the coming of a new generation of experimental poets. Creeley seems to have known this:: in 1986, in a review for the *San Francisco Chronicle* of Ron Silliman's controversial anthology *In the American Tree*, Creeley declared, "Whatever poetry may prove to be at last, the very word (from the Greek poiein , "to make") determines a made thing, a construct, a literal system of words." "A great deal of the writing," he adds, "has active rapport with the resources that the system of language itself provides and plays upon patterns of syntax and reference with remarkable effect." Not



everyone, Creeley is quick to insist, will find such “structuralist” poetics attractive: “We are, of course, far more likely to think of a poem as a pleasing sentiment, a lyric impulse, an expression of feeling that can engage the reader or listener in some intensive manner.” But, having paid “pleasing sentiment” its due, Creeley concludes:

Certainly one will have favorites and I have a lot of them here, as it happens: Robert Grenier and Charles Bernstein, and also Barrett Watten, David Bromige, Fanny Howe, Susan Howe, Stephen Rodefer, Bernadette Mayer, Bob Perelman, and others. Michael Palmer's "Echo" must be, surely, one of the great poems of the period, just as Clark Coolidge's work is now a contemporary classic. . . . The brilliance of the writers collected here is not simply literary. Their response to the world, however demanding, is intently communal. They are asking - often with great wit and heart - that we recognize that language itself is real and we must learn to live in its complex places.<sup>10</sup>

I cite this review at some length because it shows Creeley’s clear-eyed understanding that here was a new movement with such affinities to his own poetry. Later, as that movement became more vocal and more doctrinaire, Creeley took a more circumspect position toward it. He himself, after all, belonged, or so the common wisdom would have it, to the school of Olson: it was Olson who was his mentor and the New American Poetry, as defined by Donald Allen in his watershed anthology, that was his poetic and spiritual home.

The issue is complicated. Certainly, Creeley’s poetics is not quite that of *In the American Tree*. What Bruce Andrews has called deprecatingly “the arrow of reference” is still operative in Creeley’s lyric, his collocations of words and morphemes are never as non-semantic or disjunctive as those of later Language poets, his identity, however fractured, never less than central to his what is a very “personal” poetry. The decorous, purposely Old World phrasing--“I am given to,” “I am embarrassed for,” I am “thinking to be rid of”— is surely closer to Robert Duncan than to Ron Silliman. And as

Theory, from Derrida and Deleuze to Adorno and Habermas came to dominate the discourse of the various Language Poetry journals, Creeley came to protest, less in print than in private conversation, that theory—dry, intellectual, impersonal-- was the enemy of poetry, that he himself was just a “simple” lyric poet who looked to experience and to tradition for inspiration. Thus, in his last decade or so, he made sure he allied himself, not just with experimental poets, but with the larger scene of postwar American—and also British—poetry, endorsing a wide variety of younger poets from Frank Bidart and Forrest Gander to Heather McHugh and Sharon Olds, as if he wanted to warn his more immediate coterie not to box him into a corner. John Ashbery, we might note, has followed a similar path vis-à-vis the New York school.

Poets cannot, of course, be expected to see themselves as later generations see them. It is too soon, in any case, to make authoritative statements about Creeley’s influence today. Still, it may now be useful to revise the earlier genealogy whereby we couple Creeley with Olson, Duncan, and Levertov, with Ginsberg and Ferlinghetti, or with Zukofsky and Reznikoff. Indeed, among the Objectivists, the one poet whose lyric very much resembles Creeley’s is the one whom the label least fits—Lorine Niedecker-- just as the “Black Mountain” heir whose aesthetic really is Creeleyesque is that non-American, Tom Raworth. Both Niedecker and Raworth may be characterized as mavericks. Both have strong group affiliations but are loners, working in isolation. Both are obsessed, in their condensed, “minimalist” lyric, with the grammaticity and paragrammaticity of language, both are intensely “personal” and yet intensely oblique and constrained love poets. To read Creeley against Niedecker and Raworth suggests, in any case, that in making genealogies, it is high time to go beyond nation and gender boundaries, high time to cast a wider net so as to capture, in Creeley’s words, “whatever is.”

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup>Robert Creeley, "Funny," *Away* (1976), in *The Collected Poems of Robert Creeley 1945-1975* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 598.

<sup>2</sup> *The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams*, Vol. 1, ed. Walton Litz and Christopher MacGowan (New York: New Directions, 1986), 343-47. According to the Notes 527-29), this poem went through seven printed versions with many changes in lineation and spacing: its first printing was in *Hound & Horn*, Oct.-Dec. 1929.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Lowell, "Eye and Tooth," *Collected Poems* (New York: Farrar Straus, 2003), 334-35.

<sup>4</sup> "I'm given to write poems," *A Quick Graph: Collected Notes & Essays*, ed. Donald Allen (Bolinas: Four Seasons Foundation, 1970), 65.

<sup>5</sup> Robert Creeley, *Contexts of Poetry: Interviews 1961-1971* (Bolinas: Four Seasons Foundation, 1971), 97.

<sup>6</sup> Robert Creeley, *Was that a Real Poem & Other Essays*, ed Donald Allen (Bolinas; Four Seasons, 1979), 86.

<sup>7</sup> Robert Creeley in conversation with J. M. Spalding, *Cortland Review*, April 1998: <http://www.cortlandreview.com/creeley.htm>

<sup>8</sup> Robert Creeley, *Life & Death* (New York: New Directions, 1998), 55.

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<sup>9</sup>Mary Ellen Solt, *Concrete Poetry: A World View* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1968), pp. 49, 223. For "fluvial," see Augusto de Campos, *Poesia 1949-1979* (Sao Paulo: AE Press, 2002), p. 106.

<sup>10</sup>Robert Creeley, "From the Language Poets," review of Ron Silliman, *In the American Tree*, *San Francisco Chronicle*, 28 September 1986, . This review was called to my attention by Charles Bernstein.