

A Letter on Rosenthal's "Problems of Robert Creeley"

Sherman Paul

The following "Letter on Rosenthal's 'Problems of Robert Creeley'" was sent to boundary 2 by Sherman Paul after economy measures forced the editor of Parnassus, who had originally accepted the piece, to return it to the author. The editors of boundary 2 found Professor Paul's "Letter" too important to die an economic death. We felt, above all, a strong sympathy with his emphatic focus on Creeley's commitment to "nakedness" and its corollary, beginning from the beginning — in the place of origins — and with his consequent impatience with critics who continue to read him — and the projectivists at large — from the end, i.e., from a spatial perspective that inevitably covers over what is essential in this kind of "post-Modern" poetry: process. What the "Letter" suggests is that to understand Creeley's and the projectivists' poetry requires a hermeneutic in which temporality is ontologically prior to self-contained or bounded form, beginning to end, being to Being, logos as speech to Logos as The Word, in short, a new hermeneutic as dis-covering. The editors of boundary 2 endorse this view and are pleased to be able to publish this suggestive example. (W.S. and R.K.)

Dear Editor:

I have never written a letter of this kind before, having preferred to let criticism, as a general activity, do its remedial work. But M. L. Rosenthal's review of Creeley, in *Parnassus* (Fall/Winter 1973), addresses me as an occasion and asks me, in Creeley's and Olson's sense, to keep faith with a criticism of "use." And Olson provides my precedent: "This man, Grover Smith, 'On Poets and Poetry,' in your 1953 Autumn issue. He's a glib one."

Anyone whose work has been criticized knows the deplorable inattentiveness and inexactness of most criticism. Of what use is criticism when as Creeley observes in a recent interview collected in *Contexts of Poetry* (reviewed by Rosenthal), "there is *no* correspondence of any interest to me between the activities of contemporary criticism and that poetry I am myself engaged with"...? The example he cites in this interview of December 1969 is Richard Howard's *Alone with America*, which he comments on with characteristic incisiveness: "there are gaps I so deeply question that the book itself becomes a fine instance of *mandarin* writing — i.e., an 'entertainment' of 'sensibility.'" What, I wonder, would he say to Rosenthal's *The New Poets* (1967) or his "Problems of Robert Creeley," the latter establishing in its initial sentence this critic's attitude and imprecision: "Despite a tendency to regard as quintessential poetry any twist of phrase that happens into his mind, Robert Creeley has written some real poems..."? Whether poetry of the projectivist kind is "real" poetry seems doubtful. But then "real," for Rosenthal, is a multipurpose, approbative adjective — in the comparison with Williams' work by which he measures Creeley's he says of a scene in *A Dream of Love* that the poem, "Love Song," is "directed by a real, grown-up man in a real, everyday world to a real woman." Not all of the problems, clearly, are Creeley's.

To be "a major domo of modern poetry criticism" (I cite the designation in "Contributors") is not an enviable position. The household of contemporary poetry is too large; there is too much to keep in order, to keep up with. Ignorance is inevitable, allowable, though not in the case of an important poet one chooses to review and has written on before and whose career one has presumably followed. To say of *Contexts of Poetry*, as Rosenthal does, that it contains considerable material on "Mr. Creeley's vague but assertive poetics" makes one question not only the care with which he read the interviews but whether, in fact, he has read *A Quick Graph* (1970), the best critical book on (of) what Rosenthal calls "The 'Projectivist' Movement," and one of the finest, most useful and necessary works of critical intelligence in our time, a work in which Creeley amply pays his debt to Pound's critical practice. The evidence of the review suggests that Rosenthal has come no further in understanding Creeley's "terms" and "insistences" and in entering his work than he had in *The New Poets*.

"Problems of Robert Creeley" is focussed chiefly on *A Day Book*, Creeley's most recent large work, but it cannot be understood or fairly considered, as Rosenthal seems to think it can be, without understanding the importance of "context," a term of Creeley's carefully employed in the title of his collection of interviews. Context, to borrow Olson's words, refers to the limits any one of us are inside of ("Limits/ are what any of us/ are inside of"); one's context is one's "field," all the particular things to which one actually refers, in which one's poetry has its occasion and beyond which it may seek to move. A book devoted to contexts – what, for understanding a poet who wants to bring the poem as close to the fact of his life as he can, is more useful to the critic? Yet Rosenthal dismisses *Contexts of Poetry* in a paragraph, or in two, if one counts his animadversions on Creeley's comments on the academic reputations of Whitman and Williams – comments in spirit not without some truth and again to be considered in the contexts of Creeley's correspondence with Williams from 1950 to 1962 (it is available in the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library of Yale University) and of his own *Whitman* (1973), a volume of selections, edited with an introduction, in the Penguin Poet to Poet series.

Not only does Rosenthal appear to be uninformed, he is still admonishing Creeley in the way he had in *The New Poets* by attending pretty much to one poem – a real but unexceptional one – and holding up to him what he considers the superior practice of Williams. In *The New Poets*, "The Riddle" is placed against the Corydon passages of *Paterson IV*, in the present review, "The Edge" against "Love Song." But in neither instance is the comparison just nor the Creeley poem opened, in the useful, admiring fashion, say, of Samuel Charters in *Some Poets/ Poems: Studies in American Underground Poetry Since 1945* (1971), to permit one to enter his world. The attention is not so much on the Creeley poem as on the poem with which it is compared, and in the instance of "The Edge," the poem may have been chosen not because "edge" is a term of increasing significance to Creeley ("at the edge of the world,/ the edge beyond that edge") but because here Creeley had meditated on "Love Song," a poem properly valued by Rosenthal, who expatiates on it as he had, in another context, at the recent MLA meetings. Rosenthal, incidentally, chides Creeley for not acknowledging his borrowing from Williams, when the borrowing, if it is that, is acknowledgment enough. For Creeley, too, values this poem: it entered his thought – he thought with it – as early as "Love" (1951), and he is aware – he treats it in *Contexts of Poetry* – of what is involved in acknowledging another writer. But putting such matters aside, my objection is that one no more discovers the Creeley of *For Love* in *The New Poets* than the Creeley of *A Day Book* in "Problems of Robert Creeley."

The resistance in Rosenthal's treatment of Creeley – the refusal to engage him directly – derives, I think, from his unwillingness to

acknowledge the magnitude of change introduced by the “projectivists.” His treatment of “Projective Verse” in *The New Poets* is scant, omitting altogether Olson’s considerations in Part 2 of stance, of the new universe and how one stands *in* it, and, accordingly, as Olson explains in Part 1, now engages in writing. Creeley has written extensively about this in *A Quick Graph* — it was a central fact of his defense of Hart Crane in 1953 — and he comments on it in *Contexts of Poetry* (“Writing, and all of the arts as well, have entered the altered consciousness of men’s situation in the world”). In fact, the possibility introduced by a process world of which he himself is a part (the universe is Whiteheadian and the poem is an “event” in it) is what he has found most liberating. And it is possibility, another term of Creeley’s, that compels him, in *Pieces* and *A Day Book*, to move in ways that many critics have not approved. That he has taken this risk and recovered possibility is the chief excitement of these works (“writing,” he said in 1967, in “I’m given to write poems,” the great testamentary essay in which he told his faith in poetry as a way of being in the world and so prepared himself for the departure of these sequences — “writing is for me the most viable and open condition of possibility in the world. . . . In poems I have both discovered and born testament to my life in ways no other possibility has given me”). “Poetry,” according to Thoreau, another New Englander, to whom Creeley pays tribute,¹ “is a piece of very private history, which unostentatiously lets us into the secret of a man’s life.” And so it is for Creeley, who, in “Inside Out” (*Sparrow* No. 14, 1973), speaks of autobiography as “a life tracking itself,” which, of course, is the essential activity of his writing, as Olson noted when he said of Creeley’s stories that the narrator makes clear “by way of his own person that life is preoccupation with itself. . . .”

Though Creeley’s poems are often spare and small and his insinuations always personal, there is, in view of his standing in the “primary situations” of his experience, nothing that merits the usual limiting characterizations of his work: minimal, domestic. He understood early what Olson told Cid Corman, that the poet starts with nothing, with only his personal details, with what he actually knows, and he was ready to accept “nakedness,” the shedding of preconceptions by which one finds himself, in Emerson’s words, in an original relation to the universe. Nakedness has antecedents in American literature just as projectivist verse has: it simply states the condition of the intrinsic form proposed by Emerson and the free verse practiced by Whitman — and reminds us of the body, and the physical aspect of this poetry. Creeley takes the term from Olson, who, in *Maximus*, provides, among others, the following instance:

He left him naked,
the man said, and
nakedness
is what one means

that all start up
to the eye and soul
as though it had never
happened before

And Creeley says, in explanation, that "'Nakedness' is to stand manifestly in one's own condition, in that necessary *freshness*, however exposed, because all things are particular and reality itself is the specific content of an instant's possibility."

What needs emphasis here is exposure, risk, and the heroic stance conveyed in Creeley's account of his "saints of this exposure" and in Olson's dedication of *Maximus* to Creeley, "the Figure of Outward," because literary history, for example Rosenthal's and Walter Sutton's *American Free Verse*, minimizes them. We tend, I think, to forget how much the change from extrinsic to intrinsic form and from subject to the activity of writing itself demands of the poet: that he change his life, his way of being in the world, his attentions. The "unbound thinking" of which Williams spoke — and he reminds us that the poet thinks with his poem — is neither easy nor safe. The poet is moved to it, as Williams was in "The Desert Music," a superb example of the new poetics and the Williams poem most esteemed by Creeley and Olson, because only in the poem, in the dancing of its words, can he find the possibility and being that insure his survival. Poetry, for Creeley, is the cry of its occasion, a necessary way of having life, "an agony of self-realization [Williams wrote in "The Desert Music"] / bound into a whole / by that which surrounds us." And it saves the poet: "Again and again, I find myself saved, in words," Creeley says, "— helped, allowed, returned to possibility and hope. In the dilemma of some literal context a way is found in words which may speak of it." This view of the extreme condition and function of poetry accounts for his belief that "in America, we are certainly not poets simply, nor much of the time." As he said recently, we are poets only when we are writing poems, and perhaps most often when, as he noted of Williams, we find "location in difficulty" — and "find and build happiness."

This brings us to *Pieces* and *A Day Book*, companion book-length poems concerned with survival.

Pieces ends on August 16, 1968, and *A Day Book* resumes the entries which comprise this journal-keeping on November 19, 1968.² Both books insist on continuity — "one continuity instead of a single poem" — which is to say that Creeley wants, as in the writing of *The Island*, a novel that he considers his first long poem, a form of writing that admits more than and carries him beyond the "single instance" of his usual poem. (The lack of pagination in *A Day Book*, lamented by Rosenthal, is deliberate.) Both books treat a continuing crisis, what might be called the crisis of middle age (Erikson's crisis of generativity?), which involves the

recognition of biological age and entropy, time and death, and prompts, increasingly, a reverie toward childhood, a return to and recovery of the past (what Rosenthal calls "Proustian recollection"). The insistences that have always concerned him are present — love, place, and being as they are jeopardized by the locked-in, thinking self — but he is not now, at least in *Pieces*, as overwhelmed by them as he once was, and is accepting ("This life cannot be lived/ apart from what it must forgive"), knowing now that even though he cannot wholly overcome the otherness of his situation, he sometimes is permitted to have being, to live in the here and now, in his body and in the world:

Here now [in his ageing body] I am at best
or what I think I am
must follow as the rest
and live the best it can.

Both books risk what Williams called "descent," a necessary loosening-up process, and one key to them, cited in *Pieces*, is Olson's "we are as we find out we are." Another, describing the undertaking, might be "This is the exercise for this morning," from Olson's "Tyrian Businesses." Because of this as well as the lack of sustained intensity and obvious formal coherence, I think of these long poems in terms of Williams' *Kora in Hell* and Ammons' *Tape for the Turn of the Year* rather than *Paterson* and *Maximus*. *Pieces*, more than *A Day Book* which is broken by its prose and poetry sections, offers the reader familiar with Creeley's work the pleasure and excitement of sustained reading. It is a unified book, having of course the single ground of the poet's consciousness, of his poetic activity, and it may be sufficiently energized, as some believe, to warrant consideration as a long poem rather than a sequence. But the title is *Pieces*, and pieces, we learn in *Words*, are fragments, the expression of fractured being, of something less than a state of being. Pieces belong to the condition spoken of in the entry for March 13, 1968: "So tired/ it falls/ apart." Yet because such entries are included, the splendid poems that appear are wonderful, both arising from and creating the place for which pieces search. The activity of writing in the way he has insures these forms ("No forms/ less than activity" — and no forms unless there is activity). In fact, the book begins with its own activity, one that creates possibility, the open form the work moves into, the book becomes, by transforming an end into a beginning:

As real as thinking
wonders created
by the possibility —

forms. A period
at the end of a sentence
which

began *it was*
into a present,
a presence

saying
something
as it goes.

Creeley discards the sentence, or syntactical prescription (as, for example, in the two fragments that comprise the poem), and by transforming end, associated with the past tense, past time, and remembering in which the self is no longer in its occasion, comes into the present and the very activity of the poem. The initial, necessary and therapeutic act is to become "a presence" — one fully present and in motion, "saying/ something/ as it goes." In this way, he avoids stasis, lives in, explores, and works through his situation, a recurrent effort, represented by daily clusters of entries as well as by "Mazatlan: Sea," the longest, concluding, paradigmatic sequence of the book.

A Day Book does not open or move so easily. It begins difficultly, in prose, with Creeley confined to his head, enclosed in a room, shut out of the world. It is not a comfortable place for either reader or writer — it reminds one of the situation of John in *The Island*. But what happens there — the meditation, reverie, fantasy, and the activity of writing and writing about writing — is necessary to the "turning occasion," the eventual resolution this section of the book achieves. The major events of this section are the deaths of John Altoon (a painter, identified in *Contexts of Poetry*, who may be said to represent the first, annunciatory death of a generation of artists: "this will happen more frequently now") and Creeley's Aunt Bernice, and the decision to leave the house in Placitas, New Mexico, for Annisquam, Massachusetts. (The larger movement of the book is from Placitas to Bolinas, California.) Among other contributing events are the telephone call from Creeley's first wife, and various occurrences of domestic life, of teaching and poetry readings. All feed a deepening crisis which now involves the house in Placitas, a context and place his success as a poet has created, that he finds comfortable and might rest in, but which has also become, like the fixed circumference of the self (in Emerson's account of "Circles") a limitation to outward expansion, a shell, a "scab of previous condition," Creeley says, that must be picked off. The issue for him, aggravated by diminished energy and "deadly tiredness," is to bring himself to leave "a place [no longer] made clear in