

ORDERED FRAGMENTS () OF A DISORDERED DEVOTION

By Charles Alexander

*recovered in august 2007 after some 25 years, in a box found while moving / an essay I
remember writing and remember as critical not so much to understanding Creeley as to
thinking about a possible poetics / italicized interventions and meanderings made in
september 2007*

I Inarticulacy: Inside the Parentheses

*the holes there / the holes I want there / the ability to wander
I might not say inarticulate anymore / rather open to multiple articulations / there is no
such thing as blank space*

Robert Creeley's writing lacks clarification; it lacks a subject. In ordinary discourse, literary or otherwise, we usually know the center of attention. We know what we are talking about; we have a subject. In a piece of writing by Creeley, poem or story, we stand on no such common ground. If only he would explain, we might think: even a clarification such as a parenthetical remark could give. But no such assurance is given. The inside of the parenthesis is inarticulate. The ground we stand on quakes. The speaker is not sure, even about what we might take to be a simple relationship.

I think I know, I think I know about what she'd do if this or that happened, if I were to say this to her, or something about something, or what people usually talk about. (GD 25)

In these lines from "Mr. Blue," much of the characteristic stance of the voice in Creeley's writing reveals itself. It is instructive to examine carefully how this utterance shapes itself, or how it does not shape itself. Not "I know," but "I think I know;" and not "I think I know" simply and firmly (as firmly as "think" might allow), but followed by a hesitancy and a repetition. When we finally are allowed a more expansive phrasing, we see not "I think I know what she'd do," but "I think I know about what she'd do." here not only infirmity reigns, but ambiguity, in the word "about," one of the small words of placement favored by Creeley. Does "about" join with "I know" to suggest the speaker understands the nature of what his wife would do, or does it align with "what she'd do" to imply he knows approximately what she would do? If such a statement appeared in a Creeley poem, we might expect "about" either to be interrupted during its utterance by a line break, or to occupy a line by itself, unable to securely lend its weight either to what precedes or to what follows. The ambiguity in the story leads not to the consideration of a specific cause that might stimulate an action by the wife, rather to the less specific "if this or that happened, if I were to say this to her, or something about something, or what people usually talk about." Such generality. Everything is relative, left open to chance, as we gather by the proliferation of words that suggest such relativity: if, this, or, that, something, about, usually, etc., some of these words appearing more than once. The entire sentence stands as merely one example of the ways in which a highly ordered language can say very little, yet suggest, in the manner of its inarticulacy, an insecure stance toward reality. Robert Creeley appears devoted to a reality, to existence as an emotional state, the emotions disordered in that they do not lend themselves to clear

exposition; but the language is highly ordered. In a controlled manner, Creeley's speaker manifests his lack of control.

what is this balance / order & control / lack of control / a space we can enter / a space left open

Lack of control, or lack of power, is the subject in Creeley's writing. It is not stated, rather it is the inside of the parentheses which we are not given. "3 Fate Tales" opens with an oblique approach that suggests such lack of control as it shows that an identity is beyond the capacity of the speaker.

I put it t his way. That I am, say, myself, that this, or this feel, you can't have, or from that man or this, me, you can't take it. And what I would do, with any of this, is beyond you, and mine. But for this time, yours too. (GD, 45)

The shiftings of ungrounded language are typical of the openings of Creeley stories. He places us in a quandary at the opening of "In The Summer."

I am not saying that it was ever to the point or that a purpose could be so neatly and unopposedly defined. Or that twenty-one or so years ago, on that day, or on this, he was then, or is now, there or here, that we could know him and see him to be what he is. I don't much care for that. I had my own time to do, a number of things to do. I had heard, then, that the growing-up of anything could become an involved and crippling process. I could see the sun each day, coming up, and then each night, going down. I gave my time to that.

At this point a reader might throw up his or her hands in dismay at not having a clue as to the subject of the story. Yet Creeley achieves much in this beginning, though it may not be perceived during an initial reading. He approaches, as closely as he ever will, statement of the prosaic subject: the effect of the past on the present, the debilitating

process of maturing. More importantly, he dramatizes, in a voice, the true subject of the story and of all of Creeley's stories: the insecurity and insubstantiality of being.

ungrounded? / perhaps it's when language stops functioning as symbol and begins to function as field, that it is precisely grounded, and grounds us, in community / walter benjamin's dream of a language that can't mean but that can ground us

We learn much about Creeley's writing if we read it as growing one word at a time. In this excerpt, first comes "I," the central actor in many works by Creeley; the more we read him, the more autobiographical we see his writing to be. At least we see it as an exploration of what existence means to its author. Second, "I am," the statement of existence, simply, without hint of what that existence might signify. Third, "I am not." Now all is taken away in typical Creeleyesque fashion. Give us something to hold, then make it disintegrate in our hands. Are we even dust in the wind? Fourth, "I am not saying": precisely the message Creeley's writing carries forth to the world. He is not saying anything; he can not say anything. He can only show, in his manner of utterance, what he is, and we can not even put a firm finger on that. Creeley orders his writing immaculately, even at times like this, word by careful word; and the order reveals his essential inarticulacy and insecurity. The remainder of the opening paragraph develops the insecurity, full of Creeley shiftings. We shift with him, nervously.

does all writing grow one word at a time / are we words or ideas?

One can begin anywhere in reading Creeley: with the poems, the stories, the novel, the letters and essays. When I first began, I read the poems; when I later read the stories I was stunned to find the same rhythms there, the same tones, as if these were not fictions at all, merely more Creeley, writing. Thus I tend to minimize the formal and generic distinctions between his works, while recognizing what can not be missed, the stylistic similarities, the common sense of phrasing, of language.

By looking at a poem we can see how there, too, he is inarticulate and maintains a tenuous hold on subject, on the world.

SPEECH

Simple things
one wants to say
like, what's the day
like, out there—
who am I
and where. (B, 101)

read another way entirely, what a joyful poem! who am I—can't that be a question that lifts one? or be heard as a cry of freedom?

Like the stories, “Speech” leaves us with more questions than answers. Return to the title; is the poem a speech? Or is it about speech? It is both and neither. It implies more than most orators say in a speech, but it says little. It suggests much about the act of speaking and the difficulty of saying anything, yet it explicitly tells us nothing about speaking (implicitly it tells us much). It is more carefully ordered than is most rhetoric, but does

not really make points. In what sense is it even a poem? It makes of rhyme a complex music, but is devoid of metaphor and metonymy. On the other hand it magnificently satisfied modernist poetry's demand for economy and concision, in that it means much while saying little. Pound might demand this of a poem; yet Pound also said "only emotion endures" in poetry, and this poem's language seems to lack emotion. But Pound is not Creeley's only mentor. Another, Louis Zukofsky, has said that in poetry "emotion is a matter of cadence." In this way, in its manner of saying, in its total articulation of sound, Creeley's poem is emotional, although the emotions are difficult to define.

ahh / so young here / aren't emotions always difficult, no impossible, to define / or, do they exist? are they chemical? who am I / and where

The poem is not simple at all, as its first line might lead us to believe; speech is not simple. One wants to speak, even to define oneself, but can not know, with security, what the day is like, one's own location, or even his identity. In such an encumbered position, and such a human situation, how difficult it is to speak. How is the difficulty achieved, the tentativeness manifested, in this poem? Like the utterances in stories, it shows in the words which can not be specific: one, things, what, there, who, where. It shows in the stops, in the inability to continue easily. We pause at line breaks, after "things," not certain what things they are; we pause after "day," left with the question "what is the day," yet we are made to continue, haltingly, to say "like." The end-line hyphen after "out there" leads us directly into a void, not a "there" but a "nowhere." As in Creeley's stories, we also pause with quick commas. Here they come immediately after we begin

lines, both times after the word “like.” Finally, we do not even know what the day is like, much less what it is; and we do not know specific things, but things “like” the examples given, the “like” implying that many more subjects could be included in what we might want to say but can not know how to say. There is no stated subject to the poem; it is not the “simple things,” it is the inability to know or speak, which is enacted rather than stated.

is dislocation another name for this / or nomadic

The poem presents still more difficulties. It seems unable to say things, so it poses its words as questions; but we are not sure they are questions, for there are no question marks. We end with a period which concludes nothing. The sounds of the poem, highly ordered, imply no such order in the speaker’s mind or in the world. We hear end rhymes (say/day, there/where), internal rhymes (like/like, wants/what’s). We hear closely matched sounds and rhythms in the second and third lines, similar phrasing breaks in the third and fourth lines, identical syllable counts in the fourth and fifth lines. The poem masterfully builds its verbal music. It exhibits all the hesitations and insecurities of a Creeley story, yet is so compressed. Because of the compression we see what is present but much less obvious in the stories: the tightly ordered language. If modern life is full of fragments shored against ruins, Creeley’s language is composed of carefully arranged fragments that barely hold, while showing the impending ruin of annihilation in a void of instability. The flux of living is everywhere in Creeley’s writing; it can not be

understood; all one can do is show the difficulty of finding one's place in the midst of it. With language, put a fence around the subject, which is the difficult existence of the self.

fencing sense in — as Creeley would later say about my poems / fencing self out (or in)

“Speech” is unlike Creeley’s stories in that it poses the problem of inarticulacy directly and causes us to reflect on it, whereas the stories dramatize the problem. Often, however, he takes on such dramatization in a poem.

LADY BIRD

A lady asks me
and I would tell

what is it
she has found the burden of.

To be happy
now she cries, and all things

turn backward
and impossible.

God knows that I love her,
and would comfort her—

but the intention is
a parallel sufferance.

Mine for hers,
hers for mine. (FL, 90)

Here he poses a relationship that is a problem, a struggle, as is the case in many of the stories in *The Gold Diggers*. Also like the stories, we do not learn what the problem is. We sense, instead, its intensity and its irresolvability. We can not even know what the

lady wants of the speaker. She asks, and he would tell, but he can not tell. As in “Speech,” he turns the phrasing around so that it seems to pose a question; not “I would tell // what it is,” but “I would tell // what is it.” Creeley always confronts something he can not define, nor even state. Yet we feel the emotional impact in the turn of phrases, in the unresolved ambiguity. “To be happy / now she cries,” and “cries” assumes a double meaning. Does she desire to be happy, but since happiness is impossible, she literally cries tears; or does she simply cry out, “To be happy,” knowing this is impossible. “All things” are impossible; “all things / turn backward”; “all things / turn . . . impossible.” Creeley’s utterances turn in such a way that we find it impossible to make them signify anything clearly. Yet the poem successfully enacts its emotional crisis by virtue of the language’s inarticulacy. We are left with a traded sufferance, an acquiescence to the failure of a relationship, because the attempt to solve the problem would be a lie for the speaker. It would be his suffering, parallel to hers, therefore not a solution at all. What makes the poem typical of Creeley’s writing is that we only gather its meaning by paying close attention to the shape of the language.

and in this relationship to us the work brings us to ourselves rather than to it or him or some other / or is self also other?

Creeley requires an immense act of belief in his language, and we tend to give ourselves over to him because of the struggle we witness as the statements strive to be born. We can not know what it means to “love her,” what it might take to “comfort her;” we do not know what the “invention” or the “sufferance” is, but we feel the language confronting a

human failure with the difficulty that failure demands on a sensitive speaker, and we are awed. If we give ourselves over to Creeley, it is difficult to read more than one poem or story at a time, for the struggle with language becomes our striving to read through it, and the emotional crisis becomes ours as we make our way through the troubled phrasing. We are finally driven away from the text until the emotional impact subsides. The achievement of Creeley, for a willing reader, is cathartic and magnificent.

he is our alps / but mountains are also valleys

II The Development of Obliquity, A Poetics

wasn't it always there?

Creeley's sense of what his achievement must be, and the obliquity of language he must arrive at in order to accomplish his aims, is at issue in his early correspondence with Charles Olson. Olson's sense of most prose, in contrast to Creeley's prose, is that it is "never growing from the nerves of the man," (CO 31); as we see it does in Creeley; it even grows from the nervousness of a man, to take shape as nervous, insecure phrasings. Creeley eschews the obligation of writing to fill standardized forms, and that prose, specifically, suffers under the demand that it must be objective.

What is 'objective': the fact that I sit here, forced to this typewriter and this paper: what I can put down : as 'subjective' as I can make it. Of course, in the popular head, imperfectly filled, now, with echoes of Rimbaud, even they wd miss the simple sense of that 'disordering' of the senses, or, later, wd miss what the Dr. calls the necessity of destruction. (CO 31)

Creeley rambles, covering much ground in his letters with Olson, but they letters are intimately linked to his own writing practice. Creeley becomes so subjective in his writing that his creative work manifests the disordering of the senses as they try to make statements. The necessity of destruction in Creeley becomes the inability to build. thus his writing constantly faces away from the world, turns inward on itself in a halting, shifting, nervous manner. Turning away from the world, he turns away from subjects, as we have seen. Subject becomes the writer's or speaker's struggle to speak. In the same letter to Olson, Creeley seems amazed by writers he admires, that their prose seems "almost an impossible impediment to HAVE to PUT it in WORDS." (CO 31-32) Creeley's stories and poems embody a similar impediment.

and words are all I have / to steal your heart away

As Creeley writes Olson, he develops his thoughts about prose (he considers himself much more of a prose writer than a poet at this time, 1950). His sense of the necessary disorder in writing leads him to what will become a method for achieving his own oblique style. After denigrating a passage by Walter Pater in one letter, he says to Olson, "No, no such clarity. Rather : the oblique : afraid of conclusions : sounds : and the oddness"; and later, "No, no direct way to anything." (CO 41-42) Creeley sees precisely what kind of writing moves him, and how he himself must write. He apprehends here that the necessary lack of clarity must be presented not in statements, but in "sounds : the oddness." He recognizes the need for obliquity at the same time that he exhibits it in his stories. Within a month of these recognitions he shares with Olson, he is writing "In The

Summer,” a story about which he says he “got the right slant.” (CO 150) In the story the speaker wants to know what a past experience meant to him then and what it means now. But he can know nothing. The inability to know is implicit in the obliquity of the language, in the oddness of the sounds of his speech as he tries, unsuccessfully, to resolve the experience.

I don't know, he said, since then or there I haven't been for some time.
Sometimes it is just that I can't remember any of it or have like a kind of fog
that, which I felt then, to wonder about, and to put against, even, what I have
now. (GD 81)

The clarity an image might carry is denied here, as the simile “like a kind of fog” is vague and trivial, turning us back to the language which comes, obliquely, “from the nerves of the man.” The sense of disorder in the speaker is achieved through the ordered “oddness” of the language.

*like the law in Duncan containing its own dissolution / the dissolution containing some
other that becomes / a deconstruction and a construction*

Creeley's first two months of correspondence with Olson, from April 21 through June 24, 1950, fill up the first volume of their letters. This first volume is crucial material to the poetics of both, as they begin to articulate and share ideas. Each finds, at a time of great need, an “other” to which he can talk. In this period Creeley mentions writers who are important to him, speaks of the effect of jazz on his sense of rhythm in writing and of jazz improvisation on his need to push forth from a central content during the course of writing a story; and he keeps returning to the issue of obliquity. We have seen, in the

openings of two stories, Creeley shift his way into a mode of telling without actually giving us an inkling of what a story is about. The shifting itself occupies our attention. He writes to Olson, “. . . PROSE. Sometimes it is the jockeying for position that is ‘more to the point’ : than what comes after it has, supposedly, been got.” (CO 58) Such recognition arises from Creeley’s reading (in this case the opening of Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*), but finds its place in his writing. He again returns to such a ruminative method when he presents Olson with the most famous formulation Olson will include in “Projective Verse.” Creeley wants, in writing, to “go over into : the possible casts or methods for a way into / a ‘subject’ : to make it clear : that form is never more than an extension of content.” (CO 79) In Creeley’s prose and poetry, subject is never more than an extension of his going “over into” the speaker’s casting about for what can not be told.

Ishmael having been cast into the sea / call me / in a sense . . . I am

The remarks in Creeley’s letters are hurried and informal, and in reading them we ascertain as much from their cumulative effect as from completely informative single statements. He does, however, speak directly and authoritatively about obliquity and his own writing in his June 11, 1950 letter to Olson.

Too, abt the prose, there you hit again : the whole push for that kind of writing, has come from the ‘freedom,’ supposed or otherwise, that the frame gives. I have a liking for the play abt the thing, around & over: touching at angles. What they call, or have called: obliquity. It had seemed, or so to me, that there was no such thing as: a direct statement/that much like the ‘objectivity’: this, as well, was a shorthand to: assumption of value/ justified or not. Like they say, that there is no straight line, it being close, that example, to the ‘straight line’ in prose (or poetry) — an excuse for hurrying thru. (CO 95)

We can move from Creeley's talk about such "play abt the thing" to its presence in a story; turn from the letters to *The Gold Diggers*. Even in a very short story, he does not hurry through. "The Séance" take sup but three pages, all of which is a rumination around a central notion of existence, occasioned by a feeling of cold, what it means to be cold, what it means to rub one's hands when cold, "A charm against what harms them." (GD 85) The story is composed entirely of obliquity. No clear statement of meaning appears. "Somewhat colder, the wind came in at the door, and with a quick turn, shifted and moved down the hall." (GD 85) The story opens with this sentence, but the story is not about the wind or the hall. The story is about nothing but itself, and the first sentence is key because it shows how Creeley moves in the story. The verbs, and a modifying phrase, clue us in: "came in . . . with a quick turn, shifted and moved." So the prose takes shape, shifting from the wind, to people at a table, to a face, to cold hands, to a chair moving, to other, seemingly unconnected concerns. What connects them is their apprehension by a voice that always shifts from one focus to another, a voice that speaks of shifting.

and of nothing / and of the sun / the blindness

In one representative paragraph we see the movement back and forth from one point of vision to another.

Behind her, thru a chink in the wall, he is watching. Takes after a time, a small pebble & throws it, tosses it, at her. It hits her back & boounces, lightly, down. She shakes & keeps working. Another. Throws. She keeps working. Another, larger, throws, harder, another, larger, throws & harder another. She keeps working. (GD 87)

To understand what Creeley attempts we must notice that nothing happens, or nothing changes, in this paragraph. The interest is in the see-saw movement of the narrator's vision. In other words, what occupies us is the "jockeying for position" or "the play abt the thing." Indeed the passage is a microcosm of the entire story, and perhaps of Creeley's world as it is evidenced in his writing. For in the story nothing happens. At the end "the wind shifts, again, comes down the hall, and finds him." (GD 87) We return to the scene of the man rubbing his hands against the cold. We would mistake Creeley to see him as merely playing games with a narrator constantly moving, games that have little significance beyond an interest in play. For this story has a powerful effect. It conveys a powerless existence. Even violence, the act of throwing larger stones, means nothing. The story does not convey the emotionally crippling nature of powerless existence, as does much of Creeley's work, because "The Séance" is harder, more bare. We are not allowed any emotions. Yet we manage to glimpse a bleak sense of our position in the world.

always between / but do we know it? / between (

Obliquity in writing, which Creeley discusses in his letters to Olson, results from his desire not to assert his will to power over his subjects. He wants to appear to have only a limited amount of control. In a letter he tells Olson, "I . . . can't trust myself: to that which I cannot grab hold of: at least in some way." (CO 68) He can not grab hold of much, especially when it comes to subjects, other people, emotions. These are all entities in the world that Creeley would believe we can not master. We are lying to ourselves if we think we can. His stories and poems act out the inability to control such entities. In this

way his poets interacts with Olson's. They appear to be very different kinds of writers: Olson always expansive, pushing to include more and more material; Creeley turned inward, revolving around a never stated center of meaning. Yet they share a distrust of any writing that would coerce its materials into a clarity, a clear order. Thus Creeley always writes obliquely; Olson always pushes out to touch new things and ideas without explaining or resolving what he touches as he goes, without making them into a system that he understands and controls.

The absence of the will to power takes us from technique and language in both Creeley and Olson, to a philosophical position beyond questions of technique. Olson prefers to call this position a "stance toward reality." (SW 24-25) It is the crux of the second part of his essay, "Projective Verse," which he formulates while in the midst of his febrile correspondence with Creeley. Olson sees the ego's effort to control as an interference to what man should be. The ego does not allow man to recognize that he is "himself an object" and that only when he recognizes himself as such does he achieve "an humilitas sufficient to make him of use." A key difference between Creeley and Olson is that Olson wants to see himself as an object so that he can venture outward and approach the world honestly, seeing things as they are, not as he would have them, but going ever outward, learning. Creeley, on the other hand, approaches what Olson calls "the larger field of objects" and is constantly turned back to himself, as object, without the comforts control might give him. And the lack of control includes the inability to understand the self, which renders him inarticulate. Of course Creeley is an artist in words, and it is only his great articulacy, his ability to hear and order words, that allows us to feel his inarticulate

lack of power. Creeley is then, in Olson's terms, a projectivist, but the continuous push of his language is not outward, like Olson's, but around the unstated center, the oblique 'play about the thing.'

and the play is the thing / it always has been

III Reading Creeley Whole: The Conjunction of Letters, Poetry, Prose Fiction

the word is not the person the person is not the word the word is the person the person is the word the is is not the is the not is not the not the the what is the the

The interplay of Creeley's correspondence and his prose fiction lead us to philosophical readings of his work. Other interpenetrations also occur, which may lead to autobiographical readings, or at least to a cognizance of the intercourse between his life and art. The poems, particularly, seem to invite identification of their speaker with Creeley the author, especially since many of them are addressed to his friends and loved ones, or are directly about his interaction with other people in his life. The interpenetration of his life with the stories can occur in a small and probably insignificant way, such as in "the Lover," where the speaker unfolds a letter and reads, "que nunca olvidate . . . , he says here, Your lad que nunca olvidate." (GD 68) Almost all of Creeley's letters to Olson are closed, "your lad," yet is Olson who was, as 1950 drew to a close (CO

v. 4), writing Creeley from Mexico. We can confidently derive that all the material of Creeley's life becomes grist for the mill of his typewriter.

old school qwerty queerly moving

The correspondence between poems and prose can be more inviting. The speaker at the end of "The Lover" (GD 70-71) wonders, "who is it, . . . that I would want if it wasn't her." His mind continues to move, powerless to keep his attention directly on his wife next to him. Yet all the thinking becomes meaningless, even forgotten, by the last sentence: "But she had rolled off and away, or he had, and lay there thinking, what was I thinking of." In the poem "The Whip," we may identify the speaker more readily as Creeley. The situation, the subject, and the progress of the writing is the same as that at the close of the story "The Lover."

THE WHIP

I spent a night turning in bed,
my love was a feather, a flat

sleeping thing. She was
very white

and quiet, and above us on
the roof, there was another woman I

also loved, had
addressed myself to in

a fit she
returned. That

encompasses it. But now I was
lonely, I yelled

but what is that? Ugh,
she said, beside me, she put

her hand on
my back, for which act

I think to say this
wrongly.

“The Whip” presents a dream situation, a man addressing himself, while tossing and turning in a fit, to a woman who is not his “love” who sleeps with him. Finally, however, the thoughts of this other woman, and the thoughts of loneliness following, amount to nothing once attention is turned back to the woman who is present.

the poem could also be an allegory / and that makes it not about thought or dream but action / the moral consequences, then, are far more troubling

I would not say we need to read Creeley’s writing as autobiography, feeding us the details of his life. Instead, the more we notice the interconnections among all his writing, the more we sense the intimacy his creative work has with the attitudes and situations of his life. Specific knowledge concerning that life may add nothing to the reading of the work, but the sense of a human presence that is constant behind all his writing may contribute, for many readers, to the emotional impact of the work. We sense that human, sensitive but nervous presence, in the language of each poem, story, or other work; and we sense it as the same presence in piece after piece. Specific correspondences between poems and prose add to the feeling that all Creeley’s writing is of one piece, in a way that

Zukofsky, who Creeley revered, meant when he said that a man writes one poem, all his life.

or enters one grand collage that includes but is not limited to her / or him

One obvious correspondence between poem and story appears in one of Creeley's most familiar poems, "I Know A Man" (FL 38), and his story, "The Musicians." (GD 137-142)

The story is a dream in which the protagonist confronts a man, John, from his past. The implication of the confrontation and the memory is that life is a darkness that surrounds us, and that we need to do something, to act, even to get into a car and simply drive.

Let's put it, two men, ourselves, we live in a long black house, like that one.
He pointed to the car on the wall. Every morning at ten o'clock sharp we take
it out of the place, wherever we keep it, and we drive it, like hell, up and
down, up and down. We love it. We think there is nothing greater or any
damn thing else. By God, we enjoy ourselves.

This imaginary ride leads to a crash, and the feeble question, "Can't we get another car?"

The question of driving, driving through the darkness, indicates a joy that occupies

Creeley, although his language evidences an inability to escape the struggle of living. The poem concerns the same situation and includes some of the same language.

I KNOW A MAN

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.

The same John, the same car, the same darkness, the same insecurity. In the corresponding situations the writing succeeds because, as we always see with Creeley, the emotion concerning the event is embodied in the difficulty of the language. In this case the poem achieves much more intensity than the story because of its rhythmic tension, embodied in line breaks that make the reader unable to transform the narrative into a continuous statement. The poem succeeds because it fails to conclude, rather leaves us in the act of "going," without knowing where we are. The story, in contrast, is not one of Creeley's most effective. The language comes more easily than usual with him, the rumination available in the imaginary situation is too loose. It lacks tension. The link to the poem, however, is instructive. We see the concerns, with the inability to act, and the ineffectiveness of action, that center Creeley's writing.

another car / another john / another darkness

IV Obliquity: The Making of a Story

"The Party" (GD 55-60), one of many terse stories in *The Gold Diggers*, opens with Creeley characteristically settling into a mode of telling that is uncentered, without subject, as if it occurs in a void. It does not begin with any hint of a party. That will come later, as a turning of the attention to concerns that make up the day to day encounters of a

male/female relationship. First the narrator's voice, twice removed from such concerns, gives us the protagonist's voice, once removed, as he ruminates on a subject we do not know. "Of uncleanliness, he was saying, there are, one must come to think, a good many kinds. Or more, put it, than dirt on the hands." The statement is simple: there are more kinds of uncleanliness than kinds of dirt on the hands. The manner of speaking is anything but simple. It shivers with a sputtering insecurity that can not even utter commonplaces directly, but must move with language over and around them. Even the grammatical subject of the sentence does not afford its identity easily. Is it "he," or "one," or "kinds?" Finding the meaning is less crucial than sensing the difficulty of uttering the words that will lead around the meaning.

around the hill around the house around the hole

In the next paragraphs we gather the setting, in a canoe on a lake, removed from the land and its connections and obligations that are seen as a dock which is, from a distance, a black line. The man in the boat stands inactive, unable to communicate successfully with the woman. Even the picture of him rowing shows him allowing the paddle and the water to interact as they must, as though he can have little to do with it: "The man kept upright, the paddle still in his hands, but he held it loosely, letting it slap at the water, lightly, as the waves lifted to reach it." The woman brings up the question of the party, and the story shifts then from its beginning, taking the man "some way beyond where he had been." We may think such a consideration of the night's activity an easy matter. But little comes with such ease. For the woman, perhaps, but her ease is what makes her so difference

from the man; his inability to speak to her forms a barrier between them. "Sometime you will have to answer me, he said. Sometime there will be nothing else for you to do."

Discomfort in the human relationship asserts itself in the first pages of the story. The woman is actor, questioner, capable being. The man is shackled by his inability to act; he is silent, unable to function. She must remember the party; she must take charge of docking the canoe; she must ask him about a drink and bring it to him. The discomfort is not stated, but shown. Whatever causes it is left unsaid at first, and when we finally glimpse the cause, we glimpse it from angles, obliquely, never head-on. The man comments on the comfort of the room (in contrast to the tension of uncomfortable silence), which we might see as an avoidance of more difficult conversation, but the casual remark leads us to our first hint of knowledge in the story. We begin to learn that the man may be uncomfortable because he is in another man's place. In reply to his comment, the woman says "He wanted it this way . . . He did most of it himself." And later, "His favorite room, she said. This and the shack were all he cared about." The man feels dirty at walking in on what another has built. He is not responsible, as it appears the other man has died, but he can not feel comfortable. This is the empty center of our story. A small center, it becomes large in that it is so difficult to approach. The revelation of difficulty comes halfway through the story, and it is embodied not only in the struggle with language, as seen in the first paragraph, but also in the powerless feeling of the protagonist. Also, the intimate handling of the story contributes to the impact on the reader, an impact that makes the reader share the struggle toward a center of meaning.

shall we you and I shall we dance

The narrator, a third person, is tied up in the events. He gives us no perspective from which to view the relationship, which causes us to feel tied up inside the events as well, working to attach them to a frame we can understand. We are finally able to do so, but our difficulty, in large part, *is* the meaning of the story. We come to share an approach to the world, a stance toward reality, that can not give us the security of control. Even the third person narrative, when it presents speech (and much of the story is speech), does so without quotation marks. We question the narrator's position, whether it is indeed he who speaks the entire story, who shares the inability to articulate a subject. The narrator, the characters, and the reader, all are implicated in an intimate involvement in a world whose footholds we struggle to touch.

hypocrite lecteur / mon semblable

After the story's center, the characters are at the party, and everything there reflects on the man's sense of discomfort in his relationship with the woman. We hear scattered comments: "Mr. Briggs, they said, and all laughed, is a strange young man!" Are they speaking of our main character? We can not be sure, but we must believe so, given the concerns of the story. Such fragments are carefully arranged to glance at angles off the story's center. "There's not much hope for them, the other answered, if they won't make an attempt to see both sides." Little hope is what we have felt all along. The toast we hear is "to John. Wherever he is." At this the man feels "a windy void," and we wonder, and

believe, that the John who is toasted must be the same whose place the protagonist feels he has usurped, however innocently. Innocence, we come to see in Creeley's writing, is dangerous. We are always innocent, in that we know little about the world around us, or about ourselves, and we can only know precious little. Our lack of knowledge cripples us.

In the next room the children cry, and instinctively, as if recognizing his own need in their cry, the man leaves the party and goes to them. His action only makes them cry louder. He needs to touch a human being, if only for his own comfort, but he can not. He looks at the woman of the house, who has followed him into the children's room.

"Bewildered, he looked down at her, beside the bed, and younger than she who he had come with, he thought, but she will not allow me, she will not understand." Here, in a visceral rendering, are the concerns of Creeley's writing: the need of human relationship, the inability to successfully satisfy that need, the lack of understanding. At least the children can express their need; the adult, the man in this story, can not give voice to his own. The writing, playing obliquely around a subject, unable to articulate its concerns simply and directly, suffers in its own way.

Because of the crisis, the party ends. The children sleep, but the temporary lapse of suffering brings no salvation. The man says, of their sleeping, perhaps of the life he leads, "does it matter in any way you can think of?" The woman with whom he came and with whom he will leave approaches life with more confidence, and she does not understand him: "You make it sound momentous, she said. You really prefer disasters." We may think she is right, but we can also share his sense, after struggling the the bleak story, of

the hovering disaster in any human situation, in the act of being human. Creeley even breathes with difficulty.

what is the poem is inside my breathing breathing breathing breathing

V Release And Flow

gather and disperse / contract and release

If there is such a thing as release for Robert Creeley, from the struggle that is his language, his stories, his poems, and perhaps his life view, it comes as an acquiescence to that which is, the lack of control. He can, at times, merely accept the stance toward reality of which Olson speaks, and find a home of relative comfort on earth. The way is expressed in a poem from what might be seen as his middle period, from the philosophical book, *Pieces*, which approaches things, one by one, in the world. The poem is "A Step."

A STEP

Things

 come and go

Then

 let them. (P 6)

Wide-eyed acceptance is the only out Creeley can have. It can be seen in "Speech," at which we have already looked, a poem which states the inability to speak. The poem, however, does not seem to struggle in the way "I Know A Man" or other poems do; it is

not as tense as are his stories. Perhaps stories, for Creeley, must embody struggle; he has not written stories in many years, possibly an implication that he has come more and more to accept life as it comes to him, the lack of power in it not seen so much as difficulty. His “letting go” of the struggle is expressed most eloquently and personally in the final poem of his 1977 sequence, *Later*.

In testament
to a willingness

to *live*, I,
Robert Creeley,

being of sound body
and mind, admit

to other preoccupations—
with the future, with

the past. But now—
but now the wonder of life is

that *it is* at all,
this sticky sentimental

warm enclosure,
feels place in the physical

with others,
lets mind wander

to wondering thought,
then lets go of itself,

finds a home
on earth.

(L. unpaginated)

i cannot live with you / that would be life

come live with me and be my love

WORKS CITED

The following works are all by Robert Creeley and referred to in the text by the abbreviations.

- GD *The Gold Diggers and Other Stories*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1965.
- B *Boundary 2*, vol. VI, no. 3, Spring/Fall 1978. Special issue titled *Robert Creeley: A Gathering*.
- CO *Charles Olson & Robert Creeley: The Complete Correspondence*, v. 1, ed. by George F. Butterick. Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow Press, 1980.
- FL Robert Creeley, *For Love*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1962.
- L Robert Creeley, *Later*. West Branch, Iowa: The Toothpaste Press, 1978.
- P Robert Creeley, *Pieces*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1969.
- SW Charles Olson, *Selected Writings*, ed. by Robert Creeley. New York: New Directions, 1966.