Creeley, Robert White (1926-2005)

Robert Creeley is a postmodernist American poet whose concern for the emotional content of the quotidian influenced Deep Image poetry, the Black Mountain School of poets, and Beat poetry.

Creeley was born in Arlington, Massachusetts on May 21, 1926. Before the age of five he had lost his physician father, and in an automobile accident the use of his left eye. Following the death of his father, Creeley moved with his mother and sister to a small farm in West Acton, where he enjoyed spending time in the woods. The relative isolation of his upbringing made him greet even strangers generously, a grace for which Creeley was known even after he had achieved literary fame.

Following formative years in the Holderness Academy in Plymouth, New Hampshire, Creeley attended Harvard, where he received little support for his writing. In 1944, restless and discontented, Creeley was suspended from the university for shenanigans, and subsequently sought relief and adventure in the American Field Service in Burma and India. When the war was over, Creeley returned to Harvard and helped edit an undergraduate literary magazine, *The Wake*, founded as a counter to the Eliotic, New Critical bent of Harvard’s *The Advocate*. Through his earliest publications in *The Wake*, Creeley began to experiment with the quotidian subjects and diction that ran counter to the rhetorical, analytical style of poets like Eliot and Stevens. In Boston, Creeley found further countercultural influence in the local jazz clubs, about which he writes: ‘line-wise, the most complementary sense I have found is that of musicians like Charlie Parker, and Miles Davis. I am interested in how that is done, how ‘time’ there is held to a measure peculiarly an evidence (a hand) of the emotion which prompts (drives) the poem in the first place.’ Still disaffected with Cambridge culture, however, Creeley in 1946 married Ann McKinnon and left Harvard without graduating.

Much of his poetry written in the later 1940s and early 1950s documents Creeley’s rough relationship with Ann, their brief stay in Provincetown, Massachusetts, and the couple’s attempt to farm in rural New Hampshire. During this time in New Hampshire, Creeley began exchanging letters with Charles Olson. Their correspondence would yield a ten-volume series in which is developed the poetics behind both Olson’s influential *Projective Verse* and Creeley’s immediate, organic style. In a 1951 letter to Olson, Creeley writes, ‘That is all we can have, and all I want. To be always here, and never a thing of all times, or places, etc. I can’t stand that thought.’ Such focus away from historical influence reverberates from Ezra Pound’s imagist axiom, ‘An image is that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time,’ and aligns with the presentist poetics of William Carlos Williams and Louis Zukofsky.

From 1951-55 Creeley lived on the Spanish island of Mallorca and started Divers Press, which published works by Olson, Paul Blackburn, and Robert Duncan. His only novel, *The Island* (published 1962), concerns this time in the Mediterranean, and shows in his prose the same favor for personal content that occupies his poetry and that influenced the confessional impulse in post-World War II American poetry. In 1954, while Creeley and family yet resided on Mallorca, Olson convinced Creeley to return to the States to edit *Black Mountain Review* and to accept a teaching position at Black Mountain College, where Olson was principal. Splitting his time between Mallorca and Black Mountain, Creeley formed lasting artistic relationships with poets like Olson, Duncan, Denise Levertov, Jonathan Williams, and Ed Dorn. The resulting aesthetic became the Black Mountain School, a postmodernist poetics based on Creeley’s famous dictum that ‘form is never more than an extension of content,’ and the open field composition of ‘projective verse,’ in which received forms give way instead to lines composed according to breath, energy, and immediate perception. In 1957, when Black Mountain College closed due to financial difficulties, Creeley moved to Albuquerque, New Mexico, and then to San Francisco, where he used the final issue of *Black Mountain Review* to publish the work of Allen Ginsberg, Gary Snyder, Kenneth Rexroth, and others. Out of this encounter grew the San Francisco renaissance and, eventually, the Beat movement in American poetry.

Although he published several volumes with small presses in the 1950s, Creeley’s national reputation was not made until 1962, with the publication of *For Love—Poems 1950-60*. On the strength of several successful subsequent publications, Creeley went on to teach at the State University of New York at Buffalo, where in 1991 with fellow faculty Charles Bernstein, Susan Howe, and others founded the influential Poetics Program at Buffalo. Following an appointment in 2003 as Distinguished Professor of English at Brown University, Creeley died of complications from pneumonia in Odessa, Texas on March 30, 2005.

References and further reading:

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Paratext:

Robert Creeley interview on KCRW’s *Bookworm* with Michael Silverblatt:

<http://www.kcrw.com/etc/programs/bw/bw020328robert_creeley>