

“America’s American” dreamer: poet Robert Creeley (1926-2005)

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Robert Creeley, the foremost surviving promoter and practitioner of the modernist poetics of William Carlos Williams, Ezra Pound and Louis Zukofsky, died last year on March 30, his lungs giving out in a hospital in Odessa, Texas, of all places. The poet breathed his last after a three-hour drive through the arid planes of Big Bend country of the Texas panhandle, oil-boom towns, far from his beloved New England trees.

The *Washington Post* informed us that “Robert Creeley, Postmodern Poet, Professor” died where poststructuralists who strip the poem to its essentials go to die, “in the arid reaches of the American Southwest, an appropriate setting for the postmodern poet.”

Appropriate indeed. In an astonishing output 60 volumes of poetry, published correspondence, criticism, prose writing, collaborations, public readings and lectures, much of which is beautifully preserved on the Internet, Creeley made it abundantly clear that in only one place is he truly at “home,” a very important word for him. Typically, that home exists as a place in his mind, emphatically his New England.

“Almost doggedly as I had moved from the east to the west, north to south, traveling at times two to three thousand miles in each direction several times a year, I have still stayed ‘home,’ in my mind at least, still thought it must be snowing now in Boston or how pleasant it must be now in Maine with the fall leaves turning color.”

Creeley wrote those beautiful lines in “America’s American,” thrown up as a post-9/11 initiative, a golden opportunity for the White House in those confused days of grief and confusion, the *Writers on America* series online. The State Department ran a long string of honors parallel to the article, identifying the poet as a major player on the American quality literature scene, as he was in the last period of his life.

His brows garlanded with Guggenheim awards, the highly valued and valuable Bollingen, Chancellorship of the American Academy of Poets, Poet Laureate of the State of New York, and still more, Robert Creeley was given, just days after September 11, a Lifetime Achievement Award by the Lannan Foundation of Marfa, Texas, a wealthy endowment with a cool \$200,000 in the pot.

And so Robert Creeley, an oxygen canister by his side, found in this characteristic way a place stumbled into far from home, a two-months residency by chance at the Lannan foundation, a spitting distance by Texas measures from Odessa. Creeley’s passing was remembered that year in the *Odessa American*, among those promoted to glory in these parts, including also the sheriff who kicked ass, one Slim Gabriel, commemorated at length for convincing criminals that they’d be better off moving along rather than “dealing with a fearless sheriff,” a historian with a neat collection of English-style ties and hats, and on to Robert Creeley, mentioned ahead of the oilman who “was always there to make sure the ship was tight,” and, finally, the local lad who died in Afghanistan. “No, I think they need me right now,” the latter told his mother before his second deployment.

It was to this youth, and thousands like him, that Creeley was speaking in “Help!,” the *least* postmodernist of his poems in his late period when

postmodernism was notable in his poems mainly for its absence:

Sitting in a bunker,
feeling blue?
Don’t be a loser,
It wasn’t you—

Wasn’t you wanted
To go kill people,
Wasn’t you caused
All this trouble.

Wonderful lines! It happened that the White House sought to follow up its outreach to creative folk in 2003 by having the First Lady, Laura Bush, host a “Poetry and the American Voice” conference. Sam Hamill, an invitee and opponent of the Iraq invasion, called on other poets to send poems to take with him, and received thousands of politically charged poems, forcing the cancellation of the White House event, signaling a challenge to postmodernism and its hatred of ‘reference,’ and arousing widespread interest in the Poets Against the War web site and subsequent antiwar anthologies.

Creeley commented in a surprising and powerful way at this time in the Australian newspaper, the *Sunday Age*, on the poets’ “authority and responsibility of being the voice of the people, the expression of feelings—neither as judgment nor as objective opinion,” but an enactment in poetic form of collective anguish. The poem “Help!” has an astonishing conclusion, an altogether unexpected turn for a poet for whom “one” was, earlier, and for so long, a lonely number. Robert Creeley was many things through his career, even postmodernist, but the people’s voice he was not, until his last days, that is:

Sing together!
Make sure it’s loud!
One’s always one,
But the world’s a crowd
Of people, people,
All familiar.
Take a look!

We should see Creeley’s sense of home in the new century, already soaked with the blood of people in imperialist adventures, against the background of how it felt to be an American in the world at the end of World War II and returning home as in “The Return,” written when Creeley came back to his studies at Yale, having served through 1944-45

in the Burma-India theatre as an ambulance driver. It is Creeley's first published poem:

Quiet as is proper for such places;
The street, subdued, half-snow, half-rain,
Endless, but ending in darkened doors.
Inside, they who will be there always,
Quiet, as is proper for such people
Enough for now to be here, and
To know my door is one of these.

This sense of some permanent form, even if established in the mind, where "they who will always be there" await, had to meet the hard reality of postwar America in which Creeley and his company led erratic and displaced lives among "the scholars of war," as Allen Ginsberg called them. The poet of "home" was simply not at home in the postwar American culture. In fact, the joy of finding shelter in friendship and family relationships, mixed inevitably by the recognition of the fragility of that "home" and the seeming groundlessness of existence as relationships end and people die, all that has been a constant theme in Creeley's writings from his first novel, *The Island*, onward.

The American poetry of the pre- and postwar years was seeking consciously a way of engaging the culture of its time in the social, political and formal issues posed in such long poems as Ezra Pound's *Cantos*, William Carlos Williams' *Paterson*, and Charles Olson's *Maximus Poems*. These were by design civic poems addressing a large community, not just the readers and practitioners of poetry. By the 1960s, however, the modernist tradition of these poets had increasingly grown self-referential, having lost hope in finding large audiences and in poetry as a communicative instrument. American poetry in its various circles (San Francisco, Black Mountain, New York, Beat) had forged a signature style that was minimalist, highly elliptical and very self-absorbed, as if the reader was overhearing an internal monologue or a shared joke.

There came for Creeley a period of disillusionment with logical and analytic thought or propositional statements in such Creeley collections as *Words* (1967), *Pieces* (1969) and *A Day Book* (1972). As Creeley then put it in a brief note, poems are "what might exist in words as primarily the fact of its activity" and further "I wanted the poem itself to exist and that could never be possible as long as some subject significantly elsewhere was involved." And so we have many minimalist productions like "A Loop" from *Thirty Things* (1974):

No
one
thing

anyone does.

Then Creeley unexpectedly turned again to the world and its human community, just about the time when the postmodernist poet-professors of the Language school had taken a dominant position in American literature with their attempt to make revolution by freeing language of subject and referential function. Robert Creeley went the other way, toward a "world is not enough with us" position as in "Love" from *Later* (1978)

There are words voluptuous
as the flesh

in its moisture
its warmth.

Tangible, they tell
the reassurances,
the comforts,
of being human.

Not to speak them
makes abstract
all desire
and its death at last.

Thus, Creeley rose from nearly a decade of mind-tripping and settled down on earth to live with others as in the tenth poem of the "Later" sequence; "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." Again and again, the late Creeley, no postmodernist, brought to the forefront the subject in history, the person within the human community.

True, Creeley was not given to the rhetorical and programmatic insistences found in the long poems of his modernist masters, but there is another order of pleasure when Creeley discovers a communal space in historical time in such common social practice as the fall burning of leaves. This is the third poem of the "Later" sequence:

The small
spaces of existence
sudden
smell of burning
leaves makes
place in time
these days
(these days)
passing,
common
to one
and all.

"One," in short, is no longer a lonely number of his poems and "home" is no longer a temporary, troubled, unstable refuge in a relationship with another person or fellow poet. It is in this context that, shortly before his death, Creeley sought to make a larger statement from a new poetic address, the community of human beings in their historical and material existence on earth. He says, for instance "Goodbye" to a bloody and inhuman century we have just left.

The century was well along
When I came in
And now that's ending,
I realize it won't
Be long.
But couldn't it all have been
A little nicer,
As my mother'd say. Did it
have to kill everything in sight.
Did right always have to be so wrong?

I know this body is impatient.
I know I constitute only a meager voice and mind,
Yet I loved, I love.
I want no sentimentality.
I want no more than home.

The poem “Ground Zero,” Creeley’s entry in the *Poets Against War* web site, wonderfully depicts the turn to the people as something intimate and familiar, very much in his own style, a metaphysical shudder. He had just gone through the poem with the thought that there would be a knock on the door where he had a home and someone else would answer to look out to see what’s there, “even if nothing is,” an emptiness or absence. And then, an unexpected optimism, even if it is a dream:

Persist, go on, believe.
Dreams may be all we have,
whatever one believe
of worlds wherever they are—
with people waiting there
will know us when we come
when all the strife is over,
all the sad battles lost and won,
all turned to dust.

So, we are back with his earliest poems, that return home where behind menacing and darkened doors there is something warm and familiar, his people waiting, the American people. He writes in “America” as the place where “we, the people” first took meaning and where precisely 150 years before Creeley’s death, Walt Whitman proposed in the preface to his *Leaves of Grass* that America itself was its greatest poem. The American dream has become an anguished cry to return that dream Creeley holds onto with such fervor:

America you ode for reality!
Give back the people you took.
Let the sun shine again
on the four corners of the world
you thought of first but do not
own, or keep like a convenience.
People are your own word, you
invented that locus or term.
Here, you said and say, is
where we are. Give back
what we are, these people you made,
us, and nowhere but you to be.

Poetry, like all arts, is permeated with social and historical forces, however refracted these forces are to the prism of that “accident” which Creeley stumbles into without design, finding in events the poems waiting to be written, at least as a pose. He had his mystical, coterie poet phase, like all poets of his “company,” but in the words of Ezra Pound, “the age demanded an image of its accelerating grimace.”

Here was his new voice, in the first poem to appear after his passing. In it we see why those from Plato onwards who thought to found a *Republic* on the end of history dread poets: they imagine alternative worlds, their *polis*, and stir things up.

One bell wouldn’t ring loud enough
So they beat the bell to hell, Max,
with an axe, show it who’s boss,
boss. Me, I dreamt I dwelt in
someplace one could relax
but I was wrong, wrong, *wrong*.
You got a song man, sing it.
You got a bell man, ring it.

This is poetry rooted in the real world, humanistic, subject-centered, engaged and embodied. Creeley, thou shouldst be living at this hour. American poetry, fen of stagnant postmodernist waters, hath need of thee.



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