

POETRY WARRIOR: ROBERT CREELEY IN HIS LETTERS

Creeley, Robert. *The Selected Letters of Robert Creeley*, ed. Rod Smith, Peter Baker, and Kaplan Harris. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014.

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“The book,” wrote Robert Creeley to Rod Smith, who was then hard at work on the volume in question, Creeley’s *Selected Letters*, “will certainly ‘tell a story.’” Now that the text of that book has emerged from Smith’s laptop and rests between hard covers, it’s a good time to ask just what story those letters tell. Certainly it isn’t a personal one. Creeley was a New Englander, through and through, and of the silent generation to boot. Yankee reticence blankets the letters too thickly for us to feel much of the texture of Creeley’s quotidian life, beyond whether he feels (to use his favored idiom) he’s “making it” through the times or not. Instead, the letters, taken together, tell an intensely literary story—and, as the plot develops, an institutional, academic one. Call this story “From the Outside In,” maybe. Or, better, treat it as one of the many *Rashomon*-like eyewitness accounts of that contentious epic that goes by the title *The Poetry Wars*.

If, like me, you entered the little world of American poetry in the 1990s, you found the Cold War that was ending in the realm of politics to be in full effect in poetry. What had begun as a brushfire conflict between rival journals and anthologies in the fifties and early sixties had settled into an institutionalized rivalry, with an Iron Curtain drawn between the mutually suspicious empires of Iowa City and Buffalo. The longstanding Iowa Writers Workshop found itself in a geo-poetic stalemate with a younger, more radical opponent, the Poetics Program at SUNY-Buffalo, which Creeley helped found in 1991, and which formalized Buffalo as the institutional home for poets who rankled at the idea that history had ended with Robert Lowell. For many young poets, it seemed one had to pick a side, and treat the rival camp with deep mistrust, if not contempt. For others, it all seemed a bit pointless, especially the rhetoric of resentment emanating from Buffalo, perhaps the best-endowed poetry program in the nation at the time. Reading Creeley’s *Selected Letters*, which begins with a wartime letter from Creeley to his family and ends with an email he sent two weeks before his death in 2005, we get a view from the trenches of the postwar poetry wars, from their beginnings to a time when they were fading into literary history. We get, too, a vivid picture of the outsider status, or non-status, of innovative poets like Creeley in their formative years (“we do not have any status as

writers in this country” he wrote in 1956).

The lack of status and external affirmation help explain why Creeley turned to William Carlos Williams self-affirming line from “The Desert Music,” “I am a poet. I am. I am” as a kind of touchstone. Indeed, one of the things that emerge from the letters is how yearningly Creeley turned to Williams as a mentor, and how generously Williams responded. Creeley repeatedly quotes Williams in his correspondence, often meditating over Williams’ assertion in the *Autobiography* that “the poet thinks with his poem, in that lies his thought.” This is a reiteration of the old Coleridgean idea of organic form, of the poem being not an illustration of an idea but something whose parts were so arranged that it would be (to paraphrase Cleanth Brooks) heresy to paraphrase it. For Creeley, though, the dictum represented no mere formal matter, but a way of making objective and precise his most troubling fears and desires:

It seemed that, first writing, I was constantly falling over my own feet trying to say what I wanted to. If, for example, I wanted to involve a sense of love, or pain, loss, whatever, I could not it seemed place it as clearly as I felt it. So I began, then, trying to articulate as carefully as possible areas of possible thought, call them—to the definition Williams gives in his *Autobiography*—The poet thinks with his poem, in that lies his thought, and that in itself is his profundity... It was a very germinal attitude for me... I am finally a shy man, or was, when younger, painfully so—and began, I suppose, to use the poem as an articulation of all the ‘unresolved’ things I felt and found no other means to ‘say.’ It was also an exorcising of sorts—the craft made exact... fears of hopes, or literal experiences, that otherwise floated in an entirely personal term of threat, etc. I felt if I made it possible, for myself as well as for others, to ‘go through’ these situations in a poem—where the formal unity provides a coherence and an objectivity of place—they might both better understand them and also find them at last related to a tolerable entity—no longer ghost, etc.

Perhaps it was because Creeley was so committed to his particular notion of what a poem should be—or perhaps it was because of the resentments of his marginal status—that we find him so frequently combative and intolerant in his letters. Theodore Roethke takes part in “every fucking filthiness of literary practice in the US today,” Louis Simpson’s work is “pathetically poor,” W.S. Merwin is “that fucking Merwin” and a “symbol of rot.” Robert Bly is “no poet,” while Helen Vendler embodies a “sad dumbness.” Kenneth Patchen (“fuck him”) is a “pathetic idiot,” and there are sneers for Louise Glück, Charles Wright, and a host of others. Kenneth Koch and Frank O’Hara get off easy with the label “lightweights,” although at one point the disdain for O’Hara looks to be much stronger. “I saw Frank O’Hara’s book

in a local shoppe,” we read, “and I think I could cut him.” The fact that this was written on a postcard to Don Allen in 1958 offers one opportunity to soften the threatened violence: Allen was working on his seminal anthology *The New American Poetry*, and it may be that Creeley was offering Allen editorial advice (a rather harsh judgment on O’Hara, certainly, but better than a knifing). It is also possible that the jazz-obsessed Creeley was using the slang specific to jazzmen, in which “cutting” meant “embarrassing by out playing.” I am informed by one of the editors that a great deal of agonized discussion went into the explanatory footnote addressing these matters.

Creeley was no pluralist when it came to poetry, and the letters show little patience for those who were. When Cid Corman’s editorial policies at *Origin* proved too broad for Creeley’s taste, Creeley denounced him as a “fuckup” who “floats all over the place.” When Kenneth Rexroth supported the poetry of Roethke, Creeley wrote him an impassioned letter, saying “I wd have you by the lapels anyhow; jesus god to say only I don’t understand. I want to, I don’t. Because I will never forget this...” He takes it even harder when William Carlos Williams speaks favorably of W.H. Auden—in fact, he can’t quite believe such a betrayal is possible: “I almost sense,” he writes Williams, “a gun at your back.” It is strange to read, in this context, that Creeley feared the poetry world would “withdraw into ‘teams,’” especially since he had already named his all-star lineup: “Robert Duncan; Charles Olson; Paul Blackburn; Irving Layton; Denise Levertov, and perhaps a few others, though I cannot at the moment think of them.” Whatever his misgivings about the taking of sides may have been, Creeley was clearly an active soldier in the poetry wars, and opposed to any talk of *détente*.

Like the young Yeats, the young Creeley writes passionately about poetics and personalities in his letters; and like the older Yeats, the older Creeley writes letters dominated by institutional concerns (with Yeats it is all publishing rights and theater sets; with Creeley it is tenure lines and Guggenheims). Given Creeley’s increasingly established position in American poetry, and his enviable academic perch, it is a bit strange to see his sense of himself as an aggrieved outsider continue under circumstances so unlike those of his youth. In Creeley’s own late-in-life formulation, this attitude became a “habit” that endured, even when he found himself a Chancellor of the Academy of American Poets and a special professor with “0 to minimal” duties, a situation so comfortable that he confessed to Susan Howe “they are paying such money I am ashamed to tell you.”

That the habit of alienation and *ressentiment* endured well beyond the situation that gave rise to it is amply demonstrated by a 1985 letter in which Creeley claims that poets from the tradition with which he identifies are

ignored and disdained by academe. Charles Olson and even William Carlos Williams are, he says, “action the academic won’t touch with a ten foot pole.” This had certainly been true in Creeley’s youth, a fact easily forgotten by those of us who were given “The Red Wheelbarrow” to read in junior high. But in the very year of Creeley’s complaint, we find academe abuzz with talk of William Carlos Williams. His work is analyzed in multiple articles in *The Journal of Modern Literature* and *The New England Review*, and in pieces in university-sponsored journals from *AGNI* to *Comparative Literature Studies*, from *Twentieth Century Literature* to the *Mississippi Review*. He’s the subject of discussion in the music studies journal *Tempo*, in *The Journal of Reading* and *Scandinavian Studies*, in *Pacific Coast Philology*, as well as in such far-flung venues as Spain’s *Grial*, Israel’s *Poetics Today*, and Mexico’s *Diálogos*. Even such traditionally conservative journals as *The Sewanee Review* and the *Kenyon Review* (one of Creeley’s *bêtes noir*) gave Williams positive treatment in 1985. The list goes on. The academics set their ten-foot poles aside for Olson, too: the University of California Press’s edition of Olson’s *Maximus Poems* received positive notice in *Modern Philology* and *World Literature Today* in 1985; the University of Illinois Press’s study *Charles Olson’s Maximus*, written by Don Byrd (professor at SUNY-Albany) was noted in that year’s *Yearbook of English Studies*, a very fine article on Olson appeared in *Criticism*, and the journal *American Studies International* called for a fuller treatment of Olson as a central figure in the history of American poetry. One could go on, mentioning articles in *Modern Language Studies* and the *New England Review*, or the fact that in 1985 George Butterick of the University of Connecticut had just published the sixth volume of his edition of *Charles Olson and Robert Creeley: The Complete Correspondence*, but one hopes the point is established.

Resentful Creeley’s rhetoric may have been, and demonstrably unjustified by the time he complained about pole-wielding academics warding off Olson and Williams, but it wasn’t just a matter of a cranky disposition: Creeley’s formation in a time when poetic recognition for those who wrote as he did was minimal left its scars: early alienation cuts a deep rut. It is to be regretted that it entered the pedagogy, and remains to this day a habit of some grizzled veterans of the poetry wars.

While the story of the poetry wars simmers at the core of Creeley’s letters, it would be wrong to reduce his *Selected Letters* to a single narrative. Despite his reticence about his personal life, for example, there are moments when we do catch glimpses of the intimate Creeley. In small flashes we see plenty of material of the sort over which another kind of correspondent might have lingered: pain at the thought of the father Creeley lost as a small

child; divorce; the tragic death of a young daughter; one or two references to the “drunkenness and ugly violence” that plagued his life generally, and his marriages particularly. His wartime service in a medical capacity in India and Burma, where he looked on helplessly as countless young men died on blood-drenched stretchers “in every conceivable posture,” was intense, and perhaps formative, but gets less than a half page of treatment in more than 400 pages of letters. Creeley is reticent, too, when it comes to politics. When he does write about social conditions, he can be quite acute, as when he describes what amount to the feudal conditions of the Guatemalan plantation estate where he lived in the late fifties. And he does, on occasion, take a meaningful stand when pushed a little: one of the pleasures of reading the letters is seeing Robert Duncan talk Creeley out of going on a State Department sponsored junket to Pakistan, when participation would have implied approval of American foreign policy during the war in Vietnam. Generally, though, Creeley is a not atypical World War Two veteran in his skepticism, even cynicism, about grand political schemes: listening to the sounds of aircraft flying overhead on their way to bomb rebels in the Guatemalan hills, he despairs of any political solution to injustice, seeing no solution, “since each government in turn seems to invest itself with what it can take.” The individual can trust no political cause or party, only himself—and, as Creeley’s frequent statements of guilt and self-doubt attest, often enough he can’t even do that.

One encounters many fine little asides as we move through the letters—an account of the “wild business in Vancouver” in 1963, when Ginsberg, Olson, Duncan and Levertov converged on the city; a sharp little portrait of a not-yet-famous Jack Kerouac in San Francisco (“one of those slightly red-faced quiet men.... I like him very much”); observations on grading student papers (“it’s a little heartbreaking, and endless”); and a note to Charles Bernstein complaining that the title of Bernstein’s journal *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* was “a son of a bitch to type.” But there is a real story here, Creeley’s, and that of a cohort from his generation—the story of a network of the isolated few reaching out and supporting one another as poets when no one else would, in what Jerome Rothenberg (one of Creeley’s correspondents), described as “an effort somehow in common.” It is a story that begins at the fringes, and ends with the old outsiders presiding over a subdivision of the literary/academic complex in which so many of us happily reside.