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*Two Cheers for Creeley (and Hardy and Herrick): A Note on the New Selected Poems*

Among Robert Creeley's many poems, one that has long been a favorite of mine appeared in *Mirrors*, the first volume following his first *Collected Poems* (California 1982). "Versions," a poem in three parts that Creeley included in his *Selected Poems* (California 1991), is one that Benjamin Friedlander has excluded from the new, revised and extended *Selected* which came out from California this year and has been much reviewed and commented upon. Of course Friedlander faced acute problems. Creeley, whom he had been consulting, died before Friedlander's work was complete. Then, too, Friedlander had to accommodate four new collections that rounded out Creeley's work while keeping his *Selected* to about the size of the earlier volume. In fact, Friedlander's is shorter, by twenty-eight pages. Given those limitations, we shouldn't be surprised to find a personal favorite absent and so not carried through as significant to Creeley's lifelong work. Nevertheless, I find the new *Selected* poorer for the absence of "Versions." Its epigraph reads "after Hardy" and the poem begins:

Why would she come to him,  
come to him,  
in such disguise

to look again at him—  
look again—  
with vacant eyes—

and why the pain still,  
the pain—  
still useless to them—

as if to begin again—  
again begin—  
what had never been?

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I confess the epigraph caught my attention for I had been reading Hardy as had, obviously, Creeley, which seems a matter of indifference (or worse) to some of his admirers. His lines look almost formal with their dashing nod to Dickinson, a mark Creeley resorts to from time to time but nowhere else that I have noticed with quite this profusion. Dickinson was more his poet, he once said in a note when I suggested a contribution remembering Marianne Moore. Beyond the dashes, we find repetitions of word and phrase, something in each stanza, with slight, or not so slight variations of pace and effect; such moments are characteristic of his work.

That third stanza reminds me of a night in Ann Arbor around 1970, at least ten years before *Mirrors* came out, when Creeley's reading went on and on because he could hardly get through, or perhaps took delight in avoiding finishing a poem, in emphasizing process over product, by beginning, pausing, then beginning again: "and why / the pain still, and why the pain / still, and why the / pain / still, and / why the pain, the pain still / the pain, the pain / still the pain," on and on though with earlier poems that night. For some it must have been painful, for some anxious-making, for others an oddly, dramatic delight. A sense of "measure," as Williams used the word, hung in the air, a measure more sought than found and always subject to revision, and that in large part because of a certain, wary tentativeness about meaning, not only that most alleged "meanings" are ambiguous by nature but that our uncertain moral and ethical standing in the world may make us tentative about what we think we mean to say. At least something close to that is how I thought I was hearing Creeley then from my backrow vantage, and it is a sense that book after book by him has kept alive.

More than a touch of that dancing, let-us-feel-it-out-together uncertainty is in this poem too with its "pain still," "pain— / still" and the inversion in the following stanza of "begin again— / again begin." Then there's the rhyme, not only the exact repetitions but also the beautifully periodic complement of "eyes" to "disguise" and the more muted "begin" and "been," which is of an entirely different register, as if sticking to one would be too much. Then both senses of rhyme are shot through, transfixed, left "pinned and wriggling" on a wall by the eye-rhyme "pain" and "again" which rings with overtones (or worse) of doggerel as Creeley smiles on a schoolmarm's insistence on rain drumming mainly in our brain again. "Again" seems

one of his favorite words, which, once you notice, you keep on seeing. Rather than end, really, we breathe and begin again and again. Lyric traditions, continuous above all else, are to be found amusing yet indulged, loved warily but not jilted; they take their stand in the background quietly, like Dickinson or Hardy, only to stumble forward occasionally like that other Hardy, Oliver. "Versions" seems most related to the poet's *Poems of 1912-13*, written for his dead wife, Emma, and very likely as Stephen Burt has suggested to "The Voice," with its own repetition, "how you call to me, call to me." It has the feel in fact of a good many of those lyrics and is all the more impressive for its succinct and deft abstraction of them. Dialogical in its address to the English poet, it says, as it were, "I've been listening and would capture in my lines the bittersweet of yours." The third section echoes the first in its halftones and undertones, and in eight more lines, locates more Hardy:

The weather's still grey  
and the clouds gather  
where they once walked  
out together,

greeted the world with  
a faint happiness  
watched it die  
in the same place.

Quatrains that rhyme, faintly in the first instance, with a little more torque of half rhyme in the second. Grey weather, gathering clouds, lovers walking together, happy, but only faintly, in the same place, which is their place, be it Buffalo or Wessex.

I have skipped over the second section of which I am less fond. Assuming Creeley finds the poetic in the anti-poetic and hears always in his anti-poetry echoes and murmurs of the poetic, this small section is tipped toward the prosaic side: "Why be / persistently / hurtful— / no truth / to tell / or wish to? / Why?" But even here there's cadence; the pause-laden passage undermines the implied certainty of a rhetorical question. There's balance in the greater length of the second-in and next-to-last lines, and a touch of rhyme.

It has become a cliché to say that Creeley's best work came early, that nothing later equals *For Love* (1962). I find that doubtful. It is an issue though with which Friedlander had to contend. Apparently, he was encouraged by Creeley to rethink the earlier *Selected* and to come to his own conclusions. As Simic observes in the *New York Review of Books*, the 1,300-plus pages that make up the now two volume *Collected Poems* will overwhelm most readers and a much slimmer *Selected* will carry Creeley along among them. It was bold and significant work that Friedlander was asked to do, and he did it boldly. The three volumes that conclude Creeley's earlier *Selected*, *Mirrors*, *Memory Gardens*, and *Windows*, are represented in Friedlander by thirty-five poems. Creeley had chosen forty-seven poems from those same three volumes. Bearing in mind that Friedlander had four more volumes to deal with in the same number of pages or fewer, we may expect some trimming. What surprises me though is how often Friedlander deleted Creeley's selections and replaced them with his own. Nineteen of Friedlander's choices were not Creeley's and so are offered now as correction, and that is over half. Moreover, Friedlander set aside thirty-one of Creeley's selections; that's a hair under two thirds, suggesting that two out of three times, Friedlander has a better idea of Creeley than Creeley. Those exclusions include "Versions" and "Small Dancers," a poem that either Creeley or editors at California chose to represent the entire earlier *Selected Poems* by printing it on the inside front flap of its dust jacket.

Set the theme  
with a cadence  
of love's old  
sweet song—

No harm in  
The emotional  
nor in remembering all  
you can or want to.

Let the faint, faded music  
pour forth its wonder  
and bewitch whom it will,  
still dancers under the moon.

No harm in the emotional? Could it be that here is just the note keepers of the Creeley legacy would prefer to discard since it doesn't fit their program, this memory of old sweet song, of emotional though faded music bewitching whom it will, of dancers under, oh-my-god, the moon?

*The Collected Poems of Robert Creeley, 1975–2005* was also published in the last year. It reprints as a preface a note called “Old Poetry” that Creeley wrote first for *So There: Poems 1976-83*. His preface takes some lines by Oliver Wendell Holmes (!) as an epigraph and works around to a lyric of Robert Herrick's before ending with this dedicatory line, “*With love, for Herrick and Zukofsky.*” Along the way come a few assertions with answers that imply doubt: “*A Nation of nothing but poetry...*’ *Who owns it? ‘He is the president of regulation...*’ *How did that go?*” So much for regulation. That follows an assertive passage in which Creeley reflects on his earlier more programmatic leanings:

It felt particularly American to have no viable tradition, no consequence of others seemingly sufficient, my elders contested if not dismissed. Yet, paradoxically, we were exceptionally chauvinistic, felt finally a contempt for the poetry of that old world, the European, which nonetheless still intimidated us.

Generally the schools of poetry that wish to draw on Creeley chart an all-American, actually only North American, actually only U.S. course from Whitman to Pound and Williams to Zukofsky to Olson and Creeley that diminishes each writer by insisting that our New is The New and plays up “the American Grain” of the work over its other elements. Perhaps Creeley thought when he wrote this new preface that American exceptionalism plays as poorly in poetry as it does in politics, that however understandable in the nineteenth century it was outdated by late in the twentieth, and that without letting go of Zukofsky, he could cherish Hardy and Herrick. If so, he stood by that thought by reprinting it as “Preface” to the second volume of his *Collected Poems*. Here is the Herrick poem toward its close:

Trust to good verses then;  
They only will aspire,  
When pyramids, as men,  
Are lost i' th' funeral fire.

And when all bodies meet,  
In Lethe to be drowned,  
Then only numbers sweet  
With endless life are crown'd.

Perhaps Herrick's repetitions of simple words, "when" and "then," foretell the eventual Creeley, and the little poetic licenses that now seem quaint—"i' th'," "crown'd"—are small keepsakes, like arrowheads found by a boy in some old field freshly plowed. Not that he would really hunt with them, now that we have graduated to slingshots and beebee guns, but he might pocket them gleefully.

Friedlander's *Selected* and the completed publishing of Creeley's *Collected Poems* have inspired several substantial reviews, admiring of his work if not always equally of Creeley: August Kleinzahler in the *New York Times Book Review*, Susan Stewart in *The Nation*, Charles Simic as mentioned in the *New York Review of Books*, Stephen Burt in the *London Review of Books*, and Marjorie Perloff in an essay online from the *Electronic Poetry Review*. There is plenty of web discussion too. Perloff is wonderfully clear eyed in her opening placement of Creeley, ticking off ways he is unlike any of the poets with whom he is commonly associated: Olson, Duncan, Levertov, Zukofsky, Oppen, Reznikoff, Ginsberg, or Corso. She goes on with wit and generosity to discover in M. L. Rosenthal, one of Creeley's early nay-sayers, a reading worth exploring, that "Creeley's restraint and cool control is the last stand of genuine sensibility, against the violence and ruthlessness of twentieth-century civilization." That the hesitation one feels constantly in his lyrics is the apt note of our time and a remarkable counterpart to the doctrinaire certainty of so many in the camps surrounding him and aspiring to include or exclude him. Rosenthal's reading is a "melodramatic comment," Perloff proposes, but not one to dismiss since it reads Creeley's hesitant "minimalism," which damns him in the eyes of many, as a struggle, often "stuttering" as Donald Hall once suggested, for what another master hoped "would suffice." And so we can braid a sense of highly disciplined, constantly self-critiquing thought into Creeley's evident sense of difficult measure, which Perloff goes on to examine in an early poem from *For Love*. Toward the end of her essay, Perloff records her disappointment in Creeley's protesting late in life that theory was becoming the enemy of poetry and so

turning away from the Language Poets who had adopted him as one of their forebears, calling himself “a ‘simple’ lyric poet who looked to experience and to tradition for inspiration,” one who might have (imagine it!) something like a sensibility,

in his last decade or so, he made sure he allied himself, not just with experimental poets, but with the larger scene of postwar American—and also British—poetry, endorsing a wide variety of younger poets from Frank Bidart and Forrest Gander to Heather McHugh and Sharon Olds, as if he wanted to warn his more immediate coterie not to box him into a corner.

I question her hint that the timing of these moves makes it a late-life folly and her phrasing, “he made sure,” since it characterizes Creeley as cautiously calculating, though, having never met the man, I’m in no position to know. Still it is possible that he simply deepened, matured, and arrived at a different judgment. “Trust to good verses” indeed, he may have thought, for good verses—not philosophy, not theory, not programs—form poetry’s fertile ground where arrowheads are yet to be found. Or as Chaucer put it in what was an axiom already in the fourteenth century:

For out of olde feldys, as men sey,  
Comyth al this newe corn from yer to yere....

Chaucer brings to mind another of my Creeley favorites, and another poem Friedlander excludes, “A Calendar,” from *Memory Gardens*, a title that nods to Allen Ginsberg in a book that includes, among other lyrics, one “For Ted Berrigan.”

“A Calendar” appeared first as a chapbook from the Toothpaste, later Coffee House Press, located then in West Branch, Iowa. It offers a poem for each month, like an old Book of Hours, with nods among them to Wyatt and Emerson as well as to Chaucer. April, Chaucer’s month, begins as deft and literal modernizing of Chaucer’s most famous lines then glides into paraphrase and variation in the course of four stanzas worth quoting in full. Notice for starters how Chaucer’s pentameter loses a foot per line in Creeley:

When April with his showers sweet  
the drought of March has pierced to the root  
and bathed every vein in such liqueur  
its virtue thus becomes the flower...

When faded harshness moves to be  
gone with such bleakness days had been,  
sunk under snows had covered them,  
week after week no sun to see,

then restlessness resolves in rain  
after rain comes now to wash all clean  
and soften buds begin to spring  
from battered branches, patient earth.

Then into all comes life again,  
which times before had one thought dead,  
and all is outside, nothing in—  
and so it once more does begin.

I don't see how I could ever be persuaded that Creeley's heart wasn't in these beautiful lines and that his allegiance did not include these old poets from whom he could, as here, begin again, which seems not to be what the avant garde wants to hear. Accordingly, at the very the end of her essay, when Perloff reminds us that it will be for readers of the future to define their Creeley—it is out of his hands now—I find a hint of license for Friedlander to hold true to the program: to make Creeley the Creeley a more theory-based school finds it needs. To do all he can, that is, to forward Creeley's Zukofsky and deny his Herrick. Which is why I will hang onto Creeley's earlier *Selected*.