

Creeley's "I Know a Man": A Metaphysical Conceit · *William T. Lawlor*

AT FIRST INSPECTION, Robert Creeley's "I Know a Man" probably does not provoke associations with the metaphysical poets of the seventeenth century, who bring together ideas that few readers expect to be joined. Mysterious in its brevity, obscure in its references, and vulgar in its language, the poem seems like a joke; however, Creeley's humor is actually yoked to serious spiritual concerns. In "I Know a Man," the joining of the antithetical forces of humor and seriousness, vulgarity and piety, and confusion and conviction creates a metaphysical energy that places Creeley in the company of Donne, Herbert, Crashaw, and other metaphysical poets of the seventeenth century.

In the first stanzas of "I Know a Man," a confused speaker reveals his spiritual weakness. He admits that he is "always talking," which indicates that he merely babbles. Apparently, the speaker tries to mask his bewilderment with drinking, but he only makes his confusion more evident, for he slurs his speech with words like "sd" and "yr," and he talks to his friend, calling him "John" although the speaker is certain that his friend's name is really something else. Moreover, while addressing "John," the speaker fumbles for words. He tries to raise questions about the lack of direction in his spiritual life, but he can only form his questions in halting, uncertain language; he asks, "what/can we do" and then slips into vagueries such as "or else, shall we &/why not." The speaker's confusion is clearest in his admission that "the darkness sur- / rounds" him and his friend. This hapless fellow wonders what alternatives exist, but the only option that occurs to him is the vulgar and materialistic suggestion to "buy a god-damn big car."

Despite such base and confused behavior, the poem takes a decisive and clearly spiritual turn in the final stanza. The setting for the dialogue is a car that the speaker is driving, and the speaker's erratic behavior worries his companion, who orders the speaker to "drive" and urges him to "look out where" he is going. The companion's recommended solution for a lack of direction on a dark road is to stop floundering with words and to keep an eye on the road. That such advice should come from a man addressed as

John is no coincidence. The name invokes associations with John the Baptist, who foretold the coming of Jesus. Consistent with this association with the name John is the fact that “John,” in economical and unequivocal language that contrasts with the rambling language of the speaker, directs the confused friend to drive “for/christ’s sake.” The utterance, on one level, is mere vulgarity on the part of the speaker’s friend, who, after all, is not really a prophet. But on a second and higher level, the name of the Saviour is not taken in vain because, for the driver, “John” (whatever his name might really be) plays the role of John the Baptist, alerting the confused man that acknowledging the value of Christ can clarify what is on the road ahead, whether the road is physical or spiritual.

The importance of recognizing Christ is reiterated in the poem’s title—“I Know a Man.” The reference is to knowing Jesus, Who can be a powerful beacon to guide the confused from their darkness. In this connection, the reader should note that the text of the poem is set in the past, as is marked by the verb “sd” in lines one, four, and ten, and the verb “was” in line four. In the text, there are also verbs in the present tense, but these either refer to continuous action or are indirect quotations of uses of the present tense in the past. The key use of the present tense, however, occurs in the title. Having gone through the experience of confusion and having received the lesson that comes in the words of “John,” the speaker is enlightened. In the title, the speaker declares that he now knows “a Man” whom he did not know before, namely Jesus. All the confusion indicated in the first three stanzas of the poem is set in contrast against the strong affirmation in the words “I Know.” The speaker now does drive “for/christ’s sake” and the poem is about how the speaker learned to do so.

This discussion does not intend to portray Creeley as a “Jesus freak” or religious fanatic. Indeed, Creeley has created a dramatic situation in which both characters speak in a way that makes spiritual seriousness seem remote. However, through Creeley’s suggestive distribution of details, the reader perceives that the speaker’s companion communicates John the Baptist’s message, both to the driver and the reader. Creeley cleverly makes language such as “goddamn” and “for/christ’s sake” point toward spiritual seriousness. Moreover, he shrewdly makes a drunkard’s miscalling of his friend’s name bring out the seriousness and value of religious

conviction. In all, Creeley's "I Know a Man" joins antithetical forces with the effectiveness of the finest metaphysical conceits of the seventeenth century.

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The Collected Poems of Robert Creeley, 1945–1975, University of California Press, 1982.