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A HKR 346. § ad 76. § (4) c) pontja értelmében:

„... A szakdolgozathoz csatolni kell egy nyilatkozatot arról, hogy a munka a hallgató saját szellemi terméke...”

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EÖTVÖS LORÁND TUDOMÁNYEGYETEM

Bölcsészettudományi Kar

# ALAPSZAKOS SZAKDOLGOZAT

*Words to be: Robert Creeley költői nyelve*

*Words to be: On the poetic language of Robert Creeley*

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# Abstract

The present thesis sets out to investigate the nature of Robert Creeley's poetic language in *For Love and Words*, and explore the processes through which his seemingly simplistic, plain vocabulary gets engaged and ordered to form a particular body of words that can carry and express the complex tensions, revelations, and reflections present in Creeley's main subject matter, human relationships. My hypothesis is that by the means of treating the material of the poem primarily as words, or things getting ordered in a particular fashion, Creeley also succeeds in objectifying intimate personal emotions and impressions in his texts. Thus, these emotions can get independent and mobile, contradicting, emphasizing, criticizing, and overriding each other, now fully inside the body of his verse.

To support this hypothesis, first I will try to illustrate the significance of Creeley via interrogating what is essentially poetic about his verse. Then I will discuss the major literary influences on his work, identifying it as an organic continuation of the radical modernist tradition into the 1960s and '70s, focusing especially on its connection to William Carlos Williams's and Charles Olson's literary activities. Subsequently, I will argue that Creeley's stance towards language shares some of its prominent features with that of Ludwig Wittgenstein, namely the preoccupation with ordinary words and the way they acquire meaning through contextualization. As Marjorie Perloff writes, "poetic writing" can be identified as "self-interruption" ("Toward" 192) and a "critique of expression" (*Wittgenstein's Ladder* 173) based on Wittgenstein. The relevance of the Wittgensteinian notion of language games will be also discussed based on Perloff's analyses in *Wittgenstein's Ladder* and "Toward a Wittgensteinian Poetics", and Linda W. Wagner's essay on Creeley's verse. After this theoretical grounding, I will conduct the close-reading analyses of "The

Language”, “I Know a Man” and “Air: “The Love of a Woman””. Thus, I will examine Creeley’s early poetry at length, focusing on his approach toward creating poetic language.

## Introduction

Boiled down into a general and thus somewhat inevitably trivial form, my objective is to observe what makes a poem a poem. It is indeed at the heart of this paper, and, naturally, the majority of scholarly writings about poetry aim to discover something similar as well. However, I firmly believe that examining Creeley’s poetry can be – if probably not conclusive – especially rewarding and fruitful in this respect, since almost all of those conventional features to which we could immediately, automatically attribute the texts’ apparent lyrical nature, are simply not present. Consequently, his verse might provide us with material on which, with Wittgenstein’s words, there is not that much “dead rubble” to break through to get as close as possible to “reach the living warm seed”, which is language in our case (*Culture* 16).

At first sight, most of the poems of *For Love* and *Words* are not very unusual in terms of form. The compact three or four-line stanzas and the presence of internal rhymes, half-rhymes, and alliterations seem to satisfy the general expectations from a poem. But the abrupt line-breaks, the frequent visual emphases on function words, split phrases, and compound words deftly deconstruct the assumption that these texts would make a true effort to live up to any aesthetic standard outside of them, or that they would follow any scheme set to please the eye or the ear. The words themselves appear to be humble, Creeley’s is not a sort of exotic vocabulary or extravagant verbal inventiveness that would qualify their constellations as poetic.

Similarly, the tone of Creeley's poems is equally far from the exuberant assertiveness of Walt Whitman and the intellectual, analytical stance of T. S. Eliot; it refuses to be placed in the conventional poetic dichotomy of emotion and intellect. In terms of theme, neither is there any trace of an explicit "message" or commitment in any social or political sense, nor a transcendental, supernatural order or belief system that is being represented in his poetry. Following the steps of his mentor, William Carlos Williams, Creeley is deeply concerned with the local, the immediate environment that surrounds him, finding the gist of human experience in the events of day-to-day life. Indeed, his focus mostly being inside his own self, he does not seem to reach out even as "far" as Williams did with "The Red Wheelbarrow". As Altieri aptly put it, "Creeley may be the most original of Williams' many followers because he alone alters the objectivist aesthetic from emphasis on concrete perceptions of objects and events to concrete renderings of complex movements of the self-reflexive psyche" (523). He is also inclined to classify himself as an artist primarily attracted by personal relationships:

Well, I've always been embarrassed for a so-called larger view. I've been given to write about that which has the most intimate presence for me, and I've always felt very, very edgy those few times when I have tried to gain a larger view. I've never felt right. I am given as a man to work with what is most intimate to me - these senses of relationship among people. I think, for myself at least, the world is most evident and most intense in those relationships. (qtd in Hallberg 365)

Observing such proximity of the source and the target of poetic attention can result in another temptation to place and evaluate Creeley in the confessional strain of literature, since its most prominent feature, a strong subjective presence in the text, seems to be inevitable if one is one's own poetic source. However, Creeley's "I" and the way it is placed in the context of any given lyric situation proves to be very different from the approach of the confessional poets. It is not an outspoken, coherent emotional honesty, a lyrical record of personal

experience that is at the core of his art, but rather a curious, permanent interplay between perplexing, intimate details and elusively general reflections, as in the case of “Something” (*Collected Poems* 281), “To Bobbie” (*Collected Poems* 337), or “The Hole” (*Collected Poems* 344).

Despite all of these peculiarities, missing poetic features that I mentioned before, I am by no means implying that Creeley’s writing stands detached from all poetic customs or that there is no craftsmanship involved on his side at all. In a letter to Creeley on the poems of *For Love* Williams stated that he had “the subtlest feeling for the measure that I encounter anywhere except in the verses of Ezra Pound” (qtd in Mariani 187), which is an extraordinary compliment from the old master if we consider how fundamentally important “measure” was to both poets. Creeley’s handling of rhythm in all contexts of the line, the stanza, and the poem indeed suggests a profound awareness of proportion, which, in the case of “Midnight” (*Collected Poems* 209), “The House” (*Collected Poems* 237), or “The Love of a Woman” (*Collected Poems* 240) for instance, results in an aural effect, a musicality that is akin to Louis Zukofsky’s verse. Besides, as another mentor and friend, Charles Olson put it, he “lands syntax down the alley” (qtd in Creeley *Collected Poems* Back cover) through exploring and challenging the possibilities of various forms of deixis, function words, and punctuation. He was and still is widely praised by critics and fellow poets for creating an authentic, inventive, yet accessible poetic language, which is, as John Ashbery put it, “as basic and necessary as the air we breathe; as hospitable, plain and open as our continent itself” (qtd in Creeley *Collected Poems* Back Cover).

Some of the features that I have mentioned so far have received considerable criticism, which, although from different angles, questioned the validity and the poetic nature of Creeley’s texts. For example, M. L. Rosenthal claimed the poems in *For Love* and *Words* to be “brief mutterings... or the few shuffling steps of an actor pretending to dance” and stated



that “the work demand[s] too little from its author, though the author demands a good deal of attentive sympathy and faith from the reader” (qtd in Perloff “Radical”). Altieri also criticizes Creeley’s poetics, and argues that his compacted style and level of abstraction he operates with are incompatible:

In his poetics of thinking Creeley becomes a victim of what had been his greatest strength: his taut, ascetic language. In short personal lyrics the spare style both intensifies emotional concentration and twists drama toward abstraction. But when the abstraction becomes the site of poetic activity, the same asceticism inordinately narrows the field and impoverishes the sense of self we need to connect the abstractions to experience. (qtd in Montgomery)

According to Perloff, Helen Vendler shared this aversion towards Creeley’s poetic language: “In Creeley, there is a relentless process of abstraction, of “serial diminishment of progression”; he purchases composition at the price of momentum and sweep” (qtd in Perloff “Radical”). This view was also expressed by Christopher Ricks, who implies that the formal constraints that Creeley and his peers refused to adhere to, might have given him still more linguistic freedom, than his style. “[Creeley] would seem to be a professional quietist and libertarian, but these conventions (e.g. no regular verse, no standard linear development) turn out to be more cramping than those of a minuet” (qtd in Perloff “Radical”). Creeley’s poetry was also hauled up by Vendler for the lack of a wider social spectrum compared to Williams’s, and by Richard Tillinghast, who claimed that “it has not been his ambition to address in a sustained manner the large human issues that are traditionally associated with major poetry” (qtd in Perloff “Radical”). Perloff also adds that her own critical reactions to Creeley include stating that his verse avoids communication for probably grounded, but unknown reasons, that the level of its ambiguity can dismount the reader’s attention, and that it is sometimes simply incomprehensible (“Radical”).

By briefly touching upon so many different aspects and considerations in connection with Creeley's poetry, we could gain an overview of its central, more controversial issues that are to be discussed in detail, and perhaps also managed to discard some of the less relevant approaches. Now I will turn to the most significant artistic influences on his work, an aspect that I believe is key in the process of understanding Creeley's stance on writing. Thus, we will be able to view his work in the continuity of American Literature, in the company of artists who inspired his unique means of poetic expression.

## Major Influences

The works of Robert Creeley constitute a genuine, on many levels singular, but also profoundly interconnected part in the body of American poetry. He consciously acknowledged the effect of all kinds of artistic groups or individuals on him throughout his career by paying homage to them in interviews, letters, essays, and poems. From his early twenties, he corresponded extensively with fellow writers, most notably William Carlos Williams and Charles Olson, traveled all over the United States and Europe to encounter such communities as the San Francisco Renaissance, Black Mountain College, and the art scene of New York in the fifties (*Selected Letters* xxxiii). This clearly illustrates the significance of being connected for Creeley, a sense of belonging to a specific stream of American literature, to influence and to be influenced by others' poetry.

## Radical Modernism

Creeley's stance towards literature is firmly rooted in the radical modernist movements of the early 20th century, most notably in Imagism and Objectivism. The imagists were a small group of poets comprised of Ezra Pound, William Carlos Williams, H. D., Amy

Lowell, and F.S. Flint among others, who, dissatisfied with the conventional forms and modes of expression in poetry, set out to create a new kind of verse according to the following rules:

- (1) Direct treatment of the "thing," whether subjective or objective.
- (2) To use absolutely no word that did not contribute to the presentation.
- (3) As regarding rhythm: to compose in sequence of the musical phrase, not in sequence of a metronome.
- (4) The "doctrine of the Image"—not for publication. (Flint 71)

According to Richard Gray, the objective of these proposals is to avoid the artificial, elated, often moralizing, or sentimental voice that had been widely associated with poetry; to create texts that remain in close contact with the object or experience being described. The “thing” is presented, not represented in an imagist poem. Concerning prosody, Imagism generally dismissed set rhyme schemes and regular meter in favor of free verse, which allowed each text to take up its own, intrinsic shape; thus the whole piece could remain essentially integral. The image was defined by Pound as “an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time” (qtd. in Gray 360) which, if faithfully presented, can evoke intense associations in the reader without including any implicit generalizations (360).

Pound’s “In a Station of the Metro”, H. D.’s “Oread” and William Carlos Williams’s “The Red Wheelbarrow” are probably the most representative poems of Imagism. They all lack common poetic devices, such as similes, symbols, rhymes, and set meter; there is no narrative, reflection, or signs of a subjective presence in their texts. Their language is intensely visual, sharp, and economical; they all carry the sense of profound attention and absorption in the image they present. In the words of Pound, they grasp “the precise instant, when a thing outward and objective transforms itself, or darts into a thing inward and subjective” (qtd. in Gray 361). For Creeley, and for subsequent following generations of

poets, this novel approach to poetry became the most relevant way of writing, a dynamic tradition that inspired them to create their own experimental poetic languages.

Objectivism can be considered the offspring of the artistic impulses of Imagism. As Gray claims, it shared the main radical modernist belief in precision, economy, the rendering of the experience rather than stating it, and stressed the importance of inherent rhythm and form. However, Objectivism put more emphasis on the lyrical, aural dimensions of a poem compared to the intense visuality of Imagism, the graphic design of the poem as an object also gained more significance in their art (363). Although they never explicitly formed a group, Louis Zukofsky, William Carlos Williams, George Oppen, and Carl Rakosi are usually classified as (also) belonging to the objectivist wing of the moderns. According to Gray, their first collective appearance in the literary field was in *An "Objectivists" Anthology* in 1932, but *Poetry Magazine* had an objectivist issue one year earlier edited by Zukofsky, featuring the works of various other poets as well (363).

## William Carlos Williams

In Creeley's work, the impact of Williams is probably the most prominent. As Paul Mariani points out, he first encountered Williams's poetry in 1944, when he got hold of a copy of *The Wedge*. Reading it was apparently a revelatory experience for him that fundamentally shaped his taste and established the main direction of his own poetic quest (173). In the introduction of *The Wedge*, Williams presents his imagist—objectivist vision and mission of writing modern poetry, which probably had a profound influence on Creeley.

When a man makes a poem, makes it, mind you, he takes words as he finds them interrelated about him and composes them—without distortion which would mar their exact significances—into an intense expression of his perceptions and ardors that they may constitute a revelation in the speech that he uses. It isn't what he says that counts

as a work of art, it's what he makes with such intensity of perception that it lives with an intrinsic movement of its own to verify its authenticity. (54)

This statement contains almost all of the premises of Creeley's own poetry as well. Robert Kern states that Williams insists in his introduction that the real nature of a poem is that of a thing made, not a fictive and ephemeral statement (223). According to Paul Diehl, this is often echoed in Creeley's prose pieces, where he emphasizes that the word "poet" stems from "poiein", the Greek word for "make." Words are thus both markers of things in a referential world and are things themselves as a phenomenon (335). "Making" instead of "saying" is a key distinction, a poetic strategy that allowed Williams and his followers to view the poem as a field of action, an independent entity that creates its own rules. Kern also suggests that in this way the very substance of the poem becomes an inner movement of language, made up of words, which the poet has found "interrelated about him", as though they were objects in his surroundings that are to be built into a structure of speech (223). Thus, the shared intensity of perceiving and expressing can result in a truly authentic revelation, since it originates from a moving, living piece of language, which is finally, ideally, independent from its creator.

John Vernon likewise emphasizes the sense of movement in Williams's poetry by drawing attention to his way of writing as physical activity. Therefore, his words can be viewed as explicit bodily gestures on the page, possessing "the quickness and shifting pace of the body and mind dancing together" (310). Through this dance, the words can reflect on their own activity as well as their subject matter, the external world, which is made present in a recreated and refreshed form inside the body of the poem (310). Although most of the texts in *For Love* and *Words* – with a few early exceptions such as "Hart Crane", "Le Fou", and "A Song" – do not exhibit the sprightly, often bouncing movement that is visually present in *The*

*Wedge* or *The Desert Music*, Creeley's compressed, careful, sometimes repetitive stanzas do grasp the bodily act of writing.

In terms of the value of that very act, Altieri states that Williams did not strive to create a systematic explanation or a metaphysical ground of any sort for his poetics, similarly to Creeley. He identified its value in the energies it contained, emitted, and engaged as an object via the interaction between the mind and a specific situation, with the linguistic and perceptual orders mutually intensifying each other (522). His famous dogma, "No ideas/ but in things" (55), expresses his distrust in anything that imposes itself onto the poem from outside, and his deep trust in the inherent virtue of "the thing", that, if the text is faithfully composed, it will carry its own value no matter what. In my view, recognizing this trust in the text is crucial to understanding Creeley's poetry as well, when we are faced with a poem made up of a plain, even cliché-like vocabulary that is not ordered into any sort of dialectical argument, nor does it arrive at a conclusion.

Will Montgomery highlights another aspect in Williams's verse that was relevant for Creeley, namely the notion that "the poet thinks with his poem" (Williams, qtd in Montgomery). He argues that for Creeley, "the poem appears to be the best available site for a full rendering of cognitive activity" since a variety of emotional, social, unconscious, and intellectual processes are to be simultaneously employed in it. At this point, the Williamsian category of "measure" comes into the picture as a unit that can textually represent that activity, thus making it possible for the poem to communicate with the reader. Based on this feature of Williams's poetics, Montgomery claims that Creeley could view the poem as "a dynamic emotional field in which large processes, undifferentiated entanglements of psychic and social, can be played out".

Turning to language, the medium of the poem, Kern attributes Creeley's fascination with language as language that is less bound by meaning, to the influence of Williams's and

Zukofsky's poetry. He claims that Creeley's formalism is firmly rooted in the modernist notion of a poem, where language is used in a way that considerably delays the process of signification and brings the focus of attention onto itself (218). This poetic aim adjoins the marked emotional and/or intellectual uncertainty that is communicated in the bulk of *For Love* and *Words* to produce the hesitant, compressed verse of Creeley.

In terms of the vocabulary of that verse, now I think it is appropriate to refer back to Williams's statement about how the poet finds his words "interrelated about him". Apart from the relatedness of the words, their proximity to the poet should also be emphasized in the case of both Williams and Creeley. The inclusion of the speech of everyday life into poetry was a major prospect for Williams throughout his career; he made considerable efforts to explore its poetic possibilities, especially its rhythm and figurative nature. However, as Linda Wagner writes, it was important for Creeley to distinguish the idiomatic from the colloquial in connection with Williams's vocabulary. He pointed out in an interview that it is a "spoken sense of sequence" (qtd in Wagner) that is present in his mentor's poetry and not so much the colloquial nature of individual words (303). In my opinion, this is even more relevant for his own poetic language, which has, as Robert Duncan put it, its own "vernacular elegance" (237). Nevertheless, this vernacular does not have any distinct, socially or regionally detectable feature; furthermore, it lacks the inevitable meandering slackness that is present in ordinary speech. Perloff, when discussing Creeley's poetic language, points out that his signature vocabulary by and large contains those words and phrases that other writers would dismiss as unpoetic, such as "insisted upon," "something," "getting out," "tiredness", "wet" in the case of "The Rain" ("Radical"). Indeed, his verse with the occasional "goddamn" (I know a Man) and "subservience" ("For Fear") appears to consist of very basic, widely (over)used expressions, that are even plainer than the voice of everyday America. As Hallberg aptly put it, "Creeley is a minimalist only in the sense that he needs little to work with (378)."

## Charles Olson

Another poet who had a significant, but also a very different sort of influence on Creeley is Charles Olson, a leading figure among the Black Mountain Poets and the author of the seminal essay “Projective Verse.” According to Mariani, they became acquainted with each other’s work through Williams, who was a touchstone for Olson’s poetry as well (177). They corresponded extensively from the early 1950s until Olson’s death, producing several thousands of pages of letters that mostly dealt with issues connected to literature and other forms of art. It was Olson, who invited Creeley to be the editor of *Black Mountain Review* and to teach at Black Mountain College, which became probably the most important artistic community for him. It also included poets like Robert Duncan, Ed Dorn, John Wieners, and Denise Levertov, whose work became a reference point for Creeley, and vice versa. However, the influence of Olson and the Black Mountain Poets is much less obvious in the style of Creeley than that of Williams. As Perloff notes, his actual poems are just as different from Olson’s, Levertov’s, and Duncan’s, as they are from the other “school” he is most associated with, Allen Ginsberg’s or Gregory Corso’s expansive — ecstatic beat poetics (“Radical”). In my opinion, they rather influenced him through the sweeping exchange of ideas about poetry, and through their individual creative efforts to create poetry, which is innovative, dynamic, and relevant for their day and age. In that respect, Olson’s work, especially the propositions he set forth in “Projective Verse”, was a perennial source of inspiration for Creeley.

Olson was just as ardent an advocate of open form as Williams and Pound. In his essay on “Projective Verse”, he claimed that “closed” or conventional verse is print-bred, thus artificial, and if poetry is “to be of essential use”, it must follow an organic, more flexible principle of organization. In his scheme, there are two main units: the syllable, which comes from the mind by the way of the ear, and the line, which comes from the hearth by the way of the breath. Their union is the poetic language in the “open field” of the poem, where the



syllables in the line can “juxtapose in beauty”. This concept of the breath and the general emphasis on the aural properties of the poem has great significance for Creeley as well, who apparently used the text as a score while performing poetry readings. When listening to him reading his work, it becomes clear that the length of the lines and the placing of the enjambments are not solely visual effects, since he consistently makes his vocal pauses exactly where his lines break.

Olson also dismissed the use of similes and descriptions as too easy a means of turning on the interpretive function in the reader, thus draining the energy of the poem. This energy comes from an alert absorption into the act of writing, and a constant movement according to Edward Dahlberg’s formula: “ONE PERCEPTION MUST IMMEDIATELY AND DIRECTLY LEAD TO A FURTHER PERCEPTION. (qtd in “Projective Verse”)” This often painfully restless sense of instant progress from one thought or observation to the other is very much present in Creeley’s poetry, even though it creates a very different mood from the outpouring flow of perceptions in “The Kingfishers” or in fact the in the text of “Projective Verse”.

Another famous quote from Olson’s manifesto is Creeley’s statement that “FORM IS NEVER MORE THAN AN EXTENSION OF CONTENT. (“Projective Verse”)” This simple proposal was first put forward in a letter to Olson discussing how the technical aspect has gained superiority over the substantial in poetry, naming W.H. Auden as an example (*Selected Letters*, 36). It became one of the poetic credos of the post-war era, which emphasized that no formal convention or ambition should undermine the integrity of the text. Creeley later refined his statement to express that he was not implying a hierarchy of any sort between the two.

Well, content is never more than an extension of form and form is never more than an extension of content. They sort of go together is (sic) the absolute point. It’s really

hard to think of one without the other; in fact, I don't think it's possible. What I meant, whatever that means, is that what's coming to be said — it's like William Carlos Williams' wonderful insistence, "How to get said what must be said..." — that need, that impulse, that demand, is what I would call the content's finding a form for its own realization, recognition, substantiation. ("Creeley in conversation")

Gray observes another tendency in Olson's work, namely his turn towards continuity and a refusal to view life and literature in closed terms. He claims that both his shorter poems, such as "The Kingfishers", and his epic *Maximus Poems* express his commitment to exploring serial, open forms in a spatial dimension. According to Gray, Olson works with repetition, parenthesis, and apposition to convey that nothing can or should be said exactly and finally (600). This is supported by his perception of American "SPACE" where there is "nothing but what is", and "no end and no beginning" (qtd in Gray 600). Creeley's reluctance to produce a clear-cut, linear narrative or a logical conclusion to his verse can be attributed to Olson's influence, as well as the inclusion of self-contradiction into poems, such as "I Know a Man" or "The Language".

At this point, I believe it is also worth noting that Robert Duncan describes Creeley's *For Love* as a continuation of the "cult of Amor" in the Tuscan tradition, especially the poetry of Dante or that of the troubadour poets of Provence. The "Lady" of his poetry represents primal feminine energy that is both archetypical and specific, and his poetic relationship to the "Wife" as "Lover" can be seen in the continuity of Dante, Rossetti, Hardy, D. H. Lawrence, and, of course, Williams (236). Creeley can indeed be called a modern troubadour since, apart from his own thoughts, mostly lovers and a few friends are those who inhabit the space of *For Love* and *Words*.

Charlie Parker

Last but not least, I believe that it is necessary to briefly discuss one more influence on Creeley that came from outside the realm of literature, the music of Charlie Parker. In an early letter to Olson, he expresses his admiration for the jazz saxophonist:

I am more influenced by Charley Parker, in my acts, than by any other man, living or dead. IF you will listen to five records, say, you will see how the whole biz ties in— i.e., how, say, the whole sense of a loop, for a story, came in, and how, too, these senses of rhythm in a poem (or a story too, for that matter) got in. (*Selected Letters* xxxii)

Creeley recognized poetic potential in Parker's music, especially in his handling of rhythm and melody, in which what is left in, is equally dominant as what is left out (*Selected Letters* xxxii). In his essay "Notes Apropos 'Free Verse'", he makes a connection between his own thinking in a "balance of four, a foursquare circumstance" and Parker's extensive variation on patterns of four, such as in "I've Got Rhythm" (494). Creeley found that Parker could lengthen and shorten the experience of time in his music through improvisation, what he would rather call "the experience of possibility within the limits of his materials (sounds and durations) and their environment." He remarks that time can be viewed as a measure of change, thus it is the quality and the distribution of change that creates the sense of time in poetry as well as in music ("Notes" 494). In an interview with Tom Clark he also expressed his deep distrust in plans in general (26) and stated in *The Times Literary Supplement* that "I have never explicitly known before writing what it was that I would say. For myself, articulation is the intelligent ability to recognize the experience of what is so given" (qtd in Clark 26). From these remarks, one might conclude that the continuous search for harmony in jazz, exploring a theme, and then moving forward probably also affected Creeley's writing.

Much more could be said about Creeley's literary predecessors and contemporaries, he would probably resent that H.D. Lawrence, Gertrud Stein, Robert Duncan, and Allen

Ginsberg were not discussed at all and that Pound and Zukofsky were only mentioned. What already seems to emerge from the previous overview of artistic influences though is that Creeley synthesized many different radical modernist concepts and often took them a step further to suit his own intentions in poetry. His signature economical style, line and syllable formation, “local” subject matter as well as his open, swiftly progressing discourse all have their poetic antecedents in some form. However, his approach toward language and its manifestation in both his poems’ grammar and vocabulary is still partly unclear. The way Creeley consistently sticks to the most basic words or neutral expressions, and that he orders them into a first seemingly bare, but confusingly intricate grammatical and visual sequence still needs further explanation. For that, I will turn to some of Ludwig Wittgenstein’s relevant ideas on the nature of language.

## Wittgenstein and Creeley

One of the most famous claims by Wittgenstein is “The limits of my language means the limits of my world” (*Tractatus* 5.6), the “limits” being that it is “impossible to describe the fact which corresponds to (is the translation of) a sentence, without simply repeating the sentence” (*Culture* 10). Perloff adds that poetry is one of those means that reveal this sense of limitation most startlingly. She cites Creeley to support this and emphasizes that his poetry does not display a set of ideas that could have also been said in various other combinations, but rather it is the very saying, the words, and their syntax, which is the poem (*Wittgenstein’s Ladder* 187). Thus, we have arrived once more at the radical modernist view of the poem as an object with its own inner activities, now through Wittgenstein’s philosophy.

However, our explanation of Creeley’s poetic language probably should get more elaborate than that, since every kind of “saying” would count then as a piece of poetry, and that is indeed too broad a spectrum for our analysis. To narrow it down, we can turn to

another relevant Wittgensteinian dictum, which is “Philosophy ought really to be written only as a form of poetry” (*Culture* 24). According to Perloff, this statement implies that poetry essentially is not an articulation of inner thoughts or emotions, but rather the critique of that articulation (*Wittgenstein’s Ladder* 173). In Creeley’s poetry, this critique often happens through the poem pointing towards its language, raising attention to the wide range of possibilities and serious limitations that are paradoxically present in it. Perloff suggests that we can view poetic writing based on Wittgenstein as “self-interruption, the production of short units – aphorisms, fragments, gnomic sentences – that undergo repeated correction, contradiction, and especially recontextualisation” (“Toward” 192). In that, as Linda W. Wagner points out, there is a similarity between Creeley’s and Wittgenstein’s enigmatic, numbered observations. They give the same impression of a cryptic, provocatively incomplete but also closed system that is often very challenging to “decode” without getting into them, thinking with them (302).

Another similarity between the two stances towards language is the shared interest in “simple” words. The prototypical Creeley poem operates with the simplest of words, verbs such as “want”, “make”, “come”, “feel”, nouns like “fear”, “pain”, “thumb”, “love”; and it is especially frugal with adjectives (“old”, “bent”) as in the case of “For Fear” (*Collected Poems* 235). First, it may seem that this prudent vocabulary gives a sense of stability to the poet and the reader; these words do not need further definition since they are at the core of one’s linguistic repertoire. However, inside these sparse constructions, they appear to be as vague and mysterious as the most exotic compounds. The reason for that, according to another dictum by Wittgenstein is that “the meaning of a word is its use in the language” (*Investigations*, 43). According to Perloff, by demonstrating the difficulties of determining the most basic words, Wittgenstein calls attention to their strong dependence on the context they appear in (“Wittgenstein and the Question”). In my view, this observation is crucial for

understanding Creeley, since, by all means, it is the creating of a context that should be identified as his key poetic craft, not a verbal inventiveness or a creative, diverse choice of topic. Perloff claims that Wittgenstein put forward another phrase for this context of action, the notion of language games (*Wittgenstein's Ladder* 99).

The study of language games is the study of primitive forms of language or primitive languages. . . . When we look at such simple forms of language the mental mist which seems to enshroud our ordinary use of language disappears. We see activities, reactions, which are clear-cut and transparent. On the other hand, we recognize in these simple processes forms of language not separated by a break from our more complicated ones. (*The Blue Book*, Page Break 17)

The recognition and artful manipulation of general, underlying patterns also seem to emerge in Creeley's work, which we would rightly call a "study" on "simple forms of language". At the same time, he is also acutely aware of the traps and uncertainties of creating meaning. When talking of Wittgenstein, Creeley made a remark that is also echoed in his hesitant, but persevering verse: "[Language is] a wall against which we all beat our heads, knowing we'll never pass that limit, but that which we nonetheless still try to do, to move into a situation of pure creation" (qtd in Wagner 306).

In the light of the connection between him and Wittgenstein, it becomes apparent that Creeley's poetic language is more than just a heritage of the modernists, a style to communicate his existential state, or a poetic improvisation that could be carried out in the open field of the poem. As his inner material reifies itself in his texts, it appears that the difficulty and beauty of self-expression and communication are communicated through those bodies of words, via their meaning and organization. This integrity cannot be achieved without a profound understanding of how language works, and a pragmatic approach to using it to its full potential. Therefore, after the theoretical grounding, now I will turn to examine

some of Creeley's poems to see how the previously discussed ideas manifest themselves in practice.

## Close-reading Analyses

### The Language

The first poem that I will delve into is probably the most obvious choice for analyzing Creeley's stance on poetic language, a piece called "The Language" from *Words (Collected Poems 283)*.

The Language

Locate *I*

*love you* some-

where in

teeth and

eyes, bite

it but

take care not

to hurt, you

want so

much so  
little. Words  
say everything.

*I*  
*love you*  
again,

then what  
is emptiness  
for. To

fill, fill.  
I heard words  
and words full

of holes  
aching. Speech  
is a mouth.

I read “The Language” as a poem of change, a text in which we continuously gain and immediately lose ground. It invites to “locate” a piece of language, which in itself presupposes an analytical stance towards the subject of the text, implying that “*I / love you*” has a spatial quality. The already broken, italicized “sample” instantly counterpoints the



neutrality with its emotionally charged content, with the “*I*” dangling apart from the rest of the phrase. The next enjambment likewise disjoins “some-where”, probably for the prosody and to call attention to the fact that its components are words of their own right, constructing a third meaning by their unity. “Teeth and / eyes” confirm that language is spatial; furthermore, they state that there is a strong bodily aspect to it.

The next invitation after “locate” is to “bite it”, which strengthens the bodily aspect to an irrational degree, while reflecting on the poet’s own act of breaking up sentences and words. Right after that comes a sharp, confusing enjambment typical of Creeley, changing “take care not” into “do indeed take care, because it can hurt”. Also, note that it is not specified who exactly is the one who can be hurt, thus language itself, and everybody who takes part in it, appear to be vulnerable. Further ambiguities arise from the final rhythmic and enigmatic sequence of the first sentence. What is wanted then, “much” or “little”? Probably both at the same time, and the sentence artfully carries this tension in itself. The “you” remains quite confusing, is it the “you” in “*I love you*”, is it a generic “you”, is it the reader, is it a third person, a lover maybe?

For the previously accumulated questions, we seem to be given a brief answer then, something secure and comprehensible. Indeed, it is so secure that it is a tautology. If anything, it only mocks our expectations and invites us to trust the text and its abilities, suggesting that we should not ask for more than we are given. At this point, it feels that the poem has arrived at a resting point, some sort of conclusion. However, the phrase under scrutiny restlessly returns, implying that the text itself is not satisfied with its own solution. The “*I*” is even lonelier, but also more prominent than before, which reassures its separateness from the rest of the phrase. The word “again” first seems superfluous in such an economical text, but it does strengthen the sense of starting our quest after language again, and it can also draw attention to the emotional content of the phrase, a re-starting of a relationship perhaps. Then

through a grammatically logical locution, we expect an explanation or an elaboration to follow; instead, it is a rhetorical question (that is indicated by the lack of a question mark) about a vague, broad, seemingly unrelated topic: emptiness. However, we may recognize that this word is also emotionally charged, and it is so close and contrasted to “*I love you*” that it suggests disharmony. What is emptiness (the enjambment suggests), and how can it even exist after such a confession? – We might ask together with the poem.

We do get an answer though, which is a broken, repeated piece of language that gives a seemingly obvious, “practical” solution for the abstract question. This is not a consoling solution by any means, since there is no material mentioned that we could use for filling. It might be language itself, the very word “fill”, but that is not explicitly suggested by the poem. Subsequently, the “I” appears unitalicized for the first time, suggesting its difference from the supposed sample; it is also more adjoined to the sentence than before. Hearing brings in yet another aspect of language, a physical one again. After a repetition of words, the line breaks surprise us with an actual physicality of sound that has holes that are, furthermore, aching. This synesthesia of aching sound is twisted and carried further by the finishing laconic, conclusive, nevertheless broken sentence that connects the concept of physical holes and the source of sound and language itself, the mouth. This connection and the boldness of the statement are powerful enough in the context of the poem to finish it. However, as we are probably used to it by now, it is not conclusive at all about language or speech for that matter. If words can be full of holes, emptiness, how can speech itself fill them, speech, that is said to be an empty place, a mouth that occasionally fills up with sound? Is it sound that fills up the words? But the very words that consist of sound, that are heard, can be full of holes themselves.

After carefully reading “The Language”, we have gathered that language is something inherently physical, intimate, and fatally incomplete that can lead us to dead ends and

delusive answers. Furthermore, since Creeley chose the claim of love to be located, bit and counterpointed by emptiness, we might realize that similarity is suggested by the poem between the way language and romantic relationships work. On the page, the simple confession appears as a set of objects that can be treated just like the rest of the text, which, by being organized into small clusters with sudden enjambments, continues to confuse, entertain and challenge the reader throughout its course. Also, “The Language” points out that while we think that it is we who are in charge when we manipulate our words to achieve the desired solution to a practical dilemma, we have been probably led to a linguistically sound, but otherwise totally untenable conclusion by language itself.

Consequently, I believe that “The Language” provides us with an intense experience of engaging with language. Its words, by being treated as interrelated objects, convey a familiar hesitation and a painful actuality, but they also show their inherent beauty, rhythm, and potential in expanding meaning.

## I Know a Man

Now I will turn to one of the most famous poems by Creeley, “I Know a Man” (*Collected Poems* 132). It is included in *For Love*, his first collection to win critical acclaim. According to Creeley, it was written in San Francisco in 1955, at the time he got acquainted with the beat poets. It was a time of personal and social uneasiness for him, he had a sense of freedom that was both liberating and frightening (“An Interview with Robert Creeley” 32). It was an acute reflection of the spirit of his age, hence its popularity; however, I believe that it also reveals a more general stance towards making art, especially poetry.

I Know a Man

As I sd to my

friend, because I am

always talking,—John, I

sd, which was not his  
name, the darkness sur-  
rounds us, what

can we do against  
it, or else, shall we &  
why not, buy a goddamn big car,

drive, he sd, for  
christ's sake, look  
out where yr going.

When reading “I Know a Man”, we can experience a very similar dynamism of gaining and losing ground to that of “The Language”. The title suggests a “knowing”, a relationship with somebody else, which is further confirmed and clarified later in the second line. The compression of “said” into “sd” implies that the language of the poem might itself be a record of colloquial speech and that this abbreviation will be probably systematic. However, the second line challenges that assumption, since neither “because”, nor “am” is shortened, which would be logical if casual talk was represented on the page. The statement “I am / always talking” suggests that the speaker is convulsive, s/he might be muttering this to him/herself or having an inner monologue. This fact also undermines the credibility and the relevance of what has been said so far, and what will be said as well. Then we encounter the familiar-sounding, concrete name of that friend, who can be identified as the “Man”, and the poem seems to cohere again to some extent. But the enjambment and the next, casual remark

quickly bring back the sense of being lost, of being insecure in a system where everything and its opposite can be true at the same time. Furthermore, we promptly learn that the speaker and “John” are in an obscure and malevolent environment with no prospect of clear vision, be it a real or an imaginary “darkness”. It is followed by a perplexed initiation that could bring a vaguely proactive mood into the poem, which quickly drifts into a nonsensical, hesitant repetition of linking phrases showing the inability to make a decision and the increasing sense of despair. Suddenly, a solution appears; however, it is apparently a solution of aggressive language and self-deceit, suggesting an escape in the symbol of consumption. In the fourth stanza, the voice of the friend comes finally and provides us with the first fact about their actual situation: they are in a car, and the speaker is driving. The sense of danger becomes very real at this point, after getting to know how confused, undecided, and maybe even drunk our driver is. The poem ends with the irritated, steady remarks of the friend to the speaker to keep his focus and recognize his responsibility in what he is doing. It appears that only “John”, a person outside of the confusion of the speaker is able to stop the catastrophe, or at least to raise awareness of its proximity. However, as he is also “sd” his advice with the constricted “yr” in it, he might as well be an inner voice of the speaker. Thus, the whole poem can be also read as an inner dialogue, with the title referring to self-knowledge.

Through reading “I Know a Man”, one can experience a profound sense of crisis on a philosophical, existential, and possibly social level. According to Vernon, the counterstatement “which was not his name” draws attention to the fact that we are in a reality of words as objects, that carry the confusion of the described condition in their activity (313). Besides, in my view, it can also be interpreted as an *Ars Poetica*, a powerful statement on composing language into poetry. Creeley draws a parallel between writing and driving in his essay “Notes Apropos Free Verse”, emphasizing the significance of being aware of the road just forming in front of the writers’ eyes.

The simplest way I have found to make clear my own sense of writing in this respect is to use the analogy of driving. The road, as it were, is creating itself momentarily in one's attention to it, there, visibly, in front of the car. There is no reason it should go on forever, and if one does so assume it, it very often disappears all too actually. (494)

Based on Creeley's statement, the road in "I Know a Man" can be interpreted as language itself, carrying innumerable possibilities and dangers surrounded by silence, and darkness. Consequently, the main poetic "craft" is the ability to look out where the road is leading and to pay acute attention to language. Vernon points out the dichotomy of speculation and practice in poetry that is present in the tension between wondering about a new car and the sudden actuality of driving in "I Know a Man" (313). Thus, language becomes primarily "poetic" through its use, through the intense care devoted to it by the poet.

### Air: "The Love of a Woman"

The last poem that I will analyze is a prime example of Creeley's love poetry. "The Love of a Woman" (*Collected Poems* 240) has a more delicate flow and a more balanced tone than the previous texts, nevertheless it clearly has the characteristic features of Creeley's poetic language.

Air: "The Love of a Woman"

The love of a woman  
is the possibility which  
surrounds her as hair  
her head, as the love of her  
  
follows and describes

her. But what if  
they die, then there is  
still the aura

left, left sadly, but  
hovers in the air, surely,  
where this had taken place?  
Then sing, of her, of whom

it will be said, he  
sang of her, it was the  
song he made which made her  
happy, so she lived.

The title implies that the poem will resemble the lyrics of a folk song, or a ballad with the most common theme of all, love. It also suggests similarly to “The Language” that we will get a definition or at least an elaboration on what womanly love is like, and what Creeley’s views are on this perennial topic. The first line comes as expected, and the supposed definition follows very quickly in the second line: the love of a woman is “the possibility”. Unlike a usual restrictive definition, this strikingly simple word, which is so plausible and out of context at the same time, seems to open up even more possibilities for the poem to proceed.

So it does, with Williamsian care and vigor to the next line and the next perception, where Creeley visualizes the possibility as hair, surrounding the woman’s head. Again, “surround” seems oddly neutral for a poem on a conventionally elevated theme, but its spatial, geographical connotation makes “the possibility” into a large halo. This vision also leads us to

suspect that the person looking at her is likewise emotionally involved, which is reassured in the last part of the sentence. Creeley calls attention to the double meaning of the title, thus extending our previous expectations from reading about only being loved by a woman to also about being in love with a woman. Thus, another person is “following” and “describing” the woman in, or rather, with the poem. These words still share the same neutral register with “surround” and so does the sudden and nearly banal presupposition of their death. Note, however, that this is the first and only occasion when the lovers are joined as “they” in the poem, finally locating the focus on their relationship, not on either of the two individual perspectives. Besides, death in this context can also refer to the passing of love from the relationship, not necessarily the end of their lives. The halo of possibility is extended into a shared “aura” which might or might not remain where their affair – “surrounding”, “following”, and “describing” – took place.

By artful self-interruptions, Creeley creates short, rhythmic sequences out of the second sentence, leaving us with a somewhat vague impression about the actual subject of the question. Likewise, the answer consists of pulsing fragments that call upon the “he” to “sing, of her”, to make her “happy“, and thus keep her and their love alive. At this point, one might easily recognize that Creeley operates with one of the classic schemes of love poetry by using a similar closure to that of Shakespeare’s Sonnet XVIII. Yet, he is expressing the statement, that would otherwise count as cliché, in such an unpretentious and constantly turning, self-renewing language that it becomes a perfectly appropriate ending to the text. The notion of singing refers back to the title and thus closes the loop of the poem, affirming that “The Love of a Woman” is the song itself that is being sung to make her happy and keep love alive.

On their own, the words in this poem are not highly-charged by emotions by any means, the two extremities being displayed are “sadly” and “happy”. It is their interrelation and artful use of their multiple meanings through which they convey the experience of love as



a possibility, it is the short lines and the quickening pace of the text that provide a sense of excitement while reading. Similarly, the powerful subjective wish to make love permanent does not appear explicitly; it is objectified through the observer's stance and by the innovative use of vocabulary and grammar that are present in the poem. Language subtly calls attention to itself as language in "The Love of a Woman", and that distances it from the personal, particular aspect of its writer to become a song "made", an imprint of the universal experience of romantic love.

## Conclusion

The articulation of human thoughts and emotions either via saying or writing is essentially an act of externalization and objectification that results in sounds in our ears, signs on a page, or possibly both in such a case as poetry. In my view, language has a material reality that poets have often tried to conceal by further aestheticizing it through various formal conventions, to create an alluring, ethereal container that can qualify the text as poetic. However, Pound, Williams, and the Radical Modernists recognized that this artificiality damages the authenticity of the poem, and advocated free verse instead of a set meter and rhyme scheme to broaden the spectrum of self-expression. Contrary to their predecessors, they were empowered by viewing the poem as a material object to let each take its own shape independent of long-established formal requirements. According to the Imagist manifesto, they refused to include anything into their text that was not an integral part of the presentation, dismissing, among other features of conventional poetry, the strong subjective presence as well (Flint 71).

Williams, who became one of the most powerful representatives of the imagist-objectivist tradition, perceived the words of a poem as “interrelated about” the poet (54), just as all the other objects that construct the scenes of life that appear in his verse. His stance is that of the artisan, who, after intensely perceiving the things that surround him, makes other things with similarly intense care to reflect the perception in their bodies. Williams estimates the “thing” very high by stating “No ideas/ but in things” (55) and so does Olson when he claims that “man is himself an object” (“Projective Verse”), implying that equality and universal likeness is present among all things in the world. Thus, objectification is by no means a derogatory term in their context.

Creeley incorporated and innovated the achievements of the Radical Modernists, especially Williams, and created poetry that could powerfully express inner, personal experience without being marred by an overly sentimentalizing or solipsistic subjective presence. The restless movement of mental processes appears to find its perfect form in the dense clusters of Creeley’s verse, where, according to a principle of Olson and Dahlberg, every perception is instantly followed by a new one (“Projective Verse”). As his thoughts and emotions materialize on the page, he turns towards them with acute attention akin to Williams’s, engaging with them primarily as language, as a set of objects that all have their own grammatical, visual, aural, and semantic properties. In their arrangement, his words embody the process of thinking and feeling about a particular theme with all its confusions and revelations, leading the readers through the experience rather than presenting it to them. As I have argued, Creeley accomplished this by having a profound understanding of what Wittgenstein called the language games, that creating meaning through language is a question of creating context, a system in which the most ordinary words can express the complex dynamism of the human mind.

All in all, I believe that Creeley's work sheds considerable light upon what qualifies a text as poetic. It seems that his observant, compacted verse recognizes and exerts the similarity between mental and linguistic processes, thus accomplishing integrity and suggestive power. Language is not merely a fancy vehicle for him to convey a message of some sort, but rather a material that has texture, possibilities, and limitations that are to be displayed in an authentic utterance. Hence, a poem for Creeley, however abstract or subjective its theme might appear, is ultimately an occasion of objectification; it strives to be no more and no less than a physical imprint of reality.

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