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“A consistently useful measure”¹: Robert Creeley’s Writing/Reading of Wallace Stevens

Patrick James Dunagan

While William Carlos Williams is the immediate literary predecessor often associated with having early influence on the work of Robert Creeley, Wallace Stevens, beginning in Creeley’s first letters in the early 1950s to the poet Charles Olson, and re-emerging in his later work, makes several appearances in the printed record. References to Stevens culminate in the final section of Creeley’s long poem “Histoire de Florida,” published in 1996, the beginning of the last decade of his life, where lines from Stevens’ “Anecdote of the Jar” (a poem which, as will be shown, remained central to Creeley throughout his life) are quoted alternating with Creeley’s own. Although, as Creeley admits, “much of [his] own initial writing, both prose and poetry, used Stevens as a model” (“The the” 121), the earliest direct reference in poetry does not appear until decades later with his poem “For John Duff” out of his collection *Later* published in 1979, which summons from the very same Stevens poem the line “I placed a jar in Tennessee. . .” as an initiating stance (*Collected* 169). These references to Stevens in Creeley’s work expand and reflect on Creeley’s belief that, as he put it, “Stevens, in Williams’ phrase, thought with his poem” (“In Respect” 50). In these later works, Creeley reverses himself on statements he made in the 1950s in letters to Charles Olson. The force Wallace Stevens had on Creeley’s own “thought,” is at last reflected in the lines of his work. Drawing attention to this gradual emergence of reference to Stevens adds new dimension to the effect Stevens had upon Creeley’s ongoing development as a poet

¹ Creeley “In respect” 51

throughout his long career and also contributes to a broader contextualization of influence between older and younger generations of poets.

Creeley's familiarity with the work of Stevens dates back to his undergraduate years at Harvard in the 1940s as an editor for the *Harvard Wake*. Stevens "came through" for the Spring issue of 1946 with his poem, "Late Hymn from the Myrrh Mountain" beginning as Creeley recalls, "Unsnack your snood, madanna . . ." Williams, too, was in that issue ("In Respect" 50). Creeley recalls in an interview with Lynn Keller that, throughout the late forties and up into the first years of the following decade, he "was very struck by Wallace Stevens' thinking and trying to write in his manner" (26). In these early years of his development Creeley immersed himself in Stevens. This immersion, as he recalls, went against the general prevailing attitude held in regard to Stevens at Harvard during this time, where Stevens was in a peculiar half-in and half-out situation of acceptance among the faculty. There was Andrew Wanning's view where all he was able to think to say concerning Stevens' later poems "was that they were very obscure," while on the other hand, F.O. Matthiessen held them with "engaging respect" ("In Respect" 50). Creeley, however, held firm in his appreciation of Stevens. Scholar Linda Wagner notes, "His early fascination with the poetry of Wallace Stevens—that most experimental of all the modern poets in terms of his own language-games—suggested the direction for Creeley's own personal poetics." (180) Despite, or perhaps as a result of, Creeley's holding on to his care for Stevens during his time at Harvard, fully realizing this "direction" in his work would require a dramatic turning away from Stevens by Creeley, a resolution of the "dilemma" he felt himself in, caught between Williams and Stevens, that would only decades later lead to an emergence of Stevens in his poems ("A visit" 29). His intense correspondence beginning early in 1951 with the poet Charles Olson would prove to be a decisive factor in this course of events.

Stevens is on Creeley's mind from the start of his lengthy correspondence with Olson. In his second letter, he writes,

Thinking of Stevens, who slipped into PR, with this: 'Poetic form in its proper sense is a question of what appears within the poem itself. . . By appearance within the poem itself one means the things created and existing there. . .' Basic. Yet they won't see it, that it cannot be a box or a bag or what you will. Like Eliot: the imposition of the tradition, etc., etc. Both senses to apply. You *cannot* put 1 tradition on top of another, without losing what APPLIES in each. . . Like these idiots who will not take what *is* of use but insist on 'returns' &tc.

Anyhow—sick at heart.

(*vol. I 22*)

Creeley is taking sides (as well, no doubt, out to impress Olson a bit with his disdain for "these idiots"), searching for a practice in the writing of a poem that will remain open and cites Stevens' remarks as leading towards possible resolutions on a path forward opposed to "the imposition of the tradition." Although he would later remark that he "couldn't depend on Stevens" he allows that at this time he was very much "attracted" to the work ("Was that" 76). This "attraction" is evident in these early remarks on and quotes from Stevens appearing in his letters to Olson, as Creeley searches for language to further define where their shared concerns lie. Indeed, just over a month later, immediately after yet again citing Stevens to Olson, Creeley follows up with his own statement "form is never more than an extension of content" which Olson would come to use as the central motto of his 20th century-defining "Projective Verse" essay.

Anyhow, form has now become so useless a term/ that I blush to use it. I wld imply a little of Stevens' use (the things created *in* a poem and existing there. . .) & too, go over into: the possible casts or methods for a way into/a 'subject': to make it clear: form is never more than an extension of content." (*vol. I 79*)

As writer Michael Davidson comments, "It is interesting to note the important role that Stevens played in the formation of what has become one of the canonical texts of

Postmodern poetics” (141). Yet the cost to be paid for Stevens having provided the launching point for the “formation” which has come to be the pivotal phrase associated with Creeley and Olson, encompassing a broad swath of literary inheritance, was decades of silence on the part of Creeley in regards to Stevens.

Olson never grants Stevens the importance he held for Creeley and references him as belonging distinctly to Creeley, “... I wld shout, the Americans are the poets... I’m getting fed up lookin for the equals of, in this generation, of Bill—Ez—EE—yr Stevens” (*vol. II* 86). As the correspondence continues, bolstered by their mutual friendship and pursuit of literary ambitions, Creeley’s esteem for Stevens begins to falter, swayed by the influence of Olson’s interests. As the two men hammer out each other’s sensibilities, the impact of Olson’s cutting down of Stevens becomes evident in Creeley’s own remarks, “Stevens aint got the push, any more. It is a method/ holds him up. NOT a content” (*vol. II* 75). During this period, Creeley and Olson are working out a consensus of who’s in and who’s out, and Stevens is shown the door. As Creeley later recalls to Keller, “Although I respected both men equally in terms of what they wrote, Williams was the writer far closer to my own habits” (26); clearly his “own habits” at this time of the correspondence are changing in reaction to the engaging dynamics of his relationship with Olson.

Creeley continues discussing how Olson’s dialogue about poetry assisted his transcendence of the authoritative weight Stevens had exerted on his development as a poet. He states rather plainly, in the same interview, that he was faltering in his attempts at writing poems under such weight, prior to Olson’s friendship.

[Olson] was an extraordinarily attentive listener and a very perceptive man. He was equally a reader of that same kind. What he picked up on was the fact of my trying to fit the emotional patterns and my ways of saying things into the far more reflective and stable line characteristic of Wallace

Stevens. I was struck by Wallace Stevens's thinking and I was trying to write in his manner. Stevens was far more reflective and quiet and I was much more intensive and tentative. Olson's point was simply that I was thinking in long periodic groups, but the characteristic mode of my saying things was in stressed short clusters. (26)

George Butterick, noted Olson scholar and editor, makes the following quick observance, providing an example of how during this period of exchange, ideas over how the poem should move on the page registers in Creeley's work, comparing an unpublished version of a Creeley poem to that published:

Creeley again shows his impatience with inherited form in a two-part poem from late 1949 titled "Notes on Poetry," directly influenced by his reading of Wallace Stevens. The second part, a variation on Stevens' "Anecdote of the Jar," is of interest ... The section appears, revised, as the initial part of "Divisions" in Vincent Ferrini's *Four Winds* in the summer of 1952 (*The Charm*, p.33) ... the lines of the original version are patterned in stiff, indeed self-conscious, symmetry:

Order. Order. The bottle contains
more than water. It is surrounded.
In this case the form is imposed.

As if the air did not hold me in,
and not let me burst, from what-
have-you, or inveterate goodwill!

To make it difficult, to make a
sense of limit, to call a stop to
meandering, one could wander here

in intricacies, unbelted, somewhat
sloppy. But the questions are,
is it all there or on some one

evening will I come again here,
most desperate and all questions,
to find the water all leaked out.

In the revised, "opened" version, the stanzas remain the same, a few words are omitted, but mostly the lines are rearranged to follow the rise and fall of speech:

Order. Order. The bottle contains
more than water. In this case the form
is imposed.

As if the air did not hold me in
and not let me burst from what-have-you, or inveterate
goodwill!

To make it difficult, to make a sense
of limit, to call a stop to meandering—
one could wander here . . .

(121-22)

A footnote of Butterick's dates the unpublished typescript of the early version to December 1949. The second version published in 1952, places Creeley's edits as occurring during the exact period of time his correspondence with Olson begins.

The fifth issue of Cid Corman's literary magazine *Origin* ultimately brought out the full force of Olson's, followed by Creeley's own, dismissal of Stevens. Reading Samuel French Morse's essay "The Motive for Metaphor" which together with the Stevens poem "Long and Sluggish Lines" comprised the entire issue, set Olson, followed by Creeley, off on a series of tirades: "For the lie in Stevens, however much the pleasure in his the play of words, is his language, that, it is without rhythm because it is without passion which is person..." (*vol. X 34*). This is Olson in a May 1952 letter to Creeley, a letter he sent via Cid Corman "just to give him my answer (by way of it) on his wrong in circulating such shit" (*vol. X 36*). Creeley's take on both his own response and Olson's to the Stevens issue of *Origin* is no less severe.

Literally, Stevens IS evil; no one damn well knows that, or can know it, better than I do. For about three years, every poem I wrote was said to be, too much Stevens. I learned it that way, I read every damn thing of his I could find... Stevens is perverter... Stevens really *is* perverter. (*vol. X 52*)

It is striking how personal both Olson and Creeley are in these passages, Olson even sending his letter via Corman so that the young editor might read for himself how offensive

Olson found the Stevens issue. It's not enough for these "sons" to merely disparage the work itself, each of them go after the "father" as well. Clearly, especially in the case of Creeley, what is at stake is his independence from the Modern poets who had come before, crystallized in his own early reading of Stevens: "No Eliot, Moore, Stevens, etc., etc. But, sons against real fathers: us against him, the old man. That's the fucking fight" (*vol. III* 74). The vulnerability Creeley feels in relation to Stevens is perhaps most obviously revealed by the fact that it is only Stevens who must suffer for the "fathers" who most impacted him early on. Pound-Williams-Crane-Lawrence are all frequently referred to favorably by Creeley in numerous poems, reviews, letters, and interviews throughout the same period of years when mention of Stevens is distinctly absent.

At the center of the objections evidenced in the Creeley-Olson correspondence, rests a rather elusive argument against Stevens' handling of language and his disposition towards the role of the imagination. This is the dishonesty Olson sees presented most especially as brought forward by Morse's treatment of the work. Olson reads Stevens' use of language as being comprised too heavily of an imagined state of verse rather than of the world in which Stevens, the man, moved. As Creeley puts it in an early interview, "We wanted to have the issue of the poem in the poem as we were writing it" (*Contexts* 11). For Olson, Stevens grants too much importance to the world of his mind and its imaginings:

To assume that imagination was extricable from the lives of other men, that its practice was different in kind from its non-practice: I would take it that this is only possible to men who have no passion but the passion for words (which is essentially none at all, words being inadequate, and passion proving that an object of love is in fact greater than the impulse, more beautiful than its imagining... (*vol. X* 34).

Olson believes that language should reflect the poet's, thereby the world's actualities. To flesh out Olson's perspective a bit more, in a recent review of Thomas A. Clark's poetry collection, *The Path to the Sea*, published in the *Chicago Review*, the poet Rusty Morrison draws a similar argument comparing Clark's work to George Oppen's:

Oppen brings the natural world *into* the poem, *into* the state of consciousness, where it becomes integral to the poem's dynamic being. In contrast, Clark brings the poem, the state of consciousness to the natural world— at a particular place and in a particular instant or over a particular span of time, so that the poem becomes the shape of a consciousness apprehending an environment.
(190-91)

Replacing “Clark” with “Stevens” and “Oppen” with “Olson” the above passage is essentially a summation of the differences Olson feels when approaching Stevens, the argument which begins in the Creeley-Olson correspondence continues to the present. One distinction drawn in this argument is a strong refusal for the poem as a place of posture. Olson refuses that the poem, as Stevens posits in the first line of his poem, “Add This to Rhetoric” (quoted in Morse's *Origin* essay), display such a position in which “it is posed and it is posed” (“Motive” 22). From Olson's perspective, there is nothing to be “posed.” The natural world is to be brought into the poem, not as a state of apprehension but rather as a statement of it as it is. One set of lines in the same poem of Stevens' read, “comes up the sun, bull fire, / your images will have left / no shadows of themselves” (“Motive” 22) and Olson responds in his letter to Creeley, “For the sun is— not bull's fire” (v.10 35). Olson's meaning being: the sun is the sun. This is a rather arbitrary distinction perhaps, yet such arbitrariness does not dispel the thrust of the argument: any rhetoric about something as fundamental to the experience of humanity should lead directly back to the thing itself; a lesson which clearly stems directly from Williams and Pound.

And there, it appears, ends, in effect, Creeley's interest in, along with any active presiding influence of, Wallace Stevens over his work for the next two decades. These years were consumed by much traveling and numerous teaching occupations. Creeley would have discussed Stevens in these classroom settings. However in the numerous essays, reviews, and interviews from this period, Stevens is not given as much as a nod. During this period Creeley isn't willing to mention Stevens as being an influence, yet he also doesn't name him as among those who "block" what he saw as "the actual tradition":

... the poetry of the Twenties and thirties, or that which was dominant of that time, publicly— let's say the poetry of Ransom and Tate and Bishop and that which then came from the younger men such as Jarrell— this poetry, in effect, tended to block off, not to smother but to cover, the actual tradition that was still operating in the poetry of say Zukofsky and Reznikoff and George Oppen... (*Contexts* 14)

He goes on to cite Williams, Pound, and H.D. as co-supporters of "the actual tradition" (*Contexts* 14-15). Clearly, while he may not be harboring true dislike for his old master he's not comfortable with his presence at the table of named influential forerunners. In the same interview, he's asked to further clarify his remarks concerning the appearance of "a very direct continuity and a very direct conversation carried on in American Poetry ever since the— what?— the twenties?" to which he responds,

Yes. And those concerned in that conversation, as distinct from the Ransom-Tate nexus, give you a particular sense of how to deal with your contemporary reality. Pound does constantly. Williams does. Olson does, to my sense. Zukofsky does. And I would rather have to do with men who are trying to think in terms of contemporary realities... (*Contexts* 23-24)

The interviewer, British poet Charles Tomlinson, is thoughtful enough during this conversation to inquire about Cummings (like Stevens an early influence Creeley does not mention often without prompt) and receives a rebuke of the poetry followed by an

endorsement of the prose (*Contexts* 19), but it's not until a 1978 interview with William Spanos that Stevens is finally brought directly into a conversation.

The interview with Spanos is far reaching and full of philosophical concern with Creeley's work and the tradition from which it arises. The section where Stevens appears is terrific, as is the entire lengthy exchange, in that it starts with Spanos interrupting Creeley's interruptive "The thing..." amidst Spanos' explorative discourse concerning Olson's work and Husserl's "phenomenological reduction" with his own assertive statement,

that is to say, goddamit, what the epistemological stance of Williams and Pound and Olson and you and so many other young contemporary poets generates is a poetry that is fundamentally "the cry of its occasion / Part of the res itself and not about it." That's Wallace Stevens's phrase from "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" but it applies so much more it seems to me to the kind of poetry that you're "writing", a poetry, that is to say, which has its "source" in the speech act as opposed to writing, as opposed to the poem as something you compose for the printed page... (*Tales* 140)

Surprisingly or not, Creeley responds without mentioning the importance of Stevens to him early on, the elephant in the room Spanos has called attention to and is not about to give up on. Several pages further on in the conversation, Spanos again brings up Stevens quoting from "Sunday Morning" and even grouping Stevens with Creeley and his dearest of poets: "Williams and Pound, the Pound of the *Cantos* and Olson and even the late Stevens and, I think, Robert Creeley, poets who return to the things themselves" (*Tales* 177-78).

Intentionally or not, Spanos is directly challenging the ground rules by which Stevens had been shown the door in the Creeley-Olson correspondence and Creeley does not utter Stevens' name once throughout the entire exchange. He is unwilling at this time to allow Stevens to enter into his dialogue about poetry. He neither defends nor attacks his early influence.

It is not until Creeley's "For John Duff," first published in the 1979 collection *Later* and the contribution of a short note of appreciation in the Fall 1979 issue of *The Wallace Stevens Journal*, that Creeley opens the door and brings Stevens as an active force into his work. Not that "For John Duff" appears to have much in common with Stevens' work. It seems more likely that Creeley is easing his way into getting comfortably re-acquainted. He places "I placed a jar in Tennessee..." as epigraph for the poem, not so much as to start in a particular cadence, but rather to state the situation.

Blast of harsh
flat sunlight

on recalcitrant ground
after rain. OK.

Life in N.M. is
not a tourist's paradise,
(*Collected* 169)

Similar to "Anecdote of the Jar" Creeley is announcing that his poem shall discuss a particular place and be philosophically vague, yet precise in its description of what happens there, and how. One sense that Creeley gathers from "Anecdote of the Jar" is that it is all about order, ordering the things in the world about you to locate both yourself and the world. A former student, Robert Basil, recalls one humorous class discussion of the poem in 1979:

One morning, we read Stevens' "Anecdote of the Jar." "The Stevens' IDEA," he said. "What: he places a jar, in Tennessee." He looked at the space on the table, and, one hand still against his cheek, he capped his own "idea-jar" with his other, and laughed, "There! Order!" He hooted.
(305)

Creeley launches his own poem to his sculptor friend John Duff who no doubt shares his concerns using the line from the Stevens' poem as a touch-stone to reflect off.

Samuel French Morse cites Stevens' letters to his wife Elsie to give a sense of the personal thoughts surrounding "Anecdote of the Jar": "I have always been of two minds about Tennessee. Sometimes I like it and sometimes I loathe it" (*Wallace* 90). It may be gathered from reading Creeley's poem that both he and Duff feel similarly towards New Mexico.

... not
your place in the sun. If

I had my way,
I'd be no doubt

long gone.

(*Collected* 169)

There is a level of jokiness to the poem spurred by the camaraderie shared between poet and sculptor. The poem, when taken as a whole, follows Stevens' in this manner as Morse notes: "in professing or seeming to profess that it is a kind of joke, the poem becomes something more" (*Wallace* 92). Creeley is meditating on the place, the people around him, his neighbor, and finally the talking he has shared with his friend John, and the further thoughts where it has brought him, the bonds of their shared concerns.

And this *it*
you gave us:

here
is all wonder,

there
is all there is.

(*Collected* 172)

Creeley's now-classic short line doesn't at first appear to have been derived from Stevens, but with time and careful attention one begins to be surprised at the tension which sounds out from his avid reading early on. Professor Albert Cook introduces the notion:

Variation is stretched to the breaking point: "sd, which was not his/name, the darkness sur-/ rounds us, what," etc. This rhythmic

modulation gives Creeley, deservedly, a classic air. “It is all a rhythm” (“The Rhythm” [W, 19]):

no sun
but sun (P, 5)

This entire strophe, two words repeated and on like pattern repeated, arguably four pitch levels and even four stress levels, paradox caught and transcended in the exactness and delicate modulation of the voice. A central doctrine of Wallace Stevens’ is pared even below the Williams threshold for conversational use” (356).

Creeley’s work demonstrates that he learned from and admired Stevens similarly to the way his contemporary Frank O’Hara does. Critic Micah Mattix notes, “What [O’Hara] admires in Stevens’ work is its difference, and the fact that it cannot be reduced to the styles of the supposed period in which Stevens lived” (691). He reminds that “Marjorie Perloff, one of the few critics to write of Stevens’s influence on O’Hara, shows that O’Hara drew from Stevens’s poetry in creating his own style” (691). O’Hara and Creeley have two of the most individual styles of their generation. There is no mistaking the rhapsodic wit of O’Hara any more than there is the jiggling rhythm of Creeley. Young poets are continually faulted on trying too hard to sound like one or either (often both!) of them. The example of clarity in Stevens’ attention to how the words sound out in a manner unique from his contemporaries brings us the wonders of an O’Hara, a Creeley. The fact of Stevens’ example, living relatively isolated in Connecticut, spending his days working in the insurance industry, physically isolated (save for trips to New York City), from the groups of poets he published with, are a generative force sustaining the diversity of poetic styles to be found in post-war American poetry.

Creeley’s poem “Thinking of Wallace Stevens” appears in his book *Echoes*, published in 1982. Following it is a short prose piece simply entitled “A Note” that contains the line, “I

had not really understood what the lone boy whistling in the graveyard was fact of' (*Collected Poems* 428-29). It's impossible to know whether Creeley intends this as commentary upon the preceding poem, yet such a line embodies so much a sense of the wonder and joy that poetry may bring a first reader, I find it impossible not to believe that he wrote the prose piece with Stevens in mind, recalling his early reading during his Harvard years. The poem itself gives such a sense of age and the understanding experience brings.

Thinking of Wallace Stevens

After so many years the familiar
seems even more strange, the hands

one was born with even more remote, the feet
worn to discordant abilities, face fainter.

I love, loved you, Esmeralda, darling Bill.
I liked the ambience of the others, the clotted crowds.

Inside it was empty, at best a fountain in winter,
a sense of wasted, drab park, a battered nonentity.

Can I say the whole was my desire?
May I again reiterate my single purpose?

No one can know me better than myself,
whose almost ancient proximity grew soon tedious.

The joy was always to know it was the joy,
to make all acquiesce to one's preeminent premise.

The candle flickers in the quick, shifting wind.
It reads the weather wisely in the opened window.

So it is the dullness of mind one cannot live without,
this place returned to, this place that was never left.

(*Collected* 428)

Creeley yields his usual short line here for one that is broadened to resemble that of Stevens, the quiet look of the couplets on the page as well bring a general sense of Stevens to mind.

With several collections of poems published and a poetry career held in high regard by many, Creeley is not afraid of losing anything by giving way somewhat to the poetic style of another well-established poet. There's nothing for him to fear in this poem which is splendid since it allows for his emotional response to pour through. He is able to acknowledge that he's still that "lone boy" in "this place that was never left." Sentimental, perhaps, and certainly there's no denying that this isn't in its use of technique one of the strongest of poems, but there's no denying the persuasive clarity of self recognition apparent here.

Having reconciled himself with the early influence of Stevens, Creeley comes to merge his own mastering of poetic skill with that of Stevens in the closing section of his ambitious later long poem "Histoire de Florida." As critic Forrest Gander observes in a review, "The crescendo" of this "meditation on place comes at the end... when [Creeley] laces his own lines around lines from Wallace Stevens' "Anecdote of the Jar", finding in Stevens' meditation the way imagination gives form to the world, a singular example of a means of being" (40).

*I placed a jar in Tennessee,
In Florida I placed a jar
And round it was, upon the hill...
And all around it grew important air*

*... and tall and of a port in air.
It was my first time there
It took dominion everywhere.
And I was far from home and scared*

*The jar was gray and bare.
In Florida, like nothing else
... Like nothing else in Tennessee.
In Florida. Like Nothing else.*

(*Collected* 483)

Creeley's closing section is twelve lines of three four-line stanzas, same as "Anecdote of the Jar." Beginning with the first line and alternating every other line on through, he lifts a line whole in its entirety from Stevens. In sequence, these lines are: 1, 2, 8, 9, 10, & 12, italicized by Creeley. These six original Stevens lines Creeley then counters with his own, moving against the structure of sound and sense in Stevens. This is analogous to how Creeley observes a musician works with his fellow players.

In reading one's writing and in writing one's reading. It's a constant pattern... the parallel for me is most happily found, say in musicians who are constantly rehearsing the resources of how you can make sounds have particular patterns and conjunction and parallel and harmony and all that. And so there's endlessly a company of that rehearsal and, in that situation, remarkably little hostility as to who thought of it, and whose it is. ("A visit" 31)

Creeley's first line is simply a mirrored reversal of Stevens': he's in Florida, whereas Stevens is in Tennessee. His second line echoes the previous one of Stevens' for the first half, "and" for "and", "around" for "round," and then calls towards the next upcoming Stevens' line, "important air" playing a near-exact syllabic sound equivalent off of "a port in air." This patterning effect is kept up with throughout the remaining lines, "there" keeping the rhyme with "air" as well as anticipating "everywhere" in the following line; the vowel sounding of "scared" echoing "everywhere" and calling forth the "bare" ending the first line of the final stanza.

This technique of relating the structure of sound created by words in the poem on the page with that of music was picked up early on by Creeley, especially in relation to Jazz. In a letter to Olson he brings up jazz musician Charles "Bird" Parker's playing in a discussion of the essence of the word being, "almost as strong as sense: a SOUND

instrument” (*vol. II 15*). Creeley argues that “words, can most certainly, be used as: Sounds, like notes... What IS important is that we grip the RANGE (possible) of the phrase/ which builds to the unit: LINE.” (*vol. II 15*). Recognizing the need to ground his argument in by way of concrete example, Creeley turns to Parker’s playing style.

Now for a brief digression: the matter (analogical) of the BIRD again/ now for purposes of explanation/ or illustration/ let’s assume that the Bird is 1/ trying to ‘say’ something and that 2/ he is trying to say it against this background (a) sounds possible (b) base beat. Now: we can take as the base beat like 1/2/3/4, not only that so-called ‘base’ stress, but, as well, its variants, or the emphases possible within its frame: so, when looking at a base beat/ in poetry, too: we must not only tag the main stress, but also, what can be played upon it, as variant, & still keep to the outline, of its stresses. Okay, so we got now drums, bass, and say: chords (simple) going on the piano. Nice sounds already: you see, already we are building the ‘main’ pattern: AGAINST which/ comes Bird & his instrument (mind, breath, & tenor): well—there is the base beat, his particular sound, and like words moving against the base beat, his particular sound, and like words moving against base pattern (stress) he is able to invert, delay, push back & forward, the PARTICULAR sound, each, that he can make: what this does, is to push meaning into such as are so used.

(*vol. II 15*)

Creeley rides Stevens’ lines as the “base beat” to wrap up his sequence of meditative lines dwelling on the situation of place. Finalizing his acute sense that what matters is his awareness of where he is at in the particular instance of writing, adamantly declaring, “In Florida, like nothing else ... In Florida. Like nothing else.” The language of poetry is his and he rejoices bringing together two of his earliest loves, the poems of Wallace Stevens and the sounds of jazz. It is a lovely pairing.

After Stevens passed away, Cid Corman published a short tribute of his own in an issue of *Origin* in which he described the work as "... calmly certain of its values, humble without meekness, certain without arrogance, intelligent without preening; clear without emptiness, and poetic in the degree of poetry's most precise imaginings. It had waited to be heard and it could wait" (116). Creeley came to feel in the later years of his life that it had waited long enough. What a pleasure it is to read him as he writes Stevens into his own work at last. And what pleasure he takes in introducing into his work what earlier in his life he had so vehemently silenced. The wonderful talker Bill Berkson recalls that Creeley, when questioned at a reading by a surprised audience member about his recent poems "in rhythms and rhymes that recalled anthology pieces of his youth out of Alfred Noyes, "Thanotopsis", & the like" just how could "he write such backward stuff," offered the superbly supple response, "because I can!" (108). And so he does.

Author's Note: This essay was written prior to Ben Lerner's review of Robert Creeley's *Collected Poems* in *Boundary 2* (Fall 2008). Lerner covers some similar territory and the two pieces should therefore be read as complimentary texts.

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