

**A POETICS OF USE: WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS AND
ROBERT CREELEY**

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Then, as all actions of mankind
Are but a laborinth, or maze,
So let your daunces be entwin'd
Yet not perplex men, unto gaze.
But measured, and numerous too,
As men may read each act you doo.
And when they see the graces meet,
Admire the wisdom of your feet.

Ben Jonson

Robert Creeley's initial personal contact with William Carlos Williams came via the post when Creeley was trying to round up some material to include in the poetry magazine he intended to bring out sometime in 1950. Creeley was 23 at the time and Williams 66 and, after explaining his intentions, Creeley admitted to the 'master', «to be frank, I've put myself to school with your work, can think of very few others who've written verse comparable to your own»¹. Creeley had know Williams' work for at least six years —since he had persuaded a girlfriend to steal Williams' *The Wedge* for him—, the contents «proved *fire* of a very real order»², both the preface, which Creeley would often quote, and its poems, which would be attractive examples for his own future poetry. *The Wedge* contained in its poems some of those lessons which would benefit Creeley in the search for his own poetics: «A Sort of a Song», with the first appearance of Williams' «No ideas/but in things», and «The Poem», with its mention of the supreme importance of the measured aural quality of the words —the «song»—, the poem «made of/particulars», the need for «something/immediate», and the «centrifugal, centripetal» energy contained within it. But what had really astounded Creeley, revealing a new way of considering the poem and of composing it, had been Williams' words in his preface:

Therefore each speech having its own character the poetry it engenders will be peculiar to that speech also in its own intrinsic form... 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 ardours 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.

The notions are there; no preconceived ideas about the form the poem must take because it will be «peculiar» to the speech which «engenders» it, the sincerity of the expression contained not in *what* is said but in *how* it is said («Man standing by his word» as Pound defined it); the idea of the poet as a «maker», expressed in the etymology of the word, —the Greek root, «poiein», meaning «to make»—; Williams would describe a poem as «a machine made of words»³; machine because it is seen as something physical not literary, and, like in it no part is redundant, it must not copy nature or refer to the outside, although it receives its impulse from outside, and it acts or, at least, it is potentially in action until it transmits its energy in the moment of reading. The typically American quality of the poetic speech which Williams implicitly defends here is remarked upon by Creeley himself, commenting on the notion of «peculiar... speech» contained in the above extract,

I think this is very much the way Americans are given to speak —not in some dismay that they haven't another way to speak, but, rather, that they feel that they, perhaps more than any other group of people upon the earth at this moment, have had both to imagine and thereby to *make* that reality which they are then given to live in. It is as though they had to *realize* the world anew. They are, as Charles Olson says, 'the last first people'. Now, in contemporary fact, they are also the oldest issue of that imagination —even in some ways bitterly so, because they have thus inherited the world as not only a place to live in, but also as that reality for which they are responsible in every possible sense.⁴

Following Williams' sympathetic answer to his first letter, Creeley immediately wrote back asking him for his «program» for writing, an explicit indication of the direction the new poetry should be taking. Within a week Williams had replied: «My own (moral) program can be briefly stated... To write badly is an offence to the state since the government can never be more than the government of the words... Bad art is then that which does not serve in the continual service of cleansing the language of all the fixations upon dead, stinking dead, usages of the past»⁵. However broad this statement might seem, to Creeley it constituted a basis

full of practical connotations; to use a language devoid of literary associations, anti-symbolistic, direct, hard, sharp, gathering its power and energy from its context and specificity, a clear throwback to Williams' imagistic origins. In 1918 Williams had stated in the prologue to his *Kora in Hell*, «But our prize poems are specially to be damned not because of superficial bad workmanship, but because they are rehash, repetition in another way of Verlaine, Baudelaire, Maeterlinck...: Men content with the connotations of their masters». Creeley certainly would not be content with the connotations of *his* masters and would continue his search for a *useful* poetics, not only in the discussions developed in his correspondence with Williams, Olson, Pound, Zukofsky, and many of his writer friends («he/ 's sure got ideas/ And a nose, a nose!/ and sense, he know/ 's / Where the business/ is», Olson would soon write to Williams⁶), but in the careful, intelligent, and sensitive reading of their poems. Many considerations came from Williams: ideas on form, measure, American speech, the concept of the «local», of «dance», the creative process, use of words, emotions; they would be picked up, absorbed if shared, reformed when necessary, but always accepted only to be of *use*, because, in Creeley's own words,

Some definitions are without meaning, lacking, as they do, a ground on which to bear. Any discussion of poetry must come to the poem itself, and take there, if anywhere, its own assumption of meaning. A theory of poetry is relevant only in what it can produce, in quite literal poems.⁷

Which were then the «theories of poetry», generated by Williams, which interested Creeley most? If we inspect those most mentioned by him in relation to his «master», we will find, how, as with Pound's, they were the ones he could —once again— make *use* of in his own poems. Most of them are interrelated and were part of Creeley's personal concerns in trying to establish his own working poetics.

In the notes Williams prepared for a talk on «The Structural Approach to an Understanding of Form in Modern Verse» at Vassar in 1942 he stated:

You see in American verse, especially in the modern phase, a struggle to establish itself *formally*... in America we have been seeking a form which will be characteristic of us and to establish it as our own. But we have encountered a difficulty at the beginning: the language! Our language is not taught in our schools. All our colleges teach only English... So that our best searches for formal elements in the vernacular have been outlaw... The best modern poets, to my thinking, will be those who seek in the vernacular for that with which to construct their verses: that is, to build into the body of their verse the formal elements of the speech which they *hear* about them, uniquely significant in its day.⁸

This concern for the use of the vernacular in modern American poetry and the way to do so continued to be one of Williams' main preoccupations throughout his poetic career, a modern and revolutionary idea because the poetry then written in the United States did not contemplate it, but not an original one, of course, if we consider that it had been one of the most important objectives for Renaissance writers all over Europe four centuries before. Williams' concern can be traced in many of Creeley's poems, «I Know a Man» being a good example:

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.

Apart from showing Creeley's capacity to include the language he hears around him, the vernacular, in his poems, «I Know a Man» also illustrates another of Williams' maxims which Creeley often quotes, «The poet thinks with his poem. In that lies his thought, and that in itself is the profundity»⁹. The poet's train of thought is captured in the poem with all its natural digressions, each line throwing the reader forward to the next line in our attempt to gather all the information needed to understand the message. Creeley comments, «we are both doing something quite akin: we are gaining an articulation for ourselves in the activity of the poem. As he (Williams) says, 'In our family we stammer until, half mad, we come to speech'»¹⁰. The line breaks never halt the momentum, on the contrary, they renew the centrifugal force which carries the reader to the end by breaking off at an unfinished syntactic clause. The use of enjambment is one of Williams' most typical techniques, used not only to give the lines that forward thrust but to make the reader notice the «thingness» of those words, be they connective particles or qualifiers, which are normally relegated to a secondary level of importance. By isolating them at the end of the lines, Williams —and Creeley also, following his example— underlines the integrity of those words and loads them with that energy that makes them reach forward toward the next line, thus stressing their

importance and singularity, as can be clearly seen in Williams' famous «Poem»:

As the cat
climbed over
the top of

the jamcloset
first the right
forefoot

carefully
then the hind
stepped down

into the pit of
the empty
flowerpot

These considerations bring us to Williams' chief concern, «measure», a concern also paralleled in Creeley's own poetics and that of many of his contemporaries. Williams' attempt to extricate his poetry from the influence of tradition, from the need to use preconceived forms, took him to try and develop an innovative type of poetic measure, not a variation of any traditional poetic feet, but what he termed a «variable foot»:

The measurement of the poetic line of the future has to be expanded so as to take a larger grip of its material. The grammar of the term, variable foot, is simply what it describes itself to be: a poetic foot that is not fixed but varies with the demands of the language, keeping the measured emphasis as it may occur in the line. Its characteristic, where it differs from the fixed foot with which we are familiar, is that it ignores the counting of the number of syllables in the line, which is the mark of the usual scansion, for a measure of the ear, a more sensory counting... The advantage of the practice over the old mode of measuring is that without inversion it permits the poet to use the language he naturally speaks, provided he has it well under control and does not lose the measured order of the words.¹¹

Williams spent all his life trying to define what his «variable foot» was exactly but, even in such an inexplicit quote as the latter, we can see how the principle was brought about by his insistence that the poet use his own specific speech in his verse and, more importantly, how it relates to Pound's imagistic admonition that the poet compose «in sequence of the musical phrase, not in sequence of a metronome»¹². The shift in both

poets goes from the mechanical counting of syllables to the use of the ear as the personal instrument to register the measure of the poetic line. As Williams commented, «You may not agree with my ear, but that is the way I count the line»¹³. Williams explained, in a 1954 letter to Richard Ebehart, that the poet must use the resources of music to «order» the poem, and made it clear that he was not advocating an undisciplined «free verse», the emphasis, again, was on the importance of the poet's sensitive musical ear:

I have never been one to write by rule, even by my own rules. Let's begin with the rule of counted syllables, in which poems have been written hitherto. That has become tiresome to my ear.

Finally, the stated syllables, as in the best of present-day free verse, have become entirely divorced from the beat, that is the measure. The musical phrase proceeds without them.

Therefore the measure, that is to say, the count, having got rid of the words, which held it down, is returned to the *music*.

The words, having been freed, have been allowed to run all over the map, 'free', as we have mistakenly thought. This has amounted to no more (in Whitman and others) than no discipline at all.

But if we keep in mind the *tune* which the lines (not necessarily the words) make in our ears, we are ready to proceed.

By measure I mean musical pace. Now, with music in our ears the words need only be taught to keep as distinguished an order, as chosen a character, as regular, according to the music, as in the best of prose.

By its *music* shall the best of modern verse be known and the *resources* of the music. The refinement of the poem, its subtlety, is not to be known by the elevation of the words but —the words don't so much matter— by the resources of the *music*.¹⁴

And, perhaps more explicitly, he had mentioned regarding rhythm that it was:

...the time, not the syllables, *must* be counted. In the new way: the same rhythm, swift, may be of three syllables or if two are elided, of one: whereas, slow, it may consist of four or seven or any numbers that the sense agrees to. This is the flexibility that the modern requires.¹⁵

This was one of the lessons which Creeley admits having learnt from Williams and which he relates to Pound's and Olson's recommendations:

Williams showed me early on that rhythm was a very subtle experience, and that words might share equivalent duration even

though 'formally' they seemed in no way to do so. Pound said, 'LISTEN to the sound that it makes', and Olson, in like emphasis, made it evident that we could only go 'By ear'.¹⁶

This sense of measure can be traced in numerous Creeley poems; «After Mallarmé», for example, shows how it is the music of one line that constitutes its rhythmic basis and not the stress pattern of a word or a predetermined number of syllables:

Stone
like stillness,
around you my
mind sits, it is

a proper form
for
it, like
stone, like

compression itself,
fixed fast,
grey,
without a sound.

Creeley found the form offered by long poems like *The Cantos*, *Paterson*, or *The Maximus Poems*, intimidating; they were certainly a proof that anything could be included in a poem, that there was nothing intrinsically «antipoetic», but it would be nearly 20 years before Creeley would find himself capable of writing long poems; he much preferred the example set by Williams in his shorter lyrical poems. Even in *Pieces*, his 1969 collection of poems, Creeley made up his long poems of shorter ones —«pieces»—, in a way reminiscent of Williams' inclusion in *Paterson* of all sorts of «objets trouvés»: letters, lists, documents, street signs, and general bric-a-brac of words which he might find around him, in his daily life. So, Creeley includes in his new poems all the brief moments, thoughts, emotions, observations, remarks, which he wants to be a graph of his life, shared by the reader.

Things
 come and go.
Then
 let them.

HAVING TO —
what do I think
to say now.

Nothing but
comes and goes
in a moment.

*

Cup.
Bowl.
Saucer.
Full.

*

They way into the form,
the way out of the room —

The door, the hat,
the chair, the fact.

*

Sitting, waves on the beach,
or else clouds, in the sky,

a road, going by,
cars, a truck, animals, in crowds.

THE CAR
moving
the hill
down

which yellow
leaves
light forms
declare.

*

Car coughing moves with
a jerked energy forward.

*

Sit. Eat
a doughnut.

Love's consistency
favors me.

*

A big crow on the
top of the tree's
form more stripped
with leaves gone
overweighs it.

PIECES OF CAKE crumbling
in the hand trying to hold
them together to give each
of the seated guests a piece.

*

Willow, the house, an egg —
what do they make?

Hat, happy, a door —
what more.

Thus runs «A Step» in its entirety, mapping the continuous movement of life, telling us —as Heraclitus affirmed, but in Creeley's idiosyncratic way—that the fundamental law of the universe is a constant flux, a constant change, pointing to the essential unity of everything; the isolation of the words underlining their condition of «things» —«made new» in Pound's words— because, as Williams remarked, «Can you not see, can you not taste, can you not smell, can you not hear, can you not touch —words?... Words roll, spin, flare up, rumble, trickle, foam —»¹⁷. Creeley's 1962 review of Williams' *Pictures from Breughel* contained an ecstatic defense of Williams which can be taken as a declaration of Creeley's own position as a poet and an allusion to poems such as «A Step»:

It is so singularly the work of a man, one man, that it moves thereby to involve all men, no matter what they assume to be their own preoccupations... the insistence in our lives has become a plethora of plans, of solutions, of, finally, a web of abstract commitments —which leave us only with confusions. Against these Dr. Williams has put the fact of his own life, and all that finds substance in it. He had earlier insisted, «No ideas but in things», meaning that all which moves to an *elsewhere* of abstractions, of specious 'reliefs', must be seen as false. We live as and where we are... What device, means, rhythm, or form the poem can gain for its coherence are a precise issue of its occasion. The mind and ear are, in this sense, stripped to hear and organize what is given to them, and the *dance* or *music* Williams has used as a metaphor for this recognition and its use is that which sustains us, poets or men.¹⁸

The «dance» metaphor, linked to this declaration of principles, brings together all the factors which Creeley found of importance, because of *use*, in Williams. Even at the end of his life, Williams would once again refer to his metaphor, quoting the end of the last completed book of *Paterson*: «We know nothing and can know nothing/ but/ the dance, to dance to a measure/ contrapuntally,/ Satyrically, the tragic foot», explaining to the interviewer that, «the satyrs are understood as action, a dance... (and that) ‘contrapuntally’ means ‘musically’ —it’s a musical image»¹⁹. The dance then needs a ‘measure’ to be carried out, and ‘measure’ is not achieved without a discipline; not a pre-established discipline but one that arises from the process of creation of the poem «under hand» (in Olson’s words); a form rising organically at the instant of creation and depending on the personal sensibility of the poet’s ear and mind. Creeley explains how he understands these concepts of «music» and «dance» as mentioned in Williams’ «The Desert Music» («The loveliest form he left us», in Creeley’s estimation):

Act becomes the primary issue of «verb», or *verbum*, a word. «In the beginning was the Word» —and the word was the *reality of the imagination*. The «music», which the poem’s title emphasizes and which becomes so central a content in the poem’s activity is that which vivifies, the *anima mundi*, lifeness and/or life itself. Our response to it or what it creates, its effects in the reality we are given, is the «dance».... Poems are very specific kinds of *dancing*, because language is that possibility most specific to our condition as human beings.²⁰

The «dance», given the poet’s specific language, his speech, will create its own peculiar form («The newly formed poem, in the new mode, is the only possible definition of the new form», Williams had written²¹), leaving behind any of the preconceived forms that traditional prosody offers, forms attacked by Williams in the shape of the sonnet. Creeley agreed with him fully, and recapitulated:

When Williams beats on the sonnet, and he has done it I think brilliantly —he is hitting at a usage which denies form *now*. In short— that implies we ourselves are incapable —as our predecessors were of course not— of invention, of finding in the direct context of what we know, where we are, an exact means to form —which will be the direct issue of such contact. The sonnet says, in short, we must talk, if you want, with another man’s mouth, in the peculiar demands of that ‘mouth’, and can’t have our own. To the contrary —any man who will listen to his own speech, to the way any words come from himself, can find the character of his own language.²²

It was the character of the poet's language that would give rise to the poem's form, and this organic concept of poetry was linked in Williams to his emphasis on the «local», because, as he saw it, «Nothing can grow unless it taps into the soil»²³, or at the beginning of *Paterson*: «To make a start,/ out of particulars/ and make them general...». The concentration on the individual, in its uniqueness, would help the poet to reach the universal, because in the particular is, of course, the universal, the same forces surging through them as surge through all that exists, the poem being «real, not 'realism' but reality itself»²⁴:

Only the poem
only the made poem, to get said what must
be said, not to copy nature, sticks
in our throats

The law? The law gives us nothing
but a corpse, wrapped in a dirty mantle.
The law is based on a murder and confinement,
long delayed,
but this, following the insensate music,
is based on the dance:
an agony of self-realization
bound into a whole
by that which surrounds us

I cannot escape
I cannot vomit it up
Only the poem!
Only the made poem, the verb calls it
into being.

(«The Desert Music»)

«Not to copy nature»: Williams departing from the classic aristotelian principle of «inventio» towards a reformulation of the imitation of nature; not as an attempt to reproduce nature in the artistic work, but to «become nature» in our creative capacity;

to copy nature is a spineless activity; it gives us a sense of our mere existence but hardly more than that. But to imitate nature involves the verb: we then ourselves become nature, and so invent an object which is an extension of the process.²⁵

The ideas implied in these words: the poem as object —the result of an act of poetic creation—, poetic activity as process, as a transmission of energy, which creates its own form (Creeley would similarly state, «Form is never more than an extension of content») would be ever present in any discussion and theorization of contemporary American poetics, and would aid Creeley in the elaboration of his own poetic principles.

Finally, Creeley found in Williams' poetry and poetics an alternative to Pound's egocentric view of the world, a capacity to enter the facts of the world outside; although Williams had defended imagination as the only reality existing, his «eyes were characteristically, turned outwards, towards the natural world and towards other people, and not inwards, bent upon the examination of the sources of our knowledge, the mind»²⁶. Creeley discussed Williams' example with Olson in their letters, because as Creeley commented, Olson «was concerned with correcting what he felt to be errors of Pound's attitude. He wanted to see the organization of a poem become something more than an ego system»²⁷, and they both agreed that «Bill HAS an emotional system which is capable of extensions & comprehensions the ego-system (the Old Deal, Ez as Cento Man, here dates) is not»²⁸ —the parenthesis here referring to Pound in *The Cantos*—. Creeley would branch out from Williams' emotional system as a way of bringing the outside world into his poems, by «extensions & comprehensions», reducing his world of poetry to his own «particulars», particulars which, shared with his readers would «make them general», engulfing us within that «intensively *emotional* perception» of the moment, which forms his poems; bearing, so, the true mark of a poet.

When Creeley has tried to explain why it is that he writes, why it is he can consider himself a poet, a poet who, as he says is *given* to write, he has always ended up using Williams words, in what can only be interpreted as a tribute to the man he considered his example and his best master:

I *am* a poet! I
am. I am. I am a poet, I reaffirmed, ashamed

Now the music volleys through as in
a lonely moment I hear it. Now it is all
about me. The dance! The verb detaches itself
seeking to become articulate .

And I could not help thinking
of the wonders of the brain that
hears that music and of our
skill sometimes to record it.

(«The Desert Music»)

Notes

1. Quoted by Paul Mariani in «'Fire of a Very Real Order': Creeley and Williams», in «BOUNDARY 2», Spring/Fall, 1978, p. 175.
2. «I'm Given to Write Poems», in *A Sense of Measure*, Robert Creeley, (Calder and Boyars; London, 1972), p. 58.
3. William Carlos Williams, *Selected Essays*, (Random House, New York, 1954), p. 256.
4. Creeley, pp. 58-59.
5. «William Carlos Williams to Robert Creeley», in *The Poetics of the New American Poetry*, Donald Allen and Warren Tallman (eds.), (Grove Press; New York, 1973), p. 140.
6. Quoted by Mariani, p. 178.
7. Robert Creeley, «The Release», in *A Quick Graph: Collected Notes & Essays*, Donald Allen ed., (Four Seasons Foundation; San Francisco, 1970), p. 101.
8. William Carlos Williams, «Studiously Unprepared: Notes for Various Talks and Readings», edited by Paul Mariani, in «SULFUR 4», 1982, p. 31.
9. Quoted by Creeley in «Linda W. Wagner: A Colloquy with Robert Creeley», in *Contexts of Poetry: Interviews 1961-1971*, Donald Allen, ed., (Four Seasons Foundation, Bolinas, Cal., 1973), pp. 95-96.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 98.
11. Quoted by Roy Harvey Pearce, *The Continuity of American Poetry* (Princeton University Press; Princeton, New Jersey, 1961), pp. 343-344.
12. «A Retrospect», Ezra Pound, reprinted in *The Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*, T. S. Eliot ed., (Faber & Faber; London, 1954), p. 4.
13. Quoted by John Malcolm Brinnin in «William Carlos Williams», in *Seven Modern American Poets*, Leonard Unger, ed., (University of Minnesota Press; Minneapolis, 1967), p. 108.
14. Quoted by Brinnin, pp. 107-108.
15. Mike Weaver, *William Carlos Williams: The American Background*, (Cambridge University Press; London, 1971), p. 83.
16. Robert Creeley, «Notes Apropos 'Free Verse'» in *A Sense of Measure*, p. 52.
17. William Carlos Williams, *The Great American Novel*, (Contact; Paris, 1923), pp. 10-11.
18. Robert Creeley, «The Fact», in *A Quick Graph*, pp. 117-118.
19. «William Carlos Williams», in *Writers at Work*, (3rd. Series), George Plimpton, ed., (Penguin Books; New York, 1977), p. 17. The interview took place in April, 1962 and Williams died on March 4, 1963.
20. Creeley, «I'm Given...», pp. 60-61.
21. Williams, «Studiously Unprepared...», p.11.
22. Robert Creeley, «A Note on Poetry», in *A Quick Graph*, p. 26.
23. William Carlos Williams, *The Autobiography of William Carlos Williams*, (Random House; New York, 1951; reprint; New Directions; New York, 1967), p. 334.
24. William Carlos Williams, *Spring and All*, (Contact; Dijon, 1923), reprinted in *Imaginations*, (New Directions; New York, 1970), p. 117.
25. William Carlos Williams, *Selected Letters*, John C. Thirwall, ed., (Mc Dowell, Obolensky; New York, 1957), p. 297.
26. Michael Alexander, «William Carlos Williams and Robert Creeley», «AGENDA IV», Summer, 1966, pp. 62-63.
27. «Robert Creeley in Conversation with Charles Tomlinson», in *Contexts of Poetry*, p. 23.
28. Charles Olson, *Selected Writings*, Robert Creeley, ed., (New Directions; New York, 1966), p. 82.