Essays on the Peripheries

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Published by Punctum Books

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Robert Creeley’s poem, “Anger,” draws attention to the dangers of subjectivity and unmediated thought, the results of which lead to a rupturing of the relation between self and a common world. Creeley has written, “poems like ‘One Way,’ ‘Some Afternoon,’ and ‘Anger,’ — that was 1964 — represent for me the apex of trying to write from inside the emotion.” Of the three poems, “Anger,” stands out as a fully developed statement of the futility of the subjective stance. This poem is the culmination of his early work, a final reckoning of the “I” whose posture had become rigid, isolate.

In the early work, subjectivity is not experienced as “existential freedom but an oppressive captivity.” The relation between the self and the other is strained to the point of rupture. While subjectivity yields multiple perspectives, they all appear “locked in / self sight, not / the world what / ever it is.” The point of reference is the self alone in the world. In the poem, “For Love,” Creeley writes, “what own / statement, wants to / turn away, endlessly / to turn away.” The inability to substantiate anything in the real world is the fate of a highly subjective stance. In looking at itself the self seems separate, split. In “Anger,” as in many of the poems in Words (1969), it is as though the speaker is ob-
serving himself from the distance, detached, a separate entity. Creeley writes, “I cannot see myself / but as what I see, an / object but a man.” The attempt to substantiate the self as object leads to the speaker’s observation that he is a man with a “lust for forgiveness, / raging, from that vantage, / secure in the purpose, / double, split.” This split is expressed in the first part of the poem where the speaker feels himself submerged in a “hole / for anger.” As he is submerged, he “watches on / the edge of it, / as if she were / not to be pulled in, / a hand could / stop him.” It is as though the speaker, an Orpheus-type figure speaking to his Eurydice, is watching himself helplessly descend, as though, “trapped inside something and unable to get out.” Creeley writes, “I think I think / but find myself in it.” That “it” is nothing other than itself, an empty hole, a mirror held up to a mirror, thought thinking about itself. The concentrated poetic energy achieved in the last lines of the first part does not lend itself to easy explication. The lines threaten to break down under the intensity of the emotion, the concentrated energy of the release. Something has changed, the speaker perceives the woman as double, his hands held out to the one, “while the other / moans in the hole / in the floor, in the wall.” Tom Clark has written that the image of the hole may have been the result of an experience in Creeley’s early childhood. Creeley writes,

We had a cesspool out behind the house, at this now unit-
ilized farm in which we still lived after my father’s death, that I actually fell into once. I can’t remember it, but was told. Apparently I was in a classic sailor’s suit, fell in, and came out half-darkened.

Creeley has described the image as “a kind of perverse well of shit — a deep hole.” The image is used to describe an emotional state that impacts him as though it was a physical presence intruding upon the speaker.

The crisis of subjectivity enacted in the poem stems from an event which is not made explicit but implies sexual resentment
and discontent. The domestic situation is exhausted to a point of contention:

In all they save,
in the way of his saving
the clutter, the accumulation

of the expected disorder —
as if each dirtiness,
each blot, blurred
happily, gave
purpose, happily —

All of which forces the sense that, “she is not enough there.” The bitter irony of the third part suggests sexual frustration as a result of unfaithfulness; Creeley writes, “and you screamed too / with the other, in pleasure.” The tension in these last lines is heightened by the preceding descriptions of imagined violence. The implications of this poem are inseparable from the Puritan strain in Creeley’s work. Speaking of Creeley, Tom Clark writes,

Puritan self-torment, the poet has written, may achieve a highly sophisticated formality that is the ultimate epistemological invention of a culture responsible for the proposition, “that pain was perhaps the most formal means society had evolved for the experience of itself.”

The trial of endless emotional labor that characterizes such a temperament can be seen as thematic in Creeley’s work in general. In “Anger,” though, Creeley writes, “But also / the pleasure, / the / opening / relief / even in what / was so hated.” But, in speaking of Rousseau’s Confessions, Creeley had written

That book is a great relief of feelings that are of the human context. Therefore their admission into the writing with such intensity and clarity is already a great relief of all that surrounds him.
The mind seeks to release itself from the cage of introspection.

The minimalism of Creeley’s early work tended to favor abstractions and generalizations. In “Anger,” the world finally reduces to a voice, isolate, with no other reference than itself. Creeley here is concerned with Puritanism’s mind/body split, the well of darkness that opens upon, like a deep “hole,” between self and object. In *Autobiography*, Creeley writes, “This must be thought of as Puritanism, a curious split between the physical fact of a person and that thing they otherwise think with, or about, the so-called mind.” Furthermore, Creeley writes, “with the denial of any Collective everything moves in, so the inside becomes the whole scene.” The last lines of Anger can be seen in this Puritan context. The rhythm of the lines is less abrupt than earlier in the poem.

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All you say you want
To do to yourself you do
To someone as yourself
And we sit between you
Waiting for whatever will
Be at last the real end of you.
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This is the “ultimate protestant introspection.” Creeley is expressing the mirroring effect of the isolated subject. One does not act in relation to another but solely in relation to oneself as another. And contained within this self is a jury that condemns this very self.

The ultimate result of this crisis of subjectivity is the loss of the sense of a common world. The words deflate in the absence of a world. They remain cold and rigid, bloodless objects. Life becomes, “an open / hole of horror, of // nothing as if not / enough there is / nothing. A pit — .” The poet searches for, “some odor / which is anger, // a face / which is rage.” The attempt to objectivize the emotional content prove futile, a “pattern,” which “is only resemblance,” or furthermore, “a sign quickly adapted, / shifted to make // a horrible place / for self-satisfaction.”
An examination of the use of pronouns in the poem reveals the progression from the singular to the collective. The “we” in the last lines of the poem are the voices of the world that stand between “yourself” and “someone else as yourself.” They can be seen as the voice of social conscience or a warning about the dangers of unmediated thought. Creeley, in conversation with Lewis Macadams, has said,

A few weeks ago in Vancouver I had a reading, and I was trying not nicely or sweetly to make known to this young group the horrors of thinking that thought itself can possess the world… And that’s why I kept writing, “I want to get out of my mind.” I mean, I didn’t want a deracination of the senses, but wanted to get out of that awful assumption that thinking is the world.

Finally, “Anger” can be seen as a transitional poem. The domestic situation exhausted, subjectivity reduced to an experience of futility, the mind become its own prison, the poem finally reveals the ways we have cut ourselves off from the common world, from the human context. In a world increasingly “virtual,” Creeley’s poem stands out as a relevant warning. This poem leads to the reconsideration of the nature of language and self in Pieces (1969), and this leads to a significant transition in Creeley’s later work.

Works Cited
