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Body, Breath, World: Robert Creeley's Phenomenological Poetics

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Consciousness is something located, bound to a place and a reality that it cannot escape—it is something essentially corporeal.
James Dodd, *"Editor's Introduction"* to *An Introduction to Husserl's Phenomenology*

Here, here, the body
screaming its orders,
learns of its own.
Robert Creeley, "Mazatlan: Sea"

In "Massachusetts" Robert Creeley writes, "You place yourself in / such relation, you hear / everything that's said" (*Selected Poems* l 4-6). To discuss Robert Creeley's poetics, consider the poet and poem in *relationship*, each an object in an object-filled world. Now add the reader. Since the poem is experienced through our bodies and because our bodies are never in stasis, the poem is also never in stasis. The creative act is not a singular act but an interrelated act*ing*, thus the poem becomes an experienc*ing*. Creeley takes into account the movement of a corporeal, temporal artist through a corporeal, temporal world, a world wherein the artist is an object acting in relation to other objects. As writes Charles Olson in *Human Universe and Other Essays* (1967), "It is a matter, finally, of OBJECTS, what they are, what they are inside a poem, how they got there, and, once there, how they are to be used" (20). It is the relationships between the world, poet, poem, reader, and the *words themselves*, that charge Creeley's work. Speaking phenomenologically, it is therefore through these relationships that Creeley has access to the order of the world.

Of course, a poetics about relationships is nothing new—think Projective Verse. For Charles Olson, what breath achieved was in question. For him, breath is both physiological and philosophical, thus Projective Verse is created through the "possibilities of the breath" (*Charles Olson* 16). Projective verse is phenomenological because the foundation is the body. It is only because we are corporeal that can we experience, posits Husserl. Projective verse, then, because it involves bodily experience, expresses a particular "stance toward reality"

(*Charles Olson* 15). This stance, Olson proposed, would change the way things looked on the page and "lead to new poetics and to new concepts" (*Charles Olson* 16). It relied on the body, breath and consciousness for its realizations, and thus led to a poetics based on experience. In "Introduction to Robert Creeley" in *Human Universe,* Olson states that Creeley is, "constituting himself the going reality and, by the depth and sureness of his speculating, making it pay, making you-me believe, that we are here in the presence of a man putting his hands directly and responsibly to experience which is also our own" (*Human Universe* 128). Olson continues that Creeley uses his presence merely "to keep the going going, to make the reach of what is happening clear. For his presence is the energy" (*Charles Olson* 128). Creeley brings energy to the page because of his ability to see the ordinary as extraordinary. This openness is Husserl's intentionality. Husserl proposes that "The conditions for the possibility of knowledge are found not in the object, but in the openness of the subject to the object, an openness that is always prior to the manifestation of the world" (qtd. in Patocka xiii). Creeley thus has a certain "access to the order of the world" in that he is an active participant with the world, and also with the words and readers he needs for his poetry to reach its form (xiii). Charles Altieri posits of Creeley that his "aim is not so much to interpret experience as to extend it by making a situation simply the focus for overlapping reflexive structures" (518). His poetics considers the poet, reader, and the poem, as both subject and object. As with the objects in the world itself, each object is a unique and essential component of making meaning in Creeley's poetic world and beyond.

Projective Verse is best understood as a particular approach. The poem is a tangible object, but is also *beyond* inanimate because of what the poem is and *does*. Olson stresses three important characteristics in Projective Verse, the first involving kinetics. "A poem is energy transferred from where the poet got it (he will have some several causations), by way of the poem itself to, all the way over to, the reader" (*Human Universe* 16). The poem, then, necessarily involves several consciousnesses. In phenomenological terms, each "world" is an extension of consciousness, or what Husserl deems intentionality, "that unifying bond that to which the experience of consciousness is not a rhapsody of impressions or other phenomena but rather a unitary meaningful process" (64). If the perceiver is open to experience, then this will manifest as a particular experience in the consciousness of the perceiver and as an experience that reveals something about the world. As contends Husserl, "For to be aware of life as the horizon of knowledge means to recognize as one's own precisely the general movement of revealing the order of the world" (xi). Therefore, the purpose of the poet is to reveal the order of the world.

Olson's second characteristic of Projective Verse is the well-known phrase "FORM IS NEVER MORE THAN AN EXTENSION OF CONTENT" (16). The syllables in a poem provide a spatial, mental, and aural structure. The poem, as an extension of the poet's consciousness, is always an object present in consciousness prior to the writing of the poem. The poem itself is a context, an object among objects in and of the world. Any context, as Dodd states in his introduction to Patocka's book, "is nothing over and above the thing, but intrinsic to it; to have something to do with something, to handle it or understand it, is to always be at the same time moving in the horizon of its significance" (Patocka xiv). The objects of the world are always in relation to other objects. Human consciousness is a context. The words in a poem, like objects in the world, work in relation to each other providing a context, moving to the page while holding the energy of experience. The words also hold energy as language. Words in English are temporal. Verb tenses, for instance, indicate time and space. Form happens on the page because of this transaction of energy. As writes Creeley in the introduction to *Words*, "Words will not say anything more than they do . . ." (qtd. in Diehl 335). As Paul Diehl continues in "The Literal Activity of Robert Creeley," words, for Creeley, are thus both "things" and "events" (337). The energy transferred in the relationships between the world, poet, words, and reader is responsible for shaping the poem. As Husserl would note, *poem*, like any other context, is experience.

Olson's third premise is, "the *process* of the thing." He adds that, "ONE PERCEPTION MUST IMMEDIATELY AND DIRECTLY LEAD TO A FURTHER PERCEPTION" (*Human Universe* 16-17). Words in the poem point to other words. This pointing of words, referencing both to sound and experiences, move the reader through the poem. A poem works because its parts sustain the energy. Olson's notion is that because the poem is a kind of consciousness, the poem must always be moving as consciousness is always moving. As relays Husserl, "an experience is a reference to a further experience" (163). Consciousness operates by continually pointing, connecting previous experiences to new ones. A poem such as "Supper" refers to a single experience, but Creeley demonstrates that one experience is full of many perceptions. Creeley further emphasizes the necessity of perception through his use of, or omission of, punctuation. The energy produced by each perception is what moves the reader through the poem.

Thus in terms of approach, Creeley's poetics is about new realities. Creeley states in *What is Poetry: Conversations with the American Avant-Garde,* "I'd agree with Williams that 'A new world is only a new mind,' that what one calls 'imagination' is the means by which we experience 'reality,' any reality" (Kane

59). Husserl too believes that it is in imagination where true perception, and thus meaning, lies. For him, the order of the world will only be revealed to one who lives as a perpetual child, looking with the openness and willingness to see things as they are and as they could be. Consciousness, for Husserl, is intentional. All meaning is a joint product of the world and the subject. As the experience is rendered on the page, it is the line that gets, as Olson states, "the attention, the control, that it is right here, in the line, that the shaping takes place, each moment of the going" (*Human Universe* 19). This control is not tyrannical, a poet controlling words. Instead, the line, for Olson, is shaped because of the attention paid by the poet. The poet must listen to the words and allow the form to be shaped by the words, not the other way around. Charles O. Hartman in *Free Verse: An Essay on Prosody* and Robert Hass in "Listening and Making" state that the line pulls the reader into a kind of attentive consciousness. Hartman writes, "A poem is the language of an act of attention" (12). Therefore attention must be paid to every syllable, the smallest unit in a poem. Olson's credo, "the HEAD, by way of the EAR, to the SYLLABLE / the HEART, by way of the BREATH, to the LINE" holds true in phenomenological terms (*Human Universe* 19). If a word is made up of individual units of sound it is the experiencing of those sounds that affects the breath and rhythm in the poem. For Olson, syllables are first experienced in the mind of the poet. He writes, "I am dogmatic, that the head shows in the syllable. The dance of the intellect is there, among them, prose or verse" (*Human Universe* 19). Therefore, the syllable is showing what the mind does (*Human Universe* 19). A projective verse poem establishes balance between the actions of the mind. Writes Olson, "I take it that PROJECTIVE VERSE teaches, is, the lesson, that that verse will only do in which a poet manages to register both the acquisitions of his ear and the pressures of his breath" (*Human Universe* 17). The poet must concern her/himself with listening and speaking, the balance providing the poem with sufficient energy to sustain itself. For Creeley, sounds are what lead and organize the verse. He states, "I guess that if I needed to choose one precept that most served my senses of poetry over the years, it would be Pound's injunction: 'Listen to the sound that it makes!'" (64). Eleanor Berry, in "The Free Verse Spectrum" (1997), writes, "It is the relation to phonological phrasing, rather than to syntax, that determines whether or not we feel a line as enjambed, fragmented, or both, and, if so, how strongly" (886). The line is thus a series of sounds that produce a rhythm, and the rhythm produced by the sounds is what projects the line forward, pushes it back, etc. Thus, for Creeley, the line shapes through the listening act. As Husserl would note, listening is an important, active, temporal and corporeal experience in phenomenological terms. One listening experience for the poet (and the reader, of course) necessarily leads to the next listening experience.

The line is also where the poet meets the reader. Creeley's lines range in length and breath, but this is less an experiment in the line and more the realization of the line. That is, Creeley allows the words to shape the context and the reader to shape the experience. Louise M. Rosenblatt states this nicely in *The Reader, The Text, The Poem,* when she contends, "the text is the stimulus that focuses the reader's attention so that the elements of past experience—concepts linked with verbal symbols—are activated" (11). This, of course, echoes Hartman and Hass, but it also adds another element—the idea that verbal symbols are connected to experiences. Sound itself constitutes an experience, Husserl would contend. The poem is an object of sound. Sounds are made with the breath, and this returns to the body as locus of orientation. If the line is experienced through the body, then that body is affected by these movements. Breath and rhythm are physiological experiences. Paul Diehl writes,

> By attending closely to pulse or breath or to some other activity, we attend closely to emotion. What the poet does is to make an 'emotion literal,' is to create a complex of linguistic activities which share the same essential characteristics as a complex of physiological activities to make possible two 'literal events' with the same essential form: one the 'emotion' which resides in the body, the other 'emotion literal' which resides in the language. (340)

It is impossible to breathe during the reading of a poem without noticing the body, and it is through the body that the poet influences emotion. Remember Husserl posits that experience is only possible because we are corporeal. The breath allows Creeley to play with energy and emotion. When the reader reads in "Mazatlan: Sea," "The sea flat out, / the light far out," it is much different than "the / blobs of dark clouds / seem closer" (1-5). Lines that are not enjambed feel different to the reader than lines that are enjambed. Each line takes a different amount of energy and feels different emotionally. If one thinks of the line as an energy transaction, as Olson contends, then it is through the breath that the poet controls how much energy is expended. Creeley influences the body's direct, immediate physiological and emotional experience through what he calls the "'syntactical environment'" (qtd. in Diehl 339). The poet's responsibility, as Creeley puts it, "is to make the 'emotion literal in the poem,' so that it becomes literal in its transmission" (qtd. in Diehl 339). Thus Creeley's poetics is phenomenological in that the experience of the poem is shaped by physiological concerns that occur only because we are corporeal. Without corporeality, the relationships between world, poet, poem, and reader are impossible.

For the phenomenologist, then, all consciousness is consciousness of something. Consciousness operates only because there is an entity, in this case a poet and a reader, to experience a "something." There is perhaps no better Creeley poem that relays the movement and process of consciousness than Creeley's "Do you think…" The poem is far more than a poem about thinking. Rather, it is a poem that shows the thinking process at work. It is a poem that shows both Creeley and the reader thinking in relation to each other, and in relation to the words on the page. As writes Patocka on Husserl's theory of the body, "In contrast with other material objects and processes, the body is a center of orientation, the point zero of an ordered sequence which we bear with us or, better, which we are" (Patocka 144). Human beings are our bodies, and this creates a particular notion of experience for a poet such as Creeley. Creeley places different objects before the reader and asks the reader to think about the object, which is what most poems do. But Creeley influences how we think about the object through his meticulous attention to syllabication and lineation. Through the syntactical environment, Creeley influences the reader physiologically. When we breathe differently, when we pause, move faster, slow down, this does not merely affect our bodies. This also affects our thinking, our consciousness. As posits Diehl, "The mind takes its own breaths which sometimes are joined by the body's. And when we breathe at places other than these natural opportunities for breath, we show that our mind has also breathed a different way" (341). Remember, phenomenology posits that the fact that we are corporeal, our bodies our constant locus of orientation, means that anything we perceive, think about, imagine, first comes into reference through our bodies. Thus when Creeley moves the reader through the poem in a certain way he is not only affecting our bodies, he is affecting our minds.

The title "Do you think . . ." is Creeley's first association. The title functions as a question and a suggestion to do something, in this case to think. The [. . .] connotes action. Thinking, for Creeley, is about movement that involves the body and the mind. The verbs "do" and "think" bring into association body (do) and mind (think). Repeating the phrase as the first line of each stanza, "Do you think that if," corresponds to each of Olson's three Projective Verse requirements: energy transfer, form as extension of content, and perception to perception. The repetition of the line constantly calls the reader back to the first association of body/mind and serves three functions: 1) The phrase gets the reader involved in the process of the poem by asking her/him to participate, to think, along with Creeley. As Creeley thinks, so will the reader, thus Olson's need as an energy transfer is emulated here. It is also a plea for openness, Husserl's intentionality. The word "you" is a direct address. The word "if" asks for openness so Creeley

can place an object in the reader's consciousness. The line repetition influences the reader to participate in the intentional and temporal world of the poem. Remember that for Husserl, all consciousness, all thinking, is thinking of something; 2) the phrase itself acts as both a question, "Do you think," and a suggestion, "that if." The reader is first called to engage her/his mind with the word "think" and then to think about something specific—the intended object. Putting the call to think in one line and the object in the next line shows Creeley wants the reader to see each, the act and the object, as important—each has emphasis because each has earned its own line. Form is an extension of content because the act and object are separated in successive lines but also linked by enjambment; 3) the phrase also allows Creeley to imitate the phenomenological processes of imaginary variation. Each object is placed before the reader in a particular form and then this form is varied. Specifically, Creeley asks the reader to imagine the object differently. Once Creeley has the reader's attentive consciousness in one stanza with one object, he is able to put more objects in front of her/him and ask the reader to think of the object in this similar way. Creeley moves the reader from perception to perception as each stanza gets its own object. Thus, all three of these ways in which the title functions comply with Olson's definition of projective verse, and thus are also phenomenological.

Creeley also transfers energy from the world to the reader through the use of lineation, enjambment, syllabication, and punctuation (or lack thereof). The first stanza is comprised of only three lines, but the fourth stanza is six lines. Each of the successive stanzas adds one line, thus on the page and in reading, the lines expand, growing as the energy builds.

The building energy is also a reflection of content. "Do you think that if" points the reader toward the object *within a context.* As writes Erazim Kohak in *An Introduction to Husserl's Phenomenology,* "Things are never meaningful in themselves, only with others; they point to a context [. . .] As such this context is nothing over and above the thing, but intrinsic to it; to have something to do with something" (xiv). In each stanza, Creeley places objects in front of the reader, the effect of which is that each object functions both within the context of the stanza and in conjunction with the other successive objects and their contexts. Each stanza exhibits Husserl's imaginary variation in that each line represents a step toward the relief of the object, the suspension of "one's everyday understanding of what the object is" (x). With each line, Creeley suggests the reader think of the respective object as it currently exists within the reader's consciousness and then to think of the object in a different way. The process is repeated in each stanza using a different context.

One object of focus introduced in the second stanza is "apple." The apple works well for imaginary variation because the apple is a simple, easily recognizable object. The apple is first placed before the reader in the simplest of terms. "Do you think that if / there's an apple on the table" (l 4-5). Creeley suggests to the reader to imagine an apple upon a table. The image earns its own line, acts as one step in the imaginary variation. The line is also enjambed. Thus the line earns a pause because it comprises one line, but it also has a slight push into the next line. The line is also read on the same breath from line one. The breath is not exhausted yet, but the reader feels a bit of a tug from the energy created by the breath and the enjambment.

In the third line, however, Creeley adds "and somebody eats it . . ." (l6). Creeley accomplishes several things with this line. First, "somebody" is added to the context and within that context the "somebody" is doing something particular—ingesting the apple. Secondly, the apple is removed from the original context. The reader placed the object on the table and then removed the object from the table within her/his imagination. At the end of the first act of imaginary variation, Creeley uses the first comma in the poem. This is a more pronounced pause, and the reader takes the second breath of the stanza here. The pause in breath also represents a pause in thought. Creeley gives the reader a moment to change the imagined picture. Because of the more pronounced pause in the line (the first stanza is all read on one breath), the reader feels that something important is about to happen. It is as if Creeley is preparing the reader for something to be revealed. In the final line of the stanza he writes, "won't be there anymore," referring back to the "it" of the previous line (l 7-8).

The "there" points in two directions—back toward the table, the apple's original "there"—and forward toward the "there" within the reader, that is the "there" of the reader's imagination. Because "there" is connected with the mind through the imagination, Creeley connects the apple to the larger context of being, as he does with want in the first stanza. In other words, "there" functions as both a kind of tangible picture in the mind and as an abstract concept. Does the apple exist if it is no longer in the mind? Because Creeley is bringing into question the notion of human want in the first stanza, it is not too much of a leap to assume that Creeley is concerned with existence itself here, and he is using the apple to first make the context simple in order to change it, in order to put it in a different relation. By putting the small, simple object within the context of existence itself, he is able to set the apple into relief—when connected with the notion of existence, apple is not mere physical object. *Apple* is now somehow different. First, *apple* has a singular existence. Then it is its

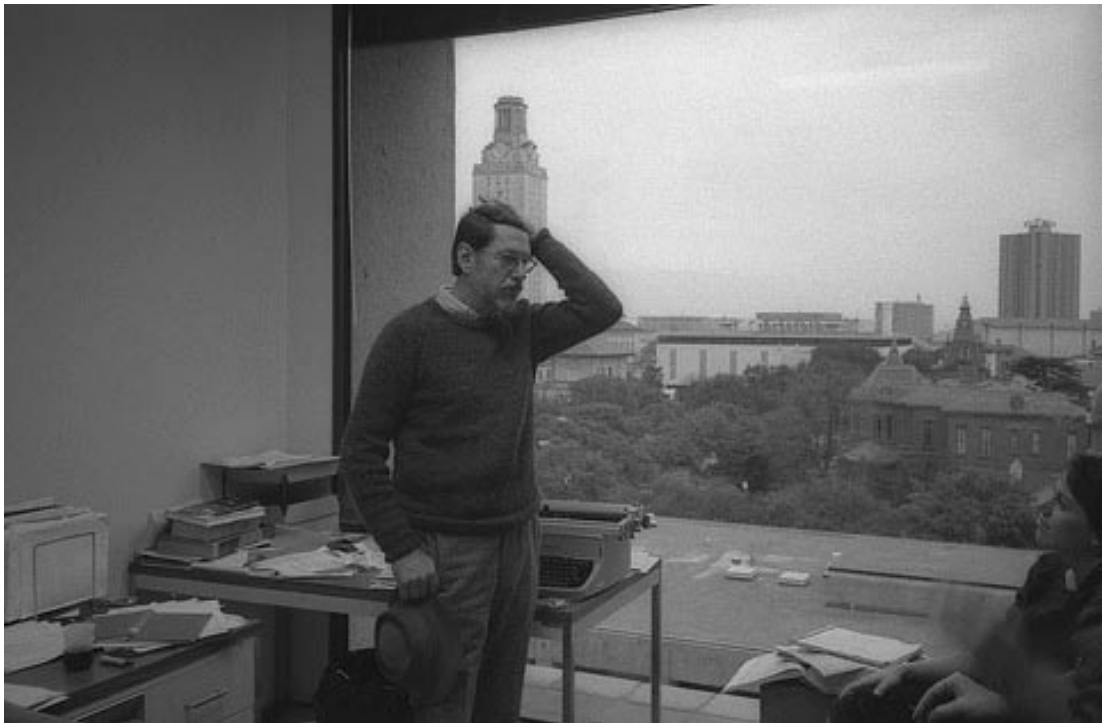
own entity that can be "there," that is, can have existence or non-existence. This represents the shift of the individual ego to the transcendental ego, the second stage of reduction. Creeley encourages the reader to think of the apple as unto itself, if you will, with its own existence removed from its relationship to the individual ego. Second, because of the new association, the existence of the apple points to human existence. Through imaginary variation, Creeley is able to make strange connections. As Husserl notes, connections always lead to other connections, experiences to further experiences. The apple necessarily leads the reader to ponder existence itself because Creeley has called her/his attention to the apple in this particular way. If the existence of the apple is different, then is all existence different? Again, Creeley encourages the reader to move from the individual ego (my existence) to the transcendental ego (existence itself). As with the first stanza, the lines read as questions, yet the punctuation at the end of each stanza is a period. The reader is left not with one specific question—is the apple still there—but with as many thoughts as this particular notion will give rise to. Closing with a question mark implies that Creeley wants the reader to think merely about the apple, that one specific question. Closing with a period implies that this is the end of one thought, and, as Husserl would note, all thoughts lead to other thoughts.

In the third and fourth stanzas, Creeley further pushes the reader in form and content. In the third stanza, the lines push toward the margin, forcing the reader to breathe in a particular way, to force the breath. As previously noted, there is no internal punctuation besides the comma at the end of the second line, thus the last three lines are meant to be read on a single breath, controlling the reader's temporal experience of the stanza. The lines are also meant to imitate the act of thinking; this "pushing" occurs in the mind as well. Thus, as the thoughts become increasingly complex or strange, the lines build in pace and content. As with the apple, Creeley encourages the reader to think of "love" in a new way. Creeley again presents the object, love, in a singular, simple way first. He writes, "Do you think that if / two people are in love with one another," (l 8-9). Then he adds a complication: "one or the other has got to be / less in love than the other at" (l 10-11). As with the apple, love is changing here. The line "two people are in love with one another" is straightforward, conjuring a predictable picture in the imagination, like "there's an apple on the table"; this is the standard version of love (l 9, 5). Yet with the addition of the line "less in love than the other" the typical notion of love has changed. It becomes more complicated with Creeley's final line of the stanza, "some point in the otherwise happy relationship" (l 10-12). Through imaginary variation, Creeley encourages the reader to see love in this new way. The two people are not in love or out of

love, happy or sad. Instead, the two people may still be "otherwise happy" in a relationship where love fluctuates, one being more in love than the other at different times.

Through this singular image of two people in love, Creeley, again, brings the reader into the poem and also into her/his own imagination. The two people are not named. Thus the reader is encouraged to come up with her/his own imaginary scenario—who the people are, what they look like, and so on. The lines depend upon the reader making a mental picture of two people in love and *then* adding the complications that Creeley suggests. Once the reader's imagination is challenged to see these two particular people in love in a different way, then *love itself* comes into question. Like the apple, *love* here is set into relief in both Creeley's imagination and the imagination of the reader. The stanza is not just about those two people, obviously, but love itself. Creeley is again encouraging the reader to move off the page. What brings the reader back is the fact that the poem is not yet finished.

In the final stanza, Creeley pushes the reader to her/his limits both with breath and with content. There are even more lines after the single mark of internal punctuation in the second line, "you once take a breath," (l 14). The punctuation functions as a signal. The reader knows what follows will be



an expansion; to this point, each of the stanzas has pushed the line on the page, thus pushing the breath. Moreover, the content has required the reader to stretch mentally. Creeley's object, *breath*, is again singular and deliberately simple. Yet immediately, even more so than in the previous stanza, Creeley adds complication. The complications begin in the second line, rather than the fourth. This creates an even greater intensity with the breath, and the intense content follows. He writes, "you once take a breath, you're by / that committed to taking the next one / and so on until the very process of / breathing's an endlessly expanding need / almost of its own necessity forever" (l 14-18). In these lines, Creeley overlaps the complications—the imaginary variations—within the lines themselves. The first variation begins in line fourteen but carries over into the fifteenth: "you're by / that committed to taking the next one" (l 14-15). The final three lines of the stanza come in a flurry, each variation connected to the previous variation. The lines function as a fast-moving, ever-expanding thought. And this, of course, is directly related to what Creeley states about breath itself—form mirrors content here. The second and third variations are: "and so on until the very process of / breathing's an endlessly expanding need" (l 16-17). Notice that the beginning of the third variation comes in the same line as the end of the second variation. Creeley is asking for a real stretch here, both physically and mentally. The third and final variation is found in the last line of the poem: "almost of its own necessity forever" (l 18). What Creeley has accomplished is taking the object, *breath*, from a singular, simple notion and connecting to both the existence of the reader and the existence of *breath itself*. In the first variation, the reader is asked to imagine breath as connected to her/his existence; breath here is still thought of as controlled by the reader, breath is connected to her/his life—"you're by / that committed to taking the next one" (l 14-15). In order to live, one must be committed to breathing, taking breath after breath. But in the second variation, breath is to be imagined as a process directly related to human need. In this way, breath is different than mere function, the reader taking breath after breath. Instead, breath is in control of the reader; the reader needs it, is dependent upon it. In the third and final variation, breath is changed still further. Creeley posits here that *breath* may be separate from the body of the reader when he writes, "almost of its own necessity" (l 18). *Breath*, like *want, apple,* and love, has its own existence. *Breath* needs to breathe, has a purpose all its own beyond the body of the reader/person. This is certainly a new way to imagine breath—it is beyond personification. Rather, the objects have

been set into relief beyond the mind of the reader, and thus beyond themselves. In this manner, the imagination moves from the poem outward, off the page, and into the world.

This intentional movement of Creeley's is, therefore, similar to what Pearce posits about Stevens, writing, "the poem, the creative act, must be made continually to point beyond itself to the problems of belief which its existence raises" (380). The reader of a Creeley poem must participate in the poem, use her/his intentionality, to both make the poem work and to form new associations beyond the page. This acute attention to temporal notions, rhythm and breath, and the attention to the corporeal body, allow Creeley to move the reader through the poem and then move the reader from the poem to life.

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Appendix

"Do you think . . ."

Do you think that if
you once do what you want
to do you will want not to do it.

Do you think that if
there's an apple on the table

and somebody eats it, it
won't be there anymore.

Do you think that if
two people are in love with one another,
one or the other has got to be
less in love than the other at
some point in the otherwise happy relationship.

Do you think that if
you once take a breath, you're by
that committed to taking the next one
and so on until the very process of
breathing's an endlessly expanding need
almost of its own necessity forever.