

THE COLLECTED PROSE OF

Robert Creeley



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Robert Creeley

Also by Robert Creeley

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The quotation on pp. 256–57, which begins, “Now, if you are sitting opposite me,” is from *The Divided Self* by R. D. Laing (London: Penguin Books, 1965), p. 21.

The quotation on p. 257 is from *Notebooks, 1914–1917*, by Ludwig Wittgenstein, trans. by G. E. M. Anscombe (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), p. 80.

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Introduction

INITIALLY I had thought that my work as a writer would be primarily in prose and so *The Gold Diggers*, published by my wife then and myself as The Divers Press in 1954, is the first book of my own imagination despite three small collections of poems preceding it. More to the point, however, is the fact that I could never separate a writer's work into comfortable categories and so was much irritated that Lawrence's extraordinary poems were overlooked by the very people who so approved his novels and stories—a circumstance much magnified in the case of either Hardy or Melville. There was a sense that if one did the one thing, one couldn't do the other. And yet it was all a compact of words, surely—and I could not believe that the literary form, so to speak, could so determine the resources of maker or materials. In short, I presumed a writer was a writer all the time, no matter the instance necessity or choice had fixed upon.

Therefore I wish there were much more in this book than there is. I always felt I was momentarily to write at least a various *War and Peace* if not a purposeful one. I love Céline's work and always have—likewise Stendhal, Dostoyevsky, and increasingly Turgenev, of all people, e.g., that brilliantly wandering two-part (in Constance Garnett's translation) story, which begins with one small landowner's befriending of another who's gone bankrupt and ends with a remarkable grey horse, etc., etc. It is the story teller in that sense Walter Benjamin has defined him in his essay of that name, which

I value—that intimate, familiar, localizing, detailing, speculative, emotional, unending talking that has given my life a way of thinking of itself in the very fact and feeling of existence. God knows one wants no end to that ever.

Most happy would be a reading and a reader who recognize that there is forever this need, to my own mind a very human one. It hardly matters that stories or poems are the particular issue, or say that they are all apiece. That blessed person is and has always been my reassurance and delight. For him and for her I have written.

Robert Creeley

Wilmington, N.C.

August 8, 1983

THE GOLD DIGGERS

For my Mother

HAD I lived some years ago, I think I would have been a moralist, i.e., one who lays down, so to speak, rules of behavior with no small amount of self-satisfaction. But the writer isn't allowed that function anymore, or no man can take the job on very happily, being aware (as he must be) of what precisely that will make him.

So there is left this other area, still the short story or really the tale, and all that can be made of it. Whereas the novel is a continuum, of necessity, chapter to chapter, the story can escape some of that obligation, and function exactly in terms of whatever emotion best can serve it.

The story has no time finally. Or it hasn't here. Its shape, if form can be so thought of, is a sphere, an egg of obdurate kind. The only possible reason for its existence is that it has, in itself, the fact of reality and the pressure. There, in short, is its form — no matter how random and broken that will seem. The old assumptions of beginning and end — those very neat assertions — have fallen way completely in a place where the only actuality is life, the only end (never realised) death, and the only value, what love one can manage.

It is impossible to think otherwise, or at least I have found it so. I begin where I can, and end when I see the whole thing returning. Perhaps that is an obsession. These people, and what happens to them here, have never been completely my decision — because if you once say something, it will lead you to say more than you had meant to.

As the man responsible, I wanted to say what I thought was true, and make that the fact. It has led me to impossible things at times. I was not obliged, certainly, to say anything, but that argument never made sense to me.

Bañalbufar, Mallorca
1954

The Unsuccessful Husband

SUCH A DAY of peace it was, so calm and quiet, with the haze at the window, beginning, and from there going far out over the fields to the river beyond, a morning haze, such as the sun soon burns and has done with. Yet all through that day there was quiet and the haze of calm. It was not the first of many such days. None followed. But it became the reminder of something somewhat better than what one had, the stasis of peace, which, once found, can always remind one and even be found again. Such a day, a peaceful day, so calm and quiet, one is never done with no matter how long . . .

We were married fifteen years ago, at a quiet ceremony attended by a very few people, close friends, and following the ceremony we travelled to a place where I had not been since my childhood but where, as it were, I had always lived or at least wanted to. My wife was then a very pretty woman, a quiet face with a smile of destructive calm, and a figure which, at the very least, provoked one to thoughts not at all in keeping with a usual intention. I cannot say how it was but it was simply that she could not be won, not in the usual manner. Although I do not remember it as deliberate, still I can see now that it was a matter of giving in the old sense such as I had believed no longer to exist. Nothing so much suggested it as when, after we had eaten and had spent what was left of the evening reading, perhaps, with some time of quiet conversation, she would at last turn to me with an air of permission and would then rise and set about the task of going to bed. What I had expected was not necessarily something more, but certainly something

different, and when on that first night I was so permitted, I saw that nothing again would ever be as I intended it, or ever what I had hoped for.

I am not a successful man in any sense of the word and if my wife has permitted me in her own way, the rest of the world has allowed me to live in another. I have never been openly molested, not with intention of the sort I might imagine for myself. I have often thought that an open attack might be fairer for all concerned but I can see now that I was only thinking of myself. Others seemed not to care that much and I suppose that they had every right not to. I have annoyed them but, after all, I have never essentially disturbed their lives. Let live, they say, and they know what they are doing.

The fact of my failure can be seen in many instances but it is not so much this fact as the other of my not having been a success. Because, after all, I haven't failed if it was my own intention not to be successful, although to anyone else it might seem that way. I will allow that I am not successful, but I confess it is more difficult to admit of my failure. I agree to the compromise but must reserve the choice for myself.

When it was that I first gave evidence of my intention to be an unsuccessful man, I do not remember. In any event it was a long time ago, and quite probably not long after our marriage. Before that time I was not quite so sure as I am now of the fact that it is at all costs necessary to oppose oneself to the determinations of one's destroyers. I had not then thought that my wife would be in some sense their general. But it turned out so and soon after I began the task of opposition on whatever level they should choose. Though I have never been successful, even in this, I have the eventual satisfaction of a life so empty that even they will be hard put to it for praise.

At the time of our marriage my wife had a small sum of money with which we intended to make our start. This sum she put at my disposal, to use in whatever way I thought best. She had given me this sum or rather she had given me a check on her bank for the amount and told me that it was now mine to do with as I pleased. So, taking the check, I set out toward the business district of the town and when I had come to the first bank, I went in and deposited the check in her name. And there it has been ever since.

This gesture, which was to be sure very much a gesture,

began the understanding between my wife and myself which was never obscured in all our years of living together, which did in fact survive those years more gracefully than we ourselves. It was an altogether simple act, half-understood and at best angry, but it served us better than any of the more deliberate ones that followed. Nothing made it quite so plain to each of us where the other stood, and there never was a better reminder.

I would often say to my wife who was not so well controlled that she could forbear mention of the money at all times, that when I had at last made my fortune, this money we would use to make a wonderful time for ourselves, spending it on a trip to the Bahamas or some such nonsensical place. On such occasions she would smile and laugh a little but the success of my wit had really more to do with the fact of my certainty that even should I have had those tickets in my hand at that very moment, she would have laughed just as delightfully and would not have moved one inch from her chair. The surety with which we grew to deal with one another was actually what delighted us and we always knew exactly what to say. If it had not been for the money to begin with, it would not have been so easy and this first gesture of mine served as model for many more. Still, if my gesture seemed the first, and the money the source of all our understanding, as time passed I began to understand my wife a little more acutely than at first, and also to see that if it was I who had put the money to such good use, it was nevertheless she who had had the good sense to give it to me.

In past years I have often had called to my attention the constant infidelities of husbands and wives which marked them much more than they would have, had they been confined to the flesh only. Because the flesh is at best flesh, and would look as poor as any hanging in a butcher's window. But these whom I have watched were dealing primarily with other values, with lives in a more total sense, and they could only be condemned for their lack of understanding. Their bickering was constant, never-ending, and the wives waited only for the moment when their husbands would return from their various jobs so that it could all begin again. And I suspect that even the husbands hurried a little faster on their way home from work, to get at it and to miss as little as they possibly could. For myself, perhaps a month or two would pass before either my wife or myself was aware of our differences. Perhaps they were not even differences

but rather our unholy similarities, our understandings. We were not thought to be unhappy, to be fighting all of the time, and to tell the truth we weren't. But I suspect that each of us was sure that there was, after all, something better, though we had long since given up trying to think about it. It was the suggestion of this which reminded us, which gave us all our pleasure.

Yet we did live together in a way in which few people do nowadays. We dealt with one another constantly and were never put off, never refused, unless it were a condition of our understanding that was in question. We knew one another as well as anyone ever knew another and, if it had not been for our loathing, we should have been happy.

Other people, although I don't for a moment believe that what they say is true, at least claim a continuity in their lives, a going up or a coming down. The rise or fall which they maintain is their way of saying that they have lived and even those who stay in the middle suppose that they narrowly missed worse or very nearly achieved better. For me this doesn't apply, and I find it very hard to believe that it does even for others. If I say that I got to know my wife better during the time we lived together, what I intend to say is that after a time I knew her whereas before that time I did not. Neither of us lived for much more than ourselves, one another, though not in the usual sense. God knows we lived long enough, both of us, though I can't say we grew older or younger or that we grew at all. If one lives at all, one lives for the kind of thing that my wife and I lived for, understanding, the security of knowledge. One certainly does not live to grow old.

But now for my purposes it is necessary to suppose a continuity although none comes readily to hand. What my wife said a year ago is no more to the point than what she said on our wedding night. There is nothing to suggest that we have lived in between. No, for both of us it was like going past some beautiful spot, stopping to look, and then never leaving, always looking to see more and more and more. We never tired of one another and we spent our lives in such looking, though at times we might wish to be gone. But still we stayed where we were.

Taken only as years our life seems very uneventful. After our marriage we settled in the town where we spent the days of our honeymoon, an acquiescence on the part of my wife which I was then still too confused to understand. Now I see that it was