Not very long ago, Marjorie Perloff, in a polemic on behalf of that new avant-garde, the Language Poets, distinguished two lines of tradition in American poetry: the one dedicated to the idea of a natural language which saw poetry as rooted in common speech, in the democratic soil of the colloquial; the other, embracing the idea of the poem as artifact, as something perhaps gained from the colloquial but as also set against it and any notion of natural roots and origins. The tradition of speech ran from Whitman to Pound and Williams on the one hand, and to Ginsberg and the colloquial stance of much contemporary ethnic poetry on the other; the second tradition from the French symbolists to Stevens and then, by way of Ashbery to the Language Poets. Of these two traditions, Perloff sometimes seems to prefer the former, at other times the latter – perhaps for the simple reason that they cannot be so easily arranged to form an opposition.

The poetry of Robert Creeley is an interesting case in point since it does not seem to belong to either of them. It appears to be solidly in the camp of common speech. Time and again Creeley has stressed his rootedness in the speech of people in the lower ranks of life: farmers,

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workers, outcasts, the linguistic context of his childhood and his youth. Yet at the same time, the delicate structure of his poems, the care he invests in the rhythmic and sound patterns of each line, his moral sense of craftsmanship solidly place him in the camp of those who embrace the artificial character, the constructedness of poetry. And, of course, language poets and their critical supporters have been among his best friends: Charles Bernstein wrote an illuminating essay on Creeley and so, for that matter, did Marjorie Perloff.

Yet, reading through his Collected Poems and the volumes that came afterwards, one may understand the massive criticism of more traditional critics that has accompanied Creeley’s poetry from the beginning. As much as his insistence on craftsmanship seems to be a Modernist idea, his poems do not bear out an aesthetic ideology of the perfect product because many of them are not and do not want to be finished: they are jottings down of a thought, of an observation, of moods or eccentric whims; or they resemble Wittgensteinian aphorisms like: “What / by being not / is – is not / by being.” They also play with a variety of traditional forms and topics: mythological material as we know it from Pound and Williams; the language of the commonplace, yes, but also of the poetry of troubadours and their vocabulary of courtly love. Therefore, some critics have called him indiscriminate, since Creeley evidently does not seem to be self-conscious in the selection of his work: the trivial and playful are placed next to the reflective and self-reflective and the intensely emotional: poems of love and anger, poems of sexual encounters, of domestic harmony and conflict. Poetry, with him, seems to have the function of a day book: a record of everyday activity, as normal and as

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2 As he wrote in a letter to Olson (19 May 1952): “Well, I came up from the bottom, rock of sorts, and fell, now, I am not going to toss out the one thing I got from it: speech. No man is going to get me to let that go. I heard everything, as a kid, and felt, then, shy & unfamiliar – often started by any words too hard, or couldn’t find those flip answers my friends could, etc. In fact, my friends: one was in prison the last time I heard, another working in some garage in Acton, the rest I don’t know. But speech, I heard the craziest, shouted, or whatever – the deepest, most permanent contempt for any ‘written’ word any man ever wrote” (Robert Creeley’s Life and Work: A Sense of Increment, ed. John Wilson, Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1987, 222).