

## ROBERT CREELEY INTERVIEWED BY JOHN AMADOR BEDFORD



John Amador Bedford

**J.A.B.:** Do you feel your poetry should touch upon those major public issues that confront us at the end of the century and which you, privately, are concerned with but which don't appear in your poetry?

**R.C.:** Well, very rarely... I've been reading the "Herald Tribune". Some years ago, living in Barcelona, I remember it was the time when Rumania had had a severe earthquake and there was also an international conference on water, and several other such sad issues, I remember writing a poem, no less, in complex outrage and despair at the world's state it was duly published in the "Herald Tribune" section of letters to the editor... in any case, I've been in the company of Amiri Baraka in the past few weeks or with Allen Ginsberg, with an active and absolutely useful public poetry of response, codification, report. All that is not only possible but to be respected and desired... still, in my own work I feel that what I can do is make evident the human capacity for feeling in relational times in direct ways of living with other people, somehow manage, if not "integrity" at least an articulation of ways in which common terms of common lives have functioned: eating, sleeping, making love, caring, children... I can't... say, living in Buffalo and thinking of the black community the other side of Main Street I can certainly support and try to make clear my own endorsement of..., e. g. when Arthur Eve, known state legislator, was running for mayor of the city I certainly supported his constituency; I would be equally supportive of any person having political integrity who could deal with the needs of that community. The point is that I can't presume to be a black spokesperson. I can't speak from the political and social fact of that community.. I can be a white person trying to say I realize you are there, I certainly am not forgetting... I'm absolutely suspicious of, and in some ways dismayed by, a generalizing, charitable middle-of-the-road, middle-class, affluent, sense of, you know, "everyone is beautiful in their own way", "hold hands children of the world", or even things that would seem in some ways respectable... large rock band performances to give money to particular causes; I don't, any longer, believe that the change comes from that kind of support or occasion... now with L.A. burning literally in response to the acquittal of the four policemen, I bleakly wonder if that is what it takes...

**J.A.B.:** It's just that there doesn't seem to be a clear echo of that in your poetry... Your themes were there from the beginning and have continued throughout your poetry, your concern with anxiety, heterosexual relationships, friendship, care, the fragmentation of identity, themes that any human being anywhere can relate to.

**R.C.:** I had no skill or “apitude”, I suppose is the most accurate word. I guess I felt so, curiously, not isolated, but so much “one” in the world that I was not despairing of the community but I could not presume a community. I grew up the son of a public health nurse in a small town which was both to have sense of a necessary commitment to public need and the employment consequent. I’ve been a teacher all my life, another curious political fact, the point being that I guess my whole life has been a curious training not to pre-empt the political disposition of those I serve, in other words, my mother, for instance, could not argue against the political beliefs of the patients she had to deal with, I, as a teacher, cannot frankly argue against the political dispositions of those I teach... that’s not the way I’ll change their minds, so that I have a peculiar inability, more than in civil act, e.g. I vote for this or I say this in public context as a citizen, but as an artist I feel my so-called focus or function is not so much otherwise by intent but otherwise by ability.

**J.A.B.:** Several people who have spoken to me about you as a person, not as a poet, have emphasized your generosity, the way you care about the people who needed you... It reminded me of that comment that “change, or revolution, starts with those people around you”

**R.C.:** I’ve always been struck by the fact that that gathering to celebrate Paterson’s two hundredth year. Obviously people were invited who didn’t come, among them Denise Levertov, Sonia Sanchez was coming and at the last minute something prevented it, etc. The only person in any sense of my situation in the group was Allen Ginsberg who, after all, was born there and is certainly a forthright political statements and all the rest... otherwise everyone was an absolute evidence of a militant political voice whether it was Jimmy Santiago Baca from New Mexico or Amiri Baraka from New York, Gwen Brooks was coming later in the week, Paul Mariani was there as William’s biographer, but he too grew up as working class Italian in the same place... What I’m trying to say is that when it came time to read as a company and the range was from Latino Black to American Chinese, I found that the audience heard me in no literary sense quite as clearly as if... I had no trouble with that audience; it wasn’t that I was fooling them or seeming elegant or “watch the honky dance”... the ways in which I could say things was quite apparent across the room. I read that elegy for Max Finstein called “Oh Max”... that was certainly specific to our occasion. Going back to that said despair in L.A... there was one woman... you see someone quickly interviewed... she says it means they don’t care whether we live or die anymore, they just don’t care, that acquittal means they don’t care, and that’s it, we don’t care either... there’s an absolute denial that we count. I think one can make it evident or can give pledge to others that they count.



John Amador Bedford, Robert Creeley  
y Kevin Power

It's like we were walking over to the *Círculo* yesterday afternoon with Nancy and an old woman was getting out of a car, middle class, etc, etc, and she was obviously having difficulty, Nancy instantly stops, holds the door, and gives her her arm to get out. In some old-fashioned way it may be just that simple, whatever the gesture.

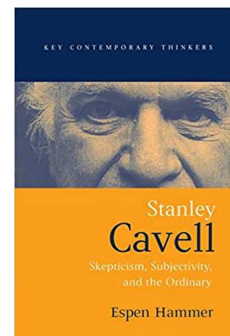
This morning when I went out to get a paper I walked through the underpass that lets you go through the major intersection and there, of course, along the sides of the tunnel were at least ten or more people who were sleeping, etc... I think what does one do or feel? take them home or give them a job? you are gonna vote for something that at least respects the fact that they are there as opposed to something that says that just says they're undesirables, put them all on a truck and dump them on the edge of the city.

**J.A.B.:** You talk about deadening of feelings... do you feel like that yourself?

**R.C.:** Trying to think how the world can be... a common place... I mean, I was struck reading a collection of essays... reading in it to be more accurate while staying with a friend in New Mexico, in Albuquerque, Gus Blaisdell, who has a great bookstore—"Living Batch"... he's a good friend of Stanley Cavell's (a decisive person in Charles Bernstein's background, his primary teacher at Harvard, a philosopher) so he is talking and Cavell had an essay on television in which he is proposing television as that means by which an "exteriority" -as he would say- comes in upon us with an extraordinary impact and range; in other words if a world were previously confined to the immediate information of a place, e.g. Madrid, and if the information otherwise was coming in either by word of mouth, or telegraph, or whatever newspapers... For example, I am reading a newspaper that I can get locally and it hasn't caught up with the L.A. situation which I've been hearing through television for two days now with images... I can't believe that the burning of a major American city is not news in Europe... I talked to friends yesterday vis-a-vis and there wasn't one who hadn't advice of that beating in the trial... people saw that repeated clubbing, fifty-four times, or more, that person was hit with steel stanchions...

[Talks about the L.A. incident at length]

I was told that the world is an absolutely confused and physically devastated place and I think "I don't even want to go out of this bedroom, that was the whole point, I don't want to talk to anybody I don't know, I'm certainly going to turn that television set off and leave it off," because, like Wordsworth "The world is too much with us" and it turns out to be as Cavell's point is that "it seems to be an increasingly uninhabitable place", that's the terror, AIDS, the chaos of the economies in the Western world, the recession, the social fact that one fifth of the world's population is literally starving... anyhow this kind of situation with no help from inside, so that given that nature of world the response to it becomes more and more dead, in the sense of... My friends, when I travel in Europe they say "How can you go to New York? You're going to get killed" I know that living in New York I'll walk through the streets and I won't have that fear, but they've seen intensive images of people getting mugged in New York and the reports that make



them legitimate... How could you live in L.A. when you see the whole damn city burning apparently?

**J.A.B.:** You talk about deadening of feelings... do you feel like that yourself?

**R.C.:** Yeah, I don't feel it personally... No, I certainly meet with an increasing sense -almost familiar from the late thirties- that it's not a bad business.

**J.A.B.:** There certainly has been a conservative upsurge throughout the world... in America definitely.

**R.C.:** That aspect of the present moment is very terrifying the harder things get, apart from stimulating the form or a sense of more radical innovation, everyone sort of hunkers down and votes for the nearest fascist, you know, to keep things together which is really a despair...

**J.A.B.:** Well, apart from those themes we talked about before that I still see present in your poetry today... maybe an increasing perception of death, as one gets older...

**R.C.:** Certainly, I remember Robert Duncan pointing out to me when I was just about fifty... I was saying "Gee, Robert, I'm needing glasses..." he said "Well, it gets interesting, your body becomes again phenomenal which is like adolescence, it no longer is the dependable age, and see that you put to bed last night you can depend upon moving forward this morning"... I'd find, for example, that doctors or dentists who would, say a few years ago, have spoken of this or that filling or treatment as "That will take care of that" now speak of it as "That will do for the time you'll need it"... curiously they are much more explicit... for example, I had a crown made a couple of years ago and it was the first time a dentist ever gave me an explicit sense as to how long that would last, five years is its usual time. We began to speak about things explicitly, whereas I can recall in my thirties and forties cures where supposed to be never a problem... one would have a cavity filled and the presumption was "That will do it"... Now I recognize that it is now measured in terms of the time of life expectancy... I even heard of an instance where a friend had had a hip operation delayed until the expected length of use of the replacement would coincide with his life expectancy... Oh God!

**J.A.B.:** Although I think that that idea of change has always been present in your poetry... In some of your essays you mention Heraclitus and having to accept that things change continually, and your thinking about it in your poetry, and this intent to grasp the moment...

**R.C.:** I was reading an obituary of Bacon in the *Herald Tribune* by Michael Kimmelman. Apparently he was in curiously good spirits, rather mellow in his old age, but he does say that life becomes increasingly a desert as one gets older, simply that all one's friends are close company, it isn't that the younger friends won't be intimate but that younger friends won't have that peer sense, in the same way, that's why, frankly, I hold on so specifically -I would anyhow- but I hold

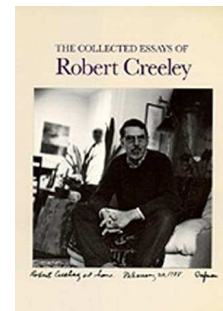
on very specifically to Allen because he's a peer in ways few other friends now can be or are... He pointed out to me that we had met in 1949 in San Francisco... that's a long specific time, ... and I dubbed him contributing editor of the "Black Mountain Review" for the final issue and we were in close touch ever after that, in the sense that we would see each other a couple of times a year. I felt very close to him.

**J.A.B.:** You are talking about poets... how about your relation with women? Many changes have occurred in your life... Feminism and how our consciousness/perception of women has changed.

**R.C.:** One time at Naropa there was a panel (this was a Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics) on what was called "Rollover Activities" and the proposal was: you are variously poets, what other profession or thing do you do? What else do you do that you consider significant and decisive function of one kind or another? I remember Anne Waldman talked about music-performance-dance that she'd been involved with recently, someone else talked about concerns with science, biology, etc... The thing that struck me I did other than poetry was fatherhood. I've been a father since the age of twenty. I'm sixty-five now and I've had children continuously as a relationship, that is, as father to them for forty-five years.

**J.A.B.:** You emphasize being a father more than being a husband...

**R.C.:** Well, I think fatherhood was the most consistent fact! I've been a husband too, I'm an extremely domestic person, in the sense that the constitution of the family has been absolute ground of my life... Psychiatrists might say, "You see, you lost your father when you were four, you were the youngest in the pattern, the sense of something that had been missed or lost obviously haunted you... You married very young, etc., etc., and you have this insistent need to realize or ground yourself in that peculiarly imagined place"... I don't know whether that has any validity or not but the point is that I certainly feel most "at home" when I am at home. I feel most secure, most active, most acknowledged and most confident. Occasionally I get frustrated... so does Penelope, with whom I've now been living for about fifteen years... I notice that there's never been, in the usual sense of casual... Well, I've had, very occasionally, had relations with someone whom I really cared about but there was no possibility or interest in that, but it wasn't usually coincident... I remember I once fell in love while travelling, which was a disaster, for myself, because I realized that, in some old-fashioned sense, I was, if anything, far too serious to be easy in such a relationship... It's like Coleridge's "To be beloved is all I need, and whom I love I love indeed".



[Madrid, May 1, 1992]