

Robert Creeley (1926–2005)

Robert J. Bertholf

Robert Creeley was a poet. He was also a New Englander. Born in Arlington, MA, Creeley attended Harvard College but left without a degree to become an ambulance driver in India and Burma. From then on he travelled the world – ‘the figure of onward’ Charles Olson called him – reading his poems and meeting people, who were drawn to him by the intimate deliberations of his poetry and his personal generosity. He had, literally, a world of friends.

With Charles Olson and Robert Duncan (and others), Creeley generated a revolution in thinking about poetic form which has come to be called the New American Poetry, or alternatively ‘Black Mountain Poetry’. He edited *The Black Mountain Review*, seeking out new forms of writing, all of which enacted his principle that ‘form is never more than an extension of content’. *For Love* (1962) was his first large collection and, with Charles Olson’s *The Distances* (1960) and Robert Duncan’s *The Opening of the Field* (1960), it defined the new poetics as well as providing a model for preparing a book of poems as a serial structure. Throughout his writing Creeley reached out to artists and musicians to collaborate and to validate the creative process he found inherent in words themselves and the sounds of those words.

In the 1950s, Creeley lived in Palma and Bañalbufar, Mallorca, where he founded the Divers Press, a small press which published books by Duncan, Paul Blackburn, and others. The press helped to define and explain the revolution in writing and thinking about poetry that he was propounding. The domestic experiences of this period on Mallorca appear in his novel *The Island* (1963), which also has many of the features of a memoir. During this period, Creeley met Robert Graves, who shaped the young American’s idea of writing as a life work, and for whom he retained a life-long admiration.

Creeley published 60 books, won awards, including the Bollingen Prize, and taught in universities, public and private – at the State University of New York at Buffalo for 37 years. His poems drew readers inside his world with their fetching rhythmic structures and close examination of the complexities of daily living, of daily seeing life moving forward. Meeting him at the supermarket was as exciting as reading the new book of poems because in his living of it there was no distinction between life and poetry. Both were held meaningful by the same patterns of perception and articulation. From the early 1950s, he was an innovative and provocative poet, and his place in the traditions of American literature is now secure. He died at dawn in Midland, Texas, and is buried in the Mount Auburn Cemetery, Cambridge, MA, among the monuments of the

New England traditions that directed his life.

Robert Creeley was born 21 May 1926 and died 30 March 2005

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