Four Times Five: Robert Creeley's *The Island*

Marjorie Perloff

- "How does something go on?" . . .
- "How does something start somewhere?
  And then continue." (CP, 159)

To invent a form that contains within itself the possibility of *continuing* — this was the challenge Creeley set himself in writing his novel *The Island* (1963). His earlier poems and short stories were, by his own account, "intense seizures of absolutely centered . . . facts of emotional possibility and involvement. And as soon as they exhausted their particular locus, or particular center in that way, they were done. That was the end of them" (CP, 160). But now he wanted a form that would allow for "coming and going," an "extended opportunity to think around and about and in terms of something which was on my mind" (CP, 105). The material was to be autobiographical (the breakdown of Creeley's first marriage during the time that he and his family spent on the island of Mallorca), but Creeley insists that "I didn’t simply want to tell what happened" (CP, 160), for "the novel isn’t so much about life . . . it’s a manifestation of the possibilities of life" (CP, 162).

One solution was to "place" the narrator’s highly personal sense of ongoing events (juxtaposed to memories of key incidents) within a
I wanted to work in an economy of statement that had to do with a range of five pages. If you look at the manuscript you'll find that the chapters are all about five pages. The next question was “How shall these be distributed, these five page pieces?” Then I thought, “Well, in fours.” Four is a number that actually feels very comfortable to me, and yet has a variety of possibility within its own nature. And so I then designed the circumstance as five chapters to each part. There are four parts. Four main parts. And then each chapter is in an economy of five pages in length, with five chapters to each of the four parts. And five times four is twenty, which is the number of chapters in the book. I remember trying to explain this to people, who would say, “Well, how did you do it?” What did you have in mind for the plot? And I said, “Well, you know, four times five.” (CP, 161-62)

How can “four times five” be regarded as the “plot” of a novel? In discussing Creeley’s number poems in Pieces (1969), Charles Altieri observes:

Number, like language, absorbs into itself the gap between individual and universal. In common sense terms, at least, numbers and words refer to specific events; yet they also incorporate these particulars into communal forms, for both numbers and language, perhaps even the human presence they help define, are essentially relational systems with each particular defined by the absent system of which it is a part.¹

The number *four*, for example, is a concrete entity — “The/ table stands on/ all fours” (P, 25) — and yet, in another sense, *four* is entirely abstract, definable only in its relation to the number system which generates it:

Abstract — yes, as two and two things, four things — one and three. (P, 26)

The relation between two given numbers is thus, in Altieri’s words, “a perpetual dialectic by which each creates and defines the other, while both
at the same time generate the number system which contains them."  
Such "perpetual dialectic" provides the perfect structure for a poet who is, like Creeley, primarily a poet of human relationships. "I've always been embarrassed," he tells Linda Wagner, "for a so-called larger view. I've been given to write about that which has the most intimate presence for me. . . . these senses of relationship among people. I think, for myself at least, the world is most evident and most intense in these relationships" (CP, 97).

To put one's faith so fully into relationships is to meet, again and again, failure, loss, isolation. For excessive concentration on the particular "number" may preclude all possibility of making contact with the absent system. *The Island* is concerned with precisely this dilemma. "As so many of that time" (the late forties—early fifties), Creeley has recently recalled, "I married primarily to reify what might be called my existence. The fact of wanting to be a social person, as well as a private one, seemingly demanded it. Again, there was nothing I otherwise 'did' that argued my relevance to a general world."  

To learn that no wife—indeed no other person—can reify one's existence, that the "love" that demands such reification is really a form of infantile dependency, this is the process of discovery charted by the twenty chapters of *The Island*. The seemingly random movement of the novel is controlled by the mathematical form *four times five*. Each of the four main parts has a distinctive configuration and each individual chapter contains one new "incident" or moment of perception that will lead toward the ultimate "death" of Joan for her husband John. Yet the "numerical balance" (CP, 162) also depends upon the intricate "interworking" of the individual "takes." Creeley recalls that when the novel was finished and he sat down to read it through, he was astonished by "all this interweaving that I had no wise intended. . . . But in the writing it, it was part of the economy of writing it" (CP, 162).

Let me begin by charting the novel's *four times five* structure. For the sake of convenience, I give each part a name implicit in its particular set of emotions and actions.

**Part I: A Certain Restlessness**

1. The intrusion of Artie upon the nighttime sleep of John and Joan; John's departure with Artie (the first move away from Joan).

2. John's meeting with Artie's wife Marge; his subliminal attraction to her.

3. Pubcrawling with Artie and the purchase of the painting of the dead bullfighter.
4. The return home: Joan’s angry rejection of the painting and, by implication, of John.

5. The lovemaking of John and Joan — the first equation of love and death.

Part II: Distraction

6. The visit of the Australian writer and his family; John’s attraction to the sister and Joan’s dislike of her. Their departure.

7. Pubcrawling with Artie, followed by the night at the brothel.

8. The return home and fight with Joan, followed by the argument about whether or not to go “home” to the States. Where is “home”?

9. The arrival of the Englishman, Robert Willis, and the Frenchman, Rene Lely; the near drowning of Willis and John’s rescue of him. Departure of Willis, who is now repugnant to John.

10. Joan’s attraction to Rene and John’s consequent distrust of him. His departure, followed by Joan’s sudden illness: the uterine cyst. Here former love (Joan’s self-inflicted abortions) almost brings on death.

Part III: Sickness Unto Death

11. The operation which marks the end of Joan’s childbearing and, symbolically, the end of John and Joan’s sex life.

12. The return home which is no longer “home” but an empty vessel like Joan.

13. The visit of old friends from France and the fishing expedition; John’s increasing sense of isolation.


15. The retreat under the blanket, followed by John’s refusal to show the editor Manus his stories.
Part IV: *Death*

16. The coming of the gypsies: John against Joan.

17. The coming of Marge’s baby, which distances Artie from John.

18. Lovemaking reduced to masturbatory sex.

19. Philip’s failure to win the school contest for his new costume made by John and Joan (another distraction), and John’s failure to accept this defeat, which leads to the final fight with Joan and her breaking of John’s typewriter.

20. The disappearance of Joan, interpreted by John as signifying her suicide. The irony of her unexpected return alive, but “dead” for John.

This chart lists only incidents in the present tense of the novel; it does not include the crucial events of the past, recalled by John and woven into the narrative. I shall say more of these past events later. But for the moment, let us note how intricately the four parts of *The Island* are interrelated.

Each part, for example, contains one or more “visitations” from the outside world, intrusions that serve to intensify John’s emptiness and restlessness. In Part I, Chapter I, Artie makes his dawn visit, a welcome guest if only for the distraction he can afford John. In Part II, there are two sets of visitors: the Australians (Chapter 6), who make John and Joan slightly uneasy, and the Englishman and Frenchman (Chapters 9 and 10), who turn John and Joan into adversaries. By the time the nameless “old friends” from France visit in Part III (Chapter 13), John is a complete outsider, regarding their deep-sea fishing expedition with some revulsion. In Part IV, the visitation of friends is replaced by the coming of the uninvited gypsies, alien creatures whose presence brings to light the hostility between John and Joan. Finally no one comes. Figuratively speaking, John’s “coming” with Joan, already less than satisfactory in Part I (Chapter 5), is gradually reduced to the momentary release afforded him by her manual manipulation. So, in one sense, the novel consists of a series of *comings*, each one emptier than the one before.

A similar structural pattern is created by the series of “returns.” In Part I, John’s night on the town with Artie leads to the absurd purchase of the ugly painting of the dead bullfighter and the consequent fight with Joan. But the rift is not yet serious and John can still say he is sorry and tell Joan he loves her. In the corresponding chapter of Part II, the offense is more serious (the night with the prostitute) and the reunion incomplete. Accordingly, the return home after the operation in Part III is less a
moment of reunion than one of pained embarrassment. Finally in Part IV, the return from the city is the moment when Joan, goaded by John’s insinuations about her possible affair with Artie, breaks the typewriter and runs out into the night. And now for the first time it is Joan who leaves the house while John remains at home, and who then “returns” in name only.

One could trace many such patterns. Consider the series of distractions in which money is spent in the hope of breaking out of the endless circle: the purchase of the painting (3), of the prostitute (7), of the sailboat (14), of the materials for the child’s costume (19). Or again, Chapters 5, 10, 15, 20 form a series of variations on the meaning of “death”: love as death (5), near-fatal illness (10), the death of creativity — playing dead inside the “cave” of the bedcovers (15) — and Joan’s projected death (20).

Each five-page “take” thus finds its correspondence in a later chapter. The novel’s division into twenty chapters grouped in four equal parts reenforces the reader’s sense that each event in the protagonist’s life is an isolated particular, like the number four, and yet part of a larger system in which these particulars have relational value. The “absent system” that controls the discrete particulars is the so-called zero relation, the dependency of all numbers given on the number that cannot refer to any object and that has no identity, the symbol of absence:

You

walk the years in a
nothing, a no
place I know as well as
the last breath
I took, blowing the smoke
out of a mouth
will also go nowhere,
    having found its way. ("Zero" [P, 33-34])

In the course of the novel, John reaches this zero degree of absence because he is unable to relate to anyone or anything outside himself, even though his only desire is to form such relationships. John/Joan — the monosyllabic names are the same with the difference of only one letter, the implication being that Joan is only a projection of John’s imagination. To accuse Creeley, as have some critics, of not giving Joan sufficient substantiality, is thus to miss the point; Joan cannot be a “substantial” character because she is what John chooses her to be. Creeley’s theme is, in his own words, “the horrors of thinking that thought itself can possess the world . . . that one is God. As though all creation would now be the fact of thinking” (CP, 166).
In his “Introduction to Robert Creeley” (1951), Charles Olson defined narrative as “RE-ENACTMENT” and distinguished between two possibilities: (1) “what I call DOCUMENT simply to emphasize that the events alone do the work, that the narrator stays OUT,” and (2) “the exact opposite, the NARRATOR IN, the total IN to the above total OUT.” Creeley’s way, in such short stories as “Mr Blue,” is the second, “constituting himself the going reality, and, by the depth and sureness of his speculating, making it pay . . . . It is his presence that matters, for it rids us of artifice as such . . . human phenomenology . . . is reinherited, allowed in, once plot is kissed out.”

Like the short stories collected in The Gold Diggers (1954), The Island embodies “the total IN”: it reenacts the movement of the narrator’s consciousness even as that consciousness gradually disintegrates, the four times five structure providing the necessary distancing so that we are, as readers, at once inside and outside the mind of the protagonist. Consider the way Creeley handles the relationship of present to past. At certain moments, when John is living fully in the present, the past seems not to exist. But in moments of uncertainty, when decision seems impossible, the past impinges on the present so fully that the mind of the narrator, and of the reader as well, cannot distinguish the two. In Chapter 4, for example, John is bringing the foolishly purchased painting home to Joan. Action is suspended as John recalls stories Joan told him about herself: her childhood at the orphanage, her adoption by a “problematic young woman,” her adolescent loneliness and consequent promiscuity. Rendered impotent by the thought of Joan’s previous encounters with men, he imagines himself and Joan in a “surrealist passage . . . into the sea, in diving suits, going down into the water together, touching through the suits and that subtle medium, speaking through tubes and wires” (I, 34-35). This is his fantasy. But the dream is quickly juxtaposed to a memory of their early courtship when he talked on and on, and Joan called his conversation “very brilliant” but sometimes fell asleep while he talked.

As the process of recall continues, the narrative moves from distant to recent past and then modulates into the present:

She told him that her meals as a child had been rigorously limited, although there was no want. One cookie after dinner, two at the most. She spoke of the coldness of the house in winter. What could he do? They both ate great amounts of candy, usually in bed, after the children were asleep. They tried to move backward together.

But sudden ruptures occurred, creating digressive, floppy losses of attention, leaving puddles of wasted time and self-regard. To maintain the area of
childhood took much of their time, which was free enough, yet they were driven as well, compulsively, to be adult, grown-up, despite the loose world in which they lived. There cannot be childhood without the adult to define it, not at their age. The children knew that their parents needed the candy, in some inexplicable sense, not their own. They saw it gone in the morning. At times they never knew it had been there at all. Secrets grew in the house like mushrooms in a damp cellar.

What can be brought into such a house? A friend? Not simply. Flowers, picked at random on walks that tended to wander, were better. Something for the house, was better. Any thing that could be quickly, gracefully, dropped into place, in the whimsical plan of it all, was right.

But the picture was, to begin with, very large, and also, very ugly. Purposefully ugly, being dead. (I, 35-36)

This has the fluidity of what Olson called FIELD COMPOSITION. Only when the reader reaches the question “What can be brought into such a house?” does he see the connection between the purchase of the ugly painting and the regressive fantasy world of John and Joan. Again, it is important to understand that in the above passage “the narrator is totally “IN,” and everything else OUT. Unlike D. H. Lawrence, to whom he has been rightly compared, Creeley does not shift point of view from John to Joan to Artie to the children. The sentence, “The children knew that their parents needed the candy, in some inexplicable sense, not their own,” is not a statement made by an omniscient narrator; it represents John’s sense of the way things are. We perceive all events and understand all characters only as he perceives them and tries to understand them, and, as his vision becomes increasingly distorted, the other characters become less distinct, more blurred — mere names like Joan and Philip and Marge, a set of small gestures seen from far away. By restricting his field so narrowly, Creeley achieves the peculiar density that Olson must have had in mind when he called Creeley’s prose “the push beyond Lawrence.”

The following passage from Chapter 5, which presents John’s feelings and sensations as he makes love to Joan, is a good example of Creeley’s distinctive style:

In the quiet they thought of each other. A hand moved, fingers extended. Something moved under the bedclothes ludicrous and humped. She had equipped
herself. He felt her under him, his own legs slide over.

But the geography was darkness. From something unsure, fumbling, gaining distinctions. Certain areas of flesh and bone. Calling into the funnel of the dark, are you there. It's me. I'm here now. Muttering words to himself, oh John, who had said it. The signature was lacking. He couldn't find anything in the dark. She moved closer.

It was I wanted you. It was me who was going to do it. (Who is speaking?) Your arms, your hair, your head is like a nut, firm as a nut. Say something, please.

Oh John. The pillows are far away, at the end of the bed there somewhere. The blankets go off, into the chasm of dark, down.

There are two people in bed together in a bubble of night, pure air, no space but occupied. Move over, there, now, I think you are ready. Skeleton laughter, harsh shatter, approximating a formal declaration. The lacking signature prevented it.

You can't do that now, you have to wait. Not now you can't, not just now you can't do it, not now you can't.

The car sped into the darkness in the tunnel of its space, in, a toy projectile sped into the walls, which are supple and yield to the impact. A false door, a melting mirror. Something you went through years ago recoheres and is present, leaning. A slippery wetness, sudden chill.

Nobody wants to give that away. Nobody talks about it. The sale is over, go home. (Who is speaking?) Says the wise guy, image, flat face, head over heels, make no mistake about it. There now. How was that. The memory.

Couldn't you. What. Couldn't you wait. What are you saying. Who are you. Why didn't you wait for me.

The hallway in the collapsing house he ran back through, the walls falling behind him, crashing and echoing. The thumping sounds of the sea, crashing and crashing. Sound of nothing, a wire of silence, take your pick. It's nothing here at all. Officer, I never saw this woman before in my life. Don't say it. No, it's the truth. I don't even know her. Look.

The head is on the pillow again. Softly the blankets slide up and over, tuck into the edges of the
bed. They lie breathing in the warm, sweet dark.

Early in the morning the church bell sounded out from the other side of the street. They woke to hear people passing by the large door of the courtyard on their way to the sea, a thin line of men and women, a curious sight in the half-dark. They went down the road in a sure file, singing, first man then woman, a song that seemed a hymn. But it was a dream-like occurrence, they seemed to be there but flitted past, ghosts under the window, wavering music. They carried something to the sea in a box, the men to the front. No one dead, but something, generation after generation. They had death in the box and they were going to throw him into the sea. (I, 43-45)

This scene is reminiscent of Lawrence: one thinks of Gudrun and Gerald’s love-hate relationship in the last part of Women in Love. But Creeley does not regard sexual union as a polarity of opposites as does Lawrence; there is here no sense of sex as electric circuit, as the vital union with a dark otherness. Rather, the whole scene is oddly internalized and distanced as if to imply that John himself doesn’t understand what is happening to him, and there is no omniscient narrator to intervene. Creeley’s prose is characterized by its indefinite nouns and verbs: “Something moved under the bedclothes”; “She had equipped herself”; “Something you went through years ago recoheres and is present, leaning”; “Nobody wants to give that away.” What is it that moved under the bedclothes? What had she equipped herself with? Nobody wants to give what away? “She,” never called by name here, seems miles away, viewed through “the funnel of the dark.” Her bits of conversation — “oh John, who had said it” — are embedded in the narrative without quotation or question marks. Indeed, the only punctuation used here and elsewhere in the novel is the comma or period — marks of separation, setting off words, suggesting brokenness, isolation. Present and past merge: “It was I wanted you. It was me who was going to do it. (Who is speaking?).” The voices of John and Joan become interchangeable: who, for example, is speaking the words, “Your arms, your hair, your head is like a nut...”? Creeley shifts from third to first and second person and back again with confusing rapidity. When the warning “You can’t do that now, you have to wait” appears, it stands for many things: Joan’s refusal to admit John, her previous refusals, the admonition of other people in the past, telling the lovers they must stop, and so on. The sex act itself is seen as a car speeding “into the darkness in the tunnel of its space, in, a toy projectile [speeding] into the walls, which are supple and yield to impact. A false door, a melting mirror.” And the orgasm itself brings “A slippery wetness, sudden chill.” These metaphors are not in themselves particularly
novel but what holds our attention here is that we are so deeply INSIDE the narrator’s consciousness that we cannot tell, any more than can he, whether the act is primarily pleasurable or painful.

In either case, sex is now associated with guilt: “Nobody wants to give that away. Nobody talks about it. The sale is over, go home.” And then the reproach: “Couldn’t you. What. Couldn’t you wait. What are you saying. Who are you. Why didn’t you wait for me.”

Their lovemaking has been a failure. The narrator sees himself running through the hallways of a collapsing house, the sounds of the sea crashing in his ears. He dissociates himself from Joan: “Officer, I never saw this woman before in my life.” And then normalcy of a sort returns: “The head is on the pillow again. Softly the blankets slide up and over, tuck into the edges of the bed. They lie breathing in the warm, sweet dark.” Here the connotations are positive, but we know that although John is still trying to tell himself he loves and is loved, something is seriously wrong. And indeed the last paragraph describes the procession of mourners heard the following morning, singing as they go down to the sea: “They had death in the box and they were going to throw him into the sea.”

These words mark the end of Part I. Creeley keeps his narrative “moving,” “continuing,” by backtracking in Part II, looping back to a renewed but diminished sense of possibility as new complications arise in the form of visitors from the outside world. In this way the four times five structure grounds the elusive, tenuous, feverishly heightened stream of consciousness of the protagonist.

Creeley has referred to The Island as “my first ‘long poem’ . . . the first piece of serial writing that went on for many days, weeks, and so forth.” He recalls that “it made me impatient with other forms of writing for quite a while” (CP, 198). When we study the way Creeley creates what Olson called “narrative by juxtaposition,” a continuum of condensed, fragmentary pieces of prose, we can see that the designation “long serial poem” is in fact very apt. Here are some of the recurrent manifestations of the Creeley “signature”:

1. Embedding speech of one or more characters in a narrative passage:

   John opened the door and looked straight into Artie’s vigorous smile, the short, bandy figure, all of Artie that there was to see. He was there all the way, and was saying something like, awfully sorry, John, such an hour, but had to see you, get canned you know, need to pay the chap, so obliging, such a long way, can you let me have the money, for the cab, pay you back this Friday. (I, 10-11)

   We fight too much, I wish we didn’t. Do we have to, she said. She was talking to him. It was curiously apt, he had
been thinking. Then, no. We don’t have to. I am sorry. I had no intention of not coming back last night. She had stopped smiling, she ate more of the food. (I, 71)

2. **Run-on sentences or clauses with excessive internal punctuation (the comma):**

Lacking other way, he began to make her up, to invest her with his own mind, no matter the twists, the shifts, the distortions of her, talking in his voice, from hers, impatient when she did in fact speak to him, now, came from whatever place she did live, out, to look for a moment at what he was, what they were, together. (I, 90)

The worst at least was over, changed, surely she was, but it was over. (I, 110)

3. **Convoluted relative clauses:**

And then John, without intention but nonetheless persistently, kept giving her wine, which he himself drank too much of, so that the two of them would often end in a bleary comradeship of mutual attraction, which Joan found the more disgusting because the thin, hairy quality of the woman offered little apparent excuse. (I, 55)

4. **Syntax imitating thought patterns or action:**

He saw, driving, what seemed a red cross bright above a door, assumed it was the clinic, stopped, took her in, carrying her. (I, 93)

Years ago he had asked his sister, older, when she had her first child, a son, if she had had any inclination to eat the afterbirth. (I, 116)

5. **Repetition of short monosyllabic word groups:**

So I can see that street, after all, and even I know who will be there, or won’t be, too late, will ask if another day will do, another place. Can’t I see you next week, or then, or there, or wherever. Won’t they say that. And you’ll be given a plan to follow, and when you have got that done, you will be given a plan to follow, and when
you have got that done, you will be given a plan to follow. (I, 117)

6. **Qualification, parenthesis, the unfulfilled question pattern:**

The day, now night, was a chaos he had lost all sense of. (I, 27)

For Joan and himself it had been, very much, the first place, the one they went to. . . . (I, 135)

What to say, then. Pinched by the sight, he began to write as he was able. . . . (I, 116)

Aren’t you concerned, she said. Yes, but perhaps differently. Shouldn’t they have children as themselves to be with, and to speak English with. (I, 74)

FORM IS NEVER MORE THAN THE EXTENSION OF CONTENT. In Creeley’s prose, the high incidence of abstract nouns and of pronouns lacking an antecedent; the short choppy phrases broken by commas and periods; the insistent repetitions of monosyllabic “simple” diction approximating baby talk; the interrogative pronouns that demand — but aren’t met with — a question mark; the awkward sentence structure, often piling up ungrammatical “which” and “where” clauses that dramatize the groping of the mind as it tries to arrive at truth; the hesitant, ill-at-ease qualifiers and parentheses — all these syntactic forms are dictated by the content, the theme that isolation kills, that to turn all experience into grist for the mill of the mind leads to despair. By the end, John recalls Lawrence’s “Man Who Loved Islands”; he has cut himself off from everything and everyone: Joan, the children, Artie and Marge, old friends. So too words become islands, cut off, disjointed, unable to relate to other words. The self dissipates, no longer an entity, and other selves merge with external objects, becoming a blank page which the poet cannot read.

One might conclude that *The Island* is the perfect embodiment of Olson’s projectivist aesthetic, an aesthetic also found in Creeley’s own “Notes for a New Prose,” which declares that prose is “the formulation of content, in progression . . . it has to continue, keep going — cannot stop” (QG, 13). *The Island*, one can argue from an Olsonian position, is a high energy construct, a field of action, in which one perception immediately and directly leads to another. It reenacts a particular process of discovery and yet that process is grounded in the solidity and stability of the mathematical construct that subsumes the relationship of particulars.
So far, I have tried to describe what kind of fiction *The Island* is. I want now to say something about what it is *not*, to clear the air of some common misconceptions. One hears, frequently, of Creeley’s “post-modernism,” of the radical innovation of works like *The Island*. I myself would argue that Creeley’s projectivism is a transitional stance, half way between what we usually call “high modernism” and postmodernism. For despite the stylistic discontinuities I have been talking about, Creeley avoids the sort of radical discontinuity that we associate with post-modernism.

Among the “comforting illusions” about narrative that post-modern writers must give up, Ronald Sukenick has argued in a recent essay, are the following:

- the feeling that the individual is the significant focus among the phenomena of “reality” (characterization);
- the sense that clock or public time is finally the reigning form of duration for consciousness (historical narration);
- the notion that the locus of “reality” may be determined by empirical observation (description);
- the conviction that the world is logical and comprehensible (causal sequence, plot). The fairy tale of the “realistic” novel whispers its assurance that the world is not mysterious, that it is predictable — if not to the characters then to the author. . . .

This emphasis on *unpredictability* as norm in postmodern literature is the subject of Roger Cardinal’s important essay “Enigma.” Cardinal outlines three stages of artistic development from the Romantic period to the present. First, “art finds itself becoming mysterious because it begins to treat of mysteries.” This is early Romanticism. “At the second stage in our imagined cycle, the mystery invoked in the work of art is deepened by artistic procedures designed to make access into the work difficult. . . . Our pleasure in such works has to do with our enjoyment in glimpsing meanings below the surface.” This is the phase of Symbolism, epitomized by Mallarmé’s dense lyrics, which invite the reader to participate “in a magical experience of polyvalence.” “It is out of such an aesthetic of preference for the shadow rather than the substance that, at the final stage of our cycle, a modern sensibility may be said to emerge that is prepared to occupy itself with the gestures of mystery and defer clarification of the content of that mystery.” The result is what Cardinal calls *enigma*.

The work of enigma could be defined as a mechanism whose paramount function is to promote this expectation of meaning, while at the same time maintain-
ing a steady embargo on the transmission of meaning . . . the receiver knows that a signal IS being emitted, but his connection with the transmitter seems to be on a faulty line. . . . The work of enigma . . . is thus a work that simultaneously discloses and conceals its meaning. It is a paradoxical synthesis of communication and lack of communication, a revelation which is equally a re-veiling.9

A similar discussion of postmodern literature is found in David Lodge’s new book, The Forms of Modern Writing (1977). Postmodernism, Lodge argues, is characterized by openness, by enigma; the “plot” becomes a “labyrinth without exit.” Beckett’s fictional world, for example, is characterized by its “resistance to interpretation.” In reading Beckett or Coover or Butor or Barthelme, we are struck again and again by the contradictions inherent in the narrative, the irreducible ambiguity of the text, whose discontinuities cannot be resolved, no matter how deeply we try to probe beneath the surface, to discover a code that will render the work coherent.10 A novelist like Robbe-Grillet overwhelms the reader with more detail than he wants or can handle, thus ensuring that the details will not, finally, cohere. Lodge calls this technique “metonymic excess” and relates it closely to another characteristic postmodern procedure: “short circuit,” that is, the condition in which the gap between the text and the world referred to cannot be closed.11

The Island is an “open” narrative to the extent that it charts a reenactment rather than a description of thought processes, to the extent that Creeley’s language acts out the poet’s quest for meaning and the displacement of action into isolated, broken bits of thought. But despite all the talk of FIELD COMPOSITION and energy discharge, the book’s thematic structure exhibits rather strong closure. In terms of Sukenick’s categories, the narrator is still “the significant focus among the phenomena of reality,” even if his sense of reality is often confused and blurred, and even if we occasionally cannot distinguish between the words and gestures of John and Joan. The premise of The Island is that the narrator-author could make sense of his world, if he knew how to proceed. Creeley’s sense of causality, for that matter, is perfectly traditional. In flashback after flashback, we come to understand what has made John the infantile person he is: the death of his father in his early childhood, the absence of male models, the sense of insecurity and longing to be loved that pervaded his childhood. Similarly, Joan — whether the “real” Joan or John’s invention — is seen as the product of her upbringing: her early years in the orphanage, her adoption by the “cold woman” who died when she was young, her adolescent promiscuity, thinly veiling a hunger to be loved and cared for. Joan’s operation is either literally or symbolically the product of her self-inflicted abortions — with knitting needles, coat hangers, pills.
John, we learn, has gotten her pregnant ten times in all; she has only three children. Their marriage seems oddly doomed from the start; two children who whisper in bed at night and eat candy, they can hardly cope with the adult demands imposed on them by having children of their own. And so on.

The postmodern fictions of Borges and Beckett refuse to be rationalized in this way. These narratives insist that there is no explanation, no clarification of “the content of the mystery.” Creeley, by contrast, makes no bones about his didactic intent. In the Preface to The Gold Diggers, he declares: “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.” And he adds nostalgically, “But the writer isn’t allowed that function anymore” (GD, 3). Similarly, in his Preface to The Island, he is careful to define the book’s moral: “People try with an increasing despair to live, and to come to something, some place, or person. They want an island in which the world will be at last a place circumscribed by visible horizons. . . . This island is, finally, not real, however tangible it once seemed to me.”

Creeley, to borrow Yeats’s vocabulary, is perhaps best understood as a moralist born out of phase. The Island is a highly moral novel: as Creeley himself told Lewis MacAdams, he wanted his readers to know “that this is what you can do to yourself, man, if you think that’s an interesting trip” (CP, 166). Toward the end of the novel, John is cruel to his wife and taunts his children because he is full of “hate of himself” (I, 174). The way out, Creeley suggests, is to learn that “the mind is physiological,” that “the mind and body are one” (CP, 167). This is a very Lawrence theme and The Island is an essentially Lawrence study of what one man’s inward turn did to his latent capacity for love and friendship and creativity.

As Creeley’s “first long poem,” The Island looks ahead to the serial mode of Pieces and A Day Book, both of which also make use of “the number condition” to give form to the fluidity of consciousness. But this is not to say that the book ushers in new fictional modes, new possibilities of “getting somewhere.” No amount of patient study, for example, can establish whether the man with the heavy coat and hat and stick encountered by Moran in Beckett’s Molloy (1951) is the man Molloy designated as C, or Molloy himself, or someone else. Hugh Kenner’s description of Beckett, “filling the air with uncertainty, the uncertainty fiction usually dissipates,”12 will apply to most postmodern fictions. It is an uncertainty Creeley avoids both in his prose and in his poetry, perhaps because he regards such uncertainty as a threat to the fragile self. Latent in the text is a curious nostalgia for order. As the poet says, somewhat wistfully, in “The Finger”:
One thing
done, the
rest follows. (P, 13)

University of Southern California

NOTES

1 Charles Altieri, "The Unsure Egoist: Robert Creeley and the Theme of
Nothingness," Contemporary Literature, 13 (Spring 1972), 181.


3 Was That a Real Poem Or Did You Just Make It Up Yourself (Santa Barbara,
Ca.: Black Sparrow Press, 1976), n. pag.

4 See CP, p. 165, where Creeley discusses this criticism levelled at him with Lewis
MacAdams.

5 Human Universe and Other Essays, ed. Donald Allen (New York: Grove Press,

6 The comparison was first made by Olson in a letter to Cid Corman (June 10,
1951):

you should, rather, be surprised if you get any prose narrative
except from Bob. . . . Narrative writing is, at the moment,
wholly waiting for the advance of verse. Only the poets can now
pull the narrative writers ahead. . . . Origin 2 [the magazine
Corman was editing] by way of Creeley ought to begin the
push. . . . For Creeley is the push beyond Lawrence. And
Lawrence is the only predecessor who can carry narrative ahead.

This citation is found in Letters for Origin, 1950-1966, ed. Albert Glover (New
York: Grossman, 1970), p. 60. See also Egbert Faas, "Olson and D. H.
Lawrence: The Aesthetics of the 'Primitive Abstract,'" boundary 2 (Charles
Olson issue), ed. Matthew Corrigan, 2, Nos. 1-2 (Fall 1973/Winter 1974),
113-26.

7 Letters for Origin, p. 60.

8 Ronald Sukenick, "Twelve Digressions Toward a Study of Composition," New
Literary History, 6 (Winter 1975), 429.


10 On this point, see also E. H. Gombrich, Art and Illusion: A Study in the

11 David Lodge, The Forms of Modern Writing: Metaphor, Metonymy, and the
passim ("Postmodern Fiction").

12 Hugh Kenner, A Reader's Guide to Samuel Beckett (New York: Noonday,