

Robert Creeley: The Minimal Self's Metaphorical Transportation

Robert Creeley: A transportação metafórica do mínimo eu

Rubelise da Cunha

Resumo

Este artigo examina a construção da subjetividade na poesia de Robert Creeley. A análise de "Focus", "Shadow", "The Rhyme", "The Language" e "Words" mostra como a sua poesia evidencia a construção de um eu mínimo conforme as idéias de Christopher Lasch em *The Minimal Self: psychic survival in troubled times*, tendo em vista que sua poesia faz uma reflexão sobre o papel do poeta na sociedade norte-americana do pós-guerra. Além disso, a poesia auto-reflexiva de Robert Creeley, que tenta entender o trabalho literário do eu, apresenta uma linguagem ao mesmo tempo filosófica e metafórica, enfatizando a discussão de Jacques Derrida sobre a reafirmação da metáfora no discurso filosófico.

Palavras-chave: Robert Creeley, poesia auto-reflexiva, metáfora.

Abstract

This work examines the construction of subjectivity in Robert Creeley's poetry. The analysis of "Focus", "Shadow", "The Rhyme", "The Language" and "Words" shows how his poetry evinces the construction of a minimal self according to Christopher Lasch's ideas in *The minimal self: psychic survival in troubled times*, as it reflects on the role of the poet in North American post-war society. Moreover, Creeley's self-reflexive poetry, which tries to understand the literary work of the self, presents a language at the same time philosophical and metaphorical, emphasizing Jacques Derrida's argument on the reaffirmation of metaphor in the philosophical discourse.

Key words: Robert Creeley, self-reflexive poetry, metaphor.

The one simple thing about metaphor is that it moves us from one place to another, the word itself of restless parts, from buried Greek *meta* meaning "over, across, behind" and *phoreo* – "to bring, bear, carry."

Marianne Boruch

In *The minimal self: psychic survival in troubled times*, Christopher Lasch studies the

behavior and survival of the self in North American post-war society, analyzing the sociopolitical and economical changes which affect contemporary art. The author uses the expression "minimal self" to define the subject that contracts him or herself into a defensive nucleus when in contact with adversity. This self is not sure about his/her own limits,

Rubelise da Cunha é Mestre em Inglês e Literaturas Correspondentes (UFSC) e Doutoranda em Teoria da Literatura (PUCRS). Artigo apresentado no II seminário Internacional de Línguas e Literaturas Estrangeiras. Professora de Letras da FURG
Endereço para correspondência: rubelise@vetorial.net

Textura	Canoas	n. 9	nov. 2003 a jun. 2004	p. 67-74
---------	--------	------	-----------------------	----------

therefore he/she sometimes wishes to reconstruct the world according to his/her own image, and wants to merge into his/her environment in an ecstatic union. This relationship of the self with the exterior world, and the consequent mixture of the self and the non-self, are characteristics of a solipsist discourse. Moreover, this discourse is a means of self assertion before a traumatic reality, such as the post-war, the holocaust and the increasing fear of a nuclear war.

Christopher Lasch also analyzes minimalist art as expression of the minimal self. The minimalist style includes a contracted vocabulary and an emotionless tone in syntax. It also has minimal characters, actions and plots. In poetry, it implies a contraction of language and images, and, consequently, a contraction of subjectivity. Lasch parts from a classical definition of minimalism, but he goes beyond when he establishes a relation with the historical period. For him, the only adequate art to a time of violence and uncertainty is the anti-art or the minimal art, in which minimalism concerns not much a particular style in an endless succession of styles, but a generalized conviction that art can only survive by means of a drastic reduction of vision: the radical "restriction of perspectives" recommended by the authorities on this theme as a strategy of survival *par excellence* (LASCH, 1986, p. 118).

The North American poet Robert Creeley has been frequently considered a minimalist writer. However, he shows little concern with the labels applied to his work, and affirms that, if the critics consider him a "minimalist" by the closeness of his style to Wittgenstein's or the musician Anton Webern's, then he thanks. Creeley is one of the most important living poets in the United States, although he was neglected by the literary anthologies for a long time. One of the founders of the "Black Mountain Review", in the Black Mountain College, North Carolina, he has been connected to the *Language Poetry* movement, which emerged in the 70s inside an aesthetics that privileged the process of representation and formulation of ideas and thoughts. His poetry is in tune with Ezra Pound's experimental mood, and with William Carlos Williams' search of "ideas, only in things". However, as Fábio de Souza Andrade affirms, these

ingredients only help us understand the course followed by Creeley, who makes use of jazz improvisation as well as of expressionist painting in America.

Many critics consider Creeley a minimalist in the strict sense of the term due to his concise language in poetry. Yet, it seems that this term limits the author's work, only opening space to a more detailed analysis of minimal language as expression of the self. This essay analyzes the construction of subjectivity in Robert Creeley's poetical work, focusing on five poems: "Focus", "Shadow", "The Rhyme", "The Language" and "Words". These poems were published in a bilingual book called *A um/As one* (1997), which was organized and translated into Portuguese by Régis Bonvicino. The study of language and form aims to show how his poetry evinces the construction of a minimal self according to Christopher Lasch's definitions, as it reflects on the poet's work inside North American post-war society. Moreover, when Creeley constructs a self-reflexive poetry, which searches for an understanding of the literary work of the self, he gets close to a philosophical and at the same time metaphorical language, reinforcing Jacques Derrida's arguments in "La retirada de la metáfora" (1989), when he approaches the reaffirmation of metaphor in the philosophical discourse.

It is not only Christopher Lasch's book and Jacques Derrida's essay that bring us important information for studying the poetical language of the minimal self. "Poesia e pensamento abstrato" by Paul Valéry, which was published in his book *Varietades* (1991), is in tune with Derrida's text and strengthens the relation between the metaphorical and the philosophical. Valéry starts with the question on the relation between abstract thought and poetry, and moves through a course of poetry discovery by means of his personal experience. In this trajectory, the poetical work is the artistic work with language, and the poem a kind of machine that produces the poetical condition through words (VALÉRY, 1991, p. 209). When he distinguishes useful language from the poetical, he shows how the latter is recovered from the ashes, since it is always reconstructed and is indefinitely what it has just been. Differently, useful language vanishes, since it is over when it is understood.

The author affirms that the poetical work



with language oscillates between voice and thought, presence and absence. This argument contributes to his statement which says that every true poet can perfectly develop precise reasoning and abstract thought, since the most authentic philosophy is in the objects we observe and reflect upon, as well as in the act of thinking itself and its maneuvers (idem, p. 208).

Valéry approximates the act of philosophical thought to the poet's process of thinking, and affirms that the poet has his/her abstract thought and, as some say, a particular philosophy, for the poetical work implies reflections, decisions, choices and combinations. The author also states that the value of a poem is in the indissolubility of sound and sense, and the poet's task is to give us the feeling of intimate union between sound and spirit. He goes beyond when he shows that this desire to get sound and sense together is part of language itself, because there is a priori relation between the sounds of the letters, their union, and the meaning attributed to them. How can "horse", "cheval" and "cavalo" designate the same object? According to Valéry, this process that approximates sounds and letters and constitutes ideas is a characteristic of metaphor.

Derrida reaffirms the metaphorical character of every language when he says that the more language tries to erase metaphor, the more it is strengthened. He shows how metaphysics is unable to separate itself from metaphor and can not define it, since the concept of metaphor as "withdrawal of the self" is in itself metaphorical. This condition is called "re-trace", that is, the notion that the withdrawal of metaphor already implies its reaffirmation, even when defining the concept. The definition of metaphor as linguistic

transportation confirms the impossibility of erasing this figure of speech to explain it, since it conducts our thought.

Valéry's and Derrida's ideas concerning language and metaphor lead to the relation between the philosophical and the metaphorical, which is present in Robert Creeley's poetical art of the minimal self. It is exactly when there is the exhaustion of language and the search for a minimal mode of expression to construct poetry that the poetical self reaffirms the presence of metaphor, since the economy of words demands a greater load of ideas and images from each sign. One can also perceive that fragmentation, play with words, and the form of the poem have a great importance for the construction of meaning. Therefore, the work of reflection, decision and choice that Valéry associates with philosophical thought acquires a crucial function in poetry.

In Creeley's work, metaphorization and the importance of form exemplify the philosophical thought through which the self reflects on the difficulties he/she faces in the poetical work. The poet's conflict when facing language is what attributes a more metaphorical quality to poetry. In the poems selected, the poetical self reflects on the possibilities and impossibilities of contemporary subjectivity – the minimal self – when he/she faces poetical language. In the two first poems, the author analyzes the poetical gaze of the self and how he/she grasps reality. In the last three, the minimal self searches for a poetical language which is completely different from that of traditional love poems.

"Focus" e "Shadow": the minimal self's gaze

FOCUS

Patches of grey
sky tree's

lines window
frames the

plant hangs
in middle.

SHADOW

There is a shadow
to intention a place
it comes through and
is itself each stasis
of its mindedness ex-
plicit walled into
semblance it is a
seemingly living place
it wants it fades it
comes and goes it puts
a yellow flower in a pot
in a circle and looks.



In "Focus" and "Shadow", one observes the way the self grasps reality. As the subject stops talking about him/herself to focus on the object observed, he/she perceives the mixing of the self and the non-self that Christopher Lasch talks about. Through the relation between the self and the non-self, the search for the inside in the outside takes place, which is an important aspect in Robert Creeley's work.

In "Focus", the form of the poem and its construction present a poetical self that tries to apprehend reality, but is only able to express it in its parts and through stops, or, as Creeley calls them in "Shadow", in its stases. The stasis, which can mean paralysis, appears in the poems as a momentary stop performed by the mind in its capture of the outside. Hence, it is a kind of photographic flash that fragments thought. The patches of sky that appear in the first stanza represent this self that can only be expressed by a fragmentary language. First, patches of "grey" are observed, and only in the second verse we have the complement "sky". Although the position of adjective before noun is part of English linguistic structure, the isolation of the adjective in the first verse creates a double meaning: first, patches of grey color; next, patches of grey sky.

In the second verse, the self perceives the sky and the tree. The possessive "tree's/lines" brings us the vision of lined trees in the grey background of the sky. The grey, the sky, and the lined trees are first perceived, only then the eyes focus a window that frames a plant in the middle. The poet's point of view shows the plant framed by the window as if it belonged to a painting, or a photograph, turning it into an artistic object – a painting that has a grey sky and trees as background. Although nature composes the scenario, the grey sky already anticipates the dark aspect that entitles the next poem to be analyzed.

"Focus" is structured in a sequence of deepening performed by the poet's gaze, which goes straight to the inside of a place, probably a house. Another possible reading is the movement from the inside to the outside, as if looking from the inside could frame the plant in the window, and then enlarge its vision when the landscape behind is perceived. In some comments during a poem reading in 1996,

Creeley affirms that he has a special concern for the question of place, and the vision of outside and inside is extremely important to his work (CREELEY, 1997, p. 157). This search for a passage from the outside to the inside is also stressed in "Shadow".

"Shadow" presents a different form from "Focus", since it is composed of only one stanza, but we can still perceive the interruptions and syllable divisions that produce meaningful linguistic plays. In a first moment, we know that there is a shadow "to intention a place" (CREELEY, 1997, p. 98), and the movement of this shadow is described. Then, a concern for creating or having space is observed.

As the metaphor itself, which slides through movements and stases, the shadow comes "through", it crosses and is in itself each "stasis/ of its mindedness ex-/ plicit" (ibidem). It is the whole and the part, for it is in itself each fragment of reality captured by its mind. The syllabic division "ex-/ plicit" reinforces the meaning of the term, emphasizing that the mind is not closed in itself. On the contrary, it is explained by the fragmentation of the universe it grasps. Another important aspect to be highlighted in these verses is the word mindedness, which represents a state of consciousness, and is perfectly connected to the concept of stasis.

The poem is constructed through paradoxes, since the shadow is the whole and the part, and the "ex-plicit" mind is walled in appearance, thus it is an apparently living place. This is the effect of shadow, which models itself according to the object it reflects. Consequently, it is potentially alive, for it does not have a substantial existence. Movement is emphasized in the end of the poem. This shadow disappears, comes and goes, but it also has a desire: it "wants". The shadow "puts/ a yellow flower in a pot/ in a circle and looks" (ibidem).

When the shadow focuses the yellow flower, this poetical gaze becomes very similar to the one that the subject of "Focus" performs towards the plant. These last verses of the poem and a certain humanization in the movement of the shadow, exemplified by the state of consciousness, allow a comparison with the poet himself when in contact with the world he observes. The poetical self merges into the

other, or the object observed, to have a place through feeling. When this shadow self acquires form by the reflection of the object in the poem, he/she assumes an apparently living place. This seems to be the only solution for this minimal self, because even walled he/she is able to bring some light to his/her dark condition when the yellow flower is focused.

The grey color and the idea of shadow in

the two poems say much about the condition of this quite obscure, or faded self, but one that is in search of expression by means of his/her concise language. Besides, there is a tentative to recover something substantial through material things, and not only through feelings. In the poems below, this search for something essential will be evinced in the poet's work when he/she composes poetry.

The self's atrophy: "The rhyme", "The language" and "Words"

THE RHYME	THE LANGUAGE	WORDS
There is the sign of the flower – to borrow the theme.	Locate <i>I love you</i> some – where in	You are always with me, there is never a separate
But what or where to recover what is not love too simply.	teeth and eyes, bit it but	place. But if in the twisted place I cannot speak,
I saw her and behind her there were flowers, and behind them nothing.	take care not to hurt, you want so	not indulgence or fear only, but a tongue rotten with what
	much so little. Words say everything.	it tastes – There is a memory of water, of food, when hungry.
	I love you again,	Some day will not be this one, then to say
	then what is emptiness for. To	words like a clear, fine ash sifts, like dust,
	fill, fill. I heard words and words full	from nowhere.
	of holes aching. Speech is a mouth.	

The poems "The Rhyme", "The Language" and "Words" do not appear in the book by Régis Bonvicino in a sequence.

However, when analyzed in this order, they evince the anguish of the poetical self in his work with the poem; it is not by accident that

the titles chosen are primordial elements in poetry writing. What is more, they present the conflict of the subject who can not find in language the words to talk about traditional lyric themes, such as love and its symbols. At this moment, the poetical self seems atrophied, and his/her fragmented language, full of interruptions, reflects his stagnation because of a disturbed world. Through poetry and feeling, the self tries to find a way to express him or herself in a violent reality, which in the North-American context is easily associated with the post-war period.

The social and historical aspect that Christopher Lasch focuses when studying minimalism is fundamental for Creeley's poetry. The author himself suggests that his tendency to work with feelings is a result of his familiar experiences, specially concerning the context in which he used to live. Creeley affirms he basically belongs to a female family: mother, grandmother, sister, housekeeper, besides the occasional presence of his grandfather. His task was much more listening than speaking, which led him to express himself through words and feelings. The author declares that feeling is the most important authority for him (CREELEY, 1997, p.160). The poet also talks about the Great Depression and the World War, reaffirming the importance of feeling inside a catastrophic context. Maybe for the war catastrophe or for the daily routine they had, he points that feeling was extremely important to validate their existence.

In the poems to be analyzed, Creeley does not approach political or social themes to denounce the impact suffered by the self. It is the difficulty to express feeling in traditional modes, and the atrophy of subjectivity that express a sociopolitical concern.

In "The Rhyme", the poetical subject develops the idea of the flower sign, generally used to refer to the loved woman. The traditional association is confirmed in the third verse, when the subject affirms he starts with the flower "to borrow the theme" (CREELEY, 1997, p.22). In this poem, the self searches for rhyme and poetry by means of the flower, but a conflict is installed in the next stanza, for the connector "But" introduces an idea opposed to the traditional symbology. The sign of the

flower can not recover "what is not love/ too simply" (ibidem). The questioning about where to recover what is not love leads to the expression of the non-love, but the third verse in this stanza completes the play with the words "too simply". Then, the existence of a more complex feeling which the flower sign can not represent is affirmed.

In the third stanza, one more sign is introduced: she, the loved woman. The self sees the beloved and, behind her, flowers, but behind the flowers he can not see anything. At this moment, the poetical subject seems desolate. The self is able to perceive only two distinct signs – the flower and the loved woman, but he can not approximate them, therefore he can not reach the rhyme.

In spite of the reference to a female being, a possible beloved, the poem never becomes a love poem. On the contrary, "The Rhyme" speaks much more about the search for language performed by the minimal self, since the complexity of what is not simply love can not produce a traditional rhyme. Thus, the association between the signs "flowers" and "loved woman" can not explain the feeling that the subject needs to express.

The impossibility of creating a love poem and the questioning about the poetical work goes on in "The Language". This poem not only uses a fragmentary language that creates new meanings, but also celebrates the play with language to reach a bitter concern about the expression of love by poetry. While in the last poem the self searches for the rhyme through the conventional association beloved – flower, in "The Language" he/she starts with the typical sentence "I love you".

The first verse – "Locate I" – already points to subjectivity, but it is completed by "love you" in the second verse (CREELEY, 1997, p.30). The word "some" that follows ironically brings the idea of loving to a certain extent, but not much. This play is broken by "where", which completes the word "somewhere". The poetical self asks us to perceive the sentence "I love you" not in the heart, where one traditionally searches for love, but in the teeth, in the eyes, and tells us to bite it carefully, not to get hurt. The idea of biting "I love you" also surprises us, but this care not to get hurt can be associated with the idea of love