

Letter to Robert

Greeley - Nov. 22, 1971

November 22, 1971
Myrrena's 13th Birthday

Dear Bob,

I don't like to fuss you with matters that may not be of any immediate concern to you; but I am rather desperate to get some new fix on thoughts which I've stirred these last several weeks. I'm in a bind; and you're the only person I can imagine entertaining some few questions of this letter meaningfully.

(It is hard to write to you now that thus much time has past since we last met. I have to keep creating Robert Creeley from past scratch; and the only thing I really do know is that you must surely have changed. This is some new Bob I'm addressing, then. I'm imagining him. It is awful to be that dependent on eyes; but I am.)

The Document in Art: that term centers my concern (as you already know from those letters-to-others I've recently sent your way). Now, how to demonstrate the wide-angle I've got on it -- make it clear that I understand every art has at least one toe securely 'Doc't' ... wow, that pun carried me all the way over to 'cut-off', didn't it?: okay, then to state an example -- take that favored Callahan image (the once you once called 'favorite' in my presence) of his wife nude on the bed, the baby, the window, the radiator, etc. Beyond simply being the document every work-of-art is, that image also comes thru to me like ... what? -- a report, that's it! ... both senses of the word -- it echoes in the mind like a ten-pound real-estate 'abstract' (as they call them) slammed down on the negotiating table. It feels to me as str#ongly thus as if it had graph-lines, cross-bars, or side-notch-indicators, like those images from gun-cameras, periscopes, and the like. The fact that Harry has written his survey-marks invisibly all over that image only makes it haunt my imagination that much stronger. I'm wondering if you agree -- that is, does this image also seem Document (along with everything else it is) in the special sense I've indicated above?

Now to stick with Poetry a bit, see what I can bite off in the same context. The case of The Document and E.P.'s Cantos seems clear (even the aestheticians have written about it); but is it? By self-testimony (in tone), by quote, by ideogram Ezra does get History to stand for itself, visibly report, whole hogs of it running (not loose but) in circles of themselves, well tethered to the rythms of the poem developing. Invective stands for itself, always -- is oddly never referential-seeming ... "Damn You!" as simply explicative as "Damn it all!" -- thus (and this may be a major reason) much invective peppers the soup. "A portable British Museum"? -- well, yes!, in the personal sense of Pound's jotting down everything he might care to refer to: and THAT's a key to Document ... i.e. when one makes something that solidly to-refer-to, then the energy runs THAT way leaving the work oddly free of its references-(wherfrom, etc.) -- reference can stop with reference-to and NOT pass thru the Poem to Poem's source. But the style of The Cantos (Pound's terribly visible signature every half sentence, sputtered abbreviations, etc.) does leak energy thru Document to refer-to the personae of The Maker, Ezra-himself, in a way that a real-estate 'abstract' doesn't, doesn't refer to the feeling of the land, the sight of it, its possibilities. Robert Browning is the spring-board for all of this (much more than "Sordello" where Pound would put his argumentative emphasis). I cannot get over the haunt of those early versions of the first several Cantos. Have you ever had the chance to read those, most-Browning-influenced Pound Cantos? They are much less Document-oriented and much less referential THRU Pound-source.

Two shifts then (when he re-wrote those Cantos): more stoppage of The Reader at the poem (making of it a collection of documents) AND more sense of Ezra (individuation of style). Question (if you know these early versions of The Cantos): is this price neccessary? -- i.e., does The Artist automatically have to 'come on strong'ly individual in order to stop The Reader's (his) attention AT the work he's made? ... ayeeee, to plug the leak of that lie Memory or His-story engenders -- must he swap his short shift of personae for Tradition's or some-such?

Let me take up Gertrude Stein as Document-maker, to get an opposite spectacle on the matter: Roses arose is Eros is Arrow# sis a row sis a roe sis sorrow ... : to spin that around twice (I've managed actually 4 turns of that wheel), with special emphasis on The Three Fates (as I've underlined and ordered according to Them). Simple Question: do we get A Document solidly-enough by making the poem all inclusive -- so there's nothing left-over to refer-to? . . . i.e. does this poem become more or less Document if its syllables approximate the outer petal formation of the flower itself? -- is it does it will it with it?

James Joyce and Charles Olson stand at two extremes of this question centering on Reference. I know that Joyce just naturally sends me running to the encyclopedia constantly (tho' I have resisted reading any 'Key's to him, "Skeleton" or otherwise); whereas Charles always throws me back upon my own surroundings (tho' I did once make the trip, as you know, to Gloucester -- that, and Charles in person, only making the poem and all sense of Maximus MORE recalcitrant to ref. . . . they'll surely NEVER be able to run Maximus tourist buses thru Gloucester -- even when there and in Charles' company I read "Angle St." for "Angel St." much to Charles' amusement. Anyway, here the questions come so thick and fast I cannot sort them into any kind of reasonable asking. Could you just do a riff for me in the area of Charles and Document? I'm especially, desperately, concerned about the question of Maximus as a possible patch on the "leak" referred to earlier: did Charles create himself/Maximus (as distinct from Maximus/himself) to stop his (or any Reader's) attention at the poem?

This IS all actually a pickup from the last good conversation we had together. You were here in my cabin and had just seen the newly finished "Lovemaking 1"; and you were offended to the extent of being made voyeur, frustrated that you were blocked by the 'other man' in the picture, and so forth. The very visible ART of the film had moved you into 'first place'/ 'base'. The 'other man' had kept you (as surely as those logs Cezanne throws down across paths into his pictures) from entering the screen. You were beautifully clear about it; and the following three "Lovemaking" films benefitted much from your comments. I found myself moving increasingly through those following three "Lovemakings" TOWARD voyeurism via Document. All that might be easily regarded as Self-Expression (or what we have come to most easily recognize as Art in this century) became (in the later "Love-making"s) an invisible container. This proclivity has increased in most of my work since. Some of the obvious manifestations of that direction are my selling all sound equipment, giving away paints and chemicals, eschewing lab effects which would be obvious as such and giving up those forms of editing which operate as absolute control over the immediate means of photography. I avoid these techniques (for the present) because I have not the ability to realize them as other than "obvious as such" -- i.e. it is a quite personal matter. I am now up-and-down to tone and rythm in the editing process.

(4)

And I am beginning work on a film photographed at The Pittsburgh Morgue. It has come to be called: "The Act of Seeing ... with one's own eyes": that is the most literal meaning of "Autopsy" and is exactly the impulse which moved me to undergo such a terrible series of sessions of photography. (Note how I'm prompted to hiss "s...s ... s....s..." mentioning it.) I had nightmares almost every single nap for weeks; and at first I kept telling people that I intended to interweave these Morgue images with mountain-ranges, moons, suns, snow, clouds, etc -- the mind leaping to escape in every conceivable symbol ... as it had while I was photographing -- to redo "The Dead", I suppose, with actual bodies the 'sculpture' of the occasion. One good look at the footage (once the lab. had processed these 3000-some feet) and I knew it was impossible (for me now anyway) to interrupt THIS parade of the dead with ANYthing whatsoever, any "escape" a blasphemy, even the 'escape' of Art as I had come to know it -- it's 'lead'/lied to inner self . . . no!, this gathering of images (rather than editing) had to be straight -- (best comment helping me at this time coming from Leslie Trumbull who runs Film*maker's Co-Op: "Think about WHY Penelope# takes ornaments off the shroud of the dead!"

Americans (and perhaps the whole Western World now) are after a good hard look and "throw words like stones", as Ed Dorn put it to me once. As I read you, Robert, the personalized lilt (even the breath-breaks which Olson allotted us) of your earlier poems disappears in "Pieces" and most later work. The Robert Creeley which Readers had made-up when reading "For Love" has all but vanished, leaving them up against themselves, as the poem bounces them back upon their own means; but "Pieces" throws no curve; and the 'ball' is (defying science) perpetual motion, I'm sure; the 'bounce' is THAT close I'd say they're referred-to the poem, period. I'm meaning to say, you've beat William's "red wheel barrow" at its own game; for tho' I read "Pieces" again and again, I get no reference to hang any poem upon, least of all any You/The Poet -- no!, there are some few "leaks" there ... like hang-overs of "For Love" (and these I foolishly liked 'the best' at first, these remainders, minders) -- but the whole of it is in "Pieces", like you say, and resists all that traction which Readers could easily attached their references-to in earlier poems (thus the fuss of those who would tune-in on your angsts and make of them Literachurrrrr to pet their loves withal, etc.)

Cup.
Bowl.
Saucer.
Full.

The three previous disappear in "Full", yet solidly retain The Source thereto 'em in daily language experience.* The closest I've seen to this in all previous reading is Stein's "Stanzas In Meditation"; yet she'd exhaust the words with reference to each other; whereas you're poems remain completely open to where ##### each word# comes from.

"The door, the hat,
the chair, the fact."

It is simply beautiful! Mentioning Stein I am especially in mind of your "Piece", "THE", as she did fuss that word so masterfully much. You extend it 4 times (drawing all those "4"s of its substance into the poem); and there it IS. Wonderful!

Do I read you right?

"Full" makes them refer-to, *Blessings, Stan*

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