Jazz-like Prosody and Poetic Improvisation in the Poetry of William Carlos Williams, Robert Creeley and Michael S. Harper

Thesis Submitted to The College of Arts & Sciences of the UNIVERSITY OF DAYTON

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for The Degree Master of Arts in English

by

Michael J. Busam

UNIVERSITY OF DAYTON
Dayton, Ohio
April 5, 1993
APPROVED BY:

Dr. Brian Conniff
(Thesis Advisor)

Dr. Herbert Woodward Martin
(Reader)
Few scholars have attempted to address specifically the influence of jazz on post World War II American poetry. This is despite the fact that poets such as Robert Creeley and Michael S. Harper have on more than one occasion noted the important role that jazz plays in their poetic styles.

This thesis will therefore focus on the evolution of a distinctively jazz-like prosody in modern American poetry. Starting with the variable foot of William Carlos Williams, which although not jazz-influenced does have a sense of improvisation similar to that in jazz, the thesis will conclude by taking a closer look at the overtly jazz-influenced prosody of Creeley and Harper.
I want to give special thanks to Dr. Brian Conniff for the patience with which he guided me through this thesis—not to mention two years of graduate school. His knowledge and understanding of poetry were invaluable to me while I was working on this project. (The pile of books he lent me and sources he directed me to where also helpful). Dr. Conniff read and commented on more drafts and revisions of drafts than I can remember, and was always willing to spend time discussing poetry and sharing his knowledge with me. Indeed, I learned quite a lot from him.

Dr. Herbert Woodward Martin, my second reader, introduced me to the poetry of Michael S. Harper. Through the two classes I took from him on African American literature and modern poetry, the conversations I had with him outside of class, and the readings of his poetry which I attended, Dr. Martin taught me a great deal about the art of poetry that I could never receive from a textbook.

I also want to thank the following: Tom Straw, for convincing me during a time in which I was tempted to shelve this project that I should continue on anyway; Kurt Ostdiek, for reading over the completed draft of the Michael Harper chapter and providing encouragement and helpful criticism; and Nancy Schaffer, for tolerating my preoccupation with this thesis and helping me typeset the final draft.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.................................................................iii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.......................................................iv
INTRODUCTION..............................................................1
VARIABLE FOOT AND THE BREAKING OF THE LINE.............8
ROBERT CREELEY: GIVEN TO WRITING JAZZ.........................21
MICHAEL S. HARPER AND THE ART OF "SPEAKING JAZZ"......41
CONCLUSION...............................................................59
WORKS CITED............................................................60
Introduction

While writing about the relationship of poetry and emotion in an essay entitled "The Serious Artist," Ezra Pound briefly explains why it is so difficult for poets to achieve a high degree of musicality in their verse:

Poetry is a centaur. The thinking word-arranging, clarifying faculty must move and leap with energizing, sentient, musical faculties. It is precisely the difficulty of this amphibious existence that keeps down the census record of good poets. (52)

Pound's remark about the amphibious nature of poets is a good place from which to begin a study of three poets on whom the influence of music is so great. For reading through the poetry of William Carlos Williams, Robert Creeley, and Michael S. Harper one is struck first, by the unique rhythms and musicality of their work, second, by the way in which their poetry is able to capture the inherent music of human speech. These poets pay close attention to the ways in which people speak in the hope of reproducing in verse the rhythms of their speech. Furthermore, all share a love of music and understand its importance to poetry, and especially to the rhythm of the poetic line.

Though in some ways similar, the musicality of these poets is expressed in different ways according to the interests or goals of the particular poet. The musicality in
Williams is most evident in his development of the variable foot, which in turn was the result of his life-long effort to capture what he felt was a distinctly "American idiom." Williams believed that poets needed to find a way to use common speech as the material for their poems. Due to its layout on the page and the ease by which its lines could be shortened or lengthened at the poet's will, the variable foot (or variable measure as it is sometimes called by critics), was meant to be "laid across a serious nervous common speech given just as it might be spoken, without inversion, compression, or other alteration by which poets tailor speech" (Goodman 296).

There was an element of orchestration to the variable foot. Lines could be set on a page like notes on a musical staff; the poet finally had a way to indicate how his or her poems should be read which was more exact than traditional line arrangements. But Williams wanted above all a unique and fittingly modern poetic form that would make a clean break from traditional poetic forms. After all, thought Williams, one could not make sonnets out of the speech of the people whom he encountered while practicing medicine in Rutherford or Paterson, New Jersey.

The influence of Williams' work on Creeley is clearly noticeable, but Creeley has been influenced by jazz (particularly bebop) as well. After spending the better part of 1944 and 1945 in Burma as an American Field Service ambulance driver, Creeley returned to America, went back to
Harvard, and began to write poetry seriously. Tom Clark writes that while in Burma, Creeley, "much to the detriment of his academic future, ... discovered marijuana, which in turn upon his repatriation led him into hipster jazz circles in Boston" (178). Although true, the implied cause-effect is misleading for Creeley had been a fan of jazz before his service in Burma: in fact, he had been a big enough fan that looking back on his early college days he said he played it "night and day"—much to his family's annoyance (Sheppard 39). Creeley's strong jazz background enabled him to appreciate the technical innovations of bebop, such as improvisation, and varied rhythms and phrasings. So it was that when Creeley read Williams' poems of the 1940s and 50s, he heard jazz in them; or perhaps more precisely, he realized the possibility of employing jazz rhythms and jazz-like phrasings in his own poetry after reading Williams.

Michael S. Harper has a different attitude towards music in his poetry than Williams or Creeley (although he does share Creeley's love of jazz). Harper explains that "The whole question of self-definition is the American problem, and the way in which you locate yourself in this very strange terrain, is a question, of course, of voice" ("Jazz and Letters" 137). Jazz music, Harper believes, is one of the most powerful voices of the African American tradition. This is especially important to Harper, since as an African American he is concerned with the lack of representation of his culture in American history. Harper thus takes the
improvisational elements of jazz and applies them to poetry in order to create a unique language and voice that will celebrate African American culture and help redefine its place in America.

Harper shares with Williams and Creeley the notion that poetry is not static and should not be expressed only in traditional fixed forms. And like Creeley, Harper uses jazz-like prosody in order to give his poems the improvisational feel that is so important to jazz. The jazz sensibility, the way jazz musicians personalize music and provide new interpretations of music, shows Harper a way to free himself from the limitations of his own language. He uses English words, but he writes in jazz.

Most readers are already very familiar with Williams; he has been generously anthologized for the past few decades and his influence alone on so many poets who came of age during or after World War II will likely dictate that he remain so. As a result this study begins with Williams, not simply for name recognition, but in order to illustrate how his experiments with the line—especially through the use of variable measure—provide a context in which Creeley and Harper's jazz-influenced prosody may be more clearly understood. This prosody has in some sense evolved partly out of the work of Williams, for Creeley and Harper both share a solid understanding and sense of the work done by the poets who came before them.
Of more importance perhaps is the fact that Creeley (born in 1926) and Harper (born in 1938) are still alive and publishing. Creeley’s collected poems were published in 1982, he is frequently the subject of scholarly articles and graduate theses, and indeed he seems fairly well established in anthologies and the literary canon of post World War II American poetry. Harper’s poetic "star" is certainly on the rise, judging by his increasing presence in, once again, poetry anthologies, although very few scholarly articles have been written about him. For these reasons Creeley and Harper are likely active, living influences on at least a few of the yet to be known young poets of today.

Jazz music, too, is very much alive and is now finding itself the subject of serious, academic studies. Part of this increasing acceptance is likely the result of greater tolerance for and understanding of the complex modern writings of Pound or Thomas Pynchon, or the abstract expressionist paintings of Jackson Pollock, for example. People are beginning to realize that these art forms are not really as random, experimental or obscure as was once thought. The increasing acceptance of multicultural interdisciplinary studies have also contributed to the acceptance of jazz as music worthy of study. Still, many people actually know very little about jazz and are a bit uncomfortable considering it as a possible influence on poetry. But it is an influence. Creeley and Harper both mention it frequently and are quite up-front as to how much
their prosody is influenced and shaped by jazz music. Yet few scholars have attempted to specifically address the subject of jazz and poetry in either poet's work.

This study will therefore focus on the evolution of a distinctively jazz-like prosody in modern American poetry. Starting with the variable foot of Williams, which although not jazz-influenced does have a sense of improvisation similar to that in jazz, the study will conclude by taking a closer look at the overtly jazz-influenced prosody of Creeley and Harper.

Finally, when considering the influence of jazz on the poetry of Creeley and Harper, it is important to keep in mind that they are not attempting simply to translate jazz music into poetry; thus, neither poet is saying "I shall write jazz poetry." Instead, following the examples of jazz musicians such as Charlie Parker, Miles Davis, and Thelonius Monk, Creeley and Harper manipulate line breaks, phrasings and rhythms in order to create in their poetry the improvisational feel inherent in jazz. They are influenced by, not merely imitative of jazz music—that is a pretty important distinction. Jazz-like improvisation is a means by which Creeley and Harper update the innovations that Williams made in American poetry. Williams turned his ear to the streets of Rutherford and Paterson, New Jersey, and Creeley and Harper turned their ears to the bebop of jazz clubs and records as well as to the poetry of Williams. But all three poets are essentially united in that they are listening to
the musicality and rhythms of speech in order to incorporate them more effectively into their poetic line.
Variable Foot and the Breaking of the Line

William Carlos Williams' poem "A Sort of Song," from The Wedge, contains what many of Williams' admirers consider perhaps the essential tenet of modern poetry; that is, poets should write not about "ideas" but "things":

Compose. (No ideas
but in things) Invent!
Saxifrage is my flower that splits
the rocks. (55)

Williams believed it was necessary for poets to deal with concrete subject matter by using concrete language, a language fresher and more naturally American. This meant also that a new poetic form (or forms) would need to be developed. Thus, in 1939, five years prior to the publication of The Wedge, Williams resolved to invent a new form for his poetry, and, in turn, for American poetry at large. "He knew he was out to break new ground, to discover a form he could use, and no resource could simply be avoided or overlooked" (Mariani, New World 419). Williams had spent most of his years as a mature poet battling what he felt was the stifling of American speech in modern poetry; he wanted to use "common speech," the speech one might hear on the streets or wherever real people, not academics or even poets, gathered. Williams always kept his ears open and was continually "listening to the speech patterns of his patients and friends and neighbors . . . and 'watching for patches of metrical coherence'" (Mariani, New World 329).
Williams' contributions to poetry—specifically his breaking of the line and his use of common speech and alternative poetic forms such as the variable foot—had a tremendous influence on countless poets who followed him, Olson, Creeley, and Ginsberg chief among them. Interestingly enough, what some of these poets heard, or thought they heard, in the prosody of Williams' poetry was jazz. Yet Williams' interest and understanding of jazz were not too deep, and his attempts to find a suitably jazz-influenced writing style were markedly unsuccessful. In the end, Williams comes to sound like jazz because he was writing verse as close to "real speech" as he could get. And since jazz is so open to improvisation it is not surprising that a poet who uses real speech in his verse comes to sound like he is listening to jazz; after all, what is human speech if it is not inherently improvisational?

In his biography of Williams entitled William Carlos Williams: A New World Naked, Paul Mariani notes that "In April of '45 Williams was . . . trying to become a convert to black jazz" (504). On Easter Sunday of that year, (and, ironically, also "all-fools" day), Williams borrowed some jazz records from a friend and tried listening to them: "'It's a bit of an acquired taste'" wrote Williams (as quoted by Mariani in New World 504). The experiment was clearly not too successful. In November of the same year, Williams wrote the poem "Ol' Bunk's Band" after he heard "Bunk Johnson and his New Orleans band" play in a club in New York (Mariani,
"Ol' Bunk's Band" is not a good poem and one can only be relieved that Williams did not attempt to follow his jazz muse for too long a time. Essentially, Williams achieves a jazz feel in the poem by repeating words and phrases and peppering the stanzas with numerous exclamation marks: "blatant, Stand up, stand up!"; "Choking, choking! while the / treble reed / races--alone, ripples, screams / slow to fast--to second to first! These are men!" (149). The second stanza begins with an attempt at approximating the sound of a jazz drummer, with, of course, the obligatory exclamation mark tacked on the end: "Drum, drum, drum, drum, drum / drum, drum!" (149). Williams uses the exclamatory phrase "These are men!" as a riff that is repeated in the poem four times. This has a slightly, though unintended, comic effect in the last stanza when he repeats (one assumes for emphasis) the word "Men!" after the phrase; and if that is not enough, Williams also attempts (rather feebly it might be noted) to capture what seems to be some sort of black-jazz vernacular by employing an odd, "triple negative":

... --Run and lie down, in slow measures, to rest and not never need no more! These are men! Men! (150)

Furthermore, late in 1945, Williams attempted a collaborative, jazz influenced, improvisational novel with a writer named Fred Miller. The novel, titled "tentatively,
Man Orchid, for the plant that looked like an oversized scrotum and that lived on air," bogged down a few months later in 1946 and was abandoned (Mariani, New World 514-16). Certainly no one will argue that Williams was writing jazz in the manner in which later poets like Creeley or Harper would.

"Ol' Bunk's Band" and Man Orchid aside, William's influence on the poets of Creeley's generation is enormous, and remains so for poets today. Clearly Williams made his greatest contributions to poetry through his "breaking" of the line and his introduction of common speech into poetry. "The poetic line would have to be rethought" argued Williams, because "it twisted and falsified speech as one actually heard it spoken" (Mariani New World 329). According to Williams, then, common speech should be used in poetry not as mere adornment or for sentimentality, but because the matter of the poem demanded it.

In 1913, Williams wrote an essay entitled "Speech Rhythms" in which he argued that "a poem . . . was not a series of metric lines repeated over and over with unfailing regularity, but rather like the sea, . . . a matter of regular rhythmic particles that were repeated as part of a greater pattern" (Mariani, New World 107). Williams further explained that "rhythmic units" were "'any repeated sequence of lengths and heights'" (as quoted by Mariani in New World 107). This means that the rhythm of a poem moves in a manner similar to that of a wave; rhythm is "' . . . a forward thrust combined with a simultaneous rising and falling'" that
"carries" the lines of a poem in the same manner that waves carry water (Mariani, New World 107).

About thirty years later, Williams would be writing in his now famous "step-down line with its variable measure" which he had initially "discovered" when he was writing Paterson 2 in 1947 (Mariani, New World 667). Williams had studied poetic forms very closely during his entire career. The variable foot is not, therefore, something he dreamt up or found accidently. Indeed, the variable foot is "based on a modulated and sophisticated use of the caesura based in turn on the classical notion of quantity" (Mariani, New World 539). Yet the variable foot is not, strictly speaking, quantitative verse; rather, it is based on the notion that the individual lines of a poem should be structured so as to most accurately represent the rhythms of speech.

Williams' innovative measure is basically a series of triadic lines that give the poem the appearance of "stepping down" the page. The lines look like the waves Williams wrote of in "Speech Rhythms" in that they move from left to right across the page. The effect is striking to the eye, for as well as reading vertically, the eye follows the lines from left to right, in effect moving to the same rhythm as the lines it is reading. Added to this is the syncopated sound of the triadic lines, caused in large part by their layout on the page. This new, variable measure allowed Williams to replicate the speech patterns of common English he had heard people speaking his entire life; it gave him the ability to
improvise that other fixed poetic forms could not.

In the early 1950s, Williams suffered two strokes: one in March of 1951 and the other in August of 1952 (Mariani, New World 629, 649). While the strokes do not seem to have had any direct effect on Williams' development or use of the variable foot--he had after all, spent his entire career attempting to find a "new measure" of some sort--it is somewhat remarkable that he could write so much innovative poetry in the face of all his physical problems. Mariani notes that "As for rhythm, Williams placed his emphasis now on the easy and the colloquial, on the fiction of a man speaking at length unhurriedly" (New World 668). By developing a measure that more closely approximates common speech, Williams was also able to write poetry that is a great deal more genuinely improvisational than "Ol' Bunk's Band." Part of the reason for the improvisational and common speech sound of the variable foot is the result of the manner in which Williams physically lays out the lines on the page. The lines are drawn out in halting rhythms that can be tightened if Williams wishes to create the feeling of hastened, "fast" speech, as in the opening lines of "To a Dog Injured in the Street":

It is myself, not the poor beast lying there yelping with pain that brings me to myself with a start--as at the explosion of a bomb, a bomb that has laid all the world to waste. (255)

or the lines can be shortened if he wishes to create a
languid, or more fluid feeling as in the following passage from "To Daphne and Virginia":

And I am not  
    a young man.  
     My love encumbers me.  
It is a love  
  less than  
   a young man's love but,  
like this box odor  
  more penetrant, infinitely  
   more penetrant  
in that sense not to be resisted. (248)

Williams' new measure, named the "variable foot," was "based on the concept of elapsed time and . . . allowed for rests, grace notes, expansions and contractions" (Mariani, New World 690). The structure of the lines as they appear on the page helps a reader see how the poem is intended to be read.

The way in which the triadic lines of the variable foot appear on the page is roughly equivalent to a musical score except for this: a musical score contains time signatures that stand for the tempo by which the piece was intended to be played; the notes of a musical score represent not only the manner in which a musician plays the melody but the duration for which each note must be "held." In both cases, the score gives a very clear indication as to what the intended tempo of the piece is. In contrast, the variable measure used by Williams gives the reader an idea as to how the piece should be read but not anything nearly as specific as a musical score gives a musician.

In his review of Pictures of Breughel, entitled "Dr. Williams and Tradition," Alan Stephens explains that the variable measure of Williams is not at all a measure, for
"'Measure' calls for a unit of measurement" and in English verse that means counting "beats, or syllables, or feet constructed of definite and recurrent combinations of stressed and unstressed syllables" (344). Stephens notes that without any concrete way of measuring Williams' variable foot, "to speak of the variable foot as a unit of measurement is like speaking of an elastic inch" (344). But, while it has "no metrical basis," Stephens does believe that the variable foot has a "definable identity" (344); that is, "a line is a line because, relative to neighboring lines, it contains that which makes it in its own right a unit of the attention" (344 emphasis in original). Stephens continues by arguing that the "unit of attention" of each line is "as precisely various in its way as are the shadings of accent that play about the abstract norm of the metrical foot" (344); as a result, Williams' variable foot is not at all at odds with traditional poetic metrics but is somehow a new way of looking at the "formal structure of the sentence" (344).

Stephens may be correct in his assessment of the "traditional" elements of the variable foot, but he is not cognizant of the way Williams' use of this unique measure strikes a reader's eye. The form of the poem on the page appears random or improvised, as if the poet was merely weaving the lines back-and-forth with no understanding of the way poems should "look"—each line stretching out from or near the left margin. And while that is not too inaccurate an assumption, Williams is still concerned with the "formal
structure of the sentence." What the variable foot does is force a reader to read the lines of the poem in a different way by following the pattern of the arrangement of Williams' lines as they "step down" the page in sets of three from left to right and back again. The following lines from "Asphodel, That Greeny Flower" are a good example of how the variable foot works:

There had come to me
a challenge,
your dear self,

mortal as I was,
the lily's throat
to the hummingbird!

Endless wealth,
I thought,
hold out its arms to me. (313)

The visual effect of the poem on the reader is greater than it would be on a listener; the conventional poetic line is broken and a reader has to decide for himself or herself where to pause and where to read one line as part of another longer phrase.

Without any conventional line breaks the poems Williams wrote in variable foot have a decidedly improvisational feeling. Though it came late in his life, Williams only used his variable measure from 1952 to 1955, specifically in the collections The Desert Music and Journey To Love (Mariani, New World 679).

Closely linked to Williams' experiments with the variable foot is his interest in poetic language. Just as he felt that conventional poetic forms needed to be challenged,
so to did he feel that the very language of poetry needed to be updated. Thus, throughout his career Williams championed the necessity of using common speech in poetry.

For Williams there was no difference between common speech and poetry. In "Writer's Prologue to a Play in Verse" Williams writes

Would it disturb you if I said you have no other speech than poetry? You, yourself, I mean. There is no other language for it than the poem -- falsified by the critics until you think it's something else (60)

And it is in his use of common speech, or what he thought of as a uniquely American idiom especially suited for American poetry, that Williams most obviously influences poets such as Robert Creeley. This is not to say that Williams' language is purely colloquial; rather, as Denise Levertov notes, "Williams' poems, God knows, are not written in 'the speech of Polish mothers': but he demonstrated that the poem could (and in some sense must) encompass that speech" (354).

Creeley understands Williams' use of common speech in the same manner. In a letter to Linda Wagner, Creeley noted that Williams' "poetic vocabulary" is not so much colloquial as it is an "'echo' [of] a 'spoken' sense of sequence rather than a 'literary one'" (as quoted by Wagner 303). Creeley understands that Williams is not attempting to slavishly replicate common speech; rather, he is intent on capturing "echoes" of the rhythms of common speech. The rhythms of speech will carry whatever words a poet chooses to use. Thus, Williams can sound like Polish mothers without
necessarily copying their vocabulary word for word, phrase for phrase.

Creeley’s interpretation of Williams’s use of language was shaped by the way in which the younger poet read *The Wedge*, published in 1944. Both the poems and Williams’ introduction to the volume influenced Creeley, for they gave him not only a model for his early poetry but also a new set of poetic principles that was much different than those in acceptance at the time (Mariani, "Fire" 173-174).

In his introduction to *The Wedge* Williams writes that a poet’s main task "may be picking out of an essential detail for memory, something to be set aside for further study, a sort of shorthand of emotional significances for later reference" (53-54). That also sounds like a pretty good definition of much of Creeley’s own work. Williams continues by explaining what he feels is the purpose of a poem. He writes:

> Prose may carry a load of ill-defined matter like a ship. But poetry is a machine which drives it, pruned to a perfect economy. As in all machines its movement is intrinsic, undulant, a physical more than a literary character. In a poem this movement is distinguished in each case by the character of the speech from which it arises.

(55, emphasis added)

Williams links what he considers the uniquely physical character of a poem--the poem as machine--with the speech
represented in the poetic language with which the poet chooses to "build" the poem. This statement predates, and is echoed by, Creeley's oft-quoted statement from Olson's "Projective Verse" essay that "Form is never more than an extension of content" (Olson 148). Or, as Williams understands the poetic process, a poet "... takes words as he finds them interrelated around him and composes them ... into an intense expression of his perceptions and ardors that they may constitute a revelation in the speech that he uses" (54).

"Catastrophic Birth," the second poem in The Wedge, underscores Williams' understanding of the use of poetic speech in a poem. The revelation in speech which Williams refers to is born out of an upheaval of the poet's language:

Fury and counter fury! The volcano!
Stand firm, unbending. The chemistry shifts. The retort does not fracture.
The change reveals--change.
The revelation is compact-- compact of regathered fury. (55)

The regathered fury--the essential character of speech--must be presented in as pure a form as possible; it is not acceptable to Williams for the poet to water his or her language down with artificially florid diction. About a decade earlier, Williams had written notes for an essay he never published in which he argued that existing poetic forms were not useful forms for "an emerging vernacular"; instead, the poet must realize that "each new language ... [is] compelled to create its own special forms" (Mariani,
New World 364). And "the special forms" of American English were not going to be found in the sonnet or any other preexisting fixed poetic form.
Robert Creeley: Given to Writing Jazz

In his essay "I'm given to write poems," Creeley recalls that "the most significant encounter for me as a young man trying to write was that found in the work of William Carlos Williams" (496). Of special importance to Creeley was the way in which Williams used language: "He engaged language," writes Creeley, "at a level both familiar and active to my own senses, and made of his poems an intensively emotional perception, however evident his intelligence" (497). In a poem from The Wedge entitled "The Poem," Williams explains the involvement of the poet's emotions in making poetry out of "things" (as in "no ideas but in things"): of poetry Williams writes, "It's all in / the sound. / A song" (74). And while the poem is "Seldom a song" (74) in the conventional sense of what a song is, it does need to embody the essential characteristic of song: rhythm. Williams writes

... It should

be a song--made of
particulars, wasps,
a gentian--something
immediate, open

scissors, a lady's
eyes--waking
centrifugal, centripetal (74)

"The Poem" echoes much of what Williams wrote in his introduction to The Wedge, an introduction that Creeley remembered taking as "absolute credo" when he was a young man ("Form" 591). "It isn't what [the poet] says that counts as
"it's what he makes, with such intensity of perception that it lives with an intrinsic movement of its own to verify its authenticity" (54). Creeley takes the "intensity of perception" as he finds it in Williams and develops it in his own poems—especially the poems in For Love—and mixed with the rhythmic jazz inflections that Creeley heard around him, intense perception becomes a trademark of his early work.

The 1950s were as good a time as any for a young poet to start a new career. The old masters Williams and Pound were around (although in varying degrees of lucidity) and carried on correspondences with just about anyone who had questions for them. Around this time, while he was raising pigeons in New Hampshire, Creeley took it upon himself to contact both Williams and Pound, not only in order to ask them for material that he could print in a small magazine, but also to humbly present himself to two of the giants of contemporary poetry. The magazine seems to have been little more than a pretense, though, as Creeley admits:

I started writing to Pound and Williams apropos a magazine I was involved in. That's how I got up my courage to write them. I would have been shy of writing them just to say, "I think you're a great man," or something. . . . I wanted to have business that gave me reason. (Contexts 141)

Both Williams and Pound responded, although, as Creeley notes, Pound tended to send reading lists and "injunctions--
'You do this. You do that. Read this. Read that’” (Contexts 141). Eventually Creeley wrote to Williams and asked him to "describe his own 'program' of writing" (Mariani, "Fire" 176). Creeley contacted Williams and Pound because of a need for "direction" or advice from established poets. "What was needed," writes Paul Mariani, "was a gathering of forces, a direction, both theoretical justification for the new poetry (yet to be written) and a way of creating a new vortex, a new center" ("Fire" 176).

At around the same time Creeley was beginning his correspondence with Williams, a young Miles Davis was turning to Charlie Parker for direction while he developed his own music that, like Creeley’s poetry, would go beyond the territory his mentor had helped chart (Welding). Youth movements in both poetry and jazz were developing as the result of a core of young novices seeking the advice and support of older artists who shared similar theories. For Creeley, Williams became such an "advice giver"; he also became an important influence.

On March 3, 1950, In response to Creeley's request for an explanation of his writing program, Williams sent a version of the acceptance speech he later gave for receiving the National Book Award for Paterson Book 3 (Mariani 176). As Williams explained to Creeley, his main goal or moral was to cleanse the English language of archaic poetic forms and syntax in order to create clearer and more modern poetry:

My own (moral) program can be chiefly stated. I
send it for what it may be worth to you: To write badly is an offence to the state since the government can never be more than the government of the words. . . . If the language is distorted crime flourishes. . . . Bad art is then that which does not serve in the continual service of cleansing the language of all fixations upon dead, stinking dead, usages of the past. Sanitation and hygiene or sanitation that we may have hygienic writing.

("William Carlos Williams to Robert Creeley" 140)

Creeley took Williams' poetics and at least partially applied it to his own work.

What is much clearer, however, is the influence that Williams' lyrics of the late forties had on Creeley's early poetry (Mariani, "Fire" 174). Creeley found hints of jazz in the "line breaks and word breaks, . . . shifts from a rising to a falling measure and back again" in The Wedge and other lyrics that Williams published in the late 1940s and 50s (Mariani, "Fire" 174). After reading Williams, then, Creeley became aware of the possibility of adapting jazz rhythms to poetry.

In "A Wicker Basket" from For Love, Creeley uses line lengths and fluctuating rhythms to shape a poem with a decidedly jazz feel. Each stanza is an individual piece or movement in the larger framework of the poem and is designed to embody a specific musical quality. As Creeley explains, the individual "lines and stanzas indicate . . . rhythmic
intention" (Contexts 76). The effect is similar to the constant changes in bebop rhythm: the poem never gets into a predictable sing-song rhythm; instead, Creeley focuses attention on the movement of each individual line as it relates to the lines above and below it in a manner akin to Williams' use of the variable foot. But whereas the musical effect of Williams' measure is more the result of the physical layout of the lines of the poem on the page, Creeley's measure achieves its jazz feel through manipulation of rising and falling meters, enjambment, and line endings.

The first stanza is written in falling rhythm. The rhythm seems to turn around on itself because Creeley enjamb the second line and makes it three syllables longer than the first:

Comes the time when it's later
and onto your table the headwaiter
puts the bill, and very soon after
rings out the sound of lively laughter--

The rhythm set in the first line is broken in three steps: first, Creeley causes the rhythm to "stumble" by using the two syllable preposition onto instead of the one syllable on; next, headwaiter, although it rhymes with later at the end of the first line, contains an extra unstressed syllable that forces a pause in the reading of the line; this pause is awkward, though, for the first three words of the third line make up a phrase that is grammatically necessary to modify "what" the headwaiter put on the table. But that awkwardness is precisely the effect Creeley intends. The falling meter
of the word "headwaiter" and the enjambment of the third line create a rhythmic stress within the opening phrase of the poem which essentially breaks the stanza into two distinct lyric phrases and forces the reader to read through the rhythmic change in order to decipher meaning. A reader is thus brought to a halt three times in the first phrase of the poem alone and at the end of each line throughout the rest of the poem. (That's a lot of stopping and starting). In an interview with Linda Wagner, Creeley commented on his insistence for pausing after lines and between phrases. "I tend to pause after each line, a slight pause. . . . Those terminal endings give me a way of both syncopating and indicating a rhythmic measure" (Contexts 77).

These pauses allow Creeley to place a special emphasis on each line of the poem. As Creeley explains, "I think of lines as something akin to the bar in music--they state the rhythmic modality. They indicate what the base rhythm of the poem is, hopefully to be" (Contexts 77). The "base rhythm" of Creeley's poems can change from line to line because for Creeley line endings "are pivots. They give me a way to ground and/or to locate a rhythmic base" (Elliott 58). This demands careful reading and listening to the rhythmic movement of not only the poem but the stanza, quatrain, couplet, line and phrase. Like jazz music, the constant rhythmic shifts of Creeley's poetry--shifts which often sound dissonant to someone not used to them--discourage passive listeners or readers. While interviewing Creeley, David
Elliott noted that in Creeley's poetry "The syntax of a sentence goes over the pauses, but the pauses are creating . . . more Monk-like [Thelonious Monk, jazz pianist and composer] rhythmic units" (59). Creeley responded by saying . . . the beat is paradoxically more determining than the syntax, and that's what I love, the fact that the rhythm becomes an expressiveness equal to that of the statement. (59)

In essence, the rhythm of a Creeley poem is arguably equal to the statement, for it indicates how to read and interpret what is stated in the poem.

The middle three stanzas of "A Wicker Basket" are made of shorter, riff-like lines. In place of a short series of notes that constitute a repetitive melodic phrase, Creeley uses short phrases of mostly one or two syllable words. This also results in a markedly different rhythm than the poem begins with. In the middle stanzas the rhythm seems more hurried or excited:

So that's you, man,  
or me. I make it as I can,  
I pick it up, I go  
faster than they know--

Out the door, the street like a night,  
any night, and no one in sight,  
but then, well, there she is,  
old friend Liz--

And she opens the door of her cadillac,  
I step in back,  
and we're gone.  
She turns me on-- (161)

These staccato-like short phrases, made up almost exclusively of one and two syllable words (cadillac is the only
exception), act as a bridge between the longer and more rhythmically syncopated lines of the initial and final stanzas of the poem. Each stanza of "A Wicker Basket," then, is intended to be an individual rhythmic movement, a piece of a larger musical/poetic composition.

In an interview with Allen Ginsberg, Creeley tells of how when he first began to sit down and write poetry he was self-conscious about writing, and that he used jazz music more for aural camouflage than anything else:

I started in a context where I was embarrassed. I didn't want to bother anybody. I didn't want, you know, like, don't mind me, but just go right ahead with what you're doing, with your serious business, with your serious preoccupation. ... I didn't want to call attention to myself. (Contexts 31)

Rather than using jazz as a tool to directly inspire him, Creeley would instead play records to "create a context in which there was a residuum of noise, constantly present, so that my own noise wouldn't be intrusive" (Contexts 31). What Creeley calls the "rhythmic insistence" of the music found its way into his writing, not because he first decided "I shall write a poem (or two) that reflects jazz," but because it was part of his experience. As Charlie Parker would say, Creeley first "lived" around the music before he was ready to let it come "out of his horn." In the same Ginsberg interview Creeley remembered listening to jazz while he worked on his poetry:
I used to play records all the time. . . . I'd put on the records that I then much valued, as Charlie Parker and what not--but just because that rhythmic insistence, I think, kept pushing me, I kept hearing it. (Contexts 31)

The close attention Creeley pays to rhythm means that sometimes the syntax of his poems is distorted so as to be almost incomprehensible. Almost is the operative word. In a very amusing poem entitled "The Man," the "rhythmic insistence" of the poem takes precedence over the literal or even metaphorical statements readers usually expect:

He hie fie finger
speak in simple sound
feels much better
lying down.

He toes is broken
all he foot go
rotten
now. He look

he hurt bad, see
danger all around he
no see before
come down on him. (222)

Clearly, this is a poem in which, as Creeley told Elliott when discussing poetry in general, "It's the rhythm . . . that's really interesting" (65). The language of "The Man" sounds like some sort of comic pidgin English: "He hie fie finger"; "all he foot go / rotten," etc. Still, the language is not that clouded, the syntax not so convoluted that a reader is prevented from understanding the poem. Nonetheless, the rhythm is the key to untangling the syntax
and grammar of the poem. For just as the rhythm of music allows a listener to understand the emotional content of a piece of music, so to does the rhythm of the line allow the reader to understand the emotional content of the poem.

In "The Man" the rhythm is syncopated and slightly different in each quatrain. Like the syntax and grammar, the rhythm of the poem is awkward and halting--made so in large part by the line breaks--and indicates that the man who "hie fie finger" is confused or stumbling around in a drunken stupor. In a manner similar to that of Williams' variable foot, the rhythm of Creeley's lines focuses attention on the cumulative emotional content of the words of the poem and thus develops not only the subject but the larger emotional sense of the poem.

While writing about his poem "The Whip," Creeley explains that he uses rhythm in a manner similar to the way jazz musicians such as Charlie Parker, Miles Davis, Thelonious Monk or Milt Jackson do. "That is, the beat is used to delay, detail, prompt, define the content of the statement or, more aptly, the emotional field of the statement" ("Form" 591). Furthermore, Creeley considers the function of the quatrain parallel to that of the paragraph in that "it is both a semantic measure and a rhythmic measure. It's the full unit of the latter" (Contexts 77). If constructed carefully, the rhythm of the poem ought to be able to help a reader understand what the poem is about. As Creeley explains,
I remember Pound in a letter one time saying, "Verse consists of a constant and a variant." The quatrain for me is the constant. The variant then can occur in the line, but the base rhythm also has a constant which the quatrain in its totality indicates. . . . This, then allows all the variability of what could be both said and indicated as rhythmic measure. (Contexts 77)

If a poet is careful with rhythm, as Creeley is, then there is more opportunity for improvising with the words of the poem; in fact, the syncopated jazz rhythms Creeley uses in poems such as "The Man" demand improvisation.

While Creeley certainly found much that influenced him in the poetry of Williams and the bebop of the late 1940s and 50s, the work of Charles Olson also had a profound influence on the young poet. Like Williams' work, Olson's helped Creeley find a way of using jazz techniques in his own poetry. Olson's 1950 essay, "Projective Verse," is essentially an argument for a poetry closer to the natural rhythms of the human voice. In this way it is strikingly similar to what Williams was calling for in the introduction to The Wedge and his other critical pieces of the 40s and 50s. Like Williams' search for an "American Idiom" Olson's argument in "Projective Verse" is one that Creeley was sympathetic to since his poetry, through the use and influence of jazz rhythms, is aiming precisely for the same thing--poetry that can be adapted to the unique rhythms of
the human voice.

Poetry, writes Olson, is made for the ear but is spoken by the voice: "the ear, which once had the burden of memory," needed rhyme and regular cadence in order to help with memorization (155). Rather than continuing to write conventionally rhymed poetry, Olson calls for attention to be given to "the smallest particle of all, the syllable. It . . . rules and holds together the lines, the larger forms of a poem" (149). The line will then come closer to having the qualities of the human voice. "And the line comes," states Olson, "(I swear it) from the breath, from the breathing of the man who writes, at the moment that he writes" (150).

But in order for poetry to get back to the human voice, the writing of poetry must be approached in a different way, argues Olson. He writes that printed poetry has removed "verse from its producer and its reproducer, the voice, a removal by one, by two removes from its place of origin and its destination" (153). The typewriter, as a "machine" is the tool the poet can use to "indicate exactly the breath, the pauses, the suspensions even of syllables, the juxtapositions even of parts of phrases which he intends" (154). Olson believes that the poet can "without the convention of rime and meter . . . indicate how he would want any reader . . . to voice his work" and notes that the typewriter does for the poet what "the stave and the bar" do for musicians (154).
Williams was very taken by what he read in Olson’s “Projective Verse” essay; so much so that he quoted lengthy sections of it in his Autobiography (Mariani, "Fire" 177). Williams’ development of the variable foot occurs at about the same time as Olson’s essay, and the variable foot seems to carry echoes of Olson’s notion that the typewriter allows the poet to indicate where pauses should occur or where lines should be read straight through. But this is not to mistake cause for coincidence. Williams’ experiments with typography and line arrangement are indeed Williams’ own; it is simply a case where Williams found in Olson someone who seemed to be thinking about the possibility of poetic form in mutual terms. What is clearly evident, though, is the influence both Williams and Olson had on some of Creeley’s early poetry.

Early in his career Creeley was often self-consciously imitative of Williams and Olson. Still, even when he is most obviously imitating his mentors Creeley manages to avoid strict mimicry; instead, there is an underlying sense of playfulness, of homage mixed with parody. More importantly there is a sense of improvisation in such pieces. Creeley reveals an ability to hear what his mentors are doing and adapt their style in order to make a poem uniquely his own. An example of this is an odd little piece entitled "Hi There!" from The Charm. In "Hi There!" Creeley uses typewriter topography a la’ Olson’s remarks in "Projective Verse" in order to capture the varied rhythms and
improvisational sense inherent in human speech. In addition, the arrangement of the lines seems to be a take on Williams’ variable foot, for like Williams’ poems in Journey to Love or The Desert Music, "Hi There!" "steps" down the page by moving back and forth from left to right:

Look, love

*****

(oo)

springs

from out the

*****

(oo)

() surface of a pedestrian

fact, a new

*****

(oo)

()

(---) day. (61)

The asterisks and parenthetical "asides" suggest pregnant pauses and unarticulated expressions. The poem as it appears on the page becomes its own score in much the same manner as music is transcribed onto a staff. The poem can be read in a variety of ways by varying the lengths of the pauses between the individual words or by literally "filling in the blanks"—the places where symbols or parenthesis but no words appear—between the lines. The poem demands that a reader have some sense of the possibility of improvisation so familiar to jazz when reading the poem.

Indeed, the improvisational element in "Hi There!" is no accident. In the essay entitled "Form" Creeley writes, "I used to listen to Parker’s endless variations on ‘I Got Rhythm’ and all the various times in which he’d play it.
"What fascinated me," Creeley continues, "was that he'd write silences as actively as sounds, which of course they were. Just so in poetry" (591). "Hi There!" is filled with the active silences Creeley was hearing in Charlie Parker's music; in fact, the poem is built around those silences. Creeley writes a simple "melody," which is contained in the poem and reads, "Look, love / springs / from out the / surface of a pedestrian / fact, a new / day." In between are the spaces of active silences in which the reader can improvise as he or she pleases. Like "The Man," "Hi There!" is a playful piece intended to be amusing and, at the same time, annoying to anyone who is unwilling to allow this sort of typographic or syntactic improvisation in poetry. But like any jazz style, and bebop especially, the technique in "Hi There!" would become cliched and tiresome if repeated for too long. Given the lack of poems similar to "Hi There!" in Creeley's canon, it seems that this is an experiment, an occasional piece that Creeley used to try out some improvisational techniques he had gleaned from Williams, Olson and bebop.

Creeley continues "writing silences" in later stages of his career. In a "P--", a poem from Later published in 1979, the seven stanzas that make up the poem are sharply separated from each other by four lines and a black "dot" about three times the size of a period. As in "Hi There!" the spaces between lines and stanzas in "P--" are left for the reader to fill:
Swim
on her
as in
an ocean

Think out
of it--
be here.

Creeley's use of the silences between lines or stanzas is
more sophisticated than in "Hi There!" In "P--" the spaces
Creeley leaves are not overwhelmed by typographical symbols.
A reader is not caught up in the attempt to decipher the
significance of "*****" or "(oo)," as when he or she reads
"Hi There!"; rather, he or she pauses for a moment over the
lines preceding the spaces. In that sense the spaces between
lines and stanzas really are silences in the proper sense
because there is nothing to distract a reader's eye while it
moves on to the next group of words. Granted, there are
"dots," but they act as placeholders so that the spaces
between stanzas are not so completely empty as to be
distracting. In this way Creeley creates a form that the
words of the poem can be built around. It is the reader,
then, on whom the responsibility of making the silences
"active" falls: he or she must decide how to interpret the
individual phrases and stanzas of the poem.

Interpretation of the poem is no small act when one
considers that many of the lines are not complete sentences
or even thoughts, but are short descriptive phrases or single
words:
Hair's all around,
floats in flesh.

Eye's measure,
mouth's small discretion.

Smiles.

Through the active silences he orchestrates by manipulating the space between stanzas and lines, Creeley forces the reader to become involved in an improvisational reading of the poem. The improvisational reading of the poem occurs during the time the reader spends in the spaces between sections of the poem. It is in those spaces where, before continuing on with the rest of the poem, the reader attempts to understand what he or she has read prior to the pause.

The improvisation "P--" demands of the reader is a little different than that demanded by "Hi There!" In the earlier poem there is a certain amount of playfulness; indeed, the poem verges on, if it does not actually become, a parody of itself. This is not the case, however, in "P--" where a reader must take the time to interpret the significance and consider the relationship of each word or phrase used by the speaker to describe the woman.
At the end of "P---", Creeley seems to discourage any one interpretation of the images in the poem. The speaker notes "Couldn't / do it / better. // Can walk / along" (58), and says in effect that using memory to re-create the lost image of a person or event can never match the original immediacy of seeing or witnessing the person or event. All memory produces is a series of loosely connected images that can be sorted out and combined in different patterns but never reworked into their original form.

There is more to Creeley's poetry than typographical improvisation, though. He has a fine sense and appreciation of the melody of the line, of the way words sound or "feel" as they are read aloud. In "Notes Apropos 'Free Verse'" Creeley writes, "For my own part I feel a rhythmic possibility, an inherent periodicity in the weights and durations of words, to occur in the first few words, or first lines, of what it is I am writing" (494). But whatever the rhythm of the opening lines of a poem may be, a poet is always free to go where he or she pleases—once again, to improvise. Creeley draws this notion from Charlie Parker:

Listening to him play, I found he lengthened the experience of time, or shortened it, gained a very subtle experience of "weight," all by some decision made within the context of what was called 'improvisation'—but what I should rather call the experience of possibility within the limits of his materials (sounds and durations) and their
Creeley’s approach to improvisation is dictated by his materials, which are of course words. But the manner in which he improvises with his materials is dependent on how they are put together to form the lines of the poem. For example: any group of words no matter how arranged will have some sort of rhythm, and most poets know that by changing the pattern of those words new rhythms are created. So once a poet writes the first line of a poem, he or she establishes the initial rhythm of the poem. This rhythm usually remains constant through the rest of the poem.

Creeley, however, has a penchant for beginning a poem with steady and melodic, prose-like lines before suddenly changing the rhythm. The opening lines of "The Immoral Proposition," for example, sound like an epigram: "If you never do anything for anyone else / you are spared the tragedy of human relations- // ships" (125). The two lines immediately following are almost rhythmically identical; however, a colon brings the poem to a halt and signals a change in rhythm:

If quietly and like another time there is the passage of an unexpected thing:

to look at it is more than it was. (125)

The changing rhythm is created by using the colon and breaking the concluding lines of the poem into shorter phrases. If read as complete, unbroken sentences it is evident that these lines share the same rhythm as the first
four lines of the poem. Once broken, though, the arrangement of the words of the lines is changed and the stress falls not on the sentence as a whole, but on the shorter phrases:

... God knows

nothing is competent nothing is
all there is. The unsure
egoist is not:
good for himself. (125)

Changing the manner in which the lines of the poem are read allows Creeley to alter what he calls the "weights and "durations" of the words of the poem. Actually there is little variation in the rhythm of the lines of the poem if they are put into sentence form--arranged horizontally instead of vertically. Breaking the lines focuses attention on the shorter phrases and diffuses the syntax of the sentences that make up the lines. More importantly, this has the added effect of slowing down the lines at the end of the poem which read "The unsure // egoist is not / good for himself," in order to stress their comic irony.

The key to understanding Creeley's poetry is to listen for the rhythms: finding the stresses, the line breaks, the intertwined relationship of words and phrases leads to a clearer sense of how the syntax of the poem is to be interpreted. The improvisational techniques Creeley uses actually provide his poems with a tight structure, for the rhythm of the poem, no matter how much it may vary from line to line or stanza to stanza, will eventually lead to an understanding of how he intends the poem to be read.
Spike Lee was most critical of what he considered director Clint Eastwood's overemphasis of Charlie Parker's heroin addiction in the biographical film "Bird." Lee felt that Parker's art, or at least his genius, was sacrificed for the sake of focusing on his drug habit; the result was that the film denigrated not only Parker's life but his music and black jazz musicians in general. While the stereotype of the heroin addicted, black-genius-jazz musician is tragically echoed in Parker's life, he did have time to make quite a bit of music. Throughout his career Parker "astonished other musicians with his tremendous fertility of melodic imagination, unprecedented mastery of the saxophone, and the dizzying pace with which he was able to improvise" (Gridley 144). Parker's music and his life "outside" of his music cannot be separated; indeed, the two weave a seamless (though admittedly messy) web, and are integral to any serious consideration of his art.

In "My Poetic Technique and the Humanization of the American Audience" Michael Harper remembers that as a boy on Sunday mornings he would ride the subway to 52nd Street in New York in order to see Charlie Parker. On one occasion, when he was with a group of friends, he actually met Parker. Harper writes that

One morning, just after 9 a.m., Bird came out a side door, his sax in a triply reinforced Macy's
shopping bag: "Boy, how come you not in church?" he asked, but I was quick, told him I'd been and took up his horn case, the handles raggedly stringed. He took us, three or four kids all under ten, to the subway station; changed a quarter, gave us each a nickel, told us not to sneak on the train going home, and disappeared uptown. (30)

Immediately following this recollection, Harper writes, "I have images of musicians at their best and when they were down and out; their playing never faltered" (30). While Harper focuses intently on the "down and out" Bird in his poem "'Bird Lives': Charles Parker," he makes no distinction between Parker's music and the events of his troubled, short life. Harper combines Parker's artistry with his biography in order to paint a complete portrait of his life; in turn, the poem itself is influenced by jazz improvisation, rhythms, and the nebulous "feel" of jazz music.

The prosody of "'Bird Lives': Charles Parker" is a clear attempt to achieve in verse what Parker does in his music. For example, the first three lines of the poem are written in falling, yet steady, rhythm and sound like short, musical phrases:

Last on legs, last on sax,
last in Indian wars, last on smack
Bird is specious, Bird is alive. (173)

But just as a jazz musician like Parker will change direction rhythmically in the middle of a phrase, so too does Harper change the rhythm of the poem: "horn, unplayable, before,
after, / right now: it's heroin time" (173). Harper breaks
the rhythm by creating a spondee out of the second syllable
in before and the first syllable in after, and focuses the
reader on the staccato-like final four lines of the stanza:

smack, in the melody a trip;
smack, in the Mississippi;
smack, in the drug merchant trap;
smack, in St. Louis, Missouri. (173)

The prosody of the first stanza resembles the changing
rhythms and improvisation inherent to jazz.

Parallel to the prosody of the poem is its central
figure, "Bird." Charlie Parker's life was marked by struggles
with drugs, depression, racism and the music industry of the
40s and 50s. Amiri Baraka writes in Blues People that "the
music of Parker et al., was called in Downbeat magazine 'ill
advised fanaticism'" (235), and organized harassment of jazz
musicians by the police was widespread--especially in New
York where musicians had to have cabaret cards if they wished
to play legally in clubs. Parker's struggles with his
personal life and musical and societal authorities have led
some to romanticize his experiences. But, Harper warns in
"'Bird Lives': Charles Parker," no one particular view of the
man can ever be complete or correct: there is always another
(usually contradictory) side to Parker. After all, "Bird is
specious" Harper points out, not easily defined or labeled--
there is clearly going to be more to this Bird than hard
living, hard traveling, and fast times. There will also be
musicianship, artistry and creative genius.
Harper continues to flesh out his portrait of Parker in the second stanza. The memory is of Parker as the itinerant jazz musician, struggling through day-to-day life and clearly dying:

We knew you were through--
trying to get out of town,
unpaid bills, connections
unmet, unwanted, unasked, (173)

Yet the speaker notes that even though "Bird's in the last arc / of his own light" (173) he turns to music, not drugs, for solace. The speaker exhorts Parker to play, and he does, albeit through Harper and the riff-like phrase, "blow Bird!":

blow Bird!
And you did--
screaming, screaming, baby,
for life, after it, around it,
screaming for life, blow Bird! (173)

The phrases between the "blow Bird!" riffs gradually increase in speed and build up to a crescendo in the last line of the stanza. The "dash" and the commas break up the longer, line-length phrases into shorter one or two word phrases; each phrase, in turn, pushes the stanza to its climax. After seven of these tense, shorter phrases--beginning with "And you did" and ending with "around it"--the longer phrase, "screaming for life," expends the energy the stanza has been gradually building and completes the musical movement of this section of the poem.

Harper writes that while he was a student at the Writer's Workshop at the University of Iowa, he wrote a poem "dedicated to Miles Davis"; more importantly, though, he
wondered "How would it be to solo with that great tradition of the big bands honking you on? Could one do it in poetry?" ("My Poetic Technique" 29). In "'Bird Lives': Charles Parker" Harper does "solo" in the jazz tradition, for the three lines with which Harper begins the third stanza represent phrases from Parker's saxophone, and in turn allow Harper to illustrate through Parker the internal struggles the jazz musician spent his life trying to resolve:

   What is the meaning of music?
   What is the meaning of war?
   What is the meaning of oppression?
   Blow Bird! (173)

The short "blow Bird" phrases introduce and conclude the longer lines and indicate that the questions are not Harper's, but are in Parker's own "voice"; Harper lets Parker play his saxophone, so to speak, and narrate his own story. Harper is playing a duet with Parker, turning Bird's music into poetry and engaging in a poetic conversation with him based on the language of jazz. As Parker's phrasing fades out, Harper takes over and continues his own narration of Parker's life:

   ...Ripped up and down
   into the interior of life, the pain
   Bird, the embraceable you,
   how many brothers gone,
   smacked out (173)

Harper is painfully aware of the effects racism and drug abuse had on black musicians, and he chronicles in this section of the poem the effect they had on Parker. Sadly, racism and addiction helped turn Parker into an icon of both jazz-genius and jazz excess. And while many others fell
victim to the same forces Parker did, it is Parker who in the guise of "Bird" becomes larger-than-life, remembered on the one hand solely for his infamous demise, and on the other for his artistic genius.

Out of the desire to promote Parker's artistry, and at the same time explain how his art and life are an active resistance against racism, Harper takes into consideration both Parker's genius as a jazz innovator and his troubled personal life. Harper knows that despite his musical genius, Parker, as a black man, had to suffer under a grotesque caricature created out of "blues and racism" (173) that reduced him in the eyes of many people to

the hardest, longest penis
in the Mississippi urinal:
Blow Bird! (173)

Much of the suffering of the man who once noted "Civilization is a damned good thing, if somebody would try it" (Reisner 25), came from the attitude of the society he lived in. Again, though, the phrase "Blow Bird" signals the return of Parker as narrator of his life. Parker remembers himself as a jazz innovator and teacher who "Taught more musicians, then forgot, / space loose, fouling the melodies" (173). He recalls his youth in Kansas City where he first began to develop as a musician:

the marching songs, the fine white
geese from the plantations,
syrup in this pork barrel,
Kansas City, the even teeth
of the mafia, the big band. (174)

As Parker's voice or saxophone fades out, Harper returns:
Blow Bird! Inside out Charlie’s guts, Blow Bird! get yourself killed. (174)

From his life and art Parker drew not only the will to live but found what would eventually kill him, for by opening himself up, by allowing music to come out, Parker also made himself vulnerable to the evils that eventually beat him down. Writing of Parker's genius for improvisation, jazz scholar Mark C. Gridley notes "It was as though he had so much energy and enthusiasm that he could not contain himself" (144). Sadly, Harper suggests neither could Parker contain the anguish caused by racism or the drugs he took to cope with it, and this eventually lead to his death.

Parker's legacy has long influenced jazz. "Methods of improvisation devised by Parker were adopted by numerous saxophonists during the 1940s and 50s" (Gridley 146). And as late as the 1980s, "musicians frequently evaluated new players according to their ability to play bop," the jazz style Parker was instrumental in creating (Gridley 139). Thus, "'Bird Lives': Charles Parker" ends with Harper stressing Parker's importance to modern jazz as well as to African American culture. Parker was, Harper notes, "In the first wave, the musicians, / out there, alone, in the first wave" (174). Harper explains that as a jazz innovator Parker's influence is traceable to wherever his travels carried him for he always took his music with him:

everywhere you went, Massey Hall, Sweden, New Rochelle, Birdland, nameless bird, Blue Note, Carnegie, tuxedo junction, out of nowhere (174)
Parker seems to have come "out of nowhere," much as a biblical prophet would in order to spread the "word." But Parker's "word" is music and it is his music that provides for Harper an important "confirmation" of the importance of the innovative black jazz musician to his art and his significance to his culture. In the last three lines—of the poem Parker's life becomes "confirmation" ("Confirmation" is also the title of a composition of Parker's which he recorded in 1953) and he is reborn in the title phrase of the poem, "Bird Lives!": a phrase that the jazz critic Robert George Reisner remembers seeing scrawled on buildings and sidewalks after Parker's death (26):

confirmation, confirmation, confirmation: Bird Lives! Bird Lives! and you do: Dead-- (174)

Harper's use of jazz musicians as subjects for some of his poems is a reaction to the unfortunate fact that history has, until recently, largely forgotten or ignored the accomplishments of many black Americans. Harper remembers,

I did not see many voices from my own ancestors ably represented in our literature, and I wanted to do my part, to testify to their efforts and achievements, and the values implicit in the making of this country and its character. (Randall 17)

As a result Harper notes that "The icons of much of the heroism and resistance to oppression by Black Americans are implicit in all my work" (Randall 17). In "'Bird Lives': Charles Parker," Charlie Parker, the man, becomes Bird
the mythic figure, and Harper uses the Bird myth to symbolize the experience of countless unknown African Americans who, like Parker, suffered because of the color of their skin.

As is evident from "'Bird Lives': Charles Parker," Harper uses jazz as both subject matter and poetic technique. While a cursory glance through his first two volumes of poems, Dear John, Dear Coltrane, and History is Your Own Heartbeat, reveals Harper's reliance on jazz as a topical source for his poetry, close reading further reveals Harper's innate transference of jazz techniques and attitudes to poetry. In essence, Harper is a poet who writes jazz as well as about jazz.

In an interview with James Randall, Harper discussed how jazz has specifically influenced the manner in which he writes poetry; basically, Harper's poetic technique is influenced by the techniques of jazz musicians. He explains:

> What the great jazz musicians meant to me was the ability to improvise upon thematic texts and make them new; they didn't start with nothing. Composition is structuring and orchestrating, revealing the hidden texts implicit in human experience. (Randall 19)

"Corrected Review" is a good example of Harper's ability to integrate elements of jazz improvisation into the structure of a poem. Harper notes that "the form [of "Corrected Review"] is improvisation or open ended" (Jackson 185). Approaching a poem via improvisation allows Harper to treat
his subject in a way unique to himself. As Charlie Parker once said, "Music is your own experience, your thoughts, your wisdom--if you don't live it, it won't come out of your horn" (Morgenstern). Harper is applying a similar philosophy to "Corrected Review." By manipulating line length and syllable patterns, he is able to create a syncopated jazz rhythm:

From the source comes the imagery and language, compassion and complexity in the one achieved in the imagination conjured, admired in surrender and transcendence: where is the perfect man? (64)

By establishing no regular meter, Harper allows the reader to "improvise" from the text. The commas and colon give some hint of where pauses should be taken, but other than that inflection and stress is left to the reader. Harper takes more liberties with rhythm and meter in the last stanza of "Corrected Review," giving the poem a decidedly improvised feel:

Our mode is our jam session of tradition, past in this present moment articulated, blown through with endurance, an unreachin extended improvised love of past masters, instruments technically down: structured renderings of reality our final war with self; rhetoric/parlance arena-word-consciousness: morality: man to man man to god in a tree more ancient than eden. (65)

Harper explained that "Corrected Review" "is a black jazz man's improvisational world view, and the assumption is that what he takes and what he makes, in the specific, is kind of
accidental" (Jackson 185). As a poet and careful craftsman, Harper understands how to create specific rhythms in his poems; the improvisational feel is a product of his ability to blend his understanding of jazz music with poetry in order to deliberately create a jazz-based prosody.

If Harper's work is read closely, a reader will come to realize that Harper considers jazz more than a vehicle for his poetic technique. Jazz is the unwritten, metaphorical language of African Americans and of vital importance to their culture. In Harper's essay "My Poetic Technique and the Humanization of the American Audience," he remembers a conversation he had with a black taxi driver in South Africa. Harper writes that the taxi driver

... wanted to know where I came from and then he asked--"What language do you speak when the White people aren't around?" I said, "English," and he said, "No, no." What language did I speak when the White people weren't around? The second time he asked I changed my response to "American."

"Brother," he inquired, "when Blacks are among themselves, don't they speak jazz?" (32)

Perhaps the key to reading Harper's poetry is to understand that he is continually developing an improvisational poetic diction that allows him to "speak jazz." In "Nightmare Begins Responsibility," a poem about the death of an infant son, Harper uses a jazz-like improvisational technique similar to that of "Corrected Review." However, unlike
"Corrected Review" or even "'Bird Lives': Charles Parker," the subject matter of "Nightmare Begins Responsibility" is intensely personal; the language is also very dense. Harper condenses words and entire phrases by running them together in a manner similar to the rapid-fire notes in a Charlie Parker solo:

watch my gloved stickshifting gasolined hands
breathe boxcar-information-please infirmary tubes
distrusting white-pink mending paperthin
silkened end hairs, distrusting tubes
shrunken in his trunk-skincapped
shaved head, in thighs
distrusting-white-hands-picking-baboon-light (57)

The way in which Harper runs words and phrases together forces the reader to read the poem faster than he or she might wish. The lines pile up on one another and lead to a rather fragmented picture of the scene Harper is depicting: a hospital intensive-care unit for infants.

Harper improvises with language in order to create tightly condensed, image filled phrases. This has the effect of frustrating a reader’s understanding of the poem: the phrases come faster than the time it takes a reader to comprehend the various images. Toward the end of the poem these phrases become even tighter, even more compact and carry an increasingly "hurried" feel—as if the melody is now being played in double time:

his mother can only know that he has flown up into essential calm unseen corridor
going boxscarred home, mamaborn, sweetsonchild
gonedowntown into researchtestingwarehousebatteryacid
mama-son-done-gone/me telling her 'nother
train tonight, no music, no breathstroked
heartbeat in my infinite distrust of them: (57)
This hurried sense is precisely what Harper intends. In his interview with James Randall, Harper noted:

Blacks have always infused the language at large with elegance and with word invention as an improvisational attitude; I grew up making words, describing events, often hostile to me. (Randall 19)

The intensity of the experience in the infant intensive-care unit seems to dictate an equally intense poetic language. Through an improvisational sense influenced by jazz, Harper is able to manipulate the rhythms of the lines in order to give the poem a genuinely unique sense of the fear, anxiety, and despair a parent suffers over a dying child.

Likewise, the intensity of life and all its relevant emotions and events—love, hate, loss, sorrow, death—influenced the development of jazz and blues. Harper believes that jazz and blues are a way in which people can share experiences and respond to them as well; that is, the music has significance across the culture. While the poem "Nightmare Begins Responsibility" treats personal subject matter, Harper is consciously working within a framework that has greater cultural significance.

Harper's poetry always contains echoes of the African American cultural tradition. While his tradition is African American, for Harper and many other black writers the voice of that tradition is most clearly heard in music. In fact, "the notion that 'black musicians are years ahead' of black
writers... can be found among many writers well into the 1970s and among writers working in all the genres" (Lenz 281). So it is that when Harper uses jazz-like prosody to write about jazz themes he is writing about something much deeper than the music. "I think the most important thing having to do with thematic influences," Harper remarked in another interview, "is the need I have to connect my work with a tradition which I came out of and which I understood. And that tradition was the black musical tradition" (O'Brian 99).

The African American musical tradition is most notable in spirituals, work songs, catches, blues, jazz, Gospel, and especially in the past decade, rap; many of the important works of this musical tradition—especially in the spiritual and work song genres—were composed anonymously. In most cases there is simply no record of an individual who wrote the song, and the authorship of much of the music belongs, for all practical purposes, to the entire culture.

What is more important than authorship, though, is the role of music as a means of transmitting a communal African American culture and history. For music, writes Amiri Baraka, in his book entitled Blues People, is one of the few cultural ties to African heritage that African Americans have (16). This is largely, Baraka believes, because "Euro-American concepts" could not erase an art form as grounded in the fabric of African culture as music. For "Music, dance, religion, do not have artifacts as their end
products, so they were saved" (16). According to Baraka, the result was that "These nonmaterial aspects of the African’s culture were almost impossible to eradicate" (16).

Harper understands the importance of music to African American culture; in addition, he appreciates the contributions known and unknown innovators of black music made in the face of a hostile American society. "Black people in this country have been under a continuous assault," writes Harper, "and the response to that assault has a great deal to do with the vibrancy, not to mention the rigor, of the artistic expression" ("Jazz and Letters" 137).

Harper’s poem "Time for Tyner: Folksong" addresses the role jazz plays not only in the daily lives of people who listen to it, but in African American culture at large. "Time for Tyner: Folksong" is one of Harper’s more "conversational" poems. It begins with a sense of immediacy, as if the reader has just joined a conversation and, after being invited to sit down, is caught up on what he has missed: "The medley goes like this: / We sit in a bar in a draft / from a swinging door" (165). A few lines later the speaker notes that

an African instrument is not  
the piano; an African village  
is not the Both/And; an African  
waltz is not in 3/4. (165)

The speaker senses that the cultural heritage of African Americans is related to but not one in the same with traditional African culture. For example, African music is
something entirely different from western music—pianos, waltzes in 3/4 time. However, the passing of time and the distance from Africa have allowed African Americans to create a unique music that combines elements of African music and western music. Harper places elements of western and African music in counterpoint to each other in order to underline the fact that the jazz music the speaker hears Tyner playing in the bar is an amalgamation of influences that represent the history of a people: African influences that represent freedom and cultural identity; western influences that represent slavery and lost cultural identity. Thus, Tyner is important to the speaker not only for his skill as a jazz musician, but for the way in which his music connects African Americans to the cultural traditions of Africa:

It strikes me in his juice
is the love of melody;
he thumbs the solo piano
in a wickerchair blues
tripping a rung tune in its
scratching black keys (165)

Jazz music of the 1940s, 50s and 60s was an important voice of a people white society had no desire to hear from. Many of the key figures of the Black Arts Movement, which includes writers Harper must have read as a student, felt that Black literature was lagging far behind Black music as an innovative and socially active art (Lenz 281). In place of literary "heroes," writers such as Amiri Baraka turned to jazz musicians not only for guidance and inspiration, but also for an understanding of how blacks could make themselves heard amidst a hostile and uncaring society. The writers of
the Black Arts Movement, like Harper, understood that the "jazz musician is . . . the leader of rebellion against postwar conformity and the spiritual agent of the politically powerless" (Thomas 291). And it is because of the importance of jazz music as a voice of a people that the speaker is able to observe that

It is a political evening:
posters of Mingus and Trane,
recordings of Bud Powell,
Bird under false names,
the economy of Miles. (165)

Harper understands the political and spiritual nature of jazz music—most especially its role as the "voice" of African American culture. The musicians the speaker names are icons of jazz; they are heroes of a culture used to being pushed out of the way, disregarded or looked down upon. Thus, when the speaker hears John Coltrane ("Trane"), Miles Davis, Bird, Charles Mingus or Bud Powell play music, he hears not only great music, but music that says something about his life and is of tremendous spiritual importance to him. This is evident in the last stanza of the poem when the speaker begins to compose verse while the sounds of Tyner and thoughts of jazz are still fresh in his mind:

I take it in scratchpad
English in the waxed light
as his liner notes pucker
on our lips in this country
abiding and earless. (165)

When Harper writes poetry he is not hearing orchestral or chamber music, but like the speaker in "Time for Tyner: Folksong," he hears the sounds, rhythms and improvisations
of jazz music. Harper translates this music into poetry.

The epigraph to Harper's *Images of Kin* reveals a lot about the importance of jazz to Harper's life and art. "A friend told me / he'd risen above jazz," Harper explains. "I leave him there." Even when Harper does not reveal his jazz influences through the subjects of his poems, his prosody and improvisation with language do. Also, as Harper once noted, "We . . . have to remember that for the poet, the craftsman, there has to be some sort of design" (Jackson 185). Harper's poetic design is jazz; his "mode is his jam session" (to borrow a line from "Corrected Review"), the limits of which are determined only by his will to improvise with language. Understanding Harper is essentially a simple task: he is always listening, speaking and writing jazz.
Jazz-like prosody and poetic improvisation are essential elements in the poetry of William Carlos Williams, Robert Creeley and Michael S. Harper. Although not directly influenced by jazz, Williams' breaking of the poetic line prepared the way for the more obviously jazz-influenced poems of Creeley and Harper. In turn, the work of the two younger poets, with its emphasis on jazz-like rhythms and prosody, poetic improvisation, and the unique, syncopated patterns of common speech, ensures that jazz music will continue to be an influence (at the very least an indirect influence), on American poetry.
Works Cited


---, "William Carlos Williams to Robert Creeley."