

‘THE ACTIVITY OF EVIDENCE’ : ROBERT CREELEY’S NEW ZEALAND

Virginia Gow

The story has no time finally. Its shape, if form can so be thought of, is a sphere, an egg of obdurate kind. The only possible reason for its existence is that it has, in itself, the fact of reality and the pressure. There, in short, is its form – no matter how random and broken that will seem. The old assumptions of beginning and end – those very neat assertions – have fallen away completely in a place where the only actuality is life, the only end (never realized) death, and the only value, what love can manage.

It is impossible to think otherwise, or at least I have found it so. I begin where I can, and end when I see the whole thing returning. (Creeley, Preface to *The Gold Diggers*, first published on Mallorca [in 1954](#). *Collected Prose* 11)

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During his first visit to New Zealand [in 1976](#), the American poet Robert Creeley writes in Wellington:

I want to be a dog,
when I die –

a dog, a dog.

(*Hello: A Journal* 13)

I like this poem.

For one thing, 'I want to be a dog' is a constant reminder to me that words are carriers of sound and memory – largely because when I read 'I want to be a dog' I can't help but recall the time I misheard the lyrics for the Stone Roses song *I wanna be adored*.

'I want to be a dog' is also a bridge of sorts to Creeley's return visit to New Zealand almost twenty years later [in 1995](#), where he sets a loop track going on his experience of being (again) in this location:

Hence the dogs,

'The Dogs of Auckland,' who were there first walking along with their company, seemed specific to given streets, led the way, accustomed.

Nothing to do with sheep or herding, no presence other than one uncannily human, a scale kept the city particular and usefully in proportion.

(The Dogs of Auckland)

Or, in that same poem, narrowing in on the self in language:

Not "The Dogs" but The Dog of Auckland –

Le Chien d'Auckland, c'est moi!

(The Dogs of Auckland)

Perhaps coincidentally (though Creeley was aware of it), the poet William Carlos Williams also once wrote: 'I would rather sneak off and die like a sick dog than be a well known literary person in America – and no doubt I'll do it in the end.' (*In the American Grain* 217)

Which seems as good a place as any for me to begin.

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When a man walks down a street he walks it only now, whether the date be 1860, 1960, or so-called centuries ago. History is a literal story, the activity of evidence. (Creeley, *A Quick Graph* 128)

This essay tells a story of how Robert Creeley is involved with New Zealand, drawing particularly from archives and his own writing to uncover how he is involved with this place.

Before going there, however, I want to set the scene a little by briefly introducing Creeley's approach to poetry and the impact he had on New Zealand writers. Poet and artist Tony Green summarises this in his 2005 obituary for Creeley:

The importance of Bob Creeley for writers in New Zealand is inestimable – many who had their sense of writing changed forever by his poems in the 60s, by his readings in 1976, his teaching at Auckland University in 1995, and by many acts of generosity and friendship. (Green)

As is often the case when writers talk about the work of those they admire, when Robert Creeley introduces fellow poet and friend Charles Olson's *Selected Writings I*, his commentary lends equal understanding to his own poetic terms.

The poems themselves are, then, the issue of an engagement, of an impingement, a location that is constantly occurring. They are not a decision of forms more than such forms may be apprehended, literally gained, as possible in the actual writing. (*A Quick Graph* 177)

Here is one of Creeley's poems from 1969, for example, where the form literally comes into being through the activity of writing (and indeed, reading):

As real as thinking
wonders created
by the possibility –

forms. A period
at the end of a sentence
which

began *it was*
into a present,
a presence

saying
something
as it goes.

(Collected Poems I 379)

‘A Song’ (1952) is another poem where sounds in motion enact meaning (a flat rhyme produces monotony, repetition is the insistence of wanting), and lines open without end:

I had wanted a quiet testament
and I had wanted, among other things,
a song.

That was to be
of a like monotony.

(A grace
Simply. Very very quiet.

(Collected Poems I 112)

Putting it very generally, Robert Creeley’s writing is characterised by a distinct musicality, a conversational directness and an ear for everyday language; and a willingness and desire to be *open* to the possibilities of a given situation or stimulus, rather than being shut down by pre-determined forms or particular subject matter.

In New Zealand, writers who read Creeley and other American poets in the 1960s and early 1970s will respond strongly to such aesthetics of presence and openness.

Poet and editor Alistair Paterson observes, for example, that New Zealand writers have gained an acceptance that:

the only way in which their writing can be ‘new’ is in the exploitation of the one and only world that they know intimately and have full intellectual and emotional contact with – the world they live in, the here and the now. *(The New Poetry 36)*

Paterson also notes, on the brink of bringing Robert Creeley to New Zealand in 1976, that Creeley’s ‘open form’ poetics has been extensively imitated:

and in a few cases such as that of [Ian] Wedde, [Arthur] Baysting himself, Jan Kemp and occasionally Alan Brunton, [has] produced NZ poems which are an effective amalgam of traditional NZ poetry and the American. (Letter to Bruce Kirkland)

Younger than Paterson, Ian Wedde, Alan Brunton and Jan Kemp stand among the so-called 'young New Zealand poets' brought together in Arthur Baysting's 1973 anthology of the same name. According to Bill Manhire, this generation (mostly born after 1945) experienced an 'absolute transforming effect' from reading American poetry, 'partly because it made sense in the context of all those other American influences to which we were being exposed as a matter of course.' ('Breaking the Line')

Robert Creeley's attentive and often jazz-like measure, for example, is something that the young Manhire found specifically useful:

What I particularly liked [...] was the way he could get syncopated, musical effects by playing the pauses of his line endings against the more conventional cadences declared by the poems' syntax. I found the hesitant, delicate rhythmic system of his poems very attractive. ('Breaking the Line')

Other poets will find different points of connection in American verse.

As Manhire summarised it, American poetry made 'diversity and possibility available, and, in so doing, it freed poetry from the single line represented by the English tradition.' ('Breaking the Line')

*

It is in this sense that Olson has been given Gloucester, which I may note briefly is a city in Massachusetts, a seaport up the coast from Boston. But that is merely what it is for me, which is not the point – nor is it even interesting to think of what it is for Olson. It is *how Olson is involved with this place, that is interesting*, how it is that he is 'caught in Gloucester,' in 'The Librarian,' or in another context, quite otherwise. (Creeley, *A Quick Graph* 128)

Rather than re-tell the story of how New Zealand literature shifted direction in response to American poetics, my primary concern here is with Robert Creeley's New Zealand.

Few people are aware, for example, that the possibility of a New Zealand connection with Creeley first occurs [in 1954](#), long before the poet is physically present in this country or more widely read by New Zealand poets and writers.

Throughout much of his writing life, Creeley's preoccupation is with relationships – the 'howness' of how we relate to other people or to a locale, how we give recognition to the effect of that connection in language.

Typically, Creeley's response is an immediate one. 'I've always felt very, very edgy those few times when I have tried to gain a larger view,' he comments in the 1960s. 'I am given as a man to work with what is most intimate to me – these senses of relationship among people.' (*Contexts of Poetry* 97)

In Creeley's later writing, however, including the poems he writes in New Zealand [in 1976](#), he begins to double back on places that he has once experienced (France, Auckland, California), constantly drawing *the past* into the present.

The sea here's out
the window, old
switcher's house, vertical,
railroad blues, *lonesome*

whistle, etc. Can you
think of Yee's Cafe
in Needles, California
opposite the train

station – can you keep
it ever
together, old buddy, talking
to yourself again?
(*Hello: A Journal* 19)

This sense of history, or the past's place in the present, will continue into *The Dogs of Auckland* [in 1995](#) (Gander), where New Zealand and its poets in 1976 become an additional locale and company to 'be' in – not distant but actively *here*, where the writer is *now*, asking:

How to stay real in such echoes? How be, finally, anywhere the body's got to?

You were with friends, sir? Do you know their address...

(The Dogs of Auckland)

*

Or just keep on walking. Viz, click click clicking along. (Creeley, *Day Book of a Virtual Poet* 24)

Written specifically for reading in a hypermedia environment (that is, an environment which allows nonlinear access to related texts or images or sounds from a single reading), this essay arguably behaves similarly to Robert Creeley's poetry.

These hyperlinks:

[in 1954](#), or

[in 1976](#)

and [in 1995](#),

for example, like the dogs/words/places/echoes/openings that haunt Creeley's New Zealand works, help to tell a story of how he is involved with this country – one that requires a reader's interaction and activity to come into being.

With them, as electronic fiction writer Michael Joyce suggests, 'the text becomes a present tense palimpsest where what shines through are not past versions but potential, alternate views' (Joyce 3), as also in an early Creeley poem such as 'The Sea':

the wash, the plunge

down

(saying:

we will not become you, we

are the impenitents

(the tears

We declare

(Collected Poems I 30)

While Robert Creeley may not have drawn any correspondence between the electronic medium and his own poetics, he loved the ‘openness and “democracy” of the possibility’ (Spalding) that is the Internet’s reach and boundlessness.

Websites such as the State University of Buffalo’s Electronic Poetry Center (EPC) which Creeley founded with Charles Bernstein and Loss Glazier, and the New Zealand Electronic Poetry Centre (**nzepc**) which he was in active and generous support of, were the complete opposite of the ‘constricted and meager’ possibilities he had experienced in the mid-twentieth century. (Spalding)

Robert Creeley’s New Zealand, a comprehensive author page concerning Creeley’s connections with the country, was added to **nzepc** in 2002. Its resources are central to my essay but it is at the meagre mid-century that I wish to begin, [in 1954](#)

In 1954

You send me your poems,
I'll send you mine.

Things tend to [awaken](#)
Even through random communication.

Let us suddenly
proclaim spring. And jeer

at the others,
all the others.

I will send a picture too
if you will send me one of you.
(Creeley, 'The Conspiracy.' *For Love* 37)

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Continuing a tradition of leaving the country to live as expatriates in Europe was a common experience among young American writers in the early 1950s. As Kenneth Rexroth would note during the next decade:

One of the most interesting things about these young postwar poets is their decentralization (it has never been noticed that this is also true of the contemporary novelists). They grew up not only in independence of the capital – the literary marketplace – but far away from it and in deliberate antagonism to it. They couldn't very well do anything else. To this day few of them have been published in the respectable literary quarterlies. ('The New American Poetry')

Creeley's movement away from America was primarily a financial decision. He and his wife Ann were starting a family and had very little money. So they moved to the south of France (which didn't work out) and ended up in Bañalbufar on the Spanish island of Mallorca.

Much of Creeley's experience of Bañalbufar is recorded in his novel *The Island* (1963); his state of mind at the time is expressed in letters to other writers. But before *The Island* came a collection of short stories called *The Gold Diggers*, published by Creeley and Ann under their own imprint, The Divers Press, in 1954.

It is here, in *The Gold Diggers*, that New Zealand first appears on the outskirts of Creeley's printed imagination.

*

We had to have the dignity of our own statement. We had to have it in a form that would be available to other people. (Creeley, quoted in Edelberg 35)

Beginning 'A Death' from Creeley's *The Gold Diggers* is like sitting down next to someone in the middle of telling a personal anecdote:

Ahead of them the path went round the trees, and into a clearing of stones, which had rolled from the higher points of the hill to make a sort of flat and broken plateau above the sea. (*Collected Prose* 27)

Gradually you piece together who 'they' are: a woman, her son, her brother and his wife and their children. Indeed, the relations between these people and their circumstances is the primary concern of the story. To the extent that 'A Death' has a subject, that is it.

As in Creeley's 'projective' (or open form) poems such as 'I Know a Man,' a rapid juxtaposing movement from one perspective to the next forces you to be present *in* the story *alive* with the characters – there is no waiting on an explanation to come from elsewhere.

Did you see the boat, his wife said. She knew it was her brother's wife. She knew her own husband was dead. She saw the faces all in front of her, and if she cried out at them, she was still in love with everything. (*Collected Prose* 31)

The un-discussed death of the story's title is another 'displaced' person, a foreigner in an English-speaking country who:

sat in a chair in the yard which he had made. There was no car. The street was long, and at the end there was a tram-stop. People spoke English but he answered them, *no se*. He was a Greek with rings in his ears, and his hands were folded in his lap. (*Collected Prose* 29-30)

And earlier:

So they pitied her. What was it like, they thought. What ever could it be like, in the heathen country of New Zealand. (*Collected Prose* 28)

*

I know the early reference to NZ in Creeley – in *The Gold Diggers* – I read it when I was at high school in the 1960s and was amazed. (Murray Edmond)

That ‘eye’ (or is it I) for the words ‘New Zealand’ in texts by overseas writers is well known to New Zealanders. Some say it’s an inferiority complex: ‘We know deep down that we are only a little country, that no-one knows where we are, that we might slip off the edge of the globe and no-one will notice.’ (Phillips)

How did that New Zealand get there?

Biographer Ekbert Faas reveals that the characters of ‘A Death’ derive from a real experience Robert Creeley had on Mallorca in late 1953.

A novelist and war reporter named Godfrey Blunden, along with his French wife and their three kids as well as Blunden’s widowed sister-in-law and her son, had arrived in Banalfubar to look for a house. They had been sent there by Robert Graves. Finally there’d be a small writer’s colony. (Faas and Trombacco 138)

Godfrey Blunden (who informs the character James in ‘A Death’) was an expatriate and exiled Australian. He surfaces again in Creeley’s novel *The Island*.

So that's one possible explanation. A thin veil of disguise for the deliberate 'use' of another man's circumstance – or perhaps even stereotypical American confusion of the sort described by Mark Twain in *Following the Equator*, where Australia and New Zealand are joined in many an American's imagination by a bridge.

Several months before the arrival of Godfrey Blunden in Bañalbufar, however, Creeley had sent off a letter to the heathen country. That letter is held by the Alexander Turnbull Library in Wellington, and begins: 'Dear Mr Hoggard.'

*



The Divers Press

Bañalbufar • Mallorca • Spain

Rec. 24/4/53.

Ans. 9/5/53.

March 6, 1953

ARENA
P.O. Box 188
Te Aro, Wellington, N.Z.

Dear Mr. Hoggard:

I hope to start a quarterly broadsheet some-time this summer, under the auspices of the above press. The emphasis will be on poetry for the most part, and on younger writers, etc. Otherwise, there will be about a page and a half given to notes and short articles on related materials. To that end, I wonder if you would be kind enough to help me with some notes, perhaps, as to what is going on where you are, and what books, or what work, etc., seems to you worth attention.

The problem is always one of communication, and god knows we have little enough in the way of facilities. I hope the broadsheet can effect something, toward that end. I don't at all want to suggest this or that emphasis as proper - if a man has just written some monumental work on the cultivation of tomatoes, etc., and if you can prove it pertinent, etc., then very great indeed. Likewise, if there is work there you think ought to have more circulation, etc., I should also welcome the chance to look at it. The only possible suggestion would be, that room for any given article, and so on, will be limited - and so the greatest degree of condensation you can get short of literal incoherence, will be the best. If you can prove something by simply quoting, etc., then so much the better. Best of all are exact references (viz, to books by title, author, & publisher, etc.) wherever they are called for.

I hope it does interest you; in any case shall look for a letter whenever you can find the time. And all best luck with your own magazine.

Yours sincerely,

Robert Creeley

[Transcript: The Divers Press
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Yours sincerely,

Robert Creeley]

*

What was it like, they thought. What ever could it be like, in the heathen country of New Zealand.
(Creeley, *Collected Prose* 28)

The fact that Robert Creeley writes to Noel Hoggard, editor of the New Zealand little magazine *Arena*, doesn't surprise me. Writing to Canadian poet Irving Layton later that year, Creeley states his intention to produce:

an actual representation of what the hell there is, actually, in every country I can get into. I'm not interested in local criteria except as they may show some particularly dismal situation (worth the noting etc.), or be characters of a particular force in the writing from wherever etc. I want French, German, Italian work as well as 'American' – but I can do nothing if everyone insists, immediately, on the safety of the cocoon etc. (Faas and Reed 66)

Since coming across the letter, however, I have often wondered how Noel Hoggard answered on 9/5/53. *Nothing to report here in the heathen antipodean isles?* Or perhaps: *Bit of bickering going on about whether we should be looking inwards or outwards to find ourselves in our poetry. Jury still out on that one.*

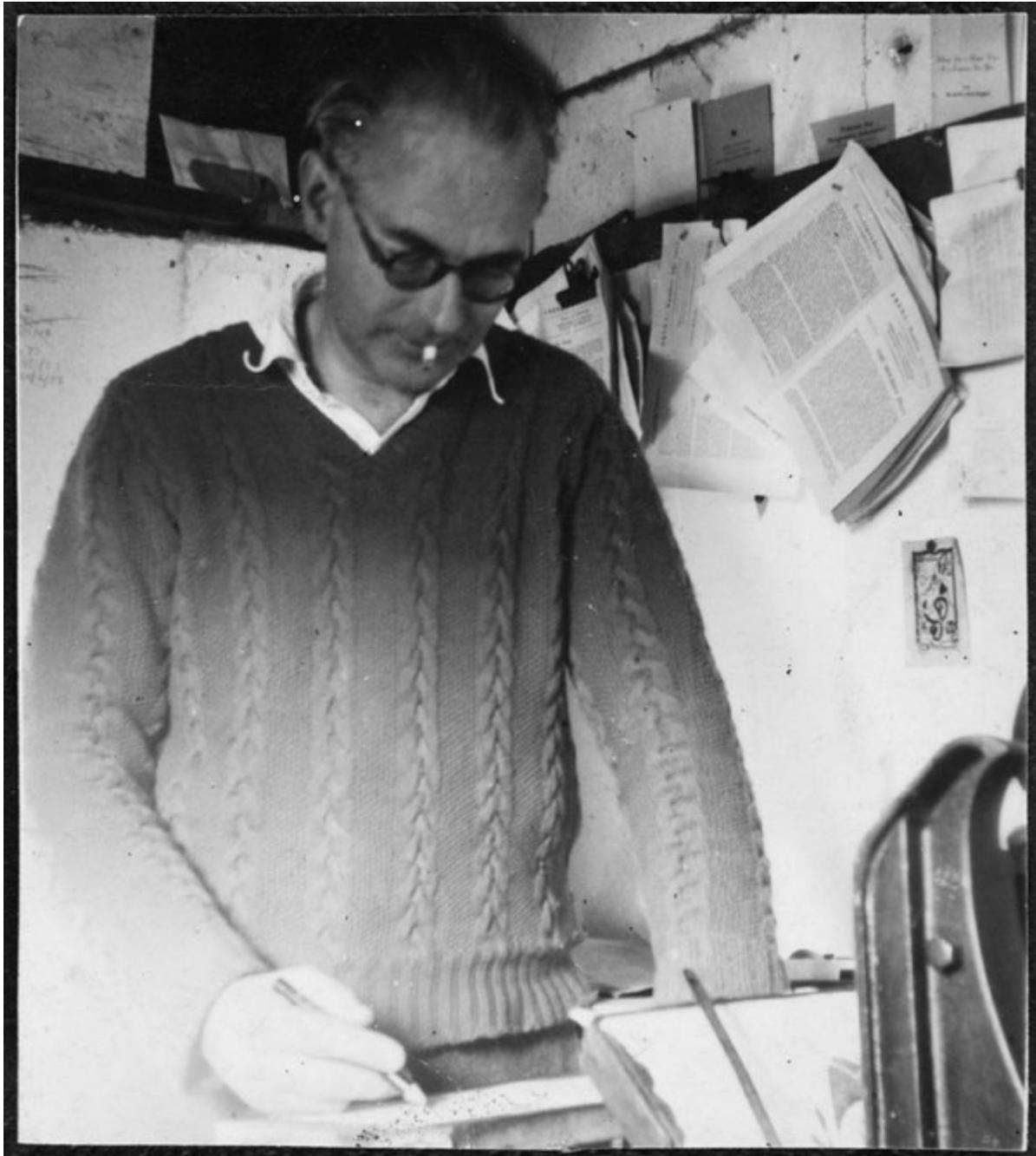
I'm pretty sure he would have noted his intention to run an advertisement in the next issue of *Arena* (No. 34, 1953) as follows:

Under the auspices of The Divers Press, Banalbufar, Mallorca (Spain) Robert Creeley, the American poet, proposes to publish a quarterly broadsheet with the emphasis on poetry and younger writers.

From what I can gather, the quarterly broadsheet is a mythical magazine intended to stimulate activity, which develops into *The Black Mountain Review*.

But this is speculation. There are no further exchanges between Creeley and Hoggard in the *Arena* archive.

*



Noel

Hoggard at Handcraft Press, 1950s. Noel Farr Hoggard Collection, Alexander Turnbull Library 75-184-13/19. Reproduced with permission of the Alexander Turnbull Library.

Here is Noel Hoggard working in his backyard shed above the sea in Pukerua Bay, north of Wellington city.

At least that's where I imagine he is.

Pinned to the wall behind him are page proofs from *Arena*, which moves through a variety of name changes in its lifetime and by 1950 (No. 24) has settled on *Arena: New Zealand International Quarterly*, ‘seeking closer contact with overseas countries through the medium of cultural association and mutual exchange of ideas in literature.’

As an ‘International Quarterly’ *Arena* is an outlet for up and coming New Zealand writers such as Louis Johnson and James K Baxter who are looking beyond more nationalist elders such as Allen Curnow and Charles Brasch. For a low budget operation, *Arena* also receives a surprising number of international subscriptions and magazines from overseas editors.

But it would be difficult to argue that *Arena* forged the way for a New Zealand avant garde.

New Zealand writer and fellow publisher Dennis McEldowney had doubts about Hoggard’s editorial practice:

ungratefully I concluded that his ability to pick future winners was not due to acute discernment so much as to lack of it. If everything went in something was bound to be of interest. [...] I began to wonder whether anyone received rejection slips from him. (McEldowney 32)

Nonetheless Hoggard’s network during a period of New Zealand’s ostensible ‘isolation’ from American literary influences is impressive. For a short moment New Zealand was on the inside of a conspiracy that would come to influence the emergence of a radical new poetry – one driven in part by American poet and editor Cid Corman.

*

Cid’s virtue. The tenacity. Damn well admirable. And the openness. What makes it possible to call him an idiot & remain in communication. More, I figure he’s got some head certainly; not like myself, to jump in (I put that smugly). Anyhow, he seems the man, if only because – there is the magazine, & damn well seems as tho it’s coming off (Creeley to Olson, 11 Feb 1951. Butterick 136)

Well before a new generation of New Zealand writers recognised American voices in their verse, Cid Corman is pushing Noel Hoggard to get *Arena*’s readers to attend to developments in American writing, as evidenced in a letter of 30 April 1953.

Rec. 7/5/53

Thursday eve, April 30th, 1953

Ans. 4/4/53 (Enmail)

Dear Noel,

Sorry not to have received 32, but grateful for 33. My interest is that of one keenly concerned about creative development the world around. ARENA paints a discouraging picture of writing in NZ. The work is generally thin and when, as in the instance of Louis Johnson, there is intelligence, it gets frittered away in a finger exercise of careful sounding sonnets. May's bit on the US scene is ridiculous, and pointless, it seems to me, to anyone not on the spot. Instead of lumping editors into "dogmatists" and "eclectics" or some undesignated purgatorial category, why doesn't he trouble to state what JGRansom represents (or KENYON REVIEW) or what I do (or ORIGIN), etc? There are dozens of mags in NY (little ones) that are totally different. What does it signify? Anything? Beyond a variety of furies? I am "friendly" with the editors of GOLDEN GOOSE, IMAGI, QRL, KENYON REVIEW, SEWANEE REVIEW, etc. So what? I would publish very little of what they do, if I had the chance (& sometimes I have had it). Any editor worth his salt in this effort (running a little mag) must have marked preferences. He should be hardheaded (even if it hurts the feelings of such your Miss Robinson). I don't mean that he must be blind or tone deaf. But the little mag, for me, as I write in May's TRACE (2), is avant-garde of our creative work. An editor must be "ready" for anything and everything, OPEN, but also highly critical and demanding. Sure, he is often, he is always, subjective--but not only subjectively. The point is that I, as you, do my best. And I take editing very seriously. And yet we will, we must, disagree. Etc. Again, then, to May to cut the generalities and conclusions and get into the exact specifics.

Let me include a poem here that you may care to print; it is more nearly what I would want poetry today to try for (I don't mean that wholly succeeds); it, at least, attempts a clean speech, with rhythm attached wholly to the emotional pitch and push, an honesty in language and structure. Or tell your readers to read William Carlos Williams Robert Creeley, if they want better examples.

NIGHT NOTE

The night is always outside
and I, in it, still close,
cold in it.

Morning
is such a far place: no birds
sing. A dog barks at me,
suddenly, frightens me. A car
goes by; I go
in, leaving the dog in the street
alone. And morning, I tell myself,
will come.

Print this, please, if only to demonstrate to your readers that there is an economy and clarity and cleanness possible to poetry, that is worth aiming at and finding. The goal varies with the poet and the poem. We speak a different language, but if we set it down accurately, a recognition becomes possible that there is a truth we can share, which is ourselves, each to each. For each.

My admiration always for your survival and your effort. Best wishes,

Sincerely
E. Stroman

If I can be of any service to you, please let us know -- I've sent you copies of ORIGIN as they've appeared (#5 8 x 9 are printed, but not on hand)

PK Page 2 Canada has moved to Australia - a very fine poet, watch out for her (Mrs. Sturib)

[Transcript:

rec. 9[?]/5/53. Ans . 4/6/53 (Airmail)

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Corman is an active American correspondent with *Arena*, which publishes notes such as his 'Focus on American Poetry,' introducing 'the major poets whom I consider worth being influenced by,' including Charles Olson. (*Arena* 31, 7)

A consummate international networker, Corman is one of the reasons Robert Creeley is now known by a wider audience of writers and readers.

As well as airing Creeley's first public reading in 1949 on his radio show 'This is poetry,' Corman also features Creeley's writing in 1951 in his little magazine *Origin*. In the same year *Arena*'s contributors are invited to submit material to *Origin* and be 'assured of international circulation and careful reading.' (*Arena* 29, 19)

Corman's intention is to establish *Origin* as a hub for avant-garde writers, bringing them 'into active relation with each other, not as a school or group, but for mutual stimulation, exchange of thoughts, community of feeling.' (*The Gist of Origin* 124)

The invitation comes a decade too soon for New Zealand writers, even though poets such as Kendrick Smithyman are receptive to American influences. (Paterson, *The New Poetry* 23)

*

From Cid Corman's *Origin*, and related sources of 'experimental' poetry such as *The Black Mountain Review*, editor Donald Allen will eventually draw Creeley and other American writers into the mainstream through his anthology *The New American Poetry 1945-1960*.

'In New Zealand and Australia poets seem to compete as to who was first to read it,' recalls Bill Manhire, noting at the same time that 'Creeley is probably the American poet who meant most to me when I was learning to write.' ('Breaking the Line')

In 1976 Manhire will interview Creeley in Wellington for the New Zealand literary journal *Islands*. Local writers have well and truly awakened to [American sounds](#).

In 1976



KC and the Sunshine Band, 'That's the way I like it.' <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ckP7gshWmNQ>

The first poem of *Hello*, Robert Creeley's 1976 travelogue, seems to breathe from the page. Sounds, and echoes of sounds, form a sort of ripple effect across time and space.

That's the way
(that's the way

I like it
(I like it
(*Hello*)

Out
in
out,
in.

Out to the syncopated sound of KC and the Sunshine Band's American disco hit 'That's the way (I like it)' then in. Openings, and within, openings again.

Clouds coming close
(*Hello: A Journal 1*)

The aeroplane from Auckland (and before that Fiji) touches down in Wellington, bringing Robert Creeley to visit New Zealand in person for the first time.

*

Did the young
couple come
only home
from London?

Where's the world
one wants.

(Hello: A Journal 2-3)

According to *The Oxford Companion to New Zealand Literature*, it is poet Alistair Paterson's sense of the 'increasing irrelevance of the British tradition' that inspires him to 'attempt bringing a leading contemporary American poet to New Zealand [...] to act as a catalyst for increasing the momentum of change in New Zealand writing and the ways in which New Zealand critics were thinking.' (Robinson and Wattie 117)

Building on Paterson's groundwork, the 'New Zealand Tour,' as it is called, is co-managed by the Queen Elizabeth II Arts Council and the New Zealand Student Arts Council. Financial support is also given by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, such that Creeley receives a fee and living allowance for the four weeks he is in New Zealand touring the university cities, from Dunedin in the south to Auckland in the north.

*

In contrast to the apparent undervaluing of American poetry in New Zealand's formal literary criticism, Creeley's New Zealand tour receives 'enormous coverage' (Kirkland) in the media, from television interviews through newspaper articles.

Helen Paske's write-up in the *Sunday Star Times* (28 March 1976) is one of the more sensitive responses:

You want to keep him here, because New Zealand is short on people like him, people who love to talk, people who know how to talk, people who will keep you up all night and send

you to bed with your throat burning from too many cigarettes, your mind reeling with an overload of information and ideas and passionate caring.

Others render a sense of Creeley's physical appearance. Peter Crisp in the student newspaper *Craccum* (5 April 1976):

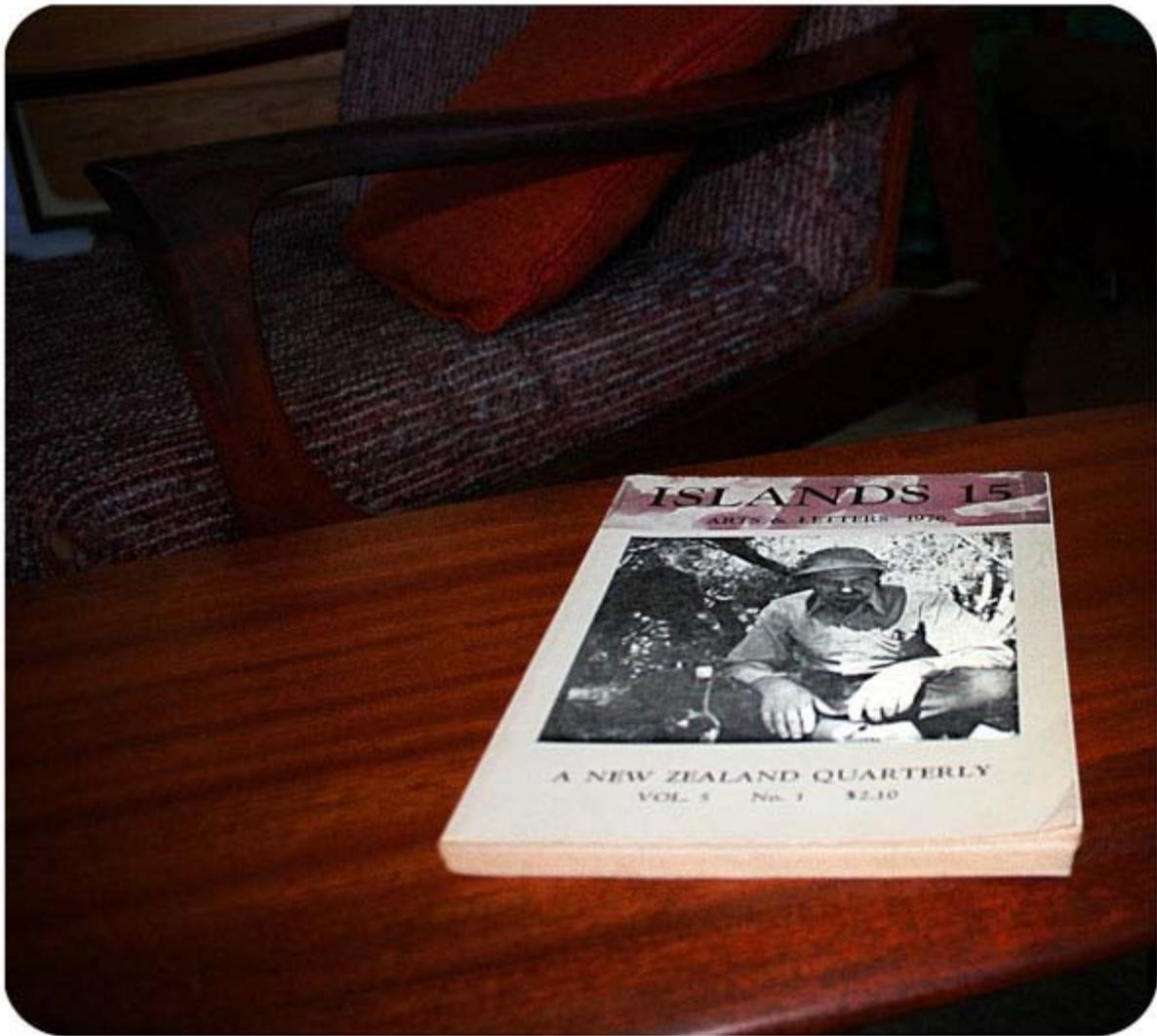
the hip clothes, worn with dandyish disregard [...] the long ankle-length blue coat, blue cloth shirt with mother-of-pearl buttons, the blue trousers and the floppy khaki hat.

I'm not there.
I'm really here,
sitting,
with my hat on.

It's a great day
in New Zealand
more or less.

(Hello: A Journal 9)

*



Robert Creeley on the cover of *Islands 15* (1976). Captioned by Russell Haley: 'American poet Robert Creeley and friend, at Hamilton.' The 'friend' is an Irish Setter, barely visible in the shadows. Image source: Ross Kettle.*

Despite the best efforts of those organising Creeley's 1976 visit, the tour is not without argument.

The archive reminds us, for instance, that an apparent confusion over arrangements will bring Auckland writer Russell Haley and writer and University of Auckland professor CK Stead into momentary opposition (see Stead).

The 'Parish Spleen' page of Red Mole's irreverent performance magazine *Spleen* has a field day:

The **Bob Creeley Tour** has stirred up a hornets' nest in Auckland. **Commissioner Haley (The Walled Garden)** is hosting **Bob (The Finger) Creeley** despite **Karl Stead's** offer of his luxurious West Coast Villa. Don Stead (**Quesada**) has organised a reading featuring

himself, **David Mitchell (Pipe Dreams in Ponsonby)**, **Allen Curnow (Collected Poems)**, and Creeley. Haley is trying to set up an alternative reading. (*Spleen 2*)

Nonetheless, Bruce Kirkland (principal organiser of the trip on behalf of the New Zealand Student Arts Council) will report the Creeley tour as ‘our most successful venture for some time. In the midst of the big tours (Split Enz and Sonny Terry/Brownie McGhee), it stood out as a wholly meaningful exercise.’

“Sonny Terry,
“Brownie McGhee”

in Dunedin (in
Dunedin
(*Hello: A Journal 5*)

Moving beyond the tension surrounding the Auckland reading, Kirkland continues: ‘The highlights of the tour were the university classes and the readings’ – a sentiment echoed by Bill Manhire, who remembers Creeley’s lecture at Victoria University of Wellington:

He held them for 50 minutes simply by talking about the importance of line-breaks. ‘Imagine,’ he said, ‘that I read a line, then go for a walk around the block ... then come back five minutes later and read the next line. Then I walk around the block again.’ (*IIML Newsletter*)

*

Walking
and talking.

Thinking
and drinking.
(*Hello 5*)

Alan Loney’s 1976 setting of *Hello* at Hawk Press (then located at Taylors Mistake near Christchurch) is in some respects the first published ‘reading’ of Creeley’s New Zealand poems.

In contrast to the New Directions edition (*Hello: A Journal*) which covers Creeley's extended tour of Southeast Asia in 1976, the Hawk Press book indents (lends time and space to) each alternate line in the first and last New Zealand poems. This is also in contrast to the manuscript of 'So There' now online at Creeley's author page at **nzepc**.

Loney describes his 'projective' approach to the composer's craft as follows: 'the design comes from my responses to the text, & not from any abstracted *ability to design* books, without reference to the actual content of the text.' (*Spleen* 5) In Creeley's words, famously quoted by Charles Olson in his 1950 manifesto 'Projective Verse': 'form is never more than an extension of content' – or later, 'form is what happens.' (Lammon 63)

Hello is writing on the move and in the tradition of Creeley's 'In London,' an earlier travel sequence in which 'three dots indicate that that was the end of a day's accumulation, and the single dots most usually indicate division in the writing as it's happening, as I was sitting down to do it.' (Edelberg 143)

*



Kees Sprengers, 'Hamilton Hotel.' Chartwell Collection, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tamaki, 1981.

Acc no: C1994/1/499. Reproduced with permission of the artist.

*

Is there any change in Robert Creeley's style or poetics as a result of visiting New Zealand in 1976?

Creeley notes in the introduction to *Hello* that he knew ‘intuitively, a time had come in myself for change. I don’t mean simply clothes, or houses, or even cities or countries or habits. I mean, all of it – whatever it ever is or can be.’

Step out into
space. Good
morning.
(*Hello: A Journal* 1)

The poems look like their predecessors. They also sound similar, and they attend to the particularity of local words and accents: ‘to make that present, and actual for other[s], is not an embarrassment, but love,’ as Creeley put it in ‘A Note on the Local.’ (*Collected Prose* 480)

Even if
again home
no roam
(at the inn)

Dunedin
(*Hello: A Journal* 16)

However, a shift begins somewhere here towards a greater place for memory and the historical passage of time in a poetry otherwise actively seeking to locate the self in the present. (Gander)

It is no secret that much of the poetry Creeley writes during the New Zealand tour is to the soundtrack *Breaking up is hard to do*, as a relationship of almost twenty years with his second wife, Bobbie, comes to an end.

No doubt the shift in mind could have occurred anywhere, but the ‘giant step, as far from what’s known as one can manage’ (*Hello*) happens to be to New Zealand.

Robert Creeley is not simply ‘here’ in New Zealand in *Hello*, but also consciously where he *has been* and *will no longer be*. In Hamilton (New Zealand), for example, he is haunted by long-ago memories of the south of France:

here in Hamilton –

[years and years ago](#)

the house, in France,

called *Pavillion des Magnolias*,

where we lived and Charlotte

was born, and time's gone

so fast –

(*Hello: A Journal* 17-18)

or:

Will you be dust,

reading this?

Will you be sad

when I'm gone.

(*Hello: A Journal* 14)

In such situations, relationships with other people become paramount.

If, in no glib way you've traveled you know that some needs are common [...] you need, in no overbearing sense, you need people, not to tell you you're great, but at least to recognize that you're *there* ...that you are now, whether they like it or dislike it – they react in endless ways – but at least you're acknowledged as being present. You're *here*. (Clark and Creeley 88)

*

So the next day he and I are having a classic lunch and drinking beer in a woeful place down in the city, which is a small one, and Margot comes in, and so we're all having lunch and she's very bored. So she calls up Penelope and says, 'Why don't you come over, these guys are just talking about America or something. Just come keep me company.' So Penelope comes over, and that's it, we've been together ever since. (Cunningham and Creeley 21)

Maybe that's what this essay really is. A love story.

For a poet whose writing comes so much from an embodied personal experience, Robert Creeley's marriage to Penelope Highton, a New Zealander twenty five years younger than himself, cannot go without mention.

And I wondered ... Was I simply trying to be younger by marrying someone younger? And I recognized paradoxically that the marriage let me be not 'older' but let me be as old as I am in age let me be *my* age. (Spanos and Creeley 32)

Ron Silliman suggests, for example, that Creeley's later work is 'easier going & the quest isn't so much to change poetry – Creeley had already accomplished that – as it was to always stay attentive to the immanence of daily life.' (Silliman)

In other words, Robert Creeley's poetry begins to settle down and to focus more and more on the commonplace – which he describes as 'an attempt – in mind, at least – to bring feeling into the common reference of a commonly experienced world.' (Clark and Creeley 84)

In 'After,' published in 1979, for example:

I'll not write again
things a young man
thinks, not the words
of that feeling.

There is no world
except felt, no
one there but
must be here also
(*Collected Poems II* 104)

Or, 'for Pen':

I want the world
I did always,
small pieces
and clear acknowledgements.

[...]

But to have it
be echo, feeling
that was years ago –
now my hands are

wrinkled and my hair
goes grey – seems
ugly burden
and mistake of it.

So sing this
weather, passing,
grey and blue
together, rain and sun.

(Collected Poems II 105)

If nothing else, the meeting of Robert Creeley and Penelope Highton changes the details of his travel itinerary. He does not board Flight 410 for Christchurch from Dunedin at 7 pm, to arrive at 7.45 pm. Instead, Penelope drives him there.

Hello: A Journal, February 29-May, 1976 will be dedicated, simply, ‘for Pen.’

Moving on. Mr. Ocean,
Mr. Sky's
got the biggest blue eyes
in creation –

[*here comes the sun!*](#)

While we can,
let's do it, let's
have fun.

(Hello)

In 1995

Don't think of it, just remember? Just then there was a gorgeous

light on the street there, where I was standing, waiting
for the #005 bus at the end of Queen Street, just there on Customs,

West – dazzling sun, through rain. “George is/gorgeous/
George is...” So it begins.

(The Dogs of Auckland)

*

How needs one say it? A tracking of the earth in time? A place? Olson loved John Smith's curious phrase, 'History is the memory of time.' (Creeley, *A Quick Graph* 188)

Robert Creeley visits New Zealand as a Fulbright Fellow in 1995 and teaches May-July in the winter term at the University of Auckland.

During these months he will write *The Dogs of Auckland*, a long piece (or arrangement of several small pieces) that continues to articulate his interest in *how* to 'be anywhere the body's got to' (*The Dogs of Auckland*), this time with an additional circumstance of re-arrival and return.

Curious, coming again here,
where I hadn't known where I was ever,
(The Dogs of Auckland)

*

For Creeley, 'being here' at the same time as 'having been here' (whether minutes or twenty years ago) is an often uncanny, even gothic, experience.

The Dogs of Auckland is full of internal echo and rhyme, each repetition and variation a reminder that, in some basic and fundamental way, everything connects: here, or the street, or dogs, the bus, rain, a house, light, sun, a body, company, small, down, up, sky, pattern, ocean, edge.

At the same time there is an ongoing resonance of some original sound, reminding us of what it means 'to rap' and truly 'build out of sound' as Charles Olson once put it, 'the wall of a city' (Olson

19): 'Forward disposition, a Christian [...] I'd have listened [...] into the dustbin. [...] So it begins.'
(*The Dogs of Auckland*)

Even more interesting are the subtle intrusions from past presences – not distant, but simply here. Listening to Creeley read *the zero zero five bus* out loud, for example, brings an older American presence to Auckland's 'Queen Street, just there on Customs // West – dazzling sun, through rain.' Behind Creeley I hear William Carlos Williams:

The Great Figure

Among the rain
and lights
I saw the figure **5**
in gold
on a red
fire truck
moving
tense
unheeded
to gong clangs
siren howls
and wheels rumbling
through the dark city
(*Collected Earlier Poems* 230)

Or again, in *The Dogs of Auckland*'s 'dazzling sun, through rain' comes Creeley's balancing 'foursquare' rhythm (*Collected Prose* 494): 'George is/gorgeous/ // George is...' And behind it:

Da. Da. Da da.
Where is the song.
What's wrong
with life

ever.
(*Hello*)

This is the opening of 'So There,' the final poem of *Hello* (in the New Zealand edition). It was written in Auckland 'Almost twenty years ago.' (*The Dogs of Auckland*) Russell Haley recorded his time with Creeley on that part of the 1976 tour:

We were playing *Abbey Road* on Wednesday afternoon, the first day at our house in Auckland, and we were playing it to give a sense of how we felt after Jean's near-drowning accident years ago and how, in the weeks after this, we had almost worn the record out. You capture these memories with a sound or a scent and that is the impeccable logic, internal, personal, the only way it can have any meaning. (Haley)

'George is/gorgeous' references a local radio station, George FM. George is also Governor Sir George Grey, the statue (if you look) in Albert Park, en route from Queen Street to the University of Auckland campus:

There is Queen Victoria still,
and not far from her the statue of a man. Sit down, sit down.
(*The Dogs of Auckland*)

*

In 'Nothing New,' a note written for Alistair Paterson's *Poetry New Zealand* during Creeley's 1995 New Zealand visit, the poet alludes to the opening scene of Federico Fellini's 1960 film *La Dolce Vita*, which begins with the camera following (and often sharing the vantage point of) a huge statue of Christ being airlifted across Rome to the Vatican.



Still from *La Dolce Vita*, Federico Fellini, 1960. Image source:
<http://oblations.blogspot.com/2007/12/frederic-buechner-face-in-sky.html>

Down below, Creeley notes, people are 'sunning on the roofs.' They 'look up, waving,' 'all becoming smaller and smaller as the helicopter lifts.' ('Nothing New')

– as in comes the crew of *Black Magic*

with the America's Cup, in their yellow slickers, the cars moving down
Queen Street, the crowd there waiting some half million –

in the same dazzling light in which I see tiny, seemingly dancing figures
at the roof's edge of the large building back of the square, looking down.
(*The Dogs of Auckland*)



Peter Blake during the America's Cup Victory Parade, Queen Street, 1995.

Image source: <http://www.athlete.com>.

Is this how a life lived appears as one gets older and moves further along? A fading vision or gradual zoom out of an accumulated existence down on the ground, where we are (together) eking out 'the city of the earth' that is history? (Olson 19)

If it is, I don't think it's where Robert Creeley wants it to be. Rather the question of how to remain 'in body,' acknowledged and acknowledging others in 'a commonly experienced world' remains key. (Clark and Creeley 84) 'It's a basic company we've come to':

Not "The Dogs" but The Dog of Auckland –

Le Chien d'Auckland, c'est moi!

(*The Dogs of Auckland*)

*

Goodbye

Now I recognize
it was always me
like a camera
set to expose

itself to a picture
or a pipe
through which the water
might run

or a chicken
dead for dinner
or a plan
inside the head

of a dead man.
Nothing so wrong
when one considered
how it all began.

It was Zukofsky's
*Born very young into a world
already very old...*

The century was well along

when I came in
and now that it's ending,
I realize it won't
be long.

But couldn't it all have been
a little nicer,
as my mother'd say. Did it
have to kill everything in sight,

did right always have to be so wrong?
I know this body is impatient.
I know I constitute only a meager voice and mind.
Yet I loved, I love.

I want no sentimentality.
I want no more than home.

(*Collected Poems II* 494. First published in *Poetry New Zealand* 11 [1995])

*

Creeley read from *The Dogs of Auckland* at Café Alba in Lorne St, Auckland, mid-way through his return visit to New Zealand. Excerpts from a video of the occasion, shot by film student Dan Salmon, are on Creeley's author page at **nzepe**.

As so often in conversation, Creeley opens his Alba reading with a story; a sketch of the different sounds the same words make when American voices say them, when New Zealand listeners hear them.

Eventually he arrives at an explanation of sorts for the title of the poem: 'The Dogs of Auckland, just as a sound, is an immensely attractive phrase to my habits of speech.'

When the reading is completed, with its recursively open last line ('Yours was the kind accommodation, / the unobtrusive company, or else the simple valediction of a look'), one of the echoes I hear is John Donne's 'A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning':

Such wilt thou be to me, who must,
Like th' other foot, obliquely run;
Thy firmness makes my circle just,
And makes me end where I begun.

Somewhere between Creeley's reading of the poem-in-progress at Café Alba and the words that appear in print, however, *The Dogs of Auckland* changes direction. From retrospection (nostalgia) to projection; another beginning.

Here is a transcription of Creeley in situ, reading from the manuscript score and giving measure to the words in the air (my emphasis):

Just then there was a gorgeous

light on the street there where I was standing, waiting
for the #005 bus at the end of Queen Street, just there on Customs

West – dazzling sun, through rain. ‘George is/gorgeous/
George is...’ So it *began*

Here comes the sun (there came the sun, just then) and with it the rhythmic insistence of an encoded sound.

But here is the poem as it appears in print on the page, and on **nzepc** where we are reading now:

Don't think of it, just remember? Just then there was a gorgeous

light on the street there, where I was standing, waiting
for the #005 bus at the end of Queen Street, just there on Customs

West – dazzling sun, through rain. ‘George is/gorgeous/
George is...’ So it [begins](#)

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