

Ben Freidlander on Larry Eigner

American Poets Since World War II: Sixth Series. Ed. Joseph Mark Conte. *Dictionary of Literary Biography Vol. 193*. Detroit: Gale Research, 1998. From *Literature Resource Center*.

WRITINGS BY THE AUTHOR:

BOOKS

- *From the Sustaining Air* (Palma de Mallorca: Divers Press, 1953; enlarged edition, Eugene, Oreg.: Toad Press, 1967; republished with original contents, Oakland, Cal.: Coincidence Press, 1988).
- *Look at the Park* (Swampscott, Mass.: Privately printed, 1958).
- *On My Eyes: Poems*, photographs by Harry Callahan, introduction by Denise Levertov (Highlands, N.C.: Jargon Press, 1960).
- *Six Poems* (Portland, Oreg.: Wine Press, 1967).
- *Another Time in Fragments* (London: Fulcrum Press, 1967).
- *The- / Towards Autumn* (Los Angeles: Black Sparrow Press, 1967).
- *Air: The Trees*, illustrated by Bobbie Creeley (Los Angeles: Black Sparrow Press, 1968).
- *The Breath of Once Live Things: In the Field with Poe* (Los Angeles: Black Sparrow Press, 1968).
- *A Line That May Be Cut* (London: Circle Press, 1968).
- *Valleys, Branches* (London: Big Venus, 1969).
- *Flat and Round* (Brooklyn, N.Y.: Pierrepont Press, 1969).
- *Circuits: A Microbook* (Quebec: Athanor Books, 1971).
- *Selected Poems*, edited by Samuel Charters and Andrea Wyatt (Berkeley: Oyez, 1972).
- *Looks Like Nothing, The Shadow Through Air: Poems*, relief blocks by Ronald King (Guildford, Surrey, U.K.: Circle Press, 1972).
- *Words Touching Ground Under* (Belmont, Mass.: Hellric Publications, Pyramid Pamphlet no. 3, 1972).
- *What You Hear* (London: Edible Magazine, 1972).
- *Shape, Shadow, Elements Move* (Los Angeles: Black Sparrow Press, 1973).
- *Things Stirring Together or Far Away* (Los Angeles: Black Sparrow Press, 1974).
- *Anything on Its Side* (New Rochelle, N.Y.: Elizabeth Press, 1974); republished in *What Is Inside, What Is Outside?: O One / An Anthology*, edited by Leslie Scalapino (Oakland, Cal.: O Books, 1988).
- *My God the Proverbial: 42 Poems & 2 Prose Pieces* (Berkeley: L Publications, 1975).
- *Suddenly It Gets Light and Dark in the Street: Poems 1961-1974* (Winchester, U.K.: Green Horse Press, 1975).
- *The Music Variety* (Newton, Mass.: Roxbury Poetry Enterprises, 1976).
- *The World and Its Streets, Places* (Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow Press, 1977).
- *Watching How or Why* (New Rochelle, N.Y.: Elizabeth Press, 1977).
- *Cloud, Invisible Air* (Rhinebeck, N.Y.: Station Hill, 1978).
- *Heat Simmers Cold &* (Paris: Orange Export Ltd., 1978).
- *Flagpole Riding* (Alverstoke, Hampshire, U.K.: B. Hemensley, 1978).
- *Country Harbor Quiet Act Around: Selected Prose*, introduction by Douglas Woolf, edited by Barrett Watten (Berkeley: This Press, 1978).
- *Time, Details, Of a Tree* (New Rochelle: Elizabeth Press, 1979).
- *Lined up Bulk Senses* (Providence, R.I.: Burning Deck, 1979).

- *Now There's a Morning, Hulk of the Sky* (New Rochelle, N.Y.: Elizabeth Press, 1981).
- *Earth Birds: Forty-Six Poems Written Between May 1964 and June 1972* (Guildford, Surrey, U.K.: Circle Press, 1981).
- *Waters/Places/A Time*, edited by Robert Grenier (Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow Press, 1983).
- *Areas Lights Heights: Writings 1954-1989*, edited by Benjamin Friedlander (New York: Roof Books, 1989).
- *Cloudy All Right, tel-let* (Charleston, Ill.), no. 5 (1990).
- *A Count of Some Things* (Oakland, Cal.: Score Publications, 1991).
- *Windows Walls Yard Ways (Lines Squares Paths Worlds Backwards Sight)*, edited by Grenier (Santa Rosa, Cal.: Black Sparrow Press, 1994).
- *Readiness Enough Depends On*, edited by Grenier (Los Angeles: Sun & Moon Press, 1998).

SELECTED PERIODICAL PUBLICATIONS-- UNCOLLECTED

- "Murder Talk: The Reception" (a play), *Duende*, no. 6 (1964): n. pag..
- "[Letter to the Editors]," *El Corno Emplumado*, no. 13 (January 1965): 183.
- "Come to Some Thing?" (a play), *Acts*, no. 2 (June 1983): n. pag.

LETTERS

- "Obscenity, Civilization, Literature & Forests" (a letter to Louis Dudek), *Delta*, no. 10 (January-March 1960): 19.
- "[Letter to LeRoi Jones]," *Yugen*, no. 7 (1961): 44-48.
- "Dear J . . . , L . . . , . . . , . . . ," *Mile High Underground*, 1 (Summer 1967): 2.
- "[Letter to the Editor]," *La-Bas*, no. 6 (March 1977): n. pag..
- "[Letter to Marcia Lawther]," *Tamarind* (August 1982): n. pag..
- *Larry Eigner Letters (to Joseph Guglielmi and Claude Royet-Journoud)*, edited by Robert Kocik and Joseph Simas (Paris: Moving Letters Press, 1987).
- "Letters [to Douglas Blazek] (Selected by Benjamin Friedlander)," *Revista Canaria de Estudios Ingleses*, no. 18 (April 1989): 11-18.

BIOGRAPHICAL ESSAY:

Larry Eigner is associated with the Black Mountain Poets of the 1950s, and his work was included under that heading in the landmark 1960 anthology *The New American Poetry*, edited by Donald M. Allen. More recently Eigner served as an influence on the Language Poets, with whom he had been in conversation since the early 1970s. Formally, Eigner's poetry marks an important development in the use of line and page introduced by E. E. Cummings and other Modernists in the 1920s, carried forward in the later work of Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams. The *shape* of Eigner's poetry is one of the most distinctive features of his work. His abandonment of the left margin and subsequent break from a phraseology determined by normative habits of sentence construction led the way to a similar development in the poetry of Charles Olson, Paul Blackburn, Robert Duncan, and many others. These formal aspects of the poem are always subordinate, however, to the particularity of perception which quickens Eigner's language and gives meaning to the form. The poem, for Eigner, is above all a mode of apprehending reality, a means of engaging with the world. As Cid Corman wrote in "*Another Time in Fragments* (Eigner)":

In a way what is *most* startling, at least to me, is the sanity of his vision, the straightness of it, which *may* be straitness. As if the strictness in this poetry were in the engrossment of the poet and that engrossment existential in the extreme.

Eigner's poetics, which emphasize the exploratory possibilities of language, have inspired an equally fruitful exchange with the experimental writers of a subsequent generation. Poet and critic Ron Silliman paid tribute to this exchange by dedicating his 1986 anthology *In the American Tree* to Eigner. Silliman's introduction especially remarks on Eigner's "rigorous and honest practice." Eigner's response to this anthology--offered in a letter to Carroll F. Terrell and eventually published in a book of Eigner's criticism, *Areas Lights Heights: Writings 1954-1989* (1989)--sums up the poet's interests nicely:

Hm, maybe this "language" poetry is centered on thinking--the descendant or else the parent of speech?--rather than speech itself. Putting it up my alley. Thinking that gets man from one thing to the next. And realization, recognition or real awareness of things, may not be a different kettle of fish, much.

Lawrence Joel Eigner was born 6 August 1926 in Lynn, Massachusetts, the eldest of three sons. Shoe City (as Lynn was then known) lay one town over from the family residence in Swampscott, where Eigner was to live until the age of fifty-one, moving west shortly after his father's death to settle near a brother in Berkeley, California. A forceps injury sustained at birth developed into cerebral palsy, marking the poet's life from the beginning as what one poem calls "a solid wall to eternity." Eigner describes this injury and its related difficulties in many fictional and autobiographical prose pieces. An error in measurement led to complications; Eigner's head was too large for his mother to deliver. The mistake was caught only after it was too late to perform a caesarian. Until cryosurgery froze Eigner's left side at age thirty-five, the poet was a spastic, a condition to which Eigner attributes his "exacerbated" curiosity. As he says in his short statement "Not Forever Serious," "in order to relax at all I *had* to keep my attention away from myself, *had* to seek a home, coziness in the world."

The particularity of Eigner's relation to language and to his environment plays a prominent role in his mature work. Both parents, for instance, came from immigrant families, and Yiddish (or "brochen English," as Eigner quotes his grandmother as saying), often spoken at the dinner table, led to a fascination with unusual or hybrid locutions. Because Eigner grew up in the 1930s, a necessary thrift became second nature, finding its ultimate poetic expression in a general disdain for wasted words. (Eigner's prophetic environmentalism--evident in many poems and in such essays as "Integration Interchange"--shares the same source.) Early memories include visits to the seashore and excursions to Boston in the family's Model T; the mangled remains left by a hurricane also left an impression, as did the wide expanse of trees surrounding his neighborhood. Eigner writes of these trees, which hid the sea from view: "pretty remote in the understanding was how they weren't infinite in their number and indestructible."

Eigner recorded this detail in "What a Time Distance," a prose piece included with his *Selected Poems* (1972). Here Eigner also describes the rigors of physical therapy, which seem to have been the most difficult aspect of his childhood:

exercise on matted tables with the therapist trying to work your fingers to touch their tips, open and close to a tune "this little piggy went to market," bend your knees separately and together, and ankles. . . . Then trying to walk, to let go, mother or a therapist in front holding him by his wrists, the other person closing just behind, lift to step forward, now curve to go back, but left knee and hop jumpy, and there was an edge, ankle his shoe hurt unlikely to go down, heel in the air, everybody helping out right except him. The head therapist really grim and determined, footwork, pushing at his shins with her soles, swift knocks when they could get in, stepping on his arch.

One gets a sense from these lines that the body is under attack and that in the confusion of its response, a foot is put down (but not all the way), an anxious muscle stretched. This description also provides a glimpse into the true nature of thinking and writing for Eigner, for he commonly compares these two activities to

walking. As Eigner says in "Not Forever Serious," "If you're willing enough to stop anywhere, anytime, hindsight says, a poem can be like walking down the street and noticing things, extending itself without obscurity or too much effort." The disparity between Eigner's difficulty in walking and the ease with which he takes notice of the world in a poem alerts the reader to a profundity in ordinary experience--and to the grace of mind which redeems experience by transposing its difficulties into the pleasures of an *extraordinary* writing.

The impact of Eigner's palsy on his work cannot be underestimated but must be weighed carefully against the similarity of his insights about body and poetry to those of his contemporaries. The abstract clarity of a statement such as Charles Olson's "Limits / are what any of us / are inside" in "Letter 5" of *The Maximus Poems* (1983) finds moving corroboration in such observations as "The self is some head you can't go around," Eigner's wry comment on his own birth, given in the essay "Rambling (in) Life." What distinguishes Eigner's career from those of his closest associates is not so much the character of his experience--his "handicap"--as the urgency this experience confers upon the act of writing, upon the task of writing as Eigner came to understand it. In his apprehension of this task, in his "stance toward reality" (to borrow Olson's phrase from his 1950 essay "Projective Verse"), Eigner was the sure ally of his contemporaries. Robert Duncan, for example, wrote a concise note on Eigner for the dust jacket of *Another Time in Fragments* (1967):

We wanted not fragments of consciousness or utterance but immediacies set into motion, comparable to the localities of color in which Cezanne built up his visual world, to the instances of impulse in which American action painters work, to the immediacies of the music in which Webern composed; and here, Larry Eigner, "*against the abyss*" which he knows as a spastic, has over the last fifteen years raised the very body of a world whose reality we sought in poetry.

More particularly, Duncan notes, describing the aspect of Eigner's verse from which he himself derived the technique of his later work (especially "Passages"), Eigner's "phrasings are not broken off in an abrupt juncture but hover, having a margin of their own--stanzaic phrases--suspended in their own time within the time of the poem."

If there was a turning point in Eigner's life, it was the evening he first heard Cid Corman on the radio in 1949, tuning in by accident to the opening installment of "This Is Poetry," a program that was to issue for the next three years from WMEX in Boston (a period of time encompassing the inauguration of Corman's influential magazine *Origin*). Eigner, taking issue with Corman's manner of reciting poetry, struck up a correspondence. Corman soon put Eigner in contact with Robert Creeley, and a second correspondence was begun. On his own, Eigner had discovered Hart Crane and Cummings. Under Corman's tutelage Williams and Wallace Stevens were soon added to the list along with Corman's own poetry and Creeley's, and Olson's "Projective Verse." (Creeley soon had Eigner reading D. H. Lawrence, Robert Graves, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, and Francis Parkman as well.) Paul Blackburn also became a correspondent of Eigner around this time.

In 1953 Creeley's Divers Press brought out Eigner's first book, *From the Sustaining Air*. In these early poems there is a characteristically halting delivery but not the syntactic fragmentation of the work that was written even two or three years later. The reign of the left margin is but tentatively broken, the poem not yet loosened from the mark of the line's habitual return. Eigner's work in this book is close to the poetry of the early 1950s by his closest associates--Creeley, Corman, and Blackburn. Rhetorical and earnest, it cloaks within a carefully studied vernacular a sharp response to the received value, the complacent. As in Creeley's "The Rites" or Blackburn's more comical "The Assistance," the ordinary is upheld, fitted to a language as efficient as Marianne Moore's, as authoritative as Pound's.

The development of Eigner's work is swift and sure, evidenced in *From the Sustaining Air* by a roughly chronological arrangement that highlights about three years of writing. At the end of the book he states:

from the sustaining air . . .

There is the clarity of a shore

And shadow, mostly, brilliance . . .

When, wandering, I look from my page

I say nothing

when asked

I am, finally, an incompetent, after all[.]

The lineation of the poem is clear but broken--like the shadows of a venetian blind. Despite the poet's avowal of incompetence, there is a mastery of speech rhythms highlighted by the affecting redundancy of the final line and by a marvelous sense of timing. Only after the fact does the reader notice how the pivotal words "I say nothing" conclude one sentence and begin another; the grammatical overlapping, so artfully conceived, complicates but does not disturb the reading. Here the poem underscores its larger meaning, that the world-sustaining language is not sustained *by* it. For all the clarity of our experience, all the beckoning disclosures of light, the very thing we would with simple competence relate is likely to remain ungraspable, unspeakable.

Eigner spent the summers of 1953 and 1954 at Camp Jened, a resort in the Catskills for physically disabled children and young adults. A short, as yet unpublished novel, "Through, Plain," eventually came out of this experience. Before beginning this novel Eigner had already written and published two short stories--"Act" and "Quiet," now collected with the rest of Eigner's fiction in *Country Harbor Quiet Act Around: Selected Prose* (1978)--and had quite probably begun work on two lengthy book reviews commissioned by Creeley for *The Black Mountain Review*, one on Kenneth Rexroth's *The Dragon and the Unicorn* (1952), the other on John Steinbeck's *East of Eden* (1952). Several more stories were to follow. Indeed, before shifting emphasis for good in 1956, Eigner wrote more fiction than poetry.

The response to Eigner's work, though favorable, was still limited to a coterie of readers. William Carlos Williams--having received *From the Sustaining Air* from Creeley--wrote an admiring response, and Olson, too, now held the poet in high esteem, initially because of Eigner's strong sense of individual responsibility. In 1954, while attending a reading by Olson in Gloucester, Eigner had interrupted by asking the older poet (referring to "Letter 5" of *Maximus*), "Why did you attack Vincent Ferrini in your poem?" The significance of the question--and Olson was quick to realize this--was the reminder that poetry is not merely a statement, but an act. The Black Mountain Poets--Blackburn, Corman, Creeley, Duncan, Denise Levertov, Olson--all shared this insistence. Cid Corman narrates the entire story in his introduction to *The Gist of Origin 1951-1971* (1975). Olson would eventually memorialize the moment in *Maximus* with a poem called "(Literary Result)":

as Larry Eigner the one day yet, so many years ago I

read in Gloucester--to half a dozen people still--

asked me

why, meaning my poetry doesn't

help anybody[.]

Soon Robert Duncan was also taking an interest. In 1957 Duncan circulated an open letter analyzing three poems published in the first issue of John Wieners' magazine *Measure*, one of them Eigner's "Brink"--later published in *On My Eyes: Poems* (1960). Not long after, Duncan and Eigner established a more direct contact, with Duncan assisting Eigner in the preparation of typescripts. Duncan also hoped at this time to produce Eigner's play "Murder Talk: The Reception" in San Francisco. Though the play eventually appeared in a 1964 issue of the magazine *Duende* dedicated to Eigner's work, the staging itself never occurred.

In 1958 Eigner's parents financed the publication of a second poetry collection, *Look at the Park*. Visually and in other ways the work resembles Eigner's maturer verse. The left margin no longer rules omnisciently; the poem assembles itself across the entire page. Structurally, two competing techniques are at play. In some places Eigner uses enjambment to unite the disparate elements of a broken form. In others the isolation of the line allows these elements to maintain their discreteness, an equilibrium of phrases that gives meaning to the gaps between lines, charging that space with the upkeep of meaning.

One of the most striking poems in *Look at the Park*, "Do It Yrself," begins with the following observations:

Now they have two cars to clean the front and back lawns bloom in the drought[.]

The poet also takes care to record the language of this scene--his own or the others' (the reader cannot tell)--no longer drawing a clear distinction between words and experience as he did in *From the Sustaining Air*. The poem now records the experience of words:

why not turn the radio on the
pious hopes of the Red Sox

yes, that's a real gangling kid coming down the street[.]

Three seemingly unrelated assertions end the poem:

sponges with handles

we got trinaural hearing

--they are taller than their cars[.]

There is no irony in the use of vernacular speech, no tension between the poet's perception of the scene around him and the language with which the scene makes itself known (nor is there tension between the scientific word "trinaural" and the slurred usage of "we got"). In "Do It Yrself" the "pious hopes of the Red Sox" and "a real gangling kid" are natural effects, the vividness of a spoken language let into the poem with all the generosity of William Carlos Williams, whose "pure products of America" are the very forebears of Eigner's apish teenager, his baseball fan pining for a radio, his family with two cars wasting water in a drought.

The poet, as Eigner's work presents him, is a spectator, as astonished by his own strangeness as by the world's. He remains one of and yet aloof from his fellows. Eigner's "they"--as in "they are taller than their cars"--are not the same "they" as the squares derided by the Beats or "the people--ourselves!" of Denise Levertov's "Merritt Parkway"; nor are they the same citizens of Massachusetts addressed so avuncularly in

Olson's *Maximus*. Eigner's "they"--like their cars--are peculiar, powerful machines.

"Whether man is mostly animal, vegetable or mineral is an open question," writes Eigner in a letter to Louis Dudek, published in 1960 in the magazine *Delta*. "I imagine anybody would agree that an animal has the most overflowing and abundant existence of the three." Eigner's unwillingness to privilege one kind of existence over another, or even to assume that such differences are knowable, shows itself in his acceptance of "man," not simply as "animal" but as "vegetable" and "mineral" too. Levertov remarks on this openness in her introduction to Eigner's first large collection, *On My Eyes*, published by Jargon Press in 1960. Levertov writes,

He gives to the humblest pebble the same attention--and so the same value, by implication--as to, let's say, a man. Instinctively, pride cries out against this--until perhaps pride breaks and we look again, and see there is no contempt for man in this attention given to a pebble, only the sense that both are strange, unknowable, unpredictable.

An early poem first published in *On My Eyes*, " . . . ance," provides an extreme example of this equanimity of attention. The title is a suffix generally denoting an action or process--the substantive of a verb. Existence, Eigner suggests, is just such an "-ance," the action or process of Being, which roars on incessantly, invisible sea in a seashell:

I am a machine for walking . . .

the fly is

complicated

she sits and hears the wind

coming . . .

The girl

is no marble[.]

How to distinguish an insect's sentience from the bluster of the wind, the poet asks, the stillness of a girl from marble immobility? "They" (the fly, the wind, the girl--and then oneself, a machine, perhaps, for walking) are all functions in the calculus of creation.

The photograph on the cover of *On My Eyes*--black trees in snow, lit from behind--provides a startling image for the work. The white of the page--interrupted by a dense foliage of print, or by a stand of words bent against the reader's attention--is the snow. The poems--variously shaped, yet a single growth--are inhabited by birds and squirrels, wind and rain, as the trees of Eigner's Swampscott are, massed in black against a spacious day:

the great matter at the end of my soul

the dog deciding to bark up my feet

and all the trees, with the wind

dragging its roots

blown to bits, eyes that are stopped[.]

Where the soul's horizons are the limits of the familiar, so Eigner seems to say, the adventure of writing will require no other courage than attention.

But nature is not Eigner's only interest, and Eigner's immediate surroundings do not provide the only clues

to the meaning of his work. In its construction on the page, for instance, Eigner's poetry is also akin to architecture, an "evolvment of space" accomplished with words instead of glass and steel. Eigner writes during the late 1950s in an essay on Walter Gropius, "Man modifies, adds to, even creates space, temporarily, let's say, by 'framing' it, by performing various actions." The reader sees the effect of these "actions" and hears their "evolvment" in several of the poems in *On My Eyes*:

B o u l e v a r d s , t e r r a c e s
t o u c h
THE CONCRETE GLASS . . .

staring at the supermarket
close the eyes, it is still there

this is the invisible
added to what there was[.]

The wall of the left margin has been cut away, revealing the interior spaces of a poetry that, like modern architecture, is a "participation in space." (Eigner further explores these ideas in an essay on Gertrude Stein's *Three Lives*, "Walls Dispose a City," first published in 1963 in the magazine *Kulchur*.) As a product of the mind, a supermarket--*even* a supermarket--is essentially invisible. For what Eigner admires about buildings--and the same is true, metaphorically, of poems--is not the imposing presence of their materials or form but the way such architectural structures can excite the imagination.

In the late 1950s Eigner also wrote his one attempt at a long poem, *The Breath of Once Live Things: In the Field with Poe*, published in 1959 in the magazine *Foot* and brought out in book form by John Martin's Black Sparrow Press in 1968. (Black Sparrow then became Eigner's principal publisher, bringing out major collections of his poetry in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s.) The poem is an experiment in continuity, ungainly perhaps for the effort, resembling less the long poems of Eigner's contemporaries than the sorts of work first produced in the 1970s and 1980s by the Language Poets. In its discontinuities and free associations, in its powers of description, *The Breath of Once Live Things* calls to mind especially the work of such readers of Eigner as Clark Coolidge in his *American Ones* (1981) and Lyn Hejinian in her *Writing Is an Aid to Memory* (1996). As Coolidge declares in *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* magazine, giving articulation to the influence, "Eigner is an *on-going* register." Especially effective in *The Breath of Once Live Things* is the description of a storm witnessed from inside a house:

divided windows
bring in the shattering depths

then clouds

I think what passes over our heads
are huge things

lightning, blind
split
naked immensities of the whole[.]

In 1962 Eigner underwent a surgical procedure to freeze the brain cells responsible for his uncontrolled movements. From boyhood on, he had contended with the flailing of his spastic limbs, with the wildness of his left arm and the wound-up energy of an "ungovernable foot." Typing, of all activities, provided relief from the wildness, from the distraction of the flailing, and from the effort of holding the body still, or trying to. Reading--dependent upon the ability to concentrate--was more difficult. "I used to sit," Eigner writes in

his story "Globe," "screwed up whole days, my left knee and ankle crossed around by right." The operation was a huge success. Writing Douglas Blazek three years later, Eigner sums up the procedure and its aftereffects as follows:

Sept. 62 cryosurgery, frostbite in the thalamus (awakened to see if i was numbed, test whether they had right spot, felt much like killing of a tooth nerve!), tamed (and numbed some) my wild left side, since when I can sit still without effort, and have more capacity for anger etc. Before, I had to be extrovert, or anyway hold the self off on a side, in this very concrete, perpetual sense. A puzzlement of the will.

Fragmentation rather than coherence of the will, the care and commotion of a self held "off on a side," expresses itself in Eigner's work as an openness to what is outside the self--the breadth of the world, vision's wealth. The correlation of "I" and "eye," self and sight, is habitual. For Eigner, the self, like the glassed-in porch of his Swampscott home (the vantage point for much of Eigner's poetry), is but a focal point of attention, is not in and of itself important.

A poem published in *Air: The Trees* (1968) makes vivid this outward cast of Eigner's thought. Tracing a movement from his own room, filled with music, to a distant stillness of birds, he writes:

I in the foreground
mirror of time huge as
I may be small
face puffed short
music comes

we have a forest

trees the leaves mass

summer autumn too

wind, sun and

stars move[.]

In 1964, traveling for the first time by airplane, Eigner visited his brother Joseph in St. Louis. Two years later the poet ventured further west to stay with a second brother, Richard, in San Francisco, stopping in Missouri again on the way back. The San Francisco trip included a first-time meeting with Robert Duncan (they would meet again in 1970 when Eigner again ventured west and then more frequently after Eigner relocated to California in the 1980s). The widening of reference in Eigner's poetry, partly traceable to his widening experience of the world beyond Swampscott, becomes especially noticeable in his work of the 1960s. A visit, for instance, to the site of the former St. Louis slave mart leads in one strange poem to a meditation on freedom and necessity. In this poem (published in *Air: The Trees*) Eigner wonders about the place of history in everyday experience. Can such reminders of the past as the cotton gin, for instance, tell something about the capacity or incapacity of the imagination? Eigner asks:

why risk your shirt no
hands to pick the cotton no
gin
in a man's thoughts[.]

The poet's increasing concern with such questions--"the drunk stagger of human affairs," as Eigner puts it in

his *Stony Hills* interview--showed itself more and more frequently in poems that made mention of Vietnam, the Kennedy and King assassinations, the destruction of the environment, as well as in poems that made reference to more oblique facts of history or politics.

Eigner's work continued at this time to develop formally as well. Already in the mid 1950s, but with increasing insistence as the 1960s progressed, Eigner produced a poetry of seemingly spontaneous grammar, a language capable of sudden starts and stops. Freed from the constraints of conventional stanzaic form to take the breadth of the page, Eigner began more and more to explore the *syntactic* possibilities afforded by the new relation of the poem to space. Using line and stanza breaks and the staggered presentation of his words to determine the voicing of the poem--following the lessons of Olson's "Projective Verse"--Eigner almost immediately began to abandon conventional sentence construction as well. This change first shows itself in a near-complete eschewal of punctuation and capitalization. The reader must instead intuit by the progression of ideas where one sentence ends and the next begins. In his most characteristic moments Eigner builds from sentence fragments a singular utterance parsed almost as if idiomatically by the visual presentation of the words. So widespread has this innovation become that it is difficult to credit any individual with its introduction. Given, however, the underground circulation of Eigner's work in the late 1950s--Charles Olson and Denise Levertov each reviewed the manuscript of *On My Eyes* and even had a hand in selecting poems, while Robert Duncan prepared the typescripts of Eigner's submissions to *The New American Poetry*--it is not far-fetched to assume a deeper and earlier impact than the publication record suggests. Eigner's role in the development of a phraseological poetics (for want of a better description) unfortunately has rarely been acknowledged. Indeed, the radicalism of Eigner's syntax has largely gone unremarked--Barrett Watten's essay in *Total Syntax* (1985) being an important exception.

In Eigner's best-remembered poetry the arrangement of the poem on the page--despite disjunction--tends to maximize rather than minimize coherence, as in the following meditation on air travel first published in 1965 in the magazine *Wild Dog* and collected in 1969 in the short volume *Flat and Round*:

Last day on earth
for a while at least . . .

a plane goes over
my eyes
a shadow lost
darkness space
not night, the day
24 hours[.]

Though there are complete sentences here and there, the poem largely consists of a staccato recitation of thematically related details--a fragmentariness that makes sense given the shifting viewpoints of the poem. In some places the poet imagines himself up in the sky; in others he places himself on the ground, looking up. Some lines evoke commercial air travel; others seem to describe the experience of an astronaut. Yet by cutting away all extraneous verbiage, Eigner arrives at a compactness of utterance that can evoke this wide array of thoughts without confusion. Indeed, like any mosaic, these bits of description achieve their greatest effect when incorporated by the eye--the mind's eye of the reader--into a single whole, something which concision alone makes possible. The lacuna inserted between "darkness" and "space" and the elision of verb between "day" and "24 hours" are thus essential to the effect of the poem. In these signature moments the layout of the poem on the page becomes something other than a mere score for oral performance--it becomes an integral part of the grammar of the poem.

Poems such as the above led Samuel Charters--in his introduction to Eigner's *Selected Poems*--to speak of Eigner's poetry as "a purifying fact":

The poetry is strong--immediate, open, direct. . . . To read work as deliberately pure as Eigner's is to be forced . . . to be conscious of the point where other poets have been less rigorous with themselves.

Yet if Eigner's most admirable qualities as a poet are directness and openness--his openness to perception and his directness of expression--he has written obscurer verses on occasion also. Strangely, this obscurity shares the same source as the purity. Eigner's curiosity--his openness, not only to perception but also to the oddness of what perception allows the reader to think or say, the directness with which Eigner expresses even the incomprehensibility of existence--leads here and there to a writing as dense as any achieved by Gertrude Stein. The following lines from Eigner's second large collection, *Another Time in Fragments*, are an example:

the bodies we have to name going
through them, the air
fires the dead falling away
 every moon, the trees waving
rabbits, the cores of stars
and giants worming the world
 the reasonable range
Uranus drinks on its axis[.]

The whorl of associations offered here--cadged, no doubt, at least in part, from astronomy texts and books of mythology--remains bewildering. For that reason they are attractive to poets more interested in the materiality of language--the density of sound and sense language can afford--than in its purity. Yet *Another Time in Fragments* also includes many more straightforwardly evocative poems, including several written in the hospital:

this time your water is golden
 I smell like a bad wing

about to die maybe I
 who could do nothing about it[.]

The widening of Eigner's experience shows itself also in an increased number of correspondents. Many of these correspondents were the small press publishers who brought out so much of Eigner's output in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. Samples of these letters appear in well-known journals of the time such as *Yugen* and *El Corno Emplumado* as well as in obscurer magazines such as *The Mile High Underground*, *La-Bas*, and *Tamarind*.

The year 1972 saw the publication of Eigner's *Selected Poems*. *Earth Ship*, no. 8 (a special issue devoted to Eigner), also appeared that year. Eigner's introduction to this special issue (a short statement now called "Arrowhead of Meaning") offered a summation of his past and present goals as a poet:

I once wanted to do big things and to try of course is the only way to begin, and to quite an extent continuing depends on it too. . . . I wonder about purpose, what priorities if not principles are possible, how to balance things.

Enough it seems has been produced, enough writings, enough cars, enough music, enough of a lot else.

In the early 1970s an era of poetry--the period which gave historical definition to Eigner's generation of poets--was coming to an end. Both Olson and Blackburn were dead while Corman--disenchanted with life

in America--had resettled in Japan.

In 1970 Eigner first met Robert Grenier, who was then an instructor at Tufts University. Grenier had been reading Eigner's poetry since 1960, after first discovering the work at the Grolier Bookshop in Cambridge and in the Poetry Room of the Lamont Library at Harvard University. In 1968 Grenier taught Eigner's poetry at the University of California at Berkeley to such students as Ron Silliman and Barrett Watten . After moving on from Tufts in 1971 to teach at Franconia College, he kept up both the personal and intellectual relationship, bringing Eigner from Swampscott three times to give readings in New Hampshire. Except for the occasional visit from a passing poet, all of Eigner's contacts with other writers had been conducted by mail--a circumstance that would not really change until the move to California. As a consequence Eigner's ongoing exchange with Grenier took on great importance. Asked in 1977 in his *Stony Hills* interview about giving poetry readings, Eigner remarked, "Starting up a conversational or reactive situation I can relax and go along in is something I've been more or less incapable of." "At Franconia," on the other hand, "back at the instructor's place (Bob Grenier's), there was quite a bit of dialogue, enough anyway so I learned a few things--at least the 2nd and 3rd times when I was there a few days and people came up now and then." Grenier also assisted Eigner in manuscript preparation, typing up the two major Black Sparrow collections of the 1970s, *Things Stirring Together or Far Away* (1974) and *The World and Its Streets, Places* (1977). Grenier at this time was also coeditor of *This* magazine with Barrett Watten . *This* published Eigner's work in each of its first five issues, and Watten himself eventually edited and published Eigner's collected fiction, *Country Harbor Quiet Act Around: Selected Prose*. These collaborations show the beginnings of what came to be known as Language Writing.

The year 1973 saw the release of *Getting It Together, a Film on Larry Eigner, Poet*, which featured Allen Ginsberg reading and discussing Eigner's work, as well as footage of Eigner himself. The film was made by Leonard Henny and Jan Boon, based on a text by Michael F. Podulke. In 1974, in addition to *Things Stirring Together or Far Away*, The Elizabeth Press brought out *Anything on Its Side* (the first of many Eigner books which this elegant press, directed by James Weil, would publish). In collections as large as these the reader begins to appreciate both the singularity of Eigner's work and the gradations of tone and difficulty that mark his poetry as the work of his *life*. Thus, alongside charming aphorisms and haiku-like description are more involved renderings of nature or evocations of meandering thoughts; there are poems that communicate their meaning idiomatically and poems that strive for a more poetic utterance.

The following example of Eigner's ear for the vernacular comes from *Things Stirring Together or Far Away*:

a brand new car
is a brand new car
I'll see it in the morning[.]

And the following example of Eigner's gift for aphorism comes from *Anything on Its Side*:

Time the unflagging
bird . . .[.]

This example of Eigner's powers of description is from the same book:

Music is human in the event . . .
the great sea is orchestrated with men
the wind and the waves[.]

And this quote shows Eigner at his most haiku-like, from the 1975 collection *My God the Proverbial: 42 Poems & 2 Prose Pieces*:

a hole in the clouds moves
the hole in the sky[.]

In 1976 Charles Bernstein and Bruce Andrews inaugurated *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E*, a magazine that gave focus to the growing "tendency" (as Ron Silliman has put it) called Language Writing. The opening piece of this issue was Eigner's "Approaching Things Some Calculus How Figure It of Everyday Life Experience," which appeared alongside Clark Coolidge's "Larry Eigner Notes." In "Approaching Things" Eigner ponders the role of the poet in a world of happenstance:

Well, how does (some of) the forest go together with the trees. How might it, maybe. Forest of possibilities (in language anyway)--ways in and ways out. . . . And I feel my way in fiddling a little, or then sometimes more, on the roof of the burning or rusting world.

A year later another collection appeared, *The World and Its Streets, Places*, Eigner's largest and richest to date. Among the noteworthy pieces in this book are several political poems ("the philosophy of risk / can breed indifference," "Madness!," "what a / uniform is," "peace / peace"), poems about time ("let / time / go on," "s e q u o i a," "time passes," "the jarring firecracker," "Time goes where"), and many other, less easily categorized works. Here, for instance, is one of Eigner's most hauntingly beautiful poems, "The Lights Go Out," which begins:

Now we are alone with our thoughts
but where are they
tomorrow I can continue reading[.]

Here we also find "(t o r e c o g n i z e w o r l d w i d e a n i m a l s t a t e o f n a t u r e)," which concludes:

no billboards
in the sky, we may walk
the limits of jobs, not too much

listening, sing

somewhat, learn
what to do with ourselves[.]

In 1978 Eigner moved to California, living first in a group home (an experience partly narrated in the essay "Course Matter") and settling finally into a house in Berkeley provided by his brother Richard. Eigner's caretaker in this house for the next decade was Robert Grenier, who undertook the living arrangement as part of his "commitment to literature." During this time the two worked together to fashion a series of verified typescripts of Eigner's poems, accumulating some twelve hundred transcriptions of Eigner's often difficult-to-make-out originals. These verified typescripts represent about half of Eigner's output and will provide an invaluable guide for those who work in the future on Eigner's manuscripts without benefit of consultation with the poet. Grenier also edited Eigner's next large collections for Black Sparrow Press, *Waters/Places/A Time* (1983) and *Windows Walls Yard Ways (Lines Squares Paths Worlds Backwards Sight)* (1994). This latter collection includes a preface by Grenier, "How I Read Larry Eigner."

Another poet who worked with Eigner on his manuscripts was Robert Kocik, a student of Grenier and also of Duncan at the New College of California. Kocik with Joseph Simas edited a volume of Eigner's letters to the French poets Joseph Guglielmi (Eigner's translator) and Claude Royet-Journoud. This book was published in Paris in 1987. Especially noteworthy about this edition is the painstaking reproduction of Eigner's typescripts. The documentary value of these typescripts is enormous, for they reveal much about the effort Eigner put into writing, both physically and intellectually. As Eigner said in the *Stony Hills*

interview, "letters get crowded just from my attempt to save time, i.e., cover less space, avoid putting another sheet in the typewriter for a few more words as I at least hope there will only be."

In 1983 Eigner read at the St. Mark's Poetry Project and with Grenier conducted a workshop. The statement written for this occasion, "How Much? What's Up? A Bit of the Questionable World," includes the following self-reflections:

I've been, am, more or less a nut about having things adequate to staying, keeping alive and taking my ease without much pain or discomfort--loafing as Whitman had it--while I've been goal-oriented more generally (speaking) too, as well as curious as to things beyond or partly beyond reach, out of sight and/or hearing; and boredom has never been a problem with me, likewise, for instance I always believed in appreciating things and making them out to myself, making it and coming from behind getting knowledge and so on under my belt.

The following year Eigner's *Waters/Places/A Time* received the San Francisco State Poetry Center Award, judged by Beverly Dahlen. This volume again includes a substantial mixture of poems taking up favorite themes as well as new ones, offering meditative, sometimes difficult poems about time and history, nature, human affairs, and poetry itself. One poem begins:

There is no community
 he goes to
Work mornings[.]

And another--one of many that concern music in this collection:

piano and strings

 the wind and rain

 go together[.]

In 1989 Eigner's *Areas Lights Heights: Writings, 1954-1989* appeared. Long in the making, this annotated compilation of Eigner's essays and short statements of poetics includes also a few letters and topical poems.

In recent years Eigner principally gave himself to the writing of shorter poems, affirming his lifelong affinity for haiku. His "Quiet grass // still air // rocks // the locust // cries," written "*after BashÅ*"--published in *Waters / Places / A Time*--captures what Robert Hass has called (in an essay on haiku) "some feeling in the arrest of the image that what perishes and what lasts forever have been brought into conjunction, and accompanying that sensation . . . a feeling of release from the self." Eigner echoed the latter portion of this statement in his "Blurb for Disabled Calligraphy": "Self-assertion (or the isolated I, like anything else enough by itself) is none too interesting, is unlike (self/) discovery a blind alley."

In Eigner's work, as Barrett Watten has written, "the imagination is thought through to a real demonstration of its power." Eigner, in a poem from *Windows Walls Yard Ways*, describes his project this way:

h e r e I g o a g a i n

 what to make of
 the slightly exotic

 or the whole world for that matter[.]

Eigner's papers are housed in the Department of Special Collections, Kenneth Spencer Research Library, at the University of Kansas Libraries, Lawrence, Kansas.

FURTHER READINGS:

FURTHER READINGS ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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