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Robert Grenier's Drawing Poems

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Robert Grenier is a contemporary poet whose latest hand-drawn work challenges the margins of poetry and tests the boundaries of recognizable language altogether. Yet, as idiosyncratic as Grenier's drawing poems may seem, I argue that they are in fact the logical extension of an important development in modern poetry toward the spatial reorientation of the page, such as one sees also in Larry Eigner. Through the disruption of the poetic line as the fundamental instrument of order and control, Grenier's draw-ing poems subvert the gridding of conventional language and undermine the poetic text itself as a site of privileged knowledge and authority, opening up the possibility that there is something productive in non-knowledge, in interruption, or even in error as an epistemology in itself.

When we view **Figure 1**, the questions first and foremost are: What is this? What is it that compels us to read such work as a poem rather than, say, the graffiti drawings of Cy Twombly? What we find are horizontal strata of color, roughly parallel lines of green, red, blue, and black that pull the viewing eye from left to right and up to down, fundamentally miming the motions of reading that have conventionally prompted us to look for the word and to search for meaning in the first place. In other words, despite the intrusion of the vertical overlap and the angular zig-zag of the hand-drawn lines, we know that this is a poem because it adheres to the logic of the poetic line: one color per horizontal plane equals one line of a short poem.

When we take a closer look, we find that Grenier's drawing poems are liter-ally about picturing the letter and learning to read. And so, out of the tangled mass of scrawling lines, we begin to recognize the letter M because it is produced in a series of likenesses—there is a green M in the upper left hand corner, then, moving vertically down the page, a red m, and below it a blue M—none of which are identical, yet all of which evoke implicit comparison to one another. Something similar occurs with the series of OO's, and yet, why is the blue letter
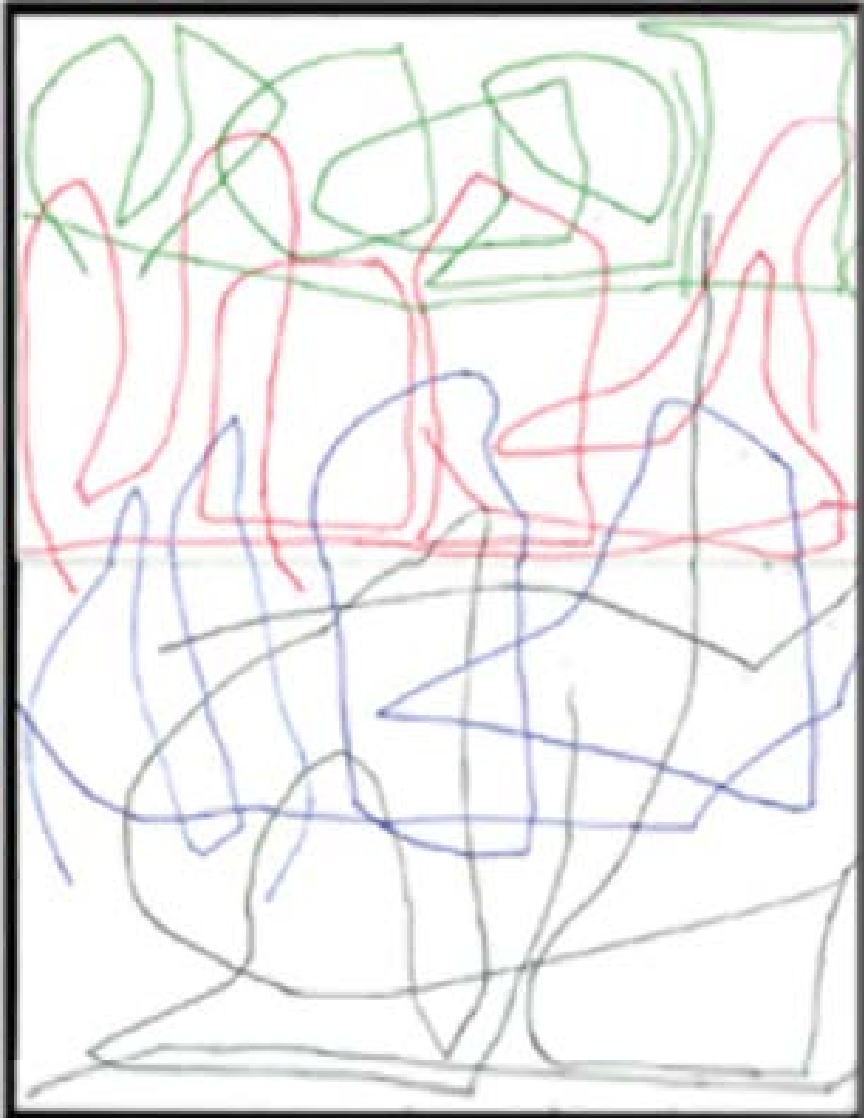
Figure 1: Robert Grenier, "Mooer," No. 2, *Six Poems / November 2003–January 2004*

at the farthest right an O and not a D? Consider the resemblance between this blue O and the green letter directly above it, which is neither an O nor a D but an R. After some time and effort, we see that the reiterations of the letters M — O — O (and the variations of the word *Moo*) become the very matter of the poem that helps us to recognize the green MOOer, echoed vertically down the page and weighted by a slight diagonal thrust through a horizontal, red *MoOS*. There follows a blue *MOO*, pulling the sound of the *Moo* off the page and splattering at the bottom of the page in a black puddle of the word *AT*. If the green Mooer

is a cow (a mooer is a cow, or one who moos), and the sound that the cow makes when it moos is "Moo," then one question that this poem asks is: What is it that the Mooer Moos Moo At? Another might be: What does it mean to "Moo" at all if the sound that a cow makes is translated into words?

At the same time that the horizontal strata of color insist upon the poetic line as letters that make up a word, they unravel the word into a slippage and repetition of hand-drawn lines that insist upon themselves as nothing other than lines. Notice here the shifting vocabulary of the word *line*: the poetic line here (what we think of as the prosodic unit of verse — or, in Grenier's work, the horizontal plane of color) is actively displaced by an attention to the hand-drawn lines closer to a visual text or drawing that seem to falter, bear down, and pause in the act of writing. Yielding the word to what Charles Bernstein calls the "letter in time" ("Poetry Plastique: A Verbal Explosion in the Art Factory" 7), Grenier's drawing poems let the alphabetic letter and the hand-drawn lines that form the letter shape conflict and coexist simultaneously.

Challenging the boundaries between letters and lines, these works bring us down into the grammar of the line to find an encounter with the materials of writing: the alphabet itself as a system of lines. Grenier's poetry, however strange and unconventional it may be, is about the production of letters out of their material component parts — the physical and visual lines. As Grenier writes, "Letters draw themselves out of corresponding letter shapes (m/n, a/s, s/z, J/L) AS IF ALL WERE MADE FROM THE SAME LETTER rather Dramatically" (untitled essay 72). Grenier orchestrates the alphabet, then, as a visual rhyming of letter shapes that shifts attention away from the function of language as a transparent medium of communication toward the materiality of language — language as the material through which we must maneuver. If, as Robert Creeley famously remarked, "form is never more than an extension of content,"[1] then in Grenier's drawing poems, the work's only content is form forming itself. Poetic form, here, is precisely the structuring incursions of the alphabet that delineate and align a complex array of communication practices from reading and writing to subject formation.

SITUATING ROBERT GRENIER

Robert Grenier is a contemporary poet whose latest hand-drawn work challenges the margins of poetry and raises the question of what it even means to read in the first place. Grenier is often contextualized as an affiliate of the language school of poetry with whom he was associated in the early 1970s; even then, however, he remained a distant satellite of language writing. Indifferent to establishing an allegiance to any group identity, Grenier remains a controversial figure in poetry even today, by his pushing the boundaries of the literary canon. Yet as idiosyncratic as Grenier's drawing poems may seem to be, they are in fact the logical extension of an important development in contemporary poetry toward the spatial reorientation of the poetic line. In the introduction to their anthology,

The Line in Postmodern Poetry, editors Robert Frank and Henry Sayre assert that "one of the most interesting developments in recent poetry has been the way in which the spatial organization of the line and the page can work against the very presumption of order it seems to embody, deconstruct it even" (xi).[2] If the poetic line, according to Charles Hartman, is the fundamental mode by which the poet attempts "to create and control attention" (qtd. in Frank and Sayre x), then what happens when the poetic line itself is problematized, obscured, or altogether illegible? At first, Grenier's drawing poems may seem to be the epitome of linguistic disorientation, of language losing itself to a painterly explosion of scrawling letters and tangled lines. Yet, however deviant Grenier's hand-drawn poems may appear, there is an historical precedent for the gesture of the poetic line as a visual device that defies conventional form, breaks traditional rules of grammar, and contests the very definition of the poetic line as a bounded verbal unit that imposes order, shape, and form.

Even a poet as undeniably canonical as Emily Dickinson experiments with a visual attention to the poetic line — by breaking it up with a material line of the dash that plays with percussive counterpoint and rhythmic silence, opening up a space between words and linguistic connotation. Susan Howe has argued, however, that Dickinson's manuscripts, which "should be understood as visual productions" (153), demonstrate that her material attention to the page is not simply the result of the paper size, but is instead integral to the poems themselves — "part of the [poem's] meaning" (152). Similarly, as much as William Carlos Williams's poetry is grounded in spoken language and reconceptualizing the idiosyncrasies of "American" speech patterns, Henry Sayre has argued that William Carlos Williams's poetics is fundamentally visual, treating "language as physical material" (7). Bram Dijkstra and Marjorie Perloff likewise have demonstrated the influence on Williams by a wide variety of painters and photographers from Pablo Picasso to Francis Picabia, Marcel Duchamp and Alfred Stieglitz. Through his famous use of enjambment that destabilizes the terminus of an image or object through the bending of the poetic line at the right-hand edge of the page,[3] Williams records an effort to reproduce the way the eye actually sees in the process of looking, detailing a rapid series of discontinuous images that are woven together through the seeing-eye's experiential movement through the New Jersey landscapes that we find in *Kora in Hell* and *Spring and All*. And, as Johanna Drucker has reiterated in her essay "Not Sound," a range of contemporary poetic works from Mary Ellen Solt's "Forsythia" to Steve McCaffery's *Carnival* and Charles Bernstein's *Veil* "have no basis in sound," but rather embody "its material specificity in print and digital environments through graphical features" (240).

From Drucker's *Figuring the Word* (1998) and Craig Dworkin's *Reading the Illegible* (2003) to Perloff and Dworkin's *The Sound of Poetry / The Poetry of Sound* (2009), recent scholarship continues to debate the conceptualization of the poetic line as either a sonic or a visual function. While James Longenbach argues in *The Art of the Poetic Line* that the "line is ultimately a sonic rather than a visual element of the poem" (18), Drucker reminds us "how intimately the visual and

verbal codes are integrated in transmission on the page—and how dependent on graphical devices our reading habits are" ("Not Sound" 238). Grenier's drawing poems do play with the enunciative potential of the poetic line (an issue I will return to later). The prominent visual axis of Grenier's work, however, is not a matter of novelty for its own sake but grows directly out of an entire poetic tradition that experiments with the spatial reorganization of the page by disrupting Paul Fussell's conception of meter as that which "results when the natural rhythmical movements of colloquial speech are heightened, organized, and regulated so that pattern—which means repetition—emerges from the relative phonetic haphazard of ordinary utterance" (5).

Transgressing the basic distinction between poetry and visual art, Grenier's hand-drawn poems are the end of the line, so to speak, the outermost extreme of this poetic tradition that challenges the fundamental disparity between the visual and sonic dimensions of a poetic text. Form, here, is neither the visual text nor its oral vocalization, but is instead a method of literacy that calls into question the transparency of language. As Ron Silliman writes in "Terms of Enjambment," "The line thus has been set off as the mark of artifice itself, that index of the arbitrary which acknowledges the social contract as the origin of convention in language—and that language is nothing if not convention" (Frank and Sayre 183).[4] If attempts to reinvent the poetic line foreground its essential arbitrariness, then it has an overtly political dimension that ultimately undermines the systematic impulse of language toward categorization, mastery, and order. The reconfiguration of the poetic line is, to borrow Henry Sayre's formulation, "not so much an anti-structural gesture" (Frank and Sayre xvi) that resists order altogether. It is instead, as Grenier's hand drawn poems illustrate, a "highly formalized device" (Frank and Sayre xvi) that subverts the gridding of conventional language and undermines the poetic text as a site of privileged knowledge and authority, opening up the possibility that there is something productive in non-knowledge, in interruption, or even in error as an epistemology in itself.

GRENIER'S *LETTERALISM*: MATERIALIZING THE LITERAL LETTER

In the preface to his anthology *In the American Tree* (1986), Silliman famously cites Grenier's "I HATE SPEECH" manifesto[5] in order to announce "a breach—and a new moment in American writing" (xvii) that marked a shift away from the "voice" or the self-presence of the poet behind the text as the foundational principle of the lyric poem. As Bob Perelman has argued in *The Marginalization of Poetry*, Silliman appropriates Grenier's phrase as a decided gesture that not only attacked the confessional or workshop poetry of the 1950s and 1960s but also directly challenged Charles Olson's notion of organic form with its emphasis on the page as a vocal score that directly measures the energy and the pulse of the poet (42–3). For Olson, as he states in his manifesto "Projective Verse," the poetic line is a direct measure of the poet's breath, "from the breathing man who writes, at the moment that he writes" (19).

While Silliman sees a break from Olsonian "breath," ironically, however, Grenier's drawing poems seem to work precisely on this Olsonian level of organic form. They are, after all, hand-drawn poems or "scrawls"[6] that appear to register the energy and the impulse of the poet as the red, green, blue, and black lines record the shifting, stumbling, and pausing rhythm of his hand in the act of writing. As Tim Shaner and Michael Rozendal write in their introduction to a special issue of *verdure* dedicated to Grenier's sixtieth birthday in 2001, "At first glance, the scrawl may suggest a backwards technological turn: written during the ascent of digital text, Grenier appears to reject this so-called advance outright" (47). Reminiscent of Apollinaire, one of Grenier's major innovations is the use of his handwriting rather than, say, the typographical experiments of Clark Coolidge's *Space*, Susan Howe's *Thorow*, or Christian Bök's *Crystallography*. To quote Willard Bohn's reading of Apollinaire's calligrams, the "imperfect (handwritten) state" of Grenier's writing may be a marker of the poet's presence and pen(manship), providing us with "a visual record—often humorous or whimsical—of hesitations and enthusiasms" (50). But while Apollinaire's calligrams might give us "a greater intimacy between the poet and the reader, who no longer have to communicate via the intermediary of typographical characters" (Bohn 50), Grenier's scrawling handwriting, by contrast, largely alienates his audience because our first experience of these obstinate works is disorientation. It requires time and effort—and often Grenier's own guidance, be it through his performance of or printed translations of his poems—to understand that these colored, jagged lines are even letters and words in the first place.

As much as Grenier's drawing poems seem to emphasize their own idiosyncratic and handmade condition, they have, in fact, a very complicated production process—or rather a reproduction process, to be more exact. Initially, Grenier's drawing poems are handwritten in black notebooks using inexpensive, everyday Faber-Castell Uniball pens in blue, black, red, and green ink. Photocopied from his notebooks, these poems are enlarged on Hahnemühle Digital Fine Art paper (15 ¼ × 17 ½ inches or 17 ½ × 23 ⅜ inches) and then reproduced as limited edition Giclée prints. Investing in a kind of inaccessibility, Grenier's poetry is difficult to find in printed form and quite expensive to purchase. The drawing poems with their four-colored ink are, as Stephen Ratcliffe writes, "impossibly expensive to print, therefore all but unavailable to anyone who would read them" (119). Estimating the price of color copies at $1.79 per page, Ratcliffe approximates that the retail cost of a printed book would approach $650—"expensive indeed for even a rare book of poems [. . .] well beyond the means of any small press likely to be interested in such writing as Grenier's" (119). To circumvent this impasse, Grenier's drawing poems are usually presented either in a gallery setting hung on a wall, as slides or digital projections delivered in a poetry reading or lecture, or freely viewed online at websites such as SUNY Buffalo's *Electronic Poetry Center* (http://epc.buffalo.edu) or *Light and Dust Anthology of Poetry* (http://www.thing .net/~grist/l&d/lighthom.htm).

A concern for the materiality of language and the consequences of production resonates throughout Grenier's oeuvre from his playful capitalization to the emphatic use of underlining and quotation marks that we find in the typed translations of his talks and published essays. As Rozendal and Shaner note:

> Technologically speaking, then, Grenier's use of four-color proof-reading pens is not the retreat some may think it be, for, as we know from his pre-scrawl, courier font texts, Grenier has always been acutely concerned with the materials of production, insisting where possible (the web being one exception), that his work be published in the form in which his poems were written. ("Introduction" 47)

Even in a conventional work such as *Phantom Anthems* (1986), which looks like a traditional book, Grenier insists upon the Courier font of his IBM Selectric typewriter (as alluded to by Rozendal and Shaner above)—taking upon himself the physical and visual production of the poetic page. While *Greeting* (1997) is a book of poems small enough to fit into the palm of a hand, *Sentences* (1972–1977) consists of a box that contains 500 index cards (5 × 8 inches) arranged in no particular order that the reader shuffles through at will, arranging, replacing, combining, and interchanging the cards. At another extreme, Grenier's *CAMBRIDGE M'ASS* (1979) is a 40-inch × 48-inch poster that consists of 265 individual poems arranged in various-sized white rectangles, floating against a black background. Reminiscent of the index cards of *Sentences*, the white blocks of text in *CAMBRIDGE M'ASS* literalize what Olson called "composition by field," treating the page as a landscape of objects that exist and interact through the mobilizing energy of the reader. Even more so than *Sentences*, where the poem-object is shuffled in the reader's hands, *CAMBRIDGE M'ASS* further resists the reader's complacency, demanding a full range of movement of the reader's body—not only the turning of the head and the shifting of the eyes—but a stepping to the left and to the right, straining up and crouching down, zooming in to read the individual poems and zooming back out to see the larger whole of the poster page.

Focusing on the textuality of a poem and on the material forms of language, Grenier's oeuvre does in fact work against the idea that the poetic line is based upon the self-presence of the poet. *Sentences* and *Cambridge M'ass*, that is, have less to do with harnessing the nuances of the poet's breath than they do with the reader's own engagement with and handling of these texts as physical objects. Similarly, as much as the drawing poems preserve the handmade quality of this writing, they also thematize the materiality of their own production. As Karl Young notes, "Both Grenier's use of color and hand lettering serve similar functions, insisting that the text be *seen* instead of merely assimilated" (*verdure* 49). Turning the manuscript notebook on its side and literally flipping the horizontal and vertical axes of the poetic page,[7] Grenier's drawing poems play with and disrupt the conventions of book reading, making the book itself not something that is read and "merely assimilated," but something that is markedly "seen" and specifically handled, held by one's hands. In other words, even as his poems move out of the confines of the book, imagining the wall of a gallery or the screen of the

slide presentation or web page as their viewing stage, they encode the graphical features of the conventional poetry book making it explicitly visible: we can see the gutter of the manuscript notebook (the horizontal line through the center of the poem) and the edges of the manuscript notebook pages (those lines now at the top and bottom of the poem) blackened through the reproduction process (even if those black lines are only faintly perceptible, especially here three times removed — the reproductions in this article, in other words, are reproductions of reproductions of Grenier's initial reproduction from the manuscript notebook). Undermining the conventional conception of the book as a transparent form that we read through and largely ignore, Grenier's manuscript notebook itself becomes part and parcel of the very materials out of which the drawing poems enact their own making.

Further reifying the materials of writing, Grenier's drawing poems are composed in four-colored ink, using pens that he initially "lifted" from the corporate law firm where he worked as a proofreader. As Grenier explains during a talk at SUNY Buffalo in 1998, "Well, it was what was lying around in the shop, where I worked as a proofreader, there were these Uniball pens in four colors & I was accustomed to using them while proofreading to try to clarify a complicated correction" ("Realizing Things"). Co-opting the instruments of proofreading for the sake of poetry, Grenier's drawing poems signify what Shaner calls a "revolt against labor" (176) that uses the tools of correction and of clarity against themselves.[8] Proofreading is a mode of reading that is also a kind of writing — correcting, crossing out, revising, editing, i.e., a practice of making marks that requires close attention to textual details and an engagement with the minutiae of language. Grenier's poetry thematizes the proofreading tradition of shorthand ciphers, turning the production of making marks into an end in itself that "poaches on" or *détourns* the social practices and institutional conventions of reading and of writing, to reference Michel de Certeau and the Situationist International respectively. This is a poetry that returns us to the somatic experience of learning how to read and write — a poetry that, however deviant and unconventional, attenuates the production of letters as material forms.

It is one thing to experience these poems during Grenier's lectures, where, as Brian Reed comments, "[w]ith Grenier as a guide, the poetry's unruly appearance thus becomes a puzzle capable of solution" (67); it is quite another to tackle these alone online, in a gallery, or at Stanford University's library which houses many of Grenier's manuscript notebooks.[9] Yet, even his lectures, in fact, perform the very difficulty of reading these works as Grenier himself struggles to read his own handwriting. For example, in one reading at Columbia University in 2006, he used such phrases as, "Is that an O or an R? Can you read that?" In a reading at the University of Pennsylvania, Grenier experiences (or performs) the same coming-into-realization as his audience, "Oh, look, the E is made out of the M and the W" ("Robert Grenier Reading"). Or again, Grenier reads, struggling through pauses, "This one says, '*Long* . . . (Gee!) . . . *Long Day* . . . *67th year*. OK, that's enough of that. That wasn't written very well'" ("Robert Grenier Reading").

These lectures, to be sure, are largely performative; yet, as performance, they resonate with what Patricia Crain in *The Story of A* calls the "technology of the alphabet"—where the repetitiveness, imitativeness, and self-articulation that define the alphabet turn it into a social discourse that not only shapes but forms the social subject. Because, as Crain writes, "the alphabet functions best when it dissolves and disappears into the text," alphabetization "has consequently seemed transparent, as though we had internalized the propaganda of the nursery: 'As easy as ABC'" (5). If reading entails dissolving the singularity of the alphabet into words that seem transparent, then what does it mean to read Grenier's letters that are not internalized, unnoticed, or made easy but instead deliberately interrogate the legibility of the alphabet in the first place? Grenier confronts us with a page that is constantly in the process of being misread, thereby challenging the alphabet as nothing more than a conventional structural order of Western writing. Yet as clumsy, errant, and even delinquent as Grenier's poems are, they participate in the instrumentalization of the alphabet even as they resist its pedagogy. In fact, it is in their errancy that the drawing poems foreground the alphabet as a constructive ensemble of new forms, where reading and misreading turns the poem into an object.

Consider the following drawing poems from the series "For Larry Eigner" (**Figures 2 and 3**) which are, it should be noted, two of the more readily legible poems:

"Looking around," what our "eyes see" are the surfaces of language and the volatility of the letter shape. Formed of jagged and capricious lines that slip, skip, bear down, and trail off, Grenier's idiosyncratic letters compose a poetry that performs the literal moment of forming language: we observe the letter "E" in the process of becoming an "E," anticipating as it does the lines that never quite connect and complete the letter shape. We look again and again at the word "around," moving in and through—around—the six letters in an attempt to reconcile the strangeness of the "a" and of the "d" and to distinguish the "r" from the "n"; we read "eyes see," and in so doing, we enact the poem—seeing our own "eyes see," that is, we see ourselves reading. What we see here is "an attempt to define a situation in which the imagination is," as Grenier explains in his talk "LANGUAGE/ SITE/WORLD" in 1982, "engaged with materials of writing in some way" (230). Or as he continues in the same talk, "[Y]ou start writing in relation to . . . writing materials" (230). Shifting attention away from the function of language toward the "materials of writing," these are works that literalize the process of learning to read and to write. "Literalism," according to the *OED*, means "of or pertaining to the letters of the alphabet; of the nature of letters" or "expressed by letters, written." Grenier's drawing poems literally bring us to the question of the letter—a literalism of the literal, or what I would call *letteralism*. Making letters literal means turning them into lines—a linealization that continuously defers the recognition of letter and of word, insisting instead on the simultaneity of both: letter and word as visible, material lines that never quite settle down to be either the word or the letter that the reader anticipates.
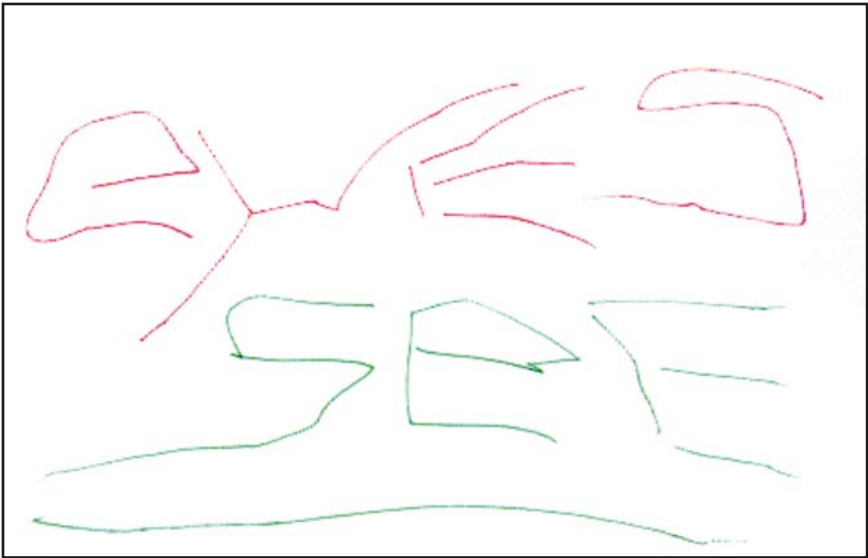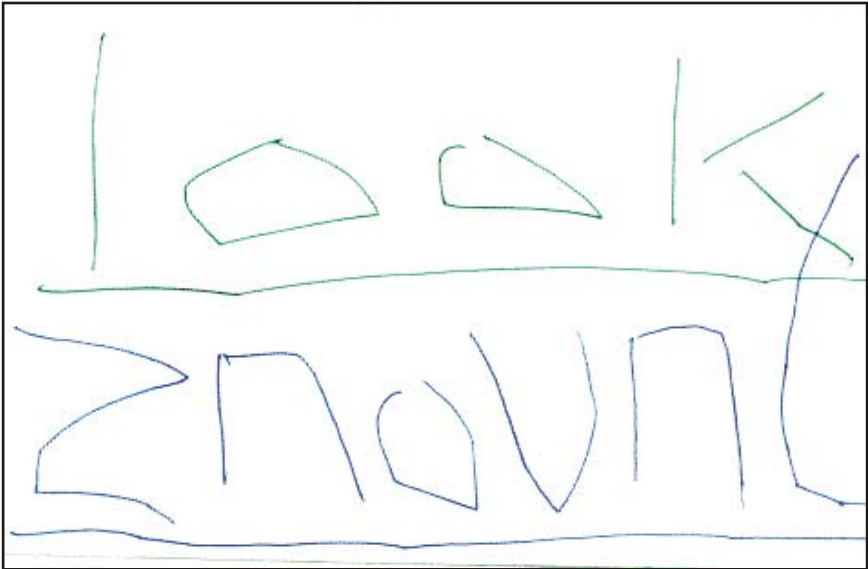
Figures 2 and 3: "Look / Around" and "Eyes / See," *For Larry Eigner.*

GRENIER'S PROJECTIVISM:
REVISING OLSON'S "FIELD COMPOSITION"

The drawing poems, in fact, invert the conception of poetic line as a marker of the poet's self-presence: these poems do not harness the nuances of the poet's breath via Olson as much as they become a kind of scoring of the reader's own breath. Forced to slow down and stumble over each next letter, it is the reader whose

breath is therefore measured, sounding out each letter in time and stuttering to reconcile the letters into words. Yet, nevertheless, Grenier is directly thinking through Olson's "Projective Verse" and the idea of "open composition" or "composition by field" that they propose. In his introduction to the *Collected Poems of Larry Eigner* (2010), Grenier writes:

> In his landmark, 1950 essay "Projective Verse," Charles Olson set forth the prospect of what he called "FIELD COMPOSITION" wherein a poet may take advantage of the precisions made possible by the typewriter to enter into an opening field of language objects, subject to varying forces, inside a dramatic arena/area where 'stuff happens' in the developing/whole space of the page. Following out from experiments in the work of Cummings, Pound and Williams, as well, Larry Eigner's mature writing is perhaps the best (and most varied) fulfillment we have, to date, of tendencies and possibilities regarding the use of space in poetry gathered into and 'projected' out into the future of American poetry by Olson's theory of composition by field. (xii–xiii)[10]

For Grenier, like Eigner, the "precisions made possible by the typewriter" are not about scoring the breath or, as he says in an email conversation with Bernstein in February 2007, "tracking soundings-of-poems-in time" (*Jacket Interview* #296). Rather, the influence of Olson's celebration of the "potential capacities of typewriter-as-instrument" (*Jacket Interview* #296) is converted into an investigation of the spatial dimensions of the page. Eigner's "field composition" is a projection of "the use of space in poetry," while Grenier's variation is, as he writes, a projection of the possibility of "poems as *letters–in–space*" (*Jacket Interview* #296).

In this same email exchange, Grenier writes:

> I 'realized' that I 'didn't need the Selectric typewriter', to make 'my mark' (after all that work— *Sentences, A Day At The Beach, Phantom Anthems* made on that instrument!) *in Space. . . . How Else* (*w/ many 'kudos' to various typewriters & their 'Achievements' etc.*) might letters (& again, I 'count letters' in relation to developing sequences of counted letters, *in part*, cause of my 'training' on the typewriter!) & words come to be formed as *writing–in–space*?? (*Jacket Interview* #296)

It should be noted that the quotation marks, italics, parenthetical asides, and typographic renderings of words such as *with* (w/) or *and* (&) that make this quotation formally difficult to digest are typical of Grenier's prose (curiously almost completely absent in the drawing poems), which attempts to counter the distinction between poetry and criticism. On the one hand, Grenier's critical writing strives for the effect of talking— a writing that seems to gesture towards Olson's vocal scoring of the poet's breath. We sense the emphasis on *my mark*, inflected as it is by quotation marks, or *instrument!* and *typewriter!* accented with exclamation points. We also sense the poet pause, as if taking a breath after *How Else*, and similarly sense the interruption of that thought, which gets stalled by the parenthesis, (*w/ many 'kudos'*). On the other hand, however, this is a writing that is insistently visual, meant to be seen and looked at. Why else, for example,

would there be a capital E in *How Else*? Grenier, in other words, is not just writing into vocal space but literally scoring the page as a physical space in its own right, where "words come to be formed as *writing–in–space*." Such attention to the physical material of words and letters looks forward to his recent drawing poems where the wobbly hand-drawn lines literally materialize as letters- and words-in-space.

But what we find in the above quotation is the specific rationale behind Grenier's shift away from the poetics of the Selectric typewriter that we find in his early works like *Phantom Anthems* and *Sentences* toward the poetics of the calligraphic scrawl, which is the form and content of his latest drawing poems. In other words, as he explains above, it is Grenier's "'training' on the typewriter" with its codified letterforms and predictable spacings that propels him to discover and to develop new means of appropriating the processes of poetic production for himself. Fundamentally revising Olson's notion of typescript as visual scoring of the poet's breath, Grenier's hand-drawn letters unhinge the homogeneity of the typeset page, projecting the poem as a "*writing–in–space*" that subverts the fixity not only of typed letters, but of the alphabet itself.

Before turning to the drawing poems, however, it is important to note that Grenier's particular version of projectivism is indebted in many ways to the "typewriter calligraphy" of Eigner, which itself revises Olson's notion of "composition by field." Grenier writes:

> "*calli + graphy*" — what is 'beautiful-writing' (in the eye of the beholder, certainly, but) it's not *only* 'the art of fine penmanship' — i.e, 'hand-writing', as in long-established Chinese and Japanese calligraphic practice — Larry Eigner's old royal portable typewriter, with its *keyboard* [. . .] has enabled him to make marks in space which *often* have exceptional written beauty, *as such* (not at all 'independent' of 'what the words say', but *as the means of saying it*) — one definition of 'beauty' is that '*it works*'! ("Introduction" xii)

Grenier and Eigner are certainly not the only writers who are thinking through the poetics of the Selectric. Poets as different as Robert Duncan and Charles Bernstein also fetishize the sanctity of the Courier type.[11] This raises the question of why such diverse poets all insist upon the same aesthetic — and one that is tied directly to their authorial mode of production. For Grenier, at least, the shift towards the hand-drawn eschews the kind of authorial presence of the poet's voice that Duncan's typography preserves[12] even as they ironically necessitate his presence as an interpreter to be read at all. For Grenier, however, the "beauty" of writing "is that '*it works*.'" Even as his poetry readings and lectures may serve as a "primer in effect" to help his reader/viewer learn how to decipher these poems, as he says in a talk at the University of Pennsylvania, the "beauty" of the drawing poems is that they continue to "work" and to work against any final or "authorized" reading ("Robert Grenier Reading"). By "work," Grenier means that the typographical words or hand-drawn letters call into existence the thing that they are shaping even as the poems exist as forms in space.

Grenier's reading of Eigner's "typewriter calligraphy" above is admittedly a romanticized conception of the poetic page, "so that what is 'said' (*on/in* that space) *happens*" ("Introduction" ix). Grenier's fundamental belief that words have the capacity to enact the world is precisely what we find in the above example from his series, *For Larry Eigner*, where reading "eyes see" turns the engagement with the materials of writing into an imaginative projection of the world. Grenier himself is a romantic poet: not only through his recurrent images of the pastoral landscape of moon, beach, trees; but also the ways in which he reaches back to Emerson's, Whitman's, and Williams's conception of America as a "new world" waiting to be discovered . . . and written.[13]

But what he learns from Eigner is what George Hart calls the difficulty of maintaining balance—a "temporary balance" (157) that "informs the 'footwork' of his poetry" (166).[14] It is well known that Eigner, from birth, was afflicted with cerebral palsy, which severely restricted his capacity to walk, move and type, as well as the clarity of his speech.[15] Grenier not only dedicated the book of draw-ing poems excerpted above to Eigner and edited and wrote the introduction to the four-volume edition of his collected poems (2010), but was also his friend and caretaker for many years, as well as a transcriber who typed up his pages. In an interview with Bernstein in 2006, Grenier objects to the characterization of Eigner's slurred speech as a "speech impediment." "He had a particular lingo," Grenier corrects. "Anyone could learn it" (Bernstein and Grenier). What Grenier objects to is the depiction of Eigner as person and poet that is predicated on some notion of "lack" or "loss"—predicated on a position of the "disabled" body as a negative term—rather than as an affirmative potential of difference that offers up alternative possibilities. Just as Eigner's poetry "unseats normalizing discourses of embodiment" (121), as Michael Davidson argues in "Missing Larry," so too does Grenier's "bad" handwriting unseat normalizing discourses of literacy and alphabetization. The patience to learn a new language—to learn Eigner's lan-guage—speaks to the kind of patience it takes to learn to read Grenier's own drawing poems. It is possible after all, as Grenier repeatedly insists in various talks and lectures, to learn to read these poems and to decipher this weird orthography, which, too, is a particular lingo that anyone can learn.

For Grenier, "Larry's work does not *derive* from his palsy—it is not 'an heart-ening example of what somebody with cerebral palsy can do [. . .] it's an '*example*' for all of us 'regular Americans' *how to think /see/ feel/move*" ("Afterword" n.p.). While Eigner, as Hart notes, "rarely writes his disability in representative terms" (155), his poetry nonetheless, as Davidson argues, "cannot help but be affected by it" (123).[16] Following Davidson, Hart argues that Eigner's brand of projectivism revises Olson's field composition in which we encounter an "upright poetics that places the poet at the center of space, arranging and composing" (163–4). Eigner's calligraphic space of the typewritten page is not neatly divided into horizontal and vertical quadrants, according to Hart, but is instead "motivated by a disabled subject position, whether from a wheelchair or a bed" (170) whereby "words create space on the page as they occur, and thus each word differentiates space,

settles it anew each time" (172–3). While Eigner subverts the predominance of the vertical axis of the poetic page, Grenier's vertical overlap of hand-drawn lines subverts the horizontal strata of color, creating a tenuous spatialization that stages the contingency of the poetic line: the convention of the poetic line continues to be central only by default, where words increasingly exist in a shifting landscape of relational lines. Grenier takes the capacity of Eigner's word to differentiate space down into the level of the letter, where the intensity of the drawing effort stretches the conventions of the letter shape such that each repetition "settles it anew each time." In other words, in the poem above "eyEs/seE," even as the letter "e" is repeated four times, there are four distinct versions of "e" that simultaneously integrate and differentiate the infinite variations in the visual alphabetic letter. What Grenier is looking for is the moment "where the letters are changing into each other," as he explains in University of Pennsylvania talk, "the momentary stability in each one which is altered by the next one. The world is in flux. That's my experience I hope" ("Robert Grenier Reading"). For both Eigner and Grenier alike, the space of the page becomes an embodiment of a "temporary balance," or as Hart writes, "a figurative strategy to find the balance that is enough" (167). For Grenier, we find a "temporary balance," in other words, that gestures *enough* toward the word while never solidifying it; that gestures *enough* toward the let-ter while never reifying it—a balance, that is, which incorporates into its very figuration the vibrations and erratic reduplications of the tottering, fumbling, stumbling—i.e., stuttering—hand.

     Stuttering, in fact, according to Craig Dworkin in "The Stutter of Form," is a "critical category" that "offers one way to understand the full range of inarticulate effects on display in the writings of the avant-garde and its broad challenge to the ideologies of normalcy, fluency, transparently communicative expository elo-quence, and any notion of a dematerialized or disembodied language" (182–3). As much as Grenier's orthography seems to register an inadequate or non-functional language, what Dworkin teaches us is that all language stutters. Stuttering, Dworkin argues, is neither an impediment nor a problem, but is in fact an inte-gral function of "normal" language production: "The ideology of transparent and referentially communicative language is so strong, however, that we tend to auto-matically overlook those dysfluencies [. . .] to which a range of corporeal opacities are in fact a perfectly normal part of speech production" ("Stutterer" 166). The "dysfluencies" of language, in other words, such sounds produced by the "intake and exhalation of air, the pool and swallow of saliva, disadhesions of moist flesh within the mouth, all the small percussive taps and clicks [. . .] are all necessary accompaniments to the normal operation of the gross physiological components of speech production" ("Stutterer" 166). The "dysfluencies" of language are not exceptions to the normal operations of language per se, but are in fact an intrinsic part of its fundamental production—be it in speech or, as I would argue, even in writing. The "dysfluencies" of language are a "necessary malfunction" ("Stut-terer" 167) that begins to measure the stutter not merely as a physiological process "registered *in* language," as Dworkin differentiates, but as a "structural principle"

that is "[r]egistered *as* language" ("Stutterer" 167). The stutter, in other words, is a language in its own right that "refers back to the material circumstances of its own production" (Dworkin, "Stutterer" 167–8).

Grenier's *letteralism* works precisely on this level of the stutter, impeding the easy consumption of language through the idiosyncratic and unpredictable waverings of the hand-drawn lines that interrupt and subvert our expectations of language comprehension. Despite the alphabet's predetermined logic and form, the irregularities of the letter shape become what Dworkin calls "wave interference" ("Stutterer" 171) that replaces communicative language with an entire visual field of stuttering erratic lines. As a "poetics of the stutter" (to borrow Dworkin's phrase ["Stutterer" 177]), Grenier's drawing poems invert the hierarchical relationship between communicative language and those "dysfluencies" that make language "malfunction." In other words, the "stutter," the "malfunction," the "dysfluencies" of Grenier's wayward lines is precisely the point: the irregularities and the reduplications of the hand-drawn lines embody the stutter as a formal and material consequence of writing by hand.

Through Dworkin's inversion of the stutter as part and parcel of the normal operations of language, Grenier's stuttering orthography similarly restores the conception of error as a problematic mistake or unintentional blunder to its Latin root, to *errare*, that is, to wander. If wandering is a mode of impeding progress and prevents us from getting somewhere, then it has an overtly political dimension which Grenier's wayward scrawls make explicit. While wandering is usually associated with inadvertent mistakes and lapses of attention, Grenier inverts this conception of disorientation, redefining it not as a negative predicament but instead as a constructive poetics — an act of making, after the Greek *poesis* — that re-imagines language as the unruling or unmeasuring of lines. Detouring from the standard course of the letter shape, Grenier's wobbly lines *détourne* the alphabet, to again reference the Situationist International, derailing its hegemonic form and turning it against the habitual ways it is used and encoded.[17]

GRENIER'S HAND-DRAWN LINES

Despite the fact that this is a poetry that cannot easily be reproduced, distributed, or even read, Grenier's drawing poems, nonetheless begin and end in language, in the fact of the written word, no matter how obscure it may seem to be. While this is a poetry that investigates the problems of reading and writing as a search for the discovery of new forms, "Grenier's scrawls," as Perelman writes, "are nothing if not poems" (55). Grenier's drawing poems, that is, never abandon the traditional concerns of poetry, composing a patterned arrangement of language that turns meter, structure, and form into the visual rhyming of hand-drawn lines and the rhythmic placing of letters. The term *drawing poem* explicitly alludes to the fact of writing, conferring upon itself the activity of the verb — the *drawing* or the *working* of this writing. Grenier writes: "The apparatus of the hands making marks + *entirely* preoccupied w/ moving fingers — as *if* that participated in the

World At Large in some *direct* way" (untitled essay 71). It is this idea of "making marks" that distances Grenier's drawing poems from Apollinaire's calligrammes. Grenier's drawing poems do not resolve into pictures, as Brian Reed notes: "There is nothing painterly or calligraphic about Grenier's penmanship" (67). Grenier, in other words, is not simply a painter with words. Grenier's writing instead retains what Roland Barthes in his essay on artist Cy Twombly calls "the gesture, not the product": "[W]hat is *shown* is the gesture. [. . .] Something like the surplus of an action" (160).[18] Or again, "*writing* no longer abides anywhere, it is absolutely in *excess*" (Barthes 161). As Reed argues in an essay that explicitly compares the "base" aesthetics of Twombly and Grenier, "Grenier's handwritten verse does not convey the same feelings of defacement and criminality as a Cy Twombly canvas" (70). Yet, it is this idea of "surplus" or "excess" that Barthes reads into Twombly's paintings that similarly activates Grenier's strange orthography—the excess of the gesture that, operating much like Dworkin's analysis of the stutter, impedes language consumption at the same time that it produces its particular form. Barthes's "excess" and "surplus," however, gives us terms for re-evaluating those "dysfluencies" and "malfunctions" of language without the "dys" and the "mal"—in other words, without the fundamental negative premise: the bad, wrongful, ill.

It is the gesture of this writing—the surplus of "making marks"—that animates these lines and that makes this poetry work. It is the gesture in all its excess that restores the activity and the agency of the verb that is so conspicuously absent from many of Grenier's scrawls:

MORE (green)	TREE (green)	RED W (green/blue)
SO (blue)	FROG (red)	OOOD (blue)
MOON (black)	A **ST** (black)	RED (black)
LIGHT (red)	**RETCH** (blue)	WOODS (red) [literally *red* woods]

The word *stretch* becomes a noun because of the modifying "a" as it stretches over the enjambed line but also returns us (via that visual prosody) to sound: to the "retching" croak of the frog as it stretches across the enjambed lines. The formation of "a st/retch," that is, enacts the attempt to build in verse an equivalent sound in the world. In other words, to read this poem aloud is to hear the sound of the tree-frog at the same time that the visual patterns of letters shaping themselves out of other letters are seen on the page. Even the few verbs that are there become adjectivized through the enjambment of the poetic line.

Consider the following examples:

COLOR / **SOAK** / KED / EUKES
CURL / ED UP / **SLEE** / PPS

Soak turns into soaked as the red line turns to green; curl turns into curled as the green line turns into black. The function of the verb is transferred to the line: on the one hand, to the enjambment of the poetic line as it moves from line to line of the poem but also to the gesture of the hand-drawn line—to the "making marks"—that endlessly defers the hierarchy of letter and of line.

Figures 4 and 5: "Color," No. 1 and "Tree / Frog," No. 6, *Six Poems / November 2003–January 2004*

Grenier's hand-drawn lines create a fragile spatial field in which all lines are contingent upon what Dworkin (in an essay that appropriates key phrases from Lyn Hejinian's *Writing is an Aid to Memory*) calls "***the rhythmic base***" of "the ***solid and mighty alphabet***" ("Parting with Description" 249) even as they work to displace it and to dispel the very homogeneity which is its figure and form. Through the material attention to the line, Grenier's drawing poems undermine yet strangely also reinforce the alphabet as a transparent assumption, forcing us to confront the poem not as a static image, but as a discourse of stuttering lines that nonetheless articulates its own making and unmaking, marking and unmarking not only as a process of deconstruction or deterioration but as an impulse that inverts the conception of error. To de-form or to de-viate is to wander with intention, to change orientation, and to confound expectations, which are means of defamiliarizing not only the ways in which language is normalized, embodied, and socially encoded, but also the ways that it serves as a corrective to larger categories of impediment.

Notes

1. Charles Olson credits Robert Creeley with formulating this phrase, which Olson then proposes as one of the basic tenets of "projective verse." See Olson 16.

2. Robert Frank and Henry Sayre write in their introduction, "This anthology is a response to a growing sense that one of the defining characteristics of recent American poetry has been its insistence on examining its own production, and that the poetic line—its status as a 'unit of measure,'

what determines its length, the effects which can be achieved at its 'turn'—has come to be the focus of this concern" (*The Line in Postmodern Poetry* ix).

3. See Perloff, "Lines Converging."

4. Paul Fussell similarly writes, "The impulse toward the metrical organization of assertions seems to partake of the more inclusive human impulse toward order" (4).

5. Robert Grenier's "I HATE SPEECH" manifesto was originally published in the first issue of the journal, *This* (1971): "To me, all speeches say the same thing, or: why not exaggerate, as [William Carlos] Williams did, for our time proclaim an abhorrence of 'speech' designed as was his castigation of 'the sonnet' to rid us, as creators of the world from reiteration of the past dragged on in formal habit. I HATE SPEECH."

6. Karl Young notes, "Although Grenier initially called these pieces 'scrawls,' he became dissatisfied with the term" (*verdure* 49). In both his performances and personal correspondences, Grenier has adopted the term "drawing poem" to describe these works, though still registering some reservations about this term as well.

7. While I am using the language of the vertical and horizontal axes of the poetic page, I am not specifically referring to Roman Jakobson's distinction between the metaphoric and metonymic processes of substitution and contiguity. Here, I mean literally that Grenier turns his notebook twenty-five degrees in order to have a larger vertical space in which to write. There is something to be said, however, about how Grenier's drawing poems do invert Jakobson's distinction. In effect, the metonymic axis of these poems does work on the vertical axis (whereby the four words combine into a syntactic phrase as one moves vertically down the page), while each word written across the horizontal axis of the page plays with the potential substitution of individual letters (whereby, perhaps metaphorically, there is an implied comparison made between the shape of the letter "r" and the shape of the letter "o" as seen in the poem above). See Jakobson 115–33.

8. Tim Shaner argues that by poaching the proofreading pens from the corporate law firm, Grenier's poetry enacts a "refusal of work" (172) and "contempt for the productionist logic of the laboring society" (173). Shaner's argument alludes to Michel de Certeau's model of "*la perruque*," or "the worker's own work disguised as work for his employer" (25). De Certeau writes, "Accused of stealing or turning material to his own ends and using the machines for his own profit, the worker who indulges in *la perruque* actually diverts time (not goods, since he uses only scraps) from the factory for work that is free, creative, and precisely not directed toward profit" (25). As a *diversion of time*, de Certeau's conception of *la perruque* gestures toward the situationist conception of the *dérive*—these are the "'popular' tactics turn to their own ends" (Certeau 26).

9. See <http://www-sul.stanford.edu/depts/hasrg/albit/amerlit/grenier.html>.

10. While this paper will only take up the influence of Larry Eigner, it should be noted that Grenier's work is also indebted in many ways to William Carlos Williams. See, for instance, Grenier, "Organic Prosody." In an interview with Bernstein, however, he dismisses the influence of e.e. cummings to his youthful infatuation with his high school girlfriend who gave him a book of cummings' poetry: "[cummings' work] didn't move me that much, but it certainly did open my eyes at the time" (Bernstein and Grenier).

11. As Peter O'Leary notes in "Prophetic Frustrations: Robert Duncan's *Tribunals*," in the stapled booklet, "Robert Duncan, *The Feast: Passages 34*" that accompanied the hardcover edition of *Tribunals*, "Duncan describes how the typewriter allows him to surpass the handwritten drafts of his poems in his notebooks, such that the machine virtually collaborates in the composition of the new draft, creating new developments in the poems, due to the special 'spacings and relationships' generated on the page" (133). Similarly, in an e-mail to Craig Dworkin, Charles Bernstein writes about his book *Poetic Justice*, "I made the pages myself with my new Selectric 2 typewriter, which really stamps it in retrospect" (Message to Craig Dworkin).

12. Duncan writes in the hardcover edition of *Tribunals*, "The printer's work, where the poet himself is not the printer, is an extension of the author's intension; the typed copy, where the poet works in typing, is the realization of those intensions" (qtd. in O'Leary 133).

13. Rozendale and Shaner write, "On the other hand, and despite its radical sense of departure, Grenier's work over the last decade does turn its gaze toward the past [. . .]: in terms of his recent interest in Emerson's conception of the 'new world,' in his finding continued currency in . . . Williams' *Spring and All* (where we discover the poet 'enter[ing] the new world naked')" ("Introduction" 47–8).

14. Hart argues that Eigner "associates walking and metered poetry—walking unassisted is not feasible for him because it is too difficult, and therefore rhymed verse, which he worked very hard at when he was younger, is equivalent to assisted walking. Eigner's poetics is walking by other means" (166).

15. Stephen Ratcliffe argues that to hear Eigner read his own poems creates a kind of notational score of the poem: "For if one cannot 'understand' Eigner speaking his poems—cannot make out what the words are—one nonetheless hears what is essential: place, tone, pitch, pause, silence read (pronounced) according to the poem's (page's) direction" (*Listening to Reading* 155).

16. According to Davidson, "Eigner's is decisively a poetry of the page, a field of intense activity produced entirely with his right index finger, the one digit over which he had some control. [. . .] Because Eigner needed to lean on the keys and peer closely at the sheet of paper, he could not use an electric typewriter and thus worked with a succession of Royal or Remington portables that permitted him a degree of flexibility in composition. The manual typewriter also allowed him to release the platen occasionally and adjust the spacing between words or lines, jamming letters or punctuation together or running one line onto the next. Eigner's careful spacing of letters and words, his indentations and double columns, could be seen as typographic idiosyncrasy, a variation of Charles Olson's "field" poetics, but they are also cognitive maps of his internally distanced relation to space (124–5).

17. Guy Debord defines *détournement* as "the reuse of preexisting artistic elements in a new ensemble" (55). Or again, "'Détournement is a game made possible by the capacity of *devaluation*,' writes Jorn in his study *Detourned Painting* (May 1959) [. . .] Détournement is thus first of all a negation of the value of the previous organization of expression. It arises and grows increasingly stronger in the historical period of decomposition of artistic expression. But at the same time, the attempts to reuse 'the détournable bloc' as material for other ensembles express the search for a vaster construction, a new genre of creation at a higher level" (55).

18. It should be noted that Brian Reed makes an explicit comparison between the "handwritten scrawl and base matter" of Grenier and Cy Twombly (68).

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