

INTRODUCTION

Larry Eigner had great eyes—he could look *right through you*, or, alternatively, he could *look right at you* (or both, at the same time).

That very *presence* of the eyes—and the intelligence and sympathy and ‘openness of understanding’ in them—was what was initially absolutely engaging to me, when I first walked up to the door at 23 Bates Road in Swampscott, Massachusetts in January 1971 (Larry’s workspace was the front porch)—this was determinative.

I was a creepy little magazine editor trying to crawl in there and get a poem (for nothing!) for my (unpublished) ‘periodical’ *this*—from the author of *From The Sustaining Air, On My Eyes and Another Time In Fragments*—and Larry welcomed me, warmly and openly. (This was his opportunity to *talk...*) His diminutive mother, Bessie, brought out a plate of snacks, and I was introduced to his father, Israel, who receded into the background of the house.

Because I couldn’t understand *At All* what he was saying—in his barrage of (palsied) speech—he had not had ‘opportunity to converse’ for so long!—in my *panic* (after all, I knew something of his work and was currently teaching his poems in my Modern Poetry class at Tufts), I asked Larry to read aloud several poems which I ‘knew in the book’—and thereby began the process of learning to hear what he was saying (because I could *see it on the page*, as he spoke).

I came out of there (after c. 2 1/2 hours, of that first interview) *utterly exhausted*—from the ‘language problem’ *and* trying to keep up with Larry’s relentless (‘monologue’) energy and ‘sidewise’/associational thinking. Afterward, I just sat in my car (the green Jeep, it would have been), before gathering myself to drive home to Lanesville, where Emily, Amy and I lived then.

It was immediately *clear* to me that Larry Eigner was a very considerable person, whose existence *shone forth from him* (how else say it?)—*and* who was one with a ‘*métier*’ (just like, differently, W. C. Williams—writing—despite Stein’s spiteful retort), a *measure*—a ‘homegrown/American’ *use of his typewriter* !

Did I emerge with a poem, for the first issue of our magazine, *this* ?

What emerged was a kind of onerous, ‘medieval apprenticeship’, in which I furthered his work with ‘selfless devotion’—*typing it up* !—and in that process, coming to understand what *I* might do/what my life’s energy might realize *different from/‘out’ from that* ! This edition is the ‘result’ of that apprenticeship, in part. (In former times, it was commonplace—how one learned and came to do the work, in a field—but nowadays, each new poet is supposed to be ‘brand new’ !)

For purposes of discussion—and to let Larry Eigner ‘introduce himself’—here are six poems (from the over 3,070 which follow) which Robert Grenier would like to be able to *take with him* to that ‘desert isle’ (presuming he could not avoid going there, and that there was time to pack). They are short enough so as not to fill up too many pages here (we mean no ‘discourtesy’ to LE’s many wonderful longer poems) and offer possibilities for commentary which may be of use to the reader encountering LE’s work for the first time (as well as offering a *brief respite*, before heading off into the ‘wilds’ that stretch off ahead). Five of them are represented in the Selected Typescripts section in Volume IV, as well as in the regular chronological sequence, so that the reader is invited to experience them (now or later) in something ‘like’ the form of LE’s original

typescript, too. Spacing in all six, which we have labored to perfect elsewhere to mirror the typewriter grid, is only approximate here (for purposes of discussion in this introduction).

September 21 65 # e b '

flock of birds
a moment
of one tree reached

apples fall to the ground

What is most remarkable here is the 'literalness' of the narrative quality of this 'middle period' poem—it shows LE's extraordinary ability by this time to synchronize the progress of the writing itself with the actual occasion *progressing* (through the telling—and maybe previously observed event (?)), as these words 'set it forth' (in prose, one thinks of the 'long' football pass sequence in Kerouac's *Visions of Cody* as having such a knack for absolute 'literalness' of exposition of event presented, in (seeming) 'real time').

The "flock of birds" flies into "one tree"—"a moment" later "apples fall to the ground"—that second "moment" is taken up by blank space (ordinarily simply a 'stanza break') *enacting time it takes* for apples to reach the ground (one can almost hear them thudding, as the six syllables ('created' by 21 separately typed letters) 'fall' on the page), after the crows (?) have landed and begun to ravage the tree; it will be noted that the "apples" have now reached the "ground" (many *pecked*), and that the three lines above them *in the poem* have become the 'verbal equivalent', in space, of the same *apple tree*. This kind of literalness of exposition by the text adds enormously to the 'truth value' of what is being said.

Also to be noticed is what is *not* apparent in the poem—the usual omnipresence of the personality of the poet telling us this (often 'compellingly') and some kind of (often moral) 'directive' from the poet (e.g., Robert Frost), *telling us* why this poem and what it says are 'significant'/worth telling. Here there is not even an 'I'—the poem begins when something begins to happen and ends when that does.

This 'living-oneself-inside-a-Moment' and speaking from within that 'lived experience' is, of course, a primary value in what Larry Eigner might have learned from (Romanticism) Keats and Pater, but look how well it's actualized by the invention of this poem itself (see IV, 1704) and many others like it!

June 17 68 # 2 1 2

moon

arithmetic
in the night

rain

This would be a mere 'journal entry' were it not for the fact of the way *reading this poem* puts one in the circumstance being presented—i.e., doing arithmetic “in the night” (*inside*) wherein at first the moon is shining (*outside*) and afterwards (in the progress of the poem)—*after* one has been doing some arithmetic—in time, it rains.

The work of doing arithmetic (by, presumably, a human?) is one space 'inside' (and in immediate one-space-relation to) the shifting 'outside' conditions nonetheless represented by different/four-letter words. The preoccupied/continuing *work* (of a human?) is thus literally situated (by the spacing-structure of the poem) within a wider, ongoing event, of which it is a part.

Stepping back a little ways, it's like seeing 'him there', in the house, through the window, from the street (as in a Vermeer)—or from space—maybe even *writing a poem* (in an essay called “not / forever / serious” in *areas / lights / heights*, LE calls “language in verse...a math of everyday life”) ? And certainly the moon/phases of the moon, etc., have had something to do with provoking mathematics.

Very 'condensed'/'simple'. In the Kansas typescript (see IV, 1708), this poem is centered on the 8 1/2 x 11” page (unusual for LE), using the whole page to frame/focus the image in its 'window'.

Seeing the words as composed of numbers (of letters) going about their business in/on the grid of the typewriter page.

February 18 69 # 2 8 9

the pastorage

symphony

the snow is

white white

in the yard

sunshine

the wind sheep

what do the clouds graze

in safety as

a child feels

heedless

of indoors

positioned slow like the aerial

half blown down

by the freak blizzard

what this place may be
unreally cold and wet
when the music was conceived

This poem would require a *long time* (and *many* words) to explicate *properly*—perhaps it would be better (as I used to think, when I was a teenager) to say nothing at all (instead construct a ‘signboard-of-myself’, wearing a white glove, *pointing toward it?*)—Fine ! This is it.

“Pastor”—shepherd, hence “sheep”. “unreally”—wow, is that a ‘real word’ ?

Imagine looking out the window (and into one’s mind) while listening to Beethoven’s 6th Symphony on February 18, 1969 during (and after) a “freak blizzard” and writing this poem—and all of these ‘elements’ are gathered together into one ongoing lifetime/lived moment on earth—all brought back suddenly/explicitly to inquire about the *origin* of (this poem and) the Pastorale Symphony in the strange (imaginary) conditions of being alive on earth “when the music [what is “music”?] was conceived” . . .

This poem demonstrates Larry Eigner’s ability (by February 1969) to bring the imaginative *range* he had sought to develop earlier, in more ambitious ‘excursions’, *back into* articulation of a present occasion, *including* the imagination (music, etc.), as part of perception of the ‘real world’.

This inclusion of a *lively* / ‘layered understanding’ of what-is-going-on, in the poem, is a *boon*—a considerable *Stimulus* to being and staying alive. (See xerox of LE’s typescript on IV, 1710.)

December 4 70 # 4 5 9

a dark day
all this time
clouds
birds in
the air
and it rains
trees
a few leaves
with
stand

If it's a *value* to have been alive, and to record aspects of what has been 'true' in existence (despite apparent oncoming extinction of all species—eventually including the humans—and LE was very much aware (through Rachel Carson and others) of 'our predicament', was himself an outspoken 'ecologist' early on), then it might be a *virtue* to record the facts of one of those December days in New England, when it all just seems so "dark" very possibly The World Is Coming To An End, in 'miniature'.

Or, it's 'only' the particular record of *this Day*—December 4, 1970.

The '*timing*' of what is being said here—relative to its articulation, moving through the (available) space of the typewriter page—is absolute/'immaculate', so that what is 'said' (*on/in* that space) *happens*.

Therefore, "a few leaves" are still there—even now, as we speak. (Cf. LE typescript at IV, 1715.)

May 3 71 # 4 9 9

the music of
the sea
beyond
the wood
the wind blows
the leaves
they stay
there such times
roots spread
flower
face the sky
sphere
ah the seed
not to choose

A 'prosperous', dreamy quality (perhaps best shown in 'dimestore' photo of LE on bio page of *Things Stirring / Together / Or Far Away*—a 'mistake' (?) shot of him 'blinking'/with his eyes shut, *but looking like* he was happily absorbed in whatever 'thought process' was then his good fortune to be wholly absorbed within!) governs this springtime reverie (which is nonetheless grounded in the 'facts of the season', which give this poem its 'force').

The “wood” and “the sea” are at once literally the very familiar trees over there (between the house at 23 Bates Road and Massachusetts Bay) and some (‘illuminated’) imaginary place (akin to Prospero’s island in *The Tempest*) to which LE’s imagination journeys and comes to know (and ‘occupy’) and articulate into possible experience for us, in this poem.

This very world is this magical place—where Earth’s renewal (in springtime) *occurs* ‘in real time’, of the seasons, and all this *energy* (making root-branch-flower-seed) is *everywhere around us*, on this living planet, in springtime.

How should one “choose” (alive within the living fact of it all) ‘*one*’ (rather than ‘another’) as a ‘better exemplar’ of this process (one thinks of Keats, who “cannot see what flowers are at my feet” in part because of their profusion) ? All round/about, it’s a “sphere”.

On page IV, 1716 below the reader may find a reproduction of a rare holograph 1st draft of this poem, followed on IV, 1717 by a (degraded *or improved?*) xerox of LE’s typewritten (next?) draft; this latter object is possessed of *extraordinary* ‘*beauty*’ and ‘*force*’, as a poem.

The word “seed” (especially as typed, in confirmation, toward left margin in LE’s typescript) seems actually to ‘seed itself’ into existence—as if the word “seed” could actually honor and ‘bring to pass’ *what is* (and continue to ‘operate’ and ‘*grow*’ into a next generation)—every (and any) poet might wish to develop the capacity to work within such “unexpected supply” !

“*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* (think Wanda Landowska and the harpsichord keyboard, upon which she performed Bach’s *Well-Tempered Clavier*), 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’ !

Larry Eigner was sufficiently ‘exercised’ by (and aware of) this connection that he wrote, in a marginal note to his poem # 1 1 1 7, beginning “calligraphy / typewriters” (see our various front cover dustjacket images made from LE’s typescript of this poem), “maybe this would be a good title for a Collected Poems”.

The typewriter, as a ‘machine’, made all possible—with the agency of the manual typewriter, one could range round (in the typewriter page—*if* one could type) with ‘perfect freedom’ (inside its grid—which could come to be a ‘whole world’) and capacity to *precisely* indicate exactly where each letter ‘goes’—it’s one ‘answer’ to Frost’s prickly objection to ‘free verse’—all that ‘room for opportunity’ and truth-telling ranging about inside the ‘net’ of the horizontal and vertical *grid* of the typewriter’s instrumental capacity, making particular (‘*various*’—one of LE’s favorite words) marks in space—which register *both* how a poem sounds in time (LE had little opportunity to deliver his verse aloud, to a wide audience—when he did, persons typically heard only his palsied speech) *and* how it can be experienced also/primarily (?) as ‘*beautiful*’/exact letter-relations/marks in space—i.e., ‘typewriter calligraphy’ !

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.

July 26f 90 # 1 6 9 0

footwork

skateboard

middle of the street

between trees

sunlight

This is a real 'moment' (evoking the appearance and vanishment of all such into and out of existence, and time)—but 'for the time-being', accomplishing itself inside an interwoven 'narrative-of-this-poem'—a very closely observed and 'animated-in-the-poem' skateboarder skateboarding down the middle of McGee Avenue in Berkeley—see how the trochaic accent emphases ("footwork"/"skateboard"/"middle") get balanced by that iamb "between", so as to evoke (for the reader) actual experience of two feet balancing on the board of that skateboarder (an interesting new word for LE)—and how would Larry Eigner *know that*, given his circumstance?—going down the middle of the poem (as if it *actually were* the "middle of the street")—all this in lines which (seem to) 'look like a skateboard' (now that I think about it!) moving forward steadily (one space at a time) rightward from the left margin.

In this poem, LE very deftly integrates the imagination (of how something might be done) with 'facts' (of what the eyes see) with language process (forming the occasion being typed into existence on the page): *one*—as if enabling anything to 'be', by writing it/testifying to it, were an ultimate value (*sotto voce*, without proclaiming this), as in Spinoza ("Being" is "the Good")—just letting whatever quietly *exist, through* these words (for you and me!) . . .

—Robert Grenier
Bolinas, CA
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