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**Two Recommendations: The Poetry of George Oppen and Larry Eigner**

**(Or, The Peculiarities of the Making of Cross-Cultural Literary History)**

What I'm here today to do is to make recommendations and to give advice.[1] I know that what I'm doing is a little bit (if not a lot) presumptuous and ridiculous, and that my talk, to some degree, mirrors consciously and unconsciously the very processes that I am talking about, particularly the idiosyncratic nature of the creation of literary historical representations in a cross-cultural and cross-linguistic domain. Of course, as someone who has visited China once before, in 1993, for a month, in association with the publication of a bilingual collection of poetry and essays,[2] and who neither speaks nor reads Chinese, what do I know? Truly, very little. In truth, my sense of "the Chinese reader" or of students and professors in China reading American poetry is hazy, imaginary, ill-informed, and peculiarly partial.

Yet, it intrigues me to open a conversation based on my limited knowledge. This spring (2013), I taught a graduate seminar at the University of Alabama called Black Mountain Extensions: George Oppen, Robert Creeley, John Taggart, and Larry Eigner. I am also in the process of working with Professor Nie, Professor Fuli, and several other translators on a bilingual edition of my selected poems.[3] My own representation in Chinese versions of the history of modern American poetry, particularly in the heroically diligent work of Zhang Ziqing, has always struck me as somewhat humorous, for I am reasonably certain that once this bilingual selected poetry is published in China, I will have more readers here (in China) than in the US. (And yes, I am aware that there are more speakers of English in China than in the United States. But that's another story…)

But more important for today's talk, because there was a very bright Chinese doctoral student – Xiaoshang Yang (an Assistant Professor at Ocean University in Qingdao, China) – in my seminar, I became interested in learning about how these four poets were being represented in Chinese histories and anthologies of American poetry. As I learned more about the idiosyncratic nature of that representation, I began to focus more carefully on the situations for Oppen and Eigner, discovering that

[1] This essay is an expanded, revised version of a talk I presented in Wuhan at Central China Normal University, June 8, 2013, for The 2nd Convention of the Chinese/American Association for Poetry and Poetics & The International Symposium on Modern and Contemporary Literature in English.
[2] *Selected Language Poems*, translated by Zhang Ziqing and Yunte Huang, Sichuan Literature and Art Publishing House, Chengdu: 1993.
[3] See also "The Intellectual Mode of Thinking in American Contemporary Innovative Poetry: An Interview with Hank Lazer," Liu Fuli, *Foreign Literature Studies*, Vol. 35, No. 2 (April 2013): 1-11.

in Oppen's case, he is written about as "a minor Objectivist poet" (even though his major work follows many years after that brief movement), while Eigner is seemingly not represented at all. It seems to me – even with my own admittedly spotty and incomplete knowledge about Chinese anthologies and histories of American poetry – that Oppen and Eigner present stunningly exciting instances of a body of poetry that will probably prove to be of immense interest to Chinese audiences.

George Oppen, was born in 1908 and died in 1984. Eliot Weinberger summarizes Oppen's early writing life: "He had published a tiny book of enigmatic poems in 1934, then had joined the Communist Party and stopped writing."[4] In this first phase of his writing life, Oppen established friendships with Louis Zukofsky, Charles Reznikoff, Ezra Pound, and William Carlos Williams. Oppen was a member of the Communist party who lived in exile from the US for a number of years in the 1950s in Mexico before returning (and resuming the writing of poetry after a 25 year silence) once the McCarthy era and its rabidly anti-communist persecutions died down in the US. His poetry offers, particularly in his Pulitzer Prize winning collection and its title poem, *Of Being Numerous*, an in-depth engagement with the complex question of how to reconcile our individual and collective identities. What could be a better tension and area of speculation to engage readers in China of the early 21st-century in its breath-taking cultural and economic transformation than a poetry concerned with what Oppen calls "the shipwreck of the singular" (as well as the enduring allure and appeal of singularity and the individualized poetic and artistic consciousness) and the compelling desire to be part of a larger collective entity.

At the heart of Oppen's poetics there are several famous passages of poetry and guiding principles for Oppen's poetic investigations. In "Guest Room" (from *This In Which*, 1965), Oppen suggests that his poetry constitutes a way[5]

> To go perhaps unarmed
> And unarmored, to return
>
> Now to the old questions –

And that is exactly what Oppen's poetry does – it returns to a series of metaphysical concerns: the nature of being and time (thus aligned with a similar return to "the old questions" in the philosophy of Heidegger); what are the essential elements of our language, and how might we write a poetry that is something other than merely clever; where should we direct our attention in this world; and how can we reconcile the competing and seemingly opposed claims of our singular and collective lives.

For Oppen, the poetry that results is somewhat stripped down to essentials – few ornamental or "creative" flights of language-play, an ethically insistent poetry bent on seeing anew and seeing and understanding (to the extent that understanding is possible) what matters. In "Route" (from *Of Being Numerous*, 1968), he declares,[6]

> Clarity, clarity, surely clarity is the most beautiful

[4] *New Collected Poems*, p. xiii. (Subsequent references: NCP)
[5] NCP, p. 109.
[6] NCP, p. 193

thing in the world,
A limited, limiting clarity

I have not and never did have any motives of poetry
But to achieve clarity

Personally, I find that Oppen's quest for clarity – particularly "a limited, limiting clarity" – links his writing to that of Larry Eigner and also to a long-standing Chinese tradition of nature poetry that pursues an intensified clarity of observation.

As in much of the poetry in the Chinese classical poetic traditions, Oppen, though writing out of a radically different political and social culture, in "World, World – " (the concluding poem from *This In Which*, 1965), makes the proper focus of our existence and our writing quite clear:[7]

'Thought leaps on us' because we are here. That is the fact
of the matter.
Soul-searchings, these prescriptions,

Are a medical faddism, an attempt to escape,
To lose oneself in the self.

The self is no mystery, the mystery is
That there is something for us to stand on.

We want to be here.

The act of being, the act of being
More than oneself.

As an aside, I think that a fruitful topic for the cross-cultural poetics central to this conference would be a thorough exploration of the differences between a Chinese and an American sense of "self" and of the related concept of "interiority" (or an "interior world"). Oppen, writing at the height of an American economic boom in the early 1960s, at a time of bristling national confidence in the prospects of global capitalism and the seemingly endless path of a personalized, consumer economy, stands in opposition to an American (Western?) fascination with the self. As Confessional poetry began to emerge in the 1960s as an American cultural product closely aligned with an entire cultural turn toward an obsession with self-fulfillment, self-knowledge, and self-development, Oppen's poetry turned our attention – or re-turned our attention, in the spirit of "the old questions" – toward the ground of our living and being.[8]

[7] NCP, 159.

[8] Oppen's turn away from self-obsession and his decisive turn toward the world itself is remarkably similar to the central project of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology. Consider, for example, Merleau-Ponty's remarks in the Preface to *Phenomenology of Perception*: "The world is not an object whose law of constitution I have in my possession; it is the natural milieu and the field of all my thoughts and of all my explicit perceptions. Truth does not merely 'dwell' in the 'inner man'; or rather, there is no 'inner man,' man is in and toward the world, and it is in the world that he knows himself" (lxxiv). Such a passage is also deeply resonant and consistent with the opening

That fascination with the self and with self-expression as the seemingly "natural" ground for American poetry persists to this day. Ever since my first trip to China in 1993, whenever I work with introductory poetry and arts classes, I will ask the students to complete this sentence: "when a poet writes, he or she tries to …" Inevitably, the overwhelming American response is "express his or her feelings." Within American consumerist culture, it is assumed as natural and right that our poetry should simply be another element in a culture obsessed with *my* tastes, *my* interests, *my* personal history, *my* journey, etc. When I suggest to students that in fact there may be radically different ways to complete that sentence, some students are so unable to think of any other options that they will stop me after class to ask what other responses might be possible.

Of course, I am struck by the way that a poetry with an emphasis on the "personal" or the "singular" can take on radically different meanings depending on the cultural and ideological context of the writing. Just as I was struck in 1993 with the great difference in meaning of a personally expressive poetry as written in China vs. a similar poetry in the US, as I've established friendships with a range of Cuban poets, particularly Reina María Rodríguez, I am again re-learning that lesson of the culturally and historically specific meaning of the personally expressive.[9]

But back to Oppen. What matters, according to Oppen, is the very enigmatic complex fact *of our being here*. What matters is that there *is* a world here. For Oppen, the mysteries worth investigating are not those of the psychologized self; rather, the fundamental mysteries are of being, and of being here, and the ways in which an engagement with the terms of being here offer us an opportunity "of being/ More than oneself." The ground of that enigmatic state of being is best realized in Oppen's poem "Psalm" (from *This In Which*, 1965) which begins[10]

> In the small beauty of the forest
> The wild deer bedding down –
> That they are there!
>
> Their eyes
> Effortless, the soft lips
> Nuzzle and the alien small teeth
> Tear at the grass
>
> The roots of it
> Dangle from their mouths
> Scattering earth in the strange woods.
> They who are there.

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lines of Oppen's "Of Being Numerous." In a letter written to Mike Heller sometime in November 1975, Oppen does indicate that he "read quite a bit of Merleau-Ponty" (*Selected Letters*, p. 311).

[9] In addition to the incredibly rapid modernization, affluence, and transformation in China since my first visit in 1993, I was struck – in conversation and discussions – by a sharp turn among Chinese students, readers, poets, and professors in the direction of a personally expressive poetry. My sense in 1993 of a sharp contrast between the assumptions of American poets/readers and Chinese poets/readers when thinking about the centrality of self-expression to the poetic enterprise has mostly evaporated.

[10] NCP, 99.

As in "World, World –," it is finally the circumstances, nature, and context of our being here – the mysterious ground of our being – that catches Oppen's attention. Thus, "Psalm" concludes,[11]

> The small nouns
> Crying faith
> In this in which the wild deer
> Startle, and stare out.

And thus for Oppen, that quest for "clarity" is linked to intensified care with and attention to the smallest of words: in, this, in which… These words, without adornment, allow us a glimpse into the enigmatic and often over-looked nature of our being. In Eigner, too, we will find a similar faith in the "small nouns," and in the seemingly flat poem that embodies that renewed experience of being here and staring out (and into).

But the primary work by Oppen that I am here today to recommend to you is "Of Being Numerous" (from *Of Being Numerous*, 1968) a poem I personally find to be the best and most important American long poem of the latter half of the 20th-century and a poem that Henry Weinfield suggests includes "as moving a poetic affirmation as any that our century has produced, as any it affords and perhaps allows."[12] In my presentation today, all I will really be able to do is point toward key topics, questions, and issues that arise in Oppen's forty section long poem.

"Of Being Numerous" begins,[13]

> There are things
> We live among 'and to see them
> Is to know ourselves'.
>
> Occurrence, a part
> Of an infinite series,
>
> The sad marvels;
>
> Of this was told
> A tale of our wickedness.
> It is not our wickedness.

Thus Oppen's great poem announces itself as one that will consider how we see the world and how we come to know ourselves through those acts of perception – and in this particular element of the poem,

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[11] NCP, 99.
[12] *The Music of Thought in the Poetry of George Oppen and William Bronk*, p. 92.
[13] NCP, 163. (Note: Appendix A, at the end of this essay, provides translations into Chinese of all passages quoted from Oppen's "Of Being Numerous." The translation is by Xiaosheng Yang, and his translation of "Of Being Numerous" will appear in *Contemporary International* Poetry, edited by Xiaodu Tang and Chuan Xi, published by China Writers Publishing House.

we have an important link with Larry Eigner's poetry. Oppen's poem also points toward human culpability, as well as our status, like things, as "a part/ Of an infinite series".

For my remarks today, though, I wish to point toward a particular strand within Oppen's poem, one that begins with an observation about modern living applicable to the changing American world of the late 1960s but perhaps even more so to contemporary China: "We are pressed, pressed on each other" (NCP, 165). The central dilemma that emerges from Oppen's long meditative poem is how to reconcile the opposing appeals of a focus on human singularity and human community, with Oppen's abiding sense that the history of the 20th-century is one that exposes the horrors of the willful inflicting of our somewhat insane singularity. The seventh section of Oppen's poem states one side of the choice:[14]

> Obsessed, bewildered
>
> By the shipwreck
> Of the singular
>
> We have chosen the meaning
> Of being numerous.

While Oppen's own poetry may be thought of as a romantic metaphysical poetry, any heroizing of the "genius" of the artist's singular vision meets with skepticism, guilt, and questioning – truly a kind of vectored thinking that pushes back against its own assumptions, experiences, and claims. Thus the ninth section of the poem begins by quoting from a letter sent to Oppen by the poet Rachel Blau DuPlessis (in the middle of demonstrations at Columbia University protesting the US involvement in the Vietnam War) and arrives at an understanding of the centrality of this critique of singularity as crucial to the entire enterprise of making poetry itself:[15]

> 'Whether, as the intensity of seeing increases, one's distance
> from Them, the people, does not also increase'
> I know, of course I know, I can enter no other place
>
> Yet I am one of those who from nothing but man's way of
> thought and one of his dialects and what has happened
> to me
> Have made poetry
>
> To dream of that beach
> For the sake of an instant in the eyes,
>
> The absolute singular
>
> The unearthly bonds
> Of the singular

[14] NCP, 166.
[15] NCP, 167.

Which is the bright light of shipwreck

Surely this tension between the vision/experience of the intellectual and the artist in relation to "the people" is a topic central to the thinking of a range of Chinese poets and political theorists, not the least of whom would be Mao Zedong. Oppen's answer to this question – must the intensity of seeing (and thus of thinking and writing) inevitably involve the creation of a gulf between the poet and the people – is to offer his honest observation and experience. He, too, has made a poetry from what he had at hand – a particular language, a dialect of that language, and a set of particular (and somewhat individualized) experiences. And, he suggests, that individuality of experience does in fact lead one toward that "bright light of shipwreck" that is peculiarly the province of that blindingly singular insight and instant. But it is equally true that Oppen's poem, and life, is constructed as an investigatory antidote to the lure of the singular, an ethical endeavor in search of a just way both to honor and overcome the lure of the singular.

In the twenty-seventh section, Oppen again addresses the complex issues of human solidarity (in its infinite particularity) vs. the perception of an underlying unity. In fact, the writing of poetry itself occurs (and must occur) at this complex intersection, of giving voice to an infinite particularity vs. a declaration of a perceived unity:[16]

It is difficult now to speak of poetry –

about those who have recognized the range of choice or those
who have lived within the life they were born to – . It is not
precisely a question of profundity but a different order of expe-
rience. One would have to tell what happens in a life, what
choices present themselves, what the world is for us, what hap-
pens in time, what thought is in the course of a life and there-
fore what art is, and the isolation of the actual

I would want to talk of rooms and of what they look out on and
of basements, the rough walls bearing the marks of the forms,
the old marks of wood in the concrete, such solitude as we
know –

and the swept floors. Someone, a workman bearing about him,
feeling about him that peculiar word like a dishonored father-
hood has swept this solitary floor, this profoundly hidden
floor – such solitude as we know.

One must not come to feel that he has a thousand threads
in his hands,
He must somehow see the one thing;
This is the level of art

[16] NCP, 180.

> There are other levels
> But there is no other level of art

As Michael Davidson explains, Oppen's poetry helps to establish "a crucial link between the generation of Pound and Williams and the New American poets such as Robert Creeley, Robert Duncan, and Charles Olson," and the work of Oppen resonated "with a younger generation of poets, such as Rachel Blau DuPlessis, Paul Auster, Ron Silliman, Barrett Watter, Sharon Olds, David Antin, David Bromige, John Taggart, Michael Palmer, and Charles Bernstein."[17] For me personally, Oppen remains the most important, challenging, and inspiring American poet of the latter half of the 20th-century. When we used to play the desert island game – you are stranded on a desert island and can only take three books with you (a decidedly pre-iPad, pre-Kindle game) – Oppen's Collected was always one of my three choices. I urge Chinese poets, scholars, and readers to explore Oppen's writing.

Let us now consider the poetry of Larry Eigner, born in 1927, died in 1996. One version of Eigner's biography – his brother Richard Eigner's "An Origin and a Setting" begins,[18]

> Because of the severity of his birth injury and resultant cerebral palsy, Larry Eigner lived almost all of his first fifty-one years in the family home, a duplex clapboard house at 23 Bates Road, Swampscott, Massachusetts.

Richard later notes,[19]

> Along with the identification of Larry's birth injury as cerebral palsy came the widely accepted claim that this disability impaired cognitive capacity, as if limitations on Larry's mental development would match limitations on his capacity to manage his body's physical movements. Larry's mother Bess would not accept this claim. The campaign of her life became educating Larry and enabling him to experience a rich inner life consonant with the level of humane culture that she had absorbed in the Salem of her girlhood that she cherished.

More directly concerned with the innovative forms that Eigner developed in his poetry, Michael Davidson notes the circumstances and adventurousness of Eigner's compositional methods:[20]

> 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. The page – specifically the 8 ½" by 11" typewriter page – is the measure of the poem, determining its lineation, length and typographic organization. Although a few poems run on for several pages, often as not Eigner continues the poem as a second column on the same page. Nor is the machine by which he produced those pages insignificant. 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

[17] NCP, p. xxxii.
[18] CP4, xxxv. (All references are to Eigner's *Collected Poems*, cited as CP, along with the appropriate volume number, followed by the page number.)
[19] CP4, xxxv.
[20] Davidson, 7. (Page citations refer to an online version of Davidson's essay.)

> 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 identations and double columns, could be seen as typographic idiosyncrasy, a variation on Charles Olson's "field" poetics, but they are also cognitive maps of his internally distanced relation to space.

Although biographical information is useful in reading Eigner, we should also beware of a reductive reading which over-emphasizes the biographical or which reads the poetry merely as a manifestation of or expression of Larry's disability. In fact, in the several thousand poems that he wrote, Eigner very rarely refers to his own physical disability nor to the circumstances of his compositional practice. If we wanted to work with biographical information, it might make more sense to think about how, in Ben Friedlander's telling of it,[21]

> 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*). (DLB, 5)

Corman, a key figure in the development of Black Mountain poetics, developed a correspondence with Eigner, and introduced Larry to a wide range of poets, including Robert Creeley (who published Eigner's first collection of poetry). Eigner developed an extensive set of literary friendships, including with Denise Levertov and Robert Duncan – the latter acknowledges that Eigner's arrangement of words on the page influenced his own compositional practice.

Or, in terms of literary history and literary movements, one might situate Eigner within or in proximity to Language writing. Indeed, a piece by Eigner is the very first item in the first issue of *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* magazine, and Ron Silliman's anthology, *In the American Tree* (still the most substantial anthology of Language poetry to date), is dedicated to Eigner. But one might also want to keep in mind Eigner's own repeated assertion that he did not understand Language poetry.

Or, one might simply stop in wonder at Eigner's amazing persistence, energy, determination, and genius to have written approximately three thousand poems, published over 30 books of poetry, and developed a wide-ranging active correspondence. One result of his work is the ground-breaking four volume *The Collected Poems of Larry Eigner* published by Stanford University Press in 2010 (scrupulously edited by Robert Grenier and Curtis Faville). An absolutely indispensable resource for developing a

[21] DLB, 5. (Citations for Friedlander's entry are identified as DLB, for the *Dictionary of Literary* Biography series, followed by the appropriate page number for the online version of the article.)

sense of Eigner's poetry is the PennSound website, which includes audio and video files of Eigner reading a number of his poems: http://writing.upenn.edu/pennsound/x/Eigner.html .[22]

There are two primary analogies or lenses through which I'd like to pursue a description or deepening of our sense of what's occurring in many of Eigner's poems. These two areas – and, admittedly, neither is a perfect fit, and for neither do I have any certainty that Eigner read these writings – are the perspectives involved in classical Chinese poetry (in the early development of Zen and Taoist poetry) and the renewed modes of perception sought by Merleau-Ponty in his late work, particularly *The Visible and the Invisible*. For today's talk, I will focus only on the former – the similarities of Eigner's poetry to early Chinese poetry – while I reserve the writing on a phenomenology of perception for a later date.

In David Hinton's remarkable book *Hunger Mountain: A Field Guide to Mind and Landscape* (2012), a book given to me by Glenn Mott, author of an important book of poetry, *Analects on a Chinese Screen* (2007), and an important writer on Chinese culture, politics, and poetics, I ran across the following summary (which is part of Hinton's reading of a poem by Tu Fu), which struck me as equally applicable to Eigner's work:[23]

> . . . for the grammar of classical Chinese is minimal in the extreme. It allows a remarkable openness and ambiguity that leaves a great deal unstated. Prepositions and conjunctions are rarely used, leaving relationships between lines, phrases, ideas, and images unclear. … And very often subjects and objects are absent, which creates the sense of individual identities blurred together into a shared space of consciousness. This openness is dramatically emphasized in the poetic language, which is far more spare even than prose. In reading a Chinese poem, you mentally fill in all that emptiness, and yet it always remains emptiness, the space into which Tu Fu's moon perennially rises.

In Eigner's poetry limitation itself is more apparent than in most poetry. I believe that in reading most poetry we do experience a vague sense of limitation – perhaps a quality of humility, or limitation of scope, or a constraint on thinking too expansively. But Eigner's poetry verges on making of limitation a palpable fact. And it is a virtuous thing. A quality of honesty, clarity, and integrity as each word is meant (and painstakingly typed, with great effort and determination), and carries with it both a simplicity (due to its generic or collective vocabulary – birds, tree, air) and the exploratory or heuristic quality of a vocabulary or language being tested for its capacities. Similarly, Larry, in his precise arrangement of the words on the page, is testing the expressive qualities and capacities of spatialization itself.

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[22] Similarly, PennSound has extensive audio and video files of Oppen his reading his work: http://writing.upenn.edu/pennsound/x/Oppen.php . The PennSound website and other similar poetry websites have had a significant effect on how modern and contemporary poetry is being taught in the US.

[23] David Hinton, *Hunger Mountain*, p. 15. Subsequent citations: HM, followed by page number.

The frame of mind – call it a poetics – of Eigner's poetry then is one that sets the self to the side and, as in Thoreau's later journals, is essentially anti-transcendentalist in its fundamental impulses. That is, rather than reflecting on the poet/speaker's emotional state and personal circumstances, the poem is filled by the act of perception itself. And rather than *using* the natural world as a resource for "more important" symbolic assertions, the natural object, intensely seen, becomes an end itself. Paradoxically, this act of intensified restraint carries with it its own spiritual, transcendent experience. Again, this quality of limitation or self-restraint is one that I find echoed in Hinton's analysis of Tu Fu's poetry:[24]

> That instrumental relationship [i.e., using the landscape to focus on the speaker or to create a lexicon of symbols] to landscape is missing here. A Chinese poem is, by convention, about the poet's immediate experience, so we register Tu Fu's presence in the poem as images, as a particular constellation of the ten thousand things. Independent, existing in and of themselves rather than serving as metaphor or symbol or stage-setting for the human drama, those images fill the opening of consciousness, which is to say they quite simply are Tu Fu's identity at that moment.

If we begin, then, to examine specific poems by Eigner, rather than leaning too heavily on a kind of poetics and philosophy of language that, oddly, may remove us slightly from the particularity of the poems themselves (even though the poems are the implicit starting point for these speculations), we can begin to identify recurring concerns and perceptions. #30, for example, identifies an ongoing concern throughout much of Eigner's poetry:[25]

not
perfect aim

at the real

what's
here

as far as you can picture

no definition

or necessity, it somewhat

something from the past

a tree is not shaped
like a star

a cloud is a moment
like a tree

[24] HM, 20.
[25] CP3, #30, August 29f 1966, p. 747. (For translation, see Appendix B.)

The poems constitute an ever-ongoing "aim/ at the real", the poem being an attempt both to say something about "the real", but equally or perhaps more important to provide *an instance of "the real"*, a representation that is absolutely inseparable from the means of making the poem. In Eigner's poetry, there is a highly circumscribed locale – "what's/ here" – and the power of the poems comes from our sensing of things coming into view, of the act of perception arising coincidental with the poem's making. That coincidental arising occurs most beautifully with the sudden shift in direction in the lines "or necessity, it somewhat// something from the past// a tree is not shaped/ like a star".

Or, as Eigner states it in a brief poem that is also a kind of mini-poetics:[26]

a poem is a
characteristic
length of time

The poem *is* an interval of time. Actually, several intervals: the length of time of composition; and the length of time of the reading of it (or the intervals of reconsideration). The poem becomes tied to (if not equal to) a feel for time and its elusive, endlessly complex and variable characteristics. Or, as Eigner writes it,[27]

how to

take things

slow

so much

The poem is a slowing of time through an engagement with attention – a slowing down by means of consciousness becoming aware of itself. It is by taking "things / slow" that things have an opportunity to become "so much". The process of slowing attention occurs, in part, through the layout of the poem, with the white or blank space providing both the necessary space and time to allow (and invite) the reader's eyes and mind to "slow// so much". Eigner's poetry – constrained by his own physical limitations and the limitations on his mobility and location – is a deeply moving and engaging instance of perception occurring, of perception and consciousness (and the spatially expressed engagement of these experiences in, of, by, through, and with language):[28]

my back
to the front of the house
inside inside
what is this sense of moving
through life

[26] CP3, #119, September 4, 1967, p. 797. (For translation, see Appendix B.)
[27] CP3, #1087, June 24, 1978, p. 1344. (This is the poem in its entirety.)
[28] CP3, #350, October 3, 1969, p. 924.

And how is it that Eigner, perhaps better than any of us?, is able to give us this tangible sense of living *in time*, of that "sense of moving/ through life"? A helpful phrase again comes from my reading of David Hinton's *Hunger Mountain*, when he writes of "mind moving through the occasions of its attentions" (93). First, perhaps it requires Eigner's particular ability "to/ take things/ slow/ so much" in order to feel, experience, and be aware of "mind moving through the occasions of its attentions". But I also think that Eigner, in the course of writing more than three thousand poems and in the physical labor of placing the words so precisely and idiosyncratically, learned the value of a profoundly stripped rhetoric in making apparent the experience of a mind in time.

Eigner's poems present him and us with a set of instructions – of how to regain a feel for time and for the miraculous arising of perception:[29]

Don't cut
time to pieces
Let it stand

inside invisible

again and again

it will work as it happens

your eyes open

It is tempting and perhaps accurate to speak of *time* and *space* – or consciousness, or the arising of perception in time and space – as Eigner's recurring topics or concerns. I say *perhaps* accurate because the volume and range of his poetry makes me wary of thematizing his writing. To identify organization-by-theme as a primary task of reading is also, if we are not careful, akin to strip-mining – a process of extraction that exploits a verbal terrain and eliminates from consideration perhaps equally important non-thematizable elements.

At their best, his poems move toward a mimesis, but not a mimesis of description of physical objects, but rather a mimesis of the processes of consciousness, of thoughts arising, being in motion, and settling or ending. The deliberate spacing on the page – and I grew curious about this spacing, wondering how exact and deliberate it had been (in light of Eigner's extreme difficulty in managing the physical process of writing itself), so I asked my friend Jack Foley, a close friend of Eigner, if he had observed Larry writing (composing at the typewriter), and Jack affirmed the absolute precision of the process[30] – gives us an instance or interval of consciousness that, by means of the poem, and how our eyes/mind move in reading it, we can revisit and experience anew:[31]

a structured field

[29] CP3, #451, October 24, 1970, p. 978. (For translation, see Appendix B.)
[30] Email from Jack Foley to me, June 11, 2012.
[31] CP3, #539, July 18, 1971 (complete poem), p. 1028.

the mind

light

and the view

with whatever eyes

What I feel in reading many of Eigner's poems is a mind awakening afresh to the moment of seeing and, simultaneously, the moment of engaging that process of mind-opening perception in language.

One might be tempted to read many of Eigner's poems as a kind of contemporary haiku, or as a contemporary version of the immediacy found in many poems in the classical Chinese poetry tradition. Consider, for example, this Eigner poem:[32]

surrounded by air

the silent life

bird calls

a tree moves

When I first began working with Xiaosheng Yang on translations of Eigner's poems, I thought it would be easy because, I thought, Larry's poems are often very much a poetry of the noun. But what might be more difficult to bring over into a translation is the deliberate indefiniteness of Larry's nouns. At first glance, we think we are getting a haiku-like poetry that gives us an instant of precise vision. In fact, Eigner's nouns dissolve or live in a multi-directional enigmatic space. *What exactly is* "surrounded by air"? Is it the speaker/viewer (an implicit *I*)? The reader (an implicit *you*)? Do we continue through the line break and think that perhaps it is "the silent life" that is "surrounded by air"? And what then is that "silent life"? Larry's own life alone? Our life as the silent reader of the poem? The space in which a "bird calls" and thus brings that silent life and still moment into sound, and then into motion as "a tree moves"?

I am reminded of David Hinton's remarks about the language of classical Chinese poetry – "its grammatical elements are minimal in the extreme, allowing a remarkable openness and ambiguity that leaves a great deal unstated: prepositions and conjunctions are rarely used, leaving the relationships between lines, phrases, ideas, and images unclear."[33] Hinton links what he calls "empty grammar and graphic form" to "the Taoist cosmology that became the conceptual framework shared by all poets in the mature written tradition" (CCP, xxi). When Hinton describes the way that a classical Chinese poem mirrors a cosmological process, I find the description (almost) applicable to a poem such as Eigner's #193:

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[32] CP3, #193, May 8, 1968 (complete poem), p. 840. (For translation, see Appendix B.)
[33] *Classical Chinese Poetry*, xx-xxi. (Subsequent references as CCP.)

> At the level of deep structure, words in the poetic language function in the same way as presence, the ten thousand things, and the emptiness that surrounds words function as absence. Hence, the language doesn't simply replicate but actually participates in the deep structure of the cosmos and its dynamic process; it is in fact an organic part of that process. And the pictographic nature of the words, enacting as it does the "thusness" of the ten thousand things, reflects another central concept of Taoist cosmology: *tzu-jan*, the mechanism by which the dynamic process of the cosmos proceeds, as presence arises out of absence. (CCP, xxii)

I say "almost" because with my good friend Yunte Huang in the audience, Yunte being the author of the books *Transpacific Displacements* and *Transpacific Imaginations*,[34] I suspect that it may well be that the perceptual and grammatical constructions that I am attributing to classical Chinese poetry are merely displaced western imaginings with a mixed or tenuous basis in fact. So let me be clear: I am not suggesting that Eigner's poetry is an instance of classical Chinese poetry nor a continuation of those language models; nor am I even certain as to how much Chinese poetry Eigner read (and read, no doubt, in translation). I am also aware that even if there is a remarkable similarity in the poetry, that the cultural context of that expressiveness must, of necessity, be radically different, and that those differences merit explication. What I am trying to do is present a poetry – Larry Eigner's, as well as George Oppen's – that will provide an occasion for some very invigorating cross-cultural and cross-linguistic conversations. I fully expect to learn a great deal about classical (and contemporary) Chinese poetry and about the poetry of Oppen and Eigner from these ensuing conversations.

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