

DISTRIBUTIONS OF AUTHORSHIP:
POETRY AS A SCENE OF DECISION

I only want to bring you to the point where this choice truly has meaning for you. It is on this everything turns. As soon as a person can be brought to stand at the crossroads in such a way that there is no way out for him except to choose, he will choose the right thing. . . . That is why I said the ethical constitutes the choice.

—Søren Kierkegaard¹

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I want to begin with the question of authorship, and specifically to bring into relation two theories of authorial intention that persist in the world of poetics, apart from the otherwise thorough rethinking of authorship in postmodern academia. Indeed, it may be that a special relationship to the author constitutes the field of poetics as one of innovation—in order for innovation to occur, authorship must be granted in the immediate here and now. But what kind of authorship must we admit as creators and critics of the new? Certainly not that of the author as sublime and inaccessible guarantor of meaning, as in the alignment of Milton with his God as necessary condition of “literariness,” nor perhaps its shadowy double, either—the material text as irreducible substrate of sublime authorship, where the inaccessibility of the author in the first case leads to its irreducibility in the second, the theory of the material text that the “reader makes meaning.” What is significant about these dual aspects of an ancient theory of authorship—the sublime as inaccessibly unknowable or materially irreducible—is their capacity for reproduction. A kind of blank space or indeterminate zone emerges precisely between the author and the work as a space of desire, projection, social reflexivity, and finally of new meaning. It is

no accident that the poetry of the Language School took its point of departure from this displacement of the author by the work, generalizing it in both its texts and its reception. Across the board, we understood the power of this nonidentity as a site for construction and critique—one that took the “author” itself as a site of revision and extended its revision by means of the material text to the world. The opening of a gap between author and work resulted in a vast amount of text—but to what end? Did we merely reinscribe the author, having gone to such lengths to dismantle it? I want to explore this opening as a scene of decision, an ethical moment, not simply as a source of aesthetic effects.

It is this movement, from author and work to text and context, that aligns the poststructuralist precursors of the current range of academic theory to the postwar avant-garde, seen as providing models for textuality (in France, Tel Quel, but by extension the American avant-garde, from the New Americans to the current post-Language writers).² My point of departure here, however, will be the genre of the “language text,” the extended nonnarrative prose poetry produced by writers associated with the Language School. One of the central political projects of the Language School in the 1970s and 1980s was the use of paratactic, nonnarrative texts to disclose, critique, and change the ideological structures of everyday life under late capitalism. Such texts depend upon a linear sequencing of disparate sources for their effects: though these texts draw on both narrative and lyric aspects of poetry, their distinguishing feature is the use of accretive forms of nonnarration. By the late 1980s, poets associated with the Language School (after the work of important precursors) had produced a number of extended, nonnarrative prose texts: examples include Ron Silliman’s Ketjak and Tjanting (later, The Alphabet); Lyn Hejinian’s My Life (later, The Cell and A Border Comedy); Steve Benson’s Blue Book; Bruce Andrews’s I Don’t Have Any Paper So Shut Up (or, Social Romanticism) (later, Lip Service); and my own Progress (later, Under Erasure and Bad History).³ The primary char-

acteristic of this text type (on its way to a genre?) is a paratactic series of quasi-referential and multiply determined elements (usually sentences, sometimes noun phrases) that work both to construct and to undermine meaning within the unfolding form.⁴ In these texts, the play of referential positing and linguistic canceling creates an on-going moment of crisis for the reader that leads precisely to a “scene of decision” that must be resolved.

There is a problem, however, with this type of text and its ethics of construction, and I will try to say precisely what it is. In the absence of a conventional author as guarantor of meaning, these texts substitute a logic of identity and difference, of immanent language and heterogeneous material, as the basis of their meaning effects. For instance, in my poem Progress I may juxtapose elements that have one kind of “set to the referent,” such as “I / look out to see cold fog / Lift over damp, stucco walls // In Toledo” (55), with those that are self-referential or nonreferential: “I turn blank sheet of paper / Into Latin, / it is a quote, / The current price of semiotics” (53) or “The use of a hammer as tears // Because I am in prison” (52). The variation of semantic frames between each of these elements—the “semantic shift” of the Russian formalists—forces the reader into a scene of decision that is the ethical work of the poem, and which is referred to within the poem itself: “This is a machine, / an X / Or network of concrete fibers // I decide to turn off at Y Road, / That is a decision” (117). The theory of processing constructed by the poem in its immanent unfolding arrives here at a crux or “X”: between an automatism of language production in which machinic effects substitute for authorship, or a human choice to make meaning out of these elements, a decision to turn off at “Y.” This moment of textual comment accurately describes, alas, the position of the reader when faced with such surpluses of meaning: either to perceive them as alienating and impossible, or to substitute one’s own interpretive thirdness, a “Y” that allows for escape. It may be the success of the poem to force perception of this decision, but at the risk that the nuanced

work between interpretive frames blurs into a univocal and indeterminate effect. This is the limit of the “language text”: that its presentation of frame conflicts as necessary critique of representation may unravel into the vagaries of subjective interpretation. Between the author and the work, textuality becomes the site of an unspecific subjectivity. That may be good for the production of certain aesthetic effects, but not for an ethics.

In an earlier version of this talk, I pursue the problem of ethical decision in the language text in terms of Information Theory, specifically the ways in which information, noise, and redundancy in communication intersect with questions of meaning and belief in the language texts of Ron Silliman, as in this excerpt from his long poem What:

At each transfer point, glimpse how lives
weave past. A woman with an interesting book
in her purse which I pretend not to see.
Letters crowd into a thought. Green paper
folded around long-stemmed roses
is stapled shut. Rapid winter sunset
lacks twilight. They take out the breast
and part of the lymph system. I
stare through a lens at the new world.
Hot tea sits dark in its cup.⁵

Information Theory, as it led from a context-independent, formal calculation of the probability of signals to a theory of communication and meaning (and organisms as communication systems), offers suggestive terms for this text type.⁶ It should be remembered that, in its original development, Information Theory was concerned strictly with the abstract probabilities of signals, not messages, as independent of context, content, or mean-

ing. But during the Macy Conferences in the 1960s, as Katherine Hayles and others have shown, questions of semantics and, later, belief were discussed in terms of information.⁷ In a semantic theory of information, meaning depends as much on the sequential form of communication as it does on its referential content or interpretive contexts: “The sense of information has nothing to do with [. . .] which possibilities we know or believe to be true,” because “p & q” conveys more information than “p [or] q,” independently of whether either p or q are “true.”⁸ Information is based on the possibility of knowledge given in the form of communication itself. If we imagined communication as a sequence of messages, each one independent of their reference or nonreference but linked together, a minimal expression of their relationship can be developed as of a series of propositions:

$$(\pm) A_1 \& (\pm) A_2 \& (\pm) A_3 \& \dots (\pm) A_x$$

If “each of the symbols (\pm) is to be replaced by \sim or by nothing at all in all the different combinations” (6), we have something like the form of the Language text, in which a sequence of statements augments, undermines, or provides redundancy for the cumulative meaning of its unfolding form. Each statement A_n is a “constituent” of a larger, paratactic discourse, as it adds or subtracts the possibility that something is the case. Let us imagine a minimal series of propositions that could be true or false, as in this series:

it is raining and the wind is blowing
it is raining but the wind is not blowing
the wind is blowing but it is not raining
it is not raining nor is the wind blowing (6)

Using information theory, we may interpret this series as indicating different states of the weather to be prepared for: the more narrowly we restrict their meaning, the more infor-

mation conveyed; the more open to possible interpretations, the less information we get. Now let us imagine that this is a sequence of paratactic sentences in a Language text: as we construct an overarching discourse in which meaning is being negotiated, we arrive at a situation where nothing determinate can be said in it (“that X is the case,” for instance). It may be truly said that for Language School the point where the certainty of saying “X is the case” ends is the beginning of the possibility of statement, but for the information theorist, “the measure of information [is] the relative number of alternatives it excludes.” How, then, do such excessive and nonrestrictive poetic texts result in communication?

Any text averaging 1.65
syllables per word demands
a college education. Asphalt black
in the back of the white dump truck.
Not aimless, blameless
nor without shame. For Rent
sign wired to fire escape.
He looks at his feet when
walking downstairs.
The Mao of physics. (37)

Here we must consider “information” in relation not only to the author’s claims to certainty but to their acceptance or rejection in terms of the reader’s beliefs. The sequence of elements in Silliman’s poem, alternating between truth and falsehood, probability and improbability, and finally communication and noise, force a scene of decision onto the reader in which she must compare the information communicated with her own beliefs. It is not simply that the reader makes meaning, but that she evaluates its probability. As

the sheer amount of information increases, however, one of two things can happen: either the poem will be accepted as specifying a commonality of reference and belief (very high information) or rejected as open to just any interpretation (very low information). The poem's construction of an interpretive community, thus, will be founded on a maximum undecidability: either there will be univocal adherence (decision is precluded) or univocal distance (decision is refused), as there is simply too much information to process. The reader's participation in making meaning, in this scenario, boils down to either a forced choice between polar opposites—in which she must identify with all the statements or reject them entirely—or to a thirdness of interpretation that is entirely subjective. This is the risk of the Language text, eerily demonstrated in the following example from What:

It's like playing Monopoly:
at a certain point all your
little green houses go back
to the bank, railroads mortgaged,
their cards turned over
and you're facing a wall of red hotels
afraid even to shake the dice. (106)

The tilt effect of Silliman's Monopoly analogy to poetic meaning points to the ways in which the Language text works against any immanent decision. Due to the redundancy of its construction, it cannot preclude a situation in which all or none of its information is accepted uncritically; or just any of its information is accepted on terms it cannot predict. The only decision is transcendent, outside the text—fine for reproducing the author, but not for the negotiation of the text within the contexts of belief in which it is being read. The central paradox of the Language text is that once it has been assembled from multi-

ple, fragmented, complex, distributed sources, it returns to a position of linear, monovalent, and conventional authorship in its meaning effects. Though the particulars of the text each work to critique meaning at the level of information and belief, the Catch 22 of the “parsimony principle” (that given ambiguous interpretations, the reader of a text will choose the simplest one) leads to a reconstructed author function, a demand by the reader that interpretation be authorized at some level to control meaning, or else it veers from pure projection to dream reverie to autobiographical allegory and all stops in between.

The concept of the “distributed author” proposed by hypertext and new media theory—not located at the origins of a monologic, linear text but distributed between disjunct points of production, be they human, textual, or machinic—helps to open up the scene of decision of the Language text. “Distributed authorship” refers to a situation in computing where authorship is distributed between man and machine, in that machines not only provide means for communication but compute and mediate parts of it as well. My recent digital poem “Question of Interpretation” (published on [mark\(s\)](#), a Detroit new media zine) is an example of distributed authorship in several interlocking senses. While I provided text and graphics, designer Deb King made substantial decisions concerning the relation of elements in a media environment—page layout, pop-ups, clickable interfaces, text and image animations, the addition of a replay button—which constitute the poetics of the text. As well, the software used for Flash animation and the hardware that performs it in real time on a home PC are part of the distribution of authorship. I might also point to the inkblots, as produced by chance operations and invoking unconscious processes, as also distributions of authorship. And the work’s distribution between poet, visual artist, designer, software, and hardware is only part of its total production, as the final sequence of viewing is determined by the reader. The work truly is a scene of decision at all points, from its composition to its mediation to its processing. An ethics

emerges that fulfills the earlier intentions of the Language School, in that it offers a real context for interaction and space for comprehending an outcome. In like sense, an opening toward a scene of decision motivates the recent turn to the blog format by authors of Language texts such as Silliman and other poets, who clearly are interested in multiple points of entry for their texts, along with large, real-time readerships (they may also be frustrated by the form of the thread in listservs, with its own redundant linearity). That there is a great political potential in such distributions of authorship has not been missed; distributed textuality may succeed in public media where author-centered texts cannot.⁹

The textual assemblages of Coolidge, Silliman, Andrews, Hejinian, myself, and other poets need to be critically reconstructed in order to recover their original motives. One way to do this will be to disclose pre-digital forms of distributed authorship that are masked by their univocal effects. Clark Coolidge, for instance, began writing his large-scale Language texts as dialogic projects between authors (his collaboration with Bernadette Mayer, “Karstarts,” led directly to the writing of Silliman’s Ketjak). A crucial feature of Silliman’s Language texts has been their disjunct composition across time and space; where the reader can “read this book on the bus,” not necessarily in any linear order, as I noted in the introduction to Tjanting. Silliman likely wrote much of the text on the bus as well—in tiny notebooks filled in across pages as well as down the page. While Lyn Hejinian’s My Life—immediately influenced by Silliman—reinstates autobiography for the more indeterminate language used in Silliman’s text, it too can be described as a form of distributed authorship, both in terms of the times and places it accesses, and in the disjunct moments of writing as it is added to each year. The composition of my long poem Progress foresees the algorithmic compilation of disjunct sources, drawn together in the display frame of sequential five-line stanza, and I often used distributed sections of the poem in constructing one-time-only readings that integrate textual elements from

other works as a performance strategy. Steve Benson's performance strategies and Blue Book and intersect here as well, as he would often use material from real-time journal entries, from his "blue books" and elsewhere, record them on magnetic tape, and comment on them, again in real time, in performance. Benson's distribution of authorship thus occurs between prior temporal instances of his work and their updated interpretation. Bruce Andrews's massive texts such as Lip Service are often composed using a series of index cards written in one stage of production and assembled in the final version of the text. Jackson Mac Low and Robert Grenier's work with index cards in their performances precedes Andrews's use of that format for distributed authorship; Grenier has recently translated his index card poem Sentences into a new media work that includes a randomizing function. Finally, Hejinian's A Border Comedy foregrounds the device of writing across as well as down through the text; as she has noted in the text itself (recasting the reflexivity of the modernist work as a new mode of distributed, improvised production):

That's why I've kept this writing of fifteen books unfinished
Fifteen underway
I move from one to the next
In the course of many days adding every day
A few lines to a book
Each of which takes a long time and considerable thought
And that passage of time facilitates forgetting
Then forgetting makes what's been written unfamiliar
As if some other writer had been writing
And each of my returns to each of the books is prompted
To immediates in a sudden present
Only pastness, which provides forgetting, can provide it (MS 134)

Such textual and performative experiments in distributed authorship lead, on the one hand, to the poetics of multi-authorship in the Language School and elsewhere (which I discuss in The Constructivist Moment), as well as to current forms of distribution in new media. The motive for these movements beyond the author, I am claiming, is and always has been ethical—to open the work as a scene of decision that cannot be easily foreclosed.

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The best example of a postauthorial poetics I know is the work of Larry Eigner, which I see as an instance of distributed authorship before the rise of new media. Eigner's work—poems, creative prose, and letters—precisely locates the point of transition between the New American Poetry and the Language School and writers influenced by it. As it appears in Donald Allen's epoch-defining anthology of 1960, Eigner's work aligns with a poetics of improvisatory spontaneity, physical embodiment, and open form. Crucial for this reception is the physical look of the poem on the page: in breaking away from the narrative frames and regular stanza forms of dominant versification, Eigner's poetry constructs a poetics of temporal immediacy and spatial unfolding, as extending the spatiality and temporality of the poet's being in time. In ways that are only suggested by Allen's cautious and thematizing anthology selection, Eigner's work may turn out to have been the most self-reflexive instance of the "field composition" called for in Charles Olson's "Projective Verse" (1950). Increasingly in Eigner's work from the 1960s on, the poem departs from an initial point of entry, graphically indexed to the left-hand margin, in a sequence of lines that generally do not return to closure (Olson's "kinetics of the thing"); each line, and the line-to-line sequence, is a self-reflexive identification of linguistic form (usually at the level of the noun phrase) with direct observation of the poet's world ("FORM IS NEVER MORE THAN AN EXTENSION OF CONTENT"); as a result, poet and

poem form an organic, integrated process where energy is translated directly into form (“always one perception must must must MOVE, INSTANTER, ON ANOTHER!”; 148-49).

Eigner’s anthology pieces, however, were about as far as his new kind of authorship went for the New Americans. There is no statement on poetics by Eigner in The New American Poetry; his author’s note states that he is a “shut-in,’ partly” who took correspondence courses from the University of Chicago, and that he got in touch with poet/editor Cid Corman after hearing him on the radio. Eigner’s circumstances—he was disabled from birth by cerebral palsy, confined to a wheelchair at home in Swampscott; and only capable of speech after an operation at the age of 21—are scarcely evident in this minimal sketch. In The Poetics of the New American Poetry, the 1973 companion to Allen’s anthology, there is again no statement on poetics by Eigner, amid many appeals to tradition. Eigner was seen during the period as a romantic isolato, an utmost figure of marginalized outsider, even while, as disabled, he could not claim that position himself. (That this is the position of all great poets, for some of the New Americans, would put Eigner in the company of Sappho, Keats, Emily Dickinson, and Hart Crane, of course.) On the other hand, aspects of New American poetics that were not stressed in its self-authorized reception may now give crucial insights into Eigner’s work. First among those would be Olson’s valorization of the typewriter, seen as a counterpoint to organic form:

The irony is, from the machine has come one gain not yet sufficiently observed or used, but which leads directly on toward projective verse and its consequences. It is the advantage of the typewriter that, due to its rigidity and space precisions, it can, for a poet, indicate exactly the breath, the pauses, the suspensions even of syllables, the juxtapositions even of parts of phrases, which he intends. (153-54)

The value of the machine, drawn from experiments in modernist typography, is to be unified with the organic immediacy of the poet, realized in terms of breath and phrasing. The epistemological or cognitive entailments of the machine as extension of the body are only hinted at in its material mediation of syntax and semantics as registers of intention. But for Eigner, especially before he gained the ability to speak, the typewriter was a life-line to communication with the outside world; his precisely scored poems and densely written correspondence are all typed out, one letter at time, by his right index finger; in his work, the typewriter becomes literally a prosthetic device for communication. In Olson's demand for an organic poetics, as opposed to the "verse print bred" or that genteel magazines would publish, he could not have anticipated or theorized the man/machine interface, in his work or in Eigner's, as predicting the nonorganic poetics of what later became the cyborg. It would take the development of a constructivist poetics in the Language School, far from its origins in cybernetics, to draw out this reading of Eigner.

A second dimension of Olson's poetics does lead to a cybernetic reading, as when he explicitly registers the impact of Norbert Wiener's work in "The Kingfishers" (1950). Wiener was a supporter of Black Mountain College, and Olson used his name in fundraising and publicity schemes for the college (he is claimed as a central figure of the college's brain trust, though it is unclear what involvement this represents).¹⁰ The poem infers, in the figure of the kingfishers' nest, an organic process of communication and control, an autotelic feedback system integrating sensory input and reflexive consciousness in an evolving form. This is generalized as a poetics in which "the feed-back is the law" and:

We can be precise. The factors are
in the animal and/or the machine the factors are
communication and/or control, both involve

the message. And what is the message? The message is
a discrete or continuous sequence of measurable events distributed in time (5)

Such a direct linking of poetics and cybernetics is unique in Olson's work, but we may now conjoin it with his valorization of the typewriter as an extension of the physical body as foreshadowing a technologically mediated, even digitized, poetics. It is crucial, here, that the "message" Olson speaks of is analyzable into components that are either "discrete or continuous" and "measurable" and "distributed in time"—a poetics distributed in the continuous streaming of bits as in any real-time romance of the poet as dancer. Had the former reading been as available as the latter, Eigner's poetry might have been seen as an early example of a technologically mediated, cybernetic feedback system, as it is evidently "a discrete or continuous sequence of measurable events distributed in time." Readers of "The Kingfishers," in any case, had a choice: to focus on a self-undoing, Dionysian poetics of idol-worship and blood lust ("hear, where the dry blood talks / where the old appetite walks") or to take the hint of the cybernetic reference as it inferred an encompassing systematicity of communication, along the via negativa of the poet's quest for meaning.

In foregrounding the materiality of communication, the Language School obviously chose the latter route, and Eigner's work was a central bridge between a poetics of embodied immanence and distributed authorship in its development. Beginning in 1971, This, which I co-edited with Robert Grenier, published selections of Eigner's work in each of its first five issues (totaling 45 pages by the end of its run). Grenier had brought Eigner to Franconia College to read in the mid 1970s (I drove him up from Swampscott, Mass., a memorable trip), and Eigner had early contact with Grenier, Clark Coolidge, Ron Silliman, David Gitin, and others. Eigner was well published in the 1970s, by Elizabeth Press, Black Sparrow, and Oyez, and a selection of language-centered, fractal prose writings appeared from This Press in late 1978. Earlier that year, L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E

began its run with a feature on Eigner's work, including his "Approaching things / Some Calculus / Of Everyday Life / How figure it / Experience" and "Larry Eigner Notes" by Coolidge. In the end, Eigner and Robert Creeley were the only New American poets to appear in This, and Eigner I believe the only one published in L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E. In this reception, as I wrote in Total Syntax, Eigner is to begin with the embodied writer "in situ," a figure of a "man-in-the-middle" (a term from Katherine Hayles's history of cybernetics) between linguistic and sensory input and poetic output,. While I did not use cybernetic terminology at the time, it was Eigner's poetry as a real-time, embodied system of language that served as point of departure for the next move, away from physical embodiment and toward a poetic use of language that was both reflexive and social. The input/output model of Eigner as an individual poetic "terminal," in other words, could be turned on the axis of the sign: toward "the word as such" in its systematic reflexivity.

A two-page spread of Eigner's poetry in This 5 (1973) may elucidate some of the cybernetic aspects of his work. The layout comprises four individual poems, only one of which has a title, in two pairs separated by a dot, along with explanatory notes. The MS for the selection shows that the poems are consecutive in Eigner's numbering scheme, as numbers 815 and 815', and 816 and 816'. The precise degrees of autonomy and connection I found in Eigner's work in Total Syntax obtain here: 815' and 816' may be read, in part, as comments or extensions of 815 and 816, as was typographically indicated by the dot (in the MS, however, the poems are separated by "a line that may be cut," a common device in Eigner's work that allowed him to send poems typed on one page to different editors; the poems are thus formatted for distribution). Beside the first two appear marginal notes between overstruck parenthesis marks that comment on their contexts or content. The poems can be read spatially as well as temporally in two ways: between individual occasions of poetry, which are partially linked; and by means of such interpretants. In

a note printed on the magazine's verso, away from the texts, Eigner indicates as much: "Poems and notes that are and aren't separate things. Houses and flowers may or may not open or shut the same way twice. Integrations are welcome when they arise. Contexts, ah!" The notes both stand outside the poems and provide interpretants for them; they suggest as well how spatial relations on the page map onto an open horizon of meaning.¹¹ Further, the notes link the published version of the poems to their prior textual occasions; the first two, here, appeared in a letter to Clark Coolidge. While that letter probably exists in Coolidge's archives at SUNY Buffalo, another letter from my own files shows how Eigner's poetry frequently appeared in the middle of lengthy, painstakingly typed letters, often addressed to other poets and editors. We also see here Eigner's characteristic habit of filling every last bit of the page, often by writing marginal glosses to his letters as they are being composed. Between the body of the letter, the embedded poems, and marginal glosses, an entire system of communication and control—a feedback system, in short, that addresses the immanent production of poetry to its exterior contexts, both literary and historical—appears in a process of self-regulated construction. The material form of Eigner's poetry—from carefully organized sequences of numbered poems with marginal notes, to hybrid writings that combine text and commentary on the backs of envelopes or scraps of paper—becomes an autotelic system generated at the interface of man and machine. The system extends outward to the world in the correspondence with poets and editors, leading onward to publication and a return to the feedback of poetic production. A postcard discussing the selection of poetry to appear in This gives an example of the way in which Eigner's work occurred as a social construction: the postcard links the appearance in This to a mini-anthology being produced by Douglas Calhoun's Athanon; Eigner then shifts to his current reading of Stein's How Writing Is Written and Tolstoy's War and Peace, mentioning that the cover is torn off his copy; he includes feedback from

editor Barry Alpert on a remark I made on Eigner's poetry; finally he discusses a possible German translation of poem 815, along with two poems responding to the 1972 Munich Olympics massacres. At another moment, when I typed up a fair copy of the selection for his approval, Eigner revised the marginal glosses, obscuring the context of the remark on Coolidge's response to his selected poems but reinforcing the materiality of publication. Poetry for Eigner is a complex of occasions that constructs meaning in and among them. In its reflexive mode of positing and recontextualizing, it enacts a site-specific poetics of feedback that is a continuous "scene of decision," both for the poet and for the reader.

A remediation of Eigner's work after new media theory, as it comprehends his forms of material production and self-regulation as a distributed network of communication, offers a reading of the content of his poetry that goes substantially beyond prior approaches—whether authorial, formalist, or in terms of subject position. Such a reading makes most sense out of the recursive displacements of his individual poems through their continually reconstructed linkages to other contexts; beyond that, it comments on the discontinuity and recurrence of our reading of the separated occasions of Eigner's poetry as an entailment of its intention and method. And this is how readers do read Eigner's work: as a displaced, recurrent, material, and self-focusing series of occasions in which one "tunes in" to the work at the discontinuous times and places of its mediated occurrence. We would expect, then, that the content of Eigner's work would be of a piece with the form of its production and distribution, as it is. The "h o r i z o n" that titles the poem taken from the letter to Coolidge in this sense refers the displaced particulars of the poem to a horizon that exceeds them. Knowledge based on specific referents must be gone beyond because resources are both impervious (to being penetrated, known?) and beyond being simply supplied. These resources are, in short, all around us, any place becoming a storehouse in which the sun and stars are moving at the limits of the horizon.

And yet there are negative relations between each of these terms, so that they cannot simply be linked in a positive statement of fact or accessibility. Rather, they occur within the form of the poem as a bounded system whose outside is both the ineffable horizon and the materiality of communication (the letter to Coolidge). The system is autotelic (it finds its way among resources); reflexive (rather than being merely an instance of linguistic throughput, it places its observation and knowledge within the limits of the form); spatial and temporal (involving sequential, deferred, and lateral relations to make meaning); embodied (self-consciousness is identical to writing as a physical act); and, finally, technologically mediated (through the possibilities and limits of the typewriter). The short poem that follows it, “close / far / open,” reduces to an absolute minimum the discussion of resources and horizons in the poem above, becoming a fractal metacommentary on the relations of meaning, even as the poem’s note refers to a material text. Which is the horizon of which? This questioning of the limits of statement in the production of meaning continues in the next poem; “news hungry / fighting green / ships in the desert” refers to the horizon of the 1973 Yom Kippur War in the Middle East, seen on television by Eigner. Here, media and immobility intersect in multiple ways; Eigner, the materially impeded author, confronts the virtuality of war on television, eighteen years before the Gulf War—or our present debacle. The poem, as a response, essays the limits of statement but also constructs the possibilities of thinking through the mediation of language. I find Eigner’s anti-war critique to be deeply moving, as a testimony to his limits, and hopeful, as it practices a critical poetics within the negativity of the media barrage. As before, a poetic coda—“At / one ent / Day / a hot wind / on the desert”—holds up to ironic scrutiny the context of forgiveness that was used as renewal of the occasion of war. In war conditions, atonement is not meant; the missing letter “m” alerts us to the gap in our understanding—or better, our belief in the reality of war—as a gap in signification.

(One can, of course, pursue the signification of the letter in a psychoanalytic reading, which I am bracketing here.)

The new media reading of Eigner as distributed author thus involves a relation between form and content that goes beyond three earlier accounts of the author that lead up to it. In sense 1, from his appearance in the inaugural issue of L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E (February 1978), Eigner is the writer “in situ,” recasting the body of the New Americans onto the new register of the man/machine interface, though not realized yet. From the later perspective of new media, we may see this role as a kind of language-centered DJ (after Lev Manovich’s discussion of the digital auteur), who mixes media and sensations in real time, drawing from an archive of samples to create a continuous feedback system:

No really perfect optimum mix, anyway among some thousands or many of distinctive or distinguishable things (while according to your capacity some minutes, days or hours 2, 4 or 6 people, say, are company rather than crowds), and for instance you can try too hard or too little.

Eigner here is the “man-in-the-middle” who takes language in both through the senses and through their media extensions (radio, TV) to produce a distributed output. The Language School thus has as one point of departure a figure of the poet caught between input and output terminals. In Total Syntax, wanting to move beyond physical embodiment to a horizon of language (sense 2), I undertook a detailed linguistic account of Eigner’s poetics in which I proposed a grammatical/phenomenological “missing X” standing outside the dissociated/accretive noun phrases/predicates of Eigner’s poems. The dialectic between input and output, then, would take the form of a binary relation between the world outside the self-regulating system of the poem and the construction of the work. Here, the binarism of communication and noise, of transmission and gaps, be-

comes the structuring principle of linguistics in the period of Jakobson and Barthes, in a dialectic that works its way into the most minute decision-making processes of the poem. For example, in Eigner's use of the typewriter to score subtle gradations of sensory intake and evaluation in the feedback system of the poem's advancing argument, I reduced his paratactic use of staggered lines to a series of binary switches between relative autonomy and connection. In a randomly chosen example of his work, I argued that the poem is based at every linguistic level—from phoneme to syntax to discourse—on such a series of binary oppositions. The poet becomes the kind of primitive switching device that early cybernetics needed to hypothesize the human nervous system. At this point, the analyst might have paused to ask, Why is this effect articulated, in such a reinforcing way, at every level of the text? A structuralist account would answer that this is in the nature of language—the foregrounding of the binary oppositions that structure language from the phoneme up. This is a clearly inadequate explanation, given decades of work in syntax, information theory, computing, artificial intelligence, and neural networking that would follow. If what I wanted was a total syntax, what I needed, finally, was another linguist.

If “the ‘missing X’ at the outset of the poem [is] ‘the world’” (187), we have not yet solved the poet's relation to it. It was this relation that Michael Davidson focused on in his revisionary discussion, “Missing Larry,” an account of authorship in sense 3, identity. For Davidson, the “X” that I proposed as an abstract relation of autonomy and connection must be returned to the embodied condition of the disabled poet, in opposition to the “ableist” ideal of integrated sensory, cognitive, and motor functions.¹² Davidson opposes as well what might be seen as the reductively formalist (or Jakobsonian) reading in my discussion, which cannot get past its valorization of “poetic language” to an adequate account of the relation of poet and work to the world—to identity, context, and history, what Cultural Studies has offered as critique of the valorization of the poem as

artifact. If the reading of Eigner as cybernetic system has the advantage of uniting a linguistic/formalist/literary reading with an identitarian/culturalist/contextual one, what does Eigner's physical disability and identity as disabled mean for the resulting synthesis of the distributed author (sense 4)? What is everywhere evident and deeply moving in Eigner is his willful and laborious overcoming of the physical limits of the man/machine interface, in his construction of a primitive feedback system and his prescient enactment of distributed authorship. Mediation in Eigner means not a disappearance of the human into clouds of virtuality, but a return to a labor theory of value: it is in the human use of technology that human limits require that value—poetry, literature, knowledge, all mediated access to experience—may be achieved. This is a result that I hope will be decisive.

III

Which brings me to a scene of decision in an immediate sense: if we accept a reading of Eigner as a distributed author, whose work involves a cybernetic system that mediates inputs and outputs and that resulted, in his lifetime, in an impressive record of publication, how should that achievement be perpetuated now that Eigner no longer is alive? This is a question that I raised, prospectively to be sure, in Arthur Marotti's seminar on bibliographic theory last fall: How should Eigner's work best be published to reflect the conditions of its production? Clearly, a theory of authorship as sublime and inaccessible, to be preserved in its material textuality, does not work: Eigner is not Dickinson; there is no comparable corpus to the fascicles; and his typewritten originals led to publication in conventional typography, in editions which he authorized in his lifetime. There is no evidence that Eigner wanted to see his work in the typewritten form in which it left its desk; of the many editions of Eigner in my library, only one reproduces the equivalent spacing of typewriter type, as opposed to the proportional spacing of most typographic fonts. On

the other hand, Eigner was exceptionally diligent in copying the exact typographic relation of words, indentations, line spacings, and marginal notes in each version of his poems, and he worked with editors assiduously (as in the correspondence for This 5) to translate the spatial relations into typography, as well as to preserve all idiosyncrasies of spelling and punctuation (as he specifically requests in the coda to his Selected Prose). Such a practice leads to a scene of decision: on the one hand, Eigner generally published his work in typographic fonts, and approved them in that form; on the other, he rigorously maintained the precise spacing of his poems as central to his mediated practice. Should the editors of his collected works choose an equivalent type or a proportional font? The question, in my view, is not strictly decidable: there are advantages to each. In the former, we get a modernist edition, establishing the poem as product, in a form that Eigner liked. In latter, a postmodern edition, we get the poem as process, a state of publication prior to the modernist one that reenvisions its mode of production. (A third option, to publish the texts online, would not preserve Eigner's work in the form it deserves.) We would need a theory of authorship to solve this dilemma; in this case it would not be a theory of authorial intention but of socially mediated authorship. But as long as we reach that scene of decision, in Kierkegaard's sense, I am sure we will make the right choice.