

Ethical Criticism and the Challenges Posed by Innovative Poetry

Hank Lazer

Academic Affairs, University of Alabama

138 Blount Living-Learning Ctr, 870257, Tuscaloosa, AL 35487, USA

Email: hlazer@bama.ua.edu

Abstract Professor Nie has led the way in developing the field known as ethical criticism. Much of the writing in this newly emerging field has focused on modern works of fiction and on the ethical dimensions and decisions of fictional characters. A reading of innovative American poetry poses a range of interesting questions and challenges for the development of ethical criticism. In this essay, I offer a range of questions that might enlarge and critique the methods and scope of ethical criticism. As one example, I cite the challenges presented by the work (and life) of George Oppen. More fundamentally, I will problematize or re-locate the ethical dimension — following upon Emerson’s language about spiritual experience — from the second-hand reading of fictional works to a sense of the reader/critic engaged in first-hand ethical experience, choices, and action through a multi-dimensional engagement with innovative poetry. I also present an example of how such ethical criticism might work through the reading of a poem by Larry Eigner. In addition, I trace some parallels (of the particular ethical epistemology involved in reading and engaging innovative poetry) to the considerable ethical and epistemological differences in the contemporaneous writings of Confucius and Lao Tzu (thus briefly contrasting Confucianism and Daoism and pointing toward the imprecise and enigmatic nature of knowing found in Daoism).

Key words ethical criticism; innovative poetry; Lao Tzu; Larry Eigner; George Oppen; limitations of understanding

Author **Hank Lazer** has published twenty-two books of poetry, including *Poems Hidden in Plain View* (2016, in English and in French), *N24* (2014) and *N18* (2012), *Portions* (2009), *The New Spirit* (2005), *Elegies & Vacations* (2004), and *Days* (2002). *Selected Poems and Essays of Hank Lazer*, completed by a group of translators and with a Preface by Nie Zhenzao, was published by Central China Normal University Press in 2015. Lazer’s Selected Poems have also been published in Italy and will be appearing shortly in Cuba. In 2015, Lazer was selected to

receive Alabama's most prestigious literary prize, the Harper Lee Award, for lifetime achievement in literature. His books of criticism include *Opposing Poetries* (two volumes, 1996) and *Lyric & Spirit: Selected Essays 1996-2008* (2008). With Charles Bernstein, he edits the Modern and Contemporary Poetics Series for the University of Alabama Press. Lazer retired from the University of Alabama in January 2014 from his positions as Associate Provost for Academic Affairs, Executive Director of Creative Campus, and Professor of English.

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When good is near you, when you have life in yourself, it is not by any known or accustomed way; you shall not discern the footprints of any other; you shall not see the face of man; you shall not hear any name; — the way, the thought, the good, shall be wholly strange and new. — Emerson, *Self-Reliance* (158)

Thus far, ethical criticism has applied perspectives, questions, concepts, and historical and cultural contexts primarily to the study of works of fiction and drama. I wish to begin by saluting Professor Nie for his internationally noteworthy and celebrated development of this field of study!¹ (And I am honored that he has written a Preface for the Chinese translation of my *Selected Poems*.²) I wish to expand the range of consideration in ethical criticism, principally through an investigation of some ways that such criticism might proceed with regard to modern and contemporary poetry, and most especially with regard to innovative contemporary poetry.

If we begin by setting the groundwork for an ethical criticism, we must do so by attending to the nature of the activity as established by Professor Nie. As noted in a recent article in *The Times Literary Supplement* ("Fruitful Collaborations: ethical literary criticism in Chinese academe," by William Baker and Shang Biwu, 29 July 2015) — which in and of itself is an indication of the international importance of Professor Nie's work — ethical criticism refers to

an approach that reads, analyzes and interprets literature from an ethical perspective. It takes literary texts as its very object of analysis, and aims to shed a new light on a variety of relationships depicted by literature such as

man/woman and him/herself, humans and others, humans and nature, and humans and society, from an ethical perspective. (14)

Baker and Shang in the *TLS* article go on to summarize:

Specifically, ethical literary criticism embraces the following five aspects: (1) it investigates the moral values of writers and their historical backgrounds and the connections between writers' own moral values and those ethical values projected in their creative output; (2) it investigates the relations between moral phenomena existing in a writer's work and in reality, the moral inclinations, and the social and moral values of that work; (3) it examines the effects of that work's moral values as exerted on readers and society, and readers' evaluations of the moral thoughts of writers and their works; (4) it evaluates the influence of writers' and their works' moral inclinations on other contemporary writers and literature; and (5) it uncovers the moral features of writers and their works and aims to explore various issues concerning the relations between literature and society or literature and writer from an ethical perspective. (14)

My talk today really represents a development and expansion of that fifth area of ethical criticism. And my remarks may be seen as a continuation of those made by my good friend Charles Bernstein in his talk at the 3rd CAAP conference, "Pitch of Poetry" (which appears in *Forum for World Literature Studies*, Vol. 7, No. 3 September 2015 426-438), specifically Charles' sense of poetics and poetic practice as dialogical and his contrasting of ethics with morality wherein "poetics cannot claim the high ground of morality or systematic theory" (427). As Charles develops his perspective in "Pitch of Poetry," poetry involves an ethics of non-utility and is participatory in art-making without ulterior purpose. Most interesting of all, since Charles is rarely thought of as a "spiritual" poet, his perspective in "Pitch of Poetry" is remarkably consonant with Lao Tzu's ethics in the *Dao de jing* (an ethics that I will return to later and contrast somewhat with the ethics of Lao Tzu's contemporary, Confucius):

Poetry makes *nothing* happen . . . , manifest in the cracks (delays, blanks) between words and the frictions of gift. A gift (this gift) is a present made present; as for reciprocity: nothing is given in return.

Mine is a homely poetics, both odd-looking (unattractive, disagreeable,

low) and intimate (even private). (435)

Ethical criticism is important for (at least) two reasons: (1) it is a *Chinese* theory of literary criticism, and thus it alters, challenges, and enlivens (from a very particular cultural and historical perspective) the range of international conversations and writings about literature and the value of literary study (at a time, perhaps, when the practicality of literary study is being treated by the public and by university planners and administrators somewhat skeptically); and (2) it inevitably returns us to a fundamental set of questions (often bypassed as our critical considerations become more “sophisticated” and specialized and professionalized?) about *why we read*, and about the value of studying literature and reading literature (particularly so-called difficult literature) intensely and carefully.

When I gave a keynote address at the 2nd CAAP conference, in Wuhan, I advocated the study of two 20th century American poets who were, I felt, under-represented in Chinese considerations of American poetry: George Oppen and Larry Eigner. That address — subsequently published in *Foreign Literature Studies* (Wuhan, China), Vol. 35, No. 5 (October 2013): 9-22 as “The Peculiarities of the Making of Cross-Cultural Literary History: Poetry of George Oppen and Larry Eigner,” — might also, retrospectively, be considered as a type of ethical criticism, asking the question what else needs to be included in an emerging Chinese version of American Literary History, particularly in the domain of modern and contemporary poetry. For there is an ethics that pertains to which poetry is, through textbooks, anthologies, translations, official literary histories, and syllabi, allowed or likely to be read. I am pleased to report that in the past couple of years, the situation with regard to Oppen in China is changing somewhat, as Xiaosheng Yang’s translation of Oppen’s most important long poem, “Of Being Numerous,” has been published in China.³

Oppen’s poetry still does provide an extremely interesting and provocative instance of how ethical criticism might establish its relationship to modern American poetry. One might begin by considering Oppen’s work from a biographical perspective — just as one engages the choices made by characters in works of fiction and drama, thinking about the historical circumstances of choices that Oppen made as poet and person, most especially his affiliation with the Communist Party — an affiliation that obviously has a radically different meaning in America than in China! — which necessitated his leaving America to live for a substantial period of time in Mexico. Oppen was only able to return to the US once the McCarthy Era persecution of Communists ceased in the late 1950s. One might

also reflect on Oppen's decision to remain silent as a poet for twenty-five years. Or, one might think about a less well known refusal that Oppen made. Once he returned to writing and publishing poetry, Oppen's work eventually did receive recognition. In 1969 he was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for his book *Of Being Numerous*. While most poets choose to cash in on such success — developing reading tours and speaking engagements (with significantly enhanced fees due to the receipt of this prestigious national prize) — Oppen chose to cancel a developing reading tour, preferring to work on his writing.

If we turn to Oppen's poetry itself, while there are many locations for contemplation of the ethical dimensions raised by the poems, I would simply point to two particular instances. First, in "Of Being Numerous" one of Oppen's central considerations is the dialectical and complex relationship between singular and collective identity. After noting the shipwreck and subsequent "rescue" of Robinson Crusoe, Oppen writes,

Obsessed, bewildered
By the shipwreck
Of the singular
We have chosen the meaning
Of being numerous. (Section 7, OBN)

And just as Mao in China gave ongoing consideration to the ideal relationship of intellectuals and artists to the people, Oppen too wonders and faces the distinct possibility that "Whether, as the intensity of seeing increases, one's distance from Them, the people, does not also increase" (section 9, OBN),⁴ causing Oppen to wonder as well "if to know is noble" (section 31, OBN). It is this complex and unflinchingly honest consideration of how to honor simultaneously one's singularity and one's commitment to a human collective that runs throughout Oppen's poetry.

Second, in "Till Other Voices Wake Us," the last poem in *Primitive* (1978), Oppen's last published book, the concluding lines are a small but crucial revision of some very famous lines from T. S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," a revision which is absolutely essential to understanding how Oppen's ethics differs radically from modernists such as Pound and Eliot. In Oppen's poem, Eliot's alienation and fear of engagement with humanity — "Till human voices wake us, and we drown" — becomes "till other voices wake/ us or we drown" (p. 286, *New Collected Poems*). For Oppen, the voices of other human beings, far from being something threatening that might drown us, are precisely that which rescues and

awakens us. One other noteworthy revision by Oppen is of Shelley's classically romantic and fabulously grandiose notion that "poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world," which, in Oppen's hands becomes, in the poem "Disasters," "legislators// of the unacknowledged// world" (267). It is that unacknowledged world that I will return to later in this talk, particularly as I consider the *Daodejing*.

In Eigner's poetry, as with Oppen's, the biographical aspect is crucial. Eigner was born with a severe case of cerebral palsy. His mobility was profoundly restricted (he was wheel-chair bound his entire life), and he had only the use of one finger and a thumb for the writing and spatial arrangement of his poetry (which has been published in a superb 4-volume edition by Stanford University [2010], with a Selected Poems forthcoming in 2016 from the University of Alabama Press's Modern and Contemporary Poetics Series, which I co-edit with Charles Bernstein). The introduction of a biographical perspective places the reading of Eigner's work within the realm of disability studies. It also asks us to consider what we mean by "the body" and its relationship to poetry, and to human consciousness. We might also think about — and attempt to embody ourselves — the heroism and persistence involved in Eigner's production of an astonishing body of poetry — over 75 books and broadsides! — and a very extensive correspondence. (In fact, in a graduate seminar I taught a few years ago, Jenifer Park, a fine poet and student, did embody Eigner's physical mode of composition, typing her research presentation as Eigner did, with limited use of one finger and a thumb, while using an old manual typewriter. It proved to be a superb learning experience, for her, and for us! Perhaps such work might be thought of as a very precise embodiment of ethical criticism?)

But often the considerations brought to bear on our reading and critical writing activities are, as Emerson would say about how we approach spiritual experience, at second-hand. Emerson's repeated call for spiritual experience at first-hand begins rather dramatically in his introduction to "Nature":

Our age is retrospective. It builds the sepulchers of the fathers. It writes biographies, histories, and criticism. The foregoing generations beheld God and nature face to face; we, through their eyes. Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe? Why should not we have a poetry and philosophy of insight and not of tradition, and a religion by revelation to us, and not the history of theirs? (21)

In "The Divinity School Address," he insists that our fundamental insights and

intuitions “cannot be perceived at second hand” (104). Interestingly, in that same essay, Emerson suggests that “Europe has always owed to oriental genius its divine impulses” (104).

The shift in emphasis that I will be proposing in the remainder of my talk is from studying and analyzing the ethical decisions and actions of *others* to thinking of *oneself as already in the process of being an ethically engaged subject/agent*. (Perhaps the fictional or dramatic character of greatest interest is the reader/critic?)

Innovative poetry changes radically the nature of the reader’s (and teacher’s) authority in relation to the text. In the uncertainty, indeterminacy, and necessarily heuristic nature of such reading, there is a profound epistemological and ethical shift that takes place. (I would also argue that this kind of knowing not-knowing is, as presented in Lao Tzu’s *Daodejing*, an essentially Daoist mode of thinking.)

When I begin to think about ethical criticism, and how it might be practiced in the territory of innovative American poetry, I begin to take a few steps back so that I’m not immediately engaged in a series of ethical questions, observations, and decisions that already plunge me into the text itself and the ethical positions of the words, characters, and voices of the text. In other words, there are a variety of *ethical moments*, many of which occur and exist *prior* to the acts of reading and interpretation. Nonetheless, these too *are critical ethical moments*. And at this point I must note that my talk is addressed simultaneously to two different audiences, an American audience and a Chinese audience, each working under very different institutional and pedagogical circumstances.

For example, ethical decision-making with regard to poetry might be said to begin with a professor who is constructing a course and a syllabus. Many readers of poetry — particularly students who are not and will never be poets or specialists in the field of contemporary poetry — have a naïve assumption that poems somehow exist principally in anthologies and textbooks. (I believe it was David Antin who said “anthologies are to poems what zoos are to animals...”) Even before we are thinking about the ethical positions taken within a particular poem, we need to consider the (small, or miniscule) economic domain of poetry. If the teacher has students encountering poems only in textbook-anthologies, then an ethical decision has been made that deprives readers of the knowledge and feel of what an actual *book* of contemporary poetry is. And if such books rarely make any money — for the publisher and the poet — the reader-student is also deprived of an important if baffling set of economic and ethical questions, such as, why would anyone devote a substantial portion of his/her life to poetry (writing and publishing) when the economics of it is not viable, or at least not given to profit? (As my poet-publisher-

business-man-friend James Sherry puts it, “what’s the quickest way to reduce the value of a blank sheet of paper? Begin to write a poem on it...” In the micro-economic ecosphere of contemporary poetry, a few classroom adoptions of a book published by a small or independent press can have a substantial impact. The same is not true of anthology adoptions or book adoptions for volumes published by huge mainstream corporate entities (such as Norton, or Macmillan, or Knopf...). Such classroom choices also have an impact on the poet’s visibility (and ability to arrange paid readings, and campus visits).

Even within an anthology-textbook, the teacher faces a range of ethical decisions, nearly all of which might be deemed to fall under the heading of the ethics of diversity. Although in American political-ethical rhetoric, *diversity* usually means identity-centered difference — numbers of poets of color, poetry by women, poetry by LGBTQ authors, perhaps some regional considerations, some class considerations — rarely do we foreground the equally important ethical consideration of the otherness of aesthetic difference.⁵ (The anthology-textbooks themselves over the past forty years have shown increasing sensitivity to the former, more prevalent dimension of diversity, though only a small amount of consideration to aesthetic diversity.)

The teaching of new poetries also places the professor in a radically different position of authority, or non-authority, as the consideration of such poems is often profoundly collaborative, heuristic, and improvisationally exploratory.

Many years ago, in fact, when I was still an undergraduate student in the late 1960s, I ran into a statement that has stayed with me: *the student is educated by what the teacher is, not by his (or her) talk*. Such a statement, I believe it comes from Carl Jung, as it has resonated for me over many years, in my work as a teacher, a poet, and a critic, reminds me that it is not the postures we strike, not the didacticisms that we espouse, it is what we do in action — in the case of the classroom, in full view of the students — that is most pedagogical. For me, that ethical dimension of my conduct (as that fused identity of teacher, poet, and critic) takes on a particular urgency in relationship to what, especially in poetry, but also in music and the visual arts, is contemporary, i.e., of the present. Thus, what a teacher might manifest amounts to an ethics of attention and choice? There is an important ethics of engagement with the present that is crucial to the decisions and choices of a teacher-poet-reader-critic.

If we return for a moment to the *TLS* article about ethical criticism, we will find another important set of considerations, particularly as ethical criticism asks us to re-think the very nature of being human:

Ethical literary critics argue that, in the history of human civilization, human beings have undergone a two-step selection procedure: natural selection and ethical selection. ... But what truly distinguishes humans from other animals is the second selection: ethical selection, which helps to endow human beings with reason and ethical consciousness. This eventually turns them into ethical beings. (14-15)

I would like to make the argument that it is ethical to seek to understand better — through poetry — consciousness itself. Or, to put it more broadly, ethics amounts to a sincere and dedicated effort toward a deeper and better understanding of being.

An emphasis of ethical criticism that merits some consideration, if ethical criticism is to have a life within the full range of poetic practice, is the place of reason. In the *TLS* article the authors discuss what is referred to as “the Sphinx factor”:

The Sphinx’s combination of a human head and an animal body suggests, first of all, that the most important feature of a human image lies in its head, which stands for reason as a result of the evolutionary process, and reason is a decisive factor that enables human beings to be human beings. (15)

While *homo sapiens* is one common definition of human being, one might also (by way of Johan Huizinga’s book, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture*, from 1950) choose to call us *homo ludens*, emphasizing the ludic or complex elements of playfulness that are equally characteristic of human beings. While in no way am I denying the value and importance of reason, there is also a compelling case to be made for an ethics which acknowledges and honors the limitations of reason, the humility and necessity of not-knowing, and the inherently incomplete nature of human knowing. (As I have been hinting, such a paradoxical affirmation lies at the heart of Daoist thinking, of Lao Tzu’s *Dao de jing*, as opposed to the societal and behavioral pronouncements of Confucius.)

Drawing on Biwu Shang’s “Ethical Criticism and Literary Studies: A Book Review Article about Nie’s Work” (*CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 15.7; 2013]), the perspective that I am eager to critique is the professed opposition or seeming incompatibility of ethical and aesthetic considerations:

...against the prevailing argument which sees literature as “an art of

language” or as “an ideology of aesthetics,” Nie considers literature as “an art of texts” and “a unique expression of ethics and morality within a certain historical period” (Ethical Literary Criticism and Other Issues 5). Further, according to Nie the primary function of literature is not aesthetics, but ethical enlightenment and education. These seemingly radical conceptions are now beginning to affect some traditional arguments about literature. Significantly, some college textbooks on literature and literary history in China have been compiled from an ethical perspective. (4)

But I don't think literature (and our relationship to it) presents us with a binary choice between ethics OR aesthetics. Of course, ethics matters. But “aesthetics” is not simply a matter of superficial (and changing) stylistic fads and adornments (like clothing accessories that go with each cultural era). At heart, aesthetics — how we go about our writing *now* — is epistemological and ontological. It involves (or ought to) the most serious of temporal (and ethical) matters: an attempt to engage reality as human consciousness *at a particular time* experiences it! (Again, this is why I much prefer Lao Tzu's *Daodejing* to Confucius' *Analects*, for the former is much less prescriptive, less moralistic, more of an epistemological and ontological investigation which acknowledges its own limitations to speak with finality and clarity.)

As one of America's great (and I suspect little known in China) poet-philosophers David Antin has stressed throughout his many years of talk-poems: the present is difficult to locate, and it is most especially difficult to locate the artistic present. In “how long is the present,” Antin says,

i have a taste
for the present ...
its a strong and peculiar
taste and the present is a difficult thing to have a taste for
its very difficult because in satisfying it the question
i always have to ask myself is what is the present and
how long is it? how long is the present?
thats a question
i take very seriously as a poet i have a very strong commitment
to the idea of the present (158)

One might argue that at the heart of ontology, and of Zen practice, and of the *Dao*

de jing, is finding and developing a feeling for and a partial understanding of the present, of the moment, of our specific residence in *this* moment in time. Yet, most literary activity — teaching, anthologies, textbooks, review-writing — is nostalgic and directed toward a seemingly more understandable *past*, a reading of and in texts where the conventions of expression and meaning-making have a comfortable (even if complex) manner of signification. One might call such an approach incomplete, or perhaps even unethical.

Among American critics, the most important and best at elucidating noteworthy contemporary writing is Marjorie Perloff (whose activity in developing the CAAP conferences has been crucial!). In preparing this talk, I returned to Marjorie's ground-breaking 1981 book, *The Poetics of Indeterminacy: Rimbaud to Cage*. Marjorie understood then, in noting that "Rimbaud was probably the first to write what I shall call here the poetry of indeterminacy" (4), that to write about innovative poetry would necessarily involve considering the very nature of signification itself (which, I would contend, is also fundamental to the *Daodejing*). Thus Perloff comes to write about works that are "endlessly frustrating our longing for certainty" and writing and art projects that "derive their force from their refusal to 'mean' in conventional ways" (34). (As you will see when I turn to the *Daodejing*, it is perhaps a profoundly Chinese epistemology or ontology to engage what is enigmatic and indeterminate and paradoxical in its nature — a cosmos and an experience of being that evades final pronouncements, and is thus best suited to the flexible modes of saying that are essential to poetry?) Perloff, one of the first to recognize the importance of Antin's work, notes that Antin declares " ' the one thing I believe a poet ought to do is respect what he doesn't understand, respect its unintelligibility' " (302). The profoundly heuristic nature of the truly new, the truly present-engaged poetry, will always seem and feel to us, initially, to be baffling. And it will also compel us to re-investigate what we mean by "meaning" itself.

Perhaps the best writing ever on the difficulties of locating the artistic/aesthetic present occurs in Gertrude Stein's lecture "Composition as Explanation" (1926). Though Stein's concern is principally with beauty, the reception and rejection of new works in new modes of artistic composition (due to the allegedly irritating nature of the new), and the subsequent strangely rapid transition in the perception and appreciation of the work from outlaw to classic, her remarks, like Antin's and Perloff's, also point to an ethics of locating or searching for the artistic present. First and foremost, such activity — trying to find the artistic present — matters for reasons that are ontological: "The only thing that is different from one time to another is what is seen and what is seen depends upon how everybody is doing

everything. This makes the thing we are looking at very different and this makes what those who describe it make of it, it makes a composition” (Selected Writings, 513). Both the work of art and *how we conduct our lives* are called by Stein *compositions*: “Each period of living differs from any other period of living not in the way life is but in the way life is conducted and that authentically speaking is composition” (517). Thus, to know the *present* modes of composition would give us insight into what we see, the nature of our present life in time, and how we are conducting (or composing) our lives. Why does this *not* happen? Laziness: “and as every one is naturally indolent why naturally they don’t see” (515). As I have been suggesting, this lack of awareness of present modes of new composition is a serious pedagogical matter, and thus an ethical matter. It might also be argued that how we respond to the otherness — the strangeness — of innovative art mirrors or rhymes with our treatment of human beings (and cultures) whose otherness and difference challenge our compassion and acceptance. Our response to textual difference — to the new composition — is no doubt every bit an occasion steeped in ethics as it is a merely cognitive or interpretive moment.

Another way to think about the composing of our lives takes us into the murky terrain of that elusive term *consciousness*. I would suggest — at the risk of being unfashionably sincere and naked — that ultimately poetry is “about” consciousness — really, a manifestation of consciousness. Which is also why poetry must and does continue to change (and why, as Stein, Antin, Perloff, and Bernstein advocate, we ought to pay plenty of attention to newly emerging modes of composition). Because the nature of human consciousness — perhaps at no time in human history as today — is changing. And poetry is, at heart, part of our effort to understand, explore, and manifest that (changing) consciousness. Poetry allows us to develop a *feel* for consciousness, which is inextricable from a deepened awareness of being and time, and deepened awareness and knowledge of the ongoing composition which we call perception.

While I have been advocating attention to such manifestations in the present — to innovative poetry of this moment — the roots, particularly in Chinese literature, for such a function for poetry and for writing generally go very deep. While Lao Tzu’s *Dao de jing* includes plenty of advice about how to govern effectively, the enduring strength of this work (which other than the Bible may be the most translated work on earth?) is in its simply stated and infinitely complex engagement with the nature of being. As David Hinton suggests in his introduction to Lao Tzu’s work,

Although its inexplicable nature is a central motif in the *Tao Te Ching*, we might approach Lao Tzu's Way by speaking of it at its deep ontological level, where the distinction between Presence (Being) and Absence (Nonbeing) arises. ... The ontological structure of Way is replicated in the structure of human consciousness, thoughts arising from the same generative emptiness as the ten thousand things. ... It is here in the depths of consciousness that Way can be experienced directly through the practice of meditation. You can watch the process of Way as thought burgeons forth from the emptiness and disappears back into it, or you can simply dwell in that undifferentiated emptiness, that generative realm of Absence. (18-19)

Lao Tzu's consideration of the Way (*Dao*) contrasts sharply with the more practical, behavioral engagement with Way found in his contemporary Confucius' *Analects*. Raymond Dawson, in his introduction to the *Analects*, suggests that Confucius uses the Way "to refer either to the ideal course of conduct for an individual or to an ideal political organization" (xxiv-xxv). In the *Dao de jing*, we study the Way for its own sake, and to engage a generative emptiness that may help us to understand better our own nature.

Throughout Lao Tzu's *Dao de jing*, we find advocacy of an ongoing engagement with the nature of consciousness, a deepening awareness of being, which is a mirroring of *wu wei* (and which *does* carry with it ethical and behavioral and even governmental implications, though that is not his primary focus): "If you're nothing doing what you do/ all things will be governed well" (3.12-13; 35) From Lao Tzu's perspective, nothing else can "compare to sitting still in Way's company" (62.10; 100). He could also be describing the often vexing experience of encountering a new mode of contemporary art, an innovative poetry that defies our expectations and habits. He asks, "Who's murky enough to settle slowly into pure clarity,/ and who still enough to awaken slowly into life?" (15.13-14; 47).

What we encounter in the *Dao de jing* is analogous to the reading experience of innovative poetry — an enigmatic encounter that requires patience, open-mindedness (in Zen terminology, beginner's mind), and the development of an ability (negative capability?) to live in uncertainty and with an ethical humility that suggests the incompleteness of our understandings. Thus the *Dao de jing* begins, "A Way called *Way* isn't the perennial Way./ A name that names isn't the perennial name" (1.1-2; 33). And yet, "Way remains hidden and nameless,/ but it alone nourishes and brings to completion" (41.21-22; 79). Lao Tzu's great poem is a cautionary tale regarding the perils of success, power, and will, and thus it

carries with it serious ecological and political implications, which, of course, are thus also pedagogical and ethical implications. It is poetry — much like the best of contemporary innovative poetry — that both asks us to give it our fullest effort, intellect, and attention, all the while realizing, “The further you explore, the less you know.// So it is that a sage knows by going nowhere,/ names by seeing nothing,/ perfects by doing nothing” (47.5-8; 85).

Thus I am proposing an additional dimension to what we think of as ethical criticism, and it involves a reading process that, by necessity, is inconclusive, not confined to what is reasonable, and knows quite certainly that certainty will not be the outcome. If it yields conclusions, they will not be Confucian nuggets of wisdom; they will be conclusions that undo themselves. It is an ethical not-knowing, which, nonetheless, is what ethical learning amounts to: an ongoing conversation, ever leading to more questions and more comments. To conclude, let me illustrate what such ethical criticism might look like by reading a poem by Larry Eigner.

May 29 71 # 5 0 7

paper
 a cut map
 beautiful
 land
 beds
 tree
 the air
 to dance in
 time
 what ground
 stretches out
 dancing, you feel like
 dancing

so many winds blowing

forest the mind
 flight

the sun
 on the open
 then the earth
 wall

(The Collected Poems of Larry Eigner, Volume III 1966-1978, 1012)

Larry Eigner's poetry presents us with a perpetual changing of direction, often a swerving from word to word, from line to line. The page becomes a highly malleable (seemingly infinitely so) locale for an instance of grace of mind, a turning about that is highly particular, idiosyncratic (and a perhaps simultaneously universal?) movement of consciousness in a complex relationship with language.

At nearly every moment of Eigner's #507 we have the possibility, and often the actuality, of a change in direction. Perhaps our own engaged questioning allows us to move with the movement of his poem. "paper" — is it this paper, that is, the one where the poem is being written? Or perhaps the paper that is, as the next line suggests, "a cut map," and is a poem, this poem, then a kind of "cut map"? cut out or from what? And the poem calls it "beautiful" — is the beauty what we are seeing emerge as the poem delineates itself, or is it something else that is more generally beautiful? What follows is a discrete series of things, a brief descending catalog — "land/ beds/ tree/ the air" — are they, each, what is beautiful, or perhaps they are beautiful, as the next line suggests, "to dance in." But how does one dance in (or with) a series of descending general nouns? Perhaps the poem is the moment of our dancing, a poem that swerves, that delights in its own possibilities of movement, "to dance in/ time," the dance, then, being a moving in space and time. The dance takes place at least two times: in the time of the poem's composition, and in the time of our reading of it (as we dance with and in its movement, its turning).

Our being, then, takes place here, in space and time, in a place of "land" and "beds" and "tree" and "the air," and we dance and we are upon "what ground" — the place that "stretches out," and which calls to us to consider "dancing, you feel like/dancing." That ground — as in Heidegger's thinking — is defined by our relationship to being and time. The ground, then, is a mixture of something we think through and about, at once familiar, present, and profoundly strange and enigmatic. A known place, but equally an ignored and unknowable thing, inextricably part of our own enigmatic nature. A ground that we may glimpse or sense in some poems.

These lines then are perhaps a kind of consecutive descent — a cascade, a waterfall — of an ongoing line of thinking, an initial direction of movement that

does not swerve or sway too far from its initial impulse and its initial direction. But then there is that last line of this section: “so many winds blowing.” What winds? That general “western wind” of an ongoing poetic tradition? A wind that might be upon and across “land” and “beds” and in a “tree” and essential and resident of “the air”? Or perhaps the “so many winds blowing” is true for any instant of consciousness, especially one manifesting itself on “paper/ a cut map”?

After a considerable open space — the largest of the poem, this “cut map” cut from an instance of awareness in space and time — we encounter the most remarkable turn of the poem: “forest the mind.” It is an apposition, which, in retrospect — the shift in direction allows us to look back — has been mildly implicit earlier in the poem, so that we now might consider another understanding of “what ground”: a support or space or entity that allows us to hold in awareness “land” “beds” “tree” and “the air,” and to dance with these seen and named locales. That forest/mind, wherein we find “so many winds blowing” — and this goes to the heart of much of Eigner’s poetry which can be read as an ongoing phenomenology, a mapping or engaging of the rapidity of perception and the complexity and grace of seeing’s dance with language and naming. It is an exhilarating sense of mind, which moves us upward perceptually, to “flight” and “the sun,” a dancing “on the open,” which, ultimately, comes back down to “then the earth/ wall.”

Perhaps it is the lack of connectives from word to word and even more so from line to line, perhaps it is the lack of a typical authorial pronoun that makes the poem on the page feel like a mobile, like a suspension of words and phrases of varying weight, in charged and multiple relationships to one another. Thus from almost every line to the next, we are either shifting or re-directing our attention or taking a leap, learning as we read the poem — and tutored precisely by the painstaking arrangement of the words on the page — how to travel a similar perceptual path.

Quite amazing, inspiring, and pertinent, then, to consider that Eigner, in spite of his severe case (from birth) of cerebral palsy, composed over 3,000 poems, “producing his typescripts on his 1940 Royal manual typewriter using only his right index finger and thumb to create shifting constellations of words in space whose musical and visual designs are realized in a language at once immediate and highly abstract” (editors’ jacket note, Vol. III).

As we take this second major turn in our reading — an exploration and recognition of the poet’s physical state, and a shift toward an embodied sense of the poem’s composition — perhaps our reading of the poem changes somewhat. In light of Eigner’s cerebral palsy and the difficult process of typing his poems, do we

read lines like “dancing, you feel like/ dancing” differently? Do we read differently knowing he could not dance, or does the poem itself become that dancing (which, perhaps, is how we would read the poem all along without the re-consideration brought about by our knowledge of the poet’s physical circumstance)? Do we return early in the poem to the cascade of general nouns and see now that “beds” is quite different than “land,” “tree,” and “the air,” and may indicate, obliquely, the poet’s physical location?

As Emmanuel Levinas has suggested, “we exist in a circuit of intelligence with the real” (*Entre Nous* 4). Innovative and somewhat baffling contemporary poetry offers us a place, in language, to experience and respond to —*without mastery* — the complexity of the real. Or, as Lao Tzu writes,

Honoring Way and treasuring Integrity
isn’t obedience to command,
it’s occurrence perennially appearing of itself. (51. ll. 7-9, 89)

In reading this one poem by Larry Eigner, I am sketching an ethical reading practice based on humility and limitation, as we come up against our not-knowing (try as we might to know). Such reading places us within an ethics of paradox and doubleness — of profound curiosity and delving, along with the recognition of the partial and indeterminate nature of the activity. That ongoing conversation where we collaborate in articulating our observations and questions, our tentative expressions of signification and meaning, *is knowing*, and its generative questions and limitations are a respectful and ethical way of being in the world.

Notes

1. This essay is an expanded version of the keynote address that I presented in Jinan on November 29, 2015, for the 4th Convention of the Chinese/American Association for Poetry and Poetics.
2. *Selected Poems and Essays of Hank Lazer*, Central China Normal University Press: 2015. For Professor Nie’s Preface, see pp, 1-7.
3. “Zui Wei Qun Ti.” *Poetry Monthly* (October 2013): 39-47. Hefei: Poetry Monthly Press, 2013.
4. Oppen is quoting from a letter sent to him by Rachel Blau DuPlessis.
5. At the 4th CAAP conference, I note with great pleasure the contributions of participants Dr. Maryemma Graham and Dr. Lauri Ramey, each of whom in their presentations, pedagogy, and publishing have done noteworthy work to promote *both* elements of diversity. The two

anthologies —*Every Goodbye Ain't Gone: An Anthology of Innovative Poetry by African Americans* (2006) and *What I Say: Innovative Poetry by Black Writers in America* (2015), edited by Lauri Ramey and Aldon Nielsen — provide tremendous resources for and evidence of the great variety and excellence of innovative poetry by African American poets.

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