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The Circle of Violence: Eigner's poetry amid the socio-political unrest of the 1960s

The United States of America, in the 1960s was characterized by big changes in the socio-political scenario, owing to the rapidly changing view of technology, science, and cultural art, marking the advent of the counterculture. With the Civil Rights Movement at its climax, there was a heavy division of race and among the people who remained conservative in the rising popularity of liberalism. This gave way to new movements in art, with localized artistic styles and innovations gaining popularity through close-knit, academically, and artistically associated groups of poets, painters, philosophers, etc. Larry Eigner, being one of them, linked to the Black Mountain school of poets, focused his poetry during this time mainly on literary-historical topics with special attention to the placement of words on the page and the creation of an environment through his words and style. This paper will explore the nuances of violence and peace in Eigner's individual poetry and artistic partnership with Ian Tyson, and how this is reflective of the alternations and coexistence of violence and peace in the world around him. This will also include broader changes in the cultural and social environment at the time and how Eigner's poetry can be read with that under consideration.

Uniquely created and deviant from Eigner's usual themes, the poem "Circle 7" designed by Ian Tyson is brilliantly malleable to the readers' interpretations and yet it encompasses the many aspects of America's changing socio-political and cultural scene. Dante Alighieri's *Inferno* outlines the nine concentric circles of hell in his epic *Divine Comedy*. The seventh circle of hell

is associated with violence, made up of three more subdivisions that show a “pattern of coordinated images that delineate a descent of man not only from the human to the animal world, but also from the animal to the vegetative and finally mineral worlds (Lansing 73-74).” The idea of violence remains in the undertones of the poem, deeply overshadowed by an overarching theme of nonviolence. The absence of an obvious theme of violence marks its implicit presence by a paradoxical idea of presence in absence. With significant events like the Civil Rights Movement (1954-1968), the Vietnam War (1955-1975) and the Cold War (1947-1991), violence was very much a topic that either enticed or repulsed the youth of America. This poem’s tentacles touching art, history, and religion with a titular allusion to Dante’s depiction of violence is ironic, but also radical and constitutive of the American avant-garde.

The American counterculture was characterized by the influence of Eastern philosophy and the acknowledgment of their cultural substance in a postcolonial society. Eigner was invested in the religious ideologies of Hinduism and Buddhism, as his letters denote. In his letter to Jerome Rothenberg, he mentions enjoying the Boddhisatva, and his special leaning towards the Eastern religious philosophies. In the poem, he writes “the second coming of/ GHANDI to LONDON/ WINSTON CHURCHILL was appalled/ at the sight of this/ half naked INDIAN// though before I had thought of CHRIST/ by his ribs...” (Eigner 1965)

The Bible mentions “the second coming” of Christ: “So Christ was once offered to bear the sins of many; and unto them that look for him shall he appear the second time without sin unto salvation.” (Hebrews 9:28, King James Version). Using a popularly Christian term to describe Gandhi, a leader of the Indian Independence movements, represents the new culture that was created as different races met and interacted and the influence of the Eastern culture started growing in the west. Eigner’s mention of Gandhi can also be closely linked to the racial tension

at that time when the Civil Rights Movement was at its peak. Martin Luther King Jr's admiration of Gandhi has been very well known and his adoption of Civil Disobedience ties the east and west together, considering that the concept of Civil Disobedience was conceived by Henry David Thoreau. Churchill's contempt for Gandhi is very central to the racial violence that has happened, and which can be used to throw light on the racial violence of the then present. Churchill infamously said, when he met Gandhi: "It is alarming and also nauseating to see Mr. Gandhi, a seditious Middle Temple lawyer, now posing as a fakir of a type well known in the East, striding half-naked up the steps of the Viceregal palace, while he is still organizing and conducting a defiant campaign of civil disobedience, to parley on equal terms with the representative of the King-Emperor." (Churchill 1931). The reference to Churchill's demeaning sentence on Gandhi could also have served as a way of highlighting the racial discrimination prevalent in the United States against people of color, especially African American people. Eigner also had a profound respect for MLK, as he states in his letter to Jackson McLow, "M.L. King, who had looked like good Presidential Timber..." (Eigner 1969) which stands in support of the argument that Eigner was very much politically inclined and in opposition of the racial discrimination.

There is a deeper connect to poetry, philosophy, and religion as Eigner begins "Circle 7", when he mentions the "memory of YEATS BLAKE/ DHL" (Eigner 1965). Eigner's letters to Paul Blackburn show his admiration for Yeats and DHL, and how he views their works as spiritually interconnected. He says: "DHL, it seems, had a keener sense of life/dth, the balance betwn em," and he mentions the "sense of godly" that he gets from DHL's *Etruscan Places*. In two of his letters, he talks about Yeats and D H Lawrence from the perspective of Carl Jung's Archetypes. Jung's archetypes were very well known in the United States in the twentieth

century as a “part of a collective field which links all human being together.” (Kidari 39). In a time of cultural amalgamation, it makes sense to refer to these two poets together in a poem that brings up racial solidarity and peace.

While William Blake and D. H. Lawrence both have been famously antiwar in their poetic expressions, W.B. Yeats had refused to engage in topics of war in his poetry. Blake rose to immense popularity in twentieth century America for his writing that vehemently condemned war, like “To peaceful arts shall envy bow” (from *Auguries of Innocence*), “London”, or “Holy Thursday: Is this a holy thing to see.” Even D.H Lawrence was very clear in his explicit writing that was against war, most notably in his poems “Casualty”, “Message to a Perfidious Soldier”, “War Baby” and many more. It is rather interesting to note the presence of Yeats in the list, who very plainly wrote in “On being asked for a War Poem” that he will not speak up in favor or in condemnation of war. All in all, these three poets, along with Christ and Gandhi, reinforce the idea of nonviolence and call for the end of war. With three notable wars and/or movements happening, this makes it extremely relevant to reach all the crowd of the general population. The poets appeal the intellectuals, Gandhi’s reference speaks to the youth that is influenced by the East, and Christ to influence the people who are swayed by religion. It is worthy to note that Tyson made a deliberate choice in highlighting the names either by capitalizing or by separating them to the right of the page with larger fonts. This could have been an intentional choice to draw more attention towards these names.

The advancement in technology, industry and consumerism led to a greater experimentation in art and design inspired by machine aesthetics. Ian Tyson’s designs for Eigner’s poetry, “Circle 7” and also “A Line That May Be Cut” are geometric, maze-like, and highly industrial in nature. The colors for Circle 7 are blue, black, and brown, all of which are

rooted to the machine-like, technical design aesthetic. While these rigid lines and colors may represent the outline of some figure to the viewer, they act as flexible illustrations for poems that are also wide in their range of interpretations. For example, the poem “End of May” appears both in the collection “A Line That May Be cut” and in one of the postcards that Eigner sent. In the postcard, the poem is written in the middle of fourteen parallel, horizontal black bars on a white page. While on one hand the design might represent a window with open blinds and the poem filtering in as light, the content of the poem visualizes a grim ending and overpowering darkness, which can also show the black bars as restricting and industrially suffocating. This adds a crucial image to the poem, which is absent when read in “a Line That May Be Cut.” Being a poet of the times, Eigner was very much invested in science, technology, and the developing advancements in the field. His letters to Jackson McLow show a marked interest in quantum physics, especially finding inspiration in the physical sciences, particularly in Heisenberg’s principle of uncertainty that was developed in 1927. (Eigner 1969). He even talked to Blackburn about his growing interest in proteins and “big molecules”, which led him to read “Physics and Chemistry of Life.” (Eigner 1956). In case of Circle 7, the brown is also especially representative of skin color, and the design on the right could be a dramatized, distorted human and the brown is in agreement with the image of a “half naked INDIAN.”

The comparison between Gandhi and Christ persists after its introduction in the poem—talking about Christ’s prominent ribs and how they now remind the poet of Gandhi. This again is in agreement with the “second coming” and how the Midlands were the hub of the Industrial Revolution in England. This is very relevant to the idea introduced in the poem, which connects the rise of industries with the rooting of humanity reinforced by moral figures. Another of Eigner’s poems from 1966 addresses a similar topic, by reference to Walt Whitman:

Whitman's cry at starvation
in a land of plenty

prison camps the mean
South

six ways
of saying it
the big problem is
consumption and conservation and population
population consumption conservation
conservation population consumption
population conservation consumption (Eigner 1966)

It clearly talks about the problems at hand, and it less disguised than most of his poetry.

Eigner's poetry, in tandem with Tyson's designs also speaks to the culture of consumerism that rose in the twentieth century. The American avant-gardists and intellectuals were just as involved in the creation of this new culture as were the merchants and advertisers. This budded mainly from the European idea of the avant-garde and an idealization of consumerism (Hobbs 140). Eigner's collection of poems from 1965 in "A Line That May Be Cut" with Tyson's designs are all very similar in theme, with an overall poetic content of spring and abundance, and an artistic expression of industrialism and consumerism. In a way, these go hand in hand as very archetypal of the art-economics dynamic of that time. For example, an excerpt from his poem from "A Line That May Be Cut" reads:

5 & ½ million
trees
annual for the
Times
how much is that a
wood pile
could not be so
high who numbers
streams beaten out
the anvil
makes good

work how many
leaves or is
it branches? (Eigner 1965)

While the poem is very nature-oriented, it also commodifies art and journalism, and views trees, leaves and branches as commodities for consumption. At the same time, Tyson's design on the left part of the page is highly geometric, very similar to a map or maze, or a highly organized city plan. This is again very interlinked to the concept of the industrialization in America and the role of poetry and art in the construction of a new society of technological advancement, paired with big changes in the political environment.

The work of a poet in times of political turbulence gives critical information about the structure of the society. Larry Eigner, being aware of the changes happening around him, expressed himself through his poetry, which was not only a reflection of him, but also of the world around him. Taking a dive into his poetry through a lens into his personal correspondence, paired with large scale understanding of America in the 1960s gives a more holistic insight into his work that has been valued for its inventive and creative merit.

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