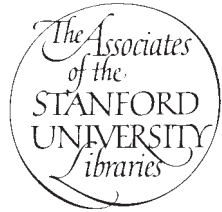


my heart in Westing

Imprint

FALL 2004 | VOLUME 23 NUMBER 1

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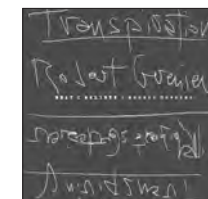
**An Artful Exile:
The Illustrations of Mary Hallock Foote**

SHERYL NESE NONNENBERG | PAGE 5



**Happy Thirtieth to The Associates
of the Stanford University Libraries**

JOHN E. MUSTAIN | PAGE 17

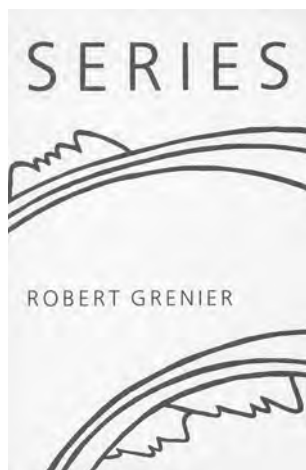


**The Genealogy of
Robert Grenier's Drawing Poems**

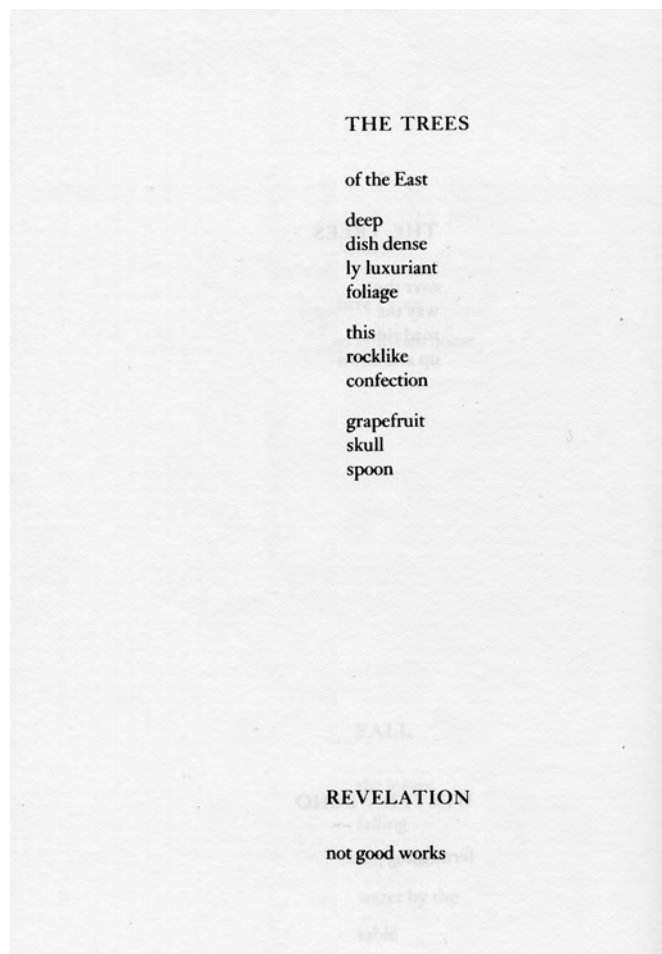
ALBERT GELPI | PAGE 21

Wrap-around cover illustration:

*A page from the sequence "What I Believe" in What I Believe
transpiration / transpiring Minnesota by Robert Grenier (Oakland, CA: O Books, 1989).
The script reads "my heart is beating / I am a beast."*



Cover, and page
from the sequence
“Fall Winter Family Home,”
in *Series* (Berkeley, CA:
This Press, 1978).



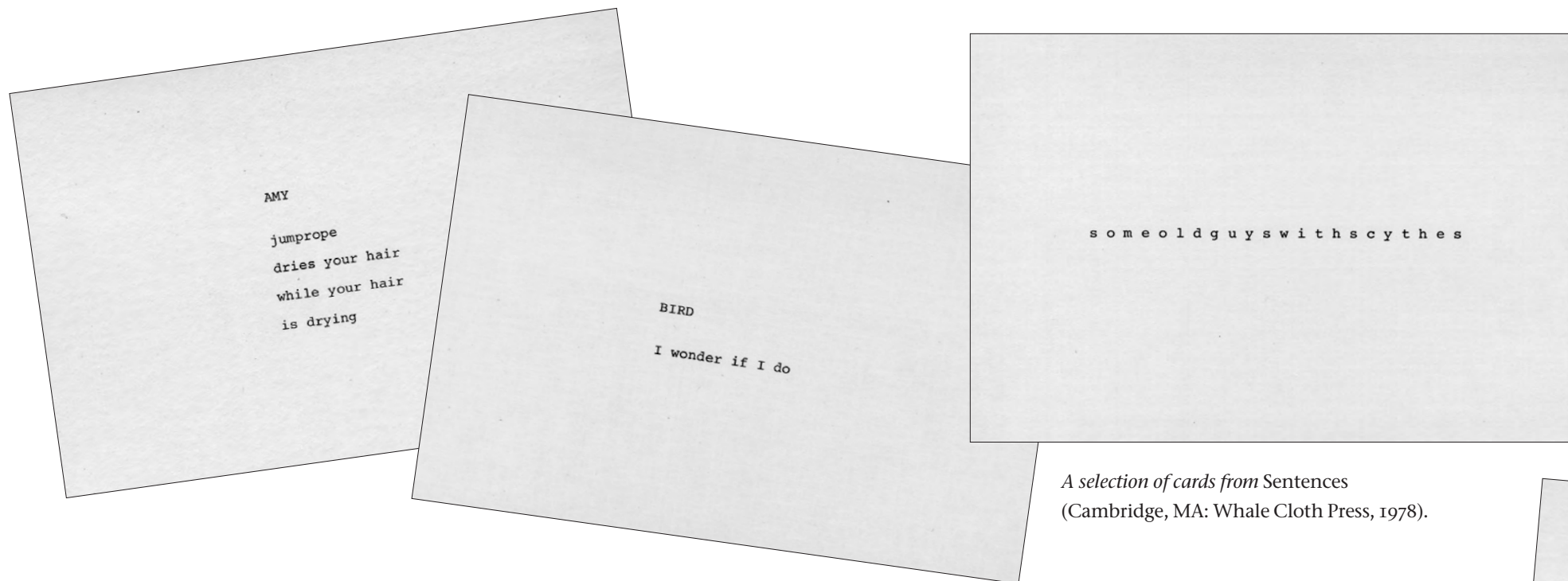
The Genealogy of Robert Grenier's Drawing Poems

ALBERT GELPI

My dialogue with Robert Grenier began some forty years ago in the sixties when, as a beginning assistant professor at Harvard, I was his tutor and the adviser of his undergraduate honors thesis on William Carlos Williams. Bob was in Robert Lowell's poetry workshops, but his poetry was already taking off in a direction very different from Lowell's. In the early sixties Bob was urging me to read Robert Creeley for the tense concentration of his short poems, and his fellow Minnesotan Robert Bly for his experiments in *Deep Image*. The course of Bob's career took him to teaching for a number of years at Franconia College in New Hampshire before settling in the Bay Area in the late seventies, by which time I had been teaching at Stanford for some years.

In the historical and critical accounts of contemporary poetry Grenier has been linked with the so-called Language poets, and he has published and been anthologized with that varied and various group. Indeed, the journal *this*, which Bob co-edited with Barrett Watten in the early seventies, provided a bridge in the evolution of open form poetry from Charles Olson's "composition by field" to Language poetry.

Language poetry became the banner movement of the Postmodernist avant-garde because it adopted poststructuralist linguistics to explore and develop a dissident strain of Modernist poetics that ran from Gertrude Stein through Louis Zukofsky and George Oppen to Robert Creeley and Larry Eigner and thence to Language poets like Charles Bernstein and Lyn Hejinian and Leslie Scalapino. Different as those poets are, they coalesce around assumptions about language as the *matter* of poetry in both senses of "matter": language both as the material medium and as itself the subject matter. Here is Creeley's 1960 anticipation of those assumptions: "I believe in a poetry determined by the language of which it is made. . . . I look to words, and nothing else, for my own redemption as a man or poet. . . . I mean then *words*—as opposed to content. I care what the poem says, only as a poem—I am no longer interested in the exterior attitude to which the poem may well point, as signboard."¹ The poetic line of descent from Stein to Bernstein represents a focus on, playing with, exploring of the materiality of language, reenforced by a poststructuralist emphasis on the slippage in reference between word and thing, signifier ("signboard") and signified, statement and meaning. Grenier's calculatedly extreme proclamation in the first issue of *this*, "I HATE SPEECH," all in provocative caps, rejected the performative, oral poetry of the Beats for the writerly material on the page.²



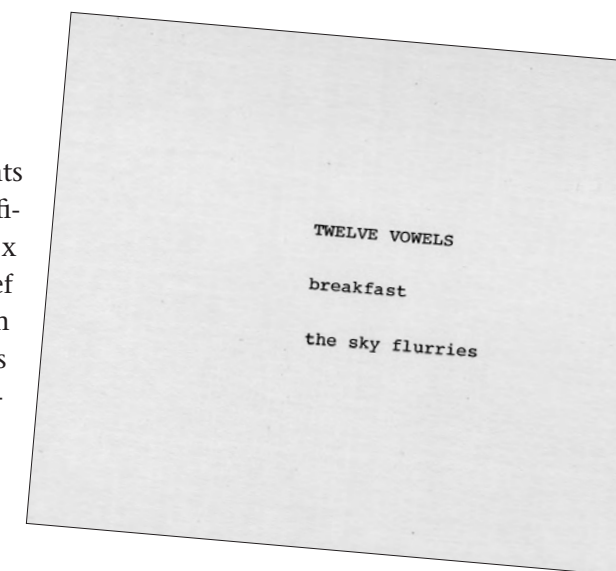
A selection of cards from *Sentences*
(Cambridge, MA: Whale Cloth Press, 1978).

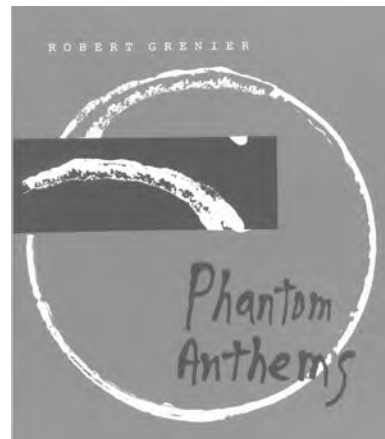
Grenier's development represents, to my mind, the most radical experiment in Language poetry because it works from those assumptions in ways that turn them inside out. And *this*, if I may borrow the title from the journal, is how it happened, or how I see it happening. The most formative influences on Bob in the early sixties, when he was learning to write, were, as I have indicated, Williams and Creeley. Williams was not taught at Harvard at the time, but Bob chose to write his senior honors essay on Williams' prosody and search for "measure," and specifically on the working of the line as poetic unit. By the fifties Williams had recognized Creeley as a poet of the next generation who was extending his poetics in those minimalist poems whose colloquial inflections concentrated the convoluted imprecisions of reference and relation in terse, halting, enjambed lines. The collections that Creeley published during the sixties were called *Words* and *Pieces*, and right from the start of their friendship he felt a strong affinity with the younger Grenier. When Scribner's proposed a volume of selected poems to Creeley, he entrusted to Grenier the task of making the selection. So the genealogical line from Williams to Creeley to Grenier is clear.

Consequently, the evolution of Grenier's work from *Dusk Road Games* (1967), his first published collection, to *Series* (1978) shows him paring the writing down, often to single word lines and even to single line poems, suspended in the surrounding white space of the page. The words stand clean and seemingly clear, till the seemingly simple and familiar phrases in sharp focus become strangely evocative of something beyond themselves, ambiguous in their origins and impli-

cations. *Sentences Toward Birds* (1975) represents a further development in definition and indefinability. No longer a bound book, forty-four 4 x 6 index cards in an envelope show brief printed texts, often a single phrase. Freed from narrative or specific reference, the words become mysterious in their ambiguous, associative possibilities. The expanded *Sentences* (published in 1978 but written between 1971 and 1978) was a box of 500 typewritten, 5 x 8 index cards with phrases and clauses in free-floating focus, again with no fixed order or sequentiality.

Along with Williams and Creeley, the third decisive figure in Bob's development is Creeley's contemporary and friend Larry Eigner. Because of severe paralysis from cerebral palsy, Eigner was able to use only the index finger of his right hand to punch out his poems on the typewriter, but this restriction forced him to explore Olson's advocacy of the typewriter as instrument of composition. The spacings and indentations of the typewriter allowed Eigner to compose his brief poems, which look at first like fragmentary jottings, visually on the page. Soon after Eigner moved to Berkeley in 1979, Bob moved in with him and was there as friend, caregiver, and fellow-poet for a decade. Bob worked with Eigner on his typescripts, edited his last collections for publication, and, with Curtis Faville, is





LEFT: "Bach Five," from *Phantom Anthems* by Robert Grenier (ABOVE) (Oakland, CA: O Books in collaboration with Trike Press, 1986).

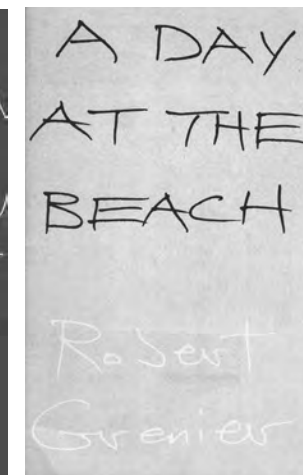
now editing Eigner's posthumous *Collected Poems* for the Stanford University Press. Through Eigner he came to see the typewriter as a medium of design and the poem on the page as a visual composition. Since Eigner's death, his battered typewriter occupies a special, totemic place in Bob's workspace in Bolinas.

With *Sentences* (1978), followed by *A Day at the Beach* (1984) and *Phantom Anthems* (1986), Grenier made the transition from print to typescript, which left him, rather than the designer or printer, in control of the visual presentation of the poems. And then in the later eighties Grenier made the surprising and crucial move that has defined him as a poet—from typed poems to inscribed poems. The shift occurs before the reader's eyes in the course of three sequences of 1988 and 1989 distributed by Leslie Scalapino's O Books in what Grenier calls the "Black Box." The box, of the standard size for typewriter paper, displays across the middle of the front the typed words in caps, white on black, "WHAT I BELIEVE / Robert Grenier"; and above and below that line there appear in italics, again in white script on black, "*transpiration Robert Grenier*" and (upside down) "*transpiring Robert Grenier*." After a few typed poems at the start, the unbound sheets present handwritten texts, gathered into separate sequences. And then, immediately after the "Black Box," the final transpiration (so far) came in 1989 when Grenier

began to inscribe haiku-like poems in notebooks in black ball-point pen. He was supporting himself at the time with a night job as a professional proofreader in a San Francisco law firm, and soon the ball-points of red, blue, and green, which were his proofreader's tools, supplemented the black ball-point in his inscriptions of poems. From then on, the facing pages of the notebook each record, in three or four words in four colors, daily impressions of life in Bolinas.

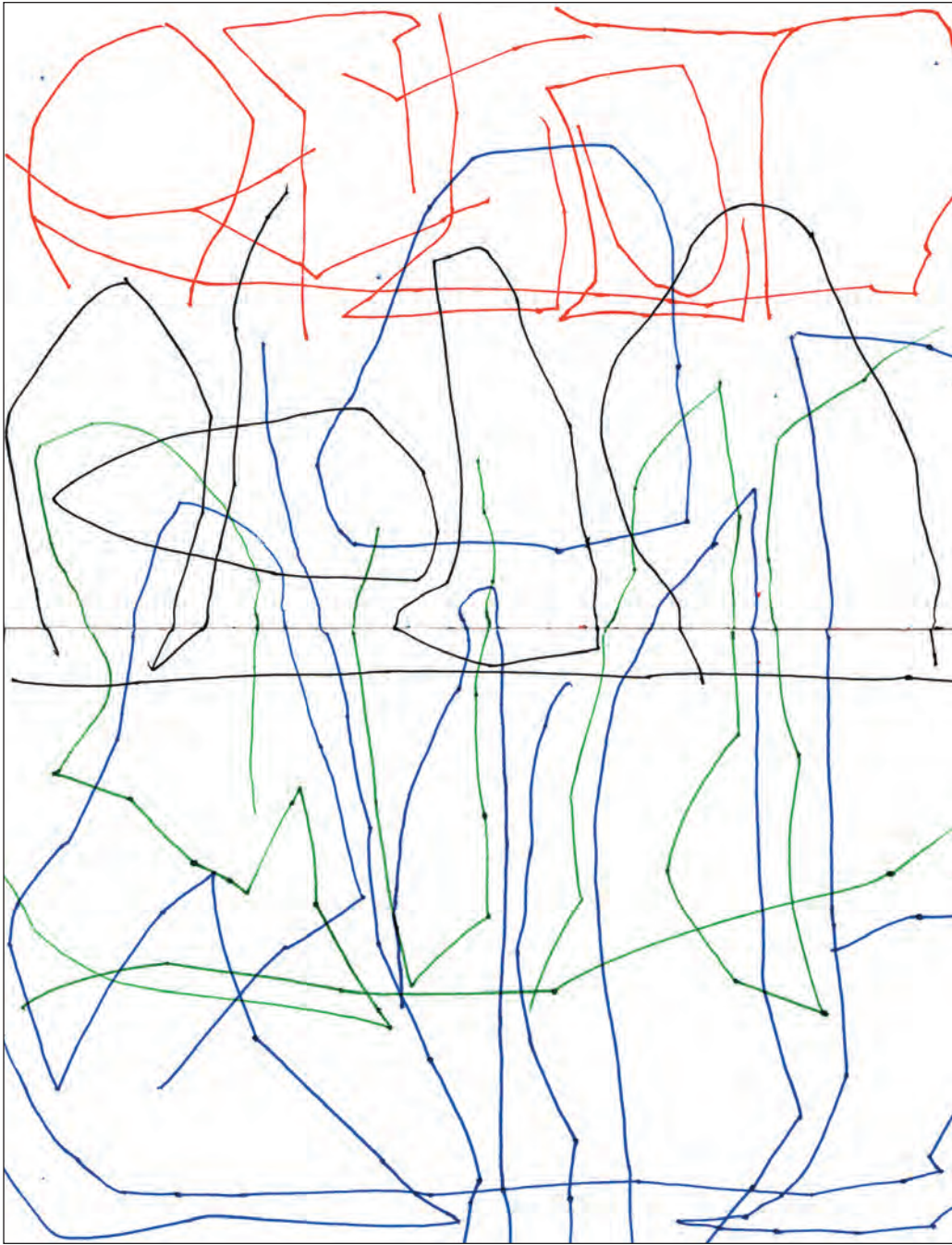
Some of these poems include the first person pronoun, and occasionally the third person "Bob," as the one seeing and hearing and smelling and feeling, but their focus is not on the observer but on the surrounding world under the keenest observation: the landscape of land and water, sea and sky, bird and fish, tree and flower, moon and star around Bolinas and the Point Reyes seashore. The stroke of the pen on the page in the urgency of momentary observation gives rise to the words on the page with a physical immediacy and material thinginess that suggest reference to the things they represent. Yet at the same time the idiosyncrasies of the lettering and the largely spontaneous relations of the shapes of the letters interpose an intricate visual design that to some extent obscures the words, so that the reading of the words becomes itself an interpretative process that demonstrates the mediating character of language and the mediated character of reference. The very nature of the experiment has created problems in finding an effective and economical way of "publishing" these notebook poems. Thus far, *12 from rhymms* (1996) and *Owl on Bough* (1997) have made a few of them available as color xeroxes on unbound sheets, and some poems are available, individually or in sets, in large, excellent color prints from the Marianne Boesky Gallery in New York. Meanwhile, notebooks of poems, one after the other, continue to accumulate.

The verbal/visual composition of the drawn poems supersedes and invalidates print and even type as necessarily and intrinsically a falsifying distortion of the gestalt of writing/drawing the poem. Indeed, the drawing poems represent a

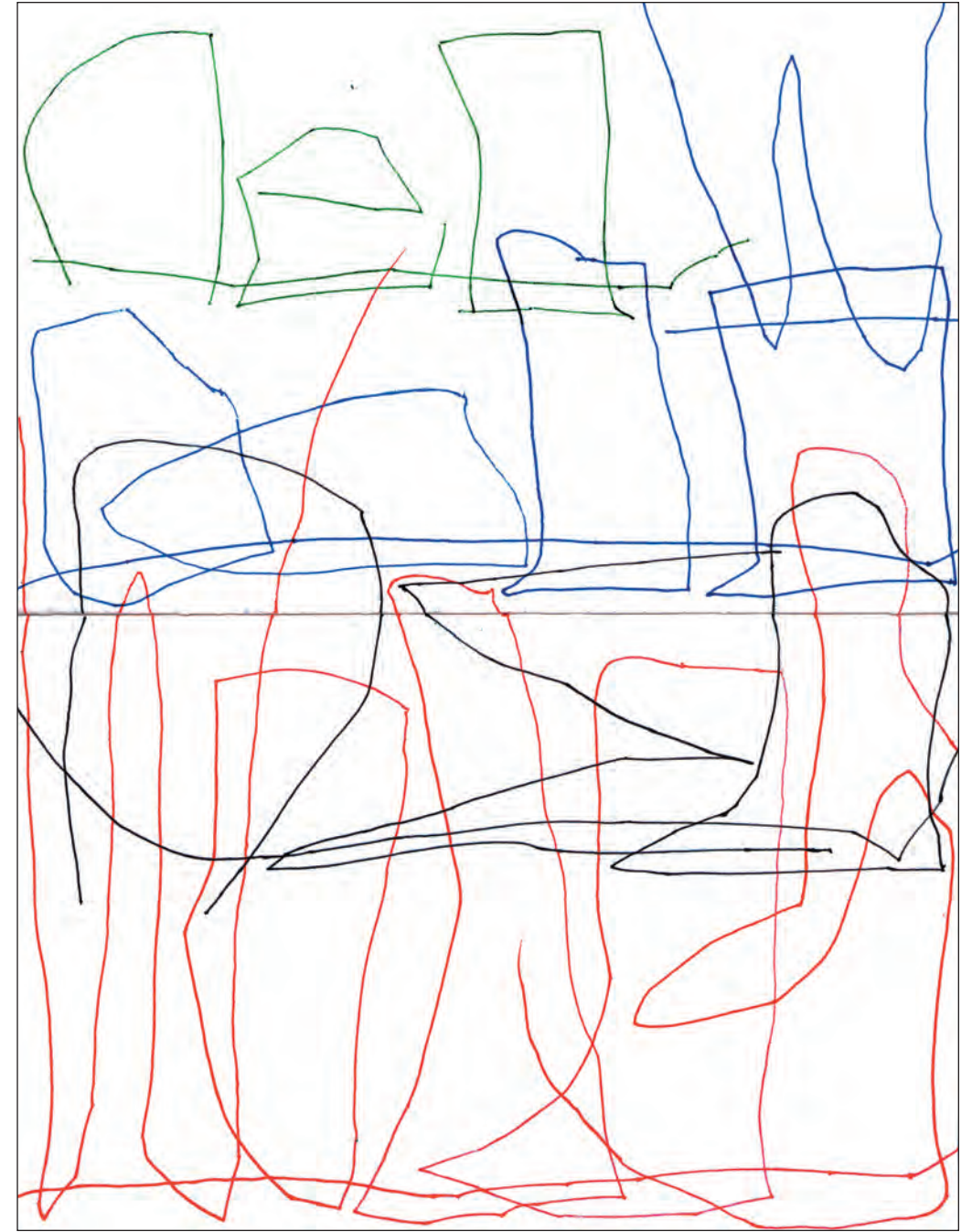


FAR LEFT: *Box cover of What I Believe transpiration / transpiring Minnesota* (Oakland, CA: O Books, 1989).

LEFT: *Cover of A Day at the Beach* (New York: Roof Books, 1984).



Robert Grenier, "AFTER / NOON / SUN / SHINE"



Robert Grenier, "RED W / OODD / RED / WOODS"

reverse hermeneutical strategy from the earlier printed and typed texts. The detached phrases on the page or index card move from clarity to complexity; the isolation of words in surrounding space defamiliarizes the obvious and familiar, and in that suspension opens indeterminate possibilities of reference and connection. By contrast, in the drawn poems, the orthographic oddities of the alphabet and the “scrawl” (as some have seen them³) of the overlapping, intersecting colored lines create, by design and by chance, something that at first looks unreadable. However, through active participation in construing what is on the page, the reader/viewer comes to arrive at something like the experience that generated the poem. The seemingly illegible scrawl yields the luminous clarity and unique freshness of the observed moment:

OWL / ON / BOUGH;
FISH / HAWK / WITH / FISH;
ABSOLUTE / DELUGE / AN / OCEAN;
START / FROGS / THEIR / CHORUS;
AFTER / NOON / SUN / SHINE;
RED W / OODD / RED / WOODS.

The Language poet Susan Howe, who began her career as a visual artist, makes the argument that Emily Dickinson’s poems should be read only visually in reproductions of the holographs. Howe has herself sometimes fractured and reassembled the lines of her own poems on the page by cutting and pasting lines of type to make a visual arrangement, but she has not (at least not yet) experimented with script, perhaps because of the vexing problem of reproducing the holographs economically so that they can be published. Howe identifies with Dickinson’s antinomian spirit: the deeply Protestant belief in the supremacy of one’s individual inspiration and insight and calling, even in the face of social and institutional constraints or opposition. Grenier is not a New Englander; but he shares with Thoreau and Dickinson and Howe that same American Protestant antinomian sensibility, and his poems are more like Dickinson’s poems than Howe’s are, in that they represent the concise expression of a single, intense moment of experience.

It is the shared conviction of unwavering responsibility to the calling of one’s genius that leads me to make what might seem the improbable and even absurd suggestion that Ralph Waldo Emerson, that supreme New England antinomian, stands as the final figure behind Grenier’s experiment in Language poetry. I am sure that he did not have Emerson expressly in mind when he began drawing poems in notebooks. But when he read my Emerson chapter in *The Tenth Muse* in the mid-1990s, it was his recognition of the assumptions and consequences

of the antinomian imagination that led him to respond so strongly to the chapter and to reread Emerson with such an energizing sense of connection as well as difference. On the first and only occasion on which I met Charles Bernstein, his first remark to me was that Bob had spent the previous evening and part of the night urging him in the most insistent terms to read my Emerson chapter. So in the genealogy of Grenier’s drawing poems Emerson stands behind Williams behind Olson and Creeley and Eigner. Moreover, Grenier’s sense of affinity with Emerson helps to explain how and why his radical experiment turned the assumptions of Language poetry inside out.

While Emerson is the oversoul of American poetry, he is also our arch-Romantic, and his idealistic Platonism and his mystical claims for the visionary imagination made him seem even more suspect and outmoded to the Postmodernists than he was to the Modernists. The three axioms at the beginning of the chapter on “Language” in Emerson’s 1836 *Nature* are at the heart of Emerson’s poetics and serve to clarify Grenier’s affinity with as well as differences from Emerson: “1. Words are signs of natural facts. 2. Particular natural facts are symbols of particular spiritual facts. 3. Nature is symbol of spirit.”⁴ Grenier is no Transcendentalist; indeed, fully aware of Heidegger and Saussure and Wittgenstein, he accepts language as a man-made semiotic system of arbitrary signs with all the ensuing gaps and slippages that complicate and undermine signification, and his epistemological skepticism makes him shy away from the metaphysics of Emerson’s second and third axioms. But Emerson’s first axiom, asserting a vital and signifying connection between word and thing, continues to challenge and engage him. The drawing poems acknowledge but resist the endless slippage of signification and the endless recession of meaning and seek to connect words to things in the immediate moment of experience by the stroke of the pen on the page, letter by letter, word by word. Without a nod to the Chinese, but with Pound behind him, Grenier’s drawing poems constitute his own kind of ideogrammic method to invent a language of nature.

Faced with the deepening epistemological elision between signifier and signified that is the condition and curse of modernity, Thoreau said that we must learn to nail words down to things again. In the same spirit, Emerson’s essay on “The Poet” declares: “the poet is the Namer, or Language-maker, naming things sometimes after their appearance, sometimes after their essence, and giving to every one its own name and not another’s.” For Emerson, “language is fossil poetry,” and the animating function of the poet is to break open those dead verbal shells and make the vital connections again: “the poet names the thing because he sees it, or comes one step nearer to it than any other.” For “though the origin of most of our words is forgotten, each word was at first a stroke of genius, and obtained currency, because for the moment it symbolized the world to the first speaker and to the hearer.”⁵

Grenier might add with a similar sense of awed wonder, that, for the inscriber and the reader of the inscription, the words symbolized the world in the moment of observation and discovery. At the same time, however, Grenier comes so long after the epistemological break that part of him even questions Williams' injunction that the poet use language to destroy the world and recreate it "afresh in the likeness of that which it was."⁶ The Postmodernist in Grenier wonders whether this is not "an absurd undertaking, since all know 'words' / 'letters' [are] but 'arbitrary' human invention." Yet the Emerson in him makes him immediately add: "this world's shapes / being alive say, 'Give it a try!'" And that is precisely what his drawing poems do undertake; he would shy away from Emerson's Romantic phrasing of a "stroke of genius," but what he aims for is a gestalt that at once discovers and invents the fleeting world in a phrase fixed in four colors. His commitment to Williams' challenge to linguistic recreation proceeds from Emerson's conception of the poet as "Namer, or Language-maker." His drawing poems evolved, he says, out of his "lifelong desire to. . . 'name' what is going on / happening (largely *unbeknownst*) with / in 'unlikely' material condition of drawn letters."⁷

Grenier's own remarks about his work substantiate the Emerson connection as a way around the dilemma of signification, not through Emersonian metaphysics but through Emersonian pragmatic practice. "You can't avoid reference," Grenier observed, and then, thinking perhaps of some of his fellow Language poets, went on: "Well, you can but I don't in writing." At the same time, reading Grenier's writing is not easy or automatic; it "requires learning a language," starting not just with the idiosyncrasies of his phrasing but with the idiosyncrasies of his handwriting and even of his alphabet. The poem is a thing that must be read actively for what it is, words scratched on a page, because it has "no meaning aside from its existence in itself." So poems are "embodiments of words in material"; and yet the material words proceed from an experience of the world outside language and exist only in relation to the material things named. As Williams said, the poem is "not opposed. . . but apposed to" nature.⁸ Or, in Grenier's words, the world is "the site of the enactment of whatever this book is," and each of its poems "enacts or re-enacts the attention" to whatever the particular and generating occasion is: its "presence and one's whole participation in that." Thus "the subject of all these things is the condition of [their] existence," and the difficulty in reading the poems is the condition of our attention to and participation in what is made present in the words of the poem.⁹

Fully aware of the extremity of his experiment, Grenier has anticipated the objections of some baffled or outraged readers that the evolution of his "work draws farther away from what is recognizably 'Literature.'"¹⁰ On the contrary, however, his ideogrammic drawing poems, extreme as they may initially appear to be, are, in point of fact, in the mainstream of the American poetic tradition.

They represent Grenier's Postmodernist exploration of Emerson's Romantic dictum that "Words are signs of natural facts" and of Williams' Modernist injunction to recreate everything anew as language in the likeness of what it was.



Albert Gelpi is the William Robertson Coe Professor of American Literature, emeritus. Two volumes of his critical history of the American poetic tradition have been published: The Tenth Muse on nineteenth-century poets, and A Coherent Splendor on Modernist poets of the first half of the twentieth century. The third volume will discuss poets of the second half of the century.

- 1 Robert Creeley, "A Note," *Collected Essays* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), p. 477.
- 2 Robert Grenier, "On Speech," *this 1* (Winter 1971), no page numbers.
- 3 Cf. Stephen Ratcliffe, "Grenier's 'Scrawl'" in *Listening to Reading* (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 2000), pp. 119-132.
- 4 Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Essays and Lectures* (New York: The Library of America, 1983), p. 20.
- 5 *Essays and Lectures*, pp. 456-457.
- 6 William Carlos Williams, *Spring and All* in *Imaginations*, ed. Webster Schott (New York: New Directions, 1970), p. 93.
- 7 All the quotations from Grenier in this paragraph come from Robert Grenier, "Preliminary Inventory of RG Materials," (an unpublished document prepared by Grenier for Special Collections, Green Library), p. 111.
- 8 *Imaginations*, p. 121.



- 9 All of Grenier's comments in this paragraph were transcribed by Albert Gelpi from remarks made by Grenier in the course of a seminar on his work that he conducted on May 8, 2002, in Special Collections, Green Library, Stanford University.
- 10 "Preliminary Inventory," p. 111.

NOTE: The papers of Robert Grenier, Robert Creeley, and Larry Eigner are in Special Collections in the Green Library. An online Guide to the Robert Grenier Papers may be found at <http://www-sul.stanford.edu/depts/spc/xml/m1082.xml> Other drawing poems may be found at <http://epc.buffalo.edu/authors/grenier/>