

Beauchamp Literary Prize

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“The contents of that absent reality”: language, being and memory in Lyn Hejinian’s *My Life*

Lyn Hejinian’s *My Life* is perhaps her best-known work, an autobiographical prose poem of “Oulipean” formal constraint¹ which has so far appeared in two incarnations: the edition of 1980 and the substantially revised 1987 version. In both editions, the poem consists of an entry for each year of her life, with each entry composed of the same number of sentences. The 1980 edition therefore follows the structure of 37 by 37, and the 1987 edition 45 by 45, with added sections at the end and new sentences worked into the existing, earlier entries. *My Life* is a text that both engages with and resists the conventions of autobiography, in line with Hejinian’s principle of the “open text,” one which invites readerly participation and rejects singular, determined meaning.²

Hejinian is associated with the language poetry movement, a loose association of avant-garde poets which began in the 1970s on the West Coast of the United States. Other poets associated with the movement include include Susan Howe, Bruce Andrews, Charles Bernstein, Ron Silliman and Bob Perelman. According to Paul Quinn, language poetry was “a critical reaction to the narrow, speech-based poetics then prevalent,” heralding “a new era of Writing writ large, foregrounding the signifier.”³ A central tenet of the language poets’ commitment to an open poetics which emphasises its own textuality is Ron Silliman’s idea of the “new sentence.”⁴ New sentences are quite ordinary, but their innovation is their tendency to operate paratactically: they are placed side by side in such a way that they influence and

¹ Marjorie Perloff, *Radical Artifice* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 164.

² Lyn Hejinian, “The Rejection of Closure,” in *The Language of Inquiry* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 54-55; Christopher Beach, *Poetic Culture* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1999), 42-43.

³ Paul Quinn, “Rattling the chains of free verse: The surprising survival of Language poetry and poetics,” *Jacket* 12 (2001), n. pag.

⁴ See his essay “The New Sentence”, in his book *The New Sentence* (New York: Roof Books, 1987), 63-93.

destabilise each others' meaning.⁵ Texts based around the new sentence resist "syllogistic movement," that is, the tendency of the text to force the reader, by effaced rhetorical operations, to particular conclusions.⁶ In contrast with traditional poetry, in which units of meaning are organised around the line, in prose poetry utilising new sentences, "the sentence is a unit of writing."⁷ According to Silliman, the new sentence operates such that "the limiting of syllogistic movement keeps the reader's attention at or very close to the level of language, the sentence level or below."⁸ Another feature of the new sentence which is relevant to my discussion of Hejinian's work is noted by Bob Perelman: new sentences tend toward "a hyperextension of syntactic possibilities, more Steinian than surreal."⁹ This essay will start by discussing *My Life* with reference to the operations of parataxis and the related rhetorical figure of metonymy. I will go on to consider how Hejinian utilises quotation and repetition, in line with these poetic principles, to generate the unique texture of this work, and finally I will consider the ways in which these writing practices contribute to Hejinian's work as postmodern autobiography, with particular attention to her engagement with chronology as an organising principle to both life writing and memory itself.

Parataxis, metonymy, the "open text"

In her essay "The Rejection of Closure," Hejinian explains her idea of the "open text" and her reason for pursuing it:

A 'closed text' is one in which all the elements of the work are directed toward a single reading of it. The 'open text,' by definition, is open to the world and particularly to the reader. It invites participation, rejects the authority of the writer over the reader and thus, by analogy, the authority implicit in other (social, economic, cultural) hierarchies."

According to Marjorie Perloff, the rhetorical strategy of parataxis is central to Hejinian's writing practices. Sentences arranged paratactically sit side by side without

⁵ I am indebted to Bob Perelman for this formulation of Silliman's argument. See "Parataxis and Narrative: The New Sentence in Theory and Practice," *American Literature* 65, No. 2 (1993), 313-14.

⁶ Silliman, 91.

⁷ Silliman, 71.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 91.

⁹ Perelman, 315.

being connected in causal or subordinating relationships, so the reader has to find her own connections between the syntactic units, becoming an active participant in the making of meaning.¹⁰ As Bob Perelman notes, parataxis is what makes the “new sentence” new: it “keeps in check what [Silliman] calls the ‘syllogistic movement’ that would bind sentences into larger narrative, expository and ideological unities.”¹¹ However, it does not operate with equal degrees of determinacy (or, I should perhaps say, of indeterminacy) across the text. To take two examples:

- I. On the cold anvil a double drone, from the press of concentricity. On the desk a bust of Lenin and a bottle of pennies. In the bank a loose toddler was unhooking and rehooking the plush-covered chains from their stanchions, which such toddlers seem compelled to do. The tongue is strung to the singing gut. A person is intrigued sometimes by breakdown and sometimes by waterspouts.¹²
- II. An occasional sunset is reflected on the windows. A little puddle is overcast. If only you could touch, or, even, catch those gray great creatures (7).

In the first extract, the first three sentences seem to beg a linking idea since they each begin with a preposition of place, yet a common theme is difficult to trace, opening up infinite speculation. The first sentence is an abstract meditation on sound; the second two seem linked to moments of actual observation. Yet Lenin recalls the anvil, the pennies the bank; Lenin and saved money in a single sentence seem in themselves to raise questions. The “intrigued” person of the final sentence could well be an adult—both “breakdowns” and “waterspouts” are occasions in which the carnivalesque seems to irrupt into daily life, attracting gawkers, perhaps because they represent systems that are not noticeable until they break down—but the rapt attention recalls that of the child, discovering that the objects in the phenomenal world, like the new sentences of the language poets, “imply continuity and discontinuity simultaneously.”¹³

¹⁰ Marjorie Perloff, *Poetry On and Off the Page* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1998) 222-42.

¹¹ Perelman, 316.

¹² Lyn Hejinian, *My Life*, 2nd revised edition (Los Angeles: Sun & Moon Press, 1987), 106. All inline citations refer to the 1987 revised edition. Some differences between it and the 1980 edition will be discussed below. Note that the first extract above is new to the 1987 edition, taken from the forty-first entry. The second extract is from the first entry and is the same in both editions, as are the sentences immediately before and after it.

¹³ Perelman, 316.

In reading the first extract, then, the reader is invited, even compelled, to participate in speculating on the accumulated meaning in the contiguous sentences. The second example, to my mind, invites participation in a different way. The first sentence introduces the motifs of weather, and reflection, which the second sentence develops, although they cannot possibly be referring to the same experience—can a sunset be described as “overcast”? The second sentence has an almost overwhelming sense of fullness: an entire sky contracted to the dimensions of a puddle. It seems to me, then, that “those gray great creatures” of the third sentence can be nothing other than clouds. I arrive at this conclusion as I read, through the effects of metonymy. The middle term which would “explain” the final sentence is “clouds,” but the word remains unwritten. Metonymy is the arrival at a conclusion of connection by means of contiguity rather than comparison. In her essay on “Strangeness,” Hejinian writes:

Metonymic thinking moves more rapidly and less predictably than metaphors permit—but the metonym is not metaphor’s opposite. Metonymy moves restlessly, through an associative network, in which associations are compressed rather than elaborated But because even the connections between things may become things in themselves, ... metonymy, even while it condenses thought processes, may at the same time serve as a generative and even a dispersive force.¹⁴

The logical association which supplies the identity of “those gray great creatures” is indeed “compressed rather than elaborated,” and in this cluster of sentences is revealed the truth of the claim that “the connections between things may become things in themselves.” Marjorie Perloff suggests that “those gray great creatures” is “a reference, perhaps, to the clouds above reflected in those puddles but also, quite possibly, to imaginary creatures read about in children’s books or emerging from the narrator’s ‘radio days,’”¹⁵ but it is not necessary to discover indeterminacy in every sentence or string of sentences in the text in order to prove Hejinian’s commitment to textual openness. As Ron Silliman puts it in “The New Sentence,” a feature of writing that employs this device is that “syllogistic movement is (a) limited (b) controlled.”¹⁶ The missing conjunction between (a) and (b) might as easily be “or” as “and,” for Language poetry teaches us to doubt whether contiguous words are synonyms. In the first extract above, the syllogistic movement might indeed be described as “limited,”

¹⁴ Lyn Hejinian, “Strangeness,” in *The Language of Inquiry* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 149.

¹⁵ Marjorie Perloff, *Radical Artifice*, 168.

¹⁶ Silliman, 91.

by the infinite number of possible connections to be drawn. In the example of the puddle and the clouds, however, I would say that it is rather “controlled.” Since the text does not supply the intermediate concept, the reader must do so herself, and this, in itself, is a form of readerly liberation: not because she is free to conclude that the creatures could be any number of things, but because she experiences first hand, in the act of reading, the operations of metonymy.

This is fascinating in terms of mimesis: at this point the text does not just describe, but actually activates in the reader’s mind, the cognitive processes that the child is experiencing. I cannot read these sentences without feeling the child lift her head, shift her attention from the bijou reflection of the puddle to the vastness of the sky and marvel at finding a connection between the two. Craig Dworkin argues that *My Life* is “fragmentary” because it is following the structures of cognition and consciousness.¹⁷ In this respect, Hejinian’s work recalls modernist stream-of-consciousness prose, although her writerly project is not the same. But to view these sentences as more semantically determinate than other passages in the text is not to foreclose the possibility of readerly autonomy; the reader is granted autonomy in a different way here, for she experiences directly the “syllogistic movement” which is a pervasive organising force in almost all texts she will encounter. In passages like this one, *My Life* exposes the deep rhetorical structure of literature and, having brought it to light, opens up the possibility of readerly resistance. If the reader is one of the “we who ‘love to be astonished,’” the pleasure of a beautifully executed metonymic compression is not to be disregarded. To return once more to Silliman, at “the point at which you read each word (the / only point there is), two minds share a larger whole.”¹⁸ But even as the reader takes pleasure in the writer’s virtuosity, and in her own cognitive capacities, which are necessary to complete the metonym, she is made aware of how the text has directed her mind: a radical courtesy that a great deal of literature (and journalism, and advertising, and political speeches, and so on) does not offer.

¹⁷ Craig Dworkin, “Penelope Reworking the Twill: Patchwork, Writing, and Lyn Hejinian’s “My Life,” *Contemporary Literature*, 36, No. 1 (1995), 69. I will return to Dworkin’s argument in my discussion of *My Life*’s engagement with the conventions of autobiography.

¹⁸ Ron Silliman, cited in Quinn, op. cit., n. pag. Attributed to Silliman but not referenced.

Because of the tendency of Hejinian's writing to foreground its own operations, and because of views espoused by other poets in the Language movement, Hejinian has sometimes been described as "a nonreferentialist poet,"¹⁹ but Hejinian distances herself from this appellation. In an interview given in 1996, she describes it as a "notion ... that somebody threw out at some point—it might have been Ron Silliman":

I vehemently disagreed that there could be such a thing as nonreferentiality in language. It seemed to me that every word, even every word-part, is screaming, calling out to its referent and grabbing as many referents as it can It's as though language were always constructing meaning around itself Nevertheless, 'nonreferentiality' stayed in the vocabulary. I still find people saying I'm a nonreferential writer, which has always made me uncomfortable.²⁰

This idea of words gathering meaning voraciously to themselves recurs throughout *My Life*. In the first entry she notes, "But a word is a bottomless pit" (8). Of a flower called a "pelargorium" she remarks, "With a name like that there is a lot you can do" (15). The peculiar power of words lies in their not having a perfect commensurability with their referents: "If words matched their things we'd be imprisoned within walls of symmetry" (70). Although language cannot fix meaning definitively at either the word or sentence level, it has the capacity to lift a concept out of the context of discourse that renders it natural, self-identical and commonplace. A sign in the carriages of the Paris metro is ultimately what makes the place real to her: "Writing maybe held it, separated, there to see" (45). No "perfect identity" exists between names and their objects,²¹ but this non-identity is what underpins the magnetic attraction of significance to words. Words cry out to meaning but never quite close the gap between language and the actual world. This recalls Heidegger's concept of naming, elucidated in his 1950 essay "Language":

The naming calls. Calling brings closer what it calls But the call, in calling it here, has already called out to what it calls. Where to? Into the distance in which what is called remains, still absent.

¹⁹ See, for example, Christopher MacGowan, *Twentieth-Century American Poetry* (Maldon, MA: Blackwell, 2004), 292.

²⁰ Larry McCaffery and Brian McHale, "A Local Strangeness: An Interview with Lyn Hejinian," in *Some Other Frequency*, ed. Larry McCaffery (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996), 138. Hereafter referred to as "Interview."

²¹ Hejinian, *Rejection of Closure*, 53.

The calling here calls into a nearness. But even so the call does not wrest what it calls away from the remoteness, in which it is kept by the calling there.²²

Hejinian's writing makes this semantic gap evident and thus reveals, as Christopher Beach puts it, "the way in which language can shift, through sonic or orthographic resemblance, into different discursive and semantic registers."²³ Beach gives the example of the phrase, "a pony, perhaps, his mane trimmed with coloured ribbons" (15), which shifts to "A name trimmed with coloured ribbons" in the title of the same entry (14), a phrase which in turn is repeated throughout the work, giving a palpable substance to the concept of "name."²⁴ The connection is in this case sonic, which occurs also in "the front rhyme of harmless and harmony" (11), which, in an unsettling fashion typical of Hejinian's semantic siftings, shows up a menacing concept beneath two apparently pleasant words. But such semantic shifts can also be effected grammatically, such as by repeating a word but changing the part of speech. The family car, passing through a tunnel, drives "from one sun to the next under a hot brown hill" (9-10). This in itself draws attention to the peculiar character of our phenomenological experience, such that a singular sun can be split into multiple objects by observing it from the perspective of a human in motion through the landscape. But the text continues: "She sunned the baby for sixty seconds" (10), shifting from noun to verb and revealing an entirely different relation in which the sun stands to human perception, and to the actuality of our interaction with it as a thing in the world. The text is frequently explicit in its speculations on semantic instability: "The plow makes trough enough. Does that kind of word-similarity become a word-sympathy" (70). *My Life* thus reveals language as a source of pleasurable bewilderment and a site at which meaning is contested and made constantly new.

Repetition and "quotation" in My Life

²² Martin Heidegger, "Language," trans. Albert Hofstadter, in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, ed. Vincent B. Leitch (New York; London: W. W. Norton, 2001), 1127.

²³ Christopher Beach, *The Cambridge Introduction to Twentieth-Century American Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 206.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

The text of *My Life* is interwoven with a great array of what appear to be quotations from outside the text—some of them flagged as such by their positioning within quotation marks, others not—and is also given to quoting itself, with certain phrases appearing again and again. Sometimes these are inserted as discrete syntactical units, identically worded, other times their lexis is altered, or new phrases are appended to them. Some occur more frequently than others, with phrases such as the heading of the first entry, “A pause, a rose, something on paper” and “Yet we insist that life is full of happy chance” becoming almost refrains or rhythmic markers in the work. Later entries tend to have a greater proportion of these repeated phrases, often constellated together, as if the repetitive impulse were gaining momentum. Hejinian writes: “I wanted this sort of tumbling effect in which context and I roll along, an effect that would be to some extent cumulative, to some extent fragmenting, dispersing.”²⁵ The repetition of phrases is one way in which Hejinian foregrounds the paratactic operations of “new sentences,” since the meaning of the phrase is modified in each incarnation by the sentences surrounding it.

While some of these modulated refrains are idiosyncratic and mysterious (“what is the meaning hung from that depend,” “my morphemes mourned events”), others smack of imported discourse (“Any photographer will tell you the same,” “The obvious analogy is with music”), and assert themselves with a stridency that is undermined by the troubling juxtapositions into which they are placed.²⁶ Marjorie Perloff and Hillary Clark have both commented on the fact that *My Life* is saturated with language which has the feel of being borrowed, or of intruding on the text from another discursive setting. Some of these phrases are marked off inside quotation marks, “to signal the endless clichéing of language”²⁷ and to “create irony where, certainly, none is intended in common usage”²⁸ (“When one travels one might ‘hit’ a storm,” “What

²⁵ Interview, 136.

²⁶ The possibility for critique that the juxtaposition of discourses opens up recalls M. M. Bakhtin’s notion of heteroglossia: each of the languages incorporated into the text, with their inherent “specific world views,” “all may be juxtaposed to one another, mutually supplement one another, contradict one another and be interrelated dialogically As such, these languages live a real life, they struggle and evolve in an environment of social heteroglossia Each word tastes of the context and contexts in which it has lived its socially charged life, all words and forms are populated by intentions.” M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 292-93.

²⁷ Perloff, *Radical Artifice*, 170.

²⁸ Hillary Clark, “The Mnemonics of Autobiography: Lyn Hejinian’s *My Life*,” *Biography* 14 (1991), 330.

memory is not a *gripping* thought”). A particularly delightful example is the bombastic “As for we who ‘love to be astonished’...”. The grand promises of this opening gambit, already somewhat undercut by the internal quotation marks, are deflated or rendered absurd by the trivial or vague phrases that follow: “...thicken the eggs in a bath Marie” (70). “...life is linked to man” (60). “...we might go to the zoo and see the famous hippo named ‘Bubbles’” (18). The promise implicit in this phrase is complicated by the ambiguous pronoun “we,” which can be either inclusive or exclusive of the interlocutor, but in any case excludes someone. A privileged place is given to this “we,” uniting them in their heightened awareness and connoisseurship of the marvellous. This “we” might include the writer and reader, sharing the aesthetic pleasures of the poem, it might be the privileged place of the cliché-fighting artist, or even the language poets, united in their commitment to estrange the normal and discover the new inside it. Or, given the banal nature of most of the things that “we” are invited to find “astonishing,” it might be the spectacle-saturated, media-numbed modern masses—in any case, there is no stable outside position from which to judge this group or their desires. Googling “love to be astonished” turns up a quotation from French poet André Maurois: “In literature, as in love, we are astonished at what is chosen by others.”²⁹ It is tempting to consider Maurois as a possible source for this quotation—partly because of the “language”-esque permutations of syntax that connect Maurois’ words and Hejinian’s, that sense of the half-remembered and appropriated; and partly for the cluster of concepts so central to the operation of the “new sentence”: how does literature conceal and reveal, foreclose and open, other people’s choices? If I am right in locating Maurois as the source of this quotation, this phrase complicates the significance of the quotation marks in the text, for in this case, the original words have not been reproduced exactly.

Quotation seems to operate in unstable ways in *My Life*. Not all examples of clichéd or ideologically-laden language are signalled by quotation marks. Some sentences are interpolated baldly into the text, so evidently ventriloquising, for example, “prescriptions on ideal femininity” (“Pretty is as pretty does” 7) or “clichés of paternal authority”³⁰ or domestic common sense (“The screen can be taken away from the fire as long as someone is sitting in the room” 40) that they do not need to be

²⁹ <http://www.quoteworld.org>, accessed 20 November 2008.

³⁰ Clark, 329.

punctuated or attributed as quotations. Yet in other places, a sentence's ambiguous attribution renders it more disturbing, for it introduces an authoritative voice without the possibility of rebuttal.³¹ Sometimes the object of the judgment is also obscure, metastatising anxiety: "Sculpture is the worst possible craft for them to attempt" (19). Leonard Diepeveen sees the incorporation of unattributed quotations as central to the language poets' interrogation of the romantic idea of the individual and the writer:

Because language is shaped by cultural forces, the self is totally immersed in language and is unable to get above, to acquire an 'objective' view. As a consequence one does not worry about the disintegration of the lyric voicesuch a dissolution of personality does not require acknowledging the quotation These writers sometimes directly quote, sometimes use genre quotations.³²

But these unattributed quotations can also, more troublingly, imply another personality, or institution, whose views are to be internalised as a lens for viewing one's own behaviour. A striking example of this can be found in those sentences in the first entry of *My Life* which were added for the 1987 edition. Hejinian says of her revising of *My Life*, "doing this makes the case for the ongoingness of living and writing by showing that thoughts are always adjusting themselves, that thinking is always reinventing what's already been thought,"³³ and indeed the new sentences do enact a kind of layering of affect, creating new resonances with and between the sentences of the 1980 text. In the first entry of the book, the interpolated sentences introduce an undercurrent of unease, not to say dread, to the narrator's recollections of family life in childhood. "In certain families, the meaning of necessity is at one with the sentiment of pre-necessity" (7); "Here I refer to irrelevance, that rigidity which never intrudes" (7); "Anxiety is vigilant" (8); "I say it about the psyche because it is not optional" (8). The sentences have a certain tone in common: they are in a formal, academic register and present blunt, abstract, universalising statements in the present simple tense, with overtones of the discourse of clinical psychology. The final sentence is, to my mind, particularly unsettling. What is not optional? The fact of having a psyche, the fact that something must be said about it, or the (unspecified) thing which must be said? Interposed into descriptions of family life as remembered

³¹ Craig Dworkin also notes that some quotations are unmarked and unattributed in the text, see p. 62.

³² Leonard Diepeveen, *Changing Voices: The Modern Quoting Poem* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993), 163.

³³ Interview, 142.

by a young child, the cumulative effect of these statements is one of official rhetoric acting metonymically to suppress the idiosyncrasies, the particularities, of one family, and one person's memory of them.

Hans-Georg Gadamer says that "speaking does not belong to the sphere of the 'I' but in the sphere of the 'We.'" Language is "the realm of human being-together, the realm of common understanding."³⁴ But Marxist and structuralist critics have shown that the price of entering into this common realm is the pressure exerted on the identity by totalising discourses. Through its paratactic and metonymic operations, *My Life* brings these authoritative discourses into the light. As Michel Delville puts it, "by combining a variety of discursive categories and suggesting the existence of multisyntactic relationships between them, Hejinian's prose exposes normative narratives and their generic by-products as so many resultants of societal or cultural codes."³⁵ Hejinian sees these quoted "snippets" of language as essential to her writing's epistemological investigations. They "are a kind of ambient constructing of the I or contextualizing of the I: social, parental, and familial contextualizing, even things that go through my head, like chronic ideas, all those things that modify and mediate the I that's knowing."³⁶ The estrangement of language from its normal context to reveal its underlying assumptions, a principle of poetics in which Hejinian is influenced by the Russian Formalists,³⁷ is here enacted not just within the sentence, at the level of the individual word, but within the paragraph, through paratactic juxtaposition.

My Life, chronology and autobiography

According to Hillary Clark, Hejinian's use of quotation and repetition is central to *My Life*'s challenge to the conventions of autobiography. Just as she uses quotation to resist totalising discourses about femininity and identity, she deploys "mnemonic techniques of association and repetition of ideas, images and phrases"³⁸ in opposition to the chronological imperative that autobiography traditionally implies. "*My Life*

³⁴ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, trans. and ed. David E. Linge (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 67, 65.

³⁵ Michel Delville, *The American Prose Poem* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1998), 211-12

³⁶ Interview, 136.

³⁷ See Interview, 133.

³⁸ Clark, 316.

challenges the view that the events of a life form an ordered sequence culminating in an always-foreseen fullness of being” and “dominant discursive practices and traditional notions of what is significant and worthy of inclusion in the writing of a life.”³⁹ I would agree that the text offers a sustained critique of the metanarrative of *bildung* as an organising principle of life writing. The idea that the “self” is developed through a series of events, with its implications of linear progress and its elision of biography and identity is radically challenged. For Hejinian, the subject of life writing is not the “self,” the “real, permanent, unchanging you” which is in fact “very hard to locate,” but rather:

the person, which has to do with activities, our daily and nightly being in the world. The person exists in context—or in an array of contexts To that extent, a person is self-creating, a construct or a construction, while at the same time being that which does the constructing.⁴⁰

Hejinian’s emphasis on this Wittgensteinian non-metaphysical subject⁴¹ arises from her commitment to “ongoingness” as an epistemological and political attitude: “If one is committed to consequences (to history, to social responsibility, to the ongoing liveliness of living), one has to be wary, to say the least, of closure.”⁴² At the same time, the empirical “fictions” of “completion and closure” “can exert cosmic fascination.”⁴³ The same might be said for the autobiographical notion of *bildung*. In the fourteenth entry of the book, she writes: “I, with crashing consequence, waited, wanting to have experienced many, many things” (42). The adolescent girl seems not to feel that the experiences she has already passed through really count—the important things lie in the future. But she looks forward not to experiencing these moments as phenomenological reality, but to having them in her past, the building blocks of an acceptable, mature, sophisticated self. The life that Hejinian writes, however, does not privilege a string of milestone events: when events that form the stuff of traditional autobiography do occur—births, deaths, going to university, moving house—they are woven into the texture of the work such that they often cede

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Interview, 130-31.

⁴¹ For discussions of the influence of Wittgenstein’s thought on the language poets, see, for example, Marjorie Perloff, *Wittgenstein’s Ladder* (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 1996); Hejinian, *The Language of Inquiry*, 137, 158, 355-56, 384; Silliman, *The New Sentence*, 11, 47, 70, 114, 161.

⁴² Hejinian, “Continuing Against Closure,” *Jacket* 14 (1991), n. pag.

⁴³ Ibid.

importance to the minutiae of daily life, to philosophical speculation, or to the prismatic play of language itself.⁴⁴ And the narrative does not proceed in a strictly chronological order. Early entries interpolate adult reflections into the child's observations, and recurring motifs and phrases call the reader's attention back and forth across the text, forming connections between events that pertain more to the richness of the experience of being in time than they do to narratives of progress.

Because of Hejinian's use of the mnemonic devices of image and word repetition, Clark asserts that *My Life* pursues a persistent effacement of chronology.

"Chronological formations emerge; ... however, these float, deprived of any real ordering function" in a text which is only tangentially concerned "with recounting events that only happened to occur when they did."⁴⁵ I cannot agree with this formulation: for one thing, as Marjorie Perloff notes, even though many of the sentences in the text could be found anywhere, creating a "saturated structure" that is irreducible to chronological progress, "the pleasure of Hejinian's text [is partly that] each unlisted number, when extracted, gives us a key to the behaviour of 'Lyn' at age *x* or *y*."⁴⁶ If events do not construct us, they are part of the changing context in which a person operates, interacts with the world, and experiences her being in time. I would argue that in fact *My Life* is deeply concerned with questions of chronology: not an objective, historical ordering of events, but with the subjective experience of time. In Craig Dworkin's formulation, *My Life* "becomes not so much a record following the actions of her life, but rather *following thoughts also*, a record of her mind remembering her life."⁴⁷ Again, I emphasise that this is not, in my view, simply a *representation* or description of the operations of memory: constellations of time references in the text, in the forms of both tense markers and actual events, cause the reader to experience the text's non-linear chronology directly, in the moment of reading.

Single sentences, and clusters of contiguous sentences, frequently project into the future and recall the past through their unconventional use of tense, as when we read of the teenaged Lyn "wanting to have experienced many, many things." That tense is

⁴⁴ Marjorie Perloff discusses this in *Radical Artifice*, 169.

⁴⁵ Clark, 320-21.

⁴⁶ Perloff, *Radical Artifice*, 170.

⁴⁷ Dworkin, 69.

a deliberate organising strategy for Hejinian is apparent in her comments on her 1994 long poem “Resistance”:

To prevent the work from disintegrating ... I used various syntactic devices to foreground or create the conjunction between ideas. Statements became interconnected by being grammatically congruent; unlike things, made alike grammatically, became meaningful in common and jointly.”⁴⁸

This principle can be seen in operation in an extract from the first entry.

I was in a room with the particulars of which a later nostalgia might be formed, an indulged childhood. They are sitting in wicker chairs, the legs of which have sunk unevenly into the ground, so that each is sitting slightly tilted and their postures make adjustment for that. The cows warm their own barn. I look at them fast and it gives the illusion that they’re moving (8).

The syntax and lexis of the first sentence in this extract demonstrates the capacity for a single sentence in the work to comprehend multiple temporal viewpoints. The past simple form of the verb *to be* would, in a typical autobiography, signify the setting of a scene which is to prove memorable for some reason. Having opened with this promise, however, the text declines to disclose any of “the particulars” to which nostalgia might be attached, which already distances the sentence from the conventions of life writing. The further temporal markers of “later” and “might” further complicate the sentence’s temporal positioning. The modal verb “might” is ambiguous—it could be speculating on future probability, or else on the appropriateness of the present material for future recycling as nostalgia. The sudden shift to the incongruous present progressive tense in the second sentence marks off the image as a frozen moment in time, bringing to mind a family photograph. With the following two sentences the tense shifts again, detaching from the specificity of a single moment into the space outside of time occupied by the present simple. The second, third and fourth sentences do not belong to the same event—although perhaps the final two go together, if “them” refers to “the cows”—but the common ground of the present tenses prompts the mind to metonymic association. The second and third sentences have a common link in that they evoke ideas of domesticity and sociability or togetherness, and of physical adaptation to the environment. There is a trace of the disgusting in the co-operative self-warming of the cows, and something farcical in the

⁴⁸ Hejinian, “Rejection of Closure,” 44-45.

photograph sitters' adjustment to the varying slants of their chairs, as if in staunch denial of their precarious position. Yet this impulse to transcend reality by adapting perception and gesture links this sentence to the final one in the extract, in which the child discovers that she can alter her experiential world by sensory tricks. The passage taken as a whole, and located within the greater whole of the paragraph, uses tense to reveal (at least) two aspects of perception: memory's capacity to link disparate moments in time into metonymic chains, and the mind's capacity to interpret the phenomenal world in a variety of ways—thus revealing the mind's active participation in the creation of reality. Since Hejinian's writing is not constrained to grammatical naturalism, as would be expected of a "straight" autobiography, every tense choice is foregrounded, and enters actively into the making of sense.

Chronology is also explored in the text through single sentences and groups of adjacent sentences which refer from the moment being narrated to the past and future, all of which is refracted through the different present moments of writing and of reading. Returning to the first entry, the book's opening sentence serves as an example:

A moment yellow, just as four years later, when my father returned home from the war, the moment of greeting him, as he stood at the bottom of the stairs, younger, thinner than when he had left, was purple—though moments are no longer so coloured (7).

This sentence brings together at least four distinct points in time: there is the "yellow" moment, which must have occurred in early childhood, but this is only determined relatively, as being four years before the "purple" moment when he returns. There is also, implied, the highly-charged but undescribed moment of his leaving for the war (this may or may not be the moment that the young Lyn experiences as "yellow"). The words "no longer" add another two temporal markers: the present, in which this immersive synaesthesia does not occur, and the moment, probably unmarked by Lyn with its passing, when this cognitive peculiarity ceased to be.⁴⁹ Another point in time

⁴⁹ As will be discussed below, Hejinian's writing has frequently been linked with that of Gertrude Stein, but the book's opening, with its references to synesthesia, also resonates with another modernist work. The first chapter of Virginia Woolf's stream-of-consciousness novel *The Waves* likewise renders the consciousness of early childhood synaesthetically:

"I see a ring," said Bernard, 'hanging above me. It quivers and hangs in a loop of light.'

"I see a slab of pale yellow," said Susan, 'spreading away until it meets a purple stripe.'

might be added, if we consider the “present” of the 1980 edition to be distinct from that of the 1987. The sense of temporal disorientation is increased by the perceptual paradox of Lyn’s father appearing younger with the passing of time, and this is further complicated by the fact that the observation cannot have been Lyn’s own. Since she was born in 1941 and her father was away at war for four years, she cannot possibly remember how he looked before he left. Thus her own perception of the past, in all its synaesthetic particularity, is mingled with that of an unidentified other person—her mother, perhaps—so that it becomes her own: “There were more storytellers than there were stories, so that everyone had their own version of history and it was impossible to get close to the original or to know ‘what really happened’” (21).

My Life’s engagement with chronology is given another iteration of self-reflexivity with the revisions which Hejinian made to the text for the 1987 edition. Marjorie Perloff argues that the new sentences, “once absorbed into the text, ... are wholly absorbed into its momentum so that it is impossible to tell where the seams are.”⁵⁰ Nevertheless, it might be expected that many of Hejinian’s readers would be aware that the two editions are different, so that the later edition speaks to and reflects on the first. In the second entry of the 1980 edition is the sentence: “A German goldsmith covered a bit of metal with cloth in the 14th century and gave mankind its first button” (10). The coalescence of the words “cover” and “button” irresistibly recall Gertrude Stein’s *Tender Buttons*. Hejinian has said that she did not consider Stein an “influence” on her work until Marjorie Perloff declared her to be one, and was motivated soon afterwards (in 1985) to study Stein in detail preparatory to giving some talks on her work.⁵¹ This, then, occurred between the first and second editions of *My Life*. In the 1987 version, following the “button” sentence, a new sentence is added: “It was hard to know this as politics, because it plays like the work of one person, but nothing is isolated in history—certain humans are situations.” If a reference to Stein is found in the first sentence (and it might not have been so evident when the 1980 edition was published), the new sentence which follows might be seen as a reflection on either a real relationship of influence, or on the inevitability of an

Virginia Woolf, *The Waves*, ed. Kate Flint, Penguin Twentieth-Century Classics (London: Penguin, 1992), 5.

⁵⁰ Perloff, *Radical Artifice*, 164.

⁵¹ Interview, 145.

artist's being located in a historical tradition, transformed into a "situation," under the scrutiny of academia.

My Life is saturated in temporality, but its chronology is a subjective one, grounded in lived experience and in the associative tricks of memory. Indeed, the experience of being in time is fundamental to the human mind, and to autobiography, but in accordance with Hejinian's writerly project, it must be rendered as experience, as the intersection of temporal planes in the mind of the person remembering, rather than as objective history: "What follows a strict chronology has no memory" (13). The text's metonymic compressions, the accumulation and dispersal of sense in its paractically ordered fragments, highlights the text's linguistic operations, allowing both writer and reader to experience themselves as persons who construct and are constructed by the language they encounter, choose, resist. According to Hejinian, language "makes us restless" because it "itself is never in a state of rest.

Its syntax can be as complex as thought. And the experience of using it, which includes the experience of understanding it, either as speech or as writing, is inevitably active—both intellectually and emotionally."⁵²

My Life brings this view of language to bear on the conventions of life writing, rendering an autobiography which goes beyond the empirical fiction of the linear development of a metaphysical "self" to reveal the agency with which the user of language constructs her identity out of the infinite contingencies of experience.

⁵² Hejinian, "Rejection of Closure," 50.

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