

## **Eight justifications for canonizing Lyn Hejinian's *My Life***

In the past few years, the second edition of *My Life* (Sun & Moon Press, 1987) has become a clear candidate for academic canonization. With this process underway, it is worth investigating why Hejinian's autography is so popular, so likable. (I use the word "autography"<sup>1</sup> because this is the story of a languaged self, a written "I," rather than the autobiography of an experiencing human.) Why is *My Life* taught, apparently as an exemplar of contemporary experimental poetry, in so many American colleges and high schools? More considerably, why might it be perceived to be worthy, a palatable "postmodern" work? This second version of the question is perhaps preferable, since Hejinian's work is hardly a national bestseller: reprinted for the sixth time in 1996, it had sold at that point something over 8,000 copies. Still, such a figure makes it considerably more successful than most other non-mainstream poetic writings.

The abundant attention to *My Life* in small prestigious journals like *Temblor*, and brief mention in a number of critical books, joins increasing comment in more mainstream academic journals: *Contemporary Literature* has had two articles on the work in the last four years, and *American Literature* recently published one. Increased mass gains gravity, of course, but critical attention to Hejinian's book is not simply a function of previous attention. This book accesses a number of categories for pleasure and familiarity, both literary and cultural.

Perhaps the most obvious category for *My Life* is American autobiography. So I want to begin by quoting perhaps the most obvious example of that genre, Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography*, addressed as a letter to his son:

Now imagining it may be equally agreeable to you to know the Circumstances of my Life, . . . and expecting a Week's uninterrupted Leisure in my present Country Retirement, I sit to write them down for you. To which I have besides some other Inducements. Having emerg'd from the Poverty and Obscurity in which I was born and bred, to a State of Affluence and some Degree of Reputation in the World, and having gone so far thro' Life with a considerable Share of Felicity, the contracting Means I made use of, which, with the Blessing of God, so well succeeded, my Posterity may like to know, as they may find some of them suitable to their own Situations, and therefore fit to be imitated.

As the linguistic version of a prosperous and happy American life, *My Life* is a descendent of Franklin's hopeful perfectionisms. The very first section indicates that "Leisure," "Affluence," and "Felicity" characterize both Franklin and Hejinian: "I was in a room with the particulars of which a later nostalgia might be formed, an indulged childhood" (8). Praise for this work makes perfect sense in a culture which likes poetry to mesh personal experience (autobiography) with language play, and life stories to be edifying (when they are not, that is, more or less prurient cautionary tales). What follows is an interconnected array of categories for the popularity of *My Life*: these are intended to be suggestive, applicable beyond the explorations carried out here.

## 1. Understandability

In rough terms, Hejinian's creative writing divides into two modes. On one hand, works such as *Writing Is An Aid To Memory* (1978) and *The Cell* (1992) are quite linguistically and poetically complex. On the other, *My Life*, and some of her other work, presumes a broad-ranging understandability. From the naive free-spirited play of her first book, the *gRRreat* adventure (1973),<sup>2</sup> [2] to the hopeful and only vaguely political passages in her collaborative work in *Leningrad* (1991), she often writes with a simplicity people don't generally call to mind when they think of "postmodern poetry." As evidence from *My Life* suggests, Hejinian operates in this mode--writing for understanding--quite consciously. Consider an excerpt from her essay "If Written is Writing" (published in 1978, the year she wrote the first edition of *My Life*):

The text is anterior to the composition, though the composition be interior to the text. Such candor is occasionally flirtatious, as candor nearly always so. When it is trustworthy, love accompanies the lover, and the centric writers reveal their loyalty, a bodily loyalty. . . . Marvelous are the dimensions and therefore marvelling is understandable -- and often understanding. (rpt. in *The Language Book* 29)

As with many of Hejinian's comments on writing, this passage profits from further explanation. But its terms are those of understanding: the process of writing ("the composition") intercourses with the product of writing ("the text"), "love" (the words) keeps company with "the lover" (the writer), and the interpenetrating "dimensions" exist in a comprehensible ("understandable") state. Process, product, the "bodily" writer, all combine to produce a marvel of comprehension. Arguably, this description indicates the complexity the "centric" writer must endure in order to produce understandable writing. The crucial point, though, is that the resulting product is clear. In this accessible mode, Hejinian conceives of herself as a centric writer, loyal and clear-minded, and in this mode she has produced a handful of books.

In latter years, though, Hejinian has not facilitated access to some of her most understandable writing. In 1994, for example, Sun & Moon Press issued *The Cold of Poetry*, which reprints most of her hard-to-find earlier works. It leaves out, however, three early works which are arguably her most accessible: the *gRRreat* adventure, *A Thought is the Bride of What Thinking* (Tuumba Press, 1976), and *A Mask of Motion* (Burning Deck, 1977). These three works are now pretty well confined to rare books rooms. So despite some darkening and complexifying

of *My Life* in its second version (a pattern I shall return to), it remains the one most understandable work of hers which is readily available. How interesting that it is the one the academy most attends.

Predictable events and language are fundamental to the understandability of *My Life*. It has been pointed out <sup>3</sup> [3] that Hejinian represents an all-American girlhood; but most of the book's events are more those of the expected surface of a privileged American childhood in the prosperous 1950s. So far so good, born in 1941, and educated at Harvard, as Hejinian was. We go from cars to kitchens to parks to books, in scenes of childhood and adulthood, and unexpected particulars are generally overmastered by predictable events.

The understandability of the language is not quite as predictable. Marjorie Perloff calls this a celebration of "language we all recognize" (225). Such a claim of course depends on a certain definition of the "we": Hejinian's educated English conveys the sense that more impenetrable language is always to hand but never used. Consider these lines from section 37:

A sense of definition (different from that of description, which is a kind of storytelling or recounting, numerical, a list of colors) develops as one's sense of possibility, of the range of what one might do or experience, closes with the years. So I gave it away. I can only offer the apologies I have committed. When we first moved in, the neighbors on the left complained about the saxophone, but eventually, as we became familiar, they began to feel well disposed towards us, friendly, until the noise was what they liked most about us, since it proved them tolerant and generous. Planes of information intersect, coincide. (90)

In the terms of this passage, Hejinian gives away definition in favor of description.<sup>4</sup> [4] This preference for description is underscored by the fact that the last three sentences of this passage were inserted in the second edition, as if to clarify and illustrate the original. Words, events, and the poetics of the work itself are described. Perception of description, not interpretation of definition, becomes the reader's task. Telling description is a matter of intersecting and coinciding, rather than defining, information.<sup>5</sup> [5]

The danger of calling this "language we all recognize," or pieces of an all-American girlhood-grown-to-womanhood, is that the book's accessibility risks being seen as generic, fully identified either with known language or known cultural habits. That is, as definition. What blocks such definition, in the passage above, is a mixture of the language we really might all recognize--neighbors and noise--with other language that only a particular segment of the population will attend to: about subtleties of definition, description, and planes of information. But even these subtleties are avowedly not complex because they are not "defined." Again, defining is associated with what "closes," with what the speaker has given away.

Such guidance systems (frequent self-explanations and simple diction) preserve the non-specialized nature of this work. It does not swim in private enigmas, it teaches us how to read it--as Wordsworth said good poetry should do--and it is consistent in its self-presentation. Above all else, perhaps, it is not terribly difficult in vocabulary or ideation. Hejinian's descriptive understandability makes a world of accessible verbal grace. This is by no means a criticism. It is meant to describe a "postmodern" writing that never turns away from possibilities of understandable meaning.

## 2. Motivated Proceduralism

The consistent self-presentation begins at the structural level of *My Life*. Joseph Conte identifies two distinctive postmodern poetic forms, the serial and the procedural (3, 13-44). In first and second editions, *My Life* fits the pattern of proceduralism, with its untraditional (unprecedented) predetermined method of 37 (then 45) sections, with 37 (then 45) sentences each. It is also, based on Hejinian's 37 (then 45) years of age, a perfectly personal form. Her proceduralism is thus at least doubly motivated--by the personal and the literary--in a kind of arithmetics of autobiography. Compare, for example, Ron Silliman's use of the Fibonacci number series as the procedural determinant of *Tjanting*. Silliman's chosen grid has an arbitrary relation to the literary; it appears random, however deliberately chosen.<sup>6</sup> [6] Hejinian's method, because its artifice is not inexplicable or (apparently) perverse, might well be more palatable to teaching and critical worlds in search of reasons, and wary, or weary, of the postmodern arbitrary.

Her method also evinces a kind of internal organic form, further linking the personal and the literary. We might call it a crystalline organicism, thinking of something like Clark Coolidge's *The Crystal Text* and of Hejinian's claim, in a second edition sentence, that "One could base a model for form on a crystal or the lungs" (48). This postmodern organicism is not the psychological variety of Romanticism, arising out of and seeking to inscribe a real-world moment. Nor is it the linguistic organicism of a modernist like Wallace Stevens, whose poems thread lyricism out from itself in a linear fashion. Hejinian's organic form can be invaded and grown out at any point, as it is in the second edition, in which she adds eight new sentences to each previous section and eight new sections to the whole. Again, we have the stability of a traceable form (growing "organically" from the subject) balanced with the experimentalism of a new variety of form.<sup>7</sup> [7]

Another detail which enhances the personalized literariness of Hejinian's procedure is the literary pedigree of the headnotes, the repeated poetic phrases which signal each section. Though used in an innovative way, these echo a tradition of elaborated headnotes stretching from medieval rubrics of forecasting to the marginalia in the late version of Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*--or better yet, the headnotes to the chapters in his *Biographia Literaria*.<sup>8</sup> [8]. Some of Hejinian's headnote phrases are beautifully "imprecise": for example, "What is the meaning hung from that depend" (16) "Preliminaries consist of such eternity" (95). But the majority are clear and simple, calling out phrases that continue to resonate: "I laugh as if my pots were clean" (78); "The greatest thrill was to be the one to tell" (65). The headnotes, then, are in the position of clarifiers, and in a tradition of authority and guidance. They make an innovation of tradition, a personalized use of recognizable form. Their slanted guidance functions something like song choruses, identifying and re-inscribing their songs. And as one of the book's many repeated phrases has it, "the obvious analogy is with music."<sup>9</sup> [9]

These procedural graces combine to make the literary scholar and teacher feel at home, linked to the literary past and given stylistic footholds into the postmodern, which looks less chaotic (than, say, Susan Howe's *The Nonconformist's Memorial*) in the light of *My Life*.

## 3. Prose Poetry = Sincere Complexity

Prose is our culture's language of sincerity, in which we expect to be most able to say what we mean and see what is meant, to be understood and to understand. The place of message. Poetry is our culture's language of complexity, idiosyncratic sensibility, the language of artifice.

Prose poetry, then, might afford the best opportunity for sincere surface play, for deep artifice, a joining of the power of prose clarity with poetic complexity. This is the model of prose poetry in *My Life*. And while it is surely a model filtered through Silliman's speculations about the prose poem in *The New Sentence* (Roof Books, 1977), it differs sharply from the difficult amalgam of poetry and prose that characterizes a writer like Gertrude Stein. Hejinian makes prose and poetry coexist but not melt into each other,<sup>10</sup> [10] in what she calls "A healthy dialectic between poetry and prose" (64). Compare, briefly, sentences from Stein's portrait of "Matisse" with an excerpt from *My Life*. First, Stein's words: "Very many did come to know it of him that he was clearly expressing what he was expressing. He was a great one. Any one might come to know that of him. Very many did come to know that of him. . . . Very many were wanting to be doing what he was doing were not wanting to be expressing anything being struggling" (330-31). Now, an excerpt from *My Life*:

It was at this time, I think, that I became interested in science. Is that a basis for descriptive sincerity. I am a shard, signifying isolation -- here I am thinking aloud of my affinity for the separate fragment taken under scrutiny. Yet that was only a coincidence. The penny disk, the rarer dollar disk. Her hair is the color of a brass bedstead. (52)

For all their affective simplicity, Stein's sentences are vastly artificial. They foreground wordplay and make precise meanings nearly invisible, emptied of immediacy into absolute ways of saying and knowing, for example "not wanting to be expressing anything being struggling." In Hejinian's lines, there is no such sustained instability of the sentence. We hear complete sentences, shards of sentences, and explanations of why "separate fragments" are "taken under scrutiny" (again, here, the second and third sentences are second-edition interpolations that clarify the passage's subject). We get, that is, both the pleasing complexity of poetic discontinuity and rhythm and the guiding clarity of prose's "descriptive sincerity."

The compact between poetry and prose operates in diction as well as in syntax. If poetry is meant to be the language of the unexpected, where juxtapositions enliven language, much of this book's "poetry"--idioms, clichés, and so on--reveals and emphasizes the "poetry" of the everyday, the poetics of the ordinary, the poetry of prose. The following passage, for example, mixes self-explanation with "ordinary" sentences which are themselves moved by subtle poetic sounds and connectives: "This autobiography of expansive sensations is divided horizontally. Mrs. Butterworth isn't racial. I was pregnant and needed a rocker. There was a moving crowd of crows loud above the swaying trees. The T-shirts hanging from the line flapped like plump birds along the shore" (61). Hejinian is celebrating, by extension, the poetry of all language, and such celebration is consoling to language users. Bruce Andrews, by way of contrast, refuses those kinds of consolation.

Hejinian does express some discomfort about prose comforts, claiming in *My Life* that "Proses is props" (62), and in "The Composition of the Cell," "64.1 When I get nervous I'm narrative" (*Cold of Poetry* 117). But the prose grounding of *My Life* is never abandoned. She is using

prose as a mode of understandability, to guide the book. Such clues as "This autobiography of expansive sensations is divided horizontally" are not like the postmodern meta-commentary of a writer like Italo Calvino, steering us from uncertainty to greater uncertainty. The poetized prose of *My Life* might compare, paradoxically, to Hejinian's description of Stein's literary vision (in *Temblor* 3): "She saw things in a present continuity, a present relativity, across the porous planes of the writing." The mix of prose and poetry in *My Life* matches such paradoxes--presence and ongoingness, presence and comparability, a plane which is also full of holes--to sustain a particular balance of real and ideal. As Hejinian writes in a later section, "It is precisely a special way of writing that requires realism. This will keep me truthful and do me good. . . . Of course I want things to be real! . . . Minute discriminations release poetic rather than cerebral effects" (101). If prose is the language of the real world, Hejinian riddles it with poetry to celebrate, simultaneously, the idealization of reality which is languaging and the "minute discriminations" in languaging which make for poetry.

#### 4. Inhabitability

The diction of prose poetry is one detail of the way *My Life* represents "real life" as a translation into ideal life, imaginable and inhabitable by many language-transfixed Americans. Such an ideal life has to do with the happiness project (of which more in a moment) and almost has to be characterized by occurrences which are not too singular or idiosyncratic. Sure enough, as Hejinian puts it, "The years pass, years in which, I take it, events were not lacking" (69). Prosaic event is translated into poetic ideal, as this passage shows:

The sudden brief early morning breeze, the first indication of a day's palpability, stays high in the trees, while flashing silver and green the leaves flutter, a bird sweeps from one branch to another, the indistinct shadows lift off the crumpled weeds, smoke rises from the gravel quarry--all this is metonymy. The 'argument' is the plot, proved by the book. Going forward and coming back later. Even posterity, alas, will know Sears. (59)

What kind of day? What kind of trees? What kind of birds or weeds? Which Sears in which town? The lack of specialized detail makes these spaces and memories languaging Americans might all inhabit.

As we might also inhabit the very "I" of the book. In autobiography, the I of memory is of course not the I remembering. This obvious separation of one I from another is multiplied exponentially in Hejinian's work.<sup>11</sup> [11] To consider the difference between idiosyncratic autobiography and the way Hejinian idealizes or linguistically reconstructs this life report, compare a passage from 1976 (from *A Thought is the Bride of What Thinking*, unpaginated) with what we might call the autographic translation in *My Life*. First, the earlier passage:

What is possibly my earliest recollection is of a brilliantly yellow flower sharp on the grass. From that period also come other purely visual memories. I remember clearly particular wallpapers, the small yellow roses on the yellowing paper in my grandmother's room, the faded green stems and leaves, and the dark green paper of my own bedroom. In still another room was a pink paper, newly hung, which I tore off the wall in long strips as I lay in my crib for an afternoon nap.

Because my memory is visual in its nature, that I should have become a painter follows logically. Yet, though my father was a painter, I am not.

And the start of My Life:

A pause, a rose,                      A moment yellow, just as four years something on  
paper            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 colored. Somewhere,  
in the background, rooms share a patterns of small roses. Pretty is as pretty does.  
In certain families, the meaning of necessity is at one with the sentiment of pre-  
necessity. The better things were gathered in a pen.

In the first passage, autobiography charts specified childhood places and experiences. In the second, autography intermingles common cultural history with the writing that gathers it in a pen, that tells an inhabitable story. The text not only enacts this relinquishment of the stable "I," it invites it: a yearning for a flexible, linguistic, even de-gendered "I" pervades the work. In her essay "The Rejection of Closure," Hejinian claims that language is ungendered: "the desire that is stirred by language seems to be located more interestingly within language, and hence it is androgynous" (Writing/Talks 283). Not only androgynous, but even disembodied. As Hejinian wrote later, "I myself feel that the physical body is astoundingly alien -- as if I had the amazing possibility of being intimate with my own otherness, which is an animal" (Aerial #5, 33).

Hejinian's focus on androgyny and bodilessness in language may explain why subjectivity becomes a loosened force in My Life. The work always has a narrating "I," but it is isolated, neutered, questioned, as these excerpts indicate: "And if I feel like a book, a person on paper, I will continue. What is the gender on paper" (76); "Pronouns skirt the subject" (77). Nor does the "I" necessarily progress or sequentially develop. This nonlinear self-telling is intensified in the second edition, in which each section has grown by eight randomly inserted sentences, further destabilizing any sense that the "I" might be located and progressively tracked. One appeal of this "I" is the suggestion that anyone can wear it, one "I" fits all. This inhabitable I, by the way, is unlike the concern with obviating the "I" that many see as a critical project of Language poetry. If word focus and phrasal repetition make My Life a Language text, its I-centeredness does not.

In addition to refusing Language poetry's excision of the "I," Hejinian's subjectively motivated proceduralism rejects classical modernism's preoccupation with so-called "objectivity." Hejinian's subjectivity recalls the personal (and uncanonized) modernism of a poet like Parker Tyler. In his long poem *The Granite Butterfly* (1945), Tyler speaks from the heart of a subjective sensibility which produces neither impenetrable self-confessions nor a refusal of shared humanity: "Some poets . . . have admired the obstacles that fixed literary forms place in the path of a creative artist, and feel that in surmounting these one may reach the highest art. But art itself is never the question. It is only the artist that matters, his personality and his fate, which are linked indissolubly with his time." Though this focus on the human is not what Hejinian usually preaches in her essays on writing, it is what her writing itself often enacts, and most keenly in *My Life*.

## 5. The Happiness Project

Given the genre context of *My Life*, it is instructive to compare it to the earliest autobiography of a woman, *The Book of Margery Kempe*. This is a medieval story of spiritual ecstasy and misery which Margery recounts to a priest. The most striking difference between the two works is the absence of any extremity at all--but particularly of pain and suffering--in Hejinian's autobiography. It contains neither grappling with evil nor even any real resistance to circumstances. The author lives in language and sees that it is good. This is a portrait of the artist as fulfilled and confident: "After any visit to a museum," the book asserts, "at home I impulsively haul out my paints and never expect disappointment" (97). Sometimes Hejinian sounds like a trusting child of Ben Franklin: "I will not despair; my hope is 1) to rise daily before seven, 5) to avoid idleness. There cannot be ups without downs" (98). But Hejinian's is not a self-improvement project; there is no sense of inadequacy or undeservingness here. Even what might be a worthy question--"Am I a kind, a good person." (81)--is formed as a statement, not a question. Its relation to a truly questing "I" is undercut by its phrasal flatness.

Happiness, the book seems to say, is a blessing that has been worked for and bequeathed as a gift to the child. This legacy is strikingly evident at the end of the second edition, with her grandfather's observations on the unnecessary of happiness. It is as though this is a story of Americans who make good emotionally on the backs of their less happy progenitors: "happiness is worthless, my grandfather assured me when he was very old, he had never sought it for himself or for my father, it had nothing to do with whether or not a life is good" (115).

Not to say that Hejinian is unaware of what she calls the "constructedness" of her project. "The trend of my theory," she writes in a second edition sentence, "may sometimes run utopianward in reality" (100).

## 6. The Absence of Evil

The decision to efface difficult moments makes this a document of the daylight hours of life, devoid of sex, violence, tragedy, and even any particular sorrow. Even in an apparent

reference to someone's (presumably her father's) death by cancer, the emotive referent is obscured by the verbal sea it swims in: "It was cancer but we couldn't say that. A name trimmed with colored ribbons. It was a warning that 'things will go our way' no longer. Snakes cannot roll like hoops and bees do not definitely suck their young wholly formed from flowers" (69). This is a moment when the deliberate constructedness of the happiness project is thrown into relief.

Two things seem to be going on here. The first is that language is not life and therefore can be made to tell stories as one likes it to. The second is that Hejinian does not like to ponder wickedness. If language can enable the self to lose gender and other fundamental attributes, language can cause all things to appear beautiful. Because it is not experience, language is never horrible. Living in language--poetizing one's life--removes the powers of horror from experience. There is no fucking or shitting here, no Kathy Ackerisms. Not even Carla Harryman masturbating on the phone, as she does in *There Never Was a Rose without a Thorn*: "I want to come before the collector gets off the phone. I look at the nude, her slatted body, her pillarlike knee, the tough looking genital area. But not her face which I choose to avoid as I come into my hand" (12).

Hejinian has coauthored a piece with Harryman: called *The Wide Road*, it is often erotic and charged with otherness. In one of a series of letters they exchanged about this collaboration, Hejinian expresses bafflement about evil, about the "trauma" that is so dominant elsewhere in the "postmodern" art world (thinking again of Acker, or of the violating photographs of Cindy Sherman). In response to Harryman's query, Hejinian writes:

And so I arrive at violence and an aspect of the eroticism that Bataille addresses and about which I feel, at the very least, trepidation and a degree of unfamiliarity. . . . I don't know how to think about this -- about torture for example. Violence in this sense disrupts and destroys the integrity of the other's self. This is so repugnant to think about that I -- I guess I have to reject it altogether. (*Aerial* #5, 30)

This is a wonderful angelicism, perhaps anticipated by something Hejinian wrote in 1976, in a Transcendental and Wordsworthian moment. Even in spite of itself, in spite of its freedom from morality, art will serve human uplift, *plaire et instruire*: "Most often, in fact, the work [of art] itself maintains ethical neutrality. (However, it's [sic] effect is usually beneficial, in that great Art serves as great Nature does, to both elevate and humble the observer. This is its effect, but not its purpose.)" (*A Thought is the Bride of What Thinking*).

It is worth keeping in mind, if we teach *My Life* as an avatar of 1980s poetic postmodernism, that it keeps on the sunny side. Hejinian's additions in the second edition, however, are almost programmatically darker and more complex than the contents of the first edition. I don't want to overstate this change, but it is traceable and often pronounced. One example in the fifth section will serve to make the point. Added sentences are in brackets:

A glass snail was set among real camellias in a glass bowl upon the table. [Pure duration, a compound plenum in which nothing is repeated.] Photographed in a blue pinafore. [The way Dorothy Wordsworth often, I think, went out to 'get' a sight. But language is restless.] They say there has been too much roughhousing. (17)

Here both diction and literary/historical allusion make the second edition's language and approach more adult, if you will. In this same section, a sentence is added about the death of a child who had fallen down a well-fitting, "in which he was wedged, recorded, and died" (16). Not every addition so clearly serves to make the work more complex; but most do.

## 7. Wordsworthian Romanticism

The complexifying of language and event in the second edition of *My Life* rescue it from a perhaps excessively Wordsworthian idealism, as though in a fit of penitential realism Wordsworth might have gone back to *The Prelude* and devoted some lines to Annette Vallon (see Jerome McGann's essay, in this issue, for more on Wordsworth's exclusion of negative and morally questionable life events from *The Prelude*). Certainly, when Hejinian writes of "The pre-life of an individual" (73), asserting that "I am a stranger to the little girl I was, and more -- more strange" (75), it is difficult for the literary reader to avoid thinking of Wordsworth. Like Wordsworth ("trailing clouds of glory . . . From God, who is our home"), Hejinian is aware of her benevolent origin and upbringing. And like Wordsworth, Hejinian constructs her life story for its happiness benefits.

The famous Wordsworthian "spots of time" are also paralleled in *My Life*, but as reinscriptions of language rather than recollections of needed moments of grace. Unlike Hejinian's, Wordsworth's program of benevolence is grounded in loss and suffering, what he calls "the ministry of fear." Further, Wordsworthian "spots of time" are fundamentally objective, even divine, moments that later and repeatedly serve a healing function for the troubled psyche. His poetry is a report and an enactment of this benevolent scheme.

Hejinian's might be better called "spots of language," personal experiences as linguistic encounters. If Wordsworth brought words to explain the significance of his spots of time, Hejinian's spots of time are always word-bound. This verbal memory is most obviously inscribed in the repeated phrases that echo throughout the book and serve their turns as headnotes: "We have come a long way from what we actually felt," "The plow makes trough enough," "One begins as a student but becomes a friend of clouds," "Yet we insist that life is full of happy chance." But the entire scene of memory in *My Life* is word-bound. Language makes the event what it is and also, later, makes the event conjurable and acceptable. Instead of Wordsworth's two consciousnesses, the "then" and "now" of being (see *The Prelude* Book II, 27-33), Hejinian's focus is on language, the "thens" and "nows" of words. Consider an excerpt from both first and second editions:

The coffee drinkers answered ecstatically, pounding their cups on the table. How to separate people from principles. A healthy dialectic between poetry and prose. Good days go by fast, too fast. On the low rectangular coffee table was a rack for the postcard collection. A lot of questions, a few answers, the progress of questioning, the spot on the brain where these words will go. For example, I remember the blue coat with the red piping but I don't remember myself in it. (64)

Here we return to spots of language visited before ("A healthy dialectic between poetry and prose," "The coffee drinkers answered ecstatically"). These spots serve as linguistic

touchstones for the introduction of new memory material, and for the very consideration of how memory might work, which "spot on the brain" holds the words of experience. At the phonemic level, too, language drives the memory. In the parallels of "coffee drinkers . . . pounding cups," "people from principles" and "poetry and prose," we hear words connecting and driving memory experiences. Words act like the memory object of "the blue coat with the red piping," which operates to put the memory in descriptive clothes but not to elicit the "I . . . in it."

Another Wordsworthian resonance comes in the potentially continuous additive structure of the book. It serves as a kind of Prelude that can be written and re-written as the author ages and wants to alter her material, since additions come in the middle of the work, in its revisability, rather than only at the end. To write a work which can be grown out, in the manner of the crystalline organicism I suggested earlier, is to inscribe into the work both presence and absence. That is, the fact that eight sentences, not present in 1980, can materialize in each section in 1987, suggests that many more sentences not in appearance do potentially exist. (Something in the way that there are sad stories not told in this happiness project.) The sentence becomes the amplifying building block, at the same time self-sufficient and a microcosm of all other already-present or potential sentences: "To some extent, each sentence has to be the whole story" (67). As the work declares, "We never wanted more than something beginning worth continuing which remained unended" (71).

## 8. The Consolation of Poetry

My Life argues that language is enough. The Wittgensteinian inheritance--the limits of my language are the limits of my world, language is itself the vehicle of thought--is written as an inheritance not of loss but of sufficiency. As Hejinian wrote in 1978, "we [are] obsessed with our own lives, which lives being now language, the emphasis has moved. The emphasis is persistently centric, so that where once one sought a vocabulary for ideas, now one seeks ideas for vocabularies" (L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E 29). We relinquish ourselves to the representative government of language, and language does not disappoint us: it shapes our world and gives it back to us.

We have come a long way from what Augustine felt. What he saw as the inadequacy of language to tell of the human becomes in My Life the adequacy of what is, the happiness project, joining the adequacy of what is told. As Hejinian wrote in her essay "Language and Realism," "things take place inside the writing, are perceived there, not elsewhere, outside it. It is the nature of meaning to be intrinsic, in other words, immanent, as the meaning of any person is, of me, is me, the person. That is how a poem means." The writing, that is, tells itself, includes within it all the necessary elements of its meaning. Such pure sufficiency makes poetry even more than Wordsworth's "abundant recompense": it aspires to a complete consolation.

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## Notes

1. "Autography" is a term apparently gaining in currency, as evidenced for example by Jeanne Perreault's use of it in *Writing Selves. Contemporary Feminist Autography* (University of Minnesota Press, 1996). Perreault discusses Audre Lorde, Adrienne Rich, Kate Millett, and Patricia Williams; she also points to earlier users of the term "autography," notably Michael Ryan in "Self Evidence" (review in *Diacritics*, June 1980) and Jane Gallop in "Writing and Sexual Difference: The Difference Within" (in *Writing and Sexual Difference*, ed. Elizabeth Abel, Chicago, 1982). I don't intend my use of the term to have any feminist overtones.

2. As far as I know, this book was never reprinted after its small initial run. In an undated letter posted May 1, 1973--inserted in the privately owned copy I looked at--Hejinian wrote to Oyez press asking if they had any interest in publishing the *gRRreat* adventure: "It was printed for me by a friend, for distribution through the Brain Frame Company," which was dedicated to "open art distributed freely and reciprocally through the mails. As it turned out, postage for the distribution of the book was far too expensive." Presumably, Hejinian soon gave up the idea of finding, as the letter puts it, "someone to publish it properly."

3. By Marjorie Perloff, for example: "My Life conveys what the archetypal life of a young American girl is like: 'Even rain didn't spoil the barbeque, in the backyard behind a polished traffic, through a landscape along a shore' (p. 73)" (225). The two pages on *My Life* in Perloff's

book would seem to be the beginning of Hejinian's critical canonization. Though Perloff is writing about the first edition of *My Life*, her words are the single blurb on the back cover of the second edition.

4. This point bears an uncanny resemblance to one made by Perloff in her new book *Wittgenstein's Ladder: Poetic Language and the Strangeness of the Ordinary* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996). Writing of Wittgenstein's turn to grammar after 1929, she summarizes his changed attitude towards language: "Description thus replaces explanation" (58). She later quotes Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, "We must do away with all explanation and description alone must take its place" (PI #109) (135). Perloff devotes a few pages to Hejinian in this new book, but she never mentions *My Life*, which might well belong to Perloff's list of recent works "written under the sign of Wittgenstein."

5. Which is the differently worked point of Craig Douglas Dworkin's quilt metaphor in his essay, "Penelope Reworking the Twill: Patchwork, Writing, and Lyn Hejinian's *My Life*," *Contemporary Literature* XXXVI, 1 (1995). Dworkin writes: "the visual pleasures of the irrevocably puzzled surface of the quilt offer a model for a reading of *My Life* that values the very incomprehensibility so often objected to in contemporary writing and so well illustrated by the deliberately fractured and fractal nature of Hejinian's work" (59).

6. Silliman's procedure is not entirely arbitrary, of course--he considers the Fibonacci number series a figure for the truth of Marxist thought. See Jerome J. McGann, "Contemporary Poetry, Alternate Routes," in Robert von Hallberg, ed., *Politics and Poetic Value* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 268-74.

7. Not that basing form on a subject's age is entirely unprecedented. Surrey, for example, wrote his eulogy for Wyatt, "Wresteth here," in 38 lines, Wyatt's age when he was dispatched by Henry VIII.

8. For example, "An affectionate exhortation to those who in early life feel themselves disposed to become authors" (XI), "Supposed irritability of men of genius -- Brought to the test of facts -- Causes and occasions of the charge -- Its injustice" (II), "On the imagination, or esemplastic power" (XIII), "A chapter of requests and premonitions concerning the perusal or omission of the chapter that follows" (XII), or, my favorite, "The former subject continued" (XX).

9. And so with motion as well, reminiscent of the way Virginia Woolf brings back words and phrases in *The Waves* (Hogarth Press, 1931; rpt. Penguin, 1992). Woolf's recurrences are never exact, however; so we might say she presents more obviously than Hejinian does the impossibility of repetition or "accurate" representation. Bernard can say "'As you passed the door of the tool-house I heard you cry 'I am unhappy'. I put down my knife. I was making boats out of firewood'" (9), and Neville can say "'We were in the tool-shed making boats, and Susan came past the door. And Bernard dropped his boat and went after her taking my knife'" (13), and the point is finally "'There are no repetitions for me. Each day is dangerous. Smooth on the surface, we are all bone beneath like snakes coiling'" (163).

10. Again on the matter of literary pedigree, Hejinian's alternating compact of prose and verse parts is loosely reminiscent of the prosimetra in, say, Dante's *Vita Nuova*, with its prose narrative, interpolated poems, and technical commentaries.

11. One of the first reviewers of *My Life* seems to have been primarily struck by the force--what he called the "Brownian movement"--of its destabilized "I." See Bruce Campbell, "As

Permeated Constructedness,' Lyn Hejinian: My Life," in Temblor 9 (1989), 192-93: "we must recognize that Hejinian's book cleaves to the generosity of 'my,' not its appropriation. We might ask, however, whether we truly want such generosity" (192).

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