

FRAGMENT, SENTENCE AND MEMORY OF THE SELF IN A POETIC NEO-NARRATIVE

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ABSTRACT

The new narrative style has invented new abilities where it is not only difficult to distinguish prose from poetry for example, but has also delved into new paradigms that transform its possibilities. One radical example of this new position is a work by Lyn Hejinian, *My Life*, primarily conceived as an autobiography in prose poems, but whose literary potential I believe converts it into a narrative where imagination and sensitivity play a primordial role. A first reading of *My Life* allows one to glimpse that its style is opposed to the old poetic and prosaic modes. It is capable of interconnecting the narration with: uncovering the author's life process, the simultaneity of events by playing with space and time, exercise of memory and the lack of ordered references.

Today's critics have sought to unite various theories in order to escape from the unsolved difficulties in relating language and literary issues. Original strategies have been developed to explain the new possibilities of literary knowledge and above all the blurring of the limits between the different literary genres. Philosophy is one of the disciplines most resorted to in marking new territories, as far as it is easy to recognize the origins of authors like Lyotard, Derrida and Foucault to cite some of the most recent. Concepts like discourse, subject, reference, author and reader have been revised, with clear consequences for the indeterminacy and instability within the literary field. Indeed, the narrative art has been one of the fields subject to most attempts to limit the diverse aspects appearing in it. Writing novels has moved on from simple recalling or collecting stories, fables or parables from human experience, subtly sieved through the imagination. It is now a literary form that reflects in its most experimental way on its own composition and textual activity, and on an image or

world indistinguishable between a true reality and an exclusive projection of this genre.

At first sight, current avant-garde narrative is not just storytelling as the art of entertaining or emotionally moving the reader. It has also become a medium of individual personal discovery and knowledge, as the question of form starts to come into play as a decisive part of its nature. The new narrative style has invented new abilities where it is not only difficult to distinguish prose from poetry for example, but has also delved into new paradigms that transform its possibilities. One radical example of this new position is a work by Lyn Hejinian, *My Life*, primarily conceived as an autobiography in prose poems, but whose literary potential I believe converts it into a narrative where imagination and sensitivity play a primordial role. A first reading of *My Life* allows one to glimpse that its style is opposed to the old poetic and prosaic modes. It is capable of interconnecting the narration with: uncovering the author's life process, the simultaneity of events by playing with space and time, exercise of memory and the lack of ordered references. In addition it considers the text as an objectual reality requiring the six participants Seymour Chapman claims as essential: "real author, implied author, narrator, narratee, implied reader, real reader" (151).¹ No conventional narrative line exists in the 45 sections or chapters of this book. They lack continuity both between, and within them where ruptures between consecutive sentences carry us assiduously to different leaps and irrevocably distance us from finding any conventional narrative thread. This accentuates the synchronicity of events and character appearances, situating descriptions, reflections and evocations at the same level. This technique also involves a certain automatism leading us sometimes to very different perceptions, obviously requiring a new model of reading and interpretation. The text forges a new style, but also a poetics of intervening mechanisms that are useful to instigate reflection on questions beyond literature itself. Generally, Hejinian proposes what we might call a neo-narrative poetic style where we end up suspended from the emotive narration of a life. She uses evocative language, only to feel disturbed by the ambiguities of the real and the ideal and even to be able to combine the ordinary with the extraordinary, a distinction in practice difficult to establish while reading.

"OK, tell me a story" is one of the locutions we must accept beforehand on starting to read *My Life*. Perhaps Hejinian's intention was to set the limits to family histories already told or to prove to herself the impossibility of setting them. "There were more storytellers than there were stories, so that everyone in the family had a version of history and it was impossible to get close to the original, or to know 'What really happened'" (21);² but even acknowledging the story she is going to tell would be far from the truth, the mysteries the technique leaves behind leave us demanding a fiction that seems to be felt much like the need for food, and insist with Hejinian: "but what we wanted to hear was a story" (37). So, what better option is left but to write about her own family and herself! In *My Life* it is evident that the author returns to this recurrently, as a point of reference from which such a personal narrative as hers sets off:

What are the essential elements? what makes a piece of writing novelistic? Henry James, in the "Preface" to *Roderick Hudson*, says that what is basic to the novel are "developments" —turns of plot, turns of interpretation (by the characters), etc. But it seems that an enormous number of novels in one way or

another are about families —about family and the familiar—and certainly these are central themes in *My Life*. (Hejinian, “Letter”).

From time immemorial, and everywhere and always, story-tellers of one sort or another are found striving as best they can to comply with that call. Such a demand has sometimes had shades of realism, or has been associated with precise cultural tendencies and references. But from Modernism on, authors have risked new polemical forms that disclaiming simple immediate references have sometimes been misinterpreted. I say this because it is obvious that Hejinian’s *My Life* participates in this experimental effort, proclaiming the end of the division between literary genres, but its potential is such that it is also draws on earlier narrative models, since its basic object is simply to tell a story. One example of this confusion is in Diane Wakoski’s appreciation. She draws to attention that *My Life* is an experimental autobiography organized in short sentences (not always, I must add), then that: “Finally, the work experiments with the traditional figurative and conceptual language of poetry (i.e. image, symbol, metaphor), while contradicting their effect by not allowing them to build either story or image” (207). The poetic qualities of *My Life* are undeniable (one has only to observe the abundance of images and the unique language inspiring constant emotive interpretations), However, Wakoski’s allusion to the impossibility of constructing a story is questionable. This would be the case if we were still limited by the traditional narrative model characterized by ordered facts and chronology. But Hejinian’s autobiography certainly has a story, that of her own life —plus multiple directions taken up over and over again, in a different way on each reading.³

If we re-order or dig deeply into *My Life*, a narrative may be observed that perhaps does not ascribe to a precise model but offers precise data, which can be collated into a more linear progression of her story. To quote but a few of those with exact references, we can give significant examples like the encounter with her father when he returns from the World War II (7), the first year at school with Miss Sly (20), her falling in love for presumably the first time at 9 years old (25), the same year in which “I trained myself to hold my breath” (31), feelings of attachment towards her mother on celebrating her tenth birthday (31), beginning adolescence (Where I refer to “a preliminary” I mean that until 1964 I regarded the world as a medium of recognition and I prepared for it to recognize me”(34)). It is in May 1958 when reading becomes important (49), in 1969 when “I could feel the scope of collectivity” (74), her father’s passing away: “There was no proper Christmas after he died”(75), and the spring when her children are 7 and 9 (83). She also goes back to an October day in 1978 (92) which we do not know for sure is related to the angry tantrum she tells us of in the next sentence or not, since the ruptures in the narrative line are so instant they give rise to ambiguity; even offering us the exact date 1979 for the year she read Montaigne (96). To these chronological traces, other much less specific clues can be added which are nonetheless applicable to her biographic development. To name but a few: the numerous incidents related with her infancy (family relationships, school years, initiation into reading, experience as baby-sitter or hiker in a summer-camp), anecdotes and time shared with her friends and neighbors or houses occupied, and of course her intellectual background. All these details scattered throughout the book contribute to developing a story inserted among fictionalized memories and deconstructed by the

compositional form employed. Here, I must clarify that the dissemination of details gradually introduced is not aligned with the narratological notion of “foreshadowing,” where the reader is prepared for the final resolution by means of revealing elements. In *My Life*, no such determinism exists so its reading remains totally open.⁴

Understood thus, that which I denominate Hejinian’s poetic neo-narrative is not centered on a linear articulation of past experience but rather in the use of a new verbal model based in and transforming the diverse elements arising during the process of a life. I believe that on having resorted to a combination of narrative and poetry has a lot to do with the paradigmatic perception of reality defended by Bleich, opposed to that of Kuhn, “for all practical purposes, reality is invented and not observed or discovered by human beings” (Bleich 11). Thus, knowledge is arrived at through a consensus negotiated in a community, but where the base continues in individual perception. The radical solipsist extreme is not reached, as we have in front of us the evident reality of the text itself. However, we do see the adoption of a narrative model that allows experience to be altered or re-invented with the security that there will be a consensual interpretation to piece together her intentions. Consequently, what appears at first sight to be chaotic and exclusively subjective will also have a social validity. This is the same trust noted by Peter Middleton when he refers to the nature of narrative, “in terms of the model-view of the world, a narrative offers a better means of representing discontinuous unstable processes than any system-model can” (56). This can be appreciated in a practical manner on approaching the form used in *My Life*, where we find an unstable narrative liable to decompose a biography lived linearly into numerous fragments. Each chapter begins with an aphorism or epigraph, whose relation with the text is more evocative than literal. These have an important function inasmuch as they reappear inserted as part of the text itself within some of the following chapters or sections, as if they were intervening constantly in her life. Of course their interpretation must be reformulated in the different contexts, conveying instability in meaning but also allowing glimpses of a continuity provided by their repetition. Let us say the most recurrent is “As for we who love to be astonished,” appearing on 24 occasions, followed by “A pause, a rose, something on paper,” used 18 times. Negotiating one single meaning for each instance is complicated, especially as the narrator does not try and find a strict equivalence but rather to always make the text a creative equivalence of the situations or references narrated. Here, I feel is where the consensus is to be found, in the primary consideration of the text as generator of different possible readings and interrelations, able to make the narrative of the self be perceived as approaching its textual nature. This may seem rather complicated, but taking into account that one of the intentions of the narrating voice in Hejinian is to try and be subjective and multiple, we must not forget we are now entering into problems of structure and reception.

A more detailed account of form and style in the text would aid us to observe her strategy and range of vision. Being pragmatic, the relationship between language, world and mind produced in *My Life* does not obey the accumulation technique seen in Henry James, nor in reproduction (Francis S. Fitzgerald) nor in desire as the motor of capitalism shown by Norman Mailer.⁵ I believe Hejinian’s new paradigm or *raison d’être* is that the fragmented story of a life being told must take up the recognition of a new form that responds to our contemporaneity. Bruce Campbell, Marjorie Perloff

and Juliana Spahr have also referred sufficiently to the structure and organization of *My Life*: the first edition was published in 1980 by the small press Burning Deck, run by the poets Keith and Rosmarie Waldrop. It was composed of 37 chapters on sections of 37 sentences each, a figure corresponding to the age of the author on writing them in 1978. To the second edition (Sun & Moon 1987), Hejinian added 8 more chapter-sections, i.e. one for each of the years up to 1986. On this occasion, all the sections now had 45 sentences (8 more than the previous edition), now inserted in the pieces arbitrarily within the different sections rather than adding them at the end. This accentuates the sensation of incompleteness in the composition, since ideas and memories are recovered and introduced of a life in process, continually being reformed and completed: “Form, then be expressive” (98).

We have before us a collage of memories, descriptions/parascrptions, lyrical emotions, portraits of characters and situations that can be shaped anew to allow glimpses of a chronological process. In this sense, the first sections are clearly dedicated to her childhood years with special emphasis on family and school relationships and vacation activities. A single sentence portrays this stage, “I was growing up as a cowgirl, a child doctor, a great reader” (34). Within this progression that comes to an end with references to her father’s death, arrival of her children and greater literary involvement, “At this time, perpetual poetry, hence poetry without dread, and there were many poets ranting sympathetically, while I could not help, nor would, but have maternal passions, knotting the materials of sincerity” (101). It should be noted that even though she advances towards adulthood, childhood memories still persist: “Thinking back to my childhood, I remember others more clearly than myself, but when I think of more recent times, I begin to dominate my memories” (66). However, I would insist that the new edition of *My Life*, although enlarged, maintains the same script-line and strategy without altering the spirit of the 1980 edition.

The general impression of this form disposition is that autobiography —where time or its perception becomes ambivalent and where explicit references may be mixed with more transcendental poetic reflections— is for her a literary medium that faithfully reflects the story-telling labor of the homodiegetic narrator. It also serves to recreate herself, seeing how life itself can turn into a fiction created by others. This awareness makes us appreciate *My Life* not so much as someone writing a simple diary but rather organizing a narrative that aims to create a history of explorations into the same literary process it is immersed in. This approach is assumed by the author and has its roots in the role attributed to language itself, here conceived of as experience and motivator of perceptions. “When I say perception, since I am thinking about a poem, I locate (just as I in fact experience) the site of the perceiving in language itself” (Hejinian, “Language” 83). She speaks here of the poem, but we must not forget that *My Life* may also contain prose-poems so this appreciation of the role of language in perception within this work is equally applicable. Language itself contains experiences and stories and comes to its apotheosis in Hejinian through the importance of the word itself, “A word is an expectation” (82), and the sentence, “A sentence is a metaphor since when I see it continually before me, it impatiently asks for my work” (105). On the one hand, the value of the word and its consequences is a constant theme in her literary career and this interest is connected to the strong polysemic character it may have in her poetry. On the other, the sentence acquires

vital importance. This is visible as notably increased in her literary productions, e.g. in the creative works *Sight* (in collaboration with Leslie Scalapino) and some sections of *The Cold of Poetry*, also when she deals with this question in her essays “The Rejection of Closure” and “Language and ‘Paradise’”). This decisive character comes to her through its being an organization of words that provides a dynamic transformation of what potentially occurs within her writing and by representing “the entirety of a perception, a complete thought” (Hejinian, “Language” 83).

The sentence is the medium chosen to narrate the universe of *My Life*, whose story is quite simple: the protagonist-narrator takes advantage of telling her life story in order to allegorize about how she became initiated into the world by knowing and imagining it, letting us know from the start that she had storyteller antecedents in her family who left her fascinated in her childhood: “My old aunt entertained us with her lie, a story about an event in her girlhood, a catastrophe in a sailboat that never occurred, but she was blameless, unaccountable, since, in the course of telling, she had come to believe the lie herself. A kind of burbling in the waters of inspiration” (13). One supposes that the situations and characters appearing in this autobiography were real, but she has created sections that may be considered unrelated fragments, which makes them ambiguous and unstable. Within these fragments, each sentence functions autonomously, in many cases unrelated to the preceding or following ones. In this way, we realize immediately that she is forcing us to jump from one perception to another, to constantly confront diversities that drive us to re-order and above all re-interpret what is happening in the text. We are faced with what I have called a poetic neo-narrative capable of describing true facts and offering an allegorical and metonymic sense to that reality. This fragmented form construction interacts with a recurrent attention on normal everyday occurrences with the ruptured, minuscule appreciation of the subjective, which finally and paradoxically leads us to the widest social level. The critical horizon that Hejinian points towards is both specific and general, as is her autobiography, given that it is totally attached to the “emergence of a life in the process of its textual (re-)construction” (Lazer 32). Entering into this narrative, the reader takes on its qualities and arguments, making it socially discursive with the peculiarity of being not only in continuous development but also dismantling itself, “My life as permeable constructedness” (93). Here again it is in this sense when her autobiography may be ascribed to events that really took place in her own life. However it also transcends and remains open to the potentialities offered by the 115 pages of the later edition of *My Life*, where we must take decisions, “If one can’t see a connection one must assume a decision” (92).

I insist that her technique uses language itself as its nearest reference:

Because we have language we find ourselves in a special and peculiar relationship to the objects, events, and situations which constitute what we imagine of the world. Language generates its own characteristics in the human psychological and spiritual condition. Indeed, it nearly *is* our psychological condition. This psychology is generated by the struggle between language and that which it claims to depict or express, by our overwhelming experience of the vastness and uncertainty of the world, and by what often seems to be the inadequacy of the imagination that longs to know it. (Hejinian, “Rejection” 138).

Language declares us human. And the sentence is the unit that expresses thought, totally adjustable to reality and memory. Hejinian shocks her readers, making us aware we are in an interpretive *tour de force* with an epistemological strategy aimed at awakening us to a highly reflexive language, its nature and what derives from it. As consequence, the same characters appearing from this narration do not give the readers the pleasure of being carried away by a conventional narrative thread. ("The "argument" is the plot, proved by the book. Going forward and coming back later" (59), on the contrary, they are organized so that their brief appearances inform us efficiently of how perception works in the implied author and reader as defined by Booth and Chapman. The characters appearing most frequently are her nearest relatives, father (1, 7 and 36), mother (109), uncle (7), grandmother (13 and 44), grandfather (16, 110 and 111), her aunt (13), Larry (102), Paull (85 and 102) and Anna (102). Next come others like her first teacher (20), the boy she falls in love with in her class (25-26), the burglar (88-89), the policewoman (95), the mailman Tommy (52), the clerk Faustina (108), the children waiting for the bus (87). If one wishes even the writers: Zola, Montaigne, Tolstoi, Trotsky, George Sand, also appear as characters, as they also take part in this autobiography like the everyday characters. So all these are inserted in a clear process of self-knowledge in relation to both the implied author and implied reader. The appearance of these characters and the numerous episodes referred to in *My Life* are so brief they end up flashing in our mind like points to grab on to within a desolate disorientating structure. Craig D. Dworkin calls this technique a "mininarrative" that sustains itself on evocation rather than on connection (73). This concords with the term poetic neo-narrative I propose, though I would put greater emphasis on the fact that Hejinian's narrating is deeply rooted in her concept of the self and the phenomenology of perception as we will see later. In any case, the example selected by Dworkin is illustrative of Hejinian's technique of alluding briefly to an episode that acquires greater dimensions if we are able to contextualize it with others. The example "The fox that survives is successful" (42) seen in isolation seems an oversimplified redundancy, but when joined with others of the type: "A shooting star is something happening in the sky, as the lion that finally roars is something happening in the zoo" (82), or associated with the numerous —almost always positive— references to animals appearing in the text like dogs, horses, elephants, gulls, raccoons, sparrows, chameleons, squirrels, zebras, horses, pigeons and starlings, they speak of her emotional approach to animals in general. The question then is: What is Lyn Hejinian's ultimate intention? To this we can respond that it is to experiment, in order that the writing process, the nature of the self and the role of perception may be revealed.

Autobiography writing is normally related to past events that have happened to people and responds to a subjective approach to reality. In *My Life*, the writing is undoubtedly individual but also must be re-created by those who approach it. Although the likeness does not seem to be aligned with the form presentation she develops here, the paradoxical result is that it may be truer and more acceptable than any other. In fact Hejinian herself insists she closely approaches realism, "It is precisely a special way of writing that requires realism. This will keep me truthful and do me good. Across the street in the pawing wind a herd of clouds pastures in the vacant lot. Night after night, in poetic society, line gathering and sentence harvesting. Of course

I want things to be real!”(101). The sentence we find in the middle of this quote is a mere realist description that —although found here out of context— contributes to the spirit of credibility, making explicit once more her own textual technique of juxtaposition. Hejinian’s other realism carries with it a sense of newness, where the sentence, as we have seen, represents a complete thought, the paragraph “is a place and a time, not a syntactic unit” (90), and where “A fragment is not a fraction but a whole piece” (82). Even the same sections, although appearing totally separate, may be considered as fragments including other fragments in the form of sentences. But she insists on “No fragments, but metonymy” (60). One idea she picks up later in her essay “Strangeness,” where the importance of metonymy as a literary device is highlighted for its more open and intervalic nature:

Metonymic thinking moves more rapidly and less predictably than metaphors permit—but the metonymy is not metaphor’s opposite. Metonymy moves restlessly, through an associative network, in which the associations are compressed rather than elaborated.

Metonymy is intervalic, incremental—which is to say measured.

A metonymy of a condensation of its context.

But because even the connections between things may become things in themselves, and because any object may be rendered into its separate component parts which then become things in themselves, metonymy, even while it condenses thought processes, may at the same time serve as a generative and even dispersive force. (Hejinian, “Strangeness” 39)

This metonymic function makes us move from the part to the whole or vice-versa. It obliges us to associate and relate and occurs as an event immersed in an open process. In this way, what for her was a family experience may become creative and inspiring for a reader who must maintain their creativity. “After crossing the boundary which distinguishes the work from the rest of the universe, the reader is expected to recross the boundary with something in mind” (77). I think what remains in our mind is an everyday epic of this half of the 20th century, a poetic narration in prose that styles her own time, preserving her existence through fragments. Without the didactic elements of fable, she makes up stories from her own life through indiscriminately appending many stories and reflections. All of them speak and act like human beings of a story told to herself about reality and the nature of literature. It is easy to see the inner process of adding on stories. It is easy to perceive that the story of her life is furnished for the sake of her own living, imagining, and reflecting; which by virtue of its presentation, finds its way into literature. It is simply an instance of autobiography fitting into the struggle to tell the readers new and pertinent things.

As can be deduced, this poetic neo-narrative doesn’t come to a stop, but moves not in endless circles, as might be the case with Kafka, but paradoxically coming closer to Proust or Gertrude Stein who tries over and over again to pick up new perceptions. Gertrude Stein’s first literary phase uses a technique that approaches Hejinian’s *My Life* most faithfully. In fact, the three basic Steinian devices used most profusely before 1910: using everything, beginning again and again and repetition, are also practiced by Hejinian, but without Stein’s centralizing function. The use of

ellipsis, juxtaposition and repetition (this latter having a much more dispersed signaling or reminding function than in Stein) pursues the intensity Hejinian intends, and returns us to her pre-textual, contextual and post-textual writing. Repetition in particular, normally conceived of as a unifying element, as a kind of “mnemotechnic rule” (Hilary Clark’s term) is closely associated with meaning:

Repetition, conventionally used to unify a text or harmonize its parts, as if returning melody to the tonic, instead, in these works, and somewhat differently in a work like *My Life*, challenges our inclination to isolate, identify, and limit the burden of meaning given to an event (the sentence or line). Here, where certain phrases recur in the work, re-contextualized and with new emphasis, repetition disrupts the initial apparent meaning scheme. The initial reading is adjusted; meaning is set in motion, emended and extended, and the re-writing that repetition becomes postpones completion of the thought indefinitely (Hejinian, “Rejection” 135).

To come back again and again with new eyes, by which we should understand it as a demand for exploration and projection, reminding us of Bakhtin’s idea that we know more when we approach the text from the outside, rather than outwards from the text itself.⁶ Being an autobiography, it is difficult for the subject to disappear, but there is no doubt that as readers we can appropriate the text, almost becoming co-authors, especially if we are invited from the fragment, “Only fragments are accurate” (55) and the repetition, “Part of the reading occurs as the recovery of that information (looking behind) and the discovery of newly structured ideas (stepping forward)” (Hejinian, “Rejection” 136). She herself notes that, in her infancy, “The lives of which I read seemed more real than my own” (51). They are supposed to have been written in a conventional manner and determined by their conclusiveness. That she as a reader experienced them in such a close, real way is not only due to the narrative quality they were written with but also to her own subjectivity that absorbed writing like a transparency of both self and knowledge of the world. The form disposition in *My Life* makes a different style evident, aimed at the non-conclusive. Her story is not linear but discursive, since it requires continuous re-consideration of its characters, episodes, sensations, times and places, she takes us to question where the priority lies, if in her life or in the text.

The structuralist Jonathan Culler, in his *Pursuit of Signs*, accepts the classic distinction between story and discourse, and claims “that narratological analysis of a text requires one to treat the discourse as a representation of events which are conceived of as independent of any particular narrative perspective or presentation and which are thought of as having the properties of real events” (171). My opinion is that in Hejinian it is difficult to establish this separation as the effects and causes the discourse are intimately related with the story and its form presentation. How can the use of fragmentation and what it involves at perception level be unbound from the scattered shreds of her life she provides us with in *My Life*? Both inform us and fulfill themselves. Her position is that of recovering a text where everything is organically interlaced and undergoing a constant renewal process where language takes the central role, “Language becomes so objectified that it is different from whatever you

know or say" (98), without needing to be gratified by reality. "The reference is a distraction" (57). The story of *My Life* is not lived by a real author or reader, but by the constructs of the implied author and reader. From this perspective, fictionalization and evocation of past events by Hejinian involve discoveries, especially about how we question the concept of truth and the limitations of language in its approach to reality. Such a hermeneutic method is rich in expectations because of the multiple subjective identifications and differentiations, i.e. they may respond to the voice of a subject and show metalinguistic features.⁷

Lyn Hejinian had already published a small piece in 1976 entitled "More Journal Than Novel," in the journal *Big Deal*. Its form composition was based on a combination of poetic prose and lines, where among other details she refers to an experimental prose not based on the harmony of thoughts or on equivalencies, but "as though waiting some carelessness not of another order of words" (Hejinian, "More" 26). This desire for alteration rather than for foresightedness contains an element of liberation, which importantly seems to take form better in a diary than in a novel. Despite this, Rimmon-Kennan notes that the narrator is "the agent which at very least narrates or engages in some activity serving the needs of narration." Giving the specific example: "The writing of a diary or a letter is thus a form of narration, although its writer may not intend or be conscious of narrating" (88-89). This open appreciation of the narrator is also to be seen in Hejinian's first literary period —characterized by a greater interest in subversion as if it was a centripetal force capable of attracting new forms, experimenting and responding to herself. A period that contrasts, for example, with her work published in the '90s like *Oxota: A Short Russian Novel*, where the organization (9 books, including a "Coda," comprising 270 chapters) and a much more recognizable form disposition (free sonnets) can be found. We often associate this sense of liberation with a positive attitude, although there are those who warn us of some problems due to the chaos or confusion provoked by such texts. This is especially important when it might have alienating consequences affecting thought, reality or the self. "Within this dominant view of being, we can too easily be transformed into powerless victims of our linguistic epistemes" (Fleckenstein 615). To avoid this, Hejinian trusts blindly in the combination of poetic images with a language in the very process of composition, "A large vocabulary finds its own grammar, and, conversely, a large grammar finds its own vocabulary" (69). It requires an almost mystical faith to believe that this encounter can happen, but there is no doubt that however disordered or magical, interesting or amusing it may be, she breaks free of everyday life and allows the reader to take pleasure and reflect on the creation of the story; not because that story is remote from ordinary experience, but because it is made familiar. This is Hejinian's approach, so far as one may infer from her praxis, to keep to the story with singleness of purpose is certainly not her duty as an artist. One form springs from another, "Can one "feel" that it is an instrument of discontinuity, of consciousness?" (25).

All the bibliographical references I have found on *My Life* point to its primarily poetic nature. I set off from the basis that it is an autobiography narrated as allegory. Nevertheless, different approaches attempt to define it accurately, like that of Craig Dworkin who refers to it as an "unconventional autobiography," significantly "listed by its distributors as "short novel," a novel-length test which reads like a poem, a

poem which is written in prose, a prose which is often, if not always, disorienting” (58). Hillary Clark prefers the classification of self-reflexive autobiography (317). For Juliana Spahr, Hejinian is immersed in a postmodernist autobiography, “about both the subject and the possibilities and limitations of the genre through which that subject is constructed or made manifest” (141). Marnie Parsons uses the term autobiography in inverted commas, emphasizing its peculiar character, as a “selection” not telling a whole life-story but a “sonal and visual dramatization of how language constructs one’s “reality” and one’s memories” (297). Marjorie Perloff carries out an exhaustive formal analysis, insinuating that the title should be changed to “*My Art or My Writing*, the natural giving way to the artificial, the individual self to the body of the words” (127). All these critics understand the difficulty or novelty of this autobiography that defies all limits making the monolithic figure of the author disappear from a genre that has always contained it. Hejinian herself names these forerunners within the text: “My lives on a shelf by Trotsky, George Sand” (96), whose specific titles were *My Life: An Attempt at an Autobiography* and *Histoire de une vie*, respectively. I feel Hejinian does not seek to improve on these authors writing an anti-conventional story and using the prose-poem to include a polyphony of voices. In fact, one of the many more clarifying quotes in *My Life* is when she refers us to a 19th-century author like Emile Zola, “I quoted Zola: ‘We are experimental moralists showing by experiment in what fashion a passion behaves in a social milieu’ ” (101). This is not to be taken in the sense of the scientific experiments of that period, but the experimental sense of the self and its projections into the social world. Perhaps Zola would have experimented in the ’80s of this century in the same way as Hejinian, i.e. reflecting inside the text about the possibilities and nature of literature in society. Hejinian has carried this out within else poetry group L=a=n=g=u=a=g=e to which she can be ascribed, distancing herself from verisimilitude and paying more attention to literary aspects in both processes: writing and reception.⁸

I have already pointed out that *My Life* has a homodiegetic narrator who participates intrinsically in the story, allowing the reader to enter it through a form based on fragments, without linear chronology or causal sequences, by which the text itself demands explorations and discoveries. These typical elements give rise to simultaneity or synchronicity in events, a device used with insistence in “The Green,” included in *The Cold of Poetry* (1994). Here, she begins by stating revealingly that “There are many figures in this scene which might form separate scenes” (Hejinian, *Cold* 127). However they appear totally interlinked, shaping sentence by sentence a visual collage of sensations. The same happens in *My Life* where the characters appear and disappear in both time and space. But when we finish reading it we are left with the impression that it all contains correspondences and we are able to connect different characters and situations. It is true that the convergence point occurs in the author herself, but the hermeneutics of this book lead the reader to a subjective plane of thought and reflection. The question to ask is: why is the narration of her life so dispersed? The most obvious answer lies in this very use of synchronicity developed through each chapter. Such a technique that transfers memories and their relevance to present life-experience to the pages and develops a discourse that separately and in conjunction re-examines the actions, contexts, and voices of a whole life. It is no surprise that one of the philosophers she most quotes is Merleau-Ponty:

Phenomenology, says Merleau Ponty, “is also a philosophy for which the world is always ‘already there’ before reflection begins —as an inalienable presence; and all its efforts are concentrated upon re-achieving a direct and primitive contact with the world, and endowing that contact with a philosophical status. It is the search for a philosophy which shall be a ‘rigorous science,’ but it also offers an account of space, time and the world as we ‘live’ them. It tries to give a direct description of our experience as it is” (Hejinian, “Language” 92).

Space, time and world/experience lie at the core of her concerns. Simultaneity allows her to play with all these concepts. She herself points out that when she started to write a novel at school in the 7th grade, she perceived that “I found myself a perpetual participant of the middle—or as I put it, ‘I find myself *in media res*’” (Hejinian, “Language” 88). Years later, almost the same expression arises in “The Green,” “one steps *in media res* with fanatic redundancy” (Hejinian, Cold 138). This posture clearly derives from her conception of life as a process in which she is immersed, with important consequences for the contrast and relativity of experience. It can also be observed as an emphasis on simultaneity, where time acquires vital importance, and a sense of organicity by her bringing together past and present, allowing subjective perception to acquire its true dimension.

This sense of simultaneity is made explicit on several occasions throughout *My Life*: “The synchronous, which I have characterized as spatial, is accurate to reality but it has been debased”(16), “The synchronous keeps its reversible logic, and in this it resembles psychology, or the logic of a person” (44). Some practical examples illustrate this psychology, like the synchronous association between horse, ferry and trolley: “The sidesaddle was impossible, and yet I’ve seen it used successfully, even stunningly, the woman’s full skirts spread like a wing as the horse jumped a hurdle and then galloped on. Lasting, ferries, later, trolleys from Berkeley to the Bridge” (18). Or we can also present an example of perception of a time past, that is now relived in a very different way in a space experienced in its moment and which one lives through again in the present:

Meanwhile I live within a few blocks of the scenes of my childhood and yet they evoke nothing, they’re neither alien nor hilarious nor sweet nor familiar nor awful, but merely local streets and an asphalt schoolyard—but now I see that in my memory of the streets, where I walked home alone from school, there is no “I” as such, while in the schoolyard I remember myself as a burgeoning personality and feel anew its nightmarish sincerity, oppressive and claustrophobic but energetic and openly candid though completely inaccurate, an effort, which makes me dread school in retrospect where I liked it so much in actuality (93-94).

The chapter containing this fragment ends significantly with the expression, “Permanent constructedness” (94), that brings us once more to the role of perception and its mutability in space and time, along with the notion of *in media res* quoted above. The playground takes on a new dimension thanks to the perception of the different self now being revealed in the text. Here, memory plays a key role. Craig Dworkin

speaks of how time must be recovered: “The past must be re-membered”(71) in Hejinian like a movement required to experience the life-process of the self intensely (in both author and reader), which shows under my criteria sensitivity as the most definitive aspect of her personality. The art of memory in Hejinian certainly does not stick to the facts but recreates and fictionalizes them with wide equivalencies. This is categorized through language, especially noting the changes from the Elizabethans until now, “In such are we obsessed with our own lives, which lives being now language, the emphasis has moved” (Hejinian, “Written” 29). Memory activates a biography but also serves to re-discover the word, or rather the sentence, under another unexperimented form. We recognize it as alive, passing again through the process, not as a search for identity and psychological equilibrium, but as a text offering itself to itself as alive and of the moment. When Craig Watson states that *My Life* “opens, rather than closes a life” (105), I understand that he perceives that the book does not begin in the '40s, when Hejinian's father returns from the World War II on the first page of the story. Rather, that it penetrates through our conventional time so as to speak of its multiple equivalencies. That quality, as I have already suggested, is possible by bringing together language and images with a strong poetic aroma, and by the fragmentation that encourages more speculation than entertainment.

Memory in Hejinian functions mainly subjectively but becomes shareable and therefore acquires social legitimation when it makes us react or identify ourselves, whether emotionally or intellectually. One neat example is when episodes familiar to all are referred to, e.g. “Then, when the neighbor's dog, his name is Wilbur, barks vehemently, even hysterically, at midday nextdoor, I am told that our mail has already arrived” (96), or “The kids stood waiting for the schoolbus where the cold was a toy for them, sucking snow” (87). These are images that sometime or other have made up part of our own reality and are used by her as a kind of atavism, bringing us closer to real-life, “Memory a separation from infinity” (87). The author speaks of childhood as an adult being does and is able to bring it to life, but the girl she was is incapable of this, “So much of childhood is spent in a manner of waiting” (8). This perspective offers us the nature of memory, i.e. characterized by the associative collection of data we integrate and reform on remembering. Reading *My Life* is a similar process. It is based on associations to be synthesized and integrated in the end, but also allows us to glimpse that a new reading will be different. We will accumulate more data and be forced to pick up the text again, consequently making use of the post-structuralist concepts of undecidability or unreadability that enter the most typical sphere of literary events.⁹

How this narrative shapes the memory, more than what shapes it, is one of the most obvious conclusions of Lyn Hejinian's writings. The devices and techniques utilized are akin to those of Gertrude Stein, i.e. use of repetition (in Hejinian's case, through expressions, epigraphs or sentences that reappear constantly in the different sections or chapters). Any material is perfectly usable and finding oneself *in media res* somehow corresponds to Stein's “beginning again and again.” In the end, those memories that make use of the first person pronouns (remember we are faced with an autobiography however unconventional) gradually build up the self, “To speak of the “self” and improve it from memory” (89), involves certain paradoxes “knowing what you do, only so much later—who heard what they said, found it being said” (83), and

poses the problem of time and its recovery, “Paull was telling me a plot which involved time travel, I asked, “How do they go into the future?” and he answered, “What do you mean? —they wait and the future comes to them —of course!” so the problem was going into the past” (85).

It is also true that in Hejinian the self is unconventional, Marjorie Perloff affirms that in *My Life* we meet “no “characters,” no “events,” and no “self,” at least in the usual sense of the word” (126). I however believe that no one doubts that this other kind self, unsubjected to linear or “authority” propositions, shows her metalinguistic capacity and affects how the text is perceived, “All my observations are made within a matrix of possibly infinite contingencies and contextualities. This sense of contingency is ultimately intrinsic to my experience of the self” (Hejinian, “Person” 167). I mean there is an emphasis on eliminating the central position of the self, though we can still recur to it, usually to find out it is full of different factors contributing to its plurality. The life presented by Hejinian in this book is not limited but rather multiplied by the complex forces that characterize perception of the self. Here we find that summers and winters, city and country life, family and neighbors, everyday events or the most reflexive thoughts together make up a narrative that becomes a personal literary journey. Hejinian requires reading it to be object and subject of knowledge, self-referential and projective, critical and communicative. The memory of the self is immersed in experience and Hejinian bets heavily on her poetic qualities, “In the metaphor, life is landscape, and living it is a journey” (83). In consequence, for her, writing an autobiography is not only making what has already been lived bloom again, but also to regain awareness of being part of an organic process *in media res*, without any interest in re-organizing everything chronologically. Or rather, to prove through writing (through language) how *My Life* is not constrained by histories or stories, but constructed of many worlds which are potential models for new word/sentence worlds. A brief conclusion: the form composition of this poetic neo-narrative, typified by its indeterminacies, belongs entirely to literature since it is at the edge of the ever suggestive sentence.

Notes

¹ It must be left clear that, for Chapman, narrator and narratee are optional. Wayne C. Booth’s formulation for the figures of implied author and reader is also of interest in the case of *My Life*. For Booth, the implied author is the true author of the work, separated from the real author, being able to hold different ideas or experiences and regulating composition and content of the work and perhaps more important fuses into the text itself. The same can be applied to the implied reader (Booth 75). On the other hand, Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan prefers to consider both as just another construct rather than as “a personified ‘consciousness’ or ‘second self’,” and even proposes their elimination for both narrator and narratee to achieve more cohesion within the narration (Rimmon-Kenan 86-89). I would hold that Hejinian’s life-narration becomes fictionalized and invites the reader’s intervention, I think the part played by the six elements considered by Chatman in his famous diagram potentiates this view even further. On this question, Wolfgang Iser, *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1974).

- ² From now on I put in brackets the pages corresponding to the edition of *My Life* I have used. On citing other works I follow the MLA norms.
- ³ I have found at least fifteen specific references dealing exclusively with Lyn Hejinian's *My Life*. Most of these emphasize its poetic or simply autobiographic nature. Some of these sources, which may be tangentially pertinent to my approach to this book as a poetic neo-narrative are: Hillary Clark, "The Mnemonics of Autobiography: Lyn Hejinian's *My Life*"; Craig Douglas Dworkin, "Penelope Reworking the Twill: Patchwork, Writing, and Lyn Hejinian's *My Life* "; Marnie Parsons, "What Then is a Window?" *Touch Monkeys : Non-sense Strategies for Reading Twentieth-Century Poetry*; Marjorie Perloff, "'The Sweetness Aftertaste of Artichokes': The Lobes of Autobiography: Lyn Hejinian's *My Life* "; and Juliana Spahr, "Resignifying Autobiography: Lyn Hejinian's *My Life*."
- ⁴ The device of foreshadowing assists in the total coherence of the work and is based in the atmosphere she creates around the characters and situations. Recently, Gary Saul Morson has proposed as analogy another term, "sideshadowing," that lacks the quality of determinist "backward causation" but abounds in possibilities of "what would have happened if...," "Sideshadowing restores the possibility of possibility. Its most fundamental lesson is: 'To understand a moment is to grasp not only what did happen but also what else might have happened'" (602).
- ⁵ I have taken these three paradigmatic examples in the evolution of the American novel following the proposal of Richard Godden (*Fictions of Capital : The American Novel from James to Mailer* 9-11), since the relationship between modes of production, social modes and literary history he establishes is rather significant. Although Godden stops with Norman Mailer following his model, I would risk suggesting Hejinian's socio-economic paradigm would correspond to a late capitalism not characterized by accumulation of goods (centralization of capital), their reproduction or the desire to consume them (these last two at the beginning and end of Fordism). I find it more connected with the interpretive analysis of codes that allow its ideological consequences to be appreciated in the text. (Fredric Jameson), power relationships (Michel Foucault) and constant "différance" of meaning (Jacques Derrida).
- ⁶ Nevertheless, unlike Hejinian, Bakhtin greatly emphasizes human agency and the concept of authority (even applied to the author) as clarified by Caryl Emerson, "Bakhtin is devoted to outsideness —and yet obsessed with individual consciousness, patterns of internalization, particularly human agency. So much of his writing on the novel and novelistic chronotope is organized around a gradual amplification of inner life, an increase in authorial access to that life, and the potential of the first-person singular to speak out confidently as singular" (Emerson 694).
- ⁷ Voice as a narratological category is a quite complex affair. The classic question of "Who speaks?" has received various responses by Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse : An Essay in Method*, Seymour Chatman, *Story and Discourse* and Didier Coste, *Narrative as Communication*. One of the most remarkable critical approaches is that of Bakhtin, for whom the voice is ontological and it is the reader who plays a crucial role in constructing meaning (*The Dialogic Imagination* 279-82). But in the case of *My Life*, despite the role of reader remaining important, we cannot forget it is essentially a poetic autobiography and therefore is solidly based in the subject. Thus, taking into account the importance of organicity I identify in the text, I concur with the concept of narrative voice having a multiple projection, taken from Richard Aczel, "It will, with Nietzsche,

figure “the subject of multiplicity, locating narrative voice as in fact a composite configuration of voices, whose identity lies in the rhetorical organization of their constituent elements” (Aczel 495).

- ⁸ Lyn Hejinian role within this group has been a determinant in the continuous poetic and editorial labor she has carried out. The interesting aspect of our topic —the challenge of literary genres along with the original use of certain literary devices like the fragment, the sentence, memory and self— is that nearly all this group of poets participate in a Barthesian singularity pointed to by David Jarraway, that of “subversive force” against standardization. “To one degree or another, all of the Language poets, it can certainly be said, conspire vigorously to test the enunciative limits of their texts” (320). This attitude has political and social importance.
- ⁹ The poststructuralist or deconstructionist sense of *My Life* in contrast with comparable texts at the level of experimentation with form and with biographical content like the *The Making of Americans* by Gertrude Stein, is that episodes and characters do not revert to the author. Stein plays on “her” perception and “her” psychology, “There are whole beings then, they are themselves inside them to me. They are then, each one, a whole inside me. Repeating of the whole of them always coming out of each one of them makes a history always of each one of them always to me.”(58). However, in our studied text, the reader accedes instantly to multiple meanings, “finalized hypotheses” are avoided, and all information requires continued reconstruction.

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