

PARTING WITH DESCRIPTION

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Le fou est la victime de la rébellion des mots.

—Edmond Jabès, “Je bâtis ma demeure: poèmes 1943-1957”

The insubordination of words . . . has shown that the theoretical critique of the world of power is inseparable from a practice that destroys it.

—Mustapha Khayati,

“Les Mots captifs: préface à un dictionnaire situationniste”

YOU MAY recall the story from Plato’s *Phaedrus*: Theuth offers the gift of writing to King Thamus, pitching it as a secret recipe for wisdom and memory. But the king doesn’t fall for it. Thamus predicts that

this discovery of yours will implant forgetfulness in the learners’ minds; they will cease to exercise memory because they will rely on that which is written, calling things to remembrance no longer from within themselves, but by means of external, written characters. What you have discovered is not an aid to memory, but to reminder. And it is no true wisdom that you offer your disciples, but only its semblance.¹⁶

And so it seems in Lyn Hejinian’s eponymous book.¹⁷ *Writing*, you may remember (or be reminded), records a similar concern with “semblance.” A representative selection of the work’s vocabulary would include “likeness,” “imitation,” “mimicry,” “reflecting,” “mirrors,” “description,” “identical,” “re-semblance,” and so on.¹⁸ Of course, this thematic recurrence might be expected, given the obvious relation between memory and mimesis. By necessity, mimesis implies memory; if one could not recall an original for comparison, one could never recognize something as mimetic or not in the first place. Memory, given its ability to reproduce the past in some measure, is itself conventionally cast as a sort of mimesis. *I know still that memory only mimics.*

Imagine for a moment, however, what it would mean to experience a memory that is nonmimetic, by which I mean something that is not simply inaccurate, and that can still be recognized as a memory as such. Or, in other words, consider what would constitute a representation that is not a (re)presentation. Such a condition, I want to propose, would be writing.

Recall, for a specific example, the case of Sergei Pankeiev, the “Wolf-man,” as presented by Freud and elaborated by Abraham and Torok. According to the psychologists’ explications, Pankeiev’s symptomatic dream-work constructs a memory, but not one that is mimetic: a *route permitting one to/forget with total recall*. Instead of following a referential logic, such memories follow a logic of the signifier. Indeed, as Freud and his successors have explicitly argued (Freud 1959, Lacan 1975, Abraham and Torok 1976, Derrida 1977), that sort of unconscious structuring is itself essentially a form of writing. “Simulation without reference dissolves the old connection between madness and illness in order to establish an entirely different connection: between madness and writing” (Kittler 1990, 308): *a state of writing called obsession*. Moreover, the psychopathology of writing, as we shall see, is all to the point in *Writing Is an Aid to Memory*. As Mac Wellman observes with regard to Hejinian’s book: “it may go unnoticed that at the core of all her easy-going rumination lies the threat of madness, despair, suicide, and other dissolutions of being” (LHP 7:20:6).¹⁹ Indeed, in a notebook entry dated October 1, 1975, Hejinian herself writes: “Eliz[abeth Sterling] asked me why I thought I wrote—what drove me to it. I laughed and said it was probably neurosis” (LHP 45:5). And again, in a letter to Barbara Baracks (13 May 1976): “As for writing—I feel obsessed and impassioned by it, and think it is probably a neurosis, if not a psychosis” (LHP 2:4).

Such statements, however, should not be read too quickly, or taken at face value; *the reference is a distraction*, and it would be a mistake to read *Writing* as some kind of direct revelation about its author’s psychology (and even if poetry did provide that kind of evidence, it would be of little but prurient interest). In the 1970s, the avant-garde in which Hejinian played such a central role was explicitly positioning itself against the increasingly canonical poetics of those “confessional” writers who had come to prominence in the previous decade. In her 1976 collection *A Thought Is the Bride of What Thinking*, Hejinian critiques that confessionalist ethos: “Artists often court madness, find insanity romantic, and point out their own eccentricities to prove their special validity.” In the contemporaneous piece “A Mask of Hours,” she cautions:

It is possible to make secrecy an obsession, but candor can be an obsession, too. Someone could be obsessed by both; I want you to understand me completely but I don’t want to reveal anything about myself lest you misunderstand. (LHP 8:13)

The challenge, then, is to achieve *candor without confession* in a writing that is *personal and inclusive, but not necessarily self-revelatory*. To read *Writing* as a revelatory, diagnostic statement about its author, whether secret or candid, would indeed be to misunderstand, and to miss the force of

its psychopathology. *Writing* is certainly symptomatic, and it *has achieved the ability to be pathological*, but rather than revealing something about the writer, it exhibits the psychotic condition of language itself, and the collateral states of extremity into which language casts its readers. *Writing*, in short, reveals *le délire de lire*.

But we should not forget about memory too quickly. Because *between circumspect and retrospect there is only the time of an idea*, and the idea of language's madness is inextricably bound with the circumlocutions of its memory. Indeed, *Writing* suggests two models of a truly textual memory, and it offers us a glimpse of what language would remember if language could reflect on itself. One model of textual memory, which we might schematize as the synchronic, would be etymology. Appropriately, *Writing Is an Aid to Memory* is full of etymological play. For instance, after the thirty-sixth section of the book opens by evoking the theme of memory with the lines "again in time I come to think maybe/nostalgia," the next two lines are linked through a word's linguistic memory: "many an error of mercy of the moment/the long wanderings of logic over the thinker." To think, to follow the logic of linguistic history, recognizes that *to err is to wander*, moving from "error" to *errare*, which does indeed mean "to wander" in Latin. The terminus for so many etymological investigations, Latin is explicitly mentioned at several points in *Writing*, and it serves as one of the motifs in Hejinian's subsequent book *My Life*. Accordingly, for just one further example from many such etymological structures in *Writing*, consider the line "points in Latin bridge a gap," in which "points" seems to bridge "Latin" and "bridge" by pointing to the latter's location in the former: *pons*, *pontem* being the Latin word for "bridge."

Abridgement, in fact, is central to *Writing*, in which abbreviation provides another, diachronic model of textual memory. Like memory and mimesis, textual fragmentation is another of the motifs that runs through the book. Moreover, the text does not simply mention words such as "fragment" and "disintegrates," but it also enacts those fragmentations and disintegrations as well. One of the most immediately striking characteristics of *Writing* is its lexicon of nonce words: "viction," "straction," "pensated," "zontal," "vived," "ternal," "trious," "mendous," "prising," "tinuos," "mena," "glish," and so on, to mention only a dozen. Such words have obviously been formed by eliminating the first part of standard, familiar word: a *short of lengthening word with just one side of it . . . like an excerpt* remaining. This procedure *causes a fragmentation of information—I thoroughly get mere bits*, as Hejinian says elsewhere. *The pieces are, further, things themselves, to be made of as one will*. Through those fragmented bits, in which *a mode of obscurity is chopped, ellipsis makes its promise leaving readers to get out of them what they can*. A writerly

reading, in fact, may be the original source of this elliptical vocabulary, which could have been generated from a source text in which Hejinian scanned down the left-hand edge of a page of justified and hyphenated prose, to leave *one step of reading and another/text in patches*, thus *fixing of memory of erasing at any page and isolating more prominence than previousness*—which would mean that *the text is anterior to the composition, though the composition be interior to the text*.

Whatever the specific means of composition, such *ruins are memorable*, and with the ruin of words themselves, the textual, graphic memory of *Writing* demonstrates that *the remainder may be a reminder*. *Memories move and with them the great planes of disintegration*. With Hejinian's affinity for the separate fragment taken under scrutiny, for fragments, of words, or phrases, or phrases and words AS fragments, the partial word in *Writing* might be read as a *shard signifying isolation*. These *morphemes of evidence*, however, implicate other words as well; the remainders of partial words in *Writing* remind the reader of all those other words that, although appearing integral, might also be fragments as well, and they "make us distrust the completeness of the words we do see as complete" (Quartermain 1992, 25). In language as a material medium one finds *not fragments but metonymy*, so that even if, from a certain perspective, *a fragment is not a fraction but a whole piece*, whole pieces can often indicate larger units into which they might be integrated. So in *Writing Is an Aid to Memory*, for example, "percussion" is followed just two lines later by "repercussion." This conjunction is not in itself especially significant, but the cumulative effect, in *Writing*, is radically destabilizing, because *the first hint ever invented is always/thicker/when you think about it for a short/time*. *A syllable is a suggestion/is the beginning of inclusion*, and once the suggestion has been explicitly made, suggesting a general protocol for reading, other less salient instances force readers to ask themselves whether they are *recognizing patterns or pruning the truth*. In the line "grammar a copy cate deal little volume," for instance, is the obviously punning "cate" merely an archaic spelling of "cat," as the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) records, or perhaps a poetically obsolete term for a gourmet delicacy, or is it a "little volume" of the larger word "duplicate," which it has partially copied? Similarly, in the line "leaved vert by memories," "vert," as the OED authorizes, could denote either "green" or "turned," both of which apply to leaves; but it might also be what is left by the memory of words such as "convert," "revert," "overt," "divert," and so on. *The tree of language sheds too much foliage*. Ultimately, moreover, this indeterminacy extends to even more familiar words. *A word is an expectation*. A "limb" for instance, might be dismembered from the "climb" that it remembers, and when *disintegration is the grain of/thought* in this way,

readers can no longer be certain whether they are encountering the word “sands” or a particle of “thousands,” “nine” or the trace of the word “feminine,” “pond” or “respond”—“shed,” “rough,” “sequence,” “fuse,” “rant,” “poses,” “ashes,” “gets.” Consider almost any line in this light and you begin to suspect that all sorts of otherwise innocuous and ostensibly complete words are pointing toward other absent, but implicitly antecedent, words. *For me*, the reader comes to feel, *they must exist, the contents of that absent reality, the objects and occasions which now I reconsider*, and so, with this glimpse into the possibility of linguistic proliferation, *a slowly gathering psychology augments the fun of writing*.

Writing induces that slowly gathering sense in other ways as well, and in terms of affect the equivalent experience of realizing how far-reaching and systemic such disintegrations might be is the realization of how coherently connected the fragmented, discontinuous, and unrelated words in this highly disjunctive text actually are. So, for instance, one of the phrasal structures that recurs throughout *Writing Is an Aid to Memory* transforms the idiomatic expression “between wind and water” to generate the phrases “between thought and water,” “between roof and bird,” “between noon and ceiling,” “between wit and water,” and so on. The *OED* records three forms of the conventional saying: “a hit between wind and water,” “a shot between wind and water,” and “a nick between wind and water.” Again, the source of Hejinian’s variations may not be particularly momentous; the striking revelation of the dictionary page is that all three of those words—“shot,” “nick,” and “hit”—prominently recur and echo through the book as key words in entirely different contexts.

“Shot,” in fact, recalls the extraordinary and astonishingly beautiful first line of *Writing*: “apple is shot nod.” Even considering only the denotations of the three nouns, the line is rich with semantic potential: perhaps describing the sway of branches whose shadows dapple the light suffused fruit, or perhaps indicating an apple ruined by excessive moisture and about to fall. Additionally, the line is suggestively allusive, evoking the fatal nod of William Tell’s shot to the apple on his son’s head, as well as the fateful nods of Newton or Adam, with whom Hejinian associates the referential ability of language to name: apple, *appel*. Or as a later line would condense the pun: “the names of apple.”²⁰ These explications certainly do not exhaust even the most plausible readings of this line (a “nod shot” is a term of art in videography, for instance), but the most likely reference may once again be the language of the text itself. If readers still had the dictionary at hand and chanced to look up “shot,” the first thing they would find, even before reaching the definition, is that the word is listed as a past participle. Or, in the convention of the dictionary’s abbreviations: “pa pple.”

Moreover, if “shot nod” suggests “not shod”—the very sort of stumbling shuffle of (metrical) feet that being unshod might cause—then the constellation of terms already assembled attracts other words that recur through the text, such as “feet,” “foot,” “shoe,” and “ped.” In fact, if readers think to look up “ped” and do not just discount it as the chopped-off ending of some truncated word such as “chopped,” they discover that it also means a “wicker basket used on horses,” which would itself recall all of the references in the book to “wicker,” which suggests “whicker,” which means, like “nicker,” “to neigh or whinny”—a connotation that should in turn remind readers of all the book’s references to horses, which may or may not be shod (*OED*).²¹ This conjunction, moreover, is further bound when the recurrence of the words “ankle” and “lock” in this context suggests the horse’s fetlock, not to mention the fact that both locks and horses with bad ankles are things that are shot. Farriery aside, a “shot” is also “a dose given to a horse in order to create a temporary appearance of sound-windedness” (a shot between wind), as well as “the powder hole drilled by a bit,” which, even if *the word pretends to get a fair distance on unshod horses*, nonetheless reins the equine associations back into the semantic nexus (*OED*).

A nod, as it happens, may be as good as a wink to a blind horse, but readers should keep their eyes open, because the network of associations in *Writing* tightens even as it expands. So, for instance, “bit” and “nick” are both part of the constellation of equine terms featured in the work. Similarly, with an evocation of the references to “type” in *Writing*, both words are typographic terms that Hejinian might well have come to know through her letterpress production of the exactly contemporaneous Tumbra chapbook series. Moreover, both words also come together through the fact that a bit is “the exact point or nick of time,” and that a nicker is also part of a drill bit; additionally, something bit is nicked, like a coin, which in the jazz slang used elsewhere in *Writing* might be “scratch,” and in fact, a bit is also a small amount of currency, such as a nickel²²—all of which, should this start to seem farfetched, comes together in the last few pages of the book with the corroborating phrases “dime nick,” “dime scratch,” and “bit time.” If we “compare beats of the dime” to the other iterations of this motif, these phrases might also suggest the “beatnick” phonically lurking behind “bit” and “nick.” *The time comes when each individual poem reveals not only its own internal connections but also spreads them out externally, anticipating the integrity each poem requires in order to explain obscure points, arbitrary elements, etc.*

I could continue to elaborate examples of the way in which dispersed and ostensibly arbitrary elements are in fact quite tightly bound together in the text of *Writing*, as well how the various constellations of associated

terms ultimately begin to link up to one another in a comprehensive concatenation. Instead, however, I want to underscore the fact that the apparently random, discontinuous, and unmotivated elements in the pages of *Writing* come suddenly and firmly together in another context, as they do, for instance, under a dictionary heading. I should note, for those who have not personally struggled with the demands of the book's confounding and at times seemingly impenetrable language, that the shock of such comprehensive meaning in *Writing* cannot be overestimated²³—nor, moreover, can the affective experience of that realization of sudden coherence and conjunction within the apparently chaotic and irreconcilably disjunctive field of linguistic events.

Because this textual world of *Writing* is the world of the paranoid.

In an undated letter to Ron Silliman, Hejinian relates: "I was thinking about what you said, that 'experimentalism' was too often a shelter for scoundrels and paranoids" (LHP 7:6). And in the poem "Crooner," which she sent to Silliman for possible inclusion in the "Language Poetries" issue of *Ironwood*, Hejinian seems to offer a considered reply: "Thus make use of paranoia—yes, even negatively speaking" (RSP 9:14).²⁴ In making use of paranoia myself, I should be clear, from the outset, that I am using the word in a technical, though not quite clinical sense. That is, I do not take "paranoia" in its colloquial sense, as simply a profound suspicion and unfounded sense of persecution (although these emotions may very well come into play when reading a work such as *Writing Is an Aid to Memory*).²⁵ By "paranoia," I want to indicate a state in which several specific conditions obtain. First, paranoia implies the systemization of those suspicions into a totalizing state of affairs in which everything is connected. "Paranoia," as Hejinian's colleague Barrett Watten puts it, "can be defined as a delirium of interpretation bearing a systematic structure" (1985, 42). Or, in short: *from such hidden to be given reason/no passions from mad men be excessive*. Indeed, however mad, paranoia should certainly not be thought of as the dissolution of logic, but rather as the rigorous and unflinching pursuit of alternative logics to the point that *logic is more persuasive than truth*.

Naomi Schor interprets Freud's diagnosis of paranoia in terms of the pathology that Benvéniste called, in another context, "l'interprétance," and she explains: "Il s'ensuit que le délire d'interprétation est une forme de folie textuelle, plutôt qu'une classe nosographique" [It follows that the delirium of interpretation is a form of textual madness, rather than a nosographic case] (1978, 243). "Psychosis," as Gilles Deleuze argues, "is inseparable from a linguistic procedure" (1997, 19), and we might in fact "consider paranoia less as a mental aberration than as a specific 'regime of signs,' that is, as a basic type of organization of signs in which the semiotic or signifying potential is dominant" (Johnston 1991, 47). Or, in short: *an allusive*

psycholinguism. To be even more specific, paranoia, in linguistic terms, would be defined by the equation—or the integration—of different semiotic systems, so that it concatenates signifiers under the regime of a single system of meaning. A *description of hazard theory*, paranoia thus obviates chance.²⁶ In a nonparanoid system, the intersection of different semiotic codes can lead to a coincidence, which may be more or less striking; one might, for example, pass a car with a license plate number that happens to be that day's date. When faced with *good but random coincidences*, we insist that life is full of happy chance, but excessively interpreting such combinations of events, and the sort of mysticism on which such interpretations are based, is what gives coincidence its bad name. In the perceptual field of paranoia, on the other hand, when planes of information intersect, coincide, all signifiers are read as signifying within the same code: there is no longer the licensing code and the separate calendric code, there is only The Code. *The synchronous keeps its reversible logic, and in this it resembles psychology, or the logic of a person, a nervous system that sort of confuses psychology*. Paranoid texts are "chronic," in both the temporal and pathological senses of the word, and *certain themes are incurable*.

The exemplary text of paranoia, then, would be the dictionary. "A book," as Hejinian has written, "is a memory" (Watten 1985, 147), and in the dictionary, both the synchronic and diachronic memory of language itself are inextricably intertwined with its paranoid project. This is particularly true of the *Oxford English Dictionary*, a book that Hejinian specifically mentions in her poetry (*The Cell*, 208), and that distinguishes itself on the accuracy and completeness of its memory of the written record. The two key contributors to the OED, as it happens, were both paranoids; although *this suits my suspicions*, it may be only a coincidence (Winchester 1998, 166–67 *et passim*). The work, in any case, was begun as an explicit attempt to bring the entirety of the English language—from the most common syncategorematic to the most doubtful and obscure *hapax legomenon*—within a closed system of concatenated definitions, so that all of the words in a definition can be found as headwords in the same dictionary. Moreover, within this web of totalizing connections, all of those headwords are themselves structured by *the arbitrary real and likewise* rigidly organizing alphabet.

I suppose a dictionary with a rhythmic base/an impulse of remembering/could show what I could, as Hejinian writes, and in fact *Writing Is an Aid to Memory* exhibits a similar obsession with the *solid and mighty alphabet, chronic in an exact place* and symptomatically displayed in the text's prosody, in which lines are indented according to the first letter of the first word in the line. In this equation *numerical the alphabet*, that is, lines such as "apple is shot nod," which begin with an "a," establish the left-

hand margin; lines beginning with a “b” are indented one space to the right of that margin, those with a “c” two spaces, and so on through all *the sentences of the alphabet*. *We are not forgetting the patience of the mad, their love of detail*.

That graphemic detail is further elaborated in *Writing* by a series of rhizomatic networks traced across the surface of the text by a *fugue elude* of paragogic chains. *Activity takes place—across the language plane itself. . . . configurations and relationships occur in sets rather than sequence*. Words appear to transform themselves letter by letter, so that “shot”—whatever its thematic relation to a number of the poem’s motif words: horses, locks, money, chance, chords, threads, bars, bits, and so on—alters into both “short” and “spot,” a word that in turn leads to “lot” and then “dot,” whence “dotes,” and then on to other, more elaborate permutations. Such *infinite change flies in many logical ways*, and these lines of the signifier’s flight proliferate with a geometric increase. Even when *random in character/a branch involves repetition* and leads to so much *detour in such detail* that if “bit” attracts both “pit” and “hit,” those words in turn veer towards “pitch” and “hint” respectively, as well as “sit” and “fit” and “mit” and so on in a seemingly infinite *trace/linked to a fence of forgetting*, as by *its rate the echo dissolves until the rate of forgetting is greatest* in a *proportion of infinite change and everything memorable*, if not remembered past *the duration of thinking*. Even as the reader, *carried giddy by a digression*, is unable to recall all of the links in these expansive chains, their anaphoric references constitute another variation of textual memory. *Each memory isn’t a thought that reiterates*, because in these networks of repetition with slight change *memories are comparisons, even the short ones*. *The nex is juxtaposed, themes because remembered. Mem nd rea. Remembered always with as ever*.

Moreover, by ordering language according to the logic of the signifier, this *pattern of bits* in *Writing* once again structures connections between otherwise unrelated words, and it serves as a litmus test for the reader by gauging (or languaging) the degree of paranoia with which they engage a text. The fact of such coincidences in *Writing* is incontrovertible, even if they are only *an ordinary coincidence* of ‘*gratuitous connections*,’ or ‘*contiguous chance*.’ *The connections are there, of course, to be made or made of, and their meaning is in the sufficiency of their being, at all*. With the *possibility not obvious but nevertheless/of significance*, no meaning is impossible because it is implausible, and when faced with what Carla Harryman calls “cohesions of detail” (LHP 4:11), *miracles merge/in a rational country, fighting back/with parallels*. *Reality follows. Reason looks for two, then arranges it from there*, and the reasonable response when *coincidence touches/a random* connection throughout a text in which

such cohesions *chance to return* is to see the *pattern more likely* to be consciously constructed than mere chance. Without being truly paranoid, the reasonable reader might suspect two sources of such conscious construction. *The usual (suspect in itself) blink of suspicion*.

On the one hand, given that *an association really consists of an activity* and that *people like the lock of a pattern*, readers might be tempted to regard the discovery of textual coincidence as no more than their own impositions. As Hejinian herself writes in “Chronic Texts,” the reader might think: “I was reading a difficult text./What is ‘to understand’ except ‘to make relevant’ or ‘to find relevancy in’” (LHP 8:4). With *combination a reward for difficulty*, the effort to make disparate words relevant might be seen as a hermeneutics in which the words’ “*slipping*” or *slippage thinks random patterns through/wishes* for meaning imposed by readers in *despair of failure for knowledge* and so desperate to make connections within an unconventional and unfamiliar text that *craving for knowledge might mean craving for noise/One syllable, ‘sounds like . . .’/And combine awkwardly. Much intention is retrospective*, and trumping any *trick of coincidence*, readers might *make meaning retrospectively out of the accidental and gratuitous*.²⁷ Obsession. Abscession. So many graces of fate. So many fates of grace. *Such displacements alter illusions, which is all-to-the-good*.

On the other hand, a reasonable reader might also come to suspect the conscious, strategic machinations of the poet. In fact, Hejinian’s poetics in the late 1970s would corroborate such speculation. Like many of her colleagues, she was interested in *putting things together in such a way as to enable them to coincide* and thus *make a way of seeing connections see writing*. In a consideration of the avant-garde moment out of which *Writing Is an Aid to Memory* emerged, Hejinian muses: “It seems that what presses as a question upon writing now (when it comes to talk of structures, for example, or systems) is how to arrange words (or word groups) rather than how to choose them” (“Smatter”). Moreover, in her contemporaneous essay “If Written Is Writing,” Hejinian describes her compositional techniques (“The Rejection of Closure,” 30):

One locates in the interior texture of such language. . . . through improvisatory techniques building on the suggestions made by language itself—on patterns of language which are ideas and corresponding behavior or despite relevant quirks; this becomes an addictive motion—but not incorrect, despite such distortion, concentration, condensation, deconstruction, and such as association by, for example, pun and etymology provide; an allusive psycholinguism. (“The Rejection of Closure,” 30)

Even the most persistent and scholarly reader, unfortunately, will find that evidence of any specific compositional technique in *Writing* is ultimately

elusive. The writing of *Memory* has been somehow forgotten, and the compositional memory of the book is completely amnesiac.²⁸ The Hejinian papers archived at the University of California at San Diego, ostensibly a complete and comprehensive collection of all extant material, contains a single uncorrected typescript, but no drafts or proofs (LHP 8:15). Indeed, the correspondence files in the archive contain no communication with The Figures concerning the publication of the book. Moreover, the collection of composition notebooks that Hejinian kept reveals a substantial aporia: the record stops in late 1975, precisely that time during which *Writing Is an Aid to Memory* was presumably being composed, and the notebooks do not resume again until 1978, just after the book's publication. Of course to suspect that these bibliographic details are anything more than mere happenstance would be quite (in the colloquial sense) paranoid.

Moreover, such evidence—even if it were proof to the contrary—would not in the least alter the interpretive resources of a genuine paranoid. Indeed, as the passage from “If Written Is Writing” indicates, suspicious readers should be looking not so much to their own ingenuity or to the schemes of the poet, as to the interior texture of language itself. “On occasion,” Hejinian admits, “I’ve transferred my restlessness, the sense of necessity, to the vehicle itself” (*My Life*, 76), and indeed, *language*, as she has announced throughout her career, *is restless. Even words in storage, in the dictionary, as we have seen, seem frenetic with activity, as each individual entry attracts to itself other words as definition, example, and amplification.* Moreover, to see the cohesions of details within *words as attractive, magnetic to meaning*, is to realize that *language itself is never at a state of rest and is productive of activity* because the articulations of the signifier establish a *quantity through a language/substitute inventing music of a series/changes very little understood/binding men for driving through a new internal logic.*²⁹ *Poems have more than one word. Or contain one word of more than one letter. Hence connection, relationship, space between.* For the most obvious example of this internal logic, the anagrammatic play in *Writing*, like the fragmentation of words, invites a ceaseless reorganization of atomic linguistic material.³⁰ These lives of the letter remind us that however *fruitful the disposal of words* strategically arranged by an author, *each word in itself is an arrangement* as well.³¹ *As a writer, but especially as a poet, one looks . . . to discover the natural order in language, in words as they represent, but particularly as they don’t.* Or, as Benjamin Lee Whorf put it, in a passage Hejinian quotes to Susan Howe in a letter dated 21 August 1976: “At first the language seemed merely to be irregular. Later I found it to be quite regular in terms of its own patterns” (LHP 4:18).³²

Those patterns, moreover, are never arrived at by chance: at the level of its means, the level of the letter, all linguistic coincidences are equally motivated. The materiality of inscription casts chance arrangements aside, with *the apologies/on paradox and dice./The word should be twitching with destiny, or with necessity. Their random procedures make monuments to fate.* With their *rule of monuments*, words are *stricken in the very fit and also the poem*, where a “fit” is not only a technical term for a part of a poem, but also both a pathologically symptomatic episode as well as a perfect congruence or coincidence. *They are both locks and/lapses.* That coincidence of words sparks across the page, leaving letters twitching with *fits that finally riddle an infinite nature* of possible combinations because *the substantial fit indicates a finish/or the possibility of a finish. Two dangers keep threatening the world: order and disorder, and with those amphilogic fits the poet plays with order, makes order of disorder, and disorder of order, intent upon confusing all the issues.* If the disorders of language continually threaten the authority of its communicative potential, to the point that the *sign can’t be justified in the slaughter* of semantics committed by language’s disarticulations, those same dismemberments simultaneously reveal an *order inscribed* with an alternative logic. That inscribed order, moreover, reveals the paranoid structure of language itself: a comprehensive system of articulations that are endlessly concatenated, recombinant, and proliferating in a dizzying and interminable proliferation of coincidences arrayed against us inhumanly—generating meanings that are radically discontinuous with our desires and intentions. If we can never hope to control the excessive restlessness of language, we can sometimes recognize its motions, but knowledge, for the paranoid, is never a salvation; there is an *unbearable anticipation of interruptions/whose cacophony is familiar* and rendered incoherent by its own inevitability; *it would be appropriate to call this not intuition but pre-knowing, or paranoia.*

Writing itself (I have, of course, all along written “Writing” when I meant simply “writing,” and vice versa) demands a response adequate to its own structure: unreasonable and irrational, but strictly logical—an *approach toward a hard-edged, rigorous, analytical, merciless* reading that *sounds the psychological density of language.* This is no more true of a book such as *Writing Is an Aid to Memory* than it is of the most conventional poem. *The paranoia of writing* requires paranoid readers, comfortable with a *restlessness made inevitable by language* and willing to *bid chaos welcome.*³³ *In the mass of my hallucinations, each sentence/replaces an hallucination* and leaves me *like a paranoid spellbound.* Faced with the self-organizing, hallucinatory patterns of that chaos we *can find no explanation if imagination includes/so much*, and being *incapable/of understanding/very definitely any of the language* we encounter, we must fight

the impulses by which *our unease grows before the newly restless* realization of the *grace of locks* linked in *the reflecting worry nervous surface* of language's sheer, unceasing productivity. *Reason grows dissatisfied with formal reflection*, and the hope and terror of linguistic paranoia is not so much that we *find the coincidence* of fit that gives *the taste of a larger pattern* and the *sensation of unreasonable discourse through elaborated space*, but that we realize that *the inconsequences it touches are full/con-victions* established without any controlling human agency. *When what happens is not intentional, one can't ascribe meaning to it, and unless what happens is necessary, one can't expect it to occur again.* The distinction of language is to generate meanings that are simultaneously nonintentional, absolutely necessary, and (in both senses of the word) significant. It is the gift of writing. And like all true gifts, it cannot be refused. Or forgotten. So that the question, of course, as you read, is never whether you are being too paranoid, but whether you are ever being paranoid enough.

APPENDIX

Sources for Integrated Quotations

- "route permitting . . ." *The Cell*, 69.
- "a state . . ." *Oxota*, 251.
- "the reference . . ." *My Life*, 57.
- "candor without . . ." "Two Stein Talks," 137.
- "personal and . . ." "If Written Is Writing," 30.
- "has achieved . . ." *The Cold of Poetry*, 179.
- "to err . . ." *A Thought Is the Bride of What Thinking*, n.p.
- "causes a . . ." Letter to Barrett Watten, published in Watten (1985, 146-47).
- "The pieces are . . ." LHP 8:12.
- "the text is . . ." "If Written Is Writing," 29.
- "the remainder . . ." *My Life*, 77.
- "Memories move . . ." *Oxota*, 286.
- "affinity for . . ." *My Life*, 52.
- "fragments, of words . . ." LHP 45:4.
- "a shard signifying . . ." *My Life*, 52.
- "morphemes of . . ." *My Life*, 10.
- "not fragments . . ." *My Life*, 60.
- "a fragment . . ." *My Life*, 82.

- "The tree of . . ." *Oxota*, 90.
- "A word is . . ." *My Life*, 82.
- "disintegration is . . ." *The Cell*, 85.
- "For me . . ." *My Life*, 13.
- "a slowly gathering . . ." *The Cell*, 78.
- "The time comes . . ." *Oxota*, 21.
- "logic is more . . ." LHP 8:13.
- "allusive psycholinguism" "If Written Is Writing," 30.
- "A description . . ." *The Cell*, 179.
- "good but . . ." *The Cell*, 212.
- "we insist . . ." *My Life*, 74.
- "interpreting such . . ." *My Life*, 50.
- "In the perceptual . . ." *The Cell*, 121.
- "planes of information . . ." *My Life*, 90.
- "The synchronous . . ." *My Life*, 44.
- "certain themes . . ." *A Thought Is the Bride of What Thinking*, n.p.
- "We are not . . ." *My Life*, 56.
- "Activity takes place . . ." "Two Stein Talks," 137.
- "infinite change . . ." LHP 8:1.
- "proportion of . . ." LHP 8:1.
- "Each memory . . ." *The Cell*, 150.
- "The nex . . ." LHP 8:1.
- "gratuitous connections . . ." LHP 8:12.
- "meaning is . . ." LHP 8:1.
- "miracles merge . . ." *The Cold of Poetry*, 22.
- "Reason looks . . ." *My Life*, 59.
- "The usual . . ." *Oxota*, 63.
- "people like . . ." *The Cold of Poetry*, 23.
- "slippage thinks . . ." LHP 42:8.
- "craving for . . ." *The Cold of Poetry*, 145.
- "trick of . . ." LHP 8:4.
- "Such displacements . . ." *My Life*, 52.
- "putting things . . ." "Smatter," n.p.
- "language . . ." *My Life*, 17.
- "Even words . . ." "The Rejection of Closure," 280.
- "words as . . ." "The Rejection of Closure," 279-80.
- "Poems have . . ." LHP 45:7:274.
- "each word . . ." LHP 45:7.
- "As a writer . . ." "Smatter," n.p.
- "the apologies . . ." *The Cold of Poetry*, 20.
- "Their random . . ." *My Life*, 10.
- "rule of monuments" *Oxota*, 238.

- "The are both . . ." *The Cell*, 150.
 "two dangers . . ." "The Rejection of Closure," 278.
 "the poet . . ." *A Thought Is the Bride of What Thinking*, n.p.
 "order inscribed" *A Thought Is the Bride of What Thinking*, n.p.
 "unbearable anticipation . . ." *The Cold of Poetry*, 97.
 "it would be . . ." *My Life*, 41.
 "an approach . . ." "Two Stein Talks," 133.
 "The paranoia . . ." *Oxota*, 103.
 "bid chaos . . ." *My Life*, 20.
 "In the mass . . ." *The Cold of Poetry*, 150.
 "each sentence . . ." *The Cold of Poetry*, 15.
 "like a . . ." *The Cold of Poetry*, 18.
 "our unease . . ." *The Cold of Poetry*, 32.
 "grace of locks" *My Life*, 12-13.
 "When what . . ." *My Life*, 17.
 "That is . . ." LHP 45.
 "that language is . . ." "Two Stein Talks," 129.
 "words without . . ." LHP 8:13.
 "the degree . . ." LHP 7:6.
 "perhaps Sound . . ." LHP 45.
 "words, for example . . ." "Smatter," n.p.
 "they are . . ." LHP 8:13.
 "Every fact . . ." *Oxota*, 211.
 "as chance . . ." *A Thought Is the Bride of What Thinking*, n.p.
 "reflections from . . ." *The Cell*, 138.
 "(I want . . ." *The Cell*, 74.

NOTES

1. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 198.
2. *Ibid.*, 199.
3. Charles Altieri, *Enlarging the Temple* (Lewisburg, Pa.: Bucknell University Press, 1979), 33.
4. Martin Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell (New York: HarperCollins, 1993), 425.
5. *Ibid.*, 420.
6. Arendt, *Human Condition*, 302.
7. *Ibid.*, 9.
8. *Ibid.*, 177.
9. *Ibid.*, 246.
10. *Ibid.*, 9.

11. Quoted in Viktor Erlich, *Russian Formalism* (The Hague: Mouton Publishers, 1955), 76.

12. Viktor Shklovsky, "Resurrection of the Word," in *Russian Formalism: A Collection of Articles and Texts in Translation*, tr. Richard Sherwood, eds. Stephen Bann and John E. Bowlt (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1973), 46.

13. Leo Tolstoy, in his diary on March 1, 1897, quoted by Viktor Shklovsky in "Art as Technique," in Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis, trans. and eds., *Russian Formalist Criticism* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965), 12.

14. Arendt, *Human Condition*, 193.

15. Shklovsky, "Resurrection of the Word," 46.

16. I have adapted this written memory of Socrates' reminiscence from the following translations: R. Hackforth, *Plato: Collected Dialogues*, ed. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961), 520; Lane Cooper, *Plato* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1938), 65; and Irwin Edman, *The Works of Plato* (New York: Random House Modern Library, 1928), 323.

17. *Writing Is an Aid to Memory* was republished in 1996, photostet from the original unpaginated pages, by Sun & Moon (Los Angeles) as part of the its Classics series. As Hejinian wrote in "Tables," in 1975: "Things are called 'classic' because they have made the transition from unrecognizable to recognizable." Ron Silliman Papers, 1965-1988, MSS 0075, Mandeville Special Collections Library, University of California at San Diego, Folder 9, Box 14. All subsequent quotations from this collection will be sourced with "RSP" followed by folder and box numbers.

18. Quotations from Hejinian's *Writing Is an Aid to Memory* incorporated into my text will appear in bold-italics. Quotations from her other works incorporated into my text will appear in italics and are sourced in the appendix.

19. Quotations from the Lyn Hejinian Papers, MSS 0074, Mandeville Special Collections Library, University of California at San Diego, will be sourced with "LHP" followed by box, folder, and (if applicable) paper numbers.

20. The association of apples with Adam's acts of naming is suggested by a passage from Hejinian's notebook: "Sound without meaning is simply words at their source, names before applied, the preverbal Adam. . . . This, of course, is an interesting theory, but something else in the application—that is, it would (or will) be extremely difficult to apply + it may not be so interesting once it is" (LHP 45). Note how many words in this passage begin "app."

Hejinian's own works, with their frequent references to apples, provide further intertexts from which glosses might be gleaned. The following are two instances, from the less readily available sources: in the 1974 "Short Arbiter" (and with a further echo of "shot" as well), one finds the line "I rifle the apple tree" (LHP 42:7); and from "A mask of Hours" is the passage "She imitates the generous woman: Here, sweetie, eat *my* apple! Then women are always sorry and they wish they could say, Hey, eat your own fucking apple! That one's mine!" (LHP 8:13).

21. Should "whicker" seem too esoteric a reference, note that Hejinian uses the word in *Redo*: "My merchant horse whickers" (*The Cold of Poetry*, 23); similarly, "fetlock" appears in the manuscript material collected in Hejinian's archive. There may be no American poet more equestrian than Hejinian, save of course Louis

Zukofsky, who in fact underwrites much of *Memory*, even making his paragrammatic appearance in the book's eighth section: "zoo . . . coffee . . . sky."

22. In *My Life*, this monetary sense of "bit" is both explicitly employed and also linked to horses: "The man with the pinto pony had come through the neighborhood selling rides for a quarter, or as he said, 'two bits,' and it was that 'two bits' even more than the pony that led the children to believe he was a real cowboy and therefore heroic" (20). Neigh-borhood indeed. The equestrian connotation of the word is one that Hejinian used contemporaneously with the composition of *Writing Is an Aid to Memory*; in a letter to her mother dated June 17, 1976, she writes: "I've been riding every day in short bits to keep the horse exercised" (LHP 1:8).

23. *Writing Is an Aid to Memory* is a notoriously restive work. As Mac Wellman argues, "this writing scorns explanations, development, and the obviously insightful conclusion as mere hesitation and quibbling" (LHP 7:20:3). Indeed, even those readers one would imagine best suited to a work such as *Writing* seem to have found it unusually difficult. As the correspondence in Hejinian's archive indicates, her contemporaries in the avant-garde writing community "didn't get it," found it "something to contend with," and admitted that they did "not know quite how to read it." In contrast, a letter dated January 29, 1983, records a less perplexed audience: "Dear Lyn, Thought you might enjoy this unexpected acclaim. My creative writing class at the SF County Jail got to talking about syntax, breaking up the line, making new words, etc. So I brought in a few items, a page from Finnegans [sic] Wake and the first poem from your *Writing Is an Aid to Memory*. My students, among whom include the education minister of the Black Guerilla Front (prison arm of the Panthers), very much liked your poem and proceeded to give me a rather thorough explication of it. They didn't find it abstract" (LHP 3:20). One can only speculate that the line "maybe the prisons would circulate" received a particularly attentive gloss.

24. In addition to direct references to "insanity," "madness," and "paranoia," Hejinian has throughout her career deployed pathological terms in idiosyncratic ways; consider the recurrence of terms such as "myopia," "hypochondria," "insomnia," "chronophobia," "agoraphobia," "melancholia," and "hysteria."

25. *Writing Is an Aid to Memory* gives the uncanny impression of some compositional pattern or system or procedure. As Steve Abbot writes, in a letter to Ron Silliman dated May 16, 1980: "Now Lyn Hejinian's work is fascinating to me, esp. *Writing As An Aid to Memory* [sic], as I sense that it might well have been 'preconceived' formalistically but in such a way that (like *Memory* itself) is impossible to completely track down—so I ride the music of it's [sic] beckoning, it's [sic] tease, and it's a music I really get off on" (RSP 1:5). And Kathleen Fraser similarly suspects some "code" compounding the difficulty of the text (LHP 3:25). *Writing*, in other words, is the type of work that the Oulipo would call a "Canada Dry": a text that "has the taste and colour of a restriction but does not follow a restriction" (Mathews and Brotchie 1998, 118).

26. Christy Burns reaches a different conclusion from a similar focus on chance; she characterizes paranoia as "a compulsion to control and reduce language, texts, and any variety of forms in which meaning can occur. Unable to open themselves up to chance, paranoiacs likewise resist ambiguity in language, repressing puns and

other forms of casually associative wordplay" (1995, 99). Hejinian has herself argued that a perfectly closed text would lead to a state of "perfect mental health" ("The Rejection of Closure," 281). No text, of course, is perfectly closed, and, as we shall see, wordplay is never casual.

27. One should not necessarily discount such imposed readings as being extraneous to the text itself. In a letter draft to Michael Gottlieb dated February 21, 1983, Hejinian writes:

I am so used to people mistaking references in my work that that seems part of the life of the text. It is my business to write the works and the readers business to read them—whatever that may turn up. Steve Abbot, for example, wrote a long article for *Poetry Flash* that discussed my book *Writing is an Aid to Memory* as a reworking of the works of Meister Eckart—but I have never read a single word of Meister Eckart. Still, Steve's article was quite interesting and I didn't think it was necessarily wrong, as a reading. (LHP 4:4)

Or as she writes in "Chronic Texts": "Once a writing is published as if finally, it ought not thereby to become a forbidden landscape" (LHP 8:4). Panoramic. Paranoiac.

28. A few fragments and words recur through the papers like brief flashes of *déjà vu*, but the only real exception to this forgetfulness is the passage that became the sixth section of the book, which appears among a group of 1977 experiments in the following form: "It becomes all the clearer and he must show himself, to catch, to be amused, to equate the man, to shoot his autobiographical work" (LHP 8:1). Though certainly not working material, some roughly contemporaneous poems might be also be considered in relation to *Writing Is an Aid to Memory* because of their verse form, which also indents lines according to the same alphabetic formula (LHP 45:7).

29. Compare these lines to a passage Hejinian quotes from Claude Lévi-Strauss: "Through the power of an ever new internal logic, each work will rouse the listener from his state of passivity and make him share in its impulse, so that there will no longer be a difference of kind, but only of degree, between inventing music and listening to it" (LHP 45:7:156).

30. With "fortress replaced by a more natural forest," and "able ducer" clearly able to reduce to another more natural form, the place of anagrams in *Writing* is clear. Consider Hejinian's play with the acronym of *Writing Is an Aid to Memory*, recorded on the bottom of a draft of another poem (LHP 42:8):

WIAATM
WAIT AM
WIT AMA

Or, as one might translate the last of these: brevity is the.

31. Hejinian is quoting Louis Zukofsky, *Prepositions: The Collected Critical Essays of Louis Zukofsky* (London: Rapp & Carroll, 1967), 21.

32. Hejinian was interested throughout the 1970s with what the Russian Futurists and Formalists called *slovo kak takovoe* (the word as such). That is, not words about something, but the word as itself. In a 1977 letter to Sharon Doubiago, Hejinian explains that "my new work has been turning in toward itself more and

more, as one word looks at its neighbors, to see what is being said" (LHP 3:10). Having realized *that language is an order of reality itself and not a mere mediating medium*, Hejinian's interest in *words without reference*—that is, *the degree to which the written word is more than, or other than, a message-bearing unit*—took the form of both graphic and graphemic experiments, as well as a project to explore *the sound for words* as "sound without meaning." She came to question whether *perhaps Sound Without Meaning can't be written—perhaps there is no sound without meaning*, because *words, for example, simply can't help but give onto meaning; they are anchored by their meaning, which calls attention to itself*. A section from the 1974 "A Month Without Days" puts the tension this way:

The lover of words is given either to philolalia or to philosophy, if not both. He delights in the adorable form of language itself or he feels a compulsive (and urgent) desire to explain something, even himself. . . . But because the words remain words under either circumstance, whether the intention is sensible or sensual (leaving aside the numerous instances in which it is both), it is not always clear to the reader in which context he or she is required to attempt understanding. This is a problem. (LHP 8:4)

Writing is a solution.

33. The surrealists provide one precedent for such reading. Attempting to bring together objective and subjective phenomenon, *with relations written of such a kind as external reality at random*, André Breton's concept of "interpretive delirium" and "objective chance," for instance, provide a passive model of Salvador Dalí's "paranoiac critical activity," a systematization of confusion that he explicitly defines as a mode of reading. A "spontaneous method of irrational knowledge based on the interpretative critical association of delirium phenomenon," paranoiac critical activity establishes associations between ostensibly random occurrences, *throwing the standard into such errors/of discovery* not in order to unveil occult motivations to the aleatory but to allow the logic of coincidence to establish meaningful relationships that might otherwise be overlooked. *Every fact could break through deterministic constraints*, and so *as chance must lead you first one way and then another . . . so here what is reflected is not always what is visible, and art is seen not to be a mirror: reflections from accidental causes, committed to memory* (we have never strayed far from either memory or mimesis). *(I want to indicate both blind/chance and clear destiny, but/really this is about introspection)*. For the reader willing to take paranoia as a critical methodology, *random consciousness takes its chance/a narrow chance* (but an arrow that always, shot nod, hits its mark).

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