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Penelope Reworking the Twill: Patchwork,
Writing, and Lyn Hejinian's *My Life*

Spin it, then weave it, and wear it out, out.

Lyn Hejinian, *My Life*

In the last two decades, so-called Language writing has yielded a collection of heterogeneous but consistently—and notoriously—“difficult” texts. With the kind of challenging and rewarding writing that is the hallmark of that avant-garde, Lyn Hejinian has been at the fore since the late 1970s with works like *Gesualdo* and *Writing Is an Aid to Memory*. The editor of an impressive series from her Tuumba Press and coeditor of *Poetics Journal*, Hejinian has more recently translated poems by Arkadii Dragomoschenko and published *The Cell*, a collection of her own poems, in addition to a sequence of almost three hundred “free sonnets” entitled *Oxota: A Short Russian Novel*. She is perhaps best known, however, for the book *My Life*, which may well be the most popular work of contemporary experimental poetry.¹ In the process of its *healthy dialectic between poetry and prose*, *My Life* is an (unconventional) autobiography listed by its distributor as a “short novel,” a novel-length text which reads like a poem, a poem which is written in prose, a prose which is often, if not always, disorienting. The

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1. *My Life* was originally published in 1980; for this essay I have chosen to use the more readily available revised edition of 1988. One might note the two selections from an obviously related project, “My Life in the Early Nineties,” printed in *Lingo* in 1993.

When appropriated and not illustrative, citations from *My Life* will be italicized and incorporated without page reference.

disorienting element of Hejinian's rhythmic writing and its blatant "rejection of closure" arises from the alinear arrangement of its sentences and phrases in a strict parataxis set against the tension of occasional intimations of hypotactic motivation and the syncopation of repeated and slightly varied "leitmotif" phrases.² *My Life*, that is to say, disrupts conventions of writing by manipulating the relation of syntactic units, rather than by disrupting syntax itself or by dislocating text at the level of the page (as in Susan Howe's *Eikon Basilike*) or of the word (as in David Melnick's *Pcoet* and David C. D. Gansz's *Per Missions*).

Despite the relative accessibility of its writing at the syntactic level, *My Life* as a whole still presents its reader with an important version of the "extraordinary restiveness" characteristic of "American letters through the past decade" (Jarraway 319). Even the most unusual and legitimately "difficult" elements of the work, however, seem substantially less perplexing when read against what has become a cliché of the familiar, traditional, and domestic American artifact: the nineteenth-century pieced quilt.³ As incongruous as it might at first appear, the analogue of the quilt accentuates certain of the book's thematic and structural elements, which in turn can help both to tease out the threads of clear and recoverable narrative woven into the text and to suggest the theoretical framework in which they might be read to the best advantage. Ultimately, the visual pleasures of the irrevocably puzzled surface of the quilt offer a model for a reading of *My Life* that values the very "incomprehensibility" so often objected to in contemporary writing and so well illustrated by the deliberately fractured and fractal nature of Hejinian's work.

2. "Rejection of closure" is Hejinian's term for a text's resistance to becoming a work "in which all the elements . . . are directed toward a single reading" and in which "Each element confirms that reading and delivers the text from any lurking ambiguity" ("Rejection" 270).

3. To suggest this conjunction between the two is not entirely the critical conceit which at first it might seem; the restricted thematic world of *My Life* itself suggests the comparison, with specific references to needlework as well as sentences such as "The person too has flared ears, like an infant's reddened with batting" (21), wherein "batting" is sufficiently unusual to stand out and suggest not only the gerund form of "bat" ("to strike," or "to discuss in detail," both of which might make the infant's ears—literally and figuratively—burn and redden) but also the noun form: the materials used to fill quilts which might, if exposed, chafe delicate skin.

Whatever the differences—and there are many—between the clearly different art forms of quilting and writing, the ‘*oral history*’ on paper of *My Life* and the traditional pieced quilt are both specifically autobiographical texts. In the previous century, quilters frequently conceived of their work in terms of autobiographical books; they called their quilts personal “albums” and “diaries,” or even “bound volumes of hieroglyphics” (Ferrero et al. 11), books which—like Hejinian’s text—are unfamiliar and difficult to read, and require some translation. Quilts were thought of as autobiographies not only because they were the products of substantial daily labor, but also because their subject matter was often quite literally composed of remainders of the artist’s daily life (work clothes, daily wear, fancy dress) and reminders of the important occasions of that life (crib swaddling, wedding dress, mourning gown). These textiles, drawn from the clothes of people close to the quilter, transform the quilt itself into a text that incorporates, as one nineteenth-century writer phrased it, “‘passages of my life,’ ‘memories of childhood, youth, and mature years . . . of life and death’ ” (qtd. in Ferrero et al. 34). Moreover, quilts themselves were often occasional works which were made to coincide with milestone events: birth, the fifth birthday, engagement, marriage, childbirth, mourning. “Quilt-makers,” Roszika Parker and Griselda Pollock have argued, “evolved an abstract language to signify . . . their personal and social histories” (77; emphasis added).

As that conjunction of “personal” and “social” illustrates, the patchwork field of the quilt has traditionally been a place in which *the universal is animated by individuality*—a locus for the complex union of the public and the private, the anonymous and the personal. While the majority of nineteenth-century American quilts were constructed within the architectonics of established patterns (Log Cabin, Flying Goose, Fence Rail, for example), individual quilters troped those common designs and manipulated colors and fabrics to create unique and sharply differentiated compositions; even within the confines of a strongly communal language, their quilts record a highly personal idiom. Like its design, the actual construction of the quilt also frequently manifested a dynamic exchange between the personal and the social. “Anonymous was a woman,” Virginia Woolf wryly noted, and even though many quilts were

signed by their artists, the art world has, until recently, done much to obscure the individual quilter; feminist critics and scholars have helped to remedy such slights, but they in turn have often romanticized the communal associations of the quilt and the quilting bee. Nonetheless, the piecing and setting of fabric (the construction and composition of patches into quilt blocks and their subsequent arrangement and assembly into the desired pattern) was usually a private and individual chore. On the other hand, the actual quilting (the sewing which connects quilt top and backing in order to hold the batting in place), while often the most individually expressive element of the quilt, was sometimes—but by no means always—a public and communal event. Although a single artist could create and piece a pattern, the realization of the artwork through the even more difficult task of the quilting was more easily effected by members of an extended family, a group of friends, or the participants at a bee.

Quilts and the circumstances of their production were not, of course, homogeneous. As always, fashions and habits changed from decade to decade; and in addition to geography, nineteenth-century quilt patterns also varied among communities according to factors such as religion, race, and even politics.⁴ Moreover, the construction of those patterns and the materials of the quilt further depended on the availability of textiles, markets, and sewing machines, as well as the class and social status of the quilter: some quilters could afford to commission works cut from factory-produced fabrics and did not need (or perhaps want) personally to recycle familiar materials in the ways I have suggested. Despite such differences, that recuperative economy—the likely origin of patchwork itself—became part of the ideology associated with quilting, and the recycling of materials in many actual quilts presents both another manifestation of the individual/communal dynamic and

4. Particular styles became associated with religious communities such as the Quakers and the Amish, and some quilts were even made to commemorate masonic organizations (Brooks-Myers 15). Eli Leon's important and provocative, if not thoroughly convincing, exhibition catalogues argue for an "Afro-traditional" aesthetic which posits Central and West African textile traditions as the prototypes for many American patchwork designs. Additionally, some designs were named for and associated with political parties or partisan causes, such as abolition (Hedges 17–18).

also a further parallel between Hejinian's text and the quilts' textile material.

Just as many quilters appropriated and transformed common, worn-out fragments of daily material into extraordinary and unique artifacts, so Hejinian transforms fragments of worn-out, quotidian, common language into an extraordinary, unique, and individual text. A cliché like "down and out," for example, appears in the phrase "the tiniest idea became a 'nagging thought' until I could write it down and out" (92); and the banal "the time of your life" is woven into the sentence "Thinking about time in the book, it is really the time of your life" (55). Even when not directly quoted, many sentences in *My Life* are recognizably familiar because they conform to the syntactic structure of adages; they employ if/then comparative constructions ("See lightning, wait for thunder" [7], "If there's nothing out the windows, look at books" [91]), short imperative or comparative constructions given in generalized terms ("Let someone from the other lane in" [48], "The dance is best seen from the upper balcony" [42]), or oracular statements about essential attributes ("A straight snake won't strike" [80], "snakes cannot roll like hoops" [69]). Moreover, these sentences often employ the same mnemonics as aphorisms, including alliteration, repetition, rhyme, and parallel construction: "Shufflers scuff" (48), "A cluttered room makes for a cluttered mind" (34), "[M]oney makes money, luck makes luck" (74). With its pervasive aesthetic of repetition with slight change, *My Life* often repeats these common phrases so that they are, as Marjorie Perloff puts it, "just slightly out of sync" (*Dance* 224). In fact, even when Hejinian repeats clichés or media "sound bites" without variation, the unexpected contexts for such phrases serve to revitalize their tired language and translate them, like quilt scraps, into an animated idiom.

The prevalence of phrases quoted from our common language is indicative of the largely citational mode in which *My Life* operates. In a characteristically postmodern manifestation of Roland Barthes's "tissue of quotations" (146), the text further emphasizes its citationality by incorporating apparently quoted material without quotation marks and, conversely (*so quoted, coded*), framing some phrases in marks of quotation without apparent significance and without citing a speaker or source. Indeed, voices accumulate in

this indeterminate citationality until *The voices of the daughter, the mother, and the mother of the daughter are heard in the background*; the source of a given sentence—and therefore its precise subject and object—is often lost in the cacophony of competing styles, vocabularies, and syntactic constructions that differentiate the text's constantly shifting linguistic frames. Drawn from the "innumerable centres of culture" (Barthes 146), the fragments of *little dialogues heard on the street* accrete until the book, even if at times it *plays like the work of one person*, exemplifies and manifests a conception of the text as a "multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash" (Barthes 146). "[T]he voice," as had been predicted, "loses its origin" (Barthes 142). Moreover, the frequent use of linguistic shifters further confuses the identity of voices so that even when a clause such as "She ate her pudding in a pattern" follows "My mother's childhood seemed a kind of holy melodrama" (16), the reader cannot be sure to whom the "she" refers. Indeed, the indeterminate text leaves the reader unable even to conclude whether "My mother" refers to Hejinian, her mother, her grandmother, or some other person. As in much of John Ashbery's writing, pronouns—grammatical elements that are already once displaced from the proper name of the "real" subject—slip and shift through *My Life* until the object of their linguistic pointing disappears into a labyrinth of potential reference: "You have always known we wanted us" (94).

Ultimately, as Hejinian explores *The limits of personality* in these ways, even the gender of speakers and subjects becomes ambiguous. As *a person on paper*, Hejinian comes to recognize that "language knows a 'subject,' not a 'person'" (Barthes 142), and that the pronouns in her (auto)bio-graphy effect an uneasy translation across that hyphen, from the world of the author to the world of the text—from "bio" to "graph." *What*, Hejinian poses in a language "where all identity is lost" (Barthes 147), *is the gender on paper*, and she later comes to realize that *As such, a person on paper, I am androgynous*; the "I," whatever it points to in the world of the author, is grammatically neuter, and Hejinian must insist, metatextually, on the connection between person and subject, world and word: "In the sentence, 'One turns onto 261 from 101 . . . ' I am the one" (81). *The world in its habits, the word in the world it inhabits, and the words*

on the page are never equivalent to things in the experiential world; *Pronouns*, as Hejinian recognizes, *skirt the subject*. That is to say, when *the person posits itself* into the linguistic realm, the pronouns which replace that person take on a life of their own; they both avoid (“skirt”: to move indirectly about the periphery) the complex issues of biological gender and also regender (“skirt”: to dress in a skirt) that subject in the rigid tripartite division of grammar: “feminine,” “masculine,” “neuter.”

The decentering of the personal “I” which *My Life* highlights and interrogates in these ways is more than contemporary literature’s now familiar distrust of Romantic conceptions of the author; such a displacement of the author and the speaker becomes particularly charged in a text with the generic pretense of biography. Statements such as “People must flatter their own eyes with their pathetic lives” (36) betray an anxiety about an autobiographical text which *was a sort of protection because it had a better plot* and in which there is always a temptation to *do things for the sake of fame and speak of the self and improve it from memory*. Hejinian seems at times to feel uncomfortable with the self-importance and egocentrism of writing an autobiography; *Was she taking herself seriously*, the text anticipates the query of its critics, *or taking herself too seriously*. However disconcerting it might be to read one’s own book and realize that *The lives of which I read seemed more real than my own, but I still seemed more real than the persons who had lived them*, the distance effected by the “death of the author” must also come with some relief to a writer who realizes the freedom of even the autobiographical “I”: *I might create myself*.

Such distance does not, however, answer the question of how authors write autobiographies when they are not celebrities, and in partial response to such a question, Hejinian’s book works within a genre that traditionally records a distance *from* the “common” life and instead records an account *of* that common life—an almost anti-autobiography.⁵ Indeed, if *My Life* acknowledges the much hailed “death of the author,” then it also accepts the conclusion that the death of the author engenders “the birth of the reader” (Barthes 148); the text begins to turn Hejinian’s autobiography into “every-

5. For a further discussion of how Hejinian writes “against the conventional autobiography” by subverting its “informational” mode, see Perloff, *Radical Artifice* 166–69.

body's autobiography," so that the title's shifter ultimately points to the reader as well as the author and *My Life* becomes "my life" to everyone who holds the book.⁶ Specifically, Hejinian's text not only presents facts relevant to her own history but also catalogues, in kaleidoscopic fashion, many facets of the typical life of an upper-middle-class woman growing up in postwar northern California: chameleons to pin to sweaters, car trips on the family vacation, the hills, the sea, and so forth. Unlike the autobiographies of celebrities, who write about idiosyncratic lives, *My Life* "conveys what the archetypal life of a young American girl is like" (Perloff, *Dance* 225). Moreover, the topics of many sentences in Hejinian's book are not just pertinent to a "young [middle-class] American girl"; they relate to almost everyone: what we learn as children about visual perception, our interaction with the external world, and, most importantly, the acquisition of and encounter with language. When Hejinian presents her own life in this way, *It is a way of saying, I want you, too, to have this experience*, and the reader realizes that *We have all grown up with it*. As Mary White, a much-quoted quilter, explained in relation to piecing: "You're given just so much to work with in a life. . . . But the way you put them together is your business. You can put them in any order you like" (qtd. in Frye 9); that is to say that for quilters, as Nina Baym has argued for women writers, "individual authors are distinguishable from one another largely by the plot elements they select from the common repertory" and the ways in which they trope established patterns (12). Taken more metaphorically, these quilters are acknowledging that although most of us live strikingly homogeneous lives, they can be viewed and re-created in unique and interesting ways. In accord with this patchwork aesthetic, the elements that Hejinian selects from the common life—*many facts about a life should be left out, they are easily replaced*—and the disjunctive ways she puts them together ("in any order you like") are responsible, in part, for rendering her noncelebrity autobiography so compelling.

Although the quilts I have been characterizing are largely products of the nineteenth century, chronology actually strengthens the ties between Hejinian's text and the textile quilt. Following

6. As should become clear, the fit of Hejinian's text to Stein's title is not at all surprising.

Jonathan Holstein and Gail van der Hoof's groundbreaking exhibit "Abstract Design in American Quilts" at the Whitney Museum in 1971, the art world increasingly accepted the quilt as an art form suitable for conservation, exhibition, and research. Other museums followed the example of the Whitney throughout the 1970s, and the art-historical interest in quilts evinced by these exhibits coincided with an explosion of popular interest. During the same decade in which Hejinian was presumably composing the first edition of *My Life*, the stock of patchwork within the cultural currency of America was skyrocketing (along with its price on the antique circuit), and quilts were collected, exhibited, and made in increasing numbers. Coinciding with the renewed production of quilts that erupted with the Bicentennial, "the new wave of feminist art [that] began around 1970" incorporated the quilt as one of its primary visual metaphors (Lippard 32), and, concurrently, quiltlike forms appeared in the art works of women sculptors and collagists (Schapiro 306).⁷ This patchwork theme was not limited to the visual arts; as Elaine Showalter has noted, "Feminist poetry of the 1970's also celebrated the quilt" (225). Indeed, for many women of Hejinian's generation, not just artists, the quilt became "one of the most central images in the new feminist lexicon" (Showalter 225). Hejinian's choice of a quiltlike form in which to record, inter alia, her interest and involvement with the feminist movement makes perfectly coherent historical sense in the cultural milieu of 1970s America.

While recasting the nineteenth-century ideologies which associated women with quilting as "the tyranny of the thread," late twentieth-century critics have still maintained the association between women and patchwork. Reinscribing the ideal of patchwork as a positive female association or as demonstrative of an anti-hierarchical art, these critics have frequently moved beyond the product to the process and hailed the patchwork quilt as an embodiment of the "female aesthetic." Fabric art such as the quilt and written art such as *My Life* are frequently characterized in the same terms. In her famous discussion of "femmage," Miriam Schapiro suggests

7. I am indebted to Elaine Showalter for drawing my attention to Lucy R. Lippard's key essay (225).

that “women’s time” might effect a “women’s art,” and that “time is a conscious factor in the way women structure their art, particularly if they are at the same time responsible for the domestic engineering of a home” (311). Accordingly, Lucy R. Lippard has argued that the patchwork technique “is in fact a necessity for those whose time comes in small squares” (32), and Elaine Showalter has similarly termed piecing “the art form which best reflects the fragmentation of women’s time” (228).

Identically, the “small squares” of Hejinian’s fragmented text correspond to the patchwork aesthetic that some critics have also identified with women’s writing, and the critical discourse about the quilt directly parallels many descriptions of works such as *My Life*. Kathleen Fraser, for example (in a panel discussion which included Lyn Hejinian), echoes the feminist art criticism of textile production when she suggests that “many times, women, who led interrupted, fragmented, disrupted lives . . . who had a non-linear life, tended to find an expression that was valid in that kind of writing” (Hejinian, “Rejection” 286).⁸ Moreover, the nonlinear narrative and fragmented composition of Hejinian’s text, with its “radical parataxis” (DuPlessis 8), manifests the “form of verbal quilt” that Rachel Blau DuPlessis imagines in her patchwork-like essay “For the Etruscans.” Indeed, DuPlessis could be describing *My Life* when she characterizes the “porous” literature of a “female aesthetic” which “will produce artworks that incorporate contradictions and nonlinear movement into the heart of the text” as “nonhierarchic, showing ‘an organization of material in fragments,’ breaking climactic structures, making an even display of elements over the surface with no climactic place or moment, since the materials are ‘organized into many centers’ ” (5, 8).⁹ One might also extend this sense of nonhierarchic language to the level of the sentence; and in fact, Hejinian uses similar words to describe the “porous planes” of Gertrude Stein’s writing (“Stein” 132), in a statement that could describe her own writing—*proves porous*—with equal accuracy: “in

8. Fraser goes on to make the important qualification that the “female aesthetic” applies, if at all, not to biological gender but properly to any lifestyle or consciousness that fits with an antihierarchical or nonlinear experience, and I take such a qualification as a given in my own discussion.

9. DuPlessis quotes from Metzger (5), who in turn quotes Shelia de Bretteville.

Stein's writing, the word values, which are conventionally hierarchical, are often instead spread out within the sentence. The role of noun and verb gets shifted or bounced back and forth across the sentence, and words trade functions . . . so that the movement is multi-dimensional, multi-relational" ("Stein" 138).

When DuPlessis continues her own description of such writing, she suggests an association between the "multifocal female body" with "its orgasmic capacity, where orgasms vary startlingly and are multiple" (8) and writing—like Hejinian's—with "multiple centers of attention": writing which is fragmented, nonlinear, and "multi-climactic" (9). Although such an argument from physiology is certainly provocative, the connection seems to stretch the point and too rigidly homogenize and delineate "female" and "male" sexual response. Nonetheless, Hejinian's writing does seem to relate to eroticism in another sense—the erotics of deferral—which I shall (deferring for the moment) explore in the final movements of this essay. If the "female aesthetic" is not exactly a model for physiological response, the fragmentary text might indeed serve as a good model for consciousness, and one could read unconventional works such as *My Life* as highly realistic and indicative of the "special way of writing that realism requires" ("Stein" 128), or conversely, *It is precisely a special way of writing that requires realism*. Indeed, Hejinian has characterized her own consciousness in terms that might also describe her autobiography: "broken up, discontinuous—sometimes radically, abruptly, and disconcertingly so" ("Stein" 133). She claims with equal aptness to "perceive the world as vast and overwhelming; each moment stands under an enormous vertical and horizontal pressure of information, potent with ambiguity, meaning-full, unfixed, and certainly incomplete" ("Rejection" 271). If one really believes that *the world is incomplete* and views life as *hopelessly frayed, all loose ends*, then a work such as *My Life* loses some of its foreignness, and the reader realizes that however fragmented the text, *life seems more incomplete when we were there in person*. That is to say, for Hejinian, who proclaims *My life is a permeable constructedness*, *My Life* becomes a *permanent constructedness* of a *permeable constructedness*. For the reader, her book attempts to *Recall the when of which I think* and becomes not so much a record following the actions of her life, but rather, *following thoughts also*, a record

of her mind remembering her life *more or less as it* [the memory] *really happened*. Hejinian's text is fragmentary, but *Such is the rhythm of cognition*. Because the mind does not work like the linear narrative of the conventional autobiography—*What follows a strict chronology has no memory*—it takes an unconventional autobiography to help one realize “consciousness by positioning sentences in the landscape of consciousness” (“Stein” 139).

Whatever the ultimate relation of *My Life* to orgasm or the movements of consciousness, as the shared metaphors and striking parallels between the discussion of quilts and the discussion of the “new way of writing” suggest (DuPlessis 9), the strongest similarity between the pieced quilt and Hejinian's work is the patchwork architecture which the two texts share. Both the quilt and Hejinian's book operate by *organizing a bit of material into a general view*; just as the fabric from a given textile will appear spaced throughout a quilt after being cut from a single source and stitched together again into a new text, so Hejinian, in order to create her final text, seems to take several complete narrative texts and *Break them up into uncounted continuous and voluminous digressions*. The surface of a quilt constantly negotiates between the individual strips and blocks of fabric on the one hand (varied small patterns), and the entire composition on the other (an overall pattern composed of varied small patterns); similarly, as Bruce Campbell aptly notes in his discussion of the individual/group ambivalence in *My Life*, the focus in Hejinian's text makes a specifically quiltlike negotiation between the particular sentence and the work as a whole (193). To put it another way, in both the quilt and *My Life*, local disjunctions are exchanged for large-scale coherence, even if that larger integrity is constantly frustrated by the opposite tendency—fragments which cohere locally but do not always seem to fit well into their context.

At first glance, the “radical parataxis” of Hejinian's text might seem to align it with the tradition of the “crazy quilt,” or at least contrast it with the ordered geometric designs characteristic of many pieced quilts.¹⁰ However, in *My Life*, as the following consid-

10. Unlike the ordered, simplified, and linear compositions of many quilt tops, the crazy quilt presents a strikingly disordered, irregular surface which appears “crazed,” like the mesh of fine cracks in a ceramic glaze.

eration of its narrative techniques should make clear, distinct patterns emerge from disjunctive fragments, and those patterns in turn ultimately reveal an overall composition. Rather than a crazy quilt, this structure perfectly echoes pieced quilt-top designs in the tradition of Orange Peel, Dolly Madison's Reel, Drunkard's Path, and even Log Cabin—"quilts of illusion" in which fragmented pieces of fabric are juxtaposed like the paratactic sentences of Hejinian's book (Fisher, chapter 1). Those fragments of both fabric and language not only compose coherent patterns but are also both structured within a rigid overall frame. The fixed, geometric, and mathematically determined pattern of these quilts parallels the "radical artifice" of Hejinian's text, with its geometric white squares opening each chapter and a "carefully articulated mathematical structure" (Perloff, *Radical Artifice* 170), in which the number of sentences in a chapter and the number of chapters in the book equal the years of the author's life at the time of writing or revision: "At one level, then, *My Life* is an elaborate, one might say Oulipean, number game, with its 37×37 (or 45×45) square" (Perloff, *Radical Artifice* 164).

As in the optical patterning of pieced quilts, or any quilt that employs a wide variety of fabrics, context in *My Life* is all to the point, because the linguistic environment of the text's fragments largely determines their meaning. Hejinian's work foregrounds this function of context by repeating certain fragments, such as the leitmotif "chapter titles," throughout the work. These "scraps" of language, *should they chance to reappear*, shift their meanings with each recurrence, and Hejinian would no doubt follow Gertrude Stein and insist that since the recurring phrases always appear in different contexts, they do not, in fact, really repeat. As Hejinian has explained in reference to Stein's writing, "phrase or sentence A is not obliterated when it appears, slightly altered perhaps, as phrase or sentence B" ("Stein" 137); when *chronic ideas return* in Hejinian's own work, "One must be careful not to read any sequence of sentences as a series of substitutions or cancellations" ("Stein" 137). "[E]lements," *I say this again*, "co-exist with alternatives in the work" ("Stein" 137), and sentences—*one of those things which continues . . . what one says over and over again*—that would seem to indicate one thing in their original context seem to mean another thing when

placed elsewhere in the constantly shifting contexts of *My Life*. The text, in the Russian formalist tradition of “making it strange,” repeats a word or phrase over and over again to disintegrate its associations, to defamiliarize it.

Like *Penelope reworking the twill*, Hejinian is rewriting in an unstable text, and the meanings of that text are constantly in flux; this continual re-creation of meaning works to indefinitely postpone completion and closure in the book and to sustain Hejinian’s *Life (eternal time—reversal)* in a textual evasion of the mortality of her “life.” Although the words on the page are of course printed in an unmovable sequence, the possibility of a second revised edition and the meanings of individual words are so calculatedly indeterminate that Hejinian has constructed a form of biography which plays a life that is always past and fixed against a perpetual activity of reading that is always present and open, *repetitious, moment by moment beginnings in the middle*. Closure—the exchange of possibility for certainty—seems to be linked with death: *The fear of death . . . infinity overness . . . an absolute*. As if to avoid this death inherent in a *Writer solstice* (“solstice”: from *sistere*, to make to stand still), Hejinian coopts the reader’s participation in the production of her work so that it always *moves forward, drives on* and overcomes the “mortal arrhythmia” that accompanies the conventional text (“Stein” 135), in which closure blocks participation and introduces a disjuncture between the time of reading and the time of writing. In contrast to this “troubling ‘syncopation’” of the conventional text (“Stein” 135), *My Life* frustrates closure in an attempt to create a sort of continuous present. As the book reminds the reader in its closing moments, *the present is a member*, that is, the past must be re-membered, and the text continually performs this remembrance to *present the illusion that present experience is familiar*; although it also finally admits the illusory nature of the effect: *It is impossible to return to the state of mind in which these sentences began*.

Rosmarie Waldrop has insightfully described *My Life* as a text that “embodies the double pull toward closure and openness” (222), and if Hejinian’s method of composition is largely unconventional, indeterminate, and nonlinear, it still clearly retains comprehensible narrative elements. At one level, Hejinian’s text—like a quilt top that conveys an overall pattern made up of smaller dis-

junctive units—does indeed yield a sense of her life, a sense that *The years pass, years in which . . . events were not lacking*. The chapters not only equal the years of the author's life in number, but they also coincide with an overall chronology; although clearly not rigid or exact (*It was not specific to any year, but very early*), the general flavor and thematics of the passages change slowly and subtly from the concerns and language of "childhood to adolescence to adult" (Perloff, *Radical Artifice* 162). Additionally, however much the text resists closure, the final sentences of the book are concerned, as one might expect, with death and cessation. In these ways, facts and images slowly and indirectly accumulate until Hejinian's life is ultimately sketched in broad and erratic brush strokes.

Despite the multiplicity and apparent disconnection of the sentences, specific thematic concerns emerge over the course of the book: war, vacation, birthday parties, the weather, getting things out of the carpet, windows, colors, birds. The list continues, of course, but the point is not so much that the thematic clusters of *My Life* are so numerous and varied, but rather that they are recognizable, finite, and frequently connected. Although many sentences seem "meaningless" because they occur in unexpected contexts, those sentences can often be extricated and reorganized to make them into easily comprehensible narratives: *Undone*, the reader learns, *is not not done*. Since the composition of *My Life* is explicitly nonlinear, the likely thematic connections for many sentences are not always clear at first encounter, and the text inscribes within its architectonics a necessary rereading. For an example of how *the plot goes bit-by-bit* in this way, consider the "trip to the zoo" sentences, the first of which occurs on the eleventh page: "The blue fox has ducked its head." On the next page, without any apparent connection, one reads, "A bird would reach but be secret," and then six pages later the explicit locale is revealed: "we might go to the zoo and see the famous hippo named 'Bubbles.'" A few pages further we learn that the speaker "wanted to see a mountain lion but had to content [her]self with a raccoon" (27) and, although "Afraid of the bears" (21), "had marvelled at the immense difference between the animals at the zoo and the gulls, pigeons, sparrows, and starlings that were only visitors there" (29). Then, on page 32, the full drama

of the story emerges in an uncharacteristically long passage of sustained coherence:

And finally, on a visit to the zoo, as we were passing by the enclosure where the silver foxes were kept, I saw a flock of sparrows pecking at the ground of the enclosure, and one of them, venturing too close to a fox which was crouching in the shadow of an artificial rock, was suddenly seized by the fox, who swallowed it in a moment.

When the understated “That was the most interesting thing I had ever seen at a zoo” arrives two pages later with deadpan comedic timing (*comic satisfaction comes from conjunction*), the context of the sentence cannot contain it as it points emphatically back to the fox episode. By some ten pages later, that episode has been generalized, internalized, and absorbed into the adage mode which so many sentences in *My Life* take: “The fox that survives is successful” (42). In the context of this mininarrative, the much later sentence “the lion that finally roars is something happening in the zoo” takes on a more ominous tone by analogy (82), and even the frequent repetitions of “plump birds” (the goose is getting fat . . .) never again carries the same good-natured connotations; the reader is perhaps relieved that all that the tigers did at the zoo was sleep (29). Ultimately, in the rereading necessitated by this patchwork narrative, the central zoo episode recasts the first sentence in a new light, and the foreshadowing waterfowl pun—the blue fox *ducked* its head—assumes the quality of a sick, but witty, joke: *It is always funny when the expectation matches the event.*

Such narratives are constructed of subtly associated segments; they work more by evocation than explicit connection among *thoughts [which] are discontinuous but not unmotivated*, and this dilation of parataxis to the level of narrative itself illuminates another manifestation of the patchwork aesthetic. The quilter’s art is an art of economy in both senses of the word; quilts were often made at home (*oikos*) for household use and display, but they could also be (although not necessarily) highly economical—recycling bits and scraps of material in a lap-work production that required very little space and adhered to the dicta about “idle hands” and “waste not, want not.” Indeed, as certain nineteenth-century ideologies defined quilting as a woman’s task, suggesting that women them-

selves were inherently domestic, patchwork became the dominant metaphor for the frugal housewife (cf. Ferrero et al. 22–29); as Lydia Child claimed in *The American Frugal Housewife* (1820), “The true economy of housekeeping . . . is the art of gathering up all the fragments so that nothing be lost” (qtd. in Ferrero et al. 26). In accord with this traditional quilting ethos of thrift and efficiency, Hejinian’s book often exercises an astounding narrative economy. After *the stripping away of superfluities*, the *Obbligato* elements of conventional autobiography remain in pared-down narratives from which—as the text itself reminds the reader—*One could elaborate*.

Given this invitation to elaborate, consider, for instance, this section of the fourth chapter:

On that still day my grandmother raked up the leaves beside a particular pelargonium. With a name like that there is a lot you can do. Children are not always inclined to choose such paths.

(15)

On a first reading, the middle sentence seems to refer to “pelargonium” and address the occurrence of the “particular” neo-Latin genus name that unexpectedly replaces the common, garden-variety term “geranium.” However, the patchwork construction of *My Life* precludes the necessity of an anaphoric reference, which may be nothing more than the fortuitous but illusory result of parataxis, and the sentence could also modify other words. For a likely example, if the reader takes “name” to denote a proper name, such as the author’s, there is indeed *a lot you can do*. Speculations on names, eponymy, the effects of naming, and the adoption of new names through marriage recur throughout the text, and this section works with those other onomastic references to suggest the relative foreignness of surnames from the perspective of one generation to another, particularly when the matrilineal name is frequently erased by marriage. Specifically, just as her maternal grandparents’ surname may have seemed unusual to Lyn (whose own maiden name was Hall), “Hejinian” may have seemed unusual to both generations, and it would have been unfamiliar to many American children, such as the classmates of Hejinian’s own son and daughter. In fact, the third sentence contrasts the activity of children with the “still” and peaceful garden paths of an older

generation. "Children," moreover, holds a position parallel to "pelargonium," and the constantly shifting focus of the text's radical parataxis allows the generic "you" of the middle sentence to stand in apposition to the unspecified "Children"; with such a shift, one poignantly understated sentence—"With a name like that there is a lot you can do"—communicates the countless episodes of name-calling—the taunts, teases, and misunderstandings—which no doubt accompany growing up with an "unusual" name. *To some extent*, in the narrative economy of Hejinian's patchwork syntax, *each sentence has to be the whole story* because *a fragment is not a fraction but a whole piece*.

With a similarly economic narrative, several sentences spread over the length of the book can work *to concentrate* narrative episodes and make them *compress into a sentence whose words are a reflection* of biographical details. Such sentences achieve their economy by serving a double function in Hejinian's indeterminate work: they suggest one meaning within local contexts and another meaning when reassembled and reread together. Four sentences, for example, conspire to intimate (but not to assert conclusively or necessarily; *there are many figures in this scene which might form different scenes*) that the narrator suffered from an eating disorder. In the childhood context of the third chapter, "Hard to distinguish hunger from wanting to eat" (13) assumes the innocuous tone of describing the frequent hunger of infants or young children: when the baby cries it is hard to tell if it's really hungry or just wanting to eat. Similarly—*If we keep on extracting*—in the grade-school context of the sixth chapter, "In the school bathroom I vomited secretly, not because I was ill but because I so longed for my mother" (20) seems to relate conventionally enough to the sleepover and summer-camp references of "that primary homesickness I'd known as a child" (107). Likewise, the baby fat and adolescent awkwardness evoked by the unassuming "plump but uncertain girl" appear to trope the leitmotif of "plump birds along the shore" with an equivalent innocence (41). However, a later sentence—"Are we not all anorexic?" (93)—works backward through the text to align the three dispersed and seemingly unrelated sentences that I have just catalogued. This explicit question, which is emphasized by the rare question mark (most interrogative constructions in *My Life* are not punctuated), triangu-

lates the other sentences so that they take on a more charged and sinister tone. "Plump" is no longer trivial and adolescent when it leads to "vomiting secretly in the bathroom." In fact, the resonance of this single question highlights and intensifies all of the scattered and miscellaneous references to food, bodies, and hunger; and because of this resonance, *what had originally seemed merely details of atmosphere or unrelated elements become, in time, thematic.*

Because these thematic nexuses are constructed in such discontinuous ways, with sentences referring forward and backward across the expanse of language in the text, *My Life* enacts, in one sense, a conception of language as trace—the Derridean formulation of the *gram* writ large on the narrative level of the sentence. In the theory of writing characterized by *différance*, basic elements constantly refer to other, absent elements, leaving a trace which itself finally dissolves into traces of traces. Analogously (*theory is a principle of presentation*), a given sentence in *My Life* evokes other sentences through theme, diction, parallel syntax, and so on; those sentences then themselves suggest more sentences, which at some remove will—as *the argument decays despite the fantastic laws of clinging*—point to yet other thematic groups, encounter one of the leitmotifs, or become caught up again in some local context where *Such displacements alter illusions, which is all to the good.* On their interrupted flights to a conclusion, the planes of [narrative] information intersect, collide, and again take flight in such a way that any given sentence will branch out with a geometrically expansive inflorescence until, from *the forgetfulness that takes place as readers begin to think of other things*, it can no longer be held in the mind and is lost in a palimpsestic blur of reference. Thus *there are long . . . lines behind every idea*, and with a constant reduction of *tension in the connecting string*, these lines travel through the text like a needle stitching through fabric and leaving the trace of its passage in an ever-lengthening thread. Just as the iterable gram "can break with every given context, engendering an infinity of new contexts in a manner which is absolutely illimitable" (Derrida 185), Hejinian's narrative thread becomes lost from view as readers *pay attention to other things* in the complex weave of *strings in the terrible distance.* In short, *Language makes tracks, and you would say these are its ghosts.*

My Life thus engages a dialectic between the disjunctive parataxis

of its sentences and their potential for forming recoverable narratives. The text constantly negotiates not only between openness and closure but also between making and frustrating sense; Hejinian's writing "ceaselessly posits meaning ceaselessly to evaporate it" (Barthes 147). Michel Serres provides a useful way to think about this negotiation with his concept of the parasite: "the Demon, the prosopopeia of noise" (56).¹¹ For Serres, the parasite, the "noise in the channel," is always already present in any communication; indeed, the parasite, paradoxically, is actually necessary for communication to occur at all. Conventional texts can be seen as attempting, always futilely, to suppress the parasite, minimize the noise, and enhance the message; accordingly, one can read a text like *My Life* as instead emphasizing the noise, as an invitation to *bid chaos welcome*. Hejinian's work not only acknowledges the parasite but even celebrates its presence, as her text magnifies the way in which all communication operates: "A given system is in place. . . . It works and makes noise. It gets used up and ages; it heads toward noise" (Serres 67). Noise leads to message, which inevitably degenerates again to noise, *ad infinitum*; "the noise is the end of a system and the formation of a new one" (Serres 67).

So many of the fragments in Hejinian's text seem to form recoverable thematic systems in this way that *My Life* tempts the reader to indulge in a fantasy of coherence—imagining that if all of the sentences in the book were cut apart, they could be reassembled to form comprehensible, grammatically correct, and conventional narratives. Like all good fantasies, however, this grand cohesion seems ultimately unattainable, and while scraps of narrative are presented so that they tempt such speculation, the "double pull" of *My Life* concurrently frustrates and warns against such a reading strategy. Indeed, those readers who approach *My Life* as a conventional text with a recoverable narrative constructed of transparent language are *entirely distracted by the facts*, and in their *desire for accurate representation* they ultimately miss the point. Just as the viewer of the quilt must resist the temptation to unstitch the patchwork and perfectly reassemble the original pieces of fabric, or reorder a

11. Serres is drawing on the term "les parasites," which in addition to its English meanings also denotes "static interference" or "white noise" in French.

crazed pattern, so the reader of *My Life* must not succumb to the "rage to know" that arises from a longing for the closure of perfect communication. As Goethe's Faust remarks, "As long as man keeps hearing words / He's sure that there's meaning somewhere" (qtd. in Hejinian, "Rejection" 281), and although *It's in the nature of language to encourage, and in part to justify such Faustian longings, to suggest that words could unite an ardent intellect with the external material world* implies a closure which, as Serres predicts, is ultimately unattainable. "Language itself is never in a state of rest" in Hejinian's text ("Rejection" 279), which skates on the torus, the transformational space between systems, where "the border goes from the message with repressed noise to the noise with repressed message" (Serres 69). As I have tried to illustrate, "Islands of coherence appear that had not been perceived" (Serres 131), but the tide rises, the parasite surfaces, and the narratives interwoven into *My Life* never fully cohere.

At some point hunger for that coherence becomes sensuous, then lascivious, and in this way the deferral of completion in My Life is, as the text itself maintains, essentially erotic. "A word is an expectation" (82), the book reminds its reader, and when, with an instructive ellipsis, it later elaborates "these words are meant to awaken in you such desire that. . . ." (93), the reader realizes that in It being impossible to complete the thought, the idea of infinity or eternity elicited a sort of desire, the sexual side of thought. The entire work, in fact, is pervaded with a mood of suspense; "throughout My Life," as Marjorie Perloff perceives, "secrets seem about to be revealed, enigmas about to be clarified, but the moment of revelation never comes" (Radical Artifice 168). As with the individual words, this deferral of closure in narrative sentences creates a space in which the intellect lingers, this too is erotic—the anticipation of the pleasure of making sense.

But there is a pleasure too in the *not* making sense. Again, Waldrop's "double pull." If a work like *My Life* "forces the question" for certain theories of language and communication, it also interrogates its reader: can order and disorder, figure and ground, noise and message, exchange places so rapidly that some equilibrium is established? Can readers position themselves on the cusp of Serres's torus, on that jagged crest between the coherence and dissolution of language, so that the whisper of the noise pregnant

with messages and the hum of the messages blurred by white noise blend into a harmonics of sympathetic vibrations? And can the frisson of those vibrations be satisfying? Hejinian's vibrantly resonant text seems to beg the question.

Susan Sontag's now famous call for an erotics, rather than a hermeneutics, of art has been often reiterated but rarely heeded (14), and readers still frequently *look for some meaning when they should have been satisfied with events*. A text such as Hejinian's does indeed, as I have tried to show, make sense in comprehensible (if unconventional) ways, but its ultimate rejection of closure is like a tease: suggesting, evoking, deferring, suggesting. There is pleasure in that tease as a process in and of itself, rather than as a means to an end, and in *My Life* that process is the focus. Readers who follow the threads but become *puzzled* because *the future would never be revealed* can let *the inaccessibility of the meaning intrigue them even more* and allow themselves, *untroubled by the distortion*, to give in to that inaccessibility, that fragmentation, and the evocative and provocative play of language and narrative through the text.

Within the pages of *My Life*, the reader has a space in which to *lapse, hypnotized by the flux and reflux* of the themes and motifs, rather than obsessively to *try to find the point where the pattern repeats* ("refluxus": ebb; regurgitation). Rather than long for the telos of a unified, encapsulated story, the reader can luxuriate in *the romance of the vanished*: the fluidity of narratives that coalesce on the surface of the text, condense in *a saturated structure*, and then, *a particular static at the surface*, evaporate into *the flesh of this book* and its tissue of language—a language in which meanings slide and evade with suggestive glimpses, wherein words and their constructs make associations that surface, *like bubbles going up, many go at once*, linger, and submerge again as references *Ring, plunge, reappear*. Then, ultimately, the reader can delight rather than despair in *the rapture of units—and phrases are units—as things bound in their cases* [both words and books] *plunge and erupt* in a language which will *twinkle, sparkle, and shoot forth its single bits of words*.

In the *old fashioned medium, the printed page*, of Hejinian's new-fashioned text, those words *sit in a cloven space* and emerge from *between little white silences*; they are highlighted and made physical as *My Life* becomes "the 'life' lived by words, phrases, clauses, and

sentences" (Perloff, *Dance* 225). In a work where the "emphasis is on writing itself" (*Dance* 224), the quiltlike, geometric page layout focuses attention on the written word with italicized phrases appliquéd onto the blank blocks that open each chapter. The text is "open" indeed: incomplete, resting on absence, its language arising from the white-noise white-space blank of the page, that space between print, and then, again, retreating into it. And we have learned that such absence has nothing to do with blankness or silence; it is the house of language and inhabited by ghostly demons: sparkling, murmuring, gesturing words.

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