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The Print and Digital Editions of Lyn Hejinian's *My Life*

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Abstract

My Life by Lyn Hejinian is now regarded as an exemplary work of the *Language* movement. It exists in several editions: first published in 1980, it was amended in 1987. A sequel, *My Life in the Nineties*, was published in 2003 and, in 2013, Wesleyan University Press released *My Life and My Life in the Nineties*, collecting the 1987 and 2003 books, but leaving aside an addendum, "What's Missing from *My Life*," and not allowing to visualize the additions made in 1987 to the 1980 book. In 2015, a digital edition was programmed and made available online by Daniel Carter. This paper considers the various versions of *My Life* and describes their effects on scholarly work as well as on teaching. It eventually suggests another way to approach the digital editing of *My Life*, focusing on the openness and paratactic construction of the text.

Résumé

On considère aujourd'hui *My Life* de Lyn Hejinian comme l'un des textes fondamentaux du mouvement *Language*. Le texte a connu plusieurs éditions : publié pour la première fois en 1980, il fut revu et augmenté en 1987. En 2003, Hejinian publiait *My Life in the Nineties* qui constitue la suite de son poème autobiographique. Les livres de 1987 et de 2003 furent réunis dans *My Life and My Life in the Nineties*, publié en 2013 par Wesleyan University Press. Cette version, cependant, omettait le texte annexe « What's missing from *My Life* » et, surtout, ne permettait pas de visualiser les ajouts faits en 1987 par rapport à la version de 1980. En 2015, Daniel Carter proposa une édition numérique qui permettait de comparer plusieurs versions. Dans cet article, nous étudions les différentes versions de *My Life* et la façon dont elles influent sur le travail de recherche et sur l'enseignement du texte. Enfin, nous imaginons une autre édition numérique possible pour *My Life*, destinée à mettre en lumière sa qualité d'œuvre ouverte et sa construction paratactique.

Keywords

Hejinian, Lyn (1941 -); language poetry; American poetry (21st century); digital humanities; digital editing; poetry and pedagogy.

Mots-clés

Hejinian, Lyn (1941 -); mouvement language; poésie américaine (XXI^e siècle); humanités numériques; éditions numériques; pédagogie de la poésie.

My Life by Lyn Hejinian was first published in 1980, and has become the most widely known example of *Language* writing, and the most studied. The *Language* movement (often spelled L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E, after the magazine it is connected with) emerged in New York and the San Francisco Bay Area in the seventies as a loose group of poets and critics influenced by Gertrude Stein, William Carlos Williams and Louis Zukofsky. In an “Introduction to language writing” written for the *Revue française d’études américaines* in 1996, Bob Perelman provided an attempt at defining the group; first negatively, as being in opposition to certain trends in American poetry, in particular confessional poetry, and at odds with the general hostility towards literary theory; then positively, by listing a number of recurring features, although he insisted that *Language* writing was never a constituted, self-conscious group with a clear-cut manifesto, and that these features may or may not appear in *Language* texts. Perelman writes:

A neutral description of Language Writing might attempt to draw a line around a range of writing that was (sometimes) non-referential, (occasionally) poly-syntactic, (at times) programmatic in construction, (often) politically committed, (in places) theoretically inclined, and that enacted a critique of the literary I (in some cases). (Perelman 1996)

These various qualities—non-referentiality, programmatic construction, political commitment, inclination towards theory and a critique of the lyric “I”—are all to be found in some or all versions of *My Life*, which contributes to explain why it has come to be regarded as an exemplary instance of “language writing”.

The *Language* poets are also associated with a number of publishing ventures—L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E journal, founded in 1978, and a number of small presses (Tuumba Press, founded by Hejinian; This Press, founded by Barrett Watten, for instance). The various editions of and additions to *My Life* are to be analyzed within this editorial context, while considering as well the impact on Hejinian’s writing of the growing academic interest for *Language* poetry from the mid-eighties onwards. Like many *Language* poets, Hejinian is both a writer and an academic and it must be kept in mind that, while writing and editing, she was necessarily aware of how academics would respond and analyze the changes.

The first print versions of *My Life*: editorial issues

Lyn Hejinian published a first version of *My Life* in 1980, with Burning Deck. The book appears as an autobiographical prose poem divided into short, unnumbered sections. Hejinian had written it in 1978, when she was thirty-seven, and this version is made of thirty-seven sections of thirty-seven sentences each. Each section seems to deal roughly with one year of her life: although it is not a linear autobiography, it provides a number of clues that allow one to measure roughly the age of the “I”. The form chosen, and the reference, the wave at least, it contains to the genre of autobiography, make of *My Life* a book-length poem. It is not a “collection”, nor can it be easily churned out into excerpts for anthologies or magazine publication. *My Life* exists as a book, which is not contingent at a time when small magazines seemed the main place of existence of what was just getting to be known as *Language* poetry.

When Hejinian wrote this first version (which was not then thought of as such: the next ones were not planned), *Language* poetry was already a thing, if a burgeoning one. The magazine L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E had just been founded by Charles Bernstein and Bruce Andrews and contributed to associate the movement with the name (though “*language*” had been in use since the mid-70s). It had been preceded by *This*, edited by Barrett Watten and Robert Grenier, which published a great number of what would later be regarded as the “big names”

of the school: Ron Silliman, Bob Perelman, Kit Robinson, Steve Benson, Rae Armantrout, and Hejinian herself. The small magazines, for this generation of poets, were highly referential objects: they were a way to stress their avant-garde quality and their relationship to a certain brand of modernism – not so much that of Eliot, the modernist-turned-institutional poet laureate, whom they had all studied extensively at school in critical or academic editions, and whose *Criterion* well illustrates the transformation of the “small magazine” modernism into a more widely broadcast, less marginalized literature; but that of Gertrude Stein, Louis Zukofsky or Wallace Stevens who, just like Eliot, were associated with the short-lived, little-circulated magazines of the 20s but who, unlike him, had kept a form of rarity and could still be regarded as hidden gems to be passed on among the more experimental and adventurous readers.

A number of these post-modernist magazines evolved into small presses, providing a space for book-length works (whether collections of one author, multi-authored autonomous books – *Legend* – or single-authored long poems). Both the presses and the magazines thought of themselves as modernist citations and testify of the sociology of the group: an avant-garde coterie of like-minded, like-educated people, dedicating their writings to one another and claiming their marginal status as a proof of their opposition to a more institutional, confessional poetry as it was then being written in the workshops.

Burning Deck is a small press located in Providence, Rhode Island. It was started in 1961, first as a magazine, then as a publisher of poetry pamphlets. In a 1982 preface to their Burning Deck anthology *A Century in Two Decades, 1961-1981*, its founders, Keith and Rosmarie Waldrop, presented their venture as an attempt to bridge the gap between various, seemingly irreconcilable schools:

In 1961, poets were supposed to be in opposing camps, often inelegantly - and inaccurately - labeled 'academics' or 'beats'. The two most widely noted anthologies of the time [edited by Donald Allen, and Donald Hall, Robert Pack and Louis Simpson, respectively], both representing the period 1945-1960, contain not a single poet in common. *Burning Deck* (the magazine) disregarded this split, printing and reviewing a spread of poets wide enough that on occasion an author would complain of being published in such unprogrammatically company. (Waldrop & Waldrop 1982)

The Waldrops, poets in their own right and now institutionally acknowledged (Keith Waldrop was awarded the National Book Award for poetry in 2009 for his *Transcendental Studies: A Trilogy* and both were made *Chevaliers des arts et des lettres* by the French government for their numerous translations), were themselves on the “academic” side (in that they were grad-school-educated), just like Hejinian, who had already published a chapbook with Burning Deck in 1977, *A Mask of Motion*, but who, like the Waldrops, belonged to an academic culture that was, in itself, interested in the counter-culture (or thinking of itself as in a way counter-cultural). The first edition of *My Life*, then, situates the book not so much among the field of “experimental poetry” or of a specific “school”, but within a poetry practice that is anti-parochial.

Interestingly, the Burning Deck edition is not present in the Library of Congress catalog, while the next ones are duly listed—one of the librarians there confirmed that the book was submitted—and is remarkably hard to find. Big university libraries in the United States usually own a copy of it; Burning Deck lists it as out of print; on Amazon, it is mixed with or mistaken for later versions. This state of fact oriented later research on the text. Discussions of the book generally mention the way the second version was built on the first, but they hardly ever discuss the differences themselves. Also, Hejinian herself, in an introduction to

her 2009 addendum to *My Life* discussed below, dates this version from 1978, not 1980, thus confusing the date of production with the date of actual publication, and making this first book even more elusive.

The second version of *My Life* is an expansion of the first; nothing has been removed from it, so that the first is literally contained within the second. This could explain, at least partly, why it was deemed unnecessary to ever reprint the first version, which was made obsolete by the second one. This new *My Life*, published in 1987 by Sun & Moon press, was written in 1986 when Hejinian was forty-five. She added eight sections of forty-five sentences at the end of the book, and also added eight sentences within each existing section, making a total of forty-five sections of forty-five sentences each.

Sun & Moon is similar to Burning Deck in several ways. It is a small press which started as a magazine, edited by scholar and writer Douglas Messerli, and became one of the publishers associated with *Language* writing, with authors such as Charles Bernstein and Barrett Watten. Later on, it ceased its activities but *My Life* in its 1987 version was re-printed by Green Integer, another of Messerli's publication ventures, which has allowed the book to remain widely available.

Interestingly, Douglas Messerli is also the editor of one of the first two anthologies of *Language* writing, "*Language*" *poetries*, in 1986. Along with Ron Silliman's *In The American Tree*, published the same year, it was widely influential in that it was a rather precocious, and widely distributed, collection, which contributed to establish *language* writing as an academically useable concept. These two anthologies, which were edited by writers who were themselves involved in the object they were thus defining, also stress the imbrication of poetry, theory and criticism that is one of the key aspects of *language*. Both anthologies contain work by Hejinian, including excerpts of *My Life*.

This second version of *My Life* must be understood in that context: published one year after these two anthologies, it appeared in a particular moment, corresponding to the beginning of an academic attention to the movement (particularly around Jerome McGann and Marjorie Perloff), which made it likely to become the object of more theoretical and political criticism, and also recognizable as a perfect example of what was then being defined as the formal qualities of the *language* school.

In 1997, Lisa Samuels, a poet and academic, published a paper in *Modern Language Studies* entitled "Eight reasons for canonizing *My Life*," criticizing the already well-established book for being "too happy," as if its author were denying the political and historical context of her experience. She wrote: *My Life* "contains neither grappling with evil nor even any real resistance to circumstances" (Samuels, 1997 113). The very existence of this paper is revealing in several ways. First, it makes clear that, since its 1987 edition, *My Life* has indeed been "canonized" (and, as such, likely to be criticized from the point of view of its institutionalization rather from that of its supposed marginality, as hinted at by the small presses and limited distribution). Second, in its content, it plays with one element that has come to be associated with *language*: that of political and social commitment. What Samuels complains of is that *My Life*, to her, does not quite meet the expectations that its author, but also the academic understanding and shaping of *language*, have made it trigger.

In response to Samuel's essay¹, Hejinian produced a hybrid text, "What's missing from *My Life* in the 1950s," which is both an essay and a further extension of the poem, in that at the end of the piece are appended two so-called "exhibits": the ninth section of *My Life* in its 1987 version (contributing to compress the first, 1980 version under the second), and that same 9th section with an extra 15 sentences. The piece was first written as a lecture given in 2004 at a conference on "Diasporic Avant-Gardes: Experimental Poetics and Cultural Displacement," organized by Barrett Watten and Carrie Noland. It was later collected in a series of volumes under the title *The Grand Piano*, defined as the "collective autobiography" of the *Language* movement (Hejinian 2009).

This response may look somewhat belated, as it was produced seven years after Samuel's paper. It might be surmised that this is not unrelated to the growing pressure in American universities to provide more inclusive syllabi and works displaying a form of commitment towards inclusion and an awareness to the social and political issues of their time. *Language*, which was always a gender-inclusive movement, but also one that was racially and socially rather homogeneous, was by then both canonized and likely to be felt somewhat threatened in its canonical position. Hejinian's "corrections" to the 9th section of *My Life* could then be understood as an attempt to protect her credit as a socially committed writer. However, they are also, very certainly, playful. It is a confirmation, after the 1987 expansion, that *My Life* is a text that is always likely to evolve, within and without its book embodiments.

Finally, in 2003, Hejinian published a new extension of her poetic autobiography, this time not strictly speaking in the form of an expansion of the previous version, but as a new book with a new title, *My Life in the Nineties*. It is made of ten sections of fifty-five sentences each. The addition of ten sections of ten more sentences corresponds to ten more years being written about, but Hejinian was fifty-eight, not fifty-five, at the end of the nineties. A few years were left out between the latest version of *My Life* and this addendum, and the gap is reflected in the discrepancy between the author's age and the number of sentences in the section. The twist also points to a certain playful liberty with the rules that seemed to have been set by the two versions of *My Life*. As for Shark Books, it is a New York publisher connected to Shark, a journal of poetics and art writing; the editorial context is still that of small presses and experimental poetry.

These first versions of *My Life* allow to trace the organic evolution and growth of the text itself, from a long poem looking like a paratactic manifesto to a book manifesting its perpetually unfinished, unstable quality. The first version was, first and foremost, an exemplification of the "new sentence" and a meditation on the dissolution of the self, leading to a paradoxical, mock-autobiographical long poem. But the existence of the further versions (in book form and as talk, then paper) situates the formal importance of *My Life* on another ground: it has become an "open" book, likely to be rewritten and expanded along with the evolutions of its author's own life. *My Life* is now read as such: both for the internal qualities already displayed in its first version (and merely continued in the next), and for its external leaning. Curiously enough, then, the "ultimate" edition of *My Life*, gathering some of its versions, seem to make this second aspect invisible.

Putting Together an Academic Edition (2013): New Critical Issues

In 2013, Wesleyan University Press published *My Life and My Life in the Nineties* as a single volume, thus merging the 1987 version of *My Life* together with the 2003 *My Life in the*

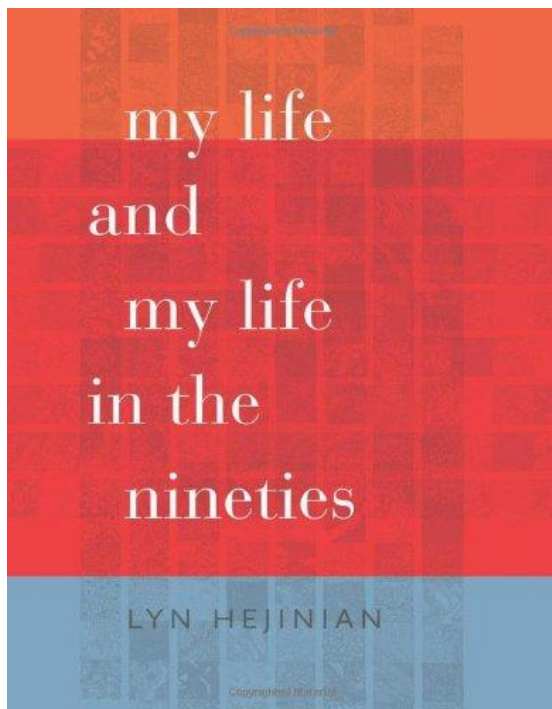
¹ According to a personal email by Hejinian dated July 2014.

Nineties. The 1987 addenda to the 1980 *My Life* are in no way highlighted, so that the 1980 version has been completely absorbed and is impossible to trace within the second version. Because it is a University Press and since by 2013, Hejinian had become a recognized author, the new volume has become the reference edition and can now easily be accessed as a PDF via Project muse from most American libraries.

Not only did the 2013 Wesleyan volume draw a new readership to Hejinian's work, paving the way for its integration into the contemporary canon beyond academic circles, it also had two side effects. First, it encouraged the reading of *My Life and My Life in the Nineties* as one long poem, rather than two separate books, and in so doing, invited readers to consider *My Life and My Life in the Nineties* as the third version of *My Life*. The new cover does not use italics or capital letters to mark the boundary between the two original book titles on the one hand, and the conjunction "and" on the other hand; what we are presented with is instead a new title that merged the two books. Secondly, the new edition "froze" the version academics are most likely to work on, and hinders any easy comparison between the 1980 and the 1987 versions. One may surmise that it does not impede it by accident but is meant to prevent it – in a playful rather than aggressive mode on the part of the author.

There is indeed an element of self-parody in language writing in general, that can be regarded as part of its modernist heritage, and that particularly focuses on the ambiguities of its anti-academic stance – ambiguous because the movement itself is, and defines itself as, theory-conscious, and because, consequently, many poets, including Hejinian, became themselves academics. Charles Bernstein provides an interesting example of this paradoxical stance of *language* poets towards Academia. In *A Poetics* he may denounce workshop poetry and the academic syllabi for their focus on inspiration, confession and the individual voice – all elements against which language poetry built itself; and be presented, on the cover of his latest books (published with Chicago UP), as "the Donald T. Regan Professor of English and Comparative Literature at the University of Pennsylvania, as well as coeditor of L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E, the Electronic Poetry Center, and PennSound, and cofounder of the SUNY-Buffalo Poetics Program. He is a fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences."

One may argue that the anti-academic tradition was all the more influential for the *language* poets that were active in the Bay Area rather than the East Coast, such as Hejinian: they were taken between two poles, one represented by City Lights Bookstore and the beat poets, who were clearly on the anti-academic side, and the other by Berkeley and its Poetics program (which is not an MFA, but a degree mixing poetry and criticism, like Bernstein's Buffalo program).



Cover of the 2013 edition

This apparently ultimate version of the book also leaves aside a number of spin-offs. First of all, Hejinian is not unlikely to write more sequences of her life, which leaves open the question of the book's closure. Besides, "What's missing from *My Life* in the 1950s" is left out. In a way, it is both an "ultimate" version of *My Life*, likely to be used by academics, and an invitation to the more eager reader to leave the realm of academic presses and go look for the real thing in the back catalogues of smaller presses, to dig for the elusive first version in little independent bookshops, to try and find online copies of Hejinian's talk in response to Samuels' criticism... In short, the Wesleyan edition appears like a dead version of an open and, as such, still alive and kicking, text. Really reading it and understanding its growth implies an attitude that is as dynamic on the part of the reader as on that of the writer.

Digital, "open" editions of *My Life*: exploring creative reading in the classroom

In 2015, Daniel Carter, Assistant Professor of Digital Media at Texas State University, published a digital edition of *My Life* meant to compare the 1980 and 1987 versions. Available online (Carter, 2015a) the digital edition also provides Hejinian's "What's missing from *My Life*" as an annex. All of this (Carter's work, as well as Hejinian's works on which it is built) is published under a Creative Commons BY-NC-SA licence, with permissions by Hejinian, Wesleyan UP and Barrett Watten (editor of the *Grand Piano*, in which "What's missing from *My Life*" was published). The licence means that the works must be attributed (BY), cannot be commercialized (NC) and must be shared alike (SA), that is, it can be adapted (if the changes are duly marked and attributed) but shared under the same licence. Carter's open access edition, then, stand at the opposite of the for-profit publishers (if for-very-little-profit) owning the rights of the various versions of and addenda to *My Life*. However, it is plainly consistent with the precocious engagement of *language* writers with online broadcasting (from their Poetics Listserv—an early form of mailing list—to the

Buffalo electronic poetry center founded by Loss Pequeño Glazier and Charles Bernstein at the Poetics Program of SUNY Buffalo in 1995).

Carter's work focuses on repetitions from one version to the other, as well as within each version; in that respect, his edition goes beyond a mere comparison of versions, since another function allows one to consider the repetition of patterns within each version. Hejinian's text revolves indeed around a number of language patterns, sentences or phrases that are taken up from one section to the next with or without variations. This is how Carter describes the programming of his digital edition:

The texts from both editions of *My Life* [the 1980 and 1987 versions] were first transformed into a single CSV file, essentially a list of all the sentences that would appear in the edition. While this method of encoding leaves out metadata such as section breaks, the formal constraints unique to Hejinian's text allow these features to be reassembled when the edition is reconstructed.

Python's `ngram.compare` function was then used to calculate a score representing the difference between each sentence and every other sentence, such that identical sentences receive a score of one and sentences that theoretically have no similarity receive a score of zero. This method of calculating similarity is commonly used, and the edition shows it to be effective at identifying the repeated motifs in the text. (Carter, 2015b)

It is striking that the comparison is based on the sentence as a unit of composition. This is not a neutral stance, as Carter himself admits (it leaves out "section breaks"), but it is one that is justified by the formal composition of the book. There are no paragraphs in *My Life* and the only breaks are, indeed, those between the various sections (each corresponding to one year), as well as the headline of sorts opening each section (actually situated in the upper-right-hand corner of the page), which is a sentence taken from another section. More importantly, Hejinian's work is highly paratactic: the sentences have no obvious connections with each other, do not follow; as such, they are the sole unit of composition. It partakes to what her fellow language-poet Ron Silliman has termed the "new sentence", as the new basic unit for prose poetry. In a 1987 landmark essay, Silliman wrote: "I am going to make an argument, that there is such a thing as a new sentence and that it occurs thus far more or less exclusively in the prose of the Bay Area.[...]" (Silliman 1987 63). He went on to list the qualities affixed to this "new sentence":

- 1) The paragraph organizes the sentences;
- 2) The paragraph is a unity of quantity, not logic or argument;
- 3) Sentence length is a unit of measure;
- 4) Sentence structure is altered for torque, or increased polysemy/ ambiguity;
- 5) Syllogistic movement is: (a) limited; (b) controlled;
- 6) Primary syllogistic movement is between the preceding and following sentences;
- 7) Secondary syllogistic movement is toward the paragraph as a whole, or the total work;
- 8) The limiting of syllogistic movement keeps the reader's attention at or very close to the level of language, that is, most often at the sentence level or below. (Silliman 1987 91)

What Silliman calls here the "syllogistic movement", that is to say the logical organization of propositions leading to a conclusion, itself expressed in a proposition, can be assimilated to,

broadly, the logical continuity of a series of sentences. With the so-called “new sentence”, this logical continuity is “limited” and “controlled”: in other words, the blocks of prose resist logic, narration and conclusion. In the same essay, Silliman quotes a poem by Carla Harryman, a *language* poet and friend (and occasional co-author) of Hejinian’s; *My Life* is also exemplary and often quoted as such, along with Silliman’s own *Ketjak*, for instance.

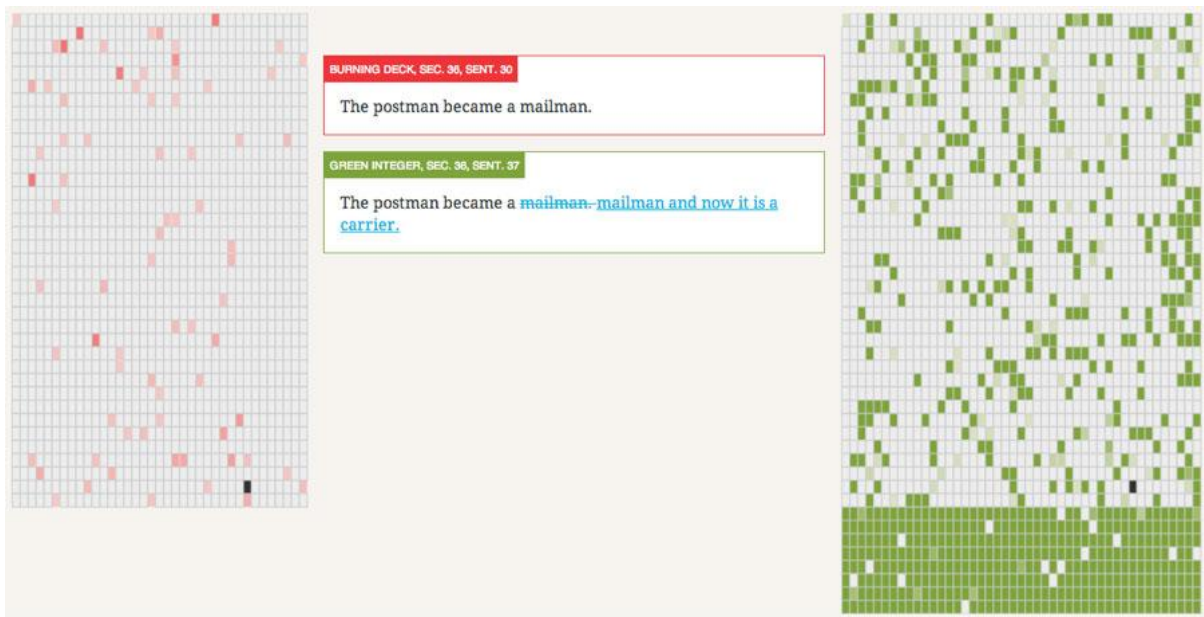
In his introduction to *language* writing, Bob Perelman provided a convenient definition of Silliman’s “new sentence”, stressing parataxis as its main productive principle:

To simplify his [Silliman’s] wide-ranging discussion, a new sentence is more or less ordinary itself but gains its effect by being placed next to another sentence to which it has tangential relevance. New sentences are not subordinated to a larger narrative frame nor are they thrown together at random. Parataxis is crucial: the internal, autonomous meaning of a new sentence is heightened, questioned, and changed by the degree of separation or connection that the reader perceives with regard to the surrounding sentences. (Perelman 1993)

What the “new sentence” also implies is that the distinction between prose and verse is no longer relevant for the poems produced in this way: the sentence being the unit of composition, a line break would only double the final stop. Carter’s programming, then, is consistent with the formal composition of *My Life*, and likely to provide a relevant mode of comparison. Carter goes on:

The logic for the digital edition, written in d3.js, uses the list of sentences and the scores for their relations to visualize the two versions as grids of rectangles, one for each sentence and arranged according to the sections in *My Life*. Thus, the grid representing the 1980 Burning Deck edition consists of thirty-seven rows of thirty-seven rectangles, and the grid representing the 2002 Green Integer reprint of the 1987 Sun and Moon edition consists of forty-five rows of forty-five rectangles. Clicking on individual rectangles highlights the corresponding sentence in the other version (if applicable) and brings up the text of both sentences with their differences highlighted. Rather than determining matching sentences manually, the edition uses the computed relation scores to determine if a match is found, and these scores are also used to highlight in blue similar sentences found throughout the versions, giving users a way to view the variations of phrases that repeat throughout the work. Similarly, users can choose to view a representation of all the differences between the versions as well as all the repeated phrases. Again, these functions rely on the computed relation scores, with a manually defined cutoff for what constitutes a repeated phrase. (Carter, 2015b)

Here is the resulting graph displayed as an illustration in Carter’s introduction to his edition, reproduced here with the author’s own caption:



A representation of the differences between the two versions of *My Life* included in this edition. The amount of change is represented by opacity, with lighter-colored rectangles representing minor changes. The area at the bottom of the right grid represents the sections added in the later forty-five-section edition. Uncolored rectangles in that area represent sentences that are repeated from elsewhere in the text. (Carter, 2015b)

Carter’s edition changes our understanding of *My Life* on several levels. First, it makes all versions widely available for scholars—though in a peculiar format, since anyone interested in reading one version in its entirety must click on rectangle after rectangle within each grid so as to read it sentence by sentence. Surprisingly, though somewhat anecdotally, it also reveals minor changes that had not been discussed previously; Hejinian’s own claims that the 1987 version was built solely through the additions of sentences and sections turn out to have been misleading. Most of these internal revisions have to do with spelling corrections (“knickknacks” is changed to “knickknacks”, “marvelling” to “marveling”): they can generally be dismissed as insignificant, especially as they are likely to be editorial, not authorial, revisions. Others, however, affect the punctuation, or single words, as when “the secret to the song” becomes “the secret of the song” (emphasis added). In these cases, what Carter’s edition reveals is actually Hejinian once again correcting the proofs of the 1980 book. Finally, there are proper additions, usually placed at the end of a sentence, as when “In every country is a word which attempts the sound of cats” becomes “In every country is a word which attempts the sound of cats, to match an inisolable portrait in the clouds to a din in the air” (emphasis added).

What matters here, as much as the changes themselves, is that Hejinian in her many talks and writings about *My Life* never once mentions them, insisting instead on the processual construction and its mathematical, fixed grid while in fact she gave herself more room for maneuver than she pretends. Once again, there might be something playfully misleading in this: these changes are elusive, and reserved to those readers who will actually go look for them; they create a form of complicity that stresses the involvement of the reader in the making of the text.

The great merit of Carter’s digital edition therefore is that it enables readers to quickly identify and grasp what actually happened from one version to the next. Before the digital

edition existed—when the 1987 and 2013 editions were the only editions widely available—, scholars were extremely limited in their comparative work. At the same time, one could argue that there was something highly stimulating in this very limitation: it led one to make hypotheses about which sentences were added in 1987 and where and thus paved the way for further speculations as to the next possibilities of growth for the text. As such, it also called for a “creative” reading. This could suggest other ways of editing *My Life*, especially for teaching purposes: a digital edition that not only reveals, but encourages, the “openness” of the text.

To refer to *My Life* as an “open text” is to summon an intellectual and aesthetic context in which openness, or what Hejinian termed “the rejection or closure,” is given particular value. In her now famous 1993 lecture “The Rejection of Closure”—later collected in *The Language of Inquiry*—Hejinian characterized “open” and “closed” as follows:

We can say that a “closed text” is one in which all the elements of the work are directed toward a single reading of it. Each element confirms that reading and delivers the text from any lurking ambiguity. In the “open text,” meanwhile, all the elements of the work are maximally excited. (Hejinian, 2000 42–43)

She then added a point about “re-arrangement within a work” that strongly resonates with the various versions of *My Life*:

Though they may be different in different texts, depending on other elements in the work and by all means on the intention of the writer, it is not hard to discover devices—structural devices—that may serve to “open” a poetic text. One set of such devices has to do with arrangement and, particularly, with re-arrangement within a work. The “open text,” by definition, is open to the world and particularly to the reader. It invites participation, rejects the authority of the writer over the reader and thus, by analogy, the authority implicit in other (social, economic, cultural) hierarchies. It speaks for writing that is generative rather than directive. The writer relinquishes total control and challenges authority as a principle and control as a motive. The “open text” often emphasizes or foregrounds process, either the process of the original composition or of subsequent compositions by readers, and thus resists the cultural tendencies that seek to identify and fix material and turn it into a product; that is, it resists reduction and commodification. (Hejinian, 2000 43)

Hejinian is heir to the Barthesian death of the author (which becomes here a rejection of authority in its various meanings) as well as to Umberto Eco’s *opera aperta*. The “open” form is one that is meant to engage the reader and to erase (or stage the erasure of) the writer—even in a text that presents itself as somehow autobiographical. The device here mentioned, that of “re-arrangement within a work”, is indeed one that “emphasizes or foregrounds process”: that of “the original composition” (here, the various versions of *My Life*) as well as that of “subsequent compositions by readers” (any aspect of creative reading).

From that perspective, one might argue that the Wesleyan edition goes counter to Hejinian’s defense of openness: the compositional process is no longer “emphasized,” it is hidden, as readers cannot locate the changes that were made between the first two editions. However, while it doesn’t emphasize process understood as the “process of original composition,” the 2013 print edition nonetheless reveals another process, that of “subsequent compositions by readers,” as Hejinian puts it. Indeed, readers are left to wonder where the added sentences or phrases are, so that, instead of limiting readers in their work, the Wesleyan edition leads them onto a more active and perhaps even a more poetic consideration of the book itself.

With this in mind, it would make sense to have another digital edition of *My Life*, not only as a way to provide easier access to all existing versions, but as a means to experiment with processual writing itself. Teaching *My Life*, consequently, might thus be able to focus on a practical understanding of its paratactic construction.

In one of few papers comparing the first two versions of *My Life*, Marjorie Perloff emphasized the differences by printing one section (the ninth) in its 1987 version while capitalizing the “new” sentences—those that did not appear in the 1980 version (Perloff 1991). It would be interesting to explore alternative ways of making the differences visible, while also providing a seamless version of the text together with the addenda. One might for instance imagine ways of visualizing an expanding text, through two images displayed one after the other section by section for each section: such a display might improve access to the variations while at the same time maintaining their seamless quality.

Perhaps more importantly, digital editions allow not only for comparison but also for manipulation. Manipulating the text would be particularly creative and enlightening in the classroom; not just because it would make it more “open” to reader participation, but also because it is a way to understand, through active learning, Hejinian’s own choices in placing the additions she made. Students could try and rearrange the sentences and observe the effect thus created, consider the reconfiguration of the context (the preceding and succeeding sentences) of each sentence.

In particular, the re-contextualization at work in the placement of these sentences provides a fertile ground for comparing the various meanings or connotations added by each instance of a repetition or mock-repetition. In “The Rejection of Closure,” Hejinian is commenting specifically on *My Life* when she writes that repetition is a mode of challenging

our inclination to isolate, identify, and limit the burden of meaning given to an event (the sentence or the line). Here, where certain phrases recur in the work, recontextualized and with new emphasis, repetition disrupts the initial apparent meaning scheme. The initial reading is adjusted; meaning is set in motion, emended and extended, and the rewriting that repetition becomes postpones completion of the thought indefinitely. (Hejinian, 2000 44)

My Life is full of recurring phrases and patterns; in many cases, the addition of new “new sentences” between instances of repeated patterns can further separate two occurrences or on the contrary, bring them closer. The sentence becomes an “event” that is both autonomous and highly reactive to context, as Silliman writes in *The New Sentence*:

The new sentence is a decidedly contextual object. Its effects occur as much between, as within, sentences. Thus it reveals that the blank space, between words or sentences, is much more than the 27th letter of the alphabet. It is beginning to explore and articulate just what those hidden capacities might be. (Silliman, 1987 92)

The manipulations rendered possible by a digital edition would make it possible for students to work on the “blank space” and fully experience its importance by experimenting with it. They could perhaps take the basic units of the texts—the sentences—as the various pieces of a puzzle, and consider the visual effect, through basic drag-and-drop, of the removal or displacement of these various pieces. The point would not so much be to support a rather cliché version of “openness” – the idea of “reader participation” as letting the reader rearrange the work and claim authority over it; rather, it would lead them to consider new meanings that emerge through the author’s own choices. The exercise is not so much one in creative writing as in “creative (w)reading”—to quote Charles Bernstein in *Attack Of The Difficult Poems*

(Bernstein 2011 43). Bernstein, *language* poet and (resistant) academic, explains here his own strategies for teaching poetry:

I try to create possibilities for reading as creative performance and as a ground for subsequent critical interpretation, based on the aesthetic principle that you can't interpret what you don't experience. Many new, but also many highly experienced, readers of poetry have a difficult time accessing the poetic strata of a work, that is, those elements that make a piece of writing a poem as opposed to . . . well let's just say prose. To counter this anaesthesia, I have a threefold plan. First, I ask students to do interactive and creative responses to assigned readings, including imitations, memorizations, rearrangements, word or phrase substitutions, homolinguistic (English to English) translations/ transpositions, and other "wreading" experiments that involve reordering or rearranging a poem's words, lines, or stanzas, as well as locating or isolating certain key linguistic, figurative, and rhetorical features of the poem. (Bernstein 2011 44)

One can easily see how "imitations" (having the students write their own *My Life* and experiment with the difficulty of resisting logical connexions between adjacent sentences) and "rearrangements" (this time easily made possible by a digital edition) may apply to a study of Hejinian's work in the classroom.

In a recent pamphlet about the teaching of literature in schools and universities, Jean-Marie Schaeffer argues for such a practical teaching of poetry, which echoes Bernstein's "creative (w)reading" (Schaeffer 2011). Schaeffer points out that, with poetry, the temporality of reading is different. Because it demands closer attention to sound and rhythm, poetry is slower to read, and it is also slower to understand. By focusing students' attention on practical experimentation, the digital manipulations would help them overcome an initial sense of frustration, of "not being able to understand," by letting them experience the making of the text, rather than its resistance.

In sum, what Schaeffer calls for is a cultural shift: clearly, digital technology can help make this shift happen, bringing readers—and among them, students—closer to a creative reading and teaching of poetry, one that might fruitfully incorporate gamification at the service of a truly critical, editorial and pedagogical experience.

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