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► **To cite this version:**

| Chloé Thomas. The Print and Digital Editions of Lyn Hejinian's My Life. 2023. hal-03821743v2

HAL Id: hal-03821743

<https://hal.science/hal-03821743v2>

Preprint submitted on 5 Mar 2024 (v2), last revised 2 Jul 2024 (v3)

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Paper submitted to *Transatlantica*, accepted, to be published. Revised version.

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

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 then 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 variants between the 1980 and 1987 versions. 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 and pedagogical work on the text, as well as on its position in the American poetic canon. It eventually suggests further ways of editing *My Life* digitally, 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, mais aussi sur sa position dans le canon poétique américain. Enfin, nous imaginons d'autres usages possibles d'une édition numérique, destinés 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, first published in 1980, has since become the most widely known example of Language writing, as well as 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 1970s as a loose group of poets and critics influenced by Gertrude Stein, William Carlos Williams and Louis Zukofsky. In his "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 gathered around a manifesto or explicit program, 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 74)

These various qualities—non-referentiality, programmatic construction, political commitment, inclination towards theory and a critique of the lyric “I”—can be found in some or all versions of *My Life*, which helps 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 such as the *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* magazine (founded in 1978) and small presses such as Tuumba Press (founded by Hejinian herself) and This Press (founded by Barrett Watten). The various editions of, and additions to, *My Life* should therefore be analyzed within this editorial context. It is also important not to overlook the impact that a growing academic interest for Language poetry has had on Hejinian’s writing since the mid-1980s. Like many Language poets, Hejinian is now both a writer and an academic, and highly self-reflexive in both capacities.

This paper will examine the various versions of *My Life*, focusing in particular on its move from small to academic presses. While scholarly editions are often meant to help readers navigate the various manuscript and print versions of a text, typically with lists of variants, the publication of *My Life* at Wesleyan UP interestingly leaves these differences invisible. This editorial choice paradoxically encourages researchers to rely on other editions as well, thus maintaining the text and its author in an in-between zone linking academia and a less academic poetry scene. Similarly, the 2015 digital edition, which is aimed for scholars and teachers alike, confirms the established status of the book in college syllabi while favoring its openness over any sense of closure that may result from canonization. These recent editions, one may argue, canonize *My Life* as an open text, not as a historicized classic.

The First Print Versions of *My Life*: Establishing a Procedural Pattern

The first version of *My Life*, published with Burning Deck in 1980, presents itself as a seemingly autobiographical prose poem divided into short, unnumbered sections. Hejinian first wrote it in 1978 when she was thirty-seven, and this version is made up of thirty-seven sections of thirty-seven sentences each: from the start, it posited a formal constraint as its mode of production. Stylistically, it corresponds to what Ron Silliman later termed the “new sentence.” 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. (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 broadly be assimilated to 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) as being exemplary of the new sentence. In his 1993 introduction to Language writing, Bob Perelman provided a convenient definition of Silliman’s “new sentence,” underlining 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 313)

Although Silliman notes the visibility of the “new sentence” on the West Coast (Silliman, *The New Sentence* 88), he does not mention *My Life* in the essay; but the poem, from its first version, happens to be a very good example of the “new sentence”, as this excerpt from the 1980 version shows:

Those birds are saying, over and over, this tree, my branch, my field of seeds, my herd of worms. Thus was it told to me. I made signs to them to be as quiet as possible. It was at this time, I think, that I became interested in science. Yet that was only a coincidence. The penny disk, the rarer dollar disk. Her hair is the color of a brass bedstead. We were proud of our expertise, distinguishing the ripe ears of corn from the green, speaking knowledgeably of tassles and the breeds of corn: Butter & Sugar, Country Gentleman, Honey & Cream, Silver Queen. The old dirt road, broken into clods and gullies, or clods and ruts, over which I was walking under some noisy trees, had been reversed in the dark. (Hejinian, *My Life*; anthologized in Silliman, 2002 51)

Each section seems to deal roughly with one year of the author’s 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 father returning from the war, pregnancies, the beginning of a relationship. Because of its form and its proximity to the genre of autobiography, *My Life* functions as a book-length poem: it is not a “collection” *per se*, nor can it easily be churned out into excerpts of a few sentences.

When Hejinian wrote the first version of *My Life*, Language poetry was already burgeoning. The *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* magazine had just been founded by Charles Bernstein and Bruce Andrews, which helped associate the movement with the name, even though “Language” had been in use since the early 1970s (Dworkin 880). It had been preceded by another magazine, *This*, edited by Barrett Watten and Robert Grenier, which published a great number of what would later be regarded as the major contributors to the group: Ron Silliman, Bob Perelman, Kit Robinson, Steve Benson, Rae Armantrout, and Hejinian herself. For this generation of poets, small magazines and presses were highly significant: Jerome McGann noted in 1987 that

“One of the most significant aspects of this work, in fact, has been the care with which it has built up an extensive (marginal) network of publishing and distribution. The decision was made that there was little future for poetry in the cultural centre, and alternative structures were fashioned” (McGann, 1987). These emerging poets tended to turn away from T. S. Eliot, the poet whom they had all extensively studied at school in scholarly editions, and whose *Criterion* well illustrates the transformation of “small magazine” modernism into a more widely broadcast, less marginalized type of writing. Instead, they claimed Gertrude Stein, Louis Zukofsky or Wallace Stevens as their forerunner: poets who, like Eliot, were associated with the short-lived, small-circulated magazines of the 1920s, yet 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 magazines evolved into small presses, thus providing a space for book-length works, including single-author collections, one-time anthologies such as *Legend* (1980), or long poems.

Burning Deck, although it predated the existence of Language writing, was one of the small presses that published the authors associated with it. Located in Providence, Rhode Island, it started off as a magazine in 1961, and soon developed into a publisher of poetry pamphlets. In a 1982 preface to their anthology *A Century in Two Decades, 1961-1981*, Burning Deck 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 unprogrammatic company. (Waldrop and Waldrop; quoted in Brown University Library)

The Waldrops were also poets in their own right, who are 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. They were themselves on the “academic” side, in that they were grad-school-educated and closely associated with Brown University, where Kenneth Waldrop started teaching in 1968. Hejinian had already published a chapbook with Burning Deck in 1977 entitled *A Mask of Motion*. The first edition of *My Life*, then, situates the book not so much in the field of “experimental poetry” or any specific “school,” but within a poetry practice that is anti-parochial, and that does not see the gap between academic writers and marginal ones as unbridgeable. It is precisely in this gap that *My Life* later kept growing.

Interestingly, the Burning Deck edition was only added into the Library of Congress catalog very recently, in September 2022, while until that date, only the subsequent editions had been duly listed—one of the librarians there confirmed that the book had been submitted but had long remained remarkably hard to find. Big university libraries in the United States usually own a copy of it, but Burning Deck lists it as out of print. On Amazon, it is mixed with or mistaken for later versions. This state of fact has certainly inflected later research on the text. Discussions of the book generally mention the way the second version was built on the first, but hardly ever consider in detail the differences between the two, with the notable exception of Perloff’s article “The Sweet Aftertaste of Artichokes” (reprinted in a different form in *Radical Artifice*), and Daniel Carter’s digital edition (Perloff, ‘The Sweet Aftertaste of Artichokes. The Lobes of

Autobiography: Lyn Hejinian's *My Life*'; Perloff, *Radical Artifice* 162–70; Carter, 'Encoding and Representing Repetition in Lyn Hejinian's *My Life*').

The second version of *My Life* is an expansion of the first, of which nothing has been removed. This might partly explain why it was deemed unnecessary to ever reprint it, as if it had been made obsolete by the second one. This new edition of *My Life* (Hejinian, 1987), published in 1987 by Sun & Moon Press, was written in 1986 when Hejinian was forty-five. In accordance with the constraint she had started from, she added eight sections of forty-five sentences at the end of the book, as well as eight sentences within each existing section, resulting in a total of forty-five sections of forty-five sentences each. In a retrospective comment on this 1987 edition, Hejinian writes that "the suggestion that this is an ongoing project, an incomplete work, a *Bildungspoem* (or *Bildungsgedicht*) that cannot fully (or successfully) account for itself is made consciously and intentionally" (Hejinian, 2015). While the first edition could be regarded as a finished, closed entity, the second, by understanding the numerical structure of the first as a pattern to be continued, already contains the possibility of its successors.

Sun & Moon Press is in many ways similar to Burning Deck. It is a small press that started off as a magazine, edited by scholar and writer Douglas Messerli, before becoming one of the publishing houses closely associated with Language writing, especially through Charles Bernstein and Barrett Watten. It later 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 through at least five reprints (Spahr 156 note 8) until the Wesleyan edition appeared.

Douglas Messerli is also the editor of one of the first two anthologies of Language writing, "*Language*" *Poetries*, which came out in 1987 (Messerli, 1987). Along with Ron Silliman's *In the American Tree*, published a year prior (Silliman, *In the American Tree*), this anthology was widely influential in that it was a rather precocious collection of Language writing. It had been preceded by two special issues of the *Paris Review* and *boundary 2* edited by Charles Bernstein in 1983 and 1984, respectively, as well as a sampler in French translation in *Change* (Bernstein, 1982; Bernstein, 1985-1986; Valaoritis); but Messerli's was relatively widely distributed, which helped establish Language writing as a concept. Reviewing the two anthologies, both edited by writers who were themselves involved in the movement, for *The London Review of Books*, Jerome McGann notes of "*Language*" *Poetries* that

New Directions has a distinguished list of Modernist and early 20th-century avant-garde writing. Its earlier successes were so great, however, that it has itself ceased to be regarded as an organ of contemporary experimental work. Today New Directions is a significant, if small establishment publisher with distinct centre-right political associations. (McGann, 1987)

The two anthologies, as McGann proceeds to show, are very different in their purpose, to the point that Silliman, although one of the main figures of the San Francisco Language scene, refused to appear in Messerli's (see the latter's retrospective comment in Messerli, 2003). Their difference lies, according to McGann, in their understanding of and commitment to the avant-garde situation of their corpus.

Messerli's is very much an attempt to win new readers for Language Writing. It is a relatively small book whose selections have been carefully chosen to accommodate first-time readers. None of the theoretical prose discussions of poetics, writing and society are included, and the verse is generally on its best behaviour. '*Language*' *Poetries* tries to be an accessible book. ... *In the American Tree* is an interpretation of the meaning of Language Writing as a

set of social and cultural practices with a distinct historical shape. The anthology is itself a piece of Language Writing, an extension of that movement insofar as it has been calling for a radical renovation of society at those fundamental levels of the consciousness industries: communication, writing, textual production. Where Messerli's anthology tries to open a conversation with established culture, Silliman's continues to insist that it is the established culture which will have to change. He will not be moved. (McGann, 1987)

Both anthologies contain work by Hejinian and include excerpts from *My Life*. *In the American Tree*, for instance, features a continuum of three sections taken in the middle of the book, thus giving a sense of its larger structure.

The second version of *My Life*, then, appeared just as the movement was gaining new readership and beginning to draw the attention of scholars; and its publisher was instrumental in the process. In the late 1980s, Language consequently also became engaged in self-reflection about its status and relation to academic institutions. This timeliness made *My Life* even more likely to become the focus of theoretical and political criticism, and to be recognized as a good example of what was then being defined as the Language school, with formal qualities such as openness, parataxis, and the "decentering of the I" (McGann, 1990 6). It was commented early on: Perloff, who had already mentioned the book briefly in a 1984 article on Language, reprinted in her 1985 *The Dance of the intellect* (Perloff, 'The Word as Such: L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Poetry in the Eighties'; Perloff, 'The Word as Such: L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Poetry in the Eighties'), published a seminal article on *My Life*, this time comparing the first two versions of the book, in 1991 (Perloff, 'The Sweet Aftertaste of Artichokes. The Lobes of Autobiography: Lyn Hejinian's My Life'). In her 1996 "Resignifying Autobiography: Lyn Hejinian's *My Life*" (Spahr), Juliana Spahr lists a large number of articles and books mentioning *My Life*, from the mid-1980s to the early 1990s, many of them from fellow Language poets (Charles Bernstein, Rae Armantrout, Michael Davidson, Barrett Watten) but not exclusively.

Further Addenda: Deviating from the pattern

In 1997, poet and academic Lisa Samuels published a paper in *Modern Language Studies* entitled "Eight Justifications For Canonizing Lyn Hejinian's *My Life*" (Samuels). She begins by showing, as Spahr had done, that the "canonizing" of the book was now granted: it was "taught, apparently as an exemplar of contemporary experimental poetry," at high school and university level in America, and, by 1996, it had known six reprints and has reached the relatively modest but still significant sales amount of 8,000 copies (Samuels 103). It has also received attention from "small prestigious journals" as well as "more mainstream academic journals" (103). Samuels then proceeds to examine the reasons which have led to or helped the process, while being herself aggressively critical of the book. Her first argument, "understandability," relies on what she perceives as a dichotomy in Hejinian's already significant corpus, separating her more difficult, experimental works from her easier ones, among which *My Life*, which "remains the one most understandable work of hers which is readily available. How interesting that it is the one the academy most attends." (105). The point is reminiscent of what has often been said of Gertrude Stein, and her compromising with what she termed "audience writing" when she started publishing easier and more commercially successful books such as *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*. More generally, Samuels' argument fits in a general dialectic model of the avant-garde, which becomes suspect of selling

out from the moment when it becomes “readily available” and / or the object of academic interest.

Samuels, however, also expresses more specific reproaches. Among them is what she terms the “Happiness Project” of *My Life*. According to Samuels, *My Life* “contains neither grappling with evil nor even any real resistance to circumstances” (113). Earlier in the article, Samuels insisted that, far from conveying “the archetypal life of a young American girl” (Perloff, *The Dance of the Intellect* 225), *My Life* tells of “a privileged American childhood in the prosperous 1950s. So far so good, born in 1941, and educated at Harvard, as Hejinian was. We go from cars to kitchens to parks to books, in scenes of childhood and adulthood, and unexpected particulars are generally overmastered by predictable events” (Samuels 106). Although she notes that the changes made in the second edition are often darker, Samuels insists that *My Life* “keeps on the sunny side” of 1980s postmodernism (115).

A few years later, Hejinian produced a hybrid text entitled “What’s missing from *My Life* in the 1950s” which can be regarded, among other things, as an answer to Samuels’ criticism. It is both an essay and a further extension of the poem, in that at the end of the piece, two “exhibits” are appended: the ninth section of *My Life* in its 1987 version (contributing to compress the original 1980 version under the second), and that same ninth section with an extra fifteen sentences. The piece was first written as a lecture delivered 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 into a series of volumes under the title *The Grand Piano*, defined as the “collective autobiography” of the Language movement (16–47), and just reprinted in the book of essays *Allegorical moments* (114–36).

The text is in fact a very ambiguous piece. On the one hand, it claims to be unapologetic about “what is missing,” insisting on the nature of the project (“a work of memory not of history,” “intended as a portrait of memory’s work at identity-in-the-making”), as well as on the fact that the memories appearing in this section are those of a nine-year-old child who cannot be blamed, let alone self-blamed, for not remembering some of the political events occurring in California and the world in 1950. On the other hand, it proceeds to provide facts about a selection of external events, most prominently the Loyalty Oath controversy at UC Berkeley (when faculty members were required to sign a written statement asserting that they were not members of the communist party), and the “family romance” exemplified by the media coverage of the family life of the then governor of California, Earl Warren. The ninth section is then appended in two versions, one from 1987 and the other enlarged from it.

Hejinian’s “corrections” to the ninth section of *My Life* might be understood, at first sight, as an attempt to protect her credit as a socially committed writer, by acknowledging the darker events of 1950. But they all remain “self-centered” – a phrase that must be heard as programmatic, not derogatory: they are memories from that year, often vague, always concerned with the familiar, family- and school-oriented world of a nine-year old, sometimes in the form of short scenes, sometimes as echoes of adult words: “One Sunday afternoon my father painted the front porch of our house a gentle gray, beginning at the bottom of the five steps leading up to it and painting back, from the left and then the right, until finally, opening the door, he painted from the threshold, stepped back, and closed us in;” “Ambivalence has the force of comparison.” A few of the extra sentences account for the violent events occurring outside the family home, entering it, one assumes, via parental conversations or the radio: “Some nights I fell asleep while still imagining the precise processes of torture, but other nights I managed to stay awake and progress to the part in my narrative in which I withstood the pain,

held out, betraying nothing and no one;” “Severed limbs are flung from houses leaving behind the gentle spirits of maimed men.” The Loyalty Oath controversy is mentioned in “He stated that I am not a member of the Communist Party or any other organization which advocates the overthrow of the Government by force or violence, and, though it would seem to contradict this he said too that I have no commitments in conflict with my responsibilities with respect to impartial scholarship and free pursuit of truth.” And Nina Warren’s attack of poliomyelitis provides a potential background to “Alone, I practiced paralysis.”

Here, Hejinian seems to be following the procedure established by the second edition, adding new sentences within the previous version. There are, however, three major differences: the extra sentences are set in bold type to be made visible; the strict correspondence between the age of the writer and the number of sentences in the section is lost; and at least some external sources for these otherwise little-situated memories are provided in the piece to which this new ninth section is appended, thus changing completely the reading experience. Among the eight reasons listed by Samuels which led to the “canonization” of *My Life* was what she called “motivated proceduralism,” namely the arithmetic correspondence between the number of sections and sentences and the age of the writer. Samuels concluded: “Hejinian’s method, because its artifice is not inexplicable or (apparently) perverse, might well be more palatable to teaching and critical worlds in search of reasons, and wary, or weary, of the postmodern arbitrary” (108). In what may be regarded as her answer to Samuels, then, Hejinian adds a twist to her procedure, making it more elusive, more arbitrary, and consequently, less likely to be regarded as excessively “palatable.”

There is, it seems, something more playful than overtly defensive in “What’s missing from *My Life*”; or rather, the defence it provides is an amused diversion. The text does confirm, after the 1987 expansion, that *My Life* is always likely to evolve, within and without its different book forms; but more deeply, that these further developments do not and will not necessarily follow the pattern that was established by the first two editions. It becomes an “open” text in which “openness” touches not only the content of the text but its underlying program, patterns, procedures and apparent constraints.

This deviation from the initial pattern of development is confirmed by the new extension that Hejinian published in 2003, as a separate book bearing a new title, *My Life in the Nineties*. The publisher, Shark Books, based in New York, was connected to *Shark*, a journal of poetics and art writing: the editorial context is still that of small presses and experimental poetry. It comprises ten sections of fifty-five sentences each. Hejinian was fifty-eight, not fifty-five, at the end of the nineties, as if a few years were left out between the two versions, a gap reflected in the discrepancy between the author’s age and the number of sentences in the section. The twist points, once again, to a certain freedom from the rules that seemed to have been set by the previous versions of *My Life*.

These first instances of *My Life* allow us to trace the organic growth of the text, from a long poem exemplifying some of the main features of Language writing, making it look like a manifesto, to a book manifesting its perpetually unfinished and unstable quality. The first version provided an illustration of the “new sentence” and a meditation on the dissolution of the self, leading to a paradoxical, mock-autobiographical long poem. But it also contained from the start the possibility of its own extension, given the age-structure correspondence. The existence of the further versions (in book form and as talk, then paper) confirm the fact, while also, more unexpectedly, suggesting new modes of development. These various iterations of the poem situates the formal importance of *My Life* as an “open” book, likely to be rewritten

and expanded with the evolutions of its author's own life. *My Life* can now read both for the internal qualities already displayed in its first version (and continued in the next), and for its playful procedural mode. Curiously enough, then, the "ultimate" edition of *My Life*, gathering only some of its versions and merging them into one, seems, at first sight, to make this second aspect less visible.

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

When in 2013 Wesleyan University Press published *My Life and My Life in the Nineties* as a single volume, it gathered together the 1987 *My Life* and the 2003 *My Life in the Nineties*. The 1987 addenda to the 1980 edition were in no way demarcated, so that the earlier version was completely absorbed and became impossible to trace within the later one. Because Wesleyan University Press is an academic publishing house, the new volume has become the standard edition in school syllabi, and it can easily be accessed as a PDF file from most American libraries.

The 2013 Wesleyan volume drew a new readership to Hejinian's work, paving the way for its integration into the contemporary canon beyond academic circles: it was reviewed, for instance, in the *Chicago Tribune*, with the reviewer stating "'My Life' is never going to be one of my favorite books, but it should be read by anyone interested in American poetry" (Robbins). Many of the readers rating the book on Goodreads mention having had to read it "for class" (Goodreads). But the publication also had two major side effects. First, it encouraged readers to consider *My Life* and *My Life in the Nineties* as one long poem, rather than two separate books. Since the new cover (fig. 1) does not use italics or capital letters to mark the boundary between the two original book titles (brought together by the conjunction "and"), we are presented with what looks like a new title altogether: *my life and my life in the nineties*. Secondly, by choosing the 1987 edition and not making the differences with the previous one visible, it hindered any easy comparison between the two.

This could very well be a deliberate choice on the part of the author. There is indeed something deeply ironic in Language writing in general—connected, perhaps, to its modernist heritage—which targets particularly the ambiguities of its own anti-academic stance. As a movement, Language writing is, and defines itself as, theory-conscious. Silliman's anthology *In the American Tree* typically contains a section of essays, entitled "Second front." Many of the poets involved, including of course Hejinian herself, became academics. The process happened progressively, though, and is relatively parallel to the integration of Language writing into college syllabi. Hejinian did not start teaching on a regular basis until 1990, and was recruited at UC Berkeley only in 2000, in her capacity of "poet;" she does not hold a PhD (Campbell et al.). But while in 1992 Linda Reinfeld could write that "few Language poets support themselves as full-time academics" (Reinfeld, 22), David Arnold, in 2007, already noted that "several of those involved have accepted academic appointments" (the footnote mentions Susan Howe and Barrett Watten) (Arnold 1), and actually devotes the first chapter of his monograph to what he calls the "scholarly life Language writing," providing a bird's-eye view of its institutionalisation. This phenomenon lies at the bottom of Samuels' essay, which investigates how *My Life* became what she calls "a clear candidate for academic canonization" (Samuels 103). More broadly, it touches on the later phase of any successful avant-garde. Discussing Paul Mann's *Theory-Death of the Avant-Garde* (Mann), Language writer Barrett Watten begins by acknowledging the apparent "historical contradiction of the tenured radical" (46), which to Mann leads to the demise of the avant-garde into hermeneutic circularity. Watten, discussing Modernism, then proceeds to claim the positivity of such a relationship between theory and

practice, leaving open the possibility of just as positive a relationship between academia and avant-garde writing practices. In Watten's rephrasing of Mann, "the avant-garde dies into theory simultaneously when its political critique turns into an empty circularity of discourse, and when its radical forms are reduced to commodities exchanged in the market and collected by museums" (46). While the Wesleyan edition of *My Life* may well be compared to this process of commodification and collection (the university press just replacing the museum), the object itself could also, in fact, be regarded as an optimistic way of navigating late, institutional avant-gardism. There is an element of self-parody in the very existence of the academic edition, which appeared while Hejinian is alive, writing and teaching. Accepting her work to be collected and republished by an academic press is certainly a way of acknowledging the institutionalization of Language writing in general and of *My Life* in particular; but by making of this new edition one which, in fact, does not contain exactly the same thing as the scattered, small-press items that it is supposed to collect, since the first edition is suppressed, and "What's missing from My Life" is left out, and which does not provide a chronology of the text's evolution and of its variants, it makes of it, not a definitive edition (far from it), but one that coexists with others and forms, in conjunction with them (and without any hierarchy between them), a group of works that remains open to its own continuation.

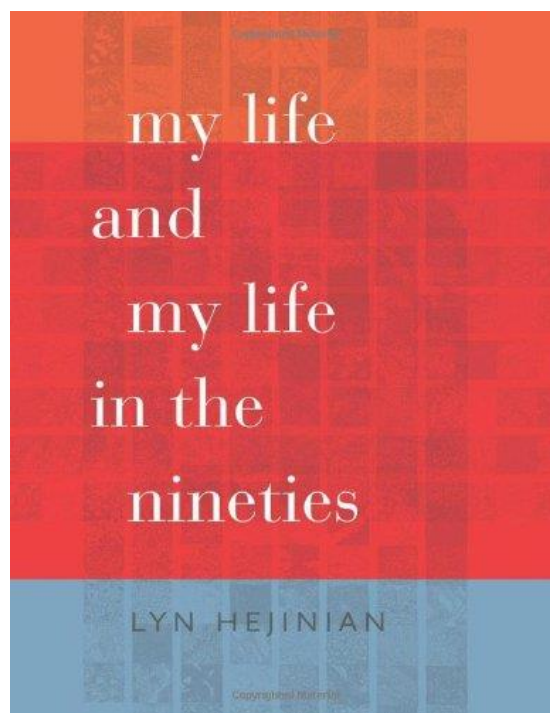


Figure 1. Cover of Lyn Hejinian's *My Life and My Life in the Nineties* (Wesleyan University Press, 2013)

Ultimately, the Wesleyan edition is both a version of *My Life* likely to be used by academics, and an invitation for the more eager readers to leave the realm of academic presses in order to go look for its other versions in the back catalogues of smaller presses, to dig for the elusive first edition in little independent bookshops, to try and find online copies of Hejinian's talk in response to Samuels' criticism, and to wait for its further developments. Only at first sight is the Wesleyan University Press edition the frozen version of an open, still very much alive, text; it is, in fact, just the latest item of an ongoing project and seems to have been designed, amusedly, as an edition that only passes for academic.

Digital, “Open” Editions of *My Life*: Exploring Creative Reading in the Classroom

In 2015, Daniel Carter, an Assistant Professor of Digital Media at Texas State University, published a digital edition of *My Life* allowing to compare the 1980 and 1987 versions. Available online (Carter, ‘Encoding and Representing Repetition in Lyn Hejinian’s *My Life*’), it also provides “What’s missing from *My Life*” as an annex. It is published under a Creative Commons BY-NC-SA licence, with permissions by Hejinian, Wesleyan University Press, and Barrett Watten, as editor of the *Grand Piano*, in which “What’s missing from *My Life*” was originally published. The licence means that the works must be attributed (BY), cannot be commercialized (NC) and must be shared alike (SA)—in other words, it can be adapted (if the changes are duly marked and attributed), but can only be shared under the same licence. Carter’s open access edition 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, in which several hundreds of recent poetry works, a large number of which by authors associated with Language, can be found, along with other resources.

The focus of Carter’s edition is on repetitions both between versions and within each. In that respect, it goes beyond a mere comparison of editions. Hejinian’s text indeed revolves around a number of leitmotifs, 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.

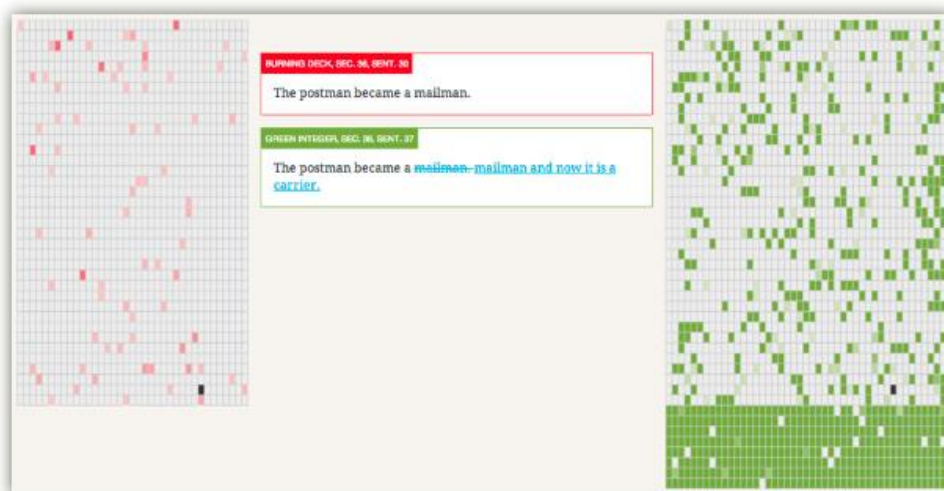
Python’s `ngram.compare` function was then used to calculate a score representing the difference between each sentence and every other sentence, such that identical sentences receive a score of one and sentences that theoretically have no similarity receive a score of zero. This method of calculating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

Of particular interest here is the fact that the comparison is based on the sentence as a unit of composition. This is not a neutral method, as Carter himself recognizes, since 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, as well as those singling out the headline of sorts opening each section, situated in the upper-right-hand corner of the page, which is always a sentence taken from another section. More importantly, Hejinian’s work is, consistently with what Silliman called the “new sentence,” highly paratactic: the sentences have no obvious connections with one another; as such, they are indeed the sole unit of composition. Carter’s programming of the digital edition, then, is congruent with the formal composition of *My Life*, and likely to provide a relevant mode of comparison. He writes:

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, 'Introduction')

The resulting graph (fig. 2) displayed as an illustration in Carter's introduction to his edition is reproduced here with the author's caption:



[Click on image to enlarge] Figure 5: 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.

Figure 2. Screenshot of figure 5 in Daniel Carter's open-access edition of *My Life* (2015), <http://scholarlyediting.org/2015/editions/hejinian.edition.html#>

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. In other words, it is an edition which is not meant for reading, but for studying the text. Surprisingly, though somewhat anecdotally, it also reveals minor changes that have not been discussed previously. Hejinian's own claim that the 1987 version was built solely through the additions of sentences and sections turns out to have been slightly 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 since they may well 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 offers

is something like a glimpse of Hejinian correcting anew the proofs of the 1980 version while finalizing the 1987 one. Finally, there are a few actual 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, apart from the changes themselves, is that Hejinian in her many talks and writings about *My Life* never mentions them, insisting instead on the procedural construction and its mathematical, fixed grid, while in fact she gave herself more room for manoeuvre than she pretends. Once again, there might be something playful in these elusive changes that can only be spotted by readers who will actually go look for them; they create a form of complicity that stresses the reader’s involvement in the making of the text.

The great merit of Carter’s digital edition, therefore, is that it enables readers, and, potentially, scholars, to quickly identify and grasp what actually happened from one version to the next. Before the digital edition existed, scholars were limited in their comparative work, especially as the first edition was not widely available. 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), thus paving the way for further speculations as to the next possibilities of growth for the text. As such, it also called for a “creative” reading. But with the tools provided by Carter, one may imagine further pedagogical and creative possibilities. First, a digital edition could be used to encourage, via manipulation, an active reading and understanding of *My Life*. Second, it could help turn *My Life* into a fruitful writing prompt, whose spin-offs (or fan-poems, just as there is are fan-fictions) could be appended as further annexes to the text in an ever-growing archive of many “Is”.

Manipulating and rearranging the text could also work with hard copies, of course, for instance by cutting out sentences from sheets of paper—a process Hejinian herself used for her 2017 *The Unfollowing*, as a means to avoid as much as possible that her sentences logically “follow” one another. But a digital version would certainly make it easier. 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 choices in placing the additions she made. Students could rearrange the sentences, observe the effect thus created, and reflect on the ensuing contextual reconfigurations. In particular, it provide a fertile ground for comparing the various meanings or connotations added by each instance of a repetition or mock-repetition. In her 1993 lecture “The Rejection of Closure,” later collected in *The Language of Inquiry*, Hejinian comments 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. (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. (1987 92)

The manipulations rendered possible by a new 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 sentences as the various pieces of a puzzle, and consider the visual and logical effect, through basic drag-and-drop, of the removal or displacement of these various pieces. For instance, the recurring sentence “A name trimmed with colored ribbons” is not heard in the same way when it immediately follows “It was cancer but we couldn’t say that” (in which case “name” seems to refer to “cancer”), and when it comes after “The universal is animated by individuality” (“individuality” becoming likely to be recognized as the “name” in question); the distance of the sentence from “a pony perhaps, his mane trimmed with colored ribbons” being also instrumental to the way it is perceived.

The point would not so much be to support a somewhat feeble version of “openness”—the idea of “reader participation” as letting the reader rearrange the work and claim authority over it. Rather, it would lead students to consider some of the new meanings that emerge through the author’s own choices, and ponder on our general tendency to build bridges and forge connections between apparently unrelated statements. This would not so much be an exercise in creative writing as a form of “creative (w)reading,” as defined by Charles Bernstein in *Attack Of The Difficult Poems* (2011 43). Both a Language poet and a (somewhat reluctant) academic, Bernstein explains 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. (44)

One can easily see how “imitations” (having the students write their own *My Life* and experiment with the difficulty of resisting logical connections between adjacent sentences) and “rearrangements” (easily made possible by a digital edition) may apply to a study of Hejinian’s work in the classroom in fruitful ways. One may well imagine a digital archive of such experiments, “opening” the text further to other lives, other selves, all porously contiguous. The Creative Commons Licence under which Carter’s edition was published actually leaves open the possibility for other writers to modify and enlarge the text, as long as the changes are duly attributed.

In “The Rejection of Closure,” 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. (42-43)

Her next point about “re-arrangement within a work” 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. (43)

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 mentioned here by Hejinian, that of a “re-arrangement within a work,” indeed “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). In the case of *My Life*, the latter may mean using the processes set up and exemplified by the book as a model for further autobiographies.

I experimented this in an informal, online creative writing workshop with a small number of my MA students during lockdown. They found the preliminary instruction to resist binding the sentences logically very hard to follow, but I was confirmed in the idea that *My Life* is an excellent creative writing prompt in the classroom (as is often the case with highly procedural texts). Similarly, Jennifer Scappettone, relying on Hejinian’s “Rejection of Closure” essay, offered a poetry workshop at the University of Chicago in 2016, with an introductory focus on “Poems as Procedures, Poems as Questions.” Although she does not seem to have used *My Life* directly, one easily sees how it would have worked. The first assignment read “1) compose instructions for writing the poem you have been given (example: ‘In a Station of the Metro.’ 2) Instructions will then be shuffled around the class. 3) Write a poem according to the instructions you have been handed.” (Scappettone).

In a recent pamphlet about the teaching of literature in schools and universities, Jean-Marie Schaeffer argued in favor of 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, it 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. What Schaeffer calls for is a cultural shift. Digital technology may 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 information technologies at the service of a truly critical, editorial and pedagogical experience.

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