

## Celebrating Subjectivity in Lyn Hejinian's *My Life*

Lyn Hejinian's *My Life* blends genre and literary form to construct, deconstruct and reconstruct modern living in America. Hejinian is often regarded as an avant-garde, feminist, language poet; examining language that dictates and reinforces ideology through a fragmented form of pros. *My Life*, however, can also be seen as an autobiography, examining the subjective experience through a seeming loss of narrative, comprehension, and a general autonomy of textual self as well as the assumed self-hood of the subject. These genre bending tropes could seem contradictory, but there is a net of association here that Hejinian has woven, unifying these forms, creating new meaning to give a socio-cultural feminist critique on society while also innovating aesthetics for rhetoric and poetics entirely.

While examining *My Life*, we can find three kinds of sentences, three different kinds of linguistically influenced styles within each of her poems in the collection. The most apparent or recognizable influence or style in her work seems to be the style influenced and imitating the rhetoric of dominating social structures. The next most frequent sentence perspective is that of the general "one" or plural "we"; making the distinction and correlation between public norms and groups of people at large. The least frequent is the perspective or influence of the subjective "I". The fact that this is a work of autobiography, calls attention to the fact that the narrative of the "I" is buried underneath these other influences creates the audience to question genre, narrative and identity. These three influences I believe is what creates the dynamic tension and ultimate resolve in *My Life*.

For arguments sake this essay will take a deeper look at one of the poems in the collection, analyzing each of these influences to find Hejinian's innovations in Feminist theory as well as aesthetic and intellectual revolution. The poem that will be under examination is the one entitled *Religion is a Vague Lowering* on page 30. The first influence under examination is the most prevalent style that propels her to be known in the genre known as a language poetry: the dominating social rhetoric. Hejinian includes so many lines that imitate and question the language and ideology of social structures outside of one's self. The first few examples from this poem, including the title, include, "Religion is a vague lowering. Learning to listen, that is taught not to talk (...) Simon says sounds from the school yard (...) Obey the best" (30). These few phrase put influences such as religion and childhood games in the same context, showing how something like religion that dictates and projects narrative onto society to be as illusory as childhood playground games like Simon says. Simon being a male name, eluding to the fact that social, narrative dictating forces are generally male centric and can stem as early as recess in grade school paralleling with something worldwide like religion. Hejinian encourages the reader to learn to listen to those who have been told to be silent which reflects the concept of "obey the best." While this idea of obeying the social dominated narrative is here to show their power of projection of ideology, it also serves as reason to question the absurdity of obeying such a rhetoric. This is a genre that Hejinian plays with to make her over arching body of work: language poetry.

Kornelia Freitag explores the correlation between gender and genre in Hejinian's work in the essay, "A Pause, a Rose, Something on Paper." It's stated, "Hejinian's work has gained recognition in the context of the loosely structured literary movement that is known as

"Language Writing." (...) As Language Writing is understood to be a predominantly male domain (...) Woman associated with the Language Writers are risking the erasure of the question of gender" (314-315). In other words, language writing is typically associated with men writers, perpetuating a male dominated social structure of rhetoric, and women risk having their own perspective being washed out in the current of linguistic association of words on the page. It is interesting what Hejinian is doing, although because, for the most part the phrases influenced by the language poetry is all in correlation with male dominated forces. What Hejinian is doing with this genre is calling attention to how language and rhetoric is presented and implanted onto everyday life to make the reader question why it works the way it does.

The second most prevalent style of perspective is the plural "we" as well as the general or unanimous, hypothetical "one." This can be seen as the bridge between the selfless perspective of the language poetry in the passive perspective of the subjective "I" in the autobiography. Some examples from the same poem include, "Can one take captive the roar of the city", "We were like plump birds, then, walking stiffly in a sandy wind along the shore". "Women, I heard, should speak softly without mumbling", and "One can discover the name of one's true love by plucking daisy petals, jumping rope or counting the tiny white spots of imperfection on a fingernail" (30). Hejinian portrays hypothetical scenarios of the 'one' as well as groups of people as large as 'we' or 'women' navigating life simply in response to, as well as developing a sense of, social norms and stereotypes. Hejinian portrays women as though they ought to be acting a certain way as 'one should.' The mundane activities of skipping rope, looking for love, and taking notice to one's own imperfections or deviation from a standard of beauty only shows how dominating rhetoric can shape everyday life, while everyday life perpetuates these ideals. The use of the pronouns

from this perspective shows that standards of social behavior and experience is as illusory as the constructs that dictate the ideology creating these norms. To have a book entitled *My Life* packed out with linguistic word play as well as hypothetical general groups of people, calls attention to the paradoxical nature of the book.

Why would Hejinian juxtapose these styles like this? Harriet Tarlo examines the nature of poetic devices like this in her essay, "Provisional Pleasures: The Challenge of Contemporary Experimental Women Poets." She states, "the destabilization of the notion of poetic authority (the idea that the poet is a truth-teller who should be listened to.) Alongside this, many poets question identity itself, or what poststructuralist critics have called subjectivity, a word which suggests a self which is 'subject to' the forces of culture, in particular language and gender" (98). While the poet puts their own perspective and identity into question, what remains is a subjective perspective of everyone else. A perspective that is only given narrative because of stereotypes and social norms that are dictated by outside forces and typically men in power.

The least common, but most desired narrative influence in *My Life*, is absolutely the completely subjective, yet personal, first person "I". The bulk of impersonal, vague, hypothetical, or rhetorical phrases in the narrative make readers react in one of three ways, or a mix of them. They either; project a narrative on top of the words to have a feeling of comprehension (which is only fueled by the influences Hejinian is critiquing), they have a longing for a personal narrative they can sympathize for, or they become driven towards critical reading and learning. (This is of course, they don't get frustrated with their lack of comprehension, but we will ignore these types for they are not the implied reader.) I believe any mix of the three options I have listed show a

deep connection between reader and narrative that Hejinian is aware of, and playing with. The few examples of the subjective "I" in the poem are as follows,

"If I'm standing here then I must be positive", "I was bored at the ballgame, afraid of the ball. Then out of burlap I made saddlebags", "I felt self-sufficient except with regard to my feelings to which I was always vulnerable, always in relation to someone else", "I may have started inexactly, I thought, nearsighted to a buttercup; I will begin again, and I rolled over the next indentation", "From the bus I saw the blind woman, whose seeing-eye dog sleeps on her sweater while she sells tissue paper carnations on Geary Street", and "I could see the July Fourth fireworks and the winter rains fall into the bay" (30-31).

Almost all of the passages coming from the subjective I are in relation to something else; a self formed under the influence of outside forces. The tasks that the "I" feels comfortable taking part in, i.e. making saddlebags over being bored and scared at a ballgame, shows how the self is defined through a reaction to forces that dictate narrative.

Through mundane, everyday activities and observation, Hejinian's subjective "I" shows the relationship between world and self, as well as a piece of art or poetry and an idea of self. Redell Olsen explores the correlation between the concept of self and the construction and deconstruction of poetry in her essay, "Strategies of Critical Practice: Recent Writing on Experimental and Innovative Poetry." She states, "One tendency that sets these writers apart from many mainstream poets and from what is commonly identified in the United States as 'women's poetry' is that, rather than claiming the authority of an unmediated transcendental ego

(I), Language-orientated women poets are exploring the very conditions of subjectivity" (375). Hejinian is challenging the genre of lyric poetry, autobiography, and language poetry, by celebrating the natural conditions of subjectivity instead of taking up an authoritarian role of omniscient first person. By playing with subjectivity, while blending these genres completely, readers are forced to look at the narrative they think they're reading and reevaluate their own narrative they think they're living. If a reader is projecting a narrative, they must come to the point of asking, "why do I envision this fragmented narrative the way I do?" and asking that question will lead right into the dominating rhetoric that this book is so critiquing. If the reader is not projecting a narrative on top of the fragmentation of subjectivity it is a good chance the reader longs for a subject to relate to . Freitag includes a passage from Hejinian that can shine some light on this phenomena, "But is it, the self, a person? And is art- including literary art- the work of a self? There is no self undefiled by experience, no self unmediated in the epistemological situation" (324). Hejinian emphasizes the desire readers have to personifying a narrative on paper to match a person's experience. While one's perspective of 'one's' experience is at risk of stereotype, Hejinian emphasizes that there is no active nouns or adjectives to attribute to the ever changing dynamic of self hood. By celebrating an experience in flux of memory and illusory rhetoric, Herjinian is channeling an honesty that lacks capability of being easily defined or understood immediately. As the autonomy of women hood or selfhood is constantly at risk of being misdefined or poorly represented, by pure nature of the self ever failing to portray illusory conceptions, Hejinian emphasizes the value in subjectivity.

Some believe the aesthetic innovation of celebrating a subjective, fragmented reality representing the daily life of human experience, points to a lack of agency and selfhood,

undermining the socio-political agenda it so stands for. This point of view seems to fail, for any subjective experience mixed in with fragmented memory can stand relatable to the reader, while also demanding questioning towards the narrative imagined. As Freitag notes,

It is the paradox of postmodern genre that the more radical the dissolution of traditional generic boundaries, the more important the concept of genericity becomes. Genres are, according to Ralph Cohen, 'historical assumptions constructed by authors, audiences, and critics in order to serve communicative and aesthetic purposes.' In Hejinian's text, they are shown to be 'open systems.' The hybrid structure of her text, which is neither prose nor poetry, invites and challenges the reader. to ask not only for the meaning of the book, but for the way in which genre and language of the text work, the way in which this text progresses forward... toward its own meaning" (323).

The fragmentation of language as well as the genre blending of the entire book, pushes readers towards developing tools of interpretation of narrative and selfhood. By keeping the text open ended the text stands for an investigative approach towards genre, gender roles, ideology, poetry, and the world around us.

Works cited.

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