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**Writing on the Margins:
The Experimental Poetry of
Lyn Hejinian, Yang Lian, and
Arkadii Dragomoshchenko**

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Comparative Literature, the
University of Auckland, 2004.

Abstract

This study assesses macroanalytic theories of global aesthetics that propose a strong correlation between artistic innovation and social, political, economic and technological conditions. The assessment is carried out through substantial new microanalytic research on the social situation, poetry and artistic intentions of Lyn Hejinian, Yang Lian 楊煉 and Arkadii Dragomoshchenko, three experimental poets whose work pushed the boundaries of poetry within their respective countries, the United States, China and the Soviet Union, from the late 1970s to the early 1990s. Existing macroanalytic theories predict that these poets should be very different because they worked in contrasting conditions, but the microanalysis shows that there are remarkable points of correlation. The three major characteristics that the poets share are: an interest in lyric poetry as an exploration of consciousness and a closely connected though contradictory interest in language as a self-sufficient medium; the use of difficulty in poetry with an intent that is both utopian and anti-utopian; the production of poetry that was intended to provide an alternative to mainstream poetic discourse, and the association of this poetic experimentation with a way of life that was intended to provide an alternative to mainstream society. These findings undermine prevailing theorizations of the globalization of poetry and thus point to the need for a reconfiguration of theories of global aesthetics.

This study employs an innovative approach that makes significant contributions to research at three levels of analysis. Firstly, it provides in-depth single-author studies of three difficult poets, based on substantial new close readings and statements of poetics in the original languages, and including valuable bibliographical material. Secondly, it presents social-context analysis of the place of experimental poetry in the United States, China and the Soviet Union, based on sociological and historical research. Thirdly, it offers a comparative, contrastive analysis, which calls into question prevailing theorizations of the way experimental poetry is developing in the context of globalization. This inquiry is built around new close readings of two works that are centrally important to the oeuvre of each writer over the period examined: *The Guard* (1984) and *Oxota* (1991) by Hejinian; “Nuorilang” 諾日朗 (Norlang) (1983) and “Banpo” 半坡 (1984) by Yang; and “Summa Elegii” (Sum of Elegies) (1986) and “Nasturtsiia kak real'nost” (Nasturtium as Reality) (1986) by Dragomoshchenko.

Dedication

For Esther

*When and where one happens it will surprise us, not in
itself but in its coming to our attention, not as
something suddenly present but as something
that's been near for a long time and which we
have only just noticed*

– Lyn Hejinian, *Happily*

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Preface

It takes a very normal person / to make a new picture

– Lyn Hejinian, *The Guard*

This work is a comparative study of three poets, Lyn Hejinian, Yang Lian, and Arkadii Dragomoshchenko. Each chapter contributes to the overall thesis, which engages questions of global aesthetics, but I have written the three central chapters in such a way that they can be read both as single-author studies and as components of my broader thesis. Thus each chapter is intended to be internally coherent and to address specific issues of interpretation within the context of scholarship on the individual writer and his or her milieu.

Because of the dual purpose and tripartite nature of my study, I have had to make careful decisions about the way the work should be structured. Firstly, in the introduction, I focus on issues of macro-level aesthetics, reserving discussion of the historical background to each poet's writing and the existing scholarship on each poet to the individual chapter devoted to that poet. In this way, I use the introduction to discuss the macroanalytic theories of global aesthetics that my study sets out to assess, while maintaining the integrity of each microanalysis upon which my assessment is ultimately based.

Secondly, I have varied the amount of historical background provided on Hejinian, Yang and Dragomoshchenko in accordance with the quality and quantity of existing scholarship in English on the groups with which they have respectively been associated, American Language Poetry, Chinese Obscure poetry, and Leningrad unofficial poetry of the 1970s and 1980s. I refer readers who would like to know more about the history of Language Poetry and Chinese Obscure to existing scholarship, particularly Bob Perelman's and Eleana Kim's accounts of the history of Language Poetry and Maghiel van Crevel's documentation of the history of Obscure Poetry. A more general overview of twentieth-century Chinese literature is provided by Bonnie McDougall and Kim Louie's excellent survey, which includes a discussion of Obscure Poetry. There are growing but still inadequate resources in English on Russian unofficial literature of the 1970s and 1980s. For this reason, I have provided considerably more historical detail in

the section on Dragomoshchenko. While I give sufficient information for a non-specialist in each area, I have also assumed a greater familiarity with the social and political context of the United States than that of China and the Soviet Union.

Thirdly, I have chosen to provide the original texts in Chinese and Russian alongside translations throughout my study, because the careful, close analysis of primary sources is central to my approach. I have included original-language texts not only for the poetry but also, wherever possible, for the prose of Yang and Dragomoshchenko. I have done so, because their prose can be read as an extension of their poetic practice, and thus the integrity of their original prose texts is very important. For secondary sources in prose, I have included only translations, except where the integrity of the original is important to my analysis. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

Finally, the organization of the bibliographic material requires some explanation. This study presents major new material and analysis on each of the three writers. The contribution of this study to scholarship on the three writers extends beyond the historical and textual analyses to include valuable new bibliographical resources. To my knowledge, the bibliographies of the three writers presented here are the most extensive currently available. For this reason, I have chosen to order the bibliography into sections, an arrangement that maximizes their usefulness for scholars interested in any one of the poets. Within each section references are made using the style prescribed by the Modern Languages Association, modified to include Chinese characters in the section on Yang Lian. The small inconvenience for the reader of the division of the bibliography into sections is outweighed by the advantages that such a bibliography provides for the researcher. All three of the writers discussed are still alive and writing, and hopefully will be for many years to come. All three have often published in ways that are difficult to track, through small presses and through *samizdat* publications. Because of this difficulty and because of the ongoing productivity of all three writers, none of these bibliographies can be absolutely comprehensive. Nevertheless, I hope that they will contribute to the growth of scholarship on all three writers.

While it may only require an ordinary person to produce a new work, I could never have completed my project without an extraordinary network of supporters. Here I wish to

acknowledge those people and organizations whose goodwill, encouragement, support and insights have been essential to my research.

I am enormously grateful in the first instance for the goodwill and generosity of the three poets who are the subject of this study. I am obliged to Arkadii Dragomoshchenko for agreeing to answer my questions in a formal interview and for spending many hours with me discussing poetry and literature in St Petersburg in the summer of 2000. I am equally indebted to Yang Lian for giving up his time to talk to me in London and in Auckland and for his willingness to share new material with me. Lyn Hejinian too has always been encouraging of my project and has generously allowed me to quote extensively from her unpublished manuscripts and talks. For this, I express my heartfelt thanks.

A team of advisors is extremely important to the success of any Ph.D. dissertation. I have been blessed with a team with just the broad range of skills that I required to guide me in my research. They have all contributed in different ways to this work. Hilary Chung, as my chief advisor, has been an insightful and exacting reader. She has also been a boundless source of enthusiasm for my project, renewing my excitement and resolve at those times when my own passion seemed to be waning. To her I owe a debt that I know I will never be able to repay fully. My advisor Ian Lilly has taught me Russian literature since I first came to the University of Auckland in 1997. Over the past seven years, his teaching and encouragement have been vital to my intellectual growth. But during work on my Ph.D. dissertation his support has been exceptional. Finally, I have also benefited greatly from the insights of my other two advisors. I have had many lively discussions over theoretical matters with Michael Hanne, and Michele Leggott has contributed with her always insightful readings of poetic texts. These two have been important in one further way. If it had not been for their initial encouragement, I would never have taken on this project.

Chance discussions, momentary insights and new challenges give rise to new ideas in ways that are sometimes difficult to recognize fully. I have made every effort in my study to acknowledge specific ideas, but here I wish to recognize that my work has benefited more generally from conversations and correspondence with many people, including Robin Aizlewood, Tim Armstrong, Charles Bernstein, Brian Boyd, Cosima Bruno, Ellen Chances, Paul Clark, Robert Creeley, Maghiel van Crevel, Wystan

Curnow, Michael Davidson, Craig Dworkin, Fredrika van Elburg, Kate Fagan, Gwyn Fox, Dmitrii Golyenko-Volfson, Michel Hockx, Brian Holton, Yunte Huang, Gerald Janecek, Frances Kelly, Mabel Lee, Perry Link, Julia Lovell, Ma Ming Qian, Sarah McDonald, Bonnie McDougall, Julian Moyle, Karla Nielsen, Michael Onslow-Osborne, Evgeny Pavlov, Marjorie Perloff, Michael Radich, Stephanie Sandler, David Wang, Donald Wesling, Michelle Yeh, and Wai-Lim Yip. While my study is stronger as a result of the contributions of all these people, they are not responsible for the views expressed here. Any errors or weaknesses that remain are likewise entirely my own.

A number of scholars have shared unpublished work with me for which I am very grateful. I would like thank in this regard Cosima Bruno, Maghiel van Crevel, Ricki van Elburg, Kate Fagan, Golyenko-Volfson, Gerald Janecek, Julia Lovell, and Stephanie Sandler. I am grateful to Gerald Janecek, Julia Lovell and Stephanie Sandler in particular for permission to refer to their work in my study.

A small part of the close readings of *The Guard*, “Norlang” and “Sum of Elegies” appear in a different form in my forthcoming article “Locating Global Resistance: The Landscape Poetics of Arkadii Dragomoshchenko, Lyn Hejinian and Yang Lian,” which is to be published in the journal *AUMLA*. I am grateful to the editor of the journal, Lloyd Davis, for permission to use material from that article here. Similarly, parts of my readings of “Norlang” and “Banpo” appear in my forthcoming article “Beyond Binaries: Rereading Yang Lian’s ‘Norlang’ and ‘Banpo,’” which is to be published in the *Journal of Modern Literature in Chinese*. I am grateful to the guest editor Michelle Yeh for permission to use material from that essay here.

Libraries and librarians have been important to my research at every stage of its development. I am especially grateful to the University of Auckland Library staff for their unfailing helpfulness and friendliness. At the University of Auckland, Hoong Lun, Linda George, and the entire interloan staff have rendered crucial assistance at various stages. I owe an enormous debt for the assistance rendered by Lynda Claassen, Sandra Hochberg, Rob Melton and the other staff in the Mandeville Special Collections of the University of California San Diego Library. I am deeply indebted to Chris Thomas, Head of the Russian Section of the British Library, for allowing me to look at material that was yet to be catalogued. I would also like to thank the librarians in the literature room at the St Petersburg State Library, and the staff in the Poetry/Rare Books

Collection at the State University of New York Buffalo, at the Bancroft Library, the Widener Library, and at the libraries of Columbia, Princeton, and Leiden Universities.

A project of this size relies not only on the support of people and libraries but also on the financial assistance provided by institutions. This project would not have been completed without the generous financial support of a number of bodies. I am especially indebted to the New Zealand Foundation of Research, Science and Technology. The Foundation's support not only allowed me the time to focus on my research but also helped fund several trips that were essential to my study. The University of Auckland has also provided considerable financial support for my project. A University of Auckland Doctoral Scholarship allowed me to continue working fulltime during the final stages of work on this project. The Dean of Arts, Doug Sutton, the Graduate Research Fund, and a University of Auckland Study Abroad Scholarship provided significant funding for research and conference attendance that was vital to my work. I also received generous support for my research from the Friends of University of California San Diego Library and the Peter John Butler Memorial Bequest. The former fund allowed me to carry out extensive archived research of the Lyn Hejinian Papers in the Mandeville Special Collections in San Diego, and the latter fund supported me in carrying out research in St Petersburg in the summer of 2000.

In my acknowledgements, I have left my family until last, not because my family is less significant but because my family's support has been the single most important factor in the completion of this project.

My first thank you here goes to my parents, to whom I am deeply indebted and not just for the obvious reasons. My mother, Mary Paul, has been a source of encouragement and enthusiasm for my project. My discussions with her and her feedback on drafts of my dissertation have been invaluable in my work. My father, Murray Edmond, too has not only encouraged me but also provided extensive and invaluable advice on the substance of my dissertation. I have benefited greatly from his skills as a reader and his extensive knowledge of American poetry. His high expectations too have forced me to push the boundaries of my work.

Most of this dissertation was written in a little house in the garden of the residence of my parents-in-law, Barbara and Bruce Smaill. Their encouragement and support has

helped me complete this work in a myriad of different ways. I have also benefited from lively debate with my sister-in-law, Anna Smaill, and her partner Carl Shuker. As writers, they have challenged me to look at my work from the poet's point of view. I am grateful to my sister, Harriet Edmond and my brother-in-law Christopher Smaill. They have both helped me keep things in perspective by reminding me in different ways that there is life beyond work. Tristram Collett and Renée Orr are all but family, so it is appropriate to mention them here. I am eternally grateful to them both for their unfailing emotional support and intellectual companionship without which I would never have completed this work.

Finally, I thank Esther Smaill, my wife. Esther has supported me in every possible way through my project, and I dedicate my study to her. I am indebted to Esther above all for her faith that "a very normal person" like me can "make a new picture."

I. Introduction: Experimental Poetry and Global Aesthetics

*Wissenschaft und Kunst gehören der Welt an, und vor ihnen
verschwinden die Schranken der Nationalität*

*Science and art belong to the whole world, and before them vanish
the barriers of nationality.*

– Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

1. The Problem: A Global Experimental Poetics?

Arkadii Dragomoshchenko, Lyn Hejinian and Yang Lian 楊煉 are three contemporary poets whose work has pushed the boundaries of poetry within their respective countries, Russia, the United States and China, during the last three decades of the twentieth century. These three poets are very different from one another and they write in three very different languages and cultural contexts. All three, however, are united by the fact that during the 1970s and 1980s they were all considered significant experimental poets in their own countries. During this time their poetry was subject to criticism for being “obscure,” “elitist,” or “nonsensical.” Focusing on innovative works by each poet from the 1980s, this comparative study explores areas of commonality and difference in the social situation, intentions and poetic practice of these three experimental writers.

The question of commonality between Dragomoshchenko, Hejinian and Yang is important for a number of reasons. The three poets are from three of the most influential countries in the world, culturally and geopolitically. Moreover, the three writers have been chosen as appropriate representatives of important moments in experimental poetry within their countries. Dragomoshchenko and Hejinian, who were both born in the 1940s and who wrote most of their work in or after the 1970s, have been cited as exemplary postmodernist artists. Dragomoshchenko was a significant figure in unofficial Leningrad literature and in Russian alternative culture generally from the mid-1970s, and has been associated with the subsequent rise of Russian literary postmodernism in the 1980s. Hejinian participated in a group that came to be known as the Language Poets during their period of greatest activity from the mid-1970s to the

late 1980s. The Language Poets have become the paradigmatic example of postmodernism in English-language poetry.¹ Yang has been seen as exemplary of a modernist revival in China in the late 1970s that provided the impetus for a postmodernist reaction in Chinese art in the 1980s and 1990s. The kind of poetry with which Yang is associated, Obscure Poetry (*menglong shi* 朦朧詩), is cited for its poetics of the celebration of the individual and of purity, concepts that are seen as paradigmatic of a revival of modernism in China.

Although not all scholars subscribe to these modernist-postmodernist categorizations, a number of theorists of contemporary culture have cited the work of the three poets, or the work of those associated with them, as examples of a shift in artistic practice in the 1970s that is said to mark a qualitative shift in culture internationally. Often this change is described as a transition not only in art but also in wider culture, society, economics, politics, and technology. The moments and movements with which Hejinian, Dragomoshchenko, and Yang have been associated in the existing scholarship thus provide the rationale and the context for this study. The hypothesis presented in this existing scholarship that there was an emerging internationalism in experimental poetry provided the initial motivation for this study. This hypothesis has been presented in a number of different forms, most of which combine the observation of similarity between experimental poetry internationally with an attempt to locate the cause of this similarity in social, economic, political and technological convergence across the globe.

The question of commonality addressed in this study in relation to the three poets, American, Chinese, and Russian, thus takes place within the context of a broad range of scholarship that has attempted to identify and explain the emergence of a global aesthetics in contemporary art in relation to social, economic, technological and political developments. This study argues against a strong correlation between social,

¹ Since the 1980s, Language Poetry, which began in the early to mid-1970s, has become the most commonly cited example of a shift to postmodernism in the history of American poetry. Arthur Marwick's new survey of the arts in the West since World War Two gives over most space to Language Poetry in the poetry section of the chapter on postmodernism (285-9). Similarly, the recent *Companion to Twentieth-Century Poetry* edited by Neil Roberts gives over a whole essay to Language Poetry, prompting Glyn Maxwell to devote most of his review of the *Companion* in the *Times Literary Supplement* to the group (5-6). In *Manifesto: A Century of Isms*, Mary Ann Caws selected Language Poetry texts as the major examples of American literary manifesto since those of Frank O'Hara and Charles Olson in the 1950s.

political, economic, technological reality and artistic innovation through close analysis of individual poets and their work. It will be shown that the existing scholarship, while important in raising questions about the reasons for artistic innovation in relation to social, political and economic change, fails to account for the kinds of similarities and differences that can be found through a microanalysis of the three poets, their social place, their poetry, and their poetics in both their theoretical statements and writing practice. Within the context of this existing scholarship, this study of Hejinian, Yang and Dragomoshchenko is situated as a test case for these broader theses concerning the relationship between artistic experimentation and societal change.

2. Scholarship: Global Aesthetics

It is appropriate to begin this study by surveying some of the most salient hypotheses that posit the emergence of a global aesthetics in the latter part of the twentieth century. Scholarship that is more relevant to the analysis of the individual authors, than to comparative and global theories, will be discussed in the subsequent chapters that deal separately with each of the three poets.

This study challenges the hypotheses put forward by scholars who seek to assess contemporary art, and sometimes culture understood broadly, in relation to changing economic conditions and the development of technology. It is common in this literature to find attempts to correlate particular artistic developments with particular economic, social, political or technological developments.

Marjorie Perloff has suggested that new developments in experimental poetics in wealthy countries are an effect of the new digital age, dominated by television and computers. Perloff draws a strong link between poetry of what she calls “radical artifice,” of which Language Poetry is a primary example, and the emergence of electronic media: “The central fact – and this is why the situation in Australia or Spain or, for that matter, in Japan is so similar to our own – is that we now live in an electronic culture” (*Radical Artifice* xii). Perloff argues that this emergent internationalism is a result of the technological and economic situation in advanced capitalist countries. She suggests that the experimental poetry that she examines reflects the “digital revolution,” which she finds in contemporary American society. This finding stems from Perloff’s formulation of the question that she sees confronting poetry: “given the particular options (and nonoptions) of writing at the turn of the

twenty-first century, what significant role can poetic language play?” (*Radical Artifice* 3).

Similarly, Fredric Jameson sees artistic postmodernism as a concomitant or artistic superstructure of post-industrial society. Jameson has been a leading advocate of the view that in the last decades of the twentieth century there emerged a new global aesthetic system. In his famous 1984 essay in the *New Left Review*, “The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism,” Fredric Jameson identified in Language Poetry, with which Hejninian is associated, Lacanian schizophrenia and the end of personal identity. Despite arriving at a very different conclusion regarding the value of Language Poetry to that put forward by Perloff, Jameson has proposed a similar causal relationship, or at least a strong correlation, between social, political and historical situation and poetic form.

Michael Walsh has pointed out that Jameson’s “primary critical interest” in aesthetic objects lies in “locating the aesthetic as serving a function within a larger historical framework” (481). “[T]he central mechanism of his [Jameson’s] theoretical practice is the attempt to link historical changes in modes of production to the production of aesthetic discourses and the attendant production of subjectivities” (Walsh 482). Jameson’s theory relies upon a periodization of aesthetic “dominants” that relates to the stage of economic development. The idea is that realism comes to be opposed by modernism, the dialectic counterpart of mass culture. Modernism opposes the mainstream through “fragmentation” and “sheer significance,” which then becomes the “cultural dominant” in the form of “postmodernism” (Walsh 483).

Like Perloff’s connection of the “digital age” with Language Poetry, Jameson’s approach to global aesthetics can be seen as an example of a “top down approach.” In such approaches, the scholar “holds that pervasive cultural mechanisms govern the social and psychic functions” of art (Bordwell 9).² This can be understood as a postmodernist position, as David Bordwell defines it: “Postmodernist thinkers presume that contemporary life is characterized by the dominance of multinational capital and by a corresponding fragmentation – pleasurable or alienated – of experience” (9). This is true even though Perloff attacks the negative conclusions regarding contemporary avant-garde art reached by Peter Bürger and Jameson (see *Radical Artifice* 182). Rather,

² David Bordwell makes this observation in relation to film criticism, but his comment is just as pertinent to criticism of literature and other art forms.

Perloff follows Adorno in championing the avant-garde poetics of the Language Poets and others. Perloff quotes approvingly Charles Bernstein's view that human beings are subject to disempowerment in the "computer age": "We live in a computer age in which the systems that control the formats that determine the genres of our everyday life are inaccessible to us" (*Radical Artifice* 188). But, unlike Jameson, Perloff thinks that avant-garde poetry offers a, perhaps unique, counter to this domination of the machine: "poetic discourse defines itself as that which can violate the system, which refuses the formula and binary opposition between 1 and 2" (*Radical Artifice* 189).

It is not only Perloff who makes claims for an emerging international avant-garde based on the spread of new technologies. Patricia Eichenbaum Keretzky, for instance, in the foreword to a recent catalogue of an exhibition of Chinese art and poetry that includes work by Yang, writes that: "at the brink of the twenty-first century, a true internationalism, a world art (not unlike world music), has been achieved." This new global aesthetic is, for Keretzky, reflected in, or the result of, the "uniform concern for technology and communication" in the work of the Chinese artists in the catalogue. She singles out "their appropriation of the computer for artistic expression" (15).

The linkage of social, political, and economic developments, as well as new technologies, with artistic innovation is also evident in contemporary scholarship on China. Arif Dirlik and Xudong Zhang see the changes in economic policy, society and politics as having a direct correlation in the sphere of the arts. Dirlik and Zhang use the term "postmodernism" to refer to the post-Mao era because, as they see it, "The coexistence of the precapitalist, the capitalist, and the postsocialist economic, political and social forms represents a significant departure from the assumptions of a Chinese modernity, embodied above all in the socialist revolutionary project" (3). Significant here is the causal relationship that Dirlik and Zhang appear to propose between "economic, political and social forms" and artistic practice, rather than the validity or otherwise of using "postmodernism" to refer to "postsocialism." These scholars see "the cultural vision" of postmodernism as being "developed out of the experience of postmodernity. This artistic, literary, and theoretical postmodernism is, as Dirlik and Zhang describe it, "the aesthetic complex that becomes the surest sign, indeed a conspicuous stage, of the changing economic, social, political, and cultural relations in post-Mao China" (8). While the direction of causation alleged in this statement is

ambiguous, Dirlik and Zhang clearly correlate cultural developments with economic, social and political developments, all of which may be placed under the sign of postmodernism and postmodernity. While Dirlik and Zhang believe that “postmodernism as a discourse preceded postmodernism as a reality” in China, they nevertheless find that the economic, social and political postmodernism is now a fact, anticipated prior to its existence in the discourse of the 1980s.³ Moreover, Zhang has suggested elsewhere that there exists a direct correlation between the poetry and manifestoes of the Obscure Poets, including Yang, and the drive for economic modernization in China in the 1980s (“Epilogue” 400). Zhang has also argued that the poetry of Yang and his contemporaries reflects the social and political values of China in the 1980s, suggesting that the Obscure Poets “valorized the political illusions of searching for a lost, immanent social value” (*Chinese Modernism in the Era of Reforms* 122).

In Russia too the concept of postmodernism has led scholars to argue for a strong correlation between artistic innovations and social, economic and political change. Mikhail Epshtein has been a leading theorist of postmodernism in Russia. Here is the definition of postmodernism with which he begins his collection of essays on the subject of postmodernism in Russia. Epshtein, like many critics, sees anti-utopianism as a defining feature of postmodernism:

Postmodernism is normally defined as a cultural formation, historical period, or a collection of theoretical and artistic movements, which share the characteristics of eclecticism, fragmentariness, and the rejection of great, all-encompassing world views and narratives. The Enlightenment goal of the ideal, the search for some kind of universal and rationally comprehensible truth, is identified with the dangers of utopianism and totalitarianism. (*Postmodern v Rossii* 5)

Epshtein associates cultural changes in Russia directly with political and economic changes, namely the transition from the Soviet Union and communism to the Russian Federation and capitalism. For Epshtein postmodernism, or as he prefers “post-

³ The out-of-synch nature of postmodernism in China, as described by Dirlik and Zhang, in itself raises serious questions about the validity of the correlation between the political, social and economic structures of a society and the art of that society. The purpose of this study, however, is to present a counterexample to this correlation through the microanalysis of three poets, rather than to consider the analytic inconsistencies of arguments for a strong correlation between socioeconomic situation and artistic practice.

futurism,” is appropriate to present day Russia because “The ‘communist future’ has become a thing of the past, while the feudal and bourgeois ‘past’ approaches us from the direction where we had expected to meet the future” (*After the Future* xi).

Epshtein has linked the “new poetry” of the 1970s and 1980s, which includes the poetry of Dragomoshchenko, with the development of postmodernity in Soviet society. For example, he has connected the new poetry with a new attitude toward the individual in society. In this way, he links a sense of loss of meaning and agency in society with what he identifies as characteristics of Russian postmodern poetry: “personality, authorship, originality are seen as contingent constructions behind which the mechanisms of the sign systems of unconscious language operate” (*Postmodern v Rossii* 640). For Epshtein, then, there is a strong correlation between the political and social situation in Russia over the period during which the Soviet Union stagnated and then collapsed and innovations in the use of poetic voice in Russian poetry of the same period.

Despite the correlation of economic, political and social postmodernity with cultural postmodernism in the scholarship referred to above, there is, at the same time, increasing recognition in some scholarship of the need to distinguish between philosophical and artistic postmodernism. It should be noted here in relation to the postmodernist theories of global aesthetics that there has recently been a shift in scholarly understanding of postmodernism in the 1970s as it manifested itself in the arts. In one recent study, an important distinction is drawn between the utopian impulses of the initial artistic developments and the subsequent dystopian views of Marxist critics such as Fredric Jameson (Perloff, “Postmodernism / Fin de Siècle”). In another recent article, David Novitz distinguishes anti-realist, dystopian postmodern philosophy from artistic postmodernism, which while being a reaction to high modernism is also a continuation of it. These studies contribute to the revision of the view of artistic postmodernism, distinguishing it from philosophical postmodernism. Moreover, Perloff’s article and her more recent book *Twenty-First Century Modernism* contribute to a counter-thesis of characteristics associated with experimental poets as a continuation of the twentieth-century tradition of alternative or avant-garde intellectual poetry.⁴

⁴ These characteristics may or may not be applicable to other alternative or avant-garde artistic, social and political movements. Elsewhere I have argued for the importance of

Notwithstanding these revisions, scholarship on global aesthetics and contemporary poetry internationally has in general been based on Western technological conditions including electronic media, in the case of Perloff and Keretzky, or on theories of economic, social and political development in the case of the studies of Chinese and Russian postmodernism. There has been much debate about the applicability of the term postmodernism in the Chinese or Russian context (see, for example, Perloff, “Russian Postmodernism: An Oxymoron?”). What has generally been lacking in the scholarship, however, is sufficient microanalysis of artistic innovations around the world. Such microanalysis requires the examination of original-language texts to assess whether these primary materials support theories that draw a strong link between global socioeconomic, political, and technological developments and the posited emergence of a global aesthetic in experimental poetry and in contemporary art in general.

This study aims to help fill this gap in current scholarship through a unique approach: the microanalysis of three poets and their work, with references to original-language texts in Russian, Chinese and English. Via close readings it will explore areas of correlation and difference in the alleged socialist modernism of Yang, the Western postmodernism of Hejinian, and the socialist postmodernism of Dragomoshchenko, in the context of the contrasting relationships of the three poets with their socio-politico-economic milieux.

This study will thus provide a challenge to the strong correlation of socioeconomic, technological and political situations with artistic practice in the existing scholarship examined above. If strong correlation were evident, the examination of poets from three very different countries with very different social, economic, and political realities would reveal differences in poetic practice and concerns that reflect these different realities, though the socioeconomic and political similarities between the Soviet Union and China should also reveal themselves in artistic practice. Here it will be argued that, on the contrary, poetic approaches across the three countries are comparable and occur in places other than those where one would primarily expect them according to the correlation theory (i.e. in the Russian and Chinese attitude to experimental poetry).

distinguishing between the fine arts and literature in particular, because of the very different relationship of the two art forms to mimesis, and because of the singularity of linguistic art, given the unique role of language in human cognition (Edmond, “American Language Poetry and the Definition of the Avant-Garde”). See also Kivy.

This study argues against a close, direct and causative relationship between social, economic and political structures and artistic innovation. The analysis here challenges the view that the social, economic, technological and political differences between Western first-world nations, such as the United States, and socialist totalitarian countries such as the Soviet Union and China in the late 1970s and early 1980s, correlate directly to substantial differences in artistic community, artistic practice and artistic intentions. At the same time, this thesis does not deny the significance of social, economic and political modernity, understood broadly. In particular, the flow of ideas, the shared culture of modern poetry that allowed Dragomoshchenko to read Allen Ginsberg's *Howl* in the 1960s and Yang Lian to read Mayakovsky's Futurist poetry in the mid-1970s, before the end of the Cultural Revolution, and that allowed Hejinian to read Khlebnikov's poetry at about the same time is a crucial reason for the similarities between the poetry of the three writers.⁵ The underpinnings of this global communications system are, of course, social, economic, technological and political, but scholars have made stronger claims. For instance, it has been claimed that there exists a necessary relationship between digital technology and certain forms of poetry. At the same time, it is also important to note that the findings of this study suggest that the explanation for similarity cannot come entirely from common reading experiences, which are ultimately caused by modernization and globalization understood broadly. This study argues that similarities in the writing and intentions of the three poets are also caused by some commonality in their experience of consciousness. The experience of consciousness cannot be said to be caused entirely by cultural, social, political or economic structures insofar as it is a central part of what it means to be human.

Though differing in specifics, the shared international understanding of experimental poetry that appears through the analysis presented here, whether spontaneously occurring, or the result of common influences, is more significant than socioeconomic, technological and political influences on poetry. The identification of shared characteristics in experimental poetry across the United States, China, and the Soviet Union in the 1980s, prior to the period in which socioeconomic convergence could seriously be claimed to exist, suggests that the thesis of strong artistic and politico-

⁵ Dragomoshchenko and Yang recounted these encounters with foreign literature in private conversations. Hejinian has recalled in an interview how Ron Silliman and Barrett Watten introduced her to the writings of Khlebnikov, Shklovsky and to Victor Erlich's book *Russian Formalism* in the mid-1970s ("Roughly Stapled").

socioeconomic correlation is unreliable. This finding is of considerable interest given the popularity of correlation theories in recent scholarship on contemporary culture, especially ones such as those examined above.

3. Scope: Microanalysis versus Macroanalysis

This study argues that innovative and to some extent controversial experimental poets working in very different traditions around the world can and in the cases examined do share characteristics in their poetic practice, intentions for poetry and their participation in society. The theories of global aesthetics examined above are macroanalyses, which necessarily cite examples only briefly. This study offers a microanalysis of the work of three poets and their intentions in their artistic practice. In addition to the detailed examination of the work of these poets, such an analysis is also able to raise a number of questions that have wider implications for understanding contemporary culture. It is able to contribute to and to test the broad analyses of the relationship between politics, society, technology and contemporary experimental poetry internationally, such as those examined above.

This study combines an analysis of the poetry of the three writers, carried out through close readings, with an assessment of the intentions that drove them to write their particular kind of poetry in the given historical context. As such, it represents a step toward the creation of a more detailed map of contemporary culture and toward a reassessment of the relationship of cultural innovation to social, political, technological and economic change, upon a strong foundation of microanalysis. This study will provide data with which to assess theories that incorporate both cultural and societal innovations such as those that place these developments under the headings of artistic modernism and postmodernism and historical modernity and postmodernity. On the one hand, the inclusion of poets from the United States, China and Russia in this study provides the diverse cultural, social and economic contexts necessary to evaluate such theories fully. On the other hand, the microanalysis approach taken here allows existing macroanalyses of contemporary art and culture to be assessed in relation to close readings of original-language texts and detailed comparative analysis, both of which have often been lacking in previous macroanalyses. Such a comparative but detailed approach creates a solid basis upon which new theories of global aesthetics can be built.

4. Approach: Society, Poetry, Poetics

The overall aim in this study is to analyze the social situation, poetic practice and intentions of the three poets in order to assess whether they share certain social positions, reasons for writing poetry, and understandings of what constitutes poetry in their poetic practice and statements of poetics. In addition to this comparative analysis of the three writers and their work, this study also compares the institutional aesthetics and the broader economic and political realities of the three countries in order to test the possibilities for correlation between these realities and the experimental poetic practice of the respective poets.

The approach taken in this study is unique in two significant ways. Firstly, as a microanalysis of poets from contrasting national contexts using original-language sources, it makes a contribution to an informed discussion of experimental poetic works and political situations in the contemporary world. Studies of contemporary poetry are usually either limited to a single literature and focus on the careful analysis of the poetry through close reading, or take the form of a general survey, in which there is little room for close reading and in which the author often has to rely on translations. Relying on translations is, however, dangerous. For example, all the translations that appear here by other translators have had to be modified substantially in the interests of correspondence with the original texts.

Secondly, this study employs an innovative form of multi-layered analysis. The conclusions of this study arise from a synthesis of three approaches: the single author study, based on close readings and statements of poetics; the social-context approach, based on historical research and analysis; and the comparative approach, which allows one to see similarities and differences in the role of experimental poets, their intentions, and the way in which they write poetry in three very different contexts. The findings will demonstrate the value of this multi-leveled comparative approach in the assessment of contemporary experimental poetry and poets.

In the following three chapters, beginning with Hejinian, moving to Yang, and ending with Dragomoshchenko, the three poets, their work and their social milieu will be analyzed using a three-pronged approach based on the three levels of analysis. Firstly, the social situation of each writer will be assessed in turn to explore the way in which each poet participated in a writing community and the relationship of that community to

mainstream society. The analysis of the community and social and political situations in which each poet wrote will serve to contextualize the two other levels of analysis that follow it. The second level of analysis is actual poetic practice. New, original analyses of selected poems will explore the concerns for lyric poetry, subjectivity, and difficulty in the poetry of all three writers. These close readings will form the core of each of the central chapters. This will enable an examination of the relationship between social situation and poetic practice, and how this practice and social context relate to the stated intentions of all three writers in their explicit poetics. Finally, the chapters on each of the three poets will analyze the intentions that motivated the writers in their poetry and how those intentions related to their social situation. In my analysis, I will refer both to the poetry and explicit statements of poetics of the three writers.

Detailed close reading is central to this study. The aim of the readings at the heart of my analysis is to bring out the meaningfulness of as many aspects of the poems as possible. The meaningfulness of a poem can be understood as the full range of its denotations and connotations, the references that it makes to the world and the internal structures that it employs. In my close readings, I will not restrict myself to the poetic texts, but instead, I will also examine how each poem's meaningfulness relates to the poet's explicit poetics. The relationship is an empirical question; there may be correspondence between the poet's stated intention and the poem that he or she produces, or there may be contradiction, or there may be a combination of the two. This study aims to give coherent, accessible interpretations of the intentions of the three poets and the meaningfulness of their poetry.

The interpretations presented necessarily follow the hermeneutic method. This traditional approach to the analysis of poetry encounters a particular problem in the case of the work of the three poets. It is possible to argue that analyzing the content, the "aboutness," of their poetry is contrary to the intentions and practice of the three poets. All three poets write poetry that, like conscious experience, is constitutive of its own content. In other words, their poetry and conscious experience are "intensional-with-an-s," as philosophers of the mind term it. This term (not to be confused with "intentional") describes something for which any change in form is also a change in content. Thus, in one sense a hermeneutic search for aboutness is redundant; the poetry simply is.

There is, however, another way of viewing this peculiar aspect of this poetry of conscious experience. The lyric, personal aspect of the poetry of all three writers emphasizes the fact that one always perceives the world from one's conscious point of view. The poets are also cognizant of the fact that, as John Searle puts it, "we cannot observe consciousness in the way that we can observe mountains and oceans because the only candidate for observation is the act of observing itself" (68). Lyric poetry, at least the lyric poetry of the three writers discussed here, seeks to provide observations of the act of observing in a written form that is itself subject to observation. That is, their lyric poetry is intended to give a description of consciousness accessible to consciousness. In this sense these poets, like Searle, aim "to treat consciousness as part of the ordinary, natural, 'physical' world that we all live in" (68), but these three writers do so in a way very different from a scientist, or an analytic philosopher such as Searle. Whereas Searle seeks to point out the conceptual framework within which we can understand consciousness, the poetry of these three writers is intended to provoke in the reader a consciousness of consciousness, to draw attention to the way he or she experiences the world.⁶ In this sense, the poetry of all three is about consciousness, and this content explains the anti-aboutness of the poetry. It is for this reason that, despite the way in which the complexity of this poetry sometimes appears intended to defeat the attribution of a subject and intentions, the approach of the close readings presented here is justified.⁷

Given that the thesis of this study is that there exist significant similarities between the three poets at the level of community, poetic practice and stated intentions, it is important to address briefly how similarity will be quantified. At the social level, the relationship of the community of writers and artists in which each poet participated to

⁶ The division and conflation of poetry and philosophy is symptomatic of an epistemological problem: "there are two fundamentally different methodological approaches that enable us to gather knowledge about consciousness: we can approach it from within and from without; from the first-person perspective and from the third-person perspective." This, in turn, "poses the question of who actually possesses the epistemological authority over the facts of consciousness: the experiencing subject, or science that takes hold of the phenomenon from outside" (Metzinger 25). These two approaches in the twentieth century came to be associated with "phenomenology" and "naturalistic objectivism." Both approaches failed, the former because its reliance on inner perception was an untenable approach to data collection, and the latter because it proved unable to account for phenomenal states (Metzinger 25-6).

⁷ For a recent and accessible discussion of the problem of "aboutness" in philosophy of the mind, see Jerry Fodor, who is one of the leading theorists of this problem.

mainstream society will be analyzed as the significant factor in assessing similarity and difference. At the level of poetics, the aims of each poet in theory and practice will be assessed for similarities in lyrical intent. In particular the focus will be on the mode of lyricism, described above as poetry of conscious experience, in which the writer attempts not only to describe the experience of a given moment or thought as he or she experiences but also attempts to impart the experience of that experience directly to the reader. As this goal is logically impossible, one finds alongside this mode of lyricism the desire in poetry of this sort to reach for the impossible. The impossibility inherent in this kind of lyricism has been expressed in various ways such as: the ineffable, paradise, perfection, going beyond, and the absolute. My analysis of the poetry and poetics of the three writers will explore points of correlation via the ways in which each poet engages with and appropriates this mode of discourse.

The chapters that follow analyze in turn the social situation, poetry, and poetics of Hejinian, Yang, and Dragomoshchenko. The three levels of analysis in the individual chapters then provide a basis for the comparative examination of the three poets in Chapter Five. Finally, these comparative findings will enable a reassessment of the questions raised by existing theories of global aesthetics regarding the relationship between poetic innovation and societal change. In this way, I will show that the work of the three poets defies definition on the basis of national social, economic and political situation alone. The three writers strive to evade all boundaries in their poetic quests for the impossible. Though the borders they cross differ, Hejinian, Yang and Dragomoshchenko are united by their urge to transgress, an endless desire that ultimately exceeds all barriers of nationality.

II. Lyn Hejinian: Language and Paradise

This / is the difference between language and “paradise.”

– Lyn Hejinian, *The Guard*

In his article “Lyn Hejinian and the Possibilities of Postmodernism in Poetry,” Charles Altieri draws attention to the internal contradictions of postmodernist theory (146). As Altieri points out, Hejinian’s poetry grapples with these contradictions in a productive way (149). In so doing, she creates a self-questioning kind of lyric poetry. What is argued here, however, is that Hejinian’s poetry is not strictly postmodernist at all. Instead, the themes and tensions in her poetry continue a modernist and ultimately Enlightenment tradition. The analysis of her poetry and poetics below will establish a number of salient features that place her within this tradition: her search for totality, for description of the world, for realism; her celebration of the fantastic and strange in language as separate from reality; her sense of responsibility, of “sincerity”; and her close but contradictory engagement with the Western search for the utopia of perfect knowledge and a perfect world. I will argue that together these characteristics demonstrate that Hejinian’s poetry not only counters but also continues the Western quest for knowledge.

This chapter will analyze the main features of Hejinian’s quest for knowledge. I base my analysis on an examination of her journals, statements of poetics, and detailed discussions of two poems written in the 1980s and early 1990s, *The Guard* (1984) and *Oxota* (1991). In the first part of this chapter, I analyze her political and ethical concerns about the representation of self in the political and historical context of the Language Poetry movement. In the next two parts, I analyze *The Guard* and *Oxota*, showing how Hejinian deals with these concerns in her poetry. Finally, I examine her explicit statements of poetics in relation to the findings of the rest of my analysis, showing how Hejinian continues and complicates the Enlightenment search for knowledge.

In this chapter, I seek to show what motivated Hejinian to write poetry, to give examples of how she went about this task over the crucial period of public attention from the 1980s to the early 1990s, and to understand the underlying philosophical assumptions and directions of her poetry and thought. To this end, I combine detailed close reading with a contextual approach. My contextual approach builds on a tendency

in the last few years toward greater historical, social, philosophical and psychological contextualization in scholarship on Hejinian and on Language Poetry generally.¹ In my study, however, I aim for greater integration of these diverse and fruitful approaches than has previously been attempted.

The opening part of this chapter examines the literary and historical context in which Language Poetry developed and in which Hejinian came to write *The Guard* and *Oxota*. It is only within this context that her approach to poetry becomes fully comprehensible. Here I show that Hejinian intended her epistemological investigations in poetry – her “quest for knowledge” – to address political and social concerns, rather than being separate from the “formalist” side of her writing. In the United States of the 1970s and 1980s, these political and social concerns were felt to be of great urgency, at least amongst those on the Left. Over this period, Language Poetry attracted considerable attention within the literary world and was subject to fierce public denunciations. In her poetry from this time, Hejinian addresses themes of experience and expression, traditionally seen as private and personal, as at once public and political issues. These issues were also raised in the literary debate over Language Poetry. The anti-self, anti-reference allegations leveled at Language Poetry in the 1980s, though simplistic, related to wider social and political debates in the United States. While the early critical discussions of Language Poetry were often hostile, excessively political or otherwise one-sided in their analysis, the desire to write poetry that was not oblivious to concerns for American society was, nevertheless, a critical motivating factor for Hejinian. Hejinian’s response in her writing and thinking from this period shows her concern for the question of how best to write about personal experience, memory and expression as partly constitutive aspects of being a person. Hejinian’s writing also addresses the

¹ Lisa Samuels’s essay on the canonization of Hejinian’s *My Life* is a groundbreaking analysis of the place of her work within the literary field of American literature. Christopher Beach has analyzed some institutional aspects of contemporary American poetry with particular reference to Hejinian (“Poetic Positionings”). Peter Nicholls has examined briefly the importance of phenomenology to Hejinian’s thought. Altieri has written several pieces that touch on the underlying philosophical assumptions of postmodernism in Hejinian’s work. Craig Douglas Dworkin has drawn on Hejinian’s journals to analyze the psychology state of mind that motivates her work (“Parting with Description”). More has been written on the historical context of Language Poetry. See especially Eleana Kim’s article “Language Poetry,” Peter Middleton’s article “1973,” Bob Perelman’s book *The Marginalization of Poetry* and Marjorie Perloff’s article “Postmodernism / Fin de Siècle.”

relationship of a person, thus conceived, to society. At the same time, she addresses the nature of description and representation in writing, and the role of language in creating and opposing ideology. Hejinian's attempts to rethink the nature of experience and the representation of reality can be seen as responses in poetry to perceived problems with American society, such as excessive individualism and the unquestioning assumption of certain dubious "truths" promoted by the government and media. She is concerned with how these problems relate to language. She draws a connection between these political concerns and her aesthetic concerns to challenge the dominant forms of self-expression in contemporary American poetry.

In the second and third parts of this chapter, I present new interpretations of *The Guard* and *Oxota*. Through these interpretations, I analyze how Hejinian's work combines a celebration of pure language separated from the world with novel approaches to traditional problems concerning consciousness and the perception and description of the world. The epigraph to this chapter could be read as an expression of these paradoxical tendencies in Hejinian's work. On the one hand, it is shorthand for the allegedly typical qualities of Language Poetry: the rejection of poetic epiphany and perfection in favor of the materiality of language. On the other hand, however, the phrase can be read as an expression of Hejinian's desire for perfect understanding of the world. It is true that Hejinian's poetic practice exhibits traits that have been characterized as "typical" of Language Poetry, such as formalism, the denial of reference, Western intellectual Marxism, and the "de-centering" of self, or the deconstruction of subjectivity. Hejinian, however, combines this Language Poetry aesthetic with seemingly contradictory tendencies toward an epistemological exploration of reference, a "quest for knowledge," and a profound interest in the self, in personal experience and in how these things relate to poetry. Moreover, in many cases these two poles, Language Poetry and personal poetry are not exclusive but mutually supportive. In Hejinian's words, she is concerned with both "language and 'paradise,'" for all the distancing of the quotation marks around the latter term.

In the final part of this chapter, I analyze the identified characteristics of Hejinian's poetry in relation to her journals and statements of poetics. In her writing, Hejinian makes frequent reference to her desire for paradise, for perfection, to her interest in quests of discovery. But she also struggles with the self-deceptions and injustices often

related to such utopian visions. Hejinian associates the desire for paradise with many voyages of discovery, scientific inquiries and acts of imagination in the West. Although Hejinian's poetry is concerned with some traditional themes that have existed in Western literature since at least the Enlightenment, these themes in Hejinian's poetry are not separate from her intention to explore linguistic materiality, to attack false consciousness, and to address ideologically powerful notions of the individual and the self. Like Francis Bacon before her, Hejinian also appeals to the imagination in order to banish such "idols of the mind."

Throughout this chapter, I argue that Hejinian engages in political and ethical issues through the form and content of her complex epistemological poetry. Hejinian's poetry contains elements of two contradictory tendencies. On the one hand, there is the tendency toward the poetic representation of perception and of the perceived world. On the other, there is the tendency toward the creation of poetic art as a self-sufficient aesthetic object. Despite this latter tendency, questions of person, self and perception remain central to Hejinian's work. Her poetry is, at one level, intended to provide an "experience of experience." In her work from the late 1970s to the early 1990s, she seems to aim to resist both naïve authoritative self-expression, and idealist, unmotivated word art. In an interview from 1979, Hejinian states what she sees as a central issue in her poetry:²

So I've been working for years in what could be considered "unmotivated" writing, which to some degree is abstract. I am very much interested in abstraction in language, in pushing language to the point that it becomes a fact itself rather than some intermediary or condition. The danger is that the work becomes solely decorative--that it degenerates into something that is maybe lovely, turning on the surface music of language, but it's nonetheless superficial. I do worry about that – it seems to be a real problem. The other issue is a concern with what it means to work from the observed world and from personal experience. That means thinking about a language that can make a match with that. ("Interview with Lyn Hejinian")

Hejinian has explicitly related her aim to combine formal abstraction with personal experience to her concept of "ethical" poetry. In 1991, the year in which *Oxota* was published, Hejinian also published an essay on "the person," in which she explains how

² Ann Vickery who has referred to the primary source of this interview cites its publication in the December 1979 issue of the *Poetry Project Newsletter*. The year of publication is incorrectly given as 1970 in the web archive of The Poetry Project at Saint Mark's Church from which the quotation here is taken.

she sees her poetry as both reflecting on personal experience and creating new, constructed experiences:

The idea of the person enters poetics where art and reality, or intentionality and circumstance, meet. It is on the neurotic boundary between art and reality, between construction and experience, that the person (or my person) in writing exists. ("The Person and Description" 169)

The conception of "construction" and "reality" as on either side of a boundary in her poetry seems to reflect Hejinian's belief that one cannot have pure "construction" or pure "reality" in language. Instead, there must always be a combination of the two. This is what Hejinian sees as the "difference between language and 'paradise.'"

1. Language, Poetry, Politics

In order to fully appreciate why Hejinian's poetry combines personal perception with impersonal constructed artifice, it is first necessary to explain why Hejinian and other Language Poets came to see the potential for political change in the investigation of the relationship between perception and cognition in language. The belief in a strong link between the personal renewal of perception, the raising of consciousness, and political opposition was a feature of the New Left and 1960s counterculture. It is only within this historical context that one can understand how the Language Poets came to associate formal experimentation with political change.

Most of those most closely associated with Language Poetry in San Francisco from the crystallization of the community around 1977 were born between the early 1940s and the mid-1950s.³ The political atmosphere of the 1960s and involvement with the Civil Rights movement, anti-Vietnam War activities and, in Hejinian's case, the Women's movement shaped the political views of this group of generally left-wing poets. The poet and scholar Michael Davidson has argued that for San Francisco poetry the era between the poet Jack Spicer's death in 1965 and 1989 was characterized by an apocalyptic sense of crisis. According to Davidson, in art circles over this period, discussions "concerned the status of art in an era of multinationals and computer technology" and "stressed the ways that global systems of control mediate any

³ For example, Carla Harryman (1952), Barrett Watten (1948), Lyn Hejinian (1941), Michael Palmer (1943), Rae Armantrout (1947), Bob Perelman (1947), Charles Bernstein (1950), Bernadette Mayer (1945), Ron Silliman (1946).

‘creative’ impulse.” In literature there was a sense of “the inadequacy of certain metaphysical and epistemological foundations underlying aesthetic production.” In the Bay Area, in particular, “Far from acknowledging its own demise, recent art – and poetry in particular – [...] celebrated its right to exist and, more importantly, its ability to realize a certain *promesse de bonheur* of a socially critical mode” (*San Francisco Renaissance* 201). Whether or not one shares Davidson’s view of the period between 1965 and 1989, he makes the important point that socially critical poetry aimed at the improvement of society through epistemological and metaphysical investigations was characteristic of the post-Beat, post-San Francisco Renaissance generation of San Francisco poets, especially the Language Poets.

The linkage that the Language Poets made between politics and artistic experimentation was part of a broader trend in alternative culture and left-wing politics as they had developed up until the mid-1970s in the United States. The position of the Language Poets can be understood within the wider history of the New Left and counterculture in the United States from the late 1950s to the mid-1970s and in the context of the historical relationship, both symbiotic and antagonistic, between these two movements. As Doug Rossinbow points out in his essay “‘The Revolution Is about Our Lives,’” the New Left was divided in the 1960s between those who sought to align themselves with the counterculture of the hippies, because they saw personal and social revolution as an essential part of political revolution, and those who saw social radicalism as a distraction from essential revolutionary activities. For a while in the mid-1960s hippies and the New Left combined, with political and social revolution going hand in hand, but at the end of the 1960s those in the New Left who were interested primarily in social revolution and counterculture turned away from politics, while others turned to hardcore activities aimed at direct confrontation. Some of these tensions between cultural and political revolution in the American Left are reflected in the phenomenon of Language Poetry. The association of the previous generation of experimental or avant-garde American poetry, including Beat Poetry and Black Mountain Projective Verse, with the New Left and hippie ideals of authenticity and self-expression also played a role in the development of Language Poetry poetics and politics and the linkage they made between the two.⁴

⁴ “Projective Verse” was the essay by Charles Olson that formed the base document for Black Mountain Poetry. Black Mountain College under Olson's rectorship (c. 1951 -

Language Poets both continued and reacted against the 1960s legacy of the American New Left, counterculture, and the interaction between these two related tendencies. The Language Poets inherited the legacy of the 1960s association of social and artistic avant-gardism with political radicalism. As Rossinbow notes, the New Left in the late 1960s had trodden the path of social radicalism:

Avant-gardism displaced vanguardism in the young radicals' self-image. Instead of aiming to seize state power, as many earlier left-wing movements all around the world had done, the New Left would seek to establish cultural hegemony. New Left radicals were determined to make inroads among their social peers. They felt they understood the deeply personal needs and aspirations within white middle-class America that had given birth to both the New Left and the counterculture, and they felt they could design a new kind of left that would appeal to the youth of this dominant social group. (“The Revolution Is about Our Lives” 109)

While inheriting an interest in social and cultural as well as political revolution, the Language Poets rejected the 1960s goal of self-discovery with its emphasis on the authentic self. Their rejection of this goal was based on the perceived tendency of this kind of politics of culture to focus on the deeply personal needs of the middle-class American. This tendency, they believed, allowed the search for an authentic self to be used as a justification for a slide into self-satisfied individualism. The popularity of this perceived self-indulgence is viewed as one of the reasons for the failure of the alliance between the New Left and counterculture in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Language Poetry can thus be seen as reflecting this schism in the cultural sphere. At the same time, however, the beliefs of the Language Poets reflected the powerful influence that the 1960s revival of the idea of linking avant-gardism with political radicalism had exerted upon them.

The contradictory attitude toward cultural self-liberation, apparent in Language Poetry in the 1970s as a tension between authenticity and artifice, was already observable in the previous decade. As Howard Brick notes, “One of the chief paradoxes of the 1960s was the coincidence of devotion to the ideal of authenticity – of discovering, voicing, and exercising a genuine personality separate from the grip of mortifying convention – and fascination with the ways of artifice, with the calculated techniques of image making or ‘the games people play.’” Brick points out that: “Each of these poles posed

1956) was seen as the ideal cultural community, the vision of the “new real.” Of course, the reality was less utopian, as Martin Duberman’s history of the College makes clear.

complex issues and paradoxically merged in the other.” They merged in the desire to “face reality” and to acknowledge the “real world” (*Age of Contradiction* 66). As will be seen, a similar paradoxical combination of authenticity and artifice appears in Hejinian’s work under the same sign of “realism.”

Language Poetry can be understood not only in relation to these broader trends, which included ideas about authenticity and artifice and the linkage between politics and culture, but can also be located within the separate but related history of American poetry and art generally. The poetry of Lyn Hejinian and other Language Poets was written partly in continuation and partly in rejection of interrelated developments in the poetry wing of what might be termed the “first post-war American avant-garde.” This “avant-garde” came after the Second World War. It was spearheaded by European émigrés (de Kooning et al) and flowered in Abstract Expressionism, New Dance (e.g. Merce Cunningham), and New Music (for example, John Cage), but it also included the poets Charles Olson, Robert Creeley, Allen Ginsberg, the New York School poets, including John Ashbery, Frank O’Hara, Kenneth Koch, James Schuyler and Ted Berrigan (who was also somewhat of a latter-day Beat), and on the West Coast Robert Duncan and others. The work of all these poets appeared in Donald M. Allen’s famous 1960 anthology *The New American Poetry*.⁵

As just noted, there were several experimental left-wing groups of poets other than the Beats that heavily influenced Language Poetry. The most significant of these influential groups in aesthetic terms was arguably the New York School of poets and Ashbery in particular. Beat Poetry, however, had special symbolic value for the linkage made by Language Poets between confessional verse and the political failure of the left.⁶ The

⁵ As Elena Kim describes it, the “Language Poets reacted against both the dictates of [William Carlos] Williams’ ‘plain speak’ as it had (d)evolved through numerous mediations and bastardizations, and against the cult of personality — that which glorified the prophetic mysticism of Ginsberg or the alcohol-induced anomic confessions of Robert Lowell” (“Language Poetry”). The reaction against the Beats and Projectivist Verse was an important part of the development of the San Francisco poetry scene in the 1970s and 1980s. Davidson also points out that the San Francisco Language Poets were part of “the most obvious change” since the 1945-65 San Francisco Poetry Renaissance. This change was evident in a “growing skepticism about the more expressive or visionary claims of the neoromantics like Duncan, McClure, and Ginsberg” (*San Francisco Renaissance* 205).

⁶ There are many examples of the considerable influence of the New York School on Language Poetry. The Language Poet Ron Silliman has cited Ashbery’s *The Tennis*

Beats also exemplify the San Francisco tradition of combining innovative poetry with left-wing politics at its most public and influential. Indeed, it has become a commonplace in cultural histories of the 1960s to cite Beat Poetry as a precursor to the 1960s focus on the individual, self-expression and authenticity.⁷ The popularity of Allen Ginsberg and his status as a symbol of counterculture are testaments to the connection that those involved in what was seen as a social revolution drew between his work and 1960s counterculture. Ginsberg's approach to poetry thus took on political significance. The aesthetic of self-expression and nonconformity in his poetry became a symbol of social radicalism as an important form of political liberation. Rossinbow identifies the popular idea in the late 1960s in the New Left that wealthy America was suffering from excessive social restrictedness. This was combined with the idea of the "noble savage," the view that people simply needed to escape the constraints of society in order to create a better life. These ideas had been tenets of Beat philosophy since its inception in the 1950s.⁸ And significantly, it was Allen Ginsberg who succinctly expressed this basic tenet of the counterculture-New Left entente in his 1967 statement "man's basic nature is that he's a pretty decent fellow when there's enough to go around" ("The King Comes to Austin").

The Language Poets emphatically rejected this naïve view that the goals of the counterculture movement could be achieved simply by finding the "natural" or "authentic" self. It was in part because Ginsberg was associated with this view that the Language Poets opposed his poetry. But they also found in his poetics and those of Projective Verse formal poetic expressions of the same idea of authenticity. The image of Ginsberg as the poet-bard, and the ideal of the "man up there talking" were rejected not just because of the gender bias but also because of the implication of getting back to

Court Oath (1962) and Berrigan's *The Sonnets* (1964) as important precursors of Language Poetry ("Language, Realism, Poetry" xvii). The Language Poet Barrett Watten also wrote fondly of Berrigan on his death ("After Ted"). O'Hara's "Try! Try!" was the first play staged by The Poets Theatre in the late 1970s in San Francisco by poets who were all part of the Language Poetry movement.

⁷ As Brick notes, "the impulse toward assertive individuality was strong in the culture of the 1960s and became especially potent in new literary trends," some of which had their origins in the previous decade. In particular, from the mid-1950s the Beat Poets, whose work provided an important point of reference and contrast for Hejinian and the other Language Poets, had "cultivated an ethic of self-expression" (69).

⁸ See James J. Farrell's "The Beat of Personalism," an extensive discussion of Beat "personalist" philosophy and its relationship to the development of 1960s counterculture (51-80).

the authentic natural self. This idea was seen as a major cause of the failure of “the movement” in the 1960s, because it led to what Hejinian has called Ginsberg’s “homebrewed Zen” (MSS 46-9, 22 Jul. 1983, entry 98, 30). The privileging of personal liberation, in poetry, and in the New Left and counterculture, was seen as leading to irrational and selfish self-absorption. In rejecting the poetics of self-expression of the Beat Poets, the Language Poets thus also rejected what they saw as the key failure in 1960s New Left counterculture politics.

Despite their rejection of certain aspects of this 1960s legacy, the Language Poets also continued many of the trends of the previous decade. Rossinbow concludes his article on the New Left and 1960s counterculture with the following summation: “The New Left revived the spirit of left-wing bohemianism and, in so doing, raised anew questions about two linkages that the New Left, like the lyrical left, assumed were real.” One of these linkages was “between cultural and political change”: “Since the time of the *Port Huron Statement* (1962), activists on the left and the right in the United States have agreed that ‘values’ are the foundation of political life and the biggest prize of all in political struggle; in this sense we are all Gramscians now” (Rossinbow 120). The linkage between cultural and political change is one that the Language Poets continued. Indeed, it was their radical insistence on this linkage that made Language Poetry’s politics and aesthetics distinctive.

The other linkage that the New Left assumed was real was “the association of the search for authenticity with the familiar left-wing goals of social justice and democracy.” As Rossinbow points out, the New Left’s sexual politics demonstrates that the two in fact did not necessarily go hand in hand. The poetics of Language Poetry, as will be argued below in the case of the work of Hejinian, has shown a distinctively ambiguous relationship toward the quest for the “authentic self” and for unmediated access to “real life.” One of the founding principles of Language Poetry was that unmediated access to reality and to an authentic self was impossible. For the Language Poets, everything was mediated and in poetry everything was mediated by language. The conception of the real self as a kernel that must be “found” was rejected because it was seen as false. Similarly, those approaches that were seen as the expression of this concept in American experimental poetry, Projective Verse and Beat poetics, were also rejected. In the case of Hejinian, an interest in mediation included not only the mediation of

language, but also of psychology, including the psychology of perception. At the same time, however, the quest for reality, for better description of the world that would smash the lies and deceptions perceived in American public life, was central to Language Poetry. In this respect, Language Poets can be seen as continuing the linkage between the quest for reality and the quest for social justice and democracy. Part of the continuation of that quest, however, involved the rejection of what were seen as the naïve and simplistic conceptions of “real life” and “authentic self” as expressed by the New Left, 1960s counterculture and by the previous generation of poets in the American left-wing experimental tradition.

Hejinian and others of her milieu rejected the emphasis on personality, personal liberation, mysticism and irrationality that were highly valued in Beat poetry and in 1960s counterculture. Hejinian retained, however, the desire to attack “the Social Lie” of American life, as the founding father of Beat philosophy, Kenneth Rexroth, had called it. Hejinian also shared with the Beats the belief in the importance of cultural activity as an integral part of social and political change. To expose the wonder of life and to raise consciousness through poetry were politically significant acts for Hejinian. In this, like the Beats and 1960s counterculture generally, Hejinian’s approach to poetry was utopian in its aim to create a better community. In contrast to the Language Poets, the utopianism of the Beats and 1960s counterculture took the form of a kind of “postmodern primitivism,” based on the “Noble Savage” view of society as a corruption of human nature (Farrell 65). On the other hand, the Language Poets and Hejinian in particular saw even this radical solution as, in a sense, too easy. Hejinian rejected the simplistic desire for the natural and authentic. Indeed, a basic premise of Language Poetry was that language itself encoded the injustices and lies of modern American life. According to this more skeptical view of natural human perception, the raising of consciousness required a different aesthetic approach. One tactic chosen by Hejinian and other Language Poets was the use of formal devices to draw attention to the unnaturalness of language in order to heighten perception. Similarly, a self-conscious, multi-layered, non-linear and open form opposed the perceived naturalness of human perception of the world. Language Poetry attacked the view that description of the world was a straightforward matter and questioned the assumption of the integrity of the perceiving subject. This self-questioning approach, with its skepticism toward human perception and language but with a belief nevertheless in improving perception, has a

long history in Western thought. In the concluding part of this chapter on Hejinian, it will be argued that Hejinian's poetics resemble Francis Bacon's Enlightenment, scientific insistence on the importance of careful attention to the world and on the need for self-questioning. At the same time, Hejinian's poetry demonstrates her wariness of the crimes committed in the name of this "quest for knowledge." Enlightenment values were problematic for Hejinian, but they were also indispensable. They were essential because they not only produced the injustices she found in American society but they also offered the only way in which these injustices could be successfully rectified.

i. "We Need Language to Aid the Senses"

In a review of Hejinian's 1984 book *Redo*, Donald Wesling made the following comment: "Lyn Hejinian is not a 'language poet' by any workable definition I know of that kind of writing; she is a 'relation-between-perception-and-cognition' poet in the line of Wordsworth and Stevens" (23). This study builds on Wesling's observation. In contrast to Wesling's view, however, it argued here that Hejinian's poetics of perception and cognition are a central part of her Language Poetry poetics. The link between the poetics of perception and the politics and poetics of Language Poetry is summed up in the quotation from Hejinian's long poem *My Life* "we need language to aid the senses." According to Hejinian's description of Language Poetry, the investigation of the relation "between perception and cognition" lies at the heart of the Language Poetry project. Language Poetry, for Hejinian, is in part an investigation based on the premise that the expression in language of experiences is structured by language and hence is subject to ideological rhetoric. Hejinian found in the structure of language "buried assumptions" and a "fairly well-elaborated worldview." For Hejinian, these assumptions could be opposed and perception of the world renewed through the investigation and revelation of how these linguistic structures shaped experience. Poetry was the ideal medium for such an investigation ("Two Auckland Talks: 1").

As Hejinian has put it, "the intersecting of aesthetic concerns with ethical concerns is one of the basic characteristics of language writing, and this fact has very much to do with its origins in a particular historical moment, namely the late 1960s and early 1970s." As has been noted, the direct motivations for the radical experimentation of the Language Poets were contemporary social and political developments in the United

States in the 1960s, especially those that related to the New Left and 1960s counterculture.

This political and social context should not, however, overshadow the aesthetic context of Language Poetry. The Language Poets were influenced by the experimental line of Anglo-American modernism. As Hejinian emphasizes, the American poetic tradition was as important as their theoretical readings and the political context: “particularly Donald Allen’s anthology, *The New American Poetry, 1945-1960*, which made the experimental tradition, with sources in Pound’s imagism and Stein’s realism, current” (“Barbarism” 322).

While it is impossible to give an exact date for the beginning of the loose configuration of poetic practices that came to be associated with Language Poetry, the movement’s origins seem to lie in the early to mid 1970s.⁹ The canonical version of the origins of Language Poetry was established in 1984, when Ron Silliman, in his introduction to the Language Poetry anthology *In the American Tree* singled out an essay by Robert Grenier in the first issue of the poetry magazine *This*, which was published in 1971. This essay was retrospectively read as a founding document for two reasons. Firstly, it can be viewed as a polemic against naïve first-person lyrics, so-called “confessional verse.” Secondly, it attacks the notion that poetry should be primarily vocal, a view that was popular in the previous avant-garde formations, including Black Mountain Poetry and Beat Poetry. The final lines of the following passage from Grenier’s essay have become strongly associated with Language Poetry:

To me, all speeches say the same thing, or: why not exaggerate, as Williams did, for our time proclaims an abhorrence of “speech” designed as it was his castigation of the “sonnet” to rid us, as creators of the world, from restoration of the past dragged on in formal habit. I HATE SPEECH.

The placing of the “I HATE SPEECH” in *This* 1, in a particular moment and literary space was important because it made a link between private reading and writing and public engagement.¹⁰ This was the kind of gesture that could simultaneously repulse the concept of “projective verse” of the previous generation of American writers in the

⁹ For details, see Middleton, “1973”; Perloff, “Language Poetry and the Lyric Subject” and *Poetry on and off the Page* 3-33; Perelman, *Marginalization of Poetry* 16; and Kim “Language Poetry.”

¹⁰ Bob Perelman also makes this point in *Marginalization of Poetry* (16).

avant-garde tradition and establish links with other literary predecessors. It also articulated a new kind of political attack on the values of romantic individualism in poetry and, by implication, excessive individualism in American society. At the same time, the slogan could equally serve as a political attack on the abuse of language in the public sphere. The Language Poets perceived this abuse in the gap between the rhetoric and actions of those in power in relation to the Vietnam War and to international affairs generally, to gender equality, to equal rights for minorities, to social equality and to the creation of more caring community values. In short, this new attack reflected all the concerns that had motivated American left-wing political movements in the 1960s.

Grenier's explicit reference to the rejection of the sonnet by William Carlos Williams can be read as a call for formal innovation in that it opposes the "projective verse" formal model. At the same time, the capitalization of his famous statement exemplifies text-based innovation. Correspondingly, Grenier criticized Robert Creeley, a poet of the previous generation. Although Creeley's poetry in many ways provided support for language-focused writing, Grenier attacked him for writing poetry that referred to something outside the writing, rather than just being a "pure" thing in itself. But formal innovation was not everything that Grenier wanted from the new poetry he can retrospectively be read as heralding. Grenier also wanted poetry that, rather than being speech-based, was based on thoughts or feelings "way back in the head." In this respect, there is a continuation, rather than a break, from the approach of Projectivist Verse. Olson had famously called for poetry closer to immediate experience in language: "ONE PERCEPTION MUST IMMEDIATELY AND DIRECTLY LEAD TO A FURTHER PERCEPTION." While Grenier differentiated himself from Olson by rejecting speech-based poetry, the idea of capturing in poetry one's experience in each moment one after another as it happens "way back in the head" remained a powerful motivator. Here there are two apparently contradictory lines: formalist experimentation with language as material, and the use of language to get at conscious experience, including perception or memory, a kind of mimesis, rather than a poetics of the "word as such." Hejinian aims at reconciliation of these two lines in her work through language and process. In Hejinian's poetry, formal word art becomes a performed act of perception, memory and association. It is no accident that Gertrude Stein and Marcel Proust were inspirational writers for Hejinian. Stein focuses on and acts out the process

of perception in language, and Proust's dramatic divergences, twists and turns in memory animate the act of recollection.

Unlike Stein or Proust, however, Hejinian and other Language Poets emphasized that they were using formal innovation aimed at improving perception to overthrow political ideologies that they believed were reinforced by conventional language. Hejinian saw something "inherently political" in challenging "formal habit." Whereas for Hejinian political language normally "channels perception," poetic language "employs various devices to un-channel and thus renew perception." Where this connection with politics was only implicit in Grenier's statement, Hejinian made it explicitly in her notes for a 1982 talk series run by the Language Poets of the Bay Area. She did so while also referring to William Carlos Williams's advocacy of formal innovation as necessary to say something of importance: "in making demands on perception and in defusing habitual ways of seeing or saying things, one challenges the status quo of perception. Clichés of and in language blockade perception. Williams: 'All sonnets say the same thing of no importance'" (MSS 46-6 Mar. 1982).

Hejinian explicitly linked clichés with what she saw as the advancement of American imperialism, by making lies or disputable opinions appear as unquestionable truths:

"Protecting American interests" is a cliché which sustains numerous people in their assumption that certain interests are "American," and that these interests also take precedence over all other kinds of interest by virtue of some unarguable absolute truth comparable to the laws of gravity. The "window of vulnerability," an updated figure through which "the domino theory" is meant to be viewed, is another more recent cliché. (MSS 46-6 Mar. 1982)

It is important to understand how closely politics and aesthetics were linked in the minds of Hejinian and other Language poets. The Language Poets were concerned with self-criticism and socially responsible poetry. Hejinian saw herself as carrying on in poetry the work of the three major American mass movements in which she participated in the 1960s and 1970s. These movements were the Civil Rights movement, the anti-Vietnam War movement and the Women's movement. Hejinian saw these movements as responses to "large scale social hypocrisy in the USA." For Hejinian "that hypocrisy took three forms: one was outright lies [...] the second was the hypocrisies buried in metaphors, a good example being the domino theory [...] And then perhaps the most difficult level of hypocrisy because the most pervasive, was the complete failure to

examine hypocrisy as it existed in language at all.” For Hejinian, “it was the language in which the status quo was establishing itself and its agenda, and the failure to examine that that struck my generation of young poets very forcefully, and kind of shocked us into social consciousness” (“Two Auckland Talks: 1”).

Hejinian and other Language Poets felt disgusted by the unchallenged ideology put forward in rhetorical devices of false naturalization (capitalism), and metaphors that allowed for elaboration and confirmation (the domino effect). These poets saw poetry as an effective method of attacking this ideological language. Their most problematic and interesting belief was that ideology went all the way down to the “assumption that the way we speak is ‘natural’” (“Two Auckland Talks: 1”). Hejinian’s concern for political change combined with her belief that poets were especially well placed to challenge ideologies buried in language because “they were attentive and attuned to the way they expressed experience and could organize experience so that one actually experienced it that way” (“Two Auckland Talks: 1”).

Connected to Hejinian’s political motivation for formal experimentation was the desire to break down the boundaries of poetry. Hejinian and other Language Poets attacked formalist and sentimentalist critics, readers and writers of poetry who viewed poetics as a purely isolated evaluative matter, as a matter of “taste” or “style” completely separate from social and political values. In fact, the first precept of Language Poetry that Hejinian gives in her bullet-point “definition” is: “a poem is not an isolated, rarified, autonomous, aesthetic object.” Hejinian explains the connection between these two motivations, changing society and changing poetry:

As poets we began theorizing language in order to do two things: one was to examine and redress hypocrisy, in that sense it was a very utopian gesture, and the ultimate goal was to improve the world. The second was to provide an opportunity for rethinking what it is that literature is, to shift the paradigm of what it is that is literature and what kinds of project poetry might undertake appropriately. And essentially to expand them, and part of the expansion involved the socialization of the poem, which took the form of collaborative projects, something I am still involved with enormously. But it also was a premise on which a somewhat self-conscious building of a literary scene was based. (“Two Auckland Talks: 1”)

As part of this “self-conscious building of a literary scene,” the Language poets gave lectures to one another (and to anyone else interested) and mapped out their literary

prehistory in modernist literature. One such combination of these two parts of building a literary movement is evident in the two lectures Hejinian gave in 1981 at New Langton in San Francisco. These lectures were collectively entitled “American Literary Realism.” They explored the similarities in intentions between the Language Poets and the realist or naturalist movement led by Emile Zola.

In “American Literary Realism,” Hejinian argues for a connection between formal experimentation and politics in Language Poetry by arguing for the “realism” of Language Poetry.¹¹ Hejinian discusses the controversy over Emile Zola and “Realism,” which Hejinian takes as synonymous with “Naturalism in this context and which was decried for its posture of “leaving nothing out,” including the obscene. Hejinian quotes the statement of Paul Alexis that naturalism is “a method of thinking, seeing, reflecting, studying, experimenting, a need to analyze in order to know, but not a special way of writing.” She also quotes Zola’s famous statement in “The Experimental Novel,” in which he writes “if the experimental method has been capable of extension from chemistry and physics to physiology and medicine, then it can be carried from physiology to the naturalist novel” (MSS 44-1, talk one, 6). Hejinian also draws a parallel between Zola and the American pragmatists William James and Charles S.

¹¹ Hejinian had elsewhere set down a different reason for connecting formal innovation to political and social structures. According to this other view, there was a connection between social and economic structures and artistic classicism and romanticism. In this case, Hejinian argued that classicism was significant because in it artistic works were created according to set forms. This made the classical work of art “an expressive instrument that parallels religious expression – it [the classical work of art] is communal, shared, a part of which there is a whole.” Hejinian opposed form, “especially classical form,” to “organic form” in romanticism, which she linked with “the bourgeois revolution, the rise of capitalism, and the romance of individualism.” The implication of this is that classical form in poetry opposes individualism, capitalism, and “authoritarianism as extreme individualism” (MSS 46-8, 30 Nov. [1982], 44). This kind of analogy between formal qualities and social arrangements is highly questionable, as is the historical demarcation of bourgeois capitalism as being entirely separate from previous forms of capitalism. The only plausible connection between organic form and authoritarianism is in the possibility of elitism by appeal to “taste.” On the other hand “organic form” could also be democratic, because it means anyone can write a poem any way they like. Similarly for classicism, while form may allow anyone to write a poem, it can equally be anti-democratic in demanding exceptional knowledge of, or creativity with, forms. This political argument for formalism, then, seems unsustainable. It was this argument that was to be one of the major targets for attack in the reductive debate over Language Poetry in the 1980s. It is, however, the argument from realism that Hejinian herself has more often cited in defense of Language Poetry. For this reason, it is this argument that is discussed here.

Peirce in their “developing a philosophy for the humanities using models from science” (MSS 44-1, talk one, 7).

As Hejinian sees it, realism asked two fundamental and distinct questions. The first was: what is the nature of the Real? And the second was: what is the relationship of art to truth? (MSS 44-1, talk one, 9). For realism, in Hejinian’s view, “there is a sense in which romanticism was seen as perpetuating a social view that denied essential and interesting humanity to the bulk of its people” (MSS 44-1, talk one, 11). From this one can see the movement’s relevance to Hejinian. Like the realists, Hejinian saw mainstream tendencies in poetry as putting forward a narrowly proscribed view of humanity and human life.

Hejinian in “American Literary Realism” also invokes Brecht’s “realism,” articulating his linkage of de-familiarization with science, which shows that things are not always as they seem. Hejinian ends the first part of her talk series with the following statement of realist poetics, the intentions of which seem close to her own:

As I see it, the work of the Realist writers, first in Europe, particularly France and Russia, and then in the United States, argued for an analytical methodology independent of individual talent and subjectivity. Its intention was to vivify clarity of thought, to make art a tool or a technique of perception, and to make the real – that is the ordinary – world its focus. (“All that was solid and established crumbles away, all that was holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to look with open eyes upon his conditions of life and true social relations” (*Communist Manifesto*.) As I see it, the Realist project is not dated, though Realism in the period I’ve been discussing was limited by its own terms – i.e. by its failure to accomplish anything toward “a special way of writing.” Reality must be continually confronted afresh. Realism as it addresses the real is inexhaustible. (MSS 44-1, talk one, 28)

Hejinian’s emphasis on the importance of “finding a special way of writing” in order to achieve the stated goal of realism (“to vivify clarity of thought, to make art a tool or a technique of perception”) is indicative of her belief that a “special way of writing” is necessary to reveal the “conditions of life and true social relations,” which she saw as being obscured by lies and hypocrisy in American society. The idea, simply put, is that radical poetry can work to dispel ideology, epistemically defective representations that support the dominance of a particular group or structure of social relations. For Hejinian, poetry offered the possibility of “an array of logics,” rather than a “TV sitcom,

for example, which is completely over-determined, wrapped up and pre-interpreted” (“Two Auckland Talks: 1”).

This is the view that there is ideology inherent in narrative closure, in that narrative closure distorts representations of the world by neglecting other stories that might be told about the same event. Subscribing to this view, Hejinian also believed that this exclusion of stories supports the dominance of those whose stories have been told. The most important thing here is the analogy between openness to new possibilities in poetics and openness to new possibilities in the way one lives one’s life. A connection is made between new poetic forms and imaginative structures and the self-conscious questioning of the way the world is, and of what we should consider moral and immoral. The idea behind this analogy, which is the justification behind Language Poetry’s avant-garde practice, is that being aware of the fact that things can be different and that our intentions matter is the first step to making changes, be they aesthetic, personal or social and political. As Hejinian puts it, “The choice making that goes on in the construction of a work of art can also be taken as a paradigm or a model or an exemplar of choice making in life. That isn’t to say that you make those choices in the same kinds of ways, but it reminds you that you can make choices, at least up to a point” (“Two Auckland Talks: 1”).

ii. “The Revolution Is about Our Lives”

“Only you can free your mind,” sang Bob Marley in “Redemption Song.” Marley’s lyrics may seem a long way from radically experimental poetry, but the oppositional stance and consciousness raising activity are points of contact between the Reggae artist and the experimental Language Poets. Marley’s lyrics and Language Poetry are, of course, vastly different, and this difference reflects opposed views of how language can be used to raise consciousness and change the world. Nevertheless, Marley’s line and the 1960s slogan “the revolution is about our lives” both capture premises underlying Language Poetry. In many ways, then, Language Poetry continued the 1960s concern in the New Left and counterculture for personal and social, as well as political, change. In the world of American poetry, poets such as Amiri Baraka and Allen Ginsberg wrote socially revolutionary poetry, which while similar in intent was vastly different in its presentation of self. This legacy provided something for the Language poets to react against. In one of her unpublished journals, Hejinian points out what she sees as the

wrong turn of some poetry and the counter-culture movement generally in the 1960s: “In the Sixties homebrewed Zen became an excuse for giving up intellectual + emotional effort – especially the latter. The emotional struggle is the most difficult” (MSS 46-9, 22 Jul. 1983, entry 98, 30). As a result of this reaction on the part of Hejinian and the other Language Poets and of the rise of “theory” in the academy, since the 1980s the relationship of politics to the construction and expression of self in lyric poetry has been a major point of debate in contemporary American poetry.

How did this relatively small group of poets have such an impact? In the late 1970s Language Poetry in the San Francisco Bay Area had already attracted attention with a 1979 Language Poetry special issue of *Poetry Flash*, the most widely read Bay Area poetry magazine. In the previous year and on the opposite coast, Charles Bernstein and Bruce Andrews had launched the magazine *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E*, the name of which was to become emblematic of the group. In the early to mid-1980s Language Poetry began to gain more national and international exposure. The publication of Language Poetry writings by university presses was important. Especially important in this regard was the publication in 1984 of *The Language Book*, which was a selection of writing from *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* magazine. Marjorie Perloff’s review of *The Language Book* in *American Poetry* also helped bring Language Poetry to the attention of a wider though often hostile audience. The linkage of politics with aesthetics as well as the unorthodox poetic methods of the Language Poets provoked criticism. Even Perloff’s largely positive review took the poets to task for their “Marxism.”

The debate that took place amongst poets with competing poetics in 1984 in San Francisco illustrates the issues at stake. The Language Poets based in San Francisco Bay were on one side of what De Villo Sloan has described as a “poetry war.” This “war” began in June and centered around two terms of abuse that related to aesthetic position: “crude mechanical access” and “crude personism.” The Language Poets were accused of the former crime for their supposed denial of the “natural” self in the poem, to which they opposed a conception of the self as socially constructed. This attack raised issues surrounding the problem of the postmodern aesthetic of the totally de-centered self, which in effect denied the value of the individual and collapsed universal value into particularity, a celebration of difference as such. Jameson expressed a similar view in his famous 1984 essay in the *New Left Review*, “The Cultural Logic of Late

Capitalism,” in which he found in Language Poetry Lacanian schizophrenia and the end of personal identity. On the other hand, Language Poets, in particular Ron Silliman, accused mainstream American poetry of being naïve in its assumption of self-expression in language, which was advocated for its humanism and its championing of freewill and imagination. For the Language Poets, the aesthetic of most mainstream contemporary poetry in the United States, which assumed an inner voice, an identity unique and inseparable from all other entities, was also the aesthetic of conservative rhetoric, which had a narrow definition of what constituted both a normal individual and universal value.

The polemic over “crude personism” and “crude mechanical access” thus went beyond the poetics and politics of Language poetry to raise issues of more general concern amongst left-leaning intellectuals to the point where an opponent called Silliman the “Secretary-General of the Language Party.” In sum, Language poetry was attacked on three grounds: its representation of self, its status as poetry, and its politics. It is important to note that Language Poets themselves often encouraged those opposed to Language Poetry to make connections between form and politics. Amongst opponents of Language Poetry, there were two opposing views: firstly a strictly autonomous view of poetry, and secondly a view of form and politics as connected but of Language Poetry as having the wrong form and politics.

The debate over “crude personism” and “crude mechanism” is quite typical of polemical debates not just over Language Poetry but also over the avant-garde in general. On both sides of the debate there were those who saw a strong analogy between language structures in poetry and political structures, so that Language Poetry was said to have democratic or anti-democratic form, for example. This was the kind of view that Hejinian herself had put forward in her analogy between “organic form” and bourgeois capitalism (see footnote 11). As noted above, Jameson had used the same analogy between form and social, political and historical situation to condemn Language Poetry for its “schizophrenia.” From similar premises, others, notably Perloff, championed Language Poetry for its putative expression of the digital age and its opposition to the structures of the mass media.

These kinds of analogies, as was pointed out above, seem fallacious. The debate over “crude personism” and “crude mechanical access” is relevant to understanding

Hejinian's work, however, because these terms can be read in relation to Hejinian's less tendentious claim that poetry can be a force for renewing perception and opposing ideology. By exploring the underlying structures in language that were seen as shaping experience, Hejinian aimed in her poetry to enhance the perception and cognition of reality. The goal was to oppose hypocrisy and ideology in American public life, politics, and society in general, by rethinking the individual person, his or her experience and how it was expressed in language. To explore the political power structures that were seen to be inherent in language seemed to Hejinian to require a reassessment of one's own language and the acknowledgement that one always perceives the world through some form or structure.

Hejinian's political convictions and her belief in the power of language motivated both her formal experimentation and also her investigation of personal experience, including the connection between perception and cognition. The following parts of this chapter analyze *The Guard*, *Oxota*, the motivations and themes of the poems, and Hejinian's statements of poetics. Through this analysis, it is argued that Hejinian's poetry exhibits a high degree of tension between self-expression and impersonal constructed artifice.¹²

¹² Eleana Kim has criticized Perloff for taking a traditional hermeneutic approach to Language Poetry. Perloff describes Language Poetry in terms of a rejection of voice and an expression of self that is struggling to find a means of expression. Ron Silliman, one of the central figures of Language Poetry also emphasizes the rejection of "aboutness" as such in Language Poetry, and claims that the failure to recognize this rejection has meant that scholars have failed to understand the work of Language Poets. It is important to note, then, how Language Poets were typically engaged in strategies at odds with "traditional hermeneusis." On these grounds, the thesis put forward here that Hejinian's poetry is in part about experience and description is open to the same criticism leveled at Perloff. The use of formal techniques for the creation of poems and a focus on the materiality of the word and disrupting perception, however, do not exclude finding strategies of expression that are focused on containing "the particulars of experience," as Perloff puts it. Kim is no doubt correct to see these tendencies as sometimes in open conflict in Language Poetry, but Hejinian sees in writing the possibility for creating "the experience of experience." Her work attempts a synthesis of materiality with aboutness aimed at a sensuous experience that is also about experience.

2. *The Guard*: Language and Paradise

Hejinian published *The Guard* as the fiftieth and final book in a series that she issued under the name Tuumba Press. Using an old hand press, Hejinian published this series of fifty single-author “issues,” which were mainly sent to regular subscribers, over the course of eight years, between 1976 and 1984. When Hejinian began Tuumba Press, she was living in relative isolation in Willits in Northern California. Hejinian has described part of her original motivation for establishing Tuumba Press as being to “hear the news” about poetry. The other impetus for the establishment of Tuumba was Hejinian’s interest in “attempting aesthetic discoveries” (“Lyn Hejinian / Andrew Schelling” 3).

In the summer of 1977, after publishing the first ten issues of Tuumba Press, Hejinian moved to Berkeley, California, where she has lived ever since. During the late 1970s and early 1980s, Hejinian was at the heart of the Bay Area Language Poetry community during its most active period. This gave her ample opportunity to expand her aesthetic voyage of discovery. The numerous readings and discussions at Bob Perelman’s Folsom Street loft, at the Langston Arts Center and at other venues gave Hejinian a chance to absorb new ideas about poetry and to test her own ideas against those of others.

Meanwhile, Hejinian continued to publish the Tuumba books. The series became an important organ for the publication of Language Poetry, though Hejinian did not exclude other writers whom she considered innovative. The Tuumba Press series roughly spanned the period of eight years between the crystallization of the Bay Area Language Poetry community and its rise to national prominence in 1984, a year that was marked by a number of events discussed above, including the publication of the anthology *The Language Book*, Perloff’s review of the book, and the Bay Area “poetry war.” The publication of *The Guard* in 1984 and with it the conclusion of the hand-press Tuumba series marked a point of transition for the close-knit Bay Area Language community, and for Hejinian in particular. The end of the series was a sign that the group was moving from self-publication to publication by presses with a wider distribution. *The Guard* contains eight sections and, as Hejinian suggests, parallels the Tuumba series as a whole (“Lyn Hejinian / Andrew Schelling” 2-3). In this sense at least, *The Guard* represents a crystallization of Hejinian’s work in Language Poetry up to this point, both as a publisher and a poet.

Not only the date of publication but also the concerns of the work mark *The Guard* as significant for understanding Hejinian's relationship to the Language Poetry movement. The tension between the desire to explore personal, subjective experience and the desire to create a constructed, self-sufficient work of artifice is very much in evidence in *The Guard*. As noted, *The Guard* consists of eight sections. Each section consists of an uneven number of stanzas most of which are between four and ten lines in length. As is typical of Hejinian's work, a number of different texts and lines appear to be spliced together. In all, there are roughly 750 lines of text, or 4500 words. This relatively long poem combines a range of thematic and linguistic interests, but central to them all is the tension between language and paradise. The poem ends with the following two lines:¹³

with a stiff serenity...this
is the difference between language and "paradise." (8)

In *The Guard*, Hejinian equates perfect or total knowledge with "paradise," which she sees both as an impossible dream and also as something important to desire. The formal structure and language that Hejinian employs provides a counterpoint to this desire in that it emphasizes incompleteness and particularity, the qualities of her consciousness. The effect of incompleteness is achieved in part by the splicing together of lines noted above. Together the terms "paradise" and "language" in Hejinian's poetic lexicon gesture toward the utopianism and realism, or anti-utopianism, at work in *The Guard*.

Hejinian's poetry combines these opposing tendencies into a lyric mode that both explores the inner world of the mind and creates an artificial world to emphasize the impossibility of such an exploration. Her poetry is part of a "quest for knowledge" at the level of imparting knowledge of conscious experience. This impossible aim is always frustrated by language, which is, in turn, a celebration, exploration and marker of the conscious mind. Rather than try to give the illusion of perfection where she does not find it, Hejinian in her poetry uses formal juxtaposition and parataxis to highlight the strangeness of consciousness and its inexpressibility in language. Despite its necessary imperfections, poetic language is for Hejinian also a means to improve one's perception of the external world, not just one's mind, to avoid insidious habits of thought, which, as Hejinian sees it, allow hypocrisy to flourish and prevent political

¹³ The quotations from *The Guard* presented here are taken from the version in *The Cold of Poetry* (11-37), unless otherwise noted. The number in parentheses that follows each quotation refers to the section of the poem from which the quotation comes.

change for the better. In her moments of utopian vision she sees open, questioning thinking about experience in language and through formal structures of language as going hand in hand with social justice.

This poetics of the foregrounding of the materiality of language and the personal subjective experience of reality is similar to what Peter Nicholls identifies as Hejinian's phenomenological poetics. Nicholls describes this poetics as a "crystallization of ideas present in the poems up to *The Guard*" ("Phenomenal Poetics" 242). Nicholls follows Hejinian's own statements in defining phenomenology, in the context of *The Guard*, as including "the perceiver, perception (or perceiving), perceived, and the various meanings of their relationships" ("Phenomenal Poetics" 242). This phenomenological poetics is the interactive poetics of the "middle ground, where we are somehow caught between the generalizing, abstracting quality of language, on the one hand, and an engagement with the localized forms of a particular perceptual world on the other" (Nicholls, "Phenomenal Poetics" 243). The combination of distrust in language's ability to express the perceptual world because of its abstracting quality and the belief in language as a medium for the communication of the subjective, perceptual world can be found in Hejinian's own comments on *The Guard*:

If one's intention is to write poetry "which is detail, not mirage," then the relationship between words and things is sufficiently problematic that "sincerity" must replace "accuracy" and "honesty" in the ethics of an aesthetics of perception (and, ultimately, consciousness). (By "things" I mean events, objects, ideas, creatures, conditions, and so on – anything that might be singled out for articulate address.) *The Guard* is about this problem. "Each sentence replaces an hallucination."
(“Lyn Hejinian / Andrew Schelling” 5)

In describing what she was trying to do in *The Guard*, Hejinian contrasts the "detail" of language and of description that takes into account the abstracting quality of language with lyric poetry that claims to express the whole self, including the totality of the poet's experience of the world, which she sees as a "mirage." Hejinian takes the contrast of detail with mirage from "An Objective," Louis Zukofsky's well-known manifesto of Objectivist Poetry, from which she also borrows the term "sincerity." In the same interview, Hejinian quotes Zukofsky's article where he describes the term:

In sincerity shapes appear concomitants of word combinations, precursors of (if there is continuance) completed sound or structure, melody or form. Writing occurs which is the detail, not mirage, of seeing, or thinking with the things as they exist, and of directing them

along a line of melody... This rested totality may be called objectification... its character may be described as the arrangement, into one apprehended unit, of minor units of sincerity... Granted that the word combination “minor unit of sincerity” is an ironic index of the degradation of the power of the individual word in a culture which seems hardly to know that each word in itself is an arrangement...” (“Lyn Hejinian / Andrew Schelling” 4)

It seems that for Hejinian only in detail, only in moments of experience, can a sincere “rested totality” be achieved. All attempts at “accuracy” and “honesty” create mirages. “Mirages,” in Hejinian’s poetics, are illusions of total vision, when there are only details “in the ethics of an aesthetics of perception.” The final sentence of *The Guard*, quoted above, states a very similar idea in another form. Throughout the time Hejinian was working on the poem, she summed up its theme in her journals and drafts as “language and ‘paradise.’” A talk she gave on the poem was also given this title. Hejinian in *The Guard* clearly presents conceptions of language and paradise to the reader, but there are numerous meanings of these terms in her work. Sometimes, Hejinian’s conception of this difference relates directly to the difference between individual subjective experience, including perception, and the expression of that experience in language: “Language is social and temporal, whereas ‘paradise’ is private and spatial.” *The Guard* discovers this and explores it. It is “about” poetic language, particularly as a “site of consciousness.” The poem “explores the world and our consciousness of it and the language in which this is located” (“Lyn Hejinian / Andrew Schelling” 3).

Dante’s *The Divine Comedy* is an important presence in *The Guard*, and Dante’s great work provides one possible referent for the title of Hejinian’s poem. The first canto of Dante’s poem was “the source of the original impulse for *The Guard*.” Hejinian has explained her understanding of the “guard” of her poem in relation to Virgil’s role in *The Divine Comedy*, in which he is both “‘guide’ and ‘guard.’” Virgil accompanies the poet on a quest to “paradise.” It is the movement on the way to paradise, however, in which the poem, the language, takes place. This is the wandering adventure of both poems, the movement from the portal with which the poem begins through the portal of the poem (“Language and ‘Paradise’” 65-6). The word “aporia” at the end of *The Guard* recalls the aporia in Dante’s *The Divine Comedy* with which, Hejinian writes, the poem began: “I began writing the poem propelled by the charged aporia that is fundamental to the lyric, and in which Dante finds himself: ‘Midway this way of life we’re bound upon, / I woke to find myself in a dark wood’” (“Language and ‘Paradise’” 65). It is in the

“dark wood,” rather than in the closing of the “gap,” or the elimination of the “guard,” between language and thing that Hejinian locates her poetic realism, her quest for knowledge in poetry.

As Hejinian notes, Dante’s poem ends when the poet figure reaches paradise, because language, with its imperfection and provisional nature, is incompatible with the perfection of paradise. Virgil, the “guard and guide,” does not enter paradise, but returns to an in-between world. *The Guard*, similarly, remains in this world of language and revels in its imperfections in an act of being in the middle, in-between. The poem through its investigation of perception and description seeks paradise, but it also celebrates its confounding. The final words of *The Guard* show satisfaction with the poem’s position. For Hejinian, it is only in this in-between position that the inexpressible complexity of consciousness can be located.

i. The Complexity of the Inexpressible

A quotation from Hejinian’s journal written around the time she was working on *The Guard* offers a clue to the meaning of “paradise” in the poem. In her journal, Hejinian quotes from Barbara Reynolds’s introduction to a translation of Dante’s *Paradise*: “the journey to God is the journey into reality” (MSS 46-9, entry 233, Sep. 1983, 70). This suggests that Hejinian associates the quest for paradise with the quest for reality. In the same journal entry as the quotation above, Hejinian also notes her yearning for “the means for expression of the complexity of the inexpressible” (MSS 46-9, entry 233, Sep. 1983, 70). Paradise can thus be seen as the perfect expression of Hejinian’s experience of reality. The desire for paradise is for Hejinian the desire to express the “complexity of the inexpressible.” To express her experience of reality is for Hejinian to acquire and impart knowledge of reality. The journey to paradise in language thus has to do with the journey to impart knowledge of reality. Hejinian creates *The Guard* as a quest for this kind of expression of reality in language. She herself acknowledges that this quest is never to be completed, that paradise is ultimately a “mirage.” But she celebrates the frustration of perfection in the poem as the driving force behind the quest. That is, the desire for knowledge creates the poem and more generally is a driving force for human inquiry.

The Guard is intended to exemplify and inspire the search for “the means for expression of the complexity of the inexpressible.” The “inexpressible” is something that is

experienced immediately but which cannot be recounted. It is intensional, in that the experience of it is constitutive of what it is. Because immediate inexpressible experience is the impossible goal of *The Guard*, the mode of expression is central to the search. Hejinian attempts not to mediate reality through language, but to create a new reality in language. She intends to make her poem as irreducible, as intensional, as conscious experience. In her prefatory remarks to a reading of *The Guard* in 1985 in Leningrad, Hejinian explained her desire to make poetry with the immediacy of subjective experience:

And the central question that continues to perplex me and to stimulate new work is the role that poetic language plays as the site, S-I-T-E, the place of consciousness, of perception and thought – an attempt to make poetic language be not a form of mediation between consciousness and the real world, but to be an immediate event, an immediate part of the real world. (MSS 74-53-15)

The experience of time is an important part of consciousness. Hejinian also conceives of the opposition between “language and ‘paradise’” in temporal terms. Reading language takes time, whereas paradise is timeless. This leads on to another important theme in Hejinian’s poem – memory:

One of the most interesting, most *captivating*, things about language – which makes it different from other art mediums, from paint and from musical sound, for example – is that it has memory. Furthermore, language can project memory forward, even into the future, enact memory.

Nabokov: Speak Memory

Sartre: The Word

Proust: place, name and place-names

I am thinking about language and memory, and sentence-structure and autobiography as part of the *language and paradise* project and as the focus of my presentation in Stephen Rodefer’s S.F. State class. They are reading *My Life*. (MSS 46-9, entry 242, Sep. 1983, 72-3)

The incessant changing of time in the language of the writers to which Hejinian refers brings a focus on how memory is different from but in normal (horizontally integrated) human consciousness always a part of experience. Proust draws attention to this, for example, with clauses that trail off into different places in the character’s memory. The point here for Hejinian is the contrast with her concept of paradise, in which everything should be immediately present. One imagines this might involve all memories being present at once as living experiences with no mediation of experience by memory (a

kind of mind of God?). Such a hypothesis goes beyond the boundaries of the imagination and the vocabulary of “experience” and “memory,” which is, of course, Hejinian’s point. As Hejinian describes *My Life*, her most sustained meditation on memory, each sentence in the poem is an attempt to catch each thought in a moment – to give it the necessary and sufficient character for its meaning, but then, each time, to realize that there is something more, and so to repeat the process as long as one lives (Lyn Hejinian, Aug. 26-29, 1992).

In *My Life*, Hejinian associates colors with memories. For example, the color “yellow” appears in the opening line of *My Life*, which begins “A moment yellow” and which is one of Hejinian’s best known lines of poetry. In her journal from around the time when she was writing *The Guard*, Hejinian explains the memory from which the opening line in *My Life* comes:

Now that I’ve written about my first memory, a spot of yellow (my eye was pressed against it), I don’t remember it any more. It’s been revised and forgotten. Other spots of color, and occasional blankets of cold, appear from moment to moment: the purple when my father returned home after World War II, for example. The color of individuals – now we are closing our eyes and imagining colors. Can you *imagine* blue? red? I attribute green to Larry, or Larry to green, yet he doesn’t like green. He says he likes green in nature but not the *color* green. By that I think he means an applied, as distinct from an intrinsic, green. He didn’t like my green sweater. (MSS 46-9, entry 1 [January 1983], 1)

The color yellow also appears five times in *The Guard*, in sections 1, 2 and 3 of the poem:

are yellow & red – of pupils. (1)
It takes hollow red and yellow factories. (1)
Red and yellow surefires reflect (2)
and obsessive of yellow (2)
pinkish-green, and gray with yellow glints (3)

The repeated use of “yellow” in the poem and the quotation from her journal suggest that Hejinian was thinking of her “spot of yellow” memory when she wrote *The Guard*. The “obsessive of yellow” memory in *My Life* is dissipated through its various uses and revisions in *The Guard*. In this way, Hejinian thematizes the fragile nature of memory and the associations that she makes between colors and events.

The association of colors with events or people is of interest to Hejinian. Association is a way in which colors seem to be stored in the brain. Color is a brain event, the experience of which is part of phenomenal consciousness, not part of the external world. There is an extent to which we are not consciously in control of these brain events, as in the case of memory associations. There is also an interesting effect when we record memories, because our description becomes as much a memory as our original memory, and we have no perfectly reliable way of telling the difference between original memory and retrospective account. This fact of consciousness is what Hejinian is referring to when she writes of no longer remembering her earliest memory.

The question of how to write about memory and the question of how to write about the self are closely connected for Hejinian. Because we are always in our present moment, our past and future selves seem distant and thus distinct from us. This is what Eugene Delacroix suggests when he contemplates his past self in the third person in a quotation recorded in Hejinian's notebook and taken from his *Journal*: "‘Before I left Paris I was producing the work of M. Delacroix as he was a fortnight ago, now I am about to begin the work of the present M. Delacroix.’ (Delacroix, 12 May 1852)" (MSS 46-8, 19 Nov. 1982, 35). The same estrangement of one's past self seems to be referred to in the following lines from Hejinian's *The Guard*:

I sleep with self-styled procrastination.
Whose next day I don't know personally. (1)

The words "dream" and "daydream" occur several times in *The Guard*. At the time of writing *The Guard*, Hejinian was reading Freud's "The Poet and Daydreaming," about which Hejinian writes:

The relevant passage is 'anyone who knows anything of the mental life of human beings is aware that hardly anything is more difficult to them than to give up a pleasure they have once trusted. Really we never can relinquish anything; we only exchange one thing for something else.' (46) He goes on to say that we exchange play for day-dreaming + that this is the material of poetry. Of course I think he is entirely wrong – and in fact ideas such as this are what have cast poetry into a role of irrelevancy. But, if one thinks of substituting a *word* for a *thing*, the idea appears quite exciting (MSS 46-8, March 23 [1983], 61-2)

Hejinian's interest in the substitution of words for things stems from her view of writing as the experience of words. Words are the medium of ideas for Hejinian. She therefore

closely associates the pursuit of ideas with experience in her writing: “pursuing the idea of an experience, or the experience of an idea; I feel like a detective” (MSS 46-9, page 4, entry 13 [February 1983]). The “idea of an experience” is an experience put into words. The “experience of an idea” is the experience of reading those words. In her writing, Hejinian intends her poetry to function at both of these levels. At the level of expressing an experience in words, Hejinian aims to fit as much as possible of an experience into her sentences. This leads to a tendency toward long sentences, in which more and more aspects of an experience are added. At the same time, the experience of a long sentence is intended to exemplify the thought process, which is constantly in motion, always incomplete. Hejinian writes: “I distrust short sentences because of their inherent incapability – to include numerous aspects of the case. The short sentence takes in too little. In its short form, the sentence only seems to be a ‘complete thought.’ Use longer sentences” (MSS 46-9, entry 19, [February 1983], 6).

Hejinian intends her idea-experience sentences to be multifaceted and experientially rich enough to reflect and enact the multidimensionality and sensuousness of phenomenal experience and of the mind in thought. For Hejinian, “Just as ideas may be emotional – i.e. one may *feel* deeply about them – so one may feel how *sensuous* an idea can be. The form of thought” (MSS 46-9, entry 23 [February 1983], 7). Hejinian emphasizes the ethical and epistemological importance of the subjective aspects of human experience about which she writes. This kind of experience is, for Hejinian, ethically significant because it values and affirms each individual’s right to experience, to life, and to thought. It is epistemologically important because to know things we need to be alive to the way our perception and patterns of thought can deceive us. At the same time, a focus on the beauty and wonder of experience and thought can provide powerful cognitive excitement, which in turn stimulates discovery and understanding.

The way in which Hejinian changes the phrase “the skull slightly displaced on the spinal column” (MSS 46-9, entry 46, early March 1983, 13) from a note on her trip to chiropractor into the line from *The Guard* “The skull slightly displayed on the spinal column” (2) is an interesting example of Hejinian’s approach to the sensuousness of personal experience in her poem. The letter *c* is displaced by the letter *y*, so that the word “displaced” is replaced by the word “displayed.” This is apparent even without knowing the source of the line because of the presence of the adverb “slightly,” which

appears strange with the verb “displayed.” The reader can substitute the word “displaced” to make the line into normal, everyday English. But the abnormal line that arises out of what may at first glance be taken as a misprint is what draws attention to the words and to what they describe. How can something be a little bit displayed? One can read this line as an indication of the feeling of tenuous attachment to one’s body, as if the skull sits very lightly on the spinal chord, almost separate. Of this feeling, Hejinian writes: “How detached, even alienated, I am from my body” (MSS 46-9, entry 46, early March 1983, 13).

In section 6 of *The Guard*, Hejinian focuses on longing, loneliness, and a frustrated search for an ineffable totality of vision. As she describes it, these are the “three sentence areas” of this section of the poem: “longing for mother, solitude, the ineffable, a vision of totality” (MSS 46-9, entry 247, 29 Sep. 1983, 74). The “longing for mother” and “solitude” appear to denote a single thematic area. The longing for mother is a longing from memory, a desire to make memory and the past “present.” This longing reflects the frustration of the attempt to escape loneliness through a “vision of the totality of all times.” This stasis in which longing would cease is what Hejinian calls “paradise.” The desire to capture the “ineffable” is also the desire for total vision, for paradise. The impossible vision of totality and expression of the ineffable are frustrated. Instead, one finds longing and loneliness. But Hejinian finds this unfulfilled yearning stimulating in poetry: “For me, the impossibility of the situation makes it exciting” (MSS 46-9, entry 247, 29 Sep. 1983, 74).

As has already been noted in the case of color, the search for totality of vision and for the ineffable is closely tied to attempts to describe and enact perception in *The Guard*. Of *The Guard*, Hejinian writes:

The central part of this poem for me is the relationship of perception to language as the site of perception. I attempted to use various kinds of descriptive language, including imitative language, conventional description and various other kinds of language. (MSS 53-15)

Along with color, the experience of sound is an ineffable quality of perception on which Hejinian focuses in *The Guard*. The air sounds, which Hejinian at one point planned to include in section 6 of *The Guard* and which are found to some extent throughout the poem, relate to Hejinian’s interest in the impossibility of the accurate description of sounds in language. Consistent with her interest in pursuing the impossible in poetry,

Hejinian nevertheless attempts to accurately describe sounds at certain points during *The Guard* by using neologisms and other devices. At the same time as writing *The Guard*, she was also working on a poem that particularly focused on attempting to describe sound. The work was called “Listening” and some of that poem eventually found its way into *The Guard*. Her notebook offers one example of her interest in this aspect of phenomenal consciousness:

What is the characteristic sound of the morning through the window on Russell St [the street on which Hejinian lives]: sound of motors – individual motors. Distant traffic: there isn’t a precise term for that sound – not a roar, nor whoark [?], nor whisper, nor hum. It most resembles the wind, though without the wind’s intimacy. The wind approaches, the wind surrounds the house.

Wind + sounds in the air: sound qualities, voice qualities. Attempting description, attempting description of the invisible. (English-American vocabulary is inadequate to such a project: “The refrigerator makes a sound we cannot spell” – *My Life*.) Calling description into question.

Phone Radio. Music (records).

A difference in speed between wind and breeze. The longer length of a low note.

How sounds endure.

LISTENING. (MSS 46-9, entry 249, 29 Sep. 1983, 74)

The third to last line of this journal entry appears in section 6 of *The Guard*:

And even desire...the work echo...one throws
oneself after the center of gravity...he walks
quickly tilted...sincerity is also a deference
to bulk...with the difference in speed
apparently...maybe instead of fear of fiction
...in the relative lengths of the low and the high
notes...he smothers his laugh in a paper towel. (6)

Here Hejinian appears interested in how physical movement and length are expressed in our perception and our description of that which we perceive. The difference in the speed of air movement is expressed as the difference between “wind” and “breeze.” The difference in wave lengths of sound, the bumping together and apart of air particles in wave-like motion, is perceived as a difference in pitch, which we describe in English as “high” or “low.”

The yearning for an overarching total vision of the world across space and time, which would include a full description of perception, also has an ethical force for Hejinian. Through the effort to visualize the world across space and time, we have the power to imagine more than our immediate time, place, and interests. This power of vision creates the possibility of, for example, conservation of the environment and universal human rights. The vision of totality that Dante produces in the *Paradiso* of his *Divine Comedy* relates, according to the Introduction that Hejinian read, to Dante's conception of universal justice. The difference between Dante and Hejinian's views of justice is that Hejinian's is always incomplete. We must constantly strive for the paradise of total vision, but always with the awareness that such total vision is both impossible and ultimately undesirable.

The theme of language and paradise in *The Guard* relates to the general emphasis on the need to see through mirages of idealization in language and to liberate oneself to think and act freely and ethically. The first two lines of the poem hint at a danger that Hejinian sees in language:

Can one take captives by writing –
“Humans repeat themselves.” (1)

The line seems to come from a reflection in Hejinian's journal on how human beings are creatures of habit:

Conversation with Jacki + Margie about guilt, habit + history when they were here. I said I thought that there was no such thing as history for humans; they only know habit. They have habits, not history. That's why we say “History repeats itself.” We mean habits. Humans repeat themselves. (MSS 46-8, 18 Nov. 1982, 34)

Because this line immediately follows a line about writing taking captives, one can read the two together as an indication that Hejinian thinks of writing and human psychology as sometimes shutting down alternatives. As has been seen, for Hejinian closed language “takes captives” by shutting down alternatives, just as habits work against a sense of free will. Hejinian wants to remind the reader “that you can make choices, at least up to a point” (“Two Auckland Talks: 1”).

The poem works playfully against “over-determined,” wrapped up and “pre-interpreted” forms. It swings between connected themes and the interruption of this flow of thoughts. In this way, *The Guard* appears to guard against interpretations. At the same

time, it hints at the possibility of an overall interpretation that overcomes these interruptions. Sometimes the text even anticipates the reader's possible interpretation:

Such hopes are set, aroused
against interruption. Thus –
in securing sleep against interpretation.
Anyone who could believe can reveal
it can conceal. A drive of remarks

and short rejoinders. [...] (1)

The “rejoinders” are enacted formally in the dislocations and conjunctions of the passage and in the hope that there will be no “interruption,” which is followed by a rejoinder “against interpretation.” “Against” can be a repression, a disruption, but to “set against” can also be to make a thing stand out. Formal features disrupt a stable narrative reading. Phonetically related words question the primacy of sound over sense. Malapropism reveals the similarity not only between “interruption” and “interpretation” but also between “can reveal” and “can conceal.” Enjambment makes compartmentalizing the poem into units of meaning difficult, as in the stanza quoted above, where the end of the sentence and the end of the stanza do not coincide. Metonymy makes associations between words, lines, sentences, and stanzas contingent, contiguous, rather than layered, accumulative and hierarchical. This can be seen, for example, in the association between “aroused,” “sleep,” and the implied “dream” that might be secured “against interpretation.” These are also, however, metaphorical structures. The poem compares the subjective semiconscious dream world, which invites and usually defies interpretation, to the activity of language in the poem. In the context of Hejinian's poetics, the lines oppose “over-determined” language not only by making interpretation difficult, but also by drawing attention to the activity of seeking an interpretation. *The Guard* is about details of language and the way in which they express the incompletely fulfilled desire for perfect understanding, “paradise” in Hejinian's lexicon. This incompleteness of understanding is highlighted in the poem through constant interruptions.

In *The Guard*, Hejinian uses the analogy between the formal devices in the poem and the process of thinking to emphasize thoughts in progress. In her essay on the poem, she writes of each line of the poem as a unit of space. Each line is roughly equivalent in

length on the page to each other line. She takes the movement between lines as a unit of time. In this way, the length of the line becomes the axis, or vector, of space, while the length of the poem represents a length of time. The poem takes place, “takes time,” within these parameters. Sentences, within Hejinian’s metaphor, are units of thought (Hejinian, “Language and ‘Paradise’” 60-2). Hejinian refers to this metaphor in the first part of *The Guard* shortly after the beginning of the poem, which was quoted above:

The landscape is a moment of time

that has gotten in position. (*The Guard* 1)

Each line in *The Guard* is “a moment of time that has gotten in position,” it occupies the spatial parameters of the poem, “the landscape,” at a point in time, while also being a single thought, a single sentence. Without a change in time there can be no movement. Each line, then, is an “objectification” in Louis Zukofsky’s sense of the word: a “totality of perfect rest” (“An Objective” 13). At the same time, however, the thought at rest in the landscape contradicts the possibility of perfection and totality. “Musical optimism takes time,” Hejinian writes at the end of part 5 of *The Guard*. Time, however, requires movement between lines, not being at rest. Each line in its striving for stillness, quixotically demands movement. It asks the reader to move on.

The complex, contradictory relationship between form and content in *The Guard* develops in the final section of the poem:

[...] This intention to write
turns into a letter. A strong mawkish blue

and blunt, but not yet foreground
(it is delightful being somewhere else
but far from close enough).

A lightbulb shines under waving incoming
of the sun. The storm implodes, withdrawing

to its center, and momentarily magnifies
the morning light. The wind comes up blowing
paper scraps and dry grass in eddies
at the edge of the school ground

into the cyclone fence.
The lining of its chain and candid wall.
Geometric and detective. More like pilings

than a pitcher, form is ... (families
are stable, friendships mobile). (7)

These lines begin with a pun. An intention to write, when put into practice, becomes words, which consist of letters. An intention to write a poem, particularly one, like *The Guard*, which is dedicated to a friend, Arkadii Dragomoshchenko, might also turn into a letter to a person. Hejinian, in her essay “Language and ‘Paradise’” refers to Tynianov’s term “oscillating sign” and gives the pun as an example of such a sign. An oscillating sign is a sign where two meanings of the sign “jostle for primacy” (79). There is, however, a greater significance to the combination of these two specific meanings of “letter.” Letters of the Roman alphabet are the smallest units of the English writing system. They are the content of all English writing. At the same, the epistolary genre is one form of writing in English. The oscillating writing sign “letter,” then, moves between content and form in language and, as a word, sits somewhere in-between the smallest particle and the larger unit of language to which it refers.

The words “cyclone fence” also foreground the uncertain relationship between contents and container:

[. . .] The wind comes up blowing
paper scraps and dry grass in eddies
at the edge of the school ground
into the cyclone fence. (7)

The wind contains “paper scraps and dry grass,” yet these contents are what make the movement of the wind visible. The wind, then, is not only the formal organizer of the contents, the “paper scraps and dry grass,” but itself becomes the subject, the contents, of the sentence. The “cyclone fence,” like the wind after which it is named, oscillates between form and content. It contains the school ground and the “paper scraps and dry grass” that the wind blows into it. This kind of fence also appears elsewhere in Hejinian’s writing: “As for we ‘who love to be astonished,’ there are fences keeping cyclones” (*My Life* [1987] 59). The fence contains the visible representation of the wind – the “paper scraps and dry grass” – while allowing the wind to pass through it. The

“misinterpretation” of the name “cyclone fence” focuses attention on the contradictory, humorous nature of a container, the particularity of which rests in how it does not contain. That is, “cyclone fences” do not “keep cyclones.” They are designed to allow wind to pass through them. The word “cyclone” itself contains similar contradiction. The focal point of this intense wind pattern, or form, its “eye,” is a point of calm.

The focus on body and surface, content and form, develops further in the lines that immediately follow:

The lining of its chain and candid wall.
Geometric and detective. More like pilings

than a pitcher, form is ...(families
are stable, friendships mobile). (7)

The patterning form of the “cyclone fence” comes into focus in the description of the “wall” and the word “geometric.” These words remind one of the formal, crisscrossing structure of the “cyclone fence.” This grid pattern is also the kind of pattern that Hejinian sees between the synchronic and diachronic, between space and time (“Two Stein Talks” 116-7). It also reflects the form in *The Guard*, in which sentences run across lines. The “lining” recalls the same word in an earlier stanza of part eight of the poem:

But why change subject matter. And I
in a shower cap of the flowers that horses like.
The body takes out the lining
of its image. Cars can mountainous
listlessly. To ink or to saddle.
The interlink of chains. The trees
in the rain, they prove a ground

for meditation. Bound, dark, bottle, green. (7)

To remove “lining” makes “image” impossible. If lining is the outline of a body, that body is only visible through the definition that a lining provides. On the other hand, “lining” of clothes is a feature not intrinsic to form; it merely improves the content, the quality, of the clothes. The adjectives that follow the “cyclone fence” jostle for position, just as principal meanings do in a pun. “Chain and candid” are contrasting. “Chain” can

be a noun, while “candid” is always an adjective, which refers to a person’s character, rather a physical quality like “chain.” But the conjunction “and” links the two words in a chain of signification. Meanwhile, reference back to the previous use of the word “chain” provides an example of the “interlink of chains,” in which the word earlier appears. An inkling of other kinds of links appears in the association with the “ink” of the previous sentence, which clicks in harmony with the “interlink” of the next line. This is indeed an association in “ink,” a visual, as well as aural, play in print.

The “cyclone fence” also contains a visual link with its surroundings, though of a different kind. It is a “wall,” a wall of lines, and in this sense it is “geometric.” The fence is a formal structure that contains space, but is also a pattern, a regular arrangement of lines. Thus, it is both a patterning and a container. “More like pilings,” a foundational structure, “than a pitcher,” a single container. Perhaps this is what “form is.” These lines are an adapted version of a note on form in Hejinian’s journal:

Form. One mustn’t think of form as *receptivity*, as passivity. Form is structured. More like studs in building than a goblet. Form thrust into material. But again, one couldn’t accurately say that material becomes filled with form. (MSS 46-9, entry 217, 14 Sep. 1983, 66)

In *The Guard* “studs in building” becomes “pilings” and “goblet” becomes “pitcher,” but the message – that form is structure, which partly constitutes content, rather than merely being a passive container – remains the same. The substitutions not only create alliteration – a formal device, while semantic content remains constant – but also a pun, an inexact aural one, on “pitcher” and picture, which is, contrastingly, the contents of a frame, its conventional container.

As outlined above, Hejinian sees the overall form of *The Guard* as the combination of spatial and temporal axes. The form of the sentence beginning “More like pilings” quoted above is not atypical in crossing not only lines but also a stanza. In this sentence, each line anticipates the next line and depends upon the previous one. The sentence fulfils the expectation of comparison in the phrase “more like pilings” and of some sort of statement following the word “families.” The ellipsis marks, however, confound the anticipation of a full statement in the middle line of the sentence. Each of the final words could also refer back to the previous part of the line, so that the indirect relationships of phrases and the poem’s form, the line, sentence and stanza structure, encourage multiple associations. In other words, the dislocated form makes the semantic

content dependent on formal relationships, such as the coincidence of certain words or phrases in a line, sentence or stanza. The relationships between line breaks and sentence breaks are particularly productive in this regard. Hejinian seems to associate the former with a break in time, and the latter with a break in thought. The effect of the combination of the two is that there are always at least two formal ways of grouping a given collection of phrases into either a “moment of time,” or a single thought. The reader must constantly negotiate these two possible means of grouping words and phrases. This is perhaps what Hejinian has in mind when she writes, in reference to Gertrude Stein’s writing, “it is the convergence of these elements – that is, space and time – with language that provides the excitement of grammar” (“Two Stein Talks” 113). This is what Hejinian describes as Stein’s landscape: “landscape is a temporal-spatial configuration and language operates within it” (“Two Stein Talks” 122).

An example of how Hejinian exploits the formal possibilities of the enjambment of line and sentence appears toward the end of the last stanza of section 7:

I wonder, is her mind the greater pleasure. The one
galloping up with flowers on the little table. (7)

The “I” here is involved in speculative inquiry. This involves an objective third person subject, “her mind.” This is similar to the matching of “I” with the third person “one,” which as an Arabic numeral resembles the “I.” Indeed, this “one” occurs again in the same line but in a new sentence, thus demonstrating how logical associations appear within a line, while sentences generally express a single thought in *The Guard*. The combination of “I” and “one” is also a reference to a line in the first stanza of the poem. In both cases, the beginning of a new sentence on the same line implies an association. Hejinian explains her understanding of this by referring to the same play on “I” and “one” at the beginning of *The Guard*:

When one sentence ends and another begins on a single line, the connection between the two is part of the plane of consciousness. This may sound slightly abstract, but it is actually a very simple way to read lines. For example, the third line of *The Guard* consists of one complete sentence, plus a single word of the next sentence: “The full moon falls on the first. I” (11). The connection between “first” and “I” is obvious (although it should also be noted that the allusion to the “first person,” solipsistic or grammatical, is somewhat ironic). When the poem begins with the question, “Can one take captives by writing,” the “one” (first) is “I.” (“Language and ‘Paradise’” 61-2)

This is the “I” in self-reflection, caught, or read, in the act of wondering, or “one-dering.” Hejinian’s guide to reading *The Guard* involves breaking down words into smaller units of meaning. In this way, Hejinian follows Zukofsky’s assertion that “each word is an arrangement.”

The focus on the “I” here also relates to problems of mind and body, to the expression of subjective experience. Paradoxically, the representation of the “I” by the word “one” breaks down its oneness by giving it many forms. Unity and disunity combine. The movement to the third person, the objectification of the “I,” also challenges ideas of a unified self. The thought, or writing, situates itself in space and time; it is on one “plane of consciousness,” one line of the poem. The plane of consciousness takes place between the boundaries of the person’s consciousness, between the border guards “I” and “one.”

Hejinian’s poem asks: can one capture the “I,” the subjective experience of the self, in writing? Hejinian’s answer is both yes and no. On the one hand, Hejinian recognizes that the poem can only be language, rather than the paradise of perfect expression of conscious experience, which would have to include memory, perception and self-conscious reflection. On the other hand, Hejinian in *The Guard* seeks to include all these things in her poem. She shares with Zukofsky the “desire for the objectively perfect” (“An Objective” 12). She strives to create a poetic site of consciousness that gestures toward paradise, toward the “complexity of the inexpressible.”

ii. The Guard of Paradise

The perfection for which Hejinian struggles in her poetry is the “realm of complete and perfect understanding.” Hejinian attempts in *The Guard* to give the reader unmediated experience of her ideas and experiences, which include inexpressibly complex moments of memory, perception and self-reflection. To succeed in this attempt would mean to reach what Hejinian calls paradise. Her goal of perfection is, however, impossible, because the subjective content of experience by definition evades capture. This is what Hejinian has in mind in the following description of the major themes of *The Guard*:

Language is the guard of paradise. It doesn’t let one in. Then too it might be the garden of paradise, or the fruits and flowers of that garden, some edible, some forbidden, of which one has to gobble all if one is to know anything.

I am imagining paradise as the realm of complete and perfect understanding, Faust's paradise.

Recollect discussions with my mother on the imperfection of perfection – i.e. that perfection by definition would be imperfect because it would be boring and monstrous.

[...]

Though one may know a language perfectly (I don't mean a foreign language, I mean one's own, though it is interesting that one may ask the question "Do you know any languages" and mean any foreign languages) – one may know a language perfectly and be able to speak articulately, and still not be assured of knowing much else at all. This is because of the shift (like parallax in photography) that occurs between things (events, ideas, objects) and the language in which they are depicted or discussed.

(And yet language is not a "thing" itself, removed, independent.)
(MSS 46-9, entry 42, 28 Feb. 1983, 11-12)

Hejinian's idea that knowledge should be sought through language might seem ill founded, but from this passage it is clear that she does recognize the empirical basis of knowledge in that she recognizes the primacy of things, events, ideas and objects. One may know the words for things, but not know much about those things. The perfect correspondence between word and thing is what Hejinian means by "paradise," or "Faust's paradise." In the passage quoted above, Hejinian points out that there is always a difference between the account one gives of an event and the event itself. When one reads an account of an event, one's experience differs from the experience of someone who has observed that event. Hejinian emphasizes the "shift" or gap between the object that is known and the mind that knows it, and again between a description of something and the thing itself. Her emphasis on this gap contrasts with anti-realist attempts to close that gap, in Hejinian's words to have "Faust's paradise." Michael Devitt and Kim Sterelny describe the standard philosophical arguments against realism and in favor of Hejinian's Faustian paradise:

Traditional philosophical arguments against realism start from a thesis in epistemology: from an assumption about the nature of knowledge. In one way or another it was then argued that we could have knowledge only if we gave up realism. For knowledge to be possible, "the gap" between the object known and the knowing mind must be closed; the object must, in some way, be dependent on our way of knowing. In the twentieth century, in contrast, arguments against realism typically start from a thesis in the philosophy of language. For reference to be possible, "the gap" between the object referred to and the referring mind must be closed; the object must, in some way, be

dependent on our way of referring, dependent on our language. With this recent change has gone another which is decidedly unwelcome: the anti-realist nature of conclusions is often only implicit and is nearly always shrouded in mystery. Attention has centered so heavily on language that the metaphysical issue has tended to disappear; or to be redefined in linguistic terms; or, worst of all, to be confused with linguistic issues. In general, the philosophy of language has become too big for its boots. (235)

Hejinian starts with metaphysical realism (the world exists independently of one's experience of it) and then approaches issues of truth and understanding. In contrast, the anti-realist linguistic philosophies of the twentieth century have tended to do the opposite; they assume *a priori* a view of language and then proceed to anti-realism. But, as Hejinian points out, knowledge of language does not ensure that we know about the world. Hejinian implicitly agrees with Devitt and Sterelny that: "this procedure of arguing from a view of language to a view of the world is all wrong" (243).

In *The Guard* Hejinian employs various kinds of sentences on different themes under the overall theme of language and "paradise." In this way, Hejinian creates a mass of interacting sentences and phrases that are specific instances of this theme. If one views this as a focus on a kind of "situation," then the following comment from Hejinian's journal offers some explanation of her intentions:

Say that I don't want to let my words construct something, a situation, that I don't mean. Say I want to describe a situation as I understand it, my feelings about it perhaps, and am willing to use as many words as it takes in order to describe it completely and exactly. In the end, haven't I only made so many sentences? (MSS 46-9, entry 284, 19 Oct. 1983, 82)

Paradise, in Hejinian's schema, is the perfect description of such a situation. In the poem *The Guard*, she aims at that paradise by describing her experience of the world, including her attempt to describe it. In the end, she has not created paradise, but only "so many sentences," that is, language.

The major theme of *The Guard* is the search for perfect Faustian knowledge, an absolutely complete description of the experiential world, which is constantly confounded by human psychology and the limits of language. The poem runs up against the impossibility of a complete description of a moment in language, because consciousness is unmediated and essentially private and subjective, whereas language is mediated and generally public. In *The Guard*, Hejinian exploits the tension created by

by the fact that she cannot fulfill her desire for completion. While Hejinian was working on *The Guard*, she read Walter Jackson Bate's biography of John Keats. In her notebook from that time she was particularly attracted to Bate's description of Keats's realization of the impossibility of completion:

Bate on Keats (p 242 of the biography): "He can only end with a plea for openness, and by recurring to a thought that has been growing on him for sometime: that the heart's hunger for settlement, for finality, cannot be answered unless we shut ourselves off from the amplitude of experience, with all its contradictory diversity. All he can do is to proceed honestly and empirically in this adventure of speculation of openness..." (MSS 46-9, page 91, entry 311, 7 Nov. 1983)

Whether or not this is a correct description of Keats thinking, it seems clear that Hejinian intends to explore the same tension between the "amplitude of experience" and the quest for perfect knowledge as that which Bate identifies in the poetry of Keats. Hejinian believes in art as a realm in which one can emphasize the importance of human experience and open the reader to the excitement of the world and of language.

Hejinian sees openness as the means to excite the reader's perception of the world and of language. Hejinian writes in a "non-linear" manner, as she puts it, to achieve this openness:

That's the issue: subject, instead of argument. I much prefer the former. Argument, however, again as Carla [Harryman] noted, is useful and good because it is a discipline, teaches focus, clarity, and coherence. Non-linear thinking is not yet developed *as a discipline* – though it, too, should aspire to clarity, coherence, and focus. (MSS 46-9, entry 318, Nov. 1983, 91)

It is unclear exactly what Hejinian has in mind that might constitute disciplined non-linear thinking. But, if one takes *The Guard* as a model, one finds a collection of sentences that are focused, more or less, on a subject, or a collection of related subjects, and that are clearly attempts at honest description of Hejinian's experience of being and her experience of the world.

Carla Harryman's book *The Middle*, which was published in 1983, appears to have been an important source of inspiration for *The Guard* (MSS 46-9, entry 319, Nov. 1983, 92), especially section 7, in which Hejinian identifies "and" as the primary conjunction ("Language and 'Paradise'" 68). In section 7 of *The Guard*, one finds the following:

of the seamless possessive. Irreducible as a door.

Maybe this in my jargon is for what
rock is a metaphor (with these glasses
I spy in a landscape). Captured
in words as by a sentence

sagging. The dumps. Storm
watching in a dent is rain catching. (7)

There is a definite focus on being “in-between” or in “the middle” in section 7 of *The Guard*. Hejinian in her notebook has likened the way a sentence “captures” an idea or thing to the way something sagging in the middle captures rain. In both cases the middle is important.

The Guard contains a number of instances of the words “rock” (3), “chain” (2), and “wall” (7 if one counts “wallflower,” or 6 if one does not). Of these common words, Hejinian writes:

Rocks: Rocks and chains are interchangeable; a rock always stands for a chain (+ both for any simple common object, which though common is never invisible). Most common objects become invisible. Rocks + chains (I am thinking of simple wooden chains) never. If invisible, one falls over them – bruised shins. WALL works with rock and chain, a simple word to come up against. [. . .] A rock wall is two things. (“My mission has to do with rocks more than walls” – Ruskin, choosing between architecture and geology). The form, whether it comes from the ceiling or the floor, appears to suggest things that stand in the way + for themselves. (MSS 46-8, 22 Sep. 1982, 3)

The last sentence quoted here is of particular interest. A “wall” is a constructed human object and is generally functionally defined as a barrier of some kind, whereas “rocks” are not functionally defined. Hejinian describes *The Guard* as both restrictive and protective, two functions of a wall, but it is also a poem. This is perhaps what Hejinian means by “things that stand in the way + for themselves.” *The Guard* both denotes things and is something that stands in the way of the reader when he or she attempts to go beyond the text. “Rocks,” in Hejinian’s terminology, are things that stand in the way – in the middle of things – and are “never invisible.” They are things and the barriers between things. In this way, Hejinian’s “rocks” appear to share the qualities that she

associates with words; words both stand for something and prevent direct access to something.¹⁴

Hejinian offers another characterization of the theme of *The Guard* in her journal from the time when she was working on the final two sections of the poem. In the journal, she suggests that one could “consider ‘paradise’ as the involving identity of all things non-paradise as the conditions of each thing’s being only itself” (MSS 46-9, entry 329, 17 Nov. 1983, 94-5). From this it seems that Hejinian conceives of paradise as all things and the totality of all their relations with one another. But the danger of this kind of paradise, as Hejinian’s note makes clear, is that things then no longer have their own separate identity and we are left with an undifferentiated or uniform mass. The tension in *The Guard* is between a striving for interconnection and totality, and a striving for individuation, an emphasis on the particularities of each thing described. As Hejinian sees it, “The function of form is to give force, not finality, to the idea, or, better, ideas” (MSS 46-9, entry 332, 17 Nov. 1983, 95). In the context of *The Guard*, this may mean that while form gives force to this range of meditations, it is not meant to subsume the ideas, or even to direct them. On the same page as these two journal notes, Hejinian describes *The Guard* as an ode, with connotations of the rich and brilliant flow of the imagination, unbridled by the necessity of articulating a single concept or idea:

The Guard: an ode, on the difference between language and “paradise.” According to the Princeton *Encyclopedia of Poetry + Poetics*, the ode is “the most formal, ceremonious, and complexly organized form of lyric poetry, usually of considerable length... These odes [Pindaric]... frequently appear incoherent through the brilliance of imagery, abrupt shifts in subject matter, and apparent disorder of form within individual sections.... the tone of the odes is emotional, exalted, intense....” (MSS 46-9, entry 330, [17 or 18] Nov. 1983, 95)

Hejinian again focuses on knowledge as a quality of experience when she characterizes *The Guard* as aspiring to be “a natural event.” She strongly desires to make something that offers a direct, natural experience of the world in her poetry, but she holds an equally strong conviction that this is impossible:

¹⁴ The use of the word “rocks” in this way is not confined to *The Guard*. In two other poems she uses the line “Rocks are emitted by sentences to the eye” (“Composition of the Cell,” entry 111, and *The Cell*). This line appears to suggest that sentences can refer to tangible things, such as rocks, and that words themselves are like black rocks seen by the eye on white paper. The word “rocks” here, of course, could also be read as a verb. For more on this line’s connotations, see my article ““A Meaning Alliance”” 558-9.

358. Nov. 26, 1983. Last night it seemed to me that the poem aspires to be a natural event, or comparable to a natural event. Star or pebble, tree, mountain, storm, etc. In a sense that is not anthropomorphic, these natural objects, events, and aspects *know* – each is a body of information which can be considered a body of knowledge. But this is difficult to speak of without falling into romantic clichés. (MSS 46-9, entry 358, 26 Nov. 1983, 99)

359. The poem aspires to be a natural event – in the poem language takes its place in nature.

Alas, both of these are conceits; also wishes.

This can be the theme of section 7, the bottled message section, of *The Guard*. (MSS 46-9, entry 359, 26 Nov. 1983, 100)

There is a strong desire, almost mystical, expressed here for just letting things be in themselves. The poem should be like the real world as it is. But there is an equally strong recognition that this is a conceit, that the poem is constructed out of conscious effort. In this context, onomatopoeia plays an important role. This is because onomatopoeia at first glance appears to be different from conventional language in that it is imitative of the actual natural sound that it describes. Such a view of onomatopoeia as nonconventional language, however, is incorrect. Even at its most unmediated, language is still not the natural thing it represents. Hejinian exploits this counterintuitive nature of onomatopoeia to reveal the conventional nature of language in a surprising way. In *The Guard*, she uses Russian words for animal noises, which are strikingly different from their English counterparts:

But I tell you that cats “say” *mya-ew, mya-ew*
dogs *gav-gav*, trains *sheex-sheex-sheekh*
(while whistling *ta-too*), roosters cry
coo-caw-reh-coo, frogs croak *kva-kva*, birds
in a flock sing *fyou-eet*, except ravens

which prefer *karr-karr*, and the ducks quack *kra*
bells ring *bom-bom*, and pigs grunt *hryou-hryou* (6)

From this use of onomatopoeia, one can understand the logic of the last stanza of *The Guard*:

splash-dripping, splash-splash
drop drip drop
drip which we have set out

to receive it. Confiding
in this aquarium...the knowledge of “empty”
surpasses the capacities of language...
the swivel, a mound...
“I am a construction worker, I work at home”
with a stiff serenity...this
is the difference between language and “paradise.”

The sounds are still language, not things in themselves or “things-as-they-are” (MSS 46-9, entry 362, 26 Nov. 1983, 100), and the poem cannot present this “empty” kind of “knowledge,” because it “surpasses the capacities of language.” Hejinian is a conscious writer, a “construction worker,” not, as some romantics saw it, a conduit for expressing the ineffable of nature. This “is the difference between language and ‘paradise.’” This difference leaves unfulfilled the desire for the poem to be an unmediated world, a “natural event.” Hejinian elsewhere refers to this difference as a “wall” and a “gate”:

“The Guard” – I’ve imagined language as a construct, the image of a wall + a gate (between the real and “paradise,” whatever that is). But I could imagine a wire fence also – the sentence, or sentences, as barbed wire: [pictures follow] (MSS 46-9, entry 132, Aug. 1983, 40)

This idea expressed above in the metaphor of the wall might strike one as Platonic. That is, if one takes Plato’s “forms” as “paradise,” then language is a conduit and a block between them and the real world. But if “paradise” is perfect expression of one’s inner experiences, then it is not really Platonic, and is more a point about the incapacity to communicate these experiences perfectly. It also seems to be a metaphor for the difference between our perception of the world and the way it actually is, as well as a metaphor for the difference between our experience of the world and our attempts to describe that experience.

Another comment from Hejinian’s notebooks, relates language and paradise to time and space: “Language and ‘paradise’” – a relationship of time to space” (MSS 46-9, entry 136, Aug. 1983, 42). In this metaphor language is associated with linearity, lack of completion, with the conscious mind – you can always say something else and you only have a limited lifetime to say everything – and “paradise” is associated with a perfectly static eternal time with a lack of consciousness and with death:

Linear time is the time of language; linear time encounters its own “stumbling block,” namely Death. The *time* that encounters *Death* is

obsessional time. Time in its encounter with death becomes obsessional (obsessive).

I equate paradise with death. Language is life, paradise is death. (MSS 46-9, entry 141, Aug. 1983, 43)

Hejinian is interested in the liveliness that she associates with language: “Various psychological states attributable to language: restlessness; desire + sensuality; the fear of Death” (MSS 46-9, entry 148, Aug. 1983, 44). Hejinian refers to the desire and difficulty of expressing ideas and to the sensuous nature of beautiful words. One can find “fear of Death” in Hejinian’s use of language to create poems that keeps her experiences alive and that create new experiences for readers. Language is associated with psychological liveliness, with being fully conscious and with having a lively mind. This constant flow of thinking is life, for Hejinian, while the obsessional focus on the perfection of a particular moment is associated with death, the certain end of the linear psychological time of human beings.

Hejinian raises a large number of issues in her work. Her work is about invention and creativity as much as it is itself an invention. *The Guard* is about the relationship between emotion and intellect, and in writing it Hejinian draws on her own experience and other sources in an eclectic way. The poem is about reference – the “gap” between words and the things to which they refer. It refers to the world and to the language in which it is written. This latter interest is possibly why Hejinian finds Francis Ponge’s work “inspiring”: “He talks about language and *paradise*, which are the two subjects of ‘The Guard.’ He writes about things, rather than humans – his motive being to restore the proper perspective, namely that the human is only a part of the universe + not necessarily the part around which all else revolves” (MSS 46-9, entry 172, 21 Aug. 1983, 51). Following Ponge, Hejinian finds in poetry a particular power to grasp the world in a way that acknowledges its intensionality, or materiality:

169. “In order for a text to expect in any way to render an account of reality of the concrete world (or the spiritual one) it must first attain reality in its own world, the textual one.” (Francis Ponge quoted p8 of “The Power of Language”)

170. Only poetic language can grasp the world, because only poetic language has sufficient materiality to allow it to do so. This is what Gavronsky says of Ponge. Is it true? I think possibly so. (MSS 46-9, entry 169-70, Aug. 1983, 50)

For Hejinian, the medium of poetry allows her to give an account of her experience of reality, of phenomenal consciousness, in which the medium of experience is intensional. Just as for Hejinian form and content are inseparable in a poem, the form of an experience is an essential part of what makes it that experience.

Hejinian's view of poetic language as nonutilitarian language that stands for itself and cannot be paraphrased is evident in her annoyance at those who wish to know what her poetry is about:

I complained about the public's demand to know what a poem means – that they can't conceive of permitting it to mean itself. The confusion with discourse, with language as a vehicle for information or expression (oppression?). The differences between asking what a poem means and understanding the meaning of new perceptions. (MSS 46-6, Jan. 1982, n.p.)

For one who criticizes people for asking what a poem means, Hejinian is surprisingly keen on repeating the subject of her poem *The Guard*: language and paradise. It is the very subject of *The Guard*, however, that leads her to reject the search for what a poem means. Her anti-reference position comes from her interest in representing the experience of reality, which she thinks requires the "materiality" of poetic language. This materiality leads Hejinian to emphasize the separate existence of the "text" as a "world" and a thing. It is not the kind of thing that can be decoded and discarded. One does not have to accept some rather dubious metaphysical conclusions that Ponge draws in the passage quoted above regarding the alleged existence of separate worlds of the text and the "concrete world" to recognize Hejinian's interest in art as a representation and instance of conscious life: "I want art to live for life" (MSS 46-9, entry 181, Aug. 1983, 54). Part of this desire involves an insistence not just on the materiality or physicality of language but also on the everyday physical world:

How to make language as physical as possible – that is an essential element of *The Guard*. Certain kinds of structure can do it, perhaps, but essentially it's a question of vocabulary (not Latinate). An abstract vocabulary (Barry's, Larry Price's, Johanna's) tends to run off the page or, as in Barry's work, very often, to frustrate the reader. Clark + Ron both build their work out of distinct cans + pebbles (Clark [Coolidge]'s work is like Watts Tower) (MSS 46-9, entry 186, Aug. 1983, 55)

As already mentioned above, while writing *The Guard*, Hejinian was reading, among other things, Delacroix's *Journal*. Delacroix's painterly attention to light, which

foreshadowed Impressionism, is exemplary of the kind of wedding of attention to the world and the medium of expression that Hejinian strives to achieve in her work. Delacroix was also very interested in the fusion of painting and literature. Many of the themes for his paintings come from literature: “In Delacroix, what started with David culminates in the literature-inspired staging of exciting and disturbing human events, real or imaginary, and a concern for the most accurate visual means of conveying them” (Gardner 673). Most important for Hejinian, however, are Delacroix’s observations of color in his *Journal*, from which Hejinian quotes. Delacroix used his observations from nature to reform the approach to color in his painting:

What Delacroix learned about color he passed on to later painters of the nineteenth century, most particularly to the Impressionists. He observed that pure colors are as rare in nature as lines, color appearing only in an infinitely varied scale of different tones, shadings, and reflections, which he tried to recreate in his paintings. He recorded his observations in his *Journal*, which became a veritable corpus of pre-Impressionistic color theory, being acclaimed as such by the neo-Impressionistic painter Paul Signac in 1898-99. (Helen Gardner, *Art Through the Ages*, 6th ed., 677)

Delacroix’s careful observation of the way he perceived the natural world and how this experience of color perception might be recreated in painting is analogous to Hejinian’s interest in how broader parts of perception and consciousness might be made perceptible through poetry. Even if this analogy is tenuous, there is no doubt that Hejinian admired Delacroix’s careful examination of visual perception in his *Journals*. Of Delacroix’s *Journals*, Hejinian writes “I liked the solidity + completeness of his mind, the degree to which he insisted on being conscious” (MSS 46-8, page 39, Nov. 25 [Thanksgiving] 1982). What is also important to note in Hejinian’s quotation is the way in which she seems to associate “being conscious” with a conscious act, rather than as an unavoidable state of being for most people when they are awake.

This special use of the phrase “being conscious” to denote a particular mental attitude, which involves “insistence” and can be quantified by the “degree” of insistence, is important for understanding Hejinian’s aim to create or incite through her own poetry a “consciousness of consciousness.” The second “consciousness” here is used in the more conventional way, and the “being conscious” that she associates with Delacroix is what she aims for through poetry. On this view then, Hejinian appears to take “being conscious” to mean that one has an intellect that is both lively and questioning. To be

conscious means to explore the world around oneself and to be aware of one's own psychology, of the way in which perception and thought are psycho-physical processes that can both reveal and conceal the nature of the world and of ourselves.

Delacroix anticipates the later development of Impressionist color science, an approach that is to some extent analogous to Hejinian's use of juxtaposition in *The Guard*. Some of Delacroix's observations about brushstrokes may have provided useful analogies for Hejinian in her practice of juxtaposing words, sentences, lines, and stanzas in *The Guard*: "It is advisable not to fuse the brushstrokes as they will [appear to] fuse naturally at [a] ... distance. In this manner, color gains an energy and freshness" (qtd. Gardner 677). Hejinian's poem is supposed to stimulate an awareness and experience of the shifting processes of conscious thinking. Whether or not one accepts that *The Guard* achieves this effect, Hejinian is undoubtedly, like Delacroix, interested in different ways in which one's perception of world can be looked at and explored. In *The Guard*, Hejinian uses quotations from Delacroix's *Journal* in which he comments on light and shade. Delacroix focused on painting color accurately, because he saw this as how we perceive. Hejinian focuses on swift shifts in thought, associative thinking, and metonymy. She avoids narratives and overall generalizations, because she does not think they accurately represent conscious experience, which is the traditional aim of lyric poetry. Experience is always and only experience, just as visual perception is for Delacroix always and only the experience of the reflection of light as color or lack of it: "Speaking radically, there are neither lights nor shades. There is only a color mass for each object, having different reflections on all sides" (qtd. Gardner 677). Proust and Stein, of course, exemplify this kind of line of experimentalism in modernist literature.

The following journal entry exemplifies Hejinian's interest in accurate observation in the tradition of Delacroix:

Landscape is a moment of time that has gotten in position.

The difficulty of recovering what falls into the space between sentences.

The relationship between landscape and time is problematic. There is a parallel between landscape and a text. Neither is the same at different times (nor when seen with different eyes).

Note the near rhyme of eyes and time. (MSS 46-8, page 37, 22 Nov. 1982)

Hejinian observes that when one looks at a landscape or reads a text, one has an immediate experience, which is a “moment of time.” Our perception is always happening in the moment of time that is our now. The second paragraph quoted above suggests that with each sentence we move to a new moment of time and so the continuous nature of experience is lost. It “falls into the space between sentences.” Delacroix realized that he could not recover completely the experience of landscape in his painting, but that the experience could be made most alive if he used contrasting strokes of color. In a similar way, Hejinian uses a writing style that allows many leaps of logic to be made between sentences. Hejinian aims to create a more stimulating effect for the reader that will vivify his or her experience. In other words, the reader is left uncertain where the next period, line break or stanza break will be, and where the content of the sentences will lead, within and between sentences. Hejinian intends this uncertainty to make the reader active and alert to the variety of ways of looking at, dividing up and describing the world of consciousness, including the perceptions, thoughts, and memories that the text describes.

Hejinian is trying to include “everything” in the work – a description of landscape, a description of the person who perceives the landscape including her thoughts, memories, and perceptual processes, and a description of text that has come out of the description and the way in which it might be perceived. This idea of the “perfect” or “well written” work is evident in the following quotation that Hejinian takes from Delacroix’s journal:

Delacroix: 8 September 1854 “... a perfect work should need no notes.” I feel inclined to add that if a work is really well written, and above all well reasoned, it should not even require paragraphs. If the ideas arise one out of the other and the style is well-knit, there should be no need for breaks until the thought which forms the kernel of the subject has been fully developed.” (MSS 46-8, page 37, Nov. 21)

Hejinian also quotes Delacroix’s observation that our descriptions of the world impose lines upon the world. Delacroix distinguishes between the “idea” of the line and our actual perception of the world: “‘The famous quality, the beautiful, which some see in a curved line and others in a straight, all are determined to see in line alone. But here am I, sitting at my window, looking at the most beautiful countryside imaginable and the idea of a line does not enter into my head’ (Delacroix, 15 July 1849)” (MSS 46-8, page

34, 18 Nov. 1982). In *The Guard*, Hejinian observes how lines are impositions of human ideas or perception on the physical world:

the littler splendor of the snow, the line of sight
bending in that direction in order to predict
...what happens to it when we're alone? (5)

Our “line of sight” is only there when we look. It is not something in the physical world, but only in our perception of it. By pointing this out in *The Guard*, Hejinian aims for “sincerity,” a clarity of vision to the point where the language of description is acknowledged, rather than hidden in the mirage of unmediated perception, of “paradise.”

The quest for “paradise” and the ultimate impossibility of this quest are recurring themes in Hejinian’s poetry. As we have seen, “paradise” in Hejinian’s poetics stands for a variety of different impossibilities associated with literature. This multiplicity of meanings is found in *The Guard* where the search for “paradise” appears as the tension between statement and the avoidance of statement, between one’s perception of the world and one’s description of it, between movement and stasis, and between line, sentence and stanza. In these points of tension, “paradise” is represented as unachievable and its impossibility justifies the disjunctive text of *The Guard*. But Hejinian has also, contradictorily, referred to “paradise” as exactly the achievement of this kind of open, non-narrative form (“Rejection of Closure” 42).

This apparent contradiction reflects Hejinian’s view of the open form of works such as *The Guard* as a form of realism that is truer to life than everyday transactional language. As has been seen, Hejinian’s motivation for her experimental poetics lay in her desire to oppose the lies she saw in American society and to improve perception. In this sense, the desire for and resistance to paradise in *The Guard* can be understood as a confrontation with the idea of paradise in America. Hejinian’s approach in *The Guard* can be understood as resisting the kind of paradise embodied in the idea of the “American dream” and “the West” in the United States. In *The Guard*, Hejinian confronts the powerful foundational myth that the United States, especially the American West, was the new paradise. Hejinian opposes the idea of paradise insofar as it supports clichés such as “protecting American interests” (MSS 46-6 Mar. 1982). If America is paradise, its interests must be paramount and its leaders always right and

just. While *The Guard* resists paradise in this sense, it also relies upon the desire for paradise. In *The Guard*, the constant urge to reach out to the world, to describe it with a painterly attention to detail and to capture the strangeness of consciousness reflects the very urge for perfection that Hejinian sees as so problematic. Hejinian desires perfect openness that escapes clichés. This is a utopian vision, a kind of paradise. Hejinian's search for paradise in language and her use of one of the classic texts of Western literature, Dante's *Divine Comedy*, reveals just how much of an American and Western poet Hejinian is, despite her resistance to the imperialist and dominating side of the Western tradition.

3. Oxota: The Hunt and Desire

As was seen in *The Guard*, Hejinian's poetics in the 1980s and early 1990s focus on ways of writing that are "sincere," that give a more real description of situations, experiences and the language in which they are described. As was also pointed out, sincerity has an ethical force for Hejinian in that it resists dangerous utopianism that in her view leads to misrepresentations that have the illusion of reality, such as those Hejinian perceived in public discourse in the United States. Hejinian's book *Oxota*, published in 1991, is a salient example of her poetics in the late 1980s and early 1990s. While in *The Guard*, Hejinian focused on sincerity, epistemological and ethical, in perception, *Oxota* introduces her new concerns for sincerity in narratives of exploration, discovery and in the knowledge that is located in storytelling. All these interests combine in *Oxota* with an account of Hejinian's experience of Russia.

Oxota is at one level an account of the author's time in Leningrad in 1989 and 1990. A journal she kept at that time is the basis for many of the lines in the poem (MSS 41-7). Prior to these trips, Hejinian had visited Leningrad on several occasions since 1983, when she first met the Russian poet Arkadii Dragomoshchenko, with whom she has collaborated on a number of projects, including translations.

The title *Oxota* is a Russian word that can be translated as "desire" or "hunt." It seems that the novel came out of Hejinian's desire for Russia in all its cultural difference and her desire to understand her experiences by bringing very different cultural material, Russian and American, together. Her poetics in *Oxota* are epistemological, in that Hejinian attempts to describe her experience of a different culture. *Oxota* is also an attempt to express the feeling of cultural dislocation directly, though always, of course,

with the view that this is an unrealistic aim, like the aim for “paradise.” Hejinian’s attempt to expand her method of description in *The Guard* to an intercultural level illustrates another way in which she seeks to write poetry that allows more than one view to coexist, that avoids “over-determined” narratives. This multilayered approach to poetry is for Hejinian ethically, as well as epistemologically, important. It is both truer to the nature of the world and morally right in that it does not make one point of view, or one culture, subservient to another.

Formally, *Oxota* is based on Pushkin’s “novel in verse,” *Eugene Onegin*. As a “novel” it is a much longer work than *The Guard*. It consists of eight “books,” instead of the eight chapters of Pushkin’s poem, and each of those books is divided into chapters. The 270 chapters and a coda are numbered consecutively throughout, and there is exactly the same number of these “chapters” as the number of stanzas in Pushkin’s *Onegin*, if one includes the abandoned eighth chapter. Hejinian’s chapters all contain fourteen sentences, each of which begins on a new line. This parallels the fourteen-line form that Pushkin used for his *Onegin* stanza.

In *Oxota*, Hejinian attempts to emulate not just the formal characteristics of *Eugene Onegin* but also its content. Pushkin’s masterpiece combines the drama and narrative of a novel with moments of lyric intensity. In an essay first presented as a talk in 1994, Hejinian suggested that the subversion of existing genres is the concomitant of changed notions of “self” and “author”:

It is precisely because definitions of the self have changed that the traditional genres that speak *for* the self (lyric poetry, for example) or *of* the self and its development (the novel) are either being consigned to an increasingly “old-fashioned,” conservative, or nostalgic position or are being subverted and reinvented to accommodate contemporary experience of being a person – a zone. (“La Faustienne” 11)

In *Oxota*, Hejinian creates a cross-genre work that combines the lyric and the novel, and thus subverts traditional genres, just as Pushkin did in his time. Like Pushkin too, Hejinian engages with the Faust myth in *Oxota*, just as she does in *The Guard* and in the essay “La Faustienne,” from which the quotation is taken.¹⁵ At the same time, Hejinian integrates Russian and narrative material into *Oxota* and so extends her poetics of sincerity to narrative and cross-cultural encounter. In *Oxota*, Hejinian creates a “zone”

¹⁵ Goethe’s *Faust* was also, of course, one of the major recent works of poetry that Pushkin sought to equal, if not outdo, in writing *Eugene Onegin*.

that is sincere to the “contemporary experience of being a person.” As was seen in the analysis of *The Guard*, sincerity for Hejinian involves writing poetry that allows multiple points of view, through which she both aims for and opposes perfect total knowledge. Here I examine two major ways in which Hejinian aims for sincerity in *Oxota*, each of which can be labeled in shorthand by different translations of the book’s title. They are “the hunt” that motivates the reader and the “desire” that motivates the explorer. A close reading of exemplary passages from *Oxota* will be used to illustrate these modes of sincerity: the hunt for meaning and the desire for strangeness.

The use of narrative is the most striking feature of *Oxota* in relation to Hejinian’s other works. For this reason, the examination of *Oxota* here will focus mainly on Book One, which is made up of seventy untitled chapters. This first part of *Oxota* draws heavily on Hejinian’s journal from her visit to Russia in 1989 and has enough common threads in terms of characters and themes to make its narrative nature clear. As Brian McHale has put it, the effect of this scrambled narrative in the first book is “weak narrativity,” rather than the absence of narrative (“Weak Narrativity: The Case of Avant-Garde Narrative Poetry”).

Apart from the use of the scrambled journal narrative, *Oxota* hints at a hidden story in various other ways. Lines that appear to be parts of riddles or that are in other ways cryptic are not uncommon. Through this “weak narrativity,” *Oxota* provokes the reader to hunt for meaning. While narrative is largely absent from *The Guard*, it is important in *Oxota*. But when Hejinian uses narrative in *Oxota* to incite the reader to an endless search for meaning, she foregrounds the qualities of openness and multiple perspectives that are also characteristic of *The Guard*. In this respect too, Hejinian draws on Pushkin’s *Eugene Onegin*, in which interpretation and the influence of reading are foregrounded, and the “meaning” of which is still hotly contested.

Strangeness, the explorer, strange lands, discovery and the price of Faustian knowledge are also important in *Oxota*. The desire for discovery, the desire of the explorer, and the feeling of strangeness experienced by him or her in a strange land are important to Hejinian’s poetics. Russia is the country outside the United States that has most

attracted Hejinian, and *Oxota* is the poet's most sustained exploration of it.¹⁶ Moreover, Hejinian has described her experience of Russia as strange and surreal.

i. The Hunt: A Search for Meaning

In Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin* the reader is subject to parody for seeking solutions. Pushkin plays with the reader's expectations regarding his main characters, Eugene and Tatiana. At times they appear to be a Byronic hero and a heroine from a sentimental novel, respectively, but Pushkin complicates such an interpretation by distancing the role of the author in creating these apparently stereotypical characters. The books that Eugene and Tatiana read, such as works by Byron and Rousseau, Pushkin implies, shape their characters. This complication frustrates the reader's search for a straightforward interpretation of the characters and of the author's intentions.

The frustration of interpretations, of the hunt for meaning, is evident in another way in *Oxota*. The reader follows clues, hunts for meaning, and loses meaning in a never-ending entangling and disentangling process. The reader may find no ultimate answer, but the hunt for meaning is a crucial part of reading *Oxota*.

This endless hunt for meaning is a characteristic of that which Hejinian calls the "open text." Hejinian has discussed in detail her interest in the "open text" in her essay "The

¹⁶ There are several reasons for Hejinian's fascination with Russia. Firstly, the Language Poets, and especially Hejinian, Ron Silliman and Barrett Watten, were heavily influenced by Russian Futurism and Formalism. Hejinian has recalled that soon after meeting Silliman and Watten, the two introduced her to the writings of Velimir Khlebnikov, Viktor Shklovsky and to Victor Erlich's book *Russian Formalism*, which made an "enormous impact" on the Bay Area Language Poets ("Roughly Stapled"). The frequent mention of Russian literary theory, literature and art in Watten's essays are also evidence of this deep interest in Russia. See, for example, Watten's books *Total Syntax* and *The Constructivist Moment: From Material Text to Cultural Poetics*. Secondly, Hejinian established a very close relationship with the unofficial literary communities in Moscow and especially Leningrad, after she visited the Soviet Union for the first time in 1983. Hejinian's closest contact in that community was the Leningrad poet Arkadii Dragomoshchenko, who is one of the subjects of this study. Thirdly, it is also possible to speculate that Hejinian's desire to find an alternative to the injustices she found in the United States made her particularly interested in America's Cold War foe. For more on the importance of Russian Futurism and Formalism to Language Poetry, particularly in relation to Dragomoshchenko and Hejinian, see Janecek, "Lyn Hejinian Translating Arkadii Dragomoshchenko," and Edmond, "A Meaning Alliance." For more about how Hejinian first met Dragomoshchenko and about their subsequent relationship, see Davidson et al (*Leningrad 2-8*) and *Letters Not about Love*.

Rejection of Closure.” The essay was originally presented as a talk in 1983, around the time when Hejinian was working on *The Guard*, and has since become Hejinian’s best known statement of poetics. In a recent introduction to the essay, Hejinian opposes her poetics to narrative closure in fiction, and to the “smug pretension” and “tendency to cast the poet as guardian of the Truth” in lyric poetry (“Rejection of Closure” 41). In “Rejection of Closure,” Hejinian connects the quest for paradise to the open text: “the conjunction of *form* with radical *openness* may be what can offer a version of the ‘paradise’ for which writing often yearns – a flowering focus on a distinct infinity” (42).

While in *The Guard* Hejinian seeks the “paradise” of the open text through radically disjunctive non-narrative form, in *Oxota* she continues her quest for paradise in a very different manner. In *Oxota*, Hejinian exploits narrative to create a different kind of radical openness through the hybrid form of the “novel in verse.” The narrative nature of *Oxota* and references within it make the long poem at times resemble a mystery, a novel (in Russian *roman*), and a romance with a “love intrigue.” This sense of romance (*oxota* [in normal transliteration, *okhota*] or desire) and mystery (the hunt, or *okhota*, for the truth) is already in evidence in the first chapter of *Oxota*:¹⁷

This time we are both
The old thaw is inert, everything set again in snow
At insomnia, at apathy
We must learn to endure the insecurity as we read
The felt need for a love intrigue
There is no person – he or she was appeased and withdrawn
There is relationship but it lacks simplicity
People are very aggressive and every week more so
The Soviet colonel appearing in such stories
He is sentimental and duckfooted
He is held fast, he is in his principles
But here is a small piece of the truth – I am glad to greet you
There, just with a few simple words it is possible to say the truth

¹⁷ A reference number in parentheses follows all quotations from *Oxota*. The Roman numerals refer to the chapter number, and the Arabic numerals refer to the sentence numbers within that chapter. *Oxota* contains 270 chapters and a coda. Each chapter is made up of 14 sentences.

It is so because often men and women have their sense of honor (I, 1-14)

Chapter Two of *Oxota* refers more explicitly to the joint project to write a mystery novel or a romance that Dragomoshchenko and Hejinian began in 1989 (*Ksenii* i-ii), but it also refers self-consciously to the composition of *Oxota* itself:

In the evenings particularly we made notes and took dictation
in anticipation of writing a short Russian novel, something
neither invented nor constructed but moving through
that time as I experienced it unable to take part
personally in the hunting (II, 9)

Both mystery and love story appear in the pun that ends the chapter:

Other links exist, on other levels, between our affairs (II, 14)

The hunt seems to be for a person, a romance, at which the Russian for “novel” hints:

And in the Russian novel is an obverse of a person (IV, 2)

Although the changes in context in *Oxota* often disrupt its narrative, Hejinian uses a number of devices that encourage the reader to hunt for a meaningful story. Hejinian frequently uses pronouns and the names of characters. Through the use of these devices, she suggests there is a story that the reader must piece together like a mystery novel. In the line quoted above, moreover, Hejinian directly suggests that the work should be read as a novel. This raises further questions. For example, is *Oxota* the “Russian novel”? Is it the obverse of a person? What is the obverse of the person? Who is this person? Is it the novelist and, if so, can one find out about the person by reading *Oxota*? The idea of discovering a person through a book recalls Pushkin’s *Eugene Onegin*, in which Tatiana finds out about Eugene’s true character by reading his books. Of course, like Pushkin’s “novel,” *Oxota* warns against the dangers of reading, including the danger of reading too much into works of fiction. As was mentioned above, Pushkin’s hero Eugene and heroine Tatiana are associated with and influenced by different books. Eugene and Tatiana have very different character traits. Pushkin suggests that they have acquired these traits from the very different books that they have read. Pushkin implies that these two central characters and other characters in *Eugene Onegin* tend to confuse literature with reality and that this confusion can cause these characters a great deal of

suffering. At the same time, books in general feed an addiction to words, a desire to read, which is a central concern of both Pushkin's and Hejinian's "novels."

In both *Eugene Onegin* and *Oxota*, this interest in the desire associated with writing leads to a complicated kind of self-reflexivity. Even as books seem to take control of Tatiana's thoughts, these books become part of the construction of *Eugene Onegin*, which is itself full of irony and even moral lessons. The production and consumption of literature is also commented on in *Oxota*:

We are occupied with production, but these are our times of
mute people (V, 1)

Who are the "we"? The contrasting conjunction "but" suggests through obverse manipulation that words or voice constitute "production." Conversely, the "mute people" might be the "we" involved in concentrated "production."

The strangeness of some of the lines in *Oxota* also complicates the hunt for meaning. The following line is syntactically garbled. This suggests syntactic interference from Russian:

With a name like Polkan to be called (VI, 4)

In the following line, too, the everyday becomes strange through Hejinian's deliberate mistranslation from the Russian:

To the post office, then the apothecary (V, 13)

Apteka, the standard Russian word for "chemist" or "drugstore," motivates the archaic English word "apothecary." Both the archaic English word and the standard Russian word for "chemist" or "drugstore" come from the Greek *apotheke*, which means "storehouse." Daily activities occur in poetry only as language, so when a person is dealing with strange language, his or her description of daily activities becomes strange. In an essay in which Hejinian discusses Gertrude Stein, an important influence on her work, she writes that it is a person's "patterns of behavior, rather than narrative sequences of events, which in Stein's view constitute the facts of a person's life" ("Three Lives" 270). The events of daily life in *Oxota* reflect a similar aesthetic: everyday actions and social interactions help to constitute a person. In the essay, Hejinian also quotes a passage in which Stein emphasizes the importance of context in the composition of life and art: "nothing changes from generation to generation except

the composition in which we live and the composition in which we live makes the art which we see and hear” (“Three Lives” 275). Hejinian also writes about the relationship between art and life:

An omen of the love of art and its social functioning (VII, 12)

In *Oxota*, however, there is not just a composition. There is a story, a narrative, which entices an adventurer, a reader, to uncover it. This is an important change from her earlier works, such as *The Guard*. This change marks a new approach to the investigation of psychological realism, which cannot be complete unless it includes narrative. The open narrative form of *Oxota* also raises the question: does the reader fill in or exclude narratives in reading the text? Does the reader go for blackout or whiteout? Here are three shades of white:

All light ruins white (V, 7)

White and no degree (VI, 2)

Fixed white (VI, 14)

Absolute white seems to relate to stasis (“fixed”), destruction (“ruins”), or excess (“no degree”). As Hejinian notes of Stein, the plot is in the composition of the person and text. In black and white terms, it is the middle ground, the movement between black and white; it is the gray of a mystery that provides the space for narrative, for inquiry.

Gray or white with objectivity which slides out written (VIII, 6)

The writing as it becomes written turns from white or gray to black on the written page. The process of writing and reading becomes the focus. This process is the movement from white to black. The process is ultimately inconclusive in that the meaning of many of the lines in *Oxota* remain ambiguous. This ambiguity is illustrated in the line quoted above. It is unclear whether the word “objectivity” applies only to white, or whether it applies to both gray and white.

Chapter Seven in part describes a street scene with an “old woman,” who is “hissing,” and “a pedestrian screaming.” The hissing “babushka” (Russian for “grandmother”) brings up “an omen of weddings,” which perhaps refers to Tatiana, who asks her old nurse for such an omen. The concluding lines of the chapter-stanza play on the sound of this omen of voice, this “o” for “men”:

An omen of the love of art and its social functioning

An orb standing for an orbit

The old woman standing in the street (VII, 12-4)

The investigation of metonymy and metaphor comes to the fore here, as it does in *The Guard*. An “orb,” a spherical object, is necessary for the action “orbit,” so it is like a part standing for a whole, although the juxtaposition of object and action confuses this relationship. This displacement, a *détourné* or *sdvig*, is visible in the change in verb between the final two lines, where “standing for” becomes “standing in.” The move draws into question the relationship between words on the page and the world they seem to describe.

In the next chapter, Chapter Eight, “standing” becomes a noun:

Standing as a voluptuary, developed in a wooden box (VIII, 3)

The use of standing as a noun brings up social position and morality. Meanwhile, “voluptuary” provides a suggestively immoral contrast to it. “Standing” as a participle, on the other hand, implies something standing in for something else. It also has the connotation of sexual arousal when combined with “voluptuary.” “Voluptuary” also points to the sensuality of the text. For example, one can read this line as suggesting juxtaposed positions, which play against one another. Something “developed in a box” might be a photo. The “box,” like “standing,” implies enclosure and stasis. This effect is enhanced when one considers the figurative meaning of “wooden.” There is a contradiction between the apparent stasis of “standing” and the activity suggested by “voluptuary.” Hejinian, following Stein, sees “portraiture as a fundamentally temporal genre.” In this genre, the artist paints “not the inert flesh of the subject but her lived (and living) experience” (“Three Lives” 277-8). This description is both static and active, or “ecstatic,” as the wordplay on “sex static” suggests:

A sex static and tingling of oblivion and description (VIII, 13)

Oxota also describes parts of the social and political situation of the Soviet Union in the late 1980s, a time when destitution and a loss of direction made Russia strange even to those who had always lived there. This desolate situation is referred to through the references to ruin in *Oxota*. For example:

Rubble – so you see that our people must squat in their ditch
and speak of beauty (III, 11)

The similarity between “rubble” and “rouble” combined with the reference to people who “must squat in their ditch” makes one think of beggars. The sentiment of the line suggests an Oscar Wilde quip: “we are all in the gutter, but some of us are looking at the stars.” The crumbling buildings and devaluing currency connote the collapse of power, the deterioration of former signs of security and prestige. At the same time, the references to roubles in *Oxota* suggest the new power of, and desire for, money. The softness of the Russian currency is also implied through its association with “snowflakes” and the reference to “hard currency” in Chapter Nine:

Snow was falling in the yard around a hard currency hospital
of the same color

The rubles too as thick as snowflakes (IX, 5-6)

The person that the description of books and everyday life in *Oxota* implies parallels, to a certain extent, the discontinuous character traits of Tatiana in Pushkin’s novel in verse. Tatiana resembles at different times different characters from books, while she simultaneously investigates those characters by reading their books. The problematic position of the “I” in *Eugene Onegin*, which has a multi-vocal quality, parallels the problematic position of the historical figure of Pushkin.¹⁸ *Oxota* also includes literary and historical characters. In this way, Hejinian creates a discontinuous, “realist” portrait:

Pushkin remains himself, but what self has he to remain (IX, 9)

This statement too is multi-vocal in its ambiguity. Is it questioning the existence of Pushkin’s “self,” or rather what sort of self he should have? In this line Hejinian may be suggesting that the Pushkin myth has grown so large that it obliterates the real Pushkin. On the other hand, Pushkin’s own poetry very often avoided self-revelation. In this sense, Pushkin’s essential self is his self-distancing, his lack of self.¹⁹ This blurring of the existential and moral is part of the ethical epistemology of Hejinian’s poetics. The line allows both readings, so it provides for an ethical plurality, while it emphasizes that it is important to ask questions. *Oxota* posits a real world and is a curious investigation

¹⁸ For more on the multi-vocal nature of *Eugene Onegin*, see Sergey Bocharov’s classic essay “The Stylistic World of the Novel.”

¹⁹ On Pushkin’s poetics of distance, see Stephanie Sandler’s *Distant Pleasures*. See also my article “Drawing Conclusions.”

into the properties of that world. The propositions that this investigation puts forward about the world provide for the existence of other propositions in all their plurality.

The economic and meteorological features of the landscape, which were prominent in Chapter Nine, come to the fore again in Chapter Eleven:

With exhilarating humility we watched the accumulating snow
The shifting of greenish drifts, the yellow silent wind
Not defiant but obsequious in storm, at kitchen window
Money is not unlucky
But a whistling man is luckless in money
What then if snow is the substance of an accounting
No objects of metonymy, of economy
A colonel's daughter drew in the frost like a vandal to the
 colonel
The wolves whistled in the forest near Pavlovsk
Little Dima bravely raced toward the palace parking lot
A poetry and with fear of authority – as if that were your sole
 justification, in itself, not in what you wrote
Simple being – simple agoraphobic being
Its meals
Their daily huntress (XI, 1-14)

The daily hunt (*okhota*) is the hunt for food in the shops. Women spent a long time waiting in queues for food in the Soviet Union in the late 1980s. Hejinian has explained that the name of her book, *Oxota*, was in part inspired by Dragomoshchenko's wife Zina, who took part in this hunt and who, like many women in Russia at that time, called herself *okhotnitsa*, the huntress, or Diana, god of the hunt ("The Poem as Risk"). This is an example of how *Oxota* includes the social reality of the Soviet Union as Hejinian perceived it in 1989. *Eugene Onegin* was also famously praised for including the social reality of Russia. The influential nineteenth century critic Belinsky called *Eugene Onegin* an "encyclopedia of Russian life." The wolf in stanza quoted above recalls the wolf as a sign of on-coming winter in *Eugene Onegin*.

In the stanza quoted above, there is also significant verbal play. The words "metonymy" and "economy" refer not to "objects," but to relationships of exchange or interaction. The play in lines 4 and 5 links "luck," "money," and "whistling" through "fortune." The

“whistling man” has a “tune,” but lacks the “for” before it. This parallels the phonetic play between the final words of the first three lines, “snow,” “wind” and “window.” The word “window” shares its final sound with “snow” and its initial sound with “wind.”

Pun disrupts the stability of words. This disruption also reflects “fear of authority,” of making an unambiguously “authorial” statement. The concern that the text achieves only this disruption of the self, that it is “your sole / justification,” highlights the problem for a political aesthetics, if that aesthetics only celebrates difference and disruption. This wanders dangerously close to a *laissez-faire* attitude, which confirms power structures, so that “fear of authority” also suggests a self-censoring that this fear might induce. The intersection between money relations, “economy,” and word relations, “metonymy,” enacts this dynamic between subversion of and conversion to a solipsistic poetics. The constant social and historical intrusion and self-aware asides work to counteract this tendency, but they are also subject to it. *Oxota* takes place in the dialectic of inquiring and acquiring.

The “colonel” is a pervasive presence in *Oxota*, just as the military was a pervasive presence in both Imperial and Soviet life in Russia. The colonel appears in *Oxota* as a common figure in Russian urban myths. Military men are also present in *Eugene Onegin*. Both daughters, Tatiana and Olga, marry men from the army, a general and a hussar, respectively. Dragomoshchenko’s father was a colonel. *Oxota* is almost unique amongst Hejinian’s writing in its focus on character, but, as with Pushkin, this use of character provides an opportunity to play with form and convention rather than to create believable individuals. This reflects Hejinian’s self-proclaimed “resistance” to an “interest in human character” (“Three Lives” 268). By using Stein’s distinction between “identity” and “entity,” one can follow how the “identity” of the characters, which we come to know through their description, relates to the “entity,” which is for Hejinian the capacity of a person to know. The novel, as a composition of things that a person knows, describes this capacity, which is always in time, always composing.

We come to know the characters in *Oxota* through a certain “capacity to know,” which the book represents. This knowledge involves literary clichés, such as the colonel, and slippages in language, not only in the language of the novel but also in the language the novel describes. For example, in Chapter Nine, the “colonel” is described as “almost catching the intonation / of a cab driver,” as if “intonation” were a common cold,

perhaps a reference to class prejudice about language. The knowledge in the book is very much knowledge of and through language. It must not be confused with what “I” know or what a certain person claims to know; it is the knowledge of reading and writing:

I simply couldn’t imagine the incorporation of what I know –
or was in the process of knowing (XII, 13)

The particularity of the situation here is perhaps the experience of knowledge out of context. The necessity is always to return to the context, here the previous line, which, like many in the poem, has an economic focus in that it involves the difficulty of shopping:

They are enclosed in such simple understanding that going
out right then for milk involved an unintelligible belief in
everything (XII, 12)

Even an economic act as simple as daily shopping requires an epistemological position, “a simple understanding,” which amounts to a hyperbolic excess of faith, “a belief in everything.” The character of the Westerner seems to be speaking in the following line. “What I know” is useless in this entirely different economic context.

“Talking and listening” is a phrase from Stein that Hejinian quotes and explains as playing “a fundamental role in the constituting of ‘identity,’ a literal articulating of oneself, in part into relationships with others, but more importantly into harmony (what Stein in ‘Melanctha’ calls ‘understanding’ of ‘knowing’) with one’s sense of who one is and who one is supposed to be” (“Three Lives” 280-1). The “talking and listening” in *Oxota* are central to this search for articulation. Articulation is difficult because the author must deal with linguistic and cultural differences. At the same time, the author must deal with the difficulty of articulation in writing her novel.

Chapter Thirteen ends with the word-line “spoons.” This seems to relate to the opening lines of the following stanza-chapter:

Women do have sense of humor
And sense of utensil – steaming bus
Things bringing our being into proximity with themselves
A woman interesting a man in herself because of what women

like
 There are letters and place
 One could long for someone right there with one and not be
 able to eat at all
 That is a transition, or a desire for one
 It's most contemporary when in the least time it covers the
 greatest space
 Nothing muffled in memory
 It was a day without anything's seeming to have priority
 And many of the people were simply stolid, suspicious not by
 habit but by design
 While waiting to see how much could change, it couldn't
 repeat itself but we could
 Nothing in sequence, nothing in consequence
 The same thing happens every day and then one day it fails to
 happen (XIV, 1-14)

The phrases of broken English in Chapter Fourteen highlight new, suggestive meanings in conventional phrases. The line "Women do have sense of humor" opens up new meanings because of the missing indefinite article. Russian has no articles, so this strange phrase is probably a quotation from a Russian who is speaking in English. The reader expects the phrase "do have *a* sense of humor." The strangeness of the phrase makes the word "sense" oscillate between different senses, between sensation, semantic meaning, and intuition. These definitions of "sense" are interrelated in the poetics of *Oxota*. Their interrelation helps articulate "one's sense of who one is and who one is supposed to be." The next line comments on another play on the different senses of "utensil" by referring back to the "spoons" of the previous chapter. At the same time, it enacts this through the uncertainty in the word "sense," which might mean "use" or "meaning." This play on the word sense is a "utensil" for pointing out a dynamic between words and senses of self and objects in the world. Simultaneously, the line enacts this dialectic.

"Talking and listening" in relation to words, people and objects find clearer articulation in the statement of line three: "Things bringing our being into proximity with themselves." We are said to exist in relation to things. "Harmony" in Stein's sense

would seem to be maximal proximity here. This relates to the aim of Stein and Hejinian to describe the present so that contemporariness is greatest when things “talking and listening” have greatest proximity, so that “in the least time it [the writing] covers the / the greatest space” (“Three Lives” 280-1).

Oxota often seems to excite this kind of complex and tendentious reading. The poetic enactment and density in the line with “sense of utensil” demonstrate how a small moment of time can have great space. On the other hand, the great space of this book of 270 chapters and a coda covers a small moment of lived experience. These senses of “time” are apparently contradictory, but the pressure of difference and interrelationship between and in the lines is actually directed toward the elision of the two in an endless excess of the present. This is “nothing in sequence, nothing in consequence.” This aim for timeless perfection of description relates to Hejinian’s concept of paradise. Like the cultural and linguistic gap between Russia and America, this gap between the desire to express everything and the imperfect language that results provides a borderline, which suggests “a transition, or a desire for one” (XIV, 7). In all these sentences and in the cultural context there is a paradoxical desire for maximal proximity, the intense line, the clear expression of relations, and maximal excess, the voluminous book and the strangeness of other voices. While proximity makes things clear, excess works to block any sense of transparency.

The density increases in Chapter Fifteen, which contains relatively few words, little time, but has many layers, or much space:

As emotional as the thumb, and beyond it the sun
Rose snow fell
The sun was only at thumb height
The river, the never
Over Nevsky a city that doesn’t sit – in light that never gathers
Enormous, gorgeous – your thumb
It isn’t patience because it isn’t waiting
Society and upon it tattoo
The thumb is not nature
No more have I thought
Nor youth
But diameter I have, and the thumb for adherence

It is not career, not in our sense
In our difference (XV, 1-14)

The words “our difference,” which end the stanza, recall the phrase “we are both” from the opening line of *Oxota*. Both phrases imply plurality, difference, and a shared identity or interaction. The whole poem and this stanza in particular take place on the borderlines of meaning, of mutuality and opposition.

The focus on a body part, the “thumb,” which has certain phallic overtones, has an erotic role in this stanza. The “thumb” is “emotional,” “enormous, gorgeous” and it seems unnatural. It is also “your thumb,” implying an erotic other. The perspective of the extreme close-up of the thumb and extreme distance of the sun may recall a Zen Buddhist story to which Dragomoshchenko has alluded in his poetry (see page 261). In this story, two disciples are asked to draw “this” by a master who is pointing at the moon. One draws the moon, while the other draws the master’s thumb. The switch in perspectives here is exemplary of Hejinian’s interest in poetry as a vehicle for heightening perception. The sun really appears “at thumb height,” although it is in fact massive and distant. The statement that the sun is at thumb height is valid insofar as the poem describes subjective experience, the act of perception itself, rather than the collection of knowledge about what is perceived.

The confusions that arise in the observation of the world through human perception have parallels in linguistic “misunderstandings.” The “river” is “the never,” yet it is also the “Neva,” the river that runs through St Petersburg. Or perhaps it is “The Nether,” which would relate to the Pushkin’s Styx-like description of St Petersburg’s river in *The Bronze Horseman*. The Neva appears next in its adjectival form “Nevsky,” which is the name of the famous main street of St Petersburg and of the Russian Prince Nevsky. The phrase “a city that doesn’t sit – in light that never gathers” recalls New York, “the city that never sleeps.” But it also refers to the endless standing in lines that life entailed for the citizens of Leningrad at that time. At the same time, this is the city where in summer time the sun barely sets, so “sit” can be seen as a play on “set.” The reference to “light” reinforces this reading, although the reference here is to the other effect of the city’s northern location. The barely rising sun in winter reaches only “thumb height,” so that the light “never gathers” much strength. The phrase plays on the standard phrase “gloom gathers.” In this way, Hejinian suggests an even darker environment in which

the light can never take hold and gloom does not gather because it is always dark. Perhaps the light never reaches the river at mid-winter, so that the Neva gathers no light. The *th* of “gathers” reinforces the suggestion of “nether,” which the darkness of mid-winter also implies. The intense strangeness and multitude of senses in these lines make the reader feel both great space in a moment of time and also particular minute details of that moment. The lines oscillate between the vastness of the sun and minuteness of a thumb, playing on the partial rhyme of these two contrasting words.

In writing on Stein, Hejinian quotes from Flaubert’s letters. Flaubert writes: “there is no such thing as subject – style in itself being an absolute manner of seeing things” (qtd. “Three Lives” 288). Hejinian’s novel reflects this focus on form. *Oxota* focuses on “seeing,” on knowing through “talking and listening,” rather than on “subject” as an independent entity. Hejinian explores and incites the hunt for meaning, rather than its capture.

ii. Desire: A Stranger in a Strange Land

In her essay “La Faustienne,” Hejinian points out what she sees as two distinct literary tropes that concern knowledge and the literary imagination. These tropes are: “the writer seeks knowledge,” and the writer “creates knowledge” (10). Hejinian opposes tropes such as Faust and paradise, which she sees as examples of the impossible desire to possess all knowledge, to hunt out all meaning. Instead of these tropes, Hejinian proposes narrative as creation. Hejinian takes “La Faustienne,” Scheherazade, as exemplary of a figure who uses narrative as creation. She calls works like those by Scheherazade “night works,” a name which in part refers to *One Thousand and One Nights*. Hejinian sees the knowledge in “night works” as opposing binary oppositions, Western epistemology and science:

In the Faust legend, Faust is able, with Mephistopheles’ help, to take nocturnal voyages, flying through the air to other times and places and summoning scenes and personages from them to his study. He is permitted to gaze on them – to have them as sights – but other interaction is impossible, including, explicitly, speech. In the face of knowledge, Faust is silenced.

Scheherazade’s position is the reverse of this. “Be silent then, for danger is in words,” says Marlowe’s Faust to some companions before whom he is exhibiting Helen of Troy. But for Scheherazade danger lies in silence, death hovers at the edge of dawn on the horizon of light when all stories come to an end, inscribing her end as well. Where

Faust sells his soul for knowledge, Scheherazade saves hers by offering it. (“La Faustienne” 27)

Hejinian quotes from the famous explorer Richard Burton’s defense of the *Thousand and One Nights* in the introduction to his translation of the classic collection of tales. In defending the story, Burton refers to Francis Bacon, founder of scientific empiricism, and to Goethe, author of the archetypal Faust story and a central poet in the Western canon. Burton also commends “the appeal of exploration itself.” Bacon contrasts fiction with history, Goethe similarly sees the triumph of art as “Art because it is not Nature,” and exploration, too, fulfills the human desire for something beyond history, Nature, or the known world – the strange. The other themes in the *Thousand and One Nights*, as Burton saw it, are the overcoming of dangers placed in the way of “speaking plain truths,” and the historical tale of “real personages and real events.” The overcoming of deception, deceit and lies, the fantastic and strange, and history are the ideals that Hejinian finds in the *Thousand and One Nights*. In the combination of these ideals, Hejinian finds a genre that serves “as a hermeneutics for resolving the conflict between social responsibility and personal impulse, between destructiveness and fertility, between hatred and love” (“La Faustienne” 26).

To the extent that *Oxota* is a journal of Hejinian’s time in Russia, her poem resembles an explorer’s description. Moreover, to the extent to which Hejinian was a stranger and was in a linguistically foreign environment, her experience mirrors the silencing of Faust. Hejinian’s response, however, is not silence. Instead in *Oxota* she includes the many different particularities of her experience, through which she, like Scheherazade, seeks to avoid silence. As the experience of a stranger in a strange land, *Oxota* reflects Hejinian’s Faustian desire to know and her Scheherazade-like desire to tell. Just as important to the poetics of *Oxota* as the hunt for meaning are the stranger’s, or the explorer’s, desire to record and tell the details of experience and, perhaps most importantly, the poet’s desire for strangeness.

Because of Hejinian’s interest in strangeness, the role of the explorer has particularly occupied her in her writing. She has written on explorers and, as noted above, on *One Thousand and One Nights* in its nineteenth-century translation by the famous explorer Richard Burton. In her essay “Strangeness,” Hejinian relates strangeness to what she calls a “poetics of description.” She writes of exercising this poetics of description “on two strange terrains, the terrain of dreams and the terrain of what was in the seventeenth

and eighteenth centuries *terra incognita*, hence the terrain of exploration” (32). Working on these strange terrains, Hejinian describes her poetics of description as “a particular and complicated process of thinking, highly intentional while at the same time simultaneous with and equivalent to perception (and thus open to the arbitrariness, unpredictability, and inadvertence of what appears)” (“Strangeness” 32). In writing about strangeness, Hejinian chooses her two examples for her poetics of description because she finds “a disconcerting similarity between records of dreams and records made by the explorers – the same apparent objectivity, the same attempt to be accurate about details and to be equally accurate about every detail (presumably because one doesn’t know which details are the important ones, either in Tahiti or in the dream)” (“Strangeness” 33). *Oxota* is exemplary of Hejinian’s interest in the explorer and his or her experience of strangeness. One might read the work as a travel book by a Western writer in a strange land of the East. This is part of a recurrent Oriental fetish in Western literature and Western society in general, as many from Edward Said onwards have argued. *Oxota* with its foreign title and its basis in Hejinian’s travel journal from a trip to the Soviet Union plays on this exoticism.

While the exotic title could be interpreted in a number of ways, the subtitle *A Short Russian Novel* adds a more obvious note of irony, because the author is not Russian. Of course, the humor in the subtitle also relates to the fact that Russian novels in the West, thanks to Dostoevsky and Tolstoy, have a reputation for extreme length. The more particular Russian reference of the title is to Pushkin, not only to *Eugene Onegin*, from which *Oxota* takes its stanza form and the idea of calling a book of poetry “a novel,” but also to Pushkin’s *Little Tragedies*, which use a similarly oxymoronic name.²⁰

The strangeness of dreams, like the strangeness of exploration, is also important to the poetics of *Oxota*. Dreams are like foreign languages that one does not understand. They can make the everyday strange. The strangeness of language that can transmute words like Neva into “never” and the strange dream that transmutes it into the “nether” are important to Hejinian’s concept of exploration and of “night works.” As we have seen,

²⁰ The oxymoron inherent in the juxtaposition of “little” and “tragedies” plays a central role in Arkadii Dragomoshchenko’s essay “Ten’ chteniia,” which Hejinian translated as the “Shadow of Reading.” The essay was first published in Russian in 1992, the year after *Oxota* was published. Although the translation was not published until 1995, it is possible that Hejinian was working on the translation while she was completing *Oxota*.

she uses this latter term to refer to non-Faustian or open inquiry, inquiry that is without end, an investigation into the boundless storytelling and experiential capacity of human beings. Chapter Twenty of *Oxota* explores some dreams:

At night the nightingale will torment us with its mercurial
phosphorescent singing
Yet again propagandists are saying they must drain St.
Petersburg
They want to build a dike and block a conduit
Still, said Arkadii, I've never been drawn to the soil
So my mother says I'm a true bastard
A dream
Brine, ozone
Our swamp sleeps in our cellars
Sleep is the cutting edge of inertia
I received compensation for the insomnia which had bothered
me for weeks, but awake I wasn't alert – in fact, I was
nervous and suppressed
Yet both awake and asleep the process of translating matter
into memory continued
Americans have an inexorable urge to be confessional – but
they seldom speak confidentially, preferring to be
overheard
Even during their American dream
With tongues for streets (XX, 1-14)

Hejinian's essay "Strangeness" provides an informative context for the stanza quoted above. Hejinian first presented "Strangeness" as a talk in October 1988. The essay appeared in print in 1989, and Dragomoshchenko translated and published the article in Russia in the same year. "Both anxiety and a sense of anticipation excited by particles occur in dreams, or as dreams," writes Hejinian in the article ("Strangeness" 139). Hejinian sees the problem of writing dreams as a problem of description, or in Stein's vocabulary "composition."

Tatiana's dream occupies a crucial position in Pushkin's novel in verse. Her dream comes just before the scene with the wolf. As was mentioned above, the chapter with

the wolf and the dream marks the transition to winter and the beginning of the serious part of Pushkin's novel. Tatiana's dream seems to relate to the events of the second half of the novel, the duel and her marriage, but how the dream should be interpreted has been the subject of much critical debate.

In *Oxota*, the sixth line of Chapter Twenty makes explicit the dream theme, which was implied in the night of the opening line. This turning point, or *volta*, of the chapter leads naturally to a conclusion in the paradise of the "American dream." The theme of dreams is continued in the next chapter, in which the issue of interpretation is raised:

Dreams don't understand, they're what's being understood (XXI, 1)

Dreams, then, like poems, present a problem of interpretation, of description. In *Eugene Onegin*, Tatiana has an interest in dreams as predictors of destiny, particularly in relation to marriage. The reader, however, can only predict who will marry Tatiana retrospectively, in the light of information later in *Eugene Onegin*. With regard to prophecy and destiny, Hejinian has commented:

Truths hidden until found. In such a case, prophecies wouldn't foretell the future, they would discover destiny. And they would be proven not on the basis of criteria established in the future but on the grounds of memory, in which are displayed the patterns of incident and decision that would seem to lead "inevitably" to the accomplishment of destiny. A sense of destiny is a result of a retrospective and heavily interpreted experiencing of experience - and apparent discovery of what was and why it worked. But it depends also on a belief in sublime causality, in a transcendental continuum which I simply can't see. I do believe in irrevocability, and with great curiosity I acknowledge "givens," but I don't believe in destiny, if one means by that that one's life is subject to some inescapable, noncontingent plan. ("Comments" 192-3)

Dreams have often been seen as prophecies, as clues to some hidden destiny. Because of this view of dreams, their interpretation has been viewed as important. Hejinian rejects this notion, but she is still profoundly interested in the description of dreams and in their interpretation, insofar as the description of a dream is an interpretation of it. In Chapter Twenty, it is said that "both awake and asleep the process of translating matter / into memory continued" (XX, 11). Dreams and their interpretation involve the translation of material in the mind, just as Hejinian translates her memories of Russia into the poetry of *Oxota*. Rather than claiming to understand her waking or dreaming experiences, Hejinian presents a variety of experiences translated into language. The

strangeness of a dream cannot be paraphrased and understood in this sense. Hejinian attempts to communicate the strangeness of Russia in Chapter Twenty through her use of the trope of the dream. Hejinian rejects a sense of destiny or fate and the normalization of the strangeness of dreams and of her experiences. She avoids “a retrospective and heavily interpreted experiencing of experience” in *Oxota* (“Comments” 192-3). Instead, Hejinian’s poem remains strange, dynamic and discontinuous. Like the dream in *Eugene Onegin*, *Oxota* avoids a single, totalizing interpretation.

Hejinian uses narrative games and discontinuities, amongst other devices, to avoid a single interpretation of her poem. One might read each chapter in *Oxota* as a play, a scene in a book. Each chapter has its own tone and its own narrative. There is, for example, an overtone of sexual encounter in Chapter Twenty-Six with concomitant discontinuities in understanding:

I was asked to explain the phrase sex kitten and the term pussy
Gray sky, frost crushed on trees
The light lifted in the Vyborg district, people floating past on
ice
Shown by incident
Writings blown from nationalists – they lacked the syllables of
spy
I’ve fully supplied my own body’s place in society, Arkadii said
Not dust, not task, not statuesque
And love of pets, which has no efficacy? he asked – language
itself is partially love but of another kind
Two crows rose out of a tiny park as if lifted by a swarm of
other birds
I arranged myself in explication – slowly lifting my right arm
A pose knowing that it can be allowed
It was absurd – like thoughts around the edge of what needs
to be understood
He deferred
He asked which women prefer (XXVI, 1-14)

The lines here rhyme metonymically through shared parts. The final two lines are linked by the repetition of the subject “he” at the beginning of each line and by the two verbs with the same root, “deferred” and “prefer.” Other links are semantic, as in the phrase “lifting my right arm” and the description of this action in the following line as “a pose.” These linkages are “like thoughts around the edge of what needs / to be understood.” These bonds of language can seem “absurd,” arbitrary even, if one forgets that language always involves linkage, that it is “partially love but of another kind.” Language loves links. Hejinian’s love of language links like and unlike things of certain kinds.

Oxota is packed with wordplay, like that just noted, with mysteries and with riddles. Chapter Twenty-Eight seems to supply the answer to the riddle “who is my father’s son and not me?” This question received an answer earlier:

My brother! the cab driver told the colonel (XXII, 7)

Now the same answer returns as the punch line to a stanza riddled with mysteries:

One guy sits beside a famous river
Another guy digs an irrigation canal
Such is allegory
And metaphor! – it is a great packer
A chemical
So what then did you see and do in Leningrad
Can you answer my riddle
If you ask it
The child of my father but not me – who is it
A point of no return – a moment of denunciation
The colonel’s wife picked up the kettle and added water to the
tea
They don’t know and neither do I, she said
He took a butter-bread
Of course! – the brother of the cab driver (XXVIII, 1-14)

The whole of *Oxota* could also be the riddle here. The question might be: “what then did you see and do in Leningrad?” The way in which language plays these games of meaning is subject to investigation. This is the bread and butter of Hejinian’s epistemological investigations into the relationship between story and knowledge.

In *Oxota*, Hejinian describes what she saw and did in Leningrad. In order for her to describe her experiences, Hejinian must deal with the problem of writing history. Chapter Thirty focuses on the nature of writing narrative or history, of recalling or describing events:

It's somewhere to be hasty from, to await a meal
The mail never comes
There's moisture on the wall which seals the wallpaper
So I'm gaping at the paintings there (Timur's, Afrika's, Ostap's) from
the interior of a bed
You cannot touch me on my papers
In such a language, so I said
The region sings under a stack
Then rustling or pluckle of rain
I'm preparing a translation of *Xenia*
Some old rags are greasily burning
Two children with a sled are playing silently on the neon-
yellow ice
There is something embarrassing about nature's power
It's part of nature's routine
Can one prepare for history (XXX, 1-14)

The cycle of the seasons, "nature's routine," plays an important role in *Eugene Onegin*. *Eugene Onegin* implies that the course of love parallels the cycle of the seasons. Chapter Thirty refers to this parallel through the placement of "nature's routine" and "history" on consecutive lines. The chapter also raises the question: what is natural? History is also part of nature in a broad sense, but one cannot prepare for it in the way that one prepares for winter. Hejinian prepares to translate Dragomoshchenko's book *Xenia*, but the translation of her experiences in Leningrad into a poem, into history, is a more complex matter. Chapter Thirty thus recalls the process of translating experience into memory referred to in Chapter Twenty: "both awake and asleep the process of translating matter / into memory continued" (XX, 11, see pages 89-90 above).

The frequent use of questions in *Oxota* invites the reader to examine the translation process that occurs between Russia and the United States and between Hejinian's experiences and the recounting of those experiences. Questions allow Hejinian to avoid

an answer. As George Bataille has put it, “The autonomy – sovereignty – of man is linked to the fact of his being a question with no answer” (*Guilty* 133). This remark prefaced a talk given by Arkadii Dragomoshchenko at the conference “Language, Consciousness, and Society” in Leningrad in August 1989. By positing different answers to the problems of writing about Russia and of writing history, *Oxota* brings answers and motivations into question in a borderland of meaning. This border has a guard, which, as in *The Guard*, is both protector and guide; it is the mediator and the medium:

On which side of the guard is the word (XXXI, 7)

In one sense, “the word” is on the far side of “the guard,” as it comes later in the sentence. In another sense “guard” is a “word,” so that guard and word coincide. In a wider sense, the metaphor of the guard as medium and message is applicable to language, to words. The line quoted above immediately follows a line that suggests that “the guard” might be a prison guard:

From the sofa we spoke of the written sentence, from the
kitchen of prison (XXXI, 6)

This is a semantically ambiguous sentence. Do different topics, different words, relate to different locations? That is, is “the sofa” for discussions of “the written sentence,” and the “the kitchen” for discussions of prison? Or, does the sentence describe one composite location that relates to a single topic? Is “the kitchen of prison” another name for “the sofa,” where “the written sentence is discussed?” Does the topic, “the written sentence,” refer to sentences in general, or to a particular sentence, perhaps this sentence? If it is this sentence that is written about it, one cannot get outside it, which is exactly the point of this “hunt” for meaning.

In the following chapter, Chapter Thirty-Two, the opening line emphasizes that it is important to admit all kinds of language and thoughts into the poem:

I haven't been conscious of inadmissibility
It's like snow in the angles of ovals
And the question of the necessity of art isn't the subject of my
novel
Necessity isn't any more abstract than beauty, Anna said – it's
all subjective

So, Papa, added Ostap, how could it be good anyway –
 why not bad
 No, no, said Gavronsky – maybe she’s right and art is
 political – but I don’t see how you can know which side
 of politics it’s on
 On application
 Soviet painting to Soviet medicine
 The fascination of the big thing
 The fear of the hole in the yellow arm
 The thing about
 We have a deeply unpleasant sense of our animal nature
 There are blue jaws moving over the bare white trees
 We are keeping up with our manifestos, he said, but we always
 add our dismay (XXXII, 2-14)

The desire to include “everything,” which is expressed in the first line and which was also noted as important in the examination of *The Guard*, opposes the self-sufficiency that seemed apparent in the quotation from the previous chapter. Consciousness, just like language, cannot leave itself out, as “the written sentence” illustrates. The words “written sentence” appear within a written sentence, just as a description of one’s consciousness must include the intention to describe consciousness. The first line of the chapter quoted above enacts this. Hejinian’s metadiscourse about what she is doing in the poem is a comment on the need to include everything. But when she describes what she is doing in *Oxota*, she is at the same time providing an example of the way in which she includes everything. That is, she is including metadiscourse about *Oxota* in *Oxota*. At the same time, the line is a statement of Hejinian’s intention in her poetry to include the quotidian. A description of one’s conscious experience must include all the everyday details of life, rather than just focusing on self-consciousness. As Dragomoshchenko put it in Hejinian’s translation, “there is more of me where I forget about myself” (“Footnotes,” *Description* 79).

Most of the chapter quoted above appears like a script, like lines of a conversation on art, politics and subjectivity. Quotations from conversations and self-conscious metadiscourse are present in various places in *Oxota*, and both are also present in *Eugene Onegin*. Chapter Three of *Eugene Onegin* begins with a stanza entirely

composed of conversation, in a seamless unison of the conversational and strict poetic form, whilst at various points in *Eugene Onegin* Pushkin discusses the direction of his novel, teasing the reader with various alternatives. Similarly, Book Three of *Oxota* begins with a digression on the subject of the poem and the novel's aims. The "question of the necessity of art" appears again in Chapter Eighty-One as a continuation of this metapoetic discourse:

Leninograd lies in the haze of its sides
It lies as heroine
Now it is both
It was
But then the work of art is not an act but an object of memory
Then from a great disturbance
The most delicate message accumulates
But you must know why you write a novel, said Vodonoy
It's not to displace anything
It has context and metronome
By insisting on a comprehension of every word I am free to
 signify place though not to represent it
So I must oppose the opposition of poetry to prose
Just as we can only momentarily oppose control to
 discontinuity, sex to organization, disorientation to domestic
 time and space, and glasnost (information) to the hunt (LXXXI,
 1-14)

The word "oppose" contains an amalgam of poetry and prose in the word "pose," which simultaneously opposes both terms in posing a question, instead of giving an answer.

In *Oxota*, not only letters, such as those in "oppose," but also numbers can take on special significance. The number "thirty-three" in Chapter Thirty-Three appears to motivate the chapter's description of a fairytale, a genre in which things often come in threes. The fable-like quality of the chapter is reminiscent of the *Thousand and One Nights*, while the communication with the devil and the temptation of the power of flight recalls the Faustian theme:

Perhaps there's a foray of ghost before life
The devil appeared, Salik said, and told Salik that he can't fly

He flies
 He is flying over the place where he will spend – or did
 spend much of his childhood and he wants to descend
 but the quality of his flying is so strong that he can't leave
 the sky
 Then he recognizes his mother – she's standing in the
 sunlight and he lands
 All around the airport naively blocking traffic are such boys
 recruited from Uzbekistan
 As merry as life's sky in which rise bulls-eyes
 A loss of self with high level of content
 One day Salik's mother tells him to go back to the hills to fly
 On his way, Salik said, he met the devil again
 And again the devil tells him he can't fly
 This time he's right
 Salik can't fly – his shadow binds him to Uzbekistan
 But when he's transparent, the devil says, Salik will fly again
 (XXXIII, 1-14)

There is a complex narrative in this stanza. Salik is said to describe what happened, but is always in the third person. His account is in the past tense, but the third person description of his actions is in the present tense. The phrase “or did spend” highlights the problem of tense, of relative location in time. It also suggests a fable, which has relevance over time. In this context, the opening line's suggestion of a “ghost before life,” as opposed to the concept of a ghost as a spirit after life, makes new sense. The word “foray” too suggests a transgression, but also the violence of pillage. This connotation suggests the association of “ghost” with death, which introduces the “devil.” Salik seems to have two temporally distinct moments of being able to fly, which are associated both with “the devil,” who comments on this ability (he says “he can't fly” twice) and also with being “transparent,” like a “ghost.” This last comment by the devil is not mediated through Salik's report. Salik seems to have lost his power to speak with his loss of flight. The whole stanza describes and enacts a search for knowledge with a concomitant “loss of self with a high level of content.” The search for contentment creates a stanza with a dense content, but also promotes anxiety, because of

its refusal of explication. The reader is left with incomplete comprehension of the content. He or she must continue to hunt for meaning.

The power that the devil seems to have over Salik's flight at the end of the chapter may also be connected with Hejinian's interest in the Faust legend. The desire for knowledge drives Faust to sell his soul to the devil. The line "A loss of self with high level of content" could refer to this. The self is lost, but content or knowledge is gained. At the same time, "content" could be shorthand for "contentment," which comes with the absence of self, which when present provokes anxiety. The anxiety here is also the anxiety of uncertainty of self, of mind and body, of "ghost." "Ghost" might be translated into Russian as "dukh," which means not only "ghost" or "specter" but also "breath," "spirit," as in "heart or mind," and "spirit," as in the "Holy Ghost."

The next chapter raises issues of sensation and the expression of the connection between mind and body:

The wind would take care of it
You could see it was a street without a tongue
And I should leave my shoes by the door
But we went for cheese and then tapochki (XXXIV, 1-4)

The phrase "street without a tongue" recalls another line that appeared earlier in *Oxota*, "with tongues for streets" (XX, 14, quoted on page 88). The "tongue" touches the lines around it as both the tongue of "my shoes" and an instrument for eating "cheese and then tapochki." The tongue provides a link between the body and thoughts of the mind through words spoken and through its role in the sensations of taste and touch. The other sensation in the chapter is vision. The second line could be saying that "you can see without speaking," as well as that "the street lacks a tongue." Of course, for the reader, the act of description on the part of the writer is essential to "see" a scene, so the line is partly ironic.

Chapter Thirty-Five describes a wintry tale with a skeletal figure:

The colonel's daughter was scraping circles on the trolley
window in the enormous frost
The kagebeshnik asked us
Ice, endurance – ice

But we weren't from Florida
 And the colonel had requested and now insisted that his
 daughter stop
 But amaze, amazed – we must excuse
 The public morality is completely apart from the rampant
 inspection of frost
 Lifting frost
 Swirling ice of ashes and frost
 Papa, why should saying that make me stop – every day you
 ignore Mama saying again don't you piss in the kitchen
 sink tonight
 Drifting tender frost
 Confusing crime and nationalism, the guy is a shifting
 defender
 Through the circle she scraped something skeletal
 It covered only the surface of something as banalities overlie (XXXV,
 1-14)

As in *Eugene Onegin*, there is too little information here to construct a “realistic” plot (Clayton 73). The question of the psychology of the author, of the “purpose” of construction, is also open to radical doubt. All the “surface” details in the chapter quoted above are themselves “banalities,” but the action here is in the interaction between them, in the way the reader must work to unite and divide them. The work, like “the guy,” is “shifting constantly,” just as the various adjectives that come before the word “frost” in the chapter quoted above are “drifting,” like snow drifts.

The chapter quoted above is typical of many of the chapters in *Oxota* in that it takes the form of a jam on a word or words. This approach to poetry reflects Hejinian's deep interest in music and the fact that her partner is an experimental jazz musician. Here is another example:

At the next stop the door fell off
 I was to remember but not to mind
 But as not mine, whose – paradise possessionless
 A sky of particles transpires
 Disassembled, with the vagueness of humility – but it's
 disinterest bobbing

And pressing
 To the metallic foretaste of Leningrad's mineral water
 Proportions, memories, infinities, trolleys – all the forms of
 weariness that guide us, Dima said, through the otherness
 of tangibility
 Through holes
 There's no unconscious space in the mind, Viktor said
 I relaxed, was at peace
 Life sufficed
 It was an inactive comedy in its yellow Leningrad day
 Its mineral lifting (XXXVI, 1-14)

In the case referred to above, there is a jam on “mind-mine-mineral.” This wordplay sets the chapter in motion. The digression quoted above advances the reader's knowledge of the “I” and the narrative that she relates, while at the same time, through digression, fragment, and a materialization of words as things (the “mind” as a “mineral,” a material object), it turns back upon itself, resisting conclusion and closure.

The change from concrete to abstract vocabulary and back is also prominent in the chapter quoted above. The change in vocabulary emphasizes both the unreality and the reality of the language, in much the same way as Pushkin uses the change from poetic to prosaic vocabulary to highlight different possibilities. Summing up Sergey Bocharov's insights, Caryl Emerson points out that the movement between poetic and prosaic vocabulary emphasizes “the *unrealized* potential of every moment” in *Eugene Onegin*. Pushkin's novel represents “actualized reality,” not through the “palpably real,” but by means of a “subjunctive mode” that allows for an “open-ended realm of possibility” (Emerson xii). The absence or distancing of meaning that takes place in *Oxota* reflects the importance of open-ended realism for Hejinian too. At the same time, the strangeness of *Oxota* also highlights Hejinian's muteness, “the unsaid,” in Russia. Muteness is, as was noted, the price of knowledge in a strange land for both Hejinian and Faust. In the chapter quoted above, there are a large number of negatives, such as “inactive, “no unconscious,” “disinterest” and “disassembled.” Negation opens up the possibility of something else. In both *Oxota* and *Eugene Onegin*, negatives allow for open-ended possibilities.

The next chapter in *Oxota* shows a curious affinity with the swift movements of Onegin through St Petersburg in the first chapter of Pushkin's "novel":

The effective life of a bald man on a motorcycle bearing an
an accordion churns up the red soil and fans the sky
We escalated into the metro from there
A babushka was riding below balancing a great new porcelain
washtub
The solid egg on chicken legs
The hammer destroying the tablecloth, the transition
The table worsening, then the littlest chair
A cabbage must be milked
But the finger was clumsily knicked instead – I tried to hide it
with a thumb
No touch now unless I touch
Empty heat in the hard currency store
A new abstraction – a new Rilke
We have had our resolution
Dive flight, and then wrest
Ostap pointed toward a slab of frying spam and said, that
organism is what we call fruit (XXXVII, 1-14)

As in Pushkin's famous description of morning in St Petersburg, we have "ordinary" people on the move. In Pushkin's description various people take part in various actions, including walking and riding, which announce the beginning of the working day. In the chapter quoted above, a variety of characters are on the move, including the "bald man," the "we" and the "babushka." Whereas in Pushkin's stanza the people's actions and the rhymes and rhythms of the stanza make up the extraordinary hum (*shum*) of the city, in *Oxota* the strikingness of the scenes described comes through the strangeness of description, as in "the effective life" or "we escalated," or the strangeness of the event described, as in the babushka "balancing a great new porcelain washtub" as she rides along. The description of food also recalls the Pushkin's detailed description of Onegin's lunch in *Eugene Onegin*.

Where *The Guard* is all about landscape, the first book of *Oxota* is all about narrative, description of everyday life, conversations, novels, books to offer a mosaic of life and literature. This quality of *Oxota* stands in contrast to most of Hejinian's work. *Oxota* is also about the desire to know another culture, to give a feeling of cross-cultural interaction, and to draw a parallel between the confounding of Hejinian's desire to understand fully another culture, and the impossibility in her view of expressing her experience of Russia perfectly in language. The work leads onwards, tempting the reader with discovery. One learns about characters, events, and one knows that a book is being written.

Oxota consists of lines that are also sentences. The sentence is a central site of investigation in Hejinian's poetry. In *The Guard*, Hejinian explores the possibilities of the sentence, unlocking its boundaries through enjambment, while in *Oxota* she uses separation, gaps, to achieve a similar effect. In both poems, Hejinian's explorations open up the relationship of the sentence to its surroundings in language, to other sentences, to perception, and to the social world. Hejinian conceives of these formal approaches as inherently political. Hejinian writes that she strives to change the world "in sentences, not by them" ("Comments" 196). Both *The Guard* and *Oxota* are investigations of the possibilities of words, sentences and lines as objects. The word might be a "rock," but it is porous. It is a border, a portal, the place where the "I" enters or exits the landscape ("Comments" 197). It involves the hunt for knowledge with its Faustian associations of hell and muteness. Hell, after all, was partly represented by the Soviet Union in Western, especially American, consciousness.

While *The Guard* can be seen as a confrontation with Western utopianism, in *Oxota* Hejinian explores another side of what she sees as the utopian Western quest for perfect, Faustian knowledge, which she has also referred to as "paradise." The difference between the two works in their treatment of this theme is evident at the level of both formal structure and content. While *The Guard* is essentially non-narrative, in *Oxota* narrative and what has been referred to here as "the hunt for meaning" play an important role in the openness of the poem, where this open form is understood as both the quest for paradise and the frustration of that quest. The events described in *Oxota*, meanwhile, take place mainly in the Soviet Union. The subject matter of *Oxota*, therefore, reflects another side of Hejinian's investigation of the Western search for

knowledge. This other side of the quest for paradise is the explorer's narrative, in which the strangeness of experience is discovered in a strange land. Together *The Guard* and *Oxota* are exemplary of the range of Hejinian's poetic investigations into the founding myth of America and of the American West as paradise, the strangeness and strange attraction of exploration and the Western quest for knowledge.

4. The Quest for Knowledge: Lyn Hejinian's Poetics

When the term realism is applied to poetry, it is apt to upset our sense of reality

– Lyn Hejinian, "Strangeness"

Lives, lines, likes

– Lyn Hejinian, "The Quest for Knowledge"

The analysis of *The Guard* and *Oxota* presented above has brought to light a number of characteristics that place Hejinian within the Western Enlightenment tradition. In her poetry, Hejinian searches for totality, for description of the world, for realism, while at the same time, she celebrates the fantastic and strange, thus paradoxically separating her language from reality. On another level, Hejinian combines a strong sense of responsibility, of "sincerity," with a close but sometimes contradictory engagement with the Western search for the utopia of perfect knowledge and a perfect world.

Hejinian's interest in the "particularity" of things may seem to preclude the generalizations involved in an interpretation of her poetics such as the one presented here. Her focus on particularity, however, relates to general concerns that she holds in relation to knowledge. From at least the period when she was working on *The Guard*, the overarching concerns expressed in Hejinian's writing have been epistemological in nature. Hejinian is interested in the desire to know new things, to discover new places. She investigates this desire as it manifests itself in both the history of Western exploration of the world and in her own aesthetic search. Hejinian's poetry searches for some kind of total expression of the world and of the ineffable feelings that are associated with her subjective experience of reality. In reference to *The Guard*, Hejinian calls this goal "paradise." And in a number of works of poetry and poetics from *The Guard* to her essay "La Faustienne," she refers to this same goal as "Faustian knowledge." While Hejinian is profoundly interested in writing poetry that captures better the reality of the world, she is also acutely aware of the problematic consequences

associated with the Western quest for knowledge and of the impossibility of achieving perfect knowledge in a poem. Her work on knowledge often suggests that there is another kind of knowledge that can be found in language. This kind of knowledge is never complete. It finds its expression in literature that is endless and that works with many logics, or that is indeterminate. She finds examples of this kind of literature in a range of sources from puns to the *Thousand and One Nights*. Hejinian has called the literature of this kind of knowledge “night works” and this kind of “knowledge” “language” or female knowledge (“La Faustienne”). Hejinian’s poetry and poetics exhibit tension and interaction between these two conceptions of knowledge.

The Western Enlightenment kind of knowledge in which Hejinian is interested is that which is collected through careful description. Hejinian finds inspiration in the particular and indiscriminate observations of the explorer or scientist, of one who makes no *a priori* assumptions about what is important or what is not and who keeps interpretation to a minimum at the initial stage of investigation. From this attitude of openness to the world and to discovery there arises naturally, according to Hejinian, strangeness. Strangeness is at once desirable, as in the case of a *terra incognita* waiting to be explored, and the natural result of openness to the nature of the world. This kind of openness entails attention not just toward the world perceived, not just toward the perceiver, and not just toward the language of description, but requires a complex combination of all three.

While this kind of openness is associated with the Western scientific tradition, Hejinian’s poetics exhibit a contradictory distrust of scientific knowledge. Hejinian is suspicious of the desire to take ownership of everything, to conquer, and to separate the world as an object of description from the perceiver-owner. She is equally suspicious of the desire of the male seeker of knowledge to dominate the female keeper of knowledge. Under the influence of postmodernist criticisms of Enlightenment thought, Hejinian at times associates these desires with Western attitudes toward knowledge. Hejinian opposes feminine knowledge, exemplified by the *One Thousand and One Nights*, to this kind of Western knowledge, which she calls Faustian knowledge and which she associates with binary thinking and the desire for paradise. Paradise, in turn, is sometimes equated with the historical desire of European explorers for America, viewed as paradise and as a woman, a virgin.

Hejinian's essay "The Quest for Knowledge in the Western Poem" is a direct confrontation with the problem of Western knowledge and with Hejinian's apparently contradictory attitudes toward it. The essay forms part of a line of thought that is evident in several of Hejinian's statements of poetics. From her 1988 essay "Strangeness" to her 1994 piece "La Faustienne," Hejinian repeatedly mentions one of the founders of the Enlightenment Francis Bacon, with whom she shares a love of discovery and language. In "The Quest of Knowledge in the Western Poem," Hejinian writes of Bacon's great Enlightenment vision in a way that helps to explain the link between this vision and Hejinian's quest in her own poetry:

The Advancement of Learning and the *Novum Organum* were explicitly directed toward problems in recording and describing data. But this essentially literary activity was seen not only as an instrument for obtaining and securing information but also as a means for achieving a particular style of mind, characterized by perceptual acuity, self-sufficiency, undistractibility, and objectivity.

In a sense, Bacon's program was devised for the sake of learning, not for the sake of knowledge. It is not knowledge per se that is to be learned, but rather the world, and the method of achieving this learning is a descriptive method, one in which the observing senses are fundamentally aided by language. (215)

Like Bacon, Hejinian recognizes that there is no human pure knowledge separate from the world, but rather we are bound to the descriptive method, in which the means of description is important.²¹ Just how language should "aid the senses" is a question with which Hejinian struggles in her poetry (Lyn Hejinian Reading *My Life* [1993]).

Hejinian writes poetry that deliberately challenges conventions in order to "dispel illusions," which she and others find in conventional descriptions:

555. Listening – writing cannot spell – it should dispell [sic] the illusion of description (MSS 47-3, 70)

²¹ It should be noted that Hejinian's poetry and poetics are not the only places in which Francis Bacon appears as a precursor of, as well as an antithetical figure to, postmodernism. Gerald Gillespie's article "Scientific Discourse and Postmodernity: Francis Bacon and the Empirical Birth of 'Revision'," which appeared in *boundary 2* in 1979, also presents Bacon as both modernist, in his striving for scientific grounding, and postmodernist in his revisionist, skeptical view of the reliability of human perceptions.

For Hejinian, this motivation to attack conventional description seems, at least in part, to be motivated by her experience of strangeness, in herself and in the world around her. Hejinian's experience in Russia was of this kind:

522. 3/28 "The feeling of the unreality of one's surroundings. This feeling I have had once, and many have it before the onset of mental illness." Wittgenstein says this in his "Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology" (#125). I have experienced this, more than once; but also I have experienced the obverse – my surroundings were perfectly real but I was unreal in them, as if unfounded, vaporous. I was not "in a fog" but was myself like a ghost.

Studying Russian – last night I felt that that was making me unreal – loosening whatever it is that holds the particles of my being together. It took on a nightmarish quality – I asked, what am I doing this for? *who* am I that is doing this?

Am I motivated by intellectual curiosity? some powerful emotional fantasy? (MSS 47-3, 64)

One reason for Hejinian's attacks on the reductive use of language, on language that is used to exclude, is that, as she sees it, closed language does not aid the senses, because it does not accurately describe the world. One way in which poetry can draw attention to this problem is by concentrating on statements that cannot be reduced to their propositional content or their aspect. In poetry a reductive paraphrase is not equal to the original, because the reader's experience of the two differs. This stress on the importance of the experience of a statement is derived from William James. In a talk at the University of Auckland, Hejinian quotes the following passage from James's *Principles of Psychology*, Volume One, which she also quotes in "The Quest for Knowledge in the Western Poem":

"If anyone asks what is the mind's object when you say 'Columbus discovered America in 1492,' most people will reply 'Columbus' or 'America,' or, at most 'the discovery of America.' They will name a substantive kernel or nucleus of the consciousness and say the thought is 'about' that. But the object of your thought is really its entire content or deliverance." Comparing content and deliverance is making an equation between conscious thought and linguistic expression. "The object of your thought is really its entire content or deliverance, neither more nor less. It is a vicious use of speech to take out a substantive kernel from its contents and call that its object. And it is an equally vicious use of speech to add a substantive kernel not particularly included in its content, and to call that its object. The object of my thought in the previous sentence, for example, is strictly speaking neither Columbus nor America, nor its discovery. It is nothing short of the entire sentence, 'Columbus-discovered-America-

in-1492.’ And if we wish to speak of it substantively, we must make a substantive of it by writing it out thus with hyphens between all its words. Nothing but this can possibly name its delicate idiosyncrasy. And if we wish to *feel* that idiosyncrasy we must reproduce the thought as it was uttered, with every word fringed and the whole sentence bathed in that original halo of obscure relations, which, like an horizon, then spread about its meaning.” (“Two Auckland Talks: 1”)

Bacon, like Hejinian, acknowledges the role of the emotions and subjective experiences in the search for understanding. For them both, the quest for knowledge involves the mobilizing of our psychological states and emotions, and an awareness of the ways in which they deceive us. From this view there arises an interest in psychology. Hejinian uses many quotations from Freud in *The Guard*. She also speculates in her notebook about Freud’s view that dream images come from words, and Jung’s view that images are primary. Hejinian’s has a deep interest in the unconscious aspects of human psychology because the exploration of the unconscious is part of her attempt at complete description and because Hejinian also has an interest in the possible limits of description that are found in unconscious or semiconscious states such as dreaming.

The view that the mind is both the source of knowledge and also the confounder of understanding is strongly associated in the West not only with artistic modernism but also and most strongly with romanticism. Hejinian’s interest in romanticism is notable in a quotation in her journal from Schopenhauer:

Oblivion “Further we do not let abstract thought, the concepts of reason, take possession of our consciousness, but, instead of all this, devote the whole power of our mind to perception, sink ourselves completely therein, and let our whole consciousness be filled by the calm of contemplation of the natural object actually present, whether it be a landscape, a tree, a rock, a crag, a building, or anything else. We *lose* ourselves entirely in this object, to use a pregnant expression...” Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation* (quoted, Monk, p 143) (MSS 48-2, 1991, 12)

This line of interest in the inexplicable is also evident in the following observation about an art exhibition, which appears on the same page of Hejinian’s journal:

A lot of “issue art” that collapsed in importance beside the occasional “pure art” paintings. The triviality of well-intentioned issue pieces when compared to the painterly paintings confirmed my inclination toward “Oblivion” over “the Person.” Pleasure over political correctness may achieve a better correctness. (MSS 48-2, 1991, 12)

Notice first that these quotations taken together express a positive view of the artifice of absorption that postmodernism and Language Poetry are often seen as opposing. Hejinian seems to have a quixotic relationship both with the romantic idea of a religious and mystical communion with Nature and also with pure aestheticism in general. Elsewhere, as has been noted, she chastises related views with the pejorative label “homebrewed Zen” (MSS 46-9, entry 98, 22 Jul. 1983, 30). Her view is actually quite hard to pin down, but her ongoing struggle with this issue is very important. Hejinian desires both art that goes beyond the earthly and art that resists this desire. In contrast, it is worth recalling that Schopenhauer advocated “resignation,” the rejection of desire because “nothing is gained through struggle and will” (Higgins, “Schopenhauer” 820). The tension between struggle and resignation creates much of the tension and anxiety in Hejinian’s poetry. Hejinian herself has commented on these opposing desires: “The desire for order and the desire for disorder – rigorous rational order or disorder” (MSS 48-2, 29 Dec. 1990, 3).

The mystical or romantic vision of literature is also part of Hejinian’s notion of “night works.” In her essay “La Faustienne,” she likens female, non-Faustian knowledge, represented by the *Thousand and One Nights*, to the Eleusian Mysteries. The female “La Faustienne,” Scheherazade, leads King Sharyar into knowledge in a way that Hejinian likens to the initiation into the Eleusian Mysteries: “into the esoteric teachings of death, rebirth, and immortality bestowed by the goddess Demeter in luminous visions” (“La Faustienne” 26).

The spiritual and romantic side of Hejinian’s thought on poetry is also expressed in statements like the following, which bears some resemblance to her quotation from Schopenhauer:

Is it possible for me to arrive at any conclusions relative to the spiritual potential in art or in a person?

Lou Andreas-Salome speaks of feeling a sense of at-oneness, a shared destiny with all things. I experienced a sense of elevation and tranquility in front of the Elgin Marbles, or listening to the music during services at the Cathedral in Vladimir, or again watching the wind in the trees in Polenza [?], which suggests that nature is a model for art-making.

What is the role of a person in questions of spiritual meaning? and what is the role of art.

In a work of art one witnesses urges of the spirit. One witnesses the approach of the spirit to its fear of death, to love, to the mysteries (whence, whither, and why). One witnesses the confrontation of the spirit with the unanswerability of its questions – in which case, I suppose, the work of art teaches or expresses rage, or resignation, a bemused silence, or a return to the richness and density of everyday present life (i.e. the aestheticization of detail + technique). (MSS 47-6, 2 July 1985, 92)

This quotation is an example of one of the ways in which Hejinian links aesthetics with ethics and reality. Our experience of the world is drawn, highlighted and heightened in art and, at the same time, returned to “the richness and density of everyday present life.” Thus art affirms the importance of individual human experience, human life, and the world around us, as well as the wonder of both.

Hejinian makes high claims for cognitive stimulation, for the virtues of perception, feeling and for the imagination in literature. These claims also lie within the romantic tradition. Hejinian makes clear the high cognitive value she sees in poetry in the following statement from a 1981 diary entry:

It has always been my ambition to write a work capable of holding all that I know, not because my mind is exemplary but because the discovery and possession of knowledge is the special province of language. (MSS 46-1)

But the expression of thoughts takes a different turn in Hejinian’s poetry. Hejinian’s concern for poetry is undeniably a concern for expressing the intensional nature of the experience of thinking. For Hejinian, this is linked to opaque language: “The surface in language is demonstrated thought. One is not meant to see through words in poetry” (MSS 46-6).

While Hejinian connects poetic language with perception of the world, she also has social and political aims for her poetry. Hejinian wants poetry to challenge perception. As she sees it, each new wave in the history of modern Western art can be seen as a new attempt to “un-channel and thus renew perception and create new meaning” (MSS 46-6). Hejinian’s statement immediately following this in her notebook from 1982 makes clear why “poetic function” was seen as so important in an intellectual environment in which left-wing intellectuals felt powerless to change the political situation:

Clichés lull one into satisfaction with the world as it is. The world is repetitiously defined by clichés which pass off the definition as fact –

it appears as fact by virtue of reiteration – and hence the world situation appears as fixed and unchangeable. (MSS 46-6)

As was seen in “Language, Poetry, Politics” above, while one can see Language Poetry as part of a pessimistic retreat into art and away from direct political action, the motivation for the movement came from the perceived importance of breaking down the clichés that were making change impossible. Thus new art had to come before or simultaneous to achieving change in “the world situation.” And in the same journal Hejinian describes the need for this kind of “poetic function” as “pressing”: “Dreams, clichés, hierarchies etc. are blockading elements. The need for fresh perception to direct one toward understanding and useful meaning (or meaningful use) is pressing” (MSS 46-6).

One does not need to accept Hejinian’s ideas about making experience palpable to see that these ideas form part of the Western aesthetic tradition. One finds in Hejinian’s explicit poetics an interesting justification of aestheticism in terms of social impact and better description of subjective experience. For instance, Hejinian picks out a passage of writing by William Carlos Williams that contradicts and shows another reading of his famous slogan “no ideas but in things.” The “things” appear to be words rather than everyday objects:

January 8: WCW, Embodiment of Knowledge p.17: “...these materials are real and must be understood, in letters, to supersede in themselves all ideas, facts, movement which they may under circumstances be asked to signify.” (MSS 46-5)

Hejinian makes clear her interest in phenomenal conscious experience, through which an emphasis on “letters” can be understood as an emphasis on “things”: “no return to the past but only a more and more intense awareness of conscious existence” (MSS 46-5). From this point of view, Hejinian launches an impassioned defense of art in a scientific age:

4/82 Art is questions, not answers. It has affinities with science just as much as, or perhaps even more than, with philosophy or mysticism. We can’t forget that Einstein was motivated by passion – a passionate curiosity, the need to know more.

Art is full of activity. Culture is not an answer to questions. (MSS 46-5)

Hejinian also has a deep interest in and awareness of the mediated nature of written language as an expression of the self. From this we can see how Hejinian thinks defamiliarization highlights the writing process:

Resistance is set up at two points. The first is between the writer and the proposed text and is manifest in various difficulties of composition, including the psychological. The second is set up between the text and the reader and includes all the difficulties which keep the writing itself visible and impress the subject (which may be so embedded in the writing itself as to be virtually identical with it) on the attention of the reader. This includes the defamiliarization techniques with which we are all so familiar. These sets of resistance are quite different from each other and are not to be confused with each other – they are essentially in-comparable – but some aspects of the latter may derive from the former. That is, some of the procedures of decision may be palpable in the form of clauses, punctuation, or digression. (MSS 46-5)

Effectively, however, Hejinian uses the ideas in the passage quoted above in combination with a moderate romantic epistemology, a view of the importance of literature as a mode of thinking and revealing emotional truths, though she might not put it in these words. The idea is to bring “scientific” attention to the description and enactment of cognitive stimulation:

I have found that [keeping a diary] increasingly difficult – so difficult in fact that I have insisted on referring to these books as “notebooks” or “journals” to emphasize my distance from self-explanation or a narrative of my self. I’ve grown very distant from myself, at least as a subject.

In a sense I am sorry – so much of my inner life is lost. Yet who would have wanted to find it?

But possibly I’ve missed things – missed *real* discoveries.

Yet my interest in poetry is that of the scientist – though an emotional one. Perhaps a scientist like so many of the great ones (Einstein, for example) – meticulous, even obsessive, yet informed with passion and some kind of mysticism or awe.

I mean my celebrations of the mind to be “all heart.” (MSS 46-5)

Hejinian is particularly interested in the connection between the emotional personal experience of something and the formal structural elements of knowing and of lyric poetry:

Over + over again people bring up the complaint that our poetry (+ mine) is “cold,” “scientific,” all ideas, no emotions. And over + over I fail to understand what they feel or how they think that that enables

them to imagine feelings as idea-less or ideas as emotionless. Even love is an idea – it is experienced as an idea – it is fraught with complications, reversals, ramifications. What is an idea-less feeling? hunger, the urge to shit. What is an idealess emotion? perhaps the instant of rage when someone cuts in front of you in traffic + forces you to jam on the brakes? or the flood of ecstatic response to a musical moment? Art may provoke those, but it doesn't contain them. (MSS 47-3, entry 535, Apr. 1984, 67)

According to Hejinian, ideas and emotions are inseparably bound in a complex search for expression and understanding. The experience of an idea is always emotional. There is no such thing as pure reason. This is similar to Bacon's view that the rational mind does not float above the irrational; it cannot free itself to engage in pure reason.

In the final lines of a draft of "The Quest for Knowledge in the Western Poem," entitled "The Foundations of Knowledge in the Western Poem," Hejinian writes: "Poetry makes philosophy that's concerned with and by what the eye can see and the ear can hear" (MSS 43-7, 5). Here Hejinian emphasizes that for her poetry is an expression of particulars and of individual human experience: "Poetry is pointing out particular states of affairs" (MSS 43-7, 5). Hejinian focuses on reflective and phenomenal consciousness in all its subjective richness.

To stretch realism to Hejinian's writing might seem extreme. But there is little doubt that what she intends is a fuller realism of conscious experience, the subject of lyric poetry, than is generally on offer, rather than a denial of realism, despite her use of irony and disjunctive form. As an example of an expression of this intention, take the following statement from her 1991 talk "The Poem as Risk":

If I say "during the fire the sky was," you expect me to say something in the area of "was black" or "was filled with smoke," but not something like "bled," or "drove on maps to an icy edge," or "dwindled in haste." And to tell the truth, as a poet, I wouldn't expect to say these things either, even as I sat down to write a poem at the fire. But I might write them and, in fact, I did write them, and *they are in their way more accurate to what I saw during the fire than the plain versions* [my emphasis].

Hejinian's interest in knowledge and realism seems to lie in the way in which our knowledge is always embodied and subjective, the way in which emotional and informational content always comes together in our minds. She emphasizes the messy, empirical, emotional and intellectual process of thinking, and the unconscious and

semiconscious aspects of our psychology, such as dreams. In emphasizing these things she is following in the footsteps of romanticism's attack on the claims made for reason, which neglected the need to satisfy and to explain our own minds. But rather than rejecting the real world in favor of some ineffable sublime, Hejinian's work is about thinking about and in the world. Her work emphasizes the emotional and intellectual excitement of inquiry and discovery.

In the tradition of William James, Hejinian explores and expresses the strangeness of consciousness, of the human mind. In her journal, she writes of a poem: "Its object an *indefinite* pleasure" (MSS 48-2, 69). It is indefiniteness that is her preoccupation. From this affirmation of the importance of lived experience in the tradition of John Dewey, William James and Walt Whitman comes the following statement: "The aim + end of human life cannot be simply the perfection of the sciences" (MSS 48-2, 48). Nevertheless, Hejinian endorses the empirical process of scientific inquiry, because it does not place the mind outside its scope of knowing and because it is committed to realism and the acquisition of knowledge through perception: "Empiricism gives authority to 'merely perceptive' persons – it is on these grounds that Poe attacks Baconian theory + that I would praise it" (MSS 48-2, 47). In terms of her own poetics, Hejinian's view seems to be reflected in the attitude that her poems "describe or express a reality of which they are part" (MSS 48-2, Oct. 1991, 32).

As Robert Stecker has pointed out, the cognitive value of literature lies in presenting conceptions to the imagination (280-93). These conceptions need not be true, but only stimulating. Hejinian, in a similar vein, writes:

However "philosophical" the poem (any poem of mine but I'm thinking especially of "The Person") might appear, I can only raise questions (that's all I want to do) since I can't answer them. Propositions, in my use of them, are not final certainties but initial (initiating) extremes. (MSS 48-2, 1991, 10)

What seems to be of most interest to Hejinian is how our psychology enables a view of reality. But what is also of interest to her is how this view is seriously distorted, in dreams, in our sense of time, and in the poverty and imperfection of our senses (for which she uses the metonym "myopia"). The idea of self as an isolated unchanging entity is among these illusions of our psychology. This does not mean that the self or dreams are unreal, but it does mean that they are real only as brain functions. Feelings

are important in art, but they are not directly expressed, nor can they be, despite the cultural acceptance of the illusion of direct expression of “soul” in some art. What Hejinian wants to explore and provoke the reader to think about in her writing is the complex experience of being a human being, a person. As Ricci van Elburg puts it:

Hejinian combines time, space and consciousness into a complex that evokes dread, anxiety and procrastination, the person as a contingent mobile reference point. In questioning whether there is a name for this state, Hejinian puts the title of her own poem, or the name of the person we meet, in doubt: we can use the word “person” but does that name sum up the condition she describes? (“How Personal?”)

Hejinian is interested in the endless ability of poetry to raise questions, to create new things, and to go beyond generalist characterizations of human beings and of the creative products of the arts, including poetry.

There are, of course, a variety of reasons for being skeptical of claims both for direct expression of self and for the lack of this expression in Hejinian’s poetry. Hejinian’s ambiguous relationship to self-expression can be seen in the following statements:

The point of my “autobiographical” writing is to foreground the elusiveness of “reality” and the reality of words. (MSS 47-3, entry 508, 20 Mar. 1984, 60)

But the real issue, in thinking about public + private language, is the issue of the art impulse itself, which may feel private and personal initially but in fact propels statement into the public sphere. “I feel the inexpressible! I must express it!” The paradox is dynamic – full of energy. (MSS 47-3, entry 509, 22 Mar. 1984, 60)

Taken together, these two statements seem to imply that Hejinian’s poetry comes out of her desire to do two things. Firstly, she aims to express an elusive reality, which is “inexpressible.” And secondly, she aims to express it in real, public, objective words. She aims for a kind of literal expression, even if literalness is inadequate to the feelings, ideas and emotions that she intended to express. In end, she must accept that it is as adequate as self-expression can be. In Hejinian’s view, the desire to express the intrinsically subjective in language and the impossibility of achieving this goal together impel art forward. Whether or not one agrees with this, her poetry is clearly driven by this unfulfilled desire. There is certainly a paradox here, and it arises from the intensional nature of intentional states, which means that perfect self-expression is necessarily impossible. But poetry as intensional language art is analogous to

consciousness in being impossible to paraphrase and so can at least gesture toward this trait of consciousness.

How can we understand Hejinian's conception of poetic knowledge? Robert Stecker's theory of the cognitive value of literature, which draws in part on Martha Nussbaum's work in this area, offers one possible answer. While not emphasizing the truth value of conceptions presented to the imagination in literature, he argues that if conceptions as they are presented in literature "are rich and plausible enough to promote fruitful commentary (in [Martha] Nussbaum's sense), then they will be effective instruments to help us find the truth, and that is more important than whether they possess truth" (286).

While Hejinian was writing *The Guard*, she was also working on a poem called "Resistance." The theme of resistance, which is investigated in this poem, is also central to *The Guard*. Hejinian's description of this theme reflects a Baconian attitude toward inquiry. The idea is that we are driven by a desire to know, to get things right in inquiry, but, if done properly, this involves challenging and overturning some things that one previously thought secure. One needs the security of the "guard" (assumptions about the world), but the "guard" is also restrictive (it can blind us to knowing how things really are). In poetry, one wants a secure meaning and form, but also innovation. Hence one needs "resistance":

Resistance: in the attempt to find something to *fix*, to stabilize, to secure, one becomes obsessive or artful, + in so doing mobilizes possibility and overturns prior meaning. I.e., for whatever reason I may have for writing, the result will be to expend and overturn my expectations. If I already knew what I was going to say and what it was going to mean, it would scarcely be worth the doing.

Thus, on the one hand it appears that no matter how hard one tries to secure oneself in the world, the world will fall apart in one's hands. On the other, every attempt to establish or construct anything releases new life, new meaning. Exchange between destruction and creation. Resistance occurs in that exchange.

If one ignores any epistemological or metaphysical claims here, what Hejinian sees happening in the "obsessive or artful" process of writing a poem is a total examination of the "something" that is to be fixed in art. Getting it fixed paradoxically requires that it be pulled apart.

Hejinian's metaphysical claim about the world can also be understood as relating to lyric poetry. Try to write a lyric poem that fixes what you are, and you will always fail, because your attempt at fixing yourself is itself part of what you are. One can never get outside oneself in this sense. Consciousness is essentially immediate, inner, and subjective. To put it into writing is, therefore, impossible. Perhaps this is what Hejinian means by suggesting that the attempt to "secure oneself in the world" inevitably leads to the world falling apart in one's hands. "World" here, whether Hejinian intends or not, can only coherently mean "subjective phenomenal experience of the world" and "securing oneself" must mean to create a summation of what one is. Hejinian's poetry focuses on the attempt to describe truly the subjective experience of being conscious, both vertical phenomenal consciousness, the experience of seeing a color or looking at the sky, and horizontal consciousness, which includes memory and other parts of thinking that give us a sense of self or personhood. As has just been pointed out, this is logically impossible, but the search for it is a search for veracity and knowledge, including self-knowledge. It is also possible to accept Hejinian's assertion that the attempt to construct poems of this kind plausibly "releases new life, new meaning."

In her poetry, Hejinian places great emphasis on subjective experience in order to heighten consciousness. She undertakes a quest for knowledge about the self for better descriptions of her experience of being conscious. This quest requires new ways of writing, hence Hejinian desires to make things new. In all these respects, Hejinian's poetry is exemplary of modern Western thought. Hejinian is a descendent of the Enlightenment in her quest for better knowing, for shattering illusions and self-deceptions. On the other hand, she is a child of romanticism in her emphasis on pure subjective experience and the importance of imaginative creation. Through both tendencies runs a strong humanist belief that an emphasis on individual human experience is ethically important, because such an emphasis affirms mutual respect and understanding amongst human beings. This ethical belief is coupled with the belief that a focus on language and psychological illusions to which we are predisposed can help us better understand the world.

In the final line of *My Life* part 52, which also appears in her essay "The Quest for Knowledge in the Western Poem," Hejinian writes:

The West is here; we can ground our uncertainties on nothing else.
(Hejinian Reading *My Life* [1993])

Bacon's ideas provide a way of understanding how Hejinian's poetry, stressing as it does the uncertainty of foundations in the search for knowledge, is intended in part to affirm, perhaps surprisingly, the core principles of the Enlightenment and scientific inquiry. Bacon argued in his "Proemium to the *Instauratio Magna*" that the "entire fabric of human reason which we employ in the inquisition of nature, is badly put together and built up, and like some magnificent structure without any foundation" (*Works* vol. IV, 7). He noted that we know what we know through our imperfect human minds, and that this means we are prone to making errors, "because the primary notions of things which the mind readily and passively imbibes, stores up, and accumulates (and it is from them that all the rest flow) are false, confused, and overhastily abstracted from the facts" (*Works* vol. IV, 7). From this insight that knowledge is not well founded and that the mind can easily be deceived, there arises the recognition of the importance of avoiding such errors through an awareness of these limitations on human knowledge. It is, in turn, this emphasis on the necessity of guarding against false perception in the search for knowledge that informs Hejinian's work. The emphasis on psychology and its importance for the whole enterprise of inquiry was a major legacy of Bacon and a great inspiration for Hejinian.

On the other hand, Bacon's imperial tone, too, is important for understanding the quixotic relationship of Hejinian to this quest for knowledge. She is not the only one who would today be uncomfortable with Bacon's call to humankind to "make peace between themselves, and turning with united force against the Nature of things, to storm and occupy her castles and strongholds, and extend the bounds of human empire" (*The Advancement of Learning*, qtd. Wilson 24). Note not only the imperialism but also the domination of a female Nature. The kind of racism and sexism implied here comes in for heavy criticism in Hejinian's essays, notably in "La Faustienne," which also deals explicitly with Western knowledge and alternatives to it.

As was seen above, Hejinian has criticized traditional Western Enlightenment approaches to the acquisition of knowledge. She sees Western knowledge as gendered, with the man acquiring the known from the woman who is the keeper of it ("La Faustienne" 20). But Bacon's recognition of psychology and particularly his emphasis on ongoing experiment do not seem to conform with the sharp binary between knower and known that Hejinian sees as the target of "postmodern critique." Hejinian sees this

critique as suggesting: “that Being [...] exists not because it is the opposite of non-Being but because it is ‘true of its own accord’” (“La Faustienne” 20). But it was exactly this recognition that things are “true of their own accord” that Hejinian in an earlier essay had suggested came from Bacon and the scientific method that he helped to found:

In essence Bacon set in motion a reformation of learning, demanding that scientific attitudes be purged of established systems and prior opinions. Instead the observer should experience direct and sensuous contact with the concrete and material world, in all its diversity and permutations, and unmediated by preconceptions. Bacon and his subsequent followers were convinced that the components of the natural are “eloquent of their own history.” (“Strangeness” 41)

Hejinian picks up on Bacon’s emphasis on experience, experiment and exploration. For Hejinian, writing poetry is a kind of experiment in language and thought. Bacon, too, understood experimentation as an ongoing process applicable in all fields of human endeavor, as is clear from his book *The Advancement of Learning* (*Works* vol. IV, 275-498).

Bacon, like Hejinian, also placed importance on the imaginative conveyance of knowledge through aphorisms, stories, fables and analogies. “The human understanding,” he wrote, “is no dry light, but receives an infusion from the will and affections; whence proceed sciences which may be called ‘sciences as one would’” (*Novum Organum*, Book 1, Aphorism 49, *Works* vol. IV, 57). The mind, he argued, “is not like a wax tablet. On a tablet you cannot write the new till you rub out the old; on the mind you cannot rub out the old except by writing the new” (*Temporis Partus Masculus*, qtd. Wilson 26-7).

“On the mind you cannot rub out the old except by writing the new” – what a marvelous justification for innovative practice, or “experiment,” not just in poetry but in all the branches of learning! There is no doubt that Hejinian wishes to show the world as clearly as a picture – she aims at “realism” – but she, like Bacon, is aware of the nature of the imagination and writing, in which transparent pictures are both logically impossible and undesirable, because words are not pictures and because “human understanding is no dry light, but receives an infusion from the will and affections.” Hence Hejinian in her poetry carries out experiments in presenting words and conceptions to the imagination with the aim of enhancing the perception of the world, the reader’s and her own, by using “language to aid the senses.” This is a true

Enlightenment goal. Hejinian is interested in writing poetic language that explores and participates in “the mental processes of discovery.”

Hejinian has also specifically invoked Bacon’s aphoristic method to explain her own writing method, through which she aims, like Bacon, to be more true to the “particularity” of nature. She explains her use of parataxis also in this way: “Parataxis is significant both of the way information is gathered by explorers and the way things seem to accumulate in nature” (“Strangeness” 42). Similarly, Hejinian finds support in the views of Enlightenment philosophers of science for her focus on particulars, and she singles out the writings of explorers from this period. In these writings she finds “a narrative tension that was established between perceptual immediacy and a deferral of complete comprehension,” or strangeness (“Strangeness” 43). For Hejinian, strangeness and disruption of expectations are, paradoxically more realistic. Hejinian sees this way of being true to nature as coming from the methods of the explorer or scientist: “Explorers and scientists sought to discover the tangibility and singular distinctness of the world’s exuberant details and individualities without spiriting them away from each other” (“Strangeness” 44).

With Hejinian’s interest in the emotions, imagination and strangeness as vehicles of discovery also comes an awareness of the way in which human psychology can cloud one’s perception of the world. This is the flipside of Bacon’s legacy and is also central to Hejinian’s project, in which suspicion of deception sometimes verges on skepticism. This skepticism has some similarities with Bacon’s warning against “the idols of the mind” in *Novum Organum* (book 1 aphorism 46, *Works* vol. IV, 55).

The word “shadow[s]” appears five times in *The Guard*. On at least two occasions the word appears in modified quotations from Delacroix’s diary of January 1857. The first quotation is interesting as an example of seeing the world in a way that is not normal but corresponds better to scientific observation:

The skin contains endlessness. Strictly speaking
there are no shadows but only reflections (*Guard* 2)

Hejinian’s original first sentence and the paraphrasing of Delacroix in the second sentence quoted above are both good examples of how Hejinian follows Bacon’s call for people to embrace reality directly without flinching and to deliver knowledge the

way it was discovered, retaining a comparable vividness and play of the emotions. One could paraphrase the observed fact of the first quoted sentence as “the skin is continuous over the body, rather than discrete” but this would lose the suggestiveness of the romantic “endlessness,” which implies an erotic exploring of the body. There is also the contradiction between “contains” and unbounded “endlessness,” which draws attention to this line. Also important in the line are the sensuous *s* sounds, of which there are five in the line, along with the *z* sound in “contains.”

At the beginning of the second part of her two-part talk “American Literary Realism,” Hejinian is particularly candid about the difficulty of knowing what “realism” in art might mean:

What I want to do tonight is talk about Realism as one might usefully think about it now in relation to contemporary writing; that is to think about what are “the terms of the real” in writing now – the nature of the written real and the limits of the relationship between writing and the real. As I’ve thought about this I’ve found the term increasingly suggestive and increasingly illusive. That is, if realism is that in art that attempts to present reality, or some part of it, as closely as possible, it is difficult to imagine its being entirely absent; and at the same time, given that words are so unlike what they describe, their referents, it is difficult to think of writing that could be completely successful realism. (MSS 44-1, talk 2, 1)

The degree to which the investigation of language is perceived as important in the investigation of reality will depend on one’s metaphysical viewpoint, on one’s view of the nature of reality. If one is a realist in the philosophical, metaphysical sense (i.e. one thinks there is a world independent of our perception of it and separate from the words that we use to describe it), then an investigation of language will be of limited use, helping us clarify where language confuses our perception of reality, but offering us no really new empirical information about reality, except possibly about the nature of language. To think otherwise is to fall into the *a priori* trap of first philosophy, particularly the “first philosophy” view of “ordinary language” philosophy. As Hejinian points out, it is hard to imagine literature that does not have a relationship to the world, that is not empirically laden, even when it deliberately goes against the empirical evidence, as it does, for example, in fantasy.

Hejinian also perceives an “institutionalized and therefore coercive” potential in realism. This kind of realism “takes a fix on reality, imposes a code on perception –

literature capturing the world in words. It tends to be more voracious than veracious. Perception becomes calcified, the possibility of movement, plasticity, and perceptual activity is lost” (MSS 44-1, talk 2, 2). Hejinian wants poetry to incite empirical activity, to ask questions, to make us more perceptive. But one of Hejinian’s criticisms of nineteenth-century realism seems contradictory in this regard. She criticizes this kind of realism for the “failure of its writers to recognize the nature of language itself as an indivisible part of the process of realization – of understanding and of making real” (MSS 44-1, talk 2, 3). If this is simply pointing to writing as being real and part of the real world, then this is not contradictory, but if Hejinian is making the stronger claim that language is constitutive of the real world and that realist writers failed to acknowledge this, then she is shutting down her own emphasis on perception. That is, she is taking an anti-realist position. More charitably, we could read Hejinian as emphasizing the essentially mediated nature of language, when it is used to express our perceptions. This reading is supported by Hejinian’s attacks on “pure language” (language without reference to the world) and on “both the purity of perception and purity of the recording of perception” (MSS 44-1, talk 2, 6). For Hejinian, the important relationship of literature to truth is one of incitement, not one of correspondence.

Hejinian is interested in attacking the idea of putting a mirror up to nature in art, and the idea that “to name something is to invoke its essence or lay a power trip on it” (MSS 44-1, talk 2, 1). Hejinian also writes, however: “The idea of a Realist methodology, where the presencing of the world in the work is a primary concern is of interest to me. ‘An account of the mind butting up against what’s available’ (Kit Robinson, ASJ).” It is not clear exactly what Hejinian has in mind here, but she goes on:

What I want to do tonight is suggest the possibility of a realism which is a method directed toward perception of the real – not Zola’s scientific method, and a special way of writing; “verbal activity, characterized by the maximum perceptibility of the modes of expression” (N. I. Efimov). Jakobson: “The distinctive feature of poetry lies in the fact that a word is perceived as a word and not merely a proxy for the denoted object or an outburst of emotion, that words and their arrangement, their meaning, their outward and inward form acquire weight and value of their own.” MSS 44-1, talk 2, 3)

The realism that Hejinian seems to have in mind here is language that draws attention to itself as being “real.” But realism for Hejinian is also the acknowledgement and description of things as they are seen, felt and experienced. Things are to be described

in all their particularity, including the self-conscious experience of them and the language in which they are described. Taking her lead from Bacon, Hejinian sums up her concept of realism in poetry:

When the term *realism* is applied to poetry, it is apt to upset our sense of reality. But it is exactly the strangeness that results from a description of the world given in the terms “there it is,” “there it is,” “there it is” that restores realness to things in the world and separates things from ideology. (“Strangeness” 44)

Hejinian links this kind of realism with attention, with “scrutiny,” which might be another word for sincerity, the term that was referred to in the discussion of *The Guard*. It involves “description that raises scrutiny to consciousness, and in arguing for this I am proposing a poetry of consciousness, which is by its very nature a medium of strangeness” (“Strangeness” 44).

Sometimes Hejinian conflates the reality of language as a thing, as words on the page, with the idea that language constitutes reality. Nevertheless, she does seem to want to maintain that there is a difference. “Where knowledge in science may be discovered, knowledge in writing can be made” (MSS 44-1, talk 2, 4). This is really the unsurprising, uncontroversial claim that a poem is some new part of the real world: “It is as productive of the real to go to the poem and release a world out of it as it is to look to the world and squeeze a poem out of that.” Hejinian here is stretching “knowledge,” using a moderate romantic epistemology, in which the knowledge gained through poetry is the power of making connections, creating stories and analogies. The emphasis is on provoking thinking: “Language in a poem is a stimulus to meaning and the understanding of what is meant” (MSS 44-1, talk 2, 4). The relative importance of this view will depend on whether one is a committed metaphysical realist, in which case language in poetry merely stimulates new ways of thinking about the world, or a constructivist, in which case the thesis is much more powerful. Even if one accepts a realist version of this romantic epistemology, however, it is not limited to literature; it is a general human cognitive ability. Poetry is a particular kind of creation that exemplifies imaginative human thought, and can incite thinking about meaning and understanding of language in its readers.

Peter Lamarque has criticized romantic theories of literature such as that which Hejinian seems to hold, without denying the cognitive benefits of literature. The problems

associated with assimilating literature and truth, or knowledge, or reality, are ones of which Hejinian is aware. This has led her to make the distinction between scientific knowledge, which she sees as discovered, and “poetic knowledge,” which she sees as made. Lamarque points out the importance of maintaining this distinction, which is not always clear in Hejinian’s writing:

Behind these [romantic] theories is the strong, and plausible, intuition that literary works have cognitive benefits, that we can learn as well as derive pleasure from them, that we can be improved by them. This is the intuition behind Horace’s dictum *utile et dulce*. It is debatable, though, whether this intuition is best captured by appeal to “truth” or even “knowledge.” In Western culture these terms are so closely integrated into the scientific enterprise that to suppose there is a kind of “imaginative truth” not accessible to science but revealed by art is only to court mystification. [...] Readers can learn and feel morally uplifted by having their imaginations stretched, without thereby acquiring new knowledge. There is a danger that by trying to assimilate literature into philosophy the features which make literature distinctive will become diluted. (Lamarque 456)

Sometimes Hejinian’s view of the truth or knowledge of poetic practice seems too strong, and thus open to Lamarque’s criticism. For example she quotes approvingly Bob Grenier’s statement that: “what words are and can do [is] to wrest truth from concealment in daily appearances” (MSS 44-1, talk 2, 4). While words may be able to wrest the truth from concealment in daily experience, if these same words also create the truth, then this appears to be an incoherent circular statement.

In the same talk, Hejinian goes further and seems to endorse a pragmatist metaphysics or at least epistemology by quoting approvingly the following words of Charles S. Peirce: “our notion of the real is inextricably involved with our words for it or talk about it” (MSS 44-1, talk 2, 4 [2]). While the view that one’s theory of language is necessarily influenced by the extra-linguistic world seems plausible, the reverse claim – that one’s theory of the world is influenced by one’s language – seems implausible (Devitt and Sterelny 233). Peirce’s claim seems to violate the metaphysical doctrine of realism. Realism is firstly “a doctrine about what exists” and secondly “a doctrine about the nature of that existence”:

Concerning the first, it holds that such physical entities as stones, trees and cats – exist (“are real”). Concerning the second, these entities do not depend for their existence or nature on our minds, nor on our awareness, perception or thoughts about them. (Devitt and Sterelny 233)

For realists then, our notion of reality is *not* a matter of words. Whether or not we have words for something or even perceive it is irrelevant to the reality of that thing. Hejinian launches a passionate defense of the “necessary relationship between reality and language.” That language is bound by the extra-linguistic world follows from realist premises and is uncontroversial. Similarly, it is not linguistic constructivism to accept Hejinian’s insistence on “the inevitable presence of the real in writing,” although this is an unremarkable fact (MSS 44-1, talk 2, 6). Hejinian, however, seems to claim the reverse – that language is necessary for reality – when she approvingly quotes Charles Bernstein: “To write as if language were an autonomous realm indeed profits reality, since reality itself is a formulation of the language we as people construct” (MSS 44-1, talk 2, 6). This constructivist view of reality – the view that “reality itself is a formulation of the language we as people construct” – is a difficult position to defend. But despite its implausibility as a theory, it is important to note the influence constructivism has had on Hejinian’s intentions for her work and her poetic practice. The constructivist view of reality for Bernstein, and apparently for Hejinian, makes the effort to “write as if language were an autonomous realm” important. This is because, for the constructivist, such activity helps to construct our collective reality.²² But here one sees the problem for Hejinian’s point of view, because she cannot coherently claim both that language constructs reality and also that it is dependent on reality. The confusion for Hejinian possibly arises by way of the fallacious argument that because “perception has to be experienced” something has to be experienced to exist. This strongly contradicts Hejinian’s view expressed elsewhere that poetry can enhance one’s perception of the world. This latter conception of the cognitive value of poetry relies on the existence of a concealed reality independent of language. Such a reality must be objective, though we all experience it subjectively.

Hejinian is not a philosopher and the intention here is not to deride her work by pointing out certain philosophical inconsistencies. It is important to note, however, how the constructivist view of reality is attractive to her, as it has been to a great many avant-garde poets, because this view increases the power attributable to poetry. One might suggest that the failure to achieve the utopian and monumental social and political changes that the avant-garde has hoped for is evidence for the falsity of constructivism.

²² Note that this is a stronger thesis than the one that points out that writing creates a new bit of reality, i.e. the poem.

In other words, the false philosophical premises of the avant-garde have led it to vastly overestimate the power of art to change the world.

Hejinian is not a consistent constructivist and she grapples with these incoherent views in avant-garde poetics herself. Sometimes she seems to take a realist line and her claims for poetry seem correspondingly more modest. Her emphasis on the importance of poetry for encouraging “the perception of reality” in the tradition of the Russian formalists and Brecht, for example, presupposes a real world, which is sometimes ignored through habits of thought. For example, she writes: “The world in the poem, or in writing, or some part of the world as thought out in language, by virtue of the passion of that thought, is embodied – made palpable, real” (MSS 44-1, talk 2, 8). Poetry in this view emphasizes that language is part of reality not separable from it. No claim is made that language makes reality. Hejinian in her poetry aims to show that language is embodied, that perception is embodied, and that lyric poetry emphasizes these two kinds of embodiment.

While it is argued here that there is an implicit Enlightenment goal in Hejinian’s poetry, it is nevertheless also true that Hejinian has expressed significant opposition to the ideas underlying scientific knowledge. In particular, her essay “The Quest for Knowledge in the Western Poem” grapples with these issues. But her criticisms of the emphasis on general truths rather than lived experience in science are criticisms that are quite compatible with a scientific point of view. Her critical attitude can be explained by seeing her view of poetry as complementary to science. While science focuses on generalized truths, Hejinian focuses on particular conscious experiences in their full subjective richness. In fact, if one combines Hejinian’s views in “The Quest for Knowledge” and *The Guard*, written a decade earlier, one finds her drawing a similar conclusion. In a draft of “The Quest for Knowledge,” Hejinian associates the goal of science with “Faustian knowledge.” For Hejinian, the scientific materialist view is that the totality of all things and their relations can be explained through science. In *The Guard*, Hejinian equated this kind of total knowledge with “paradise,” which she saw as an impossible dream and something important to desire. Poetic language, in Hejinian’s poetry, provides a counterpoint to this by emphasizing incompleteness and particularity, the qualities of her experience of consciousness. Her poetry is thus envisaged as part of the same “quest for knowledge” as science, but on the level of giving the reader

knowledge of conscious experience through language. As has been pointed out, this is an impossible task, always frustrated by the nature of language. The language of Hejinian's poetry is also, however, a celebration, exploration and marker of the conscious mind. On the other hand, poetic language is for Hejinian also aimed at the perception of the reader. In this way, Hejinian conceives of poetry as a means to improve one's perception of the external world, not just one's mind, and as a way to avoid insidious habits of thought. These habits of thought, as Hejinian sees it, allow hypocrisy to flourish and prevent political change for the better. In her moments of utopian vision, in which she sees open, questioning thinking as going hand in hand with social justice, Hejinian is truly a daughter of the Enlightenment, though one painfully aware of the injustice done in the name of that tradition.

"Lives, lines, likes," the quotation with which Hejinian's essay "The Quest for Knowledge" ends, could be read as standing for "human life and consciousness, language, and desire," three major driving forces behind Hejinian's poetry. At another level, of course, the line is untranslatable; it is the "line," and it is "about" the transition between words with the replacement of a single letter – a non-logical form of thought uniquely adequate to its subject of the intricate details of human experience expressed in language. This inherent quality of "like" words is also uniquely well suited to expressing the motivation for this expression: the desire for understanding and communication of these details of experience, the desire that drives Hejinian's "quest for knowledge."

As has been seen, Hejinian has a strong interest in the exploration of consciousness through poetry, and an equally strong interest in poetic language as a self-sufficient, non-mimetic medium. Hejinian's poetic practice combines aspects of what has been characterized as typical of Language Poetry with a "quest for knowledge" and a profound interest in the self, personal experience and in the question of how to relate these things to poetry. A similar tension between aestheticism and exploration of the self will be demonstrated for Yang and Dragomoshchenko in the chapters that follow.

In Hejinian's case, the desire for perfect understanding of the world, which has driven many voyages of discovery, scientific inquiries and acts of imagination in the West, is a

powerful motivation for her lyric poetry. The strangeness and difficulty of her work is also based on her belief in the importance of making poetry new in order to “aid the senses” and, to paraphrase Bacon, to wipe out the old by writing the new. In this sense, the difficulty of Hejinian’s work is a result of her utopianism. On the other hand, Hejinian’s poetry and statements of poetics exhibit a deep anti-utopian distrust of language. Difficulty in her work arises partly as a result of her suspicion that ideology is deeply imbedded in language and perfect knowledge, or “paradise,” is unobtainable.

Both utopian and anti-utopian tendencies reflect Hejinian’s intention to write poetry that provides an alternative to mainstream poetic discourse. For Hejinian, the creation of an alternative poetry was part of the struggle to oppose what she saw as the pervasive lies and deceptions promoted by public discourse in the United States. As will be shown in the case of the other two poets, for Hejinian, formal experimentation went hand in hand with a desire to promote an alternative to mainstream society.

III. Yang Lian: Beginning from the Impossible

從不可能開始

Begin from the impossible

– Yang Lian

How can the concerns of a poet writing in China not long after the Cultural Revolution possibly be compared with those of an American intellectual living in affluent, democratic California? In what sense can one talk seriously about poetry across this great divide? Here it is argued that Yang Lian's motives for participating in a writing community resemble those of Hejinian, despite the enormous cultural and political differences between China and the United States in the late 1970s and early 1980s. In their work, both poets explored the world of consciousness, the world of the self. Their intense scrutiny of consciousness motivated both writers to experiment, to "make it new." Their innovative approaches in turn led them to participate in communities that opposed the existing literary establishment, and their poetry provoked controversy as a result. While this controversy was not entirely welcome, both poets would have agreed that there was a relationship between poetic practice and social values. Hejinian and Yang conceived of poetry as offering an alternative not just to other forms of poetry but also to prevalent social and political positions within their respective countries. And both saw their innovative poetic explorations as an essential form of opposition to this status quo.

This chapter is an examination of Yang's poetry and poetics. The discussion centers around two important texts written during and just after the debate over Obscure Poetry (*menglong shi* 朦朧詩) (1979-1984). The first of these is "Nuorilang" 諾日朗 ("Norlang"), which was written between 1982 and 1983. The second is "Banpo" 半坡, which was written between 1982 and 1984. This chapter offers substantial new interpretations of "Norlang" and "Banpo" and critical analysis of Yang's poetics that challenge previous views of the two poems and of Yang's poetics generally. My critical reevaluation will be carried out in three parts: firstly, an analysis of the political and historical context in which Yang wrote the poems and the critical context in which they have been received; secondly, close, in-depth readings of both poems; and, thirdly, an

assessment of Yang's explicit statements of poetics that brings together the findings of the previous two parts of the analysis.

In the first part of this chapter, I present new analysis of areas of critical debate that relate to the historical and political context of the production and reception of "Norlang" and "Banpo." Yang's work, and the work of his associates, pushed the boundaries of poetry and provoked political rebukes in China, especially between 1979 and 1984. Over this period, an intense and protracted discussion took place in official Chinese literary journals, and even in official newspapers, over the alleged obscurity and ideological incorrectness of the new poetry, which was dubbed Obscure Poetry. Since that time, Yang's poetry has continued to play an important role in debates over Obscure Poetry and the offshoot "root-seeking" poetry (*xungen shi* 尋根詩), with which "Norlang" and "Banpo" have been associated. My analysis of all these critical debates will show how the binaries of these debates relate to wider social and political issues in China. It will be shown that in the context of these debates, poems such as "Norlang" and "Banpo" can be read as addressing questions about the nature, development and future of Chinese society, and related social, political and philosophical issues. In particular, I single out three important areas of debate: firstly, the position of Yang's poetry as pure poetry as opposed to socially engaged poetry; secondly, the attitude inferred in his poetry toward tradition and modernity, and China and the West; thirdly, the place of his poetry in relation to modernization, to the philosophical concepts of modernity and postmodernity and to the literary-historical categories of modernism and postmodernism.

The second part of this chapter presents new close readings of "Norlang" and "Banpo." As is the case for the chapters on both Hejinian and Dragomoshchenko, close readings lie at the heart of this chapter. This is because it is only through close readings that it is possible to judge properly past critical assessments of Yang and his place within Chinese literary and cultural history. "Norlang" and "Banpo" have played important roles in the interpretation of post-Mao Chinese poetry in relation to the ideological assumptions of the time. Scholars have singled out these two poems as exemplary of two characteristics of Chinese intellectual discourse in the 1980s. On the one hand, it has been said that "Norlang" represents a kind of subjectivity that is extremely masculine and that reflects in the poetic medium the modern drive to dominate nature

through scientific and technological advancement. It has also been said that the cultural appropriation evident in “Norlang” reflects Han nationalism. On the other hand, it has been claimed that the use of traditional themes and the focus on what was considered a preeminent center of original Han Chinese culture in the poem “Banpo” reflects the desire of Chinese intellectuals in the 1980s to return to tradition and to recover lost social values. The close readings presented here challenge these interpretations of “Norlang” and “Banpo.” I show, instead, how in “Norlang” and “Banpo” Yang sought to oppose the simplistic binaries of the debate that was taking place when he wrote the two poems. In “Norlang” and “Banpo,” he counters these binaries through more dynamic, interactive representations of subjectivity and of the relationships between masculinity and femininity, nature and humanity, tradition and modernity.

The third part of this chapter analyzes Yang’s explicit poetics in relation to the close readings and contextual analysis. In this concluding part of the discussion of Yang, I will argue that his poetry and statements of poetics, like those of Hejinian, address the problems of the self and consciousness in a complex manner, comparable with Western modernist poetry. His poetry exhibits an inherent tension between individuality and universality, and a similar tension to that shown by Hejinian between utopianism and anti-utopianism. Yang’s poetry is nothing if not ambitious. At times it seems to attempt to encompass the entire gamut of Chinese history and literature, and yet is also intensely personal and exhibits a deep distrust of language. Yang strives for perfect expression of the self and, simultaneously, recoils from the notion that such perfection is possible. Yang’s literary experimentation was oppositional toward the literary and political status quo in China in the early 1980s, toward the ideas of socialist realism, didacticism, and the placement of importance of the “people” above the individual. But Yang’s poetry is not simply oppositional. Yang’s work exhibits a complex relationship between history and modernity, purity and engagement, the individual and the masses, East and West. It cannot be understood simply as the cultural arm of Deng Xiaoping’s “four modernizations.” Nor can it be viewed as a simplistic retrograde modernist poetry that soon became obsolete with the arrival of Chinese postmodernist poetry. Yang’s complex poetry resists all such simplistic categorizations.

Together the three parts of this chapter argue that Yang and his work resist simplistic categorization at a critical point of transition in China’s history. Yang was part of a

group of poets who, as a social group, presented an alternative to mainstream discourse regarding the individual and self-expression in China in the late 1970s and 1980s. Over this period with the rise of Deng Xiaoping and his four modernizations there was increasing official acceptance of individuality, greater openness to the West, and a revival of interest in China's cultural heritage. To some extent, Yang and Obscure Poetry in general can be understood as part of this change in official policy. Yang's poetic response to these changes is, however, more complex. His poetry can be read in part as an expression of the search for some middle ground between the previous socialist view of the individual as subservient to the masses and the new capitalist view in which the individual increasingly took center stage.

Like the writing of Hejinian, Yang's experimental poetry combines contradictory tendencies. On the one hand, it tends toward the creation of a pure world of language. On the other hand, Yang's poetry is directed toward the expression of the complex self-conscious relationship of the individual to the world. His poetry exhibits tension between utopian vision and anti-utopian realism, and between aestheticism and political engagement. In the concluding part of this reevaluation of Yang and his poetry it will be argued that the distinction normally drawn between the "modernist" Yang and "postmodernists" such as Hejinian is problematic. While Hejinian's poetry is pulled between language and paradise, Yang's poetry is built on a similar tension. In his words, his poetry "begins from the impossible."

1. Politics and Literature

In China there was widespread disillusionment in politics as such after the end of the 1960s, the first and most extreme part of the ten-year Cultural Revolution. With the outbreak of the Cultural Revolution in 1966, schools and universities closed. Mao Zedong called young people to arms. These youths became the Red Guards. The violent turmoil that resulted, as McDougall and Louie note, gave these young Red Guards unprecedented freedoms. In 1968 as an economic crisis loomed, Mao launched the Rustication Campaign, calling on urban youth and older intellectuals to go and live with the poor peasants in the countryside. The Rustication Campaign exposed the young Red Guards to the reality of poor rural China and represented a loss of their privileged position of the first two years of the Cultural Revolution. This produced much disillusionment:

This crisis of faith was a consequence of the Cultural Revolution and especially the Rustication Campaign. First, the anti-establishment fury of the summer of 1966 had exempted this generation from attending school, in many cases of the duty – or the right to respect and obey one’s elders in general. Secondly, their relocation away from the cities had barred them from the political arena but made them less malleable to official exegesis of battles fought there and to ideological control. As a result of the drastic, often painful changes in their lives and because they had the chance to appraise these changes themselves, many came to regard official reality – government propaganda – with understandable scepticism. (van Crevel, *Language Shattered* 39)

This disillusionment, along with the pervasive influence of politics on Chinese literature, partly explains the rise of aestheticism in Chinese literature, of which Obscure Poetry is exemplary. Van Crevel suggests that in China literature at this time provided an alternative outlet to intellectual thought (*Language Shattered* 39-40). Obscure Poetry was not the first kind of experimental poetry to which this disillusionment gave rise, but Obscure Poetry crucially coincided with a more tolerant attitude on behalf of the Chinese Government to experimental poetry in the late 1970s. This opening up led eventually to “an era of pluriformity and proliferation” in “official and unofficial circuits,” but Obscure Poetry had the good fortune to be right at the beginning of this proliferation and so it attracted particular attention (van Crevel, *Language Shattered* 77).

The Cultural Revolution, McDougall and Louie also suggest, was an important factor in the developments in literature in the 1970s: it created a “vacuum in literature and the arts,” a general breakdown in social order that allowed “a kind of personal liberty, free from neighbourhood, school or Youth League supervision and control;” and it “brought about in some [...] a deep revulsion against any form of support for the current leadership (including entry into the ranks of the official writers)” (*Literature of China in the Twentieth Century* 423-4). This rejection of the chance, when it arose, of entering into the ranks of official writers bears some resemblance to the 1970s generation of Russian writers, who reacted against the relatively benign repression, stagnation and loss of legitimacy in official culture associated with the Brezhnev era.¹

¹ The influence of the Cultural Revolution on Obscure Poetry should not be overstated. One can acknowledge the influence of the Cultural Revolution on the young Obscure Poets’ lives, without assuming a simple causal relationship between the Cultural Revolution and Obscure Poetry. Maghiel van Crevel also makes this point (*Language Shattered* 45).

The origins of Obscure Poetry lie in a period of the Cultural Revolution when there was a brief relaxation toward underground literature. This allowed there to emerge a “golden season” of salon culture and reading of foreign literature in Beijing in 1972 and 1973. The experimental poets Jiang Shiwei 姜世偉, Zhao Zhenkai 趙振開, and Li Shizheng 栗世征, better known under their pseudonyms Mang Ke 芒克, Bei Dao 北島, and Duoduo 多多 respectively, took part in this golden season and their literary experiments sowed the seeds for the controversy over Obscure Poetry a decade later (van Crevel, *Language Shattered* 42-55).

In 1974 there was a harsh crackdown on underground literature. Manuscripts were confiscated and “counter-revolutionaries” taken to task. This was part of the Gang of Four’s reign of terror, which only came to end after Mao Zedong’s death in September 1976. After Mao’s death, the beginnings of relaxation were consolidated with the confirmation of Deng Xiaoping’s leading position at the Third Plenum of the Eleventh Central Committee in December 1978. The trend toward liberalization associated with Deng along with the reinterpretation of the Tiananmen Incident of 1976 contributed to the emergence of the Democracy Movement of 1978 and 1979.

The movement began in November 1978, when intellectuals put up wall-posters around Beijing. These included Wei Jingsheng’s famous poster *The Fifth Modernization: Democracy and Other Things*. The following month a wall in central Beijing became established as the main site for such postings. This wall became known as the Democracy Wall (*Minzhu qiang* 民主牆). The lenient attitude of the authorities toward the posting of political and literary materials encouraged Bei Dao and Mang Ke to begin publishing the poetry of their circle. On 23 and 24 December 1978 the first issue of their magazine *Today* (*Jintian* 今天) was posted around Beijing. In contrast to many contemporary publications, Bei Dao and Mang Ke proclaimed their focus as purely literary in the editorial to the first issues. Although Yang Lian had previously written poetry, it was only in August of 1979 that he began to write in an experimental style and, around this time, joined the *Today* group of writers, with the help of an introduction from Gu Cheng 顧城. The establishment of *Today* magazine marked an important event for experimental poetry in China. The magazine in its heyday had a print run of 1000 or more copies. While still a small and essentially elitist activity

concentrated on the Beijing area, the experimental poetry salon organized by the *Today* group of writers attracted large crowds in 1979 and 1980.

The experimentations of the *Today* writers reflected an upsurge of interest in technique amongst writers after the downfall of the Gang of Four. In the new environment, technique was seen, in part, as an antidote to political ideology.² To this extent at least, there is a causative relationship between experimentation, individual expression and the previous suppression of these elements. The excitement at what was previously denied and the desire to express oneself were part of the impassioned beginnings of Obscure Poetry. As a result of repression and disillusionment followed by a softening of official policy, these writers could “demand of literature and imaginative writing a degree of independence unprecedented in the history of the People’s Republic” (Leo Ou-Fan Lee, “Politics of Technique” 161). In this environment, according to Lee, two distinct, though interrelated, forms of literary dissidence emerged. The first was the idea of delving into society to interfere with life, through daring investigations into taboo subjects. The second was the position of Yang and the other Obscure Poets, who argued that literature must be totally separated from politics and should “depict the uniqueness of the human individual.”

The political implications of the new poetry and its association with the Democracy Movement made the authorities anxious. The large public gatherings associated with *Today* magazine and other more politically orientated groups were not tolerated for long. In March 1979, Wei Jingsheng was arrested. In April, a poetry reading of the *Today* writers was almost cancelled. Further arrests in 1979 showed that the regime’s tolerance was coming to an end. Registration was made compulsory for magazines such as *Today*, and this was used as a pretext to close down the publication in 1980. Despite these set backs, the new experimental poetry began to appear in official poetry magazines such as *Shikan* 詩刊 (*Poetry*). Between 1979 and 1984, the increasing prominence of the *Today* poets caused a fierce debate about their poetry in the official media. During this debate, the new experimental poetry of Yang Lian and his fellow poets acquired the initially derogatory name Obscure Poetry.³

² For a more general and detailed examination of the upsurge in the variety and uses of literature in the late 1970s and early 1980s, see Perry Link.

³ For an outline of the origins and development of Obscure Poetry see Maghiel van Crevel’s excellent account. This section follows van Crevel’s reasoning in using

Chinese cultural debates in the 1980s raised issues of central political importance in China. The debates concerned the value and nature of modernization, of the interaction between China and the West, and between modernity and tradition, the nature of human and Chinese subjectivity, including the role and value of the individual. These discussions took place as Chinese society began to open up to the outside world, to move to a capitalist economy, to recover the cultural heritage that had been lost in the Cultural Revolution, and as some began to pay more attention and give voice to non-utilitarian values, such as “pure” literary values and human rights. These issues are prominent in the debates over Obscure Poetry that took place in China in the early 1980s and in subsequent discussions over this poetry and its place in history both inside and outside China.

This engagement of art with the development and future of Chinese society was already noted in the first editorial to the *Today* magazine, despite the authors’ claim that theirs was a purely literary publication. The editors of the magazine stated that they and their associates were part of the progressive change of the “new epoch” in China. They claimed that to them had fallen “the task of reflecting that epoch in writing” (van Crevel, *Language Shattered* 63-5). The association that the *Today* writers drew between epochal change and poetry in the editorials of the *Today* magazine was repeated and amplified in the subsequent Obscure Poetry debate. The result of these repeated associations and of the historical events in which the *Today* writers participated was that Obscure Poetry came to occupy an important symbolic space in interpretations of post-Mao Chinese culture.

Yang through his involvement in Obscure Poetry participated in a writing community that offered a different and oppositional view of the role of literature in society. At the same time, the new poetry often engaged with new ideas about how that society should be reformed. Because of the symbolic importance of Obscure Poetry, the views espoused by Yang in his poetry and prose have an important place in Chinese cultural discourse in the 1980s. As was seen in the previous chapter, Hejinian’s poetry and poetics contain an apparent contradiction in that she attacks the directness of expression and the simplistic presentation of self in American poetry, while at the same time

“Obscure Poetry,” instead of the more common “Misty Poetry,” to translate the Chinese *menglong shi* 朦朧詩 (*Language Shattered* 73). For a detailed account of repression and relaxation in official literary policy, see He Yuhuai.

demanding a direct political role for poetry. A similar contradiction is also present in Yang's poetry. In his poetry of the early 1980s, the central contradiction arises between pure poetry and political engagement, between aestheticism and political opposition. Yang's "obscure" and "pure" poetry promoted an alternative view of the individual in society, and the relationship of tradition to modernity.

i. Personal Freedom and Pure Poetry

The reason why this contradiction between aestheticism and engagement arose in the work of Yang and other Obscure Poets is that "pure poetry" was necessarily political in China in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Pure poetry was political because it raised the taboo subject of the individual "subjective ego" (*ziwo* 自我). The question of self-expression in poetry is a complicated one in China, just as it is for Hejinian's poetry in the West. In China, one of the reasons for the controversy over Obscure Poetry was that this poetry challenged the subservience of the individual to society as dictated by socialist ideology. The Obscure Poets claimed autonomy for literature as part of their claim to autonomy for themselves as individuals: "they claimed the right to a spiritual life outside politics, to private truths and to self expression; they discarded the orthodox Self – a faceless, expendable part of a collective, all-important whole – for a human, individual variant." They presented this as "necessary for a self-respecting modern Chinese poetry, not as crimes against culture and ideology" (van Crevel, *Language Shattered* 75).

Given the assumption of social engagement in literature, in which the "I" was subservient to the masses, in China at the moment when Obscure Poetry went public through the unofficial journal *Today*, the rhetoric of "pure poetry" was, paradoxically, socially and politically significant. Whereas in the United States, Language Poetry was subject to criticism for opposing the view that poetry was an isolated realm of activity, for insisting on social engagement, in China the opposite was true. "Pure poetry" attracted criticism and challenged the accepted social norm of reading literature as a reflection of or comment on society. The poets of *Today* argued that the collectivist ideology prevalent up to that time in China had deprived them of "their essence as human individuals" (Leo Ou-Fan Lee, "Politics of Technique" 183).

As van Crevel points out, the debate over Obscure Poetry was less about poetry and more about politics. Nevertheless, questions about the nature and value of the "purity"

claimed for this poetry, and about closely related issues such as the representation of subjectivity, or the “subjective ego,” continued to occupy a range of critics as “part of a slowly maturing, tentative literary criticism” long after the initial controversy subsided (Crevel, *Language Shattered* 76). The Obscure Poetry debate was important not only for the way in which it has affected subsequent critical discussions but also because it explains the background of discourse and theory, politically distorted as it was, in which Yang wrote the two poems that will be examined below. It is thus possible to see “Norlang” and “Banpo” as responses to, as well as texts for, critical assessment in a debate in which the “issue was not just literature but the Obscure poets’ worldview and proclivity to make it public: it involved the question of literature’s function in society and freedom of expression” (Crevel, *Language Shattered* 76).

The opposition of Yang and other Obscure Poets to the suppression of conscious thinking, or the “subjective ego,” as it was often referred to in the debates, resembles to some extent the modern drive of Western artists to break out of the perceived mind repression of modern society through artistic acts. Hejinian, for instance, saw this as one of the motivations behind Language Poetry. Both Language Poets and Obscure Poets saw themselves as fighting for greater personal freedom and thus societal freedom through their art.

There are various ways in which the aestheticist stance of Obscure Poetry has been construed. One particularly influential approach has been the drawing of an analogy between the value of personal style and the value and uniqueness of the individual as such. Sometimes this analogy between aestheticism and the ethical value of individual subjectivity is taken further, to the extent that the poetry is seen as exemplary or even creative of individual subjectivity. This is why, as Torbjörn Lodén points out, the definitions of pure poetry are various amongst the Obscure Poets, and even amongst the most extreme views there is an ethical aspect claimed for poetry (153-60).

The historical, political, social, and critical background to Yang’s poems “Norlang” and “Banpo” explains why the exploration of subjective individual experience is so central to these works. The historical denial of self-expression, the political repression of it, as a bourgeois value, opposing the correct literary line, the tradition in Chinese society of seeing literature as providing significant statements on the nature and direction of Chinese society, and the demonstration of all these elements in the Obscure Poetry

debate between 1979 and 1984 not only made it inevitable that Yang's poems would be read for their expression of subjective self-expression but also may have inclined the poet to write in a way that was cognizant of this central issue of the "subjective ego," or the "self," as well as the related issues of the individual and the masses, tradition and modernity, Chinese tradition and internationalism, often taken as a synonym for Westernization.

As Perry Link notes, the desire for purity, for the separation of literature from politics, was part of what motivated the use of ambiguity in Obscure Poetry (so that a clear political statement was not present in a poem), but this use of ambiguity, ironically, "was precisely what allowed impurities to seep in" (*Uses of Literature* 321). In fact, it seems while other more apolitical forms of literature, such as romance literature, did emerge as a result of the relaxation of official policy, Obscure Poetry was never entirely separated from politics, despite the protestations of the poets.

ii. Modernization and Tradition

The debate over Obscure Poetry was closely intertwined with the broader debates over artistic modernism and economic modernization that were taking place in China in the early 1980s. The debate over artistic modernism was widespread, involving criticism of newly published translations of Western modernist texts as well as Chinese literature and art, but it was particularly sharp in relation to Obscure Poetry.⁴ At the same time, some supporters of artistic modernism linked modernist art and literature, including Obscure Poetry, to Deng Xiaoping's policies of modernization and of opening up China to the rest of the world. As He Yuhuai points out, from the late 1970s, with the policies of the "four modernizations" and "open door" adopted by the Chinese Communist Party, it became possible again to claim an acceptable place for literary modernism in China. The acceptability of modernist experimentation was also due in part to the renewal of the pre-Cultural Revolution "old guard." This old guard worked to restore the official socialist literary system and renewed the call for "one hundred flowers to

⁴ For a fine account of the debate over modernism, see Pollard 1985. See also Barmé 1984. For the debate over artistic modernism as it extended throughout the 1980s, see the chapter "Mapping Aesthetic Modernism" in Jing Wang's book *High Culture Fever* (137-94). For information on the "Obscure Poetry" debate in addition to that presented here, see van Crevel (*Language Shattered* 71-6).

bloom,” and for “the broad road for realism.”⁵ This call emerged out of the policies put forward in the Third Plenum at the end of 1978, and especially the Fourth Writers’ Congress in October 1979. Proponents of modernism in literature could thus claim both to be broadening the path of realism through experimentation and also to be renewing literary modernism as part of Deng’s drive for Chinese modernization and the opening up of China to Western ideas and technology (on the latter, see He 279, and Pollard 647-8). The leading Chinese physicist Qian Xuesen 錢學森, for example, claimed that: “The modernization of science and technology will undoubtedly bring about the modernization of literature and art” (qtd. He 279). As part of the old guard’s restoration of the pre-Cultural Revolution socialist literary system the major literary journals were resurrected in the second half of the 1970s. *Poetry* (*Shikan* 詩刊) was revived in 1976. While initially very conservative, the editors of the journal published a poem by Bei Dao in 1979.⁶ This publication marked the beginning of the public debate in the official press over modernism and Obscure Poetry.

Why, then, was modernism so controversial in China between 1979 and 1984 that it both sparked a heated debate and brought political repression to those who advocated it? Pollard gives the following explanation:

The reason why Modernism had to be handled with kid gloves will be obvious if one considers the standard Chinese view of it: Modernism was spawned in Europe at a time when European civilization had collapsed from within. Around the turn of the twentieth century monopoly capitalism began to crumble; the foundations of society were shaken by the vibrations of the marching feet of workers; religion and philosophical certainties were undermined. The First World War then confirmed the end of civilization. Writers and artists came to see the world as chaos or wasteland, and, mistrustful of or repelled by objective reality, turned in on themselves. The only thing they could be sure of was the subjective truth of what went on in their

⁵ The references here are to the Hundred Flowers Campaign of 1956-7. Mao Zedong launched the campaign in May 1956 with the slogan “Let a hundred flowers blossom, let a hundred schools of thought contend.” In September of that year Qin Zhaoyang published an article entitled “Realism – The Broad Road,” in support of this short-lived liberalization of intellectual discourse and the arts. For more details, see McDougall and Louie 201-3. For an account of the revival of the “Hundred Flowers” policy, see Michael S. Duke 1-28.

⁶ The groundbreaking poem by Bei Dao was “Huida” 回答 (The Answer) and it appeared in the March 1979 issue of *Poetry*. The following year several more poems by Obscure Poets appeared in *Poetry*, including one by Yang. The poem by Yang was “Zhi yu bo” 织与播 (Weaving and Sowing).

own heads. Various forms of irrationalism dominated philosophical thought: Nietzsche's "the world as will and idea," Bergson's vitalism, and Freud's theory of the libido. Hence the works of Modernism are marked by self-aggrandisement, or a sense of vacuity, isolation, gloom and doom, or anarchy. Existentialism, the theatre of the absurd, the French *nouveau roman* were regarded as later broods from the same nest. The picture was bad enough to send a shudder through any right-thinking person, but the fact that Modernism currently had magnetism, however generated, could not be disguised. While foreign trash could be dealt with by fiat, the hold Modernism had on the mind could only be loosened by attrition. Once the threat was recognized, the war of words was on. (Pollard 643)

This context, along with the tradition of linking literature to politics in modern China, explains why the debate over Obscure Poetry was less about poetry and more about politics. This was not only true in the case of articles that attacked Obscure Poetry as a form of bourgeois liberalism. The most important critical proponents of Obscure Poetry amongst literary critics in China in the early 1980s, Xie Mian 謝冕, Sun Shaozhen 孫紹振 and Xu Jingya 徐敬亞, all advocated the new poetry for being modernizing, open to foreign ideas, and representative of the new era, in other words, for being ideologically correct. These three authors published three essays, Xie in 1980, Sun in 1981, and Xu in 1983, which together marked the "three resurgences" in theoretical support for Obscure Poetry. They argued for the value of Obscure Poetry not only on the grounds of its "purity" and its expression of the "subjective ego" but also because Obscure Poetry could be viewed as part of Deng's modernization and open door policies. Xu, for example, in his famous essay "Jueqi de shiqun" 崛起的詩群 (translated as "A Volant Tribe of Bards") argued that "the single most important characteristic of these poems is that they vibrate with the spirit of their times" (60).⁷ Similarly, as Jing Wang notes, Sun's equally famous essay "Xinde meixue yuanze zai jueqi" 新的美學原則在崛起 (A New Aesthetic Principle Is Abruptly Arising) championed the new poetry's "struggle against tradition."⁸ As Wang points out, in relying on this rhetoric of progress, Sun's "critical sensibility" remained "confined within and informed primarily by ideological considerations" (Wang 143). This blurring of the distinction between economic modernization and artistic and literary modernism was inherent to the politically

⁷ "Vibrate with the spirit of their times" is a translation of the phrase: "pumian er lai de shidai qixi" 撲面而來的時代氣息 (Xu, "Jueqi de shiqun" 249).

⁸ Sun's exact phrase is "quanwei he chuantong tiaozhan" 權威和傳統挑戰 (challenge to authority and tradition) (Sun 106-7).

charged discussions of the new poetry in the early 1980s. The hyperbolic rhetoric of progress used by supporters in such discussions was, in turn, part of the broader phenomenon of the Chinese elite's creation of a "utopian discourse of enlightenment" that would reach its apex in the "high culture fever," or simply "culture fever" (*wenhua re* 文化熱), of the mid-1980s (Wang 1-2).

The critical debate over "tradition" versus "modernity" also tended toward a debate over Chinese versus Western poetics. Obscure Poetry was attacked for being modern and Western. The questions of tradition versus modernization and Chinese versus Western have been perennial themes in modern Chinese literature and continue to be so. In the debate over modernism, modernization and Obscure Poetry, it was not only critics who had their say. Yang also made his own statements in relation to this issue during the period of controversy between 1979 and 1984. Yang began his 1983 essay "Tradition and Us," by pointing to the inseparability of tradition from today, and from modernity:

It existed long ago, it exists now, it will continue to exist into the future. It is more than a word, more than that river, that never-ending mountain range some people claim it to be. It is a solution within our very blood, a component of our every cell, a part of every tremor of our spiritual being. It is formless, but potent! It is a constant reminder to us that nothing we do today can be a negation of yesterday. Yesterday was, and will not perish. In the gradually receding eye of the future, yesterday and today are a sequence, each a sign of its time. ("Tradition and Us" 69)

Yang described tradition as encoded in language, however modern the content might be: "We are rooted in a common culture, in the unique linguistic form of a psychological structure. It is a form, in that it never determines the modernity of the subject-matter, but instead dictates certain peculiar modes of feeling, thinking and expression" ("Tradition and Us" 69). According to Yang, this meant that an artist could never escape his or her tradition:

It commands our obedience in each act of artistic creation. I believe that no individual artist in his creative work can betray his tradition. Either consciously or unconsciously, every artist's work, his "individual entity," is to a greater or lesser degree permeated with the "intrinsic elements" of his tradition. This is the premise of his very existence. Tradition should be seen as a series of such "individual entities," independent of each other and yet at the same time linked by the continuity of these "intrinsic elements." It is like a train held

together by invisible couplings. It lives in the way we individually forge our links with it. Through the specific essence of individuals it reveals the national quintessence. (“Tradition and Us” 69)

By arguing for the complex interaction between modernity and tradition, the individual and the nation, Yang in this essay sought to oppose the simplistic terms in which the debate over modernization was being conducted in China at that time. Yang advocated a more dynamic, interactive view of the individual’s relationship to society and to tradition. He did so not just in statements such as “Tradition and Us” but also in poems written over this period, such as “Norlang” and “Banpo.”

iii. Modernism and Postmodernism

The common understanding of the concepts of postmodernity and postmodernism in China differs from other places. In many ways, the ideas surrounding the postmodern in China continue the themes of the debates over modernism in Chinese literature. This can be seen in how the question of indigenous culture and Western culture in the debate over modernism recurs in the debate over postmodernism. In both cases, those involved in the debates have often confused the descriptive and prescriptive concepts associated with these words. Although not unique, the confusion in the Chinese modernism debate of the early 1980s was perhaps even worse than similar debates in the West, largely because of political pressure, isolation, and the novelty of the debate at that time (see Barmé, “Translator’s Introduction” 47).

Postmodernism in its most simplistic articulation in China has been seen as the antithesis of modernism in terms of the debate over tradition and modernity, indigenous versus international or Western, and collective versus individual. In these cases, where modernism was seen as advocating the latter position in each binary, postmodernism has been seen as advocating the former. This simplified version of the modernism versus postmodernism debate has led to bitter arguments in which proponents of modernism have accused postmodernists of conservatism, while postmodernists have accused modernists of Western imperialism. It is important to note that this kind of polemic preceded the use of the terms modernism and postmodernism. The interesting development is that postmodernism provided a Western and “ultra-modern” point of view from which to criticize the modernist position, confusing the debate still further

and providing Western theoretical backing for the ideological stance of the current Chinese political leadership.⁹

Critical controversy relating to Obscure Poetry did not end with the 1980s. Obscure Poetry and its offshoots have also played a significant role in broad debates over Chinese versus Western cultural traits and over historical periodization of Chinese art into modernist and postmodernist. Obscure Poetry is often viewed, pejoratively or positively, as Western. In the positive case, Western qualities are seen as modernizing and good. In the pejorative case, this poetry is seen as derivative, or not true to its origins. Similarly, Obscure Poetry is usually characterized as “modernist,” sometimes in contrast to later “postmodernist” poetry. This too can be either a positive or negative label, depending on whether one sees “modernism” as outdated, backward and supporting suspect political views, such as domination, and capitalism, or whether one sees modernism in China as opposing the postmodernist capitulation to the cultural and political status quo. In these ways, characterizations of Obscure Poetry have been used to support certain broader views of cultural change in China in the 1980s and 1990s.

Xudong Zhang, for instance, contrasts the “post-Enlightenment” period of the 1990s with the 1980s when “meta-narratives” were still in effect. Zhang’s strongly argued thesis is that “Chinese postmodernism as a social discourse can [...] be considered a revolt against the modernist and modernization ideology of the New Era (1979-89); during this time modernism posed as a “new enlightenment” in opposition to Maoism as a form of Chinese feudalism, and thus sealed the legitimacy of Deng’s China within the discourse of modernity” (“Epilogue” 400). According to Zhang, the modernist, pure poetry stance of Obscure Poetry was based on a “vacuous metaphysics.” For Zhang, the metaphysics of the Obscure Poets was vacuous because the poets were searching for a past that could not be recovered. But this seems to imply that the correctness of one’s metaphysics is relative to time, a highly debatable assertion. Zhang’s view of pure poetry also shows that he sees a strong and direct relationship between art and historical, political and social situation. Zhang, for example, characterizes the “root searching” in Yang’s poetry from the 1980s, particularly the poem “Banpo,” as

⁹ For a discussion of this phenomenon in relation to contemporary Chinese literary criticism and criticism of Obscure Poetry in particular, see Michelle Yeh’s insightful article “International Theory and the Transnational Critic.” See also Haun Saussy (133-4).

exemplary of the “vacuous metaphysics” about which he writes. According to Zhang, Yang’s root-seeking poetry demonstrates that the Obscure Poets were searching for irrecoverable social and political values (*Chinese Modernism in the Era of Reforms* 122). Zhang’s argument illustrates the persistence of the view that there exists a direct relationship between art and social and economic change in the ongoing cultural debate on recent Chinese literature. It also shows the critical importance of Yang’s poetry in that debate.

Scholars who may well not agree with this postmodernist critical viewpoint would still accept the periodization and the concept of a lag between developments in literature in the West and their appearance in China. Thus Bonnie S. McDougall accepts the received wisdom concerning the distinction between modernism and postmodernism, which she uses to criticize Chinese writers for following Western trends and being out of date. McDougall writes, “May Fourth writers (for example), applied themselves vigorously to the latest literary fashions, but, given the inevitable time-lag, had the misfortune to be copying trends which were on their way out.” And she goes on:

A similar fate befell Chinese writers in the 1980s in pursuit of modernism and postmodernism. Communications were much faster by then, of course, and Chinese writers were kept informed, inter alia, by Chinese students and scholars in Western universities. But trends were also shorter-lived, while the processes of production and translation and reproduction remained as tediously lengthy as ever. (“Anxiety of Out-Fluence” 103)

For McDougall, the lag and lack of originality that she sees in Chinese literature are sources of mediocrity. On the other hand, for Xiaomei Chen, Obscure Poetry represents not only a late modernism but also a kind of modernism fundamentally different from its Western counterpart, a “misunderstood” modernism. For Chen, though, “misunderstanding” is not an evaluative term, but simply refers to “a text or a cultural event by a ‘receiver’ community that differs in important ways from the view of that same phenomenon in the community of its origins.” According to Chen, such “misunderstanding” is to be celebrated as “the natural result of a cultural dialogue between readers both within and between cultures” (*Occidentalism* 96).¹⁰

¹⁰ If one accepts Chen’s view, debates over “modernism” that relate to intercultural debates over Chinese and Western poetics are incoherent. Significantly, according to Chen’s argument, the central thesis of this study, namely that all three poets share certain traits, would be flawed from the outset. Chen’s argument, however, is difficult to

Chen Xiaomei in her discussion of the Obscure Poetry debate notes that two key terms used by Xie Mian, one of the leading advocates of the new poetry, provided the framework for debate over the new poetry. These terms were “subjectivity” and “Western modernism” (*Occidentalism* 75). Both these terms related to broader social and political issues. Subjectivity was a way of extending “realism” to practically anything one might care to write about. It allowed one to interpret the new poetry as expressing the intrinsic value of human life and even as advocating freedom and democracy. In all these uses of the interpretative notion of “subjectivity” there was a dual concern on the part of critics to make the poetry acceptable and to interpret the poetry as advocating change and new values that were not necessarily acceptable to the authorities. The aim in part seems to have been to push the boundaries of acceptability in literature and politics. It is in this way that Yang and the other Obscure Poets represented part of an oppositional cultural force in China.

Chen, in her book *Occidentalism*, has also examined in detail the simplistic certainties by which critics defined modernism in China in the 1980s. Both proponents and detractors of Obscure Poetry in China used a simplistic characterization of modernism. The use of a straw modernism, however, is neither confined to China nor to the 1980s in

accept, because her view implies that the received opinion of a given culture about its cultural products is always correct and complete. This would seem to make revisionist interpretations within a culture unmotivated by any desire for improvement, increased accuracy etc. Moreover, it may be Chen who misunderstands the received opinion of Western modernism in the West. For example, after quoting one critic who says of Pound that: “how to write concerned him far less than how to govern,” she writes: “In the West, therefore, Pound is hardly regarded as an artist who believed in ‘art for art’s sake’ ideology” (*Occidentalism* 77-8). There is a strong school of Western critical thought, however, which sees Pound’s poetics as very much continuing a line of aestheticism. Of “modernist” poetry today in the United States, Marjorie Perloff writes “there is now an impressive range and production of poetry in which language, sound, rhythm, and visual layout, in Pound’s terms, ‘charged with meaning’ – ours may well be the moment when the lessons of early modernism are finally learned” (*Twenty-First Century Modernism* 200). Nor is this view of Pound as promoting a poetics of poetry as language approaching absolute music – surely a hallmark of *art pour l’art* – particularly new in Western critical circles. It is articulated as the intention of the poet himself. While revisionists may or may not decide that he was charlatan with no interest in poetry (a hard thing to prove given his obsessive work on the *Cantos*), Chen’s assessment of how Pound is regarded in the West is highly questionable. Chen is on firmer ground in arguing that the view in China of Western modernism as emphasizing self-expression is contrary to the view of modernism in the West (*Occidentalism* 77). But only some Western modernist art aims at impersonality. The self-obsessed side of Western modernism is much in evidence from Mayakovsky to Surrealism.

discussions of Obscure Poetry. Moreover, that the debate over modernism was simplistic does not necessarily imply that the poetry discussed was equally simplistic. Nevertheless, several other critics, notably Kwai-Cheung Lo and Xudong Zhang, have labeled certain features of Yang Lian's work, particularly the works "Norlang" and "Banpo," as modernist in order to point out the alleged simplistic "modernist" certainties of Yang's "root-seeking": his representation of the relationship of the subject to the world, and, as has already been pointed out in the case of Zhang, the alleged "purity" of the poetry of Yang and other Obscure Poets. These interpretations have ongoing implications in cultural debates about modernism and postmodernism in China in the 1980s and 1990s. In the readings that follow, it will be shown that these interpretations in the case of Yang's work do not do full justice to his complex poetry.

The categorization of Obscure Poetry and its offshoots has been heavily influenced by the political and social context in which it was written and first analyzed. Moreover, the analyses of Obscure Poetry in relation to broader social and political questions of subjectivity, individual freedom, Western versus Chinese values, and modernity versus tradition have continued to have significant implications in cultural debates. It is in this context that Yang as an Obscure Poet, like Hejinian as a Language Poet, took part in an oppositional literary movement that offered a political and social, as well as literary, alternative to the status quo. In the close readings that follow, certain of the traits attributed to Yang's poetry, particularly the depiction of self and the view of tradition and modernity, will be examined in relation to the interpretations put forward here. As has been pointed out, these binary oppositions were prominent in the public debate that was taking place at the time he wrote "Norlang" and "Banpo." Below, I will argue that Yang in his poetry seeks to avoid being tied down to either side of these oppositions. I will show how Yang's poetry, like Hejinian's, exhibits a complex and keen interest in the expression of subjective experience and of consciousness generally. Like Hejinian's poetry, Yang also strives to encompass the entirety of conscious experience, including history and modernity, "I" and "you," nature and humanity. In this sense, his complex poetry opposes the simplistic assessments that have been made of Obscure Poetry, just as his stance as an Obscure Poet opposed the simplistic and repressive approach to self-expression in China at the time. This thesis in turn makes the categorization of his work

as modernist as opposed to postmodernist problematic. It also raises questions about the broader periodization of Chinese cultural modernism and postmodernism, which is based in part upon different interpretations of the poetry of Yang and his milieu.

2. Answering the Sun: Nature and the Self in “Norlang”

“Norlang” was a central text in the controversy over Obscure Poetry between 1979 and 1984. Yang wrote “Norlang” in three weeks over the 1982-1983 New Year’s period, and the poem was published in 1983 in *Shanghai wenxue* 上海文學 (Shanghai Literature). The subsequent criticism of “Norlang” was one of the key events in the later aborted Anti-Spiritual Pollution Campaign.¹¹ “Norlang” and the poem’s controversy belong to a period when “pure” aesthetics could be very political, because of the paradox of autonomy being political in the socialist literary system. Yet already in “Norlang” Yang sought an alternative to the binary opposition, in a semiotic sense, between an autonomous poetics and an interactive poetics, which emphasizes connections and thus sociality. While, as critics have pointed out, there is a tendency toward the semiotic dominance of the “I” in Obscure Poetry, “Norlang” is one of a number of works that complicate the relationship of the “I” to landscape as part of a shift away from autonomous form. In this way, one can understand the politics of Yang’s poetry as advocating the individual as the basis for a new sociality. The new sociality in Yang’s poetry challenged the strict boundaries of subjectivity in China, at the moment when the country was moving from collectivism to rampant individualism. This moment gave a brief opportunity, curtailed by the launch of the Anti-Spiritual Pollution campaign, to explore and question the middle ground between self and society. At a transitional time in China, when the direction of China politically, socially and culturally was still uncertain, Yang’s poetry examines the poetic potentials of boundaries, making politics and aesthetics disputed ground.

Yang’s poetry from the 1980s negotiates value in a dialectic play between self and other, the “I” and the landscape. It opposes both the socialist Chinese literary system and an aesthetic of pure poetry, which was initially necessary in order to break free from the political demands of that system.¹² Criticism of Yang’s work “Norlang,”

¹¹ For a general account of this criticism see Xiang Chuan 向川 1985. See also Yao Jiahua 姚家華 and He Yuhuai.

¹² For an extensive study of this system, see Link

exemplifies the flux in value in China and in Chinese literary criticism in the 1980s and the 1990s.

During the Anti-Spiritual Pollution Campaign, “Norlang” was singled out for its alleged individualism and elitism. It was attacked for being too obscure, and ideologically unhealthy, for being chauvinistic, and for representing “an individual overriding a whole nation and era” with a “personal wish to dominate everything,” while being stuck in an “ivory tower” (Xiang 164). The qualities of individualism and elitism have long been associated with intellectuals internationally and have been particularly common as forms of abuse in communist countries. As will be seen, the terms used in the vitriolic attacks on “Norlang” closely resemble those terms used in the condemnation of Dragomoshchenko and others, such as “egoism” and “snobbism,” in the early days of the *perestroika* period (Vasil'ev 189).

The open confrontation in these transitional literary debates demonstrates in one sphere the difficulties that the totalitarian states of China and the Soviet Union experienced as their leaders sought to reform and modernize their countries by harnessing the dynamism of individualism in the economy and the expertise of intellectuals, including dissidents, who were key to the technological and scientific development of the country. “Norlang” is written against the repression of individualism under the old system at a time when reforms in that system allowed the individual voice to be heard in poetry and in other areas. As such, “Norlang” elicited the reaction of those who sought to prevent, limit or control change, who sought to constrain the new individualism associated with modernization and the opening up of China to the West.

On the other hand, Yang in “Norlang” uses pre-Confucian texts and folk traditions to counteract contemporary conformist but modernizing discourses such as that of the neo-Confucian movement of the 1980s, which, as Adrian Chan sees it, uses Confucian tradition to legitimize modern capitalism (16-24).

In more recent years, a number of scholars writing in the West have also criticized “Norlang,” but from a perspective very different from that of the old Chinese literary orthodoxy of the early 1980s. In the view of these scholars, Yang’s poetry can be seen as a part of the modernist revival, which has been overcome by Chinese literary

postmodernism. Some of these scholars have been highly critical of a number of aspects of this modernist ideology allegedly expressed in “Norlang” in particular.

Kwai-Cheung Lo, for instance, criticizes several of Yang’s poems, including “Norlang,” for expressing “the Enlightenment vision of man’s domination over nature” (“Writing the Otherness of Nature” 113). Similarly, the scholar Xudong Zhang attacks Yang and his contemporaries for valorizing “the political illusions of searching for a lost, immanent social value,” and exhibiting a “monolithic monumentality” (*Chinese Modernism in the Era of Reforms* 122, and “Epilogue” 401).

Another aspect of this revisionist criticism, also relevant to the discussion of “Banpo” below, has focused on Yang’s “root-seeking.” Scholars have sometimes misunderstood Yang’s use of pre-Confucian texts and folk traditions in his poetry as advocating a return to tradition and a distasteful form of nationalism. Lo writes that Yang searches “for a Logos from history and a mythology that would give him the origin of Chinese culture.” Lo also claims that Yang traveled around China to “the sources of Chinese civilization,” which ignores the fact that he is often interested in non-Han ethnic groups and traditions. In “Norlang,” which is the name of a male god in Tibetan, as well as a mountain and waterfall in Sichuan, Yang draws on Tibetan tradition in order to examine and complicate the assumptions of self and collective identity, and counteract the oppressive Han tradition. Nevertheless, the use of Tibetan culture also raises the question of whether this is a case of cultural appropriation and thus within the Chinese imperialist tradition. It is probably for this reason that Geremie R. Barmé, although recognizing that “Norlang” is set in Tibet, criticizes the poem for giving “voice to Han male dominance” (*In the Red* 275).¹³ Yet as Yang himself points out, this is both an issue of appropriation and counter-appropriation: “A relationship has to be turned upside down: motherland, mother tongue and tradition are not inherent in nature but are precisely dependent upon us” (“Poet without a Nation” 153). Although he appropriates Tibetan culture in his poem “Norlang,” Yang uses this cultural appropriation to counter, rather than to give voice to, Han dominance. Yang’s poem “Norlang” has been criticized for exoticism, violence and excessive masculinity, but what scholars often fail

¹³ Gregory Lee also argues that Yang “reinforces Han Chinese hegemony” in another poem that uses Tibetan subject matter (118).

to acknowledge is that it is this very cultural eclecticism and violent interaction that make the poetics of “Norlang” as a whole non-dominating and dynamic.

Michelle Yeh sees in Yang’s root-seeking writing, which includes “Norlang,” an extension of the trope she calls “Nature’s Child”: “by celebrating the pristine energy of the land and the people, it endeavors to dig through thick layers of a stagnant civilization to reach and rediscover the core of its original spirit, life and beauty.” In support of this view, Yeh quotes a passage from “Banpo” that contains the phrase “having died a thousand times, I am reborn a god.” In this phrase, Yeh finds a falling away of tradition and the “rebirth of the individual.” (“Nature’s Child and the Frustrated Urbanite” 407). The god in the poem, however, is also a symbol of tradition. Therefore, the phrase that Yeh quotes refers both to the individual overcoming tradition and to the renewal of tradition. In my readings below, I show that an ongoing cycle between modernity and tradition, between individual and collective, and between humanity and nature takes place in both “Norlang” and “Banpo.”

In the reading below it will be argued that the poetics of “Norlang” is complex and interactive. This complexity in part grows out of a desire to resist the ideological perspective of both those who resisted change in China and those who sought to control it. At the same time, as complex modern poetry, it cannot be simplistically categorized as an expression of modernist certainties of individualism and nationalism that give way to postmodern flux. To do so would be to reduce literature to an arm of Deng’s Four Modernizations. It would also do a serious injustice to Yang’s poetry. The fluidity of Yang’s allegedly simplistic “modernist” poetics in fact resist the assignment of any particular view on tradition and modernity, individual and collective, nature and humankind.

Both Lo’s characterization of Yang’s “I” as Nature’s master and Yeh’s as “Nature’s Child” tell part of the story. In “Norlang” Yang’s focus is on subjectivity, on the self, but not in isolation from the world and the natural landscape. The title of “Norlang” is the name of a waterfall, a prominent feature on the natural landscape. In the opening lines of the first section, called “Suntide” (*Richao* 日潮), three body parts of the first human being to enter the scene fuse with three elements, a “sail” (*fan* 帆), a “rock”

(*yanshi* 岩石) and an “eagle” (*cangying* 蒼鷹). The movement is upwards toward the sky, which, in the form of the sun, is fusing with the earth as it sets:¹⁴

高原如猛虎， 焚燒於激流暴跳的萬物的海濱

哦， 祇有光， 落日渾圓地向你們泛濫， 大地懸掛在空中

強盜的帆向手臂張開， 岩石向胸脯， 蒼鷹向心

牧羊人的孤獨被無邊起伏的灌木所吞噬

經幡飛揚， 那淒瀟的信仰， 悠悠凌駕於蔚藍之上

The plateau like a raging tiger burns at the shore of creation’s torrent

Oh, there is only light, the setting sun floods toward you [pl.] in a perfect sphere, Earth hangs in space

The pirate sail opens to the arm, rock to chest, eagle to heart

The shepherd’s solitude swallowed in the endless undulating brush

The prayer flag fluttering, a sad, shrill faith slowly rising through the azure (“Nuorilang” 59)

The up and down oscillations mirror the continuous ebb and flow throughout “Suntide.” The implied speaker, the “I,” spreads out like the flooding sun to address the multitude of the plural “you” (*nimen* 你們), while the solitary figures of the second stanza reverse the process, moving the reader from the collective “you” back to focus on individuals. The movement between heaven and earth also breaks up the body of the “pirate” (*qiangdao* 強盜). As parts of the body are attached to parts of the natural world, these parts are spread across the landscape and, thus, both enlarge the person and tear that person apart. This can be seen in the other movement in the passage about the “pirate,” the shift from the outer body inwards, from “arm” (*shoubi* 手臂) to “chest” (*xiongpu* 胸脯) to “heart” (*xin* 心), and from the seemingly innocuous “sail” to “rock” to the “eagle,” a violent bird of prey. The landscape’s preying on the human figure becomes

¹⁴ The Chinese version of “Norlang” that appears here is taken from Yang’s collected poems from 1982-1997, *Dahai tingzhi zhi chu: Yang Lian zuopin*. The translation is in large part based on Alice Joyce and John Minford’s translation, which first appeared in *Renditions*, but it has been modified for greater correspondence with the layout and literal meaning of the Chinese text as it appears in *Dahai tingzhi zhi chu*.

more explicit when “The shepherd’s solitude” (*muyangren de gudu* 牧羊人的孤獨) is “swallowed” (*tunshi* 吞噬) in the following line. Moreover, the passive verb “swallowed” is not neutral in the Chinese, but implies an adverse affect on the “shepherd’s solitude.”

This action also happens the other way, when the “prayer flag” (*jingfan* 經幡), a human item that symbolizes a human “faith” (*xinyang* 信仰), rises or more accurately, “encroaches” and “places itself above human concerns,” as the Chinese “lingjia” 凌駕 implies. The Chinese for “fluttering,” “feiyang” 飛揚, is more active and could be translated as “flies upwards,” making it part of the same dynamic oscillations and linking it to the eagle’s downward dive. Elements of the human and natural world are bound together and torn apart by and in the landscape and the language itself.

The pronouns “I” and the Chinese plural “you” (*nimen* 你們) are important to Yang’s poetics. In “Norlang” he sees the “I” as symbolizing “spiritual search” and “complex spiritual loneliness.” In contrast, the plural you symbolizes “external reality,” and “objective suffering.” Together the “I” and the plural “you” create, for Yang, “a real human experience.” This experience is “a space in which transcendent aspirations and cosmic consciousness can intermingle” (“Concerning ‘Norlang’” 162). The interaction between the “I” and the natural world, the objective external reality, can be understood as part of what Yang calls “a real human experience.” It is the intermingling of conscious striving and some sort of “cosmic order” that creates the experience of experience in the poem, for Yang. This dynamic interaction helps explain Yang’s description of the binary of the “spiritual search,” symbolized by the “I,” and “objective reality,” which includes the plural “you” and the surrounding objective natural world as described in the poem: “these contrast and complement one another powerfully, they develop and merge in the poem, gradually moving toward the purity of a higher plane” (“Concerning ‘Norlang’” 162). It is Yang’s intention that the interactions described here combine “objective reality” and the “spiritual search” of the “I.” Whether or not “a real human experience” is really achieved, Yang’s intention to create one in this way partly explains the motivation behind the complex interaction between the “I” and the plural “you,” and between the “I” and the natural world, as well as several other binaries in “Norlang.”

The breaking apart and intensification of language in Yang's poetic also shows itself in the way the title, "Norlang" (*Nuorilang* 諾日朗), and the title of the first section, "Suntide" (*Richao* 日潮), embody key features of this opening passage. Firstly, the character for "waterfall" (*pu* 瀑) contains the element water, which is an important metaphor in "Suntide." Apart from the radical for water, this character also contains the character for "violence" (*bao* 暴), which, as we have seen, is an essential part of the dynamic interaction of the opening lines and which appears as part of the word "torrent" (*jiliu putiao* 激流暴跳) in these lines. Thus, "waterfall" (*pu* 瀑) captures the violent dynamism of the poem. At the same time, the "sun" (*ri* 日), which makes the plateau "burn" (*fenshao* 焚燒) in the opening lines, is one of the Chinese characters that make up the word "Norlang" (*Nuorilang* 諾日朗), the name of the same waterfall. In the opening lines this sun is, moreover, very watery, a "torrent" that "floods" (*fanlan* 泛濫). The contradiction and conjunction between fire and water in the opening lines is, thus, contained in the title itself, as well as being present, more obviously, in the section's title, "Suntide" (*Richao* 日潮), which contains the character for "sun" and the radical for "water." The dynamic interplay between creation and destruction is clear in the opening line of the Chinese, where the "plateau" (*gaoyuan* 高原) "burns," or in the Chinese, perhaps, "destroys [by fire]" (*fenshao* 焚燒) at "the shore of creation's torrent" (*jiliu putiao de wanwu de haibin* 激流暴跳的萬物的海濱). The elements of contradiction and intensification, of creative construction and violence in the images and symbols of the poem resonate with uncertainty, with the same interplay between creation and destruction as the language itself.

The next lines continue the confrontation and integration of death and creation, human and sky, the plural "you" and their surroundings. The "white cloud" and the faces combine and turn away from one another. Then, time and the surrounding world, the "dusk" (*huanghun* 黃昏), appear to take on body parts, "feet" (*jiao* 腳), which have previously only been part of the human subject. The dusk also has "demands" (*qushi* 驅使), another human characteristic. The crawling figure simultaneously becomes more animal and also appears as an imprint, a footprint, a printed sign of the natural world, like the printed signs of language on the page:

你們此刻爲哪一片白雲的消逝而默哀呢
在歲月腳下匍匐， 忍受黃昏的驅使
成千上萬座墓碑像犁一樣拋錨在荒野盡頭
互相遺棄， 永遠遺棄： 把青銅還給土， 讓鮮血生鏽
你們仍然朝每一陣雷霆傾瀉著淚水嗎
西風一年一度從沙礫喚醒淘金者的命運
棧道崩塌了， 峭壁無路可走， 石孔的日晷是黑的
而古代女巫的天空再次裸露七朵蓮花之謎

For which departed cloud do you stand in silent tribute now?
Crawling beneath the feet of the ages, enduring the demands of the
dusk
A myriad of tombstones like ploughs drop anchor at the wasteland's
end
Abandoned by each other, forever abandoned: returning copper to
earth, letting the fresh blood rust
Are you still pouring tears upon every thunderclap?
Each year the west wind wakes the gold-panner's fate from the
gravelly deeps
The cliff-side trail has collapsed, there is no path along the precipice,
the sundial in the cave is dark
And the heavens of the ancient shaman woman once again reveal the
riddle of the seven lotus flowers ("Nuorilang" 59)

This reading, which connects footprint with imprint, becomes more plausible in the following line, where the engraving on gravestones is connected metaphorically with the plough's carving of the earth. Furrows combine to form lines, like those on a page. Both gravestones (*mubei* 墓碑) and ploughs (*li* 犁) are fields of signs that mark an historical space. Just as the text takes place in a field of language, pin-point markers in a sea of possibilities that simultaneously lose other possibilities and mark that loss creatively, these images both bear witness to and create a history of destruction.

The line also clarifies the related connection between heaven and earth. The dying of the light, "huánghūn" 黃昏, relates to the dying of the cultivated land, which the

motionless ploughs and the word “huāngyě” 荒野 express. The phonetic connection between the title of one of the books in which “Norlang” appears, *Huānghūn* 荒魂 (Desolate Spirit), and the dying light, “huánghūn,” increases the plausibility of this link. In this way, the yellow dying light (*huánghūn*) is connected metaphorically and phonetically with the desolation of the spirit (*huānghūn*) and the desolate landscape (*huāngyě*). The intersecting planes of landscape, land, sky, and water, parallel the intersecting planes of meaning. The location on water, which appears in the opening stanza both as the location of the human being in “pirate sail” and of the sky, as an inverted sea in the words “burns at the shore of creation’s torrent,” now becomes a metaphor for the “wasteland” through the words “drop anchor” (*pao mao* 拋錨). The fusion and fission of water and sky, and water and fire now infuses itself with the earth in a further complication. The word wasteland, however, does not capture the contradiction inherent in “huangye” 荒野. The first character could imply the human desolation of a famine and, thus, relate to the stilled ploughs. On the other hand, the second character implies a natural world, the wildness of nature untamed, which provides a large part of the rich imagery in the opening stanzas.

The interaction between heaven and earth, in the twilight and Suntime, is accompanied by interaction between the present moment, the “now” (*cike* 此刻) and the history or eternity referred to as “ages” (*suiyue* 歲月). The domination of the ages over the plural “you” makes sense in relation to Yang’s characterization of the plural “you” as symbolizing “human suffering” (“Concerning ‘Norlang’” 162). Fleeting human life is contrasted with eternity, emphasizing that “human suffering” arises at least in part out of human mortality. In all this, the “I” is absent, but appears implicitly as the addresser of the plural “you.” In Yang’s poetics, then, the overview of human suffering in the passage quoted above emphasizes a human ability to transcend the immediate situation and struggle for a view of the wider world. One such example of this struggle for transcendence is the “female shaman” (*nüwa* 女巫), who is at one with the natural world, or at least the “heavens” (*tian* 天).

According to Yang’s explicit statement of poetics regarding “Norlang,” this move to transcendence also involves a communion or synthesis between this “spiritual struggle” and “objective reality.” An example of this interaction occurs in the fourth line of the

stanza quoted above. In that line, blood becomes rust, and copper returns to earth. The return to earth, to an original oneness, which relates to ideas of reincarnation and the Tibetan “sky-burial,” to which the images of human body parts at least in part refer, is explicit in the next line:

互相遺棄， 永遠遺棄： 把青銅還給土， 讓鮮血生鏽

Abandoned by each other, forever abandoned: returning copper to earth, letting the fresh blood rust (“Nuorilang” 59)

The English translation “forever” does not quite capture the continuous and unending process that the phrase “yongyuan yiqi” 永遠遺棄 implies. This “endless abandoning” suggests the relinquishment of human responsibilities, which goes beyond limits and, so, relates, to the “wasteland’s end” (*huangye jintou* 荒野盡頭) in the previous line. Beyond the wasteland’s limit might be fertile ground, and indeed this mixing of metaphors provides fertile ground for poetry. The copper, which was possibly taken from the earth by humans, returns to the earth and becomes associated with the rich image of life and death, “fresh blood” (*xianxue* 鮮血). Meanwhile, the reference to a gold-panner (*taojinzhe* 淘金者) two lines later in “Suntide” draws attention to the reverse process: human beings extracting minerals from the earth. In the line quoted directly above, mineral iron, which comes from the earth, mixes with biological blood, because the blood is “rusting” (*shengxiu* 生鏽). In this way, something living through the metonym of “blood” is mixed with something non-living through the verb “rust.” There is a contradiction here between absolute desolation and richness, between abandoning wholeness and a return to an original wholeness. The poem oscillates between these dynamic tensions, between limits and the transgression of those limits.

The mutual abandonment seems to be the action of the plural “you” (*nimen* 你們), although it is possibly the ploughs (*li* 犁) or tombstones (*mubei* 墓碑) that are rusting away into the earth. In any case, the contradiction applies to the collective “you,” which is both isolated and suffering but also shares a common fate of a kind that is analogous with the communion with earth that metal undergoes in destruction, in rusting and being returned to the earth (*huigeitu* 還給土). Communion and abandonment, life and death are intimately connected.

The intrusion once again of a human aspect into the natural, wild world, which is observable above in the fresh blood rusting (*xiaxue shengxiu* 鮮血生鏽), also plays itself out in the tension between abstract and concrete associations of body parts and other human attributes. The line that follows parallels “blood” with another epithet of human suffering, “tears” (*leishui* 淚水):

你們仍然朝每一陣雷霆傾瀉著淚水嗎

Are you still pouring tears upon every thunderclap? (“Nuorilang” 59)

The “thunderclap” (*leiting* 雷霆) might refer here to the thunderous noise of the waterfall. Whether or not it does refer to this, the implication of falling water is clear in the reference to stormy weather, especially in the Chinese, in which “thunderclap” is made of two characters with the radical for “rain”: *lei* 雷 and *ting* 霆. The line quoted above thus contains falling water produced by a natural phenomenon, rain, and by a human activity, crying. Suffering and separation here too involves communion between the collective “you” and the natural world.

The human element, which the address to the collective “you” and the reference to “tears” seem to invoke, contrasts with the wild, desolate inhuman scene that the previous lines described. This is also notable in the way in which the human, controlling “turning toward,” “chao” 朝, here translated as “upon,” contrasts with the wild “ye” 野 two lines earlier. The sympathy of the human beings for the natural phenomenon both marks them off and makes them one with the natural world.

After the previous long stanza that develops the interplay between creation and destruction, through interacting images of humanity and nature, as well as life and death, the final stanza of “Suntide” reminds the reader of the title and name of the waterfall:

哦，光，神聖的紅袖，火的崇拜火的舞蹈

洗滌呻吟的溫柔，賦予蒼穹一個破碎陶罐的寧靜

你們終于被如此巨大的一瞬震撼了麼

——太陽等著，為隕落的劫難，歡喜若狂

Light! Sacred crimson glaze, fire-worship fire-dance

Lave the soft moans, bestow upon the firmament the tranquillity of a
shattered urn

Are you finally roused by this vast moment?

— The sun waits in ecstasy for the meteoric apocalypse (“Nuorilang”
59-60)

The first character of the title “Norlang” (*Nuorilang* 諾日朗) means “to reply” (*nuo* 諾). This creates the sense of replying to the sun's brightness, or a brightness that replies to the sun. The light that bathes also recalls the combination of fire and water in the section title. The English translation “soft moans” does not capture the oxymoron of pain and warm security in the Chinese “shenyin de wenrou” 呻吟的溫柔. “Wenrou” 溫柔 implies a “peacefulness,” “passivity,” and “harmony,” as in “wenhe” 溫和 (moderate), while “shenyin” 呻吟 implies “pain” and a “cry out against pain.” They are opposites brought together in a violent act on language that both mutes it and cries out against this silence.

The “sun waits” (*taiyang dengzhe* 太陽等著) for a falling from the sky, “the meteoric apocalypse” (*yunluo de jienan* 隕落的劫難), while it itself is falling. The terrible event that it anticipates, the meeting of earth and sky, is the moment the whole poem seems to be striving for, as human and landscape words run together and toward the sky in the opening. Landscape, earth, sky, and human elements fuse and disperse themselves in a landscape of language. This language of description of landscape places the human in the context of landscape and landscape in the context of human perception. A sense of self, of the person in landscape, comes through description of landscape, so that the human inscribes itself on landscape and is simultaneously inscribed in landscape.

The opening passage of the next section of “Norlang” is entitled “Golden Tree” (*Huangjin shu* 黃金樹). Some scholars have taken the representation of the “I” in this section as showing categorically the masculine, dominating subjectivity at work in “Norlang.” Lo, for example, has interpreted this section of “Norlang” as putting forward two propositions. The first is that: “mastery and possession of pliable natural beings” is necessary to be a “real man.” The second is that: “consciousness asserts its priority over nature and turns all natural objects into a reproduction of its will.” It is of particular

interest, therefore, to assess to what extent an analysis of “Golden Tree” supports the interpretation that the poem “gives us a strong sense of the triumph of human will over the earth” (Lo, “Writing the Otherness of Nature” 105).

At first glance this interpretation seems convincing. “Golden Tree” begins by introducing the “I” to the poem. This “I” is then immediately identified with a “god” (shen 神). At the end of the poem, the reader is also told that this “I” is “the true man.” But all is not so straightforward. The god is no normal male human, but is the god of a waterfall called Norlang in the Tibetan part of Sichuan Province. The god in the poem is also the god of a mountain with the same name. The name “Norlang” means “majestic sublimity,” or “male god” in Tibetan. Once all this is taken into account, the question of whether it is possible to interpret “Golden Tree” as a representation of humanity dominating nature is not so easy to answer. The question raises at least two interpretive issues: firstly, what is the nature of the interaction between the human and natural in “Golden Tree”; secondly, what is the position of the “I” in relation to the human and natural worlds in the poem?

To begin the analysis, here is the opening part of the poem “Golden Tree”:

我是瀑布神，我是雪山的神

高大，雄健，主宰新月

成爲所有江河的唯一首領

雀鳥我胸前安家

濃郁的叢林遮蓋著

那通往秘密池塘的小徑

我的奔放象大群剛剛成年的牡鹿

慾望三月

聚集起騷動中的力量

I am god of the waterfall, I am god of the snow mountain

Great and powerful master of the new moon

I become leader of all rivers

The sparrow makes its nest in my breast

The dense grove conceals
The path to the secret pool
My passion like a great herd of bucks that have newly come of age
The spring moon of desire
Accumulates strength in the midst of tumult (“Nuorilang” 61)

The voice and relationship immediately changes here. Instead of being subject to powerful forces, like the collective “you” in “Suntide,” the “I” is “master of,” or “one who dominates,” the “new moon” (*zhuzai xinyue* 主宰新月). This can be seen in clear contrasting correspondences with “Suntide.” The “sparrow” (*queniao* 雀鳥), which is “in my breast,” or “before my breast” (*wo xiong qian* 我胸前), parallels and contrasts with the “eagle,” which threatens the “chest” (*xiongpu* 胸脯). The Chinese character for “chest” (*xiong* 胸) is common to both phrases and thus makes the connection clear. This “I” in its powerful domination parallels the sun in the first part. Its identification with water, furthermore, sets it against the fiery sun. The coldness of “snow” (*xue* 雪) and the sun’s solar twin and opposite, the “moon” (*yue* 月), further set this play in motion. Also, the sun was setting in the previous section, but here the “new moon” (新月) is in the sky, which implies a beginning that accompanies the end, as life accompanies death. The way this stanza “conceals” (*zhegaizhe* 遮蓋著) a “secret pool” (*mimi chitang* 秘密池塘) distinguishes it from the previous section, in which the “light” (*guang* 光) of revelation played a central role. On the other hand, the accumulating “strength in the midst of tumult” (*saodong zhong de lilian* 騷動中的力量) continues the dynamic description of the waterfall as “torrent” (*jiliu baotao* 激流暴跳) and torrential “pouring” (*qingxie* 傾瀉著) in the first part of “Norlang.”

我是黃金色的樹
收獲黃金的樹
熱情的挑逗來自深淵
豪不理睬週圍怯懦者的箴言
直到我的波濤把它充滿
I am a golden-coloured tree
Gold-harvest tree

Fierce challenge arises from the abyss
Casts aside admonitions of timid bystanders
Until my great waves fill it to the brim (“Nuorilang” 61)

Here these opposites, the stillness of the pool, “the abyss” (*shenyuan* 深淵), and the rushing “great waves” (*botao* 波濤) of the waterfall interact. The “abyss” right at the centre of the stanza provides attraction, like the swirling waters of a whirlpool, as the Chinese “taodou” 挑逗 implies both provocation and temptation. The “challenge” that the “abyss” (*shenyuan* 深淵) offers is defeated through “waves” of water, which fill the abyss (the most likely thing to which the “it” of the final line of the stanza refers). Emptiness and desolation, symbolized by the “abyss,” are thus contrasted with the abundance of “waves,” “gold” and “harvest.”

Here the yellow (*huang* 黃) of the opening dying light returns as the “golden-coloured tree” (*huangjinse de shu* 黃金色的樹). That the tree possesses waves and that these waves seem to correspond to the abundance implied also by “gold-harvest” (*shouhuo jin* 收穫黃) suggest that the tree could be the waterfall in the sun’s light and, thus, be harvesting the gold of the sun and reflecting it in its own glory. Whether or not the tree should be associated with the waterfall, it is the source of light, strength, and power. It is also a link between the sky-world, the heaven, and the earth of the quiet, mysterious pool.

The play on “huāng” 荒 and “huáng” 黃, the contrast between “desolation” and the “yellow” or “gold” of flame and sunset, repeats itself again here in the interplay of the emptiness of the “abyss” (*shenyuan* 深淵), and the fullness that the golden tree brings to it. The connection between the two becomes clearer in the use of “harvest” with the word gold. This implies an autumnal bounty, a fulfilment of spring promise, which contrasts with the “The spring moon of desire” (*yuwang sanyue* 慾望三月). The emptiness, the abyss, or the desire is a necessary part of the fulfilment.

The flow of lines and water continues in the next stanza, which begins with the character for flow in a new personification:

流浪的女性，水面閃爍的女性

誰是那迫使我啜飲的唯一的女性

我的目光克制住夜

十二支長號克制住番石榴花的風

我來到的每個地方，沒有陰影

觸摸過的每顆草莓化作輝煌的星辰

在世界中央升起

占有你們，我，真正的男人

Roaming woman, a woman of a glistening surface of water

Who is she this woman that compels me to drink?

My gaze holds back the night

Twelve horns hold back the pomegranate wind

Every place I come to is without shadow

Every strawberry touched is a bright star

In the centre of the world rising

Possessing you, I the true man (“Nuorilang” 61-2)

Another “huáng” 煌 enters the description here in an explicit reference to light, “huihuáng” 輝煌.¹⁵ In “Golden Tree” there is a contrast between male and female, light and dark. But the interaction between these opposites is not a one-way process. Just as the spray from the waterfall rises up, “a fierce challenge arises from the abyss” (*reqing de taodou lai zi shenyuan* 熱情的挑逗來自深淵). The water that the “I” is compelled to drink is part of the natural scene of the waterfall. But, at the same time, the “I” is the god of the waterfall. More than this, it is possible to interpret the golden tree as the waterfall caught in the rays of the setting sun. In this reading, instead of nature being dominated by human subjectivity, the human and natural worlds mix. The line “The sparrow makes his nest in my breast” (*Queniao wo xiong qian anjia* 雀鳥我胸前安家)

¹⁵ Note that this play on huáng 黃, yellow, and huāng 荒, also takes place in the titles of two collections of Yang’s poems in which “Norlang” appears, *Huanghun* 荒魂 (Desolate Soul) and *Huang* 黃 (Yellow). The connection is less phonetic and more in the binary roles they play of hunger and fulfilment, desolation and plenty.

also supports the view that the mountain and waterfall are the embodiment of the god and that this god has a close and symbiotic relationship with nature. Interaction between the human and natural also occurs between the woman and the natural surface of a pool of water. In the Chinese this personification or naturalization is particularly clear in the character for “surface” (*mian* 面), which can also signify “face.” So the play on “face” and “surface” is more obvious than in English. This increases the play on “roaming” (*liulang* 流浪), which in Chinese is etymologically associated with water. These examples show that the relationship between human and natural features is interactive and non-dominating in the poem. At the semiotic level, therefore, there is dynamic interplay between humanity and nature in “Golden Tree,” rather than a relationship of simple domination.

The interaction between humanity and nature is clear in the poem, but the question of the place of the “I” in this interaction deserves further attention. The pronoun “I” has a particular significance in “Golden Tree.” Rather than fulfilling a conventional lyric function, the “I” is the god of the waterfall and the mountain of the same name. The “I,” then, in “Golden Tree” is part of nature. It is something beyond humanity. This interpretation is supported by Yang’s own explication of the “I” in “Golden Tree” as a representation of nature. He has written of aiming in “Norlang” to take the “bitter fruit of human life” and transform them into “blazing stars” (“Concerning ‘Norlang’” 162). Rather than expressing the domination of nature by man, as others have suggested, Yang intends the “I” to represent, in his words, “the transcendent will and divinity of nature.” This transcendence can be seen symbolically in the dispelling of shadows in “Golden Tree”: “Every place I come to is without shadow” (*wo lai dao de mei ge difang, meiyou yinying* 我來到的每個地方，沒有陰影). Transcendence can also be found in the turning of “strawberries” (*caomei* 草莓), a symbol of temporal abundance, into “bright stars” (*huihuang de xingchen* 輝煌的星辰), a symbol of permanent beauty. Rather than representing the “conquest and possession” of nature, as has often been assumed, the possession referred to in “Golden Tree” is exactly the opposite: nature is powerful and possesses humanity. It is true that “Golden Tree” associates masculinity with power, but this power is crucially the power of nature, as opposed to human power. This reverses the trope, so common in Western discourse, of feminized nature possessed by man.

The natural world pushes back the “pomegranate wind” (*shiliu hua de feng* 石榴花的風), which can be read, according to Yang’s statement, as a symbol for human suffering. That is, the pomegranate flower implies the pomegranate fruit. The fruit of the pomegranate is extremely bitter, as anyone who has tasted it will be aware. As was seen above, “bitter fruit” is the metaphor Yang uses to refer to human suffering in his explanatory piece “Concerning ‘Norlang.’” Therefore, the “pomegranate wind” can be read as standing for human suffering. Also, Yang writes of the plural “you” as representing human suffering as opposed to divine nature (“Concerning ‘Norlang’” 161-2). At the same time, the opposition between humanity and nature is not represented in a simplistic way. The transcendent “I” is presented as a mixture of light and dark, male and female, humanity and nature. “Golden Tree,” then, can be read as an expression of nature, of humanity’s interaction with nature, and of the transcendence that results from this interaction, rather than as an expression of simple domination.

As Michelle Yeh has shown, in *Obscure Poetry* nature is “portrayed in a predominantly positive way and is often contrasted to negative social systems” (“Nature’s Child” 407). The representation of nature (the “I”) as powerful and humans (the plural “you”) as suffering in “Golden Tree” is thus in some respects typical of *Obscure Poetry*, in which poets look to nature for consolation, strength, and unity that are lacking in the human world.¹⁶ As my reading has shown, however, in “Golden Tree” Yang also complicates this approach to nature by foregrounding dynamic interactions between the human and the natural. This interpretation is supported by Yang’s explication of “Norlang,” in which he explains that the “I” and the plural “you” together create “a real human experience” (“Concerning ‘Norlang’” 162).

¹⁶ For examples of the representation of nature in *Obscure Poetry*, see Yeh (“Nature’s Child”). As Yeh notes, Gu Cheng’s early work is particularly rich in childlike depictions of nature as a source of beauty and consolation (“Nature’s Child” 407). For an in-depth discussion of the representation of nature in Gu Cheng’s poetry and prose, see Li Xia’s article “‘All My Flowers Are Dream Flowers.’” Prior to Yeh’s article, Bonnie McDougall had also pointed out that nature “offers a refuge to the oppressed and weary” in the early work of the *Obscure Poet* Bei Dao 北島 (“Bei Dao’s Poetry” 227). The representation of nature in “Norlang” might also be fruitfully compared to the work of the poet Duoduo 多多, some of whose poems from the mid-1980s resemble “Norlang” in that they represent nature as powerful and animate and, on occasion, employ a singular speaking subject who has both human and non-human properties (van Crevel, *Language Shattered* 195-221).

The next section of “Norlang,” “Blood Sacrifice” (*Xue ji* 血祭) focuses on blood because, according to Yang, blood is “the symbol of humanity’s pain,” and “also the starting point for humanity’s transcendence.” In this section a Tibetan “sky-burial” is described and the “the conjunction between history and present reality” is stressed (“Concerning ‘Norlang’” 163):

用殷紅的圖案簇擁白色顱骨，供奉太陽和戰爭
殺嬰的血，行割禮的血，滋養我綿綿不絕的生命
一把黑曜岩的刀剖開大地的胸膛，心被高高舉起
無數旗幟象角鬥士的鼓聲，在晚霞間激蕩
我活著，我微笑，驕傲地率領你們征服死亡

——用自己的血，給歷史簽名，裝飾廢墟和儀式

Cluster the crimson pattern on the white skull, make an offering to sun
and war

With the blood of sacrificial infant, with the blood of circumcision,
nourish my never-broken life

An obsidian knife rips the Earth’s chest, the heart is raised high

Countless banners, like the drumbeat of a wrestling master, rage in the
sunset glow

I live, I smile, I lead you proudly to conquer death

– Sign your name for history in your own blood, adorn the ruins and
the ceremony (“Nuorilang” 63)

The violence of self-differentiation and self-definition becomes apparent here in the violence of ritual. Here the cutting up of blood and bones strengthens the “I.” The bloody battle is for life, “to conquer death” (*zhengfu siwang* 征服死亡), yet this paradoxically entails the imagery of violent death. This is clear in the contrast between the “never-broken life” (*mianmian bu jue de shengming* 綿綿不絕的生命) and the following line, where a “knife rips earth’s chest” (*dao guakai dadi de xiongtang* 刀剖開大地的胸膛). In this line the chest once again appears. The role of the chest or bosom has shifted from the previous two sections. In the first section, it was the object of the natural world’s aggression. In the second section, it represented a symbiotic relationship

between the human and the world. Now in the third section, the chest becomes a representation of a natural landscape that is being subjected to violence. History, the story of humankind, is invoked at a point of total differentiation from the natural world. This differentiation, however, has as its purpose contact and worship of this natural world in the form of the “sun” (*taiyang* 太陽).

The association of blood and sun in this stanza and the reference to dusk, to “the sunset glow” (*wanxia* 晚霞), is another example of how natural and bodily images mix in “Norlang.” The red is at once the light of sunset, of the dying rays of the sun, and indicative of bloody human sacrifice. The word “obsidian” in Chinese includes contradictory characters: the character for “black” (*hei* 黑) and a character meaning “sunlight” (*yao* 曜). The “obsidian knife” thus combines the shadow cutting across the landscape as the sun falls low in the sky with the light of the sun. Like the sunset, the obsidian knife is a liminal sign that lies between day and night.

After the dispelling of shadows in “Golden Tree,” the poem returns to the theme of “Suntide,” in which light and darkness are mutually necessary opposites, and in which the time of day is also dusk. In “Suntide,” “dusk” is both a “wasteland” (*huangye* 荒野) and a “sea of creation” (“the shore of creation’s torrent” [*jiliu putiao de wanwu de haibin* 激流暴跳的萬物的海濱]). In Yang’s own commentary: “the sun witnesses all, perceives all (enlightenment), still celebrates the ecstasy of necessary destruction” (“Concerning ‘Norlang’” 162). With life comes death is the message here, but more importantly it is the interaction between celebration and destruction that creates the dynamism of the poem.

The reference in “Blood Sacrifice” to the practice of Tibetan sky burials is clear. Yang notes how this practice involves “feeding the body to eagles on a mountain top.” This part of the sky burial was already alluded to in the third line of “Suntide,” in which an eagle closes in on the heart of a body on the rocks of a high plateau. Sky burial ceremonies, however, usually take place at dawn, not at dusk, as one would be justified in concluding from “Blood Sacrifice.” Also, the body is chopped up first. Yang mixes the sky burial ceremony with the Tibetan “sun-ritual” and “sacred pilgrimage,” creating a scene that is neither Chinese nor authentically Tibetan (“Concerning ‘Norlang’” 162).

In the 1980s, Yang often used an eclectic combination of sources to give an ancient and traditional “feel” to his modern poetry.

The flag of the opening stanzas of “Suntide” once again returns, though it has changed from a lonely image to an emphatic image of a powerful army of banners. The image, however, is once again attached to loss, to the waste of ruins, the empty, desolate earth of the wasteland. The sharp, contradictory images of life and death play themselves out and entwine together in this stanza. On one level, of course, the “red” or “crimson” (*hong* 紅) ironizes the orthodox political symbol of communist vitality by associating it with bloody murder. Thus symbols of life and death fuse. “Red” also links other unlike things. Between the lifeless ruins and ardent “red” there is not only a link of contrast but also of similarity in the shared blood-red colour. This is the same combination of complementary and contradictory meanings that one witnesses in the name of one of China’s most famous ruins, Yinxu 殷墟, between which characters this stanza takes place. “Yin” 殷, apart from being the name of a dynasty, means “abundant and rich,” while “xu” 墟 means “ruin.” Although the reference to the ancient dynasty may well be accidental, as Yang sees it, “Blood Sacrifice” “stresses the conjunction between history and present reality,” and the stanza certainly oscillates between abundance and ruin, as well as between life and death, day and night (“Concerning ‘Norlang’” 163).

The next stanza moves from the relationship with the sun to the relationship with the earth and mountains:

那麼，擦去你的悲哀！讓懸崖封閉群山的氣魄
烏鷹一次又一次俯衝，像一陣陣風暴，把眼眶啄空
苦難祭台上奔跑或撲倒的軀體同時怒放
久久迷失的希望乘坐尖銳的飢餓歸來，搬下呼嘯與贊頌
你們聽從什麼發現了弧形地平線上孑然一身的壯麗
於是讓血流盡：赴死的光榮，比死更強大
And so, wipe out your [sg.] sorrows! Let the precipice seal in the
mountain spirit
The eagles and vultures dive and dive again, like a gusting tempest,
pecking eye sockets clean

On the bitter sacrificial altar the racing, falling bodies bloom
Long lost hopes return on the sharp edge of starvation casting screams
and eulogies
Where have you [pl.] learned to discover the solitary grandeur of the
arched horizon?
Therefore let the blood flow: the glory of meeting death is stronger
than death (“Nuorilang” 63)

The point of sunset becomes the point of death. This parallels the extremes of landscape in the stanza, the “precipice” (*xuanya* 懸崖) and the “horizon” (*dipingxian* 地平線). The death itself is extreme. The vividness of the vision is ironic in the face of the focus of violence – the eyes. Once again famine, here “starvation” (*ji'e* 飢餓) is linked with new discoveries and hopes. The hole in the mountain, the precipice, parallels the holes of the eye sockets. Both gaps provide spaces for movement. Flow toward the earth and a return of the body to the landscape and to the natural world take center stage in this stanza. The “eagles and vultures” (*wuying* 烏鷹) recall the “eagle” in “Suntide,” which heads “to the heart” (*xiangxin* 蒼鷹向心), which was held aloft in the previous stanza (“the heart is raised high” [*xin bei gaogao juqi* 心被高高舉起]). The downward flight of the vulture also resonates with the flow of blood. This creates another link between blood and the setting sun, the descent of which is paralleled by the eagle’s flight in the opening stanza.

The “I” of the opening stanza appears to address the two forms of the second person, singular in the opening line of the stanza and plural in the penultimate line. The “I” appears to be similar to the transcendent “I” of nature in “Golden Tree,” but in “Blood Sacrifice” the “I” also appears to be a human being leading the ceremony. On the other hand, the pleasure in death seems to recall the sun in “Suntide,” which “waits in ecstasy for the meteoric apocalypse” (*dengzhe, yunluo de jienan, huanxi ruokuang* 等著，為隕落的劫難，歡喜若狂). Hence the “I” welcomes death and calls upon the singular “you” to “wipe out your sorrows” (*caqu nide bei'ai* 擦去你的悲哀). The singular “you” appears to be the person who is being “sky-buried,” whereas the plural “you” appears to be the generalized suffering humanity that recognizes in general the interaction between its collective nature and the lonely horizon and between life and death. At the same time, however, the “solitary grandeur” (*yishen de zhuangli* 一身的壯麗) of the

“horizon” (*dipingxian* 地平線) also contains a collective: it is not only “solitary” but also “one,” “whole,” or literally “one body” (*yishen* 一身).

In the final stanza of “Blood Sacrifice” images from the previous stanzas return once again, dislodging previously set meanings and creating new, unstable ones:

朝我奉獻吧！四十名處女將歌唱你們的幸運
曬黑的皮膚像清脆的銅鈴，在齋戒和守望裡游行
那高貴的卑怯的，無辜的罪惡的，純淨的肮髒的潮汐
遼闊記憶，我的奧秘伴隨抽搐的狂歡源源誕生
寶塔巍峨聳立，為山巔的暮色指引一條向天之路
你們解脫了--從血泊中，新近神聖
Pay tribute to me! Forty virgins will sing for your [pl.] good fortune
Charred skin like bronze bells, parade at the fast and during the watch
That nobly abject, innocently criminal, purely filthy tide
Vast memory, my mystery accompanies the shuddering ecstasy
continuously being born
The pagoda towers aloft, guiding the mountain dusk on a heavenward
path
You [pl.] are free – from the middle of the pool of blood, the newly
divine (“Nuorilang” 63-4)

The process of interaction in language mirrors the turning of the “sun tide” of the poem, the time of interaction between day and night, and between humanity and the sun that the poem describes. The tide is a liminal moment between day and night, life and death, when everything is covered in the gold, or here blood red, of sunset. This is a moment of flux, as the Chinese word for “turn,” “cháo” 朝, which is related to the Chinese word for “tide,” “cháoxi” 潮汐, and which opens this stanza, reminds the reader. This connection draws out the relationship between the characters for “tide,” “cháoxi” 潮汐, and the characters for dawn and dusk, “zhāoxī” 朝夕, which together form a word that means “all the time” or, paradoxically, “a very short time.” This is central to the themes and linguistic play of the poem, to its poetics of flux, of combination and contradiction. The introduction of the water element, or radical at a language level, creates the compound “tide” (*chaoxi* 潮汐). The unification of water and the heavens within the

character and the interactions between sky, earth and water in the poem lie in the characters and the process of language formation, destruction and change.

The sense of flow and flux is also captured in the phrase “continuously being born” (*yuanyuan dansheng* 源源誕生). The word “continuously” (*yuanyuan*) in Chinese has a sense of “flow” or “source” of a river. The “I” appears as a source of spiritual power that frees the collective “you” of humanity from its suffering and, through birth and death allows humanity to reach the “divine” (*shensheng* 神聖). In this sense, the “I” appears to be outside the flux between day and night, life and death. But at the same time, the “I” is the figure leading the ceremony and so at the center of flux. At another level, then, this tension over the place of the “I” creates a further layer of movement, between the divine and the human. The sense of the inevitable combination of birth and death, and the tidal flow between these binaries is expressed in a variety of ways in “Blood Sacrifice,” through the setting sun, the ritual sacrifice, the sky burial, the interplay between “I” and the collective “you,” and through the tension between the divine and human aspects of the “I,” as well as a variety of other semantic oppositions. The final stanza of “Blood Sacrifice” builds upon this productive combination of opposites in the phrases “nobly abject, innocently criminal, purely filthy,” which describe the word “tide” (*chaoxi* 潮汐), a word that in the poem stands for the interplay between such opposites.

The next short section is entitled “Gatha” (*Jizi* 偈子). A “gatha,” as a footnote to the poem informs the reader, is a short form of Buddhist hymn that resembles a motto. “Gatha,” as the title of the poem suggests, provides something of a motto for the poetics of the poem as a whole. This section develops the play of opposites in the most strikingly simple and yet contradictory form:

爲期待而絕望

爲絕望而期待

期待是最漫長的絕望

絕望是最完美的期待

期待不一定開始

絕望也未必結束

或許召喚祇一聲—

最嘹亮的，恰恰是寂靜

Despairing of expectation

Expectant with despair

Expectation is endless despair

Despair is perfect expectation

Expectation may never begin

Despair may never end

The summons may only sound once

The greatest resonance is stillness (“Nuorilang” 65)

In Chinese the interplay of the contradictory “despair” (*juewang* 絕望) and “expectation” (*qidai* 期待) form a circle of meaning that remains in process, in a state of flux. The opening lines could be read both as “in order to expect, despair” (*wei qidai er juewang* 爲期待而絕望) and as “in order to despair, expect” (*wei juewang er qidai* 爲絕望而期待). To follow the logic of this opening stanza is to follow an endless circle. Such a hermeneutic approach constantly expects a meaningful conclusion, a paraphrase, and yet this logical process is also aware of its circular nature and, so, in its very hope has “lost hope” (*juewang* 絕望) – another alternative translation to “despair.” Thus the stanza in its structure enacts the matter of its statements in a circle of meaning and non-meaning.

The next stanza expands the play between creation, links between words and meanings, and destruction, contradictions between words and meanings. Both these aspects are

present in the use of the superlative marker “zui” 最, which is often translated as “most,” but which does not appear in the translation quoted here. The adjective “zui” resonates in harmony with the words “endless” (*manchang* 漫長) and “perfection” (*wanmei* 完美) but in the second case there is a note of contradiction. “Perfection” in the Chinese implies, even more strongly than in the English, a total completion, so that to say that something is “most completed” suggests the inadequacy of the total completion. The contradiction does not end here, of course. The superlative “endless,” or “with an end out of sight,” (*manchang* 漫長) contrasts sharply with “despair,” which implies not only a loss of hope but also that the subject is no longer looking. Therefore, for one no longer looking everything is equally “out of sight,” and the word “most” is again contradictory.

To the binaries that interplay throughout the first three sections of “Norlang,” death and life, suffering and celebration, night and day, “Gatha” explicitly adds the binary of expectation and despair, which Yang sees as a central contradiction in human existence. For Yang, this is part of his attempt in “Norlang” to examine “human suffering,” which he sees as “to a large extent” coming from “the torment of this contradictory struggle,” while also emphasizing the necessity of death after life (“Concerning ‘Norlang’” 163). The process of contradictory and complementary forces, meanings, and characters in constant flux is summed up in “Gatha,” but the meditation on this theme continues in the final part of “Norlang.”

The fifth and final part of “Norlang” bears the title “Midnight Celebration” (*Wuye de qingdian* 午夜的慶典). According to Yang’s own textual note, the poem’s overall form comes from a Sichuan folk elegy, which contains the same three subsection titles as those in “Norlang”: “Opening the Song’s Way” (*Kai ge lu* 開歌路), “Piercing the Flower” (*Chuan hua* 穿花), and “Halting the Drum” (*Shagu* 煞鼓). There is a long tradition in Chinese poetry of taking folk material and turning it into poems. One of the earliest examples of this is “Nine Songs” (*Jiu ge* 九歌), written over two thousand years ago, which takes the material of folk rites and turns it into “refined” poetry. It is thought that the original “Nine Songs” were performed as a theatrical event (Watson, *Columbia Book of Chinese Poetry* 45-6). The form of the first section of “Midnight Celebration,”

“Opening the Song’s Way,” also resembles the “Nine Songs” in this respect; it has parts for a “lead” (*ling* 領) and “chorus” (*he* 合):

領：午夜降臨了，斑斕的黑暗展開它的虎皮，金燦燦地閃潤耀著綠色。遙遠。青草的芳香使我們感動，露水打濕天空，我們是被誰集合起來的呢？

合：哦這麼多人，這麼多人！

領：星座傾斜了，不知不覺的睡眠被松濤充滿。風吹過陌生的手臂，我們緊緊擠在一起，夢見篝火，又大又亮。孩子們也睡了。

合：哦這麼多人，這麼多人！

領：靈魂顫栗著，靈魂渴望著作，在漆黑的樹葉間尋找一塊空地。在暈眩的沉默後面，有一個聲音，徐徐松弛成月色，那就是我們一直追求的光明嗎？

合：哦這麼多人，這麼多人！

Lead: Midnight has fallen, brilliant darkness unfolds its tiger skin, radiates a brilliant golden green. Distance. The fragrance of the grass touches our hearts, the dew dampens the heavens. Who has gathered us tonight?

Chorus: Oh so many people, so many people!

Lead: The constellations have tilted, unconscious sleep is filled by the wind sloughing in the pines. Wind blows through strange arms, we are squeezed tightly together, dreaming of a bonfire, big and bright. The children also sleep.

Chorus: Oh so many people, so many people!

Lead: Our souls tremble, our souls thirst, searching for a space amidst the pitch-black leaves. Behind the vertiginous silence there is a sound, slowly melting into the moonlight. Is this then the light we have been searching for?

Chorus: Oh so many people, so many people! (“Nuorilang” 66-7)

It may seem that the mention of “Nine Songs” in relation to this passage is of too general a nature to be significant. But there are several reasons to believe that Yang had this early Chinese poetry in mind over the period in which he wrote “Norlang” and a number of other works. “Nine Songs” has traditionally been attributed to the semi-mythical poet Qu Yuan 屈原. In “Concerning ‘Norlang,’” as well as in a number of other statements of poetics, Yang compares his own effort to that of Qu Yuan: “If Qu Yuan had not pursued the heights and the depths, he would not have been Qu Yuan.”

He refers to Qu Yuan as an example of a poet who transcended his own time, by taking the reality of “human suffering,” and the “human power to confront reality” to “create a new spiritual world.” This kind of poetry, as Yang sees it, is “self-sufficient,” by which he means it is “independent of that concrete reality which inspired it (as the poetry of Qu Yuan is independent of the contemporary social reality of the Kingdom of Chu)” (“Concerning ‘Norlang’” 163). Yang also intends “Norlang” to be a “self-sufficient” work in this sense.

“Nine Songs” is not the only work attributed to Qu Yuan. It is part of the collection the “The Songs of Chu” (*Chu ci* 楚辭), the greater part of which is traditionally attributed to Qu Yuan.¹⁷ In Yang’s work, however, apart from the use of folk songs, there are other reasons to see a relationship with the “Nine Songs,” of which there are actually eleven. The eleventh of these is entitled “Ritualization of the Soul,” or “Ritual Cycle” (*Lihun* 禮魂). Yang’s first published collection of poems was also entitled “Ritualization of the Soul” (*Lihun* 禮魂). Moreover, Yang’s “Blood Sacrifice” and this first section of “Midnight Celebration” resemble in their descriptions of rites of death “Ritualization of the Soul,” which ends the “Nine Songs”:

成禮兮會鼓，傳芭兮代舞；

夸女倡兮容与；

春蘭兮秋菊，長无絕兮終古。

The rites are accomplished to the beating of the drums;

The flower-wand is passed on to succeeding dancers.

Lovely maidens sing their song, slow and solemnly.

Orchids in spring and chrysanthemums in autumn:

So it shall go on until the end of time.

In “The Way of the Opening Song,” as in “Ritualization of the Soul,” the “souls” (*linghun* 靈魂) appear to be the focus of a group ceremony involving song. In the final part of “Midnight Celebration,” “Halting the Drum,” the use of drums is also important. As in Qu Yuan’s poem, throughout “Norlang” one also finds interaction between the human figures in the ceremony and the natural world. The “we” in “The Way of the

¹⁷ The view today is that only some, if any, of the *Nine Songs* were actually composed by Qu Yuan with others being added at a later date (Watson, *Columbia Book of Chinese Poetry* 45-7).

Opening Song” are placed alongside the natural world. Where in “Ritualization of the Soul,” the “flower-wand” (*ba* 芭), “orchids” (*lan* 蘭) and “chrysanthemums” (*ju* 菊) appear to be used as extensions of the people’s arms in the ceremony, in “The Way of the Opening Song” the arms of the people appear to be compared with branches of pines in the wind (“filled by wind sloughing in the pines. The wind blows through strange arms” [*bei songtao chongman. Feng chui mosheng de shoubi* 被松濤充滿。風吹過陌生的手臂]).

Through this metaphor, the first part of “Midnight Celebration,” “Opening the Song’s Way,” continues the vivifying of the interaction between heaven and earth, fire, water, and air, and between the human and the natural world of landscape in “Norlang.” In this part of the poem, however, this play transmutes itself through a religious ceremony of the kind from which Chinese poetry is thought to have originated. The leader of these ceremonies in the earliest written Chinese poetry was a poet-shaman who interacted with the forces of heaven and took part in courtship with an invoked god. In “Opening the Song’s Way,” too, the leader both describes and enacts this interaction between heaven and earth, nature and humanity.

The temporal movement from dusk to midnight makes darkness, night, and light, or fire, the focus of opposition. There are two sources of light, the sky and the bonfire. The light is associated with the untrustworthy symbol of the tiger in the opening lines. This mysteriousness and untrustworthiness appears again later in the “strange hands” (*mosheng de shoubi* 陌生的手臂) and in the “bonfire” (*gouhuo* 篝火), which in Chinese recalls the idiom “bonfires, shouts, and cries” (*gouhuo hu ming* 篝火呼鳴). This idiom refers to a case of deception in which bonfires and shouts were used to deceive an enemy. It suggests secret revolt, and a deceptive, two-edged or phantasmal invocation of the spirit world.

From the tiger-skin metaphor the description of light moves to “gold” (*jin* 金). This word links this section back to the sunset, gold-digger, golden tree, and the waterfall references in earlier sections. It appears in a line that describes the process of perceiving fire and light. The movement is from the color “gold” to another color, “green” (*liuse* 綠色), between which lie the apprehension of “brightness” (*cancan* 燦燦) and glittering

(*shanyao* 閃潤) of the fire. In this way, the line describes and creates a flickering perceptual process.

Like the word “gold,” the tiger and the fire in “Midnight Celebration” recall the opening sections of “Norlang,” particularly the opening line:

高原如猛虎， 焚燒於激流暴跳的萬物的海濱

The plateau like a raging tiger burns at the shore of creation's torrent
 (“Nuorilang” 59)

The contradiction of threat of destruction and creation noted in “Suntide” is also central in “Midnight Celebration.” Yang describes “Midnight Celebration” as an “elegy,” but one that “can only arrive in an atmosphere of praise.” For Yang, this is because “death is inevitable and never to be feared.” The necessity of death for life continues in “Midnight Celebration.” As in “Suntide,” the contrast of darkness and light (the fire here *is* the darkness) expresses the mutuality of life and death. The excitement of the collective “you” is at this combination directly perceived through ceremony. While the collective “you” were previously passive in “Suntide” and “Blood Sacrifice,” now in “Midnight Celebration” they have become active in a kind of ecstatic ceremony. This is possibly the reason why Yang places later on in “Midnight Celebration” an “echo of the last part of ‘Suntide’”: “ecstasy for the meteoric apocalypse” (*wei yunluo de jienan huanxi nuokuang ruo kuang* 為隕落的劫難， 歡喜若狂) (“Concerning ‘Norlang’” 163).

The interaction between the human and natural continues in the next words of the “song”: “Distance. The fragrance of the grass touches our hearts” (*Yaoyuan. Qingcao de fangxiang shi women gandong* 遙遠。青草的芳香使我們感動). The movement of flames, described in the previous words of the “leader,” parallels the movement implied by the word “distance” (*yaoyuan* 遙遠). The word for “distance” in Chinese is made up of two characters, both of which have the radical, or meaning component, for movement. Movement is also implied by the word “touches,” or in Chinese, “gandong” 感動, literally “moves.” Movement in the next sentence, just as in the opening sentence, then becomes an unfolding, an opening or a revelation. The Chinese for “dew” (*lushui* 露水) also has the figurative meaning “to reveal.” This “revealing water,” then, introduces the reader to the heavens. In Chinese too the dampening of the heavens is

described actively as a striking or making wet (“the dew dampens the heavens” [*lushui dashi tiankong* 露水打濕天空]). One can see the dew as transcending the distance and filling the emptiness of the “heavens.” (In the Chinese word for “heavens,” the second character means “empty” [*kong* 空].) The sky becomes a bowl of water. The unification of water and sky leads on to the union of the “we,” which the grass, perhaps covered in dew, has already moved in a single motion of emotion. The coming together of people in the ceremony parallels, and interacts with, the dynamic natural phenomena.

This combining of people and of nature is the topic of the chorus of the song “Opening the Song’s Way”:

合：哦這麼多人，這麼多人！

Chorus: Oh so many people, so many people!

The heavens open the lead’s next verse:

領：星座傾斜了，不知不覺的睡眠被松濤充滿。風吹過陌生的手臂，我們緊緊擠在一起，夢見篝火，又大又亮。孩子們也睡了。

Lead: The constellations have tilted, unconscious sleep is filled by the wind sloughing in the pines. Wind blows through strange arms, we are squeezed tightly together, dreaming of a bonfire, big and bright. The children also sleep. (“Nuorilang” 66)

The constellation sits off balance. The strangeness of the scene continues as it enters “sleep” (*shuimian* 睡眠). Here the sound of pine trees in the wind reveals a connection back to water through the phrase “songtao” 松濤, which translates as “wind sloughing in the pines,” but which literally means “pine waves.” It thus compares the sound to that of a wave crashing. Once again, as with the empty sky, now full of water and stars, there is a movement toward filling with an etymological link to water: “chongman” 充滿.

The natural and human combine as the wind blows through both “pines” (*song* 松) and “arms” (*shoubi* 手臂). In fact the “we” here could conceivably include the trees and describe how the pines and humans are semantically “squeezed tightly together.” The description of the dream in the phrase “dreaming of a bonfire” also acts to make the whole dream world of pines, waves and hands one, and simultaneously links all with the changing fire of the opening stanza.

The “souls” (*linghun* 靈魂) of the people are the subjects of the opening sentence of the lead’s final verse in “Opening the Song’s Way”:

領：靈魂顫栗著，靈魂渴望著作，在漆黑的樹葉間尋找一塊空地。在暈眩的沉默後面，有一個聲音，徐徐松弛成月色，那就是我們一直追求的光明嗎？

Lead: Our souls tremble, they thirst, searching for a space amidst the pitch-black leaves. Behind the vertiginous silence there is a sound, slowly melting into the moonlight. Is this then the light we have been searching for? (“Nuorilang” 66-7)

Here the merging of human and natural involves a danger, because becoming one means not only a gain but also a loss of separation, a loss of body. A soul without “a space” is perhaps a soul without a body. This is a reason for it to “tremble [with fear]” (*chanlizhe* 顫栗著). It is “searching for a space amidst the pitch-black leaves” (*zai qihei de shuye jian zhuzhao yi kuai kongdi* 在漆黑的樹葉間尋找一塊空地), which are part of trees, with which the human body mixed in the previous stanza. This filling of an empty vessel parallels the filling of the sky with dew in the first stanza and, thus, simultaneously works to merge the body and soul with the natural world, just as in a sky burial the soul leaves the body and merges with nature.

Space in blackness is light, so that “behind the vertiginous silence there is a sound, slowly melting into moonlight.” The word translated here as “silence,” “*chenmo*” 沉默, also has a connotation of visual indistinctness in its first character, as in “*xing chen yue luo*” 星沉月落, and blackness in its second, “*mo*,” which contains the radical for “black” and has the same pronunciation as the character for “ink,” black” or “dark” (*mo* 墨). Silence and darkness, sound and light also mix, confusing the senses, just as the sound is “slowly melting into moonlight.” The mixing of senses comes “slowly,” or, better, “lazily” (*xuxu* 徐徐), it exhibits the lethargy of sleep and the strangeness of the night world of dreams. The body here is upset, not only “tilted” but also giddy in the “vertiginous” (*yunxuan* 暈眩) environment. This section ends in an uncertain grasp in the dark at light, at understanding, a certainty of space and wholeness, where this wholeness simultaneously provides a paradoxically giddy infinity.

The middle part of “Midnight Celebration,” “Piercing the Flower” (*Chuan hua* 穿花) can be read as a kind of metapoetic statement. It explicitly turns the focus of the poem toward the poem itself, to that which the poem is intended to express:

落日朗的宣喻：

唯一的道路是一條透明的路

唯一的道路是一條柔軟的路

我說，跟隨那股贊歌的泉水吧

夕陽沉澱了，血流消融了

瀑布和雪山的向導

笑容蕩漾袒露誘的女性

從四面八方，跳舞而來，沐浴而來

超越虛幻，分享我的純真

The proclamation of Norlang:

The one road is a transparent road

The only road is a supple road

I say this: follow that stream of praise

The sunset has precipitated, the flow of blood has melted

Guide of the waterfall and the snow mountain

Women smiling, rippling, naked, alluring

From every corner, come dancing, come bathing

Transcend illusion partake of my purity (“Nuorilang” 67)

In “Piercing the Flower,” one finds the intensification, or condensation, of the symbols and contradictory and complimentary forces and language that are employed in the poem “Norlang.” This section of the poem is explicitly “the proclamation of Norlang” (*Nuorilang de xuanyu* 落日朗的宣喻), which raises the question: who is Norlang?

Norlang is definitely the waterfall and the Tibetan god, from which the waterfall takes its name. It was also suggested earlier that it has to do with “answering the sun,” and this is reflected in the binary opposition between fire or light and water in the poem. In “Piercing the Flower,” “Norlang” is explicitly personified: this is her, his or its “proclamation” (*xuanyu* 宣喻). This suggests that it is Norlang the god who is

speaking, but this god also has a specific spiritual meaning within the poem. It was suggested from the poet's own comments and the poetics of "Golden Tree" that the "I" represents "that spiritual existence over and above humanity's 'real' existence," and the "transcendent will and divinity of nature" ("Concerning 'Norlang'" 162). Along with the invocation-like nature of the poem, this suggests that in the poem the god Norlang is some kind of natural spirit of the waterfall and the waterfall itself, a personification of nature, and also a representation of human spiritual yearning in nature.

"Piercing the Flower" begins with a description of the one or only path, which paradoxically is double on the page. The idea of a "transparent road" (*touming de lu* 透明的路) also seems contradictory, as it appears both insecure and invisible. Yet in Chinese "touting" 透明, which is translated here as "transparent," connotes light and, thus, feeds into the metaphors of light that preceded it in the poem. This suggests a reading of the poem that follows this line or path of light.

In the following lines this path of light becomes, in a now familiar transmutation, a "stream" (*quanshui* 泉水). Moreover, this stream or road now explicitly attaches itself to an oral form, a "song of praise" or "eulogy" (*zange* 贊歌). In Chinese too it is not simply a stream but is water from a source, "spring water" (*quanshui* 泉水). This song is attached to the voice of the "I" ("I say" [*wo shuo* 我說]).

The play from light to water now becomes a play from the light of the sun to the flow of blood in an elaboration of meaning that also involves a doubling of meaning.

夕陽沉澱了，血流消融了

瀑布和雪山的向導

The sunset has precipitated, the flow of blood has melted

Guide of the waterfall and the snow mountain ("Nuorilang" 67)

As day becomes night the light becomes water, perhaps the "dew" that "dampens the heavens" (*lushui dashi tiankong* 露水打濕天空) in "Opening the Song's Way" or the "tide" (*chaoxi* 潮汐) that seems to be associated with the evening light in "Blood Sacrifice" and in the title "Suntide" (*Richao* 日潮). This water becomes "blood" (*xue* 血), just as it does earlier in the poem at points of sunset, but, far from precipitating, it

has “melted” (*xiaorong* 消融) or de-congealed in a process that suggests a return to life in spring or a kind of rebirth. Thus, once again natural forces link with the human ones. The “guide” (*xiangdao* 向導) could be the water, which links waterfall and the melting snow of the mountain, so that the lines of change become the lines or guide to the road of the poem. The precipitation of the sunset recalls the fine particles of gold in water that are searched for in “Suntide” and signals a change in state from day to night. The condensation of the sun parallels the melting apparent in “the flow of blood” (*xueliu* 血流); the red and gold of blood and sunset both become parts of a watery flow.

The melting of snow then leads to a shower of dancing women:

笑容蕩漾袒露誘的女性

從四面八方，跳舞而來，沐浴而來

Women smiling, rippling, naked, alluring

From every corner, come dancing, come bathing (“Nuorilang” 67)

In Chinese “dancing” (*tiaowu* 跳舞) and “showering” (*linyü* 沐浴) parallel one another, creating an impression of falling water, which links with the personification of the waterfall in “Golden Tree.” Moreover, it suggests an accumulation of water, becoming moist in the evening dew or perhaps immersing oneself in a pool or shower of water. The “rippling” (*dangyang* 蕩漾), however, suggests that they themselves are this water.

The question of which reading or image is real and which is its metaphor emerges clearly in the light of the last line of “Piercing the Flower”:

超越虛幻，分享我的純真

Transcend illusion, partake of my purity (“Nuorilang” 67)

The Chinese here for “illusion” (*xuhuan* 虛幻) has connotations of emptiness in the character “xu” 虛. This suggests that the surpassing of illusion might involve filling this space, just as the dew filled the heavens in “Midnight Sacrifice.” The second character, “huan” 幻, also implies a change of state. This partaking of “purity” (*chunzhen* 純真) however, is contradictory, for once it is shared it cannot be said to be purely “mine” (*wode* 我的), nor entirely “pure.” Moreover, the juxtaposition of the two phrases is also ironic, because an overcoming of a subjective illusion might imply an overcoming of

the twists and turns of this poem, while if one takes the “I” to speak not only *in* but also *about* the poem, then the parallel phrase implores the reader to partake in the illusion, to read. This double move of overcoming and imbibing constitutes “Norlang,” its self-creation, and the process of reading the poem. On this reading, the plural “you” is not just a representation of “humanity’s suffering” but is also explicitly addressed to the reader. The poem “Norlang,” through the lyric “I,” which is a natural force and the spiritual force that the god Norlang represents in the poem, becomes a potential source of the transcendence of illusion. This transcendence, however, is only achieved through the reader’s participation in the artistic illusion of the poem.

In “Halting the Drum” (*Shagu* 煞鼓), the processes that take place throughout the poem, which “Piercing the Flower” has made explicit, continue to play themselves out:

此刻，高原如猛虎，被透明的手指無垠的愛撫
此刻，狼藉的森林漫延被蹂躪的美，燦爛而嚴峻的美
向山洪，向村莊碎石纍纍的毀滅公佈宇宙的和諧
樹根像粗大的腳踝倔強地走著，孩子在流離中笑著
尊嚴和性格從死亡裡站起，鈴藍花吹奏我的神聖
我的光，即使隕落著你們時也照亮著你們
那個金黃的召喚，把苦澀交給海，海永不平靜
在黑夜之上海，在遺忘之上，在夢囈的呢喃和微微呼喊之上
此刻，在世界中央。我說：活下去--人們
天地開創了。鳥兒啼叫著。一切，僅僅是啓示
At this moment, the plateau like a raging tiger receives the infinite
caress of transparent fingers
At this moment, the tousled forest spreads its ravaged beauty,
resplendent, stark beauty
Announcing to the mountain torrent, to the gravel-heaped destruction
of the village the harmony of the universe
Tree roots, like thick ankles, keep stubbornly walking, the homeless
children smile

Pride and identity rise up from within death, the lily plays the music of
my divinity
My light illumines you [pl.] even in your meteoric fall
A golden summons returns anguish to the sea, the never-tranquil sea
Over the black night, over oblivion, over the twittering, faint cry of
dream talk
At this moment, in the centre of the world. I say: live on – people
Heaven and earth have begun. Birds are calling. All nearly a
revelation (“Nuorilang” 67-8)

The final section, the coda, begins like the classical coda with a recapitulation. Here the opening line of the section returns the reader to the opening line of “Suntide,” the first section of “Norlang.” At the same time, the “transparent hands” (*touming de shou* 明的手) recall the “transparent road” (*touming de lu* 透明的路) in the previous section, “Piercing the Flower.” The opening words, “at this moment” (*cike* 此刻), which are repeated several times in this final section, draw attention to the new context, while also referring back to the same phrase in “Suntide.”

In this final section creation of the self, creation of the song, and creation in nature all interplay. There is a confusion of the “I” of the poet and the “I” of some divine being, just as in “Nine Songs.” This tension between the metapoetic and internal logic of the poem is already present in the title “Halting the Drum.” The title could be read as a kind of code for this contradiction or counter-fugue. The first word of the title in Chinese, “sha” 煞, means stop or finish. In this reading the end of the drumming, and the end of song, could be seen as the end of the poem. On the other hand the same character with a different pronunciation can refer to a kind of evil spirit, which is very much in the vein of the spirit world in which the poem takes place. Conversely the character could also be read as an intensifier. This would make the section the climax of the drumming.

The second word of the title, “drum” (*gu* 鼓), also resonates in multiple directions. It relates to the musical themes and beating drums of this and previous sections. As a drum, it is also a hollow object and, thus, participates in the tropes of filling and space in the poem. A drum is usually circular, so it also relates to spheres of earth and sun that make up the constellation of “Norlang.” The Chinese for drum, “gu” 鼓, also means “rouse” or “agitate.” This implies an incitement to movement that contradicts the meaning of “sha” 煞 as ending. The contradictions run not only between senses of the

same character but also between the two characters of the title. The poem enacts this contradiction in its themes of life and beauty coming out of desolate, natural landscape. In a sense, here, all is over, the drum has ended its march. The final words of the poem, however, anticipate something that is “nearly a revelation” (*jinjin shi qishi* 僅僅是啓示), a new beginning.

In “Norlang” nature appears almost to speak for itself, to reveal all, but it is only in the human answer that the poem is made, that the approach to revelation is reached. “Norlang” describes the attempt to commune with and yet be separate from nature. It is about the complex interplay that results from attempting to *nuo ri lang* 落日朗, to answer the sun, and to answer truly nature in general, to fully apprehend its revelation and to reveal it in poetry.

The dynamic interplay between creation and destruction, beginnings and endings, oneness and separation is clear from the opening lines of “Norlang” to the last. The elements of contradiction and intensification, of creative construction and violence in the images and symbols of the poem resonate with uncertainty, with the same interplay between creation and destruction as the language itself. Yang’s own view of poetry also focuses on words as multi-layered experiences, as “concentric circles”: “in words the poet fuses with the myriad things to create the concentric circles of poetry” (*Yi* n. pag. [introductory notes], trans. Lee, “Before Tradition” 94).

As the poet says of the work, “Norlang attempts a synthesis – it allows the spirit to be grounded in real experience, and thereby to be still richer, while experience becomes more profound through illumination of the spiritual world” (“Concerning ‘Norlang’” 163).

3. “Banpo”: History Today

Yang wrote “Banpo” between July 1982 and June 1984. Part of the poem was published in 1985 in Yang’s first official book of poetry, *Lihun* 禮魂 (Ritualization of the Soul), in which “Norlang” also appeared.¹⁸ Like “Norlang,” “Banpo” is a historically important poem, in that it is exemplary of the Root-Searching School (*Xungen pai* 尋根派) of poetry. The emergence of this school represented an important development in Chinese poetry in the first half of the 1980s. Along with Jiang He 江河, Yang Lian was the leading exponent of Root-Searching Poetry, which was characterized by an attempt “to redefine Chinese identity in the modern world” by creating “modern epics” that employed imagery and motifs from the Chinese tradition (Yeh, “Light a Lamp in a Rock” 393-4).

Apart from its historical importance in a direct sense, “Banpo” also has symbolic importance because the Root-Searching approach employed in the poem has been interpreted as expressing the prevailing attitude toward tradition in the discourse of Chinese artists and intellectuals in the 1980s. Because “Banpo” is an even longer poem than “Norlang,” the discussion here will focus on the first and second sections of the poem, entitled “Myth” (*Shenhua* 神話) and “Stone Axe” (*Shi fu* 石斧) respectively. “Myth” has been singled out as exemplary of a tendency in Obscure Poetry, and in Chinese intellectual discourse of the 1980s generally, to valorize the search for lost social value (Zhang, *Chinese Modernism in the Era of Reforms* 122). Yang Lian’s Root-Searching Poetry in general and the poem “Myth” in particular have also been interpreted as attempts “to describe the ‘collective unconscious’ of the Chinese people” (Chen, *Occidentalism* 92).¹⁹

The use of Chinese mythology and historical references in “Banpo” certainly reflects the revival of interest in the Chinese tradition amongst intellectuals in China in the

¹⁸ “Banpo” is a cycle of six poems. Parts 1, 3, 5 and 6 were published in *Lihun*. Prior to the official publication, Yang had already produced a mimeographed *samizdat* version of *Lihun* in 1984 that included the “Banpo” cycle in its entirety (1-29). The dates of composition come from this mimeographed version (29). The full cycle is most readily available in Yang, *Dahai tingzhi zhi chu* 3-28.

¹⁹ While Chen does not explicitly mention “Myth” in relation to Root-Searching poetry, she refers in general terms to the popularity of the myths of Hou Yi 后羿, Kua Fu 夸父, and Nüwa 女媧, all of which are present in “Myth.”

1980s. To address whether this phenomenon, as it appears in “Banpo,” is about a search for lost social value, however, one needs to assess the relationship between history and modernity represented in the poem. In other words, does the poem represent an attempt to recapture a forgotten past, a lost Chinese unconscious, or is the relationship with tradition in “Banpo” more complex?

The title “Banpo” immediately implies a search for origins. As is well known, Banpo is the name of an archaeological site near Xi’an where evidence has been uncovered of a historical civilization that might be linked to the ancient myths of the Han people. Since the Neolithic village was uncovered in the 1950s, it has been a potent symbol of the ancient birth of Chinese culture. It is not surprising, therefore, that the poem has been interpreted as a search for an original lost culture. As in “Norlang,” however, all is not so simple. A footnote at the beginning of “Myth” refers to the poet’s visit to Banpo, where he saw an ancient statue of the goddess Nüwa 女媧. The footnote gives the reader an awareness of the modern context in which the poem is written. Just as Banpo is a place where history and myth mingle, the real event of the poet’s visit to this place intertwines with the mythical world that he creates in the poem.

“Myth” presents an “I,” which is a living statue, an embodiment of history and the mystical or spiritual aspects of ancient Chinese culture. The use of the “I” to represent a god recalls the same poetic approach as in “Norlang.” But while in “Norlang” this god was a natural spirit of the waterfall and mountain, the embodiment of the god in “Myth” is an object made by human hands, a statue. Thus, the spirit voice in “Myth” allows for interaction between contemporary and ancient figures, myth and reality, rather than between humanity and nature. This interaction is clear in the first stanza of “Myth,” in which the ancestors are present, but are also in the process of departing:²⁰

祖先的夕陽

一聲憤怒擊破了萬年的綠意

大地和天空驟然翻傳

²⁰ The Chinese version of “Banpo” that appears here is taken from Yang, *Dahai tingzhi zhi chu: Yang Lian zuopin*. The translation is my own.

鳥鴉像一池黑睡蓮
憐叫著飛過每個黃昏
Twilight of the ancestors

A voice of wrath shatters the ancient green
Heaven and earth swirl
Crows like a pool of black lilies
Fly shrieking through every dusk (“Banpo” 5)

A point of transition between day and night is also a point of transition between silence and speech, which is, of course, paradoxically already referred to in language, in the poem.

The words seem to relate to history and lost texts in the following stanza:

零亂散失的竹簡，歷史的小小片斷
從另一種現實中，石頭
登上峭崖，復原了自己的面孔
Disordered, shattered bamboo slips, little shards of history
From another kind of reality, rock
Clammers the precipice, recovers its lost face (“Banpo” 5)

The link of the organic and human-made is in the bamboo. The two noun phrases, each of seven characters, illustrate this in their parallelism. The “I” sees itself in “another kind of reality” (*ling yi zhong xianshi* 另一種現實). It reads itself in rock, which is personified, just as one might find meaning in an ancient text. The movement here is from the fragments of text to the whole and immediacy of “its own face” (*ziji de miankong* 自己的面孔).

The question here is whether this is narcissistic or self-effacing, which is a general problem of seeing the self in another, here “another kind of reality” (*ling yizhong xianshi* 從另一種現實中). Similarly, the poem here deals with boundaries in the peak, a boundary between earth and sky, the precipice, a point between heights and depths, and the movement from ancient fragments to the whole face and immediacy of the “I.”

祖先的夕陽

落進我懷裡
像這祇盛滿過生命泉水的尖底瓶
一顆祈願補天的五彩的心
茫茫沙原，從地平線向我逼近
離去石頭，歸來石頭
我是一座活的雕塑
Ancestral sun
Sets into my breast
Like this tapered flask brimming with the spring water of life
A multicolored heart that yearns to mend the sky
A vast dune approaches me from the horizon
Departing stone, returning stone
I am a living statue (“Banpo” 5)

The meeting of the “I” and the other of the ancestors is more explicit here. They meet at the border point of the sunset. There is an implicit violence in this connection, because the Chinese for “approaches” (*bijin* 逼近) contains an implicit threat of compulsion. The correspondences between the heart and body of the individual and the natural features of the sky and sunset deny the sharp oppositions, which the lines paradoxically set up. This combination of animate and inanimate, present and ancient, finds its most explicit expression in the living statue that comes from and returns to stone.

哦紅褐色的光，照耀同一片黃土
那兒，起伏著我童年的茅屋
松樹和青銅器，在山坳裡默默佇立
優美的物獻出溫暖的花紋
骨珠串的日子
我的大地膚色的孩子
當夢發白，飽含澆灌萬物之水
第一個單音詞，喃喃誕生
Oh russet light, shining on the same yellow earth

There, the waves of thatched huts of my childhood
Pine trees and bronze vessels stand silent on the col
Fine beasts gave up their warm patterns
Day strings of bone beads
My earth-colored children
When the dream paled, drank the waters of creation
The first syllable came muttering into being (“Banpo” 6)

The combination of violence, even death, and life that the redness of the sky implies further develops the theme in the opening of “Norlang.” Here again we see the same play with “huanghun” 黃昏 (dusk), which is implicit in the “russet light” (*honghese de guang* 紅褐色的光), and “huangtu” 黃土 (yellow earth), which is more explicit in the opening lines of this stanza than in “Norlang.”

The life-giving effect is clear in the final characters of the fifth and sixth lines of this stanza. The combination of “rizi” 日子 and “haizi” 孩子 as parallel nouns ending consecutive lines draws attention to the commonality between the Chinese words for “sun” and the “child” in the suffix “zi” 子. Although an extremely common suffix in Chinese, the word child draws attention to the independent meaning of the character as the noun for “son” or “seed.” In this way, these final “rhyming” words reveal the human son in the natural sun. The words enact the thematic material of the stanza.

The semantic correspondences resonate with transformations in the next stanza.

我游遍白晝的河灘，一條蛇尾
拍打飛鳥似的時間，化爲龍
我走向黑夜的岩谷，一雙手掌
摸索無聲的壁畫，變成鷹
I wander the flood banks in the daytime
My serpent’s tail slaps time, which is like a flying bird, transforms
into a dragon
I walk into the rocky valleys of black night, a pair of palms
Groping the noiseless rock paintings, become an eagle (“Banpo” 6)

The metamorphoses take place not only between animals, but also between natural features, human attributes, perceptions and animals. The first line moves metaphorically

from daylight to a riverbank. This riverbank implies a river, which, because of its snakelike character, seems to be the motivation for the metaphoric move to the “serpent’s tail” (*shewei* 蛇尾). The “I” swims in and explodes into a multitude of images, into light, sky, water and animal movement. From physical images the second stanza moves through another animal, a bird that reverses the downward movement of the first stanza and brings it back to the sky. The line moves into the subjective human quality of time, which is metaphorically compared to a bird.

Nüwa is sometimes said to have had serpent’s tail, but there is a more direct reference intended here. A note in a never completed manuscript translation makes clear that the Nüwa statue is depicted with Fuxi, mythical inventor of cooking, music, the calendar, hunting, fishing and writing, and that they are carved “with their lower bodies (serpent-tails) intertwined” (Yang Lian and John Minford, Handwritten Notes on “Banpo”).

The stanza functions not only along these horizontal transformations but also along the vertical axes of its syntactic and prosodic parallelism. All lines consist of seven or eight characters followed by a caesura and another three or four characters. Lines one and three begin with “I” followed by a one-character verb, while lines two and four begin with a two-character verb. All lines then contain a qualified object noun of two characters, though the qualifying component varies in length and grammatical type. The parallels bind the two odd lines and the two even lines together, while the use of enjambment, contrastingly, links the first line to the second and the third to the final line of the stanza.

The parallels are also semantic. Where the epithet for the first noun is the daylight in the first line, the corresponding modifier is the “black night” (*heiye* 黑夜) in the third line. Similarly the third line’s “rocky valleys” (*yangu* 岩谷) resonate with the “river” (*he* 河) of the first, which one might expect to find in a mountain valley. The united opposites of “river” and “bank” (*an* 灘) find parallels in the opposites of “cliff” or “rocky” and “valley” in the third. The emphasis is on the interrelatedness of things, which are always in motion.

The intense repetitive meter of the stanza is also inscribed within it, as “time, which is like a flying bird” (*feiniaoshi de shijian* 飛鳥似的時間), could be the meter of beats counted by the “slapping” (*paida* 拍打) of the serpent’s tail that eventually seems to

become the bird, the “eagle,” with which the stanza ends. Thus the beating wings of time and of the “I” in its many forms inscribe the clapping meter of this stanza of the poem.

早已不是少女，在這裡一跪千載 ---
而把太陽追趕得無處藏身的男士
被風暴般的歡望折斷了雄渾的背影
震顫著寂寞大海的鳥兒
註定填不滿自己淺淺的靈魂
第九顆烈日掙扎死去
弓弦和痛苦，卻徒然鳴響
一個女人祇能清冷地奔向月亮
在另一種光中活著
向過頭，沉思已成往日的世界
Long since not a young girl, kneeling here these thousand years
Storm-like desire broke the powerful back of the warrior
Who chased the sun till it had no place to hide
The bird that makes the solitary ocean quiver
Destined to failure in filling its own shallow soul
The ninth burning sun dies struggling
Bowstrings and torment peal in vain
A woman can only, abandoned, flee toward the moon
Live in another kind of light
Turn back her head to ponder the world of the suns now past
 (“Banpo” 6)

This stanza in part describes the legend of Chang E 嫦娥, the woman in the moon. Furthermore, the dying of “ninth burning sun” (*dijiu ke lie ri* 第九顆烈日) obviously recalls Chang E’s legendary husband Hou Yi 后毅, who destroyed the nine suns to save the world from burning up. According to legend Chang E took a concoction that belonged to her husband and that would have granted him immortality. Instead, Chang E became immortal, either in an act of arrogant selfishness, or in an act of selflessness

to save the world from her tyrannical husband. Whatever version of the legend one follows, Chang E ascended to the moon, despite being pursued by her husband. In the final lines of the stanza quoted above, the pursuit by Hou Yi of Chang E all the way to the moon is reversed in the turn, the look back, to the world of the suns, to the past, and importantly to the mortal world.

The “bird that makes the still ocean quiver” (*zhenchanzhe jimo dahai de niaor* 震顛著寂寞大海的鳥兒) in the fourth line of this stanza might refer to the mythological Jing Wei 經衛. There are several reasons for making this inference. Jing Wei was said to be the incarnation of Nüwa after her death. The ocean swallowed Nüwa, and it is for this reason that, according to legend, Jing Wei carried stones and branches in its beak and deposited them in a vain effort to fill it up, thus avenging Nüwa’s death by drowning. This could be what “destined to failure in filling its own shallow soul” (*zhuding tianbuman ziji de linghun* 註定填不滿自己淺淺的靈魂) refers to in the fifth line of the stanza, with the comparison and contrast between filling the deep ocean and the bird’s own “shallow soul.” Also, Jing Wei was said to be a “crow-like” bird, and “Myth” also mentions crows.

In having the male warrior pursue the sun rather than the moon, the poem mixes the legend of Hou Yi with a reference to yet another legend: the legend of the warrior or giant Kua Fu 夸父, who pursued the sun, but could not catch it and, as a result of his exertion, died of thirst. The stanza, by describing different legends, focuses on the length of time that has passed. The stanza in the time of its own lines enacts the mythical events and the movement to the present moment, with which the stanza seems to begin and end. The retreat from the sun to the moon is ambiguous. For Chang E this move guarantees her safety, yet as this sun is the setting sun of the ancestors, according to the opening line, the move away from the sun may also connote Chang E’s death, as she is both an ancestor and a mythical figure from a time passed, as the movement of time in this passage emphasizes. With the dual implications of *ri* 日 (“sun” and “day”) this could mark a move away from the mythic world to the everyday.

All these myths have a common element that supports this reading of a transition from the immortal and mythical to the mortal and everyday. They all contain elements of failure and loss. Kua Fu fails to catch the sun and dies of thirst. Jing Wei can never fill

the ocean, and its efforts are the result of loss. In the legend of Chang E and Hou Yi, the two are separated forever. Despite Chang E's longing for Hou Yi and the granting of her wish for him to become immortal, Hou Yi is immortal in the palace of the sun. Moreover, both are separated not only from mortality but also from the earth. All these stories explain how these legendary figures can no longer play an active role in human affairs. They thus support the reading of "Myth" as partly concerning the transition from the mythic world to the everyday, or the loss of this mythic time, rather than its recovery or purity.

無窮歲月的播種著呵
紙有這一片黃昏能觸摸你幽暗的永恒
告訴我：金燦燦的膚色究竟意味著什麼
果實纍纍的生命在綠色藤蔓上搖
我的靈魂到底收穫什麼
Oh, one who sows endless years
This dusk alone can feel your dim eternity
Tell me: what does the golden skin mean
Fruit-laden life swaying on green tendrilled vines
What has my soul reaped ("Banpo" 7)

This stanza is built around two questions. These two questions emphasize and contrast with one another. The question about the outer world, the sunset, becomes a question of the soul of the "I," who seems to have taken in, to have "reaped" (*shouhuo* 收穫), this world. The inextricability of the world and the "I" emphasizes the border between them, which is a liminal line, like the sunset, the point between the mutually necessary day and night and the only thing that can affect the sculpture.

六條龍倒在腳下，懷抱一座深淵
這石頭，以原始的強勁，悠悠書寫
最古老的種族蔓延成一片高原
崩塌之後廢棄之後，不加雕琢的美
始終空曠的真實，朗讀風聲

我一千次死亡再生爲神
Six dragons fall underfoot, embrace an abyss
This stone, with primeval force, calmly writes
The most ancient race spreads out into a high plateau
After ruin, after desolation, an unpolished beauty
An utterly vast reality, the sound of wind reciting
After a thousand deaths I am finally born a god (“Banpo” 7)

The poem here enacts the recording of history, in which it also participates. For Yang the recovery and renewal of history, particularly the history of the Cultural Revolution, is a key political concern. At the same time, the poem records and is part of an ancient tradition (as Yang notes in his essay “Poet without a Nation” [153], “A poem – even one written on a computer – is still a Stone Age event in cultural terms”). Yang’s use of ancient tradition and his emphasis on repetition tend to universalize the poem’s discourse. As the last line emphasizes, this has happened “a thousand times” before. The emphasis on repetition, however, also leads to an ironic distancing of the poem’s claim on tradition. The poem not only reaches back into five thousand years of Chinese history, but also emphasizes that this is a singular event in language, to which the thematic material is almost incidental. Thus, we see the paradoxical tendency in Yang’s poetry toward autonomy and social, historical and political statement, a paradox that grows in the stanzas that follow:

看呵，和綠色的田野糾纏不清的早晨
每天的未卜之辭，像一堆灰燼
而大地另一面，太陽的希望的篝火
灼傷第一個撒下小麥的人
第一個用血液搖撼海洋的人
固定在邊緣，永遠是第一次日-----

一座母親的雕像
俯瞰這沉默的國度
站在峭崖般高大的基座上

懷抱的尖底瓶

永遠空了

See, early morning tangled and indistinct in the green open fields
The un-divined oracle inscriptions of every day, like a pile of ash
And on the other side of the earth, the bonfire of the sun's desire
Scorches a person sowing wheat
The first person to use human blood to shake the ocean to its roots
Fixed on the brink, it is always the first

A statue of a mother

Surveys this silent land

Stands on a base that towers high as a cliff

Hugs a tapering flask

Forever empty ("Banpo" 7-8)

Following the form of early Chinese poetry, "Myth" presents an "I," which is a living statue, an embodiment of history and the mystical or spiritual. The natural spirit, which appears, for example, in "Norlang," now becomes an object made by human hands. Thus, this spirit voice allows for another moment of interaction between human and natural worlds and between contemporary and ancient figures. Just as in "Norlang," the first part of "Banpo" begins with the setting sun and a metaphorical "twilight of the ancestors." This interaction is also evident in the three lines of "Myth" that follow the stanza quoted above and conclude the poem:

我在萬年青一樣層層疊疊的歲月中期待著

眼睛從未離開沉入波濤的祖先的夕陽

又一次夢見那片蔚藍正從手上徐徐升起

I wait in the layers of ancient green time

My eyes have never left the ancestral sun setting deep in the waves

Once again I dream of that azure blue rising slowly directly from the hands ("Banpo" 8)

The "I" that is the focus of the final three-line stanza can be assumed to be the goddess Nüwa, rather than the poet figure. One can assume this because of the great age of this

“I.” This “I” has waited “in the layers of ancient green time” (*zai wannian qing yiyang cengceng leilei de sui yue zhong* 在萬年青一樣層層疊疊的歲月中).

If this speaking “I” is a goddess, apparently reborn, however, there is a contradiction between the end of the poem, the “sun setting” (*xiyang* 夕陽), and the continuity of “once again” (*you yi ci* 又一次). This dialectic between “ancient” (*wannian* 萬年) and “green” (*qing* 青) takes place within these very words. In the Chinese, one could plausibly read this first line of the stanza differently, which would give the translation “ten thousand young” (*wan nianqing* 萬年青), instead of “ancient green.” In this line, then, ancient and youthful, death and birth combine.

In “Myth,” the fact that the “I” in part represents the ancient Chinese goddess Nüwa has several important implications. Nüwa created humanity and hence she indirectly created the poet who writes about her. Moreover, according to Chinese mythology, Nüwa created humankind out of clay. At the same time, she appears as a stone statue in the poem. Her creation by human hands thus creates a paradox. Both mythical figure and the “I” of the poet make each other and share a commonality as makers and as those who are made out of earth. That is, the poet writes about Nüwa and so creates her in the poem. At the same time, Nüwa has made humankind, including the poet. Also, the embodiment of Nüwa is a stone statue, and humanity, according to Chinese mythology, was made out of clay. Therefore, both god and poet have been made out of earth in the world of the poem.

The line about “azure blue rising slowly directly from the hands” (*weilan zheng cong shou shang xuxu shengqi* 蔚藍正從手上徐徐升起) might also refer to another part of the Nüwa myth. According to Chinese mythology, Nüwa restored the sky to its rightful place, saving humanity from the apocalyptic event of the heavens crashing onto the earth. Reversing this process, the poet participates in recovering and renewing this traditional myth after the Cultural Revolution by writing about Nüwa.

As the goddess of marriage, Nüwa symbolizes unity between male and female. The title of this poem itself enacts this dialectic relationship between a male human poet and the statue of a female goddess. The Chinese title of the section, “Shenhua,” means “Myth,” the human story that creates the gods, but its two characters literally mean “the speech

of the god or goddess” (*shen hua* 神話). This is something like “god spell” becoming “gospel” in English. Read both as one word and as two separate words, the title makes the speech oscillate between the human speech of mythology and poetry and the divine speech of the gods. In this border realm of the poem, the boundary between myth and reality is uncertain and dynamic.

The second part of *Banpo*, “Stone Axe” continues the theme of interaction between history and the present, life and death, creation and destruction and especially between the natural and human worlds. This interaction begins with a metaphor that describes a natural phenomenon, rainfall, through the metaphor of a human object, a “cup” (*beizi* 杯子). The metaphor itself describes an interaction between nature and a human being, the “I” of the poem. The “I,” which has anthropomorphized nature, itself becomes passive, acted upon by a natural phenomenon that has been made active by the description of the implied author, possibly the “I.”

風
草
樹
山谷的杯子
傾斜
滿月
把我洗劫
Wind
Grass
Trees
The cup of the mountain valley
Tilts
The full moon
Leaves me sacked and looted (“Banpo” 9)

The movement here is from sky to earth through important features of the natural environment. The first natural feature is the “Wind” (*feng* 風) – part of the air and sky. The next are plants, which sit between earth and sky – “Grass” (*cao* 草) and “Trees” (*shu* 樹). Then next comes the earth, the landscape feature of the mountain valley that encapsulates a reaching upwards (“mountain” [*shan* 山]) and dipping downwards (“valley” [*gu* 谷]) in a single unit. The metaphor of the cup tilting suggests the imminent unleashing of some sort of power, possibly the water of the mountain valleys flooding downwards into rivers. This context highlights the literally liquid filling (*man* 滿) of the moon (*yue* 月) in “full moon” (*manyue* 滿月) and thus encourages a metaphorical reading of this otherwise straightforward expression. That is, it is as if the tipping cup of the mountain valley has spilt water, which has filled the moon, making it full. The play on water radicals continues with the “sacking” or “looting” (*xijie* 洗劫) containing the character for “wash” (*xi* 洗). The image of the cup tilting and releasing water or some liquid thus flows into the image of the full moon and onwards to the sacking of the poem’s “I.” The cup thus appears to be the agent that, through pouring out its contents, makes the moon full and the “I” desolate. The bountiful nature that results is in contrast to the barren human or anthropomorphized first person subject.

As a footnote to the poem explains, the next line in the poem is a quotation from “Elegy” by Dylan Thomas:

太高傲了以至不屑去死!
Too proud to die! (“Banpo” 9)

Yang takes only the first half of the opening line of Thomas’s poem. The full line is:

Too proud to die; broken and blind he died

Dylan’s “Elegy” describes the death of an old man, who died, despite the fact that he struggled against death in his pride. Although in this way a poem of resignation, the “Elegy” also describes the infusing of the man’s spirit into the natural world through the medium of the poem:

On that darkest day, Oh, forever may
He lie lightly, at last, on the last, crossed
Hill, under the grass, in love, and there grow
Young among the long flocks, and never lie lost

Or still all the numberless days of his death, though
Above all he longed for his mother's breast

Which was rest and dust, and in the kind ground
The darkest justice of death, blind and unblessed.
Let him find no rest but be fathered and found,

I prayed in the crouching room, by his blind bed,
In the muted house, one minute before
Noon, and night, and light. The rivers of the dead

Veined his poor hand I held, and I saw
Through his unseeing eyes to the roots of the sea.

And then more explicitly this connection with nature, with “the grass,” “the long flocks,” the “dust,” and “kind ground,” and the “sea” is seen as being realized through the vision of another, the lyric “I”:

Out of his eyes I saw the last light glide.
Here among the light of the lording sky
An old man is with me where I go

Walking in the meadows of his son's eye
On whom a world of ills came down like snow.
He cried as he died, fearing at last the spheres

Finally the last line of “Elegy” leaves the reader with a clear statement that this life after death is due to an act of remembrance on the part of the lyric subject, or the poem itself:

(Until I die he will not leave my side.)

In Yang’s poem the lyric subject is described as infused with and affected by the natural world. Similarly, it is the remembrance in the poem that keeps this “I” alive. This explains how the witnessing of death, of the end of age in the first part of “Banpo,” “Myth,” can also be a rebirth of sorts, through the evocation of history in the poem.

The first lines of “Stone Axe” saw the lyric “I” “sacked” (*xijie* 洗劫) by natural phenomena. This is similar to the death that Thomas envisages, in which the old man becomes the earth and grass of the fields. In contrast to Dylan’s poem, however, the struggle between the dying subject and the natural world is not over; only the first positive half of the opening line of the “Elegy” is quoted. The “I” in “Banpo” continues to refuse to die.

Indeed, rather than the return to nature being a sign of the end, in Yang's poem the merging with the natural world leads to a new beginning, an "awakening" (*xinglai* 醒來), as the next two stanzas make clear:

穴居的夜
白骨和隕石
青臺泛濫
我，一顆無法孵化的心獨自醒來

沒有眼睛，只有風
沒有耳朵，只有草
沒有手臂，只有樹
和一片漸漸發黑的嘴唇
咬紫泥土
太高傲了以至不屑作流淚的夢！

Cave-dwelling night
White bone and stony meteor
Liver mosses run rampant
I, a heart and mind unable to hatch, awake alone

I have no eyes, only wind
I have no ears, only grass
I have no arms, only trees
And a pair of lips that little by little let forth blackness
Bite tightly the clay
Too proud to dream of crying! ("Banpo" 9-10)

The "I" that appeared in the first stanza of "Stone Axe" as subject to the violence of the natural world, now appears to be that natural world itself (the same representatives appear here: "wind" [*feng* 風], "grass" [*cao* 草], and "trees" [*shu* 樹]). And this natural world or the subject that has become part of it ("no eyes, only wind" [*meiyou yanjing*,

zhi you feng 沒有眼睛，只有風] etc.) appears to be suffering, but it is also resisting death and tears.

The first of these two stanzas quoted above seems to be some kind of evocation of things from the natural world: the “Cave-dwelling night” (*xueju de ye* 穴居的夜), the contrasting “white bone” (*bai gu* 白骨) and “stony meteor” (*yunshi* 隕石), and the “liver mosses” (*qingtai* 青臺). On one level, these images suggest an archeological discovery of strange and ancient things. What may be happening here is that the very force that destroys the ancient “I” by turning it into the earth, plants and wind is actually the same force that allows it to awake. This life in death theme resembles Dylan’s “Elegy,” but where the Welsh poet’s words bid a life farewell, Yang’s imply a mystical summoning of someone long dead. In Yang’s poem, the lyric subject’s invocation is of someone who has long ago become part of the natural world. Similarly, the lyric “I” in “Elegy” expects the old man to become part of the natural world in the future, through the decay of his body into the ground and, most importantly, through the memories of the lyric subject (“Until I die he will not leave my side”).

All this implies an epic sweep of history and a sense of both time, through the ruins of an ancient civilization in Banpo, and timelessness, through the awakening of something or someone ancient today. This theme is picked up in the next stanza, through reference to the heavens, which suggest both great age and a repeating cycle, an eternal constant:

大地，無盡地朝聖
太陽的正午之光的絞索
早已勒緊
整個世界落在我身上
(白晝多麼和諧地退入黑夜)
盤古的手大萬的手
如今只剩一隻手，我被埋葬
The Earth is on an endless pilgrimage
The hangman’s noose of the midday sun’s light
Has long ago been pulled tight

The whole world falls upon me
(The day fades into night so harmoniously)
The hand of Pan Gu, the great hand
Today all that is left is the hand, I am buried (“Banpo” 10)

Once again, as in “Myth,” the poem explicitly enters the world of Chinese mythology. Pan Gu 盤古 is the god who created the universe by separating Earth and the heavens. The Earth and heavens were two halves of a shell, which is probably referred to in the phrase “unable to hatch” (*wufa fuhua* 無法孵化) in the third stanza of “Stone Axe.” Pan Gu broke the egg with an axe, creating the world, according to some versions of the story. This is probably one of the connotations of the title of this section of “Banpo,” “Stone Axe.” The creative destruction that is attributed to Pan Gu wielding the axe in the Chinese creation myth is a familiar theme in Yang’s poetics, in which creation and destruction constantly intertwine.

The interaction between creation and destruction is also part of the myth of creation to which the stanza quoted above appears to refer. After the separation of earth and heavens was achieved and Nüwa had created humankind from clay, it was Nüwa who saved the newly created human beings from the apocalypse of the sky falling to the Earth again. The apocalypse of the sky falling in appears to be happening in this stanza, in an enactment or reenactment or renewal of the ancient story. The “endless pilgrimage” (*wujin de chaosheng* 無盡地朝聖) of the first line suggests that this is history repeating itself. In the second line, the event is described as being far in the past, in a metaphor that powerfully links this apocalyptic event with execution and with the shutting out of the light. The fall of the sky is thus linked with the twilight in “Myth” and explicitly with violent death. This connection is carried through by the funeral burial described in the last line of the stanza: “I am buried” (*wo bei maizang* 我被埋葬). With the twilight of the ancestors in the first part of “Banpo,” this stanza could also be seen as referring to the apocalyptic destruction of tradition associated with the Cultural Revolution or with the rise of modernity generally. If it is read in this allegorical way, the implicit conclusion is that these ancestors and myths can rise phoenix-like from the ashes, or at least can be brought to life in the present in literature, as the poem in part proves.

The interaction between history affecting the poem's description and the poem's description making history is made explicit in the next stanza:

被歷史拋棄也拋棄了歷史

石頭的復仇是石頭

善良，是千萬年後鋒利的一擊

把豹子殺死

把不知不覺充滿了罪惡的時間殺死

Those forsaken by history forsake history

The revenge of stone is stone

Goodness is a sharp blow after thousands of years

It kills the leopard

It kills the time that has unconsciously been filled with evil (“Banpo”
10)

These aphoristic lines draw attention to, or witness, what has not been witnessed or recorded, that which has been “forsaken by history” (*bei lishi paoqi* 被歷史拋棄). This self-sufficiency that separates humanity from nature is described in the poem by the repetition of the opening two lines of the stanza. “Those forsaken by history” (*bei lishi paoqi* 被歷史拋棄) have forsaken history and so have no need for or connection with it; they exist independently. Similarly, the stone’s revenge lies in nothing but itself; it does not seem to require outside forces to have its own history of revenge. The moment of awakening, “the sharp blow” (*yi ji* 一擊), could be read as the poem itself, which interferes with the self-sufficiency of the natural world. The killing of the leopard implies the Chinese proverb “when a leopard dies, it leaves behind its skin, but when a person dies, his or her name is left behind” (*bao si liu zhi, ren si liu ming* 豹死留支，人死留名). The leopard’s death leaves behind no words, but the missing name is referred to and shown indirectly in the poem by the missing second half of the proverb. The natural world without humanity, and thus without names, is described in language partly through absence. This is also an acknowledgement of the difference between the description of the natural world without language and the language in the poem that describes it.

青臺，蜷縮，伸展

軟綿綿的，小心翼翼的騙子
來吧！黑暗，只對自己真實就夠了
我們以這樣彼此安慰著
看慣了一切
Liver mosses, huddle, extend
Come weak and cautious the deceiver!
Only in answering its own reality is the darkness complete
In this way, we have already consoled one another
Have become accustomed to the sight of everything (“Banpo” 10)

In this stanza, too, the self-reciprocation of the natural world, here specifically the “darkness” (*hei'an* 黑暗), is emphasized. The mosses also have a dual role; they “huddle,” or “curl up” (*quansuo* 蜷縮), but also “extend” (*shenzhan* 伸展). The “I” now participates in the theme of interaction between partners for the first time in the poem. The poem invokes a “deceiver” (*pianzi* 騙子), and the first person switches from the singular “I” to the plural “we.” This plurality and interaction allow a certain kind of resignation, which contrasts with the resistance in the previous statements of the lyric subject. This difference between the “we” and the “I” parallels the symbolic use of the pronouns “you” (pl.) and “I” in “Norlang.”

The pairs of opposites that require one another are expanded upon in the next two stanzas. Filth and purity are bound together in the first of these stanzas, while in the second “light” (*guang* 光) and “heaven” (*tian* 天) contrast with the “night” (*ye* 夜) and “hell” (*diyu* 地獄) of the first:

只能讓骯髒把純潔包裡起來
而純潔內部，又是一個更恐怖的夜
原子的地獄，無法拯救的地獄
渴望破碎，象火山在毀滅 - -

一道寒光，那唯一能等待的天使
我將徹底屬於我！

All that can be done is for filth to wrap up purity
And the inside of purity is an even more terrifying night
The hell of the atom, the irredeemable hell
Years to break, like a volcano in devastation –

A beam of pallid moonlight, the only heaven that could wait makes
Me thoroughly belong to me! (“Banpo” 11)

The words “makes / Me thoroughly belong to me” (*shi / wo jiang chedi shu yu wo* 使 / 我將徹底屬於我) encapsulate the dislocation from self through the division into pairs of opposites and the fusion of opposites together to make them thoroughly one. This recalls an earlier line that says something similar about the dark:

.... 黑暗，只對自己真實就夠了
Only in answering its own reality is the darkness complete (“Banpo”
10)

The violent destruction (“like a volcano” [*xiang huoshan* 象火山]) and the filth are the flip sides of creation and purity. The atoms that make the universe are also in the poem potential destroyers. This interaction between contrasted pairs is what seems to be meant by something “answering its own reality” (*dui ziji zhenshi* 對自己真實).

The penultimate stanza of “Stone Axe” repeats the quotation from the opening line of Dylan Thomas’s “Elegy,” which has already appeared twice in the poem. This time, however, the implication of the second half of the line appears:

太高傲了
不屑去死儘管不得不死
素不相識的腳步（同某犯最後的親吻）
滿月升起來
一片漸漸發黑的嘴唇
The one too proud
To die, nevertheless, cannot but die
Footsteps that have never known one another (together they conspire
to commit a final kiss of the lips)
The full moon rises

A pair of lips that little by little let forth blackness (“Banpo” 11)

Death and night appear linked here. Death also seems to be connected with the meeting of those who “have never known one another” (*bu xiang shi* 不相識) who come together for “a final kiss of the lips” (*zuihou de qinwen* 最後的親吻). These kissing lips appear to emit the blackness of night. The predestined nature of this death is referred to in the final lines of the poem. This destiny seems to suggest that death is intimately linked with birth, a binary that parallels the other pairs that appeared in previous stanzas, creation and destruction, heaven and hell, light and darkness. The final falling line contrasts with the rising “full moon” (*manyue* 滿月), but the full moon is also possibly a metaphor for the lonely “I,” the light in the darkness, the waking subject at the point of death:

訃告

從誕生第一天就已發出

我

獨

自

醒

來

The obituary

From the day of birth had already been issued

I

Alone

Awake (“Banpo” 11)

While rebirth is part of this passage, the inevitability of death “from the day of birth” is also emphasized. Even one “too proud to die” must die. The theme of interaction between life and death, creation and destruction, in “Banpo” also becomes a theme of interaction between tradition and modernity, myth and reality. Yang, the modern poet, draws on traditional Chinese myths for his poetry. This is in line with Yang’s own

intentions. According to the poet, “Banpo” is not an expression of a desire to “regress” to the past, but rather it is an attempt to examine “histories of the depths of miserable reality” (“Poet without a Nation” 152).

As was seen in “Norlang,” Yang sees the interaction between suffering and transcendence, life and death as basic to the human condition, and he seeks to express this in his poetry. The dialectic themes that Yang creates by drawing on historical and mythical material in “Banpo” are, for him, general characteristics of human existence, rather than being particularly related to an idealized past. In “Myth,” tradition is used to create something new out of this dialectic, rather than to recover something old. Moreover, the theme of interaction between tradition and modernity is based on the reality of Yang’s personal experience. For example, he has written about his experience in a small village near Beijing during the Cultural Revolution. There he observed the custom of burying the dead with their heads facing west. Subsequently, he discovered that the same tradition was in operation over six thousand years earlier in Banpo Village (Yang, “Poet without a Nation” 152). Rather than reading Yang’s poetry as a search for a lost past, then, it seems better to understand his Root-Searching work as an attempt to recognize the reality of the modern world, which includes the influence of tradition. In “Banpo,” Yang seeks to build a semiotic alternative to the continuation or rejection of the Chinese tradition. He does so through the creation of something new out of the dynamic synthesis of yesterday and today.

As my readings have shown, both “Norlang” and “Banpo” can be read as complex explorations of subjectivity, masculinity and femininity, nature and humanity, tradition and modernity. The poems can be interpreted as expressing a more complex kind of subjectivity and a more dynamic attitude toward these binaries than has sometimes been supposed. Moreover, the interpretations presented here point toward dynamic interactions between the two poems, interactions that add a further layer of complexity to these already multifaceted poems.

In “Norlang,” the interactions between the human and natural, and the feminine and masculine are dynamic. The masculinity that Lo criticizes in “Norlang” is not a simple example of the masculine domination of nature. The poem integrates aspects of

masculinity and femininity, and, most importantly, the masculine “I” is an embodiment of nature rather than being human, reversing the trope of man dominating a feminized natural world. Furthermore, the centrality of the female goddess in “Banpo” shows that Yang’s poetics do not rely on a central, dominating masculine subjectivity. In “Banpo,” Yang clearly aims to create a dynamic interaction between the male poet-creator and the female goddess-creator Nüwa, who herself symbolizes unity between men and women. Together these two interactive representations of the masculine and the feminine can be read as creating an inter-poem dialectic. Because Yang genders the deity figures differently in “Norlang” and “Banpo,” he creates a further layer of dynamic interaction between the poems, an interaction in which neither masculine nor feminine can be said to dominate.

Like the dynamic between masculine and feminine, the interaction between tradition and modernity is present in both “Norlang” and “Banpo.” In both poems Yang uses traditional myths to create strikingly modern poetry. Significantly, however, the two poems refer to different traditions. Yang uses Tibetan tradition and mythology in “Norlang” and Han tradition and mythology in “Banpo.” Thus, as with the feminine-masculine dialectic, in addition to the internal dynamics of tradition and modernity in each poem, there is the dynamic interaction of different traditions between the two poems, in which neither Han nor non-Han tradition can be said to be privileged as subject matter.

The representation of subjectivity in terms of the lyric “I” is complex in both “Norlang” and “Banpo.” Neither poem uses the first-person pronoun in the standard lyric manner. That is, the “I” in both “Norlang” and “Banpo” is best interpreted as referring to nonhuman deities, rather than to the poet or a poet-like lyric persona. In this way, Yang creates tension in the poems between the implicit “I” of the poet and the explicit “I” of the deity. Because of this tension, each poem represents subjectivity as dynamic with neither the “I” of the poet nor the “I” of the deity entirely dominating.

Taken together and individually, “Norlang” and “Banpo” can be seen as resisting the binary oppositions of the debate that was taking place when Yang wrote “Norlang” and “Banpo,” oppositions that continue to influence the assessment of his poetry and of Obscure Poetry generally. The poems can be read as statements on the interaction

between feminine and masculine, humanity and nature, tradition and modernity, and as conscious exemplifications of this interaction.

4. Limitless Forms: Yang Lian's Poetics

Вне насилия нет поэзии

There is no poetry without violence

– Roman Jakobson

世界上最不信任文字的是詩人

The one who trusts writing least in the world is the poet

– Yang Lian

My close readings show some of the salient features of Yang's poetry at the formal and thematic levels. This concluding section on Yang examines the intentional attitude that motivates his writing and the effect of his poetry at the level of social engagement. Firstly, I will show that his poetry from the 1980s had a direct political effect only insofar as it promoted self-expression, focused attention on China's cultural heritage, and opposed the binary terms of contemporary debates. The form and complexity of Yang's poetry, meanwhile, had no inherent political effect. Secondly, I will argue that Yang's poetry is motivated by his desire for perfect expression, by his suspicion of the possibility of achieving this in language, and by his belief in the importance of exploring language and consciousness in poetry in order to offer an alternative to the social and political status quo. Even if this utopian belief in the power of poetry is ultimately unfounded, it motivates Yang to investigate the rich strangeness of conscious experience.

In Yang's writing there is, as the close readings have shown, often a high degree of ambiguity and dialectic interaction. By means of this dialectic poetics, Yang avoids characterization as a Chinese nationalist, a "root-seeker," a champion of modernity, or a poet who explores consciousness in a simplistic way. Because Yang consciously confronts these binaries in his poetry, it is fruitful to assess his poetry from the early to mid-1980s within the context of the contemporary debates over Obscure Poetry. When Yang and his contemporaries called for "pure poetry," they were opposing the view of the authorities that literature was essentially and directly political. When Yang called for a return to roots and to nature, he was doing so in the context of debates over China and the West in the 1980s. He consciously adopted aspects of Western modernism, but combined them with Chinese myth. The interweaving of the end of tradition and the

revival of tradition that appears in Yang's work is also an interweaving of Western modernism and the Chinese tradition. Within the context of China in the 1980s, Yang's poetry is not simple. This section examines two ways in which his poetry is, in fact, highly complex. Firstly, I argue that his "pure poetry" exhibits a tension between aestheticism and political engagement. Secondly, I show that his complex, difficult poetry and statements of poetics reveal a related tension between his utopian search for the totality of subjective experience and his anti-utopian distrust of the power of language. In his poetry, Yang engages with the problems of language and reality, time, self, and consciousness, problems that continue to engage poets throughout the world.

i. Pure Poetry and Social Engagement

Yang has very strong ideas about what constitutes literature and these are first and foremost formal features. Yang calls himself a "formalist" or "stylist," "because if literature is not style what is it" (*yinwei wenxue bu shi xingshi shi shenme?* 因為文學不是形式是什麼?) ("Xunzhao zuowei liuwang yuanxing de shi" 3). Elsewhere he writes:

The essence of art lies in its form, its structure, the arrangement of ideas, the consistency of its inner movement, the power to explore language, rhythm, substantive qualities, and much more besides. Only after these formal aspects have been demonstrated can it be said that a literary or artistic work has "content" and "significance." ("Living in the Now and Forever")

This is part of Yang's call for "other Chinese writers to give up any defense of cultural or political relativism, and subject their works to a *universal* criticism" ("Living in the Now and Forever").

Form is particularly important to Yang because for him "'form' is really a 'formula or pattern of an individual person'" ("*xingcheng*," *qishi shi "geren chengshi"* "形式", 其實是 "個人程式") ("Zijue de shiren: fanhui yu chuzou" 306). For Yang, form is created through the combination of different kinds of language, particularly modern language and classical language. These languages then "discover one another" (*huxiang faxian* 互相發現) ("Zijue de shiren: fanhui yu chuzou" 306). The movement between different kinds of language is part of what Yang seems to mean by "returning and leaving." As Yang puts it, "the subject of 'returning and leaving' is the subject of 'being consciousness'" ("*fanhui yu chuzuo*" *de timu, jiushi "zijue" zhe ge timu* "返回與出走" 的題目, 就是 "自覺" 這個題目) ("Zijue de shiren: fanhui yu chuzou" 307).

Yang views the formal features of his poetry as creating a dynamic dialectic. It is this dialectic that makes the view that his poetry is “pure” difficult to sustain. Yang’s poetry negotiates a dynamic path between autonomy and engagement. As has been seen in the case of “Norlang” and “Banpo,” Yang uses the formal feature of contradiction to offer an alternative understanding of salient political and cultural issues, such as tradition and modernity, and the relationship between individual aspiration and collective humanity. At a transitional time in China, his poetry examined the poetic potentials of boundaries, making politics and aesthetics disputed ground.

Yang’s poetry from the 1980s is politically engaged not only because it attacks the binaries of political debate but because of its claim of “purity.” *Obscure Poetry* was important in reestablishing the self as “more of an individual” (van Crevel, *Language Shattered* 70). The politics of *Obscure Poetry* lay in its avoidance of politics, a position that attacked the founding assumptions of the socialist literary system. The more liberal attitude toward literature adopted in the 1980s in China, however, led to a reduction in the political significance of *Obscure Poetry*. The rejection of politics progressively lost its significance as a political act.²¹ Although “Norlang” and the poem’s controversy still belong to a period in which “pure” aesthetics could be very political, the poem’s autonomy already anticipated this loss of validity. In “Norlang,” Yang sought to find an alternative both to autonomous, or immanent, poetics and also to interactive poetics, which emphasizes connections and thus sociality. In this way, Yang’s poetry from this period was intended to establish a middle ground in poetry and in politics, through a more complex conceptualization of the individual and his or her relationship to tradition and society.

The “root-seeking” in which Yang engaged in works such as “Banpo” can be seen as a form of artistic engagement with the contemporary intellectual debate concerning tradition and modernity. His root-seeking poetry was part of a revival of culture, the so-called “cultural fever,” in the 1980s, when intellectuals struggled to renew links with Chinese culture from before the Cultural Revolution, as well as links with the West. It is only when formal aspects of the texts are decontextualized that Yang’s early works appear to be a kind of aestheticism.

²¹ Van Crevel makes a similar point (*Language Shattered* 70).

While the political power of purity was already on the wane in the early 1980s, pure poetry nevertheless retains some of its political significance in China, even today. As was seen earlier, the Obscure Poets made a radical social and political statement when in the late 1970s they advocated self-expression and individual freedom. As one observer of Chinese dissidents recently observed, it was not Wei Jingsheng's call for the "fifth modernization" (i.e. democracy) written on the Democracy Wall that led to him spending the next fifteen years in jail, but rather it was his defiant act of placing his name at the end of his statement on the wall ("Political Influence New York - Chinese Dissidents and Foreign Policy").

In his book *Cycles of Repression and Relaxation: Politico-Literary Events in China 1976-1989*, published in 1992, He Yuhuai also explicitly linked the struggle for artistic freedom and self-expression to the struggle for democracy:

It is of great significance that during the so-called "new period" [i.e. after Mao] Chinese writers and intellectuals were taking the initiative more and more in their demand for liberalization, for freedom and democracy. [...] One can believe that the Peking Massacre of 4 June 1989 cannot silence people forever. Sooner or later, the CCP tyranny, together with the oscillating cycle [of repression and liberalization], has to go. The tide will sweep them away. The progress to democracy and freedom is bound to succeed. And so is the healthy, pluralistic development for Chinese literature and art. This is independent of man's will – really a matter that is determined by "the international macro-climate and the micro-climate of China." (He 448-9)

Despite the fact that utopian beliefs in the role of art in emancipation such as He's have not been supported by subsequent developments, the arguments for and against a linkage between politics and aesthetics continue to rage in Chinese studies of the "new era." It is interesting to note that "the hermeneutics of suspicion," as Paul Ricoeur put it, have been carried out in the Chinese literary system in a very different political environment to the revisionist atmosphere of literary studies in the West. The stakes have been very high in a system in which those on both sides of political debates have at times attached so much political import to self-expression and formalist purity in literature.

While extreme politically reductionist readings of literature are narrow and misguided, it is undeniable that there is some reason to read literary texts for political meanings in a society where this practice has been commonplace. In this sense at least, the idea of

“pure poetry” was always a theoretical nonsense. As Liu Kang comments, cultural debates, especially in China, often concern politics to some degree:

What can be learned from Western cultural debates and theories is a new way of looking at the relationship between culture and politics. Cultural practices are inseparable from politics. Indeed, cultural events should be seen as political interventions. Just as the 1966-1976 “Cultural Revolution” is indisputably a political intervention of Mao’s faction *within* the Party and the state, so too are the Chinese civil society and cultural debates of the 1980s forms of political intervention of the forces *outside* and against the Party and state. (“Subjectivity, Marxism, and Cultural Theory in China” 49)

Liu sees ideology as deeply imbedded in all concepts on both sides of the debates of the 1980s. One does not need to accept this or the Western theories on which this view is based in order to recognize that cultural acts often have political import, even if their political import is as seemingly obvious as the recovery of lost cultural heritage.

Liu’s view that ideology is deeply imbedded in “myths” such as “modernity,” “democracy,” and “humanism” is based on the “rigorous demystification” that he sees in current cultural critique. These demystifications are often based on the view that ideology is inherent in certain rhetorical forms or in language itself. The idea that ideology is inherent in form has been popular in modernist poetry and criticism. It provides a link between radical formal experimentation and political movements. In this way, the “violence,” in Roman Jakobson’s expression, done to traditional forms in modern poetry could be seen as a direct attack on ideological power structures. In the case of Yang’s work, for example, the poet is interested in new ways of self-expression and in expressing the bond between past and present, nature and humankind. While it is arguable that it is really the content of these messages that has political intent, there is one way at least in which formal difficulty in China had a semantic force that was important politically. By writing strange, formally complex poetry, which he saw as a form of self-expression, Yang emphasized unique individuality as the *raison d’être* of modern art. This could be seen as part of modern art’s attack on both communist and capitalist economic utilitarianism. The individual and the work of art are valued in themselves, rather than as means to an end. It is in this sense that there is a humanist strain in Yang’s work. But the results of formal experimentation in terms of politics argue against the view that formal innovation is a driver of political change. It is guns

and mass movements that change political situations, not poetry, however radical it may be.²²

Yang's advocacy of "pure art" made a lot of sense in a society where works of art were forced to tow a certain political line. Although it would be simplistic to reduce Obscure Poetry to a certain political posture, art cannot be entirely separated from politics and history. Yang's Root-Searching poetry cannot be understood fully without acknowledging this. In this way, one can posit a limited political impact for Yang's poetry from the 1980s: his poetry asserted the right to individual expression and the importance of cultural history, and it opposed the simplistic binaries of contemporary literary and political debates. But there is no evidence that complex poetic forms and obscurity have any inherent political value. The utopian rhetoric of modern poetry is not matched by reality, whether one likes it or not.

ii. Yang's Modernist Poetics: Tradition, Time, Subjectivity, Metaphysics

For Yang, "A poem – even one written on a computer – is still a Stone Age event in cultural terms" ("Poet without a Nation" 153). Both in his writing on poetry and his poetic practice, Yang sees poetry's "quest" as essentially the same over time and place from the poetry of Qu Yuan to the poetry of Dante to the poetry of today. There is no evidence from Yang's explicit poetics or from the readings above to support the view that Yang advocates or practices anything like a "paradigm shift" in poetry. Though his poetry is innovative and modern, his poetic practice shows continuity within tradition and the intention to emulate, rather than reject, predecessors in that tradition.

In looking back at Chinese modernism from the May Fourth era, Yang sees what he calls the "departure" or "exit" (*chuzou* 出走) of these modernist poets as the vernacular language (*baihua* 白話). In this context, Yang approves of the simplification of the

²² The main problem with the kind of criticism that locates "resistance" in formal structures is that, as Carroll argues, it would be more accurate to locate ideological structures "in terms of rhetorical structures, such as the ideological deployment of presupposition in the service of eliciting ideological tenets (which will often be of the nature of commonplaces)" ("Film, Rhetoric, and Ideology" 236). The key point here is that it is only when formal structures are deployed in the service of epistemologically questionable views that one can speak of ideology. Resistance, therefore, cannot be purely a matter of form, because to resist ideology, a text must oppose the ideological tenets that are presented as unquestionable truths and not just the formal structures that are used to persuade people to believe in these tenets.

Chinese script, particularly the first simplification. Most of all, he emphasizes individuality over both old and new, citing Wang Wei as exemplary in this regard. He quotes a line of Wang's poetry:

明月松間照

Moonlight between pines shines

Yang then compares this line with a line from *Where the Sea Stands Still*:

當月光無疑是我們的磷光

Take the moonlight unquestionably to be our phosphorescent light

In this way Yang emphasizes both individuality and tradition, both “departure” (*chuzou* 出走) and “return” (*fanhui* 返回). The phosphorescence, like the light through the pines, emphasizes a re-visioning of the moonlight through a human perspective. In both lines flashes of moonlight appear on either side of the earthly presence, enacting a partially obscured image of the moon. The ultimate goal of this “return to tradition” and simultaneous “turn to the present” is to “abolish time” (“Zijue de shiren: fanhui yu chuzou” 300-1).

Yang writes of the need for modern poetry to respond to tradition and to look after it in its old age by “going out” (*chuzou* 出走), which means leaving the already trodden territory of tradition and motherland. Yang is particularly interested in the musical possibilities that modern poetry opens up to the classical character. In this way, one can understand Yang's concerns as being shared by all those trying to innovate while staying aware of tradition. Indeed, both Yang and Hejinian focus on formal developments that allow the exploration of new possibilities in poetry and in life. Yang's criticism of those who see tradition as either irrelevant or special is essentially a criticism of a poetics of origins that privileges “original meaning.” “The bad habits of tradition” (*chuantong de liegenxing* 傳統的劣根性), Yang writes, are “today's” (*jintian de* 今天的) and not “yesterday's” (*zuotian de* 昨天的). According to Yang, “whoever tries to speak of him or herself as pure and innocent” (*shei ba ziji shuo cheng shi qingbai wu gu* 誰把自己說成是清白無辜) will, all the same, end up “dirty” (*angzang* 骯髒) and “dark” (*hei'an* 黑暗). He then immediately quotes the opening lines of “Myth” from “Banpo” (“Zijue de shiren: fanhui yu chuzou” 307).

An interview between Fredric Jameson and Yang exemplifies the way in which Yang's "dirty" relationship to tradition has been misunderstood. In the interview, Jameson constantly tries to draw Yang into the contrast between what he sees as the modernist view of the human controlling language, which Jameson saw as still prevalent in China though obsolete in the West, and the postmodernist view of language controlling the human. Yang tries to drive a wedge through this opposition. As he puts it, "people can only exist within this kind of contradiction" (*ren zhi neng zai zhe zhong maodun zhong shengcun* 人只能在這種矛盾中生存) (Yang and Jameson 222).

Jameson, by attempting to typecast Yang in order to place him within a paradigm, ignores the context in which Root-Searching poetry was written. Yang's use of the Western modernist rhetoric of the return to roots and nature had a different significance in the context of debates over China and the West in the 1980s. His approach consciously adopted aspects of Western modernism but combined them with the use of Chinese myth. His poetry refuses to be typecast as either purely Western modernist or solely Chinese traditionalist, but weaves a complex path between these two paradigms.

Like Hejinian, Yang is interested in the representation of space, of landscape, and of time in language and in his subjective experience of these dimensions of reality. A central issue for both Hejinian and Yang is the relationship of subjective experience, thoughts, memories and perceptions, to the world. The desire of Hejinian and Yang to explore the complexity of subjectivity supports the categorization of both as utopian. Both aim at capturing the ineffable nature of consciousness.

One theme that is prominent in the work of both writers is the relationship of death to timelessness and life to time. For both poets, death and timelessness are attached to the concept of perfect expression, which is always confounded by the particularity of life, by consciousness, and by the experience of time and space.

Death and exile are closely related in Yang's poetics. This may be due partly to the fact that the Chinese words for "the dead" (*siwang* 死亡) and "exile" (*liuwang* 流亡) share the character "wang" 亡. Exile signifies a dynamic interaction between tradition and individual, home and away, life and death that Yang intends for his poetry. The way in

which a sense of dislocation creates a heightened sense of space is illustrated in a passage from Yang's essay "Lies," or literally "Ghost Speak" (*Guihua* 鬼話). In this passage, the space of the house is felt to be like pages in a book. The loss of familiarity creates an awareness of the universal qualities of a person's experience of space and time:

每天上樓梯，你都會想，這就是流亡。每個臺階都得摸著走，萬一踩空了，整個世界會翻過來，壓在身上。你能把每個台階寫成一證章，兩層樓，寫成一部人類流亡的偉大史詩。卻還不是你。你說不出那個抓不住的感覺，於是誰談論真實，你就總想笑。

Every day you climb the stairs you think: this is exile. Feel every step carefully. Miss a step and the whole world comes tumbling down on you. Each step could be a chapter, this two-storied house a great epic of humanity in exile. Still it's not you. You can't speak of a feeling you can't grasp. So when someone mentions reality, you want to laugh. ("Guihua" 15-6)²³

This passage expresses the experience of being a ghost, of not being oneself. This sense was heightened in Yang's case by his experience of being in exile in Auckland, New Zealand. In another essay, also written in Auckland, Yang writes of being in a ghost town, a city with only one person. One's sense of self becomes radically dislocated from one's experience of reality when everything is foreign. While biographical facts inform the passage quoted above, radical dislocation is a characteristic of all Yang's poetry. His poetry describes the world in a way that is radically dislocated from the reader's normal experience of it.

The extract quoted above also concerns the old problem for the poet of creating an "I," which exists only through poetry but which is somehow connected to the author, a problem that can produce a feeling of dislocation analogous to that caused by exile. At the same time, there is also the human experience of being unable to express a feeling. Thus, there is the person not fitting into the place and the "I" not fitting into the language in which it takes place. Yang writes in another Auckland poem: "The one who trusts writing least in the world is the poet" (*shijie shang zui bu xinren wenzi de shi shiren* 世界上最不信任文字的是詩人) ("Dongtian huayuan" 338). The question then inevitably arises, does this mean the person denoted as "the poet" (*shiren* 詩人) or the two characters that make up "the poet" in Chinese, the "poem" (*shi* 詩) and the

²³ The translation of "Guihua" is by Mabel Lee with a few minor alterations.

“person” (*ren* 人)? This question arises because it demonstrates how language is untrustworthy in that it can split the poet into two separate things. It is these tensions on which poetry plays for Yang. When Yang was separated from his homeland in 1989, he adopted the concept of exile as a symbol of the dislocation that he saw inherent in human experience, and that he particularly focuses on in his poetry, even in his poetry from the early 1980s.

The connection between Yang’s experience of the real world and the way his poetry dislocates language became clearer to the poet in Auckland, which he describes as a radically de-familiarized reality:

你說你在逃，在這座陌生的城市裡逃。從一個路口到另一個路口，那些同樣讀不懂的街名，與你有什麼關係？從一隻手到另一隻手，你讀一部上千頁的書，與把僅有的一頁翻動上千次，有什麼區別？流亡著，無非沿著一條足跡的虛線，在每一個點上一動不動。比站著還痛苦，你被釘著，沒那麼光榮，你不動只是因為你無力移動。活埋進每天重複的日子，像你的詩，一個關於真實的謊言。從什麼時候，辭[詞？]像陳年的漆皮一樣，酥了，碎了，掉下來。你不說，才聽清那個恐怖的聲音 - 又過了一天！

You say you’re on the run, you’ve escaped to this strange city. From one corner to the next, unintelligible street signs. What have they to do with you? Read a book of over a thousand pages, turning one page at a time, or turn one page a thousand times, what’s the difference? The exile only moves along the traces of a dotted line, remaining motionless at every dot. Feels worse than standing still. You’re nailed down there, not at all gloriously. You don’t move because you haven’t the strength to move, buried alive in the tedium of each passing day. It’s like your poetry, a lie about reality. When did words start to resemble the old paint on the wall – flaking, peeling, falling away? When you don’t speak, you hear that awful sound – **another day over!** (“Guihua” 16)

In this passage the physical world becomes a world of language and vice versa. “Unintelligible street signs” [literally, ‘street signs that cannot be understood when read’] (*du bu dong de jieming* 讀不懂的街名) are compared with “a book of over a thousand pages” (*shang qian yue de shu* 上千頁的書). At the same time, poetry becomes like life: “it’s like your poetry, a lie about reality” (*xiang nide shi, yi ge guanyu zhenshi de huangyan* 像你的詩，一個關於真實的謊言). Dots on the page nail the poet down. Time passing assumes the reality of words.

In this context, one can look at “Grafton Bridge” (*gelafudun qiao* 格拉夫頓橋), a poem that also plays on spatial and temporal relationships in the world and on the page:

用眼睛幻想 死亡就無須速度
你走去的還是你被變老的那一端
草地上的死者俯瞰你 是相同距離
Use the eyes to imagine Death does not need a speed
That one point where you walk, or are aged
The dead on the grass look down at you It's the same distance

“Death does not need a speed” (*siwang jiu wu xu sudu* 死亡就無須速度) because the passing of time is a movement through space-time. The description of space and time as dimensions in the same continuum changes the way in which we look at the world, but looking itself provides relatively different experiences of time-space – the speed of light that brings us an imagined “point” (*yi duan* 一端) for our journey surpasses the speed of our movement. In any case, even seeing takes time, so that, because any movement takes time, we are all, as conscious beings, time travellers. In the Chinese, there is a play on the physical points on, say, a map, and a point as an example or reason. Looking at the point, literally on the page, makes a point.

This apprehension of dimensions relates to the city in which there is only one person. There are also other characteristics of Auckland that feature prominently: the evergreen trees, the lack of distinct seasons, and, most importantly, the extinct volcanoes. These are like ghost mountains, especially in the Chinese, which might be literally translated as “dead fire mountains” (*si huoshan* 死火山). “Where is the fire?” (*huo zai nar?*), Yang asks of the Auckland volcanoes in “The City of One Person.” The lifelessness of the volcanoes seems to signify death for Yang (“Yi ge ren de chengshi” 27).

In Yang’s article on Kundera, “The Book of Crying and Forgetting” (*Ku wang shu* 哭忘書), Yang describes the emptiness of the witness of crying, who watches “without blood, a dry crack” (*wu xie, gan lie* 無血，干裂) (8). He writes:

生著圍在死亡的窗外哭。
你坐在窗內，聽與你無關的聲音。

死亡太靜，因此萬物都在嚮。

The living surround the outside of the window of the dead and cry.

You sit inside the window, listening to sounds unconnected to you.

Death is too quiet, so the myriad creatures all make sounds. (“Ku wang shu” 8)

The passage goes on to explore the words on the page as faces: “you do not have a face, who are you?” (*meiyou lian ni shi shei?* 沒有臉你是誰?). Death here is as much a trope for the un-described or unseen as the literally dead. The “fleshiness” (*routi* 肉體) of the world, its visual richness and liveliness, is emphasized through the contrast with death (“Ku wang shu” 9).

In the same way that Yang connects death to richness and life, he associates the idea of exile, or being absent, with consciousness, or being present. Recall that for Yang the subject of “returning and leaving” is related to consciousness (“Zijue de shiren: fangui yu chuzou” 307). Yang goes on to claim continuity between traditional and modern poetry: “traditionally and in modern times, amongst all peoples, there has always been the demand for the poet to create his own conscious self – to take all external inquiries and to transform them into, or return them to, inquiries into the ‘self’” (*zai chuantong yu xiandai, zhengti yu geren zhi jian, dou yaoqiu shiren qu jiangou ziji de zijue – ba suoyou dui chu de xunwen, zhuanhui dao xunwen ‘ziji’ shang* 在傳統與現代，整體與個人之間，都要求詩人去建構自己的自覺 - 把所有對處的尋問，轉回到尋問 “自己” 上) (“Zijue de shiren: fangui yu chuzou” 307). “To use the self’s language to reiterate humankind’s plight” (*yong ziji de yuyan chongshen ren de chujing* 用自己的語言重申人的處境): this is one way in which Yang sums up the aim of his poetry (Yang and Gao 366). As he sees it, poetry is an exploration of the human condition through the subjective expression of the experience of being conscious. Yang goes on to say: “even if one goes round in a big circle and returns to the beginning, this is still both ‘literature and the study of humankind’ – of course it also includes the arrangement of ideas from your individual impressions. In this way literature discovers the reason for its own existence, the basis of its development” (*raoguo yi ge da tuan, huidaoyuandi, haishi “wenzue ji renxue” – dangran jiaru le ni geren ganshou de cengci* 繞過一個大團，回到原地，還是 “文學即人學” - 當然加入了你個人感受的層次) (Yang and Gao 366).

The stress that Yang places on the self might suggest that his poetry does express a dominating subjectivity, as some scholars have claimed. The view that Yang's work is poetry of the big "I," an expression of the self writ large and simplistically, however, does not conform with the complex interactions between the "I" and world and the "I" and "you" that were examined in the preceding close readings of "Norlang" and "Banpo." Neither is the big "I" view supported by reference to Yang's explicit statements of poetics. For example, in the essay "Writing of Mirage Space," he writes of a poem as follows: "It is 'it' that has cruelly turned the 'I' into the background – it exposes the 'I' as being or not being – there is nothing that can replace the way a poem confirms its own self" (*Shi "ta," canrende ba "wo" biancheng yige beijing: baolu chu wo zai, huo buzai – meiyou shenme, neng daiti yi shou shi du qi zishen de zhengshi* 是“它”，殘忍地把“我”變成一個背景：暴露出我在，或不在 - 沒有什麼，能代替一首詩對其自身的證實) (“Huanxiang kongjian xiezu” 176). Yang very much likes to play with the existential status of the “self” in the lyric poem. For example, he ends his essay “Writing of Mirage Space” with the following sentence: “But I am not me, I am this poem, quietly watching a mask that has just drifted by: ‘my self’” (*er wo bu shi wo, shi zhe shou shi, anjing kanzhe yi kuai ganggang piaoguoqu de mianju: “wo ziji”* 而我不是我，是這首詩，安靜看著一塊剛剛漂過去的面具：“我自己”) (“Huanxiang kongjian xiezu” 183).

As Yang comments in the same essay, many outside China have noted the similarities between modernist and surrealist poetry of the 1920s and 1930s and recent Chinese poetry. Yang also writes about his view of the difference between the poetics of time in China and the West in “Writing of Mirage Space” (“Huanxiang kongjian xiezu” 178). Yang calls the writing of consciousness (*zijue* 自覺) “writing of mirage space” (*huanxiang kongjian xiezu* 幻象空間寫作:

幻象，空間，寫作，三個詞，三個層次

誰是誰的幻象 - 作品的，還是現實的？中文的啓示是：寫作，不可能不構成一個“形而上”。

Mirage, space, writing – three words, three ideas.

Who is whose mirage – the mirage of the work, or the mirage of reality? The revelation of Chinese writing is this: writing cannot but form a “metaphysics.” (“Huanxiang kongjian xiezu” 179)

From here Yang argues that poetry acts as a kind of “abstract” (*chouxiang* 抽象) reflection of the “human condition [plight]” (*ren de chujing* 人的處境), which results from the abstract nature of the present reality: “A work is a kind of fine artistic incarnation of the abstract” (*Yibu zuopin, shi yizhong chouxiang yishu jingshen de tixian* 一部作品，是一種抽象藝術精神的體現). Poetry, for Yang, shouldn’t reflect reality or provide already experienced things, but create “a completely new experience” (*chuanzao quan xin de jingyan* 創造全新的經驗) (“Huanxiang kongjian xiezuo” 180).

In his essay “Mo jing,” “The Polished/Worn Mirror,” Yang describes the important binaries that were prominent in the close readings above: “In contemporary Chinese poetry there exist three important symmetries: tradition and modernity; language and reality; the poem and the poet” (*Zhongwen dangdai shi li, cunzai zhe san zhong duicheng: chuantong yu xiandai; yuyan yu xianshi; shi yu shiren* 中文當代詩裡，存在三重對稱：傳統與現代；語言與現實；詩與詩人) (“Mo jing” 187). Language, self, and tradition – these are the major resources for the contemporary Chinese poet, as Yang sees it (“Mo jing” 188). As Yang would have it, the three elements are necessarily linked: “If one does not have the human desire to seek out and express ‘the self’ then one’s language will lack a deformed power” (*Yushi, meiyou ren de tanxun he biaoda ‘ziji’ de yaoqiu, yuyan jiu meiyou le bianxing de dongli* 於是，沒有人的探尋和表達 “自己” 的要求，語言就沒有了變形的動力) (“Mo jing” 189). And: “‘Tradition’ and ‘modernity’” are “two expressions,” but “they refer to one consciousness” (*“chuantong” yu “xiandai,” liang zhong biaoda, zhixiang tongyi ge zijue* “傳統” 與 “現代” ，兩種表達，指向同一個自覺) (“Mo jing” 190).

Yang’s explicit poetics, then, expresses an interactive vision of tradition and modernity, the individual and humanity, and language and reality. On language and reality, Yang writes that the seemingly lowliest level of writing, which is “to use one’s own language to express one’s own thoughts and feelings” (*yong ziji de yuyan biao xian ziji de ganjue* 用自己的語言表現自己的感覺), is actually poetry’s loftiest goal (“Mo jing” 190). For Yang, poetry does not simply describe reality, but *discovers* reality (“Mo jing” 191).

Yang, like many modern writers, has expressed deep uncertainty over the nature and even existence of literature. For example, Yang writes:

What do we understand by contemporary Chinese literature? A difficult question, even for Chinese writers and poets themselves, concerned with its particular characteristics, forms and intentions. At times, they seem to face an even more difficult question: does this literature even exist as such? Years of hard work are swept away by this question mark. (“Living in the Now and Forever”)

Yang in his work seems to be aiming to explore language and particularly to exploit tensions between the lyric “I” and the poem, through the play of their apparent mutual creation. Yang plays on the tension between reality and the “reality of the poem,” which itself describes a reality, which may or may not correspond to the world. Thematically, Yang takes “traditional” songs or subjects and turns them into “modern art,” emphasizing both the ancient nature of the poetic art and the novelty of his modern innovation in reworking the past.

Yang sees the theme of exile as particularly relevant in China: “especially in the Chinese written language, ‘exile’ is directly relevant to the plight of our [Chinese] culture” (*tebie zai zhongwen li, “liuwang” zhijie xiangguan yu women de wenhua chujing* 特別在中文裡, “流亡” 直接相關于我們的文化處境) (“Xunzhao zuowei liuwang yuanxing de shi” 2). The “thought’s ‘exile,’” in Yang’s words, “endlessly takes the departure of reality and turns it into the return of literature” (*sixiang de “liuwang” [...] buting ba xianshi de chuzou biancheng wenxue de huigui* 思想的” 流亡“ [。 。 。] 不停把現實的出走變成文學的回歸). So that: “in a single person tradition is renewed and discovered” (*zai yige ren shang, chongxin faxian chuantong* 在一個人上, 重新發現傳統) (“Xunzhao zuowei liuwang yuanxing de shi” 2). In this way, Yang sees being in “exile” as the condition of literature, from the famous poet-exile Qu Yuan to today, because it must always go beyond the bounds of normality, and because, for Yang, literature crosses the temporal bounds of modernity and tradition through the medium of the self, of individual experience, which creates and transcends tradition and reality.

In the classics, according to Yang, one can discover today’s truths, while exile allows the poet to discover his or her own “‘Chinese-style’ consciousness” (“*zhongwen xing de zijue* “中文行” 的自覺) (“Xunzhao zuowei liuwang yuanxing de shi” 2). As was noted above, Yang sees the Chinese language as “abstract” (*chouxiang* 抽象) and timeless, in contrast to European languages, which he sees as concrete and temporal. To support this he points out that Chinese verbs have no tense, number, or person. This

means, according to Yang, that Chinese verbs do not describe “movement” (*dongzuo* 動作), but the “difficult [human] situation” (*chujing* 處境). He calls Chinese the “common time language” (*gong shi de yuyan* 共時的語言) in contrast to the “historical nature” (*lishi xing* 歷史性) of European languages. For Yang, “To write is to annihilate time, including annihilating the active agent himself or herself” (*xie, jiuzai quxiao shijian, baokuo quxiao zuozhe ziji* 寫，就在取消時間，包括取消作者自己). This view is related to Yang’s constructivist metaphysics: “literature and reality, who is whose mirage? Or are they both mirages, gazing at one another in astonishment/despair?” (*wenben he xianshi, shei shi shei de huanxiang? Huo dou shi huanxiang, bici mianmian xiangqu?* 文本和現實，誰是誰的幻象？或都是幻象，彼此面面相覷？) (“Xunzhao zuowei liuwang yuanxing de shi” 2).

In the introduction to his collected essays, Yang writes of how he could not tell whether the unnaturalness of his poetry was due to himself or to China when it was commented upon in the West. Yang points out that the theme of death in his poetry has been frequently misunderstood. According to him, death, as we understand it, is a quality of our experience of life (“Weishenme yiding shi sanwen” 3-4). In this understanding, life is the displacement of self, which is accentuated by the experience of exile and the experience of writing. As Yang writes, while in New Zealand he felt split between two dreams – one in New Zealand, and one in Beijing.

In all these statements of poetics, there are two tendencies. Yang insists on making significance through formal relations of the “objective” kind. At the same time, he wants to “create” a real world, which is also mimetic of the *real* world he sees hidden behind the everyday. This other reality, apparently some sort of transcendental power, is also how he sees the pragmatics of poetry – the “other reality,” for Yang, is in the reader’s novel experiences, in the search for and erasure of self in language, and in the formal structures of the poetry itself.

What is important to note here is that Yang’s concept of self is transgressive, though not in the normalising way of the Cultural Revolution. Mabel Lee makes a similar point about Yang’s concept of self:

For Yang Lian, the face with a name in socialized humanity is a mask which separates individuals. Poetic creation is a struggle to distance oneself from the mask with its accretions of dehumanizing socialized

existence and to reach the self which is part of the cosmos.
("Discourse on Poetics" 92)

These tensions are manifest at the level of language aesthetics, and this brings the materiality of language to the fore. "Norlang" and "Banpo" are packed with associations internally, just as much as they relate to external traditions. At both levels the compression of material causes excess. This process involves violence on and in language.

It has been argued here that Yang writes poetry that is motivated by his belief in the importance of exploring language and self-consciousness in poetry in order to avoid being tied down to a position on one side of a series of binary oppositions, particularly those between tradition and modernity, East and West, self and Nature. Yang's poetry opposes these oppositions that dominated the debates over Obscure Poetry in the 1980s and continue to influence interpretations. In this sense, he opposes the tradition of looking for a clear statement on the nature and development of Chinese society in literature. At the same time, through the political act of opposing such clear statements, Yang's poetry, paradoxically, participates in this tradition.

Even Yang's apparently simpler work from the first half of the 1980s aims at a complex "reworking of tradition" that does not fit unambiguously into any of the common categorizations applied to contemporary Chinese literature: pure or political, modernist or postmodernist, a subjectivity dominating nature and reality, or a "de-centered" subjectivity. My interpretation of Yang's poetry in relation to literary debates in the 1980s shows interesting congruencies with Julia Lovell's analysis of Yang's work in the 1990s in relation to contemporary literary debates. In the 1990s, Lovell argues, Yang came to see "modern Chinese poetry as boxed in between two models: flat imagism from stereotyped ideas of traditional Chinese poetics, or engaged poetry that registers protest against Communist repression," and thus he sought oppose these models with "a purer, more complex poetic form" ("Yang Lian and the Poetics of Disorientation" 1). Lovell, however, contrasts Yang's approach in the 1990s with what she sees as his simpler work from the 1980s. The interpretations presented here show that, on the contrary, Yang was writing poetry that escaped the stereotypes of modern Chinese poetry as early as the first half of the 1980s.

Yang's complex poetry pushes the reader to the boundaries of comprehension. His work reflects his positive goal of expressing subjective experience in all its complexity and particularity. The strategies he uses place him in the continuing line of difficult modernist poetry, which includes the work of Western modernist poets such as Ezra Pound. While Lovell seems to suggest this modernist difficulty is characteristic only of his later work, the analysis presented here shows that this tendency is already in evidence in "Norlang" and "Banpo."

Some Chinese critics under the influence of Jameson's neo-Marxist and postmodernist ideas have seen *Obscure Poetry* as modernist, a movement directly preceding the postmodernism of the 1990s in China. Given the difficulty of defining Western postmodernist writing in contrast to modernist writing and the complexity of Yang's poetic practice from the early 1980s, however, it is difficult to see how this derivative theory of Chinese literature can be sustained. While there have been significant aesthetic shifts in Chinese avant-garde poetry over the last twenty years, these do not necessarily constitute a fundamental paradigm shift. As the close readings have shown, the interpretations of Yang's poems "Norlang" and "Banpo" upon which the "paradigm shift" view has in some part been based are not solid foundations for this view.

Yang writes strongly of his belief in particularity over categories of time and place, such as "tradition," "modernity," "Western": "I do not trust in the 'new' only in the 'deep'" (*wo bu xinren "xin," zhi xinren "shen"* 我不信任“新”只信任“深”) ("Tongxin yuan" 312). He opposes seeing his poems as "history" or "culture" writing. In Yang's view, to see poetry only in terms of thematic material is to misunderstand poetry. Like Hejinian, he wants his poetry to be strange, to transcend violently the ordinary, but, in doing so, to reflect real human experience. Echoing Jakobson, Yang articulates his complicated modernist poetics as: "there is no poetry without cruelty" (*meiyou bu canren de shi* 沒有不殘忍的詩) ("Tongxin yuan" 312). This relates to the "limitlessness" of poetry, which can form endless concentric circles of form and meaning. The boundlessness that Yang intends for his poetry is expressed in his phrase "begin from the impossible" (*cong bukeneng kaishi* 從不可能開始).

Like Hejinian, Yang in his poetry and explicitly stated intentions exhibits tension between his desire to describe real human subjective experience and his desire to create something impossible, beyond the bounds of the everyday. As with the other two poets, this tension reflects a utopian striving for perfect expression of conscious experience and an anti-utopian recognition of the impossibility of such a goal.

Yang's tendency toward both utopian and anti-utopian positions relates to his participation in a community of writers and artists. Yang's role as an Obscure Poet meant his poetry was read for its position on the individual and society, and on modernization and tradition, perennial themes in Chinese cultural debates. As my analysis has shown, Yang's complex modernist poetics intentionally resist the simplistic polemical positions common in these debates. Yang's complex poetry of the self, with its utopian and anti-utopian tendencies, reflects his desire to put forward an alternative to the prevailing social discourse, both individualist and collectivist, modern and anti-modern. As with Hejinian, Yang's formally complex poetry correlates with his desire to find an alternative to the social and political status quo.

IV. Arkadii Dragomoshchenko: Always Different

поэзия - это уже всегда иное

poetry is always quite different

– Arkadii Dragomoshchenko, “O lishnem”

Like Hejinian and Yang, Dragomoshchenko participated in a community of writers and artists who created a cultural space separate from the mainstream. In contrast to the role played by the other two poets, however, Dragomoshchenko’s participation in his writing community was never overtly political. Nevertheless, as this chapter will show, the history of the writing community in which he was involved once again demonstrates the link drawn by experimental poets between the freedom to experiment in poetry and the freedom to live their lives, or a portion of their lives, outside official or mainstream society. Different writing communities, however, can associate freedom with different kinds of poetic experimentation, a fact that is critical in Dragomoshchenko’s case. While Dennis Ioffe has described him as the “guru” of Russian postmodernist poetry, Dragomoshchenko is also associated with the independent Leningrad literature of the 1970s, a time when experimentation in poetry was conducted under a very different sign than that of postmodernism. Dragomoshchenko’s dual role in Russian literature provokes an important question: is his poetry a form of postmodern parody and deconstruction, or does it follow the serious existential and metaphysical tradition of unofficial Leningrad literature? This is a fair question to ask, given the circularity and obscurity of much of his work. Yet it is, for these reasons too, a difficult one to answer. In this chapter, I will show that both tendencies are exhibited in Dragomoshchenko’s poetry, but that his work ultimately eludes either characterization. Dragomoshchenko escapes categorization, because his poetry and explicitly stated poetics exhibit the same two internal points of tension found in the poetry and poetics of Hejinian and Yang: first, the conflict between utopianism and anti-utopianism, and second, the related opposition between the desire to describe the subjective world of experience and the desire to create a separate world of language.

In this chapter, I will provide support for my thesis about Dragomoshchenko in three major ways. Firstly, I will evaluate the importance to Dragomoshchenko’s work of the independent writing community of Leningrad in the 1970s and 1980s, its ethos, and its institutions, which Dragomoshchenko helped to establish and which laid the

groundwork for many subsequent developments in Russian literary culture in the 1980s and 1990s. Secondly, I will provide substantial new close readings of two important poems from the crucial transitional period – both in Dragomoshchenko’s work and in Russia culture – of the mid-1980s: “Summa elegiia” (“Sum of Elegies”) and “Nasturtsiia kak real'nost” (“Nasturtium as Reality”).¹ Finally, I will evaluate Dragomoshchenko’s explicit statements of poetics in relation to the rest of my analysis, putting forward my own new interpretation of his fundamental concerns as a writer. In these ways, I aim to demonstrate the contradictory impulses central to his work and his ongoing search to make poetry that defies definition – that is “always quite different.”

In the first part of this chapter, I analyze Dragomoshchenko’s crucial role as a bridge figure between the new generation of Russian poets who came of age in the 1980s and his contemporaries in the unofficial Leningrad literary community of the 1970s. I examine in detail his place in “Second Culture” (*Vtoraia kultura*), a broad grouping of intellectuals and artists who participated in unofficial cultural activities in the Soviet Union from the early 1970s to the mid-1980s. I show that it was within Second Culture that Dragomoshchenko developed his desire to make poetry a small sanctuary of power in which new worlds, beyond everyday reality, could be constructed. I also assess his subsequent participation in the transformation of unofficial Leningrad literature and art in the *perestroika* and post-Soviet periods, when it became an open and vibrant part of Petersburg cultural life.

In the second and third parts of this chapter, I analyze in turn “Sum of Elegies” and “Nasturtium as Reality” to illustrate the tension in Dragomoshchenko’s poetry between postmodernist play and the utopian desire to reach out to the purity of experiential consciousness. Dragomoshchenko’s poetry from the mid-1980s was part of a body of work that laid down the canon of “new Russian literature” or “Russian postmodernism.” The periodical *Mitin zhurnal* was central to the rise of this new Russian literature in the 1980s, and it was in this groundbreaking journal that “Sum of Elegies” and “Nasturtium as Reality” were first published, in 1986 and 1987 respectively. These poem cycles thus provide representative examples of Dragomoshchenko’s work from this important transitional period in Russian literature and give a clear indication of his significant role

¹ Although translated by Hejinian in Dragomoshchenko’s English collection *Description* as “Summa Elegia,” the most literal translation of “Summa elegii” is “Sum of Elegies.” This latter translation is preferred here.

in that transition. In these works, Dragomoshchenko combines the utopian desire for the eternal and universal with the postmodern play and the irony that arose in response to this utopianism.

In the final part of this chapter, I show how Dragomoshchenko's explicit statements of poetics also exhibit two contradictory tendencies: a tendency toward playful irony and a tendency toward the sincere expression of the sensuousness of experience. On the one hand, Dragomoshchenko in his writing plays endlessly and subversively with language, creating poetry that seems impossible to locate precisely and that sometimes appears to mock the very idea of reference. On the other hand, he exhibits an equally strong interest in consciousness, perception and description. Dragomoshchenko's poetry reveals deep skepticism toward language and self, but it also displays an equally deep commitment to exploring the world of experience in language. Dragomoshchenko aims at making poetry that is always something else, always unpredictable, indefinite in meaning and seemingly incomplete. But it is this very "postmodern" quality that is the poet's way of exploring the subjective parts of perception, description and consciousness with their infinite possibilities for recursive self-reflexive thought. In other words, because the mind never stops thinking, the connections, possibilities and transitions never cease in his poetry.

This chapter shows once again the contradictory tendencies of contemporary experimental poetry and of the intentions that drive it, as exemplified in Russia by Dragomoshchenko. Dragomoshchenko's particular variety of strange realism demonstrates the paradoxes of the modernist stance in which the writer strives to achieve perfection and to express subjective experience, while also exhibiting the seemingly contradictory aestheticism of the word as such. The playful and profound complexities of Dragomoshchenko's work show that categorizations of poetry, and correlations between poetry and socioeconomic changes, can be just as complex and problematic in Russia, as in the United States and in China.

1. Other Worlds, Other Poetry

Dragomoshchenko's poetry combines indefiniteness, strangeness, and incomprehensibility, with the conscious exploration of consciousness and the language of description. How he came to write in this way is best understood in the context of the community and ideas that contributed to his development. Dragomoshchenko participated in a literary community that was a world away from mainstream Soviet culture. This other world, sometimes called Second Culture, provided an alternative to official cultural reality and a cultural space in which other kinds of poetry could develop. The space that experimental poetry and this kind of community opened up provided a sanctuary, a realm of autonomy that escaped the dominance of the mainstream. In turn, the desire for the maintenance and enhancement of this autonomous realm promoted an aesthetic of world construction and "making it new" in order to escape the perceived oppressiveness of everyday Soviet life. In the following three subsections, these three factors will be analyzed in further detail in order to demonstrate their important roles in determining the approach to poetry taken by Dragomoshchenko.

i. Second Culture

There was a wave of optimism amongst the intelligentsia in response to the de-Stalinization of 1956. This optimism was already on the wane by 1963 and deteriorated still further with Khrushchev's resignation and Brezhnev's assumption of power in 1964. Any remaining optimism amongst the intelligentsia was crushed in August 1968, when the USSR led the Warsaw Pact countries in the invasion of Czechoslovakia. For intellectuals, the Brezhnev era as a whole was characterized by disillusionment and stagnation. Dragomoshchenko was part of the "lost generation" of poets who were born between 1945 and 1960 and who came of age during this period of stagnation (Smith xxv-vi). Innovative poets of this generation were, for the most part, never part of the official Soviet literary system and only began to publish during the last years of the Soviet Union. They lived in what was known in the 1970s as the Second Culture, a sector of underground, private, but tolerated, intellectuals and artists, who conducted private readings and exhibitions but never went public before the Gorbachev era. They also struggled even then to have work published, because the *perestroika* revolution was controlled in large part by the 1960s generation, which was not so interested in the

poetry of 1970s generation. As Ol'ga Sedakova puts it, “there was the ‘Second Culture’ on one side and the 1960s generation on the other.”²

Dragomoshchenko first appeared on the Leningrad literary scene around the time that is generally considered the beginning of a new era in Russian poetry and in the cultural situation of artists in the Soviet Union in general. This change in eras is sometimes dated to Joseph Brodsky’s emigration in 1972, and sometimes to one of a number of other cultural and political events. These events include the invasion of Czechoslovakia, noted above, the trial of leading intellectuals known as the “Protsess chetyrekh” (Trial of the Four) in 1968, and the rejection of *Lepta*, an anthology of unofficial literature for publication in 1975. Despite disagreement over which events were decisive, it is generally agreed that a crucial feature of the early 1970s from a cultural perspective was the increased degree of separation between official culture and unofficial culture, which led to the phenomenon that has been called Second Culture, or “The Other Culture” (*Drugaiia kultura*).³ This separation led to increasingly complex institutional structures for unofficial writers and artists, including exhibitions, conferences, scholarly editions, criticism, journals, and prizes.⁴

² Although Sedakova is not a Petersburg/Leningrad poet, the separation of official and unofficial culture about which she speaks was especially marked in Leningrad. According to Krivulin, by the end of the 1970s, there were two distinct subcultures within the so-called “second culture.” These were the subcultures of Leningrad and Moscow. The Leningrad subculture was like a “mirror copy” of the official culture in that it had its own journals, regular events and prizes. In Leningrad the complete and conscious separation of a generation of writers from the state ideology and aesthetic began as early as the 1960s, at which time there was a movement away from official literary gatherings to private apartments (“Zolotoi vek samizdata”). In Moscow, there was not such a clear divide between official and unofficial literature. As an example of this, Krivulin cites *Metropol'*. *Metropol'*, published in 1979, contained works by members of Writers’ Union and provoked controversy and the expulsion of these members as a result. In Leningrad, in contrast, the lack of such a close relationship allowed for a somewhat easier coexistence of unofficial and official literature. Krivulin argues that the closer relationship in Moscow was the reason why *samizdat* journals were never established in Moscow.

³ Both these two terms were more popular in Leningrad than in Moscow, because of the greater distinction between official and unofficial culture in the former city (see note 2). For an extended discussion of the terminology see Yevgeni Barabanov.

⁴ Indeed, the establishment of these institutions has been cited as a cause, as well as an effect, of Second Culture. According to Viktor Krivulin, one of the leading poets and theorists of the unofficial Leningrad literary community, the establishment of *samizdat* journals marked the decisive move toward Second Culture. Apart from *Sintaksis*, which was produced for a brief period between 1959 and 1960 under the editorship of

The *samizdat* publication of the poetry anthology *Lepta* was a decisive event both in the establishment of Second Culture in Leningrad and in the development of Dragomoshchenko's poetic reputation. Prior to *Lepta*, Dragomoshchenko's poetry was not widely known even within the unofficial Leningrad literary community. His "discovery" by the editors of *Lepta* helped establish Dragomoshchenko's place in Leningrad literary Second Culture at the moment at which this literary world was becoming established.

According to Boris Ivanov, the infamous bulldozing of an unofficial exhibition by the KGB on 15 September 1974 set in motion a train of events that led to the compilation of the anthology *Lepta*.⁵ Ivanov recalls that the bulldozing of the exhibition appalled the unofficial Leningrad artistic community, and it was in part in reaction to this shocking event that an exhibition of unofficial artists took place at the Gaz Cultural House at the end of December 1974 (Ivanov, "V bytnost'" 192). Konstantin Kuz'minskii, on the other hand, remembers the successful unofficial exhibitions that followed the Bulldozer Exhibition as encouraging and emboldening the unofficial literary community to create an anthology. Nevertheless, both Ivanov and Kuz'minskii agree that the activities of

Aleksandr Ginzburg and in which Brodsky first came to prominence, there were no regular *samizdat* periodical publications until the 1970s, according to Krivulin. For Krivulin, the "sudden explosion" of *samizdat* literature was a reaction to two events apart from Brodsky's emigration, which then provoked one final effort to engage with the authorities. Between 1972 and 1973, Mikhail Kheifets and Vladimir Maramzin put together a four-volume collected works of Josef Brodsky. This led to political attacks on the two and eventually to their arrest. The trial of Kheifets and Maramzin in 1974 did not dissuade the unofficial Leningrad literary community, but was one of the events that led to the further separation of the community from official culture (for more on Kheifets and Maramzin, see Hill). The other event was the publication of *Lepta* ("Zolotoi vek samizdata"). For details, see below.

⁵ The unofficial exhibition was organized by a group of artists including Aleksandr Glezer, and Oskar Rabin. The group gained permission for the first public unofficial exhibition of art, which was called the "First Autumn Open-Air Show," but which became known as the "Bulldozer Exhibition," in Bitsev Park in Moscow. For a contemporary account of the events surrounding the "Bulldozer Exhibition," see "The KGB Just Isn't Itself These Days." The long-term significance of the event in relation to nonconformist artists in Moscow is unclear. A fortnight after the Bulldozer Exhibition, the authorities permitted an exhibition in Izmailovskii Park, which was attended by thousands and became known as the "Soviet Woodstock." Other concessions to nonconformist artists followed, including a modicum of official recognition, and concomitant official control. For two accounts that attempt to place the event in broader art-historical and political contexts, see Barabanov 24-9, and Karl Eimermacher 112-6.

unofficial artists acted as a catalyst for the anthology and for the establishment of regular unofficial readings and literary discussions.⁶

Whatever the exact motivations of the individuals involved, at the end of January (according to Ivanov) or February (according to Kuz'minskii) a group gathered at the apartment of Iuliia Voznesenskaia to initiate the compilation of an anthology of unofficial Petersburg poets (Kuz'minskii, "Lepta" 92). In all, more than one hundred poets submitted their work, and more than a thousand poems were examined (Ivanov, "V bytnost'" 192). Viktor Krivulin, Evgenii Pazukhin, Kuz'minskii, and Ivanov, along with Voznesenskaia, who acted as secretary, put together this "huge anthology of contemporary poetry from the preceding twenty years," which they called *Lepta*. The entire anthology was completed in a month in a state of high anxiety: "We all constantly felt the attention of the KGB. Poets who in principle got along well suddenly began to argue." The anthology was around 500 pages long and included a representative selection of 32 authors (only from Leningrad and no émigrés, and not those who, like Josef Brodsky and Aleksandr Kushner, were already well known). In the process of assembling the anthology, the editors uncovered several new names, including, as already mentioned, Dragomoshchenko. The anthology was compiled openly and submitted to the state publishing house Sovetskii pisatel' in March 1975. It received two reviews from censor readers, one positive and the other from a KGB official that was extremely nasty (it singled out all the obviously Jewish poets for particular attacks). The book was, of course, rejected for publication (Krivulin, "Poeziia – eto razgovor samogo iazyka" 232).⁷

For Krivulin, this last attempt at the legalization of unofficial poets was decisive. It convinced him and others that there was no point in trying to engage with official

⁶ Kuz'minskii notes that the first unofficial readings were attached to apartment exhibitions, and that the idea of producing *Lepta* initially came from the more radical demands for publication circulated in a petition by the artist Igor' Siniavin. In general, as Kuz'minskii sees it, the exposure to a wider audience that unofficial artists achieved in late 1974 motivated unofficial writers to seek similar exposure (see "Lepta" 92 and "Kommentarii i dopolnenii" 100).

⁷ For an extensive collection of materials relating to *Lepta*, including the book's table of contents and an account of its publication, see Konstantin Kuz'minskii and Gregorii Kovalev.

culture.⁸ According to Ivanov, the rejection demonstrated the changed attitude of liberal writers within the Writers' Union. Liberal writers had taken part in the defense of Brodsky in 1964. But in 1975, these same liberal writers did not want to reply to the written address of the more than thirty young poets in the *Lepta* anthology. To reply, according to them, would have been a sign of their recognition of the nonconformists, a recognition that they did not wish to extend to the young writers (Ivanov, "Evoliutsiia literaturnykh dvizhenii" 27-8). In earlier times, Krivulin comments, the negative reader's report on *Lepta* might have led to the editors being isolated and eliminated. But times had changed. The "Bulldozer Exhibition" of the previous year had made the authorities apprehensive of a similar public confrontation, Krivulin believes, and so a blind eye was turned to the activities of the Leningrad unofficial literary scene. This helped widen the gap between official and unofficial culture and allowed the latter to develop its own institutions further. In short, the rejection of *Lepta* for publication completed the separation of unofficial and official literature in Leningrad.

Dragomoshchenko thus entered the unofficial poetry scene at precisely the time that Second Culture was establishing itself in Leningrad. The separation and normalization of unofficial culture is attested to by the fact that there matured in the late 1970s and early 1980s "a generation of authors who had *never* crossed the threshold of the Writers' or Artists' Union, and who had *never* submitted their manuscripts to state, that is Party, publishers" (Ivanov 196-7). Dragomoshchenko was a member of this generation of writers.

The anthology *Lepta* played an important role in establishing Leningrad literary Second Culture. For example, many of writers from the anthology began attending the series of religious-philosophical seminars held at the apartment of Tat'iana Goricheva probably from 1975 onward.⁹ These seminars, which continued until Goricheva's emigration in

⁸ On the other hand, Kuz'minskii claims never to have believed there was a possibility of publication: "I was no idiot and did not believe, even for a minute, that they would allow us our BOOK" ("Kommentarii i dopolnenii" 100).

⁹ Though Ivanov claims the Goricheva apartment seminars started in 1974, Krivulin says that the seminars came after *Lepta*, which would mean that they began in 1975. Given that Krivulin carefully contextualizes the seminars as growing out of the work on *Lepta*, his version seems most likely to be accurate.

1980, became “one of the centers of the spiritual searching of Petersburg’s independent intelligentsia” (Ivanov, “Evoliutsiia literaturnykh dvizhenii” 26).¹⁰

Krivulin recalls the early days of the seminars after the compilation of *Lepta* and how they, in turn, led naturally to the establishment of *samizdat* literary journals:

We continued to meet and take part in discussions, the philosophy seminars started up. Poetry and philosophy for a certain time combined [...]. Life was unbelievably intense: reading, criticism, symposia of a kind. What’s more, completely openly, which meant the KGB caused quite some trouble. That whole way of life needed some kind of reflection – there was a need for a regular journal, but Boris Ivanov and I [Krivulin] split up, and we both began working on our own individual publications. Our journal, *37* [1976-1981], came out first. Three month’s later Ivanov’s almanac, *Chasy* [1976-1990], came out. (“Poeziia – eto razgovor samogo iazyka” 232-3)

The establishment of unofficial literary journals was one sign of the consolidation of Second Culture. While *37* was the first *samizdat* literary journal in Leningrad, it was more specialized and exclusive. Moreover, it did not match *Chasy* for size (300 typewritten pages in 1½ space text), or for regularity. *Chasy*, thus, became the central organ of unofficial Leningrad literary culture in that, in contrast to the more exclusive editorial policy of *37*, almost all the independent poets and prose writers in Leningrad published in the journal (Ivanov 194). As a member of the editorial board of *Chasy*, Dragomoshchenko played an important part in this community. His role as a member of the board was to read submissions to the journal and at a general meeting put forward his assessments and suggestions (Ivanov, “V bytnost” 193-4).

Chasy and other initiatives, such as the seminars that Goricheva organized, also embodied the concept of a living, self-educating community, with all the institutions but none of the restrictions of official culture. The developments of the 1970s led to a more finely differentiated and hierarchical underground literary scene (Ivanov, “Evoliutsiia literaturnykh dvizhenii” 27). In terms of the intellectual life of artists and writers in Leningrad it was the developments of the 1970s, rather than *perestroika* and *glasnost*, which made the greatest difference. The reforms of the 1980s allowed this well developed community to take its place internationally by forging links with artists and

¹⁰ Goricheva, who had completed a degree in philosophy, was strongly attracted to German existential philosophy and was a recognized teacher of Petersburg’s religious-literary milieu. For more, see Boris Ivanov, “V bytnost” 192-3).

writers from various parts of the world, including the Language Poets of the United States, a link forged principally by Dragomoshchenko and Hejinian.

It was a group associated with *Chasy* who established another institution that distinguished unofficial literature from official culture. This was the Andrei Belyi prize for literature, established in 1978. The prize was awarded to Russian-language authors of innovative works, regardless of where they lived, and was the first independent literary prize in Russian history (Ivanov, “Evolutsiia literaturnykh dvizhenii” 27). In 1979, Dragomoshchenko received the inaugural prize for a prose work published in *samizdat* in 1978.¹¹

In 1979 and 1980, the independent Leningrad writers associated with *Chasy* undertook a new set of institutional initiatives that ultimately led to another attempt at engagement with the authorities, even though these initiatives were aimed ostensibly at consolidating the unofficial community’s self-sufficiency. In 1979, unofficial writers and artists held two Cultural Movement conferences that were directed toward the creation of a new cultural reality in Russia. In October 1980, unofficial writers established a group for initiatives in connection with the *samizdat* journal *Chasy*.¹² The nature of *Chasy* and the community of readers and writers that had built up around it made the journal the natural place from which to create a representative group of *samizdat* writers who could negotiate with the authorities. The establishment of the group seems to have been partly due to an increase in the KGB’s pressure on independent writers. Three leaders emerged from the group for initiatives: Ivanov, Adamatskii, and Novikov. This group began to work on the establishment of some sort of legal artistic society that could resolve the difficulties faced by its members in publishing their work, that could create conditions in which work could be judged freely

¹¹ Boris Ostanin explains that while the Andrei Belyi prize might have struck some as silly because of the material discrepancy between it and official prizes (the prize was a bottle of vodka and an apple), it was taken seriously. He contrasts the “Moscow underground mentality,” in which parody and envy were evident, with the attitude of his associates. Ostanin claims that the Leningrad writers ignored the material discrepancies between official and unofficial culture because they ignored and were not envious of official culture. Whether or not this is true, it illustrates that unofficial Leningrad writers such as Ostanin strongly believed in their independence. See Ostanin, “Byt' vmesto imet'.”

¹² The group was made up of the editor of *Chasy*, Boris Ivanov, Igor' Adamatskii, Arkadii Dragomoshchenko, Iurii Novikov, Boris Ostanin, Nal' Podol'skii, and Boris Kudriakov (Mikhailichenko 236).

and fairly, and that could also provide some protection for its members against their being accused of “parasitism” (*tuneiadstvo*) by the authorities (Mikhailichenko 236). According to the account in *Chasy*, at this time a decision was made “to establish a club in some or other Culture House [*Dom kul'tury*]” ([Account] 292).

The club, which became known as Club-81, was finally established, after roughly a year of protracted negotiations with the KGB and the Writers' Union. Members of the club were allowed to meet regularly at the Dostoevsky Museum and to discuss literature, under the watchful eye of the KGB and a Writers' Union representative.

Dragomoshchenko took part in the months of negotiations over the conditions under which the authorities would allow the formation of such a group, which was, according to the statutes finally agreed upon, independent in aesthetic matters. The representative from the Writers' Union, however, retained “the right to a deciding vote in all club activities.”¹³

Why the KGB allowed the initiative to go ahead and whose idea it was to set up the club remain matters of some historical controversy:

There exist at least two points of view regarding the founding of the “Club.” According to former KGB general O. Kalugin, Club-81 was established by the security services. Iu. Andreev, the former Writers' Union representative in the Club, also sees it as “a clever idea of the GB [i.e. KGB]” to organize the literati. The initiators of the establishment of the Club are themselves convinced that representatives of the “second literary reality” would have been organized in any case. According to the former chair of the Club I. Adamatskii, “there would have been publications, there would have been everything else” (Mikhailichenko 236)

In 1983, Hejinian offered the following explanation, probably given to her by Dragomoshchenko: “Eighty percent of the intellectuals have left Leningrad – emigrated from the Soviet Union – in the last ten years. This is an embarrassment. Also by sanctioning the Club the KGB can supervise it” (MSS 47-1, 14 June). Hejinian also quotes Dragomoshchenko directly. His words capture the strangeness and uncertainty of the time for independent Leningrad writers: “The state would like to send us to the

¹³ An account of the establishment of Club-81 and the club's statutes were printed in the samizdat journal *Chasy* ([Account]).

camps but the KGB likes us. We don't know why. There could be many different explanations.”¹⁴

Whatever the explanation, the establishment of Club-81 did seem to give a focus to the independent Leningrad literary community, with a number of new journals springing up in the early 1980s. Dragomoshchenko co-edited the translation journal *Predlog*, which was started at this time and which made available the works of non-Russian writers, including Rainer Maria Rilke and Czesław Miłosz, literary theorists and philosophers, including Maurice Blanchot and Edmund Husserl, and more recent surveys of Western literature, including an article by Donald Wesling on contemporary American poetry (Ivanov, “V bytnost” 197). The publication of this last article may have been a result of Hejinian’s visit to Leningrad in 1983. This event led to correspondence and collaboration between Hejinian and Dragomoshchenko. Hejinian’s visit coincided with the initiatives of a younger generation of poets and prose writers to break away from the 1970s generation, in what has been considered by some the rise of literary postmodernism in Russia. Ivanov dates this rise to the establishment of the short-lived journal *Molchanie*, which was followed in 1985 by the better-known and longer-lived *Mitin zhurnal*. Dragomoshchenko, though of the 1970s generation, was to become a leading contributor to this journal, which played a central role in the establishment of postmodernist literature in Russia.

¹⁴ By the time of Hejinian’s visit, Brezhnev was dead and had been replaced as General Secretary by Iurii Andropov. It is also possible to speculate that Andropov, as head of the KGB at the time of Club’s establishment, had some role in the initiative. In the same diary entry from 14 June 1983, Hejinian records: “The City Council of Leningrad, under the directorship of a powerful Party member and member of the Politburo named Romanov, has refused to give permission for a concert, so an unofficial concert is to take place at the Dostoyevsky Museum, which is where Club-81 meets. The Club is sanctioned by the KGB, which runs the Dostoevsky Museum” (MSS 47-1, 14 June). It is well known that Andropov was engaged in a campaign against Brezhnev supporters around the time Club-81 was established, and potential candidates for Brezhnev's position included Grigorii Romanov, the Party boss of Leningrad and a member of the Politburo (Solovyov and Klepikova 164). The wedding of Romanov’s daughter ended his chances, when a KGB official started the ancient Russian custom of dashing a teacup to the floor (Solovyov and Klepikova 166). The dinner service was taken from Leningrad Hermitage Museum and had been made for Empress Catherine II. Andropov made sure that the press and the Kremlin learnt about the event (Solovyov and Klepikova 166-7). It is evident from Hejinian’s diary entry that Romanov did not like Club-81. The Club may have been another KGB initiative to undermine his authority. For a further examination of Andropov’s use of the KGB against his rivals, see Resat Bayer.

Konstantin Chernenko died on 10 March 1985, and on the following day Mikhail Gorbachev was elected General Secretary. In April, Gorbachev gave a speech at the plenary session of the Party Central Committee in which he called for democratization of society, and for *glasnost'* (openness) that would enable the Soviet public to express its opinions and criticisms. The following month, Gorbachev gave an improvised televised speech in Leningrad in which he criticized industrial failures and the Party's excesses, particularly those of Leningrad Party chief and Politburo member Grigorii Romanov.

It is probably no coincidence that *Krug*, the long-promised anthology of Club-81 writers, was finally approved for publication in 1985. Publication had been held out as a carrot to Club-81 writers since 1981, and indeed between 1983 and 1985 the efforts of the sympathetic Writers' Union representative Iu. Andreev led to a few members of Club-81 publishing in periodicals, including Dragomoshchenko in 1984 (Mikhailichenko 240). Dragomoshchenko contributed to *Krug* a poem cycle entitled "Velikoe odnoobrazie liubvi (opyt priamoi rechi)" (The Great Monotony of Love [An Attempt at Direct Speech]).

Despite Gorbachev's ascendancy, changes in official attitudes did not come overnight. Although the writers of Club-81 did not receive the extensive opportunities to publish that the Obscure Poets did in China, official assessments of *Krug* reveal the continued chasm between official and unofficial aesthetics. On 25 October 1985, a letter from B. A. Markov, the chief of the Leningrad branch of the Soviet censors criticized a certain "weakness" for religious motifs, and singled out Dragomoshchenko's poem amongst others. The poems were also criticized for being "associative, they allow for many meanings, and sometimes there are verses with explicit double-meanings" (Markov 234-6).

The attack by Vladimir Vasil'ev on the anthology *Krug* in a published review also illustrates the hostile reaction in official literary circles. Vasil'ev's main criticism was that the works in the anthology did not deal with "reality" (*deistvitel'nost'*), but instead with other artistic works. Vasil'ev associated "reality" with representing national interests, and respect for literary history. The poetry in *Krug*, in his view, was elitist and the product of, amongst other things, "reactionary bourgeois ideology," "subjective idealism," "cosmopolitanism," "egoism," "hedonism," "snobbism," and "decadence"

(Vasil'ev 189). Vasil'ev made an ideological attack on the anthology for not writing about the real world, while ignoring the political situation, where his view represented the aesthetic of the ruling ideology. In this case, just as in China, elitism, art for art's sake, and "pure" poetry were oppositional; they attacked the role of literature as a state commodity and were thus seen as dangerous.

Russian Second Culture, though by no means homogenous, had its own aesthetic values in relation to poetry. These aesthetic tendencies are important to understanding the starting point of Dragomoshchenko's approach to writing. Yet despite being part of the older generation and despite his activity as a poet in the 1970s, Dragomoshchenko has also been closely associated with the Russian postmodernist poetry and a new generation of writers who rose to prominence in the 1980s. It is in the combination of these two sides to his work, outlined below, that one finds an explanation for his particular approach to poetry.

ii. Tiny Sanctuaries of Power

As with American Language Poetry, the developments in Russian poetry in the 1970s arose as a result of both internal literary-historical struggles with the previous generation, and external historical changes that resulted in a younger group of poets feeling the need to establish their own separate cultural world. As in the United States too, there was also some connection between these two levels, albeit indirect and difficult to pinpoint.

At the external historical and political level, Paul Sheeran persuasively demonstrates that: "the social pressures which emanated from alternative/counter-culture, sprang, in part unconsciously, from the prolonged contact and experience with the lies that prevailed throughout the Soviet Union" (149). While not "oppositional" in any direct sense, the literary milieu that included Dragomoshchenko was part of a wider tendency, evident in a large proportion of the population that made up Soviet society, to look to alternative cultural activities, from rock music to experimental art, to traditional cultures, which were outside the narrow and oppressively imposed norms of official culture.¹⁵ In this way, one can see how independent poetry, like rock music, was in part an expression of the desire to escape the oppressive norms of Soviet society but was

¹⁵ Thomas Cushman has documented extensively the Leningrad rock music counterculture from its origins in the 1960s through to the post-Soviet era.

also part of a desire to claim the rightful place of Russia in the Western tradition. Alternative culture was an expression of the refusal of a large proportion of the populace to allow the Soviet system to prevent them from participating in international culture.

It should be noted that separation from official cultural institutions and separation from official poetics did not necessarily go hand in hand. In his introduction to *Poeziia kak fakt* (Poetry as Fact), Vladislav Kulakov is careful to avoid conflating the sharp aesthetic distinction between official and unofficial poetry with an equally sharp political distinction. Kulakov differentiates between “official poetry” and “unofficial poetry.” “Official poetry,” for Kulakov, includes also the “phenomenon of Soviet liberal literature of the 1950s to 1980s.” Kulakov sees the primary characteristic of unofficial literature as its complete indifference to official literature and its aesthetic approach, rather than any political position. As Kulakov points out, there were oppositional and even avant-garde poets who were not part of the alternative culture because they shared aesthetic traits with official poetry.¹⁶ For example, poets like Evgenii Evtushenko and Andrei Voznesenskii remained within official culture, though they were considered avant-garde by some in the West. Though Evtushenko and Voznesenskii were able to meet such intellectual luminaries as T. S. Eliot and Martin Heidegger while abroad, they could not gain entry to the unofficial elite at home (Sedakova, “Interview” 70). To both the straightforwardly official, conformist and the liberal, nonconformist Soviet traditions, Kulakov contrasts authors who did not subscribe to the aesthetic system, though they might or might not subscribe to the political system. “They understood art differently” (8). Over time they formed a cultural space almost entirely separate from official art, Soviet and anti-Soviet. Their art was “non-Soviet,” or “non-official” (7-8). While Dragomoshchenko definitely falls into the group of poets who wrote as if official culture were not there, even within this grouping his poetry is at the aestheticist end of

¹⁶ The art critic Andrei Kovalev also makes the important distinction between artistic and real political dissidence. In the 1970s, artistic dissidents were treated relatively lightly compared with political dissidents. Moreover, however they were treated, there was no direct relationship between the degree of artistic innovation and punishments meted out by the authorities. Likewise, John E. Bowlit notes the tendency in Western coverage of the Soviet Union to “equate the search for artistic freedom with the search for political freedom,” while paying little attention to the “actual paintings or poems in question.” The degree of political opposition exhibited by a given artist or poet had no direct correlation with the degree of innovativeness in his or her artistic practice (227).

the spectrum. Dragomoshchenko has said: “I wasn’t considered a dissident because I didn’t know how to do it properly” (qtd. Zolotonosov, Note on Dragomoshchenko 241).

There was also a distinct aesthetic turn associated with the establishment of more or less complete cultural separation in the 1970s and with the natural desire of the poets of the 1970s to distinguish themselves from their predecessors. For these reasons, a poet like Brodsky, though still admired by many, was in some ways considered passé (see Sedakova, “Muzyka”). Consciousness of an aesthetic break in poetry between generations, and not just between official and unofficial or official-indifferent aesthetics, was raised at the beginning of the 1980s when Boris Ostanin published an important article in *Chasy*, “Molitva i raduga” (“Prayer and Rainbow”). In that article, Ostanin contrasted the emotional poetry of the 1960s and 1970s (i.e. “prayer” poetry) with the new poetry characterized by its aesthetic pluralism, or “poly-stylistics” (i.e. “rainbow” poetry).

There have been various other distinctive features suggested for Russian alternative poetry of the post-1972 period. Krivulin suggests two characteristics of the socially and aesthetically independent poetry of the 1970s: a desire to return to the point prior to when totalitarianism began and revive the literature of the first decades of the twentieth century, and a desire to be up with the play internationally, “to find a cultural language in common with that of the contemporary West” (“Zolotoi vek”). Ostanin has recently defined Leningrad’s independent writers of the 1970s and early 1980s partly in aesthetic and partly in ethical terms. Ostanin singles out a “thirst for complete independence, for life without backward glances at our ‘senior comrades’ (and what kind of comrades were they and how were they senior?), outside and separate from the state, from the ‘empire of ready-made forms’ – be it in service of the state or in war with it” (“Byt’ vmesto imet”). This desire for freedom from constraints, political and aesthetic, parallels the desire of American Language Poets and Chinese Obscure Poets to create a completely independent space for and through their poetry. At the same time, Ostanin singles out another aspect of Leningrad Second Culture:

“Second Culture” as a whole teaches us a certain moral lesson that with the separation of twenty years is much easier to see than right up against it, than to one in the thick of it. We taught those close to us (and learnt from them) not to panic, not to exaggerate the burdens of our life, not to suffer vainly, not to climb into the ‘upper spheres,’ to the top where there were to be found the fruits of political (now –

commercial) speculation and propaganda, we learnt to see that in very large numbers (copies of books, honors) one ends up with zero and not one, and to direct ourselves and our work toward ones and not zeros. (“Byt' vmesto imet”)

Ivanov distinguishes the “Youth Literature” of the 1960s from the literature of the 1970s in aesthetic terms. At the centre of the 1960s poetry was “the feeling person,” while for the writer of the 1970s psychological life was in itself lacking in meaning. The writer of the 1970s searched for truth and thirsted for faith (“Evoliutsiia literaturnykh dvizhenii” 26). As part of this change to a more complicated search for truth and faith, one that rejected the direct psychological expression that had been so liberating in the 1960s, the writers of the 1970s showed an increased interest in philosophy and religion, and especially in the Tartu and Moscow semioticians and other investigators of cultural and historical phenomena, who expanded structural interpretation from literature to include every aspect of social phenomena. As Ivanov sees it, this led to the “neo-acmeist” tendency of the new writing characterized by “culture-centered and religious retrospection.” Ivanov thinks the writer of the 1970s saw “his or her situation as a reproduction of eternal problems and fates. In the works of this literature Soviet reality loses its uniqueness, and the artist stands before God and History as a medium speaking for all” (Ivanov, “Evoliutsiia literaturnykh dvizhenii” 27). While this was a powerful viewpoint in Dragomoshchenko’s milieu, Dragomoshchenko has explicitly rejected the literature of “Great Ideas.” The more mystical or transcendent side of Dragomoshchenko’s writing, however, shows the influence of the qualities that Ivanov identifies.

Sedakova has called the new independent poetry after Brodsky the “new lyric,” or “other poetry.” While the new lyric shared with Brodsky the focus on inspiration and the avoidance of a polemical tone, the values of the new lyric and the culture surrounding other poetry in general were different from those expressed in Brodsky’s poetry. Despite the fact that Sedakova sees Brodsky as renewing the “sovereign Author who is ‘his/her own highest judge’” (*sam svoi vysshii sud'* [a quotation from Pushkin]), Sedakova also notes that Brodsky’s act of renewal did not directly influence the younger poets, who rejected his manner and “especially his ‘lyric personality’.” Leonid Aronzon is, for Sedakova, a closer predecessor to the poetry of the “new lyric.” In some of his poems, “the muffled veil of what we usually call ‘reality’ is torn off, and in a far-off window some sort of different reality lights up – and becomes the main theme”

(“Muzyka” 258). Sedakova goes on: “This theme is, with its important composition beyond the mirror, almost musical, symbols of a kind that are insistently repetitive (in part this recalls the cinematographic poetics of Tarkovsky)” (“Muzyka” 258).

Despite the name, Sedakova finds in “other poetry” the same characteristics as in the “normal poetic tradition, at least of European authorial poetry as it developed up to this century.” Sedakova argues that the characteristics that were alien to, or different from, Soviet literature were normal in the European tradition. The characteristics of the European tradition and “other poetry” that Sedakova singles out are “a problematic relationship to language and to expression in general; real inclusion in the national and European tradition (this inclusion presupposes a certain minimal knowledge of what was written in other times and in other places); the principled ambiguity or polysemy of meaning – and other characteristics so exotic in the context of Dorizo and Drunina [two Soviet poets]” (“Other Poetry” 223-4). Sedakova points out that in this European tradition “artistic coldness, artistic emptiness are particularly popular concepts in the art of the twentieth century, in impersonal art,” but that this kind of art has rarely if ever been popular with the general reader who prefers the traditional lyric hero, the “expresser of his or her feelings,” as lyric subject and author (“Other Poetry” 224).

It is important to note that the Russian poets whom Sedakova identifies with “Drugaiia poeziia” form no group, but rather represent the spectrum of poetry that poets could not or would not publish in the Soviet Union. Indeed, Sedakova suggests that aesthetic unity is more properly ascribed to “official poetry,” while unofficial poets worked in various ways within the European modernist tradition that was their heritage. While this may in part be a claim aimed at strengthening the position of unofficial poetry, the point about the diversity of poetry published only in *samizdat* is an important one. Even the Leningrad poets who wrote “other poetry” were very mixed. They were a group without a common aesthetic. For example, Hejinian noted the following of the writers in Club-81:

They are interested to know that my circle of writers is bound together by aesthetic principles; for them, the Club is a means of survival, + stylistic concerns, genres, even quality is secondary, or perhaps tertiary. (MSS 47-1, 14 June 1983)

There were some general trends in poetry of the 1970s and early 1980s away from self-expressive lyrics and toward, as Sedakova says, concerns with an interest in the

problematic relationship of language to expression and a revival of interest in Russian poetry of the first three decades of the century. “Other poetry,” however, was a vital mixture of different developments all thrust together by a sense of solidarity and the need to survive, the need to carve out a small territory of freedom. Dragomoshchenko has the following to say about being an artist at this time:

Художник тогда, если не отстаивал свое некое (ему известное, но, конечно же, не последнее) место, был занят своей ролью в "искусстве", — крохотным заповедником власти. Мифические времена, мифические фигуры...

An artist at that time, if he didn't fight for his particular position (the one that he knew was his, but, of course, not his final position), would be occupied by his role in “art,” – by his tiny sanctuary of power. Mythical times, mythical figures... (“O iazyke piva” [About the Language of Beer])

By the early 1980s, Dragomoshchenko and his contemporaries had built an autonomous realm of Second Culture, a milieu in which truth, religion, the European tradition and the social structure of the world and other serious topics were discussed in relation to poetry. In this “mythical time,” Dragomoshchenko worked to enhance his freedom from official culture through the internal freedom of poetic experimentation. But the very success of Second Culture increased the need for writers such as Dragomoshchenko to differentiate themselves within it. When even before the onset of *perestroika* the imperative of community gave way to the imperative of differentiation, Dragomoshchenko would build on his attempts to create “small sanctuaries of power,” reacting to the changed situation by building new worlds of language.

iii. A New World Constructed

Already in the early 1980s, the independent Leningrad writing community was developing new branches and a greater degree of differentiation thanks to the fresh energy of a younger generation. This new energy and the stimulation of his correspondence with Hejinian may have helped spur Dragomoshchenko's poetic output at the crucial time of transition from the mid-1980s to the early 1990s. Over this period, *perestroika* and the collapse of the Soviet Union brought Second Culture to an end. Dragomoshchenko describes how the use of art to carve out a little bit of freedom, a tiny space of self-government in a social situation of disempowerment, gave way to a less heroic role for literature:

Нет, конечно, постепенно, когда все изменилось, когда поэзия стала тем, чем она должна быть — абсолютно бесполезным видом занятий, изменился не только ее пейзаж, карта, изменилась ее едва ли не физиологическая машина, и потом, конечно, политика.

Но если говорить просто, то поэзия сегодня для меня есть лишь определенный порядок слов, — причем очень неустойчивый, — и эти слова устанавливают между собой непредвиденные, не предусмотренные мною отношения... слова остаются открытыми постоянной возможности значения, или просто самой возможности. Поэзия — это чистая возможность быть. Только возможность. Сама по себе поэтическая истина возможна только в пересечении других высказываний.

No, of course, gradually, when everything changed, when poetry became what it should be – an absolutely useless kind of activity, not only did its landscape, its map, change but also its nearly physiological machinery, and then, of course, its politics.

But if one speaks simply, poetry today for me is only a certain ordering of words – and a very unstable one at that – and these words establish between themselves unpredictable relationships unforeseen by me... the words remain open to the continuous possibility of meaning, or simply to possibility itself. Poetry is the pure possibility to be. It is only possibility. By itself poetic truth is possible only at the intersection of other utterances. (“O iazyke piva”)

At the beginning of the 1980s, a new tendency arose in unofficial literature. The representatives of this new direction felt that many older unofficial writers were too enamored with their own sense of opposition, and exhibited too serious an attitude toward culture. This serious attitude toward culture, which now came in for criticism, included a deeply held belief in the sacredness of the eternal values born in literature, the service of which required “if not sacrifices, then an elevated principled position.” For this new younger generation “all authorities, official and unofficial were distractions” (Ivanov, “V bytnost” 195). “They saw literature’s mission as the creation of texts that unchained the imagination, abolished every kind of thematic and lexical restriction, and removed the ban on eroticism. This new tendency, which sensed its links with Western postmodernism, established broad contacts with young Muscovite writers, and occupied a visible place in the literary movements of the *perestroika* period.” (Ivanov, “Evoliutsiia” 28). This younger generation expressed themselves in literature from 1985 through Dmitrii Volchek’s *Mitin zhurnal* (Ivanov, “V bytnost” 195). While the journal certainly presented new aesthetic developments, it is difficult to concur with Ivanov that those who published in *Mitin zhurnal* were all from the “new

younger generation.” Though Volchek, who was only twenty-one years old at the time, certainly was young, and the impetus for the journal may well have come from younger writers, the tendency that Ivanov describes was not limited to younger writers.

Dragomoshchenko was only one of a number of writers from the previous generation who played an important role here. And he was not the oldest. For example, the prose writer Arkadii Bartov, who published in *Mitin zhurnal*, was born in 1940, while Dragomoshchenko was born in 1946.

Mitin zhurnal was, according to its founder Volchek, “conceived as a publication destined for a very small circle of connoisseurs of nontraditional literature. As it turned out, it reached a wider group of readers” (qtd. Ivanov, “V bytnost” 196). Ivanov remarks that: “Anyone who wants to understand exactly what went on in literature in the second half of the 1980s and who wants a clear idea of how Soviet postmodernism began should be acquainted with this publication” (Ivanov, “V bytnost” 195). As Dmitrii Kuz'min notes, in the late 1980s the editors of *Mitin zhurnal* came increasingly to focus the poetry section of the journal on a group of poets that included Dragomoshchenko. This favored poetry was characterized by the “linking of the Mandelstam-Vaginov tradition with the assimilation of English- and French-language stylistic, semantic and compositional innovation of the first half of the twentieth century – from Pound to Breton” (Kuz'min, “Literaturnyi periodicheskii samizdat”).

While practically all journals from the *samizdat* era had closed by the early 1990s, *Mitin zhurnal* continued to appear more or less regularly. Ivanov asks the important question, also addressed by the founder of the journal, Dmitrii Volchek: “what explains the existence of the journal at a time in which the majority of *samizdat* journals had departed the scene?” As Volchek saw it, the reason *Mitin zhurnal* lasted so long may have been that “its authors, with few exceptions, found themselves in the commercial, free-market world in the same position as they had been in when they were in the world of the Party and the KGB” (qtd. Ivanov, “V bytnost” 196).

This continued marginality illustrates the fact that these authors were aesthetically marginalized not only for political reasons but also because the vast majority of the population did not understand or did not care for what they were doing, even when they had uninhibited access to their work. This bears out the point that Liudmila Zubova makes:

While in the 1960s to 1980s such texts in our country were rejected by the censor, in the conditions of freedom of the 1990s, texts with deformed language have been rejected by the greater part of society, who were brought up on the aesthetic ideals of a past era and are satisfied with a feeling of personal superiority to the poets. As a result, one can see that no matter how great the amount of political freedom the linguistic resistance realized in poetry will never cease to exist. (168).

From the mid-1980s onwards, critics have sought to define Russian poetry in relation to national and international poetic tendencies, preferring, like those in Club-81, to consider literature an autonomous field of inquiry, rather than to define it by group or institutional affiliation. These definitions all emphasize two major tendencies in the underground literature from the 1970s and 1980s that are grouped together under the name of Russian postmodernism. These two tendencies can loosely be called the anti-art, or deconstructive, tendency, and the utopian constructive tendency.¹⁷

¹⁷ Many critics have pointed to these two tendencies. Mikhail Epstein, one of the first critics to attempt to categorize the new poetry, for example, uses the term “metarealist” to describe a maximalist line in contemporary Russian poetry that tends toward “superart and linguistic utopianism,” in contrast to the anti-art tendency, which he identifies as the other major trend in Russian poetry (“Catalog of New Poetries”). As such, these linguistic explorations might be expected to represent positivist attempts to create a new aesthetic, in contrast with post-modern cynicism. Epstein, however, associates Dragomoshchenko with deconstruction used as a “creative method” (210). Like, Epstein, David Bethea also observes two developments in Russian *perestroika* and post-Soviet literature. He sees a new trend toward “Western scepticism and irony,” which contrasts with the more traditional “Russian maximalist spirituality.” On the other hand, as Bethea also notes, despite this move toward a postmodernist aesthetic, “there is a maximalism here” (203). Dragomoshchenko’s landscape poetics seems to unite the positivism of the maximalist tendency with the scepticism and irony of the other major tendency in contemporary Russian poetry through a deconstructive-constructive method. Vladislav Kulakov has also commented on the “maximalism” of Russian poetry, even during the period when Western postmodern irony was becoming more popular in the 1980s. Kulakov associates several of the leading poets in Club-81, such as E. Shvarts and V. Krivulin, with the maximalist line in contemporary Russian poetry, “the ‘complicated’ poetry about which people once debated so hotly.” Kulakov considers the “notorious ‘complexity’” of these writers the result of “stress on the authorial word, on the profoundly personal and, as a rule, extrasocial lyrical mythology.” This kind of poetry, as Kulakov sees it, is “an expression of general postmodernist thought with respect to the possibility of direct utterance,” under which the “problem of the ‘sign’ and the ‘significance’ becomes [...] the constant motif of the lyrical reflex” (“What’s Needed Is Lyricism”). O. I. Severskaia also discusses the metarealist poetics of Dragomoshchenko and others in linguistic terms, pointing out the importance of French post-structuralism to his work. Metarealism or “Meta-literature,” as Severskaia describes it, is the “mastery of the means of narration with the simultaneous description of the language of description” (541).

Although critics have pointed out the creative-deconstructive play of “language describing language” in Dragomoshchenko’s work, they fail to emphasize that this arises from an investigation of description, through a study of landscape. Another metarealist poet, Solov'ev, points out that metarealism also resists the postmodern ideology of language as a play of signifiers with no room for agency, describing metaliterature as “the only path at present that offers movement without which literature will be forced to follow the flow of language, ossifying in ideology” (qtd. Severskaia 541). Description of language is integral to description of landscape, because in Dragomoshchenko’s poetry the world includes the words that describe it.

In this approach to poetry, Dragomoshchenko sees himself as continuing the project of exploration and experimentation of language in poetry initiated at the beginning of the century. This concept of research or investigation is for him central to poetry. He speaks of the importance of the group that he helped to set up with the support of the Cultural Fund (*Fund kul'tury*) in the mid-1980s called “Poetic Function”: “Our efforts were directed toward understanding the relationship between language, consciousness, and society.” The group was “interested in poets who were conscious of what they are doing, without pushing any particular line.” And their approach intentionally recalled “the first decades of the twentieth century, when poets and theoreticians united their efforts – I am speaking of Jakobson, Shklovsky, Khlebnikov and Mayakovsky” (“O iazyke piva”).¹⁸

Dragomoshchenko puts forward what he sees as the “main subject of poetry”:

Когда поэт задает себе вопрос о том, что он делает, он приходит к тому, что его интересует не собственно его творчество, а процесс восприятия и осмысления этого действия. И предметом его исследования (сама поэзия — это исследование) является его сознание, стало быть, и отчасти сама поэзия. Можно сказать по-другому, что это и есть желание знать и желание понять, почему и как мы хотим узнать наше собственное знание и его эффекты, по-моему, это является главным предметом поэзии.

When a poet asks himself what he is doing, he comes to the conclusion that he is not interested in his oeuvre as such, but in the process of perceiving and conceptualizing this action. And the object of his investigation (poetry itself is investigation) is his own

¹⁸ Viktor Erlich and Vladimir Markov have documented the history of the symbiotic relationship between new developments in literary theory, linguistics and poetry in Russia in the 1910s and 1920s, which Dragomoshchenko has in mind.

consciousness and, consequently, in part poetry itself. One can put it another way: this is the desire to know and the desire to understand why and how we want to discover our own knowledge and its effects. In my view, this is the main object of poetry. (“O iazyke piva”)

As will be seen, Dragomoshchenko’s playful upsetting of expectations and his refusal of final description are also aimed at the experience of phenomenal consciousness, at the moment of apprehension, before things become “codified.” Whether or not this is informed by a plausible theory of perception, it is a fundamental motivation for Dragomoshchenko’s poetry.

Dragomoshchenko’s poetry, paradoxically, creates a kind of epiphany through the constant frustration of the total apprehension of reality. At a formal level, one simple way in which Dragomoshchenko aims at this kind of effect is through “lines that are so long no one knows when or where they will stop,” as the author himself put it in a conversation with Hejinian in 1983 (qtd. Hejinian, MSS 47-1). In Dragomoshchenko’s long lines, the moment at which sense becomes lost is also the moment of poetic revelation.

Dragomoshchenko’s poetry from the 1980s reveals a tension between traditional concepts of poetic revelation and the conscious rejection of such concepts. It combines a renewed interest in linguistic innovation, the avant-garde, OBERIU, Mandelstam, Khlebnikov, and mystical strains in Russian poetry, with a rejection of “Great Ideas” literature.¹⁹ Dragomoshchenko’s rejection of “great literature,” his close contact with “postmodern” Language Poetry, and his interest in the Russian experimental tradition differentiated him from some of his contemporaries and made his poetry important to a younger generation of Leningrad experimenters, who began writing in the 1980s. The so-called “postmodern” orientation of his poetry and the poetry of the 1980s generation toward play between author and reader is a characteristic that has been widely noted in

¹⁹ Dragomoshchenko’s radical questioning of poetic form owes much, as Evgeny Pavlov points out, “to the experiments of OPOYAZ critics and OBERIU writers,” particularly Vvedensky and Vaginov, who “were supremely preoccupied with the absence of any firm ground antecedent to poetic discourse, including the ground of the poetic voice.” In Pavlov’s view, it “was not until the advent of new, underground writing of the 1970s that this line was picked up and the same questions began to be asked again – although until the late ’80s mainly in a vacuum, as even the unofficial poetry of the late Soviet period was doggedly attached to the idea of poetic voice and stable cultural narrative” (“Arkadii Dragomoshchenko” 215).

criticism of contemporary Russian poetry.²⁰ While the orientation toward playfulness is already prominent in the 1970s work of the Moscow Conceptualists, Dragomoshchenko's poetics were more radical within the Leningrad milieu. Moreover, his approach is quite unlike that of the Moscow Conceptualists.

In his cycle "Ostrova siren" (Islands of Sirens), composed during the crucial 1980s transition period, Dragomoshchenko's writes:

Открывалось то, чего не мог ни описать, ни понять, ни отнять у
языка, учившегося зрению, однако в своей странной
совокупности бывшего еще неопределенней нежели тех
несколько «образов», которые он предлагал сознанию, изумляя
его доступностью

That which he could neither describe, nor understand, nor remove
from language that has studied vision, opens up, although in its
strange totality of what has already been it is more undefined than
those several "images" that he offered to his consciousness, amazed it
by its accessibility. (*Nebo sootvetstviu* 32)

The sentence quoted above is a good example of the way Dragomoshchenko came to combine metaphysical seriousness with postmodern playfulness in his poetry. The indirectness of human perception of reality is enacted by a long unwinding sentence, characterized by its lack of "accessibility." In the same sentence, the communication of reality, especially in language, becomes problematic because of the several layers of self-reflexive description in the sentence. The world of perceptual reality toward which the sentence seems to gesture is, ironically, obliterated in self-reflexive layers of description. The more the sentence seems to attempt to enclose the entirety of an experience that cannot be described, the more that experience slips away to be replaced by a world of self-referential language. Hejinian notes in her journal from 1983: "Arkady says he writes and the old world is written out and the written world is written in, a new world constructed" (MSS 47-1, 14 June 1983).

Postmodern playfulness enters Dragomoshchenko's poetry as part of what can be termed a "linguistic turn" in his work.²¹ This turn leads to the tension in his poetry

²⁰ See, for example, Fateeva, Kurytsin, and Epshtein.

²¹ Aleksandr Skidan has described the change in Dragomoshchenko's poetics in the early 1980s as his "linguistic turn," a phrase that comes from the title of Richard Rorty's 1967 book. Skidan is one of a number of experimental poets from St Petersburg who began writing in the 1980s and who were inspired in part by Dragomoshchenko's example.

between parody and metaphysical seriousness, conflicting approaches that mark Dragomoshchenko's crucial place as a transitional figure between the new generation of Russian poets who came of age in the 1980s and his contemporaries in the unofficial artistic community of Leningrad intellectuals of the 1970s. The analysis in the sections that follow will support my argument that these competing tendencies in Dragomoshchenko's work are central to his poetry and statements of poetics. I will show that these conflicting approaches arise from his intensive investigations of reality and literary experimentalism, investigations that lead the poet to adopt strategies that are at once sensuous, mystical and deconstructive.

2. "Sum of Elegies": A Landscape of Language

I have analyzed above Dragomoshchenko's position on the historical boundary between Russian postmodernism and the unofficial Leningrad literature of the 1970s. My analysis of "Sum of Elegies" will show that Dragomoshchenko constructs a poetic world on the aesthetic boundary between metaphysical seriousness and postmodern play, between the search for reality in the world and the creation of a new world in the poem itself. In "Sum of Elegies," Dragomoshchenko attempts to build a new world of language by using a form of creative-destructive landscape poetry. In this poem cycle, Dragomoshchenko explores subjectivity in landscape in a way that demonstrates both his sincere search for the expression of reality in poetry and his playful recognition of the ironies and impossibilities of such a search.

Dragomoshchenko's cycle "Sum of Elegies" investigates, enacts and disrupts perception and description. Dragomoshchenko begins with the world of perception and writes it out, as he put it to Hejinian, by layering the levels of description and self-reflexivity. In this way, the poem ends up being a world of language, "a new world constructed." But at the same time, it is also a reflection on the "old world," on the complexity of the perceiving, describing and writing processes, an attempt at capturing the subtleties of the mind thinking and communicating its thoughts, as well as the sensuousness of phenomenal consciousness.

In 1983, Dragomoshchenko had already written at least one version of "Sum of Elegies." In her diary from the summer of that year, Hejinian notes this title as a book of poems that Dragomoshchenko had written. "Sum of Elegies" appeared in "Nebo sootvetstvii" (Sky of Correspondences) published in *Mitin zhurnal* in 1986 and may

have been revised as a result of the poet's correspondence with Lyn Hejinian (see Molnar, "Vagaries of Description" 76). "Sum of Elegies" has also appeared in two of Dragomoshchenko's poetry collections, *Nebo sootvetstvii* (Sky of Correspondences) (1990) and *Opisanie* (Description) (2000). The poem cycle is made up of eleven poems, each with a length of between roughly 30-100 lines. In the discussion here, I assess a number of these elegies, though I refer in most detail to "No ne elegiia" (But Not an Elegy) and "Kukhonnaia elegiia" (Kitchen Elegy).

"But Not an Elegy" is the first "elegy" in "Sum of Elegies" as they appear in the book *Sky of Correspondences*. This was Dragomoshchenko's only poetry collection to be published in the Soviet Union. The combination of correspondence and non-correspondence between the section title and the title of the poem opens up the first gap in meaning, a gap between diametric opposites that suggests the possibility of a middle ground.

The second gap or discontinuity appears between the lines that the opening line suggests:²²

Параллельный снег.

Parallel snow.

The black script of the lines runs between parallel lines of white paper, like the parallel lines of snow that the words of this line suggest. These lines, however, are horizontal, suggesting the phrase "horizontal snow" upon which this line seems to play.

The parallels between the line on the page and the snow it describes point to the process of finding parallels in description and explanation. This comparison, which usually seems to bind similar things together, works here to separate the words on the page from the event that they seem to describe. In this way, one is made aware of the

²² Unless otherwise noted, the poems quoted here, from both "Sum of Elegies" and "Nasturtium as Reality," appear as they do in *Nebo sootvetstvii* (Sky of Correspondences), Dragomoshchenko's 1990 collection. The translations are, likewise unless otherwise noted, modified versions of the translations by Hejinian and Balashova in *Description* (1990) (this book in English translation should not be confused with the Russian book *Opisanie* [Description] [2000]). When Hejinian and Balashova depart significantly from the literal meaning of the Russian, the translations presented here differ substantially from theirs, because of the need to preserve literal meaning for the discussion of the original Russian.

difference between the world described and the language of the description.

Dragomoshchenko himself has discussed this paradox of comparison and description:

Казалось бы, простейшее сравнение одного с другим
свидетельствует о целостности. И все же каждое, даже отстоящее
другого слово, говорит о не соединимости, не сочетаемости,
разорванности. Реальность состоит из дыр. Как речь из различия.
Нескончаемых начал. Поэтому «поэзия – это уже всегда иное».
("O lishnem" 347-8)

It would appear that the simplest comparison of one thing to another
gives evidence of the coherence of the whole. Yet every word, even if
preceded or followed by another, speaks of *nonconnectibility*,
noncompatibility, of being ruptured. Like speech, reality consists of
holes. Of difference. Of endless beginnings. Because "poetry is
always already different." ("On the Superfluous" 98)

The incongruence of the two words "parallel" and "snow" exacerbates this rupture here.

The next lines expand and develop the gaps, or holes, which this rupture creates:

Звериный дым уютится по неолитовым норам
ночи.
Понимание заключено в скобки глаз,
покусывающих
белое.
Animal smoke huddles in the neolithic burrows
of the night.
Comprehension is confined between the brackets of the eyes,
which nibble
white.

The holes in the ground, an absence of earth, "burrows" (*nory*) here combine with the hole of the night, an absence of light. Together they form the situation in landscape of the second sentence and link together through their assonance and alliteration. The primacy of sense over sound is again challenged, first through this phonetic play and then, ironically, through the semantic placing of "comprehension [...] between brackets." Understanding, it seems, is an afterthought or addition not necessary to the main flow of text. Yet, again ironically, this statement, which is quite comprehensible, takes place in the main flow of text. The implied curved lines of brackets form a hole, an uncertainty in meaning, or non-meaning. Through these lines we see the shape of eyes and the problems of vision and description.

The placing of text on the page involves nibbling white, as the black print “nibbles,” into the white paper. “White” also suggests the whites of the eyes (*belok*), so that the eyes seem to be nibbling into themselves. The way the eyes “nibble / white” could also refer to the way vision, which takes place by means of the “eyes” (*glaza*), works to give form, or outline to the world, like the black lines of the poem on the white page.

The connection between lines, walls and the perceiving mind becomes more explicit in the next line:

И мозг, словно в лабиринте мышь.

And the brain is like a mouse in a labyrinth.

This sentence moves from the “brain” (*mozg*) at its beginning to a “mouse” (*mysh'*) through the words “as in a labyrinth” (*slavno v labirinte*). These words not only describe but also enact the confusing play of lines that lead from one place or word, “brain,” to another, “mouse,” through a transformation, a metamorphosis, and a transportation or metaphor, which also appears physically in the movement across the line. This movement through the inner workings of the sentence, through the “labyrinth,” disappears in translation because of the syntactic restrictions of English. Lost, too, is the alliteration of “mozg” and “mysh',” although it does come across in Hejinian’s translation of “mozg” as “mind.” This alliteration resonates with the opening lines, so that the likeness of “brain” and “mouse” as signified things parallels the likeness of the two signifiers, which have a common initial phoneme.

The brain in comprehending the world or the poem is described as being like a mouse in a labyrinth. Accordingly, seeing the world is not a simple transparent activity, but one that is mediated by the brain’s sensory equipment. One way of reading the following line is as a comment on the mediated nature of vision, sensation and perception, to which the previous line drew attention:

Ты видишь то, что ты видишь.

You see what you see.

In this line there is syntactic parallelism between left and right halves, like two halves of the brain. This time, however, the translation similarly presents two acts of seeing across an axis of the pronoun “what” (“to, chto” in Russian), which enacts the variability of vision through its own semantic openness, or blankness.

The emptiness of the line makes the “что” seem like a definite article. This is similar to the way in which “что” is used in “Nekotoroe kolichestvo razgovorov” (A Certain Collection of Conversations) by Aleksandr Vvedenskii, whom Dragomoshchenko quotes elsewhere in the cycle of elegies. The second of these, “Razgovor ob otsutstvii poezii” (Conversation about the Absence of Poetry), ends with a series of short remarks:

Певец сделал паузу. Диван исчез. Певец умер. Что он этим доказал.

The singer paused. The couch disappeared. The singer died. What did he show by this. (144)

There is no question mark at the end of this piece. It is simply “what” or “that” that he showed. Similarly, in Dragomoshchenko’s poem, the emphasis is on the word as such. The line both says this and exemplifies this statement.

Thus, although it has not come across in translation, “the world has hidden itself”:

Мир притаился. А ты только дичь, ступающая
с оглядкой по ворсу хруста.

The world lies. You are only a hunted beast creeping
cautiously across a crackling nap of sound

The translation, however, cleverly plays on the double meaning of the English word “lies,” which captures both the sense of “lying low” in the original and the makes the hint of an untrustworthy world, where nothing can be taken for granted.

The play in the second line of the Russian once again turns toward vision with the phrase “s ogliadkoi,” which means “with extreme caution,” but literally means “with a look around.” At the same time, the phrase “po vorsu,” “across the nap,” usually appears with the verb to smooth, *gladit'* or its concomitant adverb *gladko*, which means “smoothly.” Thus the phrase that implies cautious looking also here hints at the smoothing down of roughness.

The “you,” the line seems to imply, is somehow outside the world, just as the self-reflexive comment appears to lie outside the poem looking in. This impossible position parallels the impossible stepping on a rough sound and smoothing it down, which is only possible outside the world or in a place of pure subjectivity. The next line,

however, with its archaic, Church Slavonic tone, appears to toll the end of this fantastic soundless sound:

Пойману быть
Помойка утратила таинственную мощь
останавливать энтропию,
как кровотечение останавливает разжеванная
крапива,
как бесноватых пение.
You will be trapped.
The trash pit has lost the secret power
to stop entropy
as a poultice of chewed nettles stops the flow of blood
as singing stops the raving mad.

The words “poimanu” and “pomoiika,” “trapped” and “trash pits,” appear one below the other on the page. This accentuates their visual and phonetic similarities. They derive from the verbs “to catch” and “to rinse” respectively. A link here appears between stasis, “entropy,” and cleanliness, because the “trash pits” have lost their “secret power.” The rubbish itself seems to become powerless, to be “trapped,” as a result of its similarity with the word that stands above it.

“Pomoiika” comes from the verb to wash or clean and can still mean the dirty water left after things have been cleaned. It, therefore, is liquid and flows like “blood.” “Chewed nettles” in the Russian also implies figuratively a breaking down by analysis of something to its simplest particles. Perhaps it is this analytical pricking, which breaks things down into solid particles, into their essential components, that stops the flow of matter.

Similarly, the “trash” through its very non-essential, unwanted nature retains a certain power to keep things in flow. Yet its categorization simultaneously excludes it and confines it. It, thus, becomes “trapped,” “poimanu,” by its linguistic, categorized existence as “pomoiika” (trash pit).

The words “raving mad” (*besnovatyie*) also suggest a contribution that may be unwanted or superfluous. Meanwhile, there is a hint of the possessive power in non-reason, in the *bes* (the devil, demon, or evil spirit) at the root of “besnovatyi” (raving mad). This

power approaches the root of “penie,” *pes*, so that ordering and disordering, reason and non-reason, poetry and the “the ravings of the mad,” are only a voicing away. The phoneme *b* when devoiced becomes *p*. The *bes* is devoiced in a linguistic trick that removes its utterance from the realm of language.

This division into and combining of opposites is suggested by the lines that immediately follow:

	Два деления или три тому
по шкале С° еще прощались	(расторгая связи) части,
	к полноте стремясь,
к распаду, как к встрече...	
	Two or three degrees ago
on the centigrade scale the sections were already farewelling each	
other	apart (cutting ties)
	longing for wholeness,
For disintegration as if it were a meeting...	

Another division appears immediately in the Russian for “degrees,” which can also mean “division” or “fissions.” The dividing movement increases along the line to “three” and then again with the semantic doubling of “tomu,” which appears in translation as “ago.” This suggests a semantic shift from numbers as degrees of temperature to numbers as units of time. Alternatively, the ambiguous “tomu” suggests “to add” or “to relate” the numbers to an unspecified thing.

The verb “proshchat'sia” also implies human subjects taking leave of a place or a person. This animates the units, numbers, divisions and words, as it simultaneously enacts the process of their creation through division. The dual movements of “coming apart” and “longing for wholeness” remain locked in endless inseparable separation.

Откуда же ствол тепла?	
Прямо солнце, ложась на кровельный скат.	
Воскресенье и опять воскресенье.	
Теперь и труп, должно быть, тверд, как звезда,	
и так же неуязвим в озерах подземных –	
	не страшен,

как не страшно оружие или огня безмятежного
светозарный столп,
у которого смолистые корабли ворон,
уменьшаясь, падают за ноготь видимого,
глазом Арктики живя наполовину и мной,
вмявшим в снег куст красноватой
польни.

Where does the column of heat come from?
The sun falls directly on the slope of the roof.
It is Sunday and Sunday again.
Now even a corpse must be as hard as a star
And as invulnerable, too, in subterranean lakes – not horrifying
As a gun is not horrifying nor the glowing column
of tranquil fire

Where tarred crow vessels
Dwindle behind the thumbnail of the visible
Living half as the eye of the Arctic and half as myself
stamping into the snow a red clump
of wormwood.

The poem continues to play upon these moments of touch and separation. Now it places this play in a perceptual and descriptive landscape. Firstly, “stvol tepla” (“column of heat”) impacts with the sensation of warmth. The Russian “stvol” has a variety of meanings, at least one other of which also suggests heat. Apart from its primary meaning, “tree trunk,” the word “stvol” can also mean “the barrel of a firearm,” “a mineshaft,” and “a column.” The earth-bound associations then give way to the sun, sky, and hence “roof.” The play between heaven and earth is reversed with the word “voskresen'e” (“Sunday”), which closely resembles the Russian word for “resurrection” (*voskresenie*). (In fact the latter word is the Church Slavonic version of the Russian word for Sunday.) The connotation of “resurrection” is reinforced in the comparison of a “corpse” with a “star,” which suggests the transformation of a dead body into a heavenly being.

Again the terrestrial and bellicose aspects of “stvol” appear in the “subterranean lakes,” “gun” and “fire,” which are all associated with “a corpse,” an object for resurrection.

This movement ends in another “column,” “stolp,” which bears visual and phonetic similarities to “stvol” as well as semantic similarities.

The trope of crows in snow is also a common one in Russian poetry and art. In art, for example, there is the famous nineteenth century painting, *Grachi prileteli* (*The Rooks Have Arrived*) by Aleksei Savrasov. Boris Pasternak almost certainly had this painting in mind when he wrote his early verse “Fevral'. Dostat' chernil i plakat'” (“February. Get ink and shed tears”):

Где, как обугленные груши,
С деревьев тысячи грачей
Сорвутся в лужи и обрушат
Сухую грусть на дно очей.
Where, like charcoaled pears,
From the trees thousands of rooks
Are plucked, fall down into puddles, and hurl
Dry sadness into the depths of the eyes.

In Pasternak’s poem “grachi,” “rooks,” rather than “crows” are the black birds on the white, melting snow. The birds and snow also play a role as a metaphor for words on paper. They are words that go to “the bottom of the eyes,” the black pupils, like Hejiniian’s “rocks to the eye.” Dragomoshchenko’s “crows,” in contrast, fall beyond the eye, shrinking “behind the thumbnail of vision.” The ink, perhaps, becomes invisible. The phrase “za nogot' vidimogo” (“behind the thumbnail of vision”) recalls the Russian idiomatic phrase “do konchikov nogtei” (“to the tips of one’s fingers”), implying in the poem that the crows have exceeded, or transgressed, the boundary of vision.

At the same time, however, these crows are like “the eye of the Arctic,” perhaps the most page-like snowy environment in the world. The phrase “the eye of the Arctic” also implies its pole and thus plays on the “column” that precedes it. In Russian, however, the geographic word for pole, “polius,” does not contain this connotation. Instead, it is a point of diametric opposition, while being visually suggestive of a “field” (*pole*), perhaps, of vision. The Arctic, however, is also a place of mystery, of myth, of Frankenstein and Santa Claus.

Так узнаем строение неба, - отмеряя себя

от месяца, -

наследуя царство по первородства праву,
 издохшую мышь
 вытряхиваешь из лабиринта.
 Из параллельных,
 звериного дыма, из того, что видишь,
 и того – что увидено.
 So we discover the structure of the sky – measuring ourselves
 against the moon;
 inheriting a kingdom by right of primogeniture
 you shake the dead mouse out of the labyrinth,
 Out of the parallels,
 out of the animal smoke, out of what you see,
 of what is seen.

The opening lines bring the distant visual image of the moon and close-up visual image of self into conjunction. This flattening of perspectives explores vision as a problem of subjectivity. It recalls a Chinese Zen Buddhist story in which a master takes two disciples outside and asks them to draw the moon. One draws the moon and the other draws the master's fingernail, with which he was pointing at the moon.²³ The perspectives here play between these two points view, which run in parallel. The final words of the poem emphasize the difference between one person's perspective "what you see" and "what is seen."

The "moon" in Russian, "mesiats," is also the word for "month" so that measurements of time, which appear in the repeating rhythm of the Sunday, return here as a scale, like the Celsius scale, which similarly seems to measure time, or, better, increments in space-time. The measuring and seeing of the world becomes a measuring and seeing of the person, which simultaneously, like the world, splits, disintegrates into particles, and reconstitutes itself in a series of juxtaposed perspectives. The poem works with the magical mysticism of the deconstruction of myth.

"Summa Elegia" is exemplary of Dragomoshchenko's landscape poetics. The dialectic between intensification and dilution occurs in the description of landscape in Dragomoshchenko's poem "Nabliudenie padaiushchego lista, vziatoe v kachestve

²³ In his recent quasi-classical Chinese poem "Spring Full Moon," Dragomoshchenko has made more explicit reference to the "contemplation of toenails."

poslednego obosnovaniia peizazha [chtenie]” (Observation of a Falling Leaf as the ‘Ultimate Basis’ of Landscape [a Reading]) from “Summa Elegia.” A landscape of language mirrors a landscape of consciousness. The poem develops and elaborates the description as a problem of perception. After “Observation of a Falling Leaf,” the next and penultimate poem in the cycle is “Do sna li nam, plenennym blgom” (But how could we sleep, rapturous with bliss). This poem begins with a quotation concerning these themes from Hejinian’s *The Guard*:

The landscape is a moment of time

that has gotten in position. (*The Guard* 1)

The poem mediates the leaf of the title through visual sensation and the language of the poem in a non-ironic attempt at description. This description suffers increasing problems of mediation and language as the poem progresses. Finally, the language, which is always heavy in phonetic associations and word play, breaks down and observes itself:

И вновь клеймит прозрачность вещество.

Всего-то литеры поверхности, лицо,
след всех следов, ячейка всех сетей.

Всего-то выбор литеры, ничто,

идущее навыворот себя

за пробуждением в пред-ложье предложения.

And once again transparency brands matter...

No more than a letter on the surface, a face,

All traces’ trace, the cell of all nets.

Only a choice of letter, nothing,

turning itself inside out

after waking in the fore-bed of the sentence.

The poem moves toward its end in the self-realization that it is merely words, “a letter on the surface” (*litera poverkhnosti*). Description of the leaf gives way to psychological description and to language describing itself. The sentence about nothing really does, as it claims, contain a “nothing” (*nichto*), which is in “the sentence” (*predlozhenie*). The Russian word “pred-lozh'e,” which appears as “fore-bed” in translation, is a compound neologism that is derived from the word “predlog,” “pretext” or “preposition,” by the

addition of a suffix that gives the word a spatial connotation. Thus the preposition “v,” “into,” is followed by a word denoting the space of the preposition, so that the process of movement is enacted through reading and prepositions. The word “pred-lozh'e” also provides a “pretext” (*predlog*) for the “proposition” and the “sentence,” both of which the Russian word “predlozhenie” denotes. The words describe themselves, their relationship to other words, and the sentence as a whole. This reveals the dislocations in language focused on description, and subjectivity focused on location, on its position in landscape. As Dragomoshchenko puts it, “each thing is the residue of its own description” [my translation] (*kazhdaia veshch' – eto osadok ee opisaniia*) (“O lishnem” 346).

Dragomoshchenko’s elegies, similarly, seem to be based upon one another’s residue. It is impossible to read any one of these elegies without also reading between them. The snow (“sneg”) of the opening line of “Kitchen Elegy” refers back to “But Not an Elegy” and forward to the other poems in the cycle, and this dialogue between the poems continues throughout “Kitchen Elegy.” The second line of the poem, like the first elegy also contains a “wormwood bush”:

Агония лучистой кости в шипящем снеге,
 по ветру изогнут полыни куст,
 он красноват и колок - не слушай звон его,
 вомни в тропу стопой. Рука,
 шип повстречав кизила, не в силах «совершенство формы»
 почтить неспешной каплей крови.

An agony of radiant bone in the hissing snow,
 The wormwood bush bent by this wind.
 It’s reddish and sharp – don’t listen to its sound,
 Stamp it into the path. The arm,
 meeting a thorn on the cornel bush, is incapable of respecting
 “perfection of form” with its lingering drop of blood.

The opening quotation warns that identities may be hidden and genres mixed in this poem. The opening lines begin with a fairly conventional, “poetic” description of a wormwood bush in a wintry landscape. Yet instead of accepting such a scene and the metaphorical association of death, through “bone,” with the bent bush and lifelessness

of winter, the reader must not “listen to its sound,” both the sound of the bush in the wind and its description in the poem, and must “stamp it into the path.”

The next lines emphasize this focus on the materiality of the language of description as such, when the “sound” of the bush and the “hissing snow” (*shipiashchii sneg*) make sense with the sound of an attribute of the bush, “a thorn” (*ship*). The Russian for “thorn,” “ship,” resonates with the Russian onomatopoeic description of the snow as “shipiashchii” (“hissing”). The word “ship” itself also means, colloquially, “a hissing sound.” The language here describes itself in a self-reflexive onomatopoeic moment.

The red “drop of blood” mixes with the red berries of the cornel bush, but once again “the arm” or “hand” (*ruka* in Russian can mean either) is unable or unwilling (“ne v silakh” is ambiguous and literally implies not having the strength for an action) to consider a “lingering drop of blood” the “perfection of form.” This implies an unwillingness to linger over the poetic comparison, an annoyance at a pricked finger, and a refusal or denial of the possibility of a perfect poetic form.

The next line recalls another traditional poetic trope of red on white that will become more explicit later in the cycle “Sum of Elegies,” in “March Elegy,” in which there is the quotation “rozy / morozy” from Pushkin’s play on this clichéd Russian rhyme:

Мороз.

И воздух.

В блеске и разрывах.

Пустырь.

Frost.

And air.

In brightness and rifts.

A vacant lot.

The second half of the Russian word for “frost,” “moroz,” contains a rose, “roz,” which links it with the word immediately preceding it in the poem, “blood,” and the red plants of the opening lines. The division of “moroz” into syllables emphasizes the

independence of the preposition “voz,” which appears almost directly below “roz,” with which the preposition shares its final two letters.

The “brightness and rifts” or “flashes and breaks” seem to relate to the “radiant bone” of the opening line, but also seem to refer to the broken articulation of the poem. The poem then moves to another break in its next word-sentence “pustyr’,” which comes from the Russian word for empty and which refers to a break or an empty lot in an urban landscape. The breaks are not only between the sentences but make up the sentences themselves.

И, мнится, небу столь же трудно
изгнать звезду из уравнений света,
как мне припомнить сколько зим до лета
And it seems it is just as hard for the sky
to remove a star from equations of light
as it is for me to remember how many winters remain before summer

The lines here have a lulling poetic tone because of their regular iambs. The latter two lines together make a rhyming couplet of iambic pentameters, which further enhances the traditional poetic sound of the lines. The archaic “mnitsia” reflects the traditional form of the lines. Tradition also hints at the idea of perfection, which is suggested by the “equations of light” or “equations of the world” – the Russian “uravnenii sveta” is ambiguous – from which nothing can be removed. On the other hand, the difficulty in remembering is about imperfection, imperfect memory and the imperfect way in which the solar cycle and other equations of time map onto our human sense of time. While on one level the idea of many winters before summer makes no sense, on another it responds to the intuitive human sense of time, a sense that could make a winter stretch out in the mind to the point of multiplying. These human imperfections in turn undermine the “equation” between the “sky” (*nebo*) and the “I.” In this way, the lines suggest a different analogy in which it is the “star” (*zvezda*) that is like the “I,” because the imperfections of human perception and recollection of the world cannot be removed from the way we apprehend the world.

In the lines that follow, the problem of perfection of memory, which is necessary for description and for poetic self-expression, again links with the problem of perfect form in poetry:

или позволить памяти свернуться,
 вернув меж тем ей совершенство формы -
 не ртутной капли –
 и иглы бессонной,
 что разрешит не требующей нити скользить
 бестенно,
 более не встретив всеотражающей и вязкой
 капли,
 как довелось ветвям, руке открывшим пламя
 в соединении с разрывом точки.

or to let memory coalesce
 having restored meanwhile to it perfection of form –
 not of a mercury drop –
 and of an unsleeping needle,
 which allows the thread that doesn't need to glide
 without shadow,
 no longer meeting the all-reflecting and sticky
 drop,
 like branches, showing the hand flame
 fused with the rupture of a point.

This long searching sentence, clause after clause, enacts this problem of memory and perception, as the reader, whom the syntax draws onwards, struggles to remember where it began. The language turns in upon itself in an act that enacts its own subject. The reader must try to remember the words “remember,” and “memory” to make sense of the sentence. The sentence also describes this self-reflexiveness. The word “svernut'sia” is translated as “coalesce,” but it can also be translated as “to turn in upon oneself,” as a leaf does when it curls up. The twisting, turning, weaving words continue in “vernuv,” “having returned,” but translated as “restored”, and then through the “needle” and the “thread.”

“Perfection of form” requires a perfect self-containment, a perfect turning in upon oneself. Here, however, one does not find “a drop,” or kernel, but the process of memory, of turning in becomes the focus of process of the poem. In fact, “svernut'sia” not only implies the coalescence or contraction of many things into a reduced form but

also something close to the opposite meaning. The word can signify the breaking apart that results from the stress of twirling, of twisting round and round, as in the phrase “kliuch svernulsia” (“the key broke”).

The redness of the prick on the hand now moves again. From the earlier berries it weaves through blood to the red of a “flame.” The open gap or space now returns to “razryv,” the break, or here where it “bursts.” This point is also the break of a full stop, because “tochka” is both point and full stop in Russian. The break comes at the end of a thread of associations, at the end of a sentence, the “point,” the end or goal, which bursts apart in its own conclusion.

“Kitchen Elegy” (“Kukhonnaia elegiia”) is thus another study in “Sum of Elegies” that plays on the residual effects of description of landscape. The opening lines of the poem, quoted above, seem to describe an antagonistic relationship between the subject and the natural winter landscape. The striving for “perfection of form” (*sovershenstvo formy*) is defeated by the strong images of snow, red berries, and blood, which seem to be a result of either stomping on the berries or the prick of a needle. This violence is inherent in the switching and mixing of genres and words of description in the language itself and in the images that the language gives up. As we saw in the lines that have already been quoted, this process of contradiction and coalescence turns into a problem of memory in the description of landscape. Finally, the uncertain relationship between form and content in landscape emerges as a central theme in the poem:

Чай жил птенцом в узорной клетке чашки,
в окне пустырь кружил - в его оправе,
Tea like a fledgling dwelled in the cup's patterned cage.
The vacant lot swirled in the window – in its frame,

The first of the two lines here makes sense, or can be made sense of, through the polysemous nature and connotations of the words used. The “tea” (*chai*) is in a “cup” (*chashka*) that is “patterned” (*kletka*). The Russian word “kletka” specifically implies a crisscross patterning and is also the word for “birdcage.” The latter sense of the word “kletka” thus makes sense of the simile “like a fledgling” (*ptentsom*). The word “fledgling” suggests potential that is still to be realized, because the “fledgling” will grow to maturity. Similarly, the “fledgling” is itself only realized in the poem through the simile with “tea,” the frame of reference of the poem, and the frame of the pattern in

the cup. When the word “chai” (tea) is compared to a bird, it may also suggest the phonetically similar word “chaika” (seagull) as the connection between these normally unrelated things. This wordplay is also encouraged by the word “chashka” (cup), which would become “chaika” (seagull) with the substitution of just one letter.

The cup of tea in “Kukhonnaia elegiia” and the combination of body parts, interiors and outdoor landscape in the poem also recall Pasternak’s “Zerkalo” (“The Mirror”).²⁴ The opening line of the “Mirror” is about a cup of cocoa seen in the frame of a mirror:²⁵

В трюмо испаряется чашка какао,
A cup of cocoa evaporates in a wall mirror,

The use of “triumo” (wall mirror) in Pasternak’s poem is suggestive of a “tiur'ma” (prison), because of the phonetic resemblance of the two words and because of the way in which the mirror seems to take over the world; one cannot break through it. As in “Kitchen Elegy,” there is also a bird, a siskin (*chizh*), in “The Mirror.” In the line after the bird in “Kitchen Elegy,” the outside world, the “vacant lot,” is entrapped in a window frame. Similarly, in “The Mirror,” the outside world, a garden rather than an empty lot, is enclosed in a glass frame:

Огромный сад тормозится в зале
В трюмо - и не бьет стекла!
The huge garden wrestles in the room,
In the mirror – and doesn’t break the glass!

There is also the combination of glass – a mirror and glasses in Pasternak’s poem, and a window in Dragomoshchenko’s poem – and the eyes of the beholder (in both poems too, the poets use poetic or archaic words for eyes “ochi” and “zenitsy,” although Pasternak also uses the standard word for “eyes,” “glaza”). In this way, attention is drawn to the fact that the perspective of the observer is mediated. Thus the mirror seems to contain the world in Pasternak’s poem, to swallow it up and prevent its escape. At the same time, however, the implied describer appears to be on the other side of the mirror. One can catch the image (*lovit'*), smear it (*salit'*), and shake it (*triasi*), but one cannot beat it (*bit'*), and thus break through it. The mediation remains. This mediation can be read as analogous to the mediated experience of the observer in the world.

²⁴ I would like to thank Stephanie Sandler very much for pointing out this connection.

²⁵ The translation here is my own, but it draws on the translation by Mark Rudman with Bodhan Boychuk, which though excellent is not always literal enough for my purposes.

In “The Mirror,” all kinds of words that denote or imply watery, runny, icy, crystalline, glassy, and translucent things are used to suggest the swimming, surreal nature of the mirror reality: “ wall mirror” (*triumo*), “eyeglasses” (*ochki*), “twinkling crystal” (*mertsaiushchii [...] kvarts*), flooding “collodium” (*kolodii zalit'*), “mirror” (*zeral'nyi*) “pouring sweatless ice” (*nepotnym l'dom nalyt'*), “tears” (*slezy*) “saltpeter” (*selitra*), “glass” (*steklo*), “rain” (*dozhd'*), “slugs” (*slizni*), “water” (*voda*). “Kitchen Elegy” also contains swimming iciness in the lines that follow the swirling of the framed world:

вгрызаясь в холод быстрыми зубами,
купались псы в сугробах.
 Плавание ворон напоминало отпечаток в угле.
 И пепел папирусный медлил падать...
 fighting into the cold with fast teeth,
dogs swim in snowdrifts.
 And the swimming of crows recalls an imprint in the corner,
 And cigarette ash delays its fall.

The tonality is calmer and less urgent in Dragomoshchenko’s poem. There is a prick of blood, but no question of beating the mirror, as in Pasternak’s poem. But the surreal, swimming world seen through a frame, nevertheless, recalls the hypnotic, mesmerizing world in the frame of Pasternak’s mirror.

The frames of reference in the poem, like the senses, are constantly switching or twisting. Although the poem previously described an outdoor landscape, the location of the subject has now been declared as inside a house, as the title, “Kitchen Elegy,” suggests. The implied observer is in the container of a house, just as the tea is in the teacup. At the same time, however, the description and the change of perspective swing this into reverse. “The vacant lot” (*pustyr'*) is “in its frame” (*v ego oprave*). Both the outside landscape and the tea would be amorphous without their respective framing devices, a window frame and a cup. The “kletka” is also a trapping, framing device not only when read as a “cage” but also when read as a “pattern,” because the process of seeing and describing, just like the problem of framing, brings up the power relationship between subject and object, between framer and framed. The relationship between subject and object is constitutive of both subject and landscape. The landscape in the poem is only a landscape because it is observed and described in the verbal structure, or pattern, that is the poem. The subject or implied observer in the poem, meanwhile, is

contained by that landscape, as if in a cage. This mutually constitutive relationship, each defined by and defining the other, is exploited playfully in the lines above.

The poem ends with another switching of perspectives. The wind outside, which is a part of the landscape that has been described, disturbs the subject's meditation on the observation and description of that landscape. This feedback leads to further refraction. The subject reflects on the place of "the object" (*predmet*):

И веял в волосах сквозняк, мешая утренней
науке
зеницы, суженной побегом лучевым,
рот обучать опять терпению предмета,
узлы вязать и не читать по ним.
And a draft was stirring my hair, interfering with the morning
studies
of the pupil, which was narrowed by a shoot of rays
To teach the mouth again the patience of the object,
To tie knots, not to decipher them.

The translation here misses another framing device. That is, it misses the bookish nature of the language, which defies a reading of the poem as an unmediated account of surroundings, just as the moving perspectives deny any perspective primacy. This bookish language is apparent in the old-fashioned "zenitsa," which translates as "eye" or "pupil." This double meaning is productive, because the word has the sense of both a black pupil and the whole eye with its white. This is important to the play between form and content in the poem as a whole.

The relationship between the breeze and the eyes echoes Pasternak's line "One can't blow out the eyes" (*Nichem mne ochei ne zadut'*) from "The Mirror," creating yet another frame through which these lines can be read. At the same time the association of the wind with binding also appears in "The Mirror":

Несметный мир семенил в месмеризме,
И только ветру связать,
Что ломится в жизнь и ломается в призме,
И радо играть в слезах.
The vast world minces its steps in mesmerism

And only the wind can bind
What breaks into life, breaks in a prism,
And gladly plays in tears.

The unbound world is caught in mesmerizing bonds and is “only to be bound to the wind” (*I tol'ko vetru sviazat'*), Pasternak's lines tells us. In Dragomoshchenko's poem, the wind teaches the mouth to tie knots – thus the wind is also associated with binding.

A double movement is also present in the influence of the “draft” (*skvozniak*), which, the Russian “meshat” implies, not only “interferes” or “prevents” the “eye's morning studies” (*utrenniaia nauka / zenitsy*) from teaching the mouth and tying knots but also “agitates” it. There is also a mixing implied here by the word “meshat',” so that the poem enacts the mixing of perspectives by interaction between subject and object. At the same time, it describes this action through the “draft,” which is part of the “object,” and the “hair” (*volosy*), which is part of the subject.

The bookishness of the language, moreover, interferes with the description of the act of description, which the reference to “the mouth” (*rot*) suggests is oral. The final line describes this tying of knots in the description that it follows. The Russian “chitat” contains a suggestion of written language that is more explicit than the English translation, “decipher.” “Chitat',” is the Russian verb “to read,” but in this case it has the figurative sense of “to perceive” or “to guess.” This verb turns the object, the landscape or outside scene of description, into a landscape of letters, which is the poem itself. Thus, another “knot” (*uzel*), or layer, concludes the poem in a rejection of the reading that has just occurred. The poem describes and enacts a perceptual act of description in a consciousness of consciousness.

“Chitat” also relates to counting or enumerating, so that description in its many facets is also a mathematical exercise. “Elegiia vtoraia po schetu” (“The Numerically Second Elegy”) refers in its title to the poetics of numbers, of mathematics. “The Numerically Second Elegy” begins with “a choice of meanings,” of two options, or alternatives. That is, either “what / is being written” or “what is written”:

То
пишется, что не написано, следуя
к завершенью.
Что написано - не завершено, постоянно

следуя к завершенью.

Выбор значения.

What

is being written is not written, it is approaching

completion.

What is written – is not complete, is perpetually

approaching completion.

There is a choice of meanings.

Like “zakliucheno” in “But Not an Elegy,” “zaversheno” and “zavershen'e,” translated as respectively as “complete” and “completion,” also have double meanings. These words etymologically relate to “sovershenstvo,” “perfection,” as in “perfection of form” in “Kitchen Elegy.” The relationship comes through the root *verkh*, which means “height” or “top.”

“Perfection of form” requires taste or art, both of which are apparent in the “seductiveness” of the following line:

Искушение неким значеньем. Затем

множественное число,

вишня,

висок покоются покуда в равенстве,

как соцветье стены в изученьи дождя.

The seductiveness of a particular meaning. Then

the plural,

a cherry,

the temples are poised for now in an equation,

like the wall’s blooming clusters, as they study the rain.

The Russian for “seductiveness” or “temptation,” “iskushenie,” links etymologically to the word for art, *iskusstvo*. The “plural,” which in Russian specifically refers to plural grammatical number, refers back to the doubling of meanings or tenses in the opening lines.

Dragomoshchenko’s “Sum of Elegies” explores the concentration and bifurcation of meanings in a landscape of language. “But how could we sleep, rapturous with bliss” explores both the residual effects of language focused on its own description, and

subjectivity focused on its position in landscape. “Kitchen Elegy” develops this exploration of residue. It investigates the various frames through which we perceive the world, from windows to language itself. In a small way, “Sum of Elegies” is an attempt to transcend the social, political reality of everyday life in the Soviet Union by exploring subjectivity in landscape through the observation and description of the world, and by investigating the language that describes this landscape. This leads to a complication of the relationship between subject and object. Language describes itself, enacting a consciousness of consciousness that is not only an attempt to escape the oppressive everyday subjectivity of Soviet life and literature, by crossing inward boundaries of language, but also an attempt to describe the wider world and renegotiate subjectivity in the Soviet Union’s changing cultural and social environment.

3. “Nasturtium as Reality”: “The Wonderful Moment-Age of Dividing”

“Nasturtium as Reality” is concerned with the “the shadow of the word, the representation of images, and the description of representation” (Sedakova, “Ocherki drugoi poezii” 266). In this cycle, Dragomoshchenko continues to explore the same complexities of perception and representation that lie at the heart of “Sum of Elegies.” In “Nasturtium as Reality,” however, Dragomoshchenko’s attention becomes focused most of all on the moment of perception itself, before full comprehension takes place. This place between the description of the real world and its absence is gestured toward through the contradictory movements that I have claimed characterize Dragomoshchenko’s work from the 1980s: the movement toward both realism and the undermining of realism, toward both creation and destruction, toward both an expression of subjective experience and the creation of a separate world of language.

The 12-part poem cycle “Nasturtium as Reality” appeared in *Mitin zhurnal* as part of “Sky of Correspondences” in 1986, and a revised version appeared separately in the same journal the following year. It has also appeared in two of Dragomoshchenko’s poetry collections, *Sky of Correspondences* and *Description*. The cycle begins with a clear articulation of one of its central themes – the problem of description:

Опыт
описания изолированного предмета
определен предвосхищением итога –

взглядом через плечо другого.

An attempt
to describe an isolated object
determined by the anticipation of the resulting whole –
by a glance over someone else's shoulder.

The opening lines of “Nasturtium as Reality” describe the poem as an attempt at the description of the experience of the perception of an isolated object (presumably, the nasturtium), which includes the perceiver's “anticipation of the resulting whole.”

The poem is, in part, a description of the act of perception. It is also a description of the act of describing the object of perception. This self-reflexivity, while seemingly aimed at a truer description of the world has the effect of making the object appear to the reader more distant and indistinct. In this way, in Dragomoshchenko's poem a new world of language is constructed out of descriptions of the existing world of experience. The reality of the “nasturtium” is changed into a poem. By focusing too closely on perception and the description of description something new is created – a world of language.

This constructed, artificial world of language is important to Dragomoshchenko's poetics. The artificial world is conveyed in the opening part of “Nasturtium as Reality” through the use of the metaphors of glass and mirrors to describe words:

Настурция состоит
из дождливой прорвы окна
для самой себя «до»,

Для меня - «за». Кому достоянье
рдеющей
дрожи
спрессованного обнажения
в проеме обоюдоострых предлогов

у

створчатой плоскости
прозрачность
разящей
стекла?

A nasturtium consists of
holes in the rain-spotted window – to itself
it’s “in front,”

to me, “behind.” Whose property is the gleaming
tremor
of compressed disclosure
in the opening of doubled-edged prepositions
in
a folded plane
which strikes the transparency of the window pane?

As in the opening lines of the poem, there is deliberate confusion here between words *referring* to objects of description and the same words *being* objects of description. For example, the “u” in the middle of the second stanza quoted above in Russian is the middle letter in the word “nasturtsiia.” Dragomoshchenko’s comments about the word “nasturtsiia” are evidence that this reading is not tendentious. He refers to the “verbal composition” and “consonants” of the word “nasturtsiia”:

Из своего окна я видел настурцию на балконе, таившую в словесном своем составе, словно в слепом стручке, новые завязи, соотношения новые меры, коим в точности было предписано повторить бывшие... словно в сумрачном стечении согласных - в смерти - где нарастающие, смыывающие друг друга, возникающие дрожат бесчисленные связи реальности.

From my own window I could see a nasturtium on a balcony. This nasturtium was concealing in its verbal composition, as if in its blind pod, its new ovaries, new measures of interrelationship, for which it was precisely prescribed to repeat former measures... literally in the twilight confluence of consonants – in death – where growing, washing one another away, and springing up, the innumerable links of reality tremble. (“Nasturtsiia kak real'nost”)

The quotation above not only refers to but also exemplifies the importance of the “confluence of consonants” (*stechenie soglasnykh*) in Dragomoshchenko’s work. The phrase “confluence of consonants” is itself part of a five-word sequence alliterated on the consonant sound *s*: “slovno v sumrachnom stechenii soglasnykh – v smerti” (literally in the twilight confluence of consonants – in death). Nor is this the longest sequence of repeated alliteration on the consonant sound *s*. In the second line of the passage quoted above, one finds: “v slovesnom svoem sostave, slovno v slepom

struchke” (in its verbal composition, as if in its blind pod). Excluding prepositions, 15 of the 39 words in the passage begin with the consonant sound *s*.

The two-line quotation with which “Nasturtium as Reality” begins comes from Velimir Khlebnikov’s poem “Rus' zelenaia v mesiatse Ai!” The relationship between this poem and “Nasturtium as Reality” will be examined in further detail below. Here, however, it can be noted that the epigraph refers to the dual process of consuming and excreting water:

Потом одетая
воду холодную пьешь из кувшинов
Clad in sweat
you drink cold water from pitchers

This interactive image relates to the description of a nasturtium and an observer looking at the nasturtium through a window. The window is in part a metaphor for language, but it is also a real window, a real object and frame for the perception of the nasturtium.

The composition of holes refers not only to the image of a nasturtium through a rain-spotted window but also to the gaps in the description of the nasturtium in the poem, and the way in which the nasturtium fragments into various perspectives and linguistic pieces in the description.

One way in which Dragomoshchenko enacts this fragmentation is through enjambment. In the opening part of “Nasturtium as Reality,” a sentence passes over a stanza break, enacting the “before” (*do*) and “after” (*za*). Then a new sentence begins on the same line as the ending of the previous one. In the final three lines of the first part of “Nasturtium as Reality,” quoted above, one finds the most confusing, counter-intuitive syntactic twist of the stanza. Here a syntactic unit is dispersed across several lines and syntactically disrupted. Together these final three lines enact the action of the plane (*ploskost'*) striking (*raziashchii*) the transparency (*prozrachnost'*) of the windowpane or glass. The relationship between the plane and the transparency only becomes clear after the two have appeared in succession to the reader. In this way, the syntax enacts the interaction between the two lines. Thus, these lines both represent an attempt at more precise description, and exploit the confusion that results from the syntactic inversion. This mixing of planes in Dragomoshchenko’s words, phrases, lines and stanzas can be

read as either an attempt at closer representation of the object described, or a distortion of that object into a play of language.

The windowpane can also be read as a metaphor for the poem, with the writer on one side and the reader on the other. The lines seem to ask: which point of view (“Whose property?”) is appropriate? This makes the reader aware of at least three layers at which distortion and transformation are possible. The first is the layer of visual perception, i.e. the author’s observation of the nasturtium through a windowpane. The second is the transformation of what is perceived into what is written, i.e. the description of the writer’s observation in the poem. The third is the transformation that takes place in reading, i.e. the reader’s apprehension of that description.

Part two of “Nasturtium as Reality” begins with colors as active agents:

Белизной атакующей иссушена
и точна
(отточена до не двоенья отточья)
стена
на бирюзе искажения.
Dessicated by attacking whiteness
and exact
(so precise it’s as irreducible as ellipsis)
a wall
in the turquoise blueness of distortion.

In this stanza, words that refer to colors such as “belizna” (white) and “biriuzna” (turquoise blue) take on active qualities. They attack and distort. If this stanza is taken as the description of a wall seen through the window, then it seems that the weathered features of the wall are described. The English translation of “ottochena,” “precise,” does not capture the sense of sharpness, of cutting up the image into pieces. This kind of fragmentation, which was seen in the first part of “Nasturtium as Reality,” reaches a point where the poem says division is no longer possible. Dragomoshchenko uses a play on “ottochena” (sharpened), and “otloch’ie,” which is both the act of sharpening, and the word in Russian for ellipsis marks. “Dvoen’e” could mean chemical reduction but it also means “doubling” and “dividing into two.” Absolute fragmentation, through

division into points of view and parts, is not only the state of the weathered wall. It is also fundamental to the approach to description in “Nasturtium as Reality.”

The play on the root *toch* is also an example of different word formations being used to the point of exhaustion. The word is “issushena,” “dried up,” or “wasted.” There is the repeated use of the prefixes for extremity, “is” and “ot.” The “is” prefix also appears in the final word of the stanza, “iskazhenie” (distortion). The cutting up implied by this final word leads paradoxically to both accuracy (*tochnota*) and “distortion” (*iskazhenie*).

The following stanza expands the description of the “Nasturtium as Reality,” by viewing the world around the nasturtiums:

Ракушечник и жар
в пурпурном полукружьи
да пар
блистающий в трилистнике двора
оставила гроза настурциям в наследство.
С изнанки знак - не зеркало, не детство.

Limestone and heat
in a purple semi-circle
and steam gleaming in the cloverleaf courtyard
are left to the nasturtiums by the storm as a legacy.
A sign, inverted – not a mirror, and not childhood.

This technique of taking an object as the center of observation in a poem and describing the world around in relation to it resembles Wallace Stevens’s approach in the “Anecdote of the Jar,” in which the jar takes “dominion everywhere.”

Dragomoshchenko’s approach, however, is more interactive. The inverted sign in the last line of the stanza could refer to the way in which the signs around the nasturtiums are used as a sign of them. The nasturtiums, through their description in this stanza, take possession of the world around them as signs of themselves in the poem. In the English translation published in 1987, this line does not appear, but it seems to be an important source of information on what is happening in the poem. The inside-out description is not only the description of the nasturtium but also the subjective description of a person observing the world. The poem describes a person indirectly, by means of his or her experiences of the world. The trace of the person is left in his or her descriptions of the

world. “Nasledstvo,” literally “legacy,” is formed from the word “sled,” the trace that comes after the event, neither reflecting exactly, like a “mirror,” nor speaking directly of origins, like “childhood.”

The next lines of part two of “Nasturtium as Reality” emphasize the importance of multiple readings, or versions, and complex syntax to Dragomoshchenko’s poetics. A single line becomes syntactically convoluted in order to preserve the syntactical integrity of the following line (the passage is quoted below with Hejinian’s translation):

(Версия: этой ночью разбитые вдребезги
лучи синевой сгущенных стрекоз,
связавших
полдень в узел слепящей пены...

(A version: this night shattered apart
by the rays of the dragonflies’ concise deep blue
drawing noon into a knot of blinding
foam...

This stanza begins a long parenthetical passage that presents different versions of the “night.” Together three versions support and negate an account of a dreamlike vision of night, dragonflies, light and darkness, and other visual effects, all of which might describe the “legacy” of the storm. These are certainly traces of memory that neither mirror the present nor recall precisely a single moment in the past, like “childhood.”

The “version” could be a description of the perception of light in a flash, before clear images come into view, as when one is blinded by a bright light in the night. This pre-conceptual vision interests Dragomoshchenko very much. He sets it out as a concern in his “Preliminary Notes” to “Nasturtium as Reality.” Dragomoshchenko writes of a “thought, refusing layer after layer the commands of ordinary speech and its doubtful comforts,” which manages “to grasp in its own striving” (*postich' v svoem ustremlenii*). What it “grasps” is not made clear, but Dragomoshchenko then explains this “striving” of thought in terms of perception:

Однако легче вообразить это стремление, как опережение
наличных представлений, как великолепный миг-век разделения,
образования смысла в потоке бессмысленно-привычного; не
более. Так, через «смерть» движет себя традиция, словно нить
сквозь игольное ушко. Вместе с тем это можно назвать временем

(как бы ни было условно здесь это слово) вновь и вновь наступающей «первой встречи».

It is, however, easier to imagine this striving as the outstripping of available conceptions, as the wonderful moment-age of dividing, of the formation of sense in the flow of the senseless-habitual; nothing more. Thus tradition moves itself through “death” like a thread through the eye of a needle. At the same time, it is possible to call it the time (however conditional this word is here) of the “first meeting” that occurs again and again.

The “flow of sense” described in this passage seems to relate to the flow of senses in the three parenthetic versions. The explosions of “foam” and “rays” also seem to enact an unbound flow of sense and “the outstripping of available conceptions.”

The syntactical form of this stanza, like the content, is complex, incomplete and excessive. Dragomoshchenko exploits the syntactical possibilities of Russian inflections in ways that do not translate easily into English. Hejinian’s translation of the lines quoted above indirectly emphasizes the importance of complicated and deliberately ambiguous syntax to Dragomoshchenko’s poetics. In order to see this more clearly, it is worth quoting this stanza again, this time with a more literal translation:

(Версия: этой ночью разбитые вдребезги
лучи синевой сгущенных стрекоз,
связавших
полдень в узел слепящей пены...
(A version: this night, rays smashed to smithereens
by the blue of the condensed dragonflies
binding
noon into a knot of blinding foam...

The opening “etoi noch’iu” is an ambiguous instrumental. It could either mean “in this night” or it could be instrumental for “razbitye vdrebezgi,” “broken to smithereens,” and thus read “the rays that are smashed to smithereens by the night.” In any case, it is the rays that are smashed, not the night. In the second line, however, the second instrumental “sinevoi” (by blue) seems to be the more likely candidate for the agent that has done the smashing.

Alternatively, and this is suggested by the stanza that follows, the rays could be “of the condensed dragonflies,” rather than the blue being of the condensed dragonflies:

(A version: this night, rays of the condensed dragonflies
which draw noon into a knot of blinding
foam, are smashed to smithereens
by the blue...

Russian, being an inflected language, allows the writer to present the same semantic content in a variety of different word orders, that is, in many different “versions.” In translating Dragomoshchenko’s poetry into English, an analytical language, the translator must choose whether to give priority to word order or meaning. Because of the strict word order of English, retaining both is often not an option. Hejinian’s translation, made in collaboration with Dragomoshchenko and a Russian translator, indicates, therefore, that syntactic integrity, the ordering of images, was considered in this stanza more important than semantic fidelity. The effect is not so much to establish relations between words as to pile images one upon the other so that the relationships described in the sentence, the sense of the sentence, are indefinite and subordinate to the experience of reading and imagining.

The image of the movement of light and dark is drawn together from disparate images through several poetic techniques. The middle line is bound together with the alliteration of the *s* sound, which also appears in “slepishchii” (“blinding”). The stanza is finely balanced between darkness and light. In the first line there is “night” and in the last there is “midday.” The “condensed dragonflies” also seem to imply a blotting out of light, as does the smashing of the “rays,” which like the “blinding foam” suggest light, an irresistible flash shining through the knot of darkness.

The next “version” is divided into two parts:

Версия: этой ночью лучи раскрошены
стрекоз, сшивающих камыш с осокою
в низине, где пар слепящ, где паутина лета,
а – совершенное отречение
от возможного воплощения

В ЧТЕНЬИ:

ни стрекозы, ни того, что образовано
и образуется
или смывается, - но и чистейшие формы

требуют грязи: версия).

A version: tonight the rays of the dragonflies
crumbled, they sewed together cattails and sedge
in the marshes, where the steam is dazzling, where the cobweb of
summer,
and – the total renunciation
of any possible embodiment

in reading:

neither a dragonfly, nor that which is formed
and forms
or is washed away, – but even the clearest forms
need mud: a version.)

In the version that appears in Dragomoshchenko's collected works, *Description*, published in 2000, a simple "odnako" (however) replaces the fourth, fifth and sixth lines of the quotation. These lines are possibly removed because they are too obviously an explanation of the lines that follow and are therefore redundant. If this is the case, they provide a clue as to how to read the negation of the previous versions. In the final lines quoted above, there is a reference to that which is "washed away." Perhaps it is "the total renunciation / of any possibility of embodiment in reading" that washes everything away. While the two previous "versions" in part two of "Nasturtium as Reality" seemed to be part of the striving to embody experience in reading, this final "version" is a rejection of the possibility of achieving such embodiment. At the same time, it is a negation of both the forming and washing away that the three versions seem to enact, so that there is a double negation: the entire text is finally negated by itself.

From this double negation, however, comes a surreal vision of dragonflies that have sewn together reeds and sedge. The relationship of elements in the stanza is strange and uncertain. Nevertheless, the objects are ordinary and are drawn from a specific landscape, a swamp or marshland area. Dazzling steam and cobwebs are also possible in this kind of environment. The combination of these things inclines the reader to conjure up an image of a marshy Russian landscape in summer, rather than anything more exotic. Out of this fairly ordinary language are built suggestive metaphors and syntactical relationships. The "cobweb of summer" and "rays of dragonflies" "are sewing together reeds and sedge" that have been "hacked to pieces by/in the night." The strangeness here again emerges in part from the unusual syntactical arrangements.

The final stanza of the second part of “Nasturtium as Reality” continues the combination of negations:

Резьбой живой в мятущейся траве
безмолвие ведет раскосый ветер.

Звук

извне

навстречу

тому,
что глаз напутал, форм не соблюдая, -
и оголяет, схлынув в сотый раз, углы,
где цепко сходятся надменное молчанье
с попыткой одержимой обогнать молчанье.

Like a living carving in troubled grass
silence carries the slanting wind.

Sound

from without

approaching

that
which the eye has blurred, not conforming to form –
and it bares, rushing out a hundred times, angles,
where the arrogant silence tenaciously closes up
with a persistent attempt to outrun silence.

The English here obscures the use of an obsolete word or poeticism “miatusheisia,” which describes the grass as “disturbed” or “being disturbed.” This is a piece of close description of the wind in the grass. The wind is only seen indirectly through the moving absence of grass. In a similar way a carving is created from the absence of material, such as wood. Wind makes noise, but it could carry silence by drawing attention to silence in its lulls. In the Russian, it is ambiguous whether the second line of this stanza should be read as “silence carries the slanting wind,” or as “the slanting wind carries silence.” In the former case, the absence of movement is then broken by the wind, so in a sense the silence of absence of air movement “carries” or “leads” the wind.

The necessary combination of absence and presence, silence and sound, negation and affirmation is clear. “Sound” comes with “silence,” while the attempt to escape silence inevitably coincides with silence. The forms of absence, carving and wind on the grass, emphasize the combination of form and formlessness.

The third part of “Nasturtium as Reality” returns to the nasturtium:

Вибрирующая настурция

(погруженье

шмеля в недопитуемую оторопь крыльев)

в

пряже намерений укрепляет края

(что-то происходит с глазами –

не достигают ума)

материи

в существительной косно-словесной ткани

цветка, –

распускает округлые траурно

в сумерках

(вскрику гортанных кустов на излете

в друзьях осени их уподобим)

листья.

The vibrating nasturtium

(submersion

of a bumblebee in the still unconsumed confusion of wings)

in

the thread of intentions strengthens the edges

(something is happening to the eyes –

they don't communicate with the brain)

of the material

in the nominative near verbal fiber

of the flower –

it opens its leaves mournfully rounded

in the dusk
(which we liken to the shriek of guttural bushes at the end of its
trajectory in clusters of autumn).

In Dragomoshchenko's poetry, there are numerous references to threads, cobwebs, sewing together and twisting apart. Dragomoshchenko seems to intend these images of twisting, winding and unwinding to gesture toward the constant striving to understand the world and entanglement of things in the world. Dragomoshchenko writes about the desire to follow the thread to its source, connecting Ariadne's thread with Russian modernist poetry:

Хлебников - вот что приходит на ум, когда возникает речь о странствовании борозды: Астерий собственного Лабиринта, зеркала, опрокинутого под небесами, крот (Мандельштам), угодивший в западню корней в поисках «неделимой частицы языка», предвечного центра, Формы, подобно тому, как физика угодила в западню языка в устремлении к неделимой части. (“Konspekt/kontekst,” *Fosfor* 9)

It's Khlebnikov who comes to mind when we talk of the wandering furrow: Asterios [the name of the Minotaur] of his own labyrinth, of an overturned mirror under the Heavens, a mole (Mandelstam) that has fallen into a trap of roots in search of “the indivisible particle of language,” of the pre-eternal center, of Form, the way physics fell into a language trap in its quest for the indivisible part. (adapted from “Syn/op/taxis” 17)

This striving for form and its impossibility, the constant entanglement and unwinding of thread, are constant themes in Dragomoshchenko's poetry, even to the extent that the sentence above twists through a variety nominal expressions in its search for an impossible center. Thread is the fiber of matter in the world, the linguistic pathways of meaning, and the perceptual formation and deformation of sensations into objects and concepts, all as subjectively experienced by the writer and the writer as reader. This perceptual process is referred to in relation to vision: “something is happening to the eyes” (*chto-to proiskhodit s glazami*). Dragomoshchenko deliberately exploits the ambiguity of “materiiia,” suggesting both cloth and physical matter in this metaphor of fiber. Here thread is the physical matter.

The English translation necessarily resolves the ambiguity of the object of the parenthetical reference to “them.” In Russian this could refer to the leaves, as Hejiminian and Balashova's translation suggests. It could equally refer to “sumerki” (the dusk),

which is a plural noun with no singular in Russian. Given that in the Russian text the passage in parentheses immediately follows the word “sumerki,” there is a strong suggestion that it is this, rather than the leaves, that “we liken to the shriek of guttural bushes.”

The next stanza of the third part of “Nasturtium as Reality” is entirely parenthetical. It is then followed by several short stanza-sentences. In contrast to the previous parenthetical stanza, “it” in English is more ambiguous than the Russian “ee,” which more certainly refers to the feminine noun “nasturtsiia” (nasturtium):

(знание, принадлежащее мне,
ее бережно впитывает, подключая
к неисчислимым сетям капилляров:
настурция - лишь отрезок нейронной
струны...)

Некоторые проедены гусеницей, тлей, лучами.
В подъезде сочится надпись: «Убит Вольтер,
позвони срочно мне».

Сыр букв мел.
(the knowledge that belongs to me
absorbs it cautiously, connecting it
to innumerable capillary nets:
the nasturtium – it is only a section of the neuron
string...)

Some are eaten through by a caterpillar, an aphid, by rays.
An inscription oozes in the entrance:
“Voltaire has been killed,
call me immediately.”

The chalk of letters is damp.

As previously in the poem, here material and matter are likened to one another through the idea of perceptual experience being a kind of threading together of reality. A

“neuron string,” a part of the brain, is combined with “nets,” so that interwoven fabric and perception of physical reality interplay. One does not perceive reality “directly,” but through the perceptual system of the brain. This indirectness is enacted in language through the intrusion of parentheses in “Nasturtium as Reality.”

Another way in which the reality of the writer’s perception intrudes is through distraction, as exemplified in the final lines. The last sentence could refer either to an inscription or to a whitewashed wall. But damp chalk is useless for writing, so the last line could equally refer to the loss of energy to write and to describe. Being the shortest and final sentence of this part of “Nasturtium as Reality,” this line also exemplifies what it describes.

Part four of “Nasturtium as Reality” begins with what at least purports to be a quotation, an epigraph to this section of the poem. The previous part of “Nasturtium as Reality” described the moment at which a description of the nasturtium forms in the perception system of the brain of the observer. Similarly, the opening “quotation” of part four of “Nasturtium as Reality” is about a moment of differentiation and distinction:

Помнишь ли ты, как впервые настурция
отделяется от листа платана?
Do you remember the nasturtium
separating from the plane leaf for the first time?

Desire, will, differentiation and perception all relate to one another in the two lines that follow immediately. These lines are presented on the page as a couplet:

Где воля обретает смысл желанья
на волос смерти вырваться вперед
Where the will takes on the meaning of the desire
to rush forward within a hair’s breadth to death

Here Dragomoshchenko plays on the expression “na volos(ok) ot smerti” (within a hair’s breadth of death), but instead of the standard idiom of fleeing from death, one finds the desire to rush “to death,” which implies a desire for death. In a further contradiction, there is an animated dash toward death that is frozen in time. The line appears to capture the stasis of death in the moment before death.

In his “Preliminary Notes” to “Nasturtium as Reality,” Dragomoshchenko makes the following comment about death and desire:

В периодическом возвращении мысли к смерти нет ничего предосудительного и зазорного, точно так же, как и в том, что мысли, отрекающейся слой за слоем от приказов привычной речи и ее сомнительных утешений, удастся - так мнится - постичь в своем устремлении, - какого же рода это желание?

In the periodic return of thought to death there is nothing reprehensible or shameful, just as it also happens that a thought that refuses layer after layer the commands of ordinary speech and its doubtful comforts will be able achieve – so it seems –through its own striving, – what kind of desire is this?

Dragomoshchenko seems to compare the desire to capture something beyond the limits of “privychnaia rech” (ordinary speech) to the desire to reach out to death, as the ultimate “unknown.” The sentence quoted above suggests that the subject itself is the thing that escapes definition. The use of “thought” in the dative makes the reader search for a subject, until the long-delayed verb (“udast'sia”) reveals that it is the thought itself that is the subject of the sentence. The person as subject is effaced through the reader’s own desire for him or her, and so the death of the author is linked to thoughts of desire.

The next strophe begins with four lines that move playfully between inanimate objects and parts of the body, by means of a series of puns:

до хруста позвонков пятитоновой гаммы
и муравьев в висках – подобны
тонкорунной соли – сухим ожившим звоном
перебирающих, как воздух, каждый волос

той,
что уже кувшин, вода и пот, и лист платана,
кувшинка, ожерелье пыли,
и лезвие, сквозящее
разрывом,
и остальное все, что может продолжаться,

лишь только память, приоткроясь, прянет
навстречу ей, распутанной глазами,
столь смехотворно соблазнить пытаюсь

ту,
что отныне только продолжение
в безмерной близости предела,
настойчивой поспешной речью.
until the vertebrae crackle in the pentatonic scale
and ants are in the temples – like
thin-fleeced salt – with dry enlivened ringing,
fingering, like the air, each hair

of what
is already a pitcher, water and sweat, and a plane leaf,
waterlily, necklace of dust,
and blade, showing through
a gap
and all the rest that might continue,

only memory, opening slightly, jumps
to meet it, untangled by the eyes,
trying so ludicrously to seduce

that
which henceforth is only a continuation
in the immeasurable nearness of the boundary,
by hurried persistent speech.

The first four-line stanza quoted above refers vividly to the experience of the brain perceiving the world through touch. This vivid description of the feeling of touch is synesthetic. It begins with vertebrae carrying the impulses up the spine, which is described as an aural sensation (“the pentatonic scale” and “crackle”).

The description of the brain thinking is also enacted in the associative relationship of the words in the passage quoted above. The movement from “pozvonki” (vertebrae) to “zvon” (ringing) and the association of the former with music are examples of the way the lines quoted above are built partly on phonetic resemblance, rather than semantic relationship. Another such pun-like association is evident in the words “kuvshin”

(pitcher) and “kuvshinka” (waterlily). This poetic logic is also aimed at enacting the movement of the mind.

This, Michael Molnar suggests in his introduction to *Description*, is a line of Russian poetry that was initiated by Mandelstam in the 1920s but not followed at that time. To support this assertion, Molnar quotes from Mandelstam’s poem the “The Horseshoe Finder” (1923):

С чего начать?
Всё трещит и качается.
Воздух дрожит от сравнений.
Ни одно слово не лучше другого,
Земля гудит метафорой,
Where to begin?
Everything cracks and shakes
The air quivers with similes
No one word is better than any other
The earth is humming with metaphor,

The reference to the pitcher, sweat and water comes from the epigraph to the “Nasturtium as Reality.” The epigraph, as previously noted, is a quotation from the poem “Rus' zelenaia v mesiatse Ai!” by Khlebnikov:

В серпня неделю машешь серпом,
Гонишь густые колосья,
Тучные гривы коней золотых,
Потом одетая, пьешь
Из кувшинов холодную воду.
И в осенины смотришь на небо,
На ясное бабье лето,
На блеск паутины.
In a week of August you brandish a sickle
You hunt the thick ears,
Dark manes of golden horses,
Clad in sweat, you drink
Cold water from pitchers.
In September you look at the sky,

At the clear Indian summer
At the flash of cobweb.

In Dragomoshchenko's "Nasturtium as Reality," the intensity of sensuous experience of Khlebnikov's poem, which details an entire year using archaic Slavonic names for the months, is combined with the self-consciousness of Mandelstam's "The Horseshoe Finder." Khlebnikov, like Dragomoshchenko, uses phonetic associations, which are contained in the Slavonic months, to motivate the movements of thought in the poem. The word for August (*serpen'*), being the time of harvest, is derived from the word for sickle (*serp*).

Echoing Khlebnikov's poem, in the passage from part four of "Nasturtium as Reality" quoted above, the experience of observing the nasturtium and describing that experience in language also includes the experience of writing. Words appear because they resemble other words, such "kuvshin" (pitcher) and "kuvshinka" (water lily). The concept of "zhelanie" (desire) as some kind of intention ("volia," or will) to observe leads to neural action and reaction in the spine, perhaps the sound of the author's own spinal cord humming with activity as he writes. The "zvon" (bell) in "pozvonki" (spine) then motivates the words "piatitonoiaia gamma" (pentatonic scale), which also seem to refer to the metaphorical "khrust" (crackle) and hum of the central nervous system, which is then described as being like having ants in one's temples, and as a "zvon" (ringing), a description that reveals part of the initial motivation for the sound. "Volos" (hair) is initially used in an expression ("a hair's breadth"), but then, being in the mind, reappears as a way of gesturing toward the tactile sensation by means of which the experience of thinking is described.

Dragomoshchenko uses sound, sight, touch, and taste ("salt" [*sol'*]) to describe the experience and create the poem. This sensuous synaesthesia also relates to the language itself, to the experience of reading and writing, because Dragomoshchenko attributes sensuous experiences to works of literature. He has spoken about the experience of reading in sensuous terms that refer to the taste, touch, and sound of certain works of literature. For example he has referred to "a soaked taste almost of the newspaper of the Anderson tales" and to "the cranberry din of the tin roof of the Oberiuty pie" ("Noch'

schastlivykh sobytii”).²⁶ He has also noted his love of the American Southern prose writers William Faulkner and Carson McCullers, whose work is characterized by the sensuousness of its language and its descriptions of the world of sensations (Interview with Jacob Edmond 355).

The first twelve lines conclude in endlessness: “and all the rest that might continue.” It is only after everything, then, that the main clause appears, as if it were an afterthought. At this point, “memory” appears, perhaps remembering the main clause, perhaps the nasturtium, which has also not appeared in the poem (excluding the epigraph) until line fourteen and then only as a plausible referent for the pronoun “ei” (“it” or “her”).

The passage describes not simply a nasturtium, but the memory of differentiation of the nasturtium. At least, this is suggested by the epigraph and the centrality of memory to the first sentence of this section of “Nasturtium as Reality.” The epigraph refers to the moment of “separating from the plane leaf,” which could be read as the moment when the observer perceives the nasturtium as a separate object.

The moment of perceptual differentiation is important to Dragomoshchenko, because it is the moment in which the world is apprehended without yet being divided up into things, concepts and so on. Dragomoshchenko explains this in his “Preliminary Notes to ‘Nasturtium as Reality.’” In the “Notes,” Dragomoshchenko writes of a “striving as the outstripping of available conceptions, as the wonderful moment-age of dividing, of the formation of sense in the flow of the senseless-habitual.” The moment of “separating from the plane leaf” seems to be exemplary of the “wonderful moment-age of dividing.” The separation of the nasturtium from the plane leaf is a specific example of the point of at which an observer differentiates an object or concept from the mass of sense data in the world.

The ludicrous attempt to seduce what is “henceforth only a continuation” returns the reader to the first part of the sentence in which a variety of different ideas and directions are taken by the text. It is indicated that this can continue without end. If the “it/she” is the nasturtium, then it is personified as trying to seduce the observer, but this is

²⁶ “The cranberry din of the tin roof of the Oberiuty pie” probably alludes to a scandalous OBERIU rooftop performance, and to one of the best known OBERIU catch-phrases, “Poems aren’t pies; we aren’t herrings.”

ludicrous because the nasturtium is only one of a whole range of ideas and memories that come in the thought-sentence about observing it.

The theme of memory develops in the dialogue that follows the first part-sentence of this section of “Nasturtium as Reality.” This provides another frame from which the “Nasturtium as Reality” can be viewed. The reader is never allowed to settle down to a single perspective, nor can the reader ever be sure what perspectives are presented. The dialogue about memory and the previous switching perspectives challenge the primacy of any part of a subjective description of the experience of a nasturtium, the memory of that experience, and all this and more turned into a poem. The switch of registers, from the long sentence full of sub-clauses to a dialogue composed of short questions and statements, emphasizes and exemplifies the multiple perspectives in writing and in writing about the “Nasturtium as Reality”:

Достаточно известен диалог:

– Где ты была? – промолвишь.

– Я... ... – запнется.

И ей немедленно подскажешь:

– Ты блуждала!

При переходе из порядка в хаос...

– Да, если хочешь... Да.

– И что же? Из прошлого что вынесла
с собой?

И нужно ли, что вынесла, теперь?

– Когда? Где? Мне?

– Да. Ты, тебе!

– О, всё, что скажешь мне, я буду помнить...

(и длится скучный диалог, переходя

в природу постепенно шума)

The dialogue is common enough:

You’ll say, “Where were you?”

It’ll stammer, “I...”

And right away you prompt it:
“You were wandering around
At the transition between order and chaos...”

“Yes, if you want... Yes.”
“And what then? What from the past did you bring
with you?”

“And do you need what you brought now?”
“When? Where? For me?”
“Yes. You, for you!”
“O, everything that you tell me I will remember...”

(And the boring dialogue goes on, turning
gradually into something in the nature of noise)

Hejinian translates the Russian feminine third person pronoun as “she” but it could be read as “it,” and refer to either the nasturtium, or, more likely, to memory (*pamiat'*). This would then make sense of the question “what from the past did you bring / with you?” On this reading, the separation of memory from the rest of the mind is parodied. The hum of the mind goes on, spinning off in different directions.

The final lines of part four of “Nasturtium as Reality” return to the description of the natural scene, in particular of a tree:

Так

дерево, читаю (что?), за тенью шло.
И если бы
сознание мое я мог вложить в народы листьев,
в регистры сучьев, искр
и в гул его стволов, размотанных папирусною
волей,
сказал бы: тень опередить готова
истоки в окончании ветвей, расставив
«умиранью»
условье нелепого признания в любви.

Непроницаемо.

So

the tree, I read (what?), went behind a shadow.

And if

I could instill my consciousness into the peoples of leaves,

into the registers of knots, sparks

and into the rumble of its trunks that have been unrolled like a papyrus

will,

one would say: the shadow is ready to surpass

its sources at the end of the boughs, having arranged

“for dying”

the conditions for an absurd declaration of love.

Impenetrable.

This passage seems to refer to the act of description, as an act aimed at instilling the describer's consciousness into the object of description, which is here a tree, presumably the “plane tree.”

The situation described is set out in the first sentence. A tree goes behind a shadow. But this is simultaneously made into a literary event by the reference to reading. The describer is possibly reading a book about a tree going behind a shadow, rather than seeing the tree and shadow directly. Or, it is the poem itself that is being read, in which case the passage describes a self-referential, circular situation in which the writer is reading his own text about a tree and describing that text in another text that he is writing and so on. The author in trying to describe the totality of the subjective experience of describing a tree must follow this endless path. There is always the possibility of another description of the previous description. Layers of description must be added *ad infinitum* in order to describe the subjective self-conscious experience completely.

The next part of “Nasturtium as Reality” consists of a description and enactment of “instilling consciousness” into the tree. This is described as a hypothetical: “And if / I could instill my consciousness” (*I esli by / soznanie moe ia mog vlozhit'*). The instilling

of consciousness is then enacted by the way the parts of the tree are described. There are “peoples of leaves” (*narody list'ev*), “registers of tree knots” (*registry such'ev*), which are likened to “sparks” (*iskry*), “the rumble of its trunks” (*gul stvolov*), which are “unrolled like a papyrus / will” (*razmotannye papirusnoiu / volei*). All these descriptions involve attributions of characteristics not normally associated with trees through the consciousness of the describer.

The last part of the second sentence concerns what would apply if this instilling of consciousness into the tree that has gone behind a shadow came to pass. If this happened, the poem says:

сказал бы: тень опередить готова
истоки в окончании ветвей, расставив
«умиранью»
условье нелепого признания в любви.

Непроницаемо.

one would say: the shadow is ready to surpass
its sources at the end of the boughs, having arranged
“for dying”
the conditions for an absurd declaration of love.

Impenetrable.

A shadow is normally utterly dependent upon that which creates it by blocking out the sun. The image of a shadow that surpasses its origins is in this sense surreal. Also, if the shadow has its origins in the branches of the tree, it is equally impossible for the tree to completely “go behind” the shadow. Thus this image is a kind of anti-image, to the extent that it is impossible to visualize. On the other hand, this passage of the poem provides an example of how something can go beyond itself. That is, the proposed instilling of consciousness into the tree makes the tree go beyond its real self, although its reality, as far as the poem is concerned, is only its reality within the poem. This bizarre, impossible semantic play is a kind of “absurd declaration of love,” though even this is reading too much of an overall picture into lines that are intended to resist an overall reading, that are and describe something “impenetrable.” In a recent interview,

Dragomoshchenko quotes the following statement that Vvedenskii made about incomprehension:

Александр Введенский: «Если мы почувствуем дикое непонимание, то мы будем знать, что этому непониманию никто не сможет противопоставить ничего ясного. Горе нам, задумавшимся о времени. Но потом при разрастании этого непонимания тебе и мне станет ясно, что нету ни горя, ни нам, ни задумавшимся, ни времени».

Aleksandr Vvedenskii: “If we sense a wild incomprehension, then we will know that no one can oppose it with anything clear. Woe to us when we reflect on time. But then with the expansion of this incomprehension it will become clear to you and me that there is no woe, not to us, nor to those who have reflected, nor to time.” (“Fosforicheskie promezhutok”)

Dragomoshchenko’s lines are, like Vvedenskii’s, about incomprehension. They also exemplify the incomprehensible.

Part five of “Nasturtium as Reality” becomes even more self-reflexive in its comments on the writing process:

Испещренные повторами лопасти
(сорок секунд уходит на поиск аналогии
разветвлению вверх
предгорловой части стебля - вместо того:
“эмоциональность является составляющей
композиции,
и выражение, разлучая себя к восклицанию,
значит столько же, сколько и запятая,
предшествующая его появлению”)

в лучеобразных прожилках, проживающих
эпидермий, как дыр надпись,
стекающую к обрыву,
не унимая беспорядочных колебаний,
ложатся вплотную,

дробя меж собою и мною
пространство спасительное рассудку. Драго-

мощенко Аркадий Трофимович описывает
настурцию, изведенную из описания.
Blades pocked with repetition
(forty seconds spent searching for an analogy
to the upward branching
of the fore-throat part of the stem – instead of this:
“emotionality is a component
of composition,
and the expression, branching itself out toward exclamation,
means as much as the comma
that precedes the expression’s appearance”)

in ray-image veins, of living
epidermis, like holes’ inscription,
which flows toward a precipice,
not calming the disordered fluctuations,
lie close,

dividing between itself and me
the space that preserves reason. Drago-
mshchenko Arkadii Trofimovich describes
a nasturtium that has been eliminated from description.

The reason, or understanding, occurs only in the space “between itself and me.” This is because it is only in the perception of the nasturtium by the observer, the “I,” that reason, including description, can take place.

The kind of description attempted in the poem, in which the interaction between the perceiver and the perceived is foregrounded, leads to the elimination of description. The poem, in its complex reflection of the process of perception and description destroys the very object of description. The intense closeness of the description creates abstraction, like a magnified image that becomes for the untrained human eye a collection of strange shapes and colors. Dragomoshchenko in an interview comments on this effect in film. This is what he has in mind when he confronts poetry and vision. Dragomoshchenko describes poetry as “invisible”:

Поэзия невидима - вернемся к вопросу о «прямой речи». Поэзия (ну... как специфический модус письма) стремится не к образу, а к стиранию любой визуальности.

Poetry is invisible – we return to the question of “direct speech.”
Poetry (well... as a specific mode of writing) aims not at images, but at the elimination of any visual-ness. (“Fosforicheskii promezhutok”)

The parenthetical statement at the beginning of part five makes a show of letting the reader into the “process” of writing. It comments on the time the writer spends in thinking up an analogy to “the upward branching / at the fore-throat of the stem.” The parenthetical statement is itself a kind of branching off, so that it enacts its own description. And then the allegedly discarded but actually retained analogy is itself a description of the writing process, the process of “composition,” including the “comma” and the “expression.” This kind of regression, potentially infinite (the description of description of description), is illustrated also by the way in which this “analogy” is contained within quotation marks and parentheses, which sit in the middle of a sentence.

This layering is aimed at some sort of rich multidimensional simultaneous experience of experience. Dmitrii Bavin'skii has commented:

Dragomoshchenko has always worked interestingly, fruitfully, productively like a machine that works smoothly grinding living vital things (and not really impressions) into thick, difficult to traverse dense masses of texts. Dragomoshchenko’s poetic works can be defined as the creation of voluminous spaces, multidimensional constructions, as the attempt to communicate the totality, the abundance of life’s substance.

The following sentences from part five of “Nasturtium as Reality” continue the composition of a linguistic reality out of pieces of description:

Хлорофилл

распрямляет галактики кислорода.

Трение света

о зеленую массу расширяет путь вещи

в сетке,

фильтрующей ливня,

ленно колышет

другую,

(the friction of light) draws attention to the language itself, but it is tantalizingly close enough to being comprehensible for one to feel the need to follow the logic of the sentence through to its end at the same time. Just as in the previous mention of “neurons,” here the unseen nature of the world revealed by scientific discovery is “seen” in the poem. Light does move; it reflects and refracts. Oxygen molecules move all around us in the air, which if we could see them might look like a galaxy of stars.²⁷

The structure of gaps in the text, strange relationships, and points of transition are referred to in the text but also make the text possible. “The new space that results in something different” (*novyi prostor porozhden'ia inogo*) is, in a sense, the poem, which provides a different way of looking at the world and at poetry. The gaps are the uncertainties inherent in form in which things accumulate but are not “immutable” (*neizmennyi*). Rather, the accumulation simply opens up further opportunities for reading and interpretation.

This endlessness is a kind of affirmation of the “Nasturtium as Reality,” the reality of the nasturtium and the independent, non-mimetic poetry that is also always striving after mimesis, or teasingly pretending to offer it. Because the goal of description of the totality of subjective experience in poetry is an impossible one, it can only be written in the absences in the “gaps” and “thresholds,” in the “accumulation” that affirms the endlessness of language, of the experience of the author as he writes the description of the nasturtium, and the necessary impossibility of the exact coincidence of the two. This is an affirmation of the inner world of experience, the outer world of reality as it is perceived, and of the pleasure of reading and writing.

The last stanzas of part five of the poem offer an “utverzhenie.” This is both an “affirmation” in the senses discussed and an “assertion,” a statement made in the writing, which could be unfounded. The uncertainty is emphasized ironically by the fact

²⁷ Stephanie Sandler has pointed out that this part of “Nasturtium as Reality” recalls Khlebnikov’s “Vshi tupo molilisia mne” (“The lice dully prayed to me”) in which Khlebnikov uses his own name and in which he refers to his brain, just as Dragomoshchenko refers to putting the nasturtium in his head. Sandler sees Dragomoshchenko’s poem as reworking Khlebnikov’s fantasies of precision “in definance of the physics of visual perception” (“Arkadii Dragomoshchenko” 13-14). It is argued here, however, that the poem can be read as enacting, rather than undermining, the scientific view of visual perception, albeit in a surreal and imaginative way.

that the affirmation/assertion turns out to be a question. The text is uncertain, open and full of gaps and contradictions. Again the impossibility of what is said defies the relatively normal syntax:

И утвержденье: те ли стрижи (что три года
назад), словно молекулы тьмы,
тему вечера снова соткут для звезды,
обронившей мускулистую линию в темя
залива?

Тому ночное умаление в зелень и ниже,
в ил

милости почв...

And assertion: are they the same swifts (as three years
ago), like the molecules of darkness,
that will again weave the theme of evening for the star
that has dropped the muscular line into the crown
of the bay?

The nocturnal belittling of this into green and lower,
into the silt of the mercy of soils...

The play on words composed of vowels and the consonants *t* and *m* is important to this stanza. It seems to motivate the combination of “t'ma” (darkness) and “temia” (crown [of the head]), which fall at the end of their respective lines. “Tema” (theme) and “tomu” (this), which both begin lines, also fall into this category. The two sentences form a contrasting pair with the first being an “assertion” or “affirmation” and the second concerning the “belittling” (*umalenie*) of what is affirmed in the first. While the first stanza moves upward toward birds, stars, and the crown of the head, the second moves down to end in the earth. Though the sentences make no straightforward sense, most of the vocabulary comes from a seaside nature scene and from night, which allows the reader the possibility of visualizing the half-light of the first stanza descending into the darkness of the second, as evening turns to night (“nochnoe”).

As noted above, the “assertion” here is, paradoxically, a question. The idea of “molekuly t'my” (molecules of darkness) is similarly paradoxical. Darkness is an absence rather than substance made of molecules. This interest in the “being of non-being,” possibly derived from Martin Heidegger, whose writings were popular amongst

рот, –

тень его флюгер, перебирающий горизонтали

решений,

мысль,

The nasturtium and rainy win-

dow behind the win

dow

(he is in it, it is in him)²⁹

are like meanings smashing one another

(I am not saying that a metaphor...)

that are drawn

by emptiness,

which is one of the details that is allowing stabilization –

it is straight,

thin,

the mouth

that has been carried across the tree like a line, –

the shadow is its weathervane, which is sorting the horizontals

of decisions,

thought,

The nasturtium in the window is the focus of this final stanza, an incomplete sentence. The use of unusual line structures mirrors the opening part of “Nasturtium as Reality.” In both these parts of the poem, line breaks are used to enhance the sense of inside and outside. A window has two sides, which are represented by the two halves of the word “okno” being cut between two lines. “The window behind the window” (*ok- / no za ok- / nom*) could also mean the other side of the window. The window also becomes, as in the opening part of the poem, a metaphor for the outside world and the inside experience of it. The outside world in our experience of it is imperfectly mirrored, represented by our perceptual system and then again through the description in the poem.

Part six of “Nasturtium as Reality” continues the final sentence of part five:

²⁹ In this line, the “it” translates the Russian feminine third person pronoun. This pronoun almost certainly refers to the nasturtium, which is a feminine noun in Russian.

Just as, not having had time to evaporate,
a droplet is frequently ejected by a scalding stove
A turn of the head is dictated by the necessity
of elucidating the trajectory
of feathered flesh, whose mass is squeezed
into the corridors that attract
the eye,
which cuts its inverse perspective
in the thicknesses of prolix equilibriums. The mechanism
of the key that extracts the sound that is hovering above
its own
description
in hearing,
which is protracted by the reverberation into the now. When?
Where? To me?

The birds from the previous part of “Nasturtium as Reality” seem to appear here again as the “feathered flesh,” although there could also be an oblique reference to writing, to the word made flesh, through the archaic “quill,” which has the same root as “operennyi” (feathered).

The “mechanism of the key” also plays on writing and other meanings. “Klavish” most commonly means the key of a typewriter or of a piano. In the context of the poem, the association with “zvuk” (sound) suggests the key of a piano, but the context of the poem and the idea of “extracting sound” suggests the transmutation of the heard word or description, “its description in hearing” (*svoe opisaniye v slukhe*) into the poem written on a typewriter.

Зачинающие головокружение
«вещи».
И очертания ее непреложны, чтобы пресечь
убывание, – рама – ее вертикали служат
примером
тому, как
осязаемое вводится в разум –
заумь возвращает суждением то, что всосала

и растворила в чистую плазму за день:

настурция необыкновенно проста (пуста)
до первой строки (с любого конца) –
позиция равновесия.

Скобка, которую невозможно закрыть.
“Things” initiating

dizziness.

And its outlines are unalterable, in order to cut off
the decrease, – the frame – its verticals serve
as an example

of how

the palpable is tied to reason –
nonsense returns by means of the conclusion that it has absorbed
and dissolved into pure plasma in a day:

the nasturtium is unusually simple (empty)
before the first line (from either end) –
the position of equilibrium.

A parenthesis that is impossible to close.

“A parenthesis that is impossible to close” could describe Dragomoshchenko’s entire approach to poetry, which is an attitude of constant diversion and addition without any definite end.

Reading backwards from this end offers a view of the complexity built out of simplicity and emptiness. The words “simple” (*prosta*) and “empty” (*pusta*) resemble one another, showing how *zaim'* (nonsense, or beyond sense) relationships motivate poetry, ironically leading to the kind of complexity that the meaning of these words denies. With complexity comes “dizziness” (*golovokruzhenie*), which is initiated by “things” (*veshchi*). The position of equilibrium is the position prior to the first line. As soon as the description begins, one begins to lose one’s balance and becomes dizzy.

Semantically, Dragomoshchenko’s poetry attempts to describe the everyday world in order to go beyond it, to create a poem. This going beyond is created through self-

reflexivity and disruption in the syntax, poetic line and word. This is clear in the penultimate stanza of “Nasturtium as Reality”:

Но видеть,
вдевая увиденное в иглу,
жадность коей под стать безукоризненности
ее выбора –

тончайшего отверстия форм.
But see,
Threading the seen through the needle,
whose greed fits the impeccability
of its choice –

the narrowest opening of form.

The syntactic arrangement disrupts the expectation of a grammatical object for the word “to see” (*videt'*). At the same time, the telescopic nature of the sentence enacts the focus on a small point of description. Thus, syntax enacts semantics. Meanwhile the tension built up by the delayed predicate reaches its height in the short indented line. This line is like the point of a needle. The indentation marks the tension point in the syntax of the line, which is then released in the right-marginalized predicate. This final line refers to the subtle opening up of form in the previous line. Here we have an example of syntactic form and line form both playing a semantic role. Syntactic form disrupts the norms of natural language, while line-form disrupts the norm immanent to the poem.

The threading of the needle relates to “the wonderful moment-age of dividing, of the formation of sense in the flow of the senseless-habitual.” Understood in this way, “the narrowest opening of form” is the moment before something, a concept or an object, is differentiated and identified. In this way, Dragomoshchenko’s poetry can be understood as describing the moment before full comprehension occurs. He achieves this in his poetry by means of language that is beyond comprehension. Like the conscious mind, Dragomoshchenko’s poetry is never complete; it is like a parenthesis that can never be closed.

In “Nasturtium as Reality,” Dragomoshchenko creates new linguistic worlds from the tiniest openings in language. Just as in “Sum of Elegies,” he builds these new worlds by

combining realism with the undermining of realism, creation with destruction, through both the representation of perceptual reality and the creation of a separate world of language. In “Nasturtium as Reality,” the starting point for these new worlds is the moment of perception itself, the point before full comprehension takes place. In “Sum of Elegies,” Dragomoshchenko investigates the description of conscious experience through an exploration of landscape. In both works, Dragomoshchenko gestures toward the description of consciousness and simultaneously undermines all attempts at description. As I will show in the following section, this paradox is essential to Dragomoshchenko’s poetics of mind and language.

4. Mind and Language: Arkadii Dragomoshchenko’s Poetics

Язык не может быть присвоен по той причине, что он есть несвершающееся бытие или Бытие. Совершенное действие не оставляет следов... Поэзия — несовершенство per se. Несвершаемость как таковая.

Language cannot be appropriated because it is an incomplete being or Being. A perfective completed action does not leave traces... Poetry is imperfection per se. Incompletion as such.

– Arkadii Dragomoshchenko, *Fosfor*

In my close readings of “Sum of Elegies” and “Nasturtium as Reality,” I have shown how Dragomoshchenko’s work moves between descriptions of the mind thinking and celebrations of language as such. In this section, I will argue that his work displays these contradictory tendencies because he is motivated by two contradictory desires that he shares with Hejinian and Yang: a desire to explore the inner world of the mind, and an equally strong desire to create another world of language. Dragomoshchenko’s work once again demonstrates the paradoxes of exploring the inner world of experience in the outer world of poetry. On the one hand, his poetry investigates the workings of the conscious mind, from perception to memory to description. On the other hand, his poetry creates a sometimes mystical, sometimes playful, world of language, an immanent world that challenges conceptions of lyric poetry as a mimetic act. In concluding this section, I will argue that underlying these contradictory tendencies is a tension that Dragomoshchenko also shares with both Hejinian and Yang: the tension between utopianism and anti-utopianism, a point that will be taken up again in the next chapter.

Mikhail Iampol'skii writes of Dragomoshchenko's poetry as being exemplary of "non-mimetic vision" (this is the subtitle of his 2001 book *O blizkom* [*Close to Home*]). It is argued here, however, that Dragomoshchenko's poetry exhibits a tension between mimesis and "non-mimesis." There is a mystical celebration of language beyond sense in his poetry, but there is also an interest in expressing the "inexpressible" of subjective experience, especially the experience of memory and perception. Iampol'skii's concept of "nearness" is actually a form of mimesis in which subject and object are blurred. Thus the object becomes the subject, and description is confused with the subjective experience of the describer. In other words, one finds in Dragomoshchenko's poetry a heightened, reflexive, complex self-consciousness conveyed in his dreamlike and playful language.

i. Consciousness, Description and the Mind

At the heart of Dragomoshchenko's poetics is an interest in the phenomenal experience of being conscious and a preoccupation with how to convey that experience in language. Like Hejinian and Yang, Dragomoshchenko is interested in creating a "consciousness of consciousness." But Dragomoshchenko is also deeply interested in language as such. He builds his peculiar poetics of consciousness by combining his interest in the mind with his interest in the creative potential of language.

What appears contradictory in Dragomoshchenko's work sometimes has a conciliatory logic. In relation to a number of contemporary Russian poets, including Dragomoshchenko, Zubova makes the following observation:

The elimination of the opposition "nebo-něbo" ["heaven-palate of the mouth" – the former is of Church Slavonic in origin] was particularly characteristic of poetry of the 1960s to 1980s. The elimination of this opposition had clear philosophical foundations in the rapprochement between the spiritual and bodily, and also in the description of a person as world-creation and world-creation as a faculty of speech: a similar rapprochement between the words "nebo" and "něbo" can also be found in the poetry of Annenskii, Mandel'shtam, and Tsvetaeva. It is also there in the poetry of D. Bobyshev, A. Khvostenko, T. Bukovskaia, I. Burikhin, and A. Dragomoshchenko. (166)

This idea of language as world-creating is, in Dragomoshchenko's poetry at least, also connected with phenomenal experience and thus to the "bodily." The world of language, in Dragomoshchenko's poetry, gestures toward phenomenal, bodily experiences. In "Nasturtium as Reality," the feeling of visual sensation is referred to as

the “crunch” of “ants,” which are likened to “salt.” But as well as referring to phenomenal experience, this is also a reference to linguistic composition. Elsewhere Dragomoshchenko has compared language to buzzing, swarming insects (*Letters Not about Love*). The “dragonflies” in “Nasturtium as Reality” may also refer to the feeling of writing.

These images illustrate that Dragomoshchenko conceives of the mind thinking in bodily, sensuous terms. Dragomoshchenko has a deep interest in the sensuousness of “pre-conceptual” moments of perception, in the bodily experience of perception, description and the exploration and enactment of these experiences in language. His poetry aims at the moment at which perception comes into being, when each layer of perception folds into another. This interest is clear in his “Preliminary Notes to ‘Nasturtium as Reality,’” in which he writes of “the wonderful moment-age of dividing, of the formation of sense.” As has been seen, in order to enact this in poetry, Dragomoshchenko exploits the layers of self-reflexivity available in the flexible syntax of Russian.

Dragomoshchenko’s interest in perception leads him to distinguish between two functions of language: “narrating” (*rasskazyvat'*) the world and “seeing” the world “anew” (*vidit' заново*). As Dragomoshchenko sees it, language is often used to narrate. But for Dragomoshchenko, seeing things anew is the exemplary function of poetry:

Поэзия отличается от прочей словесности тем, что она ничего не рассказывает, ничем не помогает, ничего не меняет. Она может создать ту зону, где мы теряем привычные координаты, привычную ориентацию, где мы находим то, что называлось раньше точкой первого соприкосновения с миром. Когда мы видим все заново. Увидеть заново - это большое счастье. Вы выходите из дому, говорите: «Боже мой, какой прекрасный мир!». Хотя на самом деле ничего прекрасного нет - уродливые детали, ржавые трубы, гигантские остатки свернутого здания. Но есть пафос, есть жажда прекрасного - и вы говорите: «Как прекрасен этот день! И утро! И небо! И воздух!». Это состояние первой встречи с миром. Поэзия - это и есть такое состояние.

The difference between poetry and other kinds of literature is that poetry does not narrate anything, does not help in anyway, and does not change anything. It can create that zone where we lose our familiar coordinates, and normal orientation, where we find that which was earlier called the point of our first contact with the world. When we see everything as if new. To see everything afresh is a great happiness. You leave home, and say: “My God, what a beautiful

world!” Although in actual fact there is nothing beautiful – monstrous details, rusty chimneys, and the gigantic remains of a demolished building. But there is pathos, there is thirst for the beautiful – you say: “How beautiful this day is! And the morning! And the sky! And the air!” This is the state of first meeting the world. Poetry is such a state. (“Predvoskhishchenie otveta”)

Here Dragomoshchenko describes the aim of poetry as touching the world through something beautiful and valuable. The point of this contact with the world is the immediate sensuous pleasure that it brings. The experience of this pleasure is the aesthetic, non-mimetic side of poetry for which Dragomoshchenko aims, but it is also mimetic in that it describes and enacts Dragomoshchenko’s experience of consciousness.

Sight plays an important role in Dragomoshchenko’s attempts to convey the experience of consciousness. Dragomoshchenko explicitly links sight with self-consciousness. He sees the subjective world of experience as being partially constituted by vision:

Зрение не существует само по себе. Зрение отдельное от человека не существует. Человек выстраивает свое зрение. Зрение – одно из форм мышления. Зрение – система сложности, система рефлексии. Но это система является, как бы, составляющей твое мышление, твое описание мира. Каждый человек – свое зрение.

И поэтому больше чем один мир?

Да. Поэтому мир не один. Мир себя поэтому бесконечный.

Sight does not exist independently. Sight independent of a person does not exist. A person arranges his or her own sight. Sight is one form of thinking. Sight is a system of complexity, a system of reflex. But it is as though this system makes your thinking, your description of the world. Every person is his or her sight.

And because of this there is more than one world?

Yes. Because of this there is not just one world. Because of this the world of the self is infinite. (Interview with Jacob Edmond)

Dragomoshchenko’s poetry creates a world of language, a fascinating linguistic object, out of close description of observations in the world. This is the implied meaning of the titles “Nasturtium as Reality” and “Observation of a Falling Leaf as the ‘Ultimate Basis’ of Landscape (a Reading).”

Dragomoshchenko’s prose and poetry both describe and enact abstraction and constant flux in language, qualities that are a necessary part of the strangeness of moments of experience and memory. That is, Dragomoshchenko often uses sentences to describe the

abstraction and flux of the mind as it thinks, while making abstraction and flux striking characteristics of the sentences themselves. For example, the third part of Dragomoshchenko's prose piece "Fosfor" in his book of the same name begins in this way:

Материнская материя памяти сокрывает ослепительный сумрак пра-материи, в котором залегает оксюмороном возможность. У меня болит глаз. Но у меня болит также и большой палец правой ноги - следствие того, что, передвигая стул, я его отдал. Перелеты птиц. Возможен ли момент, когда «источник» боли исчезнет, то есть, некое «возмущение» равновесия мышечных тканей утихнет, а сигнал, последняя дробь его остатка, которую это возмущение отослало, прибудет в мозг рябью описания, не описывающего ничего, но вызывая реакцию опознания, потому как того, о чем сигнал свидетельствует, более не существует, источника нет. 20000 лье под водой.

The maternal matter of memory conceals a blinding dusk of proto-matter, in which opportunity has taken root like an oxymoron. My eyes hurt. But the big toe of my right foot also hurts – as a result of my having squashed it while moving my chair. Migrations of birds. Is it possible that there is a moment when “the source” of pain disappears, that is, a kind of “indignation” of the equilibrium of the muscular fabric becomes quiet, and a signal, the last shudder of its remainder, which this indignation has left behind, arrives at the brain as a dazzle of description, which describes nothing, but causing a reaction of recognition, because that to which the signal attests no longer exists, there is no source. 20000 leagues under the sea. (*Fosfor* 87)

The sentence that begins “Is it possible” (*Vozmozhen li*) is a good example of the way in which Dragomoshchenko seeks to enact a sense of an ineffable moment, in this case the moment when the pain disappears but the experience, or the nervous system's description of the pain, continues without a source. This is the subject of the sentence, but the sentence describes something that is no longer there. The “source” (*istochnik*) at the beginning of the sentence is negated at its end. The twists and turns of the convoluted sentence add up to nothing, so that everything is in the “signal,” the progression of the sentence, rather than that to which it refers. It is in this way that Dragomoshchenko seeks to describe the ineffable moments of memory and sensuous experience, always while recognizing that this is, of course, by definition impossible, since subjective experiences always differ from the language that describes them.

Dragomoshchenko seems to associate that which is beyond expression with non-visual language. As noted above, Dragomoshchenko sees poetry as that which eliminates

“visual-ness” (“Fosforicheskii promezhutok”). His comments on his earliest memories evidence his interest in ineffable senses and feelings, feelings that are not “visual,” or that do not provoke expressible images. Dragomoshchenko suggests that his earliest memories may come from his time in Germany, even though he returned to the Soviet Union when he was only one year old:

какие-то странные, неизъяснимо зыбкие, скорее отвлеченно-чувственные, нежели пластические/визуальные образы периодически всплывают (все реже...) в “памяти”, возможно в воображении, хотя в последние годы граница, отделяющая воображение от памяти стала очевидно таять.

certain strange, ineffably shaky, more abstractly sensuous than plastic/visual images periodically rise to the surface (more and more rarely...) of my “memory,” possibly in my imagination although in the last few years the border separating imagination from memory has noticeably faded. (Interview with Jacob Edmond)

Even when writing of more certain memories from his childhood in Ukraine, Dragomoshchenko feels these cannot be given a “single form”

А Украина? Ну, здесь уже все складывается в довольно явственные и внятные картины, хотя, признаться, они, опять-таки реже и реже оживают в эмоциональном, скажем так, плане, иными словами — они, скорее, относятся к *физически закрепленным* воспоминаниям, но никак не являются следствием некоего желания и одновременного переживания непостижимых моментов зарождения этого желания, которые вряд ли когда найдут свою подлинную артикулированную в единственности форму.

And Ukraine? Well, here already are quite clear and distinct pictures, although, I confess, they, just the same, more and more rarely awake in the emotional, let us say, plan, in other words – they relate more to my *physically secured* recollections, but they are in no way the result of some desire and simultaneous experience of ineffable moments of the birth of that desire. They could hardly then find their authentic articulation in a form of uniqueness. (Interview with Jacob Edmond)

This interest in precise description of the imprecision of memories is evidence of the Proustian side of Dragomoshchenko’s poetic intentions. It is not just play in language for the sake of it – though that is part of it. The poet also has a strong interest in the sensuousness and ineffability of indirect, fallible recollections, perceptions and linguistic expressions of these things. Dragomoshchenko in his poetry and prose searches for a way to convey these phenomenal experiences of being conscious, in language that excites the very sensuousness that it describes.

ii. Endless Play, Impossibility and Language

In addition to the desire for the ineffable sensuousness of experience, Dragomoshchenko's poetry also exhibits the opposite desire: the desire to eliminate the mimesis of experience in poetry and to create an immanent world of language. Dragomoshchenko works to fulfill this opposite desire by undermining the referentiality of language. In his work, pieces of language take on the value of characters and real things. At times, Dragomoshchenko strives to make language that refers to nothing but itself.

In an essay on the subject of the "I" and the self, Dragomoshchenko begins with an epigraph from Fedor Tiutchev that plays on the fact that one person's "I" is always another's "you," i.e. always something else:

О, нашей мысли обольщение,
Ты, человеческое Я...
O, delusion of our thoughts
You, human I... (qtd. *Fosfor* 129)

"You" is also "I," and seeing one or the other as essential is a delusion.

Dragomoshchenko plays on the way indexicals have no referent outside a context. Dragomoshchenko is clearly interested in the way in which language can seem to detach itself from the world and to refer to nothing but itself. In this respect, Dragomoshchenko's approach to writing is at times very reminiscent of Jacques Derrida, but in Dragomoshchenko's work there is also a genuine striving for epiphany. Where Derrida deals generally in abstract words and mythic situations, Dragomoshchenko seems genuinely interested in actual experiences, flashes of memory or desire that elude expression. As was pointed out, part of this interest in experience relates to Dragomoshchenko's interest in description, in trying to describe actual situations, appearances, and the effects of light. Dragomoshchenko places particular emphasis on vision because, as noted above, he sees the visual systems as "creating your thoughts, your description of the world."

Vision is one of the ways in which Dragomoshchenko turns a theory of language into metaphysics. In Dragomoshchenko's work, such a transformation of the world into language and vice versa often involves visual descriptions that are patterns, like patterns of form in language:

Узор травы определяет контуры “будущих костров.” Возникает “вопрос” (и точно так же исчезает. Вина не доказана) – знаем ли мы то, что мы знаем, либо, что “узор травм определяет узор будущего.” Знак “”, блуждающих глаз эхо, обращенных к истоку и устью, истечению темных спиралей, сворачивающихся в массивы ускользящего узнавания.

The pattern of grass determines the contours of “future bonfires.” The “question” arises (and immediately disappears. Guilt is unproven) – do we know that we know, or that “the pattern of traumas defines the pattern of the future.” The sign “”, the echo of wandering eyes, turned to the source, to the mouth, to the outpouring of dark spirals folding into masses of slipping recognition. (“Kholodnee l'da, tverzhe kamnia” 150)

In Dragomoshchenko’s work, the transformation of the world into language is highlighted. In this sense, his work displays an acknowledgement of the difference between description and the reality described in that description. At the same time, his work and statements of poetics show a desire to grasp the ineffable in language, to reach beyond the possible to things that possibly do not exist:

Мне интересны возникновения, пороговые состояния. Может быть, что они не существуют, но мне интересно, что будет дальше. Я хочу знать что ничто.

I am interested in origins, threshold states. Maybe these do not exist, but I am interested in what comes afterwards. I want to know what nothing is. (Interview with Jacob Edmond)

Dragomoshchenko’s concept of beginnings needs more explanation. In his poetry, Dragomoshchenko tries to capture the beginning of a feeling before it is fully grasped, as was clearly evident in “Nasturtium as Reality.” This resembles Hejinian’s desire to convey the experience of experience, and Yang’s intention to express a real human experience. Dragomoshchenko is particularly interested in the “experience of the unfathomable moments at which the origin of desire begins” (*perezhivanie nepostizhimykh momentov zarozhdeniia etogo zhelaniia*) (Interview with Jacob Edmond):

Я хочу пойти туда, где возникает эта сила, еще не оформленная, еще не артикулированная. Есть тревога – беспокойство, которое возникает, и возникает желание. Но как они возникают?

I want to go where that still unformed and unarticulated force begins. There is anxiety, a disturbance that arises. Desire also arises. But how do they arise? (Interview with Jacob Edmond)

This desire to get at “unfathomable moments” is also apparent in the interest that Dragomoshchenko has expressed in Derrida’s *différance* and the “Way” (道 *Dao*) of Lao Zi 老子 (Interview with Jacob Edmond). What he finds in the work of both philosophers is an opposition to the definable, to essence, so that:

Принимается мир не как структура, а как метаморфозы, как бесконечные превращения.

The world is taken not as a structure, but as metamorphoses, as endless transformations. (Interview with Jacob Edmond)

Thus Dragomoshchenko finds support for his exploration of phenomenal consciousness from texts that, like his “unfathomable moments,” cannot be reduced to structure, just as poetry cannot be reduced to prose.

Dragomoshchenko achieves this effect in poetry by keeping ideas and language constantly twisting and turning. For example, there are connections between the beginning and ends of his sentences, but they are often strange and very long. The reason for this becomes clear in the poet’s explanation of his method:

Перед тем, как закончил предложение и уже четыре раза его перечитываешь. И когда ты читаешь, даешь себе новые импульсы. Ты можешь закончить предложение *совершенно* не так, как первое начинаешь [...]

Before you finish a sentence you have already read it four times. And when you read, you give yourself new impulses. You can finish a sentence *completely* differently from the way you started [...]
(Interview with Jacob Edmond)

In Dragomoshchenko’s long sentences, the shifts in direction are at least in part a result of his method of writing. New associations that occur from rereading a phrase give new directions to a given sentence. Dragomoshchenko aims at the enactment of experience, in which things are constantly in flux and are “endless transformations,” rather than objects. He employs a kind of “anti-structure” form in his writing. Although his method bears some resemblance to the automatic writing of the Surrealists, Dragomoshchenko’s approach is deliberate, rather than aimed at accessing the subconscious. Importantly, his aim is to frustrate closure, to frustrate any search by the reader for an overriding form. Instead, Dragomoshchenko aims at flashes of perceptual experience and memory, like those that Proust’s *madeleine* brings forth. As Dragomoshchenko sees it, perception and memory are closely entwined:

Поэтому нельзя понять, чьё воспоминание твое собственное. Что это? Где это? Это в твоей жизни? Эти образы, когда ты переходишь от сна, ты уже не спишь, это такие flashes вспышки.

It is impossible, therefore, to understand whose memory is your own. What is it? Where is it? Is it in your life? These are the images that come when you cross out of dream, when you are no longer sleeping; they are flashes of haste. (Interview with Jacob Edmond)

In “Nasturtium as Reality,” as was seen above, the dialogue with memory illustrates the strange otherness of memory. Dragomoshchenko’s interest in conveying the strangeness of memory is part of his concern for the lyric exploration of subjective experience, of the feeling of existing, in his poetry. Dragomoshchenko writes, for example, that what attracts him most in reading and writing is:

Полное свое собственное существование. Это безумное чувство.

One’s own complete existence. It is a mad feeling. (Interview with Jacob Edmond)

This existential completeness involves a feeling beyond everyday language, for Dragomoshchenko; it is a feeling beyond reason, beyond normal depiction. For this reason, Dragomoshchenko is adamant that poetry should not aim to create “images” (*obrazy*). From this it follows that poets must strive to avoid writing that can be depicted. Or as Dragomoshchenko puts it:

И поэтому главная задача увести человека от возможного создания воображения так называемых картинных образов. Поэтический образ никогда не может быть описан, ни в каких иллюстрациях.

And because of this [because one should not aim at images], the main task [of poetry] is to take one away from the imagination’s possible creation of so-called pictorial images. A poetic image can never be depicted in any kind of illustration. (Interview with Jacob Edmond)

Both a visually reproducible and rationally conceivable poetics is out. Indeed, Dragomoshchenko aims at “beyond-being” (*za-byvanie*), as he put it in the title of one of his essays. Dragomoshchenko has described this inherently impossible aim:

Я хотел бы поставить некоторые вещи, которыми я занимаюсь. Я бы хотел заниматься вообще пустыми вещами. То есть, хочу перейти к абсолютно ауту. Есть предметы, как, например, яблоки, стаканы, сапоги. Они салки. Они занимаются, как бы совершенно абстрактно подключенными вещами.

I would like to put forward several things, with which I am occupied. I would like to be occupied only with empty things. That is, I want to

cross absolutely toward the “out.” There are subjects, like, for example, apples, glasses, and boots. They are things in a tag game. They act as though they were completely abstractly connected things. (Interview with Jacob Edmond)

This “absolute out” seems to be language in which there is no concrete reference to things outside the poem at all, where words are like things, abstract counters in a game. Part of the aim of this, however, is to capture existential feelings that are normally inexpressible. Dragomoshchenko thus has a somewhat a mystical view of poetry and its effect on subjectivity. He writes:

Известный тезис: «я существую постольку, поскольку существует другой» – замещается иным: «так как мое “я” отстоит от моей сущности, то и “другой” в этом случае утрачивает насущность». Панъевропейский диалогизм управляет любым повествованием, но не письмом поэзии. (“O lishnem” 347)

The well-known thesis “I exist because of the other” is replaced by a different one: “Since my ‘I’ is separate from my being-ness [essentialness], the ‘other’ in this case also loses his or her necessity [urgency].” Pan-European dialogism governs any narrative but not the writing of poetry. (adapted from “On the Superfluous” 98)

In the passage quoted above, Dragomoshchenko appears to be claiming that the distinction between “I” and “you” is a linguistic illusion, because he locates self and other in “Pan-European dialogism.” The *Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy* describes some varieties of mysticism as claiming that the distinction between subject and object is illusory:

Non-theistic varieties are more apt to describe the experience as one that can be induced and controlled by the mystic and in which distinctions between self and reality, or subject and object, are revealed to be illusory. Mystics claim that, although veridical, their experiences cannot be adequately described in language, because ordinary communication is based on sense experience and conceptual differentiation: mystical writings are thus characterized by metaphor and simile. (Mann 593)

Moreover, “non-theistic mystical experiences are usually claimed to reveal the metaphysical unity of all things” (Mann 593). Dragomoshchenko’s view appears to share some parallels with mysticism not only in his understanding of the subject and object but also in his apprehension of the world. Dragomoshchenko takes the world “not as a structure, but as metamorphoses,” a position that seems to conform to the mystical view that structural conceptions of the world that distinguish self from reality are

illusory. The elimination of the “separate self-sufficient I” is an important theme in Dragomoshchenko’s work. For example:

Я, возникающее из прикосновения, отпущено поровну всем, и ты понимаешь, что не в означивании дела, но в исключении. Незримые опоры, растягивающие кожуру совмещений в неукротимом переходе в иное, - вторжение. Разве в том городе, где провел он юность (холмы, глинистая река, сладчайшее тело Иисуса, запах которого смешан с запахом старческих тел), разве там не говорили на всех языках? И что за благо, начав движение в одном, завершать в другом, не сдвигаясь ни на йоту: дерево в окне поезда, кружащее вокруг собственной оси, - вавилонские башни степей, - кружащее, пленяющее собою твое, дарованное многими «я», которое, как известно, забывается в первую очередь. Жаворонок. Провода. (*Ksenii* 42)

I, appearing from a touch, released equally to all – and you understand that the point is not in signification but in elimination. Invisible foundations, stretching the rind of combinations in an indomitable transformation to something else – an intrusion. Is it really in that city that he spent his youth (hills, the clay-filled river, the sweetest body of Jesus whose odor mingles with the odor of old people’s bodies), is it really there that they spoke in every language? And what good is it, having begun to move in one, to finish in another without having moved at all: a tree in the train window, circling its own axis, - the towers of Babylon of the steppe, - surrounding, swaddling in itself your “I,” the gift of many, your “I” which, as everyone knows, is forgotten at the first occasion. A crane [a bird]. Wires. (*Xenia* 66-7)

The subjectivism of the pronoun “I” is here compared with the relative positions of a tree and an observer in a train. This comparison makes the point that being surrounded is a matter of perspective, just as the existence of an “I” necessarily implies the existence of other people, from whom the “I” is distinguished. The “I” is, therefore, “the gift of many.” The “I” is defined negatively, as not other, a fact that could also explain the claim that: “the point is not in signification but in elimination” (*ne v oznachivanii delo, no v iskliuchenii*). The elimination of the opposition between the “I” and the world allows not only for mysticism but also for the free play of language, separate from reality. For example, Dragomoshchenko writes of “poetic moments” as moments when “nothing exists”:

Но прожить поэтическое состояние невозможно. Оно - дыра, когда ничего не существует. Можно попасть в него, но оно никогда не оседает никакими кристаллами. Это воронка. Она засасывает. Быть может, это и привлекает.

But to live a poetic existence is not possible. It is a gap, when nothing exists. One can fall into it, but it never settles into a crystallized form.

It is a crater. It sucks you in. Possibly, it also attracts you.
("Predvoskhishchenie otveta")

Dragomoshchenko finds in writing the potential to create undifferentiated things, a situation in which nothing can exist as singular or unique:

ночь письма есть ночь вос(з)хищающего соединения множества голосов, где по определению не может существовать «единственный», «уникальный» голос, и если речь опять пойдет о таком, то с запаздывающей легкостью мы будем вынуждены согласиться, что пишущий есть действительное средоточие ночи, средоточие всех голосов.

the writing's night is the night of the enrapturing conjunction of a multitude of voices, where by definition there cannot exist a "single," "unique" voice, and if the discussion should again turn to such a thing, then with leisurely ease we will have to agree that the writer is the real center point of night, the center point of all voices. ("Noch' schastlivykh sobytii")

Dragomoshchenko conceives of poetry as a radical departure from set forms, an "intersection between utterances," a collection of words that allows for possible connections rather than any statement of fact or meditation on a theme.

Dragomoshchenko wants his writing to be always incomplete and in motion, to be "tireless activity" (*neustannoe deistvie*), as he has put it ("Noch' schastlivykh sobytii"). By this he does not mean simply unfinished texts, but has in mind literature in which the play of language and representation is stimulating, without the assumptions of any narrow conception of realism or self-expression. As has been seen, Dragomoshchenko seeks to go beyond realism, beyond subject and object, beyond mimesis itself. His mystical, playful desire to reach the "absolute out" of language contrasts with his other strong desire to explore consciousness. Indeed, the flux of his language at times threatens the very idea that poetry could be a mimetic act.

iii. Modernist Utopianism or Postmodern Realism?

As has been seen, there is a conflict in Dragomoshchenko's poetry, essays and statements of poetics between his desire to capture the ineffable sensuousness of consciousness and his view that poetry is simply activity without a referent. As with Hejinian and Yang, Dragomoshchenko's desire to grasp the real world of experience in his writing can be seen as utopian, and his view that his writing refers to nothing but itself can be seen as anti-utopian. Dragomoshchenko in his poetry and statements of

poetics reveals a deep and abiding tension between these utopian and anti-utopian impulses.

Dragomoshchenko has objected to excessive claims for the power of literature. In fact, his rejection of grand claims for literature forms part of his defense of experimental writing and his dismissal of the literary concept of “uniqueness of voice.” In his speech at the 1997 Andrei Belyi Prize ceremony, Dragomoshchenko rejected the concept of uniqueness of voice in writing and the idea that literature, even the literature of innovative contemporary Russian writers such as Viacheslav Kuritsyn and Irina Rodnianskaia, contains some sort of divine truth:

Зрение неизбежно ставит вопрос о слухе.

Но разве слух обращен к уникальности голоса? К его неповторимости? К божест-венности истины, которую мы очевидно не найдем в письме пишущей? Если бы наоборот, мы бы давно уже терли в руках каблогаммы от великого Курицына или странной Роднянской. Увы, в руках мы ничего не находим. Мы вынуждены полагаться на себя. Впрочем, так принято в Петербурге.

Sight inevitably raises the question of hearing.

But is one’s ear really directed toward the uniqueness of voice? To its inimitability? To the divinity of truth, which we clearly will not find in written language? If it were otherwise we would have rubbed in our hands the cablegrams from the great Kuritsyn or the strange Rodnianskaia. Alas, in our hands we don’t find anything. We are forced to rely upon ourselves.

At least, that’s the custom in Petersburg. (“Noch' schastlivykh sobytii”)

This is the sober side of Dragomoshchenko’s view of the writer’s power.

Dragomoshchenko’s strange poetry at times appears aimed at some sort of mystical destruction of subject and object in a flow of language that rejects any conception of realism in literature. Yet at the same time, his poetry seems genuinely concerned with exploring moments of experience, memory, perception, reading and writing. In this way, Dragomoshchenko’s poetry exhibits a tension between a utopian modernist impulse for capturing the real world and an ironic postmodernist, anti-utopian deconstruction of realism in a flow of language.

According to Helen Vendler, “Every achieved poem is built on the paradox by which an object (the poem) reproduces, on the virtual plane of language, sense and mind moving

inextricably together, as they do in every act of consciousness” (13). Vendler’s comments are applicable to Dragomoshchenko’s work, insofar as they relate to the lyric poet’s interest in the senses and in the meditation of the mind. But the idea of “re-creating” the senses, although a motivating factor in Dragomoshchenko’s work, is never realized in his writing. In fact, Dragomoshchenko’s recognition of the impossibility of achieving the tantalizing goal of “sense and mind moving inextricably together” underlies statements that he has made. The constant collapsing of such certainties leads the poet to identify his writing and “marginal” writing in general as:

именно того, что не поддается присвоению прямым зрением, господству управляющего применения и что возможно схватить лишь *looking awry*, тотчас упустив в ускользающем не-месте исходного положения вещей, и где происходит переход реальности в реальное: точка распада, точка фрагментации (ферментации), несвершаемого превращения.

precisely that which does not give in to the assimilation of direct vision, the rule of the dominant method, and that which is possible to capture only by “*looking awry*,” at once lost in the slipping away non-place of the original position of things, where the transition of reality into the real takes place: the point of collapse, the point of fragmentation (fermentation), the never complete transformation. (“*Fosforicheskiei promezhutok*”)³⁰

In this chapter, I have shown that Dragomoshchenko’s poetry can be identified not with the actualization in language of sense and mind moving in harmony, but rather with the *process* of striving for this necessarily impossible goal. This sounds like deconstruction – in which the impossibility of the goal is inscribed in the origins of the thing – but it is not necessarily so. It is simply that virtual reality is not possible in poetry, let alone the direct re-experience of subjective experience, nor in fact is it always the goal.

Dragomoshchenko’s poetry, nevertheless, plays on and is motivated by the striving for this goal of perfect knowledge of subjective experience. While subjective knowledge is constitutively only available to those who experience it, objective knowledge is available to all and can be agreed upon. Deconstruction has been associated with the conflation of the ontological and epistemologically subjective and objective, but one does not need to accept the deconstructionist argument to appreciate Dragomoshchenko’s deconstruction-influenced poetry. Alternatively, the impossibility

³⁰ “*Looking awry*” is a term used by Slavoj Žižek, with whom Dragomoshchenko is presumably familiar. The reference explains why the original of this phrase is in English.

of knowing “what it is like to be,” in Thomas Nagel’s words, is quite different from the possibility of knowing that the earth orbits the sun. From this perspective, Dragomoshchenko’s poetry is motivated in part by a striving to impart the former kind of knowledge, while lacking the further implications of deconstruction.

As with Hejinian and Yang, Dragomoshchenko associates the way his poetry makes language strange with the way he subjectively experiences the real world. The incoherence of Dragomoshchenko’s vision is thus an essential part of that vision. His writing gestures toward the strange nature of consciousness, toward his subjective experience of the world, which can never be equated with a linguistic description, but which the poet can hint at through the strangeness of his poetry. Dragomoshchenko is not a philosopher and should not be judged as one. Philosophical inconsistency is not necessarily a fault in poetry and may even be an asset. Dragomoshchenko’s work fulfills a central function of lyric poetry by drawing attention to the strangeness of consciousness. In this way, Dragomoshchenko’s writing invites one to think about one’s subjective experience of the world, including the linguistic world that his poetry creates.

As I have shown in this chapter, two contradictory tendencies are central to Dragomoshchenko’s place in Russian literature and to his poetry and poetics. Dragomoshchenko, paradoxically, strives both to describe conscious experience and to undermine such descriptions through endless linguistic play. In my evaluation of his place in unofficial Leningrad culture, I showed how these contradictory tendencies related to his critical position as a transitional figure between the unofficial literature of the 1970s and the new, postmodern literature of the 1980s. I also argued that Dragomoshchenko came to construct new worlds in poetry, firstly because he wished to escape the confines of Soviet culture, an impulse common to many unofficial writers and artists in the 1970s, and secondly because he was seeking to differentiate himself within Second Culture in the early 1980s. In my readings of “Sum of Elegies” and “Nasturtium as Reality” and in my analysis of his explicit poetics, I showed how Dragomoshchenko’s work swings between philosophical and sensuous descriptions of the mind thinking and postmodern celebrations of language as such. I also argued that these contradictory tendencies are a necessary part of the subject of his work: the conscious mind. These same opposing tendencies also make Dragomoshchenko’s work ultimately indefinable as either seriously metaphysical or postmodernist. Like Yang and

Hejinian, Dragomoshchenko oscillates between utopian and anti-utopian impulses in his work – between the desire to describe perfectly his subjective experience of the real world and the rejection of this goal through the creation of a separate world of language.

V. Poetry Unbound: The Possibilities of the Impossible

Poetry should surprise by a fine excess

– John Keats, Letter to John Taylor, February 27, 1818

Poetry enlarges the circumference of the imagination

– Percy Bysshe Shelley, “Defense of Poetry”

Lyn Hejinian, Yang Lian, and Arkadii Dragomoshchenko are three very different poets who write in three very different languages and cultural contexts. The analysis presented above, however, implies that the three share certain characteristics in their poetic practice, in their intentions, and in their involvement in their cultural communities. These common traits can be summarized as the search for an alternative reality, and/or an oppositional stance, in the social engagement of the three experimental poets; the utopian and anti-utopian difficulty of their poetry; and their common interest in lyric poetry as the complex exploration of consciousness in language, with the concomitant attempt to gesture toward the “inner world” of the mind and the simultaneous recognition of the impossibility of success in this attempt.

In other words, the three poets share a specific mode of lyricism that aims at the conveyance of the experience of experience, while recognizing the impossibility of this goal. Various terms such as the ineffable, paradise, perfection, going beyond, the absolute, the transcendent, all of which have been used to describe the aims of the work of the three writers, can be seen as synonyms for the impossible communication of subjective experience, which is the goal in this mode of lyric poetry. Accompanying this poetic practice, in the case of all three writers, is a specific intentional tendency toward utopianism in their poetry: the desire to change the world, or to create a new world, in and through poetry. At the same time the communities in which the three writers participated shared the desire to create an alternative to mainstream society.

These central points of similarity between Hejinian, Yang and Dragomoshchenko are analyzed and compared in more detail in this chapter, beginning with their approach to lyric poetry and consciousness, moving to the utopian and anti-utopian difficulty of

their work, and ending with their social engagement. The findings on each poet in relation to these points of comparison will first be summarized and then they will be compared. Underlying the points of comparison at all three levels of analysis is the common desire of Hejinian, Yang, and Dragomoshchenko to explore poetry to its limits, to make poetry that exploits the tension between “language and ‘paradise,’” that “begins from the impossible,” that is “always different.”

1. Lyric Poetry and Subjectivity: Impossibility and the Inner World

One of the most important common interests of the three poets is in lyric poetry and subjective experience. All three poets are lyric poets, in that they write what might be termed “poetry of the inner world.” All three writers are interested in what it feels like to see, hear, taste, touch, and smell, in the nature of consciousness, in the subjective feel of a memory, in the relationship between a line of thought and a line of poetry. The three writers extend the traditions associated with lyric poetry in remarkably parallel ways. In their lyrical modes, each of the three writers undertakes a quest for the impossible but also attempts to communicate subjective experiences. Each desires the “real reality,” and yet recognizes the necessary impossibility of fulfilling this desire.

Hejinian in her poetry carefully constructs poems from sentences accumulated over a period of time from a combination of descriptions of scenes, places, ideas, thoughts and feelings (often using strikingly new metaphors and metonyms), and words taken directly from other texts. This deliberate, formal technique is, nevertheless, motivated by an interest in consciousness. For Hejinian there is no contradiction in this combination of the formal and the personal in works such as *The Guard* and *Oxota*. In her view, a person’s experience of consciousness is strange and multi-layered, and one becomes aware of this when encountering strange language. Hejinian writes complex poetry because she sees it as a form of realism that is truer to life than everyday transactional language. It is only through the use of such strange language that one can convey the reality of subjective experience. This is seen in her use of observations of perceptions in *The Guard*, and also in the way in which the elusive narrative of *Oxota* relates the experience of being a stranger in a strange land and explores the desire of the writer and reader for meaning. The desire to achieve true perception of reality and to raise consciousness motivates writing that causes the reader to be aware of the tricks of

language and to perceive reality in what is intended to be a more direct way. Hejinian's aim of drawing attention to conscious experience and improving perception can be seen as a continuation of the Enlightenment goal of the acquisition of knowledge unfettered by illusion, as exemplified by the writings of Francis Bacon. She refers to this kind of perfect knowledge as "paradise," a word that allows her to acknowledge both the impossibility and desirability of such knowledge. *The Guard* and *Oxota* are exemplary of the range of Hejinian's poetic investigations into the founding myth of America and of the American West as paradise, the strangeness and strange attraction of exploration, and the Western quest for knowledge, both its creative impulse and its terrible destructive impact.

Hejinian equates being conscious with a lack of closure. One can understand her interest in lack of closure as an interest in the ontologically subjective world of experience of consciousness. Because the description of one's subjective experience of the world would have to be infinite in order to include everything, the rejection of closure is an essential part of her poetics. She associates language with linearity, lack of completion, with the conscious mind – you can always say something else, and you only have a limited lifetime to say everything – and "paradise" with a perfectly static eternal time with a lack of consciousness, with death. She is interested in the liveliness that she associates with language, associating restlessness, desire, sensuality, and the fear of death with language (MSS 46-9, entry 148, Aug. 1983, 44). Yet she is also interested in universal timelessness. Indeed, she seems to intend her poem *The Guard* to be a struggle for paradise in language, in time. In relation to the issue of "language and paradise," she quotes Brown's biography of St Augustine: "For what had obsessed Plotinus was the contrast between the changing and the changeless. In the 'here' of the world known to his senses, he was haunted by the timeless quality of a 'there' of another world, which his mind could grasp with abiding certainty in judging qualities such as goodness and beauty" (*Augustine of Hippo*, qtd. Hejinian, MSS 47-3, entry 368, Nov. 1983, 1).

The perfection of description of the subjective world, which is a central goal of Hejinian's poetry, is represented in her work by the concept of "paradise" and of the "West" as a perfect, atemporal totality of knowledge. This absolute "Faustian" knowledge is never achieved and is emphatically rejected for the abuses of power that

she sees it as having wrought. Nevertheless, the quest for knowledge, for paradise and the West, understood as a search for perfect consciousness of consciousness, provides the central impetus for her poetry.

The techniques that Yang uses in his poetry differ dramatically from those in Hejinian's work. Yang does not use a large amount of quotation, and his poetry from the 1980s provides a more concrete sense of a scene in which action takes place. Indeed, "Norlang" and "Banpo" are set in precise locations. Nevertheless, like Hejinian, Yang seeks to convey and explore the complexities of conscious experience in his writing. Yang's poetry of the self investigates the interaction between the subjective "I" and the world, between "I" and "you," between the individual and tradition. In "Norlang" and "Banpo," the interaction between these opposites creates a dynamic structure that is intended to express the experience of being conscious, which necessarily involves interaction between the individual and the world, between tradition, culture and individual experience.

For Yang, this dialectic poetics is necessary to express real lived experience. Like Hejinian, he is interested in how one's subjective experience of the world can be made to appear to others, how it can be known. He conceives of the dialectic poetics of "Norlang" explicitly as allowing "spirit to be grounded in real experience" ("Concerning 'Norlang'" 162). The tension in the use of the dialectic between individual and collective, modernity and tradition is not only a result of his complex conception of individual consciousness but also arises from his belief in the transcendental, impossible quality of individual experience. His poetry and his explicitly stated intentions exhibit tension between a desire to describe real human subjective experience and the desire to create something impossible, beyond the bounds of the everyday. As is the case with the other two poets, this tension reflects a utopian striving for perfect expression of conscious experience and an anti-utopian recognition of the impossibility of such a goal.

Yang's concept of exile literature also relates to his poetics of the self. Yang aims to "leap walls" (*yueqiang* 越牆) in his poetry, to escape enclosure ("Xunzhao zuowei liuwang yuanxing de shi" 1). Yang uses the concept of "returning and leaving" to explain the function of contradiction in his work and in literature in general. He sees

contradiction as working to renew the apprehension and consideration by the readers of the words in the text (“Zijue de shiren: fanhui yu chuzou” 299).

Yang’s attitude toward time in poetry is part of his conception of poetry as the exploration of consciousness. “All poetry is of the ‘present,’ and this is a universal phenomenon,” he declares. According to Yang, this ancient and most profound revelation is enshrined in the Chinese poetic tradition. When he started writing in the late 1970s he was somehow vaguely aware of this. For him, poetry can come so close to actual existence that he has sometimes seen poetry as revealing existence itself (Mabel Lee, “On the Annihilation of Time” 15). In practice, the emphasis on the present in his poetry results in the synchronicity of a number of different events. This synchronicity supports the dynamic structure of interaction and contradiction, as can be seen in “Norlang” and “Banpo.” This endlessly unresolved present in Yang’s poetry is the method by which Yang attempts to gesture toward the experience of human existence.

In Dragomoshchenko’s work one finds dynamic interaction between the person and landscape, similar to that which is enacted and described in Yang’s poem “Norlang.” Yet while the desire to express the experience of being conscious is similar, the techniques Dragomoshchenko uses are very different. Dragomoshchenko employs long sentences with difficult syntax and dreamlike scenes to explore the ebb and flow of thoughts, to gesture toward the strange, nonlinear world of the mind in thought. By describing their own processes of description, his poems “Sum of Elegies” and “Nasturtium as Reality” are also attempts to create a more responsive description and enactment of the person in landscape, through the performative nature of the poetic text, to create an interactive consciousness of consciousness. Through this multi-layered synthesis, he attempts the impossible task of capturing the totality of conscious experience, its self-reflexivity and flux.

Dragomoshchenko writes about the way in which he believes poetry can challenge normal temporal relations, and normal relations between “you” and “I”:

«Ты» и «я», «прошлое» и «будущее», «и» и т.д. могут быть исчерпаны в метафоре раковины, вращающей на одной оси внешнее и внутреннее, влагу и песок, присутствие и отсутствие (“O lishnem” 347)

You and I, past and future, etc. can be exhausted in the metaphor of the shell that rotates on a single axis the exterior and interior, moisture and sand, presence and absence (“On the Superfluous” 98)

In the same essay, he also writes about stasis, which he associates with death, and with which he contrasts “difference.” The quotation above demonstrates the way in which Dragomoshchenko in his writings aims to both capture and disperse the endless interactions of the conscious mind. “I” and “you,” “past” and “future” are the ways in which the mind thinks, its basic coordinates, and yet they are insufficient labels for the strange way in which conscious experience works. Dragomoshchenko exemplifies this by means of a number of contradictions that leave the reader lost in an impossible metaphor. The point is that the empty shell that is left after reading this creates an awareness of the strange way in which the thinking mind can be lost in its own thought and, in so doing, can leave behind any thoughts of “I” or “you,” of “past” and “future.” To incite that experience perfectly in the reader would be to convey the kind of experience of experience about which Dragomoshchenko writes and which he attempts to enact in his poetic structures. This perfection, however, is a kind of stasis that Dragomoshchenko attempts both to achieve and to avoid. While he aims at stasis insofar as he aims to get at the subjective experience of a moment, creating a static eternal moment, stasis is also antithetical to his aim, because subjective experience is never static, but is always happening in time, always moving on.

In sum, Dragomoshchenko shares with Hejinian and Yang the utopian desire to grasp the ineffable feeling of being and the simultaneous anti-utopian avoidance of the fulfillment of this desire. The striking similarities in the lyrical modes of each poet are clearly apparent, most notably in the desire of all three to reach for the impossible and to convey a sense of conscious experience that also incites that experience in the reader through complex, dynamic poetic structures.

The foregrounding of the lyrical mode and intent of the three writers raises the question of the different conceptions of self across cultures. One of the most popular themes in literary studies since the 1960s has been the difference in “subjectivity” in different cultures. Along with this has come the view that the concept of “self” and the concept of “Cartesian dualism,” or “Cartesian subjectivity,” are constructs of a specific culture (the West) and a specific system of social organization (capitalism). The extent to which self and subjectivity are culturally defined or culturally limited is relevant to lyric poetry,

because such poetry in the West is traditionally understood as being poetry about the self of the lyric poet or poetic persona. If the concept of self as we in the West know it were limited to a specific tradition, it would seem reasonable to assume that lyric poetry would be similarly limited.

The common concerns of Hejinian, Yang and Dragomoshchenko, however, themselves argue against this view. All three attempt to convey their experiences of phenomenal consciousness, memory, and thought, experiences that are fundamentally human. While concepts of self may differ across cultures, these basic characteristics of consciousness do not change radically and therefore provide common ground upon which all three poets construct their individual worlds of poetry. Without an appeal to this commonality of conscious experience and, to that extent, of subjectivity, it would be difficult to explain the similarities in their lyric modes and their similar motivations to write complex, interactive poetry that emphasizes openness, strangeness and movement.

A person's experience of always being present in time is a key characteristic of phenomenal consciousness, regardless of culture. One always experiences things as immediate and present, even in dreams. One's sense of flux and presence arises from a combination of this sense of presence with memory and anticipation. This feeling of being infinitely close to our sense of time and infinitely distant from it arises, in a variety of ways, in the poetry of all three writers. Yang writes of imagining movement in space as imagining the future, and thus death. Dragomoshchenko writes of things seen too close to focus upon them as a metaphor for our transparent experience of phenomenal consciousness, which is similarly too close for us to get a perspective upon it (because we *are* that perspective). Hejinian, like Proust, investigates the way in which memories and experiences all feed into our experience of this happening *now*.

The tension between totality and movement onwards, between the desire to capture the moment of experience in writing and the fact that one's experience of that moment is always moving on, is clearly evident in the work of all three writers. Yang refers to the perpetual flux of the human mind in writing of the Buddhist conception of "eternal expectation" and "eternal despair." This tension between incompleteness and completeness, today and history is central to Yang's poetics in "Norlang" and in "Banpo." Hejinian has explained her poem *My Life* as a collection of sentences, in each of which she wishes to say everything, so that the sentence is complete. Contradictorily,

however, she has said that she also wishes to add something more, so that every sentence is perpetually incomplete (Lyn Hejinian, Aug. 26-29, 1992). Like Yang, but in a very different way, Hejinian is gesturing toward something that expresses the living moment of experience and its eternal incompleteness. It is this flux of consciousness to which Dragomoshchenko refers in speaking of the desire to get at “unfathomable moments” (Interview with Jacob Edmond). He finds this kind of flux and opposition to the definable, to essence, and to completeness, in Derrida’s *différance* and in the “Way” of Lao Zi (Interview with Jacob Edmond).

The desire to grasp the reality of subjective experience is what makes the poetry of all three writers similar. Their poetry enacts a struggle between the urge for perfect timelessness and the necessity of the imperfect location in the moment of time. For Hejinian, one finds this struggle in her quest for knowledge and paradise and its necessary frustration in language. In Yang’s work, the same tension is observable in the dynamic interaction between tradition and modernity, between self and other. In Dragomoshchenko’s work, the same desire can be found in the seemingly endless accumulation of frames of description, which in their infinite regress aim at both the capture and diffusion of the moments that they describe.

All three poets attempt paradoxical things in their writing. They strive to reflect the world (mimesis) but they also try to create a distinct world of language beyond the bounds of normal reality. The poets are driven to construct separate linguistic worlds by their very desire to capture and embody the subjective, sensuous aspects of conscious, the strangeness of experience, in all its ineffableness. The writers begin with a lyric mode based on the investigation and communication of subjective experience, from which arises the desire of all three to explore the boundaries of the possible, to exploit the possibilities of the impossible.

2. Difficulty: Utopianism and Anti-Utopianism

From this exploration of subjective experience arises the major theme of the impossibility of perfect description of this experience in language. The view of the poets that their aim of capturing the strangeness of experience is impossible explains why they not only strive to explore subjective experience but also attempt to create distinct worlds of language beyond reality. The intense examination of the experience of being conscious and of each poet’s subjective experience of the world leads,

paradoxically, to skepticism toward language as a means of description of the world and of the self. A more complex, nuanced understanding of the difficulties associated with describing conscious experience and with the concept of the self as a definable and unchanging entity leads to an interest in deconstructionist and existentialist philosophy in the case of all three writers and to an interest in psychology in the case of Hejinian. In practice, the formal consequence of this appreciation of the complexities of consciousness, the problematic nature of perception, description, the concept of self and the possibilities of language, leads to a remarkable characteristic of the work of all three poets – difficulty.

The difficulty of the work of all three poets can be understood as reflecting two contradictory tendencies in their poetry: utopianism and anti-utopianism. The difficulty of the writing of all three poets arises partly from the realist urge to write more precisely about reality and to give experiences that stimulate that sense of reality. As a result of this, all three are motivated by a utopian desire to grasp the reality of the experience of being conscious in language. This utopianism manifests itself in three very different approaches to poetry.

The difficulty of Hejinian's work arises from her utopian desire to explore subjective experience fully. The combination of disparate texts and associative relationships between words and lines makes the reader work hard for meaning. Hejinian carefully constructs texts out of observations of the world and of language to effect a sense of "putting it all in" through works that are open and associative. Hejinian's poetics of the "quest for knowledge" is in part a search for the ineffable nature of experience. Her radical, disjunctive poetics is aimed at the "paradise" of the "open text," but this is not simply because this kind of "paradise" evades the reader's expectations. Hejinian's poetics is for her a kind of realism. Hejinian views her poetry as truer to the reality of experience, which is disjunctive and strange, than more conventional poetry or everyday descriptive language.

While searching for this paradise of knowledge, paying careful attention to the details of the perceived world, Hejinian also exhibits a contradictory tendency in her work. She is wary of transparency, of any claim that the ineffable or Truth can be expressed in poetry. The strangeness and difficulty of her poetry, then, is in part intended to emphasize what she calls "the difference between language and 'paradise.'" This phrase

itself contains this contradiction of Hejinian's poetics, because the quotation marks around the word "paradise" emphasize that it is merely written language, and not some entry point into the divine. It is the difficulty of the impossible entry point, or "portal," rather than paradise, or perfection, in which Hejinian is interested. While this is a rejection of the utopia of paradise, Hejinian's attempt to combine the description of the world with a rejection of transparency in order to improve perception may be seen as a form of linguistic utopianism. Thus the Enlightenment search for perfect understanding lives on in her poetry.

The reader of Dragomoshchenko's work also encounters difficulty, but for different formal reasons. In contrast to Hejinian's disjunctive poetics, in which a variety of sentences are carefully constructed into a poem, Dragomoshchenko uses long sentences and linguistic deformations to explore trains of thought and association, which at first appear more linear. In these long sentences filled with strange diversions and ambiguities, discrete units of poetry, which are highlighted in Hejinian's work, are difficult to determine. The strangeness in Dragomoshchenko's work often emerges from syntactical arrangements, which are rather like the unusual but everyday lexical combinations that are typical of Hejinian's work. In the work of both poets, normal syntax is used to semantically abnormal effect. Dragomoshchenko's "Nasturtium as Reality," however, takes its object of description from a restricted realm in a way that is unlike Hejinian's accumulation and recombination of sentences from various texts and observations noted in journals. Nevertheless, in "Sum of Elegies" and "Nasturtium as Reality," Dragomoshchenko strives, like Hejinian, to write descriptions that also acknowledge the complexity of the description of one's subjective experience of the world. While the formal techniques are different, Dragomoshchenko attempts to encompass the totality of experience, even as he undermines that goal. Thus, like Hejinian, his poetry attempts a utopian perfection of description as it is actually experienced.

Dragomoshchenko, in writing strange, difficult poetry, also exhibits another form of utopianism. Like other contemporaries, he sought to escape utilitarian imperatives in order to create another world in language that paralleled the other world of Second Culture. While on the one hand his poetry demonstrates a deep attention to experience and description, on the other the complexity and difficulty of this description removes

his poetry from reference to reality. In this way, Dragomoshchenko's poetry is utopian in striving to achieve the complexity of experience and in trying to create an entirely separate world of language. On the other hand, the strangeness and difficulty of his work is anti-utopian. Its complexity and unfinished nature defeats all totalizing interpretations.

The difficulty of Yang's poetry also arises from his utopian desire to explore the complexity of subjective consciousness and from his utopian belief in poetry as a medium for achieving this. Yang's poetry is built on oppositions between self and other, the present and history, the immediate moment and eternity. These binary oppositions are intended to create the sense of what Yang has called a "lived experience," the self-conscious interactive act of the mind observing itself. In "Norlang" and "Banpo," Yang associates a lived experience in poetry with a combination of reality and the spiritual world. Through this concept of binary combination, Yang rejects naïve realism, which he calls poetry "with the goal of recreating present life." Yang strives to write poetry that includes a mixture of or an interaction between reality and some sort of divine spiritual yearning.

Yang, in writing "obscure," difficult poetry, necessarily took a position that advocated a poetics of value outside direct didactic, political or aesthetic imperatives. As part of this, he opposed a blunt utilitarianism. Yang sees the issues of world and humanity, collective and individual as irresolvable paradoxes. Quoting a sharp contradiction from his poem *Yi*, Yang explains that he seeks "to force a world used to silence to reveal its unreality" (*poshi yige xiguan chenmo de shijie baolu qi buzhenshi* 迫使一個習慣沉默的世界暴露其不真實) ("Chenmo zhi men" 231). The formal aspect of dynamic interaction used to create interest in his poetry is thus motivated by a belief in the relevance of contradiction and questioning in poetry to general human concerns. The world is deliberately made strange in order to reveal its true reality, or unreality.

"If one takes profundity itself and turns it into grammar, then the 'new' comes naturally" (*dang shendu bensen bianhuanzhe yufa*, "xin" *jiu ziran er ran le* 當深度本身變換著語法, "新" 就自然而然了), Yang writes ("Xunzhao zuowei liuwang yuanxing de shi" 1). He is obsessed by the move from Chinese literature, to Chinese-language literature to "Yanglish" (*yangwen* 楊文) poetry, by finding his own pure

expression in language (“Xunzhao zuowei liuwang yuanxing de shi” 1). Like Hejinian and Dragomoshchenko, Yang writes poetry that strives for paradise, for perfect expression in language. His poetics of exile, however, concern a dynamic interaction between going away and returning, between tradition and modernity. Thus, like Hejinian, Yang acknowledges the impossibility of his own poetic striving in his explicit statements of his poetics. Like his poetic practice examined in the close readings, Yang’s statements reflect a complex, interactive and extremely difficult modernist poetics.¹

The difficulty in the work of all three writers can be seen as both a utopian striving for perfection and as an acknowledgement of the impossibility of reaching this goal. Perfection in this sense comes through the creation of perfect poetic works of a lyric mode that aims at the exploration and mimesis of subjective experience. Perfect mimesis of consciousness and perfect poetic works necessitate complex formal structures and references that are difficult to follow. The poets, however, always

¹ Julia Lovell has suggested that this complexity leads to a dead end in Yang’s poetry. But, as she acknowledges, “the questions that Yang Lian raises as regards poetry are admirable.” Moreover, Lovell’s criticism is based on her view that Yang “has perhaps set the objectives [of his poetry] too high” (17). Whether or not one sees the difficulty of this quest for perfection as a dead end, it was undeniably an important motivator for experimental poets writing in the 1980s such as Hejinian in the United States, Yang in China, and Dragomoshchenko in the Soviet Union. It is for this reason that it is difficult to concur with Lovell’s view that by the time modernism reappeared in China in the 1980s, “it had already become passé in the West” (8). Recent polemics against Language Poetry demonstrate that the debate over the apparent obscurity and difficulty of modernist poetry is alive and well in discussions of contemporary poetry in the West. For example, in a review of the new *Oxford Companion to Twentieth-Century Poetry* in the *Times Literary Supplement*, Glyn Maxwell attacks Language Poetry as exemplifying everything that he sees as wrong with modern poetry. He singles out the difficulty of Language Poetry as problematic, interpreting this difficulty or strangeness as an assault on the assumption that “language has a representational function” (5). Indeed, in her paper on Yang, Lovell herself offers another example of the ongoing nature of this debate from the opposite side of the argument. She takes her example from a review of a collection by Wisława Szymborska that also appeared in the *Times Literary Supplement*. In the review, Clair Wills questioned whether “a writer so reluctant to tax her audience can really have much of durable significance to say” (25). This review, according to Lovell, exemplifies that “the debate about difficulty in modern poetry is as alive as ever” (“Yang Lian and the Poetics of Disorientation” 18). Rather than entering into this contemporary debate only in exile, as Lovell seems to suggest, Yang’s work written between 1982 and 1984 at the tail end of a heated political debate over poetry already explores the possibilities of difficulty and complexity in modern poetry, just as much as Hejinian and Dragomoshchenko do in their work from the same period.

acknowledge that the perfection of poetic language is an impossible goal, one that must be striven for but which cannot be achieved. These acknowledgments of impossibility in the poetry itself and in the explicit statements of poetics of the authors make the difficulty in their poetry tend, contradictorily, toward anti-utopianism. The acknowledgement by poets of the impossibility of understanding the world is exemplified through the difficulty of understanding their poetry. The difficulty of establishing reference for the poetry, equally, points to the impossibility of poetry capturing the richness of the world. The anti-utopian difficulty of all three poets can thus be understood as an extension of their distrust of the use of language as a means for reflecting or exploring the world and as a result of their interest in the apparently impossibly complex nature of the world.

3. Innovative Poetry and Community: Aestheticism and Engagement

One common characteristic of all three poets discussed here is the way in which they wrote poetry not just as an individual activity of literary creation but also as part of an ethos that reflected wider political and aesthetic concerns. In different ways, poetry was part of a way of life for all three poets. The approach of each of the three writers demonstrates a different possibility for the cultural context and social intentions of experimental writers and of alternative or avant-garde cultural and social groups in general.

It is significant that all three writers in this study have participated very actively in close communities of writers and other artists. These communities were built not only on the desire to exchange ideas over literature but were also spheres of sovereignty for artists, realms in which an alternate ethos to mainstream society could be developed. It is for this reason that even in the cases in which the poets had political aims for their formal experimentation, the aestheticist tendency was never far away.

For the Language Poets, it was important to create a functioning self-critical community that could oppose what they saw as the injustices of United States society and of their government's foreign policy. They believed that these injustices were being perpetuated by the rhetoric used in public discourse, which, according to them, was full of clichés and deception. Aestheticism was, paradoxically perhaps, seen as socially engaged, because the Language Poets located the injustices of the political culture and social

structure of the United States in formal linguistic devices. Breaking linguistic rules was viewed as an essential part of eradicating social injustice.

Like Hejinian, Yang combined in his poetry from the early 1980s the inner world of consciousness with difficulty and with a desire for the impossible inclusion of everything. As an Obscure Poet, Yang participated, like Hejinian, in a group in which literary experimentation was undertaken with the goal of the creation of an autonomous aesthetic realm and, simultaneously, with the aim of the promotion of an alternative to the social and political status quo. For the Obscure Poets, it was critical to develop an alternate sense of self and self-expression through public acts of poetry reading and publication. In China, this desire for self-expression was political, yet it was partly this desire that also led the poets to claim that they wrote pure, apolitical poetry. They made this claim in order to distance themselves from oppressive political readings of their poetry.

Dragomoshchenko's poetry and his explicitly stated intentions exhibit tension, similar to that of Hejinian and Yang, between the desire to describe the subjective world of experience and the desire to create a separate world of language. As is the case with the other two poets, this tension reflects a utopian search for perfect expression of conscious experience and an anti-utopian recognition of the impossibility of such a goal. These utopian and anti-utopian urges are also present, as in the case of Hejinian and Yang, in Dragomoshchenko's participation in a community of writers and artists. Dragomoshchenko as a member of the unofficial Leningrad literary community created a cultural space separate from the mainstream. The fact that Dragomoshchenko's participation in this community had an aesthetic focus and that he explicitly rejected politics demonstrates the poet's anti-utopian political realism. The history of his participation in that community nevertheless demonstrates a utopian urge, shared with others in his community, to live his life, or a portion of his life, outside official and/or mainstream society. This desire to create a "tiny sanctuary of power" beyond the realms of daily life demonstrates, once more, the link drawn by the three poets between the freedom to experiment in poetry and the desire to create a cultural realm that provided an alternative to the prevailing social reality. For Leningrad's alternative writing community, a different set of standards in which politeness and cooperation were the norm offered an alternative to the daily corrosion of ethical standards that was the

inevitable concomitant of everyday Soviet life. This alternative community of artists offered a small realm of sovereignty. The aestheticist's stance took on a political meaning, in as much as it offered an escape of sorts from daily Soviet reality.

As in the Chinese and American contexts, in the Soviet Union experimental poetry provoked reaction against its perceived position on social and political issues. The question of the value of pure poetry versus socially engaged poetry, however, was raised in very different ways in China and the United States. In China, the aestheticist position was controversial. This is in direct contrast to the situation in the United States, where locating social engagement in radical poetic experimentation caused controversy. While the situation in the Soviet Union bore some resemblance to China, experimental poets and non-official art co-existed in many ways more easily in the Soviet system, so that writing pure poetry was not in itself such a radical act, though getting it published officially was difficult until the late 1980s. Hence the term "Second Culture," which pointed, as Yevgeni Barabanov puts it, "to the disconnected nature of the space claimed by nonconformist art." This space created a virtually "autonomous support infrastructure" that provided information, education, exhibitions, prizes, journals, historical and theoretical groundwork (Barabanov 7-8).

There was also another difference between the situation in China and the state of affairs in the Soviet Union in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Unlike Yang, who took part in a radical shift in cultural policy, Dragomoshchenko participated in a vital living alternative culture, which existed despite its lack of official recognition. Although, as van Crevel has pointed out, it is not true to say that such an alternative culture did not exist in China at all, even in the most difficult years of the Cultural Revolution, the infrastructure of the Russian Second Culture of experimental artists and writers was incomparably more developed by the mid-1970s than any alternative cultural activities in China.

While at one level, the situation of poetry in relation to politics was much closer in China and the Soviet Union, at another the Chinese and American poets have more in common in the relationship between their poetry and politics. At the institutional level, the relationship of poetry to its social and political environment, in both Hejinian's and Yang's poetry, can be seen one of engagement. Direct political opposition has gone hand in hand with poetry for Yang and Hejinian. Both opposed the direction of national

politics in their respective homelands and, for the most part, continue to do so. Both felt that, to some extent, finding new ways of writing poetry was part of the struggle to find new ways of being, that writing innovative poetry was a step toward a better society. In Yang's case, this was partly done through what was at first glance a contradictory move toward aestheticism. The necessity of separating art from politics in a socialist system that denied any separation led Dragomoshchenko, like Yang, to concentrate on poetry for poetry's sake, without reference to politics. In contrast to Yang, however, for Dragomoshchenko and the alternative cultural world in the Soviet Union in the 1970s and early 1980s, this really did mean avoiding politics. There was in the Soviet Union a pragmatic avoidance of politics, along with a strong assertion of freedom in aesthetic matters.

While in China in the late 1970s and early 1980s the importance of expressing the *Zeitgeist* of the nation played a considerable role in artistic practice, the political role of poetry for Hejinian in the United States was far more oblique. She aimed at an aesthetic attitude that was seen as also constituting a politically questioning stance. When Hejinian writes an "open text," she seeks to make competing narratives open to question, in order to challenge such things as "institutional stupidity and hypocrisy." In Russia, meanwhile, the disruption of stable ideas and the escape from everyday Soviet life as such were the explicitly aesthetic and apolitical aims that informed Dragomoshchenko's writing.

While these poets engaged with their social and political environments in different ways, the common ground that they share enables fruitful comparison. All three have undertaken intensive explorations of poetic form and of the expression of self, of their subjective experiences, in poetry based on a distrust of and belief in language. Distrust of language for all three emerged partly from their feelings of repulsion at what they saw as the misuse of language by their respective governments, and their general suspicion of mainstream discourse and mindsets within their respective societies. Because of this, language and the investigation of psychology, of consciousness, were seen in a utopian way as key tools for battling entrenched political power and inhumanity, in the case of Hejinian and Yang, or for escaping from these things, in the case of Dragomoshchenko. The Holocaust and American imperialism were exemplary of deep problems in Western reason for Hejinian. Similarly, the Cultural Revolution and

famine in China were exemplary for Yang of the deep problems of Chinese culture. For Dragomoshchenko, on the other hand, experimental poetry and the Other Culture provided a less problematic escape from mainstream discourse. Dragomoshchenko believed that, while the Language Poets in the United States felt the need for radical reformation of language in order to achieve resistance to this discourse, in the Russian poetic tradition, poetry was always a different realm from mass culture and the power of ideology:

И не нужно прибегать к радикальным (то есть буквально коренным) методам изменения актуального состояния сознания, для нас язык всегда — некое незавершенное состояние, бесконечное обещание, в отличие от того, которым кормят массовая культура (то есть, народная), СМИ, реклама. А стало быть, идеология в целом.

And there is no need to have recourse to radical (that is literally root) methods for the change of our actual state of consciousness, for us language is always in an unfinished state, an endless promise, in contrast to that which feeds mass culture (that is, the culture of the people), mass media, advertisements. And, possibly, ideology in general. (“O iazyke piva”)

Dragomoshchenko, nevertheless, saw poetry in the Russian context as a powerful tool for changing “language as such” (“O iazyke piva”). Despite their differences, then, all three poets shared a belief in the exploration and reformation of human nature and language through poetic art as offering hope of a brighter future, or a least escape from the realities of the present day world.

In this study, three examples of experimental poetry have demonstrated the contradictory aims that seem to drive experimentation. Anti-utopianism and utopianism are both motivating forces in the experimental poetry of all three writers. This is because their extreme, or radical, alternative poetry is motivated by the desire for perfection and, as part of this yearning, by the desire to escape from false perfection. This wariness of false perfection means that anti-utopianism is a necessary part of their striving for perfection. The search for the impossible and for the “real reality” provides a strong impetus for experimentation in their poetry.

Overlaid upon these motivations is the objective of creating a new social reality either by constructing a separate realm of art, which might range from a private world of pure poetry to an institutionalized society of artists, or by engaging with the linguistic forces

that are perceived as maintaining the larger social reality in order to change society as a whole. These two tendencies, then, have a common source, and are in fact extremely close to one another. From a broader art-historical perspective, the tension between these tendencies is manifest in the modernist split between aestheticism and engagement. The aestheticist champions the immanent perfect work, while the avant-garde artist creates anti-art, art beyond the normal boundaries of art that is intended to completely transform, or in Marxist terms sublimate, art and life. Both the aestheticist and the avant-garde artist want to transform a realm absolutely, though each rejects the other's stance above all else.

Both the avant-garde and the aestheticist directions of experimental art are evident in the work of all three poets. Although these directions appear antithetical, they are in some senses very similar. This is evident from the fact that the attempts of Hejinian, Yang and Dragomoshchenko to create art that is outside the bounds of everyday reality can be understood as both avant-garde and aestheticist. The attempts by the communities of writers and artists in which the poets participated to create a social alternative can be understood both as instances of ivory-tower aestheticism and also as avant-garde attempts to create a new society within a society.

As has been seen, the desire to create an alternative at the social level correlated in all three cases with the desire at the level of artistic practice to create alternative forms of language through experimental poetry. All three poets write complex, difficult poetry that reflects their deep concern with subjectivity and consciousness, with what it feels to be a person, to experience the world and to describe in language. All three exhibit varying degrees of skepticism toward the possibility of the description of conscious experience in language. This tendency results in the interest of all three writers in creating non-mimetic "worlds of language." These contradictory tendencies toward perfect mimesis, on the one hand, and toward the rejection of mimesis, on the other, can both be understood as forms of linguistic utopianism. All three writers, however, are committed neither to perfection of description nor to perfection of linguistic art and recognize the impossibility of both ideals. It is this recognition that has been referred to here as "anti-utopianism." Hejinian, Yang and Dragomoshchenko all exhibit a powerful tension between utopian and anti-utopian urges, between the possible and impossible, between isolation and engagement. This tension is evident at all three levels of analysis

examined here. It appears in their approach to lyric poetry and consciousness, in their difficult forms, and in their participation in communities of writers and artists. The difficulty of determining whether the utopian or anti-utopian impulse of the three poets is stronger underscores their assertions of the boundlessness of poetry.

VI. Conclusion: Poetic Innovation and Political Change

Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world

– Percy Bysshe Shelley, “Defense of Poetry”

*There is the view that poetry should improve your life. I think
people confuse it with the Salvation Army.*

– John Ashbery

The thesis of this study is that Dragomoshchenko, Hejinian and Yang, though they work in very different traditions and write in very different ways, exhibit significant common traits. The analyses of the individual authors and the comparative analysis presented here support the conclusion that there are common traits in innovative poetry from the 1970s to the early 1990s in the United States, China and Russia. Firstly, each poet shares an interest in lyric poetry as an exploration of consciousness and/or self, and a closely connected though contradictory interest in language as a self-sufficient medium. Secondly, each uses difficulty in poetry as both a utopian and an anti-utopian act. Thirdly, each produces poetry intended to provide an alternative to mainstream poetic discourse, and for each this poetic experimentation is associated with a way of life that includes an ethos of opposition toward, and/or the provision of an alternative to, mainstream society.

The common concern of the three poets to accurately reflect the reality of subjectivity, of their experience of the world, leads to the paradox of anti-aboutness aboutness. The paradox is in turn accompanied by the desire to resolve this paradox by reaching for the impossible and, at the same time, the realistic acceptance of this paradox and the acknowledgement of the impossibility of such goals. The experimental drive of all three poets, their desire to push the boundaries of poetry, is at least in part motivated by this effort to reach for the impossible. There appears to be a connection, however, between their challenge to the limits of poetry and their participation in alternative communities that were formed around the desire to create a social space that provided an alternative and/or opposition to mainstream cultural activity and, to a varying extent, to mainstream society in general.

Since it is indeed possible to identify, in the case of each of the three poets, a relationship between poetic experimentalism and the utopian desire to find an alternative to the social mainstream, this has significant implications for existing scholarship on global aesthetics and contemporary culture with which this discussion began. What is significant about this commonality of interest in the complex exploration of subjectivity, their shared utopian desire for literature to touch the world and to separate from it, and last but not least, the perceived linkage between poetic experimentation and social and political alternatives? One of the most interesting and significant implications would be that there is a direct relationship between poetic form and political change, but this study shows the dangers of assuming any kind of straightforward relationship between poetry and politics. On the other hand, while no straightforward relationship exists between culture and politics, the separation of the two realms, even if desirable, is in practice problematic.

As was seen in the case of Dragomoshchenko and his milieu, in the relatively benign (relative to Stalin, that is) totalitarian conditions of the Soviet Union in the Brezhnev era there was no simple correspondence between political dissidence and literary experimentation. Radical political reformers could and did write conventional verse, while those with no great interest in politics could and did develop artistic innovations. On the other hand, it is not possible to argue that there was no relationship between artistic innovation and political opposition. As one of a broad range of “alternative culture” activities from rock music to religion, the artistic Second Culture of the Brezhnev era had political significance. It was part of a general turning away from official culture that at its height in Leningrad in the late 1970s and early 1980s must have helped to undermine the legitimacy of the Soviet regime. And to the extent that it did, it did so not by opposing, but by ignoring the existence of official culture. This cultural politics of disengagement, in which Dragomoshchenko participated, demonstrates one possible way that experimental poetry in which aesthetic concerns were primary could be associated with a social grouping that offered a concrete alternative to the political and social status quo.

Yang and the Obscure Poets exemplify a very different way in which aestheticist, experimental poetry could engage with politics. In the Soviet Union, unofficial and official culture studiously ignored each other. In China, on the other hand, the shake up

of the post-Cultural Revolution era witnessed in a series of “swings and roundabouts” the direct engagement of unofficial culture with official culture. Though this often resulted in misinterpretation and incomprehension, both cultures maintained a belief in the early 1980s in the political significance of literature. Yang’s “pure poetry” and poetry of the self were part of a utopian struggle for social and historical renewal, and for the rights of the individual. Yet this case should not be overstated. The political nature of Obscure Poetry was largely due to its attempt to free poetry from politics, not its engagement with it. In more recent years, there has been some success in the achievement of this separation. As a result, the central status of literature in society has been to some extent undermined, or at least significantly changed. The examples of “Norlang” and “Banpo” show aestheticist poetry describing mythological worlds that can be read as significant statements on the individual in society in China in the early 1980s, and the relationship of modernity to tradition. Contextual analysis and close readings of these poems by Yang show a very different set of circumstances to that of Dragomoshchenko and his milieu. Nevertheless, both sets of circumstances led to a similar connection being drawn between experimental poetry and the provision of an alternative to the political and social status quo.

Both Yang and Dragomoshchenko participated in writing communities that, in different ways, sought to gain some much needed depoliticized space for literature. Hejinian, in contrast, while still fighting for the right to artistic experimentation and to freedom, participated in a community that sought to instill some politics into literature. Language Poetry can be understood, to some extent, as a response to the perceived excessive depoliticization of literature. By insisting on the political importance of form, Hejinian sought to draw attention to the deception of rhetorical devices and to the importance and difficulty of the accurate description of the world in language. Opposing the view that poetry was an isolated aesthetic realm, Hejinian aimed to write poetry that investigated the world and the experience of being conscious. This aim is evident in her approach to writing poems such as *The Guard* and *Oxota*, and in her statements of poetics. Moreover, she insisted that the investigation of language and consciousness in poetry and poetics was a political act. While Yang and Dragomoshchenko also explore the phenomenal experience of the world in their poetry, unlike Hejinian, they sought to distance this exploration from politics, rather than insisting upon it.

In sum, all three poets participated in writing communities that sought to provide opposition toward, or an alternative to, mainstream society and politics. And part of that quest involved an attempt to renegotiate the relationship of literature to politics within their given society. For the communities of Yang and Dragomoshchenko, this meant separating politics and literature. But, importantly, while for Yang this involved the contradictory engagement with the political issues of individual and society, tradition and modernity, in order to avoid simplistic categorization, for Dragomoshchenko, the route taken was the complete avoidance of engagement in these issues, in official culture, and in the tradition of poetry being politically significant in Russia. In contrast to both Yang and Dragomoshchenko, Hejinian and the Language Poets fought for the recognition of the politics in poetics. They too, however, suffered, like Yang and his milieu, from excessively political and simplistic readings of their poetry. Interestingly, even in the United States, the political opposition to Language Poetry was hard to separate from the aesthetic opposition. This may have encouraged a belief in the existence of an essential relationship between formal poetic innovation and social and political change.

At the beginning of this study, a number of theories were examined that suggested a strong correlation between artistic innovation and social, political, technological and economic change. This correlation was given explanatory force in scholarship on American, Russian and Chinese culture with reference to Hejinian, Yang, Dragomoshchenko and their contemporaries. My findings have serious implications for these global aesthetic theories. This study has shown that in the case of the three poets similarities do exist, but they do not relate to specific social and political similarities. Rather, these similarities exist *in spite of* major differences between the societies and politics of the United States, China and the Soviet Union over the period examined in this study. This implies that innovation in poetry, and in art generally, is relatively independent of economic, political, social and technological developments over the period examined. My research also implies the unsurprising conclusion that experimental poetry is politically insignificant. Given the assumption of strong correlation in macroanalyses of contemporary culture, however, the findings presented here are, by contrast, of great significance. This is because they undermine this fundamental premise. Scholars will look in vain for strong and consistent correlations between art and political, economic, technological and social change. This is not to

deny that the analysis presented here supports the hypothesis that interaction does take place between art and socioeconomic and political developments. The evidence provided here, however, is of a complex and indirect relationship between politics, economics, technology, and society, on the one hand, and art, on the other. Many macroanalyses of contemporary culture and global aesthetics fail to acknowledge this complexity because of their commitment to the theory that there exists a close correlation between societal change and artistic innovation.

I have shown here that there is no simple and essential relationship between formal poetic innovation and social and political change. This finding undermines claims for the political significance of poetry and demonstrates the need to avoid excessive politicization for the successful close reading of poetry. Apart from these significant negative findings, several further lessons and conclusions can be drawn from my analysis.

My study supports a view of poetry somewhere between those expressed by Shelley and Ashbery. Poets can do little as poets to achieve social and political revolution, but poetry is not devoid of social and political import. This is true at all levels of analysis from the intentions of the poets, to the interpretation of their poetry, to the role of poets in society.

Firstly, I have shown in my study a variety of relationships that experimental poetry can have to politics and a variety of social contexts in which such poetry has been written in recent years. Beyond being a clear warning against any correlation, let alone a causal relationship, between poetic form and political situation, this suggests the value of paying close attention to the specific relationships that exist between art and politics, without making unwarranted generalizations.

Secondly, I have demonstrated that poetry is most fruitfully assessed as poetry, not as a proxy for political or social debates. Despite this, I have also shown that poetry is not isolated from the world. The exploration of consciousness and the self does resonate with social and political ideas, with a sense of what is ethical and what is true. To remove ethics and epistemology from consideration in the analysis of poetry would be to return to a New Critical approach that would make reading this poetry an infinitely less rich experience. Poetry can be understood on its own terms as an artistic practice,

but it should not at the same time be unduly separated from the concerns, expressed in it, to know the world, to understand one's experience of the world and to explore these things in language.

Thirdly, I have established that all three poets attempt to reach for the impossible in their poetry. In this sense they are closer to Shelley's romanticism than Ashbery's "postmodern" view expressed above. This common utopianism is both the desire to reach out to the world around them and also the desire to create a separate world of language. It is significant that these intentions are comparable across very different cultures, approaches to poetry, and social situations. By showing how three poets in different countries share certain concerns, I have illuminated the increasing internationalization of experimental poetry.

Finally, I have demonstrated the kinds of relationships that can exist between literary subcultures and society at large. Although literature is not politics and should be understood, for the most part, according to its own conventions, literary communities do not exist in a social and political vacuum. Like all social subgroups that attract a following, literary communities have political and historical import. Understood in this way, the communities in which Dragomoshchenko, Hejinian and Yang have participated represent examples of subcultures that provided an outlet for cultural, social and political dissatisfaction in their respective societies. In this respect, they were not unique, and one could point to any number of comparable subcultures with similar international appeal, such as, for example, punk music.

In relation to subcultures, the significance of my study comes from the way in which it is indicative of wider practices amongst experimental artists and alternative communities in the 1970s and 1980s. It shows how the desires and self-conscious anxieties associated with intellectuals internationally in the earlier decades of the twentieth century continued unabated and, if anything, intensified over this period. This in turn suggests an alternative explanation for the emergence of a global aesthetic in experimental poetry to the kinds of explanations put forward by Perloff, Jameson, Zhang, Dirlik and Epshtein. On the basis of my research, I propose that it may be concepts and ideas that act as the primary forces of globalization in the arts, and that economic, social, political and technological changes only impact on cultural production through a complex, mediated process that scholars do not yet fully

understand. The thought that everyday language and symbols can help to reinforce power structures resonated again and again with intellectuals who were dissatisfied with the status quo in the twentieth century. The idea of making difficult modernist poetry and the concepts of counterculture and artistic consciousness-raising built and expanded upon this idea. That such ideas were so widespread might in part explain why Hejinian, Yang and Dragomoshchenko developed an interest in writing utopian, difficult modernist poetry and associated it with the provision of an alternative to mainstream society. The popularity of the idea that ideology was so deeply imbedded in language would also help explain why all three writers were simultaneously so cautious about the possibility or even desirability of their utopian goals. Such an ideas-based explanation of global aesthetics would make sense because poetry, after all, primarily requires ideas and because ideas move around the globe at a pace unmatched by social, political, economic and technological changes.

My analysis of these three poets points to the need to build on this research in order to test further this hypothesis about the globalization of experimental art and alternative culture in the 1970s and 1980s. It also underscores the necessity of close and detailed analysis of specific texts, individuals and groups. It is only through such detailed analysis of original texts that a proper understanding of recent experimental art and alternative culture globally can be achieved. Analysis of these changes and practices in the future will lead to a fuller understanding of this transitional period in culture, society and politics internationally, a period that remains so important in understanding the state of the world today.

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⁶ The poems are dated 1982-4. The cover is signed by the author.

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