

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

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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."