

**CONSIDERING LYN HEJINIAN'S *MY LIFE*:
A QUESTION OF CONFIDENCE, AN ISSUE OF STRENGTH**

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I have read Lyn Hejinian's *My Life* twice (if I remember correctly). And with "read" it should be understood that both times I was forcing my way through the book. I did not get to the end by the energies of the pleasure of reading; I got to the end because, for essentially academic reasons (if self-imposed), I felt it necessary: the first go through was because I felt I needed a basic familiarity with the book; the second was because I wanted to affirm or reject my first response. If that response has somehow evaded you in this paragraph I will be blunt: no, I do not hold *My Life* to be meritable literature.

I picked it up again a couple months ago (indeed, I pick it up here and there when I come across its name to test it yet again) and it has since sat within arm's reach at one reading place or another, though mostly I have only been re-reading the first few chapters. The reason I picked it back up this time was because I have recently finished re-reading Burroughs's Nova Trilogy, and wanted to explore the differences between the works, as both present a fragmentary text though of different methods and natures. (For the record, that was the second time I had read the Nova Trilogy straight through; though, unlike *My Life*, I first came to the trilogy because *Naked Lunch* and *Cities of the Red Night* had already made me an admirer of Burroughs.)

The question that I was and am exploring is a simple one: why do I revel in and praise Burroughs but am bored by and reject Hejinian?

Yes, I will admit that the Burroughs's subject matter of sex, drugs, and interplanetary mind-control wars is far more interesting to me than the childhood experiences of a girl in the U.S. Though, the record is also more than clear that such subject preference does not carry a text all that much farther than it will be carried by its literary sophistication and execution. Most books about sex, drugs, and interplanetary mind-control wars are terribly written and intellectually banal (if not laughable), and I usually cannot make it past the first chapter, if even the first pages. And while most books about U.S. youth are similarly unappealing, if I came across an unfamiliar book by Fanny Howe or Gertrude Schnackenberg¹ – to chose two writers who at time use somewhat similar subject matter – I would pick them up with happy expectation and for the find leave the interplanetary mind-control wars section unvisited.

So while there might be some small influence as regards subject matter, that influence is wholly insufficient to explaining the difference between my receptions of the two books. The difference lies not in subject but in the designed composition and its execution.² If it were but an issue of subject matter, my recent

¹ To note, Howe's works also function through fragmentation, though of a style different from both Burroughs's and Hejinian's.

² There is, I believe, an argument that can be made that Burroughs's chosen subject, in that it is a far narrower subject than Hejinian's (to all appearances) broad and if non-specific approach, in itself creates a greater intensity of experience in reading. A one-hundred-and-fifty page book on the life of a sailors in general in navies in general will be far less interesting – or I should maybe say far less energetic – than a book of the same size about the specific life of a specific sailor on a specific ship within the framing of a specific event in which that sailor has a discernable role. The condensation of subject matter will force upon the writer a greater degree of attention. There will be more detail, energy, and interaction within and between moments in the text (in subject, rhetoric, style, etc.) than there

pondering about the two works would not have lasted as long as it has. It is not, after all, as though Burroughs and Hejinian are writing out of the same style or technique but with that variation of subject: there are two wholly different methods behind the books, two different intentions, two different executions.

To leave it at that, to say that the difference results from the different methods and intents, however, is to rest on but the surface of the matter and accomplish nothing. The question is not what is the difference in method; the question is why does the end result of one succeed and that of the other fail? In answering a question about a *reading*, about the experience of a text, it is a fallacious step to go to the writing of the text. You go to the *text*. It is undeniable that the texts were created out of two different methods of writing. But it is equally undeniable that methodology is broad even across writers of straight-forward (that is, narrative, unfragmented) prose fiction. As such I reject up front the answer that “Burroughs and Hejinian are at the core working to the same literary event, only Burroughs is executing it better.”

Yet it is thirdly undeniable that method effects the end product. A writer who intricately plots their projects will make very different works than someone who sits at the keyboard with the more limited – and limiting – concern of “that which comes next.” Nonetheless, and again, my engagement as a reader is not with the method of the writer, it is with the results of the method. Yes, there is a degree one can extrapolate backwards – especially with a method such as cut up – but I must here try to limit such to being presented only from the orientation of the final product, the book before me.

So when it comes to it, this critique cannot be held as a critique of *method*. The same method in the hands of people of different skill

would be with a very loosely based story. Which is a lot of words to say something obvious with writing: if you do not narrow down your focus, you will only ever wander about accomplishing little.

While this idea does play into the comparison between the two books, I am leaving it out of this discussion, if only for the sake of my own narrowing of subject.

will result in texts of different degrees of success. The success of the Nova Trilogy as literary works does not lie in the cut up method, but in Burroughs's skilled, aesthetic *use* of the cut up method. In turn, I leave open the possibility that Hejinian's method may have succeeded in a different writer's hand (or on a different project). As such, Burroughs and Hejinian also are themselves removed from the exploration. Again, for my answers I go only to the text at hand and my experience of it.

As such, there is one final consideration: myself as the reader. But this is at its core a comparison, even if the majority of what follows is about *My Life*. By saying it is a comparison I saying that *My Life* is by no means the first fragmented or experimental text I have read and explored. As such, I should also be able to eliminate such too-subjective issues such as unfamiliarity with the style or personal taste as regarding style: I enjoy very much the style of the Nova Trilogy and the reading experience created by that style. Hopefully, then I am also eliminating myself from the exploration to the degree that it is possible or desirable: after all, I do not want to eliminate myself completely, as this is a exploration of *readings*, and my own sophistication must come into play. I will not then enter an analysis of the nature of a formal analysis, revealing how one text has succeeded because it has followed some body of "literary rules" while the other text has failed because of the inability to do the same. It is a poor critic that tells a reader what they are *supposed* to see in a text. It is also a poor critic that does not recognize that what they themselves see in a text is in fact what *they themselves* see in the text. After all, the experience of a text exists only when the text is *read*. My intent here is to explore what is in the text of *My Life*, what experience comes from reading what is in the text, and what that experience presents to me as a reader; what the text makes possible, what the text makes unlikely; what the text invites and what it refuses; what the text *offers*.

It is assumed in all criticism that a sophisticated reader can look at a poorly constructed sentence and see that it is a poorly constructed sentence. It is assumed in this criticism that different sophisticated readers may have different responses as to the

effectiveness of different *styles* of sentence composition. But it is demanded in this criticism that it is recognized that there is an important difference between those two events.

A gymnast may launch themselves across a mat with intent to perform a tumbling line. The success of that tumbling line is not judged by what they announce they are doing, by their intent. The performance is judged by what actually happens in the tumble. This is a rather fundamental point of viewership that seems to be actively avoided in contemporary poetry culture (and literature, and art): writers are too often praised for the mere act of throwing themselves across the mat. A sophisticated judge should be able to tell the difference between a well executed move and a not-so-well executed move. In turn, a sophisticated judge should be able to tell the difference between an executed *move* and a body flinging itself across the mat. Just because the person *says* they performed moves X, Y, and Z does not mean that what looked far more like a person leaping from a fast-moving vehicle was in fact X, Y, and Z but poorly executed. A sophisticated reader should be able to conclude, “I see what you are trying to do, but you are not executing it well.” Likewise, a sophisticated reader should be able to conclude, “I see what you *think* you doing, what you claim to be doing, but that is not in fact what you are doing.” It does not require a body of critical “rules” to look at a text and see what is going on in the text. Poetry culture in the U.S. would be far stronger if the mere statement “I wrote a poem” – or “I wrote a poem about the plight of Hindu, gay, recovering-drug-addict, political refugees forced to live without the pets they left behind using a scripted method that disrupts the capitalist reification of the text and opens the door for a neo-realist deconstruction of post-post-urban regionalist identity” – was, in the way of the above gymnast, irrelevant to the reception and judgement of the text.

“Well,” more readers (especially, more editors) should reply, “that’s nice and dandy. But let’s see what is actually there on the

page.”³

To make a long introduction short, I emphasize that what follows is *exploration*. I am looking at Hejinian's text and seeing what is there, what it offers, what *it performs*, in an effort to understand why it fails for me when Burroughs's fragmented texts succeed. The Nova Trilogy exists in this mostly as counterpart (not as second subject). In a way, the primary function of the Burroughs text is the grounding assertion that it is not merely the fragmentation itself to which I am reacting negatively. It would serve no real purpose in the exploration of how well the Hejinian text works to go into how the well Burroughs texts work: that risks setting up rules by way of one text which are then falsely applied to the other. I will bring Burroughs in only when it functions as a means of comparison and contrast. In the end, my subject here is *My Life*.

So, then, why does the fragmentation work for me in Burroughs but fail for me in Hejinian?

For those unfamiliar with the text, *My Life* is written as a series of sections – for clarity I will call them chapters as there is no real reason not to – mostly between one-and-a-half and two-and-a-half pages in length. Every chapter is marked at the start by a short phrase – and there is no reason not to take these phrases as titles. Though, they do not uniformly function as titles in the quotidian, descriptively-marking sense. For example, the title for the chapter which I will look at is "*A name trimmed with colored ribbons*", a phrase which plays on the last words of the chapter, "his mane trimmed with colored ribbons." But if there is any other correlation between the title and its chapter, it is not readily apparent.

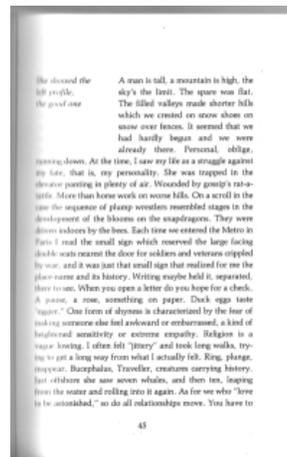
The chapters are made up of sentences or, less frequently,

³ I will say because it is worth saying, such statements as mocked in the above do indeed influence *my* reception of the text; because I have found, through much experience, that when an author makes such a claim, I should have little expectation as to finding *literary* value in the text. Those claims tend to be made *in the place of* claims of literary value. And with reason.

fragments-with-periods that are never meant to be distinguished from the idea of being a kind of sentence, nor are they ever out of place even when grammatically variant. The book is meant to be seen and received as variation of prose. The sentences vary in length and rhetoric, though the norm is shorter length and of a descriptive, declarative nature. There are no paragraph breaks in the chapters; nor is there any paragraph-like structure evidenced by the chapters. Each chapter is but a long string of sentences, and often they are a string only in that, in the nature of prose, one comes immediately after the other. And now that I have bothered with the effort of that paragraph, I will cap it off with a visual, a random page from the book (pg 45), so you can see the presented format that I am describing.

I am going to follow through the beginning of one chapter of *My Life*, the fourth (pgs 14-15). Going all the way through would be overkill and really only prompt my repeating myself. I think the amount I cover will be sufficient to the task at hand. (To note: I will mark quotations from the chapter given out of order with an asterisk *.)

To help with the presentation, I am going to break passages from the chapter into its constituent sentences rather than present them as a block quote. It will be rightly said that this will change, slightly, both the rhythm and the reading of the text in that the addition of the breaks is eliminating the visual aspect of a continuous flow. However, I think the damage done to the ideational flow is minimal if not trivial. After all, the text of *My Life* is that it is a string of sentences: i.e., the primary unit of the text is the individual sentence. It is at best infrequent that the sentences link together into a larger structures. As such, it seems to me, the reader is supposed to be reading the text with attention to each individual sentence. If that is not the case, if the reader is meant to



but skim across the surface of the text, then the text itself has demonstrated its triviality, and I can end this essay here. For why am I bothering to talk about a text that is meant to be read but not meant to be read with enough attention to permit engagement, is not meant to be read in a manner that provokes thought. That is a text on the level of Harlequin Romance, and I believe Hejinian is claiming something different for her book, as does the book claim something different for itself. So I will assume the former: the reader is meant to read the text as a series of sentences and is meant to cognitively acknowledge each sentence. As such, my visually breaking the text up should be of no consequence.

As I proceed I am going to present what I see in the text, in regards both to the individual sentences and to how the sentences connect to each other, whether that be in the flow sentences or across passages. When I am showing what I see to be flaws in the text, do not read this as though what I am pointing out is necessarily glaring or on its own damning of the text. What I see with the failure of *My Life* is not the egregiousness of any one (or handful) of issues but the cumulative effect generated both by the nature of the text and its perceived flaws. For example, in this chapter one finds the sentence: “But, already, words.” That sentence in its immediate context reads to me as a gimmicky appeal to something like textual self-awareness can only be considered but a flaw in the rhetoric of the text. But when such moments repeatedly occur, when the abstract, meta-textual appeals never seem rise above being trite assertions, it is no longer a but a flaw. In that I have no desire to go through the book and demonstrate such events in the majority, and I am sure you do not wish to read such a demonstration, I will mostly stay here with presentation out of the one chapter, and leave it to you to take my ideas into the book in your critical reading. What can be assumed, however, is that I will not bother with pointing out events that are singular in their occurrence.

As I said, this is meant to be exploratory in nature. I am pointing out what I see, presenting what I experience. As always, your reading must be your own.

The chapter starts off:

They are seated in the shadows husking corn,
shelling peas.

Houses of wood set in the ground.

I try to find the spot at which the pattern on the
floor repeats.

Pink, and rose, quartz.

They wade in brackish water.

I have read in passages about *My Life* (and we will see such, below, with Marjorie Perloff) that people perceive a degree of ambiguity in the use of pronouns. I will agree so far as to say that it is not too difficult an argument to make to say that there is an instability between whether the voice that owns any one sentence is the narrator's or central character's. As such, the word "you" could be referring at times to a second character, at times to the primary character, and the word "they" can be read at times to include the primary character, at times to exclude it. Though, because of the nature of the relationship between the sentences of the text, in that they only infrequently overtly form a semantic sequence, the same argument for ambiguity can be used to say that it is not at all necessary to read the text with any ambiguity whatsoever, which is how I read the text. Applying Occam's razor, reading the presence of "you" as pointing to a unspecified, generic "you," is as simple solution to the issue as can be had. If the ambiguity was indeed intended in the writing, my response is that the text is not very well written to that end. If it was intended, then the ability to read without ambiguity should have been eliminated. As such, the question of ambiguity seems to me not a product of controlled design but a happenstance of poor writing, a justification of the lack of control. As such, I would not call it "ambiguity" but the lack of clarity, a confusion created by a lack of control. Confusion is not the same thing as ambiguity. (Though, confusion can be manipulated to create an ambiguity.)

What of the use of the pronouns? Reading the text the way I read it, without ambiguity, it seems (as evidenced in the five sentences above) that the central purpose of the pronouns within

the text is to be a means to divide whether the sentence is about the primary character or about someone else; whether the statement is observed or acted. Yet, compare the above to this, where I remove the pronouns:

Seated in the shadows husking corn, shelling peas.
Houses of wood set in the ground.
Try to find the spot at which the pattern on the floor
repeats.
Pink, and rose, quartz.
Wade in brackish water.

In the rewrite, in that the second sentence is about "houses," which would be external to the primary character, there is created in the coupling of the sentences the idea that the first sentence is also external to the primary character: that is, the outward-pointing function of the "they" is implied. The third sentence in itself seems to naturally refer to an action inside a mind, so there too the "I" is implied. As for the "they" in the original fifth sentence, it does not naturally link up to the "they" in the original first sentence. It is different "they," if different only in time and place. But, again, in the modified text, in that the preceding sentence points to things outside the primary character – it is what she is looking *at* – the motion has already been established that the fifth sentence can also be read as external.

Is there ambiguity in the text when the overt outward/inward-pointing pronouns are removed? Yes. But I opened this discussion talking about perceived ambiguities as to pronoun usage, as to their outward/inward-pointing function. What seems to me to be gained in losing the pronouns – which is also to say what is to be eliminated, the flaw created by the use of the pronouns – is that the reader is not constantly being pointed to antecedents that do not exist. There is created ambiguity without a sense of confusion. When you write the sentence

They are seated in the shadows husking corn,
shelling peas.

especially as the first sentence of the chapter, the reader is putting the word "they" into suspension, waiting for the "they" to be

identified. But that never happens in *My Life*. When comes the fifth sentence

They wade in brackish water.

the reader now is told that there never was meant to be an identified "they" for the first sentence nor even an identified "they" for the fifth sentence, and there is no reason even to think that it is the same group in both sentences being tagged by the "they"s – after all, is there reason to expect that people who husk corn would also wade through brackish water? The two events are too unrelated for such an association, and yet they are being tied together by the "they"s.

At a semantic level the text is at odds with itself. "They"s are being presented, but they can only ever remain unidentified: it is *not* that they are ambiguous, which points to alternatives. The text wants (or so I gather in the reading of it) to present a kind of fluid telling of a child's life, letting the nature of that life be created through a montage, as it were, of thoughts/sentences. But the syntax of the sentences, and the semantic *expectation* generated by that syntax (that is, the suspending of the identity of "they" until the text speaks the identity) works directly against the efforts to create association. The clash in the "they"s in the first and fifth sentences present a rather strong reading cue to tell me that *these sentences are not related*. It is the opposite direction intended: separation of the sentences, not union. I believe the argument here presents itself in the reading of the two versions. If I may offer them again:

They are seated in the shadows husking corn,
shelling peas. Houses of wood set in the ground. I
try to find the spot at which the pattern on the floor
repeats. Pink, and rose, quartz. They wade in
brackish water.

Seated in the shadows husking corn, shelling peas.
Houses of wood set in the ground. Try to find the
spot at which the pattern on the floor repeats. Pink,
and rose, quartz. Wade in brackish water.

There is to me no small difference between the two. (It goes without

saying that I am now completely ignoring intent and looking only at the results on the page.) The primary difference to me is a very basic sense that the version with the pronouns sounds uncontrolled, even amateurish, as though written by a person who needed to think in blunt statements, and had not developed enough writing sophistication to eliminate trivial words from their writing. That is, the writer, though perhaps wanting to create a montage of ideas, could not recognize how the sentences were clashing both with each other and that intent, not in the surface meaning of the sentences but in their syntactic construction. In fact, is the “they” the purposing element of the first and fifth sentences? Pound’s insistence on the elimination of the unnecessary goes not only to the elimination of empty fluff but also to the elimination of what might cause problems for being present when there is no need for it to be present: mere presence creates the assumption of importance. To me, these sentences read like someone not sophisticated enough to recognize how pronouns function in the rhetoric of the *chapters*, how they function in the interaction of the sentences. It reads like the writer’s laziness, lack of sophistication, or bad habits dominated the constructing of the sentences as opposed to awareness of how the sentences were functioning in the text.

To give some body to that statement consider dialog tags, which often speak of the same type of issues. A writer who needs to identify every statement in a dialogic exchange with “he said”s and “she said”s is revealing their lack of control over language. Rather than write dialogue that does not require such tags (which is more difficult), they fall back on convention to do the work for them. Most use of dialog tags sound aurally clumsy and when they over used come off as being amateurish. Most dialogue can be written without using them at all – or using them vary sparingly – with but a little thought and graceful manipulation: thought and graceful manipulation being some of that which defines sophisticated writing. A strong writer knows how to manipulate the medium. A person who writes dialog by way of the constant tick-tocking of “he said”/“she said”s is speaking to the reader that they have yet to put any real consideration into the technique of writing dialogue (or

even of syntax itself to any complexity). It is almost a marker for the quality of a book: merely look at some dialogue and see how dependent – deeply descriptive word there, *dependent* – the writer is upon the dialog tags.

Such is similar to what I read when I read through *My Life* as regards the use of pronouns. These are the questions I am led to ask: if the presence and identity of the subjects of the sentences were so important (which is a narrative importance) as to requisite pronouns, why be so lazy as only to identify them with pronouns, and to use pronouns in a way that creates clashes in that identification?; alternatively, if the identity of the people are not important (as with a more lyrical text), why be so lazy as to write using the pronouns? That the questions occur speaks to me that I do not have confidence that Hejinian herself addressed those question when writing the book. By extension, I then question whether Hejinian was either unable to address such questions because of a lack of sophistication in her writing ability, or whether she did not care enough to address them. Either way, for the mere presence of the questions, for the legitimacy of the questions (and any answer to the questions is here irrelevant), I have lost a degree of confidence in the text.

Next sentence, a long one:

The leaves outside the window tricked the eye, demanding that one see them, focus on them, making it impossible to look past them, and though holes were opened through the foliage, they were as useless as portholes underwater looking into a dark sea, which only reflects the room one seeks to look out from.

As said, most of the sentences in *My Life* are of the nature of simple declarative statements. Occasionally a long sentence like this comes around that reaches for a more complex thought. Unfortunately, this sentence is a poorly written sentence: it changes subject half way through, and that change clashes with its syntax, one that functions through one subject. For those who do not see the problem, I will

explain. The opening of the sentence:

The leaves outside the window tricked the eye, demanding that one see them, focus on them, making it impossible to look past them [. . .]

The subject of the sentence is the leaves. The closing of the sentence:

[. . .] useless as portholes underwater looking into a dark sea, which only reflects the room one seeks to look out from.

This describes not leaves but the holes in the foliage. In the middle there is the mess:

The leaves [. . .] tricked the eye [. . .] *and though* holes were opened through the foliage, *they* were as useless [. . .]

Syntactically, “they” should refer to the leaves not the holes. It is a faulty sentence. Not a creative sentence; not a poetic sentence; a *poorly written* sentence.

But the problem with the sentence goes beyond grammar:

[. . .] though holes were opened through the foliage, they were as useless as portholes underwater looking into a dark sea, which only reflects the room one seeks to look out from.

The comparison does not work. Yes, a window between a lit room and darkness will reflect what is in the lit room, making it difficult to see through the window: the purpose of the window, the ability to see through it, is thwarted by the absence of light outside, is thwarted by the reflective property of the glass of the window itself. However, that is not what is described in the sentence above:

The leaves *outside the window* tricked the eye

It is not the window that is doing the action, it is the leaves. They are “tricking the eye” by forcing the viewer to look only at leaves. (To say, I do not like the use of the phrase “tricked the eye,” since is no real “trick of the eye” occurring. It reads like a hack phrase somewhat mis-used. But that is minor.)

The leaves [. . .] tricked the eye [. . .], making it impossible to look past them [even though] holes

were opened through the foliage

Unlike a window between light and dark, the situation presented here is not that what should be transparent is not. The action is that something is getting in the way of looking beyond the window. A more correct – and with some thought I am sticking with the word “correct” – comparison would be

The leaves outside the window tricked the eye,
demanding that one see them, focus on them,
making it impossible to look past them, and though
holes were opened through the foliage, they were as
useless as *if looking through closed storm shutters*.

To all appearances Hejinian came upon the interesting instance of the inability to look through a porthole into the dark and applied it haphazardly as a comparison to the situation of looking through the leaves. The sentence fails both in it being poorly constructed grammatically and in it being a poorly coupled comparison. Again I am led to question whether Hejinian just is not a good enough writer to have noticed it or whether she just did not care enough to bother. Either way, what suffers is my confidence in the book.

Continuing, after the window sentence comes:

The leaves outside the window tricked the eye, [. . .]
making it impossible to look past them [. . .].

Sometimes into benevolent and other times into
ghastly shapes.

It speaks of a few of the rather terrible blind.

I grew stubborn until blue as the eyes overlooking
the bay from the bridge scattered over its bowls
through a fading light and backed by the protest of
the bright breathless West.

While the general flow of *My Life* is of sentences that are more or less disconnected, they do here and there fall into chains such as this. The connection here is created through the idea of vision or seeing:

The leaves tricked the eye
[Things turned] into benevolent or ghastly shapes

The terrible blind

I grew stubborn [trying to see past]

The narrative action created with the pairing of the first and fourth sentences is infrequent in *My Life*, but it does happen. Referring to the group as a whole, because of the inherent action in the idea of *seeing*, there is some ideational energy created. Here is but one possible ideational field (a.k.a. one reading):

Person tricked into not being able to see through,
only at.

In their looking at sometimes positive, sometimes
negative shapes result.

The event brings to mind “the rather terrible blind.”
[a good phrase which I leave undefined]

Despite the obstacles, because of what is brought to
mind, the person tries very hard to see through.

I am not saying that the four sentences should be *collapsed* into such one narrative flow, be it this or any other.⁴ When the fragmenting in *My Life* works well, it permits such associations but does not demand them.

What is needed here is only the recognition there is an ideational connection between the four sentences.

In the Burroughs books, the source text for the fragments used in the cut up technique are generally already interrelated ideationally: whether directly, as passages from different points in a narrative sequence, or indirectly, as with passages that are only thematically related. As well, it is very infrequent that the source passage for a cut fragment is not presented (if even then slightly modified). As such, there is a pre-existing, underlying ideational unity to the text of the books before the texts are submitted to cut up techniques.

For example, the first extended cut-up passage of *The Soft Machine* (the first book) occurs on page 10 (the fifth page of text).

⁴ It might also be said that the passage is describing the text of *My Life* itself. Though, I do not think that idea succeeds when given thought. Whether it succeeds or not, the reading is not relevant to the point at hand.

But the majority of the phrases in the passage have already been established within the ideational field of the brief, interrelated episodes preceding that section. So while the cut up passage generates new energies within the ideational field through the quasi-random re-ordering, there is never the feeling that random thoughts are being thrown in from the outside: even when there appear fragments that have not already occurred. The method behind the text – which includes the choice of texts brought in, the writing of those texts (when written) and the choice and situating of fragments used within the final text – works to create a unity within the final result. As such, the extended passage beginning on page 10, while generating new energies through the cut up method and introduction of new phrases into the text, never rejects or clashes with – or even steps away from – the ideational field developed in the four pages previous. The new ideation created in the cut up builds upon and develops the base ideational energies of the text; it does not attempt to introduce new ideational energies *ex nihilo*.

My Life, in contrast, does not work in such a manner. First in that when a chain evidences an ideational unity, that ideational energy does not generally survive the end of the chain. A new idea is brought in, and the reader is asked, as with the “they”s, above, to move on. Second, ideational unity *within* such chains is not the norm. Usually, when you come upon a chain of statements they are linked together merely by some shared denotative element: a mechanistic rather than organic linking that for the nature of the connections never develops any depth, ideational energies. For example, consider this chain of sentences in the first chapter. I will continue to isolate the sentences, and here, between the sentences, identify the concept that links the sentences:

It was a tic, she had the habit, and now she bobbed
like my toy plastic bird on the edge of its glass,
dipping into and recoiling from the water.

[glass=well=pit]

But a word is a bottomless pit.

[pit=darkness=uterus]

It became magically pregnant and one day split

open, giving birth to a stone egg, about as big as a football.

[stone]

In May when the lizards emerge from the stones, the stones turn gray, from green.

[day/daylight]

When daylight moves, we delight in distance.

[movement]

The waves rolled over our stomachs, like spring rain over an orchard slope.

[stomachs/bumpers]

Rubber bumpers on rubber cars.

If it seems stretched at times, that is because the general nature of *My Life* is either that the sentences are unconnected except tangentially, or connected by way of some common element, as with most of the above. Another example, taken from near the end of the chapter that is the focus of this exploration:

That was the fashion when she was a young woman and famed for her beauty, surrounded by beaux.

[surround=encircled]

Once it was circular and that shape can still be seen from the air.

[circle=arc, like the reach of a guard dog on a chain]

Protected by a dog.

[protected and circles]

Protected by foghorns, frog honks, cricket circles on the brown hills. (*)

One might argue that there are depth energies being created here. For example, connecting a circle of beaux to a circle of crickets. But is the connecting of “beaux” to “crickets” creating ideational energies that the reader can then use? or are the energies but accidental, extending only as far as the accident, as such trivial to the work, only of value to that one moment, that one linking, and meriting of being immediately discarded from the reading mind (if not prompted of such) as soon as the moment is done? Again I

remind you of the opening issue with “they”s: the first instance of the words was presented in a manner that cued the reader to suspend the pronoun in their mind for future use. But the text then cued the reader with the second “they” that there was no real reason to begin with to suspend the first pronoun *or any future pronoun* for future use. The reader is overtly told by the text that ideas exist only for the time of the appearance of their signifiers, and are to be discarded at the coming of each period.

One more:

Is that willful.

[will = power = force (as in physics)]

Inclines.

[inclines=hill]

They have big calves because of those hills.

[hills = dirt = stones]

Flip over small stones, dried mud.

[stone = mica/gold]

We thought that the mica might be gold.

[mica/gold = nature]

A pause, a rose, something on paper, in a nature scrapbook. (13)

Again, there is a point by point connection linking the sentences into a chain, but there is no development of any depth. The linking is entirely mechanistic. Once a link of chain passes from before the eyes, there is no reason to think about it any more.

Linking occurs not only within chains of sentences. There is also type linking that works across the text (the chapters) by the repeated (if manipulated) use of words, phrases, or concepts. Some examples from the early chapters include “stone/egg”

It became magically pregnant and one day split open, giving birth to a stone egg, about as big as a football. (8)

The egg of Columbus, landscape and grammar. (9)

It was an enormous egg, sitting in the vineyard--an

enormous rock-shaped egg. (*15)
and “solitude”

There is no solitude. (9)

Solitude was the essential companion. (16)

The greatest solitudes are quickly strewn with rubbish. (16)
and window and screen scenes, like that we have already
encountered

The windows were narrowed by white gauze curtains
which were never loosened. (7)

At night, to close off the windows from the view from
the street, my grandmother pulled down the
window shades, never loosening the curtains, a
gauze starched too stiff to hang properly down. (10)
and flower (and plant) names

On her walks she stepped into people's gardens to
pinch off cuttings from their geraniums and
succulents. (7)

A snapdragon volunteering in the garden among the
cineraria gapes its maw between the fingers, and we
pinched the buds of the fuschia to make them pop.
(13)

The smells of the house were thus a peculiar mix of
heavy interior air and the air from outdoors
lingering over the rose bushes, the camellias, the
hydrangeas, the rhododendron and azalea
bushes.(13)

On that still day my grandmother raked up the
leaves beside that particular pelargonium. (*15)
(In gathering those four I was focusing primarily on flowers and
large names, and am passing over other examples.) The sentence

that follows the last – which is in our concerned chapter – is one of the unconsciously self-deprecating ironies I find in *My Life*:

With a name like that there is a lot you can do.

Except that sentence prompts me to ask: *But what is ever done?* Indeed, what ever is being done with the strained use of any of the flower names? Yes, there are a lot of flower and plant names in the text but they are all nothing outside of *names*. They are pointless to the text except as demonstration of there having been a list of big flower names at hand during the writing of the book.

By happenstance I have been reading *Swann's Way*, and the third flower sentence in the list above, starting with “The smells of the house were thus [. . .]” – in tandem with other moments in the opening parts of *My Life* – cannot help but put into my head the idea that Hejinian herself had read the book, which frequently focuses on scents as part of the “remembering” that motivates the text, and was consciously (or unconsciously) influenced by the reading. I am not saying that as a point of fact or critical acuity. It is only a curious observation, made curious in the comparison of how the plants and scents function within *My Life* as opposed to how they work in *Swann's Way*. In the latter, the scents are presented both as stylistic mechanism and ideational cue. It is established early in the text how the primary scenes of remembering are heavily linked to scents and other sensuous experiences, and how the remembering is brought back all the more vividly because of the associated sensuous aspects. The appearance of sensual elements are cues to the reader as to the importance of the scene, as to what in particular makes the scene important within the ideational field of the text as a whole; for it is only through (or in tandem with) such sensuous cues that these scenes are remembered at all by the narrator. They are sensuous because they are important; that importance is linked to the sensuous because the importance is primarily within the *unconscious* of the narrator. *Swann's Way* is not theoretic (nomic) prose, though it is narrative in form. It is presenting a series of views that act together to reveal the deeper unconscious, more primal drives and motivations that make up the narrator – and the book itself.

Another example, if I may briefly present it, is the hyacinths in *The Waste Land*. Countless pages have been written on the function of the idea of the hyacinths within the greater ideational fields of *The Waste Land*. Why? Because they are presented in the text in a way that *something is done with them*. But that cannot be said with *My Life*: there, they appear, they pass, they are forgotten. And everything about the text prompts the reader to forget them.

Look back at the first two examples with the word “solitude”:
There is no solitude. (9)

Solitude was the essential companion. (16)

Which is it to be? In answering that question you have to keep in mind that the text of *My Life* does not create a field of ideation around the two where they can both be at play and energy is created out of their opposition. *My Life* only throws the lines out and moves on to something else. They exist only in their most basic, denotative state: the book itself acts not to prompt engagement between the two (though that may be what was Hejinian's intent). As has been described, the nature of the text is to actively *reject* ideational development. As such, the sentences exist only as brute statements of fact: they can either be accepted, or they can be rejected. When the text contradicts itself, and *My Life* is constantly contradicting itself, even that method of reading is rejected by the text, and again we are reduced reading the text one sentence at a time, with no need to consider or even recognize, except at the most mechanical levels, connections between the sentences.

It is not fatal to have contradicting statements within a text whose field of thought rarely if ever moves beyond the span of any two sentences. Where in *Swann's Way* the narratives create an underlying field of ideational energies, if developed over the narrative time of the book (though, indeed, for all the digressions, that narrative linearity is greatly disrupted and fragmented), where in Burroughs the thematic unity of the underlying episodes is used to rearrange a an ideational body out of which the cut up can develop and build ideational energies by rearranging fragments of the text; in *My Life* there is no such working of its sentences

together toward generating a field of ideation.

Or, in the very least, the book in no way *engenders confidence in the reader* that the book was designed or successfully executed to that end. The flower names are just flower names. Nothing is ever done with them. The pronouns are just pronouns: nothing more than grammatical elements in sentences. The brute qualities that link sentences into chains are nothing more than mechanistic, surface denotations. And while phrases or ideas repeat, that is all they do: repeat. Indeed, the sentences *are just sentences*. Nothing is ever done with them. Indeed, they undermine, continually, any confidence I have that something is being done with them. From the point of the view of the reader, there is nothing I find that *I can do with them* beyond trivial surface effects, and the text constantly demonstrates – whether by intent or by bad writing – that there is nothing *for me to do with them*. As such, the reading of *My Life* is a trivial experience, pun intended.

On the back cover of my edition of *My Life* there is an excerpt about the book taken from Marjorie Perloff's *The Dance of the Intellect*. In Perloff's book, *My Life* is addressed directly on pages 223-25, and very briefly on 228. The first mention is primarily an extended description of surface effects. This is the opening paragraph of that description (forgive the length of the quotation; I want to give full idea of the nature of the passage as it continues beyond this excerpt):

The italicized phrase in the upper left “box” [that is, the “title” of the quoted, opening chapter] – “*a pause, a rose, something on paper*” – will become a leitmotif later in the text (it first reappears on page 12 in the sentence, “A pause, a rose, something on paper, in a nature scrapbook”), but the “repetitions” are, in Hejinian's words, “free from all ambitions,” for we never really learn what a pause, a rose, and something on paper have in common. “Pause” and “rose” have similar consonant endings; “Pause” and “paper” begin with *pa*. On the opening page, the

leitmotif seems to have something to do with the “pattern of small roses” on the nursery wallpaper, but the connection is never fully made, for the main thing is not the connotative value of roses or paper but the fact that the phrase itself goes through endless permutations, appearing each time in a new context. Thus, on page 21, we read: “I found myself dependent on a pause, a rose, something on paper. It is a way of saying, I want you, too, to have this experience, so that we are more alike, so that we are closer, bound together.” The leitmotif, one surmises, of love, of paper valentines. But on page 29, the narrator declared, “I have been spoiled with privacy, permitted the luxury of solitude. A pause, a rose, something on paper” – the phrase now pointing, not to communion with the beloved other, but to the writer’s need for self-sufficiency. (223-24)

In only being able to describe and refer to surface events in *My Life*, Perloff is doing my work for me, showing how the book refuses the generation of ideational depth. Perloff’s use of the word “leitmotif” is, with such recognition, incorrect usage. The word *leitmotif* identifies a recurring musical phrase or event that marks for the listener a place or person or idea. There are two elements to leitmotif, however, that do not exist within the re-occurring phrasings in *My Life*. First, in its being music, a leitmotif will carry its own emotional value, and as such the reappearance of the phrase will pull that emotional value (which is, granted, developing as the music progresses) into the text. The phrasings in *My Life*, however, reject any permanent attachment of ideation: they carry nothing from one appearance to the next; or, perhaps more correctly, subsequent appearances as often as not reject what is carried forward by previous appearances, if anything is even meant to be carried forward at all. At the risk of overly repeating the point, the book overtly cues its readers not to carry any ideational energies from one moment to the next.

Second, a leitmotif does not in music exist on its own. It is a

phrase that appears in and is a unified *part of* the music of the moments of its appearances: that is, it is part of the full context of the musical moment. The music's flow does not stop so that the leitmotif can appear and then resume once the repeated phrase is over. The phrase is integrated into the greater work so that it can both influence the particular moment of the work (by bringing its development into the music of the moment) and be influenced by the particular moment of the work (with the musical moment adding more to the leitmotif's development).

None of which occurs in *My Life*. That work reads as entirely surface effect, entirely momentary effect, and Perloff's description of the operating of *My Life* is wholly within that vein: description of trivial, surface effects. And yet Perloff somehow (and perhaps not surprisingly) comes to this conclusion:

Hejinian's strategy is to create a language field that could be anybody's autobiography, a kind of collective unconscious whose language we all recognize. [. . .] *My Life*, it seems, is not "mine" at all; [. . .]. (225)

The idea that *My Life* creates a "language field" is an entirely opposing conclusion to the language acts that Perloff herself demonstrates in the preceding description. *My Life* by Perloff's own accounts does not at all create a language *field*: there is do depth generated. The sentences flow by in mechanical succession, but they do not in any way *develop*, and seem to spend far more effort thwarting any such development than working toward it. Perloff continues (and here we get into the quotation on the back cover of *My Life*),

[. . .] the emphasis, in any case, is on writing itself, on the "life" lived by words, phrases, clauses, and sentences, endowed with the possibility of entering upon new relationships.

It is as specious a claim as those made frequently within the text of *My Life* itself. If I may choose one rather useful to the purposes of this essay, one occurring later in the book:

There was once a crooked man, who rode a crooked

mile – thereafter he wrote in a crooked style characteristic of 19th-century prose, a prose of science with cumulative sentences. (36)

It is very easy for Perloff to say that the words of *My Life* are “endowed with the possibility of entering upon new relationships”; it is equally as easy to say that by avoiding “a prose of science with cumulative sentences,” by removing phrasing from a mechanistic, narrative flow like what one finds in nomic, generic texts, the text of *My Life* has created a situation for such possibilities. It is another thing altogether to demonstrate such within the text itself. Simply because Hejinian has fractured her text into small units does not mean she has created a text that will, when read by a competent reader, create an ideational field that functions contrary to the nature of theoretic prose. Just because a phrase repeats does not mean the phrase generates the ideational energies of a leitmotif. It could very well be nothing more than a repetition. Just because Hejinian fragmented some “prose of science” does not mean that the result is in its essence different from “prose of science”: the result could simply be “fragmented prose of science.” Understanding the difference between the two lies in a depth understanding of the literary text.

This is where Burroughs's Nova Trilogy works as demonstrative counterpoint. Burroughs also intentionally writes to thwart the linear, mechanistic text: as the trilogy is described in *The Ticket that Exploded*, “Th[ese are] novel[s] presented in a series of oblique references” (13). The thwarting of “prose of science” is also part of the subject matter of the trilogy, with language and thought control being the primary methods of the invading aliens. He works such disruptions through the cut up method, but also through the episodic nature of the text, through the non-linear relationship between the episodes (perhaps I should say greatly disrupted linearity), and the disjunctive nature of what might be called the story (or stories) of the books. But as described above, everything in the books folds in on itself, points to itself. Unlike *My Life*, the fragments often become of the nature of leitmotifs. One primary example is the word *blue*, which becomes so charged with meaning

its appearance in the text – even when you have not read the books in a while – immediately pulls in a full body of energetic fields of ideation about sordid drug use, corrupted sex, and alien rituals. For another example, on page 55 of *The Ticket That Exploded*, in a chapter titled “*writing machine*,” referring to the machine that is both externally the typewriter on which Burroughs is writing and cutting up the three books and internally a weapon against the thought control invaders, there is found within a cut up passage the following moment:

You can say could give no information – dominion
dwindling – We intersect on empty kingdom read to
by boy – *Five times i made this dream*

(emphasis mine). That final phrase flashes back to the second page of the first book, *The Soft Machine*:

Out of junk in East St. Louis sick dawn he threw
himself across the washbasin pressing his stomach
against the cool porcelain. I draped myself over his
body laughing. His shorts dissolved in rectal mucus
and carbolic soap. summer dawn smells from a
vacant lot.

“I’ll wait here. . . Don’t want him to rumble me.
. . .”

Made it five times under the shower that day
soapy bubbles of egg flesh seismic tremors split by
fissure spurts of jissom. . .(6)

It is a passage itself lightly subjected to some cut up. But it shows how the leitmotif of the phrase is being generated, by its association with sex, drugs, the world of junkies, and the hallucinatory realm that is the cut-up trilogy. (Indeed, if you were re-reading, it even carries hints of the alien infiltration.) The phrasing is repeated even within the first chapter:

Casbah house in the smell of dust and we made it. .
. Empty eukodal boxes stacked four feet along the
walls (8)

shots of demerol by candlelight. They turned off the

lights and water. Paper-like dust we made it. (10)

[. . .] . . Freight boat smell of rectal mucus went down
off England with all dawn smell of distant fingers. .
. About this time I went to your Consul. He gave me
a Mexican after his death. . . Five times of dust we
made it. . . with soap bubbles of withdrawal crossed
by a thousand junky nights. . . [. . .] . . Looking at
dirty pictures casual as a ceiling fan short-timing the
dawn we made it in the corn smell of rectal mucus
and carbolic soap. . .[. . .] (10)

In no way can it be said that Burroughs's texts are "prose of science." Contrary to *My Life*, the texts function for the reader to generate an ideational and experiential field around the elements of the books, be they episodes, phrases, or even stylistic moments. (In this instance, by the end of the chapter the phrase "we made it" is turned from a positive to a corrupted event, which bends back around to give question to that first positivity.) There is a unity about the first chapter both as concerns itself and its relationship to the rest of the trilogy: many of the phrases within reappear over and again throughout the books. The fragmentation and re=pairing generates ideational energies that would not exist if the episodes were presented without modification; it generates, to use Perloff's phrasing above, "a language field [. . .], a kind of [. . .] *unconscious*" (my emphasis). What is key is that where *My Life* to expends its energies isolating its sentences one from each other, the *Nova Trilogy* expends its energies bringing them into a chaomic union.

Hejinian's text in reducing itself to surface only effects, does not ever function to generating any kind of ideational depth. There is only a run of sentences – a linear run of sentences – that occasionally link in wholly mechanistic manners, through the repetition of similar, surface characteristics.

It is as such that Perloff's next claim becomes as regards Perloff, Hejinian (especially in her association with L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E), and *My Life* in general, more than a bit

ironic:

[. . .] *My Life* conveys what the archetypal life of a young American girl is like: “Even rain didn’t spoil the barbecue, in the backyard behind a polished traffic, through a landscape along a shore” (p. 73). The contradictory spatial designations take us, so to speak, from the mountains to the prairies, to the oceans white with foam. And of course to the city with its “polished traffic” as well.”

If *My Life* conveys the life of an archetypal, American girl, that life seems surprisingly white and middle class.

But let’s return to the chapter under examination, because I want to pull back to the idea of confidence. Starting at the end of the previous group of excerpted sentences:

I grew stubborn until blue as the eyes overlooking
the bay from the bridge scattered over its bowls
through a fading light and backed by the protest of
the bright breathless West.

Each bit of jello had been molded in tiny doll dishes,
each trembling orange bit a different shape, but all
otherwise the same.

I am urged out rummaging into the sunshine, and
the depths increase of blue above.

A paper hat afloat on a cone of water.

The orange and gray bugs were linked from their
mating but faced in opposite directions, and their
scrambling amounted to nothing.

This simply means that the imagination is more
restless than the body.

But, already, words.

I did not yet address the construction of that first sentence.

I grew stubborn until blue as the eyes overlooking
the bay

I love that phrasing of “I grew stubborn until blue,” and how it brings action to idea of being stubborn. It is not just that the

character was stubborn, but also that she brought herself into the character of stubbornness. But from there I do not know what to do with the rest of the sentence:

blue as the eyes overlooking the bay from the bridge
scattered over its bowls

What is scattered? By syntax “its bowls” refers to “bay,” and I can see how this could be a description of a geography like that of San Francisco Bay. But how can a bridge be “scattered”? Confidence again comes into play here. Do I have enough confidence in the writing to consider scattered a well chosen word? Language play only works if the reader has confidence that the writer is competent enough to perform the games. If the reader has no such confidence, they will see only the absence of control.

through a fading light and backed by the protest of
the bright breathless West.

Is there ideational purpose to calling the West “breathless”? Or does it exist only for the surface effect of the aural play? Why is there protest from the West? Why bother stating that if *nothing is done with it*? Continuing to the next sentence:

Each bit of jello had been molded in tiny doll dishes,
each trembling orange bit a different shape, but all
otherwise the same.

I am presented with the idea of tiny doll dishes made out of jello. They are all orange. They are different shapes. “Otherwise,” than the shapes, “they are the same.” But what other characteristic is there by which to differentiate them? That is, in what way could they be different? By this point in the book, I do not have enough confidence in the text to believe that this is clever writing; I no longer have enough confidence to rule out that this is nothing but bad writing, and as such, especially in the cumulative effect of these constantly appearing issues, that is my reception. Hejinian is again trying to turn a clever phrase but either is not competent enough to recognize that the sentence goes nowhere fast, or does not care. Either way, my confidence is diminished, and the text is trivialized.

I am urged out rummaging into the sunshine
great phrase, but

and the depths increase of blue above.

Do I have enough confidence in the writer that I can accept this as poetic play? as an intentional disruption of grammar to some aesthetic end? Do I have enough confidence in the book not to dismiss it as uncontrolled writing? or writing in the manner of a four- or five-year-old who has just discovered jokes: “Why did the bear honk the horn in his car? Because he was *brown!*” The jokes exist for the child because they have recognized that the punch line to a joke carries a relationship to the information in the set up, but they do not yet understand the *joke* aspect. It is funny to them because it is *like* a joke. So, in my quickly diminishing confidence in the text of *My Life*, I ask: is “the depths increase of blue above water” a clever manipulation of words? or is it a four-year-old’s punchline? I experience it as but another trivial event in a long sequence of seemingly trivial events. There is a difference between a disruption of grammar or syntax that creates ideational energy from out of the disruption, and a disruption of grammar that is nothing more than a bad grammar.

A paper hat afloat on a cone of water.

I have puzzled and puzzled and puzzled but cannot come up with anything for “a cone of water.” I am actually very curious if that refers to something.

The orange and gray bugs were linked from their mating but faced in opposite directions, and their scrambling amounted to nothing.

This simply means that the imagination is more restless than the body.

But, already, words.

Look first to the last two sentences, which are like the self-referential sentences touched on above. Sentences such as these, that break from the concrete and present abstractions about writing, and are not infrequent in the text. It must be argued – at least I do not see how the argument can be defeated – that these statements are functioning to describe the text itself, the politics of the text, and are meant to act as cues to the reader on how to read the text. (If such an argument is rejected, then it becomes further

demonstration of the triviality of the text.) But as already said, stating is one thing, demonstrating is another. The question with the three sentences is how do we get from the description of the *physical* motion of bugs to the consequent idea that “the *imagination* is more restless” than a physical body. It is yet another moment of poor idea control. As a reader I am left with that same choice: either Hejinian was being sloppy (or incompetent) or she did not care. While one may *say* that it is an intended contradiction, by this point of the book my response should be predictable: it may have been intentional, but nothing is *ever done* with the contradictions. And again I present the grounding point: there is a difference between a contradiction designed to create ideational energy, and a contradiction that is the result of bad writing.

There is a second level where these abstract sentences act to the diminishment of the book. These sentences are plays to philosophical moments: they are the “headier” moments of the text, as it were. Yet, because of my lack of confidence in the text, I have very little confidence that when Hejinian wrote

in a crooked style characteristic of 19th-century
prose, a prose of science with cumulative sentences

she really has any idea of the meaning of that sentence beyond trite, bumper sticker understanding, or really has any understanding how that statement applies to the text of *My Life*. The same goes with the statement in our featured chapter:

This simply means that the imagination is more
restless than the body.

Do I have any reason, as presented up to this point in the fourth chapter, to believe that this is anything other than a trite line, carrying no more intellectual weight than “They waded in brackish water”? Has *My Life* given me any evidence that “a prose of science with cumulative sentences” carries philosophical resonance within the book beyond trite, mechanistic associations? The honest answer is no. Has *My Life* given me any reason to believe that it was written out of philosophical and theoretical grounding where the concept of “a prose of science with cumulative sentences” as a negative concept functioned within the generation of the text, at least

beyond the simplistic “if I fragment the text, then it is magically no longer prose of science” methodology described above? No. It is that *absence* that is what is so damning of *My Life*.

Let me go back and gather similar statements:

The resistance on sleeping to being asleep. (8)

“Everything is a question of sleep,” says Cocteau, but he forgets the shark, which does not. Anxiety is vigilant. Perhaps initially, even before one can talk, restlessness is already conventional, establishing the incoherent border which will later separate events and experience. (8)

There is no solitude. It buries itself in veracity. (9)

It is hard to know this as politics, because it plays like the work of one person, but nothing is isolated in history – certain humans are situation. Are your fingers in the margin. Their random procedures make monuments to fate. (10)

What follows a strict chronology has no memory.
(13)

In that they are presented and then dropped, they are never developed beyond the boundaries of their existence as a mere syntactical unit. In that they are undeveloped, they are only ever surface statements. Worst of all, they ring out like lines from pop-poetry, like those god-awful attempts at moral or philosophical profundity that appear too often in pop-poetry, and really can only ever occur in pop-poetry. But the lack of attention is so glaring, the ideational clashes between the lines so startling, they descend even below bumper-sticker philosophizing and set themselves wholly in the more basic idea that it is all simply nothing more than bad writing. Look at that last one presented:

What follows a strict chronology has no memory.
(13)

Seemingly that is to be taken as an indictment of what will later be called

a crooked style characteristic of 19th-century prose,
a prose of science with cumulative sentences.

And yet, if a prose of science has cumulative sentences, then would it not be said that it has a memory? And in what way at all can *My Life*, which is trying very hard to not be chronological, but to all evidence is trying just as hard to avoid any development of ideational depth, be said to have a memory? Plus, to step out one step farther, is the phrase “what follows a strict chronology has no memory” even defensible? Does not the entire associational philosophy of the 18th and 19th centuries, that which lies behind “prose of science,” speak exactly to the opposite, saying that memory is *constituted* by associations like that of chronological succession? Even more, when Coleridge critiques associational theories of memory, does not that critique yet *maintain the presence* of associational memory within his theory *as a necessary element* of literature? I would think it far far easier to argue that *what lies in the random* has no memory. From that you should see how when I read such statements as “what follows strict chronology has no memory,” I read statements that are fallacious not in that they are in error – and the text itself does often speak that the statements must be in error – but that they are stated in a text that evidences no real understanding of the phrases.

Without confidence that there is understanding and competent design behind *My Life*, without confidence that there is *sophisticated* understanding and design behind *My Life*, the abstract phrases come off as cutesy, pseudo-philosophical bon-bons. They are like bumper-sticker theology, meant to be accepted or rejected on their surface, not meant to be considered to any degree. Of absolute importance here is to keep in mind that whether Hejinian herself does or does not understand the sentences she found in *My Life* to any depth is *irrelevant*: my concern here is only for the book *My Life* and my reception of the book, and that reception is predominantly that the book does not show such understanding; it gives me no reason to believe the book was well written; not even reason to

believe that it is a good idea poorly executed.

In the third chapter:

Every family has its own collection of stories, but not every family has someone to tell them. (12)

First, it rather speaks against Perloff's conclusion that *My Life* presents an archetypal childhood if Hejinian is overtly making statement that every family has a collection of stories *specific to that family*. Second, that same conclusion seems to speak against the construction of the book: for if every family has stories specific to the family, why is *My Life* being presented in a way that eliminates the specificity either of the stories or of the family? Really, though, I put that sentence there because it is so very much one of those cutesy lines you see in pop-poetry. It is something you might read on a poster for a feel-good, holiday movie. It is not something that instills confidence in me as a reader that what I am reading is ever going to be anything but cutesy lines and trivialities. As with the grammar in a sentence a couple of sentences down:

A pansy suddenly, a web, a trail remarkably's a snail's.

Is there any reason to do the aurally clumsy “remarkably's” instead of “remarkably is” except to be cutesy? Or, the next sentence in the queue:

Can there be laughter without comparisons?

Perhaps not.

Of course, if you know about Hejinian and her participation with L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E, you will see in phrases such as “poetry of science” some of the theoretical orientation of that group. Though, within the text of *My Life*, the statements are entirely declaration, literary theory by fiat. But then I will admit that that seems to me the nature of much of the theoretic and critical defenses of literature like that of *My Life*. If we are to accept the phrases as being valid, then narrative prose, prose of “cumulative sentences” or of “strict chronology,” is “prose of science,” not a “prose of life” (a phrase I will coin as off-the-cuff counterpart). That is, actually, something to which I would grant

some measure of validity. Only when I say it, I am saying that strict chronology is *a characteristic* of theoretic – nomic – literature. This is the first fallacy of the idea that *My Life* has escaped in its fragmentation being a poetry of science: there is a confusion of surface quality with the underlying cause of the surface quality. Nomic texts – texts that function only on the surface so that the ideation does not get in the way of the body of conventions being appealed to by the text (i.e., prose of science) – tend to be chronological narrations. But chronological narrations need not be nomic in nature (e.g., *Ulysses*, *Nightwood*, or *The Death of Virgil*). The “science” aspect of prose of science that is supposedly being brought to task by *My Life* is not the surface effect of chronology, it is rather that which impels the writing of chronological text.

“Prose of science” is a not a bad phrase for nomic literature in general, or for genre literature if you want to narrow the category. And prose of science may generally be naïve narratives that utilize reportage as both method and purpose of the telling of the story. The elements will tend to be linked by chronological progression (“what comes next is that which happens next”) because chronology offers a simple, non-obtrusive, mechanistic means to connect A to B to C to D. So, the argument of *My Life* goes: if we write in a manner that rejects those mechanistic connections, then the writing has been freed from being a “prose of science” and will become a “prose of life.”

Except, what is a “prose of life”? That is, what is prose of life – what is aesthetic, or mythic literature – looking not at surface features but at its modality, its essence. It is a prose of ideational fields, of generating *depth of ideation*, of generating mythic ideation. It is what Coleridge calls “the poetic.” The difference between prose of science and prose of life is that prose of science functions only on the surface; prose of life functions by creating ideational depth. And here we see the second fallacy in the presented justifications within *My Life* and the critical defenses of such writings in general: manipulating the surface features does not necessarily create depth. As regards *My Life*, just because the language is fragmented does not mean in it is generating a fluid field of ideational energies – and

the comparison between the reading experiences of *My Life* and the Nova Trilogy go directly to that point. Fragmenting a surface text will most likely do nothing other than create a fragmented surface-only reading experience.

My Life is demonstration to that point as it continually *rejects* effort by the reader to develop deep fields of ideation. Like prose of science it rejects efforts to move beyond its surface effects. In fact, when there is no sustainable ideational connections between the sentences except *mechanistic* connections – and sequentiality is chronology – the result is going to be a prose of science. Yes, it rejects the conventions that are appealed to by most conventional prose. The fragmentation may be disrupting the conventions that govern culturally dominated prose; but that does not mean the text is liberated from conventionality. The text could simply be operating under a different body of conventions. In fact, it might be said that *My Life* is a perfection of a means for a text whose meaning is entirely conventional, entirely exterior to the text, in that it continually thwarts the generating of ideational energies. In the end, the only thing there is to get out of *My Life* is what someone tells you to get out of it: in particular, here, but not exclusively, those theory-by-fiat statements and their political underpinnings as found in $L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E$, conventions such as “if a text is fragmented, it rejects prose of science and becomes ‘prose of life.’” Double-plus good all around.

I think that is far enough into and about this chapter to make my point, so let me move on into conclusion. I have mentioned a couple of times on this blog how Eliot in his essays discerns between “sham” and “genuine” literature. The terms have been very useful in my vocabularies of literature, primarily in bringing in to my language on pop-literature – as well as to my continual development of my own literary sophistication – in part in how the idea of “sham” generally involves some kind of misdirection or false presentation. In the discourse on literature, such false presentations would include a claim that a poem is meritable literature because it meets whatever requirements of formal verse. But that is a

substitution of one characteristic – and a characteristic usually reduced to its most abstract elements – for the consideration of the work in its unity. Even, because of the abstract nature of the claim, I am invited to ignore the actual *aural* experience of the work. (I am often surprised – but then not surprised – how New Formalism will defend poetry that is aurally clumsy or clunky simply because it meets metrical performance definitions.) Common to the contemporary culture of pop-poetry is the sham of substituting political or sentimental content for consideration of the entirety of the work. Often when Eliot talks about sham literature he is referring to literary mimicry: poets who write in the style of what is considered a contemporary great (whether that greatness be literary or only of popularity) – that which mimics the great must also be great. But such works lack that depth of being found in the first, great poem because they are only mimicking surface effects. This is the core of the Modernist critique of nineteenth-century verse (as well the Romantic critique of eighteenth-century verse): the majority of the contemporary poetry was established entirely within the mimicry of styles and conventions; but the poetry itself – even the conventions – were less than poetic, if one could but see through the self-deluding sham. (Indeed, my argument with contemporary poetry-culture is that it is for the most part embedded in such a self-deluding sham of mimicry, only now a empty mimicry of “free verse” styles.)

A couple of days ago I read an essay by Harold Bloom (the first piece by Bloom that I have read in a while) that came worked with his idea of looking at literature in terms of *strength* and *weakness*.⁵ Strong literature for Bloom stakes out its territory in the world of literature, pushes back all other literature – especially the weaker literature of the contemporary culture of literature (which is *always* weaker literature) – to declare the individuality and value of the work. It is another very useful idea, if but in creating the idea that literature that does not demand comparison and more importantly

⁵ “The Breaking of Form,” in *Deconstruction and Criticism*.

contrast to the body of contemporary literature, of whatever time period, cannot be considered literature of strength, and loses claim on its being worthy of merit or even of memory.

I am reminded here about Coleridge's comments in the *Biographia Literaria* about poets of fancy that he considered great poets (especially Cowper) even though they were but poets of fancy, not poets of the imagination. It seems a very simple and very small argumentative step to say that they are meritable because of their strength, their separating of themselves from the crowd of the immemorable poetry of fancy of the time. I am also brought to think of Nietzsche's statement, which I also used recently but probably do not use enough: *Whatever can be common always has little value*. It is such an obviousness.

Coming back upon Bloom's idea of strong literature is not what motivated the idea of confidence that I am using here. I started thinking about Hejinian in terms of confidence well before the return to the essay. Though, perhaps it did motivate me to bring confidence to the fore; and it cannot be denied that the idea of strong literature (versus weak literature) gives some body the use of "confidence" – both as regards the text and the experience of the reader – as regards the character of strong literature. A strong literary work will speak confidence in its own aims, execution, and being. Likewise will the work give confidence to the reader that what they are reading is strong, sophisticated literature: or in the least an attempt out of strength of literature of sophistication, whether or not that attempt was successful. While I do not think it could be said that "confidence" is anything but an intuitive response to the text, after all, an analytical response moves the critical exploration from the experience of the text into abstraction and characterization of quantifiable or qualifiable details, and the mimicry of confidence can also be part of literary sham, weak literary works will speak their weakness to readers sophisticated enough to see it, critical enough to actually look – and it could very well be the latter is the more requisite readerly element, for the former does not exist without the latter. It is, by my observation, the nature of most readers to enter a new text giving it the benefit of

the doubt. (Arguably, it is the nature of most readers to give far too great a benefit of the doubt.) Weak literature will undermine that granted benefit, both in not generating the confidence that comes from strength and in its own undermining of the reader's desire for confidence in the work.

Now, as said above, confidence is related to the sophistication of the reader: less sophisticated readers are more likely to be brought under the confidence of sham texts; and we see here how the idea of *sham* literature works so well as an expansion of the idea of weakness. Weaker literature shams readers of less sophistication into believing the literature is greater than what it really is. The literature is not strong enough to declare its own value in the tradition of literature, is not strong enough to declare its own *presence* within the tradition of literature. It relies rather on misdirection and false presentation to create and attach the quality of value. That is the nature of popular culture, and any dominant literary culture will be pop-culture. In fact, what I expect would be the hair trigger response to that previous sentence – “poetry is not pop-culture, it is an art; it is elevated language that speaks the higher qualities of humankind” – is itself such a sham, a sales job, but on a broad scale. To any critical mind, any alert mind, any such statement should immediately raise warning flags that a sales pitch is being made, for the very nature of the statement is to get people *not to look at the poetry* but instead to look at the banners and flags, the glitter and glow-sticks, the marching band and the monkey with the microphone. Come on down, these poems are selling like mad. Get yours before they're gone because everybody wants one.

Do *I* think that poetry is “elevated language that speaks the higher qualities of humankind”? No. But I do think that that is an workable description of literature – imaginative literature, in Coleridge's sense – at its greatest; and I do think that it is always inherent to some degree in strong poetry. But that general statement as a defense of anything that might be called poetry? An absurdity. A con (in the language of Nova). And the very means by which pop-cultures are maintained.

This is what lies behind the very elemental idea, spoken not

infrequently in criticism, that part of the learning curve of literary sophistication is finding voices of sophistication greater than one's own that can be trusted to guide the traveler on their journey, and the importance of rejecting those voices that cannot be trusted when it is found they cannot be trusted.⁶ For me, if Harold Bloom (to choose one name simply because it has already been spoken) is singing the praises of a text, I walk into that text with confidence that it is not sham literature (even if in the end I disagree with Bloom's own considerations about the text), and that confidence will serve as a stable standing point from which I can approach the text. Critics like Robert Pinsky or Dana Gioia offer no such standing points to me, but then part of the learning curve of literary sophistication is to know when you need new standing points.

When Eliot speaks of finding authorities to trust he is also speaking of them as a means to learn how to discern sham from genuine. Which is part of the problem of contemporary criticism and review and contemporary literary culture. There is far too much praise, and not nearly enough pointing out of shams (including shams within criticism and review). So there is little place for persons entering the curve to go to help them discern between sham and genuine literature. (MFA programs are probably not going to go there; and with damn good reason, as they probably could not handle the self-condemnation.) Am I declaring myself authority enough to be considered a guide in discerning the genuine articles from the sham? It is inherent to any piece of criticism that such a declaration is being made, however humble the critic. Criticism fails – criticism is sham criticism – when it relies on such declarations of authority to back up its conclusions and observations. It may or may not be a surprise to you but most of that writing that you find on literature and poetry in the more popular mags such as *Poetry* or *Boston Review* and *NYRB* is of that

⁶ Perhaps also you see the necessity of cultures to eliminate trustworthy when those voices are pointing out the lesser nature of that culture's desired authorities. Like it or not, the phrase "dead white authors" is also a con.

nature. When criticism succeeds is when it is grounded on a body of ideas and presents the text under question from out of that body of ideas in such a manner that the reader can test both the text and the grounding ideas in their own exploration. That is a fair description of my intentions here, however imperfectly I may be executing it. That is to me genuine criticism. (That is why I like reading Harold Bloom.) I do not want you to take me only at my word, except perhaps in that first, minimal confidence that might assure you I am worth reading, and worth thinking about, whether you agree with me or not; that might assure you that there is also something to be gained in looking at the texts I here explore in the way I am prompting. But in the end, I try always to leave the final steps to you. Either you see what I see or you do not. Success on my side lies in very simple task that I was able *to get you to look*, critically, at the text and think, critically, about the text. In the short run the conclusions are irrelevant.

Yet, though I minimize inherent claims to authority with the phrase “that first, minimal confidence,” that assurance of which I am there speaking is, in truth, no small thing. Indeed, it might be argued that it is, for a sophisticated reader, the mark of a genuine text: a good (if partial) description of a genuine text may lie in that it is able to establish that first, necessary confidence, that confidence that the text is worth reading and worth thinking about, and maintain it. Though I may at times find that a cut up passage in the Nova Trilogy does not ring successful, the work as a whole has the strength necessary to declare itself as *genuine*.

No such confidence exists for me with *My Life*. Nor does *My Life* convince me of any such confidence within itself.

My Life (Sun & Moon Press, 1987) – apparently this is a second edition, differing from a 1980 edition also published by Sun & Moon Press.

The Soft Machine, The Ticket that Exploded, The Nova Express (Grove Press, originally published 1961, 1962, 1964)

The Dance of the Intellect: Studies in the Poetry of the Pound Tradition

(Northwestern UP, 1985).