

f. Other works of those late Eisenhower  
does not advocate awful crimes," but we  
recognition this one gives, with its stern  
one way, the poem is a daring, ebullient  
poet's vision and language spring from a  
ture has given.

judgment prior to the vision of any poem  
, I believe, a resistance or transformation  
it of totally visible, monolithic London;  
of grace and moral insight has no worldly  
cheerfully lawless in American life. Even  
te privacy of the soul, she does it in terms

temporary poetry indicates, the unpre-  
t one writes may be less to the point than

der to the wheel.

ntinue the art, can be filled only through  
nge the terms of the art as given—and it  
y. What that will mean in the next poem  
e, with all the possibility of art.

1984

Gioia, et al, eds. Twentieth-  
Century American Poets

Boston: McGraw Hill,  
2004.

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LYN HEJINIAN

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(B. 1941)

One of the founding members of the Language Poetry movement, Hejinian was born Lyn Hall in San Francisco and raised in Alameda, California. She graduated from Harvard University in 1963, the year she began publishing poems in literary magazines. Her 1961 marriage to John Hejinian, with whom she had two children, lasted until 1972. Five years later she married a Bay Area jazz musician, Larry Ochs, a member of the ROVA Saxophone Quartet. During the seventies, she gave increased attention to her writing and founded Tuumba Press in 1976, with which she published several chapbooks, *A Thought Is the Bride of What Thinking* (1976), *Gesualdo* (1978), and *The Guard* (1978), as well as books by other Bay Area Language writers. Her first full collection, *Writing Is an Aid to Memory* (1978), explores the disjunctions of memory through correspondingly disjunctive lines and syntax. Her prose poem, *My Life* (1980), continues these explorations through its open-ended approach to autobiography. Hejinian gives many possible versions of her childhood self, stresses the instability of adult recollections of childhood, and, by omitting transitions between most of her sentences, invites the reader to participate in her narrative. In 1987 she made *My Life* even more open-ended by publishing a significantly revised and expanded edition, which effectively gave critics two versions to consider. Since *My Life* Hejinian has continued to focus on "a flow of contexts," the "transitions, transmutations, the endless radiating of denotation into relation" that she defines as the essential properties of language in the introduction to her book of essays, *The Language of Inquiry* (2000).

Although her early poetry was political in calling "the self" into question, her many visits to Russia in the 1980s increased her concern with poetry's social and political dimensions, and her subsequent books have raised even more explicit questions about identity. In particular, Hejinian challenges national identities and gender identities while continuing to highlight language's fluidity in *Oxota: A Short Russian Novel* (1991), *The Cell* (1992), and *A Border Comedy* (1999).

In the following essay, delivered as a talk in 1983, Hejinian advocates an "open text" whose form encourages multiple readings. Introducing "The Rejection of Closure" in *The Language of Inquiry*, she suggests that texts

should be open because perception itself lacks closure. For Hejinián, the incompleteness and ambiguity of individual experience, the social world, and language itself present infinite opportunities for both writers and readers.



## THE REJECTION OF CLOSURE

Two dangers never cease threatening  
the world: order and disorder.

Paul Valéry, *Analects*

Writing's initial situation, its point of origin, is often characterized and always complicated by opposing impulses in the writer and by a seeming dilemma that language creates and then cannot resolve. The writer experiences a conflict between a desire to satisfy a demand for boundedness, for containment and coherence, and a simultaneous desire for free, unhampered access to the world prompting a correspondingly open response to it. Curiously, the term *inclusivity* is applicable to both, though the connotative emphasis is different for each. The impulse to boundedness demands circumscription and that in turn requires that a distinction be made between inside and outside, between the relevant and the (for the particular writing at hand) confusing and irrelevant—the meaningless. The desire for unhampered access and response to the world (an encyclopedic impulse), on the other hand, hates to leave anything out. The essential question here concerns the writer's subject position.

The impasse, meanwhile, that is both language's creative condition and its problem can be described as the disjuncture between words and meaning, but at a particularly material level, one at which the writer is faced with the necessity of making formal decisions—devising an appropriate structure for the work, anticipating the constraints it will put into play, etc.—in the context of the ever-regenerating plentitude of language's resources, in their infinite combinations. Writing's forms are not merely shapes but forces; formal questions are about dynamics—they ask how, where, and why the writing moves, what are the types, directions, number, and velocities of a work's motion. The material aporia objectifies the poem in the context of ideas and of language itself.

These areas of conflict are not neatly parallel. Form does not necessarily achieve closure, nor does raw materiality provide openness. Indeed, the conjunction of *form* with radical *openness* may be what can offer a version of the "paradise" for which writing often yearns—a flowering focus on a distinct infinity.

For the sake of clarity, I will offer a tentative characterization of the terms *open* and *closed*. We can say that a "closed text" is one in which all the elements of the work are directed toward a single reading of it. Each element confirms that reading and delivers the text from any lurking ambiguity. In the "open text," meanwhile, all the elements of the work are maximally excited; here it is because ideas and things exceed (without deserting) argument that they have taken into the dimension of the work.

Though they may be different in different texts, depending on other elements in the work and by all means on the intention of the writer, it is not hard to discover

devices—structural devices—that may serve. The writer's choice of devices has to do with arrangement and, of course, with the work. The "open text," by definition, is a text that invites the reader. It invites participation, rejects the authority of the author, and thus, by analogy, the authority implicit in the text. It speaks for writing that is generative, that resists total control and challenges authority. The "open text" often emphasizes or foregrounds original composition or of subsequent cultural tendencies that seek to identify and resist that is, it resists reduction and commodification. It is a tendency within a feminine sphere of discourse, an economy which diverts the linearity of a male desire, explodes the polarization of desire and opens the way to only one discourse."<sup>1</sup>

"Field work," where words and lines are not straight but curved, such as Robert Grenier's poster/map entitled "Love Song 41" (also originally published in *Field Work*), works in which the order of the reading is not linear. The lines of these works is an improvisation; one line leads to another, but in curves, swirls, and across intersecting lines that attract attention repeatedly.

Repetition, conventionally used to underline a melody to the tonic, instead, in the work like my *My Life*, challenges our understanding of the burden of meaning given to an event. When certain phrases recur in the work, recontextualization disrupts the initial apparent meaning and meaning is set in motion, emended and extended. The work becomes postpositional, completion of the thought is postponed.

But there are more complex forms (I mean to suggest that I succeeded) in a sense. I write a lyric poem in a long form—that is, the single moment into which the idea rushes (ideas cross the landscape and become a unit). I proposed the paragraph as a unit representing a moment in the mind, its content all the time. The impulses—all the diverse, particular, and included in an active and emotional mind at the time of the writing, the poem is a mind.

To prevent the work from disintegrating into rubble haphazardly on the waste heap of the ground or create the conjunction between

First given as a talk in San Francisco on April 17, 1983, at a panel discussion entitled "Who Is Speaking?" First published in *Poetics Journal: "Women and Language"* 4 (May 1984). First collected by Hejinián in *The Language of Inquiry* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000) 41–58. All notes are Lyn Hejinián's.

1. Luce Irigaray, "This sex which is not one," tr. Claire Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron (Amherst: Univ. of Massachusetts Press, 1985).  
2. Robert Grenier, *Cambridge Mass* (Berkeley: Tuolumne: Pod Books, 1982).  
3. At the time this essay was written, "Resistance" etc. it was eventually incorporated into "The Green" (Berkeley: Sun & Moon Press, 1994).

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devices—structural devices—that may serve to "open" a poetic text. One set of such devices has to do with arrangement and, particularly, with rearrangement within a work. The "open text," by definition, is open to the world and particularly to the reader. It invites participation, rejects the authority of the writer over the reader and thus, by analogy, the authority implicit in other (social, economic, cultural) hierarchies. It speaks for writing that is generative rather than directive. The writer relinquishes total control and challenges authority as a principle and control as a motive. The "open text" often emphasizes or foregrounds process, either the process of the original composition or of subsequent compositions by readers, and thus resists the cultural tendencies that seek to identify and fix material and turn it into a product; that is, it resists reduction and commodification. As Luce Irigaray says, positing this tendency within a feminine sphere of discourse, "It is really a question of another economy which diverts the linearity of a project, undermines the target-object of a desire, explodes the polarization of desire on only one pleasure, and disconcerts fidelity to only one discourse."<sup>1</sup>

"Field work," where words and lines are distributed irregularly on the page, such as Robert Grenier's poster/map entitled *Cambridge M'ass* and Bruce Andrews's "Love Song 41" (also originally published as a poster), are obvious examples of works in which the order of the reading is not imposed in advance.<sup>2</sup> Any reading of these works is an improvisation; one moves through the work not in straight lines but in curves, swirls, and across intersections, to words that catch the eye or attract attention repeatedly.

Repetition, conventionally used to unify a text or harmonize its parts, as if returning melody to the tonic, instead, in these works, and somewhat differently in a work like my *My Life*, challenges our inclination to isolate, identify, and limit the burden of meaning given to an event (the sentence or line). Here, where certain phrases recur in the work, recontextualized and with new emphasis, repetition disrupts the initial apparent meaning scheme. The initial reading is adjusted; meaning is set in motion, emended and extended, and the rewriting that repetition becomes postpones completion of the thought indefinitely.

But there are more complex forms of juxtaposition. My intention (I don't mean to suggest that I succeeded) in a subsequent work, "Resistance," was to write a lyric poem in a long form—that is, to achieve maximum vertical intensity (the single moment into which the idea rushes) and maximum horizontal extensivity (ideas cross the landscape and become the horizon and weather).<sup>3</sup> To myself I proposed the paragraph as a unit representing a single moment of time, a single moment in the mind, its content all the thoughts, thought particles, impressions, impulses—all the diverse, particular, and contradictory elements—that are included in an active and emotional mind at any given instant. For the moment, for the writer, the poem *is* a mind.

To prevent the work from disintegrating into its separate parts—scattering sentence-rubble haphazardly on the waste heap—I used various syntactic devices to foreground or create the conjunction between ideas. Statements become interconnected

1. Luce Irigaray, "This sex which is not one," tr. Claudia Reeder, in *New French Feminisms*, ed. Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1980), 104.

2. Robert Grenier, *Cambridge M'ass* (Berkeley: Tumba Press, 1979); Bruce Andrews, *Love Songs* (Baltimore: Pod Books, 1982).

3. At the time this essay was written, "Resistance" existed only in manuscript form. A large portion of it was eventually incorporated into "The Green" and published in *The Cold of Poetry* (Los Angeles: ...)

by being grammatically congruent; unlike things, made alike grammatically, become meaningful in common and jointly. "Resistance" began:

Patience is laid out on my papers. Its visuals are gainful and equably square. Two dozen jets take off into the night. Outdoors a car goes uphill in a genial low gear. The flow of thoughts—impossible! These are the defamiliarization techniques with which we are so familiar.

There are six sentences here, three of which, beginning with the first, are constructed similarly: subject—verb—prepositional phrase. The three prepositions are *on*, *into*, and *in*, which in isolation seem similar but used here have very different meanings. *On* is locational: "on my papers." *Into* is metaphorical and atmospheric: "into the night." *In* is atmospheric and qualitative: "in a genial low gear." There are a pair of inversions in effect here: the unlike are made similar (syntactically) and the like are sundered (semantically). Patience, which might be a quality of a virtuous character attendant to work ("it is laid out on my papers"), might also be *solitaire*, a card game played by an idler who is avoiding attention to work. Two dozen jets can only take off together in formation; they are "laid out" on the night sky. A car goes uphill; its movement upward parallels that of the jets, but whereas their formation is martial, the single car is somewhat domestic, genial and innocuous. The image in the first pair of sentences is horizontal. The upward movement of the next two sentences describes a vertical plane, upended on or intersecting the horizontal one. The "flow of thoughts" runs down the vertical and comes to rest—"impossible!"

The work shifts between horizontal and vertical landscapes, and the corresponding sentences—the details of each composed on its particular plane—form distinct semantic fields. (In fact, I would like each individual sentence to be as nearly a complete poem as possible.)

One of the results of this compositional technique, building a work out of discrete fields, is the creation of sizable gaps between the units. To negotiate this disrupted terrain, the reader (and I can say also the writer) must overleap the end stop, the period, and cover the distance to the next sentence. Meanwhile, what stays in the gaps remains crucial and informative. Part of the reading occurs as the recovery of that information (looking behind) and the discovery of newly structured ideas (stepping forward).

In both *My Life* and "Resistance," the structural unit (grossly, the paragraph) was meant to be mimetic of both a space and a time of thinking. In a somewhat different respect, time predetermines the form of Bernadette Mayer's *Midwinter Day*. The work begins when the clock is set running (at dawn on December 22, 1978) and ends when the time allotted to the work runs out (late night of the same day). "It's true," Mayer has said: "I have always loved projects of all sorts, including say sorting leaves or whatever projects turn out to be, and in poetry I most especially love having time be the structure which always seems to me to save structure or form from itself because then nothing really has to begin or end."<sup>4</sup>

Whether the form is dictated by temporal constraints or by other exoskeletal formal elements—by a prior decision, for example, that the work will contain, say, *x* number of sentences, paragraphs, stanzas, stresses, or lines, etc.—the work gives the impression that it begins and ends arbitrarily and not because there is a necessary

4. Bernadette Mayer to Lyn Hejinian, letter (1981?).

point of origin or terminus, a first or last of the words and the ideas (thoughts, perceptions) beyond the work. One has simply stopped because and not because a conclusion has been reached.

The relationship of form, or the "correlation" of the work (to its themes, the conceptual material) is the initial problem for the "open text," one that makes the primary chaos (the raw material, the uncertainty, incompleteness, vastness, the uncapturable vitality, its generative power?) actually generate that potency, opening up space for speculation, and turning vastness into plenitude that is, in fact, the function of form in art.

In an essay titled "Rhythm as the Constructive Factor" the Formalist writer Yurii Tynianov writes:

We have only recently outgrown the idea of a glass is to wine. . . . I would venture to say that the word "composition" covertly implies a static dynamic category. Repetition ceases to be a strength in various situations of frequency. The concept of the "symmetry of composition" cannot speak of symmetry where we find

One is reminded of Gertrude Stein's "Repetitions": "A thing that seems to be exact repetition but is it." "Is there repetition or is there is no such thing as repetition. And if there is no such thing as repetition because there is and if you insist you must each time use every possible while anybody is alive that they shall be." Tynianov continues:

The unity of a work is not a closed symmetry of integrity. . . . The sensation of form in itself (and therefore of change). . . . Art exists

Language discovers what one might say. We encounter it as children. Anything with limits can be defined as an object, by analogy with other objects—because when they render it their plaything, in jingles and chants and rhymes. They discover that

5. Yurii Tynianov, "Rhythm as the Constructive Factor," in Ladislav Marejka and Krystyna Pomorska (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 1973), p. 6.  
6. Gertrude Stein, "Portraits and Repetitions," in Gertrude Stein and Harriet Chessman (New York: Library of America, 1981), p. 7.  
7. Tynianov, "Rhythm as the Constructive Factor,"

things, made alike grammatically, become "dance" began:

As visuals are gainful and equably square. Outdoors a car goes uphill in a genial possibility! These are the defamiliarization nihil.

Such, beginning with the first, are constructed phrases. The three prepositions are *on*, *into*, *and* used here have very different meanings. The first is metaphorical and atmospheric: "into the car in a genial low gear." There are a pair of words made similar (syntactically) and the like are made different (semantically). The first might be a quality of a virtuous character ("papers"), might also be *solitaire*, a card game of attention to work. Two dozen jets can only be "laid out" on the night sky. A car goes uphill on the jets, but whereas their formation is esthetic, genial and innocuous. The image in the upward movement of the next two sentences is *on* or *intersecting* the horizontal one. The first *and* comes to rest—"impossible!" The second *and* vertical landscapes, and the corresponding composition on its particular plane—form would like each individual sentence to be as

an essential technique, building a work out of gaps between the units. To negotiate this (say also the writer) must overleap the end of one sentence to the next sentence. Meanwhile, what is normative. Part of the reading occurs as the reader is behind) and the discovery of newly struc-

ture structural unit (grossly, the paragraph) and a time of thinking. In a somewhat different form of Bernadette Mayer's *Midwinter Day*, the work runs out (at dawn on December 22, 1978) and the work runs out (late night of the same day). The work runs out to be, and in poetry I most especially always seems to me to save structure or formality has to begin or end."<sup>4</sup>

Formal constraints or by other exoskeletal structure, for example, that the work will contain, say, stanzas, stresses, or lines, etc.—the work gives structure arbitrarily and not because there is a necessary

point of origin or terminus, a first or last moment. The implication (correct) is that the words and the ideas (thoughts, perceptions, etc.—the materials) continue beyond the work. One has simply stopped because one has run out of units or minutes, and not because a conclusion has been reached nor "everything" said.

The relationship of form, or the "constructive principle," to the materials of the work (to its themes, the conceptual mass, but also to the words themselves) is the initial problem for the "open text," one that faces each writing anew. Can form make the primary chaos (the raw material, the unorganized impulse and information, the uncertainty, incompleteness, vastness) articulate without depriving it of its capacious vitality, its generative power? Can form go even further than that and actually generate that potency, opening uncertainty to curiosity, incompleteness to speculation, and turning vastness into plenitude? In my opinion, the answer is yes; that is, in fact, the function of form in art. Form is not a fixture but an activity.

In an essay titled "Rhythm as the Constructive Factor of Verse," the Russian Formalist writer Yurii Tynianov writes:

We have only recently outgrown the well-known analogy: form is to content as a glass is to wine. . . . I would venture to say that in nine out of ten instances the word "composition" covertly implies a treatment of form as a static item. The concept of "poetic line" or "stanza" is imperceptibly removed from the dynamic category. Repetition ceases to be considered as a fact of varying strength in various situations of frequency and quantity. The dangerous concept of the "symmetry of compositional facts" arises, dangerous because we cannot speak of symmetry where we find intensification.<sup>5</sup>

One is reminded of Gertrude Stein's comparable comments in "Portraits and Repetitions": "A thing that seems to be exactly the same thing may seem to be a repetition but is it." "Is there repetition or is there insistence. I am inclined to believe there is no such thing as repetition. And really how can there be." "Expressing any thing there can be no repetition because the essence of that expression is insistence, and if you insist you must each time use emphasis and if you use emphasis it is not possible while anybody is alive that they should use exactly the same emphasis."<sup>6</sup>

Tynianov continues:

The unity of a work is not a closed symmetrical whole, but an unfolding dynamic integrity. . . . The sensation of form in such a situation is always the sensation of flow (and therefore of change). . . . Art exists by means of this interaction or struggle.<sup>7</sup>

Language discovers what one might know, which in turn is always less than what language might say. We encounter some limitations of this relationship early, as children. Anything with limits can be imagined (correctly or incorrectly) as an object, by analogy with other objects—balls and rivers. Children objectify language when they render it their plaything, in jokes, puns, and riddles, or in glossolalic chants and rhymes. They discover that words are not equal to the world, that a

5. Yurii Tynianov, "Rhythm as the Constructive Factor of Verse," in *Readings in Russian Poetics*, ed. Ladislav Matejka and Krystyna Pomorska (Ann Arbor: Michigan Slavic Contributions, 1978), 127–28.

6. Gertrude Stein, "Portraits and Repetitions," in *Gertrude Stein: Writings 1932–1946*, ed. Catharine R. Stimpson and Harriet Chessman (New York: Library of America, 1998), 292, 288.

7. Tynianov, "Rhythm as the Constructive Factor," 128.

blur of displacement, a type of parallax, exists in the relation between things (events, ideas, objects) and the words for them—a displacement producing a gap.

Among the most prevalent and persistent categories of jokes is that which identifies and makes use of the fallacious comparison of words to world and delights in the ambiguity resulting from the discrepancy:

—Why did the moron eat hay?

—To feed his hoarse voice.

—How do you get down from an elephant?

—You don't, you get down from a goose.

—Did you wake up grumpy this morning?

—No, I let him sleep.

Because we have language we find ourselves in a special and peculiar relationship to the objects, events, and situations which constitute what we imagine of the world. Language generates its own characteristics in the human psychological and spiritual conditions. Indeed, it nearly *is* our psychological condition.

This psychology is generated by the struggle between language and that which it claims to depict or express, by our overwhelming experience of the vastness and uncertainty of the world, and by what often seems to be the inadequacy of the imagination that longs to know it—and, furthermore, for the poet, the even greater inadequacy of the language that appears to describe, discuss, or disclose it. This psychology situates desire in the poem itself, or, more specifically, in poetic language, to which then we may attribute the motive for the poem.

Language is one of the principal forms our curiosity takes. It makes us restless. As Francis Ponge puts it, "Man is a curious body whose center of gravity is not in himself."<sup>8</sup> Instead that center of gravity seems to be located in language, by virtue of which we negotiate our mentalities and the world; off-balance, heavy at the mouth, we are pulled forward.

I am urged out rummaging into the sunshine, and the depths increase of blue above. A paper hat on a cone of water. . . . But, already, words. . . . She is lying on her stomach with one eye closed, driving a toy truck along the road she has cleared with her fingers.<sup>9</sup>

Language itself is never in a state of rest. Its syntax can be as complex as thought. And the experience of using it, which includes the experience of understanding it, either as speech or as writing, is inevitably active—both intellectually and emotionally. The progress of a line or sentence, or a series of lines or sentences, has spatial properties as well as temporal properties. The meaning of a word in its place derives both from the word's lateral reach, its contacts with its neighbors in a statement, and from its reach through and out of the text into the outer world, the matrix of its contemporary and historical reference. The very idea of reference is spatial: over here is word, over there is thing, at which the word is shooting amiable love-arrows. Getting from the beginning to the end of a statement is simple movement; following the connotative byways (on what Umberto Eco calls "inferential walks") is complex or compound movement.

8. Francis Ponge, "The Object Is Poetics," in *The Power of Language*, tr. Serge Gavronsky (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), 47.

9. Lyn Hejinian, *My Life* (Los Angeles: Sun & Moon Press, 1987), 14–15.

To identify these frames the reader has to read the text, in order to gather intertextual sub-themes or motives). I call these interpretations not mere whimsical initiatives on the part of the reader but rather discursive structures and foreseen by the text's available components of the construction.<sup>1</sup>

Language is productive of activity in an environment in which the reader who experiences words as attractive, magical, or surprising things one notices, for example, in works of art or chance operations (or from a vocabulary limited according to some condition) (for example, Alan Davies's *a an av es*, a long string of letters with ascenders or descenders, what he calls "a condition," either because the bars are removed or because the bars are present) to discover any string or bundle of words that has a definite psychological content. Moreover, though the same string of letters can be interpreted differently by different readers, the string has definite limits. While word strings are permitted to have a range of possible psychological content.

Writing develops subjects that mean the same thing in different contexts.

Even words in storage, in the dictionary, attract to themselves other words. Thus, to open the dictionary at random, one might find *poral*, *bone*, *ear*, and *behind*. Turning to *t* one might find *time*, *space*, *life*, *world*, *transitory*, *and*, *not*, *mastoid*. There is no entry for *nipplelike*, *over*, *protuberance*, *breast*, *udder*, *the female*, *nursing bottle*, but again not *mastoid*, nor *teat*, *word*. It is relevant that the exchanges are in

and how did this happen like an excerpt  
beginning in a square white boat above  
tooting of another

hacking lark . . .

as a child

to the rescue and it

in a great lock of letters

like knock look . . .

worked by utter

think through with

already

slippage thinks random

through

wishes

I intend greed as I intend pride

patterns of roll extend over

1. Umberto Eco, Introduction to *The Role of the Reader* (1984), 32. This book was of great help to me as I was especially interested in Eco's emphasis on generation (and the polygendered impulses active in it).

2. Lyn Hejinian, *Writing Is an Aid to Memory* (Los Angeles: Sun & Moon Press, 1987), 14–15.

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ovement.

*Power of Language*, tr. Serge Gavronsky (Berkeley:  
on Press, 1987), 14–15.

To identify these frames the reader has to “walk,” so to speak, outside the  
text, in order to gather intertextual support (a quest for analogous “topoi,”  
themes or motives). I call these interpretative moves inferential walks: they  
are not mere whimsical initiatives on the part of the reader, but are elicited by  
discursive structures and foreseen by the whole textual strategy as indispen-  
sable components of the construction.<sup>1</sup>

Language is productive of activity in another sense, with which anyone is famil-  
iar who experiences words as attractive, magnetic to meaning. This is one of the first  
things one notices, for example, in works constructed from arbitrary vocabularies  
generated by random or chance operations (e.g., some works by Jackson Mac Low)  
or from a vocabulary limited according to some other criteria unrelated to meaning  
(for example, Alan Davies’s *a an av es*, a long poem excluding any words containing  
letters with ascenders or descenders, what the French call “the prisoner’s conven-  
tion,” either because the bars are removed or because it saves paper). It is impossible  
to discover any string or bundle of words that is entirely free of possible narrative or  
psychological content. Moreover, though the “story” and “tone” of such works may  
be interpreted differently by different readers, nonetheless the readings differ within  
definite limits. While word strings are permissive, they do not license a free-for-all.

Writing develops subjects that mean the words we have for them.

Even words in storage, in the dictionary, seem frenetic with activity, as each  
individual entry attracts to itself other words as definition, example, and amplifi-  
cation. Thus, to open the dictionary at random, *mastoid* attracts *nipplelike*, *tem-  
poral*, *bone*, *ear*, and *behind*. Turning to *temporal* we find that the definition  
includes *time*, *space*, *life*, *world*, *transitory*, and *near the temples*, but, significantly,  
not *mastoid*. There is no entry for *nipplelike*, but the definition for *nipple* brings  
over *protuberance*, *breast*, *udder*, *the female*, *milk*, *discharge*, *mouthpiece*, and  
*nursing bottle*, but again not *mastoid*, nor *temporal*, nor *time*, *bone*, *ear*, *space*, or  
*word*. It is relevant that the exchanges are incompletely reciprocal.

and how did this happen like an excerpt  
beginning in a square white boat abob on a gray sea . . .  
                                  tootling of another message by the  
                                  hacking lark . . .  
as a child  
                                  to the rescue and its spring . . .  
      in a great lock of letters  
                  like knock look . . .  
                          worked by utter joy way  
                          think through with that in minutes  
already  
                          slippage thinks random patterns  
                          through  
                          wishes  
          I intend greed as I intend pride  
                  patterns of roll extend over the wish<sup>2</sup>

1. Umberto Eco, Introduction to *The Role of the Reader* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979), 32. This book was of great help to me as I was considering the ideas expressed in this essay; I was especially interested in Eco’s emphasis on generation (creativity on the part of both writer and reader) and the polygendered impulses active in it.
2. Lyn Hejinian, *Writing Is an Aid to Memory* (Los Angeles: Sun & Moon Press, 1996), parts 2 and 12.

The "rage to know" is one expression of the restlessness engendered by language. "As long as man keeps hearing words / He's sure that there's a meaning somewhere," as Mephistopheles points out in Goethe's *Faust*.<sup>3</sup>

It's in the nature of language to encourage and, in part, to justify such Faustian longings.<sup>4</sup> The notion that language is the means and medium for attaining knowledge and, concomitantly, power is, of course, old. The knowledge toward which we seem to be driven by language, or which language seems to promise, is inherently sacred as well as secular, redemptive as well as satisfying. The *nomina sint numina* position (that there is an essential identity between name and thing, that the real nature of a thing is immanent and present in its name, that nouns are numinous) suggests that it is possible to find a language which will meet its object with perfect identity. If this were the case, we could, in speaking or in writing, achieve the "at oneness" with the universe, at least in its particulars, that is the condition of complete and perfect knowing.

But if in the Edenic scenario we acquired knowledge of the animals by naming them, it was not by virtue of any numinous immanence in the name but because Adam was a taxonomist. He distinguished the individual animals, discovered the concept of categories, and then organized the various species according to their different functions and relationships in the system. What the "naming" provides is structure, not individual words.

As Benjamin Lee Whorf has pointed out, "Every language is a vast pattern-system, different from others, in which are culturally ordained the forms and categories by which the personality not only communicates, but also analyses nature, notices or neglects types of relationship and phenomena, channels his reasoning, and builds the house of his consciousness." In this same essay, apparently his last (written in 1941), titled "Language, Mind, Reality," Whorf goes on to express what seem to be stirrings of a religious motivation: "What I have called patterns are basic in a really cosmic sense." There is a "PREMONITION IN LANGUAGE of the unknown, vaster world." The idea

is too drastic to be penned up in a catch phrase. I would rather leave it unnamed. It is the view that a noumenal world—a world of hyperspace, of higher dimensions—awaits discovery by all the sciences [linguistics being one of them] which it will unite and unify, awaits discovery under its first aspect of a realm of PATTERNED RELATIONS, inconceivably manifold and yet bearing a recognizable affinity to the rich and systematic organization of LANGUAGE.<sup>5</sup>

It is as if what I've been calling, from *Faust*, the "rage to know," which is in some respects a libidinous drive, seeks also a redemptive value from language. Both are appropriate to the Faustian legend.

Coming in part out of Freudian psychoanalytic theory, especially in France, is a body of feminist thought that is even more explicit in its identification of language with power and knowledge—a power and knowledge that is political, psychological, and aesthetic—and that is a site specifically of desire. The project for

3. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Goethe's Faust, Part One*, tr. Randall Jarrell (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1976), 137.

4. This idea is reiterated in *My Life*, one of the several forms of repetition in that work. (See *My Life*, 46).

5. Benjamin Lee Whorf, *Language, Thought, and Reality* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1956), 252, 248, 247–248.

these French feminist writers has been the unconscious, not as separate entity only one, to the unconscious, to that if allowed to rise, disrupt the established, dubbed the Law of the Father."<sup>6</sup>

If the established symbolic order were to be not only repressive but fall, the new symbolic order is to be a woman's desire.

Luce Irigaray writes:

But woman has sex organs just about everywhere. Even without body, one can say that the geography is more multiple in its differences, in its being. . . . "She" is indefinitely other. . . . she is called temperamental, incommensurable. . . . mention her language in which "she

"A feminine textual body is recognized out of ending," says Hélène Cixous: "The

The narrow definition of desire, the body, and the literalness of the genital in these writers insist on may be problematic. . . . located most interestingly within language, create the subject by saying, and as springs from the impossibility of satisfaction. . . . Wordsworth's "underthirst / Of vigor" in Carla Harryman's "Realism":

When I'm eating this I want food.  
in a devouring machine, but she still  
we enter her thoughts, when she eats  
the subject of the problem which is

If language induces a yearning for expression, it also guards against it. The

It is written: "In the beginning was  
Already I have to stop! Who'll help  
It is impossible to put such trust in

6. Elaine Marks, in *Signs* 3, no. 4 (Summer 1978).

7. Luce Irigaray, "This sex which is not one," 10.

8. Hélène Cixous, "Castration or Decapitation?"

9. William Wordsworth, "The Prelude" (1850).

10. Wordsworth: *The Prelude* 1799, 1805, 1850, c.

Gill (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1971).

11. Carla Harryman, "Realism," in *Animal Instinct*.

12. Goethe, *Goethe's Faust, Part One*, 61.



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*Reality* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1956), 252,

these French feminist writers has been to direct their attention to "language and  
the unconscious, not as separate entities, but language as a passageway, and the  
only one, to the unconscious, to that which has been repressed and which would,  
if allowed to rise, disrupt the established symbolic order, what Jacques Lacan has  
dubbed the Law of the Father."<sup>6</sup>

If the established symbolic order is the "Law of the Father," and it is discov-  
ered to be not only repressive but false, distorted by the *illogicality* of bias, then  
the new symbolic order is to be a "woman's language," corresponding to a  
woman's desire.

Luce Irigaray writes:

But woman has sex organs just about everywhere. She experiences pleasure al-  
most everywhere. Even without speaking of the hysterization of her entire  
body, one can say that the geography of her pleasure is much more diversified,  
more multiple in its differences, more complex, more subtle, than is imag-  
ined. . . . "She" is indefinitely other in herself. That is undoubtedly the reason  
she is called temperamental, incomprehensible, perturbed, capricious—not to  
mention her language in which "she" goes off in all directions.<sup>7</sup>

"A feminine textual body is recognized by the fact that it is always endless, with-  
out ending," says Hélène Cixous: "There's no closure, it doesn't stop."<sup>8</sup>

The narrow definition of desire, the identification of desire solely with sexual-  
ity, and the literalness of the genital model for a woman's language that some of  
these writers insist on may be problematic. The desire that is stirred by language is  
located most interestingly within language itself—as a desire to say, a desire to  
create the subject by saying, and as a pervasive doubt very like jealousy that  
springs from the impossibility of satisfying these yearnings. This desire resembles  
Wordsworth's "underthirst / Of vigor seldom utterly allayed."<sup>9</sup> And it is explicit  
in Carla Harryman's "Realism":

When I'm eating this I want food. . . . The I expands. The individual is caught  
in a devouring machine, but she shines like the lone star on the horizon when  
we enter her thoughts, when she expounds on the immensity of her condition,  
the subject of the problem which interests nature.<sup>1</sup>

If language induces a yearning for comprehension, for perfect and complete  
expression, it also guards against it. Thus Faust complains:

It is written: "In the beginning was the Word!"  
Already I have to stop! Who'll help me on?  
It is impossible to put such trust in the Word!<sup>2</sup>

6. Elaine Marks, in *Signs* 3, no. 4 (Summer 1978), 835.

7. Luce Irigaray, "This sex which is not one," 103.

8. Hélène Cixous, "Castration or Decapitation?" in *Signs* 7, no. 1 (Autumn 1981), 53.

9. William Wordsworth, "The Prelude" (1850 version), Book VI, lines 558–559, in *William Wordsworth: The Prelude 1799, 1805, 1850*, ed. Jonathan Wordsworth, M. H. Abrams, and Stephen Gill (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1979), 215.

1. Carla Harryman, "Realism," in *Animal Instincts* (Berkeley: This Press, 1989), 106.

2. Goethe, *Goethe's Faust, Part One*, 61.

This is a recurrent element in the argument of the lyric: "Alack, what poverty my Muse brings forth . . ."; "Those lines that I before have writ do lie . . ."; "For we / Have eyes to wonder but lack tongues to praise. . ."<sup>3</sup>

In the gap between what one wants to say (or what one perceives there is to say) and what one can say (what is sayable), words provide for a collaboration and a desertion. We delight in our sensuous involvement with the materials of language, we long to join words to the world—to close the gap between ourselves and things—and we suffer from doubt and anxiety because of our inability to do so.

Yet the incapacity of language to match the world permits us to distinguish our ideas and ourselves from the world and things in it from each other. The undifferentiated is one mass, the differentiated is multiple. The (unimaginable) complete text, the text that contains everything, would in fact be a closed text. It would be insufferable.

A central activity of poetic language is formal. In being formal, in making form distinct, it opens—makes variousness and multiplicity and possibility articulate and clear. While failing in the attempt to match the world, we discover structure, distinction, the integrity and separateness of things. As Bob Perelman writes:

At the sound of my voice  
I spoke and, egged on  
By the discrepancy, wrote  
The rest out as poetry.<sup>4</sup>

1983

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## LOUISE GLÜCK

(B)

Born in New York City, Louise Glück grew up on Long Island. Her father was fulfilled dreams of being a writer. In her own words, "Both my parents admired in particular, revered creative gifts." Glück remarks, "I read early, and when I returned. When, as a child, I read Shakespeare, Yeats and Keats and Eliot, I did not know this was the tradition of my language. My inheritance. My wealth. Glück notes the impact of psychoanalysis.

After beginning her undergraduate studies at Colby College, Glück transferred to Columbia College, to study with Stanley Kunitz, to whom she dedicated her first book of poems, *Firstborn* (1968). She has since studied at the University of California at Los Angeles and in 1984 at Williams College in Massachusetts. Her work has received the National Book Award, the Pulitzer Prize. Her early collections include *Firstborn* (1975); *Descending Figure* (1980), with *The Triumph of Achilles* (1985) as the early books; *The Triumph of Achilles* (1985).

Glück's early work flirts with surreal and grotesque imagery but already displays the clarity which her poetry is now known. She has developed a deeply expressive lyric style in which the repressed and evoked. Though autobiographical, her family life—enters her poems, Glück universalizing from personal experience. She sets in terms of grammar or subject matter, the logical archetypes. She has also quite a voice of a figure in a painting to that of the plainness of her diction while praising

3. Lines excised from Shakespeare's *Sonnets*, nos. 102, 115, and 106.

4. Bob Perelman, "My One Voice," in *Primer* (Berkeley: This Press, 1981), 11.