

**Bridging Poetic and Cold War Divides
in Lyn Hejinian's *Oxota*
and Vikram Seth's *The Golden Gate***

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Lyn Hejinian's *Oxota: A Short Russian Novel* (1991) and Vikram Seth's *The Golden Gate* (1986) are works from two very different poetic camps—Language poetry and New Formalism—that both draw on Russia's national poet Alexander Pushkin's novel in verse *Eugene Onegin* (1833) for inspiration and so offer a unique opportunity for reconsidering poetic and Cold War divides in U.S. poetry. These two poems can be read as attempts to transcend the Cold War binaries of the 1980s at both formal and thematic levels. Each poem employs its connection with *Eugene Onegin*, including the genre-crossing elements of that work, to create a symbolic space in which divides are bridged between East and West. The poetics of boundary crossing in both works thus belies the apparently radical formal difference between the two and demonstrates the multiple ways in which the crises and euphoria of the late Cold War period have promoted artistic expression and experimentation as part of an attempt to interpret the conflict and flux that marked the last decades of the previous century. At the same time, my comparison of *Oxota* and *The Golden Gate* demonstrates the need for criticism to bridge the conflicts in contemporary U.S. poetry and so to parallel the formal, thematic, political, and geographic boundary crossing of these two novels in verse.

The Cold War in the United States produced a pervasive sense of crisis and clearly demarcated divisions between “them” and “us” that U.S. literature both reiterated and undermined. In responding to the crises and conflicts of this era, U.S. literature, like the Cold War itself, both produced and challenged U.S. reality and cultural stability. The intimate relationship between the crises of the Cold War and the development of U.S.

literature demonstrates the dynamic interplay between U.S. culture and the role the country has played in global politics and transnational relations, especially its relations with Russia. As scholars such as Michael Davidson, Jonathan Monroe, and Deborah Nelson have demonstrated, the discursive structures of the Cold War played a particularly critical role in U.S. poetry. What Monroe calls “the oppositional discursive economy” that characterized the Cold War era produced a poetics dominated by binary oppositions (106). As Davidson notes, the “polemics around public versus private, body versus mind, confession versus containment, individualism versus cultural nationalism” reflected an environment in which “borders seemed useful for differentiating guys like us from guys like them” (224). Davidson and Monroe contrast this Cold War poetics with the “moving borders” (Davidson 220), oppositional poetics, and “renewed emphasis on the possibilities of narrative” in U.S. poetry of the post-Cold War era (Monroe 125), an era in which, “with the fall of the Berlin Wall, the usefulness of walls to define structures of identity seems dubious” (Davidson 224). While noting an important shift in U.S. poetry reflecting the geopolitical changes of the 1980s and early 1990s, Davidson, Monroe, and other scholars have so far paid little attention to the critical period of transition between Cold War and post-Cold War poetics. This moment of transition, I argue, is intimately linked to the flux, crisis, euphoria, and collapse of the late Cold War era.

The critical reception and poetic structures of *Oxota: A Short Russian Novel* (1991)—a long poem by the San Francisco Language poet Lyn Hejinian—and *The Golden Gate* (1986)—a novel in verse by the Indian poet and novelist Vikram Seth, who was then living in the Bay Area and was associated with the New Formalist School—demonstrate both the pervasive power of the oppositional criticism and poetics of the Cold War discursive economy and the unsettling of this economy in the face of changing geopolitical realities during the transition from the Cold War to the post-Cold War world. An examination of these two texts from the late Cold War period of the 1980s and early 1990s thus provides a retrospective glance at how U.S. literature can be read as responding to national and global crises. These two texts and their reception provide insights into how the sense of political crisis, flux, and possibility of the 1980s and early 1990s promoted artistic experimentation as part of an effort to interpret this critical period, a period that, although located at the close of the last century, continues to cast a long shadow over the new millennium. The border crossing of Cold War and poetic divides that these two works undertake enacts a moment of crisis and transition from crossing to moving borders, from oppositional to

oppositional poetics, and from lyric to narrative modes. Moreover, these texts demonstrate how the divide between Cold War and post-Cold War poetics is transcended by a common desire for the Other and a concomitant tendency to attempt to exceed the geographical boundaries of the United States whether by uniting East and West, or undertaking a more complex unsettling of identities and borders in a post-Cold War, multi-polar world.

Hejinian's and Seth's attempts to investigate and cross the divides of the Cold War highlight how the poetic response to the late Cold War moment of crisis led to a regeneration or broadening of focus in contemporary U.S. poetics through the unsettling of geographic and aesthetic divides and the shift from a lyric to a narrative mode. These works and their authors have to date often been located on opposing sides of the oppositional/accommodational binary that characterized Cold War poetics and criticism (Monroe 105–6). By returning to this moment, I therefore aim to undertake a similar act of border crossing in order to highlight and unsettle the critical divides in U.S. poetry that still remain and that are in part a legacy of the same discursive structures of the Cold War.

Critical Divides

Reflecting the binary, oppositional, “them” and “us” discursive structure of the Cold War, the field of U.S. poetry since World War II has been divided into opposing camps with wildly varying aesthetic and often political ideologies. In such an environment, new aesthetic tendencies, conservative and radical, often garner a great deal of attention, be it laudatory praise, or vitriolic attack. Perhaps the best known example of such polarities is the radically different images of U.S. poetry presented by Donald Hall, Robert Pack, and Louis Simpson's *New Poets of England and America* (1957) and Donald Allen's *The New American Poetry, 1945–1960* (1960). These anthologies have become the canonical representatives of what Marjorie Perloff has termed the “Establishment” and “counterpoetics” of the 1950s (“Poetry 1956” 84, 101). Although, as Alan Golding points out, “[t]he stability of the distinction between so-called open and closed form, ... upon which the anthology wars of the late fifties and sixties rested, has been questioned” in more recent decades, U.S. poetry has remained riven by a divide that in many ways continues the mid-century division between mainstream and avant-garde poetics (78).

In the 1980s and early 1990s, the radical Language poets and the conservative New Formalists highlighted this divide. As Golding notes,

despite being at opposite ends of the literary spectrum, these groups shared some positions, including a “view of the impulses toward openness and closure as mutually generative” (78). Nevertheless, with the notable exception of Golding’s article, little attempt has been made to read across the divide between these two tendencies. An intriguing opportunity to do just this is presented by Hejinian’s *Oxota* and Seth’s *The Golden Gate*, two works by authors from these two very different poetic camps that both draw on Alexander Pushkin’s novel in verse *Eugene Onegin* (1833) for inspiration. Seth’s *The Golden Gate* in particular arguably represents a high point in the mid-1980s conflict over poetics, having been, on the one hand, damned by Perloff, the most influential critical proponent of Language poetry, for having “neither poetic nor novelistic value” (“Homeward Ho” 37), and on the other hand, lauded by one of the most prominent proponents of conservative poetics, John Hollander, for its “use of expertly controlled verse” and “moral substance and extraordinary wit and plangency” (32). The use of Russia’s national poet in these texts is not just a strange coincidence, but indicates a broader connection between, on the one hand, poetic practice and critical debates within the United States and, on the other, the Cold War divide between Russia and the United States.

Oxota and *The Golden Gate* in different ways engage the sense of crisis and possibility of the late Cold War era by attempting to transcend symbolically the binaries of the Cold War at both formal and thematic levels. Each poem employs its connection with *Eugene Onegin*, including the genre-crossing elements of that work, and its respective city—Leningrad/St. Petersburg and San Francisco—to create a symbolic space in which divides are bridged between East and West. The poetics of boundary crossing in both works thus belies their apparently radical formal differences and demonstrates the multiple ways in which the crises and conflicts of the late Cold War period have provoked artistic expression and experimentation. At the same time, I read the opposing poetics of the two texts and the critical divide exemplified in their reception as in a certain sense re-inscribing Cold War binaries. My comparison of *Oxota* and *The Golden Gate* thus also aims to demonstrate the need for criticism to bridge the conflicts in contemporary U.S. poetry, without ignoring or denying them, and so to parallel the formal, thematic, political, and geographic boundary crossing of these two novels in verse.

Hejinian’s *Oxota* is written, as the publisher’s back cover blurb puts it, in “free sonnets” “inspired by Pushkin’s *Evgeny Onegin*.” Each of the 270 “chapters” in the work comprises fourteen sentences, and each sentence is arranged on a new line. To this extent, the form of *Oxota* resembles the

fourteen-line stanzas that Pushkin employed in his masterpiece. Moreover, *Onegin* and *Oxota* are arranged in eight main “chapters” (*glava*) or “books,” respectively (*Oxota*’s ninth book, consisting solely of an eleven-line “Coda,” parallels the various additional stanzas appended to *Onegin* but not included in the main text). *Oxota* is a poetic work that draws on Hejinian’s eight-year long intensive engagement with Russian writers and artists initiated in 1983, when she traveled to the Soviet Union for the first time and established a close friendship with the unofficial Leningrad poet Arkadii Dragomoshchenko (see Sandler; Edmond, “Meaning Alliance” and “Lyn Hejinian”). Over the subsequent eight years Hejinian visited Russia frequently, learnt Russian, and translated Dragomoshchenko’s poetry into English (Edmond, “Meaning Alliance”). Like Hejinian’s other work, *Oxota* is radically disjunctive in style. It is full of stories, anecdotes, and poetic observations relating to her visits to Russia and especially to Leningrad, where she spent most of her time, and to this extent the work has been associated with a narrative turn in American poetry (McHale, “Telling Stories”) and “a decrease in fragmentation, and an increase in ... discernible narrative structures” in Language poetry in particular (Perelman 376). While reflecting the shift towards narrative as a response to the unsettling of Cold War binaries, like earlier Language poetry works of the 1970s and 1980s, *Oxota*’s sentences do not appear to relate to one another in a linear way. *Oxota* is “packed with narrative, but ‘minor’ narrative” (McHale, “Telling Stories” 261), exemplifying what Brian McHale elsewhere calls “weak narrativity,” so that narrative fragments appear everywhere, “trigger[ing] our narrative-sensing apparatus” while never taking the form of a coherent whole (“Weak Narrativity” 164–65). Instead, narrative is disrupted by “fragmentation, interruption, dispersal, and juxtaposition,” and the additional “noise” created by the frequent use of rhyme (McHale, “Telling Stories” 262). Given this complex deployment and disruption of narrative, Perloff argues that *Oxota* works partly as Shklovsky described *Eugene Onegin*—as a “game with [the] story,” in which the artistic structure is more significant than the story of Onegin and Tatiana (“How Russian” 188).

Vikram Seth’s novel in verse *The Golden Gate* is more conventional in both narrative and form. Though now overshadowed by his subsequent novels *A Suitable Boy* (1993) and *An Equal Music* (1999), *The Golden Gate* “first brought literary fame” and critical attention to Seth (Kumar 668, 670–71). The book tells the story of a group of young friends living in and around San Francisco in the early 1980s. The twist to this otherwise fairly conventional tale of the trials of love and friendship is that the entire book

is written in the strict form of Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*, in fourteen-line tetrameter stanzas with a complicated rhyme scheme of alternating masculine and feminine rhymes. *The Golden Gate* is made up of 490 of these stanzas. Seth's use of Pushkin's form reflects the central tenet of New Formalism, the call for a return to traditional forms, and thus participates in the Cold War binarism of the 1980s polemic between innovation and tradition. At the same time, like *Oxota*, *The Golden Gate* has also been seen as a key text in the renewed interest in narrative within post-Cold War U.S. poetry. Its surprise success as one of the most highly acclaimed books of 1986 was key to the rise in popularity of the novel-in-verse over the subsequent two decades. With *The Golden Gate* in mind, Rajeev Patke argues that "To have restored the drive of narrative to verse is Seth's principal contribution to poetry" (273–74). Through this mixed oppositional and appositional poetics, *The Golden Gate*, like *Oxota*, reflects and responds to the geopolitical crisis of the late Cold War period.

Despite, or perhaps in part because of, its popularity, *The Golden Gate* has been criticized both for the apparent conventionality of its narrative and characters and for its form. McHale cites *The Golden Gate* as an example of how postmodernist poems that employ popular culture run the risk of "too complete an identification with their models": "Seth may have intended to update Pushkin's *Evgeny Onegin* for the 1980s, but what he has in fact done in *The Golden Gate* is fashion a conventionally perfect yuppie soap-opera along the lines of *Thirtysomething*" ("Telling Stories" 256). Similarly noting the resemblance to popular culture narrative forms, Lars Ole Sauerberg argues that *The Golden Gate* employs double-coding such that while the "common reader" contextualizes the narrative according to "the ubiquitous television situation comedy, whose conventions tend to format large areas of contemporary culture" (449), the reader "familiar with literary history" reads the verse form as part of a "metafictional aspect," which "by implicit contrast, questions and undermines the naturalness of prose for novelistic purposes" (461–62). For McHale, however, it takes more than "some wittily rhymed *Onegin* stanzas ... to hold the stultifying conventionality of mass culture at bay" ("Telling Stories" 256), echoing Perloff's assertion that Seth's novel is addressed to the stereotypical types that it describes and is "as reassuring as a cup of hot cocoa" ("Homeward Ho" 43). At issue here seems to be the degree and effectiveness of the double coding that Sauerberg identifies in the novel and, by extension, the degree to which the work unsettles the Cold War binaries that it deploys. For Perloff, the book's success is the product of both general nostalgia and a reaction against the rise of theory: "*The Golden Gate*

speaks to the nostalgia that characterizes the not-so-golden late 1980s. As the millennium approaches, ... as political and military decisions become increasingly complex and problematic, there is inevitably a longing for the Old Poetry, poetry written before the fall into free rhythms and abstruse, often seemingly prosaic locutions” (“Homeward Ho” 43). Yet, as Roumiana Deltcheva, drawing on Iurii Lotman, has suggested, Seth’s novel in verse might also be read as following the model of *Eugene Onegin* understood as “the recurrent recreation of the microcosm of the dandy” (35). Read in this way, the “stereotypical nature” of the discourses (Deltcheva 49) and other conventionalized elements that have been criticized might be taken as part of this model, in that they embody the ambivalent position of the dandy between the assertion of aristocratic superiority and total infatuation with the superficial surfaces and appearances of consumer culture. If the apparent superficiality of the novel’s characters and narrative—its Cold War binary poetics—is radically distanced in this way or read as double coding, then this also opens up the possibility of rethinking the significance of other elements in the text, most importantly, the central thematic role played by the Cold War.

To bridge the critical divide that I have outlined here and which is particularly evident in the responses of McHale and Perloff to the two texts, I want to read this divide itself in relation to the Cold War binary that is central to *The Golden Gate* and *Oxota*. Each poem employs its connection with *Eugene Onegin* to create a symbolic space in which divides are bridged between East and West, poetry and prose. This poetics of boundary crossing in turn suggests the possibility of reading across the critical and poetic divide between the two works in order to explore how these texts address the late Cold War moment of crisis and transition.

Poetic and Cold War Divides

There is clear political significance to the decision made by two writers living in the San Francisco Bay Area in the 1980s to write works drawing inspiration from a nineteenth-century Russian classic. At the formal level, both *Oxota* and *The Golden Gate* represent symbolic bridges across the crumbling Cold War divide. By using the Russian classic as a formal model for contemporary American works, both Hejinian and Seth assert solidarity between the literatures, writers, and, by implication, the peoples of the two superpowers. At another formal level, the use of Pushkin’s model of the novel in verse also asserts a sense of boundary crossing. Like Pushkin’s text, both poem-novels resist generic categories and identities. Both flaunt their

in-between status, drawing an implicit analogy between political and generic boundary crossing. *Oxota* contains numerous references to the interplay between poetry and prose, including the quotation from *Onegin* “my years to sober prose incline” (*Oxota* 255:10) and the assertion that “I must oppose the opposition of poetry to prose” (81:13).¹ While the quotation associates *Oxota*’s generic boundary crossing with *Onegin* and its ironic announcement of a shift to prose in the poetic form of iambic tetrameter, the latter phrase—“oppose the opposition of poetry to prose”—uses the recurring *p* and *o* sounds in the words “oppose,” “poetry,” and “prose” to break down the binary between the two. Therefore, in *Oxota*, “the theme of the novel and poetry / [is] one theme” (192:1–2). Just as the text is located in an indeterminate position between Russia and the United States, its position between poetry and prose remains uncertain.

In *The Golden Gate*, the narrative is interrupted at the beginning of Chapter 5 to emphasize the generic rule-breaking inherent in the novel in verse. The narrator tells the story of how he met his editor at a party, and the editor asked:

... “Dear fellow,
 What’s your next work?” “A novel ...” “Great!
 We hope that you, dear Mr. Seth—”
 “... In verse,” I added. He turned yellow.
 “How marvelously quaint,” he said,
 And subsequently cut me dead. (5:1:10–14)

This passage presents the form of the novel in verse as a literary no man’s land, analogous to the no man’s land between Russia and the United States that *The Golden Gate*, like *Oxota*, transgresses through its form.

In addition to using form to oppose Cold War boundaries, both *Oxota* and *The Golden Gate* make the bridging of the U.S.S.R.-U.S. divide a central theme. In *The Golden Gate*, questions about armament and disarmament and the anti-nuclear movement play a central role. Although, with the notable exception of Makarand Paranjape, many scholars see the anti-nuclear theme as secondary (Bawer 77; Perloff, “Homeward Ho” 43), or largely satirical (Durczak 107), there are good reasons to consider the theme thematically and formally central. One of the main characters in *The Golden Gate*, Phil Weis,

1. All references to *Oxota* (1991) are given by chapter and line number. All references to *Eugene Onegin* (1833) and *The Golden Gate* (1986) are given by chapter, stanza, and line number. In Russian, the quotation from *Onegin* is “Лета к суровой прозе клонят” (6:43:5).

is a committed anti-nuclear campaigner. Phil used to work designing guidance systems for the U.S. military (4:17), and the other main male character, John, still works on missile technology (6:16). The falling out between these two main male characters is in part the result of their ideological disagreement. Several passages of *The Golden Gate* document their disagreement, the longest being a debate between Phil and John about the ethics of nuclear disarmament in Chapter 6. The passage is ten stanzas long (6:38–47) and involves a discussion of the position of the Russians vis-à-vis the Americans. Attacking the anti-nuclear activists, John recalls “the fate of Mandelstam” (6:42:10), while Phil argues: “How can you think of we or they / When we’re both in the soup” (6:46:11–12). The reference to the great twentieth-century Russian poet draws attention to the fact that *The Golden Gate* is written in the form of what is generally considered the greatest Russian poem. The debate thus suggests that *The Golden Gate* affirms the unity between Americans and Russians about which Phil speaks by drawing on the Russian poetic tradition to which John refers.

The nuclear issue receives even greater attention in Chapter 7, which is taken up entirely by an account of an anti-nuclear protest outside the ominously named Lungless Labs. Approximately twenty of the forty-eight stanzas of the chapter are given over to the anti-nuclear speech of one Father O’Hare (7:14:12–7:34:14), a speech that Seth has made clear he thought of as central to the serious side of the novel (“Forms and Inspirations” 20). The chapter is also arguably the crucial chapter in the narrative, because the surprise attendance of John’s then girlfriend, Liz Dorati, precipitates the breakdown of their relationship and the eventual marriage of Liz to Phil. The formal structure reinforces the impression that the nuclear weapons issue is central to the book. Chapter 7 is the middle chapter of the 13-chapter novel and O’Hare’s speech is located precisely in the twenty central stanzas of that chapter, with exactly 14 stanzas preceding and following the speech in Chapter 7. The symmetry is completed by the location of the central point of the speech in the center of the central chapter, the opening two lines of stanza 25:

There are occasions when morality
And civil law are in dispute. (7:25:1–2)

In this way, *The Golden Gate* not only highlights John’s personal failure of compassion and friendship, but also focuses on his failure, evidenced in his arguments with Phil and implicitly in O’Hare’s speech, to address the broader need for compassion and friendship across the Cold War divide, for “morality” to triumph over “civil law.”

It is this need that the novel in its entirety attempts symbolically to fill. *The Golden Gate* of the title itself stands as a symbol for the bridging of the Cold War divide. As a bridge and gate, the title suggests the possibility of connection across a divide enabled by the city of San Francisco itself. As an entry point for those coming from the East into the so-called “Land of Opportunity,” the bridge also points to an East-West connection and so, as J. Y. Chouleur notes, alludes to the Indian-born Seth’s own position as an outsider and visitor from the East and his *Golden Gate* as a “symbol of ... East-West symbiosis,” like the “Golden Door” between Europe and Asia in Istanbul (38–39). This connection between author and bridge is inscribed on the cover, where “Seth,” when pronounced correctly, rhymes with the “gate” of the title (Kumar 668–69). Moreover, the phrase “The Golden Gate by Vikram Seth” is in iambic tetrameter, the meter of the novel and, of course, of Pushkin’s original. In this way, the divides between Indian novelist, Russian poet, and American city are bridged symbolically by the poetics of the title and by the Golden Gate Bridge—the iconic symbol of San Francisco. City, poet, and form are tied together. In Chapter 5 of the novel, Seth makes the import of *The Golden Gate* as a symbolic bridge across the Cold War divide more explicit when he writes of using “The dusty bread molds of Onegin/In the brave bakery of Reagan” (5:3:5–6). The rhyme here between Reagan and Onegin points to a projected unity between the U.S. and the Soviet Union, between politics and art, as well as being a humorous, ironic register of the Cold War divide that the novel seeks to overcome. At the same time, the Onegin/Reagan rhyme suggests a broader relationship between the dandy Onegin and the actor Reagan and, by extension, implies that readers should be wary of the fictional performances and superficial surfaces of the novel itself, as well as of contemporary public discourse generally—including the “Evil Empire” rhetoric that Reagan used to amplify the Cold War divide. Thus *The Golden Gate* simultaneously deploys and subverts the binaries of Cold War poetics.

While the bridge to Russia in *The Golden Gate* appears mediated through the use of Pushkin’s form and the focus on the issue of nuclear weapons, *Oxota* reflects Hejinian’s much more personal, intensive, and extensive contact with Russia. Hejinian and others associated with Language poetry first developed an interest in Russian modernist poetry and Russian Formalist literary theory in the 1970s (Edmond, “Lyn Hejinian” 98). In 1983, Hejinian traveled to Russia for the first time, befriending the Leningrad-based poet Arkadii Dragomoshchenko and “initiating an intense, personal and artistic engagement with Russia and Russian writers, which

involved Hejinian learning Russian, making extensive and frequent trips to the Soviet Union, and translating the work of Dragomoshchenko and a number of other contemporary Russian poets” (Edmond, “Lyn Hejinian” 98). *Oxota* reflects this extensive relationship with Russia, including references to her trips to Russia, especially Leningrad, and her association with Russian writers, as well as allusions to Russian Formalist theory and classic works of Russian literature.

Like *The Golden Gate*, therefore, *Oxota* thematically creates a bridge that transcends the binaries of the Cold War divide. If the adoption of Russian theory and literary practice by Hejinian and other Language poets “came to stand for the idealized vision of the creation of an artistic community that would bridge the Cold War divide” (Edmond, “Lyn Hejinian” 105–6), then Hejinian’s engagement with Russia and Russian literature and literary theory and her friendship with Russian writers and artists documented in *Oxota* can be seen as a partial realization of this utopian vision, a vision that Language poet Barrett Watten, quoting William Carlos Williams, has called the dream of a “wedding between Russia and the United States” (xviii). In this way, *Oxota* reflects and responds to the crisis of the late Cold War and immediate post-Cold War period. On the one hand, it recalls the oppositional Cold War poetics of “them” versus “us” by siding with Russia against the United States and mainstream U.S. poetry. On the other hand, it anticipates an appositional post-Cold War poetics of moving borders by unsettling the binary division between East and West.

There are many chapters in *Oxota* that make explicit the desire to bridge the divide between East and West. There is talk of a “San Francisco-St. Petersburg anthology” (27:7) and there are frequent references to the point of view being that of an American in Leningrad. For example, “An American adds that Leningrad’s a city of women” (50:3). As in *The Golden Gate*, the geopolitical relationship between Russia and the United States is also associated with personal connections, even a “love intrigue” (1:5). There is also a dream of connection between the two languages: “The excitement of the same experience by two grammars—it’s not impossible” (53:14). And there are intimations of connection that are simultaneously erotic and linguistic. For example, there is mention of “a desire to surpass the opposition between ‘me’ and ‘you’” (65:6).

Oxota proposes a bridge between Russia and the United States partly by rejecting “the opposition between ‘me’ and ‘you’” and so the essentialist binary models of identity central to Cold War politics and poetics. This bridge is not only indicated thematically, but, as in *The Golden Gate*, is

enacted through formal, structural elements of *Oxota*. As in *The Golden Gate*, the title itself provides a bridge. The title “OXOTA” as it appears in block capital letters on both the cover and title page can be produced from both Cyrillic and Roman characters. It therefore acts as a visual bridge between the two alphabets and, by extension, the two countries, even as, by contrast with *The Golden Gate*, it emphasizes the estranging otherness of Russia through an untranslated Russian word, rather than domesticating this otherness under a title and story that are immediately familiar to American readers. As in *The Golden Gate*, the author’s name on both the title page and cover functions as a bridge. Here Hejinian’s Armenian surname (acquired through her first marriage) contrasts with her familiar English given name, “Lyn.” Particularly since Armenia was part of the U.S.S.R., the name, like the title, signals border crossing between East and West.

Most significantly, however, *Oxota* enacts its resistance to binaries through its fragmented structure, its metapoetic discussion, and its presentation of the foreigner’s experience of alienation in Russia as the realization of modernist estrangement. Thus *Oxota* describes and enacts the merger of art and life, Russia and America in poetry (Edmond, “Lyn Hejinian”). The various themes and formal devices I have mentioned here are brought together strikingly in Chapter 81, which Perloff describes as “perhaps the poem’s clearest statement of poetics” (“How Russian” 203):

Leningrad lies in the haze of its sides
 It lies as a heroine
 Now it is both
 How not—the not is sometimes impossible to reach
 It was
 But then is the work of art not an act but an object of memory
 Then from a great disturbance
 The most delicate message accumulates
 But you must know why you write a novel, said Vodonoy
 It’s not to displace anything
 It has context and metronome
 By insisting on a comprehension of every word I am free to signify place
 though not to represent it
 So I must oppose the opposition of poetry to prose
 Just as we can only momentarily oppose control to discontinuity, sex to
 organization, disorientation to domestic time and space, and glasnost
 (information) to the hunt (81:1–14)

As Perloff notes, the twelfth line here is especially revealing of Hejinian's poetics, with its insistence on the freedom to "signify" but its refusal to "represent": "Once writing is no longer regarded as the vehicle that conveys an already present speech, every word, indeed every morpheme can be seen to carry meaning, to enter relationships with its neighbors" ("How Russian" 204). Even a single letter can be charged with meaning as in the movement from "Now" to "How" through the substitution of the Cyrillic letter for the sound [n]: н or H, which closely resembles the Roman letter H in its uppercase form. The statement of poetics here is related to the situation of cross-cultural encounter and the place "Leningrad" announced in the opening line. The mixing of alphabets and the assertion "Now it is both" relate what Perloff terms "the perils of dichotomizing" (suggested by the list of binaries to be opposed in the final line) to the specific situation of an American in Russia ("How Russian" 205).

In its preference for signification over representation, Hejinian's poetics is antithetical to Seth's in that, like John Ashbery, with whom Perloff contrasts Seth ("Homeward Ho" 44–45), Hejinian refuses the illusion of representation of reality, while accepting and exploiting the multiple possibilities for signification and reference in language. For Perloff, Seth's work fails because the formal sound and visual devices of the Pushkin stanza are divorced from the representation, or indeed stifle it, so that the signifying possibilities of "language charged with meaning," as Ezra Pound put it, are not exploited (28). This is also the crux of McHale's criticism and his distinction between the success of Hejinian and the failure of Seth. Both scholars clearly demarcate the dividing line within U.S. poetry of this period. Indeed, Perloff uses Hejinian's line about signification and representation in order to highlight the divide between Language poetry and mainstream poetry criticism, which, according to Perloff, attacks Language poetry for lacking "representation" and insists on a clear division between poetry and prose ("How Russian" 204–5).

Oxota and *The Golden Gate* have prompted scholars such as Perloff and McHale to point to the divide between the poetics each text represents. Seth's poem at various points does, however, employ devices, such as those used on the title page and in the numerical structuring, to charge language and the poem with meaning. Moreover, Seth's novel in verse is predicated on breaking down the generic distinctions between poetry and prose, even as it is mainstream enough to have been a great financial success and to have been compared to TV soap operas and sitcoms. Moreover, the common ground between these two apparently diametrically opposed poetics lies

precisely in the way in which both emphasize boundary crossing in multiple forms and link this boundary crossing to their attempts to bridge the Cold War divide between Russia and the United States during the critical period when that divide was itself crumbling.

Bridging Divides

Both *The Golden Gate* and *Oxota* make connections across the Cold War divide through their use of Pushkin's novel in verse and their encounters with their respective cities, San Francisco and Leningrad. Both not only formally enact opposition to the Cold War but also thematically explore the transcendence of Cold War binaries, performing the moment of flux and crisis that marked the shift from the Cold War to the post-Cold War world. By engaging with this moment of crisis, the two texts in turn contribute to the broadening of focus, including the reintroduction of narrative and the unsettlement and transcendence of geographical boundaries, that characterizes post-Cold War U.S. poetics.

My comparative discussion of *Oxota* and *The Golden Gate* can also be seen as an attempt to transcend binaries: the binary between the Language poets and the New Formalists, the broader poetic and critical oppositions of the period, and the binary between U.S. poetry of the 1980s and 1990s. In the 1980s and early 1990s, the former oppositions were exemplified in critical debates between conservative critics, such as Hollander, and avant-garde advocates, such as Perloff, and were arguably at their sharpest when discussing poets like Hejinian and Seth. While I do not deny that there are important aesthetic differences between the two poets and their two poetic schools and good grounds for these debates, the critical climate, heavily invested in the oppositional discursive economy of the Cold War, tended to obscure points of contact and comparison between Language poetry and New Formalist poetry and more generally between "experimental" and "mainstream" poetics.

My comparison of *Oxota* and *The Golden Gate* implicitly argues for critical boundary crossing that parallels the formal and thematic boundary crossing of these two texts. Bridging this critical divide enables an exploration of contemporary poetry that moves beyond the binaries of Cold War poetics, that is enriched by the very poetics of mutuality, of "both" rather than either/or, that *Oxota* seems to enact. At the same time, it allows one to see how the boundary crossing in the two texts reflects and responds to the dramatic geopolitical crisis of the period. In the case of *The Golden Gate* and *Oxota*, it also entails taking seriously the attempt made in each novel to address the

Cold War divide. In her review of *The Golden Gate*, Perloff singles out the unrealistic elements of Seth's work apparently caused by the need to keep to Pushkin's stanzaic form ("Homeward Ho" 39–42). It is also possible, however, to read the interference created by rhyme and rhythm as pointing toward the false claims to easy mimesis made not only by the apparently straightforward narrative of Seth's novel but also by the nostalgic certainties that Perloff identifies in 1980s U.S. literary criticism and the culture at large ("Homeward Ho" 43–44). Indeed, a reading of the novel through its infelicities and failures might underscore the aporia at the novel's heart. For all the shifts in love and bridging gestures of the novel, the nuclear threat remains, and the rule of law and strictures of verse triumph over "morality" and "direct" expression. At the same time, while "representation" is rejected at one level in *Oxota*, at another level the novel aims to represent the experience of Hejinian in Leningrad, an experience ironically intertwined with the rejection of direct representation through the poetics of estrangement. In a sense, *Oxota*'s rejection of representation itself represents the Cold War divide and the lacunae of cross-cultural encounter. Read against the grain of the Cold War poetic and critical dichotomies within U.S. poetry, both texts represent the Cold War division through the gaps and uncertainties in their signification. To read these gaps is thus also to bridge the divisions within poetry of the late 1980s and early 1990s and to recognize how the critical divide itself suggests, through its absences and gaps, an uneasy relationship to the Cold War divide that *The Golden Gate* and *Oxota* attempt to bridge.

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