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Hejinian Meditations: Lives of *The Cell*

John Shoptaw

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Nuns fret not at their convent's narrow room;
And hermits are contented with their cells.

—William Wordsworth, from *Miscellaneous Sonnets*

I am not I, pity the tale of me.

—Sir Philip Sidney, from *Astrophil and Stella*

Cell walls communicate. The etymological and semantic membranes of “cell” afford us multiple entries into Lyn Hejinian’s 1992 volume, *The Cell*. The Latin word *cella* denotes a narrow room, a kind of “stanza.” Many Roman cells were storerooms, a function that survives in the meaning of “cellar” and “solar cell.” In the extrapolated Indo-European root *kel-* the interconnected verbal senses of “cell” are stored: to save, to cover, to hide. These subterranean passageways link “cell” to such unexpected relatives as “hell,” “hollow,” “hole,” “holster,” “helmet,” “color,” “occult,” “Calypso,” and “conceal” (Watkins 1521). “Ars est celare artem,” goes the Latin proverb: Art is the art that hides its art. *The Cell* is composed of 150 narrow poems, most of which are confined to a page, none longer than two, their lines further grouped into indented cells that resemble contiguous stanzas. These poems may be described with Hejinian’s words from *The Cell* as “Charged closets and dark batteries / of sound / Time is storage, with time’s / increase / The bulk of something lost / in storage” (85). There

may be no “hidden meanings” stored in *The Cell*, but there are concealed principles of construction. The first line quoted above, for instance, was produced by recombining the expected modifiers of “dark closets” and “charged batteries,” a procedure that discovers truths latent in language. Hejinian’s poems are as charged as they are dark.

Though there are unicellular organisms (the ovum being most prominent in *The Cell*) and remote hermit’s caves, cells most often exist and work in conjunction. Cells are discrete structural units: work cell, cell block, monastery, tissue, honeycomb. As Hejinian puts it, “the doors are shut / and the walls are romantically / linked” (190). Hejinian’s cellular poems are often verbally ringed and connected. One poem, for instance, contains the ring word “hefty” in its bordering lines, “Hefty and conjugal — come over / air” and “Minutes . . . their hefty and / provocative widths” (85; ellipsis added). The subsequent poem revises “Time is storage, with time’s / increase” (85) with its opening line, “Anger is storage, with time’s / decrease,” which it continues to resonate in its close, “Too little danger, too much / love” (86). The communication within and between poems (and lines) here is both semantic (“increase,” “decrease”) and alphabetical (d/anger). All units, all cell mates, are constructed equal. In cell theory, the cell (not the molecule or the gene) is the smallest unit capable of being integrated into life. “Omnes cellulae e cellula,” postulated the early cell theorist Rudolf Virchow in 1855: all cells come from cells. In Hejinian’s “composition by juxtaposition” (“Strangeness” 42), “every single line is internally complete and is of equal weight and importance” (“Line” 192). The lines in *The Cell* differ widely in “width” but none are grammatically subordinate or enjambed; each stands paratactically on its own.

But independence inhibits cell structure. Commenting on her prose poem “Resistance,” Hejinian remarks: “One of the results of this compositional technique, building a work out of discrete intact units (in fact, I would like each sentence itself to be as nearly a complete poem as possible), is the creation of sizeable gaps between the units” (“Rejection” 1984, 136). An extremely disjunctive poem, Peter Quartermain notes, “so undermines ordinary decoding procedures that the reader is forced to take account of both the individual particulars (each separate word) and the totality in which those words appear (the whole text). In effect, such work presents islands of localised meaning” (17). As we shall see, however, the poems of *The Cell* are composed not of absolutely disjunctive but of relatively discontinuous elements, insofar as “discontinuous” conveys balance in its offsetting prefixes. The fruitful, destabilizing complication of cellular identity is lost if the individual units are either too distantly or too nearly, too haphazardly or too predictably related. A purely disjunctive poem is an assemblage of individual words, phrases, or lines; how we read it is solely up to us. A seamlessly conjunctive poem offers no particular resonance or resistance; how we read it is solely up to the poem. The gaps in Hejinian’s poems are meant to present readers not with walls but with projects: “The reader (and I can say also the writer) must overleap the end stop, the period, and cover the distance to the next sentence” (“Rejection” 1984, 136). The entirely disjunct or conjunct poem is already destroyed or locked into place; the discontinuous poem is always under collaborative construction.¹

The poems in *The Cell* are written and arranged in chronological, though not in narrative, sequence, extending from October 6, 1986, to January, 21, 1989. These anonymous poems are distinguished not by titles at their heads but by dates at their tails. The dates are one formal measure; almost every poem is one day long. Whatever happens on that day (including the writing of a poem), whatever is thought about or experienced, may be comprehended by that day's poem. We may think of each poem as a time capsule: "One unit of rain taken / by dictation" (42). With its daily editions, *The Cell* recalls the prose discourse of the daily paper; but Hejinian's poem is scarcely journalistic: "Lyricism — it makes the country / seem far away" (174). Though she wrote *The Cell* during both the Iran-Contra scandal and the 1988 Presidential election, Hejinian does not report or comment on the public events of her day. As she laments elsewhere, "And then there is the news itself, of course, or rather my despair over the efficacy (or inefficacy) of poetry in the course of events — the imperviousness of the world to such improvements as might be suggested by artistic work and artistic thought" ("Strangeness" 39). The poem dated November 7, 1986, for instance, the day Reagan first stammered the news of the diversion of funds from Iran to Nicaragua, begins vaguely with "Government is dizzy without capitals / to name" (26) before proceeding to its larger topic, the linguistic character of the imagination: "Every place the imagination occurs / replace it with the working / term 'language'" (26).² But *The Cell* is political, after its fashion, describing the linguistic, social structure of "natural" cells. These strange descriptions have their own salutary political effect of focusing attention on perception: "An emphasis on the medium / bares what is assumed" (116).

Though one chapter of Hejinian's *My Life* closes with the sentence "The very word 'diary' depresses me" (46), the dated entries of *The Cell* recall the diary form. As Hejinian has reminded us, diaries were one of the first avenues open for women writers: "of course, there haven't been few women writers, but what they've been writing was letters and diaries, more often than published works. And those forms are fragmentary, and sometimes exoskeletally [that is, externally, habitually] determined — like the diary is just what we do every day and what we think about what we do" ("Rejection" 1985, 286).³ Traditionally, a diary is something women and writers "keep"; its discourse is personal, private, "feminine": "my mother . . . kept a diary but she never read it" (*My Life* 31). But though the language of *The Cell* is variably private, it is not diaristic in content. There are intermittent narrative traces of a death and a birth, but Hejinian claims none of these stories as her own. For one thing, the book is almost devoid of proper names that would provide narrative continuity and location. Narrative statements such as "Then a huge wave hits / the beach at Santa Cruz" (199) are the exception for this California poet.⁴ As Hejinian speculates, "To the weather what it / writes is not a proper / weather diary" (172). And such confessional sentences as occasionally appear have only a representative personal character, (with) which any reader might identify: "Everyone knows I'm in love" (16). Nevertheless, *The Cell* is a diary of its time. It is meditative and exploratory of its world and its linguistic medium.

With its 150 untitled, comparably-sized poems, *The Cell* resembles a sonnet sequence (Shakespeare's 154 poems in particular). Yet here too comparison

draws our attention first to differences. *The Cell* offers us no tortuous and halting progress of love. Love poems such as the delightful one beginning “With a wave of yourself / you’re here with me” (148) are few and far between. The more objective, physical topic of sex is more frequent. The sonnet’s first-to-second-person addresses are replaced in *The Cell* by third-person descriptions, and the narrative past tense gives way to the habitual or general present. Yet as one of Shakespeare’s sonnets gives birth to the next, Hejinian’s cell structure is generative: “Such poetry is reproductive” (166). And as the real subject of Shakespeare’s and other sonnet sequences is not the love object but the subjected loving subject, Hejinian’s main topic will be the cellular self. *The Cell* is personal, subjective poetry in that it takes the person as its object.

The Poetics of Description

Hejinian formulates her cellular poetics in a contemporary essay, “Strangeness,” which is divided like *The Cell* into dated journal entries (July 10–August 30, 1988; cf. *The Cell* 179–98). Hejinian begins by distinguishing her “poetics of description” both from traditional realism and from a realist “theory of language.” Hejinian’s poems are not “after the fact” descriptions of inner or outer reality. Rather, description is discovery: “Description, in my sense of the term, is phenomenal rather than epiphenomenal, original, with a marked tendency toward effecting isolation and displacement, that is toward objectifying all that’s described and making it strange” (“Strangeness” 32). Hejinian here alludes to the Russian Formalist Victor Shklovsky’s concept of defamiliarization,⁵ but also to Andrew Marvell’s “The Garden”: “Annihilating all that’s made / To a green Thought in a green Shade” (47–8). It is the (metonymically “green”) shade that turns Marvell’s thoughts green, not vice versa. With his own bemused objectivity, Marvell calls things by their own true names: “Fair Trees! where soe’er your barks I wound, / No Name shall but your own be found” (23–4). Such on-the-scene reporting, “at once improvisational and purposive” (“Strangeness” 32), is dependent on circumstances and events both outside and inside the reporter. Thus Hejinian takes as models of description neither realist fiction nor journalism but, surprisingly, dream reports and explorer’s journals. She discovers uncanny similarities between these descriptive discourses: “the same apparent objectivity, the same attempt to be accurate about details and to be equally accurate about every detail” (33). In both models, the mysterious multiplicity and the disparate tendencies of the worded “object” (less observed than aspired to) may disorient and disintegrate the intensely absorbed describer. “Description then is apprehension” (33) in both senses of the word. The results of this “expectant knowledge” (33) are not known beforehand. As Hejinian recommends in a contemporary entry from *The Cell*, “You might anticipate, to apprehend” (192).

Scattering, displacing, and estranging, Hejinian’s poetics of description is governed by metonymy:

If one posits descriptive language and, in a broader sense, poetic language as a language of inquiry, with analogies to the scientific methods of the

explorers, then I anticipate that the principal trope will be the metonym, what Roman Jakobson calls “association by contiguity.” The metonym operates within several simultaneous but not necessarily congruent logics, oscillating inferentially between induction and deduction, depending on whether the part represents the whole (reasoning from the particular to the general) or whether the whole is being used to represent the part (reasoning from the general to the particular). Or again an object may be replaced by another adjacent, the cause by the effect or the effect by the cause, spatial relations may replace temporal ones or vice versa, an action may replace the actor or vice versa, and so forth. Metonymy moves attention from thing to thing; its principle is combination rather than selection. Compared to metaphor, which depends on code, metonym preserves context, foregrounds interrelationship. And again in comparison to metaphor, which is based on similarity . . . the metonymic world is unstable. While metonymy maintains the intactness and discreteness of particulars, its paratactic perspective gives it multiple vanishing points. . . . Metonymy moves restlessly, through an associative network, in which the associations are compressed rather than elaborated. . . . Comparing apples to oranges is metonymic. (“Strangeness” 38-9)

Hejinian’s citation of Jakobson is an index of her abiding interest in Russian Formalism and the Russian avant-garde. For her poetics Hejinian draws not only from Jakobson’s often anthologized essays, “Two Aspects of Language and Two Types of Aphasic Disturbances” (1956) and “Linguistics and Poetics” (1958), but from his important early discussion, “Marginal Notes on the Prose of the Poet Pasternak” (1935), where Jakobson first described the metonymic horizon. Important for Language poets, like Hejinian, as for literary theorists, Jakobson brought metonymy into prominence in structuralist and poststructuralist criticism by pairing it with metaphor as an equal and opposite gravitational pole of language production, noting wryly that literary critics who applied the “amputated, unipolar scheme” of metaphor in their analyses exhibited a behavior which “strikingly enough, coincides with one of the two aphasic patterns, namely with the contiguity disorder” (144).⁶

“What does it have against / metaphor” (121), *The Cell* seems to ask of its creator. To understand Hejinian’s prejudice, it helps to associate along Jakobson’s axes. The vertical axis of resemblance appeals to a higher (deeper, inner) authority, a relatively stable region of truth and value; the horizontal axis of combination overthrows this upstanding vertical and places all things, including all of us, on the same democratic level. Metaphor likens things out of context, whereas “There is no marginality in / metonymy” (195), which ties things to their “associative network.” On the metonymic horizon everything corresponds to everything else rather than to exalted Platonic forms; the “metonym is anti-platonic” (111). Like narrative, metonymy “moves attention from thing to thing.” And like paratactic syntax (note that these likenesses are themselves metaphorical), metonymy provides “multiple vanishing points” rather than a single main clause or ruling conceit. Metaphor is true by virtue of correspondence, metonymy by virtue of (in)coherence; though incomparable (so they say), apples and oranges are side by side in the same fruit cart. But it is worth

noting that despite all these advantages, metonymy is no utopian alternative to metaphor. In everyday life, metonymy is a conservative trope relying on habitual public and private associations (“our song,” “that prick”). Similarly, advertisers, who forge mass consumer response, frequently give their product (Diet Coke, Steve Forbes) a fresh new look, its intrinsic properties notwithstanding.

Writing in the New Critical 1950s, Jakobson emphasized the distinctness and autonomy of poetry; writing in the postmodern 1980s, Hejinian and other Language poets strive to reconnect the poem with the world. Though Hejinian aligns her poetics with Jakobson’s axes, she diverges from his views in at least two respects. First, whereas Jakobson defined the poetic function as the “focus on the message for its own sake” (69), reserving the “so-called . . . ‘denotative,’ ‘cognitive’ function” (66) for non-literary, referential language, Hejinian considers the metonym “a cognitive, perceptual, logical unit” (“Strangeness” 40) and associates synecdoche (for her as for Jakobson, a kind of metonymy) with the logics of induction — whole for part — and deduction — part for whole (38). Thus she is able to characterize her own poetic method as “scientific” (40), leaving the word in quotation marks. Hejinian’s poems are themselves cognitive metonyms, inextricably bound up in the world’s network of associations. A second point of divergence between Jakobson and Hejinian concerns the relationship between trope and genre. While noting that there are “poems which are woven through and through with metonymies, while narrative prose may be studded with metaphors” (309-10), Jakobson argued that metaphor tends to predominate in romantic (and symbolist) verse, metonymy in realist prose (111). But Hejinian takes the poetic line of most resistance by describing her poetry as realist: “When the term *realism* is applied to poetry, it is apt to upset our sense of reality. But it is exactly the strangeness that results from a description of the world given in the terms ‘there it is,’ ‘there it is,’ ‘there it is’ that restores realness to things in the world and separates things from ideology” (“Strangeness” 44).⁷ *The Cell* is a non-narrative metonymic sequence, its “realism” resulting not from the succession of detailed events but from the strange metonymic juxtaposition of perceptions.

In arguing that poetic realism is a “medium of strangeness” (44), Hejinian departs from the traditional identification of realism with ordinary and romanticism with extraordinary experience. In Hejinian’s synecdochic realism, the description gets displaced or derailed by the stray detail or association, resulting in “[l]oss of scale accompanied by experiences of precision” (32). In this regard, Hejinian models her descriptions after Stein’s *Tender Buttons*, a work reflecting, in Stein’s words, her growing excitement “about how words which were the words that made whatever I looked at look like itself were not the words that had in them any quality of description” (*Lectures* 191; also quoted in Hejinian, “Two Stein Talks” 132). Hejinian’s description of *Tender Buttons* as “a hard-edged, rigorous, analytical, merciless, romantic realism” (“Two Stein Talks” 133) also characterizes *The Cell*. Nothing out of the ordinary happens in *The Cell*, but in her depictions of ordinary life everything is made strange.

The skeletal key metonym and ultimate object of *The Cell* is the person. Hejinian outlines her idea of personality in “The Person and Description,” a contemporary essay in which unattributed aphorisms from *The Cell* appear.⁸

For Hejinian, the idea of the immortal soul has led to a poetics of expression in which the poem issues “from an inner, fundamental, sincere, essential, irreducible, consistent self” (“Person” 166). Such a spirit — an *Imago Dei*, an embodied Form, an unparaphraseable poem — is metaphorical. Hejinian takes the alternate route of metonymy, asserting that “there is no self undefiled by experience, no self unmediated in the epistemological situation, but a person instead” (167). *The Cell* displaces both “the self” and “the soul,” which nevertheless resonate in Hejinian’s title. The word “person” itself is divided among discursive spheres. It is a grammatical term used to categorize pronouns and verb forms, a term used to define nouns (a noun is commonly understood as a person, place or thing; see “Person” 168), a legal and political term for individuals (or corporations) with rights and responsibilities without reference to gender or age (hence the value of nondiscriminatory titles such as chairperson), a philosophical term for humans (as distinguished from animals) as “self-conscious” or “rational,” and a sociological and psychological term for individuals conditioned by their environment. In American usage, a person is more corporeal than a self: “I am an unattractive person,” “Alcohol was found on his person.” Hejinian juxtaposes these senses in her poetry and poetics. “Drawn into the world by perception, implicated by language, moving around in life” (168), Hejinian’s person is contextual and contingent, “a relationship rather than an existence” (167).⁹ In *The Cell* she most often treats the person objectively, less as a “person” than as another place or a thing, an “it.” With witty scientific detachment, Hejinian dissects modern subjectivity in the third person: “a person pitying / itself having identified with a / storm” (*Cell* 18); “A person has a favorite / food” (25); “But the person with bodily / exercises identifies with its city” (20); “Every person is born preceded / by its desire” (194); “A person to be funny / buried itself in sand” (173). As Sidney’s subjected lover implores, “I am not I, pity the tale of me,” so Hejinian’s deconstructive narrator relates, “From under the cape of / penmanship the person signs its / name / It is not it” (207). The person who signs its name is never the same.

As with the leveling of metonymy, the disintegration and objectification of the (American) individual is tied to an implicit political agenda. In *Leningrad*, co-authored with three other Language poets, Hejinian relates a conversation with the Russian poet Arkadii Dragomoschenko (whose works she has translated): “Subjectivity is not the basis for being a Russian person. Our independent separate singularity can hardly be spoken of, but, Arkadii said, ‘many people wish it.’ ‘You know,’ I said, ‘many of *us* wish to overcome it. We think that if we can surpass or supercede the individual self we can achieve a community” (*Leningrad* 34).¹⁰ But for a community to be more than pieces of persons and poems it must have readers, which means its descriptions must in some sense be readable. For Hejinian, description means “simultaneously exploration, discovery, and communication,” which, as she reminds us, “brings us to the reader,” another “entity we call a person” (“Person” 168). The poetics of description then is necessarily a poetics of interpersonal communication.

The Poetry of Grammar

The “literary situation,” which Hejinian imagines as “a scene in which the writer is standing on a concrete curb in the commercial district, the reader is standing beside the writer, and many many people are moving up and down and across the street — many heads, many stomachs, many bags, many shoes and boots” (“Person” 168), is described in the initial poem of *The Cell*. The poem is a kind of envoy, traditionally a dedicatory poem or stanza addressed to a beloved first reader. In the opening envoy of the *Amoretti*, Edmund Spenser’s first person dedicates his book to his terrifying second, placing himself (metonymically) in her hands:

Happy ye leaves when as those lilly hands,
 which hold my life in their dead doing might
 shall handle you and hold in loves soft bands,
 lyke captives trembling at the victors sight.

Avoiding the direct address in her envoy, Hejinian puts the writer, the readers, and at first even “I,” in the objective third person. This reader’s object will be to read Hejinian’s poem not so much “closely” as productively, by treating it not as a thing but as a goal:

It is the writer’s object
 to supply the hollow green
 and yellow life of the
 human I
 It rains with rains supplied
 before I learned to type
 along the sides who when
 asked what we have in
 common with nature replied opportunity
 and size
 Readers of the practical help
 They then reside
 And resistance is accurate — it
 rocks and rides the momentum
 Words are emitted by the
 rocks to the eye
 Motes, parts, genders, sights collide
 There are concavities
 It is not imperfect to
 have died (*Cell* 7)

The literary situation of this poem involves the writer, nature, language, the poem, and its readers. But although the poem lies before us, the word “poem” is missing, and we miss it particularly. As John Ashbery writes in a related poem, “Paradoxes and Oxymorons,” “You miss it, it misses you. You miss each

other" (283). But here instead of "the poem" we find its metonym, the life for which it stands: a yellow "flower" (another conspicuously missing word) on its green stem, a cellular organism, an anthologized flower of speech. We hear expectantly too a Shakespearean pun on "eye" in "human I." The composite image of the observant natural object may derive from "i-stem," a Latin grammatical term for adjectives and certain nouns of the third declension.¹¹ In any case, we are drawn to see the capital, stem-like "I" as well as to hear "eye" in it. This flower is flourishing but "hollow" (a distant cognate of "cell"). Unlike Sidney's or Petrarch's love objects, this I-stem has no hallowed soul or Platonic essence at its core but rather draws its inner productive life from abroad.

Hejinian's next cellular segment sets up an analogy: as rain supplies life to the flower, language gives vitality to the human, writing I. Reading productively, we supply "letters" for "rains," which yields a drumming rain of fingers sending letters pouring over the sides of the manual typewriter. Language is not the means by which the writing I represents nature; as the writer experiences it, it is part of nature itself. Language is as right as rain that nourishes itself through the budding typist. This segment introduces us to a primal scene of typewriting. But in the rhythmically regular phrase "along the sides who when," the relative pronoun is missing its grammatical antecedent (cf. "alongside one who, when asked"). The omission is significant: Hejinian's originary story calls for a biological antecedent, an instructor who first operated "the paternal typewriter" (41; cf. "I borrowed my father's typewriter" [*My Life* 30]). Alongside such a one, the child learns the facts of life and language — how to typify. Compare the conventional writer's life: "I learned about life, those rainy afternoons, from my mother, who . . ." In Hejinian's scene only the language machine remains.

Hejinian turns in the middle of her poem from "writer's" to "readers" (making the poem a one-to-many correspondence), but her lines turn away from easy readers. "Readers of the practical help" is grammatically ambiguous ("practical" may be an adjective or, if we take "help" as a verb, a noun) and unidiomatic as it stands. But it is not unresponsive to a productive reading. Readers of the poem ("practical" may evoke "paratactical," or I. A. Richards' "practical criticism") help make it into a structure where they may "then reside." The next unit appears to be tacked on paractically with a relatively superfluous "And." But the bridge between "They then reside / And resistance is accurate" is made not by grammar, logic, or narrative but by phonemic contiguity; "resistance" encrypts "residence." Many lines in *The Cell* begin with coordinating conjunctions, but their juxtaposition tends to be askew.

The vocabulary of "And resistance is accurate" is patently derived from Wallace Stevens, who wrote a great deal of poetry about reading. In one influential observation, from "Man Carrying Thing," he advises poets and their readers that "The poem must resist the intelligence / Almost successfully" (*Palm* 281). And in "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" the actuarial poet invokes a plainsong for the major(ity) man: "My dame, sing for this person accurate songs" (214). The accurate resistance of Hejinian's poem exerts its own force on readers, who experience the poem as a "wave" (the crypt word here) they "ride" that "rocks" their boat or surfboard. To suggest the physical

nature of this encounter, Hejinian adopts scientific discourse. We read things, first of all, by seeing them, as reflected light waves are inverted in the eyeball. This collision is physical (“eye / Motes,” “rocks,” “sights” encrypting *sites*), sexual (private “parts,” sexual “genders”) and linguistic (*mots*, “parts” of speech, grammatical “genders”). The accident ties up stimulating writers and responsive readers: “One person responds by fixing / motes, another person by floating / them” (*Cell* 167). Hejinian discovers an erotic vitality in these experiments. So her penultimate line, completely incomplete, points out geological and amorous “concavities.” A poem is a hollow, animated thing.

One prominent grammatical feature of this poem (and this book) is that its first, second, and last statements begin with “It.” Hejinian has remarked how attracted she is to “the all-purpose, fluid, ambiguous, forever serviceable It. . . . I find this pronoun and its usage fascinating, because of its flexibility: It’s raining tonight. What is?” (quoted in Perloff 209). Hejinian’s manipulations of “It” are instances of what Jakobson calls the “poetry of grammar” (see Jakobson 121-44). Poets such as Hejinian choose and misuse their grammatical structures as strategically as they do their words. Grammarians currently distinguish between an anticipatory “it,” which delays and emphasizes the subject (as in Hejinian’s first and last statements), a dummy or empty “it,” which stands for an agentless subject such as time or the weather (as in the second), and a neuter pronominal “it,” which indicates an inanimate or impersonal object. In this poem both the dummy and the anticipatory “it” do double duty as the impersonal pronoun. This ambivalence widens its scope immeasurably. Like a big-bang radiation detector, Hejinian’s omnidirectional “it” points outward toward, and stands in for, something so immense, tacit, and ubiquitous that it can’t be pinpointed: “That of which it is / said it is rain” (205). In the twentieth century, Stevens, Hemingway, and Stein have experimented with this indefinite pronoun, but no poet has explored its outer reaches more assiduously than Ashbery, as in these wide openings: “It’s this crazy weather we’ve been having” (221); “All that we see is penetrated by it —” (259); “It came about that there was no way of passing” (281); “It was me here” (286). If “It” is Hejinian’s object, what is it? Language, life, poetry, interpersonality, and so on. Each of these short answers, vague and vast, merits only partial credit.

The poetic grammar of Hejinian’s closing remark, “It is not imperfect to / have died,” is particularly resistant. An infinitive is an infinite verb form unbound by gender, person, time, or number. As such, it shares the steady state of death and makes good grammatical poetry. But “to / have died” is a present perfect infinitive, which describes an act or event completed in the past with relevance to the speaker’s and hearer’s (writer’s and reader’s) present. One may say, as Tennyson did, “’Tis better to have loved and lost,” but not “It is not imperfect to / have died,” because the “persona” who has died can no longer speak. Moreover, Hejinian introduces her perfect infinitive with the litotes “not imperfect,” whereas death is as perfect a state of nonbeing as anything we know (and we know next to nothing about it).¹² In “The Poems of Our Climate” Stevens announces that “The imperfect is our paradise,” or perhaps our inferno, “Since the imperfect is so hot in us, / Lies in flawed words and stubborn sounds” (*Palm* 158). We miss something in Hejinian’s “to have died” like “to

have written." Supplying this missing sense would allow us to read "to / have died" figuratively with its missing object: "to have died [into]," or in other words, to have survived as, a poem.

Though the poem progresses metonymically, the metaphorical principle of equivalence is also operative. With its infinitive construction, the last line roughly parallels the first: "died" recalls "life" both antonymically and sonically (entering the internal rhyme scheme: "I," "supplied," "sides," "replied," "size," "reside," "rides," "collide"). As with rhyme, in grammatical parallelism "unlike things, being made alike grammatically, become meaningful in common and jointly" ("Rejection" 1984, 136). The first poem may then be read in a circle, a not imperfect figure: to become an "It," the poem as a goal and a thing, is "the writer's object." The Elizabethan sense of "die" is also appropriate in these climactic, promiscuous collisions. To have died into poetry in this erotic sense would indeed be a "not imperfect" ongoing act or event. Hejinian affirms at the end the possibility that poetry ought to be more than a subjective expression or even an objective description; it should be, at least in part, real communication. The game the poet wages her life on is that poetry may be read, that the life it supplies may be thought about and felt by each new set of ears and eyes.

Cell Divisions

We can better read *The Cell* if we know its cell structure. For Hejinian, structural form is not a container but "a means of setting the materials in motion and keeping them moving, active, undergoing change. In this sense, form is a poem's dynamic" (Hejinian and Miller 36). What, then, is the formal dynamic, the reproductive mechanism, of *The Cell*? What is its "cell," its generative unit? Each poem or lyric cell — with its short, indented, scarcely punctuated "lines" — looks like modified free verse. In a brief review of *The Cell*, Mark Jarman described "each entry" as having "a central column with arms extended to the left margin." With some frustration, the New Formalist poet confesses that "the soul of Hejinian's poetry is not ultimately formless, though I cannot describe it" (415-6). The Language poets can be as formal as the New Formalists, but their forms are less familiar. We may begin taking the measure of *The Cell* by counting — not accentual feet or stresses but words. Each "line segment," as I'll call it, whether capitalized and left-justified or uncapitalized and indented, contains up to five words (for instance, "It is the writer's object"); several have fewer, but only one has more.¹³ Each sentential "compound line," as I'll call the capitalized line segment plus its optional indented continuations (for instance, "It is not imperfect to / have died"), may contain any number of words. If it runs over five, it continues indefinitely through indented segments until it concludes, often in a segment under five words.

Hejinian's tantalizing versification deconstructs the line as we know it. Does the opening poem, for instance, have nine lines (capitalized, justified) or twenty (also counting the eleven uncapitalized, indented segments as lines)? It depends on what counts as a line, and there is no adequate way of taking both types into account. Both segments and compounds have claims to being the

poem's main line. This undecidability is highlighted by Hejinian's simple but suggestive device of indenting her compound lines as though they were run-overs. Think of the difference between an enjambed line (as in *Paradise Lost*) and a run-over line (as in *Leaves of Grass* or *Howl*): the poet determines line-breaks for the one, the printer for the other. But the compounded lines of *The Cell* are both enjambed and run over, conflating both stages of verse production. Hejinian herself counts her compound lines as her poem's lines, as is evident from her composite poem "The Composition of the Cell" — a Cagean rewriting of *The Cell* which Hejinian produced by extracting, numbering, end-punctuating, and sometimes rewording lines from her book (at least one per poem). Here are the first two lines of "Composition," drawn from compound lines 1 and 6 of *The Cell*:

- 1.1 It is the writer's object to supply.
 1.6 Rocks are emitted by sentences to the eye. (*Cold* 111)

As these aphoristic lines demonstrate, the poet counts compound lines at the expense of her five-word segments, which have disappeared.¹⁴ Line 1.6, which revises "Words are emitted by the / rocks to the eye," provides us with a nice instance of metonymic verbal recombination. The verb "emitted" generates a descriptive syntax for both sentences: an emitting source, a medium, and a terminal/receiver. Both sentences describe reading as a subset of seeing. Both versions are "true"; both correspond to the mutual emission of certain words and things. A sentence with "rocks" in it makes us think of (if not imagine) rocks. And (in the stranger, "original" version) "the rocks" we see make us think of the word "rocks." Each sentence stores its own semantic charge.

The singular hybridity of Hejinian's verse form may be appreciated by measuring it against the two complementary postmodern forms distinguished by Joseph Conte: "The series [that] is determined by the discontinuous and often aleatory manner in which one thing follows another" and "procedural form which consists of predetermined and arbitrary constraints" (3). Conte characterizes serial form as discontinuous, "paratactic" (22), and "metonymic" (23) — terms familiar from Hejinian's poetics. Yet with its pentaverbal segmentation and its "imposed exoskeletal . . . predetermined temporal framework" ("Rejection" 1984, 136-7), *The Cell* also qualifies as procedural form.¹⁵ But Hejinian's book won't stay put. In procedural poems, according to Conte, "formal choices precede content" (40); but in *The Cell* each new compound line length is determined by the content, the variable length of the statement. *The Cell* may be described just as fruitfully in pre-postmodern terms, as an organic sequence (as its organic title and opening image and its resemblance to the sonnet sequence suggest), with each thought leading indirectly to the next. But here too the local discontinuities, the lack of a narrative and a characterized "human I," keep *The Cell* from remaining in traditional categories.

By making her threshold five words or black piano keys long ("The vertebrae crackle down the / pentatonic scale" [*Cell* 34]), Hejinian renovates the Elizabethan line for postmodern, post-subjective usage. Her pentaverbal segment is objectively, though not audibly, registered in a way that the accentual-

syllabic pentameter is not. We may read Shakespeare's first sonnet line, "From fairest creatures we desire increase," with either four or five stresses, but we may only read five words in "It is the writer's object." Hejinian's quantitative meter thus underscores her poetics of conscious objectivity. In a narrative compound that may be applied to herself and her fellow Language poets, Hejinian relates that "They abandoned the sound in / large measure to a large / measure / A tissue" (168). *The Cell* is a cellular tissue of segmented lines.

In modern poetry, the quantitative measure is best known from the syllabics of Marianne Moore. But Hejinian's nearest prototypist in *The Cell* is the Objectivist poet Louis Zukofsky, who in his lifelong poem *A* invented the pentaverbal line. Zukofsky's lines differ significantly from Hejinian's segments, however, in that they always contain exactly five words — a formal invariance that tends to compact and fragment the line into counted words, as in this pentaverbal quinzain from *A-22* (511):

shard porcelain learned blue veined
by wreathed penny in ice—
coo (where?) dig or not
piece dig who with what
what with ninth year's gait

In *The Cell*, by contrast, the segmentation varies according to the fulfillments of the sentential line. Though Hejinian's "line is not continuous" (*Cell* 8), it proceeds more smoothly — "not one word / at a time" (125). This process is promoted by the fact that Hejinian's segmentation is variable. Every line in *A-22* contains five words, whereas every line segment in *The Cell* contains anywhere from one to five. Hejinian's variable segmentation embodies the poetics of imperfection; in her highly formal design, the desire for formal perfection goes unfulfilled. As she reminds us (in a nine-word compound), "My thought is a prospect / of increase, not attainment" (86).

It will be surprising for some readers to learn that Hejinian actually composed the bulk of *The Cell* in seven-word segments and only in revision trimmed them down to five.¹⁶ Why seven? Hejinian may have adopted it as a manageable factor of the sonnet's fourteen lines, a word count left untried by Zukofsky. But she may also have derived it from the English sonnet line; when remeasured into seven words, the opening and closing segments of the first poem scan as pentameters: "It is the writer's object to supply," "It is not imperfect to have died." However she arrived at her new segment lengths, Hejinian's retrospective revision raises questions for her readers. Since the line segments were mathematically redetermined, should their enjambments be discounted? Do the segments have any local or only a general significance? Even if we could overlook them (which we can't), I don't think we would arrive at an easy answer, or an easy way of disentangling subjective from objective determinations. Compare these successive opening versions, dated July 3, 1988:

The crossing is very soft where the
ant is on its stomach

Half in degrees, half in gallons — these
 are the intimates of the description
 (“From *The Cell*” 227)

The crossing is very soft
 where the ant is on
 its stomach
 Part object, part subject — these
 are the intimates of the
 description
 (*Cell* 174)

In this summer lyric, the objectified describer adopts the ant’s scale and perspective, imagining a “soft” (smooth) oceanic “crossing” on “its” (the ant’s) half-submerged stomach, across either a beach bucket or “its” (the describer’s) own “soft” stomach. In the first scaled-down compound, Hejinian doubles her enjambments (“soft / where,” “on / its”), which gives the boundary words more visual prominence and accentual stress. In the second, she decided to retain her border deictic “these,” which she managed to do by dropping the rhyming “degrees” and by broadening her allusion to Wordsworth’s *Tintern Abbey* (“Of eye, and ear, — both what they half create, / And what perceive”). The new Cartesian subject-object dyad, “Part object, part subject — these” expresses more accurately her relative, composite situation, antlike herself perhaps on the sea’s side or ship’s deck. Hejinian’s wholesale word-reduction gave her the opportunity to recompose more particularly.

Hejinian best articulates the formal dynamics of *The Cell* in “Line” (without a definite article, the title reverberates “Lyn”), a brief, roughly contemporary essay. Here she nominates the (compound) line as her nonmetrical, cellular unit of measure: “If there is such a thing as a perceptual rhythm (and possibly there isn’t), the line would be its gauge in my work. The line affixes detail to time, and it is at least rhythmic to that degree. In any case, it is for me the standard (however variable) of meaning in the poem, the primary unit of observation, and the measure of felt thought” (“Line” 191). In *The Cell* there are rhythms of discovery and disclosure, observations made and felt: “Syntax is a measure and / on it are increments of / pleasure” (*Cell* 140). Each compound line, counterpointed or discontinued by the pentaverbal segment, is also a sentence, an utterance or observation: “[R]ecently I have been writing lines which are equivalent to sentences — to full thoughts. . . . I mean my lines to be read as if hyphenated — one cognition” (Hejinian and Miller 36). The poet best known for her book-length prose poem *My Life* (recalling Dickinson’s similarly capitalized line, “My Life had stood — a Loaded Gun—”) here reveals her new “inclination to reject the sentence (or at least my own uses of it) except as it is modified by the line (which discontinues the sentence without closing it)” (“Line” 191). The Hejinian of *The Cell* skeptically balks at making sentential claims: “The authority of the line (intrinsic) is different from that of the sentence, and momentarily I have lost faith in what I can say in a sentence. . . . Imagine then that I turn to the line in order to begin again, writing, basically”

("Line" 191). Though the sentential compound lines of *The Cell* are composed of "hyphenated" pentaverbal segments, they are themselves grammatically (though not poetically) independent: "The sentence is complete and / separate like a hedgehog, like / a charcoal, or a rock" (*Cell* 8). In other words, each compound line in *The Cell* is end-stopped.¹⁷ This surprising feature explains the scarcity of final punctuation marks in *The Cell*; verse capitalization and indentation make full stops redundant.

Hejinian's cellular line resembles what the fellow Language poet Ron Silliman termed the "new sentence." In his influential 1980 essay, Silliman characterizes the new sentence as one which, among other things, resists being incorporated into an intersentential narrative or argument. Claiming that "sentence length is a unit of measure," Silliman proposes a fascinating experiment: "Imagine what the major poems of literary history would look like if each sentence was identical to a line" (90-1). Hejinian did; she made each of her sentences equal to compound lines. But these compounds, though discontinuous, function differently from Silliman's new sentences. Combining any number of indented line segments, Hejinian's new lines operate more like stanzas or verse paragraphs.

Hejinian's cellular lines vary widely in length and type: "Lines . . . may be rigid or relaxed, increasing or decreasing, long or short, ascending (questioning) or descending (decisive), predisposed (necessary) or evolving (speculative), representative of sequence or of cluster" ("Line" 192). Consider the following unattributed dialogue on nonverbal communication (*Cell* 11):

 Eyeball-to-eyeball, a small spot, and
 its temporary moment-to-moment hoarding stasis
 Exactly!
 Blue

Here the proliferating compound words elongate the pentaverbal segments to describe the hyphenated line of sight from ("Blue") eye to eye. Each of these lines comprises syntactically incomplete but discursively complete remarks (note the rare final punctuation). The compound line, which may be as brief as a single word, is practically immeasurable as in the following (180):

 The waters are bulging with
 description
 Glossy with stillness, cups gliding
 The waves sucking up the
 rising sand close so it
 stands but only into part
 of the wave above which
 there's an effect of red
 glints, as in green rock

This ocean-view "description" is a nice example of what Hejinian diagnosed as the "loss of scale accompanied by experiences of precision" ("Strangeness" 32).

These lines are “torqued” with crypt words and phrases (“Glossy” — “Glassy,” “cups” — “[wave] caps,” “close so” — “so close,” “stand[ing]” “waves”) and metonymy (wavelike sand, red compared with green). The run-on syntax of the final run-over compound line, afflicted with the loss of punctuation, captures at least the urgency to get the flux of description on dry paper.

One entry in *The Cell* begins with an allusion to Gertrude Stein’s longest work in verse, *Stanzas in Meditation*: “Lines in meditation — or inspection / — convinced of my head’s substantiality” (124). Hejinian’s distinction is accurate. Lyn writes lines, Stein stanzas. Stein’s book-length meditation on socialization, like Hejinian’s comparably long meditation on “personification,” begins with a primal scene of parental instruction:

I caught a bird which made a ball ,
 And they thought better of it.
 But it is all of which they taught
 That they were in a hurry yet
 In a kind of a way they meant it best
 That they should change in and on account
 But they must not stare when they manage
 Whatever they are occasionally liable to do
 (*Stanzas* 13)

The acuteness of the expatriate’s ear for the free indirect discourse of American parental speech is evident from her cryptography (“we meant it for the best,” “on no account,” “you must not stare”), especially in the encrypting of “And then” in “And they,” which captures the formation of “second thoughts.” Stein closes her opening nursery rhyme quatrain with a hypermetrical “yet” (“That they were in a hurry [yét]”) that enjambes with the following line and initiates the pentameter parental apologetics. The difference between Stein’s and Hejinian’s interlinear juxtaposition may be gauged by Stein’s handling of “it.” In a stretch of five hypotactic lines — patterned concentrically with “But” “That,” “In,” “That,” and “But” — Stein defines each “it” with a subordinate “That” clause (“But it is all” — “That they were in a hurry”; “meant it best” — “That they should change”). To be sure, Stein is also adept at using the dummy “it,” as the rest of the stanza would demonstrate (not quoted here). But although Stein’s line, like Hejinian’s, is sparsely punctuated, invariably capitalized, and rhythmically and syntactically complete, it tends to act as a countermeasure to her predominantly hypotactic, (un)periodic sentence — the overriding measure of her stanzas. But though Stein’s hypotaxis entails an “undemocratic” subordination, it actually discontinues lines at a greater distance than Hejinian’s parataxis, which discontinues adjacent lines. Stein’s and Hejinian’s meditations are thus equally, but differently, discontinuous.

Expectant Knowledge

Though the “person” of *The Cell* is most often neutrally gendered and considered, Hejinian does pay particular attention to the female gender and to its particular historical circumstances. Consider the following interrogation (*Cell* 55):

Do you patrol? outside the
 self? around a body and
 the follicle in which it
 stands?
 Or cell?
 Request?
 Have you reverted?

This series of questions registers current political pressures. The echo of the pledge of allegiance reminds us that in the 1980s the flag became identified with the Republic(ans) for which it metonymically came to stand.¹⁸ A more crucial metonymy arises with “follicle” (which encrypts “flag”), a small cavity open at one end, which, in the specific case of the uterus, stands in contiguity to the fertilized single-celled egg that makes a “person.” Though Hejinian refrains from using the word “abortion” in *The Cell*, the politicized philosophical question of when a person becomes a person, which pits the “right to life” against the “right to privacy” and fundamentalists (“Have you converted?”) against feminists, hovers behind this poem and others.¹⁹

Although Hejinian is suspicious of impermeable cell walls of sexual or linguistic division (“No wonder there are no / single notes, no unique gender” [*Cell* 13]), she offers a Foucauldian speculation on the peculiar advantages offered the contemporary woman poet: “I can imagine positing poetry, for example, as the place of exile (or sanctuary) for suppressed discourses. . . . I can also regard poetry as highly eroticized. . . . I think, for example, that at the moment women are capable of creating an entirely new opportunity for exploring the erotic, including uses of power (withholding power, deferring power, letting power slip away)” (Hejinian and Miller 39). Metonymy itself is fetishistic in its partial fixations. The poems in *The Cell* are sometimes discreetly exhibitionist: “The poem is the becoming / exhibition of its own language / It comes only in part / in parts / Because of what women like / In metonymy” (66). At other times, they are coyly explicit (202):

My metonymic body part stands
 for solitude
 It is a member of
 a standing society
 Constantly
 Like a jelly between two
 sticks, my subway line (well
 not completely mine) goes in
 The person entering it is
 way out in its enmity

The person writing is way
in in its attraction

In this light parody of confessional pornography, the metonymic womb-poem attracts the “penetrating reader.”

But Hejinian knows well the heritage of making women into metonymic part-objects. In “The Person and Description,” she notes that artistic description has long tended to confine women within cells: “Description, whether it is intentional or the result of merely ambient ideology, bounds a person’s life, whether narrowly or broadly. In another sense it likewise bounds a person, and this is, for example, a central (perhaps the classic) issue for feminism, which recognizes that traditionally women are often described but they have very seldom been the describers” (169). In *The Cell* Hejinian exposes the historical, cultural dimensions of these cellular descriptions. Observing women of her mother’s generation, for instance, she demonstrates how “female” behavior has undergone distinct changes: “Women of my mother’s generation / having their hair done, submitting / as to medication” (66), “Many women shopping and they / will watch out to know / the butcher’s name” (131).

One poem in *The Cell* versifies a passage from Thoreau’s *The Maine Woods*: “Think of our life in / nature — daily to be encountering / matter, to come into contact / with it — rocks, trees, wind / on our cheeks!” (151; cf. Thoreau 646). The next poem echoes it: “And your cheeks! / Talk of mysteries! / Think of our life in / a nation — daily seeing mothers” (152). The reverberation is instructive. One daily “matter” that especially interests Hejinian in *The Cell* is the national, natural “mother.”²⁰ Shakespeare’s Sonnet 1 begins with a homotextual misrepresentation of motherhood, in which the fair male object is urged to reproduce himself, to make some woman “mother” him again: “From fairest creatures we desire increase.” As a “very normal poet laborious / on a convexity” (*Cell* 40), the postmodern serial poet is also intent upon cell reproduction. This may be another reason why no sentence or line in *The Cell* is punctuated by a full stop; Hejinian’s book of “expectant knowledge” (“Strangeness” 33) is missing its periods.²¹ We may think of *The Cell* as a pregnant sequence, with one poem generating the next.

Like any person, the American mother is a manufactured, national thing, a metonymic assemblage: “A person might ask if / its mother is a natural / or a cultural thing / A bundle or a burden / of properties” (*Cell* 179). This bundler of joy is burdened by stereotypes. Synecdochically and nominally reduced, she is made “equal to the thumping in / a bulb which is purely / reproductive named ‘Mom.’” In the USA, a mother is both producer and consumer. Stevens wrote that “Money is a kind of poetry” (*Opus* 191). Hejinian, who objects that “money doesn’t give itself / to poetry” (*Cell* 157), nonetheless takes up the challenge. If “time is money,” eligible mothers are worth time and money out of circulation in the form of maternity leave: “Mothers are given a round / sum and an amount of / time” (the enjambed phrase reshuffles “lump sum,” and “round figure”). This allotment gives them leave to pump the money back into circulation. Hejinian thus closes this poem with a single swelling compound (155-6):

And so it is that
 mothers because they purchase so
 much — the greatest amount of
 purchasing is done by mothers
 —do it regularly, anywhere, and
 very often, until it's hardly
 visible, something white behind a
 green medium — spring and a
 cascade of peas!

In a waste of shamelessness, mothers spend their change and their body fluids. Breast-feeding would be the immediate metonym for the mother's ubiquitous expenditure. But their discharge, as natural as a waterfall, also resonates as a cascade of "piss."²²

These mothers pass streams from their purses in public view without being "self-conscious," without embarrassment. *The Cell* is the record of one woman poet unselfconsciously experiencing — seeing, knowing, describing — in public. The Western myth of shameful knowledge is retold in the final two poems of Hejinian's book. The closing pace is slow and measured; the next-to-last poem bears three dates (November 23, 29, and December 1, 1988), and the last (dated January 21, 1989) reworks an entry from July 5, 1988.²³ In the penultimate poem, the nearing end of daylight (and of the book) makes the writer apprehensive of the end of sentences and sensations (214):

All sentences about the sense
 of seeing, the sense of
 embarrassment
 It could all disappear — instead
 it appeared
 My language
 My language is a genital—
 let's say that
 My language, in part

These appositional sentences center around the stark proposition, "My language is a genital—". The line may be read cryptographically by tracing "genital" back through "genitive" (by way of "My language") to "Genesis." The latter locates the myth of embarrassment: "And the eyes of them both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together, and made themselves aprons" (Gen. 3:7, *King James Version*).

"Now I know in part" (1 Cor. 13:12, *King James Version*), Paul told the Corinthians. Partial, metonymic knowledge is the fallen human condition (*Cell* 214):

Distinctions steering sunlight
 A field of horses is
 a landmark but not a

particular horse stirring in the
 terrain
 Knuckles, or knocking from a
 train
 A thirst produced by onion
 You cannot concentrate on oblivion²⁴

“Adam was a taxonomist,” Hejinian reminds us (“Rejection” 1984, 141). The original scientist gained knowledge not of essences but of differences. Seeing a “field of horses,” for example, is different from seeing a “particular horse” in a field, hearing someone’s “Knuckles” knocking is different from hearing the inhuman “knocking from a train,” and tasting an “onion” is different from mouthing the oniony signifiers “*on oblivion*” (compare “steering” and “stirring,” “terrain” and “train”). The discontinuous, cellular form of *The Cell* makes for distinctions. We have no comprehensive field theory or field writing with which to represent the world, but “While failing in the attempt to match the world, we discover structure, distinction, the integrity and separateness of things” (“Rejection” 1984, 143).

The consummate distinction of *Genesis* is sexual difference, telling one body part from another. Hejinian sets her scene of carnal knowledge in the clouds (*Cell* 214):

The eye applies a visage
 to the cloud
 No thought of rain tonight
 though clouds of provenance
 How to write
 There is bas-relief
 I see Marcus Aurelius and
 a water buffalo
 “Your American feminism is suggesting
 women’s sex,” he said

The (female) speaker fancies she sees male shapes — the Roman bas-relief column of Marcus Aurelius, the “horny” water buffalo — and the non-native male speaker cited in the final line finds the “clouds of provenance” (encrypting “God’s Providence”) equally suggestive of the female body.²⁵ If Adam names the animals, Eve names — differentiates between — Adam and herself. Herein lies her error, the story goes: her desire to reflect upon herself. So Milton’s Eve dotes upon herself in a “Smooth Lake, that to me seem’d another Sky” (*Paradise Lost* 4.459), and Stevens’ Eve (in “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction”) “made air the mirror of herself” (*Palm* 209). In both poems, Eve’s self-consciousness is a narcissistic delusion. True knowing begins in Milton as Eve is directed away from her reflection and toward Adam; Stevens himself directs Eve toward “Adam” (a pun on Hebrew “earth”) as the independent reality of the world: “But the first idea was not to shape the clouds / In imitation. The clouds preceded us. // There was a muddy centre before we breathed” (209-10).

Hejinian aims differently toward the real world. Reflecting back on “My language is a genital—”, we would expect Hejinian to have written something like “My language is a fig leaf.” But for her, language doesn’t cover or hide the naked self and world. In her Steinian realism (Stein’s title, “How to write,” is written in her sky), the eye sees — she writes and we read — not through language but with language: “things take place inside the writing, are perceived there, not elsewhere, outside it” (“Two Stein Talks” 133):

It’s the event of seeing
 what I speak of with
 someone’s eyes
 The event of a carnality
 covered by eye
 (*Cell* 215)

Description is here an “Eve-nt” “covered” by “Eve” (encrypting “eye”) — “eye-witness reporter” and carnally knowing poet. But such partial knowledge, *The Cell* attests, is not simply “personal” or solipsistic. Linguistic experience is shared, communicable experience: “It’s relevant — though a person / is implicated in the process / it keeps in sight” (215).

The line “My language is a genital—” is varied in the final poem’s opening: “A person’s character is in / the realm of possibility / This means hysteria” (216; the compound line recalls Dickinson’s “I dwell in Possibility—”).²⁶ In the 1980s, the “wandering womb” was woven into a network of American and French feminist writing in response to Freud’s *Dora: An Analysis of a Case of Hysteria*.²⁷ Among other things, “This means hysteria” points to *écriture féminine*. While Hejinian has expressed reservations about “the identification of desire solely with sexuality, and the literalness of the genital model for a woman’s language,” she has shown interest in what Elaine Marks has described as the liberating function of 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” (quoted in “Rejection” 1984, 142). Yet Hejinian, as is clear from her deliberations, writes “a poetry of consciousness — a poetry, for example, with intentional poetics” (Davidson et al. 6) — whether her object is the conscious or the unconscious (or otherwise conscious) person. In *The Cell*’s last poem, she resists the confinement of woman’s writing to the dark cell of a prelinguistic unconscious: “For one moment this too / means hysteria but without loss / of the lively consciousness of personality” (216). Hejinian’s poetics of the “wandering womb” might be thought of as an extra-vagrant, unembarrassed self-consciousness that discovers itself by rewording the world. As Hejinian put it in “The Person and Description,” the (male or female) person “posits its self-consciousness in consciousness of environment and detail, and in work and language” (170). Nothing perhaps, including what has been repressed, is beyond its ken.

The Cell ends with a framing infinitive construction (217):

Might it come to the
 consciousness of unconsciousness

It is good to know
so

Whether we tie the penultimate line with the next as a worry (“it might come to nothing”) or a wish, we are left with the feeling that there is no evil left in Eve’s knowledge. The anticipatory, expectant “It” is just so good to know. It is, moreover, good to know it “so” — a delightful parting adverb meaning “in conclusion” and “in this manner.” Hejinian writes with personality and without shame: “Thus I’m completely unembarrassed” (180). *The Cell* is a thinking woman’s poetry: intellectual without being disembodied, abstract without being immaterial, philosophical without being ahistorical, formal without being closed, objective without being detached, playful without being opaque, and transparent without being clear. It is good for us that Hejinian keeps knowing so.

Notes

1. My poetics of reading differs from that of Dworkin, who argues that “the reader of *My Life* must not succumb to the ‘rage to know’ [Hejinian’s phrase] that arises from a longing for the closure of perfect communication” (78). Full knowledge and perfect communication, of the world or its poems, may very well be impossible (not to say meaningless), but that does not relieve poets and readers of the desire of knowing and communicating what they can. As Spahr argues, Hejinian’s work “shows its readers how to . . . accept the responsibility of reading actively” (155).

2. In this regard, Hejinian’s *The Cell* bears comparison with Ashbery’s *Flow Chart*, a daily written poem whose dates of composition overlap those of *The Cell*. See my discussion in *Outside* 327-38.

3. The early version of “The Rejection of Closure” contains a transcript of the ensuing conversation between Hejinian and her audience which was omitted from the later version published in *Poetics Journal*.

4. By contrast, Hejinian’s next book-length sonnet-like sequence, *Oxota*, is studded with personal and place names: “Siberia begins again, Dima said, fifteen minutes from Leningrad” (50).

5. Compare Jakobson: “metonymy changes the accustomed order of things. Association by contiguity . . . transforms spatial distribution and temporal succession” (310).

6. For interest in Jakobson among the Language poets see, for instance, Silliman 94-108, Watten 140-67, and Waldrop 219-22, for whom “L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetics” involves a “shift away from the emphasis on analogy and metaphor toward emphasis on combination” (219). On Hejinian’s adaptation of Jakobsonian metonymy “to her own purposes” in *Oxota*, see Perloff 190-1.

7. Contrast Jarraway’s assertion that Hejinian is “devoted to the demystification of realism” (323).

8. The list also includes sentences from the “The Person” (*Cold* 143-81). The twenty-eight poems of this series (each section was first numbered, then

wryly given the same titular name, “The Person”) are slightly individualized in form, with their capitalized, unpunctuated sentences either enjambed or indented. Covering much the same thematic territory as *The Cell*, “The Person” seems inevitably overshadowed by its larger sequential counterpart.

9. Compare Jakobson on Pasternak’s first person: “We learn [only] what he lives on, this lyric hero outlined by metonymies, split up by synecdoches into individual attributes, reactions, and situation; we learn to what he is related, by what he is conditioned, and to what he is condemned” (313).

10. Hejinian attended the Leningrad conference in August of 1989, about six months after finishing *The Cell*.

11. In *On the Outside Looking Out* and “The Music of Construction,” I call these missing but operative words and phrases “crypt words” and “crypt phrases,” their textual deformations “markers,” and the productive process “cryptography.” We may think of cryptography as a sort of linguistic metonymy in which an unwritten word or phrase is buried beneath one that sounds or looks like or is otherwise associated with it. We might say, paraphrasing Jakobson, that Hejinian’s cryptography projects the principle of contiguity from the axis of combination onto the axis of selection. Such “revisions” are common in *The Cell*: “an articulate organ which / he called a lung” (31; cf. *tongue*); “Outside the stars are stunning” (33; cf. *shining*); “the witnesses plink” (38; cf. *blink*); “Where will it all prelude” (40; cf. *end*); “A sign on the floor / says come in” (54; cf. *door*); “No less of this will / I say” (68; cf. *more*); “the / past is foreseeably disturbed” (199; cf. *foreseeable future* or *visibly disturbed*); “I closed my mind” (46; cf. *eyes* or *closed-minded*); “Are you elated?” (59; cf. *related*); “Clog hours measure” (82; cf. *clocks measure hours*).

12. Jakobson praised the not dissimilar ending of the Mayakovsky poem “To Live”: “the second clause with its imperfective infinitive [‘to live’] and with a neuter, subjectless form of the predicate [‘it is good’], represents a pure process without any limitation or transposition and with an open place for the dative of agent [for instance, ‘for me’]” (124). Note that in Russian “to live” is termed “imperfective” in aspect since the act has not yet ended. Jakobson’s analysis of Mayakovsky’s poem may have influenced the production of Hejinian’s “not imperfect” ending, which may be reworded as a tautological grammatical truth: the perfect infinitive “to have died” is “not imperfect.” Compare Altieri’s grammatically informed reading (216-23).

13. The exception that proves the rule reads, “Spread and independent — the person feeling” (43). It may be unintentional, however, since it doesn’t call much attention to itself as over-extended.

14. The sentential line survives the line segment in *Oxota*, a sonnet-like sequence modeled after Pushkin’s *Eugene Onegin*, and composed about a year after Hejinian finished *The Cell*. Each poem in *Oxota* is composed of fourteen unsegmented, indented lines of any word length. As is evident from journal publications where the printer establishes the right-hand margin breaks (see for instance *Oblek* 8, 146-9), the discontinuous lines of *Oxota* are run-over, not enjambed. Thus these poems differ significantly from unrhymed free-verse sonnets, such as Robert Lowell’s, which are characterized by long enjambed periodic sentences. Curiously, the next selection in *Oblek* 8 is taken from a

Clark Coolidge poem, *This Time We Are Both*, which is also the first line of *Oxota*.

15. Hejinian's autobiographical prose poem, *My Life*, is also numerically and temporally formed. Written in 1978, when Hejinian was 37, *My Life* is composed of thirty-seven sections of thirty-seven sentences each. Each section thus corresponds to a calendar year and to a year of Hejinian's life. Hejinian may have been encouraged in her project by the opening performative of Whitman's autobiographical "Song of Myself": "I, now thirty-seven years old in perfect health begin, / Hoping to cease not till death." Hejinian added 8 sections and 8 sentences to each section in the 1987 edition of her poem, much as Whitman revised "Song of Myself" in subsequent editions.

16. "From *The Cell*," for instance, contains twelve late poems (from June 26, 1988, to August 9, 1988), each divided into seven-word line segments. The fall 1989 issue of the journal *screens and tasted parallels* contains the next entry in *The Cell*, dated August 11, 1988, in which the opening seven-word compound is chopped into a pentaverbal segment and an enjambed remainder: "A beautiful sea of a / chopped blue[.]" This poem, number 132 out of 150, was apparently the first one (re)written in pentaverbal segments.

17. One instance that I noticed of enjambed compound lines stands out as a Penelopean exception: "It's incomplete, perpetually — is being / written is unwritten and nearing / completion, what / Do I mean enough to / stop (which suggests a violent / metamorphosis)" (136). The break might easily have come earlier: "completion / What do I . . ."

18. When this poem was composed, the flag had not yet become an issue in the 1988 Presidential campaign, but the debate between George Bush and Michael Dukakis over the pledge of allegiance may have influenced Hejinian's pentaverbal revision.

19. Ronald Reagan spoke to anti-abortion supporters on the anniversary of *Roe v. Wade* in 1986 and in 1987 (*The Cell* ends January 21, 1989). By then, abortion clinics were being bombed. In 1988 Pat Robertson, who helped found the National Right to Life Committee, made a short-lived run for the Presidency.

20. The obsession spills over into Hejinian's prose. Consider this dream transcript: "*Dream of November 2, 1986*: I am taking part in a project to measure the planetary system. Other people are involved including a tall thin man and a woman with enormous breasts. In the project to measure the planetary system each participant slips into place between other participants to form a sphere. . . . I am afraid of being smothered by the woman's enormous breasts" ("Strangeness" 34-5; ellipsis added). The fear of being "smothered" cryptographically identifies the solar center of this system as "mother."

21. Again, a single possible exception — aside from a poem punctuated by ellipses (65) — is the line "Etc." (132), in which the period punctuates an abbreviation.

22. Compare the autobiographical perspective on motherhood in *My Life*: "from the little laundry porch, like the other mothers, I could overlook the rectangular lot enclosed by the four arms of the building for tenant parking where a group of small children were playing — or rather fighting — and it was to enter these fights that the women shouted and cajoled from their porches at the

children and each other" (63; the speaker is 24, the year 1964). However "I" and Hejinian are related, this first-person eye securely orients the reader's point of view.

23. See Hejinian, "From *The Cell*" 229. This poem was omitted from the chronological sequence of *The Cell*.

24. For Hejinian, the distinctness of objects is enhanced by West Coast sunlight: "In the Bay Area, the light, despite and even in the fog, is bright, strong, and bounded; it separates and maintains objects, as if it were the source of their discreteness and their finitude, and makes the contrast between an object and its shadow definite and resolute" (Hejinian in Davidson et al. 85).

25. The male seeing and saying in non-idiomatic English may echo the Russian poet Dragomoshchenko, who first visited Hejinian in the US in the spring of 1988 (Hejinian and Miller 37).

26. These lines depersonalize the seventh and eighth lines of the poem's first version: "A man in a different language loves / me — for him my character is in / the realm of possibilities / For one moment this too means hysteria / but without losing the lively consciousness of / my personality" ("From *The Cell*" 229).

27. For the project of "hysterical" knowledge and writing, see Auerbach 111-31, Cixous 245-65, and Kristeva 227-34.

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