Radical dialectics in the experimental poetry of Berssenbrugge, Hejinian, Harryman, Weiner, and Scalapino

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RADICAL DIALECTICS IN THE EXPERIMENTAL POETRY OF BERSSENBRUGGE, HEJINIAN, HARRYMAN, WEINER, AND SCALAPINO

A Dissertation
Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the Louisiana State University and A&M College in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in

The Department of English

by
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Begin with this: the world has no origin.

. . . .

Continue with this: not body vs. soul,
but the inherent doubleness of any situation.
Thus in fusion there is also abyss.

Clayton Eshleman, *Under World Arrest*
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ABSTRACT

In this dissertation, I focus on the work of five contemporary experimental poets – Mei-mei Berssenbrugge, Lyn Hejinian, Carla Harryman, Hannah Weiner, and Leslie Scalapino – in order to demonstrate various aspects of a philosophical dynamic at work in their poetry. The critical debates surrounding experimental poetry often tend to be structured as a dualistic opposition with, for example, the forces of coherence, narrative linearity, and transparent referentiality on one side, and the forces of semantic disruption, narrative discontinuity, and linguistic materiality on the other. On each side, critics attempt to bolster the essential value of one term or set of terms over the other, in a binary polarity. However, such a critique only leads to the formation of another hierarchy. I believe that it is important to understand the dialectical motion at work in much experimental poetry in order to avoid lapsing into reductive theories that reinstate hierarchical structures and dualistic thinking.

By describing a “radical dialectics,” I am proposing a strategy of reading experimental work that recognizes its philosophical significance and its attempts to complicate dualistic conceptual constructions such as public and private realms of experience, subject and object relations, and narrative and non-narrative forces. This strategy emphasizes the mutually informing and critiquing dialogue and the nonresolving aspect of the dynamic interplay between conceptually opposed terms. I demonstrate this interdependent dialogue in several different yet related realms, including subject and object perceptual experience, the construction of individual subjectivity, temporality and narrativity, and intersubjectivity.

To support my argument for the dialectical motion that I describe in the poetry, I draw upon a diverse range of thinkers, some of whom have influenced the poets whose work I analyze. These theorists span a wide range of fields, including ancient Indian Buddhist philosophy,
cognitive science, feminist psychoanalysis, and phenomenology. In their various ways, these thinkers share, along with the poets with whom I place them side by side, the common project of transforming a dualistic view of the world and engaging in a profoundly dialectical philosophical project.
CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION:
A MIDDLE WAY WITH NO MIDDLE GROUND

Because there is a relationship between the mind and the body, there are inevitable experiences of instability and therefore of loss and discontinuity.

Loss of scale accompanied by experiences of precision
Lyn Hejinian

. . . disappearing and rooted at once
Hilda Morley

The epigraphs to this introductory chapter give clues to the theoretical treatment of contemporary experimental poetry that I present in this dissertation. Lyn Hejinian juxtaposes loss of scale with precision; Hilda Morley proposes the coexistence of disappearance with rootedness. The experimental poets whose writings I analyze throughout this work question habits of thought and language and investigate conventional and conceptual dualisms, including that between mind and body. Their poetry is concerned with the coexistence and the dialogical motion between seemingly contradictory terms such as “private” and “public,” and “referentiality” and “nonreferentiality.” Moreover, their poetry proposes the interdependence of such terms, and indeed, at a certain level, their deep identity. In the four thematic chapters of this dissertation, I am concerned with ways in which contemporary experimental poetry enacts a dialogue between putatively contradictory realms and generates multiple meanings in the process-oriented and endlessly-circulating motion of that dialogue. The non-resolving and endlessly circulating dialogue between putatively contradictory terms is what I am calling the radical dialectics of experimental poetry.

Providing a detailed history of contemporary experimental poetry would be an involved and complex project, and is outside the range of possibility for a work such as the present one.
The history and historicization of experimental poetry has begun to be seriously addressed and reevaluated by critics in recent years, notably by Marjorie Perloff, Eleana Kim, Linda Reinfeld, George Hartley, and Peter Quartermain. However, a summary of its origins and development and some of its major figures will be helpful for contextualizing the theoretical foundation for the rest of this chapter, as well as for the analyses in the four thematic chapters.

First, it must be stressed that categorizing and labeling poets is anything but a fixed and inflexible undertaking. The European and American poetries of the twentieth century inherited characteristics from various lineages, and, since the categories of their forebears are not mutually exclusive, sometimes from more than one. The modernist period was full of contradictions as poets who entered the new century struggled to slough off poetic dictates of the previous century yet still had a nostalgic foot in old philosophical and poetic groundings. A poet such as Wallace Stevens, for example, has elements of both symbolist and avant-garde poetics.

Furthermore, the proponents of both experimentation and traditionalism in poetry have been known to claim for their respective sides the same body of work. In this hermeneutical tug-of-war, critics attempt to bring a particular poet’s body of work over to one camp or the other. Thus John Ashbery is championed both by Perloff and other apologists of experimental poetry, and by Helen Vendler and Harold Bloom, critics who value the high modernists and their successors such as James Merrill, A. R. Ammons, and Robert Penn Warren. Similarly, the work of Ezra Pound has been embraced by critics who are at opposite poles on the range of the experimental and the traditional in twentieth-century poetry. But in spite of such complexities and crossover figures, the category of experimentalism is helpful for distinguishing a broad poetic tendency that points to philosophical issues critical to understanding problems in contemporary poetry and poetics.
In tracing the historical roots of twentieth-century experimental poetry, some critics find antecedents in poets of the mid-to-late nineteenth century. In *The Poetics of Indeterminacy: Rimbaud to Cage*, for example, Perloff traces the current schism between so-called mainstream or academic poetry and experimental or avant-garde poetry back to two lineages that branched off from nineteenth-century French poetry: symbolism, such as that of Stéphane Mallarmé and Charles Baudelaire, and the avant-garde poetics of Arthur Rimbaud. Indeed, in distinguishing among the various continuities and disjunctions within the history of Western poetry since the late nineteenth century, there appears to be, very generally, a polarity between the poetics of symbolism and the poetics of the avant-garde, or what might also be generally referred to as objectivism. By the latter term, I refer not only to the objectivism or “objectism” of Louis Zukofsky and Charles Olson, but to a broadly-based movement that reacted against symbolism and advocated a return to a direct and immediate response to reality, or to the object at hand, including a preoccupation with perception, thought, language, and the poem itself. The first tendency has its roots in the nineteenth-century, and is epitomized by the poetry of Baudelaire and Mallarmé, and continuing in a lineage that includes William Butler Yeats, T. S. Eliot, Stevens (arguably), Robert Lowell, and John Berryman. The poets who reacted against symbolism and whose poetry tends to break down the dualistic and organic approach of the symbolists include Rimbaud, Gertrude Stein, Guillaume Apollinaire, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, William Carlos Williams, Pound, Tristan Tzara, Zukofsky, Olson, John Cage, Clark Coolidge, Ashbery, and more recently, the poets associated with the language school such as Ron Silliman, Hejinian, Bruce Andrews, Charles Bernstein, Carla Harryman, Rae Armantrout, Bob Perelman, Barrett Watten, and many others. In terms of twentieth-century schools of poetry, these poets generally follow a line of development that includes Dada, Italian and Russian
Futurism, Surrealism, Objectivism, Black Mountain, Beat, New York School, San Francisco Renaissance, and Language poetries.

Before moving to the twentieth-century experimentalists, including the language poets, let us first return to Mallarmé and Rimbaud, whom Perloff views as representatives marking the roots of the historical split between the two poetic lineages described above, briefly to examine the nature of their different approaches. Mallarmé believed that there was a crisis in poetry in which the “supreme [language] is lacking,” and “since the immortal word is still tacit,” verse must make up for linguistic deficiency, “completely superior as it is.”5 In “The Book as a Spiritual Instrument,” he conceived of an ideal book that would contain all earthly experience and would represent all harmony and joy. The words and motifs of such a book would be precisely placed on the page so as to communicate an intended and ultimate meaning, which, when properly understood, would allow the reader to escape reality and to “become immortal for a brief hour.”6 Critics of symbolism have pointed out that such a book would be impossible to write, since human experience is an infinite continuity, and impossible to read, since it would take all time to pronounce. In these statements by Mallarmé, a duality is evident between reality and an ideal, a divinity or “beyond” that the poet constantly struggles to inscribe, yet is doomed to failure.

Mallarmé’s poem “Les Fenêtres”7 portrays this duality starkly and vividly. A dying patient (who represents the poet as well as the general human condition) gazes from his hospital window and longs for the pure azure beyond the “golden panes.” In his yearning for the arcadian world behind the glass, he kisses the panes, defiling them. He longs to “wear his dream like a crown” and join the paradisiacal world beyond the panes. The glass (his art) both allows him a view of the ideal paradise of autrefois, yet also prevents him from transcending the barrier and
join the paradise of eternal beauty. He asks whether he dares to crash through the glass into the world beyond, with his featherless wings, and risk falling into an eternity. For Mallarmé, the risk of “falling” has not only the psychical danger of entering that realm at the peril of insanity, but also symbolic Christian moral implications. The duality that the symbolists created between earthly existence and an ideal beyond reflects an attempt to substitute art for religion. The symbolic tableau that Mallarmé constructs in his poem expresses the semantic and epistemological fatalism of this scene. For the symbolists used words as vehicles to point to a meaning beyond their ordinary significations, just as they also yearned to transcend physical reality and reach toward a utopian place in which the subject/object and signified/signifier distinctions would collapse into a Dionysian world of non-differentiation. Ironically, the symbolists attempted to fuse subject and object using the very linguistic formation guaranteed to assure its rupture, symbolic language. The symbolist poet was torn between the desire for a paradise, and the knowledge of its impossibility, unless he resorted to the illusion of the windowpane.

Rimbaud took a very different approach to symbolist poetics. It is false, he says, to say, “I think,” for the moment one does so, one posits a separation between the thinking self and the not-self. The mind becomes removed from natural processes, which it posits as an “other,” perhaps to be disdained or controlled. It is more accurate to say, “On me pense,” “I am being thought.” In such a formulation, the self is no longer a unified, autonomous subjectivity, a monolithic thinking being apart from the world, but becomes a witness to the birth of its own thoughts. As Perloff puts it, when the poet states “Je est un autre” (I is an other) the “schizoid” poet steps aside and observes the mind in its process of thinking itself. This stance allows one to posit oneself as an object within nature and natural processes, and not apart from them. For “in
Rimbaud, the Romantic distinction between subject and object, a distinction that persists in the poetry of Yeats and Eliot, collapses.” Rimbaud’s loosening of the semantic field and of the notion of the discrete and autonomous self gave permission to the modernist and contemporary avant-garde poets who followed him to continue the process of diverging from the dualisms of Symbolist poetry.

The most recent flourishing of American experimental poetry, grouped rather loosely under the collective label “language poetry,” arose from a group of poets in the 1960s and 1970s, mainly concentrated in New York City, the San Francisco Bay Area, and Washington, D.C. Contemporary poets writing in this tradition are sometimes called experimental, avant-garde, language, or innovative poets. “Language poetry” is so called because of \[L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E\], the ground-breaking journal of poetics that was published between 1978 and 1981, and because one of its primary projects was to dispel the myths of the transparency of the medium of language and to emphasize its materiality. In the present work, I use “avant-garde” and “experimental” interchangeably. My preferred term, however, is “experimental.” Critics sometimes state that “experimental” signifies work that is unfinished, a sketch that is not yet ready to rise above notebook status and attain the more dignified realm of a polished piece so finely crafted that its satisfying coherence and emotional import would suffer from the change of a single word. The contemporary poet Jack Foley, however, points to the shared etymological roots of “experiment” and “peril.” To these I would add “experience.” “Peril” is the root of all three: L. periculum, periculum experiment, trial, risk, danger, f. root of peri-ri to try, make trial of + -culum, suffix naming instruments. The roots of the word “experiment” indicate its usefulness in describing the decentered approach to the writing and reading of what has been previously described as “avant-garde.” It indicates a certain danger in
the trial, in the stepping away from a comfortable place and into the unknown, to test convention, to risk the consequences of leaving a center and moving into another center, to leave that one for another, and another, and perhaps finally to understand that centers do not hold. “Experiment” lends itself well to a poetry that encourages the reader to risk letting go of various epistemological and existential habits.

The language poets developed their poetry and poetics in part in reaction to a number of interrelated political, cultural, and sociological conditions of that period. Politically leftist in orientation, many of the poets perceived their project in utopian terms, creating a community of writers seeking a radical alternative to ideologies of state militarism and imperialism, economic injustice, multinational capitalism, consumerism, racism, and sexism. Culturally, these poets were also reacting against the dominant aesthetic in poetry that was largely fostered in university creative writing programs during the 1960s and 1970s. The so-called “workshop aesthetic” tended to emphasize the poet’s cultivation of a unique, authentic voice, and to value the writing of a kind free-verse lyrical self-expression. Thus one of the original projects of language poetry was “debunking the figure of the poet as a solo egoist” and challenging prevailing ideologies about a unified and authoritative subject. In general, language poetry placed linguistic, perceptual, social and cognitive habits under scrutiny, compelling the reader – or at least seeking to compel the reader – to question the status of those habits or thought patterns as possessing inherent structures or qualities. Such conventions as linear narrativity and shape, realistic description, unified subjectivity, and the referentiality of language were all subjected to critique, from the inside out. Language poetry had from its beginnings a strong self-reflexive impetus, encouraging the reader to examine the materiality of the language being used in the poem, as opposed simply to accept the marks on the page as a medium transparently conveying a message.
yet itself invisible to examination. Language poets were eager to show language to be an artifice, and they constructed their poetry so that one might become aware of the crane in the deus ex machina transporting the supposedly sacred meaning onto the stage of the poem. The reader’s innocent absorption in the drama was no longer a goal. The reader was to become implicated in constructing meaning in the play of language.¹³

Needless to say, language poetry was not generally received with open arms, either in the popular culture or in the academy, and it was often met with open hostility to its perceived meaninglessness and total linguistic anarchy. And so the poets themselves created venues and forums for the publication and exposure of their work. A number of small magazines and presses, edited and published by poets, came into being during this period, creating a means to disseminate the work and to discuss and debate its ideological grounds. Tuumba (edited by Hejinian), The Figures (edited by Geoff Young), and This Press (edited by Watten) were some of the ground-breaking presses of the earlier days of the new experimental poetry. Watten’s This, Perelman’s Hills, Tom Mandel’s Miam, Silliman’s tottel’s, Harryman’s Qu, Bernstein and Andrews’ L=A=N=G=U=A=L=E, and Hejinian’s and Watten’s Poetics Journal also provided a means of publishing work that might not have seen the light of day, given the either hostile or indifferent attitude toward this work by mainstream presses and magazines. And reading series such as The Grand Piano (curated by Silliman, Mandel, and Armantrout) and Talks (curated by Perelman) also encouraged the formation of a community of like-minded poets.¹⁴

Post-language poetry is in a shifting and uncertain period at present. Some younger-generation poets and critics of language poetry are reacting to the perceived asceticism of the poetry, and reinstating elements of such verboten categories as unselfconsciously linear narrativity and cohering subjectivity, sometimes with theological or mystical overtones. Poets
who inherited the poetic and ideological legacy of language poetry are also departing from it in significant ways, sometimes claiming to restore a sense of the foundational importance of content, meaning, the experience of material reality, historical contextuality, and a political ethos to poetry, while remaining within the avant-garde tradition. For example, the editors of the journal *Apex of the M* (active briefly during the mid-1990s), reacting to the perceived extreme semantic disruption of their immediate avant-garde predecessors, the older generation of language-centered poets, expressed their desire “for a move away from . . . an avant-garde dominated in its practices by a poetics espousing the priority of ‘language itself’ over all other relations.” While opposing the “conventional referentiality” of mainstream poetry, they also decried “the self-conscious opacity” and language idolatry of the language poets, whom they charged with endorsing “the notion that we are restricted solely to slippages within language to frustrate its conventional usages.” Instead, these poets advocate “a radical transparency of language that maintains particular ties with mimesis and narrative” and that is ultimately objectless, that allows for the non-linguistic, and finds the basis for its address in a relationship with other that is not a making of the other into a theme or an object to be possessed, is not a losing of oneself in another, and is certainly not a violent confrontation with the other that first and foremost endeavors to alienate individuals from the very possibility of dialogue and therefore responsibility.

These and other broad claims in the manifestos of the *Apex of the M* tend to blur and homogenize distinctions among their forebears and to exaggerate claims for their own dissimilarity from their predecessors. One would be hard pressed, however, to find any founding or older-generation language-centered poet – even among those who most radically challenged metaphysical assumptions of referentiality – who abandoned meaning, history, narrative, and a phenomenological concern for the perceptual experience, as issues central to their poetry and
poetics. Criticism of language poetry has often emphasized what is arguably a more salient feature of the work, that is, its concern with the slippage between signifier and signified, and between these and the referent represented by perception, language, and cognition. However, to make the sweeping claim that language poetry has been almost exclusively concerned with the play of signs at the expense of context, history, and the material world is to ignore the fact that many of these very poets have consistently stated that what they are doing is not to erase or downgrade such concerns, but instead to question ways in which one thinks about them and to destabilize ingrained notions of dualisms and hierarchies among conceptual categories.

For this reason, it is perhaps unfortunate that contemporary experimental poets have been saddled with the label “language poets.” Some of these writers have expressed their unease with this and other terms, which “can be as troublesome as they are illuminating,” for diverse reasons. For example, Armantrout says, “I use the term [“language-oriented”] but I’m suspicious of it, finally, because it seems to imply division between language and experience, thought and feeling, inner and outer.” For Armantrout, then, the term seems to weigh more heavily on one side of the epistemological and ontological scale than the other, and thus gives it a dualistic cast. Moreover, the label “language poetry” tends to define the numerous projects of the poetry under a single rubric of concern rather than allowing them to circulate in a more open arena. As Bernstein and Andrews have pointed out, “[s]logans and catchphrases signal the possibility that stylistic fixation can be an entrapment for these as well as other tendencies in recent poetry.” Labels can unduly restrict a project that, “if it can be summarized at all, has involved exploring the numerous ways that meanings and values can be (& are) realized – revealed – produced in writing. This involves an opening of the field of activity and not its premature foreclosure.” Also, such labels tend to stereotype the concerns of experimental poets, which has probably
contributed to the one-sided nature of the criticism, both positive and negative, of the various disillusioning investigations associated with their poetry.

Within the very broad category of late-twentieth-century experimental poetry, there are many conflicting ideologies and political positions. The movement never was in any sense monolithic. There are, of course, many philosophical commonalities among experimental poets, such as the desire to question linguistic and existential categories such as the autonomy and identity of the subject. As with any internally diverse group, the poets associated with the Language school were not all equally devoted to, in agreement with, or even aware of, all of these oppositional goals, and within the movement there have been differences and debates. Megan Simpson, in *Poetic Epistemologies: Gender and Knowing in Women’s Language-Oriented Writing*, explores the history of language poetry from a feminist perspective. Pointing to some decidedly non-utopian moments in the history of late-twentieth century experimental poetry, she demonstrates that sexism is indeed not impossible in a poetry whose primary criticism lodged against it has been its “meaninglessness.” The sexism, egoism, and intellectual arrogance of some male practitioners of the new experimental poetry has been documented and analyzed. Sexist positioning has been observed not only in the content of some of the poetry, but also in the sometimes poor representation of women in anthologies, journals, and reading series, and in practices such as the subtle or overt exclusion of women poets in social contexts. Neither, as Scalapino points out, are postures of racial and gender privilege unheard of among the largely (but by no means exclusively) white and middle-class practitioners of experimental poetries.

A variety of opinions have been stated, over the history of contemporary experimental poetry, on the question of the production of meaning in which language poets claim to have such an important stake. As the movement aged, the more extreme positions of some of its...
practitioners have altered to embrace a more conciliatory attitude toward poetry that is less disruptive of meaning and syntax. From the beginning, however, most poets writing experimental poetry made it clear that the issue was not, and never was, that “writing should (or could) be stripped of reference,” an idea “as bothersome and confusing as the assumption that the primary function of words is to refer, one-one-one, to an already constructed world of things.”

Not even in the wildest dreams of analytic or logical positivist philosophy has the idea of such an ideal language – at least one in ordinary usage, that is – free from irregularities, ambiguities, and semantic fuzziness, and embracing a direct correspondence between word and object, been entertained. Similarly, Armantrout commonsensically and perhaps with mediating intentions reminds us that “[t]o believe non-referentiality is possible is to believe language can be divorced from thought, words from their histories.” The words of a language cannot be completely, absolutely divorced from their meaning, however circulatory, elliptical, slippery that meaning might be. Armantrout’s words were not only intended as part of her own statement of poetics, but a reply to critics of language poetry who proclaimed the abject meaninglessness of much of the work and the resulting assumption of linguistic dogmatism. Referring to the works in L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E, Bernstein and Andrews state that instead, “reference, like the body itself, is one of the horizons of language, whose value is to be found in the writing (the world) before which we find ourselves at any moment. It is the multiple powers and scope of reference (denotative, connotative, associational), not writers’ refusal or fear of it, that threads these essays together.” I would extend such statements regarding the inescapability of referentiality to include poetic language that, to use Julia Kristeva’s psychoanalytic terminology, seems to arise directly and without mediation from the prelinguistic magma of the semiotic chora and that does indeed appear to be divorced from meaning. Despite their extreme discontinuity or apparent
rejection of signification, nonsense poetry that attempts to create an artificial or imaginary language or alphabet; sound poetry, which seems to aspire to the conditions of music; and some concrete poetry, do not escape signification. Constructed with signs of various types, they elicit emotional registers that carry meaning.

For example, Isidore Isou’s “Larmes de jeune fille” might seem on first exposure to the poem to be communicating nothing at all, yet it has clusters of emotionally suggestive intensities and evocative symbols. Here are the first three lines of the poem:

M dngoun, m diahl Ohna îou
hsm îoun înhlianhl M pna iou
vgâîn set i ouf! sai iaf

George Steiner claims that such poetry “breaks the association not only between words and sense, but between semantic signs and that which can be spoken. Poetry has been produced solely for the reading eye.” Despite the poem’s radical unfamiliarity and linguistically alien context, the poem is somehow strangely moving. Indeed, “[t]he wall is at the same time blank and expressive.” Yet in spite of a possible feeling that the poem perversely refuses interpretation, that very feeling has the seeds of meaning, and indeed may be thought of itself as a meaningful reaction to the work. Even to claim that such poems are nonverbal is to deny the potential linguistic-cum-emotional effect of the symbolizations. Isou’s poem may leave us moved or frustrated. While some might feel its poignancy, others might feel emotionally distanced or even feel repelled by its opacity. Our emotional response is as meaningful as it is inevitable. Such experiments as these demonstrate the power of linguistic symbols, even of those symbols do not seem to correspond in any recognizable way to the structure and semantic
content of traditional alphabets or morphemes – and they push back the boundaries of what is “tolerable linguistic deviance.”

The lineage of experimental poetries, from Rimbaud to dada, futurism, surrealism, objectivism, and so on through the language and post-language schools of poets, have in general posed different kinds of inquiries, different sets of questions, often embracing the possibility of pain or sorrow, as well as the delight of play or jouissance, that comes with the acknowledgement of the rupture between signifier and referent, as does Hejinian:

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

Yet the attempt to universalize that sorrow or to attribute an essential or transcendent existence to the felt correspondence between mortality and linguistic rupture is not a necessary concomitant to such an acknowledgement. Indeed, to do so would be to fall prey to the belief that a nihilistic divorce between experience and reality, between language and object, and between signifier and signified, is the whole story, a complete philosophical statement of truth. We cannot mistake language and perception for the object itself, yet this rupture, this acknowledgement of our isolation from the not-self, is only part of a larger and more complex picture that also acknowledges the important role of the reality outside consciousness.

Stein continues and increases avant-garde poetry’s distance from the symbolist aesthetic. The often extreme semantic disjunction in her poetry has spawned debates regarding the presence or absence of an overall semantic design in works such as Tender Buttons. The ongoing discussion concerning the issue of encoded meaning versus indeterminacy in this work illustrates
a potential for dualistic hermeneutical thinking about experimental work in general. In writing about the composition of that work, which is often taken to an example of her cubist poetics, Stein claims to have studied an object intently and allowed it to suggest associations. Sometimes, the “associations” seem to have absolutely no connection with the object being described, as in “PEELED PENCIL CHoke / Rub her coke.” Other works, such as “A PLATE,” are described in recognizable terms: “Cut in white. Cut in white so lately.” The latter seems to emphasize the edges of the object, and attests to an acute attention to the object at hand, not to the object as use-function, as vehicle to a transcendental purpose, as the symbolists often did in order to evade the distressing and sordid reality of industrialized society. Stein tries to see the object as it is and also as an object within the imagination, but not in order to reach, at least imaginatively, an ideal of a distant beyond.

In Stein scholarship, there is a school that tends to resist interpretation – at least a coherent interpretation – that might do violence to the intrinsically polysemous nature of the work. Others claim that one can indeed find an encoded trail of meanings that not only disrupts conventional phallogocentric notions of signification through its method of radical disjunction and incessant beginnings, but also disrupts such conventions thematically. However, to believe either one way or the other is to limit one’s appreciation of Stein’s project, for, as Armantrout and other poets associated with the language school have stated, words are never entirely free of their signifying function. The reader can find patterns of signification in Stein just as he or she can enjoy the radical de-centering of her signifying process.

On the side of valuing the jouissance and polyvalence in Tender Buttons, Marianne DeKoven makes a claim for the extreme indeterminacy of coherent meaning in this work. According to DeKoven,
[C]oherent, referential meaning – the transcendental signified – is . . . absent from Stein’s experimental work. . . . Stein’s radical works deny, avoid, in fact negate the transcendental signified. They have no themes. Interpretation of them – close reading of a whole text – is reduced to listing all possible combinations of lexical meanings, as if those meaning themselves . . . were the point of the writing.42

Despite DeKoven’s qualification of “transcendental” in the doomed search for the signified of *Tender Buttons*, her position of the radical absence of themes in the work still comes across as a rather extreme one. After all, the very fact of Stein’s catalogue of objects, sometimes even described in such a way that the reader might guess what is being portrayed, attests to at least the possibility for an overarching meaning in the work, even if that meaning overlaps with several others in dialogue with one another.

Other scholars, such as Lisa Ruddick, claim to find a coherent structure of signification lurking beneath what DeKoven calls the “word-salad” of the work.43 She finds examples of such encoded, “Gnostic” meanings throughout *Tender Buttons*, which have to do with, on the one hand, the sacrifice of the female in a patriarchal society, and, on the other hand, the restoration and revitalization of that sacrificed female. For Ruddick, whereas *Tender Buttons* has been viewed as impenetrable, however dazzling stylistically,44

[it] is far more intellectually cohesive than has been supposed. In the midst of its linguistic play lies a series of substantive thoughts that point in the direction of a gnostic feminism. Now Stein’s precursor text is the Bible: she contests and corrects that text, unlocking within its patriarchal symbols a suppressed, woman-affirming story.45

Ruddick makes a compelling case for her interpretation, yet it is not the only possible overall interpretation. Moreover, such arguments should not detract from the possibility for the reader also to experience the sheer pleasure of the text with its splashed and shattered surface play.
The arguments of DeKoven and Ruddick, whom I have taken as representatives of supposedly antithetical opinions regarding the more experimental of Stein’s work, are actually not so far apart. DeKoven states that Stein’s creative process of blending representations of an “outside” (“some feature of the world outside”) and an “inside” (“a compatible point in one’s own internal landscape: a mood, feeling, cluster of associations”) seems to have the effect of cutting the language loose from coherence but not from meaning. . . . Conventional description is faithful to the external coherence of the object; free association and stream-of-consciousness are faithful to the internal coherence of consciousness, or the subconscious; and purely chance groupings of words (“word-salad”) are faithful to no anterior coherence at all. This experimental writing, however, is neither faithful to an anterior (either external or internal) coherence nor completely random. It is . . . senseless and yet signifying.46

Ruddick at moments also admits to the possibility for both critical positions for the same work:

Quite simply, I believe that a text can be polysemous and still have themes, or “patterns of meaning.” There is no question that Stein opens up what is sometimes called jouissance, or the play of the signifier. But the fact that a person’s language is mobile and polysemous does not mean that the person cannot at the same time be thinking “about” various things, in ways that can be traced and interpreted.47

For both critics, then, it would seem to be a matter of degree, and both admit the possibility of the coexistence of both an encoded system of meaning and a polysemous play of language.

It is not surprising that the theoretical backdrop of DeKoven’s analysis is deconstruction, and that of Ruddick’s is feminism. Reading these two analyses against each other, one senses a tension within a larger theoretical arena between questions of representation, meaning, cultural and individual identity, and material oppression. Deconstruction and feminism, uneasy bedfellows since the beginning of deconstruction’s emergence in the late sixties, continue to coexist uneasily and question each other’s categories and tenets. A more dialectical Stein
criticism would move in the direction of acknowledging the possibility for the simultaneous existence of both an open field of meaning (arguably a feminist endeavor itself in the twentieth century) and the possibility for an encoded feminist critique within a single work. Such a response would not simply champion disruptive semantic surface for its own sake, nor would it seek only to decode the work’s possible feminist interpretations. Instead, it would analyze how these two impetuses in *Tender Buttons* work together in a dialogical manner to inform, shape, and critique one another.

The analysis of tendencies in Stein criticism exemplifies a broader tension in the history of the criticism of twentieth-century Western poetry. This history often chronicles a debate between positions that, when described as the extreme ends of a range of possibilities, are essentially dualistic. On one side are the proponents of experimentation and the philosophical congeries often associated with it: an emphasis on the forces of chaos and entropy predominates, as does a valuing of process over product, chance operations, disjunctiveness, the materiality and opacity of language, nonlinearity, the diffusion of the authorial self, and generally speaking the questioning of all manner of linguistic and conceptual habits and categories. On the other side are the proponents of a set of values that can be traced to varying degrees to aspects related to Romanticism and to a Cartesian faith in hierarchical binaries, including an emphasis on temporal linearity, narrative trajectory, thematic coherence, a faith in referentiality, focus on the transparence of the linguistic medium, and a poetic voice emerging from a more or less unified and cohering subject.

To delineate the two extreme positions so sharply is to oversimplify a field that is complex and interconnected, and which contains many examples of cross-pollination between the two critical positions. However, the categories are useful in pointing out the overt and latent
tensions in discussions of twentieth-century poetry. Issues of faith in the categories of one posture or the other have arisen over and over again, like debates that artificially set up the argument as a battle between entrenched and diametrically opposed attitudes. The fact that they continue to surface testifies to the tendency to understand the issues in terms of dualities: radical disjunction versus conservative linearity, centrifugal *jouissance* versus centripetal coherence.

In the criticism of contemporary experimental poetry, then, there are dualistic tendencies related to the ones just examined in reference to Stein criticism. On one side, semantic indeterminacy is upheld to the extent that it appears to acquire something of the dreaded transcendental status it would seek to dismantle. On the other side, critics disparage language poetry for its lack of an easily accessible grammatical and semantic depth, as though one should be able to approach it with the same hermeneutical strategies and standards as a poem by Robert Frost, for example. In this work, I articulate critical approaches and reading strategies for contemporary experimental poetry that recognize the operation of a radical dialectics in the work, and that avoid dualistic modes of thought.

I am focusing primarily on five contemporary poets in the experimental tradition: Mei-mei Berssenbrugge, Lyn Hejinian, Carla Harryman, Hannah Weiner, and Leslie Scalapino. They are all American poets, and with the exception of Weiner, still living. From the 1970s to the present, they have all been integrally involved in the formation of the community of language poets. And they have all self-consciously written philosophically engaged work that enacts the kind of dialectical motion with which I am concerned.

Of course, the poets themselves are not working in a theoretical or philosophical vacuum, and many of them point to specific influences in such fields as ancient and recent philosophical thought, feminist theory, and psychoanalytic theory. Many of these influences have in common...
the rejection of dualistic thinking and the embracing of a reciprocal and non-resolving motion between opposed terms or categories. For example, the ancient Indian Buddhist philosopher Nāgārjuna is an important influence for Scalapino. Indeed, a non-Western approach to the analysis of a radical dialectics in experimental poetry might be to use the terms and philosophical approaches of the Buddhist middle way. In this dissertation, I use in particular the radical deconstruction of cognitive concepts found in the work of Nāgārjuna to describe the poetic and philosophical dialogue between putatively contradictory terms. Nāgārjuna’s relentless questioning of any dualistic construction as misleading is particularly apt to my thesis, especially in my discussion of time and history in Chapter Four, and public and private realms of experience in Chapter Five.

The feminist psychoanalytic theories of Jessica Benjamin have inspired the work of Harryman. Feminist psychoanalysis, particularly in the work of Benjamin and Kristeva, inform my discussion of Harryman’s and Weiner’s breakdown of dualisms in the construction of subjectivity, which is the theme of Chapter Three.

Another means of imagining the challenge to dualisms is to study the open-ended and non-resolving dialectics of the kind that certain twentieth-century phenomenologists such as Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Emmanuel Levinas have described. These figures are particularly useful in describing the relationship between subject and object, and subject and other, which form the main themes in Chapters Two and Five.

And finally, to these thinkers who were either directly influenced the poets, or whose work bears a striking resemblance to a particular poet (as in the case of Levinas and Berssenbrugge), I add to my theoretical framework several thinkers in the field of cognitive science. Their work exhibits many correspondences with the idea of a radical dialectics in
experimental poetry. The writings of Antonio Damasio, Richard E. Cytowic, Michael S. Gazzaniga, and the collaborative writings of George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, among others, have contributed much to my understanding of the response of cognitive science to questions of dualism. Recent developments in cognitive science during and following the “decade of the brain” of the 1990s most often attempt to shatter the last vestiges of Cartesian thought by demonstrating the profoundly illusory nature, yet the eminent usefulness to survival, of cognitive categories. In each chapter, the work of one or more of these thinkers informs my argument regarding a radical dialectics of experimental poetry.

The above sources, along with a few others, are admittedly disparate in terms of their various fields of investigation as well as the era in which they lived. However, my emphasis is not on their differences, but on the resonances of their philosophies with the dialogical poetry and poetics of the five contemporary poets I discuss. In their various ways, they share along with the poets with whom I place them side by side the common project of overturning a dualistic view of the world and engaging in a profoundly dialectical philosophical project.

The term “dialectics” has had a long career. Thus it is necessary, if not to pin down a term whose meaning has fluctuated during the history of philosophy, at least to give a flavor of its application in the present work. In the late work of the phenomenological philosopher Merleau-Ponty, I find a helpful exposition of the kind of dialectical thought that best describes a similar operation in the work of the five experimental poets in this work.\footnote{48} One caveat in such a defining move is that because of the very unstable nature of dialectical thought, attempting to render it into a set of theses has the effect of displacing the very dialecticalism that one tries to describe, and ossifying the term so that the motion of reciprocity that is at its heart is stilled.\footnote{49}
Nevertheless, Merleau-Ponty gives a provisional definition that maintains the dynamic aspect of the motion:

From the most superficial level to the most profound, dialectical thought is that which admits reciprocal actions or interactions – which admits therefore that the total relation between a term A and a term B cannot be expressed in one sole proposition, that relation covers over several others which cannot be superimposed, which are even opposed, which define so many points of view logically incompossible and yet really united within it – even more that each of these relations leads to its opposite or to its own reversal, and does so by its own movement.  

This motion cannot be seen and captured as if from above, objectively and abstractly, in what Merleau-Ponty calls “high-altitude thinking.” Instead, it must be thought by “trac[ing] its own course” and by acknowledging the multiple relationships among terms in all their contradictoriness, incompatibility, and multivalence. This movement of thought is thus thoroughly implicated in the production of meaning and the engendering of relationships among terms. In dialectical thought, dichotomous relationships among terms are essential to their very being:

[D]ialectical thought is that which admits that each term is itself only by proceeding toward the opposed term, becomes what it is through the movement, that it is one and the same thing for each to pass into the other or to become itself, to leave itself or to retire into itself, that the centripetal movement and the centrifugal movement are one sole movement, because each term is its own mediation, the exigency for a becoming, and even for an auto-destruction which gives the other.

It is the dialectical nature of thought that discourages the tendency to purify a term of the shape or content of its opposite so that, thus freed from the taint from or dependency on a contradicting term, it takes on an intrinsic or meaning or character that must be valued in and for itself and that rises to a transcendental status. In a dialectical epistemology, the terms under investigation – say,
those of perceiver and perceived, or private and public, or referentiality and nonreferentiality—
are shown to be interpenetrating, thoroughly implicated in one another’s being and becoming,
and without an intrinsic or inherent nature. In Merleau-Ponty’s definition there is also something
of a paradox in the relationship between terms, in the deep identity between the “centripetal
movement and the centrifugal movement.” It is the same thing, Merleau-Ponty claims, for each
term to “pass into the other or to become itself, to leave itself or to retire into itself.” The identity
of the terms is not static and essentialist, but dynamic and dependently originating. At the same
time that a term merges with another, it also becomes itself. Dependence and independence are
separate relationships, yet also, paradoxically, one and the same. This paradoxical movement is
strikingly similar to a motion that Nāgārjuna posits between contradictory terms and categories,
as we shall see especially in Chapter Four. And it is also a characteristic of the radical dialectical
movement enacted by the experimental poetry analyzed throughout the present work.

By using the term “radical,” I intend to suggest that the dialectical motion that I describe
is thoroughgoing and dynamic, and involves the mutual investigation and interplay of terms.
This dialetics radically questions the essentializing of human categorization, in which the
intrinsic existence of our cognitive and perceptual categories are taken for granted. Yet a radical
dialectics does not denigrate the mediation of human experience by our cognitive and perceptual
functions. Instead such a dialectics places such mediation in a dynamic and interdependent
dialogue with the emptiness – to use a term important to Buddhist thought – of its functions. I
propose not a hierarchy of terms or an extreme deconstruction of one realm in order to elevate
the other, but a vital, interdependent, and mutually interrogating drama among terms. In the
sense that the dialectics enacted in the poetry allows reciprocal critique without closure, and
allows the paradoxical coexistence of contradictory terms, it is radical. The poetry enacts a
leveling of any hierarchical relationship or dualistic construction through the blurring of boundaries between terms, at the same time that it acknowledges the discrete alterity of terms.

Describing this dialectics as “radical” is also a response to the use of the word in what I consider to be dualistic critiques of poetry. The Apex of the M espoused “radical transparency” in their poetics. Experimental poetry has been viewed as embracing “radical disruption” of various linguistic parameters such as narrative, meaning, and the construction of the self. I propose instead a “radical dialectics” that rejects either extreme of an essential or transcendental formulation of poetics, and instead stresses a dialectical motion between contrary terms.

It is easy to think of the binaries under consideration as something other than convenient categorizations, as somehow reified and existing apart from our cultural and cognitive constructions, or at least somehow inevitable and natural. It would be equally misleading, however, to believe that they are exclusively human constructs, for humans do not exist as entities that are divorced from their environment, but as beings interconnected with other living and nonliving beings. Each term of a dualism can be complicated to be shown to be not so much distinct but containing its own range of possible meanings and valences. Moreover, the terms of every dualism can be shown to be parts of an interconnected complexity and plurality. To use Hegel’s classic example, there exists master and slave, but not as pure entities. Instead, their relationship both reinforces and interrogates the binary arrangement. And what is the status of the child born of master and slave? The child is “owned” in a sense by the master, yet not purely a slave. The categories of master and slave are not only interdependent and complex, but they are also parts of a larger dynamics of social relationships.

To give an example of a different binary, one can experience degrees of meaning and meaninglessness in language, yet in a specific context, each term is dependent upon so many
interlocking conditions as to be useless as a pure, abstract term. As I show in Chapter Three, Harryman’s *Gardener of Stars* is neither narrative or anti-narrative, and yet it is both. It is an exploration of the terms and conditions of narrative, which is a nominal or conventional category. It is what a writer and reader – and their historical and cultural context – make of it. One can recognize in conventional binary categories useful terms for describing particular aspects of human existence without attributing to these categories essential or absolute values or characteristics, or as somehow only in orbit with one another rather than each being itself implicated in relationships with other phenomena or categories in a larger dynamic process.

In order to understand how this dialectical motion functions in experimental poetry, it may be helpful to summarize some of its features exhibited by the poetry and poetics that I closely examine in the coming chapters. First, where human convention has designated a binary relationship between terms, a radical dialectics suggests that that relationship is fundamentally dialogical and investigatory. The dialogue between the two terms means that they mutually interrogate one another in a conversation that endlessly circulates and that does not resolve into a truth-value or a hierarchical relationship between the two terms. One term does not take precedence over the other, but instead the contradictory or opposed terms retain something of the discreteness of each while simultaneously blurring the boundaries between them. Thus they allow mutual interrogation and critique. The open-ended and reciprocal dialogue between opposing terms results in a relationship that is process-oriented: it is the continual enactment of the reciprocity between the terms that makes it dialectical. There is no higher synthesis or any single or stable truth toward which the dialogue progresses. Moreover, there is no compromise between the terms. In terms of poetry, such a compromise might result in a watered-down
version of the two and a stasis of motion – perhaps a tepid lyricism rather than a dynamic dialogue.

Such a dialectical motion breaks down and destabilizes dualities, and admits of contradictions and paradoxical states. As Hejinian puts it, the “current [of experimental poetics] includes, among other things, swarms of contradiction and ambivalence.”54 And since the dialectics enacts or encourages continual circulation rather than closure, the relationship is decentering rather than hierarchicalizing, pluralistic rather than monistic or dualistic. Armantrout’s description of experimental poetry as “ambi-centric” is apt in this context.55 The dialectical motion in the poetry generates multiple meanings: it expands the semantic field rather than tending to restrict meaning or to posit a unified semantic structure that is determined by authorial intention.

A poetics of a radical dialectics can hold no easy answers to polemical questions of, for example, linguistic transparency versus the material signifier. In fact, the presentation of such a polarity in experimental poetry might take the following movement: the recognition 1) that there is some truth to both positions, 2) that there are many ways of conceptualizing the dilemma posed by such a duality. These ways might include the possibility a) that both are truth; b) that neither is true; c) that only one is true; or d) somewhere between a) and b) with an infinity of degrees of positions of truth and falsity. A radically dialectical analysis would recognize, however, that words can never be divorced entirely from their signification; they can be divorced from signification to a degree (as in a pre-linguistic state, or in the phenomenon of repeating a word until its sound seems to detach from its meaning), but it is not possible, short of damage to our central nervous systems, not to have a reaction on some level to the stimulus of a symbol or representation.
However, it is possible to imagine that without the mediation of human cognition, a word scratched onto paper has no inherent meaning and no essential existence. Our concepts, even traced down to their roots in perception, are, from the start, profoundly constructed. We might rephrase the old conundrum of whether a falling tree makes a sound if there’s no one in the forest to hear it, by asking whether colors exist if there is no one to perceive them. Colors are a phenomenon of human visual perception and do not exist in or on the objects. We have probably all, at one time or other, assumed that objects are actually somehow saturated with the colors that we see. Even if we are thoroughly aware of this particular illusion, because of the commonality of human experience, and because color seems so unquestioningly natural, we still often blithely talk about color as if it is an inherent property of objects.56

The binary between, on the one hand, human constructions and interpretations of reality, and, on the other, a reality apart from human cognition, is recognized and addressed by almost all the poets whose work I analyze in this work. It occurs most strongly and obviously in poets such as Scalapino, Hejinian, and Berssenbrugge. All five poets who form the core of my analysis in this work are opposed to a correspondence theory of truth, in which concepts or symbols somehow correspond to phenomena outside the mind and body. But instead of experiencing nostalgia for an Edenic world that holds the promise for a more direct union with reality, they posit a continually circulating dialogue between binary categories. And in the work of some experimental poets, in addition to the dialogue between contrary terms, it is possible to discern a deep identity between the two realms. For to posit that humans along with their conceptual apparatus and framework are divorced from nature is to subscribe to an unacceptable dualism between humans and the natural world. This aspect of radical dialectics is perhaps most apparent in my discussion of the work of Scalapino in relation to the philosophy of Nāgārjuna.
Another aspect of the radical dialectics of experimental poetry is the engagement with self-examination and self-critique. The experimental poetry with which I am concerned is at heart philosophically engaged. This engagement is not so much a discursive or logical exposition of philosophical ideas, but instead an enactment of a dialectical motion by placing terms in dialogue with one another in a reciprocal and open-ended exchange. The poetic face of this radical dialectics may seem disorienting in some ways yet quite ordinary in others. The philosophical “nonpositioning” is a feature of its radical dialectics. On the one hand, this dialectics refuses nihilism and dogmatic relativism, and on the other, it resists the temptation to ground itself in a position that shields itself from the possibility of interrogation, or that prevents its own transformation into new modes of human expression. In becoming, it may not itself become static. It also maintains the ability to question itself and to be wary of any tendency within itself to abstraction or essentialism, and to acknowledge its cultural and historical context. By setting, for example, autobiography in dialogue with a questioning or critique of autobiography, both terms that have been set in motion are placed under investigation. Hejinian describes her poetics as having “dilemma (as a border under pressure of doubt, as a border in question).” For Hejinian, a “responsible” poetics “vigorously questions assumptions, including, or especially, its own,” and allows “swarms of contradiction and ambivalence.”

The idea of a “responsible” experimental poetics is related to the third feature of its radical dialectics, which is the question of its ethical potential. The poetics that I am describing is neither nihilistic nor devoid of ethical potential. It does not partake in the extremes of either l’art pour l’art or didacticism. It tends to be revelatory rather than instructional, investigating and questioning rather than lecturing or proclaiming what is morally right. Hejinian, who has theorized her poetics more than most of the poets in this dissertation, again provides a relevant
description of a responsible poetics. In the following quotation, she defends the ethical potential of experimental work against the perception of its nihilistic and anti-ethical stance by some of its detractors:

Faced with the notorious gap in meaning, we may ask, “What should we do?” But we already know what to do. And this knowing what to do is neither derived from nor does it produce guidelines – either prescriptive, proscriptive, or even descriptive. It is, rather, intrinsic to living in context. Not to totalize, not to pre- or proscribe – we know that this is some of what we must do . . . because we are alert to the context in which it must be done – in history and in reason.\[^{58}\]

“Living in context” means living within a set of material and historically determined circumstances, and living with a deep understanding of the situatedness of language within that context. In addition, it means having an understanding of the continually shifting and radically impermanent nature of reality. Thus

[v]ictories are particular, local, and almost always temporary. To improve the world, one must be situated in it, attentive and active; one must be worldly. Indeed, worldliness is an essential feature of ethics. And, since the term poetics names not just a theory of techniques but also attentiveness to the political and ethical dimensions of language, worldliness is essential to a poetics.\[^{59}\]

Hejinian’s emphasis on the importance of “worldliness” and historical situatedness to an ethics in experimental poetry serves as a caveat to the seductions of poststructuralist theories in which material reality and its contributions to one’s being in the world recedes before the endless and fetishistic fascination with the freeplay of the signifier, with semantic circulation and uncertainty, and with the mediation of language in experience. Hejinian emphasizes not only the continuum between humans and world, but also our dialogical relationship with the world. And she insists upon the radical impermanence of both. In the sense that the poetics that Hejinian embraces continually investigates cognitive categories, alert to formulations of authority, coercion, and
empty rhetoricity in language, it is profoundly ethical. It is tempting to say that it is ethical despite its non-prescriptive and investigatory nature. However, it is more accurate to state that its non-prescriptive and investigatory nature is concomitant to its ethics. For it is the realization of radical impermanence, which is closely related to the idea of the non-essential (or, to use the Buddhist term, empty) nature of all phenomena, that allows one to believe in the possibility for change. And change, the condition of continual circulation and radical impermanence, is the alternative to essentialism. It allows one to imagine and to actualize improved material conditions for living beings. This is so because of the dialogical and continually circulating and reciprocal relationship posited between the realm of human perception, cognition, language, and conceptualization, and the realm exterior to human constructions and interpretations of reality. The two realms are not in a hierarchical or dualistic relationship. Neither is prior to or more important than the other. The realization of the constructed nature of our perceptions and interpretations of reality allows one to shed illusions that might otherwise rigidify one’s beliefs, as in a correspondence theory of representation, and lead one to hold to dogmatisms and authoritative positions. Such a realization allows one to understand the profound importance and constant necessity of transformation in the world. And it is the understanding of the pervasiveness of change that allows one to imagine any number of shiftings in our commonalities, our quotidian assumptions, and putatively held systems of belief. Thus while a radically dialectical poetics relentlessly attempts to dispel illusions at all levels, it also understands the necessity for human engagement with commonalities, with the realm of conventional existence, and thus willingly admits possibilities for a common ethics. The two are not mutually exclusive, but interdependent.
Having set forth what I am calling descriptives, I am afraid that they may be, after all, interpreted as proscriptives or even prescriptives for understanding a radically dialectical poetry and poetics, the enumeration of so many poetic “shoulds” for all time. Perhaps the key phrase that allows them to escape this legislative fallacy is “for all time.” For in the diachronic scheme, with all its impermanence and vagaries, these descriptives are, in practice, liberatory strategies geared to a particular time and place. The poetic approaches I discuss in this work are above all a response to a political and cultural context, interwoven with the times, persons, things, and places from which they spring. “The fact of the matter is that the world requires improving (reimproving) every day. Just as one can’t prepare an all-purpose meal and dine once and then be done with the preparation and consumption of food forever; so one cannot come to the end of the fight for social justice and ecological safety, for example, forever.” An acknowledgement that this list of attributes of a radical poetics is historically situated need not negate it. As Hejinian reminds us, a poetics needs to be continually in the process of being shaped, defined, revised, and contextualized, and this is its strength in the face of its historical contingency.

What I suggest in the remaining chapters, then, is a set of ways of reading particular instances of contemporary experimental poetry that recognizes the open-ended dialectical movement among seemingly contradictory terms. This project is unique in the theorizing of contemporary experimental poetics. Although, as we will see, some of the poets themselves have described or hinted at dialectical processes in their work, and suggested hermeneutical approaches that might take these processes into account, the critical debates surrounding the poetry often tend to be polemical, one-sided, or grounded in dualistic preconceptions. There has not yet been a sustained analysis of what such an approach, with close readings of the poems, might be like. There are, however, a growing number of books and dissertations that address
contemporary experimental poetry and poetics, including writings by the five poets in the present work. I have already noted several recent books on the topic of contemporary experimental poetry and poetics. As to the dissertations written in the past twenty-five years, there are now twenty in which Hejinian is discussed, six in which Scalapino’s work is analyzed, three devoted to Harryman, two featuring Berssenbrugge, and one that highlights the work of Weiner. I am confident that soon it will no longer be possible to claim that the field of experimental poetry is a neglected or a particularly marginal one. My effort is unique in its emphasis on a philosophical description of dialectical processes at play, in which contradictory impulses are integrated in a dialogical, reciprocal, mutually determining, and mutually critiquing motion.

One dissertation approaches the theme of the present work: Simpson’s “Poetic Epistemologies: Gender and Knowing in Women’s Language-Oriented Writing” (later published as a book, cited above) discusses the poetry of Hejinian, Scalapino, Berssenbrugge, and Harryman, among others, in terms of the intersection of gender and ways of knowing. Simpson acknowledges “the tension between immanence and transcendence” in the work of Berssenbrugge, and invokes the kinship of her work with Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology. My work is not specifically feminist in orientation, at least not in a sustained way, and it also differs from Simpson’s work in that it explores particular ways in which the poetry creates a dialogical enactment of that tension. Whereas Simpson’s work explores “the subversion of conventions of identity and gender and the deconstruction of culturally reified oppositions, binarisms, and categories,” I am concerned to demonstrate ways in which these subversions and deconstructions of categories interact dialogically and dialectically with impulses to form categories, identities, and narratives. My argument emphasizes the necessity of the interaction of boundary-forming with boundary-transgression in order to produce the semantic proliferation
that is so characteristic of experimental poetry. I wish to show that categories are not simply invoked by the poets only to dismantle, and thus devalue them, but rather in order to place them in dialogue with one another, on an equal footing. It is this dialogue that generates plurality on a field of both knowing and unknowing.

In the chapters that follow I examine the works of specific poets who have been either directly or peripherally involved in the language poetry movement, and who seem to me to exemplify some aspects of the practice of such a theory of radical poetics. Biographical sketches of these five poets are included in appendix A. These are poets whose work, it seems to me, demonstrates an attempt to complicate binary categories without lapsing into nihilism or dualism. My intent is not to idealize the poetry that I exemplify, but to point the reader to tendencies in certain contemporary experimental poetry that enact aspects of the radical dialectical movement that I describe. Although all of the poets are female, and although I am using feminist theory to frame some of my arguments (particularly in Chapter Three, which explores subjectivity), I am not claiming an overriding feminist approach to this work, but instead one that is more broadly philosophical. However, I believe that the argument could easily be made that many of the themes and approaches to them do have feminist implications.

In each chapter, I place poets in analytical conversation with philosophical traditions that seem to me to be most compatible with their philosophical approach. In some cases, there is a direct relationship of influence from theorist or philosopher to poet, as in the case of Nāgārjuna and Scalapino, and Merleau-Ponty and Hejinian. In other cases, there is not so much a direct relationship as sympathetic vibrations between the philosophical approach of the poet and philosophical and scientific thinkers.
Each of the following chapters explores a different kind of binary opposition in the work of two different poets, and proposes reading strategies for recognizing the dialectical motion between binaries at play in their work. In Chapter Two, I investigate the relationship between subject and object, and perceiver and perceived, in the work of Berssenbrugge and Hejinian. These two poets are intensely concerned with the objects around them and the ways in which they perceive those objects – in short, their work is a poetic philosophy of perception. The poetry enacts rather than describes the perceptual process and the relationship between subject and object. This relationship is enacted as reciprocal and interdependent. The poets portray the object of perception not as passive and inert, but instead as actively contributing to the process of perception. Through their poetry, they demonstrate their understanding of the embodied nature of cognition, language, and perception, and of the shared material connection with the objects of their perception. The dialectical relationship between subject and object that Berssenbrugge and Hejinian explore in their poetry points to a close affinity with the phenomenological philosophy of Merleau-Ponty, especially to his theories of perceptual openness in the relationship between subject and object, a relationship he calls the “flesh of the world.” Through analyses of Berssenbrugge’s “Irises” and “Experience,” and Hejinian’s “The Person” and “The Flying Statues,” I demonstrate the dialogical and investigatory nature of their poetry and some correspondences of their poetics with Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology.

The representation of the self in the poetry of Weiner and Harryman is the theme of Chapter Three. I propose strategies for reading their work that reveal the dialogue between the centripetal and centrifugal impulses in the construction of individual subjectivity. Multivocality, a primary concern in their work, is shown to be in continual and reciprocal dialogue with integrative impulses of the self. Both tendencies work to reinforce as well as critique one
another, and neither one is ascendant or dominates the other. I first demonstrate, by way of contrast, a kind of poem that invokes a rather heroic – or at least individuated – model of an integrated self and authentic voice that produces a coherent and unified model of subjectivity. This model is strikingly similar to that of the homunculus often described in cognitive science as a remnant of Cartesian dualism. Stanley Plumly’s statements in “Chapter and Verse” are generally representative of this type of authorial stance that is common in mainstream poetry. In my analysis of works by Harryman and Weiner, I show a quite different model of subjectivity that reveals a dialogical tension between the impetus to conceptualize the self as unified, and of the recognition of the multiple voices within the self. Subjectivity is shown to be a dynamic interaction between these impulses in the self – the centrifugal and centripetal forces that continually interrogate the construction of a subject. Weiner, whose neurological condition caused her involuntary to visualize words arising from her subconscious mind, constructed her poetry as a dialogical engagement with her conscious language and the voices that she saw projected onto objects. Through an analysis of works from Clairvoyant Journal and Little Books / Indians I demonstrate the poetic processes of the splitting and cohering of her subjectivity. These processes engage in a dynamic and never-resolving conversation of the drives within her multiple self. Harryman’s poetic novel Gardener of Stars shows her construction of characters whose selves are unbounded, fluid and ever-shifting, at the same time that they are discrete and interdependent beings. The multi-layered narrative encourages a variety of interpretations of various types of dialogues, including a dialogue of characters in a drama of human evolution, intersubjective dialogues, and intrasubjective dialogues. The psychoanalytic theories of Kristeva and Benjamin provide theoretical support for the ideas of the dialectical relationship between the unifying and shattering forces within individual consciousness. In addition, the cognitive theories
of such thinkers as Damasio, Daniel Dennett, and the collaborative work of Lakoff and Johnson provide evidence for a more dialectical and less dualistic view of the multiple versus unified self.

Chapter Four treats the phenomenon of the event in time and narrativity in works by Hejinian and Scalapino. In my analysis of their poetry, I identify approaches to the work that acknowledge the relationship between the forces of narrative disjunction and narrative linearity. Neither is essentialized, but instead shown to be in dialogue so that each interrogates the other to produce a rich semantic field of possibilities. Their work does not suppress narrative, but instead explores the premises of its construction. This is done by allowing elements of both narrative and its disruption to question one another in a dialogue without definitive answer or closure.

Scalapino’s philosophical concerns with time, narrative, and the nature of memory produce a poetry that interrogates, without denigrating, the premises of our conventional conceptualizations of past, present, and future, of causality, of an event occurring in time, and of one’s memory of events. A close look at a section from her early work “The Woman Who Could Read the Minds of Dogs,” along with a later work, New Time, shows that Scalapino demonstrates a rupture between phenomena and perception, yet also recuperates experience, memory, and narrative through her treatment of the reconstruction of an event as an event in its own right. The radical impermanence that forms the basis of her poetics also informs its ethics. The work of the ancient Buddhist philosopher Nāgārjuna profoundly influenced Scalapino’s philosophy. In my discussion of time, event, and narrativity in her work as well as that of Hejinian, I refer to Nāgārjuna’s dialectical interplay between human conceptions of time and narrative and the emptiness of those temporal suppositions. In my analysis of Hejinian’s now classic work of experimental autobiography, My Life, I demonstrate that in spite of the disjunctions at the level of the sentence, there are threads or motifs that run throughout the work. Contrasting motifs,
such as that of sentences containing precise realistic descriptions, juxtaposed with sentences that question the ability of language to record events mimetically, produce a dialogue in which each category – faithful recording of events and the impossibility of doing so – critiques the other in a non-resolving dialogue that discourages the formation of a dualistic hierarchy.

Chapter Five returns to the notion of the relationship of the subject with the world, this time exploring intersubjectivity in the work of Berssenbrugge and Scalapino. This relationship is developed in two aspects. First, I investigate the relationship on the simplest scale, that between subject and other, in the work of Berssenbrugge. My close reading of her poetic essay “Kate’s Talk” reveals a vital awareness of the shared materiality between self and non-self, and the intensified consciousness and increased richness of experience that comes from social interactions in which the integrity and transcendence of the other is recognized, as well as from a deep realization of the impermanence of reality. Merleau-Ponty’s theories are revisited as they apply to intersubjective experience. However, it is to the works of Levinas that I turn for a more sustained analysis of intersubjectivity and its ethical implications. Berssenbrugge’s poetics of self and other bears a striking resemblance to phenomenological and ethical vision of Levinas. Like Berssenbrugge’s idea of empathy in human relations, Levinas sees the encounter with the other as an occasion for a generative and enriching experience – what he calls the “infinite.” His philosophy is not a dialectics of totality, but one of continual interplay between the radical alterity of individuals and the continual overflowing and surplus of signification that arises from the generosity of the ethical intersubjective encounter. The second part of this chapter explores the dialectical relationship between private and public realms of experience in the work of Scalapino. By complicating traditional divisions between private and public experience, she seeks to demonstrate – but not necessarily denigrate – human categories of intersubjective
experience and the illusory nature of their conceptualization and hierarchicalization. She questions the rigidity of categorizations of intersubjective experience in order to reveal the tendency to reify boundaries that impoverish experience. She attempts to recover the richness of experience by demonstrating the interdependence of the private and public realms, and to demonstrate the illusory nature of the discrete separation of these arenas. Nāgārjuna again provides a useful conceptual framework for destabilizing and complicating notions of human conceptualizations. In addition, Giorgio Agamben’s theories of the expropriation of experience in public and private life provide an instructive comparison with Scalapino’s poetics. And cognitive science also has a say on the fallacy of separating the biological and the social. Scientists such as Damasio are pointing to the interpenetrating and interdependent relationship between the neural and the intersubjective, which is consonant with the poetics of both Berssenbrugge and Scalapino.

In bringing together in one work such a broad spectrum of thinkers from various fields to inform the work of contemporary experimental poets, I am not claiming that the scientific and philosophical bodies of work that inspire my analyses of the poetry are completely compatible with each other in the fine points of their theories. Within the tradition of phenomenology, for example, there is much debate and disagreement. And there is a vast cultural and temporal separation between the works of Nāgārjuna and those of contemporary cognitive science. Nevertheless, in the work of the thinkers whom I cite in this work, I find a commonality of approach that involves what might be called a dialectics of the middle way. I hope that the analyses in the coming chapters elucidate some of these commonalities among the thinkers and poets, and generate further dialogue in the growing field of experimental poetry and poetics.
Notes


8 Perloff, The Poetics of Indeterminacy: Rimbaud to Cage, 61.

9 Ibid., 59.

For a helpful summary of some of the characteristics of the aesthetics prevalent in M.F.A poetry programs, see David Dooley, “The Contemporary Workshop Aesthetic,” *The Hudson Review* 43 (1990): 259-280. Dooley’s list of the “10 Theses About the Workshop Aesthetic” specifies rhetorical devices and psychological stances that encourage what he sees as the mannered triviality of much contemporary workshop-bred poetry.


Ibid.

Ibid., 6.

Ibid., 7.


Ibid.

26 See the debate on this topic between Leslie Scalapino and Ron Silliman in “What/Person: From an Exchange,” Poetics Journal 9 (1991): 51-68. This debate is summarized in a note in Chapter Four.


28 Armantrout, “‘Why Don’t Women Do Language-Oriented Writing?’” 544.


30 Bernstein and Andrews, “Repossessing the Word,” ix-x.

31 Julia Kristeva’s psychoanalytic theories of subjectivity will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Three.

32 Dada practitioners such as Hugo Ball, Kurt Schwitters, and Raoul Hausmann have inspired a renewed interest in sound poetry among such contemporary poets as Kenneth Goldsmith, Steve McCaffery, Christian Bök and bp nichols.

33 Isou, a Romanian poet and artist born in 1928, is the founder of French Lettrisme, a kind of calligraphic visual poetry.

34 Isidore Isou, qtd. in George Steiner, After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation (London: Oxford University Press, 1975), 195.


36 Ibid., 196.

38 Hejinian, *The Language of Inquiry*, 56.


41 Ibid., 16.

42 DeKoven, *A Different Language*, 75.

43 Ibid., 79.


46 DeKoven, *A Different Language*, 79.


48 Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy will also be discussed in Chapter Two, alongside the work of poets Lyn Hejinian and Mei-mei Berssenbrugge, and to a lesser extent in Chapter Five.


50 Ibid., 89.

51 Ibid., 88, 91.

52 Ibid., 90.

53 Ibid., 90-91.


55 Armantrout, “‘Why Don’t Women Do Language-Oriented Writing?’” 546.

56 For an excellent explanation of the illusion of color perception, see George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and Its Challenge to Western Thought* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), 105-6.

More discussion of this ethical side of experimental poetics will be discussed in the coming chapters, particularly in Chapters Four and Five.


CHAPTER TWO
THE VOICE OF THINGS: MEI-MEI BERSSENBRUGGE’S AND LYN HEJINIAN’S DIALECTICS OF PHENOMENA

For our eyes are no longer the subjects of vision; they have joined the number of things seen.  
Maurice Merleau-Ponty

Everything is subject to visibility. 
Lyn Hejinian

A sensitive empiricism identifies with the object . . . 
Mei-mei Berssenbrugge

The works of Lyn Hejinian and Mei-mei Berssenbrugge investigate the nature of perception and of the relationship between subject and object. These contemporary experimental poets are vitally concerned with the objects at hand, and their poetry demonstrates an intense involvement with epistemological and ontological questions regarding perception and consciousness. Their poetry attempts not simply to describe objects from the perspective of a perceiving subject, but also to give utterance to the act of experience close to the roots of perception, with due attention to the intertwining relationship between subject and object. The analyses of Hejinian and Berssenbrugge that follow focus on the treatment of language and perception as mediators of experience, particularly the experience of a non-human object by a subject, while Chapter Five concentrates on intersubjective experience. The philosophical implications of the relationship between self and object and between self and other are by no means mutually exclusive, and indeed, as I will point out in Chapter Five, they share some important characteristics.

Both Berssenbrugge and Hejinian might be described as poets working in the phenomenological tradition, that is, they are both deeply engaged in an investigation of an
experiencing self in relation to the objects of its perception. Their respective projects are
philosophically aware, and the investigations in their work are characteristically open-ended. The
relationship that they posit between self and object is reciprocal, and does not resolve into a
hierarchy of active perceiver versus passive perceived. In addition, their poetry is concerned with
the objects of perception, but it does not simply name or describe objects. Nor does it engage in
the rhetoric of philosophy, at least not in a traditionally rational way, to describe the nature of the
act of perception. Instead, the poetry does something akin to an enactment of the perceptual
movement. For example, through its semantic, thematic, and temporal disjunctiveness, the poetry
effectively disrupts hierarchical or one-sided formations in the expression of the subject-object
relationship. The kind of perceptual motion that I describe in their poetry is consonant with the
dialectical perceptual motion that Maurice Merleau-Ponty made one of the fundamental projects
of his philosophy. A close analysis of works by Berssenbrugge and Hejinian reveals a
remarkable affinity with Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological thought, particularly his notions of
the primacy of perception, reversibility, intersubjectivity, and the “flesh of the world.” In his
unfolding of each of these notions, he is steadily and consistently undermining traditional
dualistic ways of polarizing categories.

Thus my analysis of perception in Berssenbrugge and Hejinian will engage in a sustained
comparison with the phenomenological thought of Merleau-Ponty. This comparison is useful
because it demonstrates the poets’ inheritance of ideas from a profoundly dialectical philosopher.
In his critique of dualism and his development of a phenomenological dialectics, Merleau-Ponty
acknowledges the shared rootedness in materiality of all living and nonliving things, a
nonhierarchical and reciprocal perceptual relationship between subject and object, and a
receptiveness to the a rich multivalence that perception offers to us. These are all characteristics
of the works of Berssenbrugge and Hejinian, who explore poetically what Merleau-Ponty
explores philosophically. Furthermore, the kind of dialectical motion in the realm of subject and
object relationships is related to a similar kind of dialectics motion in other areas – such as
conceptualizations of time and narrative, and of public and private realms – that I will explore in
subsequent chapters.

Even a superficial reading of their work will show Berssenbrugge and Hejinian to be
poets following very different stylistic paths. Berssenbrugge’s long lines, serious tone, and
homogeneous texture contrast rather sharply with Hejinian’s ebullience, humor and disjunctive
juxtapositions. One would never mistake one for the other. Yet in spite of their surface
differences, they are probing similar philosophical issues, and, I would argue, come to similar
conclusions, if that word may be used to describe a poetics that is singularly anti-conclusion.

Throughout her career as a poet, Berssenbrugge’s work has consistently investigated the
nature of perception and the relationship between self and not-self. In *Endocrinology*, for
example, she develops, in collaboration with the artist Kiki Smith, the theme of the
interrelatedness of the body and the natural environment. And in *Sphericity*, which was written
before and after the birth of her daughter Martha, she was concerned with “the changes in body
chemistry” that “so dramatically changed my language and perception, during this time.” In both
of these works, she interweaves ideas about the body’s organs, chemistry, and functions into her
poems, often in great detail and with scientific specificity.

A section from her longer poem “Irises” in *Four Year Old Girl* demonstrates
compellingly Berssenbrugge’s interest not only in naming and evoking perceived objects, but
also in philosophically questioning of the nature of her perception of objects, and of the
relationship between perception and cognition (see Figure 1). The continuity among the images
and concepts in the poem is more elliptical than linear or causal; the terms in the metonymic chain are more mutually determining in unpredictable ways than inevitably or formally structured. Despite its discontinuities, the theme of the dialectical relationship between an object and an idea of that object runs through this section. The actual meat of one’s winter food ("During winter, this had been a matter of stripping meat from the bone, to dry and freeze") leads to a “dream of shadows of meat.” The sight of a “satellite dish” is followed by the “white dish” on which the dreamed meat-shadows lie. An imagined ghost and a real deer are both true. An experience lies next to the form that its communication takes, and “a wild animal automatically lies next to its form.” The appearance of a metaphor in the text ("like proximity to death, the way a wild animal automatically lies next to its form") leads to an investigation of the relationship between metaphor (an imagined relationship) and such a linguistic relationship taken as real (the animal lying “next to its form”). These juxtapositions demonstrate the interchange between the material object and its idea or form, and the dialectical relationship between the two.

Berssenbrugge also sets up a dialectical relationship between the objects and their representation in the human brain during the perceptual process. Material objects and their qualities are everywhere represented in the poem: “stripping meat from the bone, to dry and freeze” to provide food during cold weather, the sight of “the color of black iris along the edge of a satellite dish,” “a blue wall,” “lily pads” in a “pond.” This fleshy and concrete “matter” of the world, however, soon gives way to matters of the interior world of dreaming, feeling, thinking, and imagining, which are all cognitive processes (“thoughts”). Berssenbrugge represents one’s thoughts about objects to be as real as the objects themselves; they are effectively a “ladyslipper behind the eyesocket, pollen falling through interstices / of her brain cells.” The linguistic metaphor of having some object on one’s mind is a literal “occurrence” in the mind of the
woman of the poem: “[t]he metaphor that the eye knows a particular by internalizing its color and shape” is also a literal happening, and is used by the woman as a “method” and a criterion for determining the reality of her intentions. The link between knowledge of the world (as represented in the brain) and knowledge of intentions is infallibly there; our “willed” actions and the action of the world on our bodies are enmeshed and inextricable, since they contain one another.

Instead of projecting her own desire to know the objects of her perception onto those objects, Berssenbrugge expresses the motion of a dialectical interchange between object and thought. In other words, she understands the objects of perception not as passive and consumable but instead as involved in the act of perception. She enacts in her poetry the mutual interdependence between subject and object. The images of both “[a] gossamer, livening fabric tips up alluringly to points of your body” and “a blue wall had assessed the posture of the women” express the action of objects on bodies in anthropomorphisms that underscore the importance of these objects in shaping our constructions and interpretations of the world, just as they influence and “acknowledge,” so to speak, the very matter and posture of our bodies by their presence. Unlike many traditional uses of anthropomorphism and prosopopeia, Berssenbrugge’s do not attempt to absorb the objects into a subjectivity by attributing to them human shapes and intentions, projecting onto them a subject’s psycho-sexual dramas, and generally remaking them in our own images.¹⁰ Instead, she uses the trope to level the field of mutual influence and interdependence between subject and object, which are shown to shape, determine, and in a sense contain one another.

Berssenbrugge’s emphasis on embodied consciousness, on the shared materiality of self and not-self, and on the cognitive movement between consciousness and perceived objects is
closely related to Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological dialectic of subject and object. One of Merleau-Ponty’s most significant theses is his profound and intricately dialectical sense of the contribution of the world in shaping our constructions of reality, his acknowledgement that “[t]he perceived world is the always presupposed foundation of all rationality, all value and all existence.” At the heart of his philosophy is the grounding of our perception in the world that we perceive, and on the importance of that reality in shaping our cognitive process and neural matter. He brings to philosophy a sense of the embodied nature of our perception and of the dialectical and non-hierarchical relationship between the perceiver and the perceived. His acknowledgment of the active participation by objects and beings in the perception of a subject is a hallmark of his phenomenology and constitutes a sustained critique of scientific objectivity. Science, he insists, must realize “the illusion of the absolute view from above” and “enjoin a radical examination of our belongingness to the world.”

Referring to the interpenetrating dialectic of a painter and the visible world, Merleau-Ponty states his thesis of the “reversibility of the seeing and the visible, of the touching an the touched,” in a subject’s relation with the objects of his perception:

Inevitably the roles between [the painter] and the visible are reversed. That is why so many painters have said that things look at them. As André Marchand says, after Klee: “In a forest, I have felt many times over that it was not I who looked at the forest. Some days I felt that the trees were looking at me, where speaking to me. . . . I was there, listening. . . . I think that the painter must be penetrated by the universe and not want to penetrate it. . . . I expect to be inwardly submerged, buried. Perhaps I paint to break out.”

And again: “[T]he vision [the seer] exercises, he also undergoes from the things, such that, as many painters have said, I feel myself looked at by the things, my activity is equally passivity . . . .” In such a dialectic, conventional boundaries demarcating conceptual categories of visible and
invisible, subject and object, sense and nonsense, are questioned to the point that the categories formerly assumed to be discrete or intact or possessing essential qualities instead become less distinctly demarcated and isolated and more interdependent. Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy is based on the notion of the shared materiality of the objects and beings of the world, as well as their shared perceivability, which he calls “flesh,” about which I will have more to say momentarily. Flesh, for Merleau-Ponty, is not the same as materiality, but is instead “the coiling over of the visible upon the seeing body, of the tangible upon the touching body, which is attested in particular when the body sees itself, touches itself seeing and touching the things, such that, simultaneously, as tangible it descends among them.”

Merleau-Ponty’s work (as well as the work of Berssenbrugge and Hejinian) is in stark contrast to Descartes’ dualistic theory of an absolute division between matter (res extensa) and soul or consciousness (res cogitans), “so that this ‘I,’ that is to say, the mind, by which I am what I am, is entirely distinct from the body, and even that it is easier to know than the body, and moreover, that even if the body were not, it would not cease to be all that it is.” Upsetting the Cartesian dualities of body and soul and redefining what it is to be an animated being in the world, Merleau-Ponty posits a “system of exchanges,” in which “[t]here is a human body when, between the seeing and the seen, between touching and the touched, between one eye and the other, between hand and hand, a lending of some sort takes place – when the spark is lit between sensing and sensible . . .” According to Merleau-Ponty, humans are, in the fullest sense, implicated in the things they perceive and the things they think, for they themselves may also be perceived and thought. The relationship in the act of perception is not that of an active perceiver acting upon a passive object, but that of mutual and active participation by both seer and seen, toucher and touched. Perception is reciprocal, not unilateral.
Merleau-Ponty developed his phenomenological dialectic in part from an argument with Cartesian dualism, which necessitates a rupture between subject and object, a bifurcation between world and consciousness.\(^1\) In this model, the perceiving self has been reduced to an active observer, and the perceived world has been reduced to an object of cognition. In philosophical terms, there has been a rupture between the realms of immanence, which refers to interior cognition or subjective consciousness, and transcendence, which refers to the existence of things apart from conscious awareness. Descartes reduces the act of perception to the realm of immanence, thus hypothesizing grounds for certainty in our knowledge of the world.

In Merleau-Ponty’s notion of the primacy of perception, which is the overarching thesis of his work, he refuses these polarized fields of immanence and transcendence as foundations for a philosophical exposition. He thus refuses intellectualism, which takes the sphere of immanence as its ultimate ground. Intellectualism posits consciousness as the only realm where knowledge and meaning is possible, and claims that nothing can positively be known about reality outside consciousness. Equally, he refuses empiricism, which takes transcendence, or the experience of a reality outside consciousness, as its ultimate ground.\(^2\) In the tradition of empiricism, the two realms of immanence and transcendence coexist, but skepticism is the result of the incommensurability of the two. However, reality is always mediated by the very act of perception, which engenders thought, emotion, and language, and so can never be known with any degree of certainty. The solution to extreme skepticism requires that a middle term be posited between the mutually exclusive realms of the immanent and the transcendent, “between certainty and ignorance, between transparency and opacity.”\(^3\) For Merleau-Ponty, this middle term was that of “flesh,” a concept he developed in his late and unfinished work *The Visible and the Invisible*. Merleau-Ponty’s notion of flesh is not matter, mind, or substance.\(^4\) It is rather an
“element,” “the concrete emblem of a general manner of being” (147), and “a connective tissue of exterior and interior horizons” (130). It is neither totalizing nor “fact or sum of facts” (130) but “the locus of an inscription of truth: the false crossed out” (130). It is the overlapping of the subject and object in the act of perceiving. To use a different metaphor, it represents a kind of perceptual dialogue between perceiver and perceived, in which no voice gets the upper hand.

In Berssenbrugge’s “Irises,” there is a similar interplay between subject and object that interrogates and confounds their distinctions. The relationship between physicality – the world stripped down to the bone, so to speak – and the interior, cognitive world, is continually being queried and reshaped, just as our interpretation of the material world is continually shifting. The relation between the form of that interpretation of “an experience / that needs to be communicated” and the experience itself cannot be described definitively by anyone. For such a relation is like a “wild animal,” perhaps unpredictable and very much of the world, lying “next to its form,” its ascribed and communicated meaning. The two are opposed yet also necessary to one another. Were the description possible, it might spell a divorce of the self from the not-self, since our relation to it would thus be defined and ossified instead of engaging in a dialectical and continually circulating movement. Or perhaps that divorce is also from the start a part of our perceptual experience, since there is very real and experiential sense in which the self is separate from the not-self. Yet the link between the material world and the human perception and interpretation of it contains both concrete and relational or formal aspects, which coexist side by side. There is both “wild animal” and “form”; there is both a representation of an object in our brain cells and a relation, impossible to describe, between that neural network and concrete reality, impossible to describe perhaps because impossible to distinguish so rigorously between
the two realms. These realms not only coexist, but also in a sense are contained within one another since they cannot be absolutely described in isolation from one another.

My semantic unfolding of the poem suggests a way of approaching the phenomenological issues it raises. Just as Merleau-Ponty encourages us to imagine perception as a reciprocal motion between subject and object, instead of as an objectifying act by a discrete subject, Berssenbrugge’s poetry interrogates the dualistic relationship between subject and object. She suggests that subject and object are at once separate in a real sense and intimately related through their shared “flesh of the world,” which is the overlapping perceptual motion between the two. Experience for Berssenbrugge is a blurring between the exterior objects and the interior representation of those objects in which “the eye knows a particular by internalizing its color and shape” and “objects . . . exist in the same size / as their image in her mind, ladyslipper behind the eyesocket, pollen falling through interstices / of her brain cells.”

My analyses of Berssenbrugge’s work should also dispel any notion that its primary focus or aesthetic value resides in the very elusiveness and undecidability of its surface, as critics of language poetry sometimes claim of works written under the sign of this broad movement. Certainly, the poem as a whole does not resolve into a clear description of a scene or landscape or a linear narrative consisting of a causal chain of events. Yet there is a philosophical and continually circulating (that is to say, elusive and ultimately undecided) query taking place that suggests depth beneath a surface blurred with disjunctions. The poem has both surface and depth, and its meaning is both determinate and indeterminate. These qualities do not suggest a hierarchical order or dualistic relation between them. To claim that Berssenbrugge is mainly interested in semantic slippage would be to miss an equally crucial aspect of her poetics of
perception, which seems more related to the phenomenological thought of Merleau-Ponty than to the deconstructive decentering of Jacques Derrida.

Merleau-Ponty’s dialectical foundationalism responds to the dualism implicit in both Cartesian skepticism and the ensuing British empiricism, and, *avant la lettre*, to deconstructive theory, which places greater emphasis on the circulation of signs in a cognitively constructed reality, to the detriment of the material reality that contributes to the shaping of that cognition. David Abrams, an ecological thinker in the phenomenological tradition, encourages a balance to “all those admittedly shaky foundations” that deconstructive analysis exposes, by acknowledging the materiality of “the actual ground that we stand on, the earthly ground of rock and soil that we share with the other animals and the plants.” He recommends that we “keep our thoughts and our theories close to this nonarbitrary ground that already supports all our cogitations.” Abrams’ suggests that the phenomenological tradition can contribute useful correctives to some of the extremes of deconstructive theory by emphasizing a less reductive approach to human cognition.

In going into some detail regarding Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy in this chapter, I do not mean to suggest that his phenomenology, or even the phenomenological tradition in general, is the only way to approach the philosophical problems in subject-object relations with which some contemporary experimental poets are grappling. However, in his philosophy exist useful tools for discussing ways in which these poets are challenging dualistic notions of being in and perceiving the world. In the poetry under consideration here, the poets are attempting to blur the boundaries, still culturally strong in the Western ontological and epistemological zeitgeist, between subject and object, and to complicate and render more dialectical the reductivist division between self and world, and between self and other. Numerous critics have pointed out the influence of deconstruction and, more generally, French poststructuralist thought on contemporary
experimental poetry. However, deconstructive analysis alone is inadequate for dealing with ways that these poets posit of merging with the world without necessitating the objectification or subsumption of the one by the other; with ways of humans’ being in and of the world that do not necessitate an irreparable alienation from the world and from our own bodies; and with ways of healing dualist constructions through a reconceptualization of the notion of the perceiving the self’s fundamentally mediated condition. There is a risk in such analysis of being reductively constructivist, and Derrida’s justly famous attacks on dualisms sometimes appear to be harboring survivals of the very metaphysical structure he sets out to overturn.

Abrams suggests an approach that is the reverse of Derrida’s “assimilat[ion of] all language to writing (l’écriture)” in order to demonstrate instead “that all discourse, even written discourse such as this, is implicitly sensorial and bodily, and hence remains bound, like the sensing body, to a world that is never exclusively human.”

Abrams, like Merleau-Ponty before him, is correct to emphasize that we must not forget the ever-present contribution of material reality in shaping those aspects of existence that seem most remote from it, such as many linguistic and cognitive functions.

Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology argues against a correspondence theory of reality, in which one’s beliefs about the world are held to be true if they correspond to some essence or quality in the external reality. It allows a complex and ambiguous notion of phenomena, which Merleau-Ponty calls an openness upon the world (ouverture au monde). This perceptual openness, which characterizes the relation between cognition and its object, “contains neither the whole nor even the essential of our commerce with the world.” If we are to remain open to the richness of perception, we must “situate that relation back within a more muted relationship with
the world," and suspend any illusion of completion or precision in our interactions with it.\textsuperscript{25} To understand the world is not to attempt to capture it descriptively by translating it into signs, for

\[\text{t}o \text{reduce perception to the thought of perceiving, under the pretext that immanence alone is sure, is to take out an insurance against doubt whose premiums are more onerous than the loss for which it is to indemnify us: for it is to forego comprehending the effective world and move to a type of certitude that will never restore to us the "there is" of the world.}\textsuperscript{26}

The ultimate illusion is to reduce the world to immanence, to an ideality that presupposes that "reflection is only that perception returning to itself."\textsuperscript{27} Instead, Merleau-Ponty’s thesis of the primacy of perception invites us to attend to the phenomenon as it appears in its richness and multi-determinability, that is, as lending itself to subsumption under a plurality of categories and to placement within a plurality of practical horizons and theoretical contexts. It is this richness of meaning that underlies Merleau-Ponty’s thesis of the intrinsic ambiguity of phenomena . . . \textsuperscript{28}

Merleau-Ponty posits “a ground where immanence and transcendence intersect: that is, in the phenomena manifesting themselves in the perceptual field.”\textsuperscript{29} In this dialectical relationship between immanence and transcendence, the knower is not strictly separated from what is known, and the object of knowledge does not exist strictly for perceptual consumption.

Berssenbrugge’s “Experience,”\textsuperscript{30} included in her collection \textit{Sphericity}, is in seven short sections (see Figure 2). An analysis of the first three sections of the poem demonstrates a poetic realization of Merleau-Ponty’s ideas about the permeability of subject and object. Berssenbrugge often uses philosophical language, yet deliberately avoids rigorous or logical analysis. Instead, her philosophical queries move flowingly, effectually interrogating boundaries between self and other, perceiver and perceived, and active and passive perceptual positions.
“Experience” opens with an exploration of difference and similarity as conceptual categories or “illusions”:

The idea of illusion suggests that existences in different worlds, herself at different stages, or moving from one metaphor to another, can compare. She is trying to tell you the moon’s color in eclipse, because she cannot reproduce a light in her memory with a pigment that is made, like a word, though seeing the moon enables a person to make inaccurate color. Think, if experience in her is time, because she gets to a state of being by experience, first. Experience is an interval in the body, but it also accompanies remembering.

The categorization into groups of similar and different objects or ideas is a cognitive function that enables us effectively to function in the world. Categorizations are illusions because they are constructed, that is, they don’t exist outside human cognition; they don’t correspond with categories inherent in the world-in-itself. Thought accommodates the comparability between “existences in different worlds,” and allows us to imagine consistency in the self (a sameness in “herself at different stages”) and stability of meaning in linguistic constructions (a fundamental kinship among the representation elements that constitute a language, despite “moving from one metaphor to another”). Berssenbrugge thus acknowledges a fundamental rift between mental constructs and a transcendent or objective reality outside human cognition. However, far from expressing an inveterate skepticism in the knowledge of this rupture, she questions the dualism concomitant with a staunch empiricism. On the one hand, the woman in the poem “cannot reproduce a light in her memory with a pigment / that is made, like a word.” There is ultimately not a direct and exact correspondence between the color that is constructed, like language, in her brain, and any actual light waves. After all, as cognitive science would be quick to point out,
color does not reside inherently in the world, but is the result of conditions both in the world (the
nature of the source of light and the wavelengths of the light as it is reflected on an object) and in
our optical and neural processing of those conditions (the color cones in our eyes, and the
extremely complex processing of this data in our interconnected neural networks). The
practical functionality that our cognitive constructs enable tend to obscure the fact that
perception and memory (both experiences) enable inaccuracy. Remembering is itself an
experience, and as such is a unique event, not a simple reproduction of a perception, such as
seeing the color of the moon. Berssenbrugge chooses an object with a subtle range of colors to
suggest that the colors of the moon are among those analogous but never identical “existences in
different worlds.” On the other hand, it is the object of perception that enables the production of
color (or any other perceived quality such as shape, motion, sound timbre, texture, etc.), however
illusory it is to think of that perception as an accurate reproduction of an objective reality.

For Berssenbrugge, as for Merleau-Ponty, it is not a philosophical error to acknowledge
the partiality, ambiguity, inaccuracy, constructedness, and illusory nature of perceptions. It is,
however, an error to hold to an abstract model of a transcendent, objective reality that irons out
differences that accompany the spatial and temporal incompleteness of subjectivity, just as it is
an error to believe in the absolute unknowability of the world outside a self-enclosed subjectivity
that has no interdependent relationship with anything outside subjective experience and linguistic
constructs. Both ways of conceiving of our being in the world are abstractions that have little to
do with lived, everyday experience of functioning in the world. They acknowledge neither the
groundedness of our perception through the contribution and participation of the object of
perception, nor the fact that the god-like objective realm that contains the totality of all
perspectives and temporalities is a god-like, or scientifically unifying, construct of our mentation.

In the second section of “Experience,” the experiencing subject finds correspondences of the phenomena within herself:

Low sun from behind you on asters, chamisa. You find a space as wide as if time fell outside
the stimulus of that glow, and her memory of it became space in her. Her body and will coordinate,
like the relation of experience to seeing and experience to feeling the moon, which has no size.
Actual size of its color in her body assesses the vicissitudes of an aspiration created by seeing,
so in this case, actual size became a piece of size in her.

She experiences bodily manifestations of experienced phenomena: the “stimulus” of the reflected light from a sun near the horizon glowing on some flowers creates the sensation of a space as immeasurable as timelessness. It is “as if time fell outside” of the stimulus so that she experiences no sense of the hierarchical divisions of past, present, and future. It is as if the boundaries of space and time have fallen away, and thus also the boundaries between perceiver and perceived have also blurred so that the subject experiences a boundless or oceanic feeling. She incorporates the experience within her body, so that the experience, as well as the memory, of the stimulus, “became space in her.” The feeling of boundlessness can be usefully related to Merleau-Ponty’s positing of “a primordial realm which subtends the polarized categories of subjectivity and objectivity.” 32 This realm is the communal space in which subject and object, as well as subject and subject, are contained within one another, so that “actual size became a piece of size in her.”
Instead of giving primacy to the subject’s “will” and “aspiration[s],” which might normally be thought of as assessing and otherwise acting on experience, Berssenbrugge questions such primacy. One’s “aspiration” is “created by seeing”; one’s cognitive processes are thoroughly enmeshed in perception, so that thought is understood to arise from the bodily experience of phenomena. Thus consciousness is grounded in the body. Yet this grounded consciousness also creates categories with which we conceptualize our being in the world: the idea of “will” and “aspiration,” for example. These terms may cause us to believe that there is a division between body and mentation. Berssenbrugge reverses the usual order of human cognition acting on experience. Instead of a subject willfully assessing experience, the internalized phenomena of the “[a]ctual size of [the moon’s] color\textsuperscript{33} in her body assesses the vicissitudes of an aspiration created by seeing.” In other words, for Berssenbrugge as for Merleau-Ponty, experience is primary: it is the active ground from which emerges all that then emerges in one’s embodied consciousness, including notions of Cartesian dualities, of unified subjectivities, and so forth,\textsuperscript{34} for “[a]ll consciousness is perceptual, even the consciousness of ourselves.”\textsuperscript{35}

In the third stanza, Berssenbrugge addresses the question of agency in the event of perception:

You look on the plain from a bluff with him, and a point of juniper grows dark and dense of scattered ones, a piece of sieved material on your side of a membrane of noon light. Seeing the object locates it like a cause in your body, for noticing a faint green around it as an underground stream. Seeing what had been invisible is a response to the object. His presence, a cause or weight in nature, does not enter experience, but accompanies it,
as experience had accompanied her memory of her, her features in her relative’s face.

A perceived thing is not a passive object of a subject’s observation. Instead, an object is “a cause in your body,” a motivating factor in the act of perception. For Berssenbrugge, subject and object cannot exist as distinct categories on either side of the equation of the act of perception. Both perceiver and perceived are implicated in the act of perception. The perceiver is not simply the agent gathering sensory data from a disengaged and passive object, but because of the body’s “openness upon the world” and the intertwining of the object and subject in the act of perception, the world “thinks itself” within me. Further, the object of perception (“[h]is presence”) “does not enter experience, but accompanies it, / as experience had accompanied her memory of her, her features in her relative’s face.” The relation between subject and object is not that of one acting on another, or even simply of one entering the other. In the event of perception, the field of agency is leveled, so that subject and object accompany one another, as opposed to the one acting on the other. Similarly, “experience had accompanied her memory of her, her features in her relative’s face.” Perception does not enter her memory, but accompanies it. The relationship between subject and object, as between experience and memory, is thus reciprocal rather than hierarchical, mutually involving rather than unilaterally involved: “My body as a visible thing is contained within the full spectacle. But my seeing body subtends this visible body, and all the visibles with it. There is reciprocal insertion and intertwining of one in the other.” As for Merleau-Ponty, vision involves “[a] participation in and kinship with the visible,” so Berssenbrugge’s image of seeing one’s features in the face of a relative is an apt analogy for the relationship between subject and object, and between experience and memory. Two related persons may be recognized simultaneously as separate beings yet also connected by virtue of
their common genetic matter. One sees one’s own features in the face of a relative the way that when one touches an object, one might feel the awakening of the object within oneself. In Merleau-Ponty’s formulation cited above, one might feel that the object is thinking itself within one.

Living within such an ontologically communal perspective, it is possible for one to feel more related to the world than if one held to a more dualistically structured perspective. It is no coincidence that Merleau-Ponty is one of the most important philosophical thinkers in the contemporary ecological movement, since his radical revision of Husserl’s idealism overturns dualistic positions that fail to challenge the separation of the human from the natural and the domination of nature by humans.38 It is also not a coincidence that Berssenbrugge, whose poetics parallels Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological philosophy in many ways, might be considered one of the most important nature poets of our time. She achieves this not through detailed or sentimentalized descriptions of natural phenomena, but by investigating a person’s attitude toward his or her relationship to objects, often of the natural world, at the level of perception. This basic philosophical stance is the ground upon which one’s feelings of kinship with, or alienation from, the not-self is founded. In her “response to the object,” she attempts to “[see] what had been invisible,” in other words, the invisible link, or in Merleau-Ponty’s terms, the flesh of the world, that indicates a “general manner of being,” “the coiling over of the visible upon the seeing body, of the tangible upon the touching body.”39

The self-described “phenomenological” and “anti-transcendent” poetry of Hejinian also addresses – arguably with more philosophical directness, and certainly with more of a sense of humor – the question of the perceptual relation between subject and object. Hejinian, one of the founding practitioners of language poetry, opened a recent talk on the influence of avant-garde
modernism on her poetry and poetics by claiming that her “writings are those of an empiricist in the tradition of Gertrude Stein.” In this talk, Hejinian claims Stein as both a progenitor of her own disjunctive poetic practices and a precursor whose work has “provided me with a demonstration of the fundamentally phenomenological and thereby mobile character of perceptual articulable reality.”

The Stein that Hejinian emphasizes here is a poet not only of the disruption of semantic and cognitive habits, but also of solid, quotidian reality, a poet grounded in the sociability and realism of the nineteenth-century novel. For Hejinian, this articulation of what she calls the “routine” occurs in Stein’s earlier *The Making of Americans*, and also pervades the sensibility of such a difficult later work of jagged perception and cognition as *Tender Buttons*. Despite its famously disjunctive semantic and syntactic texture, the latter work nonetheless names ordinary objects and (arguably) describes them, however elliptically and cabalistically. The main divisions of *Tender Buttons* testify to the importance of the realms of everyday existence: “Objects,” “Food,” and “Rooms.” The titles of many of Stein’s prose poems (for example, “Mildred’s Umbrella,” “Seltzer Bottle,” and “A Blue Coat”) also point to her concern for the everyday object. Hejinian’s Stein “is about the social milieu, the ordinary things around her in her life. . . . It’s a domestic social life, even an eccentric, idiosyncratic and personal one, but nonetheless, it’s social life.” The presence of objects occurs not simply in a condition of static being, but in movement, and the objects’ coming-into-being is an event that involves reciprocity between perceiver and perceived.

Like Stein, Hejinian says, she sees “appearances. I am attracted to and engaged with what moves, what comes into view. Things have presence because they occur in and as motion. They exist by virtue of motions in and as character. And our role among them is participatory, shared, in and as.” For Hejinian, writing the quotidian expresses its active and continuous “motion of
appearance,” as well as its irregular and digressive process. She does not consciously exclude digressive elements or meandering thoughts in order to shape coherently delineated frames of experience; her poems are not structured as frozen frames of images, scenes or persons, or detailed description of the quotidian as if it were a still life captured on paper. Instead, she embraces and follows the wandering progress of perception and consciousness. Hejinian’s writing of the quotidian is political, since it concerns itself not only with the nature of individual perception but also with the social interactions and formations that grow from an acknowledgement of one’s continual and participatory coming-into-being in the world and among others.

Hejinian’s affirmation of the phenomenological aspect of her Steinian poetic lineage and philosophy is an important admission. It responds to critics who sympathize with the project of avant-garde poetics, and who tend to concentrate almost exclusively on the importance of the freeplay of the signifier to language-centered poetry. Such criticism, which often prizes such freeplay for its own sake, constitutes a lopsided response to the poetry it values if it overemphasizes semantic slippage to the detriment of the groundedness of experience and language in material reality. While it is true that some poetry emphasizes formally disjunctive processes more than others, it is simply not possible for a linguistic construction to be completely free of any relation to embodied experience. As studies in the cognitive sciences demonstrate, cognitive functions – including semantic, linguistic, conceptual, and logical processes, and even the most abstract reasoning – arise from our sensory and motor interactions with the world. In other words, “the mind is inherently embodied,” and it is impossible to interpret symbols in an experiential vacuum.
Hejinian’s statement also answers poets and critics who are unsympathetic to experimental poetry, and who use similarly one-sided claims to formulate an offensive against its apparent fetishizing of language and apotheosis of indeterminate meaning. Such cases by both apologists and detractors of language poetry tend to present an essentialist conception of the poet’s relation to materiality and to perception. It is in juxtaposition with the views from two very different camps making similar claims, that Hejinian’s statement might seem startling. Hejinian’s proclamation of her philosophical and poetic lineage, acknowledging equally the disjunctive (decentered) and referential (centered) aspects of Stein’s influence, as well as the interdependence of these realms, has important implications for a dialectical analysis of her poetry.

Speaking of the influence of Stein on her continually evolving autobiographical poem *My Life*[^45], she could just as aptly be referring to her poetry in general when she claims that the work is about the quotidian, and though ostensibly autobiographical, and built from materials accumulated in the imagination, it is in fact a work exclusively of the present. The quotidian, by definition, exists nowhere else. Invisible, but essential to the jagged progression of phrases, it’s a primarily perceptual movement among three equally and reciprocally active elements: the perceiver, the perceived, and language.[^46]

In Hejinian’s phenomenology, the primary characteristic of the reciprocity among subject, object, and language is motion. The motion does not trace a trajectory of teleological progress with some kind of closure as a goal. Instead, Hejinian is concerned with the fundamentally phenomenological and thereby mobile character of perceptual articulable reality. The entirety of what’s available to the senses is phenomenological in character. Everything that is happening is happening phenomenologically, as something appearing, that we appear to experience,
something that we sense coming to be sensed. This by its nature involves motion. Something’s happening, something’s taking place, something’s taking time.  

The process of this experience is a continual arrival of appearances to the senses. She is “attracted to and engaged with what moves, what comes into view. Things have presence because they occur in and as motion. They exist by virtue of motions in and as character. And our role among them is participatory, shared, in and as.” What matters for her is not only the reciprocal and participatory nature of the relation between self and not-self, or subject and object, but the continually becoming present of perception and consciousness. This process is, for Hejinian, “what is known as the routine,” the quotidian acts of being and doing. “How and why things matter, how they materialize, how they appear, is contingent but intrinsic. The motion of appearance is active, ongoing.” For Hejinian, this motion involves a dynamic and nonresolving reciprocity in the act of perception.

One of the most distinctive features of Hejinian’s poetry is the continual testing of the boundaries between inner and outer realities. Many examples of such testing can be found in her long poem “The Person,” which consists of twenty-eight sections, each subtitled “The Person.” In her investigation of how one comes to know and represent reality, she imports characteristics normally associated with one realm, say, that of the perceived object, into that of consciousness, and transfers aspects from the category of objective reality to that of subjectivity. Here are examples of such transferences in separate lines excerpted from the first few pages of “The Person”:

I am having the sensation of description  
. . . . .  
Physical reality consists of sympathetic units  
. . . . .  
I heard the sounds of the many stones outside pronoun
The results of this borrowing and lending between traditional dualities are often startling, and they raise serious philosophical ontological and epistemological issues. For example, in the first excerpt above ("I am having the sensation of description"), Hejinian begs the question of how one can have the sensation of something ("description") generated internally. It is as if one’s cognitive process has been turned into an object of perception.

In the second excerpt ("Physical reality consists of sympathetic units"), “[p]hysical reality” is given the characteristic of the emotional response of sympathy. Above, I quoted Merleau-Ponty’s description of painters feeling that they are being observed by the things they paint. Hejinian echoes this idea in her statement of emotional solidarity in the world. With tongue-in-cheek humor, the statement is couched in the objective scientific language of “units” of sympathy. As in the case of Berssenbrugge, Hejinian’s anthropomorphic attribution is not the result of a subsuming or totalizing consciousness, but is rather an attempt to question the traditional dualistic boundaries between subject and object by imagining an emotional nexus among the objects and beings of the world. Later in “The Person,” Hejinian gives an example of a somewhat grandiose and exaggerated anthropomorphism in the style of a nineteenth-century novel: “The personification in branches gesturing from the desperate trees.” More specifically, this kind of personification is what John Ruskin disparagingly called a pathetic fallacy, in which human emotions are projected onto the non-human world. Hejinian acknowledges the trope as a literary device in which the subject attributes his or her own feelings of agitation onto trees that willfully gesture in desperation. By highlighting the literary convention, Hejinian thus
distinguishes this kind of articulated relationship between subject and object from that which is evident in her own work. The pathetic fallacy (and its long literary lineage that dates to pastoral conventions) is based on the imposition of human characteristics onto objects without a consideration of their own unique existence, nature, and function in the world. Thus it relies on a hierarchical relationship between subject and object. As I will demonstrate, Hejinian’s epistemological literary project questions the dualistic relationship between subject and object by positing a relation of mutual and sympathetic participation among the things of the world.

In the third excerpt (“I heard the sounds of the many stones outside pronoun”), the subject’s act of perceiving the sounds made by objects (“stones”) outside a grammatical unit (“pronoun”) again questions conventional language-perception-object circumscriptions. In a subtle acknowledgement of the otherness of reality external to the subject, Hejinian states that the sounds from the “many stones” originate external to a linguistic construction. This statement recalls Merleau-Ponty’s thesis regarding the importance of external reality in shaping subjectivity (including a subject’s use of pronouns).

And in the fourth excerpt (“The internal objects stand,”) “[i]nternal objects stand” as if they were physical units outside the self, which is not a sovereign subject but instead consists of multiple objects. Thus the status of objects internal and external to the self are confounded. Hejinian also suggests a pun on “stand.” The objects that are internalized and interpreted through perceptual processes “stand,” that is, they stand up as objects in their own right, since they are cognitive creations. They also stand for, in the sense of representing, the objects perceived.

Lastly, consider the rather comical image of the fifth excerpt (“You may pull the strings / of your many nerve-surroundings”). One is “pull[ing] the strings” of one’s nerves, which are “nerve-surroundings” instead of “nerve-endings.” It is as if these strands of neurons existed
outside the body, like strings attached to a marionette that one might pull to achieve motion and manipulate objects.

In many of the images in “The Person,” not only are the boundaries among language, subject and object transgressed, but also those between mind and body. In this schema of consciousness and body, “[s]incerity is an intestinal part”\(^{51}\), a mental attitude is linked with the viscera, the body’s least likely candidate for collusion with states of consciousness. Yet the oddness of this juxtaposition seems less so in the context of persuasive evidence from neuroscience regarding the contributions of the entire body in shaping cognitive processes. Increasingly, studies in cognitive science are blurring dualistic delineations between body and mind and demonstrating the interconnectedness and interdependencies among the parts of the whole body.\(^{52}\)

The “jagged progression of phrases” that is one of the characteristic features of Hejinian’s work arises in part from the “perceptual movement” that transgresses boundaries “among three equally and reciprocally active elements: the perceiver, the perceived, and language.” This jaggedness of perceptual movement, far from being a philosophically or phenomenologically exceptional occurrence, is for Hejinian the hallmark of the quotidian: it occurs naturally and constantly in daily living. The “portrait” of the person that emerges from this poem is not self-contained or isolated from its surroundings or from its own body. Thus the comically absurd opening of the poem, “Let’s get isolated” (perhaps an ironic revision of the popular 1981 song “Physical,” whose lyrics include injunctions such as “Let’s get physical” and “Let’s get animal”) is everywhere contradicted by the blurring of bounds. And yet, as she also says later in the poem, “[i]n discontinuity, distinction.”\(^{53}\) However, that distinction is one of an increasingly complex version of the self and subjectivity, not one of increasing isolation.
Hejinian’s poetry encourages a revision of the conventional model of perception, which takes for granted an active subject perceiving a passive object. It invites the reader to understand the act of perception not as a spectator consuming an object through the senses, but instead as an “active and dialogic” reciprocity that involves both subject and object in the act of a creative and generative perception. The portraits of viewer and viewed that emerge from the poem are multi-dimensional; the identities of subject and object are ambiguous and multi-layered. Thus the act of perception, which is the act of knowing and also of representing, involves the interacting of multiple perspectives that produces neither absolute certainty nor utter chaos, but a richness of signification that partakes in a dialectically impure mixture of both. This cognitive movement acknowledges the intermingling of elements from the two competing sides of a dualism. It accepts the opacity and transcendence of the material world, which motivates sensations that can thus never be considered certain or complete or absolutely truthful. It accepts equally the idea that the semantic product of sensations are a part of the structure of those perceptions, and so perception is acknowledged to have some degree of transparence, and the object is acknowledged to have some degree of immanence. Thus, as Martin C. Dillon explains, there is “an affinity between thought and its object: [one’s] cognitive posture with regard to the objects of experience can thus never be one of total ignorance or of complete obscurity and utter confusion.” Absolute certainty can never be guaranteed, just as absolute divorce from certainty cannot be justified.

Before moving on to a reading of a poem by Hejinian that embraces many of the phenomenological ideas, it may be helpful to delve deeper into the relationship between the subject and object dialectics I have been describing and signification through language, since this relationship is consistently of great importance to Hejinian. Although Merleau-Ponty does not
use psychoanalytic terminology to describe his phenomenology of perception, he does refer to a “prelogical bond” of the self with the world, which describes our perceptual link with material reality that does not presume a controlling relationship with it, but rather one that is mutual, reciprocal, and non-hierarchical. Such a bond would seem to tap into a cognitive function or place that recovers the (pre-Oedipal) state of being prior to the linguistic accretion of symbolizations. Instead of articulating the world through given formulations, we must, according to Merleau-Ponty, seek a perceptual reciprocity with objects that allows them to speak, in their silence, through us, their coming-into-being. If our thought about the world is not to make undue and controlling presumptions regarding the nature and descriptions of the objects of perception, it must seek in the world itself the secret of our perceptual bond with it. It must use words not according to their pre-established signification, but in order to state this prelogical bond. It must plunge into the world instead of surveying it, it must descend toward it such as it is instead of working its way back up toward a prior possibility of thinking it – which would impose upon the world in advance the conditions for our control over it. It must question the world, it must enter into the forest of references that our interrogation arouses in it, it must make it say, finally, what in its silence it means to say.57

This is not to say that objects will dictate their own translation into language, but to acknowledge the dialectical nature of experience, and the significance of the role that objects play in our representations of them in perception and in language. Following Merleau-Ponty’s notion of the semantic infinity that subtends the phenomenal world, it is to allow the voice of things to be heard, to restore “a wild meaning, an expression of experience by experience”58 in our speech. But reflection on the mediation of language is not, for Merleau-Ponty, the occasion for positing absolute disconnection between referent and signified. Language is not the flip side of an
absolute correspondence between thing and word, “not simply the contrary of the truth, of coincidence”; one must believe

that there is or could be a language of coincidence, a manner of making the things themselves speak – and this is what [the philosopher] seeks. It would be a language of which he would not be the organizer, words he would not assemble, that would combine through him by virtue of a natural intertwining of their meaning, through the occult trading of the metaphor – where what counts is no longer the manifest meaning of each word and of each image, but the lateral relations, the kinships that are implicated in their transfers and their exchanges. . . . But we have to recognize the consequence: if language is not necessarily deceptive, truth is not coincidence, nor mute.\(^{59}\)

Such a dialectical breakdown of categories speaks to the disintegration of the hierarchical duality that has reigned in the objective modes of scientific thought. For Merleau-Ponty, this breakdown and radical dialectic takes the metaphorical shape of the chiasm, which is a reference to the crisscrossing of the optic nerves. The failure of objectivist modes is “to be understood not as a victory of the ‘interior’ over the ‘exterior’ and of the ‘mental’ over the ‘material,’ but as a call for the revision of our ontology, for the re-examination of the notions of ‘subject’ and ‘object.’”\(^{60}\)

George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, in their groundbreaking critique of dualistic thought *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and Its Challenge to Western Thought*, similarly reject an either-or proposition in formations of subjectivity and objectivity. Their philosophical revision is based on findings of cognitive science, namely the embodiment of the mind, the largely unconscious nature of the mind, and the largely metaphorical origins of conceptualizations and categorizations.\(^{61}\) Their theory of “embodied realism” rejects “the Cartesian view that reason is transcendental, universal, disembodied, and literal,”\(^{62}\) and instead makes use of the evidence of “a strong dependence of concepts and reason upon the body,” and
“the centrality to conceptualization and reason of imaginative processes, especially metaphor, imagery, metonymy, prototypes, frames, mental spaces, and radial categories.” These revisions of Cartesian and analytic philosophical traditions, based on current knowledge in cognitive science, relate to the question of the relation between subject and object. It is worthwhile to present the extended quote below for its consonance with the emphasis on embodied cognition and the interrogation of traditional subject-object dualism in Merleau-Ponty as well as in the work of Berssenbrugge and Hejinian:

Embodied realism can work for science in part because it rejects a strict subject-object dichotomy. Disembodied scientific realism creates an unbridgeable ontological chasm between “objects,” which are “out there,” and subjectivity, which is “in here.” Once the separation is made, there are then only two possible, and equally erroneous, conceptions of objectivity: Objectivity is either given by the “things themselves” (the objects) or by the intersubjective structures of consciousness shared by all people (the subjects).

The first is erroneous because the subject-object split is a mistake; there are no objects-with-descriptions-and-categorizations existing in themselves. The second is erroneous because mere intersubjectivity, if it is nothing more than social or communal agreement, leaves out our contact with the world. The alternative we propose, embodied realism, relies on the fact that we are coupled to the world through our embodied interactions. Our directly embodied concepts (e.g., basic-level concepts, aspectual concepts, and spatial-relations concepts) can reliably fit those embodied interactions and the understandings of the world that arise from them.

The problem with classical disembodied scientific realism is that it takes two intertwined and inseparable dimensions of all experience – the awareness of the experiencing organism and the stable entities and structures it encounters – and erects them as separate and distinct entities called subjects and objects. What disembodied realism (what is sometimes called “metaphysical” or “external realism”) misses is that, as embodied, imaginative creatures, we never were separated or divorced from reality in the first place. What has always made science possible is our embodiment, not our transcendence of it, and our imagination, not our avoidance of it.

Subject-object dualism thus necessitates adherence to the equally untenable constructions of objective reality. In one, the assumption is made that our categorizations exist “out there,”
embedded in perceived entities, which then take on the essential qualities projected onto them. In
the other, intersubjective commonalities and relations assume the aura of transcendental truth,
leaving out the bond between subjects and physical reality, and ignoring their shared materiality.
Lakoff and Johnson’s theory of embodied realism suggests a fluid dialectical relationship
between subject and object, between intersubjective relations and embodied mental processes.
Merleau-Ponty’s revision of dualism also calls for a dialectic of the terms of subject and object,
and sense and nonsense, whose relation can encompass and even unite logically contradictory
perspectives. Further, each relation “leads to its opposite or to its own reversal, and does so by its
own movement.”65

Like Merleau-Ponty, Hejinian shows the relation between subjectivity and objectivity in a
paradoxical light, as the coexistence of contradictory realms. The necessary cohabitation of
opposite realms is apparent in “The Flying Statues,” an eleven-page poem written over a three-
week period in 1978. On a first reading, a reader might feel puzzled by the elliptical language
and the seeming randomness of images and thoughts. However, with increased familiarity with
the poem comes the growing awareness that Hejinian is very much concerned with perception
and with both the possibility and the impossibility of representation. A note following the poem
indicates that it was written during travels through North America and Europe. Hejinian probably
wrote the poem or took notes for it while traveling by train, considering references to rumbling,
clattering, speed, motion, tracks (and being “on track”), and a quote from Edgar Degas stating
his preference for riding in trains over cabs, perhaps the most coherent, or at least conversational,
lines in the poem:

“... I love to ride
on the train
you can look
at the people
we were created to look at
one another – weren’t we?”

The poem as a whole also gives a sense of frequent shifts in terrain and location, and the imagery is reminiscent of the flow of impressions from the window of a train. It is not that the imagery is simply descriptive of objects on the other side of the window – aside from a few references to rocks, trees, the terrain, “dun cows,” and the window itself, the writing doesn’t try to describe objects; it rather traces mental movements, a stream of digressive thoughts perhaps triggered by passing images seen by the passenger or otherwise experienced during travels.

The opening of “The Flying Statue” suggests several modes of thought, including separation, ambiguity, and contradictory states. These modes imply a complex and perhaps paradoxical interaction between self and not-self:

limb on limb
things often change
fingering
from the lights of night
between rocks
and the commoner trees
around blocks bulge
as interest rumbles
undelivered in its versatility
the place, its verticality
and foreground clapping –
a knife moves the thinker
of information –
and information speaks
of visibility – little trees
on which glass glows
pass as I pass
as can’t be said of clay
the windows separate
metamorphoses from discontinuity
and half heads at a pool
spitting self-portraiture
at assimilation – everything
– I can’t assimilate it
in an hour at awful emotional speed
without animal

The repetition of “limb” in the first line introduces ambiguity – the word can signify either the projecting flesh of one’s body or the projecting branch of a tree; one is “on” the other. Or the limbs might both be human or both of a tree. But which is which? Are the limbs one or the other, or are they both? The line doesn’t decide for us which kind of limb is intended, and remains an ambiguous construction, perhaps suggesting ambiguity between self and the object of perception. The next line, an offhandedly obvious observation that “things often change,” suggests the possibility of a transformation of some sort, perhaps merely a reference to the changing view from one’s window, or the frequently shifting thought process of the poem. If we take it as a commentary on the previous line, we might take it to suggest an interchangeability between the limbs, an indication that the boundary between them might be indeterminate.

The tautological construction of “limb on limb” is echoed twice later in the poem in the lines “embraces / the embrace” and “the pleasure / of an enormous pleasure.” Just how does one embrace an embrace, or experience the pleasure of a pleasure, much less an enormous one? The act (“embracing”) and the sensation (“pleasure”) rebound on their own words, seemingly redundantly. This construction brings to the fore the words for the events, as if to emphasize what Robin Blaser calls a “reversal of language into experience, which is not a dialexis between ourselves or a discourse true only to itself, but a broken and reforming language which composes a ‘real.’” Hejinian’s oddly non-descriptive train ride is moving toward language as experience, and not simply language in the service of experience.
Like “limb,” the word “fingering” is also semantically ambiguous. It can refer both to the act of touching or the act of pointing; the act of perceiving or the act of referring. Again, as in the first line, one doesn’t have a frame of reference to know which is which, and so perception and the act of referring to something are merged.

As the train rumbles down the tracks, the observer’s “interest rumbles” also; Hejinian seems to be drawing a correlation between the train’s journey through a landscape and a subject’s progress through a succession of perceived objects. However, this interest or perception is “undelivered”; although “on track” it doesn’t reach its goal, despite its versatility, despite being “on track.” Hejinian uses the old metaphor of the window to signify the separation of subject from object, perceiver from perceived: “little trees / on which glass glows”; “the windows separate / metamorphoses from discontinuity.” Glass shines, as if “on” the trees visible beyond the window. And windows separate change, a universal Heraclitean condition of material reality, from the discontinuous quality of perception. “[T]he light” that enables vision seems very brief with an attractive disproportion here like a burr between a person and a panorama

The “burr” between self and scene (seen) is their “disproportion”; despite the vastness of what’s beyond the self, one can experience only a very small part of that reality, from the very limited spatial perspective of one’s own body.

And yet, as Hejinian says elsewhere, “[d]iscontinuity in my experience / to me means radical coverage.” The other side of the dialectic, enmeshed with its opposing tensions, is the possibility, even the radical possibility, of coverage, of speaking, of describing, albeit not in the
sense of a subsuming subjectivity that would claim a voice on behalf of an object. There are “no silent facts on track”; something does speak – the facts, or the perceiver of facts – and that speech is “on track” in all its discontinuity and metamorphoses. The self in the train and the objects experienced by that self are fellow travelers: the “little trees / . . . pass as I pass.”

Thinking and perceiving are, in profound ways, separated from experienced reality, and yet in ways just as fundamental, they are also motivated by that same solid reality, for, as Hejinian states in “The Person,” “the objects deliver perception.” In the following passage from “The Flying Statue,” thoughts are motivated by a knife:

a knife moves the thinker
of information –
and information speaks
of visibility

Like the subject perceiving a tree, the thinking self is moved to think by the objects of its perception, in this instance, a knife. And like the subject separated from the object by the window, the object of the thinking self (with the implied violence of the knife), separates it from the information (either thought or perception) that informs it; and that very information, whether internally or externally generated, speaks of one of the means by which it comes to be thought, visibility. These passages also demonstrate the tension in the poem between silence and speaking; both are conditions of our being in the world. For our reflection on the world “must question the world, it must enter into the forest of references that our interrogation arouses in it, it must make it say, finally, what in its silence it means to say.”

In “The Flying Statue,” Hejinian speaks of the impossibility of an objective description transparently communicating some essence of an object, as if delivering goods from one station to another. But however present this impossibility, however fundamental the rupture between
perceiver and perceived, this impossibility constitutes only one side of a dialectic, and what is experienced contributes vitally to what comes to be represented. In one somewhat humorous passage, she deals explicitly with representation:

I cannot draw in dome
at all a duck in tracks

but if I had some days in room
I could draw good ducks

The first two lines are metrically regular, in iambic trimeter. The syntax seems quaintly stylized and contorted; instead of the syntactically more normal “I cannot draw a duck at all in a dome,” she delays “at all,” giving the impression of an older, formalized English prosody with its complex syntactical inversions. The choice of “cannot” over the contraction adds to the formal style of the lines. The oddness of “duck in tracks” further complicates the meaning of the sentence; “track” can refer to train tracks, or to the tracks the animal makes, or, more abstractly, to a trace or mark, or to a succession of events.

The second pair of lines is distinctly more conversational, and its meter follows more natural and irregular speech patterns. In both couplets, she leaves out the article before “dome” and “room”; the syntactical elision draws attention to the language used for both passages. The difference between these two words is crucial, for, the question is begged, why can she “draw good ducks” in a room, but not in a dome? A “room” is a more domestic, quotidian place than a “dome,” which is architecturally more formal and possibly more sublime; the word also carries religious or academic connotations. Representing the duck, a decidedly unsublime and potentially comical subject for drawing, is more possible in the everyday realm of one’s room, whereas in the theological or formal environs of a dome or academy, it is not “at all” possible.
Perhaps Hejinian is implying that representation (and the belief in one’s ability to accurately and functionally represent) belongs to the everyday quotidian realm. In the rarefied realm of the dome, however, far from domestic functions and contingencies and the necessity to represent by language or picture, one might easily enough swing to the opposite view, that representation (and thus also communication) is impossible. Neither world is particularly impugned; drawing “good ducks” is not simply possible in one, impossible in the other. Both realms are necessary if we are, in the first instance, not to harbor illusions, and, in the second, to function with some proficiency in the social and material world.

The importance of humor in Hejinian’s work cannot be underestimated, for it often philosophically charged. In the following passage from “The Person,” she addresses the enabling function of comedy in the context of some primary philosophical questions regarding the self and the exterior world:

It’s funny –
I do love poetry
with a certain speed of mind

But funnyness!
it is a technical vibration
which enables us to swallow
at a single gulp

under clouds of exterior reality
It is also capable of stopping
Do I have time for this?
Yes, realism, yes, time; yes, paradise

I can’t believe it!
Congratulations!
to imagine
not being born in fear of solids?2
Humor can both enable and prevent, a double-edged “technical vibration” with which humans are endowed. It carries the gift of enabling comprehension “at a single gulp”; it can give us the sense that, despite the possibility of human alienation “under clouds of exterior reality,” despite our knowledge of rupture between self and not-self, such feelings need not translate into despair or “fear of solids.” “[S]olids” also evokes the first hard foods of an infant; we can imagine being born without the fear of solids because we are also a part of that solid world, solids being what we ingest.

The two duck-drawing couplets exhibit a salient feature of Hejinian’s work: humor in the midst of some profound philosophical questions. If there is a message to Hejinian’s humor, it is that she believes we can investigate such philosophical questions fearlessly and with good humor, without invoking nostalgia for some originary, unified, or unmediated state of being in the world., that we can be a consciousness of solids living in a realm of other solids, because we are a part of that realm.

My analysis of passages from “The Flying Statue” offers possible meanings that a reader might construct. The syntax and words are more ambiguous and investigatory than logically coherent. However, even if one were to arrive at a different interpretation, I would argue that Hejinian demonstrates complexly intertwined, interdependent, and perhaps contradictory relations among subject, object, and language. This is consistent with her definition of the quotidian being “a primarily perceptual movement among three equally and reciprocally active elements: the perceiver, the perceived, and language.”

Hejinian’s poetry is profoundly interested in investigating a subject’s relationship to reality at the fundamental level of perception. In this respect, she is one of the most important contemporary phenomenological poets. In the sense that she is also intensely concerned with
expressing what it is to live in social and material world, she is indeed an empiricist in the tradition of Gertrude Stein, exploring the nature of that lived quotidian being in all its disjunctive and multitudinous state, and, as Merleau-Ponty says, the “phenomenon as it appears in its richness and multi-determinability.” Hejinian recognizes the influence of both Stein and Merleau-Ponty on her poetic and philosophical when, in *The Language of Inquiry*, she quotes from Merleau-Ponty’s preface to *Phenomenology of Perception* and states that “[i]f one accepts Merleau-Ponty’s definition of phenomenology, *Tender Buttons* might be read as a phenomenological masterpiece, a work that guarantees writing a role in the exploration of ‘realness.’” That concern with the “real” and with the richness of the language that mediates the subject’s experience and expression of that reality, shows Hejinian to be a poet well engaged in the phenomenological tradition of inquiry.

The philosophical explorations in the work of Berssenbrugge and Hejinian are very similar: they are both equally preoccupied with questions of perception and in creating a poetic language that interrogates notions of dualism in the relationship between subject and object. The poetic realization of their philosophical investigations is very different, however. Berssenbrugge’s work has a more consistently sensual quality, less jagged in texture than Hejinian’s self-consciously digressive jumpiness. This aspect of Hejinian’s poetics might be summed up in a sentence from “The Guard”: “I / ‘whatever interrupts.'” Whereas her poetry demonstrates the overdetermined play of perceptual impressions, Berssenbrugge’s work has a more even-toned emotional register and a more limited range of sensory impressions in its concentrated yet nonlinear philosophical inquiry. Hejinian often bubbles over with humor and playfulness; Berssenbrugge’s work gives the impression of a more serious, even spiritual tone.
Yet both poets are deeply engaged in phenomenological explorations, and their differences in approach do not point to any fundamental divergence in their philosophical inquiries.

Both Hejinian and Berssenbrugge are also intensely involved in the social and material world of lived reality, and in seeking through their poetry ways of dismantling old and ingrained dualisms and their concomitant hierarchy and domination of a lower term by a higher term. Merleau-Ponty’s frequent criticism of the kind of scientific thinking that makes a religion of objectivity (“high altitude thinking”) attests to his belief that such thinking posits a subject soaring over a passive object, an unequal relationship in which the terms do not accompany one another or acknowledge a kinship with one another, but instead feature a subject that perceives foreignness in the faces of things, and that sees in them no resemblance to its own being.

The subject of perception can be thought of as plural in at least two senses. First, the subject is not only a self-contained individual unable to prove the existence of other subjectivities due to the conviction that what an individual cannot experience (another’s subjectivity), cannot be proven definitively to exist. Cartesian ontology logically ends in solipsism. However, once certain ontological premises are challenged, the subject may be reconceived in a communal and public context, in a dialectically balanced relationship with its private aspects. I will explore this aspect of subjectivity in Chapter Five, using the poetry of Berssenbrugge and Leslie Scalapino as poetic challenges to dualistic divisions between private and public realms and between self and other, and to an ontological perspective rooted in the Cartesian cogito that cannot but refuse a communal conception of the phenomenal world.

Second, the subject is plural in that it does not consist of an essentially unified being, but is multifarious and multivocal. This aspect of subjectivity will be the topic of the next chapter.
Notes

1 “The voice of things” is from Merleau-Ponty, The Visible and the Invisible, 155.

2 Ibid., 29.


5 I am thinking of a type of formal philosophical argumentation that progresses, or claims to progress, through a rational and linear succession of thoughts. I find some of the later work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Emmanuel Levinas, two philosophers on whose work I rely in this dissertation, to be quite poetic. These philosophers are challenging some fundamental belief systems in Western thought, and they sometimes seem to find the language, in which these beliefs are embedded, inadequate to the task. Thus, their later work is sometimes expressed in an elliptical and even apparently irrational diction. See, for example, Colin Davis’ analysis of Levinas’ late work in “Ethical Language: Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence” in Levinas: An Introduction (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1996), especially pp. 69-74; and Claude Lefort, “Editor’s Foreword,” The Visible and the Invisible, by Maurice Merleau-Ponty (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1968), xi-xxxiii.

6 Martin C. Dillon, Merleau-Ponty’s Ontology (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1997), 86.

7 Kiki Smith (b. 1954) is a German-born American sculptor, draftsman and printmaker whose work often investigates the nature and boundaries of the human body.

8 For example, in the poem Endocrinology, Berssenbrugge notes that “Shortly after phagocytosing material, leucocytes increase their oxygen consumption and chemically produce light.” See Mei-mei Berssenbrugge, Endocrinology (Berkeley: Kelsey St. Press, 1997), 8.

9 Berssenbrugge draws a sympathetic link between one’s perception of objects and the objects themselves. In this context, and especially given Berssenbrugge’s scientific interest in the human body, it is relevant to note that neuroscientific studies show that objects take shape in the visual cortex of the brain; in other words, the representations that our neurons form during the process of seeing bear a physical relationship to the objects perceived. See Antonio R. Damasio, Descartes’ Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain (New York: Avon Books, 1994), 103, 279. See also Lakoff and Johnson on the inherently embodied nature of the mind in Philosophy in the Flesh.


12 Merleau-Ponty, The Visible and the Invisible, 27.

13 Ibid., 147.


15 Merleau-Ponty, The Visible and the Invisible, 139.

16 Ibid., 146.


19 For an excellent comparison of the thought of Descartes and Merleau-Ponty to which my analysis is in part indebted, see Dillon, “Consciousness,” in Merleau-Ponty’s Ontology, 101-12.

20 Dillon, Merleau-Ponty’s Ontology, 53.

21 Ibid., 36.

22 Merleau-Ponty, The Visible and the Invisible, 139.


25 Merleau-Ponty, The Visible and the Invisible, 35.

26 Ibid., 36.

27 Ibid., 37.

28 Dillon, Merleau-Ponty’s Ontology, 53.

29 Ibid., 54.

31 For an excellent explanation of the perception of color, see Lakoff and Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh*, 23-26, 104-6.

32 Dillon, *Merleau-Ponty’s Ontology*, 86.

33 Berssenbrugge here synesthetically confounds the perceptual categories of size and color. It is interesting to note that Merleau-Ponty grappled with the mysteriousness of synesthetic perception and speculates that, far from being an anomalous and rare condition, it is instead the norm, only an unrecognized and unacknowledged one: “Synaesthetic perception is the rule, and we are unaware of it only because scientific knowledge shifts the centre of gravity of experience, so that we have unlearned how to see, hear, and generally speaking, feel, in order to deduce, from our bodily organization and the world as the physicist conceives it, what we are to see, hear and feel.” See Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, translated by Colin Smith (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962), 229-30. I draw no conclusions from his statement, since synesthesia is considered by neuroscientists to be a complex and still mysterious phenomenon. However, it is perhaps inevitable that Merleau-Ponty would be interested in the confounding of the senses, given his interest in cognition and perception and in ideas of reversibility and chiasm (discussed later in the present chapter) in regard to a subject’s relation with the external world.

34 See Dillon’s helpful explanation of Merleau-Ponty’s relation of phenomena to consciousness in “Consciousness” *Merleau-Ponty’s Ontology*, 101-12.

35 Merleau-Ponty, qtd. in Dillon, *Merleau-Ponty’s Ontology*, 111.

36 Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 28, 136. The latter quote is worth presenting in fuller context: “One can say that we perceive the things themselves, that we are the world that thinks itself – or that the world is at the heart of our flesh. In any case, once a body-world relationship is recognized, there is a ramification of my body and a ramification of the world and a correspondence between its inside and my outside, between my inside and its outside.”

37 Ibid., 138.

38 For an ecological perspective on the work of Merleau-Ponty, see Abrams, *The Spell of the Sensuous*, 44-90.


41 Stein, *Tender Buttons*.

42 Hejinian (untitled talk presented in the series “9 Contemporary Poets Read Themselves through Modernism” at Kelly Writers House).

43 Among language-centered poets, compare, for example, the radically disjunctive poetry of Peter Ganick or Clark Coolidge (particularly his earlier work), with the more lyrical and grammatically coherent work of Peter Gizzi or Rae Armantrout. Here are Peter Ganick’s opening lines from *<a’sattv>* (Tucson, Ariz.: Chax Press, 1999):

```plaintext
if and the colorless climate tamed bandwagon
real skin transplanetary orifices filed awash
industrial rubicon metal ears plastic heart

normal th code those refer linguistic oddbook
now th with reason hid behind conservation
old scheme threads threads some finesse vigil (11)
```

Ganick’s tercets continue in a similar solecistic vein for over one hundred pages. Compare this with the opening of *Artificial Heart* by Peter Gizzi (Providence, R.I.: Burning Deck, 1998), which is more syntactically normal yet semantically disjunctive:

```plaintext
Out of this close horizon there are animals
breathing unlike a child’s drawing of a nativity.
Orbiting circles with brown x’s. Farther off
pedestrians make parallel lines and collapse
into distance. Or becoming one of several skylines

in charcoal or finger-paint. (11)
```

The reader attuned to the links provided within each poem will begin to piece together meanings perhaps coalescing around ideas of linearity (“threads,”) artificiality (“real skin” versus “plastic heart,” “skylines”) and representation (“a child’s drawing,” “pedestrians make parallel lines”).

44 For a compelling analysis of the embodied nature of cognition, see Lakoff and Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh*. This work exhaustively demonstrates that the construction of meaning – no matter how abstract the concept or obscure the metaphor – always arises from an embodied mind and its functions, and from its interactions with the world.

45 I will analyze this work in Chapter Four. The first edition of *My Life* contained thirty-seven chapters, each containing thirty-seven sentences, corresponding to her age at the time that she completed that version of the work. For a subsequent edition eight years later, Hejinian added eight chapters of forty-five sentences, and eight sentences to each previous chapter, to update the work to correspond to her then-current age. In her talk at the Kelly Writers House, Hejinian quipped, “*My Life* is an ongoing project.” Her additions mark the work’s status as perpetually unfinished and contributed to its semantically open-ended project. Compare Lyn Hejinian, *My

46 Hejinian (untitled talk presented in the series “9 Contemporary Poets Read Themselves through Modernism” at Kelly Writers House).

47 Ibid.

48 Ibid.


51 Ibid., 157.

52 See Damasio, Descartes’ Error, and Lakoff and Johnson, Philosophy in the Flesh. In Descartes’ Error, Damasio expands on the intricate interrelations between body and brain in his thesis that “[t]he brain and the rest of the body constitute an indissociable organism, integrated by means of mutually interactive biochemical and neural regulatory circuits (including endocrine, immune, and autonomic neural components)” (xvi-xvii). See also pp. 87-89. A major thesis of Philosophy in the Flesh is that the mind is embodied, and that “the very structure of reason itself comes from the details of our embodiment. The same neural and cognitive mechanisms that allow us to perceive and move around also create our conceptual system and modes of reason” (4). Furthermore, “[t]he mind is not merely embodied, but embodied in such a way that our conceptual systems draw largely upon the commonalities of our bodies and of the environments we live in” (5).

53 Hejinian, “The Person,” 144.

54 In Sight, a collaborative project with Leslie Scalapino, Hejinian describes in her introductory remarks their “emphasis . . . not on the thing seen but on the coming to see. As I see it, this book argues that the moment of coming to see is active and dialogic, and as such it is dramatic.” Lyn Hejinian and Leslie Scalapino, Sight (Washington, D.C.: Edge Books, 1999), n.p.

55 Dillon, Merleau-Ponty’s Ontology, 20.

56 Ibid.


58 Ibid., 155.
Ibid., 125.

60 Ibid., 22-23. The dynamic interconnectedness and intertwining among perceiver, perceived, and the medium of language in Hejinian’s poetry enacts a version of Merleau-Ponty’s chiasm.

61 Lakoff and Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh*, 3.

62 Ibid., 76.

63 Ibid., 77.

64 Ibid., 93.

65 Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 89.


67 Recalling from Chapter One the discussion of Mallarmé’s “Les Fenêtres,” it is instructive to compare his use of the window as a rather tragic boundary between subject and world, with Hejinian’s more dialectical understanding of such a boundary. For Hejinian, the window-barrier has its reality, yet is also illusory.


69 Hejinian, “The Person,” 166.

70 See Hejinian, “The Person” (especially pp. 150 and 150), in which Hejinian uses the knife and other images of the cut and uncut to signify various states of unity and disunity.


72 Hejinian, “The Person,” 175.


CHAPTER THREE

CARLA HARRYMAN, HANNAH WEINER, AND THE POETICS OF MULTIVOCALITY

The “personal” is already a plural condition. Perhaps one feels that it is located somewhere within, somewhere inside the body – in the stomach? the chest? the genitals? the throat? the head? One can look for it and already one is not oneself, one is several, a set of incipiences, incomplete, coming into view here and then there, and subject to dispersal.¹

Lyn Hejinian

There is no whole self.²

Jorge Luis Borges

Some say the brain under substantial scrutiny Belongs to someone other than the subject.³

Sheila E. Murphy

With the possible exception of referentiality, the representation of the self most adamantly separates contemporary American poetry along the fuzzy divide between mainstream and avant-garde. Although by no means homogeneous in style or strategy, the dominant mode of free verse lyricism during the past thirty to forty years nevertheless demonstrates a consistent indebtedness to romanticism, more specifically to an emphasis on individual subjective experience and emotional epiphany.⁴ Generally speaking, around the time that language poets were emerging on the reading and publication scenes in the late 1960s, and early-to-mid-1970s, mainstream poets during that same time were cultivating and valuing a voice that they felt possessed the stamp of sincerity and authenticity, and that rang true to its own inner emotional coherence. These benchmarks hold regardless of whether the poet’s voice is seen as broad and public or personal and confessional, and whether its prevailing tone is perceived by readers as expansive or humble.⁵ Broadly speaking, mainstream poetry tended to represent the self (whether
speaking or spoken of) as a coherent identity, as relatively autonomous, individuated, and
unitary, and as possessing a clear, if often troubled, agency. This is usually the case, despite the
anxieties, fears and desires that might bind one person to (or separate one person from) another
person or object. However agitated the emotional surface of the self might be, however much the
self projects its psychological ripples onto the world or its vision of the world, that self is
nonetheless most often manifested as a dualistic entity, defined by its basically integrated model
and its possession of a measure of authenticity or inherent nature, and by its fundamental
individuation from other selves and from the world. The selfhood constructed in such poetry
does not normally reflect on or question its own constructedness.

With the understanding of the diversity within the rather artificial but nonetheless useful
category of mainstream poetry in the United States, the values adhered to within the dominant
lyricism can be summarized thus: 1) a preoccupation with authenticity or sincerity of voice,
which involves the expression of an emotional center of gravity and an individuated and
believable speaking voice; 2) the necessity for an urgent and unartificial translation of experience
so that the craft of the poem is unobtrusive and subservient to the conveyance of the emotional
hub; and 3) the control of narration so that there is a feeling of closure, in the sense of an
achieved emotional empathy if not a simplistically clinched moral.

Setting up a model of mainstream aesthetics and demonstrating why such a model is
dualistic and problematically unselfconscious in its presentation of subjectivity, invites an
instructive comparison with the more decentered subjectivity of experimental poetry. However,
my purpose is not simply to set an “either” of the mainstream (authorial control, authentic voice,
cohering subjecthood) over against an “or” of experimental poetry (erasure of the author,
dismissal of speech-based diction, non-individuated “I”). As Marjorie Perloff points out in a
recent essay intended to question essentialist thought in discussions of subjectivity in experimental poetry, “must it be either/or?” Why pit the lyrical ego against a model of egolessness that is just as essentialized as its sincere but equally deluded antithesis? Such a critical exercise in shadowboxing would reveal the contenders to be closely identified as opponents, each making a claim for an inherent quality about the self, whether that quality be its cohesion or its absence of cohesion. It is more helpful to identify strategies of reading experimental poetry that reveal a dialogical tension between, on the one hand, the positing of a recognizable individual consciousness, and on the other, an interrogation of the construction of subjectivity. Such strategies can encourage readings that recognize the possibility for both positions, the “either” and the “or,” in the poetic presentation of subjectivity.

The notion of a novice poet finding his or her authentic voice has been prevalent for several decades, and is in large part a product of the emergence of an aesthetic widely respected in the M.F.A. poetry workshop that has developed in the United States since the 1960s. Countless reviews of recent poetry books as well as recent statements of workshop aesthetics celebrating the development of an “authentic voice” expressing unique moments of individual experience, reveal that the achievement of a privileged center of subjectivity continues to be a dominant ideal in contemporary mainstream poetry. It is so prevalent that it seems to have entered the mass consciousness of popular culture as a primary criterion of poetic excellence.

One of the clearest statements of the ideal of the authentic voice, individual expression, and the cohering self in poetry occurs in Stanley Plumly’s “Chapter and Verse,” a two-part supplement to the American Poetry Review in which he analyzes the hallmarks of what he considers to be good contemporary poetry. It is worth analyzing aspects of this statement in some detail, since many of the ideals that Plumly expresses have continued to exert a presence in
mainstream contemporary poetry. While it is beyond the scope and purpose of this work to analyze the poetry celebrated by Plumly, his analysis offers a compelling contrast to the poetics of multivocality and dialectical movement with which I will be concerned in this chapter, as well as to theories about subjectivity in cognitive science and psychoanalytic feminist theory.

According to Plumly, the ideal poem must have a singleness of design, an “emotional imperative” that grants the speaking voice the authority to make assumptions about the inner life of subjects reflected upon and the control to “preside” with authority, whether as a participant or a narrator, over the poem’s materials (21-22) It is a poem’s centripetal forces that lend it power and intensity, whether the center of gravity is emotional or emblematic (23).

In addition, the poet should, through careful attention to craft, render the very material of his or her trade invisible. The language should not focus the reader’s attention on itself, which would detract from the poem’s *de rigeur* components of authentic voice and clear narrative: “At its flexible best,” the free verse lyric “calls less and less attention to the language and more to the body of the action. Ideally, . . . its language should be transparent.” And what makes the poem’s inevitable narrative convincing or authentic is the tone of its master’s voice. Tone is what we are left with once the language assumes transparency.

But there is a mind as well as a body to the action. And together, whole, in terms of voice print, fingerprint, phrenology, and shadow on the wall, they probably should look and sound a lot like the person of the poet. The point of a poem declaring its freedom as verse is that it somehow better represent the individuality – no, the *personality* of things, the metaphysics of the action, and *who* is presiding (23).

The poem usually illuminates a “single moment, worked out in its single voice” that remains “in control” (24-25). The valued work is a “whole poem . . . that surrounds its ‘subject,’ that completes its emotional arc.” The voice must have a “sense of fullness” whose unity is enhanced
by the narrative (26). The voice is, in effect, the “hero of the story” (27). Referring to a book by C. K. Williams, Plumly asserts that the reason that the “voice throughout the book is so consistent, so complete” is that “[i]t comes from an absolute source, an emotion so exposed as to call into question the very idea of artifice [sic]” (31).

Not only individual poems, but the gathering of poems into a book must exhibit a similar coherence. In a description that subtly, if unconsciously, alludes to its theological underpinnings (as does the title of Plumly’s article, for that matter), Plumly states that “the genuinely good book, the one that returns and returns its value, offers more than a miscellany of fine poems. It provides us, we usually say in such circumstances, with a whole conception, a design, a vision, an organic unity, etc.” (25-31). In short, the free verse lyric of the past thirty years places great emphasis on unity, coherence, control, authority, and authenticity on the part of the poet, who exercises command over his or her materials, and suffuses them with the uniqueness and authenticity of his or her vision.

Even when the center of gravity is not ostensibly the poet’s voice but instead the central image of the poem, voice is still present, either in the form of the poet, whose voice registers more as a “guide” than a “hero,” or through the objects themselves. Objects, often cloaked as metaphors, effectively speak and take on a kind of subjectivity of their own: “The subject, the implicit source of ‘speech’ here, is, from the beginning, the object” (24). And the primary organizing principles of unity and coherence still apply:

[D]iscrete images tend to separate the poem from its implicit center of gravity, and the greater their distinction the more the poem is forced out to its peripheries. This can create tremendous tension and power. It can also waste opportunities. . . . There ought to be a metaphysical compromise, oneness without sameness, unity of music without locking in the metaphor” (30).
Although Plumly proposes that the unity and oneness be expressed without rigidity, he is primarily concerned with the centripetal forces in a poem that encourage coherence and singularity, and that express an essential and unified projection of the creating self represented by its unique, authentic voice.

These descriptions bear a striking resemblance to an antiquated model of the functioning of the human mind: the homunculus. In this model, a metaphorical little person inside one’s brain represents the central command post of experience and of mental authority in an individual. This is the mythical place where sensory data come together and are interpreted by an “internal agent” – a Mind – that mysteriously understands this information. Such a hypothetical cognitive process is dualistic because it tends to bypass questions of modular and interdependent functioning, and instead posits, in various metaphorical constructs, a “ghost in the machine,” or a “finish line” – a precise threshold – of consciousness. In recent years, many thinkers in the field of cognitive science have insisted on the importance of debunking survivals of the homunculus in critical thinking, attempting, in effect, to knock the centralized view of consciousness from its Cartesian pedestal. Daniel Dennett, one of the strongest critics of residual dualistic thinking in cognitive science, reminds us that

[t]here is no single, definitive “stream of consciousness,” because there is no central Headquarters, no Cartesian Theater where “it all comes together” for the perusal of a Central Meaner. Instead of such a single stream (however wide), there are multiple channels in which specialist circuits try, in parallel pandemoniums, to do their various things, creating Multiple Drafts as they go. Most of these fragmentary drafts of “narrative” play short-lived roles in the modulation of current activity but some get promoted to further functional roles, in swift succession, by the activity of a virtual machine in the brain.

According to Dennett’s Multiple Drafts theory, the process interpreting perception creates “multiple ‘drafts’ of narrative fragments at various stages in various places in the brain.” There is
no “single narrative . . . that is canonical,” no final published version that has been read and revised by a master editor inside the mind. The distributed and multiple interpretations yield something akin to a narrative sequence, but are “subject to continual editing by many processes distributed around in the brain, and continuing indefinitely into the future.” The idea of a self with a recognizable identity that is created from the richly interconnected accumulation of interpreted experience is both real in a practical sense, and also an illusion. One’s self is, practically speaking, unique and identifiable, both to oneself and to others. One’s identity is also a representation of many different and constantly shifting narratives about oneself and one’s surroundings. The formulation of identity as both a functional reality and a myth composed of ephemeral narratives is thus paradoxical – the discrete self both is and is not, simultaneously. Furthermore, the boundaries of the biological self are not discrete. The human body is host to many microorganisms, some benign and some destructive. And there is a sense in which a group of individuals can be considered to behave like a single organism.

Antonio Damasio is engaged in a similar project of dismantling the dualism that still haunts cognitive science:

[B]ecause of the brain’s design, the requisite broad-based knowledge depends on numerous systems located in relatively separate brain regions rather than in one region. A large part of such knowledge is recalled in the form of images at many brain sites rather than at a single site. Although we have the illusion that everything comes together in a single anatomical theater, recent evidence suggests that it does not.

Instead of envisioning consciousness as a central theater where experience all comes together, most cognitive scientists agree that consciousness is much more diffuse, and is spread over many layers in a process involving many functions that are interconnected and that don’t always communicate effectively or rationally with one another. What merits inclusion in the contents
available for consciousness is a much fuzzier affair than previously thought. In current thought, brain processes are less centralized and hierarchical, and instead more distributed and interdependent.

The model of a “single voice,” “in control” of a narrative that illuminates with coherence and completeness a “single moment” in a narrative that is “consistent” and “complete,” emanating from an “absolute source,” sounds very much like the model of the homunculus presiding over the raw materials of experience and directing a coherent narrative with its authentic “master’s voice.” The poetic ideal that Plumly describes is also akin to the illusionary construction of the self that we all more or less take for granted in everyday life – what George Lakoff, Mark Johnson and others in the field of cognitive science call “folk psychology,” which consists of the common sense assumptions of a culture. Folk psychology provides explanatory models that help people to function on an everyday basis, but are not necessarily an accurate model of cognitive matter or functioning. In differentiating among the various metaphorical conceptions to describe one’s inner life, Lakoff and Johnson propose that the folk theory of essences dictates the metaphor of a true or authentic self, which “is the locus of consciousness, subjective experience, reason, will, and our ‘essence,’ everything that makes us who we uniquely are.”

There is nothing particularly harmful about our conceptualizations about the self, for “we all grow up with a view of our inner lives that is mostly unconscious, used every day of our lives in our self-understanding.” However, this locus of rationality and center of consciousness is “both internally inconsistent and incompatible with what we have learned from the scientific study of the mind.” Borges’ admonition in the epigraph to this chapter that “there is no whole self,” which he repeats like a refrain throughout his essay “The Nothingness of Personality” is a cultural corrective to the commonplace of the sovereign self, and an attempt to dethrone the
homunculus from its privileged command post: “I want to tear down the exceptional
preeminence now generally awarded to the self . . . . I propose to prove that personality is a
mirage maintained by conceit and custom, without metaphysical foundation or visceral reality. . .
. There is no whole self.” 18 Furthermore, Borges reasons, the locus or essence of that ineffable
yet entirely commonplace thing called the “self” is impossible to pin down:

I am not my own activity of seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching. Nor am I
my body, which is a phenomenon among others. Up to this point the argument is
banal; its distinction lies in its application to spiritual matters. Are desire, thought,
happiness, and distress my true self? The answer, in accordance with the precept,
is clearly in the negative, since those conditions expire without annulling me with
them. Consciousness – the final hideout where we might track down the self –
also proves unqualified. Once the emotions, the extraneous perceptions, and even
ever-shifting thought are dismissed, consciousness is a barren thing, without any
appearance reflected in it to make it exist. 19

The idea of a definitive, bounded, and discrete self, with a locus and a will, is illusory. Borges’
prescient and bold questioning of the sovereign self was years ahead of neuroscientific theory
confirming, at ever deeper levels of neural processes, the fiction of the autobiographical self. 20
After enumerating all the various components of the self and their neural regions, there is no one
place or function within one’s being where everything miraculously comes together in order to
ponder the intellectual conundrum of selfhood. Who, or what, after all, is chasing down the self?
The self is not only more internally diffuse and unlocatable, but it is also factitious to claim that
it emerges from a biological individual being. What we think of as the self emerges from a
person’s interactions with other beings and entities as well as from internal biological functions.

Historically, avant-garde poetry has also interrogated the construction of identity or
selfhood, so that the boundaries between self and not-self are problematized. This aspect of
avant-garde poetry was explored in the previous chapter. In addition, one of the principal
projects of experimental poetry is to represent the self not simply as a unified construct. Instead, the self is shown to be capable not only of expressing multiple voices, but of experiencing the otherness of the self, a simultaneous self-integration and self-alienation, and of being deeply aware of the self’s multivocality.\footnote{21}

The constructedness and artifice of one’s image of self is just what the free verse lyric as described by Plumly attempts to obscure. Experimental poets attempt to make the social and individual conditions for the construction of the self apparent. For

> our lives are completely permeated not, as we think, with ourselves, but rather with exactly a concept that we call a person, or ourselves. This concept is embedded in our language, our forms of thought, our forms of art. . . . [P]opular art . . . assumes or accepts the socially affirmed concept of the person, [whereas] avant-garde art . . . does question the concept of the person.\footnote{22}

Norman Fischer’s division between popular art and avant-garde art is somewhat simplistic, yet there is truth to his assertion that avant-garde art generally has tended to interrogate the essentialist construction of the self common in Western culture, and to make that construction visible as construction. Instead of occupying a self-evident position within the person, the self is dependent on the concept we form of the self. This may seem obvious, but when one considers the extent to which commonsensical conceptualizations permeate much of our language and effects the ways that we shape our awareness of being, there is much for poets to interrogate. Experimental poetry generally attempts to represent the state of permanent flux in consciousness and identity. As Hélène Cixous aptly states,

> All poets know that the self is in permanent mutation, that it is not one’s own, that it is always in movement, in a trance, astray, and that it goes out towards you. That is the free self. Our time is afraid of losing, and afraid of losing itself. But one can write only by losing oneself, by going astray, just as one can love only at the risk of losing oneself and of losing.\footnote{23}
Cixous’ acknowledgement of decentered human cognition is very similar to the description of many cognitive scientists regarding the nature of human consciousness: “the self is a repeatedly reconstructed biological state; it is not a little person, the infamous homunculus, inside your brain contemplating what is going on.”\(^\text{24}\) Furthermore,

At each moment the state of self is constructed, from the ground up. It is an evanescent reference state, so continuously and consistently reconstructed that the owner never knows it is being remade unless something goes wrong with the remaking. The background feeling now, or the feeling of an emotion now, along with the non-body sensory signals now, happen to the concept of self as instantiated in the coordinated activity of multiple brain regions. But our self, or better even, our metaself, only “learns” about that “now” an instant later. . . . Present continuously becomes past, and by the time we take stock of it we are in another present, consumed with planning the future, which we do on the stepping-stones of the past. The present is never here. We are hopelessly late for consciousness.\(^\text{25}\)

This constant cognitive flux, only a tiny percentage of which actually reaches conscious awareness, produces the sense of a self in constant permutation. It is not simply to engage in misplaced hyperbole to say that the self is other to itself in a very real sense. Current neuroscientific theories often speak of multiple levels or layers of self owing to the multiple regions of the brain that process neural and hormonal information, and to their interconnectedness in ways that are not purely logical, noncontradictory, or particularly conducive to accuracy of recall. To give one example, memory is stored not in one site, but in many separate regions of the brain that somehow are coordinated – with widely variable accuracy and reliability – to form images, whether verbal, visual, aural, and so forth.\(^\text{26}\)

The “homunculus at the helm” invoked or implied by previous generations of cognitive scientists has died, or has at least relinquished a good part of its supposed control, and in its
place is a more complex and diffuse notion of the self and how it shapes its self-images and interprets its experiences. Such theories also approach questions of why the illusion of the integrated, unitary self exercising its free will is so appealing and comforting, and why the illusory construction is so convincing as to seem natural and inevitable. Gerald M. Edelman, a neuroscientist who is grappling with questions about the nature of human consciousness, refers to a “homunculus crisis,” which is the consideration of the seeming contradiction of “the unitary appearance to a perceiver of perceptual processes that are known to be based on multiple and complex parallel subprocesses and on many maps. . . . Who or what organizes a unitary picture?”\(^27\) The paradox, once more, is that in constructing a theory of subjecthood, the homunculus is to be rigorously avoided at the same time that one attempts to account for the processes by which humans generalize and categorize, and for all practical purposes, seem to behave as if there is a homuncular command post.

There seems to be a real sense in which things do come together in the brain, organizing around more or less centralized zones of neural activity, and giving the impression of coherence and unification, however illusory that feeling is. In fact, our ability to conceptualize and generalize about phenomena – including our characterization of the self as a discrete and coherent being – is necessary for animal survival. The very image of the homunculus – the very fact that humans do have the impression of some kind of unified consciousness and autonomous will – implies the existence of a neural function that produces the impression of the homunculus steering human awareness and decision-making. Various theories regarding the unification of conscious experience have been set forth, including that of “global mapping” (Edelman), a “global workspace” (Bernard J. Baars), and the “left hemisphere interpreter” (Michael S. Gazzaniga).\(^28\) These scientists are attempting to account for the integrative, as well as the
distributive, aspects of consciousness without invoking the dreaded homunculus, Cartesian dualism, or a correspondence theory of truth.

On the other hand, consciousness is simultaneously rather hopelessly fragmented and fallible. The concept of “multiple selves” within the individual is being discussed and debated a great deal recently in the fields of neuroscience, psychology, and philosophy. The holding of contradictory belief systems, making illogical decisions, self-deception, and the existence of dialogical inner speech are all held to be evidence for a divided self, whether in a strong, literal, sense, or a weak, metaphorical, sense.29

It may be correctly pointed out that the idea of multiple selves is also a metaphorical construction of the self. Lakoff and Johnson give the example of the language of a person who feels morally divided between spheres of values within herself: “I keep going back and forth between my scientific self and my religious self.”30 However, I am less interested in the statement of divided mind in a literary work than I am with its demonstration of mental processes that more closely follow the way that the brain seems to function. In other words, I am not claiming that characters or personae in a poem of the kind Plumly admires might not describe the state of being of a divided mind. However, the process of description and narration of such a state would most likely have the requisite coherence, authenticity, and consistence that Plumly extols. Similarly, in a poem of a more experimental nature, I am interested in the way that writing or reading the poem invites a process of interpretation that more closely investigates cognitive process (as opposed, for example, to making the language transparent), including the revelation of the constructedness of the self’s image. I am also concerned with the way in which the poem brings to consciousness the illusions of selfhood and will that humans create.
Psychoanalytic theories also offer versions of the self that contradict the illusion of the autobiographical whole and of the unified entity. Notably the theories of Julia Kristeva propose a narrative of the individual centering around the acquisition of language, and suggesting a dialectical relationship between unifying and rupturing forces that effectively shatters representations of subjectivity and discourse in poetic language. Although psychoanalytic theories most often take the form of a narrative or diachronic view of the forces that shape the self and its images, and neuroscientific theories most often express structures and processes synchronically taking place within the individual, their theories regarding the multiple and decentered constructions of the self often bear a striking resemblance to one another. Both reinforce the notion of the kind of dynamic and reciprocal exchange between terms that I am theorizing.

My position is that the human mind encompasses both unifying and dividing functions and structures, and that there exists, in both the synchronic state and the diachronic narrative of an individual, a dynamic and reciprocally dialectical motion between the centripetal self (the unifying structures and functions) and the centrifugal self (the splintering structures and functions). This dialectical movement between division and unification, a movement may also describe the biological interaction and interdependence among the regions, layers, and systems of the brain, and what Edelman calls the “global mapping” that brings these regions into coordination and helps to form the impression of a coherent and unified consciousness. This global mapping is not a static organization, but instead a “dynamic structure” that is continually being reshaped “with time and behavior.”

It may be helpful at this point to recall my previous discussions of dialectical “movement” or “motion.” I am not referring simply or literally to an object that is in motion, but
to a dynamic interrelationship between structures and functions that lend themselves to the sense of fragmentation (i.e., different brain regions processing information separately), and structures and functions that lend themselves to the sense of unification (i.e., the interconnectedness between systems). The relationship between these two tendencies of splintering and integrative forces is one of interdependence, so that they do not cancel out one another, but depend upon one another for their very existence and activity. In the remainder of this chapter, I will investigate ways in which the illusion of the coherent, centered consciousness coexists with the decentered self theorized in of cognitive science, and mutually interrogate one another in experimental poetry. I will show how avant-garde poets acknowledge the forces of both coherence and disunity in their representation of the self, without evoking the control and heroic model of the poetics of authentic voice.

The work of Carla Harryman and Hannah Weiner consistently engages dialogical strategies in order to disrupt dualistic, unitary and nonreflexive notions of selfhood, resulting in a multivocality of the self. Their poetry demonstrates the heterogeneity of subjectivity and the signifying process, as well as a reciprocal exchange between unifying and shattering cognitive forces. Aside from their both being contemporary experimental poets vitally concerned with the construction of subjectivity, on the surface Weiner and Harryman have very different approaches to the presentation of the self in their poetry. However, both take as primary to their work the idea of voices in dialogue with one another, and through these voices they investigate the multivocality of the self. They would both consider antithetical to their work the notion of authorial control or a unified subjectivity. Rather, the subjectivity that develops is, from the start, decentered and plural, shape-shifting and evanescent.
The theatricality or performativity of Harryman’s work applies not only to her frequent use of characters in dialogue, but also to her juxtaposition of different kinds of writings and genres in order to have them interrogate one another: “I like to put families of language in conversation with each other, such as theoretical discourse, fiction, and nonsense – I use the page to perform the dialogue, first, although I think of the page also as a staging device. Virtually anything can be performed, after all.”32 Harryman’s writing transgresses many of the norms associated with particular genres. For example, her essays often are so concentrated imagistically and dramatically that they might just as easily fall into categories other than those that tend to restrict their content to logical and analytical modes. In “Toy Boats,” she inserts, in a fairly discursive essay about narrative, a humorous dialogue under the heading, “What is the Status of Narrative in Your Work?”:

. . . I can only make fun of the possibility of your tale.
My tale?
Isn’t that what you wanted?
You have no tact, no skills, no frame of, frame of . . .
You mean no plan.
Nor do you produce resemblance or have a serious purpose of struggle with truth.
Or dally in genre literature.33

This reads more like an inner dialogue than an exchange between author and critic, since the voices mutually interrogate one another. They play a sparring game in which each voice alternately critiques and defends the mode of narrative and of its own interlocution. In her dialogues, Harryman constantly questions subjective autonomy, whether her dialogues are interpreted as an imaginative discourse among characters, or as a conversation among different aspects of the self.

The shifts among discursive types and from inner speech to objective narration
continually thwart[s] any gestures toward wholeness or autonomous identity for
the speaker that any one of these modes might initiate on its own. These units of
language become the performers in Harryman’s dramatic insistence that
autonomy – if it exists at all – can be neither discovered nor expressed in
language. . . . Harryman’s critique of autonomy extends to incorporating into her
writing material appropriated from other texts; her many sources include H. D.,
Freud, Saint Augustine, the Marquis de Sade, and “nonliterary” material such as a
promotional brochure for the Rova Saxophone Quartet.34

These conversations among modes of discourse as well as among characters, genres, and aspects
of the self demonstrate her concern with the linguistic construction of subjectivity and voice, and
tends to diffuse the sense of an author in control of material that has the stamp of a unique,
individual voice.

In “My Story,” a brief poetic prose piece in Animal Instincts, Harryman uses birth and
infancy as the inceptive event and state of subjecthood in order to explore the possibility of the
faithful or mimetic rendition of that subjectivity.35 Birth and early infancy are apt for Harryman’s
purpose because they are perhaps the most remote from human memory and understanding, and
thus are least accessible to descriptive recounting. The material fact of “living flesh” of an other
is not to be denied, yet “[s]peaking in a state of fidelity to the subject . . . is similar to assuming
one has acquired the song of birth through the ritual repeating of names and gestures of newborn
infants.” Harryman compares the linguistic capture of a state of being to the futile attempt to take
on the mantle of a subjectivity (“acquir[ing] the song of birth”) simply by verbalizing its name
and mimicking its behavior.36 “This,” she says, “makes me want to cry” – perhaps like a baby,
but not, according to her comparison, presuming to capture what it is like to be a baby. To define
a being by its gestures would be to reduce the complexity of subjectivity to a set of behaviors
observed in a “neutral light” that doesn’t exist, anyway.37 For as Harryman states, she “can’t lie:
no way am I going to disguise myself in the habit of that body, the one that isn’t mine.”38 Thus

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she would deflate the hubris of an author who imagines having descriptively captured a state of
being, who, for example, solemnly “assum[es] the tone of reverence” and “describes a woman
climbing a hill.” Harryman does not accept the traditional authorial prerogative to climb into the
skin of a subject and make the reader believe that she is linguistically living, or reliving, that consciousness. Such a narrative, Harryman claims, would be “a braggart’s tale.” Neither
phenomena nor subjectivity are transparently available to understanding or linguistic translation:
“I was born but do not understand that phenomenon any better than whatever creature may never
think about it.” On “My Story,” Harryman comments that her intention was to articulate

a radical questioning of the representation of subjectivity in writing, the sense of the continuity of the self in language, constructing a character or person as having a continuum, which I think has very little to do with the “living flesh, though it may be.” . . . I am submitting “the authentic subject” to a kind of erotic play or tease. The teasing would not be possible without our already constructed sense of a subject as being whole – the whole baby, the whole person. On the one hand, there is no partial person, and on the other, our persons are constitutive of parts. 39

Harryman’s critique of “authentic self” is dialectical because she posits a reciprocal and
interpenetrating relationship between positions of wholeness and diffusion in subjectivity. To
critique the subject position of authorial authenticity is not to deny the human sense of
wholeness, “our already constructed sense of a subject a being whole.”

Such a feeling (one of many ways of conceptualizing the self) is a metaphorical
construction arising from our physical experience in the world. Lakoff and Johnson remind us
that

when you try to find your “true self,” you are using [a] usually unconscious
metaphorical conceptualization. . . . When we consciously reason about how to
gain mastery over ourselves, or how to protect our vulnerable “inner self,” or how
to find our “true self,” it is the hidden hand of the unconscious conceptual system
that makes such reasoning “common sense.” 40
According to Lakoff and Johnson, conceptualizing subjectivity in such a way that “there is always a Subject that is the locus of reason and that metaphorically has an existence independent of the body . . . arises around the world uniformly on the basis of apparently universal and unchangeable experiences.” Such a view of the self is largely unconscious and habitually used in our daily lives, yet it is “both internally inconsistent and incompatible” with current cognitive scientific understanding of the mind.  

Harryman does not disparage the wholeness of the subject as a conceptual category, one that is in fact quite useful in quotidian life. “On the one hand,” she states, “there is no partial person.” Our neural systems that articulate different aspects of our subjecthood are integrated well enough so that we do not normally speak of divergent beings within a biological individual. Yet equally, “our persons are constitutive of parts.” And the relationship between the parts and the whole is fluid and reciprocal. On the one hand, “[t]he subject is alienated and fragmented – there is no golden age of the self . . .” On the other, “[t]he desire for unity . . . is true, a true desire, and it has constructive and destructive outcomes.” Harryman attempts in her writing to place both views of self – the unified and fragmented conceptualizations – in conversation with one another. For Harryman, the representation of the self necessarily evades any historically accurate or objective rendering, for her “aesthetic project is not related to a transparent construction of personal history.” She also recognizes the reality, strength, and usefulness of the universal desire for wholeness and unity, and submits that conceptualization and desire to a dialogue of “erotic play or tease” that disrupts gestures towards absolute or inherent unity. 

Harryman’s experimental poetic novel *Gardener of Stars* is a richly textured and multi-layered long narrative work that presents a complex working out of her ideas regarding
subjectivity. The complex characters exist and interact with one another as if in a child’s fantasy or a dreamworld. They spin out their games and shifting identities on a post-apocalyptic and surreal stage in which virtually anything that can be imagined can be performed. The narrative is primarily concerned with utopian desire, and plots the dynamic tension of the characters moving among various ideal and dystopic settings. The two principle persons in the drama are Gardener and M, who live on opposite ends of a wooded area. They are both childlike, in the sense that they inhabit and continually dream up a spontaneous and imaginatively shifting world, yet they are also fully sexual beings with desires and fantasies that they play out, often with inventiveness and ferocity.

Gardener and M are complementary, though not entirely opposite, female beings. M is mercurial, wild, artistic, spontaneous, fun, boyish, self-sufficient, and instinctual. She is capable of aggression, including erotic aggression. She is described in animalistic terms: she has “paws” and “claws” (18, 145). In one scene she “crashes into the woods willfully as an overfed skunk” (20). Her appearance is perpetually filthy, sweaty and coarse: Gardener “can’t tell [M’s] flesh from dirt” (18). She lives in a tiny shack on the opposite side of the woods from Gardener, who has never visited her there. Her shack is for protection only; it is not a homey, domestic place, but a mere shelter in which “the relationship of inside to outside is slight,” and “[t]here is little, albeit enough, between the elements and me” (29). M has little need for the conscious, rational or collective ordering of the world, and experiences no strong boundaries between inside and outside. However, she does not lack intellectual knowledge about the world. She reads “science and mechanics” in order to find her place within the outside, and to reinforce what she already instinctively knows, that “humans are part of the world” and that they orient themselves around the “all the complex interrelationships” in the world: everyday life “is as external as anything
could possibly be” (29, 30). She is not interested in forming a community, which would be “redundant,” since the world already functions proficiently without the self-conscious interrelationships and orderings of the group (30). She is more autonomous and individualistic than Gardener, and is concerned with practical and mechanical functions in the world. When she is not lying naked in the dirt, she is sometimes depicted as the archetypal handyman, carrying a set of tools under her belt and a screwdriver between her teeth, “look[ing] into the bowels of some wayward machine” (25, 105). M’s character comes close to being pure desire, and she does not have the ability to plan for and carry through an event. Neither does she have much consciousness about the desires of others: “I have always wanted to be pregnant and I don’t know what other women want” (38). In cognitive terms, M is closer to limbic functions, which is to say emotional and instinctual: in one scene, she describes to the child Babs “a magnificent and bucolic world of insults” (84).

Whereas M is a scavenger, Gardener is a farmer and more domesticated, though “not deeply rooted” (18). M frequently visits Gardener at her “chaos of light and yelling called a home,” especially when there are men hanging around, with whom she might engage sexually (86). M loves and desires Gardener’s ethereal qualities of creativity and imagination, which complement her own earthiness and connection to material reality. At Gardener’s,

[t]he premise that one is part of the natural world flies out the door. One might as well be a part of a work of fiction written by someone who doesn’t know the wilderness exists. It would be a work written by someone who does not exist. One is so far inside the fiction that practicality appears to be a coincidence, and yet the vegetables do grow in the garden, the household is well engineered, and meals, if not served regularly, are almost always available. People want to do things for other people in her house, more than I ever think I want to do anything for myself (30).

Entering Gardener’s abode
is as marvelous as knocking on the magical door to a great city. One knows something terrible will happen when invited to pass through the opened door, that one’s role will be that of a stranger caught up in a ruse or revolution. It will contaminate one’s judgment. . . . Everything has become subjective. The loss of judgment is the door (29).

If we read Gardener as a force in the history of human consciousness, she would represent the culture-producing aspects of human consciousness. She is less analytical or practical than M: she doesn’t want to research the stars (she knows almost nothing about them), and is weary of studying them (15). Her psychic energies are of a more self-conscious and subjective nature: she feels compelled to “read [her] own genetic code” if “for no reason other than that I had been genetically programmed to read it” (15). She is linguistically precocious and digressive: she has a “skewed wayward gabbiness” (109) in which she tends to “associate anything with anything else” (15). She is creative (though in a less wild and unselfconscious way than M), imaginative, and fictionalizing. Events sometimes seem to occur simply because Gardener thinks of them. Her identity is fluid; she constantly reinvents herself. She also represents the desire for the individual and collective ordering of the world, although she also tires of trying to understand and conceptualize things, especially on a transcendental level. She loves, but less violently and instinctively than M, and more with a sense of curiosity.

If the eponymously named Gardener represents the cultivating force in humans – the evolutionary tendency to settle into agrarian-based communities that demands a collective endeavor – then M’s animalistic and instinctual nature could represent what Ken Wilbur calls the “archaic-uroboric” stage in the evolution of human consciousness, particularly prevalent in hunter-gatherer societies. This is the period of the “typhonic self” (referring to the part-human, part-snake mythological being) “that has differentiated its body from the environment but not yet
differentiated its own mind from its body. M’s thoughts are more bodily than self-conscious or conceptual, practical and material-bound rather than linguistically sophisticated and fiction-creating. When Gardener and M are taken captive into a dystopic rural “paternalistic boot camp” consisting of a “harem” full of “creeps”, M asks whether they are “just stock characters in an historical fantasy” or perhaps “squatters reinventing a trauma our descendants will brood over later facing the chalkboards”. She exhorts Gardener, as a historical force of acculturation who is trapped in a patriarchal nightmare, to regain her feminist pluck and fighting spirit by recalling her passage through history, including her “poverty and hatred of power and attack on international investors and the big war machine interests. . . . Was that you? Or the ghost of yourself?” Later, a character named Serena, who is the “revolutionary of memory when there is no history, when there is only the option of making whatever must be made in an economy of scarcity and hope looking backward”, encourages Gardener to “return . . . to the past . . . . What is your past? It was the industrial revolution and women were still burning, but it was not only women who burned. Why would the plague, any plague, seem more horrific than all this murder?” Thus the characters sometimes emerge as historical tendencies, but not reenacting events in a realistic drama set within a historically specific framework of personality and event. Instead, the narrative’s shifting and unsettled structure allows synchronic and diachronic layers to unfold side by side. That is, the multi-layered narrative enfolds the possibility of several kinds of dialogues, including those among 1) characters in a drama of the evolution of human consciousness, 2) characters in an intersubjective drama engaging dualistic cognitive archetypes such as master and slave, body and mind, chaos and order, imagination and practicality, and 3) characters presenting various aspects of an individual consciousness, including the exemplification of stages in childhood development. The novel’s hybridized
structure also allows more discursive modes, such as a reflexive commentary in the form of literary criticism. A third person analyzes the literary predilections of M, who distrusts psychological realism as a “labyrinth of snapshots in words” that attempts to anticipate and capture the reader’s “neurotic reaction” to the work (127). The simultaneous existence and intertwining of these various interpretations in Harryman’s novel attest to its fluid model of subjectivity, or rather intersubjectivity. Parts of an individual’s person’s psychological being reflect and relate to parts of other persons’ subjecthood, and these, in turn, may be related to the development of human consciousness in the individual as well as through history. These layers are not separate but interdependent modalities of subjectivity.

Thus part of the richness of *Gardener of Stars* is that it presents several interpretive layers, of which the scheme of characters in the evolution of human consciousness model is one possibility on which I will focus for the purposes of this chapter’s theme. The characters present contrasting facets of an individual, such as the airy imagination and narrative-generating Gardener versus the bodily drives and earthy practicality of M. It is as if the various elements of a person have been given free and unbounded articulation and dramatization. The work can be conceptualized as a map of a human psyche with mysterious and sometimes unreadable signposts, fluid boundaries, and shape-shifting denizens. On this cognitive map, for example, M’s love for Gardener is “the same as having loved myself” (31). In a scene between Gardener and a doctor that includes the possibility of the two being parts of a single consciousness, Gardener argues with the doctor as if “with her own reflection in a pool of sweet water” (33). Sometimes M seems to be a manifestation of the subconscious mind, which has knowledge about Gardener (the more linguistic and self-conscious part of the self) before Gardener becomes aware of it: “M I can’t get up! I cannot get my mouth open. M knows it already. It is so like her
to already know it, I can’t stand it” (53). It is as if M, the voice of the subconscious, knows
everything before Gardener becomes aware of it. In another scene that conflates the identities
and desires of the two main characters, Gardener feels “caught between [her] impulse and [M’s]”
(105-06). Sometimes, however, M seems to be much less cognizant of the makeup of Gardener’s
being, for “even as [Gardener] invents herself” she also “escapes the grasp of my knowledge”
(110). Like the unconscious mind, M knows things about Gardener before Gardener becomes
conscious of them. However, M doesn’t have full knowledge of Gardener. During a game of
“pretend,” Gardener asks M whether she will hold her to her words, since she is merely

talking about my thoughts . . . not what you can see.
If I could see your thoughts said M.
We would be having the same ones (121).

If they were capable of perceiving one another’s thoughts, they would be self-identical, and there
would not be any differentiation within the self that makes possible their dialogue with others.
Recall that Gardener and M may be considered not only as facets of a single being, but also as
individual beings.

Like the creature of consciousness that she is, Gardener never visits M’s side of the
woods, but M often emerges in Gardener’s dwelling, energetically enacting her bodily drives and
bringing Gardener’s celestial and mythical musings down to an earthy and sexual level. Early in
the novel, during a visit from M, Gardener retreats into her home, where she “flop[s] on a sofa
freshly upholstered in lemon-colored fabric facing the window that frames, just now, a wintry
light” (21). The sofa, its upholstery, and the light are all spontaneous fabrications of Gardener’s
thought. Through the window she sees
what appears to be a sensuous tangled neoclassical sculpture tiled on the ground in an odd position. . . . Overgrown sages and rocket plants partially obscure the object. It is a deliciously aromatic spot that has often filled my pores with a heady love. I think about the crouching tit-ridden fertility goddesses sporting the garden as forms of inert consciousness to remind us, the gardeners, of an invasive being, something useless. Sometimes I associate uselessness with the divine (21).

She goes outside and, hearing a “thumping from the direction of the object,” gradually realizes that what she took for a statue of a mythological figure is actually “M on the ground struggling with someone, a man I think. . . . They seem to be wrestling and fucking at the same time.” Gardener attempts to join in their sexual act, but M rebuffs her. Gardener senses that there is something in what she has witnessed “that belongs to [her],” yet she also feels she doesn’t know M at all (21-22). M, like the unconscious, influences Gardener, but is at a certain epistemological level inaccessible to her conscious being. Similarly, Gardener “escapes the grasp of [M’s] knowledge” (110).

As different as M and Gardener are, they can be understood as aspects of one mind and thus they are also not absolutely drawn with fixed boundaries. Instead, their relationship is interpenetrating and dynamic, just as in the human brain the multiple regions are in reciprocal engagement with one another. The characters are not pure types, but exaggerations that share in each other’s natures. Gardener is the cultivator, the orderer, the associator, but there is a wildness to her associations, not unlike the chaotic wildness of M. M is the wild, untamed, instinctual one who yields without hesitation or forethought to her desires, yet perhaps through the influence of Gardener, she also desires acculturation. She dreams and desires the bonds of society within a city, “without knowing what a city would be anymore” (26). The beings within the mind are in one sense discrete, since they are not fully accessible or comprehensible to one another, yet in another sense they are in a constant dynamic conversation with one another and through their
mutual influence, assume aspects of one another, similar to the way children assume various roles in play-acting.

The flexible and fluctuating model of subjectivity in Harryman’s novel is very far removed from the kind of cognitive structure implied in Plumly’s model of the integral and authentic self, and its carefully crafted and presiding voice. Far from resembling the model of the ideal and dualistically individuated homunculus at the helm of the subject, Harryman’s characters propose a model that is closer to the prevailing views in cognitive science of the self as decentralized with interdependent regions and pathways, and of the more intersubjective and multi-vocal models of the self proposed by such psychoanalytic writers as Jessica Benjamin and Kristeva, about whose work I will have more to say later in this chapter.

Not only are the boundaries within the multiple aspects of the self confounded in Harryman’s intrigue, but also the utopian city that emerges as the novel progresses is one of erased or diffused boundaries between dwellings and between objects of personal property. Throughout the novel, the roads are rambling, and they rarely progress in a rational or orderly way from place to place. This geography of loosely structured roads and communities is reminiscent of the metaphor of the medieval city that Amélie Oksenberg Rorty uses in describing one view of the self, which is suggested by the phenomenon of a subject holding contradictory views (self-deception) and the irrational aspects of human agency. This version of the structure of the self is represented by

the older medieval city of relatively autonomous neighbourhoods, linked by small lanes that change their names half way across their paths, a city that is a very loose confederation of neighbourhoods of quite different kinds, each with its distinctive internal organization, and distinctive procedures for foreign relations, even different conditions for entry into the federation: a city of guilds, the courts of grand families, religious orders, and old small towns.
The other, more rationalistic view of the self, is represented by the orderly structure of a central plan and government of the city, with its “grand plan of radial avenues emanating from the centre to the outskirts; the rational plan of the city that one can see from an aerial view.” In this view of the self, “decisions emanate directly from the centre, along the broad boulevards to the outskirts, to the commercial and industrial centres, to the suburbs.” In terms of human subjectivity and agency, the rational and centralized map exists simultaneously with the decentralized and meandering map, and within individuals, the two views of selfhood can have varying strengths and emphases. However, “the new main arteries [of the centralized plan] do not necessarily provide the best routes from one part of the city to another, and they do not give the most perspicuous idea of the working relations among the various parts of the city.”

The meandering archeological plan in Harryman’s novel corresponds to the view that the subject has multiple cognitive centers, as opposed to a central command post to which all roads lead and where information from its various hypothetical branches is processed and evaluated. In *Gardener of Stars*, subjectivity is imagined as characters with identities, but at the same time those identities are in a state of flux and revision. In addition, as my previous comments show, the characters can also be thought of as part of a larger social being, in both a synchronic and a diachronic sense. One of the driving forces in Harryman’s novel is the impetus, not to resolve these contradictory states or movements, but to keep them in a continually circulating reciprocal and dialogical exchange so that utopian desire does not create hierarchical structures that merely invert structures of power.

To demonstrate how Harryman is challenging dualistic frameworks in her conceptualization of subjectivity in her characters, I will highlight one more aspect that is pertinent to this question: that of the characters Caesar and the slave, and their relationship to the
utopic desires and structures in the novel. The problem of intersubjectivity in the following
discussion foreshadows a more extended analysis in Chapter Five. However, it is also relevant
here, since the question of intrasubjective construction and intersubjective relationships are
closely related.

Caesar, who is the son of Gardener, is introduced in the novel as a slave who, perhaps
because of his own subjugation by masters, attempts to denigrate M and her “land of cunts.” M
recounts that “[h]e was either a slave, or imitating one. . . . In an extremely disorganized manner
he told me that he was a slave from a city about two hundred miles away. . . . He preferred his
life to mine, women were also welcome in his city, but he was disgusted by this land of cunts”
(37). When M responds that she likes to be called a “cunt,” the slave says that he intended to
insult her, implying that words and names can have slippery meanings and intentions (37). “A
slave is nothing, he said. Nothing but a name.” He shows her the word “Infant” branded on his
head, and M asks whether he wants to be called “Infant.” “Only if you want me to be what I am,”
he responds. M prefers that “he act the part he wasn’t” (38).

It is in infancy that issues of domination, control and independence arise, as the child
develops an increasing sense of her separation and individuation from the parents. According to
Benjamin, one of the central problems in departing from dualistic notions of the self in classic
analytic thought is that of “recognizing the other” [emphasis in original]:

Establishing myself (Hegel’s “being for itself”) means winning the recognition of
the other, and this, in turn, means I must finally acknowledge the other as existing
for himself and not just for me. The process we call differentiation proceeds
through the movement of recognition, its flow from subject to subject, from self
to other and back. The nature of this movement is necessarily contradictory,
paradoxical. Only by deepening our understanding of this paradox can we
broaden our picture of human development to include not only the separation but
also the meeting of minds – a picture in which the bird’s flight is always in two
directions.51
Benjamin’s image of a bird flying in two different directions at once nicely echoes the conceptualization of cognitive processes and the reading strategies in the poetry I have presented thus far. The simultaneous and dialogical coexistence of contradictory movements and terms takes the form of a paradox, which we will encounter again in the context of intersubjectivity in the discussion of Emmanuel Levinas, Mei-mei Berssenbrugge, and Leslie Scalapino in Chapter Five. Benjamin’s model of intersubjectivity overturns Hegel’s theory of the recognition of the other as a competitive struggle. In his analysis of the relation between self and other, Hegel posits, in one stage in the development of self-consciousness, “two self-conscious individuals” whose relation “is such that they prove themselves and each other through a life-and-death struggle.” 52 If a subject kills the other, the subject’s need for recognition by the other in order to establish his own status as separate being is thwarted. The resolution of this struggle is the domination of one by the other. Since Hegel takes as a given the necessity of an independent consciousness being for itself, and Hegel’s the ever-developing dialectical progression toward a higher social unity, the object or other continues to exist for a subject. For Benjamin, however, “[t]he ideal ‘resolution’ of the paradox of recognition is for it to continue as a constant tension”: “true independence means sustaining the essential tension of these contradictory impulses; that is, both asserting the self and recognizing the other.” 53 If one cannot recognize the other as subject, as opposed to an object that exists for one’s own subjecthood, then the result is domination. 54 Benjamin recognizes this possibility yet also suggests the possibility for the movement of non-resolution, which means continual dialogue between the contradictory positions within the subject. This principle of reciprocity between the contradictory aspects of a
self is demonstrated in *Gardener of Stars* in the relationships among Caesar, the slave, and Gardener.

Throughout Harryman’s novel, Caesar and the slave both have independent existences, yet they also seem to be interchangeable, flip sides of one another in a single being. They both, for example, have the word “Infant” branded on their heads (38, 44). Because of his dual status as dominator and dominated, Caesar is a contradictory being. He “can act the part but he can’t be a slave, even if he has no power. *Infant* is branded on his head. He is a walking contradiction. My greatest desire is to inhabit paradox, make the world big enough for the both of us in our co-constructed movie” (44-45). In order to “make the world big enough” for both of them, Gardener must discover how to retain the possibility of the coexistence of contradictory states so as not to banish Caesar entirely, which would be to exchange one dualistic condition for another. If Caesar is allowed to “rule the roost” (56), as Gardener puts it, he will dominate others, and the master and slave dichotomy will prevail. If Caesar is banished, a crucial aspect of the psyche will wither. As Benjamin points out, a more dialectical view of the psyche must be developed that embraces a view of the person as both an individuated, discrete being, and an intersubjective being, a subject interacting among other subjects:

I suggest that intrapsychic and intersubjective theory should not be seen in opposition to each other (as they usually are) but as complementary ways of understanding the psyche. To recognize the intersubjective self is not to deny the importance of the intrapsychic: the inner world of fantasy, wish, anxiety, and defense; of bodily symbols and images whose connections defy the ordinary rules of logic and language. 

Caesar thus needs to loosen a few boundaries within himself and learn to recognize others as subjects. And one of Gardener’s central problems in the narrative is to find a place for Caesar – for “His Majesty the Baby,” as Freud puts it – within the utopia that she is trying imaginatively
to construct. Gardener worries that if, in the care of others, no one will set limits on his omnipotent tendencies, he’ll end up lonely because he won’t be able to relate to others as subjects in their own right. He’ll simply “rul[e] over the roost. No one will care. I am supposed to be there to prevent him from thinking he’s god. It is my responsibility to bring him down for his own good” (56-57). In the utopia that Gardener seeks across the bridge, there’s no place for an absolute ruler, yet a place must paradoxically be found for Caesar, for repression is not a good response to the desire for power, either. Gardener hesitates to “[abandon] him to a world we have refused to live in” (45). She sees the task of her and others in her envisioned community as being “to provide a kind of human bridge between one territory or community and another and to deliver Caesar to the right place. When there cannot possibly be a right place for him. This story is not about him but about myself, or myself as him as wanting to be him” (45). Here again, the roles of the characters as both individuals and as parts of a single psyche is ambiguous. For Gardener, crossing the bridge turns into a misadventure of floating down a river and visiting various utopian – and dystopic, in the case of the “paternalistic boot camp” – communities. And Caesar proves his usefulness to Gardener: “Caesar, the mot juste ghost of the living, intervenes in her desire to be taken in by wedding decor and the haunting tragedy that maintains it. It is a world assimilated in death, and her child Caesar is the unassimilable” (65-66). Caesar thus prevents Gardener from being seduced into a patriarchal marriage arrangement in the harem, by being the unassimilable part of her consciousness.

Gardener abandons Caesar when he is four years old, leaving him to be raised by “M and Gardener’s friends” (153), for, “[a]s in many utopian fantasies, the idea of a natural mother was modified so that child rearing wasn’t a burden” (154). During her absence from Caesar and his female caregivers, Gardener joins the “City of Men” and proceeds to tear down the fences that
separates the yards and houses (140-143). Meanwhile, Caesar is tearing down a few borders within himself, fantasizing himself first as riding on a motorcycle with a girl, then being “a girl on a bike.” Identities of others around him also blur, for the girls that he plays with are “a little bit like him and a little bit like everybody else too” (155). The boundaries between master and slave within Caesar also shift. He is “a slave who was not a slave but a person without a clear designation” (130).

In the last chapter of Gardener’s Stars, “Not the World Beyond but the World Below,” M and Caesar are reunited with Gardener during a walk in the hills, and Caesar experiences rapid alternations in his identity. The slave is everpresent, ready to emerge as a part of who Caesar is, in case Caesar needs him. In the following scene, Caesar seems to be recalling his relationship with Henry, who is from “the land of the dead, where “all the cars are still running (160),” before the “Great Collapse” that results in Gardener and M’s post-apocalyptic world (96-97). Caesar also thinks of death when, during their rambling walk, he and Gardener see the seated corpses of three women, simply because “in this world everything was desired and there had to be three corpses (175)”: 

The fact is, said Caesar, I didn’t die yet. How old are you? asked M. Get closer and I’ll tell you, said Caesar. M was still keeping her distance. The slave found this somehow agreeable. Nothing is as it seems. I am twelve I think. No not yet, said Gardener. Gardener had forgotten that there was a way to talk to children. She actually hadn’t forgotten but did not know how any more. I think that might be all for the best, is how she justified her own cruelty. It isn’t so mean after all is it? I could be dead but I’m not, said Caesar. I could be in those chairs. The skull could be mine. Or mine, said Gardener. She took Caesar’s hand and Caesar didn’t seem to like it but then he did. He wanted his mother to hold him. Even if it was the slave who never left his side. He and the slave were men.

And yet Gardener wanted everything. So the hand was somehow just part of everything. Caesar was first intoxicated and then rebuked, denied, crushed by her lusty voracious feelings of proliferation. How could you be my mother? He put his hand on her big belly. The baby is going to kick he announced. And it did.
The slave gave a little start when he saw Caesar touch the mother again. He did not like Caesar’s fascination for the person who had left him for so long. He wanted Caesar to grow up strong as he had but connected to something useful. Something truthful perhaps, accurate and precise, dizzingly [sic] adult. And yet the slave was not simply a victim of emotion, he was not only guided and trampled by impulse, he did not just seek pleasure for the sake of the infancy he had lost. They had all lost it (176-77).

The slave in Caesar at first resents Gardener’s emergent role as a mother-subject instead of simply an object to hold him. He distrusts Gardener’s newfound “lusty voracious feelings of proliferation.” But, perhaps because of Gardener’s subjective stance, Caesar didn’t die but lives alongside the slave in a paradoxical state.

Harryman’s characters resist killing off the ones that might be considered to have no place in their desired utopia. Instead, they are integrated, engaged, and made useful to others as well as to their own beings. They become engaged in a dialogue in which they must recognize the other as a subject with the same interdependent function within the group as their own. As contradictory and conflicting parts of the self, they must recognize the self not as a unity of being but as a multiplicity of drives, moods, positions, sexual impulses.

_Gardener of Stars_ beautifully and complexly demonstrates the dialectical tensions between the intrasubjective and intersubjective realms. The recognition of the multiplicity of the former is crucial to the recognition of the differentiation between self and other. Moreover, the recognition of the radical alterity between self and other is, paradoxically, crucial to the development of non-coercive and non-dominating relationships with others, and to the development of feelings of empathy with others. Through the ambiguity of the status of the characters as arts of a self or as individual subjects, Harryman’s drama develops the idea of the paradoxical and simultaneous existence of both functions in a profoundly dialogical and dialectical dynamics of characterization.
Like the work of Harryman, Weiner’s poetry demonstrates an acute awareness of the self as an internally dialogical and multivocal being, although Weiner takes a very different approach to the issue. An examination of Weiner’s writings provides a particularly instructive and unusual example of a multivocal poetry. Diagnosed with schizophrenia in her forties (rather late for the manifestation of this illness), Weiner experienced the onset of an ability that is unique even among poets, artists, and musicians who have reported exceptional neurological conditions such as neurasthenia, synesthesia, and schizophrenia. She saw words hovering in the air and projected onto walls, paper, her typewriter, people’s foreheads, and other objects, including her own forehead “in such a way that she [was able to perceive] them from within.” These words appeared in both color and black and white, and sometimes seem to be infused with light. Weiner reports that the ability to see words was the culmination of a progression of visual experiences, that progressed from “feeling and seeing auras, to seeing pictures, and finally the slow development of seeing words which first appeared singly, then later in short phrases.” She wove these words, often along with her “own” words, to create a patchwork or dialogue of interacting voices. According to Weiner, the words seemed to come to her as if “external to herself.” Yet she insisted that the messages she received were quite involuntary and unconscious. She claimed to have no conscious control over the words that appeared before her or, later in her life, the voices and hallucinations that she experienced. They were part of the fabric of her own being, generated from a part of herself to which she had no conscious access. She came to engage these printed voices, these others within herself, in a dialogue.

The published record of these conversations constitutes a poetry that both engages and goes far beyond the mere neurological oddity of its genesis. Weiner was a poet before she experienced the onset of schizophrenic symptoms, and her use, or in a sense, her collaboration
with the involuntarily produced words is an artistic achievement of acute intellect and artistic sensibility. Moreover, her work makes a salient philosophical point about the nature of the self: the poetry shows the disruption of the unitary self at the same time that it continually constructs a self out of many selves by engaging these multiple voices in conversation. Hers is quite literally a poetics of intrapsychic multivocality.

My use of Weiner to illustrate a poetics of multiple selfhood that I am describing as a strategy, as in the case of Harryman, is not entirely accurate, since she has no control over the words that appear to her, insisting that they are unconscious. Without denying the pathology of Weiner’s condition, for which she doubtlessly suffered, I would point out that our own thoughts are not somehow magically generated by a rational consciousness, but are generated from regions of the mind that are not accessible to consciousness. We know how we might respond to a stimulus before our conscious mind becomes aware of our possible actions, words or thoughts. Recalling Damasio’s admonishment regarding the myth of the autonomous and inner-directed self, “we are hopelessly late for consciousness.” By the same token, we might challenge Harryman’s strategy as a consciously determined and rational working out of voices. Harryman makes use of a rich jumble of dreamlike material whose structure and meaning hover like auras around the congeries of characters and events. Short of proposing a schizophrenic continuum, it is possible to see a relation between the dialogical poetry of Weiner and Harryman. Both recognize that the self has many voices that are in constant dialogue among themselves, on conscious and unconscious levels.

In order to understand something of how Weiner’s poetry looks and works, I will examine a page from her book-length work Clairvoyant Journal, bearing the date “3/10.” The poem is worth presenting in full in order to see the full effect of its concrete image
(see Figure 3). In *Clairvoyant Journal*, Weiner indicates the words she sees in both capital letters and italics. These words sometimes overlap one another and interrupt her “own” words, the ones in her conscious inner dialogue, establishing a conversation among the various visual “voices” and Weiner’s conscious voice. Weiner’s poetry seems obsessed with the process of its own construction, and with the examination of the bits and pieces of language that construct communication but that might disrupt it as well. In her journal, her self as site of multiple voices – both conscious and unconscious – is revealed in its multi-faceted moods: the voices are in turn humorous, demanding, despairing, frustrated, joyful, and playful.

One of the most obvious things, both visually and verbally, about the text of *Clairvoyant Journal* is the incessant interruptions of the voices. Hardly does one thought become articulated before another thread take its place. The interruptions are differentiated from the stream of Weiner’s conscious thoughts, “just trying to get through the day,” and are visually indicated in the alternation of normal typography with upper case and italic words. Sometimes, a word interrupts another word, literally cutting across it on the page, as in “get exciJUNKtement.” And Weiner (and her multiple inner voices) often deals with this interruption by commenting on it, as in the first statement of this journal entry: “How can I describe anything when all these interruptions keep arriving and then tell me I dont describe it well.” There is a playfulness about this statement, for the italics voice interrupts her very statement about interruptions, filling in a crucial word in her sentence. Thus, although the voices interrupt, they also complete, fill in gaps. And when Weiner’s conscious voice tells herself to “Try praying,” and she does so by beginning the Lord’s prayer, “Our father who art . . .,” the italic voice jumps in playfully, as if assuming the voice of God, “be right over.”
At times, Weiner’s journal-voice comments on the words that she sees, which are often in the form of imperatives and instructions. One voice insistently tells her to “GO TO COUNTDOWN” (“got that for days and yesterday it didn’t stop”). She goes to Bloomingdale’s, tries on a pair of “maroon velvet pants,” which at first she doesn’t buy. But the voice won’t leave her alone, so she returns to buy them (“it’s better than seeing GO TO COUNTDOWN for the rest of my life peace so they fit well”). The mundanity of the voices in constant dialogue regarding the little rituals of everyday life – shopping, calling or visiting friends, seeing art galleries, fixing household objects, doing the laundry, making tea, and so forth – situate the words of the poem within the minute-to-minute goings-on of a life. And although Weiner was an extraordinary person with very unusual abilities, the events that she documents through the incessant chatter within her mind are often of the most banal kind. The scolding voice that tells her “Hannah behave yourself stupid silly” or that insists that she buy a particular article of clothing, or that nags her to make that phone call to a friend, bring to mind our own dialogues within ourselves, the voices within our own psyches. They remind us that we are not alone within ourselves, and that we are constituted by the voices and attitudes of all of our combined experiences, including the voices of others, and perhaps if we would listen more closely to those voices, we would discover a far less organically integrated self, and instead one that is continually in the process of constructing itself. It is as if in Weiner’s microscopic, blow-by-blow diary of the mind, all the thousands of synapses involved in the minute decisions and activities of the mind are exposed for their complex circuitry, and we see, not a self, but many selves bantering, pushing and pulling, vying for expression.

Charles Bernstein points out the political implications of Weiner’s emphasis on the visual manifestation of the language that comes to her, through typographical differentiations among
the voices and threads, and the dialogical nature of her poetry. If we all engaged with the many words that each of us daily sees before us with the kind of critical dialogue in which she engages, we might take the meaning and implications of what we read much less for granted. Weiner works on “the language that fills, and often enough, controls our lives . . . ([Weiner] says ‘group mind’).” By actually seeing the elements of her work before her, they are thus rendered “physicalized, palpable”; when we see language thus in operation, “we can start to free ourselves from a compulsive obedience to it,” but only if we simultaneously critique the authority of the words before us.66

By recording her mental chatter, Weiner renders the hundreds of little dramas of her inner conversations visible and materialized. She shows the non-linear aspect of these boisterous and insistently digressive conversations by inserting responses and interjections between the lines, as in her observation that “Joan’s / head says LAUGH as she / laughs” and the spoonerism “QUINK THICK / LY.” Sometimes she records the visualized voices diagonally across the page, as in “IT WRITES ITSELF.” Through such unorthodox placements of the multiple voices that populate the pages of her journal, Weiner insists that we question our linear reading habits, which, she suggests, may be alien from our mental processes. We must be prepared to read a page in Clairvoyant Journal in the way that we may not always be aware that we think: attuned to the chaotic swirl of mental voices that interact to produce subtle and multiple meanings.

In reading Clairvoyant Journal, one may also become aware of the ways in which the debris of our culture litters our mental landscape and dominates our thoughts. Note, for example, the word “MONEY” in large boldface letters, which ends “3/10,” and which exerts a pull throughout the entry. Weiner counters obsessive materialistic desire by counting backwards (“10, 9, 8, 7”), which corresponds ironically to Bloomingdale’s “countdown” sale. When we see
language at work in such a palpable fashion, we can begin to question its more baneful pressures.67

The work of Kristeva can serve as a useful theoretical counterpart to the multivocal poetry of Weiner and clarify, from a psychoanalytic perspective, notions of a disunified self in dialogue with the conceptualization of a whole or unified self. A key concern in Kristeva’s work is to dismantle notions of a unitary self and instead posit a “pulverized” signifying self. Her psychoanalytic theory of avant-garde poetry can productively engage with experimental poetry, particularly in regard to its interest in multivocality and reflexivity. The investigation and questioning of linguistic habits by contemporary experimental poets explains much of the metalinguistic emphasis in their work, which is often engaged in a dialogue regarding the validity of its own existence and mode of expression. As Ron Silliman succinctly states, it is a “philosophy of practice in language.”68 In experimental poetry, the transmission and reception of knowledge is understood to be a radically decentralized and uncertain exercise. Kristeva’s theory provides a psychoanalytic account of the disjunctive nature of such poetry as well as its preoccupation with reflexivity. Generating a dialogue between Kristeva’s theories of language acquisition and Weiner’s poetry demonstrates ways in which Weiner’s multivocal poetry exemplifies the contradictory and heterogeneous functioning of what Kristeva terms the semiotic chora.

Kristeva’s theories of the avant-garde are relevant to the criticism of contemporary experimental poetry and poetics, particularly in relation to thinking of the heterogeneous nature of the self in terms of linguistic disruption. Her monumental work on the conjunction of avant-garde poetic practice and the process of language acquisition, Revolution in Poetic Language, coincided with the emergence of the emergence in the early 1970s of the American language
As I mentioned in Chapter One, an early matrix for the sophisticated theoretical development of contemporary experimental poetics was \( L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E \) (February 1978 – October 1981), a journal dedicated to the discussion of a poetry whose practitioners share with Kristeva many concerns regarding poetic expression and its political implications. Since that publication began, many books have been written to chart and describe the historical phenomenon of language poetry and to elucidate its theoretical premises.

Yet despite Kristeva’s claims for the psychoanalytical underpinnings of radical poetic expression, her theories are not often mentioned in analyses of the philosophical and political implications of language poetry, and if so, often as a footnote to the theoretical materials that influenced the language poets in their quest to throw off entrenched linguistic habits. Perhaps the reason that experimental poets and their theorists have tended to shy away from psychoanalytic approaches to the poetry and to embrace deconstructive and reader response theories is their rejection of the practices of what Bernstein calls the “official verse-culture of the university writing programs,” which tend to stress finding one’s unique voice and authentic self (Plumly’s mandates for good poetry, discussed earlier in this chapter, are exemplary of this tendency). Psychoanalytic theories of language acquisition inevitably rely on analyses of the triadic relationship among child, mother and father. They tend to portray the Oedipal narrative as the infant individual’s heroic struggles to understand and come to terms with the mighty parental figures who loom above and who, as seemingly omnipotent sources of pleasure and discomfort, oscillate between behaving as the infant’s allies and foes. Such narratives sometimes emphasize the development of the individual as a discrete personality. Perhaps for apologists and theorists of experimental poetries, such analyses seem uncomfortably close to the family romance that
mainstream poets so often psychologize in their poetry from the stance of the authoritative narrative voice.\textsuperscript{72}

Far from positing a development of a unified self, Kristeva’s theory of the divided self focuses on the transformations that occur in an individual when as an infant he or she acquires the ability to use language to represent phenomena. Thus her theory constitutes in part a narrative of the initiation of the individual into linguistic signification; the subsequent repression of the infantile state, which is ordered by bodily drives, through the linguistic ordering of the phenomenal world into hierarchies and divisions (as between subject and object); and the reemergence of the pre-representational state in disruptions of the habitual symbolic ordering. Other theories that posit a divided self focus not so much on ontogenetic narratives but on the synchronic state of cognition. These theories most often seek to displace or at least balance notions of a homunculus at the helm guiding cognitive activity, and posit instead cognitive systems that are inherently nonunified and decentralized and that function in reciprocal and interdependent ways.

One of the risks of Kristeva’s account of the divided or multiple self is that of any narrative: its construction is in part dependent on the shape and teleology of previous stories. Kristeva’s version accepts much of the terminology and givens of her predecessors, Freud and Lacan, including the controversial concept of the Oedipal stage of development.\textsuperscript{73} Kristeva’s conceptual assumptions, as well as her focus on the development of the individual in society, might lead to a neglect of the historical contextualization of the psychological and linguistic ontogenetic phenomena she seems to accept as being pervasive and universal. One might misleadingly assume that initiation into symbolization is inevitably an initiation into cultural and social authoritarianism, a condition which must be liberated by the ecstatic irruption of the pre-
representational and drive-motivated chora or unconscious. The state of representation is no more tyrannical than the state of non-representation is liberatory. These states are capable of contributing to either socio-political condition, and in varying proportions and degrees. Some skepticism and caveats are thus in order in a consideration of Kristeva’s contributions to a theory of experimental poetry.

Before proceeding with further analysis of work by Weiner, it will be useful to have a basic notion of Kristeva’s method in her narrative tracing the origins of semantic disruption in avant-garde poetic expression (or in any expression, for that matter, that disrupts semantic certainty and any notion of a unified self). In spite of the caveats just mentioned, Kristeva’s positioning of the account of linguistic disruption within a narrative of individual development also constitutes its strength for my purposes. Her concern to trace the origins of poetic language ontogenetically and to describe the diachronic unfolding of syntactic disruption facilitates the dialectical motion of reciprocity between terms that I am describing from a number of perspectives in the present work. Her diachronic method shows the disruption of the symbolic as a processual and interdependent motion between terms over time, rather than as a relatively steady-state description of non-linear, nonhierarchical, and distributed cognitive systems. She thus explains the disruption of boundaries between representational and nonrepresentational impulses as a motion of continual circulation of impulses necessary to one another, and indeed contained within one another. I am suggesting that this mutually interdependent relationship of impulses within the self, and the dialectical movement in the signifying process is related to reciprocity and interdependence between subject and object explored in the previous chapter.

Although much of her work deals with the relationship between the pre- and post-linguistic stages in human development, it is above all in Revolution in Poetic Language that
Kristeva proposes a psychoanalytic explanation of how disruptive, avant-garde poetic practice comes into being. The semiotic *chora*, which was repressed after the subject’s entrance into the realm of the symbolic, reemerges and destabilizes those conditions that symbolic language instituted: the illusion of the unified subject, the division and hierarchical positioning of subject/object and signifier/signified through socialization and syntax, the representation of the world by the word or symbol, the investment in mimesis and verisimilitude, and the subject’s taking of positions and forming of judgments. Poetic language emerges when “those drives that the thetic phase was not able to sublate . . . by linking them into signifier and signified” cannot be contained, and become posited as autonomous in relation to the thetic and the symbolic. Thus in its attack on the symbolic, avant-garde poetic language places the divided subject in process/on trial [*en proces*].

The double meaning of which Kristeva so aptly takes advantage in the phrase *en proces* expresses both the putting-on-trial of the illusion of the post-thetic unified subject, and the idea of the reemergence of process in the semiotic, as opposed to the structural basis of the symbolic. The subject distorts and takes apart syntax in order to expose the “defensive construction” of language that “protects the body from the attack of drives by making it a place in which the body can signify itself through positions.” Kristeva thus conceives of the reemergence of the semiotic as “an influx of the death drive, which no signifier, no mirror, no other, and no mother could ever contain.”

In terms of Kristeva’s scheme of language acquisition, the functioning of language as an invisible conduit between signifier and signified corresponds with the symbolic, which tends to privilege the signified and to mask the instability of its meaning. The functioning of language as
a medium with its own materiality and expressive energy independent of its fungibility in regards
to the meaning it is intended to convey, corresponds to the pre-representational semiotic drives.

But words never exclusively belong to either the symbolic or the semiotic, for there is

da necessary dialectic between the two modalities of the signifying process which

is constitutive of the subject. Because the subject is always both semiotic and
symbolic, no signifying system he produces can be either “exclusively” semiotic or
“exclusively” symbolic, and is instead necessarily marked by an indebtedness
to both.\textsuperscript{78}

Since the semiotic chora is “a space in itself” and by nature does not take positions or form
judgments, it is unable to “challenge meaning’s closure.” Only a “dialectical oscillation between
the semiotic and the symbolic” can produce a new language that is capable of pulverizing
signification.\textsuperscript{79}

It is important to recognize the heterogeneous nature of the semiotic, whose essential
class is negativity or, Kristeva’s preferred term for this state, reject (rejection).\textsuperscript{80} It is a space
in which the fort-da\textsuperscript{81} game is replayed over and over, and eventually reaches a crisis in the
eruption of the signifier as representative of the object and in the individuation of the self:

By dint of accumulating ruptures, and through this heterogeneity, which use the
presignifying engram produced in the absence of any object isolated in itself,
rejection becomes stabilized. Its tendency toward death is deferred by this
symbolic heterogeneity: the body, as if to prevent its own destruction, reinscribes
[re-marque] rejection and, through a leap, represents it in absentia as a sign.\textsuperscript{82}

Paradoxically, although the motion of rejection in the semiotic is the basis upon which the
symbolic builds its own illusions of selfhood, this same “rejection is also at the root of its
destruction (172).” This contradiction is also at the heart of a double movement that is the means
by which a poetics maximizes its radical political edge: that in which the poetics both disrupts
habitual discursive practices and ontological constructs and uses the habitual, symbolic mode to articulate its critique of the dominant modes of thinking of being in the world. Such contradiction underlies the relationship between the symbolic and the latent or emergent semiotic through poetic language: “poetry becomes an explicit confrontation between jouissance and the thetic, that is, a permanent struggle to show the facilitation of drives within the linguistic order itself” (81). Such contradiction inheres in the relationship between poetic practice and the violent act of sacrifice or sacred murder. The thetic sacrifices the semiotic and instates the symbolic: “what is violent is the irruption of the symbol, killing substance to make it signify” (75). The sacrifice reenacts this repression of the semiotic, yet this reenactment also enables reentry into the jouissance that was denied by the symbolic. It is as if the reenactment of the sacrificial moment of the thetic, the reenactment of the “confrontation between jouissance and the thetic” creates something of a gateway to the unconscious, which the sacrifice resembles (78). By “reproducing the process of [the] production of [symbolic functioning]” (75) through sacrifice, as through poetic practice, “the subject crosses the border of the symbolic and reaches the semiotic chora, which is on the other side of the social frontier” (79). Thus poetic language ends up sacrificing the symbolic order within that very order; poetic language asserts its political challenge “within and against the social order”; it is, paradoxically, “the precondition of the survival and revolution” of the symbolic order. As Kelly Oliver aptly explains Kristeva’s concept of the heterogeneity of words,

[I]t is the dialectical oscillation between the semiotic and the symbolic that breaks and redefines the limits of language because a space in itself, the semiotic chora cannot challenge meaning’s closure. Only a new way of speaking can do that. And this new way of speaking comes only through acknowledging that the signifying process is necessarily a heterogeneous process.
It is just this dialectical relationship between the semiotic and the symbolic in Kristeva’s theory that enables one to account for moments in contemporary poetic texts that accomplish this double movement of the shattering of discourse, experience, and subjecthood, along with a critique of the dominant practice and conception of these constructs.

Such assumption of mastery by the speaking self also posits that self as a unitary whole, an impervious construction with a distinct individuality. If we have a notion of the self as a unified whole, a totalized system of body, drives, symbolizations, and so forth, we then relinquish the idea of a self that may not transgress itself to become reflexive. Vantage points from which to posit or imagine language or desire referring to itself need not be thought of as taking place outside a discrete self. To have such a vantage point need not imply objectifying the self or achieving an absolute position exterior to language or drives or body. To understand the concept of enacting such a position, one must have a notion of the self as performing many selves, as the sujet en procès. The key word is “enact,” as distinguished from “represent,” for, as Oliver emphasizes,

poetic language discharges rather than represents drives. In this way, the repressed makes its way into the Symbolic: the unconscious drives become conscious, but they do so in a way that is analogous to the psychoanalytic process and not merely a form of mimesis; poetic language enacts a transference between drives and language rather than an imitation of drives in language.\(^8^4\)

The chora releases drives into consciousness and allows the enacting of dialogue within the self; it “dissolves identity.”\(^8^5\) One could equally apply this movement to that of experimental poetry, which, to quote Bob Perelman, “critiques the norms of voice and self.”\(^8^6\) However, in a recent interview, Perelman also acknowledges the “continuous tension” between the impulses that unify and shatter identity, envisioning the flux of identity in experimental poetry as a “contest between
various centers”: “[I]dentity is something you can never overturn once and for all, any more than you can establish it. It is a continuous tension that sometimes threatens to close down and harden, but can sometimes open up.”  

Perelman – and many other contemporary experimental poets – are less interested in “re-establish[ing] a binary” by merely upholding the unraveling of identity, or the presenting of unraveled identity, as an essentialist ideal. In the 1970s, such ideals were more commonly proclaimed, in reaction to the dominant ideal of the academic workshop poem of the 1960s and 1970s, which typically stressed individual self-expression and a centered authorial voice. However, as Perelman wisely states, “Writing focused on textuality doesn’t preclude any sort of readerly identification – or disidentification. There’s always a continuum to reading, from accurate registration to all kinds of resistance, critique, disobedience.”  

The processual and dynamic tension between the banding and disbanding of the voices of a self in Weiner’s work exemplifies well the intrasubjective dialectical process I am describing in the present chapter.

In order to show this facet of Weiner’s clairvoyant poetry and demonstrate how Kristeva’s psychoanalytic theory might be helpful in analyzing it, I will examine a concrete poem from *Little Books / Indians*, which, lacking a title, will be referred to by its first line, “I sjust.” As with the previous poem, it is worth presenting this one in toto, since its effect as a concrete poem is dependent upon seeing the whole (see Figure 4). In this work, Weiner claims to have seen all the words and letters that she writes and arranges. The concrete form of the untitled poem we are looking at creates (mimics) syntax through its structure – like a diagramed sentence – as it simultaneously destroys it: the very form of the contradictory state of the semiotic I have been discussing. The purpose of sentence diagraming, which was a common grade school exercise during Weiner’s youth, is to highlight the logical structure of sentences, showing their
abstract connectedness and relationships. The exercise is a sort of linguistic geometry in which the particularities of a sentence become idealized and hierarchicalized in structural relationships. The noun and verb occupy the most important places, and all the other elements of the sentence exist in a formal relationship of subordination to their foundational dichotomy.

However, the fragmented words and interrupted sentences of Weiner’s mock-diagram work against the idea of ordered and hierarchicalized syntax and place that syntax under extreme pressure to produce multiple meanings and disrupt its normative structure. In Kristeva’s words, the irruption of the *chora* does not produce the suppression of the sentence but instead, its infinitization. For example, the first, fragmentary, group of letters, “I sjust,”: can be read several ways: 1) “I is just” – “I” is just, ethically in the right, a “just” construction. But who, or which “I,” is “speaking” these words? Because we have no clear idea of a unified self or voice speaking, the very source of the words becomes problematic, and the idea of an ethical, unitary self is questioned. 2) “Is just.” In this reading, we have the predicate but no subject. However, the subject is embedded within the construction, since the “I” of “Is” stands apart. Is the subject present or not? The answer is ambiguous and contradictory. 3) “I (s)just.” The “s” could be read as silent, a dead letter or a pleonastic letter, like the appendix of one’s body that no longer serves any function. This letter reminds us of the materiality of language, the “thinginess” of the letters and words that are not inevitable but instead come together in particular ways by habitual and socialized usage. It is these habits of language that Weiner disrupts.

Weiner’s fragmented diagram is also rendered highly self-conscious: the very theme that the words explore is the sentence, and sentence structure; the thesis is a debate, never resolved, between the imperative to “finish the sentence” and the equally demanding injunction, “donst continue,” and “dont continue with this sentence.” Another voice reminds her of the “structure /
stupid" at the same time that the very idea of received structure is destabilized within the framework of the poem. The structure not only of sentences but of letters is also explored: the words “STRUCTURE” AND “SENTENCE” appear without the T’s crossed, followed by the incomplete note, “cross my ts / across the” The habit that is formed by the act of having read the words “sentence” and “structure” several times during the poem assists us in reading the fragmented letters as uncrossed t’s instead of as capital I’s. But the effect is unsettling, and reminds us of the materiality of language – from its syntax to the smallest units of its composition, its letters, and even the parts of letters – and the possibilities of its radical disjunctures and instabilities.

The acquisition of the ability to articulate syntactically belongs to the thetic break between the semiotic chora and the symbolic stage. The division between subject and predicate “represent[s] the division inherent in the thetic.” In fact, syntax and the thetic are inseparable, and this indivisibility “implies that signification . . . is a process in which opposable ‘terms’ are posited as phenomena but can be identified as the two faces (denotation-enunciation) of the thetic break” (55). Syntax is predicated on the absence of the subject: he or she gets left out in the transformation from drive to signifier within the rupture into heterogeneity of the symbolic (55). When, as in poetic discourse, the semiotic chora brings about the reemergence of the subject and disrupts “the thetic position by redistributing the signifying order, . . . the denoted object and the syntactic relation are disturbed as well.” “The possibility of both verisimilar denotation and communication” are still ensured, for grammatical markers and divisions are maintained. However,

the completion of the grammatical sequence does not take place because the division is not completely rejoined in a NP-VP, modified-modifier, etc. whole. This ellipsis or syntactic non-completion can be interpreted as the thetic break’s
inability to remain simply intra-syntactic – a division within a signifying homogeneity. A heterogeneous division, an irruption of the semiotic chora, marks each ‘category’ of the syntactic sequence and prevents the ‘other’ from being posited as an identifiable syntactic term (subject or predicate, modified or modifier, etc.). In this realization of the signifier, particularly as it is seen in poetic texts, alterity is maintained within the pure signifier and/or in the simply syntactic element only with difficulty. For the Other has become heterogeneous and will not remain fixed in place: it negativizes all terms, all posited elements, and thus syntax, threatening them with possible dissolution. (56)

In other words, the breach between self and other, subject and object, the subsequent representation of the opposed entities by signs, and their reassimilation within syntactical structures are subject to attack by the irruption of the semiotic chora’s drives, because the signifying process is not homogeneous, but instead inherently heterogeneous. The process was born out of a heterogeneous condition of conflicting drives, and the possibility of its destabilization, fragmentation, and infinitization always remains language’s radically disruptive potential. Grammatical non-completion and ellipses allow the terms of the syntactical units to be linked together and recombined ad infinitum (56).

The interruptions and fragmentations of voice in Weiner’s poetry signify the death of the unitary self (think of Weiner’s frustration at not being able to describe anything because of the continual interruption of the “voices”), but also the positing of its reconstruction (through the coming together of many voices interwoven in conversation). One of the effects of the presence of multiple voices is that the subject as an impossibly unified construct seems to be simultaneously constructed and deconstructed – she is everywhere and nowhere, and constantly rehearses her appearance and disappearance. This resembles the process of drives and stases that constitute the semiotic stage. Kristeva posits that during the acquisition of language and the entrance into the symbolic, “the production of [the] subject [is] a process, an intersection – an impossible unity. Negation, which characterizes the post-semiotic subject, “serves, along with
syntax, as the strongest breakwater for protecting the unity of the subject and offers the most tenacious resistance to the shattering of the verbal function in the psychotic process.”

On the other hand, “the semiotic chora is no more than the place where the subject is both generated and negated, the place where his unity succumbs before the process of charges and stases that produce him.” Furthermore,

In schizophrenia and in the poetic language of the modern text, negation and syntactic structure find their status transformed and their normativeness disturbed: they become textual phenomena that bespeak a specific economy of drives, an expenditure or a shattering of the “drive vector,” and hence a modification of the relation between the subject and the outside. Negativity, stopped and absorbed within the negation of judgment, therefore shows through only in modifications of the function of negation or in syntactic and lexical modifications, which are characteristic of psychotic discourse and poetry” (124).

Weiner’s poetry manifests the semiotic functioning of the alternating charges and stases that posit social structure and negate it. The social is predicated on the separation of self and other; and on the distinction of voices. Weiner’s poetics posits the self as other – the place where (perhaps) repressed aspects of the self continually erupt, a place in which the self has not yet been (irretrievably) distinguished from other, and thus is other. The internalized other(s) continually shatter the continuity and wholeness of self and discourse, but also create the means by which they may continually come together. Thus the contradictory and heterogeneous nature of the semiotic emerges in the multiple voices that constitute Weiner’s speaking subject (or subjects).

Since the disruptions enacted by experimental poetic texts maximize the possibilities of language, allowing a seemingly endless proliferation of meanings, such texts maintain their capacity to subvert the position of the subject as signifying practice. Experimental poetics has always operated against the symbolic. Thus it will always maintain the potential to change our
relationship to self and language, and to the dominance of the rationality and transparence of our linguistic expressions. Kristeva’s theories of the heterogeneity of the semiotic and symbolic, and of the dialectical interacting between “rejection and identification,” theorize the condition and constant rehearsal of contradictoriness and multivocality in experimental poetics.

Like the psychoanalytic theorizing of Kristeva and Benjamin, as well as many contemporary cognitive scientists, the works of both Weiner and Harryman begin with the premise of intrasubjective plurality, which is generally presented as a necessary and valued condition. Indeed, these poets’ recognition of the multiplicity within the self makes the presiding homunculus of Plumly’s poetics seem rather lonely. Yet Weiner and Harryman do not stop with a reductive celebration of that plural condition, but instead create texts that present a continually circulating dialogue between the impulses toward a multiple self and the desire for a unified or integrated self. The dichotomies within the self, whether these poets express them as power relations, as in master and slave; or as semantic relations, as in the tension between symbolic representation and its destabilization; or as the relation between the multivocal self and the conceptualization of subjective coherence and unity, remain unresolved. Their utopia consists of a dynamic dialogue in which each side recognizes the intrinsic value of its interlocutor other. The result is not a conflicted or unhappy self, but one fully engaged in its own plurality, and thus one more able to recognize the other as a subject in his or her own right.

Dialectical movement in intersubjective relations will receive a fuller treatment in Chapter Five. In the next chapter, I will turn to the subject’s experience of time and the creation of narrative in the poetry of Scalapino and Hejinian.

Notes

1 Hejinian, *The Language of Inquiry*, 207.


7 It is fair enough to posit a range in the treatment of subjectivity along a spectrum of authorial decidedness. Yet it is also necessary to qualify that spectrum by suggesting that a number of differently-arranged spectrums might be proposed, and also by suggesting that the historical situatedness of each stop along that spectrum is overdetermined. If there are borders, they bleed profusely into one another. The point along that spectrum at which dialogical exchange shades into essentialism is eminently debatable. Thus (as I pointed out in Chapter One), literary criticism often witnesses the tug-of-war to claim a particular poet (such as John Ashbery, Hart Crane, or Wallace Stevens) as belonging to one camp or the other.


9 Plumly, “Chapter and Verse” (part One), 21.

10 Plumly, “Chapter and Verse” (part Two), 22.


13 Ibid., 113.

15 Damasio, *Descartes’ Error*, 84.


17 Ibid., 268.


19 Ibid., 9.


21 This picture of the representation of the self in contemporary American poetry is greatly oversimplified, of course. Reality is much more complicated, and there are many examples of poets who do not neatly fall into the camps of poets I have described.


25 Ibid., 240.

26 See Damasio’s explanation for the distribution of the reconstructed image over many different regions of the brain, in *Descartes’ Error*, 102-3.


29 Jon Elster gives a good example of holding contradictory beliefs, despite awareness on some level of the incompatibility of the beliefs. “As a child (and even a bit longer) I had two different beliefs concerning the origin of hot water in our house. On a practical level I believed, indeed knew, that the hot water came from a heater in the basement. There was not enough for everybody to have a bath in the morning, so we followed the operations of the heater with some attention. In addition I entertained the theoretical view that beneath the streets there ran two parallel sets of water pipes, one for hot and one for cold water. One day the two beliefs, hitherto separate, came into contact with each other, upon which one of them crumbled, never to be seen


36 In this analysis of one of Harryman’s more essay-like prose pieces, I am provisionally identifying Harryman with the speaker of the poetic essay, although Harryman herself might deny that identification. Speaking of another poetic prose piece, “In the Mode Of,” she states, “let me clarify that I am not the ‘I’ in the story. This is one of the problems that ‘I’ or I keep running into in respect to contemporary/postmodern critiques; people inadvertently think biographically.” Harryman, interview, 531.


38 Harryman, “My Story,” 32.

39 Harryman, interview, 527.


41 Ibid., 268.

42 Harryman, interview, 530.

43 Ibid., 528.


45 In another scene, M dreams of “floating rudely down a torrential stream that tossed me into shapes an alphabet would make. I tried to speak to this event as if it were a person. I am spelling nothing was formed in my mouth but my mouth was at once instantly submerged and opened too huge and inhaling” (93). In her dream, M’s body forms shapes of letters in an alphabet, a physical manifesting of written language. This is reminiscent of a kind of synesthesia in which a
person’s body forms shapes corresponding to the letters of the alphabet (but not literally forming the shapes of the letters). Synesthetic experience has been shown to be a function of the limbic region of the brain. For a discussion of “alphabetic” and other types of synesthesia and of the neurological underpinnings of synesthesia, see Richard E. Cytowic, *The Man Who Tasted Shapes: A Bizarre Medical Mystery Offers Revolutionary Insights into Emotions, Reasoning, and Consciousness* (New York: Warner Books, 1993).

46 Ken Wilbur, *Up from Eden: A Transpersonal View of Human Evolution* (Boston: Shambhala, 1986), 43. During this stage in the evolution of human consciousness, archeological evidence shows that representations of half-human, half-animal figures were culturally ubiquitous. Wilbur argues that these creatures, such as those found in Native American totemic figures and certain Paleolithic cave drawings (such as the so-called “Sorcerer of Trois Frères”) represent a state in which “the self is distinguished from the naturic [sic] environment,” yet “remains magically intermingled with it” (41).


48 Ibid.

49 Ibid., 130.

50 Ibid., 116.


54 Ibid.

55 Ibid., 20-21.


57 At least during the early stages of Weiner’s schizophrenia, she recognized the illness for what it was. According to friends, her speech was quite ordinary and did not exhibit the disorder and uncontrollable disjunction that often characterizes schizophrenic individuals. See the reminiscences of Weiner by various poets and friends, in particular Ron Silliman’s, on Electronic

59 According her introduction to *The Fast*, Weiner’s description of the process by which this gift developed in her are contained in the following titled diaries: *The Fast* (1970), *Country Girl* (1971), *Pictures and Early Words* (1972), and *Big Words* (1973). Only the first of these titled journals (*The Fast*) has been published, and it is the only one that I have been able to examine. Hannah Weiner, *The Fast* (New York: United Artists Books, 1992).


61 Mac Low, back cover notes, *Clairvoyant Journal*.


63 In 1973 and 1974, Weiner recorded passages from *Clairvoyant Journal* with three other readers: Regina Beck, Sharon Mattlin, and Peggy De Coursey. In these recordings, her visual manifestation of the inner dialogical “voices” is dramatically rendered aurally as a rather wild and rapid-fire conversation of overlapping and interrupting voices that comment on each other’s observations and interjections. These performances make strikingly vivid the dialogical nature of Weiner’s inner world. Hannah Weiner, online soundfile, Electronic Poetry Center, retrieved October 20, 2002, from the World Wide Web: http://epc.buffalo.edu/authors/weiner/clairvoyant.html


67 Ibid.


One exception is Steve McCaffery’s mention of Kristeva’s dialectics of the “two fundamental dispositions” in the signifying process: “the one thetical, nominative and prepositional; the other preverbal, residual, operating through sono-rhythmic gestures across the lines of the symbolic order.” McCaffery acknowledges the interdependent relationship between written symbols and the signifying process: the “written mark . . . is separable from the signifying process yet at the same time the signifying process is unsupportable without it.” Steve McCaffery, “The Unreadable Text,” in *Code of Signals: Recent Writings in Poetics*, Io Series, no. 30 (Berkeley, Calif., North Atlantic Books, 1983), 220. His later reevaluation of her contribution to poetics is more restrained. See Steve McCaffery, “Insufficiencies of Theory of Poetical Economy,” in *The Ends of Theory*, ed. Jerry Herron, Dorothy Huson, Ross Pudaloff, and Robert Storzier (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1996), 257-71. Calvin Bedient’s article on Kristeva is another exception; however, his evaluation of the effectiveness of her theories in poetry criticism is a negative one. Moreover, Bedient’s literary views are rather conservative, and he consistently misreads her work: “We had thought that poetry was a grace beyond biology; except for the biomovements of dancers, athletes, or those we love most. We had thought it a contradictory ‘organic’ perfection in the relatively staying realm of the symbolical. But, no, according to Kristeva’s theory, poetry is essentially antiformal” and “profoundly antiaesthetic” (italics in original). Calvin Bedient, “Kristeva and Poetry as Shattered Signification,” *Critical Inquiry* 16, no. 4 (1990): 809.


For a useful comparison of a poem by Sharon Olds (as representative of contemporary academic or mainstream poetry) and one by Lyn Hejinian (as representative of experimental poetry), and an analysis of how self and other are constructed in each, see Rae Armantrout, “Feminist Poetics and the Meaning of Clarity,” *Sagetrieb* 11, no. 3 (1992): 7-16.


A few brief definitions may help to orient the reader unfamiliar with Kristeva’s terms. For Kristeva, the “semiotic chora” is a prelinguistic state articulated by bodily drives and their stases. The “thetic” refers to the threshold between the semiotic chora and the symbolic realm, during which the subject becomes posited as a separate being. This stage prepares the way for the child’s entry into language. By *jouissance*, she means the heterogeneous process in which the drives, operating through language, destabilize and shatter signification.


Ibid., 37.

Ibid., 49-50.
In Beyond the Pleasure Principle, Freud describes the game of a child who would throw an object with a string attached to it out of sight, emitting the interjection “o--o-o-o,” which he and the child’s mother agreed probably represented the word “fort” (“gone”). He would then reel it in while joyfully exclaiming “da” (“there”). Freud believed that the child was rehearsing the concepts of disappearance and return. Sigmund Freud, “Beyond the Pleasure Principle (1920),” in The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, translated under the General Editorship of James Strachey in collaboration with Anna Freud, assisted by Alix Stachey and Alan Tyson (reprint, London: Hogarth Press, 1957), 18:5-64.

Kristeva, Revolution in Poetic Language, 171. An engram is a permanent effect produced in the psyche by stimulation, assumed in explaining persistence of memory.

Oliver, Reading Kristeva, 97.

Ibid., 99.


Ibid.


Kristeva, Revolution in Poetic Language, 54.

Ibid., 118.

Kristeva defines “negation” as “the act of a judging subject,” and distinguishes the term from negativity, which is “the process of charges and stases” during the semiotic stage. Revolution in Poetic Language, 28.

94 Ibid., 28.

95 Oliver, *Reading Kristeva*, 11.
CHAPTER FOUR

READING THE MINDS OF EVENTS:
LESLIE SCALAPINO’S PLURAL TIME
AND LYN HEJINIAN’S ONGOING LIFE

In a stream of reassuring argument the memory forms a flight of steps swinging out over the

Void ...¹

Norma Cole

Narrative is neither an oppressor to be obliterated nor the validating force of all literary impulse.²

Carla Harryman

One of the primary arguments against experimental poetry is that it attempts to do away with that most diachronically ubiquitous of human linguistic activity, the telling of stories. However universal it may be, the activity of selecting events, linking them in a relationship of causality, and giving them significance through narrative structure and commentary, is fraught with social and political implications. Hayden White, for example, demonstrates compellingly some of the tropes that historical narratives tend to fall into, and Michel Foucault reminds us of the relations of power that always shape the reconstructions of past events. By the nature of their project of questioning mnemonic, cognitive and linguistic habits, experimental poets have generally been skeptical about attributing truth-value to narratives. However, to conclude that on the whole these poets abandon or disparage narrative would be at best a reductive exercise. In this chapter, I will demonstrate that experimental poets Lyn Hejinian and Leslie Scalapino acknowledge the natural and even necessary human proclivity to shape narratives and at the same time engage this conceptual habit in a dialogue with its contrary, the understanding of
narratives as events in themselves that can never be considered as faithful recreations of phenomena that exist no longer.

The works of Scalapino and Hejinian are well suited for my analysis of the dialectics of narrative in contemporary experimental poetry. First, the work by Scalapino that I examine is stylistically very different from the work by Hejinian that I analyze. Moreover, the two works by Scalapino that I analyze are from different periods in her writing career and reflect a stylistic, if not philosophical, change. The various approaches of Hejinian and Scalapino to complicating questions of time, memory and narrative involve juxtaposing different kinds of narrative and anti-narrative material. Moreover, the texture of referentiality and linearity in each work is markedly different. Nevertheless, Hejinian’s project in My Life of interrogating autobiographical conventions and Scalapino’s project in “The Woman Who Could Read the Minds of Dogs” and New Time of investigating the roots of memory in the perceptual process share a similar philosophical basis. I wish to demonstrate that widely divergent approaches can accomplish the kind of dialectical interrogation of time, memory and narrative that I describe in this chapter.

Let us look briefly at two works by Hejinian, in order to understand how works with very different approaches to referentiality, or to put it a different yet related way, narrative linearity, can harbor very similar dialectical strategies underneath their more superficial differences. Hejinian has written works that are almost as disjunctive as any in the literature of twentieth-century avant-garde poetry. Consider the following opening four lines of Writing Is an Aid to Memory:

apple is shot nod
ness seen know it around saying
think for a hundred years
but and perhaps utter errors direct the point to a meadow

3
The effect can be discombobulating, even after many readings. A dedicated close reading, however, will yield some clues as to ways one might approach such a dauntingly dissociative text. The first line, “apple is shot nod,” a possible allusion to the legendary Swiss rebel William Tell, contains the seed of the problem of uncertainty of meaning that is explored throughout the remainder of the work. The passive construction of “apple is shot” leaves out the characters of the drama: who shot the apple, and from whose head? And who nods? The observer of the apple-shooting, the reader of the statement, or, more playfully, William Tell’s son, now that it is safe to do so? The pithiness of the opening statement gives arch, nodding approval of an achieved target. Yet this nod, which seems to convey, “Target hit. End of story.” is belied by the absence at the heart of the story’s thumbnail sketch, and by the meandering and collage-like argumentation that follows, which questions one’s ability to “know it around saying,” even if one were to “think for a hundred years.” The “utter errors” inherent in linguistic expression and in thought, indicate a system in which words do not merely “point” to their objects with a terse nod of certainty, but refer instead “to a meadow of possibilities.”

The suffix “ness” also presents a puzzle of uncertainty and absence. It is the first of many word fragments – mostly endings, such as “sopher’s,” “spondent,” and “tinuous” – sprinkled throughout the work. Peter Quatermain points out that these truncations both suggest multiple whole words that might connect with the parts, and present the reader “with the resistant materiality of the word.” In normal usage, the suffix “-ness” transforms an adjective into a noun; its use in the poem as the nominal object of “seen” creates a grammatical pun. The suffix is what it normally does. Moreover, “ness” is almost the phonetic reverse of “seen.” This near-palindrome creates a mirror image of “seen” in “ness,” making concrete the self-reflexiveness of the text in its exploration of the dialectics of meaning. And lastly, if not exhaustively, “ness” is
also a noun meaning a cape or promontory that projects into a body of water, or perhaps a peninsula of groundedness jutting into the sea of meaning it has occasioned. The multiple meanings that even a single suffix engenders creates a semantic richness and diffuseness that nonetheless can be interpreted as coalescing around the theme of meaning.

Thus, Hejinian shakes the stability of meaning and linearity in a very fundamental way, and yet she does give a nod of acknowledgment to the fact that her words are not totally arbitrarily selected but will have connotations in common for many readers. For example, the image of the apple being shot are likely to evoke for many readers the story of William Tell. Words have a very practical, mundane effect, but on the other hand, the old dream of analytical philosophy, in which words might refer more precisely to their target objects, is everywhere unraveled in Hejinian’s text. The arrow hits and yet does not hit, the apple of referentiality, both at the same time.

Now consider the opening sentence of Hejinian’s *My Life*: “A moment yellow, just as four years later, when my father returned home from the war, the moment of greeting him, as he stood at the bottom of the stairs, younger, thinner than when he had left, was purple – though moments are no longer so colored.” Here the reader swims in an entirely different sea of reference and narrative. The sentence is complex in structure, and it describes the complex psychological (or neurological) condition of childhood synesthesia, in which the senses are blended. Yet the words, meanings, and syntax are recognizable. They tend to make some sense without an extraordinary effort on the part of the reader, despite the initial uncertainty of the slightly torqued syntax of “a moment yellow,” and even though three stages in a person’s life are differentiated in one sentence: 1) before the father’s return from war (yellow), 2) the father’s return from war (purple), and 3) the present moment of autobiographical writing (no color). But
the idea of a subject followed by the development of the subject and a resolution of its questions or events proves to be illusory. The “yellow” of the first, brief, clause is the sentence’s subject – it ostensibly provides a key to what the writer’s preoccupations in subsequent sentences. Yet in the remainder of the sentence (as well as in the ensuing and, for the most part, syntactically coherent sentences), the digression leads us irrevocably on to other referential pastures, equally complex.

Nevertheless, the reader might become aware of a subtle narrative percolating in the yellow-to-purple synesthetic transformation. The yellow of cowardice becomes the purple of the purple heart. And these two, later, merge into the neutral no-color of the present, perhaps into a more zen-like state of judgmental emptiness of the adult. Or perhaps the childhood synesthesia of attributing color to moods or emotions associated with events has simply been outgrown.

The coherence of this first sentence in My Life, however, belies the disjunctiveness of the whole pattern of the weave of sentences, as the statement on the progress of synesthetic experience yields to the following seemingly unassociated sentences: “Somewhere, in the background, rooms share a pattern of small roses. Pretty is as pretty does. In certain families, the meaning of necessity is at one with the sentiment of pre-necessity.” The cluster of 1) memories, 2) a worn adage, and 3) a sociological commentary on family life follow one another with no pretense to shaping a linear reconstruction of events in a life. Yet Hejinian’s work constitutes not a denial of narrative, but instead both a questioning of its status as faithful recording of events and causalities and a recognition of the profound interdependence and indeterminacy of those events (and one’s memories of them) and causalities. It is a play between the elements of narrative and those that disrupt its linear tendencies.
One could chart a similar range from relative disjunction to relative coherence in the work of Scalapino. In the analyses of two of her works later in this chapter, such a range is evident. Her earlier work in particular, such as *Considering How Exaggerated Music Is*, tends to be more syntactically coherent, whereas her later work, such as *New Time*, tends to be more disjunctive. Yet it is not the case that in the former work, Scalapino is embracing narrative, whereas in the second, she is distancing herself from its literary conventions. As we shall see, in both works – albeit in different ways – she is toying with notions of temporal hierarchies, and with the relationship between an event, the memory of it, and the written record of it.

The reemergence of a strong avant-garde poetic community in the 1970s reinvigorated the debate regarding the status and function of narrative. Taking a more extreme position, some theorists and practitioners (actually, both apologists for and detractors of avant-garde poetry and poetics) argue that narrativity should be a watershed by which to distinguish avant-garde from mainstream poetry. Steve Evans, for example, claims that avant-garde poetic practice necessarily positions itself against narrative, which is seen as a structural apparatus that impedes the freeplay of cognitive processes:

> . . . radical linguistic practice has worked to contest not only the way specific narratives participate in the reproduction of social reality, they have contested *narrative* itself. In refusing the attenuation of human sense-making that comes of equating it exclusively with “telling stories,” such practices interrupt the norming of cognition. They re-introduce *negativity* into a life-world from which it has otherwise been expelled. And they expose the ideological commitment to narrative for what it is – a restriction of the horizons of the humanly thinkable. ⁸

According to Evans, radical avant-garde practice is thus by nature anti-narrative. However, this rather reductive position is as ideologically committed to rebellion against narrative as poets such as Stanley Plumly and Frederick Turner are to the conventions of a relatively seamless and
linear plot and transparent linguistic vehicle. The reader taking such a stance will presumably only seize on those practices that tend to disrupt narrative, that resist the formation of a linear succession of events that might “make sense” of events and risk falling into a conventional plot predetermined by received texts. If one were to take such a position in reading, say, Hejinian’s *Writing Is an Aid to Memory*, one might suppress as “cognitive norming” any gesture toward temporal, thematic or causal linking, any trajectory that might suggest a coherent relationship between the parts or a goal to the whole. One might suppress, for example, the disjointed but somehow philosophical melodiousness of the opening phrases. One might insist upon the paratactical rubble of the work and perhaps take one’s *jouissance* only in the play of sounds and disconnected signifiers, “delight[ing],” as Hejinian states, “in our sensuous involvement with the materials of language.”

But if the pleasure that may be experienced in the semantic and narrative discontinuities of a work – the “euphoria” it creates “by its freedom from social narratives” – is not to disintegrate into an exercise in plurality that suggests little cultural contextualization, both reader and text must also actively suggest the formation (and undoing) of positions, meanings and narratives. Otherwise such exercises might lapse into what Hejinian calls (echoing sentiments from statements by Barrett Watten and Bob Perelman) a “withdrawal into numerousness”; they might lose their political edge by “risk[ing] a directionless pluralism, one we may claim as a politics but which stops short of activating relationships within that plurality – and lacking participation in that forming of relationships, “possibility” is likely to turn into what I believe to be a dangerous immanentism.”

In order to counteract the centrifugal forces that might otherwise cause the work to “disintegrat[e] into its separate parts – scattering sentence-rubble haphazardly on the waste heap,” Hejinian recognizes the need to “create the conjunction between
ideas.”

This conjunction is accomplished in various ways, for example, through syntactical or structural correspondences among clusters of sentences, or through the repetition of words, phrases, or whole sentences. Regarding the latter technique, however, Hejinian agrees with Gertrude Stein’s caveat that “there is no such thing as repetition” because each time the same word resurfaces in a text, it is tinged with a slightly different emphasis or meaning. This is not only because of the different context of a recurrence, but also because one is a slightly different person with a slightly altered memory from moment to moment. She also acknowledges that the cohesive forces in her work do not negate the disjunctive forces, and she is concerned that the semantic richness that arises from “the sizeable gaps between the units . . . . remains crucial and informative.” I will have more to say about the tension between the centripetal and centrifugal narrative forces in Hejinian’s work in my analysis of My Life below.

In spite of the gaps in an experimental poetry, no matter how sizeable, it is simply unrealistic to posit a non-referential creation of, or response to, the most discontinuous of signs. Even the most unimaginative of readers is likely to attempt to activate relationships among the most extremely disjunctive of word sequences. “It is impossible,” in fact, “to discover any string or bundle or words that is entirely free of possible narrative or psychological content.” And the meanings of sequences generated even by random processes will not be infinite but will probably fall within a certain range: “While word strings are permissive, they do not license a free-for-all.” The process of the cultural contextualization of a text is a relative and transitive matter, with many interdependent factors at play. It is in the creative activation of relationships among signifiers that a reader becomes aware of the process of the production of meaning and narrative as an activity dependent on many factors, having to do with both the individuality of the reader
and his or her cultural milieu. Meaning is therefore realized as a dependent construction and not an immutable imperative that is the essence of either word or world.

Like Hejinian, many contemporary experimental poets demonstrate a dialectical understanding of the process involved in the reading of their work, while acknowledging a wide variability in what different readers will find in a particular experimental work. Perelman, for example, points to the process whereby readers might fashion the paratactical sentences of the “New Sentence” mode of disjunctiveness at the level of the sentence (of which the sentences in Hejinian’s *My Life* may be taken as exemplary) into his or her own narrative, teasing forth the tenuous relationships between disjunctive terms and bridging the gulfs with exogenous material, thereby becoming the co-producer of narrative meaning.\(^{17}\) Here he quotes and analyzes the opening of his poem “China”:

> We live on the third world from the sun. Number three. Nobody tells us what to do.
> The people who taught us to count were being very kind.
> It’s always time to leave.
> If it rains, you either have your umbrella or you don’t.

What from one perspective may look like a sign of radical disconnection may from another be a gesture of continuity. For some, there may be utter gulfs between these sentences; others, however, may find narrative within any one of them. In the context out of which I was writing, each sentence of “China” seemed to me almost transgressively relaxed, long-winded novelistic.\(^{18}\)

If one person’s narrative is another’s rubble of signifiers, then the reading of a work is a profoundly social event, determined not only by what the writer offers through his or her words or sounds, but also by the expectations of the reader who approaches them. If one expects to find narrativistic connections in “China,” it will be easy enough to find justification for the position
that they exist, although one would find considerable difficulties proving a correlation between
the kind of narrative in that poem with the plot structure of a nineteenth-century British novel.
And if one expects to find gaps and discontinuities in a nineteenth-century British novel, one will
likely find them. Of course, the gaps will be more apparent in a work that is, in Roland Barthes’
terminology, more “writerly” (scriptible) than “readerly” (lisible). The readerly text does not
lend itself well to hermeneutic plurality; it is a “product” rather than a “production,” and it is
“committed to the closure system of the West” and “devoted to the law of the Signified.” The
writerly text, on the other hand, “make[s] the reader no longer a consumer, but a producer of the
text. . . . [T]he writerly text is ourselves writing, before the infinite play of the world (the world
as function) is traversed, intersected, stopped, plasticized by some singular system (Ideology,
Genus, Criticism) which reduces the plurality of entrances, the opening of networks, the infinity
of languages” (emphasis in original). Barthes correctly points out that narrative disjunction is in
proportion to its writerly qualities, and that this relationship is one of degree: “[F]or the plural
text, there cannot be a narrative structure, a grammar, or a logic; thus if one or another of these
are sometimes permitted to come forward, it is in proportion (giving this expression its full
quantitative value) as we are dealing with incompletely plural texts, texts whose plural is more or
less parsimonious.” However, in the analyses of poetry that follow, I will demonstrate a
reading strategy that does not simply place an ultimate or essential value on narrative
disjunction, but instead encourages the identification of a reciprocal dialogue and tension
between narrative and its disruption.

The process of narrative discovery in a work of experimental poetry involves hints and
offerings by the writer, as well as active framings and content contributions from the reader.
Moreover, many interdependent conditions influence the event of reading, including the events
in the reader’s own life. Text, reader, and the cultural and historical circumstances of the reading will all influence one’s experience of a text. As Perelman points out, Walt Whitman’s famous object concatenations were perceived differently – more dissonantly – by his contemporary readers, whereas today they seem to many readers to express Whitman’s grand gestural sweep of all-inclusiveness.\(^{23}\) What puzzled one culture at one time will delight the same culture at a different time in its history. On a smaller scale, the same is true for the individual reader, who will approach the same text differently at different times, since he or she will bring to the text accumulated changes in memory and experience, as well as the mood of the moment:\(^{24}\) “. . . I is not an innocent subject, anterior to the text, one which will subsequently deal with the text as it would an object to dismantle or a site to occupy. This ‘I’ which approaches the text is already itself a plurality of other texts, of codes which are infinite or, more precisely, lost (whose origin is lost).”\(^{25}\) Because of the potentially infinite complexity of these factors surrounding an act of writing or reading, the question of the relative linearity or disjunctiveness of a text must always remain, to a degree, open and debatable.

With this limited caveat, then, for a writer or a reader to place either of the terms of a dualistic equation in a hierarchical position, in which one term is placed at the service of the other term or becomes inferior to the other term, or in which the terms cease to mutually inform or interrogate one another on a fairly equal footing, is to steer toward an essentialist position. On the one hand, to dismiss the narrative impulse as limiting the potential infinitude of meaning is to suppress the quite natural and conventional human desire to find temporal connections between terms. If, on the other hand, one denigrates the desire either to bring narrative conventions to awareness in order to realize their existence as a nominal category and not an inherent quality in the text or in the world, or to weaken the temporal and causal links between terms so that the
path itself and its digressive meanderings become more important than an overall semantic goal, then one risks assigning immanent qualities to linguistic and experiential constructions. Both positions tend to apprehend an essence either in disruption or linearity, in meaning or nonreferentiality. A middle way between these two positions would be to allow both to exist simultaneously in a dialogical and non-resolving relationship. As Perelman states, referring to an often-cited debate between Fredric Jameson and experimental poets, 26

[renarrativization is a necessary part of the construction in these wider paratactic arguments. But in both cases, this process needs to be seen for the combined reading and writing practice that it is: renarrativization is also necessary. If we try to separate out the results of these practices, we are left with fictions, metaphorical condensations, reifications, the purely autonomous New Sentence on the one hand and the rubble of snapped signifying chains on the other. 27

Each extreme position neglects the dialogical element that engages opposed terms in a reciprocal exchange, each questioning the other’s position, alternatively bolstering and undermining the status of each as a (fictitious) essential textual property and as an (equally fictitious) empty category. This reciprocity between terms is what might be referred to, after Buddhist philosophy, as a middle way in experimental poetry, which acknowledges an endlessly undermining and reinforcing of opposed positions. It is not the same, however, as reaching a compromise between the two positions. Indeed, such a middle way is potentially more radically illusion-busting than a simple and reductive ideology of denarrativization, which halts the conversation between terms, instead of allowing a perpetual and dialogical motion between terms. And it is in the reading of opposing terms as mutually informing and endlessly circulating that may allow a reader to come to a better understanding of the philosophical issues at stake in experimental poetics. The dialogical middle way in the question of narrative does not suggest a status of narrative, which would, as Carla Harryman points out regarding her poetry, “presuppos[e] a
hierarchy of literary values. . . . Narrative is neither an oppressor to be obliterated nor the validating force of all literary impulse.”

Harryman prefers “to distribute narrative rather than deny it,” for

[t]he enemies of narrative are those who believe in it and those who deny it. Both belief and denial throw existence into question. Narrative exists, and arguments either for or against it are false. Narrative is a ping-pong ball among blind spots when considered in the light of its advantages and defects.

Narrative holds within its boundaries both its advantages and defects. It can demonstrate its own development as it mutates throughout history. This is its great advantage. I.e., in accomplishing its mutability, it achieves an ongoing existence.

Narrative might be thought to be a character, and its defects lie in his “potential to observe his own practice of making falsehoods.” If this narrative is imitating anything, its intention is to convince the audience to enjoy the imitation, whatever its lack of truth or reasonableness.

Those who object to this artifice are narrative’s enemies, but they, too, are part of the story. They are subjects in the hypothetical world of a story. “I” too am a subject of narrative; I see enemies all around.

For Harryman, the artifice of literary narrative is coterminous with the artifice of narrative within human lives: both characters and real-life subjects are conventionally constructed. In this sense, narrative exists, yet one cannot properly argue for or against it because doing so would presuppose a hierarchical relationship between the two terms. Harryman’s writerly narrative eludes its essentializers and its skeptics: it exists outside of such monological arguments, paradoxically because it is in perpetual argument with itself and thus cannot ossify into either position. In the following analyses of works by Scalapino and Hejinian, then, I will demonstrate, not a denial or suppression of narrative in their work, but an active investigation into the premises, conventions and hierarchies within narrative ideologies. I will also show their acknowledgement of both narrative and its disruption as literary forces, and their engagement of these forces in dialogue.
Among contemporary poets in the United States and Canada whose works have developed in the avant-garde tradition, Scalapino occupies an ambiguous place. On the one hand, she seems to embrace many of the principles generally accepted to varying degrees by poets who would describe themselves as experimental or avant-garde. On the other hand, as I mentioned in Chapter One, she has challenged other ideas that she believes are regressive. Furthermore, her work is among the most accessible and referential of poets who consider themselves experimental or avant-garde. But she shares with many of her colleagues in experimentation a dedication to the questioning of boundaries between dichotomies, and to the revelation of the constructed nature of human experience.

One of Scalapino’s primary concerns in her poetry, critical essays, and cross-genre works, is to question conventional ways to think about the relationship among the phenomena of event, time, memory, oral and written narrative, and experience. Her work manifests a relentless determination to deconstruct narrativistic categories, and to expose dualistic and essentialist ways of thinking about time and memory. Scalapino uses narrative to question the putative immanences within its framework, as opposed to simply denying outright narrative’s linkage of events in a causal sequence.

Unlike much contemporary experimental poetry, Scalapino’s work is more apparently referential and syntactically normative (or at least much of it is not so disjunct that one cannot discern conventional sentence structure). People, events and objects often seems to be situated in a specific time and place, even though that locus may not be described with many details. Indeed, the tone of her poetry can seem flat and stark, particularly to those not used to reading her work or familiar with her philosophical project. It seems to lack dimensions that might give it a texture, feeling, or depth to which one is accustomed in reading more conventionally
descriptive or narrative writing. In her poetry, people sometimes seem faceless, activity takes place without psychologized or emotional drama, poetic sequences often omit a definite temporal or spatial orientation (instead, everything seems to exist and occur in relation to everything else), and the boundaries between self and other, public and private, past and present are everywhere transgressed, questioned, and blurred. The iteration of actions or images in varying contexts also gives the work a radically unfamiliar quality.

It is just this feeling of an unfamiliar mental terrain that Scalapino constructs, in order to demonstrate the illusions of hierarchy that conventional structuring of language can create, and how this hierarchy influences the interpretation of one’s experience. For example, conventional narratives and ways of thinking about time tend to place events along a temporal echelon of past, present, and future, and to impose a structure of causality on events and phenomena. These temporal and causal conventions structure events and thought so that “activity and time per se” become “a condition of tradition,” and thus “both time and activity are a ‘lost mass’ at any time,” and experience is drained of the kind of intelligibility that Scalapino associates with the non-hierarchical and simultaneous presentation of past, present, and future.

Scalapino is attempting to practice a writing that imitates experience, as opposed to representing it according to a preestablished order, and that allows the multiple layers that create the memory of a single event to exist simultaneously without structuring them in a arrangement of prominence, causality, or in a psychologized drama. She deconstructs the simplest events as instances of “social and interior constructions” in order to show their impermanent nature, once they are no longer taken outside of present experience and attached to a construction of temporal order, either within a narrative or linked by allusion to other histories. She avoids the emblematic and descriptive framing of experience and resists the coalescing of experience into ordered
wholes. Instead, her writing allows events (including memories themselves as events) to exist dependent upon one another, while avoiding the temptation to reify or essentialize experience. For when events, perceptions, or thoughts are given intrinsic existence, it can seem deceptively natural to bring them into a conventional order whose relationship to the phenomenal world seems transparent and inevitable, and even preordained. Scalapino chooses a more difficult kind of writing that critiques such ordering into hierarchical dualities of inner and outer being, and private and public experience. She critiques the effects of such ordering through a demonstration of its radical absence in her writing, and through a blurring of conventional categories of existence and action in time.

An analysis of Scalapino’s early poem “The Woman Who Could Read the Minds of Dogs” will further demonstrate her concern with the relationship of perception and memory to the recollection and writing of historical events, a theme that she continues to explore in subsequent books. This poem consists of eighteen short sections, some of which are connected thematically. Although some are not so obviously connected in theme, they are all related in the kinds of associative mnemonic experience they explore. A close reading of the poem’s first section, entitled “on itself. His red hair was standing up) ‘I just began to weep,’” reveals how intertwined events and memories function within the poem to produce a sense of temporal disorientation, and how the poem’s syntactical and stylistic idiosyncrasies work in concert with the content (Figure 5).

In “on itself. . . .” temporal reciprocity occurs between the event of narration, the memory of that event of narration, and memories of other events. In Scalapino’s poem, the temporal and experiential interchange is effected by the poem’s syntactical complexity and elliptical twists. The superimposition of several narrative strands creates momentary confusion.
and produces a plurality of time frames that questions the nature of historical events as discretely communicable phenomena.

Like many of the individual poems in “The Woman Who Could Read the Minds of Dogs,” “on itself . . .” presents a narrative within a narrative. In the first of these, the speaker relates a story told to her by a friend in which he, driving with his first wife and circling around the block trying to find the entrance to a hotel parking lot, sideswipes three parked cars in the process. After this, he “just began to weep.” The speaker then relates a second incident, in which she sees a man in a motor boat going around in circles. During the second incident, she experiences a resurgence of the friend’s story as she sees an event that reminds her of the car narrative. The primary common element in the two stories is the circular motion of the boat and car.

Scalapino not only juxtaposes these two events, but also conflates them through syntactical structures that disorient the reader’s sense of their discrete nature. In order to demonstrate how the syntax works to create a distinctive sensibility in regard to time, memory and experience, it may be helpful first to analyze the layers of time that overlap and spill into each other. There are five identifiable layers, in which (in chronological order):

1) a man and his first wife circle around a block in a car
2) the speaker hears the man tell of his experience in the car
3) the speaker sees a man circling in a boat
4) Scalapino writes the poem
5) the reader reads Scalapino’s poem

The list does not include events of remembrance, in which, for example, the man remembers his experience in the car, the speaker remembers the man telling of his experience in the car, etc. Such events of memory exist in potential infinitude.
Setting aside the title for the time being, the poem opens with the third time frame in which the speaker, standing on the jetty of a marina, sees a man in a boat going in circles: “Much later, after I had ceased to know the man who had once / described to me how , driving his new car . . .” (emphasis added). The poem immediately switches to its two prior events: the man tells the speaker of circling in the car with his first wife, and prior to that, the event of circling around the block takes place. Midway through the poem, the speaker returns to the marina incident: “as I said, it was much later when I was standing / on the jetty of a marina . . .” In a parenthetical exegesis toward the end, Scalapino juxtaposes the three in simultaneity: “‘Well’, (I remembered the man I had known saying about himself / – as I watched the man in the motor boat turning it slowly / on itself. His red hair was standing up) ‘I just began to weep’. ” By the withholding of syntactic closure, and the suspension of the emotional gesture toward which the poem seems to be leading (“I just began to weep”), the whole poem seems like one long periodic sentence. The long subordinate and independent clauses, parenthetical interruptions, and grammatical solecisms are not resolved until the very end. However, unlike the formal result that might be expected of a sentence that is structured hierarchically, the effect of this periodic sentence that is more than the resolution of its parts is not order but temporal disorientation; one’s sense of time, place, and point of view is momentarily dislocated.

If the dispersed sense of time and the syntactical ambiguities reticulate experience and memory rather than centralize it, they also move toward a convergence, if not resolution. First, a simultaneity of events is suggested by the overlapping of the imagined time, the recalled time, and the current time. Second, there is a convergence of coinciding elements within the narratives; its topology resembles the converging of tributaries into one commingling and transformed river. Following the description of the man in the boat, the impetus of a linear narrative would
logically be expected to continue in the context of the speaker and that man. The final gesture of weeping, although belonging semantically and originally to the man circling in his car, is attributable also to the speaker. If one disregards the parenthetical remark and the quotation marks in the last three lines, which refer to the context of the man in the car:

“*Well*, (I remembered the man I had known saying about himself – as I watched the man in the motor boat turning it slowly on itself. *His red hair was standing up*) “*I just began to weep*”. [Emphasis added.]

the syntactical inertia indeed impels us toward a weeping speaker, and by transference, to Scalapino and to the reader. The repetition of “standing” in reference to both the speaker and the man (“*I was standing / on the jetty of a marina and watching a man standing up in / a motor boat . . . His red hair was standing up*”) further implicates the speaker and the man in the boat in the same gesture, therefore facilitating the transference of “weeping” from the man to the speaker.

Nevertheless, although weeping constitutes the emotional crux of the poem, the temporal disjunctures and clausal ambiguities result in the text’s resistance to the stabilization of the locus of the weeping and to the centrality of that emotional response.

These simultaneous movements of divergence, reticulation and convergence generate much of the tension and instability of the poem. They also suggest metaphorically the schism between event and narrative; the associative infinity that, through the fractured (and fracturing) self, destabilizes the discrete historical event we know through conventional wisdom; and the coincidence (as in the simultaneity of “weeping”) of recreated events through that association.

Scalapino is concerned to demonstrate a rupture between phenomena and our perception and memory of them, and ruptures between successive remembrances of a particular past event: “*Perception itself is phenomena,*” and Scalapino is careful to distinguish between an event and
the perceptual interpretation of that event. She is also concerned to demonstrate the same
principle regarding writing as phenomena. A consideration of the implied time frame of the
writer further demonstrates this phenomenon of contradictory motions. First, the writing of
narrative inherently exhibits the rupture between the writing and the event narrated: “The camera
lens of writing is the split between oneself and reality. Which one sees first – view of dying and
life – is inside, looking out into untroubled ‘experience.’” Writing creates both a distancing
from and a transformation of experience, in which the writer makes visible what was concealed.
Scalapino’s writing of history involves the interplay among moments remote in time, as well as
between those moments and the associations spawned by them in the speaker’s mind (and by
extension, the reader’s mind). Such interplay, in a potentially infinite network recreating the past,
is made accessible and public. The mind as creator of events and the writer as recorder of a thus
pluralized history constitute the true narrative, for “No events occur. Because these are in the
past. They don’t exist.”

Then there is the time level of reader, who also participates in and reconstructs the events
of the narrative. In a phrase that echoes reader response theories, Scalapino writes “Reading as
imposing syntax, is creating reality as imposition on a formation of one’s thoughts and actions,”
and again, “reading impos[es] a reality on us.” For Scalapino, the reader recreates recorded
events as they collide with his or her own remembered narratives, transforming them in the
process into narrative phenomena in their own right.

The actual and mnemonic events in “on itself. . . .” do not seem to lead to climax and
closure as is often the case in conventional narrative, but rather these events suggest an infinite
network of possible junctures and intersections of narratives. The coincidence of narratives
suggests a circuity in events that “come up as the same sound pattern.” Scalapino’s poem
reveals and expands meaning through the network of juxtaposed narratives. And through correspondences in thematic material, she explores the interplay of experience, memory, and written history. Scalapino would claim that events do not exist—other than as they are recreated and associated in the mind.

She also addresses the inevitable lament that if events do not exist, then humans are forever alienated from any meaningful experience of reality. This would be the case, however, only in a philosophy founded on the possibility of epistemological certitude. Scalapino recuperates experience by positing observation or “attention of itself as an activity,”41 which is different from approaching experience with a drive for accurate or certain knowledge, and viewing the result of experience as a body of perceptual and mnemonic data that one possesses as a storehouse of one’s own experience. Instead, one attends to the process of observation, an event of attention, “watching as being itself action.”42

In her more recent writings, Scalapino acknowledges that she has been greatly influenced by traditions of eastern philosophy, and in particular by the writings of the early Indian Buddhist philosopher and poet Nāgārjuna, who lived approximately during the second century C.E. The Nāgārjuna founded the Mādhyamika (Middle Path) schools of Mahāyāna Buddhism. His longest and most significant text is the Mūlamadhyamakakārikā (translated by Jay L. Garfield as The Fundamental Verses of the Middle Way).43 The influence of Nāgārjuna’s systematic revelation of the emptiness of all conceptual, nominal, and conventional categories is evident in Scalapino’s thinking about the dispelling of conceptual illusions.44 Since his philosophy is relevant both to my premise of a radical dialectics in experimental poetics and to Scalapino’s work, it will be useful to present a summary of some of Nāgārjuna’s principal doctrines in his unrelenting critique of ontological and epistemological categories.45
In the Mūlamadhyamakakārikā, Nāgārjuna speaks of two realities or categories of truth. Conventional or nominal truth refers to the human conceptual framework. This is the quotidian reality that is shaped by social consent, the reality of common sense observation whose categories and referents seem accurate enough to our human judgment. We accept this everyday truth in order to get on in the world without spending an undue amount of time making simple decisions. Conventional existence, in this philosophy, is dependent upon the referential nature of language. However, Nāgārjuna argues that this conventional and nominal reality, while extremely useful, and while existing on a practical level, does not correspond to an independent reality. Ultimate truth, on the other hand, is reality free of subjectivity, free of the linguistic constructions through which we interpret our perceptions of objects and events. It is independent of the perceptual and conceptual reality that always mediates human knowledge of the world. It denotes “the way things turn out to be when we subject them to analysis with the intention of discovering the nature they have from their own side, as opposed to the characteristics we impute to them.” This truth can never be known from its side, but only through our perceptions of it.

Through an exhaustive and rigorous analysis, Nāgārjuna attempts to dispel every shred of illusion regarding the inherent existence of any category of reality, including emptiness itself. Emptiness cannot be upheld as a reality that is less empty than human categories, an essential void that stands beyond the pale of conventional reality. It is, like all other categories, itself empty, part of the nature of conventional reality. And it is the emptiness of emptiness that for Nāgārjuna is the link that keeps the two mutually contradictory realms in relation to one another, and that in fact that explains their paradoxical unity. He demonstrates that the two realities are in a subtle, paradoxical and dependent relationship to one another.
Nāgārjuna suggests that “what counts as real depends precisely on our conventions,” yet he goes to great pains to demonstrate the emptiness of those conventions. And even emptiness has no inherent or independent existence, but is itself empty. To see an object as empty (of inherent or essential existence) is to see it as dependently arisen and as conventional reality. Any object “depends upon the existence of empty phenomena,” therefore “emptiness itself is empty.” And for Nāgārjuna, the doctrine of the emptiness of emptiness is inextricably interwoven with the doctrine of the deep identity between the two truths of conventional reality and ultimate reality. Our interpretations of the world are ultimately empty of essence, and yet because emptiness is itself also a dependently arising phenomenon, it is also empty.

Nāgārjuna’s Buddhism is not nihilistic in its denunciation of inherent existence. He does not intend to imply that reality is nothing at all, an absolute void without matter or shape. Instead, “the actuality of the entire phenomenal world, persons and all, is recovered within that emptiness.” When he speaks of the lack of existence, he speaks of what we might call “essence” or “inherent existence,” that is, an existence with properties apart from human attribution of a bounded entity with properties, as if there were a direct correspondence between language and the object it describes. Morality and salvation are just as crucial to Nāgārjuna as are his emphasis on pervasive emptiness. For Nāgārjuna, the recovery of the former is, paradoxically, dependent upon a full understanding of the latter. His critique of inherent existence insistently breaks down all conventional and nominal categories, which impose hierarchies and attributes that humans often come to believe as fixed and stable. His philosophy is one of radical impermanence and emptiness, yet it is also profoundly concerned with morality.

Thus Nāgārjuna’s philosophy is not dualistic, nor is nihilistic. The doctrine of emptiness is closely interwoven with the doctrine of the identity of the doctrines of the two truths
or realities, and within this doctrine is recovered a strongly soteriological and moral ground. For, Nāgārjuna’s logic goes, with an essential or inherent nature, how could one hope to effect the change necessary to become enlightened?

The brief explanation above gives something of the important points about Nāgārjuna’s complex and subtle argumentation in the twenty-seven verses of the *Mūlamadhyamakārikā*. For my purposes, one of the most important features of his philosophy of the middle way is the holding of two contradictory truths at one time (their radical difference), and the simultaneous erasing of the boundaries between them (their deep identity). Nāgārjuna does not set “ultimate reality” on a pedestal as the more important of the two realities, but instead seems to keep them in perpetual tension, mutually informing one another in a relationship of balanced dependence and dialogue.

Scalapino’s reading of Nāgārjuna has profoundly influenced her thought and work, which engages in a critique of essentialized thinking about phenomena, and invites us to consider the ultimate emptiness of our constructions and interpretations, and to realize that “all phenomena and perception are groundless.”

The poetry that she values articulates a critique of ‘one’s assumptions’ (one’s observation, or of perception itself as cultural) by perceiving or rendering perception as being without basis. At the same time, this examination of subjectivity in fact can work as a critique and revelation of our culture.

In other words, by undercutting the observer, one has a perspective of place that is both spatially ‘interior’ and ‘outside’ – a relativity.

For Scalapino, “the observer” to be undercut is the idea of the individual’s unique perspective on reality and his or her unawareness of that perspective as socially and individually constructed – in other words its status as a category that, in Nāgārjuna’s sense, is empty of inherent or transcendental quality. “The deconstruction of our view of reality is oneself in one time not
maintaining either one’s own subjective view or the social or phenomenological interpretation of occurrences. Nor is this ‘not holding a view.’ One must maintain, instead, a “perspective of place” that is simultaneously interior and exterior, aware of the mediation of one’s perception yet also attempting “to find out what’s there, as occurrence.” Perception may indeed be empty, “without basis”; however, its critique is paradoxically arrived at through the very nominal categories called empty. And thus this very practical vehicle of the critique is not devalued in relation to ultimate reality.

For Scalapino, neither the phenomenon itself nor its apprehension by the mind has inherent existence. She attempts to demonstrate this in her writing through her treatment of narrative, which dismantles sequential events by showing that narrative as well as one’s sense of the division of time discretely into past, present, and future has no basis outside our conceptual framework. On the other hand, her work does not try to demonstrate the inferiority of narrative. To the contrary, she paradoxically, investigates narrative through narrative, and imagines a presentation of phenomena unfolding in time that is radically different from the conventionally linear ordering of events that are held together by the glue of causality and intentionality. Thus she criticizes “[t]he contemporary poetic-polemics association of ‘narrative’ as being only convention – ‘experience’ thus denigrated, not regarded as exploratory,” for this position “in fact does not allow scrutiny of one’s own polemic.” If an avant-garde poet sees his or her task as being only the dismantling and denigration of conventional constructs of time and narrative sequence, then one denies from the outset the very thing that is crucial to the dialectical development of one’s critique. What is needed is a dialogue between the natural and human impulses to link events in a narrative sequence and the recognition of the emptiness of that
linkage from the standpoint of extrasubjective reality – Nāgārjuna’s ultimate reality. And that critique, according to Scalapino, must also include self-scrutiny.

An examination of passages from two of her works will demonstrate her “middle way” of conceptualizing events occurring in time and the processes of remembering and recording them. *New Time*, a recent book-length work by Scalapino, effectively demonstrates some of the notions that have been a constant concern in her poetry and poetics.\(^{58}\) In this work, she also makes expressively clear the political implications of one’s attitude toward such categories as history and narrative. This work is a long meditation on how time might be thought if one were to dispense with many of the hierarchies that one takes for granted in one’s experience of actions and thoughts, and in the writing of these events. If one is to dispel one’s illusions of the inherent existence of memories and their correspondence to actual events in a continually receding present moment, then one must realize the extent to which language shapes one’s interpretations of perceptions.\(^{59}\)

For Scalapino, writing itself is an action, an event, that is as remote from a past event as one’s memory of it. According to her, writing about an event does not have a causal relationship to the event itself, which also has no inherent existence, since it is in the past. Writing about an event (like thinking about an event) is an event itself, a *new time* in its own right, a present experience that attempts to recall a nonexistent event, yet is tinged with all other events perceived since the experience of the event that prompted the writing: “Remembering everything, all layers at the same time, writing is the mind’s operations *per se* and imitation of it at the same time.”\(^{60}\) Herein lie two meanings of “new time”: it is at once a new way of conceptualizing time, as well as a guide for a more zen-like experiencing of the “new time” of the present moment.
In her discussion of her play *The Present*, Scalapino describes this phenomenon of writing as a means of revealing the mind in the act of structuring reality, yet also as a means of creating its own reality. In the play, the characters speak as well as enact their actions. These verbalized and acted movements are followed later by “sequences of observation or discursive commentary,” which are “spoken and also shown as handwritten phrases on slides.” The separation of the passages of action and those of conceptualization causes these obverse phenomena “to collapse becoming one – always being separate. It is ‘as if’ we’re seeing and reading mind structuring.” The events are simultaneously related (they “becom[e] one”) and individuated (“always being separate”). The boundaries between event, conceptualization, and writing (narrative) are collapsed at the same time that each of these phenomena is held to be a discrete event in its own right. Conceptualizing events by verbalizing or writing them tends to cause one to blur the boundaries between narrative and event, as if one is reliving a phenomenon that somehow still exists through the recreation of it. The artifice of narrative obscures the speaking and writing of an event as events themselves: “Writing not having any relation to event/being it – by being exactly its activity. It’s the ‘same thing’ as life (syntactically) – it is life. It has to be or it’s nothing.” Writing is both an imitation of the motion of the mind (and indeed, of perception itself) constructing and categorizing and associating events, and an event, a motion, an activity, in its own right. Scalapino’s writing inverts the insight that social constructions are always necessarily mediated through language . . ., suggesting instead that these vehicles of mediation are themselves the central constituents of experience – hence the text becomes the act. Scalapino asks that the reader acknowledge that the text doesn’t simply *represent* reality for us (albeit in an ideologically governed way) but *produces* a reality on its own terms. (emphasis in original)
Scalapino writes the mental terrain as experience and reveals the process by which we construct that terrain. This process renders us more consciously aware of the rupture between event and interpretation or imitation in writing, as well as of the phenomenon of writing as life.⁶³

Below, I will examine a brief passage from *New Time*. This work will receive more extended treatment in Chapter Five, in which I look at at the relation between public and private realms of experience. In using the same work in these two chapters, I wish to demonstrate how Scalapino’s dialectical process works on different dualistic concepts within the same poem. In this chapter I will also analyze a longer work, “bum series,” from *way*. This work, with its concern for private and public realms, could also have been analyzed for the purposes of Chapter Five. Scalapino’s dialectics works on several different levels, challenging ways in which humans conceptualize their experience of phenomena.

*New Time*, like many of Scalapino’s previous works, is in the form of a series of short blocks of text. Each block in the series consists of one or more paragraphs. Here is the first block:

there’s still on the rim of night (having been in it) which is (in night) there as his horizontal lying rest in snow – breathing in breath ‘at’ the light day

overwhelming the mark being ‘by’ his ‘action’ – there – only. one’s – only breathing in breath – not night or day.

past cold, the man kneeling in snow – outside, one – which is horizontal waiting – in ‘falling snow’ overwhelming of the mark, the other being in it – only. as being the only overwhelming of rim.

that he’s – ‘running’ – by being forward ‘lying’ which is waiting (outside): ‘by’ – on the ground in rim of snow dropping on sky and floor only.⁶⁴

In this brief and rather disorienting episode are encapsulated some of the thematic materials that are to undergo many permutations during the course of the sequence (giving the impression of an

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infinity of possible recontextualizations). The whole does not have a conventional climactic narrative shape, but instead proceeds incrementally and elaborationally. Its line of development is not a trajectory moving towards a goal, but an investigation in a psychologically flattened field in which neither the outside realm of discursive, socially sanctioned language nor the interior language of individual subjectivity are allowed to settle into anything resembling a conventional descriptive or historical account. Instead, interior and exterior states of being are allowed to become blurred, to commingle and to critique one another so that the language of neither individual psychology nor the larger political and social realm can be reified or seen as having an essential or separate existence. Nor can the recounting of events be construed as uncomplicated history. Instead, the writing posits itself as phenomenon, and tends to resist at every successive reading any stable interpretation, but whose structure and syntactical displacements complicates dualities of time, perception, and history, and destabilizes hierarchical formation.

The setting, point of view, and action in time can only be described in plural and provisional terms. The time of day shifts, so that taken as a whole, the passage does not clearly seem to take place at night or day, dawn or dusk. Or rather, it is all of these and thus also none of them. It is a place and time “on the rim,” taking place during “not night or day” but instead in a state between darkness and light, night and day, action and rest, subjective and objective, inside and outside. This middle ground is reminiscent of Nāgārjuna’s formulation of the “middle way” in the Mādhyamika school of Buddhism. It is a state on the rim that is both empty of determinable coherence, yet continually “overflowing the mark,” its significance overdetermined at every turn as various themes and events are continually recontextualized and perceived in different time frames. This also recalls Scalapino’s description of “a relativity” in which both inside and outside, past and present, can occur simultaneously. Scalapino acknowledges the
hierarchy imposed by interpretation and conceptual categorization, and posits a new time that
neither exists as a reflection of the past or a reference to the future, or a description or
interpretation of an event that no longer exists: “[New Time] is ‘about’ time in that a new time
occurs outside as being the present moment ‘then,’ which is separate from either the text or the
interaction between the people (and separate from the interaction between one’s reading and
one’s present mind) but arising ‘between’ these.” In this rather difficult passage, Scalapino
theorizes an in-between state of apprehending the new time. This temporality is not any of the
discrete time frames associated with an event, or with its recording as written text, or with its
performance for an audience, or with its reading by an individual. It is not the occurrence of any
of these phenomena alone as somehow representing any other occurrence, yet it is also all of
them. It is a temporality outside them (not restricted to a point of view) and also between them. It
is a temporality not separate from the event.

In the text, dawn and dusk are interchangeable; their relatedness consists in the fact of
their having both once been in the present, and their recurrence as a phenomenon of the writer’s
and reader’s experience of the text, occurring with no basis for intrinsic reference: “Dawn is at
the same time as dusk ‘as’ present time. Syntax ‘there’ (of the text) is relational as if a ‘time’ of .
. . muscular physical motion. . . . It is a ‘time’ not as speech or sound per se – but as the reader’s
experience of simultaneous relating and dis-connection only. There is ‘to be’ no basis.”
Scalapino posits timeframes (dawn and dusk) as syntactical constructions, and shows their
relation to the actual “muscular” events of physical movements as one of dissociation. Yet they
are also related in the mind in the experience of the reader. The experiences of “relating and dis-
connection” are, paradoxically, simultaneous, with no hierarchical positioning between them.
Scalapino posits a radical critique of rationality at its earliest, most elemental inception – the moment of perception and the incipient work of the brain to interpret perceived phenomena, including that of reading a text. Indeed, “Perception itself is phenomena,” just as the perceived event is a phenomena:

My focus is on non-hierarchical structure in writing. For example, the implications of time as activity – the future being in the past and present, these times separate and going on simultaneously, equally active . . . suggest a non-hierarchical structure in which all times exist at once. And occur as activity without excluding each other.  

. . . . .

(My) intention – in poetry – is to get complete observing at the same instant (space) as it being the action.  

There’s no relation between events and events. Any. They are separate. Events that occur – (regardless of their interpretation – ). (But also that they are at once only their interpretation and only their occurrence.)

The repetition of “only” in the opening of New Time suggests just this separation of events through the emptiness of their causality. In other words, events are separate because no matter what spin we put on the causal relationship between them, they are, according to Nāgārjuna’s category of “ultimate truth,” free of subjectivity, perspective, linguistic construction, interpretations, and intentions. But as Scalapino hastens to add, since the reality of our interpretations and nominal attributions are not to be denied or negated, and since we are have only perception and thought with which to judge existence, events are simultaneously our interpretation of them. Scalapino’s is not a nihilistic universe, but one in which perception has been radically de-hierarchicalized and critiqued in order to realize its merely apparent essential correspondence with exterior reality:

A phenomenon hasn’t inherent existence – as it is not based on a single moment of a mind, nor on successive moments of a mind, as such moments arise dependently (don’t exist inherently, not being that phenomenon itself – though
appearing to be). In other words, the apprehension or the ‘moment’ of the mind appears to be the phenomenon itself, which the mind itself is seeing. Neither exists inherently.  

The “onlyness” of events, which I take Scalapino to mean the emptiness of causality between events, is similar to Nāgārjuna’s (and more generally, the Buddhist) doctrine of dependent co-origination. Nāgārjuna rigorously deconstructs the notion of any phenomena’s inherent or independent existence. Our perceptions may convincingly persuade us of their identity with their object, of their direct and correspondence with an independent reality. However,

An existent entity (mental episode)  
Has no object.  
Since a mental episode is without an object,  
How could there be any percept-condition?  

Our perception posits no direct correspondence to phenomena; instead, our perceptions give the illusion that what we are seeing gives us knowledge about the actual object, knowledge which corresponds directly to that object. What we perceive is, in effect, is the mind seeing its interpretation of what is out there. According to this view, our experience is dependent upon the interpretations of perceptions, which are dependent upon the structure and functions of our body, including its production of language, and its interactions with other bodies and phenomena.  

Nothing within or without human existence has permanent, inherent, essential, or independent features or qualities. The aim of a conceptualization of perception based on dependent co-origination is to yield a view of reality freed of the illusions of a model of direct correspondence, and simultaneously to posit the ultimate emptiness of the separation and hierarchicalization of such dualistic categories as inner and outer, public and private, subject and object. For each term of a duality is contained within the other; indeed, in a sense is the other and is dependent upon
the other, without, however, necessitating a causal link between them in which the one somehow inherently brings about or influences the other. It is this link that is empty: the non-relation
between events that Scalapino suggests above. For, as we have seen, Nāgārjuna posits a deep identity between what at first introduction to this philosophy must seem like the ultimate dualistic relationship between the doctrines of conventional and ultimate reality.

For Scalapino, writing that attempts to capture one’s memory of experiences in descriptive detail or narrative and causal links can perpetuate illusions about the ways that we actually perceive, encode, and recall phenomena. Her project is instead the persistent disillusionment of notions regarding any notion of permanent or essential nature of experience, memory, and perspective. Our interpretation of phenomena depends upon our perception and memory, and Scalapino goes to these roots of cognition to investigate how we formulate, and come to believe in, mnemonic illusions. Her process demonstrates the constructed, impermanent, and creative nature of memory. To alter Heraclitus’ maxim slightly, she demonstrates that one is never able to step into the same mnemonic river twice. This phenomenon is what Scalapino refers to when she says that

A segment in the poem is the actual act or event itself – occurring long after it occurred; or acts put into it which occurred more recently. They somehow come up as the same sound pattern.

The self is unraveled as an example in investigating particular historical events, which are potentially infinite.72

The text itself is an event that reenacts the prior event it records, and intersects or collides with other “acts which occurred more recently.” Indeed, events related by the speaker become interrelated moments that exist in potential infinitude in the mind. Such recreated and recreating events are exposed through the unraveling of the self in the writing of these moments.
Thus Scalapino does not nihilistically negate the convention of narrative, which would be effectively a dualistic position that would not admit of a dialogue between conventional or nominal reality and an imagined reality empty of the subjective creation of categories and temporalities. Instead, her work engages both realities in a dialogue that acknowledges both narrative convention and its illusions. Her work leads the reader to become hyper-aware of the artificiality of the tenses and causalities that one constructs in narrating events, and of the illusory nature of the project of reproducing events linguistically, so that one feels that the words somehow intrinsically correspond with or attach to a phenomenon. To recall an event is, according to Scalapino, its own event. This notion is a truism for cognitive science. As Richard E. Cytowic states,

memory . . . is a creative process during which the state of the brain’s electrical fields change. The sensory cortices generate a distinct pattern for each act of recognition and recall, with no two ever exactly the same. They are close enough to cause the illusion that we understand and have seen the event before, although this is never quite true. Each time we recall something it comes tainted with the circumstances of the recall. When it is recalled again, it carries with it a new kind of baggage, and so on. So each act of recognition and recall is a fresh, creative process and not merely a retrieval of some fixed item from storage.

Even though humans often have the illusion of thinking of memory as a simple process of retrieval of stored information, and that each time a memory is recalled it is a faithful repetition of the first time it was recalled, this is not the case. As far as memory is concerned, there is no such thing as repetition. And this phenomena of the fundamental non-identity of events and memory goes to the heart of Scalapino’s revision of notions of narrativity.

Considering her emphasis on the radical impermanence as well as the emptiness of essence at the heart of any narrative endeavor, it is fitting that her work never arrives at a stasis, but instead is constantly engaged in producing a paradoxical relationship between its narrativistic
and anti-narrativistic impulses, that is, between passages that describe phenomena and those elements that disrupt such description. Scalapino is not engaged in a denial of story. Indeed, within her works she tells many stories. Rather, she is concerned in her work to level the field that includes an actual event and the narrative that describes it so that they occupy more or less equal regions on a plane, so to speak. Each is a phenomena in its own right, and each has properties of impermanence and the lack of an essence that can be fixed temporally or semantically. And neither is subordinate to the other: narrative is not subordinate to the event that it attempts to mimetically reproduce, and the event is not subordinate to a notion of the lasting monument of its description. Instead, Scalapino shows the two terms to be mutually dependent: they are in constant dialogue with one another, interrogating one another’s position so that neither is seen as predominant or superior to the other.

One point that is crucial to the consideration of Scalapino’s project of questioning our conceptual habits of structuring time is that cognitive science prioritizes motion before time. No matter how we express ideas of time, they are always dependent upon the particular kind of metaphor used, and it is misleading and fallacious to reify what were conceptual metaphors in the first place. In her works, Scalapino often isolates motion and merges time frames, as if time were not an outwardly reified entity passing along a linear continuum (a metaphorical conceptualization), but something created and recreated inwardly, in a blooming, buzzing confusion of present, past, and future.

Scalapino’s poetics attempts to reverse the impulse to reify and to give priority to ordered and hierarchicalized time (tradition), and to make motion and the experience of time subservient to tradition. Such a cultural imperative tends to impoverish experience, which in a conservative worldview must be understood as a condition of the conceptualization of motion and events.
Also lost in such a view is the articulation of the public and private spheres so that the possibility for action and present experience to be recovered outside of conventional conceptualization remains alive, allowing community interactions to take place in a greatly enriched field of possibility, without the necessity to integrate dualities, but also with an understanding that the drive to order and prioritize them is not a determinant of an order of truth that exists outside of us:

Activity is the only community. The conservative gesture, always a constant (any ordering, institutional and societal) is to view both activity and time *per se* as a condition of tradition. As such, both time and activity are a “lost mass” at any time. “For just as modern man has been deprived of his biography, his experience has likewise been expropriated.”

I will return in Chapter Five to Scalapino’s notion of activity as the basis of community or social interaction. I will also examine more closely a crucial issue at stake for Scalapino, the recovery of experience, including, and in particular, the experience of the public realm and the blurring of the boundaries between public and private realms. To close my analysis of temporality and narrative in Scalapino’s poetry, let us examine “bum series,” a section within her book-length poem *way* (see Figure 6).

In this work, perspectives and time-frames are confused, so that if the reader is expecting a psychologized narrative describing how the “bums” came to live – and die – on the street, or how the “I” enters the causal sequence of events, such expectations are everywhere deflected. Events and relations, and not time, are primary. Scalapino fashions a temporal poetics in which time does not consist of a series of discrete beings or things occurring in a sequence of measured moments and happenings among which can be traced a narrative held together by the glue of causality. Objects, persons, and events do not possess discrete or inherent existence; instead, they
always arise in a relationship of dependence, or rather interdependence. They are recorded in a web of motions and events that we only seem to perceive as the phenomenon itself. Not only are boundaries between subjectivities and tenses blurred, but the more conventional narrative and descriptive ordering is actively destructured and flattened, and instead shown as a series of related or dependent phenomena.

For example, the bums and the speaker are outside in the cold at the same time. However, in the first stanza, it cannot be determined grammatically which she is referring to in the clause “though usually being there when it’s warmer.” Subjectivity is ambiguous rather than discrete; however, the events and entities and persons in the work are not totally fungible or of equal value. The title focuses attention on the morally charged primary event of the series, the death of the bums. Furthermore, the bums and their deaths are brought into relation with several other events, consciousnesses, and entities, including cranes, freighters, a man in new wave attire who works in a garage, the “dumb” speaker, oil rigs, and the “present president.” The event that was invisible to the community, the death of the bums, is brought into ordinary, matter-of-fact relation to surrounding people, events, and things, and to the sphere of political and economic power. The very invisibility of the event is a barometer of the community’s malaise: its snobbery, uncaring attitude, and ignorance. The poem enacts the relations among the various persons and entities, yet resists their dramatization, which would assign a causality and hierarchical ordering to events. Self-sufficiency seems absent in the series. Instead, all movements, events, and entities exist and function in relation to others. The writing enacts the “public figure” and “the freighter and / their relation,” “[the relation] of the man with the dyed / blonde hair and / new wave attire – and / the freighter,” “[the relation] of our present / president . . . to the freighter,” the relation of the “social struggle” of the bums “to the freighter,” the relation
of “the person of / new wave attire . . . to / the freighter,” and so forth. The writing also demonstrates that the relationship of self to self is a complicated one, conditioned by the interpretations of others and one’s interpretation of one’s own identities. “[T]he man in the new / wave attire” exists, not inherently or independently, but “as the relation / of him / being another person,” and “as / the freighter” and also as “his and its relation.”

However, some entities and events seem to be in an inverse or negative relation to others, notably the “present president” in relation to the bums and their social struggle, although the bums seem not to be very aware of the “social struggle,” a stock phrase which is a social and linguistic construction describing conditions of suffering, oppression, and social malaise. To the president, the bums are “abroad,” not in his own country and therefore in a vacant locus, always elsewhere and never included. Or rather they are included (living within the city limits, haunting its streets, and in the potential care of the state and community) as an exclusion (relegated to exist and perish outside that care). In a protectionist state, they exist outside of the rope that separates those who belong from those who do not merit the paternalistic beneficence of the state. Thus the president is in an inverse relation to the bums “when there’s a social struggle in their whole setting, which is abroad.” But the bums themselves seem unaware of the social struggle, involved instead in the struggle for existence and survival on the streets. Not to “have desire – of the present” is to remain “dumb,” ignorant of social struggle and social interrelatedness. Although the speaker confesses her ignorance, she also has the possibility not to remain as “unrepaired” as the car, not to remain in a senseless time, unable to experience the presence or to sense – in the sense of both understanding and perceiving – the interrelatedness and dependent nature of existence. She, like the bums, “almost froze” at the same time as the bums, “and realized I / could die from it.” Then she both doesn’t care, and also realizes that it’s
not possible for her not to care, since she and the bums cannot have inherent existence atomistically separated from each other. “[W]hen that’s senseless,” when not caring makes no ethical sense, her ignorance has been repaired, as the car may be repaired. However, the car has not been repaired at the time that the bums die from the cold, and so, as if in sympathetic vibration with even so remote an entity as a broken-down car in the same setting, they are, even in their death, experiencing “grinding and / movement in relation to it.” The ending brings home the critical issues at stake for Scalapino in a darkly and starkly comical moment.

Scalapino doesn’t so much shock us into the recognition of the bums’ relation to the various parts and to the whole of the community, as she does make us feel discomfort at the metaphysical rug of time and description and their hierarchical accoutrements being pulled from under us. And it is in this zone of unease, in which we no longer have the comfort of temporal and causal handles, of hermeneutical certainty, or of the truth-correspondence of perception and cognition with some extrasubjective reality, that we find ourselves adrift in the free-floating strangeness of a world of phenomena and events in dependent relation. Discrete things and happenings do not ineluctably and irretrievably recede into a past that we continually try to recapture and reclaim through historical representation of a selective narrative with causal links. Instead, Scalapino uses writing to invite critique of the experientially alienated self, the self incapable of experiencing movement and event, bound instead to a dualistic, atomistic, and mechanistic conception of existence. In “bum series” she presents the possibility of a “dumb” existence lost to the universe of becoming, prioritizing lost time and reifying time and its passage. She also, however, presents the possibility of a disillusioned existence in which the present event is given priority, and in which inner and outer clocks only seem to correspond to reality. The speaker has awareness and the possibility for self-critique that the other “snobs” do
not seem to have. In the writing, then, is the possibility of greater self-awareness and the realization of what Nāgārjuna calls “dependent co-origination” of the phenomenal world. This view of reality is opposed to what cognitive scientists call the illusion of the “homunculus,” which is to say the discrete, disembodied, rational mind that is independent of other homunculi and that believes in the capacity to capture the past with a truth that somehow corresponds with external reality.

Hejinian, who has engaged in several collaborations with Scalapino, including the book-length poem *Sight*, shares Scalapino’s concern with both the recovery and critique of narrative and experience, and not simply with negating or denying them as a reactionary illusion. Her “ostensibly autobiographical” work *My Life* demonstrates some of her philosophical ideas regarding narrative, memory, and time. At the beginning of this chapter, I began an analysis of small sections of this work, showing how one might begin to approach the disjunctive sentences with an awareness of the subtle and intricate associations among the ideas. In the following analysis, I will demonstrate more specific ways in which the dialogical relationship between the opposed terms of narrative and narrative reflexivity is achieved.

The first edition of *My Life* was published in 1980, when Hejinian was thirty-seven years old; it consisted of thirty-seven sections of thirty-seven sentences each, paralleling her age. The new edition, published in 1987, adds eight sections and eight new sentences to each previous chapter to equal her then-current age of forty-five. While it is true that the sections ostensibly correspond to the years of the author’s life, and that, as Marjorie Perloff notes, “in the course of the narrative, the references gradually shift from childhood to adolescence to adult thought and behavior,” chronological progression is undermined by references to adulthood in the earlier sections and to childhood in the later sections, so that “each is a collage made up of numerous
interpolations – memories and meditations, axioms and aphorisms.” One the one hand, the correspondence of chapter number to the age in the author’s life that it ostensibly represents does set up a formally mimetic structure: the form suggests a division by the years of one’s life: each section, in form if not in content, represents the interval of time from one birthday to the next. On the other hand, the weak link between section number and the actual events that occurred at the corresponding age in Hejinian’s life throws in question the notion of the discreteness of any event or of any time span. The arbitrariness of the apportionment of years acknowledges the artificiality of superimposing discrete time periods on the continual and open-ended flux of overlapping developments and events in one’s life. Yet the work does not, therefore, produce a more closely mimetic version of what might actually have been taking place cognitively, temporally, mnemonically, and so forth, in Hejinian’s life. To be sure, the nonlinear progression of sentences produces a “languaged self” that does tend to eschew a mimetically conceived descriptive writing, even of the type of so-called “writing on the brain” that attempts to represent, through a stream of associations, cognitive or mnemonic processes. As Kornelia Freitag points out, “[t]hat the number is constituted by the age of the author does not lead to more intimacy but rather to a foregrounding of the artifice of the textual body.” Furthermore, “the text is not so much structured as to lead logically from one sentence to the next but to recontextualize and to decontextualize the sentences and phrases in a way that makes a swift and superficial reading impossible – it doesn’t ‘make sense.’” The artifice of the disjunction among the sentences blocks the easy consumption of the material.

I would also state that there is a kind of intimacy within the very artifice of the work. First, intimacy through description and through temporal and thematic focus creates a feeling of intimacy. Second, the element of arbitrariness and and the purposeful disjunction in the
juxtaposition of sentences creates a feeling of artifice. These two ideas are antithetical. Yet in My Life they are engaged in a dialogical process that allows each to be recognized (if only by contrast with the other) while at the same time not allowing the ascendancy of either at the expense of either. Intimacy of description, undermined, exhibits gaps that demonstrate its instability, yet also its richly generative potential, through that very undermining. Disjunction, undermined by conjunctions found within relatively discrete units, allows the forging of bridges that demonstrate possible stabilizing tendencies, yet such forging does not accommodate permanent or inherent meaning or temporal successions. There is a reciprocal and dialogical process between rubble and conjunction, between causality and the lack of relation between events, that allows the existence of both and prevents the ascendancy of either. The text doesn’t inherently construct a particular sense, although it invites the making of multiple senses. Its semantic progression alternatively stitches and unravels sense, never allowing a sedimented meaning to take precedence, but instead remains constantly in a shape-shifting motion. The text’s meaning both comes into and departs from being. It resists both the illusion of narrative stability as well as the denial of cohesive forces.

Each section of the book consists of more or less unlinked sentences describing incidents, thoughts and observations that create a patchwork texture of utterances, many of which are recognizably descriptive of events in a person’s life. In this sense, the work’s title and content bear a positive relation to the genre of autobiography, although it is a highly unusual kind of autobiography. Far from attempting to structure a chronological sequence of events in telling the story of her life, Hejinian seems to claim that chronological ordering is foreign to the way that memory actually works: “What follows a strict chronology has no memory.” The circuits of memory do not have the well-ordered sequence of a plot with its pattern of rising and falling
tension that builds toward a climax, or that develops toward a subject’s increased understanding of the world and of her or her place within it. In order to pattern a more “strict chronology,” the autobiographer must select particular incidents and suppress others, charting one’s experience so that its moral or philosophical paths of development become more or less consistent or clarified. Diffuse and interconnected time and event are pared down and modeled into a trajectory that suits one’s retrospective understanding of the shape of one’s life. In My Life, Hejinian attempts to avoid the assumption of an individual self at the center of a timeline, and moreover, of a sequence of events and reflections that lead, under the aegis of more or less well-defined moral premises, to a subject’s development of consciousness.

According to Lisa Samuels, My Life “is the story of a languaged self, a written ‘I,’ rather than the autobiography of an experiencing human.”83 Or rather, as I believe, it is the conjunction of Hejinian’s attempt to write her experience and of her simultaneous exploration of the implications of such an attempt. My Life is an account of experiences: she tells of events in her life as well as of events within her own consciousness. However, her account is radically different from the conventional construction of narrative chronology. The disjunctive succession of apparently unrelated sentences somehow document the thoughts and experiences of a life that is not linguistically defined within a trajectory of events, retrospectively understood as having an inexorable shape and direction, and leading to an altered understanding of one’s self in relation to the world.

However disjunctive the work seems on the surface, a close reading of the work shows subtle relationships of ideas in the flow of sentences. Either by chance or by intentional design, or both, there exist intricate links that relate one sentence to the next, so that in reading the work one becomes aware of a meandering but subtly and intelligently associative flow of
consciousness. Hejinian’s poetic history of her consciousness in *My Life* is, to be sure, a construction of a particular kind that plays with, but does not relinquish entirely, the conventions of narrative. Time and event, instead of being in the service of the shape of moral or philosophical development, as in the *bildungsroman*, are redistributed so as not to betray an overriding teleological structure. But even though the texture of the work as a whole is relatively homogeneous, there does exist a pattern to its organization that contributes to the dialectics between the work’s linear and nonlinear impulses.

Several critics have pointed out various kinds of patterns in the work. For example, Craig Dworkin compares the semantic texture of the work to the design of patchwork quilts, especially those quilts that have a design, as opposed to the relatively random patterns of crazy quilts. He extends the connection between semantic and textile disjunction to encompass a wider context of women’s production and feminist values. Regarding the thematic structure and interplay in *My Life*, Dworkin recognizes the recurrence of particular themes: “war, vacation, birthday parties, the weather, getting things out of the carpet, windows, colors, birds.” He correctly points out that these themes are “recognizable, finite, and frequently connected.” In other words, there is a constant push and pull between semantic disjunction and the creation of linear connections among certain themes, even though a particular theme might not recur again until several pages after its previous mention. Furthermore, he correctly points out that the narratives generated by such connections “are constructed of subtly associated segments; they work more by evocation than explicit connection among thoughts [which] are discontinuous but not unmotivated.”

Dworkin also locates other thematic categories such as the one in which Hejinian “transforms fragments of worn-out, quotidian, common language into an extraordinary, unique and individual
text.”87 For example, he observes that “[a] clichè like ‘down and out’ . . . appears in the phrase ‘the tiniest idea became a “nagging thought” until I could write it down and out.’”88

Critics have also noted and analyzed the significance of the repetition of particular phrases throughout the text. For example, at the head of each section, which “represents” in a loose sense each year of her life, Hejinian places a title, which then is repeated in various contexts in the body of each section throughout the remainder of the book. For example, the first chapter is entitled, “a pause, a rose, something on paper.” This phrase is repeated many times throughout the book, but each time in a different context and sometimes with added words. For example, in section twenty-five, the title phrase becomes “A pause, a rose, something on paper, of true organic spirals we have no lack.”89 Freitag notes a thematic resonance among the section titles of My Life, which she describes as “[t]he negation of a direct account of the past and of a direct access to meaning.”90 She astutely notes that when the phrases and sentences that constitute the section titles recur in the body of the text, they undergo a semantic alteration through recontextualization. And Perloff refers to the titles-cum-leitmotifs as having “an oddly reassuring effect. . . . In the course of My Life these phrases become markers, signposts around which much that is confusing in one’s life can coalesce.”91

Dworkin, Perloff, and Freitag all note the correspondence of sentences containing particular themes with other thematically similar sentences across the spatial gaps that separate their occurrence in the text. Similarly, when viewing a patchwork quilt one seeks out and mentally highlights those patches that are of the same fabric, in order to perceive the overall pattern to the quilt’s design and to find some reassurance in the disorder. To their analyses I would highlight a different kind of tension within the text, one that brings to the fore a dialogue between seemingly contradictory drives in the text: the push and pull between referential and
non-referential drives, and between narrative and non-narrative drives. One way to demonstrate this is to show various types of leitmotifs or threads running through the text, and to analyze ways in which these threads (or patches, to borrow Dworkin’s analogy) play off one another in a reciprocal and interdependent engagement.

Particular categories or threads of thought are woven, apparently more or less at random, but also more or less evenly distributed, throughout the work. For example, one thread evokes the strangeness of ordinary language, in the manner of Ludwig Wittgenstein. Hejinian quotes a remembered common saying or expression that seems straightforward enough in the context of ordinary usage. She isolates the expression, often by enclosing it in quotation marks, and defamiliarizes it by couching it within a broader cultural context, or simply pointing to its metaphorical quirkiness. One example is “We can ‘plan the weekend.’” The idea that one can plan a weekend as one might plan a party points to the irony of that particular linguistic construction, as if one can bring a period of time into existence by writing it onto one’s calendar. Particular examples of certain threads sometimes intersect with other threads, so that this sentence is also an instance of another kind of thread in which Hejinian records ways in which her family quantified and ranked the objects of experience. As Perloff observes, “what emerges is that this is a family that makes discriminations between ‘better’ and ‘worse’ things, that is concerned with hierarchy, propriety, and order . . . and that the narrator recalls registering a certain puzzlement about these things.” The motif of the “better” and “worse” categories is repeated several times in My Life, in sentences such as “The better toys were gathered in the playpen,” and “The better dishes (the good china) were kept in a special closet.” Throughout My Life, Hejinian plays with categories and highlights their status as subjective constructs that can be scrutinized and not taken as having a universal or essential truth.
Sprinkled throughout *My Life* are a number of Hejinian’s Wittgensteinian observations regarding ordinary language (for a list of several examples, see appendix B). To examine one instance of this particular thread, Hejinian remembers that “[m]y father would say I’ve a ‘big day’ tomorrow” (50). The use of size to describe the importance of an impending event is a common metaphorical construction, and makes a physical property that one experiences in daily life correspond to something that has no such property. And consider the sentence, “It is a way of saying, I want you, too, to have this experience, so that we are more alike, so that we are closer, bound together, sharing a point of view – so that we are “coming from the same place” (21-22). The comparison of commonality of thought with a physical location in space indicates Hejinian’s recognition of the use of bodily experience to describe a state of affairs that is more abstract.

In *Philosophy in the Flesh*, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson point to hundreds of such examples of metaphors that have a basis in everyday physical experience, and that we use to describe phenomena in a way that brings abstract concepts (agreement, time importance) down to a physical level. These authors emphasize the bodily mediation of categories in ordinary metaphors that we use, often unaware of their embodied origins. “Important Is Big” is one of the categories of primary metaphor that Lakoff and Johnson list in their enumeration of linguistic conflations of domains (such as knowing with seeing) that are formed in childhood, and that lead to the largely unconscious formation of numerous metaphors used in everyday life. In the case of the primary metaphor “Important Is Big,” subjective experience (importance) is paired with sensorimotor experience (size). The example “Tomorrow is a big day” has its genesis in the primary childhood experience of “finding that big things, e.g., parents, are important and can exert major forces on you and dominate your visual experience.”96 The recurring “ordinary language” motif in *My Life* indicates one aspect of Hejinian’s fascination with the vagaries of
language: her acknowledgement of the metaphorical underpinnings of language, and its source in rudimentary bodily experience. Her cognizance of such peculiarities has shaped all of her poetic endeavors as she reveals the hidden meanings and often experiential origins behind commonsensical and ordinary linguistic usages.97

Sometimes these linguistic quirks echo in other parts of the book, as when Hejinian notes, “She could only give a little shrug” (9), which one might recall when later reading “One makes a shrug but gives a shit.” This and other kinds of interrelatedness among the fragments of experience in My Life give the whole work a richness and resonance that is reminiscent of the way that memory functions. As one continues to experience, one relates new perceptions and thoughts with prior ones, in an ongoing process of sorting, cataloging and comparing.

My larger strategy in highlighting these various threads is to show how, in the context in which they occur in the body of the text, they play off surrounding sentences, such as in the following example: “My father would say I’ve a “big day” tomorrow. Words are not always adequate to the occasion, and my “probably” sounded hopeless. It’s real, why, so, it’s wrong.” The sentence acknowledging the “big day” metaphor is followed by another sentence describing the speaker’s response of uncertainty, in which the emotional shading of “probably” is highlighted by placing it in quotation marks, echoing a similar emphasis in the first sentence. The idea of the adequacy of language to express affective gradations also retroactively reflects on the adequacy of words to refer in a literal fashion to abstract concepts such as “importance.” The associative relationship between these two sentences, whose theme is the adequacy of language precisely to translate emotions and thoughts, reflexively underscores the artifice of linguistic expression, as well as the embodied basis of linguistic expression. If, as the next sentence suggests, her response of “probably” is “real” (the word’s neural and vocal production
are materially based), it might also be “wrong” (the word does not correspond directly or literally to the emotion). Hejinian playfully couches this observation in a somewhat old-fashioned expression using the interjection “why,” which signifies mild surprise or hesitation, further extending the general theme of the strangeness and figurative basis of ordinary language. Note that it is possible in all three sentences to imagine their source in actual events in someone’s life, so that Hejinian’s description of an autobiographical experience (having responded to someone’s query with an unconvincing “probably”) also become the occasion for her more intellectual musings on the artifice of language and its relation to experience (which she is, self-consciously, attempting to describe). Thus an open-ended and unresolved dialogue ensues between the projects of 1) describing incidents in life, and 2) showing the artifice of that description. Hejinian does not denigrate the project of description by showing language to be artifice, and neither does she elevate description at the expense of questioning the realities of the categories assumed by such description. Instead, she allows each term in the dichotomy to interrogate the other in a dialogue that highlights each as real and each as posing a set of problems from the other’s perspective. The debate serves to enrich and question, and not to exalt or annihilate, the other term.

Another type of thread can be found in the reflexive sentences woven throughout the work, which often comment on the process of recording a life or on the nature of memory (for a list of several examples, see appendix C). For example, “Life is hopelessly frayed, all loose ends” (15) reflects on the quality of lived experience outside the retrospectively imposed trajectory of a more conventional autobiographical narrative. It is the very lack of a reconstructed overall shape that Hejinian attempts to represent in the assortment of loose ends in her autobiographical work.
Some of the examples of reflexive commentary occur as if an isolated rumination, for example this one: “But the argument decays, the plot goes bit by bit” (71). Others occur within the context of a memory such as the following description of the multiple versions of a single story told by various members of her family: “There were more storytellers than there were stories, so that everyone in the family had a version of history and it was impossible to get close to the original, or to know “what really happened” (21). Most speak to the impossibility of capturing experience, of remembering it, speaking it, or writing it as an exact or faithful record of the original experience, so that “[i]t is impossible to return to the state of mind in which these sentences originated.” Thus they also reflexively refer to the writing and organization of My Life itself. At the heart of the work is the simultaneous construction and deconstruction of narrative, which is aptly formulated in the above statement, “If there is a story at all, accounted for, a settled thing to have experienced, it’s nothing of the kind.” If there were such a thing as a stable, absolute, or inherent quality of experience that can be definitively “accounted for,” then it is also must be the case that “it’s nothing of the kind.” In other words, there is a contradictory condition at the heart of this autobiography, which presupposes the telling of a life, yet simultaneously presupposes the impossibility of doing so.

The two threads or categories of which I have given particular instances are examples of Hejinian’s consciousness of the slipperiness and ambiguity of language and of its inability to capture experience in any complete or stable fashion. These statements deconstruct notions of inherent or essential qualities in language or memory. Another kind of thread runs counter to this warp of self-reflexiveness, and attempts to record, in a rather conventionally descriptive way, particular “spots of time” in experience, to use a Wordsworthian term (for a list of several examples, see appendix D). One example of such memories of concrete things or events is the
following: On her walks she stepped into people’s gardens to pinch off cuttings from their geraniums and succulents (7). Others have a more surreal or dreamlike quality, as in the following two: “I found a penny in a calla lily” (51), and “The nightmare was of a giant bluebottle fly which buzzed, ‘I’m all there is’” (54). These recorded memories are often complex, strange, intriguing, and open-ended. They constitute descriptive threads in some of the frayed selvages of life’s experience. But compared with the selfconscious kinds of statements of the first two categories, they are relatively straightforward as conventional description. Whether mundane or extraordinary, these descriptions share a wealth of concrete details and striking images.

When the warp of reflexivity is juxtaposed with the weft of described experience, they often inform and develop one another in surprising and delightful ways. For example, the following sentences occur together in the twenty-eighth section of My Life:

The young women sat in front of the apartment building in the mornings, arranged on three levels of steps, like chorus boys on risers. A painting is a flat reflection. A fence is a belt, gives one confidence. When I say compulsion and characterize it as numb, I am thinking not of the satisfactions it invented for me as one compelled but of the impenetrable dutifulness of my will (71).

The first sentence creates a decidedly three-dimensional portrait of women sitting on successive steps. The second sentence, “A painting is a flat reflection,” seems to comment on this description in order to remind us that it is, after all, a representation, lest we become so absorbed in its vividly realistic depiction that we forget its somewhat flatter existence as a word-painting or as a mental or mnemonic picture. The copulative grammatical structure of the second sentence is echoed in the third sentence: “a painting is . . .” echoes “a fence is . . .” and introduces the idea that boundaries can be psychologically comforting. Yet the confidence produced by boundaries
is also questioned as an illusory product, just as, in the sentence that follows, “When I say compulsion and characterize it as numb, I am thinking not of the satisfactions it invented for me as one compelled but of the impenetrable dutifulness of my will,” the pleasures created by one’s compulsions are understood as inventions of the inescapable (and thus “numb”) emotional backdrop of the will. Moreover, in the sentence “There was a garden, a hole in the fence, a grandfather who had no religion – one can run through the holes in memory, wearing a wet hat, onto the sidewalk covered with puddles, and there are fingers in them” (30), Hejinian has previously referred to “a hole in the fence” (like the “holes in memory”). She has also referred to “fences keeping cyclones” (59), an odd and ironic rephrasing of the expression “cyclone fence,” which is a chain-link fence designed to weather storms. The fence is resistant to the storm because it allows its winds to pass through – it keeps rather than resists the winds. These images attest to both the impermanence of memory with its holes, and its ability to create new and surprising linguistic formulas. Thus, Hejinian seems to be pointing out that language and memory have both a conventional and nominal existence as well as a radically impermanent and nonessential nature – a rather similar dialectical movement to the one observed in the work of Scalapino and her philosophical ally Nāgārjuna.

In order to show how these threads often resonate next to one another over a more extended passage, let us examine another sequence of sentences from My Life:

Overhead a small plane drags a banner, it is summer, its engines revving and whining – for years I suffered nightmares in which just such a plane would lose control and plunge spinning through the roof of the schoolroom, blazing the cobalt, red, green, and yellow of the Hammond World Atlas. I in my chronic ideas return. Stalin medallions dangle at the windshield in trucks throughout the republics – why do they do this. The language of inquiry, pedagogy of poetry. One doesn’t want to be seduced by the sheer wonder of it all, whereby everything is transformed by beauty. There is a bulging lake and sunlight juts from it like a rock, as laughter for its practitioners. Past midnight, exhausted, fainting, and very
old, the gray ice – Halley’s beaver – was swimming in the sky toward the deep forest on the distant ridge, its tail partially submerged. The flow of thoughts – impossible?

In this passage, we can trace the alternation of relatively descriptive sentences with metapoetical sentences. In the sentences in the first category, the writer sees an airplane dragging a banner, remembers her fear of airplanes crashing into her school (ironically targeting a map in her classroom), wonders at the cultural phenomenon in Russia of placing political idols on windshields (much as Christians in the United States might hang a crucifix from a rear-view mirror), and describes a dreamlike lake and sky. In the metapoetical category are the statements, “I in my chronic ideas return,” “The language of inquiry, pedagogy of poetry,” “One doesn’t want to be seduced by the sheer wonder of it all, whereby everything is transformed by beauty,” and “The flow of thoughts – impossible!”

The sentences in the passage above are thematically linked, so that there is a subtle and complex interaction among them, and a dialogue between description and reflexive commentary. For example, the recurring nightmare, “chronic ideas,” and the widespread custom of deifying a dictator are all related by the themes of repetition and pervasiveness. The author returning with her chronic ideas is also a comment on the use of repetition in the text, as if this perhaps has something to do with her formation (and transformation) of identity. The sight of an airplane banner reminds her of a fear earlier in her life of an airplane crashing. The recurring themes in My Life are like “chronic ideas” that recur and thus shape her as a person. However, that “I” is a different self from the earlier one: she no longer has the nightmares, for one thing. Also, due to intervening experiences (such as seeing the airplane banner), she now recognizes the theme as a recurring one and is able to inquire into the nature of her habitual thoughts so as not to allow them to become too settled, too negatively “chronic.” “Chronic” has the connotation of
pathological recurrence, and thus leads well into the description of seeing many Stalin medallions at truck windshields. There is also a connection between an airplane crashing on a map and Stalin’s violent plans for world domination. Hejinian asks why people continue their old habitual glorification of Stalin with these little tokens, which are also like “chronic ideas” that need to be inquired into. The “language of inquiry, pedagogy of poetry” is a concise and apt statement of Hejinian’s poetics, and works in subtle opposition to the preceding description of the apotheosis of Stalin, whose term of dictatorship was marked by the opposite of the spirit of free inquiry. The poetics of inquiry allow the dislodging of thought habits, and allow one to ask of oneself, as of others, why continue old, settled habits of thought?

The sentence about “inquiry” is followed by a concise argument on aesthetics. If one has an open, inquiring sensibility, one might find and become lured into believing in the inherent quality of beauty in the world. If beauty is an illusion, is there any harm in being “seduced” by it? This bit of philosophizing on aesthetics is followed by prose – a surreal and dream-like description of a lake and sky – that indulges in the very feeling for beauty that was just questioned. Their juxtaposition engenders a dialogue between the two notions, a dialogue that circulates the ideas but does not resolve them, suggesting the possibility – and the negation – of each.

The sentence with which I more or less arbitrarily closed the section above, questions the notion of a “flow” of thoughts and, by reflexive analogy, the textual flow in My Life. In ordinary usage, “flow” connotes a smooth, continuous motion, but not necessarily one whose particles are linked by strong logical, linear or causal connections. It does suggest a fluid and directed movement. Several sentences in My Life mention the impossibility of the autobiographical or descriptive project, as in the following:
It is impossible to return to the state of mind in which these sentences originated (30).

It being impossible to complete the thought, the idea of infinity or eternity elicited a sort of desire, the sexual side of thought (33).

These statements refer to the impossibility of recording an event in a way that faithfully and precisely mimics the original state of affairs at the time of the event, or of describing phenomena without evoking a multiplicity of meanings that deviate from the attempted descriptive capture.

On the other hand, what is equally impossible is freeing oneself from the conventions, reinforced by cognitive imperatives, of finding commonalities and continuities in experience: “Continuity, not so much of ideas as of assumptions, or attitudes, a style one simply can’t break away from” (27). Continuity or flow is a “style” – an ingrained human predilection – that is impossible to “break away from.” This state of very human affairs coexists with another reality, which is the impossibility of flow, which is to say that apart from our human projection of continuity, there is no such inherent continuity, no repetition except that which is cognitively assumed, in the world. This is what Hejinian refers to when she states that “It is impossible to discover any string or bundle or words that is entirely free of possible narrative or psychological content.” It is in our nature to discover links between even the most disparate of terms.

The coexistence of these seemingly opposed notions recalls Nāgārjuna’s two categories of truth or realities. Conventional reality (that which assumes connection, correspondence and repetition) encompasses the deep-seated human conceptual framework, that which names and points to things and categorizes. This is an eminently practical framework of reality; indeed, it is a framework that is necessary for biological survival, and one that we take for granted in everyday life, much as we take for granted the metaphorical constructions in language that are
based on embodied experience, as in Hejinian’s defamiliarized metaphorical expressions above. It is also illusory to believe that cognitive categories or qualities inhere in objects to which we impute such characteristics. Thus the “flow of thoughts is impossible,” even though that flow is “a style one simply can’t break away from.” Both subjective and outer-subjective realities exist at once, and are maintained in a non-resolving dialogue with one another.

There are links among the thoughts and descriptions of *My Life*, but they are not obvious, and the onus is on the reader to discover them. The returns on such “impossibility,” however, are richly rewarding, because the dialogue that is generated by the disjunction between the narrative and the anti-narrative, the description and the anti-description, maintains a perpetual and never-resolving friendly debate. Neither side ever gets the upper hand, and there is no resolution to the discussion. Instead, the dialogical motion is maintained in perpetual and paradoxical motion.

Like the work of Scalapino, Hejinian’s work flattens out the temporal and descriptive dimensions of conventional autobiography in order to show their simultaneous conventional existence and their constructed nature – reminiscent of Nāgārjuna’s middle way. Experience and one’s memory of experience are simultaneously woven into recognizable patterns and hopelessly frayed. The work is like a garment whose shape and details are being constantly altered through the very act of remembering its appearance. We might imagine it as possessing an overall design (or several designs), but in fact we are incapable of experiencing it in a consistent way since any understanding of it at a given moment will have been altered by intervening experience. Hejinian demonstrates this principle by showing the transformation of recurring ideas or images in their new contexts. In the work, the threads of the weft and warp are constantly unraveling and being retied with other threads. To stretch the sartorial metaphor a bit further, the garment of *My Life* is like the emperor’s new clothes, an autobiography everywhere suggesting its reflexive knowledge
of itself as constructed and impermanent, and not directly reflecting any essence of experience, perception or thought. At the same time, it is a richly intertextual garment, reveling in the colorful interconnections among its (constantly unraveling) threads and (continually shifting) shapes. It does not settle into a preference for either the mode of invisibility or that of conventional or nominal existence, but explores the interconnections between the two through the dialogue among the various threads that refer to one and the other. The temporal flow of the author’s life does not have a hierarchical shape, but is instead deliberately flattened out to show the frayed and loose ends of life, in which there may indeed be various trajectories representing various goals or events, but with many intervening occurrences outside of and within the author’s consciousness.

Hejinian’s and Scalapino’s project of paying close attention to one’s perception of ongoing motions and events in an attempt to recover experience not yet steered into temporal categories and trajectories is closely related to the project of recovering experience in a reality that is constantly being shaped (often without one’s consciousness of it) into categories of intersubjective relations, and private and public realms of experience. Both projects aim to open the field of possibility for experience, both individual and social. In Chapter Five, I will examine ways in which works by Scalapino and Mei-mei Berssenbrugge interrogate divisions in intersubjective relations, and between public and private realms, and propose a dialectics that might transform social experience by going to the perceptual and phenomenal roots of such experience.

Notes


4 The cited fragments are found in poems 9, 18, and 34, respectively, of Writing Is an Aid to Memory.


6 This meaning is duly noted by Quartermain.


9 Hejinian, The Language of Inquiry, 56.


15 Hejinian, The Language of Inquiry, 51.

16 Ibid.

17 Ron Silliman identified and noted the main features of this type of writing in “The New Sentence,” in The New Sentence (New York: Roof, 1987), 63-93. The paragraph, the organizing structure of the new sentence, consists of sentences whose syllogistic movement (logical progression from sentence to sentence) is both limited and controlled, thus focusing the reader’s attention on the language instead of the logic, and on the production as opposed to the absorption of meaning (91).


20 Ibid., 5, 7-8.

21 Ibid., 4-5.

22 Ibid, 6.

23 Perelman, “Parataxis and Narrative,” 254.


26 Jameson has been criticized for his cultural historicizing that tends to totalize the contemporary experimental cultural field and damn it by superficial resemblance to pathological economic and social conditions. Jameson casts a wide net over the cultural manifestations he deems “postmodern,” and in doing so encompasses some extremely diverse cultural expression under this rubric. His attempt to historicize postmodernism blurs distinctions and fosters the impression that all such culture is in a death-dance with late capitalism, that it is an unwitting participant in the pathology of its necessarily concomitant political realm. See Fredric Jameson, Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), 1-54.


29 Ibid., 107.

30 The debate between Scalapino and Silliman in “What/Person: From an Exchange” is a fascinating document recording some of the political tensions within experimental poetry. Silliman claimed that experimental poets tended to come from those who consider themselves to be “the subject of history,” such as “many white male heterosexuals,” and who are more “apt to challenge all that is supposedly ‘natural’ about the formation of their own subjectivity.” On the other hand, he continues, it is “the entire spectrum of the ‘marginal’” and oppressed who “have a manifest political need to have their stories told” (emphasis in original). Thus their writing seems “much more conventional” (63). Ron Silliman, “Poetry and the Politics of the Subject,” Socialist Review 18, no.3 (1988): 61-68. Scalapino counters that such a position is “authoritarian” and that “no one is free of their narrative.” Furthermore, she responds, “those who are without social power are less inclined to see reality as orderly; for example, less inclined to see the social construction as unified. . . . The conception of a ‘unified subject is merely taught, in certain conventionalizing setting such as school or workshops . . . .” (52). Scalapino, “What/Person: From an Exchange,” 51-68.

31 Scalapino is also crucially concerned with the conceptualization of public and private realms of experience. I will investigate this aspect of her work in Chapter Five.


35 Ibid., 33.


38 Ibid., 21.

39 Ibid., 30.

40 Ibid., 21.


42 Ibid., 13.


45 In the discussion of Nāgārjuna in this chapter, I am indebted to Garfield’s clear analyses of the often puzzling and obscure verses of the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*. See his introduction and commentary in *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way: Nāgārjuna’s Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, 87-359.


47 Ibid., 298.

48 Ibid., 89.
For example, in the preceding sentence, my description of the past as “receding” uses a common metaphor in which the future is in front of oneself, the present is where one is located, and the past is behind oneself. This metaphorical structure for temporality is common among cultures worldwide, but is not the only way of conceptualizing time. As Lakoff and Johnson point out in *Philosophy in the Flesh*, the language of Aymara, spoken by a Chilean people of the Andes, the past is in front of oneself, and the future is behind oneself. Lakoff and Johnson claim that an analysis of metaphors for time are important to philosophy, because it is so easy to be led astray by such metaphors, and to take them as literal fact instead of as a useful conceptual apparatus. For example, if one thinks of an event as taking place within a duration of time, then one may be led to believe that the event and the duration are separate phenomena, and therefore that time has “a metaphysical existence independent of events.” See Lakoff and Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh*, 156-57. The entire chapters on “Time” (137-69) and “Events and Causes” (170-234) are helpful to understanding how our cognitive categories shape our ways of thinking about time, events, and causality.


This paradoxical and dialectical movement has a philosophical relation to the kind of movement that I have been identifying and analyzing in the past two chapters. There is no higher synthesis of contraries, and no conclusion to the dialogue between them. The coexistence of
contradictory conditions is characteristic: the phenomena are discrete and identical, at the same
time.


66 Ibid., 36.

67 Ibid., 3.

68 Ibid., 16.

69 Ibid., 53.


71 See Garfield, commentary to “Examination of Conditions,” *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way*, 117-18: “If we consider a particular moment of perception, the object of that perceptual episode no longer exists. This is so simply because of the mundane fact that the chain of events responsible for the arising of perceptual consciousness takes time. So the tree of which I am perceptually aware now is a tree that existed about one hundred milliseconds ago; not one that exists now. The light took some time to reach my eye; the nerve impulses from the eye to the brain took some time; visual processing took still more time. So if the story about how the tree is the percept-object condition of my perception according to which the tree exists simultaneously with the perception and exerts a causal power on my eye or visual consciousness were accepted, perception would be impossible.”


76 Hejinian and Scalapino, *Sight*. Discussing the philosophical nature of this project, Hejinian writers: “In the broadest sense, we were interested in a joint investigation into the working of experience: how experience happens, what it consists of, how the experiencing (perceiving, feeling, thinking) of it occurs, what the sensation of sensing tells us. And we were interested in knowing what actual experiences would take place over the period of time we would be working on the collaboration – what would happen in our respective lives and what would happen between us, in public (as the writing) and in private (as a flourishing friendship)” (n.p.).
77 Hejinian (untitled talk presented in the series “9 Contemporary Poets Read Themselves through Modernism” at Kelly Writers House).


81 Ibid., 321.


83 Samuels, “Eight Justifications,” 103.


85 Ibid.

86 Ibid., 73. Italics and the bracketed word are in the original. The italicized text is quoted from My Life.

87 Ibid., 62.

88 Ibid.

89 Hejinian, My Life (1987), 65.

90 Freitag, “A pause, a rose, something on paper,” 318.

91 Perloff, “‘The Sweet Aftertaste of Artichokes,’” 123.


94 Perloff, “‘The Sweet Aftertaste of Artichokes,’” 124.


See Hejinian’s often humorous observations on literal translations of Russian metaphorical expressions in *Oxota: A Short Russian Novel* (Great Barrington, Mass.: The Figures, 1991) – for example, “Where we say ‘he’s a crook’ they say ‘he’s a corner’” (91). And “Lyosha, I said, please / Explain to me the two avant garde traditions after Mandelstam and Pasternak / With no indolence, he said” (148).

CHAPTER FIVE

INTERSUBJECTIVE HAUNTING:
SELF AND OTHER, PUBLIC AND PRIVATE
IN MEI-MEI BERSSENBRUGGE AND LESLIE SCALAPINO

There has been a gentle exchange of bodies.¹
Lyn Hejinian

It is in the world that we rejoin one another.²
Maurice Merleau-Ponty

The separated being is satisfied, autonomous, and nonetheless
searches after the other with a search that is not incited by the lack
proper to need nor by the memory of a lost good. Such a situation
is language.³
Emmanuel Levinas

This chapter is a continuation and extension of the discussion begun in Chapter Two,
which investigated the nature of the subject and object relationship in the poetry of Mei-mei
Berssenbrugge and Lyn Hejinian. In that chapter, I explored in their works the nature of a non-
dualistic relationship between the self and the objects of its perception. The subjects in their
poems do not act upon passive objects in their field of perception, or assume a colonizing
position in relation to objects understood to exist for one’s use. Instead, a relationship emerges
between subject and object that is more mutually active and interdependent. The perceiving
subjects in their poems acknowledge their shared physical commonality with the not-self, while
simultaneously respecting the separation between self and not-self that is necessary to a
relationship of reciprocity. They recognize that there is a dialogical basis in the act of perception.
Their poetry demonstrates a reciprocal relationship with the objects within the subject’s field of
perception by acknowledging that both are implicated in the act of perceiving. However, the
subject and object’s boundaries are not so blurred that they are in danger of resolving into a
totality. They engage in a dialogical relationship in which the perceiving self acknowledges both
its separateness from the object (the irreconcilability of subject and object into a totality) as well as its commonality with the object (the shared materiality and perceivability of subject and object). Their work acknowledges the mutuality and commonality of subject and object, but not in order to subsume the object into a conceptual whole, since the integrity of both self and object are respected.

The non-dualistic relationship between subject and object that I have described is dialectical. It will be helpful at this stage to reiterate some of the features of the dialectical movement that I have identified in contemporary experimental poetry, since I will be extending this movement to intersubjective encounters, and to the connection between private and public realms of experience. The dialectical relationship is fundamentally dialogical: opposing terms engage in an open-ended and non-resolving conversation. The terms neither nullify one another, nor do they attempt to subsume one another into a totality. Instead, the coexistence of – and dialogue between – contradictory or opposed terms terms multiply the semantic possibilities of the conversation. In this chapter, I will extend the investigation of the subject and object dichotomy to the social dimension by analyzing the dialectical and reciprocal relationship – first, between self and other in the poetry of Berssenbrugge, and second, between the private and public realms in the poetry of Leslie Scalapino.

In the discussion that follows, I will be discussing the dialectical relationship between the following three sets of terms: 1) the relationship between self and other, by which I refer to the experience of one person by another and the patterns and meanings that this experience and relation engenders, 2) the relationship between categories of interiority and exteriority, by which I refer to the relationship between a reductive subjectivity that posits a self incapable of knowing the experience of an other, and an intersubjectivity that acknowledges the commonality of lived
physical experience, and 3) the relationship between public and private realms of experience. The works of Scalapino and Berssenbrugge demonstrate an acute awareness of the philosophical and political implications in the ways in which culture constructs and conceptualizes the relationship between these terms. Their works demonstrate dialogical, interdependent, reciprocal, non-totalizing, and non-resolving relationships among the terms of intersubjective experience.

In her 1978 poetic essay “Kate’s Talk,” Berssenbrugge offers insights into her poetics of experience and reveals the importance of the ethical, sensual, and emotional dimensions of her work. Berssenbrugge is concerned to show the relationship between sensual experience in the world, interactions with persons, and the feeling that attaches to one’s experiences. She begins by locating a moment in one’s present experience “when knowledge in the body starts to cross over into knowledge that you can say,” and describing the richness of this moment’s layers:

I will try to elucidate the feeling of tunings of the richness of the events in your experience, as degrees of meaning of your experience.

I am going to try and do this by creating a patchwork or collages out of words to imitate the experiential patchwork, the patchwork of our senses, and the meaning we attach to those patches, which I will call a feeling of meaning, or in daily life I want to call it a feeling of richness.

For Berssenbrugge, one’s “experiential patchwork,” consists of moments of sensual perception and the emotional significance of this perception, in which emotional significance and meaning become attached to one’s percepts. According to Berssenbrugge, the more closely one’s emotions and the meanings one attaches to experience are in harmony, the more sensually attuned one will be with persons and objects. And this, for Berssenbrugge, is closely related to the experience of generating meaning in poetry:
Is it how close you are to being a creature that enables you to experience with sensuality,

or is it the refinement of a moral sense, so that the person’s feeling and sense of meaning are congruent with each other?

And this is really talking about the way a poem means something.

Berssenbrugge’s own poetry attempts to identify the “patches” of feeling and meaning that coincide and attach to moments of experience, and the way in which experience and knowledge “seem to reveal each other translucently.” And the richness of one’s layers of cognition are for Berssenbrugge intimately related to one’s interactions with persons:

A greater perception is what you can know more of, becoming more open to a richer level of experience,

which is why one’s capacity for awareness is inseparable from being with other people

as if interaction with the person, whether it be in the present or in memory, were a growing point, and direction, the direction towards a perception, twinkling lights below the trees in town, from your vantage point above.

Memories, emotions, and perceptions interact in a subject to produce the “opaqueness” or the “richness of saturation or density in our experience of a moment or of an event.” This richness of subjective experience is multiplied through interactions with others.

The excerpts from “Kate’s Talk” quoted above do not reveal much of the collage effect of experience and time that Berssenbrugge attempts to render in the whole poetic essay. In order to enact the overlapping of perception, memory, feelings, and thoughts, she describes, then interweaves, different moments of complex experience. For example, she juxtaposes the experiencing of hearing a branch scraping against a window with that of hearing “the sound of
bus wheels.” This is followed by the juxtaposition of the experience of seeing a person walking toward one and one’s thoughts and memories of that person:

A person comes to you, while you are thinking. She is there with you in your thought, and she is also struggling to leave her body,

like a patch of the sound of bus wheels next to a branch that is moving back and forth outside your window.

You can’t help seeing sections of wall behind it, as if your memory or your sense of meaning about the person were an embodiment of the person,

so that the end result is that you see through the branch the expanse of wall behind the branch,

when the spray of yellow leaves moves.

One’s actual perception of the approaching person, and one’s whole range of associated thoughts, memories, emotions relating to that person, are inextricably intertwined to create a rich patchwork of experience: one experiences the physical person as well as the opaque cognitive backdrop. Similarly, one might hear a branch scraping against one’s window and have the associated experience of hearing the sound of a bus. A relatively insignificant experience does not take place in a cognitive vacuum, but is accompanied by an inevitable wall of meaning, that is, if one is sufficiently attuned to the richness of experience. In other words, one’s cognitive processes seem inseparable from one’s perceptions: they mutually inform one another, “reveal[ing] each other translucently” and multiplying the meanings that radiate from one’s experience. Berssenbrugge does not treat language, emotions, cognition, and memory as a mediation that is a barrier to a direct experience of reality. Rather, the richness of experience arises from reality, and has its basis in reality, since subjective experience is itself part of that
reality. Furthermore, the richness of experience is positively related to the impermanence of material reality and of lived experience:

Patches of each of these things that you pay attention to, assemble in October light with a richness that comes from the light emitting from each little red box of a deteriorating plant cell.

Perceived reality is evoked here as autumn leaves whose decay is experienced as the color red. The spectacular coloration of leaves in autumn is an apt emblem not only for the richness of experience, but for the impermanent nature that it shares with the perceived world. The semantic richness “comes from the light” that is reflected from each “deteriorating plant cell.” Perception and the objects of perception (whether things or persons) share a basis in materiality as well as an ephemeral nature.

The meanings that one attaches to experiences and feelings generate associated experiences and meanings in one’s memory, which color and transform the object of present experience: “. . . there is a patch of feeling, and patches of the causes of the feeling adjacent to each other, which seem to reveal each other translucently.” Berssenbrugge is not saying, however, that the meanings, categories, and so forth, that we attach to experience are somehow embedded “out there” in the things we perceive. Instead, she emphasizes the material basis of our perception and cognitive processes, which arise from the reality with which we interact, and insists upon the dependence of the richness of experience on the acknowledgment of our experience as well as the objects (and other subjects) experienced as impermanent. To posit subjective experience as a barrier to a more direct communion with the world is to desire an illusory perceptual capture or possession. Indeed, what “prevents your feeling of meaning from
starting to assemble into glowing patches” is the desire for possession and permanence, whether of another person or of time:

> What has this got to do with a feeling of death, that seems to be such a distinct substance?

or in regard to appearances, What is it about another person that you think you have, that you think you can lose?

this may have to do with clinging to an idea about time,

which prevents your feeling of meaning from starting to assemble into glowing patches.

In Berssenbrugge’s poetics, one’s interactions with others enhances one’s “capacity for awareness.” This capacity is stalled by the desire not to lose one’s experience or the objects of one’s experience to time and impermanence. The desire to cling to one's ideas about others and to memories mutes the ongoing and continual process of creating meaning from experience. The belief that knowledge can endow persons and objects with inherent qualities and stable meanings, and thus can fix them outside of time, creates the rhetoric of history and impoverishes experience.

For Berssenbrugge, the plurality of a subject’s experience does not require bringing objects or persons into a totalized system or subsuming them into the scope of one’s own subjectivity. In her poem “Irises,” Berssenbrugge acknowledges the coexistence of two mutually opposing yet interacting states, in which 1) each being is integral to itself, and 2) social interaction allows the transcendence of the separateness of individual beings without annihilating the integrity of the other:

> In a world which transcends the confines of her transient being, she can reach and bring existences within the compass of her life, without annulling
their transcendence.\(^6\)

This philosophical and poetic statement contains three occurrences of the prefix “trans-,” suggesting motion across or beyond, and change. Such a world of relationships posited in these lines cannot be static because of the constant motion between contradictory realms: “transience” is dependently linked with “transcendence.” Also, “transcendence” is identified with two opposing ideas: the separation of the individual being and going beyond that separation to “bring existences within the compass” of one’s being. In this world, the transcendence of individual being is maintained without being annulled, and the transcendence of the confines of individual being is facilitated. The second section of “Irides” opens with the following statement:

> This person is incorrigible in how things seem to her, that the body is responsible for actions we share with brutes, for example, reflex, light reflected from a wolf in the eyes of a sheep exciting flight.\(^7\)

In the first clause, an unidentified person (an other) stubbornly clings to her own particular way of perceiving the world. Her subjectivity is a unique perspective, transcendent in its alterity. The second clause, which does not syntactically follow the first, describes the common emotional basis that humans share with animals. Theses two ideas are logically linked in opposition, which Berssenbrugge underscores by the syntactical warp between the two clauses. However, the ideas are engaged in a dialogue with one another without argument, but simply as realms revolving in separate orbits around a common center. Uniqueness of beings and commonality among beings do not annihilate one another. The end of this section contains a statement of the coexistence of contradictory realms, and the need for a mind sufficiently “wispy” to embody such a philosophy:

> . . . The more wispy the mind, as at the edge of the greenness
of a dogwood blossom, the more fit to catch sight of such an invisible entity as “parallel,” its distinct substance capable of having all mountains thought away and still being around.8

Wispy edges do not form discrete boundaries; “wispy” cognition would presumably not tend to conceive discrete boundaries. Such thinking would therefore be less susceptible to absolutist thinking and more likely to “catch sight of” or accept the coexistence and dialogue between opposing terms. The example that Berssenbrugge gives is a paraphrase of the ancient Buddhist parable regarding the stages in the journey toward enlightenment.9 First, one experiences objects without really considering their basis in a mediating perception. Then, when one is enlightened, one’s previous naivete about the world is disillusioned, and one becomes aware of the illusionary constructs that we create when we experience, and of the radical impermanence of all. Finally, one is able simultaneously to comprehend both the materiality of the world (mountains are once again mountains) and the illusion of a direct, unmediated experience of it. One is able to accept the coexistence of both perspectives.

The phenomenological philosophy of Maurice Merleau-Ponty substantially informed the discussion in Chapter Two of the poetic challenge to cultural survivals of the Cartesian subject-object dualism. Merleau-Ponty’s critique of this dualism urges a return from the objectification of the world by an “information machine,” “to the ‘there is’ which underlies” our thought, to “the soil of the sensible and opened world such as it is in our life and for our body.”10 He advocates a return to the sensual world that forms the basis for a commonality of existence, and an embodied and reciprocal participation in the act of perception. Merleau-Ponty extends (and complicates) the subject and object problematic to the realm of intersubjectivity, in which he interrogates the conceptual boundaries that have effected a schism between self and other: “[A]ssociated bodies
must be brought forward along with my body – the ‘others,’ not merely as my congeners, as the zoologist says, but the others who haunt me and whom I haunt; the ‘others’ along with whom I haunt a single, present, and actual Being . . .”

Merleau-Ponty always returns to a profoundly embodied conception of self and other as a prerequisite – a grounding – for the “associat[ion] of bodies” in which subject and other haunt one another in a way that goes beyond the mere recognition of similarity of one’s individual perceptions of the world. For Merleau-Ponty, there is an interpenetration of beings that more profoundly connects humans than the fact of our biological relatedness. Merleau-Ponty might challenge the insistence of some cognitive scientists and philosophers on the essentialist position regarding qualia, which is to say the irreducible quality of subjective experience, which cognitive philosopher David Chalmers calls the “hard problem” of current cognitive philosophy. To privilege individual subjective experience at the expense of the commonality of experience (or vice versa, for that matter) is a mistake, for both are necessary and interdependent facts of existence:

I can count on what I see, which is in close correspondence with what the other sees (everything attests to this, in fact: we really do see the same thing and the thing itself) – and yet at the same time I never rejoin the other’s lived experience. It is in the world that we rejoin one another. Every attempt to reinstate the illusion of the “thing itself” is in fact an attempt to return to my imperialism and to the value of my thing. Therefore it does not bring us out of solipsism: it is a new proof of solipsism.12

Merleau-Ponty addresses the problem of the imperialistic ego by positing a commonality of being in the world that nonetheless maintains the otherness of the object by implicating it in the act of experience. However, it is another important philosopher in the phenomenological tradition, Emmanuel Levinas, who more thoroughly complicates and critiques the relationship between self and other. Levinas’ starting point in his philosophy is the alterity of subjectivity,
while Merleau-Ponty emphasizes the “flesh” of the world that is the shared being and experience of self and not-self. However, this difference does not alter their usefulness in theorizing a challenge to dualistic thought through the non-resolving dialogue between contradictory terms. As we shall see, Levinas each also posits dialogical movement between the alterity of the individual subjectivity and the commonality of the social experience, and he shares with Merleau-Ponty the important characteristics of the radical dialectics I am proposing in this work. Also, the vocabulary and ideas that preoccupy Berssenbrugge in her writings reveal a strong affinity with the thought of Levinas.

Levinas’ work is based on what he calls an ethics of the “presence of the Other”: the radical alterity and exteriority of the other in relation to a subject. Levinas designates this alterity a transcendence of the other. The transcendental sovereignty of the other presupposes the irreducible difference or separateness of the other in relation to the self, and is the basis for Levinas’ concept of infinity in human relations. For Levinas, the infinite is necessarily achieved in the presentation of the other, which exceeds any concept or idea that the self may have about the other: “The strangeness of the Other, his irreducibility to the I, to my thoughts, and my possessions, is precisely accomplished as a calling into question of my spontaneity, as ethics.”

The terms of self and other in Levinas’ ethics do not resolve into a simple opposition that can be encompassed in a dialectics of totality:

Neither the separated being nor the infinite being is produced as an antithetical term. The interiority that ensures separation (but not as an abstract rejoinder to the notion of relation) must produce a being absolutely closed over upon itself, not deriving its isolation dialectically from its opposition to the Other. And this closeness must not prevent egress from interiority, so that exteriority could speak to it, reveal itself to it, in an unforeseeable movement which the isolation of the separated being could not provoke by simple contrast.
On the one hand, Levinas states, otherness is defined as exteriority and alterity. There is a partition between beings that is a condition of the uniqueness of subjective experience, the “something that it is like to be” a particular being. The otherness of the other is unable to be encompassed either epistemologically or ontologically by one’s self, for there is always an overflow in the presentation of the other, in which an “inexhaustible surplus of infinity overflows the actuality of consciousness” of one’s self. This infinity stems from the radical alterity of the consciousness of the other – from the ultimate inaccessibility and incommensurability of an other’s subjectivity from one’s own perspective: “[t]he presence of a being not entering into, but overflowing, the sphere of the same determines its ‘status’ as infinite.”

Levinas expresses the tension between the utter closedness of the other and the egress from the other’s interiority that allows his or her presence to be experienced and appreciated by one’s self, as a paradox:

. . . the knower neither participates in nor unites with the known being. The relation of truth thus involves a dimension of interiority, a psychism, in which the metaphysician, while being in relation with the Metaphysical, maintains himself apart. But we have also indicated that this relation of truth, which at the same time spans and does not span the distance – does not form a totality with the “other shore” – rests on language . . . .

The condition of absolute separateness between self and other and the simultaneous condition of communication between them is a paradox in which “[i]n the separated being the door to the outside must hence be at the same time open and closed.” It is language, aboriginally communicative, that bridges the chasm between self and other and that allows a glimpse of the infinity presented by the other in a face-to-face encounter.

The paradox of coexisting and contradictory conditions that Levinas describes in interpersonal encounters is reminiscent of Berssenbrugge statement of the simultaneous transcendence of beings confined to their own subjectivities and being able to “reach / and bring
existences within the compass of her life, without annulling / their transcendence.” The “wispy”
quality of mind allows one to bring into the range of one’s life the lives of “parallel” beings,
which although “invisible entit[ies]” in their alterity, can yet be experienced and can enrich one’s
perception of the world: the mountains can be “thought away” while at the same time “still being
around.” As we will see, Berssenbrugge uses the structure of the paradox in other works to break
the hierarchicalizing and totalizing structure of dualistic terms.

Berssenbrugge’s poem “Empathy” offers a nonlinear and poetic philosophical parsing
of an intersubjective encounter (see Figure 7). In this poem, Berssenbrugge attempts a poetic
enactment of communication between a self and other. The encounter is rife with paradoxes and
complexities. As Berssenbrugge makes clear in her prefatory statement to the poem, what is
casually or unconsciously communicated (“the insignificant or everyday gesture,” and “the error
and tension” in communication) is just as important, if not more, than what is overtly conveyed.

As one proceeds through the poem, it becomes apparent that the concepts of intelligibility
and unintelligibility are being contrasted. On the one hand, communication between the female
subject and the male other is full of uncertainties: the subject cannot capture what necessarily
overflows the means of capturing it. The “state of confusion” in their communion “is never made
comprehensible by being given a plot.” Their communication is pervaded by a “feeling of
mysteriousness” and “problem[s] of interpretation.” Their “speech and thought” are like a
“hysterical question” that is never resolved despite attempts to construct them rhetorically. Their
speech is also “a constant notation of parallel streams of thought and observations,” parallel lines
that never meet despite “her feeling of identifying with him.”

The uncertainty in communication includes the subject’s knowledge of herself, for “the
innermost nature of her wishes is as much known and unknown to them as the reality of the
external world. / It is as incompletely presented by what she can see as is the external world / by
communication with someone she wishes for.” The subject and the other are “in the dark,” both
literally and figuratively.

On the other hand, there is in a real sense communication taking place, oral expression
that has meaning, however plagued with mysteries and uncertainties, between the interlocutors.
Berssenbrugge describes communication as being subject to all the transiencies and instabilities
of matter and being, but it is “a starting point for uncovering a story through translation from
wish into desire.”

Paradoxical formulations pervade “Empathy” and contribute to the rejection of a
hierarchical formulation in which one term might enjoy precedence over the other. The
paradoxes concern the subject’s communication with an other, which is marked by a tension
between two tendencies. First, the subject encountering and interacting with an other experiences
the limitations of its own consciousness to totalize and assimilate the presence and
communication of that other into one’s own subjective domain. That subject acknowledges the
“incomplete present[ation]” of the “external world,” including the consciousness of an other, to
one’s senses. On the other hand, knowing these limitations and illusions, the subject still desires
to be connected and to identify with an other, and to “make meanings stick,” to find a plot within
the “state of confusion.” In other words, “[t]he speaking becomes fixed, although there is no such
thing as repetition.” Although speech events can never be exactly repeated because they are
temporal events in a constantly changing scenario, in another, more practical sense, speaking can
become fixed by “uncovering a story” or tapping into familiar plots, as one translates “from wish
into desire.”
The subject accepts her belief of the other’s communication, but doesn’t feel the need to prove the practical veracity of what he presents to her, since with enough repetitions of actions and words, one comes to accept certain patterns: “an appearance in the dark will not deceive after enough appearances / and everywhere, sooner or later, there will be a hint of a tree or space above a lake.” Despite the mysterious uncertainty of communication, one does in a sense come to know an other through “enough appearances” in the darkness of that mystery, for “everyday gestures or tensions accrete an intimacy she can recognize.”

In another paradoxical formulation, Berssenbrugge writes that speech is “a kind of oral thought at once open and precise.” This wording strikingly recalls Levinas’ metaphor for his paradoxical state of the opposed and coexisting terms of the separated being still able to communicate with an other: the door separating interior from exterior is both open and closed at the same time. According to Berssenbrugge, speech as communication with an other is both open, that is, open to a multitude of meanings, and precise in the practical sense of being able to convey useful information.

The lighting in the settings of each of the three parts of “Empathy” also contributes to the importance of nonresolvable terms in dialogue with one another. In the first section, the female subject (who is sometimes referred to in the first person, and sometimes in the third person) is walking along a dark path with a male companion. Darkness, however, is not a simple metaphor for the uncertainty of their communication. It is not a one-sided symbol for the “state of confusion” that is “never made comprehensible by being given a plot.” The connectedness of subject and other is not one-sidedly reduced to an artificial plot imposed on their relations. It also “reveals ways in which she construes what she perceives / according to an internal connection which will announce its conflict in the plot.” The language that gives meaning to experience
arises from the relation between self and other. As Berssenbrugge states in “Kate’s Talk,” the other enriches one’s experience: “one’s capacity for awareness is inseparable from being with other people / as if interaction with the person . . . were a growing point, and direction, the direction towards a perception.” Similarly, the dark setting of the first section is double-edged: even in the “pitch dark,” things are still visible, such as the roses and the “road through the woods.” Despite the “confusion” and “mysteriousness,” it is also true that “an appearance in the dark will not deceive after enough appearances.” The northern lights that appear during their walk are similarly two-sided: they can simultaneously be understood to a degree, and also epistemologically opaque. Although its “circumference is inferrable,” its other, more remote, spatial and temporal dimensions remain unknown and perhaps unknowable: its “outermost region lacks any known form of registration, / such as before that and before that.”

By contrast to the dark and intimate road in the woods, full of mysteriousness and confusion (in spite of the assertion of a degree of certainty and visibility), the stadium in the second section is a brightly lit public space. From the subject’s perspective, the stadium is concave, yet it resembles objects that are convex, from the normal perspective of a subject: a honeycomb and a geodesic dome. Thus the stadium has one shape from the subject’s perspective, but it metanymically resembles other objects with the opposite kind of shape, turned inside out. In details such as the shape of the stadium, Berssenbrugge introduces a complexity and instability regarding the nature of objects and relationships.

In the stadium, the subject and her companion sing a song, the simple certitude of whose antiphonal statements are betrayed by an underlying feeling of instability and even hysteria. The ordinary order of question (where are you?) and response (I am here) are reversed, so that the declarative statement (“I am here”) is followed by the question that would logically precede it
(“where are you”). Although the brightly lit setting might imply a greater certitude regarding the relations and communication between self and other, instead that certitude is everywhere destabilized. In the first place, it is ironic that in a brightly-lit place one singer asks the location of the other. The question has shades of the metaphysical as well: the question of the individual’s location in space is also a question of the autonomy of the individual, her degree of separateness from or identity with an other: “[I]n light so bright she sees her eyelash as a golden line reflecting on the inside of her sunglasses,” she feels “a sense of scandal at invoking a real person” with whom she would feel empathy. Also, there is “a problem of interpretation” in speculative thought. Despite the illumination, things are not so clear, and repetition of any event is an illusion: there’s “no such thing.” The flip side of this negativity also has its place in the oddly unilluminating bright light of the stadium. Stories are, after all, uncovered; thought is, after all, found to be precise.

In the final section, a contrast is presented between light that is fragmented and intervallic (a “time lapse photograph of lightning” and “an interval of colored light on the plain”) and a more steady and focused light illuminating the parts of objects or of the self (“real and constant luminosity of the parts”). The tension between the two kinds of light reflects the tension between two positions. On the one hand, the desire for a definitive understanding of self and other, in which “everyday gestures or tensions accrete an intimacy she can recognize,” for attaining empathy for an other “for what is good in life / from his point of view,” for a real or whole self with an essential core that can achieve communion with an other (“a real self who will remain forever in the emotion of a necessary or real person”). On the other hand, the recognition that wholeness, like “those collages that verge on trompe l’oeil,” is discovered to be illusory on close examination.
Desire for communion with and empathy for the other constitute the fulcrum for Berssenbrugge’s complex drama of the infinite signification that desire engenders and the rhetorical limitations in our constant plotting of time and event. The plotting of a series of events in a story is roughly comparable to the song, with its oversimplified antiphonal refrain. The song is contrasted with the “presentation of the song,” the actual performance of the song by the two persons. The former is marked by artifice; it is “a starting point for uncovering a story through translation from wish into desire.” It is not, however, the same as desire, which is marked by an infinity of signification, the basis of which is the linguistic communication between the two singers. In the words of Levinas, “the essence of language is the relation with the Other,” and “[s]ignification is infinity, that is, the Other. . . .” [207] For Levinas, as for Berssenbrugge, language is enacted not in an individual consciousness, but emerges from the relation between a subject and an other, and that places the subject in question: “Language is not enacted within a consciousness; it comes to me from the Other and reverberates in consciousness by putting it in question. This event is irreducible to consciousness, where everything comes about from within . . .”[22] The desire of Levinas’ ethics is one that is “for a land foreign to every nature,” (34) that is, for the other. Further, “It is a desire that can not be satisfied. . . . The metaphysical desire has another intention; it desires beyond everything that can simply complete it. It is like goodness – the Desired does not fulfill it, but deepens it.”[23] For Berssenbrugge, finding a way to empathize with an other, to feel “empathy for what is good in life / from his point of view,” means finding a way that does not totalize self and other into a unity in which each gains identity from its opposition to the other, or when one’s desire to merge with an other might produce the undesired effect of “construct[ing] a rhetorical story again.” Rather, “her feeling of identifying with him is like a quick flash or a signal”; it, too, is fleeting, impermanent. The rich meaning generated in an
encounter with an other is “never made comprehensible,” with the conceptual strategies of hierarchical structures, since “at each instant [the other] overflows the idea a thought would carry away from it. It is therefore to receive from the Other beyond the capacity of the I, which means exactly: to have the idea of infinity.” This generous overflow of signification is not possible to be contained by conceptualizations or identifications, which are impermanent, or comprehended by the experiencing self. Instead, this surplus of meaning arises from the intersubjective encounter.

In keeping with the poem’s frequent testimony to both the uncertainty of communication and the conviction that it has taken place, Berssenbrugge ends with a statement that suggests the coexistence of terms at the opposite ends of the spectrum of communication and meaning. There is no hierarchy of one term over the other, no subsuming of one term by the other. There is also no “happy medium” of these opposed realms, no gray area in which the extreme ends of the terms are annulled and resolve into a compromise position in which the terms blur to the point of relative indistinguishability. Instead, Berssenbrugge offers an acknowledgement that communication and meaning are both real in a practical sense, and illusory in the sense of being eternal or stable, or of having an essential quality inhering in the what one believes one means. The terms remain opposed yet in dialogue and unresolved:

Be that as it may, real and constant luminosity of the parts can create a real self who will remain forever in the emotion of a necessary or real person. To deny this is to deny the struggle to make certain meanings stick.

The terms do not form a totality. Instead, they generate an infinity of signification and creation through their ceaseless dialogue. As Levinas has it, “A relation whose terms do not form a totality can hence be produced within the general economy of being only as proceeding from the
I to the other, as a face to face, as delineating a distance in depth – that of conversation, of
goodness, of Desire.”

The terms of the relation are dialectically necessary for one another, but
they can never contain one another and do not unite into a totality. They are, first of all, not
discrete realms with certain boundaries, and moreover, they overflow one another. They are in
constant and unresolved dialogue with one another through the very language with which self
and other communicate.

Much of Berssenbrugge’s work returns again and again to concerns of the perception and
consciousness of a subject, often invoking memories or encounters with others to complicate her
eliptical description of being in the world. Although her poetics of intersubjectivity bears some
remarkable similarities with the ethical philosophy of Levinas, it also suggests a more feminist
version of Levinas, who makes of the feminine other an instrumental being, providing a
welcoming presence in the home for the male, yet herself homeless; providing the male with the
face-to-face encounter, yet herself serving only to assist the male towards his own
transcendence.

Berssenbrugge seems always to be aware of relations of power between male
and female, and of the feminine presence of the subject in many of her poems, as she does in
“Empathy.”

Berssenbrugge complicates rigid divisions and dualistic relations between subject and
object, and between inside and outside realms ingrained in much of Western culture; Scalapino
also subjects such dualisms to a radical critique, as we discovered with temporal hierarchies in
Chapter Four. Their poetry is very different in from one another in formal innovation. Both
contain disjunctions, but Berssenbrugge’s work is by far more coherent syntactically, at least
when compared with Scalapino’s later work. What they share, however, is of greater significance
than any stylistic differences. Both Berssenbrugge and Scalapino attempt not simply to shake up
or eradicate categories of certainty or stability, or any term that has historically gained transcendental status in the Western philosophical tradition. Instead, they attempt to reinstate the submerged term and place it in a continually circulating conversation with the opposed term, not so that they mutually determine or identify one another, but so that a surplus of signification is generated in the encounter.

One of Scalapino’s primary intentions in both her critical work and her poetry is to complicate traditionally dualistic relations between subject and object, public and private realms of experience, and individual and social experience. She is concerned not only with the moment of perception of a biologically discrete individual person, and thus with an atomistic or individualistic view of humans, but also with the social aspect of perception, with the ways in which interior and exterior, self and other, individual and crowd, are conceptualized and hierarchicalized. She attempts to show that the doctrine of separate public and private or subjective and objective realms is illusory, a product of dualistic mental categorizations. Considering what scientists are discovering about the multi-leveled and complexly interlinked relationship between self and not-self, and between nature and nurture in the formation of selfhood, such a doctrine is neither inevitable nor realistic. For Scalapino, the public realm has suffered because it is constructed as an arena where dissent is relegated to individual or private experience. And in leftist thought, individual experience has generally suffered, for to set up a hierarchicalized dichotomy at the expense of the private, individual experience is to define a priori that life narrative or personal experience as being other than investigative or provisional. Experience in and of itself is not authoritative; it is how one interprets experience that gives it a particular philosophical or political slant.
Scalapino privileges neither factor in a dualistic equation, which would reinstate the dualism, with the relationship of the factors in terms of power or primacy merely inverted, yet once again in an inverse relation to one another. Instead, in her poetry she shows these dichotomous constructions to be conceptual categories, and profoundly questions rigid boundaries between public and private, subject and object, self and other, boundaries that are often construed as natural, that is, as existing outside the mental categories that our brains construct. Her project of recovery involves the rescue of both the subjective and the objective and the demonstration of their interrelationship on different levels of truth, with the resulting contradictions allowed to stand instead of being reasoned into a more monolithic facticity.

Because of the conventional syntax and thematic coherence that Scalapino’s early work often exhibits, at least one critic – Marjorie Perloff – has interpreted her work as being descriptive and emblematic of an interior response to exterior reality. In *Seamless Antilandscape*, Scalapino challenges Perloff’s analysis of a particular poem in her poetic sequence *hmmmm*. Perloff assumes that Scalapino’s project is to write an “emblem of the postmodern metropolis,” and sees in the “just barely controlled hysteria of *hmmmm*” an unintentional effect or tone of its representation of the alienating influence of social interaction within urban public space. In the poem the speaker is seated next to a woman, who, when the bus lurches, grabs the speaker’s arm, pinching it so hard the the pain lasts two or three minutes. The speaker imagines that the woman was saying to her, “I wish that I could make you yelp just once.” But to Scalapino, “If it’s seen as unintentional[,] that isn’t having the view that perspective itself is impermanence. Or that view (or perspective) is harder to see.” In other words, if one views Scalapino’s work as having an unintentional tone – of “barely-controlled hysteria,” for example, describing scenes or events in a way that renders them emblematic, say, of the urban postmodern condition of despair or angst,
that treats them from the viewpoint of a socially constructed given – then one misunderstands or misses her critique of perspective itself as constructed and thus radically impermanent. One instead recognizes only the superficial resemblance of Scalapino’s text to works that attempt a mimetic representation of an alienating cityscape in which one might be paranoid regarding an innocent mishap with a stranger on a bus. Such an interpretation will see perspective and perception in the text as essentialized, as a product of an individual recreating faithfully a scene descriptive of social habit instead of a “breakdown of prior constructions of events.”28 In taking such an approach to Scalapino’s work, Perloff brings perspective, the “I’s” perception & emotion, to the foreground. She interprets the appearance of seamlessness as an indication that the work must be read as an emblematic whole, albeit an imaginatively constructed or surreal whole, but nonetheless an emblematic unit conveying a certain meaning emanating from a single consciousness. What is “harder to see” is the critique behind the only apparently seamless narrative. Scalapino writes that

Tone in *hmmmm* was actually very intentional – what is laughing? The tone gives the reader a surface that is non-readable – disingenuous and facetious and sincerity-as-vulnerable really being exactly the same. So it takes ‘one’ outside of socially controlled exchange. In other words, to call this surface ‘hysteria’ is to limit it by regarding it as nonintentional, which intention was to cut past that limiting itself, that barrier of social definition (that is acting as a lid of violence) itself.29

Scalapino’s intention is to question perception as having inherent qualities or existence. She seeks to lay open to question all conventional categories, and indeed, perspective itself, to reveal their structure as convention, and thus subject to impermanence and revision. Her intention is also to attempt to recover a “public world” in which conventional descriptions and divisions of experience are demonstrated and imitated, with the relationships between their hierarchical
arrangements revealed, but not emblematized, dramatized, or psychologized. In Scalapino’s view the latter encourage the hierarchical division between the public and the private, with the privileging of a (conservative) public world, and dissension from that world relegated to the realm of individual experience:

A characteristic of conservative thought is iteration of tradition for its own sake, valuable in that it is that. Social conditioning is transcended – there is no “other” – rather than perspective itself being seen being created. Without the conception of the social as phenomenological, actions that are rebellious in response to whatever conditions, are seen as ‘personal’ merely. Articulating outside’s warp imitated as being one – is interpreted as one’s being unable to comprehend, couldn’t put things together. A syntax that is this dismemberment will be incomprehensible in the framework of conservative thought (one characteristic of which: conception of the past as entity to be preserved as being the present). In terms of a conservative framework, ‘dis-location’ is seen as merely personal aberration or failure to comprehend the whole, rather than strategic and phenomenological.30

Scalapino challenges what she sees as conservative trends in experimental poetics, and claims that a “polemics-based” poetics (such as Bob Perelman’s) betrays its conservative gesture in its suppression of the constructed nature of conceptual categories.

Phenomenological ‘dis-location’ in writing is strategic and specific, detail arising from or noting social conditions or background; which conservative ideology regards as without transcendence, transient. Yet such transience is change as writing’s subject (in avant garde or radical practices).

The view of aberration as failure is an exclusion that is an action, rendering what it defines as minor to the condition of nonexistent or irrelevant ‘over-time.” (As if there were an ‘objective’ cultural basis that becomes or is ‘history.’)

Polemics was to be demonstration (that was the intention) . . . [but] polemics-based writing merely imposes point of view and suppresses demonstration.31

And later, still critiquing Perelman:
The notion of defining ‘the life’ narrative as inferior is also defining what ‘the life’ is. Defining is conceptualizing that separation of the public and ‘interior’ as power.\textsuperscript{32}

That is, to define the experiential narrative, in which one’s inner thoughts and emotions are presented, is to hierarchicalize the private and the public. It is to conceptualize “that separation of the public and ‘interior’ as power.” Perelman promotes a kind of social power or efficacy of poetry. However, the dichotomizing of the private and public or social institutes a relation of power between the two, since it is a hierarchical relation with the private denigrated. Instead, she claims that writing, acknowledged as narrative, permits scrutiny of itself, and that leftist thought that would denigrate the experiential basis of writing actually betrays a more conservative position.

Recovery (vis-à-vis the soteriological aims of Nāgārjuna’s philosophy) is also one of Scalapino’s central themes: she suggests that because of the predominant Western dualistic way of viewing self and other, inside and outside, we often tend to privilege the expression of individual perception and perspective. This privileging tends to essentialize and reify individual values, conceptual constructs, and linguistic expression, and to forge, with a sense of inevitability, their direct correspondence with a reality outside the individual self. Her recovery of the public world occurs in that relativizing of individual experience and common social existence, in realizing and scrutinizing, as fully as possible, the ways in which we tend to essentialize conventional reality and linguistic expression in both public and private realms. Thus her recovery of the public does not occur at the expense of individual expression. For, as she makes clear, poetry that uses the conventional in order to critique itself as conventional construction comes closest to “Nāgārjuna’s ‘logic,’” which “deconstructs rationality with
observation and phenomena (‘single’ particularities, which have no basis in that they have no individual existence). That is, observation is deconstructed by admitting of the ‘subjective,’ its own lack of basis; therefore it critiques itself.”33 The conventional is not denigrated, but is instead an indispensable interlocutor in the conversation of self-critique. Without the expression of nominal and conventional categories and subjective judgment, there would be no culture; at the same time, without their expression, they could not be placed under investigation as illusory.

In her essay “Signifyin(g) on Stein: The Revisionist Poetics of Harryette Mullen and Leslie Scalapino,” Elizabeth Frost compellingly demonstrates how Scalapino writes through Stein, in sympathy with her project to eroticize language, yet also insists that such language not be relegated to a private, encoded, and symbolically opaque or closed sphere of essentially private association. Instead, poetic language must also open the doors of the erotic to issues of the political and economic implications of the erotic. Intimate relationships constantly shift from private expression to a larger context of socio-economic relations. Scalapino thus addresses “the pressing question of how individual desire is situated within existing social categories.”34 In poems such as way,

Scalapino opens Stein’s’ erotic discourse . . . to the public sphere, one that women have frequently been excluded from, and that women poets, in efforts to combat the lack of value placed on affect and the “personal,” have sometimes deliberately shunned. . . . For Scalapino, separation of the erotic from socially engaged writing is neither efficacious nor desirable in any way: “If eroticism is eliminated, that leaves only that social context, which has ‘seen’ it as sexist; there is no area existing for apprehension or change. We are split from ourselves.”35

Thus in Scalapino’s poetics the erotic is not excluded from the public sphere, but instead the two are shown to be interrelated and interdependent.
Recent studies in cognitive science also point to ways in which categories of individual and the social are intertwined and not separable into discrete categories. According to Antonio Damasio, for example, it is reductive and dualistic to believe, as some scientists do, “that the mind can be fully explained solely in terms of brain events, leaving by the wayside the rest of the organism and the surrounding physical and social environment – and also leaving out the fact that part of the environment is itself a product of the organism’s preceding actions.” Moreover, there is a “powerful connection” between “social phenomena [and] biological phenomena,” for although

conventions and rules need be transmitted only through education and socialization, from generation to generation, I suspect that the neural representations of the wisdom [that education and socialization] embody, and of the means to implement that wisdom, are inextricably linked to the neural representation of innate regulatory biological processes. I see a ‘trail’ connecting the brain that represents one, to the brain that represents the other. Naturally, that trail is made up of connections among neurons.

Thus, if our brains represent and interconnect the innate and the social so that they cannot be discretely separated, then Scalapino’s poetics corresponds with this emerging consensus among neuroscientists regarding the inextricable relatedness between the biological individual and the social, and between the private and the public. Stein’s poetics, in many ways in opposition to, and yet developing within and in concert with a bourgeois democracy, has recently been criticized for giving preference to the private, encoded symbolic expression, over and integration of the private and public to show ways in which they represent the two sides of the same ultimately political and economic coin. To ignore or repress the collective implications of private acts and expression is to separate dualistically and artificially spheres of activity and to ignore their interrelatedness. Scalapino’s recovery of the public consists in allowing private, individual experience, and the structures of collective and cultural influences, to spill over into one another,
revealing their intrinsically enmeshed involvement, and the fallacy of their relationship as separate entities. In fact, as she demonstrates, the spheres are contained within one another, despite the potential for the perceptual and conceptual illusions of their discrete qualities.

In Chapter Four, I referred to some words by Scalapino in which she quotes Giorgio Agamben, an Italian philosopher who has been influential in her project of the recovery of experience: “For just as modern man has been deprived of his biography, his experience has likewise been expropriated.” The inner impoverishment of human experience in the West “does not mean that today there are no more experiences,” but that “they are enacted outside the individual,” who “merely observes them.” Scalapino’s work also investigates the impoverishment of the outer, or public realm of experience, the loss of the feeling of interconnectedness, as “bum series” makes clear and attempts to remedy.

Agamben points to the lamentable indistinguishability of the inner and outer, and of inclusion and exclusion. He means that when the fact of existence – the biological fact of life – begins to coincide with the political realm, . . . exclusion and inclusion, outside and inside . . . enter into a zone of irreducible indistinction. At once excluding bare life from and capturing it within the political order, the state of exception actually constituted, in its very separateness, the hidden foundation on which the entire political system rested.

For Agamben, this political state represents a “radical crisis” in which the “limit figure” (the bum in Scalapino’s way, for example, discussed in Chapter Four) embodies the conflation of “membership and inclusion, . . . what is outside and what is inside, . . . exception and rule.” The homeless man in “bum series” is “homo sacer,” the sacred man “who,” as Agamben formulates the status of such banished beings, “may be killed and yet not sacrificed.” Sacred life may not be sacrificed, but is expendable, and may be killed without a homicide having taken place. The
community has effectively banned the homeless man from participation in its political life, and he dies as a result of his exclusion into the outer limits of the community, exposed to the outside elements, where he perishes from the cold. The principle of the sacredness of life in such a community is a hypocrisy, since the sacredness of the bum’s life does not prevent him from dying of his banishment to the fringes of the community: an exclusion that is, as Agamben demonstrates, simultaneously an inclusion, since all “bare life” is subsumed within the sovereign power of the state. Scalapino’s poem renders the bum, invisible within the cityscape to the point that he may freeze to death without collective responsibility or guilt, visible yet not romanticized, and his exclusion by inclusion becomes painfully obvious. Furthermore, her interweaving of the interior and the exterior takes place on both an epistemological level and a political level, and signifies not a crisis but a middle way that recognizes the complex relationship between exterior and interior, public and private, and, for that matter, the “inseparable dimensions of all experience.”

It is important to distinguish what Scalapino means when she refers to inside and outside. When she refers to interior experience, she is not referring to inclusion within a public or political realm or power, and when she refers to exterior experience, she is not referring to exclusion from that realm. Therefore, Agamben’s regrettable blurring of boundaries between material life, and the tendency of the state to subsume that life (thus including life in order to exclude it), is different from Scalapino’s more utopian blurring of boundaries between individual, private experience and public, collective experience. For Scalapino, the public realm is not necessarily identified with the state. In a more liberatory community, she implies, public life would not be a static, discrete category, but a fluid one. Moreover, public and private realms would be interpenetrating and interdependent and not rigidly defined and exclusive.
Let us now return to the analysis of *New Time* begun in Chapter Four, in order to see how Scalapino complicates notions of inner and outer, public and private. A useful exercise in reading (and struggling to make meaning from) Scalapino’s *New Time* is to trace the multiple entries of an image or word – the different contexts in which it appears. It proves exceedingly difficult, however, to consider a word, theme, or phrase in isolation. One feels pulled toward a more relational and ever-expanding investigation, a sort of spreading from each (muddy) center, each of which changes slightly or radically the meaning suggested by the previous context of the word. Thus assertions in the poem are subsequently challenged or turned on their heads. Also, various themes that appear are continually recombined in subsequent segments of the sequence, in kaleidoscopically shifting patterns. The effect of the whole is inconclusiveness of position, blurred boundaries between dualisms, and a sense of time that resists structured chronology. The process simply does not lend itself to thematic or climactic development. The words and themes exist dependent upon one another, yet refuse to fix each other’s meanings, so that the interpretation always remains slippery and evasive, resisting the normative, conventional relations or attributions of causality that shape a narrative into a psychological drama, and that assume a transparency of the act of writing or the act of reading:

As written text (of *New Time*): the text is phrases separated by dashes which simultaneously relate and dis-connect (also, the phrases are simultaneously unrelated). The phrases are ‘as’ (the motion of?–by being separated, ‘other than’) ‘being in the place of’–freezing-red-sky-dusk-that-is-dawn. There is no relation ‘outside.’ At all. 46

The phrases are simultaneously related (in one’s mind) and unrelated (“outside”). There is a neuroscientific hypothesis about the human conceptualization of time as an internally regulated measuring stick, a kind of internal clock that we use to posit relationships between events.
According to this theory, because these timing mechanisms and processes occur at an unconscious level, it is very easy to take our subjective experience of time as an organizer of events into hierarchies and causalities as natural and inevitable instead of mediated by internal events within our physical bodies and thus first and foremost, embodied and constructed, not corresponding to any relationships “out there.” The disjunctiveness of Scalapino’s text attempts to jolt us into an awareness of the continual conceptual processes that mediate our experience.

One might even say that such an exceedingly complex system of recurring words and contextual interrelatedness discourages such an exercise as the isolation of one word, since the reader feels pulled to follow up on surrounding words and the various contexts in which they occur, ad infinitum. Indeed, this is part of the pleasure of the text, the never-ending series, the resistance to completion, the free-floating series of investigations that lead, as they resist chronology and hierarchy, to other investigations. Themes such as “exhaustion” or “small jobs” or “poverty” or “snow” arise and recur throughout the text, just as in one’s life they occur and recur in various context – in events, in thoughts, and in writing. A word or theme occurs, and in subsequent repetitions becomes enmeshed contextually with other recurring words, confounding a sense of logical development, yet introducing a sense of pleasure in the continuity of the flow of the series.

It is impossible adequately to represent how the whole works through this isolation. Isolating a theme in New Time as it occurs over many pages artificially removes a concern from the richly interwoven texture of the whole work, and thus also removes that theme from its associations and interactions with other themes. Thus there is a danger that we will miss the complex interweaving of the themes that occur in the whole work (a work that resists “wholeness” but that instead suggests continuation).
However slippery the chronology or unresolved the thematic development in the sequence of shifting themes, it is possible to trace overarching concerns in the text, albeit concerns that never stabilize into definitive positions. And one concern to which Scalapino repeatedly returns is the relation of the self to its own inner life and to the social environment. Public and private realms come into conflict as people construct social categories and draw imaginary (and construct physical) boundaries around groups, including some and excluding others, often to the point of hating, fighting and killing the latter. The historical reality of this contention and violence is not denied in the text, nor is it dissolved into an amoral relativity of position. Instead, through textual linkages and contrarieties she interrogates social struggle as conflicts that may be critiqued through their lack of inherent existence, through their surface reality that may be changed once the subjective nature of the categories is realized as false:47

Statements of definition (that perceived as ‘givens’ ‘in-coming’ from the outside society, which ‘determine’ social reality) are apprehended as bogus. Because they are revealed as subjective, without basis. One is only constructing a reflection of these as one’s reorientation of apprehension. The syntax itself reorients one’s apprehension (by continual dis-location) and enables that which is exterior to be included in a process of its examination, necessarily self-examination.48

Scalapino constructs the public realm as an exposure of its own constructedness, not a tabula rasa that is created ex nihilo, but as a set of movements and interactions that are inextricably linked with cognitive realities which, as I previously discussed, do not correspond with a reality outside those movements, interactions, and cognitive functions. Interrogating the themes of inner and outer, we find that the inner cannot be easily separated from the outer, or the interior from the exterior. The text reveals them as a network in which dualities break down through an enactment of ways in which public and private are contained within each other. And yet the exercise of demonstrating their conflatedness is not purely a mimetic act, a sort of writing on the mind and
on the mind of society, to show mimetically through the writing how things really are, how the
mind really is, and how interactions between one and the other really are. The writing does not
point to an ultimate reality about public and private, about cognitive reality, and group cognitive
reality. It does enact these dualities in the act of being implicated in one another, and yet the
writing is also a movement that occurs in the present, in the reader’s interactions with the words,
generating new ways of thinking time, space, and community.

Let us trace some occurrences of the concepts of “inner” and “outer” over part of the
complex text of New Time. Each block or stanza in the following excerpts contains a reworking
of these themes in different contexts. These blocks do not occur successively, but over roughly
the first quarter of book. My commentary follows each block so as to trace the shifting contexts
and meanings relating to these themes. The thematic and contextual movement of the poem does
not trace a linear narrative trajectory of the development, crisis, and resolution (or even anti-
resolution) of protagonists. Instead, the text suggests an ever-shifting kaleidoscopic experience
of persons interacting with others.

In the following excerpts, the three tildes demarcate the start and finish of a block of text,
as they do in the original.

~~~
structure in reverse is the black sky – inside
defining (as, one) – blue destroying – not – gap – where is figures – is
dawn
being the reduction of the sky by (one’s) structure not seen after merely
but in being after only.

~~~

Here Scalapino plays on night (“black sky”), day (“blue”), and dawn. It is tempting to read
“black sky” as a representation for the Buddhist idea of emptiness. And indeed one might
fruitfully suggest that one’s structure (bodily frame or cognitive structure) conceived “in reverse” is empty as a conceptual category (an “inside” or subjective framing) – events are “fictive” both “while occurring” (3) and “in reverse,” mentally going back thinking of past events. The sequence of dawn, day, and night, while having their basis in actual physical events, are also mental events or constructs (the dark side of the moon, so to speak), and, as Nāgārjuna would have it, devoid of inherent existence. Positing a definition, as of oneself or one’s perceptions, may be a kind of destruction. Things seen in the light of day, during the “blue sky,” are also interpretations (in the next block, she writes “interpretative – blue destroying – itself – their – structure in being after only”) (2).

But however one interprets these fragmentary and recombinatory statements of themes, they rarely fit into a neat causal or chronological or psychological pattern. Instead, a perpetual uncertainty and haziness remains at the edges of any words or concepts one attempts to link together. One is left with the implication of linkages and deeper meanings, but without a definite structure or system of meaning taking shape.

~~~

they think (of it, this) knowledge is of one – inner. only. woman carried can see inner. this is some don’t hate everyone. this is being. people need the thought of comfort. there’s no comfort.

the physical body has comfort
sometimes
(enervated)
whereas this doesn’t (3)

~~~

There is no precedent for the pronoun “they” in the text previous to this block. Perhaps the speaker is stating a general assumption of the public. Whoever “they” are, they believe (and apparently Scalapino thinks they believe erroneously) that knowledge is only a private,
individual accumulation of experience. This corresponds with her premise that rebellion from social conditions is perceived as – and driven into – the personal realm of experience, instead of acknowledging “the social as phenomenological” and not transparently natural or given. In *R-hu*, an autobiographical and philosophical essay, Scalapino states,

Deliberately dislocating anything/observation is on (perspective) to take it (the observed and observation itself) constantly out of the given was not rebellion (sure) but to change ‘this’ illusionist, solidified perspective, to get at being (while alongside), which isn’t and can’t be in the illusionist hierarchical structure. Notice how one has to deny rebellion. A shock has been administered to one by suddenly being in this hierarchical structure [when Scalapino moved back to the United States from the East]. They’re saying that it is merely “personal” that one would notice this structure.  

Her ironic aside “(sure)” indicates that rebellion indeed must somehow get beyond the cognitive illusion of a “solidified perspective” and acknowledge that the hierarchy of the social structure is empty of inherent being. Knowledge – in terms of both individual experience and social conditioning – “gives no comfort,” as opposed to the body (subjective experience), which sometimes does. One “gets at being” by denying the comfort of retreating one’s rebellion to the personal realm and noticing, however comfortlessly, the constructed nature of the public or social realm.

~~~

enervated – extended
not itself
the physical body has
comfort – this is inner
people don’t hate everyone is to the physical body’s inner (4)

~~~
Scalapino sometimes does seem to be tracing a philosophical position with the continuation of the comfort of the body (as opposed to the comfort of knowledge) in the next block of text, reiterating the correlation between physical comfort and subjective or “inner” experience: the body’s comfort is an interior experience, irreducibly incapable of being shared. In the last line, “people don’t hate everyone is to the physical body’s inner,” a social or public condition so global in its articulation as almost to lose its meaning, is juxtaposed with an expression of the biological individual’s subjective experience. In other words, a most public condition (“people” not hating “everyone”) is placed next to a most private one. Whether these two are set in opposition to one another is unclear, and thus they stand in seeming yet unresolved opposition, yet also in a kind of conflation.

~~~
there’s nothing outside – man kneeling horizontal lying in snowing outside – for oneself kneeling in intense action.
he’s only overflowing on rim as sky not snowing
where sky’s snowing overflowing (7)
~~~

“[T]here’s nothing outside”: the outside (social convention) is a “bogus” construction. This laconic statement could also refer to the belief that there’s no direct correspondence between our articulation of the world and the world itself. Yet in the next statement Scalapino refers to what was perceived to be outside. But these “outside” phenomena are contradictory: the man is both “kneeling” and “horizontal lying”; it is both “not snowing” and “snowing. There’s also an emphatic “overflowing” taking place, as if the meanings of the text, and perhaps also inside and outside, are overdetermined, overflowing the bounds of their determinants, blurring into one another.
bow encrusted trees – not snowing – man’s horizontal lying while waiting, 
cold – (for oneself kneeling) – is sky being split, as: ‘not’ snowing 
his is overflowing rim of sky – in undercutting snowing sky

itself is overflowing – his is being ‘inside’ (7)

“I]tself” (that is, the state of being an entity, a self) “overflows” its boundaries because it cannot
be only a discrete being. The sky is split into “not snowing” and “‘not’ snowing, snowing being
both a common, quotidian reality and a statement of words to describe the perceived reality.
Underscoring the contrarieties of the text, the sky is simultaneously a “snowing sky.” The man’s
being is described as “‘inside,’” in quotation marks; his interior being is not only interior but
overflows, undercuts its discrete being. He seems to be awaiting his own action

interpretative is the ‘fixing’, and as such distortion of phenomenal activity
(per se, not simply fixing the view of actions)

an ‘outside’ outwardly-articulating ‘social’ interpretation which
qualitatively changes the object of its consideration – as does the inner ‘warp’,
which warps in order to see its own reverberation – is there (8)

Through the act of memory and interpretation, events and phenomena are inevitably transformed
(“distorted”) and their meanings set out on a course toward ossification. This is true both of
acculturation and of one’s “inner warping” of present action. The exterior or social “warp” and
its object, as well as one’s inner interpretation and its object, are mutually determining, not
dualistically separate. These interpretative acts and their interactions with their objects are
“there.” Scalapino avoids stating that they “exist,” perhaps to avoid the implication of anything inherent about their existence.

~~~

but – outside – but which is fully open – because outside of one as occurring lightly

a ‘burst’ that’s from one being returned to oneself – after one being away (outside). the outside is one’s awareness (11)

~~~

“[O]utside of one” is “fully open” and “occur[s] lightly,” perhaps because this exterior is empty of inherent or essential existence, taking its social pattern or public stamp from the “warp” of interpretation; it is not closed and heavy with an inevitability of meaning or form. “[T]he outside of one’s awareness” indicates that consciousness is not only inner and subjective, but outward and inclusive, merging and to a degree indistinguishable from its outward or social manifestation in group consciousness. A later passage in the poem states, “somewhere interior that’s the outer world (it actually) / – inner – represented – without comfort anywhere” (28). “[I]nterior” and “outer world” here resolve into one another; “interior” is “it actually,” “the outer world.” In yet another passage, we find that “the adamant social being / is inner” (32); even the most recalcitrant social structure begins with individual thought processes. Yet this inner also “isn’t there” (30), and in fact, “there is no inner.” Not only does Scalapino blur boundaries between inner and outer, subjectivity and objectivity, but disavows any inherent existence of the shaping of either realm, of any “recalcitrance,” “weight,” or “fixedness” to the inner or outer manifestations and phenomena of human thought and action. Interior and exterior “warps” may be inevitably constructed out of human necessity and drive, but these warps do not exist inevitably, outside of these necessities. As Scalapino would phrase it, they do not exist “per se.”
The foregoing analysis gives only a glimpse of the complexity of *New Time*, which enacts a radical dialectics in the realms of temporality and of intersubjective experience. It is a difficult work with many recurring themes continually surfacing throughout the work in different contexts, never allowing any particular position to settle into a fixed belief, but freely circulating and continually generating new semantic possibilities in its wake.

It seems fitting to close this discussion of Scalapino’s poetic interest in private and public spheres with a reference to Robin Blaser, another poet deeply and philosophically concerned with such issues. In “The Recovery of the Public World,” Blaser points to the limitations of claims to primacy of any one aspect of reality, such as socioeconomic, artistic, political, sacred, of the widespread “disaster and danger [in modernity] of such total claims to reality, in which the complex discourses of a world and their relation to one another disappear in the hegemony of one of them . . .”51 Much of Scalapino’s writing is engaged in a similar project, that of warning against the dangers of giving public or private concerns primacy in any human community or interactions, or of giving either one – or any particular aspect of one – the stature of a fixed or ideal structure or content through social or individual interpretation of events:

A “public world” was one’s illusion or shadow of such that can’t reflect its origin, as this was nonexistent. And is subjective while being only an occurrence which then isn’t that as it isn’t one.

So it is to have a “public world” occur only from what people say and do now

It is not a reference or future.52

The strictly and essentially subjective is an illusion, since the mind is “action literally,”53 the biological functioning of neurons and chemicals, “while being only an occurrence which then isn’t that as it isn’t one.” The mind’s activity is “only” its event in the present, and “isn’t one,” that is, doesn’t define one’s being, since it is constantly changing. And thus it also isn’t an
occurrence, since to describe it as such would be to begin the process of limiting or “warping” it after its instant has passed. By the same token, the public world is also in a sense an illusion; it does not contain within itself an allusion to the past or to its future, and thus cannot represent any origin; such representation would partake in a narrative constructed to interpret the causality of events or behavior.

Each in her own way, Berssenbrugge and Scalapino present in their poetry moments of intersubjectivity that are enacted as profoundly dialogical and dynamically reciprocal events. Berssenbrugge’s poetic world is the more intimate of the two. In her work that deals with intersubjectivity, she is primarily concerned with one person’s subjective response in the company of another – in particular, to the shifting consciousness and expanding semantic field that one experiences in an encounter with another person. This is true even when the persons in the poem are in a public space, such as in the stadium scene in “Empathy.” Berssenbrugge always seems more interested in poetically enacting what it is like to encounter – and communicate with – another person. Her poetry presents the experience of the other by a subject as dialectical and without closure. It retains both a sense of the transcendent alterity of the other as well as the common perceptual, cognitive, and material ground of their being in the world. As Merleau-Ponty has it, “I never rejoin the other’s lived experience. It is in the world that we rejoin one another.” Subjectivity both is and is not shared, and Berssenbrugge’s work enacts this paradoxical condition. Moreover, communication is both radically uncertain and mundanely possible. Her work does not force a decision between these two conditions, but instead allows both to exist simultaneously and to engage in a dialogue. In this conversation, the uncertainty of communication both confirms and questions the equally inescapable acknowledgment that communication does occur, that stories are uncovered.
The intersubjectivity in Scalapino’s work, on the other hand, takes place on a wider social scale, showing interconnections and interdependencies among widely divergent persons and objects. She simultaneously creates and dissolves social categories and constructions, never allowing the impermeable or rigid formation of any one frame of reference. In *New Time*, she continually shuffles themes and events, time frames and intersubjective experiences, exterior and interior perspectives, so that there is an unresolved and continuous communication among them. One might say that Scalapino’s complication of a larger social realm is macrocosmic to Berssenbrugge’s microcosmic one-on-one experience. Above, I mentioned that each resurrects the submerged term of a dualism. In Scalapino’s case, the recovered term is the public realm, liberated from rigid conceptualizations and categories, and from its excluding function. In Berssenbrugge’s case, the recovered term is the radical alterity of the other, who is thus liberated from the coercions of a subsuming subjectivity, yet embraced within the fold of the material and cognitive commonalities of both.

In spite of their differences, Scalapino’s and Berssenbrugge’s work is remarkably similar in its philosophical approach to the relation between self and other. Although their poetry is philosophical, rarely does it betray the diction of a philosophical tract. Instead, their poetry dramatizes moments of the encounter of self with other, or with a larger social context. It is not a drama in the conventional sense of a work with well-defined, three-dimensional characters and a plot, but in the sense of a dialogue between characters that are often submerged in more realistic literature. The identity of their characters is speculative and their positions are continually shifting. They are at once relational and concrete, individual and social. And the stage on which they enact their philosophical play is at once invisible to the audience and rendered visible and partaking of the drama.
Notes

1 Hejinian and Scalapino, *Sight*, 65.


4 For Merleau-Ponty, the bridge between the two, and what sustains a dialogue between the two otherwise incommensurable realms of reality, is “flesh.” See the discussion of this concept in Chapter Two.


6 Berssenbrugge, “Irises,” in *Four Year Old Girl*, 11.

7 Ibid., 12.

8 Ibid.

9 The parable is generally credited to the eighth-century Chinese Zen master Quingyuan.


11 Ibid., 161.


13 Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 50.

14 Ibid., 43.

15 Ibid., 148.

16 This a phrase brought into currency by Thomas Nagel, “What Is It Like to Be A Bat?,” *Philosophical Review* 83 (1974): 435-50. In this essay, Nagel explores the conundrum of the subjective quality of individual experience (also called “qualia”) and its inaccessibility to the experience of any other living being.


18 Ibid., 195. In Levinas’ terminology, “the same” indicates “I,” or what I refer to here as “the self” or “one’s own self,” as opposed to “the other.”
Ibid., 64.

20 Ibid., 148.


22 Levinas, Totality and Infinity, 204.

23 Ibid., 34.

24 Ibid., 51.

25 Ibid., 39.


27 Scalapino, R-hu, 81.

28 Ibid., 83.

29 Ibid., 84.


31 Ibid., 21-22.

32 Ibid., 20.

33 Ibid., 54-55.


35 Ibid., paragraph 38.

Damasio, a neurologist, sees part of his task as integrating cultural and social considerations into neuroscience, for “[t]o understand in a satisfactory manner the brain that fabricates human mind and human behavior, it is necessary to take into account its social and cultural context” (260). Approaching the problem from the opposite perspective, Blonder and Armstrong would like to see neurological considerations integrated into anthropology and the social sciences. Blonder criticizes anthropology for its mind-body or culture-biology dualistic approach, its deterministic view of culture, in which social and cultural patterns determine human behavior, to the exclusion of biological, and more specifically, neurological considerations. According to Blonder, “one unfortunate consequence of the postmodern position is to further disengage the human mind from the biological, and in so doing, to nullify its potential for study as a brain product” (85). The way out of such dualistic thinking “is to link culture with neural processes of behavior and cognition” (87). Armstrong analyzes the importance of integrating neurological considerations into the study of human culture: “The human ability to live according to learned, shared rules of behavior requires cortical functions.” Moreover, “limbic functions are necessary for human symbolism and culture” (117). The view of Lakoff and Johnson on intersubjectivity will be discussed later in this chapter.

37 Damasio, *Descartes’ Error*, 250-51.

38 Ibid., 124.

39 Ibid., 125.


41 Ibid., 14.


43 Ibid., 25.

44 Ibid., 8.

45 Lakoff and Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh*, 93.


47 Ibid., 30.

48 Ibid., 26.


52 Scalapino, R-hu, 20.

53 Ibid., 60.
CHAPTER SIX

CONCLUSION

I must act right, I must intend right even when there’s
No such thing as I or right I must choose correctly
Keep those muscles practising, always hit the right key¹
Philip Whalen

I hope that this dissertation will, above all, encourage the appreciation of the poets whose
writings I have presented and analyzed. Although the critical attention to experimental poetry
increases every year, it is still on the margins of the already rather marginal field of
contemporary American poetry. I believe that a better understanding of this body of work in all
its multifaceted significance is crucial for a more complete appreciation of the diversity in
contemporary American literature.

In addition, I hope that the theoretical ideas that I have set forth will engender further
discussion regarding the philosophical, political and ethical implications of experimental poetry.
As the movement of contemporary experimental poetry of the past thirty-five years or so is
critically reexamined and historicized, it is more important than ever to understand the
philosophical dynamics at work in this poetry in order to avoid lapsing into unsupportable
theories that, covertly or overtly, reinstate hierarchical structures, a negative strategy that is often
employed in order to critique the aesthetics of mainstream poetry and poetics. Too often in the
debates within the field of experimental poetry and poetics, critics attempt to bolster the essential
value of one term of a binary opposition over the other, which only leads to the formation of
another hierarchy of one valued term over the other. The extolling of the materiality of language
over language as a transparent vehicle, the championing of the disruption of narrativity over
ordered linearity and causality, the embracing of jouissance over encoded gnostic messages –
these critical strategies are doomed because they create another hierarchy in place of the critiqued hierarchy. If we think of the structure of a dualistic equation as an hourglass, what the dualistic critic does in extolling one side over the other is merely to invert the hourglass, and gravity pulls the sands from one funnel to the other. The two positions of the hourglass are structurally and dualistically identical.

My description and favoring of a kind of dialectics of the middle path is a proposal for a strategy of reading experimental work, one that recognizes its philosophical significance and its attempt to unravel and complicate dualistic conceptual constructions. It is important to develop strategies that allow the reader to appreciate the radically dialectical aspect of the work, which reveals the mutually informing and critiquing dialogue between terms. Far from being a hermeneutical device whose goal is to resolve the question of value in either the conceptual world or a transcendent or ultimate world free of conceptualizations, the strategy emphasizes the nonresolving aspect of the dynamic interplay between conceptually opposed terms. In the preceding chapters, I demonstrated this interdependent dialogue in several different, yet interrelated realms, including subject and object perceptual experience, the construction of individual subjectivity, temporality and narrativity, and intersubjectivity.

I exemplified particular themes of dialectical relationships with the work of particular poets who seemed most concerned with the radical questioning of that particular dichotomous formulation. For example, I used the work of Harryman to illustrate the concept of multiple versus autonomous self. I could just as effectively have used her work to analyze issues surrounding narrative and temporality in experimental poetry. I presented the work of Lyn Hejinian in my investigation of the relationship between subject and object, and in my exploration of time and narrative. But her work could also have been used to demonstrate the
idea of the multiple self, following Brian McHale’s assessment of Hejinian’s *Oxota: A Short Russian Novel* as a “radically heteroglossic and polyphonic text, a fabric of multiple voices and multiple registers. . . . its plurality of voices resists assimilation to the voice of an ‘author.’”^2 The works of the poets represented in this work are so rich and multifarious in their investigations that each one could also have served as well in almost any of the other chapters.

Since there are five poets and only four thematic chapters, three of the poets are represented in two different chapters: Scalapino, Berssenbrugge, and Hejinian. The double service of each of these poets demonstrates different aspects of their work. For Scalapino, for example, issues of narrativity and temporality are as important to her as the exploration of divisions between public and private realms of experience. In my estimation, the ability of these poets to investigate different philosophical conundrums in their works is a measure of their artistic importance and maturity.

By the same token, I could have effectively used Nāgārjuna (to speak of perhaps the most obvious example) to provide theoretical ideas for other chapters besides the one on temporality, history and memory. For example, his work would have beautifully accompanied the analysis of subject and object dialectics in Chapter Two. This would have been, however, a rather different chapter, even though it would probably have arrived at similar thoughts regarding the nature of the dialectical relationship in question. As Scalapino would have it, the two versions might have “come up as the same sound pattern.”^3

Considering the rich possibilities for exploring other facets of the five poets, and for using the philosophers, psychoanalysts, and scientists to theorize different kinds of dialectical relationships, one way to further my research immediately presents itself. In Chapter Four, I tentatively approached the exploration of the relationship between Scalapino’s treatment of time
and narrative constructions and the public and private conventional dichotomy. Just as I proposed that Scalapino’s dialectics operates on different levels to complicate human conceptualizations of experience, it would be rewarding to investigate how, for example, her dialectics of narrativity is enmeshed with her dialectics of intersubjectivity – in other words, how her questioning of the conventions of temporality interacts with her questioning of the formation of private and public experience. Similarly, the connections I made between intrasubjective and intersubjective dialectics in Chapter Three could be expanded to show further points of relation.

Another avenue in which my research might be taken further would be to explore whether or to what extent this dialektical process might also inform the work of other contemporary experimental poets, the work of avant-garde modernist poets, and going back farther in literary history, the works of earlier writers sometimes claimed as predecessors or influences of contemporary experimentalists, such as Laurence Sterne, François Rabalais, Thomas Wyatt, Christopher Smart, and William Blake.

I hope that my work will also encourage the further investigation into correspondences between literature and the discoveries and theories of cognitive science. Thus far, not much work has been done in this area beyond a few speculative studies such as Max Nänny’s “Ezra Pound: Right Brain Poet” and Mark W. Booth’s “The Ballad and the Brain." One significant exception is Mary Thomas Crane’s groundbreaking work Shakespeare’s Brain: Reading with Cognitive Theory. Her faith in the premise that “[c]urrent cognitive science offers the grounds for a number of theories of human subjectivity and language that are beginning to be reformulated in ways that make them readily applicable to the reading of literary and cultural texts” encouraged me, in the face of some doubt, to continue my first explorations into such connections between neuroscience and experimental poetry and to integrate some of these findings into my work.
Finally, Philip Whalen’s epigraph in this concluding chapter reminds us of the ethical dimension within contemporary experimental poetry. With the assistance of Levinas’ ethics of the other, I explored some aspects of the ethical dimension in the dialectics of intersubjectivity in the works of Scalapino and Berssenbrugge. The ethical and political dimension of a radical dialectics in experimental poetry and poetics could be developed in a more comprehensive and detailed manner. The Buddhist flavor of Whalen’s excerpt reminds us that such a dialectics would take into consideration the conventional or empty category of any ethics, and yet, equally, the necessity of right intentions, in life as in one’s creative practice. An inquiry into the dialogical exchange between these paradoxically coexisting realities yields possibilities for a continual and open-ended practice of the ethical in an embodied poetry.

Notes


3 Scalapino, How Phenomena Appear to Unfold, 21.


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APPENDIX A

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCHES OF MEI-MEI BERSSENBRUGGE,
LYN HEJINIAN, CARLA HARRYMAN, HANNAH WEINER,
AND LESLIE SCALAPINO

Mei-mei Berssenbrugge was born in Beijing in 1947 to Chinese and Dutch-American parents, and grew up in Massachusetts. For twenty-five years, she lived in rural New Mexico, where she wrote *Sphericity* and *Empathy*. Her poetry is noted for its long lines and sentences, which seem to imitate the vast horizons visible from her home on a plateau in New Mexico, where she lived for twenty-five years, an example of the shape and scope of the concrete world manifesting itself in her poetry. She has collaborated with several artists, including Richard Tuttle (her husband) (*Sphericity*) and Kiki Smith (*Endocrinology*). She has also composed theater works with Frank Chin, Blondell Cummings, and others. She has long been active in Native-American and Asian-American cultural movements. Presently, she lives in New York City. Her collections of poetry include *Four Year Old Girl* (Berkeley: Kelsey St. Press, 1998), *Endocrinology* (Berkeley: Kelsey St. Press, 1997), *Sphericity* (Berkeley: Kelsey St. Press, 1993), *Empathy* (Barrytown, N.Y.: Station Hill Press, 1989), and *The Heat Bird* (Providence, R.I.: Burning Deck, 1983).

Lyn Hejinian is a poet, essayist, and translator of Russian poetry. She was born in 1941 in the San Francisco Bay Area, and currently lives in Berkeley, California. Translations of her work have been published in many languages, including French, Spanish, Japanese, Italian, Russian, Swedish, and Finnish. From 1976 to 1984, she was editor of Tuumba Press, one of the first presses to publish the emerging language poets. Since 1981, she has co-edited, with Barrett Watten, *Poetics Journal*. She is co-director, with Larry Ochs, of Atelos, a literary press that commissions and publishes cross-genre works by poets. Her collections of poetry include *A*

Carla Harryman is a poet, essayist, and playwright, who was born in 1952. Her hybrids of various kinds of writing demonstrate her tendency to blur traditional genre distinctions. During the 1970s, Harryman edited Qu, a journal of experimental prose. Her plays have been produced by Poets Theater in San Francisco. Her collections include Gardener of Stars (Berkeley: Atelos, 2001), The Words: After Carl Sandburg’s Rootabaga Stories and Jean-Paul Sartre (Oakland, Calif.: O Books, 1999), There Never Was a Rose Without a Thorn (San Francisco: City Lights, 1995), Memory Play (Oakland, Calif.: O Books, 1994), In the Mode Of (La Laguna, Canary Islands: Zasterle Press, 1991), Animal Instincts: Prose, Plays, Essays (Oakland, Calif.: This, 1989), Vice (Elmwood, Conn.: Potes & Poets, 1986), Percentage (Berkeley: Tuumba Press, 1982), Property (Berkeley: Tuumba Press, 1982), and Under the Bridge (Oakland, Calif.: This Press, 1980). Her poetic plays have been widely performed in the United States, the United Kingdom, and New Zealand. Currently she is Senior Lecturer in the Department of English at Wayne State University.

Hannah Weiner (1928-1997) graduated from Radcliffe College. She was, by profession, a designer of women’s undergarments. In her early forties, she developed an unusual and apparently involuntary capacity for visualizing words, which she incorporated into her poetry.


Note

The following are sentences from Lyn Hejinian’s *My Life* (Los Angeles: Sun & Moon Press, 1987), in which she ironically or puzzlingly comments on particular metaphorical constructions:

I had “hit upon” an idea (20).

It is a way of saying, I want you, too, to have this experience, so that we are more alike, so that we are closer, bound together, sharing a point of view – so that we are “coming from the same place” (21-22).

They insisted on the importance, the primacy, of “inner resources” and “inner qualities of mind,” so that one could “bear up” under any circumstances (28).

What memory is not a “gripping” thought (37).

Take your place (one) not your places (42).

He framed his sentences carefully (42).

Before a busy day, one wants to “get” a lot of sleep (43).

We “took” a trip as if that were part of the baggage we carried. In other words, we “took our time” (47).

My father would say I’ve a “big day” tomorrow” (50).

The difference between “he presented his argument” and “they had an argument” (59).

One makes a shrug but gives a shit (79).
Perhaps initially, even before one can talk, restlessness is already conventional, establishing the incoherent border which will later separate events from experience (8).

My old aunt entertained us with her lie, a story about an event in her girlhood, a catastrophe in a sailboat that never occurred, but she was blameless, unaccountable, since, in the course of the telling, she had come to believe the lie herself (13).

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

But a word is a bottomless pit. It becomes magically pregnant and one day split open, giving birth to a stone egg, about as big as a football (8).

Life is hopelessly frayed, all loose ends (15).

There were more storytellers than there were stories, so that everyone in the family had a version of history and it was impossible to get close to the original, or to know “what really happened” (21).

Vision determines the view (24).

There was a garden, a hole in the fence, a grandfather who had no religion – one can run through the holes in memory, wearing a wet hat, onto the sidewalk covered with puddles, and there are fingers in them (30).

My aunt, holding up the little letter I had written, insisted that the act of writing-down was testimonial and that the writing would always be used as proof of what I held to be true. She, too, was a clumsy athlete (34).

What is one doing to, or with, the statement (the language) or the stated (the object or the idea) when one means it (42).

Language which is like a fruitskin around fruit (43).

The inaccessibility of the meaning intrigued me all the more, since I couldn’t read the single letters, if that is what they were, the little marks which constitute Persian (46).

The old fragmentary texts, early Egyptian and Persian writings, say, or the works of Sappho, were intriguing and lovely, a mystery adhering to the lost lines (47).

Any work dealing with questions of possibility must lead to new work (48).
Only fragments are accurate. Break it up into single words, charge them to combination (55).

History hugs the world. The Muses are little female fellows. To some extent, each sentence has to be the whole story (67).

If words matched their things we’d be imprisoned within walls of symmetry (70).

But the argument decays, the plot goes bit by bit (71).

And if I feel like a book, a person on paper, I will continue. What is the gender on paper. A fatigue in the cold, fear of finishing. And doesn’t it make a difference to me, reading this book now, to know that you are going to read the same book afterwards, in the same copy, these selfsame words – and would that difference made be different if you were reading your own copy of the book at the same time that I was reading mine (76).

An extremely pleasant and often comic satisfaction comes from conjunction, the fit, say, of comprehension in a reader’s mind to content in a writer’s work. But not bitter (85).

If there is a story at all, accounted for, a settled thing to have experienced, it’s nothing of the kind. The obvious analogy is with music as with words. A sense of definition (different from that of description, which is a kind of storytelling or recounting, numerical, a list of colors) develops as one’s sense of possibility, of the range of what one might do or experience, closes with the years. So I gave it away (90).

My life is as permeable constructedness (93).

Permanent constructedness (94).

It is precisely a special way of writing that requires realism (101).

There is tension in the connecting string (110).
APPENDIX D

REALISTIC DESCRIPTION FROM LYN HEJINIAN’S MY LIFE

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

A child, meanwhile, had turned her tricycle upside down and was turning the pedal with her hand to make the front wheel spin (20).

My grandfather had two horses, old Duke, “a fine animal,” and High Spot, with his rider, cantering in place, so that sitting on his back was like sitting pretty (27).

I found a penny in a calla lily (51).

What I felt was that figs resemble kidneys (55).

The nightmare was of a giant bluebottle fly which buzzed, “I’m all there is” (54).

A neighbor rolled the terriers in a stroller and wiped their little bottoms with a tissue when they shat (68).

On the desk a bust of Lenin and a bottle of pennies (106).
Camille Martin is a poet and translator who lives in New Orleans. She earned the degrees of Bachelor of Music in piano performance and literature from Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, in 1978; Master of Music in piano performance and literature from the Eastman School of Music, University of Rochester, in Rochester, New York, in 1980; and Master of Fine Arts in creative writing from the University of New Orleans in New Orleans, Louisiana, in 1996. She was a Teaching Assistant at the University of New Orleans, where she taught six sections of Freshman Composition between 1994 and 1996. In 1996, she was awarded a Graduate Fellowship for study in the doctoral program in English at Louisiana State University.

Her poetry collections include codes of public sleep (under submission), sesame kiosk (Bedford, Md.: Potes & Poets, 2001), rogue embryo (New Orleans: Lavender Ink, 1999), and Plastic Heaven (New Orleans: Fell Swoop, 1996). Her poetry is anthologized in Another South: Experimental Writing in the South (Tuscaloosa, Ala.: University of Alabama Press, forthcoming) and From a Bend in the River: 100 New Orleans Poets (New Orleans: Runagate Press, 1998), and is published or forthcoming in such journals as Taverner’s Koan, Xcp: Streetnotes, Word/For Word, Muse Apprentice Guild, can we have our ball back?, moria, Holy Tomato, HOW2, Fell Swoop, Perspektive (also in German translation), Brown Box, Raunchland / The Eternal Anthology, Unarmed, poethia, VeRT, Cauldron & Net, 6ix, New Orleans Review, Fiddlehead, Kiosk, and Caliban. Her translations of French poetry have been published in The Literary Review and Modern Poetry in Translation. Since 1992, Martin has given over seventy readings of her poetry, including at St. Mark’s Poetry Project in New York, Small Press Traffic in San
Francisco (scheduled April 2003); and at numerous venues in Austin, Pensacola, New Orleans, Lafayette, and Baton Rouge.


Martin has presented papers at professional conferences on nineteenth- and twentieth-century poets, including Hannah Weiner, Mina Loy, and Augusta Webster.

She founded and co-curates the Lit City Poetry Reading Series in New Orleans, which is in its third year of programming.
During winter, this had been a matter of stripping meat from the bone, to dry and freeze, the color of black iris along the edge of a satellite dish. If I dream of shadows of meat on a white dish like the underside of a leaf, it is a feeling, like thinking. If I imagine a ghost and a deer, both are true. No one can describe the relation between an experience that needs to be communicated and the form of that communication. It lies next to its form, separating her, like proximity to death, the way a wild animal automatically lies next to its form. The metaphor that the eye knows a particular by internalizing its color and shape became the woman’s substitute for animal belief in life among the shades. A metaphor interpreted as occurrence became her method for only remembering objects which exist in the same size as their image in her mind, ladyslipper behind the eyesocket, pollen falling through interstices of her brain cells, as if exact scale were the infallible touchstone for her intention.
Lily pads sketch out the foreground of the pond. A gossamer, livening fabric tips up alluringly to points of your body, the way a blue wall had assessed the posture of the women. It’s why you assume the logical space, giving a reason, stands in the same relation to the causal emotion for the space, as a halo rescued out of her life.
The idea of illusion suggests that existences in different worlds, herself at different stages, or moving from one metaphor to another, can compare. She is trying to tell you the moon’s color in eclipse, because she cannot reproduce a light in her memory with a pigment that is made, like a word, though seeing the moon enables a person to make inaccurate color. Think, if experience in her is time, because she gets to a state of being by experience, first. Experience is an interval in the body, but it also accompanies remembering.

Low sun from behind you on asters, chamisa. You find a space as wide as if time fell outside the stimulus of that glow, and her memory of it became space in her. Her body and will coordinate, like the relation of experience to seeing and experience to feeling the moon, which has no size. Actual size of its color in her body assesses the vicissitudes of an aspiration created by seeing, so in this case, actual size became a piece of size in her.
You look on the plain from a bluff with him, and a point of juniper grows dark and dense of scattered ones, a piece of sieved material on your side of a membrane of noon light. Seeing the object locates it like a cause in your body, for noticing a faint green around it as an underground stream. Seeing what had been invisible is a response to the object. His presence, a cause or weight in nature, does not enter experience, but accompanies it, as experience had accompanied her memory of her, her features in her relative’s face.

If she only sees with another person, what about the response is phenomenal, and what is contingent, as a comet or virus, resonating to its presence in an other human being, but which could be a metaphor, like grass in light, or sunlight on distant yellow trees? Nature, full of causes that never enter experience, contrasts to your thinking adjusting contingency to contingency like a synthesis. Desire to know opposes, for example, desire for children. It structures a branched straw in the snow, so its blue shadow is blue in a tiny armpit. When he sees autumn grass, I tell him about its shadow on snow, leapfrog of see/known, to straw of light.
A silver of cloud lights up. Not knowing where it is between you and the horizon turns into desire to know this. “Where” is the secret of durable pigment. “It” is the part hit by an angle of light that is moving, so each moment triangulates the space by way of the cloud, not giving you to know it, the way knowing opposes wanting a person, or a person is opposed to an infant, being inspired, not experiencing.

She is making the space during the day in an unanalyzed form, expressing it, using light, which as experience emotes a color, and one of the elements of making is the space, because she cannot see the light as a tool, while she is still figuring how to use it. Its use is his presence, or its end is, to which its use is a means. Her concentration obliterates time, like the relation of experience to a moment. It falls outside the stimulus of an absent person as a golden light in the room.
Seeing the light became a substance in her body, as knowing a ghost by seeing light in a room, a relation of experience to feeling. The metaphor of the light became an obliterating emotion, from one metaphor to another, so she got to the state of being of the light by knowing, first, a synthesis that put time outside her situation. She makes *that* into time, which can flood a plain, inside a leaf, a leaf of gilt on an image. Wanting to know as opposed to wanting a person is herself in a room flooded by light through yellow leaves. Each leaf like an ancestral feature assesses the vicissitudes of this aspiration. A consciousness outside a state of being is flooded.
How can I describe anything when all these interruptions keep arriving and then
tell me I don't describe it well WELL forgive them big ME COUNTDOWN
got that for days and yesterday it didn't stop GO TO COUNTDOWN GO TO
COUNTDOWN CALL DAVIDS get COUNTDOWN finally GO TO COUNT-
DOWN at the door so OK I go see these maroon velvet pants I'm not BUY $40
pants BLOOMINGDALES all over again I leave GO TO COUNTDOWN: refuge,
get in a taxi, start for home, no peace, get out GO TO COUNTDOWN ok it's only
money go back and buy the pants it's better than seeing GO TO COUNTDOWN
for the rest of my life peace so they fit well UNTIL MICHAEL COOPER
For a while I tried to get away with negative COUNTING by counting down
10, 9, 8, 7 while breathing GO TO MAKE CLEARer FAR OUT
at the door RHYS RHYS IMPORTANT (notes) HAVE A DOUBLE
image of pink embroidered pillow case appears on blanket, get it out
GO NOW girlfriend negative MOTHER made it when I was 2
JANA
she's fasting TRY HARDER across her chest and
DRESS WARM across Charlemagne's groin Joan's
head says LAUGHS as she
QUINK THICK SAY IT
Rhys rhythm VERY IMPORTANT says radio
DESCRIBE go ahead in Charlemagne's white pants WOOL white hat
IMITATED Hawai JOAN ARAKAWA (more notes going back 3 days)
YOU WON'T OBEY PORK CHOP BUY THEM pig in pork chop color along
the edge of
frying ORGASM go to a museum
can't get the spacing
it's a nice arc

Try praying: Our father who art be right over
A song: Here we go round the mulberry bush the
grapefruit John the mulberry mush GIVE UP
GRAPEFRUIT IS THE NAME OF Yoko Ono's book, APOLOGIZE is on a Ringo
Star2 record 2 r's Call Jerry MISS ROTHENBERG MISS DAVID ANTIN
SNOWING IN VERMONT delightful Dream about Jason Epstein very huge
louder SHUT UP in his office, I refuse laugh DESCRIBE CHARLEMAGNE:
how old 33 spiritual discipline
not in dollars not too negative
no money

MONEY
Hannah Weiner. "I sjust."
on itself. His red hair was standing up) “I just began to weep”.

Much later, after I had ceased to know the man who had once described to me how, driving his new car with its top down around and around the block (with his 1st wife in the car – he said that he had been downtown with her drinking in a bar), while he was looking for the entrance to the hotel parking lot, he had collided, or rather, had grazed the sides of 3 parked cars; as I said, it was much later when I was standing on the jetty of a marina and watching a man standing up in a motor boat, while he turned it around and around in circles. “Well, (I remembered the man I had known saying about himself – as I watched the man in the motor boat turning it slowly on itself. His red hair was standing up) “I just began to weep”.
the men – when I’d
been out in the cold weather – were
found lying on the street, having
died – from the weather; though
usually being there when it’s warmer

the men
on the street who’d
died – in the weather – who’re bums
observing it, that instance
of where they are – not my
seeing that

cranes are on the
skyline – which are accustomed
to lift the containers to or from
the freighters – as the new
wave attire of the man

though not muscular
– but young – with
the new wave dyed blonde hair – seeming to
wait at the bus stop, but
always outside of the hair salon

the bums – the men – having
died – from
the weather – though their
doing that, seeing things from their view when
they were alive

so not to
be upper class – the new
wave baggy pants – the
man with the dyed blonde hair – who’s always standing in
front of the hair salon on
the corner

the public
figure – as gentle – as
the freighter and
their relation

that
of the man with the dyed
blonde hair and
new wave attire – and
the freighter

of our present
president – who doesn’t
know of the foreign
environ – as vacant – and
to the freighter and
his and its relation

when our present
The president is in an inverse relation to them – when there’s a social struggle in their whole setting, which is abroad.

The bums – who’ve died – but could be only when they’re living – though it doesn’t have desire, so inverse in that one setting.

To their social struggle in their whole setting, which is abroad and its relation to the freighter.

To the person of new wave attire – that person’s relation to the freighter.

When the bums are not alive – at this time – though were here, not abroad – and not aware in being so of a social struggle.

The man in the new wave attire – as the relation
of him
being another person – as
the freighter and
his and its relation

the inverse
relation to the freighter
only occurring when that
person is living

the man – who’s
accustomed to
working in the garage –
as having
that relation to
their whole setting

I have been – am –
dumb – as the way
in which that would occur – the
bums – not their existence or
ding from the weather – though
the effect of that

for me to
be dumb – to have
been actually stupid – so that
really could occur – the
bums – in an event

so – dumb as an
active relation to
the bums or to the freighter and
the still oil
rigs – on the ocean

to the repair of
the car – so inverse in that
setting – though
it doesn’t have desire – of
the present

as the oil rigs – which
are the freighter – on the ocean – pushed
up to be the relation
with me, by my being – am – dumb – their
to have that occurrence

to have that – for them, some
people who’d had an attitude
of snobbery – always – so that they’re dumb – when it’s
senseless – that relation with
them

I almost froze – and realized I
could die from it – when the bums
were in that situation – and then not
caring, though that’s not possible

which had been repaired
– to the car – as I
am – when that’s senseless – though
it doesn’t have desire – of the present

the bums –
found later – in the whole setting
– though when the car
hadn’t been repaired – and so
their grinding and
movement in relation to it
Mei-mei Berssenbrugge. “Empathy.”

For me, the insignificant or everyday gesture constructs a choreography of parts and what touches me is where the inarticulate, the error or tension finds concrete manifestation and is recognized.

First, I see roses in the dark with him, a compaction of spare light, then a road through the woods in pitch dark. How she perceives the corridor in the dark is a space within the time in which they were moving, as if perspective of a space in the dark constructed a hierarchy in her mind, in reverse of how the contents of her wishes remain unchanged and timeless, so the innermost nature of her wishes is as much known and unknown to them as the reality of the external world. It is as incompletely presented by what she can see as is the external world by communication with someone she wishes for. In this way her interrogation of him appears instead as a dialogue pertaining to uses of power, because she can only remember what has been consciously said to her, so that her feeling of identifying with him is like a quick flash or a signal. When it is intense, tormenting and continuous, it’s using itself to construct a rhetorical story again.
This state of confusion is never made comprehensible by being given a plot, in the same way a complicated plot is only further complicated by being simplified, although connectedness may not always be an artifice, for example, when it reveals ways in which she construes what she perceives according to an internal connection which will announce its conflict in the plot, a tension like his mistaken gesture which is interesting as a site of power formation. It may well be where the feeling of mysteriousness occurs in which she believes him, but she doesn’t want to prove it, because an appearance in the dark will not deceive after enough appearances and everywhere, sooner or later, there will be a hint of a tree or space above a lake, so describing something as it is could by precise reference gain a neutral tone, but in this case adheres to his and her manner of asking where is the space, instead of what space it is. There occurs an interval of northern lights over their walk whose circumference is inferrable, but whose outermost region lacks any known form of registration, such as before that and before that.

In an empty stadium they alternate the refrain of a song in Japanese. The light is harsh on rows of seats like cells of a honeycomb under high magnification. The entire stadium resembles a honeycomb or geodesic dome turned inside out and concave.
He is saying, I am here. She is saying, where are you.

Speech and thought arise simultaneously as an hysterical question. An idea is a wish.

As a descriptive stream or spontaneous reaction to him,
speech serves as a starting point for uncovering a story through translation from wish into desire,
but when thought becomes reflective, a problem of interpretation enters the stream of emotion itself.
The speaking becomes fixed, although there is no such thing as repetition.
The speaking is a constant notation of parallel streams of thought and observations
whose substance is being questioned in a kind of oral thought at once open and precise,
but with a tension between ideas and her sense of scandal at invoking a real person.
He makes a rift or glimpse, both generative and relative to the glimpse,
a liberty of interruption, or exclusion, inside the stadium
in light so bright she sees her eyelash as a golden line reflecting on the inside of her sunglasses.
In the same way the song must never be allowed to threaten the presentation of what takes place in the song,
so that she may try to develop empathy for what she really wants to happen to her,
instead of desire being the song.

Anything with limits can be imagined, correctly or incorrectly, as an object,
even some language in the way that it is remembered, if you consider
each repetition a fact or object of varying strength in various situations of frequency and quantity,
and although you can never vary an unconscious wish,
which can only reveal itself in the contingency of the words, sexualizing the words, the way a shadow moves up a wall of trees growing intensely gold at sunset. Her equivalent for this is a time-lapse photograph of lightning, in proportion to each moment you are looking. It is her attempt to show him a lightning storm or any interval of colored light on the plain as what is good in life, the person, and what is good, so instead of saying what time it is, she is asking, where is the time, its ratio as an opened lens on clear sky. It may be relevant to ask if this kind of autobiography limits formal or object possibilities, meaning less neutral or less real within her empathy for what is good in life from his point of view. From her point of view, feminizing an art of presence such as moving or speaking, with its distinct kind of maneuverability is akin to those collages that verge on trompe l’oeil. Only when she looks closely does she realize that that head is really not the one connected to that body, although everyday gestures or tensions accrete an intimacy she can recognize. Be that as it may, real and constant luminosity of the parts can create a real self who will remain forever in the emotion of a necessary or real person. To deny this is to deny the struggle to make certain meanings stick.