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**“WHAT I WANTED WAS NOTHING TO DO WITH MONUMENTS”
ERRING AND LYN HEJINIAN’S *THE GUARD***

NERYS WILLIAMS

Searching and error, then, would be akin. To err is to turn and to return, to give oneself up to the magic of detour. One who goes astray, who has left the protection of the center, turns about, himself adrift and subject to the center, and no longer guarded by it. ¹

— *Maurice Blanchot*

I

It is tempting to assert that the book in American poetry is an agonistic site where problematic literary legacies can be addressed or resolved momentarily. While this proposition is an alluring one, contemporary poets’ continued fascination with the book as both an expansive and liberating site also suggests that it is being redeployed as an enabling form. One could claim that for recent poets the book becomes a dynamic field in which theory and praxis not only intersect, but are indistinguishable from one another. As Lyn Hejinian states somewhat quixotically:

Theory asks what practice does and in asking, it sees the connections that practice makes. Poetic language, then, insofar as it is a language of linkage, is a practice. It is practical. But poetry insofar as it comments on itself (and poetic form is, among other things, always a poem's self-commentary), is also theoretical.²

In considering Hejinian’s poetry, I will attempt to examine how this transformative approach to theory and practice is orchestrated within the structure of the poetry book. Furthermore, this essay will consider how the figure of the book presents what Hejinian terms a certain “lyric dilemma” or “aporia” between a formal construction and a provisional enquiry. This tension between structure and spontaneity is one which Hejinian’s poetics both embraces and celebrates. Eventually, I will suggest that we can further understand the tensions between formal “containment”, a spontaneous lyricism, and a transformative impulse, through a reading of “erring” in Hejinian’s *The Guard* (1984). Drawing from Hejinian’s early poetics, an “erring” reading of the momentum and dynamics generated *within* the scope of her poetry book will allow us to reflect upon the discreet negotiation between intentionality and provisionality which her poetry enacts.

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1. Maurice Blanchot, “Plural Speech: Speaking Is Not Seeing”, in *The Infinite Conversation*, trans. Susan Hanson, Minneapolis and London, 1993, 26.

2. Lyn Hejinian, “A Common Sense”, *The Language of Inquiry*, Berkeley, 2000, 356. Further references to Hejinian's essays will be taken from this collection, unless otherwise noted, and the original dates of publication will be indicated in the footnotes.

Initially, it is worth turning to aspects of Hejinian's poetry and poetics, since they grant us a position from which to introduce her engagement with the book as an enabling form for experimentation and enquiry. In Hejinian's introduction to *The Language of Inquiry*, which collects most of her essays and papers given over the last twenty-five years, she states:

Poetic language is also a language of improvisation and intention. The intention provides the field of inquiry and improvisation is the means of inquiring. Or, to phrase it another way, the act of writing is a process of improvisation within a framework (form) of intention.³

Far from asserting a coercive structure, Hejinian suggests that formal constraints enable the possibility of a certain poetic freedom. Indeed, Hejinian's poetry testifies to such an enquiry into the poetics of the book as a site which allows for a sustained experimentation in a lyrical nexus. Her most celebrated work, *My Life*, examines the construction of an autobiography while interrogating distinctions between prose and poetry within a procedural matrix.⁴ Her later book, *Oxota*, subtitled "A Short Russian Novel", is composed of two hundred and seventy free sonnets, significantly called "chapters", inspired by Pushkin's "novel in verse" *Eugene Onegin*.⁵ Her collaborative works, such as *Leningrad* (with Michael Davidson, Ron Silliman and Barrett Watten, 1991); *Sight* (with Leslie Scalapino, 1999) and *Sunflower* (with Jack Collom, 2000) create a space for dialogue between the writers themselves.⁶ Furthermore, their internal "discussions" within the book often promote humorous inconsistencies and conflicts.

We can begin by making the general assertion about Hejinian's work that the spatial co-ordinates of the poetry book provide a welcome respite from the concept of the individual lyric as a purely self-contained entity. The following section from *Oxota* grants us an insight into the design which Hejinian proposes for her own poetry book:

But to return to the theme of the novel and poetry
That is, one theme
The time comes when each individual poem reveals not only
its own internal connections but also spreads them out

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3. *The Language of Inquiry*, 3.

4. Writing *My Life* in 1978 in her thirty-seventh year, Hejinian constructed a volume of thirty-seven sections of thirty-seven sentences, each section paralleling the year of her life. In the second edition, published eight years later, Hejinian added eight sections and inserted eight new sentences to each original section to "update" the new work.

5. Hejinian has noted with considerable glee that "seeing the book shelved under the heading 'Fiction' in a number of bookstores has secretly delighted me". See "A Local Strangeness: An interview with Lyn Hejinian by Larry McCaffrey and Brian McHale" in *Some Other Frequency: Interviews with Innovative American Authors* ed. Larry McCaffrey, Philadelphia, 1996, 131.

6. Full details of the volumes mentioned are: *My Life*, Los Angeles: Sun and Moon Press, 1987; *The Cold of Poetry*, Los Angeles: Sun and Moon Press, 1994; *Oxota: A Short Russian Novel*, Great Barrington MA: Figures, 1991; *Sight*, Washington: Edge Books, 1999; *Leningrad: American Writers in the Soviet Union*, San Francisco: Mercury House, 1991; and *Sunflower*, Great Barrington MA: The Figures, 2000.

externally, anticipating the integrity each poem requires in order to explain obscure points, arbitrary elements, etc., which, if they were kept within the limits of the given text, would seem otherwise to be mere examples of the freedom of expression.⁷

The immediate collapsing of genre distinctions in this passage could be placed in the wider context of early language writing's general fascination with cross-genre work and its scepticism towards divisions between theory and praxis. But what seems particularly useful in examining *Oxota* as an instance of Hejinian's own intention for the poetry book is the emphasis on refuting the autonomy of individual "chapters" as moments of lyric epiphany or "mere examples of the freedom of expression." Far from being closed self-contained units, the passage suggests that the internal dynamics of each chapter provide a lateral "anticipation" or momentum for other chapters. We may also begin to read Hejinian's book as challenging conventional patterns of establishing knowledge and meaning in a poetic text. An essay by Charles Bernstein "Artifice of Absorption", notoriously written in verse, places into focus the tensions between the establishing and disruption of meaning within a poem. His comments alert us to a further characteristic of Hejinian's writing:

An individual poem may
be understood as having a restricted or general
economy. Indeed, part of the meaning of a poem may
be its fight for accumulation; nonetheless, its
text will contain destabilizing elements — errors
unconscious elements, contexts of (re)publication
& the like — that will erode any proposed
accumulation that does not allow for them.⁸

This conflict between an accumulation of meaning and its simultaneous disruption is read by Bernstein as a necessary procedure generated by poetic language within an individual poem. But we might also want to consider how these resistances which Bernstein indicates as characterising poetic language assume a pivotal role in the writing of Hejinian's own poetry book. Usefully "Artifice of Absorption" also points us towards a context of *rewriting* which informs the reception and interpretation of the poetic work. This act of rewriting is one which Hejinian practices most explicitly in "The Composition of the Cell", anthologised in the collection *The Cold of Poetry* (1994). Drawing on her 1992 book *The Cell*, this later work takes a sentence from each of the original one hundred and fifty sections, in effect creating an alternative "Cell" which works neither as a synopsis nor shorthand but as a transformed text. Marjorie Perloff comments that this trope of concentration and the numerical layout of "The Composition of the Cell" is

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7. *Oxota*, "Chapter 192".

8. Charles Bernstein, "Artifice of Absorption" in *A Poetics*, Cambridge MA, 1992, 16.

reminiscent of the patterning of Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*.⁹ One cannot help but be lured into the cross-referencing which "The Composition of the Cell" demands. For example, the following line "64.1 When I'm nervous I'm narrative" leads to the relevant section in *The Cell* which then yields a simultaneously surprising and reassuring reference to Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*:

When I get nervous I'm
     narrative
 Chronological
 Begin again
 See life dissolving vegetate again

The perpetual green and yellow
     take shape in different and
     combined tips of light
 Like a moth in an
     episode
 There are no words closer
     to the intimate resemblance than
     these
 Of whose method in our
     work we can create
 Footfalls
 Perpetual divisions in the widening
     fact for page and transportation
     in grass.¹⁰

Beginning with a confession, this section curiously shifts its opening lyrical inflection to concentrate upon a phenomenological engagement with the world. The admission that narrative and even chronology is a somewhat neurotic compulsion is undercut by the command "Begin again". Throughout *The Cell*, Hejinian constantly and playfully undermines the temptation towards a narrative self-indulgence through making aphoristic remarks and admonitions. While perhaps we cannot state that Hejinian is motivated by the same ambitions or rhetorical gestures which drive *Leaves of Grass*, there is an unexpected correspondence between these books. In reading this extract from *The Cell*, I am reminded of Whitman's celebrated: "Do I contradict myself? / Very well then I contradict myself, / I am large, I contain multitudes."¹¹ Although initially *The Cell* proposes that "there are no words closer to intimate resemblance than these" this inflection of a *nomina sint numina* position is radically dissected by the division between the "fact for page" and its "transportation in grass". These contradictions, disturbances or

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9. See Marjorie Perloff *Wittgenstein's Ladder: Poetic Language and the Strangeness of the Ordinary*, Chicago, 1996, 211-18.

10. *The Cell*, Los Angeles: Sun and Moon Press, 1992 90.

11. Walt Whitman, *The Complete Poems* ed. Francis Murphy, Harmondsworth, 1979, 123.

even resistances in both Whitman and Hejinian's work prevent the book from turning into an exercise of lyrical infallibility and dominance. As has been often noted, the "I" careering through "Song of Myself" curiously unthreads, and even erases the dominance of a static subject position. Hejinian herself proposes that subjectivity is less a fixed entity than "a mobile (and mobilized) reference point."¹²

One could thus propose that the poetry book allows for conflicts and contradictions. These refute any tendency to privilege the lyric or to validate what Hejinian calls "its smug pretension to universality and its tendency to cast the poet as guardian to Truth"¹³ Perhaps then we can begin to read indeterminacy and contradiction as paradoxically integral strategies for resisting subjectivity as a static organising principle. Contradictory elements in Hejinian's design for the book open up breaches in the text which do not have to be resolved and which propel the work away from the dangers of solipsism. Perloff's insightful discussion of "The Composition of the Cell" and its relationship to Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* draws attention to the following passage from the philosopher's work:

If I wrote a book "The world as I found it," I should also have to report on my body and say which limbs obey my will and which do not, etc. Namely, this would have to be a method of isolating the subject, or rather of showing that in an important sense there can be no subject: of it alone, namely, there could be *no* reference in this book.¹⁴

Hejinian equally interrogates the impossibility of resting upon the confines of an isolate subjectivity as an organising principle for *Oxota*. In a section dedicated to the poetics of reading (and one cannot help but consider that it reflects upon the process of writing too), Hejinian muses:

An adolescent, reading, doesn't look around even once — is it
some tension of age that prevents me from expending all
my attention?
And what is it I want now from a book?
With curiosity I watched a head moving through the grass
The sentences could not be divided
Outside they say, let well enough alone
Inside they say, don't step outside
Here's an extreme situation
My figure would disappear¹⁵

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12. Hejinian, "The Person and Description", *Poetics Journal* 9 (1991), 167.

13. *The Language of Inquiry* p. 41. It should be noted that Hejinian's reference to the lyric here points specifically to "the coercive, epiphanic mode in some contemporary lyric poetry", 41.

14. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus* #5.631 cited by Perloff in *Wittgenstein's Ladder*, 216.

15. *Oxota*, "Chapter 130".

This overwhelming impression of the book as a site of containment is one that Hejinian productively struggles against. Her poetics constantly emphasise subjectivity as a dynamic of momentum and movement, typified in her essays as a form of restlessness within the confines of formal constraints. This resistance to a static positioning can be read in Hejinian's puzzling over the wisdom of "Outside they say, let well enough alone / Inside they say, don't step outside". Pondering this conundrum, Hejinian's text is resistant to such dualisms which threaten to immobilise, or even erase her "figure" in a disappearing act. Certainly, Hejinian is suspicious of constructing a book in which a subjectivity dependent upon ideas of authority asserts the centralising nexus of the work. This search for an aesthetic of the book which problematises the lyric's claim to mastery is given cryptically by an assertion in *The Guard* that "what I wanted was nothing to do with monuments".¹⁶ The challenge facing Hejinian is how to refute the "monumental" ambition implicit in the writing of the poetry book while also maintaining the formal intentions which provide a site for a sustained poetic enquiry. As she puts it in her essay, "The Rejection of Closure":

Writing's forms are not merely shapes but forces; formal questions are about dynamics — they ask how, where and why the writing moves, what are the types, directions, number and velocities of a work's motion. The material aporia objectifies the poem in the context of ideas and of language itself.¹⁷

Recognising this impulse towards mobility in *The Guard* as a form of erring will allow us to understand the intentionally contradictory elements in Hejinian's work. But before engaging with *The Guard* in detail, a conceptualization of Hejinian's erring impulse can be formulated from her early essays.

II

An early reference to erring occurs in the 1976 essay "A Thought is the Bride of What's Thinking." Here the remarks are perhaps more consistent with Hejinian's initial approach to error as mistake. But usefully she draws attention to a form of tracing, retreading, or repetition, informing an errant passage that is by no means a narrative of "progress":

Distortion, or error, To err is to wander, probably in an unanticipated direction, inadvertently. The mistake is not necessarily without advantage, though it may be irrevocable.

Ink, or, the guitar. Returning from the middle distances, to the same points, repeatedly, from whatever direction, one homes, like a nomad or migrant. Perhaps that is a function of thought, nomadic homing — undertaken (consciously or not) in defiance of all narratives of progress.¹⁸

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16. *The Guard*, 29.

17. "The Rejection of Closure" in *The Language of Inquiry*, 40-58, 42. Originally published in 1985.

18. *The Language of Inquiry*, 15.

The identification of “to err” with “to wander” is consistent with its etymological root — deriving from the Latin *errare* — to stray, wander or rove. What is most striking in Hejinian’s formulation is the initial suggestion that the “mistake” may not be recalled. “Irrevocable” paradoxically also suggests something which is unalterable, even fixed. Mining this dilemma, the second section presents us with two contradictory assertions in the oxymoronic “nomadic homing”. Hejinian seems to claim that a return to a point of origin is a tenable aim. This section betrays an inflexion of Gertrude Stein’s itinerary of “beginning again and again.”¹⁹ For Stein, the insistent gesture of “homing” is not an innocent retreat to a point of origin. She declares in “Portraits and Repetitions” that “there is no such thing as repetition”, and continues “It is not repetition if it is that what you are actually doing because naturally each time the emphasis is different”.²⁰

Stein’s work features as a constant point of reference for Hejinian’s poetics, and the parallels with her work may become clearer when we consider the erring proposed by Hejinian’s 1978 essay “If Written Is Writing”. There is a certain process of *accretion* in Hejinian’s poetry book, a building up of propositions which evoke a Steinian insistence upon a text that is not writing but “composition”. Indeed Hejinian indicates that a focus on the suggestiveness of language generates a self-perpetuating linkage of associations:

This becomes an addictive motion — but not incorrect, despite such distortion, concentration, condensation, deconstruction and digressions that association by, for example pun and etymology provide; an allusive psycholinguism .... The process is composition rather than writing.²¹

Certainly the assumptions of this work exist within the context of early language writing’s preoccupation with the viscosity and materiality of language.²² What is more striking is Hejinian’s description of a lateral movement that is “not incorrect” within the text. In insisting upon composition, rather than writing, Hejinian is drawing on Stein’s “Composition as Explanation” and its evocation of a Jamesian continual present:

The time of the composition is the time of the composition. It has been at times a present thing it has been at times a past thing it has been at times a future thing it has been at times an endeavour at parts of all of these things. In my beginning it was a continuous present a beginning again and again and again.²³

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19. Gertrude Stein, *Look at Me Now and Here I am*, ed. Patricia Meyerowitz, Harmondsworth, 1984, 26.

20. *ibid.*, 100, 107.

21. *The Language of Inquiry*, 28.

22. See, for example, Charles Bernstein “I want to establish the *material* the stuff of writing, in order, in turn, to base a discussion of writing on its medium rather than on preconceived ideas of subject matter or form”, *Contents Dream 1975-1984*, Los Angeles: Sun & Moon Press, 1986, 63.

23. *Look at Me Now and Here I am*, 29.

In Stein's work, this form of temporal folding suggests an accretive measure. The insistence on the "time of the composition" allows us to consider the text, and our own context of the book, as an ongoing method of description which is not harnessed to immobilising or objectifying the world. In the 1986 essay "Two Stein Talks", Hejinian draws attention to Stein's work as an "encounter with the world."²⁴ This word "encounter" is significant, and an important development in Hejinian's own poetics. Peter Nicholls draws attention to this sense of "encounter", as a thread between Stein and Hejinian's work in their application of a "phenomenological literature". Urging us to understand Stein's work then not purely in the terms of self-reflexivity but as a "dynamic sense of inherence in the world", Nicholls suggests that the nature of this encounter could be read as "a refusal of any pursuit of knowledge or truth which would seek to reduce the other to the same".²⁵ Viewed in a context of erring, we can begin to see how the condition of "knowledge" becomes tentative at best. We may even want to ascribe to erring the possibility of recognising and acknowledging alterity.

Following this lead from the early poetics, it is significant that Hejinian also considers ethics in these early essays. In "A Thought is the Bride of What's Thinking", an ethical poetics is sketched by Hejinian's discussion of an "inclusive art" of a certain "integrity".²⁶ Characteristically, Hejinian re-evaluates and redeploys the word "integrity", suggesting that it is not indicative of completeness but of "an infinite capacity for questioning".²⁷ Calling for responsibility and responsiveness, the claim of this early essay remains somewhat elliptical. What seems particularly pertinent to our inflexion of erring is Hejinian's warning against "the dangerous purism of a conventional dictionary definition of the ethical ('the condition of not being marred or violated; unimpaired or uncorrupted condition; original, perfect state; soundness')".²⁸ Although this comment does not propose an "erring ethics" *per se*, it certainly suggests an ethical enquiry which ultimately remains unformulated and not predetermined. Earlier in the work she proposes that "to have definite and final opinions, is a matter of doubt to the ethical intellect".²⁹ Yet there is an equivocal oscillation in this early piece between Hejinian's gesture to the ethical as being non-prescriptive and the closing evocation of the writer exerting a "moral force of combination" which suggests judgement or value.³⁰ It will be necessary to assess how this dilemma is broached in *The Guard* and how the poetry book enacts its own theoretical enquiry through an erring composition.

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24. *The Language of Inquiry*, 97.

25. Peter Nicholls, "Phenomenal Poetics Reading Lyn Hejinian" in *The Mechanics of the Mirage: Postwar American Poetry*, eds. Michel Delville and Christine Pagnouelle, Liège, 2000, 242-243.

26. *The Language of Inquiry*, 7-21. Originally published in 1975.

27. *ibid.*, 20.

28. *ibid.*, 20.

29. *ibid.*, 20.

30. *ibid.*, 21.

III

The Guard was originally published by Tuumba Press as an individual volume. Since then it has been reprinted in *The Cold of Poetry* (1994), a book that restores Hejinian's earlier volumes of poetry. Although *The Guard* now forms part of this collection, the work has retained its original form as an individual book. Divided into eight extended sections, *The Guard* combines domestic tableaux, aphoristic statements, meditations on acts of cognition, vignettes and philosophical reflections. Hejinian sustains a remarkable sense of momentum throughout each of the sections without capitulating to a lyric poetics of immediacy or spontaneity. Hejinian meditated upon the writing of *The Guard* at some length in the essay "Language and 'Paradise'", where she indicates that the work began as a response to the opening Canto of Dante's *Divine Comedy*. This ambitious evocation of an epic terrain of *purposeful* roaming cues our reading of erring and its relationship to a poetics of the book. Hejinian remarks that her attraction to Dante's opening lines; stemmed from a proposition of a work beginning in "the middle".³¹ Unsurprisingly, this epic opening appears as a skewed intertext in *The Guard*. Near the centre of Hejinian's own book we find the following evocation: "When memorized midway this life we lie on / But there was no reply — my husband / had gone back to sleep"(27). Taken out of Hejinian's context, this appropriation of Dante's line would appear to translate the heroic epic into a bathetic evocation of everyday life. But Hejinian's intentions for her configuration of the book are complex. What is taken from this "beginning" is less an imposition of itinerary upon the work, than an invocation to consider what the essay will call "the lyric dilemma". The title, "Language and 'Paradise'", is drawn from the closing line of *The Guard*, and proposes for Hejinian a certain lyric aporia which motivates the writing. A reading of this dilemma initially appears to return us to what Hejinian sees as Dante's "challenge" of "capturing" experience into words:

Dante says "I turn the face of my words towards the poem itself, and address it" .... The word "captives" refers to several things. First and most important, to capturing the world in words. I want to explain to myself the nature of the desire to do so, and wonder aloud if it is possible. The poem opens with a challenge to the poem itself and raises the lyric dilemma.³²

Here the impossibility of harnessing experience to language is not seen as inadequacy but as a desire located within language. More recently, Hejinian makes reference to an understanding of "dilemma" and "aporia" in the light of Jacques Derrida's examination of the irresolvable doubts and hesitations that the reading of a text elicits.³³ But most alluring in Hejinian's early account of this problem in "Language and 'Paradise'" is the suggestion that language generates a persistent "restlessness". Hejinian frames this characteristic in "The Rejection of Closure" as a "Faustian" longing for knowledge and a

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31. Hejinian, "Language and 'Paradise'", *Line 6*, 1985, 86. The opening lines of Dante's *Inferno* read: "Midway this way of life we're bound upon / I woke to find myself in a dark wood /Where the right road was well and truly gone", from *The Divine Comedy: Hell*, translated Dorothy L. Sayers, Harmondsworth, 1974, 71.

32. "Language and 'Paradise'", 91.

33. See, for example, Hejinian's "Reason", in *The Language of Inquiry*, 337-54.

continual “curiosity”.³⁴ The form that this knowledge takes is constantly reviewed in the poetry. “Paradise” in Hejinian’s configuration suggests “a horizontal or spatial sense of time, eternity being that moment when time is transmuted into space”.³⁵ Against this is the proposal of language as a constant perceptual encounter with the world which exerts a particular temporal pressure upon the work. Indeed, in a later essay Hejinian refers to the line as establishing a form of “perceptual rhythm” in her poetry.³⁶

Viewed in this light, *The Guard* becomes less the quest for the “right road” lost, than a focus within a pattern of erring in an attempt to sustain the temporal mobility of the book. The work enfolds the domestic, the quotidian, and the political, added to a self-reflexive commentary within a labyrinthine enquiry of the lyric. When combined, these elements go beyond accretion to a saturation of the text which frequently overflows into aphorism. This tension in *The Guard*, between a constantly shifting process of perception and encounter, and an impulse towards aphoristic display which frequently slips, generates a thwarted and erratic mobility. Hejinian indicates that her intention is “to set the work in motion against itself, so to speak, to establish the inward concentricity, the pressure, the implosive momentum that stands for the conflict between time and space in the poem”.³⁷

Turning to the opening section of *The Guard* allows us to consider how this passage of erring can be read as an enquiry generated against its formal constraints:

Can one take captives by writing —
 “Humans repeat themselves.”
 The full moon falls on the first. I
 “whatever interrupts.” Weather and air
 drawn to us. The open mouths of people
 are yellow & red — of pupils.
 Cannot be taught and therefore cannot be.
 As a political leading article would offer
 to its illustrator. But they don’t invent
 they trace. You match your chair.

Such hopes are set, aroused
 against interruption. Thus —
 in securing sleep against interpretation.
 Anyone who could believe can reveal
 it can conceal. A drive of remarks

and short rejoinders. The seance
 or session. The concentric lapping.
 If the world is round & the gates are gone ...
 The landscape is a moment of time

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34. *The Language of Inquiry*, 49.

35. “Language and ‘Paradise’”, 86.

36. “Line”, in *The Language of Inquiry*, 131-134, 133. Originally published in 1988.

37. “Language and ‘Paradise’”, 85.

that has gotten into position.
 Why not arrive until dawn. Cannot be taught
 and therefore cannot be
 what human cunning can conceal. (11)

This extract reads as a constantly interrupted meditation. Propositions and aphorisms build up through parataxis as one sentence displaces another. The opening is preoccupied with ideas of restraint, enclosure, focus and pedagogy. Hejinian comments that *The Guard* is “about words ... It’s words who are guards. And users of words. Do they guard us or do they guard their things? And are they keeping something in or something out?”³⁸ There are certainly rules and constraints acknowledged in this section — actions are “repeated”, anything that “Cannot be taught” “cannot be”, and we are told “they don’t invent they trace”. Even the cartoon is prompted, if not guided, by the rhetoric of the political leading article. We can re-connect the “leading article” with the prominence of “one” “first” and “I” in the opening lines. Evidently, Hejinian’s poetry places a troubled focus on the authority of the static, single speaking subject.

But this section’s position on the “I” or “whatever interrupts” is ambiguous. The broaching of a lyric dilemma presents us with a contradictory pose of “hopes”, which are somehow “aroused against interruption”. In “Two Stein Talks”, Hejinian had indicated that she resists James’s conceptualisation of consciousness as a stream of thought or a certain “continuum”. Consciousness, Hejinian remarks “often does appear to be broken up, discontinuous — sometimes radically, abruptly and disconcertingly so.”³⁹ Importantly in “Language and ‘Paradise’”, the poet suggests that the lyric “appears to seek to extend the continuity of consciousness”.⁴⁰ Read within the context of the poetics, this section enacts an ambivalence towards a pressure for continuity that is associated not only with the lyric form but with the narrative ambition of the poetry book. Indeed, there is the suggestion here that this pressure towards continuity, or what Veronica Forrest-Thomson calls the “naturalisation” of poetic language, would “conceal” or deny an interpretative freedom. We could even extend this sense of “denial” to a repression of a latent meaning that remains condensed or hidden in “securing sleep against interpretation”.⁴¹ Although this line may not point us definitively towards Freud’s ‘Dream-Work’, it does evoke a preoccupation with a trace or encryption which the text may indeed “guard”.⁴² We could even re-inscribe this reading within Hamlet’s equivocation of “To sleep perchance to dream”, which unravels a further aspect of a lyric

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38. Hejinian, “Comments for Manuel Brito”, in *The Language of Inquiry*, 177-98, 196. Originally published in 1992.

39. *The Language of Inquiry*, 103.

40. “Language and ‘Paradise’”, 95.

41. See Veronica Forrest-Thomson, *Poetic Artifice*, Manchester, 1978.

42. At the time of writing, Hejinian is engaged in an extensive work entitled *The Book of a Thousand Eyes*, “a night work”.

“dilemma” as a paralysis between intention and action that is latent in the figuration of the book.

Certainly in the opening of *The Guard*, Hejinian is suspicious of any claim for a lyric continuity — or extension of the lyric consciousness which might appear to smother the provocative imbrication of meaning inherent in the text. But is it enough to relegate her ambition to a focus on a poetics of play and deferral? The preoccupation with authority in the opening of the extract suggests that there is a purposive intentionality at work. *The Guard* indicates that the lyrical impulse towards continuity must not simply be read as a narrative of progress. This drive towards progress is associated with a display of authority, and there are already indications that Hejinian reads this display as a censorial proviso upon her composition.

The close of the extract returns us to more familiar intertextual territory. We are certainly in a Dante-esque landscape with its indication of “the gates are gone”. There is also an invitation here to an errant passage of “concentric lapping”, and the momentum of section appears to accelerate with its awareness to the world locatable outside of the book. “The landscape is a moment of time / that has gotten in position”. But this “surplus” or saturation in the text is once more thwarted by the repeated execution of the aphorism: “Cannot be taught”. This gnomic statement is then undermined by the reference to a certain “human cunning”. Reading this line intertextually, this could be a reference to an Edenic fall, as human curiosity becomes human error and a banishment outside the “gates”, a proposition which is eerily evoked later in the poem as a resurrection of ghosts “longing to have their feet fit in boots. / And finish in Eden” (15). Moving away from a purely citational reading, the poetry strikes a warning against a predetermined itinerary, the context of pedagogy alerts us to an alternative poetics which is not predisposed to asserting claims to authority or definitive knowledge. A proposition which is later reinforced in the work by the suspicion of a claim to poetic mastery or authority: “what I wanted was nothing to do with monuments”(29).

While a poetics of erring through a serpentine wandering in the text serves to counter the problems of rhetorical performance, I want to emphasise that Hejinian’s work is attuned to an interplay within the constraints of the conventions of the poetry book. Erring then offers a method of interrogating established conventions without a dependency on an overarching commentary or authoritative critique. Furthermore, Hejinian’s ambition in *The Guard* seems less about fetishising the indeterminacies of the text than examining the tensions which exist between a desire towards restless momentum, a pithy aphoristic commentary, and the formal configuration of the composition.

Turning finally to a later section from *The Guard* may help to elucidate these claims. The following excerpt bears a striking resemblance to the performance of an operatic aria, albeit an aria which attempts to include the mundane and the overlooked details of daily life:

Loosely a bullfrog exits a pond
My heart did suck .... to fidget, soothed
... by seawater, restless ... against
the unplugged phone. Barking up the street
in a rainstorm as a rose

with ardent jiggling stands. A jackhammer
shatters the pavement — was this repression
radiant with static and a single dog.

However the lawnmower is idling
outdoors ... it is like slowly throwing oneself
...as if simply to walk into arms ... so much
restlessness because one is hungry. The tongue
becomes observant and the tongue gets tough
inevitably, like a fruitskin. Now it migrates
(I hear the pen pat as I come to the end
of the phrase and make a comma) in G-minor.

Spring and convention ... the ringing
in my ears is fear of finishing ...
in a bus, but the rhapsodic rider-driver, springing
invention ... (poetry is not solitude).

So she tells me she loves adjectives
... that love is emotional restlessness ...
it mobilizes in modesty ... bathed in modesty ...
(the window is waterish) ... we are reserved
in vehement strings, retraced, retracted
and sometimes reversed exclusively for it. (28)

The opening of this section is overwhelmingly dense with phonetic resonance and glossolalia; there is an onomatopoeic wallowing in the poem. Reading the resonance of sound signifiers, an associative evocation is built up through the bodily and the sensual. Scanning the poem, an association is formed from the membrane of the bullfrog's skin to the beating heart and the physiological implication for speech as the tongue thickens — "the skin gets tough". *The Guard* suggests that the ardent "jiggling" and "restlessness" of this section is working against the implied "repressive" rules of genre, suggested by "Spring and convention" and "the fear of finishing". The humorous dramatic portrait of the lawnmower "idling outdoors" and the emotive response it elicits "it is like slowly throwing oneself", evokes or even conforms to the narrative of the tragic heroine in a libretto. But this melodramatic scene of erotic love is transposed to an insatiable desire for linguistic description, "so much restlessness because one is hungry". This tension between the references to technique and a simultaneity of composition, come to a climax in "(I hear the pen pat as I come to the end / of the phrase and make a comma) in G-minor".

Equally, we could apply this simultaneous examination of composition within the confines of governing rules to the frequent intrusions of "slipped" aphorisms in the text. It is significant that in her revision of "Language and 'Paradise'" for *The Language of Inquiry*, Hejinian adds a pertinent note on the aphorism:

I wanted to resist the synthesizing tendency of the syllogism and the aphorism; I wanted to subvert the power of “therefore” and, wherever one of a series of terms (sentences) might threaten to subsume others (the sort of sacrifice that the dialectical tend to make in its quest for categorical clarity), to deny it the capacity to do so.⁴³

This seems an important gesture to make, since Hejinian attempts to protect her own work from the reading of aphorism as pedagogy. Of course, we cannot read the aphorisms straight — as proverbial or common-knowledge epithets. In a later essay “Strangeness” the criteria for the aphorism is the communication of knowledge in “a mode that condenses material”.⁴⁴ This impetus towards delivering knowledge is skewed in the design of Hejinian’s own aphoristic impulse. Yet there is a contrariness, even a wilful defiance, within *The Guard* towards the totalising import of its own aphoristic texture. In this section we are told “Poetry is not solitude”, even though the opening draws attention to the “unplugged phone”. Hejinian’s playfulness should not be ignored, and the “misappropriation” of aphorisms does generate humour. Take for example the line which *almost* echoes a popular ballad, with its beginning “she tells me she loves —” but what does she love? “adjectives”? This bathos is further punctured by the grandiose statement of “love is emotional restlessness”. Bearing in mind that this scene is played out against a backdrop of “vehement strings”, what we seem to have is a troubadour’s lament in a suburbia of the jackhammer, circuit traffic and the barking dog.

In concluding, I will suggest that considering the passage of the book as a form of erring allows us to approach *The Guard* as circumnavigating claims of epic authority. Erring also promotes a consideration of the composition itself as a form of enquiry. While a provisional poetics (or a poetics which is not predetermined in advance), does not offer definitive solutions to problems of authority and pedagogy in the text, it does alert the reader to the enabling possibilities inherent in the book as a site of composition. Finally, although *The Guard* does not refute its mechanisms of containment, erring offers a productive strategy for testing out the interplay and tensions between the process of composition and governing rules.

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43. “Language and ‘Paradise’”, in *Language of Inquiry*, 68. Revised edition

44. *The Language of Inquiry*, 154. Originally published in 1989.