

Kathy-Ann Tan

The Nonconformist's Poem

Radical “Poetics of Autobiography” in the Works
of Lyn Hejinian, Susan Howe and Leslie Scalapino

Bernd Engler, Michael Hochgeschwender, Jörg Nagler,
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Tübingen, July 2008

Kathy-Ann Tan

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1.	INTRODUCTION	9
	L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Writing and Experimental Strategies of Self-representation	9
2.	DISCOURSES OF AUTOBIOGRAPHY IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY	35
2.1	Metaphors of Self: Critical Approaches to Autobiography from New Criticism to Post-structuralism and Deconstruction	35
2.2	Feminist Perspectives on Autobiography and Self-representation	52
2.3	Theorizing an Experimental Poetics of Autobiography: L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Writing and its Critique of Authorship	60
3.	LYN HEJINIAN'S PLAYFUL POETICS OF AUTOBIOGRAPHY	69
3.1	Reconfiguring the Conventions of Autobiography in <i>My Life</i> and Hejinian's Poetics of the Person	71
3.2	A Poetics of the 'Transpersonal' in <i>Writing Is an Aid to Memory</i> and "The Guard"	89
3.3	The Language of Intention and Digression in <i>A Border Comedy</i> and <i>The Cell</i>	106
3.4	Self-reflexivity and Self-questioning in <i>The Fatalist</i>	112
3.5	An Experiment in Collective Autobiography: <i>The Grand Piano</i>	118

4.	SUSAN HOWE'S HISTORICAL POETICS OF AUTOBIOGRAPHY	125
4.1	Visions and Re-visions: the Act of Self-writing in <i>My Emily Dickinson</i>	131
4.2	Linguistic Decreation and Transgressive Absence: Re-configuring the Autobiographical Subject in <i>The Nonconformist's Memorial, Singularities</i> and <i>The Europe of Trusts</i>	144
4.3	Stretching the Truth? The Autobiographical Impulse in Captivity Narratives ("The Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson" and "Articulations of Sound Forms in Time")	173
4.4	"An Aesthetics of Erasure" in <i>The Midnight</i>	181
5.	LESLIE SCALAPINO'S PHENOMENAL POETICS OF AUTOBIOGRAPHY	193
5.1	Seriality and Autobiographical Subjectivity in <i>The Tango</i>	200
5.2	The "tiny self" in <i>Objects in the Terrifying Tense/Longing from Taking Place</i>	208
5.3	A New Temporal Poetics of Autobiography in <i>New Time</i>	212
5.4	Bending the Autobiographical Genre in <i>Zither & Autobiography</i> and <i>Dahlia's Iris: Secret Autobiography and Fiction</i>	215
6.	CONCLUSION	229
	BIBLIOGRAPHY	237
	INDEX	253

1. INTRODUCTION

L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Writing and Experimental Strategies of Self-representation

Could we have those trees cleared out of the way?
And the houses, volcanoes, empires? The natural
panorama is false, the shadows it casts are so many
useless platitudes. Everything is suspect. Even
clouds of the same sky are the same. Close the door
is voluntary death. There is one color, not any.

Prove to me now that you have finally undermined
your heroes. In fits of distraction the walls cover
themselves with portraits. Types are not men. Admit
that your studies are over. Limit yourself to your
memoirs. Identity is only natural. Now become
the person in your life. Start writing autobiography.
(Barrett Watten, "Mode Z")

At the recent "Poetry and Public Language 2007" conference held at the University of Plymouth, Lyn Hejinian was one of the keynote speakers.¹ In her keynote address, titled "The Sad Note in a Poetics of Consciousness," she focused on Barrett Watten's early poem "Mode Z," explicating her long-standing preoccupation with the last three lines of Watten's poem. Surely, Hejinian asks, the ultimate imperative, "Start writing autobiography" and the phrase "Identity is only natural" in the previous line are meant to be read ironically, as Watten's poetic strategy, in keeping with his affiliation to the Language school of poetry, would rather be to create a sense of socially-reflexive subjectivity that remains deliberately absent in

¹ "Poetry and Public Language 2007," an international conference on contemporary poetry sponsored by the University of Plymouth and Dartington College of Arts was organized by Professors Tony Lopez and Anthony Caleshu, and took place from 30 March to 1 April 2007.

the text. Or perhaps not, Hejinian goes on to suggest, as Watten's directive could be read as part of his overarching tactic in the poem, which is to undermine and complicate the very approach it seems to put forward. That is, articulation and disarticulation, affirmation and doubt, ambitious self-fashioning and self-effacing anonymity, contradiction and coherence, actually co-exist within the framework of the poem. "Mode Z" thus requires the imaginative participation of the reader to constantly re-invent and revise the contexts in which the poem makes sense.

Hejinian's reading of Watten's poem struck a chord in me, particularly because it reflected my own enduring fascination with what seems to be a fundamental paradox in contemporary linguistically innovative, 'experimental' poetry – the existence of a strong autobiographical impulse despite a poetic ethos of multiplicity and collective authorship which posits socially-reflexive forms of subjectivity over the authority of a coherent, lyric "I." That the self seems to have 'returned with a vengeance', and that an autobiographical impulse is strongly present in experimental and avant-garde poetry, which positions itself along the margins and in the fringes of mainstream literature, is also an interesting incongruity, given the fact that the genre of autobiography is otherwise largely embraced by popular culture.

Turning to existing scholarly research on experimental American poetry of the last three decades in an attempt to unravel this 'mystery', I was surprised to discover a lack of engagement with the issue – critics seemed more intent on exploring the linguistically innovative and radically disruptive nature of the writing, leaving little room for an examination of what a new "poetics of autobiography" might imply with regard to broader notions of the construction of selfhood in the text, renegotiations of subjectivity, identity and authorship along gendered lines of inquiry, and the situating of the poetic text within larger postmodern cultural and social formations that shape the poetic consciousness. The following chapters are thus my attempt to bridge this gap and provide an examination of how, and to what end, the autobiographical impulse is reconfigured in the works of three American experimental women poets: Lyn Hejinian, Susan Howe and Leslie Scalapino. Combining theoretical approaches with close readings of poetic texts and poetological essays which render themselves particularly apt to an investigation of alternative methods of self-construction, I argue that behind the experimental façade of the work of these poets lies a deeper, more 'traditional' urgency to reconfigure the ways in which modes of self-perception and self-representation ultimately structure and complicate the very processes of writing.