

# Lyn Hejinian and Russian Estrangement

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**Abstract** This essay shows how the Language poet Lyn Hejinian came to relate her experiences of Russia and her poetics of the “person” to Victor Shklovsky’s concept of estrangement (*ostranenie*). I argue that in *The Guard* (1984), *Oxota* (1991), *Leningrad* (1991), and in other writings about Russia, Hejinian came to conflate poetic estrangement with the estranging effect of Russia itself and, in so doing, developed her poetics of the person, which linked the material text of poetic estrangement with the social poetics of everyday life. Everyday life in Russia seemed to take on the very qualities that she associated with estrangement: the dissolution of defined objects and essential selfhood and their replacement with the dynamic experience that Hejinian defined as “personhood.” At the same time, Hejinian found in this dynamic personhood a means to oppose essentialist national identities, so that Russian estrangement also became central to her utopian vision of bridging the Cold War divide between Russia and the United States.

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Like a word in Russian inspiring notice of the present  
 incorporeality of one's self  
 Lyn Hejinian, *Oxota*, 1991

### 1. Estrangement and the Person

Victor Shklovsky's concept of estrangement (*ostranenie*) has attracted many avant-garde groups, but perhaps none more so than the Language poets, the most prominent avant-garde group in English-language poetry of the last quarter century. Among the Language poets, this theory of poetic estrangement finds no better expression than in Lyn Hejinian. Like Shklovsky, Hejinian extends her poetics of estrangement beyond the textual, connecting the radical artifice of poetic language with the act of seeing the world anew and with the estranging effect of Russia itself, the autonomous poetics of the word as such ("form made difficult") with the renewal of perception in everyday life.

According to Hejinian (2002a: 105), "Sensation of the world and a counter to pessimism are what Language writers, when first encountering Shklovsky in the 1970s, found in his work." It was in the mid-1970s that Barrett Watten and Ron Silliman, two members of the then nascent Language poetry group, introduced her to Victor Erlich's *Russian Formalism* (1955), a book she has described as making an "enormous impact" on the Language poets at that time; of the Formalists, Shklovsky exerted the greatest influence on the group's "sense of literary style and strategies" (Hejinian 1995). Shklovsky and Russian Formalism not only provided Hejinian and other Language poets with a method that emphasized poetic "technique" over the "subjective aesthetic approach" based on "values from psychology or biography" (Watten 1985: 1), they also supplied the model for the Language poets' "utopian project" to create an artistic community in which theory and practice went hand in hand (Hejinian 1995).

Then, in 1983, Hejinian traveled to Russia, the "home" of estrangement and, as fellow Language poet Michael Davidson (2003) puts it, the "fount" for Language poetry theory. There she established a friendship with the Leningrad-based poet Arkadii Dragomoshchenko, initiating an intense, personal and artistic engagement with Russia and Russian writers, which involved Hejinian learning Russian, making extensive and frequent trips to the Soviet Union, and translating the work of Dragomoshchenko and a number of other contemporary Russian poets.<sup>1</sup> While their close artis-

1. Hejinian's initial trip to Russia is documented in Hejinian 1983c. Correspondence and documents from the Lyn Hejinian Papers show that Hejinian made at least six subsequent

tic and personal relationship has already been explored through studies of her translations of Dragomoshchenko's work (Janecek 2001), the translation aesthetics of her own work (Edmond 2002), and the "persistence of Romanticism" in the poetic practice of both writers (Sandler 2005), in this article I aim to show how Hejinian's approximately eight-year period of close engagement with Russia and Russian writers led her to conflate estrangement in art and life. Partly through her developing poetics of the "person," Hejinian came to link three kinds of estrangement: poetic estrangement, the estranging effect produced on her by Russia itself, and estrangement as the basis for a community that would unite Russian and American writers. In what follows, I explore the intertwining of these three levels in Hejinian's poetics of the person and in her poetic and personal engagement with Russia.

The peculiar appeal of Shklovsky's theory of art to avant-garde artists such as Hejinian derives, at least in part, from the internal contradictions within its essential term, *estrangement*. These are immediately apparent in the essay "Art as Device," where Shklovsky (1929 [1917]: 13) makes the famous statement: "In order to return sensation to life, to feel things, in order to make the stone stony, there exists that which is called art. The purpose of art is to impart a sensation of a thing as vision and not as recognition; the device of art is the device of 'estrangement.'"<sup>2</sup> He immediately adds, however, that the "device of art" not only involves returning "sensation to life" but also "the device of form made difficult [*zatrudnennaia forma*], which heightens the difficulty and length of perception, for the perceptual process in art is autonomous and should be prolonged" (ibid.). Here the more conventional Russian Formalist conception of poetic language as autonomous language that draws attention to words as such is combined with the view that poetic language is "expected to de-automatize and 'make strange' not only language but also the objects referred to" (Matejka 1978: 285). As Victor Erlich (1955: 154) points out, Shklovsky's emphasis on perception contrasted with that of some other Formalists, such as Roman Jakobson. Indeed, as Tzvetan Todorov (1985: 139) notes, Shklovsky here conflates two conceptions of poetic language, apparently without noticing, let alone acknowl-

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trips to Russia: in 1985, 1987, 1989 (twice), 1990, and 1991. For more on Hejinian's collaborations with Dragomoshchenko, see Edmond 2002.

2. While I draw freely on translations by Lee Lemon and Marion Reis (Shklovsky 1965: 12) and Benjamin Sher (Shklovsky 1990: 6), I have chosen to translate this passage myself in the interests of literalness and the preservation of ambiguities. Discussing the quoted passage, Sher (2005) acknowledges that "neither Lemon and Reis nor I are in actual fact close to the text," noting that both translations make decisions about the relative emphases on the autonomy of art and on perception of the world.

edging it: “If the process of perception becomes an end in itself through the difficulty of form, we perceive the object less, not more; if estrangement determines the definition of art, the process of perception is imperceptible, and we see the object instead, as if for the first time.” Shklovsky’s famous passage from “Art as Device,” then, proposes what Marjorie Perloff (1991a) would call the “radical artifice” of the autonomous word as the basis of poetic language but simultaneously argues that poetic language, through the device of estrangement, can also renew our perception of the world and can thus oppose the dreaded habituation, or “automatization,” of language and perception that threatens to destroy any real experience of life.<sup>3</sup>

Shklovsky’s conflation of “form made difficult” with the device of estranging the “real” world outside automatized experience has had an enduring appeal to avant-garde artists such as Hejinian, who wish to combine radical formal experimentation with the transformation of everyday life. As Svetlana Boym (1996: 515) argues, “Shklovsky’s ‘Art as Device’ harbors the romantic and avant-garde dream of a reverse mimesis: everyday life can be redeemed if it imitates art, not the other way around. So the device of estrangement could both define and defy the autonomy of art.” Moreover, estrangement, as Shklovsky conceived of it, was a peculiarly Russian concept, because for him it was only in Russia that the estrangement of everyday life could truly be realized. Russia offered the “imagined community of fellow intellectuals” necessary for this utopian goal (ibid.: 518), just as that same community provided the model for the utopian project of the Language poets.

Following Shklovsky, Hejinian (2000: 161) links estrangement in art and life, or what she refers to as “literary praxis” and “social materiality,” terms that parallel fellow Language poet Barrett Watten’s (2003) key theoretical concepts “material text” and “social poetics.” But Hejinian develops her own distinct, though related, view of this relationship over the course of the 1980s and 1990s. She elaborates Shklovsky’s original emphasis on perception through her key terms *experience*, the *person*, and *description*, even as she opposes traditional preconceptions about lyric poetry that are sometimes associated with these terms.

Hejinian’s statements about her poetry express precisely the two conceptions of poetic language that Todorov identifies in Shklovsky’s work, but in

3. On estrangement as a device of mediation between art and life, see also Steiner 1984 and Striedter 1989. Fredric Jameson (1972: 75–79) also discusses what he sees as the “profound ambiguity” in Shklovsky’s theory of poetic language, an ambiguity he identifies primarily in the tension between estrangement in content and form, the latter implying an autonomous aesthetic.

her poetics, these conceptions are combined through her key term *experience*. In defining her poetics, Hejinian (2000: 301) consciously echoes Shklovsky's famous statement in "Art as Device": "The function of art is to restore palpability to the world which habit and familiarity otherwise obscure; its task is to restore the liveliness to life. Thus it must make the familiar remarkable, noticeable again; it must render the familiar *unfamiliar*." Here, the poetic function of estrangement is to renew perception. In the same essay, Hejinian (*ibid.*) also echoingly defines estrangement as all those effects that draw attention to the language itself, through "'roughening,' dissonances, impediments, etc." Elsewhere, however, she describes these literary techniques not simply as drawing attention to language but as Shklovsky's "set of devices intended to restore palpability to things" (*ibid.*: 344). Like Shklovsky, Hejinian (*ibid.*: 301) thus conflates these two forms of estrangement, so that the literary device of form made difficult operates "to alert us to the existence of life and give us the experience of experiencing." But this goes further than Shklovsky in that the estranging poetic text (a tautology for Hejinian) imparts an experience of the process of experiencing, or what she also calls a "consciousness of consciousness," because it draws attention to its own construction (*ibid.*: 144, 344).<sup>4</sup> Through her concept of the "experience of experiencing," Hejinian provides a rationale for Shklovsky's original and unacknowledged conflation of two conceptions of poetic language. For Hejinian, the poetic text, through its impediments (its estranging, self-focused, "autonomous" devices), highlights the process of experiencing (experiential structure and contingency), even as it provides an experience that renews our perception of the world.

Hejinian (*ibid.*: 344) thus gives "preeminence to experience," as "an extension of the poetics implied by Shklovsky's aphorism," one that she (*ibid.*: 95 and 343) quotes twice in her book of essays: "In order to restore to us the perception of life, to make a stone stony, there exists that which we call art." She (*ibid.*: 345–46) rejects, however, the notion that a poetics of experience must "promote immediacy and disdain critique." Rather, poetry affirms life by saying "this is happening" in context, "which is to say, in thought (in theory and with critique) and in history." Without thought, critique, and history, without a self-reflexive consideration of the basis of experience, "there is no sensation, no experience, no consciousness of living"—only

4. Variations on these expressions, central to her definition of poetry, recur throughout Hejinian's essays. In Hejinian 2000, see, for example: "experiencing of experience" (3), "consciousness of life" (8), "consciousness of perception" (67), "experience of experience" (203), "thinking of thinking" (300), "experiences of our perceptions" (315), "experiencing experience" and "consciousness of consciousness" (344), and "*experience* of our experience" (345).

automatization, the loss of experience through the repetitions of everyday existence.<sup>5</sup>

Hejinian further develops her link between estrangement and experience through another central term in her poetics: the *person*. In her essay "The Person and Description," first presented as a talk in 1988, during her period of intense involvement with Russia, she argues: "It is on the improvised boundary between art and reality, between construction and experience, that the person (or my person) in writing exists" (ibid.: 207). In the same essay, Hejinian distinguishes the concepts self and person. She (ibid.: 201) notes that "each person is felt to be individualizing, different, unique." However, this uniqueness remains distinct from "essential selfhood": "Our individuality, in fact, is at odds with the concept of some core reality at the heart of our sense of being. The latter has tended to produce a banal description of the work of art as an expression uttered in the artist's 'own voice.'"

As Marjorie Perloff (1992: 193) points out, Hejinian's poetic practice rejects the concept of "voice" and "all notions of the *self* as 'some core reality at the heart of our sense of being.'" This rejection has been noted by many scholars in her best-known poetic work, *My Life*, which Perloff (1991b: 122) describes as "a language field in which 'identity' is less a property of a given character than a fluid state that takes on varying shapes and that hence engages the reader to participate in its formation and deformation." In *My Life*, there is "a studied refusal to engage in introspection, a steady suspicion of Romantic self-consciousness" (ibid.: 126). Craig Dworkin (1995: 69) identifies the estranging device of "radical parataxis" as a means by which Hejinian avoids the impression of a singular continuous self in *My Life*. Radical parataxis involves taking "several complete narrative texts" and, as Hejinian puts it in *My Life*, breaking them up "into uncounted continuous and voluminous digressions" (quoted in ibid.). The effect is close "to what Gertrude Stein calls *Everybody's Autobiography*, in which the individual life is interwoven with language, perception, and social constructs in such a way that one cannot delineate where 'Lyn Hejinian' leaves off and the world begins" (ibid.: 62). As Lisa Samuels (1997: 116) has put it, in *My Life* "personal experiences" are transformed into "linguistic encounters," whose generalities all Americans might inhabit (ibid.: 111–13). The self is dissolved as "my life" becomes anybody's life in language.

Like Samuels, Charles Altieri notes the continued emphasis on the *I* in Hejinian's work, but he follows Hejinian's own statements on her poetry more closely by stressing the persistence of individuality over inhabitability.

5. Hejinian's extension of estrangement to historical context resembles that made by Yuri Tynianov (see Todorov 1985) and that involved in Jameson's (1972) critique of Shklovsky's theory.

With special regard to Hejinian's *The Cell* (1992), a work written during her period of contact with Russia, Altieri (1999: 149) suggests that Hejinian "dissolves fixed identity while preserving a range of values like individuality and intimacy which have derived from now outmoded depth-psychology versions of selfhood." According to Altieri (*ibid.*: 150), Hejinian still focuses on "the subject's experience," but she rejects dramatic climaxes "because the dramatic organization blinds the author to the most intimate features of repetition and change as life unfolds, and it greatly oversimplifies the play of voices that constitute self-consciousness within that unfolding."

Altieri's distinction between the lyric mode that foregrounds the self as entity rather than a process and Hejinian's work is analogous to Hejinian's own distinction between the self and the person, which she developed in the late 1980s, around the time *The Cell* was written. Hejinian (2000: 201–2) rejects the focus on "the self of the English language, whose definition posits it as the essence of each single human being, the sole and constant point from which the human being can truthfully and originally speak." She contrasts this English notion of self with the lack of an exact Russian equivalent, suggesting that notions of personhood in Russian are consequently more dynamic and less fixed than in English. For Perloff (1992: 193), Hejinian's distinction between Russian and English is "somewhat fanciful," given the strong sense of self in the Russian poetic tradition.<sup>6</sup> The distinction, nevertheless, allows her to "articulate her own view." Instead of the self, Hejinian (2000: 202–3) envisions a dynamic entity she terms the "person": "the exercise of possibilities (including that of consciousness) amid conditions and occasions constitutes a person." The "person" is "a relationship rather than an essence," and "it is here that the epistemological nightmare of the solipsistic self breaks down, and the essentialist yearning after truth and origin can be discarded in favor of the experience of experience." Hejinian associates a nonessentialist, dynamic personhood with the "experience of experience" and thus with the Russian language, which, in her view, lacks an exact equivalent for *self*, and with Shklovsky's conception of poetic language as the language of estrangement. For Hejinian, estrangement imparts to the reader an "experience of experience," but this effect is also central to her concept of the person, which, as Stephen Fredman (2001: 63) points out, "consists of and is known by its descriptions of its own experiences." Hejinian thus sees the "experience of experience" imparted through Russian estrangement as critical to her conception and poetic exploration of the person as "relationship rather than an essence."

Through her conceptions of experience and the person, Hejinian links

6. Stephanie Sandler (2005: 22–23) also discusses this contrast.

her poetics of estrangement to the poetics of everyday life by introducing a third key term: *description*. In her prefatory note to “The Person and Description,” Hejinian (2000: 200) writes of description as being “pivotal to the question of personhood and hence to everyday life”: it occupies an intermediary zone between “art and reality” to create “a space through which a person might step.” In her essay “Strangeness,” Hejinian (*ibid.*: 158) defines description as a response to the world not already shaped by everyday assumptions, presented “in the terms ‘there it is,’ ‘there it is,’ ‘there it is,’” citing as examples the narratives of explorers and descriptions of dreams. Description thus has a “marked tendency toward effecting isolation and displacement, that is, toward objectifying all that’s described and making it strange” (*ibid.*: 138), a statement that alludes to Shklovsky’s concept of estrangement (Shoptaw 1996: 60). Description here allows Hejinian to enact her dynamic conceptions of personhood and the “experience of experience,” because so defined, it refuses preconceived notions of self and world. It also links estrangement in art and life, because as her examples show, description for her explicitly relates estranging writing to encounters with strangeness in the world. For Peter Nicholls (2000: 243), such description is “‘phenomenal’ in the double sense of acknowledging the claims of both the facticity of experience and its strangeness. And this strangeness is the strangeness of some middle ground, where we are somehow caught between the generalizing, abstracting quality of language, on the one hand, and an engagement with the localized forms of a particular perceptual world, on the other.”

Nicholls (*ibid.*: 241) associates Hejinian’s concept of description with the development of a “new sociality” in her work, against the tendency of critics “to focus almost exclusively on modes of self-reflexivity and on a subversion of conventional models of self.” Instead, Nicholls follows Language poet Bob Perelman, who comments on “a decrease in fragmentation, and an increase in complete sentences and discernible narrative structures or gestures” in the work of the Language poets over the course of the 1980s and 1990s, so that the “texture of the writing is more socialized” (quoted in *ibid.*). For Nicholls (*ibid.*), it is significant that Perelman cites Hejinian’s work to exemplify this formal shift toward a “more socialized” texture of writing. This shift occurred between *Writing Is an Aid to Memory* (1978) and *Oxota: A Short Russian Novel* (1991). In the latter, Hejinian most explicitly and extensively utilizes material from her experiences of Russia and from Russian literature and literary theory. Nicholls does not note, however, that the “new sociality” he identifies in Hejinian’s poetic practice beginning with *The Guard* (1984) and her first clear articulation of her poetics of the person both coincide with her period of close contact with Russia.



Oren Izenberg (2003) has addressed the social poetics of Language poetry partly in relation to their contact with Russia, identifying Language poetry's ethos of "collective life" with the collaborative book *Leningrad* (Davidson et al. 1991), an account by Hejinian and fellow Language poets Michael Davidson, Ron Silliman, and Barrett Watten of their 1989 visit to Leningrad to attend an international conference titled "Language—Consciousness—Society."<sup>7</sup> Izenberg (2003: 135) argues that the effect produced by Language poetry is one of "anaesthesia" rather than estrangement, suggesting that Language poetry texts such as *Leningrad* assert a universal human capacity to produce sentences. Hejinian's poetics of estrangement suggests, however, that the sociality of her work is located precisely in the aesthetic, estranging quality of her poetry, a quality that Izenberg dismisses as largely irrelevant to Language poetry. For Hejinian (2000: 170), "aesthetic discovery is also social discovery." Moreover, where Izenberg (2003: 136) argues that Language poetry "is not oriented toward . . . perception," Hejinian (2000: 301) insists, following Shklovsky, that the "function of art is to restore palpability to the world." Far from emphasizing the universal everyday human capacity to produce language, therefore, Hejinian's poetics of estrangement emphasizes precisely the *extraordinary* nature of poetic language.

Hejinian theorized poetic estrangement as a way to affirm personhood, sociality, and community without essential identity. Her contact with Russia provided another way for her to oppose the strictures of essentialist, restrictive identity while emphasizing sociality. First, by engaging with Russia, Hejinian escaped from the realm of American poetry, in which the typecasting of the Language poets and the attacks on their poetics in the 1980s evidenced the difficulties and restrictions of community identity, even an identity based on opposition to essential identity.<sup>8</sup> Second, Hejinian's engagement with Russia opposed the essentialist binary models of identity central to Cold War politics, such as Russian versus American and communist versus capitalist. Instead, she can be seen partly as living out what Barrett Watten (2003: xviii), quoting William Carlos Williams, has described as the dream of a "wedding between Russia and the United States," a utopian vision based on the model of Shklovsky's community of intellectuals, the OPOYAZ, which Watten considers important to Language poetry during its development in the 1970s. Russian estrangement, through its application by American poets, came to stand for the idealized vision of an artistic

7. On the poetics of collective voice in *Leningrad*, see also Silliman 1995.

8. Charles Altieri (1996) argues that Language poetry both advocates a politics of identity and rejects identity. Barrett Watten (2003: 116–18) also makes this point while challenging the conclusions Altieri draws from it in some respects. For an account of one attack on Language poetry in the 1980s, see Sloan 1985.

community that would bridge the Cold War divide, just as Hejinian identified estrangement as enabling a middle ground between life and art. An American poet using utopian Russian theory could dream of reconciling both oppositions.

Estrangement thus became a key point of linkage between material text and the social poetics of everyday life, linking art to life through the figure of the person. The estrangement produced on Hejinian by Russia itself reinforced her sense of a relationship between existential and poetic estrangement. Meanwhile, estrangement also took on a social role as the basis for a community that would unite Russian and American writers.

In the rest of this article, I look at how Hejinian's encounter with Russia drew her attention to the extraordinary strangeness and contingencies of being a person and thus encouraged her to conflate this strangeness with the estranging qualities that she saw as essential to poetic language. In this way, Russia became a key site for poetic and existential exploration as she developed her theory of estrangement based on her concepts description, experience, and the person. Hejinian found that the experience of being in a radically different cultural context alerted her to the cultural contingencies of personhood, just as the estranging effects of poetic language highlighted the contingencies of meaning in language. Thus Hejinian came to conflate poetic estrangement not only with the utopian vision of uniting Russia and the United States but also with the estrangement produced on her by Russia itself.

## 2. Encounters

When Hejinian first traveled to the Soviet Union in June 1983, she had been concerned for some time about the direction taken by her circle of writers. Her letters, journals, and the texts of several talks show that, prior to her trip, she was already thinking about subjectivity and the mediation of experience as critical issues for investigation, which she felt were undervalued in the Language poetry community.<sup>9</sup> At this time, however, Hejinian (1982) still expressed her belief in the primacy of artistic devices and words as such in poetry. Her trip to Russia seems to have encouraged her to relate poetry and poetic estrangement more directly to social and existential ques-

9. For example, in a letter to Susan Leufer and Charles Bernstein, Hejinian (1983a) questioned why some Language poets refused to discuss subjectivity: "Why was the term subjectivity inadmissible, even as something to talk about? Self-expression is an obvious irrelevancy. But subjectivity? . . . What does it mean when one feels one 'doesn't have anything to say'? Who/what determines valid and relevant styles and topics of discourse? (This is the one that concerns me personally—and prompts my question about the topic subjectivity)."

tions of consciousness and experience, issues that coincided or found resonance with those current in Russia's unofficial writing community.

Hejinian's first trip to Russia was very brief, but her correspondence with poets and translators after that trip may have made her look at her own work in a new way, because it forced her to explain her poetics to Russian writers who were not necessarily familiar with her approach to writing or its underlying assumptions. In Leningrad, she left behind several books of poetry, one of which included her poem "The Altitudes." The poet and translator Vladimir Kucheriavkin began translating this poem immediately after she left, and he (Kucheriavkin 1983) addressed to Hejinian questions regarding the poem, which he clearly found somewhat bewildering. In response, Hejinian (1983b) explained the estranging impediments of her poetic language by linking these techniques with existential estrangement, describing her poem as "an autobiography . . . whose subject is the life of the mind."

The influence of Hejinian's experience of Russia on the link she developed between poetic and existential estrangement becomes more evident in her long poem *The Guard*, begun before her first trip to Russia and completed in 1984. Nicholls (2000) identifies this poem as a critical text in her move to a "phenomenal poetics"; I (Edmond 2004) identify it as marking a new stage in her attempt to combine linguistic materiality with a socially located poetics of the person. Hejinian herself (2000: 196) draws a connection between her experience of existential estrangement in Russia and her use of poetic estrangement in *The Guard*: not only did the poem result from the "disorientation and longing" that she experienced through her encounter with Russia and the Russian language, but a "similar disorientation and longing informs much of my writing." Her increasing interest in the phenomenology of experience, already evident in her comment to Kucheriavkin, and a new interest in the strangeness of Russia are both evident in the poem. One clear Russian influence in *The Guard* is the use of Russian animal noises:

But I tell you that cats "say" *mya-ew, mya-ew*  
 dogs *gav-gav*, trains *sheex-sheex-sheekh*  
 (while whistling *ta-too*), roosters cry  
*coo-caw-reh-coo*, frogs croak *kva-kva*, birds  
 in a flock sing *fyou-eet*, except ravens  
 which prefer *karr-karr*, and the ducks quack *kra*  
 bells ring *bom-bomm*, and pigs grunt *hryou-hryou*  
 (Hejinian 1994a [1984]: 30)

The use of foreign animal noises highlights the arbitrary nature of onomatopoeic words. This conventionality is only revealed in the quoted

passage when translation is compared to transliteration. Hejinian (2002b [1987]: 156) writes about this effect in section forty-four of *My Life*, which corresponds to the forty-fourth year of her life (1984–85), the time just after she had written *The Guard*: “But any translator will complain, woof is translation and gav transliteration.” The plain everyday English “woof, woof” also becomes strange when compared to the bark of a dog, because it is shown to be not a transliteration of the dog’s bark, but a translation from animal sound into language, which is conventionalized and uses a limited number of phonemes. A Shklovskian device of poetic estrangement, it thus draws attention to its linguistic materiality and also makes the reader attend to the phenomenal reality of that which it describes—or, as Shklovsky might have said, it renews the “barkness” of the dog’s bark. This passage from *The Guard*, therefore, establishes a direct link between Hejinian’s experience of Russia and Russian and her poetics of estrangement.

Hejinian’s second trip to Russia in May through June 1985 had an even greater impact on her developing linkage between estrangement in art and life. On May 28, 1985, in Leningrad, Hejinian gave a talk on contemporary American poetry, in which she first broadly outlined American poetry, then discussed Language poetry, and finally talked about her own work, focusing on *The Guard*. Her talk emphasized her interest in writing lyric poetry that was a site for consciousness and that addressed the lyric problems of self-expression and mediation. In relation to *The Guard*, she (1985a) noted that “the question of mediation, of poetic language as mediation, is an old problem with lyric poetry—the lament in lyric poetry of the poet unable to say, unable to capture in words, his or her desire to say whatever it is he or she wants to say.” Here one sees Hejinian seeking to relate the resistance or impediments of poetic estrangement, which emphasize the mediating role of language, to questions of experience and its expression in language.

During this trip, Hejinian began to see Russia as playing a crucial role in her exploration of such relationships. Soon after leaving Russia, she (1985b: 90) wrote in her journal: “In Russia I felt the inadequacy of my description . . . of my writing—the subject and the metaphysics of my project. In our circle, discussion is more technical than metaphysical, and I suspect us of being embarrassed by our potential metaphysics. . . . One element of my attachment to Arkadii—my need for him, or at least, my *use* for him (he too uses me, and this reciprocal necessity is part of the amorous dynamic that is characteristic of our imagination of each other)—involves a displacement—or replacement, rather, of the emotional center of my work, *away* from the Language School condition” (emphasis in the original). Hejinian (*ibid.*) then attempted to list the contents of her work in her journal. First on that list was a “phenomenology of consciousness: perception, psychol-

ogy, reality,” which addressed “the position of a person in the real world.” This phenomenology was to be “located within the context of *poetic* language,” and language was to become “the site of a *poetry of consciousness*” (emphases in the original). Hejinian (2000: 202) thus interrelates the poetics of estrangement with a poetics of phenomenology and consciousness, insisting that mediation and the strangeness to which it gives rise are necessary parts of the experience of being a person in the world or what she would later call her experience of being a person as a “relationship rather than an essence.”

Her heightened interest in this relationship arose in two ways from her experience of Russia. The first was simply the estranging effect that Russia itself had on Hejinian. Her list of the contents of her work ends with the following comment: “For days at a time in Russia I was not conscious of being conscious” (Hejinian 1985b: 91). The foreignness of everyday Russia unsettled both her assumptions as a person and her experience of the world, thus heightening her awareness of the contingencies involved.

Second, the discussion of what Hejinian referred to as “meaning”—and what she had missed within her own group of poets in the United States—was central to her literary conversations in Russia and also had an impact on her work. In a letter to the Russian poet Ilya Kutik, she describes the importance of a particular conversation:

By the way, did you know that you yourself had a certain influence on my writing, beginning in 1985? In our circle here we often talked about writing, and sometimes about what we were working on at the time, but usually our discussions were technical, about devices rather than “meanings.” . . . Then in Moscow, in 1985, when we were sitting at a table . . . we began talking about poetry, but at the level of “meaning”—which I found strangely exhilarating and liberating—while it was clear that we all assumed that poetic language is, as you say, the object-subject of thinking, of inquiring, of such “meaning.” In any case, that conversation gave me the courage and context for clarifying my writing and my intentions. Or, to put it another way, I began to insist on acknowledging not just *how* there is writing, but also *why* there is writing. (Hejinian 1990a; emphases in the original)

This letter refers specifically to Kutik’s statement that “in his poetry he was asking the question, ‘Do objects die?’” (Hejinian 2005). Kutik thus began with the existential status of objects in the world rather than with a question of poetic technique, in contrast to the emphasis on technique and its priority to meaning that Hejinian noted within her own circle. By paying greater attention to objects in the phenomenal world, Hejinian came, like Shklovsky, to articulate the relationship between the techniques of estrangement and the phenomenological and experiential objects of inquiry. By allow-

ing meaning or experience or abstract ideas to come before their formal realization, she could develop further her phenomenology of description and strangeness. Moreover, as will be seen below, Kutik's particular question resonated with the link that Hejinian was developing between poetic estrangement and the disorienting loss of objects that characterized her experience of Russia.

Hejinian immediately started building on what she had gained from her trip to Russia. In June 1985, the same month she returned to America, she attended the New Poetics Colloquium at the Kootenay School of Writing in Vancouver. There she presented a talk on *The Guard* titled "Language and 'Paradise.'"<sup>10</sup> In a letter, she (1985c) described this talk as "broaching various metaphysical concerns a la [*sic*] discussions in Moscow and Leningrad."

At this colloquium, Hejinian also read from her unfinished poem "The Person," the very title of which alludes to Hejinian's increasing interest in writing about the lyric problem of describing what it is to be a person. "The Person" would later provide the inspiration and materials for Hejinian's essay "The Person and Description," which, as seen above, identifies the person as a key middle term between everyday life and the estranging effects of art. In September 1985, after her second trip to Russia, she worked on the final three sections of "The Person." These sections are strikingly lyrical and show her interest in direct confrontation with metaphysical and epistemological issues related to her concept of personhood. The last part of "The Person" thus begins with the line "Realism is an unimaginable ballad" and includes the word "NATURE" twice in capital letters. In this section, Hejinian (1994b: 179–80) investigates the phenomenological relationship of a person to the world and the way a person is simultaneously a part of that world:

Described, the corresponding sky  
in circumstantial detail goes up  
as if having yielded—blue  
seems to yield to our gaze—  
having as its object something unknown but  
conscious  
Below the brain are overt gates.

"The Corresponding Sky" was the name of a collaborative project that Hejinian and Dragomoshchenko had embarked on. The name most obviously referred to the extensive correspondence between the two poets that

10. This talk was published under the same title in Hejinian 2000: 59–82. In the preface to the published version, Hejinian (*ibid.*: 59) herself notes the influence of her second trip to Russia on the essay and compares it to the influence of her first trip on *The Guard*.

formed such an important part of their relationship. It was, however, also suggestive of the relationship between words and things, which was at the heart of the project. Both poets set out to write works that explored the phenomenology of perception and description (see Edmond 2002). Hejinian's part of the project was "The Person," while Dragomoshchenko (1986) produced a large number of poems that he published under the title "Nebo sootvetstvii" ("Sky of Correspondences").<sup>11</sup> Both poets focused on description in these poems. In the quoted passage, Hejinian undermines the common association of "circumstantial" with something anecdotal and not generally valid by suggesting that, far from being imprecise, the description of "the corresponding sky" is detailed. Further, "circumstantial" implies being located in time, which human consciousness always is.

The corresponding sky also sets up a link between things: not only between the person and nature but also between people. Hejinian describes the processes of perception and description as sensuous. Object and subject are animated: "blue / seems to yield to our gaze." The object of the gaze is "unknown but / conscious" not only because what is out there in the world is perceived only through the conscious mind of the observer but, less obviously, because being conscious entails the registration of what is unknown, or strange. The world yields to the gaze, but the gaze must also yield to the strangeness and estranging effects of the world. Hejinian thus presents phenomenal experience as an interactive process among mind, eye, and world in which existential estrangement plays a central role. The final line also suggests interaction. The "overt gates" imply that the interaction is sexual, although the phrase could also stand for oral communication through the gate of the mouth or, perhaps most clearly, of the eyes. The line makes the normal strange by describing eyes, mouth, or sexual organs as "overt gates." Strange in itself, "gates" is made stranger by the use of "overt" instead of "open." "Overt," in turn, opens up a connection with the "making visible" implied by "yields to our gaze." This estranging use of "gates" draws attention to the bodily nature of consciousness, the brain, and the bodily organs implied by the word. But significantly, this bodily aspect of the person (in the poem's title) is a portal, not an essence. That person consists in a dynamic process of interaction between subject and object through the "gates" of perception and the mediation of language highlighted by the text's estrangement.

Notwithstanding her continued avoidance of direct, unmediated self-expression, then, Hejinian confronts the phenomenal nature of being a per-

11. On the collaboration, see Molnar 1989. "Sky of Correspondences" was published as Dragomoshchenko 1986 and 1990b and also appears in Dragomoshchenko 2000. The work is in Hejinian's English translation under the title *Description* (Dragomoshchenko 1990a).

son in *The Guard* and “The Person” more directly than in her earlier work. Even her apparently more personal work *My Life*, first published in 1980, focuses more on the language that makes up a life than on the phenomenology of being a person. Hejinian’s increasing tendency to link estrangement to her notion of the person can be attributed at least partly to her contact with Russia.

Russia became, however, more than just an aesthetic pivot for Hejinian. Her intensive involvement with Russia was motivated by her deep personal attraction based in part on a certain aesthetic quality of estrangement that she found in everyday life there. After a visit in 1987, she (1987) wrote to the Russianist Michael Molnar about her “romance” with Russia: “I was thinking that surely Russia isn’t magical. That is, I was forgetting. It is—I’m mystified, but it is. I had moments when I felt completely isolated, and thought maybe I was losing personality and would become no one. . . . [But then] I began speaking Russian. . . . It is amazing how direct the link between personality (or person) and language is.” In this letter, Hejinian locates her romance with Russia in her experience of the loss and then the transformation of self. She was attracted by the strange effect of being translated, as it were, into a Russian person and by the similarities between her loss of self in Russia and the loss of essential selfhood that she sought to enact in her poetry.

### 3. Russian Loss

In her contribution to the collaborative book *Leningrad*, Hejinian further develops the distinction between Russian and American notions of personhood that she had implied in her 1987 letter to Molnar and explicitly articulates in her 1988 talk “The Person and Description”: “Subjectivity is not the basis for being a Russian person. ‘Our independent separate singularity can hardly be spoken of, but,’ Arkadii said, ‘many people wish it.’ ‘You know,’ I said, ‘many of *us* wish to overcome it. We think that if we can surpass or supersede the individual self we can achieve a community’” (Davidson et al. 1991: 34).

In *Leningrad*, Hejinian repeatedly associates the difference between American and Russian experiences of being a person and of the world with different kinds of light. Whereas she finds in the United States that each individual and each object is sharply separated from others by American light, in Russia she encounters what she sees as a communal mingling caused by Leningrad’s strange light. Russia provides her with an escape from the self through strangeness, just as her poetry dismantles divisions between objects through linguistic estrangement. She quotes Dragomosh-



chenko as saying: “You are afraid of your finitude, and we are afraid of our infinitude” (ibid.: 35). “Finitude” implies a selfhood that is not dynamic, that is delimited and contained. Such a notion of essential selfhood is seen by Hejinian as resistant to community and, therefore, dangerous. In contrast, “infinitude” implies the lack of sharply defined selfhood or objects and accordingly an emphasis on community over the individual. Russia thus offers Hejinian a potential escape from the finitude of the Western individual through the diffusion of objects and the self that she sees as naturally occurring in Russia and that is central to her own poetics of the person as a dynamic rather than an essence.

In *Leningrad*, as in her letter to Molnar, Hejinian describes Russian strangeness as not only liberating but also passionate. Her “love affair with Russia,” she writes, “is stirred by an insatiable identity. Being there is to be in a state of incommensurability, and hence of inseparability, as if that were the status or ‘human’ nature of Not-me” (ibid.: 99). Hejinian (ibid.: 104–5) escapes the finitude of “me” in the “Not-me” of Russia and clearly finds this loss of self suggestive, even erotic:

An array of images without corresponding objects, without correlatives, wasn’t alienating, although I was sad, as if grieving. The images were saturated. And my own ego was disintegrating. . . . The title of one of Ostap’s paintings . . . is *This Time We Are Both*. Sveta gave me a small pin on which she had intertwined the words St. Petersburg and San Francisco in Cyrillic. And I can’t say I felt split but rather, so to speak, doubled—and this was erotic.

This statement employs disjunction, the estrangement device that Shklovsky (1929 [1917]: 20) called “semantic shift” (*semanticheskoe izmenenie*), between sentences. Three seemingly unrelated things appear in quick succession: a disintegrating ego, Ostap’s painting, and Sveta’s pin. This semantic disjunction is linked with the feeling of being doubled in Russia. The semantic shifts between the sentences enact the multiplying of self, even as the content of the sentences gives examples of doubling: being “both,” a pin intertwined with the names of Hejinian’s native city and the Russian city she is visiting. The estrangement of semantic shifts here combines with a doubling of self, which implies a loss of essential selfhood. These in turn are associated with a connection between Russia and America implied by the pin and the phrase “this time we are both.”<sup>12</sup> Estrangement and union thus, paradoxically, come together in a moment of doubling.

This doubling gets associated with Russia once again in the following passage from *Leningrad*: “There is something indeterminate about a Russian’s

12. Hejinian also used part of the title *This Time We Are Both* as a line in her “Russian poem” *Oxota* (1991: 290) and had intended to use it as the title of the book *Leningrad* (Hejinian 1990b).

place in history, caused by the separation between his or her simple being and his or her life. We often assume that we construct ourselves and our lives simultaneously, in the same gestures, within a continuum of options. Soviet friends enjoy pointing out the surreal effect of such constructing in their world" (Davidson et al. 1991: 120). The effect of simultaneous construction is surreal in the Soviet context, because people maintain a distinction between their "simple" existential being and everyday grind, which are referred to by the terms *bytie* and *byt*, respectively (on the distinction, see Boym 1994). Hejinian, therefore, implicitly identifies the doubling of the self in Russia with the distinction between *byt* and *bytie*: in Russia, there is no essential selfhood, but what she would term a dynamic "personhood," resulting in a "surreal effect" and the "indeterminate" place of the Russian in history. The doubling of self in Russia also relates to the "objectlessness" that Hejinian finds in Leningrad. "Without objects to organize," she writes, "one doesn't develop a strong sense of organization, nor a method which stretches events taut over the framework of time" (Davidson et al. 1991: 148). Russia dislocates objects, including "essential selfhood," and so allows an escape from the finitude of the self. Hejinian's experience of Russia thus corresponds to the experience of the person as a dynamic, which she aims to convey through her poetics of estrangement.

Hejinian's long poem *Oxota* (1991), written between 1989 and 1991, further develops the connection between poetic estrangement and the estranging effect of Russia. Indeed, while writing the work, she (1990c: 67) explicitly described it as an attempt "to accomplish something on those grounds and within the terms of that disorientation" which she had experienced in Russia. *Oxota* is loosely modeled on Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin* and consists of 270 "chapters," each fourteen sentences in length, and an eleven-sentence coda. Hejinian's use of the sentence-line in *Oxota* recalls Shklovsky's distinctive one-sentence paragraphs in works such as *Third Factory* (1926). In broader terms, as Perloff (1992: 188) has pointed out, Hejinian conceived of the work partly as Shklovsky had described *Eugene Onegin*—as a "game with [the] story," in which the artistic structuring of narrative is more important than the ostensible story of Onegin and Tatiana.<sup>13</sup>

As Brian McHale (2000: 261) notes, *Oxota* is "packed with narrative, but 'minor' narrative." Employing what McHale (2001: 164–65) calls "weak narrativity," it both "triggers our narrative sensing apparatus" and frustrates our search for narrative "by the dispersal of narrative fragments." Narrative materials are disrupted to slow down perception, a key feature

13. Perloff probably has in mind Shklovsky's article "Pushkin and Sterne: *Eugene Onegin*"; for a discussion of this article, see Hodgson 1985.

of estrangement as Watten (1985: 24), following Shklovsky (1929 [1917]: 13), outlined it. McHale (2000: 262) identifies a number of estranging devices that act on narrative materials in *Oxota*, including “fragmentation, interruption, dispersal, and juxtaposition,” and the device of rhyme, which is used to add additional “noise.” The use of these estranging devices in *Oxota* can be viewed as asserting Hejinian’s vision of dynamic personhood rather than an essential selfhood implied by a single overarching narrative.

This resistance to essentialism is associated with the estranging effect of Russia itself. According to Hejinian (2000: 209–10), as in *Leningrad*, the narrator in *Oxota*, a Westerner, through her experience of Russia, “becomes estranged from the markers of self and incapable of self-location.” Chapter 251, for example, plays with and half accepts the idea that the ego or individual disappears in Russia, and this disappearance once again involves erotic interplay and doubling:

A situation is erotic at many points  
 There is sex at intersections and at vanishing points  
 A person will always submit to a time and place for this  
 A novel of non-being, a moan of ink  
 A Russian loss  
 The eros of no individual, the sex that is impersonally free  
 It might be pornography, stripping and gears  
 But only if I speak  
 I could say I like music but I don’t like rhythm when it’s too much in  
 the air  
 It’s water that’s the light of the sky  
 There’s no *a* and no *the* there  
 Not much is  
 Heat’s weight and cold’s weight bouncing  
 Hot and cold heights

(Hejinian 1991: 270)

Hejinian begins by stating that points are erotic. What could be points in time in the first line (the usage here is ambiguous between time and space) are defined in the second as points in a geometric field: at the intersections of lines and at vanishing points in pictures. Therefore, combining line one with line two, points of intersection are erotic. In line two, Hejinian’s substitution of “sex” for “erotic” is gently undermining, because it strangely associates sex in public spaces, possibly prostitution, with the rules of perspective in painting. Another meaning here, however, seems to be that when a person accepts that he or she is always located at an intersection of time and space (or place), at a point, the person is in an erotic state. Erotic and sexual connection appears positive—it can be “impersonally free” because

it is not about a single individual but about two individuals, like two lines meeting at some point. Points represent a meeting in space-time and are, therefore, free and unbound by the lines that describe them. Points stand for the doubling that resists essentialist selfhood. Points thus free us from the self; they are encounters and experiences, as opposed to generalizations. In Hejinian's poetics, the rejection of the conception of self as a fixed identity frees one up to acknowledge being as becoming through encounters. The erotic, sexualized encounter of lines at an intersection or point, therefore, creates the "eros of no individual." Hence *Oxota* is a "novel of non-being," a novel not of the individual essential self but of an erotic encounter on paper—"a moan of ink." This is, at one level, Hejinian's encounter with Russia. The erotic point of nonbeing is thus connected, in turn, with "Russian loss" of self, "the eros of no individual."

In this chapter, Hejinian also refers to the indefiniteness caused by what she sees as the lack of definite identity in Russian, where "There's no *a* and no *the*." The following line can also be related to the grammatical strangeness of Russian, in which the copula is omitted. Just as in her essay "The Person and Description," here the grammatical peculiarities of Russian mirror those of existence in Russia. The line "Not much is" could equally refer to the metaphysical uncertainty about the reality of things in Russia. Things have no essential qualities but exist only as dynamics. The thermodynamic movements between hot and cold at the end of the chapter are like the uncertain oscillations between things that constitute this Russian state of being for Hejinian.

As in many other chapters in *Oxota*, Hejinian thus alludes to the loss of self and of objects that she explicitly associates with Russia in *Leningrad* and that she sees as a central quality of her estranging poetics of the person. A great many of the chapters in *Oxota* also make some reference to strange light, another feature of her experiences described in *Leningrad* that points the same way. Observe how chapter 157 explores Leningrad's light, the "Russian loss" of objects and self, everyday life, and the relationship of life to art:

We can take no time, we can take no light, but they appear and we  
 have accounts  
 New pictures and defects  
 No objects  
 The poetic—this means loaned  
 Daily life presents matters for practical reason (free will)  
 Or it isn't so  
 There are parts of the light—agency, green, pink, and grime  
 No subject to light, and no discontent with life

Zina shrugged when I wanted to speculate  
 No innate love of forms  
 Then dispersal and reform  
 And Misha?—we laughed  
 It is impossible to study it all equally  
 Our curiosity cannot be practically applied  
 (Hejinian 1991: 173)

Many of the typical features of Hejinian's descriptions of Leningrad as a landscape of estrangement appear here: light, a lack of objects, and the strangeness of time. The relationship between "objectlessness" and light is also worked out in this chapter. Neither time nor light can be possessed like objects. All one can do with them is notice appearances and give accounts, from which come "New pictures and defects" (perhaps photographs which are created through the exposure of light-sensitive material to light for an instant of time), but "No objects." The essences of things themselves cannot be possessed but only the mark they leave in our memory and their representations, like the mark of light on photographic paper. Poetry as the language of estrangement provides new pictures and thus renews perception but is not about possessing objects by giving them identity. Instead, it presents a dynamic affirmation that "this is happening" in context and through encounters. Poetry, therefore, is not about owning things but "means loaned." "The poetic" is always already a product of exchange, such as loaning, and thus concerns not objects but relationships. Hejinian associates this objectless poetics of exchange and estrangement not only with daily life but also with free will, so that the light becomes the catalyst for creating "agency" in life. Hejinian even uses paronomasia to connect "light" with "life." Light acts to eliminate both objects and subjects ("No subject to light"), producing a utopian effect—"no discontent with life."

Hejinian also gently challenges her own further speculation ("Zina shrugged") that there are no objects and subjects, that there is "No innate love of forms," the anathema of Hejinian's poetics of estrangement. Following Shklovsky, Hejinian aims to overcome predetermined structures for experience, such as the essential self, to restore perception of words and the world. The next line demonstrates both linguistic estrangement and the effect supposedly achieved. It suggests the "dispersal" of essential objects and selfhood through the "reform" of "form." The rhyme with "form" draws attention to the form of the words and thus suggests that the reworking of form is a necessary part of the way estrangement reforms language to renew perception and disperse essentialist, or "innate," notions about the self and about objects.

The romantic view put forward here—that poetic estrangement is embodied in Leningrad’s light and Russian life—is then debunked through a semantic shift involving a category error. The abstract nouns “dispersal and reform” are combined with a proper noun, the unidentified “Misha,” in a question probably used facetiously by Zina, Arkadii Dragomoshchenko’s wife: “And Misha?” Zina’s skepticism helps to point out the incompleteness of Hejinian’s dream of the sublimation of art and the everyday in Leningrad’s light, but the recording of Zina’s attitude in the poem also helps to expand the realm of the everyday. It shows how a piece of everyday conversation can provide the material for a semantic shift, a key estrangement device.

The final two lines articulate the difficulty that Hejinian confronts in including the everyday while maintaining her poetics of estrangement. On the one hand, not everything in the everyday can be attended to “equally” and so, by implication, brought into the poem. On the other hand, the view that the light possesses the values of Hejinian’s poetics of estrangement—it disperses objects and provides a utopian space in which there is “no discontent with life”—is impractical in the real world: “Our curiosity cannot be practically applied.” While Hejinian here appears to conflate poetic estrangement with her everyday experience of Leningrad, therefore, she also acknowledges the tension between them.

Light plays a similar key role in chapter 249 of *Oxota*:

Leningrad was made of light and my eyes were moths  
 They were both  
 Floating even rudely—no way to brush them off  
 They reverberated whole  
 They returned to the skull  
 A compassion  
 The twilight glowed from within its own plum blindness  
 I climbed a little slope pressed to its birches  
 But Leningrad was stayed in light  
 A crow rose  
 Puppet night  
 A flutter of knees  
 Nerves of an oily shadow, a protraction  
 There above I didn’t remember how I’d been below  
 (Hejinian 1991: 268)

In the opening line, the image of flying moth eyes in a city made of light links the experience of seeing Leningrad with disembodiment, since the “eyes were moths” and, therefore, fly through the air unattached to a body, able to dart anywhere. Besides granting freedom from an essential, sin-

gular selfhood, Leningrad with its light is also attractive to moth eyes. This attraction is also implied in line two, “They were both,” which recalls the line “This time we are both” in *Leningrad* (Davidson et al. 1991: 104). “Moth” and “both” thus rhyme semantically because either stands for the loss of self achieved, according to Hejinian, through estrangement. They also create a visual rhyme, and the third line ends in “off,” half-rhyming with “moth.” Essential entities break down in Russia, where things can be “both,” and at the same time, slippage at the boundaries between things is reinforced through the estrangement device of paronomasia. Hejinian conflates the estranging effect of Russia, in which objects merge into one another, with poetic estrangement, which, analogously, blurs the boundary between words by highlighting their common qualities and placing them in unexpected combinations.

#### 4. Strangeness

In her poetry, letters, and other writing about Russia, Hejinian came to link various estrangements across the usual art/life divide. In this, she followed Shklovsky, whose internationalist modernist outlook, Boym (1996: 517–18) has argued, was, ironically, based in part on his belief that only in Russia could everyday life yield to the artistic device. According to Boym, Shklovsky believed there was simply inescapable everyday existence in the West, because it lacked the opposition between everyday grind (byt) and existential being (bytie). The uniquely Russian opposition opened up the possibility of taking life out of the daily grind through artistic devices of estrangement that would make it perceptible again as bytie. Similarly, Hejinian came to link poetic estrangement, which for her opposed the singularity of essential selfhood, with uniquely Russian experiences of estrangement in everyday life, experiences that, like poetic estrangement, dissolved subjects and objects, including essential selfhood. Thus for Hejinian (2000: 210), the “theme of dislocation and disorientation” of the self in *Oxota* reflected not only the experience of being a foreigner but was also a particularly “Russian theme.”

In associating Russia with the dispersal of essential selfhood in favor of dynamic personhood, Hejinian drew on the image of the Russian soul as communal rather than individual. Boym (1994: 84) points out that this image has been common in Russian and Western discourse since at least the nineteenth century: the “Russian soul” is “the product of Russian fiction and Western interpretations and of a peculiar two-way love-hate relationship between Russia and the West.” Whether this image is fictional or has its origins in a real cultural difference, Hejinian can be seen as continuing

the tradition of contrasting the communal Russian soul with the Western conceptions of the private life and selfhood.

Shklovsky saw estrangement as a means to experience the world outside the automatized daily grind, the dreaded *byt*, which proved so perilous for Vladimir Mayakovsky's "boat of love."<sup>14</sup> Hejinian (2000: 301) likewise sought poetic devices that would "alert us to the existence of life and give us the experience of experiencing." Like Shklovsky too, she and her fellow Language poets saw the use of Formalist estrangement as emphasizing their affinity with modernist internationalism against romantic nationalism and thus as opposing the Cold War divide between Russia and the United States. Through her use of Russian estrangement, Hejinian was not only attempting to revive a modernist means to circumvent what she and other Language poets viewed as ever-mounting levels of automatization in the West's experience of everyday life (Watten 1985: 15). She also sought to exploit what Boym (1994: 31) calls the "radical difference between the American dream of the private pursuit of happiness in the family home and the Russian dream" of "transcendental homelessness" that Boym (1996: 518) discerns in Shklovsky's association of estrangement with Russia. The "Russian theme" of dislocation and "homelessness" offered a counterpoint to the American dream, which Hejinian saw as being based on notions of essential selfhood and the singularity of existence, and thus provided a point from which to criticize and change society in the United States.

In this respect, Hejinian was undertaking a utopian project that resembled that which the American critical theorist Susan Buck-Morss participated in through her collaboration with a group of philosophers at the Institute of Philosophy in Moscow. From 1988 to 1993, Buck-Morss (2000: x–xi) visited Russia frequently and dreamed of creating "a new, shared cultural era" that would avoid the pitfalls she saw in both capitalism and communism by examining both "mass dreamworlds," as she has termed them. For her, "the cultural forms that existed in 'East' and 'West'" were "uncannily similar," and it was these similarities between the two systems that were the source of potential liberation. For Hejinian, however, the differences between Russia and the West were just as important as the similarities.

Boym (1996: 517) notes that Shklovsky perceived "the safe haven of West European everyday existence . . . as a major threat to his survival as an intellectual and as a Russian theorist and practitioner of estrangement." Unwittingly, Shklovsky repeated the Romantic cliché of the Russian writer

14. In his suicide poem, Mayakovsky (1961: 236–37) famously wrote: "Liubovnaia lodka razbilas' o *byt*" ("Love's boat has smashed against the daily grind" [*byt*]).



loathing European byt and searching for Russian poetic bytie. Like him, the Language poets worried about the everydayness of everyday life in the West. Indeed, Language poet Barrett Watten (1985: 15) judged the level of automatization in the United States in the 1980s as far worse than in Russia in the 1910s and 1920s. As Boym (1996: 518) describes Shklovsky's view of the West, "everyday life would remain everyday life, no more and no less. It would not yield to the Russian artistic device." Hejinian experienced things in Russia somewhat similarly. She found that "Russian loss"—of objects and singular, essential selfhood—corresponded to the dynamic conception of personhood that she sought to enact through her poetics of estrangement. Hejinian also found in Russia the possibility of opposing the discrete identities of Russian and American by creating a community of writers, one that resembled the "imagined community of fellow intellectuals and artists" that Russia meant to Shklovsky (*ibid.*). Hejinian thus discovered in Russia a place where estrangement could merge art and life, Russian and American poetry.

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