

A Poetics of Translocation

Yang Lian's Auckland and Lyn Hejinian's Leningrad



JACOB EDMOND

一个字，一个人，移动。

A word, a person, moving.

– Yang Lian, “Why There Has to Be Prose”

The border is not an edge along the fringe of society and experience
but rather their very middle.

– Lyn Hejinian, “Barbarism”

Transcultural Poetics, Dislocation, and 1989

THE SEARCH FOR A POETICS that traverses the boundaries of nation and culture has been a major driver of avant-garde poetics for the past one hundred years, creating a powerful if ill-defined imagined transnational poetic community whose shared sense of location is based, paradoxically, on its very valorization of dislocation. The Chinese poet Yang Lian (b. 1955) and the American poet Lyn Hejinian (b. 1941) exemplify the persistence of this transcultural vision based on aesthetic and lived dislocation, which I here term *translocation*. Their poetics of translocation illustrates a tendency in contemporary poetry that emerges in relation to the period of geopolitical and cultural transition precipitated by events that took place in and around the year 1989 and that are associated with the wave of globalization and transnationalism that followed. These events provide the specific context for Yang's work written in Auckland exile (1989–92), imposed by the Tiananmen Square

massacre of 4 June 1989, and Hejinian's *Oxota: A Short Russian Novel* (1989–91), written in the context of her close artistic and personal connections with Russian writers during the final years of the Soviet Union. As I argue, these works emerge out of a poetics that draws on but also revises the transcultural poetics and transnational imagined community of the avant-garde partly in response to the condition of social and political dislocation and uncertainty under which they were written. They do so through a commitment to address but not subsume the Other, foregrounding the dislocations and estrangements of the transcultural encounter that they describe.

Articulated perhaps most influentially by Ezra Pound, the concept of a transcultural poetics, with its ambivalent position between acknowledgement and appropriation of the Other, has been a powerful force in twentieth-century avant-garde poetry. As Yunte Huang points out, “Pound assembled the data [from world cultures] to document his theory of culture and to ‘immediately’ reach in to the ‘essence of culture’.”¹ Charles Bernstein, a member of the same avant-garde Language poetry group as Lyn Hejinian, describes how Pound in his *Cantos* sought

to create a work using ideological swatches from many social and historical sectors of his own society and an immense variety of other cultures. This complex, polyvocal textuality was the result of his search – his unrequited desire – for deeper truths than could be revealed by more monadically organized poems operating with a single voice and a single perspective.²

As Huang has shown, Pound's project was deeply problematic not only in its search for the “essence of culture” but also because it involved the re-creation of the Other in a form that related to his own purposes.³ In this respect, Pound's practice resonates with Walter Benjamin's “The Task of

¹ Yunte Huang, *Transpacific Displacement: Ethnography, Translation, and Intertextual Travel in Twentieth-Century American Literature* (Berkeley: U of California P, 2002): 90.

² Charles Bernstein, *A Poetics* (Cambridge MA: Harvard UP, 1992): 123.

³ See also Haun Saussy, *Great Walls of Discourse and Other Adventures in Cultural China* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Asia Center; Harvard UP, 2001): 35–74, on this re-creation of the Other in Pound's presentation and translation of Chinese poetry.

the Translator,” in which the translator is urged “to release in his own language that pure language which is under the spell of another, to liberate the language imprisoned in a work in his re-creation of that work.”⁴

Despite the problematic invocation of essence or purity and the potentially appropriative nature of such re-creations, the idea of a transcultural or translational poetics, as put forward in different ways by Pound and Benjamin, has remained powerful within avant-garde poetry. One of the reasons for this ongoing attraction is clear from Bernstein’s description of the *Cantos*, quoted above, in which he describes approvingly Pound’s “polyvocal textuality” even as he distances himself from Pound’s “search [...] for deeper truths.” Pound’s poetic theory and practice and Benjamin’s “The Task of the Translator” have remained compelling precisely because of this duality, offering, on the one hand, the utopia of “essences,” “pure language” and “deeper truths,” and, on the other, resistance to such perfection through “polyvocal textuality” and “the spell of another.”

The continued attraction to this transcultural poetics in US post-World War II avant-garde poetry is exemplified by Jerome Rothenberg. As von Hallberg argues, “Rothenberg and other poets, particularly avant-gardists, of the 1960’s and 1970’s had a vision of global culture, a poetry ‘of a fundamental human nature’.”⁵ While Rothenberg’s interest in ethno-poetics and his work as an anthologist differed from Pound’s approach in many respects, he nevertheless maintained a commitment to a transcultural poetics built upon a belief in a universal element of human culture. As Peter Middleton notes, in Rothenberg’s many transcultural anthologies “the usual markers of poetic identity drop away in the face of the transitivity he produces by his disembedding of the poems from their usual locations,” an effect that, Middleton argues, has been central to new developments in avant-garde poetics over the last few decades.⁶

⁴ Walter Benjamin, “The Task of the Translator” (1923), in *Illuminations*, tr. Harry Zohn, intro. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken, 1968): 80.

⁵ Robert von Hallberg, “Poetry, Politics, and Intellectuals: A History of American Poetry, 1945–1995,” in *Cambridge History of American Literature*, vol. 8, ed. Sacvan Bercovich (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996): 171.

⁶ Peter Middleton, “The Transitive Poetics of Rothenberg’s Transnational Anthologies,” *West Coast Line* 34.2 (2000): 103.

While Middleton does not address fully the problematic question of appropriation, he nevertheless points to, in Huang's words, "an American literature that transcends cultural and linguistic boundaries, a national literature rooted in transnationalism and committed to translanguing practices."⁷ This transnational, translanguing vision of literature is especially notable in the case of the poetic avant-garde, where, as the examples of Pound and Rothenberg suggest, transcultural practice has been at its most stridently overt. Nor, of course, are the processes of textual migration and transformation that Huang explores limited to the USA. For example, Chen Xiaomei has documented how Western modernist notions were imported and transformed, or "misunderstood" in her non-pejorative sense, during the craze for modernism in China in the 1980s, in which so-called modernist poetry written by young Chinese poets such as Yang Lian played a particularly important role.⁸

Accompanying the transcultural strategies of various avant-garde poetics have been, as Romana Huk points out, the persistent

imaginings of a global avant-garde community [...] even mid- to late-twentieth-century discourses on cultural relativism [...] have continued to be read comfortably alongside unspoken assumptions in postmodern poetics that its overall project does or should transcend such boundaries.⁹

Huk argues that the rejection of all notions of identity (such as the disembedding from usual contexts that Middleton identifies in Rothenberg) in the avant-garde, postmodernist poetics of writers such as Bernstein ignores "differences *between* national imaginaries."¹⁰ Instead, she asserts the importance of a transnational perspective that reveals differences, rather than eliding them. Huk's distinction between the "global" and the "transnational" resembles that put forward by Françoise Lionnet and Shu-Mei Shih:

⁷ Huang, *Transpacific Displacement*, 5.

⁸ Chen Xiaomei, *Occidentalism: A Theory of Counter-Discourse in Post-Mao China* (New York: Oxford UP, 1995).

⁹ Romana Huk, "Introduction" to *Assembling Alternatives: Reading Postmodern Poetics Transnationally*, ed. Romana Huk (Middletown CT: Wesleyan UP, 2003): 2.

¹⁰ Huk, "Introduction," 4.

whereas the global is, in our understanding, defined vis-à-vis a homogenous and dominant set of criteria, the transnational designates spaces and practices acted upon by border-crossing agents, be they dominant or marginal.¹¹

This distinction could be taken as paralleling that which I drew above between the universalizing, essentialist aspects of Pound and Benjamin's transcultural poetics and their polyphonic practices that acknowledge the presence of the Other. Where Huk sees Bernstein's continuation of Poundian poetics as perpetuating a singular, totalizing, global poetics, it is possible to recognize both tendencies in Pound and Benjamin, and in Bernstein's reading of Pound. As Lionnet and Shih point out, "transnationalism is part and parcel of the process of globalization," even as it resists the totalizing aspects of globalization by being "less scripted and more scattered."¹² The same can be said of avant-garde poetics.

Just as transcultural poetics has a long history in the twentieth-century avant-garde, mobilized to claim, if not achieve, a transnational avant-garde poetic community, so too does the value placed on dislocation in this community. The vision of an international avant-garde as, in Benedict Anderson's terms, an "imagined community"¹³ of intellectuals has been discussed by Svetlana Boym precisely in terms of dislocation and exile.¹⁴ Boym suggests that Anderson's conception of imagined communities through the equation of biography with nation leaves no room for those whose stories start not at home but in exile. Further, Boym argues that the modernist approach to biography with its emphasis on dislocation finds no place in Anderson's account. In a dialectical corrective, Boym suggests that we can think of a modernist or avant-garde "imagined community" as being founded on dislocation, homelessness, and estrangement, qualities precisely opposite to those that underpin the "imagined community" of a nation. Dislocation here means not just a sense of separation from home,

¹¹ Françoise Lionnet & Shu-Mei Shih, "Introduction: Thinking through the Minor, Transnationally," in *Minor Transnationalisms* (Durham NC: Duke UP, 2005): 5.

¹² Lionnet & Shih, "Introduction," 5.

¹³ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 2nd ed. 1991).

¹⁴ Svetlana Boym, "Estrangement as a Lifestyle: Shklovsky and Brodsky," *Poetics Today* 17.4 (1996): 511–30.

but an aesthetic that questions the solidity of the relationship between word and world through writing that foregrounds estrangement. Boym writes of the modernist avant-garde community, but her analysis is equally applicable to the imagined community of the postmodernist avant-garde in the post-1989 era of globalization. Arjun Appadurai, for example, demonstrates how Anderson's theory can be extended to include the transnational "imagined worlds" of this era.¹⁵ Like Anderson, however, he does not discuss the place of an "imagined community" based on an aesthetic of dislocation, rather than belonging. As I have argued elsewhere, however, the combination of aesthetic and literal estrangement described by Boym has continued to provide the basis for imagined transnational communities of avant-garde poets.¹⁶

In his article "Avant-Garde Poetries after the Wall," Jonathan Monroe posits a change in avant-garde poetics, primarily in poetry from the USA, which relates to the end of the Cold War. He contrasts the "oppositional rhetoric" of the 1980s with the "multicultural poetries" of the 1990s. According to Monroe, 1989 "dramatically changed the lens through which any and all of the century's avant-gardes must be considered."¹⁷ Monroe's primary reason for this assertion is that, at this time, socialism and Marxist ideas ceased to be seen as a compelling justification for avant-garde practice. In the case of the avant-garde in the USA, and particularly Language poetry, Monroe identifies the after-effect of 1989 with "ideological disorientation, dislocation, and uncertainty," a situation in which "opposition" was replaced by "apposition."¹⁸ The resultant "multicultural poetries,"¹⁹ I want to suggest, not only reflected a shift away from the oppositional poetics of the 1980s but also provided a different, retrospective way of understanding the avant-garde poetic tradition, not as oppositional Marxism-informed resistance to capitalist commodification but, rather, as a polyvocal, transcultural poetics that resisted the singularity of the new

¹⁵ Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1996).

¹⁶ Jacob Edmond, "Lyn Hejinian and Russian Estrangement," *Poetics Today* 27.1 (2006): 97–124.

¹⁷ Jonathan Monroe, "Avant-Garde Poetries after the Wall," *Poetics Today* 21.1 (2000): 101.

¹⁸ Monroe, "Avant-Garde Poetries after the Wall," 102, 125–26.

¹⁹ Monroe, "Avant-Garde Poetries after the Wall," 95–96.

unipolar world of the 1990s. Thus Hejinian comes to employ her estranging poetics to address the problem of transcultural encounter raised by her experiences of physical dislocation in Russia: how to encounter and write of the Other without subsuming the Other in the self.

Monroe's analysis is clearly applicable directly only to countries, such as the USA, in which Marxist ideas remained attractive. In the socialist world, avant-garde artists by the 1980s generally saw Marxist ideas as irrelevant at best. Nevertheless, Monroe's key insight that 1989 marked a critical shift in avant-garde poetics has validity both in the capitalist West and in countries that were or are ostensibly communist, including China. The events of 4 June 1989 marked a change in Chinese avant-garde poetry, precipitating the creation of a new literature of exile already latent in the poetic practices of a number of avant-garde PRC poets, including Yang. As Maghiel van Crevel argues, "June Fourth and Yang's ensuing exile function[ed] as catalysts of an individual track of poetic development that had started a decade earlier."²⁰ Yang's emphasis on dynamic dislocations of the subject and of language in his work from the 1980s develops in post-1989 exile into a poetics in which such dislocations emerge out of transcultural encounter.²¹

In what follows, I compare the exile poetics of Yang with Hejinian's post-1989 poetics of transcultural encounter to demonstrate how both respond to the sense of disorientation and uncertainty caused by 1989 and its aftermath. In both cases, the transcultural vision of the modernist avant-garde, put forward by writers such as Pound and Benjamin, became increasingly attractive and preferable to more 'oppositional' understandings of avant-garde praxis, with a concomitant shift in emphasis toward strategies that emphasized the acknowledgement, rather than domination, of the Other. These strategies combine with a positioning of poetry characterized by transnational dislocation, the basis, as I suggested, for the poetic avant-garde's imagined transnational community. Thus I argue that 1989 crea-

²⁰ Maghiel van Crevel, "Exile: Yang Lian, Wang Jiaxin and Bei Dao," in van Crevel, *Chinese Poetry in Times of Mind, Mayhem and Money* (Sinica Leidensia Series, 86; Leiden & Boston MA: E.J. Brill, 2008): 162.

²¹ On such dislocations in Yang's work from the early 1980s, see Jacob Edmond, "Beyond Binaries: Rereading Yang Lian's 'Norlang' and 'Banpo'," *Journal of Modern Literature in Chinese* 6.1 (2005): 152–69.

ted an opportunity for writers such as Hejinian and Yang to explore the intersection between dislocation and transcultural avant-garde poetic strategies – in short, to create a poetics of translocation.

Yang Lian's City of "Incomprehensible Street Names"

Yang Lian's exile from China in 1989 marked the beginning of an acute confrontation with the problem of transcultural encounter within an avant-garde aesthetic of physical and linguistic dislocation. Born in 1956, Yang was one of a number of experimental poets who came to prominence in 1978 and 1979 as contributors to *Today* (*Jintian* 今天), the first independent literary magazine to appear in mainland China after the Cultural Revolution. While suffering periodic bouts of persecution, by the late 1980s Yang had come to be recognized officially and unofficially as one of China's leading poets writing in the so-called modernist style.²² From 1986, Yang was able to travel abroad and, in 1988, while in Australia, he was invited by John Minford to the University of Auckland to teach Chinese poetry in the 1989 academic year. Thus Yang came to be in New Zealand in the run-up to the June Fourth massacre. At this time, Yang took up the role of political dissident, leading protests against the Chinese government. In retaliation for his strident stance, the Chinese authorities refused to renew his passport, so that he had no choice but to apply for refugee status in New Zealand. For the following three years, Yang was based in Auckland and unable to return to China, so that the city in his work is inextricably bound up with his experience and poetics of exile.

Yang has described poetry as "an attempt to exceed the boundaries of language," an attempt that he explicitly associates with the dislocation of exile and the transformation of reality into literature.²³ Reflecting on the period between 1989 and 1992 when he was based in Auckland, Yang has described exilic dislocation in terms of the transformation of the relationship between words and reality, writing of exile as involving "the depar-

²² For a history of Chinese avant-garde poetry from the 1970s to the early 1990s, see Maghiel van Crevel, *Language Shattered: Contemporary Chinese Poetry and Duoduo* (Leiden: Research School CNWS, 1996).

²³ Yang Lian, "Zhuixun zuowei liuwang yuanxing de shi" 追寻作为流亡原型的诗, YangLian.net, http://yanglian.net/yanglian/pensee/pen_wenlun_02.html (accessed 3 March 2009). My translation – all translations are my own unless otherwise noted.

ture of reality” and “the return of literature.”²⁴ Isolated geographically and linguistically, Yang at this time produced poems and essays that are not located in his homeland but are, rather, located in surreal Auckland landscapes. Thus the avant-garde aesthetic of dislocation develops into a poetics of transcultural encounter with the strange land in which he found himself.

In one of Yang’s prose works written during his period of exile in Auckland, “Ghost Talk / Lies” (“Guihua” 鬼话), one finds the dislocation of exile reflected in the radical translocation of the normal relationship between words and world:

你说你在逃，在这座陌生的城市里逃。从一个路口到另一个路口，那些同样读不懂的街名，与你有什么关系？从一只手到另一只手，你读一部上千页的书，与把仅有的一页翻动上千次，有什么区别？流亡者，无非沿着一条足迹的虚线，在每一个点上一动不动。比站着还痛苦，你被钉着，没那么光荣，你不动只是因为你无力移动。活埋进每天重复的日子，像你的诗，一个关于真实的谎言。从什么时候起，辞像陈年的漆皮一样，酥了，碎了，掉下来。²⁵

You say you’re on the run; you’re on the run in this strange city. From one intersection to the next, what have all those incomprehensible street names got to do with you? What’s the difference between you reading a book of more than a thousand pages and turning the only page you have from one hand to the other a thousand times? All an exile can do is follow a dotted line of footprints, stopping motionless on every dot. It’s more painful than standing still. You are nailed down, not at all gloriously. You don’t move simply because you haven’t the strength to move. Every day you are buried alive in days that keep repeating themselves – it’s like your poetry, a lie about reality. At some point, words have become brittle and cracked and have flaked off, like a time-worn coat of paint.²⁶

²⁴ Yang, “Xunzhao zuowei liuwang yuanxing de shi.”

²⁵ Yang Lian, *Guihua: Zhili de kongjian: Yang Lian zuopin 1982–1997 sanwen, wenlun juan* 鬼话：智力的空间：杨炼作品1982–1997散文，文论卷 (Shanghai: Shanghai wenyi, 1998): 16.

²⁶ Yang Lian, *Unreal City: A Chinese Poet in Auckland*, tr. Hilary Chung & Jacob Edmond, with Brian Holton, ed. Jacob Edmond & Hilary Chung (Auckland: Auckland UP, 2006): 75–76. For an alternative translation, see Yang Lian, “Ghostspeak,” tr. H.R. Lan & Jerry Dennerline, *Renditions: A Chinese English Translation Magazine* 46 (1996): 92–96.

In this passage, the translocation of exile leads to a transformation in the position of language and reality. The physical world becomes a world of language and vice versa. The physical reality of the city, through its “incomprehensible street names,” comes to resemble “a book of over a thousand pages.” At the same time, poetry becomes like life: “it’s like your poetry, a lie about reality.” The linguistic sign of “a dotted line” (*xuxian* 虚线) on the page, which in Chinese implies a ghostly “emptiness” (the word *xu* 虚 means ‘empty’), has the power to nail the poet down. Physical reality becomes an empty linguistic reality devoid of meaning as the movement from dot to dot or page to page signifies the passage of time.

The “strange city” is the starting-point for an inquiry into the boundaries of reality and language that emphasizes the materiality of language in an unreal city. The city becomes a linguistic landscape, a conglomeration of incomprehensible street names. Exile in the city becomes a process in language, but one devoid of significance. Instead of words, there is simply a dotted line. But the strangeness of language revealed in the strange city draws attention to the materiality of language – to its physical qualities as a thing in itself. Thus, while the world becomes like language, language also becomes part of the world, when words start to resemble “a time-worn coat of paint.” The translated encounter with an untranslatable reality becomes an opportunity to see language anew, to make it as perceptible to the poet as peeling paint is to the touch.

Here the upsetting of the relationship between words and world relates to the problem in transcultural avant-garde practice of writing without subsuming the Other. One cannot simply use the language of the self to describe the situation of otherness one encounters without denying difference. In the “strange city,” therefore, language becomes a part of the otherness, transforming into the peeling paint of a decrepit Auckland house. By foregrounding the estrangement of language in his writing about Auckland, Yang attempts to preserve the otherness of the transcultural encounter.

In another of Yang’s Auckland prose works, entitled “City of One Person” (“*Yi ge ren de chengshi*” 一个人的城市), paint comes to signify not the materiality of language but the artificiality of a landscape that appears utterly strange to the dislocated Beijing poet:

这是只有一个人的城市。这城里只有你。

到处布满了死火山。山坡上的草，像绿色的岩浆，一股一股朝下流，从季节到季节，无声地流。你说“四季”，这只是习惯。这座城市一年到头是绿色。绿，像旧木板上洗不掉的油漆，有云的日子，变成一片灰色。²⁷

This is a city of only one person. In this city there is only you.

There are extinct volcanoes everywhere. The grass on their slopes flows down in torrents, like green magma; it flows soundlessly season after season. You say “four seasons” only from habit. This city is green all year round. The green is like paint on an old wooden plank that won’t wash off. On cloudy days it becomes an expanse of grey.²⁸

The city is empty and also solitary (“one person” [*yi ge ren* 一个人] also means ‘alone’ in Chinese), reflecting not just the introspection of the essay but also the dislocating experience of living in a city a fraction the size of Beijing. Everything in the city is presented as strange: extinct, or literally “dead,” volcanoes (*si huoshan* 死火山) are everywhere. Unlike in northern China, it remains green all year round. The image of the green paint that will not wash off emphasizes the strange unreality of this world and the translocation of the relationship between artifice and reality, language and the world. While the paint of the strange landscape is secure on the hills, the paint-words of the poet start to peel off. The paint image in “City of One Person” detaches greenness from nature, making it artificial and thus beyond the real world, but at the same time the paint image in “Ghost Talk” makes words a part of the material world. The paint descriptions here point to the translocation of both the world and language, binding the strange artifice of the Auckland landscape to the less secure, peeling artifice of Yang’s Chinese words.

The transformation of language and landscape in Yang’s Auckland work enacts an exilic dislocation that is also evident in the upsetting of temporal and spatial relations in his poetry, in which John Cayley identifies a desire “to create shared poetic space out of linear historical time, to bring luminous moments of the past into the timeless present of what he calls in Chinese *gongshi*, shared time or simultaneity.” As Cayley suggests, Yang’s emphasis on simultaneity arises partly out of his “translingual engagement” with Western literature, notably with the work of

²⁷ Yang, *Guihua*, 27.

²⁸ Yang, *Unreal City*, 87.

Ezra Pound.²⁹ As Yang's Auckland work shows, however, the dislocation of exile and the transcultural encounter with Auckland also helped to develop his poetics of spatial and temporal simultaneity. Yang's desire to create a shared transnational imagined community of avant-garde poetry, built on a Poundian aesthetic, can be seen as developing out of the translocational aesthetic of his Auckland work.

Yang's Auckland poem "Grafton Bridge" ("Gelafudun qiao" 格拉夫顿桥) plays on spatial and temporal relationships in the world and on the page to achieve this effect of simultaneity. The effect of strange language mirroring a strange environment is immediately apparent in the title, which in the original contains a transliteration of the English name "Grafton." Yang uses the standard Chinese transliteration for Grafton, so that, like many other foreign names, instead of normally meaningful characters, it is based simply on transliterated sounds. This strikingly un-Chinese title places the Chinese reader in a situation of confrontation with foreignness from the outset, a technique also found in Yang's use of a non-Han Chinese place name in "Norlang" from the early 1980s.³⁰ In this 24-line poem, Yang takes as his starting-point the act of crossing Grafton Bridge, a well-known landmark in central Auckland, which Yang walked over every day on his way to and from his workplace at the University of Auckland:

桥下的墓地 在你过桥时 逼近
 松树抬起一张张孤疑的脸
 死者的海面 铁块般散发腥味
 铁锈色的阳光绕过去
 像一只老狗嗅你
 一只狗眼盯着 风景在桥上格外清晰
 死火山萎缩的天空 一个暗红的拳头
 廉价墓碑上一滴过时的血
 云 汇合了昨天所有的风暴
 却被鸟爪弄脏

²⁹ John Cayley, with Yang Lian, "Hallucination and Coherence," *Positions* 10.3 (2002): 781.

³⁰ See Jacob Edmond, "Locating Global Resistance: The Landscape Poetics of Arkadii Dragomoshchenko, Lyn Hejinian and Yang Lian," *AUMLA: Journal of the Australasian Universities Language & Literature Association* 101 (2004): 71–98, and Edmond, "Beyond Binaries."

被带你回家的栏杆 敞开透明的窗户
 你在家过桥
 整整一座城市住进一间病房
 碧绿的野草把那么多脚步连在一起
 石头的主人在石头屋顶下逼近
 铁的主人在铁的走廊里逼近
 用眼睛幻想 死亡就无须速度
 你走去的还是你被变老的那一端
 草地上的死者俯瞰你 是相同的距离

 而你得回来 像被玻璃手铐铐着
 检修每座今天的罪恶的桥墩
 一群雪白的海鸥里一个狂奔的孩子
 突然站住 为星星高呼
 为黑夜中陡然延长的疼痛 放声哭泣³¹

when you cross the bridge the graveyard below closes in
 the pine trees look up faces wary
 the surface of the sea of the dead like iron smells of fish
 rays of rusty sunlight pass by
 like an old dog sniffing you
 a dog is staring the view from the bridge is especially clear

 a sky shrivelled by extinct volcanoes a dark red fist
 a drop of dated blood on a cheap headstone
 clouds converge into all the storms of yesterday
 but are fouled by the claws of birds

 the railings that guide you home open transparent windows
 you cross the bridge at home
 an entire city is lodged in a sick room
 jade-green weeds join so many footsteps together
 under a stone roof the stone master closes in
 along an iron corridor the iron master closes in
 hallucinate with your eyes then death won't need a speed
 that point you walk to is also the point where you are aged
 the dead in the grass look down at you it's all the same distance

 but you have to come back as though handcuffed in glass
 to repair every pier of today's crimes
 a child runs wildly among snow-white seagulls

³¹ Yang Lian, *Dahai tingzhi zhi chu* 大海停止之处 (Shanghai: Shanghai wenyi, 1998): 341-42.

suddenly stops short calls out for the stars
 weeps aloud for the pain unexpectedly prolonged in the night³²

Despite the precise, realistic setting, dimensions are radically altered in the poem: “you cross the bridge at home / an entire city is lodged in a sickroom.” Normal boundaries between the subject and the world are placed in flux when the exterior city becomes interior to the subject’s home. The dislocation of the relationship between city and subject resembles the dual process in “City of One Person,” in which the city is made interior and, simultaneously, the person is made exterior and comes to resemble a city: “You sit in the room; you and the room forget each other. [...] When the trees finally get up and walk, the critically ill patient silently retreats. You turn back into the cavern within yourself. The city is inside one person.”³³ The sense of claustrophobic interiority is reflected elsewhere in the poem: in the first line, where the cemetery “closes in,” implying a movement of the ground upwards to meet the subject, as if he or she were falling; in the second line, where “the pine trees look up faces wary”; and in lines fifteen and sixteen, where the iron and stone masters close in. Through this entrapping movement, the view of the city, sea, and extinct volcanoes from the bridge becomes compacted into a room in an act of spatial translocation that echoes both Yang’s exilic dislocation to New Zealand and the translocation of reality into literature that Yang associates with exile.

In “Grafton Bridge,” as in his Auckland essays, Yang seems to attribute this translocation of reality to the experience of the strange city. In addition to the bridge, he refers to several other prominent features of the Auckland landscape, including, significantly, the “extinct” or literally “dead” (*si* 死) volcanoes that, as noted above, are also central to his Auckland essay “City of One Person,” and that here resonate with the other references to death in the poem.

Towards the end of the poem, spatial distortion combines with the theme of death when we are told that “death won’t need a speed.” No speed is required, because our movement through space and time leads inevitably to death. The description of space and time as dimensions in the

³² Yang, *Unreal City*, 39.

³³ Yang, *Unreal City*, 89; tr. of Yang, *Guihua*, 29.

same continuum changes the way in which we look at the world: “that point you walk to is also the point where you are aged.” To walk across the bridge involves a movement in space and time, just as the distance between you and death is a distance in time and space. We age as we walk, but we could also fall off the bridge to a much quicker death. In fact, Grafton Bridge was dubbed “Suicide Bridge” by locals, because of its popularity in this regard. But the “dead” who look up from below are not just the imagined leapers. There is an old graveyard below Grafton Bridge, so the poem also refers to the dead looking up from their graves. Both the instant death of suicide and the inevitable death of all human beings are evoked. The length of time to death is measured at once by the length of time it takes to fall and by footsteps, where with each step you “are aged.” Yang crossed the bridge each day on his way to and from work while living in Auckland, so that the ritual of bridge-crossing also becomes a palpable measure of the passing of time and thus of aging.

“Grafton Bridge” is made up of separate, fragmented phrases, or points, on the page, separated from one another by a line break or a gap within a line. Thus the movement between points – the time it takes to read – is also enacted in the layout of the poem. Fragmentation also works to create a kind of simultaneity through the juxtaposition of perspectives: the view from the bridge, the sense of spatial and temporal dislocation, the masters closing in, and the child and seagulls at the end of the poem. The moment of hallucination (“hallucinate with your eyes”) becomes one of simultaneity, revealing that everything happens in the same instant of space and time: “it’s all the same distance.”

The act of hallucination (*huanxiang* 幻想) recalls the title of the series of poems from which “Grafton Bridge” comes. This poetic cycle features aspects of the Auckland landscape and is collectively entitled “City in a Mirage” (“Huanxiang zhong de chengshi” 幻象中的城市). In Chinese, the noun ‘mirage’ and the verb ‘hallucinate’ share the character *huan* 幻. The dislocation from reality, which Yang, like other avant-garde poets, sees as central to the process of poetry (the “departure from reality”), is associated with his transcultural encounter with the illusory, unreal nature of the city itself. Through a poetics of translocation, Yang undermines the sense of reality, so that poetry and reality merge and become equally illusory. The otherness of the transcultural encounter is preserved with

neither the ‘poem’ nor the ‘reality’ of Auckland taking precedence. As Yang asks in another essay on exile, “literature and reality, who is whose mirage? Or are they both mirages, gazing at one another in stunned silence?”³⁴

The sense of dislocation in “Grafton Bridge” becomes more pronounced with the closing-in of the masters and the point of realization of illusion through hallucination. The final stanza moves away from any clear reference to the situation on the bridge, and the subject moves from being on the bridge to being underneath it, working to keep it up, “to repair every pier.” The “crimes” perhaps invite a reading along political lines, but they also suggest, more generally, the predicament of being in a liminal position on the bridge, because the subject seems to be caught between “crime” and “repair.” This sense of being in-between is also accentuated by the handcuffs of glass, an image simultaneously of the brutal power of torture and the fragility of the subject and that which binds the subject to the bridge. The description of the child and seagulls stands in imagistic relation to the rest of the poem, conveying a sense of being caught between black and white, day and night, just as the position on the bridge related in the poem marks a dynamic sense of being in-between, of being in translocation.

“Grafton Bridge” is one of a series of poems Yang wrote in Auckland that recall prominent downtown features, including the Auckland Hospital (“The Hospital”), the Auckland War Memorial Museum (“Museum Windows Carved with the Names of Different Oceans”), and the Winter Gardens (“Winter Garden”).³⁵ The transformation of landscape into language in Yang’s poetry is thus repeated on another level. The Auckland landmarks are made strange by being translated into Chinese. But at the same time Yang’s poems have been translated into English and presented as New Zealand poems, and there are indeed intriguing points of contact with the local tradition. Yang is by no means the first poet to have made use of Grafton Bridge. For example, Mark Young published a poem in 1965 entitled “Grafton Bridge,”³⁶ and Murray Edmond’s collection *Entering the Eye* not only refers to the bridge (as an eye) through its title but

³⁴ Yang, “Xunzhao zuowei liuwang yuanxing de shi.”

³⁵ All in Yang, *Unreal City*, and Yang, *Dahai tingzhi zhi chu*.

³⁶ Mark Young, “Grafton Bridge,” *New Zealand Listener* (5 February 1965): 5.

also makes the reference overt through the pictures of Grafton Bridge on the cover of the book and the inclusion of a poem addressed to a bridge.³⁷ Yang befriended Edmond soon after arriving in Auckland and so may have been aware of this connection when he wrote “Grafton Bridge.” Although Yang’s English at this point was limited, the two could well have discussed the similarities in their circumstances, with Yang then living in a dilapidated and soon to be demolished house in Grafton and Edmond having lived in a part of Grafton that overlooked the area newly cleared of buildings to make way for the motorway around the time when he wrote *Entering the Eye*. The position of Yang’s “Grafton Bridge” and other Auckland poems within New Zealand literature, suggested by these connections with poems by Young and Edmond, has recently been asserted in a number of ways. First, Yang is a featured author in the *New Zealand Electronic Poetry Centre*, a major online resource for New Zealand poetry based at the University of Auckland. Second, Yang received official New Zealand government sponsorship for his appearance as a New Zealand poet at the 2003 Third Moscow Poetry Biennale. Third, a collection of his New Zealand work, entitled *Unreal City*, has been brought out by Auckland University Press, one of New Zealand’s leading poetry publishers.

Locatable within the New Zealand and Chinese traditions simultaneously, Yang’s Auckland writing is inherently translocated. His Auckland poems translate Chinese poetry into New Zealand poetry and New Zealand into Chinese poetry. At the same time, the location of the term ‘New Zealand poetry’ is already uncertain. The boundaries of New Zealand’s national literature and the borderlines of nation are disputed and fluid.

The translational border between Māori and English has been central to the contestation of New Zealand poetry, a fact that is perhaps most apparent in the debate surrounding two generalist anthologies of New Zealand poetry. In 1985, the editors of the *Penguin Book of New Zealand Verse*,³⁸ Ian Wedde and Harvey McQueen, broke new ground by including a significant selection of Māori poetry, inviting criticism from conserva-

³⁷ Murray Edmond, *Entering the Eye* (Dunedin: Caveman, 1973).

³⁸ *The Penguin Book of New Zealand Verse*, ed. Ian Wedde & Harvey McQueen (Auckland: Penguin, 1985).

tive critics keen to police the linguistic boundaries of New Zealand poetry.³⁹ In 1997, the editors of *An Anthology of New Zealand Poetry in English*, Jenny Bornholdt, Gregory O'Brien and Mark Williams, attempted to delimit a section of New Zealand poetry on linguistic grounds, recognizing work in Māori but placing it outside the bounds of the anthology, arguing that Māori poetry was better served by anthologies devoted to Māori-language literature.⁴⁰ In so doing, however, the editors invited criticism for excluding from what has become the leading generalist anthology of New Zealand poetry the problems of linguistic and thus cultural translation which are arguably central to New Zealand society. For Alex Calder, "excluding considerations of translation from an anthology of New Zealand poetry has done this canon, this nation, no service whatsoever."⁴¹ While the debate over the representation of Māori poetry in these two anthologies focused on the place of biculturalism and bilingualism in New Zealand poetry, it tended to ignore the broader issue suggested by the debate about the place of multilingualism and translation in New Zealand poetry as it develops in an increasingly multicultural and multilingual New Zealand society. Although Yang is a New Zealand citizen and his Auckland work is located in specifically New Zealand landscapes, his work would have no place within New Zealand poetry if one were to follow the logic of the editors of the Oxford anthology, for whom the only other language of New Zealand poetry is Māori, and even that a marginalized one. Yang's position illustrates the fact that Yunte Huang's call for a rethinking of American literature "in the context of transnationalism," "no longer confined to national, cultural, or linguistic boundaries," is in-

³⁹ See, for example, Karl Stead, "Wedde's Inclusions," *Landfall* 155 (1985): 289–302, repr. as "At Home with the Poets: *The Penguin Book of New Zealand Verse* (1985)," in *Answering to the Language* (Auckland: Auckland UP, 1989): 133–45.

⁴⁰ *An Anthology of New Zealand Poetry in English*, ed. Jenny Bornholdt, Gregory O'Brien & Mark Williams (Auckland: Oxford UP, 1997).

⁴¹ Alex Calder, "Unsettling Settlement: Poetry and Nationalism in Aotearoa/New Zealand," *New Zealand Electronic Poetry Centre*, ed. Michele Leggott (University of Auckland, 17 September 2003), www.nzepc.auckland.ac.nz/misc/calder.asp (accessed 20 June 2005). Repr. from *Literature and the Nation*, ed. Brook Thomas (*REAL: Yearbook of Research in English and American Literature* 14; Tübingen: Gunter Narr, 1998): 165–81; see also Murray Edmond, "Then It Was Now Again: New Zealand Poetries and Colonial Histories," *UTS Review* 6.1 (2000): 104–29.

creasingly applicable to New Zealand literature.⁴² The translocated nature of Yang's work challenges the boundaries of New Zealand literature, a literature already subject to contested, translocated flux.

Yang's work, although precisely located, is translated and transient in multiple senses. This apparent contradiction reflects the poetics of translocation operative in his Auckland work, which acknowledges but does not appropriate the Other. The strangeness that Yang experiences in his transcultural encounter with a foreign language and land, accompanied by his avant-garde emphasis on linguistic and physical dislocation, leads him to emphasize translocation on multiple levels, from the transformation of language and the world to dislocations in space and time. Words take on the quality of things, while the city becomes an artificial interior landscape divorced from reality, preserving the otherness of the transcultural encounter – the untranslatable strangeness of Yang's Auckland exile.

Lyn Hejinian's Encounter "Launched in Context"

Like Yang, Hejinian responded to events in and around the year 1989 by addressing the problem of transcultural encounter within an avant-garde aesthetic of physical and linguistic dislocation. Just months after the June Fourth crackdown in China, which began Yang's Auckland exile, she travelled to Leningrad to take part in the Language–Consciousness–Society conference. The conference brought together writers and theorists from Russia, the USA, and a number of other countries with the ambitious aim of re-thinking these three fundamental aspects of human existence.⁴³ This transcultural encounter between Russian and Western writers in 1989 would have been inconceivable without the relationship between Hejinian and the Russian poet Arkadii Dragomoshchenko, who headed the conference organizing committee. Hejinian had met Dragomoshchenko in 1983 on her first visit to the Soviet Union, and the two had established a close friendship that extended to their translating each other's work.⁴⁴

⁴² Huang, *Transpacific Displacement*, 187.

⁴³ For a first-hand account of the conference, see Michael Davidson, Lyn Hejinian, Ron Silliman & Barrett Watten, *Leningrad: American Writers in the Soviet Union* (San Francisco: Mercury House, 1991): 1–8.

⁴⁴ For more on Hejinian's contact with Russia and her collaboration with Dragomoshchenko, see Jacob Edmond, "'A Meaning Alliance': Arkadii Dragomoshchenko

From 1983 to the early 1990s, Hejinian engaged in an intense personal transcultural encounter with Russia and Russian writers, visiting the country frequently, learning some Russian, and immersing herself in Russian literature and culture. The conference marked the climax of the utopian desire, which emerged from this encounter, to cross the Cold-War divide through an imagined transnational community of avant-garde poets who shared an aesthetic of linguistic and physical dislocation.⁴⁵

This dream and the sense of dislocation upon which it was founded were further enhanced by the series of dramatic geopolitical changes dating from 1989. The period between 1989 and 1991 was one of global flux, spanning the collapse of the communist regimes of Eastern Europe, the integration of East Germany into the West, and the break-up of the Soviet Union. In response to her experience of transcultural encounter with Russia and building on her aesthetic of dislocation, Hejinian addresses this time of global uncertainty through a focus on the problem of borders, boundaries, and cross-cultural encounters in her work from the early to mid-1990s. She thus develops a poetics of translocation that reflects the transition from oppositional to appositional aesthetics and the emphasis on transcultural encounter and dislocation that I have associated with this tendency. In her 1994 essay “La Faustienne,” Hejinian writes that the “global political configuration is in flux” and describes the present as a “liminal period” in which “the question of boundaries, of possible shifts or displacements along them, and the question of what is being bounded (or unbounded) are preeminent ones.”⁴⁶ In another essay from the mid-1990s, she argues, “poetry [...] has the capacity and perhaps the obligation to enter those specific zones known as borders, since borders are by definition addressed to foreignness, and in a complex sense, best captured in another Greek word, *xenos*.”⁴⁷ According to Hejinian, *xenos* stands for

& Lyn Hejinian’s Poetics of Translation,” *Slavic and East European Journal* 46.3 (2002): 551–63. For a comparison of the two writers in relation to romanticism, see Stephanie Sandler, “Arkadii Dragomoshchenko, Lyn Hejinian, and the Persistence of Romanticism,” *Contemporary Literature* 46.1 (2005): 18–45.

⁴⁵ See Jacob Edmond, “Lyn Hejinian and Russian Estrangement.” See also Dragomoshchenko’s description in “Arkhiv” [Archive], *Big Information System Project*, <http://nmsf.ssc.ru/Welcome.asp?vw=book&bo=4305> (accessed 8 March 2004).

⁴⁶ Lyn Hejinian, *The Language of Inquiry* (Berkeley: U of California P, 2000): 234.

⁴⁷ Hejinian, *The Language of Inquiry*, 326.

both ‘guest’ and ‘host’ and for the relationship between the two, a relationship that “comes into existence solely in and as an occurrence, that of their meeting, their encounter.”⁴⁸ Hejinian also connects this idea of an encounter – what she elsewhere refers to by the phrase “something comes along – launched in context” – with the Russian term for ‘occurrence’, *sobytie*, which is made up of the prefix meaning ‘with’ and the word for ‘being’ in Russian, so that for her it implies “being with,” “a with-being” or “co-existence.”⁴⁹ Through an act of translation, Hejinian imagines her poetics of encounter as providing a vision of connection, of “co-existence” across a border, a situation of translocation through encounter: “Every encounter produces, even if for only the flash of an instant, a *xenia* – the occurrence of co-existence which is also an occurrence of strangeness or foreignness.”⁵⁰

For Hejinian, the border is centrally translocational, in that it puts location into question and presents it as something that takes place through encounter. Rather than ‘globalizing’ through the rejection of identity or a universalizing discourse, Hejinian’s poetics of the border acknowledges the existence of the Other by questioning the positionality of the subject, so that it comes into being only through encounter. The border-zone of Leningrad and of Hejinian’s encounter with Russia becomes the place in which she creates an encounter on paper, a “co-existence” that, like her experience of dislocation in Russia, occurs only in the context of mutual strangeness.

Hejinian’s *Oxota: A Short Russian Novel* can be seen as her central translocational work from the early 1990s, because it deals directly with her transcultural encounter with Russia and the poetics of dislocation on which it was based and because it occupies a temporal and physical borderland.⁵¹ A “Russian novel” written by an American author between December 1989 and February 1991, it spans the most important border of the second half of the twentieth century – the Iron Curtain – at the moment in which this border was disintegrating.

⁴⁸ Hejinian, *The Language of Inquiry*, 326.

⁴⁹ *The Language of Inquiry*, 335.

⁵⁰ *The Language of Inquiry*, 326.

⁵¹ Lyn Hejinian, *Oxota: A Short Russian Novel* (Great Barrington MA: Figures, 1991).

Oxota draws on Hejinian's extensive contact with Russian writers and Russian literature, especially on her experiences of Leningrad. *Oxota* is dislocated and transcultural in multiple senses. This "Russian novel" is written in English and is not a novel at all but a poem, although, at almost three hundred pages, it is the length of an average-sized novel. A work of postmodernist American poetry, *Oxota* is formally modelled on the nineteenth-century Russian classic *Eugene Onegin* by Alexander Pushkin (both works use a fourteen-line stanzaic form, though Hejinian's line is a sentence of greatly varying length, rather than the iambic tetrameter of Pushkin's poem), so that the poem is located in an uncertain position between American literature and Russian literature. These internal temporal and spatial dislocations are mirrored on the historical and geopolitical level of the poem's setting – Leningrad. Created by Peter the Great as part of his drive to westernize his country, St Petersburg/Leningrad has traditionally been considered to occupy an uneasy border-position between Europe and Russia, fitting satisfactorily into neither realm. *Oxota* focuses on Hejinian's experiences in Leningrad in the late 1980s and early 1990s, but shortly after Hejinian published *Oxota* in August 1991, the poem's location had vanished from the map. Leningrad and the Soviet Union had ceased to exist. Just as with Yang's work, Hejinian's poem is translated in several senses and is located in an even more transient nation.

Rather than dislocated, however, Marjorie Perloff sees *Oxota* as avoiding location altogether, as presenting "in Wallace Stevens's words, 'description without place'."⁵² According to Perloff, "Words like 'there' are always suspect in Hejinian's scheme of things, origin and location, whether of speech or event, being all but impossible to define." For Perloff, such a dematerialized vision is typical of postmodern poetry's representation of the city as "cyberspace."⁵³ Perloff's interpretation resembles Huk's analysis of fellow Language poet Charles Bernstein's poetry as rejecting identity, which I equated with the globalizing mode of transcultural poetics.

⁵² Marjorie Perloff, "John Cage's Dublin, Lyn Hejinian's Leningrad: Poetic Cities as Cyberspace," *Electronic Poetry Center*, ed. Charles Bernstein (SUNY, Buffalo, 19 October 2000), <http://wings.buffalo.edu/epc/authors/perloff/cyber.html> (accessed November 2004).

⁵³ Perloff, "John Cage's Dublin, Lyn Hejinian's Leningrad."

Perloff has in mind the way in which *Oxota* resists the norms of narrative coherence by placing sentences alongside one another so that “the reader feels as if she has come in on a conversation whose participants cannot be located.”⁵⁴ As Brian McHale has shown, Hejinian achieves this effect in *Oxota* at least partly by splicing up various narratives and distributing them across several chapters, so that parts of the narrative are supplied incrementally and are interspersed with apparently unrelated material. According to McHale, the effect of this technique is “weak narrativity,” a term that points to the place of translocation in Hejinian’s work: the combination of dislocation through narrative dispersal and the retention of the transcultural encounter through the continued impression of narrative.⁵⁵ Location and narrative retain their importance but are placed in constant flux, translation or translocation.

In *Oxota*, location-specific names play an important role in conveying a sense of location and narrative, even as the conventional assumptions about place and plot are subverted. As Perloff puts it,

the rejection of *representation* does not, as many readers have assumed, entail the loss of *reference*. A Hejinian stanza, that is to say, does not present us with a coherent picture of something external to it, a photograph *of* or picture *of*. But reference, whether to persons (Zina, Olga, Natasha, Vodonoy, Alexei, Arkadii, Gavronsky) or places (cities, rivers, streets, houses), is essential to the poem, the necessary peg upon which speculation can take place.⁵⁶

There is, however, more to this strategy of dislocated, non-representational reference. The names and places are more than a “necessary peg” for speculation. They serve to underscore the importance of context to Hejinian’s poetics, where context for her involves dynamic encounters, so that *Oxota* is simultaneously located and in transit. Hejinian emphasizes the importance of context to her poetics at the beginning of her essay “Reason” with the phrase “Along comes something – launched in con-

⁵⁴ Perloff, “John Cage’s Dublin, Lyn Hejinian’s Leningrad.”

⁵⁵ Brian McHale, “Weak Narrativity: The Case of Avant-Garde Narrative Poetry,” *Narrative* 9.2 (2001): 161–67.

⁵⁶ Marjorie Perloff, “How Russian Is It?” review of *Oxota: A Short Russian Novel, Parnassus: Poetry in Review* 18.1 (1992): 204, repr. in Perloff, *Poetry on and off the Page: Essays for Emergent Occasions* (Evanston IL: Northwestern UP, 1998): 222–42.

text.” For her, strangeness arises not so much from dislocation as through border-crossing encounters, interactions that place location in flux and in doubt. Such interactions are central to her work, and she describes them as involving

conjunction: encounter, possible confusion, alteration exerted through reciprocal influence, etc. – the kind of situation that is typical, I might add, along borders between nations, between speakers of different languages, between neighboring ecosystems, etc.⁵⁷

Rather than happening in an “unspecifiable space/time realm,” as Perloff would have it, in *Oxota* Hejinian locates her encounter in an historically specific Leningrad, creating many chapters from material drawn directly from the journals she kept while in Leningrad,⁵⁸ and supplying precise commencement and completion dates.⁵⁹

In *Oxota*, Hejinian searches for a kind of location or context that is not there prior to the encounter and that takes place in the liminal, historically and geographically translocational space of Leningrad. As Perloff points out, Hejinian does not map Leningrad out with a compass, as James Joyce did Dublin.⁶⁰ Instead, she aims at writing the city as a continuous moment of encounter, in which the object that is being described, the describer, and the context of that description are simultaneously ‘launched’ together. The location comes into being at the very point of its translation into experience and into the poem. We can see evidence that Hejinian thought of her Russian poem in this way in her essay “Reason”:

The context, in other words, is the medium of our encounter, the ground of our becoming (i.e. happening to be) present at the same place at the same time. [...]

As strangers (foreigners), it is hard for us to find the “right words” (themselves simultaneously demanding context and serving as it) for what we experience in that perception and involvement.

Usually comparisons are the first things foreigners make. [...] “The pink wet light in Saint Petersburg on a winter day is like a summer San

⁵⁷ Hejinian, *The Language of Inquiry*, 339.

⁵⁸ See Lyn Hejinian, “Soviet Diary” (MS, Lyn Hejinian Papers, MSS 74-47-8, Mandeville Special Collections Library, University of California, San Diego).

⁵⁹ Hejinian, *Oxota*, 293.

⁶⁰ Perloff, “John Cage’s Dublin, Lyn Hejinian’s Leningrad.”

Francisco fog,” etc. Such comparisons, reaching out of the present situation to another, previously experienced, recollected one, may appear to constitute the “making of a context” for the current context, but a context made in such a way is a transported one, acquired by way of metaphor. And such metaphors, cast in the form of similes and intended to smooth over differences, deny incipience, and to the degree that they succeed, they thereby forestall the acquisition of history.⁶¹

Hejinian here gives as her example precisely the problem that a poet from San Francisco confronts in an encounter with St Petersburg. She insists that context must not be transported wholesale from another place – rather, that it comes into being in the moment of encounter, thus preserving the strange otherness of that context.

Where metaphor creates a context that smoothes over difference, metonymy perhaps offers Hejinian a way to create context while maintaining difference and therefore the possibility of translocational encounter. We can see this in Chapter Eleven of *Oxota*:

With exhilarating humility we watched the accumulating snow
 The shifting of greenish drifts, the yellow silent wind
 Not defiant but obsequious in storm, at kitchen window
 Money is not unlucky
 But a whistling man is luckless in money
 What then if snow is the substance of an accounting
 No objects of metonymy, of economy
 A colonel’s daughter drew in the frost like a vandal to the colonel
 The wolves whistled in the forest near Pavlovsk
 Little Dima bravely raced toward the palace parking lot
 A poetry and with fear of authority – as if that were your sole
 justification, in itself, not in what you wrote
 Simple being – simple agoraphobic being
 Its meals
 Their daily huntress⁶²

Different pieces of information, phrases, and combinations of language are brought together here to create a context that seems to defy the norms

⁶¹ Hejinian, *The Language of Inquiry*, 342.

⁶² Hejinian, *Oxota*, 21.

of language and narrative. Strange word-combinations such as “exhilarating humility” and “obsequious in storm” combine with strange shifts between lines, such as from “being” to “meals,” to resist a totalizing narrative or a singular location. Metonymy seems to dominate over metaphor. The work neither layers things up nor disperses them, but places them in positions of contiguity, so that locations are multiple and uncertain.

One can see the basic connections in this chapter from *Oxota* as metonymic, particularly if we consider rhyme, rhythm, and other material qualities of language to be more metonymic than metaphoric, in that they are based on contiguity of sound and spelling. The first three lines belong to a single theme: the observation of a snow storm. But they are also bound together by wordplay. The end of the word “snow” in the first line and the word “wind” at the end of the second line combine in the word “window.” Meanwhile, the final *ow* links “yellow” in line two with both “snow” and “window.” The caesurae in the second and third lines, followed by three and two pure iambs respectively, also help to give the lines surprising weight and beauty.

Elements within the poem are connected not so much by layered significance, based on a single metaphor, narrative, or centering location, as by simple relationships of metonymy or rhyme. In fact, the word “metonymy” in the chapter quoted motivates the word “economy” in this way. Both in turn are related through paronomasia, and, in the case of “economy,” through metonymy, to the word “money.” That is, both “economy” and “metonymy” contain all the letters of the word ‘money’ and money is, of course, central to the economy of a nation. The constant exchange of money in an economy can also be viewed as mirroring the metonymic movements of language in the poem. Just as no piece of money has value outside exchange, so, too, no single location or narrative in *Oxota* functions outside the constant process of interaction with other locations and narratives. Such movements between things do not give one description power over another; there is no key. Instead, Hejinian creates what is intended to be poetry of exchange and encounter, in which “authority” is relinquished to multiple metonymic conjunctions and translocations in and through language.

For Hejinian, then, American poetry transferred to the Russian context requires an emphasis on non-hierarchical relationships between lines

based on metonymic and paronomastic connections. Through this approach, she emphasizes the materiality and untranslatable qualities of language and the world. Rhymes rely on certain words; we cannot substitute synonyms and achieve the same effect. Similarly, the act of placing different sentences side by side without a symbolic or metaphoric superstructure emphasizes the “co-existence” critical to her concept of *xenos*. In this way, she allows different ideas and phrases to brush against one another without an authorial organization that privileges any one account, sentence or theme. By mobilizing weak narrativity, metonymic connectives and other devices that promote circulation and guard against conclusions, Hejinian aims at preserving the perpetual moment of encounter that is central to her poetics of translocation.

A Common Strangeness

In their work written between 1989 and the mid-1990s, both Yang and Hejinian investigate how poetry can address the Other and bring a transcultural perspective without falling into the position of dominance. The resultant poetics foregrounds the dislocations and estrangement of the transcultural encounter that they describe. Hejinian’s poetry refuses to create a context that elides difference, favouring instead a metonymic poetics as a way of achieving what she terms “co-existence.” Yang’s exile work preserves the radical otherness of his transcultural encounter with Auckland through a poetics that foregrounds the radical dislocations of exilic space, time, and language. Thus both authors produce a poetics of translocation, which combines transcultural engagement with an aesthetic of textual and physical dislocation.

At the same time, the work of both writers is situated in an uncertain, transitive position between national literatures and geographical nations during a period of global political flux. The two writers employ their poetics of translocation as they grapple with strange new locations, both geographic and literary, even as those locations are themselves placed in transit and in doubt by the increasingly transient nature of the national, literary, cultural, and linguistic boundaries of contemporary poetry.

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