

« Projective Verse » and the « Open Text » Considered as Practices of Body

I. Introduction

I want to talk about two different modes of embodiment in two historical strands of non-mainstream American poetry: the Black Mountain Poets, as represented by Charles Olson and his poem “The Kingfishers,” and the Language Poets, as represented by Lyn Hejinian and her book *My Life*. Because I am talking about embodiment, I am going to be talking about voice and breath and movement; because I am talking about voice and breath, I am going to be talking about the ways in which these two poets relate to “natural” speech. Because bodies move in time and space, I am going to be talking about these poems *as* spaces; I am going to be talking about how they are structured, what it is like to navigate through them, what paths one can take. And because the structures of the poems are artificial designed spaces that act on the body, I am going to talk about them *as machines*; machines for acting on the body of the reader.

Finally, because these designs are both aesthetic and ideological choices, I am going to be focusing on Olson and Hejinian’s most representative statements on poetics (respectively, “Projective Verse,” and “The Rejection of Closure”). I’ll be focusing on their accounts of the reasoning *behind* their

choices, just as much as (or maybe even more than) I am going to be focusing on the poems themselves.

Here I am taking my cues (whether they be positive or negative) from four main sources. First, from William Carlos Williams, who once defined the poem as a “small (or large) machine made of words.”¹ Second, from Lyn Hejinian, who writes in “The Rejection of Closure” that “for the moment, for the writer, the poem *is* a mind.”² Third, from Brian McHale, who, in his essay on “Poetry as Prosthesis,” has argued that “all poetry, indeed all language use whatsoever, appears to be what Donna Haraway terms a *cyborg phenomenon* – a human being coupled to a machine – or what David Wills characterizes as a *prosthesis*.”³

In talking about these things, I am also going to be talking specifically about my own voice, my own breath, my own speech patterns, my own sense of embodiment, my own movements, and how they change when I read these two poets. I realize that in a paper of this sort, one is expected to maintain a certain stance of objectivity. The “I” of literary criticism, when it appears at all, is – or has been, at least for the past century and a half or so – typically

a distant figure, a figure of authority, someone very much like a stern father.† And the apparatus of the critical essay – the works cited, the footnotes, the endnotes, the elision of the first person – reinforces this impression. It is meant to give the reader the sense that this is authoritative, that this is science, that these are reproducible results. That is a useful fiction – a productive constraint – and I am, by and large, going to adhere to it.

But I also have other stories to tell you, in other ways.

II. “The Kingfishers”: Trajectory, Syringe, Parasite

In his poems, Charles Olson wanted to tie the world together in a “field” generated by breath. His project was nothing less than the liberation and salvaging of modern man: “man is once more to possess intent in his life, and to take up the responsibility implicit in his life ... to comprehend his own process as intact.”⁴ And for this, he saw the renewal of poetry, and the continuation and expansion of the project of modern-

ism (Pound’s and Williams’s, mainly) as crucial. Poetry was to fill, among other things, a didactic role.

Guy Davenport has written of “The Kingfishers” as a Poundian ideogram, an imagistic structuring and juxtaposing, all of its elements working in “synergy.”⁵ I’d expand on that. For Olson, poetry had to work not only as microcosm but as organism, since what it is supposed to teach man is how to experience his own body – how to experience experience, in fact, since for Olson all experience was “SENSIBILITY WITHIN THE ORGANISM / BY MOVEMENT OF ITS OWN TISSUES.”⁶ But whose organism, whose experience is an Olson poem?

First, fact: between the writing of “The Kingfishers” (February to June of 1949), and the writing of “Projective Verse” (written in 1950), Charles Olson was thinking about theatre. In a letter to a Japanese poet and editor, Kitue Kitasono, on April 14, 1949, Olson writes that the way to continue the project of modernism was by learning from “THEATRE ... the union of SPEECH and SOUND.”⁷

† There have been notable exceptions. Woolf, Cixous, Irigaray, Acker, for instance. It’s no accident that these are not the names of fathers. Of course Olson is another one who uses an “I” in his criticism that is not the expected “I.”

Concurrently, Olson was also thinking about physics – Rosemarie Waldrop, among others, has pointed out that the “field” of “Composition by Field” is, implicitly, an electromagnetic field.⁸ Projective verse itself is characterized as being “kinetic,” both in the essay itself, and also in Olson’s correspondence (for instance in a letter in 1951 to W. H. Ferry).⁹

The idea of something being “kinetic” implies movement. This was a fundamental component of Olson’s worldview, one of the main things he learned from the physics of the twentieth century – the idea that “the minute particles of substances (including any one of us) is in vigorous & continual motion.”¹⁰ The idea of movement, in turn, implies something – a body (maybe even *somebody*) – that moves, and a space in which it moves. Theatre is not only the “union of SPEECH and SOUND,” but is also the marking-off of space, the differentiation of boundaries, and the placement of locations (in, for instance, the assigning of the space of the stage, separate from the audience, and the careful “blocking” of the actor’s movements and positions, their relationships in space). The fact that Olson was thinking about theatre means, then, that we should consider how he thought movement should be controlled – *what* movement should be controlled; *whose* movement should be controlled; *how* it should be controlled; *who* controls.

And control is above all what is necessary for Olson. It is necessary because for Olson control is something “outside” of the poem that is the object of the poem. It is what the poem strives

to be equal to. In a letter to John Finch, written in 1935, Olson writes that the “red question mark called life” must be molded by “control and restraint” if it is to be shaped into “dignity . . . beauty . . . good.”¹¹ He goes on to say, however:

When the best America’s got comes out, it bursts and spatters like black oil struck in the Oklahoma fields. By the time it’s harnessed and piped, controlled, the terrible fire, the lovely power, somehow, is gone.¹²

So the wrong kind of control is a neutralizing or a neutering, is a deadening of energy – of “fire,” of “power” – a loss of essence. The wrong kind of control is the kind that restricts movement with the bond of the “harness,” compresses and redirects it in “pipes,” converting the kinetic “burst” and “spatter” of oil and the percussive “struck” into static, lazy “sprawl.” It is no accident that the first of the eponymous “Kingfishers” that Olson shows us in the poem are caged, one of them with a bad leg, and the other sexless, his virility in doubt: “they *had* hoped [it] was a male” (my italics).¹³ Later on in the poem, we read:

in the animal and / or the machine the factors are communication and / or control, both involve the message. And what is the message? The message is a discrete or continuous sequence of measurable events distributed in time

is the birth of air, is the birth of water, is a state between the origin and the end, between

birth and the beginning of another fetid nest

is change, presents no more than itself

And the too strong grasping of it, when it is pressed together and condensed, loses it

This very thing you are¹⁴

The thing itself – what happens – is continual change, continual motion, change that goes from air to water, that brings life where “excrement and decayed fish becomes / a dripping, fetid mass.”¹⁵ This thing, this “message” is “a discrete or continuous sequence of measurable events distributed in time” (the linear, historical time of a “machine”). But it is at the same time a mythic “birth of air . . . of water . . . between . . . origin and . . . end” that takes place in the cyclical time of the kingfisher’s lifecycle. And when this “thing” is grasped “too strong,” “pressed,” “condensed,” closed in, the motion that constitutes it (and gives it its thing-ness) stops. Any possible hope for renewal is then stillborn.

This is why, in “Projective Verse,” Olson’s enemy, he says, is “closed” verse, “that verse which print bred.”¹⁶ Against this – “inherited line, stanza, over-all form” – he pits what he calls “FIELD COMPOSITION.”¹⁷ To compose by field, he says in “Projective Verse,” is to go by the “musical phrase” rather than the metronome’s “push” (quoting Pound), and to, above all, let the poem move according to the rhythms of speech.¹⁸ In other words, the control that is rejected is the external control of traditional

meter – for which the metronome is the metonym – the marking off of time in iambs. Instead, Olson is saying, the poem must move in varying lengths, line by line, according to the intensity of the moment, of the individual line, so that the oil can still burst and spatter. In this way, with the ebb and flow of speech, with the movement of the air and water of his breath, he hopes to record – or conduct, as with electricity – the change at the heart of reality, the “terrible fire” and the “lovely power.” Only then can the poem be equal to lived experience, or (perhaps) surpass it in intensity. “*The Trojan Women*,” Olson writes, “is able to stand . . . beside the Aegean – and neither Andromache or the sea suffer diminution.”¹⁹ This is possible, according to Olson, only when the poet reaches “down through the workings of his own throat to that place where breath comes from, where breath has its beginnings, where drama has to come from, where, the coincidence is, all act springs.”²⁰

What we have “suffered,” according to Olson, is an estrangement from the impulse that generates the poem: “manuscript, press, the removal of verse from its producer and its reproducer, the voice, a removal by one, by two removes from its place of origin *and* its destination.”²¹ The antidote is the composing of the textual field in such a way as to transfer the “energy” of the poet’s breath and speech more directly to the reader. This is the figuring of the poem as bullet (“projectile,” as the subtitle of the essay would have it), the poem as electric spark (“energy-discharge”) bridging the gap between the poet and the reader.²² The poem is a machine so simple and so efficient that it only has one moving part, and

that made of the most insubstantial material: lightning, breath. The only control on it is the aim, the intensity, the spin. This would suggest (in line with Olson's project) that "projective verse" is a liberation, a freeness, a minimizing of control, capable of bringing its readers into the very heart of the experience of the world, into the unmediated "terrible fire," "lovely power."

sound and breath? Audio recording was a technology that was already in widespread use by 1950. So why not the phonograph (patented 1857)? The tin foil cylinder (1877), the wax cylinder (1885), the steel wire (1898), the magnetic tape (1928)? Why, in a letter written to Chad Walsh in 1967, do we have Olson writing: "(I shld of course warn you – or urge you to abjure(!) tape or dictaphone if, as 'tis claimed – & therefore he claimed it as 'projective'(!) – you take Ginzy's [Allen Ginsberg's] latest, or later work (example, Wichita Vortex Sutra) as any evidence of what you are there talking about!"²⁵

This is a question much less trivial than it might, on the face of it, seem. The emphasis on speech and on sound – said emphasis coming both from Olson himself and from many of his readers – is misleading when applied too hastily to interpreting the text. The question of speech focuses on the method of control used by the poet to control composition, to give shape to the poem. It shifts focus away from the ways in which the already-composed poem then controls its reading – and controls the reader.

"Speech," in Olson, of course isn't, not in any literal sense, actual speech, and announces itself as (not being speech) such in a variety of ways. There is the fact that the poem is made visible: the fact of the typography, the layout, which constantly draws attention to itself, declares itself as written, not voiced. As of course it must. Even if (*especially* if) we take Olson's claim that the typescript, with its regular spaces and uniformly sized letters, functions as a musical score for the reading of the poem at face value, it follows that

the reader must pay particular visual attention to the ways in which the text is organized on the page.

For instance, the first line of "The Kingfishers": "What does not change / is the will to change."²⁶ Of this line, in "Projective Verse," Olson writes that he "wishes a pause so light it hardly separates the words, yet does not want a comma – which is an interruption of the meaning rather than the sounding of the line [and so] uses a symbol the typewriter has ready to hand."²⁷ The shorter lines of "The Kingfishers" take on the feeling of percussion; they give the eye time to dwell on each word, and so the words are voiced slowly, distinctly, but with resonance. Conversely, the longer lines of the poem – for instance, "in some crack of the ruins. That it should have been he who said, 'The kingfishers!'" seem to be longer so as to make the eye hasten to scan them, and make the voice speed up in sympathy, knowing that there is a long way to go, and only limited breath.²⁸

But think about what's happening here. Isn't the verse acting as a kind of steering mechanism? Isn't it, in fact, the driver of the voice? I once walked to Trader Joe's with Charles Olson. I mean that figuratively, of course, but not entirely so. It was early afternoon, in fall. The morning had been cloudy, but now the sky was drying out, cracking around the edges, peeling back to show blue. In my hand I held my copy of *The New American Poetry* open to page two, and I read "The Kingfishers" out loud as I walked. "What does not change / is the will to change," I read, recognizing the Heraclitus as I listened to myself. And as I read, the syllables began to

synchronize with my footsteps – or was it, I wondered, the other way around, were my footsteps starting to take on the rhythm of my reading?

When you start learning boxing (for instance), one of the first things they tell you is to synchronize your breathing with your movements. When you throw a punch, you exhale as you step and twist your hips, and then you inhale as you retract your arm, and your feet bounce back. Your whole body is mobilized, an orchestra of fast twitch fibers, and your breathing is the conductor, controls the pace. And something very much like that was happening to me: "He [step] WOKE [step], [inhale] FULL[step]-ly[skip] CLOTHED [step] [inhale], in his BED [stepstep skip]. HE [inhale]," I read as I walked, my footsteps syncopated, varied, controlled by the breathing. But also the walking itself was now starting to have an effect on my breathing, so that the vowels were starting to come from a place deeper in my chest.

The breathing and the movement together meshed like gear wheels. Each long "O" grew longer, deeper, more resonant, and my strides grew longer to match. Soon I found that I was reading in a voice that wasn't my own – it was slower, deeper. It had an accent, of sorts – clipped, crisp consonants, slightly nasal, vaguely British in that way that recordings of American voices from the first few decades of the twentieth century can often sound to the modern ear – nothing like my own featureless Midwest. And I was walking as if I were trying to keep pace with some unseen companion, somebody taller than me, and faster.

“The poem is a machine so simple and so efficient that it only has one moving part, and that made of the most insubstantial material: lightning and breath.”

But then here's the question: if the antidote is directness, if the emphasis is on speech, is on the "personal and instantaneous" recording of the poet's work, if the work the poem does is the work of liberation, why does Olson valorize the typewriter?²³ Why is the typewriter, of all things, the machine that "record[s] the listening [the poet] has done to his own speech and by that one act indicate how he would want any reader . . . to voice his work"?²⁴ A typewriter does not "record" sound, after all.

Why not a machine already available to Olson and his contemporaries and immediate predecessors – a machine that would actually record speech and

“What I think Olson means is that he wants to live in your vocal cords. He wants to ride the text into your body and pull on the tendons.”

Our path was straight, direct, fast. Under the influence of what I was now beginning to think of as the Olson-voice I found myself constantly cutting across curves in the sidewalk, moving over or through obstacles (benches, bushes, piles of leaves, puddles) rather than around, trying to keep my momentum going, as if the first reading had been a long plunge down a fixed track, and I were trying to reach the end before I ran out of speed or breath, which was mimetic of the way in which I was reading the longer lines of “The Kingfishers.” The space through which I was moving was thus structured like a ballistic trajectory, structured by the rhythm of my walking, which was structured by the Olson-voice, which was structured by the feedback-loop between my breathing/reading and my movement, which, ultimately, was structured by the text.

I am, of course, embellishing my experience. We do such embroidery constantly, without meaning to. When we dream, our brains fashion characters and stories from the accidental discharging of neural potentials, from the whispers of stray ions, from the long chain molecules that diffuse in the interstices of our nerves. And so out of “I walked to the supermarket to get some greek yogurt and cheap clementines, and as I walked I read, and as I read the rhythms of what I read found their way into the way I walked, the way I breathed, and that

change in my walking and my breathing triggered a corresponding change in the way I read, and I felt that I’d arrived at a new and visceral understanding of how and why what I was reading had been written,” I have fashioned this ghost story, in which the narrator is ridden by the spirit of a dead poet, in which a dead man’s breath changes a quick man’s body to reconstitute the remembered lungs.

I have fashioned it so, most of all, because it is true in spirit, if not wholly in substance. Olson says that what he wants is for the reader to see how a poem should sound, but what I think Olson *means* is that he wants to live in your vocal cords. He wants to ride the text into your body and pull on the tendons. Here, he says, where in the typewritten text there is “a space as long as the phrase before it,” you must hold your “breath, an equal length of time.”²⁹ Here, where there is a dash, pause in your reading, where I indicate “a pause so light it hardly separates the words.”³⁰ These are not mere instructions. These are disciplines for the body of the reader – instructions for mimicking the actions of the body of the poet – and Olson writes as if he wants them to be universally recognized conventions that all readers of “contemporary poet[s]” should follow.³¹

We can think of “Projective Verse” as a tablet of commandments, the recorded, imperative voice. The reader of the

“contemporary poet,” in this reading, acts like a prophet, who speaks with a voice that is simultaneously his own (i.e., generated by his body), and not: a voice that has taken possession of his body. And his body moves along the tracks carved for it by that voice. Or we can think of the rigidity of the conventions of the visualization of “speech” as a delivery device, like a needle, like the ovipositors of parasitic wasps, pushing through the membrane of vision, to deposit the controlling mechanism – pathogen, drug, egg – in the reader’s flesh.

Olson’s project of “projective verse,” ultimately depends on the substitution of the poet’s own body for the reader’s. Olson once wrote (in “Human Universe”) that “Art does not seek to describe but to enact.”³² He also wrote that in the confrontation between man and the world, it is:

the body that is his answer, his body intact and fought for, the absolute of his organism in its simplest terms, this structure evolved by nature, repeated in each act of birth, the animal man; the house he is, this house that moves, breathes, acts, this house where his life is, where he dwells against the enemy, against the beast.³³

He wrote that:

the soul is proprioceptive... the “body” itself as, by movement of its own tissues, giving the data of, depth... that one’s life is informed from and by one’s own literal body... that this mid-thing between... that this is “central,” that is – in this ½ of the picture – what they call the SOUL, the intermediary, the

intervening thing, the interrupter, the resistor. The self.³⁴

But none of these bodies are the reader’s body. The body that is answer, that is house, that is refuge, that calls up and constitutes soul by its own perception of its own self – none of these belong to the reader. It is the work of the Olson poem to remake the body of the reader in the image of the poet’s voice. What passes for “speech,” but is really a carefully coded sequence of commands, in Olson, acts as a coercive, colonizing, parasitic force, invading the host organism and remapping it. For the moment, for the Olson poem, the reader is the poet’s body.

3. *My Life: Maze/Map, Loom, Simulator*

Near the end of the first section of *My Life*, there is a sentence (-fragment) that reads, in full: “An ‘oral history’ on paper.”³⁷ On the surface level of meaning alone, this sounds ridiculous – how does one go about putting an “oral” anything on paper? Once it’s on paper, isn’t the oral already written? Then you recognize the reference. The “Oral History of the World” was the grand, modernist (in the sense that its author purported to be attempting, through solitary heroic, artistic labor, a monumental synthesis and re-configuring of earlier narratives), and almost completely fictional project of a Harvard-educated East Village vagabond, a contemporary of E. E. Cummings named Joe Gould, who achieved a certain amount of fame when a profile of him appeared in *The New Yorker*. In that context, it becomes hard to read the sentence as anything other than a comment on Williams and

Olson's perceived emphasis on speech and sound.

"They claim to value orality but then project it onto paper, flattened and emptied, and it's ridiculous anyway, to claim to say that something on paper is still somehow 'speech,'" is, in essence, what I take Hejinian to be saying. Elsewhere in *My Life*, she writes: "In every country is a word which attempts the sound of cats, to match an insoluble portrait in the clouds to a din in the air."³⁵ But, she writes later, it is "impossible to spell these sounds," impossible to pin down their essence with words.³⁶ The sound of cats is a cloud shape, fleeting, existing only in relation (it is "insoluble") to a specific configuration of clouds that exists for one specific moment. To attempt transcription is to remove the cat-sound from the context (without which it wouldn't exist) and to remove what is changeable about it, what is alive; to make of a "portrait" a "din." Signal become noise.

Elsewhere in the book, Hejinian compares the "desire for accurate representation" with the "mania for panorama" of the sort that one can acquire from days spent "cataloguing the travel library."³⁸ "Mania" suggests that the desire for accurate representation is pathological; "panorama," "catalogue," and especially travel "*library*" suggests that what gives birth to this pathology is the condition of being constantly surrounded by nothing *but* representations, and that, by implication, representation can only aspire to be "accurate" when it is representing other representations. The referential function of the word has begun to break down.

This is how Hejinian announces her break with the project of modernism – which is for her also a break with the idea of the written word as being tied to voiced sound.

Hejinian's statement is in line with something that Robert Grenier once said, in his essay "On Speech." I'm going to quote him at length, because I think the context of his statement is important. The particular statement I have in mind, however, comes at the very end:

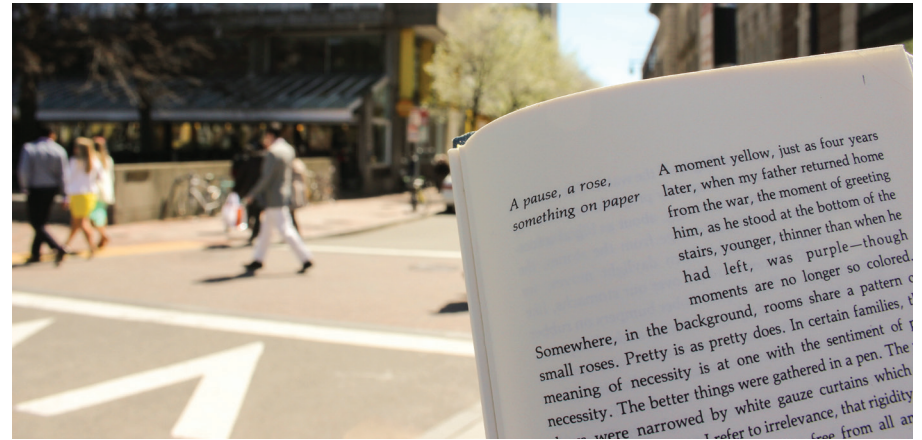
It isn't the spoken any more than the written, now, that's the progression from Williams, what now I want, at least, is the word way back in the head that is the thought or feeling forming out of the 'vast' silence/noise of consciousness experiencing world *all the time*, as waking/dreaming, words occurring

...

Why imitate "speech"? Various vehicle that American speech is in the different mouth of any of us, possessed of particular powers of colloquial usage, rhythmic pressure, etc., it is only such. To me, all speeches say the same thing, or: why not exaggerate, as Williams did, for our time proclaim an abhorrence of 'speech'... to rid us, as creators of the world, from reiteration of the past dragged on in formal habit. I HATE SPEECH.

...

I want writing what *is* thought/where *feeling is/ words are born*.³⁹



My Life, Page One. Photo by Thomas Dodson, 2013.

"What is thought/where feeling is/ words are born" is the statement to which I refer, of course, and it is a deliberate echo of Olson's "where breath comes from, where breath has its beginnings, where drama, has to come from, where, the coincidence is, all acts spring."⁴⁰ Crucially, however, Grenier's formulation leaves out breath, leaves out the physical presence of the poet in the act of composition, leaves out the body in which consciousness experiences, figures experience not as fleshy texture or movement but as the on/off of awareness ("waking/dreaming") and the "occurring" of words.

The words themselves, then, and the awareness of the words, are to be the objects to which the poem refers. And it appears that, for Grenier at least, the *form* of what he wants to write is something that precedes both the "spoken" (by which I take him to mean, essentially, "projective verse"), and the written (by which I take him to mean, essentially, what Olson calls "closed verse"). What he wants to write, in fact, "is thought."⁴¹ And yet poets are

"creators of the world," which I take to mean that, for Grenier (and for others of his generation, like Hejinian), a poem – even though it is merely the occurrence of words, "thought or feeling forming out of... silence/noise of consciousness" – is somehow at least a world or at least congruent to the world. What is the shape of this world? Is it made of anything other than words or "thought"? Who gets to live there? Will we be able to do anything there, other than wake/dream or occur as words? Isn't this a curiously disconnected, schizophrenic, solipsistic world?

Whether it is or not, it makes it difficult to talk about embodiment and space in Hejinian when what she and Grenier seem to be suggesting is that they are deliberately leaving the body out. So here's another story, about the first time I read *My Life*. I think it might help us think across this aporia. The edition of *My Life* that I own is the third edition, from Green Integer. It is a tiny book, perhaps four inches wide and six inches tall and half an inch thick; it fits easily into the pockets of my jeans, and can

be (mostly) covered from view by my right hand. As for the text itself, I knew something of what to expect – I'd read other poems by Hejinian, and I'm fairly familiar with the work of other poets associated with L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E.

Nevertheless, it came as something of a shock to open the book to see a neat rectangle of text nearly filling the entire page, its expanse only broken up by a square-shaped blank space in the upper left corner (and that blank space in turn only marked by the two lines of the italicized section-heading “*A pause, a rose, / something on paper*”). Turning the page didn't really help. Here, text filled everything that wasn't margin. There were no paragraph breaks to indicate the structure of the text. There were no indentations. The top, left, and right margins were identical in width and the bottom margin was twice as wide – that, too, seemed strange. Most of all, I saw the very regularity of the textual field, the sheer geometrical precision of it, as a clear visual signal that I was looking at something new, something foreign.

In “After Free Verse: The New Non-Linear Poetries,” Marjorie Perloff writes of the American free verse anthologized in *Naked Poetry* (1969) that they all look more or less similar on the page – they are “columns of verse centered on the page, with justified left margins, and . . . jagged right margins.”⁴² That the very layout of Hejinian's book has the power to shock is a measure of how ubiquitous and natural-seeming (even considered solely as a visual – a *spatial* – convention) such “free verse” has become.

It's also a measure of something else. We read (and write) with our bodies, though we have managed to forget that we do so. My stepson Henry is a fine and confident reader for his age (he will be nine in two weeks). But when he's asked to read an unfamiliar word or sequence of words to us in the living room, he (consciously or not) tenses up – a shoulder will move up or down, his neck will hunch or bend ever so slightly – and his arm will move out towards the paper or screen. His index finger extends, traces the writing, almost as if it were Braille; his eyes open just a little bit wider. His nostrils flare and his pupils might dilate (I'm not prepared to swear to it). His lips start to move before any sound comes out. When he sounds the word out you can see him listening to the sounds, trying to piece them together into something more familiar, and his lips will move again, as he varies the speed or the vowel sounds. And you can see him listening to these new sounds. And if it still sounds unfamiliar, he might repeat the process again and again or (especially if he's hungry or tired or sick), you might see his eyebrows start to scrunch together and his lower lip begin to push out.

Our adult faces and limbs are not so eloquent; the novelty – both of being a body, and of the written word – has receded into the background. Nevertheless, when one pays attention to what one's body is doing when one reads or writes – when we attend to *proprioception*, to use Olson's pet term – one begins to have an idea of the degree of purely physical coordination involved in text-reading and text-making. For instance, right now I am typing this with my eyes closed. In part, this is

because my eyes are tired, and I want to give them a rest. It is also because, when I type with my eyes open (I have just opened my eyes again, to remind myself of what it feels like), they tend to dart and wander, fixate on objects both textual and not, which makes me pause in my writing to evaluate those objects, to catalogue them, assign to each a place.

This in turn has an effect on the quality of my prose. It makes me digressive and expansive. It makes my clauses proliferate and my parentheses nest. My sentences begin to mimic the structure of my looking – the complex shapes that my visual attention and comprehension trace in space and time, moving from, for instance, this sentence that I am writing now, to the contrasting features of sentences I wrote earlier with my eyes open, to the books strewn over the couch where I'm sitting – until the entire structure of my thought starts feeling to me as if it were something fronded and subdivided and involuted and weed-wild, a fractal structure from which I must zoom outwards, losing entire levels of detail if I am to keep it whole in my sight. I don't want that right now. I want to stay focused.

So I close my eyes again, and this lets me listen more closely to myself as I compose the sentence. The sentences start echoing each other. They become more uniform in length. Their syntactical structures become parallel. They begin to group together by sound and by meaning, which is inseparable from the sound. As I type I listen both to the inner voice that sounds out the words one by one and also to the sound of my own typing. The fluidity of it

when I know what I am about to type before-hand (literally, before my hands move) encourages me to go faster, faster, hurry the sentence onwards and the logic to its conclusion. My fingers know where to go almost before I know what word I am typing. The slow, deliberate tap-tap-ing I hear from my fingers when I am unsure sounds like a blind man's cane scouting out the lay of the land for obstacles and bumps, or like a sculptor's chisel, chipping slowly away at the stubborn and unnecessary rock.

And this makes my thought in turn slow down, turn inward and under, working away at a metaphor until I've either gotten it hopelessly mixed up or wrung dry or some combination of both. But whether my eyes are open or closed, whether I am looking or listening, what is happening is that I am using my body, my senses. I am using the movements of my body, and these movements are what shape my thought, are the shape of my thoughts.

And these same processes are at work when I read, though they are less available to me to be aware of, because they have a less obvious external effect. When I read I am moving, just like Henry is. My eyes move, and perhaps certain muscles in my throat and lips, and my hands turn the pages. When we read things that look substantially the same – for instance, the conventional left-justified columns with ragged right margins of “free verse” – our eyes move in similar ways, trace similar, well-worn paths, paths that they have traced a hundred times before, saccade after familiar saccade. Our hands, too, move in roughly the same rhythm, turn the pages at more or less the same

rate of speed, whether we are reading Lowell or Olson or Ginsberg or Spicer or Berryman or Berrigan. And because our movements are similar, because they resemble movements that we have performed before, our thoughts also grow to be roughly the same shape.

This is one of the things that genre and intertextuality means to me: it means that, on many levels, my perception (and therefore interpretation) of the text is being shaped by muscle memory, by memories of moving through other textual spaces very much like whichever one happens to be lying in front of me at the moment. It means that I am comfortable, at home. The town may be unfamiliar, the street names foreign, but the walk I take through them is not. The navigation is automatic – I know where east is; I am always oriented.

My point is that the text of *My Life* is, for these very reasons, *disorienting*, physically uncomfortable, spatially uncanny (*unheimlich*; it makes me not-at-home). When, on the first page of the book, I see the sentence “Pretty is as pretty does” followed immediately by the sentence “In certain families, the meaning of necessity is at one with the sentiment of pre-necessity,” I feel it, not only as a disjunction in meaning and thought, but also as a *physical* stopping. My eyes stutter; they skitter around the page looking for something they have missed, something that will act as a bridge for those two sentences; they look in between them just to make sure that the gap between those two sentences is really there. My hand, which by the time I have gotten to the middle of a page, is usually moving down towards the lower right hand



Lyn Hejinian. Photo by Gloria Graham, 2005.

corner, preparing for the turn, stops, and because it has stopped in the middle of a well-worn and automatic routine, there are muscles in my arm and shoulder that experience a tensing that they seldom do when I’m reading. When Hejinian writes that

[w]riting’s forms are not merely shapes but forces; formal questions are about dynamics – they ask how, where, and why the writing moves, what are the types, directions, number, and velocities of a work’s motion. The material aporia objectifies the poem in the context of ideas and of language itself.⁴³

I’m not certain that this kind of physical reaction was, precisely, what she meant. (She seems to be thinking, in fact, along lines similar to Olson’s, when he talks about “kinetics.”) But that is the way my body understands it, and therefore that is the way I must understand it. My orbital muscles take it at face value.

What *My Life* does, then, is force the reader’s body into a new and unexpected routine in relation to the space of the text. At every sentence’s end the eye cannot continue without taking a quite literal leap of faith – *this* time, the eye always expects (because it has been right so many times before in so many different texts), this time there will be a connection. This time I (the eye) can move from the end of this sentence to the beginning of the next and ignore the space in between; won’t have to check to see whether there’s another sentence that I’ve unknowingly skipped. But the eye is always disappointed until it fastens on a new element of the text, one that seems oddly familiar. After a while the eye recognizes it, figures out why it is familiar – it’s a repetition in the text; a phrase that appeared earlier on in the text as an italicized section heading is here “recontextualized [. . .] with new emphasis.”⁴⁴ Again, muscle memory plays its part; the hand reaches out and flips through the book, riffling through the pages, while the eye skims through the blur, looking for other section headings, other repetitions, stopping at the repetitions and then flipping back to compare them to the “original,” flipping forward again to compare them with each other. It’s as if a new dimension had been added to the usual practice of reading, a new motion. In addition to left to right, moving from one end of a line to the other and back and so on till the end of the page and then moving forward – the horizontal axis of reading – we now have this accelerated back and forth, these threads of inquiry that pierce and suture pages together: many vertical axes. A shuttle carrying the weft where before there was only warp.

Words cannot “unite an ardent intellect with the external material world,” Hejinian suggests.⁴⁵ To attempt to do so, to attempt to make things cohere, is to fall into the trap that Olson fell into – to colonize and control in the attempt to liberate. It is a “Faustian longing.”⁴⁶ Where Olson attempts to carry us through the text, sweep us along the prepared path with a single push, Hejinian invites us (by repeatedly blocking the path) to explore it, take different routes through it, map it, rather than block it (that is, “block,” in the theatrical sense). The repetitions are the landmarks by which we navigate, by which we map the “vast and overwhelming” world.⁴⁷ What language can do is make “tracks” whereby the vast undifferentiated expanse of the past – the “immense and distant bay of blue, gray, green” – can be navigated, traversed, by creating an “incoherent border which will later separate events from experience.”⁴⁸ By breaking the “Faustian longings” with “uncounted continuous and voluminous digressions,” Hejinian hopes to “jump lines, hop cracks.”⁴⁹ In doing so, she provides us with new ways of configuring our bodies, new routines that can supplement the old – and therefore both new shapes of thought, new ways of navigation in the “external material world” and new ways of reading and writing in the world of words. After all, the two are one.

NOTES

1. William Carlos Williams, *Selected Essays of William Carlos Williams* (New York: New Directions, 1954), 256.
2. Lyn Hejinian, *The Language of Inquiry* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 44.
3. Brian McHale, "Poetry as Prosthesis," *Poetics Today* 21(2000): 2.
4. Charles Olson, "Human Universe," in *A Charles Olson Reader*, ed. Ralph Maud (Manchester: Carcanet, 2005), 119.
5. Guy Davenport, *The Geography of the Imagination: Forty Essays* (Jaffrey, New Hampshire: Nonpareil Books, 1997), 89.
6. Charles Olson, "Proprioception," in *Collected Prose*, ed. Donald Allen and Benjamin Friedlander (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 181.
7. Charles Olson, *Selected Letters*, ed. Ralph Maud (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: California University Press, 2000), 96.
8. Waldrop, Rosmarie, "Charles Olson: Process and Relationship," *Twentieth Century Literature* 23(1977): 467–486.
9. Charles Olson, *Selected Letters*, 143.
10. *Ibid.*, 162.
11. *Ibid.*, 12.
12. *Ibid.*, 12.
13. Charles Olson, "The Kingfishers," in *The Collected Poems of Charles Olson: Excluding the Maximus Poems*, 86–97.
14. *Ibid.*, 86–97.
15. *Ibid.*, 86–97.
16. Charles Olson, "Projective Verse," in *A Charles Olson Reader*, 39.
17. *Ibid.*, 39, 40.
18. *Ibid.*, 40.
19. *Ibid.*, 48.
20. *Ibid.*, 49.
21. *Ibid.*, 45.
22. *Ibid.*, 40.
23. *Ibid.*, 47.
24. *Ibid.*, 41.
25. Charles Olson, *Selected Letters*, 388.
26. Charles Olson, "The Kingfishers," in *The Collected Poems of Charles Olson: Excluding the Maximus Poems*, 86–97.
27. Charles Olson, "Projective Verse," in *A Charles Olson Reader*, 46.
28. Charles Olson, "The Kingfishers," in *The Collected Poems of Charles Olson: Excluding the Maximus Poems*, 86–97.
29. Charles Olson, "Projective Verse," in *A Charles Olson Reader*, 46.
30. *Ibid.*, 46.
31. *Ibid.*, 46.
32. Charles Olson, "Human Universe," in *A Charles Olson Reader*, 119.
33. Charles Olson, "The Resistance," in *Collected Prose*, 174.
34. Charles Olson, "Proprioception," in *Collected Prose*, 182.
35. Lyn Hejinian, *My Life* (Kobenhavn & Los Angeles: Green Integer, 2002), 9.
36. *Ibid.*, 8.
37. *Ibid.*, 85.
38. *Ibid.*, 80.
39. Robert Grenier, "On Speech," in *The American Tree*, ed. Ron Silliman (Orono, Maine: The National Poetry Foundation, 2002), 477.
40. Charles Olson, "Projective Verse," in *A Charles Olson Reader*, 49.
41. Robert Grenier, "On Speech," in *The American Tree*, 477.
42. Marjorie Perloff, "After Free Verse: The New Non-Linear Poetries," in *Poetry On & Off the Page: Essays for Emergent Occasions* (Evanston, Ill: Northwestern University Press), 153.
43. Lyn Hejinian, *The Language of Inquiry*, 41.
44. *Ibid.*, 44.
45. Lyn Hejinian, *My Life*, 63.
46. *Ibid.*, 63.
47. Lyn Hejinian, *The Language of Inquiry*, 41.
48. Lyn Hejinian, *My Life*, 83, 35, 9.
49. *Ibid.*, 63, 33.